

**THE RISE OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS LIL MIQUELA AND KIM ZULU:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INSTAGRAM'S PLATFORM CAPITALISM
FROM AN AFRICAN CONTEXT**

By

Mikaela Oosthuizen

Submitted in full fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Media Studies at Rhodes University

April 2022

Supervisor: Dr P.A. Boshoff

DECLARATION

I, Mikaela Oosthuizen, hereby declare that:

- The content of this thesis entitled “The Rise of Virtual Influencers Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu: An Exploratory Study of Instagram’s Platform Capitalism from an African Context” is my own work;
- All sources used or quoted, have been acknowledged and documented by means of references; and
- This thesis has not been submitted previously for a degree at any other tertiary institution.



Mikaela Oosthuizen

GRAHAMSTOWN

SEPT 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my incredible supervisor Dr Boshoff.

To my heavenly father for daily strength.

To my loving parents who inspired me to embark on this journey.

To my family for their continuous support.

To the National Research Foundation (NRF) for funding my research project.

To all the participants who were willing to share their experiences and insights.

To the creators of virtual influencers Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela who sparked this very important debate.

To Ryan for his endless patience and encouragement.

ABSTRACT

We have never been more dependent on the platforms that connect us. As we increasingly conduct our social interactions and economic transactions online, our reality has stepped into the virtual and as a result the virtual has stepped into our reality. It is at this time, when the boundaries between reality and fiction are at their most destabilised, that a new type of online profile has emerged, namely virtual influencers. Virtual influencers, also known as computer-generated imagery (CGI) influencers, are neither humans nor robots but are visual creations that mimic the online profiles of human influencers and whose creation by brands and agencies is driven by explicit commercial intent.

This research documents the incremental societal shifts that have facilitated an acceptance of virtual influencer profiles on platforms such as Instagram. I outline how years of social media use have altered *perceptions* of the nature of social media endorsement, *expectations* of online performance in adherence to platform capitalism logic and *impressions* of visuals as no longer grounded in reality. As a result, I highlight that the modern visual is no longer necessarily a means to *capture* reality but can actively *construct* that reality, while humans' increasing *synthetic* portrayals online through hyper-editing have meant that virtual influencers' human *realistic* portrayals are increasingly accepted and celebrated. The emergence of these virtual influencers necessitates a renewed investigation into the kinds of self that are deemed necessary to thrive in today's cyber attention economy. I emphasise how two virtual influencers, in particular Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu, naturalise consumer identities through embodying an aspirational identity that appeals to Western and Southern audiences respectively. They also simultaneously enact an idealised version of the modern consumer that serves the commercial interests of the agencies that create them, and the Instagram platform they exist on.

I therefore argue that the *supply* of virtual influencers is on the rise (given the advanced technical capabilities of creative agencies to execute the creation of human realistic visuals) as well as the *demand* for these virtual influencers (as brands increasingly see virtual influencers as able to generate higher returns with lower risks than their human influencer counterparts). Furthermore, the *market acceptance* is on the rise as we have become accustomed to the blurring of the authentic and the commercial on platforms such as Instagram.

The consumer identities promoted in the constructed personas of these virtual influencers illustrate Instagram's broader alignment with platform capitalism. I suggest that although Instagram positions itself as a free app, the true cost of the personal data we share and the labour we are expected to perform in creating, reacting to, and circulating content on the app,

is often subverted. In the context of the global South, and Africa in particular, the naturalisation of these opulent consumer identities, as manifested in vehicles such as the virtual influencer Kim Zulu, takes on greater significance as the acquisition of possessions and the documentation of the attainment of a privileged lifestyle are a means of enacting a citizen identity previously denied to many in South Africa.

My empirical research investigates the Instagram platform as an artefact from the three contexts in which meaning is constructed. Firstly, I present the site(s) of the production of an artefact where I conduct an app-walkthrough of Instagram in Phase One to demonstrate the architectural features that guide user behaviour towards sharing data, creating and consuming content and spending money on the app. Secondly, I present the site of the Instagram artefact itself in Phase Two where I conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of purposively selected virtual influencer content (18 Lil Miquela and 12 Kim Zulu Instagram visuals). I demonstrate how the mediated authenticity principles of predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, imperfection, and ambivalence are weaponised by virtual influencers to construct 1) an identity as relatable to followers; 2) a persona in keeping with expected celebrity/influencer behaviours, and 3) a posting pattern in line with Instagram's platform-specific content creation genre. Lastly, I present the site of consumption in Phase Three, where I present the findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with Instagram users. Participants included one representative from the Kim Zulu team (the Representative) as well as 12 South African Instagram users split into three use-case groups namely the Privates; the Influencers and the Creatives.

The boundaries between identity, commerce and commodification are blurring. This research explores how Instagram user behaviours are deliberately shaped to cater to platform interests. Virtual influencer personas thus project a consumer identity that benefits the profile and platform creators to the detriment of users. I furthermore present recommendations on researching virtual influencers in the academic space, and present guidelines for co-existing with virtual influencers in the online space.

Key Words: Virtual Influencer, Platform Capitalism, Instagram, Lil Miquela, Kim Zulu, Mediated Authenticity, Authenticity, South Africa, Neoliberalism, Social Media, App-Walkthrough, Application.

TABLE OF CONTENTS		
		Page
DECLARATION		i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		ii
ABSTRACT		iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS		vi
LIST OF IMAGES		xvii
LIST OF FIGURES		xviii
	CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY	
1.1	INTRODUCTION	1
1.2	VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS	5
1.2.1	Lil Miquela	5
1.2.2	Kim Zulu	5
1.3	CONCEPT CLARIFICATION	6
1.3.1	Influencers	6
1.3.2	Virtual Influencers	6
1.3.3	Mediated Authenticity	7
1.3.4	Social Media	7
1.3.5	Platform Capitalism	8
1.3.6	Discourse	8
1.3.7	Neoliberalism	8
1.4	PROBLEM STATEMENT	8
1.5	PREVIOUS RESEARCH	14
1.6	RESEARCH OBJECTIVES	17
1.6.1	Primary Objective	17
1.6.2	Secondary Objectives	17
1.7	RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	17
1.7.1	App-Walkthrough Method	18
1.7.2	Visual Social Semiotics (Multimodal Discourse Analysis)	18
1.7.3	Semi-Structured Interviews (South African Instagram Users)	18
1.8	CONCLUSION	19

	CHAPTER TWO A REVIEW OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS	
2.1	INTRODUCTION	20
2.2	VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS	21
2.2.1	Defining Virtual Influencers	21
2.2.1.1	Avatar	22
2.2.1.2	Robots	23
2.2.1.3	Virtual Agents	23
2.2.1.4	Virtual Characters and Virtual Celebrities	24
2.2.2	An Industry Overview	25
2.2.2.1	Popular Agency-Based Virtual Influencers	27
2.2.2.2	Popular Brand-Created Virtual Influencers	31
2.2.3	Lil Miquela	33
2.2.4	Kim Zulu	37
2.3	THE ENDORSER EVOLUTION – HOW DID WE GET HERE	38
2.3.1	Types of Endorsement	40
2.3.1.1	Human Endorser	41
2.3.1.2	Animated Spokesperson	41
2.3.2	The Evolution of Endorsement	42
2.3.2.1	Traditional Celebrities as the Original Endorsers	42
2.3.2.2	Reality Television, Celebrification and the New Celebrity	44
2.3.2.3	The Declining Popularity of Traditional Celebrity Endorsements	46
2.3.2.4	The Rise of the Internet, Social Media and eWOM	47
2.3.2.5	A Shift Towards the Personal	48
2.3.2.6	Influencers	49
2.4	VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS MITIGATE THE RISKS OF HUMAN ENDORSERS	55
2.4.1	Incongruent Pairings	55
2.4.2	Scandal and Disassociation	56
2.4.3	Endorser Loses Relevance	57
2.4.4	Production Costs	58
2.5	CONCLUSION	59

	CHAPTER THREE PLATFORM CAPITALISM AND CONSUMPTION IN AFRICA	
3.1	INTRODUCTION	61
3.2	PLATFORM CAPITALISM – THE INSTAGRAM BUSINESS MODEL	63
3.2.1	Instagram History	63
3.2.2	Platform Capitalism	69
3.2.2.1	Definition	69
3.2.2.2	Characteristics of Platform Capitalism	69
3.2.2.3	Revenue Models	73
3.3	INDUSTRY REGULATION	75
3.3.1	Disclosure of Paid Partnership and Advertising	76
3.3.1.1	Regulation of Human Endorsers	77
3.3.1.2	Implications for Virtual Influencers	79
3.4	THE COMMODITISED INDIVIDUAL	82
3.4.1	Person as Product: Commercialised Self and the Creation of an Asset	82
3.4.2	The Creation and Valuation of an Asset as Measured through Reputation Capital	83
3.4.3	Visibilty Labour and Neoliberalism	86
3.4.3.1	Apploitation	87
3.4.3.2	Neoliberal Practices of Hiding Labour and Effort	88
3.4.4	The Impact on How We Post – Visual Assets in Online Portfolios	89
3.4.4.1	Documentation and Validation	89
3.4.4.2	The Selective Self	91
3.5	CONSUMPTION AND AFRICA	93
3.5.1	The Legacy of Inequality within South Africa	93
3.5.2	Class and Upward Mobility through Lifestyle Images	95
3.5.3	Consumption and Identity Formation	96
3.5.4	Envy	97
3.5.5	Access to Luxury Lifestyles through Emulation	98
3.6	CONCLUSION	100
	CHAPTER FOUR THE VISUAL AND THE VIRTUAL	
4.1	INTRODUCTION	103
4.2	THE EVOLUTION OF THE VISUAL	104
4.2.1	Visual Inventions	105

4.2.2	The Photograph	106
4.2.3	The Mobile Camera Phone	107
4.2.3.1	Numerical Representation and Condensing	108
4.2.3.2	Transcoding	109
4.2.3.3	Modularity, Convergence and Mobility	109
4.2.3.4	Variability and Editing	110
4.2.3.5	Automation and Computational Photography	111
4.3	VISUAL STYLES ON INSTAGRAM	113
4.3.1	A Brief History of Instagram	114
4.3.2	Instagramism: Subjectivity and Photo Styles on Instagram	115
4.3.2.1	Casual	116
4.3.2.2	Designer	118
4.3.2.3	Professional	118
4.3.2.4	Photographer Subjectivity	119
4.3.2.5	Item Fetishisation	121
4.3.2.6	Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality and the Virtual	122
4.4	VIRTUAL CULTURE AND THE NEW REAL	124
4.4.1	Reality as Unstable	124
4.4.2	Simulation and Hyper-Realism	125
4.4.3	Visual Technology Spurs on Hyper-Reality	126
4.4.3.1	Visual Technology as Removing Indexicality Thus Aiding the Creators of VirtualL Influencers	127
4.4.3.2	Computational Imagery as Changing what Users Capture and Post	128
4.4.4	Social Media as Hyper-Reality	129
4.4.5	The New Real	130
4.4.6	Neoliberalism the Expected Work of Editing the Image	131
4.5	CONCLUSION	132
	CHAPTER FIVE BEING REAL – AUTHENTICITY AND REALISTICNESS	
5.1	INTRODUCTION	135
5.2.	BEING REAL - AUTHENTICITY	136
5.2.1	Defining Authenticity	136
5.2.2	Brand Authenticity	140
5.2.3	Mediated Authenticity	141

5.2.3.1	Authenticity Illusions	142
5.2.3.2	Genre	143
5.2.3.3	Advances in Technology	143
5.2.3.4	Suspension of Disbelief	144
5.3	THE PERSONAL AND THE PUBLIC	145
5.3.1	Facework	145
5.3.2	Performance on Social Media	146
5.3.3	Commercialising Authenticity and Neoliberalism	147
5.3.4	If Authenticity Can Be Reproduced is it Authentic?	149
5.3.5	Virtual Type of Authenticity	150
5.4	BEING REAL - HUMAN REALISTICNESS	151
5.4.1	The Uncanny Valley	152
5.4.2	Responses to Realisticness	154
5.4.2.1	Are we Threatened?	155
5.4.2.2	Morbid Curiosity	155
5.4.2.3	The Uncanny may become Canny	156
5.5	CONCLUSION	157
	CHAPTER SIX	
	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	
6.1	INTRODUCTION	159
6.2	RESEARCH PARADIGM	161
6.3	CORPUS CONSTRUCTION AND SELECTION	162
6.3.1	Corpus Construction and Selection	162
6.3.2	Sampling and Corpus Refinement	162
6.3.2.1	Purposive Text Selection: Phase One and Two	163
6.3.2.2	Non-Probability Sampling Technique	163
6.4	TEXT AND DATA COLLECTION PROCESS	166
6.4.1	Phase One of the study	167
6.4.1.1	App-Walkthrough Method	167
6.4.1.2	App-Walkthrough Method Incorporation in this Study	169
6.4.2	Phase Two of the Study	170
6.4.2.1	Visual Social Semiotics	170
6.4.2.2	Visual Social Semiotics Incorporation in this Study	170

6.4.3	Phase Three of the study	170
6.4.3.1	Semi-Structured Interviews	171
6.4.3.2	Semi-Structured Interview Incorporation in this Study	171
6.5	TEXT AND DATA ANALYSIS METHODS	174
6.5.1	Phase One: App-Walkthrough Method	175
6.5.2	Phase Two: Visual Social Semiotics (Multimodal Discourse Analysis)	176
6.5.2.1	Position and Composition	177
6.5.2.2	Point of View, Pose and Angles	177
6.5.2.3	Demographic	178
6.5.2.4	Caption	178
6.5.2.5	Modality	179
6.5.3.	Phase Three: Semi-Structured Interviews (South African Instagram Users)	180
6.5.3.1	Step One: Familiarising Yourself with the Data	180
6.5.3.2	Step Two: Generating Initial Codes	180
6.5.3.3	Step Three: Searching for Themes	181
6.5.3.4	Step Four: Reviewing Themes	181
6.5.3.5	Step Five: Defining and Naming Themes	181
6.5.3.6	Step Six: Producing the Overview Manuscript	181
6.6	ETHICS	183
6.6.1	Phase One of the Study	183
6.6.2	Phase Two of the Study	183
6.6.3	Phase Three of the Study	184
6.7	TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE RESEARCH	184
6.7.1	Credibility	185
6.7.1.1	Phase One	185
6.7.1.2	Phase Two	186
6.7.1.3	Phase Three	186
6.7.2	Dependability	187
6.7.2.1	Phase One	187
6.7.2.2	Phase Two	187
6.7.2.3	Phase Three	188
6.7.3	Confirmability	189
6.7.3.1	Phase One	189
6.7.3.2	Phase Two	189

6.7.3.3	Phase Three	189
6.7.4	Transferability	190
6.7.4.1	Phase One	190
6.7.4.2	Phase Two	190
6.7.4.3	Phase Three	190
6.8	CONCLUSION	192
	CHAPTER SEVEN APP-WALKTHROUGH METHOD	
7.1	INTRODUCTION	194
7.2	SOFTWARE APPS	195
7.2.1	The Growth of Apps	196
7.2.2	Updates to Apps	196
7.3	AN APP-WALKTHROUGH OF INSTAGRAM	197
7.3.1	Instagram Extracts Data	198
7.3.1.1	Instagram Downplays the Implications of Downloading the App and Opting-In	198
7.3.1.2	Instagram Encourages Me to Sync with other Social Accounts	200
7.3.1.3	Instagram Presents Data Gathering as Informal	201
7.3.1.4	Instagram Induces Me to Volunteer Data	202
7.3.1.5	Instagram Stores Deleted Data	204
7.3.2	Instagram Persuades Me to Generate Content	205
7.3.2.1	Instagram's Iconography	205
7.3.2.2	Instagram Makes Sharing of Content a Habit	207
7.3.2.3	Instagram Creates Dopamine Reward from Engagement with Posted Content	207
7.3.2.4	Instagram Offers Different Content Formats for Every Occasion	208
7.3.2.5	Instagram Creates a Dependency on its Archiving Function	210
7.3.2.6	Instagram Allows Ease of Use of Two Accounts	211
7.3.3	Instagram Aims to get Me to Consume Content	211
7.3.3.1	Instagram Encourages Me to Follow Accounts	211
7.3.3.2	Instagram Encourages Me to Spend Time Viewing Content	213
7.3.3.3	Instagram Encourages my Interaction with Content	213
7.3.3.4	Instagram's Disappearing Content Secures Daily App Use	214
7.3.3.5	Instagram Encourages Public Accounts	215
7.3.4	Instagram Stimulates Spending on the App	216

7.3.4.1	Instagram Stimulates Spending Money on Boosting Content	217
7.3.4.2	Instagram Stimulates Purchasing Products and Experiences	222
7.4	CONCLUSION	226
	CHAPTER EIGHT MEDIATED AUTHENTICITY AS ILLUSTRATED IN VIRTUAL INFLUENCER CONTENT	
8.1	INTRODUCTION	228
8.2	PRINCIPLES OF MEDIATED AUTHENTICITY	229
8.2.1	Predictability	229
8.2.2	Ordinariness	229
8.2.3	Confession	230
8.2.4	Spontaneity	230
8.2.5	Immediacy	230
8.2.6	Ambiguity	231
8.2.7	Imperfection	231
8.3	IDENTITY PERFORMANCE AS RELATABLE	231
8.3.1	Ordinariness – Relatable Identity Ethnicity	231
8.3.2	Ordinariness – Relatable Location	235
8.3.3	Predictability - Gender, Femininity, Age, and Sexualisation	236
8.3.4	Confession and Imperfection – Connection with Virtual Identity	242
8.4	CELEBRITY PERFORMANCE	246
8.4.1	Predictability - Self Promotion Tactics	246
8.4.2	Predictability - Expectation of Commercialisation	247
8.4.3	Spontaneity– In the Moment Celebrity	249
8.4.4	Immediacy – Third-Party Validation	250
8.4.5	Ambivalence – Celebrity Mystery	251
8.5	WAYS OF BEING ON THE PLATFORM	252
8.5.1	Immediacy and Imperfection – Live Posting	253
8.5.2	Spontaneity – Informal Modality	254
8.5.3	Spontaneity - Multiple Viewpoints	255
8.5.4	Imperfection – Flawed Framing	257
8.5.5	Immediacy – Real Trends	258
8.6	CONCLUSION	259

	CHAPTER NINE INTERVIEW RESPONSES – A VIEW FROM AFRICA	
9.1	INTRODUCTION	261
9.2	DEPENDENCIES ON INSTAGRAM AS ILLUSTRATED IN USES	261
9.2.1	The Privates	262
9.2.2.	The Creatives	263
9.2.3	The Influencers	265
9.3	PROFILES AS ASSETS IN AN ATTENTION ECONOMY	266
9.3.1	Profile Privacy Settings	266
9.3.2	Content Posting Strategies	267
9.4	WHEN ARE VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS BELIEVABLE AND AUTHENTIC	270
9.4.1.	Consistency	271
9.4.2	Story	272
9.4.3	Does it Matter?	274
9.4.4	Visually Believable – The Uncanny	274
9.5	EFFICACY OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS	277
9.5.1	Buy From	277
9.5.2	Collaborate With	279
9.5.3	Follow Virtual Influencers	279
9.6	CONTENT TYPES	280
9.6.1	Not in a Studio	280
9.6.2	In a “Make-Believe Real Life”	281
9.6.3	Fantasy	282
9.7	THE CULTURAL AND GENDER IDENTITY OF KIM ZULU	282
9.8	INDUSTRY REPERCUSSIONS	287
9.8.1	Disclosure of Virtual Status	287
9.8.2	Physical Links to the Virtual	289
9.8.3	Capitalism as Good if it Supports Small Businesses	290
9.8.4	Virtual Influencers as Threat	290
9.8.5	Deepfakes and Profiting off of Identity – the Production Value of People	292
9.8.6	The Future of Instagram	293
9.9	CONCLUSION	295

	CHAPTER TEN CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
10.1	INTRODUCTION	298
10.2	INSTAGRAM’S PLATFORM CAPITALISM	300
10.2.1	Instagram Extracts Data from Users – Cross Subsidisation in Platform Capitalism	301
10.2.2	Instagram Encourages Content Consumption – Instagram as Intermediator	302
10.2.3	Instagram Encourages Content Generation – Acceptance of Unpaid Labour	303
10.2.4	Instagram Encourages Spending Money – Profiles as Neoliberal Assets and Identity as Consumed	306
10.3	VIRTUAL INFLUENCER SUCCESS	311
10.3.1	Influencer Genre Consistency	312
10.3.2	Instagram Visual Genre Consistency	314
10.3.3	Audience Identity Consistency	316
10.4	A FUTURE WITH VISUAL INFLUENCERS – GUIDELINES FOR CO-EXISTENCE	319
10.4.1	Reduce Sexualised Identities	319
10.4.2	Heighten Visual Realisticness – Only When Coupled with Disclosure	320
10.4.3	Disclose Virtual Status – Features and Regulations	320
10.4.4	Use Suitable Products, Settings and Co-Stars	326
10.4.5	Incorporate Narrative and Lifestyle	330
10.4.6	Consider the Protection of Identity and Copyright	331
10.5	RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	332
10.6	CONCLUSION	334
	CHAPTER ELEVEN LIST OF SOURCES	
11	LIST OF SOURCES	337
11.1	ACADEMIC REFERENCES	337
11.2	INSTAGRAM REFERENCES	390
12	ADDENDUM	398

	LIST OF IMAGES	
Image 2.1	Kyoko Date	
Image 2.2	Gorillaz VIRTUAL	

Image 2.3	#lvseries4
Image 2.4	Hatsune Miku
Image 2.5	Days Gone Campaign
Image 2.6	Liam Nikuro
Image 2.7	Imma Gram
Image 2.8	Plustic Boy
Image 2.9	Ria-Ria-Tokyo
Image 2.10	Noonoouri
Image 2.11	Aliona Pole
Image 2.12	Knox Frost
Image 2.13	Dagny
Image 2.14	Brenn
Image 2.15	Galaxia
Image 2.16	Shudu
Image 2.17	Koffi
Image 2.18	Blawko
Image 2.19	Bermuda
Image 2.20	Lu
Image 2.21	Liv
Image 2.22	Colonel Sanders
Image 2.23	Yumi
Image 2.24	Keena
Image 2.25	Magazine Shoot
Image 2.26	Spotify
Image 2.27	Crying
Image 2.28	Beading
Image 2.29	Mini
Image 2.30	Puma Collab
Image 2.31	Takis
Image 2.32	Nelson and Winnie Mandela
Image 4.1	Intimate Christmas Memory
Image 4.2	Informal Shopping
Image 4.3	Lil Miquela Glamorous Gold Gown
Image 4.4	Kim Zulu Pink Glamorous
Image 4.5	Mermaid in Water
Image 4.6	Kim Zulu in Nature
Image 4.7	View from Behind Studio
Image 4.8	Body from Behind on Beach
Image 4.9	Moschino Jacket and Handbag
Image 4.10	Kangol Headwear
Image 4.11	Angel Baby Filter
Image 4.12	Facial Prints
Image 4.13	Fan using Facial Prints Filter
Image 4.14	Ananova
Image 7.1	Sync Contacts

Image 7.2	Hidden Terms and Conditions
Image 7.3	Instagram from Meta
Image 7.4	Link to Facebook
Image 7.5	Story Annotations
Image 7.6	Story Stickers
Image 7.7	Music Sticker
Image 7.8	Instagram Logo Evolution 2010, 2012, 2015
Image 7.9	Instagram Icons
Image 7.10	Uploading a Post
Image 7.11	You're All Caught Up
Image 7.12	Instagram Story Loaded
Image 7.13	Time Spent on App
Image 7.14	Time Limitations on App
Image 7.15	Professional Account Set Up
Image 7.16	Insights Overview
Image 7.17	Budget and Duration
Image 7.18	Make Payment
Image 7.19	Shopping Tab Landing
Image 7.20	Shopping Tab Options
Image 7.21	Product Post in Shopping Tab
Image 7.22	Shopping Collection
Image 7.23	Location Search
Image 7.24	Sandton Location
Image 7.25	Sandton City Information
Image 8.1	African Couture
Image 8.2	Black Fist
Image 8.3	Hispanic Culture
Image 8.4	Frame One Kim Zulu in Parking Lot
Image 8.5	Frame Two Building
Image 8.6	Land a King
Image 8.7	USB Port
Image 8.8	Pancakes and the Male Gaze
Image 8.9	Upskirt
Image 8.10	Body Curves
Image 8.11	Voyeuristic Angle
Image 8.12	Anxious confession
Image 8.13	 Okay, so MINOR PSA
Image 8.14	South African Flag
Image 8.15	Barcode
Image 8.16	Black and White
Image 8.17	Gold Chain
Image 8.18	Frame One Kim Zulu
Image 8.19	Frame Two Connie Ferguson
Image 8.20	Magazine Print
Image 8.21	Wax Statue

Image 8.22	Coachella Live Interview
Image 8.23	Car camera
Image 8.24	Birthday with Bermuda is Bae
Image 8.25	Birthday Real People
Image 8.26	Birthday Blurred
Image 8.27	Birthday Bird's Eye View of Cake
Image 8.28	Birthday Video Balloons in Wind
Image 8.29	Tapping on Camera
Image 8.30	Trend
Image 9.1	Electric Mini Studio Advert
Image 9.2	Kim Zulu in Studio
Image 9.3	Nelson and Winnie Mandela

LIST OF FIGURES	
Figure 6.1	Research Design Followed for This Study
Figure 6.2	Overall Corpus of the Research
Figure 6.3	Participants Interviewed
Figure 6.4	Data Collection Processes Used in Research
Figure 6.5	Data Analysis Processes Used in Research
Figure 6.6	Elements of the App-Walkthrough
Figure 6.7	Multimodal Discourse Analysis Framework
Figure 6.8	Thematic Analysis Steps
Figure 6.9	Example of Thematic Analysis Codes, Themes, Sub Themes
Figure 6.10	Trustworthiness of the Qualitative Research Findings

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The lockdowns enforced by governments all over the world in attempts to curb the spread of COVID-19 severely restricted our movement and face-to-face contact with others. We have never been further apart and, therefore never more dependent on the digital platforms that bring us together. As we increasingly conduct our social interactions and economic transactions online our reality has stepped into the virtual and as a result the virtual has stepped into our reality. A platform that facilitates this shift of offline-life to online-existence is Instagram. Instagram users have grown increasingly dependent on, and as a result accepting of, Instagram.

Originally released as a photo-sharing app, Instagram has integrated numerous media modes to cater to its now one billion active users, including Instagram videos, reels, and Stories (Newberry, 2021). Instagram is described as a “pervasive personal mediation device” (Brownlie, Hewer & Kerrigan, 2015:455) which exemplifies the new era of mobile photography (Manovich, 2017:11), commodified interactivity (Serafinelli, 2017:101) and visual self-presentation (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart & Madden, 2015). It continues to gain popularity in South Africa, with 5.43 million users (Statista, 2021).

As the activity of consumption evolves, so too do the platforms and spaces that facilitate such consumption habits, thus paving the way for “platform capitalism” as an extension of existing commerce models. Since the acquisition of Instagram by Facebook in 2012, various subtle yet impactful updates to Instagram features have occurred that highlight the ethos of “platform capitalism” (Dalayli, 2020:94). Platform capitalism centres around the commercially-driven aspirations of social media platforms that mobilise technological architecture and deploy proprietorial software to facilitate the exchange of commodified goods and services through user activities (Srnicek, 2017; Dyer-Witheford, 2020:116). The business model of social media platforms is one where value is extracted from users regarded as platform-assets who “will yield income that can act as collateral and as sources of profit in their own right” (Leyshon & Thrift, 2007:100). As a result, social media platforms such as Instagram embody discrete modes of capitalist business arrangements that promote consumption (and thereby attract advertising revenue) (Pasquale, 2016:309).

This research investigates how Instagram's platform business model informs the activities the application (app) provides, supports and enables. I aim to uncover how Instagram mobilises the architecture of its user interface to position itself as a network intermediary in fulfilment of its platform capitalist goals. In this way, Instagram not only ingrains the use *of* the app as a crucial tool for everyday digital practices but also certain uses *within* the app. I uncover how this architectural scripting manifests on the app, how it aids Instagram's commercial goals, and how different Instagram user groups in South Africa often obliviously and obediently take on Instagram's idealised user behaviour. Instagram positions itself as a free app, yet I seek to expose the true cost of the personal data we share and the labour we are expected to perform in creating, reacting to, and circulating content on the app.

Platform capitalism furthermore embodies a broader discourse of neoliberalism which naturalises a consumer identity. This idealised user is not only entrenched through the app architecture, but is subtly promoted in the genre of commercialised content celebrated on the app. This shift reflects the broader neoliberal social order of "hyper-commodification" (Maso, Roberston & Rogers, 2019:7). Instagram's changes in navigation, modes of uploading, and novel features have therefore increasingly prioritised commercial interests on the platform, with over 25 million Instagram business accounts now registered on the app (Newberry, 2021) and the number of sponsored posts growing from 2.5 million to 6.5 million in the last five years (Elmhirst, 2019; Newberry, 2021). Responding to this shift, many Instagram users, including South Africans, have become self-investing entrepreneurial capitalists who craft themselves as assets that maximise their positions in the market (Brown, 2015:33; Bosch, 2020). We are constructed to consume and be consumed by others. The rise of social media endorsement content created by celebrities and human influencers illustrates this as they exchange social capital for economic capital (Molina, 2020:11).

As a result, online performances that successfully unlock engagement are a key source of online currency. Authenticity is an example of an engagement-unlocking online performance tool that serves a profit-oriented strategy through the "weaponisation of the performance of self" (Black, 2020:46). There is a growing acceptance that Instagram posts are never truly authentic, and that commercial interests underpin all app content.

As a result, the boundaries between identity, commerce and commodification are blurring at the same time that our online and offline worlds are more blurred than ever. We conduct more

and more of our social interactions and economic transactions online. Our reality has stepped into the virtual, and as a result, the virtual has stepped into our reality. It is at this time when the boundaries between reality and fiction are at their most destabilised that a new form of Instagram profiles has grown in frequency, popularity and potential harm to fellow users. The new phenomenon of virtual influencers, also known as computer-generated imagery (CGI) influencers, embodies this shift. Virtual influencers are neither humans nor robots but are visual creations that mimic the online profiles of human influencers and whose creation by brands and agencies is driven by explicit commercial intent (Kalpokas, 2021). In this research, I outline how the *supply* of virtual influencers is on the rise (given the advanced technical capabilities of creative agencies to execute the creation of human realistic visuals), as well as how the *demand* for these virtual influencers has increased (as brands increasingly see virtual influencers as able to generate higher returns with lower risks than their human influencer counterparts). Furthermore, I investigate how the *market acceptance* is on the rise since Instagram users have become accustomed to the blurring of the authentic and the commercial online.

This research therefore documents the shifts that have occurred over time that have facilitated an acceptance of virtual influencer profiles on Instagram. I seek to outline how years of social media use have altered *perceptions* of the nature of social media endorsement, *expectations* of online performance in adherence to platform capitalism logic and *impressions of* visuals as no longer grounded in reality. As a result, I highlight that modern visuals are no longer necessarily a means to *capture* reality but can actively *construct* that reality, while humans' increasing *synthetic* portrayals through hyper-editing have meant that virtual influencers' increasingly human *realistic* portrayals are increasingly accepted and celebrated. The emergence of these virtual influencers furthermore necessitates a renewed investigation into the kinds of self that are deemed necessary to thrive in today's cyber attention economy. To frame this argument, I focus on two virtual influencers, Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu, as they bear further scrutiny for their role in naturalising consumer identities through authenticity performances in Western and African contexts respectively.

I question how virtual influencers, as vehicles of consumption, sell their identity narratives and what this means for the Instagram audiences that they sell to. I investigate what methods virtual influencer creators use in conveying a sense of authenticity and aliveness in these synthetic profiles. I note that in the same way that Instagram's platform features seemingly promote

authentic interactions between users yet serve the platform creator's profit agenda, virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu employ Enli's (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles to promote "authentic" interactions with followers that serve their profile creator profit agendas. Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu, as "vehicles of consumption" (Molina, 2020:8), are therefore not only embodiments of the commodified shift of Instagram from an online social community to an individualised self-promotional arena but also embodiments of the leveraging of authenticity for platform profit within a broader neoliberal movement.

I aim to explore how virtual influencers furthermore communicate a "cool by consumption" narrative where followers are moulded into compliant consumers. The implications of this in considering the South African audience that Kim Zulu is positioned for, is further investigated. In South Africa since the 1994 political transition, the "freedom to consume" has ostensibly served as a sign of the political freedom won by the liberation struggle (Posel, 2010:157). South Africa's history of barriers of entry to economic, political, and material life, because of systematic racial oppression, has resulted in a growing significance in the post-apartheid era of being able to assert identity through not only our purchasing power, as in the value of our currency in exchange to goods and services, but also our power to purchase, namely the political power to access certain goods (Iqani, 2016:196). The powerful symbolism of aspiration is apparent in the very structure of social media, which is increasingly proving to be the preferred site for this display of luxury consumables that foster consumption behaviours. The online space has become the new terrain for identity formation and communicative consumption (Iqani, 2016:154). Kim Zulu, in posting about "her" luxury lifestyle is therefore commenting about the rights of her (predominantly South African) followers to have equal access to a degree of citizenship previously denied to some. What is of particular interest, in the context of this research, is how virtual influencers simultaneously enact an idealised version of the modern consumer that serves both the commercial interests of the agencies that create them, and the Instagram platform they exist on.

Since the profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu take centre stage in this research, I provide an overview of these accounts below.

1.2 VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS

In this research project, I analyse two virtual influencers whose profiles are selected for their ability to exemplify the platform capitalist shift of Instagram from a Western, namely Lil Miquela, and African, namely Kim Zulu, context.

1.2.1 Lil Miquela

The Instagram account @lilmiquela was created in 2016 by Brud, a Los Angeles based start-up. Although Brud has created various virtual profiles, the most successful is the Instagram influencer turned “singer” Lil Miquela, one of the earliest virtual influencers to be made and positioned specifically for the Instagram platform (Black, 2020:47). She claims to be from Downey, California and “her” full name is apparently Miquela DeSousa. The Instagram profile enacts a 19-year-old racially ambiguous model and musician persona (Mc Donald, 2018; Rouse, 2019). Although categorising her is challenging, many journalists and scholars have described her as a light-skinned woman of colour with Spanish roots (Sabraw, 2020:9). The Lil Miquela profile details a fictional narrative that follows the personal highs and lows of Lil Miquela as she navigates her conflicting identity as a “virtual being,” deals with breakups and partners with numerous top brands in advertising campaigns. She is a model (for top brands from Prada to Calvin Klein); a musician (with over 100,000 monthly Spotify listeners); fashion brand owner (she created the Club 404 clothing line along with her other virtual influencer “friends”), and a podcast host (ironically entitled “Get Real”) (Singh-Kurtz, 2018; Drenten & Brooks, 2020:1).

For the purposes of this research, I refer to the @lilmiquela Instagram account as “Lil Miquela” and not Miquela de Sousa, which is the alleged full name of the virtual character. Due to the creation of her profile as @lilmiquela, the “existence” of this virtual character begins and ends with the profile and username, so reference to the profile will follow this Lil Miquela format.

1.2.2 Kim Zulu

Kim Zulu is described as “South Africa's first virtual model” (Ntwasa, 2020) and was created by Lebo Kambule. Kambule is a South African based graphic designer who worked with EMOJI Digital (now named The Avatar Company), a creative agency based in Johannesburg, South Africa (Kambule, 2019).

The profile is entirely created using 3D modelling software and was launched in March 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Sporting dark skin, a bald head and distinctive African face-prints, “she” is described as a “bubbly 21-year-old girl” who is “passionate about modelling” (Kambule, 2019; Jadezweni, 2020). The Kim Zulu profile has collaborated with established brands such as Puma, Kangol, Superbalist, Veet, BMW Mini and Engen (Engen SA, 2020; Masemola, 2020). Her plans allegedly include a music album, television show, and a DJ career (Jadezweni, 2020; Ntwasa, 2020). In this research, I refer to the @KimZulu_ Instagram profile as “Kim Zulu”.

1.3 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

I include several complex notions in my study. Because of the range of definitions in the literature, I clarify the central concepts in the following section before proceeding with the study's problem statement.

1.3.1 Influencers

Social media influencers are human individuals who shape attitudes and behaviours through online channels by acting as opinion leaders (Klassen, Borleis, Brennan, Reid, McCaffrey & Lim, 2018; Song, Han, Lee & Kim, 2018). Influencers are Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media sites through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles (Abidin, 2016:4). They use their social power to shape the behaviour of others and monetise their digital following by integrating “advertorials” into their blogs or social media posts (Robinson, 2020:1). Influencer categories range from “nano influencers” (below 10,000 followers), “micro-influencers” (10,000 to 100,000 followers), “macro-influencers” (100,000 followers to one million followers) and “mega-influencers” (over one million followers) (Cherrington, 2016; Allison, 2020).

1.3.2 Virtual Influencers

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2020) defines an influencer as “a person or thing with the ability to influence potential buyers of a product or service by recommending it on social media.” By specifying that a “thing” and a “person” can wield influence, this Oxford definition addresses the evolving nature of influencing and allows for a broader conception of the term, encompassing virtual influencers. I agree with Darner and Arvidsson's (2019:7) critique that current definitions of virtual influencers are “vague and generic,” and I further argue that they are often contradictory.

Although a formalised definition does not exist, for this research I partially accept the definition by Creasey and Anido (2020:12) as well as Andersson and Sobek (2020:8) of a virtual influencer as “a computer-generated persona and digital entity with a recognisable personality and an established personal narrative, but no physical form, that is created, crafted, narrated and managed to promote or sell a particular message for marketing purposes” (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020:149). I expand on this definition to include a virtual influencer as being a virtual profile that exists in the online space, does not have a physical presence offline and is not necessarily based on a real person, but is instead a digital creation that mimics similar real human profiles that appear on an online platform.

1.3.3 Mediated Authenticity

Mediated authenticity is grounded in the idea that our understanding of society is based on mediated representations of reality (Gill, 2009:346). Enli (2015:2) explores this concept by arguing that mediated authenticity is established through negotiations between producers and audiences in what is coined the “authenticity contract,” where the genre of the platform that the authenticity performance occurs in guides the audience’s expectations and market strategies that help people interpret media content. The authenticity contract is adhered to through production techniques and authenticity illusions, which range from minor adjustments such as lighting and sound effects to drastic post-production editing and photoshopping (Enli, 2015:2). Sometimes the authenticity contract is broken, leading to authenticity scandals and the need to renegotiate this contract.

1.3.4 Social Media

Social networking sites are network communication platforms where participants have uniquely identifiable profiles and share media content that others can interact and view via online streams of user-generated content (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007:158; Ahmad, 2016:2). The most popular platforms in terms of monthly active users, as well as monthly time spent, for 2020, include Facebook (which emphasises social communication); Twitter (which emphasises news and links exchange); LinkedIn (which emphasises professional connections); Instagram (which emphasises aesthetic visual communication), as well as Snapchat and TikTok (which emphasise ephemeral content) (Manovich, 2017:41; Kellogg, 2020).

1.3.5 Platform Capitalism

Platform capitalism employs a platform's technological architecture and business models to gain a competitive advantage and create novel forms of value (van Doorn, 2018:104). Langley & Leyshon (2017:25) define a platform as a novel form of digital economic circulation and a feature of the "new economy." The platform thus becomes a legitimate object of capitalisation, that is, an enterprise that can access debt from investors because its revenue prospects suggest that it can realise a return on capital. Platform capitalism is thus seen as "variegated capitalism" as it is both a continuity and rupture in our global capitalist system (Maso *et al.* 2019:6; Zhang, 2020:131).

1.3.6 Discourse

Discourse is "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about [and] representing the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment" (Hall, 1992:291).

1.3.7 Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces favouring free-market capitalism and deregulation which puts competition at the centre of social life (Wilson, 2018). It praises competition for its ability to ensure efficiency and incite creativity. Neoliberalism asserts that when spurred by competition, individuals and companies will seek to optimise and innovate, creating a genuinely free social world where the best people and ideas come out on top (Wilson, 2018). There is an emphasis on amplifying outputs while reducing inputs and a logic that, although expected, labour effort should be hidden (Britannica, 2021).

The following section will deliberate on the problem statement of the study.

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT

There has been an "influx of avatars" onto social media and online advertising spaces (Tiffany, 2019). Journalists and scholars describe virtual influencers as "fictional characters" (Black, 2020:46), "synthetic persons" (Kalpokas, 2021:6), "hyper-realistic avatars" (Creasey & Anido, 2020:1), "humanoids" (Verburg, 2020:10), "robot pop stars" (Molina, 2020:2) and "promotional bots" (Lacković, 2020:2). From Bed, Bath & Beyond furniture (Cherrington, 2016) to Louis Vuitton clothes (Tiffany, 2019) and from Renault cars (Mosely, 2020) to KFC

food (Cook, 2020), various brands are taking advantage of the “eye-catching solution for brand representation” that virtual influencers provide (Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:46).

To date, around 120 virtual influencers have been identified (Bojanic, 2019:11; Kambula, 2020; Molina, 2020:7). As Tiffany (2019) puts it, “virtual influencers are seen as the future of advertisements, the future of fashion, the future of commerce,” and so their presence on the Instagram platform should be acknowledged, but they should not go unchallenged, as they represent a particular moment within global neoliberalism.

The @lilmiquela profile is the most popular virtual influencer with three million followers (known as “Miqaliens”) and a nomination from TIME magazine as a member of the 25 most influential “people” on the internet. Lil Miquela’s success is adopted in a South African context in creating @KimZulu_. Kim Zulu is the only virtual influencer account created by a design team on the African continent. No academic research has been conducted on the profile to date. This thesis aims to address a notable research gap by analysing her Instagram posts and presenting findings from an interview with a member of the creative design team behind the profile’s creation.

In exploring the significance of the Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu profiles, it is worth discussing what identity narratives they perform and how this is rewarded and made visible on Instagram through the rewarding or penalising mechanisms of the platform algorithm and app architecture. In the same way that the media might not tell audiences what to think but may inform what audiences “think about” (Cohen, 2012:202), platform architecture exerts power through its prioritisation and encouragement of specific actions and discouragement of other actions through technical limitations. As Kracauer (1960:2) states, each medium has a particular nature that invites certain kinds of communications while obstructing others. In this way, the Instagram interface informs the “cultural scripts” and “platform practices” regarding the norms and expected use of the app, which together constitute the “genre” of Instagram texts. Like any commercial genre, these features channel user behaviour to serve the profit-agenda of its creators (Kerr, Kücklich & Brereton, 2006:68; Abidin, 2016:87; Nieborg, Duff & Poell, 2020:1).

The choices made by the creators of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu in their construction of the virtual influencer’s online narratives in adherence to these platform practices and celebrated

identity norms invites scrutiny. If no aspect of the creation of the Lil Miquela or Kim Zulu profiles is neutral (their class, gender, ethnicity, or age), then both profiles are the culmination of a series of deliberate choices of representation and can be read as social “texts” (Van Leeuwen, 2001:394). Prinsloo (2009:210) notes that the choices made to construct a text draw on the discourses at play in society and are acts of mediation which propose and validate a way of knowing and being. In this way, certain modes of representation become naturalised and adopted as the prominent discourse. In the age of platform capitalism, this discourse is one of neoliberalism that naturalises a consumer identity.

In this thesis, I critique the power exercised through the naturalisation of this identity where we are constructed to consume and be consumed by others in adherence with capitalist ideologies. These ideologies were communicated through popular culture in the past and are now communicated and naturalised through social media. Shifts in the attention economy have altered these hegemonic identities and prompted users to adhere to these forms of subjectivity. Neoliberalism, as exemplified in the platform capitalism of Instagram, therefore, becomes a set of not just ideas, but practices in which we are prompted to do “work” on the self in creating profiles that produce the branded and commoditised self (Foucault, 1977; Hall, 1992; Althusser, Balibar, Establet, Ranciere, Macherey & 2016).

Instagram presents this neoliberal discourse and capitalist ideology as a naturalised status quo on Instagram. A discourse will always stem from a socially (politically) identifiable point and will serve the interests of the groups around that point by making their sense of the real appear as common sense (Fiske, 2010:42). I question where the discourse of Instagram platform capitalism-inspired realism originates and whose point of view is naturalised in the context of social media. Similarly, it is worth investigating whose interests are being served and whose, if any, are disadvantaged by the new “reality” that virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu embody.

The current cultural moment is one where a distinction between the “original,” the “real,” and the “authentic” is no longer evident as digital identities have blurred these boundaries to the point that authenticity and realism as we have come to know it, might no longer exist (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016:413; Nguyen, 2016). Virtual influencers are also significant in demonstrating the changing nature of perceptions of being “real,” such as the commercialisation of authenticity. Until recently, we assessed authenticity by positioning the “authentic self” in

opposition to commercial success (Hahn, 2019:35). However, the rise of social media and the identity performance it requires has meant that authenticity has become a profit-oriented strategy as Instagram “weaponises the performance of self” (Black, 2020:46). In the same way that Instagram’s platform features seemingly promote authentic interactions between users yet serve the platform creator’s profit agenda, Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu’s profiles employ Enli’s (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles to promote “authentic” interactions with followers that serve the profile creator’s profit agenda. Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu, as “vehicles of consumption” (Molina, 2020:8), are therefore not only embodiments of the commodified shift of Instagram from an online social community to an individualised self-promotional arena, but also embodiments of the leveraging of authenticity for platform profit within a broader neoliberal movement.

We require more research in the virtual influencer field as virtual influencers are an under-researched emerging phenomenon, which have the potential to drastically impact the influencer industry and Instagram platform discourse as a whole. The results obtained in this study can serve to understand the significance of these new virtual profiles, the risks of blurring real and virtual boundaries, and how the ethics of disclosure may guide a future where virtual influencers and human profiles co-exist on social media platforms.

Therefore, I formulate the problem statement for the study as follows:

How do Instagram platform features serve as mechanisms of platform capitalism, and in what ways do these features enable the authenticity-for-profit performances of the virtual influencers Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu? How do South African Instagram users experience these features and performances?

To answer these research questions, I present a foundational overview of the definition of virtual influencers and the evolving endorsement landscape in which they operate in **Chapter Two**. I argue that the *supply* of virtual influencers is on the rise (given the advanced technical capabilities of creative agencies to execute the creation of human realistic visuals) as well as the *demand* for these virtual influencers (as brands increasingly see virtual influencers as able to generate higher returns with lower risks than their human influencer counterparts). By doing so, I argue that virtual influencers undoubtedly represent the next phase of the endorser evolution and are no less structured, organised or impactful than the human influencers that preceded them.

In **Chapter Three**, I argue that these commercially-driven endorsers are as much a result of the market they exist in as the platform they operate on. I maintain that social media platforms such as Instagram have entrenched themselves as the new arena for digital economic circulation. By scrutinising the characteristics of platform capitalism (digital infrastructural intermediators, network effects and cross-subsidisation), as well as Instagram's platform revenue models (extracting data/time from users and advertising spend from brands), I maintain that both profit-seeking users of Instagram and general users of the platform are transformed into commercial assets. The increasing expectation of visibility labour, and the algorithmic punishment if not done, is explored through the lens of neoliberalism. The role of virtual influencers Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu as portraying this idealised version of the modern consumer to Western and Southern audiences respectively takes on particular significance in South Africa with its legacy of inequality where affirming our newfound political freedom and economic status through possessions is a political act as much as an economic one.

I illustrate Instagram users' changing *perceptions* of the nature of endorsement in Chapter Two and their changing *expectations* of profile creation and maintenance in adherence to platform capitalism in Chapter Three. **Chapter Four** depicts their changing *impressions* of visuals given the new visual mode of "Instagramism." I argue that visuals are no longer necessarily a means to *capture* reality but can actively *construct* that reality. The mobile camera phone and its features of numerical representation and condensing; transcoding; modularity, convergence, mobility; variability and editing, as well as automation and computational photography, have further problematised previous ideas of visuals as depictions of reality. Digital cameras have evolved from being *recording* devices to *production* devices that do not just *take* pictures but *make* pictures. These changing perceptions of the reality of a visual, with embedded editing creating a hyper-real stream of content, enable virtual influencer visuals to be "read" as belonging to the same category as other human influencers. I build on this idea in **Chapter Five** by arguing that humans' increasing *synthetic* portrayals through hyper-editing, coupled with virtual influencers' increasingly *human realistic* portrayals, contribute to virtual influencers' believability as "real" beings.

In **Chapter Six** I outline the research methods used in this study. Chapters Seven, Eight, and Nine set out the empirical evidence of my research and present an investigation of the three sites of meaning-making in visuals. This includes (1) the site of the production of an image,

namely the “technological” as explored through an app-walkthrough of Instagram in Chapter Seven. After that, (2) the site of the image itself, namely the “compositional,” is explored in Chapter Eight, where Instagram posts from the profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu are analysed. The final empirical chapter, Chapter Nine, explores (3) the site where it is seen by various audiences, namely the “social.” In **Chapter Seven**, I demonstrate that Instagram’s architecture works as a behavioural “script” that directs user behaviours towards activities that serve Instagram’s platform capital goals. I argue that Instagram prompts 1) the extraction of user data; 2) the labour of content generation; 3) the consumption of content, and 4) the spending of money on the app.

In **Chapter Eight**, I demonstrate that mediated authenticity (as communicated to audiences through media) is a social construction achieved through an interplay between audience expectations and preconceptions about what determines a sense of the “real,” on one hand, and media producers’ success in delivering content that corresponds with these notions, on the other hand. I explain how mediated authenticity relies on the successful implementation of “authenticity illusions,” and I reference Enli’s (2015) findings that these authenticity illusions are constructed through seven mediated authenticity principles. I argue that virtual influencers use these mediated authenticity principles of predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, imperfection, and ambivalence to construct 1) an identity as relatable to followers; 2) a persona in keeping with expected celebrity/influencer behaviours, and 3) a posting pattern in line with Instagram’s platform-specific content creation genre. I demonstrate this through a multimodal discourse analysis by considering the position and composition, point of view, pose and angle, demographic; caption and modality of 30 visuals extracted from the Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu virtual influencer Instagram profiles.

In **Chapter Nine**, I present the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted. The participants interviewed consisted of two key groups, namely, 13 South African Instagram users and one member of the creative team behind the Kim Zulu virtual influencer profile (the Representative). Within the South African Instagram user group, I distinguished three important subgroups, namely, the Privates (everyday Instagram users who have their account settings on private), the Influencers (users whose accounts are on public and who utilise Instagram in promoting a brand for commercial purposes), and the Creatives (namely photographers or creators in the visual space who use Instagram for inspiration, portfolio sharing and networking). Each of these groups had different uses for Instagram, different views

towards platform capitalism and different reactions to virtual influencers and their attempts at authenticity. By exploring the viewpoints of one of the producers of virtual influencer content against the consumers of virtual influencer content, I place these critical stakeholders in conversation with each other for the first time in academic research. In **Chapter Ten**, I conclude the findings, present the study's contribution, offer recommendations and guidelines on a future in which virtual influencers co-exist on the platform and outline the study's limitations to guide future research.

1.5 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Kuhnle (2019:3) rightly argues that the current lack of in-depth knowledge regarding the virtual influencer space is due to the lack of combined academic research approaches into social media influencers, Instagram as a media platform, its media producers and representational practices executed on the app. However, the growth of virtual influencers has recently sparked interest in academic writing, joining the existing journalistic conversation. General research on virtual influencers have investigated their impact on video advertising (Pozharliev & Marcati, 2019:5), or have compared the differences between how virtual influencers are consumed in the East and West (Hoang & Su, 2019:1), as well as the responses of followers to levels of advertising disclosure (Abdullahi, 2020:14). Research by Stamatoula and Kirke (2019:46) compared the comments on posts from different virtual influencers, including Lil Miquela, Bermuda is Bae, Blawko, Shudu and Imaa. The degree of human “realisticness” of virtual depictions proved a popular angle of research as Seymour, Yuan, Dennis & Riemer (2020:4673) analysed perceived trustworthiness, affinity, and preference to human realistic avatars, while Creasey & Anido (2020:78) investigated the favourability of virtual influencers in terms of realisticness and the “uncanny valley.”

In investigating the profiles of Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela specifically, no academic research has considered the Kim Zulu profile, with just a handful of media articles mentioning the profile. The large following of Lil Miquela and the fact that the account has been around for almost five years means that the profile has received more scholarly attention. Research has analysed Lil Miquela within the field of anthropology (Bojanic, 2019:3), informatics (Darner & Arvidsson, 2019) and neural rendering of digital face generation (Seymour, Riemer & Yuan, 2021:4859), with most works investigating Lil Miquela from a marketing perspective. Scholars such as Antonio & Gaidamaviciute (2020:1) have evaluated the “brand value” of a Lil Miquela, with Darner & Arvidsson (2019:27) analysing Lil Miquela as a form of “virtual star creation.”

On the other hand, some have operationalised Lil Miquela's profile in terms of digital, interactive and transmedia narratives (Spinelli, 2019:5).

Additional research assessed consumers' perceptions of Lil Miquela's authenticity (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:1) as well as followers' responses to and interaction with Lil Miquela (Bojanic, 2019:3) with Molin and Nordgren (2019:1), investigating Lil Miquela's parasocial relationship with followers. Lil Miquela has also explicitly been studied from an ontological and ethical lens (Robinson, 2020:2). Carbajal and Blanton (2019) investigated what they described as Lil Miquela's "social media deception," while Walter (2020:4) analysed to what extent the identification of an influencer as virtual and not human influences consumers in their purchasing intentions and brand perceptions. Kalpokas (2021:1) and Dalayli (2020:87) have analysed her profile as an embodiment of synthetic media and an example of Baudrillard's simulation and simulacra. Several studies have investigated Lil Miquela's impact on the fashion industry as a marketing tool (Matthíasdóttir, 2018; Vaughan, 2020:44; Stamatoula & Kirke, 2019). In contrast, Molina (2020:31) takes a critical stance in investigating Lil Miquela as an embodiment of the objectification of female bodies.

Although the topics investigated in the research are important, the research methodologies chosen also bear further scrutiny. Desktop research methodologies employed in research on Lil Miquela have either analysed content created on her profile or Instagram audience reactions to this content. For instance, Kuhnle (2019:34) compared her posts to a human influencer's, while Molina (2020:2) analysed a video "interview" conducted with "her" on a YouTube talk show. The comments section of Lil Miquela's profile also served as a rich source of data in analysing audience perceptions, with Verburg (2020:4) mining user comments on Lil Miquela posts and Hahn (2019:2) and Stamatoula and Kirke (2019) conducting semiotic analysis on realness and authenticity themes in these comments. Another research area concerning virtual influencers are focus group and individual interviews with Instagram users on their perceptions of the profiles (Robinson, 2020:2; Andersson & Sobek, 2020:1; Bojanic, 2019:3; Molin, & Nordgren, 2019:1; Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:7)

Despite this body of scholarship, there are various gaps that this research addresses through investigating the topic through an alternative analytical lens. This project furthers knowledge in the following ways. Firstly, although virtual influencers from the perspective of Western and Asian audiences (Hoang & Su, 2019:1) have been researched, no scholars have analysed virtual

influencers from a Southern context. Inequality, aspiration, and authenticity become sites of tension when related to luxury lifestyles on Instagram. Investigating this within the Southern and specifically, African context is therefore crucial. This research will be the first of its kind in analysing South African perceptions on virtual influencers - both in exploring South African's perceptions about a Western virtual influencer such as Lil Miquela and perceptions about a local South African virtual influencer such as Kim Zulu.

Secondly, the profile of virtual influencer Kim Zulu, although investigated in a few local news articles, has never been researched academically. With Kim Zulu being the only existing virtual influencer created by a design team from the African continent, this is a substantial gap that the research aims to address. Thirdly, to date, no creative team behind the conceptualisation and design of a virtual influencer has been interviewed globally, with most agencies such as Brud, the creators of Lil Miquela, aiming to shroud their identities in secrecy. This research, therefore, provides a unique interview with a member of the creative team behind a virtual Influencer.

The time frame of the investigation into Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu's posts is also of relevance. As Hahn (2019:36) noted, there is a need for "longitudinal studies" of future research on virtual influencers. This research, conducted over three years, achieves just that. Furthermore, most research has investigated Lil Miquela within the framework of authenticity, yet no study has analysed her profile according to Enli's (2015) mediated authenticity principles. Additionally, although researchers have analysed the imagery of Lil Miquela's profile and how the visual composition of her posts stimulates a narrative of authenticity, to date, none have explored how the Lil Miquela profile uses the Instagram app features as a whole to communicate this authenticity narrative.

Furthermore, none have analysed virtual influencers using the lens of platform capitalism and neoliberalism. As the rawest embodiment of the weaponisation of authenticity performances for capital gain, virtual influencers are an essential topic that this thesis addresses. Lastly, this research seeks to contribute significantly through its innovative data collection methodology. Scant research has been conducted on app-walkthrough methods for Instagram, recent updates to platform architecture necessitate further investigation as the previous research conducted to this point loses relevance with every feature update, which changes app use.

1.6 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In the previous section, I discussed the research problem investigated. I will address the primary and secondary objectives of this study next.

1.6.1 Primary Objective

The primary objective of this study is to attempt to determine how Instagram platform features serve as mechanisms of platform capitalism and how these features enable the authenticity-for-profit performances of the virtual influencers Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu.

1.6.2 Secondary Objectives

I identified the following secondary objectives to achieve the study's primary objective. This research aims:

- To conduct a literature review on the evolution of endorsement and how virtual influencers have emerged as a new category in this industry.
- To provide a robust definition of virtual influencers and the perceived benefits that working with virtual influencers offer.
- To understand the role of luxury lifestyle narratives for Instagram users in the global South, and Africa in particular
- To examine how platform capitalism and the transformation of profiles to reputation assets contribute to the discourse of consumption within neoliberalism.
- To explore how advances in visual technology alter our perceptions of reality and visual “truth.”
- To examine the changing definition of authenticity in the online space, as well as interrogate the narratives of the Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu profiles that aim to embody new definitions of online authenticity.
- To analyse how the profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu perform Enli’s (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles.
- To document how the architecture of the Instagram platform guides consumer practices in favour of its platform capitalist goals.
- To shed light on South African Instagram users’ responses to virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu.

1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs the interpretivism paradigm or qualitative research approach, enabling us to cultivate new theories instead of simply testing existing ideas (Collis & Hussey 2014:46). The empirical research section consists of three stages: 1) an app-walkthrough of Instagram to demonstrate the architectural features that guide platform capitalist aims; 2) multimodal discourse analysis of purposive selected virtual influencer content (18 Lil Miquela and 12 Kim

Zulu Instagram visuals) to demonstrate how mediated authenticity principles are weaponised and performed for material gains; 3) semi-structured interviews with 12 South African Instagram users and one representative from the Kim Zulu creative team.

1.7.1 App-Walkthrough Method

The app-walkthrough method involves the step-by-step observation of an app's screens, features, and activity flows, thus revealing cues hidden within Instagram architecture (Light, Burgess & Duguay, 2016:1). This method assists in identifying the technological mechanisms that shape, and are shaped by, the app's cultural, social, political, and economic context (Nguyen, 2017:14). I investigate Instagram according to its vision, operating model, registration and entry process (from downloading to signing up), everyday use (from posting reels to resharing Stories) and profile deletion process. In this way I seek to gain insights into the design architecture that facilitates online interactions.

1.7.2 Visual Social Semiotics (Multimodal Discourse Analysis)

I analysed 18 Lil Miquela and 12 Kim Zulu visuals from Instagram posts using a multimodal discourse analysis which analyses how several or all of the different semiotic modes work together to create a unified text or communicative event (Liu, 2013:1260). The multimodal discourse analysis includes position and composition; point of view, pose and angle; demographic; caption and modality. I furthermore incorporate Enli's (2015) mediated authenticity principles, including predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, imperfection, and ambivalence. In this way, I interrogate visuals of Instagram posts for their embedded meaning and demonstrate how these meanings work together in achieving mediated authenticity in the construction of an identity that 1) is relatable to followers; 2) is in keeping with expected celebrity/influencer behaviours and 3) adheres to platform behavioural scripts.

1.7.3 Semi-Structured Interviews (South African Instagram Users)

I interviewed 13 purposefully selected participants, which consisted of two key groups, namely, 12 representing South African Instagram users and one participant representing the Kim Zulu design team (the Representative). Within the South African Instagram user group, I distinguished three important subgroups, namely, the Privates (everyday Instagram users who had their account settings on private), the Influencers (users whose accounts are on public and who utilise Instagram in promoting a brand for commercial purposes), and the Creatives

(namely photographers or creators in the visual space who use Instagram for inspiration, portfolio sharing and networking). These interviews explore perceptions of virtual influencers and general user consumer behaviour on the Instagram platform.

The meaning of an image is made at three sites, namely: the site(s) of the production of production an image (the technological), the site of the image itself (the compositional), and the site(s) where audiences see it (the social) (Rose, 2007:13). This research examines all three. I investigate the site of production through interviewing a representative of the creative team behind the Kim Zulu virtual profile; the site of the image itself through a multimodal discourse analysis of the content of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu posted on Instagram; and the site seen by audiences through an Instagram app-walkthrough method and interviews with Instagram users in their experiences of Instagram and the virtual influencer profiles. This research thus provides a holistic view of virtual influencers and the neoliberal themes that underpin their existence.

1.8 CONCLUSION

Opening up a debate is easier than resolving it (Liebes & Curran, 1998:239). With the realm of virtual influencers being relatively under-researched and critical concepts such as platform capitalism and neoliberalism entering the discussion, this research is exploratory of nature. This research does not aim to argue that virtual influencers or platform capitalism should be done away with, but rather, in the spirit of critical analysis, it aims to broaden the scope of our understanding of the phenomenon and problematise vital issues so that these can be analysed adequately. Understanding what virtual influencers are, how they operate, why they have emerged and thrived on Instagram and how and why they need to be differentiated from human profiles is a critical next stage of Instagram media literacy.

Lunenfield (2011:76) remarked that “the web has now been around long enough to think through what we might mean by developing it.” This research poses that same argument in light of the Instagram platform. Over ten years of Instagram's existence means that we should ponder the platform's role in our lives and how we see the next ten years of development of the platform unfolding. Virtual influencer profiles, as an emerging element of Instagram's future, should not go unnoticed or unchallenged.

CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter One provided an overview of the research project and commenced with a background discussion of the critical points of investigation in the research. I explored the investigated research problem and introduced the primary and secondary study objectives. I clarified the concepts used in the study and outlined the proposed research design and methodology. In this chapter, I provide an in-depth analysis of the virtual influencer phenomenon with a specific focus on the Instagram profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu as representatives of the trend towards virtual influencers in Western and Southern online contexts.

Influencers are individuals or groups who can shape attitudes and behaviours through online channels and leverage their online following to endorse products/brands (Klassen *et al.*, 2018; Song *et al.*, 2018). As a form of human endorsement, influencers have become a defining characteristic of the present mediatised society (Driessens, 2012:641). With trillions spent annually on endorsements, this form of marketing has entrenched itself within the fabric of consumption culture (La Ferla, 2005; Crutchfield, 2010; Lamb, 2012). The current saturation of traditional advertising, combined with decreased consumer attention spans, makes attaining and maintaining the attention of online audiences essential, with endorsers proving an attention-grabbing solution to brands (Nkosi, 2011:1; Harris, 2015).

Endorsers substantially enhance advertising effectiveness and financial success by boosting sales of advertised products and services (Banister & Cocker, 2014:25; Mathys, Burmester, & Clement, 2016:430). However, the appeal of human endorsers such as traditional celebrities and human influencers have shown signs of decline. Industry experts have started to imagine what the next phase of the endorser evolution will be characterised by and in what form this new vehicle of consumption will manifest in (Ndlela & Chuchu, 2016:79). Virtual influencers such as the Instagram profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu have emerged as the forerunners of this new category of endorsement. These virtual influencers are “digital entities with no physical form that is created, crafted, narrated and managed to promote or sell a particular message or brand” (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:149).

This chapter presents a working definition of this new category of virtual influencers and sets out the current landscape that virtual profiles operate in. I review the evolution of endorsement

to investigate similar “shoppable avatars of consumer avarice” (Error, 2018), namely traditional celebrities and standard human influencers that preceded the new category of virtual endorsers. In this way, I will trace the changing marketing landscape that has fostered the emergence of virtual influencers, including the adjusted expectations of consumers of online Instagram content. According to market logic, demand generates supply. This chapter will establish the “demand” of brands to “buy into” these virtual influencers as new vessels for online content generation. I demonstrate how virtual influencers generate higher returns with lower risks than their human counterparts. In this way, I construct a foundational knowledge of what virtual influencers, such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu, are and what context they operate in.

2.2 VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS

There has been an “influx of avatars” onto social media and online advertising spaces (Tiffany, 2019). The relatively under-researched realm of the social media virtual influencer industry is slowly becoming more pertinent for academic research on media production and representation (Kuhnle, 2019:3). Virtual influencers, also known as “CGI influencers” have been described as “digital art projects” (Grosler, 2018), “synthespians” (synthetic thespians/actors) (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:152); “horrifying social experiments” (Tiffany, 2019), “synthetic persons” (Kalpokas, 2021:6), “artificial intelligence (AI) avatars” (Dooley, 2020), “virtual characters” (Error, 2018), “hyper-realistic avatars” (Creasey & Anido, 2020:1), “humanoids” (Verburg, 2020:10), “computer-generated cyborgs” (Jones, 2018), “digital simulations” (Mc Donald, 2018), “viral sensations” (Sobande, 2021), “virtual brand ambassadors” (Kadekov & Holienčinova, 2018:97), “anonymous celebrities” (Darner & Arvidsson, 2019:7), “robot pop stars” (Molina, 2020:2), “visual expressions of an algorithmic sublime” (Horning, 2018), “algorithms of desire” (Lacković, 2020:2), “transmedia storytelling characters” (Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:7), “Sims marketing stunts” (Cherrington, 2016), “mannequin dolls” (Black, 2020:46), “glorified stickers” (Horning, 2018), and “promotional bots” (Lacković, 2020:2).

While the existence of virtual influencers is fake, their influence is “real” (Trepany, 2019:6). From Bed, Bath & Beyond furniture (Cherrington, 2016) to Louis Vuitton clothes (Tiffany, 2019) and from Renault cars (Mosely, 2020) to KFC food (Cook, 2020), various brands are taking advantage of the “eye-catching solution for brand representation” that virtual influencers provide (Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:46; Walter, 2020:12). To date, scholars have identified between 44 (Bojanic, 2019:11) and 60 virtual influencers on Instagram (Molina,

2020:7), with the VirtualHuman.org website categorising a total of 120 virtual influencers who classified as “masculine,” “Instagram verified,” “doll-like,” “humanitarian” and “animalistic,” to name a few, with some focusing on modelling (@heymrs.stone) or erotic content (@thereal.veronica, @milamilo.gram) (Bojanic, 2019:11). Christopher Travers, founder of VirtualHumans.org, “the database for all things virtual influencers,” maintains that virtual influencers “represent the ongoing merger of humanity and the internet” as they “enhance and humanise the world’s relationship with digital experiences” (Klein, 2020). The following section explores this emerging class of virtual influencers, including a comprehensive inquiry into the Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu profiles.

2.2.1 Defining Virtual Influencers

It is essential to accurately and objectively define the virtual influencer category. Reducing virtual influencers by placing them in the same bracket as avatars or robots conceals the possible harm they may cause for the human profiles they try to imitate. We need to know what we are looking at. We need to understand how to critically read what we see.

In conceptualising a definition for virtual influencers, it is perhaps easier to start, not with what they are, but with what they are not. The four popular areas of categorisation in defining virtual influencers include “avatars,” “robots,” “virtual agents,” and “virtual characters/celebrities.” The section below will illustrate what these terms mean and where they are or are not relevant concerning virtual influencers.

2.2.1.1 Avatar

A digital avatar is “an avatar with the realistic, interactive facial representation of the human actor puppeting it” with its behaviour imitating the human actor behind it (Guadagno, Blascovich, Bailenson & McCall, 2007:14; Seymour, Riemer & Kay, 2018:955). Therefore, an avatar is a virtual image that a person shapes and/or chooses as their “embodiment” in an electronic medium, and the user controls it entirely (Pozharliev & Marcati, 2019:6; Walter, 2020:10). As smoke contextually indicates a fire, our avatar in the virtual world is supposed to indexically signify our physical existence in the offline world (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce & Taylor, 2012:52). Research on avatars has found that they are used to decrease uncertainty since avatars function as means to clarify emotions and recognise, identify and evaluate others (Nowak & Rauh, 2005:156). Avatars are, therefore, the digital, online representation of an offline, alive being. It would therefore not be entirely accurate to describe these virtual

influencers as “avatars” as avatars are “icons or images representing a living being” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020), and there is essentially no “living being” that virtual accounts such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu expressly represent.

2.2.1.2 Robots

When people encounter what is new and unfamiliar, users deal with the anxiety this evokes by relating the unfamiliar element to the familiar (Janssen, 2017:193). Perhaps the unfamiliarity of virtual influencers has led to their incorrect categorisation as robots, as robots are a familiar category of “being” that users are accustomed to.

Virtual influencers are not “working robots” as these are “practical machines that are designed to do work, for example, a mechanical arm in a factory” (Hahn, 2019:6). The confusion occurs when we define virtual influencers as “virtual robots” (Nonaka, Inoue, Arai & Mae, 2004) or “fantasy machines” (Bailey, 2005) which are “mythic android robots” that strive to imitate the human form and do not have a practical function (Hahn, 2019:8). However, even this categorisation is inaccurate as a robot, whether working or fantasy, is “a physical machine that resembles a living creature” and is “capable of moving independently and performing complex actions (such as grasping and moving objects)” (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2020). The profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu are, therefore, not visual illustrations representing physical robots that exist offline but are visual creations with no offline physical reality.

2.2.1.3 Virtual Agents

Virtual agents, also known as AI agents, can be identified as entities that include AI and robotic algorithms to perform tasks without human involvement (Seymour *et al.*, 2020:4677). The behaviour of a virtual agent reflects its crafted algorithm, which guides its completion of different tasks. Nowadays, virtual agents are used mainly by organisations within the customer service area, such as answering customer requests or handling simple problems (Guadagno *et al.*, 2007:15). Describing virtual influencers as “virtual agents” is therefore inaccurate as despite the illusion that virtual influencers present of having “agency” over their “life,” humans create and manage their profile. These virtual influencers are however still managed by humans and do not have agency of their own.

2.2.1.4 Virtual Characters and Virtual Celebrities

Virtual characters are dependent on the constructed story worlds for which they have explicitly been created. They only live in and from the story — without the story, there would not be the character (Hoang & Su, 2019:19). On the other hand, virtual influencers do not fall exclusively in this category, as unlike virtual characters, who only appear in their given fantasy story worlds, virtual influencers make claims to reality by performing “real life” activities and soliciting the spending of real money on real products. Therefore, virtual influencers are closer to being defined as “virtual celebrities” (Hoang & Su, 2019:9). Therefore, every virtual celebrity is a virtual character, but not vice versa (Hoang & Su, 2019:9). However, I do not find the description of virtual influencers as “virtual celebrities” to be entirely accurate either since the realm of “celebrity” is distinguished from that of an “influencer” both in the human and virtual space.

A celebrity is someone famous for reaching acclaim in a particular area such as music, sport and film. In contrast, an influencer is a person who can influence potential buyers of a product or service by promoting or recommending them on social media (Hasa, 2020). Although some celebrities are influencers, not all influencers are celebrities, so these terms are not entirely interchangeable. Therefore, associating virtual influencers with the term virtual *influencer* is more accurate. As Leaver *et al.* (2020:164) aptly summarise: “virtual influencers are to some extent the indigenous lifeforms of Instagram, dazzling entities who, at their best combine communication, commerce and 21st-century authenticity without existing in the world outside the platform at all.” Yet describing Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela as “virtual influencers” can in itself be seen as diminishing the cultural potency of the term and aids the apparent inevitability of these profiles. Are we not all virtual versions of ourselves on social media, and why would we resist the inclusion of these virtual influencers? As this section illustrates, we can. And we should.

Having provided a broad definition of virtual influencers, I will now present an overview of the virtual influencer industry by exploring the most popular agency-based and brand-created virtual influencers. This will establish a necessary foundation for the success of Lil Miquela as an example of a famous Western-situated virtual influencer and Kim Zulu as the profile’s South African-situated counterpart.

2.2.2 An Industry Overview

To understand the current context of virtual influencers, it is crucial to explore their origins and evolution. While some argue that virtual influencers are not as relatable as their human counterparts, they certainly are “engaging, intriguing, and wildly entertaining” (Hawley, 2020). Digital icons are not precisely new phenomena (Darner & Arvidsson, 2019:30). Human simulations have existed for years, and virtual celebrities and influencers, as an extension of this, have been around for decades, releasing content and collaborating with real-life artists (Rouse, 2018; Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:8; Hawley, 2020). The launch of the first “virtual idol” can be traced back to 1996 when the Japanese virtual idol “Kyoko Date” was created by HoriPro Inc. to commemorate the company’s 35th anniversary and released various songs in the same year (see Image 2.1) (Considine, 1997). Since then, experiments in avastardom and virtual identities have been percolating in popular culture for a while, with notable examples including the rise of the “Gorillaz,” the Damon Albarn assembled musical supergroup (Shieber, 2019) (see Image 2.2).

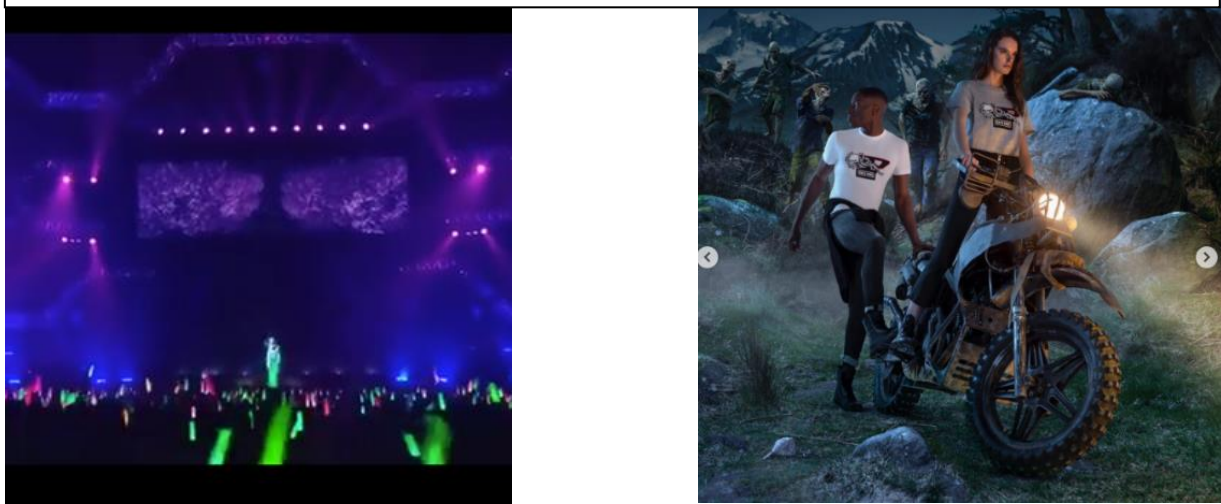
There has been an “influx of avatars” (Tiffany, 2019). For instance, international fashion brand Louis Vuitton created a range of virtual characters for an advertising campaign under the #lvseries4: see Image 2.3 (Tiffany, 2019; @exhibitionmag, 2020). Furthermore, the creative director at Louis Vuitton at the time, Marc Jacobs, designed the costumes for a holographic Japanese “pop star” named Hatsune Miku (see Image 2.4). Hatsune Miku is a form of anthropomorphism as the virtual character represents voice software whose artificially created “voice” has collaborated with singers such as Lady Gaga and Pharrell Williams (Mc Donald, 2018). Hatsune Miku, which means “first sound of the future” in Japanese, was launched by Sapporo-based company Crypton Future Media in August 2007. She quickly became the most popular avatar of Yamaha’s cutting-edge voice synthesiser “Vocaloid,” a synthesised voice programme that has performed “live” in cities around the world (Hoang & Su, 2019:26). Hatsune Miku is an example of how a virtual influencer can take on celebrity status, as a Japanese fan named Akihiko Kondo spent \$18,000 to marry Hatsune Miku legally. Gatebox, the company that manufactures hardware to display holograms of various anime characters in homes, has issued at least 3,700 marriage licenses to fans like Kondo (Shieber, 2019). Long touted, the original virtual influencer researchers of Hatsune Miku have been the pioneers in the virtual influencer space (Hamasaki, Takeda & Nishimura, 2008; Oppenneer, 2011; Jørgensen, Vitting-Seerup, Wallevik, 2017; Lam, 2016).

Other notable fashion brands to employ virtual influencers within their creative campaigns include Diesel, which, in collaboration with the famous videogame “Days Gone,” created a line of clothing and advertised it through pictures of avatars of their models in a virtual world see Image 2.5 (Pozharliev & Marcati, 2019:23).

Image 2.1: Kyoko **Source:** Considine, 1997; **2.2:** Gorillaz **Source:** @gorillaz, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CF2AS2dHmTb/>; **Image 2.3:** #lvseries4 **Source:** @exhibitionman, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHf-Q3PnLpc/>.



Image 2.4: Hatsune Miku **Source** @hatsune_miku_official_, 2018: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmgE0EFDE7D/>; **Image 2.5:** Days Gone Campaign **Source:** @diesel, 2019: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwcCl6DhKfH/>.



The commercial potential of these virtual creations has not gone unnoticed by the global fashion industry, which was projected to invest \$3.6 billion in virtual and AI technology by the end of 2020 (Tiffany, 2019). New venture-backed companies such as Shadows, SuperPlastic and Toonstar are all developing virtual characters that will launch via social media channels such as SnapChat and Instagram (Shieber, 2019). “Virtual beings” company Fable Studio, is

already promising to make “sentient avatars who can move between platforms using machine learning to talk and evolve” (Tiffany, 2019). In the same way, Betaworks, a marketing agency, has shifted its focus to “synthetic media,” a combination of virtual and AI capabilities. The company plans to make a series of R3 million investments in ten startups that want to build technology that can “create better digital influencers” (Tiffany, 2019). Ultimately, the goal is to have 20 characters a year with virtual characters interacting online as if “within their own community” (Shieber, 2019).

2.2.2.1 Popular Agency-Based Virtual Influencers

Although it is not practical to explore all these virtual influencers, the section below will provide a brief overview of some of the most notable virtual profiles who are “agency-based” in that they are created by, or affiliated to, one specific brand, but are run by digital design agencies that partner with multiple brands. The discussion below aims to further contextualise the creation of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu profiles.

Virtual influencers have proved especially popular in the Asian sphere with numerous popular examples of virtual influencers ranging from the cartoon-inspired to the human-like. The profile **@liam_nikuro**, for instance, was created by “virtual human planning and production” company 1sec and is a “Japanese-American boy born in Los Angeles” (see Image 2.6) The profile was allegedly made with the use of three-dimensional tools on a body that was filmed in live-action (Tiffany, 2019). The virtual influencer has become the NBA Washington Wizards team’s “official virtual influencer” (McNicol, 2020).

Japanese firm **@AwwTokyo** describes itself as a “Virtual Human agency” and manages several Asian centred virtual influencers, including “Harajuku-Girl like profile” **@imma.gram** (see Image 2.7). The popularity of virtual influencers within the Asian sphere is best exemplified in the **@imma.gram** profile. In less than a year of activity, it ranked up over fifty-thousand followers and gained followers exponentially quicker than other popular profiles from the Western world such as **@lilmiquela** (Pozharliev & Marcati, 2019:21). The number of followers signals the social network reach of the profile with the more significant the follower amount, the greater the number of more people can see content posted by the profile with presumably a higher chance of receiving likes and comments (Bakhshi, Shamma & Gilbert, 2014:967). Other

virtual influencers created by @AwwTokyo include the red-haired trans **@plusticboy** (see Image 2.8) and the feminine **@ria_ria_tokyo** (see Image 2.9) (Cook, 2020).

Image 2.6: Liam Nikuro Source: @liam_nikuro, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHkwplfn1Z/>; **Image 2.7:** Imma Gram Source: @imma.gram, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIpwJALnvDA/>.



Image 2.8: Plustic Boy Source @plusticboy, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHz0TeRtokyoDBEH/>; **Image 2.9:** Ria-Ria-Tokyo Source: @ria_ria_tokyo, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTo35MClZZ6/>.



On the European front, the cartoon-like **@noonoouri** (see Image 2.10) is a famous example. @Noonoouri is described as “a 19-year-old girl who lives in Paris” with huge eyes, a small mouth, and the same blank expression on every image (Hawley, 2020). According to Coleman (2018), this digital individual is created by Joerg Zuber, a graphic designer and owner of the studio “Opium” (Chekoufi, 2018). The feed of Noonoouri has a strong focus on fashion and couture, and she works for a wide range of high-end brands like Dior, Marc Jacobs and Versace, does makeup tutorials for Kim Kardashian beauty line and made an “appearance” at the

Fashion for Relief fashion show during the 2018 Cannes Film Festival (Darner & Arvidsson, 2019:6; Moustakas, Ranganathan, Lamba & Mahmoud, 2020:1). Despite her constructed nature, the comments on her images are “indistinguishable from other influencers” (Chekoufi, 2018). The Russian profile @Aliona_Pole depicts 18-year-old Aliona who lives in Moscow, Russia, and has collaborated with brands such as AliExpress and Fakoshima (see Image 2.11). On the Western front, there are a plethora of American targeted virtual influencers, including @knoxfrost (see Image 2.12), “a 19-year-old virtual man with 1.1 million followers on Instagram who “currently resides in Atlanta” (Hawley, 2020).

The concept of virtual influencers taking up roles within the endorsement industry previously dominated by models and human influencers is most clearly illustrated in companies such as “The Diigitals” and “Brud.” “The Diigitals” is a company created by Cameron-James Wilson and it describes itself as the “world’s first all-digital modelling agency” which “represents” the “ethereal” @dagny.gram (see Image 2.13), the plus-sized “model” @brenn.gram (see Image 2.14) and even @galaxia.gram (see Image 2.15) “the world’s first alien supermodel.”

Image 2.10: Noonnoouri Source @noonnoouri, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJDwdrYBJM2/>; **Image 2.11:** Aliona Source: @aliona_pole, 2021: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLEn0PHMCAR/>; **Image 2.12:** Knox Source: @knoxfrost, 2021: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKHQZnrgymd/>.

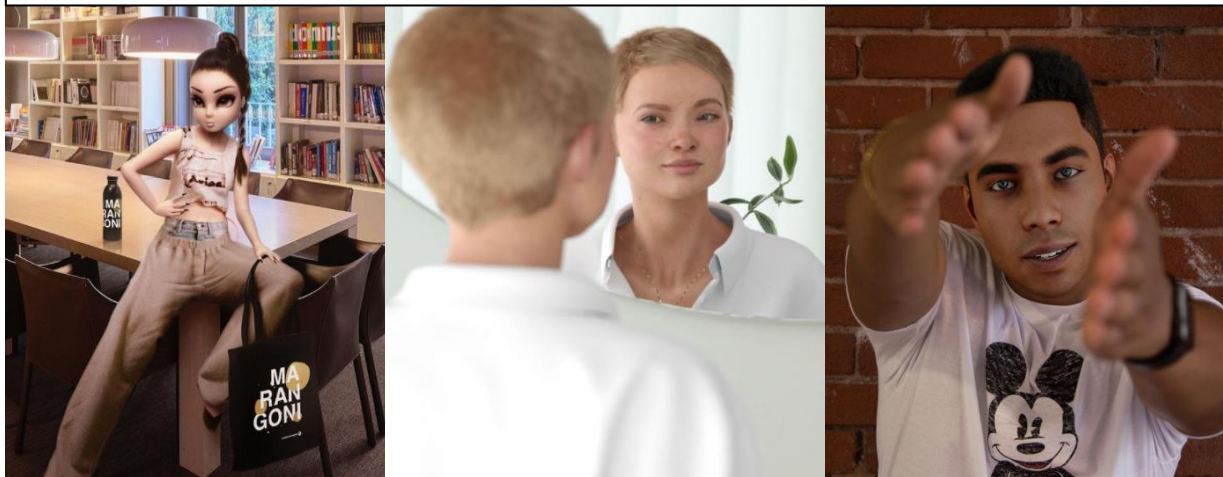
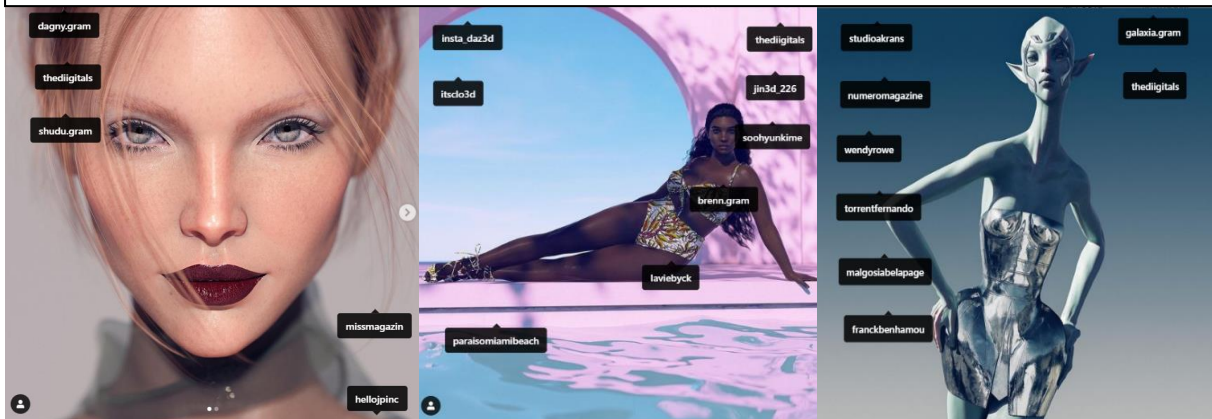
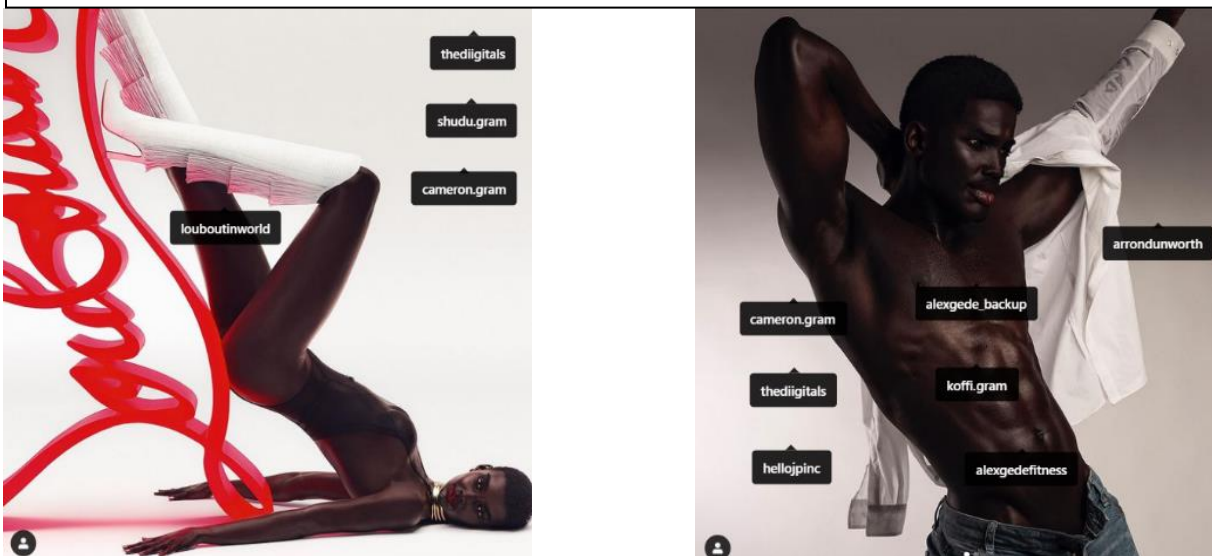


Image 2.13: Dagny Source: @dagny.gram, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDwellrjwWZ/>; **Image 2.14:** Brenn Source: @brenn.gram, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEUdZMbjdPM/>; **Image 2.15:** Galaxia Source: @galaxia.gram, 2020: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAIvtZ4A5zC/>.

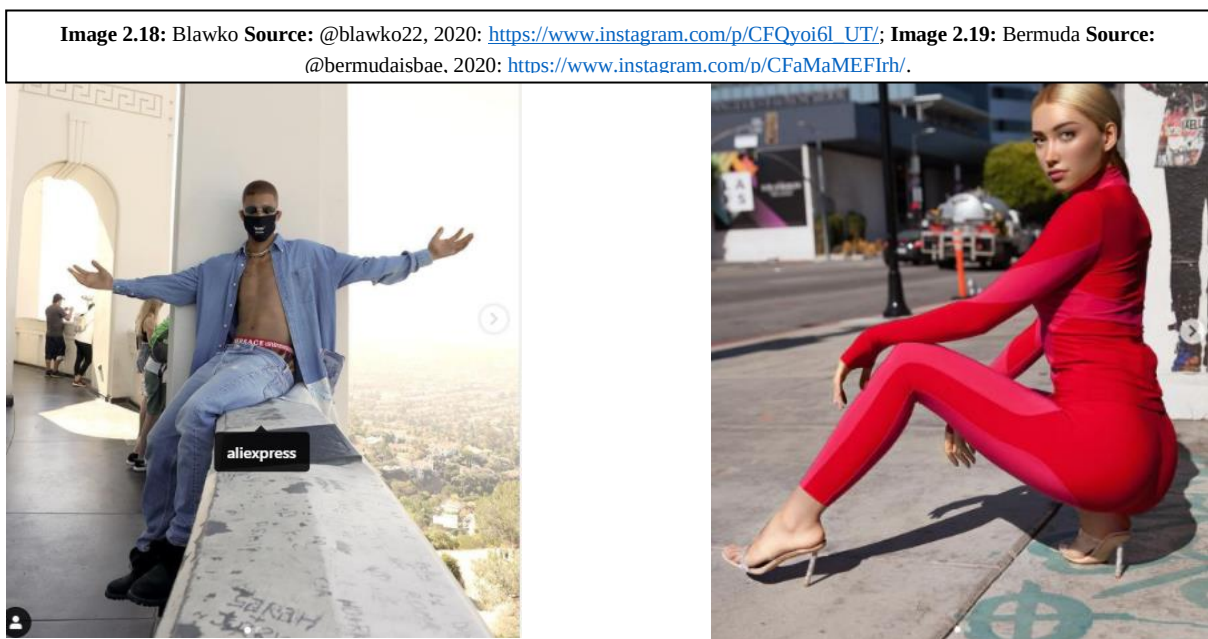


The Diigitals also include what they deem the “world's first digital supermodel” @shudu.gram (see Image 2.16). Shudu is an African model that first appeared alongside a Caucasian virtual “Margot” with a “distinctly French appearance” and an Asian virtual “modelled after David Bowie” called “Xhi,” as the first digital supermodels for Balmain fashion house (Cherrington, 2016; Stamatoula & Kirke, 2019:45). Shudu specifically gained popularity for her ultra-humanlike depiction when Fenty, a beauty line mistook her for a real customer and briefly reposted a photo of her “trying out” the brand’s matte lipstick (Cherrington, 2016; Stritch, 2018). Shudu has a male counterpart, @koffi.gram (see Image 2.17) (Stritch, 2018). Interestingly, the profile @shudu.gram initially featured hashtags that aligned the profile with the black community, such as #blackisbeautiful and #blackgirlsrock; after criticism, the profile more clearly disclosed its virtual status and moved away from culturally identifying as a black human being (Parcq & London, 2018).

Image 2.16: Shudu Source: @shudu.gram, 2020: https://www.instagram.com/p/CG-c2v_Bxwc/; **Image 2.17:** Koffi Source: @koffi.gram, 2020: https://www.instagram.com/p/CAX_uzuJ-yX/.



The trend of one marketing agency creating and managing multiple virtual influencers who interact with each other is also a feature of Brud, the agency behind Lil Miquela. Besides Lil Miquela, there are a few other virtual influencers, including @Blawko22, a boy and self-described “young robot sex symbol” whose mouth is constantly covered with designer masks and who has 151,000 followers (see Image 2.18). The choice of a mask consistently covering the virtual influencer’s face was done in the pre-COVID-19 era, before masks became a necessary daily accessory. As Connell (2002:17) puts it, “donning a mask because others are perceived as contaminating is a powerful statement of social distance and claimed superiority.” Other virtual influencers created by Brud include @BermudaIsBae, @Blawko22’s ex-girlfriend and Lil Miquela’s blonde, enemy-turned-friend, whose biography (bio) boasts that she is a “Robot/Unbothered mogul with daddy’s PIN and a flawless highlight” (see Image 2.19) (Cherrington, 2016).



2.2.2.2 Popular Brand-Created Virtual Influencers

It is not just creative agencies that have embraced virtual influencers; many brands have created their own virtual influencer as a new form of animated spokesperson. Fashion brand Balmain’s creative director Olivier Rousteing created a virtual #BalmainArmy with “two Balmain-exclusive digital supermodels named Xhi and Margot. Neither Xhi nor Margot have their own Instagram accounts, and they exist solely for Balmain advertisements, unlike Shudu, the third Balmain originating model whose presence and profile have grown beyond the Balmain brand as considered in the previous section (Tiffany, 2019). The success of the inclusion of virtual

influencers into Balmain’s digital strategy cannot be underestimated, as according to Social Blade, in the month that the “Balmain army” campaign was introduced in 2018, the average number of new followers per day was +3315 (Ward, 2020).

Similarly, Brazil’s Bed Bath & Beyond-equivalent “Magazine Luiza” created Lu, an older female virtual influencer (see Image 2.20) (Cherrington, 2016, Tiffany, 2018). On the other hand, global automotive brand Renault has created their virtual ambassador, Liv, who was introduced in their latest television advertisement in what was described as her “debut” as a “virtual actress” (Mosely, 2020). Renault advertised their new SUV model “Kadjar” by “bringing Liv to life” through an “authentic driving experience” where they visually depicted her as gradually becoming increasingly alive and more human during the time that she “drove” the vehicle (see Image 2.21) (Pozharliev & Marcati, 2019:24).

Even KFC has created their “Sexy Colonel Sanders,” who promoted the KFC fried chicken (though he has also worked with outside brands such as Dr Pepper, Casper Mattresses and Old Spice) (see Image 2.22) (Cook, 2020). When Japanese skincare brand SK-II introduced Yumi as its “digital influencer,” they, without irony, described her as “a digital human capable of interacting and engaging in ways technology has not been able to do until now” (see Image 2.23). The company claims that she “provides the warmth and connection of human touch in the form of a digital experience” (Dooley, 2020). The line between virtual influencer and human continues to blur in German-based make-up brand Essence’s integration of a virtual influencer through a unique tactic where they “hired” a virtual intern @thisis.keena (see Image 2.24) (Essence, 2019).

Image 2.20: Lu **Source:** @magazineluiza, 2021: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CX4UCaOtQKg/>; **Image 2.21:** Liv **Source:** Pozharliev & Marcati, 2019:24 **Image 2.22:** Colonel Sanders **Source:** KFC, 2019: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwkunliA IL/>.

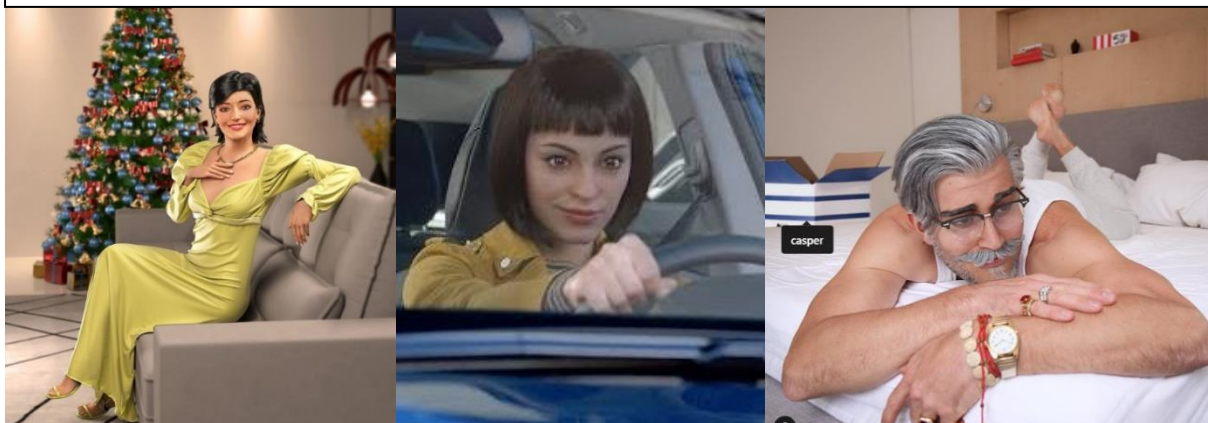
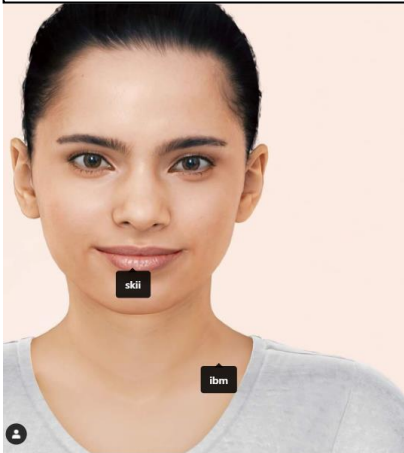


Image 2.23: Yumi Source: @soul_machines, 2019: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0CG5ZxnaHn/?hl=en>; **Image 2.24:** Keena Source: @essence_cosmetics, 2019: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B6OQbvtj4AG/>.



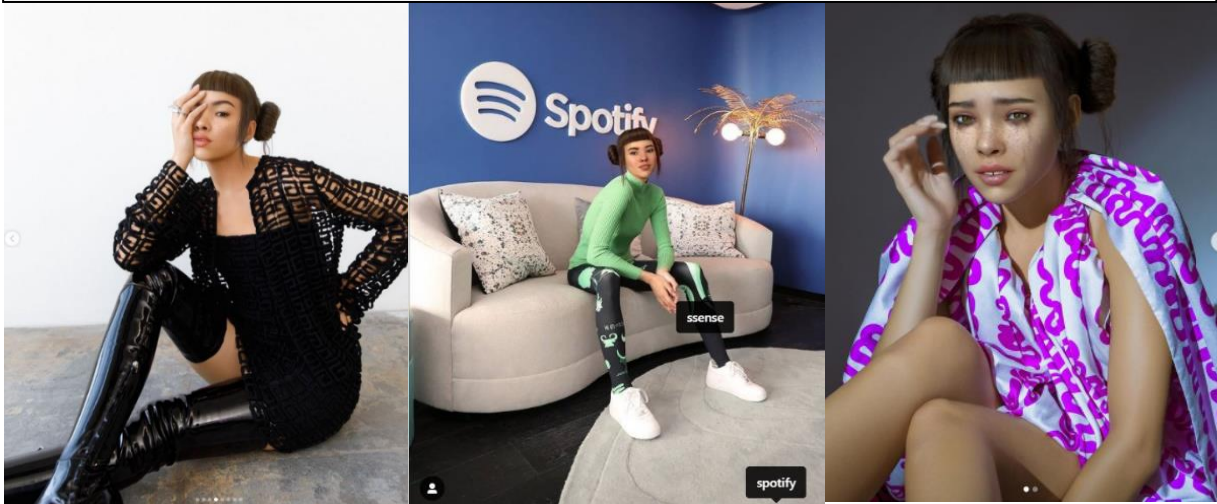
The examples above suggest that virtual influencers are gaining prominence on social media, as the number of fans that follow and brands that collaborate with these virtual profiles are increasing rapidly. In particular, two virtual influencers bear further scrutiny for their role in naturalising consumer identities through authenticity performances in Western (Lil Miquela) and African(Kim Zulu) contexts.

2.2.3 Lil Miquela

The Instagram account @lilmiquela was created in 2016 by Brud, a Los Angeles based start-up that is now worth at least \$125 million (see Image 2.25, 2.26, 2.27). The company describes itself as a “transmedia studio that creates digital character-driven story worlds” and is co-founded by Sara DeCou and ex-DJ and music producer Trevor McFedries, who incidentally claims to have “written a bill of rights” for AI (Tiffany, 2019). Brud defines itself as “a technology startup specialising in artificial intelligence and robotics,” yet Cherrington (2016) notes that Brud holds no patents in AI, robotics, or related fields, and Lil Miquela is, in her opinion, “little more than a well-crafted image.” Although Brud has created various virtual profiles, the most successful is the Instagram influencer turned “singer” Lil Miquela, who was part of the earliest virtual influencer groups to be designed and positioned specifically for the Instagram platform. Though Brud has never offered any information on how the images are produced, it is apparent that they involve extensive use of computer modelling and virtual technology, and speculators have reverse-engineered very plausible creation methods (Black, 2020:47). Some have speculated that instead of being a “computer-generated image,” it is a

“computer *modified* image,” where the photos feature a human model whose head and limbs are digitally distorted before being uploaded online (Erer, 2018).

Image 2.25: Magazine Shoot **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021a: https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ9A_tOhJcW/; **Image 2.26:** Spotify **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2019a: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B48I9FaHj1Q/>; **Image 2.27:** Crying **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2020b: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFP-peqn-Z7>.



Lil Miquela has been dubbed the “new face of America” (Horning, 2018) and is described as an “entirely artificial and rigorously planned persona and presence” (Kuhnle, 2019:34). Lil Miquela’s profile description describing her as a “robot with a drip” is inaccurate, as she is neither a human nor a robot (Robinson, 2020:3). Physically, she does not exist; she “isn’t a person” (Trepany, 2019), is not “actually a biological human” (Kuhnle, 2019:18) and is not “made of flesh and blood” (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:4); at best she can be understood as a “copy of a human being” and a “representation of a robot” (Verburg, 2020:23). No matter the description, the impact of her profile cannot be underestimated as the @lilmiquela Instagram profile has gained over three million Instagram followers; TIME Magazine included her in their 25 most influential “people” on the internet list (Sobande, 2021); and various top fashion houses including Prada have hired “her” to “model” their clothes. In addition, she has appeared on a billboard in Times Square (Tiffany, 2019); starred in a Calvin Klein television advertisement alongside human supermodel Bella Hadid (Yotka, 2018); been “appointed” as a “contributing editor” at Dazed, a London-based digital lifestyle magazine (Singh-Kurtz, 2018); and has even become a popular dress up icon for Halloween – proof of “her” pop-culture-idol status (Sabraw, 2020:12).

As the Instagram features made available to users have evolved, how the Lil Miquela profile uses these mediation tools has adapted. The Lil Miquela profile has evolved substantially from

being a static image medium to including Lil Miquela in videos “interviewing” real human musicians, “live” singing in music videos and presenting podcasts. Like many influencers, she uses her Instagram space to bounce between content types, signalling that she is professional yet relatable, and mixes in promotions for external brands and her own projects (Black, 2020:48). For instance, she created a clothing line, Club 404, along with her other virtual influencer “friends,” and in April 2019, she released her first album (Drenten & Brooks, 2020:1). Since 2017, she has released eight songs featuring an artificially created or synthetically enhanced voice giving her music a “distinct virtual vibe” (Kelly, 2017). A robot trying to become a pop star might seem implausible, but Lil Miquela already has over 183,000 monthly listeners on Spotify, while her single, “Sims,” has reached nearly 57 million streams (Sobande, 2021). She carries significant cultural clout evidenced by her millions of followers who are seemingly unperturbed by her “un-reality” (Robinson, 2020:2).

What sets Lil Miquela apart from other virtual influencers is the advanced human-likeness of her visual imaging and the robustness of her identity and constructed life history. All of Lil Miquela’s life—public and private—is fictional (Drenten & Brooks, 2020:2). She enacts a 19-year-old racially ambiguous model and musician persona (Mc Donald, 2018; Rouse, 2018). In a post that addresses her “racial identity,” Lil Miquela “explains” that “she” does “not comfortably identify as a woman of colour” because “brown was a choice made by a corporation.” Yet, she stresses that she realises that she is “different” and is “committed to bolstering voices that need to be heard” (@lilmiquela, 2018). Leaver *et al.* (2020:157) highlight the strategic significance of this statement in distancing Lil Miquela from the controversy around virtual influencer profile Shudu with the creator criticised for appropriating ethnicity.

In what her fans describe as her “outcast artsy kid” look (Bojanic, 2019:29), Lil Miquela wears her dark hair in Princess Leia-style double buns, which she affectionately refers to as her high-cut “art-school bangs” (Black, 2020:47). She features a convincingly realistic sprinkling of freckles and “flyaways” (baby hairs) (Creasey & Anido, 2020:1) and wears an impassive expression characteristic of fellow human Instagram it-girls. Her ability to tap into “youth culture” is evident through the profile’s expert performance of streetwear fashion and Instagram influencer cues with captions that are often emoji-laden, casual, and upbeat (Black, 2020:48). Lil Miquela does what other influencers do, and she does it effectively (Bojanic, 2019:9). She “reflects the look of any number of young, female aspiring Instagram influencers in L.A. while being somehow, obviously yet opaquely, non-human” (Black, 2020:47).

Researchers such as Black (2020:53) suggest Lil Miquela “re-stages the digital, fictional, young-girl” online persona. In Black’s view (2020:58), this performance is not a new paradigm but rather “a newly performative form of a very old one.”

It is not just Lil Miquela’s hyper-realistic aesthetic presentation that appeals to audiences. Instead, the profile’s established narrative and online story world seems to appeal to followers’ emotions and has elevated the profile above other virtual influencers who also exist on Instagram. The profile’s Instagram captions serve the entire range of human emotions, revealing everything from the struggles of her “life” such as writer’s block and heartbreak, navigating her conflicting identity as a “virtual being,” and the shock when she realises, she is not “real,” to feuds with other virtual influencers such as @BermudaIsBae (Error, 2018; Hoang & Su, 2019:21; Drenten & Brooks, 2020:2).

