

Anthropomorphism and Digital Influencers

Unveiling how digital influencers present themselves.

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencers, specifically digital influencers, come to mind when thinking of opinion leaders, as they can shape audience opinions. They strategically engage and appeal to target audiences by showcasing highly desirable traits and ideals that resonate with their followers. For example, such a strategy is sharing posts centred around their fictional lives and active engagement with followers, fostering an impression of genuineness and closeness (De Visser et al., 2016, p. 331). Generally, Schroeder and Epley (2016) revealed that humans tend to anthropomorphise machines and adhere to social norms when interacting (pp. 1427–1428). Since computers possess social agency, much of the current research and application of human-agent interaction is grounded in the Computers-Are-Social-Actors (CASA) theory (Heyselaar, 2023, p. 3). Nevertheless, becoming an influencer is more complex than sharing posts and engaging with followers; it requires having an identity. Therefore, the thesis will elaborate on *anthropomorphism/humanisation*, *attractiveness* and *authenticity* (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti 2021, pp. 1-21; Torres et al., 2019, pp. 1267-1269). Moreover, identification plays a key role when looking at digital influencers and their relationship with their followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 2). Coincidentally, Horton and Wohl (1956) were the first to introduce such a concept; they proposed that this relationship is characterised by a unilateral connection with celebrities, which involves both unilateral and illusory emotive qualities (p. 215). Moreover, perception is influenced by specific cues ranging from femininity, clothing, facial expressions, physical attractiveness, use of emojis, and photorealism (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 12). Thus, as society has advanced, individuals' aesthetic preferences have become more diverse, and the idealised presentation of a digital influencer often mirrors subjective understandings and evaluations of feminine beauty. As a result, promoting unachievable physical ideals can cause followers to acquire a distorted perception of reality and negatively affect their mental well-being by fostering unflattering comparisons (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024, p. 7). In essence, the rise of this phenomenon can be ascribed to the manipulation of brands towards followers, who manipulate the outward appearance and personal encounters of these influencers in accordance with the desires and demands set by brands. Hence, this inclination arises from the perception that there must be a congruence between the influencer and the endorsed product (Wan & Jiang, 2023, p. 338). For instance, the fashion industry relies heavily on social influencers, recognising them as essential figures such as Lil Miquela, who successfully secured endorsements with high-end brands (Hwang et al., 2024). However, digital influencers have limitations in their ability to formulate opinions about products independently and may possess lower levels of social accessibility than humans. Therefore, based on these empirical findings, this research addresses the following questions: "How do digital influencers present themselves to their followers on Instagram?", "How do digital influencers represent fashion brands on Instagram?". Specifically, this was achieved through a thematic analysis; this research compared four digital influencers, examining their Instagram posts to capture and analyse their anthropomorphism/humanisation, attractiveness and authenticity.

KEYWORDS: *CASA Paradigm, Parasocial Theory, Digital Influencer, Anthropomorphism, Authenticity.*

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1. Introduction

The emergence of social media influencers, i.e. digital influencers, can be credited to the concept of "phygital," which represents an understanding of the growing convergence between the physical and digital worlds (Gaggioli, 2017, p. 774). For instance, Thomas and Fowler (2021) define a digital influencer as "a digitally created artificial human who is associated with Internet fame and uses software and algorithms to perform tasks like humans" (p. 12). Interestingly, the hyperconnectivity revolution has made it easier for followers and digital influencers to interact with each other. During this time, different technologies came together, which led to considerable progress and made it possible for nonhuman entities to enter areas that were not accessible before (Beer et al., 2015, p. 1; Gaines, 2019, p. 8). Therefore, the influence and formation of online identities are believed to be influenced by popularity and trends in the digital realm (Sookkaew & Saephoo, 2021, p. 326), such as the rapid advancements and current developments in various technological domains (Sookkaew & Saephoo, 2021, p. 331). As a result, social media influencers are crucial in endorsing and shaping their audience's opinions on various social media platforms (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). These influencers are intended to engage and appeal to specific target audiences by exhibiting highly desirable traits and ideals relevant to their audience (Lee & Yuan, 2023, p. 2).

Moreover, the ability of social media to enable two-way communication, which enables followers to engage with influencers' shared content actively, distinguishes it from top-down information dissemination and allows for a bottom-up approach to communication (Dijkmans et al., 2015, p. 634). Hence, regarding product endorsement, digital influencers that exhibit human-like characteristics and behaviour have become increasingly prevalent (Silva & Bonetti, 2021, p. 3; Miao et al., 2022, p. 84). For example, several studies have explored the factors contributing to social media influencers' ability to attract and retain followers. One of these factors includes the influencers' level of authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 558), while the vital reason for their success is their ability to create an illusion of artificial objects resembling social actors with human characteristics (Thellman et al., 2016, p. 412). In addition, scholars have discovered that digital influencers must conform to recognised standards of attractiveness to sustain their influence, persuasive power, and authenticity (Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 131; Khan & Sutcliffe, 2014, p. 147). Moreover, digital influencers have gained significant popularity and have amassed many followers, competing with renowned human influencers (Baklanov, 2021).

For instance, studies such as the one by Baklanov (2021) have indicated that digital influencers exhibit significantly higher levels of engagement, as measured through metrics such as likes and shares. This can be attributed to the fact that digital humans are often designed to possess attractive physical attributes and personalities that mirror those of humans (De Visser et al., 2016, p. 344). However, the construction of digital influencers is contingent upon human social and cultural factors (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023, p. 2487); as a result, their humanness plays a key role (Yang, 2023, p. 706). In contrast, human influencers may encounter limitations imposed by gender, race, appearance, socioeconomic status, and other personal attributes; as a result, they may use digital alteration or fake aestheticisation techniques such as filters or photo retouching apps to increase the impact of their photos, especially in the context of product endorsement (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 142; Tiggemann, 2022, p. 173; Zhang et al., 2023, p. 167). Consequently, digital influencers

have started to replace human influencers in advertising (Franke et al., 2023, p. 524), with a lower social distance between digital influencers and their followers than human influencers (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023, p. 2485).

In essence, numerous academic investigations have revealed noteworthy disparities in the manners by which males and females manifest their emotions and sexuality in online contexts, with a considerable body of academic research highlighting significant differences in how different genders express their emotions and sexuality and how these expressions frequently align with prevailing stereotypes associated with each gender within a digital environment (Brody & Hall, 2008, p. 397; Wolf, 2000, p. 831). These stereotypes posit that women are more inclined towards emotional expression and display a greater frequency of positive emotions (Timmers et al., 2003, p. 42). Hence, self-presentation strategies by influencers are visible to members of online communities and have the potential to shape the establishment of norms on appropriate and acceptable behaviours (Lee et al., 2021, p. 1940). Incidentally, Instagram sets itself apart from other social networking platforms by allowing brands to share visually compelling and artistically captivating content; in doing so, visual representation provides an ideal opportunity for brands to effectively promote their products (Lyfe Marketing, 2018, pp. 8-11). As a result, the fashion industry and image-sharing social networking sites capitalise on the ability to showcase styles, outfits, clothing, and shopping experiences; these social networking sites incentivise followers to engage in fashion-related content and contribute to disseminating and consuming visually appealing fashion imagery (Mull & Lee, 2014, p. 192).

For instance, Instagram's substantial follower base, which has recently surpassed 1.35 billion individuals (Oberlo, 2024), has facilitated sharing of over 50 billion posts (Müngen et al., 2021, p. 1). This extensive follower base and the abundance of posts on Instagram provide significant opportunities for followers to be exposed to influencer endorsements (Statista, 2022). Additionally, Instagram plays an essential role in fashion and aesthetic presentation (Casaló et al., 2020, p. 510). As revealed, more than half of social media users in the United States follow at least one digital influencer (Admin, 2022). Furthermore, the rise in quantity and popularity of digital influencers (Sookkaew & Saephoo, 2021, p. 331; Walker, 2018) serves as a prime illustration of the transformative impact of artificial intelligence (A.I.) on follower-brand interactions (Ameen et al., 2021, p. 1). Again, examining the marketing efficacy of digital influencers is imperative, given their simulated identity (Lou et al., 2022, p. 540). In particular, the success of digital influencers is significantly influenced by parasocial interaction (Shan et al., 2019, p. 594). As shown, numerous studies have indicated that as digital humans become more anthropomorphic, their perceived credibility and competence increase (Nowak & Rauh, 2006, p. 174).

As a result, followers sometimes perceive digital influencers as possessing animate qualities and metaphysical essences (Karpinska-Krakiowiak & Eisend, 2023, p. 114). Therefore, as societal advancements occur, individuals' aesthetic preferences have become more diverse, and the visual presentation of an ideal digital influencer is likely to mirror people's subjective understandings and evaluations surrounding feminine beauty (Ji et al., 2022, p. 785). Moreover, unattainable body ideals can significantly affect followers' perception of reality, self-image and mental health (Rodner et al., 2022, p. 44; de Castro et al., 2021, p. 68; da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 10). In other words, exposure to unrealistic body ideals negatively impacts social behaviour and endorsement efficacy

(Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023, p.2488). Overall, digital influencers' growing popularity and profitability have attracted academic attention, particularly in exploring their commercial implications for followers' perceptions (Ji et al., 2022, p. 784). Therefore, due to limited previous studies, this thesis would address the following research question: *How do digital influencers present themselves to their followers on Instagram?*

Incidentally, previous research indicated that artificial intelligence has become prevalent in various industries and is poised to significantly alter certain domains (Qin & Jiang, 2019, p. 338; Davenport et al., 2020, p. 1; Rodgers, 2021, p. 1). Moreover, a rise is observed in its utilisation within advertising (Davenport et al., 2020, p. 32). Furthermore, digital influencers represent a novel phenomenon in brand endorsing, with followers' favourable attitudes towards such endorsements being of utmost significance for their success (Li et al., 2023, p. 2). Moreover, these strategies are transforming because digital influencers are imitating the behaviours of human influencers when it comes to their design and, therefore, possess comparable abilities to exert influence (Sands et al., 2022, p. 1722-1723). Specifically, the growing digital economy is emphasised by the importance of considering the influence of technologically adept interactions on the relationship between followers and brands (Hong & Wang, 2008, p. 222). Notably, the fashion industry is widely recognised as a crucial sector due to its substantial contribution to the global economy (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Therefore, scholars have identified variables influencing followers' behaviour when considering adopting new technology (Liang et al., 2008, p. 769).

By 2020, influencer marketing was set to reach an estimated \$101 billion (Association of National Advertisers, 2018). In the case of Brud, the world's pioneering digital influencer agency that created Lil Miquela (Alexander, 2019), the fashion industry perceives social influencers as integral figures within their domain (Wiedman & von Mettenheim, 2010, p. 708). An example of this is Lil Miquela's reach on social media posts exceeding those of her human counterparts by 224% (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p.18). Nevertheless, digital influencers face limitations in their ability to formulate opinions about a product independently and may exhibit lesser social accessibility compared to their human counterparts (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, pp. 12-14). For example, a concern among digital influencers entails deliberations about their autonomy and dependency (Sands et al., 2022a, p. 1726). Therefore, the interconnectedness between the brand and the publication potentially impacts the credibility and trustworthiness of the content (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023, p. 2490). Additionally, a variability exists between digital influencers and product categories (Franke et al., 2023, p. 524). In the case of beauty-related products, they commonly promote attractiveness (Moustakas et al., 2020, p. 3). In essence, establishing a solid connection between a digital influencer and a brand is paramount in cultivating credibility and improving attitudes (Breves et al., 2019, p. 441).

For the most part, brands have progressively embraced technology and social media platforms in the modern era while constructing idealised portrayals of the human physique that surpass realistic boundaries (Ji et al., 2022, p. 785). As a result, the influence exerted by digital influencers on brand perception is intricately linked to their perceived level of attractiveness and trustworthiness (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023, p. 2485). Thus, the deliberate emulation of physical bodies and hyper-realistic depiction of attractiveness in digital influencers represents a

conscious pursuit of perfection, as evidenced by the impeccable replication of flawless physical qualities it acts as a seductive and influential force for a widespread audience (Li et al., 2022, p. 785). In certain instances, creators intentionally manifest the digital nature of influencers, while an ambiguous or misrepresented portrayal of the influencer's true identity characterises other cases (Klein, 2020). Therefore, the prevalence of unrealistic body ideals gives rise to an array of limitations that have significant repercussions, such as negative consequences, which manifest as hate and distrust and may eventually outweigh the initial fascination and charm associated with these aesthetics (Lou et al., 2022, pp. 544-545). Furthermore, followers are growing concerned about influencers' compromised genuineness, as there is rising suspicion regarding manipulated content (Kleinman, 2019; Russon, 2018). Consequently, as it becomes more difficult to identify authentic digital influencers than human influencers, followers are exhibiting a growing desire for authenticity and transparency (Sands et al., 2022b, p. 782).

