

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS IN
THAILAND**



**A THEMATIC PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF MANAGEMENT
COLLEGE OF MANAGEMENT
MAHIDOL UNIVERSITY
2022**

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Thematic paper
entitled
**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS IN
THAILAND**

was submitted to the College of Management, Mahidol University
for the degree of Master of Management
on
April 30, 2022



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Technology and Innovation are interesting knowledge as it has a huge influence on both the economic and social sectors around the world. This is one reason for this study to understand consumer standard attitudes toward new technology as a virtual influencer. I would like to thank all interviewees who are my customers in each sector and my colleagues and friends who support my research by helping me get the right candidates for the interview.

I really want to express my thankfulness to my advisor, Associate Professor Dr. Randall Shannon, who continues providing me with great advice and encouragement. Your insightful feedback pushed me to contribute my thoughts and brought my work to a higher level. My sincere thanks to all professors at the College of Management, Mahidol University, who give me valuable knowledge and guidance throughout my studies. I would also like to thank all my friends at CMMU, especially my friend, Ms. Rungravee Sukit, who brought me to get started my master's study at CMMU.

A special thanks to my caring, loving, and supportive family and boss. Your encouragement pushes me to overcome difficulties and my laziness while studying and working.

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to understand consumer behavior and attitude toward virtual influencers and the possibility of growing this technology in Thailand. There are some agencies and companies in Thailand that have built virtual humans and created communities to build to influence consumers. This study aims to explore the attitudes of marketers in different business sectors and consumers of different ages toward virtual influencers in Thailand through the qualitative method. The 14 selected stakeholders are interviewed with open-end questions and the results showed that the interviewee from both groups pointed out various things about virtual influencers in Thailand based on their understanding and point of view which they separate into 3 subjects; 1) Perceptions of Influencers and Virtual Influencer, 2) Attitude toward the virtual influencers, and 3) Virtual influencers affect consumers' perception of products which it complies to the variables. In the end, the study provides the potential recommendations that the creator and marketer can apply when they bring virtual influencers into the Thai market which could be beneficial for them from a consumer's perspective.

KEYWORDS: Consumer Attitude / Virtual Influencer Marketing / Trustworthiness
/ Personality / Social Media

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, technology has changed the world tremendously and the COVID-19 situation is a part that prevents more people from going out and meeting on social media (Haenlein, Anadol, Farnsworth, Hugo, Hunichen, & Welte, 2020). One of the most effective marketing is 'influencers', which have more diverse and specific needs of consumers. These influencers often influence consumer decisions. These influencers often influence consumer decisions. As a result of this efficiency, the influencer market continues to grow. The different types of influencers are categorized according to the type and expertise of the influencers, with new categories being added to cover almost every market, including Influencers Market, Executive Influencers, Inclusive Influencers, Cross-border Influencers, and Virtual Influencers (Scheer, & Stern, 1992). It's not that easy as influencers themselves have to face higher competition in the influencer market. Brands themselves have to decide which influencers are right for their job and build trust through influencers to their products and services.

In terms of marketing needs, humans are clever enough to take advantage of technology to create sustainability in Influencer Marketing by creating a "Virtual Influencer" in the market. The benefit is the virtual influencers are under control. The creator can design the character, appearance, and lifestyle that match the brands. Virtual Marketing is growing fast and influencing a lot of the main channels like Instagram, YouTube, or TikTok, and many brands want to work with them to differentiate themselves. When a Virtual Influencer doesn't get old, doesn't get sick, doesn't die, it can continue to evolve in the future and it's very likely that in the future, big brands may want to create a Virtual Influencer to be a model to represent their brand. There may be Virtual Influencers of each brand who can work together in the future. The first virtual influencer launched in Brazil in 2016 and then it will happen in South Korea in 2020 as the first country in Asia, then China, and Japan.

Thailand launched the first Virtual Influencer in the country, Ailyn or Irene by SIA Bangkok. Irene is a 21-year-old bob-haired girl who has a career as a creative, freelancer, and influencer whose specialty is playing music, dancing, and taking photos, Irene was recently chosen by AIS as a Brand Ambassador to develop Metaverse Human in creating engagement in communication and creating experiences for customers in the New Normal era.

