

## TYOLOGY OF OPINION LEADERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: INNOVATIVE INTEGRATION OF HUMAN, HYBRID, AND VIRTUAL FORMS

**Ing. Simona Burzová**

Department of Marketing

Faculty of Commerce

Bratislava University of Economics and Business

Dolnozemska cesta 1, 85235 Bratislava

e-mail: simona.burzova@euba.sk

**Ing. Simona Balaščáková**

Department of Marketing

Faculty of Commerce

Bratislava University of Economics and Business

Dolnozemska cesta 1, 85235 Bratislava

e-mail: simona.balascakova@euba.sk

### Abstract

This article compares traditional celebrities, human influencers, and virtual influencers, emphasizing the innovative role of AI-driven forms. Results indicate that virtual influencers offer brands unique advantages such as stability, controlled content, and higher engagement rates. Despite concerns about authenticity, they represent a promising innovation in shaping consumer preferences and enhancing marketing effectiveness.

**Key words:** Digital influencers, Innovation in marketing communication, Opinion leaders, Virtual influencers

### INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of opinion leaders has long been a central topic in marketing and communication research. While traditional celebrities and, later, digital influencers have been extensively studied as key actors shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors, virtual influencers remain a relatively unexplored domain. Emerging from advancements in digital technology and artificial intelligence, virtual influencers represent a new and innovative form of communication. Their growing presence on social media platforms highlights the need for systematic academic inquiry. This paper seeks to contextualize their role by comparing them with both traditional and digital influencers, with particular attention to their potential in marketing practice.

### METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this article is to examine the evolving typology of opinion leaders with a particular focus on virtual influencers, and to assess their potential role and functionality within contemporary marketing communication. To achieve this aim, the study employs a qualitative

research design based on a systematic review and synthesis of relevant academic literature. Secondary data sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs, and empirical studies, were critically analyzed to trace the historical development from traditional celebrities to digital influencers and to highlight the emerging phenomenon of virtual influencers. A comparative approach was adopted to identify similarities and differences among these categories and to emphasize the innovative dimension introduced by artificial intelligence technologies. The methodological framework of this article thus integrates descriptive analysis, theoretical reflection, and conceptual comparison, providing a foundation for further empirical research.

### TYOLOGY OF OPINION LEADERS: TRADITIONAL CELEBRITIES AND DIGITAL INFLUENCERS

The evolution of cultural and societal changes has been accompanied by an increasing scholarly interest in examining figures who serve as generational idols. This interest has been approached from various perspectives, gradually leading to the development of diverse categories of opinion leaders. According to Bergström and Belfrage (2018), an opinion leader is an educated individual with in-depth knowledge in specific fields, whose expertise grants them recognized authority within a given context. There are multiple ways to differentiate among the various types of opinion leaders.

One of the fundamental classifications of opinion leaders that holds particular relevance today is the distinction between traditional celebrities and digital influencers. This differentiation reflects the transformation of the media landscape in the 21st century, where digital influencers gain societal influence primarily through social media platforms, while traditional celebrities established their status predominantly via mass media such as television, film, and print. Whereas advertising campaigns in earlier decades largely relied on traditional celebrities, the dynamics of digital platforms now enable individuals originally perceived as “ordinary” to emerge as opinion leaders [22].

Traditional celebrities may encompass both individuals and groups, most often associated with the entertainment and sports industries. Their fame is typically derived from physical attractiveness, economic capital, distinctive talent, professional accomplishments, or notable family background [9]. A key characteristic of this

category lies in the fact that traditional mass media produce both the content and the audience, while celebrities contribute mainly through their image and persona. The value of these figures is rooted in their capacity to attract audiences and to sustain societal attention over time [2, 12].

A digital influencer is defined as an individual who publishes content online and possesses a significant following [4, 23]. These are online personalities who exert influence over their audience through one or more social media platforms, achieving recognition primarily by creating and disseminating content within these environments. In the academic discourse, they are often referred to as “social media influencers,” “online influencers,” or “digital content creators.” It is important to note, however, that while every influencer is a content creator, not every content creator qualifies as an influencer. Although their popularity may eventually extend beyond the digital sphere, their origins are inherently rooted in social media platforms [5, 10].