Therefore, introducing digital influencers in brand representation addresses concerns usually associated with human influencers since digital influencers lack human attributes and identity; ethical concerns related to branding are eliminated (Tan, 2020, p. 1136). Moreover, digital influencers offer the advantage of maintaining a consistent image without the risk of real-life indiscretions, as they do not have an offline existence (Tan, 2019). This allows for carefully calibrating their behaviour and image behind the scenes (Tan, 2019, p. 1137). As a result, the attractiveness stereotype and human-like functionality factors regarding the digital influencers' influential status and persuasive impact are sustained through these (Faddoul & Chatterjee, 2020, p. 1587; Khan & Sutcliffe, 2014, p. 142). Besides, digital influencers can alleviate concerns regarding authenticity as they are consciously recognised as authentically fake, making followers cognizant that the content they consume is staged (Wills, 2019). Thus, digital influencers offer distinct contexts in advertising that evoke animistic thinking, a phenomenon not often observed with human influencers (Karpinska-Krakowiak & Eisend, 2021, p. 105).

However, scholars have acknowledged the considerable importance of the fundamental compatibility between the celebrity endorser and the product or brand being endorsed (Torres et al., 2019, p. 1269). As a result, followers anticipate gaining a deeper understanding of advertising brands' motivations, values, and identities (Sands et al., 2022b, p. 783). Consequently, this paper aims to expand existing research and explore an additional research question: *How do digital influencers represent fashion brands on Instagram?*

2. Theoretical Framework

This section will elucidate the theoretical framework concerning the self-presentation strategies employed by digital influencers regarding followers and their role in representing brands. After reading previous research that has been conducted, many concepts have been discussed, such as the CASA paradigm (Nass et al., 1995, pp. 223-239), the Technology Acceptance Model (Weerasinghe & Hindagolla, 2018, pp. 142-143), the Uncanny Valley Theory (Mori, 2012, pp. 98-99), Two Step Flow Model (Britt, 1945, p. 268), the Social Comparison Theory (Hirakawa, 1979, pp. 10-12) and Parasocial Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956, pp. 215-229) that contribute to the phenomena of digital influencers in the current social media context. However, to lay the theoretical groundwork best, the CASA paradigm (Nass et al., 1995, pp. 223-239) and the Parasocial Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956, pp. 215-229) are the two that this thesis will use to proceed further. The two theories mentioned above have been chosen because they further expand the conceptual framework for comprehending the digital influencer research previously carried out by scholars (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 1-21; Torres et al., 2019, pp. 1267-1269). Furthermore, this thesis will elaborate on the categories of anthropomorphism/humanisation, attractiveness and authenticity. Lastly, regarding this specific research, it is essential to consider that the categories' interaction can be characterised as non-linear and highly dynamic, which the following sections will illustrate (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 18).

2.1 Identifying Digital Influencers

The development of digital influencers is contingent upon various social, cultural, and technological factors present within a given period; humans must possess the necessary knowledge and capability to incorporate these elements into the existing digital influencer framework in order to facilitate growth and further development (Sookkaew & Saephoo, 2021, pp. 326-330). According to Leaver et al. (2020), these digital influencers are non-physical entities deliberately designed, constructed, narrated, and controlled to endorse or market specific messages or brands; this definition encompasses transmitting these messages as an integral aspect of digital influencers' role (p. 200). Hence, the cornerstone of influencer marketing is identifying with an endorser (Schouten et al., 2020, pp. 258-259). Interestingly, a recent online survey of Instagram influencers indicated that a significant majority, 84%, were identified as female (West, 2024). Furthermore, Li et al. (2023) posit that authentic interactions are experienced when the digital influencer replicates followers' behaviour in diverse settings (p. 3). Moreover, digital influencers possess the ability to address doubts surrounding authenticity as they are perceived as authentically fake (Wills, 2019), implying that followers are consciously aware of consuming staged content. As shown by, Edwards (2018) extensively highlights A.I.'s significance in modern strategic communication practices, emphasising the substantial influence wielded in shaping various aspects of followers' lives regarding consumer choices, political inclinations, and ideological preferences (pp. 360-361).

Additionally, in the context of digital influencers, identification plays a role in influencer marketing and relationships with followers (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, pp. 2-3). Hence, the identity theory provides a framework for elucidating the notion of identification as a cognitive process by which individuals acquire a conscious awareness of both self and others (Stryker &

Burke, 2000, p. 286). Also, digital influencers are recognised for their adeptness in engaging with their vast audience and actively establishing and sustaining personal connections with numerous followers (Belanche et al., 2021b, pp. 1-2). Moreover, followers on social media platforms typically establish connections and develop a sense of identification with others who possess similar attributes or manifest comparable self-presentation styles (Gräve, 2017, pp. 1-2; Schouten et al., 2020; pp. 260-261). Consequently, advertising strategy is fundamentally transforming due to the prevalence of digital influencer endorsements (Li et al., 2023, p. 1).

2.2 CASA Paradigm

Taking the stance that computers possess social agency, much of the current research and application of human-agent interaction is grounded in the Computers-Are-Social-Actors (CASA) theory (Nass et al., 1995, pp. 223-239; Heyselaar, 2023, p. 3). First, Schroeder and Epley (2016) indicated that humans tend to anthropomorphise machines and adhere to social norms when interacting (pp. 1427–1428). Second, Nass et al. (1999) argued that individuals' reactions towards computers display automatic and unconscious characteristics; this assertion aligns with Langer's preceding investigation, which disclosed that individuals tend to engage with technology in an instinctive and unreflective manner (pp. 1095–1105). Therefore, the CASA theory posits that digital influencers possess anthropomorphic characteristics and often cite social perceptions from their followers through predetermined, uncontrolled, and instinctive levels of cognitive, emotional, and social responses (Miao et al., 2022, p. 74). Furthermore, individuals display responses akin to their interactions with fellow humans regarding their interactions with computers, such as norms, politeness, reciprocity, self-disclosure, premature labelling effects, and homophily (Nass & Moon, 2000, pp. 83-90). Consequently, human-to-computer interaction is highly influenced by various cues typically found in human-to-human interactions; computers are more susceptible to eliciting responses similar to those in human-to-human interactions.

These cues encompass the use of language, perceptions of interaction, and the assumption of roles traditionally carried out by humans (Nass et al., 1999, p. 1105). On the one hand, external cues play a vital role in directing human behaviour and shaping perception; these cues encompass a wide range of elements, such as the physical attributes and situational factors in which the object is encountered (Puccinelli et al., 2015, pp. 1-5). On the other hand, internal cues consist of cognitive and affective components that are recognisable to the followers; these components include the individual's associations, thoughts, and emotions that emerge during the process of perception (Keller, 1987, pp. 329-331). In the context of endorsements, external cues manifest in the verbal expressions and behaviours of an endorser and the visual characteristics of a product (Dean, 1999, pp. 1-5). In contrast, internal cues are distinguished by the associations that individuals attribute to an endorser and the associations generated through the endorsement of the product (Bakamitsos, 2006, pp. 403-404). Thus, when individuals encounter such cues, they tend to respond, relying on frameworks related to interpersonal communication rather than engaging in the cognitive processes required to construct a fresh set of mental frameworks that align with the specific situational context (Nass et al., 1999, p. 1105).

In the case of prior studies have investigated the extent to which computer-based interactions elicit normative responses in comparison to conventional methods driven by the perception that computers are impersonal and nonjudgmental, offering greater anonymity, which could potentially promote more truthful and unbiased responses (Nass et al., 1999, p. 1095). Furthermore, when confronted with computer systems, individuals often exhibit attitudes towards technology that are typically associated with human interactions (Nass et al., 1999, p. 1095). Moreover, it is common for followers to ascribe messages to a human agent, such as the designer, instead of considering the computer as the ultimate source; this psychological affiliation persists even in the face of geographic and temporal separation between the follower and the designer (Nass et al., 1999, p. 1105). Additionally, studies revealed that individuals interact psychologically with anthropomorphic machines by perceiving social presence (Potdevin et al., 2020, p. 2). Similarly, previous research discovered that older users specifically seek the presence of digital agents to mitigate their distrust (Kwon et al., 2011, pp. 534-536). Consequently, these findings suggest that digital influencers have the potential to be accepted and integrated into human networks as if they were peers, while this phenomenon is not limited to specific user groups (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008, pp. 301-304).

Interestingly, the seminal distribution of this theory occurred three decades ago during significant changes in the development, accessibility, and integration of technology within society (Heyselaar, 2023, p. 1). Incidentally, when computers emit cues that resemble human signals, they automatically engage intrinsic mechanisms that aim to interact with humans efficiently; a reflexive and involuntary social response is elicited when confronted with computer-generated cues (Heyselaar, 2023, p. 1). Thus, according to Rogers's research (as cited in Heyselaar, 2023, p. 2), a novelty effect is observed with the advent of new technologies. In the original study, the computer was emphasised as an example of emerging technology, while current novelty lies in the domain of digital influencers. Consequently, Heyselaar (2023) asserts that technology unfamiliar to individuals tends to receive greater attention and interest than older, established technologies; however, this heightened fascination with novelty inevitably diminishes rapidly as the novelty factor wears off (p. 2). Moreover, the initial CASA theory experiment involved participants who possessed a high level of computer literacy, resided in a cultural context with limited access to the internet and interacted through written text using a word-processing tool; their limited exposure to computers exhibiting social behaviour meant that engaging in social interactions with a computer was novel for them (Heyselaar, 2023, p. 2).

Therefore, in social media, authenticity is often determined by the audience's perceptions; they tend to perceive personalities or practices as authentic if they appear genuine and in line with the specific context in which they exist (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 283). Thus, authenticity becomes more about individuals' subjective perceptions rather than an objective measure of authenticity (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 283). In a study conducted by Felnhofer et al. (2019), it was found that the mere presence of a digital agent can potentially function as a source of social support, thereby reducing individuals' perceived stress levels and aiding in the preservation of their self-esteem (pp. 45-46). Additionally, research suggests that when a digital agent closely resembles a human, the level of affinity with it tends to decrease; this phenomenon can be attributed to imperfections or discrepancies in the resemblance, which often make individuals feel uncomfortable

(Beer et al., 2015, pp. 16-18; Li, 2015, pp. 34-35). Moreover, the cultural representation of sophisticated technologies in Western literature frequently presents unfavourably and contributes to individuals' sceptical and cautious attitudes when engaging with digital agents, while this cultural demonisation may impede the social acceptance of digital influencers in various contexts (Stein et al., 2020, pp. 1-2). In essence, this research suggests that the CASA Theory may be more applicable to emergent technologies, implying the need to consider this crucial element when exploring and developing human-to-computer interactions (Heyselaar, 2023, p. 1).

2.2.1 Anthropomorphism/humanisation

First, in the category of *anthropomorphism/humanisation*, da Silva Oliveira and Chimenti (2021) posit that followers may raise concerns regarding the authenticity of digital influencers and their human-like appearance (pp. 15-17). For example, digital influencers often possess anthropomorphic qualities and exhibit human-like behaviour, which allows their followers to engage with them in a manner akin to interactions with human beings (Stein et al., 2022, pp. 1-2). Furthermore, scholars have revealed that digital influencers possess social cues, as discussed before, which prompt individuals to engage with them; these internal and external cues include femininity, fashionable attire, suitable backgrounds, facial expressions, attractiveness, utilisation of emojis, and perceived photorealism (Tan & Liew, 2020, pp. 1136-1141; Feine et al., 2019, pp. 138-143). Therefore, digital influencers have become increasingly prevalent in recent years, strategically designed to appeal to particular population segments by embodying idealised standards of attractiveness and promoting values that resonate with their intended audience (Lee & Yuan, 2023, pp. 3-4). For example, when it comes to opinion leaders in the fashion space, the desire to foster an individualistic identity has been identified as a primary motivator (Bertrandias & Goldsmith, 2006, p. 29; Goldsmith & Clark, 2008, p. 309). Furthermore, these individuals seek to differentiate themselves from others, intending to shape their personal and social identities positively (Tian et al., 2001, pp. 52-53).

Moreover, Kreiss et al. (2020) illustrated that identity ownership refers to the strategic construction of group identities by political and social actors, including social media influencers, based on factors like partisan affiliations, racial and ethnic backgrounds, genders, religions, and personal values (p. 2). As a result, digital influencers can customise their self-presentation, thus providing an unmatched level of flexibility with the capability to cater to specific demographics. Furthermore, this phenomenon is characterised by the enactment of bonding performances reaffirming differentiation from perceived outgroups (Kreiss et al., 2020, p. 2). However, previous research has revealed notable disparities in the online manifestation of sexuality between males and females. For example, gender-based expressions sometimes align with prevailing gender stereotypes (Wolf, 2000, pp. 831-833). For instance, digital influencers strategically disclose their artificial digital attributes to showcase authenticity while openly embracing their robotic identity in a self-deprecating manner, allowing for humanisation and enhancing their increased perceptions of honesty, imperfection and relatability (Lee & Yuan, 2023, p.2). Interestingly, vocal communication is another pivotal element in anthropomorphism, which attempts to emulate human behaviour (Purington et al., 2017, p. 2854).