This study will be beneficial to Thai marketers and virtual influencer creators, to understand the acceptability of virtual influencers among Thai consumers.

1.1 Problem Statement

2022 continues to be the year that the ‘Influencers’ industry continues to grow as it is one of the most effective marketing campaigns in line with the diverse and more specific needs of today’s consumers. Nearly 70% of Thais are following at least one influencer, especially females who are more likely to follow than men. These influencers tend to influence consumer decisions based on their likes, trust, and promotions.

Therefore, belief in influencers can be a problem in accepting virtual influencers because consumers perceive virtual influencers as just something a brand or agency has created.

1.2 Research Questions

- 1) How do virtual influencers affect consumers’ attitudes? Why?
- 2) How can virtual influencers affect consumers’ perception of products?

1.3 Research Objectives

To gather the information from different sources of consumers and marketers to understand their perception of virtual influencers and reflection on their attitude towards the products, This research is based on a literature review which

includes background research from previous and related theories studies; and a set of one one one interviews with 5 marketers from different industries (Hospitality, Real estate, FMCG, Automotive, and Digital Agency) and a focus group of 3 people in different groups separated by age (18 - 29, 30 - 40, 41 -50+).

The next chapter is a literature review in which the chapter will demonstrate knowledge and an integrated overview of the progress made by other scholars and researchers on the proposal's topic.



CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Variables

2.1.1 Virtual Influencer Marketing

Over the past several years, we have been living in the online world until we have adapted, more and more people have started to trade and communicate on the Internet. The emerging careers include Youtubers divided into online sellers, product reviewers, and attractions as well as food, online producers, and 'influencers'.

All of these occupations play an important role in driving the economy through social media and are also key players in helping and influencing consumer decision-making. The influencer market is growing rapidly and there is still a lot of competition among influencers. Human influencers have a wide variety of habits, behaviors, thoughts, and shapes. Most of them will change over time, making it difficult to control the character to be consistent with the brand's customers, and there are also some influencers misbehaving which may affect the customer's brand. that is the customer of that influence as a presenter, which is no different from other celebrities that can directly impact brands from their behavior and lifestyle as discussed in the research of (Vollenbroek, & De Vries, Constantinides, & Kommers, 2014)

The advantage of technology that has an impact on influencers is that artificial intelligence (AI) innovations are advancing every day and one of the technologies that the world is interested in and constantly evolving is 'Virtual World'. Why? Because when we have problems using various influencers. So we came up with a replacement that could work for us in the same way, but sustained and controllable meant that we needed influencers that we could tailor ourselves to our looks and character. Influencers in a way that suits brands but feels like a human and that is a Virtual Influencer.

The created Virtual Influencer uses computer graphics that design precise

mathematical models to define virtual human surfaces and shapes. It is said that it takes expertise and advanced skills as well as an enormous amount of information about human appearance and structure that can attract a large number of people. These are available on social media platforms such as Instagram, and TikTok, where creators are responsible for expanding Influ's social media platforms and elevating these virtual people into influencers and recognition in Society (Cheung & Leung, 2021)

(Dhanesh, & Duthler, 2019) also explains that influencers' success depends on their close relationship with their followers because they share common interests and that influencers are more likely to make product recommendations. Relating to those topics is a key benefit of virtual influencers when we can tailor their lifestyles to the brand and build a community towards that brand (Farrera Saldaña, 2021). This statement that influencer behavior is a form of storytelling makes it seem believable.

(Mohanty, 2021) divides virtual influencers into two categories; Human-like and less human-like because it is up to the creators who design the story and the key roles in it. Both retain their attractiveness despite differences among consumers such as ethnicity, attitudes, and humanity as consumers are just as different as virtual influencers.

Virtual Influencer has become a product that happens in the online world that is very distinctive with the clarity of the character that can be customized to suit the target audience. which is another marketing tool that people in the “Influencer industry” and “digital agency industry” have taken action that will remove the limitations that have been put through technology that advances to the next level in digital life connecting from the real world to the virtual world.

