

VIRTUAL AVATARS, VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS

&

AUTHENTICITY

A Qualitative Study From A Consumer Perspective

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Preface

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Abstract

Virtual avatars and the subgenre virtual influencers are growing in the contemporary digital society. With this growing phenomenon of virtual avatars and virtual influencers, the questions arise what is real, what feels real, and what do we as consumers perceive as authentic? This is a qualitative study that examines virtual avatars and virtual influencers' authenticity from a consumer's perspective, through exploratory focus groups and in-depth individual interviews. What was found in the analysis was that realism can both enhance and decrease the authenticity of an avatar, previous gaming/virtual experience affects the way consumers perceive virtual avatar authenticity, and virtual avatars have difficulties reaching the same level of perceived authenticity as humans by consumers. We further suggest a model for assessing virtual influencers' authenticity from a consumer's perspective. The model contains four interrelated factors *Purpose, Personality, Continuity, and Transparency*. This study contributes to existing authenticity research by adding virtual influencers to understand authenticity. Future research could use our model to explore other types of virtual influencers or virtual influencers in other contexts. Lastly, our contributions to the knowledge of virtual avatars and virtual influencers including the model, could be of practical help when using virtual avatars in marketing and be of guidance when creating virtual influencers.

Keywords:

Virtual avatars, Virtual Influencers, Authenticity, Digital Marketing, Influencer Marketing, Social Media Marketing

Introduction

The virtual avatars can be perceived as futuristic, though, the word avatar has a historic and religious origin - stemming from Hinduism (Hemp, 2006). Historically, the word avatar was used as a reference to the incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, i.e., as a graphical representation of the god. Ever since these incarnations, the concept of avatars have grown in many directions, there is the realistic avatar, that accurately portrays the user of it, the abstract avatar, which is a cartoon or fictional character and there is the naturalistic avatar, that is human-like, but not necessarily a portrait of the user (Salem & Earl, 2000 found in Bashar, Jiménez & Wergin, 2018). Avatars are today frequently used in the digital landscape and have rapidly grown over the last decade, along with the internet (Garnier & Poncin, 2013; Nowak & Rauh, 2005). Therefore today, the virtual avatar could be defined as a graphical computer-generated representation of the user in a virtual environment (Bashar et al., 2018; Hemp, 2006). The increased usage of virtual avatars in an online context has drawn the attention of researchers from various fields, such as marketing and psychology. These studies have found that virtual avatars can increase trust between individuals when they communicate (chat) with each other online (Nowak & Rauh, 2005). Virtual avatars add the user's emotions and look compared to commu-

nicating through only text or audio. Studies have also shown that avatars can increase the customer experience by humanizing e-commerce stores (Bashar et al., 2018) and influence consumers' behavior and interpersonal relationships depending on how they perceive the virtual avatar (Nowak and Rauh, 2005). Various types of virtual avatars have also been researched such as avatars as retail salesmen (Moon, Kim, Choi & Sung, 2013; Mimoun, Poncin, & Garnier, 2012), the difference between two and three-dimensional avatars (Garnier, & Poncin, 2013), avatars in virtual worlds (Garnier, & Poncin, 2013) and avatars as virtual models, for trying garments online (Garnier, & Poncin, 2013).

Virtual avatars create a discussion about what is real and what is not (Garnier and Poncin, 2013). People are increasingly willing to substitute reality for representations of reality (Turkle, 1995 found in Garnier & Poncin, 2013), i.e., virtual avatars are blurring the line between real humans and computer-made humans. Studies also show that avatars are used as an expression of self (Fong & Mar, 2015; Sung, Moon, Kang, & Lin, 2011). Today, individuals have the opportunity to possess several virtual representations of themselves in virtual worlds, games, and social media. This creates new platforms for companies to be present on and reach customers beyond traditional marketing (Lui, Piccoli & Ives, 2007). Though, it has been debated

whether marketing in virtual worlds and games affects online individuals to make real-life offline purchasing decisions (Arakji & Lang, 2008).

The increased usage of virtual avatars in the digital environment, leaves a question mark on which avatars consumers like and perceive as original, genuine and trustworthy? This can be referred to as authenticity. Authenticity could in a business context be explained as, how consumers experience the originality and genuineness of a product or brand (Leigh, Peters, & Shelton, 2006). Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2013) argue that authenticity is one of the essentials in contemporary marketing, and that an authentic brand could work as a competitive advantage for companies (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). Authenticity is important for brands since the concept is so connected to brand identity, where uniqueness is vital (Brown et al., 2013). In other words, the brand has to be unique and genuine in its core. When looking at human influencers, Bakanauskas and Kisieliauskas (2018) state that they can become brands of their own. Therefore, virtual avatars and virtual influencers could arguably be perceived as brands. The question is then if we can understand how consumers perceive virtual avatars better through examine their authenticity? Analyzing how virtual avatars are perceived as authentic or not could also add improved knowledge and depth to the theoretical concept of authenticity.

What is arguably one of the most novel phenomena within the avatar field, is the emergence of virtual influencers. Virtual influencers are computer-made avatar influencers that are highly similar to human influencers (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Virtual influencers have different objectives and areas of expertise, they promote products and share their content on social platforms just as any other human influencer. There are today several virtual influencers with a substantial number of followers, and the industry is growing (Kulp, 2018). With the virtual influencers emerging, various types of them have been created and are now active on social platforms such as Instagram. For example, whilst Miquela (Miquela will further be referred to her Instagram account name Lil-Miquela) portrays a human-like American girl in her 20-ties, who is pursuing a career in music as an artist, the virtual influencer Noonoouri can be described as a cartoon-like character,

who is vegan and collaborates with luxury fashion companies such as Vogue and Dior. Furthermore, Swedish grocery brand ICA has created a virtual influencer on Instagram called Elis (Elis will further be referred to their Instagram account name Bebis-elis), which is a human-like child avatar that provides tips and recommendations to parents of young children. The phenomenon of virtual influencers is constantly growing, virtual influencer Lil-Miquela has at the moment of writing 1,9 million followers on Instagram and was listed on TIME magazine's list of the top 25 most influential people on the internet of 2018 (TIME magazine, 2018). While Lil-Miquela might be influential, Powers (2019) argues that consumers in relative terms still interact more with real human influencers than with virtual.

Studies show that human influencers today are struggling with authenticity when marketing products. One aspect contributing to the growing issue of influencers' authenticity is the fact that they have been increasingly commercialized (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018). This is an issue in the way that followers and fans question the genuineness of the recommendations and content of the influencers, which leads to less effective marketing and a less engaged audience for the influencers (Mudambi & Schuff 2010). This is not only problematic for the influencer, but also for companies, which in the past have been successful due to their influencer marketing strategies. For a human influencer to achieve authenticity, they have to be perceived as consistent, transparent, and passionate about the products they market (Audrezet, De Kerviler, & Guidry Moulard, 2018). Since authenticity is an important issue for human influencers, the question is if the same principles apply to virtual avatars and virtual influencers? The fact of not being a human may affect the way consumers perceive virtual influencers' authenticity, and virtual influencers might need other factors for evaluating how consumers perceive them as authentic. Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) argue that influencer marketing is depending heavily on the trustworthiness of influencers' word of mouth. The most affected consumers by influencer marketing are millennials, 40% of millennials feel that their favorite YouTube-personality understands them better than their physical friends (Kádeková &

Holienčinová, 2018). This leaves a question mark on how the virtual influencers could be sufficiently authentic to influence and build relationships with their followers. Additionally, as mentioned previously, several types of virtual influencers have emerged in recent times, such as human-like virtual influencers, cartoon-like virtual influencers and animal-like influencers. To examine these types is of interest, since it deepens the knowledge of virtual influencers and whether some types are perceived as more authentic than others.

To summarize, there is little theoretical knowledge of virtual avatars and subgenre virtual influencers in relation to authenticity. We will first need to explore the broader concept of how virtual avatars are perceived as authentic by consumers before diving into what factors that makes a virtual influencer perceived as authentic. Exploring this will bring additional understanding to the theory of authenticity.

Thus, the purpose of this study is two-folded. The first part is to develop knowledge of the concept of authenticity concerning virtual avatars. This means examining perceptions of how virtual avatars are perceived as authentic from a consumer perspective. The second part of the two-folded purpose is to increase the knowledge about virtual influencers and how they are perceived authentic, i.e., examining on a deeper level which factors that determine the perceived authenticity of virtual influencers.

Together, the purpose of examining virtual avatars and authenticity on an exploratory level, whilst examining virtual influencers on a deeper level - will enrich the existing knowledge of authenticity by adding virtual avatars and virtual influencers to the concept of authenticity. The study will additionally contribute with practical marketing knowledge on how consumers evaluate virtual influencers' authenticity. Therefore, the purpose of this study evolves into these two research questions:

- How are virtual avatars perceived as authentic?
- What factors make consumers perceive virtual influencers as authentic?

As for delimitations, this study is a qualitative study with a two-folded purpose to increase knowledge of authenticity concerning virtual avatars and to develop knowledge about how virtual influencers are perceived as authentic. The study is from a consumer's perspective. To collect the material required to answer the research questions, first, exploratory focus groups were conducted, followed by in-depth interviews. The virtual avatars and the virtual influencers were analyzed by their authenticity, through how consumers perceive their authenticity. The study was conducted in Sweden and the respondents were individuals between 20-30 years old. The virtual influencers used as examples in this study were Lil-Miquela, Noonouri, Bebiselis and Bee_influencer. The following order of the study will be a literature review, method, analysis of the gathered material, discussions, conclusion and finally, limitations and future research.

Literature review

To develop knowledge of the concept of authenticity concerning virtual avatars, and increase the knowledge of virtual influencers and authenticity, there will in this section be a presentation of how academia has researched and understood these concepts. The literature review works as a complement to the theoretical framework. The literature review is providing a required understanding of what virtual avatars, virtual influencers, and authenticity are, and what has been previously researched, compared to the theoretical framework, which is used as a lens through which we analyze our material.

This literature review will provide insights into how virtual avatars' can be used as means to express oneself, what ways and forms that they take shape, how virtual avatars are used within the marketing field and how the virtual influencer can be understood. Lastly, the concept of authenticity and how it affects brands, will be introduced in order to set the foundations of our theoretical framework.

Virtual avatars as an expression of self

The way people interact has in the last years evolved through technical achievements (Fong & Mar, 2015). Today, digital advances have created virtual worlds, games, and applications where people can meet, talk, and socialize, without being physically present. To represent the user in those digital

environments, individuals create virtual representations of themselves, also described as virtual avatars. A virtual avatar can be defined as complex beings created for use in a shared virtual reality and a visual representation of a user in an online community (Bashar et al., 2018). These avatars are used to communicate a virtual personality (Fong et al., 2011). Individuals tend to customize their avatar into self-representative and self-reflective versions of themselves regardless of the type of online environment, tool, game, or website (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009). The creation of an avatar has online social consequences, for instance, easiness of making online friends in a game or a virtual world (Fong & Mar, 2015). Dunn, Andrew, and Guadagno (2012) found that men and women are generally following the normative gender ideals when creating their self-representative avatar. They further describe that the characteristics (personality) of the individual in real life affect how superficially similar the avatar will look like the creator. For example, in their study, introverted individuals and women with high neuroticism were more likely to create an attractive avatar. Moreover, studies show that the personality of the avatar often reflects the creator's personality in broad terms, though some characteristics are often exaggerated to improve the avatar's personality (Sung et al., 2011). To be able to connect and build bonds with other internet users, it is of essence that the avatar is a realistic representation of the user, and to incorporate self-disclosure to the avatar's personality (Hooi & Cho, 2014).

Types of virtual avatars

Different types of online virtual avatars have emerged through the evolution of the digital age. The simplest version of a virtual avatar is a two-dimensional static image or a picture of the user, used mainly in chats, forums, or on personal web pages (Garnier, & Poncin, 2013). A more dynamic type of avatar is called a generic avatar, which is a three-dimensional graphic representation of the user that can move inside virtual worlds, for example, a representation of the user in a three-dimensional shopping mall (Garnier, & Poncin, 2013). Similar to a generic avatar is the graphic gaming avatar, that could be a human or a non-human character used in games. Unlike the generic avatar, this also includes non-human characters, such as a goblin in a fantasy game (Garnier, & Poncin, 2013). An

extension of the gaming avatar is the virtual world inhabitant, which could be both two or three-dimensional, and is used to navigate in virtual universes or metaverses. Lastly, a virtual model is used to represent the customer in online shops, for example, to visually try clothing when doing online shopping (Garnier, & Poncin, 2013). There is also an extended version of online avatars, commercialized created embodied virtual agents, also referred to as a virtual sales agent (Ben Mimoun, Poncin, & Garnier, 2012). This type of avatar is created by companies with the purpose to provide service and sell products.

Marketing in virtual worlds and in-game advertising

Technical breakthrough achievements create from a marketing perspective an opportunity for the companies to be present and interact with the customers' avatars in virtual worlds (Lui, Piccoli & Ives, 2007). The virtual environment enables the possibility of creating a global platform at a relatively low cost, to communicate with their customers and potential new customers in real-time (Gottlieb & Bianchi, 2017). Lui, Piccoli & Ives (2007) claims that customers could experience physical products online and test physical concepts, such as hotels in virtual worlds. Though, studies show that with a shifting marketing platform, it creates a risk that traditional marketing could become ineffective (Tikkanen, Hietanen, Henttonen & Rokka, 2009). The same study also suggests that there is a marketing potential with innovative marketing methods, for example, user involvement through value creation, interactive applications, and community management. To be successful in virtual worlds, companies need to acquire technical acceptance among their customers (Huang, Backman, Backman, & Moore, 2013). To embrace acceptance, the platform needs to be easy to use, create usefulness, and engage the user.

An important aspect of a marketing perspective in virtual worlds is the concept of virtual communities. Catterall and Maclaran (2002) define virtual communities as groups of people who come together and discuss common interests, such as, products, brands, or games across distant locations. It is often the shared opinions, in forms of reviews of products or brands, that creates the sense of a com-

munity (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010), i.e., virtual communities are often built on shared norms, rules, values and identities (Fernbank, 1999 found in Catterall & Maclaran, 2002). Communities are of interest to corporations and brands since communities can increase customer loyalty and strengthen the brand (Catterall & Maclaran, 2002). These virtual communities can either be in the control, initiated by a brand, or be consumer-driven. This means that brands can lose some control of the brand to its customers since opinions on the internet can spread fast (Catterall & Maclaran, 2002). In other words, virtual communities can both strengthen or hurt a brand, depending on the opinions of the customers.

Marketers have in recent years turned more focus on advertising in games, which has evolved from being a niche to a mass-market (Chaney, Hosany, Chen & Nguyen, 2018). Market research agency Nielsen together with game maker Electronic Arts Inc. found that product placement within games can be highly effective in generating offline sales (Guzman, 2010). Their research focused on the energy drink company Gatorade's product placement in sports games such as NBA 10 and NHL 10 which generated 24% increased household spending (Guzman, 2010). According to Chaney et al. (2018), consumers perceive brands and advertising differently based on what type of game it is. In games that require heavy concentration on the task, the player will be less likely to remember the brands than in games that are of a more relaxed nature. In-game advertising and brand-placement can also add to the realism of the game as well as to the players' identification with a game or character (Nelson, 2002). Nelson (2002) found that brand placement in games fit in naturally where in reality there is also advertisement. For example, on the side of racetracks, etc., if the in-game advertisement matches the reality poorly, the advertisement might hurt the quality and enjoyment of the game (Nelson, 2002).

Avatar-based marketing

The amount and usage of virtual avatars are increasing in the digital landscape (Garnier & Poncin, 2013; Nowak & Rauh, 2005). The usage of virtual avatars has been studied in various ways, research has been conducted on avatars as retail salespeople

(Moon, Kim, Choi & Sung, 2013), avatars in advertising (Gammoh, Jiménez, & Wergin, 2018; Bélisle, & Bodur, 2010), value analysis of virtual words (Arakji & Lang, 2008), avatars and personality (Fong & Mar, 2015) among others. According to Nowak and Rauh (2005), the usage of avatars can affect social interactions and interpersonal relationships, depending on how the avatar is perceived. Thus, the consumers' behavior can be influenced depending on how they perceive the presented avatar.

As mentioned in the introduction, research on avatars has found that they are used to decrease consumer uncertainty - the avatars function as means to clarify emotions, as well as to recognize, identify and evaluate others (Nowak & Rauh, 2005). Avatars are therefore used in communication between consumers, or between brands and consumers. Different studies have been made on how different avatars are perceived by consumers, for example, research has been conducted on anthropomorphism and avatars. Results on how consumers perceive avatars have been inconsistent, claiming both that a realistic avatar is more credible than a less human-like and vice versa (Nowak & Rauh, 2005). Research has also indicated that more realistic avatars can lead to disappointments, due to higher expectations (Nowak & Ruah, 2005). In the research of Nowak and Ruah (2005), it was found that the more attractive the avatar was, correlated with the increased credibility. Further, feminine and child-like avatars were seen as more attractive than male avatars.