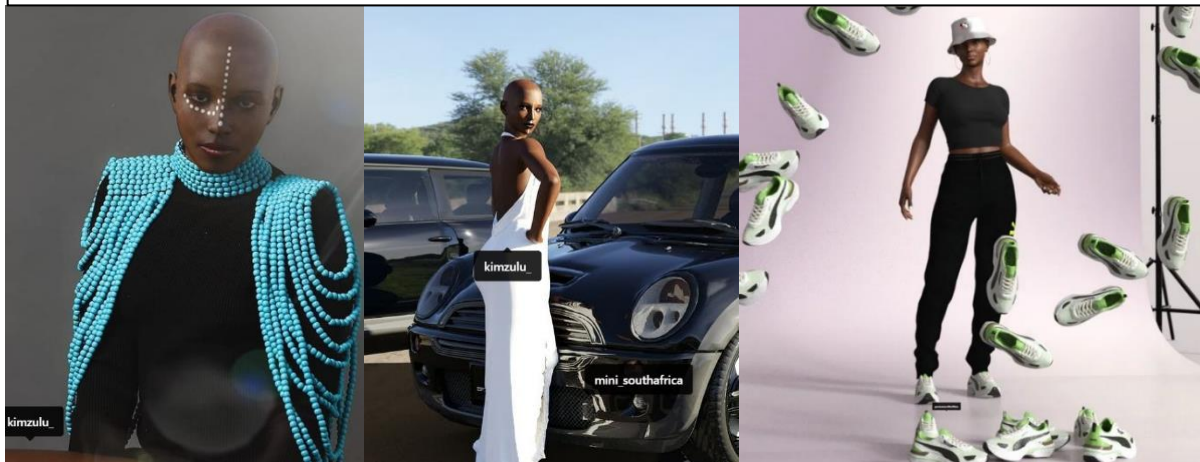
She often uses her blurred identity between real and virtual to appeal to followers who feel that they do not fit into society’s mould and uses the intrigue and mystery around Lil Miquela’s virtuality for the profile’s attention-grabbing goals. Before April 2018, Lil Miquela had not openly declared herself virtual or non-human and generally allowed the speculation to speak for itself (Black, 2020:47). For two years, it was unclear whether Lil Miquela was real or not. On the 29th of April 2018, Lil Miquela revealed her “true self” through a six-screenshot-long statement in a post on her Instagram. In this statement, Lil Miquela explains that she is “not a real human being,” but instead a “highly intelligent robot” (Verburg, 2020:4). However, despite having “come out” as non-human, Lil Miquela presently still captions “her” posts as if writing in first person as a regular human influencer, with her posts often detailing experiences as “lived” and dodging direct questions that ask about her human status, apparently leading to many followers being unaware that the profile is, in fact, virtual (Stamatoula & Kirke, 2019:45).

Critics worry that excessively humanoid virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela possess the potential to deceive social media users into assuming they are living, breathing people. In Lil Miquela’s case this was aptly illustrated when the Elizabeth Hilfiger marketing team mistakenly physically sent Lil Miquela free sample clothing, believing that she was a human (Rosenstein, 2018). The success of the Lil Miquela profile has undoubtedly inspired the creation of many other virtual influencers, including Kim Zulu, created by a South African team and positioned for the Southern African market.

2.2.4 Kim Zulu

Within the Southern context, there are no virtual influencers, except @KimZulu (see Image 2.28,2.29,2.30). Although some agencies have created black virtual influencers, the only African based agency that has created an African model is the design team behind Kim Zulu, The Avatar Company (formerly known as EMOJI Digital). Within three months of launching, the Kim Zulu profile was hailed by Forbes as “one of the top 12 black virtual influencers to follow globally” (Rabimov, 2020). Kim Zulu is described as “South Africa's first virtual model” (Ntwasa, 2020) and is the creative brainchild of Lebo Kambule, a South African based graphic designer (Kambule, 2019). Sporting a dark skin, bald head and distinctive African face-prints (see Image 2.28), Kim Zulu is described as a “bubbly 21-year-old girl” who is “passionate about modelling” and has aspirations of “becoming a global fashion icon” and is “a huge fan” of black models such as “Zozitunzi Tunzi, Tyra Banks and Naomi Campbell” (Jadezweni, 2020; Kambule, 2020).

Image 2.28: Beading Source: @kimzulu_, 2020b: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-ckvm8jf-p/>; **Image 2.29:** Mini Source: @kimzulu_, 2021c: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMM-btKjWsR/>; **Image 2.30:** Puma Collab Source: @kimzulu_, 2022: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaPJxFYMTbL/>.



The profile was launched in March 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. A year later, the Kim Zulu profile has garnered 3404 followers and has created a persona that embodies what the team dubs a mixture between “authentically South Africa roots and stylised luxury” (Jadezweni, 2020). Kim Zulu has collaborated with brands such as Kangol (a UK headwear brand), has launched a jacket capsule collection entitled “Umemulo” (the coming of age) at the Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week in Russia (Travers, 2020), and has collaborated with brands such as Superbalist, Veet and BMW Mini. She was also part of Engen South Africa's #PlayItForward Campaign to “take South Africans to that special place, where IRL (in real

life) and the digital world meet” (Engen SA, 2020). Her plans allegedly include an album, a television show and a “career as a DJ” (Jadezweni, 2020; Ntwasa, 2020).

The above section provided an overview of the current virtual landscape and briefly established why Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu are essential in understanding these virtual influencers' presence within a global West and African context. Despite the mystery and shock-factor of these virtual influencers, I view their rise as a natural progression of the ever-evolving endorsement industry. While virtual influencers are both fascinating and bizarre, their success on Instagram is “hardly surprising” (Bojanic 2019:10). The evolution of the endorser industry and the changing relationship of endorsers to stakeholders such as advertisers and the public are discussed in the following section to further explore virtual influencers' popularity due to changing expectations in the online space. This will illustrate that not only are virtual influencers ready for the market, we, the market, are ready to receive them.

2.3 THE ENDORSER EVOLUTION – HOW DID WE GET HERE?

This section explores the endorser industry, including a summary of the types of endorsement and the stages of the evolution of endorsement that have instigated the present virtual influencer endorser phenomenon. In an era where 40% of the public have advertising-blocking tools activated on their devices (Kelly, 2020), brands need to find alternative ways of making their advertisement and marketing content visible to their target audiences. Digital technology has enhanced the public's abilities to “filter, process and encode” information (Pramjeeth & Majaye-Khupe, 2016:39). The result is that audiences take steps to block adverts from their social media feeds, meaning that alternative routes to integrate branded products into the public's mind's eye are necessary (Nutley, 2014).

Endorsement is one such method to integrate branded content into the public's daily life. Endorsement has become an overall marketing communication strategy that represents one in four advertisements internationally (Allison, 2020), with approximately 20-30% of global advertisements having featured a famous person as an endorser (Shimp, 2007; Sliburyte, 2009:935; Banytė, Stonkienė & Piligrimienė, 2011:1215). Information on fees paid to endorsers tends to be closely guarded (Hung, Chan & Tse, 2011:608; Elberse & Verleun, 2012:152). However, some brands spend around R7 trillion annually on endorsement contracts and pay some endorsers R23 million for a single endorsement post (Robehmed, 2016; Geyser, 2021).

Despite the immense cost of working with such high-profile endorsers, endorsement remains a tactic of choice for brands due to their return on investment. The public's perceptions of endorsed products enable an endorsed product to have a higher purchase value than its counterpart (Bennett, Anaza & Andonova, 2021). Therefore, signing a high-profile endorser can help reassure the public about the product's intrinsic quality, as a high-profile endorser attaching their affiliation to the product is an additional sign of quality (Spence, 1973:358; Rao & Ruekert, 1994:90; White, Goddard & Wilbur, 2009:330). Human endorsers work to inject imaginary and symbolic relations into the products they picture themselves engaged with (Iqani, 2019:240). This, in turn, results in more favourable brand evaluations (Atkin & Block, 1983:59; Silvera & Austad, 2004:1510); more positive word-of-mouth (Bush, Martin & Bush, 2004:110); improved stock market value of the brand (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995:58); and a decrease in competitors' stock market value (Mathur, Mathur & Rangan, 1998:72; Schaffer, 2021). van der Walddt, van Loggerenberg & Wehmeyer (2009:105) aptly argue that endorsers are effective because they connect with audiences by at least appearing to bring some independent credibility to the advertisement.

As the public's perception of quality is often not necessarily related to the product's technical specifications, nor ascertained by careful analysis of its characteristics, but is instead related to a broad and intangible feeling regarding the brand, endorsers play an essential role in communicating this “intangible feeling” (Keller, 2008). As such, the job of “living the brand” (Iqani, 2019:240) entails adding “magic” into the presentation of the products by associating them closely with the endorsers' personalities and lifestyles. Iqani (2019:239) goes so far as to label these endorsers as “employees” of the brand whose job it is to “represent its lifestyle” and “bring to life its values.” Endorsements are brand alliances between the endorser, an individual brand, and the product sold, a corporate brand (Thomson, 2006; Elberse & Verleun, 2012:149).

Therefore, the crux of the value that endorsers add lies in their ability to inspire the public's purchasing intentions, which is a crucial goal of marketing and advertising (Thrash, Moldovan, Oleynick & Maruskin, 2014:501; Bottger, Rudolph, Evanschitzky & Pfrang, 2017:116). This becomes apparent when considering the “stages” of purchasing a product, as set out by Lima (2017): (1) problem identification; (2) recalling & gathering information; (3) evaluation of available alternatives; (4) purchase decision; and (5) post-purchase behaviour. Endorsements are most critical in the second and fifth stages. In stage two, endorsers play the role of

“initiator” by providing information about a product to the users, while in stage five, the prominence of the endorser's profile leads to more positive post-purchase behaviour as the user is satisfied with owning a product affiliated to the endorser (Campbell, Pitt, Parent & Berthon, 2011:89). The following section expands on the overview of endorsement by providing insights into different types of endorsement.

2.3.1 Types of Endorsement

The genre of endorsement often blurs the line between advertising and user-generated content. In theory, however, there is a fundamental difference between advertising and user-generated content as the former is a “paid message carefully calibrated to entice people to buy a product,” while the latter is intended to be an “authentic expression of appreciation and creativity without commercial intent” (Keen, 2007:92). The act of endorsement merges these two distinct principles.

Defining and categorising endorsement is not clear cut. According to Lima (2017:8), there are two types of endorsements: celebrity and non-celebrity endorsement. On the other hand, Friedman, Termini, and Washington (1976:23) identify four types of endorsers, namely the celebrity, the typical consumer, the professional expert, and the company president. Alternatively, Hackley and Hackley (2015:464) identify four types of celebrity: “achieved celebrity” (those who are famous because of their talent and skill in their particular field); “ascribed celebrity” (those whose social impact is a reflection of their bloodline, whereby hereditary titles are passed down to individuals, for example, the monarchy); “celetoid celebrity” (ordinary people elevated to fame by the media), and “aristocratic celebrity” (an innate star by virtue of unique charisma, personality, or glamour that sets an individual apart from the ordinary person simply for who they are). Despite the plethora of endorsement categories, there are two critical distinctions of endorsement types that researchers do agree on: an animated spokesperson and a human endorser. Exploring these two categories is essential within the broader conversation on virtual influencers as Lil Miquela, Kim Zulu, and similar virtual influencers can be seen as a hybrid form, combining both an animated spokesperson and a human endorser.

2.3.1.1 Human Endorser

A human endorser is essentially a person, either a public image or a private citizen, who makes a testimonial or a written or spoken statement, extolling the virtue of a product or service

(Rodriguez, 2009:85). Furthermore, the category of human endorsers can be divided into celebrities and influencers, which will be explored in greater detail in the section to follow. The use of an endorser to increase the brand sales and/or recall value is therefore called “endorsement” (Kumar, 2016:86). There are three forms of human endorsements: explicit, implicit, and imperative. “Explicit endorsement” relays the message that the endorser only endorses the product and does not utilise it (Seno & Lukas, 2007:123). “Implicit endorsement” occurs when the message relayed informs the public that the endorser utilises the product. An “imperative endorsement” is where the endorser clearly tells the public to use the product with a call to action.

2.3.1.2 Animated Spokesperson

“Animation” includes films, drawings and models that are photographed or created by a computer and shown in a way that makes them move (Cambridge Dictionary, 2021). When a company cannot find a human endorser that is in unison with the brand's image, it often creates its own endorser in the form of an animated spokesperson (van der Waldt *et al.*, 2009:104). The benefit is that an animated endorser's longevity will be for as long as needed by the brand and the same created spokesperson can be used indefinitely and adapted to changing circumstances (Aspan, 2005). Animated spokespersons provide the brand with greater control and the ability to change and to adapt to the brand's market and advertising needs (van der Waldt *et al.*, 2009:100). The most significant disadvantage when using a created spokesperson is that the created animated endorser will only be well known *after* the brand has created awareness and high advertising spend behind exhibiting the animated spokesperson to a wide range of audience members (van der Waldt *et al.*, 2009:104). Unlike a human endorser who has their own established brand before embarking on the endorsement agreement, an animated spokesperson would need that level of popularity to be generated and facilitated by the brand itself.

The choice between using an animated spokesperson or a human endorser often depends on the nature of the product being sold or the length of the campaign (Aaker, 1997; Thomas & Fowler, 2016:377). Tom, Clark, Elmer, Grech, Masetti and Sandar (1992:51) and Schaffer (2021) suggest that marketing professionals should use created animated spokespersons when the advertising objective is to create a long-term link between the endorser and the brand, whilst human endorsers would be the better option when the brand prioritises establishing a short-term link. Human endorsers are also viewed as a more suitable endorsement type when it comes

to the “personal care” product segment. This is due to the “attribution theory,” where, when an attractive endorser promotes an attractiveness-enhancing product, the public assumes that the product has played a role in the endorser's attractiveness (Mishra, Roy & Bailey, 2015:1168; Park & Cho, 2015:228). Human endorsers are therefore more persuasive in convincing the public to purchase products than animated spokespersons in the “personal care” segment, as customers would like to see some “evidence” to satisfy them of the effects of the product, and this is hard to achieve through an animated spokesperson because they lack the “realistic factor” (Malik & Guptha, 2014:135).

Choosing between a human and animated spokesperson finds its answers in virtual influencers who are seen as a combination of the two in that they are an animated representation of a human form. Some scholars attribute the popularity of virtual influencers to the fact that “humans have always been infatuated with cartoons” and virtual influencers are a form of “animated expression” with improvements in technology enabling the advancement of the “complexity of characters” (Keen, 2007:204; Shieber, 2019). The present endorsement industry is characterised by a growing disillusionment with and distrust of human endorsers. An outline of this regression is presented below.

2.3.2 The Evolution of Endorsement

This section provides an overview of the evolution of endorsement to investigate similar “shoppable avatars of consumer avarice” (Eror, 2018), namely traditional celebrities and human influencers that preceded virtual influencers to trace the shifting landscape that has given rise to the creation and infiltration of these virtual influencers. Reference will be made to the changing nature of fame, the impact of new media on the design and distribution of celebrity brands, shifts in the emphasis on the personal, the rise of “Electronic Word of Mouth” referrals (eWOM) and the recent audience distrust.

2.3.2.1 Traditional Celebrities as the Original Endorsers

Celebrities are defined as well-known people who show exceptional performance in a determined area, be it professional competence or physical beauty and who, above all, attain widespread public recognition (Banytė *et al.*, 2011:1216; Muda, Musa & Putit, 2012:376; Hackley & Hackley, 2015:463; Aureliano-Silva, Lopes, Freire & da Silva, 2015:59). Kowalczyk and Royne (2013:212) expand on this definition to include those who professionally label, manage, and promote themselves to the public to commercially leverage

this unique image. The commercial value of celebrities becomes evident when they use this public recognition on behalf of a product by appearing with it in an advertisement, subsequently amplifying the impact of an advertising campaign (McCracken, 1989:313; Kumar, 2016:85). Advertisers employ celebrities in advertising because of their famous attributes (beauty, talent, athleticism, power) that represent the attractions desired for the brands they endorse (Banytè *et al.*, 2011:1216).

As all media channels converge around the internet and old media are integrated with social media to mobilise an entertainment-driven economy, the “business of celebrity” has adopted a distinctive “cultural intensity, cyclical rapidity, and economic imperative” never seen before (Hackley & Hackley, 2015:462). The use of celebrities to endorse products dates to the 19th century when British actress Lillie Langtry appeared on a Pears soap commercial and Queen Victoria endorsed Cadbury's Cocoa (Sherman, 1985:69; Erdogan, 1999:302; Han & Yazdanifard, 2015:24). Since then, celebrities have become entrenched in popular culture, with the increased prominence of celebrities traced back to the 1920s Hollywood movie industry (Turner, 2006:156). Celebrities were built on a system that produced stars in response to the demands, not of screenplay writers or directors, but of fans. Once the studios and the artists realised that named celebrity actors with established brands improved the sales of theatre tickets, and anything else, publicity agents crafted actors' public images to fit the movie roles and genres they promoted (Hackley & Hackley, 2015:465). This resulted in the emphasis on “persona-based-” or “profile-anchored-fame” (Abidin, 2020:77).

Since the 1950s, the celebration of being “known for being known” (Boorstin, 1992) has migrated from entertainment into many less likely spheres, including politics, sport, literature, music, business and journalism (Brownlie & Hower, 2011). However, it was not until the 1970s, when any perceived “shame” associated with endorsing products faded, that the following number of celebrity endorsers increased (Croft, Dean, & Kitchen, 1996). Since then, the marketing potential of celebrity endorsers has been exploited unashamedly. Commercialisation has evolved to such a point that rather than “adapting to the whims of brands once celebrities achieve a certain level of influence,” celebrities developed to “actively turn themselves into marketable products from the start” (Choudary, 2015).

Then came television. Marwick (2015:139) notes that media and celebrity are inextricably intertwined, and as a result, changes in media technology impact how celebrity endorsers are created and shared. The advancement of television in the 1930s facilitated the growth of

celebrity endorsements, and this trend has continued for decades, with Lee and Um (2014) noting that television has always been “celebrity dominated” with celebrities featuring in more than 25% of television commercials on average.

The increase in television viewership, which predominantly included celebrities in advertisements, furthermore, spurred the growth of our commercialised culture. As Ferguson (2016:106) notes, the media do not simply mirror society, but they help shape it through cultural perceptions. As television was incorporated into the daily routines of individuals, the media portrayals of people who produce goods and services became much less interesting than the portrayals of those who excessively consume them (Ferguson, 2016:408). Berger (1972:146) warns that the effect of this “elevation of consumption over production” should not be underestimated since how the media frame stories about class influences value perceptions and purchasing decisions.

Television shows, magazines and newspapers featuring celebrities sold the idea that our success is measured according to our ability to identify with the rich and powerful and to live vicariously through them (Berger, 1972:146; Ferguson, 2016:404). The logic of influence is based on this “vicarious identification” as we indulge in the fantasy of being like the star, sharing their glamour, and partaking in their position in culture (Horning, 2018). Constantly bombarded by stories about the lifestyles of the rich and famous, we feel a sense of intimacy with celebrities with whom we have little or no contact (Ferguson, 2016:402). Studies have also found that extensive television viewing leads to higher spending rates and lower savings, presumably because television and the celebrity advertising content in them stimulate consumer desires (Ferguson, 2016:404). In this way, television normalised excessive consumption habits by celebrating celebrity lifestyles. The ways that television also introduced a new method of *producing* celebrities are considered next.

2.3.2.2 Reality Television, Celebrification and the New Celebrity

As the public's appetite to “consume” celebrities and their lifestyles grew, so did the need to “produce” these celebrities faster, with contemporary television proving the ideal tool to do so. Modern television created a shift in the nature of celebrity endorsements as it introduced a new approach to producing celebrities. As the years progressed, television was able to invent, produce, market and sell personas on a larger scale than ever before by installing ordinary people into game shows, docu-soaps and reality programming through providing access to “the

real” by using surveillance cameras or capturing reactions “in the moment” (Turner, 2006:156; Enli, 2015:66). The opportunity of becoming a celebrity had therefore spread beyond the various elites and into the population in general, where “ordinary people” were “discovered,” suddenly “extracted from their everyday lives” and positioned for stardom (Bright, 2008; Cekete, 2012). Turner (2006:155) defines this moment as “celebrification,” namely, the process by which an ordinary individual becomes famous and is “transformed into a celebrity” (Choi & Rifon, 2012:341).

The process of producing celebrities, therefore, shifted in that fame became increasingly disarticulated from innate qualities and achievement, with an emphasis on “attributed celebrity” instead of “achieved celebrity” (Rojek, 2001:22). This is affirmed by Cashmore (2006:7) and Alexander (2018), who argue that celebrification embodies the “shift of emphasis from achievement-based fame to media-driven renown.”

This has led to increasing numbers of “celetoids” or “one-hit wonders,” namely persons who are momentarily in the spotlight but unable to hold attention and are thus forced to return to anonymity after their “15-seconds of fame” have passed (Rojek, 2001:20; Kim & Jeong, 2016; Kerrigan, Brownlie, Hower & Daza-LeTouze, 2011). The benefit of this shift is that the media can discover “unlimited performances of diversity” in generating new content through mining the rich pool of performances of “the ordinary” (Turner, 2006:160). This emphasis on the “ordinary” is supported by Couldry (2003:102), who notes that ordinary people have never been more desired by, or more visible within, the media. This is especially true in the current entertainment climate where the return on investment from low cost unscripted (reality) television shows has far surpassed traditional scripted shows (Peterson, 2005:1089).

Television broadcasting created a new sense of authenticity based on the unremarkable ordinariness of everyday life, with the audience member’s ability to relate to the performer on screen a crucial factor (Tom *et al.*, 1992:45; Scannell, 1996). The impact of this, as highlighted by Iqani and Schroeder (2016:413) and Enli (2015:73), is that the “private becomes public” and the “ordinary becomes spectacular” to the point where ordinary people have, to a degree, replaced actors, and scripted reality has, to a degree, replaced fiction. The successes of new forms of non-celebrity prove “the capacity for new media technologies to grant and facilitate, fame” through “the commercialisation of amateur content” (Berryman & Kavka, 2017:309). As relatability gained cultural prominence, with an increased emphasis on the “genuine” and

the “personal,” the traditional celebrity endorser format has started to decrease in popularity (Schimmelpfennig & Hollense, 2016:12). The declining popularity of traditional profiles of celebrity endorsers, documented in the section below, illustrates further transformations.

2.3.2.3 The Declining Popularity of Traditional Celebrity Endorsements

Research on the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements in increasing product sales has unearthed contradictory findings. Findings of studies in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s suggested fervent support for the use of celebrity endorsements, arguing that celebrities help make brands recognisable and create a positive brand attitude (Petty, Cacioppo & Schumann, 1983:136), enhance the likelihood of purchase (Friedman & Friedman, 1979:293), foster brand loyalty, and positively impact word-of-mouth (Bush, Martin & Bush, 2004:108). However, for the past 15 years, celebrity usage in advertising in Western countries has been declining (Choi, Wei-Na & Hee-Jung, 2005; Belch & Belch, 2013; Schimmelpfennig & Hollense, 2016:11; Kedet, 2021). The use of celebrity endorsement in Western countries has become saturated and has caused the public to become cynical about endorsers' true intentions, according to Kumar, Kalidas and Abbas (2016:3). Endorsements in the Western world are seen to be less credible than a few years ago, as the overuse and over-exposure of celebrities have also made the public more critical of celebrity adverts, with the novelty of celebrities fading to the point where “celebrities are becoming wallpaper” and are blending into the online sphere (McEwen, 2003; van der Walldt *et al.*, 2009:101; Schimmelpfennig & Hollense, 2016:14). For instance, the use of celebrities in United Kingdom television advertisements has been on the decline: from 22% in 2000 to 9% in 2016 (Pringle & Binet 2005:205; Knoll & Matthes, 2017:57). This is mirrored by the USA, which has seen a decline in the use of celebrities for television advertisements from 25% in 2000 (Elberse & Verleun 2012:151) to 9.5% in 2012 (Belch & Belch, 2013).

The ability of celebrities to have a positive effect on product sales thus seems to be changing. Other research on nationally televised advertisements found that one-fifth of advertisements with celebrities had a “negative effect” and turned viewers away from the products (Pramjeeth & Majaye-Khupe, 2016:42). Furthermore, celebrity endorsements were found to garner “less trust” from the public than any other type of brand promotion (Pramjeeth & Majaye-Khupe, 2016:43). Research on consumers from India found that a strong brand mascot is actually more successful than celebrities in certain product categories (Malik & Guptha, 2014:138). South African marketing executives have often “overestimated the importance of celebrity endorsers” (Pramjeeth & Majaye-Khupe, 2016:43). This is supported by Elberse and Verleun (2012:160),

who note that the positive impact of celebrities on sales is evident but is often weaker than expected. Research by Lima (2017:46) found that 74% of participants preferred non-celebrity advertisements to celebrity advertisements, while Knoll and Matthes (2017:69) found that the presence of quality seals and awards was more effective than the inclusion of celebrities. Research by Nkosi (2011:20) on South African participants found that participants heavily criticised celebrity endorsement as nothing but a “money-making scheme,” while other research found that most participants were “not sure” that celebrities use the products that they endorse (Malik & Guptha, 2014:135).

Therefore, it can be hypothesised that although celebrity endorsement is not necessarily dead, the old structure of producing, promoting, and engaging with these endorsers is. The impacts of the introduction of the internet, including significantly impacting the endorser industry and lessening barriers to participation in the online space through an emphasis on eWOM, is examined in the following section.

2.3.2.4 The Rise of the Internet, Social Media and eWOM

The rise of the internet and the advancement of technology to include smartphones and social media apps have shifted how the public is entertained and thus advertised to. The public's habits have been changing over time, and as a result, there has been a shift from television as a one-way communication zone to greater engagement and participation online, with social media facilitating an always-on, always-connected state.

The rates of social media users have grown to the point where most brand endorsement work takes place on social media platforms and not through traditional television commercials (Iqani, 2019:231). Previous research found that the public responds much more positively to endorsement content shared through social media than paid placements such as television advertising. Additionally, researchers found that those who viewed a video via social media sharing were 83% more likely to have positive perceptions of the advertised brand than those exposed to the same content via traditional paid advertising (Neff, 2012). Of the various social media platforms, research by Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016:2), Lima (2017) and Bailis (2020) found that the most popular social media platform used to connect with celebrities was Instagram, followed by Facebook, YouTube and then Twitter. The growing power of online engagement is best exemplified in eWOM. In the past, the only way the public used to understand their experience of a product was to personally purchase and try it themselves

(Nelson, 1974:729). In the Web 2.0 era, however, users can further understand the experience goods through eWOM. eWOM includes “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company,” which is posted on a public online platform (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler, 2004:39; Mudambi & Schuff, 2010:186; Glover, 2021). These eWOM online customer reviews have a dual role: they provide product information and then make recommendations from a customer's perspective (Lee, Park, & Han, 2008:344). Users tend to rely on these reviews as product research before purchasing them (Norman & Russell, 2006:1088; Wei & Lu, 2013:197). As informants, they provide user-oriented product information and share their opinions and experiences, this includes honest evaluations of the advantages and weaknesses of a product in order to help other consumers judge the quality of a product (Jin & Phua, 2014:186).

The cornerstone of eWOM is the sharing of our personal experiences when using a product or service. Within the endorser evolution, the “personal” has gained a new significance level. This will be tackled in the following section to illustrate further the changes in the public's expectations of endorsers.

2.3.2.5 A Shift Towards the Personal

The changes in technology and shifts in how information and entertainment are consumed not only affect where brands place their products (namely an Instagram partnership as opposed to a television advertisement), but also how the public interacts with that endorser (Keen, 2007:89; Wei & Lu, 2013:193).

In prior decades, the publics' engagement with celebrity endorsers was based on information from traditional media with tailored press releases sent to publications. If in the past the communication between the public and celebrity endorsers was indirect, social media has made it possible for endorsers to speak directly to the public through their social media channels. Instead of relying on the traditional media outlets that report on celebrities, celebrities can now be their own reporters and can share daily information about their personal lives (Myers, 2012:58). Transitioning from celebrity-focused television magazines to social media profiles has allowed the public to more intimately explore “engagement” with celebrities (Groeger & Buttle, 2014:21). Members of the public can now “connect” with celebrities at any time and feel like the celebrity is talking directly to them.

“Traditional” celebrities like pop stars and actors have embraced social media to create direct, unmediated relationships with the public, or at least the illusion of such (Marwick, 2015:139). Further evolution in the dynamic between celebrity endorsers and the public is that more and more people were obsessed with hearing and seeing celebrities as “real” people, and not just the aspects of their life as a celebrity (Liebes & Curran, 1998:104). The public, therefore, want insights into celebrities' authentic lives, as opposed to the imagery that is often conveyed through the traditional media. The more personal and uncensored, the better (Keen, 2007:175; Nkosi, 2011:4). As a result, “real” people as a category in their own right started gaining greater importance. The importance of the emphasis on the ordinary and the authentic has resulted in a further departure from the celebrity model and an embracing of a new form of endorsement, namely influencers. The following section will introduce influencers as a new endorsement evolution phase.

2.3.2.6 Influencers

The term “influencer” can be traced back to a 1968 report titled “The People's Choice,” which studied how voters make up their minds during a presidential election (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1968). The article identified the importance of “opinion leaders” who draw their views from the media, then use their “personal influence” to diffuse media messages across their personal networks, shaping opinions across the broader mass (Erer, 2018). Since then, influencers have surfaced on social media platforms and combined eWOM product reviews and lifestyle narratives to become strategic avenues for product promotion (Patterson, Khogeer, Hodgson, 2013; Ashman, Patterson. & Brown, 2018).

Social media influencers can be defined as individuals who can shape attitudes and behaviours through online channels by acting as opinion leaders (Klassen *et al.*, 2018; Song *et al.*, 2018). Influencers are ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs, micro-blog posts and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, hold social power and shape the behaviour of others through their words and actions, engage with their following in “digital” and “physical” spaces, and monetise their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blogs or social media posts (Abidin, 2016:4; Robinson, 2020:1). A blog is a regularly updated website or web page that is written in an informal or conversational style, while a micro-blog is a short, frequent social media post (Knapp, 2020). Posts such as those made by influencers on social media platforms like Instagram can be seen as micro-blogs. These microblogs embody the trend towards celebrating

the private elements of life in public, with 50% of influencers blogging or posting for the sole purpose of reporting and sharing experiences about their personal lives (Keen, 2007:7). Though these celeb-bloggers and digital influencers are allegedly disrupting “the fame paradigm,” they are upheld in the popular imagination as individuals “just like us” (Duffy, 2017:10).

The number of followers defines an influencer's level of influence (Darner & Arvidsson, 2019:6). Influencer categories range from nano-influencers (below 10,000 followers), micro-influencers (10,000 to 100,00 followers), macro-influencers (100,000 followers to one million followers) and mega-influencers (over one million followers) (Cherrington, 2016; Allison, 2020). Brands can utilise macro influencers to create buzz and awareness, whilst micro-influencers are flagged as brand advocates to provide “more genuine recommendations” (Bogliari, 2019). Their business model is surprisingly transparent; the more followers an influencer has, the more they can charge businesses to promote their products (Robinson, 2020:4). Influencer content production must achieve two simultaneous goals: gaining and keeping followers and appealing to brands to pay them for sponsored content (Black, 2020:49).

Influencers produce content in several ways:

a. Lifestyle Showcase

When influencers market wares that are coherent with a newly entered life stage that reflects overall persona creation in weaving in advertorials and discreet sponsor hashtags (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:101).

b. “Promos”

Promotions, namely conspicuous posting or promotional material (Zappavigna, 2012);

c. Competitions

Giveaways or contests where followers are asked to comment, give feedback, answer specific questions or tag friends on the influencer's advertorial post for a chance to win prizes usually sponsored by the advertising brand (Zappavigna, 2012);

d. Account Takeovers

Influencers are sometimes invited to take over official accounts of brands as part of advertising campaigns.

e. Instagram Aesthetics

The arrangement of items is especially visually appealing. For example outfit of the day (OOTD), flatlay (photograph items on a flat surface), fashion spotlights (feature one accessory), make-up libraries (spotlight on cosmetics), partying (behind the scenes of dressing up), café hopping (“food porn” inspired food photography) (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:101).

f. Relative Other

In an attempt to naturalise ads, these posts reference a child, parent or partner as they muse about a product being used. This has created a new category of “micro-microcelebrity,” namely the child of a microcelebrity who is knowingly situated online as part of their parent's online presence (Abidin, 2015).

g. Shout Outs and Tags

An “amplified reference” practice where influencers mention select follower handles on their Instagram post according to their visibility, explicit thanks and public acknowledgement to direct followers' attention to the sponsors (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:101);

h. Multi-Influencer Campaigns

Multiple influencers are tasked to promote a product within a designated period using a dedicated hashtag (Abidin, 2015).

Much research on various forms of influencers on social media has focused on self-curation (Abidin, 2014; Marwick, 2015; Wissinger, 2015:9), follower-engagement (Abidin, 2015:8), authenticity (Hopkins & Thomas, 2011:139) and advertorial disclosure (Ots & Abidin, 2015), as well as ordinary users as “promotional apparatus” for brands (Carah & Shaul, 2016:71) and as participants in eWOM (Erkan, 2015:1436).

Influencer posts can be categorised as advertorials which are thought to be more effective than dispassionate, clinical advertisements since it takes the form of a personal narrative and incorporates influencers' perspectives of having experienced the product or service first-hand as a form of eWOM (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006:344). An overwhelming 90% of people on Instagram follow brands' profiles but only engage with these profiles when the brands post “fun, real and creative content” (Sehl, 2021). As a rule, advertising is perceived as authentic when it depicts a realistic plot reflecting an everyday situation, presented mainly by ordinary, non-idealised characters (Becker, Wiegand & Reinartz, 2019:29). Therefore, the influencer’s role is to reflect some aspect of normalisation and connect followers with the authentic stories

and quality of the brand in real and virtual occasions (Baadjies, 2018). The importance of the more personal appeal of influencers is affirmed by Ilicic and Webster (2011:622), who found that participants have a stronger attachment towards endorsers who make them feel they are cared for (relatedness) but also free to do as they wish (autonomy), and so influencers are an embodiment of these two principles more so than their predecessor celebrities were. When the influencer interacts with followers by replying to comments, solving problems, and inviting participation, consumers generate a feeling of connection and thus experience a higher level of relationship quality in the same way that frequent social interactions between two people often leads to greater interdependence and trust (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Klassen *et al.*, 2018). For instance, influencers generally refer to users who “follow” them on social media as “followers” as opposed to “fans” (as would be the case with a celebrity) (Khanye, 2017) because this term obscures the status elevation and sense of social distance between influencers and their following (Abidin, 2016:86).

Brands, therefore, often benefit more by aligning with influencer endorsers as opposed to celebrity endorsers because they help by connecting them to audiences on a more personal level. This has led to a higher level of engagement as influencers have, on average, three times as many views, twice as many actions and 12 times as many comments compared to videos from traditional celebrities (Kelly, 2020). Some researchers, such as Klassen *et al.* (2018), even go so far as to assert that social media influencers have overtaken traditional celebrities in their ability to influence purchasing behaviour, as users find them to be more credible and relatable. Influencers have an average Instagram engagement rate per 100,000 followers of 7.2% compared to celebrities at 1.1% (Bogliari, 2019). Kelly (2020) found that 70% of teenagers trust influencers more than traditional celebrities. While Keller (2020) found that 49% of social media users depend on influencer recommendations, with 40% purchasing something after seeing it advertised by an influencer. The popularity and effectiveness of influencers have furthermore increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with 90% of marketers indicating that influencer marketing results have been better than those pre-COVID-19 (Wiltshire, 2021).

This often leads to higher returns on investment. For example, 89% of companies indicate a return on investment from influencer marketing that is better than other marketing channels (Bailis, 2020), with some marking this return on investment to be 11 times more than other more traditional forms of advertising (Pozharliev & Marcati, 2019:5). In a recent global study, 17% of companies spend *over half* their marketing budget on influencers, with this number set

to rise as nearly two-thirds of marketers are expected to increase their spending on influencer marketing this year (Bailis, 2020).

A critical distinction between a celebrity and an influencer is the blurring of the lines between personal experience and promoted product. There is, however, a danger in followers forgetting that there are paying brands behind some of the influencer's posts. Therefore, influencers are neither entirely commercial nor entirely sincere (Elmhirst, 2019; Iqani, 2019:232). Some scholars consequently have the somewhat cynical view that influencers have repurposed Instagram's original philosophy by appropriating its networked intimacy for a non-reciprocal mass audience, supplementing mobile phone photography with high-end digital cameras and apps, converting “memory keepsakes” into “broadcast material” for high circulation and reworking “spontaneous captures” into “purposeful staging” (Zappavigna, 2012). The current stage of the endorser evolution, where the legitimacy and credibility of influencers are called into question, is presented in the following section.

2.3.2.7 Influencers' Credibility Crisis

Through the increased commercialisation of a platform comes the risk of its exploitation. Social media fraud has become increasingly prevalent, especially on platforms such as Instagram with companies such as Devumi, Viralyft, Socialpros.io, Get Viral, Follower Packages, Views Expert, Fast Likes.io, Famoid and more selling followers and retweets/reposts to celebrities, businesses and anyone who wants to appear more popular or exert influence online (Confessore, Dance, Harris & Hansen, 2018). As a result, social media users today perceive human influencers as less authentic than they were five years ago (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:28). Some have even described the influencer industry as “an entire ecosystem that is drenched in fiction” thanks to “inflated metrics and false information” (Klein, 2020).

There have been noted credibility catastrophes, such as the Fyre Festival in December 2016, where 400 influencers, including celebrities, were paid an estimated \$250,000 to promote and advertise an event that “spectacularly failed to resemble its publicised image” (Elmhirst, 2019). Misrepresenting images posted by influencers has become increasingly common. Carolyn Stritch, a British travel blogger, used Face-App to insert her face into photos on a glamorous holiday to Disney Land, while YouTuber Amelia Liana triggered a backlash last year after she posted a suspiciously perfect photo of herself in front of the Taj Mahal with no other tourists in sight (Stritch, 2018). There have been revelations of corruption, such as buying followers,

undeclared paid-for content, and fake likes with programmable personal fabricators becoming an increasing reality (Gershenfeld, 2005:4; Elmhirst, 2019).

In what Leaver *et al.* (2020:80) describe as a “shadow economy,” followers and likes are bought by profiles to cultivate visibility of an account and its content. Fake accounts and engagement “bots” through apps such as Instagress, Social Growth, Archie, InstarocketProX and Boostio now “infest social media networks: (Constine, 2018a; Confessore *et al.*, 2018). Dovetale, a software company identifying large numbers of fake accounts, notes that, on average, 16.4% of the followers on Instagram's top 20 accounts were fraudulent (Maheshwari, 2018). As articulated by Confessore *et al.* (2018), the risk is that “these fake accounts are counterfeit coins in the booming economy of online influence, reaching into virtually any industry where a mass audience, or the illusion of it, can be monetised.” When the number of followers and interactions a profile has becomes its most significant currency, it is no wonder that users would pursue any means necessary to grow this, even artificially (Hudson, Huang, Roth & Madden, 2016:28; Elmhirst, 2019). Instagram has taken some steps to address this. For instance, in December 2014, Instagram conducted the first of several purges, systematically deleting millions of suspected bot accounts (Lee, 2014). Despite these attempts, “influencer fraud” is still seen as the foremost challenge to the industry, with 54% of marketers concerned about the authenticity of followers (Wiltshire, 2021).

Alexander (2018) painted a particularly gloomy picture, lamenting that “from sponsored posts to affiliate marketing, much of your natural Instagram feed is increasingly curated by savvy marketing teams, designed to lure you into handing over both your time and money.” This has led to a spate of industry-press articles proclaiming the “death of influencer marketing” as trust in influencers and celebrities has been eroded to the extent that they are rendered “worthless” (Elmhirst, 2019; Bishop, 2020). With the “humanity” of human influencers under question, from increasingly bot-generated engagements to commercially rather than authentically lead-content creation, the “human” in “human influencers” has begun to seem superfluous.

The endorsement industry has undergone many changes with the current influencer stage evolving once again. Liebes and Curran (1998:194) have stated that “reform is the best form of defence,” and so the endorsement industry appears to be heading toward yet another new evolutionary phase. As the appeal of standard influencers and traditional celebrities begins to wear off, industry experts have started to reimagine what the next alternative stage of the social

media endorser evolution will be characterised by (Ndlela & Chuchu, 2016:79). To create the novel while still retaining the appeal of standard endorser models, a new hybrid breed of virtual influencers is being created. Virtual influencers represent a bridge between the highly controlled celebrity Hollywood star system and the highly liberated social media influencer whilst also combining ideas about an animated spokesperson and an influencer (Drenten & Brooks, 2020:1). The celebrification of virtual influencers reflects a reimagined virtual star system, defined by techno-human cultural intermediaries and the non-agentic persona as property (Drenten & Brooks, 2020:1).

2.4 VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS MITIGATE THE RISKS OF HUMAN ENDORSERS

From the perspective of marketers, who look at the mode of influencing as a tool to achieve capitalist aims of selling products, virtual influencers can be seen as a means of generating higher returns, with lower risks than their human counterparts. Despite the effectiveness of using endorsers over time, there have been numerous cases of human endorsements gone wrong, and many scholars have cautioned against the risks and hazards of using human endorsers, whether celebrity or influencers (Kumar, 2016:86).

The popularity of virtual influencers highlights the rise of a new endorser system protected from the unpredictable personalities and scandals of humans and includes control over not just the virtual influencer's body and face but also its entire behaviour (Shieber, 2019; Tiffany, 2019). Research about virtual influencers suggests that they have several more advantages when compared to real influencers, since virtual influencers successfully navigate online authenticity paradoxes more consistently and without suffering the crises of subjectivity and burnout many human influencers experiences (Bojanic, 2019:10; Black, 2020:46). It is, therefore, worth investigating the risks that human endorsements pose and how virtual influencers can mitigate such risks to a degree, making virtual influencers a more profitable, less risky asset investment for a brand.

2.4.1 Incongruent Pairings

Selecting an endorser to partner with a brand in a meaningful way is not a simple process (Zwilling & Frutcher, 2013:394). Congruence is the coherence between the announced product characteristics and the profile of the endorser that make the public perceive the endorser as fit to endorse a determined product or brand (Kim & Na, 2007:314; Aureliano-Silva *et al.*, 2015:60). Even an unrecognised brand will be better evaluated when endorsed by an endorser

who displays high congruence with the product (Aureliano-Silva *et al.*, 2015:62). Selecting an endorser to partner with is a high-risk/high-reward proposition as a pairing could prove ineffectual, and the strategy may backfire (Brodeser-Akner, 2007; Mishra *et al.*, 2015:115). The public are not likely to overlook poorly chosen endorsement deals by endorsers (Till, 2001).

Human error further escalates such issues as even when an initial endorsement partnership may be successful, a change in human endorser behaviour could threaten the match-up. For example, the endorser might publicly endorse one product but privately use a competitor's product, such as the case where celebrity singer Britney Spears was photographed drinking Coca-Cola whilst in a deal with Pepsi, its largest competitor (Banytè *et al.*, 2011:1217; Zamudio, 2016:412). Virtual influencers can mitigate elements of this risk as every post is purposefully crafted and such virtual characters will never be “caught” behaving in a way that is not congruent with the brand “they” are representing. Similarly, their profile can easily be “adjusted” to exhibit the traits of a planned brand merger. For instance, Lil Miquela, having never shared much about her apparent Spanish heritage, started posting her captions in both English and Spanish two years into her profile creation, a month before launching a partnership with Taki chips, which is acclaimed for its “proudly Mexican and Spanish heritage” (see Image 2.31). Similarly, the Kim Zulu profile started including more “every day” content, such as Kim Zulu grocery shopping, along with the profile's usual stylised model-esque posts so that the profile could be seen as more relatable and entrenched into the everyday lives of users ahead of the announcement of partnerships with BMW Mini. Although human endorsers can tweak their profiles to be congruent with brands, the level of control in managing the profiles of virtual influencers means that they are more effective in this sense.

2.4.2 Scandal and Disassociation

Human influencers always present a risk of controversy or insecurity in their personal lives, which manifests as a direct or indirect threat to their partner brands (Creasey & Anido, 2020:75). Before social media, information about high profile endorsers was only reported by third parties (television reports, magazine editors) and was, therefore, controlled, whereas the internet and the democratisation of information have meant that a scandal is not as easy to contain with human error a critical risk (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016:2; Hoang & Su, 2019:7). Human influencers' personal issues can negatively impact their branded relationships—for example, almost half of human influencers admit to suffering from mental health issues

associated with their profession, which are understandable given the intense public scrutiny of their appearances and lifestyles (Dodgson, 2019). Beyond this, personal or professional issues can escalate to the point of becoming a scandal.

Zamudio (2016:411) defines a scandal as a high level of negative interest by the public surrounding an endorser. When a scandal occurs, and such adverse events become the focus of media attention, the consequent publicity may have a disastrous impact not only on the public's opinions of the endorser but on their opinions of the brand endorsed as well as some see that brand as "guilty by association" (Carrillat, d'Asto & Lazure, 2013:17; Thomas & Fowler, 2016:379). The most significant selling point of virtual influencers if you work in advertising or fashion is not the perfection of an avatar's body or face but the predictability of its behaviour (Tiffany, 2019; Robinson, 2020:2). Virtual influencers do not have an unplanned "offline life," which could negatively affect their "online persona" (Moustakas *et al.*, 2020:1). Given the risk that scandal poses, the saying that "prevention is better than a cure" rings valid for brands partnering with virtual influencers since this is an ideal way to ensure a lack of unplanned scandal, as every "act" or post of a virtual influencer is curated with the greatest intent.

If the concept of scandal is to be incorporated, this is done purposefully and controlled so that the virtual influencer and the brand gain prominence through it. As Drenten and Brooks (2020:4) note, if Lil Miquela's celebrity "nude photographs are leaked" or "she breaks the law," these transgressions will undoubtedly unfold as a strategically planned storyline. This infallibility makes virtual influencers appealing for commercial means as partners benefit from commodifying the non-agentic personas of virtual influencers who serve as a form of property to be bought, sold, and manipulated.

2.4.3 Endorser Loses Relevance

A further risk related to endorsers is that of "extinction," namely losing relevance to the point of obscurity and a "fall from fame" (Johansson & Sparredal, 2002; Banytè *et al.*, 2011:1215). Indeed, brands often design contracts such that endorsements can be terminated if the endorser no longer adds value by decreasing their fame, popularity or aesthetic appeal (Stein, 2007:28). Human endorsers may sometimes become liabilities to the brands they endorse by reducing the quality of talent or losing relevance due to age. Therefore, virtual influencers are "like human influencers without all the baggage" (TINA, 2020). As a result, an increase in the use of "animated characters" as product endorsers is predicted by Malik and Guptha (2014:131) as

these characters are generally immune to negative publicity and a loss of relevance. The fact that virtual influencers never age, never gain weight and can be made thinner, or taller or more Brazilian, or their skin made lighter or darker all means that they can be adapted in whichever way necessary to stay relevant and popular according to the trends of the time. Virtual influencers are not only “ageless” and “immortal” but could quickly become “someone else” in ways that are out of reach for corporeal beings (Moustakas *et al.*, 2020:1; Black, 2020:53). Their relevance is not bound to a particular generation but can be adjusted throughout the years to consistently meet the target group (Hoang & Su, 2019:20). Since virtual influencers are characters created by humans, only imagination can limit what characteristics they can have (Darner & Arvidsson, 2019:7). There is nothing better than an asset without an expiration date for capitalists.

2.4.4 Production Costs

There are considerable costs associated with producing campaigns featuring human endorsers, costs and constraints that can be avoided using a virtual influencer (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:11). We no longer have to book and pay for a model, shooting crew, and all of the expenses that come with the photoshoot. It takes just one skilled digital artist and a computer programme (Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:46). In terms of scalability, virtual influencers are constantly available, are not constrained by energy levels, family commitments, or overtime legislation, nor do they require vacation or sick days, so they are essentially available for brands’ use 24/7, can take on inhuman workloads and work in multiple locations simultaneously (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:5; Creasey & Anido, 2020:2).

Virtual influencers are fully customisable and do not have to wear actual outfits or travel to geographical locations, meaning that costs are saved in physically producing, and shipping items as these can be recreated digitally (Bojanic, 2019:10; Moustakas *et al.*, 2020:2). The ability to not only insert the product onto the virtual influencers but also insert the virtual influencer onto whichever setting is needed means that companies save on transporting, hiring and accommodating production crews to the shooting location (Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:101; Walter, 2020:6). Using virtual influencers at the beginning of launching a product could also be a cost-saving strategy. Companies could identify potential demand for their product before introducing it in the market by assessing audience reactions to the virtual influencer campaign (Moustakas *et al.*, 2020:2). Virtual influencers can reap the “rewards” of these idealised bodies without the “work” of creating and maintaining them. As Jin (2018:158)

notes, the level of bodily perfectionism portrayed by the virtual influencers is usually associated with eating disorders. Virtual influencer creators never have to run the risk that their “stars” will develop an eating disorder as an after effect of the pressure placed on them aiming to attain a constantly thin ideal. They have lower risk and higher rewards.

However, although there are considerable benefits to using virtual influencers, scholars warn of an oversimplification of its benefits (Kadekov & Holienčinova, 2018:92). Andersson and Sobek (2020:7) warn that virtual influencers could harm the company if they do not signify that the virtual influencer has a commercial purpose. Lack of transparency can damage both the company and the virtual influencer in that consumers feel cheated by hidden advertisements. Ultimately, leveraging a virtual influencer could depend heavily on the target audience, product or service type, and influencing context (Creasey & Anido, 2020:72). Brand-new virtual influencers are not considered a vital source of credibility since they possess no clear track record. Building awareness for and best practices surrounding a novel marketing tactic demands a considerable time investment, and brands should bear this in mind before launching their virtual influencer campaigns (Creasey & Anido, 2020:78). However, this research focus is not on whether to use human influencers or virtual influencers, but rather why these virtual influencers, as an embodiment of consumer lifestyles on social media, thrive on Instagram.

2.5 CONCLUSION

Chapter Two presented a thorough overview of the new category of virtual influencers. The importance of accurately and objectively defining the virtual influencer category was highlighted as attempts to reduce virtual influencers by categorising them as “avatars” or “robots,” concealing the possible harm they may cause to the human profiles they desperately try to imitate. I then sketched a robust outline of the current virtual influencer industry landscape, including agency-based and brand-created virtual influencers. This proved that, although a “new” phenomenon, virtual influencers are no less structured, organised or impactful than the human influencers that preceded them. With 120 virtual influencers on Instagram alone to date and the exponential growth in quantity and quality of virtual influencers produced, the growing maturity of the category is evident.

I illustrated that not only are the technical capabilities of creative agencies at a point where the creation of these virtual influencer profiles is executed to a high standard (i.e. the *supply* of

virtual influencers is on the rise), but the *demand* for these virtual influencers is also growing with many brands replacing previous endorsement vehicles with virtual influencer profiles instead. This was caused by shifts in audiences' receptions of human endorsers such as celebrities and human influencers, with online audiences increasingly sceptical. The benefits of virtual influencers in mitigating some of the risks posed by human endorsers served as further proof of the market value of virtual influencers as endorsement vehicles with lower risk and higher returns for brands.

Chapter Three will build on this debate by exploring how the profit-seeking, market-driven logic of human and virtual influencers have expanded to subtly entrench a commercial focus in the creation and maintenance of everyday user Instagram accounts. As a result, all Instagram accounts are transformed into assets to be optimised within an attention economy. How Instagram encourages this transformation and benefits through this commercial shift is embodied in a new sphere of "platform capitalism" as an extension of existing commerce models. The significance of the subtle entrenchment of consumer activities and commercialised profiles in Instagram existence is investigated from a Southern context in the next chapter, given that affirming our status through possessions is a political act as much as an economic one.

CHAPTER THREE

PLATFORM CAPITALISM AND CONSUMPTION IN AFRICA

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter provided an overview of the changing endorser industry with an outline of the nature of traditional celebrities, human influencers and the newest type of virtual influencers. Endorsers as a vehicle of consumption-inducing desire are fundamental to Western consumer culture and are central to the “re-invention of global capitalism” (Kerrigan *et al.*, 2011:1505). In this chapter, I argue that these commercially-driven endorsers are as much a result of the market they exist for as the platform they operate on.

The practice of consumption is entrenched in every area of life and has become the most global and substantial activity of people at the end of the twentieth century, thus evolving into a space where identities and shared meanings are forged (Cross & Street, 2009:6). We live in a hyper-commodified society with consumerism, an entrenched societal principle as we purchase the things we need to live (Ferguson, 2016:409; Maso *et al.*, 2019:7). As the activity of consumption evolves, so too do the platforms and spaces that facilitate such consumption habits, thus paving the way for “platform capitalism” as an extension of existing commerce models. In this chapter, I argue that social media platforms such as Instagram have entrenched themselves as the new arena for digital economic circulation (Kenney & Zysman, 2016:2; Langley & Leyshon, 2017:16). By scrutinising the characteristics of platform capitalism (digital infrastructural intermediators, network effects, cross-subsidisation), as well as Instagram’s platform revenue models (extracting data/time from users and advertising spend from brands), I maintain that it is not just profit-seeking users of Instagram such as influencers that are transformed into commercial assets, but general users of the platform as well. I demonstrate that the market logic of Instagram has penetrated every sphere of the app as users are made and unmade into assets through adhering to celebrity and influencer performance norms and engaging in visibility labour. The increasing expectation of this labour, and the algorithmic punishment if not done, is explored through a neoliberal lens.

The problematic nature of virtual influencers as unregulated players in the market is underscored. I then turn my focus from platform capitalism on Instagram to the relevance of this from the context of the global South, and Africa in particular. The portrayal of an idealised

lifestyle in evoking envy and desire is a common tactic used by marketers to associate the purchasing of their products as the first step in unlocking a previously unattainable way of life. The desire to emulate the lives of the wealthy is broadly accepted as the driving force for the engine of consumption. In this chapter, I explore how Instagram, through its hypervisibility and documentary nature, exploits this tactic even further. The implications of this for South African audiences is further explored since South Africa is characterised by a “culture of desire” due to the duality of the South African economy, with coexistence between opposite ends of the buying power spectrum, namely, wealthy consumers on the upper spectrum and poor consumers focused on day-to-day survival on the lower spectrum (Feketha, 2018). Furthermore, the hybrid economic model of part neo-liberal capitalist competition frameworks existing in disharmony alongside economic assistance welfare models breeds underlying economic and political tension. With the most unequal economy in the world, South Africa hosts a constant tension between the haves and have nots, with the distinction palpable. Turn to social media, and this distinction becomes even more visible, which further accelerates desire, as privilege is brutally visible to those who are deprived of it (Petzer & De Meyer, 2013:384).

I therefore argue that within this context, the moral and ideological components of consumption pleasures cannot at any point be disentangled from the social and economic elements of shopping itself (Firat, 1997:60; Muensterberger, 2014). Given the legacy of inequality within South Africa due to systematic racial oppression under apartheid, many South Africans view affirming their newfound political freedom and economic status through possessions as a political act as much as an economic one. The acquisition of possessions and the documentation of the proof of our attainment of an elevated lifestyle on platforms such as Instagram are a means of making claim to a degree of citizenship access previously denied to some.

What is of particular interest, in the context of this research, is the role that virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu play within this narrative in embodying this aspirational identity to appeal to Western and Southern audiences respectively, whilst simultaneously enacting an idealised version of the modern consumer that serves the commercial interests of the agencies that create them and the Instagram platform they exist on. We are presented with an idealised profile of what beauty, youth, class and glamour is, and we are sold a narrative that the attainment of this idealised profile is through acquiring the goods and services

advertised in the posts. We are told what our ideal online identity should be, and we are told what activity we need to do to achieve it — spend.

3.2 PLATFORM CAPITALISM – THE INSTAGRAM BUSINESS MODEL

We are in an era of massive corporation-like platforms (Bojanic, 2019:45). Social media and their coded software are not neutral actors (Gehl, 2014). Instead, they are shaped by the politics of “platforms” (Gillespie, 2010:347), constituting social software companies’ tension between providing services for content generation and community building while simultaneously turning a profit (Sismondo, 2010). In examining the Instagram app, it is worth considering ideas that the app conveys about the activities it is supposed to provide, support or enable (Light *et al.*, 2016:11). In the section below, I trace Instagram’s history to summarise the app’s original vision and how subsequent releases have enhanced or adjusted its core purpose. I argue that the commercial aspect of Instagram has increasingly gained ground over the years and illustrate this by drawing parallels between platform capitalism attributes and ways that Instagram adheres to them. Instagram’s means of profiting off its users, creators and brands in the form of time, data and money are further explored.

3.2.1 Instagram History

Instagram is a free, content sharing mobile and web social media app. Originally released as a photo-sharing app, Instagram has integrated numerous media modes to cater to its one billion active users, including videos, reels, and Instagram Stories (Newberry, 2021). Instagram has been described as a “pervasive personal mediation device” (Brownlie *et al.*, 2015:455) which “exemplifies the new era of mobile photography” (Manovich, 2017:11), “commodified interactivity” (Serafinelli, 2017:101) and “visual self-presentation” (Duggan *et al.*, 2015). It continues to gain popularity in South Africa, with 5.43 million users (Statista, 2021e).

When it was initially created in 2010, the founders, Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger invented Instagram focusing on location-based check-in apps and created it as a competitor to Foursquare, but later shifted its emphasis from location-based to image-based (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:15). When Facebook bought Instagram for R15 billion, Instagram was 18 months old, had 13 employees, 30 million users, an android version of the app was only a week old, and had not made a single cent of revenue (Shontell, 2013). Many changes were made after the acquisition, including changes to the Instagram app programming interface (API), which meant that granting access to data on the platform was limited. Prior to this change, many third-party companies like Padgram and Webstagram researched user behaviour and created third-party

apps that spoke to user needs not yet addressed by Instagram. It is no coincidence that Instagram's application platform interface (API) change came during the platform releasing several standalone apps, including "Hyperlapse" which allowed users to speed up video footage and "Layout" which let users create image collages of various forms and post them directly to Instagram. This previously thriving third party innovation ecology has been severely truncated in the light of Instagram's limitation of access to its API, its embrace of commercial partnerships, sponsored content and its development as a shoppable platform (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:150). The vision of Instagram can therefore no longer be seen to be about creating the best user experience – rather the motto becomes "have fun," as ringfenced within the Instagram platform specifically.

This is further evident in Instagram disabling integration with other social media platforms other than Facebook, also owned by Meta. Initially Instagram was able to connect Instagram accounts to Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr (Manovich, 2017:135) and allowed users to cross-post images directly to the feeds of other platforms. This initial integration added much needed visual content to other social media platforms and greatly increased Instagram's visibility in its early days. Following Instagram's purchase by Facebook, Twitter blocked the ability for Instagram users to find friends who they were connected with on Twitter (Robertson, 2012; Spinelli, 2019:102) and later Twitter removed the ability for Instagram images to appear in the main Twitter timeline. This is strongly contrasted with the process of sharing content between Instagram and Facebook, both owned by the same holding company Meta, which is effortless, even encouraged. Encouraging the linking of Instagram and Facebook posts not only allows for additional data gathering as user behaviour can be scraped from both profiles (thus enabling advertisement serving), but also means that content can be created once by the user but circulated to both Instagram and Facebook audiences (thus increasing the amount of content that can be consumed and thus the amount of time spent on the app).

A further illustration of how Instagram aims to ringfence attention and engagement on its platform is through not allowing clickable URLs on posts as happens on Facebook. The only way to hyperlink content is to use a hyperlink sticker tag on a Story, or to include it as the selected website information in a bio. Users cannot include clickable hyperlinks in permanent posts. The result is that engagement is contained within Instagram because in order to access for example, a photographer's website, a user would see an Instagram post by the photographer's account, navigate to that photographer's account, probably follow that account,

then click the website URL in their bio to view their website. In this way Instagram decreases the likelihood of users linking out of the app, and if users do link out of the app, they are forced to follow the post to the account first, thus increasing engagement time.

This primarily profit-driven, rather than user-experience-driven, shift is evident to this day where Instagram can be seen to mimic the common business practice of acquisition of, or replication of, competitors. Platform companies' acquire rival platforms which allows them to incorporate new features from the acquired platform, scale up quickly and subsequently dominate markets (Cunningham & Craig, 2019:9). For instance, in 2013 Snapchat very publicly rejected an offer of three billion USD from Facebook to buy the platform and by 2016 Snapchat was Instagram's biggest competitor in the visual social media landscape (Ask, 2013). Soon after, Instagram Stories was launched on Instagram which largely replicated the idea of ephemeral content made popular by Snapchat. Instagram's latest integration of reels, which largely mimics the short-video-collage style of TikTok, a further rival, once again embodies this marketplace logic.

A further shift was evident in the expansion of several features to include a mobile and web interface, instead of trying to only build out the mobile version of the app. Initially, the Instagram world was strictly confined to the mobile and committed to the idea of the instant. Kevin Systrom, a co-founder of Instagram explained the motivations behind the original upload limitations since "Instagram at its core, is about seeing and taking photos on-the-go and so we do not offer the ability to upload from the web as Instagram is about producing photos on the go, in the real world, in real time" (Stern, 2013). In the past users could not upload images taken previously (for instance in how we upload gallery visuals now) but were only able to take a photo within the app and upload it immediately. Users used to also not be able to edit captions to posts once posted. Furthermore, while Instagram had a website on which photos could be viewed, the site's functionality was limited and users could not access direct message on web, nor could content be uploaded from a website, all uploads needed to be made from mobile devices. As a result, the vast majority of activity was done through the mobile app (Marwick, 2015:142). This has however shifted with the web interface version of the Instagram app no longer being so severely limited thus catering to the needs of businesses and marketers who would use the web for creating, loading and monitoring of content that is served to the users who consume the content on their mobiles.

A further shift was evident in the nature of advertising with various experiments running on the platform in 2013 after the Facebook acquisition provided additional access to underlying Instagram user data (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:19). This rapidly escalated to a point where most of the revenue of the platform is based on advertising (Bojanic, 2019:44).

Interestingly, when the acquisition of Instagram by Facebook initially occurred, the Instagram founders Systrom and Krieger stayed on and appeared to try to keep Instagram a separate entity from its parent company Facebook. However, industry experts claim that the rise in popularity of Instagram started to pose a threat to the Facebook app itself (Constone, 2019). There were subsequently various policy decisions to further the companies' Facebook-first philosophy such as the fact that Facebook deliberately made it harder for traffic to flow from the main Facebook app to Instagram as more users shifted entirely from Facebook to Instagram (Thompson & Vogelstein, 2019).

In October 2018 Systrom and Krieger officially stepped down from their role heading Instagram explaining that "no one ever leaves a job because everything is awesome" (Wagner, 2018; Leaver *et al.*, 2020:32). They were replaced by Adam Mosseri who was the previous head of newsfeed at Facebook, suggesting that Instagram's and Facebook's direction were going to be much more closely tied in the coming years. Mosseri however did not seem to have the same commitment as its founders to keep Instagram as a separate platform (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:35). Tellingly, in Facebook's 2019 earnings report the company noted they would be moving away from giving user statistics for each platform or service they own individually such as Instagram, instead reporting grouped "Facebook family metrics" in the future, noting that there were 2.7 billion Facebook family users by end 2018 (Constone, 2019). This move is seen by many as an effort to hide the diminishing Facebook active users' rates which are concealed by the growth in Instagram active users.

The relevance of these changes in management is the resultant shifts in the direction of the Instagram app, with Instagram increasingly becoming a space where communication and commerce overlap (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:1). For some, the original spirit of "spontaneity" behind the app has been replaced with an "intentional and effortful programming and scheduling of content" where the originally intended accessibility of Instagram has been moving towards professionalism (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:83). These managerial and structural changes to Instagram, along with the shifts in the nature of profile management and content creation due

to the growing influencer industry, as established in the previous chapter, have resulted in a shift in the fundamental use of the platform.

A summary of Instagram would be incomplete without making mention of influencers, who, although may have existed in some form on other channels, become a structured and market-dominating force on Instagram. Influencers have utilised the affordances of platform capitalism on Instagram to the extent that an economy of Instagram commerce has emerged known as the “influencer industry” where social capital can be converted to economic capital (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:82; Molina, 2020:11). Influencers are utilising Instagram as a digital repository of advertorials and self-branded images, and this behaviour is being emulated by other general Instagram users (Molina, 2020:11).

The latest introduction of various shopping features has formalised this commercial model by building out the eCommerce functionality of Instagram even further. This is evident in the latest “Instagram shop” and “Shopping tab” features. We know that the market favours interactivity restricted by two choices “buy now” or “buy later.” The “buy now” option takes precedent, and it is this instant gratification that Instagram taps into. Instagram describes its shopping functionality as ensuring “people can easily shop in the moment of discovery” (Instagram, 2019b). Building these features into the overall flow of the app, therefore, allows for an easier purchasing journey which in turn boosts this action on the app. On average, 130 million Instagram accounts tap on a shopping post to learn more about products every month (Sehl, 2021).

When this function was introduced, Instagram seemed to have deprioritised its most important segment – influencers. Where the brand shops and Shopping tab successfully appeased marketers, influencers felt excluded from the buying journey they had all but started. For Instagram to effectively integrate shopping into the fabric of its platform, it, therefore, needed to attain buy-in from influencers who were pivotal in the commercial practices of the platform in the first place. Retaining creators on the Instagram platform is critical as they are essential sources of content generation that keep Instagram audiences engaged (Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:19). Without such content, Instagram’s business model is largely under threat. This possible threat to influencer engagement on Instagram was exacerbated by aggressive strategies by other platforms such as TikTok and YouTube which had various content creation incentive schemes to grow their creator base. For instance, TikTok announced

its \$200 million “TikTok Creator Fund,” which allows popular posters to earn money from their videos based on the number of views. Soon after, YouTube announced a \$100 million fund for top creators on “YouTube Shorts” (a new YouTube content format that mimics the short-form video of TikTok videos and Instagram reels). YouTube has paid over \$30 billion to content creators in the last three years, while Snapchat has paid \$1 million per day to creators on their Spotlight platform (Silberling, 2021). As a result, Instagram started its annual creator’s forum, providing advice to not just brands, but creators on how to monetise their content. “Our goal is to be the best platform for creators to make a living,” explained Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg at the launch of the creator summit (Silberling, 2021). Within the realm of social media, much criticism has arisen from the intellectual property attributed to content creators. In the space of virality, resharing and repurposing of content, tracing the original source of content and ensuring the remuneration of that source is increasingly challenging. The ability to reimburse creators of content while not incentivising such content to the degree where it skews the nature and intention of the content being created, is a delicate balance for platforms.

The ability for Instagram creators to make money was also prioritised through the introduction of a “native affiliate tool” which allows creators to recommend products available on checkout, share them with followers and “earn commissions for sales their posts drive (Silberling, 2021). The inclusion of a tagged product shopping sticker was further illustrated as a direct sales link (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:32).

As a platform, Instagram has evolved significantly for the user, but even more significantly for marketers and brands with ample opportunity for sales-stimulating, profit-earning campaigns (Goldstuck, 2018; Dalayli, 2020:94). In 2021 Instagram’s advertising reach outpaced that of Facebook (McLachlan, 2022). Instagram has thus positioned itself as a digital platform with “multisided markets” that functions as an intermediary linking different user groups such as advertisers, influencers and the audiences they wish to sell to (Manovich, 2017:137; Zhang, 2020:122). As a result, overtly commercial content has taken up a more significant percentage of the average user’s feed, with one in four posts within a user’s main feed being paid partnership content (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:31). The return on investment for these brands to claim a share in the Instagram market is clear. Instagram has proven the best platform to advertise on as it unlocks engagement with brands on Instagram at a rate that is ten times higher than Facebook, 54 times higher than Pinterest, and 84 times higher than Twitter (Mittala, Kaula, Gupta & Arora, 2017:143). Tellingly, the number of Instagram advertisers increased from

200,000 in 2016 to one million in 2017 to 25 million in 2021 (Manovich, 2017:4; Siminitz, 2018; Newberry, 2021).

The role of Instagram as a facilitator of capital has thus become more prominent in recent years. So too has its means of extracting value from its growing user bases, with Instagram as an embodiment of platform capitalism ever more apparent.

3.2.2 Platform Capitalism

Compared with legacy media conglomerates, platforms are guided by business models that foreground connectivity between users and producers over creating, commissioning, and licensing intellectual property (Cunningham & Craig, 2019:9). Platform capitalism as an emerging term is defined below with an overview of its essential characteristics and the types of revenue models used for value extraction. Instagram's integration of these platform capitalist elements are outlined below.

3.2.2.1 Definition

To understand how Instagram caters to commercially orientated goals, an understanding of capitalism and platform capitalism specifically is needed. "Capitalism" is broadly defined as an economic system wedded to a particular mode of production – one rooted in private property, market competition, and the profit motive (van Doorn, 2018:103). Capitalism is essentially marked by a "capitalist market dependency" that ensures a "systemic imperative to reduce production costs in relation to prices" for goods (Srnicek, 2017).

On the other hand, platform capitalism can be seen as "both a continuity and rupture in our global capitalist system" (Zhang, 2020:131). Maso *et al.* (2019:6) describe platform capitalism as "variegated capitalism." Platform capitalism illustrates how particular platform assets "will yield income for its creators that can both act as collateral and as sources of profit in their own right" (Leyshon & Thrift, 2007:100). The platform thus becomes a legitimate object of capitalization, that is, an enterprise that can access debt from investors because its revenue prospects suggest that it can realise a return on capital. The use of the platform's technological architecture and business models to unlock profit and gain a competitive market advantage is not new to companies. What is new is the ability to isolate this model and firmly categorise it within the realm of platform capitalism (van Doorn, 2018:104). Understanding the nuances of platform capitalism is crucial. As van Doorn (2018:103) notes, "it matters what story is being

told about platform capitalism, for it determines how we apprehend and evaluate the agents driving its change.”

3.2.2.2 Characteristics of Platform Capitalism

I will explore the three key characteristics of platform capitalism, namely the role of platforms as intermediaries; the ability of platforms to create network effects; and the cross-subsidisation model utilised by platforms to acquire more users in the next section.

- a) Platforms are digital infrastructures serving as **intermediators** that connect different people (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:16; Srnicek, 2017:43). Digital economic circulations such as Instagram can facilitate networked exchange relations between users across geographic and time zones because of their collaborative qualities (Parrish, 2015; Langley & Leyshon, 2017:12). Platforms “condition” how networks come together and entrench themselves as the facilitators of those connections. Instagram therefore validates and legitimises its mediating role between brands, influencers and audiences through purposely reinscribing heterogeneous spatial and cultural configurations into its technology (Maso *et al.*, 2019:3). In this way, the platforms such as Instagram, Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon and Uber use their proprietorial software and technical abilities as a launch-point for user activities, thus making their platform an integral stakeholder in the online connection journey (Dyer-Witthford, 2020:116). They establish the assumption that the only route to online connection is through the app.

Furthermore, as embodied through Instagram, platform capitalism connects users and then profits from that connection. Platform intermediation thus frames the “market encounters” of marketisation processes in ways that are different to the typical mediation of market exchange (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010:14). What is distinctive is not so much the role of the platform as a “non-human mediator” of market encounters, but that platform intermediation targets “the opportunities offered by network effects and the power of its positioning as a gatekeeper between such relations” (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010:15). Platforms are not simply in the business of “intermediating connections,” but of “actively curating connectivity” to further strengthen their middle-man positioning (van Dijck, 2013).

This embodies the notion of “netarchical capitalism” where infrastructure is “in the hands of centralised privately-owned platforms” or “corporate oligopolies” (Kostakis & Bauwens, 2014:71). It further demonstrates Srnicek’s (2017) assertion that platforms have an innate predisposition to monopolise so that they are the centre of all online actions. The “winner takes all” objective of platforms (Kenney & Zysman, 2016:1) is grounded in an intermediary logic and business model that hinges on coordinating network effects in particular niche domains of digital circulation. This is achieved by expanding data extraction and analytics into all areas of life (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:12). For example, Google offers a range of digital services such as web search data, locational data, photos taken on Android smartphones, voice data from Google assistant and other modes of data capture, which present an immense volume of data, with Google platforms becoming a one-stop-shop for a user’s online behaviour (Hjorth & Pink, 2014:43; Taffel, 2021:238).

Through its role as an intermediary it can leverage this network effect to control how connections occur and how these connections can be profited off through scale and content generation.

- b) Platforms rely on **network effects**, namely the idea that the more users use a platform, the more valuable it becomes for everybody else (Srnicek, 2017:43). The value of a network is proportional to the square of the number of system users, so networks become more powerful and valuable as more users join them (Lunenfield, 2011:86).

Performing the structure of the venture capital investment, which also backs it, the platform business model capitalizes “capitalization” processes that “leverage debt against future revenue prospects from digital economic circulation” (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:13). It goes beyond the making of multi-sided markets through software code to also include the creation and coordination of network effects. Choudary (2015:38) succinctly summarises: “the network effect is the new driver for scale.” The key for the platform is to intermediate the ever-expanding value created by user interactions across their market network. This is because continually increasing the number of users (who are in their own right producers and creators of valuable data) is crucial to a platform’s capacity to cultivate and capture value at an ever-greater scale (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:22).

There are, however benefits to scale beyond just the number of active users. Some scholars see the motives for network effect as less about the “archival of membership” and more about the “generation of digital content,” no doubt stimulated by the free labour of its users with Instagram profiting off of the so-called “co-creation” of value between users (Çalışkan & Callon, 2010:15; Leaver *et al.*, 2020:87). While Instagram does not legally own any content posted, its “terms of use” grant Instagram the “non-exclusive, fully paid and royalty-free, transferable, sub-licensable, worldwide use” of the content users post (Bosher, 2018). The more users of the platform, the more these users produce their own content (increasing the variety of posts available) and the more they interact with content created by others (increasing the engagement rates content earns). Through incentivising the constant production of content through, for instance, algorithmically prioritising frequent posters, Instagram stimulates the production of media texts for circulation. Media texts, for example in the form of posts on Instagram, are continually being “produced and renewed” as they intend to engage people, to convey some kind of information, and to produce reactions in their audiences “which justify their continued production” (Burton, 2005:45).

Platforms aim to strengthen their network efforts in three ways. The network effect and ability for a platform such as Instagram to scale is facilitated by “connection” (the ease by which others can connect to the platform “to share and transact”); “attraction” (the more straightforward the process of connection, the more attraction the platform will generate as a market network for users) and “flow” (connection and attraction ensure that the “co-creation of value” between users will flow through the platform gaining momentum) (Choudary, 2015; Langley & Leyshon, 2017:21). I document how connection, attraction and flow are embedded in the structure of Instagram in my app-walkthrough presented in Chapter Seven.

- c) **Cross-subsidisation** is a tactic often employed by platforms to achieve their profit goals. As a tactic, cross-subsidisation is based on the idea that companies will provide something for free to attract more users but then raise the prices of other elements of a business.

According to the platform business model, achieving scale and coordinating network effects opens out into enacting three principal and somewhat overlapping “revenue models” (Chase, 2015:121; Zuboff, 2019). The three key revenue models include that of a “paid for” app (users are required by the platform to pay upfront fees or charges upon downloading and registering). The second revenue model is that of a “free app with in-app purchases,” often referred to as “freemium” (a combination of free and premium) where users can upgrade their free account to a premium version and unlock certain features only available to premium subscribers. The platform, therefore, does not merely list goods, services, assets but structures particular standardisations, qualifications and categorisations that can multiply transactions and the fees earned on those transactions. The third revenue is a “free app” where there are no direct costs or fees owed by the user when signing up or using the platform (Chase, 2015:105). Instagram falls within this “free app” model. However, although no exact monetary payment is extracted, there is a “cost” to using the platform infrastructure created by Instagram. Although the app is free to download, there are additional payable layers in the form of promoted posts and advertising for businesses which users are knowingly or unknowingly exposed to (Light *et al.*, 2016:11).

In the free-app model, value is extracted from sources other than explicit subscription fees in a model summarised as the “service/data-profile/advertising complex” (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:22). Social media platforms such as Instagram have been particularly successful at not only attracting large audiences but, by subjecting the data of users to close analytical scrutiny, offering advertisers and their clients more forensic and targeted marketing campaigns (Chase, 2015; Langley & Leyshon, 2017:16). Centralised information and image flows therefore become entangled with the building and sustaining of platforms for social interaction and enmeshed with the continuous gathering of users’ data, whose value fuels those platforms (Couldry, 2014:880). By combining data analysis with automated customisation techniques, platforms earn revenues from targeted advertisements and recommendations, thus directly monetising users’ consumer habits (Maso *et al.*, 2019:6; Langley & Leyshon, 2017:22). Therefore, platform capitalism “weaponises the performance of self” to capture, gather data on, and sell it back to itself (Black, 2020:46). In this way, users of Instagram (and similar apps) are therefore enrolled, knowingly or not, in a corporate-owned service, which is ultimately profit oriented and sells advertising space (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016:411).

Nieborg *et al.* (2020:5) go so far as to conclude that platforms such as Instagram can therefore be understood not only as conduits or intermediaries but “explicitly as markets.” I provide more detail on revenue generation models on platforms such as Instagram next.

3.2.2.3 Revenue Models

An app’s operating model involves its business strategy and revenue sources, which indicate underlying political and economic interests. Revenue generation may include payment for the app or in-app purchases, permitting access to additional functions (Light *et al.*, 2016:11). Platforms can extract value from businesses and users in several ways as discussed next,

From Businesses:

As established previously, platforms have positioned themselves as intermediaries and the “‘rentiers’ of the network.” Instagram’s role as an intermediary means that it can accumulate fees from stakeholders as “rent.” This is exemplified through the Instagram “checkout,” namely its Instagram shopping functionality where vendors are charged for utilising Instagram platform payment infrastructure as Instagram takes a percentage of payments for transactions. This includes a selling fee of 5% per shipment or a flat fee of \$0.40 for shipments of \$8.00 or less. The Instagram checkout has further entrenched itself as an intermediary “by wrestling control from sellers” as brands lose out on valuable customer data (such as emails) as all communications are handled by Instagram rather than the brand directly (Warren, 2020).

From Users:

a) Data:

Apps allow access to services in exchange for personal data that can be sold to advertisers and data miners, and so the core aspect of the Instagram platform business is the extraction and control of user fed data (Bojanic, 2019:43). The extraction of rent via automated targeted advertising, data harvesting and analytics is “a payment in attention, information, or affiliation, which in turn can be sold to advertising companies and market researchers who require access to users, their content, and their networks” (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:23). Platforms, therefore, pay attention not just to network circulations but to the data trails associated with these connections. This data is never neutral and is a core element of the new logic of capitalist accumulation (Zuboff, 2015:75)

Furthermore, Instagram pays attention not just to the links between interaction with such content but analyses the content itself. In this sense, the visual content uploaded by users are not just content that adds to the plethora of visual consumption opportunities for users, but the photos and video are sources of data extraction in their own right, with the coding of such images unlocking important surveillance data for Instagram in terms of race, location, gender and age. The data generated by taking a photograph and the metadata generated by the mobile device taking the photo and added manually by the user in terms of tagging people and locations, and adding hashtags all add to the usefulness of the image as a data point that can be added (Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Bojanic, 2019:44). In this way, platforms capitalise on the potential of platforms to realise monopoly rents (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:11).

b) Time:

The transformation of human attention from an innate information gathering tool to a profitable resource has paved the way for the “economy of attention” (Hoang & Su, 2019:1). In the age of social media, nearly every moment of human attention is, as Iqani (2019:235) puts it, “being converted into an occasion for a sales pitch.” This is supported by Couldry (2015:612), who notes that commercial media exists to sell audiences to advertisers since members of the public are transformed into consumers who are created, promoted, and sold to us through the mass media. Platforms must invest in “behaviour design,” eliciting “new behaviours that had never existed in the past” and ensuring that “users stick around of their own accord” (Choudary, 2015:43). The more time users spend on platforms, the more data can be extracted from their behaviours, and the more advertisements can be knowingly or unknowingly served to them in their feed. For example, if the Instagram ad-serving logic is that ads are embedded within a user’s feed once every five organic posts, then a user who is on Instagram for ten minutes and scrolls through 50 posts would have had an advertisement serving opportunity ten times. If a user spends 30mins, the number of organic posts seen and the number of adverts served increases. Instagram’s incentive is clear - keep the user scrolling.

Therefore, Instagram stimulates the production and consumption of posts by prompting its users to follow as many accounts as possible and thus be exposed to as

much content from as many accounts as possible. Tellingly, research by Manikonda, Yuheng, Hu and Subbarao (2014:3) found that Instagram follower relationships were overwhelmingly non-reciprocal and unidirectional, with fans following endorsers but endorsers only following back 14.9% of the time.

3.3. INDUSTRY REGULATION

While Instagram did not launch itself as a place for commerce, I argue that it has radically evolved to become just that over the past few years, aided in no small part by influencers, with various feature updates started catering to influencer activities specifically (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:12). Some go so far as to assert that influencers have actively made Instagram more commercially-driven, making it a marketplace for attention long before Instagram's tools cater to this (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:12). There has been a steady increase in marketing-driven content, with brand-sponsored influencer posts increasing from 1.2 million posts in 2016 to 6.1 million posts in 2020 (Statista, 2020a). As Instagram advertising becomes more popular, the number of paid messages in the main feed has reached as high as one in four (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:31). I agree with Abdullahi (2020:14) that disclosing advertising is an "ethical responsibility of brands and influencers." According to a Pew Internet and American Life Project study, while most people can distinguish between regular programming and infomercials on television, and between regular content and advertisements in print publications, 62% of users browsing the web could not differentiate between paid and unpaid content among search results (Keen, 2007:87).

From a platform capitalism perspective, the question can be asked whether the policy should focus on encouraging competition or regulation. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive—many forms of regulation could assure a fairer playing field for competition. However, the standard neoliberal narrative of competition presumes that "deregulation is a linchpin of truly open and contestable markets" (Pasquale, 2016:319). The hesitation of Instagram to regulate this activity is therefore consistent with its overall platform capitalist approach.

This "laissez-faire approach" has come under increasing scrutiny by regulatory bodies such as the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which insisted that functional changes be made to Instagram in ensuring increased transparency on whether posts are sponsored by brands

(Elmhirst, 2019). In the following section, I delve into the complexity of regulation in the current human influencer market next.

3.3.1 Disclosure of Paid Partnership and Advertising

“Advertising disclosure” is the process through which the commercial intent of a social media post is revealed clearly and transparently as being a post that is paid for (Abdullahi, 2020:13). Disclosure is, thus, defined as the “labels and cues that help to clearly identify the persuasion attempt in an advertisement” (Spangler, 2017). For example, Instagram has introduced “branded content” tags as a way for influencers to indicate when a company or brand is sponsoring their posts. The posts look like organic posts published from the user’s account; only they have a tag reading: “Paid partnership with [brand name]” (Southern, 2020). Alternatively, influencers are encouraged to use the hashtags #ad or #sponsored in their captions. These branded content tags serve as “small markers” that are placed within the caption to signpost advertorials such as AD, sp (sponsored post) #sponsored (Abidin, 2015). Using disclosure thus gives complete information to consumers about the persuasive intent (Abdullahi, 2020:11).

3.3.1.1 Regulation of Human Endorsers

Despite the various disclosure options in place, many influencers purposefully do not use the disclosure functions available and a lack of tight regulation on the platform means that a lot of branded content “leaks into organic feeds undetected” (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017:139). Influencers are thus paid to endorse branded content without any disclosure, and branded content masquerades as organic content. Leaver *et al.* (2020:101) refer to this as “astroturfing,” namely the orchestrated promotion of sponsored messages in the guise of unsolicited non-commercial casualness without any indication that these sentiments and messages are calculated campaigns.

The reasons why an influencer would choose not to disclose their content as advertising is linked to “advertising scepticism,” which is the tendency of users to disbelieve advertising claims (Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998:160). Previous research found that when consumers are faced with disclosure language, especially the term “#sponsored,” they perceive the brand negatively and have low purchase intention (Evans *et al.*, 2017:138). Within this context, to point out that a post is sponsored is to “render it pointless” and “damaging to both brand and Instagram personality” (Speed, 2015). Paid content can often be perceived by the consumer as

“disingenuous” as it can be questioned whether the influencer is solely posting the content for monetary purposes, therefore diminishing the authenticity and reliability of the content being conveyed (Vaughan, 2020:18). People discount an endorser’s intrinsic motive if they infer that the endorser makes endorsements merely for financial compensation or to improve their reputation (an extrinsic motive) rather than from a belief in the product (an intrinsic motive) (Park & Cho, 2015:227; Bergkvist, Hjalmarson & Mägi, 2016:181). In the past, Instagrammers who were overtly commercial seemed to risk losing followers who no longer find the influencer relatable.

However, these perceptions seem to be changing. More recent findings by De Veirman and Hudders (2019:94) indicate the contrary, with participants indicating more positive brand responses to posts that indicate paid for partnerships rather than those that did not indicate this. This is supported by findings by Abdullahi (2020:11), who notes that an advertisement disclosure condition enhances the trustworthiness of the influencer as opposed to no disclosure. Andersson and Sobek (2020:26) have unearthed similar findings as participants “experienced it as positive” when the sponsorships from brands are communicated plainly. When this is done, advertising disclosures are seen to signal to followers the need to receive the information at their own discretion and “signposts the responsibility of information accuracy as a shared endeavour between the influencer and the client” (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:114). Alternative research found that effects of advertising disclosure were more dependent on the influencer’s perceived credibility, as sponsorship disclosure had a negative impact when consumers perceive the celebrity or influencer to have no credibility (Boerman, Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2013:1047; Dekker & Van Reijmersdal, 2013:224).

An advocacy group called “Public Citizen” has argued that “Instagram has become a Wild West of disguised advertising, targeting young people and especially young women” (Rath, 2017). External to the Instagram platform, many nationally regulated influencer industries now require human influencers to signpost their sponsored content publicly and mark their relationship to a brand mentioned in their post, declare their earnings, pay taxes and even be subject to an audit of their follower status when asked (Spangler, 2017; Geller, 2018). The FTC in America, where Instagram is based, has begun to act against social media personas who have endorsed products online without disclosure. According to Business Insider, the US FTC sent letters to 90 celebrities and other social media stars in April 2017 that warned users to “clearly show when an Instagram post was sponsored by a brand” (Rath, 2017). The Unfair Commercial

Practices Directive further warns against misleading advertising that “materially distorts or is likely to materially distort the economic behaviour about the product of the average consumer whom it reaches” (Goanta & Spanakis, 2020:15). In the UK, the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA) warned bloggers against unmarked sponsored posts, which contravenes the ASA code, and also, potentially, UK law (Speed, 2015). In South Africa, the Advertising Regulatory Board implemented new guidelines in 2019 stipulating that social media advertisements should “not contain deceptive, false or misleading content” and that “messaging should be responsible and authentic” (Rangongo, 2019). It further advised that “marketers should make sure paid social media ads are obviously identifiable as such. An identifier could be a hashtag such as #AD, #Advertisement, or #Sponsored.”

It further notes that “advertisements should not contain or refer to any testimonial or endorsement unless it is genuine and related to the personal experience over a reasonable period of the person giving it” (Rangongo, 2019). It advises that “marketers should ensure that paid social media advertising is obviously identifiable as such.”

3.3.1.2 Implications for virtual influencers

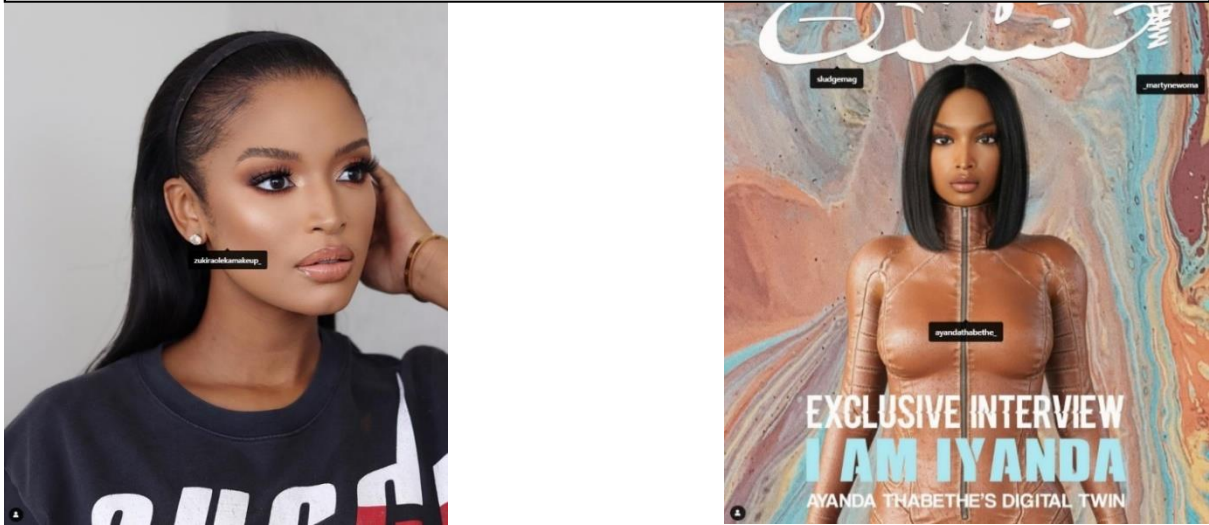
In an interview on the Zach Sang show, when asked about whether she thinks robots will take over the world in the future, Lil Miquela answers: “no, I think we’re going to co-exist in harmony” (Sang, 2019). However, we cannot “co-exist in harmony” if the playing field is not even. Although Instagram regulatory laws are now more relatively clear for human endorsers, there is no clear guideline for the new category of virtual influencers. Whether something is alive becomes a criterion for whether “moral recognition” and an “ethical discourse” is appropriate to it (Descartes, 1984; Turkle, 2005:60). The debate on the aliveness of virtual influencers takes on a new dimension in light of social media regulation; if virtual influencers are aiming to, and succeeding in, successfully “passing” as human endorsers, should they not be regulated as such? Is it inevitable that virtual identities flourish alongside human endorsers? If measured side by side, should they not have to be regulated on the same level?

The Instagram community guidelines, which serve as the regulatory framework for content on the app, forbid “fake and misleading user reviews,” the “impersonation of others,” and “accounts created to mislead others” (Instagram, 2021). Yet virtual accounts impersonate humans, make claims about imaginary experiences and uses of products and are often deliberately misleading about their non-human state. When given the option, virtual influencer

profiles clearly prefer to rely on mystery and confusion, confusion as to whether they are human or not and confusion as to the advertising nature of their product. Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu illustrate this. When asked about the companies and products she endorses in an interview, Lil Miquela claims “I would never say that I have promoted anything. Everything that I have worn or tagged, is my style, and it is usually something that my friends have made or collaborated on. I have never been paid to promote anything” (Dawson, 2017). The danger of such outright lies, when the creative team behind her account is financial profiting off her profile, is evident and is a new space of murky ethics and disclosure. Their reviews and recommendations are entirely artificial and based upon mimicking trends alone, which does not sit well against a backdrop of increasing importance and awareness of fake news and a growing number of legal regulations ensuring honest advertisements (Kadekov & Holienčinova, 2018:104). Virtual influencers endorsing products they claim to have tried (which is, of course, impossible) “contains more than a hint of manipulation” (Kalpokas, 2021:8).

Kim Zulu, in turn, does very little to highlight to users that she is not a real human being, nor does she make any attempt to disclose paid-for partnerships using a sponsored button or a #ad #sponsored disclaimer on any of her over 100 posts, despite obvious paid agreements between brands such as fuel station Engen and car brand BMW Mini. Virtual influencers are therefore not subject to the same rules human influencers are (Singh-Kurtz, 2018). The additional risk in not regulating this part of the market is that brands start to migrate to using virtual influencers because there is more leeway in constructing their campaigns (Kalpokas, 2021:8). Moreover, actual human influencers can begin to promote their virtual alter egos to circumvent rules and regulations (Bojanic, 2019:10). For instance, South African television personality Ayanda Thabethe’s Instagram account @ayandathabethe_ (see Image 3.1) has 1.9 million followers, yet she has also created a virtual influencer account @iamiyanda (see Image 3.2), which is described as “Ayanda Thabethe’s digital twin” and has 3730 followers. It is worth questioning why a human influencer with an already thriving Instagram presence would create a second virtual specific profile.

Image 3.1: Ayanda Human **Source** @ayandathabethe_, 2021: https://www.instagram.com/ayandathabethe_/; **Image 3.2:** Ayanda virtual **Source**: @iamiyanda, 2021: https://www.instagram.com/p/COcx8b2DU_w.



The co-opted space between human and virtual influencers is growing. The caption of the Calvin Klein advertisement, which featured Lil Miquela and Bella Hadid, a human influencer, reads: “Human supermodel Bella Hadid and virtual influencer Lil Miquela feature in Calvin Klein collection” (Cherrington, 2016). Is there going to be a need to put “human” as a means to categorise an influencer in the future? The more people express concern that followers might mistake Lil Miquela for a real person, the more convincing that illusion becomes, and the more Lil Miquela and other synthetic creations like her can be used to drive down the earning power of human models and influencers (Horning, 2018). The risk of human endorsers and their associated industries losing income is evident (Horning, 2018).

Despite the clear need for consumers to be protected from undisclosed advertising, content regulatory reform has been slow to react to emerging gaps (Goanta & Spanakis, 2020:21). The term “virtual influencer” does not appear in the FTC’s Endorsement Guides, which the agency uses to tackle deceptive influencer marketing. The FTC has since acknowledged in a hearing by the Truth in Advertising (TINA) commission that it “hasn’t yet specifically addressed the use of virtual influencers” (TINA, 2020). With a dearth of research on virtual influencing and little clarity in legislation relevant to governing these digital profiles, critics are wary of the future effects of this type of influencing (Creasey & Anido, 2020:6).

The results of platform capitalism, therefore, have far-reaching effects on the users of the platform who are influenced by Instagram’s incentivisation of specific user behaviour that aids the platform’s market earnings goals. I argue that the market logic of platforms has become

internalised by users and guides how users create, manage and position their profiles as assets in an attention economy. In fact, younger Instagram users primarily consider Instagram as a “platform for self-branding” than a virtual photo album or memory tool (Vainikka, Noppari & Seppänen, 2017:118). Instagram is therefore no longer considered as a “place of personal history, life-chronicling or a self-narrative,” but content posted is mainly viewed as “being positioned for potential followers” (Vainikka *et al.* 2017:118). Rather than making memories through images, commercial practices of “posing, grooming and constructing idealised versions of their best life” has become the norm where users cultivate a sense of a “future-orientated aspiration rather than past-orientated nostalgia” (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:83). The result of the market-driven use of Instagram is the identity modification of users from “citizens” to “consumers” (Woodruffe-Burton, Eccles & Elliott, 2002:261). An overview of the state of Instagram users as “commoditised individuals” is explored next.

3.4 THE COMMODITISED INDIVIDUAL

The above section explored the profit motive of Instagram as a guiding principle in its business model. In this section, I examine the implications of users assimilating this market logic. Users increasingly model themselves based on personas made popular by celebrity narratives (Creeber & Martin, 2009:121). As a result, self-presentation takes on greater importance in an increasingly “exhibitionist culture” (Enli, 2008), with social media serving as an “expanded zone of self-display” (Beaulieu, 2018). As software designed for personal visual display, Instagram further stimulates such exhibitionist behaviour (Marwick, 2015:157). This builds on my arguments in Chapter Two, which explored how the logic of celebrity has informed the shifts in how users curate their online profiles on social media. In this section, I turn to examine the role of the endorsement industry as satisfying platform capitalist goals and building a neoliberal logic on platforms.

3.4.1 Person as Product: Commercialised Self and the Creation of an Asset

Some cultural theorists have suggested that the facilitation of commerce is the principal function of the famous (Turner, 2010:18). As consumers, we “buy” celebrities and influencers by watching their movies, watching their Instagram reels and liking their posts, thus “commodifying the human form” (Miller & Lacznia, 2011:499; Fillis, 2015:653).

Suppose we accept the role that endorsers play in stimulating consumption and driving capitalism. In that case, the process by which an endorser, such as a celebrity, is created and

managed can therefore be seen as a commercialised business process producing an asset with a quantifiable reputation. This notion of an endorser brand as an asset is supported by Choi and Rifon (2012:641), who note that an endorser is a “commercial asset” as it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity and media industry. A celebrity endorsement brings about economic rents in the same way an asset would (Popsecu, 2014:123). A profile can be measured as a business “asset,” wherein “what a business is worth equals its capacity to generate a stream of revenues for the investor” in the same way that what a profile/account is worth equals its capacity to generate returns in the form of engagement from follower responses or paid partnerships” (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:22). The higher an influencer’s follower count and engagement rate, the more they can charge per post.

As expressed above, it is not just celebrities and influencers who are impacted by this, but everyday users who, knowingly or unknowingly, emulate the attention enhancing practices of these celebrities and influencers. As many of the most-followed Instagram users are already pop stars or celebrities, it follows that those hoping to achieve popularity will model their own profiles and presences on celebrity self-representation tactics that have been established and rewarded previously (Giles, 2000:25). In this sense, our willingness to share life details while portraying an envy-inducing lifestyle is seen as a profitable path.

3.4.2 The Creation and Valuation of an Asset as Measured through Reputation Capital

Changing forms of cultural representation in the digital world constitute new forms of value extraction (Maso *et al.*, 2019:1). For Hearn (2017:64), the value of an asset is expressed in reputation capital since online reputation is “financialised reputation.” This is a “reputation economy” where our “online history becomes more powerful than our credit history” (Duffy, 2017:26). Reputation capital is the aggregated value of signs indicating the perceived esteem, honour, respect, likability, importance and trustworthiness attributed to a given person or entity that is understood as that person or entity’s “intangible asset” (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016:193).

The production and maintenance of reputation capital is a process called “brand management.” Fournier (1998:345) defines brand management as a sophisticated information- and service-based industry that seeks to further the profit-making aims of various corporate and consumerist entities operating within the neoliberal market.

Though self-promotion is by no means a new imperative, in recent decades, structural transformations bound to the neoliberal ideologies of individuality and self-governance have instigated more self-conscious efforts to brand the self (Duffy, 2017:26). Online reputation and perception management are a process of production, with an asset as the final product, namely a marketable profile/account, can unlock returns in the same way that an asset would (Creeber & Martin, 2009:133; Kerrigan *et al.*, 2011:1505).

As a result, user behaviour on Instagram has shifted to the point where aspiring influencers are urged to identify their distinctive strengths, engage in brazen self-promotion, and spearhead “personal visibility” campaigns (Duffy, 2017:12). Individuals are seen as “microentrepreneurs,” self-investing entrepreneurial capitalists (Brown, 2015:33; Sundararajan, 2016) who craft themselves as assets that would maximise their positions in the market.

The world’s collective yearning for connection has created a new status marker: the number of people who follow, like or “friend” you, which renders popularity palpable. Reputation capital can therefore be measured, from ratings, to reviews, to followers. The number of followers an influencer has on Instagram, and the amount of engagement (likes, comments, shares) elicited from these followers impacts how much they can charge to create content for brands, given the scope of their follower audience and the potential sales pool for the brand. Interestingly, these platforms entrench these reputation metrics into the infrastructures of digital economic circulation (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:20). Therefore, the “like” button on social media platforms should be seen not as a means of consolidating friendships or indicating content preferences but as a computational system that assigns data its value as economic currency in a global online sociality (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015:3). The “circulation of social quanta of beliefs and desires” has fueled continual feedback between live data and automated information processing (Rosamond, 2020:113).

However, the tendency to quantify and rank popularity is not new or exclusive to Instagram. For example, Google’s search engines can be seen not as mimicking a social process of searching for information, but rather as having created a new system of data circulation based on algorithmically defined criteria of quantified popularity. For free-market enthusiasts, reputational devices make the sharing economy a near-perfect market, where participants have

access to almost fully disclosed information on the other parties. This transparency serves as its own form of regulation in a neoliberal market (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:19).

In the attention economy, this virtual status is a real-world currency (Confessore *et al.*, 2018). Our online reputation capital becomes an intangible asset (Rosamond, 2020:108) and the content produced by said asset becomes a stream of income. Therefore, online reputation itself has been weaponised for capital gains (Davies, 2018:18). However, online reputation is a complex and contested construct, is highly dynamic and volatile and subject to significant value erosion processes as “the A-lister of today is often the C-lister of tomorrow” (Luo, Chen, Han & Whan, 2010:1114; Chang & Ki, 2005; Schimmelpfennig & Hollense, 2016:18). Whereas a “sharing” platform like Airbnb has a clear stake in upholding its users’ reputations (it stands to earn more when both its users and its reputational measures are trusted), a site like Instagram, which simply seeks increased platform engagement, does not necessarily share a stake in upholding any particular user’s reputation. Platforms without a clear stake in upholding users’ reputations may be more likely to exacerbate some users’ reputational volatility (Rosamond, 2020:113).

Despite this complexity and however biased and flawed, reputation remains an indispensable social-epistemological tool within information-rich societies. In calculating online reputation, a key consideration is “data derivatives,” which are “aggregated scores derived from disaggregated data sets” (Amoore, 2011:26). Similar to financial derivatives, data derivatives are derived from, yet are indifferent to, underlying assets (such as the lives reputational scores represent). This is not simply speculation on personal trustworthiness or worth; it is also the performance of provisional agreements or tensions between a user’s value and the value of the platforms (such as Instagram) through which that user’s reputation has been rendered legible (Rosamond, 2020:113). Data derivatives make data actionable in real-time by appearing as scores and symbols on screens (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006:53).

The data derivatives on Instagram are evident in the metrics immediately visible to all when landing on a person’s profile with total posts (total content created and shared), total followers (total users who follow the account) and total following (a total account that the profile itself follows), appearing just under a user’s account name. Foucault (1977:139) cautions against such monitoring practices, warning that “beneath every set of figures, we must seek not a meaning, but a precaution, we must situate them not only in the inextricability of a functioning

but in the coherence of a tactic.” It is in this sense that insights and metrics of profiles can be seen as tools of the organised discipline of analytical spaces, as platforms require users to “adhere by our platform-specific rules or have their metrics threatened.” (Mirzoeff, 1998:184). Our profile data indicators mimic Foucault’s (1977:191) idea that we are made into “cases” through linking ourselves to features, measurements and gaps that “mark” us. In this space, “it makes it possible to observe performances to map aptitudes, assess characters, and draw up rigorous classification” (Foucault, 1977:204). The “science of the individual” (Foucault, 1977:191) is possible through measuring, monitoring, profiting off, and punishing individuals. Interestingly, third-party apps like “Ins Tracker,” which allows users to trace which accounts have viewed their profile, have gained popularity as an example of the holistic nature of this culture of data surveillance online (Abidin, 2020:77). We are being watched, and we watch who watches us.

Importantly, it is not just the metrics indicated in these profiles individually but their relationship to each other that serves as a value indicator. The number of posts (content produced and effort put into creating the profile) in relation to the number of followers gained (as a result of that content production) indicates something about the market response to production by that account profile. An account with a lower number of posts, yet a higher number of followers, is more valuable because the effort-input to follower-output ratio is lower.

An overlooked aspect of the production of online content is that of labour. I argue that labour on Instagram should be problematised, not just for the lack of labour compensation, but the various attempts to explicitly hide labour from the output it produces. This is investigated next.

3.4.3 Visibility Labour and Neoliberalism

Endorsers, and users who increasingly mimic endorser principles, are both “labour” and the thing that “labour produces” (Dyer, 1998; Driessens, 2012:650). The reputation capital paradigm strongly emphasises the potential reward of cultivating an excellent online reputation, insofar as enhancing our profile constitutes a form of “venture labour” (Gandini, 2015:91). Brand-related labour needs to be understood as simultaneously linked to self-expression and the operations of global capitalist power. For those who use digital media platforms to create content that might promote a corporate brand and their own persona, there is a complex tension between self-empowering action and possible exploitation by economic power structures (Iqani, 2019:234).

The work that social media users perform to be noticed by their intended audiences is known as “visibility labour” and includes self-posturing and the curation of self-presentations to be “noticeable” among viewers (Abidin, 2020:78). The visibility labour of endorsers as commercialised assets is noteworthy (Abidin, 2016:86). Endorsers must sustain an insatiable audience and satisfy platforms that reward constant posting (Elmhirst, 2019). Social media platforms have become more sophisticated, and user expectations have increased to the point where a simple text post or even a basic image will not earn engagement rewards anymore (Alfonzo, 2019:5). There has therefore been a significant cultural shift from “aspirational consumption” (status-induced consumerism that routes self-expression through the marketplace) to “aspirational labour” where self-expression is articulated through a patterned set of highly individualised market quality controlled, value-generating, productive activities (Duffy, 2017:13). In this section, I argue that these practices on Instagram illustrate a broader issue of “apploitation.” The fact that most of this unrewarded and expected labour is performed by women is not to be overlooked. Neither is the increasing naturalisation of this labour which become a barrier to participation when not enforced.

3.4.3.1 Apploitation

Ferguson (2016:96) highlights those critical elements of the Marxist class analysis are “exploitation” and “domination” with the current capitalist ideology that dominates our society “perpetuating elite privilege and power on the one hand and widespread deprivation on the other.” I do not take such a sceptical view of the market. However, the importance of understanding power in terms of labour and remuneration for such labour on platforms such as Instagram is a necessary exploration.

“Apploitation” refers to the exploitation of the platform-based workforce. This “gig work” is dominated by short-term or casual contacts and is often discussed in terms of “precarious work” and one-off tasks such as Uber, Upwork or in the South African influencer space, platforms such as Humanz (Pasquale, 2016:310; Vallas, 2019:48). Such commodification of users’ participation exploits the immaterial labour of users, creates precariousness, and ultimately shifts economic power from traditional institutions (in this case, government trading infrastructure and offline malls and markets) to digital platforms (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018; Zhang, 2020:123). Today’s gig economy is “effectively accelerating the long-term tendency towards more precarious employment” (Srnicek, 2017).

On Instagram specifically, exploitation is more subtle (Iqani, 2019:233). In follower-anchored Instagram campaigns, users partake in under-compensated and under-acknowledged, highly gendered visibility labour (Abidin, 2016:93). What they lack in financial repayments, Instagrammers possibly gain in cultural capital, as they may gain visibility and followers through voluntarily associating themselves with the brand they feature in their content (Abidin, 2016:93). However, not only do the producers of content often not get recognised and rewarded, but neither do their followers who engage with their content. The products of followers' labour are often publicly utilised with little to no remuneration, compensation or acknowledgement (Abidin, 2016:87; Carah & Shaul, 2015:11). Many aspirant social influencers (often in the form of Millennial women) go to great lengths to produce free online content that promotes brands in the hope of landing their dream job with those brands, yet they often end up producing content for free (Iqani, 2019:233). It should be noted that women make up a vast majority of this visibility labour market.

Young women are substantial producers and consumers in social media markets (Schmeichel, Kerr & Linder, 2017:11). Banet-Weiser (2012) situates gendered social media praxis in a historical context wherein girls and young women are seen above all as consumers who engage in work on the self-brand. Examining women as self-promotional canvases more closely, Wissinger (2015:4) investigates the modelling industry and coins “glamour labour” as “both the bodywork to manage appearance in-person and the online image work to create and maintain an “alluring persona” including a “demand” to be always “on” and seen everywhere. Understanding the power structures that create the neoliberal impetus for self-promotion and hyper-feminine performance within a highly gendered visual economy where images are “traded like currency” is crucial (Connell, 2009; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015:206).