Unlike traditional celebrities, whose public recognition stems from professional talent and achievements, digital influencers acquire popularity by cultivating an image of “expertise” in selected domains through authentic and enthusiastic content sharing on social media [11, 17]. Many social media users are able to capture attention in the early stages; however, transforming into a publicly recognized figure requires sustaining and gradually amplifying this interest. Only in this way can they achieve influencer status, which enables the monetization of their activities on these platforms. This process relies not only on personal skills but also on talent, charisma, and consistent work ethic [12]. The decisive factor distinguishing an individual with a large follower base from a true digital influencer lies in the integration of entrepreneurial skills and strategies into creative and communication processes. This ability is regarded as essential for building a digital presence that can be commercialized and converted into a sustainable source of income [11].

The fundamental distinction between traditional celebrities and digital influencers lies not only in the platforms through which they operate but also in the process of content creation. Digital influencers both produce their own content and simultaneously build their audiences, whereas traditional celebrities remain largely dependent on the media and entertainment industries, which determine who receives the opportunity to enter the spotlight [10]. Empirical evidence further indicates that individuals perceive influencers as relatively approachable and familiar figures who exhibit elements of social or value-based similarity with their audiences [8]. Research shows that as many as 92% of consumers report a higher level of trust in influencers than in traditional celebrities [20]. This

distinction is also reinforced by the fact that digital influencers devote significantly more time to engaging with their followers and actively seek to understand them better.

Digital influencers can be further classified according to several criteria. One of the most common methods of categorization is based on the size of their social media following. Within this framework, the following groups are distinguished [20, 25]:

- Nano-influencers (from 1000 to 10 000 followers),
- Micro-influencers (from 10 001 to 100 000 followers),
- Macro-influencers (from 100 001 to 1 000 000 followers),
- Mega-influencers (more than 1 000 000 followers).

Another widely applied approach is classification according to thematic focus, often referred to as their “motivation to act.” Based on this criterion, the following types can be identified [23]:

- Idols – popular personalities who primarily focus their messages on themselves, but frequently intertwine their content with other topics, such as politics or current social issues.
- Experts – specialists, consultants, reviewers, or testers who are recognized as authorities in a given field due to their knowledge and skills.
- Lifestyle influencers – individuals engaged in discussions on lifestyle and leisure activities, whose content typically addresses fashion, beauty, health, or travel.
- Activists – internet users who promote specific ideas and values through their content, often focusing on issues such as environmental protection, minority rights, or feminism.
- Artists – creators dedicated to producing visually and aesthetically appealing materials, most often in the form of photoblogs or curated social media profiles.

Digital influencers can also be categorized according to the platform on which they primarily operate. Within this classification, one may distinguish bloggers, YouTubers (with YouTube often regarded as the most profitable platform for digital influencers), Facebookers, Instagrammers, Snapchatters, and TikTokers. Moreover, it is important to consider platforms that are not dominant in the European context but play a crucial role in other markets. A prime example is the

Chinese platform WeChat, which has become one of the most widely used tools for communication and marketing promotion in China [6].

Another criterion is the level of activity on social media, which allows influencers to be divided into two categories: active and passive. The former includes creators who systematically and consistently produce content, making them attractive to companies seeking to promote their products and services. The latter encompasses individuals whose activity is irregular and unsystematic, and who are therefore not the primary targets of corporate collaborations. Nevertheless, such influencers may still command a large follower base, with their popularity often stemming from achievements in other fields such as sports, art, or public life [1].

### **TYOLOGY OF OPINION LEADERS: REAL AND VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS**

Another emerging typology distinguishes between *real* (so-called “live”) influencers and virtual influencers. The boundary between these two categories is gradually becoming less distinct [19]. Real, or human, influencers represent a driving force of contemporary digital marketing, as they rely on authenticity and a perceived closeness to their audience to establish connections with followers through social media platforms [3]. These are actual individuals who have gained popularity through their own activity in the online environment.