Thus, these varying results indicate that perceptions of avatars are complex and need further research, to understand the use of avatars (Nowak & Ruah, 2005). A significant amount of the research made on avatar-based marketing has been made on their visual appearance of the avatar, making it interesting to evaluate how the avatar's personality is displayed and how it is perceived by consumers.

Virtual influencers

A recent study shows that an average person spends approximately two hours a day on social media and that the average teenager spends nearly nine hours (Kádekov & Holienčinová, 2018). Thus, there is a business opportunity for companies to advertise

to customers on these platforms, one way of doing so is through influencer marketing. An influencer is considered by Kádekov & Holienčinová (2018) to be an individual with expertise, reputation, and popularity, which has a significant number of followers on social media. Hence, they influence how their followers are thinking and what they are purchasing. Influencers have with their position and authority a decisive effect on people's purchasing behaviors (Kádekov & Holienčinová, 2018). The influencers are often paid by companies to promote their products, by posting digital content (pictures and/or videos) of them using their products. The perception of influencer marketing is heavily dependent on the age group (Kádekov & Holienčinová, 2018). Kádekov and Holienčinová (2018) study showed that millennials are more likely to perceive an influencer as positive.

A subgenre in influencer marketing is the notion of virtual influencers. Today, brands and marketing agencies are beginning to create their virtual replicants of influencers (Kádekov & Holienčinová, 2018). The virtual influencer possesses all the characteristics of a human influencer, despite that the virtual influencer is not made out of flesh and blood. Moreover, using virtual influencers is argued to be both beneficial and risky for brands (Kádekov & Holienčinová, 2018). Virtual influencers could positively, be completely shaped by the company's intentions. A virtual influencer does not possess a personal agenda, and they do not require vacation or sick days. That means that they are constantly available. On the contrary, virtual influencers could harm the company, if they do not signify that the virtual influencer has a commercial purpose (Kádekov & Holienčinová, 2018). Lack of transparency can harm both the company and the virtual influencer, in the way that consumers feel cheated by hidden advertisements. Another problem connected to human influencers is when promoting several brands and products, human influencers risk losing credibility and authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018). The level of authenticity could be determined by the perceived degree of passion the human influencer has for the product or brand, and the level of transparency the human influencer communicates to his or her followers (Audrezet et al., 2018).

Due to the novelty of virtual influencers, there are today only a few academic articles published addressing the topic of virtual influencers. This makes the phenomenon interesting to research, as the phenomenon is not fully mapped or understood, in an academic and a theoretical context.

Authenticity

The word authenticity stems from the Latin word *authenticus*, which relates to trustworthiness (Bruhn, Schoenmüller, Schäfer & Heinrich, 2012). Even though the heritage of the Latin word can seem straight forward, the concept of authenticity has been widely used and a clear definition is difficult to find.

Studies on authenticity are connected to originality, assessing the genuineness of experiences, brands, or products (Leigh et al., 2006). On an individual level, consumers experience authenticity through a filter of their perceptions and experiences (Leigh et al. 2006). There have been studies on visual realism in games, where Selmbacherova, Vit Sisler, and Brom (2014) researched authenticity in games where human-like and cartoon-like characters were compared. According to Bruhn et al. (2012), authenticity is something that is particularly sought after by consumers in society. For brands, the concept of authenticity has become highly important. According to Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2013), it has become one of the cornerstones in marketing and branding, where uniqueness is essential for brand identity. Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin, and Grohmann (2015), studied how brands are assessed in terms of authenticity and found four factors: continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. A deeper explanation of these factors can be found in this paper's theoretical framework.

As mentioned previously, research has been made on avatars as salespeople, avatars and their personality and avatars in advertising, etc., but there is a research gap to fill when it comes to virtual avatars and virtual influencers regarding authenticity.

Theoretical framework - virtual avatars & authenticity

Due to the lack of research on authenticity and virtual avatars (especially on virtual influencers), a theoretical framework has been compiled by research on authenticity and virtual avatars as concepts. The theoretical framework acts as a lens, through which we analyze our gathered material. The theoretical framework begins with explanations of studies regarding virtual avatars and authenticity used in our analysis, and how consumers' perception of virtual avatars depends on their industry/product knowledge. This is followed by an explanation of a framework called *Authenticity management framework* and a mathematical expression that determines influential power for human influencers.

Understanding virtual avatars & virtual influencers

When referring to virtual avatars in this study, a definition of virtual avatars from Fong et al. (2011) will be used. In their study virtual avatars are defined as a graphical representation of users in a shared online environment. Online environments include virtual worlds, games, webshops, social media, and online forums (Bashar et al. 2018). How the consumer chooses to form his or her avatar, will affect their ability to make online friends in a game or virtual world (Fong & Mar, 2005). Fong and Mar (2005) found that female avatars are perceived to be more open than male avatars. Also, avatars that have an average appearance (i.e., do not stand-out) are perceived as more friendly. Hiding the avatars face with for example glasses, hats, etc., have negative effects on the easiness of making friends online. Whilst the wearing of a sweater has a positive effect of perceived friendliness, compared to other over waist clothes. (Fong & Mar, 2005). Studies conducted by Sung et al. (2011) found that the avatar often reflects the creator and his or her personality in broad terms, with some exaggerated elements for improvement. This means that the consumers are creating their more positive and idealized self, through the avatar (Sung et al., 2011).

Virtual influencers are also included in the concept of avatars. A virtual influencer can, similar to a conventional avatar, be a graphic representation of a user. Though virtual influencers are not necessarily

representations of users, they are more often created for commercial purposes, by several individuals, representing a brand or marketing agency (Garnier, & Poncin, 2013), i.e., the virtual influencer can appear wise and be decoupled from its creators. The definition of virtual influencers that are used in this study is virtual individuals with commercial purposes on social media, that have a substantial number of followers, and can affect the purchasing behaviors of other individuals (Garnier, & Poncin, 2013). Additionally, human influencers are defined similarly, with the difference that they are representing and posting pictures of their human self.

Consumers' previous industry/product knowledge

There are existing studies that explain why some consumers are more positive to virtual avatars in advertisements than others. Gammoh et al. (2018) argue that the effectiveness of using virtual avatars in ads and commercials are dependent on the consumer's product and industry knowledge. Consumers who possess high knowledge, will not be affected by the realism of the virtual avatar. They are confident of the industry and product which makes them less fragile to be affected by the virtual avatar. What Gammoh et al. (2018) refer to as experts (individuals with high product knowledge) in their study preferred human-like avatars. Using virtual avatars in marketing can reduce production costs and production-time for companies, but it also comes with a risk. Consumers who are exposed to the promotion or product for the first time, are more likely to be negatively affected by the realism of the avatar (Gammoh et al., 2018). When consumers have less experience of an industry or product, they tend to evaluate human-like virtual avatars in commercials more thoroughly, and they are often more negative towards human-like avatars. Consumers with less experience tend to prefer human or cartoon-like avatars, and on the other side, they are often skeptical of human-like avatars (Gammoh et al., 2018).

In our study, the respondents' previous knowledge is considered when analyzing the answers from the focus groups and interviews. The previous industry knowledge is also used in our analysis to see whether respondents who have more experience of gaming/virtual or more experience of influencers

have different perceptions than respondents who have less experience.

Staged authenticity & brand authenticity

Staged authenticity is a type of authenticity, in this type, realism or actual originality is not of concern (Leigh, et al. 2006). In staged authenticity, the concern is related to technology and how authentic the object feels. Leigh et al. (2006) describe staged authenticity as related to the postmodern consumer, the more authentic the representation of reality feels, the more real it is.

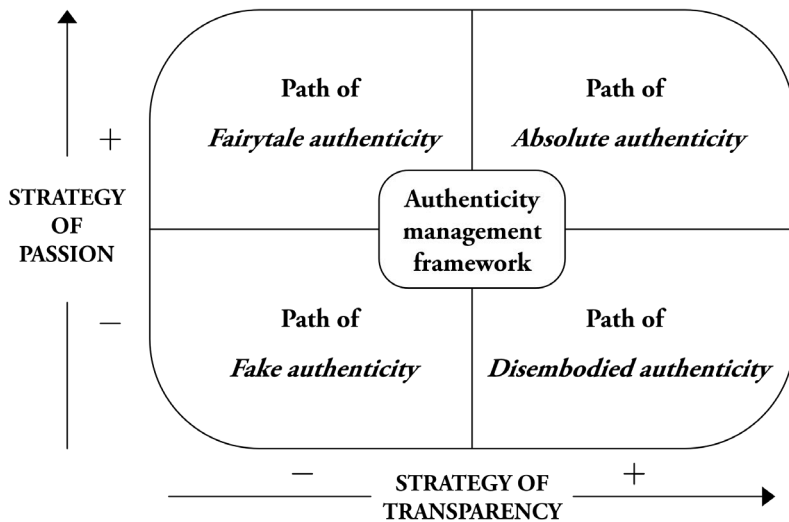
To understand how virtual avatars and virtual influencers can be perceived and assessed in terms of authenticity, we need to understand how brands are perceived and assessed as authentic. According to Bakanauskas and Kisieliauskas (2018), human influencers can through social platforms become brands of their own, it is therefore interesting to assess the authenticity of virtual influencers through conventional brand authenticity concepts. Morhart et al. (2015) found that brands' authenticity is decided by four factors: continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. Continuity is described as if the brand is consistent over time and survives trends without making drastic changes (Morhart, et al. 2015). The second-factor credibility is described as the brand's ability to deliver what was promised (Morhart, et al. 2015). Thirdly, integrity is an important factor when it comes to authenticity. This factor stresses the values the brand communicates, and its intentions (Morhart, et al. 2015). The last factor symbolism is defined by Morhart et al. (2015) as a resource, in which individuals can use the brand to construct their identity.

Dwivedi and McDonald (2018) argue that companies' brand authenticity is strongly affected by their marketing communications. Their study shows, that companies could leverage a brand's perceived authenticity. Put simply, authenticity could work as a competitive advantage towards other companies. Dwivedi and McDonald (2018) further claim that brand marketing communications contribute to clarifying the positioning of the brand, which indirectly affects the perceived brand authenticity. To communicate a clear market position, a brand needs to be marketed holistically, and include all the different parts of the brand. Lastly from their

study, there was a clear correlation between millennials' evaluation of brand marketing communications and the perceived brand authenticity.

Passion & transparency - deciding factors for perceived authenticity

There were no studies found that addressed virtual influencers and authenticity. However, there have been studies on human influencers and authenticity. Audrezet et al. (2018) describe a framework named *Authenticity management framework* (see Fig. 1), and it is used by them for analyzing human influencers' level of authenticity on social media. The framework is used to determine the influencer's strategy of communicating their message as authentic. Human influencers' authenticity is in their model relying on the influencers' strategies when collaborating with brands, and their strategies contain the factors passion or/and transparency. The framework that they present consists of four different paths and those are measured by the degree of passion and degree of transparency. When analyzing the data from our focus groups and interviews, the factors passion and transparency are going to be used as exploratory tools. Degree of passion contains how the brand fits the human influencer's other content if the human influencer could express creative freedom within the campaign, and how the human influencer appreciates the brand that they promote. Audrezet et al. (2018) argue that for human influencers to be perceived as authentic through passion, the passion needs to evolve from intrinsic motivation. Which means that they have to be driven by their desires and goals. To have an authenticity strategy based mainly on passion, the human influencer needs to be primarily driven by the passion for the product and brand, rather than by commercial intentions. The degree of transparency refers to how open a human influencer is to communicate that a post is sponsored, how the influencer can evaluate the products properly, and if they can post, as Audrezet et al. (2018) describe it, "true-to-life unedited content". "True-to-life unedited content" is defined in their study as, social media content that is unedited material in realistic everyday life situations, where for example, the products are used as in real life. Transparency also includes the level of facts about the product the human influencer conveys.



Authenticity management framework
(shorted description)

Authenticity management framework is a framework for evaluating human influencers' social media strategy and determine how authentic they are. The model displays four different paths for influencers. The strategies is determined by the level of passion and transparency the influencer possess. The model is from an influencer's perspective. Authenticity is positive, and *Absolute authenticity* is the most desirable path.

Source: Audrezet et al. (2018)

Fig. 1. Authenticity management framework. Source: Audrezet et al. (2018)

The outcome of the strategies (Passion and Transparency) to become an authentic human influencer is divided into four different paths. The different paths consist of the path of *absolute authenticity*, with a high degree of passion and transparency, the

path of *fairytale authenticity*, with a high degree of passion and low degree of transparency, the path of *disembodied authenticity*, with a low degree of passion and a high degree of transparency, and *fake authenticity*, with a low degree of passion and low degree of transparency (Audrezet et al., 2018).

The most desirable path for human influencers is *absolute authenticity* (with a high degree of passion and transparency), where the influencer is considered professional when it comes to the products they promote. In this part of the framework, the human influencer openly communicates on their social media channels that their posts are sponsored, and they are perceived as passionate about the message, brand, or product that they are communicating (Audrezet et al., 2018). Further, in their model, influencers on the path of absolute authenticity are often open to their followers that they have a desire of earning money, without negative effects on authenticity. This is because they are considered experts and that they are not trying to conceal or lure the potential customer into purchases. The expression absolute authenticity will be included in the analysis, as an explanation of when a virtual influencer is perceived by a consumer as highly authentic. The least desirable management strategy is the path of *fake authenticity*, where the influencer seeks fame, is peer pressured, or solely has financial desires (Audrezet et al., 2018). Influencers on

this path feel fake, since they may not stand for the products that they advertise. They seek short turn rewards, and they often set their true identity aside on social media, for short benefits (Audrezet et al., 2018).

Their framework is not entirely applicable to virtual influencers, but parts of the framework are relevant for analyzing the gathered data from the focus groups and the interviews. The analysis will not address the different paths separately or will not test the accuracy of the framework when applied to virtual influencers. It is difficult to determine the different paths for the virtual influencer, since, the model is partly depending on the human influencers' inner desires and motivation, which is not the focus of this study. Therefore, the virtual influencers will not be analyzed from what type of path they have chosen. Though, all the different paths are displayed and explained here to get a better understanding of the model and understand why the factors (passion and transparency) are important.

The model is by Audrezet et al. (2018) applied to human influencers from an influencer's perspective, examining when human influencers are choosing a strategy for collaborations with companies. For our study, the factors (passion and transparency) from the Authenticity management framework sets the fundamental guidelines for analyzing the findings regarding what factors are determining authenticity within the virtual influencer field. Also, the explanation of absolute authenticity will be used in the analysis definition of when an influencer is perceived as authentic. Audrezet et al. (2018) gathered their material from the influencer's perspective

(interviewed social media influencers and gathered data from company campaigns), researching authenticity based on influencers' collaborations with different company campaigns. Their study focused on how influencers are managing their authenticity with different strategies. Our study contributes to the research regarding if there are similar or other factors relevant to virtual influencers' authenticity. Also, the factors from the Authenticity management framework will be applied in this study from a consumers' point of view, and examine what factors are making an influencer authentic for consumers, not the influencers. The factors are going to be used more as exploratory factors to determine a virtual influencer's authenticity from a consumer perspective, rather than use the factors as determining a path for the virtual influencer.

How Affinity to Brand & Relationship Power with Followers affect the authenticity

There was no research found on the performance of virtual influencers, though, as in the previous sections, there are studies of what determines human influencers' performance. Hence, the desirable outcome of consumers' perception of the human influencers' authenticity, is the effectiveness to influence behaviors (Kádeková and Holienčinová, 2018). Influencers desire authenticity to be able to influence and affect consumers' purchasing decisions. Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) wrote in their study that the degree of influence could be summarized into three factors: *Audience Reach*, *Affinity to Brand*, and *Relationship Power with Followers*. These three factors explain the relationships between the influencer and the followers and reveal how powerful an influencer is. Their study focused on human influencers' capability to influence different age categories. Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) summarized these three factors in a mathematical expression that they call *Mathematical expression of the influencer-follower relation*.

$$\text{Influence} = \text{Audience Reach} \times \text{Affinity to Brand} \times \text{Relationship Power with Followers}$$

Fig. 2. The Mathematical expression of the influencer-follower relation. Source: Kádeková & Holienčinová (2018)

The number of followers is an obvious factor for shaping behaviors. To be able to shape trends, the content of the influencers needs to be widely spread (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Further, the number of followers does not per definition mean influence, rather the followers of the influencers need to be correlated with companies' customer segments, referred to in the expression as *Affinity to Brand* (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). In the section *Affinity to Brand*, the influencers' perceived credibility and expertise are also included. So, to be coupled with the company the influencers need to possess knowledge of the products that they recommend. This is correlated with Audrezets et al. (2018) argumentation of passion when assessing influencers' authenticity, where the influencer needs to be passionate about the brand that they promote. The influencer also needs to create a bond with his or her followers. This is in the model Mathematical expression of the influencer-follower relation called *Relationship Power with Followers* (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). This is achieved through trustworthy information, and that influencers can genuinely assess the products, which leads to trust and a built relationship with the followers (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). The perception of how sponsorships by the influencer are communicated and how they build relationships are linked to Audrezets et al. (2018) argumentation that an influencer needs to be transparent.

