



Virtual Influencers

*Cutting Costs,
Lacking Authenticity.*

photo by ChatGPT



**Analyzing Puma's
Virtual Influencer
Maya**

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The AI-Driven Influencer Revolution

Athletic apparel giant *Puma* chose to create an AI-generated virtual influencer, a.k.a. a fake human who lives online, called Maya as the influencer/brand ambassador for the South Asian region. Her primary purpose was to promote their new sneaker line, *Future Rider*, launched in early 2020. South Asia was a region that needed a boost in marketing, as the area accounted for the least amount of Puma sales globally. At 28%, South Asia represented the weakest link in Puma's global marketing chain (Quang, pg. 6). Finding a single influencer who would appeal across the entire region was difficult because of the diverse countries within it. There was also stiff competition from Indonesia, Singapore, and South Korea, who all had well-developed influencer industries. Korea had K-pop, and Singapore had many celebrity-influencer marketing driven campaigns. (Quang, pg. 6) Finding an influencer who would stand out against this stark competition called for something new, innovative, and different.

Puma opted for an AI influencer instead of a human influencer for two main reasons. One was to exercise a "unicorn" strategy that the firm Ensemble Worldwide utilized for all its clients, and the other was simply to put means to an end. Puma was initially searching for a human influencer, but in facing difficulty finding one, they agreed upon the solution of inventing an influencer who would summarize the region since there were no better human alternatives in their specific situation. There was a heavy mix of diversity in the South Asian market, with Singapore, India, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc., all exercising unique cultures. While an influencer may have qualities that appeal to India, such as expertise and credibility, Pakistan would be more interested in an influencer with religious sensitivity. If there are no existing feasible solutions, companies almost have no choice but to venture into the blue ocean.

There were many proven advantages of opting for a virtual influencer. Scalability is much easier to achieve, as the company does not have to account for travel costs, and the AI influencer will not have any personal preferences that may contradict with certain cultures in the region. The opportunity for growth is clear as the AI influencer can be adapted to directly suit whichever community they are created for. Adapting human influencers to other cultures is unethical and would be met with resistance. The use of an AI persona is also a huge bonus point for brand differentiation, especially as the South Asian region had never seen an AI influencer before, and they were growing in popularity in the U.S. Blue-ocean strategies

like this almost always make for strong brand differentiation, especially when they fill a significant gap in the market.

AI-Generated Influencers vs. Human Influencers: Advantages and Risks

Despite the benefits offered in scalability and differentiation, AI-generated influencers often fail to create real brand engagement compared to human influencers. AI-generated influencers contradict the reason for using influencer marketing, which is bringing a human connection into marketing and establishing intimacy with the audience. Marketers turned to influencers to help with promotion because they recognized consumers were less willing to trust advertisers and had purchasing behavior heavily influenced by their peers. An AI influencer is like an advertiser wearing a mask. No common human is bridging the gap between consumers and advertisers. A fake human means a fake human connection, and little to no trust. 24% of Gen-Z survey respondents found virtual influencers authentic compared to the 41% authenticity of human influencers. (pg. 4) When searching for a human influencer, marketers don't only consider their follower count, but also how authentic they are and how much an audience *trusts* the influencer. They must be "relatable, engaging, and reachable." (Quan, pg. 3) While virtual influencers can be relatable and engaging, they can never be reachable because they don't exist. It is simply impossible for a virtual influencer to be authentic because they are programmed. Other people are making all their decisions for them.

The advantages of using AI influencers are, for the most part, advantages the company enjoys, not the consumers. For example, a huge advantage of using an AI influencer is the lower cost. While they may be initially expensive to build, the company's cost is less in the long run since they don't have to pay the influencer themselves. The company keeps all the revenue, and the AI influencer is getting nothing, as they are not a real person with financial needs. Consumers are not concerned with the company's revenue. The biggest risk companies face with virtual influencers is losing trust with their customers. Advertising can be naturally deceiving and manipulative, but the presence of a fake human is clear deception. While consumers recognize that the company is writing what the virtual influencer is posting, they don't know who exactly that is. They know it is not the person in the post, so there is already a disconnect happening. With a well-liked human influencer, it's very clear who the communication is coming from.

The way for companies to successfully use AI influencers would be to hide the fact that this is not a real person. This would be possible with high-quality technology, but even then, issues would arise when fans or fellow human influencers want to meet them in person.

“Maya” did boost consumer engagement and brand awareness for Puma, as the character had over 8,500 followers on Instagram at the time of her last post in August 2020, and had previously reached 10,000 followers just two months after her initial launch. (Quang, pg. 9) Consumers were said to be curious about her and had interacted and flirted with her online. A lot of the interest in Maya came around speculation on whether or not she was real. Speculation is not the same thing as interest, but it is beneficial for awareness as consumers discuss the character with one another. Maya did create a lot of “buzz,” which lasted for about 10 months (Quang, pg. 10). However, the “buzz” died out, because after consumers discover something innovative and different, but it never changes, they lose interest. This is unless the innovation is a product that has directly transformed their daily routines. Shock only lasts so long. Overall, Maya’s launch received mixed results. The campaign likely did generate enough organic traction to justify its execution, but only due to confusion and short-term shock value. It was also not able to adapt to societal changes like COVID-19 and maintain brand sensitivity. Human influencers typically receive higher metrics as they can authentically engage with their followers through livestreams and DMs. The most followed virtual influencer is Lil Miquela at 2.4 million, compared to celebrities like Selena Gomez with 421 million followers. Overall, the insights Puma gained from creating Maya were more valuable than the profit and engagement they generated.