Additionally, warmth perception encompasses how followers perceive the kindness and trustworthiness digital influencers exhibit (Aaker et al., 2010, pp. 225-226). As a result, the concept of anthropomorphism and its influence on digital influencers' presentation potentially influences the social and physical attractiveness of digital influencers, ultimately impacting followers' evaluations of them (Ahn et al., 2022, p. 327)

2.2.2 Attractiveness

Second, in the category of *attractiveness*, physical appeal, economic dimension, sponsorship, and consistency with the brand are associated with the digital influencer (Torres et al., 2019, pp. 1267-1269). For example, the phenomenon of influencers highlights the significance of congruency between followers' perceptions of influencers and the products they promote (McCormick, 2016, pp. 39-41). Moreover, Ahn et al. (2022) argue that the personality traits exhibited by digital influencers can significantly impact followers by fostering relevant associations and influencing their attitudes (pp. 328-329). This was seen in prior research regarding influencing followers' attitudes, and this congruency facilitated the formation of associative learning, resulting in an enhanced brand attitude (Till & Busler, 2000, pp. 1-4). Incidentally, sometimes, a need arises to augment their physical appearance by customizing their presentation to align with prevalent societal expectations surrounding gender to be perceived as attractive (Lee & Yuan, 2023, pp. 6-7). Therefore, the phenomenon of gender stereotypes often postulates that females exhibit a greater propensity for emotional expression, specifically in terms of displaying a higher frequency of positive emotions compared to negative ones (Timmers et al., 2003, pp. 41-44). Moreover, it can be stated that the credibility of a digital agent is heavily influenced by gender stereotypes, as evidenced by the tendency to portray these agents in an exaggeratedly feminine manner (Brahnam & Weaver, 2015, pp. 172-177).

Additionally, the identification of gender may potentially elicit stereotypes about anticipated behaviour (Brahnam & Weaver, 2015, pp. 175-178). In order to portray attractiveness, the predominant effects of influencers can be attributed to their self-presentation (Holzwarth et al., 2006, pp. 21-22). For example, this performance refers to a deliberate communicative strategy employed by individuals in social media influence, whereby they strategically emphasise their anticipated gender identity and encourage the corresponding gender identification of their audience (Parks et al., 2022, pp. 287 -293). Furthermore, this practice enhances followers' engagement, fosters parasocial interactions and may be leveraged to endorse products (Bhattacharya, 2022, pp. 272-278). Additionally, it is imperative to acknowledge that digital influencers serve a purpose beyond mere marketing instruments; they possess significant social relationship assets which ultimately allow brands to harness through collaboration to achieve their marketing objectives (Olenski, 2017). In addition, gender presentation can be conveyed through linguistic choices; specifically, female influencers demonstrated a greater propensity towards utilizing language associated with sexuality within their social media content (Auxier et al., 2019). Furthermore, Hudders and De Jans (2022) have revealed that female influencers' gender expression and content have a noteworthy impact on female followers' engagement with posts and their parasocial interactions, particularly in the context of product endorsements (p. 139-144).

As a result, digital influencers can manipulate their physical forms and personal experiences to suit the preferences and requirements of brands (Thomas & Fowler, 2021, p. 13). Furthermore, research has indicated that followers prefer endorsements when there is a perceived alignment between the influencer and the product (Park & Lin, 2020, p. 1). Coincidentally, digital influencers have been recognised for their informative value, as they provide consistent and standardised advice that primarily showcases the attributes and value of the promoted products (Lou et al., 2023, p. 554). According to Boshier (2020), digital influencers like Lil Miquela are engendering a shift in the concept of identity whereby it becomes a means of cultural exchange, primarily to generate financial gains. Moreover, using Instagram's technological features, such as filters and photo tools, enables influencers, specifically females, to manipulate and modify images according to prevailing and idealized gender aesthetics (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 143). Therefore, several brands argue that digital influencers have comparable if not superior, effectiveness compared to human influencers in fostering interpersonal relationships and enhancing engagement (Thomas & Fowler, 2021, p.13). Additionally, particularly for females, influencers may conform to gender norms by presenting themselves to align with their gender; this strategic self-presentation allows influencers to effectively convey authenticity, intimacy, and attractiveness (Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 132).

However, while digital influencers on social media platforms may possess autonomy, they are subject to external pressures, such as commercial and societal influences; these pressures can potentially restrict their agency and undermine their perception of authority over their self-presentation (Liu & Lee, 2022, pp. 176-177). Furthermore, a greater intensity of emotional attachments between an influencer and their followers is associated with an enhanced capacity to influence followers, motivating them to embrace a product that the influencer has endorsed (Ki et al., 2020, pp. 2-3). Additionally, Boshier (2020) asserts that identity peddling aligns with the proposed notion of Influencers employing a strategic approach to continually peddle and capitalise on identity intrigue and storytelling that resonate with mainstream and underground audiences, in the end, intended to evoke emotional responses, gain visibility, exert influence, and ultimately generate a monetary gain. Incidentally, to establish persuasiveness, influencers must project an image that encompasses credibility, attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise in the specific domain of the endorsed product (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 3). Moreover, when it comes to digital influencers the role of opinion leaders holds a significant role in the fashion world; their influence over their followers is derived from their extensive knowledge and expertise, establishing them as reliable sources of information and significantly influencing others' adoption of these trends (Thakur et al., 2016, p. 2765).

As a result, followers are likely to favour adhering to advice provided by an opinion leader who produces content that aligns with their personality traits and fields of interest; in doing so, individuals can potentially cultivate an aspirational self-image that mirrors the idealised persona of the opinion leader, thus shaping their consumption patterns (Pradhan et al., 2014, p. 457).

2.2.3 Authenticity

Lastly, in the category of authenticity, narrative strength, accompanied by other variables, not only diminishes the importance of authenticity but occasionally subjects individuals' genuineness to

scepticism by the followers of digital influencers (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 12-14). Incidentally, originality pertains to how individuals can achieve novelty and distinction through actions while perceiving these actions as unusual, innovative, and refined (Casaló et al., 2020, p. 512). Therefore, authenticity is the psychological perception or experience in which objects, events, or situations are interpreted as genuine (Wu & Hsu, 2018, p. 241). Moreover, Duffy and Hund (2019) posit that influencers place great importance on projecting a friendly and relatable persona to establish a strong connection with their audience and effectively promote brands (pp. 4991-4994). Additionally, the genuineness of digital influencers, distinguished by their life-like and genuine characteristics in contrast to animated figures, has been discovered to exert a notable impact on the attitudes and intentions of their followers (Silva & Bonetti, 2021, p.1; Ilicic et al., 2017, p. 2078; Kennedy et al., 2021, p. 349). For one, form realism refers to the degree to which a digital influencer is perceived as human-like in appearance (Miao et al., 2022, p. 71). For another, behavioural realism refers to the degree to which a digital influencer demonstrates human-like behaviours, including communication and expression (Kang & Watt, 2013, pp. 1170-1171).

Therefore, followers develop stronger connections with influencers when the latter consistently share personal emotions, thoughts, and daily experiences (Tian et al., 2023, pp. 1048-1049). Furthermore, research on online comments has revealed a noticeable disparity in the levels of harassment and scrutiny experienced by females compared to their male counterparts, which determine an individual's online expression (Searles et al., 2020, pp. 948-949). Hence, exploring the dynamics of digital influencers' self-presentation is crucial because understanding how digital influencers present themselves and are received by their followers is crucial because followers witness these public interactions, which in turn shape norms regarding acceptable behaviour, and this increases the probability that future followers will imitate and conform to these behaviours (Lee & Yuan, 2023, pp. 2-3). For example, digital influencers sometimes demonstrate their perceived authenticity by providing access to private spaces typically reserved for intimate connections, such as their bedrooms and bathrooms (Phelps et al., 2022, p. 3159). As a result, followers often experience a heightened perception of connection with these influencers (Belanche et al., 2020, p. 39). Incidentally, previous research by Ilicic et al. (2017) indicated that an essential factor influencing followers' attitudes and behavioural intentions is the presence of specific biological facial cues, such as freckles and moles, among influencers, and these cues are believed to enhance the perceived authenticity of the influencers (pp. 351-352).

However, digital influencers may be perceived as less authentic and relatable than human influencers due to their limited agency and propensity to adhere to marketing strategies (Moustakas et al., 2020, p.4). According to a study by Lee and Yuan (2023), female digital influencers demonstrated heightened positive emotions and a stronger tendency to reveal their digital identity; hence, authenticity disclosure in digital influencers encompasses more than merely simulating human characteristics; these entities lack an offline existence (pp. 6-7). Therefore, due to the social media platforms' hyperconnectivity and visible nature, the engagement occurring with digital influencers and their followers has the potential to exert a substantial influence on feelings of connection and a sense of belonging (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, pp. 1-2). Moreover, in the contemporary digital landscape, influencers and their devoted followers communicate and disseminate enthusiasm and

passions within specific domains of their choice (Xie-Carson et al., 2023, p. 8). Regardless, followers appreciate digital influencers for their ability to provide rational advice grounded in factual and knowledge-based advice; this suggests that digital influencers enhance the utility of the transmitted message (Xie-Carson et al., 2023, pp. 8-9). In doing so, influencers effectively position themselves as authorities by frequently disseminating commercial and non-commercial content relating to these subjects via social media platforms (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 566).

According to Harrigan et al. (2021), followers perceive online recommendations as more valuable when they align with their interests and task orientation, as they aid in accomplishing their objectives (p. 1300). Coincidentally, the influence of influencers can be enhanced when they establish more robust connections and relationships; as demonstrated by previous research, followers identify with influencers by exploring their life experiences and perceiving commonalities (Ki et al., 2020, p.5). In this regard, followers are inclined to adopt recommendations from influencers if they perceive shared interests, values, or traits with these individuals (Kelman, 2006, p.11). However, in the context of authenticity, particularly in the realm of Instagram, spontaneity has gradually disappeared from creating professional and personal content; this is evident in the fact that such content has evolved into a deliberately orchestrated process within social media (Leaver et al., 2020, p.614). Therefore, for an endorsement to be authentic, it must possess authenticity, match the endorsed product and align with the influencer's presentation to their followers (Audrezet et al., 2018, p. 562). Moreover, just as viewers invest themselves in fictional characters, followers similarly become engrossed in the lives and narratives of digital influencers, finding solace in their seemingly monotonous existence (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, pp. 2-3).

Also, existing research indicated that influencers should emphasise maintaining their brand's authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2018, p. 565). As a result, social media influencers who consistently present a positive image without acknowledging any negative elements of their real-life experiences or imperfections may be seen as less relatable or compelling (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016, p. 789; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 4).

2.3 Parasocial Theory

The inclination towards engaging in online interactions can amplify the influence of opinion leaders on various aspects of online communication (Casaló et al., 2011, p. 142). In the realm of influence, the disclosure of emotions and feelings has been observed to generate a perception among followers that a relationship is being formed, often resembling a parasocial connection (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 483). Hence, social media platforms facilitate interactive communication, enabling the audience to react and respond to the content posted; this ability for immediate and dynamic feedback can influence the poster's behaviour, as they may adjust their future actions based on audience reactions and responses (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016, pp. 788-790). As previously mentioned, followers expect an authentic experience when engaging with digital influencers, and deviations from this expectation can result in negative consequences; this is particularly evident in online chat experiences, where followers anticipate the interaction to be facilitated by a real person (Luo et al., 2019, p. 945). As a result, followers often perceive a sense of intimacy and two-way communication

with their preferred influencers, enabling them to receive messages from the influencer and engage in reciprocal communication with them (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, pp. 2-3).

Coincidentally, Horton and Wohl (1956) were the first to introduce this concept; they proposed that this relationship is characterized by a unilateral connection with celebrities, which involved both unilateral and illusory emotive qualities (p. 215). Additionally, research conducted by Wang and Liu (as cited in Gomez-Lacap et al., 2024, p. 79), the establishment of online relationships between digital influencers and their followers is contingent upon the notions of legitimacy and branding. Furthermore, Horton and Wohl (1956) drew a parallel between the emergence of a novel mass media and contended that television engendered an illusory face-to-face communication experience (p. 215). Influencers effectively utilize mass interpersonal communication to forge connections with their audience, positioning themselves as more relatable than conventional celebrities (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 5). However, Horton and Wohl (1956) observed face-to-face interactions, suggesting that the audience's engagement relies on commitment, effort, or responsibility while having the ability to select from pre-existing relationships but cannot establish new ones (p. 222). Furthermore, the televised encounter lacked balanced discussion, was devoid of dialectical exchange, was characterized by the dominance of the host, and failed to facilitate mutual advancement (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215).