2.1.2 Consumer Attitudes towards Virtual Influencers

People tend to think that most decisions to buy a product or service are driven by rational consumer demands, but in fact, our brains tend to use our emotions and feelings to help. Consequently, consumer attitudes towards a brand or product and service become one of the key indicators in consumers' purchasing or service decisions (Ajzen, 2018). The link between consumer emotions and virtual influencers is shared interests and lifestyles, as did research by Dhanesh that describes an increase in the number of followers generated by sharing between influencers and followers.

(Dhanesh, & Duthler, 2019) It's no surprise that some influencers who simply use the product to be seen by the general public can dramatically increase the sales of that product based on their number of followers.

(Norgren, & Lindqvist, 2017) Researchers have found that the majority of consumers have a positive attitude towards virtual marketing because it is novel and if creators don't market based on politics, preferences, and relationship status. As these factors are consumer-sensitive (Ruey, & Ismail, 2021), the results revealed that attitudes towards virtual influencers mediate the relationship between social interactions, attractiveness and reliability, and purchase intention

2.1.3 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the ability to believe, not connected to the truthfulness of the message, but to the purpose and components that make others believe (or not). (Caldwell, Cam, Anderson, Verl, 2019) also support that trust is a behavioral response of a person to trust based on his or her perception of the other person. It concluded that decisions related to human behavior were linked to cognitive perception and emotional perception, assessment of alternative responses to the situations and actions of others, cognitive beliefs, and cognitive feelings. Emotions are combined with the intentions that form the basis for human action, which are conditioned upon one's character, preferences, commitment, and external environment.

(Wiedmann, & von Mettenheim, 2020) got the result as trustworthiness is the most important requirement of influencer marketing's simple comparison is the same as when we see a celebrity, artist, or someone we love using this product, but in reality, they still don't decide to buy it until friends, parents, siblings or close ones say, "Oh, it's really good. Because I'm using it." Now, we may have a sudden urge to buy it because it looks reliable and people close to us use it. (Santiago, & Castelo, 2020) also prove that product experimentation, which through the sharing of experiences and opinions of influencers together with the credibility associated with those digital influencers that make followers relate to them and trust in their opinions is necessary to make an impact on the brands and products. (Rönnhed, & Wiksborg, 2021).

(Xiao, Wang, & Chan-Olmsted, 2018) support that trustworthiness, community influence, quality discussion, and other information involvement are

influential factors affecting consumer perceived information credibility and reveal a strong positive correlation between perceived information credibility and platform attitudes. Customers may not trust influencers at all, but instead use the method of reading comments on influencer review posts to encourage trust beyond the influencers themselves, who are mostly of this type. Likes to constantly read reviews, not attached to any influencers. But the type of person who sees reviews and immediately believes an influencer may be a fan of that influencer means that trust has already been built to a level trust.

2.1.4 Personality of Influencers

Influencers are role models and opinion leaders who must be reliable and know what they communicate well. Being an influencer means that you are a normal person, but have something special than the average person who can direct, motivate, and convince your audience to do something. Which is required to have the following preliminary qualifications: Credibility, Knowledge of what is being said, The art of communication is good and easy to understand, Understanding of the audience, and Discipline, no bad habits.

These qualifications are needed to be prepared. First and foremost, it is important to choose what you are good at or what you like to create content about, requiring some level of experience in the subject to establish yourself as an influencer. You'll need to do a lot of research on a subject that interests you, so choose one that you're passionate about, and have the energy to spend time with (Poulopoulos, Vassilakis, Antoniou, Lepouras, Theodoropoulos, & Wallace, 2018).

Secondly, Influencer behavior is divided into two types;

1. Observable behaviors: Degree and In-degree Centrality, New Brand Trial, Spending, information-seeking, and Consumption.

2. Unobservable behaviors: Personal-Product Involvement, Public Individuation, Brand Preference, Risk Preference, Selective Perception, Openness, Extroversion, and Attention to Social Comparison Information (Sudarat, Piyawan, & Preeda Srinaruewan, 2018).

