

# Negotiating Creativity amidst Interactive Marketing: Understanding Persuasion Tactics of Virtual Influencer Marketing from a Developer's Perspective – Extended Abstract

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Interactive Marketing, Persuasion, Creativity, Virtual Influencers, Developers of Virtual Influencers

## Extended Abstract

Influencer marketing has attracted the attention of research scholars and marketers in recent years. Brands have progressively leveraged social media influencers as a means to expand their reach, persuade and connect with a broader audience (Yang et al., 2023; Woodroof et al., 2020). Besides human influencers, brands have started showing interest in virtual influencers (VIs). VIs are computer-generated characters who have substantial followers on social media. They can take any form based on perceived virtuality and anthropomorphism (Mouritzen et al., 2023). They range from anthropomorphic and hyper-realistic to non-alive characters. Despite the rapid growth of interactive marketing and brands utilising VIs to persuade followers and promote products, there is a lack of understanding of how developers ensure persuasion and engagement with followers. Research in the past on this subject is fragmented; on the one hand, studies have shown that virtual influencers create three times more engagement than human influencers (Baklanov, 2021). It also suggests that anthropomorphic characters are perceived as credible and proficient, leading to parasocial interactions. On the other hand, studies also suggest that only 15% of VI fans find them authentic and credible (Lou, 2023), and there is a need for more creativity in audience persuasion (Moustakas et al., 2020). As VIs become popular in social media marketing, our study aims to explore the developers' perspective to ensure follower persuasion while taking creative leaps in conceptualising, designing, and managing a VI.

Since the developers' perspective is understudied in literature, our study uses a phenomenological approach. We conducted eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews with developers of anthropomorphic VIs in India. The qualitative approach allows us to understand the dynamic nature of interactive marketing and creative decisions that developers face while navigating the intersection of business and creativity. We argue that these eight developers form the entire population because these participants were from the two agencies in India, which are the only ones engaged in developing fully developed anthropomorphic VIs.

The findings of the study suggest that developers of VIs demonstrate a consistent focus on two business imperatives that ensure audience interactions and persuasion. It includes gaining a substantial following and forging brand partnerships. We argue that as the number of followers increases, developers become increasingly inclined to exercise their creativity in order to persuade the audience and create engagement. Our study addresses a significant gap in the literature concerning the developers' perspective on the interactivity of VIs (Mouritzen et al., 2023). A new area of application for the triangular theory of creativity is evaluated for nuanced considerations of the developers as they negotiate creativity. By leveraging some of these insights, marketers may take affordances of creativity and generate content that can result in higher levels of persuasion in the long run.

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