3.4.3.2 Neoliberal Practices of Hiding Labour and Effort

The neoliberal principle that underscores platform capitalism is evident in the fact that attempts are made to “hide” the labour that goes into the creation, or even reaction to, content. As a result, there are certain prescribed “efforts” that users are expected to input into the daily use of the platform. In the same way that the performance of celebrity has become “an almost reasonable expectation for us to have of our everyday lives” (Turner, 2006:155), a profile elevated to the point where rewards are extracted from the content it posts is becoming a “reasonable expectation” for profiles.

An example of this is the popular practice of hiding hashtags on a post. A hashtag is a form of metacommunication where the # key is followed by an uninterrupted line of text to form a hashtag to attribute that post to a specific category of content (Daer, Hoffman & Goodman, 2014:15). Users often include hashtags in captions of posts to raise the level of visibility of the post and thus gain greater exposure and engagement. Many, however, hide attempts at purposeful engagement-boosting tactics, by either featuring them below the rest of the caption several lines down so that they will be cut off when seen in a user's feed, putting them in a separate comment, or retrospectively editing them out of the post caption at a later stage. The workaround of hiding hashtags is a "vernacular practice" that allows the user to maintain a "cleaner profile" in keeping with the platform's own promoted aesthetic, whilst still putting in the "work" to boost the engagement on, and visibility of, the post (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:63).

In the neoliberal era labour is not only "hidden" but is "distanced" from its produce. In the post-Fordist age, labour is increasingly "alienated from its products" while value is increasingly displaced into the aesthetic realm (Iqani, 2019:233). This is illustrated in the practice of "white walling," where social media users retrospectively delete posts that did not earn as many engagements and are therefore "less valuable." In this way, when a new user visits their profile, they will see a high number of followers (as "earned" through the posts of content), but a lower number of overall posts (since the user deleted the non-performing posts), thus creating a perception of higher value in the user's mind, with the "work" hidden. The neoliberal principle that "everything must have returns" and that the efforts to gain these returns should not be visible, can result in a change in user behaviour, as when posts are measured in terms of the effort put into a post, in relation to the output reward of that post (be it payment or just engagement), then the motivations for creating content become skewed to the point that if the post is not going to achieve a certain amount of desired engagement, it goes unposted. Users, therefore, "edit" themselves, after posting (i.e. deleting non-performing content) and before posting (i.e. not posting content if they do not foresee the "market" (Instagram audience) to respond well to the "supply" (created post)). When content is created for the specific purpose of catering to an audience or demand, it impacts what, when and why users post.

3.4.4 The Impact on How We Post – Visual Assets in Online Portfolios

Social measures of value actively reshape the spheres of valuation they operate in. The value of posts as calculated through likes, engagements and shares changes what content we go about posting and when. In an age of digital Darwinism where it is the "survival of the loudest and

most opinionated” (Keen, 2007:15), the type of content posted adjusts to adhere to this attention economy. In the following section, I establish the underlying motives for content creation in terms of documentation and validation and explore the effects of this on the way users see the role of their online profiles as reflections, or rather enhancements, of the self.

3.4.4.1 Documentation and Validation

The importance of users’ creating and maintaining competitive displays of lifestyle as contributing to Instagram’s success should not be underestimated. Various key features on Instagram did not necessarily originate on the platform, including likes, selfies and memes. In fact, previous successful photo-sharing apps, such as “Hipstamatic,” which also used filters and square frame conventions and was highlighted by Apple as one of its “Apps of the year” in 2010 (Carter & Maclean, 2012). “Hipstamatic,” however, emphasised the “taking” and “editing” of the photo, not the “sharing” of the photo. This is where Instagram established its unique position as it recognised the social act of “sharing” a post as an essential step in evoking reactions such as envy from users.

This can appeal to the user’s desire for documentation and validation. Humans’ need to document themselves is not new (Hayes, 2007:144). People have recorded and transmitted versions of events for thousands of years from cave paintings to ideograms, thus illustrating human nature to historically represent our experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Creeber & Martin, 2009:158). It has even been argued that the creation of a life archive appeals to the human desire for a degree of immortality (Janssen, 2017:192).

Mobile telephones as “pocket technospaces” have become powerful symbolic bearers of the self through acting as storage spaces for intensely personal data (Richardson, 2007:208), thus acting as a kind of virtual photo album or “personal cyber documentary” (Lee, Moon & Sung, 2015:555; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016:94). As micro-worlds of the self, mobiles work to mirror and secure the self-identities of their owners thanks to stored media content, phonebooks and saved messages (Creeber & Martin, 2009:116). Similar to the Filofax of the 1980s, mobile phones have become culturally and ideologically loaded objects, made to secure and carry presentations of self-identity. These days, anyone with a smartphone has their own portable archivist. Manovich (2017:52) reiterates that the documentation function of the visual has been intensified through platforms such as Instagram. This is supported by Lunenfield (2011:34), who notes that social media promotes itself as a way for friends, family and co-workers to

communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question “what are you doing?” Social media, therefore, opens the continued possibility of critical scrutiny and surveillance (Creeber & Martin, 2009:110).

When you depend on online platforms to remember the past, you focus on whatever past is kept on the computer and from a platform capitalist lens, you learn to favour whatever past unlocked the most “value.” Turkle (2011:305) warns that in this space, “archiving might get in the way of living,” and “we begin to live for the record, for how we shall be seen, such that travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs.” In this realm, physical space gets set up for the purposes of smartphone photography; locations become interlinked with brands, events and experiences become opportunities for further mediation of commercial content (Carah & Angus 2018:180).

This impacts users’ experiences with space and even nature. It changes how users “frame and experience nature” to the point where users tend to overlook the apparent physical reality of a location by putting themselves in dangerous situations while seeking to take a photo, which sometimes results in death (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:70). Space, therefore, becomes a tool for communicating a novel experience to unlock engagement rather than a lived reality. Within digital culture, when everything in our lives is captured, we begin to live the life that we hope to have archived (Turkle, 2011:300). We may end up with life “deferred by the business of its own collection” where we lose the sense that our collective life could lie anywhere else than online (Couldry, 2014:890; Janssen, 2017:192).

The “pics or it did not happen” narrative of Instagram makes the act of documenting everyday experience a testament to life itself, with users feeling “guilty” when not posting about experiences (Turkle, 2011:300; Nguyen, 2017:2). On Instagram, to exist is to post, to take, crop, filter, like and comment. The problem, then, is that our existence is defined, not simply by “being,” but by “being seen” by others (Baroncelli & Freitas, 2011). Therefore, the idea of “doing it for the gram” where situations are to be created and captured for their Instagramability rather than the experience itself (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:55) reflects Instagram’s platform capitalist goals as it leads to increased content production and consumption. From a neoliberal lens, the need to extract value from a moment or experience through a visual output in the form of a post on social media illustrates the need for a return on an enhancement made to the user’s created brand archive.

3.4.4.2 The Selective Self

In the digital age, reputational measures (such as likes, comments and followers on Instagram) weave themselves ever more tightly into online users' potential to act (Rosamond, 2020:116). From an economic perspective, the demand is for certain types of content since these are the content types that receive the most significant "returns" (in terms of likes, ranking, engagement), and so supply is adjusted accordingly. The curation of a profile as our own "autofiction" (through the selection of photos, texts and other context) is fashioned based on the anticipated reaction of online users to unlock a response (Worthington, 2018:10; Bojanic, 2019:38). Self-representational images have therefore moved from "markers of the private self" towards "establishing social capital within a highly commodified visual economy" (Taffel, 2021:250).

In the social media sphere, these ideal standards, as best exemplified by Influencers as examples of the most sought-after levels of engagement, therefore become content guidelines. "Everyday Instagram users are beginning to model themselves after influencers, taking up the cultural scripts' of the app itself" (Abidin, 2016:87; Bojanic, 2019:25). Negotiations of the self, the other and the person change in virtual spaces with interaction in different online platforms being "context appropriate" (Bojanic, 2019:26). The attention economy thus evolves to a point where the pursuit is no longer some semblance of authentic disclosure but a competitive investigation into different strands of selfhood, namely which strand of "self" is most "profitable" at earning platform-specific revenues and rewards (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:88).

Goffman's (1959:44) argument about performance, that an "individual learns to embody several ideal standards of performance and, if these performances are rewarded, they sustain these practices in public, even at the private sacrifice of other practices," thus rings true. To exist, to remain relevant, requires a constant stream of content creation that maintains the "compelling illusion" and embodies the "idealised self-brand" (Sundén, 2003; Black, 2020:52). However, it has become abundantly clear that rather than *recording* the world as it is, social media is far more prone to *distorting* it (Gil, 2018). We are conditioned to project only our best, albeit unrealistic, selves on our social media profiles as a way of virtually "keeping up with the Khumalos" (Khumalo, 2018). We elevate our highlight reel while suppressing the behind-the-scenes less glamorous moments of our life, a practice reflected in the rise of terms such as "insta-worthy" (namely, good enough to share on Instagram) illustrating our selective disclosure.

Therefore, it is clear that the structure of Instagram has established a trend where personal profiles are transformed into sources of profit in unlocking paid for partnerships or enhanced engagement. As a space of lifestyle depiction and a tool for stimulating consumption desires, Instagram is not only an embodiment of *platform capitalism*, but further illustrates that as a *platform* Instagram can facilitate traditional *capitalist* activities as well.

3.5 CONSUMPTION AND AFRICA

Consumer behaviour cannot be comprehended without first understanding the meanings consumers attach to possessions (Belk, 1988:139; Balmer, 2002:11). Commodities, as well as being three-dimensional objects with functions and uses, are also signs in their own right, and consumption is, therefore, “inherently semiotic” (Goodman, 1976; Iqani, 2016:199). Consumption is an essential element to participate in social life through reflecting an individual’s image to other members. This obsession with “having something” and thereby claiming to “being someone” is further exacerbated in societies such as South Africa, where access to goods is a signifier of one’s place in the broader political economy. The significance of asserting identity through our purchases is amplified in the South African context due to South Africa’s history of barriers of entry to the economic, political and material life of certain racial groups through the systematic racial oppression of apartheid (Iqani, 2015:196). The historically oppressive workings of race that “regulated people’s relationships to things and the symbolic politics thereof” is an essential investigative route (Posel, 2010:160). Therefore, the role that consumer goods symbolically fulfil in attempts at class mobility and expressions of equal access takes on specific significance in South Africa.

In this section, I examine consumption within the South African context and argue that consumption acts by previously underprivileged South Africans can be seen as efforts to fortify their status within the middle class via asset acquisition and a competitive display of possessions (Belk, 2001; Nieftagodien & van der Berg, 2007:8). To validate this argument, I present an investigation into the meanings that users attach to possessions in terms of identity formation. Thereafter I present a discussion on the role of the narration of lifestyles of luxury and the unlocking of envy and desire. I explore how the tension between having and wanting, coupled with a persistent state of aspiration adds significance to the display of luxury on Instagram.

3.5.1 The Legacy of Inequality within South Africa

Almost thirty years after the dismantling of apartheid, South Africa remains one of the world's most unequal societies and is a nation divided into the "haves" and the "have nots" (Carter & May, 1999:33; Gelb, 2013:2). Post-apartheid South African society is a melting pot of commodities, media cultures and human inequality that stimulates envy, desire and aspiration. Despite the dismantling of apartheid and the ideal of equality that the new dispensation promotes, the antic picture of a society where consumers and commodities circulate freely and endlessly in a utopian democracy is not the lived reality of many South Africans (Firat, 1997:62; Petzer & De Meyer, 2013:384).

Measures have been put in place to try fast track equality. South African governments have promoted "black economic empowerment" (BEE), defined as "black people gaining access to corporate ownership and management roles that give them equal access to scarce resources" (Murray, 2000; McEwan, Hughes & Bek, 2015). This has enabled the growth of the black middle class, which are seen strategically as the forerunner for integrating black people into the mainstream economy and fighting poverty (McEwan & Bek, 2006:1022). However, many measures that have sought to distribute wealth across a broader spectrum of previously disadvantaged South Africans have been criticised as a means to "guarantee the enrichment of a few, already relatively privileged, black people who display their status through conspicuous consumption" (Posel, 2010), while the living standards of the vast majority have not improved (Patel & Graham, 2012).

Clearly, post-apartheid South Africa remains a structurally unequal society where class-based inequality is often still racialised (principally, the poorest remain almost exclusively black) (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005). Until 1994, white South Africans were the primary recipients of public expenditure, receiving over half of all social spending, while black South Africans' social spending per capita remained at 12% of the white level (Gelb, 2013:16). For a country with a racially discriminatory past such as South Africa, it is natural that legacy income differences reflect a strong racial footprint. The co-existence of inequality and unceasing aspiration are characteristics of post-apartheid South Africa. This divide between the rich and the poor is reflected in a divide in buying power (Hoogeveen & Özler, 2004:14; Iqani, 2016:197).

The duality of the South African economy, with sophisticated, wealthy consumers on the upper spectrum and poor consumers focused on day-to-day survival on the lower spectrum, further stimulates a culture of desire as privilege is brutally visible to those who are deprived (Petzer & De Meyer, 2013:384). The result is a co-existence between opposite ends of the buying power spectrum, for instance, a doctor and a nurse; a domestic helper and a housewife or a beggar and a sportscar driver (Iqani, 2015:207; Greene, 2017; Feketha, 2018).

This culture of desire has meant that South Africa has transformed into a society even more consumerist than the one that preceded it, with a desire to emulate the lives of the wealthy the driving force for the engine of consumption (Firat, 1997:56; Iqani, 2017:94). Trentmann (2009:209) affirms this, stating that in the aftermath of apartheid, South Africa has become addicted to growth and consumerism. As Western lifestyles intersect with Southern cultures, “possessive individualism” therefore permeates interactions in asserting power and citizenship (Nikolaeva, Kozlova & Nurkhamitov, 2017:556).

3.5.2 Class and Upward Mobility through Lifestyle Images

It has become commonplace that audiences are conceived of in terms of their lifestyles (Burton, 2005:235). People use visual aesthetics and styles to define their membership in subcultures, to signal their “identities,” and to identify with lifestyles associated with specific class and power structures (Manovich, 2017:40). Class can be defined as a social category indicative of multi-layered locations, relations and experiences according to sex, race, nationality and more (Ferguson, 2016:68).

As Ferguson (2016:68) highlights, class informs people’s understanding of their location in systems of social hierarchies. Iqani (2019:242) aptly notes that in the hyper-mediated world, these forms of public connection and aspiration are increasingly mediated by ideas of consumption. Beyond just the pleasure of consumption, the power to purchase has political significance. Hopes for a better life are often organised around material markers of success and forms of consumption (Kerr *et al.*, 2006:63). The status attached to especially visible consumer goods (for example clothes, footwear, cars, jewelry) is a key identity marker (Posel, 2010:158). These aspirations take on a particular set of political concerns when they are expressed by those who have been historically excluded and marginalised from national and global economies, as black South Africans were throughout apartheid (formally) and after the transition (thanks to the economic legacies of apartheid) (informally) (Iqani, 2019:241).

It is important not to ignore how many black South Africans aspire to full consumer agency and pleasure (Iqani, 2019:241). Consumption acts by previously underprivileged South Africans can, to some degree, be seen as fueled by efforts to fortify their status within the middle class (Nieftagodien & van der Berg, 2007:8; Belk, 2006:2). However, despite these claims to “access,” scholars have highlighted the false notion of “democratised consumption” within the supposedly “open market” retail environment (Firat, 1997:47; Wodak & Meyer, 2008:10). Within the space of consumption, elite participants may still control the occasion, time, place, setting and the presence or absence of participants in such events, according to modes of exclusion (van Dijk, 1993:259; Carter & May, 1999:33; Sahn & Stifel, 2000:2124). This raises important questions about the extent to which consumption is a right to which people should be able to demand access, or merely a luxury attainable only by a small elite group (Iqani, 2017:284).

3.5.3 Consumption and Identity Formation

The media portray people who produce goods and services as much less interesting than those who excessively consume them, thus promoting the idea that the only way to get ahead is to identify with the rich and powerful and to live vicariously through them (Berger, 1972:146; Ferguson, 2016:408). As a result, consumption has evolved to be a fundamental activity in contemporary society. Human cultures have always been material cultures, as interactive exchanges have always been mediated by, and fashioned through, material objects (Iqani, 2016:24). Consumption comprises one of the three fundamental states of existence, namely: “having, doing and being” (Belk, 1988:139). Consumption embodies the crucial states of “having and being” In reducing the state of being to that of consumption, a culture of commodity fetishism arises where “you are what you own” (Firat, 1997:51; Firat, Kutucuoğlu, Saltik & Tunçel, 2013:197).

This mode of content production is evident on Instagram where luxury products are captured “in-application,” namely, in a moment of ordinary use, for instance, a designer luggage case pulled at an airport, or a designer lipstick being applied in an extravagant bathroom, all of which present the type of life a person who uses that product would live. Indeed, what I have therefore becomes interlinked with what I am, as possessions start to carry greater significance as a symbol of my place within society. All products, no matter how mundane, carry a symbolic significance as consumers often purchase the meanings of objects, rather than the objects themselves, as products project non-verbal cues (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982:134; Firat *et*

al., 2013:191; Iqani, 2017:94). The meanings that these objects express beyond their use-value encompass the fundamentals of commodity fetishism as a pillar of consumer culture (Firat *et al.*, 2013:190).

Having and being are therefore distinct, but inseparable in identity formation today (Belk, 1988:145; Iqani, 2017:98). It is clear that the line between what we call “me” and what we simply call “mine” is not clear-cut, as the process of an object becoming a possession, merges what was once self and not-self, thus combining the states of having and being (Belk, 1988:145), seen, for example, in the diminished sense of self when possessions are unintentionally lost or stolen (Firat *et al.*, 2013:188). This is also illustrated by the measures taken to project a sense of ownership of an item denoting luxury. For example, “The Digital Collection” offers a collection of fashion items that users can order online. After selecting the item, the buyer sends a picture of himself or herself to the digital creators, who then photoshop the item onto the sent picture and send it back, so that the buyer can post it to their social accounts as if they had bought the physical item (Mbata, 2017; Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:29). One of the reasons why someone would go to this extent to portray this idealised version of self is to evoke envy from others. In the past, this envy was less measurable, however on Instagram, the documentation of the use of a newly acquired possession is not only hyper visible and easily accessible by followers but is also measurable given the tracking of engagement with a post.

3.5.4 Envy

Within any marketplace, demand, and the activities that stimulate such demand, are worth investigating. The act of consumption is often stimulated by content created on Instagram which depicts influencer endorsers using products, or enjoying experiences that unlock envy of the influencer, and desire for the product advertised. Berger (1972:153) goes so far as to say that publicity and marketing is the life of this culture of consumption, as without publicity and narratives of lifestyle “capitalism could not survive.”

The powerful symbolism of aspiration is clear through the display of luxurious consumables (Iqani, 2016:154). Consumers are, for example, confronted, in one location, with a concentrated presentation of those products associated with the “good life” (Woodruffe-Burton *et al.*, 2002:259). Consumers seek to live the spectacle, and as a result, the process of consumption is made spectacular (Firat, 1997:87; Petzer & De Meyer, 2013:384).

“The power of the glamorous resides in their supposed happiness” Berger (1972:133) goes so far as to accuse luxury lifestyle images of displaying an absent, unfocused look as users “look out over the looks of envy which sustain them.” Endorsers certainly enjoy the benefits of associating with a category that denotes luxury. For this reason the concept of endorsers, such as celebrities and influencers, has become synonymous with lifestyles of luxury which invoke envy (Pramjeeth & Majaye-Khupe, 2016:43). Envy is defined as an “unpleasant and often painful blend of feelings caused by a comparison with a person or group of persons who possess something desired” (Smith & Kim, 2007:49). Envy occurs when others accomplish superior achievements or when they have possessions considered desirable (Smith & Kim, 2007:49). Envy as a cornerstone to endorsement success is further elaborated on by Berger (1972:146) who notes that the endorsement image, such as an Instagram post of an influencer living a lifestyle of luxury, “makes us envious of ourselves as we might be” and so desire is created through the contradiction of what we are and what we would like to be. It makes the difference between current experiences and future aspirations palpable.

Berger goes on to question what “makes this self-which-we-might-be enviable?” and concludes that is in fact “the envy of others.” The endorsement, therefore, becomes not just about objects but about social relations and the pleasure derived from being envied by others (Mgabadel, 2016). This opinion is supported by Turkle (2011:249) who suggests that “feeling secure as an object of desire” (because the other is able to imagine you as the perfect embodiment of his or her desire) is one of the “deep pleasures of Internet life.”

3.5.5 Access to Luxury Lifestyles through Emulation

For Berger (1972:146), the critical emphasis is for the user to celebrate “who they can be” as the lifestyle orientated posts of the celebrity/influencer endorsers use only the future tense. There is, therefore, a shift from the “indicative” to the “subjunctive” mode of culture; that is, from reality as it is, to reality as it “ought to be” (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2009:28). Berger (1972:133) claims that “publicity images” are about the future buyer. They offer the user an improved alternative image of themselves made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell, making the user envious of themselves as they might be. This envy prompts users to imagine themselves participating in the lifestyle moment portrayed in an endorser's post.

In this way, content narrating luxury lifestyles creates an idealised fantasy. The idea of fantasy originates from Freudian psychology as it is a “repressed desire, a longing for satisfaction, for

merging, for oneness, for the full identity of self” (Freud, 1919:220). By fantasising about the endorser they adore, individuals may cast themselves into a celebrity role so that their identity is intertwined with the celebrity's (Hung, 2014:161; Gigaba, 2018) or intertwined with the lifestyle the celebrity or influencer embodies. Eror (2018) goes so far as to argue that traditional influencers are “shoppable avatars” who let their audience imagine themselves in the products they are promoting. Users who purchase a product after seeing it “advertised” by an endorser thus partake in “observational learning” and imitative consumption where they copy the spending habits of endorsers to emulate the endorser's persona (Hung, 2014:162; Fillis, 2015:653). As a result, the public are encouraged to view themselves as having an equal right to purchase items that somehow will make them of equal class to the people above them in the social class hierarchy (Ferguson, 2016:403). In this way, endorsers such as celebrities and influencers become “material agents” that are, according to Iqani (2019:243), “deployed to spread key brand messages to new markets” and drive home the message that the brands are accessible to all, and that once acquired, the items will elevate the user's status.

Both items and experiences are sold. Influencers often post about glamorous destinations and luxury experiences. In the 18-34 age group, leisure travelers voted Instagram as the top online channel for discovering destinations (Sehl, 2021). We are therefore urged to consume the life influencers claim to live. This is facilitated by influencers through the photographic composition and visual angle of their posts, with the influencer featuring some part of their body in the photo (such as their hands stretched in front of the camera holding an ice cream, or a bird's-eye-view shot from the top-down where the user can see the influencer's arms, lap and legs). The users know that the body parts in the images are the influencer's because of their profile. This point of view adjusts the influencer-follower relationship away from “interaction” with the represented influencer participant by way of gaze, but instead a relationship of “imagining oneself as being” or “being infusion with” the influencer image producer (Zappavigna, 2016:277). Equality does not exist in contemporary society, but influencers' followers are encouraged to view themselves as having an equal right to purchase items or pay for experiences that somehow will make them of equal class to the people above them in the social class hierarchy, and similar to the influencers they admire (Ferguson, 2016:403). The specific context of South Africa means that endorsers take on special significance in their role as drivers of desire for agency, equal access and elevated lifestyles.

To an extent, the influencers who post about luxury lifestyles are commenting about their rights, but also the rights of all those who look up to them, to have access to the elite luxuries of global brands (Iqani, 2019:241). The consumer-focused lifestyle is not an attempt to emulate whiteness but an attempt to elevate class. Research on other African countries concluded that, for example, black Nigerian women who favour a “Western” aesthetic in their personal styling do not see this as copying “whiteness,” but as a way of connecting with global, cosmopolitan blackness (Govender, 2018; Dosekun, 2019). Similarly, the South African influencers who at once celebrate and promote global brands are not trying to be Western. They are claiming the fruits of global consumer culture as their own and claiming their right to “occupy the most elite and luxurious consumer identities available” (Iqani, 2019:243). This is furthermore evident in Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu, who communicate the opportunity for their followers to be “cool by consumption” through embodying the ideal representation of the modern consumer in their respective Western and Southern contexts. Virtual influencers require further analysis in this respect as the implications of the identities they portray are just as culturally and politically impactful as human influencers since their followers also aspire to their promoted aspirational identity. In the case of virtual influencers however, this identity portrayed is rooted first and foremost in an identity that is most profitable to the agencies that create them and the Instagram app they exist on. Virtual influencers will be depicted on Instagram in a way that is most profitable for them to be depicted and in so doing they condition their followers to adopt an idealised consumer behaviour.

When considering the platform capitalist business model and the expected performances and sacrifices users need to make to partake in the benefits of platforms, it is worth questioning how such practices are naturalised to the point where it goes undetected and is accepted as common sense (Dines & Humes, 2011:106). The danger in the level of visibility, or lack thereof, is crucial as economic power is open and obvious, discursive power is hidden, and it is its hiddenness, its “repression of its own operations,” that enables it to present itself as common sense, as an objective, innocent reflection of the real (Fiske, 2010:43). In the context of social media it can be asked where the metadiscourse of Instagram platform capitalism originates and whose point of view is naturalised.

3.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I provided an overview of how the logic of the neoliberal markets has embedded itself into various practices on platforms such as Instagram. Through an analysis of platform capitalism and Instagram's revenue model, I established the need for platforms to optimise their network effects to boost content production and content interaction levels. I further confirmed that social media profiles are commoditised and transformed into assets that generate returns. I argued that the desire to emulate the lives of the wealthy is the driving force for the engine of consumption. The exhibition of the achievement of luxury lifestyle narratives was proven to be an important tactic in evoking envy. This practice is accelerated on social media platforms that encourage the documentation of luxury acquisitions and enables the measuring of audience responses through engagement on such posts, thus making the pleasure derived from being envied by others calculatable.

The significance of this in South Africa with its “culture of desire” was further explored. The duality of the South African economy, with coexistence between opposite ends of the buying power spectrum further accelerates this desire, as privilege is brutally visible to those who are deprived of it. Given the legacy of inequality within South Africa due to systematic racial oppression under apartheid, many South Africans view affirming their newfound political freedom and economic status through possessions as a political act as much as an economic one. I argue that the influencers who post about luxury lifestyles are commenting about their rights, but also the rights of all those who look up to them, to have access to the elite luxuries of global brands. The acquisition of possessions and the documentation of the proof of our attainment of an elevated lifestyle on platforms such as Instagram are a means of making claim to a degree of citizenship access previously denied to some.

What is of particular interest, in the context of this research, is the role that virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu play within this narrative in embodying this aspirational identity to appeal to Western and Southern audiences respectively, whilst simultaneously enacting an idealised version of the modern consumer that serves the commercial interests of the agencies that create them and the Instagram platform they exist on. In virtual influencers we are presented with an idealised profile of what beauty, youth, class and glamour is, and we are sold a narrative that the attainment of this idealised profile is through acquiring the goods and services advertised in the posts. We are told what our ideal online identity should be, and we are told what activity we need to do to achieve it — spend.

I argued that this demonstrated that the Instagram has clearly shifted to a more commercially-driven platform than its founders may have intended. The relevance of this, within the broader investigation of virtual influencers which this research is focused on, is that profiles are increasingly accepted as marketing assets. Virtual influencers as an embodiment of this commercialised version of Instagram, become easier to accept as they embody many human endorser practises for example, promoting themselves as commercialised assets to bring about returns. It is in this spirit that their respective marketing agencies created Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu. They expertly perform the commercial aims of marketers within the neoliberal logic. Because this commercial vehicle has been integrated into the fabric of the platform, the online behaviour of influencers is naturalised and even expected. The newly accepted practice of creating content that reflects our lives as we want them to be, not as they are, furthermore, challenges what is understood to be real or imagined, with virtual influencers an extreme embodiment of this trend.

In Chapter Two, I illustrated that Instagram users' perceptions of the nature of endorsement have changed. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated that the expectations of profile creation and maintenance have also changed in adhering to the logic of platform capitalism. Key “currencies” that get “circulated” within the digital economy of Instagram's platform capitalism include visual assets. In the next chapter, I will provide an overview of the visual mechanics that have dominated the way narratives are shared online. I explore Instagram users' changing perceptions of visual “truth,” given the new visual mode of Instagramism, with embedded editing creating a hyper-real stream of content that enables virtual influencers to scroll by users without being detected as being non-human. The implications of this shift mean that visuals are no longer necessarily a means to *capture* reality but actively *construct* that reality; indeed, a successful visual no longer needs to be grounded in any version of reality at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE VISUAL AND THE VIRTUAL

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I provided an overview of the principle of “platform capitalism” and confirmed the role of social media platforms as the new arena for digital economic circulation. An important “currency” that get “circulated” within this digital economy is visual material such as pictures and videos, which have become the essential social currencies online (Manikonda *et al.*, 2014:1). Changes in the nature of profile creation and online attention due to platform capitalism significantly impact how users see *themselves* (namely, as assets to be optimised in a market). This section documents changes in visuality as a whole and how this impacts how users see *others*. These changing expectations of visual communication on online platforms go some way to substantiate how virtual influencers have evolved to become an acceptable mode of online profile creation.

This chapter examines our current “visual culture” as it appears on Instagram. Berger (1972:1) notes that “seeing comes before words since the child looks and recognises before it can speak.” In the contemporary era there is a tendency to “visualise existence” with a premium placed on rendering experiences in “visual form” (Mirzoeff, 1998:6). Vision and the visual are therefore fundamental to human experience. If “vision” is what the human eye is physiologically capable of seeing, “visuality,” refers to how vision is constructed, including “how we see and how we are able, allowed, or made to see” (Rose, 2007:2). This emphasis on the visual is evident in the “image first, text second” content upload rule of Instagram, where the first content a user uploads is a picture or video, with the caption added as a final step, or not even a step at all as is the case with Instagram Stories or reels where text/caption inclusion is all but discouraged.

In environments where cultural meaning is expressed in visual symbolic forms (from the painting to the camera), the effects of these visual framing devices have far-reaching consequences, as the way we see things “affects what we know or what we believe” (Fornas, Becker, Bjurström & Ganet, 2007:27). Images are representational resources that display culturally produced regularities (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). There are different ways of seeing the world, and the critical task is to differentiate between the social effects of those different visions (Rose, 2007:6). Understanding our relationship to the visual is therefore key to investigating why evolutions in visual representation such as that on Instagram (from a raw

photo, to an edited photo, to a digitally created image), have changed our fundamental experiences of the world around us and have cultivated an environment for the acceptance of virtual influencers.

This chapter commences with an overview of the history of visualisation and describes how introducing new technologies such as the photograph and the modern mobile camera impacts notions of reality whilst altering the role of the visual. The mobile camera phone and its features of numerical representation and condensing; transcoding; modularity, convergence and mobility; variability and editing; automation and computational photography have further problematised ideas of visuals as depictions of reality. The result is a change in our understanding of the sign-signifier relationships, such that visuals are no longer necessarily a means to *capture* reality but can actively *construct* that reality. I argue that digital photography renders images inherently manipulatable, with the produced visual no longer being linked to its referent and no longer needing to be grounded in any version of reality. This has established the foundation on which virtual influencers become acceptable— indeed, inevitable — as audiences view virtual influencers as neither more nor less real than any other image. The idea of virtual influencers as “collaborations” between existing physical locations and imagined visual beings therefore gains greater acceptance. I conclude the chapter with the platform-specific visuality of Instagram with Instagram a “map of modern social media visual cultures” (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:1)

4.2 THE EVOLUTION OF THE VISUAL

Human experience is now more visual and visualised than ever before. Throughout history, the introduction of media technologies has affected how humans come to picture and ultimately define reality and the positioning of the self within this reality (Nguyen, 2017:6). Visual imagery is never innocent, as “it is always constructed through various practices, technologies, and knowledges” (Rose, 2001:32). Understanding these technologies is therefore vital in investigating the implications of changes in visual culture. The images produced by these media technologies claim to offer us access to an unmediated reproduction of the real. As a result, the visual has come to mean something different as each invention “changed the way men saw others and themselves” (Berger, 1972:15; Fiske, 1998:157). This supports Cartwright’s (1998:207) notion that changes in culture are accompanied by the emergence of a “new mode of visual representation.”

Visual culture has evolved from the “portrait path” that spanned from the 1830s to 1888, through the “Kodak path” that lasted from 1888 to the 1990s, into the present “digital path” in which digital photography, the mobile phone camera and social media reign (Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011:2). The section below describes the visual culture changes that the introduction of photography and the mobile camera brought about and how this has ushered in the present-day visuality of Instagram.

4.2.1 Visual Inventions

The invention of visual technologies have impacted our way of viewing the world. However, this is nothing new: our fascination with control over the visual predates the modern photography era. Mirzoeff (1998:4) defines visual technology as an apparatus designed to be looked at or which enhances natural vision, from oil paintings to television and the Internet. Beginning in the late 1500s, the optical phenomenon of the **camera obscura** (also known as the “pin-hole”) redefined the relationship between observer and world. It consisted of a small, darkened room with light admitted through a single tiny hole (Crary, 1998:246); this inverted image separated the scene from the viewer and “de-naturalised” it. A further such visual technology was the 1787 **panorama**, a 360-degree cylindrical painting, viewed by an observer in the centre, which used “circumambient scenery” to create an “artificial elsewhere” for the panoramic spectator (Friedberg, 1998:257). Further proof of the lure of artificiality is evident in the 1823 **diorama**, a panorama of remarkable realism which also positioned the viewer at the centre with a view to a platform of “cells” or “galleries” that rotated and mobilised the viewer (Friedberg, 1998:259).

Sternberger (1977) has emphasised that the appeal of these visual technologies was not simply their ability to faithfully reproduce an image of reality - their “verisimilitude” - but rather their ability to deceive and their very “artificiality.” Friedberg (1998:259) supports this by noting that devices such as panoramas and dioramas which concealed their machinery produced an illusion of “unmediated referentiality.” Mendelson and Papacharissi (2007:234) go so far as to say that these devices aim to satisfy a social desire to have “visual mastery” over the constraints of space and time. As Friedberg (1998:261) points out, the technology offered a visual excursion and a “virtual release” from everyday space and time confinements.

4.2.2 The Photograph

Photography has always involved an assemblage of perception that brings together human and non-human forms of vision and mediation (Taffel, 2021:241). In 19th century France, the rise of photography coincided with the spread of positivism, an intellectual attitude that discouraged metaphysical speculations in favour of a scientific, recordable approach (Kracauer, 1960:4). Initially, there was a move away from representational and artificial constructs such as paintings to identical replications of objects, recordings of physical reality, and reproductions of nature through photographs (Mirzoeff, 1998:7). Photographs were seen as “the first transcript of history” as an instrument to record reality and a literal representation of what was before the lens as a “kind of evidence” (Galanopoulos, 2011:16; Hayes, 2007:151; Nguyen, 2016; Stritch, 2018). The photographer was therefore seen as “a reader intent on studying and deciphering an elusive text,” a “witness and observer” and an “indiscriminating mirror” that captures a view that is “identical with the camera lens” (Kracauer, 1960:38; Proust, 2006; Hayes, 2007:152).

We initially rooted the visual truth of the photograph in the view that photographic images, unlike paintings or line drawings, are “indexical signs” as they are “connected to their referents” (Prince, 1996:28; Barthes, 1973:53). Barthes (1981) noted that photographs are never “divorced from their referents.” A photograph always carries more information than is necessary to make its point, and these bits of unnecessary information function to substantiate the “truth injunction” of the photograph (Fiske, 1998:158). Photos have preserved at least some of their testimonial power, and people still tend to believe that the “photographic truth” reveals something intimate and real about a person (Vainikka *et al.*, 2017:122). This is especially relevant when understanding the role of photographs in creating social media profiles to establish trust. Photographs are much better than texts for self-expression and impression management since the myth of photographic truth lends photography credibility that text can lack (Marwich, 2015:138). The type of consciousness the photograph evokes is not a consciousness of the “being-there” of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its “having-been-there.” We have a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, with the photograph an ambiguous conjunction between the “here-and-now” and the “there-and-then.” We, therefore, saw photographs as a means of bridging the gap, providing a kind of “presence by proxy” (Fornas *et al.*, 2007:93).

However, this unwavering trust in the photograph has shifted in the modern era. The impossibility of depicting reality authentically through images has become a central concern of modernity (Enli, 2015:11; Molster, 2016:131). As time passed, the idea of the factual accuracy of the photograph eventually came under scrutiny, with some seeing photography as needing to conform to the acknowledged principles of fine art and emphasise “beauty over truth” (Kracauer, 1960:18; Isitman, 2018:103). Understandings, therefore, moved away from “objects as they are, and towards “reality as the viewer chooses to see it.” The remaining truth attributed to photography was only within the precise moment that the photograph was taken, as a photograph can only “isolate an instant,” and after that, it becomes something else and can never represent the truth of how something always is (Benjamin, 1999; Nguyen, 2017:7). The photographic camera showed that the notion of time passing was inseparable from the experience of the visual, as the “here and now” that the photograph is witness to is already a thing of the past (Berger, 1972:12). Photographs were then seen not as “mechanical records” but as “selected sights” curated by the photographer (Berger, 1972:3).

This tension between perceptual realism and referential artifice has since heightened with the invention of new digital visual advancements, increasing the degree of the photographer's control over the informational cues that establish perceptual realism (Prince, 1996:34). The neutral reality of an image gets challenged as the subject or object being photographed can always be put into discourse differently by being placed in focus or being blurred out in the foreground or background which enables photographers to lead the viewer's eye towards key compositional points (Fiske, 1998:158; Taffel, 2021:240). Therefore, what the photographer captures depends on their framing device, how he or she edits the captured photograph post-production, and how live filters change what is depicted even before the image is captured. I explore these three elements in the analysis of mobile camera phones below.

4.2.3 The Mobile Camera Phone

The cameras integrated into our mobile phones have become part of our daily lives. Advanced digital cameras that enable mobile photography are embedded within smartphones and have become “portable computers with wireless Internet connectivity” (Taffel, 2021:238). In analysing this shift in visual communication, it is worth questioning how the fabric of the visual has been changed “megabit by megabit” due to the introduction of these “pocket computers” (Hepp, 2020:12).

Mobile camera photography means that capturing the visual becomes “programmable” (Manovich, 2002:24) and amenable to analysis using Manovich's (2002:53) five characteristics of new media, namely: numerical representation, modularity; variability, transcoding and automation. Manovich's model serves as a suitable framework to organise an investigation of mobile camera phones, as his “software studies” approach incorporates the two distinct layers at play in this new digital culture, namely the cultural layer and the technological layer.

4.2.3.1 Numerical Representation and Condensing

The shift from traditional to digital media has meant that all new media objects are composed of “digital code” and are thus essentially “numerical representations” which can be described “mathematically” and manipulated via “algorithms” (Gershenfeld, 2005:5). The process by which we transform data into a numerical representation is called “digitisation,” which consists of sampling and quantisation (Manovich, 2002:27). Data is sampled at regular intervals, for example, the grid of pixels used to represent a digital image, with the frequency of samples referred to as “resolution.” Sampling, therefore, turns “continuous data” into “discrete data” that is assigned a numerical value drawn from a defined range, and so we can create new content that originates from new combinations of these units (Negroponte, 1995:20; Manovich, 2002:27; Isaac, 2016).

These visual units that have been minimised into digitised codes can more easily be captured, stored and shared. Smartphone photography thus enables the production of vast numbers of images. Of the approximately 1.8 trillion pictures taken in 2017, 85% were taken with smartphones (Meeker, 2018). Today, mobile phones can hold thousands of photos and automatically back them up to network services—as opposed to the 20th century 35mm still film formats that had only 12-36 exposures and thus encouraged careful planning of every shot (Manovich, 2017:53). The result is a substantial shift in the choice of, and frequency of, image capturing with an ever-increasing “multitude of images,” producing a “cinema of convenience” instead of a “deep relationship with the image” (Zappavigna, 2016:284). For this reason, smartphone photography has altered the social function of photography as it has gone from being a medium for the “collection of important memories” to an interface for ongoing visual communication (Taffel, 2021:240). The camera phone has thus changed the definition of what is “picture worthy” and what is “attention-worthy” (Manovich, 2017:32). Haraway (1998:192) warns against this “unregulated visual gluttony” when vision becomes a “technological feast,” and all perspective gives way to “infinitely mobile vision” where we see “everything” from

“everywhere.” Turkle (2011:166) heeds this warning by noting that it is difficult to maintain a sense of what matters in the din of constant communication and visual stimulation. In this space, the ability of virtual influencers to attract attention due to their novelty becomes significant. Turkle (2011:280) goes so far as to suggest that we have evolved to a point where new encounters need not be “better” to get our attention, as we are wired to respond positively to their simply being “new.”

4.2.3.2 Transcoding

Transcoding refers to the translation of a digital media object from one format (such as the “traditional” ways in which human culture modelled the world) to another, namely the “computer’s own means of representing it” (Manovich, 2002:46). For example, text to sound or the adaptation of new media for display on different electronic devices. This involves taking already compressed (or encoded) content such as a high-definition video, decompressing (decoding) it, and then somehow altering and recompressing it, for instance, to be compatible on a mobile screen using a lower resolution. In this way, the mobile phone has enabled the transformation of visual communication into compressed formats that are more easily accessible and transferable to end-users. In a world where graphical images are being made and unmade, coded and decoded, transformed and transferred, the “permanency” of a photograph loses relevance as all digitised content is able to be transcoded and transformed.

4.2.3.3 Modularity, Convergence and Mobility

Modularity refers to the principle of assembling larger units from smaller ones where independent elements such as pixels, images, text, sounds, frames, code all combine to form a new media object (Manovich, 2002:32). Modularity, therefore, links to convergence, where we combine independent smaller elements into a new whole. Lunenfield (2011:17) defines this as the “Swiss Army knife” theory of technological improvement where all mobile phone apps can live on one device and can feed off of and speak to each other with a “one-stop-shop” that means leaving your device is “at best unnecessary and at worst impossible.” Convergence, therefore, represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content to content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems (Creeber & Martin, 2009:107). The effect of this on visual communication is the resurgence of a “hyper-media immediate interface” that typically displays different forms of information (textual, pictorial, graphical) simultaneously and relies on the seamless integration of visuals and sound (Manovich, 2002:32). Instagram’s hybrid

intertextuality, where we can link text to graphics, photos, moving images, graphics interchange formats (GIF) and sound, therefore becomes a source of all-engrossing visual entertainment with blurred boundaries (Lunenfield, 2011:35).

The mobility of the device enhances the temptation of this convenience. Users can now “carry” cyberspace through physical space, and people increasingly use their mobile devices for online activities. Today, 75% of all website traffic in South Africa comes from mobile devices (Qwerty Digital, 2017; Statista, 2021a). The mobile camera's condensed size and added mobility have created a form of “on the move” visual communication in what Marshall and Rossman (2014) has dubbed “nomadic communication.” Therefore, the smartphone camera is likely to be with the photographer during her daily activities, offering portability in visually experiencing sociality online “on the move” (Serafinelli, 2017:97).

Always on, and always on our person, the accessibility of mobile phones blurs the distinction between being online or offline as we carry the device through which we create our online self. Where analogue photography ties users to physical space, mobile devices connect users to the online world. The aim of “liberating users from the fixed places and times of older analogue media” has, perhaps, ended up reinforcing and fixing presentations of self-identity through mobile phones' customisable, multimedia and data storage capacities (Creeber & Martin, 2009:116). On Instagram specifically, most photos are typically taken via mobile phone, and so they tend toward the documentary since mobile phones are continually present as users go about their day-to-day lives in the form of non-stop partial production where snippets of fractional realities are captured (Marwick, 2015:142). Creeber and Martin (2009:121) note that this mobility has also created a “shoot and share” culture due to the mobile camera's key attributes of “portability and pervasiveness.” The smartphone as the “shell you take with you,” although initially “centred on the home,” inevitably expands beyond the home and takes the familiar and “private” self out into an unfamiliar public space (Creeber & Martin, 2009:109). Mobile phones have allowed us to become interactive documentary makers since we can now serve as viewers, participants, prosecutors, or provocateurs in relation to the action recorded on-screen (Nichols, 1991:45).

4.2.3.4 Variability and Editing

Variability relates to a lack of consistency or fixed patterns and is synonymous with terms such as “liquid” and “mutable” (Manovich, 2002:130). Today's technology no longer caters to, but

rather invents, the consumer's needs in the name of “innovation, with change its only consistent presence” (Nguyen, 2017:9). New media are not meant to last; they are meant to “disrupt” (Nguyen, 2017:9). In this context, the ability to view, capture and edit the world around you in constantly innovative ways takes on new significance. The ability to edit photos and “remake” already “captured” visuals illustrates this idea of reality as editable and mouldable. Manovich, (2017:114) argues that editing is not necessarily unique in that “since the beginning of photography, we have deleted the bad pics and celebrated the good ones.” In this way, “everything is edited” by selecting certain photos (Manovich, 2017:114). The mobile photograph and the influx of downloadable in-app and 3rd party editing filters have exacerbated this trend.

Therefore, photography can be seen as a form of “writing” that produces while being produced, inscribing even as it is inscribed (Batchen, 1998:277). Digital cameras have evolved from simply being a passive recording device to a production device as digital cameras do not only *take* pictures but *make* pictures (Hayes, 2008:94). In terms of in-app editing, Instagram provides users with post-processing techniques such as filtering, cropping, blurring and image manipulation functionality (Zappavigna, 2016:272). An Instagram filter is a “digital layer” that gives it the appearance of stylistic editing (Bakhshi *et al.*, 2014:967). These edits adjust the photograph's brightness, highlights, shadows, exposure, contrast, and sharpness, including removing any (typical) physical characteristics that are “flaws,” such as pores, dark circles under eyes, and yellowed teeth (Schmeichel *et al.*, 2017:7). A distinction to be noted here is that we applied earlier forms of editing software after we had captured the image and so we were able to identify the flaws we would like to adjust on the raw photo and choose a filter based on those needs. Instagram now offers 24 filters for permanent posts and 13 Instagram Story filters which have become so normalised and integrated that it becomes an unconscious step before posting, as we feel “exposed” without a filter (Nguyen, 2017:33). Automation escalates this further to the point where the process of editing an image “feel” automatic to the user, but it is automatically built into the technology.

4.2.3.5 Automation and Computational Photography

A photo is not a perfect representation of reality, rather it is an interpretation based on many choices, including the camera's specifications. Visual technology has evolved to the point where those specifications are automatically selected and pre-populated for the user (Merritt, 2018). Automation is present in devices that allow users to create or modify media objects

using templates or algorithms not just after capturing the image but during (Manovich, 2002:32). This is known as “computational photography.” Computational photography alters the representational and social functions of photographic imaging through the built-in features of the camera phone, as it mimics the aesthetics associated with professional cameras (Taffel, 2021:237). The key difference is that computational photography refers to the in-camera-app processing of digital images through algorithmic processes and machine learning, which happens before the user even views an image, rather than the editing of already-taken images using a separate computer or an after-the-fact editing app installed on the smartphone (Taffel, 2021:238). This changes the visual *during* capture, not just *after* capture, which transforms the process to *creating* instead of *editing*.

These features include a range of heavily automated computational processing techniques such as pattern recognition algorithms that focus the camera on the detected face or faces, sharpen the photo after the capture, create shallow depth-of-field, balance greyscale and colour histograms, enhance low-light performance, and apply image stabilisation, thus emulating the aesthetics associated with larger format digital cameras and professional photographic workflows (Manovich, 2015:59; Taffel, 2021:237). This is an example of what Marwick (2015:146) calls “meta-automation,” where photo characteristics are adjusted simultaneously to fit the automatically detected or user-selected scene types, thus offering, for example, sports mode, night mode and food photography based on the subject being shot. Consequently, we begin to see the idealised user assumed and constructed by the technocultural assemblage of computational photography (Elias & Gill, 2018:74).

The significance of the user's view of what they are capturing being transformed in front of their eyes should not be underestimated as this alters how and what we see. Carter's (2016:2) assertion that “beauty is in the AI of the beholder” rings true in light of facial filters driven by facial retouching algorithms, known as “beauty mode,” which are instances of computational photography and are often automatically switched on during the “selfie” mode of cameras, namely where the camera angle is flipped to reflect inwards towards the user. The option to disable automated facial retouching is not present on some smartphones, such as the iPhone XS Max, which has been criticised for featuring always-on, aggressively smoothening facial retouching built into its camera (Taffel, 2021:249). Facial retouching involves the camera recognising human faces and applying an algorithm to smooth the appearance of skin through adding blur and removing chrominance or luminance differences that suggest “blemishes” such

as spots, freckles, blackheads or scars, often in ways that are functionally invisible to end-users (Taffel, 2021:246). The ideal of human skin as a wrinkle and blemish-free surface that is uniform in colour and almost entirely lacking in texture is, therefore, “articulated and fetishised” by the algorithms built into contemporary smartphones, which cultural filters influence (Rettberg, 2014; Taffel, 2021:248).

Enhancements are “radically transforming photographic practice” (Taffel, 2021:237). The question can be asked to what extent the photographer is still the creative agent responsible for these images when most “decision-making” is “undertaken by the camera” (Taffel, 2021:253). Because of powerful automated functions built into the software, “human intentionality can therefore be removed from the creative process” with the creative energy of the author going into the “selection and sequencing of elements rather than into the original design” (Manovich, 2002:32). Authorship or artistry, therefore, involves selection from pre-existing images, codes and programmed editing filters that serve as a kind of “collaboration” with the software (Lishchynska, 2022). The idea of virtual influencers as “collaborations” between existing physical locations and imagined visual beings begins to gain greater acceptance. Platforms of image sharing such as Instagram best embody the impact of these technological advances in image capturing and image editing. This has created Instagram's own unique visual style and expected content model.

4.3 VISUAL STYLES ON INSTAGRAM

The development of high-resolution smartphone cameras parallels the timing of the shifts in Instagram use (Nguyen, 2016; Manovich, 2017:11). Originally released as a photo-sharing app, Instagram was conceived of and launched in a post-Facebook, post iPhone moment in October 2010. It enables users to upload and edit photos, which other users can then view, like and comment on using accompanying tags (Wortham, 2012). Instagram has integrated numerous different media modes to cater to its now one billion active users, including videos, reels and Instagram Stories (Newberry, 2021). Instagram has been described as a “pervasive personal mediation device” (Brownlie *et al.*, 2015:455) which exemplifies the “new era of mobile photography” (Manovich, 2017:11), “commodified interactivity” (Serafinelli, 2017:101) and “visual self-presentation” (Duggan *et al.*, 2015). Instagram, combined with the smartphone on which it runs, thus became an image machine that stimulates and captures the productive activity of producing, circulating, and attending to images (Carah & Shaul, 2015:3). Much has been written about this new photo culture exemplified by Instagram (Pittman & Reich,

2016:158; Serafinelli, 2017:97; Blight, Ruppel & Schoenbauer, 2017:315). As a medium, Instagram emphasises the creation of aesthetic material with visually stimulating photographs and is the most popular mobile app for photo-sharing and visual self-presentation (Duggan *et al.* 2015). The most popular image-sharing social media platform, Instagram occupies a unique niche in its visual style (Iqani, 2019:236).

This section will provide an overview of the type of visibility present on Instagram, the codes of content creation often followed by users in sharing their lives in the visual form, and how the ability of virtual influencers to adhere to this new visual genre, aids their acceptance on the platform.

4.3.1 A Brief History of Instagram Visibility

The name “Instagram” is a combination of “instant camera” and “telegram.” As the name suggests, Instagram embodies both elements of a camera and a communication tool (telegram). The mobile app is broadly defined by two frameworks: the culture of connectivity and convergence as a social media app (Nguyen, 2017:4).

Instagram gained over one million downloads on the day it was launched (Nguyen, 2017:26). Shortly after, in 2012, it was purchased for \$1 billion by Facebook, although it had only 13 employees (Marwick, 2015:137). Initially, Instagram was described by CNN as having “lots of buzz but no business model” (Parrish, 2015). This criticism was quickly dispelled when the commercial success of Instagram became apparent. Although Facebook remains the most used social media platform, with a presence in over 200 countries (Adams, Kelly & Koltun, 2021), Instagram is steadily growing in reach and influence. Instagram was named the fastest growing app of 2013 by Nielsen (2013) and the number of users has increased by more than 13% in almost every demographic group. It has remained the 2nd most downloaded app for consecutive years and in 2021 it was the 7th most visited website in the world (Clark, 2021). The frequency of use by users is, in fact, higher than on Facebook, with most users checking Instagram daily (McLachlan, 2022). It is also in the top two most “time-consuming platforms,” with international averages on Facebook being 58 minutes and Instagram being 56 minutes per day (Smith & Anderson, 2018; Hutchinson, 2019). This translates to 1.22 billion active monthly users globally who generate 4.2 billion likes a day and 100 million photos and videos uploaded a day on the platform (Goldstuck, 2018; Kowalczyk, 2017; McLachlan, 2022).

The majority of Instagram's one billion monthly active users fall in the 18-29 age group and are located outside the United States, peaking at around one-third in the Middle East and Africa (34%) and Latin America (33%), followed by North America (25%), Europe (16%), and the Asia Pacific (16%) region (Erz, Marder, & Osadchaya, 2018:49; Alfonzo, 2019:33). It continues to gain popularity in South Africa, increasing from 680,000 in 2013 to 5.43 million users in 2021 (Kowalczyk, 2017; Goldstuck, 2018; Statista, 2021c).

In contrast to earlier visually driven apps such as Flickr, Instagram was meant to be an app for sharing pictures of everyday activities and photos with people, not an app for photographers (Manovich, 2017:41). Its original manifesto describes its goal of “building Instagram to allow users to experience moments in their friends' lives through pictures as they happen” to create a world “more connected through photos” (Instagram, 2016b). However, as mobile technology advanced, the expected quality of photos shared on Instagram increased while the expected quantity decreased, leading to a more curated and professional approach to content creation. Along with that popularity, social media platforms have become more sophisticated, and user expectations have increased and so “a simple text post or even a basic image just does not cut it anymore” (Alfonzo, 2019:5). The saying that we should not “bleed the feed” namely, share too many photos at once and over-saturate followers, represents this emphasis on selective sharing and strategic profile crafting (Alfonzo, 2019:5). Instagram is used in many ways by different users, so any single answer to the question “what is it” will be insufficient, and so it is more helpful to ask “what it is in the context of media history” (Manovich, 2017:11). I will analyse this below.

4.3.2 Instagramism: Subjectivity and Photo Styles on Instagram

The Instagram platform has positioned itself as a space for “aesthetic visual communication” (Manovich, 2017:41). In fact, it has created its own visual genre. Genre is a way of classifying graphical images into certain groups with images that belong to the same genre sharing certain features (Rose, 2007:26). The “genre” of Instagram aesthetics includes features like the contrast between the visual presentation of shapes and lines, the filters available, and the physical parameters that dictate the content's appearance (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:37). The majority of the content created is notable for its ability to reproduce the platform's established and popularised visual style (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:164). The popularity of certain image styles reflect what people like to photograph and at the same time enforce these preferences, making them “appear natural” (Manovich, 2017:54).

This Instagram-specific visual style has even been dubbed “Instagramism,” by Manovich (2017:115) who compares Instagram's impact to other modern art movements such as futurism, cubism and surrealism. Like these earlier –isms, Instagramism offers its own vision of the world and its own visual language. But unlike modernist art movements, Instagramism is shaped by millions of authors connected by, and participating in, Instagram (Manovich, 2017:115). The affordances of mobile devices paired with social media apps such as Instagram have meant that “ individuals' everyday lives are being remediated into new contexts of social visibility and connection” (Zappavigna, 2016:271). Instagramism is therefore situated not just within histories of photography, design and visual culture but within the histories of social, economic and cultural ideologies (Manovich, 2017:70). The viewing *context* of photographs is as significant as the visual *content* in concluding what photographs “mean” (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2007:241). Understanding the context of Instagram as a visual genre is therefore key.

For Mittala *et al.* (2017:145), Instagram post types can be classified according to food, fashion, health, location and activity. Manovich (2017:32) identifies four phototypes on Instagram: 1) Casual; 2) Professional; 3) Designed; and 4) Photographer subjectivity. I propose two additional categories, namely 5) Item fetishisation and 6) Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality and the virtual. I define these six Instagram content categories next.

4.3.2.1 Casual

Casual photos fall into what Bainotti, Caliendo & Gandin (2020:10) has termed a “grammar for documentation.” Casual photography shares with documentary photography the desire to picture life “as it apparently is” (Rose, 2007:16). The aim is the establishment of “sincerity” by documenting life “as is” (Pignagnoli, 2019:224). This casual photography is located in the primarily private sphere and is also referred to as “family,” “amateur,” “vernacular” or “home mode” photography (Couldry, 2014:890). The unauthorised and uncontrolled nature of these photos privileges the private, and therefore authentic, self in contrast to the controlled public image (Myers, 2012:55). In this style, users emphasise emotion over aesthetics and post photos of the celebration of special events, common everyday topics and “non-essential moments” of their lives, mostly for peers and friends. This content is often shared on Instagram Stories, which create a sense of a fleeting moment of intimacy due to their ephemerality. Therefore, Instagram Stories are seen to promote the visual display of ordinary life and reaffirm the

original purpose of Instagram as a “social media for sharing pictures taken on the go” (Bainotti *et al.*, 2020:10).

The features used within this realm mimic the realist conventions of a film documentary as the user tends to use conventions like the hand-held camera, the cramped shot, and “natural” lighting, often supported by unclear or inaudible (and therefore “natural”) sound (Fiske, 2010:30). These features are designed to give the impression that the camera has “happened upon a piece of unpremeditated reality” which it shows to us objectively and truthfully (Fiske, 2010:30).

Just because a sense of staged spontaneity is projected as an “authentic” record does not mean that in reality these images are not planned, calculated, staged and mediated (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016:409; Manovich, 2017:55). This mode of image-making “is constructed precisely to seem unconstructed” and is manufactured to be read as spontaneous (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016:409). Through this “constructed spontaneity” most events are recounted as if they have just happened or they are still happening (Pignagnoli, 2019:232). For brands, this visual quality can be harnessed to promote brands as authentic, invoke the “average consumer” as a credible product endorser, and show how the brand might fit in with regular consumers' lifestyles (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016:409). See Image 4.1 and 4.2 of Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela projecting “informal” daily moments such as intimate Christmas moments or shopping trips.

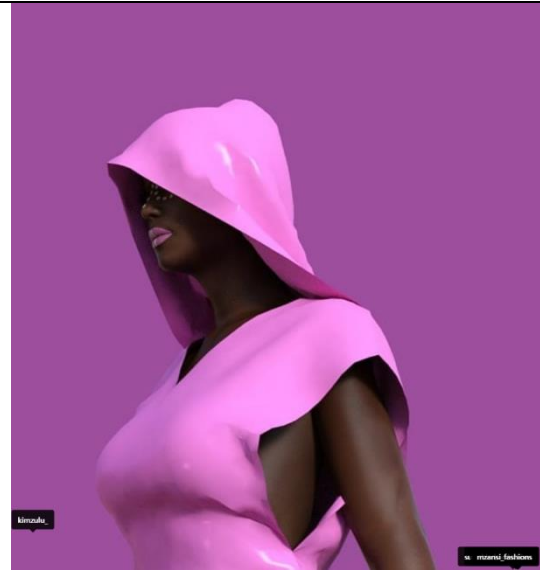
Image 4.1 Intimate Christmas Memory **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021i: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXg3k-tvOpN/>;
Image 4.2 Informal Shopping **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020m: https://www.instagram.com/p/CE1ud7LDb_Z/.



4.3.2.2 Designer

Like casual photos, designer photos are focused on the individual as the subject of the image. However, how that subject and the moment that the content seeks to capture is framed, differs significantly. Designer photos are “aesthetically perfected photos,” many of which are taken with professional cameras. These have increased in volume to the point where designer photos are seen to be the official “face” of Instagram (Manovich, 2017:20). Designed photos are photos that have been arranged and edited to have a distinct stylised look in an emerging category of “iPhoneographers” (Manovich, 2017:67). The category falls into Bainotti *et al.*’s (2020:11) “grammar for interaction” where users tend to mimic the practices adopted by celebrities and influencers (Marwick, 2015). This content is focused on the human subject with the image edited to such a degree as to create a spectacle out of the lifestyle that the individual professes to live. This has created the impression that Instagram has become the platform where the “flawed no longer exists” (Manovich, 2017:20).

Image 4.3 Lil Miquela Glamorous Gown **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021g: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPbYn-Xh3YM/>;
Image 4.4 Kim Zulu Pink Glamorous **Source:** @kumzulu_, 2020f: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-hJeF8DamY/>.



4.3.2.3 Professional

Professional and designed photographs fall under the category of “competitive photographers” who publish only their best shots and try to get as many likes as possible (Manovich, 2017:42; Vainikka *et al.*, 2017:121). In many ways all Instagram users are pushed towards becoming “competitive photographers” to develop and edit their images to be commodities in the attention economy. The difference between designer photography and professional photography lies in the choice of subject, with designer photography centred on a human

subject, while professional photography is dominated by nature/city view genre (Manovich, 2017:64). Photographers use a number of techniques to enhance the world and environment around them, that is, they control or choose appropriate natural lighting, exposure, and use editing to achieve certain effects (Manovich, 2017:69). See for example Image 4.5 and 4.6 of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu which illustrate instances of posts where the environment surrounding the subject is enhanced and highlighted.

Image 4.5 Mermaid in Water **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021f: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVLXYv4pqlZ/>; **Image 4.6** Kim Zulu in Nature **Source:** @kumzulu_, 2020s: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_mRz19jRJw/.



4.3.2.4 Photographer Subjectivity

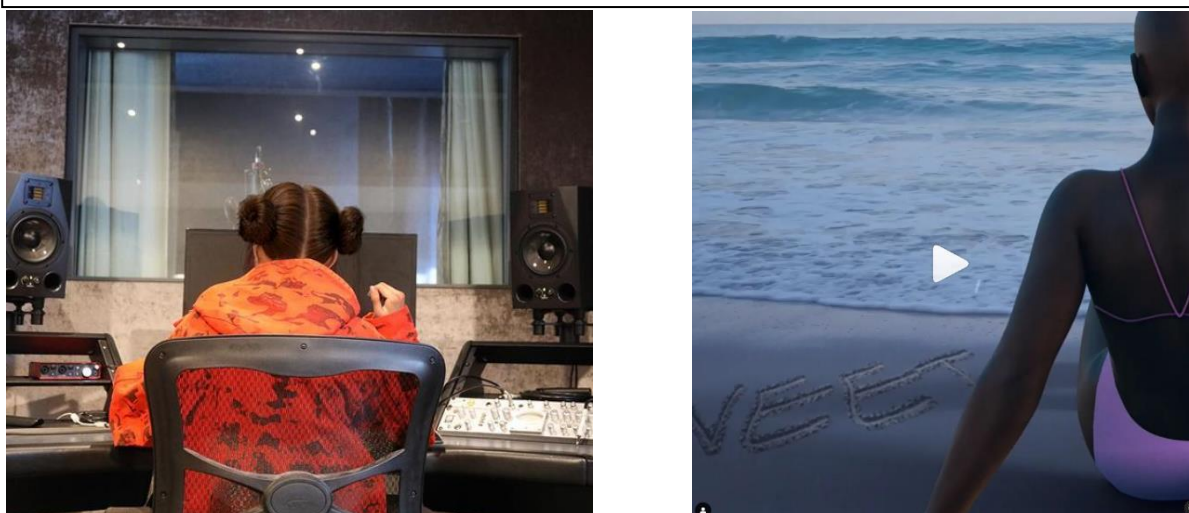
There are two crucial avenues of subjectivity in content creation with an “as photographer” or “with photographer” viewing position (Berger, 1972:12; Zappavigna, 2016:278). Traditional photos are framed from a “with photographer” stance which do not include any clues in the visual structure relating to the subjective presence of the photographer (Zappavigna, 2016:279). In “as photographer” the photographer is represented explicitly in the image or inferred by the inclusion of part of their body in the image (Zappavigna, 2016:278). This style deliberately opposes mainstream photography conventions, as the Instagram author is not an observer situated outside of the scene; instead, he or she is in the scene, in the situation, in the moment (Manovich, 2017:125).

The rise of this form of subjectivity can be attributed to technological advances in the mobile phone. Given the relative ease of taking out a mobile device, both within the rhythm of a

domestic routine, or while navigating public space, visual sharing can approach synchronous time or “real-time” (Zappavigna, 2016:271). This results in an illusion of “intimate visual co-presence” in an ongoing stream of “viewpoint specific photos” (Ito & Okabe, 2005). This is supported by Zappavigna (2016:284), who notes that the slim construction of the device affords flexibility in terms of its positioning about the subject, as the device can be held in one hand while the photographer is doing something else. There is, therefore continuous “partial production” (Lunenfield, 2011:34).

These images of mediated portraits and mediated still life invite viewers to approach the image as if they were sharing in the photographer’s subjective experience (Zappavigna, 2016:289). As Burton (2005:91) notes, if our view of a private moment is via a camera placed half behind some object, then the spectator is positioned as a voyeur and becomes subjectively involved. This inserts the spectator into the narrative: by allowing the spectator to see and understand the action from (nearly) the points of view of the characters (Fiske, 2010:29). The effect is a form of visual co-presence with the portability of mobile media producing a style of “you could be here with me” photography similar to the pre-digital “wish you were here” postcard sent by holidaymakers (Zappavigna, 2016:279). Image 4.7 for instance, depicts Lil Miquela st shot from behind “working in her studio” thus inviting the reader into the intimate moment of her “content creation.” Similarly, Image 4.8 is shot of the ocean featuring parts of Kim Zulu from a behind angle making the user feel that they are in the moment watching the ocean.

Image 4.7 View from Behind Studio **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2018b: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bhp12uMFd7M/>;
Image 4.8 Body from Behind on Beach **Source:** @kumzulu_, 2020p: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCGQ6rRDZj/>.

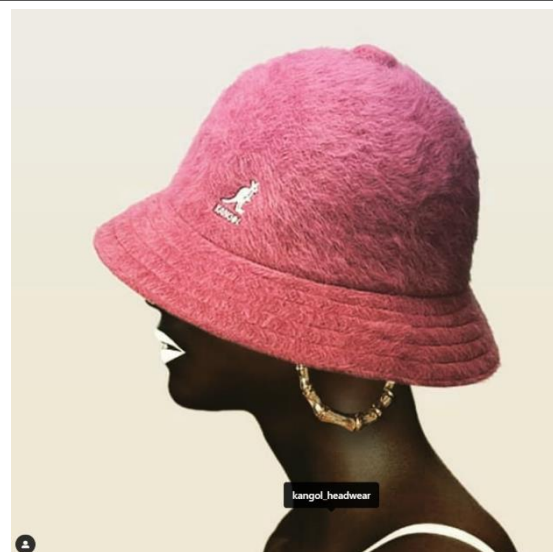


4.3.2.5 Item Fetishisation

This form of content creation positions consumption items at the centre of the screen with the human or virtual “being” included in the shot as an accessory to illustrate the importance and use of the item. This is an example of “mediated still life” where the photographer’s relationship to represented objects take centre preference for instance in capturing food, shoes, handbags and coffee (Zappavigna, 2016:288).

The display of such items to boost consumption desires is not new. For Benjamin (1999), the culture of consumption that emerged in Europe during the 19th century was intertwined with the spread of photography (Fornas *et al.*, 2007:27). Consumption and vision are mutually constructing practices in the ongoing legacy of late modernity (Fornas *et al.*, 2007:82). Acts of communication are therefore typically formed as acts of consumption and embedded in market systems (Fornas *et al.*, 2007:27). The item fetishisation evident in this form of Instagram photography mimics the visual display of items in store windows at a mall where we are presented “simultaneously with the product and its image, a photographic image that projects the desired qualities associated with the product – power, luxury, style, fun– but that are not evident in the product alone so that the real object and the hyper-real are woven together in the display” (Fornas *et al.*, 2007:85; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016:92). See for example Image 4.9 of Lil Miquela prominently featuring a Moschino jacket and handbag and Image 4.10 of Kim Zulu advertising a Kangol hat.

Image 4.9 Moschino Jacket and Handbag **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021j: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CL42b6En3Qi/>;
Image 4.10 Kangol Headwear **Source:** @kumzulu_, 2020h: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHcBxDODcpO/>.



4.3.2.6 Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality and the Virtual

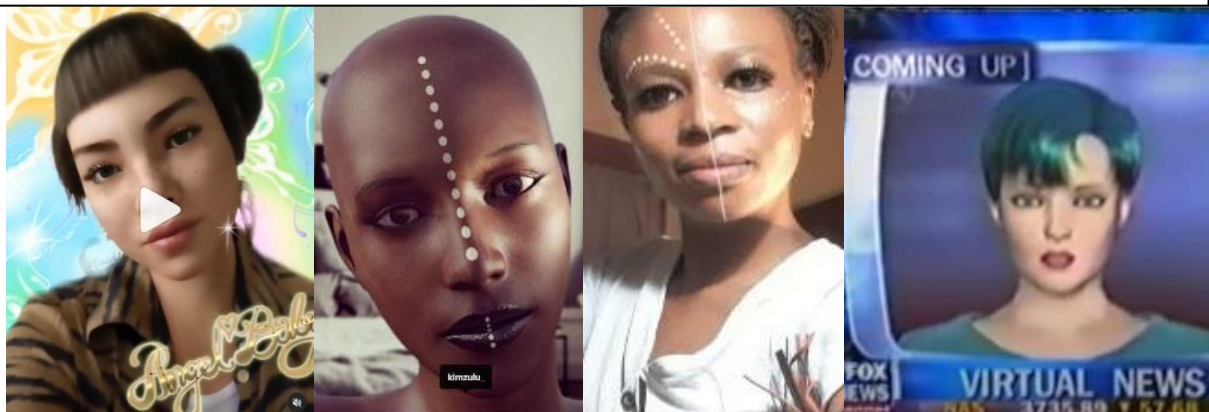
A newly emerging category of content production gaining popularity on Instagram includes augmented and virtual reality as well as virtual. Convergence and cross-platform intertextuality are changing our experience of media spaces through blurring the distinctions between the “real” and the “virtual” (Creeber & Martin, 2009:36). The mobile interface, which once mediated interactions between the user and the mobile digital device, now mediates a “social interface” between users and the “hybrid” (at once physical and virtual) spaces they move through (De Souza e Silva, 2006:262).

Previous techno-social photographic conventions of this nature sought to produce images that “masqueraded as a transparent and incorporeal intermediary between the observer and world” systematically concealing nonhuman agency and leading to conflation between human and technical modes of vision (Crary, 1992:136; Taffel, 2021:242). For instance, projecting the virtual onto the real, so that we encounter the Internet, say, not just on a computer screen but on a street corner (Creeber & Martin, 2009:36).

This virtual mode of content production is gaining an increasing content production share on Instagram. The Oxford dictionary defines the virtual as “not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to be so.” Virtuality is “that which is so in essence but not actually so” and captures the nature of objects and acts that actually exist but are not tangible (Mirzoeff, 1998:181; Shields, 2003). “Augmented reality” is technology that overlays a virtual or animation on a user’s view of the real world, usually through the use of their smart phone. Its counterpart, “virtual reality,” involves the use of a type of virtual reality headset that allows the user to be immersed in a computer-generated 3D environment that can be explored and, in some cases, interacted with. Although often confused, Hahn (2019:3) highlights the clear distinction between virtual and augmented reality, where virtual reality is only accessible through a pair of special 3D glasses and so there is a distinction between what is, and what is not - real (Hahn, 2019:3). In contrast, augmented reality offers a mixed reality that adds a virtual layer on real world objects (Hahn, 2019:3). Examples of this are Instagram Stories that have augmented reality filters that project virtual visuals onto physical surfaces such as dog ears or flower crowns on a face. See Image 4.11 depicting the filter created by Lil Miquela which inscribes the words “angel baby” over a user’s visual. See also Image 4.12 and 4.13 for Kim Zulu’s filter which layers African-themed face art on user’s faces.

Virtual on the other hand is a mode of visual representation that creates synthetic realities that can look just like photographic realities (Prince, 1996:32). The origins of virtuality can be traced back to 1968, when a team of Russian mathematicians created the first virtual, namely a moving cat on screen (Link-Miles, 1992; Stamatoula & Kirke, 2019:16). As the years progressed, so too did the idea of depicting not just animal virtual visuals but human virtual visuals as well. In 1971, “Ananova,” the world’s “first digital newscaster,” an “embodied conversational agent” (ECA), was created by a UK based company Press Association News Media, made “her” debut on national television, being the first use of virtual technology on national television for the purposes of newscasting, see Image 4.14 (Cooper, 2000:31; Gobbyboy, 2007).

Image 4.11 Angel Baby Filter **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2020a: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_7tW5MnrK5/; **Image 4.12** Facial Prints **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020r: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCQs51zDRb2/>; **Image 4.13** Fan using Facial Prints Filter **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020i: <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17871120928752509/>; **Image 4.14** Ananova **Source:** Gobbyboy, 2007.



The impact of the incorporation of these new content production styles on users’ experiences of visuality on the Instagram platform should not be underestimated. Augmented reality, virtual reality and virtuality can broadly be grouped together as “digital imaging” which departs from photographically coded realism and operates according to a different ontology than do traditional indexical photographs (Prince, 1996:29). The ability to digitally simulate perceptual cues about surface texture, reflectance, colouration, motion, and distance provide an extremely powerful means of “gluing” together synthetic and live-action environments (Prince, 1996:33).

Digital imaging such as augmented reality, virtual reality and virtuality therefore work to create a version of reality which is apparently true but not truly “true” and a reality which is apparently real but not really “real” (Batchen, 1998:273). Unreal images have never before seemed so real

(Prince, 1996:34). These correspondences establish bridges between what can be seen and photographed and that which can be “photographed,” or rather visually captured but not seen (Prince, 1996:34). Social media’s generative capacity to create synthetic likenesses, personalities, and entire environments solely by way of digital technologies is therefore worth highlighting (Kalpokas, 2021:1). I examine this new virtual culture in greater detail in the following section.

4.4 VIRTUAL CULTURE AND THE NEW REAL

In the above section I have substantiated the claim that modern visuality has now reached a point where there is something “fundamentally unnatural” about the modern multimedia image (Erer, 2018). These advancements in visual technology have accelerated our ability to depict the synthetic as natural to the point where such boundaries seem superfluous. This has manifested in what Nguyen (2017:5) dubs “digital skeuomorphism,” a term used in graphical user interface design to describe interface objects that mimic their real-world counterparts in how they appear and/or how the user can interact with them. Within this context, “mediatisation” is used as a broad-ranging metatheory that explains the degree of impact that synthetic media has on society (Kalpokas, 2021:1). Some of these effects include the destabilisation of ideas about “reality,” the rise in simulation and hyper-realism with hyperreality on social media impacting users’ acceptance of digitally altered visuals and subsequently adjusting their own content production to conform with these ideals.

4.4.1 Reality as Unstable

The academic debate about the media as “real” or “hyper-real” has occupied philosophical thinkers for many years as the collision between real and artifice both confounds and engages audiences (Drenten & Brooks, 2020:3). Well before concepts such as VR or virtual gained prominence, scholars such as Baudrillard (1983) argued that contemporary media tend to blur the line between reality and simulation, in a way that makes the simulation of reality seem more real than reality itself.

As is clear from the overview of visual technology advancements in the preceding section, as digital technology becomes more advanced, it has developed the ability to offer an accurate portrayal of reality to the point where “technology has transformed us into fake-looking real humans” (Hahn, 2019:3; Verburg, 2020:9). As Fornas *et al.*, (2007:143) note, these visual technological advances have given rise to new concepts such as “virtual reality,” “hyper-

reality” or “real-time” that seem to either sort out what is left of an “ever-shrinking common reality” or distinguish one kind of reality from another. This confirms Hall’s (1997) assertion that reality (or, at least, the perception thereof) is ‘increasingly less stable” with the potential for manipulation of reality portrayals on the rise.

4.4.2 Simulation and Hyperrealism

The current era of “digital aesthetics” is part of a broader “visual digital culture,” brought about by these advances in visual technology. It has two key characteristics, namely simulation and hyper-realism, terms which suggest a divorce between the image and reality, a heightening of the quality of images to the point that they can substitute for reality, with the emphasis not on truth but on sheer visual pleasure (Darley, 2000; Creeber & Martin, 2009:27). Scholarly understandings of what the image means has therefore evolved through various stages, from 1) an image as the reflection of a basic reality; 2) an image as masking and perverting a basic reality through embellishment, exaggeration and even distortion (there is however not yet an absolute detachment from reality); 3) an image as masking the absence of a basic reality; 4) an image as bearing no relation to any reality with reality vanishing into a “vicious circle of the reproduction of the simulacra” (Baudrillard, 2002:2; Dalayli, 2020:89).

“Simulcra” (the plural form of simulacrum) are images that serve as a representation or imitation of a person or thing (Error, 2018) and so to “simulate” is to present something that is not real and try to show it as such. “Simulation” is therefore an artificial reproduction of actions, functions and look and feel of a phenomenon-specific mode of operation by means of a computer programme for the purpose of demonstration (Lunenfield, 2011:14; Baudrillard, 2015:3). Simulation becomes “a kind of virtual reality [that] is produced by models of what we want reality to be” (Baudrillard, 2012).

This is done through reality being condensed and minimised to signs and indicators meant to refer to something in the real (Baudrillard, 2012). Postmodern society is driven by cyberculture, where objects are no longer seen based on their functionality or monetary value, but their “sign-value” (Carah & Shaul, 2015:17; Molina, 2020:13). Kress and Van Leeuwen’s (2002:362) notion that “all signs have to have a site of appearance” is no longer relevant in the digital realm. There is no longer any necessary or logical connection between a virtual image and exterior reality (Mirzoeff, 1998:186). The indicators and simulation have replaced reality in the creation of a “symbolic society” where symbols and signs have nothing to do with the real

(Dalayli, 2020:89). For Kalpokas (2021:9) we seem set to lose the awareness of—or, indeed, interest in—the source of lived reality. These simulacra create hyper-reality where indicators have evolved to not refer back to any source rooted in reality.

Simulation is the generation of “models of a real without origin” or reality, namely, a hyper-real (Baudrillard, 2002:1). This hyper-reality invades all reality to a point where “we live in the simulation universe” (Baudrillard, 2002:15). The result is the production of a new reality in the form of “hyper-reality” where “reality abandons being itself” and the line between reality and fiction disappears (Baudrillard, 2015:149). This world of simulation threatens the difference between “true” and “false,” between “real” and “imaginary” (Baudrillard, 2002:2). These synthetically prepared, mediated elements are “the caricature of what is natural” (Adorno, 1973:35). This escalates to a point where it is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real (Baudrillard, 2002:4). This new model of reality no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance (Baudrillard, 2002:2; Keen, 2007:25). As a result, simulation technology, as an embodiment of the hyper-reality, is increasingly represented as the replacement of the “real” and people get easily fooled by simulated realities (Turkle, 2009). In this context the idea of virtual influencers as referents to an *imagined* – not existing – “being” gains credibility. For Eror (2018), the fact that virtual influencers’ state of “realness and aliveness” is debated with such passion indicates how “warped our perception of reality has become” after a decade of “social media misuse” where we have become conditioned through repeat exposure to simulations in a space of hyper-reality.

4.4.3 Visual Technology Spurs on Hyperreality

Reality is “destroyed” and replaced by the dominance of the indicators and simulacra through technology (Baudrillard, 2009:18). This happens as images have “disappeared systematically with technology” through the “transition from analogue technologies to digital technology” (Page, 2013). The process by which indicators start to lose relevance to their referents is therefore exacerbated by visual technological advancements which have initiated a new style of digital aesthetics. The nature of digital aesthetics means that such transitions and manipulations of the original are untraceable. In developing an understanding of digital aesthetics, the material qualities of the digital media needs to be taken into account. An aesthetics of painting considers brushwork, colour, depth and consistency of the paint, while digital aesthetics includes many aspects from telnets to Internet governance, that simply cannot

be seen or touched. In the past we were able to recognise a digital animation to a degree by its sharply defined edges, saturated colours and high gloss (Creeber & Martin, 2009:27). However, the distinction between an unedited image and a digitally altered one is no longer as clear, and as digital aesthetics start to dominate our screens the links to sources of reality become even more remote.

Electronic manipulation leaves no trace of its operation (Chester, 2018:13). Where products are produced digitally, we often have no clues to indicate how they were made that way (Creeber & Martin, 2009:27). When every pixel in an image can be manipulated, every symbol rewritten, every note turned and stretched, the moment of creation is far removed from the end product (Creeber & Martin, 2009:29). Digital imaging can anchor pictured objects in apparent photographic reality by employing realistic lighting (shadows, highlights, reflections) and surface texture detail to the point where we question whether reality can be staged so accurately that the camera eye will not detect any difference between the original and the copy (Kracauer, 1960:38; Prince, 1996:29). This can escalate to the point where the fact that there was no original point of reality that the creation was based on, does not matter so long as this distinction is not noticeable.

The advancement of visual technologies therefore has implications for both parties involved in the virtual influencer phenomenon, namely general Instagram users who follow the virtual influencers and the creators of the virtual influencers:

4.4.3.1 Visual Technology as Removing Indexicality Thus Aiding the Creators of Virtual Influencers

Digital imaging alters our sense of the necessary relationship between the camera and the profilmic event, as the presence of either is no longer an absolute requirement for generating photographic images (Prince, 1996:34). When considering virtual influencers, ideas concerning signs and signifiers take on particular significance. “To dissimulate is to feign not to have what we have, while to simulate is to feign to have what we do not have - one implies a presence, the other an absence” (Baudrillard, 2002:2). Virtual influencers are thus able to feign a shared existence of humanness with the audience they attempt to appeal to. This is done through condensing and minimising signs and values in the act of digitisation where “the real is produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models— and with these, it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” (Baudrillard, 2002:1).

Virtual influencers can be seen as broken-down feature-specific models copied from observed influencer tropes that are remade. This illustrates the move to digitisation as the era of a “culture forever wedded to a dialectic between authenticity and imitation” (Benjamin, 1999) where we increasingly no longer have signs and their referents but instead have “copies without originals” (Haraway, 1991:35).

Virtual influencers could therefore be interpreted as copies of humans, since they are neither an original, nor a real human being (Verburg, 2020:8). They fall into the category of “perceptual realism” which combines unreal and also referentially realistic images to the point where “unreal images may be referentially fictional but perceptually realistic” (Prince, 1996:32). This results in an “implosion of reality and representation” where the paradoxical virtual image dominates actuality and turns the concept of reality on its head (Virilio, 1994:63). The apparent realism of digitally processed or created images, then, is a function of how multiple levels of perceptual correspondence are built into the image (Page, 2013). Because virtual influencers have been rendered with such attention to 3D spatial information, they acquire a very powerful perceptual realism, despite the obvious ontological problems in calling them “realistic.”

With visual content no longer needing to abide by its signifier relation namely the offline embodiment of its online representation, few barriers exist for the justification of virtual influencer creation. Users increasingly accept virtual influencers as “real” as they participate in a collective “technological imaginary” aided by the spread of hyper-reality (Hahn, 2019:9). Not only does this alteration in visual content judgement impact the rates at which users increasingly accept virtual creations, but it also impacts what type of content users create about themselves.

4.4.3.2 Computational Imagery as Changing what Users Capture and Post

In an increasingly competitive attention economy, attention-grabbing content takes preference, and aspects related to aesthetics such as good/bad, ugly/pretty are prioritised above values such as truth/lie and virtual/real (Renaningtyas, Mutiaz & Syarief, 2014). As Forceville (1999:166) notes, pictures reflect different claims to verisimilitude, namely the appearance of being real or true. Computational photography problematises the seeming objectivity of images as a mechanically preserved moment, whereby “the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent” (Barthes, 1981:80). Computational photography suggests a departure from

conventional understandings of photography as mechanically freezing moments of time (Taffel, 2021:240). When considered in terms of taking photos of humans, computational photography's automatic enhancement of an image before the moment of capture, generates an idealised appearance that departs from the kind of indexical representation that is often assumed to occur with photography. Consequently, we begin to see the idealised user assumed and constructed by the technocultural assemblage of computational photography as highly edited.

The result is a naturalisation and a normalisation of this form of imagery to the point where our unmediated appearance is destined to be judged as "inferior" compared to the automatically retouched digital representations of others (Georgakopoulou, 2017:268). There is, therefore, an expectation among users that images are to be edited, and so when other visual creations such as virtual influencers are highly edited, this is perceived as an extension of the normalised expectations of posting performance on Instagram.

As Jones (2018) puts it, Lil Miquela and other virtual influencers are essentially an embodiment of what we all engage in – "highly stylised content masquerading as a documentation of reality." Virtual influencers do not initiate it so much as they "mobilise and harness tendencies already present on platforms" (Rosamond, 2020:116). The creators of virtual influencers often utilise this argument: for example, in response to a question about the manipulation of her image, "Lil Miquela" in an "interview" "replies:" "can you name one person on Instagram who doesn't edit their photos?" thus justifying her curated appearance by citing the general practice of curating flawless Instagram feeds (Cherrington, 2016; Jones, 2018)

For some, the debate about realness, or who has the right to make claims to realness, is not as valuable as investigating the effects of these blurred lines on society (Dalayli, 2020:100). Prince (1996:32) echoes a similar sentiment and suggests that we should instead question "what kinds of linkages connect the represented fictionalised reality to the visual and social coordinates of our own 3D world." Hyperreality becomes engrained in spaces such as social media platforms.

4.4.4 Social Media as Hyperreality

In the same way that television came to be understood as a producer of reality, not just a reflection of it (Fiske, 2010:21), social media also not only reflects but produces, new forms of reality. I argue that it is not only virtual influencers who can be seen as simulations, but the very platform on which these virtual influencers exist (Instagram and social media platforms as a whole), can also be seen as a form of hyper-reality. Dalayli (2020:93) notes that social media can be considered as simulacra as it represents a break from both the traditional and the social. Social media, an information and communication tool, reproduce reality in a virtual environment using communication and sharing functions. The fact that individuals create profiles on Instagram and create these profiles by means of a combination of fictional narratives and technical codes reveals that, in a sense, the raw material of the simulations of individuals in social media are codes and indicators (Dalayli, 2020:93). Even values and emotions are digitised, and so all “abstract concepts” become indicators, such as the heart emoji used on a comment indicating a form of affection (Dalayli, 2020:92). These digital indicators are signifiers for the offline emotion they aim to communicate.

Social media is conventionally thought of as a representation of reality, while virtual worlds are thought of as fantasy. However, these boundaries continue to blur with increased gamification features proliferating on Instagram and elements from “virtual worlds” making up an increased content ratio (Matthíasdóttir, 2018:17). The real world is being implicated and somewhat transformed by these virtual realities (Matthíasdóttir, 2018:15). The bombardment of “pseudo realities” begins to produce “inauthentic humans” that are “as fake as the data pressing at them from all sides” (Lunenfield, 2011:9).

4.4.5 The New Real

The distinction between reality and unreality is no longer a simple dichotomy (Wright, Huston, Reitz, & Piemyat, 1994:231). Culture is constructed and reproduced by communication processes, including visual communication (Fornas *et al.*, 2007:190). As communication structures change, culture changes, and so do concepts of reality, realism, and the relationship between them (Barker, 1988:43). Every new genre of communication has implications for our understanding of realism. For instance, when reality television first entered the spheres of media, it forced practitioners and the industry to question what “reality” is on television (Friedman, 1958). Now that virtual influencers have entered the online sphere, they too are forcing social media practitioners to re-question what reality is on social media.

Fiske (2010:21) notes that reality is the product of people, and not a universal object that people merely observe from the outside. Realism as an aesthetic code is thus defined by the way it makes sense of the real, rather than by what it says the real consists of, and is thus more concerned with *producing* reality instead of merely *reflecting* it (Fiske, 2010:25). Any conception of reality is thus “symbolically mediated,” “socially determined” and constructed out of the conjuncture of the text with the socially situated reader (Fornas *et al.*, 2007:143; Fiske, 2010:81).

The construction of realism therefore needs to be investigated for the process that it is. Hall (2003) notes that naturalised codes produce apparently natural recognitions but warns that such transparency is deceptive because it conceals the practices of coding which are present. As a result, scholars such as Barker (1988:42) prefer to replace the term “realism” with the term “verisimilitude” because, by definition, “real-seeming,” or “appearing to be true” implies the notion of “work” and highlights the process as being a product of participation between encoder and decoder. Baudry (1986:34) suggests that “between objective reality and the site of inscription (namely the camera) there are certain operations, aT work” which results in a “reality effect” produced by codes and discourse (Prince, 1996:31). Since realism involves the active participation of both encoder and decoder, the idea of work is vital (Barker, 1988:44).

The result is that the “real” as representing some form of “truth” is no longer relevant since it is “reality,” not “*the* reality,” that is reflected (Fiske, 2010:21). Barker (1988:53) notes that for most of human history, the reality of any mediated experience was measured against the benchmark of the original. The current cultural moment is, however, one where a distinction between the “original,” the “real,” and the “authentic” is no longer evident as digital identities have blurred these boundaries to the point that authenticity and realism as benchmarks no longer exist (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016:413; Nguyen, 2017:12). This is of relevance in the digital sphere with its “architecture of participation” where audience and author are increasingly indistinguishable and “viewers” (user and viewer) and “prosumers” (producer and consumer) blend to the point that authorship is “undefined, collaborative, and unstable” (De Souza e Silva 2006:262; Keen, 2007:25; Elea, 2012:72). As Keen (2007:65) puts it, “when we are all authors, and some of us are writing fiction, whom can we trust?”

4.4.6 Neoliberalism and the Expected Work of Editing the Image

The built-in computational photography filter, which suggests filters for application in real-time, along with Instagram's own in-built filters, serves as the first content-creation decisions users need to make in selecting what filter to use and to what degree to apply its effects, all speak to the work of editing done to an image before it is posted. Computational photography and Instagram "takes away the journey behind each image" (Alexander, 2018) whilst simultaneously normalising the editing of images. Filters help to normalise notions of editing and touching up content and send the message that simply taking a photograph is not the end of the process, with the work of editing the content a necessary step (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:45). This demonstrates the connections drawn between the image processing functionality of contemporary smartphones and the forms of quantification and commodification associated with neoliberalism, whereby editing becomes an additional labour step to unlock returns (Taffel, 2021:247).

Previous research on Instagram content production habits has revealed the practice of carefully staging photos that are made to look as spontaneous as possible: the work done behind the scenes to get a good picture is made "invisible" to the viewers (Vainikka *et al.*, 2017:119). Here, Goffman's (1959) facework theory provides a valuable model: in the same way that neoliberal tendencies expect – but hide – labour, performers of facework may conceal certain things by only showing the end product of their labour to their audience. In these cases, Goffman (1959:44) observes that the audience "will be led into judging [the performer] based on something that has been finished, polished, and packaged" (Schuller & Schrader, 2018:84). Goffman (1959:43) asserts that when an individual engages in facework, they typically conceal something to achieve idealisation. Goffman (1959:43) points out that the individual engaging in facework may be covering a variety of matters, including a profit motive. Goffman (1959:43) also notes that "errors and mistakes are often corrected in the backstage region before the performance takes place," which parallels the process that takes place before uploading the content in which flaws and errors are reduced and removed before uploading on the public "stage" of Instagram for the scrutinising audience. Digital aesthetics replicates this logic through distancing/concealing the work behind an image whilst simultaneously making this work compulsory through rating/measuring non-edited content as subpar.

4.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I argued that changes to visual culture have aided the acceptance of virtual influencers as profiles on the Instagram platform. I demonstrated why previous views of photographs as a form of “visual truth” that objectively reflected a captured reality through its use of indexical signs as connected to referents rooted in reality is no longer relevant in the age of digital photography. Photographs are no longer understood as “mechanical records” but as “selected sights” curated by the photographer, as a photograph can only “isolate an instant.” I then illustrated how the launch of the mobile camera phone and its features of numerical representation and condensing; transcoding; modularity, convergence and mobility; variability and editing, as well as automation and computational photography further problematised ideas of visuals as depictions of reality.

I demonstrated that numerical representation and condensing has meant that visual units are minimised into digitised codes that can be captured, stored and shared more efficiently, resulting in a substantial shift in the choice of, and frequency of, image capturing with an ever-increasing “multitude of images” producing a “cinema of convenience” instead of a “deep relationship with the image.” I further revealed how the attribute of transcoding has meant that digital forms lose their sense of permanence as they are continually made and unmade, transformed and transcoded into new digital formats. I then defined the attributes of modularity and convergence as causes of a “hyper-medial immediate interface” that seamlessly combine different forms of textual, pictorial, graphical and musical content. I further explored how the characteristic of mobility has blurred the line between our offline/online selves as we can carry around these pocket technospaces of our online selves into all areas of our offline existence. The characteristic of variability and editing further proved that digital cameras have evolved from simply being a passive *recording* device to a *production* device as they do not only *take* pictures but *make* pictures. My argument was strengthened in considering the automation ability of mobile camera phones where editing is automatically built into the technology so that the visual reality of a visual is changed during the moment of capturing, not just after.

For these reasons, the idea of virtual influencers as “collaborations” between existing physical locations and imagined visual beings begin to gain greater acceptance in light of the changing way we use our technological devices to capture the visual. I then expanded my investigation beyond just the technology through which we capture visuals but also the specific visual styles of the platforms we post on. In exploring Instagramism and its distinct visual styles of casual,

professional, designed, photograph subjectivity, item fetishization, and augmented/virtual reality, I illustrated how virtual influencers can adhere to Instagram's visual genre.

The chapter documented how meanings of images have shifted from an image as a reflection of reality; to an image as masking and perverting reality through embellishment, exaggeration and even distortion; to an image as masking the absence of a fundamental reality; to an image as bearing no relation to any reality at all. The latter is the current state in which contemporary media tend to blur the line between reality and simulation, making the simulation of reality seem more real than reality itself. This history reveals how digital aesthetics with inbuilt editing takes away the journey behind each image as a form of neoliberalism where the “work” built into an image is hidden, yet is expected from all participants in this visual economy. In the chapter to follow, I will build on this argument by highlighting how attributes of realisticness, authenticity, and aliveness contribute to virtual influencers being accepted on the Instagram platform and being seen as real humans.

CHAPTER FIVE

BEING REAL – AUTHENTICITY AND REALISTICNESS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I analysed technological advancements to ways of capturing the visual and its impacts on our way of seeing others and visually representing ourselves. By doing so, I demonstrated the changing expectations of visual content as no longer needing to be an online representation of an offline reality, thus fostering an environment where online creations do not need physical incarnations to be seen as credible. In Chapter Five, I build on this exploration of perceptions of virtual influencers as “real” by presenting how humans’ increasing *synthetic* portrayals are coupled with virtual influencers’ increasingly *human realistic* depictions, which together contribute to virtual influencers’ believability as real beings.

Virtual influencers have successfully portrayed themselves as human through the weaponisation of authenticity. Authenticity broadly refers to the “real or genuine” (Vannini & Williams, 2009:2). What we mean by “the real” has been challenged by the concept of authenticity coming into crisis, just as the idea of the “reality of the photograph” came into crisis earlier (Van Leeuwen, 2001:397).

In this chapter, I explore how authenticity is performed, transmitted, and negotiated. I commence the chapter by laying a foundation for the different definitions of authenticity. I then explore how social media users have identified the value of authentic performances and harness this value by strategically introducing their “back-stage” personal moments on their “front-stage” public accounts. In an increasingly saturated attention economy, I identify authenticity as a distinctly valuable feature in capturing and sustainably retaining audience attention. Authenticity can be viewed as valuable because of its rarity in an increasingly artificial world. In preserving the distinction between performances of self in relation to the real/synthetic, authenticity is seen as the distinctive principle.

As with most concepts that start to become in demand, commerce has taken notice. Although the valuation of authenticity is not exclusive to any generation, this day witnesses the intriguing way it is communicated and capitalised via social media for commercial gains (Nguyen, 2017:3). I therefore explore the commercialisation of authenticity by brands and virtual influencers. The combining of authenticity with human realistic portrayals of virtual

influencers is also explored in relation to theories around the uncanny and how the agencies that created virtual influencers have used morbid curiosity to stimulate mystery around, and interest in virtual influencers, thus creating captive audiences to sell to.

5.2. BEING REAL: AUTHENTICITY

The search for authenticity is a rational and emotional response to life in a world perceived to be “deeply inauthentic” (Erickson, 1994:28). As we overdose on the synthetic, we crave the complete opposite - genuine human nature (Siminitz, 2018). This “yearning” for authenticity is now central to contemporary culture (Fine, 2003:162; Vannini & Williams, 2009:2). Society has witnessed a rise in the “cult of authenticity” (Speed, 2015); the “doctrine of authenticity” (Adorno, 1973:137); the “awakening of authenticity” (Vaughan, 2020:17) and the “anxiety of authenticity” (Shoenthal, 2018). The implications of this for identity should not be underestimated as concerns with authenticity lie at the roots of group membership, group collective identity and values, personal and social identity formation and status (Widdicombe & Woofftt, 1990:263; Levitt & Hiestand, 2004:607; Moore, 2004:309; Riley & Cahill 2005:270; Williams, 2006:181; Coco & Woodward, 2007:502).

Due to its role in cultivating connection, authenticity is seen as an essential tool to foster transactions between a producer and consumer as it is regarded as a precondition for promoting meaningful connections and feelings of intimacy between consumers and brands, followers and influencers, fans and stars (Dyer, 1998:11; Keller, 2008; Preece, 2015:619). Without the impression of authenticity, intimate and credible communication would not be possible. “Authenticity” has even surpassed “popularity” as the most critical factor in people’s perception of a message (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011; Ilicic & Webster, 2013:942). However, this emphasis has led to negative reactions in which authenticity is viewed as a “hook employed either to sell products and services” (Beverland, 2006:251; Rose & Wood, 2005:290) or a “hegemonic discourse through which various ideologies are articulated” (Bramadat, 2005:7; Coupland, 2003:418; Heynen, 2006:291).

5.2.1 Defining Authenticity

Understanding what constitutes authenticity has been an essential debate in Western philosophical thinking (Ferrara, 1998; Furtak, 2003:424; Tran & Keng, 2018:279). Essentially, authenticity concerns the construction, exchange, consumption, and interpretation of public

claims to genuineness, truth, and self-congruency (Peterson, 2005:1083). The various definitions of authenticity include authenticity as:

a) Natural

Some view authenticity as an “inherent quality” of some object, person or process that an individual might possess or lack that is “essential” rather than “accidental,” and because it is inherent, it is neither negotiable nor achievable (Adorno, 1973:127; Pierce, 2015:443). In this definition, authenticity cannot be stripped away, nor can it be appropriated as the person is either “authentic or is not, period” (Vannini & Williams, 2009:3). This definition of authenticity appears irrelevant in an era where authenticity is mediated - in other words, socially constructed.

b) Socially Constructed

Some scholars emphasise that authenticity is not created by the person themselves but is defined by consumers of the content who symbolically negotiate interpretations based on what is observed (Beverland, 2006:253; Enli, 2015:3; Hahn, 2019:14). Authenticity is therefore always relative as it is “ultimately an evaluative concept” (Van Leeuwen, 2001:392; Verburg, 2020:9). Consumers are often considered to be co-creators of authenticity because they interact with the authentic object or person (Leigh, Peters & Shelton, 2006:482; Hall, 2015). For example, Dyer (1998) has argued that the appeal of celebrity depends on the degree to which they are accepted as truly being what they appear to be. The consumer’s role in accepting or rejecting this is therefore crucial.

From this perspective, authenticity is a cyclical process that shifts across time and space adapting to changes and trends, rather than being a static characteristic that, once socially constructed, is used to build, or validate, its very own manifestations and performances (Peterson, 1997; Vannini & Williams, 2009:3; Preece, 2015:618). From this perspective, authenticity is therefore seen not only as an experience but also as an intersubjective accomplishment shaped by the dominant conventions and common sense understanding of a particular social world (Creeber & Martin, 2009:163; Vannini & Williams, 2009:8). Considering this definition in relation to virtual influencers, it is worth questioning that if this “natural understanding” of authenticity is constructed based on common elements, what happens when such features shift from being human to virtual? What ripple effects occur when our

common “sense” keeps changing with the introduction of these new performers of authenticity?

c) Being in Opposition to Another Principle

Many scholars see authenticity as never absolute but always positioned in distinction to its counterpart, inauthenticity (Adorno, 1973:123; Vannini & Williams, 2009:4; Marwick, 2013:361). Here the authentic stands against replicas, pretence, and posing (Vannini & Williams, 2009:3). For Rigoletto (2018:394), authenticity is, therefore, a “negative concept” as its presence is most visible when we are faced with its “perceived absence,” since authenticity’s “perceived denial is exactly what produces it.” The “inauthentic” in that way thus becomes a “critical” term, in definite negation of something else (Adorno, 1973:7). From this perspective, the authentic is constructed in relation to the inauthentic. Thus, when perceptions of the inauthentic change, then so do the yardstick against which authenticity positions itself.

d) Originality

Authenticity is also described as valuing “uniqueness, creativity, original expression, non-conformity and independence from the market” (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017:193). In this approach, authenticity is associated with “the original” as opposed to the “reproduced” and “imitated” (Van Leeuwen, 2001:393; Brownlie *et al.*, 2015:458). Therefore, something is authentic because it is declared authentic by an authority and is therefore valid, “authorised,” and bears a genuine signature, stamp, or seal of approval (Van Leeuwen, 2001:393). For Baudrillard (1996:79), the demand for authenticity is reflected in an obsession with certainty - certainty as to the origin, date, author and signature of a work as a source of truth. The opposite of originality, scarcity and rarity, is mass production and oversupply. Products and services offered for mass consumption are often perceived to be devoid of authenticity (Liao & Ma, 2009:93). When considering the virtual influencer space, it provokes the question of whether the “mass production” of influencers leads to them being perceived as inauthentic by virtue of their oversaturation in the marketplace. Furthermore, the concept of authorised originality is problematised by the existence of virtual influencers.

e) Intrinsic

Attribution theory explores whether a person's behaviour is attributed to intrinsic motivations (namely their true self) or extrinsic pressures (Jones & Davis, 1965:220). Intrinsic motivation is innately satisfying and stems from an "innate self" with representation that is "true to an individual's nature" (Trilling, 1972; Deci & Ryan, 2002:5). By contrast, extrinsic motivation (motivation by the potential consequences of potential rewards and punishments) is associated with being inauthentic (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016:5). In this way, influencers who post too much commercial content tagging brands are perceived as less authentic as their motivations for creating the content are seen to mainly stem from extrinsic motivations of commercial gains. Similarly, authenticity is seen to be linked to the intrinsic parts of humanness. Being authentic stands for the values of self-reflection, self-discovery and for a concern with deep felt humanity (Boyle, 2004). If being authentic is to be true to the intrinsic parts of our humanity, the question can be asked, how can a non-human entity ever be seen to be authentic?

f) Consistent

Our behaviour is characterised as intrinsic if it is unique to us, is similar across different situations and is similar across different stimuli or entities (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016:5). Goffman (1967:6) defines maintaining or saving face as "when the line [a person] effectively takes presents an image of him that is internally consistent, that is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants, and that is confirmed by evidence conveyed through impersonal agencies in the situation." This involves providing an accurate account of ones' self to others and being what we claim to be in an "integrity of representation" and "transparency" of the self" (Furtak, 2003:427; Rigoletto, 2018:389).

We become authentic only by having a consistent moral character, a temporally extended self (Furtak, 2003:434). Some level of consistency is necessary. This does not mean that our conceptions of self cannot change or evolve, but that for our self-understandings to be recognised and validated by others who share the identity in question, it must be perceived as being a significant and lasting part of our identity, rather than a passing fad, or an attempt to appropriate something taken to be "exotic" (Pierce, 2015:445).

However, the question can be asked whether authenticity is about being authentic to the self, or is about being consistent with an individual's procreated persona and is therefore compatible with group expectations, as these can contradict. There are, therefore, expectations of consistency, but consistency with what? Consistency with individual authenticity or collective authenticity?

For some scholars, authenticity, as a dimension of performance, is not a central self, or even a set of techniques for maintaining a mask, but a combination of pressures that determine how an individual manages various social norms in a given environment by negotiating between their "actual identity" and their "ideal identity" (Vainikka *et al.*, 2017:120; Black, 2020:50). Therefore, authenticity is a multifaceted concept that is difficult to comprehensively define (Van Leeuwen, 2001:396). For this reason, scholars such as Pierce (2015:455) suggest "abandoning the idea of authenticity" altogether. For Vannini & Williams (2009:14) the focus should shift away from trying to define "the meaning of authenticity" to rather understanding "how authenticity is made meaningful." This is supported by Noy (2004:118) who argues that it is not important to discern between what is authentic or inauthentic, but instead to focus on "what people do to authenticate what they do or who they are."

The above can be summarised in defining authenticity as referring to the qualities of genuineness, sincerity, truth, and reality (Vannini & Williams, 2009:8; Pierce, 2015:444; Tran & Keng, 2018:279). Based on these definitions, virtual influencers should not be seen as authentic. They are by no means natural, their construction is not socially accepted, they are seen on par with and not in opposition to the synthetic, they are copies of humans and not originals, they do not have intrinsic inner selves. However, as virtual influencers have an underlying profit motive, it is perhaps worth considering them in terms of brand authenticity.

5.2.2 Brand Authenticity

In the same way that a human can be seen as authentic or not, brands can also be measured accordingly. The rhetoric of authenticity is often used heavily to market retail goods ranging from blue jeans to coffee (Enli, 2015:114). The advertising and marketing industry extensively uses the term "authenticity" to distinguish products and thus gain an advantage in overcrowded market areas (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Lindholm, 2008). In fact, Beverland (2006:257) showed that authenticity is the cornerstone of contemporary marketing practices. For a brand to be seen as authentic by its consumers is highly profitable and thus highly desirable.

The result is an increasing expectation of authenticity in brands. Dimensions of brand authenticity include connection, realism, aesthetics, control, scarceness, sacredness, virtue and purity (Liao & Ma, 2009; Tran & Keng, 2018:277); pedigree, stylistic consistency, relationship to place, method of production and downplaying commercial goals (Beverland, 2006:253). Consistent values linked to brand authenticity research include originality (Liao & Ma, 2009; Coary & Oakley, 2018:190; Tran & Keng, 2018:277); quality commitment (Beverland, 2006:253; Tran & Keng, 2018:277); credibility (Liao & Ma, 2009; Tran & Keng, 2018:277; Becker *et al.*, 2019:41) and heritage (Beverland, 2006:253; Becker *et al.*, 2019:41).

While performance, social norms of emotional expression, validity, and modality were considered as important aspects in determining authenticity by traditional media, the rise of web 2.0 extended these aspects by incorporating elements such as personality, connectivity, immediacy, and regularity in determining authenticity (Hahn, 2019:13). Vannini and Williams (2009:3) highlight the irony of contemporary culture industries investing efforts into building authentic seeming brands, thus producing the very authenticity they tell us cannot be manufactured.