Lastly, there is a DISC test that aims to influence personality which represents certain behaviors and characteristics. A person with a high rate of an I

personality type in their DISC profile could possibly be an Influencer because they like to interact with people and are very outgoing. They would love to be around people and socialize more than others who have a low rate of an I personality type. People are attracted to their outgoing personalities. Influencer personality traits: Interactive in new situations, Persuasive to impact others' thoughts and opinions, Charming when building rapport, Talkative when meeting new people, and Magnetic in personal and professional settings. The strengths of this personality are "how they bring value to the audience" (Slowikowski, 2005) my personality styles can be overly talkative, emotional, and easily get disruption. They may over-promise because they are so optimistic and eager to be liked by other people. My personality profiles are identified as very lively and friendly, energetic people.

(Vodák, Novyzedlák, Čakanová, & Pekár, 2019) It's important to choose the right influencer for your brand and product. Don't just focus on the number of followers, because if you don't choose the right target audience, it will be a waste of marketing or if the selected person has a bad history or untrustworthy behavior. It will harm the image of the brand.

2.1.5 Uses of Social Media

(Mayfield, 2008) said that social media is changing communication around the world. It is any digital tool or platform that allows users to quickly create and share content with friends and the public. Previously, the trend of using social media was popular, but after the COVID-19 The epidemic is heavy and humans have to adapt to live in a New Normal way, so we can see the benefits of social media online more clearly whether it's playing to relieve stress or using these media to promote, share and search for information or Communicate. It is also used to build a brand and drive traffic to a business website by the major social media providers known as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.

At present, leading brands in every business are planning to use social media on various platforms and spend a large amount of marketing budget to deal with various digital marketing channels, especially social media marketing channels on platforms that are in line with the Brand's target audience to publicize products and services Increase sales and profits, increase brand value, build brand awareness and interact with

new and old customers. Social Media's outstanding strengths are that it can act quickly and see results almost instantly (Voorveld, Van Noort, Muntinga, & Bronner, 2018).

More than 500 million people use social media in just one year, bringing the total number of social media users to 4.48 billion worldwide, or more than half of the world's population. Thailand is one of the countries with the highest usage of Social Media in the world, especially the popular platform like “Facebook” and the main factor is the development of telecommunication infrastructure, which Thailand is currently expanding high-speed internet networks. and 4G – 5G mobile phones covering the whole country, Social Media can meet the lifestyle of Thai people as Thai people have migrated from their hometowns to work or study in many different areas, making Social Media become a communication channel for them to stay connected anywhere, anytime and lastly, the growth of E-Commerce businesses and businesses increasingly use Social Media as a communication, marketing, and sales platform, with product-service brands recognizing that Social Media is more important and an effective channel to reach out to target consumers. Therefore, Social Media is an important part of marketing and sales strategy (Whiting, & Williams, 2013).

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Methodology

The purpose of this study is to gather information on the questions, “Why and how do virtual influencers affect consumers’ attitudes towards products? And how can virtual influencers affect consumers’ perception of products?”. It will be beneficial to Thai marketers, to understand the acceptability of virtual influencers among Thai consumers during the fast-moving of technology in marketing.

Semi-interview structure questions are used in this research as the focus of the study is more to describe and explain rather than predict, and the variable studied is not easily identifiable by quantitative questions. The question will be answered for the study by a total of 14 interviewees through an online interview session.

3.2 Data Collection Techniques

The one-on-one interview and focus group method was used in this study because it is suitable for answering the research questions appropriately and adequately. The strength of the one-on-one interview and focus group method is to gain a better insight into the possibilities for virtual influencer acceptance, both interviews will be semi-structured interviews which allows me to ask the topic-based interviews cover common themes such as the credibility of a virtual influencer but can also ask questions that follow the answers of the interviewees for more in-depth information.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic situation, interviews will be conducted online on a google hangout to prevent any harm from the virus, and the time of interview is limited to approximately 20 minutes each while answers will be recorded by note-taking.

3.2.1 Script and Question Design

In conjunction with other research, I developed a focus group script with questions that enabled a deeper understanding of consumers' attitudes about virtual influencers and the perception of product values through virtual influencers. The question has been prepared separately for one on one interviews with marketers and focused groups of consumers on participants' current perspectives about the power of a virtual influencer as a marketing tool.