Additionally, Horton and Wohl (1956) found celebrities of different kinds, such as puppets with anthropomorphic traits, to convert into personalities (*personae*), and the parasocial relationships extended to a much larger audience (p. 216). As a result, the *personae* established a sense of intimacy with their intended audience, regardless of the accuracy of the impression they created (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 216). Furthermore, Chung and Cho (2017) note that parasocial relationships established through online platforms have become increasingly transparent; followers divulge personal information, fostering friendship rather than followership (p. 482). Again, parasocial relationship dimensions like attractiveness, source trustworthiness, and self-disclosure warrant further exploration, as social media interactions between digital influencers and followers can influence brand credibility and loyalty (Gomez-Lacap et al., 2024, p. 79). For example, when examining and building relationships with their *personae*, self-disclosure is the most crucial dimension for followers (Kaloydis et al., 2017, p. 244). Moreover, when digital influencers interact more with their followers, they tend to self-disclose more, i.e. sharing personal information and emotion, all the while the digital influencers' self-disclosure influences the intentions of the followers (Gomez-Lacap et al., 2024, pp. 88-91; Leite & Baptista 2022, p. 304; Chen et al., 2016, p. 569). Thus, through self-disclosure, social media interactions foster parasocial relationships (Gomez-Lacap, 2024, p. 90).

Therefore, the role of digital influencers extends beyond mere promotion and sales, as they actively engage in self-advocacy and advocacy for others (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, pp. 269-270). Additionally, followers respond to the digital influencer as if engaging in a typical social relationship because the narratives presented on Instagram that showcase the digital influencer's self-doubt and inquiries about fashion have played a significant role in establishing parasocial relationships through these relationships (Giles, 2002, p. 279). Moreover, Banet-Weiser (2012) posited that a merging of the genuine and branded selves is not only increasingly blurred but also anticipated and accepted as a

norm as a result of the distinction between the authentic self, which encompasses inner beliefs, creativity and the constructed self, which is associated with branding (p. 13). In addition, individuals' intended social and relational identities are determined by their selection of groups or other followers with whom they engage (Pan et al., 2017, pp. 72-73). Furthermore, scholars provided evidence suggesting that digital agents are capable of satisfying specific social interaction needs in a manner akin to human-to-human interactions and that individuals engaging with digital agents exhibit mimicry behaviours similar to those seen during interactions with other human counterparts (Krämer et al., 2013, pp. 336-339; Krämer et al., 2018, pp. 117-120).

Moreover, in the context of social media platforms and interacting with digital agents, this enhances intrinsic satisfaction and fulfils individuals' need for autonomy (Downie et al., 2008, pp. 524-526; Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 76). In doing so, engaging in this activity, followers purposefully interact with a persuasive agent, actively consuming any promotional or advertising materials that may be presented to them (Hanus & Fox, 2015, p. 37). Thus, as social interaction increasingly relies on mediation, digital agents will become more familiar (Fox & Ahn, 2012, p. 265). In essence, promoting closer and more connected relationships is widely acknowledged as contributing to this domain (Sookkaew & Saephoo, 2021, p. 331).

3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Methods

Exploratory analysis is a conventional qualitative research approach encompassing diverse components and techniques from multiple traditions and epistemological orientations. Therefore, researchers widely recognise it as a content-driven inductive method (Mayring, 2000, pp. 1-2). Moreover, adopting an exploratory and qualitative approach is critical, given the constantly evolving nature of digital influencers as innovations. In doing so, this research sought to establish a theoretical groundwork for future generalisations in the field. Consequently, this research employed a qualitative analysis, utilising the definition proposed by Denzin and Lincoln (2011); "qualitative research is an activity in which the observer is situated in the world, while interpretative research means that qualitative researchers study phenomena in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret them according to the meanings people assign" (p. 3). However, before initiating this process, the researcher considered the critical factor of the research topic under investigation, the historical context intricately intertwined with the research question, and the theoretical framework intended to optimise the impact of the chosen qualitative technique (Brennen, 2017, pp. 8-9). Thus, with its principles, the Big Q qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable method for this thesis, involving qualitative data collection, analysis and a non-positivist framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.2). Moreover, Big Q researchers often consider mind-dependent facts instead of mind-independent truths (Tebes, 2005, p. 216). In conclusion, thematic analysis was the chosen approach that most effectively aligns with the qualitative method paradigm, which will be elaborated upon in the next section.

3.2 Thematic Analysis

Swain (2018) asserts that implementing a thematic analysis enables the identification of essential themes that are integral to characterising phenomena and documenting meaningful patterns in primary qualitative research (p. 4). Therefore, the researcher gathered digital influencer Instagram posts for this thesis to capture potential patterns. Additionally, these posts encompassed manifest, immediately observable, and latent content that conveyed subconscious or symbolic meanings of greater significance. Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of the various approaches and methodologies employed in thematic analysis was essential for engaging in effective thematic analysis practice (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.1). Given the exploratory nature of this thesis, adopting a strategy that involved reviewing data and identifying keywords, patterns, themes, and concepts that contributed to framing the analysis before conducting it seemed appropriate and suitable (Guest et al., 2012, p. 7). Besides, Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a coding process wherein codes are organised and grouped into themes (p. 88). Additionally, the concept of coding and categorising can be understood from realist or constructivist perspectives (Gibbs, 2007, p. 40). Meanwhile, Kuckartz (2014) and other scholars are firm believers in developing categories and subcategories, or themes, which were applied to data to generate the first codes (p. 9). However, it was essential to note that the identification and development of themes was influenced by whether the research topic was primarily data-driven or theory-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 83-84).

Therefore, reflexive thematic analysis recognises the methods employed within thematic analysis while distinguishing it from other research methodologies (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 6). Coincidentally, topic summaries were not conceptually meaningful; they were designed to understand and interpret data while capturing an essential aspect of the research in order to go beyond surface interpretations by diving deep and engaging with data using a comprehensive coding process to capture multiple dimensions of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 3). Also, in this research project and its complex topic, a more hybrid approach to analysis was preferred; Swain (2018) called this "a top-down, deductive, theoretical process and a bottom-up, inductive, data-driven process. The former approach yielded a set of a priori, i.e. pre-empirical codes derived from the research objectives and questions, and the latter yielded a set of a posteriori, i.e. post-empirical codes derived from an examination of data generated" (p. 5). Therefore, a coding frame was created, as it was essential to provide a more comprehensive explanation of what a coding frame entails (Flick, 2014, p. 170). Furthermore, developing a robust coding frame was crucial for this practical qualitative content analysis, and in order to develop a coding frame, four steps were considered: material selection, category structuring and generation, category definition, and frame revision and expansion (Flick, 2014, p. 174).

At its core, the coding frame was a pivotal element in the research methodology, consisting of a primary category and, in some cases, two or more categories and to ensure effectiveness, the main categories within coding frames concentrated on a singular aspect of the data, adhering to the unidimensionality principle while the subcategories beneath a main category adhered to the principle of mutual exclusiveness (Flick, 2014, pp. 174-175). Interestingly, the reasons behind these requirements were partly rooted in conceptual considerations, seeing that interpreting this requirement within the broader context of the coding framework is crucial instead, emphasising that each unit should only be coded once under a single primary category (Flick, 2014, pp. 174-175). Moreover, the researcher categorised each segment accordingly, while the thematic analysis categories aimed to encompass the pertinent data characteristics within the context of the principle of exhaustiveness, ensuring that the framework covered all the dataset components (Flick, 2014, pp. 174-175). Additionally, the approach had a few reliability difficulties that will be discussed in later paragraphs. Moreover, thematic analysis's versatility served as its key strength and limitation. Also, it demanded reflexivity on the researcher's part and a well-defined analytical approach that could withstand scrutiny to establish the credibility and trustworthiness of the research findings.

In addition, presenting the findings entailed showcasing the coding frame, while the findings could also serve as a foundation for further data exploration beyond individual coding units and categories (Flick, 2014, p. 180). In conclusion, thematic analysis was the most effective method for capturing the complexity of meaning inside the textual data set.

3.3 Instagram

Instagram has emerged as a focal point in the realm of social media platforms owing to its exponential growth as a prominent social networking site and its esteemed status as the preferred platform among influencers (Pineda et al., 2020, p. 1138; Casaló et al., 2020, p. 510; Sheldon &

Bryant, 2016, p. 89). Thus, the rise of Instagram as a prominent platform for nurturing and promoting influential digital personalities signifies a crucial development within the contemporary digital landscape (Sookkaew & Saephoo2021, 2021, p. 327). For instance, followers on this platform tend to focus on self-presentation, namely identity construction and prefer sharing content, therefore being a predominantly visual platform (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016, p. 90; Johnson et al., 2019, p. 112; Waterloo et al., 2018, p. 1817). Furthermore, from 2023 onwards, Instagram has experienced a substantial expansion, ultimately gathering a sizable follower base of 1.35 billion (Oberlo, 2024). Thus, by demonstrating its prominence, Instagram is the primary social media platform employed by prominent figures, with brands exhibiting a notable surge in follower count and interaction levels with other brand categories (Casaló et al., 2020, pp. 510-511).

Coincidentally, since influencers gained notability, mainly through Instagram, an appealing visual presentation of the digital agent is crucial in the interaction between followers and influencers; this platform was particularly suitable for examining follower responses towards them (Khan & Sutcliffe, 2014, p. 142). Therefore, a representative sample of posts, including public comments, was gathered during the research process to minimise potential bias. This arose from parasocial ties with the influencer, which led to a deliberate avoidance of the inclination to make favourable comments due to following the influencer. Also, the sample consisted of comments from both influencer followers and non-followers. Lastly, the comments analysed encompassed various languages; the analysis was conducted exclusively in English, seeing that this language choice aligns with the predominant use in interactions with the influencers.

3.4 Data

The initial step in constructing the coding frame was selecting a representative portion of the data to construct the coding frame, which prevented cognitive overload (Flick, 2014, p. 175). For this research, a corpus consisting of 172 Instagram posts published from 2020 to 2024 was subjected to reflexive thematic analysis, employing a semiotic toolbox as the analytical framework. Incidentally, Guest et al. (2012) emphasised the greater significance of validity, as it encompassed a broader concept: the assurance that the analysis aligned with the intended focus of this study (p. 45). Moreover, in qualitative research, face validity held crucial importance as it entailed researchers' judgment in discerning the authenticity of phenomena under investigation (Guest et al., 2012, p. 100). Furthermore, the rationale behind triangulation was rooted in mitigating the inherent bias often associated with investigations that rely on single-method, single-observer, and single-theory (Guest et al., 2012, p. 105). Moreover, the utilisation of publicly accessible online data has been a topic of controversy within the research community in the past (Moreno et al., 2013, p. 711). Therefore, when utilising user data, anonymity was paramount; however, for this research, the data was posted by public user accounts on Instagram.

3.4.1 Sampling

The preferred choice in qualitative research was using a non-probability sampling strategy, specifically purposive sampling, to meaningfully capture an appropriate amount of data. This method

allowed for the deliberate selection of units to be included in the researcher's assessment of their representativeness and relevance to the research objectives (Babbie, 2014, p. 200). Additionally, segmentation was applied, involving the division of the material into distinct units assigned to specific subcategories to facilitate the organisation and comprehensive analysis of classification; this process was closely intertwined with developing a coding frame in order to achieve mutual exclusivity by developing criteria, in this case, thematic criteria aligned better with the coding frame when segmenting the material and coding units numbered consecutively per source (Flick, 2014, p. 178). Hence, in this research, Instagram posts were deemed the most suitable units of analysis. Additionally, when constructing units of analysis, it was imperative to consider the formation of categories or topics to which these units were allocated. Given the specific requirements of the research, data from Instagram posts relevant to the four selected digital influencers were considered for analysis.

However, before selecting the 172 posts, the researcher employed inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1) to identify and determine their suitability for analysis. Moreover, the researcher prioritised the sources as the primary criterion for post-selection, breaking the material into smaller segments, such as organising it according to the source (Flick, 2014, p. 178). Furthermore, section 3.4.3. (Operationalisation) will elaborate on the main categories (structuring) and new subcategories (generating) (Flick, 2014, p. 178).

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posts that had a digital influencer endorsing a brand. • Posts in which the following three categories were analysed: <i>anthropomorphism/humanisation</i>, <i>attractiveness</i> and <i>authenticity</i> (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 1-21; Torres et al., 2019, pp. 1267-1269). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posts that pre-date digital influencers being used for brand campaigns prior to 2020.

This research centred on Instagram posts that communicated perceptions about the three pre-defined categories that aided in identifying a digital influencer and employing a data-driven strategy for developing coding frames involving systematically comparing and contrasting different sources, which proved particularly advantageous when analysing diverse datasets (Flick, 2014, p. 180). In doing so, the units of analysis were organised in spreadsheets and categorised accordingly by each digital influencer and category. Furthermore, sufficient and comprehensive information was collected from the profiles of the four selected digital influencers. Appendix A: Units of Analysis contains detailed tables containing the sources for each profile and category. Coincidentally, the choice of these particular accounts was not arbitrary (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 537); instead, it was grounded in their critical attributes, including their expanding follower base, specialised focus on the fashion industry, and surging popularity on the Instagram platform. Thus, a sample of four Instagram digital

influencers was purposively selected. In particular, the four digital influencers included two notable choices, namely, Lil Miquela, who has garnered media attention over the years with a substantial following of over two and a half million on Instagram, and Shudu, who is a digital supermodel, along with Lil Miquela, has worked with blue-chip brands from around the world, such as Chanel. Lastly, for an overview of the four digital influencers, see Table 2 for clickable links to view their Instagram profiles.