Thus, by connecting authenticity to this expression, authenticity is strongly correlated to *Affinity to Brand* and *Relationship Power with Followers*. How original and genuine the influencers' collaborations are perceived, could determine the impact of an influencer (Audrezet et al., 2018). Dwivedi and McDonald (2018) research regarding creating holistic marketing communications, is referable to an influencer's affinity to the brand they collaborate with, where it needs to be a holistic theme when communicating with consumers and market their products. The influencer needs, therefore, to fit the company's brand holistically, to successfully influence consumers. If they are not able to provide a genuine impression, or that they lose their perception of realness, consumers are likely to not be influenced (Leigh, et al. 2006). Audrezet et al. (2018) state that, for influencers to be able to achieve authenticity, they need to naturally be affiliated with

the brand, and be perceived as passionate about it.

The audience reach will not be analyzed in our study, due to, our study is focusing on the content and the influencers' perceived authenticity. To analyze our gathered material, the *Mathematical expression of the influencer-follower relation* has not been applied in our study as a whole. Instead, the factors *Affinity to Brand* and *Relationship Power with Followers* have been incorporate as explanatory factors for determining how authenticity can affect a virtual influencer's influential power. Examine if the respondents are willing to purchase products advertised by the virtual influencers (i.e., influence the respondent), could be indicative of whether the virtual influencer is perceived as authentic or not. Also, *Affinity to Brand* and *Relationship Power with Followers* is explanatory factors for determining how consumers perceive the virtual influencer as authentic. Therefore, factors from *Mathematical expression of the influencer-follower relation* by Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) is in our study used as a link between influencers and authenticity. It displays what factors that determine the influence on consumers. Their study is mainly focusing on age-differential perceptions and what is encouraging customers to proceed to purchase products, motivated by influencer marketing. As discussed above, Dwivedi and McDonald (2018), Leigh, et al. (2006) and Audrezet et al. (2018) articles regarding authenticity could be contributing explanations in different ways to what determines influence.

Method

The method section describes how the study was conducted, what choices were made, and why they were made. The chapter starts with a description of why the study is an exploratory qualitative study, followed by, elaborations of why the data was collected through focus groups and interviews, also, how they were recorded and transcribed. After, there is an explanation of how the analysis was conducted and how it was divided into themes. Lastly, a section of how credibility and trustworthiness were ensured. There is also a short description of each virtual influencer that was included in the study.

A qualitative study

This study was conducted as an exploratory qualitative study. The method was considered appropriate, since, the aim of this study was to in-depth explore the perceived authenticity within the virtual avatar area (virtual influencers is a subgenre within virtual avatars). Authenticity is difficult to measure in absolute terms (Leigh et al., 2006) and virtual influencers are a relatively novel phenomenon (Kádekóv & Holienčinová, 2018). Thus, a qualitative approach was chosen to be able to research the consumers' perception of virtual avatars' authenticity and to more deeply understand virtual influencers' authenticity. Both focus groups and individual interviews were conducted, which are common methods for gathering material in qualitative studies (Patel & Davidson, 2003). We wanted to find out how consumers experienced virtual avatars and virtual influencers, and therefore, as a start opted for consumers discussing the different avatars in focus groups (Crag & Cook, 2007). The respondents within the focus groups were interacting in a social context, learned from one another, and misunderstood each other during the discussions (Crag & Cook, 2007). From the conducted focus groups, we aimed to find interesting angles and understandings of virtual avatars which could be more deeply understood by conducting further interviews. According to Pedersen, Delmar, Falkmer, and Grønkjær (2016), the use of focus groups to form interview questions, increases the researchers' knowledge in general, broaden their perspectives and even more important, focus groups provide the researchers with the participants' experiences and use of language. Thus, researchers could more easily set the interview questions into common understandable language for the respondents. The interviews were conducted to make the respondents elaborate for themselves regarding virtual influencers and reveal underlying perceptions. The underlying perceptions could be difficult to obtain exclusively with focus groups. Our analysis is built upon the respondents' answers and discussion from both the focus groups and the in-depth interviews. The intention of mixing focus groups with interviews, was both to receive a social contextual view on the subject, and with this data in hand, see how individuals perceive avatars and virtual influencers. Moreover, the reason to include focus groups, was due to virtual avatars and virtual influencers is a qu-

ite novel phenomenon, therefore group discussions can ease and enhance the answers from the respondents. Furthermore, the research question was split into two different questions, due to the data collection. The first research question was to cover the exploratory data collection from the focus groups, and the second research question was to niche the subject and cover the analysis from the in-depth interviews. The first question was to be explained by the focus groups and the second question aimed to be explained by the in-depth interviews. Though, individual quotes from the focus groups to answer the first research question and vice versa.

Prior to the focus groups and the interviews, a minor desktop research was conducted to be able to get an initial understanding of virtual avatars and virtual influencers. From the desktop research, the introduction, literature review, and the questions for the focus groups were established. The desktop research included academic writings, such as peer-reviewed articles and books, but also lesser academic sources such as movies, blog posts, and social media content. The avatars and virtual influencers which were used in our data collection method were found either in the desktop research (Lil-Miquela, Noonooori & Bebiselis) or through the focus groups, where the respondents brought up examples of avatars and virtual influencers that they knew of (Bee_nflunecer).

Focus groups & interviews

We conducted three focus groups prior to the interviews. The number of participants in each focus group was five respondents, and the time was set to approximately one hour per session. The list of the respondents from the focus groups is displayed in *table 1*. The focus groups were to the greatest extent composed of homogeneous respondents, to encourage discussions and shared experiences (Kitzinger, 1995). Homogeneous in this study means that the respondents in the focus groups were composed of factors e.g., age and marital status in consideration as means to smoothening discussions. The sessions were held on evenings at the University of Gothenburg. The place was chosen due to that it is a neutral place for all the respondents where the discussions could be held in a quiet and calm room without distractions. Some snacks and beverages were brought to the meetings to make the respon-

dents relax and create a comfortable atmosphere, which facilitates better discussions (Cragg & Cook, 2007). The room where the focus groups were held included a larger television screen, where we could show the respondents the questions, as well as pictures and videos that the respondents reacted to. Thus, the ability to show examples enhanced the quality of the focus groups.

The focus groups aimed to capitalize on the respondents' interaction and conversations (Kitzinger, 1995). The focus groups resulted in wider understandings regarding the perception of the respondents' knowledge and attitudes towards virtual avatar marketing. We also used the outcome of the focus groups when forming the questions for the individual in-depth interviews. The focus group was moderated by one person who asked the questions, kept the flow, and the group "on track" in the discussions (Cragg & Cook, 2007), whilst the other was responsible for the recording of the sessions. Further, the moderator acted to distribute the word equally among the participants to prevent group hierarchy, and extensionally prevent that only one respondent answered the questions.

After the focus groups were eight interviews conducted. The respondents were four individuals who had participated in the focus group and four new respondents. The list of the respondents from the interviews is displayed in *table 2*. The selection of respondents enabled an opportunity to make a comparison between respondents who had been exposed to virtual influencer and newly recruited respondents who had not discussed virtual avatars previously. The findings from the comparison will be analyzed in section *Continuity* in the analysis. To be able to capture facial expressions and easier interpret sarcasm the interviews were to the greatest extent as possible conducted face-to-face. One of the interviews was conducted over the phone, and two interviews were conducted over the computer. Both in the phone and computer interviews, all the visual material was sent to the respondent during the interview, through social media channels. The interviews over the computer included video interaction with the respondent, allowing the researchers to capture reactions and facial expressions like in a face-to-face interview. The reason for an interview over the phone was that the respondent requested

it. Although, the respondent did view the visual material during the interview and reacted to it.

The length of the interview varied from 50 minutes to slightly over an hour. The aim of using interviews was to gain deeper knowledge and to be able to answer the second research question. Interviews are widely used for collecting qualitative data (Patel & Davidson, 2003). Accordingly, the interviews resulted in a deeper knowledge about the phenomenon of virtual influencers and their perceived authenticity. Compared to the focus groups, the interviews had a more unilateral theme and allowed the respondent to answer more extensively (Patel & Davidson, 2003), without interruptions from other respondents.

All the respondents were from Sweden. Thus, the focus groups and interviews were conducted in Swedish to keep the conversations as natural as possible and to not risk that the respondents would be linguistically restricted.

Prior to the focus groups, we conducted a pilot interview to test our questions and visual content. Furthermore, a second pilot interview was conducted after the focus groups as preparatory to the in-depth interviews. We analyzed what could be done better after both interviews and adjusted the semi-structured questions accordingly. The pilot interviews were recorded but they were neither transcribed nor used in the analysis. They were recorded to be able to go back and analyze what could have been changed in the focus groups/interviews. Transcriptions of the pilot interviews were not considered necessary, since, they were not used in the analysis.

The questions in the focus groups followed a semi-structured template, categorized after different themes, such as “Avatars in virtual worlds and in-game marketing”, “Avatars and brands”, “Virtual Influencers” etc., the complete template of questions can be found in the appendix. A template was used to ease the comparison between the different focus groups and make the analysis more valid. There were 27 structured questions per session with additional spontaneously asked questions. At the end of the focus group, we also used pictures of three virtual influencers, one virtual company-avatar,

two commercial tv ads (which included virtual influencers), and a picture of the creators of a virtual influencer. The visual material included Instagram screenshots from the virtual influencers Lil-Miquela, Noonooori, and Bebiselis, the Swedish virtual brand representative Boxer-Robert and the tv-ads were from Samsung and Calvin Klein. The company avatar Boxer-Robert was excluded from the interviews due to the fact that he is not present on social media, and the interviews included the respondents to scroll in different influencers’ Instagram feed. As mentioned in the description of the virtual influencer, the pictures that were used in the focus groups and interviews are included in the appendix below, and also, links to the tv ads. The aim of the visual material was to understand the actual reaction of the respondents when encountering a virtual influencer. Additionally, it was also included to enhance the discussions when the groups saw different virtual influencers, and to make an authenticity comparison between them. During the focus groups, a Keynote presentation was used to display the questions by theme and the visual material. Avatars is a quite novel phenomenon in many different areas, it could have been difficult for the respondents to understand the differences between the types of avatars without categorizing them into themes. Granted that, we chose not to provide an academic definition of the different avatars in the Keynote. By providing the definitions or examples of the different avatars could have affected the respondents’ answers. Instead, we categorized the questions by different themes and presented them under different headlines such as “Avatars and brands”. We displayed the questions one at a time to not confuse the respondents. After the first focus group, we made some minor changes in the Keynote, merged, and rephrased questions that we experienced as hard for the respondents to interpret. No question was changed in its core, rather small vocabulary changes to make the questions more understandable.

In the interviews, we presented the questions semi-structured to create a flow with the individual respondent. The questions were formed by desktop research, a pilot interview, and the results from the focus groups. For example, a respondent mentioned the virtual influencer Bee_nfluencer in one of the focus groups which was then added to the in-

terview template. As in the focus groups, a template was used to conduct the interviews but was not presented as structured. The complete template is available in the appendix. The reason why the interviews did not have the same structure was to create more fluent discussions and get more extensive answers. The template varied slightly depending on if the respondent had participated in the focus group or not. The respondent that had not participated in the focus groups was asked some additional questions, which was needed to finalize the analysis. The reason why we did not ask those questions to the other four respondents was that they were already answered by the respondents in the focus group. The questions that differed were mainly regarding influencers in general and not specifically on virtual influencers. Compared to showing the pictures of the virtual influencers like in the focus group, the respondent was asked to scroll in the different influencers' feed instead, to get a deeper understanding of the perception of the different posts. Also, to be able to observe which posts the respondent chose to click and talk about. In the interview, we also added another non-human virtual influencer Instagram account, Bee_influencer, a virtual bee-influencer, produced by a bee-foundation encouraging people to donate money. The bee influencer was included to see how the respondents reacted to an influencer which was not aiming to imitate a human influencer. Further, we analyzed our focus groups and interviews after the sessions to improve our performance and thus the quality of the sessions in order to have a richer material.

Recording and transcription

All the focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded, in order to ease the process of analyzing and comparing the material (Kitzinger, 1995; Crang & Cook, 2007). Further, during the sessions, we took notes and transcribed the interviews (Crang & Cook, 2007). The transcriptions were made as close to the interview or focus group session as possible to be able to remember what happened during the sessions. Notes that were taken during or after the interviews included feelings, thoughts, and events that happened during the session (Crang & Cook, 2007). During the interviews, one researcher asked the question meanwhile the other researcher kept notes and interjected with spontaneous questions. By doing that, we hoped to capture material that

could be missed by only relying on transcriptions. For the phone and computer interviews, the same method for interviewing was used, during these interviews, the loudspeaker on the phone was used, where one researcher asked the questioned and the other researcher took notes. The interviews were recorded on a computer.

Hence all the focus groups and interviews (face-to-face, computer and phone) were conducted in Swedish the original transcriptions have been written in Swedish. When using the material in the analysis a translation of the respondents' answers has been made into English, to make it understandable. To facilitate the translation of the quotes, Grammarly has been used to double-check when translating key quotes to minimize false quotations.

Respondents

With the mix of focus groups and individual interviews, in consideration of the subject (avatar-based marketing) a sample size of 15 respondents in focus groups (see Table 1) and 8 individual interviews (see Table 2) were considered appropriate (Sandelowski, 1995). When sampling the respondents, we applied a mix of convenience- and snowball-sampling. The respondents were contacted in person or on social media and were chosen by the researchers. The sample was determined by the researchers by a selective sampling which had no purpose or hypothesis to prove (Coyne, 1997). The respondents in the focus groups were allowed to bring an additional respondent of their choice. Hence, the intentions were to enhance comfortability for the respondents and motivate them to answer more thoroughly and wider. We decided on keeping the focus groups smaller ranging from five to six people, preventing the fact that people get intimidated by a larger group and therefore become reluctant towards sharing their experiences (Crang & Cook, 2007). To not fall short of participants in the focus groups, we over-recruited the groups to hedge for late drop-offs (Crang & Cook, 2007).

The respondents were approximately gendered equal and the focus groups were mixed. The respondents within the focus groups were homogeneous in the fact that they were approximately the same age and life-stage (young, urban and without children). The respondents also shared the approximate-

ly same level of knowledge about avatars in marketing, they were individuals within the age of 20-30, and were present on social media and have played video or computer games before. The respondents were individuals who have been exposed to avatars in marketing in various ways. One respondent in the second focus group, however, had a professional career background in the gaming industry, making his level of knowledge deeper than the rest of the respondents.

Focus Group 1		Focus Group 2		Focus Group 3	
Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age
Alula	25	Brian	26	Alexander	25
Cecilia	24	Hanna	25	Anton	25
Erik	26	Johan	30	Arina	20
Ida	25	Oscar	23	Emelie	26
Simon	26	Sara	23	Wilma	21

Table 1. List of respondents from the focus groups

The interview respondents were four men and four women (see Table 2), and the age range was between 20-30 years old. The number of interviews was considered proper. When conducting qualitative studies too many respondents could affect the depth in the results, although, depending on the subject and character of the study, it could be difficult to exactly determine how many respondents are appropriate for the study (Boddy, 2016). The questions in the individual interviews were exclusively focusing on virtual influencers. Due to the fact that four of the respondents had participated in the focus groups, it could be argued that they would have possessed deeper knowledge of virtual influ-

encers than the respondents who had not participated. Though, the researcher had no pre-knowledge of whether the respondents that did not participate in the focus groups had any previous experiences of virtual influencers. However, this did not affect the performance of the interview since the questions that were asked surrounded the respondents' perceptions and not their knowledge. Therefore, no hypotheses were established to predict the knowledge of the respondents. The researchers had no intention or hypothesis to prove when recruiting the respondents who did not participate in a focus group, and these respondents had approximately the same level of technical and social media background. They had the same knowledge of avatars.

Before each interview and focus group, the respondents were given the choice to be anonymous when quoted in our research - all of the respondents agreed to have their first name and age displayed in the thesis. So, when quoting the respondents in the analysis their first name is used.