Additionally, I also prepared a slide presentation to introduce influencers and virtual influencers to the interviewees.

3.2.2 Open-ended questions lists

The preceding text introduced the questions as an open-ended question that has been separated into 2 groups of questions based on the types of interviewees.

Table 3.1 Interview Questions of Consumers: Age group (18 - 29, 30 - 40, 41 -50+)

Finding Factors	Interview Questions
Consumers' perceptions of Influencer and Virtual Influencers	How do you understand influencers?
	Have you heard about virtual humans?
Consumers' attitudes toward virtual influencers	What do you think of when you hear the word influencer?
	What influencer do you like/dislike? Why?
	What is your opinion of virtual influencers?
	Can you give an example of the world with virtual influencers without human influencers?
Virtual influencers affect consumers' perception of products.	Do you normally buy products online?
	Have you ever purchased something based on recommendations from an influencer? Why?
	Would you trust a virtual influencer? And What kind of product?
	Which product suits virtual influencer marketing? Why?

Table 3.2 Interview Questions of Marketers: Hospitality, Real estate, FMCG, Automation, and Digital Agency

Finding Factors	Interview Questions
Marketer perceptions of Influencer and Virtual Influencers	How do you understand influencers?
	Have you ever used influencer marketing?
Consumers' attitudes toward virtual influencers	Have you heard about virtual humans?
	Would you like to hire virtual influencers instead of human influencers?
	What is the benefit of influencer marketing?
	What is your opinion of virtual influencers?
Virtual influencers affect consumers' perception of products.	Do you think your consumers are accepting a virtual influencer?
	What are the key factors to hiring virtual influencers instead of human influencers?
	Would you hire a virtual influencer to promote your products? why?
	What type of products do you use to promote by influencers?
	What challenges/drawbacks do they think virtual influencers may face and how to overcome them?

3.2.3 Sample Selection

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with 5 marketers from different industries (Hospitality, Real estate, FMCG, Automation, and Digital Agency) and a focus group of 3 people in different groups separated by age (18 - 29, 30 - 40, 41 -50+). The total is 9 people for the focus group and 5 people for one on one interviews. A marketer was defined as someone who usually selects tools for promoting a customer's product and the group of people was defined as consumers who usually receive the content from the marketer and brand.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewer also took notes to complement the recordings. The collected data from interviews were analyzed and coded in different approaches as a qualitative method to explore the possibility of virtual influencer marketing in Thailand according to the research objectives;

To analyze the potential and opportunity of virtual influencer marketing in Thailand by understanding consumer and marketer's attitudes toward the virtual influencers.

All interviewees live in Bangkok and have experience purchasing products online. They were selected by divided into 2 groups; 5 marketers (or marketing) who were using influencers for their products and service which were implemented in the past and 9 consumers with different occupations and ages who provided perspectives based on real experiences and reflected desirable actions from their views.

4.1 Responsive Profile

The study includes 14 representatives who are in Bangkok and had experience purchasing products online. The interviewed stakeholders were selected with different occupations and ages to receive various responses and perspectives. The profile of each participant is given in Table 4.1 and Table 4.2.

Table 4.1 List of Consumer Interviewees

Code	Age	Occupation	Industry
C1	28	Sales and Marketing	Professional Service
C2	26	Sales Development	Education
C3	26	Customer Service	Professional Service
C4	36	Sales Section Head	Professional Service
C5	37	Graphic Designer	Trading
C6	40	Office Manager	Product Export/Import
C7	42	Graphic Designer	IT Product
C8	42	Business Development	Software
C9	41	Graphic Design Manager	FMCG

Table 4.2 List of Marketer Interviewees

Code	Position	Work Experience	Industry
M1	Growth Commerce Manager/ Customer Strategy	10 Years	Real Estate
M2	Senior Marketing Strategist	9 Years	Automation
M3	Regional Brand Manager	7 Years	FMCG
M4	Marketing Director	17 Years	Hospitality
M5	Account Director	8 Years	Digital Agency

4.2 Interviewee Perceptions of Influencer and Virtual Influencers

All interviewees are using social media and have their own Facebook accounts and Youtube account. All of them have watched the introduction presentation of both influencers and virtual influencers before getting into the interview session. The consumer interviewees had experience shopping online and they always spent time on social media when they had a chance. The results of consumer interviewees after they

got asked about their understanding of influencers and how they got that information. All of them have a good knowledge of influencer marketing and even know some of the names of influencers.