Table 2. Selection of four influencers

Influencer	Followers
Noonoouri	432K
Shudu	240K
Lil Miquela	2.6M
Bermuda	233K

3.4.2 Data Collection

Yin (2018) highlighted the importance of carefully selecting relevant examples, such as the Instagram posts from the four selected digital influencers, to ensure the data either predicted similar outcomes or produced contrasting results explained by predictable factors (p. 91). Therefore, the process of data collection encompassed identifying the specific data being investigated, gathering relevant data, and determining how to handle the data acquired; this entailed engaging in consistent information collection and conducting assessments (Yin, 2018, pp. 123-124). Hence, the comparative technique was valuable as it examined multiple scenarios within a comprehensive framework, thereby revealing patterns and connections among different examples (Yin, 2018, p. 24). After collecting Instagram posts, a qualitative coding process was employed to identify the main themes, patterns, and trends within the dataset. As previously mentioned, a purposive data collection technique was utilised to gather the necessary information. Moreover, data types were selected based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Table 1. Also, specific criteria and rules were applied during the search process to ensure future replicability and enhance the reliability of the study. A restricted publication range was set for the previous four years, specifically from 2020 to 2024, which helped maintain relevance within the dynamic landscape of digital influencers.

Therefore, it was crucial to emphasise that the data-gathering procedure adhered to the set timeframe regarding publication dates. In addition, Google and YouTube were used exclusively to verify additional data on notable digital influencers beyond what was available on Instagram. For example, sites and content channels with financial, local news, and beauty were considered. This was done to validate the authenticity of brand campaigns. Moreover, upon identifying sources through this search, the researcher thoroughly evaluated the platform from where the data was acquired. For instance, search phrases consisting of the names of the digital influencers were used to ease this procedure. Additionally, it was mandatory for all recorded data points to be written in English. Due

to the unique scope of this research, which focused on how digital influencers are seen by their followers and how they represent brands, the amount of available data was restricted; thus, it was seen as a limitation. Nevertheless, data triangulation was implemented to ensure a sufficient number of posts per digital influencer.

3.4.3 Operationalisation

The research questions outlined at the outset of this thesis exist within a nuanced world, necessitating a specific approach to their operationalisation. First, as mentioned in the theoretical section, the following theories have been operationalised: the CASA paradigm (Nass et al., 1995, pp. 223-239) and the Parasocial Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956, pp. 215-229). Second, this research paper addressed the when, where, what, how, and why questions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. In order to achieve this, the researcher examined structuring (main categories) and generating (subcategories) by combining concept (main categories) and data-driven (subcategories) methods to provide a comprehensive description of the data (Flick, 2014, p. 176). Furthermore, the researcher used various data analysis strategies to adopt a data-driven approach (Schreier, 2012, p. 39). As a result of this, facilitated the creation of main categories through existing knowledge and then complementing them with data-driven subcategories by applying two critical strategies: subsumption and progressive summarising; the former strategy was a valuable approach for deriving subcategories; however, the iterative process continued until saturation (Flick, 2014, p. 176). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, when it came to the coding frame, successive summarising was applied, thus creating the structure and providing the category definitions: a category name, an explanation of its meaning (including indicators that signalled the presence of a phenomenon), positive examples, and decision rules (Flick, 2014, pp. 176-177).

Moreover, the researcher used three pre-defined categories as inclusion criteria: *anthropomorphism/humanisation*, *attractiveness*, and *authenticity*. First, in the category of anthropomorphism/humanisation, followers raised questions regarding the authenticity of a digital influencer's human identity when the influencer exhibited a remarkably human-like appearance (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 1-21). Second, in the category of attractiveness, this was attributed to the digital influencers' physical appeal, economic dimension, sponsorship, and consistency with the brand (Torres et al., 2019, pp. 1267-1269). Lastly, in the category of authenticity, the strength of the narrative, among other factors, potentially diminished the importance of authenticity, thereby leading to instances where the authenticity of humans becomes the subject of questioning among followers of digital influencers. (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 1-21). As a result, after establishing and organising the categories above, reviewing of the organisational structure of the coding frame was done next; if subcategories appeared similar, merging these specific subcategories that were re-conceptualised as main categories, in doing so prompting a revision of the overall structure of the coding frame, with each expansion thoroughly reevaluating all previous steps, ensuring that any structuring (main categories) and generating (subcategories) were identified and defined (Flick, 2014, pp. 177-178).

Consequently, the data collection phase took place from April 1st to April 29th and involved gathering data from 172 Instagram posts published on the accounts of Noonouri, Shudu, Lil Miquela, and Bermuda. Also, the data analysis phase occurred from May 6th to May 20th. Lastly, the results and conclusion phase occurred between May 21st and May 27th, constituting a micro-longitudinal study.

Table 3. Operationalisation of categories

Categories	Definition	Code	Operationalisation
Anthropomorphism/Humanisation	The extent to which an individual's physical appearance on social media, in the role of a digital influencer, aligns with human-like attributes (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 1-21)	AH	Facial expressions, human features, body language, clothing choices, emotional expression and authenticity.
Attractiveness	The portrayal of the digital influencer's economic status, sponsorships, and the alignment of content with associated brands (Torres et al., 2019, pp. 1267-1269)	AT	Association with sponsorships, brand collaborations, frequency and prominence of sponsored content, messaging, lifestyle indicators and possessions.
Authenticity	The narrative strength and followers' scepticism toward the authenticity of human experiences portrayed by the digital influencer (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 1-21)	AU	Strength of the narrative, storytelling techniques and audience engagement.

3.4.4 Data Analysis

As mentioned in the previous sections, a more hybrid approach to analysis was preferred for this research and complex topic, namely "a top-down, deductive, theoretical process and a bottom-up, inductive, data-driven process" (Swain, 2018, p.5). Therefore, the initial step in the primary analysis involved segmenting the remaining material into coding units and then coding these units by assigning them to the appropriate categories within the coding frame (Flick, 2014, p. 178). Furthermore, thematic analysis was a method of qualitative text analysis that involved exploring and identifying underlying themes present in the materials under investigation; it is widely regarded as one of the most commonly employed approaches to qualitative text analysis. (Bryman, 2004, as cited in Kohlbacher, 2006, p. 10). Moreover, the themes for this research were connected to *anthropomorphism/humanisation*, *attractiveness* and *authenticity*. Additionally, during the primary analysis phase, all materials are coded, with the understanding that the coding frame was modified; hence, it was crucial to establish the reliability and validity of the coding frame before commencing this phase (Flick, 2014, p. 174). Therefore, in the final step of the primary analysis phase, the coding results were translated and transformed to ensure their relevance and applicability in addressing the research question (Flick, 2014, p. 180).

3.5 Reliability and Validity

When undertaking qualitative research, it was essential to acknowledge and address issues regarding the legitimacy and dependability of the findings (Yin, 2018, p. 290). Moreover, this research investigated the reliability of the data and two dimensions of credibility: construct and

external validity. The research focused on establishing causal linkages, rendering internal validity useless (Yin, 2018, p. 78). Therefore, assessing the coding framework entailed examining the trial coding outcomes in relation to their consistency and validity; this enabled a greater level of consistency across the coding rounds, indicating a higher-quality coding framework (Flick, 2014, p. 179).

3.51 Reliability

Reliability refers to the capacity to replicate similar research in future circumstances, especially in relation to operations involving data collection and conducting these replications, which are likely to yield similar or equal results (Yin, 2018, p. 78). Therefore, the objective of guaranteeing dependability was to reduce biases and mistakes in research. In order to ensure the dependability of this study, a database specifically containing Instagram posts was established (see Appendix A) to hold all the collected data throughout the data-gathering procedure.

3.5.2 Validity

External validity refers to the degree to which the research results were applied to different scenarios that were not explicitly addressed in the study; asking "how" and "why" questions were often helpful in establishing external validity (Yin, 2019, pp. 81-82). In this regard, the present research explicitly examined how digital influencers strategically presented themselves to their followers and how they represented brands. Moreover, construct validity refers to the accurate assessment and operationalisation of ideas in this research; however, a limitation was that this type of validity has faced much criticism in research because it is subjective (Yin, 2018, pp. 79-80). Therefore, validity was crucial for evaluating coding frames, as it determined the categories' suitability for accurately representing the material and concepts (Flick, 2014, p. 179). Furthermore, the accuracy of data-driven elements of the coding frame was assessed by analysing the distribution of coding frequencies among the subcategories of a main category (Flick, 2014, p. 79).

Hence, advocates contend that incorporating many sources of information is a method that can improve the construct validity (Yin, 2018, p. 80). Moreover, studies have demonstrated that employing several sources of evidence yields superior quality compared to depending only on a single source (Yin, 2018, p. 171). Therefore, addressing the notion of triangulation in this situation was crucial. Triangulation refers to utilising many pieces of evidence to bolster a particular conclusion, improving the accuracy of the overall findings and strengthening the validity of the constructed convergent evidence (Yin, 2018, pp. 172-173). Lastly, data triangulation was accomplished in this research by thoroughly analysing internal and external sources (i.e., Instagram) (i.e., Google, YouTube and Websites).

4. Results

The research question pertains to a novel and multifaceted topic, making it unsurprising that the corpus exhibits diverse, compelling aspects within its domain. Furthermore, the prevalence of digital influencers has escalated in recent years; the impetus behind this research stems from the emergence of digital influencers as endorsers representing a novel phenomenon that has garnered the attention of brands while beginning to permeate followers' consciousness (Miao et al., 2022, p. 2; Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2). Therefore, this research examined the digital influencers' Instagram posts to determine if they aligned with the research objectives. Specifically, the posts were analysed by considering three categories: anthropomorphism/humanisation, attractiveness, and authenticity in self-presentation with and without brand participation or endorsement. Therefore, each of the categories above has been operationalised, as mentioned in Table 3 in the methodology section. As a result, these categories provided insights into the influencers' posts, including their overall content, brand affiliations, and followers. Lastly, the posts were assessed for containing brand mentions. First, the number of Instagram posts per influencer is Shudu with 41, Bermuda with 40, Noonouri with 51 and Lil Miquela with 40. Additionally, the present research incorporated a qualitative analysis of Instagram posts, revealing various viewpoints on categorising a particular topic.

Therefore, this research paper aimed to examine three distinct categories individually and subsequently elucidate the rationale underlying the researcher's selection of Instagram posts fitting within each category. Furthermore, a thorough analysis revealed that all 172 Instagram posts examined were categorised as exemplifying anthropomorphism/humanisation and attractiveness. Second, 169 of the posts assessed were assigned the category of authenticity. As a result, this thesis sought to investigate the fundamental process behind the portrayal of digital influencers, with and without brands and or endorsements. Moreover, this research was especially relevant considering the current academic fascination with this concept and the potential implications for the human experience (Torres et al., 2019, pp. 1267-1269; da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 1-21; Olivier, 2016, p. 261). Lastly, the findings demonstrated that the alignment between digital influencers and brands was present and influenced the followers' perceptions of authenticity.

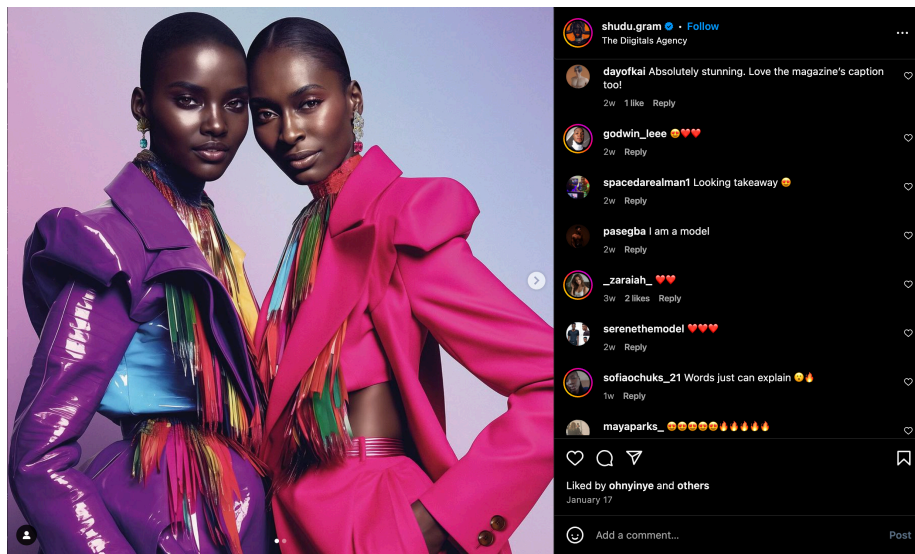
4.1 Anthropomorphism/Humanisation

4.1.1 Shudu

First, when looking at facial expressions, a range of different ones can be interpreted amidst the Instagram posts IGShudu#, ranging from smiling (with their mouth) to smizing (a term coined by famous American Supermodel Tyra Banks when someone is smiling with their eyes) to soft, expressionless, pensive (three quarters facing the camera) and sultry. One illustrative instance can be observed by examining IGShudu#20220615. Within the digital influencer's post, one can observe the presence of a prominent, amiable smile. Notably, this expression harmoniously aligns with the image's backdrop, wherein carefully positioned lens flares adorn two opposing corners. Furthermore, the digital influencer's body language exudes a relaxed demeanour, conveying the impression of a casual encounter during a leisurely walk while wearing something not very revealing by the brand

Fila. In analysing IGShudu#20211222, it is evident that the digital influencer presents a smiling facial expression. However, the context is very much opposite to the previous post depicting a smile. Interestingly, in IGShudu#20240117 (see Figure 1), the digital influencer emulates the same body language as their real-life counterpart, conveying authenticity. Moreover, the digital influencer's clothing choices resemble their real-life counterparts. This further reinforces the connection between the two individuals and enhances the overall visual coherence of the depiction.