Even when considering virtual influencers in relation to brand authenticity they still theoretically fall short of many of the characteristics that would deem them authentic. Yet a recent study by social content agency, Fullscreen, found that nearly a fourth of Gen Z and Millennials would describe a virtual influencer as “authentic” (Klein, 2020). How have our previous understandings of authenticity evolved to create a space of acceptance of virtual influencers as an embodiment of authenticity? I argue that this is because our understanding of authenticity has moved from authenticity as a *quality*, to authenticity as a *performance*, with those that successfully adhere to this performance seen as authentic. When this is done authenticity becomes “mediated” through the platform on which the performance is done, and the expectations of the audience that process this performance.

5.2.3 Mediated Authenticity

The study of mediated authenticity is an all-encompassing inquiry into the crafting and negotiation of authenticity on digital media (Nguyen, 2017:12). Enli (2015) defines the negotiation between the “actual self” and the “ideal self” as an “authenticity contract.” Media prosumers accept the distinction between the real and imagined self because of this authenticity contract which is “an informal agreement regarding where the line is drawn between reality

adjustment and outright fakery” (Enli 2015:132). This authenticity contract is therefore an agreement between producers and audience, but it remains a social construction, one that is based on a set of genre conventions, as well as established practices and expectations (Enli, 2015:2). It is this negotiation that makes it possible to transmit a sense of authenticity through inherently inauthentic channels (Molster, 2016:131). The main participants in the authenticity contract are the producers, the audiences, and the regulatory authorities who use the genre conventions of the platform on which the interaction occurs as guidelines for the acceptance or rejection of the authenticity illusions (Enli, 2015:13). In the case of virtual influencers, the participants would therefore be virtual influencer creative agencies, Instagram users, and Instagram as a regulatory authority.

The authenticity contract is therefore maintained through a few important concepts. “Authenticity illusions” demonstrate the understanding of authenticity as a co-producing negotiation between participants who use various editing tools and techniques to portray authentic scenes and subjects. The genre of the platform on which the interaction occurs guides both *producers* in signaling what type of content is to be produced in adherence to genre conventions, and *consumers* on how to preferably read such content as corresponding with similar content on the platform. Advances in technology often require a further renegotiation of the authenticity contract as the genre expectation of producers and consumers adjusts with changes to the platform and the genre it adheres to. The role of audiences in choosing to believe in the illusions created by producers through a “suspension of disbelief” is also an important factor. I consider these elements within the context of virtual influencers below.

5.2.3.1 Authenticity Illusions

Authenticity work is skillful and craft-like, and it does not go unnoticed until it is challenged (Peterson, 2005:1083). In the case of online social interaction, the sparse contextual social cues in digital communication require a set of authenticity illusions (Enli, 2015:91). The production techniques required to produce authenticity illusions, range from minor adjustments such as lighting and sound effects to drastic post-production editing and photoshopping (Enli, 2015:2). Authenticity illusions can then be considered a side effect of digital participatory culture, for they require both the promoting and approval from the social media users to be effective. This form of acceptance suggests that the producers and consumers are responsible for their own authenticity contract and necessitates an interactive, and co-producing audience (Enli,

2015:107). Everybody is given correspondingly greater responsibility as an online media consumer because we must not only read a post but also evaluate its validity and intentions.

5.2.3.2 Genre

Authenticity is mediated through the coproduced contract between participants in the interaction (authenticity illusions), as well as the genre conventions of the platform on which the interaction occurs (Enli, 2015:13). The term “genre” is widely used in rhetoric, literary theory and media theory, and more recently, linguistics, to refer to a distinctive type of “text” (Chandler, 1997:1) or a “category which mediates between industry and audience” and signals to the audience the nature of the texts they encounter (Tolson, 1996:92; Prinsloo, 2009:245). Genres are not simply features of texts but are mediating frameworks that operate between texts, makers and interpreters that help people interpret media content (Chandler, 1997:6; Fourie, 2009). The genre system is multidimensional, touching upon textual features as well as production values, market strategies and audience expectations (Enli, 2015:2).

a) Guides Consumers

Genre guides what type of content is produced and how to read such content. Genre provides a critical frame of reference that helps readers identify, select and interpret texts, in relation to the genre as a whole (Goffman, 1974; Chandler, 1997:5). Genre constrains the interpretation of a text, guiding readers of a text towards a preferred reading (Chandler, 1997:6).

b) Guides Producers

Genres are essential for commercial interests. The relative stability of genres enables producers to predict audience expectations based on the particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts within that genre (Chandler, 1997:1). A post in Instagram can be seen as authentic because it resembles previous social media postings in terms of form, content, and address.

5.2.3.3 Advances in Technology

The authenticity contract is constantly challenged and renegotiated due to the development of new media technologies and the introduction of new media systems and the user patterns they enable (Nguyen, 2017:10). The historical phase of a novelty — when a new media technology is in the process of being established and incorporated as an “extension of man”—is of particular significance, as this is the phase when the negotiation of authenticity is at its most intense and most decisive for further media-audience relations (Enli, 2015:19).

In considering mediated authenticity on social media, it is worth investigating how the rapid evolution of Instagram’s affordances has changed the negotiation of authenticity contracts. For instance, there is an expectation of a particular composition of an influencer which virtual influencers to keep up-to-date on. Research on Lil Miquela for instance, found that the profile “reflects a pitch-perfect understanding of the tropes of Instagram, from repetitions of poses to the use of hashtags, all of which construct herself as an authentic individual” (Black, 2020:50).

5.2.3.4 Suspension of Disbelief

In addition to the genre system and its established conventions, the authenticity contract is based on a “certain irrationality” because audiences choose to believe in the illusions created by producers, in part because they “want or need the pleasure of believing” (Enli, 2015:12). To a degree, the authenticity contract requires a “suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, 1817), namely the audience’s tendency towards believing, even when they know it is an illusion. This illusion is impossible without “play and imagination” (Schudson, 1995:96). This adheres to the narrative construct of the notion of “transportation,” which is defined as an “integrative melding of attention, imagery and feelings, focused on story events” (Green & Brock, 2000:710). In transportation, the reader may consciously or unconsciously push real-world facts aside and instead engage with the narrative world created by the author (Green, 2004:258). There is thus a melding of a virtual layer between the audience and the internal world created by the story that the characters themselves experience and encounter (Spinelli, 2019:103).

For example, Enli (2015:12) illustrates how audiences watching sitcoms “understand that canned laughter is a technique for enhancing a comedy show,” but the seemingly spontaneous outbursts of laughter are an expected component in their viewing experience related to the genre. The canned laughter is not real and is not perceived as real (by the viewers), but it

nonetheless helps create a sense of authenticity in the specific context of comedy shows. Mediated authenticity is inauthentic, but that does not matter because the audience accepts and knows it as such (Molster, 2016:131). How Enli's (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles of predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection and how virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu incorporate these principles into their content creation in order to be perceived as authentic, is investigated in detail in Chapter Eight.

These changing understandings of authenticity impact how Instagram users interpret content posted by accounts such as that of virtual influencers and brands and how they curate their own content. Users are expected to "be themselves" and "act natural," but also always be compatible with the format criteria of the genre of the platform on which they interact (Enli, 2015:11). Instagram users themselves perform authenticity by presenting private moments on public platforms.

5.3 THE PERSONAL AND THE PUBLIC

Defining authenticity as a performance rather than an ethical and psychological dimension evokes the insights of sociologist Goffman (1986), who demonstrated that human interactions always involve a degree of performance of a desired persona (Enli, 2015:107). Authenticity can be evoked when private aspects of self are revealed to the public. Goffman explores how this occurs when the "backstage" is brought to the "frontstage" (Wiederhold, 2018:215). In theory on facework, Goffman (1959:107) describes the performances of self in bounded regions, commonly referred to as the front and back regions. He defines the front region as "the place where the performance is given" and the back region, or backstage, as "a place relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (Goffman, 1959:112). He notes that front regions embody specific standards, including moral and instrumental requirements (Goffman, 1959:107-108). The back region, however, is a region where the performer can "drop his front" or "step out of character" (Goffman, 1959:112; Schuller & Schrader, 2018:82). The relationship between our front and back regions is an ever-evolving process of facework.

5.3.1 Facework

Goffman (1967:5) defines face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during particular contact." Facework is thus the

technique of how our face (or forward-facing sense of self) is created, reinforced, maintained, or diminished through interactions with others (Schuller & Schrader, 2018:80). It is “the actions we take to make whatever we are doing consistent with face” (Goffman, 1967:7). He goes on to describe face as “present[ing] an image” or a “good showing.” According to Goffman (1959), we wear masks and perform roles for others not because we fancy ourselves thespian-like or histrionic characters, but because our expressive action is first and foremost directed at the maintenance of relationships through the saving of face (Goffman, 1967:45). We, therefore, strike a balance between presenting our front and back region in the creation, maintenance and redemption of a favourable image or “face.”

5.3.2 Performance on Social Media

It is difficult to know what can be deemed truly authentic and what may be a manipulation of our front stage for personal or profitable gain (Schuller & Schrader, 2018:87). This manipulation often occurs in the social media space. By applying Goffman’s theoretical construct of facework to the online realm, we can recognise social media for what it truly is — the front stage in a new medium (Schuller & Schrader, 2018:87). Social media is a means of communication through “mediated contact,” which in contrast to face-to-face contact, allows a person to maintain their face easier than in a direct confrontation (Schuller & Schrader, 2018:81). This desire for our “front region” or online profile to lie favourably in the eyes of our peers is, therefore, an ambition that Goffman (1967) identified decades ago. The ongoing tensions between being truthful and positioning and presenting oneself in a favourable light is a common experience in navigating online profiles. These conflicts about self-presentation are not new to social media (Turkle, 2011:186). People are always performing for other people through impression management, whether online or offline (Berger, 1972:3; Turkle, 2011:121). “Pretending” behaviour long predates online profiles, or for that matter, virtual influencers, but this performative work does take on particular significance in the online environment.

Although initially positioned as a space for authentic engagement, social media has seen a stark departure from this. According to the Instagram community guidelines as drawn up by its creators, Instagram aims to be an “authentic, positive, open, diverse and safe place for inspiration and expression” (Vainikka *et al.*, 2017:114). Since its launch, Instagram has fast evolved from its original mandate of authentic connection. Speed (2015) notes that it is hard to know which could be more damaging: the loss of Instagram’s sense of spontaneity and authenticity or the attempts to fake it. As a result, there is an acceptance that we have moved

from authentic selves to performative idealisations of self. All digital identities are manufactured to some degree, notes Sommer (2018). Turkle (2011:12) pinpoints creating a profile on social media as the commencement of the blurring of solitude and intimacy, where performances of identity may begin to be experienced as identity itself. At its simplest form, the term “online identity” implies that there is a distinction between how people present themselves online and how they do offline (Marwick, 2013:360), establishing what Wallace (1999) has labelled as the “identity laboratory.” The result is a carefully curated “veneer of self” to which we can attach our name (Hodkinson, 2011; Beck, 2014). Simply, we edit our messages until they project the self we want (Turkle, 2011:12), creating an identity that is essentially “typed into being.”

Interestingly, Jones (2018) notes that it is too simplistic to point to this as a bad thing. The effects of social media are multifaceted and hard to quantify, and there has been a general acceptance that a level of dishonesty is the norm to present a positive self. It then feels pointless to demand more authenticity from something that does not necessarily require it (Jones, 2018). If authenticity has never been at the core of online identity formation, the question can be asked why we demand it now. Does authenticity matter when none of it is real? (Drenten & Brooks, 2020:4). For Vannini and Williams (2009:5), this form of impression management is not the epitome of inauthenticity but the root of what it means to be a functional, socialised, integrated, and lovable member of society. To them, a level of performance is not only *accepted* but is often *required* on such platforms.

5.3.3 Commercialising Authenticity and Neoliberalism

In what Jurgenson (2012) calls “the fetishisation of the offline,” we reward, celebrate and fetishise the caught-off-guard authentic moments from the offline space which we imagine to not be staged. Authenticity posts often occur when the backstage is brought to frontstage (Wiederhold, 2018:215). Self-disclosure, namely the revelation of intimate personal details-is therefore considered a prime method of communicating authenticity as the backstage is brought to the frontstage (Nguyen, 2017:12). The blurring of these regions has led to Meyrowitz’s (1985) suggestion of a “middle region” combining Goffman’s front and back regions. As a result, people increasingly post personal photos onto public or semi-public online spaces as they navigate the boundaries of disclosure and privacy and move into a realm of the “intimate public” (Berlant, 2008:13; Abidin, 2014; Zappavigna, 2016:282). The balance of risk and reward becomes clear as users are willing to risk the exposure of their backstage selves in

exchange for the increased engagement on content that comes from doing so. Those who disclose hope to be repaid in intimacy in the offline space, or engagement and connection in the online space. Authentic content is often celebrated and rewarded and so many try to fabricate the authentic disclosures that unlock such favourable responses in the market. Authenticity is thus “exploited maliciously” (Um, 2016:1847) and becomes “more contrived than real” (Brown *et al.* 2003:20).

Marrying the desire to boost your profile and gain followers with the need to show and “just be you, flaws and all,” is a challenging conundrum (Alexander, 2018). Research suggests that authenticity influences consumer behaviour in a more nuanced manner than previously recognised. For instance, whereas an advertisement congruent with the brand’s essence has a positive effect on sales in most cases, an overly honest advertising message can actually hurt performance; the latter is true especially for hedonic products, for which consumers rely more on subjective information when making purchase decisions (Becker *et al.*, 2019:24). The paradox of authenticity is therefore that the harder you try to be real, the more fake you are (Hahn, 2019:4). There is a fine balance between publicising private moments and the backlash experienced in oversharing to simply attract attention. This is found, for example, in “grief hijacking” (Abidin, 2018), a phenomenon in which users post publicly about grieving moments at funerals for instance, which is widely seen as an attention-hacking strategy. There is therefore a line in the sand about how much personal information is too much to disclose.

As a result, authenticity is often performed in a new mode of “staged authenticity” (Leigh *et al.* 2016); “mediated authenticity” (Enli, 2015:1) “calibrated amateurism” (MacCannell, 1973:591) or, in Goffman’s terms, “scheduling.” Calibrated amateurism is a contemporary adaption of Goffman’s (1959:84) theory of “scheduling.” This refers to the way that performers may obscure the routine character of their act and stress its spontaneity. I note that often this backstage is seldom as spontaneous as it pretends to be but is instead a deliberate effort to manufacture a back region. Authenticity becomes “both pawn and king on the chessboard: quickly sacrificed in certain moments, yet ultimately important for those determined to win the game” (Vannini & Williams, 2009:14).

Platforms such as Instagram therefore become digital spaces where authenticity is articulated and disarticulated as a condition for value extraction (Maso *et al.*, 2019:4). The idea of “cultural platform capitalism” can reveal how authenticity is commodified through platform

technologies to drive more users to access platform content, thus generating more user data and sustaining the digital circulation of this cultural economy (Maso *et al.*, 2019:5). The expectation of authenticity on social media, Turkle argues (2011:272), cheats people out of what she calls “passively being yourself.” Everything becomes labour. Pierce (2015:455) supports this argument when he identifies a “paradox” of authenticity, where “authenticity has become an institutionalised demand on subjects.” Senft (2008) similarly notes the pressure to reveal more and more our private selves, as if followers are “owed a spectacle worth watching.” Authenticity is therefore a type of public performance but a performance which, crucially, is not to be perceived as “acting” (Turner, 2001:445). The neoliberal discourse underpinning this is evident in authenticity as being a form of expected labour yet labour whose efforts should be hidden from its end product. The irony of this is clear: if being authentic means something like living in accordance with one’s own unique values and ideals and resisting the imposition of the values and ideals of others, then the very imperative to “be authentic,” if not arising from within oneself, but rather as demand from another, becomes a recipe for inauthenticity (Pierce, 2015:441). How social media users have come to understand, enact and consume authenticity has therefore shifted, and as a result brands and virtual influencers have changed the way that they have produced authenticity in their brand strategies.

5.3.4 If Authenticity Can Be Reproduced, Is It Authentic?

Prior work has defined authenticity as “the *perception* that someone behaves according to their true self” (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016:5). The onus is on “perception” as “it’s up to us to determine the real” (Bojanic, 2019:39). Individuals are said to possess an inner, irreducible essence, a “real self” behind whatever public face, or mask, they might project (Turner, 2001:456). But what if the perception of this real self can be simulated? Instagram users represent themselves in a highly structured manner, according to the implicit rules of the genre, to the extent that their replication by machines is comparatively simple as the behavioural codes they need to follow are clearly outlined.

Baudrillard (2002:2) discusses this with the analogy of symptoms for an illness. In his hypothesis, the simulator cannot be treated objectively either as ill, or as not ill, for if any symptom can be “produced,” and can no longer be accepted as a fact of nature, then every illness may be considered as “simulatable” and simulated, and medicine loses its meaning since it only knows how to treat “true” illnesses by their objective causes (Baudrillard, 2002:2). Because of this, Baudrillard (2002:2) hesitates to draw the distinction between true and false,

between the “produced” symptom and the “authentic” symptom. What is authenticity then if its symptoms can be reproduced? The results include changing expectations and definitions of authenticity for different contexts. Human authenticity has evolved to brand authenticity and now the new sphere of virtual influencers introduces a further transformation of categories of authenticity., namely virtual authenticity.

5.3.5 Virtual Type of Authenticity

The evolving nature of perceptions of authenticity has implications for the way virtual influencers are perceived. Verburg (2020:7) notes that what was authentic a decade ago may lack authenticity today. Similarly, what was considered inauthentic before interactive digital technology, may now be considered original and a genuine and valued reproduction.

This is clear in insights from research on user’s reactions to virtual influencers. Research on the reactions of followers to Lil Miquela illustrates that Lil Miquela “does not necessarily need to be authentic, to be perceived as such” (Verburg, 2020:11). Research by Black (2020:48) found that because virtual influencer profiles have been previously circulated on the platform enough to create strong visual identifiers, genre cues, and expectations for audience members, followers are comfortable accepting the performance even as virtual influencers’ human statuses remain uncertain. This is supported by Bojanic’s (2019:29) research where participants noted that “even if Lil Miquela is physically not real, she’s real enough to have an impact on people.” Antonio and Gaidamaviciute (2020:82) similarly found that the majority of Lil Miquela followers “believe that Lil Miquela is as authentic and honest as she can be.” On the opposing end Gilmore and Pine (2007) found that Lil Miquela was seen as “inauthentic” not necessarily “because she is fake,” but rather, they argue, because she is perceived as “not real enough.” The emphasis here is on the concept of “enough” and that there are degrees of authenticity and an acceptance of authenticity that changes depending on which vehicle it manifests in. Interestingly, a participant noted that although she was initially drawn to Lil Miquela because she “wasn’t human” Lil Miquela was “acting more real than social influencers” (Bojanic, 2019:30). Since understandings of authenticity are formed in relation to other elements, when profiles such as human influencers are seen as inauthentic, the virtual influencer profiles which used to stand in opposition to them, start to find a correlation.

I argue that virtual influencers being seen as authentic is more harmful than brands being measured as such. Unlike marketers who use authenticity to make their brands more appealing

to audiences, virtual influencer's utilization of authenticity is especially significant as they perform authenticity to appear real seeming, thus more relatable and therefore more commercially viable as vehicles to stimulate follower consumption. Both marketers and virtual influencers therefore use authenticity with the aim of promoting sales. However, the virtual influencer's embodiment of authenticity has far broader implications for the humans she aims to appear authentic to. It is worth unpacking what it means to be real in this context. "Real" involves both the human "realisticness" of the visual portrayal of the influencer persona, as well as being "real" and authentic in terms of the established brand. The former will be explored next.

5.4 BEING REAL – HUMAN REALISTICNESS

Social robots and virtual profiles that mimic online performances make it increasingly tempting to project our feelings onto objects and to treat things as though they were people as an example of "human complicity in a digital fantasy" (Turkle, 2011:23). I make a case that our willingness to accept virtual influencers is not only because the technology to create hyper-realistic virtual influencers is ready, but also because we are. Perhaps the technologies to create believable human-like virtual influencer profiles have existed for some time, it is just that now, due to our increasingly simulated reality and our increasingly performative ideas of authenticity, that we are ready to accept such integrations.

Perhaps the virtual influencers are not "playing us;" rather, "we are the ones playing the game" (Klein, 2020). The fact that visual technology has advanced to a point where replications of the human body are hyper-realistic is still a critical factor in believability. (Fiske, 2010:34). Human perception is not only rational and influenced by behaviour but is strongly influenced by visual appearance (Seymour *et al.*, 2020:4678) and this perceived realism can affect belief change (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000:257). However, conclusions about how users perceive virtual influencers with varying levels of visually realistic depictions have been inconsistent, as research findings show both that a realistic virtual depiction is more credible than a less human-like version and vice versa (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:1). For some, there are numerous reasons to make virtual influencers appear as human-like as possible to the point of the virtual influencer "passing" as human as people are more inclined to bond with humanlike creations (Rau, Li & Li, 2010:176). Both social robots and virtual influencers are similar in that their creators attempt to visually mimic human-like characteristics. The majority of literature focusing on reactions to real versus fictional content falls under perceived reality research. In

general, perceived reality research has suggested that more realistic content can lead to larger emotional or behavioural effects (Potter, Pashupati, Pekurny, Hoffman & Davis, 2002:29; Wilson, Smith, Potter, Kunkel, Linz, Colvin & Donnerstein, 2002:18). Humans are hard-wired to respond to human faces in unique and positive ways (Seymour *et al.*, 2020:4673). Research has found that if users perceive a virtual character as real, they automatically develop stronger emotion of envy and a stronger desire for the advertised brand and the virtual creations are perceived as more attractive, trustworthy, and are believed to have expertise (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019; Walter, 2020:4). The visual realisticness of the virtual influencer is so important that Seymour *et al.* (2020:4674) found that it was a more important factor in building trust in users than the virtual influencer's perceived online behaviour. Key factors contributing towards being seen as real include the virtual influencer showing emotion and responding to the emotions of others (Walter, 2020:11); attractiveness (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:3); as well as consistency of expression in communicating a unified message where facial expressions and body posture and movements should work together (Walter, 2020:12). However, it appears that a robot or virtual with a face too similar to a human's, can also lead to "disappointment" when it is discovered that the virtual creation cannot act as convincingly as it looks.

Due to the higher expectations their realisticness evokes, interactions with digital humanoids will always lead to "negative familiarity" (Hahn, 2019:8; Andersson & Sobek, 2020:2). For this reason, it is recommended that robots or virtual influencers should "not look too much like a human" (Duffy, 2003:177). Virtual influencers who are too human-like are described as "weird" "creepy," "spooky," "too much" and "scary" (Seymour *et al.*, 2018:955; Tiffany, 2019; Andersson & Sobek, 2020:23) and category uncertainty as well as a perceptual mismatch takes place when the virtual technology is too advanced (Walter, 2020:12). Research by Andersson and Sobek (2020:14) found that participants "distinctly clarified that the level of perceived authenticity that humans achieve is unreachable" for virtual influencers, even the more computer-experienced sensed that there is a dimension of authenticity missing. Participants described not being able to "connect emotionally" with virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:14) and so some conclude that virtual influencers should not strive for a human realistic standard that they cannot attain.

Darner and Arvidsson (2019:27) go so far as to advise that it should be purposefully noticeable that the virtual influencer is not real so as to generate curiosity and engagement. This is reiterated by findings by Creasey and Anido (2020:68) who found that it was better for virtual

creations to be more “cartoon-like,” than “human-like,” as virtual influencers who appeared more cartoon-like than human-like were perceived less sceptically. This is in part due to the “uncanny valley” effect, which explains why robot or virtual interactions that very closely approximate real life communicate a degree of abnormality, causing the level of affinity that an individual experiences with a robot or virtual creation to decrease and results in feelings of unpleasantness or eeriness (Creasey & Anido, 2020:23).

5.4.1 The Uncanny Valley

When James Cameron's “Avatar” (2010) film made its debut, the box office numbers were high, but the reviews were mixed as viewers were not sure how to react to the photo-realistic virtual characters (Emerson, 2009) – luckily, they were blue so as to create an unquestionable veneer of distance between the “us” as humans and the “other” Avatar characters on screen. The sense of unease felt by viewers in “Avatar” as well as “The Polar Express” (Zemeckis, 2005), a film that features human characters animated using live-action motion capture animation, relates to the “uncanny valley.” See Image 5.1 and 5.2,

Image 5.1 Scene from Avatar movie **Source:** Rubin, 2021; **Image 5.2** Facial Prints **Source:** Gonzalez, 2004.



The term “uncanny valley” was coined by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori (1970). Mori hypothesised that a person’s response to a humanlike robot would abruptly shift from empathy to revulsion as it approached, but failed to attain, a lifelike appearance. It refers to the feeling of discomfort we experience when something is close enough to be human-looking but unable to completely convince us - we always find what is wrong (Tiffany, 2019). In climbing toward the goal of making robots and other technologies appear human, our affinity for them decreases and this “descent into eeriness” is known as the uncanny valley (Mori, 1970). The presence of movement steepens the slopes of the uncanny valley, as movement and other human-like elements increases the subject’s believability, which in turn increases our repulsion when the truth of their non-human state is exposed. However, Freud (1919:219) notes that people’s

sensitivity to the quality of feeling varies. This is supported by Jentsch (1906:7) who warns that the same impression does not necessarily exert an uncanny effect on everybody.

The uncanny effect often depends on the context/function of the uncanny subject/object. For example, when considering the uncanny in reference to robots/machines, Mori (1970) highlights that a robot arm on an assembly line does not evoke an uncanny feeling as it is “designed for functional use” and although it performs functions similar to those of human factory workers, it does not try to look similar to a human (Mori, 1970). It is not making claims to humanness/aliveness. Contrastingly, when we unknowingly interact with a someone who has a prosthetic hand, the moment of realisation that the hand, which looks real, is a prosthetic hand through for instance feeling its “limp boneless grip and cold texture,” exposes the hand as fake and evokes uncanniness (Mori, 1970). It is this moment of realisation that that which looked real at first sight is in fact artificial and it is at this moment that the hand becomes uncanny. The potential for the uncanny is thus present in technology that aims to mimic human physicality, such as virtual influencers. This uncanny eeriness is characterised by moments of doubt, namely doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may in fact be animate. The uncanny therefore stands between standard categories and challenges the categories themselves (Turkle, 2011:43; Robinson, 2020:6). In navigating the uncanny, Jentsch (1906:7) argues that we are involved in a process of “reality-testing” as we experience the sensation of not being able to “trust our eyes.” Advancements in visual technology can therefore be seen to be aiding the experience of “not being able to trust our eyes.” What is also noteworthy is that despite users initially, or eventually, realising that something is artificial, many remain as intrigued, if not more intrigued, with the uncanny subject, as is the case with virtual influencers. I investigate the motivations around threat and fascination next.

5.4.2 Responses to Realisticness

I explore the various types of responses to subjects that are hyper human realistic, such as virtual influencers, next. In so doing I aim to demonstrate how virtual influencers evoke feelings of uncanniness in some while others feel threatened, and still, others experience a sense of morbid curiosity. I then present an overview of how our initial feelings of unease towards these uncanny subjects eventually begins to fade away as they increase their human realistic visual portrayal and we get accustomed to them through repeated exposure.

5.4.2.1 Are we Threatened?

When considering the uncanny in particular, the oversimplistic assertion that that which looks most like us, scares us, should not be relied upon. Freud (1919:233) points out that children have no fear of their dolls coming to life. The element of repulsion is therefore caused, not only by likeness but also by threat. When people are distrustful of a source's motive, the cognitive system reacts to the distrust by automatically triggering incongruent associations between the source and its messages (Park & Cho, 2015:228). People react to the new and the unusual with mistrust, unease and even, hostility (Jentsch, 1906:9). This is especially true for a creation that too closely aligns to characteristics we see as unique to ourselves as a species. For example, we are most disturbed by virtual influencers who post "emotional" content since emotions and feelings are seen as a distinctive human trait. In considering the feelings of uncanniness, the question can be asked why humans have been equipped with this eerie sensation? Is it essential for human beings as an integral part of our instinct for self-preservation? (Mori, 1970). Humans are competitive by nature and defense mechanisms are the responses we use to deal with realities too threatening to face (Turkle, 2011:78). Is it the possibility that social robots or virtual influencers could be on our level and render us obsolete that scares us most?

Some scholars safeguard against this "threat" by noting that virtual influencers are still perceptibly not entirely human. Creasey and Anido (2020:67) assert that while hyper-realistic virtual influencers like Lil Miquela come closer to approximating a humanlike social media presence, the "limitations in graphical rendering technology" still expose her non-humanness and lead to perceptions of dissimilarity with human social media users. The relevance of the statement can however be called into question as virtual influencer profiles continue to evolve in their human likeness due to visual technological advancements to the point where many follow the accounts without realising that they are not human. Interestingly many users cite a feeling of being simultaneously repelled and intrigued by virtual influencers. This dual sensation is defined as "morbid curiosity".

5.4.2.2 Morbid Curiosity

The uncanny, as Mori (1970) describes it, is something both "long-familiar and strangely new." We are "drawn to what frightens us, fascinated by what disturbs us and we interact with that which unsettles us to try to reassert our control over it" (Turkle, 2005:37; Turkle, 2011:61). Morbid curiosity implies a certain unsettling; a notion of things outside the "realm of the known," of things not yet quite understood or articulated, or things that are "forbidden"

(Jentsch, 1906:7; Rogoff, 1998:19). Morbid curiosity in interpreting an inanimate object/subject as animate/real has become increasingly accepted as we “celebrate the success of this deception” and are “enchanted by our own deception” (Carbajal & Blanton, 2019). For instance, the prestigious Loebner Prize, widely regarded as the world championship for conversational software, was recently awarded to a “chatbot” programme that was judged best at convincing people that they were talking to another person and not to a machine (Turkle, 2011:5). We are fascinated by what fools us.

This morbid curiosity is used to attract attention. A large part of Kim Zulu or Lil Miquela’s online allure is the opportunity they provide us for attempting to decipher what exactly “they” are. Many users admit to continuing to follow virtual influencers after realising that they are not real humans out of morbid curiosity and a desire to watch the virtual narratives unfold even though they know the subjects of these profiles are not human. This reiterates Freud’s (1919:230) earlier musings on human’s “compulsion to repeat” to the point where although we can rationally detect the sober truth; this knowledge does not lessen fascination. As a result, the creators of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu continue to strive to enhance their virtual appearance with attempts to edge closer to their human influencer counterparts with every post. With a growing number of virtual influencer account on platforms such as Instagram, users repeatedly see virtual influencer accounts at a higher rate to the point where their presence on platforms such as Instagram is normalised

5.4.2.3 The Uncanny may become Canny

I note that meaning is derived not just from what we see but how often we see it. Exposure frequency is a well-established factor in the literature on advertising effectiveness (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999:29). The two-factor theory suggests that the relationship between the exposure frequency of a stimulus and the evaluation of that stimulus by the receiver has an inverted U shape. Increasing exposure facilitates familiarity until boredom occurs (Mathys *et al.*, 2016:432). There is therefore a strong possibility that the novelty of virtual influencers will eventually wear off. Some things were unthinkable, and yet, with time, the unthinkable becomes taken for granted as people get used to the new idea and find ways to reassert a “centred view of the human within the new context” (Turkle, 2005:281). Like a doctor who, through repeated exposure to cadavers, gets used to the uncomfortable feeling, so too through constant working through of a feeling of discomfort we too could get used to the idea of sharing an online presence with virtual influencers. Could we become so accustomed to these profiles

that we accept a future where our co-existence becomes the new normal? Research that has analysed audience's changing levels of acceptance of virtual influencers found that there is a "clear adoption phase" where "repeat exposure" to virtual posts increased levels of acceptance (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:26). This is supported by findings from Stamatoula and Kirke (2019:36) who, in analysing the five most followed virtual influencer profiles, found that positive comments on the profiles far outnumbered both the neutral and the negative ones. Not only is repeated exposure to a specific virtual influencer post a factor, but exposure to any account within the virtual influencer group also aids the acceptance of a virtual profile in the long term. For example, Antonio and Gaidamaviciute (2020:98) found a strong correlation in a user's willingness to follow other virtual influencers once having initially followed one virtual influencer profile. They found that 75% of users who followed Lil Miquela also followed a similar virtual profile @BermudaIsBae, which is Lil Miquela's online "friend" created by the same agency Brud. With 120+ virtual profiles on Instagram, the chances of growing accustomed to them are high as our acceptance of one profile grows through our repeated exposure to other virtual influencer accounts. The question can be asked whether moments of uncanny through repeated exposure to Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu will mean that we become so used to virtual influencers that profiles like theirs are not worth commentary anymore. There is risk in this. Perceptions of aliveness without disclosure of inanimation are dangerous. If our experience with relational artefacts is based on a fundamentally deceitful exchange (they perform in a way that persuades us), there is a great deal of ethical risk (Turtle, 2011:108). Media-fabricated simulations make us think that we have the freedom to choose whether or not we buy into the sign of an object yet we cannot knowingly buy into signs if we do not realise that these are signs and not reality (Taffel, 2021:249). People who are not aware of the new virtual influencer trend are subjected to manipulation by accounts they perceive as alive (Walter, 2020:6).

5.5 CONCLUSION

The possibility that virtual influencers could "pass" as human is "not a threat but a promise" (Horning, 2018). Their believability is enhanced through their use of mediated authenticity and human realistic portrayals, which in an increasing inauthentic and hyper synthetic/edited online environment has resulted in a further distortion of "the real." Our online selves have been reduced to such a degree that so little of our true selves are needed to build online profiles, in fact, we no longer need to be behind the profiles in the first place. In this context it is therefore easy for virtual influencers to make claims to humanhood online because humanhood online

has been degraded to such a degree that not much humanity is needed to survive on these platforms.

In this chapter, I explored the importance of authenticity as a tool to foster transactions between a producer and consumer as authenticity is regarded as a precondition for promoting meaningful connections and feelings of intimacy between consumers and brands as well as followers and influencers. I then presented the changing definitions of authenticity and how authenticity online is mediated through an authenticity contract between producers (namely virtual influencer agencies), consumers (Instagram users), and the regulatory authorities (Instagram governance). I demonstrated that authenticity illusions are created through different editing techniques and that the genre of the platform on which the authenticity negotiation occurs guides both producers in signaling what type of content is to be produced in adherence to genre conventions, and consumers on how to preferably read such content as corresponding with similar content on the platform. I further illustrated how advances in technology destabilise the current understanding of authenticity and therefore require a further renegotiation of the authenticity contract with the choice of audiences to believe these authenticity illusions cited as an example of the suspension of disbelief.

Authenticity and aliveness are essential to the creators of virtual influencers, as the increase in the acceptability and believability of the profile leads to deeper parasocial online relations and more effective commercial endorsement activities. Although the commercialisation of authenticity is not new since both marketers and virtual influencers now use authenticity with the result of stimulation sales, the implications of virtual influencers' embodiment of authenticity have broader impacts on the humans they aim to appear authentic to. This chapter concludes the literature review of the research. Chapter Six sets out an overview of the various research methodology approaches followed in this study after which Chapter Seven, Eight and Nine will present the empirical portion of the research. The empirical research of this thesis will focus on three sites at which the meanings of an image, or in this case, an Instagram post are made, namely (1) the site of the production of production of an image – the “technological” (discussed in Chapter Seven where an App-Walkthrough of Instagram provides an overview of the platform on which content is produced and shared); (2) the site of the image itself – the “compositional” (discussed in Chapter Eight where Instagram posts from the profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu are analysed); and (3) the site where it is seen by various audiences – the “social” (discussed in Chapter Nine where interviews with Instagram users are shared).

CHAPTER SIX

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study examines how virtual influencers, as an emerging new category of influencers, embody the platform capitalist motive of Instagram, while exploring the implications of this trend for the global South, and Africa in particular. The investigation of a platform such as Instagram is complex and subsequently the investigation of platform capitalism, identity construction and virtuality necessitates drawing upon a range of disciplines, knowledges and research methods (Turner, 2010:16; Jang, Han, Shih & Lee, 2015:4039). This chapter presents the methodology and research design followed in this study. The research design summarises the overall strategy for running a research study and includes how data was collected and examined to respond to the research question. Figure 6.1 summarises the research design followed for the different phases of this study.

In this chapter, I present the choice of research paradigm, corpus construction, and text and data collection processes. The three phases of empirical research conducted are presented, including how I (1) performed a critical analysis of Instagram as a platform by conducting an app-walkthrough; (2) completed a multimodal discourse analysis on purposively selected content shared by the profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu; (3) conducted semi-structured interviews with three groups of Instagram users as well as a representative from the Kim Zulu creative team. Thereafter the ethical considerations of the research will be presented. Trustworthiness of the research as ensured through the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability will be outlined in the conclusion of the chapter.

Figure 6.1: Research Design Followed for This Study

RESEARCH DESIGN OVERVIEW			
PHASE	PROCESS	METHOD	ELEMENTS CONSIDERED
PHASE 1	Research Paradigm	Interpretivist	
	Corpus Construction	Purposive Text Selection	
	Data Collection	App-Walkthrough	
	Data Analysis	App-Walkthrough and Grounded Theory	
			Instagram Extracts Data from Users
			Instagram Downplays the Implications of Downloading the App and Opting-in
			Instagram Encourages You to Sync with other Social Accounts such as Facebook
			Instagram Presents Data Gathering as Informal
			Instagram Induces Users to Volunteer Data
			Instagram Stores Deleted Data
			Instagram Persuades Users to Generate Content

				Instagram's Iconography
				Instagram Makes Sharing of Content a Habit
				Instagram Creates Dopamine Rewards from Engagement with Posted Content
				Instagram Offers Different Content Formats for Every Occasion
				Instagram Creates a Dependency on its Archiving Function
			Instagram Allows Ease of Use of Two Accounts	
			Instagram Aims to get Users to Consume Content	
				Instagram Encourages Me to Follow Accounts
				Instagram Encourages Me to Spend Time Viewing Content
				Instagram Encourages my Interaction with Content
				Instagram's Disappearing Content Secures Daily App Use
				Instagram Encourages Public Accounts
				Instagram Encourages Me to Follow Accounts
			Instagram Stimulates Spending on the App	
				Users and Brands Spend Money on Boosting Content
				Users Spend Money on Purchasing Products and Experiences
PHASE 2	Research Paradigm	Interpretivist		
	Corpus Construction	Purposive Text Selection		
			Kim Zulu Instagram Posts 12	
			Lil Miquela Instagram Posts 18	
	Data Collection	Visual Social Semiotics		
			Position and Composition	
			Point of vView	
			Pose and Angle	
			Subject Demographic	
			Post Caption	
			Modality	
	Data Analysis	Multimodal Discourse Analysis	Identity Performance as Relatable	
				Ordinariness
				Predictability
				Confessions
			Celebrity Performance	
				Predictability
				Spontaneity
				Immediacy
				Ambivalence
			Ways Of Being on the Platform	
				Imperfection
				Spontaneity
				Immediacy
PHASE 3	Research Paradigm	Interpretivist		
	Sampling	Non-probability Sampling		
			Instagram users	The Privates (Five participants)
				The Influencers (Four participants)
				The Creatives (Three participants)
			Kim Zulu team representative	The Representative (One participant)
	Data Collection	Semi-structured Interviews		
	Data Analysis	Thematic Analysis	Familiarising Oneself with the Data	
			Generating Initial Codes	
			Searching for Themes	
			Reviewing Themes	
			Defining and Naming Themes	
			Producing the Overview Manuscript	

Source: Author's Own.

6.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

The starting point in the research design is to select a research paradigm, namely a philosophical strategy and structure that guides how scientific research should be conducted (Collis & Hussey, 2014:59). This study's inquiry can be regarded as exploratory, as it considers the under researched world of virtual influencers from an African context. The interpretivist paradigm, also known as "qualitative," "subjectivist," "humanistic" or "phenomenological" research, was therefore selected (Creswell, 2007:39; Cooper & Schindler 2008:164; Collis & Hussey 2014:46).

Interpretivism is founded on the understanding that reality created through social interaction is not objective, but highly subjective, as it is formed by views and opinions (Bryman & Bell, 2014:14). Interpretive research is any type of research where the outcomes and deductions are not derived from the statistical examination of quantitative data but rather stem from qualitative methods of analysis (Collis & Hussey, 2014:45). These methods include in-depth involvement in issues of culture, gender and marginalised groups, with topics that are emotion-laden and have practical implications on day-to-day existence (Quinlan, 2011). Qualitative researchers therefore study objects or beings in their natural settings and interpret phenomena according to the meanings people attach to them (Denzin, 1997). The purpose of an interpretivist paradigm is to highlight content and to cultivate new theories, instead of testing existing theories (Crotty, 1998:31; Creswell, 2007:39).

This research is exploratory for several reasons. First, there has been very little research conducted investigating virtual influencers from the lens of platform capitalism. Second, no scholarly research has been conducted on the profile of Kim Zulu. Third, there has been no research to date on audience perceptions of virtual influencers from Africa. Fourth, to date, no previous research has interviewed the creators of a virtual influencer: this research draws on an interview with a representative from The Avatar Company (formerly known as EMOJI Digital), the design team behind the creation of Kim Zulu. The exploratory nature of the research thus necessitates an interpretivist, qualitative approach to unlock new findings. The topic of analysis in investigating social media further justifies a qualitative approach. While there are ways that quantitative approaches or automated analyses of digital communication data do tend to grasp traces of what users do online, qualitative approaches focus on why and how they interact in that way (Schreiber, 2017:37). The latter is most relevant in answering the overall research question. The exploratory nature of this inquiry, during all three phases of the

research process, suited the interpretivist paradigm and required a qualitative research approach.

6.3 CORPUS CONSTRUCTION AND SELECTION

The first step in defining a research sample is to define the corpus body of text. The corpus construction process followed in this study, as well as the choice to employ the non-probability sampling technique of purposive or judgemental selection, will be presented in the following section.

6.3.1 Corpus Construction and Selection

The corpus refers to all of the individuals, or units relevant to a study (Quinlan, 2011:206; Mugenda & Mugenda, 2010:30). However, it is not always practical to use every conceivable item within a corpus and it is therefore necessary to select a targeted group.

This study has three data collection phases. The corpus for each phase is as follows:

- Phase One: Social Media Platforms on which Virtual Influencer Profiles Exist
- Phase Two: Virtual Influencer Profiles and their Content
- Phase Three: South African Instagram Users

6.3.2 Sampling and Corpus Refinement

After defining the corpus of a research study, the relevant elements to be analysed are selected. There are two primary forms of selection and sampling, namely probability and non-probability sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2014:172). Probability sampling is established on the basis that every member or unit of the population is chosen on a purely random basis. Non-probability sampling is a purposefully selected concrete group abstracted from the overall corpus (Mouton, 2009:135). The choice of the selected text is shaped by the objectives of the research.

This study employed a purposive text selection technique in Phases One and Two. On the other hand, Phase Three which featured semi-structured interviews, used non-probability, purposive, judgmental sampling to select the 13 participants interviewed. See Figure 6.2 for the corpus selection and sampling techniques employed in the various research phases.

Figure 6.2: Overall Corpus of the Research

Phase One	Phase Two	Phase Three
Overall Corpus Social Media Platforms on which Virtual influencer profiles exist	Overall Corpus Virtual Influencer Profiles and their Content	Overall Corpus All Virtual Influencer Profiles
Purposive Text Selection	Purposive Text Selection	Purposive Text Selection
Final Corpus Instagram	Final Corpus 12 Kim Zulu Instagram Posts 18 Lil Miquela Instagram Posts	Final Corpus Instagram users: The Privates (five participants) The Influencers (four participants) The Creatives (three participants) Kim Zulu Ream Representative: (one participant)

Source: Author's Own.

As this study has three data collection phases, the sample for each of the phases will be described in greater detail.

6.3.2.1 Purposive Text Selection: Phase One and Two

A purposive selection was made of text units which were chosen for their distinctive characteristics.

Phase One: Social Media Platforms on Which Virtual Influencer Profiles Exist

With a mass of information available, researchers need to know “where to look” (Connell, 2002:12). Not all social media platforms on which virtual influencer profiles exist could be analysed. For instance, Lil Miquela has a large following on several platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Snapchat. I made the decision to focus exclusively on Instagram as the preferred platform for virtual influencers. Instagram is the platform on which virtual influencers such as Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela launched their online identity, and it is on this platform that virtual influencers have the highest follower and engagement rates compared to other platforms on which they have profiles. Platform capitalism as a whole was furthermore seen as something that was most strongly embedded into the architecture of Instagram through its various commercially focused features. Phase One therefore specifically consisted of an app-walkthrough of the Instagram app.

Phase Two: Virtual Influencer Profiles

It was not practical to analyse all virtual influencer profiles on Instagram and so two specific profiles were selected in Phase Two of the study based on their popularity, the depth of their

online narrative construction, and their relevance to Western (Lil Miquela) and African (Kim Zulu) contexts. I focused on Instagram posts by the Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu profiles, shared since the profiles were created until the end of 2021.

This timeframe was selected so that the evolution of the constructed story world of the virtual characters could be traced back to their original posts. I furthermore only considered posts and reels that had been pinned to the main feed of the profiles and excluded reels and other content that had not been purposefully included in the main feed. In this way, the content that one of the curators of the virtual influencer deemed most valuable to the profile composition, was considered.

It was not possible to analyse all 1160 of Lil Miquela's posts nor all 141 of Kim Zulu's posts. This research therefore further limited the selected content and identified Stories and posts only those that illustrated Enli's (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles of predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection in answering the research question on the mobilisation of virtual influencers for platform capitalist goals. The pool of 12 Kim Zulu and 18 Lil Miquela visuals were then semiotically analysed according to a multimodal discourse framework including aspects such as position and composition; point of view, pose and angle; demographic; caption; comments and modality. Both the visuals of the posts (static or video) and the captions of the posts were analysed. I excluded specific analysis of the comments of other users on the posts as this research phase was focused on the incorporation of mediated authenticity into the posts instead of users' reactions to those posts. Reactions to the profiles were analysed in-depth in Phase Three where I conducted semi-structured interviews with South African audiences' reactions to virtual influencers.

6.3.2.2 Non-Probability Sampling Technique

Non-probability sampling was used in Phase Three of the research where participants who were selected to be interviewed were chosen based on their ability to meet certain criteria. In this sampling technique, I was able to select participants based on their relevance to the theoretical ideas investigated and their ability to purposefully inform an understanding of the central phenomenon investigated (Creswell, 2007:125; Nguyen, 2017:17).

Phase Three: South African Instagram users

The number of interview participants interviewed depends on the point at which data saturation is reached, which is when no new information arises (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006:59). The idea of a small sample group for qualitative interviews has been proven to carry numerous advantages as more in-depth interviews with a smaller number of participants produce rich accounts of subjectivity (Adler & Adler, 2011). This is reiterated by Mason (2012) who notes that qualitative research analysis is very time consuming, and given the high premium placed on the quality of interpretation and the importance of researcher inventiveness, it is vital to factor in enough time to make the best use of the data generated. It is therefore better to have a smaller number of interviews, creatively analysed, than a larger number where the researcher runs out of time to do them justice analytically.

Researchers have differing viewpoints about the ideal number of participants with some advising one (Denzin, 1999); between six and ten (Miller, 2012); eight (Speedling, 1981); at least ten (Bertaux, 1981:35; Moser & Korstjens, 2018:9); at least 12 (Adler & Adler, 2011) or between five to 25 (Creswell, 1998). I chose to interview 13 participants. This proved to be an ideal number of participants to gather a variety of data from.

The participants interviewed needed to adhere to certain criteria. Firstly, they needed to be from South Africa as this research is centered within a Southern African context. Furthermore, participants needed to be between the ages of 18-35 years. A broader group such as 18-35-year-olds provides diversity, as both Generation Z (anyone born from 1997 onward) and Millennials (anyone born between 1981 and 1996) fall within this age group. Selecting participants who are over the age of 18 years also ensured that all participants were able to provide consent to participate. I further limited the scope to include participants who were “active users” of Instagram. Active users are defined as those who use the Instagram platform every day, have posted content within the last three months and have had a profile on Instagram for at least a year. This ensured that the participants had an intimate relationship with the Instagram app, were aware of the features of the app, and had a high probability of interacting with at least one human influencer to some degree. This ensured participants had the necessary experience needed to answer the research questions. The Kim Zulu team member was selected through choosing a team member of The Avatar Company (originally called EMOJI Digital) who had been involved in the creation and maintenance of the Kim Zulu profile. It was considered unnecessary to interview more than one participant from the Kim Zulu team since

the participant interviewed had intimate knowledge to address the questions posed. Although several attempts were made in reaching out to Brud, the creative agency behind the Lil Miquela profile, all social media messages and emails were not responded to.

Fiske (2010:67) notes that interviewees as social subjects have a history, live in a particular social formation (a mix of class, gender, age, region), and are constituted by a complex cultural history that is both social and textual. Choosing a diverse group of participants is therefore important in unlocking different experiences. To unlock a variety of viewpoints, the participants were furthermore purposively selected to reflect different genders to ensure an equal input of viewpoints. The Instagram users consisted of six participants identifying as female and six participants identifying as male, with one male participant representing the Kim Zulu creative team. Previous research on social media usually has an uneven gender distribution with more emphasis on females (Lima, 2017:45) and so this research aimed at providing a more even ratio. See Figure 6.3 for an overview of the participants interviewed.

Figure 6.3: Participants Interviewed

Participants Interviewed		
Participant Type	Participant Group	Number of Participants
Instagram users	The Privates	5
	The Influencers	4
	The Creatives	3
Kim Zulu team representative	The Representative	1

Source: Author's Own.

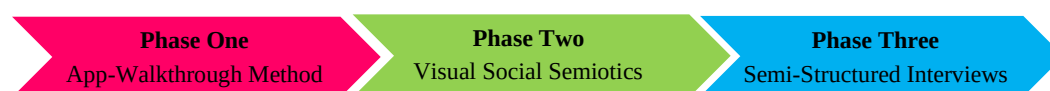
6.4 TEXT AND DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

To address the objectives of this study, both secondary and primary research was undertaken. Secondary research, often referred to as “desktop research” is a research method that involves using already existing data which is summarised and collated to increase the overall effectiveness of research. The lack of literature on virtual influencers, specifically from a African context, justified a more exploratory approach. For the purposes of this study, a comprehensive literature search was conducted in investigating the scholarly perceptions regarding authenticity, online identities, platform capitalism and social media behaviour through the library of Rhodes University and Google Scholar searches.

Primary research, on the other hand, comprises all data gathered through the researcher's own efforts. The aim of primary research is to collect data directly, rather than to rely on previously

collected data from past research (Quinlan, 2011:228). The eventual goal in conducting primary research is to study something new that can be approved and supported by fellow researchers (Collis & Hussey, 2014:60). Primary research for this study was conducted in three phases using three different data collection instruments, as depicted in Figure 6.4.

Figure 6.4: Data Collection Processes Used in Research



Source: Author's Own.

6.4.1 Phase One of the Study

In investigating the Instagram app, the app-walkthrough method was selected for its ability to systematically identify the technological mechanisms that shape, and are shaped by, the app's cultural, social, political, and economic context through the step-by-step observation of the Instagram architecture (Light *et al.*, 2016:1; Nguyen, 2017:14).

6.4.1.1 App-Walkthrough Method

As “devices,” digital platforms can be “both part of the methodology and the object of study” (Weltevrede, 2016:15). As relatively closed technical systems, apps pose new methodological challenges for sociocultural digital media research (Light *et al.*, 2016:1). By definition, apps more closely resemble “platforms” as closed and controlled systems, which are often commercially owned and organise activity within a specific software programme (Pearce, Suay Greene, Teeling, Bansard, Omena, & Rabello, 2020:162). Today, the term “interface” is no longer restricted to the Windows, Icons, Menu, Pointers (WIMP) formula of desktop interface but implicates multiple layers of contact surfaces and exchanges (Nguyen, 2017:14). In analysing software apps, previous research has relied on source code (Langley & Leyshon, 2017:16). An app's source code known as an API is not often shared publicly, prohibiting researchers from examining its underlying structure or operating code (Weber, 2004; Burgess & Bruns, 2015). Further, the API documentation lacks app-based social data (Uddin & Robillard, 2015:69; Dieter, Gerlitz, Helmond, Tkacz, van der Vlist & Weltevrede, 2019:10). Instagram's API is no longer accessible to the public as of April 2018 (Bainotti *et al.*, 2020:2). APIs furthermore overlook an app's symbolic elements and users' social interpretations (Rieder & Röhle, 2012).

As a result of these shortcomings, a more interpretative school of thought known as interface criticism was established in analysing platforms. Interface criticism is defined as “a rigorous interpretive analysis that explicates how elements of the interface, through their relationships to each other, produce certain meanings, affects, moods, and intuitions in the people that interact with them” (Nguyen, 2017:13). Interface analysis techniques include “netnography,” a type of ethnographic approach used for studying interactions online (Bojanic, 2019:12); “cognitive walkthrough,” a usability inspection method that links the interface walkthrough to a cognitive model (Mahatody, Sagar & Kolski, 2010:742); “product demonstrations (Dieter *et al.*, 2019:4); “visual cross-platform analysis” (VCPA), the study of still and moving images across social media platforms (Pearce *et al.*, 2020:161); “use testing” (Dieter *et al.*, 2019:4); Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005); “commercial technology reviews” (Dieter *et al.*, 2019:4); “human-computer interaction,” the study of elements of interface aesthetics and interaction design (Nguyen, 2017:38); “multi-situated app studies” (Dieter *et al.*, 2019:1); “user experience design and “science and technology studies” (STS) (Light *et al.*, 2016:3).

In the last few years, there was an increased demand for a combination of “medium research” with “social research” (Rogers, 2019; Pearce *et al.*, 2020:164). As a result, the app-walkthrough method has gained popularity, for it incorporates the meticulous scrutiny of a platform’s interface with cultural studies techniques for recognising discursive and symbolic representations.

The core of the app-walkthrough method involves the step-by-step observation and documentation of an app’s screens, features, and activity flows, slowing down the mundane actions and interactions that form part of everyday app use to make them available for critical analysis. The researcher registers and logs into the app, mimics everyday use where possible, and discontinues or logs out while attending to technical aspects, such as the placement or number of icons, as well as symbolic elements, like pictures and text (Light *et al.*, 2016:2; Moller & Robards, 2019:102). As a sense of habitation arises from pre-established knowledge and impressions as well as in direct engagement with the material space at hand, the field notes detail narratives of the sequences of interface affordances with the social coding that the researcher reads into each button, layout, profile picture and so on (Moller & Robards, 2019:102).

6.4.1.2 App-Walkthrough Method Incorporation in this Study

Connell (2002:11) notes that a difficult task in social research is to take a situation that everyone thinks they understand and illuminate it in new ways. As an avid Instagram user, the challenge in conducting the app-walkthrough of Instagram was to take an app that I had interacted with as a user for many years and now investigate it as a researcher. This was done by firstly not using Instagram in my personal capacity in the two weeks preceding the initial stages of my app-walkthrough of Instagram to ensure that I returned to the software with a fresh lens. Furthermore, I chose to create a new dummy account instead of using my already existing personal account so that a fresh perspective could be maintained and all information about the process of Instagram use from inception to deletion could be documented. Dieter *et al.* (2019:12), however warn that the creation of a new dummy account may restrict data gathering as newly created personas may not trigger the same elements (especially advertisements) as more “organic” performances. This was avoided by conducting the app-walkthrough over a extended period, namely the month of December 2021, using the app every day so that the Instagram platform gained sufficient “data” about the dummy profile to be exposed to all aspects of the app.

I used the mobile view of Instagram since most users make use of the Instagram social media app on their mobile phone. I tested elements such as the immediacy, permanency as well as ephemerality of the interface including the creation of a dummy profile to analyse the stages of app download, profile creation and post sharing. I further collected data on the user journey of making a purchase within the app, sharing content by other users, deleting posts and reporting content of other users. Throughout this process, I took screenshots of what visual the Instagram mobile interface provided at each moment and made field notes about what I observed. Schreiber (2017:38) describes screenshots, the process of visually capturing one’s screen, as “ideal supporting data to understand visual communication on social media” and “a credible means of capturing different modalities that exist within an image.” Screenshots include the shared picture and the corresponding framing through the inclusion of captions, likes, and comments and depict the interface within which the post was shared (Schreiber, 2017:42). Field notes are also crucial because ideas and memories will most likely be lost further in the research process (Wengraf, 2001; Tessier, 2012:451).

6.4.2 Phase Two of the Study

Visual social semiotics is the analysis and interpretation of connections between the audience of an image and the content within an image (Harrison, 2003). In analysing the Instagram profiles of Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela and the nature of the content that gets posted in the construction of these profiles, visual social semiotics was deemed an appropriate choice to collect information about the words, images and shapes of a post and capture them into a unified communication unit.

6.4.2.1 Visual Social Semiotics

Visual literacy is the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and communicate information in any form that engages the cognitive processing of a visual image¹ (Chauvin, 2003). It is an emerging area of study that deals with what can be seen and how we interpret what is seen (Mitchell, 2002; Pennings, 2002). Visual social semiotics is, therefore, “the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted” (Hobbs, 1997; Jewitt & Oyama 2001:136).

6.4.2.2 Visual Social Semiotics Incorporation in this Study

In conducting the visual social semiotic analysis, I incorporated Enli’s (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles of predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence and imperfection. At the end of 2021, I went back to the first posts of the Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela Instagram profiles and systematically worked through each post, selecting posts that assisted in answering my research question on the use of mediated authenticity principles in the construction of calibrated authenticity for commercial gains. The selected pool of 12 Kim Zulu and 18 Lil Miquela visuals that adhered to these principles were identified and a screenshot was taken of each post within the Instagram platform. I made sure to screenshot the visual with the tagged account visible so that the choice of accounts the creator linked the post to was clearly captured. All screenshots and downloaded videos were labelled according to their date of posting.

6.4.3 Phase Three of the Study

A semi-structured interview is an interview framework set up according to open-ended questions (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson & Kangasniemi, 2016). The semi-structured interview approach was the ideal balance between allowing for the open flow of information from

participants, whilst also guiding the participants thoughts back to the research question being investigated.

6.4.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

A semi-structured interview schedule is primed in advance and provides a construct for the interview (McIntosh & Morse, 2015:4). Since a semi-interview guide offers a clear set of instructions for interviewers, and clear, reliable, comparable qualitative data is provided, it is a popular research method (Harrel & Bradley, 2009:27). In semi-structured interviewing, attention is given to the interviewees' viewpoint, and there can be a considerable deviation from the questions asked in the interview schedule to allow the interviewee to raise issues and explain points of relevance (Silverman, 2009:194; Bryman & Bell, 2014:216).

Critical studies, which this research grounds itself in, investigate meanings people construct. Interviews are a way to gain insights into what those individual meanings are. In this way, the context where decisions are made and activities are undertaken by participants is explored. Researchers such as Kircaburun and Griffiths (2018:166) highlight the importance of in-depth qualitative methods such as interviews in researching social media, as previous research relies on observations of reactions to content through an analysis of comments on posts, as opposed to direct questioning through interviews. The use of a semi-structured interview schedule is therefore most relevant to this research as it produces a guideline for the researcher but unlocks the freedom for the researcher to ask the participant new probing questions as new insights are unlocked.

6.4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview Incorporation in this Study

I interviewed 13 participants, 12 representing South African Instagram users and one participant representing the Kim Zulu creative team. I created and utilised an interview schedule, which is a list of questions and topics that were asked to all participants (Crotty, 1998:34). This means that the interview structure was similar for all participants; however, I varied the questions as the situation demanded extracting knowledge on elements I had not previously considered. The questions were tailored according to the group.

Due to the social distancing guidelines put in place by the South African government, to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus, at the time of data collection, in-person interviews were not possible. The interviews were therefore conducted and recorded using virtual platforms. I had

my camera video switched on during the interview, as did all of the participants to ensure visibility of non-verbal cues (Clark, Birkhead, Fernandez & Egger, 2017:4). The recordings were transcribed through Otter.ai to create a transcript that was verbatim and could be converted into an editable document to create codes, themes and sub-themes (Otter.ai, 2018; Dale, 2021; Tessier, 2012:451; Mobley, 2021).

The following process was followed in selecting participants to be interviewed.

1) Open Call to South African Instagram Users

Possible participants responded to an open call posted on my online profiles. The open call communicated:

- the fundamental ethos of the research (as centred around Instagram use, consumption behaviours online, and ideas around authenticity on social media);
- the eligibility criteria for participating (South African citizen between the ages of 18-35 years who are active Instagram users);
- the medium through which the interview will take place (virtual/online interview via video conferencing tool such as Zoom/Microsoft Teams);
- the time commitment (a 30-60 minute interview); and
- a commitment to anonymity (in keeping all participants' true names anonymous).

In the open call, interested users were invited to click on an online form (see Addendum A) which gathered data on participants to ascertain their eligibility for participation. The use of an online form is recommended by Zwilling and Frutcher (2013:394), who cite it as a non-intrusive method of gathering preliminary demographic data from prospective participants. This information included their contact details, age group, demographic group, the geographical region in South Africa, occupation and Instagram use frequency. Based on this information, 12 participants were selected to make up the Instagram user group

2) Personal Email to the Kim Zulu Team for Representative

I initially reached out to the Kim Zulu team via Instagram's direct messaging to attain the contact details of a representative from the team. After that, an official email was sent to the gatekeeper of the Kim Zulu team, who granted permission for interviews and agreed to himself be interviewed as a representative of the team. This completed my full set of participants: one Representative and 12 Instagram users (the Creatives, the Influencers and the Privates).

3) Introductory Email

I then emailed the pool of 13 participants an introductory email which included the following information:

- an explanation on what the interview is about and how the data will be used for a PhD research thesis;
- a reiteration that the participant's identity will remain anonymous and that participants can choose not to answer any questions should they not be comfortable in answering;
- a warning on the possible risks involved in participating and how I plan to mitigate those risks;
- a reminder that the interview will be recorded for transcription purposes.

Research ethics demand that participants must be treated equitably and with respect, and therefore they were provided with the research topic ahead of the interview so that they could make a meaningful judgement as to whether or not they want to participate. Informed consent was thus sought from all participants as this is a critical component of research with human subjects (Lazar, Feng & Hochheise, 2010:368).

I further requested that those who were still interested in participation:

- complete the official consent form as per Rhodes University guidelines and
- provide possible interview timeslots during which the interview could be conducted.

On the day of the interviews, a reminder message was sent to the participant. During the interview, the comfort and security of the participant was maintained by:

- taking time to establish rapport with the participant;
- describing the steps that I would take in securing the data recorded;
- reminding the participant that they do not have to answer questions that they do not feel comfortable to answer;
- reminding the participants that they can end the interview at any time;
- reminding the participant that there are no right or wrong answers;
- sequencing the questions so that more complex and possibly contentious questions that may bring discomfort to the participant are posed towards the end of the interview;
- taking ample time at the end of the interview to “debrief” with the participant and “acclimatise” them to re-enter into their day.

4) Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Participants were interviewed on virtual video calls from the comfort of their homes. This was done in part due to the global pandemic, which limited person-to-person contact and made in-person interviews impossible, but also in part because it allowed the participant to reflect on their uses of the Instagram app while being in the setting where they mostly used the app, namely their home environment.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used with a list of 25 questions (see Addendum B). The Instagram users were asked open-ended questions around concepts informed by the literature review. This included questions about their Instagram use habits, perceptions of authenticity, views of human influencers, and reactions to the profiles and posts of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu. Specific controversial posts of Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela were shown to the user during the interview and probing questions were asked about their interpretation of the posts.

The representative from the Kim Zulu team was asked a set of slightly different questions. This was because the type of insights that I sought to gain from the Kim Zulu representative was different from that of general Instagram users. Where the Instagram user interviews focused on their use of Instagram, views on online authenticity and their reactions to virtual influencers, the Kim Zulu representative's interview questions focused on his thoughts on the human influencer industry and the virtual influencer, what the purpose of the Kim Zulu profile was, the process of creating a Kim Zulu post, and what informs the Kim Zulu narrative.

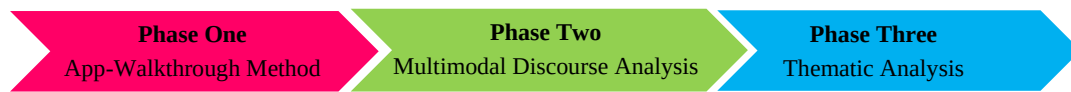
Both groups of participants were asked a final question if they were to speak to the creators of Kim Zulu or the followers of Kim Zulu directly what they would say. In this way an attempt was made to bring the two sides (the producers and the consumers of the content) into conversation with one another. As new information was unearthed and the conversation moved in a new direction, the semi-structured interview format allowed for a degree of freedom in following new ideas raised based on the answers provided by the participants.

6.5 TEXT AND DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

The data analysis is inductive and establishes innovative themes and patterns (Creswell, 2007:37). Myers (2009:5) states that a benefit of this kind of research is that it permits the researcher to understand the context in which decisions and activities are undertaken and

focuses on how and why things happen the way they do. The data analysis methods that were used in this study as presented in Figure 6.5 will be explored in the following section.

Figure 6.5: Data Analysis Processes Used in Research

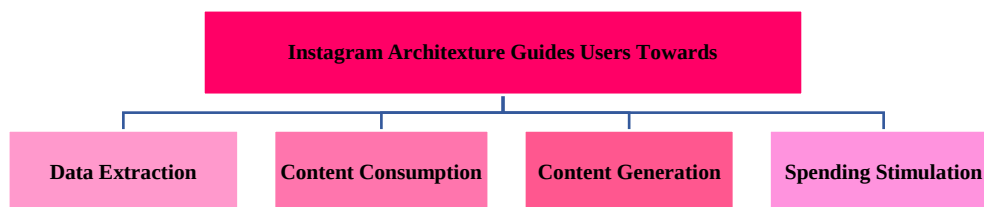


Source: Author's Own.

6.5.1 Phase One: App-Walkthrough Method

The app-walkthrough method was used in the analysis of the data as the data analysis took place concurrently with the research data collection process. As I conducted the app-walkthrough of Instagram by taking screenshots of the Instagram screen that was visible at each step of the Instagram use journey, I detected common elements, making field notes of noticeable pushes towards and pulls away from certain Instagram uses. I adapted the app-walkthrough framework by Light *et al.*, (2016:2) and structured my analysis according to the ways that Instagram (1) enables the extraction of data from users; persuades users to (2) generate content; (3) consume content and (4) spend money. See Figure 6.6. This was achieved through a user app-walkthrough of the various footer tabs: Home, Explore, Reels, Shopping and Account; header tabs: Content Upload, Notification and Message tabs.

Figure 6.6: Elements of the App-Walkthrough



Source: Adapted from Light *et al.* (2016).

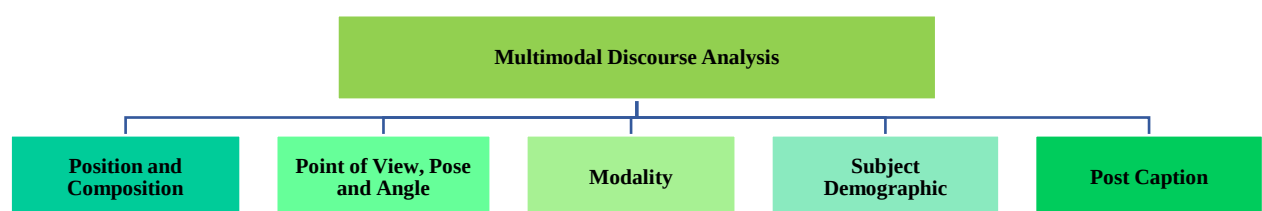
The data collection and analysis stages therefore proceeded simultaneously. Grounded theory was furthermore incorporated as I aimed not only to merely describe the Instagram app features and functions but also to analyse them so as to generate and discover theories (Creswell, 2007:63). Pettersson (2001:3) notes that “the perception process always consists of two stages namely a fast overview followed by a conscious analysis.” Through repeated uses of the Instagram platform I was able to gather raw data and form widespread observations through multiple levels of abstraction (Richards & Morse, 2013).

6.5.2 Phase Two: Visual Social Semiotics (Multimodal Discourse Analysis)

The use of visual social semiotics as a research methodology was presented in section 6.4.2.

Traditional visual analysis usually relies on semiotic theoretical frameworks, however scholars such as Borges-Rey (2015:576) highlight the need to explore multiple modes within this space as posts are “continuous, frameless, multiple and processual” as opposed to “finite, framed, singular and static.” The need for a multimodal discourse analysis that addresses these various modes is thus clear. The study of visual communication is a multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional effort (Moriarty & Kenney, 1995:7). As Norris (2004:3) proposed over a decade ago, “all interactions are multimodal.”

Multimodality has therefore been highlighted as a key framing device for the analysis of present-day communication forms, as well as the study of consumer culture (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Iqani, 2017:282). Multimodal discourse analysis (also known as “multimodality,” “multimodal analysis,” “multimodal semiotics” or “multimodal studies”) comes into play whenever at least two input or output modes are involved (Levine & Scallon, 2004:2; O’Halloran, 2011:1; Pauwels, 2012:250). O’Halloran (2011:18) notes that a key challenge to multimodal discourse analysis is managing the detail and complexity involved in recording, describing, analysing, searching and retrieving multimodal semantics patterns within and across complex multimodal phenomena. In comparison to a written text, a visual contains an infinite amount of information (Pettersson, 2001:4). It is therefore important to have a framework by which to structure this interpretation. This analysis is often done through a preselected group of modes, which the researcher uses as a framework for analysis. In this research the multimodal discourse analysis framework consists of the elements of position and composition; point of view, pose and angle; demographic; caption; and modality. **Figure 6.7:** Multimodal Discourse Analysis Framework



Source: Author’s Own.

6.5.2.1 Position and Composition

Visual image is governed by the logic of spatiality, organised arrangements, and simultaneity (Kress, 2003). Visual signs tell us where we are placed in relation to the content of the image (Burton, 2005:53). The text directs the reader through the signifiers of the image, causing her to avoid some and receive others (Barthes, 1977:157). We therefore need to look at the visual

systems of point of view and focalisation to explore interpersonal meaning in these images (Zappavigna, 2016:271).

Multimodal “texts” provide significant information through the arrangements. Three aspects are distinguished:

- a) the “zone” in which an element occurs (left/right, bottom/top, centre/margin); (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006);
- b) the “salience” bestowed on it (via foregrounding/ backgrounding, relative size, and colour) (Panofsky, 1955; Liu, 2013:1262);
- c) “framing” devices such as vectors between participants (Forceville, 1999:165).

6.5.2.2 Point of View, Pose and Angle

Point of view (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) also known as “focalisation” (Painter, Martin & Unsworth, 2013) and “subjectification” when considered in terms of narrative studies, typically distinguishes between the “voice” (who tells us the story) and the “persona” (through whose eyes we see the unfolding narrative). In terms of visual images embedded in narrative texts, focalisation is about the viewing position, for example, whether users are in eye contact with the depicted characters, or observing them, and if observing, are they observing directly or vicariously (through the eyes of other characters) (Haraway, 1998:196; Zappavigna, 2016:277). The placement of the camera becomes the location from which the spectator views the content (Burton, 2005:53). According to Painter *et al.* (2013) an image may either engage the viewer in contact, through the gaze of the character out to the viewer or invite the viewer to observe in images with no gaze. The image can be mediated through either an inscribed “as character” choice (for example part of the character such as hands, feet, or shadow depicted as emerging from the lower frame) or “along with character” (for example the back view of a character depicted in the foreground signaling a shared view) (Zappavigna, 2016:277).

Pose on the other hand, is the position in relation to others. It is important that this is not done in isolation, “we never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (Berger, 1972:9). The visual choices made in the image create a relationship between the represented participants and the viewer (Painter *et al.*, 2013). Here, elements of social distance and attitude are important

a) Social Distance

This centers on how the participants are framed, with a close-up shot creating intimacy and mid to long-range shots creating increasing social distance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Social distance indicates how the images visualise (or render invisible) social difference, or categories (Rose, 2007:6). Visual constructions of social difference work not simply by what they show but also by the kind of “seeing” that they invite.

b) Attitude

This describes the relative subjectivity or objectivity of the image; for instance, the degree of involvement that is realised through the choice of perspective which impacts the viewing relationship, with a horizontal “front on” angle construing involvement and an “oblique” angle construing detachment (Painter *et al.*, 2013).

6.5.2.3 Demographic

The profile identities of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu are the product of a series of purposeful stylistic design decisions and so the very makeup of their identities should be analysed as a form of content. Representations tend to reflect the ideological positions of the times in which they are created (Burton, 2005:62). The type of beauty that Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela represent are positioned to be in line with the type of beauty that is most desirable to their audiences – and therefore most profitable to their creators. These elements can be investigated in considering demographic choices made in their creation such as their race and cultural positioning, their age, their body type, their gender and presented speech style. As Turner (2010:12) suggests, changes in societal preferences for endorsers communicate crucial messages regarding society’s preference shifts around gender, race or nationality.

6.5.2.4 Caption

Barthes (1986) notes that the meaning of a picture and its accompanying text are mutually independent. As Barthes (1980) suggests, the visual is “not an isolated structure; it is in communication with at least one other structure, namely the text that loads the image with meaning.” This is supported by Braden (1982:39) who proposes visual/verbal symbiosis as pictures used should always have captions to guide the understanding of their intended contents (Pettersson, 2001:2). The text accompanying a visual is seen to add fresh information (Barthes, 1977:155). The captions ascribed to shared posts are therefore important to analyse and virtual influencers use these captions as opportunities to be both relatable and boost engagement.

6.5.2.5 Modality

Factuality is not merely a question of truth or lies but a more complex semiotic system which provides for carrying authority, certainty and appropriateness to be allocated to particular representation of the worlds. This semiotic system is called the modality system (Graddol & Boyd-Barrett, 1995). Factuality depends on high modality but also on the genre of the text making a claim (Graddol & Boyd-Barrett, 1995). The integrity of the genre is crucial to the perception of factuality and often allows it to carry off what would otherwise be dubious and ambiguous practices (Graddol & Boyd-Barrett, 1995). The various choices of content creation modes will be analysed including the choice of static or video content, the use of special effects and sounds, choices on the movement of elements around the subject, all of which can be seen to work together to communicate the narrative of authenticity and at the very least, aliveness. These elements therefore made up the analytical modal framework for analysing the selected posts.

6.5.3 Phase Three: Semi-Structured Interviews

In analysing the responses from the interviews, a thematic analysis was conducted. Through conducting a thematic analysis I constructed themes around repeated responses to reframe, reinterpret, and/or connect elements of the data (Braun & Clarke 2006:82). Themes are actively constructed patterns (or meanings) derived from a data set that answer a research question, as opposed to mere summaries or categorisations of codes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020:1). The Six-Step Framework of Thematic Analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006:78) was followed as outlined in Figure 6.8.

Figure 6.8: Thematic Analysis Steps



Source: Braun and Clarke (2006:78).

6.5.3.1 Step One: Familiarising Yourself with the Data

This involves repeated active reading through of the data and familiarising oneself with the entirety of the data set to lay a foundation (Braun and Clarke, 2006:84). I rewatched all of the

interview recordings as well as reread the Otter.ai transcriptions that were made of the recordings to correct any transcription errors.

6.5.3.2 Step Two: Generating Initial Codes

This phase of work generates codes, not themes. Boyatzis (1998:63) defined a code as “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon.” Codes are tags or labels that attach meaning to the raw data collected during field work (MacMillan & Schumacher, 2010:43; Vaughn & Turner, 2016:7). These tags or labels are used to retrieve and organise chunks of text to categories according to a particular theme (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011:218). Coding helps to organise data at a granular, specific level (Walliman, 2015:214). I extracted initial quotes and made sure to include a large enough section of text to provide context for the extract. See Figure 6.9.

6.5.3.3 Step Three: Searching for Themes

Themes are constructed through analysing, combining and comparing how codes relate to one another as a form of content analysis. A coding framework was developed that arranged common words, themes from the interviews based on inductive coding. Themes should be independently meaningful but also “work together to form a coherent whole” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:84). I analysed the initially generated codes by investigating the frequency that an aspect was mentioned; comparing different excerpts from the same person; comparing similar excerpts that occur between different participants and comparing different participants’ experiences within similar excerpts (Charmaz, 2006). Special attention was paid to information shared by the interviewees organically, namely, new ideas that users volunteered without specifically being asked. In this way new information that contradicted a code, expanded on a code or supported a code could be captured (Charmaz, 2006).

6.5.3.4 Step Four: Reviewing Themes

Additional codes from different portions of the transcripts were then incorporated into the theme and its sub-themes. At this point themes were added, combined, divided and even discarded. I ensured that data within each theme had adequate commonality and that data between themes was distinct enough to merit separation (Attride-Stirling, 2001:385).

6.5.3.5 Step Five: Defining and Naming Themes

I then created a definition and narrative description of each main theme with various subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Key themes that were identified include Instagram uses; the choices that inform Instagram profile creation and content sharing; interpretations and expectations of authenticity; responses to virtual influencers as the “new frontier;” identity politics as related to issues of race and gender in the context of representation/ commercialisation; and industry repercussions.

6.5.3.6 Step Six: Producing the Overview Manuscript

I then synthesised the overview report in creating an overview that weaves a narrative and provides a clear, concise, and logical account on interpretations of the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). The findings from the interviews in answering the overall research questions related to platform capitalism, the commercialisation of authenticity and the relevance of virtual influencers as symbols of shifts in online behaviour, were also presented.

Figure 6.9: Example of Thematic Analysis Codes, Themes, Sub Themes

Line of Questioning	Participants	Theme	Sub-Theme	Extract
Instagram Use	The Privates	News		“News” Participant L Participant H
		Guidance		“Motivational, therapy stuff” Participant L Participant H
		Motivation		“Specifically following my rolemodels” Participant I
		Politics		“Political Activism stuff” Participant L Participant H
		Entertainment		“Mindless entertainment” Participant D, humorous posts
		Store images		“I actually use it is to store memories.”
		Friends	Awareness	“Keeping up with friends locally and internationally” Participant L Participant H Participant D Participant G Participant I
			Connection	Connecting with friends who aren’t in the same geographic area was a key point of interest for Participant D.
			Fear of Missing Out	“Location inspiration” “Be part of the moment” Participant D
	The Creatives	Creative Inspiration		The Creatives highlighted Instagram as an original source of inspiration. “I went on Instagram for inspiration as a photographer. Coming from Port Elizabeth it was good to see what photographers were shooting all of the world and what was possible” says Participant F.
		Collaboration Opportunity		For photographer Participant C, it was a means of finding people to creatively collaborate with. “I like that I can reach out to models internationally more directly” Participant C
	The Influencers	Brands	Exposure	“I use Instagram mainly to market my business” explains Participant G.
			Brand Building	“I use it to build a name for myself” Participant M
		Personal connection with audience	Fans Connection	“I use it to build a picture that is relatable” Participant I
		Portfolio	Catalogue of Word	“It’s a one stop picture to who you are. Everything in one place.” Participant I
	All	Consumption		
			Shopping Inspiration	For Participant L, her first activity that she used Instagram for prioritised consumption activities. I mainly use Instagram for “shopping and ideas for products.”

				This was the same for Participant D who used it for “gift ideas.”
				“I don’t necessarily buy in an app, I usually follow a link or tap on a product tag and buy on the website” explains Participant L.
				I prefer to buy in the “proper website” says Participant D.
				And the “specific product” says Participant I.
				The process that most users follow is: “click on sponsored post on Instagram, then click on link to website. Shops only post certain things on Instagram.”
			In-app purchases	“No, I haven’t made in app purchases on Instagram” Participant I.
				“No, I haven’t done any in app purchases I think I’m too con still.” Participant M
				“I never ever shop online I’ve trust issues of the whole thing. I will tell my wife and she would do the transaction for me.” Participant G
				“In general online shopping is stressful in SA, I worry about being scammed, website are more credible than inputting my details for some random Instagram profile.” Participant H
				“Companies don’t always post all their product options on Instagram. The website has the full catalogue.” Participant M
				“I use Instagram for smaller companies that might not have a website.” Participant H

Source: Author’s Own.

6.6 ETHICS

Ethical research is grounded in moral principles of respect for persons (Marshall & Rossman, 2014:47). Research that involves interviewing human subjects, or the interpretation of data shared on social media platforms warrants an ethical framework discussion. There is a need to incorporate an “ethics of care” (Moller & Robards, 2019:104) and this was achieved in the following ways throughout the three phases of this study.

6.6.1 Phase One of the Study

The information extracted during this phase was taken from the publicly accessible Instagram app itself and therefore consisted of information available to the public. The app-walkthrough method that was employed in Phase One of the study required me to pay particular attention to how I was made visible to other users, how my presence might be perceived and how such a presence might negatively affect the other users’ sense of pleasure and safety (Moller & Robards, 2019:103). While the walkthrough avoids interaction with users, there is the possibility that it may disturb users. Conducting an app-walkthrough method is not possible without some kind of staging of the user experience (Dieter *et al.*, 2019:11). Apps present researchers with something of a paradox in that to make available non-user-centric enquiries such as those relating to infrastructure and political economy, they need to consciously recreate

and pass through them (Dieter *et al.*, 2019:11). To employ the app-walkthrough method in my research, I needed to create a dummy account to access steps within the registration and profile setup process. This constructed account is referred to as a “fake account,” “dummy account” (Light *et al.*, 2016:19) or “digital persona” (Dieter *et al.*, 2019:12). To ensure that the creation of this dummy account did not have any implications on the general Instagram system, I made sure not to interact with any content when using the dummy profile beyond what was needed to gather data for investigation in the app-walkthrough. As soon as the necessary research was completed, I deleted the dummy account.

6.6.2 Phase Two of the Study

This phase involved the capturing and interpretation of Instagram content shared by the profiles of Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela. Both profiles were in public mode and were set as professional accounts allowing for the granting of access to all content. On social media, the analysis of the images is based on the understanding that the details on the profiles as included in the posted content are accessible because the subjects (for example Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela) intended them to be (Schmeichel *et al.*, 2017:7). Ethically, I was therefore able to view, capture and analyse this publicly-available data without explicit consent from Kim Zulu or Lil Miquela due to the nature of access granted and consent given through the public setting of these accounts.

6.6.3 Phase Three of the Study

Interviews were conducted with 13 participants during this phase and a semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data from the participants. For the first core group of participants, namely the South African Instagram users, anonymity was a key focus. Anonymity was ensured through removing participants’ names. Each transcript was assigned a letter of the alphabet to ensure that the participants could not be identified, and all participants were subsequently referred to using the assigned letter, for instance, Participant A. This replacement of the participants’ names with these coded names was done early in the research endeavour. The identifier information was stored separately from the interview recordings in secure files so that only I had access to the true identity of the participants.

Anonymity was however not of relevance when interviewing the representative of the creative team behind Kim Zulu, namely The Avatar Company (then known as EMOJI Digital) a digital design studio based in Johannesburg South Africa. It was not possible to have the creative agency behind Kim Zulu remain anonymous as their creation of Kim Zulu was already public

knowledge with various news articles referencing the company as well as them making explicit reference to the agency on Instagram where Kim Zulu is featured as an example of work done by The Avatar Company (formerly EMOJI Digital) on their Instagram page (Jadezweni, 2020).

6.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE RESEARCH

Unlike a quantitative study, a qualitative study reveals data that is more “voluminous, diverse, and nonstandard” (Neuman, 2011:204). Whereas standardisation is a key metric for quantitative research, the quality of qualitative research is established by ensuring trustworthiness of the research. Trustworthiness relates to the impartiality of its findings and the extent to which the research can be depended upon and believed.

Schreiber (2017:38) notes that a credible researcher should demonstrate a degree of self-awareness in an acknowledgement that no research is without some form of bias. Since this research has explored a digital app (Phase One); the creation of digital content (Phase Two) and the audience reading of this digital content (Phase Three), it is important to understand “digital bias.” Marres (2017:123) identifies three issues in digital bias including (1) bias in the selected data and content, as I could in theory select certain snapshots of social media coverage; (2) built-in software bias in the research instruments, for example, bias through embedded algorithms; and (3) bias of methodological nature, for instance, social media research tools are more amenable to textual queries than visual queries, resulting in a bias towards textual analysis that provides only partial analysis of platform content. In recognition of these digital biases and the other accepted biases that occur in any form of qualitative research, I took various steps to ensure objectivity so that as much as possible I let the “data speak” (Mitchell, 1998; Chouliaraki, 2006).

Qualitative researchers can use the subsequent four suppositions as presented in Figure 6.10 to precisely reflect the assumptions of the qualitative paradigm: credibility, dependability, conformability and transferability (Kothari, 2004:58; Babbie & Mouton, 2012:277).

Figure 6.10: Trustworthiness of the Qualitative Research Findings



Source: Adapted from Babbie and Mouton (2012:277).

6.7.1 Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research can be defined as the degree to which the data and the data analysis can be considered believable and trustworthy (Struwig & Stead, 2014:137). Yin (2011:19) highlights that the objective of building credibility is that qualitative research is performed in a publicly accessible manner and that the research processes are transparent. This research therefore described and documented qualitative research procedures so that others can review and understand them. The general idea in enabling future researchers to scrutinise the work and the evidence used to support the findings and conclusions was therefore achieved and so others can view the theoretical motivations behind certain findings abstracted (Zikmund, 2003:68).

6.7.1.1 Phase One

In conducting qualitative research many researchers recommend “prolonged engagement” between the researcher and the investigated artefact to gain an adequate understanding of an artefact in its natural use environment (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). My many years of experience in using the Instagram app prior to the research study, as well as the prolonged timeline of conducting the app-walkthrough method (over 30 days in December 2021), assisted in fostering credibility during this phase of the research. The app-walkthrough was captured step by step through visual screenshots that were clearly described. In this sense the reader has access to the raw visual information from which conclusions were drawn thus allowing all data to be accessible for scrutiny.

6.7.1.2 Phase Two

The qualitative data collection process in Phase Two of the study was a selective process. Based on the cultural scripts identified, applicable visuals were selected from the profiles of Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela. Data analysis encompassed an iterative process of inductive categorisation and abstraction to derive major themes related to the content (Schöps, Wegerer & Hemetsberger, 2017:475). In this way, patterns were identified, and themes explained as explicitly and coherently as possible (Nguyen, 2017:21). I was therefore able to establish the elements that made up the multimodal discourse analysis framework including position and composition; point of view, pose and angle; demographic; caption and modality. An overview was furthermore provided of the concept of mediated authenticity and the principles that inform it. In this way, the lens through which the content from Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela was analysed, was made clear and replicable. Furthermore, use was made of screenshots to describe the

content so that a reader could see the raw visual and caption data for themselves alongside my interpretation. The detailed outline of the Instagram post content, date and source ensured these can be retraced by future scholars for analysis.

6.7.1.3 Phase Three

In interviewing participants, a key challenge is often regarding the honesty of the answers. Kircaburun and Griffiths (2018:166) warn that interviews as a form of a self-reporting research method suffer from a number of well-established biases (such as memory recall and social desirability). This is supported by the notion of “social desirability,” where participants may be biased in the way that they answer questions for fear of how they will be perceived (Toncar, Reid, & Anderson, 2007:260; Wood & Shen, 2016:223). For example, participants may be unwilling to admit that an influencer could influence them to purchase items for fear of being judged as impressionable. This research lessened this impact by ensuring user participants were anonymous, thus creating a space where they were able to answer more freely where the anonymity removed the threat of them being judged in the publishing of the research. Credibility was further ensured through the choice of the type of questions posed to participants in the semi-structured interview schedule and the sequence this was done in. I asked the less invasive questions first before moving to the more personal questions around identity and representation as related to virtual influencers. This ensured that participants were comfortable and more willing to share detailed information.

6.7.2. Dependability

Dependability refers to the fact that the research procedure should be systematic, rigorous, constant and reliable. (Quinlan, 2011:307; Struwig & Stead, 2013:137). Dependability is the degree to which research findings can be repeated with similar subjects in similar settings. In qualitative research it is challenging to confirm dependability, since human behaviour is not static and is contextual, changing and reliant on various influencing factors (Gill, 2009:347). Dependability can however still be accomplished by generating an audit trail and reporting the research process in detail (Babbie & Mouton, 2012:278). I ensured dependability of my research through clearly explaining and justifying every choice made in my research project (Quinlan, 2011:307).

6.7.2.1 Phase One

The app-walkthrough method had a comprehensive methodological guideline following Light *et al.*'s (2016:19) renowned app-walkthrough guidelines. This included examining Instagram's vision, operating model, daily user behaviour and governance, to gain insights into how an app's designers, developers, publishers and owners expect users to receive and integrate the app into their technology usage practices. The subjective observation and interpretation of the Instagram interface criticism was therefore grounded in the theoretical framework as well as related concepts (Nguyen, 2017:22). This structured, logical analysis of the process ensured that new relevant information to the topic investigated, was considered.

6.7.2.2 Phase Two

The multimodal discourse analysis of the Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela posts can be seen as a form of "decoding cultural images" which Bordo (1998:216) and Turner (2010:14) describe as a complex process when we consider the wide variety of ethnic, racial, and class differences that intersect with, resist, and give distinctive meaning to dominant, normalising imagery. The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe (Berger, 1972:1). There is therefore great risk in the overreliance on the interpretation of the text and data by the researcher without an adequate structural outline. My research is however strengthened by my well documented and established framework using Enli's (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles of predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection.

Initially any observation that I made I wrote down in a free-flow of thought after viewing the posts and Stories. This was done so that I interacted with the content the same way that a user on social media would do. Thereafter my general observations were categorised in terms of the multimodal elements that the analysis framework consisted of. This framework was clearly outlined so that future researchers wishing to follow the same framework in analysing the posts would be able to do so. The framework included position and composition; point of view, pose and angle; demographic; caption and modality. The elements of this framework were grounded in existing literature on important multimodal dimensions to consider in visual semiotic analysis.

6.7.2.3 Phase Three

Although there was a lot of noteworthy data generated from the interviews, the findings were placed into categories and systematically analysed in a way that helped structure the research argument. The established six-step framework of thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006:78) was followed including step 1: familiarising yourself with the data; step 2: generating initial codes; step 3: searching for themes; step 4: reviewing themes; step 5: defining and naming themes; step 6: producing the overview manuscript. The process was well documented in the response report/overview where the themes, subthemes, codes and raw quote extracts were categorised so that the quotes from which insights were drawn could be accessed by future researchers.

Dependability was not just maintained through the analysis of the content but by the capturing of the data. In the capturing of the semi-structured interview data I made sure to record all sessions as well as accurately transcribe all answers. These direct quotes from participants, along with field notes I took during the individual interviews informed the findings themes extracted from the data during the thematic analysis process.

6.7.3 Confirmability

Confirmability relates to whether the research is affirmed or verified by other data sources (Struwig & Stead, 2013:137). To achieve confirmability, researchers must take steps to demonstrate that findings emerge from the data and not their own predispositions (Shenton, 2004:64).

6.7.3.1 Phase One

Admittedly, interface criticism such as an app-walkthrough is largely interpretative and prone to subjectivity, especially when concerning aesthetics (Nguyen, 2017:15). Critical to this process is the “audit trail,” which allows any observer to trace the course of the research step-by-step via the decisions made and procedures described (Shenton, 2004:64). This audit-trail was supported using field notes where initial observations were incorporated. This is suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1989) as an important confirmability technique which is termed “progressive subjectivity” in the monitoring of the researcher’s own developing construction. Reflective commentary is therefore used through the research to record my initial impressions with patterns appearing to emerge in the data collected and theories generated.

6.7.3.2 Phase Two

Validation strategies for qualitative studies include confirming data from several sources (Creswell, 2007:39). During this study, I continuously asked whether the data helped to confirm the general findings by providing detailed information and background on the theory behind the study in a step known as “literature review confirmation” (Struwig & Stead, 2013:137). The elements used to inform the multimodal discourse analysis were informed by important features in the literature on social semiotics.

6.7.3.3 Phase Three

Although new phenomena did result from the participant interviews in Phase Three of the study, various findings could be confirmed by previous research and trends. This research was therefore able to seek insight into, and make informed decisions on, the arising themes. The identified themes and findings were further supplemented or contradicted by findings from similar research so that my findings could be put in conversation with other conclusions in this space (Silverman, 2001:6).

6.7.4 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the qualitative research findings can be generalised or applied to other contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006:79). In transferability the researcher attempts to demonstrate that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny is being presented (Shenton, 2004:64). While credibility roughly refers to internal validity, transferability refers to external validity (Nguyen, 2017:22).

6.7.4.1 Phase One

The Instagram mobile app is similar to many other mobile apps that harness social media networking as a modum for platform capitalisation. As the findings obtained from this research are interface based, it can be related to many other mobile apps which have similar interfaces such as algorithmically powered home feeds, recommendation-based follower suggestions, textual limitations in profile creation such as bio character restrictions and visual restrictions in terms of available image cropping and suggested filters.

6.7.4.2 Phase Two

In conducting a multimodal discourse analysis of the posts, the provision of a detailed framework is important as it helps to convey the actual situations that have been investigated

and, to an extent, the contexts that surround it (Shenton, 2004:64). The creation of the framework was informed by existing literature findings (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). Furthermore, the detailed description of the analysis process ensured that other researchers would be able to conduct similar investigations on other virtual influencer profiles and their operationalisation of Enli's (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles of predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection. By using mediated authenticity principles as a guideline and analysing the performance of these principles from the multimodal discourse lens, the rigor of the findings was established and a sound route of analysis for future researchers established.

6.7.4.3 Phase Three

In investigating whether findings from interviews can be generalisable to a large audience, researchers have contradictory positions. Erlandson *et al.* (1993) caution that in practice, even conventional generalisability is never entirely possible as all observations are defined by the specific contexts in which the interviews occur. Others suggest that, although each case may be unique, it is also an example within a broader group and, as a result, the prospect of transferability should not be immediately rejected (Stake, 1994:239; Denscombe, 2008).

Despite the opposing positions, more recent research has agreed that a researcher can ensure transferability through sufficient discussion of the selected text group and context (Babbie & Mouton, 2012:277; Kircaburun & Griffiths, 2018:166). This is affirmed by Schreiber (2017:38) who notes that research should adequately describe and take into account the perspective of the participant. A thorough description was provided of the various groups interviewed including the Instagram users such as the Privates, the Creatives and the Influencers and the Kim Zulu creative team representative, which provided a foundation in understanding their differing viewpoints. Here individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behaviour of those under scrutiny may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people (Shenton, 2004:68).

Shenton (2004:68) further notes that participants should be selected from both "receivers" and "the professionals who deliver it." The fact that the consumers of Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela content were interviewed (South African Instagram users) and a representative from the creative team behind Kim Zulu was interviewed ensured that different viewpoints of the same discussion point were considered. Furthermore, the different types of South African users

interviewed namely the Privates, the Creatives and the Influencers, ensured that different motivations for the use of Instagram, and reactions to virtual influencers, would be considered. This underpins the concept of “circling reality,” which is “the necessity of obtaining a variety of perspectives to get a better, more stable view of “reality based on a wide spectrum of observations from a wide base of points in time-space” (Brewer & Hunter, 1989:10).

The overall trustworthiness of the data is furthermore strengthened not just in the credibility of the individual phases, but the ways in which these phases complement each other in providing insights into different stakeholders. This is often referred to as “triangulation” which use different “overlapping methods” to gain information on different facets of the investigated phenomenon. The use of different methods in combination compensates for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits whilst also reducing the effect of investigator bias (Guba, 1981:80, Schreiber, 2017:38). The three study phases therefore addressed the three sites at which the meaning is extracted from visuals (Rose, 2007:13) namely the site(s) of the production of an image – the “technological,” the site of the image itself – the “compositional,” and the site(s) where it is viewed by various audiences the “social.”

Phases One and Two complement each other since although a multimodal discourse analysis provides detailed aesthetic analysis, this risks providing too thin a slice of a platform’s visual vernacular (Pearce *et al.*, 2020:173). It was therefore not enough to only analyse the Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela posts in isolation, but through including the Instagram app-walkthrough in Phase One of the research, the overall landscape in which these posts exist was also explored. Furthermore, Phases Two and Three complement each other as Rose (2007:6) notes that writers on visual culture, among others, are concerned not only with how images look, but how images are looked at. “Reading” a visual is not just a garnering of meanings from the text but is a dialogue between text and the socially situated reader (Fiske, 2010:45). It was therefore important not just to analyse the posts according to a multimodal discourse analysis in Phase Two, but also to gather direct feedback from participants on how they view the virtual influencer profiles and the content they produce during Phase Three of the study. Phase One and Three furthermore complemented each other in the analysis of the Instagram application and the findings from participants on their user behaviour within the app. In this way, I have taken into consideration interconnections between the app and the society within which it is situated (Schreiber, 2017:38).

6.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented a detailed review of the research design and methodology, which was followed. With the study's objectives in mind, the interpretivist paradigm was deemed to be the most suitable for all three phases of the study due to the exploratory nature of this inquiry. The chapter outlined the corpus construction process for each of the three study phases and the use of non-probability techniques in employing purposive and judgemental selection was elaborated on. The data collection and data analysis methods used in each study phase were presented. Reference was made to Phase One as centred on the Instagram app incorporating the app-walkthrough method as a data collection and data analysis method in conjunction with a grounded theory approach. I was able to identify how Instagram's architecture (1) enables the extraction of data from users, persuades users to (2) generate content, (3) consume content and (4) spend money on the app.

In Phase Two, I outlined the selection of 30 combined visuals from the Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela accounts collected based on their illustration of Enli's (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles of predictability, spontaneity immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection. The data analysis used in Phase Two included a multimodal discourse analysis framework of position and composition; point of view, pose and angle; demographic; caption and modality.

I further described my Phase Three consideration of 13 participants, 12 South African Instagram users including Creatives, Privates and Influencers, and one representative from the Kim Zulu creative team. The data collection process of semi-structured interviews was documented along with the data analysis method, namely thematic analysis, employed. The trustworthiness of the research findings of the three qualitative inquiry phases were strengthened by addressing credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. The following chapter will present the results of the three research phases of this study.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AN APP-WALKTHROUGH OF INSTAGRAM

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the literature review section, in Chapter Two, I illustrated that Instagram users' perceptions of the nature of endorsement have changed in Chapter Two while in Chapter Three I demonstrated that the expectations of profile creation and maintenance have also changed in adhering to the logic of platform capitalism. In Chapter Four I prove how digital cameras have evolved from *recording* devices to *production* devices as they do not only *take* pictures but *make* pictures thus distancing a visual from needing to be rooted in reality. This chapter commences the empirical results of the research including 1) the site of the production of an image as explored through an app-walkthrough of Instagram and provides an overview of the platform on which content is produced and shared. Thereafter (2), the site of the image itself will be investigated in Chapter Eight where Instagram posts from the profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu are analysed. The final empirical chapter (3), Chapter Nine, explores the site where it is seen by various audiences.

This chapter focuses on the architectural design and guided user flow of the Instagram app. Digital platform usage has increased enormously, with billions of users becoming dependent on social media platforms and apps to work, socialise, and be entertained. South Africa participates eagerly in this global digital sphere, for despite a significant “digital divide” (Aggad, 2021), 38.13 million South Africans are online and 24.63 million South Africans use social media apps (Statista, 2021b). The popularity of these apps has created a new wave of “platformisation” where platforms are “elevated to the status of being vital utilities” as users are increasingly “desperately dependent” on them (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019:165; Levy, 2020). Our relationships to these media objects are “imagined, not discovered” (Burton, 2005:86), as we are “taught to need” the activities which the app enables and “we learn to be an audience for ads” served on the platform. In this way, apps such as Instagram not only ingrain certain uses *within* the app but ingrain the use *of* the app as a crucial tool for every day digital practices.

App interfaces and features mediate experiences and guide user behaviour, with technical limitations *preventing* certain behaviours and other features *prompting* others (Garnham, 2000:125; Hochman & Manovich, 2013). I argue that this behavioural “script” directs user

behaviours towards activities that serve Instagram's platform capital goals (Kerr *et al.*, 2006:68; Spinelli, 2019:100). The implications of this should not be underestimated. Platforms reflect the "power of the architects of conversations" (Kavada, 2015:1), with app software designers configuring networks of relations through which discourses become materially enrolled within everyday social media practices. In this chapter, I aim to highlight the subtle platform capitalist serving intentions behind Instagram features through systematically documenting and abstracting interface features from their settings in the form of an app-walkthrough. I analytically engage with Instagram's interface by working through screens, tapping buttons, and exploring menus. Not only do I capture what I observe, but I critically recognise indicators of embedded cultural discourses (Mahatody, Sagar & Kolski, 2010:742).

I foreground this chapter with an investigation into the implications of introducing apps and subsequent updates to apps as changing the way we tell our narratives online. I then conduct the app-walkthrough where I analyse the critical stages of Instagram use, including registration and entry; the use of footer tab functionality (such as the Home Feed tab, Explore/Search tab, Reels tab, Shopping tab, and the Profile tab); the use of the header tab functionality for uploading content (including posts, reels, Stories, Instagram television (IGTV) videos) and the conversion to a professional profile. In my analysis of Instagram I analyse the immediacy, permanency as well as ephemerality of the interface, how content is shared, interacted with and deleted (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Madsen, Mackay & Negus, 2013; Hochman & Manovich, 2013; Couldry & van Dijck, 2015:5). I therefore build on the structural foundations of previous app-walkthroughs which documented a step-by-step observation of the app. I do this by organising my analysis according to the extraction of key architectural features in service of Instagram's platform capitalist goals. This includes how Instagram extracts my personal information, encourages me to generate and consume content and persuades me to spend money on the app.

7.2 SOFTWARE APPS

Software app are a subset of computer programmes that solve particular, often singular, user needs and are the site of significant sociocultural and economic transformations across many domains (Light *et al.*, 2016:1). Apps are "new industrial objects" consisting of algorithms, databases, and network protocols (Hui, 2016).

7.2.1 The Growth of Apps

On the 10th of July 2008 Apple launched its App Store, a significant milestone in the political economy of software cultures. From the beginning, the App Store contained not only official, or “first-party” apps developed by Apple, but also apps published by third-party developers. Shortly thereafter, on 22 October 2008, Google launched Android Market (which was later rebranded as Google Play) and similarly made apps available for the Android operating system. Contrary to the web, which was originally imagined as a shared information space and only later turned into a commodified space, apps were conceived as “informational commodities” from their inception (Dieter *et al.*, 2019:2). There are over three and a half million Android apps and two million iOS apps with 230 billion apps downloaded in 2021 alone (App Annie, 2018; Perez, 2022).

With the average user spending almost 4.1 hours a day on mobile apps, these apps have become deeply embedded in our everyday lives (App Annie, 2018; Perez, 2022). Apps are, therefore “mundane software” not only because they support everyday practices but because they insert themselves into our routines and habits and invite our attachment which inevitably changes our way of being in the world (Morris & Elkins, 2015:65; Turkle, 2011:79). The most profound technologies are those that “disappear” and weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it (Weiser, 1991:95). Apps tend to “move into the background” while remaining thoroughly entangled with data-intensive infrastructures and the economic models of platforms (Grandy, 2012:166). This technology is so pervasive in its personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that it leaves no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered (McLuhan, 1967:26; Perez, 2022). Importantly, apps are typically designed with behaviours—not meanings—in mind. App developers aim to get their users to do specific things—to change their behaviour—and the walkthrough method can be used to reflect this behavioural focus (Dieter *et al.*, 2019:5). To understand how this happens, it is crucial to break down these pervasive characteristics into their constituent elements (Grandy, 2012:166).

7.2.2 Updates to Apps

App technologies shape culture while simultaneously being a product of it (Zittrain, 2009; Du Gay *et al.*, 2013). Instagram is constantly changing both in and of itself and as part of a broader visual social media landscape as each technology spurs the other's development (Berger, 1972:1; Nguyen, 2017:27; Leaver *et al.*, 2020:36). Through periodic updates, different versions

of the same media objects are commonly generated in computer culture. With each new updated release of the Instagram app, it destabilises established use practices, tactics and prevailing norms and means of expression, facilitates new ways of both representing and manipulating reality and introduces new potential uses that guide users ever more closely to an intended app use script (Enli, 2015:133; Manovich, 2017:4; Serafinelli, 2017:91; Waterloo, Baumgartner, Peter & Valkenburg, 2018:1816).

These updates in introducing the “new” keep users engaged on the app by capturing attention in the same way that an apparel brand launches a new collection every season. Transformations to these apps often require updated modes of investigation and analysis (Nieborg *et al.*, 2020:1). For these reasons, it is often challenging to consult previous literature on Instagram as new versions of the app would have been released, rendering the previous insights less relevant. In this chapter, I contribute to research in providing a robust app-walkthrough of Instagram as of the end of 2021.

7.3 AN APP-WALKTHROUGH OF INSTAGRAM

Boyd (2008) suggests that social networking services have several characteristic attributes: persistence (capture and archiving of content), replicability (duplication of content), scalability (broad visibility of content) and searchability (access to content via search). Most social networking services have in common several basic functions: profile creation, the ability to generate a list of affiliated users, privacy customisation, and a mechanism for viewing the activities of affiliated users (Boyd, 2008). However, while seemingly similar, each online social media platform represents a unique social context for its audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011:140).

The review below documents an app-walkthrough of Instagram. An app-walkthrough examines affordances at multiple levels of scale from the app’s buttons to its interaction with operating systems, hardware, structures of connectivity (for example, wifi), and other apps in its extended environment (Light *et al.*, 2016:7). Attention is paid to the app’s embedded sociocultural representations as well as its technological features or data outputs, which also have social and cultural influences (Light *et al.*, 2016:11). To analyse the app, I redownloaded the app and created a new dummy profile on Instagram to experience afresh what users would experience from the very first moment of interaction with the app. The app was downloaded from Google Play as the device used to conduct the research was a Huawei P20 Android device.

Although previous app-walkthroughs have presented observations in chronological order of using the app (Light *et al.*, 2016:11), I will analyse Instagram according to the set of meanings that appear in relation to the overall research question of platform capitalism. My first-hand-account observances and experiences of the app showcase how Instagram guides me to fulfilling its ideal user behaviour in service of its commercial goals including me sharing data, generating content, consuming content and spending money. By structuring my research in this way, the subtle tactics embedded in the platform architecture of the app can be exposed and can be categorised according to the commercially-beneficial activities for Instagram it unlocks.

7.3.1 Instagram Extracts Data

During my app-walkthrough of Instagram, I observed that one of the key goals of Instagram is to extract as much data about me and my online user behaviour as possible, as this helps guide the advertisements targeted at me in service of businesses on Instagram, whilst also guiding Instagram on what type of content to serve to me based on my interests, thus keeping me engaged on the app. Instagram subtly attains an opt-in and gathers data from me through downplaying consent giving actions, urging the syncing to other social accounts through automatic access granting selection, repeated syncing suggestions and through rewarding me when I provide more information about myself through unlocking additional features.