“Based on my understanding, they are a famous person on youtube who promotes some products through an online platform. Example Milky Priya, Nat Nisamanee” (C4)

“The person who motivates the consumer to buy that product” (C2)

One of the consumer interviewees from the youngest group does not believe in influencers as some hidden things reveal the key to saying good things about the products.

“I know when those influencers are showing products or saying that they had applied this cream on and the result was good, all these are the script as they get paid for it” (C1)

While interviewees from the marketer group are familiar with influencer marketing as they were using influencers as a tool to promote their products and service.

When they get asked about virtual humans they become an influencer. There are only 2 interviewees from consumer groups who knew and heard about it while all marketers have heard about the first virtual influencer in Thailand from AIS.

“What was it made for?” (C6)

“How was a virtual influencer compared to a real human?” (C3)

Some of them are curious about the technology behind it.

“Does it have AI to manage the speech and information of the product through the virtual influencers?” (C5)

On the other hand, marketers are familiar with the virtual influencer as they've seen it on social media but they are waiting for the right time to use it in their work.

“Yes, I saw it from AIS and then TRUE published their own. I just wonder why they are doing this and how it is different from humans. I just don't understand the reason behind why AIS created the virtual influencer.” (M5)

“I saw it from the billboard and content sharing from friends” (M1)

Virtual influencers are the new thing in the Thai market as consumers don't get the idea of it and have some concerns about virtual influencers compared to human

influencers while marketers only know roughly about virtual influencers and never experience them in their job.

4.3 Interviewee Attitude toward the Virtual Influencers

From the point of view of consumers' attitudes toward virtual influencers, there's so much feedback in each group. One of the interviewees gave an idea of a virtual influencer as a new beauty standard as they can be as much as beautiful by programming with many shades of color, skin tone, eyes, and others on the body.

“The model and shape of virtual influencers can be built to create new beauty standards to sell clothes or cosmetics as they can manage the type of body, skin tone to fit with an outfit” (C1)

One of them has negative thoughts about virtual reality as they are human programming and they couldn't represent real things.

“If they are presenting some dishes and telling us that it's delicious. I won't believe it. The virtual influencers are not real, how can I trust that the picture or place that they are presenting is real.” (C2)

One of the consumer interviewees in the oldest group is concerned about the law.

“Is there any legal support for this? I don't think it will not be alright as they are not human. The things they've said might not be confirmed with their responsibility because they are made by programming.” (C7)

Even though all consumer interviewees are giving many different attitudes toward virtual influencers, all marketers agree in the same way that influencers and virtual influencers are just a channel to communicate with consumers. As long as it provides the right information about products and engages the correct consumer target, either human or virtual influencers are the same.

“It doesn't matter if it's human or virtual human, as long as I can get the correct target consumers for the customer's product.” (M5)

“I am only concerned about their followers, is it specific to one industry or it's only the lifestyle of a virtual human that doesn't strongly represent anything.” (M4)

Some attitude that is unique among other interviewees is the idea of creating the virtual influencer as the belief of showing new technology that affects the brand recognition. Moreover, it can represent some areas in that humans cannot fill the gap so they are programming the virtual influencer to do it instead of humans.

“I think AIS has only created the virtual influencer because they want to be a leader of technology which it creates trust on their brands to reflect their products and service” (M5)

“It might be some products or services that cannot present by human so virtual influencer can be fit to that area” (M7)

There is an interesting opinion about pricing, one interviewee thought that there must be a competitive price for using virtual influencers as they can do a lot of work at the same time as programming and another interviewee is concerned about the price as the production cost is higher than human influencers.

“I am concerned about the price as it has to use high-technology to build a virtual influencer. Cost of production might increase the price rate of influencer” (M3)

4.4 Virtual Influencers Affect Consumers' Perception of Products

Firstly, start with the question of consumers' interviewees about their purchasing behavior and then the next question is deep into the effect of influencers and virtual influencers on the products. Surprisingly, most of the respondents are focusing on the review under the post and the real results more than the influencer's motivation. The consumer value post and comments from other consumers and positive or negative comments are the keys to motivating them to buy the product.