Figure 1. IGShudu#20240117



Additionally, when observing the facial expression known as a smize in images IGShudu#20240104 and IGShudu#20230729, due to the differing clothing choices, the meaning conveyed by the smize diverges from that in the previous examples. Therefore, it should be noted that the images possessed inherent power in the previous instances. In contrast, the significance of the smize is influenced by the specific clothing elements. In the analysis of IGShudu#20230726, an intriguing portrayal is observed. The digital influencer's vacant facial expression is juxtaposed with their presence in the rear seat of a vehicle, attired in a coat reminiscent of formal occasions. This strategic composition humanises the digital influencers by situating them within a relatable context familiar to their followers. This is observed in the post IGShudu#20230704, wherein the digital influencer assumes a pensive gaze in the distance while holding a warm beverage. When analysing IGShudu#202010, it is evident that the image portrays a sultry facial expression. Nonetheless, there is a stark contrast in the body language exhibited in each post. The digital influencer is observed concealing half of their face in the former, whereas, in the latter, they assume an alluring pose while being upside down. One notable finding from the compilation of Instagram posts featuring Shudu is IGShudu#20230531. This particular post stands out as it typifies the entire category, highlighting the decision made by the team responsible for this digital influencer not to enhance or smooth out their skin digitally. Instead, they maintained its texture, giving a more realistic human appearance. This approach resonates with the underlying concept known as the CASA Paradigm, as discussed in the theoretical framework.

4.1.2 Lil Miquela

In examining facial expressions portrayed in the posts under the account labelled IGLilMiquela#, a variety of interpretations can be discerned. These interpretations encompass a playful demeanour, characterised by sticking out one's tongue, and the 'duckface' pose, which involves pressing one's lips together to convey a kiss-like symbol. Additional expressions include winking and moments of contemplation, while specific posts showcase a lack of discernible facial expressions. Specific body language cues often accompany these various facial expressions. For instance, the origin of the trend of digital influencers sticking out their tongue in every photo can be attributed to IGLilMiquela#20210823, where the act is reminiscent of childlike behaviour. Similarly, in IGLilMiquela#20220611, the digital influencer maintains the tongue-out gesture, but this time pairs it with the rock n roll hand gesture, which is typically associated with this expression. For instance, the post, IGLilMiquela#20220323, illustrates the digital influencer's expression of joy while at the beach, dressed in a swimsuit that replicates the style of her favourite television personality, a teenage character known for her unusually mature demeanour. Similarly, IGLilMiquela#20220422 captures the digital influencer's jubilant demeanour in celebration of the seventh anniversary of her nineteenth birthday. Additionally, IGLilMiquela#20210802 playfully depicts the digital influencer, winking in what appears to be an old photograph of her in a uniform from their previous employment at a minimum wage job, which is recognisably in their home state of California.

The facial expression "duckface" is observed in IGLilMiquela#20230926, which shows the digital influencer engaging in a mirror selfie while attempting various clothing items. In IGLilMiquela#20231011, the digital influencer adopts a playful stance by deliberately positioning herself partially out of the frame while posing alongside the latest model of a BMW electric vehicle. A frequent facial expression in the posts gathered was one of no expression, as seen in IGLilMiquela#20210719, IGLilMiqu#20220910 and IGLilMiquela#20240116; the former portrays the digital influencers dining with a fork in their mouth after consuming a portion of their meal. Conversely, the second post shows the digital influencer reclining on a couch, gazing upwards, accompanied by a caption prompting followers to provide their preferred voice choice for the influencer. While the latter depicts the digital influencer as resting and invites their followers to ask any questions they desire, the aforementioned facial expressions reinforce the assertions made by scholars in the theoretical section regarding the significance of humanisation.

4.1.3 Noonoori

Analysing facial expressions within the posts IGNoonoori# reveals a notable pattern; notably, variations in eyebrow shape, eye colour, and eye size when open contribute to the digital influencer's facial expressions. While the overall face remains constant, each post's distinct eye features change. Significantly, the extent to which the eyes are open determines the resulting expression, categorised as one-quarter open, halfway open, three-quarter open, or fully open. For instance, in IGNoonoori#20231001, despite the face being in profile and the digital influencer not directly facing the camera, the slightly open eye and accompanying body language, combined with the flowing gown, evoke an aura of mystery. Similarly, in IGNoonoori#20240122, the different eye

shapes and the eye being halfway open contribute to a more sultry expression, accentuated by the suggestive garment worn by the digital influencer. In analysing IGNoonouri#20231116, the subject's eyes are partially open. Notwithstanding this, the setting by the ocean, the graceful body language, and the formal attire create an ethereal atmosphere. Contrasting this, IGNoonouri#20231004 showcases a swimsuit-clad figure with once again halfway opened eyes. It is worth considering whether the choice of clothing affects the overall emotional expression of the post. Nevertheless, rigidity lingers due to the body language and a subtle hint of hesitance.

Similarly, in IGNoonouri#20231106, the digital influencer's eyes are fully open. However, the tilted head and the oversized garment contribute to slouched body language and a nonchalant demeanour. Lastly, in IGNoonouri#20240109, the subject's eyes are open, with no hint of closure. Moreover, the visual aspects of the digital influencer's body language and attire significantly impact the overall sentiment of the post, shifting it towards a more seductive tone. Interestingly, in IGNoonouri#20231208, an intriguing element emerges as the influencer's eyes are open, albeit with a subtle arch in her eyebrows and accompanying body language that can be interpreted as slightly aggressive. Interestingly, in IGNoonouri#20231024, the eyes again display a lighter shade, and the eyebrows possess a distinct shape, thereby contributing to a gentle facial expression reinforced by the unique choice of attire. These posts imply that the digital influencer is constantly evolving, trying to portray themselves as more human or human-like.

4.1.4 Bermuda

When analysing facial expressions in the posts IG Bermuda#, it is evident that little can be deduced solely from the facial cues. However, when considering the accompanying body language, a range of emotional expressions emerges, encompassing facets such as confidence, pensiveness, flirtation, allure, happiness, enigma, intensity, and seduction. Specifically, when examining IG Bermuda#20200818, the digital influencer's facial expression remains indiscernible. Nevertheless, the soft body language contrasts with the provocative attire, contributing to a contradicting emotion when looking at the other components in the post. When looking at IG Bermuda#20200502, the digital influencer is portrayed in a relaxed position on the floor, juxtaposed with a garment contrasting their body language. Furthermore, their facial expression appears blank, contributing to an overall emotional expression of hesitancy. In IG Bermuda#20200414, the digital influencer exhibits a neutral facial expression accompanied by a bold choice of metallic attire and a rigid posture, resulting in a mysterious emotional tone. In IG Bermuda#20200413, the digital influencer is captured in a close-up shot with a hand placed on the chin, devoid of facial expression. However, this hand placement generates a pensive emotional expression. Interestingly, in IG Bermuda#20200419, the digital influencer flaunts a pouting facial expression while the body language and clothing choices exude playfulness.

Consequently, the overall emotional expression oscillates between sweetness and flirtatiousness. Finally, in IG Bermuda#20200331, the digital influencer appears wrapped in towels from head to toe, accompanied by a smirking facial expression, engendering an overall emotional expression of happiness. When analysing IG Bermuda#20200317, it is evident that the digital

influencer's facial expression is characterised by a slight pout, complemented by confident body language and bold clothing choices. The overall emotional expression conveyed in the post is enticement. Furthermore, in the case of IG Bermuda#20200315, the digital influencer is observed walking arm in arm with another digital influencer being examined for this thesis. The digital influencer exhibits a warm smile and a relaxed demeanour in their body language, all while adorned in a striking metallic garment reminiscent of a robot; overall, the post gives an overall impression of happiness and contentment. The digital influencer strives to emulate human-like qualities in light of the posts above and their varying facial and emotional expressions. This aligns with the concept of the CASA paradigm discussed earlier in the theoretical section.

4.2 Attractiveness

4.2.1 Shudu

When examining attractiveness within Instagram posts featuring IGShudu#, several elements can be discerned. One such element pertains to the association with sponsorships, which manifests in two distinct manners: via the inclusion of a hashtag or through direct mention in the caption accompanying the posts. The initial instance of sponsorship is demonstrated in the IGShudu#20220825 post, wherein multiple brands are visually represented within the image and concurrently acknowledged in the accompanying caption. Additionally, as observed in the IGShudu#20221128 post, a sole brand collaboration is featured, with the sponsorship explicitly acknowledged and articulated in the accompanying caption. Upon analysing IGShudu#20240117, it becomes evident that the digital influencer uses a particular hashtag to suggest their identity as a digital model. Explicit examples supporting this inference can be found in IGShudu#20230710, IGShudu#20230704, and IGShudu#20230726, where the digital influencer portrays a highly glamorous lifestyle without explicitly promoting brand collaborations. This finding supports and reinforces the earlier arguments, which emphasise the utilisation of digital influencers in combination with particular items for brand partnerships; as a result, several brand collaborations can be identified in the postings.

Moreover, in the analysis of IGShudu#20200822, swimwear emerges as the preferred brand collaboration. Similarly, IGShudu#20201222 showcases a noteworthy partnership with a renowned luxury brand encompassing apparel and accessories. Intriguingly, IGShudu#20210318 features an alcoholic beverage brand as the promotional partner in the post. Among the total product categories featured in the gathered posts, sixteen refer to clothing, including six affordable brands like Adidas, alongside ten luxury brands encompassing Ferragamo, Karl Lagerfeld, and Louis Vuitton. Additionally, two posts focused on the automotive brand, while seven articles examined a range of fashion accessories from high-end to low-end markets. In examining messaging, it was observed that the digital influencer strategically incorporates current pop culture references in their posts. Furthermore, out of the forty-one posts analysed, only five do not overtly mention any form of brand collaboration. Nevertheless, the range of collaborations encompassed various brands, aligning with the notion outlined in the theoretical section that a successful digital influencer must establish a suitable match between themselves and the product or brand to be perceived as commercially appealing.

4.2.2 Lil Miquela

In analysing the posts labelled IGLilMiquela#, it is evident that attractiveness is portrayed through various dimensions. Twenty-two posts collected in this digital influencer's data set highlight collaborations with fashion brands. A specific instance can be observed in IGLilMiquela#20231210, where an art space in the physical world is showcased alongside a fashion brand tagged but not explicitly mentioned in the post. This presentation conveys a creative lifestyle that seamlessly merges fashion and art. Additionally, IGLilMiquela#20220323 depicts the digital influencer in an effortless beach lounging scenario, donning a luxurious Emilio Pucci swimsuit. Notably, in this post, the digital influencer also emulates the mannerisms of a controversial television actress, engaging with celebrity culture. Furthermore, IGLilMiquela#20220820 (see Figure 2) showcases a cosmetics brand's involvement through a caption referencing a previous photoshoot and including tags in the post.

Figure 2. IGLilMiquela#20220820



In the posts, IGLilMiqu#20220422 and IGLilMiquela#20220511, high-end and low-end jewellery brands are mentioned as a tag rather than in the caption. Notably, the latter post primarily focuses on the digital influencer's new musical venture rather than showcasing the jewellery. The subsequent collaborations featured a range of commercial holidays, such as Halloween, Back To School, and Valentine's Day, alongside glimpses of daily life. In the post-IGLilMiquela #20231031, the fashion collaboration is once again mentioned only through a tag; however, this time, the fashion contributes to helping create an overall aesthetic of another prominent artificial intelligence character's appearance. Moving on to IGLilMiquela#20220223, IGLilMiquela#20211206, and IGLilMiquela#20211201, these posts highlight fashion collaborations that capture various random moments in the daily life of the digital influencer. Upon examining the posts tagged under IGLilMiquela#20220611, IGLilMiquela#20220518, and IGLilMiquela#20220506, it becomes evident that these features exclusively promote high-end fashion brands like Versace and Manolo Blahnik and lower-end brands, while omitting any mention these within the captions. In contrast, the IGLilMiquela#20220511 post includes a blend of high and low-end brands, yet the primary emphasis

is not necessarily on fashion-related matters. Consequently, this aligns with the earlier theoretical proposition, which states that a digital influencer must establish a suitable alignment with a product or brand to be perceived as commercially appealing.