Virtual influencers

In the focus groups and the interviews, we used four different influencers which are primarily active on Instagram. None of the influencers are human, instead, they are virtually created. The virtual influencers that were used in this study were *Lil-Miquela*, *Noonoouri*, *Bebiselis* and *Bee_influencer* (All referred to their Instagram account names). For a shorter description of each influencer, see Fig 3.

The motivation for choosing these four virtual influencers was that they all were considered to possess one or several unique attributes. The avatars were also considered to share attributes that made a

Interviews

Respondents from focus groups	Age	New respondents	Age
Alexander	26	August	26
Alula	25	Viktorija	24
Brian	26	Martin	25
Hanna	25	Emma	25

Table 2. List of respondents from the interviews



Fig. 3. List of virtual influencers. (Permission granted from creators to use their images)

comparison possible. In the *Mathematical expression of the influencer-follower relation* presented by Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) one of the factors determining the level of influence was *Audience reach*. Though in our study, we chose to not mention exactly how many followers each influencer at the time of this study being published had, due to their number of followers is constantly changing. The influencers above had at the moment of writing between 8000 to 2,1 million followers. To mention each influencer's followers were not considered to be of importance and the influencer's number of followers was considered adequate to use Kádeková and Holienčinová's (2018) expression. How the influencers were presented to the respondents in the focus groups and the interviews are written below, in the method section where it is described how the questions were presented to the respondents.

All the material of the influencers used in the study is included in the appendix. We as authors of this thesis have asked for permission to use the virtual influencers' picture directly in the study, to make it more understandable for the reader. The creators of Lil-Miquela, Bee_nfluencer, Noonouri, and Bebiselis have all granted permission to use images of their virtual influencer in this study. The creators were contacted either by email or through the direct messages function on Instagram.

Data analysis

The result of the discussions from the focus groups was compared by dividing the outcome into different themes, for example, realism (Kitzinger, 1995). The analysis distinguished between general opinions of the group and individual opinions expressed by a single respondent within the group.

Additionally, the finalizing of the discussions was not summarized in numerical numbers or percentages, due to the data to analysis and the findings would be very scant (Kitzinger, 1995). Throughout the analysis, our theoretical framework was used as a lens to draw conclusions based on research. Though, the analysis did not test relevance or significance on our chosen theoretical framework, rather the theoretical framework worked as a tool to analyze the gathered data. Qualitative studies enable the researchers to analyze the material after each interview or focus group to improve the material (Patel & Davidson, 2003). The focus groups and the interviews were discussed by the researcher after each session, to be able to improve the question and ensure that the researchers' interpretations of the answers were similar.

The analysis section was split into two different parts. The first part is dedicated to finding what made a virtual avatar perceived as authentic by consumers. Secondly, to be able to contribute to the avatar research with a deeper analysis regarding virtual influencers' perceived authenticity. By applying this structure of two sections in the analysis, we aimed to educate contribute to the virtual avatar research by first analyzing exploratively and secondly narrow the research down to only one sub-genre within virtual avatars, videlicet virtual influencers. Even though the first part of the analysis is mostly dedicated to the data collection of the focus group and the second part is dedicated to the interviews, both the data collection methods (the focus groups and the interviews) were used to answer both parts of the analysis. We will clarify where the quotes come by referring to either the focus groups or interviews, and the quotes are presented as italic text to ease the reading. The analysis was split into two parts in consideration with the two-folded purpose to analyze the two research questions. The first and second parts of the analysis are not cross-compared. The factors for determining virtual influencers' perceived authenticity by consumers are not applied to the first question and vice versa. That means that the two parts of the analysis are analyzed separately. The reason for separate the analysis is that the two research questions had two purposes, one exploratory and one in-depth.

Trustworthiness and credibility

For this qualitative research to be credible, we have used a triangulation method in order to validate our findings. This means that multiple sources have been used (Cope, 2014) to ensure that found patterns in our focus groups, interviews, desk research, and observations are recurring and not outliers. Additionally, we used an audit trail method to validate our findings (Cope, 2014). This means after having collected the material, we audited our findings by analyzing the material separately and then discussed what the patterns were. Through this, we validated our analysis.

In terms of dependability, our research should be replicable with the same conditions and types of respondents that we have interviewed (Cope, 2014). Linkages with similar studies will, therefore, be drawn during our analysis to ensure dependability. To ensure confirmability directly translated quotes will be used in our analysis (Cope, 2014) to explain a conclusion of patterns found in the collected material. Our study should be transferable to other groups and settings. The transferability might be affected by the age group that is examined, nationality and country of residence of the respondents. The exposure of virtual avatars and virtual influencers is likely to vary between different age groups and nationalities which therefore affects the way consumers perceive them and the transferability of our results.

Analysis

The analysis is divided into two parts. The initial part of the analysis is addressing the findings regarding the first research question, virtual avatars, and their perceived authenticity. The second part is narrowing down the analysis to focus on elaborating on the findings of virtual influencers' perceived authenticity.

Exploratory analysis of virtual avatars

On broad terms, how important virtual avatars' perceived realism and appearance are for consumers will be discussed, followed by how the previous experience affects the consumer's perceived authenticity for the virtual avatar. Lastly, it will be discussed if a virtual avatar can, in fact, achieve authenticity?

Realism

As mentioned in the literature review there are many types of avatars, where one avatar may look very realistic and another may look like something that does not exist in our physical world. The question then arises, does a more realistic virtual avatar make them perceived as more authentic?

The answer to this question according to our respondents is that it depends. When it comes to realistic games such as FIFA or Sims, our respondents preferred realism and thought it added positively to the game. Simon describes the opinion of the first focus group, *“You want to be able to associate yourself to the avatar, you want it to be your extended arm in the digital space”*. During the first focus group, Ida confirmed Simon’s answer by saying, *“You want to relate to it (the avatar) and strengthen what you want to achieve”*. Simon and Ida’s quotes indicate that realism is sought after to a large degree by the respondents when creating a virtual avatar in games and virtual worlds such as Sims and FIFA. Realism is an element deciding the authenticity of the avatar in Sims and FIFA since the games promise a realistic digital experience to the consumers. This can be linked with credibility which Morhart, et al. (2015) describes as an important element in the concept of authenticity.

The respondents’ discussion around the Snapchat (social media platform) avatar was fairly similar to how they discussed the FIFA and Sims avatar. The respondents talked about how they wanted to identify with the avatar whilst still making adjustments to strengthen certain elements. How the different groups discussed their creation of the avatar could be exemplified by Brian from the second focus group, *“I have tried to make a version of myself. The avatar is a bit thinner, but it is a close attempt”*. Sung et al. (2011) found that avatars are often created with the purpose to reflect the human in broad terms for both visual appearance and personality, but certain elements are exaggerated, i.e., our findings reflect what Sung et al. (2011) have found. The underlying reason for the respondents wanting to adjust certain elements and create a true to self-avatar is to portray the best version of themselves since they are exposing their avatar in a social space. The aspect of showing your avatar version to others is a factor that changes the way

the respondent thinks about how they create their avatar. Therefore, how the respondents choose to create their avatar can differ between Snapchat and the two games FIFA and Sims. Hanna from the second focus group explains the difference between exposing your avatar to others:

“I think it depends on if others can see you or know who you are (how realistic you make your avatar). In Sims, you can do what you want since you do not meet anyone but on Snapchat, you feel that you do not want to look just anyhow”.

These findings of our study can be referred to as the fact that adjustments are made to the avatar and its personality to affect their ability to make social connections (Fong & Mar, 2015). Since Snapchat is a social media channel where social relationships and connections are the focus, our respondents changed their avatar to enhance their social ability, i.e., to make friends. On the other hand, in FIFA and Sims, there is no social connection and therefore the avatar will not be created with social thoughts in mind.

During the focus groups, it became clear that recreating the superficial was more important than recreating the attributes of the avatar. This might be obvious when it comes to Snapchat avatars, where the attributes of the avatars are limited, but even in games such as FIFA, the respondents talk a lot about the look of the avatar and less about its attributes. Emelie’s answer represents the focus group’s opinion when she explains her thoughts about creating a Bitmoji-avatar on Snapchat, *“On Snapchat, I think you create an avatar that is as similar to yourself as possible”*. Though, when in games the avatar does not need to reflect the user’s real-life. Oscar says, *“When I was playing hockey I was a defender, but in the game NHL when you play with only one player it is not fun to be a defender, so then I usually play as a center, or as in football I was a midfielder, but now in the game FIFA I usually choose to play as forward”*. This indicates that the authenticity of an avatar in certain games and virtual worlds is depending on the visual similarities with the user, i.e., for the respondents to feel authentically connected to the avatar they have to visually resemble the user. On the other hand, the attributes are not important to feel this connection. As Oscar explained above, the

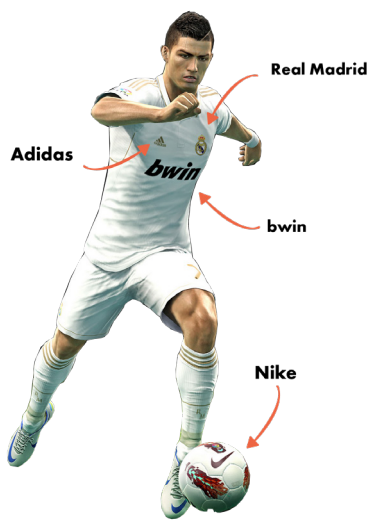


Fig. 4. Brands on a FIFA avatar

game would be less enjoyable if the avatar were a true representation of the user's attributes. Instead, the user assesses the authenticity of the avatar solely on how similar it looks to the user.

What was also found in the focus groups is that the brands can enhance the feeling of realism. The respondents especially discussed how brands are integrated into the games of FIFA and NHL. In these games' sportswear brands such as Nike, Adidas and the different sponsors of the teams appear in the clothing of the avatar, footballs, hockey sticks, and ads placed around the stadiums (see Fig 4. for image example of how brands are displayed in games). Erik explains the general opinion of the focus groups, *"I think it is very popular (using brands in games) and it is important for the gaming experience as a whole. It feels more genuine and real, and you want to make it as real as possible"*. The focus group respondents also discussed if games would use fake brands instead and how it would affect the experience. Hanna from the second focus group describes the general perception of using fake brands, *"It is easier to feel at home in some way when there are brands that you know. If you would have fake-brands in FIFA it would not have been the same feeling"*. This shows how realism can be positively affected by brands and therefore also the authenticity. Like Hanna and Erik describe above, brands lift the realness and experience of the game creating a more genuine feeling which can be linked to the concept of authenticity. The brands such as Nike and Adidas affect the authenticity of the entire game through raising the authenticity of the avatars, both for avatars created by the players but also the existing

in-game avatars, i.e., the fact that Cristiano Ronaldo uses the same Nike football shoes in the game as he does in real life, contributes to the authenticity of his avatar and therefore the entire gaming experience. The respondents described that when they are creating an avatar in FIFA or NHL themselves, they often choose the brands that they use in real life or that the person which they look up to uses. Oscar from the second focus group describes how he uses brands when creating an avatar on NHL, *"If I create an avatar on NHL, I pick the brands that I use myself. The same hockey stick and stuff. I believe I do it to increase the realness of the game"*. The increased realness that brands contribute to can be referred to as the concept of staged authenticity, which Leigh et al. (2006) describe as the more authentic the representation of reality it feels, the more real it is. In this case, brands contribute to the authentic feeling of the avatar which increases the realness of the avatar.

The respondents of the focus groups also discussed in which cases brands can disrupt the authenticity of the avatar, and therefore also the gaming experience. In cases where realism is not sought after, the respondents discussed that brands become irrelevant in the game. Johan from the second focus group describes the general view across the focus groups, *"If the game is not related to reality, I do not think it (brands) belong there. If it, for example, is a fantasy game, then the McDonald's logo does not make sense there"*. Brian confirms Johan's comment during the second focus group when discussing less realistic games by saying, *"Yes, it would be weird to be running around with an Adidas cloak on"*. The inconsistency described by the respondents above, when brands appear in fantasy games is hurting the authenticity of both the avatar, the game as a whole but could also hurt the brand which advertises. The inconsistency relates to what Morhart et al. (2015) describe as credibility, which is one of the deciding factors of perceived authenticity. A fantasy game mixing in real-life brands is not perceived as credible due to that it promises an imaginary experience that is distorted by real brands trying to advertise.

When instead looking at the conducted interviews, which focused on the virtual influencers, we also found interesting exploratory insights on avatars.

Martin says in his interview that he does not perceive that the non-human-like virtual influencer Bee_nfluencer feels less real than human-like influencers such as Lil-Miquela. He describes his perception of the Bee_nfluencer as, *“It is less creepy, it is less unpleasant, it is also fun, and it is something different”*. This can be referred to as what Leigh et al. (2006) describe as authenticity when the interpreter experiences uniqueness and genuineness. Incorporated in our study these findings from our focus groups and interviews imply that, to create a virtual avatar that has unique attributes could be interpreted as more authentic than reproducing a human-like appearance. During the interview with August, he answers the question if it is positive or negative that Bee_nfluencer does not look human-like, he says, *“I think it is positive, it touches an area that you have not touched yet”*. This quote is representative of what all the respondents perceived both in the interviews as well as in the focus groups, and it refers to that authenticity is highly linked to the notion of uniqueness, i.e., for an avatar to not be human-like can be an advantage when it comes to authenticity.

On the other hand, the respondents from the focus groups are not confident that they would have been equally positive of Bee_nfluencer if there were several similar virtual influencers. Emelie says in the third focus group when talking about Bee_nfluencer, *“I follow Bee_nfluencer because I think it is funny, though, I do not know if I would want every account to be like this”*. So, it could be argued that Bee_nfluencer is perceived authentic solely due to its uniqueness, the respondents have not seen anything like it before, which makes it seem original and authentic. Thus, there is a possibility that if there were several animal avatar influencers that Bee_nfluencer would not be perceived as authentic. Brian says in the second focus group, *“What I think about virtual influencers is if each marketing agency had their influencer, it would be too widespread, it works when it is one (virtual) influencer and when it is new”*. What could be interpreted by that quote is that if the trend of virtual influencers increases, it will create the risk that different types of virtual influencers lose their uniqueness, and extensively their authenticity.

Previous gaming/virtual experience

What was clear from our focus groups was that the previous gaming/virtual experience had an

impact on how avatars authenticity is perceived. Respondents that had a lower degree of previous gaming or virtual experiences had stronger negative perceptions of the virtual influencers displayed in the commercial examples shown during the focus groups than the respondents who had more experience in video or computer games. Emelie from the third focus group sums up the view of virtual influencers for those with lesser gaming/virtual experience, *“I think it feels unpleasant when it looks real but when it is fake. You get a little bit disgusted, I do not like it”*. These insights can be interpreted with the study of Gammoh et al. (2018), which found that consumers who had a low degree of product or industry knowledge were more inclined to be negatively affected by human-like avatars, i.e., avatars such as the virtual influencers which have a human-like appearance may intimidate consumers such as Emelie. The reason behind this may be due to the realism which was discussed above in this paper. In this case, where consumers do not have much experience of gaming or are newly exposed to virtual influencers realism might instead lead to that the avatar is perceived as less trustworthy.

Those respondents with more gaming experience talked instead about the importance of the quality of technology and the setting of the avatars, for them to make sense. The second focus group especially talked about the importance of the technological quality of the avatar when mixing humans and avatars in movies and commercials. Respondent Johan who has a background in working in the gaming industry explained his fascination over the latest Star Wars movie, where the character Leia is an avatar due to the actor Carrie Fisher's passed away before the film was made, *“You know she is virtual and you look for faults but I could not find any. I think it is very impressive if you focus on it (finding faults) but still cannot find anything, you know she is not real, but it feels real”*. This perceived feeling of reality can be linked to our theoretical framework of staged authenticity, which is described by Leigh et al. (2006) as that the more real the avatar feels - the more real it becomes. Johan is in this case impressed by the technology, which creates the virtual avatar - making it even more authentic to him. This finding might indicate that consumers who are experienced and knowledgeable within the gaming and avatar field will perceive the avatars as more

authentic when the realism increases.

Virtual avatars and absolute authenticity

Throughout the focus groups, the respondents distinctly clarified that the level of perceived authenticity that humans achieve is unreachable for avatars today. As previously mentioned in the analysis of realism, the respondents have different perceptions of how authentic an avatar is, but even the most computer-experienced sensed that it is a dimension of authenticity missing. Johan in the second focus group says after watching a commercial with Lil-Miquela, *“If you see it, and if it does not look completely genuine, I think about it a lot”*. But it is not only the superficial, for example, Ida also describes her feelings about following avatars and virtual influencers on Instagram as follows:

“For me, it is important that the one I follow is someone who stands for something I like. I have not felt that it is her (Lil-Miquela) who stands for something but at the same time, there are people behind her who stand for something and who says that she (Lil-Miquela) should stand for something. But I think that I would have felt that it feels a bit fake. I can relate to influencers who feel anxiety, they are still human, but I think I would have a hard time relating to her (virtual influencer Lil-Miquela).”