At the same time, a new era is unfolding in which the sustainability and long-term impact of live influencers is increasingly debated. Technological progress now makes it possible to create digital characters whose appearance closely resembles reality – so called virtual influencers (VI) [25]. According to Appel et al. (2020), virtual influencers may serve as potential alternatives to human counterparts. A virtual influencer is a fictional, computer-generated persona based on artificial intelligence that engages followers—particularly on Instagram—through the dissemination of digital content. They embody various identities and personas through which they conduct a “social and professional life,” articulate ideas, and convey emotions [15].

Some virtual influencers possess fully developed fictional lives and sophisticated personalities through which they express human emotions—such as sadness or affection—on social media platforms. Although artificially created, their content is designed to emulate the behavior and presentation style of real influencers. Consumers, however, are not always able to clearly determine the origin of such content, particularly whether it is controlled by humans or generated by artificial intelligence [18, 21]. At present, virtual influencers are predominantly created using motion graphics,

which are managed and directed by humans. Looking ahead, a transition toward automated, AI-driven content generation is anticipated. Software tools will be capable of autonomously producing posts by virtual influencers in contexts and situations that yield the highest levels of interaction, reach, or popularity on social media platforms [21, 25].

Virtual influencers possess fully constructed online identities, whereas human influencers gain popularity through authentic self-presentation. The emergence of virtual influencers raises several questions concerning the nature of influence and the role of authenticity in the digital age. While traditional influencers are rooted in personal experiences and life stories, virtual influencers are designed and controlled by creative teams who craft a cultivated image free from the unpredictability of human behavior [7]. Unlike real influencers—whose roles, appearance, and personas evolve and change throughout their lives, sometimes deliberately and other times unpredictably—virtual influencers may (but do not necessarily have to) remain unchanged. Their digital nature grants them unique advantages [14].

They are resistant to illness, fatigue, aging, and other physical limitations. Furthermore, they are not bound by time or place, which ensures brands continuous availability and opportunities for strategic use in marketing activities [16]. Virtual influencers thus provide brands with a degree of stability and predictability, offering the possibility of more deliberate storytelling and more precise long-term planning.

Despite existing concerns, virtual influencers have demonstrated a certain degree of effectiveness, particularly in engaging audiences through a unique combination of visual appeal, storytelling, and the novelty of their digital existence [7]. Their success across diverse fields highlights their versatility and potential as a new form of digital content. According to Baklanov (2019), virtual influencers may even achieve higher levels of interaction with followers compared to human influencers. However, the broader implications of such engagement for advertising effectiveness and subsequent consumer purchase intentions remain relatively underexplored.

Although virtual influencers represent a significant trend in the digital age, there is still insufficient empirical evidence to confirm their ability to fully replace real influencers or traditional celebrities in product and brand promotion. Nevertheless, one advantage of virtual influencers lies in the higher level of control over their content and behavior, which can help minimize human error.

### CLASSIFICATION OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS

In recent years, a growing number of studies have explored the phenomenon of influencers and their remarkable impact on perceptions, intentions, and consumer behavior. However, research specifically focused on virtual influencers is still in its early stages and continues to expand, primarily due to the novelty of this phenomenon. Existing empirical findings indicate that virtual influencers achieve nearly three times higher engagement rates with their followers compared to real influencers. This heightened interaction reflects a stronger audience interest in content generated by VIs. Based on a comparison of several scholarly categorizations and an analysis of the current state of practice, we propose a typology of virtual influencers according to their visual characteristics, distinguishing three categories [13, 24]:

1. Virtual influencer with a realistic human visuals = This type is often almost indistinguishable from an actual human being. Their physical features are designed to closely resemble human characteristics and may even include imitation of other traits, such as voice. The content they produce typically revolves around personal and social life, situating them in everyday human contexts—such as meeting friends or attending social events. An example is the first Slovak virtual influencer, Bejby

Blue.

2. Virtual influencer with an animated human visuals = The second type consists of animated characters that display some resemblance to humans but are primarily designed as 2D or 3D animations. They often appear within their own virtual worlds (though not exclusively), thereby blurring yet also reinforcing the boundaries between virtual and physical environments. A representative example is the Instagram persona Seraphine.
3. Virtual influencer with a non-human visuals = This category includes digital personas in the form of animals, animated objects, or abstract entities that may or may not exist in reality. Their content is usually not centered on lifestyle promotion but rather on specific themes, such as environmental awareness, comedy, or artistic expression. A notable example is the abstract character Nobody Sausage, active primarily on TikTok.