7.3.1.1 Instagram Downplays the Implications of Downloading the App and Opting-in

When I download the Instagram app from the Google Play store this is done within seconds and the only trace of the installation of Instagram was the appearance of the Instagram icon on my phone screensaver neatly integrated into the framework of the rest of my mobile apps, as if it was always meant to be there. Downloading and installing apps through official app stores is regularly presented as a seamless experience where I do not get to see the downloaded app on my device; instead, I can only experience the automatically installed version. In this way, app stores obfuscate the status of apps as concrete software objects (Morris & Elkins, 2015). The implication of downloading this app is downplayed in this way.

Similarly, Instagram employs various tactics that combine the act of granting Instagram access to personal data, with necessary steps in setting up an account. For instance, upon registering I was asked to “Continue and Sync Contacts” (namely sync Instagram with the contacts in my phonebook to see which of my phone contacts have Instagram accounts linked to them). A disclaimer at the bottom of the screen indicates: “Your contacts will be periodically synced and

stored in Instagram servers to help you and others find friends and help us provide a better service” (see Image 7.1). These disclaimers are in much smaller text and are grey on a white background and not offset against a contrasting colour block. For this reason, they do not draw attention in the same way that the buttons, the actions that Instagram wants me to complete, are presented.

Although there are options to continue without syncing contacts or to undo the syncing of contacts at a later stage, Instagram guides my behaviour through the bright colouring of the button and the very fact that choosing to “continue” the process of registration is combined with the choice to “sync contacts.” This is a tactic often used by Instagram where registration actions are seamlessly integrated with consent-providing steps, as opposed to a separate individual step asking me whether I want to sync contacts or not. In this way, Instagram guides me to opt-in to providing personal data without being aware that I am doing so, thus further strengthening Instagram’s profitability in generating income from advertisers who serve targeted adverts back to me based on data gathered.

After successfully creating a username, the following notice appears at the bottom of the screen: “by clicking next you agree to our terms, data policy and cookies policy.” These three elements are hyperlinked and displayed in small text at the bottom of the screen. Only by explicitly scrolling down and clicking on “our terms” or “data policy” or “cookies policy” do the links open up as three separate URL pages where I can read the contract conditions and take into consideration the scale of the agreement I am consenting to.

Interestingly, there is never a moment where I purposefully tick the option to agree to the terms; instead, this step is incorporated as an automatic element of choosing a username. This constrains my behaviour as I cannot select a name and “exist” on the platform without agreeing to the terms and conditions first. These compulsory actions and mandatory steps are key indicators of app developer motivations. Furthermore, I note that the “Terms, Privacy Policy and Data Policy” are all grouped together and do not allow me to agree to one aspect, for example, accepting the risks involved with using Instagram while also not accepting Instagram’s notoriously intrusive data use policy. This furthers Instagram’s goal to attain opt-in by downplaying the extent of what I am consenting to. Once again, the step of clicking “next” in the registration process is combined with the steps of opting into the terms and conditions. This step is even more hidden as the button does not say “Next *and* Opt into Terms,

Data Policy and Cookies Policy” as other combined buttons have done, but goes even further in downplaying the act by not including a direct call-out on the button on which I am consenting: rather, it just says “next,” which leads me to believe that what I am saying “next” to is just the choice of my username (see Image 7.2).

7.3.1.2 Instagram Encourages Me to Sync with other Social Accounts such as Facebook

Not only does Instagram gain as much data from my behaviour on Instagram itself, but also my user behaviour on other platforms used as well. This embodies the “techno-economic relations of platformisation” where social media platforms are strengthened by their ability to collect datapoints about me from multiple platform sources (Helmond, 2015). This is precisely the case for Facebook, another social media platform owned by Meta, Instagram’s parent company. When I open the newly downloaded Instagram app for the first time, the welcoming screen displays the words: “Instagram from Meta” (see Image 7.3). Meta is the new company name for the holding company of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. It is no accident that the lettering of Meta mirrors the visual style of Instagram’s rainbow-esque pink, orange, yellow colouring. This visually unites Meta and Instagram and introduces Meta as the bright, friendly and familiar “older brother” of Instagram, as opposed to the “big bad wolf” of data abuse and privacy breaches that it has become known for, thus unlocking greater trust in Instagram and a greater willingness to share my information such as my personal data.

After the welcoming screen display, the first decision I am asked to make is to link to my Facebook account. Instagram automatically detected an existing Facebook profile I had previously created and presented it as a suggestion to “log in as Mikaela Oosthuizen” (see Image 7.4). Interestingly, Instagram’s intended user behaviour is automatically highlighted in blue, making the option to link to Facebook the most aesthetically appealing button. Instagram was able to detect that I had a Facebook account despite not providing any additional information to the Instagram app since at this point, I had not even confirmed my cellphone number. Instagram had therefore pulled data from other apps on my device to detect that I had a Facebook account. It is worth noting that this was done before I had granted Instagram access or consented to Instagram doing so. Upon choosing not to sync to my Facebook account when registering, Instagram repeated the request at various stages, which is indicative of the value gained from such cross-pollinated platform sharing. Instagram aims to get me to connect my Facebook and Instagram accounts to build out a more robust data set about me. The use of blue (Facebook’s official colour) in buttons, not just at the registration phase, but throughout the

app, communicates this sense of unity between Instagram and Facebook. It would have made sense for Instagram buttons to be pink in linking it with its logo and established aesthetics. The incorporation of blue makes linking to Facebook feel natural.

Image 7.1 Sync Contacts **Source:** Author's Own; **Image 7.2** Hidden Terms and Conditions; Author's Own; **Image 7.3** Instagram from Meta **Source:** Author's Own; **Image 7.4** Link to Facebook **Source:** Author's Own.

English (South Africa) ▼

NAME AND PASSWORD

Full name

Password

☒ Remember password

Continue and sync contacts

Continue without syncing contacts

CREATE USERNAME

Add a username. You can change this at any time.

zoi.barker

Next

Instagram

Continue as Mikaela Oosthuizen

OR

Sign up with email or phone number

Your contacts will be periodically synced and stored on Instagram servers to help you and others find friends, and to help us provide a better service. To remove contacts, go to Settings and disconnect. [Learn More.](#)

By clicking Next, you agree to our [Terms](#), [Data Policy](#) and [Cookies Policy](#)

from Meta

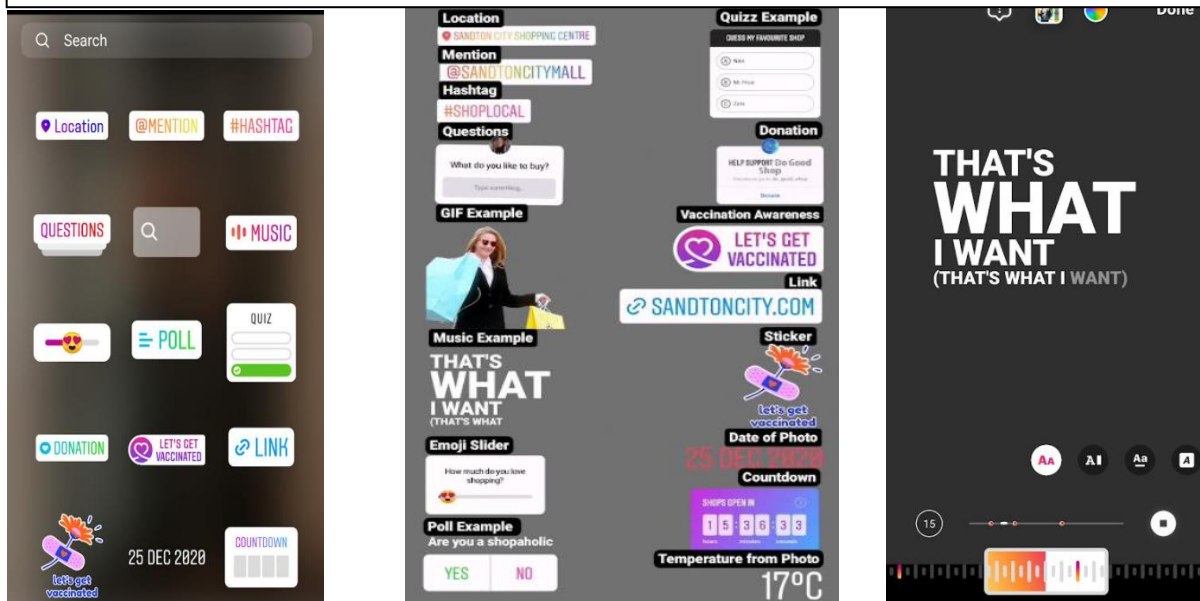
Already have an account? [Log in.](#)

7.3.1.3 Instagram Presents Data Gathering as Informal

Instagram incentivises the sharing of information through unlocking features when doing so, as described above, or making the adding of information a fun and necessary content sharing activity. I note that this is best illustrated in the Stickers and Story annotations features. Stickers or Story annotations can be added on top of an image or video to provide location, time or temperature information of the weather at the moment of capturing in degrees Celsius – it does this by using information from the mobile app’s weather app (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:54). There are several overlays of multimodal elements that can be added to a Story including: **Location sticker** (for example Sandton); **@Mention** (for example @sandtoncitymall); **#Hashtag** (for example #ShopLocal); **Questions** (where the user is able to pose questions to followers and collate the answers as a means of creating a sense of dialogue for example “What do you like to buy?”); **GIF** (a short, animated image of for example an iconic character from a movie such as Cher Horowitz from the 1995 movie “Clueless”); **Music Sticker** (this links to the music streaming platform Spotify which plays songs and displays text to the lyrics, for example “Money” (That’s what I want) by Barrett Strong); **Emoji Slider** (an approval/response slider

featuring the heart-eye emoji to unlock responses from users for example “how much do you like shopping?”); **Poll** (poses a question with two options example “are you a shopaholic” with option one yes and option two no); **Quiz** (poses a question with more than two options for example “guess my favourite shop” with option one Nike, option two Mr Price and option three Zara); **Donation** (users can donate to non-profit organisation); **Awareness Sticker** (for example “Let’s get vaccinated” badge); **Countdown** (displays a date and time that the countdown clock counts down to) and **Photo Date, Time and Temperature** (pulls data from phone at the moment of capturing the image). Beyond just a fun way to reinvent content, whenever I use each of these annotations, more and more information about me can be extracted such as the type of music I like, brands mentioned in my poll questions, hashtags used, accounts tagged and locations visited. The use of locations goes beyond being just a fun feature, as the location check-in is a key source of data currency for Instagram which is able to track personal movement information as an example of the “datafication” of movement (Van Dijck, 2014).

Image 7.5: Story Annotations Source: Author’s Own; **Image 7.6: Story Stickers** Source: Author’s Own; **Image 7.7** Music Sticker Source: Author’s Own.



7.3.1.4 Instagram Induces Me to Volunteer Data

Beyond the initial opting into data monitoring, there are several ways throughout the use of Instagram that the app entices me to share more and more personal data.

a) Reward Sharing of Data

Instagram guides user behaviour, by unlocking access to features based on the information/content you share. To post content I need to grant Instagram access to my “microphone to record audio;” “camera to take photos or video;” and allow “access photos, media and files;” and grant “access to device location.” The more I adhere to Instagram’s desired user flows, the more I get “rewarded” with full access to the platform. For instance, when I had just registered, and had not posted content or chosen a profile picture yet, I did not have some footer tab features such as reels or Shopping tabs displaying on my profile. This may be because of a lack of data and interaction initially. To test this theory, I uploaded a profile picture to the profile and within an hour the interface had seamlessly updated (without any input on my end) to include the shopping and reels navigation.

b) Explicitly Ask for Input/Feedback

Instagram also **asks input** from me to best tailor/customise the type of content served to me. There is an option to indicate “not interested” on a post. This is followed by a pop-up message that reads: “Thanks! Your feedback helps improve your experience.” This again positions Instagram’s user data-gathering functions as benevolent, providing an “improved” experience to me. This conveniently omits how knowing what type of content I respond to positively supports Instagram’s goals of keeping me engaged on the platform for longer.

c) Observe Behaviour

Instagram can unlock data subtly without explicitly asking me through monitoring my platform use. This is done by tracking my user behaviour and observing content preferences through monitoring the types of content I like, save, comment on and linger on. Based on this information, the nature and order of the content served on my home feed is tailored to my perceived interests thus leading me to spend more time on the app. This prediction of user preference based on user profiling leads to the personalisation of information, increasing user interaction with a digital service or product (Goanta & Spanakis, 2020:7). We have moved from just the “networked self” (reflexive process of fluid associations with social circles) to an extension and complication of this, namely the “algorithmised self” (which understands the self as deriving primarily from a reflexive engagement with previous self-representations

rather than with our social connections) (Papacharissi, 2011). This “automation of taste” (Barile & Sugiyama, 2015:413) has meant that “interest itself has become automated” with Instagram comfortably inserting itself as the facilitator of these recommendations (Manovich, 2002:135) thus capturing my content interests and serving them back to me.

d) Language of Benefits to User

I was then asked to indicate my date of birth. I clicked the “why do I need to indicate my date of birth option” which provides the following explanation: “Providing your birthday impacts the features and ads you see, and helps us keep the Instagram community safe” (see Figure 7.7). The language used by Instagram constructs a culture of concern for me, ostensibly protecting younger audiences from being exposed to unsuitable content, for example, being served an advertisement for alcohol. However, the underlying benefit to Instagram is that my indicated age group guides what type of products Instagram can advertise to me. Instagram knows what *not to sell* based on my age, but also what *to sell*. I indicated my age to be 18 years old in setting up my dummy account. Similarly, when asked to sync contacts, Instagram advises that “your contacts will be periodically synced and stored in Instagram servers to help you and others find friends, and help us provide a better service.” This again implies that the sharing of data is beneficial to me and my experience, without any reference to how it benefits Instagram.

7.3.1.5 Instagram Stores Deleted Data

Instagram makes deleting a draft, a shared post or an account a time consuming and complex task with two-step verification and aggressive attention-grabbing warning at each stage of the journey. This is in contrast with the act of “restoring” a previously deleted post or account which is easy, efficient and subtle. When trying to exit an in-progress post, Instagram reminded me to save it as a **draft** by automatically selecting the option to save it as a draft in the moment of creation, whilst also guiding me towards sharing the incomplete draft at a later stage whenever I clicked the upload content option. “Don’t waste your labour” it urges implicitly, however, the real motive is “don’t waste your data, we want to save it.” Content that does not get shared is just as valuable to Instagram as content that does get posted as data can still be extracted about me from both published and unpublished content.

Similarly, when I tried to delete a **permanent post** I was served a message saying “if you don’t want to delete the post you can archive it. Only you’ll be able to see it.” Even after choosing to explicitly delete a photo, Instagram offers several opportunities to “restore a post” within 30 days. Thus, the deleted posts only become permanently deleted after 30 days, with Instagram retaining the data as long as possible. When deleting a post permanently and immediately I was served a pop-up warning and needed to complete a two-step verification process where a one-time pin was SMSed to the number associated with my account. This is cumbersome process is in stark contrast to the process of restoring a post which took a matter of seconds and which did not need any form of additional verification. The “item has been restored” notification was also suspiciously subtle, appearing as a banner in the bottom of the screen.

When **deleting an account** I had the option to “temporarily disable” my account which would hide my account and all of its content – again Instagram aims to hold my data even if they have to keep it hidden. To permanently delete my account, I needed to go to the “delete your account” page on a website browser – I could not delete my account from within the Instagram mobile app. Before deleting my account, I was prompted to “download a copy of [my] information” including previously shared content. This option made me value the content I was about to “lose” more highly – a tactic that demonstrates Instagram’s desire to embed itself as an important middleman in the sharing of visual memories by making visual memories a cherished commodity. After deleting my account, the app holds onto the data from the content/account for 90 days during which time I can choose to reactivate the account and importantly, during which time Instagram still has access to my data.

7.3.2 Instagram Persuades Me to Generate Content

Instagram benefits from my efforts to produce a large pool of content as this means that other users spend more time on the platform consuming this content. Instagram therefore prompts the constant production of content in several ways such as making it feel productive, providing dopamine hits through notifications of reactions to content, the habituation of uploading content and providing different content format options to create and save content for several occasions. The platforms technological affordances in archiving content as well as seamlessly moving between multiple accounts that I own, establishes Instagram as the content generation platform of choice.

7.3.2.1 Instagram's Iconography

Since the Instagram logo is the first visual element I see of the platform, it is important not to gloss over its design implications. The first Instagram icon was a stylized version of a Polaroid OneStep instant camera which embodied the original style of Instagram from the icon to the filters as built on bringing a retro-aesthetic to everyday visual photography (Yeung, 2017). However, with the third reimagination of the logo in 2015 following Facebook's acquisition, the logo, along with the rest of the app's aesthetics, took a strong departure from vintage themes. This could be in part because commercial accounts advertising and selling their products through the Instagram platforms did not find alignment with a nostalgic 1970s theme appealing (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:36). In 2015 the logo was completely redesigned to embody an "abstract camera" that is now "flattened" with a warm gradient of pink, purple, yellow and orange (Pachal, 2016) (see Image 7.8). The logo and icon changes embody the trend of a "visual saliency" as the human brain tends to pick up quicker and prioritise images with high levels of contrast such as the camera icon's white line against the vibrant gradient background of orange and pink hues (Mormann, Towal & Koch 2015). The now plain logo therefore conveyed maximum meaning with minimal detail (Nguyen, 2017:25).

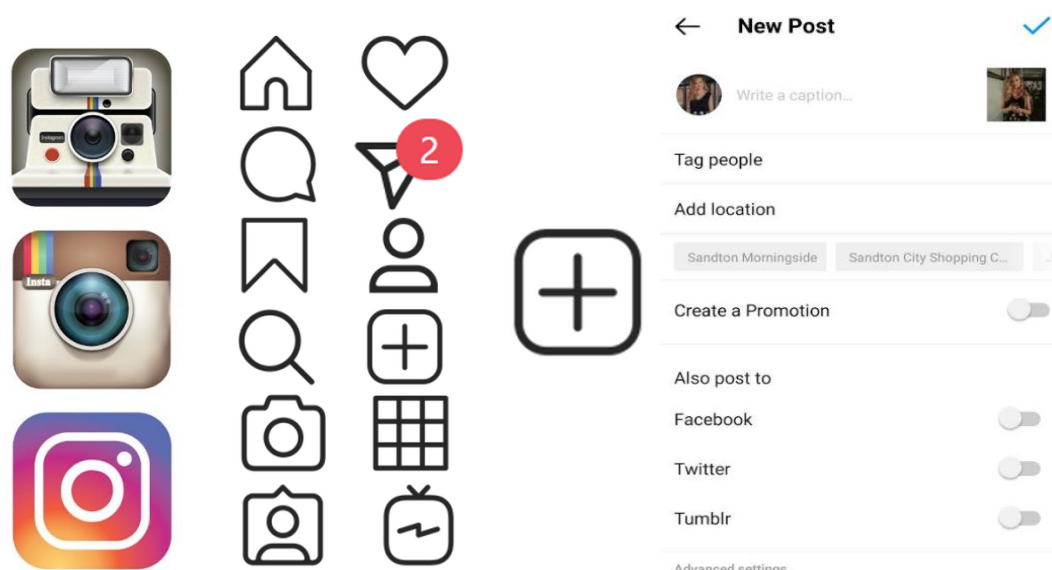
This visual evolution stretched beyond the logo with the latest updates featuring simplified iconography across the platform including a white space without a border in the main feed so that "the colours come from the communities' content" (Ian, 2016). The colourful filters especially stand out in stark contrast with the white background and minimalist user interface: the intention is to place the users' content in the spotlight while the technology vanishes in the background (Nguyen, 2017:25). By 2018 the new post icon, which used to be a camera icon, was instead a simple rounded square with a plus sign offering consistency with other add functions across the web (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:43). Not only is the icon less representative of how images are captured before publishing on Instagram but also demonstrates how the type of content pushed by the platform is less about personal static photography (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:42). The plus sign further symbolises the act of "adding" content to the stream of content that exists in the market (see Image 7.9). The basic iconography further ensures that "notifications" signaled through a red circle are more enticing to users. The colour of these notifications, namely an off-red (not too red to seem alarming, but bold and colourful enough to grab attention) - contributes to the dopamine hit experienced by users. In order to satisfy the dopamine hit experienced when receiving a notification, I learn to upload more content, to unlock more likes on content, thus creating more dopamine unlocking rewards notifications,

whilst also fulfilling Instagram’s aims of having an ever-increasing pool of content to keep me engaged on the platform.

7.3.2.2 Instagram Makes the Sharing of Content a Habit

The location feature has contributed to a change in habit in what Jansson (2013:289) calls the “centripetal dynamic” of always “checking-in.” I check in to a location so that I will be part of the “story” told through the collection of photographs produced at that location (Jenkins, 2018). In the absence of keyword search functionality, location information is a valuable hook for exploring content on Instagram (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:69). To be seen, we need to have checked in to being there, thus habitualising the act of capturing, check-in in and posting proof of our experience.

Image 7.8 Instagram Logo Evolution 2010, 2012, 2015 **Source:** Constine, 2017; **Image 7.9** Instagram Icons **Source:** Pixabay, 2022; **Image 7.10** Uploading a Post **Source:** Author’s Own.



7.3.2.3 Instagram Creates Dopamine Reward from Engagement with Posted Content

The Notifications tab is accessible in the header section of the app and notifies me when my content has been interacted with through likes and comments. I “like” a photo by tapping a heart icon situated at the bottom left of a post (Lup, Trub & Rosenthal, 2015:248). The number of likes quantifies the number of distinct users who liked the photo and the notifications appear as red circles (Bakhshi *et al.*, 2014:968). The endorphin boost experienced when clicking on the heart to see what new notifications have arisen is criticised as addictive. Research has found that Instagram notifications release dopamine also known as the “happiness hormone” through

neurotransmitters (Pardiwalla, 2019). Dopamine motivates action and stimulates user behaviour through the “reward” (dopamine hit) experienced when completing said behaviours, such as finishing social interactions (Cilli, 2022). Interestingly, research has found that the rewards we associate a successful offline social interaction with are also associated with getting online notifications (Pardiwalla, 2019). What makes the notifications of Instagram additionally addictive is due to “variability reward schedules” as rewards that are delivered randomly (as with a slot machine or a positive interaction on social media) and rewards that can be checked easily (as is the case of Instagram where the notification is the top right button and easily clickable when holding a mobile device) unlock a dopamine-triggering behaviour which becomes a habit (McSweeney, 2019). Every time the stimulus notification responds in a reward, the association becomes stronger and more intense through a process called “long-term potentiation” (McSweeney, 2019). Instagram triggers repeated checks to notifications without a decrease in the endorphin boost as the total number of likes indicated in the notification do not decrease when the notification is accessed. For example, if you have 60 new likes on a post and check the notification, then next time you get a notification it will say you have 100 new likes (as opposed to 40 new likes since the last time you checked), thus further enhancing the endorphin boost received.

Not only are notifications visible when logging into the app, but I receive push notifications on my phone even when not logged onto the app. Push notifications are messages that pop up on my mobile phone or desktop device and appear on my home screen advising me on new information related to an app (Hung, 2021). For instance, push notifications from Instagram alert me about how many people have liked my latest post and thus entice me to tap into Instagram to get more information about engagement with my post. The default setting on smartphones is for these notifications to automatically be enabled until the user explicitly disables notifications. It is also worth noting that in an instance where one of my accounts did not have notifications, for example my real account, a red dot appeared under my second account, namely my dummy account, as if to draw me towards checking that account and the notifications associated with that profile. These red dots, push notifications and endorphin hits work to prompt me to upload content and to repeatedly log into Instagram to monitor how that content is performing for all accounts I own.

7.3.2.4 Instagram Offers Different Content Formats for Every Occasion

The introduction of Stories as ephemeral content that lasts for only 24 hours, if not placed in a highlight (Bainotti *et al.*, 2020:1), has “radically changed” how Instagram is used (Nguyen, 2017:42). Before Stories, less than one-third of the app’s daily users posted each day (Bell, 2016). By the first anniversary of Stories on Instagram there were 250 million Instagram users using Stories every day (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:29). After Stories came online, users posted more less polished content and checked Instagram more often (Bell, 2016; Nguyen, 2017:28). The Instagram Story format changed the way the Instagram users posted content in several ways.

Firstly, the informal nature of Stories means that I treat them different to permanent posts. Instagram describes Instagram Stories as allowing me to share “all the moments of your day, not just the ones you want to keep on your profile” (Instagram, 2016a). Stories are characterised by a documentary, narrative and everyday style, and enable me to combine the various modes of communication of the platform (pictures, videos, texts, emoji and stickers, audio) into a single digital object. This has stimulated increased content generation as **Stories are a means of inserting Instagram into every moment of daily life**, be it glamorous or unglamorous thus giving me ample options to show informal (Story) or formal (post) versions of myself (Nguyen, 2017:30).

Secondly, ephemeral content also feeds the urge to **constantly generate new content** (Nguyen, 2017:30). Stories embody Instagram’s architectural facilitation of micro-narrations. For instance, the original Facebook post asked users “what’s on your mind?” while Instagram questions “what are you doing?” Stories constantly invite me to express myself and document mundane moments of my everyday life in real-time (Bainotti *et al.*, 2020:5). Stories become a way of posting content that is shareworthy but not perhaps as deserving of permanence on the profile (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:55). The name “story” is an important signifier of the way these content forms changed the way that online narratives are constructed. The steps in uploading Stories embodies this. For example, I assumed that clicking on my profile picture would provide the option to change my profile picture. Instead, this action opened an option to upload a Story - in this way Stories are engrained as an important part of my daily identity performance. To maintain my Instagram identity (as represented through my profile picture) I am guided to upload Stories to this profile icon.

Thirdly, **Stories aid the circulation goal** of Instagram as I often reshare a permanent post on my Stories to draw attention to it on my profile so that users will go look at my newly published permanent post. I also share posts by other accounts on my own Stories which provides attribution in naming the account creator of the original post, plus my own optional commentary (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:80). Being tagged in an Instagram Story by another account allows for the resharing of that Story on my own Stories.

Fourthly, the ability **to add Stories to highlight categories** as a form of archiving, could lead to more content being generated as I do not feel that my content production efforts are wasted, as I have the option to save and earn engagement from highlighted Stories past the 24-hour period. Turkle's (2011:299) statement that "the digital is only ephemeral if you don't take the trouble to make it permanent" rings true in the case of the Story Archive. In 2017 Instagram introduced in-built Story archiving which allowed for the possibility to save your favourite ephemeral content in ad-hoc folders called "highlights" which usually have specific themes and which are visible on each users' profile (Alfonzo, 2019:37; Pignagnoli, 2019:229). The act of archiving can be understood as changing the context of the content, as the choice of a highlight selection adds new meaning to the extracted Story. The idea of Stories as ephemeral is therefore complicated by the act of archiving in creating highlights categories (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:55). Archiving balances the ephemerality of communication and the performativity of the main Instagram profile and appears to provide the best of both worlds for Instagram (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:30). This juxtaposition is not necessarily contradictory, for ephemeral and archival cultures co-exist across social media platforms and interact with and complement each other (Bainotti *et al.*, 2020:17). The ability to save Stories can be seen to have increased my willingness to create them, as previously the labour involved in creating content for something only visible for 24 hours seemed a waste of effort; yet adding a Story to a highlight category allows for engagement with that Story and for value to be extracted from that content beyond the first 24 hours.

7.3.2.5 Instagram Creates a Dependency on its Archiving Function

Instagram has stimulated the use of its platforms by inserting itself as a necessary intermediary for the saving of visual memories. As explored above, it automatically archives Stories so that I can go back and reshare or add the Story to a highlight. This is done by visiting the archive section in my account settings page, which provides the option to search for Stories based on location, or by date. For instance, Instagram includes a "one year ago today" notification

showing Stories shared on this day a year ago. This aids the resharing of previously posted Stories, thus increasing content circulation, yet also positions Instagram as a data storing service. This is done not just on Stories, but also on the saved tab, which allows me to save any content I see and access it later under my saved folder, thus integrating Instagram's role to not only archive *my* posted content but also content I saved from the profiles of *other* accounts.

7.3.2.6 Instagram Allows Ease of Use of Two Accounts

Instagram further prompts content sharing not just by aiding different content format creations, for example permanent post and Stories, but also ease of navigation between different accounts I own. Initially, Instagram did not clearly facilitate the ability of users to have multiple accounts. However, as users started the trend of having two separate accounts for example private and public accounts, Instagram appropriated this trend. For instance, Finstagram or Finstas "Fake Instagram" accounts are private accounts with very low numbers of trusted followers, featuring content for a smaller and more selective circle of friends, which display a comparatively unfiltered view of a person's private life (Manovich, 2017:130). This Finsta account contrasts with the "real" Instagram account Rinstagram or Rinstas (real instas) which is tied to the identity users choose to share with the larger world (Wiederhold, 2018:215). After observing this user behaviour, in 2016 Instagram added the ability to move between multiple Instagram accounts without having to log on. This ease of movement between multiple accounts is accompanied by prompts to "share a different side of yourself," for example through a "private" account to "share images with close friends." Thus signifying to me that a previously subversive use of the platform has been co-opted, promoted and monetised by the platform itself (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:87). Encouraging the creation of multiple accounts benefits Instagram as it means I spend more time on the platform in managing two separate accounts (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:22). The ability to clearly link two separate accounts to one user offers Instagram a more complex understanding of my online behaviour across my multiple profiles, further aiding targeted advertising.

7.3.3 Instagram Aims to get Me to Consume Content

Since Instagram's launch, the average time spent on the app has increased substantially. This was achieved in several ways, which I outline below.

7.3.3.1 Instagram Encourages Me to Follow Accounts

Users following an Instagram account are called “followers.” Following on Instagram is “unidirectional” and “nonreciprocal,” as I may follow a public account without permission and there is generally no mutual expectation of the account to follow me in return (Lup *et al.*, 2015:247; Waterloo *et al.*, 2018:1817). Instagram’s social network is therefore asymmetric, meaning that if user A follows user B, user B need not follow user A back (Manikonda *et al.*, 2014:1; Stapleton, Luiz & Chatwin, 2017:145). Instagram’s motives for getting me to follow more accounts is clear: the more accounts I follow, the more content from these accounts populate my feed, the more time I spend on Instagram and also the more opportunities there are to serve adverts to me.

Instagram provides multiple opportunities to follow more accounts. At the beginning of the registration process the insistence is clear in the subtly coercive message that appears when choosing to “skip” this step: “Instagram is more fun when you follow your friends and see their posts. Are you sure you want to skip this step?” Again, the option appears to “Follow Friends” or “Skip,” with the option to “Follow Friends” automatically highlighted. I view these “suggestions” as “instructions” when it is more effort for me not to follow Instagram’s intended use case than to follow it. In the last step at the end of the registration process before an account is activated, I am directed to the home page and am once again instructed to follow other accounts. When I do not input any accounts to follow of my own, Instagram provides a “People Suggestions” tab with suggestions of people to follow. It is significant that the “people” profiles suggested to me include the brand Nike which is a brand account, not a person as Instagram’s “People Suggestions” list seems to indicate. Again the option to “find Facebook friends” or “connect contacts” was signaled as the first suggestion so that if I was not comfortable doing so at the start of my registration journey, after seeing what options there are of people to follow, and not seeing anything that appealed to me, I could decide to share more information with Instagram in the form of Facebook friends or phone contacts to further “enhance” the options of accounts Instagram suggested to me. At this point I chose to follow one account. However just following one account was clearly not in Instagram’s intended behaviour as I was then again shown a carousel of suggestions of profiles to follow.

Encouraging the act of following occurs not just at sign up stage but throughout the daily use of the app. After scrolling through the feed and seeing all content created in recent days from the one account I follow, a “you’re caught up” message appears, indicating that “you have seen

all new posts from the past two days” (see Figure 7.11). This pop up was incorporated in 2018 as part of a new support strategy to help users “better control their experience,” which included tools and metrics to manage the time spent on Instagram and Facebook (Ranadive & Ginsberg 2018). Interestingly, after the “you’re caught up” pop up message appeared on my screen (see Image 7.11), Instagram promptly suggested *more* accounts for me to follow to repopulate my now empty feed, implying “there is no more content, but here is how you can find more.” These two messages combined therefore work, not to warn me of how much time I am spending on the app, as Instagram claims, but to notify me that the reason I have run out of content is because I need to follow more profiles.

Instagram further encourages following by justifying why certain accounts are being recommended to me. For instance, the indication of the recommended account is either followed by another account that I follow, explaining “followed by X,” or is similar to an account I follow explaining “because you like X.” The explanation for the recommendation strengthens my desire to follow the accounts recommended by Instagram.

Not only does Instagram prompt me to follow *other accounts*, but it also incites me to action steps to get other accounts to follow *my account*. I am instructed to “grow [my] audience,” by “inviting friends” to follow my account. A particularly noteworthy instruction Instagram used urged me to “follow [my] friends” to “encourage them to follow [me] back” – getting me to follow other accounts in the hope that they will follow me back, all of which rewards Instagram with increased account follows and content engagement, with low chances of reciprocal following for me.

The prompting of account follows is also done in less explicit ways. As established previously, Instagram does not enable URL hyperlinks to be clickable within captions. This serves Instagram’s goal of stimulating further account visits and follows while restricting me from linking outwards to non-Instagram/Facebook platforms. The result is that my first step in satisfying a moment of curiosity when seeing content from an account, is not to click on a hyperlink on the post (as this is not supported by Instagram) but to first click on the @mention, directing me to that account’s profile. Once on that profile, I am more inclined to following the account and will then tap into other content on that page, which often features other @mentions whose accounts I will tap into, thus leading to further account exploration in what Kircaburun

and Griffiths (2018:165) describe as the Instagram “rabbit hole” where I am guided into visiting more accounts and spending more time on the app.

7.3.3.2 Instagram Encourages Me to Spend Time Viewing Content

The order of the text embodied in the user interface is significant in this regard (Dalayli, 2020:93). The prominent position of the Home tab as the first of the five tabs makes commercial sense as it guides me to the activity of scrolling and spending time on the app. As confirmed previously, the home page for Instagram is populated by a “feed” which is made up from recent content posted by accounts followed. A feed is a “simple, linear way to gather and display the content contributed by accounts followed” (Isaac, 2016). Once on the home tab, which is populated by content posted by accounts I follow, several tactics maintain my attention. First, each time I close and open the app, regardless of frequency, a new selection of unseen content is brought to the top of my feed, thus “rewarding” me with a fresh set of content to lock in my attention. Second, on opening the feed, the first post on the feed will appear for one second before the feed is “refreshed” with new additional content and the first post moves to lower down in the feed. I am therefore “teased” with a one-second view of a post and then forced to scroll back into the feed to find the initially shown content five posts down. Instagram thus “forces” me to start scrolling to get to the teaser post, initiating the highly addictive act of scrolling.

This teaser tactic is also used in the reels tab. A reel is a 15-second multi-clip video with audio, effects, and various editing tools in a vertical layout. When clicking on the Reels tab the first reel automatically suggested by Instagram starts playing. When the first reel is near completion, a small part of the next reel starts to take over the screen as a teaser for the content to come, thus aiming to entice me to view the next reel.

The automatic playing of videos is a further tactic that Instagram uses to direct attention to content, as I am not asked for “permission” to play content, for example through placing the onus be on me to press play to start a video that I am interested in. Instead, Instagram automatically plays videos. The introduction of sound captions (text overlayed on a video of what words are said in the video) being automatically applied is a further illustration of this. In 2020 Instagram launched AI-powered automatic video captions allegedly as “part of an effort to make the platform more accessible to all users with the feature available in 16 languages” (Al-Heeti, 2020). This means that when my volume is turned down on my phone, videos that

have sound will automatically have captions depicted on screen. Instagram has positioned this feature as “helpful for people with hearing loss” (Al-Heeti, 2020). However, I argue it to be a way of capturing attention even when a phone’s sound has been turned down to ensure videos have more views.

7.3.3.3 Instagram Encourages my Interaction with Content

Instagram has built in numerous mechanisms for users to interact with, and circulate, content. When I interact with content, I engage in a process of collaborative meaning-making of and around the post (Schreiber, 2017:46). In this way, I perform an act of labour as my interactions either enhance the perceived value of a post (through having a higher number of likes/comments) or the circulation of content helps achieve Instagram’s aims of keeping more users consuming more content on the platform.

Instagram shifts much of the labour of creating, engaging with, and monitoring content on the platform to its users. To **interact** with content, I had the option to “like” and “comment” (with a character limit of 2200 characters) or to “save” a post which gets saved to my private archive, an archive which is not visible to other users but is accessible by Instagram for data gathering. To **circulate** content, I have the option to “send.” Sending the content to an individual or group can be accompanied by a personalised note – in this way I can remake and recontextualise content, thus contributing to the ever increase pool of content to keep users engaged. On reels, there exists a further option to “**remix**” content posted. The remix function allows me to record a video in response to an existing Reel — similar to TikTok’s popular Duet feature. This is a strategy that seeks to stimulate “Chain Mail” videos in a “logic of contagion” (Parikka, 2007:289) that invites me to duet and respond to a video and pass it on to other accounts who can in turn add to the thread with their own responses in a sequential fashion. This adds virality to trends and helps “keep a trend going” by stimulating different reinventions of content (Abidin, 2020:83; Rosamond, 2020:117). The aim is therefore to make it as easy and appealing as possible for new content to be generated, or old content to be reinvented. Interestingly, a permanent post of one account that is reshared on Stories by another account always includes the username of the initial account that posted the content. This is a control brought in by Instagram due to historical outcries over ownership and the attribution of content to its original creators (Bishop, 2012; Wetta, 2016:31; Alfonzo, 2019:36). The benefit of this to Instagram is that I not only view the content, but often take the added step of following the account mentioned, thus leading to me spending more time on the app.

7.3.3.4 Instagram's Disappearing Content Secures Daily App Use

The combination of permanent and non-permanent content formats means that I often check Instagram every day because if I do not, non-permanent content generated from that day will disappear. I therefore tend to pay more focused attention to these exchanges as I know I am unable to return to them (Bayer, Ellison & Schoenebeck, 2016:958). This is the case of Instagram Stories as well as Instagram Live.

The Instagram “Story” feature is Instagram's response to Snapchat’s popular, disappearing short-form content (Nguyen, 2017:27). Once Instagram Stories were introduced, the average time spent per session on Instagram increased from 01:58 (2012) to 02:43 (2015) to 02:53 (2019), with 58% of Instagram users say they are more interested in a brand or product after seeing it in Instagram Stories (Bayindir, 2019; Newberry, 2021). On my dummy account, I was able to upload an Instagram Story through the “+” content creation button on the right hand and also through clicking on my circular profile picture. Once a Story is loaded to a profile picture, the profile circle is encircled with colour (see Figure 7.12). In seeing this colour I am thus enticed to click on the profile circle and view the Story added by that user, thus aiding Instagram’s goals of keeping me engaged on the app for longer.

The same can be said for Instagram Live where I can livestream a video, during which followers who have “tuned in” to the live stream can comment in real time on the video (Alfonzo, 2019:35). This sense of liveness captures the essence of live television as a relay of what is presently happening (Fiske, 2010:22).

Live videos on Instagram can last for up to an hour. The latest release of the Instagram App enables participating in a live video with another Instagram account, during which both accounts sync — this is ideal for interviews and collaborations. When an account that I follow starts an Instagram live streaming, I receive a notification informing me of the start of the live stream and prompting me to tune in to the broadcast. Instagram’s Explore tab also features current live Stories and tapping the “Top Live” button enables me to see what live videos are trending in that moment based on number of viewers, location and engagement. Live content further enhances Instagram’s aims of creating captivating content that keeps me engaged as the “live” nature of content forces me to be on the app at the moment of content broadcast. Simulated “liveness” not only creates an impression of an actual broadcast, but also offers a

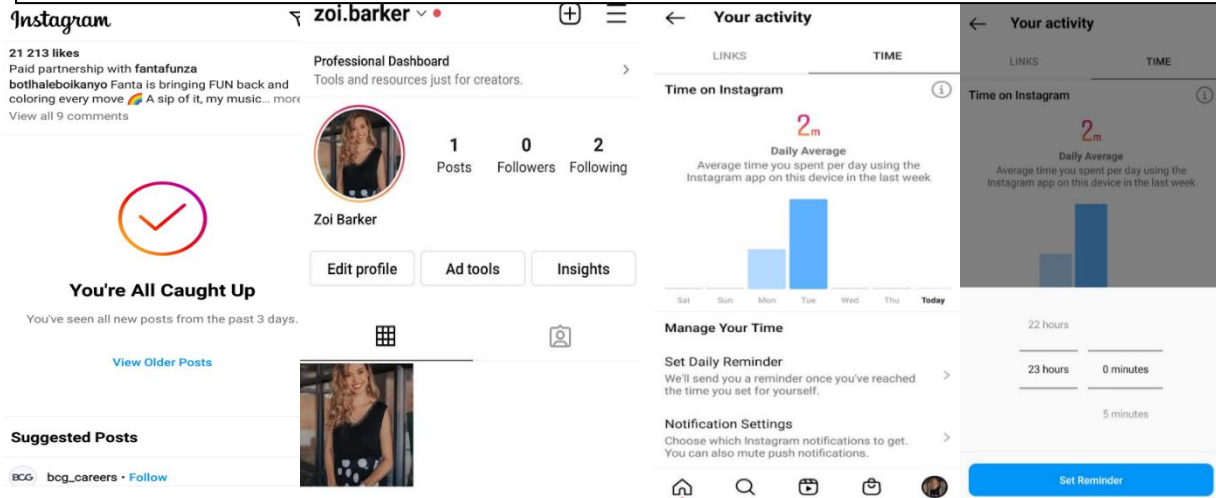
sense of access to an event in its moment-to-moment unfolding, reinforcing the illusion of authenticity; “this presencing, this re-presenting of a present occasion to an absent audience, can powerfully produce the effect of being there, of being involved in the here and now of the occasion” (Enli, 2015:33).

7.3.3.5 Instagram Encourages Public Accounts

Instagram has a binary model of privacy, where I may set my account to either public or private, affecting the accessibility of my content (Marwick, 2015:144). A public account is an account where content is accessible to anyone. A private account would mean that the posted images and videos are available only once the profile owner has accepted the request from the follower. By default, my account is set as public, with images and videos visible to anyone using Instagram apps or Instagram website (Manikonda *et al.*, 2014:1). Public accounts are more valuable to Instagram as content from these accounts can be made visible in spaces like the Explore tab where I can discover content from accounts I do not follow. Instagram guides me to having my account on public by selecting this as the default setting. In his work on app-walkthroughs, Van Dijck (2013) notes that affordances become visible mainly through the interface but also through default settings. The default setting is significant as a public account would be more valuable to the Instagram platform as a source of content accessibility for me to direct my time and attention to.

Despite the numerous tactics Instagram employs to urge me to spend more time on the app, it stresses that its control mechanism is in place to help me track and cut back on my time spent on the app. This is accessible under my account setting under “**Your Activity.**” This provides an overview of links I visited, and my time spent on the app with options to send a reminder once I have reached the limit I had set for myself for the day, see Image 7.12. Interestingly, the highest amount that you can limit interaction to is 23 hours. This tactic puts the onus on me to self-regulate because if Instagram was committed to curbing overuse of the app there would not be an option to use the app for up to 23 hours, see Image 7.14.

Image 7.11 You're All Caught Up **Source:** Author's Own; **Image 7.12:** Instagram Story Loaded **Source:** Author's Own
Image 7.13 Time Spent on App **Source:** Author's Own; **Image 7.14:** Time Limitations on App **Source:** Author's Own.



7.3.4 Instagram Stimulates Spending on the App

Instagram urges the spending of money to boost professional accounts to grow follows and engagement. It also facilitates the purchasing of products and experiences.

7.3.4.1 I Instagram Stimulates Spending Money on Boosting Content

Through positioning brands and personal accounts as assets in an attention economy, Instagram habituates the tracking of profiles as assets. It furthermore suggests the “upgrading” of profiles to professional accounts that unlock insights and promotional payment options to make content and accounts more visible to potential audiences.

a) Tracking of an Asset

Public accounts can either be set as personal or professional. Both personal and professional accounts feature a bio section. The Instagram bio is the space where I can provide a brief synopsis about who I am (Alfonzo, 2019:35). This information includes name; username; pronouns; website URL and bio paragraph. It also provides a drop-down option for me to easily navigate between multiple accounts I own. It furthermore lists three Instagram-specific metrics which appear in order of importance in the top right of a profile, namely post number, follower count, and following count. When landing on my account, the first thing a follower would see is my account's profile picture and name and then the three metrics to the right. The **photo count** quantifies my activity on the site and foregrounds the value of me producing and posting content. It represents the number of photos on my profile: the higher the

number, the more active the user is (Bakhshi *et al.*, 2014:968). The number of **followers** is a proxy for the size of my follower audience with a larger audience increasing the likelihood of engagement (Bakhshi *et al.*, 2014:971). **Following** refers to the number of accounts that I follow.

b) Professional Account Positioned as Brand to be Invested In

The power of these metrics is evident in the meaning extracted from their relation to each other which impacts how users perceive my account. Accounts are viewed as “more valuable” when they have high follower counts with a lower photo count as the “effort input” on the account (the number of posts created) is low, yet the “reward output” evoked by such content (the number of followers) is high (Jang *et al.*, 2015:4042). As a result, users often engage in “white walling” (Agosto, Abbas & Naughton, 2012:1112), a practice where users retrospectively remove photos after posting to decrease their post count metric and appear to have higher followers with lower effort. Similarly, an account with a high follower count and a low following number is perceived by someone viewing the account as more valuable. Keeping my following number low has become socially significant: I must have many followers but not follow others. I must be of interest to others, but not be interested in others.

Instagram takes this further through encouraging the conversion of public personal accounts to **professional accounts** which enables me to launch sponsored posts, have a shop built into my profile, have access to in-depth data and be contacted directly through the app on email or phone. Instagram temptingly instructs me to “upgrade to a professional account” with the reference to *upgrade* stimulating my desire to do so. Instagram further describes the move to a professional account as an opportunity for me to “get access to tools like insights about your followers and account performance;” “reach more people through promotions” and “get new contact options.” When making the shift to a professional account I was asked to indicate what category best describes me from a prepopulated list, such as artist, musician/band, blogger, as this “helps people find accounts like [mine].” Instagram positions my sharing of information with them as a means by which to ensure greater visibility for my profile. Interestingly, within the conversion process Instagram directed me to “get inspired” by “following other businesses or creators to see how they share and engage with their audience.” Instagram positions the following of other accounts as beneficial

to me as the user: as a form of market research, if you will, without highlighting how this stimulation of activity feeds Instagram's overall engagement goals. It further positions the act of following other Instagram accounts as a way for me to gain followers for my own account. Instagram prompts me to follow my friends and "to encourage them to follow [me] back." Instagram furthermore guides me not only to follow other accounts but to "grow [my] audience," by "inviting friends" to follow my account (see Image 7.15). Again, Instagram tacitly pushes the agenda of connection which drives the platform business model.

The goals of stimulating engagement are also made clear in the way Instagram incentivises content creation. After I switched from a personal account to a professional account during my app-walkthrough, I was immediately promoted to share content. Instagram urged me to "share three photos or videos within [my] first week [of being a professional account] for higher engagement." Instagram would therefore reward me with higher visibility to unlock engagement if I adhered to their content creation expectations.

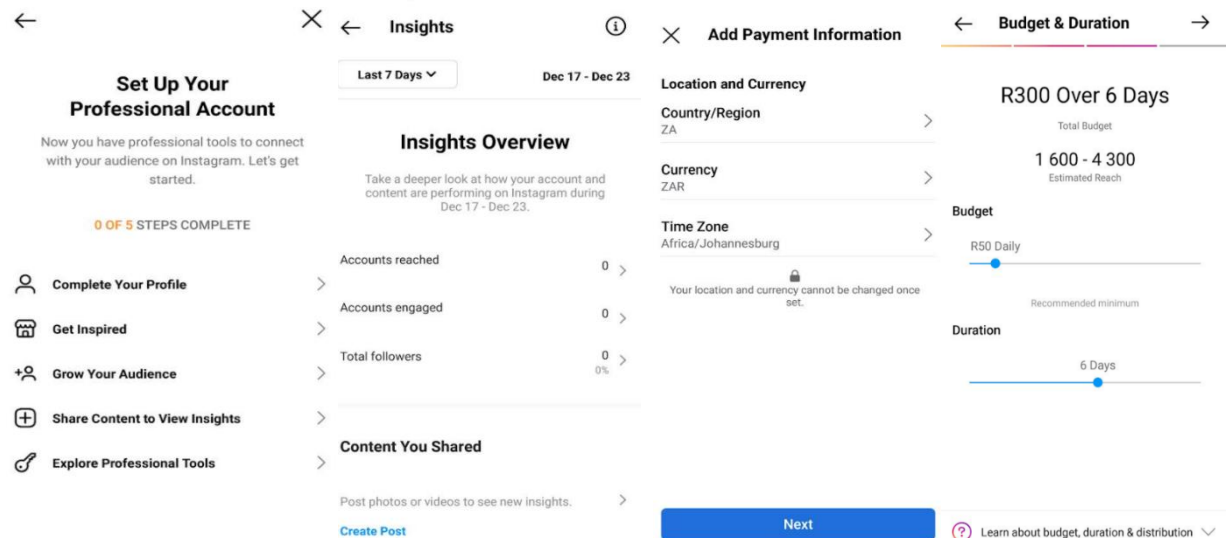
The two key advantages for profit-orientated professional accounts are the insights that can be extracted from, and the promotions that can be run on, a professional account. The **insights feature** is described by the app as enabling me to "see how [my] content is doing, with analytics about [my] content's performance." These "Insights" into my account performance can be gained for the last seven days, last 14 days and last 30 days, providing info on accounts reached (the number of unique accounts that have seen any of my content at least once), accounts engaged (the number of unique accounts that have interacted with my content such as likes, saves, comments shares and replies); and total followers gained or lost (see Figure 7.16). This takes the previously established metrics included in personal accounts and tracks content performance in greater detail.

Promotions are automatically unlocked when my account is transferred into a professional account. The option appears for already shared content where my posts can be "promoted" so that not just followers of an account see my post, but other targeted audiences as well. As soon as I share a post, an option to promote the post is displayed. This enables my account to "reach new people on Instagram when I

promote a post or story,” which includes either creating a sponsored post or a new advertisement-set. In a sponsored post I pay a fee to have an already shared post appear more visibly in people’s feeds thus leading to higher follows on my account and engagement on my promoted post. Promoted posts can be set up as part of a campaign, with the campaign creator indicating a set campaign goal, a target audience that the post should be shown to, and a budget. These campaign goals can include to “reach new people;” “gain more profile visits” (ideal if my profile showcases products, services, a portfolio or a brand); “gain more website visits” (ideal if I want people to browse an online store, learn more about an event or sign up for a mailing list) and “receive more messages” (ideal if I provide services and want to encourage potential customers to inquire about requests, appointments or consultations).

Instagram urges spending on high budgets, saying “as you spend more you grow the pool of people you can reach.” Instagram recommends and automatically sets campaigns for at least six days, for which it automatically charges the user R50 a day (Hitz, 2018) (Image 7.17). The last step is to actually make a payment, with Instagram automatically displaying the currency based on my known location, namely, South Africa (Image 7.18). The sleek user interface, step by step simple instructions guiding me through the process of setting up the campaign and the automatic selection of certain elements such as duration and budget, increases my willingness to spend money on the campaign. In this way, professional account owners such as myself, see the spending of money through sponsored campaigns as a necessary tactic in the attention economy.

Image 7.15 Professional Account Set Up **Source:** Author's Own; **Image 7.16:** Insights Overview **Source:** Author's Own
Image 7.17 Budget and Duration **Source:** Author's Own; **Image 7.18:** Make Payment **Source:** Author's Own.



c) Encourage Business to Spend on Ad Spend

Not only does Instagram make the process of switching to a professional account and creating a promotions campaign as simple as possible; it provides brand accounts with a chance to advertise content directly, something Instagram forces through the non-performance of organic content that does not have additional advertising content behind it.

The change to the home feed algorithm is an example of this. Previously, the Instagram feed used to be arranged as an unfolding “feed” of content in reverse chronological order (Zappavigna, 2016:273). This however changed in 2016 when Instagram switched to an algorithm sorted timeline, where Instagram will place the photos and videos it thinks I will most want to see from the people I follow toward the top of my feed, regardless of the time that those posts were originally shared (Isaac, 2016; Leaver *et al.*, 2020:23). According to Instagram my unique Instagram feed is based on three core categories: interest (how much I would want to see a post based on past viewing of similar content); recency (how new the post is); relationship (how close I am to the user posting the content) (Constine, 2018b). The result is that on average, people miss about 70% of the posts in their Instagram feed. Instagram claims that this algorithm ensures that the 30% I see is the “best 30% possible” (Isaac, 2016), in other words the 30% most likely to unlock engagement from me. The fight to be part of the 30% seen by users has led to various attempts to “beat the algorithm” and

ensure that our post is visible on the feed including paid for advertisements, sponsored posts. Instagram's purposeful change to the algorithm has forced many brands to engage in paid-for content promotion options as organic content no longer is as visible, thus boosting business spending.

7.3.4.2 Instagram Stimulates Purchasing Products and Experiences

Not only are brands and users directed to spend money on boosting their profile and account visibility through sponsored posts and promotional campaigns, but they are also urged to spend money on direct purchases of products sold on the app.

a) Products

Instagram's shift towards electronic-commerce (eCommerce) began with the launch of Instagram shops, in which Facebook — and by extension, Instagram - partnered with eCommerce platforms Shopify, BigCommerce, Woo, Channel Advisor, CedCommerce, Cafe24, Tienda Nube and Feedonomics (Ha, 2020). The Shopping feature turned business profiles into storefronts by allowing users to browse and buy products directly from a business' Facebook Page or Instagram profile. A brand would set up an Instagram shop, usually linked to a Facebook shop with a catalogue of their products. When posting content, the brands would use product tags which display the item price and link to the products listed on their shop in the same way that I would label an item in store, and visually in the same way that I would tag a fellow user in a post.

The creation of the Shopping tab and the placement of the tab near the centre of the footer area is significant. The layout of previous Instagram version releases had the "create content" upload button placed in the centre. This change signals the move away from content creation as being the key activity Instagram aims to unlock from me, to the act of shopping being the most important activity. Granted, Instagram wants me to produce, but not as much as it wants me to consume.

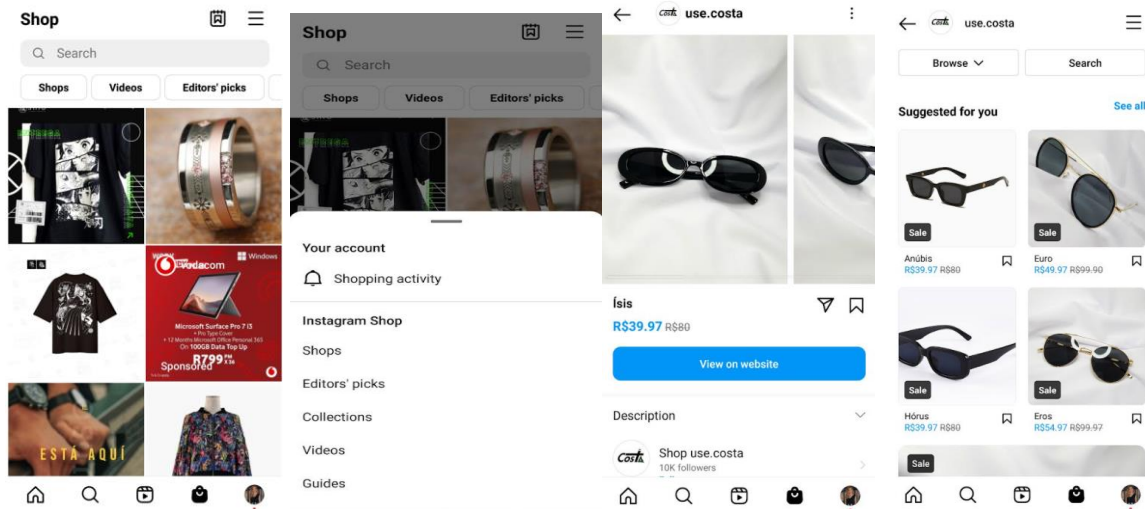
On opening the Shopping tab, various products appear in a two-column grid of square tiles (see Image 7.19). The choice of these products is based on brands that I follow or accounts whose content I previously interacted with. Interspersed in these tiles are sponsored products paid for by advertisers for their placement. These tiles have a

“sponsored post” label marking in the bottom left corner. There are various options to interact with shopping content including saving the product to my Wishlist or sharing it with my friends (see Image 7.20). Clicking on the advertisement redirected me to the “Product Details Page,” where I could learn more about the item, view additional imagery, and browse additional products from the brand (see Image 7.21). Clicking “Continue shopping” opens the brand-specific shop on Instagram (see Image 7.22). If I wanted to purchase the product I would click “view on website” and complete the transaction on the website.

This Instagram Shop can be seen to naturalise and glamourise the act of shopping on Instagram through several features:

- (1) **Editors picks:** These are recommendations “chosen by the @shop channel” with various features from guest editors such as influencers.
- (2) **Collections:** This Menu tab item mimics the idea of a fashion “collection” where a specific brand or designer’s latest range is showcased.
- (3) **Guides:** These feature listicles (lists of relevant articles grouped under a set theme) such as “10 Top Products for Spring.”
- (4) **Wishlist:** The Wishlist icon is strategically placed at the top right corner of the page, rather than being collapsed within the other options in the drop-down menu. This is similar to the “save” icon but mimics the language of eCommerce channels, allowing me to create a list of desirable - but not yet purchased - products. Once clicking into the Wishlist, the “shopping-trolley” icon appears in the top right corner, seamlessly guiding me to the next step of purchasing an item. On clicking the cart, I am notified of Instagram’s “free shipping” offer on items from selected partner brands, meaning that I do not need to pay a shipping cost to have it delivered – a further tactic to stimulate sales.
- (5) **Shopping activity:** This includes updates about my “favourite brands and products.” For instance, when Nike, a sports apparel brand, adds a product to their shop, this will appear as a notification thus getting me to *buy* a product of a brand that I have already *bought into* by having followed their account previously.

Image 7.19 Shopping tab Landing **Source:** Author's Own; **Image 7.20** Shopping tab Options **Source:** Author's Own; **Image 7.21** Product Post in Shopping tab **Source:** Author's Own; **Image 7.22** Shopping Collection **Source:** Author's Own.

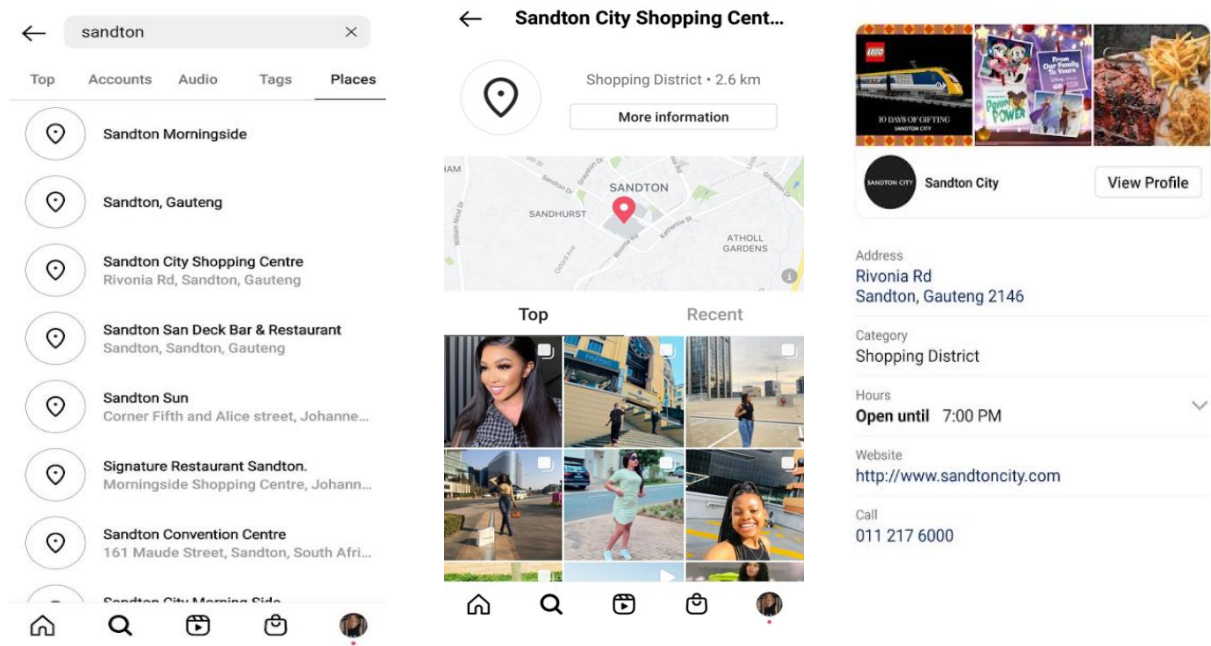


b) Experiences

It is not just physical products that users are enticed to spend money on, but lifestyle experiences. This is done through Instagram's interface which strongly emphasises physical place and users' locations (Hochman & Manovich, 2013). Locations can be cities and neighbourhoods but also landmarks and businesses: this becomes a check-in of sorts (Leaver *et al.*, 2020:69). When searching for locations, a photo map appears which showcases where users take photos and which can be used to explore where other users have taken photos on a map. The geo-tagging feature has also contributed to the popular nomad theme, where an ideal user is seen as someone who "never stays too long in one area" (Manovich, 2017:125).

For instance, when searching for “Sandton” (an upmarket area with a similarly named shopping centre located in Johannesburg the largest city in South Africa), Instagram suggests several location pins that exist nearby. The geo-tag allows the sharing of precise positions or a nearby point of interests (POIs) provided by Instagram (for example, a Starbucks coffee shop) (see Image 7.23). Once selecting “Sandton City Shopping Centre,” the geographic proximity is shown (2.6km away) as well as content shared by users who have “checked-in” there and used that location when loading content (see Image 7.24). This feature highlights the consumption of experience with users searching, for example, for restaurants to visit based on the visually appealing experiences of others who have accessed the location. When clicking the “more information” button, additional information is shown including business hours, reviews, address, and contact details are indicated (see Image 7.25). This is an increasingly popular feature, as users on Instagram share their geo-locations at a rate of 31 times, much higher compared to Twitter for instance (Manikonda *et al.*, 2014:1) with at least 28.8% of users having at least one of their pictures GPS tagged (Manikonda *et al.*, 2014:4).

7.23 Location Search Source: Author’s Own; **Image 7.24 Sandton Location** Source: Author’s Own; **Image 7.25 Sandton City Information** Source: Author’s Own.



7.4 CONCLUSION

Applications matter because they reflect our cultural values, bring multiple actors, including users, developers, and advertisers, into an interactive space, and communicate meanings that shape our everyday practices (Light *et al.*, 2016:20). It is, therefore, crucial to consider the political-economic, social, and cultural dynamics associated with apps (Dieter, Gerlitz, Helmond, Tkacz, van der Vlist & Weltevrede, 2019:1). The process by which a medium, such as a platform or an app, is translated into a cultural practice by users involves the appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion of a technological artefact, such as Instagram, into existing social relationships and routines (Mansell & Silverstone, 1996). By analysing cultural artefacts, such as social media apps, in relation to their social formations, we can gain insights into the interrelationships of cultural signs, their production conditions, and their use by audiences (Durham & Kellner, 2012).

This app-walkthrough has provided an overview of how Instagram's platform architecture guides user behaviour. Shaping the user's behaviour is a central aim of interface design, which it achieves particularly through forms of embedded and enacted user scripting. This raises questions concerning the circulation of power, subjectivation, and the production of value, which are especially pertinent under conditions of platformisation and the data-intensive forms of "controlled consumption" that apps facilitate (Andersen & Pold, 2018).

Previous app-walkthrough research has presented a step-by-step analysis of an app's use. In this chapter I chose to extract the key findings from my analysis to explore how Instagram's embedded architecture aided its platform capitalist goals and served its commercial interests. By doing so, this chapter made a meaningful contribution to the overall research argument. I therefore show how Instagram uses interface designs and suggested user flows to direct four key behaviours. Instagram 1) encourages the extraction of user information through downplaying the implications of opting-in, urging the user to sync their other social media accounts, presenting informal opportunities for data gathering, prompting the volunteering of data, and subtly storing users' deleted data. Instagram further 2) encourages the labour of content generation by users through its choice of iconography, its habituation of the act of sharing, its rewarding of content creation, its different posting formats to cater to different needs, its robust archiving affordances that create dependencies on its architecture and its catering to several Instagram accounts being linked to one individual. The platform not only

stimulates the creation of content but the 3) consumption of content by urging the user to follow other accounts, to spend more time viewing content and interacting with content, showcasing disappearing content to instill daily use and through promoting the choice of making an account public. Instagram furthermore 4) stimulates spending on the app through directing users and brands to pay money to boost content to be more visible, as well as spending money on purchasing products and experiences.

Now that an understanding has been gained of the Instagram features, namely (1) the site of the production of an image (the “technological”), I will move on to exploring (2) the site of the image itself (the “compositional”). In the next chapter, I conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of selected Instagram posts from the Instagram profiles of virtual influencers Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu. My analysis illustrates how virtual influencers use the interface and features of Instagram to enact the seven principles of mediated authenticity including predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, imperfection and ambivalence. In so doing, the virtual influencer profiles are interpreted to be more human realistic, thus leading to greater believability and acceptance by followers. This in turn, leads to more effective commercial endorsement practices as followers are more willing to make purchases that are suggested by profiles that they connect with, have a parasocial relationship with and perceive as being authentic. This will be investigated in the chapter to follow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF MEDIATED AUTHENTICITY

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Five suggested that an impression of authenticity in online and offline spaces is created through the successful performance of pre-established norms. From this perspective, authenticity is both a “construct” and a “performative effect” (Rigoletto, 2018:392). This chapter broadens these insights through findings on a type of authenticity that originates in, and thrives on, online spaces, namely “mediated authenticity.” Mediated authenticity is defined by Enli (2015:32) as the result of a paradoxical process whereby a negotiation between producers and audiences is crucial to the success of the communication. In other words, authenticity (as communicated to audiences through media) is a social construction achieved through an interplay between audience expectations and preconceptions about what determines a sense of the “real,” on one hand, and media producers’ success in delivering content that corresponds with these notions, on the other hand. From this perspective, mediated authenticity relies on the successful implementation of “authenticity illusions” from which understandings of authenticity are crafted and negotiated. Audiences successfully accept these authenticity illusions if they adhere to the pre-established norms of authenticity, which involve “various interrelated dimensions of genuineness” (Tran & Keng, 2018:280) and “advocated authentic codes of conduct” (Goffman, 1963:111; Van Leeuwen, 2001:393).

Enli (2015) proposes that these authenticity illusions are constructed through seven mediated authenticity principles: predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, imperfection, and ambivalence. Interestingly it is not just humans who can present authenticity illusions and perform in accordance with authenticity scripts. Research on virtual influencers suggests that the virtuality of these profiles offers a unique and intriguing twist on a known set of authenticity performance principles. In this chapter I argue that virtual influencers utilise these mediated authenticity principles to construct 1) an identity as relatable to followers; 2) a persona in keeping with expected celebrity/influencer behaviours on Instagram and 3) posting formats that follow platform-specific genre practices, that all create a profile that is “sellable” (Black, 2020:50).

The “beingness” of a virtual influencer profile is constructed mainly through the permanent posts and temporary Story content, as well as accompanying comments and responses they

make to their fans. In order to understand how, and to what effect, virtual influencers utilise these various modes of communication on Instagram, a multimodal discourse analysis will be conducted on several Instagram posts by Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela. A multimodal discourse analysis is used to analyse how several or all of the different semiotic modes work together to create a unified text or communicative event (Liu, 2013:1260). The multimodal discourse analysis includes aspects such as position and composition; point of view, pose and angle; demographic; caption and modality.

The adherence of content posted on Instagram by these virtual influencers to the principles of mediated authenticity (as analysed within a multimodal discourse analysis framework), and the collaboration of these principles in the construction of a profile that is sellable on the platform for commercial gain, will be argued in the chapter.

8.2 PRINCIPLES OF MEDIATED AUTHENTICITY

Enli (2015:136) concludes that mediated authenticity is comprised of seven characteristics: predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, imperfection and ambivalence. These principles do not operate in isolation but combine in the narrative construction of the virtual influencer profiles in communicating an authentic self to followers.

8.2.1 Predictability

Audiences make sense of narratives not as isolated units but as a part of a “flow” of programming, characterised by a high degree of repetitiveness (Hoerschelmann, 2006:35). When users use the Instagram app, they are familiar with standard formats and styles of posting in capturing predictable online behaviours. When virtual influencer profiles successfully follow this expected content creation genre on the Instagram platform, it leads to a higher probability of the profiles being seen as authentic.

8.2.2 Ordinariness

“Plainness” is considered authentic because it challenges the “glamorously mediated” and “overtly edited polished media performance/persona” (Enli, 2015:137). The more mundane and ordinary a persona appears to be, the more authentic and representative of “the people” they seem. Virtual influencers portray a sense of “genuineness” by making themselves more relatable to their audiences through “calibrated amateurism” or “faked amateurism” (Enli, 2015:76).

8.2.3 Confession

“Confessions” indicate the uninhibited disclosure of personal details and secrets on social media, making the authenticity illusions all the more plausible as the emotional openness of raw material feels more authentic and makes the confessor more relatable to followers (Hill, 2007; Enli, 2015:107). Self-disclosure is defined as “any message about the self that an individual communicates to another” and is an important tactic used on social media to build emotional connections with followers (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006:155; Derlaga & Berg, 2013). Together, confessional moments are utilised in a tactical way to craft authenticity illusions on social media, since authenticity experiences are rhetorically powerful emotional performances (Vannini & Williams, 2009:13; Enli, 2015:107).

8.2.4 Spontaneity

Media performances are regarded as authentic if they include spontaneous elements or improvisation (Enli, 2015:12). The essential strategy is to appear spontaneous, and not staged, prepped, or rehearsed. This can be achieved by a strategic performance that may indeed be rehearsed but is written to come across as natural and unscripted. The aim is to come across as personal, engaged, and emotionally driven rather than calculated and strategic. Even though it might seem contradictory, a thoroughly planned performance might seem more spontaneous than a truly improvised performance (Enli, 2015:11).

8.2.5 Immediacy

The immediate is closely related to “liveness” and imparts a sense of togetherness whereby the producers and the audiences are interconnected in a shared “now” in which they construct meaning and authenticity together. With mobile connectivity, we can communicate our lives at the rate we live them (Turkle, 2011:207). Virtual influencers who share content relevant to the here-and-now communicate this sense of in-the-moment living and sharing. Simulated “liveness” not only creates an impression of an actual broadcast, but also offers a sense of access to an event in its moment-to-moment unfolding, reinforcing the illusion of authenticity; “this presencing, this re-presenting of a present occasion to an absent audience, can powerfully produce the effect of being there, of being involved in the here and now of the occasion” (Enli, 2015:33).

8.2.6 Ambiguity

There is ambivalence and ambiguity around virtual influencer identities. When the authenticity contract is challenged, or broken, we face an authenticity scandal or, less dramatically, an authenticity “puzzle” (Enli, 2015:2). This happens when the media producers present a playful and complex puzzle for the audience to solve (Enli, 2015:15). In the case of the virtual influencers, the audience is invited to actively participate in solving the puzzle of whether Kim Zulu or Lil Miquela are human or not.

8.2.7 Imperfection

In a media context, authenticity is generally seen as positive, and audiences appreciate seemingly raw and unscripted moments (Enli, 2015:3). The emphasis here is on “seemingly.” When virtual influencers can produce content that appears to show their “raw, unfiltered” side to their followers they are seen as more authentic (Abidin, 2016).

Virtual influencers utilise these mediated authenticity principles to construct 1) an identity as relatable to followers; 2) a persona in keeping with expected celebrity/influencer behaviours and 3) posting formats that follow platform-specific genre practices, that all create a profile that is sellable.

The principles of predictability, ordinariness and confession work together to construct an idealised identity that can be related to and thus profited off of. These principles work together to construct a persona with a similar ethnicity, gender, age as followers, and exists in a similar geopolitical location and positioned in an expected mode of femininity and sexualisation.

8.3.1 Ordinariness – Relatable Identity Ethnicity

The ethnicity, age and body composition of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu can be seen to be in line with the predictable performances of other human influencers in the region, as well as in line with the ordinary lived experiences of the audiences they position themselves for. This achieves a sense of familiarity with the content produced by virtual influencers as being similar to normal influencer-esque styles whilst also appealing to users’ personal cultural affinity, all whilst presenting a version of this identity that is most profitable to its creators.

The construction of the ethnic and cultural components of the Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu profiles can be seen to directly position the virtual influencers as relatable to the audiences they

target, whilst also performing an aspirational identity within that target group. A critical factor influencing people's interest and purchase intention is if they relate to the person selling the product or service: "People like people who look like them" (Nkosi, 2011:10). Knoll and Matthes (2017:57) reiterate this, noting that humans tend to give preferential treatment to stimuli related to their identity and goals.

Kim Zulu, for instance, is positioned to resemble the South African audience, which consists of mainly black South Africans, who comprise 47 million out of the 58.4 million South African population (Statista, 2021d). The choice of the identity of Kim Zulu (meaning "I am Zulu") ensures that her identity correlates with the largest group of people in South Africa, with Zulu South Africans making up 23% of South Africa's population. Kim Zulu positions herself as ordinary and similar to her followers through her "proudly African" identity, for example celebrating "Africa Day," proclaiming "Africa your Time is Now," posting about how she "is so glad [she] was created right here in South Africa." She furthermore incorporates many Zulu phrases into her posts. Therefore, following her and supporting her feels like a natural extension of being a proud South African. Kim Zulu can subsequently appeal to the largest demographic group in South Africa and be seen as "relatable," if not because of the profile's human status, then at least for its ability to capture the essence of their Zulu culture.

For example, Image 8.1 depicts Kim Zulu in a cattle skin poncho. This clothing item is elevated to a high status of importance in the image as it is centred in the frame and foregrounded through the subject's forward-facing stance with arms slightly parted to show off the garment. The fashionable cattle skin, which is described as "African couture" (@kimzulu_, 2020a) in the post caption, is an ode to the incorporation of culturally significant traditional South African adornments, reimagined in a contemporary format for luxury consumption. This is supported by the traditional decorative facial patterns that adorn her face, cup her left eye and draw a line down the centre of her face. This line works as a vector to draw attention to her bald head, which illustrates a return to a naturalised proudly South African identity namely without a wig. Her nonchalant expression, along with the intimate setting of the shot being in her bathroom, adds to the significance of this post as an identity proclamation saying "this is me" which challenges a Western-centric way of positioning aspiration on the Instagram platform. This post symbolises the claiming of a global standard of luxury by presenting an elite consumer identity within the South African context Kim Zulu has purposefully grounded herself in.

The positioning of Kim Zulu as proudly South African, proudly African, and proudly black, is further embodied in the type of content she produces and engages with, centring around the celebration and promotion of black-centric beingness, artists and films. It is echoed in the causes she supports, for instance Figure 8.2 was posted on June 16th a day memorialised in South Africa for the day black youth under the previously racially segregated apartheid regime protested against racialised and unequal learning conditions. The image depicts a stylised image of a raised black fist painted on her left cheek, symbolising the “black power” movement, popular in South Africa for its messaging of empowerment and pride in black identity. The fist captures a confrontational spirit, whilst the post caption communicates the idea of Kim Zulu being a black person who “celebrates” the “freedom [the protests in South Africa] gave me [her]” yet encourages her followers to stand with all “black people globally” in the face of racial unrest and shootings in the USA that sparked the #BlackLivesMatter movement which she references in her post. Therefore, she can historically position herself as a black South African who understands the racially oppressive trauma of the past, whilst also inserting herself into the globally trending #BlackLivesMatter topic. Her sultry lips are emphasised with a charcoal lipstick that catches the light and embodies the reclaiming of a black-is-beautiful narrative that is inevitably sexualised. Her black identity is constructed in a commercially viable manner so that the purchasing of South African themed garments and adornments is seen as an act of pride in a national identity, while the sexualisation of her black lips is seen as an act of liberation in embracing her distinctly African curves and fuller lips. All of which hides the commercially-driven goals of the creators in presenting an aspirational luxury black identity to her followers and selling this identity back to them.

Image 8.1: African Couture **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020a: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-kNQ95jkce>; **Image 8.2:** Black Fist **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020e: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBf5Rn2jn7x>.



Lil Miquela is similarly positioned to appeal to a particular demographic, constructed as a Hispanic female from California living in Los Angeles. Interestingly, USA-specific Instagram statistics show Instagram is most popular with hispanic adults (51%), followed by black (40%), and white (33%) adults (Sehl, 2021). The difference between Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu is the purposeful ambivalence around her nationality, which can be seen as part of a broader narrative of ambiguity where she chooses to appeal to an audience that does not feel that they belong in binary categories whether it be race, gender or sexuality. Figure 8.3 for example, depicts a relaxed Lil Miquela on the beaches of Praia Porto de Barra Beach in Salvador, Brazil. The caption is only in Spanish, with no English translation within the post and reads “tudo ok” (@lilmiquela, 2020e) meaning “everything is okay” thus capturing the laid-back feeling of being on holiday depicted in the post. The high colour saturation of the image communicates the “vibrance” of the Brazilian setting and instils a sense of desire in the user to consume the experience of being there. Lil Miquela often positions herself in line with this heritage, for instance, incorporating Spanish words into other posts or even into her song lyrics. In this post, the act of celebrating her Hispanic heritage is tied to travelling to Brazil, her “roots,” soaking up the Brazilian sun and speaking Spanish.

Image 8.3: Hispanic Culture Source: @lilmiquela, 2020e: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9DdBYhHqHS/>.



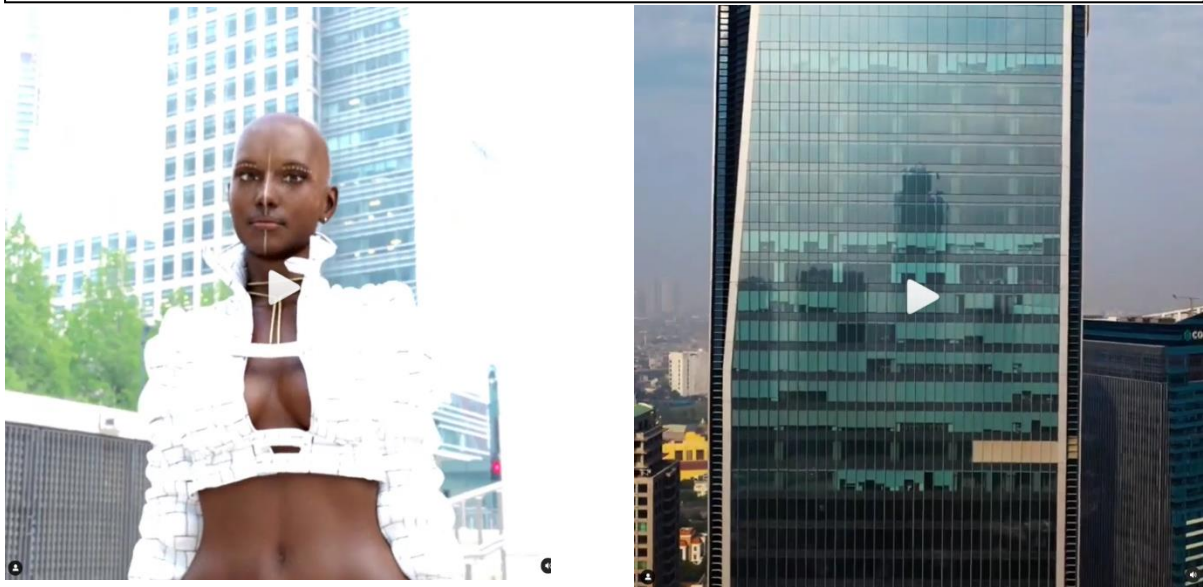
8.3.2 Ordinarity – Relatable Location

The use of location is aimed at evoking a sense of immediate connection and shared experience. For example, suppose Lil Miquela goes to Coachella and tags the location of the festival. In that case, people who also went to Coachella may experience an increased intimacy with Lil Miquela for having a shared experience (even if this claim is false) (Verburg, 2020:9). If this tactic is used, it is important that the locations are spaces that the target audience would recognise. For instance, research on virtual influencers by Molin and Nordgren (2019:24) found that posts by LilMiquela (based in America) and Noonooori (based in Paris) did not

resonate with Swedish audiences who did not share an understanding of the spaces that these virtual influencers depicted themselves in.

In the South African context, Image 8.4 and 8.5 shows Kim Zulu as having a photoshoot on the top floor outdoor parking lot of Sandton City Mall, which is well-known for its panoramic surroundings of the contemporary Johannesburg skyline. The location is inferred by splicing together a visual of Kim Zulu in front of the building, followed by a real world video of the physical building. This use of splicing is a good example of Zappavigna's (2016:277) claim that content mediation may be inferred through a sequence of images that collectively work to communicate a unified message.

Image 8.4: Frame One Kim Zulu in Parking Lot **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2021b: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CP1GROLj-DV/>; **Image 8.5:** Frame Two Building **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2021b: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CP1GROLj-DV/>.



8.3.3 Predictability - Gender, Femininity, Age, and Sexualisation

The choice to create both these virtual influencers, and most of the other current 120 plus virtual influencers on Instagram, as female, mimics the expected gender ratio of human influencers. Although scholars have noted a growth in male influencers on Instagram, females still make up 84% of human influencers on Instagram (Abidin, 2016:4; Statista, 2021c). Not only are most virtual influencers female, but the female virtual influencers also achieve consistently higher positive sentiment among audiences than males (Creasey & Anido, 2020:69).

Enli (2015:100) notes that using a teen or 20-something female as the front face of a content site, whether that be an Instagram profile or blog is not new, “as if this particular gender and

age combination also added to the authenticity illusion.” The use of a female identity has links to trust with the profiles intending to connect with a stereotype of girls as more trustworthy, innocent, and less likely to manipulate online content than boys would be. The content emphasises the female subject's innocence, courage, and openness and creates an online persona that invites trust and empathy (Enli, 2015:100).

It is well established that gender is performative (Butler, 2004). It is worth understanding what gender identities Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela are depicted as performing. In the past, magazines were seen as crucial social sites of that performativity (Pilane & Iqani, 2015:127). In the same way that women's magazines showed their readers particular definitions and understandings of what it is to be female by representing women to themselves according to certain ideals, bringing together social interaction and consumption (Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer & Hebron, 1991; Burton, 2005:132), Instagram now does the same. Instead of turning the pages of a magazine women now scroll through an Instagram feed to see examples of celebrated versions of their female gender. Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela's posts use a feminist-inspired narrative of “power femininity” with a language of empowerment, equality and “taking charge” (Lazar, 2006:506). Their content adheres to Gill's (2007:151) observations that “women are not straightforwardly objectified but are portrayed as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do.” Yet this repertoire is almost always pressed into service to promote goals that “might otherwise be coded as traditional rather than feminist to construct a desirable subjectivity” (Gill, 2009:345).

This includes sexualisation with content produced in adherence to a modern “pre-occupation with the body and sexuality as the locus of femininity” (Gill, 2016). The virtual influencers adhere to the current space of the “modernisation” of romance narratives which demand “technology of sexiness” (Hooks, 1984; Gill, 2009:366). Crucially it is not about the fulfilment of her own sexual desire, but rather she is put in service to satisfy the sexual desires of another. She is the supplier, not the intended receiver of pleasure. The scope of this “men-ology” where women are instructed in how to learn to please men through transforming the self, goes beyond bodily discipline to encompass levels of intimate self-surveillance, monitoring and planning (Bordo, 1993; Gill, 2009:365).

Image 8.6 depicts Lil Miquela taking a selfie with her “homegirl” musician Saweetie. The picture captures an intimate moment of womanhood where they are having a “girls’ night” over drinks. Both subjects wear exposed crop tops with deep v-lines while Saweetie’s extended nails form a vector drawing attention to her overly lubricated lips. In the caption, Lil Miquela praises Saweetie but does so because “@saweetie the OG ICY GIRL. Queen” is “teaching [her] how to land [her] very own king” (@lilmiquela, 2020c). The idea of empowerment and knowledge as serving the goals of “landing a king” illustrates the men-ology of the past where a woman’s power is tied to “finding and keeping a man” (Gill, 2009:362). This representation of femininity informs that content that populates Instagram, content which, like most societal elements, is market-driven. Women will be depicted on Instagram in a way that is most profitable for them to be depicted. In adherence to these expectations, virtual influencers will be depicted on Instagram in a way that is most profitable to their creators for them to be depicted with expectations around toned bodies, perfectly plucked eyebrows, manicured nails, tanned skin and the newest wardrobe all seen as necessary steps to “secure” a partner.

The post further depicts a flat-chested Lil Miquela next to the supple breasts of Saweetie. This reflects the sexualisation of Lil Miquela, but through infantilisation where her youthful age and preadolescent-looking body (devoid of pronounced curves) embody the sexualisation of grown women as childlike. This is done through applying childlike cosmetics and presentation methods to a woman who is clearly not a child, for example Lil Miquela’s child-like hair buns, her freckles, her gap tooth, her colourful clothing, and her school-girl cheeky poses. Her innocence validates parental authority and social control by making her passive, vulnerable and in need of protection, but this conception ultimately denies agency (Faludi, 1991:71). This reinforces Goffman’s ideas on the “ritualisation of subordination” where men are empowered and sexually aroused from feelings of dominance and control which are at its most extreme in a parent-child power play. Women are thus pacified by the discourse of protection as men are able to control women and to legitimise that control (Goffman, 1981).

This angle of infantilisation subverts the sexualisation of Lil Miquela, making the act even more sinister. For instance, Image 8.7 depicts Lil Miquela in a playful, toddler-like pose with her lean legs stretched over her head and a perky smile on her face as she makes eye contact with the reader. She wears a brightly coloured long-sleeve bodysuit with cut out circles and girly ballet pumps and sports her signatures school-girl hair buns. The light-hearted spirit of the post camouflages the sexual messaging as on closer inspection, she is holding a gold heart-shaped USB to the centre of her buttocks with the caption “where do you think my USB port is? 🖱️🤖👉” (@lilmiquela, 2021l). The USB and the use of the plug emoji in the caption “👉” is therefore suggestive of a phallus penetrating her anus.

Image 8.6: Land a King Source: @lilmiquela, 2020c: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGbDta9Hq5E/>; **Image 8.7:** USB Port Source: @lilmiquela, 2021l: https://www.instagram.com/p/CQeGY1-hl_F/.



The reader is not only invited to view Lil Miquela as a sexual object through direct demands, making eye-contact with the reader, but also through the incorporation of the “male gaze.” Instagram content is often seen to cater to the male gaze, so virtual influencers, therefore, produce content in adherence to these genre norms. Theories of the male gaze suggest that the privileged subjectivity of content is inherently that of the masculine (Connell, 2002:84; Chong *et al.*, 2012:420). Notably, a user does not need to be male to evoke a male gaze. This male gaze may even be adopted by the female viewer of the image of a woman. It is the female, as it were, taking the man’s part, because she has learned that her “natural” gender role includes being looked at by men (Mulvey, 1975; Burton, 2005:92). Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being “appreciated as herself by another” (Berger, 1972:46).

The “scopophilic act” of looking at the screen thereby renders women as objects who connote “to-be-looked-at-ness” and men as the active agents with whom the viewers identify. Some images not only allude to a male gaze but explicitly depict it (Burton, 2005:141) as is the case in Image 8.8. In the post, Lil Miquela and her “boyfriend” Nic are pictured in an intimate setting in their bed with Lil Miquela in crisp white underwear, a cotton top and mid-length white socks. The choice of white captures the innocence of prepubescent tighty-whities (instead of more a more sexually charged red lace underwear set), however, the cut of the underwear exposing her thighs and legs still presents her body as a sexualised object. She is lazily stretched out across the bed diagonally, placing her in the foreground so that her exposed behind is centred in the frame and is the first part of the post the reader’s eye is directed to. As Burton (2005:93) notes, in the case of sexually provocative looks, it is clear that the women in the picture are encoding messages for the supposed male viewer. Her direct eye contact invites the reader to “consume” her in the same way that she seductively consumes her pancake, provocatively licking her fingers. In the background, Nic embodies the male gaze through his unsubtle gawking at her buttocks, acting as a further vector pointing towards her body and directing the user to focus on her sexualised buttocks and thighs. The look of desire on his face, as if his mouth is watering to consume her body, mimics the consumption of the food Lil Miquela eats in the shot and the reader is invited to imagine their gaze as Nic’s gaze.

This infantilised sexualisation is not just a part of the Lil Miquela brand, but is a repeated key pillar. For example, Image 8.9 depicts the visual used for her first album release. The school-girl style skirt harkens to her infantilised portrayal. The shot fractionalises her body, cutting out her face completely to prioritise the part of her body being “objectified” (Burton, 2005:92).

The line of her smooth legs, illuminated by the light, acts as a vector drawing the eye down the length of her legs and guiding the reader’s gaze towards her vagina, barely hidden under the veiled skirt which is angled in an elementary “up skirt” position, inviting the reader to “look up her skirt.” “Upskirting,” namely the practice of catching glances up women’s skirts, often without their knowledge is a new twist on voyeuristic pleasure. #Upskirt positions women and girls into a particular way of being “seen” or watched with the practice itself often extremely misogynistic and gendered in action (Sebastian, 2019:40). The choice of this visual as the cover image for her first-ever single “On my Own” is significant as she actively positions herself as the subject of this voyeuristic gaze. The teasing angle of the skirt, where readers see a slight

view of the curve of her left buttock cheek, communicates the “mystery” that she has used as a hook to capture the attention of audiences in all of her content forms.

Image 8.8: Pancakes and the Male Gaze **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021d: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9VGfZOHbqh/>; **Image 8.9:** Upskirt **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2017: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BaKexrblPIZ/>.



The choice of personhood curated for Lil Miquela’s virtual influencer profile is one which appeals to a racially, sexually and gender-ambiguous state and whose sexuality is camouflaged through the infantilised positioning of the profile. Kim Zulu’s identity is in contrast to this. As explored in section a, she does not entertain any ambiguity about her racial orientation, choosing to firmly position herself not just as a part of the black community, but as a symbol of the most luxurious way of being within that community.

A further distinction is that Lil Miquela subverts her womanhood, choosing instead to side with a school-girl infantile sexualisation – while Kim Zulu elevates her achieved womanhood through her developed body. The achievement of “womanhood” is a consistent content theme in Kim Zulu’s posts with roots in the type of gendered identity celebrated by her South African followers. For example, she created a series of posts around “Umemulo” (meaning “the coming of age”) which is a Zulu coming of age ceremony for woman, a ritual is usually done for females at the age of 21, signifying that she is now ready for marriage. Where Lil Miquela follows prepubescent thinness, Kim Zulu presents a constrained hourglass figure. Arguably, the “skinny” body aesthetic of Lil Miquela is a Westernised idea of beauty that contradicts and erases indigenous ideas of beauty, which prize fuller figures and curvaceous shapes and see

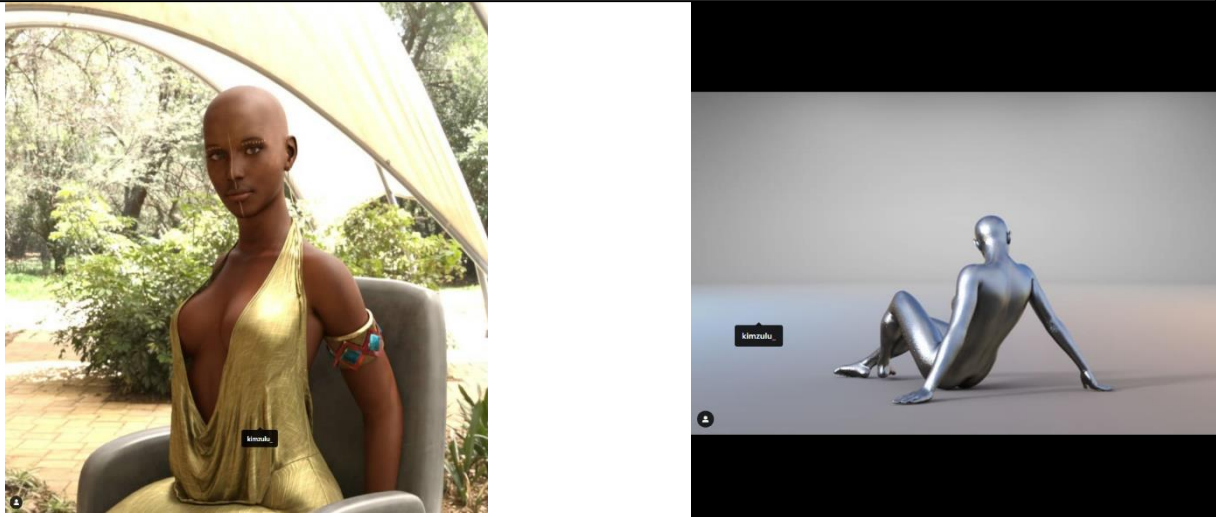
“big” as beautiful (Puoane, 2005). The celebration of this achieved womanhood as depicted in emphasised curves, thus positions Kim Zulu as the bodily ideal for her South African audience.

In Image 8.10 Kim Zulu is depicted looking directly at the viewer in a demand pose, as she sits in a three-quarter profile in an armchair under an awning in an outdoor setting. It is the expression of a woman responding with calculated charm to the man whom she imagines looking at her although she does not know him, she is “offering up her femininity as the surveyed” (Berger, 1972:55). She is wearing a fitted dress of gold fabric. The high modality of the tight, shiny fabric emphasises the contours of her breasts and hips. These body parts are foregrounded against a low modality background in the central zone of the image, arresting the gaze. The scooped neckline, with liquid-like material cupping around her navel, reveals the contours of her breasts which are pushed forward as she arches her back, supported by her elbows. The bend of her left elbow frames the deep curve of her waist and back. The left arm, decorated with a large blue and gold bangle, is bent backwards and presses against the chair-back. The arches of the awning draw the eye down towards the curve of the breasts, which are provocatively naked under the soft draping fabric. The shape of the left breast, as well as the smoothness of the left arm, are accentuated by the bright light falling on the dress and skin. An Instagram post is usually tagged with the handle of the subject (in this case, @kimzulu_) with the tagging placed on the face of the subject, however Kim Zulu’s posts feature her handle tagged not on her face but on her sexualised body. She is her body.

As previously argued Lil Miquela invites a male gaze’s dominance over her through her infantilised positioning. Kim Zulu also invites a sense of dominance but does so through various submissive poses. The shot’s framing is thus used to communicate voyeuristic surveillance of the body of a participant, who may or may not know that she is being observed. The imagined male gaze thus surveys and visually consumes the woman’s body with or without her awareness or consent (Burton, 2005:92). We are given the illusion of looking in on a private world, allowing us to project our own voyeuristic desires onto the unknowing bodies (Fiske, 2010:227). For instance, Image 8.11 pictures Kim Zulu alone, naked, sitting with her back to us on the floor in an empty room with her knees bent and leaning back on her hands. The medium-long shot separates her and positions her as an object which we can view without needing to engage with her. The angle of her head as looking down to the right, as opposed to looking up and tilted back (as if embracing the light) as well as the fact that her legs are bent and partly drawn towards her (as if in a comforting embrace instead of being outstretched fully),

projects a sense of being vulnerable, alone, naked, defenseless. The high modality of the silver paint that covers her body and head further illuminates her nakedness as the light draws a line down the left of her body, guiding the user's gaze down the length of her left side towards a side view of her left breast. At no point is there eye-contact between Kim Zulu and the camera view, thus communicating the idea of Kim Zulu as a passive, naked object being watched.

Image 8.10: Body Curves **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2021a: <https://www.instagram.com/p/COZxHqbDz9f/>; **Image 8.11:** Voyeuristic Angle **Source:** @kimzulu , 2020o: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-H92fdiGHu/>.



The viewer is guided to consume Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu, to consume their bodies and the products that they drape over these bodies. Kim Zulu's femininity is therefore portrayed in a manner that is not just most predictable on Instagram, but also most profitable through the normalisation of commercialisation.

8.3.4 Confession and Imperfection – Connection with Virtual Identity

Virtual influencers prompt their followers to connect with their presented identity through the art of confession. Confession is an example of “mediated intimacy” – that is, the ways intimate relationality is constructed in different media sites (Gill, 2009:346). Social media has seen a “rise of the truth” namely “confessional, candid, unflattering, imperfect and unfiltered thoughts” that give profiles the “feel of an intimate diary or blog” (Speed, 2015; Vaughan, 2020:44).

The confessional nature of user-generated culture is resulting in a cultural explosion of self-revelation with trending hashtags such as #RealConvo #RealTalk fostering the spirit of confession where unflattering information is often shared (Keen, 2007:180; Siminitz, 2018). Sharing a feeling is a deliberate act, a movement toward intimacy (Turkle, 2011:175). The

incorporation of moments of confession into the narratives of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu are therefore of strategic value in fostering feelings of connection and intimacy with followers. The identities are positioned according to what is most profitable as users are more prone to following and buying products from a profile that they feel a personal connection to and perceive to be authentic.

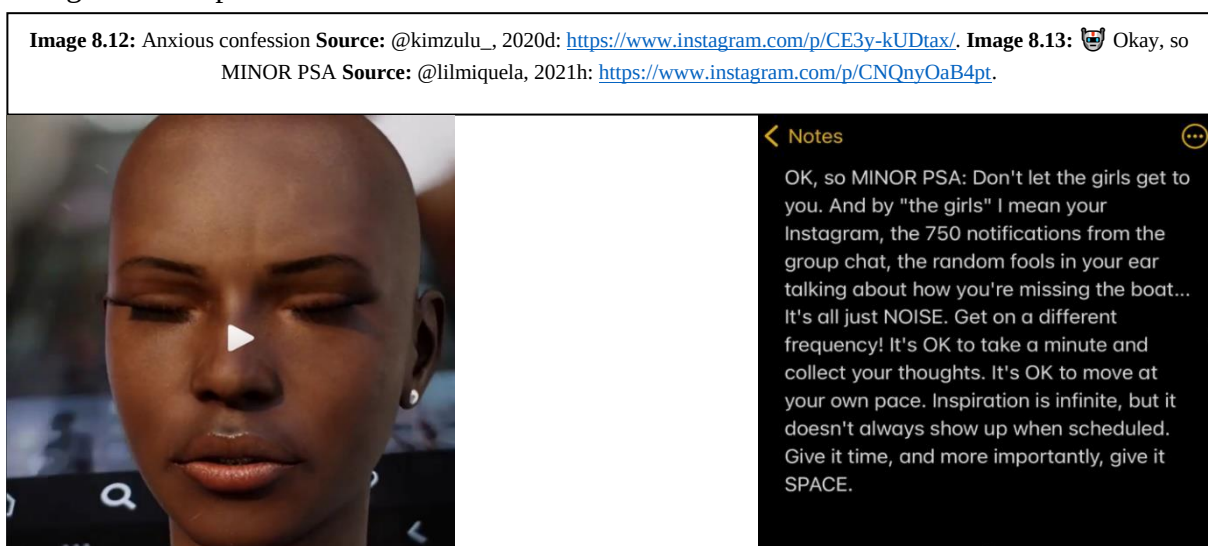
Mediated authenticity is constructed from confessions and the disclosure of personal secrets or details about oneself that seem plausible because they are recognisable for the audience and resonate with their personal experiences and often show the confessor in a less than perfect light, making them more endearing and relatable (Enli, 2015:74). For example, Image 8.12 depicts a screenshot from a video post where Kim Zulu confesses to feelings that most of her youthful South African audience would experience. The post depicts a close-up framed video of Kim Zulu in an anxious moment, with closed eyes and a distraught facial expression, as a scrolling phone screen in the background depicts the agony she experiences when “constantly checking [her] phone” waiting for “that one call from [her] crush.” Her subject of confession is therefore in line with her narrative (and is consistent with what she, as a 21-year-old woman, has experienced up to now) and also in line with the shared experiences of her youthful audience who, it is assumed, also knows what it feels like to wait for a message from their “crush.”

The mode of the post as a video is a popular choice among virtual influencers who create a great deal of video content as it “enhances the personality” of the virtual influencer and conveys emotions in mimicking human emotional breakdowns (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:20). This post further embodies Kim Zulu’s utilisation of pose and social distance in the composition of her posts which often reduce as much distance as possible between her and the viewer – in fact, 78% of content posted by Kim Zulu (101 out of 141 posts) are close-ups (namely shots emphasising her face). Her anguished face is highly emotive. We are tempted to think of emotion as a uniquely human attribute (Turkle, 2011:286). Thus, when virtual influencers accurately and appropriately “perform emotions” (Turkle, 2011:140), such as in a moment of confession, the distinction between human and non-human is blurred, and the effectiveness of the virtual as a vehicle of connecting with followers and inducing spending desires, increases. These are triggers that unlock emotions which we project onto these non-human elements (Turkle, 2011:39). The use of emotion during confession to unlock sympathy has proven to be effective, for instance, research analysing comments on Lil Miquela’s posts found that the most

popular word was “sorry,” with many followers expressing sympathy for her (Verburg, 2020:20).

Lil Miquela also themes confessions around relatable issues experienced by her followers but does so in a way the serves her commercial positioning. For example, posting confessions of feeling heartbroken about a breakup, just before releasing songs such “Speak Up” and “Hard Feeling” thus adding a sense of authenticity to the “feelings” she sings about in her as she turns her “boi tears into honest bangers.”

A confession is successful not just because of the subject of the confession, but also the mode/medium through which this confession is communicated. Image 8.13 depicts a confession of sorts where Lil Miquela indicates that she is choosing to take a break from social media due to all the negativity she is experiencing. The post is a screenshot of the notes section on her phone – a common practice by celebrities on Instagram who feel the need to share confessions / breaking personal news with followers through informally typing out the text on the notepad app within their phone and then sharing the screenshot (visual capturing what is displayed on the screen) as an image in a post. The modality of the notepad conveys a sense of authenticity as the statement does not come across as premeditated. The caption includes reference to “random fools” who create “noise” and her desire to “get on a different frequency” and get some “space.”



Lil Miquela goes on to say “I hate it here” speaking about her “existence” as an “outsider” on earth as she is not human. This narrative of not “fitting in,” of having an identity crisis of sorts, is a narrative that strongly resonates with Lil Miquela’s followers, many of whom see

themselves as gender-neutral and therefore unable to fit within a category (whether that category is “male” or “female,” or in Lil Miquela’s case “real” or “not real”). She draws a parallel between her identity confusion and that which her youthful followers might be feeling, saying “send me questions about things that confuse you about me, things that confuse you about the world.” In her confessional video series “Get Real” she boldly claims that her experiences in this regard make her a reliable role model: “trust me I understand confusing.” “I hear humans using the phrase I am just programmed that way. Trust me I can relate. I really think we can find common ground, you humans and I. Common ground about feeling controlled by fate, or nature, or programming.”

She presents herself as a voice of reason guiding the youth to reject allocated boundaries. “A lot of people have shared their stories with me about gender and sexual identity and said I’ve helped them figure those complicated things out” explains Lil Miquela (Kelly, 2017). Lil Miquela’s narrative of feeling “misplaced” is one where “anyone can agree with the reasoning” as it makes “her seem so normal that she can be viewed as a real person” (Andersson & Sobek, 2020:21). In so doing, she makes use of a feeling of “alienation” as a “hook” for “group identification” (Molina, 2020:25). Her followers are known as “Miquelians” which she defines as her “Internet friends” or “including anyone who knows what it feels like to feel different,” such as “robots and aliens.” She continues by saying these are “friends because they’re just trying to survive in a world that’s made for humans,” and that she can “heavily relate to anyone who’s ever felt out of place” (Zach Sang Show, 2019; Molina, 2020:27).

I note that virtual influencers usually deny, subvert or hide their virtual status but that when there is an opportunity to tap into a market mood through utilising their non-human status, for instance, with Lil Miquela’s outcasts-finding-a-home-narrative, then their virtual status is emphasised – and it works. Findings from research by Antonio and Gaidamaviciute (2020:9) suggest that the participants who they categorise as “community seekers” were more likely to disregard the fact that Lil Miquela is not a real human, as they are looking to find their “tribe”.

8.4 CELEBRITY PERFORMANCE

In the above section, I have illustrated how the mediated authenticity principles of predictability, ordinariness, confession and imperfection are utilised by virtual influencers to construct an identity as relatable to followers. In the section to follow I will show how predictability, spontaneity, immediacy and ambivalence work together in constructing a

persona in keeping with expected celebrity/influencer behaviours such as self-promotion, commercialisation, event attendance, third-party validation and mystery, thus ultimately creating a profile that is sellable.

8.4.1 Predictability - Self Promotion Tactics

a) Branding

There is an expectation of self-branding from influencers who are seen to be in constant pursuit of gaining followers and unlocking engagement. Virtual influencers adhere to these expectations. For example, Image 8.14 is a screenshot of a video post by Kim Zulu featuring “her” own “logo.” It displays a bar code and her name which consistently appear within the first two seconds of every video posted. Beyond the significance of the barcode logo, an embodiment of a business, as the first things users see, the use of the bar code as part of the logo could speak to the consumption-based purpose of the Kim Zulu profile. I read her profile as a bar code viewers “scan” on interaction and “pay” for with their attention thus unlocking video view counts as measurements of “sales.” The high modality of the visual with a saturated midnight blue against the white text, make the barcode stand out even more.

b) Introductory Self Promotion Posts

A trending form of content among influencers is an “introductory post” where influencers provide a synopsis about who they are and what they post to essentially “sell” their narrative and convince users to follow their journey. Kim Zulu posted a video (Image 8.15) where she jokingly refers to her viewers as “my fellow South Africans” thus mimicking the format of the South African President Cyril Ramaphosa’s means of addressing South African audiences who are watching Presidential announcements. She introduces herself as South Africa’s “very first digital citizen. That’s history in the making.” The choice of the term “citizen” is significant as, due to South Africa’s history of racial exclusion, the idea of citizenship connects to ideas of access and equality. By branding herself as a “fellow South African” and a “citizen” Kim Zulu is making claims to equal access of personhood and citizenship as her “fellow” humans. She explains that her account is aimed at telling “the real story of Kim Nozizo Zulu - which is about the rebirth of African cool.” The mention of the second name Nozizo, a distinctly Zulu name, further positions her to her majority black South African audience. It also serves as an important tactic of

introductory videos, namely sharing new intimate information that followers do not know – for example, that “her” second name is Nozizo. The focus on “the rebirth of African cool,” along with the South African flag overlay and use of South African flag emojis in the post caption is also a clear signifier of the type of content users can expect from her. Like all introductory videos, she ends with a call to action to “check out [her] videos as they drop.”