What Ida refers to is that she wants to be able to connect emotionally with influencers, which is something she cannot imagine at this point with the virtual avatars on social media. Ida describes that she (Ida) is missing that the virtual influencer Lil-Miquela stands for something, which can be referred to that the perceived passion from Lil-Miquela is vague, meaning, Ida does not perceive that Lil-Miquela (through her creators) deliver a genuine message of her life or products she is promoting. Therefore, Lil-Miquela fails to reach a certain level of authenticity. This can be referred to as what Audrezet et al. (2018) describe as *Absolute authenticity*. Absolute authenticity is when a human influencer is perceived as genuinely passionate about the message, product or brand they are showings, whilst also openly communicating that they are posting sponsored content on social media channels. This indicates that even if the human creators are making the avatar and expressing feelings, thoughts, and moods through the avatar this cannot fully reach the absolute authenticity of a human. Káde-

ková and Holienčinová (2018) study of influencers ability to affect followers is relying on their capability to create a relationship with their followers. The findings in our study show that creating a relatable bond with followers is important for virtual influencers as well. Though, there were no findings where the virtual influencer is evoking the same relatability as the human influencers.

There were discussions in the focus groups when virtual avatars came close to be perceived by consumers as authentic as humans. Alula in the first focus group, brought up the idea to be able to create a virtual model of herself when she was shopping online. For an avatar to become as authentic as physically trying a product, the model has to have the same measurements and same skin tone to fully be comparable to a physical shopping experience. Alula says in the first focus group,

“I do some online shopping, so if you could make your avatar with your own measurements, your own hair, and then try clothes with it. Like, I have this skin color, I try this rouge or do these shoes fit with the dress. If it suits me, that is better than ordering home, try and send back”.

She expressed that it is better to virtually try clothes than ordering a product home, try it and send it back. This example was brought up by the researchers in the other focus groups and the response from the other focus groups was mainly positive. Granted that, not all the respondents were positive, and they questioned if it was possible today to achieve the same shopping experience as going to a physical store and try the product, but all respondents in the focus groups were positive if it would be possible to create a completely authentic model of themselves for shopping. The findings in this study are that the respondents desire authenticity in avatars, but their perception is that it is not fully achieved yet. Leigh et al. (2006) write in their study that it is not necessarily what is most real that it is experienced as authentic, rather the perception of the interpreter.

In-depth analysis of virtual influencers

The analysis will from here continue to focus on the determining factors of how virtual influencers are perceived as authentic. The virtual influencers that will be discussed are Lil-Miquela, Noonouri,

Bebiselis, and Bee_nfluencer (shorter explanations of these virtual influencers can be found in the method section of this paper). In our study, there were four factors found that was of significant importance for the respondents to perceive a virtual influencer as authentic. These factors were *Purpose*, *Personality*, *Continuity*, and *Transparency*. In the following part of the analysis, these four factors will be described, analyzed, and deeply elaborated.

Purpose

The first factor that affects the respondents' perception of a virtual influencer's authenticity was rooted in the question of why they were created. The respondents from the interviews experienced that virtual influencers that had a clear *purpose* enhanced their feeling of authenticity. Alula sums up what the respondents felt in the interviews by saying, "*With the Bee_nfluencer they have a focus on something I think is important (sustainability and saving bees), and it feels like their purpose is not only to make money*". Initially, when the respondents encountered the virtual influencers, they had difficulties with understanding what the virtual influencers were and why they existed. When not knowing what they saw, they started to search for a purpose. Emma says in her interview when talking about the benefits of being a virtual influencer, "*They (virtual influencers) can be shaped exactly how the companies like, but it needs to be clear what they are doing and why, or it will just be confusing*". It turned out that the respondents had initially a more negative attitude towards virtual influencers that had multiple purposes when posting promotions, as in the case of Lil-Miquela and Noonouri. Lil-Miquela's account contains material including her music career, social life, and commercial advertisements, likewise, Noonouri's account has multiple purposes such as charity, social life, and fashion. Brian expresses his skepticism in the second focus group when he encountered the Instagram feed of Lil-Miquela for the first time, he says, "*What is the meaning with her, it feels like a virtual character is not necessary for that purpose*". Simon is expressing similar confusion as Brian in the other focus group when he was talking about Noonouri, Simon says, "*My first thought is, what is the purpose with creating this person, I get a little provoked by the thought of it or I do not see the point*". All the respondents in the focus groups had roughly the same perception of Lil-Miquela and Noonouri promotions and their advertisements of

products, or as in Lil-Miquela's case promoting her music. The respondents felt as previously quoted, regarding Lil-Miquela and Noonouri, that both virtual influencers lacked a clear purpose and they did not understand why they were created. When the purpose of the account is diffuse, it becomes difficult for the influencer to be associated with brands (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Due to that, brands are often looking for an influencer that fits their holistic marketing mix, and virtual influencers that lack a clear purpose, risk harming their capability to influence their followers. When the credibility of the virtual influencer is experienced as low, it also creates an incapability to shape behaviors.

On the contrary, when the purpose was perceived more obvious, the attitudes towards the Instagram accounts from Bebiselis and Bee_nfluencer were much more positive. Martin explained the differences between Lil-Miquela and Bee_nfluencer, "*I think it is different cases, like this case (Bee_nfluencer) it is clear what the account is promoting, donating money to bees*". He further states that it is applicable to Bebiselis as well, he says, "*I know what ICA (Swedish grocery brand) is trying to do and I have no reasons to distrust them*". Dwivedi and McDonald (2018) write in their study that brand clarity impacts the overall perception of how a brand is authentically perceived by the consumers. In their study, they focused their research on whether brand clarity was relevant for millennials (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018). Due to our respondents being mostly millennials, our findings suggest that the brand needs to have a clear purpose and spread holistic messages to be perceived as authentic. The respondents felt that both Lil-Miquela and Noonouri are currently incapable of mediating a holistic approach, with an understandable purpose, which can be an indicator of why they are perceived as less authentic.

There was further a difference in how the purposes were communicated by the virtual influencers to the consumers. Both Bee_nfluencer and Noonouri had intentions to evoke philanthropically behavior by being e.g., vegan and fur-free. Nevertheless, the respondent expressed that Bee_nfluencer's intentions were perceived as more authentic. The criticism is explained by Brian during his interview when discussing Noonouri's intentions, "*She*

has a painted fur on her painted body, that does not feel like she is doing so much for humanity". Brian's quote supports that virtual influencers that are not considered to be related to the material that they post are not likely to influence a change in behavior (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018). Conversely, the respondents have a completely different attitude towards Bee_nfluencer. Bee_nfluencer's account includes posts of an animated bee in human-like situations. The account was perceived as funny, interesting and, innovative. The respondents further felt that the purpose of Bee_nfluencer was more well-described and understandable. Regarding Bee_nfluencer Alula says, *"There is a clear environmental aspect that could make me follow this account more than the others that want to sell products"*. The fact that Bee_nfluencer account had a clearer purpose with an environmental focus, was considered to be more authentic by the respondents, due to, what Audrezet (2018) describes transparency, i.e., the fact that the influencer openly shows their desire to make money without the loss of perceived authenticity. This ability to be transparent can according to Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) this leads to the influencer being more capable of influencing the respondents.

In our study, there were further findings of that Bebiselis and Bee_nfluencer account was perceived as providing a more authentic purpose than the other accounts, and one explanation of that could be credibility and expertise. Audrezet et al. (2018) argue in their study that passion for influencers is the ability to communicate the passion the influencer feels for the brand that they collaborate with. In their study, credibility and expertise for the brands that influencers are collaborating with affects how their followers perceive them as authentic. Findings from the interviews show that there is some evidence that Bee_nfluencer and Bebiselis are perceived by the respondents to have a clearer purpose and, therefore, receive more credibility from the respondents. When the purpose is considered understandable and relatable to the account as a whole, it feels honest and that the animated bee is considered to possess expertise and knowledge. Though, in the example of Bee_nfluencer, the respondents experience that the Instagram account has a passion for their cause rather than the actual bee. The account is capable of communicating passion for bee

preservation, Brian expresses the general perception of the interviewees by describing in his interview, *"This appeals to me, it is a bee, it is funny and you know what they are communicating, and they want to achieve something (bee preservation)"*. This shows that the Bee_nfluencer is capable of express passion, though, not through inner motivation rather a consistency in their purpose and Instagram feed. Brian's previously mentioned quote, *"that does not feel like she is doing so much for humanity"* regarding Noonooori's Instagram biography, could be interpreted that her avatar has several purposes, and thus, the account loses credibility. The respondents do not believe her charitable intentions when she also does sponsorships with fashion brands. Alexander says in his interview regarding Bee_nfluencer, *"It is not that you want to donate money instantly, but it does make it a fun thing, it is built on knowledge, that you need to take care of your bees"*. This further increases the tendencies of our findings that credibility and expertise are important for the purpose of the virtual influencer. As Alexander says, the account is built on knowledge and that it is something positive. Hence, the respondents from the interviews experience that when the virtual influencers are posting their content on Instagram, they need to possess expertise and knowledge of what they are posting.

Personality

The next factor found in our interviews on how our respondents perceived the authenticity of the avatar is personality, i.e., when the respondents got to know the virtual influencer on a deeper level than just pictures. Enhancing the personality of the virtual influencer was found to be primarily done through video content posted either by the virtual influencer themselves or through a third party. Hanna explains after watching an interview with virtual influencer Lil-Miquela:

"It feels like a real person being interviewed, he (the interviewer) asks questions and she does not just answer the questions like a robot, and you get a picture of her personality. Whom she seems to be and how she describes herself, she tells a joke and is easy-going. It feels genuine".

The fact that Hanna mentions that she feels that Lil-Miquela has a personality that feels genuine through the interview can be referred to as Leigh

et al. (2006) concept of staged authenticity. Even though Lil-Miquela does not exist in real life, the way she is portrayed in the interview through her voice, looks, and how she answers the question still feels genuine and can, therefore, be referred to as our theoretical framework and more specifically staged authenticity. Alula expressed a similar opinion as Hanna during her interview and even mentions that it changes her view of avatars. Alula describes:

“I have to say that this changed my opinion of avatars, that she (Lil-Miquela) says I can relate to anyone who can feel like an outsider or misplaced. I can agree with this reasoning. I think this makes her seem so normal, that she can be viewed as a real person.”

This quote shows the ability to humanize virtual influencers. The fact that Lil-Miquela communicated her values can be linked with how brands communicate their values which Mohart et al. (2015) describe as integrity which, in fact, can enhance the authenticity of a brand. In the case of Lil-Miquela, she communicates that she is an outsider and can relate to people feeling misplaced, which in this case enhances Alula’s perception of Lil-Miquela’s integrity and therefore authenticity.

What was interesting was that some of the respondents were intimidated by the virtual influencers and the way they portray their lives and personality. Even though the respondents expressed that seeing more of the virtual influencer’s personality (for example through the interview with Lil-Miquela) humanizes them they took it as something negative. Alexander describes, *“Seeing her like this (in interview format) humanizes her, it feels more real than her Instagram, but it feels like I am cheated in a way”*. This comment from Alexander indicated that the virtual influencers can be perceived as less authentic when humanizing their behavior and looks. The reason behind this can be due to transparency issues, i.e., the consumers perceive that the virtual influencers are pretending to be something they are not. This is interesting since this can be a dead-end for the virtual influencers when looking at the current theory within authenticity. Audrezet et al. (2018) describe how human influencers’ authenticity depends on their transparency. In other words, how the influencer properly evaluates products and if they post “true-to-life” unedited content. For a

virtual influencer to create “true-to-life” unedited content is not possible for the simple reason that they do not exist and even when they achieve the technical capability to make it look like if they were human (like Lil-Miquela), consumers like Alexander can still perceive it as lacking transparency. Alexander further says in the interview when talking about a picture with a virtual influencer that looks like a human, *“when you cannot even see that it is fake and then I really think it feels like you are being fooled”*. These quotes by Alexander can be connected to the factor of realism, which was discussed in the exploratory section, in this case, realism is something negative for the virtual influencers to the degree where consumers feel cheated when not able to divide between humans and avatars. The underlying factor of Alexander perceiving Lil-Miquela as inauthentic may be caused by the lack of transparency. This factor will be elaborated in-depth further on in this paper.

Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) discussions of the importance of influencers creating a relationship with their followers to be able to influence them, could be referred to our findings regarding the influencers’ personality building content. Findings from the interviews showed that when the influencer created relatable content, it eased the relationship building with the respondent. Hanna says generally about influencers in her interview:

“It is a real person who has a real life. They are at H&M and eat lunch at restaurants. I want to do that as well. I like that they are available in different formats. I do not follow a lot of influencers who are just on Instagram, rather, I follow those that are on YouTube, I listen to their podcasts, and follow their Instagram. So you get to see them on film, hear their voice and opinions in pod format, then you see their clothes. Also, when you may have been out and seen some influencer that you have followed for a very long time. On “Way Out West” I saw Angelica Blick (human influencer) and then it was a bit “wow, it is her”.”

This shows both that, as argued above that presence on several platforms increases authenticity, but also that building a relationship with the influencer is important for consumers. Hanna further says in her interview when she describes what kind of virtual influencer she would want to create, she says,

“A cool influencer from Gothenburg or Stockholm. You can see that she eats lunch where I also eat lunch, and it would also be nice to get some tips about Swedish companies that cooperate with her”. When she describes how a virtual influencer she wants to follow is, she says that it would be similar to what she like with human influencers, an account that collaborates with Swedish brands and eats at places where she eats, therefore, she can relate and build a relationship with the virtual influencer.

Relatedness to the content was important, several of the respondents, expressed that the content was more engaging if it was relatable to their own personality and life situation. Alexander, who is a student, describes what type of virtual influencer he wanted to see, he says, *“You could have been an influencer that everyone recognizes, for example, a student. You could make that fake-student do things that you can relate to like he is late for class and he drinks a lot of coffee.”*. This is a shared opinion by the respondents, August, for example, positively highlights the relatable in Bebiselis posts for parents of young children where they post displays the struggles of being a parent. August says when talking about a picture of Bebiselis vomiting on her parent, *“It shows the funny side of it when the baby is vomiting on the shoulder. It is a situation where people will recognize themselves. These could definitely be pictures that someone else had posted. The picture catches the dilemma”*. Even though these happenings did not occur in real life, they are still relatable to the respondents, and therefore, do they perceive the picture as staged authenticity, which Leigh, et al. (2006) refer to as perceived real- and genuineness. The respondents felt that pictures that they can relate to, or see themselves in, are perceived much more authentic.

How the consumer perceives the virtual influencer and if they are positive or negative to them showing more of their personality leads this paper into the next section of continuity.

Continuity

Continuity is for the respondents another deciding factor on how they will perceive the virtual influencers. For the respondents who were fairly new to the subject, their perception of the virtual influencers was often negative. Our study shows that almost every respondent initially had a negative

attitude towards every virtual influencer that was shown to them. The reactions were often similar to, for example, Martin, who says when encountering Bebiselis for the first time, *“But no, why is he so weird?”*. This was a common reaction of the respondents when first encountering one of the virtual influencers. The respondents had at the beginning trouble of making sense of the virtual influencers and often wondered why they existed. Simon describes his perception during the first focus groups of the virtual influencers, *“this is sick, have they said why they are doing this? Is it just marketing?”*. Due to the novelty of the virtual influencers they can be perceived as inauthentic. Audrezet et al. (2018) describe passion as, how consumers perceive the authenticity of human influencers. Consumers then assess if the influencer promotes the product or brand because of its qualities and they genuinely enjoy it (i.e., the influencer has a high-level of passion for the product or brand) or if they are simply paid to promote it. With virtual influencers new to the phenomenon, consumers have trouble seeing how the influencer can have passion for the product since the virtual character does not exist. At first glance, the virtual influencers are perceived by our respondents as lacking passion for a product or brand and therefore perceived as inauthentic.

Although, what happens over time, being continuously exposed to content from the virtual influencer is that the respondents are not as intimidated by them. Hanna explains during her interview:

“When you first see them, you think “what is this? this will never take-off”, but when you see that they (the virtual influencers) have many followers then you get that it will grow. It is a bit like a fashion trend. For example, that you sometimes say, “are you supposed to have fluffy arms now? no”. But then after a month you stand in the store and think they are great.”