“I know that influencer got paid to give a good opinion on the product so I'd rather read the comments from other consumers instead” (C1)

One of the interviewees hesitated to buy the product.

“I always think that there's must be some problem in the product, that's why they need to hire someone to cheers them up” (C5)

However, there's some positive perception from the interviewees as they thought that influencers point out the pain point and explain how the product can solve the problem which makes them decide to buy the product easier.

“I have a problem with my kids as they are hard to sleep. When the influencer brought this case and showed how the product can solve the problem. I’ll not think further, just buy it.” (C8)

In terms of virtual influencers, their opinion had changed in some interviewees such as the person who said that he had concerns about the product quality when the influencer is trying to present good things about the product but when it comes to a virtual influencer, he has gained trust on the product somehow as he believes in the technology behind it.

“Virtual influencers are programming and AI may give the reliable information of the product and I can get necessary information by watching them.” (C5)

Some interviewees are giving another opinion as virtual influencers are not human and it hasn’t provided a lively feeling. It will only provide one side of feedback on the products and places but not the real experiences and comments from the virtual influencers.

Furthermore, marketer interviewees don’t care about the look and image of the virtual influencers as they confirm that the customer only focuses on the result. Virtual influencers can represent any products that make sense. The key to using virtual influencers is only the followers as they normally use influencers to engage with end-users.

“I only want to see if the followers are in the area of my target growth. I don’t mind the virtual influencers because I’ll use them to create engagement and awareness on the products and brand” (M2)

The key factor that motivates them to hire virtual influencers is that virtual humans can be customized to specific groups and the creator wouldn’t let a bad reputation happen to the virtual influencer. Hence, the challenge of virtual influencers in Thailand in their opinion is what the follower segments need to focus on and how to grow followers as this is the important key success factor of virtual influencers.

“The creator needs to create the strong reputation of virtual influencers by specific industries such as technology & gadget, automotive & vehicle, etc. to gain specific followers and sell it from there.” (M5)

4.5 Finding and Discussion

A virtual influencer is an evolution of advertising communication in the future. The first virtual influencer was created in Brazil then other countries started to create their own virtual influencer in their language, lifestyle, and famous looks to engage audiences. The next step of building the identity of the virtual influencer then the creator will bring it to market for business. (Rodrigo-Martín, Rodrigo-Martín, Muñoz-Sastre, 2021). Asia is the new market to grow this virtual influencer market as influencer marketing is high growth and fast during the COVID 19 pandemic. Thailand also follows this technology by creating the first virtual influencer, Ai-Ailyn becomes AIS's first virtual brand ambassador.

Consequently, the study to explore virtual influencers in Thailand is necessary for the Thai market and marketers. This study is qualitative research by separating an interview into 2 groups; 1 on 1 interview with marketers from different industries and a focus group of consumers with different occupations and ages. There are a total of 14 interviewees. Hence, the questions are preparing to get the perspective and attitude on the virtual influencer's marketing.

From the interviews, there are 2 types of interviewees separated into positive and negative attitudes and perceptions of virtual influencer marketing;

Consumers;

Positive attitudes and perceptions of virtual influencers

- New selection channel to get product information
- Data Accuracy from the data input by the brands
- Virtual influencer has no bias on products and services
- Flexibility and customization for presenting the product in different ways
- Look so much like human

Negative attitudes and perceptions of virtual influencers

- Blurring real and fake, creates a hesitant feeling.
- Unlively feeling because it's not human.
- Legal may not support the content from virtual influencers.
- Feel like a cartoon character.
- Virtual influencers don't matter with the products.

Marketers;**Positive attitude and perceptions of virtual influencers**

- Not to worry about the bad reputation of influencers.
- Fully Customization by the order is perfect for brand ambassadors.
- Potential for the new segment
- Various on pricing/ lower than Human Influencers

Negative attitudes and perceptions of virtual influencers

- Followers mixed with the lifestyle and tech-savvy.
- It takes a long time to build followers and produce a virtual human.
- The character of virtual influencers may not be strong enough to motivate consumers.
- Virtual influencers have a limit of use on the type of products and services.
- Virtual influencers are just a trend.