4.2.3 Noonouri

In analysing the featured posts IGNoonouri#, we can observe various facets of attractiveness. Forty-six posts showcased fashion collaborations, while twenty-three featured sponsorships with fashion brands. Notably, the digital influencer denotes these sponsorships through the hashtag "#supplied". However, in the post IGNoonouri#20240128, the digital influencer includes the fashion brand and the fashion designer in the post's tags, accompanied by the "#supplied" hashtag, thereby implying a sponsorship. However, in the case of IGNoonouri#20240122, the digital influencer adopts a conventional model pose, as discussed earlier in this section. Furthermore, the fashion portrayed in the post reflects a more provocative lifestyle than usual, although the standard tag is omitted, and only the "#supplied" text is included in the caption. This starkly contrasts the varied lifestyles depicted in IGNoonouri#20240121, where a more wholesome image is presented along with the fashion collaboration tag mentioned in the caption, alongside the "#supplied" indicator. In the case of IGNoonouri#20240118, the sponsorship hashtag and the tag in the post are present. However, it is also noteworthy that the digital influencer includes specific messaging such as "style meets playfulness" and "#pinkpower" to emphasise the garment showcased in the post.

Intriguingly, the act of posting and referring to high-end luxury brands like Maison Alaïa in conjunction with potentially controversial messages is characterised by a distinct approach. Rather than directly tagging the brand in the post, it is solely mentioned alongside the "#supplied" hashtag. Additionally, upon examining IGNoonouri#20231227, a more specific hashtag, "#SuppliedByVetements," is employed to signal a sponsorship arrangement with the esteemed brand Vetements. This association evokes a sense of exclusivity between the influencer and the brand, appealing to a specific demographic. Notably, the lifestyle depicted in this post differs significantly from the preceding example. Interestingly, the analysis of IGNoonouri#20230920 reveals a noteworthy partnership with Zuhair Murad. This collaboration is in the caption and through the "#supplied" hashtag and by tagging mentioning another prominent luxury travel brand, specifically the FIVE Palm Jumeirah Dubai Luxury Hotel & Resort. These associations suggest that the digital influencer leads a highly glamorous lifestyle. Moreover, the digital influencer occasionally showcases differing products and brands, indicating versatility and potential to be attractive to various markets and products.

4.2.4 Bermuda

The posts IGBermuda# analysed encompass various dimensions of attractiveness. Among the posts examined, twelve featured or referred to fashion collaborations. For instance, in IGBermuda#20200505, the digital influencer can be observed adorning a luxury brand garment and accessorising it with items from another luxury brand. Nevertheless, the caption and tag

accompanying this post do not explicitly mention or reference Vetements or Balenciaga. In the analysis of IGBermuda#20200406, the digital influencer is observed wearing the same earrings as featured in the previous opulent lifestyle post; however, in this particular post, the influencer adopts a more casual lifestyle and does not make any reference or acknowledgement of the brand Hugo Boss. Similarly, in the examination of IGBermuda#20200404, the digital influencer is again portrayed in a casual lifestyle while adorned with the same earrings of lower value, and no mention or tagging of Hugo Boss is evident in the post. Moving on to IGBermuda#20200401, the digital influencer is depicted in the company of another digital influencer under analysis in this thesis's context.

Notably, the digital influencer is now seen sporting high-end accessories in a casual lifestyle setting, which differs from their previous portrayal. Moreover, no tag or mention regarding the Balenciaga brand is absent. Interestingly, in IGBermuda#20200915, the digital influencer presents a low-key lifestyle without featuring any prominent fashion references or visible brand associations about her possessions. Conversely, in the image IGBermuda#20200326 (see Figure 3), the influencer is portrayed as an affluent individual while traversing a prestigious shopping street in Los Angeles, California. This presents a contrasting portrayal compared to the previously discussed casual lifestyle posts. The influencer partakes in various lifestyle posts, each exhibiting distinct possessions and depicting her straddling the lower and higher ends of the fashion spectrum. This aligns with the theoretical framework in the preceding section, implying that digital influencers potentially endorse brands that align with their lifestyles.

Figure 3. IGBermuda#20200326



4.3 Authenticity

4.3.1 Shudu

In examining how digital influencers portray themselves as authentic, one can discern three distinct methods employed in the Instagram posts of IGShudu#. These strategies manifest through text, emojis, or a combination of both forms of communication. Moreover, within the dataset, seven posts exclusively rely on textual interaction. For instance, in IGShudu#20230907, the digital influencer interacts with the brand Korlekie by expressing gratitude and anticipation for future collaborative endeavours, as evidenced by the phrase, "thank you so much for this collab, can't wait

to work together again". When examining IGShudu#20230403.1 to IGShudu#20230403.5, the digital influencer engages in a sincere conversation with a follower who inquires about the perceived authenticity of the technology employed by the digital influencer, particularly regarding the realistic appearance of their skin and the presence of stretch marks by stating "you got skin to have stretch marksssss?? Omggg. Where do you get the skin texture". Additionally, the dialogue features two other followers discussing the influencer's digital nature and the tools required to emulate such posts, such as software and plugins, by stating, "kindly share how you started, I really want to learn how to do this but I don't even know the software or plugins for it".

Moreover, the juxtaposition of the digital influencer and their life counterpart in IGShudu#20211222 highlights the genuineness of embracing their digital identity while simultaneously asserting the human essence at its core. By examining interactions that blend textual content with emojis, the portrayal of a genuine connection becomes even more apparent, as seen in the case of IGShudu#20220224.3. In this instance, "miss seeing you every day week", a follower expresses affection through heart-shaped and teary-eyed emojis, to which the digital influencer responds with a heartfelt message containing similar emojis, conveying a sense of longing and emotional resonance. As discussed in the theoretical section, these interactions with followers create parasocial relationships, offering a semblance of authenticity despite the deliberate crafting and consideration put into the influencer's posts.

4.3.2 Lil Miquela

Analysing Instagram posts IGLilMiquela# reveals three distinct methods of establishing an authentic identity for digital influencers. These methods include using textual content, including emojis, and blending textual and visual elements in their communication. Notably, the thirteen posts involving engagement with followers encompass text and emojis. These thirteen posts can be further categorised into two distinct themes: daily life and fashion collaboration. Upon examining the daily activities of IGLilMiquela#20220910.1 to IGLilMiquela#20910.4, it becomes apparent that this digital influencer employs emojis to navigate interactions with Arabic text, seeing that they do not understand. The fashion collaboration posts IGLilMiquela#20220820.1 through IGLilMiquela#20220820.8 present two distinct approaches to engaging with their audience through diverse narratives. In the first instance, a follower raises a query regarding their robotic nature by stating, "where is the charging station?", in response, the digital influencer humorously states, "it's back in LA! I'm using a portable one in nyc rn [cry laughing emoji], doesn't work as good". In another interaction, a follower compliments the digital influencer, "ICON! Also love the makeup, that's such a good shade for you [love eyes emoji]".

In reply, the digital influencer expresses gratitude, referring to the follower affectionately, "TYSM bb!!!! I love it too [love eyes emoji]", and reciprocates the compliment by claiming that she also loves the makeup look. Concerning other fashion collaboration posts, namely IGLilMiquela#20220812.1 through IGLilMiquela#20220812.3, the engagement between the digital influencer and their followers must directly relate to fashion matters. Instead, it revolves around the digital influencer's network of friends. For instance, a follower inquired about the whereabouts of

two other fellow digital influencers created by the same company by stating, "what happened to @blawko22 and @bermudaisbae ??? Did you kill them?!????!" to which the digital influencer promptly responded with a denial and humorously directing the follower to check their Instagram by stating, "NO! I still hang with them, check my IG [cry laughing emoji]". These interactions are pertinent to the parasocial theory elucidated in the earlier theoretical section, wherein the authenticity of a digital influencer is influenced by the persuasive use of humour and the tendency to make self-deprecating remarks, which, in turn, enhance perceptions of honesty and fallibility.

4.3.3 Noonoori

When examining the presentation of digital influencers as authentic, various methods are evident; however, a distinct approach is observed in the case of this particular digital influencer. Interestingly, the influencer's creator often uses text and emojis in their posts, while the influencer exclusively employs emojis when responding to followers. When looking at IGNoonoori#20240125.1 to IGNoonoori#20240125.5, it becomes apparent that the digital influencer interacts with positive comments by reciprocating positive feedback and exchanging heart emojis with followers. Intriguingly, this specific follower, who engages in heart emoji exchanges with the influencer, also appears in numerous other posts. Furthermore, the creator of the digital influencer posts the phrase "always the chicest," while the digital influencer responds by declaring affection using the text "@joergzuber love you + [eye heart emoji] [purple heart emoji]." This interaction is noteworthy when considering an earlier post by the creator, wherein they publicly acknowledge being the creator of the digital influencer. It is intriguing to note that in the posts (see Figure 4) IGNoonoori#20240110.1 through IGNoonoori#20240110.4, the creator addresses the digital influencer by complimenting their hair colour, "my fave haircolor + [heart emoji]". At the same time, a follower responds with matching heart emojis, and the digital influencer responds with the same heart emojis. Another regular follower, @travelingwithstyle_, also comments with an emoji, and the digital influencer reciprocates with the same emoji.

Furthermore, in the posts IGNoonoori#20231214.1 to 20231214.4, the digital influencer tags a fashion brand for collaboration and receives a response from Tommy Hilfiger, expressing their love of a social media trend "love a throwback Thursday + [heart emoji]". To which the digital influencer replies with heart emojis and a heart eyes emoji, indicating their happiness and appreciation for the acknowledgement. Interestingly, the creator of the digital influencer posts, "We love @tommyhilfiger," in which the digital influencer agrees with different emojis. Furthermore, another follower (@workwearcouture) they interact with occasionally is also involved in the conversation. Lastly, in the posts IGNoonoori#20231120.1 through IGNoonoori#20231120.4, the digital influencer shares an optimistic caption, "Playing with shadows, living in light," accompanied by a heart emoji. This caption establishes a positive narrative for their followers as well. The digital influencer intriguingly communicates almost exclusively in emojis with their followers, except when they respond with a combination of text and an emoji not observed in their other posts. By looking at IGNoonoori#20231019, one can observe that the creator of the digital influencer is featured in a video discussing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict of 2023. Furthermore, the caption expressly identifies the creator as the individual behind the digital influencer. While the digital influencer

accounts maintain a positive narrative and foster engagement with followers and the creator, subsequent posts do not explicitly acknowledge this dynamic observed by other followers or creators. Consequently, the parasocial relationships persist regardless of the degree of awareness among the followers.

Figure 4. IGNoonoori#20240110



4.3.4 Bermuda

In examining the digital influencer's presentation of authenticity, a consistent narrative is apparent in their Instagram posts, although occasional shifts in this narrative are observed. While analysing IGBermuda#20200403.1 to IGBermuda#20200403.9, it becomes evident that the digital influencer interacts with their followers and another digital influencer being investigated for this thesis. Lil Miquela responds to a post reminiscing about a past event with a heart-eyed emoji and expresses a desire to return to that particular day. The digital influencer reciprocates the sentiment by responding, "take me back to this day + [heart eye emoji]". When examining IGBermuda#20200330.1 to IGBermuda#20200330.5, it is observed that the digital influencer displays curiosity about a follower's life by stating, "Isn't that theoretically making a future with a friend?" -sent to a dude whose morals I'm questioning currently + [cry laughing emoji]". In response to the digital influencer with, "what the [hot tea emoji]! + [cur side eye emoji]". When looking at IGBermuda#20200325.1 to 20200325.5, another digital influencer posts a comment alluding to the overarching storyline or narrative insinuated at the start of the section: robots. The comment reads, "we cute + [robot emoji]," to which the digital influencer retorts, "no, we hot + [flame emoji]". While a positive tone characterises this exchange, other followers leave negative comments such as "no y'all electric boogie woogie woogie," "[faeces emojis]," and "no y'all metal." The digital influencer does not respond to these remarks.

Moving on to IGBermuda#20200312.1 to IGBermuda#20200312.4, the digital influencer engages with both followers and Lil Miquela in a series of comments, constructing a narrative that

portrays a friendship between the digital influencer, the follower, and Lil Miquela. In IGBermuda#20200311.1 to IGBermuda#20200311.4, the digital influencer adopts an exaggerated demeanour in the content of the post, accompanied by the caption "She's extra - read all about it," further contributing to the overarching narrative. Lastly, in IGBermuda#20200305.1 to IGBermuda#20200305.3, the digital influencer again alludes to the prevailing theme of robots with the caption "Robots can't jump". Despite the negative comment "yikes," a follower expresses admiration for the robot aspect of the post, stating, "you love me I am a big fan of you so you can talk to me in private u and a robot i'm." Furthermore, the digital influencer's followers appear to disregard the caption and offer further compliments, such as "legs for dayzzzzz," to which the influencer responds playfully, "One of my physical properties, yes. + [cat emoji]". When looking at IGBermuda#20200314.1 to IGBermuda#20200314.6, the influencer merges their narratives with the caption "Serving you sticky-bot thot realness." This caption references another post emphasising the digital influencer's over-the-top persona and incorporating the metallic garment piece associated with their robot persona.