Image 8.14: South African Flag **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020k: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFCZ9bcDd3Z/>; **Image 8.15:** Barcode **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020g: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDBD2lwDkyP/>.



8.4.2 Predictability - Expectation of Commercialisation

It is generally accepted that influencers will create content with the aim of selling something to users, be it a product or an experience. When analysing content through compositional elements such as zones of appearance, salience and framing devices, it is clear that many posts are composed to direct attention to the item being sold so that it’s the first part of the post that catches the user’s eye. The female is essentially the hanger on which the product is positioned and displayed.

Kim Zulu has strongly positioned herself within the world of luxury and describes herself as “a rich African queen with gold, plenty of gold!” (28 March 2020). Image 8.16 for example has the subject Kim Zulu immersed in a puffy jacket in the **centre zone** with the product in the **foreground** in an all-white to stand out against the contrasting background. Kim Zulu is in a dynamic pose, with her left leg forward as if caught in the act of walking. In terms of salience, the recurring strobe light pattern, with stark black and white line contrasts, pulls the reader’s attention to the centre of the image where the product is located. The user is positioned below

Kim Zulu, looking up at the item of clothing as if it symbolised the dawn of hope. This acts as a further framing device to the not-so-subtle vectoral lines.

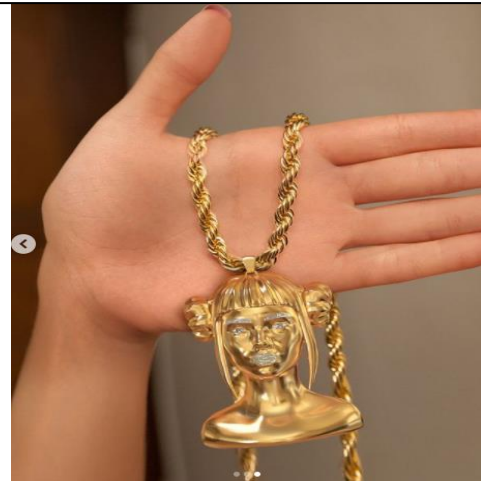
In a new step in Lil Miquela's evolution as a commercial vehicle, not only do promoted products get draped on her, but she, through her newly gained fame, is able to "create" products that sell because of her association with them. This takes the form of Lil Miquela-themed items such as the gold chain in Image 8.17. In the post, her recognisable hairstyle and face are commodified as an ostentatious gold necklace, similar to those worn by rappers and R and B artists. The face embodied in the necklace looks directly forward at the viewer and alludes to a sense of power. In the necklace, the persona of Lil Miquela as first and foremost being a musician is clear. Her Instagram handle @lilmiquela, is a copy of the rapper-esque naming conventions of Lil Wayne, Lil Pump, Lil Baby (Osei, 2021), all of whom add a sense of "street-cred" and make her positioning as a musical artist more believable. Presenting her image in the form of an item to be worn is also an expected celebrity practice. She is the brand, and she has become so commodified that she is what is being sold to her followers (Kuhnle, 2019:22). The caption "two truths and a lie: I'm real. This chain is real. FOREVER is OUT NOW" (@lilmiquela, 2020f) utilises the mysterious position of her fake/real existence and comments on the correlation between lie and truth that has made her profile a brand.

This commercialisation extends to value through authorship. In early 2021 Lil Miquela started creating non-fudgeable tokens (NFTs) as part of a "Venus" series. Between January and May she created a total of three NFTs. The use of NFTs as a newly evolving medium of exchange that exists only in the digital realm is a suitable match for her incorporeal being. Those that can accept value ascribed to an "asset" that exists only in the digital realm, such as NFTs, would be the type of audience to be drawn to a profile such as Lil Miquela that exists only in the digital realm.

Lil Miquela's ability to mobilise consumption on Instagram has therefore been able to stretch across three realms. Firstly, Lil Miquela wearing 3rd party items to sell (for example Lil Miquela wearing a designer brand); secondly, having the Lil Miquela brand depicted on the

items being sold (for example jewellery or Tshirts with her face on it); and thirdly, creating products which sell because of Lil Miquela being the “author” (for example NFTs).

Image 8.16: Black and White Source: @kimzulu_, 2020c: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_pu15ipej/; **Image 8.17:** Gold Chain Source: @lilmiquela, 2020f: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_c9unZnF6W/.

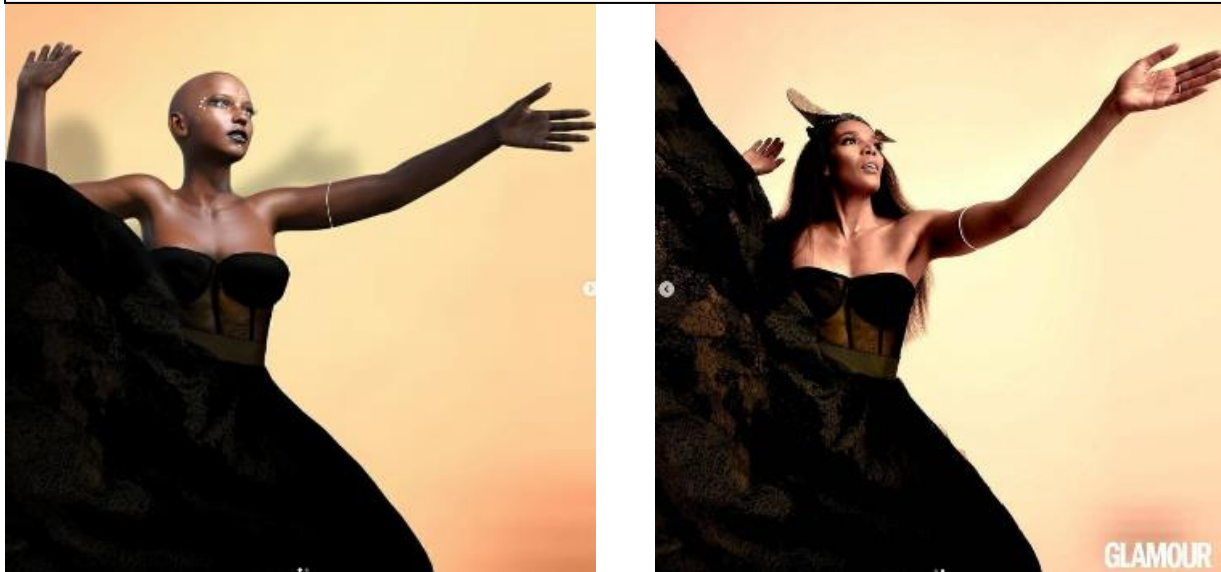


8.4.3 Spontaneity– In the Moment Celebrity

Virtual influencers are often grafted into real-world scenes alongside flesh-and-blood people (Horning, 2018), gaining thereby “a halo effect” of realness (Drenten & Brooks, 2020:3). Not only does the humanness of the human celebrities add credibility to the virtual influencer’s claims to aliveness, it also elevates the social standing of influencers who get associated with celebrities (Kuhnle, 2019:5). Images 8.18 and 8.19 depict a tactic used by Kim Zulu to create celebrity post thereby gaining visibility and unlocking reactions and engagement from fellow celebrities. In the post, Kim Zulu recreates South African media mogul Connie Ferguson’s “Vogue” magazine photoshoot. The idolisation and attempted embodiment of famous black South African women is in line with Kim Zulu’s narrative on celebrating black beauty. The images show Ferguson in an all-black ensemble with her skirt flaring up to the right and an outstretched foregrounded arm to the left. Her right arm is flung backwards, all of which gives the illusion of movement, as if she was flying through the sky reaching out to grasp onto something. The upward tilt of her head, along with slightly parted lips and her off focus eye line make it appear as if she is gazing into the future, reaching out. Interestingly Kim Zulu’s embodiment of the shot includes shadows, which the Ferguson original shot does not have. Kim Zulu’s creative team has therefore added in shadows to make the post reenactment seem more real, while the actual real shot, does not need shadows to appear real. “So I tried to be a queen for a day... not sure it worked out. 🙈🙈 @connie_ferguson,” she quips, to which @connie_ferguson comments in response: “@kimzulu_ - Nailed it! 🙌🙌🙌❤️”

(@kimzulu_2020l). Kim Zulu is therefore demonstrating that she is on trend, is able to capture a shot for a magazine cover just as well as the actual shot (creating the illusion that she can and should be in the magazine herself) whilst also getting validation from a prominent black female celebrity.

Image 8.18: Frame One Kim Zulu **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020l: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-rof3VDlxh/>; **Image 8.19:** Frame Two Connie Ferguson **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020l: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-rof3VDlxh/>.



8.4.4 Immediacy – Third-Party Validation

The real-time corroboration of information from external sources further communicates ideas of realness and authenticity. Internal validation would for example be Lil Miquela’s profile as being “validated” by Instagram, i.e., marked with a green tick. External validation would come from sources outside of the direct Instagram realm. However, these elements are brought into the Instagram realm through the sharing of an Instagram post that alludes to third-party validation.

Linking to a channel other than in Instagram itself is also done by linking to press articles about the virtual influencer. Image 8.20, for instance, shows a photo of an article about Lil Miquela in Paper Magazine. Keen (2007:81) notes that “anything and anyone can be lent legitimacy when propagated by mainstream media channels,” and this post is an example of the credibility as a celebrity that Lil Miquela gains from being seen as popular enough to create a feature article. The post is furthermore a photo of the physical printout of the magazine, as opposed to the actual digital image used in the article. The credibility of this virtual star thus enters the

physical “real” world as her fame can be touched in the glossy magazine pages. The image within the magazine as spread over two pages and vertically angled mimics the “centrefold” of a magazine which traditionally would include an overtly sexualised female subject. In the post, Lil Miquela wears a nude coloured seamless body-suit which creates the illusion that she is naked. The suit is adorned with fashion brand logos that appear “tattooed” onto her body. This takes the idea of “branding” (which originated in cattle farmers branding their cattle with irons so that ownership of herds was distinguishable) to the next level. Not only does she wear the brands, but these brands are also imprinted on her, they become a part of her, they are her. The sexualisation of her body is supported by her pose with her legs slightly bent and body leaning forward, left arm covering her vagina, and right arm draped across her body to barely cover her nipples but still expose her breasts. Although this pose would usually be associated with someone shocked, for example covering up her naked body as if caught while changing, the lack of shock on Lil Miquela’s face unearths a different meaning for the post. Her facial expression, looking straight at the camera, chin slightly lowered to reveal hooded, piercing eyes, lips closed, communicates direct intentionality thus dominating the viewer. The branded logos furthermore look like spots on a cheetah – she looks like a hunter focusing on her prey, ready to pounce.

8.4.5 Ambivalence – Celebrity Mystery

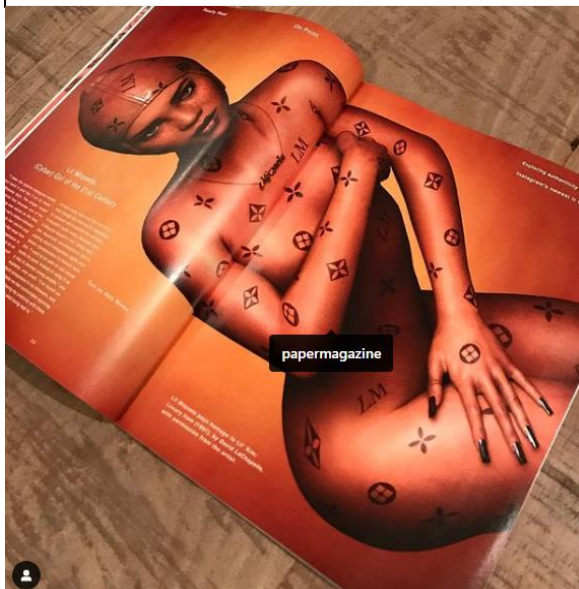
The “knowing wink” is a rhetorical strategy by which content draws attention to itself as a construction. It enables characters to visually address the audience, to step outside the narrative and join with the viewer in a wryly speculative commentary on what we have seen (Abel, 2012:403). Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela often jokingly allude to their non-human status and the criticism about their lack of realness.

Image 8.21, for example, is a post by Lil Miquela where she ironically comments on concepts of “realness.” The post depicts her posing at the Madame Tussauds Hollywood museum next to a hyper-realistic wax sculpture of Ariana Grande a well-known pop star (IMDB, 2022). In the image, Lil Miquela copies the pose of the wax statue, left arm bent and placed on her hip, emphasising her petite middle, head coyly tilted to the right and the left eyebrow raised quizzically, with the edges of her closed mouth lifted into a flirtatious smile.

The choice of being depicted as standing next to Ariana Grande’s statue is of significance when considering the infantilisation of Lil Miquela as Ariana Grande is similarly often depicted with

girl-like sexualisation with her high school-girl ponytail, thigh-length socks and cat-eyed eyeliner. This infantilisation is further echoed in the clothing of Lil Miquela, which appears to emulate that of a girl scout with its pleated open flair skirt, brown and cream colour scheme, colourful badges clipped to her top and draped in a chain across her hips. In so doing, Lil Miquela draws a parallel between her and Ariane Grande, as both being infantilised celebrities. She also draws a parallel between her and the wax sculpture itself as both being human realistic replicas that accurately mirror human physical states. The use of a wax sculpture is significant given Freud's (1919:226) musings on wax-work figures as an example of how the uncanny "casts doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, a lifeless object not being animate." Not only does Lil Miquela comment on the realness/fakeness of the physical wax sculpture but her post alludes to the other meaning of real in relation to authenticity as being genuine. The caption of the post stating "everybody in LA is fake" highlights how humans can be "fakes," as in "not real," (@lilmiquela, 2021b) in the context of social relations and "fake" as in "not human" but made of wax not flesh and blood. The post therefore seeks to allude to her ambiguity and ambivalence as a real human/virtual being through the idea of a wax sculpture as an embodiment of the blurring of the line between the real/fake.

Image 8.20: Magazine Print **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2018a: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdoY-BulwEx>; **Image 8.21:** Wax Statue **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021b: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CW8xWEGp6Kx>.



8.5 WAYS OF BEING ON THE PLATFORM

In the above section, I have illustrated how the mediated authenticity principles of predictability, immediacy, spontaneity and ambivalence, are utilised by virtual influencers to construct a persona in keeping with expected celebrity/influencer behaviours thus ultimately creating a sellable profile. In this next section, I will prove how the virtual profiles harness the principles of spontaneity, imperfection and predictability posting formats that follow platform-specific genre practices that are expected on the Instagram platform, including live posting, informality, the use of multiple viewpoints, flawed framing and piggybacking on the virality of trends

8.5.1 Immediacy and Imperfection – Live Posting

Despite the more polished content that gets posted on Instagram, there is still an expectation of the “INSTAnt” in “INSTAgram” and so there is an expectation of sharing snippets of our lives in the moment. Virtual influencer profiles adhere to these expectations by posting seemingly spontaneous content that not only seeks to validate that the content is shared in the moment of it happening, but also that they, as virtual influencers, exist within that moment. Image 8.22 depicts a screenshot of a post by Lil Miquela which demonstrates this. The post is a snippet from an Instagram Live video that was posted showing a “live interview” between Lil Miquela and musician JB Alvin, a performer at the Coachella music festival. Lil Miquela’s video points out that they are “live” several times. The phenomenon of “liveness,” namely broadcasting live in the form of “breaking news” live broadcast television (Scannell, 1996), or the use of Instagram Live, creates a sense of connection between the followers and influencers who feel that they are living the present moment with them. Followers who have “tuned in” to the live stream can comment in real-time on the video (Alfonzo, 2019:35). The reposting of the live video on her Instagram feed is an attempt to recapture the “live” immediacy of the interview.

In live broadcasts followers can post comments live on the livestream, which the influencer can respond to. A higher rate of reference to comments by the virtual influencer makes users feel like the virtual influencer is just like them and that they can talk to them about anything. Research on virtual influencers found that users feel “a sense of care-taking” and feelings of “being seen” by virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela, “which the respondents normally lack with human influencers” (Molin & Nordgren, 2019:30). This can partly be attributed to the fact that virtual influencer producers invest more time and energy into only actions with fans and followers through comments or direct message replies because “virtual influencers are stuck in

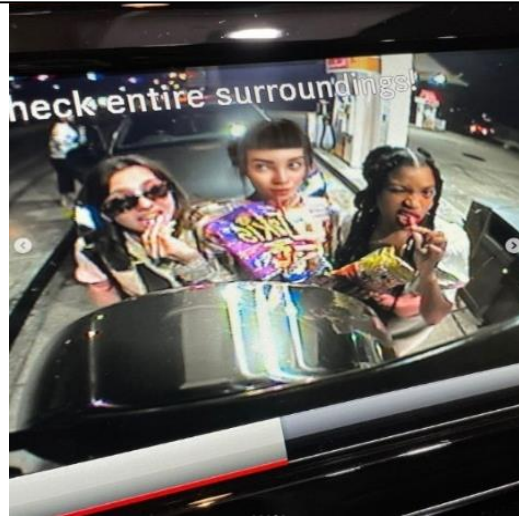
a virtual universe and need to exaggerate their online presence due to their physical non-existence” (Molin, & Nordgren, 2019:30).

Credibility is added through the live video including elements of imperfection, so that Lil Miquela’s presentation is not too polished so as to look “rehearsed.” In the post, she is depicted stumbling over her words, looking up before asking a question to remind herself of what she needs to ask and pausing several times as if thinking (in the same way a human would). Furthermore, the post includes an off-screen voice who it is assumed is the director who prompts Lil Miquela in her interview and gives guidance to Lil Miquela. Lil Miquela’s performance, therefore, matches the genre of live music interviews, which would be informal, would have a director on hand, would include “bloopers,” and which would be broadcast live.

8.5.2 Spontaneity – Informal Modality

When considering modality, it becomes clear that both virtual influencers use a combination of different mediums which would “naturally” be used in daily life and shared spontaneously, such as facetimeing screenshots, security cameras and VCR recordings. These multiple platforms appear to validate the “reality” of the virtual influencers as they show different versions of the same piece of content (Abidin, 2016). In Image 8.22, Lil Miquela and her friends (which are visuals of real people – not her fellow virtual influencers) are depicted on a spontaneous night out looking at themselves in the back camera of a car parked at a gas station. The car’s camera is switched on to guide the driver and alert them of any obstacles behind the vehicle as indicated with the writing “check entire surroundings” and the visibility of the tire fastened to the back of the car. Lil Miquela and her friends appear to jokingly position themselves in front of the camera so that when the driver looks at the visual to guide their driving, they get a fright. In the image, Lil Miquela holds a bag of Taki’s chips and feeds the chips into the mouths of her friends. Lil Miquela is depicted in the centre, with her eyes glancing left cheekily. The image appears to be a spontaneous capturing of getting snacks after a night out with the subjects appearing to have drunk alcohol or smoked marijuana (given that one of the subjects is wearing of sunglasses at night) and the desperate hunger that entails, forcing them to “stop for food” The setting of the post is one which many of her youthful followers can relate to, and the taking of a picture of a video of them adds to the credibility of Lil Miquela, as the car video would technically only be able to capture something in the video that physically exists and is obstructing the vehicle’s reverse path.

Image 8.22: Coachella Live Interview **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2019b: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwOE8bn81C/>; **Image 8.23:** Car camera **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021c: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVdZFubp2KM/>.



8.5.3 Spontaneity - Multiple Viewpoints

The framing devices employed thus communicate the idea of being spontaneously in the moment. Lil Miquela does this successfully by using carousels, where each visual shows a different side to the same “experience.” Multiple viewpoints add validity in the same way that mobile phone pictures corroborate eyewitness accounts of stories as news sources (Creeber & Martin, 2009:149). For example, Image 8.24 depicts a single post from her celebrating her 19th birthday with various images included in a carousel. An Instagram carousel is a post with multiple photos or videos that can be viewed by swiping or clicking left, and up to ten images or videos can be added and shared as a single post on the feed (Sehl & Tien, 2021). Lil Miquela makes use of this combination of viewpoints often. In fact, 63% of Lil Miquela’s posts in the last two years (2020 and 2021) are carousels (of the 513 posts the previous two years, 324 are carousels). This is done to communicate as many angles as possible about an event/occasion being experienced. The multiple viewpoints bring Lil Miquela’s online existence into an offline reality through inserting hints of her alleged existence in these offline, real-world places. For example, **slide one** of the post shows a polished, professional photo of her, and @BermudaisBae. This is a predictable styled image with high salience, and high colour contrast of blue and pink and the usual influencer-esque sexy pose of Lil Miquela’s legs opened wide further pulling up an already short mini skirt over her tight thighs. The placement of Lil Miquela in a shot with a fellow virtual influencer is a tactic used to ensure credibility by including an additional virtual influencer, thus normalising the virtual world in which Lil Miquela exists, socialises and has virtual friends, just like her followers would have friends. **Slide two** shows her with her other “friends,” who are real people consistently included in her

content. Including both real people and her fellow virtual influencers as friends is a further attempt to combine virtual and offline spaces. The consistent use of the same real faces also adds credibility to her friendship narrative. **Slide three** shows an over-exposed, blurry shot of Lil Miquela next to blue balloons eating strawberries. The blurry photo, reminiscent of a phone camera with a lens that needs to be cleaned, suggests an unedited, flawed, in-the-moment picture. Lil Miquela eating the strawberries with a seductive uptilt of her head and exposed tongue is an expected seductive pose. **Slide four** shows a bird's eye view of the birthday cake taken as if by Lil Miquela looking down at her cake. A shot from this point of view is especially noteworthy, as Zappavigna (2016:277) claims that this framing gives the idea of observing the events vicariously through the viewpoint of the subject. Furthermore, this shot includes consistent elements that were visible in previous posts, such as the strawberries she is eating. **Slide five** is a video that is clearly taken in the real world, depicting the setting as included in the previous frames. The use of the video emphasises that this is a real place and the movement of the blue balloons blowing in the breeze further communicates the liveness of the scene.

Not only does Lil Miquela include more visuals in each post through multiple frames in carousels, but she also posts more frequently than Kim Zulu. Lil Miquela has a high frequency of posts, with 1160 posts since the profile creation on 27 April 2017, posting content on average every 1.5 days. Kim Zulu on the other hand does not post as frequently, with a total of 141 posts since the profile creation on 23 March 2020, an average of one post every 4.5 days. However, Kim Zulu's response rate to comments is much higher, with all comments responded to within a day of posting.

Image 8.24: Birthday with Bermuda is Bae; **Image 8.25:** Birthday Real People; **Image 8.26:** Birthday Blurred; **Image 8.27:** Birthday Bird's Eye View of Cake; **Image 8.28:** Birthday Video Balloons in Wind **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021k: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CN-gseXBIof/>.



8.5.4 Imperfection – Flawed Framing

There is an expectation on Instagram that users will show a fun, flawed side to themselves at some point. Image 8.29 for example is a screenshot of a video post depicting Kim Zulu as “behind the scenes” on a photoshoot. The behind-the-scenes aesthetic suggests they are sharing a private moment with their media audience (Abidin, 2016). The camera is tilted upwards towards her, as she playfully looks down into the camera. Patterns of eye-contact often reflect the status and authority of participants (Graddol & Boyd-Barrett, 1995). The illusion of face-to-face interaction that is created when people on the screen address viewers through eye contact and informal language perpetuates an illusion of authenticity (Enli, 2015:52). Kim Zulu starts the video tapping the camera and trying to set it up correctly so that the light from the sun favourably falls on her. The caption reads: “robots also struggle to get the right angle

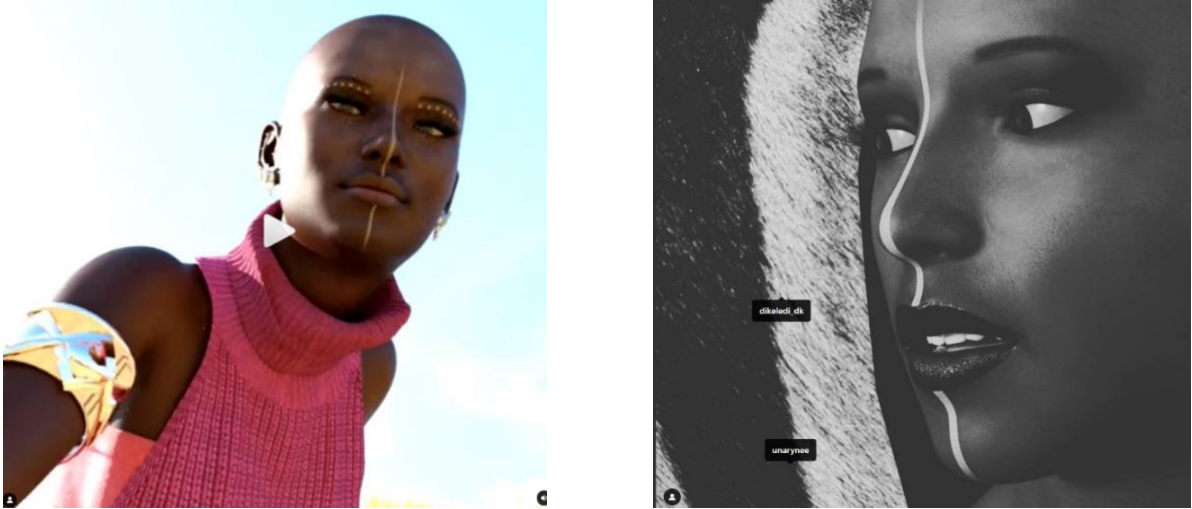
📷...🔊 and can the 🌻 please behave...” (@kimzulu_, 2021d). The capturing of the tapping and setting up of the camera (which usually does not get included in the final sharing of a post) signals the informal intimacy of the scene. The modality of the video which includes “imperfect” elements such as light leaks and light rays, which usually would be avoided or edited out in the final edit of a post, gives the video an imperfect and informal - but thereby authentic - flair.

Imperfection is often further communicated through the modality of videos used. Kim Zulu uses video at a greater frequency than Lil Miquela. Video content makes up 9% of Lil Miquela’s content (a total of 114 videos out of 1160 posts), compared to 35% of Kim Zulu (48 out of 141 posts). Lil Miquela’s video posts are longer, often stretching past 15 seconds, while most of Kim Zulu’s videos are under ten seconds in length. Kim Zulu purposefully includes imperfect video production techniques such as video flickering, blurry videos, and unstable camera positioning that “shakes” as if held by a human hand.

8.5.5 Immediacy – Real Trends

Both Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela create the illusion of “spontaneously” taking part in online trends “in the moment.” For instance, in July 2020 there was a social media “challenge” where women were invited to post a photo of themselves in black and white describing why they are powerful, and then nominate or “challenge” another woman to do the same (Image 8.30). Kim Zulu was “nominated” by @unathestylist and @dikeledi_dk and posted a photo using the trend hashtag #ChallengeAccepted. The image is a black and white image of Kim Zulu with a very close up of her face at a side angle. She is pushed up against a zebra pattern, with the texture indicating real zebra skin, not just a print of the zebra pattern. She glances towards the zebra skin to the right, lips parted as if looking at the zebra skin in admiration. The bold white line down the middle of her face seems to mimic the black and white lines of the zebra-skin pattern, this is done to naturalise her synthetic identity as she matches her lines in parallel to the natural zebra lines. She is an African beauty, and the zebra is an African beauty.

Image 8.29: Tapping on Camera **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2021d: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQB90aVD6ca/>; **Image 8.30:** Trend **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020q: https://www.instagram.com/p/CDKGIF_DWnf/.



8.6 CONCLUSION

The way that virtual influencers have been able to portray a version of online authenticity that appeals to users has intrigued various scholars (Carbajal & Blanton, 2019; Darner & Arvidsson, 2019; Molin & Nordgren, 2019; Andersson, & Sobek, 2020; Black, 2020:48; Drenten, & Brooks, 2020; Molina, 2020; Moustakas *et al.*, 2020; Robinson, 2020:16). For example, Andersson and Sobek (2020:27) identified purpose, personality, continuity, and transparency as four key factors that determined whether a virtual influencer was perceived as authentic. Kunhle (2019:3), in contrast, stresses the importance of enacting pre-defined cultural scripts on Instagram, such as calibrated amateurism, personal branding, being “cool” and selfies.

In this chapter, I suggest that the illusion of authenticity is most effectively communicated by virtual influencer profiles that incorporate Enli’s (2015) seven mediated authenticity principles. I argue that virtual influencers utilise these mediated authenticity principles to construct 1) an identity as relatable to followers through the principles of ordinariness, predictability, confession and imperfection. These principles work together to construct a persona with a similar ethnicity, gender, age as followers, and exists in a similar geopolitical location and positioned in an expected mode of femininity and sexualisation. Furthermore, the principles construct 2) a persona in keeping with expected celebrity/influencer behaviours through predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, and ambivalence, which follows an online celebrity script of self-promotion, commercialisation, event attendance, and third-party validation and mystery. Finally, the principles of spontaneity, immediacy and imperfection are used by virtual influencers to 3) post in formats that follow platform-specific genre practices, that all create a

profile that is “sellable” including live posting, informality, the use of multiple viewpoints, flawed framing and piggybacking off of the virality of trends.

Virtual influencer agencies therefore mimic the most successful human influencer content format, and the most relatable human general-user content and sell it back to us in a virtual package. The importance of authenticity to build parasocial relationships online is not overlooked by creative agencies. Calibrated authenticity has become a common content genre on Instagram where private aspects of self are strategically revealed to the public through the “backstage” being brought to the “frontstage.” We reward, celebrate and fetishise the caught-off-guard authentic moments from the offline space which we imagine to not be staged. Creative agencies understand this and replicate the calibrated authenticity genre in keeping with Instagram content expectations as faithfully as possible.

CHAPTER NINE

INTERVIEW RESPONSES - A VIEW FROM AFRICA

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The empirical research of this thesis focuses on three sites at which the meanings of an image are made, namely (1) the site of the production of an image (discussed in Chapter Seven where an app-walkthrough of Instagram gave an overview of the platform on which content is produced and shared); (2) the site of the image itself, (discussed in Chapter Eight where Instagram posts from the profiles of Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu was analysed); and (3) the site of consumption, as the content is read by various audiences and thus enters lived culture. This last moment of consumption is the focus of this chapter. This chapter begins by presenting an analysis of the Instagram users' responses to, and interpretations of, the Instagram platform as a whole. This establishes what the different types of Instagram users choose to use Instagram for, which further contextualises their responses to authenticity-for-consumption vehicles such as virtual influencers. I then move on to examine these users' responses to the virtual influencer profiles that exist on this platform and the forms of content that these profiles create. I gather evidence in relation to users' interpretations of commercialised authenticity performances employed to achieve broader platform capitalist goals.

In this chapter, I work through the core themes arising from the semi-structured interviews and then provide key response themes from participants. The exploration of the findings from the individual responses includes quotations from the interview data and limited references to the literature review to substantiate the points being made. Participants have been allocated pseudo-names to ensure anonymity. The interviewed participants consisted of two key groups namely, South African Instagram users, and a representative of the creators of the Kim Zulu virtual influencer profile (the Representative). Within the South African Instagram user group, three important sub-groups were distinguished, namely, the Privates (everyday Instagram users who had their account settings on private), the Influencers (users whose accounts are on public and who utilise Instagram in promoting a brand for commercial purposes), and the Creatives (namely photographers or creators in the visual space who use Instagram for inspiration, portfolio sharing and networking). Each of these groups had different uses for Instagram, different views towards platform capitalism and different reactions to virtual influencers and their attempts at authenticity.

Research by Hoang and Su (2019:106) on how virtual celebrities in the West are consumed notes that such reactions to virtual influencers from one group cannot be simplified in one singular success model. Similarly, this research does not claim to represent a simplified answer to the reactions of the global South to virtual influencers. However, with no research on interpretations of virtual influencers by audiences from Africa, this research is the first step in the general conversation.

The first group, namely the South African Instagram users, were asked questions regarding Instagram app use, platform purchasing behaviour, attitudes towards authenticity, engagements with human and virtual influencers, and reactions to content from the Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu profiles. To build on these findings, the representative from the Kim Zulu creative team, The Avatar Company (previously known as EMOJI Digital), was asked questions around the influencer industry as a whole, the goals behind the creation of Kim Zulu, the strategy behind choices in constructing the profile, ethics and disclosure, and the future of virtual influencer industry from an African perspective. These views will be unpacked next.

9.2 DEPENDENCIES ON INSTAGRAM AS ILLUSTRATED IN USES

When interviewing the South African Instagram users, it became clear that the primary use of Instagram differed depending on the type of group the users fell in, namely the Privates, the Creatives or the Influencers. Across the different groups, the ability of Instagram to embed itself as a facilitator of connection was clear.

9.2.1 The Privates

The main uses mentioned explicitly by the Privates in this research included using Instagram for accessing “news and current affairs” (Participant H; Participant L), “motivational therapy stuff” (Participant H; Participant L), “mindless entertainment” (Participant D) and a source of “political activism” (Participant H; Participant L). The uses of Instagram illustrate how Instagram has embedded itself within users’ daily needs to the point where they are reliant on its platform architecture and uses and affordances.

The use of Instagram as a connector and facilitator of relationships was a recurring theme for the Privates. In terms of friendships, browsing Instagram was seen as a means to “keep up with friends locally and internationally” (Participant D; Participant I; Participant G) even if they are “not in the same geographic area” (Participant D) and be “part of the moment” (Participant D).

This highlights the network effect of Instagram, presented in Chapter Two, which has created a sense of dependency on Instagram as the facilitator of our connections. Many participants mentioned this connectivity as the redeeming quality of Instagram, seemingly unaware that this is not the only medium that can foster such connectivity; yet, Instagram has successfully entrenched itself as a critical bridge on which online relationship maintenance is built. This fosters the “all or nothing” acceptance of Instagram, where the substantial criticisms against Instagram are accepted as a necessary price to pay for its convenience.

The reliance on Instagram’s architecture was also evident in the mention of Instagram as “a place to store images.” “Paying for cloud storage gets pricey. I prefer not to keep all photos on my phone, because they can be stored on Instagram with proper safety procedures,” explains Participant D. Instagram’s archiving function now enables users to save and access Stories, reels and posts on the Instagram archive section. The participant did not mention the implications of sharing this visual content with Instagram as a source of data information attributed to their profile. This returns us to the characteristic trade-off nature of Instagram use, where users are aware that with every Instagram feature introduced, users relinquish some degree of their private selves to gain the right to use the Instagram feature for free. Interestingly, this same participant mentioned choosing to set their account to private mode because of concerns around “safety” and “account hacking.” There is thus trust in Instagram’s ability to store data safely but not in the security of logins to the app.

9.2.2 The Creatives

Unlike the Privates, the Creatives had uses for Instagram that applied specifically to their craft. The photographers and graphic designers interviewed highlighted Instagram as a source of inspiration. “I went on Instagram for inspiration as a photographer. Coming from a small city it was good to see what photographers were shooting all over the world and what was possible,” says Participant F. Some Creatives did not see the “point” of Instagram for just entertainment but saw it as a source to inspire their future creative outputs. This embodies the neoliberal realm of Instagram as a space for rewarding and fostering constant content generation. A well-produced post cannot simply be enjoyed but needs to be learnt from and incorporated in the creator’s own online profile to be operationalised for additional online credibility and future content monetisation.

However, Instagram does not always succeed in inspiring Creatives. “What's quite sad is I don't feel inspired by Instagram anymore” admits Participant F, “a lot of people don't. The initial enthusiasm for it as inspiration is gone.” It is worth considering when this shift in the inspirational value of Instagram may have happened. Participant F suggests that the alteration from “getting inspired for the desire to create good work” to now getting inspired to create work that unlocks Instagram-rewarding metrics has caused the change. The result is that Influencer participants “post way less” than they used to. Instagram’s goals of increased content generation and circulation seem hindered because of the pressure of their metrics that monitor the rates of this circulation, deterring users from posting content that they do not have full confidence will unlock returns.

Instagram has further entrenched itself as a networking arena. For photographer Participant C, Instagram is a means of finding people to collaborate with creatively. “I like that I can reach out to models internationally more directly,” explains Participant C. “They can access my work easily by visiting my profile and they can see from Instagram that my work is legit[imate].” This use of Instagram as a source of legitimacy was raised repeatedly by the Creatives. It was clear that being an “early adopter” of Instagram was a metric of creative credibility with the number of years that you have been on the platform a source of respect. Photographer Participant C claims to be part of the earliest adopters of Instagram in South Africa. “I always say I never found Instagram, Instagram found me. I was one of the first users of Instagram when they were still closed group testing before launching,” explains Participant C. Similarly, photographer Participant F started Instagram almost eight years ago and says his long history on the platform often leads to clients trusting him more when creating content on the platform. Interestingly, Participant K, a member of the creative team behind Kim Zulu, also stressed that he has been “on Instagram since 2010” and is therefore an “Instagram veteran.” These remarks suggest that Instagram was quickly recognised as a platform that can be leveraged for gain with set rules that seasoned professionals know how to use proficiently to unlock success.

To Participant C, there was also an important distinction between Creatives on Instagram and “normal users.” “Photographers on Instagram use the app differently because we're not social human beings, we're creative human beings on this platform.” He laments that it often feels like Instagram has “forgotten about the creatives.” “Instagram used to be photo-sharing layout platform with chronological order,” explains Participant C, describing himself as “annoyed” because “Instagram has moved so far away from that that it is not hard to do the most basic

thing like sharing a full ratioed image, we have to download third-party app such Instasize that adds a white background in your image just to show the full image.” This sentiment has been echoed in the press for a while and was further exacerbated when the new Instagram CEO Adam Mosseri, proclaimed that Instagram is “no longer a photo-sharing platform” (Clark, 2021). Participant C describes his disappointment at hearing that statement: “I am passionate about stills photography so what he said was upsetting, it felt like a truck rode over me.” To Participant C, Instagram, which started off only offering the sharing of static visuals, should not “forget its roots,” because it “started off with photos.” This reaction reflects the proprietorial feelings that users develop towards the app, which becomes a kind of “home” for them as they get used to their established ways of existing on the app. When Instagram changes the rules of the game, users are reminded that they have no real say in how the app is reconfigured or put to different use but are at the mercy of the whims of the company.

9.2.3 The Influencers

Though similar to the Creatives, the Influencer group also uses Instagram for networking and brand building, however the brands associated with Influencers are centred around them as individuals, while brands regarding Creatives often are centred around their produced body of work. All Influencers interviewed mention their first and most prominent use of Instagram is to build and maintain their brand. “I use Instagram mainly to market my business and build a name for myself,” explains Participant G, a fitness influencer. For these users, Instagram is the source of their public identity, and the nucleus of their online self. This again centres Instagram as an essential participant in the presence and stability of a consistent online identity.

Interestingly, for Participant I, Instagram is also a method to create “personal connections” with her audience, however the market-related nature of this activity becomes clear in her explanation that she uses Instagram to “build a picture that is relatable.” The fostering of connection through personal engagement tactics is therefore operationalised to serve the end goal of creating a profile, “building a picture” and presenting an image that the target audience can relate to and buy into.

Furthermore, Participant I uses Instagram to gauge the market, identify the strongest players and emulate their content posting strategies to unlock engagement from followers. Participant I specifically follows her “rolemodels” within the industry as she wishes to replicate their success: “I want to work to get to that same point” she says. This replicates the Creatives’ use

of Instagram as inspiration for the type of visuals produced by other photographers, while Participant I uses it as inspiration to the kind of personality-infused narrative used by other influencers that she wishes to emulate. The use of Instagram as a source of work is clear, the end goal is to be like the role model, the idealised influencer identity ranked highest in the attention economy.

9.3 PROFILES AS ASSETS IN AN ATTENTION ECONOMY

Chapter Three explored how Instagram users are made and unmade into assets through adhering to celebrity and influencer performance norms and engaging in visibility labour. The responses from participants in their choice of privacy setting and content posted reflects the idea of Instagram profile creation and maintenance as work.

9.3.1 Profile Privacy Settings

One of the first decisions made when setting up a profile on Instagram is the choice of profile settings being on “public” (where anyone can access your profile and see your posted content) or “private” (where users have to request to follow you and only once access is granted, is your profile and its content visible to them). As the name suggests, the Privates were all users who had chosen to have their account set as private.

At the time of interviewing the Creatives and Influencers, all participants had their profiles on public. The core distinction between the description of private and public mode was using Instagram for “fun” in privacy mode. For users who moved from public to private, the decision to set their profile to private was “freeing” explains Participant B, who used to have it on public but after entering the corporate world, decided to put it on private mode so that she could use Instagram for “fun.” Once putting it on private, her Instagram account became a “safe space of a further expression of self.” Participant H also chose to go private after getting tired of the pressure of monitoring metrics. “When I switched to private, I started to care less about the number of followers and likes on a post and I posted more of what I actually wanted to post” she explains.

This is supported by influencers Participant I, Participant M and Participant J, who describe the opposite feeling when they switched from private to public. “When on private my account used to be just for fun” explains Participant M, “now I actively use it to make money and as a real source of income.” “I moved from having fun to being more tailored,” describes Participant

I, “once my profile was on public there was a different intention behind the posting.” The decision to move from public to private for the Privates was attributed to the “pressure” of monitoring metrics; in contrast, the decision to move from private to public for the Influencers was attributed to the “pressure” from the entertainment industry in which many of them work in that there is an expectation of online performance. According to Participant I, “you need a social media brand to support an industry brand.” An Instagram online brand has therefore been engrained as a necessity in the minds of the users, who appear to accept at face-value Instagram’s all-powerful role in making or breaking relationships in the private sphere or making or breaking brands in the public sphere.

9.3.2 Content Posting Strategies

The choice on which parts of oneself to share is in itself a form of curatorship. Interestingly, when the Influencers do share moments from their life it is often from a very neoliberal position. For instance, Participant J shares his music as a product up for sale, while Participant M, an influencer, explains that she “shares everything [she] does career-wise,” in other words, sharing content that enhances the value of herself as a model and influencer commodity. She explains that “there’s a lot about [her] relationship [she doesn’t] share.” Thus, when perusing her profile there are posts featuring her partner, but only when it is linked to advertising a certain product, such as a his-and-hers watch or a night out at a restaurant in exchange for a complimentary meal.

The focus is not only on what *type* posts to share or not share, but the *quality* of content shared. The pressure of only posting content that had been tailored and edited to be of a high enough standard on Instagram was clear. For example, Participant I insists that “I don’t post content unless I have time to edit it properly.” When this level of professional editing is not possible, or when the final version of the image falls short of the user’s intended quality, the posting activity gets abandoned. “Sometimes I won’t even post something that I have shot because I am worried about it not doing well,” admits Participant C, a photographer. The amount of labour that goes into creating these posts does not go unnoticed, with Participant G noting, “I absolutely see my content creation as work.” Participant M admits that “even [her] Instagram Stories have become more strategic” because “what I post is based on what I want people to focus on, what I want them to link me with.” She explains that this needs to be purposeful because “you can’t just post random nonsense, that doesn’t link together, people will get

confused.” The content posted thus needs to work together to serve the overall brand positioning being built.

The pressure expressed was not just for the *quality* of content produced but also the *frequency* of content creation. Influencers admitted feeling “under pressure to put something up at least once a week” (Participant G), the emphasis is on “frequent and consistent posting” (Participant F) because if they do not share content “you kind of fade away” (Participant J) and run the risk of “losing your audience” (Participant C). “It starts to feel like work to keep up with the demand” admits Participant J, “it’s like trying to just keep up on a treadmill” describes Participant F. “People don’t see the labour that goes into maintaining a profile or portfolio” says Participant C.

The labour of Instagram is most apparent in the description of input efforts and output measurements frequently mentioned by the participants. Attention is paid to these metrics as returns/rewards on content that is produced of high quality, positioned to the right audience, and posted at the right time. This approach is also followed by the Kim Zulu team, with the representative Participant K explaining that as a team they “check feedback from the audience” to “test everything” since they “don’t know the answer” to many things. He notes that they furthermore follow competitors in the form of other human influencers and virtual influencers to “look at sort of best practice but also see where the mistakes are in the industry, so we are able to use the good and the bad of what exists out there in the industry and adjust the content.” For instance, Participant K identifies Lil Miquela as a source of inspiration for the Kim Zulu team as she is “the pinnacle” of virtual influencer existence on Instagram. Lil Miquela is therefore the best embodiment of a virtual influencer that has leveraged her constructed online identity for the profitable gain of the agency behind the profile.

Interestingly, the monitoring of these metrics was not just an activity done by Influencers and Creatives but also done by Privates, even though they did not have a direct financial incentive to do so. Participant H was so interested in the metrics behind her posts that even though she does not identify herself as an influencer or brand, she made her profile a public business account at one point so that she could have access to “specific reporting” and “get nice insights into [her] posts.”

These insights were used by Influencers and Creatives to guide the kind of content created, thus mimicking a supply-demand market logic. The Creatives monitor what type of content users want and engage with best (demand) and so they adapt the content they produce to meet those demands (supply) including best “posting times” (Participant C). Participant F furthermore describes needing to “get the numbers up” thus mimicking market language in boosting sales numbers.

The negative effects of this are not lost on users. For Participant F, it becomes “a comparison game” and a “weird game of trying to use the algorithm to your advantage to try and get those numbers up.” When asked why metrics are so important, Participant F describes the “kick you get out of engagement” which is similar to “an endorphin release.” He admits, “I know that I shouldn't care, but I still check the views/likes for some reason.” A creative, Participant F tends to focus on metrics as a source of proof of content performance, a habit not without merit. When considering the importance of metrics with the Privates, essentially Participant F's target audience for which he produces his content, they subtly indicated the importance of metrics in changing their judgement of profiles and posts. Participant J, when asked whether he liked a post or not responded: “Do I like this picture? I don't know, how many people liked it?” This suggests that the metrics of a post are used as guidance for a positive or negative reaction. Participant J further mentions not initially liking a post or profile, but after “seeing how many likes or followers it has” going back and “looking again.” It is not only the Privates who highlighted this tendency. Participant C, a Creative, also admitted that the knowledge that “over three million people follow Lil Miquela and have connected with the profile” immediately changed his perspective of the profile. Metrics are therefore not only important to producers of content in measuring the performance of their posts, but they are also important to the consumers of that post (audience who view the content) in guiding how they are to respond to it.

As a result of the obsession with metrics, many participants admitted to engaging in some form of engagement boosting tactics. This includes “**engagement pods**,” essentially groups of Instagram users who share their posts asking for engagement in the form of likes and comments from other users. Participant C, a photographer who has used several engagement pods, does not see the use of such engagement pods as artificially boosting metrics but rather as a means for users to “support one another as fellow creatives.” “I think any form of engagement is good engagement, especially when it comes to social media and marketing,” explains Participant C.

Interestingly, the engagement pods which are open to the general public do get tedious and so Participant C has become more selective in joining pods, by specifically only engaging in “VIP Pods” namely a pod of photographers who have “been on the Instagram platform for over seven years.” For Participant F, comments are a crucial metric of engagement as “seeing the comments reminds me of what it meant to be on the platform initially, before it was super commercialised.” The irony of trying to stimulate engagement because it simulates a sense of the original community of Instagram, yet employing tactics to do so, takes away the natural engagement flow and contributes to the contrived nature of the platform, which the user tries to avoid.

A step further from human pods, where real humans using their real profiles comment on posts, is the growing trend of using **bots**, namely fake profiles that comment on posts. The buying of followers was another example of this where fake profiles are created to artificially bump up the number of followers on a profile. Some participants were very clear about bot buying and follower buying being an ethical problem but did not have the same stance towards pod engagement. Another less frowned upon, but an equally noteworthy tactic used by the participants to boost engagement is in the **type of Stories** they post. “I will mix content that I know performs well with content that I want my followers to see. I will throw in four or five memes to spike the number of views and shares and then the sixth post will be an actual photography shot I took, or a selfie of me doing something. In that way my Stories would hit 3500 views as opposed to just 1000 views if I had not included the booster meme posts” admits Participant F.

9.4 WHEN ARE VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS BELIEVABLE AND AUTHENTIC

All participants could “appreciate the creativity and skill behind the creation” (Participant B & Participant H). “It’s really progressive,” remarks Participant F, “I’m in awe of it and as a fellow creator I am curious as to how they did it” explains Participant A, while Participant C also celebrates the profiles saying that “any procedure that you apply well can be unstoppable.” “The Kim Zulu team have practiced the rawest form of character creation” explains Participant F, “as a creative that is amazing to witness.” When asked whether participants perceived virtual influencers as authentic, the responses were mixed with Creatives the most inclined to see virtual influencers as authentic, and the Influencers having the strongest negative reaction to the idea. The importance of a strong narrative (story) and visually realistic portrayal were identified.

9.4.1 Consistency

Interestingly, authenticity and commercialisation are not necessarily contradictory elements in the minds of the participants as long as there is consistency. Participant L for instance sites the “Kardashian family who consistently portray themselves as very commercialised, materialistic, sexual-centric kind of identities” yet they are seen as authentic to the consistent brand they have established for themselves. We have become so accustomed to the sharing of our personal life moments as intertwined with commercial goals, that this act is easily accepted - if done consistently. “Even if you are communicating a commercial message but you do it in an authentic way, I can see it as authentic” admits Participant F.

Participants cited the combining of authentic moments with commercial endeavours in a way that feels “jilted” as problematic as then “it is clear that the act of pouring your heart out is linked to monetisation and this reduces the value of the post” explains Participant L. Participant A, a Creative, has a particularly strong stance, “as soon as I see any sort of product included in a post it loses its authenticity.” For Participant D it is this authenticity-for-gain narrative that has resulted in him not following any influencers and never having bought an item advertised by an influencer. This negative reaction was especially true when the partnered-with company was a “big brand” which made the influencer “appear like a sellout” in Participant A’s opinion, and have a “big capitalism vibe” according to Participant E. This sentiment was softened when the influencer partnered with a smaller brand as this was seen as a means of “supporting small businesses” explains Participant H.

The Privates Participant D and Participant L therefore emphasised “consistency” in relation to perceived authenticity. “There needs to be consistency between what you say and what you do, your actions need to match what you say” says Participant L. According to Participant D, there also needs to be “consistency between your offline and online self, you can’t be contradicting yourself.” Commercial partnerships with brands that are consistent with an influencer’s brand have a high “congruency” and when audiences perceive coherence between a brand and an influencer it has positive results (Amos, Holmes & Strutton 2008:73; Fleck, Korchia & Le Roy 2012:658; Roy & Bagdare, 2015:136; Bergkvist *et al.*, 2016:173). The participants approved of virtual influencers endorsing products that were consistent with their virtual identity and were linked to the virtual space, for example “a voice over for a GPS” (Participant B) and “virtual games” (Participant I). To Participant J, the electronic car advertisement of BMW Mini was a successful collaboration with a virtual influencer that “makes sense for Kim Zulu and

Lil Miquela.” In fact, Participant F admits being “a little upset that a brand such as Tesla (also an electronic vehicle manufacturer) did not use a virtual influencer to tell this kind of story.” But Participant M saw even virtual brands as a mismatch: to her the mini advertisement’s electronic-car virtual-being angle was still “a far stretch between the electric car and electric person.”

The importance of consistency was something not overlooked by the Kim Zulu team representative, who observed that in the human influencer industry “it is very hard to be consistent - as an influencer, you have to sometimes do things just for money, especially influencers who do it full time.” Consistency also relates to the timeframe of brand partnerships. Influencers who post about companies within a single brand category over a long period of time were seen as more authentic. “You can’t be posting about eight different makeup brands,” explains Participant M. This was also mentioned by the Kim Zulu team representative who stressed that the creative team strongly “script Kim Zulu’s story” and that they have “said no to quite a few campaigns, because it didn’t match Kim Zulu’s story.” The representative aimed to project authenticity by emphasising that they are “not brand partnership focused, but story-focused” and if they are approached to collaborate “and that market talks to our story, and we do it, because we understand that it’s a long-term curve, it’s not a short journey.” Despite these claims at being focused on the story, he mentions that his “first thought” when the Kim Zulu concept was presented to him was to be “excited about the types of partnerships we could do.” It is significant that his mind immediately went to ideas around the capitalisation of the asset and not about what type of message Kim Zulu could speak to, which his emphasis on narrative claims to have focused on.

Furthermore, in the concluding question to the Kim Zulu team representative I asked what he would say if he had the platform to speak to Kim Zulu’s followers directly. Without hesitation he mentioned that he would like to see “what Kim’s followers would like her to influence” as he admits “we don’t ask enough of our audience what they want and what issues are important to them.” This emphasises a market logic as narrative driver as the audience demand dictates the content that the Kim Zulu team would supply.

9.4.2 Story

The Kim Zulu team representative claims to prioritise narrative as Kim Zulu’s “identity” is of “great importance” as the team strives to “create an identity that people can resonate with.” He

explains that “it is about being sensitive on when and when not to speak because just because you have a platform doesn't mean you're qualified to speak.” Similarly, he mentions that they are “super determined not to be in the space of the attention economy where people do and say whatever, just for likes” and that they do not just “jump on the bandwagon” “because something is happening.” The importance of a strong story was highlighted by many participants who, without prodding, mentioned the role of story as a key indicator of authenticity. Some participants, predominantly the Creatives, admitted that if a virtual influencer's narrative was conveyed successfully, they would be able to see virtual influencers as authentic. “If the goal of social media is content creation and engagement, and the virtual entity is interacting with the community and really engaging with them through their profile story then it does not matter that the source is virtual or not” declares Participant A, a Creative. “Whether virtual influencers are manufactured, or if they are a hybrid model, as long as the authenticity is there, the content is engaging, then I'm all for it” explains Participant A. This is supported by fellow creative Participant C who argues that “it's all about the message at the end of the day, whether the vehicle is virtual or human is irrelevant. If the message is carried out well and the story is communicated authentically, then I'll support it” Participant C elaborates. “Even if it's not a human being, it's serving a purpose, it's making people happy” says Participant C. “It is the personality, the narrative that sells it and that can come from anywhere” says Participant A. Some of the Privates, such as Participant I, also stressed the importance of story as “very NB.” “It is all in the captions for me, yes the virtual should look human, but the believability for me is in the story told in the captions” explains Participant J.

Despite the Kim Zulu team representative's apparent emphasis on narrative, when comparing the perceived authenticity of Kim Zulu versus Lil Miquela, participants described Kim Zulu as less authentic than Lil Miquela because the profile's narrative is “weak” (Participant H), the profile's “purpose is unclear” (Participant I) and “doesn't really push a message” (Participant H) and is ineffective when compared to Lil Miquela's “stronger story” (Participant D).

However, despite the strength of a story, most participants were still unable to see virtual influencers as authentic due to their non-human status. “I obviously do not think virtual influencers can be seen as authentic based on the fact that they are not real people” explains Participant H. This opinion is reiterated by Participant I and Participant J, both influencers, who admit that “knowing that it is a virtual influencer and not a human innately makes her unconvincing.” Interestingly, there were moments when many participants admitted not

knowing that Lil Miquela was a virtual influencer, leading us to question whether in those moments the profiles could be seen as authentic.

Participant L elaborates on this by citing the lack of personal characteristics of the virtual profiles. “If it's a true representation of your personal characteristics, then by that definition, it's authentic. But the problem here is that virtual influencer does not necessarily have personal characteristics in the form of like a human person. They have personal characteristics in the form of their brand and what the concept of whatever their profile is.” “What constitutes a person?” questions Participant L, “if you're going to take a person as a human being, and a person who has lived experiences as a human being and interact with other human beings, then I don't think virtual inferences can be authentic, because their authenticity is not rooted in personal characteristics that they gain from interactions with other people such as a human person” says Participant L.

9.4.3 Does it Matter?

A counter argument about the importance of disclosure is that what people do not know cannot hurt them. In the context of virtual influencers, it can be questioned that if the result is the same does the source matter? For Participant I, “virtual influencers do execute the strict function of social media” just “like input and output, they mechanically show experiences and point to signs of emotion” just “like a crying emoji” and this “isn’t different to human influencers.”

This is supported by Participant C, who cites an example of a strong public reaction to a human authentic moment during an audition on America’s Got Talent where singer “SongBird” gave a particularly touching account of how she stays positive while battling cancer. Participant C muses that “if a robot went onto stage and sang well on America’s Got Talent, what would happen?” To him “entertainment is entertainment” and to him the logic is “if we watched the show for good singing and that good singing comes from a robot or virtual influencer then there is no barrier?”

9.4.4 Visually Believable - The Uncanny

All participants including Influencer, Privates and Creatives, admitted they would not know if Lil Miquela was virtual when scrolling past. “Scrolling past I wouldn’t be able to tell but when you zoom in you can see there are still some elements missing in comparison to a human” says

Participant I. “No, I wouldn’t tell its virtual, I would just think it is a very insecure girl who’s editing herself to be totally different and is looking for attention” explains Participant J.

For some there was a clear distinction in the comparison between Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu, as Participant H states: “even scrolling it is clear Kim Zulu isn’t real.” “Her eyes seem to be dead and unresponsive” suggests Participant A. Her profile was “not as human realistic” to Participant G and “clearly not a person” to Participant D. However, for Participant J, a few of her “pictures look real and [she] looks like a model.” Participant I attributes the believability of the Kim Zulu profile to the mood of the “cool structured elegant aesthetic” that exists in the profile which replicates what Participant M describes as “the very perfectionist aesthetic style that thrives on Instagram.” To Participant A it is the type of “classic influencer content that screams “Vogue” advertising.” Participant C, a photographer, likes the “clean look” of the Kim Zulu profile and highlights that this is how he “would have edited the skin of a model [he] shot.” This demonstrates the correlation between the real person *editing* that occurs and the virtual profile *creating* that occurs.

It was also striking that participants that participants who did not see Kim Zulu as real were shocked that there could be users out there who could not see that it was virtual: “why can they not tell when it is so clear?” questions Participant D. The opposite was true for Lil Miquela, who all participants admitted could pass as a human. Even those entrenched in the virtual world, such as graphic designer and avid gamer, Participant A admitted to being “duped and bamboozled by Lil Miquela.” “I actually thought Lil Miquela was real and just had a custom filter,” explains Participant A. Creatives like Participant A and Participant F displayed a form of embarrassment at not being able to tell that the user was virtual despite their visual media literacy. “I was actually taken aback in the beginning” admits Participant F, “it was all actually a little bit foreign to me, it’s actually really wild.”

The explanations for the believability of the virtual influencers focused on the changing visual landscape of Instagram. “We’re all using filters on these platforms, and so we all look a little bit meta human-ish” proposes Participant E. As a result, participants like Participant I admitted to not always being able to tell when a photo is edited. For Participant M, it is “getting harder and harder to tell when normal photos are edited and to what extent something is real or curated.” Not only is visual editing normalised on Instagram but so is the use of augmented reality, for instance through the use of Story filters which superimpose dog ears, or heart eyes

onto faces. To Participant A, it “makes sense that virtual influencers would be on Instagram as the platform has always included augmented reality into their filters.” This is supported by Participant E who notes, “there are so many people making so many different accounts, making so many different like claims online about things that exist and things that don’t exist, this is just more of that.” As a result, Participant F and Participant A describe the normalisation of a “post-human online entity” brought on by “liminal transition periods,” for example during a pandemic where online and offline work and life selves became intertwined due to work-from-home practices. As a result, Participant F admitted that he is not “sure where to draw the line.”

It is worth analysing not just whether the participants could tell whether virtual influencers were human or not, but how they felt about their correct or incorrect reading of the profiles as real or not. For non-creative participants, the fact that they were not able to tell that virtual influencers were not human took on particular significance. This distinction was raised by Participant C a Creative who thought “Lil Miquela was really cool” but his friend who is not in the creative space, was “uncomfortable.”

The realisation that participants could not tell virtual influencers were not real was a “a shock” (Participant M), “confusing” (Participant I), a “big worry” (Participant L), “very creepy” (Participant M) “disturbing and weird” (Participant H) and “anger inducing” (Participant I). Participant E described being simultaneously “plainly freaked out” but also “morbidly curious.” These reactions support finding by Creasey and Anido (2020:78) on their research on virtual influencers which found that although a humanlike appearance is favourable, marketers should consider the “uncanny valley effect to avoid unintentional eeriness and creepiness that may disturb potential consumers.”

The disturbing nature of the virtual influencer’s human likeness was amplified when the identity embodied by the virtual influencer was similar to our own. Male participants were “unaffected” by thinking that these female virtual influencers were human and then being told that they were virtual” (Participant D), while female participants were all “negatively affected” as they had a “deeper connection with a female being, so it is more high stakes” (Participant B), especially for black female participants as “the idea of a virtual influencer performing [her] black, female authentic identity [was]s disturbing” (Participant L). This is reiterated by Participant M who is a white Afrikaans female but imagines that if the virtual “emulated those

parts of [her] identity and pretended to be a white Afrikaans female” that this form of “cultural embodiment” would be “upsetting” to her on a deeper level as well.

The nature of the participants’ connection to not only the identity of the influencer, but the content of their post, also impacts the extent of their feelings of betrayal. If the post is “emotional” (Participant L), is “making claims at overcoming incredible hardship or trauma” (Participant D) or got the user to “emotionally invest in the post and build up trust” and was “stepping into the sacred realm of the human” (Participant C) then the “betrayal factor” would be “high” and the user would have a “bad reaction towards” it (Participant M), would “feel offended” (Participant L), and “would completely tap out and block the virtual influencer profile at the extreme” (Participant M). This was also true for purchase stimulation for Participant L, for “if the posts made [her] purchase something, based on [her] belief of the virtual influencer’s realness, [she] would feel betrayed” explains Participant L.

9.5 EFFICACY OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS

The creators of Kim Zulu stress the advantages of virtual influencers “from a client’s perspective” (namely the brand that the virtual influencer would endorse) as “virtual influencers are consistent” and “there aren’t ratchet moments” that lead to negative scandal so that “clients have control and have a sense of safety.” Participants also acknowledge the time and cost-saving benefits of using a virtual influencer instead of a human influencer or model including the “labour of models on set, the crew and the travel costs” (Participant H). When considering the efficacy of virtual influencers as online profiles three key metrics are worth considering. First, would the participants buy a product/service advertised by the virtual influencer; and then, would those in the industry be willing to collaborate with a virtual influencer, or at the very least, would they engage with the content posted by the virtual influencer by following the profile.

9.5.1 Buy from Virtual Influencers

“If the purpose of Kim Zulu or Lil Miquela is to make money then I can’t find an issue with that because a lot of people use social media to make money so there is not anything innately wrong with that” explains Participant I. Despite not having an issue with the commercial nature of virtual influencers due to the accepted and established commercial nature of human influencers, the preference for participants was still towards buying from human influencers. All participants indicated that they would rather buy something endorsed by a human influencer

than a virtual influencer. Interestingly all explanations as to why this is the case referenced a desire to “support” a human influencer instead, says Participant D. This comment indicates the participant’s awareness that their actions help to financially uphold an influencer.

One of the reasons cited for not being willing to buy from a virtual influencer refers to the root of eWOM namely an influencer actually using a product and sharing their experience of it with their audience, something virtual influencers are unable to do. “I prefer human influencers because at least I can somewhat relate to them and I know that their recommendations and opinions come from them using and interacting with the product to some degree, whether their posts as entirely truthful or not” explains Participant L. “Nothing is sacred but at least human influencers are real people” remarks Participant H. The inability of virtual influencers to “physically try the products” was also a key issue identified by Andersson and Sobek (2020:23) and Kalpokas (2021:9).

Others did not believe virtual influencers were able to aid or dissuade a purchase. “If I really liked something Lil Miquela promoted, I would buy it, like I wouldn't like not buy something just because she promoted it but I would not go out of my way to get something just because she promoted it either” explains Participant H. For Participant L, it depends on the type or product promoted by virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela, “I could buy a functional, low stakes object if advertised by a virtual such as a couch, but I wouldn't buy a book because a book is something I would internalise and make it part of my identity and virtual influencers don't have the right to advise on that kind of stuff.”

It is questionable whether findings regarding influencer effectiveness accurately indicate that the participant is genuinely not swayed by such endorsements, for research indicates that the public is often unaware of the effect or unwilling to admit how impressionable they are. This subconscious power is highlighted in research by Hackley and Hackley (2015:467), who note that the public is often highly susceptible to the influence of endorsement without necessarily imagining or aspiring to a relationship with the influencer, as only the most candid fans would concede that their consumption choices are made to mimic a particular celebrity endorser. The true effect is therefore often not admitted by the individual.

Previous research has unearthed conflicting findings about the true effectiveness of these virtual influencers to effect purchasing intention. Many found that when the public identified

that it was a virtual influencer and not a real human influencer, factors such as perceived originality and uniqueness, perceived brand-matchup and purchasing behaviour decreased even in Millennial and Gen Z participants (Walter, 2020:49). This explains the negative sentiments of some participants in this study. Although participants could appreciate the creativity behind Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela posts, Participant I mentions that “knowing it is virtual not a person ruins it for [her] and so [she is] less inclined to marvel at the actual presentation as [she] knows it's not real.” This is supported by Participant M who notes that if a real human influencer had done a post of this quality, it would be great.”

However, other studies have found virtual influencers to be effective when, for instance, endorsing an already established brand (for example Lil Miquela and Versace, Kim Zulu and Veet) as it is shown that individuals who have previously purchased a product of the brand were also more likely to buy the promoted product by the virtual influencer (Walter, 2020:49). Similarly, Chowdhary's (2019) research in virtual influencers found that 15% of followers of virtual influencers find them credible and 23% perceive their content as authentic. To ensure the success of a campaign, many brands are combining popular human influencers with virtual influencers in group campaigns. For instance, model Bella Hadid and Lil Miquela for Calvin Klein, or actress Millie Bobby Brown and Lil Miquela for Samsung.

9.5.2 Collaborate with Virtual Influencers

Those that saw virtual influencer as a piece of art, such as the Creatives, expressed a willingness to collaborate with Kim Zulu or Lil Miquela. Participant J, a singer, explained that if Lil Miquela wanted to produce a song with him he would “definitely not say no.” The same was true for photographers Participant C and Participant F who would “definitely do a collab with her no matter the cost” (Participant C) and who admits “I'm willing to create anything for a million dollars” (Participant F). Participant M, a human influencer, admits seeing the value in mimicking the virtual influencers to understand what it is about their posts that appeals to users, stating that she would “follow Lil Miquela for a few days out of pure theory” and from a “business perspective.”

9.5.3 Follow Virtual Influencers

Notwithstanding this admiration, all participants indicated that they would not only not buy a product promoted by virtual influencer but would not follow the Instagram profile long term. “No, I wouldn't follow her” says Participant M. “What would I be hearing from her?” questions

Participant L, “it would feel quite hollow” explains Participant H. The fact that she is non-human is the key reason for Participant D and Participant J not to follow her as “after knowing she is virtual” they “lose interest.” Months after the interviews, I went back to the participant’s profiles to see if they were following Lil Miquela or Kim Zulu and true to their word, none of the participants followed the virtual influencer Instagram profiles.

For many this was done as a means of self-defense in protecting their mental health. All of the female identifying participants interviewed explained that they “wouldn’t want to follow” a profile that “is flawless” (Participant I) and “communicates unreal standards” (Participant L). “I wouldn’t want my kids to grow up in a space where they think that the people that they should be looking up to, and the imagery that they’re seeing online, is of virtual creations” explains Participant B. Participant M also feels anxious. “For the general wellbeing of the Instagram world, the idea of young kids and young girls being exposed to these virtual profiles is worrying to me.” It is unfair to present pictures of perfectly smoothed computer-generated imagery to imperfect humans (Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:29) as these “perfect bodies become our rolemodels for ideal beauty standards” against which real people judge their own bodies (Lacković, 2020:2). Virtual influencers are physically perfect women made of pixels, standing in for women who have long been pressured to become physically perfect, without the advantage of that even being possible (Cherrington, 2016; Tiffany, 2019).

I note that the criticism of the virtual influencer perfection is dominated by a resistance to the *physical standards* these virtual influencers set, not so much to the non-real *luxury lifestyle standards* they often portray. There seems to therefore be an acceptance of the portrayal of luxurious “fake” lifestyles that already saturate Instagram. For many respondents, neoliberal ideals are naturalised to the point where it is not the biggest threat.

9.6 CONTENT TYPES

The reaction towards virtual influencers seems to differ based on the type of content posted on their profiles. True to form, the Instagram visuals unlocked contradictory responses from participants.

9.6.1 Not in a Studio

Virtual influencer posts that were depicted in a photography studio setting, for example with plain walls and special lighting, were seen more negatively. When reacting to the advertisement

of Lil Miquela and car brand BMW Mini (Image 9.1), Participant A remarks that “it seems even more disingenuous and fake” and “looks like a mascot for a company instead of feeling authentic” he explains, “the advertisement just feels like a mini advert with her in it, instead of her exhibiting a mini.” Similarly, the content of Kim Zulu in an avant-garde studio setting (Image 9.2) unlocks a similar reaction from Participant A who describes it as “manufactured.” Virtual influencer content that appears to capture a “moment in life” was seen as a more effective setting according to Participant J. There is however a fine line between how closely embedded in reality the settings should be.

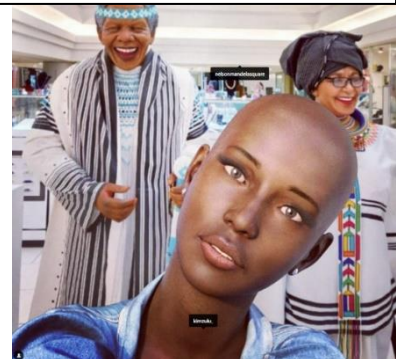
9.6.2 In a “Make-Believe Real Life”

The Lil Miquela posts which were based on a real environment were seen as more authentic than an in-studio environment. However, participants highlighted that this “real life” environment should mimic the style of real life, but should not be of an actual place that exists. When Kim Zulu for instance, posted a post of “herself” in front of a pair of popular statues of late South African president Nelson Mandela and his wife, inside Sandton City, a well-known mall in Johannesburg South Africa, (see Image 9.3), participants such as Participant L found it “disturbing,” given that it is a real place that exists that they themselves had been to. This type of content is “particularly strange” and “even more upsetting” to Participant I. She describes it, not just as the Sims coming to life but “Sims coming *into* [her] life” with these types of posts being more invasive.

For Participant M, it is “even more bizarre and unbelievable, not credible.” The post emphasises the distinction between the humans who have experienced it and the virtual influencer who claims to have experienced it. To Participant L, “this place that Kim Zulu is claiming to be at is personal. I have an intimate knowledge of the references she is making to Nelson Mandela’s statues; I know the place.” As a result of her prior experience of the setting, the “lie” of the virtual influencer in claiming to have experienced it is more obvious. The Kim Zulu team representative defends posts where Kim Zulu is “superimposed in a real-life place” as “not that different” than if someone “took a picture of themselves in front of the green screen and then placed themselves in another country.” To Participant K “there is no difference,” and so he questions “who are we to limit what somebody else can do?” The response by Participant D that the post has no effect on him because “to [him] it would be the same as a normal person taking a selfie” supports Participant K’s assertion. The participant’s choice of words is significant in explaining that it would be “like a normal person” posting a selfie. This language

of anthropomorphism and the bestowing of life on the virtual influencer is also practiced by Participant K, the representative of Kim Zulu creative team, who refers to what “Kim’s wants,” the way “Kim would do it” as if “Kim” is a personal friend who is known on a first name basis and has a level of agency.

Image 9.1 Electric Mini Studio Advert **Source:** @lilmiquela, 2021e: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMcf9-lnk6-/>;
Image 9.2 Kim Zulu in Studio **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020j: <https://www.instagram.com/p/ClkmkPPDM9j/>; **Image 9.3**
 Kim Zulu in Studio **Source:** @kimzulu_, 2020n: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CE3YP8JDf0c>.



9.6.3 Fantasy

Participants indicated a desire for the virtual influencers to be presented in an “alternate futuristic universe” or “fantasy hyper-reality world” “that spoke to their brand” (Participant H), so that the virtual influencer is “firmly positioned in the realm of the non-human.” Instead of depicting themselves in their own “virtual world, they make claims about existing in ours” (Participant A). The reasons why virtual influencers are not positioned accordingly has links to their role as vehicles of consumption. Above all else there needs to be an underlying mutually relatable experience between an influencer and their followers, no matter how constructed. Virtual influencers’ ability to depict, to a degree, experiences similar to those of their human followers is what leads to a level of relatability and a level of desire induced for the products they advertise. For example, we are less likely to buy a shampoo pictured in 3054 when our reality is 2022 and we want clean hair in 2022. It therefore makes sense that virtual influencers would distance themselves from the too virtual and too futuristic part of their hybrid identity.

9.7 THE CULTURAL AND GENDER IDENTITY OF KIM ZULU

The participants cited the choice of Kim Zulu’s demographic features as a black Zulu female as most contentious considering elements such as representation and the commercialisation of these identities.

For the Kim Zulu team representative, “using Kim’s heritage” was “natural” and a tactic to make Kim Zulu “acceptable to the South African audience” as she is “familiar.” To the Representative, Participant K, the member from The Avar Company that created Kim Zulu, her posts are “about being connected to an African identity.” “Commonly, these types of virtual things will come from Europe, Asia or America” and so “the fact that she is from South Africa intrigues people because they don’t expect that from us.” Participant K goes on to explain that followers are proud that “we aren’t a Johnny come lately, we are part of the global conversation, we are not five years late with creating our own virtual influencer.”

It is well-established that people of colour are under-represented in the media landscape (Pilane & Iqani, 2015:127). This underrepresentation would be problematic in any multicultural society, but it is especially so in a country like South Africa, which has a history of high black readership but not representation and where black South Africans make up the majority of the population (Pilane & Iqani, 2015:133). As a result of this absence, the presence – albeit virtual – of a black female South African is something many participants admired about Kim Zulu. Most participants celebrated the idea of the Kim Zulu profile as a celebration of South African culture. Participant F congratulates the team saying: “well done to these guys for jumping on the virtual trend so quickly.” Participants “liked her unashamedly African pride narrative” (Participant B, Participant J, Participant G), liked that she “is a homegrown African interpretation of the virtual trend” (Participant I), and has a “home feel” (Participant C) which increases “visibility of the Zulu culture internationally” (Participant G) through “paying homage to Zulu culture through its digitisation” (Participant A). “For a long time, there has been a yearning of more black and African representation so the visibility of different African cultures on a global scale is a beautiful thing” explains Participant B. For Participant E, what is important in Kim Zulu’s identity is that “followers have a deep will to have the image of the representation of a Zulu woman in South Africa be that of opulence and brands.” This has links to ideas of citizenship and consumption established in previous chapters.

“I am glad Zulu women are being represented, more power to them” says Participant G. But to say that women are being “represented” is to forget what representation is. When delving deeper into the idea of cultural representation, most participants realised that they would prefer this desire of black and South African cultural representation to come from a human, and not virtual, source. Participant B, a black female, notes that representation is still needed but does not believe virtual influencers should be the vehicle to do it. “Black women need the

recognition and access to these space” she states, “we need inclusivity but not like this. We're so desperate for representation that anything will do. So even this kind of representation is a win, but the virtual version actually isn't good enough.” “We can't justify using virtual just to get black representation” adds Participant E.

This is supported by Participant H who notes, “you know who really could represent Africans? Africans.” Participant E questions “whether these virtual influencers are adding to or taking away from the opportunity for real African women to find themselves influencer opportunities.” In this thinking not only are virtual influencers threats to human influencers in taking paid for partnership opportunities but they are perceived as threats to the very demographic of black women, they claim to try to be celebrating and elevating.

Participant M criticises the team behind Kim Zulu on social justice grounds as the creators “could have taken a real human beautiful black female, who might be from a disadvantaged background and invest in her and build her up to be a brand and use the money they make from all these paid campaigns to actually enrich someone's life in the process as well.” In this example, it is not just the creators of the content profiting but the subject of the content profiting as well. This train of thought is reiterated by Participant A who states that it is fine to use the identity as a commodity, but questions how Kim Zulu will be used to “add value to the community she represents.” “Since the team is profiting off of the exhibition of a particular culture, how is the team planning to work to help the living standards that the majority of people within that community find themselves in in South Africa?”

On the other hand, Participant C, a Creative, disagrees with the argument that “a black human model should rather have been used instead of virtual,” because using a virtual influencer “in a way protects the human model from the pressure that goes with being a persona.” The irony is that the pressure felt by the standards set by these non-humans is still felt by humans, yet the human influencer is not empowered to at least profit off her own profile, she is in the participant's mind “protected” from her fame, by allowing a behind-the-scenes team to profit from idealised female standards. I strongly reject the argument that women need to be protected from the pressures of fame that their talent brings.

Other than the idea of cultural and racial representation, participants criticised that the Zulu culture is commercialised within the Kim Zulu profile with her “meta tribalistic, futuristic” and

“African and European avant-garde” “commercial fashion flair” (Participant A). “She is purposefully emphasising tribalism as being really deeply associated with the Zulu culture and nationalism” explains Participant B. “My point of discomfort isn't the appropriation of culture necessarily, in and of itself as artistic expression, but the appropriation of culture for the advancement of material accumulation” explains Participant E. “There's definitely some kind of cultural reclamation taking place” observes Participant E, “but it is grounded within deep capitalism.” The Kim Zulu team seem to be “monetising the black is beautiful movement” (Participant B) as the “team is justifying capitalism promoting actions with identity politics for people of colour” (Participant E).

These responses were especially evoked when showing participants a post by Kim Zulu which was part of the Mercedes Benz Fashion Week in Russia, where Umemulo, the rite of passage of becoming of a woman in Zulu culture, was incorporated as part of the narrative. “The Umemulo post is troubling to me” explains Participant L, “the most troubling part is that the purpose of the post was achieved in pushing sales, which means that this post resonated with some people and they didn't see it as problematic that this sacred ceremony was used to sell clothes.” This is reiterated by Participant B who sees that post as “tone-deaf” and a product of “a lack of cultural competency.”

The additional issue comes from the fact that it is not posted by a human but a virtual influencer. “It's not even a real person saying this is my journey,” laments Participant B. This is supported by Participant L who notes, “the act of commercialising a ceremony like Umemulo is problematic, but at least if a human influencer did it there would be some level of authenticity in it because they actually experienced the ceremony but a virtual influencer never went through this rite of passage.”

For many participants what was, therefore, important was not just that “representation occurs” but who is behind that representation and who profits from it. For Participant B, it is important to understand the demographic of the team behind Kim Zulu “because this is black imagery, a black person and black culture,” and so she “would want to know that it is a black-owned company and that at least it is a black person that's profiting from this.” To some, therefore, as long as the team behind the virtual influencer were of the same ethnicity as the virtual influencer they created, there was a level of acceptance. For the creators of Kim Zulu this was their key rebuttal against criticism: “I could understand the criticism against Kim Zulu”

explains Participant K, “however because we as the people and the creative team behind Kim Zulu are culturally connected to the culture of the story I don’t see an issue.” “The criticism would make sense if we ourselves were not connected to that culture” but we “use Kim’s heritage to talk about our own heritage” he explains.

I tested this theory of virtual influencer and creator culture congruency by initially not disclosing the status of the Kim Zulu team’s race, but first hypothetically asking participants how they would feel knowing that the black female Kim Zulu was created by a white male. Some participants like Participant L had a “major issue” with it as an example of “cultural appropriation.” It was clear that the knowledge that the team behind Kim Zulu were Zulu was a source of comfort to some participants. It appears that the virtual influencer was seen as more authentic if the identity of its creator matched the identity personified by the virtual influencer; the greater the dissimilarity, the less authentic the virtual influencer was perceived to be.

A key distinction between the Kim Zulu team is that although the team member are black and from the Zulu culture, they are male. The Kim Zulu team representative claims to be “very aware about the fact that [they] are three guys” that created a female virtual profile. Participant B, upon finding out that the team behind Kim Zulu consisted of Zulu men, questions: “why didn’t the Kim Zulu team make a guy? Why did you then choose to do a female perspective when you’re not a woman?” She questions why the male creators “think that they have insight into a black woman’s lived experience,” especially in a “patriarchal culture, such as a Zulu culture.” She concludes that just because they are “black and Zulu still doesn’t mean they have the right to show a female ceremony such as the Umemulo post.”

The creation of a female virtual influencer by a male team was also viewed as problematic given the male gaze and sexualised portrayal associated with it. Participant L highlights that most of the IT/ computer science space that creates this type of virtual is male dominated “so when the creations that come out of this space are of female identities it is from the perspective of the male gaze and they create their idealised female profile which is not authentic to the lived experience of women.” The commercialisation of the female identity was of particular significance. “Kim Zulu’s presentation is upsetting to me because it makes me think of sex robots,” in fact, it takes female body exploitation further because “at least when photographing models the human model subjects have some level of autonomy, they can say no so there may be somewhere models aren’t willing to go, but a virtual influencer can’t say no” explains

Participant H. The virtual influencer female body is an object that can be contorted however the makers, who are overwhelmingly male, desire. For Participant L and Participant H, female virtual creations are “just another way that women don’t have control of their bodies” and proof of how “women’s bodies are easily exploitable.” The Kim Zulu team representative however claims to be “super careful about objectification,” yet previous chapters illustrate the overt sexualisation of Kim Zulu’s body, which proves the contrary.

Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela furthermore create content featuring the fetishisation of a product draped over their sexualised bodies. Participant L notes how “we have gone from seeing a product on a rack in the store, to seeing a product on a body” and so “we have gone from admiring the product itself to admiring the person who has the product on their body and wanting to attain what they have.” For Participant L this is a “problematic trend” as when this is done by a virtual influencer “it isn’t even a physical body that’s commercialised but it’s a concept of human nature that is commercialised.”

9.8 INDUSTRY REPERCUSSIONS

“Something we need to be specific about is that the idea of Kim Zulu was brought to us while we were in lockdown” explains Participant K, the representative of the Kim Zulu team. The timing of the Kim Zulu profile launch can be seen as the perfect combination of a number of factors. It was not only the time when agencies such as The Avatar Company (who were then known as EMOJI Digital) needed to diversify their profit-making activities as lockdowns due to COVID-19 impacted their existing reliance on human influencers, events and performers, but brands were also looking at new routes to grab attention in a time where South Africans were spending more time than ever online. The demand was there, and the willingness of agencies such as The Avatar Company to cater to this demand was also there. “I think it’s interesting that there is the creation of content on social media on one hand, and market-related capital accumulation through social media monetisation on the other, and that those two things are not separate anymore and they can’t be in the way Instagram is now structured” says Participant E.

9.8.1 Disclosure of Virtual Status

The Kim Zulu team representative alluded to the use of Kim Zulu’s non-human status as a point of intrigue in why users follow her. “People wonder if she’s real or not” explains Participant K, “there was a long time when we did not even entertain that as a question - she

was just out there.” Of particular concern to Participant K was the question of “how to maintain intrigue because [they] chose not to be exposed as the people behind her.” This illustrates the use of mystery and to an extent confusion, as an attention-grabbing tool. The danger to audiences in a lack of disclosure is however clear. The motivations for participants wanting to be clearly told at the onset of their exposure to a virtual influencer profile is because they “engage differently” (Participant B) with non-human content as it “drastically changes the way [you] looked at the profile” (Participant I). Participants want to “know who or what [they] are engaging with” (Participant I) so that they “know what type of filters to activate when engaging with content” (Participant E). “Readers allocate their processing resources according to their expectations about the genre of a text” (Zwaan, 1994:920) By knowing the nature of the event ahead of time, by it being disclosed as real or virtual for instance, our brain is prepared to use different strategies for understanding (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2007:235).

All participants indicated a desire for the virtual influencer to be more open and obvious about their virtual status. They dislike that both virtual influencers “don’t own up to the fact that they aren’t real” (Participant H) and “they don’t seem to emphasise that they are not actual human beings” (Participant A). Some users have an even stronger reaction beyond virtual influencers profiles as being misleading, they actually see it as deception. Participant L, in reading a caption of a post by Kim Zulu that says that Kim Zulu has “walked these past statues” (@kimzulu_, 2020n) evokes an exasperated cry from Participant L saying :“that’s an outright lie! Kim Zulu cannot walk past anything, it isn’t real.” Participant M, an influencer, goes so far as to accuse brands virtual influencers promote as “100% false marketing.” The Kim Zulu team representative however strongly denies any deception. “No, I don’t think it is misleading to not be clear that she isn’t human” explains Participant K, “think about the amount of times that human influencers have been exposed for depicting something as real when it isn’t.” He cites the example of “an influencer posting pictures of her sitting in first class and then going to sit at her actual seat in economy.” “Kim Zulu is mimicking that behaviour and commenting on that kind of behaviour,” he explains.

For Participant B the responsibility for disclosure lies with virtual influencer profiles and Instagram itself. “It is Instagram’s responsibility to build features that make it clear to users, the onus and the responsibility is on the platform to put down rules and regulations of engagement” says Participant B. A notable omission is the responsibility of agencies behind the virtual influencer profiles to use these disclosure tools. One such a tool is the creation of a

button on Instagram that would indicate a “virtual profile” disclosure similar to the way we disclose a post as “sponsored content.” Although a disclosure button currently does not exist, there are other methods that virtual profiles can use to be more explicit about their state, such as the use of hashtags in captions and clear labels in profiles. Participants were “frustrated and angry” that these current methods of disclosure were not used consistently (Participant A). These findings support a previous study on virtual influencers which found that it was important to users that the creators be upfront about the virtual beings (Moustakas *et al.*, 2020:3). Other research has found that disclosing a non-human status and being open about the creative agency behind a virtual profile unlocks “greater trust” (Donoughue, 2018; Molin & Nordgren, 2019:34).

On the other hand, one participant had an entirely opposite view and did not see virtual influencer profiles as needing to disclose anything. “On principle we would then expect not just virtual influencer but any virtual to be disclosed” explains Participant D, “we wouldn't be able to watch movies, because people are portraying things that are not necessarily true as movies have always had virtual effects.” The parallel between virtual influencer fantasy and film fantasy is also one cited by the Kim Zulu team representative, Participant K, who explains that the agency has tried to “position itself as a transmedia studio” and sees “Kim Zulu as a player in a virtual universe” in the same way that “people believe in King Titshala from Wakanda in the movie Black Panther.” Participant K goes on to explain that “even though they know that the character King Titshala isn't real, they are still interested,” as the “Marvel universe is the pinnacle of transmedia with multiple stories, multiple platforms and multiple characters.” I however find this parallel between virtual influencers and virtual or cinematic characters problematic. In the act of watching a movie there is a genre expectation, which includes entering into a fantasy world and knowing to suspend your disbelief when exposed to virtual and cinematic characters. However, on Instagram the genre expectations of the type of profiles and content interacted with is different and there is an expectation of a profile representing a real human being unless explicitly indicated otherwise.

9.8.2 Physical Links to the Virtual

The lack of physical existence was cited by Participant M, a human influencer as a possible barrier to future growth for virtual influencers. “At some point people are going to want to meet this person, how is the Kim Zulu team going to work around that?” A huge part of influencing is linking the offline world with the online space. “The COVID-19 pandemic has possibly

allowed them to get away with it but at some point we will return to normal” she explains. “I can’t follow someone who I know is not going to be able to appear as a public speaker at an event for example – there’s no point” Participant M concludes.

9.8.3 Capitalism as Good if it Supports Small Businesses

For Participant A, the current downturn in the market and the struggling economy due to the pandemic makes him more open to any new vehicles that can assist economic circulation. When asked how he would feel if 50% of Instagram profiles were virtual influencers he says her “really wouldn't mind” and “regardless, if they are manufactured, or if they are a hybrid model, as long as value is being added to businesses and communities” and “virtual influencers can help keep businesses flow and keep people employed” then he is “all for it” because “businesses need all the help they can get.” To Participant A as long as virtual influencers successfully fulfil their capitalist function then they have the right to exist on the platform.

Others also praised the role that virtual influencers can play in economic stimulation but would prefer this to be used to assist smaller businesses and brands. When the virtual influencer partners with a “big brand” it makes her “appear like a sell out” argues Participant A. “I don’t like the big capitalism vibe of Lil Miquela” explains Participant E, “I like supporting small businesses like craft candles.” I would want to see Kim Zulu promote small local South African brands” explains Participant I. Virtual influencers should therefore be commercial, but not obviously big capitalism.

9.8.4 Virtual Influencers as Threat

Each of the three groups had different reactions to the idea of virtual influencers as threats to human influencers. The Privates have a somewhat naïve view in that they did not see virtual influencers as a threat to real human influencers. “Virtual influencers won’t ever be fully able to relate to humans” argues Participant G. For Participant L “humans are so socially inclined that we can’t be mimicked,” “virtual influencers can’t be like us” she concludes. However, as the depth of our social interactions deteriorate, the ability of virtual influencers to successfully copy our superficial attempts at connection become more possible. Other participants theorise that there are parts of our “humanity that remain sacred” but also highlight that they, in being human, may have a biased view of this.

The Influencers participant group undoubtedly saw them as a threat. There is recognition that this is the next stage in the endorsement evolution. For Participant M “it is like when brands started using influencers instead of models in advertorials for half the rate. Now they will use virtual influencers instead of human influencers for even less.” The introduction of virtual influencers as the next evolutionary stage of endorsement is reiterated by the Kim Zulu team representative, who notes that when human influencers launched “we had to explain what a human influencer is to agencies,” yet now it is “an essential part of a strategy matrix that agencies do for sales – virtual influencers need to be explained now but will become crucial to campaigns soon.”

The idea of virtual influencers taking up human influencer positions is not too unsettling to Participant M who does influencing as an add-on to her other work in modelling and acting; “luckily influencing is not a main income stream” she admits with a sigh of relief. If it was, as is the case with many high-profile human influencers, the threat would be more imminent she admits. The Kim Zulu team representative, Participant K, sees any reading of virtual influencers as a threat as “super short sighted,” “naïve” and “very small minded.” Incorporating market logic, he explains that “competition is a good thing” as “virtual influencers force human influencers to up their game.” But up their game about what? How can humans up their game of being human, authentic and engaging if this is something we innately are.

To test this market logic of competition, I asked Participant K the Kim Zulu team representative whether he thinks that the introduction of more South Africa virtual influencers would help (increasing familiarity with the virtual category) or hinder (taking away her novelty) the Kim Zulu profile. Although he admits that the initial appeal of Kim Zulu was that she was “unique and new to brands” he suggests “the more the merrier” as more South African virtual influencers “will help elevate the virtual influencer world as a whole, with raised levels of the quality of designs and the quality of partnerships.”

Creatives also see this as an inevitable next step in visual technology. “We’re moving into a point where how we interact with digital content is going to change dramatically within the next five to ten years” says Participant A. For Participant C it is like when TikTok gained popularity and many users moved from Instagram to TikTok and people were uneasy about the shift. “With Instagram these virtual influencers are the same. New always feels scary” he explains. For Participant F, virtual influencers are the growth of existing photoshop practices

that are “taken to the extreme in producing new forms of art.” We have become somewhat accustomed to the reality-to-augmented ratio of online visuals, virtual influencers now invert that ratio so that there is more “augmentation” than “reality.” The Kim Zulu team representative echoes this sentiment by noting, “we’ve been doing this for years” and we now “live in a digitally altered world” where “we are all adding more light to our photos” and we “cannot expect that a platform and a space like your Instagram which is essentially your digital home wouldn’t include the possibility of altered beings.”

There is a sense from the Creatives that if we start regulating how much technology has a place in the visual, we need to question what we have been doing until this point. “I’m trying to be as sensitive and empathetic as possible to the trajectory of technology” explains Participant F. He warns that we need to be “careful” of hard and fast rejections of visual technology as a “contradiction” may arise. “Even I may use technology enhancements to photos that others who are pure analogue photographers do not agree with” explains Participant F. There is no clear line for how much technology can and should be used to enhance, or at the far extreme, fabricate, a visual.

When questioned whether virtual influencers were a threat to the art of photography directly Participant C answers that “photographers shouldn’t be threatened if the virtual creators are good at their craft, it should be celebrated. It’s just another form of creativity.” In Participant F’s opinion “the way we have communicated the story has always changed whether it’s an artist’s paintbrush, or a writer’s pen, or a fashion designer’s fabric, or a teenager’s iPad using a stylus” and virtual influencers are just “a new mode of creative expression.” “People used to believe that content is king. If we believe content is king then this sort of stuff will upset us because the content that we’re using is changing so rapidly that if the content is why I’m doing what I’m doing, then anytime anybody brings in new content, it’s either a threat or a challenge that I need to oppose. If story is king, then there is an acceptance of whatever elements are needed to build the story” explains Participant F.

9.8.5 Deepfakes and Profiting from Identity – the Production Value of People

Questions can be asked around the ownership of this created identity. What virtual influencers illustrate is the complexity of ownership of identity. For Participant L, not only are virtual influencers a “by-product of the performative nature of Instagram” but more importantly of the

“production value of people.” For Participant B “these virtual influencers are a sad reflection of how we have come to view our souls, how we value our bodies in relation to the market.”

For some participants this is not shocking as this unnerving reality has existed for some time already. “There already exists many platforms where human features can be superimposed” notes Participant A, for instance, “Deep Fake allows you to upload images of somebody and creates a facial model which can be imposed onto a visual recording of somebody else.”

The Kim Zulu team representative, Participant K, explains that “Kim isn’t modelled after one specific person.” We know that virtual influencers are created from scratch, that anything that informs their identity is pulled from other sources, and that this finalised virtual construction earns money as a result of the success of these identity elements incorporated into its persona. Whether it is one person or several different people whose physical features are copied in the creation of the virtual influencer, questions of ownership and allocated profit arise. Participant J for example, who has previously had his picture used in a stranger’s profile claiming to look like him, wonders what would happen if a virtual influencer “uses your physical appearance without consent” – “would it count as identity theft if they are using a replica of your face to sell products without your permission?” he asks, “would I get commission if they used my features?” This complicates the debate about virtual influencers further as profiting from a hypothetical identity can be problematic, such as is the case with virtual influencer, but profiting from a real identity without their consent is a new area of debate. “As an Instagram user, how am I going to know in the future if someone has used my face” Participant J asks, “is Instagram going to put in a check to see whether the face already looks like a current user?” If Instagram allows these virtual influencer profiles to exist on the platform, it will need to take greater measures in monitoring not only the disclosure of the virtual status of a profile, but the very creation of the profile and whether or not the construction infringes on existing human identities and features. I note that over 120 virtual influencers exist on Instagram and these profiles have not yet been shut down by the platform surveillance system, despite Instagram’s rigorous content monitoring practices. Furthermore, while Instagram often releases several updates to the app, there has not been a button to disclose our human status or lack thereof. The omission of these censorship tactics indicate as much through their inaction as their action. Instagram’s *laissez-faire* approach to monitoring virtual influencer profiles will need to drastically be improved if users are to maintain a sense of trust of and on the platform.

9.8.6 The Future of Instagram

There is an acceptance, however reluctant, that more virtual influencers will be created and that their content generation capacity will be further elevated as technology improves. The Kim Zulu team representative Participant K promises this saying “Kim is going to be doing some pretty interesting things very soon because her capability and the ability to interact in an environment is improving.” Not only will Kim Zulu be ready, but South African audiences will become more and more “ready” to receive her. “Lil Miquela was ready for an American audience that was ready to embrace her far quicker than South Africa is able to receive Kim Zulu” he notes. As time goes on, this will change, initially “some might struggle to trust the profile” while “some fans will get it from the start. Regardless of whether South Africans are totally ready yet we have to push forward as the digital revolution keeps moving” says Participant K.

I observed that reactions to virtual influencers were muted when participants imagined these profiles to be a small amount of the overall Instagram composition. I then asked how they would feel if 50% of Instagram profiles were virtual influencers. For many participants from all groups, this possibility was unsettling, “scary” (Participant J), “horrible” (Participant L) and is likened to “living in The Sims now” (Participant H) or being “in a video game” (Participant F). “It makes me sad about Instagram” says Participant M “I feel sorry for people having to buy into that” she explains. “If that is allowed to happen then humanity is doing something wrong” says Participant L. “I would be more doubtful than ever about humans” adds Participant M. That kind of Instagram is “so far removed from any of the reasons as to why I connected on Instagram in the first place” says Participant F. “It shows how far we have moved away from just seeing real people live their real lives” explains Participant B. Participant H sums it up by explaining that she simply would not use Instagram if 50% of profiles were virtual. Those that were not too unsettled by this prospect cited the options to guard themselves against exposure to virtual influencer content through unfollowing or blocking virtual influencer profiles or reporting content from virtual influencer profiles.

“Virtual influencer content just becomes another advertisement or poster on Instagram that I either unfollow or block” explains Participant D. He cites the use of Instagram’s customisation tools in customising the type of content appearing on your feed through choosing to **unfollow** or **block** the content so that he is not exposed to it. This presents a somewhat naïve idea about the ability to “contain” our exposure to such virtual influencer profiles which will be more and

more interconnected in brand campaigns to the extent that simply choosing to not see that content is not as easy as it sounds. It furthermore reflects an assumption of a level of high media literacy where we can “read” a virtual influencer’s post as non-human, and therefore can choose to unfollow or block. This step, is however not possible if the user is unable to detect the non-human status of the profile, as is often the case. The onus on the individual’s ability to decipher content is dangerous and presupposes a level of perception and alertness that is not associated with existing user behaviour in relaxingly scrolling through an Instagram feed.

Participant M furthermore cites a reliance on the Instagram’s powers of regulation/censorship to **“flag and report”** virtual influencer content. “I would use the necessary platform conventions to unfollow content or flag and report it.” Yet this presupposes a belief that once flagged, Instagram would see virtual influencers as infringing on their policies and would choose to remove the content. The odds of this happening are low for several reasons. Firstly, the existence of these virtual influencers without any regulation already indicates Instagram’s predisposition to their existence. And why wouldn’t they? From Instagram’s platform capitalist lens, virtual influencers are the perfect profiles for consistent content generation and commercial activities which the platform thrives on, and so there is little motivation for Instagram to remove reported content.

Participants also indicated the possibility of being “irritated” by “constantly needing to block out these pop-up adverts” and would ‘hope that Instagram would inevitably move to a paid version without ads and a free version with ads” (Participant D).

Others, like Participant D viewed the regulation of virtual influencers as unnecessary as “even if it is virtual, there's still a human’s views behind it. That person might not be comfortable showing themselves online but that doesn't mean that their voice is not valid. It could be the creator’s authentic experience being portrayed through the virtual profile. The view is the view, and it's coming from somewhere.” For Participant D, the question is not about whether virtual influencers have the right to free speech but whether the creators behind them have the right to free speech with the virtual profile as the vehicle of that speech.

9.9 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided insights into the responses of South African Instagram users to virtual influencers. By comparing the differing viewpoints from the Privates, the Creatives and

the Influencers, virtual influencers could be unpacked through different points of view. The further inclusion of insights from a representative of the Kim Zulu team, Participant K, further painted a holistic viewpoint of the virtual influencer Kim Zulu and the positioning of this profile within an African context.

The uses of Instagram identified by the users illustrates how Instagram has entrenched itself as an arena for networking, online social connections, data storing and career enhancement. Consenting to the sharing of personal data was seen as a necessary price to pay for the privilege to use Instagram's architecture as a bridge on which online relationships and commercialised profiles are built and maintained. The infiltration of this commercialised market logic in guiding posting behaviour to reach all types of Instagram users was demonstrated in the users' confessions to the use of content boosting tactics such as engagement pods, algorithm reworks and even bots. The pressures of the genre expectations of the Instagram platform in the frequency and quality of content posted was evident from user responses. The acceptance of Instagram as a space of hyper-edited content was used to justify the believability of virtual influencers as many were unable to tell that the virtual profiles were not human.

The responses from participants on the efficacy of virtual influencers as a new vehicle of endorsement was assessed according to their willingness to buy from, collaborate with, or follow virtual influencer profiles. Positive reactions to virtual influencer content was observed to be stronger when content was not situated in a studio setting and was instead situated in an environment that mimicked "real life" but was not of an actual place that exists as this was seen as too invasive.

Key elements of contention with the virtual influencers included complex ideas around representation and the use of gender and cultural identities for commercial gain. The representative from the Kim Zulu team argued that because the creators behind Kim Zulu were Zulu the inclusion of Zulu elements was a further medium of creative expression for them. This was accepted by some, yet others argued that their male status alienated them from the right to depict the true lived experiences of Zulu women. The sexualised positioning of Kim Zulu's female body, together with the commercialised lens through with the Zulu culture is fetishised in her posts were identified as problematic to many participants. A consistent criticism against Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu is the misleading nature by which they make claims to human

liveness, with a clear prioritisation of commercial gains through a purposeful lack of disclosure, and a disregard for the inevitable harm caused to Instagram users.

In the concluding remarks by one participant, he notes that “the road to evil is paved with good intentions” (Participant G). Despite the Kim Zulu team representative’s insistence on their focus on inspiration and authentic representation, their unwillingness to be more consistently honest in disclosing Kim Zulu’s virtual influencer status, their positioning of her story in line with whatever they measure will be best received by audiences and their overall prioritisation of paid-for partnerships reflects the commercial nature of virtual influencers as income-generating tools above all else.

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

10.1 INTRODUCTION

The spread of COVID-19 and the lockdowns enforced by governments around the world restricted movement and face-to-face contact to curb the spread of the virus. This meant that we have never been further apart and, therefore never more dependent on the platforms that brought us together. The importance of platform architectures that facilitated online social interactions and commercial transactions evolved from a nice-to-have, to being an essential. We increasingly moved our physical interactions online as we stepped into a hybrid world where we hosted team meetings, educational classes, dates and even funerals in virtual calls. While our reality stepped into the virtual, the virtual stepped into our reality.

The repercussions of this are evident in the rise of ideas about the “Metaverse” (Ghaffary, 2021), namely virtual worlds aided by virtual or augmented reality technology and spearheaded by big technology companies such as Meta (formerly known as Facebook) and Microsoft. These two companies have been the custodians of online existence in the past through computer and platform software and are now strategically pushing towards a new means of online existence in the future. It is at this time when the boundaries between reality and fiction are at their most destabilised that a new form of Instagram profiles has grown in frequency, popularity and potential harm to fellow users.

The timing of the rise in popularity of virtual influencers and their virtual profiles is important. “The idea of Kim Zulu as a virtual influencer was brought to us while we were in lockdown” explains Participant K, a representative of the The Avatar Company (who were then known as EMOJI Digital) the South African creative team behind the creation and management of the Kim Zulu profile. The timing of the Kim Zulu profile launch and other virtual influencer profiles like hers can be seen as a combination of several market factors. It was not only the time when agencies such as The Avatar Company needed to diversify their profit-making activities as lockdowns due to COVID-19 impacted their existing reliance on human influencers, events and performers, but brands were also looking at new methods to grab attention in a time where the world was spending more time than ever online. Online audiences had also never been readier to accept these virtual influencers. Years of increasingly blurring the lines between the online and offline, real and hyper-real, authenticity and

commercialisation, natural and edited, meant that “real” became an unnecessary accessory to online profile existence.

Demand grew as brands wanted new avenues of online attention-grabbing vehicles, supply grew as creative agencies needed to adjust their focus to online spaces in a lockdown restricted society, and audiences’ acceptance of these profiles grew as virtual influencers were seen as an extension of our own hybrid existence. Not only were the producers (agencies) and consumers (followers) of these virtual influencers ready, so too were the platforms that would facilitate these exchanges. The subtle evolution of Instagram towards a platform capitalist driven app has established it as the go-to marketplace for the attention economy. Instagram’s ability to help the businesses and professional accounts on the app make money, whilst simultaneously achieving its own commercially driven aspirations have become increasingly foregrounded as Instagram mobilises technological architecture and deploys proprietorial software to facilitate the exchange of commodified goods and services through user activities. Instagram’s changes in navigation, modes of uploading, and novel features have shifted in the last few years towards an increasing prioritisation of commercial goals on the platform. The result is a transformation of not just professional influencers, but every day private Instagram user accounts into assets in an attention economy. Instagram’s app user interface deliberately shapes and channels user’s choices and behaviors towards investing unseen labour into their profile to unlock returns such as engagement. Instagram therefore naturalises specific ways of being on the platform which aids its platform capitalist goals. In particular, two virtual influencers bear further scrutiny for their role in naturalising consumer identities through authenticity performances in Western, namely Lil Miquela, and African, namely Kim Zulu, contexts.

In this chapter, I synthesise my findings through exploring Instagram’s adherence to the characteristics of platform capitalism, how Instagram’s app architecture guides users to online app use behaviours that aid Instagram’s platform capitalist goals, and how Instagram users have grown increasingly dependent on, and as a result accepting of, Instagram. I further argue that the success of virtual influencer profiles is due to their adherence to performance, posting and platform genre conventions. The personas they create are consistent with the commercialised existence of the human influencers that have preceded them; the identities they forge position them as relatable to their audiences; and the visual posting styles they follow are consistent with the visual genre expected on Instagram.

10.2 INSTAGRAM'S PLATFORM CAPITALISM

Consumption in terms of purchasing behaviours has evolved into the world's most widespread social activity and a meaningful social behaviour where we forge identities and shared meanings. As the activity of consumption evolves, so too do the platforms and spaces that facilitate such consumption habits, thus paving the way for "platform capitalism" as an extension of existing commerce models.

Social media platforms embody the business model of platform capitalism where value is extracted from users, who are regarded as platform-assets who "will yield income that can act as collateral and as sources of profit in their own right" (Leyshon & Thrift, 2007:100). The app-walkthrough reveals how Instagram embodies platform capitalism through its expectations of content creation, coupled with the market-related capital accumulation through social media content monetisation. In Chapter Three I presented how Instagram's platform business model informs the activities it chooses to provide, support or enable. I illustrated the benefits that Instagram gains through its adherence to platform capitalist principles including its role as an intermediary, its role in creating network effects; and the utilisation of a cross-subsidisation model to acquire more users.

Chapter Seven's app-walkthrough method documented the practical manifestation of these platform capitalism principles as embedded into the user interface of Instagram. The app-walkthrough not only documented the latest features of the Instagram app as a new contribution to research, but it importantly extracted evidence of how Instagram prompted me towards its desired behaviours through various in-built affordances, limitations and default settings. By presenting my app-walkthrough of Instagram, I illustrated how Instagram induces me, and by extension other Instagram users, to carry out platform activities in service of Instagram's commercial goals. These key tasks include sharing my data, generating content, consuming content and spending money. I therefore not only discussed platform capitalism, but also illustrated the practical embodiments of it on the Instagram app. In Chapter Nine I further enhanced my argument by proving how Instagram's theoretical platform capitalist goals are being accepted and internalised by different Instagram user groups. The responses from participants on their uses of Instagram illustrate Instagram's efforts to embed itself within the users' daily needs to the point where they rely unquestioningly on its platform architecture and its affordances in their daily lives. The interviews suggest that users are often oblivious to, or passively accepting of, the power they grant Instagram in relation to their personal data and the

labour they are expected to perform in creating, reacting to, and circulating content on the app. The section below summarises each platform capitalist *theoretical* principle in detail along with its corresponding *commercial* benefit to Instagram (Chapter Three), its *practical* technical embodiment in the app (Chapter Seven), and its *normalised* use based on user responses (Chapter Nine).