Puma’s head of digital strategy might first collect data on the sentiment analysis of Maya. Are consumers intrigued by her because she is AI-generated, or do they find the concept creepy, uncomfortable, or deceiving? If the latter, Maya’s personality must be adapted to seem friendly and approachable, solidifying the fact that she is there to celebrate South Asian culture and not to deceive. Consumers would have lasting interest in Maya if they felt culturally and emotionally connected to her, not because she’s AI-generated. If SoMin.ai could humanize her with a defined personality and physical features that closely resemble reality, her appeal could be built off of connection, and not the fact that she’s AI-generated. However, this is not a possibility *after* her launch, if consumers are already aware that she is AI-generated.

Much like the case on THE YES, the question is whether the team should invest in enhancing the technology, or in advertising the technology at its current state. Which method would increase engagement? It would make sense to first enhance the technology and then invest in advertising, perhaps splitting the budget to achieve small increments of both. For advertising, Puma could expand her presence across TikTok and have her participate in collaborations with real athletes. Integrating her presence with real-life KOLs could help her seem more familiar, and prove that AI can collaborate with and enhance human influencers, without replacing them entirely.

Investment and ROI

Puma would need to dedicate a large amount of their budget to SoMin.ai if they wished to develop and maintain Maya. They would additionally need to pay for social media management and content creation teams to work on clarifying Maya's personality beyond her visuals. According to a study by Influencer Marketing Hub, brands spent an average of \$18,000 to \$30,000 on a single virtual influencer campaign in 2023, with brands like Nike investing over \$1 million in virtual influencer campaigns (Dave Ansari, *Communicate*, 2024.) It's a lot more work to build a following from scratch than to tap into an existing network. However, paying human influencers is more expensive. Brands that wish to collaborate with high-profile celebrities or influencers would have to pay a hefty fee that exceeds the cost of building an AI model. For Instagram, influencers typically charge \$10 for every \$1,000 followers, so paying an influencer with 1 million followers to post for the brand would cost \$10,000 per post (WebFX.) That would be \$20,000 for just two posts from a human influencer, compared to \$18,000 for the entire virtual influencer campaign.

Due to these factors, ROI for virtual influencers would be higher than ROI for human influencers. In terms of long-term scalability, the money saved by using virtual influencers could be used in other areas of marketing, such as advertising the brand's products through paid media. Brand consistency would also be stronger given that creators have full control over the influencer. As seen in the Puma case, marketers were even able to curate the face of the virtual influencer to reflect their audience and brand, which is not an option with human influencers. Virtual influencers are a literal embodiment of the brand, while human influencers will inevitably implement their individual brand into the marketing. Given the high ROI and brand control

considerations, it would be smarter for Puma to double down on AI marketing rather than revert to human influencers, especially if they could advance their technology to make Maya more human-like to fill the absence of an authentic human touch. Ansari concludes, "As the technology continues to improve and the cost of virtual influencers continues to make more sense, we can expect to see even more brands switching to virtual influencers." (Dave Ansari, *Communicate*, 2024)

The Future of AI Influencer Marketing

It's worth noting that the virtual influencer landscape has evolved significantly since Maya's launch. The global market for virtual influencers is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 38.9% from 2023 to 2030, indicating increasing potential for such campaigns (dreamfarmagency.) Given advancements in AI and generative content, virtual influencers are likely to evolve to become more realistic, so the differentiation between them and human influencers becomes blurry. This will be an advantage for brands, as their unique and personalized influencer will be able to form an authentic emotional connection with users who don't realize they're relating to someone who isn't real. As far as digital global outreach, this is certainly a strong point. Other global brands would do well to follow Puma's lead, especially if they find themselves in a similar situation where they face difficulty in finding influencers to represent certain regions. They would be wise to approach the situation similarly to Puma, having the influencer built from a mix of faces of people from the region, to make the character all the more relatable to the group and did merely an idealized looking human. They should ensure that their AI software is adaptable and able to respond to real-world disruptions like COVID-19, so they do not have to end their campaign because of brand sensitivity issues like Puma did.

As there are advantages and disadvantages of employing AI models, the answer of whether or not to do so is not a clear yes or no; it depends on the company and their situation. A smaller company who cannot afford to pay highly sought after human influencers may find a solution in opting for an AI figure as they are costly up front but much cheaper in the long run, offer global scalability, and some (but not all) of the benefits of human influencers will be in reach for their marketing. Unless a company is stuck with limited resources, AI models should not

replace human influencers, because when the goal is human connection they can only come from a place of deception, and they are often too one dimensional to hold interest for long. AI models should be used only as a temporary replacement and stepping stone towards human influencers.

AI-driven marketing will become a mainstream advertising tool, and in fact, it already has. Virtual influencers only scratch the surface of AI's capabilities in advertising. Generative AI can quickly and effectively create images and videos that capture the impossible, placing viewers in imaginative worlds that are fascinating and engaging. Any tool that gives companies such a huge advantage like AI will be a priority, not a niche strategy.

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