Eventually, the attitude toward virtual influencers may be varied as we haven't seen the strong idea of creating virtual influencers from the creator. There are still a lot of questions behind this. The interesting thing is that all interviewees from both groups gave the same thought about virtual influencers as it was just an option for advertising marketing.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The study revealed that ages aren't a factor in the attitudes and perceptions of virtual influencers, the consumer didn't trust influencers or virtual influencers but the fact of product material, reviews, and comments on the post which influencers are only creating communities in their social media to provide those reviews.

Additionally, marketers from different industries are also seeing the influencers as a tool to get engagement from audiences. The number and type of followers are important factors (Janssen, Schouten, Croes, 2022).

Therefore, there's an opportunity for virtual influencers in the Thai market. If the creator selects the right segment, lifestyle, industry, and consumer group target to grow the community under the virtual influencer's social media. Because the virtual influencer didn't gain trust in the products themselves but the followers and reviews did.

The challenge of virtual influencer marketing is how to create a ton of followers in a short period and the way to verify the follower type to create values of the virtual influencer itself. Fashion seems to be an easy market to start using virtual influencers as the character can be created to match with clothes style, size, etc. as a model. Sports media or Entertainment is the second market as it can be programmed into the virtual influencers on the screen.

As a result, the industries that need to use senses such as smell, taste, and touch are not a good choice for virtual influencer marketing as the lack of trust of consumers and virtual influencers couldn't represent these feelings.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the results, virtual influencers have an opportunity to expand their service in Thailand but they need to build up the character that is specific to the industry

that can apply this kind of marketing such as Real estate, Hospitality, Media, and some product by only giving product information. The key selection of using virtual influencers from marketers are their followers and the design that can be customized by customer requirements. While the consumer doesn't care about influencers, they can accept both virtual and human. Because they'll only see what the influencers are presenting and comment or review from other users.

The study mentioned 3 main points to success in building virtual influencers;

1. Research your target audience in Thailand:

Create surveys or research to get a high percentage of your target audience. This can help you build a virtual human that hits your target audiences and more easily gains followers which could support the main business that can grow fast in a short period.

2. Create and design the right persona:

When you get the target audience, then you need to find an expert designer to create the virtual human based on your target audience's affection. This also includes the contents and style of the virtual influencers.

3. Build an online presence with strong character:

Promote the virtual influencer in the place where your influencer can meet the target audience such as Facebook, Youtube, TV online, Blog, Vlog, and Billboard. Joint event with famous actors, singers, or celebrities who have the same target audiences. Keep posting and show it often to make awareness or even create activities that motivate the audience to follow, live streaming as an example.

Currently, consumers are smart enough to understand the marketing systems and know what is up to them while they receive the contents. Thus, the part of the target audience is very important because you'll understand your audience's behavior and lifestyle enough to know how to manipulate them and succeed in growing followers.

5.3 Limitation

The data collection was based on the online interviews because of the COVID pandemic and it contained a focus group separated by age and 1 on 1 interview

with marketers in Bangkok, Thailand. Due to the group composition and the explorative qualitative nature of our research approach, the results of the interview discussions cannot be considered representative of the Thai population. Instead, the qualitative study is designed to discover the depth and qualities of the research field specific to the subject of study and the target group related to the virtual influencers. The result of the study is the presented attitude and perspective of a specific group that related to virtual influencers in the future but they haven't had a direct experience yet as the virtual influencer is a new thing in Thailand.

5.4 Future Research

Future researchers should analyze consumer attitudes more and investigate the statistics of sales revenue from the consumer experiences of using virtual influencers. It could be done by quantitative methods to gather data from samples. In terms of attitude, future researchers should penetrate the consumer's perspective after the real experience of viewing virtual influencers to find out the positives and negatives of the consumer's attitude. The quantitative data can be analyzed by how they feel and trust the virtual influencers and reflect on sales revenue from consumers to summarize the potential style and specific industry of growing followers properly.

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