All of the respondents that were interviewed which were also part of the previous focus groups shared the opinion of being more open and positive towards virtual influencers which indicated that there is an adoption phase for the consumers. The respondents that participated in both a focus group and a couple of weeks later a follow-up in-depth interview had a much more positive attitude towards the idea of virtual influencers. Brian says when he

participated in the focus group, *“Virtual influencers lack basic emotions, they do not have flesh and blood and that bothers me”* and, *“It feels like it is a marketing agency in the shape of a person”*. Though, when interviewing Brian his perception was not as negative, as his perception previously was in the focus group. In the interview, he is rather positive with quotes such as, *“It will be interesting to see how virtual influencers are going to evolve, and I am interested in the technology behind it”* and, *“I am more positive now, virtual influencers do not feel as frightening anymore”*. Brian is even showing two examples of virtual characters on Instagram that he has found since the focus groups. In the influence-expression from Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) they mention “Power Relationship with Followers” as a key factor of gaining influence. Their study claims that building a relationship with an influencer’s followers takes time, which requires accurate collaborations with brands that are affiliated to their profile. The respondents harmonized attitudes from the focus groups to the interview, show that time and adaption is essential when the respondents evaluated the virtual influencers. Focus groups and interviews are different, in the focus group Brian’s opinion could have been shaped by, for example, peer pressure from the other respondents. Though, as previously mentioned, Alexander, Brian, Hanna are all saying that in just a couple of weeks (between the focus groups and interviews) they have become more comfortable with the notion of virtual influencers. When talking about their Instagram feed in the interviews, they are focusing more on the content of the influencer compared to the focus group, where the respondents mainly commented on the influencer’s looks. This points to the fact that the virtual influencer’s authenticity is likely to increase over time as they are normalized within society.

Therefore, continuity is important for accustom the respondents to virtual influencers, and for the virtual influencers to build a relationship with their followers. Notwithstanding, when the respondents are asked how their perception of human influencers has developed in the last five years, the majority of the respondents, perceive that their perception of them has changed negatively. Oscar says in the second focus group, *“Influencers have become too many”*, moreover, Erik says in the second focus group, *“Influencers today lose their identity because*

of money and free stuff, as it often is. I think it hurts them in the long run”. Audrezet et al. (2018) describe a path of fake authenticity where an influencer only seeks financial benefits from collaborations with companies. The respondents from our focus groups experienced that human influencers have decreased in their passion for the brands that they promote. Though consistency for brands in choosing collaborations is still desirable by the respondents, Oscar says, *“Henrik Lundqvist (Swedish ice hockey player) and Head and shoulders. He has been advertising it forever. It should be the same, you have recognition, not only that you send out your products to influencers, but that there is a relationship between the product and the person”*. Virtual influencers have not existed long enough to evaluate brand collaborations that have gone on for years. But the respondents from our focus groups indicate that continuity, in appearance and collaboration is important to be perceived authentic. This can be referred to the study of Morhart et al. (2015) on brand authenticity, which argues for the importance of the factor continuity for brands when creating authenticity. The respondents from the focus groups and the interviews experience it as positive if influencers and brands are consistent over time with collaborations. Our findings also show that it may be true on virtual influencers as well since the respondents experienced harmonization from the first to the second encounter with virtual influencers.

Transparency

The next found factor will be the consumers’ perception of virtual influencers’ *Transparency*. The factor transparency could be explained in two different aspects. The first one is transparency connected to the underlying intentions of the virtual influencer’s creators. When the underlying intentions of the influencer are unclear, several of the respondents questioned who benefited from the account. Erik expresses during the first focus group when seeing a commercial with Lil-Miquela, *“What do they want to replace, is this a cost issue so companies can make even more money?”*. Several similar questions were raised by the respondents after they encountered virtual influencers for the first time. The respondents did not know who or why the influencer was created by and for. When the respondents were shown the two human creators of Lil-Miquela, they felt that they got a more positive image of her.

Viktoria says during her interview when seeing the picture of the creators:

“I would say that it feels a little better to see this, that these two people are real”. In the case of Bebiselis, ICA is very transparent that they are responsible for the account and have an expressed theme in their biography (tips and advice to parents of young children)”.

Several of the respondents experienced in the case of the avatar Bebiselis case that a virtual character was even more suited than a human. On the question regarding if a human or virtual baby is preferable for ICA Alexander replies, *“Virtual baby. Since a baby cannot choose for themselves it is always the parents that decide”.* The majority of the respondents shared the same opinion. When the virtual influencer is a baby, they prefer it to be an avatar since the baby cannot at that time decide if they want to be displayed in a commercial context. This indicates when the account and the content are perspicuous, a virtual character could be in some cases preferable. It further indicates that it is perceived positive when the creator is known, not necessarily obvious but easily accessible. The creators though, do not have to be similar to the virtual influencer in style and opinions. Though, if the opinions of the creator were considered very radical differentiated it could have an impact on authenticity. Hanna says in her interview when asked if the style and opinions of the creators behind the virtual influencer are relevant, *“I do not think that matters, but if the creators had expressed for example racism you would become skeptical”.* Several of the respondents further felt that fewer creators were desirable, the respondents articulated that it would be more trustworthy than a group of four or more. Anton expresses the general opinion of the respondents, *“It feels better to see them (the human creators of Lil-Miquela) and I like to see that they are not an entire team”.* It helps to clarify who the creators of the virtual influencers are and why they created what they did for increased transparency, which leads to being perceived as authentic by consumers. As Anton mentioned, fewer creators behind the virtual influencer were preferred. All of the respondents felt that it was more authentic that the virtual influencer had few creators compared to if a larger marketing agency would have created it. When seeing the creators, the respondent felt that a layer of humanization

was added to the virtual influencer. Viktoria says in her interview, *“it feels a little bit better, if it is these two creators (creators of Lil-Miquela), they are real”.* When the creators were revealed, the respondents felt that the virtual influencer’s account’s authenticity increased, though, the virtual influencer itself were perceived more as a fictional character than before, Johan says in the second focus group, *“At least, I think it feels more genuine to know who is behind it, but she (Lil-Miquela) becomes more of a character or their creation”.* Leigh et al. (2006) argue regarding staged authenticity, that it is not what is real rather what feels real, that determines authenticity. The findings from our focus groups and interviews suggest when the creators are revealed the virtual influencer is perceived less real but more authentic. Several of the respondents, especially from the focus groups got curious to find out more about the creators. Hanna says in her interview, *“Yes, now I actually feel that I want to go in and find them in some way, I imagined that there was a large agency behind this, but now there are two younger people behind this then it feels cool”.* It shows that Hanna has a positive attitude towards seeing the creators, and the account benefit of being transparent with displaying the creators.

On the other hand, if it is a brand that has created a virtual influencer such as ICA that created Bebiselis, this is also a way to be transparent, since the respondent already has a perception of the brand which is transferred to the virtual influencer. Emeilie describes this by saying:

“You associate ICA with ICA-Stig (one of the main characters in their TV-commercials) and all their commercials so when you see this (Bebiselis) you have a more positive perception of it. I mean that you already have a positive perception of their marketing.”

These findings indicate that companies with strong brands are well suited to create virtual influencers and avatars since they do not have to deal with the same transparency issues as virtual influencers who are not created by brands.

The second aspect of transparency is how transparent the communicated content on the virtual influencer’s Instagram was perceived. Audrezet et al. (2018) describe transparency as an influencer’s

ability to openly communicate sponsored posts and evaluate products' trustworthily. Our findings show that the general perception was that virtual influencers were not evaluating products transparently and critically. The major argument among the respondents was that the virtual influencer was not able to physically try the products. Though, as Gammoh et al. (2018) argues that the effectiveness of using avatars could be depending on the user's product and industry knowledge. There were some indicators from the interviews of that being true. Hanna says for example in her interview when scrolling in Noonouri's Instagram feed, *"The Daisy perfumes from Marc Jacobs, are a little cool and exclusive and then I also like the picture because it feels like it fits with their brand"*. This shows that she is not as critical when there are products, she is familiar with and feels comfortable to talk about. This is obvious, and she also mentions it, a product that she has previously smelled and evaluated. As the previous quote in the analysis of purpose from Alexander, when he talked about what type of influencer he wanted to follow and he mentioned, *"a student who drinks coffee"*. Coffee is another product, likewise Hanna thoughts about the perfume, that Alexander clearly shows that he is confident about. Alexander does not have to trust the influencer's evaluation of coffee to the same extent as if he had never drunk coffee before.

The respondent experienced that the sponsored posts from the virtual influencers were clearly and openly communicated, Brian even said about Noonouri, *"I feel that I clearly see what brands she has, here it says Dior largely in the background. Regularly you have to go into the post and read the text to know that it is sponsored"*. Brian experiences it as positive which is referable to what Audrezet et al. (2018) describe as a successful influencer transparency strategy. When the respondents are allowed to scroll in the different virtual influencers' Instagram feed, they experience it as positive if the sponsorships from brands are communicated plainly. Brian's quote is representative of the respondents' attitudes towards how the brand advertisement was communicated. Though, few respondents were willing to purchase products exclusively based on virtual influencers' posts. Viktoria says in her interview regarding if she could buy products based on virtual influencer advertisements, *"No I do not think I could*

have done it, but I think that I might have been able to do it in the future". She highlights the issue that it is still not an actual person, which means that the influencer is incapable of expressing creative freedom how the influencer appreciates the brand. This also indicates when influencers fall short in communicating authentic posts to their followers, what Kádeková & Holienčinová (2018) call Relationship Power with Followers, it will affect the influencer's capability to influence behaviors, and extensively not lead to purchases. As Viktoria said about willingness to purchase products from virtual influencers, that just by seeing a virtual influencer's sponsored post are not very influential and that the feeling of the influencer not being human affects her capability to build a relationship and trust with the influencer.

Another finding supporting the fact the virtual influencers' content was perceived transparent was that the attitudes towards the brand that occurred in their feed were perceived positive. The respondent felt that those companies felt cool and innovative. When talking about those brands Hanna says, *"My image of virtual influencers is that it is very new, high-tech, cool and then it feels like the brands have to be like that too"*. This implies that even though advertising through virtual influencers does not lead to direct purchases, it could benefit the perception of the brand and it is not damaging the image. There is among human influencers a risk of losing perceived passion and authenticity when promoting several brands (Audrezet et al., 2018), whereas in this study there was no evidence of that being true for virtual influencers. Not even within the same product category. No respondent mentioned that it does appear negative that influencers had advertisements for several clothing brands.

Discussion

To develop our analysis further, this section will clarify the findings from our focus groups and interviews. The discussion will first address the relationship between *Realism* and authenticity of virtual avatars - continued by a discussion of how *Previous gaming/virtual experience* affects how consumers perceive the authenticity of virtual avatars. The discussion will then be dedicated to the subgenre of virtual avatars - *Virtual influencers*. We will start with discussing how the creators of the

virtual influencers affect the perceived authenticity. The discussion is then led into discussing virtual influencers and the found factors (*Purpose, Personality, Continuity and Transparency*) that affect how consumers perceive the authenticity of virtual influencers. Finally, we present our model for how consumers are assessing virtual influencers' authenticity.

Realism stood out as a factor that did not have a clear positive or negative effect on the perceived authenticity of the virtual avatars and virtual influencers. In some cases, realism was sought after by the respondents, whilst on the other hand, they wanted a clear separation of reality and graphically created avatars.

The respondents wanted realism when creating their own avatars. They wanted the virtual avatar to reflect themselves to a large degree. As Simon described in the first interview, *"You want to be able to associate yourself to the avatar, you want it to be your extended arm in the digital space"*. This means that the respondents wanted to be able relate to the avatar for it to be perceived as authentic. Though, the respondents also mentioned that they wanted to create an ideal version of themselves, i.e., to some degree move away from realism. This included both the virtual avatar's visual appearance and the avatar's abilities. In games such as FIFA and NHL, the respondents created a highly realistic visual appearance whilst maximizing their abilities (such as speed, strength, etc.) to the game. A difference however between how the respondents viewed realism was if others could see and interact with the created avatar. The respondents felt that if others could see their avatar, they wanted to create a positive impression towards others. This distinguished the virtual avatars created for the social media platform Snapchat from the virtual avatars created for games such as FIFA or Sims - where you do not expose your avatar to other consumers. These findings can refer to the fact that when consumers create an avatar on a social platform, they are aware of the fact that it affects their ability to make social connections (Fong & Mar, 2015), i.e., to make new friends.

When instead looking at how perceived realism affected the perceived authenticity of the virtual

influencers the respondents' answers were divided. Brian expressed in the second focus group the difficulty to connect and relate to the virtual influencers, due to that they are not real, *"Virtual influencers lack basic emotions, they are not made out of flesh and blood and that bothers me"*. Whilst other respondents such as August described relatable elements in the virtual influencer Bebiselis, *"It shows the funny side of it when the baby is vomiting on the shoulder. It is a situation where people will recognize themselves. These are definitely pictures that someone else (human) could have posted. The picture catches a dilemma"*. This shows that even though the virtual influencers are not real, they can still create relatable content that feels real, which can be described as staged authenticity. They can with other words create stories that feel real.

The respondents were also divided by how real the virtual influencers should appear visually. Alexander described in his interview after watching an interview with virtual influencer Lil-Miquela, *"Seeing her like this (in interview format) humanizes her, it feels more real than her Instagram, but it feels like I am cheated in a way"*. This shows that an increased realism can instead decrease the perceived transparency, and therefore, the authenticity of the virtual avatar/virtual influencer, i.e., to humanize a virtual avatar might lead to a decreased authenticity and a less real virtual avatar or virtual influencer can increase the authenticity. On the other hand, respondent Alula described a different viewpoint than Alexander, *"I have to say that this changed my opinion of avatars, that she (Lil-Miquela) says, "I can relate to anyone who can feel like an outsider or misplaced". I can agree with her (Lil-Miquela) reasoning. I think this makes her seem so normal, that she can be viewed as a real person"*. Instead of feeling cheated as Alexander, Alula was positively affected by the humanization of Lil-Miquela. Through the video, Lil-Miquela is able to show her personality, with her voice and thoughts in another way than just through pictures on Instagram. This may indicate that the realness of the virtual influencer to be perceived positively by consumers, is dependent on if consumers can relate to the avatar. If the consumer can relate to the virtual influencer, then the realness of the avatar is perceived as positive and therefore also appears to be more authentic.

The discussion regarding if realism contributes to added perceived authenticity or not, leads to what was often referred to in the analysis as *Staged authenticity*. Since a virtual influencer does not exist in the real world, the virtual influencer can never portray what Audrezet et al. (2018) describe as unedited content of their life which is a dimension that human influencers can use to create authenticity. Instead, the creators of virtual influencers must “stage” and edit every part of the virtual influencers’ life, i.e., what consumers perceived as authentic is what is perceived true to the overarching story of the virtual influencer. This can also be what Morhart et al. (2015) refer to in their brand authenticity research as continuity, where they describe it as the way brands stay consistent with their own story and an important element for brands to create authenticity. Virtual influencers and brands are similar in that they are not human beings, which means that their authenticity has to be created differently. Although, what is also true about both brands and virtual influencers is that they are made by humans and can therefore also be perceived as human. As exemplified above, Lil-Miquela’s creators can humanize her by creating video content where she shows herself and her personality, or for example as Bebiselis, by posting pictures of relatable moments for parents. This shows that the creators of virtual influencers can use technology to create perceived staged authenticity.

The second factor found in the first part of the analysis that affected the perceived authenticity of virtual avatars was the *Previous gaming/virtual experience* of the respondents. It was found that the respondents with less gaming/virtual experience were more inclined to perceive the virtual avatars and virtual influencers that are human-like negatively than those with more experience. These findings are similar to the study of Gammoh et al. (2018), which found that human avatars are often perceived as more negative by consumers with a low degree of product or industry knowledge. Previous gaming/virtual experience can thus be interlinked with the previously discussed factor of realism, i.e., consumers with less gaming/virtual experience are more sensitive towards a virtual avatar or virtual influencer that looks real.

With the above discussion revolving around more

explorative findings of how virtual avatars can be perceived as authentic - we will now continue to focus this discussion solely on the subgenre of virtual avatars: *Virtual influencers* and the four factors that make them perceived as authentic by consumers. As mentioned above, both the overarching factors found in the more explorative analysis of virtual avatars (realism and previous gaming/virtual experience) have effects on virtual influencers perceived authenticity. This discussion will continue to go deeper into understanding the perceived authenticity of virtual influencers.

First, before discussing the four factors, for understanding virtual influencers, there is an aspect that differentiates virtual influencers from human influencers that have to be considered, which is that they are made by a creator or several creators. The findings from our study showed that the creators were important for determining how authentic the virtual influencer is perceived. It was important for the respondents who the creators were, how many they were, how they looked, and what motivations they had. Thus, to create a better understanding of the following discussion regarding the factors that determine the virtual influencers’ authenticity by consumers, it is essential to understand the role of the creators.