Since we have identified and described all categories of opinion leaders that are currently relevant not only for the purposes of this study but also within the contemporary social and digital environment, we present their systematic overview in Figure 1.

Research on opinion leaders has traditionally focused on celebrities, who for a long

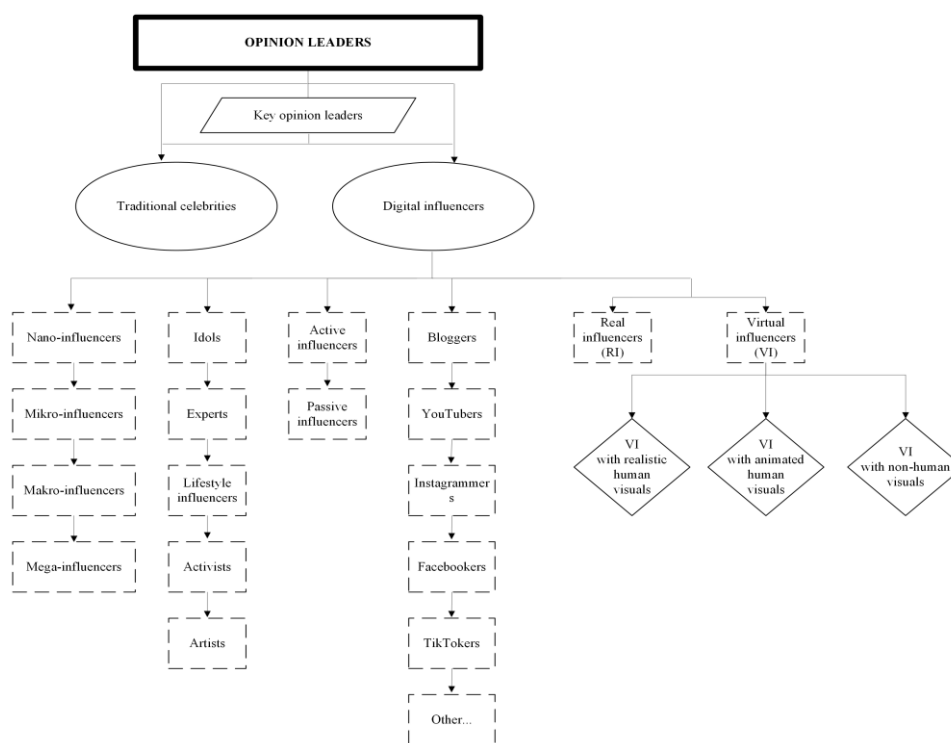


Fig. 1 Systematic overview of opinion leaders categories

time were regarded as the dominant actors in marketing communication. With the rise of social media, scholarly attention shifted to human digital influencers, whose impact is now relatively well examined. Virtual influencers, however, despite their increasing popularity, still represent a relatively novel phenomenon for which empirical evidence remains scarce. Their distinctive contribution lies in extending the boundaries of marketing communication, introducing new innovations, and offering brands unconventional opportunities, while at the same time raising questions of authenticity and trustworthiness.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of opinion leaders demonstrates a clear trajectory: from traditional celebrities, through human digital influencers, to the recent emergence of virtual influencers. Unlike their predecessors, virtual influencers embody the integration of advanced artificial intelligence technologies, which serve as a driving force of innovation in contemporary marketing communication. Their design, adaptability, and controlled presence introduce novel elements that expand the possibilities of brand promotion, storytelling, and consumer engagement. Virtual influencers represent more than a technological experiment; they symbolize a paradigm shift in how authenticity, trust, and influence are constructed in the digital age. By eliminating physical limitations and offering brands constant availability, they provide unprecedented opportunities for strategic planning and content personalization. As a result, they stand as a distinct innovation in communication and promotion, reshaping the relationship between brands and audiences. Future research is therefore essential to fully understand their impact, consumer perceptions, and long-term effectiveness within the evolving landscape of digital marketing.

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