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A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF VIRTUALHUMANS.ORG AND ITS ROLE IN VIRTUAL INFLUENCER RESEARCH, 2019 TO PRESENT

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Introduction

Virtual Influencers are CGI-rendered, 2D-drawn, or AI-generated characters with social media accounts in their own name. Often driven by a team of creators, an agency, or conglomerate which participates in their aesthetic design, storyline, tone of voice, and real-time interaction with followers in the comments section or inbox (Oosterom et al., 2023; Sands et al., 2022), virtual influencers represent a nascent presence on social media platforms. VirtualHumans.org, a privately owned website, functions as a significant database and information hub for this emergent virtual influencer industry.

Inspired by Ben T. Pettis's study (2022) of the website and database *Know Your Meme*, I investigate the considerable influence of VirtualHumans.org on the emerging field of virtual influencer research. I present findings from a systematic review (n=29) of academic articles published between 2019 and 2024 that reference the website. I examine how often and in what capacity VirtualHumans.org is cited in these articles and whether the website's commercial affiliations are critically considered. My initial findings indicate frequent reliance on the website for quantitative data, with limited acknowledgment of its role as an industry participant. I conclude by highlighting the risks of homogenization in academic narratives when research relies too heavily on industry-driven resources, proposing a need for more diversified and contextualized approaches in the study of emergent social media phenomena.

Background

Since 2019, VirtualHumans.org has described itself as “the best source of information on virtual influencers, directly from industry insiders” (homepage). Founded by Christopher Travers, an entrepreneur based in Atlanta, USA, the website was originally formed to collect information about virtual influencers shortly after a viral stunt by Lil Miquela, a Brazilian-American social media influencer on Instagram, revealed that the

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nineteen-year-old was not a human but a CGI-generated character by tech company Brud Inc. (Brachtendorf, 2022). The website's influence continued past 2020, when the creation and use of virtual influencers became more popular in response to the COVID-19 crisis (Choudhury et al., 2022; Hund, 2023).

VirtualHumans.org catalogues the broad landscape of virtual influencers, offering detailed profiles, categorization systems, and background information of the companies and developers behind each character. In late 2022, the website was formally acquired by Offbeat Media Group, a digital marketing agency; a year later, Offbeat Media Group was acquired by entertainment company and gaming network, Vertiqal Studios Corp. These acquisitions led to shifts in the website's focus, becoming more actively involved in brokering relationships between brands and virtual influencer agencies. Travers departed the website in January 2023.

While the website has been described as the “most comprehensive” (Hofeditz et al., 2023) resource for virtual influencer data, its commercial affiliations and potential biases remain underexplored in academic research. With the underlying political economy context in mind, I examine references to VirtualHumans.org across 29 articles, inspired by Pettis (2022)'s critique of the database and wiki *Know Your Meme*, which demonstrated how uncritical reliance on industry-driven resources could narrow scholarly perspectives. The core question guiding this review is whether academic studies adequately contextualize VirtualHumans.org's dual role as a database and an active industry player.

Method

In February 2024, a search for “virtualhumans.org” was conducted on Google Scholar, limited to the website's existence from 2019 to 2024. This search yielded 189 results. A parallel search for “virtual influencers” within the same time frame yielded 1,030 results, indicating that nearly one in five studies about virtual influencers referenced VirtualHumans.org. To focus on scholarly work, the initial 189 results were filtered to include only peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and conference proceedings in English and Korean. This selection process resulted in a corpus of 29 studies. Each study was then manually read and analyzed for the frequency and nature of references to VirtualHumans.org, examining how the website was being contextualized within the research. Additionally, a use-based analysis of the current VirtualHumans.org website was conducted. This analysis included reviewing staff profiles, website organization, frequently cited content, public statements from founders and staff, and information about stakeholders on platforms like Instagram and LinkedIn.

Findings and Impact

A wide range of disciplines engaged with VirtualHumans.org, including media studies, marketing, computer science, and sociology. Despite this diversity, few studies critically assessed the website's commercial interests or its influence on defining the boundaries of virtual influencer research. Notably, 20 out of 29 studies referenced VirtualHumans.org as a quantitative resource, utilizing the website to provide statistics

on the virtual influencer industry, such as the number of active virtual influencers and trends in follower counts. Researchers often derived legitimacy for their methodology or information from VirtualHumans.org, going beyond merely acknowledging it as a legitimate resource. This reliance was evident in the rationale statements for data collection, methodologies, and even in defining the phenomenon of virtual influencers or virtual humans. Studies cited former and current VirtualHumans.org staff writers alongside academic and news media citations without further commentary. These citations originated from blog posts, interviews, and independent research content produced by the website, effectively blurring the lines between industry-produced content and academic research. Most significantly, none of the studies contextualized VirtualHumans.org or its writers as a for-profit entity or broker in the virtual influencer industry.

There are several implications regarding these initial findings. VirtualHumans.org, as a singular commercially driven platform, appears to be shaping research questions, methodologies, and interpretations within the field. This reliance is concerning given that VirtualHumans.org has a vested interest in promoting a particular view of the industry, one that aligns with its commercial goals. To start, the website's industry focus may downplay controversies of representation and identity politics, potentially excluding diverse perspectives and cultural nuances of the infamously racialized virtual influencer landscape (Sobande, 2021). The platform's categorization system, which relies on keywords such as 'doll-like' or 'feminine,' might not adequately capture the complexities of virtual influencers operating in non-Western contexts or within specific subcultural communities. Moreover, failing to acknowledge the website's commercial interests and potential biases could lead to an oversimplified and potentially misleading understanding of the industry. Finally, relying heavily on VirtualHumans.org for foundational data and definitions could undermine the development of independent and rigorous research methodologies. Ultimately, an overreliance on this platform as a primary source of information could compromise the originality, significance, and quality of research in several ways. I contend that future studies must strive to diversify their data sources and critically evaluate the information presented on the platform.

Conclusion

By conducting a systematic review of the use of VirtualHumans.org as a major resource and database for virtual influencer research, I questioned whether studies of virtual humans adequately consider the rooted industry contexts of VirtualHumans.org, potentially overlooking its position as a for-profit broker in the virtual influencer economy when relying on its extensive database of historical and commercial knowledge about virtual humans across multiple platforms.

Echoing Pettis (2022)'s concerns regarding *Know Your Meme* on classifying, historicizing, and interpreting meme content, I argue the need for a more critical and contextualized approach to studying virtual influencers, one that moves beyond a single source and embraces the complexity and diversity of this emerging phenomenon. Exploring alternative data sources, such as social media platforms, interviews with creators and audiences outside the VirtualHumans.org network, and analysis of industry reports from diverse sources, may offer opportunities to challenge VirtualHumans.org's

popular monopoly over virtual influencer discourse, particularly for critical academic inquiry. There appears to be a clear need to further investigate the platform's editorial practices, classification systems, and potential influence on research questions and interpretations.

Ultimately, VirtualHumans.org has become a starting point and even a validation tool for emerging research, creating a risk of inadvertently shaping a constrained view of the virtual influencer landscape. This analysis suggests that while VirtualHumans.org serves as an invaluable database, an uncritical reliance on it could oversimplify the complex, culturally diverse, and evolving nature of virtual influencers. As a case study, it cautions the potential of homogenization when a single source assumes the authority to define and frame digital phenomena.

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