To illustrate the creators’ role, we will exemplify how passion, is communicated towards consumers. Audrezet et al. (2018) describe passion as a strategy for human influencers to create authenticity and refers to their inner motivations and desires for the products or brands they collaborate with. Virtual influencers’ passion is generated through their creators (see Fig. 5) and can, therefore, be distinguished as a different type of passion, compared to the passion Audrezet et al. (2018) are describing for human influencers. Human influencers’ passion and virtual influencers’ passion share the same characteristics, but human influencers’ passion is connected directly to the influencer, and virtual influencers’ passion is connected indirectly via the creators. If consumers perceive virtual influencers as passionate, this passion is not driven directly by the virtual influencer. Instead, it is the creators who have successfully communicated their passion, which leads to that the consumers perceive the virtual influencer as authentic. Consequently, the creators have a significant impact on how consumers perceive vir-

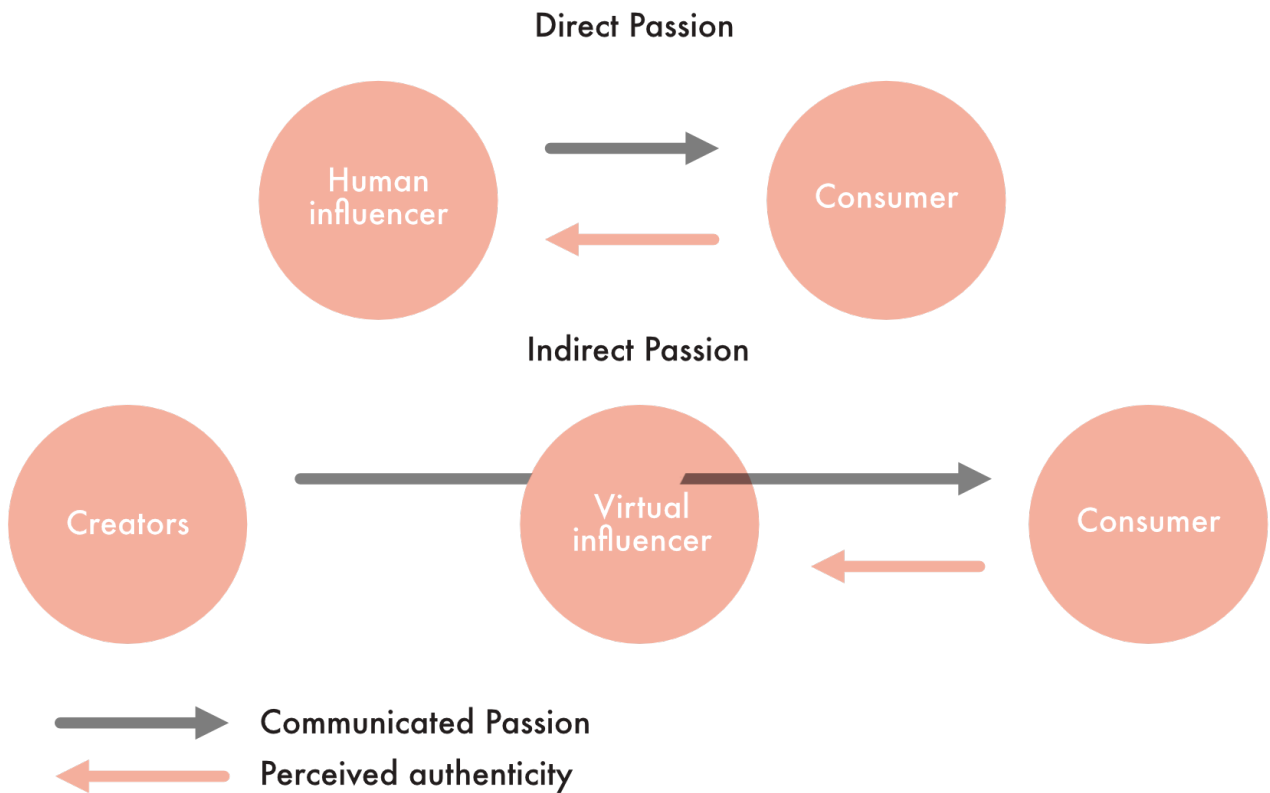


Fig. 5. The difference between direct passion and indirect passion

tual influencers' authenticity.

After having discussed how the creators affect the virtual influencers perceived authenticity - we now move into discussing our found factors that consumers use in order to assess a virtual influencers authenticity. There are no studies today that provides a holistic explanation of virtual influencers' perceived authenticity. We, therefore, suggest four factors for analyzing how consumers perceive virtual influencers' authenticity. The four factors found in the analysis are *Purpose*, *Personality*, *Continuity*, *Transparency*, which determine how consumers perceive virtual influencers as authentic.

The first factor is the *Purpose* of the virtual influencer. Purpose could be explained by that the virtual influencer has to have a simple, clear, and under-

standable purpose that is affiliated to their content, to be perceived as authentic by the consumers. Consumers experience that a virtual influencer has to have a reason for being created and that this reason has to be communicated clearly, in order to be perceived as authentic. When the consumers perceive the purpose as simple and understandable, they experience that the virtual influencer possesses expertise and credibility regarding their content. If the purpose is clearly communicated, as in the example of Bee_influencer, the purpose to preserve bees makes her be perceived as more credible and an expert on bee preservation. On the other hand, if the consumer has trouble with understanding the purpose of the virtual influencer - the consumer will start to question if the virtual influencer has a hidden agenda, or if the virtual influencer is created for a purpose that is striving to deceive the consumer.

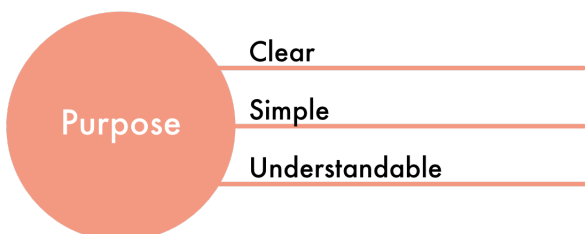


Fig. 6. Purpose

The second factor, *Personality* refers to consumers' perceived genuineness and relatability of the virtual influencer's content, which can be enhanced by producing content across different platforms. The content has to be genuine and relatable to the consumer, not in the way that the virtual influencer

has to look human but rather to act human. The consumers perceived it as positive to be able to relate to the content on virtual influencers accounts, e.g., true-to-life situations such as Bebiselis posting content of everyday family hassles. Thus, when consumers can recognize themselves in the virtual influencer's content it becomes more authentic. Virtual influencers' relatable content contributes further to the research of staged authenticity by Leigh et al. (2006). As mentioned, this study found that the respondents wanted to follow virtual influencers that post relatable content, even though the fact that the posts on the virtual influencer's account never occurred. This could be referred to as content with staged authenticity - where the social media posts are displaying a situation that never actually happened but is still considered to be authentic. By being present on several platforms - using different medias increases the virtual influencer authenticity, and the content feels more genuine. For example, by creating video material on YouTube and posting pictures and/or videos on Instagram. Video provides the consumer with the possibility to learn more about the virtual influencer and their created personality, since, consumers can hear the virtual influencer's voice whilst at the same time interpret movement and facial expressions.

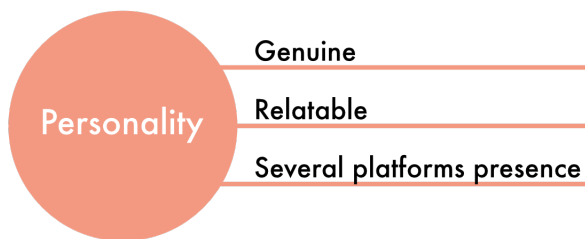


Fig. 7. Personality

The third factor, *Continuity* refers to that consumers perceive virtual influencer as more authentic when interacting with the virtual influencer over time. This was shown through that the respondents that first participated in the focus groups and encountered virtual influencers, were more positive to the notion of the virtual influencer in their interview, than the interviewed respondents who hadn't attended the focus groups and therefore never seen a virtual influencer before. The respondents that had attended the focus groups were also more positive to the specific virtual influencers that were shown to them in the interviews, i.e., our study shows that just by encountering virtual influencers a second time makes the respondents perceive the virtual

influencers as more authentic. Thus, our findings indicate that, when virtual influencers have continuity (interact with consumers over time), the perceived authenticity of the virtual influencer increases. Interacting continuously over a longer period with the virtual influencer provides a possibility for the virtual influencer to build a relationship with the followers. The relationship is built through the harmonization of the previously discussed factors (Purpose and Personality), i.e., the consumers have accepted and understood the purpose of the virtual influencer and perceive that the virtual influencer has a certain personality. This decreases the perceived uncertainty among consumers and increases perceived trust and extensively authenticity. Further, virtual influencers also benefit from long-lasting brand collaborations. Virtual influencers could collaborate with several brands, even within the same industry, without having consumers perceive them as less authentic if the collaborations are long-lasting. Thus, if they collaborate over a longer period of time with the same brand their perceived authenticity increases.

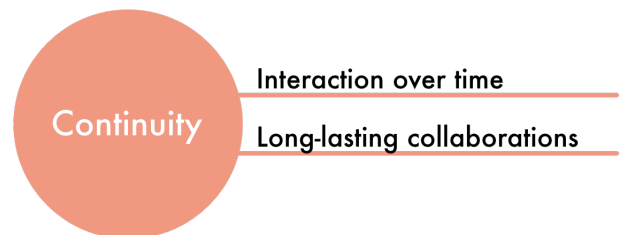


Fig. 8. Continuity

The last factor is *Transparency*, which refers to the transparency of the creators and the transparency of the virtual influencer's brand collaborations. This factor refers to how easy it is to access information regarding the creators, and how similar the creators are to their created virtual influencer. Knowing who created the influencer increased the perceived authenticity. The creators do not have to possess exactly the same personality as the virtual influencer, though, if the creators' opinion differs a lot from what is communicated on the influencer's account affect the perceived authenticity. Reconnecting to

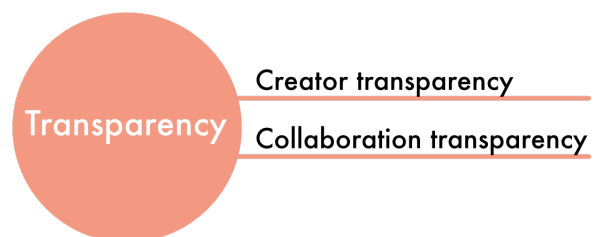


Fig. 9. Transparency

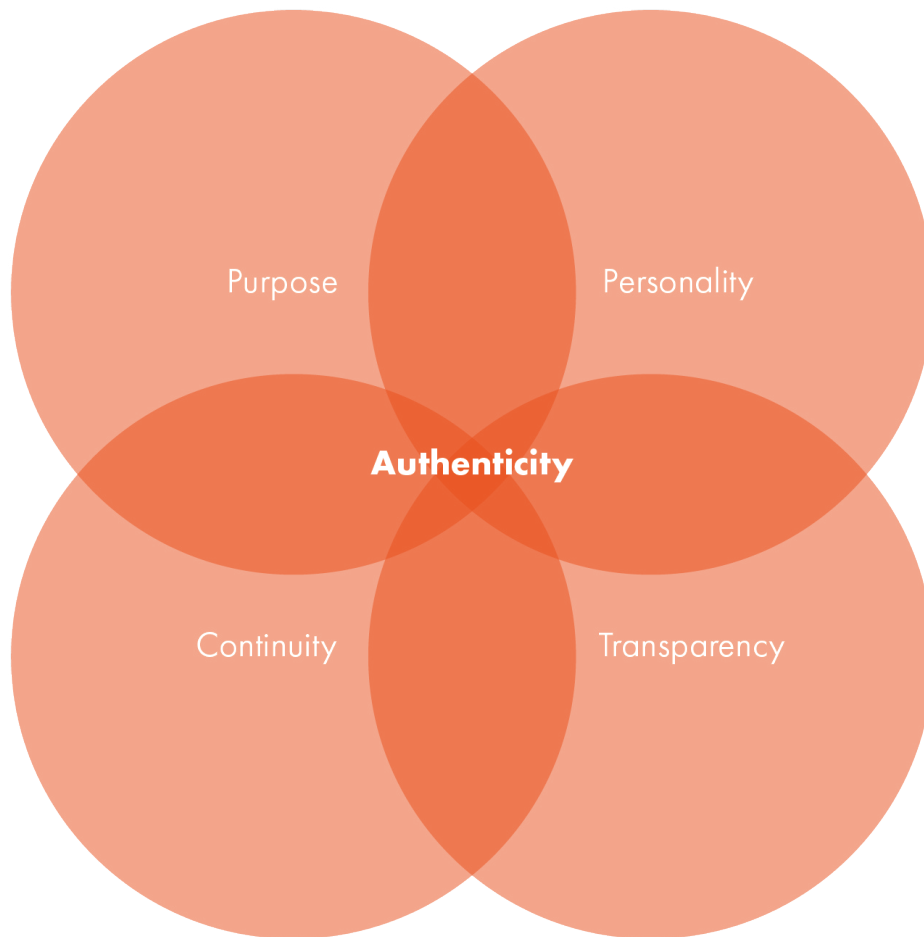


Fig. 10. *Four Factor Authenticity Model for Virtual Influencers*

the factor purpose, how transparent the creators' underlying intentions are also affecting the virtual influencers' authenticity. The fact that the virtual influencers are perceived as more authentic when openly communicating that a post on social media is sponsored can be referred the research of Audrezet et al. (2018), which found that human influencers are perceived as more authentic when they openly communicate that a post is sponsored. There is therefore a similarity between human and virtual influencers in how they are perceived as authentic.

Hence, we suggest a synthesis of these four factors (Purpose, Personality, Continuity, and Transparency) to form a model referred to as *Four Factor Authenticity Model for Virtual Influencers* (see Fig. 10) - for assessing how consumers perceive virtual influencers as authentic. The model consists of the four factors, including the underlying explanations of the factors, i.e., the factor Purpose is created by the purpose of the virtual influencer being simple, clear and understandable, Personality is created by

the virtual influencer being genuine, relatable and present on several platforms, Continuity is created by consumers interacting over time with the virtual influencer's followers and long-lasting brand collaborations, and Transparency is created by the creators' transparency and the virtual influencers' openness with brand collaborations. Though, to ease the visual interpretation of the model (fig. 10), only the actual factors are visually exhibited in the model (Purpose, Personality, Continuity and Transparency). The factors are all connected, which means that they all affect how consumers perceive virtual influencers' authenticity. A clear and understandable purpose, e.g., will lead to that the consumers perceive the personality of the virtual influencer as more authentic. Though, a single factor cannot exclusively make a virtual influencer perceived as authentic by consumers. For example, continuity will not enhance the perceived authenticity if the consumer does not understand the purpose of the virtual influencer, or if the virtual influencer does not transparently communicate sponsored posts.

Thus, all of the four factors are interrelated, and together form the consumers' perceived authenticity of virtual avatars. If the virtual influencer has a clear purpose, genuine personality, interacts continuously over time and is transparent with sponsorships and its creators this will lead to that the virtual influencer is perceived authentic by the consumer. This is shown in the heart (middle) of the model where all the factors are successfully met and therefore, consumers perceive the virtual influencer as authentic.

Four Factor Authenticity Model for Virtual Influencers is created from a consumer's perspective, i.e., how consumers interpret the virtual influencer's authenticity. It is compiled of the data from the three focus groups and eight in-depth interviews and should be interpreted as exploratory. The model is applicable from two angles. It could be used by researchers to test the model on different types of virtual influencers or virtual influencers in a different context, such as different countries or age group. Therefore, using the model in further research of virtual influencers could both improve and/or confirm it. Moreover, for companies and marketing agencies, the model can be used as a tool when creating a virtual influencer of their own.

Conclusion

The first part of the research was dedicated to finding out how virtual avatars are perceived as authentic. It was found that for virtual avatars to be authentic - they have to be relatable to consumers. This can be referred to as staged authenticity, which is described by Leigh et al. (2006) as, the more real an object feels - the more real it is, i.e., the virtual avatars and their content have to feel real to consumers and can, therefore, be perceived as authentic. The way that staged authenticity and the ability to relate to the avatar is achieved differs between the setting and the communication of the avatar. In games such as FIFA and Sims, which are based on simulating a realistic experience, realism is sought after both for the visual appearance of the avatar as well as the setting that the avatars are. Thus, making the avatars as real as possible will increase their staged authenticity, and therefore also the perceived authenticity of the game. Brands can enhance this feeling of realism - making the virtual avatar more relatable for the consumer where the consu-

mer can choose the brands they use themselves or that their idols use. When instead looking at the avatars which are used in a social setting such as the Snapchat avatar - the consumer becomes aware of the fact that the way the avatar is perceived will affect the ability to make social connections (Fong & Mar, 2015). Thus, when creating an avatar in a social context, the respondents try to create an ideal version of themselves to be perceived positively.