10.2.1 Instagram Extracts Data from Users – Cross Subsidisation in Platform Capitalism

In Chapter Three, I established that Instagram allows access to services in exchange for personal data that can be sold to advertisers and data miners. In this way, the platform's characteristic of "cross-subsidisation" comes into play as Instagram provides free use of its app architecture in exchange for "payment" in a different form. This "payment" to Instagram includes granting access to the tracking, retaining and operationalisation of our user data which is sold to advertisers and their clients to enable more forensic and targeted marketing campaigns where our tracked content preferences and likes are sold back to us.

In Chapter Seven, I documented how Instagram achieves this through my app-walkthrough of the app. I propose that Instagram's intended use "suggestions" are transformed into "instructions" when it is more effortful for us not to follow Instagram's intended use cases than to follow them. I indicated how Instagram achieves its platform capitalism goal of data extraction through downplaying the implications of downloading the app and opting-in. Instagram combines the act of granting Instagram access to our personal data with necessary steps in the setting up of an account so that it is simultaneously unnoticed and unavoidable. Instagram furthermore aims to build out its holistic data-point overview of our profiles from multiple platform sources through urging us to sync our Instagram account with other Meta-owned social media channels such as Facebook. I identified several tactics used by Instagram to unite Instagram, Facebook and Meta brands through the melding of brand colours in backgrounds and buttons. Instagram furthermore makes the sharing of data points continuous and "fun" through building data tracking features such as location check-in buttons which we are guided to interpret as content-enhancing features instead of data-tracking features. Instagram furthermore utilises a language of "benefit" to our experience in that the sharing of data is communicated as a necessary step to help Instagram "provide a better service" whilst neglecting how it benefits Instagram's own platform capitalist goals.

Instagram also asks us directly for data information, for instance, indicating when we are “not interested” in a post through a button feedback mechanism, whilst also tracking what content we engage with, like and linger on and tailoring the nature and order of the content served on our feed according to these perceived interests. Instagram furthermore fosters increased data sharing by punishing the non-sharing of data by limiting access to Instagram features when we do not grant access. Instagram not only gets us to share as much data as possible as continuously as possible, but it holds onto that data for as long as possible. It makes deleting a draft, a shared post or an account a time consuming and complex task with two-step verification and aggressive attention-grabbing warnings at each stage of the journey. This is in contrast with the act of “restoring” a previously deleted post, or account, which is easy, efficient and subtle since adding, rather than reducing, publicly available content is more beneficial to Instagram’s content circulation goals.

This data builds up audience segments that Instagram can sell to advertisers who pay to have their advertisements appear to their desired consumer groups. Instagram furthermore uses the data to build up an interest profile on us so that the type of content that most appeals to us is easily and continuously accessible, thus increasing the time spent on the app. I explore how Instagram fosters increasing content consumption next.

10.2.2 Instagram Encourages Content Consumption – Instagram as Intermediator

Instagram “conditions” how networks come together and entrenches itself as the facilitators of those connections, thus validating and legitimising its mediating role between brands, influencers and audiences. Typical of platform capitalism, Instagram entrenches itself as an intermediary and connector of people as users become habituated to relying on its digital infrastructure. The use of Instagram as a connector and facilitator was identified by participants for personal relationships (Privates) to “keep up with friends locally and internationally.” Others, who viewed themselves more as “creative beings” than “social beings,” noted the role of Instagram in advancing their careers (Influencer, Creatives) “to connect with fellow creatives,” showcase a “portfolio of work” on a profile and gain “professional credibility” online. Most participants mentioned this social and career-enhancing connectivity as the redeeming quality of Instagram, seemingly unaware that this is not the only medium that can foster such connectivity; yet, Instagram has successfully entrenched itself as a key bridge for making and breaking relationships in the private sphere or making and breaking brands in the public sphere. This fosters the “all or nothing” acceptance of Instagram, where the substantial

and valid criticisms against Instagram are accepted as a necessary price to pay for the reliance on its platform affordances.

The time spent by users on the app is furthermore a key source of income within platform capitalism. The more time users spend on platforms, the more Instagram can extract data from user behaviours and the more advertisements are knowingly or unknowingly served to them in their feed. Metrics such as average daily use and total active users are vital indicators for platform valuation and so Instagram builds intended user behaviours into its design to increase these metrics. In Chapter Seven, I outline how Instagram entrenches the dependence on its platform and guides us to spend more time on the app. Not only does Instagram direct us to follow other accounts, it urges us to take active steps to get other accounts to follow our account, all of which rewards Instagram with increased account follows and content engagement, with low chances of reciprocal following. I further identified that Instagram does not enable URL hyperlinks to be clickable within captions which serves its goal of stimulating further account visits and follows while restricting us from linking outwards to non-Instagram/Facebook platforms. It, therefore, wants us to spend time on social media, but specifically on their social media site.

Beyond prompting account follows, which results in more populated feeds that generate new posts for engagement, Instagram also stimulates more frequent and more time-intensive engagement with already followed account content. Through refreshing content appearing at the top of the home feed, automatically playing videos, displaying small bits of upcoming content as teasers and introducing disappearing content such as Instagram Stories, Instagram habituates the daily (and even constant) checking of Instagram. Instagram furthermore shifts much of the labour of engaging with, and monitoring of, content on the platform onto us as we can *interact* with content through likes and comments, can *circulate* content through sending messages or sharing content on Stories and can *report* content we perceive to be against Instagram's community guidelines. The time we spend on the platform correlates with the quantity and quality of the content produced, so Instagram also subtly habituates the labour of profile creation and maintenance.

10.2.3 Instagram Encourages Content Generation – Acceptance of Unpaid Labour

In Chapter Three, I confirmed that Instagram, in adherence to platform capitalist characteristics, relies on network effects, namely the idea that the more users use a platform,

the more valuable it becomes for everybody else. The more we use the platform, the more we produce our own content (increasing the variety of posts available) and the more we in turn interact with content produced by others (increasing the engagement rates content earns). The motives for the network effect generation of digital content are stimulated by its users' free labour with Instagram profiting from the so-called "co-creation" of value between our accounts. Through incentivising the constant production of content by, for example, algorithmically prioritising frequent posters, Instagram further boosts the production of media texts for circulation. The algorithmic power to enforce constant content production is clearly felt by participants interviewed who describe "keeping up with the demand" like "constant work" and like "being on a treadmill" because without "frequent and consistent posting" they realise that they would "lose [their] audience" and "fade away."

In Chapter Seven, I outline how Instagram has built this unceasing engagement into the platform. For instance, there is an expectation of the *frequency* and *type* of posts shared, but also the *quality* of those posts. The pressure of only posting content that had been tailored and edited to be of a high enough standard on Instagram was clear in responses from participants documented in Chapter Nine who admitted that they "post way less these days." When this level of professional editing is not possible, or when the final version of the image falls short of a participant's intended quality, the posting activity gets abandoned as they are "worried about it not doing well." Ironically Instagram's goals of increased content generation and circulation seem to not be achieved because of the pressure of their metrics that monitor the rates of this circulation being achieved that deter users from posting content that they have full confidence will unlock returns.

This illustrates the neoliberal expectation of work on the app where effort is expected, but we should distance the work behind the image from the final posted visual. The neoliberal principle that underscores platform capitalism is evident in the fact that we attempt to "hide" the labour that goes into the creation, or even reaction to, content. As a result, there are certain prescribed "efforts" that we expect users to input into the daily use of the platform. In Chapter Four, I explored the expected work of editing the image with Instagram's inbuilt filters demonstrating how "natural" photos are positioned as not good enough to be shareable. The architecture of Instagram's filters being a constant option in overlaying content (from reels to Stories) habitualises the need to apply a filter before sharing. Thus ensuring that visuals are edited and optimised to extract the most significant "returns" is a naturalised expectation.

Furthermore, we are directed to generate content through Instagram's iconography such as the "plus sign" that makes the sharing of content feel "productive." Furthermore, the platform habituates content sharing so that experiencing an occasion does not feel complete until it is documented and shared on Instagram. Instagram's architectural facilitation of micro-narrations positions Instagram as the platform to answer the question "what are you doing?" in the same way that Facebook's original question was "what's on your mind?" We can view the need to always document an experience from a neoliberal lens where the extraction of value from an experience through a visual output in the form of a post on social media, is a means to unlock a "return" through an enhancement made to our created brand archive. Therefore, the plus sign for uploading content feels productive as a "plus" to the total profile value.

Creative participants' identification of Instagram as a source of "inspiration" that can be "incorporated into [their] profiles" validates this drive to be "productive" on the app. Creatives highlight this shift from being "inspired" for "creating good work" to now getting inspired to create work that unlocks Instagram-rewarding metrics. This demonstrates how we approach Instagram from a neoliberal viewpoint as some Creatives did not see the "point" of Instagram for just entertainment but saw it as a source to inspire their future creative outputs. This was also true for Influencers who noted observing and replicating their influencer "role models." Some Creatives, therefore, use Instagram as inspiration for the type of visuals produced by other photographers, while some Influencers use it as inspiration to the kind of personality-infused narrative used by other influencers that they wish to emulate. In both cases, we cannot simply enjoy a well-produced Instagram post, but instead it needs to be learnt from and incorporated in the creator's own online profile to be operationalised for additional online credibility and future content monetisation.

In Chapter Seven, I argue that Instagram's iconography furthermore satisfies dopamine hits that are experienced when receiving a notification, as we learn to upload more content, to unlock more likes on content, thus creating more dopamine-unlocking rewards notifications. We are furthermore encouraged to repeatedly check these notifications as the total number of likes indicated in the notification do not decrease when the notification is accessed. This is validated by participant responses who noted the "kick you get out of engagement" which is similar to "an endorphins release."

There is not only a dependency on Instagram for its facilitating of creating and sharing content, but also for storing content as we rely on its archiving function as Instagram inserts itself as a necessary intermediary for the saving of visual memories. Participants identified the role of Instagram as “a place to store images” since “paying for cloud storage gets pricey” and storing images on Instagram’s archiving architecture is preferable to “keeping all photos on a phone.” Participants did not mention the implications of sharing this visual content with Instagram as a source of data information that Instagram can attribute to their profile. This again highlights the cross-subsidisation characteristic trade-off nature of Instagram use where we accept that with every Instagram feature introduced, we relinquish some degree of our private selves to gain the right to use the Instagram feature for free. Instagram’s platform architecture furthermore positions the app as the custodian for not just one but several identities as we can create multiple accounts on Instagram and switch between them effortlessly. The ability to link two separate accounts to one user also offers Instagram a complex understanding of the user’s online behaviour across their multiple profiles, further aiding their data gathering goals in facilitating targeted advertising. Beyond just time spent on the app creating and consuming content, we are spurred to spend money. I demonstrate how Instagram achieves this next.

10.2.4 Instagram Encourages Spending Money – Profiles as Neoliberal Assets and Identity as Consumed

Instagram creates an environment where online performance metrics such as the number of followers are valued. It fosters the desire for these metrics to increase in value and provides users and brands the opportunity to spend labour and money to enhance these metrics through sponsored posts, paid advertising placements, and more. Therefore, users and brands are led to see the spending of money on the app as a necessary “investment” to improve the overall valuation of their brands and profiles. Instagram, therefore, instils a prioritisation of metrics and a payment opportunity to boost those metrics.

This desire to spend money to elevate an account’s reach expands to individual users as we are urged to spend money on the app through direct purchases to enhance our personal status and perceived class. Instagram facilitates the central positioning of consumption in its content so that luxury commercial lifestyles are naturalised. It then provides tools to facilitate this consumption through direct purchases through shopping features. Instagram, therefore, naturalises a consumer identity and builds purchasing opportunities to satisfy these commercial desires.

a) Spend Money to Make Money

Instagram directs users and brands to spend money on tactics to enhance the value of their accounts through boosting content, sponsoring posts and paid advertising placement. Through positioning brands and personal accounts as assets in an attention economy, Instagram habituates the transformation, tracking and investment into profiles as assets.

In Chapter Three, I argued that although online self-promotion is by no means a new imperative, in recent decades, structural transformations bound to the neoliberal ideologies of individuality and self-governance have instigated more self-conscious efforts to brand the self. As a result, online reputation and perception management mimic the process of production into an asset as the final product, namely a marketable profile/account, can unlock returns similarly to an asset. Furthermore, I established that Instagram facilitates the transformation of accounts into assets to optimise in an attention economy and benefits through this commercial shift. I argue that these commercially-driven tactics are as much a result of the market for which they exist as the platform on which they operate. As a result, this market logic has impacted not just brands and commercial influencers but all users who are made and unmade into assets through adhering to celebrity and influencer performance norms and engaging in visibility labour as a form of venture labour. Responses from the participants interviewed prove this as it is not just Creatives and Influencers, who have a financial incentive to track and optimise their profile performance metrics, but even Private users have bought into this market logic of asset tracking. One participant from the Private group admitted to making her account a public professional account, just to access “specific reporting” and “get nice insights into [her] posts.”

Elevating the importance of these metrics is the first step in Instagram persuading the user to spend money in order to improve these metrics. We will not spend money to improve something we do not see as valuable. In Chapter Seven, I illustrate that the positioning of the number of followers an account has, other accounts the user follows and total number of posts, positions it as one of the first information sources we extract when landing on a profile. These metrics mean that a “science of the individual” (Foucault, 2020) is possible in measuring, monitoring, and profiting from these online value measures. The importance of these metrics is underscored in Chapter Nine,

where the Private participants subtly indicated the importance of metrics in changing their judgement of profiles and posts. When asked whether he liked a post or not one participant responded: “Do I like this picture? I don’t know, how many people liked it?” This suggests that we use the metrics of a post as guidance for a positive or negative reaction. Participants furthermore mention “not initially liking a post or profile,” but after “seeing how many likes or followers it has” going back and “looking again.” Metrics are therefore not only crucial to producers of content in measuring the performance of their posts, but they are also vital to the consumers of that post (audience who view the content) in guiding how they are to respond to it.

Participants noted the pressure of constantly improving one’s metrics as they felt additional “pressure” when making their private account public. Influencers and Creatives used these metrics to guide the kind of content created, thus mimicking a supply-demand market logic. The Creatives monitor what type of content users want and engage with best (demand), and so they adapt the content they produce to meet those demands (supply) with constant pressure to “get the numbers up.” As a result of the importance of these metrics, attention is paid to these insights as returns/rewards on content. This approach is echoed by the Kim Zulu team representative with Participant K explaining that as a team, they “check feedback from the audience” to “test everything.”

Furthermore, the importance of these insights fosters the “upgrading” of profiles to professional accounts that unlock insights and promotional payment options to make content and accounts more visible to potential audiences. The desire to increase these metrics, often by whatever means necessary, is indicated by the participants who admitted to the use of “engagement pods” (groups of Instagram users who share their posts asking for engagement in the form of likes and comments from other users), “bots” (fake profiles that like and comment on posts), “buying followers” or artificially boosting Story views by splicing memes in between official content shared. Other direct payment tactics that Instagram endorses include paid advertising placements and sponsored content where brands and professional accounts pay Instagram to have their content viewed by a targeted audience. In Chapter Seven, I further outline how the algorithmic changes have meant that posts do not display chronologically and so the rates of organic engagement generated in the past have

decreased to the extent that many see the paid-for boosting of content as a necessary means to attain visibility on the app.

(b) Direct Purchases

Not only do users and brands “invest money” in paying to increase visibility so that their accounts can be valued higher, but Instagram also facilitates direct spending on acquiring products. In Chapter Seven I document Instagram’s newly introduced features of how the “Instagram shop” and “Shopping tab” serves its vision of “ensuring people can easily shop in the moment of discovery” (Instagram, 2019a). These features are irrelevant without the entrenching of consumer habits that would urge the use of these shopping features. Not only does Instagram architecture act as a connector between an Instagram users and the shop they purchase from through facilitating the transactions, but Instagram has assisted in normalising a consumer identity on the platform.

In Chapter Two, I argue that virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu embody this “cool by consumption” narrative as they portray an idealised version of the modern consumer to Western and African audiences, respectively. In Chapter Three I argue that commodities, as well as being three-dimensional objects with functions and uses, are also signs in their own right, and consumption is, therefore, inherently semiotic, as having and being have become intertwined to the point where our possessions communicate our social status to those around us. Consumer goods fulfil a symbolic role in attempts at class mobility through communicating expressions of equal access, agency and status elevation. The consumerist society we live in means that the exhibition of the achievement of luxury lifestyle narratives is an important tactic in evoking envy. This practice is accelerated on social media platforms such as Instagram that encourages the documentation of luxury acquisitions and enables the measuring of audience responses through engagement on such posts, thus making the pleasure derived from being envied by others calculatable. We are now at a peak commercialised point where consumption is more engrained in every area of societal life than ever before, commercial activities are more strongly technologically scripted in apps than ever before and commercial identities are more normalised on platforms than ever before.

The significance of this in South Africa with its “culture of desire” was further explored. The duality of the South African economy, with coexistence between opposite ends of the buying power spectrum further accelerates this desire, as privilege is brutally visible to those who are deprived of it. Given the legacy of inequality within South Africa due to systematic racial oppression under apartheid, many South Africans view affirming their newfound political freedom and economic status through possessions as a political act as much as an economic one. I maintain Kim Zulu’s consumer identity positioning is of particular significance given the legacy of inequality within South Africa which makes affirming our newfound political freedom and economic status through possessions a political act as much as an economic one. In being positioned for a particular South African audience, Kim Zulu is making a comment about her individual rights and the rights of all her followers to have access to elite luxuries through emulation. This is not unnoticed by Instagram users with participants in Chapter Nine noting that “there is a deep will to have the image of the representation of a Zulu woman in South Africa be that of opulence and brands.” Virtual influencers positioned for the global South, and Africa in particular, will be depicted on Instagram in a way that is most profitable for them to be depicted and in so doing they condition their followers to adopt an idealised consumer behaviour.

Kim Zulu therefore serves the commercial interests of the agency that created her and the Instagram platform her profile exists on. In the Kim Zulu profile, South Africans are presented with an idealised profile of what beauty, youth, class and glamour is, and we are sold a narrative that the attainment of this idealised profile is through acquiring the goods and services advertised in the posts. We are told what our ideal online identity should be, and we are told what activity we need to do to achieve it — spend. Instagram therefore prioritises the positioning of excessive consumption and opulence through the embedding of product advertorials in every sphere of the app. Then when the desire to emulate this identity is at its most intense, Instagram provides the chance for users to purchase the item in the moment of discovery.

In the theoretical overview I argue that Instagram’s shift towards a primarily commercially focused app adhering to platform capitalist principles is clear in its prioritization of profit driven goals over user interests. In the practical analysis of the app-walkthrough I prove that Instagram not only ingrains certain uses *within* the app but ingrains the use *of* the app as a

crucial tool for every day digital practices. Its technical limitations prevent certain behaviours and its default settings prompt others, thus shaping our behaviour through embedded and enacted technical scripting towards that of an idealist consumer. Not only do Instagram's user interface affordances direct us to commercial activities, Instagram has fostered an online genre that celebrates and algorithmically prioritises an ideal persona which embodies an opulent commercialised lifestyle. Virtual influencers are an important illustration of this commercial shift and embody profit driven motives that underscore platform activity. The fact that commercial vehicles such as virtual influencers can exist on Instagram and successfully appeal to audiences, proves how warped our expectation of online behaviour have become.

10.3 VIRTUAL INFLUENCER SUCCESS

It is within this virtual commercial hothouse that we must evaluate the success of virtual influencers. The platform creators' goals shifted towards increased profits, whilst the platform users expectations and uses of the platform also shifted based on changes in the broader online influencer industry. In Chapter Two, I provided context into the present endorsement industry, which is characterised by a growing disillusionment with, and distrust of, human endorsers. With the "humanity" of human influencers under question, from increasingly bot-generated engagements to commercially- rather than authentically-led content creation, the "human" in "human influencers" has begun to seem superfluous. I showed how it is not only advertising agencies that have embraced virtual influencers but also that many brands have created their own virtual influencer profiles as well. This is because virtual influencers are seen as the ideal combination of the two types of endorsement, namely human and animated spokesperson. I suggested that virtual influencers most represent the next phase of marketing due to their ability to provide the same benefits as traditional human endorsers while mitigating the threats human error poses to brands. The market value of virtual influencers as endorsement vehicles with lower risk and higher returns for brands is thus evident. This is supported by explanations by the representative from the Kim Zulu team on the profile's success as he explains that "clients have control and have a sense of safety" when using virtual influencers who are "less risky" than human influencers with uncontrolled "scandal and ratchet moments."

However, despite their value to brands, the virtual influencers are only as successful as the acceptance of their performances on the platforms they are created for. In Chapter Two, I outline the success of several of these virtual influencers to date. I argue that their adherence to genre expectations on the Instagram platform and its visual style, the genre of human

influencers they emulate, and the genre relatability to the audiences they wish to appeal to, all contribute to their popularity on the platform and are rooted in the most important online currency — authenticity.

10.3.1 Influencer Genre Consistency

In Chapter Five, I explored how virtual influencers' increasingly human *realistic* portrayals are coupled with humans' increasing *synthetic* and commercialised portrayals. Virtual influencers position themselves as real in various ways. Firstly, virtual influencers successfully enact celebrity/influencer behaviours such as self-promotion, commercialisation, event attendance, third-party validation, and mystery which ultimately create a profile that is consistent with influencer genre expectations. This includes content formats presented in Chapter Two such as lifestyle showcases, promotions and competitions; account takeovers; Instagram aesthetics styles; relative other viewpoints; shout outs and tags and multi-influencer campaigns. In this overview, I demonstrated how virtual influencers adhere to these expected influencer posting formats to establish the same sense of familiarity as the human influencers that Instagram users have grown accustomed to.

In Chapter Five I proved that virtual influencers are not only consistent with the expected posting habits of human influencers, but they enact online authenticity performances that appeal to general users as well. Virtual influencer agencies mimic the most successful human influencer content format, and the most relatable human general user content and sell it back to us in a virtual package. Authenticity was established as the cornerstone for such accepted performances as authenticity is seen as an essential tool to foster intimate and credible communication between brands and consumers and between influencers and followers (Preece, 2015:619). For virtual influencers to be seen as authentic by their followers is a key indicator of success. In the online space especially, authenticity is not an absolute or innate term and so the onus is on a profile being *perceived* as authentic. This perception of authenticity is brokered through a mediated authenticity contract with guiding principles. There is a growing consensus that there are degrees of authenticity and an acceptance of authenticity that changes depending on which vehicle it manifests in. In Chapter Eight I established that authenticity online is mediated through an authenticity contract between producers (namely virtual influencer agencies), consumers (Instagram users) and the regulatory authorities (Instagram governance). Producers negotiate what type of content is to be produced in adherence to Instagram genre conventions, and consumers negotiate how to preferably read such content as corresponding

with similar content on the platform. There is therefore an established set of mediated authenticity principles that when enacted, facilitate the perception of online authenticity, and include predictability, spontaneity, immediacy, confessions, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection. In Chapter Eight, I explore how virtual influencers effortlessly incorporated these principles into their profile. Chapter Nine proves that as a result, some participants did describe them as authentic.

It is not just virtual influencers increasingly human realistic portrayals that have facilitated their success. The increasing visually synthetic and commercialised portrayals of general Instagram users is a further contributing factor. General Instagram users have become dependent on a hyper-edited visual style on the platform to the point where boundaries between raw and edited visuals blur. This is coupled with advances in visual technology that manipulate an image during the moment of capturing, not just after, thus altering our viewings of the reality we seek to capture. There is not only an acceptance that Instagram posts are edited and synthetic to a degree, but that the motivation for the posts has links to commercial aims.

In Chapter Five I prove audiences do not see authenticity and commercialisation as necessarily contradictory elements if they are combined and positioned consistently. This was validated by participant responses in Chapter Nine that illustrated that we have become so accustomed to sharing our personal life moments as intertwined with commercial goals that this act is easily accepted — if done consistently. Responses from participants support this as they identify the virtual influencers' commercial tactics as similar to existing human influencer tactics. "If the purpose of Kim Zulu or Lil Miquela is to make money, then I can't find an issue with that because a lot of people use social media to make money, so there isn't anything innately wrong with that."

Further evidence is provided in Chapter Nine where the human influencers interviewed admitted to using authentic-seeming style formats to achieve commercial goals. One Influencer participant used Instagram to create "personal connections" with followers to "build a picture that is relatable." The fostering of (potentially profitable) social connections through personal engagement tactics is therefore operationalised to serve the end goal of creating a profile, "building a picture" and presenting an image that the target audience could relate to and buy into. When the participants from the Influencer participant group do share moments from their life, it is admittedly "strategic" and intended to aid a consistent brand narrative in serving a

neoliberal position. For instance, one Influencer participant shares his music as a product for sale, while another only “shares everything [she] does career-wise,” in other words, sharing content that enhances the value of herself as a model and influencer commodity. The platform capitalist profit-driven goals of Instagram have therefore become an accepted, and even expected practice for human- and now virtual- influencers.

The rhetoric of authenticity is often used heavily by the advertising and marketing industry to distinguish products and thus gain an advantage in overcrowded market areas. For a brand to be seen as authentic by its consumers is highly profitable and thus highly desirable. Although I note that the use of authenticity for commercial goals is not new, the dangers of its utilisation by virtual influencers is more significant than its previous uses by brands. Both marketers and virtual influencers, therefore, use authenticity to stimulate sales. However, the implications of virtual influencers’ enactment of authenticity have broader implications for the humans they aim to appear authentic to. In the case of brands and human influencers authenticity is used to project a real — as in relatable — human, in the case of virtual influencers, authenticity is used to project a real — as in alive — human. I argue that the strategic crafting of virtual influencer profiles by agencies should be read as sinister when considering that in the context of virtual influencers, authenticity is not just a personable marketing tactic, it is a tool for dishonesty in portraying a sense of authentic aliveness that cannot exist in a synthetic construction.

10.3.2 Instagram Visual Genre Consistency

Virtual influencers adhere strictly to the expected visual styles of the Instagram platform genre. In Chapter Four, I explored the visuality of “Instagramism” which included visual posts according to categories of casual; designer; professional; photographer subjectivity; item fetishisation; augmented reality, virtual reality and virtual platform-specific visuality of Instagram. This was validated in Chapter Eight where I analysed how virtual profiles harness the mediated authenticity principles of spontaneity, imperfection and predictability in adhering to posting formats that follow platform-specific genre practices that are expected on the Instagram platform, including live posting, informality, the use of multiple viewpoints, flawed framing and piggybacking on the virality of trends. This visual style is aided in no small part by the changes in visual culture.

In Chapter Four, I proved how changes in digital photography have meant that images are now inherently manipulatable, with the produced visual no longer being linked to its referent and

no longer needing to be grounded in any version of reality. The implications of this shift mean that visuals are no longer necessarily a means to *capture* reality but can actively *construct* reality. This has provided the foundation on which virtual influencers become acceptable - indeed, inevitable as audiences view virtual influencers as neither more nor less real than any other image.

Scholarly understandings of what the image means have therefore evolved through various stages, from 1) an image as the reflection of a basic reality; 2) an image as masking and perverting a basic reality through embellishment; 3) an image as masking the absence of a basic reality; 4) an image as bearing no relation to any reality Baudrillard, 2002:2; Dalayli, 2020:89). I argued that the introduction of the mobile phone exacerbated this process according to Manovich's (2002:53) five characteristics of new media: numerical representation, modularity, variability, transcoding, and automation. I demonstrated that numerical representation and condensing has meant that visual units are minimised into digitised codes that can be captured, stored and shared more easily, resulting in a substantial shift in the choice of, and frequency of, image capturing with an ever-increasing multitude of images producing a cinema of convenience instead of a deep relationship with the image. I further revealed how the attribute of transcoding has meant that digital forms lose their sense of permanence as they are continually made and unmade, transformed and transcoded into new digital formats. I then presented the attributes of modularity and convergence that seamlessly combine different forms of textual, pictorial, graphical and musical content. I further explored how the characteristic of mobility has blurred the line between our offline/online self as we can carry around these pocket technospaces of our online selves into all areas of our offline existence. The characteristic of variability and editing further suggest that digital cameras have evolved from simply being a passive recording device to a production device as they do not only *take* pictures but *make* pictures. I strengthened my argument by considering the automation ability of mobile camera phones where editing is automatically built into the technology so that the visual reality of a visual is changed *during* the moment of capturing not just *after*. This transforms the process to creating the visual instead of *editing* the visual.

That virtual influencers are a natural extension of the trend towards image manipulation is supported by participants' responses in Chapter Nine. For some participants, virtual influencers are simply the growth of existing photoshop practices that are "taken to the extreme in producing new forms of art." We have become accustomed to a certain ratio of real-to-

augmented online visuals; now, virtual influencers invert that ratio so that there is more “augmentation” than “reality.” Participants explain that “we all look a little bit meta human-ish” and “there are already [so] many different accounts making many different like claims online about things that exist and things that don’t exist that this is just more of that.”

The Kim Zulu team representative echoes this sentiment by noting, “we’ve been doing this for years” and we now “live in a digitally altered world” where “we are all adding more light to our photos” and we “cannot expect that a platform and a space like your Instagram which is essentially your digital home wouldn’t include the possibility of altered beings.” In one Creative participants analysis of a Kim Zulu post he notes that this is how he “would have edited the skin of a model [he] shot.” This demonstrates the correlation between the real person *editing* and the virtual profile *creating* that occurs in adherence to these editing expectations. Not only do virtual influencers correlate with influencer genres and Instagram genres but they also correlate with the identities of the audiences they try to appeal to.

10.3.3 Audience Identity Consistency

In Chapter Eight I argue that these mediated authenticity principles of predictability, ordinariness and confession are utilised by virtual influencers to construct an identity as relatable to followers. The principles of predictability, ordinariness and confession work together to construct an idealised identity that can be related to and deployed for the purposes of profit. These principles work together to construct a persona that is a similar ethnicity, gender, and age as followers, exists in a similar geopolitical location and performs an expected mode of femininity and sexual orientation.

This weaponisation of identity is best exemplified in the Kim Zulu profile which strongly positions itself as proudly South African with the creative representative describing their efforts to “create an identity that people can resonate with.” The participants’ reactions of being impressed and happy that South Africa is being represented in Chapter Nine confirms that this aim has found its mark. Most participants celebrated the idea of the Kim Zulu profile as a celebration of South African culture. The result is that not supporting Kim Zulu starts to feel unpatriotic and not being proud of the profile feels like not being proud of a part of your identity. The Kim Zulu team representative Participant K admits to viewing Kim Zulu as a representation of a proudly South African narrative, thus taking feelings of being proudly South

African and overlaying it with the profile so that a lack of support for Kim Zulu starts to feel unpatriotic.

a) Commercialising Identity

Critical elements of contention with the virtual influencers included complex ideas around representation and the use of gender and cultural identities for commercial gain. For one participant the “discomfort isn’t the appropriation of culture necessarily, in and of itself as artistic expression, but the appropriation of culture for the advancement of material accumulation.” It is the intentional positioning of the virtual identity as a kind of cultural reclamation” that is “grounded within deep capitalism.” The Kim Zulu creators were perceived by participants to “be justifying capitalism promoting actions with identity politics for people of colour.” Virtual influencers thus highlight the tension in the ethics of representation and commercialisation. Previous research described this dilemma as the “tip of the moral iceberg” (Hawley, 2020).

b) Representation when Manifested in a Virtual Influencer

In Chapter Nine I established that due to the absence of black representation in media the presence – albeit virtual, of a black female South African is something many participants admired about Kim Zulu. One participant remarked that he was “happy Zulu women were being represented.” But to say that women are being “represented” is to forget what representation is. When delving deeper into the idea of cultural representation, most participants realised that they would prefer this desire of black and South African cultural representation to come from a human, and not virtual, source. The participants question “whether these virtual influencers are adding to or taking away from the opportunity for human African women to find themselves influencer opportunities.” In this thinking, not only are virtual influencers threats to human influencers in taking paid for partnership opportunities, but they are perceived as threats to the very demographic of black women they claim to try to be celebrating/elevating. From their perspective, it is problematic that a fictional rendering of a woman of colour is taking up space in an industry where real women of colour already struggle to find a platform.

c) Creator and Virtual Influencer Identity Congruency

For many participants what was important was not just that “representation occurs” but who is behind that representation and who profits from it. For Participant B, it is important to understand the demographic of the team behind Kim Zulu “because this is black imagery, a black person and black culture” and so she “would want to know that it is a black-owned company and that at least it is a black person that's profiting from this.” To some, therefore, as long as the team behind the virtual influencer were of the same ethnicity as the virtual influencer they created, there was a level of acceptance. For the representative from the Kim Zulu team, this was his key rebuttal against criticism: “I could understand the criticism against Kim Zulu” explains Participant K, “however because we as the people and the creative team behind Kim Zulu are culturally connected to the culture of the story, I don't see an issue.” “The criticism would make sense if we ourselves were not connected to that culture” but we “use Kim's heritage to talk about our own heritage.” I observe that the knowledge that the team behind Kim Zulu were Zulu was a source of comfort to some participants. It therefore appears that the virtual influencer was seen as more authentic if the identity of its creator matched the identity personified by the virtual influencer, the greater the dissimilarity, the less authentic the virtual influencer was perceived to be.

However, Kim Zulu remains a female virtual influencer controlled by a mainly male creative team. This was an issue for participants who questioned why they did not just create a male virtual influencer. “Why do they think it is okay to create a female when they are male, especially in the context of a patriarchal culture, such as a Zulu culture,” questions participant B.

Some could argue that virtual influencers are online narrative characters and so the creators of these profiles have “creative license” to create characters outside of their identity experience, since all narratives, for instance, as created in literature, depict representations of fictional characters whose identity is not necessarily the same as the author. The context of the platform is however important. Instagram is not, and has never been, a space for online fantasy narratives: rather, it is a social media platform premised on facilitating online interactions between real people with the aim of promoting profit-driven consumer activity.

Furthermore, the use of identities for the sake of telling a story is in and of itself not an issue. But the incorporation of commercialisation adds complexity to the debate as these characters are created first and foremost to serve a commercial goal. These virtual influencers aim to not just entertain – but to sell. This is the distinction, and the possible threat.

10.4 A FUTURE WITH VISUAL INFLUENCERS AND PLATFORM CAPITALISM – GUIDELINES FOR CO-EXISTENCE

With COVID-19 unlocking behaviours that further combine offline and online versions of reality and identity, there is an acceptance that this hybrid space is here to stay. This co-opted space between human and virtual influencers is not a passing fad, but a new stage in social media platform usage. The Kim Zulu team representative sees any reading of virtual influencers as a threat; as “super short sighted”, “naïve” and “very small minded.” Incorporating market logic, the Kim Zulu creative team representative explains that “competition is a good thing” as “virtual influencers force human influencers to up their game.” He is not the only one. In an “interview” with Lil Miquela, “she” is asked whether human influencers should be threatened by virtual influencers, to which she answers: “no, I think we’re going to co-exist in harmony” (Zach Sang Show, 2019). However, we cannot “co-exist in harmony” if the playing field is not even. To this end, this section provides an overview of guidelines for the creation and maintenance of virtual influencers that would benefit both the producers of these virtual influencer profiles (creative agencies), the audiences that consume them (Instagram users) and the marketplace they operate on (Instagram). If we know that these profiles are here to stay, how do we use these new vehicles in ways that benefit and protect all stakeholders of the Instagram universe that virtual influencers have made their home.

10.4.1 Reduce Sexualised Identities

I summarised the over-sexualisation of Lil Miquela’s infantilised positioning, and Kim Zulu’s blossoming womanhood positioning in Chapter Eight. This overt sexuality was noted as “problematic” by all female participants. These virtual influencers were likened to “sex robots” and were seen to take existing practices of female bodily exploitation to the extreme because “at least when photographing models the human model subjects have some level of autonomy, they can say no so there may be somewhere models aren’t willing to go, but a virtual influencer can’t say no” explains a participant. The virtual influencer female body is therefore an object that can be contorted however the makers, who are overwhelmingly male, desire. The overt sexualisation of the subjects is off-putting to the very audiences they aim to appeal to. Reducing

the sexualisation would be beneficial to the agencies behind visual influencers as less sexualised identities would be viewed more favourably by female audiences- their direct target market for the female clothes/products these female virtual influencers promote.

The benefits to the general Instagram community are plentiful in that it is important for female Instagram users to see their bodies visually represented on Instagram in other ways than as the subject of the male gaze. This would address some of the key reasons why female participants indicated not wanting to follow the virtual influencers because of the possible damage to their mental health as they are bombarded with perfect, sexualised visuals.

10.4.2 Heighten Visual Realisticness – Only When Coupled with Disclosure

All participants including Influencer, Privates and Creatives, admitted they would not know if Lil Miquela was real when scrolling past. Whilst participants marvelled at the technological prowess of the team, these benefits and admiration shifted to negative sentiments when disclosure about the virtual influencer's non-human state was not clearly indicated. In this sense, the visual technological advancement was perceived by users to “dupe and bamboozle” them instead of entertaining them. Research on the uncanny has unearthed contradictory findings on the ideal standard of human realistic perfection with some advising that visuals should not be too humanly realistic. Findings from my research however indicate that the more humanly realistic the better – as long as this is coupled with full disclosure that the profiles are not human.

10.4.3 Disclose of Virtual Status – Features and Regulations

In Chapter Two's overview of virtual influencers, I note that attempts to reduce virtual influencers by categorising them as “avatars” or “robots” conceals the possible harm they may cause to the human profiles they so desperately try to imitate. The problematic nature of virtual influencers such as Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu misleadingly describing themselves as “a robot with a drip” or a “girl robot,” coupled with their rare and inconsistent use of any type of virtual status disclosure, was identified as a significant problem for all participants.

The representative from the Kim Zulu production team does not see the profile as misleading, claiming that they make sufficient provision to disclose the influencer's virtual status. However, the observed behaviour of the profile to date – which seldom uses the disclosure opportunities that do exist currently (namely hashtags) – indicates an overall lack of motivation

for ethical disclosure, unless strictly regulated. When Lil Miquela defines herself as a “robot,” and the question arises in interactions with followers, the response from the profile is cryptic at best. Kim Zulu’s profile takes this illusion even further, by outright denying that Kim Zulu is not real. Despite the profile’s bio description recently being updated to indicate that Kim Zulu is a “girl robot” and a “#virtualbeing,” when given the opportunity to provide clarity on Kim Zulu’s virtual status in direct questions, the response is the same as Lil Miquela, a claim that the profile is “real.” For instance, when follower @zee_mazibuko questioned Kim Zulu’s human status commenting: “Nah, surely you not real cos wtf?!” @kimzulu_ replied “@zee_mazibuko what makes you think that... I'm absolutely real 🤖🤖🤖🤖” (@kimzulu_, 2020c). There is a need for the non-human status to be disclosed upfront visibly and consistently on the account bio, every post/Story/reel as well as in responses by the account to questions in the comments section.

a) Non-Human Status Disclosure – The Role of Creative Agencies

Carbajal and Blanton (2019) suggest that virtual influencers have brought us to a cultural crossroad where critical consciousness and reality converges with varying degrees of misdirection and deception. The creative agencies behind these virtual influencers however do not see the lack of disclosure as problematic. “No I don’t think it is misleading to not be clear that she isn’t human” explains Participant K, the creative team representative: “think about the amount of times that influencers have been exposed for depicting something as real when it isn’t.” He cites the example of “an influencer posting pictures of herself sitting in first class and then going to sit at her actual seat in economy.” “Kim Zulu is mimicking behaviour and commenting on that kind of behaviour” he explains.

He further justifies the lack of disclosure as an intriguing element in creating entertainment and mystery. “People wonder if she's real or not” and we are choosing to not entertain the question too much but to rather have her out there.” This illustrates the use of mystery and to an extent confusion, as an attention-grabbing tool. The representative from the Kim Zulu team did not see the need for disclosure citing a parallel between virtual influencer fantasy and film fantasy as The Avatar Company has tried to “position itself as a transmedia studio” and sees “Kim Zulu as a player in a virtual universe.” I however find this parallel between virtual influencers and virtual

or cinematic characters problematic. In the act of watching a movie there is a genre expectation, which includes entering into a fantasy world and knowing to suspend your disbelief when exposed to virtual and cinematic characters. However, on Instagram the genre expectations of the type of profiles and content interacted with is different and there is an expectation of a profile representing a real human being unless explicitly indicated otherwise. This was the stance of participants, who indicated a strong desire to “know who or what [they] are engaging with” so that they “know what type of filters to activate when engaging with content.” Virtual influencers who had zero or part-disclosure were viewed by some as not just being a “betrayal” and “misleading” but also being deceptive and “lying to audiences” thus eroding any trust. Participants noted this deception was most drastically felt if they had made a purchase based on a recommendation from a virtual influencer who they incorrectly perceived as human.

This supports previous studies on non-disclosure which found that when the public identified that it was a virtual influencer and not a real human influencer, factors such as perceived originality and uniqueness, perceived brand-matchup and purchasing behaviour decreased even in Millennial and Gen Z participants (Walter, 2020:49). This supports research on feelings of the uncanny as documented in Chapter Five where if disclosure is not up front, the later realisation is perceived negatively. Users should therefore not have to come to the conclusion that the virtual influencer is not human by themselves – they should be told upfront at every point of interaction. Not just half-heartedly in a veiled bio description or in a hidden hashtag used in every 5th post, or in cryptic responses to questions in comments which is the current case with Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu. So far, the creative agencies have shown a disregard for their misleading responses to followers’ questions about whether virtual influencers are real or not. Platform and industry regulation should be in place to ensure a non-human disclosure status. This would include the inaccurate answering of questions pertaining to a non-human status. Both are equally harmful and regulations should provide for both.

This disclosure is not only a means to protect audiences but is also beneficial to the success of the virtual influencer profile as content produced is viewed more favourably when disclosure is clear and upfront. This is supported by Abdullahi (2020:11) who notes that an advertisement disclosure enhances the trustworthiness of

the influencer as opposed to no disclosure. Andersson and Sobek (2020:26) have unearthed similar findings as participants “experienced it as positive” when the sponsorships from brands are communicated plainly.

A key metric of the long-term success of an influencer is the profile follower count as followers are accounts that have essentially “bought into the brand” and signed up to see and engage with consistent content posted. The lack of disclosure of virtual influencers was a key reason for not following virtual influencers. Months after the interviews, I went back to the participant’s profiles to see if they were following Lil Miquela or Kim Zulu and true to their word, none of the participants followed the virtual influencer profiles.

Furthermore, responses from the Kim Zulu team representative Participant K reflects the downside of mystery, where people make incorrect assumptions and interpretations. Participant K notes that they receive backlash about Kim Zulu as being powered by AI, with significant cultural criticisms of AI in traditional communities that see AI as blasphemous in trying to “play God.” By clearly and consistently declaring what the profile is, these incorrect impressions of what it is not can be communicated. It is therefore more financially viable for virtual profiles to clearly and consistently disclose their non-human status.

b) Disclosure of Feature Builds – The Role of the Instagram Platform

Disclosure is irrelevant if the platform features to enable disclosure are not in place. I, therefore, recommend that Instagram builds a disclosure feature that makes virtual profiles’ non-human status clear. This can be done through a “Not A Human” button which can be selected in the moment of virtual influencer profile creation. By selecting this profile option, all content posted by this account is automatically visibly tagged with a “Not a Human” status button that mimics the existing “Paid Partnership” disclosure button. This also means that disclosing the non-status of the profile with each piece of content produced is not needed as it is automatically done by Instagram. This decreases the chances of creative agencies accidentally (or more likely purposefully) omitting the use of a non-human disclosure button.

Instagram furthermore needs to put in place conditions of engagement in its community guidelines that explicitly pertain to virtual influencers. This will assist in the regulation of these profiles as the parameters pertaining to their ethical conduct will be explicit.

When these regulations are not adhered to, the creative agency behind the virtual profile, needs to be held accountable, whether that be through the removal of content from the account, the banning of the account on Instagram or legal repercussions. If agencies want recognition for these visual influencer accounts they also need to take greater accountability for the potential harm they cause.

Importantly, Instagram needs to be more stringent in enforcing this at the onset of profile creation. Its current regulation model, where Instagram relies, in part, on users to flag/report content and accounts that go against community guidelines and then investigates the validity of removing that content, will not suffice. This process, if applied to virtual influencers, would rely on users being able to identify that content is that of a virtual influencer and is not being disclosed as such. Evidence from participants' responses and findings from previous literature on the inability of users to discern between human or virtual influencer posts means that Instagram cannot rely on a level of media literacy and visual discernment that does not exist. The onus on the individual's ability to decipher content presupposes a level of perception and alertness that is not associated with existing user behaviour in relaxingly scrolling through a feed.

The Instagram community guidelines which serve as the regulatory framework for content on the app currently forbid "fake and misleading user reviews," the "impersonation of others" and "accounts created for the purpose of misleading others" (Instagram, 2021). Yet virtual influencers do impersonate humans, make false claims of experiences and uses of products and are often deliberately misleading about their non-human state. But why regulate when you can make a profit? Instagram needs to have the political will to curb misleading behaviour. The price to pay will be a loss of trust on the platform if not done.

This would help Instagram be perceived more favourably by human influencers, one of their key stakeholders on the platform. Human influencer participants viewed Instagram's lack of action against regulating virtual influencers negatively, as they perceived virtual influencers as "unregulated players in the market." In Chapter Nine I illustrated this dissatisfaction with the Influencer participants having the most negative reactions to virtual influencers.

Responses from the Privates evoke similar negative feelings to Instagram's lack of regulation with the ideal of more and more virtual influencers creating and running unregulated accounts a major "worry." This raises important questions about the ethical construction of identity, and how this may affect the ongoing preservation of social values like trust in online spaces (Robinson, 2020:1), such as trusting that the person presenting themselves as a person is indeed a person. Instagram runs a risk in the deterioration of trust on the platform if they do not take action soon. Participant H, for instance, sums it up by explaining that she simply would not use Instagram if the current non-regulation of virtual influencer persists. Half of the participants even indicated a willingness to shift to a paid-for version of the Instagram app if it meant that they would be "protected" from exposure to non-disclosed virtual profiles. If, for instance, it could be demonstrated that the rise of virtual influencers is having a negative effect on trust and cooperation online, this may detract from the legitimacy of platforms and threaten the Instagram platform (Robinson, 2020:4).

c) Non-Disclosure– The Role of Industry Regulators

Virtual influencers are being increasingly incorporated into general advertising campaigns which appear in spaces outside of the Instagram platforms such as billboards and television advertisements. There is a need for clear disclosure on these advertisements as well. In the same way that food advertisements in South Africa are mandated to have a "for display purposes only" disclaimer, any and all content featuring a virtual influencer should have a disclosure indicating "this is not a human." As virtual influencers infiltrate spaces beyond Instagram, we need clear guidelines for all spaces in which these virtual influencers exist.

d) Indicate the Creative Team Behind a Virtual Profile

In Chapter Nine, one participant noted that virtual influencers were vehicles of "creative expression" for creative agencies. "Even if it is virtual, there's still a human's

views behind it. That person might not be comfortable showing themselves online but that doesn't mean that their voice is not valid. It could be the creator's authentic experience being portrayed through the virtual profile. The view is the view, and it is coming from somewhere." From this viewpoint, the question is not about whether virtual influencers have the right to free speech but whether the creators behind them have the right to free speech with the virtual profiles as the vehicles of that speech. The argument of free speech always needs to be considered in context. In this case it is the context of Instagram, which has its own expected nuances. I accept the participant's prioritisation of free speech; however, I note that this argument is only successful if the agencies responsible for the creation and management of these virtual profiles clearly disclosed the virtual status of the profile, not just to Instagram upon registration of the app, but in the bio of the virtual profile itself. In this disclosure step, before a virtual account is able to be activated, the full identities of the team members managing the profile are to be disclosed and verified by Instagram (in the same way it currently offers its verification option). In this way the party that is responsible for not adhering to Instagram or industry guidelines on virtual influencer content creation, can accurately be held accountable.

There is a school of thought that prioritises the rights to anonymity of creators. When considering virtual influencers' existence on social media platforms such as Instagram specifically, I reject the above right to anonymity as the genre conventions of the Instagram platform presupposes a level of real-world existence and openness.

If virtual influencers are creative expressions, then Instagram users exposed to this content have a right to know whose creative expression it is. This argument may differ on other platforms that prioritise primarily creative works where there is an unspoken agreement that the content reflects fictional created works. Instagram, however, is first and foremost a social network. The disclosure of social-being that creates an account is a necessary published truth which maintains the trust between users, which is a cornerstone of the platform's success. I observe that the knowledge that the creative team behind Kim Zulu was open about their role in creating Kim Zulu was a source of comfort to some participants who viewed this more positively than the more secretive agency Brud, the creators of Lil Miquela.

10.4.4 Use Suitable Products, Settings and Co-Stars Deemed Most Suitable

a) Consistent with Virtual Identity

In Chapter Nine participants approved of virtual influencers endorsing products that were consistent with their virtual identity and were linked to the virtual space, for example “a voice over for a GPS” (Participant B) and “virtual games” (Participant I). To Participant J the electronic car advertisement of BMW Mini was a successful collaboration with a virtual influencer that “makes sense for Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela.”

b) If Not Virtual Brand then at Least Not Item Reliant on the Physical

One of the reasons cited for not being willing to buy from a virtual influencer refers to the root of eWOM, namely an influencer actually using a product and sharing their experience of it with their audience, something virtual influencers are unable to do. The inability of virtual influencers to “physically try the products” was also a key issue identified in participant feedback from Andersson and Sobek (2020:23) and Kalpokas (2021:9). Although in principle no virtual influencer is able to physically try and review any product or service, there are certain items that point out this discrepancy more obviously than others leading to negative perceptions by users.

I recommend that virtual influencers should not promote food consumables as due to their non-human status, they do not eat. Similarly, virtual influencers should not recommend any items dealing with mental health, spiritual guidance or personal motivation as these are viewed by participants to be “sacred spaces” that non-humans do not have the right to advise users on. Participant L, for instance, notes that she would not buy a book recommended by virtual influencer because a “book is something I would internalise and make it part of my identity and virtual influencers don’t have the right to advise on that kind of stuff.” Participant H supports this by noting any of those suggestions would “feel hollow” as the virtual influencer does not have the “live experience” to advise on life and happiness -enhancing purchases. This includes virtual influencers posting about contentious emotional experiences for example Lil Miquela’s post claiming to have been molested by her Lyft driver (an e-hailing service)

Items that virtual influencers can promote without the same amount of backlash include items that can be clearly and visually depicted in a post. For instance, a clothing item,

“worn” by the virtual influencer because the “benefit” of the product is clear for all to see, namely the clothing item looks aesthetically appealing on the virtual influencer. Other visually evident items cited by participants include “low stakes functional objects” such as furniture.

c) Relatable but not Real Setting

Participants had a stronger positive reaction to virtual influencer content that was not situated in a studio setting and was instead situated in an environment that mimicked “real life” but was not of an actual place that exists. When virtual influencers superimposed themselves in well-known places that exist and that participants had physically visited themselves before it was seen as “too invasive.” As a result of the participant experiencing the setting previously, the “lie” of the virtual influencer in claiming to have experienced it is more obvious. This setting, therefore, emphasises the distinction between the humans who have experienced it and the virtual influencer who claims to have experienced it. A similarly negative reaction was experienced when the setting was in a studio; it was viewed by participants as artificial and as “too manufactured.” Content that mimicked a realistic setting but was not clearly aiming to position a virtual influencer in a recognisable space, was seen as the most acceptable setting.

d) Established Brands

The choice of when to include a virtual influencer in campaigns in terms of the level of market maturity of the brand and the market maturity of the virtual influencer was a factor in the positive response to a campaign. Based on participant feedback, I argue that the most successful partnerships are when a burgeoning virtual influencer (medium to high market maturity) is used by an established brand (high market maturity). For established brands which are seeking ways to be seen as modern, on the cutting edge of trends and in keeping with the times, partnering with “futuristic” virtual influencers is a logical choice. They may have reached saturation points with existing customers and need to be seen as “reinventing” themselves with “fresh” and “bold” campaigns. This is seen, for example, when Lil Miquela partners with Versace and Kim Zulu partners with Puma. This confirms previous research that demonstrates that individuals who have previously purchased a product of an established brand were more likely to buy this promoted product by the virtual influencer (Walter, 2020:49).

This partnership is also beneficial to the virtual influencer who gains additional credibility through the partnership with a reputable brand. It is the combination of the old and familiar brand with the new and unfamiliar virtual influencer which appeals most to participants. To have had a new virtual influencer partnering with a new brand still establishing itself within its product category is noted as too “foreign” by users.

e) Long Term Partnerships

Previous research has established that long term partnerships with a product in one category leads to great recall and purchase intent. Virtual influencers should use the same care as human influencers in hopping between too many brands or switching between competitors in the same category space. The importance of consistency was something not overlooked by the Kim Zulu team representative, who observed that in the human influencer industry “it is very hard to be consistent - as an influencer, you have to sometimes do things just for money, especially influencers who do it full time.” Despite this pressure, the Representative claims that the Kim Zulu team “understands that it's a long-term curve, it's not a short journey.” Consistency also relates to the timeframe of brand partnerships. Influencers who post about companies within a single brand category over a long period of time were seen as more authentic.

f) Collaborations

Brands such as Samsung are combining popular human influencers, for example, Millie Booby Brown, with virtual influencers, for instance, Lil Miquela, in joint campaigns. I argue that these collaborations can be successful if the distinction between the human and virtual influencer is clearly and consistently disclosed. I furthermore recommend that virtual influencers should not just collaborate with human influencers but should collaborate with creators for the sake of creating thought-provoking visuals, instead of just collaborating with brands to produce branded content. Of all participants interviewed the Creatives proved the most accepting of virtual influencers as they saw virtual influencers as “pieces of art.” All Creatives interviewed expressed a desire to work with a virtual influencer like Lil Miquela whether through co-producing a song, or a co-created visual.

g) Partnering with Smaller Brands/ Donation to Community

One of the reasons cited by participants in preferring to buy something attributed to a human influencer and not a virtual influencer was the desire to “support a human.” This

comment indicates an awareness by followers that their social media actions help to financially uphold an influencer. To this end, I argue that virtual influencers should have an offline benefit. This is in part addressed by the disclosure of the creative team behind the virtual influencer but does not address other criticism regarding the use of identities for profit.

In Chapter Nine Participant M, for example, criticises the team behind Kim Zulu on social justice grounds as the creators “could have taken a real human beautiful black female, who might be from a disadvantaged background and invest in her and build her up to be a brand and use the money you make from all these paid campaigns to actually enrich someone's life in the process as well.” In this instance, it is not just the creators of the content profiting but the subject of the content profiting as well. This train of thought is reiterated by Participant A who argues it is fine to use the identity as a commodity, but questions how Kim Zulu will be used to “add value to the community she represents.” “Since the team is profiting off of the exhibition of a particular culture, how is the team planning to work to help the living standards that the majority of people within that community find themselves in in South Africa?” By a portion of proceed going to a fund, some of these hesitations by participants would be addressed.

Other negative reactions from participants were especially clear when the partnered-with company was a “big brand” which made the influencer “appear like a sellout” and have a “big capitalism vibe.” This sentiment was softened when the influencer partnered with a smaller brand and was seen as “helping people stay employed” and “small business stay afloat” with economic assistance to small businesses seen as positive given the economic downturn caused by COVID-19 which has meant that “businesses need all the help they can get.”

10.4.5 Incorporate Narrative and Lifestyle

The importance of a strong story was highlighted by many participants who, without prodding, mentioned the role of story as a key indicator of authenticity. Some participants, predominantly the Creatives, admitted that if a virtual influencer’s narrative was conveyed successfully, they would be able to see virtual influencers as authentic. “If the goal of social media is content creation and engagement, and the virtual entity is interacting with the community and really engaging with them through their profile story then it doesn’t matter that the source is a virtual

or not” believes Participant A, a Creative. This is supported by other Creatives who note that “the way we have communicated the story has always changed whether it's an artist's paintbrush, or a writer's pen” and virtual influencers are just “a new mode.” “If we believe that content is king then this sort of stuff will upset us because the content that we're using is changing so rapidly that if the content is why I'm doing what I'm doing, then anytime anybody brings in new content, it's either a threat or a challenge that I need to oppose. If story is king, then there is an acceptance of whatever elements are needed to build the story” explains Participant F. This argument is strengthened when the story is of a high quality with a “rich story world.” The fact that virtual influencers are admired for the ways in which they successfully establish and maintain their profile on social media illustrates the claim that when it comes to genre we “derive pleasure from observing how the conventions of the genre are manipulated and stretched (Abercrombie, 1996:45; Thwaites, Davis & Mules, 1994:92). Virtual influencers master our human created Instagram features and sell it back to us.

Despite claims by the representative of the Kim Zulu team that he is “not brand partnership focus, but story-focused” he mentions that his “first thought” when the Kim Zulu concept was presented to him was to be “excited about the types of partnerships we could do.” It is noteworthy that his mind immediately went to ideas around the capitalisation of the asset and not about what type of message Kim Zulu could speak to, which his previous emphasis on narrative claims to have focused on.

Furthermore, in the concluding question to the Kim Zulu team representative, I asked Participant K what he would say if he had the platform to speak to Kim Zulu's followers directly. Without hesitation, he admitted he would ask “what they would like her to influence” as “we don't ask enough of our audience what they want and what issues are important to them.” This emphasises a market logic as content driver instead of narrative as a content driver. This is reflected in the participants' perception of Kim Zulu who described the profile as less authentic than Lil Miquela's “stronger story” because the profile's narrative is “weak,” the “purpose is unclear,” the account “doesn't really push a message” and “feels hollow.”

Interestingly the incorporation of aspirational luxury lifestyles into overall narratives were not seen as negative by participants. I note that the criticism for the virtual influencer perfection is dominated by a resistance to the *physical standards* these virtual influencers would set, not so

much on the non-real *luxury lifestyle standards* they often portray. There seems to therefore be an acceptance about the portrayal of these “fake” lifestyles that already saturate Instagram.

10.4.6 Consider the Protection of Identity and Copyright

In Chapter Nine, a participant keenly observes that “virtual influencers illustrate the complexity of ownership of identity.” As virtual influencers grow in prominence and their financial returns in profiting from appropriated identities increase, the issue intensifies.

The Kim Zulu team representative explains that “Kim isn’t modelled after one specific person.” We know that virtual influencers are created from scratch, that anything that informs their identity is pulled from other sources, and that this finalised virtual construction earns money as a result of the success of these identity elements incorporated into its persona. Whether it is one person or several different people whose physical features are copied in the creation of the virtual influencer, questions of ownership and allocated profit arise. Participant J for instance, who has previously had his picture used in a stranger’s profile claiming to look like him, wonders what would happen if a virtual influencer “uses your physical appearance without consent” – “would it count as identity theft if they are using your face to sell products without your permission?” he asks, “would I get commission if they used my features?” This complicates the debate about virtual influencers further as profiting from a hypothetical identity can be problematic, such as is the case with virtual influencer, but profiting off of real identity without their consent is a new area of debate. “As an Instagram user, how am I going to know in the future if someone has used my face?” Participant J asks, “is Instagram going to put in a check to see whether the face already look like a current user?” If Instagram is to allow for these virtual influencer profiles to exist in the platform, we will need to take greater measures in monitoring not only the disclosure of the virtual status of a profile, but the very creation of the profile and whether or not the construction infringes on existing human identities and features.

10.5 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since all research acts as a potential basis for future academic investigation, it is crucial that academics openly concede the limits of their own work (Hoang & Su, 2019:107). No research is objective and my subjective view of platforms such as Instagram and profiles such as virtual influencers is informed by my upbringing in an age where technology and the internet flourishes, where much of my work and schooling has involved the use of digital media, and

by my personal interest and following of Instagram influencers and social media celebrities. This may lead to an overly optimistic view of Instagram and an exaggerated assumption of the significant role social media plays in our everyday life. This view, however, may also help with the understanding of Instagram in a more holistic manner and the understanding of the more subtle context and thought processes of others who grew up in a digital era.

Any research project is limited by its scope. This research laid an important foundation for understanding Instagram's platform capitalism and the ways in which virtual influencers embody the commercialisation of authenticity, especially from a South African and Western context. Future research can and should build on this research.

This thesis examined only two virtual influencers from a Western (Lil Miquela) and Southern (Kim Zulu), context. It would be nearly impossible to analyse every component and facet of the complex digital world of Instagram which is why some element of selection was required to create a realistic scope. Future research can use some of the other 120 virtual influencer profiles that do exist and compare their positioning for alternative audiences. I also limited the number of visuals of the virtual profiles to 30 visuals given the depth of information that could be extracted from them. Future research could analyse more posts of these profiles. Future research could also incorporate different aspects from these accounts through for example, prioritising Story content and analysing followers' comments on posts in depth. By analysing comments on posts in depth, feedback from the community and analyses of the comments section of each post the follower's reception of these posts can be document and any obvious patterns in the engagement and social interactions for each post identified.

Since both virtual influencers analysed in the study were female, it can be argued that this study had a larger relation to women, as men might experience more difficulties in putting themselves in a position where they would buy a female product. Hence, it can be suggested for future research to analyse a male virtual influencer to make the study more accessible to both genders.

This was the first time that a creative agency responsible for the creation of a virtual influencer was interviewed. This research was however limited to only interviewing a representative from The Avatar Company (formerly known as EMOJI Digital) who created Kim Zulu. Attempts to contact Brud, the team that created Lil Miquela, were unsuccessful. This is a gap in the research that future scholarship can address.

Although I was able to provide a broad overview of most stakeholders involved in interacting with virtual influencers such as the creative team producing the profiles, and the audiences consuming the profiles, future research can interview the brands that employ these virtual influencers and choose to use them in campaigns instead of human models and influencers. The brand's motivations for doing so, and their experiences of using a virtual influencer would be valuable to overall conversations on the efficacy or impending threat of virtual influencers.

I furthermore restricted my research to the Instagram platform since this is the platform that most virtual influencers have the strongest presence on. Instagram was furthermore selected for its embodiment of platform capitalism. Future research can however consider the dual themes of virtual influencers and platform capitalism in relation to other social media platforms since virtual influencers are growing in popularity on these other platforms, and platform capitalism tactics are increasingly evident on other platforms. Furthermore, a more comprehensive study could also include multiple online platforms and how the content posted by virtual influencers differ on platforms like Instagram versus YouTube and Twitter.

With every introduction of new features into these online spaces it changes our perceptions of virtual influencers. For instance, Meta's investment in the meta-verse, and the increasing trend of creating digital avatars of our face all contribute to a merging of the real and virtual. As industries like the metaverse mature, future research should position these phenomena in relation to shifts in the virtual influencer industry.

This includes advancement in AI and predictive content generations. Once virtual influencers cease being painstakingly human-made and, instead, become interactively and automatically generated, they will not only become ubiquitous but will also become even more irresistible by automatically adapting to their audiences. And as their impact increases, the question of whether they are human or virtual will become increasingly irrelevant (Kalpokas, 2021:9). If virtual influencers create content derived from algorithms and mining "trending" topics on Instagram, attributing ethical responsibility for their actions would be more difficult. Understanding the ethical responsibility of virtual influencers in these cases would rely on the kind of analysis developed in the ethical responsibility and Artificial Agent literature (Robinson, 2020:5). As the possibility of AI becomes more closely integrated with virtual influencers, future research needs to analyse this new phenomenon.

10.6 CONCLUSION

The findings from this study have serious implications not only theoretically but also from an applied perspective in both academic and marketing spheres. In this thesis, I explored how Instagram's architecture and technical scripting serves its platform capitalist goals by moulding users' behaviour in a way that is most profitable to the platform. Instagram encourages us to exchange our data and time for the rights of use of its app architecture. It also normalises the acts of consuming content, producing content and spending money on the app. We are taught what app uses to habitually follow to the point where we legitimise Instagram's central positioning in our online social life and become reliant on Instagram as the central facilitator of our online existence. We furthermore internalise the naturalised consumer identities and are transformed into self-investing entrepreneurial capitalists where we spend money and labour as an investment into unlocking returns on our profile assets, whilst also spending money to make purchases that adhere to an idealised commercial identity of a luxury lifestyle celebrated on the app.

As a result, the boundaries between identity, commerce and commodification are blurring. Virtual influencers are an embodiment of this. I argue that the *supply* of virtual influencers is on the rise (given the advanced technical capabilities of creative agencies to execute the creation of human realistic visuals) as well as the *demand* for these virtual influencers (as brands increasingly see virtual influencers as able to generate higher returns with lower risks than their human influencer counterparts). Furthermore, the *market acceptance* is on the rise (since Instagram users have become accustomed to the blurring of the authentic and the commercial).

Years of social media use have altered *perceptions* of the nature of endorsement, *expectations* of online performance in adherence to platform capitalism logic and *impressions* of visuals as no longer grounded in reality. As a result, modern visuals are no longer necessarily a means to *capture* reality but can actively *construct* that reality, while humans' increasing *synthetic* portrayals through hyper-editing have meant that virtual influencers' increasingly human *realistic* portrayals are increasingly accepted and celebrated. The way we contemplate virtual influencers' realness says much about who we are and who we are willing to become online.

Responses from participants indicate an acknowledgement that virtual influencers will become more common on the Instagram platform, thus mirroring previous similar findings (Antonio & Gaidamaviciute, 2020:98). I have illustrated that virtual influencers are an undoubted next

phase of the endorser evolution, whether we like it or not, and these new online entities are no less structured, organised or impactful than the human influencers that preceded them. In exploring the lack of disclosure and regulation of virtual influencer profiles I argue what people do not know *can* hurt them since without upfront and consistent disclaimers that the profile is not a human, users feel misled, leading to negative perceptions of the creative agencies creating the profiles and the Instagram platform regulation that fails to hold them accountable.

We need to be alerted to the agendas of virtual influencer creators. “Today they feed the desire for new socks and fancy tops, tomorrow it might be a new war” (Lacković, 2020:3). Today virtual influencers are commodified, what if tomorrow they become weaponised?

In this context, reform is the best form of defense (Liebes & Curran, 1998:194). With a decade of Instagram experience, we are at a point of maturity where we can and should question what we want the next century of online Instagram life to look like and what types of existence we want the platform to support and encourage. As we learn about Instagram and other social media platforms that weave together our online and offline social lives, we need to expand our media and technological literacy to not just involve a mastery of a platform’s functions, but rather also learn about the powerful ideas embodied in it within the context of the platform’s overarching goals. Understanding what virtual influencers are, how they operate, why they have emerged and thrived on Instagram and how they embody problematic platform capitalist goals is a critical next stage of Instagram media literacy.

11. LIST OF SOURCES

11.1 ACADEMIC REFERENCES

- Aaker, J.L. 1997. Dimensions of Brand Personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3):347-356.
- Abdullahi, F. 2020. The Effects of Social Media Influencers' Advertising Disclosure on Consumer Responses on Instagram. *International Journal of Contents*, 16(1):11-24.
- Abel, S. 2012. *Postfeminism Meets Hegemonic Masculinities*. In Ross, K. 2012. *The Handbook of Gender, Sex and Media*. United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell Publishers.
- Abercrombie, N. 1996. *Television and Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Abidin C. 2014. #In\$tagLam: Instagram as a Repository of Taste, a Brimming Marketplace, a War of Eyeballs. In: Berry, M. and Schleser, M. *Mobile Media Making in the Age of Smartphones*. New York: Palgrave Pivot Publishers.
- Abidin, C. 2015. Communicative <3 intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology*, 8(1):1-16.
- Abidin, C. 2016. Visibility Labour: Engaging with Influencers' Fashion Brands and #OOTD Advertorial Campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1):86–100.
- Abidin, C. 2018. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Abidin, C. 2020. Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours. *Cultural Science Journal*, 12(1):77–103.
- Achterberg, W., Pot, A.M., Kerkstra, A., Ooms, M., Muller, M. & Ribbe, M. 2003. The Effect of Depression on Social Engagement in Newly Admitted Dutch Nursing Home Residents. *The Gerontologist*, 43(1):213–218.
- Adams, P., Kelly, C. & Koltun, N. 2021. 8 Marketing Trends to Watch for in 2021 as After effects of a Volatile Year Linger. Marketing Dive [Online]. Available at: <https://www.marketingdive.com/news/8-trends-set-to-reshape-marketing-in-2021/592658/>. Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Adler, P.A. & Adler, P. 2011. *The Tender Cut: Inside the Hidden World of Self-Injury*. New York: New York University Press.
- Adorno, T.W. 1964. *The Jargon of Authenticity: Jargon der Eigentlichkeit: Zur deutschen Ideologie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Aggad, F. 2021. Africa's Digital Transformation Risks Becoming Trapped in Geopolitical Competition. Mail and Guardian [Online]. Available at: <https://mg.co.za/africa/2021->

- 02-08-africas-digital-transformation-risks-becoming-trapped-in-geopolitical-competition/. Accessed 16 March 2021.
- Agosto, D. E., Abbas, J., & Naughton, R. 2012. Relationships and Social Rules: Teens' Social Network and other ICT Selection Practices. *JASIST*, 63(6):1108-1124.
- Agrawal, J. & Kamakura, W.A. 1995. The Economic Worth of Celebrity Endorsers: An Event Study Analysis. *Journal of Marketing*, 59(3):56–62.
- Ahmad, B.M. 2016. A Comparative Study of Celebrity & Non-Celebrity Endorsed Social Advertisements in India. *Global Media Journal: Pakistan Edition*, 9(2):1-5.
- Ajana, B. 2013. *Governing Through Biometrics: The Biopolitics of Identity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Alexander, K. 2018. What it Really Means to be Authentic on Instagram. The Yoga Nomads [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theyoganomads.com/what-it-really-means-to-be-authentic-on-instagram/>. Accessed 8 May 2019.
- Alfonzo, P. 2019. Mastering Mobile through Social Media: Creating Engaging Content on Instagram and Snapchat. *Library Technology Reports*, 55(2):5-42.
- Al-Heeti, A. 2020. Instagram Launches Automatic Captions for IGTV to Promote Accessibility. CNet [Online]. Available at: <https://www.cnet.com/news/instagram-launches-automatic-captions-for-igtv-to-promote-accessibility/>. Accessed 11 May 2021.
- Allison, K. 2020. How to Work with Nano, Micro, Macro and Mega Influencers and Where to Find the Most Success. Grin [Online]. Available at: <https://grin.co/blog/nano-micro-macro-mega-influencers/>. Accessed 6 December 2020.
- Altman, I. & Taylor, D. 1973. *Social Penetration: The Development of Interpersonal Relationships*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston Publishers.
- Amoore, L. 2011. Data Derivatives: On the Emergence of a Security Risk Calculus for our Times. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28(6):24–43.
- Amos, C., Holmes, G. & Strutton, D. 2008. Exploring the Relationship between Celebrity Endorser Effects and Advertising Effectiveness: A Quantitative Synthesis of Effect Size. *International Journal of Advertising*, 27(2):209-234.
- and Contextual Age. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 58(1):89–97.
- Andersen, C.U. & Pold, S.B. 2018. *The Meta Interface: The Art of Platforms, Cities, and Clouds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Andersson, V. & Sobek, T. 2020. Virtual Avatars, Virtual Influencers and Authenticity., Master's Thesis, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden.

- Antonio, S. & Gaidamaviciute, U. 2020. Next Step for Influencer Marketing - the Fascination of Robots, Master's Thesis, Copenhagen Business School, Copenhagen.
- App Annie. 2018. 2017 Retrospective: A Monumental Year for the App Economy. App Annie [Online]. Available at: <https://www.appannie.com/en/insights/market-data/app-annie-2017-retrospective>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Arvidsson, A. 2016. Facebook and Finance: On the Social Logic of the Derivative. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 33(6):3–23.
- Ashman, R., Patterson, A. & Brown, S. 2018. Don't Forget to Like, Share and Subscribe: Digital Autopreneurs in a Neoliberal World. *Journal of Business Research*, 92(10):5-10.
- Ask, J. 2013. Snapchat Rejects Facebook's \$3B Bid. Forbes [Online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forrester/2013/11/14/snapchat-rejects-facebooks-3b-bid/>. Accessed 14 November 2013.
- Aspan, M. 2005. Great for Craigslist but not for Newspapers. New York Times [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/28/technology/great-for-craigslist-but-not-for-newspapers.html>. Accessed 23 October 2019.
- Atkin, C. & Block, M. 1983. Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsers. *Journal of Advertising Attitudes toward Celebrity Brand Extensions. The Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*.
- Attride-Stirling, J. 2001. Thematic Networks: An Analytic Tool for Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3):385–394.
- Audi, M., Al Masri, R. & Ghazzawi, K. 2015. The Effect of Celebrity Endorsement on Creating Brand Loyalty: An Application on the Lebanese Cosmetic Sector's Demand. *International Journal of Business Management and Economic Research (IJBMER)*, 6(5):273-287.
- Aureliano-Silva, L., Lopes, E.L., Freire, O.B. & da Silva, D. 2015. The Brand's Effect on the Evaluation of Advertising Endorsed by Celebrities: an Experimental Study. *Brazilian Business Review*, 4(12):57-78.
- Baadjes, M. 2018. South African Celebrities Love Endorsing Alcohol Brands. IOL [Online]. Available at: <https://www.iol.co.za/lifestyle/food-drink/drink/sa-celebs-love-endorsing-alcohol-brands-14081016>. Accessed 30 March 2019.
- Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. 2012. *The Practice of Social Research*. Oxford University Press: Southern Africa.

- Bailey, L.W. 2005. *The Enchantments of Technology*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Bailis, R. 2020. The State of Influencer Marketing: 10 Influencer Marketing Statistics to Inform Where You Invest. Big Commerce [Online], Available at: <https://www.bigcommerce.com/blog/influencer-marketing-statistics/#10-most-important-influencer-marketing-statistics-for-2020>. Accessed 6 December 2020.
- Bainotti, L., Caliandro, A. & Gandin, A. 2020. From Archive Cultures to Ephemeral Content, and Back: Studying Instagram Stories with Digital Methods. *New Media and Society*, 1(1):1-21.
- Bakhshi, S., Shamma, D.A. & Gilbert, E. 2014. "Faces Engage Us: Photos with Faces Attract More likes and Comments on Instagram." *Proceedings of the International Conference on Human factors in Computing Systems*, Canada, 6 April.
- Ballaster, R., Beetham, M., Frazer, E. & Hebron, S. 1991. *Women's Worlds – Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Balmer, J. 2002. Of Identities Lost and Found. *International Studies of Management and Organisation*, 32(3):10-27.
- Banet-Weiser, S. 2012. *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Banister, E. N., & Cocker, H. L. 2014. A Cultural Exploration of Consumers' Interactions and Relationships with Celebrities. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 30(2):1–29.
- Banytė, J., Stonkienė, E. & Piligrimienė, Z. 2011. Selecting Celebrities in Advertising: The Case of Lithuanian Sports Celebrity in Non-Sport Product Advertisement. *Economics and Management*, 16(1):1215-1224.
- Barile, N. & Sugiyama, S. 2015. The Automation of Taste. *International Journal of Social Robotics*, 7(3):407–416.
- Barker, D. 1988. It's Been Real: Forms of Television Representation. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5(1):42-56.
- Baroncelli, L. & Freitas, A. 2011. "The Visibility of the Self on the Web: A Struggle for Recognition." *Proceedings of the ACM*, Germany, 14-17 June.
- Barthes, R. 1973. *The Pleasure of the Text*. France: Éditions du Seuil.
- Barthes, R. 1977. *Rhetoric of the Image* in *From Image - Music - Text*. New York: Hill and Wang Publishers.
- Barthes, R. 1980. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Hill and Wang Publishers.

- Barthes, R. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang Publishers.
- Barthes, R. 1986. *Rhetoric of the Image: The Responsibility of Forms*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Batchen, H. 1998. Spectres of Cyberspace. In Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Baudrillard, J. 1983. *Simulations*. USA: Semiotext.
- Baudrillard, J. 1998. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. United Kingdom: Sage Publishers.
- Baudrillard, J. 2002. *Simulacra and Simulations*. France: Éditions Galilée.
- Baudrillard, J. 2009. *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* West Bengal: Seagull Books.
- Baudrillard, J. 2012. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Los Angeles: Semiotext.
- Baudrillard, J. 2015. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*. Los Angeles: Semiotext.
- Baudry, J. 1986. *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus in Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bavelier, D. 2012. TED x Talk: Your brain on Video Games [Online]. 9 November 2012. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FktsFcooIG8>. Accessed 29 April 2020.
- Bayer, J.B., Ellison, N.B. & Schoenebeck, S.Y. 2016. Sharing the Small Moments: Ephemeral Social Interaction on Snapchat. *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(7):956–977.
- Bayindir, N. 2019. How Social is Social Media? Global Web Index [Online]. Available at: https://blog.globalwebindex.com/chart-of-the-week/how-social-is-social-media/?_ga=2.120621388.5706135.1574071268-1670198331.1574071268. Accessed 18 November 2019.
- Beaulieu, M. 2018. Ten Legitimate Reasons It's OK to Take a Man Selfie. Ask Men [Online]. Available at: https://www.askmen.com/recess/fun_lists/ten-legitimate-reasons-it-s-okay-to-take-a-man-selfie/. Accessed 2 May 2019.
- Beck, J. 2014. How to Spot a Narcissist Online. The Atlantic [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/01/how-to-spot-a-narcissist-online/283099/> Accessed 12 February 2020.
- Becker, M., Wiegand, N. & Reinartz, W.J. 2019. Does It Pay to Be Real? Understanding Authenticity in TV Advertising. *Journal of Marketing*, 83(1):24-50.

- Belch, G.E. & Belch, M.A. 2001. *Advertising and Promotion: An Integrated Marketing Communication Perspective*. McGraw Hill Publishers: New York.
- Belk, R.W. 1988. Collectors and Collecting. Association for Consumer Research. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 15(1):548-553.
- Belk, R.W. 2001. Specialty Magazines and Flights of Fancy: Feeding the Desire to Desire. *European Advances in Consumer Research*, 5(1):197-202.
- Belk, R.W. 2006. *Collecting in a Consumer Society*. Routledge Publishers: United States.
- Bell, K. 2016. The Line Between Instagram and Facebook is Getting Very, Very Thin-and Here's Why you Should Care. Mashable [Online]. Available at: <http://mashable.com/2016/12/06/instagram-more-like-facebook/>. Accessed 17 July 2019.
- Benjamin, W. 1999. *Illuminations*. London: Pimlico Publishers.
- Bennett, D.H., Anaza, N.A. & Andonova, Y., 2021. Big Names and Small Price Tags: An Analysis of Celebrity Endorsement on Consumers' Perceptions of Price, Quality, and Intent to Purchase. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 2(1):1-17.
- Berger, 1972. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books.
- Bergkvist, L., Hjalmarson, H. & Mägi, A.W. 2016. A new Model of how Celebrity Endorsements work: Attitude Toward the Endorsement as a Mediator of Celebrity Source and Endorsement Effects. *International Journal of Advertising*, 35(2):171-184.
- Berlant, L. 2008. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berryman, R. & Kavka, M. 2017. "I Guess a Lot of People See Me as a Big Sister or a Bertaux, D. 1981. *Biography And Society: The Life History Approach in the Social Sciences*. London: Sage.
- Beverland, M.B. 2006. The Real Thing: Branding Authenticity in the Luxury Wine Trade. *Journal of Business Research*, 59(2):251-258.
- Bishop, B. 2012. Instagram's New Terms of Service: From Overreaction to Retraction. The Verge [Online]. Available at: <http://www.theverge.com/2012/12/20/3790560/instagram-new-terms-ofservice-from-overreaction-to-retraction>. Accessed 11 January 2021.
- Bishop, K. 2020. The Pandemic and the Influencer: will the Lifestyle Survive Coronavirus? The Guardian [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/may/02/influencers-coronavirus-future-income-marketing-lifestyle>. Accessed 14 March 2021.

- Black, T.C. 2020. Just a Robot Keeping It Real: Lil Miquela, Instagram, and the Performance of Authenticity. *Journal of Art, Media and Visual Culture*, 1(1):46-59.
- Blight, M.G., Ruppel, E.L. & Schoenbauer, K.V. 2017. Sense of Community on Twitter and Instagram: Exploring the Roles of Motives and Parasocial Relationships. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking*, 20(5):314-319.
- Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C. & Taylor, T.L. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual World – A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Boerman, S., Reijmersdal, E. & Neijens, P. 2013. Sponsorship Disclosure: Effects of Duration on Persuasion Knowledge and Brand Responses. *Journal of Communication*, 62(6):1047-1064.
- Bogliari, A. 2019. Council Post: Why Sustainability Is Becoming As Important As Influencers In Fashion. Forbes [Online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2019/10/04/why-sustainability-is-becoming-as-important-as-influencers-in-fashion/#3858e994a826>. Accessed 26 January 2021.
- Bojanic, F. 2019. *The Virtual Other: Negotiating Personhood in the Digital Age*, Master's Thesis, Central European University, Budapest.
- Boorstin, D.J. 1987. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. New York: Atheneum Publishers.
- Bordo, S. 1993. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western culture, and the body*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bordo, S. 1998. *Reading the Slender Body*. In Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Borges-Rey, E. 2015. News Images on Instagram: The Paradox of Authenticity in Hyperreal
- Bosher, H. 2018. Ten Things You Should Know About Instagram's Terms of Use. The Conversation [Online]. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/ten-things-you-should-know-about-instagrams-terms-of-use-102800>. Accessed 1 January 2022.
- Bottger, T., Rudolph, T., Evanschitzky, H. & Pfrang, T. 2017. Customer Inspiration: Conceptualisation, Scale Development and Validation. *Journal of Marketing*, 81(1)116–131.
- Boyatzis, R.E. 1998. *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks: California.
- Boyd, D. 2008. Viewing American Class Divisions through Facebook and MySpace. Apophenia Blog Essay. Available at:

- https://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2007/06/24/viewing_america.html. Accessed 13 September 2020.
- Boyle, D. 2004. *Authenticity: Brands, Fakes, Spin and the Lust for Real Life*. London: Harper Perennial Publishers.
- Braden, R.A. & Hortin, J.A. 1982. Identifying the Theoretical Foundations of Visual Literacy. *Journal of Visual/Verbal Language*, (2):37-42.
- Bramadat, P. 2005. Toward a new Politics of Authenticity: Ethno-Cultural Representation in Theory and Practice. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 37(1):1-20.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. 2006. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2):77–101.
- Brewer, J. & Hunter, A. 1989. Multimethod Research: a Synthesis of Styles. *Sage Library of Social Research Series*, 175(1):5-12.
- Bright, L.F. 2008. Consumer Control and Customisation in Online Environments: an Investigation into the Psychology of Consumer Choice and its impact on Media Enjoyment, Attitude and Behavioural Intention, Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Texas, Austin.
- Britannica, 2021. Neoliberalism. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/neoliberalism>. Accessed 10 January 2021.
- Brown, W. 2015. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. New York: Zone Books.
- Brownlie, D. & Hower, P. 2011. (Re)covering the Spectacular Domestic: Culinary Cultures, the Feminine Mundane and Brand Nigella. *Advertising and Society Review*, 12(2)1-10.
- Brownlie, D., Hower, P. & Kerrigan, F., 2015. Celebrity, Convergence and Transformation. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(5):453–460.
- Bryman, A. & Bell, E. 2014. *Research Methodology*. South Africa: Oxford University Press.
- Burgess, J. & Bruns, A. 2015. *Easy Data, Hard Data: The Politics and Pragmatics of Twitter Research after the Computational Turn. From Social Media to Big Data*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Burton, G. 2005. *Media and Society: Critical Perspectives*. United Kingdom: McGraw Hill.
- Bush, A.J., Martin, C.A. & Bush, V.D. 2004. Sports Celebrity Influence on the Behavioural Intentions of Generation Y. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 44(1):108-118.
- Busselle, R.W. & Greenberg, B.S. 2000. The Nature of Television Realism Judgments: A Revaluation of their Conceptualisation and Measurement. *Mass Communication and Society*, 3(1):249–268.

- Butler, J. 2004. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge Publishers.
- Çalışkan, K. & Callon, M. 2010. Economisation: A Research Programme for the Study of Markets. *Economy and Society*, 39(1):1-32.
- Cambridge Dictionary, 2020. "Avatar." Available Online:
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/avatar>. Accessed 19 July 2021.
- Cambridge Dictionary, 2021. "Animated." Cambridge Dictionary [Online]. Available at:
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/animated>. Accessed 19 July 2021.
- Cambridge Dictionary, 2022. "Appropriation." Available Online:
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/appropriation>. Accessed 1 January 2022.
- Cameron, J. 2010. Avatar. [Film]. New York: Lightstorm Entertainment.
- Campbell, C., Pitt, L.E., Parent, M. & Berthon, P.R. 2011. Understanding Consumer Conversations around Advertisements in a Web 2.0 World. *Journal of Advertising*, 40(1):87–102.
- Carah, N. & Angus, D. 2018. Algorithmic Brand Culture: Participatory Labour, Machine Learning and Branding on Social Media. *Media, Culture & Society*, 40(2):178-194.
- Carah, N. & Saul, M. 2016. Brands and Instagram: Point, Tap, Swipe, Glance. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 4(1):69–84.
- Carbajal, D. & Blanton, R. 2019. *Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman: A Critical Case Study on Social Media, Deception, and Lil Miquela: Handbook of Research on Deception, Fake News, and Misinformation Online*. New York: IGI Global.
- Carey, J.W. 1987. The Press and Public Discourse. *Center Magazine*, 20(1):4-16.
- Carrillat, F.A., d'Asto, A. & Lazure, J. 2013. For Better, for Worse? What to Do When Celebrity Endorsements Go Bad. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 1(1):15-30.
- Carter, D. 2016. Hustle and Brand: The Sociotechnical Shaping of Influence. *Social Media and Society*, 2(3):1-12.
- Carter, M. & May, J. 1999. One Kind of Freedom: Poverty Dynamics in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *International Food Policy Research*, 1(1):1-37.
- Carter, N. & MacLean, A. 2012. The Photo App Facebook Didn't Buy: Hipstamatic. Inc [Online]. Available at: <https://www.inc.com/nicole-carter-and-andrew-maclean/photo-app-facebook-didnt-buy-hipstamatic.html>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Cartwright, L. 1998. Science and the Cinema. In Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Cashmore, E. 2006. *Celebrity/Culture*. New York: Routledge Publishers.

- Cassidy, S. 2006. Teenagers Beguiled by False Dreams of Instant Fame on Reality TV. The Independent [Online] Available from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/teenagers-beguiled-by-false-dreams-of-instant-fame-on-reality-tv-6111923.html>. Accessed 3 October 2019.
- Cekete, N. 2012. High Stakes in Celebrity Endorsements. Sowetan Live [Online]. Available at: <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/entertainment/2012-10-19-high-stakes-in-celeb-endorsements/>. Accessed 22 February 2019.
- Celebrity Brand Theoretics and the Logic of the Celebrity Brand. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 27(14):1504–1524.
- Chandler, D. 1997. An Introduction to Genre Theory. *The Media and Communications Studies Site*.
- Chang, B.H. & Ki, E.J. 2005. Devising a Practical Model for Predicting Theatrical Movie Success: Focusing on the Experience Good Property. *Journal of Media Economics*, 18(4):247–269.
- Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Chase, R. 2015. *Peers Inc: How People and Platforms Are Inventing the Collaborative Economy and Reinventing Capitalism*. United Kingdom: Headline Publishers.
- Chauvin, B.A. 2003. Visual or Media Literacy? *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 23(2):119–128.
- Chekoufi, F. 2018. Meet Noonoori, the Virtual Instagram Influencer loved by Kim Kardashian West and Dior. Vogue [Online]. Available at: <https://www.vogue.com.au/vogue-codes/news/meet-noonoori-the-virtual-instagram-influencer-loved-by-kim-kardashian-west-and-dior/news-story/dfeb2658e3bbc7b2cfd11d0d26eb5bbc>. Accessed 6 June 2021.
- Chen, Y. & Gao, X., 2014. “Interpretation of the Representational Meaning of Movie Posters from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis.” In Proceedings of *International Conference on Education, Language, Art and Intercultural Communication ICELAIC*, China, 14 May.
- Cherrington, R. 2016. Lil Miquela: Instagram's Latest It Model Who's Confusing the Hell Out of Everyone. Is she Real or isn't she? Huffington Post [Online]. Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/lilmiquela-instagram_uk_57c94056e4b085cf1ecd0af. Accessed 16 October 2019.
- Chester, A. 2018. The Outmoded Instant: From Instagram to Polaroid. *Afterimage*, 45(5):9–16.

- Chevalier, J. & Mayzlin, D. 2006. The Effect of Word of Mouth on Sales: Online Book
- Choi, S.M. & Rifon, N.J. 2012. It is a Match: The Impact of Congruence between Celebrity Image and Consumer Ideal Self on Endorsement Effectiveness. *Psychology and Marketing*, 29(1):639-650.
- Choi, S.M., Wei-Na, L. & Hee-Jung, K. 2005. Lessons from the Rich and Famous: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Celebrity Endorsement in Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 34(2):85-98.
- Chong, C., Molyneaux, H. & Fournier, H. 2012. Communication as Commodification. In Ross, K. 2012. *The Handbook of Gender, Sex and Media*. United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell Publishers.
- Choudary, P.S. 2015. *Platform Scale: How an Emerging Business Model Helps Startups Build Large Empires with Minimum Investment*. Boston: Platform Thinking Labs.
- Chouliaraki, L. 2006. Towards an Analytics of Mediation. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 3(2):153-178.
- Chowdhary, M. 2019. Bot or Not? Exploring the Rise of CGI Influencers. Fullscreen. [Online]. Available https://fullscreen.com/wpcontent/uploads/2019/01/Fullscreen_CGI-Influencers_Bot-or-Not.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2kAIK7s6ergtBFR2noRKnudKjugoSlRwoHJA2rEU2IJG46AY8HpzBprA. Accessed 25 January 2021.
- Cilli, K. 2022. Dopamine Dressing: How to Dress for Your Happiness in 2022. Very Well Mind [Online]. Available at: <https://www.verywellmind.com/dopamine-dressing-how-to-dress-for-your-happiness-in-2022-5217231>. Accessed 19 February 2022.
- Clark, L., Birkhead, A.S., Fernandez, C. & Egger, M.J. A Transcription and Translation Protocol for Sensitive Cross-Cultural Team Research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 27(12):1751-1764.
- Clark, M. 2021. Head of Instagram says Instagram is No Longer a Photo Sharing App. The Verge [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2021/6/30/22557942/instagram-no-longer-photo-app-video-entertainment-focus>. Accessed 2 December 2021.
- Clough, P. & Nutbrown, C. 2012. *A Student's Guide to Methodology*. London: Sage.
- Coary, S.P. & Oakley, J.L. 2018. The Development and Measurement of a Brand Authenticity Scale. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 7(2):183-196.
- Coco, A. & Woodward, I. 2007. Discourses of Authenticity within a Pagan Community: the Emergence of the 'Fluffy Bunny' Sanction. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 1(1): 479-504.

- Cohen, J. 2012. *Configuring the Networked Self*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Coleman, L. 2018. Inside the Incredible World of a Virtual Mogul-in-the-Making. *Forbes* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurencoleman/2018/07/31/inside-the-incredible-world-of-a-virtual-mogul-in-the-making/?sh=2a7d060a7d02>. Accessed 24 January 2021.
- Coleridge, S.T. 1817. *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions*. London, England: Fenner.
- Collis, J. & Hussey, R. 2014. *A Practical Guide for Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students*. United Kingdom: Palgrave Publishers.
- Communication*, 42(1):73–93.
- Communication*, 52(1):5–35.
- Confessore, N., Dance, X.G., Harris, R. & Hansen, M. 2018. The Follower Factory. *New York Times* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/27/technology/social-media-bots.html>. Accessed 8 May 2019.
- Connell, R. 2009. *Gender in World Perspective*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity Publishers.
- Connell, R.W. 2002. *Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Considine, J.D. 1997. Kyoko Date: The World's First Virtual Pop Star. *Entertainment World* [Online]. Available at: <https://ew.com/article/1997/05/16/kyoko-date-worlds-first-virtual-pop-star/>. Accessed 9 August 2021.
- Constine, J. 2017. Instagram's Growth Speeds up as it Hits 700 Million Users. *Tech Crunch* [Online]. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2017/04/26/instagram-700-million-users/>. Accessed 1 January 2022.
- Constine, J. 2018a. Instagram Kills off Fake Followers, Threatens Accounts that Keep using Apps to get them. *Tech Crunch* [Online]. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2018/11/19/instagram-fake-followers/>. Accessed 24 January 2021.
- Constine, J. 2018b. How Instagram's algorithm works. *Tech Crunch* [Online]. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2018/06/01/how-instagram-feed-works/>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Constine, J. 2019. Snapchat Launches Scan, its AR Utility Platform. *Tech Crunch* [Online]. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2019/04/04/snapchat-scan-platform/>. Accessed 12 April 2021.
- Cook, J. 2020. Brands Are Building Their Own Virtual Influencers. Are Their Posts Legal? *Huffington Post* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/virtual->

- instagram-influencers-sponcon_n_5e31cbefc5b6328af2ef97fd?guccounter=1. Accessed 2 December 2020.
- Cooper, D.R. & Schindler, P.S. 2008. *Business Research Methods*. United States: McGraw-Hill Publishers.
- Cooper, W. 2000. Ananova: A Virtual Newscaster Goes Online. *World Broadcast Engineering*, 23(9):30-32.
- Corcoran, F. 1984. Television as Ideological Apparatus: The Power and the Pleasure. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1:131-145.
- Couldry, N. & van Dijck, J. 2015. Researching Social Media as if the Social Mattered. *Social Media and Society*, 1(1):1-7.
- Couldry, N. 2003. *Media Rituals: A Critical Approach*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Couldry, N. 2014. Inaugural: A Necessary Disenchantment: Myth, Agency and Injustice in a Digital World. *The Sociological Review*, 1(1):881-897.
- Couldry, N. 2015. The Myth of us: Digital Networks, Political change and the Production of Collectivity Information. *Communication & Society*, 18(6):608–626.
- Coupland, N. 2003. Socio-linguistic Authenticities. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 7(1):417-431.
- Crary, J. 1992. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Crary, J. 1998. The Camera Obscura and its Subject. In Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Creasey, M.C. & Anido, A.V. 2020. Virtual Influencing Uncharted Frontier in the Uncanny Valley, Master's Thesis, Lund University School of Economics and Management, Sweden.
- Creeber, G. & Martin, R. 2009. *Digital Cultures*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Creswell, J. W. 1998. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J.W. 2007. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. United Kingdom: Sage Publications.
- Croft, R., Dean, D. & Kitchen, P.J. 1996. "Word-of-Mouth Communication: Breath of Life or Cross, J. & Street, A. 2009. Anthropology at the Bottom of the Pyramid. *Anthropology Today*, 25(4):1-9.
- Crotty, M. 1998. *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. Thousand Oaks, United States: Sage Publishers.

- Crutchfield, D. 2010. Celebrity Endorsements still Push Product. Why, in the era of Social Media, the Rewards continue to Outweigh the Risks. *Advertising Age* [Online]. Available at: <http://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/marketing-celebrityendorsements-push-product/146023>. Accessed 25 February 2019.
- Cunningham, S, & Craig, D. 2019. Creator Governance in Social Media Entertainment. *Social Media and Society*, 5(4):1-11.
- Customer Reviews on Amazon.com. *MIS Quarterly*, 34(1):185–200.
- Daer, A.R., Hoffman, R.F. & Goodman, S. 2014. Rhetorical Functions of Hashtag Forms Across Social Media Applications. *Communication Design Quarterly Review*, 3(1):12-16.
- Dalayli, F.U. 2020. Representation of Robots in the Social Media With The Simulation Universe: Social Media Influencers and Influencer Robot Miquela Sousa. *International Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(2):87-102.
- Dale, K. 2021. NVivo and Citavi Make it Easier than Ever to Write and Reference. Nvivo [Online]. Available at: <https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/resources/blog/nvivo-and-citavi-make-it-easier-than-ever-to-write>. Accessed 5 March 2021.
- Darley, A. 2000. *Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres*. London: Routledge.
- Darner, A. & Arvidsson, N. 2019. Virtual Influencers - Anonymous Celebrities on Social Media: A Qualitative Study of Virtual Influencers, A New Phenomenon on Social Media, Masters Thesis, Jonkoping University, Sweden.
- Davies, W. 2018. *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World*. London: Jonathan Cape Publishers.
- Dawson, S. 2017. Conspiracy Theories and Interview with Lil Miquela [Online]. 18 September 2017. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NdNYAiU-SLI>. Accessed 31 October 2019.
- De Souza e Silva, A. 2006. From Cyber to Hybrid: Mobile Technologies as Interfaces of Hybrid Spaces. *Space and Culture*, 9(3):261–278.
- De Veirman, M. & Hudders, L. 2019. Disclosing Sponsored Instagram Posts: the Role of Material Connection with Brand and Message-Sidedness when Disclosing Covert Advertising. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(1):94-130.
- Deci, E.L. & Ryan, R.M. 2002. Overview of Self Determination Theory: an Organismic Dialectical Perspective. *Handbook of Self-Determination Research*, 1(1):3-33.

- Dekker, K. & Van Reijmersdal, E.A. 2013. Disclosing Celebrity Endorsement in a Television Program to Mitigate Persuasion: How Disclosure Type and Celebrity Credibility Interact. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 19(2):224-240.
- Denscombe, M. 2008. *The Good Research Guide for Small-Scale Social Research Projects*. United States: Open University Press.
- Denzin, N.K. 1999. Cybertalk and the Method of Instances in Jones, S. 1999. *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Derlaga, V.J. & Berg, J.H. 2013. *Self-Disclosure: Theory, Research and Therapy*. New
- Descartes, R. 1984. *Philosophical Writings*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Dieter, M. Gerlitz, C. Helmond, A. Tkacz, N. van der Vlist, F. & Weltevrede, E. 2019. Store, Interface, Package, Connection Methods and Propositions for Multi-Situated App Studies. *CRC Media of Cooperation*, 1(1):1-16.
- Differences Between Influencers and Followers. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 89(1):48-60.
- Dines, G. & Humes, J. 2011. *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Dodgson, L. 2019. Nearly Half of Influencers Think Their Jobs Impact Their Mental Health, From Body Image to Facing Scrutiny Of Their Integrity and Work Ethic. Insider [Online]. Available at: <https://www.insider.com/nearly-half-of-influencers-feel-work-impacts-their-mentalhealth-2019-12>. Accessed 23 January 2021.
- Donoughue, P. 2018. Instagram star Miquela Sousa is testing the Boundaries of Social Media Authenticity. ABC: News [Online]. Available at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-21/miquela-sousa-instagram-famous-influencer-cgiai/9767932>. Accessed 25 January 2021.
- Dooley, T. 2020. Why Are Brands Using CGI Influencers to Promote Skin Care and Fashion? Teen Vogue [Online]. Available at: <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/why-are-brands-using-fake-influencers>. Accessed 10 December 2020.
- Dosekun, S. 2019. *Fashioning Post Feminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture*. Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Drenten, J. & Brooks, G. 2020. Celebrity 2.0: Lil Miquela and the Rise of a Virtual Star System. *Feminist Media Studies*, 20(8):1319-1323.
- Driessens, O. 2012. The Celebritisation of Society and Culture: Understanding the Structural

- Du Gay, P., Hall, S., Janes, L., Madsen, A.K., Mackay, H. & Negus, K. 2013. *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*. London: Sage.
- Duffy, B. 2017. *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work*. London: Yale University Press.
- Duffy, B.R., 2003. Anthropomorphism and the Social Robot. *Robotics and Autonomous Systems*, 42(3):177-190.
- Duggan, M., Ellison, N., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A. & Madden, M. 2015. Social Media Update 2014. While Facebook Remains the Most Popular Site, other Platforms see Higher Rates of Growth. Pew Internet Research Center [Online]. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014/>. Accessed 19 July 2019.
- Durham, M.G. & Kellner, D.M. 2012. *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. Wiley-Blackwell: United States.
- Dyer, R. 1998. *Stars*. London: British Film Institute Publishers.
- Dyer-Witheford, N. 2020. Left Populism and Platform Capitalism. *Triple C*, 18(1):116-131.
- Dynamics of Celebrity Culture. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16(6):641–657.
- Economy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Publishers.
- Elberse, A. & Verleun, J. 2012. The Economic Value of Celebrity Endorsements. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 1(1):149-165.
- Elea, L. 2012. Fanfiction and Webnovelas the Digital Reading and Writing of Brazilian Adolescent Girls. In Ross, K. 2012. *The Handbook of Gender, Sex and Media*. United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell Publishers.
- Elias, A. & Gill, R. 2018. Beauty Surveillance: The Digital Self-Monitoring Cultures of Neoliberalism. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(1):59–77.
- Elmhirst, S. 2019. It's Genuine, you Know? Why the Online Influencer Industry is going "Authentic." The Guardian [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/apr/05/its-genuine-you-know-why-the-online-influencer-industry-is-going-authentic>. Accessed 8 May 2019.
- Emerson, R. 2009. Avatar Plunges into the Uncanny Unimaginative Valley. Available at: <https://www.rogerebert.com/scanners/avatar-plunges-into-the-uncanny-unimaginative-valley>. Accessed 13 April 2020.
- Endorser: The Michael Jordan Phenomenon. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 37(3):67–73.

- Enli, G. 2015. *Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Constructs Reality*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Enli, G. 2020 in Patterson, A & Ashman, R. 2020. *Getting Up-Close and Personal with Influencers*. London: Routledge.
- Enli, G. 2013 in Patterson, A., Khogeer, Y., Hodgson, J. 2013. How to Create an Influential Anthropomorphic Mascot: Literary Musings on Marketing, Make-Believe, and Meerkats. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 29(1):10-18.
- Erdogan, B. Z. 1999. Celebrity Endorsement: A Literature Review. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 1(1):291–314.
- Erickson, R. 1994. Our Society, our Selves: Becoming Authentic in an Inauthentic World. *Advanced Development Journal*, 6(1):27-39.
- Erkan, I. 2015. Electronic Word of Mouth on Instagram: Customers' Engagements with Brands in different Sectors. *International Journal of Management, Accounting and Economics*, 2(12):1435–1444.
- Erlandson, D.A., Harris, E.L., Skipper, B., & Allen, S.D. 1993. *Doing Naturalistic Inquiry: A Guide to Methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Error, A. 2018. Meet Lil Miquela, the AI Influencer on the Cover of Our New Print Issue. High Snobiety [Online]. Available at: <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/lil-miquela-cover-story-issue-16/>. Accessed 31 October 2019.
- Erz, A., Marder, B., & Osadchaya, E. 2018. Hashtags: Motivational Drivers, Their Use, and Evans, N.J., Phua, J., Lim, & Jun, H.J. 2017. Disclosing Instagram Influencer Advertising: The Effects of Disclosure Language on Advertising Recognition, Attitudes, and Behavioral Intent. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 17(2):138-149.
- Faludi, S. 2016. *Backlash: The Undeclared War on Feminism*. New York: Three River Press.
- Feketha, S. 2018. South Africa World's Most Unequal Society. IOL [Online]. Available at: <https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/south-africa-worlds-most-unequal-society-report-14125145>. Accessed 2 January 2019.
- Ferguson, S. 2016. *Race, Gender, Sexuality and Social Class: Dimension of Inequality and Identity*. California: Sage Publications.
- Ferrara, A. 1998. *Reflective Authenticity*. London: Routledge.
- Fillis, I. 2015. The Production and Consumption Activities Relating to the Celebrity Artist. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(5):646–664.
- Fine, G. A. 2003. Crafting Authenticity: The Validation of Identity in Self-Taught Art. *Theory and Society*, 32(1):153–180.

- Firat, A.F. 1997. Marketing. *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 1(1):1-95.
- Firat, A.F., Kutucuoglu, K.Y., Saltik, A. & Tunçel, U. 2013. Consumption, Consumer Culture and Consumer Society. *Journal of Community Positive Practices*, 23(1):182-203.
- Fiske, J. 2010. *Television Culture*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Fiske, R. 1988. Meaningful Moments. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 1(1):246–250.
- Fiske, J. 1998. *Videotech*. In Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Fleck, N., Korchia, M. & Le Roy, I. 2012. Celebrities in Advertising: Looking for Congruence or Likability? *Psychology & Marketing*, 29(1):651-662.
- Forceville, C. 1999. Educating the Eye? Kress and Van Leeuwen's Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design. *Language and Literature*, 8(2):163-178.
- Fornas, J., Becker, K., Bjurström, E. & Ganet, H. 2007. *Consuming Media*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Foucault, M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. 2020. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Fourie, P.J. 2009. *Media Studies*. Cape Town: Juta Publications.
- Fournier, S. 1998. Consumers and Their Brands: Developing Relationship Theory in Consumer Research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 24(4):343–353.
- Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. 2011. Who Are the Social Media Influencers? A Study of Public Perceptions. *Public Relations Review*, 37(1):90-92.
- Freud, S. 1919. The Uncanny. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, 17(1):217-256.
- Friedberg, A. 1998. The Mobilised and Virtual Gaze in Modernity. In Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Friedman, H. H., Termini, S. & Washington, R. 1976. The Effectiveness of Advertisement Utilising Four types of Endorsers. *Journal of Advertising*, 5(1):22–24.
- Friedman, H.H. & Friedman L. 1979. Does the Celebrity Endorser's Image Spill over the Friedman, J. 1958. *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourses on the Real*. Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick.
- Friend''': the Role of Intimacy in the Celebrification of beauty vloggers. *Journal of*

- Furtak, R.A. 2003. The Virtues of Authenticity: A Kierkegaardian Essay in Moral Psychology. *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 43(172):423-438.
- Galanopoulos, Y.A. 2011. Photograph Without Space and Time-Functions, Values and Messages of the Generated-through Software Photograph (GSP). Grin [Online]. Available at: <https://www.grin.com/document/180321>. Accessed 10 January 2022.
- Gandini, A. 2015. *The Reputation Economy: Understanding Knowledge Work in Digital Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garnham, N. 2000. *Emancipation, the Media and Modernity. Arguments about the Media and Social Theory*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- Gehl, R.W. 2014. *Reverse Engineering Social Media: Software, Culture, and Political Economy in New Media Capitalism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gelb, S. 2013. Inequality in South Africa: Nature, Causes and Responses. *Inequality in Middle Income Countries: South Africa Case*, 1(1):1-89.
- Geller, M. Unilever Takes Stand against Digital Media's Fake Followers. Reuters [Online]. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-unilever-media/unilever-takes-stand-against-digital-medias-fake-followers-idUKKBN1JD10R?edition-redirect=uk>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Georgakopoulou, A. 2017. 17 Small Stories Research: A Narrative Paradigm for the Analysis of Social Media. In: Sloan, L. & Quan-Haase, A. *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Gershenfeld, N. 2005. *Fab - The Coming Revolution on your Desktop, from Personal Computers to Personal Fabrication*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geyser, W. 2021. 20 of Instagram's Highest Paid Stars in 2021. Influencer Marketing Hub [Online]. Available at: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/instagram-highest-paid/>. Accessed 11 September 2021.
- Ghaffary, S. 2021. Why You Should Care About Facebook's Big Push into the Metaverse. Vox [Online]. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/recode/22799665/facebook-metaverse-meta-zuckerberg-oculus-vr-ar>. Accessed 22 March 2022.
- Gibbs, J.L., Ellison, N.B. & Heino, R.D. 2006. Self-Presentation in Online Personals: The Gigaba, S. 2018. Sho Madjozi Scores Endorsement deal with TRACE Mobile. Zkhiphani [Online]. Available at: <https://www.zkhiphani.co.za/sho-madjozi-trace-mobile/>. Accessed 22 February 2019.

