



## What's real and what isn't? Welcome to the virtual influencers

Parents are being warned of a fresh online threat to children from social media influencers who look real and post photos of themselves with other celebrities, but are in fact digital creations of the advertising industry.

The rise of deep fakes and virtual influencers allows companies to 'easily manipulate' young people and threatens to damage their wellbeing, according to Internet Matters, an online campaign designed to keep everyone under 18 safe on the Internet. The campaign is **backed by** internet service providers and social media companies.

Perhaps the most famous fake influencer is Lil Miquela, a virtual singer and model created by a US company, who has 1.6 million followers on Instagram®. There are all sorts of rumours about Lil Miquela. One theory is that she's a real singer who doesn't want to become famous and so hides behind an online persona. Another theory is that she has been created by someone in the music business who has suddenly realised that traditional singers and artists are losing popularity. What we do know for a fact is that a few years ago she was used by the fashion house Prada® as a star of one of their seasonal shows in Milan and that she was awarded the honour of appearing in the *Time* magazine list of the top 25 most influential people of the year, even though she isn't really a person.

Nobody can deny that influencers are big business. InfluencerDB, a company that supplies influencer-management software, claimed that \$5 billion was spent on Instagram influencer marketing in 2018. In that case, it seems to make sense to begin using virtual influencers instead of spending so much money on real people. Thanks to improvements in 3-D imaging, it has become much cheaper and easier in recent times to create digital influencers. And it goes without saying that CGI influencers don't need to have their hair done or to get expensive professionals to do their make-up, either. Not to mention the fact that they don't make mistakes or create problems for their bosses. The deciding factor for advertisers, though, is that they bring something that real influencers have already lost and that advertising companies always need – novelty value. They really do offer something original that can capture the public's attention.

'The virtual influencer gives brands and corporations the ability to create posts that feature perfect boys and girls who can speak to a large young audience at the click of a button,' said psychologist Dr Linda Papadopoulos, an ambassador for Internet Matters. 'This potentially allows companies to easily manipulate young people by using live data to create the most influential series of images.'

The virtual influencers sometimes describe themselves as robots, but also act as if they were human – what the industry calls 'mixed reality'. Lil Miquela wrote recently: 'I keep a Spotify® list of stuff I'm listening to, but outside of that, I've been really into Skee Mask and Nina Kraviz. I found a cool remix of that new Lizzo song I really like the other day. But yeah, the new Billie Eilish and Slayyyter songs are on repeat, too.' Her Instagram posts show her **posing with** real musicians backstage.

'This in-between thing can be very difficult for children,' Papadopoulos said. 'A child needs role models but these role models are being created by **marketeers**. They aren't real and create nothing but attention-seeking. They are **grabbing** attention and for what? They are not there to educate and empower; they are there to engage and they do that by making us feel afraid, angry and insecure. The biggest thing we can do for our kids is get them to think critically, to ask, am I being influenced by an individual or a group? And why?'

Peter Fonagy, the chief executive of the Anna Freud Centre for child mental health, said fake influencers were an example of computers being used to **mimic** a deep psychological process which allows people to trust others. They can recreate the feeling of being recognised.

'The problem is that AI can mimic this process,' said Fonagy. 'You can programme it so that the optimal number of people feel that this voice can be trusted ... I am not trying to create a moral panic, but it is important we are aware computers can mimic some important aspects of what the human brain has evolved to be able to detect.'

Advertising industry sources said that within two or three years, artificial intelligence would allow virtual influencers to generate their own fresh Instagram posts using machine learning to analyse data about followers and work out how best to manipulate them.

In the UK, fashion photographer Cameron-James Wilson has already created a team of virtual models, which have been used to promote Smart cars, Ellesse® and KFC®.

'There are some virtual influencers that aren't showcasing that these models *aren't real*, and I find that quite worrying,' he said. 'If you are liking and following an account and you don't know who is behind it, you could be following someone with completely different views.'