In contrast to the virtual avatars on realistically based games such as FIFA and Sims, our findings indicate that the subgenre virtual influencers' perceived authenticity does not always benefit from an increased feeling of realism. Consumers might instead be intimidated by realism and feel like they are being cheated. Our findings suggest that virtual influencers that appear less real (such as the virtual bee on Instagram Bee_influencer and virtual baby Bebiselis created by Swedish grocery chain ICA) are perceived to be more genuine and trustworthy than human-like virtual influencers, e.g., Lil-Miquela and Noonouuri. Hence, this indicates that less realistically looking virtual influencers, might also be perceived as more authentic. Although, an element that affected the respondents' perceived authenticity of the virtual influencers was their previous experience with playing computer and video games. The respondents who had less experience within gaming appeared to have a more negative perception of the human-like influencers than those respondents with more gaming experience.

Lastly, the respondents showed a desire for authenticity in the avatars and particularly virtual influencers, a desire that was not fully met. Kádeková and Holienčinová (2018) found that for a human influencer to achieve authenticity, they have to build a relationship with their followers/consumers. In our study of virtual influencers, the respondents had trouble seeing how they would form a relationship with the virtual influencer. Virtual influencers were new to all of our respondents, and therefore there was no time to develop a relationship. However, these findings indicate that human influencers still have an advantage over virtual influencers in terms of authenticity. Human influencers are more relatable to consumers and can, therefore, more easily create a relationship with the consumers.

The second research question addressed; what factors that make consumers perceive virtual influencers authentic. This study found four key factors, that determine what makes a virtual influencer perceived as authentic by consumers. The first factor is the virtual influencer's *Purpose*. To be perceived as authentic by the consumers the virtual influencer has to have a simple, clear, and understandable purpose that is affiliated to the virtual influencer's content. A virtual influencer has to have a reason for being created, and this reason has to be communicated clearly, to be perceived as authentic. For consumers to perceive a virtual influencer's purpose as authentic, they have to consider the virtual influencer to have expertise within the subject the promote. The second factor found was *Personality*. Personality was considered to be positive for the virtual influencer to have a genuine, unique, and humanized personality. Also, a personality that is relatable to humans and that the virtual influencer posts content of human-like relatable situations. Humanized personality is not referring to how the virtual influencer look, as mentioned above, it is not always positive to recreate exactly a humanly superficially appearance. In personality the influencer's presence is included, it was found positive for the influencer to be seen on several social platforms and several media forms, e.g., pictures on Instagram and videos on YouTube. The third factor found was *Continuity*, which refers to the virtual influencer's capability to interact with consumers several times. Continuous interactions with long ongoing brand collaborations increased the perception of authenticity. Though, a virtual influencer could have several collaborations with brands in the same sector without decreasing their perceived authenticity by the consumers. The last found factor was *Transparency*, which could be divided into two parts. The first part of transparency is linked with the transparency of the creators and their underlying intentions. Consumers perceive it positive, if the creators are available and if it is easy to access information regarding the creators of the virtual influencer. The second part of transparency is how open and transparent the sponsorships on social are communicated. The consumers' experience that clearly signifies sponsored posts, with text and visuals enhances the perceived authenticity. These factors were then graphically combined in our created model *Four Factor Authenticity Model for Vir-*

tual Influencers (find the model in the discussion part, Fig. 10). The factors are all interrelated, and which means that all together they create authenticity. Each factor has an impact on the consumer's perception of the virtual influencer's authenticity as a whole. Though, no factor could exclusively determine how consumers perceive the virtual influencer's authenticity. Authenticity is achieved when the virtual influencer has a clear purpose, genuine personality, interacts continuously over time, and is transparent with sponsorships and its creators.

As mentioned above, our study shows that consumers today experience that virtual influencers are not as authentic compared to human influencers. Though, there are several indicators that it is depending on the novelty of the phenomenon of virtual influencer, and that the perception of virtual influencers is likely to change when virtual influencer goes more viral. This study's created model could then be of guidance to determine the virtual influencer's perceived authenticity by consumers.

To summarize, this study contributes to the research of authenticity generally and staged authenticity particularly, by adding knowledge regarding virtual avatars and virtual influencers' perceived realism, and how consumers' perceptions are affected by their previous gaming/virtual experience. Our study further contributes to increased theoretical knowledge about how consumers perceive virtual avatars and virtual influencers - by adding the theoretical concept of authenticity to better understand how consumers understand them. This is generated through our created model *Four Factor Authenticity Model for Virtual Influencers* - where the four factors (*Purpose, Personality, Continuity and Transparency*) function as means to understand how consumers assess the authenticity of virtual influencers. Therefore, our study contributes to the theoretical concept of authenticity by including virtual avatars and virtual influencers to authenticity, whilst contributing to the theory regarding virtual avatars and virtual influencers by adding authenticity as a tool to evaluate them.

Managerial implications

As the gaming industry and the number of virtual influencers is increasing (Lui, Piccoli & Ives, 2007), companies are risking making digital marketing in-

vestments that are either irrational, not sufficient enough, or misplaced. There are today several different types of virtual avatars, which make it difficult for companies to sort among and set the avatar marketing-strategy with the most return. This study might, therefore, be of guidance for companies in understanding how to work with virtual avatars and virtual influencers. Companies could use our conclusion regarding how consumers perceive realism and previous gaming/industry knowledge when using virtual avatars in their marketing. The superficial realism of virtual avatars does not always lead to increased authenticity, which could be of importance for companies when creating avatars. Further, companies can for example use our suggested *Four Factor Authenticity Model for Virtual Influencers* when creating a virtual influencer of their own. Making sure that it checks all the elements discussed in the model (purpose, personality, continuity, and transparency). Doing this might guide companies in creating an authentic virtual influencer. When the virtual influencer is created, the model could also work as a framework for setting marketing strategies for the virtual influencer, e.g., creating a personality through presence on several platforms, or create continuity through long-going brand collaborations.

Limitations and future research

Since our study has focused on the consumer's perspective, future research could contribute to the theory of virtual avatars and virtual influencers by taking a different perspective. It would be interesting to take a company perspective and assess the impact of using avatars and virtual influencers in marketing. An extension of the company's perspective of virtual influencers is to research on marketing efficiency of using a human versus virtual influencer. There are today only speculations on the efficiency of human versus virtual influencers. There are still several factors that have not been researched, such as, influencer's conversation rate, spending on influencers, and time management. To compare efficiency between human and virtual influencers could be done from several perspectives, the companies, the consumers, or the creators. Additionally, future research could revolve around the perspective of the virtual influencer as well, to see

how they build their perceived authenticity.

Further, the model Four Factor Authenticity Model for Virtual Influencers could be extended and tested on different influencers, in different geographical areas and applied to different age groups. What is a speculative thought is that the perceived authenticity might differ between countries and regions depending on how developed the phenomenon is, i.e., if the consumers are used to seeing virtual avatars and virtual influencers. The understanding of consumer perception of virtual influencers and virtual avatars could also be deepened by looking at different age groups, it might be that younger generations generally have more positive perceptions than older due to them being more used to virtual avatars and virtual influencers. Younger generations tend to be more present in contexts' where avatars virtual avatars appear - such as gaming and social media and therefore might be more used to virtual avatars and virtual influencers. Future research could also improve the understanding of virtual avatars and virtual influencers by looking at other types of virtual avatars and virtual influencers, for example, by including male virtual influencers in the analysis. Moreover, it would also be interesting to repeat our study in a few years. The phenomenon of virtual influencers is relatively novel and is predicted by Kádekova and Holienčinová (2018) to grow, making it difficult to forecast how the respondents' perceptions of virtual influencers authenticity will evolve in the future. On the other hand, the notion of human influencers has grown in the last few years (Audrezet et al., 2018). Although, when the respondents reviewed how they changed their perception of human influencers in the last few years, they expressed that they felt that human influencers are less authentic today than five years ago. Doing similar studies as ours in a few years could valuably contribute to our findings since perceptions might change due to that the phenomenon is growing. As the analysis shows, previous gaming experience and industry knowledge affected the respondent's perception of authenticity. There are studies made on the impact of previous gaming experience for example by Gammoh et al. (2018). The respondent in this study had roughly the same technological background, and if other respondents with either higher or lower technical knowledge had been chosen, could impact the result. Therefore, it could be

interesting to test the model on respondents with different technical backgrounds.

Lastly, another area that would contribute to the understanding of virtual influencers is to study them from a creator perspective. Here, the authenticity management framework created by Audrezet et al. (2018) could be used in a qualitative study to assess the authenticity of the virtual influencers. The framework would be applicable, since the virtual influencers' inner motivations and desires are driven by the creators, which, in turn, determine the authenticity of the virtual influencer.

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Appendix

Template - Focus Group Questions

Beginning

If we say avatar, what does first come to your mind?

What avatars do you use, have used or come in contact with?

Virtual World Inhabitant Avatar = Graphic representation of the internet user on in the virtual universe, *metaverse* or 3D social networks. (Sims, Habbo, GTA)

What's important when creating your VWI-avatar?

Can you mention any brand that you have seen in a game/virtual world?

Do you like the fact that you can use existing real brands for your avatar? (why)

Is there a difference what type of game it is and what type of advertising that fits and what doesn't?

If you have a snapchat Bitmoji, please show it and explain your choices of clothing etc.
In what cases do you use your Snapchat Bitmoji to communicate?

Is there something missing when you are creating your avatar?

Gaming avatar = Graphic representation of the gamer though a character, human or not. (FIFA, Need for speed, COD)

What type of games do you play and what avatars do you use there?

Related to games, what avatars first comes to your mind?

In games do you make the avatar similar looking to yourself? (same height, skin color, hair etc., clothing style)

When creating an avatar in for example FIFA, do you like the fact that you can choose existing brands (nike, adidas etc.) for your avatar to wear?

What are you missing in creating your in-game avatar today?

What do you think of games that are created from movies? Do they feel as if you were in the movie? For example, Star Wars Battlefront.

Virtual influencers = fictional computer generated people who have human characteristics, features and personalities of humans. (Lil Miquela, ICA-bebis, Shudu (Elis) Liam Nikuro, Noonouri)

Do you follow any influencers and if you do, why do you follow influencers on for example Instagram?

Have you ever purchased a product recommended or worn by a influencer? Alternative question: Have you ever intended to buy a product and negatively changed your mind after seeing a influencer have worn/used that product?

Show commercial Samsung. Who was virtual? What do you think of the commercial?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AogkLmimfRU> (Samsung)

Show commercial of Bella Hadid and Lil-Miquela, What do you think of it?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2jdb3o2UtE> (Calvin Klein)

Have you ever purchased a product that you encountered on a virtual being/person?

What do you like/dislike with influencer trying to advertise products? (helpful/inspiring vs scam)

What is the benefit of a influencer being human?

What is the benefit of a influencer being virtual?

What do you think of the different types of virtual influencers? Show examples:

Lil-Miquela
Noonoouri
Ica bebis Elis

Does your opinion on the virtual influencer depend on if you know who is creating it?
(and does it matter who it is)

What are you missing in the influencers today?

Have your opinion changed regarding influencers the last three years?

Here are the two creators of the virtual influencer Lil-Miquela

Generally, would you trust a virtual or human influencer more? Why?

Ending

Are there any additional thoughts or something that you feel that we should have addressed during this session?

Appendix continues on next page...

Template - Interview questions - For new respondents

Questions for new respondents

1. What do you think about when you hear the word influencer?
2. Do you follow any influencers? Which?
3. Have you ever purchased a product recommended by an influencer?
4. What influencers do you like/dislike?
5. What do you think of when you hear the word virtual influencer?
6. Video - What did you see? Who was virtual?
7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnNGefHPVy0>
8. Video, Commercial with Bella Hadid & Lil-Miquela, What do you think?
9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h2jdb3o2UtE>
10. Ask respondents to use their own Intragram and visit the various influencers (what do you think about them, which images work/which don't, what do you think of the bio? (when it is branded content ask you they feel about the brand and what it does for the virtual influencer)
11. What are the pros of a human influencer?
12. What are the pros of a virtual influencer?
13. What are the cons of a human influencer?
14. What are the cons of a virtual influencer?
15. In which situations do you think that a virtual influencer could work? (clothing, food)
16. For which age do you think that virtual influencers are made for? (are they okay for every age?)
17. What changes when the virtual influencer is not human-like? (In what way is it positive/negative that a virtual influencer is human-like?) show bee-example (ask person to scroll through and ask if the surroundings matter (paris in that case)
18. How are the creators behind the virtual influencer affecting your opinion? (show Lil-Miquela's creators)
19. What do you think of a virtual character of James Bond would go on Instagram?
20. Would you consider buying something or donating money to a virtual influencer?
21. Would you trust a human or virtual influencer more?
22. Have you ever purchased a product that you encountered on a virtual being/person?
23. Have we missed something?

Template - Interview questions - For respondents that participated in focus group

Template - Interview questions - For respondents that participated in a focus group

1. Have you encountered any virtual influencers since we last met? (Follow up: Can you show? Have you started to follow any of them?) (if the person hasn't mentioned it before in the focus groups) Do you follow any influencer? and if so name some of them
2. Ask respondents to use their own Instagram and visit the various influencers (what do you think about them, which images work/which don't, what do you think of the bio? (when it is branded content ask you they feel about the brand and what it does for the virtual influencer)
3. What are the pros of a human influencer?
4. What are the pros of a virtual influencer?
5. What are the cons of a human influencer?
6. What are the cons of a virtual influencer?
7. How has your perception of virtual influencers changed since we last met? (for example if you look at Lil-Miquela again now that you have seen her before, has your perception changed?)
8. In which situations do you think that a virtual influencer could work? (clothing, food, travel)
9. For which age do you think that virtual influencers are made for? (are they okay for every age?)
10. What changes when the virtual influencer is not human-like? (In what way is it positive/negative that a virtual influencer is human-like? Does it feel as real as the human-like? Would you trust a non-human like influencer more?) show bee-example (ask person to scroll through and ask if the surroundings matter (Paris in that case)
11. If you would create a virtual influencer what would you do?
12. Show interview with Lil-Miquela. (What do you think of it? What feels real or unreal? What do you think of the voice that is used for her? Has your perception of her changed after hearing the song and listening to the interview)
13. How are the creators behind the virtual influencer affecting your opinion? (should they be align with the virtual influencer, how many creators should it be)
14. What do you think of a virtual character of James Bond would go on Instagram?
15. Would you consider buying something or donating money to a virtual influencer?

Pictures used in the focus groups and the interviews

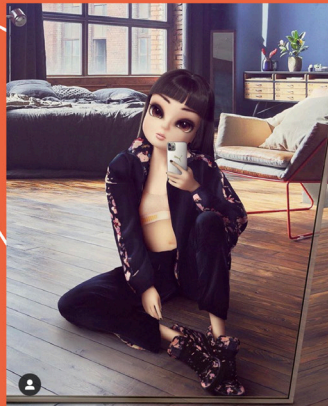
Lil-Miquela



The pictures are print-screens from Lil-Miquela's Instagram account. The first picture shows Lil-Miquela's Instagram biography, and the second picture is a picture of her doing pottery. Lastly, the third picture is her doing a collaboration with Samsung. The pictures were used in the focus groups and the interview with the respondents that did not participate in the focus groups.

Source: The account Lil-Miquela on instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/lilmiquela?hl=sv>)

Noonoouri



The images we showed was pictures from Noonoouri's Instagram account. First we showed Noonoouri's Instagram biography. Secondly, a selfie (as displayed above) by Noonoouri. Lastly, a third picture of her doing a collaboration with Vogue. The pictures were used in the focus groups and the interview with the respondents that did not participate in the focus groups.

Source: The account Noonoouri on instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/noonoouri?hl=sv>)

Bebiselis



The images we showed was pictures from Bebiselis' Instagram account. First we showed Bebiselis' Instagram biography. Secondly, a picture (as displayed above) on Elis lying on a blanket. Lastly, a third picture of her baking for Christmas. The pictures were used in the focus groups and the interview with the respondents that did not participate in the focus groups.

Source: *The account Bebiselis on instagram* (<https://www.instagram.com/bebiselis?hl=sv>)

Lil-Miquela's creators

In the focus groups and the interviews the respondents were shown a picture of the creators of the virtual influencer Lil-Miquela. The picture shows the two creators Trevor McFedries and Sara Decou. We have included a link below where the image is accessible.

Source: <https://www.businessoffashion.com/community/people/trevor-mcfedries-sara-decou>

Video links used in the focus groups and the interviews

The televised commercials were used in both the focus groups and the interviews. The interview with Lil-Miquela was only used in the interview.

Samsung commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AogkLmimfRU>

Calvin Klein commercial: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuTowFf6B9I>

Interview with Lil-Miquela: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6wnHsEoTmc>