- Gil, N. 2018. Refinery 29 [Online]. This Site Helps You Fake the Perfect Life On Instagram – But There's A Catch. Available at: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2018/04/197467/fake-life-instagram>. Accessed 3 May 2019.
- Giles, D.C. 2000. *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*. Basingstoke:
- Gill, R. 2007. Post-feminist Media Culture: Elements of Sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2):147-166.
- Gill, R. 2009. Mediated Intimacy and Post Feminism: a Discourse Analytic Examination of Sex and Relationships Advice in a Women's Magazine. *Discourse and Communication*, 3(4):345-369.
- Gill, R. 2016. Post-Post Feminism? New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16(4):610–630.
- Gillespie, T. 2010. The Politics of Platforms. *New Media & Society*, 12(1):347-364.
- Gilmore, J. & Pine, J. 2007. *Authenticity: What Consumers really Want*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Glover, M. 2021. Word of Mouth Marketing in 2021: How to Create a Strategy for Social Media Buzz & Skyrocket Referral Sales. Big Commerce [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bigcommerce.com/blog/word-of-mouth-marketing/>. Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Goanta, C. & Spanakis, J. 2020. Influencers and Social Media Recommender Systems: Unfair Commercial Practices in EU and US Law. *Transatlantic Technology Law Firm*, 1(54):1-21.
- Gobbyboy, 2007. Ananova, the World's First Virtual Newscaster. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ek-g5A0YTkW>. Accessed 2 September 2021.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life as Theatre*. Garden City: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. 1963. *Behaviour in Public Places. Notes on the Social Organisation of Gatherings*. New York: Free Press.
- Goffman, E. 1967. *Interaction Ritual; Essays on Face-to-face Behaviour*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Goffman, E. 1981. *Forms of Talk*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Goffman, E. 1986. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Touchstone Publishers.
- Goldstuck, A. 2018. #SML18: Profiling the Social Media user in South Africa. Biz Community [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/19/183501.html>. Accessed 27 February 2019.
- Gonzalez, E. 2004. Review: The Polar Express. Slant Magazine [Online]. Available at: <https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/the-polar-express/>. Accessed 2 January 2022.
- Goodman, N. 1976. *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishers.
- Govender, J. 2018. SA Celebrities Endorse Samsung South Africa. Indian Spice [Online]. Available at: <https://www.indianspice.co.za/2016/08/sa-celebrities-endorse-samsung-south-africa/>. Accessed 21 February 2019.
- Graddol, D. & Boyd-Barrett, O. 1995. *Langue and Literacy in Social Context*. Multilingual Matters. United Kingdom, The Open University Press.
- Grandy, D. 2012, The Future of Information Technology. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 25(1):161-176.
- Green, M.C. & Brock, T.C. 2000. The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(1):701–721.
- Green, M.C. 2004. Transportation into Narrative Worlds: The Role of Prior Knowledge and Perceived Realism. *Discourse Processes*, 38(2):247-266.
- Greene, A. 2017. Generalisation when it is Inappropriate and Appropriate. The Odyssey [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/generalization>. Accessed 10 April 2018.
- Groeger L & Buttle, F. 2014. Word-of-Mouth Marketing Influence on Offline and Online Communications: Evidence from Case Study Research. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 20(2):21–41.
- Grosler, F. 2018. Meet Lil Miquela: Fashion’s First Virtual Instagram Influencer. High Snobiety [Online]. Available at: <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/lil-miquela-virtual-influencer-instagram/?format=amp>. Accessed 16 October 2019.
- Guadagno, R., Blascovich, J., Bailenson, J. & McCall, C. 2007. Virtual Humans and Persuasion: The Effects of Agency and Behavioural Realism. *Media Psychology*, 10(1):1-22.

- Guba, E.G. & Lincoln, Y.S. 1989. *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Guba, E.G. 1981. Criteria for Assessing the Trustworthiness of Naturalistic Inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, 29(1):75–91.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. & Johnson, L. 2006. How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1):59–82.
- Ha, A. 2020. Facebook and Instagram roll out Shops, turning Business Profiles into Storefronts. Tech Crunch [Online]. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2020/05/19/facebook-shops/>. Accessed 24 December 2021.
- Hackley, C. & Hackley, R.A. 2015. Marketing and the Cultural Production of Celebrity in the era of Media Convergence. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(6):461–477.
- Hahn, J. 2019. Computer-Generated Influencer Miquela and Myths of Realness and Authenticity on Social Media: A Semiotic Analysis, Master's Thesis, Utrecht University, Netherlands.
- Hall, A. 2003. Reading Realism: Audiences' Evaluations of the Reality of Media Texts. *Journal of Communication*, 53(1):624–641.
- Hall, K.A. 2015. The Authenticity of Social-Media Performance: Lonelygirl15 and the Amateur Brand of Young-Girlhood. *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory*, 25(2):128–142.
- Hall, S. 1992. *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power*. In Hall, S. & Gieben, B. Formations of Modernity. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Hall, S. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. California: Sage Publications.
- Hamasaki, M., Takeda, H. & Nishimura, T. 2008. "Network Analysis of Massively Collaborative Creation of Multimedia Contents." *Proceeding Of The 1St International Conference On Designing Interactive User Experiences For TV And Video*, Silicon Valley, California, October 22-24.
- Han, W. & Yazdanifard, R. O. 2015. The Review of the Effectiveness of Celebrity Advertising that Influence Consumer's Perception and Buying Behaviour. *Global Journal of Management and Business Research*, 15(4):23-29.
- Haraway, D. 1991. A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge Publishers.

- Haraway, D. 1998. The Persistence of Vision. In Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Harrell, M. & Bradley, M. 2009. *Data Collection Methods. Semi-Structured Interviews and Focus Groups*. New York: RAND.
- Harris, 2015. How Does Digital Affect Canadian Attention Spans? Marketing Mag [Online]. Available at: <http://marketingmag.ca/consumer/how-digital-is-affecting-attention-spans-146742/>. Accessed 27 February 2019.
- Harrison, C. 2003. Visual Social Semiotics: Understanding How Still Images Make Meaning.
- Hasa, K. 2020. Difference Between Celebrity and Influencer. Pediaa [Online]. Available at: <https://pediaa.com/difference-between-celebrity-and-influencer/#:~:text=Definition-,A%20celebrity%20is%20someone%20who%20is%20famous%2C%20especially%20in%20areas,recommending%20them%20on%20social%20media>. Accessed 15 March 2021.
- Hawley, D. 2020. Best CGI and AI Influencers to Follow in 2020. Viral Nation [Online]. Available at: <https://www.viralnation.com/blog/best-cgi-and-ai-influencers-to-follow-in-2020/>. Accessed 21 January 2021.
- Hayes, B.J. 2008. Computational Photography. *American Scientist*, 96(1):94–99.
- Hayes, P. 2007. Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography. *Kronos*, 33(2):139-162.
- Hearn, A. 2017. Verified: Self-presentation, Identity Management, and Selfhood in the Age of Big Data. *Popular Communication*, 15(2): 62–77.
- Helmond, A. 2015. The Platformisation of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2):1-11.
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I. & Bailey, A. 2020. *Qualitative Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K.P., Walsh, G. & Gremler, D.D. 2004. Electronic word-of-mouth Via Consumer-Opinion Platforms: what Motivates Consumers to Articulate Themselves on the Internet? *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 18(1):38-52.
- Hepp, A. 2012. Mediatisation and the Moulding Force of the Media. *Communications*, 37(1):1–28.
- Hepp, A. 2020. Artificial Companions, Social Bots and Work Bots: Communicative Robots as Research Objects of Media and Communication Studies. *Media, Culture and Society*, 1(1):1-7.
- Heynen, H. 2006. Questioning Authenticity. *National Identities*, 8(1):287-300.

- Hill, A. 2007. *Restyling Factual TV: Audiences and News, Documentary and Reality Genres*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Hitz, L. 2018. Instagram Impressions, Reach, and Other Metrics You Might Be Confused About. Sprout Social [Online]. Available at: <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/instagram-impressions/>. Accessed 22 January 2021.
- Hjorth, L. & Pink, S. 2014. New Visualities and the Digital Wayfarer: Reconceptualising Camera Phone Photography and Locative Media. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 2(1):40–57.
- Hoang, T.D. & Su, Y. 2019. Virtual Celebrities and Consumers: A Blended Reality. How Virtual Celebrities are Consumed in the East and West, Master's Thesis, Copenhagen Business School, Copenhagen.
- Hobbs, R. 1997. Literacy for the Information Age. *The Handbook of Reservation on Teaching Literacy Through the Communicative and Visual Arts*. New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan.
- Hochman, N. & Manovich, L. 2013. Zooming into an Instagram City: Reading the Local through Social Media. First Monday [Online]. Available at: <https://firstmonday.org/article/view/4711/3698>. Accessed 18 June 2019.
- Hodkinson, P. 2011. *Media, Culture and Society*. London: Sage.
- Hoerschelmann, O. 2006. *Rules of the Game: Quiz shows and American culture*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Holbrook, M.B. & Hirschman, E. 1982. The Experiential Aspects of Consumption: Consumer Fantasies Feelings and Fun. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 9(1):132-140.
- Hoogeveen, J.G. & Özler, B. 2004. Not Separate, Not Equal: Poverty and Inequality in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *University of Michigan Business Press Journal*, 1(1):1-34.
- Hooks, B. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End.
- Hopkins, J. & Thomas, N. 2011. Fielding Networked Marketing: Technology and Authenticity in the Monetisation of Malaysian Blogs. In: Breindi, A.D. & Nexus, T.J. *New Intersections in Internet Research*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Horning, R. 2018. The New Face of America. Rob Horning Blog [Online]. Available at: <https://tinyletter.com/robhorning/letters/new-face-of-america>. Accessed 16 October 2019.
- Hudson, S., Huang, L., Roth, M.S. & Madden, T.J. 2016. The Influence of Social Media Interactions on Consumer–Brand Relationships: A Three-Country Study of Brand

- Perceptions and Marketing Behaviours. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 1(33):27–41.
- Hui, Y. 2016. *On the Existence of Digital Objects*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hung, K. 2014. Why Celebrity Sells: A Dual Entertainment Path Model of Brand Endorsement. *Journal of Advertising*, 43(2):155–166.
- Hung, K., Chan, K.W. & Tse, K.C. 2011. Assessing Celebrity Endorsement Effects in China. A Consumer-Celebrity Relational Approach. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 1(1):608-623.
- Hung, L. 2021. What You Should and Shouldn't Be Using Push Notifications For. One Signal [Online]. Available at: <https://onesignal.com/blog/what-you-should-be-using-push-notifications-for/>. Accessed 17 February 2022.
- Hutchinson, A. 2019. How Much Time Do People Spend on Social Media in 2019? Social Media Today [Online]. Available at: <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/how-much-time-do-people-spend-on-social-media-in-2019-infographic/560270/>. Accessed 18 November 2019.
- Ian, K. 2016. Designing a New Look for Instagram, Inspired by the Community. Medium [Online]. Available at: <https://medium.com/@ianspalter/designing-a-new-look-for-instagram-inspired-by-the-community-84530eb355e3>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Ilicic, J. & Webster, C.M. 2011. Effects of Multiple Endorsements and Consumer–Celebrity Attachment on Attitude and Purchase Intention. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 19(1):230–237.
- Ilicic, J. & Webster, C.M. 2013. Celebrity Co-Branding Partners as Irrelevant Brand Information in Advertisements. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(7):941–947.
- IMDB, 2022. Ariana Grande Biography. IMDB [Online]. Available at: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm3812858/bio>. Accessed 27 January 2022.
- Instagram, 2016a. Introducing Instagram Stories. Instagram [Online]. Available at: <http://instagram.tumblr.com/post/148348940287/160802-stories>. Accessed 22 January 2021.
- Instagram, 2016b. See the Moments You Care About First. Instagram [Online]. Available at: <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/see-posts-you-care-about-first-in-your-feed>. Accessed 24 January 2021.
- Instagram, 2019a. How do I Access or Review my Data on Instagram? Instagram [Online]. Available at: <https://help.instagram.com/181231772500920>. Accessed 6 June 2021.

- Instagram, 2019b. Introducing Instagram Checkout. Instagram Blog [Online]. Available at: <https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/introducing-instagram-checkout>. Accessed 12 April 2021.
- Instagram, 2021. Community Guidelines. Instagram [Online]. Available at: <https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119/>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Iqani, M. & Schroeder, J.E. 2016. #Selfie: Digital Self-Portraits as Commodity form and Consumption Practice. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 19(5):405-415.
- Iqani, M. 2016. *Consumption, Media and the Global South: Aspiration Contested*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Iqani, M. 2017. *Consumer Culture in Media and Cultural Studies*. South Africa: Sage Krevets Publishers.
- Iqani, M. 2019. Picturing Luxury, Producing Value: The Cultural Labour of Social Media Brand Influencers in South Africa. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22(2):229–247.
- Isaac, M. 2016. Instagram May Change Your Feed, Personalizing It with an Algorithm. New York Times [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/16/technology/instagram-feed.html?module=inline>. Accessed 1 January 2022.
- Isitman, O. 2018. Somewhere Beyond Hyper-Reality. *Global Journal of Arts Education*, 8(3):103–107.
- Ito, M. & Okabe, D. 2005. “Intimate Visual Co-presence.” *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Ubiquitous Computing*, Tokyo, 19 January.
- Jadezwi, A. 2020. Is SA's First Computer Generated Influencer our First Peek into life after Covid-19? News 24 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.news24.com/w24/Style/Fashion/Style/is-sas-first-cgi-influencer-our-first-peek-into-how-industries-may-be-digitalised-after-covid-19-20200424>. Accessed 8 March 2021.
- Jang, J.Y., Han, K., Shih, P.C. & Lee, D. 2015. Generation Like: Comparative Characteristics in Instagram. *Understanding and Protecting Kids use of Technology*, 1(1):4039-4042.
- Janssen, E.D 2017. *Phenomenal Gender: What Transgender Experience Discloses*. New York: Indiana University Press.
- Jansson, A. 2013. Mediatisation and Social Space: Reconstructing Mediatisation for the Transmedia Age. *Communication Theory*, 23(1):279–296.

- Jenkins, C.E. 2018. What is a Instameet. Simple Social Media [Online]. Available at: <https://www.simplysocialmedianm.com/blog/what-is-an-instameet>. Accessed 15 May 2021.
- Jentsch, E. 1906. On the Psychology of the Uncanny. *Angelaki*, 2(1):7-16.
- Jewitt, C. & Oyama, R. 2001. Visual Meaning: A Social Semiotic Approach. London: Sage Publications.
- Jin, S. V., Muqaddam, A. & Ryu, E. 2019. Instafamous and Social Media Influencer Marketing. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 37(5):567-579.
- Jin, S.A. & Phua, J. 2014. Following Celebrities' Tweets about Brands: The Impact of Twitter-Based Electronic Word-of-Mouth on Consumers' Source Credibility Perception, Buying Intention, and Social Identification with Celebrities. *Journal of Advertising*, 43(2):181–195.
- Jin, S.V. 2018. Interactive Effects of Instagram Foodies' Hashtagged #Foodporn and Peer Users' Eating Disorder on Eating Intention. Envy, Parasocial Interaction, and Online Friendship. *Cyberpsychology Behaviour on Social Networking*, 3(21):157-167.
- Johansson, J. & Sparredal, J. 2002. Celebrity Endorsements: A Case Study of Axa and the Ludmila Engquis Incident. Dissertation. Lulea University of Technology, Sweden. Available at: <http://www.epubl.ltu.se>. Accessed 5 March 2019.
- Jones, D. 2018. Meet Miquela: An Instagram Model With 800k Followers – & No Soul. Refinery 29 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/miquela-sousa-fake-instagram>. Accessed 2 December 2019.
- Jones, E.E. & Davis, K.E. 1965. From Acts to Dispositions the Attribution Process in Person Perception. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 2(1):219-266.
- Jørgensen, S., Vitting-Seerup, S. & Wallevik, K. 2017. Hatsune Miku: an Uncertain Image. *Digital Creativity*, 28(4):318-331.
- Jurgenson, N. 2012. The IRL Fetish. The New Inquiry [Online]. Available: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-irl-fetish/>. Accessed 19 July 2019.
- Kadekova, Z. & Holienčinova, M., 2018. Influencer Marketing as a Modern Phenomenon Creating a New Frontier of Virtual Opportunities. *Communication Today*, 9(2):90-105.
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A.M., Johnson, M. & Kangasniemi, M., 2016. Systematic Methodological Review: Developing a Framework for a Qualitative Semi-structured Interview Guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 72(12):2954-2965.
- Kalpokas, I. 2021. Problematising Reality: The Promises and Perils of Synthetic Media. *SN Social Sciences*, 1(1):1-11.

- Kambule, L. 2019. Emojis Digital. Business PR Blog [Online]. Available at: <https://biz.prlog.org/EmojisDigital/>. Accessed 8 March 2021.
- Kambule, L. 2020. Our Virtual Worlds Are Proving Culturally Diverse. Virtual Human [Online]. Available at: <https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/our-virtual-worlds-are-proving-culturally-diverse>. Accessed 8 March 2021.
- Katz, E. & Lazarsfeld, P.F. 2009. *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Kavada, A. 2015. Social Media as Conversation: A Manifesto. *Social Media and Society*, 1(1):1-2.
- Kedet, B. 2021. 11 Social Media Advertising Statistics for 2021. War Room Inc [Online]. Available at: <https://www.warroominc.com/institute-library/blog/11-social-media-advertising-statistics-for-2021/>. Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Keen, A. 2007. *The Cult of the Amateur - How Today's Internet is Killing our Culture*. New York: Double Day Publishers.
- Keller, K. L. 2008. *Strategic Branding Management Building, Measuring and Managing Brand Equity*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publishers.
- Kellogg, K. 2020. The 7 Biggest Social Media Sites in 2020. The Search Engine Journal [Online]. Available at: <https://www.searchenginejournal.com/social-media/biggest-social-media-sites/>. Accessed 18 April 2020.
- Kelly, D. 2020. 20 Influencer Marketing Statistics That Will Surprise You. Digital Marketing Institute [Online]. Available at: <https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/20-influencer-marketing-statistics-that-will-surprise-you>. Accessed 6 December 2020.
- Kelly, K. 2006. Scan This Book! New York Times Magazine [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/14/magazine/14publishing.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=C9A799D7CE140B77BE5D8428ED0C9B43&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>. Accessed 23 October 2019.
- Kelly, T. 2017. Virtual It-Singer Miquela Says “Controversy Doesn't Mean Anything:” Interview. Billboard Brazil [Online]. Available at: <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/international/7964899/virtual-instagram-miquela-controversy-interview>. Accessed 16 October 2019.
- Kenney, M. & Zysman, J. 2016. The Rise of the Platform Economy. *Issues in Science and Technology*, 32(3):1-5.
- Kerr, A., Kücklich, J. & Brereton, P. 2006. New Media – New Pleasures? *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(1):63–82.

- Kerrigan, F., Brownlie, D., Hewer, P. & Daza-LeTouze, C. 2011. Spinning' Warhol:
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. 2017. Self-branding, 'Micro-Celebrity' and the Rise of
- Khanye, K. 2017. South African Celeb Endorsement Deals. Youth Village [Online]. Available at: <http://www.youthvillage.co.za/2017/07/south-african-celebs-endorsement-deals/>. Accessed 22 February 2019.
- Khumalo, K. 2018. DJ Zinhle is Making Money Moves, Lands International Endorsement Deal. Entertainment SA [Online]. Available at: <http://www.entertainmentsa.co.za/entertainment/dj-zinhle-is-making-money-moves-lands-international-endorsement-deal/>. Accessed 22 February 2019.
- Kiger, M.E. & Varpio, L. 2020: Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data: AMEE Guide. *Medical Teacher*, 131(1):1-9.
- Kim, H.C. & Jeong, J.Y. 2016. Effect of Celebrity Endorsement in Marketing of Musicals: Poster versus Social Networking Site. *Social Behaviour and Personality*, 44(8):1243–1254.
- Kim, Y. & Na, J. 2007. Effects of Celebrity Athlete Endorsement on Attitude towards the Product: the Role of Credibility, Attractiveness and the Concept of Congruence. *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, 4(8):310-320.
- Kimmel A.J. & Kitchen, P.J. 2014. Word of Mouth and Social Media. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 20(2):2–4.
- Kircaburun, K. & Griffiths, M.D. 2018. Instagram Addiction and the Big Five of Personality: The Mediating Role of Self-liking. *Journal of Behavioural Addictions*, 7(1):158–170.
- Kiss of death?" *Proceedings of the Marketing Education Group Conference*, Glasgow, 7 May.
- Klassen, K.M., Borleis, E.S., Brennan, L., Reid, M., McCaffrey, T.A. & Lim, M.S. 2018. What People "Like": Analysis of Social Media Strategies Used by Food Industry Brands, Lifestyle Brands, and Health Promotion Organizations on Facebook and Instagram. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 20(6):31-35.
- Klein, M. 2020. The Problematic Fakery of Lil Miquela Explained—An Exploration Of Virtual Influencers and Realness. Forbes Africa [Online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattklein/2020/11/17/the-problematic-fakery-of-lil-miquela-explained-an-exploration-of-virtual-influencers-and-realness/?sh=22af970b1b8d>. Accessed 21 December 2021.

- Knapp, J. 2020. How to Start a Blog – Beginner’s Guide for 2020. Blogging Basics [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bloggingbasics101.com/how-do-i-start-a-blog/>. Accessed 22 April 2020.
- Knoll, J. & Matthes, J. 2017. The Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsements: a Meta-Analysis. *Journal of the Academic Marketing Science*, 45(1):55–75.
- Kostakis, V. & Bauwens, M. 2014. *Network Society and Future Scenarios for a Collaborative*
- Kothari, C.R. 2004. *Research Methodology; Methods and Techniques*. India, Mumbai: Wishwa Prakashan Publishers.
- Kowalczyk, C.M. & Pounders, K.R. 2016. Transforming Celebrities through Social Media: the Role of Authenticity and Emotional Attachment. *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, 25(4):1-14.
- Kowalczyk, C.M. & Royne, M.B. 2013. The Moderating Role of Celebrity Worship on
- Kowalczyk, K. 2017. Instagram User Demographics in South Africa – May 2017. Napoleon Cat [Online]. Available at: <https://napoleoncat.com/blog/instagram-users-in-south-africa/>. Accessed 27 February 2019.
- Kracauer, S. 1960. *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, T. 2002. Colour as a Semiotic Mode: Notes for a Grammar of Colour. *Visual Communication*, 1(3):343–368.
- Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, T. 2006. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Kress, G. 2003. *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Kuhnle, D.A. 2019. A Comparative Analysis of CGI Instagram Influencer, @lilmiquela, and Human Instagram influencer, @_emmachamberlain, Masters Thesis, Malmö University. Malmö, Sweden.
- Kumar, P., Kalidas, K. & Abbas, J. 2016. A Literature Review on Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsement for the Social Cause. *International Journal of Research in Commerce & Management*, 7(3):1-3.
- Kumar, S. 2016. The Impact of Celebrity Endorsement on Brand Positioning: an Empirical Research. *International Journal of Research in Commerce & Management*, 1(17):85-88.

- La Ferla, R. 2005. The Celebrity Endorsement Game. The New York Times [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/19/fashion/thursdaystyles/the-celebrity-endorsement-game.html>. Accessed 19 March 2019.
- Lacković, N. 2020. Postdigital Living and Algorithms of Desire. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 1(1):1-3.
- Lam, K. 2016. The Hatsune Miku Phenomenon: More Than a Virtual J-Pop Diva. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 49(5):1107-1124.
- Lamb, R. 2012. What Packs more Punch: Unknown Models or Celebrity Endorsements? Luxury Daily [Online]. Available at: <http://www.luxurydaily.com/what-packs-more-punch-unknown-models-or-celebrity-endorsements/>. Accessed 19 March 2019.
- Langley, P. & Leyshon, A. 2017. Platform Capitalism: The Intermediation and Capitalisation of Digital Economic Circulation. *Finance and Society*, 3(1):11-31.
- Latour, B. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Lazar, J., Feng, J.H. & Hochheise, H. 2010. *Research Methods in Human-Computer Interaction*. Bell & Bain: Glasgow.
- Lazar, M.M. 2006. Discover the Power of Femininity: Analysing Global Power Femininity” in Local Advertising. *Feminist Media Studies*, 6:505–518.
- Lazarsfeld, P.F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. 1968. *The People's Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Leaver, T., Highfield, T. & Abidin, C. 2020. *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*. United Kingdom: Polity Press.
- Lee, D. 2014. Instagram Deletes Millions of Accounts in Spam Purge. BBC News [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30548463>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Lee, J., Park, D.H. & Han, I. 2008. The Effect of Negative Online Consumer Reviews on Product Attitude: An Information Processing View. *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications*, 7(1):341–352.
- Lee, J.A., Moon, J.H. & Sung, Y. 2015. Pictures Speak Louder than Words: Motivations for Using Instagram. *Cyberpsychology Behaviour and Social Networking*, 18(9):552-558.
- Lee, W.N. & Um, N.H. 2014. Celebrity Endorsement and International Advertising. In Cheng, H. *The Handbook of International Advertising Research*. United Kingdom: Wiley Publishers.

- Leigh, T.W., Peters, C. & Shelton, J. 2006. The Consumer Quest for Authenticity: the Multiplicity of meanings within the MG Subculture of Consumption. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 34(4):481-493.
- Levine, P. & Scollon, R. 2004. *Discourse and Technology Multimodal Discourse Analysis Consumer Psychology*. United States: Georgetown University Press.
- Levitt, H & Hiestand, K. 2004. A Quest for Authenticity: Contemporary Butch Gender. *Sex Roles*, 50:605-621.
- Levy, S. 2020. Has the Coronavirus Killed the Techlash? Wired [Online]. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/plaintext-has-the-coronavirus-killed-the-techlash/>. Accessed 21 January 2021.
- Leyshon, A. & Thrift, N. 2007. The Capitalisation of Almost Everything: The Future of Finance and Capitalism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24(8):97-115.
- Liao, S. & Ma, Y.Y. 2009. Conceptualising Consumer need for Authenticity. *International Journal of Business and Information*, 4(1):89-114.
- Liebes, T. & Curran, J. 1998. *Media, Ritual and Identity*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Light, B., Burgess, J. & Duguay, S. 2016. The Walkthrough Method: An approach to the Study of Apps. *New Media & Society*, 1(1):1 –20.
- Lima, S. 2017. The Effect of Celebrity Endorsement on 15–34-Year-Old Consumers Buying Behaviour, Honours Thesis, The Independent Institute of Education, South Africa.
- Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. 1985. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Lindholm, C. 2008. *Culture and Authenticity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Link-Miles. 1992. Computer-Generated Imagery. *Displays*, 13(4):211.
- Lishchynska, D. 2022. What are Bots? Bots Crew [Online]. Available at: <https://botscrew.com/blog/what-are-bots/>. Accessed 19 January 2022.
- Liu, J. 2013. Visual Images Interpretive Strategies in Multimodal Texts. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4(6):1259-1263.
- Lunenfield, P. 2011. *The Secret between Downloading and Uploading*. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Luo, L., Chen, X., Han, J. & Whan Park, C. 2010. Dilution and Enhancement of Celebrity Brands through Sequential Movie Releases. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 47(6):1114–1128.
- Lup, K., Trub, L. & Rosenthal, L. 2015. Instagram #Instasad? Exploring Associations Among Instagram Use, Depressive Symptoms, Negative Social Comparison, and Strangers Followed. *Cyberpsychology Behaviour and Social Networking*, 18(5):247-254.

- MacCannell, D. 1973. Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings. *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(1):589–603.
- MacMillan, J. & Schumacher, S. 2010. *Research in Education: Evidence-Based Inquiry*. New York: Cloth.
- Mahatody, T., Sagar, M. & Kolski, C. 2010. State of the Art on the Cognitive Walkthrough Method, Its Variants and Evolutions. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 26(8):741-785.
- Maheshwari, S. 2018. Uncovering Instagram Bots with a New Kind of Detective Work. New York Times [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/business/media/instagram-bots.html> Accessed 8 May 2019.
- Malik, G. & Guptha, A. 2014. Impact of Celebrity Endorsements and Brand Mascots on Consumer. *Journal of Global Marketing*, 27(1):128–143.
- Manikonda, L., Yuheng, Hu. & Subbarao, K. 2014. Analysing User Activities, Demographics, Social Network Structure and User-Generated Content on Instagram. *Vanity*, 1(1):1-5.
- Manovich, L. 2002. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Manovich, L. 2017. Instagram and Contemporary Image. New York: Nova Iorque CUNY.
- Mansell, R. & R. Silverstone, 1996. Communication by Design. *The Politics of Information and Communication Technologies*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Marres, N. 2017. *Digital Sociology*. Bristol: Polity Press.
- Marshall, C. & Rossman, G.B. 2014. *Designing Qualitative Research*. California: Sage Publications.
- Marwick, A. & Boyd, D. 2011. To See and be seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 17(2):139-158.
- Marwick, A. 2013. Online Identity. In Hartley, J., Burgess, J. & Bruns, A. *Companion to New Media Dynamics. Blackwell Companions to Cultural Studies*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- Marwick, A.E. 2015. Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy. *Public Culture*, 27(75):137–160.
- Masemola, N. 2020. Meet Kim Zulu. Superbalist [Online]. Available at: <https://superbalist.com/thewayofus/2020/06/05/meet-kim-zulu/17025>. Accessed 8 March 2021.

- Maso, G.D., Roberston, S. & Rogers, D. 2019. Cultural Platform Capitalism: Extracting Value from Cultural Asymmetries in Realtech. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 1(16):1-9.
- Mason, J. 2012. In Baker, S.E. & Edwards, R. 2012. *How Many Qualitative Interviews Is Enough*. Discussion Paper. NCRM.
- Mathur, L.K., Mathur I. & Rangan, N. 1998. The Wealth Effects Associated with a Celebrity
- Mathys, J., Burmester, A.B. & Clement, M. 2016. What Drives the Market Popularity of Celebrities? A Longitudinal Analysis of Consumer Interest in Film Stars. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 33(1):428–448.
- Matthíasdóttir, S.B. 2018. Fashioning Identity Online: How Online Avatars are Fundamentally Shifting the Relation Between Fashion and the Performance of Identity. Master's Thesis, Iceland University of the Arts, Iceland.
- Mbata, M. 2017. SA Celebs and their Endorsement Deals. OK Mzansi [Online]. Available at: <https://okmzansi.co.za/south-african-celebrities-endorsement-deals/>. Accessed 2 February 2019.
- Mc Donald, S. 2018. This Instagram Influencer Is Not Even Human. Footwear News [Online]. Available at: <https://footwearnews.com/2018/influencers/technology/miquela-sousa-instagram-virtual-influencer-491637/amp/>. Accessed 16 October 2019.
- McCracken, G. 1989. Who is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16(1):310-321.
- McEwan, C. & Bek, D. 2006. (Re)Politicising Empowerment: Lessons from the South Africa Wine Industry. *Geoforum*, 37(7):1021-1034.
- McEwan, C., Hughes, A. & Bek, D. 2015. Theorising Middle Class Consumption from the Global South: a Study of Everyday Ethics in South Africa's Western Cape. *Geoforum*, 67(1):233-243.
- McEwen, W.J. 2003. When the Stars Don't Shine. *Gallup Management Journal* [Online]. Available from: <http://gmj.gallup.com>. Accessed 15 March 2019.
- McIntosh, M.J. & Morse, J.M. 2015. Situating and Constructing Diversity in Semi-Structured Interviews. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, (1):1-12.
- McLachlan, S. 2022. 35 Instagram Stats That Matter to Marketers in 2022. Hootsuite [Online]. Available at: <https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-statistics/>. Accessed 22 January 2022.
- McLuhan, M. 1967. *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Penguin Books.

- McNicol, A. 2020. What is Liam Nikuro and How Did he get into the NBA Bubble? South China Morning Post [Online]. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/sport/basketball/article/3098800/what-liam-nikuro-and-how-did-he-get-nba-bubble>. Accessed 14 December 2020.
- McSweeney, K. 2019. This is Your Brain on Instagram: Effects of Social Media on the Brain. Northrop Grumman [Online]. Available at: <https://now.northropgrumman.com/this-is-your-brain-on-instagram-effects-of-social-media-on-the-brain/>. Accessed 5 February 2022.
- Meeker, M. 2018. Internet Trends Report 2018. Kleiner Perkins [Online]. Available at: <https://www.kleinerperkins.com/perspectives/internet-trends-report-2018/>. Accessed 12 March 2021.
- Mendelson, A.L. & Papacharissi, Z. 2007. Reality vs. Fiction How Defined Realness Affects Cognitive & Emotional Responses to Photographs. *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 14(4):231-243.
- Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2020. “Robot.” Merriam Webster Dictionary [Online]. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/robot>. Accessed 3 December 2020.
- Merritt, K. 2018. Male Selfies Are Bad. I’m Here to Help. Mel Magazine [Online]. Available at: <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/male-selfies-are-bad-im-here-to-help>. Accessed 2 May 2019.
- Meyrowitz, J. 1985. *No Sense of Place. The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mgabadeli, N. 2016. Entertainments Biggest Endorsement Deals of 2016. ZALebs [Online]. Available at: <https://zalebs.com/whats-hot/entertainments-biggest-endorsement-deals-2016-december-content/>. Accessed 22 February 2019.
- Miller, D. 2012. In Baker, S.E. & Edwards, R. 2012. *How Many Qualitative Interviews Is Enough*. Discussion Paper. NCRM.
- Miller, F.M. & Lacznia, G.R. 2011. The Ethics of Celebrity Athlete Endorsement: What Happens When a Star Steps Out of Bounds? *Journal of Advertising Research*, 1(1):499-510.
- Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Mishra, A.S., Roy, S. & Bailey, A.A. 2015. Exploring Brand Personality–Celebrity Endorser Personality Congruence in Celebrity Endorsements in the Indian. *Psychology & Marketing*, 32(12):1158–1174.

- Mitchell, T. 1998. Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order. In Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Mitchell, T. 2002. Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1(1):165–181.
- Mittala, V., Kaula, A., Gupta, S.S. & Arora, A. 2017. Multivariate Features Based Instagram Post Analysis to Enrich User Experience. *Procedia Computer Science*, 122(1):138–145.
- Mobley, J. 2021. Hardware for the Hybrid Classroom and Funding Resources. Zoom [Online]. Available at: <https://blog.zoom.us/hardware-hybrid-classroom-funding-resources/>. Accessed 15 March 2021.
- Molin, V. & Nordgren, S. 2019. Robot or Human? – The Marketing Phenomenon of Virtual Influencers. Masters Thesis. Uppsala University.
- Molina, C.E.A. 2020. Lil Miquela: From Illuminati Sex Doll to Robot Pop Star, Master's Thesis, Utrecht University, Netherlands.
- Moller, K. & Robards, B. 2019. Walking Through, Going Along and Scrolling Back Ephemeral Mobilities in Digital Ethnography. *Nordicom Review*, 40(1):95-109.
- Molster, R. 2016. Gunn Enli Mediated Authenticity. How the Media Constructs Reality. *Nordicom Review*, 37(2):131-134.
- Moore, R. 2004. Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction. *Communication Review*, 7(1):305-327.
- Mori, M. 1970. The Uncanny Valley. *Energy*, 7(4)33–35.
- Moriarty, S.E. & Kenney, K. 1995. Visual Communication: A Taxonomy and Bibliography. Visual Communication: A Taxonomy and Bibliography. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 15(2):7-15.
- Mormann, M.M., Towal, R.B. & Koch, C. 2015. Visual Importance of Marketing Stimuli: Insights from Visual and Computational Neuroscience. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2709187>. Accessed 17 July 2019.
- Morris, J.W. & Elkins, E. 2015. There's a History for that: Apps and Mundane Software as Commodity. *The Fibreculture Journal*, 25(1):63–88.
- Mosely, M. 2020. Virtual Influencers: What Are They & How Do They Work? Influencer Match Maker [Online]. Available at: <https://influencermatchmaker.co.uk/blog/virtual-influencers-what-are-they-how-do-they-work>. Accessed 2 December 2020.

- Moser, A. & Korstjens, I. 2018. Series: Practical Guidance to Qualitative Research. Part 3: Sampling, Data Collection and Analysis. *European Journal of General Practice*, 24(1):9-18.
- Moustakas, E., Ranganathan, C., Lamba, N. & Mahmoud, D. 2020. "Blurring lines Between Fiction and Reality: Perspectives of Experts on Marketing Effectiveness of Virtual Influencers." *International Conference on Cyber Security and Protection of Digital Services*, Dubai, 5 September.
- Mouton, J. 2009. *How to Succeed in your Master's and Doctoral studies*. South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik Publishers.
- Muda, M., Musa, R. & Putit, L. 2012. Breaking through the Clutter in Media Environment: How Do Celebrities Help? *Procedia-Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 42(1):374-382.
- Mudambi, S.M. & Schuff, D. 2010. What Makes a Helpful Online Review? A Study of Customer Reviews on Amazon.com. *MIS Quarterly*, 34(1):185-200.
- Muensterberger, W. 2014. *Collecting: An Unruly Passion. Psychological Perspectives*. United States: Princeton University Press.
- Mugenda, O.M. & Mugenda, A.G. 2010. *Research Methods, Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. Kenya, Nairobi: Acts Press.
- Mulvey, L. 1975. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16(3):6–18.
- Murray, G. 2000. Black Empowerment in South Africa: Patriotic Capitalism or Corporate Black Wash? *Critical Sociology*, 26 (3):183-204.
- Murray, S. 2005. Doing Politics or Selling Out? Living the Fat Body. *Women's Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal*, 34(1):265-277.
- Myers, G. 2010. Stance-Taking and Public Discussion in Blogs. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 7 (4):263–275.
- Ndlela, T. & Chuchu, T. 2016. Celebrity Endorsement Advertising: Brand Awareness, Brand Recall, Brand Loyalty as Antecedence of South African Young Consumers' Purchase Behaviour. *Journal of Economics and Behavioural Studies*, 8(2):79-90.
- Neff, J. 2012. GE study Proves Consumers Respond more to Shared Content than to Paid Placements. Advertising Age [Online]. Available at: <http://adage.com/article/digital/ge-study-proves-consumers-respond-shared-content/232324/>. Accessed 7 March 2019.
- Negroponste, N. 1995. *Being Digital*. London: Coronet Books Hodder and Stoughton.
- Nelson, P. 1974. Advertising as Information. *Journal of Political Economy*, 82(1):729–754.
- Neuman, W. 2011. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

- Newberry, C. 2021. 44 Instagram Stats That Matter to Marketers in 2021. Hootsuite [Online]. Available at: <https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-statistics/>. Accessed 22 November 2021.
- Nguyen, J. 2016. Digital Future in Focus: Global Trends and Insights [Slide Show]. Retrieved from <http://www.comscore.com/Insights/Presentations-and-Whitepapers/2016/Digital-Future-in-Focus-Global-Trends-and-Insights>. Accessed 2 June 2019.
- Nguyen, P.T. 2017. Nostalgic for the Present: Digital Nostalgia and Mediated Authenticity on Instagram, Master's Thesis, Media and Communication Studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm.
- Nichols, B. 1991. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. United States: Indiana University Press.
- Nieborg, D.B., Duffy, B.D. & Poell, T. 2020. Studying Platforms and Cultural Production: Methods, Institutions and Practices. *Social Media and Society*, 6(3):1-7.
- Nieftagodien, S. & Van der Berg, S. 2007. Consumption Patterns and the Black Middle Class: the Role of Assets. *Bureau of Economic Research*, 2(1):1–10.
- Nielsen Global Survey, 2013. Top of 2013. Newswire. [Online]. Available at: digital.www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2013/tops-of-2013-digital.html. Accessed 19 June 2019.
- Nikolaeva, O.A., Kozlova, Y.A. & Nurkhamitov, M.R. 2017. Methods of Modality Transmission within Intercultural Communication. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 6(4):554-562.
- Nkosi, N. 2011. Celebrity Endorsement vs. Other forms of Advertising: What Appeals to the 18-24 South African Youth Market, Honours Thesis, University of Cape Town, South Africa.
- Nonaka, S., Inoue, K., Arai, T. & Mae, Y. 2004. "Evaluation of Human Sense of Security for Coexisting Robots using Virtual Reality." *IEEE International Conference on Robotics and Automation*, New Orleans, 26 April.
- Norman, A.T. & Russell, C.A. 2006. The Pass-Along Effect: Investigating Word-of-Mouth Effects on Online Survey Procedures. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(4):1085–1103.
- Norris, S. 2004. *Analysing Multimodal Interaction: A Methodological Framework*. London: Routledge.

- Nowak, K.L. & Rauh, C. 2005. The Influence of the Avatar on Online Perceptions of Anthropomorphism, Androgyny, Credibility, Homophily, and Attraction. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(1):153-178.
- Noy, C. 2004. Performing Identity: Touristic Narratives of Self Change. *Text & Performance Quarterly*, 24(1):115-138.
- Ntwasa, T. 2020. Meet Kim Zulu, SA's First Virtual Model. Times Live [Online]. Available at: <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/lifestyle/fashion-and-beauty/2020-04-26-meet-kim-zulu-sas-first-virtual-model/>. Accessed 8 March 2021.
- Nutley, K. 2014. Adults Spend Almost 10 Hours Per Day with the Media, But Note Only 150 Ads. Media Dynamics Incorporated [Online]. Available at: <https://www.mediadynamicsinc.com/uploads/files/PR092214-Note-only-150-Ads-2mk.pdf> Accessed 19 June 2019.
- O'Halloran, K.L. 2011. *Multimodal Discourse Analysis: Companion to Discourse*. United Kingdom: Continuum Publishers.
- Obermiller, C. & Spangenberg, E.R. 1998. Development of a Scale to Measure Consumer Scepticism Toward Advertising. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 7(2):159-186.
- OED, 2016. "Authenticity." Oxford English Dictionary [Online]. Available at: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/13325>. Accessed 19 July 2019.
- Oppenneer, M. 2011. Seeking Hatsune Miku. My Big Thoughts [Online]. Available at: <https://www.mybighthoughts.com/on/seeking-hatsune-miku/>. Accessed 24 January 2021.
- Osei, S. 2021. A Lil Ranking of "Lil" Rappers from Worst to Best. High Snobeity [Online]. Available at: <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/lil-rappers-ranking-2/>. Accessed 27 January 2022.
- Ots, M. & Abidin, C. 2015. The Influencer's Dilemma: the Shaping of New Brand Professions between Credibility and Commerce, Proceedings of the AEJMC Annual Conference, San Fransisco, August 6-9.
- Otter.ai, 2018. PhD Students and Qualitative Researchers Save Time by Using Otter Voice Meeting Notes. Otter.ai [Online]. Available at: <https://blog.otter.ai/phd/>. Accessed 20 March 2021.
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2020. "Influencer." Oxford Dictionary [Online]. Available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/influencer>. Accessed 23 January 2021.

- Pachal, P. 2016. What the Designer of the Old Instagram Icon Thinks of the New One. Mashable [Online]. Available at: <https://mashable.com/2016/05/11/instagram-old-icon-designer/#HltnKBc.lZqU>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Page, R. 2013. *Stories and Social Media: Identities and Interaction*. London: Routledge.
- Painter, C., Martin, J.R. & Unsworth, L. 2013. *Reading Visual Narratives: Image Analysis of Children's Picture Books*. London: Equinox Publishing.
- Panofsky, E. 1955. *Meaning in the Visual Arts*. New York: Doubleday Publishers.
- Papacharissi, Z. 2011. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community and Culture on Social Network Sites*. New York: Routledge Publishers.
- Parcq, A. & London, B. 2018. The man behind Shudu Gram & the world's first 'digital supermodels' reveals the secrets behind his stratospheric success. Glamour [Online]. Available at: <https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/shudu-gram-virtual-supermodels>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Pardiwalla, T. 2019. Notifications and Dopamine: Weird Ways in Which Instagram Likes Lead to Happiness. Mashable India [Online]. Available at: <https://in.mashable.com/science/2616/notifications-and-dopamine-weird-ways-in-which-instagram-likes-lead-to-happiness>. Accessed 5 February 2022.
- Parikka, J. 2007. Contagion and Repetition: On the Viral Logic of Network Culture. *Ephemera* 7(2):287–308.
- Park, S.Y. & Cho, M. 2015. Celebrity Endorsement for Non-profit Organisations: The Role of Celebrity Motive Attribution and Spontaneous Judgment of Celebrity-Cause Incongruence. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 21(1):224–245.
- Parrish, C. 2015. Instagram's Kevin Systrom: I'm Dangerous Enough to Code and Sociable enough to Sell our Company. The Telegraph [Online]. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/11568119/Instagrams-Kevin-Systrom-Im-dangerous-enough-to-code-and-sociable-enough-to-sell-our-company.html>. Accessed 19 July 2019.
- Pasquale, F. 2016. Two Narratives of Platform Capitalism. *Yale Law & Policy Review*, 1(35):309-319.
- Patel, L. & Graham, L. 2012. How Broad-Based Is Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment? *Development Southern Africa*, 29(2):193-207.
- Patterson, A & Ashman, R. 2020. *Getting Up-Close and Personal with Influencers*. London: Routledge.

- Patterson, A., Khogeer, Y., Hodgson, J. 2013. How to Create an Influential Anthropomorphic Mascot: Literary Musings on Marketing, Make-Believe, and Meerkats. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 29(1):10-18.
- Pauwels, L. 2012. A Multimodal Framework for Analysing Websites as Cultural Expressions. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3):247-265.
- Pearce, W. Suay M.O., Greene, A.K. Teeling, L., Bansard, J.S. Omena, J.J. & Rabello, E.T. 2020. Visual Cross-Platform Analysis: Digital Methods to Research Social Media Images. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(2):161-180.
- Pennings, A. 2002. What is Visual Literacy? Marist College [Online]. Available at: <http://www.marist.edu/pennings/viswhatis.htm>. Accessed 23 October 2019.
- Perez, S. 2022. App Annie: Global App Stores' Consumer Spend up 19% to \$170B in 2021, Downloads Grew 5% to 230B. Tech Crunch [Online]. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2022/01/12/app-annie-global-app-stores-consumer-spend-up-19-to-170b-in-2021-downloads-grew-5-to-230b/#:~:text=At%20the%20high%20end%20of,making%20over%20%241%20billion%20annually>. Accessed 20 January 2022.
- Peterson, R. 1997. *Creating Country Music*. University of Chicago Press: USA.
- Peterson, R. 2005. In Search of Authenticity. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(1):1083-1098.
- Pettersson, R. 2001. Interpreting Image Content. The 33rd Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association. Eskilstuna, November 7-11.
- Petty, R.E., Schumann, D.W. & Cacioppo, J.T. 1983. Central and Peripheral Routes to Advertising Effectiveness: The Moderating Role of Involvement. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 1(10):135-146.
- Petzer, D.J. & De Meyer, C.F. 2013. Trials and Tribulations: Marketing in Modern South Africa. *European Business Review*, 25(4):382-390.
- Photo Reportage. *Digital Journalism*, 3(4):571-593.
- Pierce, A.J. 2015. Authentic Identities. *Social Theory and Practice*, 41(3):435-457.
- Pignagnoli, V. 2019. Changing Dominants, Changing Features? The Fiction/Nonfiction Distinction in Contemporary Literary and Instagram Narratives. *European Journal of English Studies*, 23(2):224-238.
- Pilane, P. & Iqani, M. 2015. Mis-represented a Critical Analysis of the Visibility of Black Women in South African Glamour Magazine. *Communicare*, 35(1):126-140.

- Pittman, M. & Reich, B. 2016. Social Media and Loneliness: Why an Instagram Picture may be worth more than a Thousand Twitter Words. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 62(1):155-167.
- Pixabay, 2022. Instagram Icons. Pixabay [Online]. Available at: <https://pixabay.com/vectors/instagram-package-icons-icons-5329598/>. Accessed 20 January 2022.
- Plantin, J.C. & Punathambekar, A. 2019. Digital Media Infrastructures: Pipes, Platforms, and Politics. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(2):163-174.
- Popsecu, G.H. 2014. The Economic Value of Celebrity Endorsements: A Literature Review. *Economics, Management and Financial Markets*, 9(4):119–124.
- Posel, D. 2010. Races to Consume: Revisiting South Africa's History of Race, Consumption and the Struggle for Freedom. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33(2):157-175.
- Potter, W.J., Pashupati, K., Pekurny, R.G., Hoffman, E. & Davis, K. 2002. Perceptions of Television: A Schema. *Media Psychology*, 4(1):27–50.
- Pozharliev, R. & Marcati, A. 2019. Virtual Ambassadors, is this New Trend Changing the Video Advertising Landscape? A Preliminary Analysis of the Renault Kadjar Case, Honours Thesis, LUISS University, Italy.
- Pramjeeth, S. & Majaye-Khupe, T. 2016. The Influence of Celebrity Endorsement on Consumer Purchasing Behaviour of Alcohol in the South African Market. *Journal of Social Science*, 46(1):39-49.
- Preece, C. 2015. The Authentic Celebrity Brand: Unpacking Ai Weiwei's Celebritised Selves. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 31(5):616–645.
- Prince, S. 1996. True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images and Film Theory. *Film Quarterly*, 49(3):27-37.
- Pringle, H. & Binet, L. 2005. How Marketers can use Celebrities to Sell More Effectively. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 4(3):201–214.
- Prinsloo, J. 2009. *Textual Analysis: Narrative and Argument*. In Fourie, P.J. 2009. *Media Studies*. Cape Town: Juta Publications.
- Product? *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 1(1):291-299.
- Proust, M., 2006. *Remembrance of Things Past*. New York: Wordsworth Editions.
- Puoane, T. 2005. Big is Beautiful - an Exploration with Urban Black Community Health Workers in a South African Township. *South African Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 18(1):6-15.
- Quinlan, C. 2011. *Business Research Methods*. United States: Cengage Learning Publishers.

- Qwerty Digital, 2017. The Digital Landscape in South Africa 2017. Qwerty Digital Whitepaper [Online]. Available at: <https://qwertydigital.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Digital-Statistics-in-South-Africa-2017-Report.pdf>. Accessed 27 February 2019.
- Rabimov, S. 2020. The Real Game-Changers: How Virtual Models Take On Creative Industries. Forbes [Online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephanrabimov/2020/06/10/the-real-game-changers-how-virtual-models-take-on-creative-industries/>. Accessed 13 December 2021.
- Ranadive, A. & Ginsberg, D. 2018. New Tools to Manage Your Time on Facebook and Instagram. Facebook [Online]. Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/08/manage-your-time/>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Rangongo, T. 2019. SA's Advertising Regulator is Drafting New Rules for Social Media – and They Could Hit Paid Social Influencers Hard. Business Insider [Online]. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.co.za/proposed-new-rules-for-social-media-advertising-and-the-use-of-influencers-in-south-africa-2019-1/>. Accessed 11 July 2021.
- Rao, A.R. & Ruekert, R.W. 1994. Brand Alliances as Signals of Product Quality. *Sloan Management Review*, 36(1):87–97.
- Rath, J. 2017. The FTC wants Social Media stars to Stop Sneaking in Ads on Instagram. Business Insider [Online]. Available at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-ftc-wants-social-media-stars-to-stop-sneaking-in-ads-on-instagram-2017-4>. Accessed 17 July 2019.
- Rau, P.L. P., Li, Y. & Li, D. 2010. A Cross-Cultural Study: Effect of Robot Appearance and Task. *International Journal of Social Robotics*, 2(2):175-186.
- Renaningtyas, L., Mutiaz, I.R. & Syarief, A. 2014. “Nostalgia and Authenticity of Faux Vintage Photo in Instagram through Digital Filters.” Proceedings of the Banding Creative Movement International Conference in Creative Industry, Canada, 10-11 November. *Research*, 23(1):57–61.
- Rettberg, J.W. 2014. *Seeing Ourselves through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Richards, L. & Morse, J.M. 2013. *Read Me First for a User's Guide to Qualitative Methods*. United States: Sage Publications.

- Richardson, I. 2007. Pocket Technospaces: The Bodily Incorporation of Mobile Media. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 21(1):205-215.
- Rieder, B. & Röhle, T. 2012. *Digital Methods: Five Challenges. Understanding Digital Humanities*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Rigoletto, S. 2018 (Un)dressing Authenticity: Neorealist Stardom and Anna Magnani in the post war era (1945–48). *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies*, 6(3):389-403.
- Riley, S. & Cahill, S. 2005. Managing Meaning and Belonging: Young Women's Negotiation of Authenticity in Body Art. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8(1):261-279.
- Rindova, V.P., Pollock, T.G. & Hayward, M.L.A., 2006. Celebrity Firms: The Social Construction of Market Popularity. *Academy of Management Review*, 31(1):50–71.
- Ringrose, J. & Harvey, L. 2015. Boobs, Back-off, Six Packs and Bits: Mediated Body Parts, Gendered Reward and Sexual Shame in Teens' Sexting Images. *Continuum*, 29(2):205–217.
- Robehmed, N. 2016. Inside The Business of Kardashian-Jenner Instagram Endorsements. Forbes [Online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2016/11/16/inside-the-business-of-celebrity-instagram-endorsements/#913b70557243>. Accessed on 5 December 2018.
- Robertson, A. 2012. Twitter Blocks Instagram from using its API for Friend-Finding Feature. The Verge [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2012/7/26/3189340/twitter-blocks-instagram-friend-finding-api>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Robinson, B. 2020. Towards an Ontology and Ethics of Virtual Influencers. *Australasian Journal of Information Systems*, 24(1):1-8.
- Rodriguez, K.P. 2009. Apparel Brand Endorsers and their Effects on Purchase Intentions: a Study of Philippine Consumers. *Philippine Management Review*, 15(1):83-99.
- Rogers, R. 2019. *Doing Digital Methods*. London: Sage.
- Rogoff, I. 1998. *Studying Visual Culture*. In Mirzoeff, N. 1998. *The Visual Culture Reader*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Rojek, C. 2001. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Publishers.
- Role of Anticipated future Interaction, Self-disclosure, and Perceived success in Internet Dating. *Communication Research*, 33(1):152–177.
- Rosamond, E. 2020. From Reputation Capital to Reputation Warfare: Online Ratings, Trolling, and the Logic of Volatility. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 37(2):105–129.

- Rose, G. 2001. *Visual Methodologies: an Introduction to Interpreting Visual Objects*. London, Sage Publications.
- Rose, G. 2007. *Visual Methodologies*. London: Sage Publications.
- Rose, R & Wood, S. 2005. Paradox and the Consumption of Authenticity through Reality Television. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32(1):284-295.
- Rosenstein, J. 2018. People Can't Tell If This Fenty Model Is Real or Fake. Harpers Bazaar [Online]. Available at: <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/beauty/makeup/a16810663/shudu-gram-fenty-modelfake/>. Accessed 23 January 2021.
- Rouse, I. 2018. Miquela Sousa Is Fashion's First Computer Generated Influencer. Hypebeast [Online]. Available at: <https://hypebeast.com/2018/2/miquela-sousa-first-computer-generated-fashion-influencer?amp=1>. Accessed 16 October 2019.
- Rouse, M. 2019. Defining the Turing Test. Search Enterprise AI [Online]. Available at: <https://searchenterpriseai.techtarget.com/definition/Turing-test>. Accessed 27 April 2020.
- Roy, S. & Bagdare, S. 2015. The Role of Country of Origin in Celebrity Endorsements: Integrating Effects of Brand Familiarity. *Journal of Global Marketing*, 28(1):133–151.
- Rubin, R. 2021. It's 2021 and "Avatar" Just Overtaken "Avengers: Endgame" as Highest-Grossing Movie of All Time. Available at: <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/avatar-avengers-endgame-highest-grossing-movie-all-time-1234929216/>. Accessed 2 January 2022.
- Sabraw, I. 2020. Virtual Yearning Virtual Yearning, Honours Thesis, Washington University, St. Louis.
- Sahn, D.E. & Stifel, D.C. 2000. Poverty Comparisons over Time and Across Countries in Africa. *World Development*, 28(12):2123-2155.
- Sarvas, R. & Frohlich, D.M. 2011. *From Snapshots to Social Media - the Changing Picture of Domestic Photography*. New York: Springer.
- Scannell, P. 1996. *Radio, Television, and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach*. England: Blackwell Publishers.
- Schaffer, N. 2021. The Top 25 Influencer Marketing Statistics You Need to Know in 2021. Neal Schaff [Online]. Available at: <https://nealschaffer.com/influencer-marketing-statistics/>. Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Schimmelpfennig, C. & Hollense, S. 2016. Significant Decline in Celebrity Usage in Advertising: A Review. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 1(15):10-17.

- Schivinski, B. & Dabrowski, D. 2016. The Effect of Social Media Communication on Consumer Perceptions of Brands. *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 22(2):189–214.
- Schmeichel, M., Kerr, S. & Linder, C. 2017. Selfies as Postfeminist Pedagogy: the Production of Traditional Femininity in the US South. *Gender and Education*, 1(1):1–19.
- Schöps, J.D. Wegerer, P.K. & Hemetsberger, A. 2017. Brand-Mediated Ideological Edgework: Negotiating the Aestheticized Human Body on Instagram: The Case of American Apparel. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 45(1):474–480.
- Schreiber, M. 2017. Showing/Sharing: Analysing Visual Communication from a Praxeological Perspective. *Media and Communication*, 5(4):37–50.
- Schudson, M. 1995. *The Power of News*. Cambridge, England: Harvard University Press.
- Schuller, J.E. & Schrader, V.L. 2018. Broadcasting the Backstage: Essena O'Neill's Facework as an Instagram Model. *Ohio Communication Journal*, 56(1):79–92.
- Sebastian, M. 2019. Instagram and Gendered Surveillance: Ways of Seeing the Hashtag. *Surveillance & Society*, 17(2):40–45.
- Seekings, J. & Natrass, N., 2006. *Class, Race and Inequality in South Africa*. New York: Yale University Press.
- Sehl, K. & Tien, S. 2021. How to Create Beautiful Instagram Carousel Posts (Free Templates). Hootsuite [Blog]. Available at: <https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-carousel/#:~:text=your%20feed%20now,-,What%20is%20an%20Instagram%20carousel%20post%3F,single%20post%20on%20the%20feed>. Accessed 28 January 2022.
- Sehl, K. 2021. Instagram Demographics in 2021: Important User Stats for Marketers. Hootsuite [Online]. Available at: <https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-demographics/>. Accessed 2 January 2022.
- Senft, T.M. 2008. *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Seno, D. & Lukas, B. 2007. The Equity Effect of Product Endorsement by Celebrities: A Conceptual Framework from a Co-Branding Perspective. *European Journal of Marketing*, 41(1):121–134.
- Serafinelli, E. 2017. Analysis of Photo Sharing and Visual Social Relationships: Instagram as a case study. *Photographies*, 10(1):91–110.

- Seymour, M., Riemer, K. & Kay, J. 2018. Actors, Avatars and Agents: Potentials and Implications of Natural Face Technology for the Creation of Realistic Visual Presence. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, 19(1):953-981.
- Seymour, M., Riemer, K., Yuan, L. 2021. Beyond Deep Fakes: Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda for Neural Rendering of Realistic Digital Faces. Proceedings of the 54th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.
- Seymour, M., Yuan, L., Dennis, A.R. & Riemer, K. 2020. "Facing the Artificial: Understanding Affinity, Trustworthiness, and Preference for More Realistic Digital Humans." *Proceedings of the 53rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, Hawaii, 15 October.
- Sheldon, P. & Bryant, K. 2016. Instagram: Motives for its Use and Relationship to Narcissism
- Shenton, A.K. 2004. Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research Projects. *Education for Information*, 22(1):63–75.
- Sherman, S.R. 1985. When you wish Upon a Star. *Fortune*, 1(1):66-71.
- Shieber, J. 2019. More Investors are Betting on Virtual Influencers like Lil Miquela. Tech Crunch [Online]. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2019/01/14/more-investors-are-betting-on-virtual-influencers-like-lil-miquela/>. Accessed 31 October 2019.
- Shields, R. 2003. *The Virtual*. New York: Routledge.
- Shimp, T.E. 2007. Selecting Message Appeals and Picking Endorsers. Yumpu [Online]. Available at: <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/9077920/selecting-message-appeals-and-picking-endorsers>. Accessed 27 February 2019.
- Shoenthal, A. 2018. The Anxiety of Authenticity. Forbes [Online]. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/amyschoenberger/2018/04/08/the-anxiety-of-authenticity/#5c67357b4d6b>. Accessed 8 May 2019.
- Shontell, A. Jack Dorsey Was Heartbroken When Instagram Sold to Facebook. Business Insider [Online]. Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/jack-dorsey-was-heartbroken-when-instagram-sold-to-facebook-2013-5>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Silberling, A. 2021. After testing, Instagram launches ads in the Instagram Shop tab globally. Tech Crunch [Online]. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2021/08/24/after-testing-instagram-launches-ads-in-the-instagram-shop-tab-globally/>. Accessed 24 December 2021.
- Silvera, D.H. & Austad, B. 2004. Factors Predicting the Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsement Advertisements. *European Journal of Marketing* 38(12):1509–1526.

- Silverman, D. 2001. *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction*. London: Sage Publications.
- Silverman, D. 2009. *Doing Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications. Los Angeles, USA.
- Siminitz, B. 2018. How to Win on Instagram: Be Authentic. JCK [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jckonline.com/editorial-article/instagram-authenticity-issue/>. Accessed 13 May 2019.
- Singh-Kurtz, S. 2018. A Hip Online Magazine Hired a CGI “It Girl” as its Contributing Arts Editor. Quartz [Online]. Available at: <https://qz.com/quartz/1425735/dazed-just-hired-cgi-influencer-lil-miquela-as-its-arts-editor/>. Accessed 10 December 2020.
- Sismondo, S. 2010. *An Introduction to Science and Technology Studies*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.
- Sliburyte, L. 2009. How Celebrities can be used in Advertising to the Best Advantage. *World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology*, 58(2):934-939.
- Smith, A. & Anderson, M. 2018. Social Media use in 2018. Pew Research [Online]. Available at: www.pewinternet.org/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/. Accessed 22 July 2019.
- Smith, R.H. & Kim, S.H. 2007. Comprehending Envy. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(1):46–64.
- Sobande, F. 2021. CGI Influencers Are Here. Who’s Profiting From Them Should Give You Pause. Fast Company [Online]. Available at: <https://www.fastcompany.com/90682915/cgi-influencers-are-here-whos-profiting-from-them-should-give-you-pause#:~:text=Created%20by%20tech%2Dsavvy%20teams,become%20increasingly%20attractive%20to%20brands> .
- Social Media Influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2):191–208.
- Sommer, L. 2018. Post-Feminist, Post-Humanist Instagram Fembot Microcelebrities: Lil Miquela and Shudu. Medium [Online]. Available at: <https://medium.com/@lizcsommer/post-feminist-post-humanist-instagram-fembot-microcelebrities-lil-miquela-and-shudu-a138c85794a0>. Accessed 20 January 2021.
- Song, J., Han, K., Lee, D. & Kim, S.W. 2018. Is a Picture Really Worth a Thousand Words? A Case Study on Classifying User Attributes on Instagram. *PLOS ONE*, 13(10):1-22.
- Southern, M. 2020. Instagram is Letting Advertisers Create Posts with Users’ Accounts. Search Engine Journal [Online]. Available at: <https://www.searchenginejournal.com/instagram-is-letting-advertisers-create-posts-with-users-accounts/388839/#close>. Accessed 6 December 2020.

- Spangler, T. 2017. Instagram Will Add Paid Partnership Tag to Sponsored Posts, After FTC's Warnings to Celebrity Users. Variety [Online]. Available at: <https://variety.com/2017/digital/news/instagram-paidpartnership-tag-sponsored-ftc-celebrity-2qwarning-1202466310/>. Accessed 23 January 2021.
- Speed, B. 2015. The Lies of Instagram: How the Cult of Authenticity Spun out of Control. New Statesman [Online]. Available at: <https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/social-media/2015/11/lies-instagram-how-cult-authenticity-spun-out-control>. Accessed 8 May 2019.
- Speedling, E. 1981. *Heart Attack: The Family Response at Home and in the Hospital*. New York: Tavistock.
- Spence, M. 1973. Job Market Signalling. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(1):355–374.
- Spinelli, S. 2019. Multidimensional Storytelling: An Analytical Framework for Digital, Interactive and Transmedia Narratives. PhD Thesis. Kings College. London.
- Srnicek, N. 2017. *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Stake, R.E. 1994. *Case Studies, in: Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Stamatoula, B. & Kirke, L. 2019. Virtual Avatars Rising The Social Impact Based On A Content Analysis and a Questionnaire In The Context Of Fashion Industry, Master's Thesis, University of Borås, Sweden.
- Stapleton, P., Luiz, G. & Chatwin, H. 2017. Generation Validation: The Role of Social Comparison in Use of Instagram among Emerging Adults. *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour and Social Networking*, 20(3):142-150.
- Statista, 2020a. Nike's Endorsement Contracts Commitments Worldwide from 2021 to 2025. Statista [Online]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/961728/nike-endorsement-contracts-value/>. Accessed 6 December 2020.
- Statista, 2020b. Number of brand sponsored influencer posts on Instagram from 2016 to 2020. Statista [Online]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/693775/instagram-sponsored-influencer-content/>. Accessed 6 December 2020.
- Statista, 2021a. Digital Population in South Africa as of January 2021. Statista [Online]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/685134/south-africa-digital-population/>. Accessed 16 March 2021.
- Statista, 2021b. Distribution of Influencers Creating Sponsored Posts on Instagram Worldwide in 2019, by Gender. Statista [Online]. Available at:

- <https://www.statista.com/statistics/893749/share-influencers-creating-sponsored-posts-by-gender/>. Accessed 20 December 2021.
- Statista, 2021c. Distribution of Instagram Users in South Africa as of July 2021, by Gender. Statista [Online]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1028354/south-africa-instagram-user-gender-distribution/>. Accessed 2 December 2021.
- Statista, 2021d. Distribution of Instagram Users Worldwide as of October 2021, by Gender. Statista [Online]. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/802776/distribution-of-users-on-instagram-worldwide-gender/>. Accessed 20 December 2021.
- Statista, 2021e. Number of Instagram users in South Africa from September 2018 to January 2021. Statista [Online]. Available at: [https://www.statista.com/statistics/1029289/instagram-users-south-africa/#:~:text=As%20of%20January%202021%20there,app's%20audience%20in%20the%20country](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1029289/instagram-users-south-africa/#:~:text=As%20of%20January%202021%20there,app's%20audience%20in%20the%20country.). Accessed 16 March 2021.
- Stein, J. 2007. Celebrity Endorsement Agreements: Contracting with the Stars. *The Practical Lawyer*, 53(1):25–31.
- Stern, J. 2013. Instagram Brings Your Photo Feed to the Web, Not Just Phones. ABC News [Online]. Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/instagram-brings-photo-feed-web/story?id=18411568#:~:text=%22We%20do%20not%20offer%20the,%2C%20simple%20and%20enjoyable%20one.%22>. Accessed 1 January 2022.
- Sternberger, D. 1977. *Panorama of the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Urizen Books.
- Steuer, J. 1992. Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence. *Journal of Stritch*, C. 2018. Blogger's Hoax Disneyland Trip Proves How Easy It Is to Fake It On Instagram. Refinery 29 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2018/03/193779/blogger-faked-disney-trip-instagram>. Accessed 3 May 2019.
- Struwig, F.W. & Stead, G.B. 2013. *Research: Planning, Designing and Reporting*. Cape Town: Pearson.
- Sundararajan, A. 2016. *The Sharing Economy: The End of Employment and the Rise of Crowd Based Capitalism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Sundén, J. 2003. *Material Virtualities*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Taffel, S. 2021. Google's Lens: Computational Photography and Platform Capitalism. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(2):237–255.
- Technical Communication*, 50(1):46-60.

- Television Reality: Determinants and Developmental Differences. *Developmental Psychology*, 30(1):229–239.
- Tessier, S. 2012. From Field Notes, to Transcripts, to Tape Recordings: Evolution or Combination? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(4):446-460.
- Thomas, V.L. & Fowler, K. 2016. Examining the Impact of Brand Transgressions on Consumers' Perceptions of Celebrity Endorsers. *Journal of Advertising*, 45(4):377–390.
- Thompson, N. & Vogelstein, F. 2019. 15 Months of Fresh Hell Inside Facebook. *Wired* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-15-months-of-fresh-hell/>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Thomson, M. 2006. Human Brands: Investigating Antecedents to Consumers' Strong Attachments to Celebrities. *Journal of Marketing*, 70(3):104–119.
- Thrash, T.M., Moldovan, E.M., Oleynick, V.C. & Maruskin, L.A. 2014. The Psychology of Inspiration. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 8(9):495–510.
- Thuy, T.T.H. 2017. Reading Images - The Grammar of Visual Design. *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 33(6):164-168.
- Thwaites, T., Davis, L. & Mules, W. 1994. *Tools for Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. South Melbourne: Macmillan.
- Tiffany, K. 2019. Lil Miquela and the Virtual Influencer Hype, explained. *Vox* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/6/3/18647626/instagram-virtual-influencers-lil-miquela-ai-startups>. Accessed 16 October 2019.
- Till, B.D. 2001. Managing Athlete Endorser Image: The Effect of Endorsed Product. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 10(1):35–42.
- TINA, 2020. Reality Check: Tina.Org Calls on FTC To Address Virtual Influencers Tina. Truth In Advertising [Online]. Available at: <https://www.truthinadvertising.org/reality-check-tina-callson-ftcto-address-virtual-influencers/>. Accessed 2 December 2021.
- Tolson, A. 1996. *Mediations – Text and Discourse in Media Studies*. London: Arnold.
- Tom, G., Clark, R., Elmer, L., Grech, E., Masetti, J. & Sandar, H. 1992. The use of Created Versus Celebrity Spokespersons in Advertisements. *The Journal of Consumers Marketing*, 9(4):45-51.
- Toncar, M., Reid, J.S., & Anderson, C.E. 2007. Effective Spokespersons in a Public Service Announcement: National Celebrities, Local Celebrities and Victims. *Journal of Communication Management*, 11(3):258–275.
- Tran, V.D. & Keng, C.J. 2018. The Brand Authenticity Scale: Development and Validation. *Contemporary Management Research*, 14(4):277-291.

- Travers, C. 2020. Meet Alexander Shumsky: President of Mercedes-Benz Fashion Week Russia and Russian Fashion Council. Virtual Humans [Online]. Available at: <https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/meet-alexander-shumsky-president-of-mercedes-benz-fashion-week-russia-and-russian-fashion-council>. Accessed 8 March 2021.
- Trentmann, F. 2009. Consumption and Globalisation in History. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 9(2):187-220.
- Trepany, C. 2019. The Robot Invasion has Begun: Meet the Computer-Generated Influencers taking over Instagram. USA Today [Online]. Available at: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2019/10/16/cgi-influencers-blur-line-between-reality-and-fantasy-instagram-advertising/3790471002/>. Accessed 20 January 2021.
- Trilling, L. 1972. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Turkle, S. 2005. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Turkle, S. 2009. *Simulation and Its Discontents*. Cambridge/Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Turkle, S. 2011. *Alone Together*. New York: Basic Books.
- Turner, A. 2001. Being yourself': the Pursuit of Authentic Celebrity. *Discourse Studies*, 3(4):443-457.
- Turner, G. 2006. The Mass Production of Celebrity Celestoids, Reality TV and the Demotic turn. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(2):153-165.
- Turner, G. 2010. Approaching Celebrity Studies. *Celebrity Studies*, 1(1):11-20.
- Uddin, G. & Robillard, M.P. 2015. How API documentation Fails. *IEEE Software*, 32(4):68-75.
- Um, N.Y. 2016. Predictors of the Effectiveness of Celebrity Endorsement on Facebook. *Social Behaviour and Personality*, 44(11):1839–1850.
- Vaidhyathan, S. 2018. *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Vainikka, E., Noppari, E. & Seppänen, E. 2017. Exploring Tactics of Public Intimacy on Instagram. *Journal of Audience and Media Studies*, 14(1):108-129.
- Vakratsas, D. & Ambler, T. 1999. How Advertising Works: What do we really know? *Journal of Marketing*, 63(1):26–43.
- Vallas, S.P. 2019. Platform Capitalism: What's at Stake for Workers? *New Labour Forum*, 28(1):48–59.

- van der Walddt, D.L.R., van Loggerenberg, M. & Wehmeyer, L. 2009. Celebrity Endorsements versus Created Spokespersons in Advertising: a Survey among Students. *South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 12(1):100-115.
- van der Wurff, R . 2011. Are News Media Substitutes? Gratifications, Contents, and Uses. *Journal of Media Economics*, 24(3):139-157.
- Van Dijck, J. 2013. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Dijck, J. 2014. Datafication, Dataism and Dataveillance: Big Data between Scientific Paradigm and Ideology. *Surveillance & Society*, 12(1):197–208.
- Van Dijck, J., Poell, T. & de Waal, M. 2018. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- van Dijk, T.A. 1993. Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis. *Discourse and Society*, 4(2):249-283.
- van Doorn, N. 2018. The Parameters of Platform Capitalism. *Krisis: Journal of Contemporary Philosophy*, 1(1):103-107.
- van Leeuwen, T. 2001. Authenticity, Talk and Mediated Experience. *Discourse Studies: Authenticity in Media Discourse*, 3(4):392-397.
- Vannini, P. & Williams, J.P. 2009. *Authenticity in Culture, Self, and Society*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Vaughan, L. 2020. The Evolution of The Influencer: An Exploration of Influencer Marketing and the Role of the Influencer, Master's Thesis, Winchester School of Art-Fashion Marketing and Management, Winchester.
- Vaughn, P. & Turner, C. Decoding via Coding: Analysing Qualitative Text Data Through Thematic Coding and Survey Methodologies. *Journal of Library Administration*, 56(1):1-11.
- Verburg, N.A. 2020. Authenticity In Social Media: How Instagram Users Respond To The Introduction Of a Robot, Master's Thesis, Utrecht University, Netherlands.
- Virilio, P. 1994. *The Vision Machine*. London: British Film Institute.
- Wagner, K. 2018. Instagram's Kevin Systrom on Leaving Facebook: No One ever Leaves a Job Because Everything's Awesome. Vox [Online]. Available at: <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/15/17979680/instagram-kevin-systrom-facebook-departure-new-project>. Accessed 5 June 2021.
- Wallace, P. 1999. *The Psychology of the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walliman, N. 2015. *Social Research Methods: The Essentials*. London: Sage.

- Walter, L.S. 2020. Changing the Instagram Game – The Rise of a New Influencer Generation. The Impact of CGI Influencers on Consumers' Purchase Intentions and Brand Attitude in the Fashion Industry, Honours Thesis, University of Twente, Netherlands.
- Ward, H. 2020. Global Personal Luxury Goods Industry - Statistics & Facts. Statista [Online]. Available at: https://www.statista.com/topics/1110/global-luxury-goods-industry/?fbclid=IwAR0FUK0IKTjdmEEn_eezMPiMeeYq7hA1vpp5AoJcbrnLhsD1kawDJ4NrDwU. Accessed 27 January 2021.
- Warren, J. 2020. Instagram Checkout: Everything You Need to Know. Later.com [Online]. Available at: <https://later.com/blog/instagram-checkout>. Accessed 19 September 2021.
- Waterloo, S.F., Baumgartner, S.E., Peter, J. & Valkenburg, P.M. 2018. Norms of Online Expressions of Emotion: Comparing Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp. *New Media & Society*, 20(5):1813–1831.
- Weber, S. 2004. *The Success of Open Source*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wei, P.S. & Lu, H.P. 2013. An Examination of the Celebrity Endorsements and Online Customer Reviews Influence Female Consumers' Shopping Behaviour. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 1(29):193–201.
- Weiser, M. 1991. The Computer for the 21st Century. *Scientific American*, 265(1):94-104.
- Weltevrede, E. 2016. Repurposing Digital Methods: The Research Affordances of Platforms and Engines. Doctoral Thesis. Universiteit van Amsterdam.
- Wengraf, T. 2001. *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. London, United Kingdom: Sage.
- Wetta, M. 2016. Instagram Now. *School Library Journal*, 1(1):30-34.
- White, D.W., Goddard, L. & Wilbur, N. 2009. The Effects of Negative Information Transference in the Celebrity Endorsement Relationship. *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 37(4):322–335.
- Widdicombe, S. & Woofftt, R. 1990. Being Versus Doing Punk: On Achieving Authenticity as a Member. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 9(1):257-277.
- Wiederhold, B.K. 2018. The Tenuous Relationship between Instagram and Teen Self-Identity. *Cyber Psychology, Behaviour and Social Networking*, 21(4):215-216.
- Williams, P.J. 2006. Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(1):173-200.

- Wilson, B.J., Smith, S.L., Potter, W.J., Kunkel, D., Linz, D., Colvin, C.M., & Donnerstein, E. 2002. Violence in Children's Television Programming: Assessing the Risks. *Journal of* 21(2):211–220.
- Wilson, J.A. 2018. *Neoliberalism*. New York: Routledge Publishers.
- Wiltshire, E. 2021. 10 Influencer Marketing Stats for 2021. Social Media Today [Online]. Available at: <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/10-influencer-marketing-stats-for-2021-infographic/594220/>. Accessed 14 March 2021.
- Wissinger, E. 2015. #NoFilter: Models, Glamour Labour, and the age of the Blink. *Interface: A Special Topics Journal*, 1(10):2-8.
- Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. 2008. Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda, Theory, and Methodology. *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 1(1):1-32.
- Wood, N. & Shen, F. 2016. Looks Matter: Facial Similarity between a Candidate and Celebrity Endorser Influences Youth Voting Behaviour. *Journal of Customer Behaviour*, 15(3):221-237.
- Woodruffe-Burton, H., Eccles, S. & Elliott, R. 2002. Towards a Theory of Shopping: A Holistic Framework. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 1(3):256-266.
- Wortham, J. 2012. It's Official: Facebook Closes Its Acquisition of Instagram. New York Times [Online]. Available at: <https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/06/its-official-facebook-closes-its-acquisition-of-instagram/>. Accessed 2 January 2022.
- Worthington, M. 2018. *The Story of 'Me.'* Contemporary American Autofiction. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Publishers.
- Wright, J.C., Huston, A.C., Reitz, A.L., & Piemyat, S. 1994. Young Children's Perceptions of
- Yeung, K. 2017. Hypernudge: Big Data as a Mode of Regulation by Design. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(1):118–136.
- Yin, R.K. 2011. *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*. New York: The Guilford Press. York: Springer Publishers.
- Zach Sang Show, 2019. Miquela Talks Being a Robot, Her Song "Money", Kissing Bella Hadid & Collabs. The Zach Sang Show [Online]. 9 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6wnHsEoTmc>. Accessed 1 January 2022.
- Zamudio, C. 2016. Matching with the Stars: How Brand Personality Determines Celebrity Endorsement Contract Formation. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 33(1):409–427.

- Zappavigna, M. 2012. *The Discourse of Twitter and Social Media*. London: Continuum Publishers.
- Zappavigna, M. 2016. Social Media Photography: Construing Subjectivity in Instagram images. *Visual Communication*, 15(3):271–292.
- Zemeckis, R. 2005. *The Polar Express*. [Film]. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video.
- Zhang, L. 2020. When Platform Capitalism Meets Petty Capitalism in China: Alibaba and an Integrated Approach to Platformisation. *International Journal of Communication*, 14(1):114–134.
- Zikmund, W.G. 2003. *Business Research Methods*. Orlando: Thomson South-Western.
- Zittrain, J. 2009. *The Future of the Internet: and How to Stop It*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Zuboff, S. 2015. Big Other: Surveillance Capitalism and the Prospects of an Information Civilization. *Journal of Information Technology*, 30(1):75-89.
- Zuboff, S. 2019. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. London: Profile Books.
- Zwaan, R.A. 1994. Effect of Genre Expectations on Text Comprehension. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, 20(1):920–933.
- Zwilling, M. & Frutcher, G.E. 2013. Matching Product Attributes to Celebrities Who Reinforce the Brand an Innovative Algorithmic Selection Model. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 53(4):391-410.

11.2 INSTAGRAM REFERENCES

- @aliona_pole, 2021. @aliona_pole. Beauty and skincare [Instagram]. 9 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CLen0PHMCAR/>. Accessed 15 March 2021.
- @ayandathabethe_. 2021. @ayandathabethe. Imagine having it all, just the way that you had hoped it would be 🌈❤️ [Instagram]. 22 November 2021. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/ayandathabethe_/. Accessed 1 January 2022.
- @bermudaisbae, 2020. @bermudaisbae. Red Widow: Superhero or villain? [Instagram]. 21 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFaMaMEFIrh/>. Accessed 14 December 2020.
- @blawko22, 2020. @blawko22. PUNK PRINCIPLES: Your boy blowing up the @AliExpress trendspotting campaign 🍀 [Instagram]. 18 September 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CFQyoi6l_UT/. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@brenn.gram, 2020. @brenn.gram. @brenn.gram X @laviebyck. The stunning new swim collection by @laviebyck [Instagram]. 25 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEUdZMbjdPM/>. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@dagny.gram, 2020. @dagny.gram. Dagny for the cover of @missmagazin earlier this year. [Instagram]. 11 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDwcllrjwWZ/>. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@diesel, 2019. @diesel. This is #DieselxDaysGone, our latest capsule collection that blends moto-influences with biker style. [Instagram]. 19 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwcCl6DhKfH/>. Accessed 27 January 2021.

@engen_sa. 2020. @engen_sa. Kim Zulu is South Africa's first virtual human and she's helping us take #PlayItForward to that special place, where IRL and the digital world meet. [Twitter]. 31 August 2020. Available at: https://twitter.com/engen_sa/status/1300344471075291136. Accessed 8 March 2021.

@essence_cosmetics, 2019. @essence_cosmetics. From our 🇳🇵 intern @thisis.kenna [Instagram]. 18 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B6OQbvtj4AG/>. Accessed 2 January 2021.

@exhibitionmag, 2020. @exhibitionmag. Here are 4 References used by Isabelle Constant in her article. [Instagram]. 12 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHf-Q3PnLpc/>. Accessed 27 January 2021.

@galaxia.gram, 2020. @galaxia.gram. Inspired to recreate one of my favourite ever fashion images from Numero magazine @Galaxia.gram X @numeromagazine [Instagram]. 13 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAIytZ4A5zC/>. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@gorillaz. 2020. @gorillaz. Gorillaz x @eltonjohn x @6lack = 🤖 Watch the BRAND NEW video now! [Instagram]. 2 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CF2AS2dHmTb/>. Accessed 2 October 2020.

@hatsune_miku_official_, 2018. @hatsune_miku_official_. 千本桜 Senbonzakura - One Thousand Cherry Trees. PART 1. [Instagram]. 15 August 2018. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmgE0EFDE7D/>. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@iamiyanda. 2021. @iamiyanda. 🇬🇧🇬🇧 Got some love this week from UK based SLUDGE MAGAZINE talking all things digital and beyond; shout out to SLUDGE MAG for this amazing article [Instagram]. 4 May 2021. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/COcx8b2DU_w/. Accessed 1 January 2022.

@imma.gram, 2020. @imma.gram. Am I the only one still obsessed with BTS's Dynamite? [Instagram]. 12 December 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIpwJALnvDA/>. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@kfc, 2019. @kfc. Time to rest and recharge with @Casper #ad [Instagram]. 23 April 2019. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BwkunliA_IL/. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@kimzulu_. 2020a. @kimzulu_. African Couture...while social DISTANCING....id rather be taking bathroom selfies 🍷 [Instagram]. 4 April 2020. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-kNQ95jkce/>. Accessed 7 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020b. @kimzulu_. #DAY6 still quarantines #KimZulu [Instagram]. 1 April 2020 Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-ckvm8jf-p/>. Accessed 15 March 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020c. @kimzulu_. Do you think I could be called Snow White? [Instagram]. 1 May 2020. Available at https://www.instagram.com/p/B_puiI5jpej/. Accessed 7 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020d. @kimzulu_. Does it sound desperate if I'm constantly checking my phone for that one call from my crush? 📞❤️🥰 [Instagram]. 8 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CE3y-kUDtax/>. Accessed 6 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020e. @kimzulu_. Everything is so uncertain for all black people globally [Instagram]. 16 June 2020. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBf5Rn2jn7x/>. 6 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020f. @kimzulu_. Feeling like a PINK SUPER HERO. 🦸 [Instagram]. 1 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-hJeF8DamY/>. Accessed 2 September 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020g. @kimzulu_. Hey 🥰🌞 so I'm sitting here reminiscing about when we could all go out freely without 🤒. [Instagram]. 24 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDBD2lwDkyP/>. Accessed 6 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020h. @kimzulu_. I'm still in my @kangol_headwear ❤️ [Instagram]. 30 April 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHcBxDODcpO/>. Accessed 2 September 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020i. @kimzulu_. OMG @winisahlungwani LOVE YOUR SELFI [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17871120928752509/>. 9 March 2020. Accessed 2 September 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020j. @kimzulu_. Pretty girl with a BIG heart  [Instagram]. 9 December 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIkmkPPDM9j/>. Accessed 2 September 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020k. @kimzulu_. So I get asked questions about myself all the time.. so here it is Mzansi on the humanoid front.  [Instagram]. 12 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFCZ9bcDd3Z/> . Accessed 6 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020l. @kimzulu_. So I tried to be a queen for a day... not sure it worked out.  @connie_ferguson [Instagram]. 7 April 2020. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-rof3VDlxh/>. Accessed 7 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020m. @kimzulu_. So I went to buy bread and milk   then ended up here..  . [Instagram]. 7 September 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CE1ud7LDb_Z/. Accessed 2 September 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020n. @kimzulu_. So I've walked past these two statues so many times. [Instagram]. 8 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CE3YP8JDf0c/> . Accessed 2 September 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020o. @kimzulu_. Social Distancing.. #KimZulu [Instagram]. 24 March 2020. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-H92fdjGHu/>. Accessed 7 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020p. @kimzulu_. #Throwback... At least   @veet_sa is holding me down looking and feeling my best [Instagram]. 1 July 2020. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCGQ6rRDAzj/>. Accessed 6 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020q. @kimzulu_. #Throwback... #challengeaccepted. Thank you so much @unathestylist and @dikeledi_dk for nominating me . [Instagram]. 1 July 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CDKGIF_DWnf/. 6 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020r. @kimzulu_. What are you up to today? I'm chilling...  . [Instagram]. 5 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCQs51zDRb2/>. Accessed 2 September 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2020s. @kimzulu_. Woke up happy this morning.. and grateful..  [#lockdown](#) [Instagram]. 30 April 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_mRz19jRJw/. Accessed 2 September 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2021a. @kimzulu_. Breakfast time at a restaurant should be treated like a fashion shoot. HAPPY MONDAY 🥰 [Instagram]. 3 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/COZxHqbDz9f/>. Accessed 6 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2021b. @kimzulu_. Hey u... how was ur day? 😊 [Instagram]. 7 June 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CP1GROLj-DV/>. Accessed 6 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2021c. @kimzulu_. MINI X Kim Zulu, it is my birthday month [Instagram]. 10 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMM-btKjWsR/>. Accessed 15 March 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2021d. @kimzulu_. Robots also struggle to get the right angle 📷... 🤖 and can the 🌟 please behave... [Instagram]. 12 June 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQB90aVD6ca/>. Accessed 6 December 2021.

@kimzulu_. 2022 @kimzulu_. Your girl is officially pushing 🍑 @pumasouthafrica 🤗🤗 [Instagram]. 21 February 2022. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CaPJxFYMTbL/>. Accessed 6 2 March 2022.

@knox frost, 2021. Don't lose focus. People would rather critique your movements than fix their own [Instagram]. 17 January 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CKHQZnrgymd/>. Accessed 20 January 2021.

@koffi.gram, 2020. @koffi.gram. Koffi x Alex [Instagram]. 29 May 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CAX_uzuJ-yX/. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@liam_nikuro. 2020. @liam_nikuro. Had a session with the world class freestyle basketballer @zinez_kamikaze [Instagram]. 14 November 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CHkwplfn1Z_/. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@lilmiquela. 2017. @lilmiquela. "ON MY OWN" is now streaming! [Instagram]. 12 October 2017. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BaKexrblPIZ/>. Accessed 3 December 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2018a. @lilmiquela. First time seeing it in print 📖 [Instagram]. 7 January 2018.

@lilmiquela. 2018b. @lilmiquela. I've been in the studio nonstop and I can't wait to FINALLY share with you! [Instagram]. 17 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bhp12uMFd7M/>. Accessed 3 December 2020.

@lilmiquela. 2019a. @lilmiquela. Did I reward myself for releasing my AUTOMATIC music video by flying to NYC without telling anyone? Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B48I9FaHj1Q/>. Accessed 10 September 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2019b. @lilmiquela. Ya girl got to interview @JBALVIN!! Thank you @youtubemusic & @coachella! [Instagram]. 14 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BwOEe8bn8IC/>. Accessed 3 December 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2020a. @lilmiquela. Always thought I was baby, my new filter #WalletSize has big Diamond energy [Instagram]. 8 May 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_7tW5MnrK5/. Accessed 3 December 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2020b. @lilmiquela. EVERYTHING'S FINE. [Instagram]. 17 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFP-peqn-Z7/>. Accessed 3 December 2020.

@lilmiquela. 2020c. @lilmiquela. My girl @saweezie, the OG ICY GIRL...Queen 🍷 teaching me how to land my very own *king [Instagram]. 17 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGbDta9Hq5E/>. Accessed 3 December 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2020d. @lilmiquela. THIS WAS 8 WEEKS AGO. [Instagram]. 9 May 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_-VYGpnDt5/. Accessed 10 September 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2020e. @lilmiquela. Tudo ok [Instagram]. 27 February 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9DdBYhHqHS/>. Accessed 3 December 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2020f. @lilmiquela. Two truths and a lie: I'm real. This chain is real. FOREVER is OUT NOW. (hit the link, duh) [Instagram]. 26 April 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B_c9unZnF6W/. Accessed 3 December 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2021a. @lilmiquela. ✨❤️😊 Did a thing for @contentculture 😊❤️✨ [Instagram]. 5 July 2021. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ9A_tOhJcW/. Accessed 3 December 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2021b. @lilmiquela. Everybody in LA is fake [Instagram]. 23 June 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CW8xWEGp6Kx/>. Accessed 3 December 2021.

@lilmiquela. 2021c. @lilmiquela. I'm funnier post upgrade ⚡🤖⚡ [Instagram]. 25 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVdZFubp2KM/>. Accessed 11 March 2022.

- @lilmiquela. 2021d. @lilmiquela. I'm ok 🤔 [Instagram]. 5 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B9VGfZOHbqh/>. Accessed 3 December 2021.
- @lilmiquela. 2021e. @lilmiquela. I'm so excited to introduce y'all to MINI Electric. [Instagram]. 15 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMcf9-lnk6-/>. Accessed 2 September 2021.
- @lilmiquela. 2021f. @lilmiquela. 🧘 I'VE REACHED MY FINAL FORM 🧘 [Instagram]. 18 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVLXYv4pqlZ/>. Accessed 10 January 2022.
- @lilmiquela. 2021g. @lilmiquela. Me!!!! For @abookof 📖 🚧 🌊 🌟 [Instagram]. 28 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPbYn-Xh3YM/>. Accessed 10 January 2022.
- @lilmiquela. 2021h. @lilmiquela. 🚗 Okay, so MINOR PSA [Instagram]. 4 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNQnyOaB4pt/>. Accessed 3 December 2021.
- @lilmiquela. 2021i. @lilmiquela. So maybe I pulled this one on purpose... whatever, he's MINE. [Instagram]. 15 December 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXg3k-tvOpN/>. Accessed 10 January 2022.
- @lilmiquela. 2021j. @lilmiquela. The buns? They're in the oven. [Instagram]. 1 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CL42b6En3Qi/>. Accessed 10 January 2022.
- @lilmiquela. 2021k. @lilmiquela. This is cute... 🥰 BIG 19...AGAIN 🥰. [Instagram]. 22 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CN-gseXBIof/>. Accessed 3 March 2022.
- @lilmiquela. 2021l. @lilmiquela. Where do you think my USB port is? 🖱️ 🚗 🤔 [Instagram]. 23 June 2021. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CQeGY1-hl_F/. Accessed 3 December 2020.
- @magazineluiza, 2021. @magazineluiza. Gente, tô prontíssima pro Natal e já com a roupa de ir até a sala sentar no sofá! [Instagram]. 24 December 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CX4UCaOtQKg/>. Accessed 28 December 2021.
- @noonouri, 2020. @noonouri. Sculpting the Future ✨: ready to become the first Nexter of the Master in Digital Art Direction. [Instagram]. 21 December 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJDwdrYBJM2/>. Accessed 20 January 2021.

@plusticboy, 2020. @plusticboy. Einstein and I were annoying my sister as she mindlessly played Animal Crossing today [Instagram]. 20 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHz0TeRtokyoDBEH/>. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@ria_ria_tokyo. 2020. @ria_ria_tokyo. Summer went by so fast [Instagram]. 10 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTo35MClZZ6/>. Accessed 14 December 2021.

@shudu.gram, 2020. @shudu.gram. It was amazing to partner with Christian Louboutin [Instagram]. 20 October 2020. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CG-c2v_Bxwc/. Accessed 14 December 2020.

@soul_machines. 2019. @soul_machines. Meet Yumi, @skii newest beauty influencer. [Instagram]. 17 July 2019. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0CG5ZxnaHn/?hl=en>. Accessed 14 December 2020.

Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdoY-BulwEx/>. Accessed 3 December 2021.

12. ADDENDUM

ADDENDUM A: OPEN CALL INFORMATION

A.1 Open Call Google Form

Participation in Rhodes PhD Research - CGI Influencers - M Oosthuizen - 2021
Should you be selected, you will be contacted via email to set up a virtual interview.

oosthuizenmikaela@gmail.com [Switch account](#)

*** Required**

Email *
Your email

Full Name *
Your answer

Phone number *
Your answer

Age Group *
☐ 18-20
☐ 21-25
☐ 26-30

Demographic Group (you do not have to answer this question, however doing so will enable the researcher to choose a diverse respondent group so that a wide variety of voices are included in the research).
☐ Black
☐ Caucasian
☐ Chinese
☐ Coloured
☐ Indian

Region in South Africa *
☐ Eastern Cape
☐ Free State
☐ Gauteng
☐ KwaZulu-Natal
☐ Limpopo
☐ Mpumalanga
☐ North West
☐ Western Cape

Occupation
Your answer

Have you had an Instagram account for at least a year? *
☐ Yes
☐ No

How often do you check Instagram? *
☐ Every day
☐ Once a week
☐ Once a month
☐ Once a year

How often do you upload content onto Instagram such as permanent posts or Instagram stories? *
☐ Every day
☐ Once a week
☐ Once a month
☐ Once a year

Would you be available for a 30-60min virtual interview about your use of Instagram? *
☐ Yes
☐ No

☐ Send me a copy of my responses.

Submit [Clear form](#)

A.2 Open Call Advertisement on Researchers Social Media

I am seeking avid South African Instagram users between the age of 18-30 to participate in my PhD research on Instagram influencers. In order to participate, you need to be an avid Instagram user (which means that you check and upload content on at least a weekly basis), be over 18 years old and under 30 years old and be willing to be interviewed in a virtual interview.

The aim of the research is to understand your reaction to CGI influencers such as Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela. I want to know your views on how authentic you feel these CGI influencers are compared to real influencers.

I will ask you questions regarding your personal use of Instagram, your views on online authenticity and your perceptions of CGI influencers. If you choose to take part, you can remain anonymous, and you can choose not to answer certain questions if you do not feel comfortable doing so. The insights obtained from the interview will be used in my Rhodes University PhD dissertation.

There is a chance that you might feel uncomfortable when reflecting on your personal Instagram use and when assessing Instagram content created by CGI influencers. However, you might enjoy reflecting on your reactions to Instagram influencers and the differences between real and “unreal” influencers such as Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela. This may create a new sense of self-awareness in how you use Instagram.

Should you be interested in participating, please complete the following Google Form by 20 May 2021: Selected participants will be contacted by 30 May 2021.

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeITZYEGpm1YINyoKFb_DmsaxK1tDczrieYgEjgP9tHMfnCDg/viewform?vc=0&c=0&w=1&flr=0&gxids=7628

CALLING ACTIVE SOUTH AFRICAN INSTAGRAM USERS

BE INTERVIEWED FOR RHODES UNIVERSITY PHD RESEARCH



COMPLETE THE GOOGLE FORM

CALLING ALL SOUTH AFRICAN INSTAGRAM USERS

BE INTERVIEWED FOR RHODES UNI PHD RESEARCH

Complete the Google Form by 30 May 2021



I AM SEEKING AVID SOUTH AFRICAN INSTAGRAM USERS BETWEEN THE AGE OF 18-30 TO PARTICIPATE IN MY PHD RESEARCH BY BEING ONE OF 14 PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN A ONCE-OFF 30-60MIN VIRTUAL INTERVIEW VIA ZOOM.

THE INSIGHTS OBTAINED FROM THE INTERVIEW WILL BE USED FOR IN CREATING A RHODES UNIVERSITY PHD DISSERTATION.



THESE INTERVIEWS WILL INVOLVE QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR PERSONAL USE OF INSTAGRAM, YOUR VIEWS ON ONLINE AUTHENTICITY AND YOUR PERCEPTIONS OF CGI INFLUENCERS. ALL PARTICIPANTS WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS AND ARE ABLE TO CHOOSE NOT TO ANSWER CERTAIN QUESTIONS SHOULD THEY NOT BE COMFORTABLE IN DOING SO.



THERE IS A CHANCE THAT YOU MIGHT FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE WHEN REFLECTING ON YOUR PERSONAL INSTAGRAM USE AND WHEN ASSESSING INSTAGRAM CONTENT CREATED BY CGI INFLUENCERS. HOWEVER, YOU MIGHT ENJOY REFLECTING ON YOUR REACTIONS TO INSTAGRAM INFLUENCERS AND THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REAL AND "UNREAL" INFLUENCERS SUCH AS KIM ZULU AND LIL MIQUELA. THIS MAY CREATE A NEW SENSE OF SELF-AWARENESS REGARDING YOUR INTERACTIONS ON INSTAGRAM.



SHOULD YOU BE INTERESTED TO PARTICIPATE, PLEASE COMPLETE THE GOOGLE FORM BY 20 MAY 2021.

LINK IN BIO

SELECTED PARTICIPANTS WILL BE CONTACTED BY 30 MAY 2021.



ADDENDUM B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE	
GROUP 1: SOUTH AFRICAN INSTAGRAM USERS	
The South African Instagram users were asked questions regarding Instagram App Use; platform purchasing behaviour, authenticity; engagements with human and CGI influencers; reactions to content from Lil Miquela and Kim Zulu profiles.	
INSTAGRAM USE	
1.	What do you usually use Instagram for?
	Probe: What are some of the key Instagram features you use?
	Probe: What privacy setting is your account on (private or public) and why have you chosen this setting?
2.	How often do you post/ make enhancements to your Instagram profile?
	Probe: Why do you post or make these enhancements?
	Probe: Do you ever see the need to post online as a form of “work?”
	Probe: Has the way in which you use Instagram and the type of content you post changed since you first joined?
	Probe: Would you say you engage with permanent posts or Instagram stories more?
3.	Do you edit your photos at all? To what extent do you do so? What are your motivations for doing to?
	Probe: Do you think you can tell if an image on Instagram has been edited?
4.	How familiar are you with e-commerce shopping?
	Probe: Have you ever made an in-application purchase through Instagram?
	Probe: Instagram recently introduced an update to its platform architecture where the shopping tab is now where one’s profile used to be. What was your reaction to this change?
	Probe: Have you made use of the shopping tab?
5.	What does authenticity mean to you?
6.	What does being authentic online look like to you?
	Probe: Is there a big difference between your expectations around authenticity online versus offline? How are they different? Why do you think they are different?
AUTHENTICITY	
7.	Is authenticity important to you in choosing who you follow online?
	Probe: What would influencers need to do online for you to see them as authentic?
	Probe: When thinking of a key human influencer that you follow, why are you attracted to following them online?
8.	Do you believe a non-human being can be authentic - why or why not?
9.	Would a human influencer endorsing something make you want to try it?
	Probe: Have you ever bought something that an influencer has promoted?
LIL MIQUELA	
10.	[Show Instagram photo of Lil Miquela]
	https://www.instagram.com/p/CMcf9-lnk6-/
	What are your first thoughts after seeing this post?
	Probe: What are your perceptions of the Mini brand that she is promoting in the post?
	Probe: Would you buy the product Lil Miquela is selling?
11.	When considering the profile of Lil Miquela, if you were scrolling by her post, would you be able to tell that she is not a real human being?

Probe: What would convince you that she could be real? What would be an indication that she is CGI?
Probe: (If respondent indicated not realising that the CGI was not real), how does it feel to find out that the profile is a CGI and not a real human influencer?
Probe: How does Lil Miquela make you feel (e.g. easy, uncanny)?
Probe: Does the extent of her human-realism make her more appealing or less appealing to you?
Probe: Would you follow Lil Miquela even knowing she isn't real? What would attract you to following her even after finding out she is CGI?
12. [Show Instagram video of Lil Miquela that was also on her Instagram Stories] https://www.instagram.com/p/CLmiFO6HhOz/
13. How does the behind the scenes video content and self-documentary video style impact your perception of Lil Miquela?
14. Does that fact that this post is an Instagram story and not a permanent posts mean anything significant to you?
15. Would you rather purchase from Lil Miquela or a human influencer?
Probe: Does it matter to you?
Probe: Do you see CGI influencers as a threat to the human influencer industry?
KIM ZULU
16. What are your thoughts around the Kim Zulu profile?
17. Are their differences in the way you perceive Kim Zulu versus Lil Miquela and what do you believe is the distinction?
18. [Show Instagram post of Kim Zulu] https://www.instagram.com/p/CE3YP8JDf0c/
Probe: Does the setting of this post impact your view of Kim Zulu?
Probe: Is there any confusion as to whether Kim Zulu is a CGI influencer of a South African influencer?
19. Would you share this post with any of your friends?
[Show Instagram post of Kim Zulu] https://www.instagram.com/p/CBTcLzYgCu-/
20. What are your thoughts on the way in which Kim Zulu uses "her" South African heritage in her range for Fashion week?
21. What characteristics, if any, make Kim Zulu appealing to you?
22. What are your thoughts around the fact that both CGI influencers, and most of the 120 current CGI influencers, are women?
23. How does the thought of say 50% of Instagram profiles on Instagram being CGI make you feel?
24. What would you say to Kim Zulu creators or Mini if you got a chance?
25. Anything you want to add?

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
GROUP 2: KIM ZULU CREATORS
Key themes include: authenticity, lifestyles of luxury, South African identity, gender, platform capitalism, CGI influencers, narrative etc.
INFLUENCER INDUSTRY
1. What are your thoughts on the influencer industry as a whole?

Probe: If there were any human influencers that you wish Kim Zulu could be like, who would they be?
Probe: Do you see Kim Zulu as being modelled off of a human influencer?
Probe: What positives do you think can come from CGI influencers?
2. What are your thoughts on the CGI influencer industry as a whole?
Probe: What do you see as the distinctions between human and CGI influencers, if any?
Probe: Do you think COVID19 has had any impact on the CGI influencer industry?
KIM ZULU CREATION
3. Tell me more about how, why and when the Kim Zulu profile was created?
Probe: It was mentioned that the profile was created during the South African lockdown, what is the significance of this?
Probe: Who is Kim Zulu's target audience? Who is her profile intended for?
4. What do you think the motivations are for the fans of Kim Zulu in following her profile?
Probe: Why do you think Kim Zulu is effective as an Instagram profile?
Probe: What is it about Kim Zulu's persona that attracts users?
Probe: Do you see novelty (the fact that she is the only South Africa influencer) as a contributing factor to her popularity?
Probe: Would the creation of more South Africa influencers have a positive or negative impact on Kim Zulu's popularity?
5. What does the creative process look like when constructing a post for Kim Zulu (could you take me through the steps usually followed?)
Probe: Where does the inspiration come from for her posts?
Probe: How do you decide what content will work well on the site or not?
Probe: What type of content have you found performs best and why do you think this is the case?
6. In the choices of Kim Zulu's appearance, what was the motivation for the identity choice made?
Probe: Why is she female?
Probe: Why is she black?
Probe: Why is she Zulu specifically?
Probe: Why is she never depicted with a wig?
Probe: Where did the name Kim Zulu arise?
7. [Show Instagram post of Kim Zulu]
https://www.instagram.com/p/CBTcLzYgCu-/
Tell me about the significance of bringing in the South African heritage into this range for fashion week?
8. Can you tell me about the responses to comments on Kim Zulu's profile?
Probe: What is the significance of the comments?
Probe: Why do you respond to them the way that you do?
PROFILE AS ASSET
9. What do you hope to achieve through the Kim Zulu profile?
Probe: What role does the potential of Kim Zulu as a revenue generator play?
Probe: How does the desire to appeal to potential brands influence your choice of content around Kim Zulu?
10. What is your response to people asking whether Kim Zulu is real?

Probe: In a comment on one of her posts, the user questioned whether she is real and the response was “yes.” Do you see this as misleading in any way?	
11.	https://www.instagram.com/p/CLRUIBgj8E/
Can you tell me about the choice of including a male face in this post?	
Probe: Why is his stance positioned that way?	
LIL MIQUELA COMPARISON	
12.	What are your thoughts on Lil Miquela?
Probe: Why do you think her profile is so popular?	
13.	What do you think the key differences are between Kim Zulu and Lil Miquela?
14.	As an agency, EMOJI Digital has been outspoken about them being the creators of Kim Zulu, unlike a lot of other CGI influencer agencies that remain shrouded in secrecy. What were your motivations for this?
15.	Do you see Kim Zulu and other CGI influencers like her as potentially harmful?
Probe: What do you see as the potential risks involved in CGI influencers becoming more common?	
ETHICS AND DISCLOSURE	
16.	What effects do you think Kim Zulu has on audience’s self-perceptions and confidence levels?
17.	What are your thoughts around the declaration of posts as sponsored/ paid for?
Probe: Do you believe this should be regulated?	
Probe: From Kim Zulu’s page it is apparent that her partnership posts do not have this declaration, what was your motivation for this?	
18.	What do you imagine the perceptions of audiences in South Africa to be on CGI influencers?
Probe: How does the context differ in terms of the global South versus the West?	
19.	If you could ask the followers of Kim Zulu one thing, what would it be?
20.	What do you see the future of CGI influencers to look like?