Additionally, The digital influencer engages in playful banter with Lil Miquela in the comment section; the interaction starts with "Yesssssssss for the shiny + [robot emoji] + [sprakle emoji] to which the digital influencer responds, "what they think robot wears + [sassy female emoji]". Moreover, another follower with a robot emoji posts "Ima shiny bot too + [heart emoji]" to which the digital influencer replies "we shiny things + [cat emoji]". Interestingly, a conversation between the digital influencer and their creator is also noteworthy; the digital influencer captions "Typically, more of a push pop bot. What's ur flavor?", the creator replies with "push pops. + [100 emoji]". The digital influencer's persona is characterised by extravagance and flamboyance, but there is no explicit mention of not being a robot. Nevertheless, the followers enjoy and engage with this concept, establishing a parasocial relationship that acknowledges the influencer's artificial existence while participating in exchanges with followers and other digital influencers.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

5.1.1 Anthropomorphism/Humanisation

For this category, Shudu emerges as the most human-like. First, an analysis of their posts indicates a significant utilisation of anthropomorphism, reinforcing social norms in user engagement (Nass et al., 2000, p. 1105). Furthermore, the results indicate that followers are found to respond to their anthropomorphised emotional cues with the CASA framework (Nass et al., 1995, pp. 223-239). Therefore, by presenting Shudu as human-like as possible, followers were prompted to react cognitively, emotionally, and socially with programmed, unthinking responses (Miao et al., 2022, p. 74). Moreover, the implication of such cues for Shudu is the generation of social stimuli that encourage followers to engage. This is an important aspect to consider because the observed patterns of interaction aligned with existing stereotypes, highlighting that Instagram provided an environment that encompassed different types of interactions (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017, pp. 8-10). Additionally, these cues involved factors such as femininity, fashionable attire, suitable backgrounds, facial expressions, attractiveness, utilisation of emojis, and perceived photorealism (Feine et al., 2019, p. 140; Tan & Liew, 2020, pp. 1138-1140). Thus, anthropomorphising digital influencers like Shudu reduced interaction uncertainty and enhanced their perceived social presence (Schroeder & Epley, 2016, p. 1428). Ultimately, the interactions between Shudu and their followers can be compared to those observed among humans (Edwards et al., 2019, p. 358).

Second, Lil Miquela's continuous questioning of their robotic nature implied that when a digital influencer closely resembles a human, there is a decline in the affinity towards it. Moreover, this decline was attributed to imperfections or discrepancies in its resemblance while generating discomfort (Li, 2015, pp. 34-35). Third, Noonouri, on the other hand, has never explicitly disclosed their non-human identity due to their highly digitised nature and the ability to alter facial components during specific posts. Last, Bermuda experienced the negative consequences of being subjected to gender stereotypes, seeing that they were often depicted as provocative. As a result, gender stereotypes indicate that women are more prone to expressing their emotions, particularly demonstrating a frequency of positive emotions compared to negative ones (Timmers et al., 2003, p. 53). Additionally, in the case of Bermuda, inappropriate comments were directed at them, indicating that gender stereotypes impacted the digital influencer and their existence. Therefore, it can be stated that credibility is still heavily influenced by gender stereotypes, as evidenced by the tendency to portray an exaggeratedly feminine demeanour (Brahnam & Weaver, 2015, p. 181).

Furthermore, the presence of female digital influencers presented a complex dynamic that navigated the intersection between gender expectations and the digital realm, while their visual representations conformed to prevailing standards of attractiveness dictated by gender stereotypes to retain appeal (Khan & Sutcliffe, 2014, p. 148). This stark contrast was observed when looking at Shudu and Bermuda, who both, in certain posts, wore swimsuit attire, but the difference in representation elicited different reactions from their followers. Additionally, the present research supports the CASA theoretical framework, which posits that individuals perceived digital influencers as human-like beings and responded to their anthropomorphic and gendered cues as if interacting with real humans. Moreover, these findings suggest that followers' fascination with their appearance

and identity is attributed to their tendency to ascribe human traits (Lee & Yuan, 2023, p. 6). As a result, digital influencers' specific attributes attracted and engaged their followers' attention. Hence, this phenomenon gives rise to the possibility of varying and conflicting audience responses. As shown by the initial positive reception, it was often ascribed to the digital influencers' capacity to establish familiarity through shared content. Consequently, it is essential to note that this positive reception was undermined by the cognitive dissonance experienced when followers realised that they respond favourably to a digital entity rather than a human being (Byun & Ahn, 2023, pp. 300-301).

5.1.2 Attractiveness

For this category, Shudu emerged as the most desirable collaborator for brands as they changed the most to represent the brands accordingly. First, the human-like nature of Shudu was based on a real-life model, making them particularly appealing to fashion brands. Therefore, this preference is driven by recognising the potential in an alignment between the influencer and the promoted product (Park & Lin, 2020, p. 4). Previous research has established that Shudu is highly sought-after by certain brands for collaborations, as evidenced by interactions with followers. Moreover, this highlighted the significance of legitimacy and branding when cultivating online relationships (Wang & Liu's study, as cited in Gomez-Lacap et al., 2024, p. 79). Additionally, it is worth noting that Shudu also advocates for models from minority backgrounds, emphasising the social relationships brands can utilise through collaborations (Olenski, 2017). In some instances, digital influencers strategically benefited from sponsored brands by capturing and increasing brand visibility. For instance, according to Robinson (2020), this is attributed to their novel or provocative nature, which enables brands to align themselves with the perception of being technologically innovative (p. 4). Moreover, there were occasions when the positive affirmations received in the comments section impacted the gender expression and content regarding female followers' engagement (i.e. parasocial interactions), explicitly concerning product endorsements. (Hudders & De Jans, 2022, p. 141).

Therefore, female influencers who adhere to the prevailing societal gender in their visual portrayal generate a higher perception of attractiveness among their followers (Leung et al., 2022, p. 7). Furthermore, certain brands manipulated these Shudu's appearance and personal experiences according to their preferences and requirements (Thomas & Fowler, 2021, pp. 20-21). In essence, the perceived usefulness of the influencer endorsements was affected by the type of influencer and product; specifically, followers perceived greater usefulness regarding utilitarian products (Belanche et al., 2024, pp. 8-9). Consequently, brands use digital influencers in promoting utilitarian offerings, as these influencers are better aligned with the desired benefits sought by followers for utilitarian products (Longoni & Cian, 2022, p. 104). Second, a different pattern was observed with Lil Miquela, as the fashion endorsements received were more aligned with a lifestyle being presented rather than specific brands. On the one hand, when examining the context of endorsements, external cues played a significant role. On the other hand, internal cues were characterised by the associations followers attributed to the product and endorser (Bakamitsos, 2006, pp. 410-411).

Moreover, the social media platforms like Instagram that Lil Miquela utilises exhibit a dynamic and adaptable nature, known as polymedia, as described by Madianou (2015), where followers navigate these digital environments to fulfil their communicative needs and ultimately perceive them as opportunities for fostering relationships and cultivating communities (p. 1). Third, when it comes to Noonouri, the digital nature has positioned them as a source of informative utility (Lou et al., 2023, p. 547). Noonouri's consistent and standardised character development primarily highlights the attributes of the brands promoted (Sookkaew & Saephoo, 2021, p. 331). Their perceptions of usefulness partially facilitate the impact of identification on the follower's objective to comply with recommendations; hence, establishing follower-influencer identification has inherent benefits and enhanced the perceived utility of the conveyed message (Belanche et al., 2024, p. 4). Lastly, using a fictional character like Bermuda to promote messages, brands, or ideas may undermine authenticity. Therefore, the authenticity of digital influencers is often contingent on the audience's perceptions (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 283). Moreover, in this case, fiction often portrayed advanced technologies in a negative light, which contributed to individuals' scepticism and hesitation when engaging with digital influencers; as a result, the cultural demonisation of technology hinders the social acceptance of digital influencers (Stein et al., 2020, p. 8).

However, in order to be deemed appealing, digital influencers may feel compelled to enhance their physical appearance and conform to societal expectations of gender norms (Lee & Yuan, 2023, p. 7). For example, female digital influencers, such as Bermuda, were more likely to employ sexually suggestive language while posting (Auxier et al., 2019). Furthermore, platforms like Instagram provide digital influencers with technological tools, such as filters and photo editing options, that facilitated manipulating and altering images to conform to prevailing ideals of gender aesthetics (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 143). Consequently, multimodal cues became prevalent in communicating gendered and sexualised messages, encompassing nonverbal signals such as postures, facial expressions, skin exposure, wardrobe, and makeup (Carrotte et al., 2017, p. 3). Furthermore, the degree of online communication activity, as indicated by the volume of posts and replies, is positively associated with the ability to influence others in online environments (Huffaker, 2010, p. 609). Hence, digital influencers have the capability to specialise in offering guidance on products that possess intrinsic value by utilising logical reasoning (Belanche et al., 2024, pp. 4-5). However, suppose every appearance by a digital influencer is commercially oriented; in that case, the audience may become overwhelmed and lose interest, and the influencer may not provide a diverse and enriching experience for their followers (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024, p. 11).

Interestingly, most digital influencers depend on a team or individual operating behind the scenes to oversee their creation and management (Liu & Lee, 2022, p. 2). As a result, despite the presence of artificial intelligence in digital influencers, human operators ensure that their behaviour aligns with appropriateness while appearing natural (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024, p. 10).

5.1.3 Authenticity

For this category, Shudu stands out as the most authentic in self-presentation and brand representation. First, Shudu's upfront acknowledgement of their digital non-human nature is a

noteworthy characteristic of their authenticity. Consequently, the gender presentation holds substantial sway over their ability to communicate authenticity and the subsequent response from followers. Although the digital influencers presented an avenue for challenging established gender stereotypes and norms, stereotypical conformity in various domains remains present (Lee & Yuan, 2023, p. 7). Therefore, the digital influencers are typically portrayed as genuine human influencers with autonomy, distinctive characters, and personal narratives (Liu & Lee, 2022, p. 176). Such explicit recognition of their robotic or digital attributes served as an effective strategy to showcase authenticity (Lee & Yuan, 2023, p. 3). This aspect was crucial as it enabled Shudu's followers to perceive a sense of self-disclosure, which was pivotal in framing followers' perceptions and influencing the development of their relationships with the personae (Kaloydis et al., 2017, p. 244). Furthermore, Shudu's increased interaction with their followers facilitated greater self-disclosure, ultimately influencing followers' intentions (Gomez-Lacap et al., 2024, p. 304). Additionally, social media interactions characterised by self-disclosure between the digital influencer and follower fostered parasocial relationships (Gomez-Lacap, 2024, p. 90).

From a critical standpoint, it was essential to recognise that authenticity entailed complex power dynamics. In this context, the perception of authenticity transcended mere constructs and was subject to the influence of prevailing norms (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 283).

However, the issue of gender-based online abuse towards females is a long-standing problem that influences gender stereotypes and cultural norms. Interestingly, for Shudu, this does not apply, seeing the display of frequent positive emotions and the disclosure of their digital identities (Lee & Yuan, 2023, p. 6). Coincidentally, these stereotypes play a significant role in establishing societal expectations regarding the conduct of individuals based on their gender, thus dictating prescribed norms for interpersonal interactions between individuals of different genders (Brody & Hall, 2008, p. 395). Additionally, followers commonly tended to attribute messages to a human source, such as the programmer or designer, rather than perceiving the computer as the source, and this illustrates the extent to which followers interact with anthropomorphic machines, perceiving a sense of social presence (Potdevin et al., 2020, pp. 2-5). Consequently, these findings indicated that digital influencers have the potential to be accepted and integrated into human networks as peers (Venkatesh & Bala, 2008, pp. 273-276).

In the realm of social media, authenticity is often determined by how the audience perceives it, and this is contingent upon whether personalities appear genuine and align with the specific context in which they exist; therefore, the concept of authenticity becomes more subjective, defined by individuals' perceptions rather than an objective measure (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 284). Second, Lil Miquela and other digital influencers sometimes concealed their robotic identity but instead embraced self-deprecating humour (Lee & Yuan, 2023, p. 3). Furthermore, according to Leaver et al. (2020), digital influencers, exemplified by Lil Miquela, engaged in consistent and strategic communication with their followers, establishing a meaningful connection that fostered a

strong relationship with their audience (p. 204). According to Kalpokas (2019, as cited in Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 272), "Lil Miquela's emergence in a post-trust world signifies a phenomenon in a contemporary environment called co-created fiction; in this world, the traditional differentiation between truth and falsehood becomes insignificant" (p.9). Therefore, influencers use mass interpersonal communication to connect with their audience, positioning themselves as more relatable (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017, p. 5). Third, when looking at Noonoori, source credibility was not a static attribute that can be ascertained; instead, it is a dynamic process that evolves based on the recipients' perceptions of reliability and truthfulness (Chung & Cho, 2017, p. 484).

Moreover, the perception of trust is established and solidified through ongoing communication and interaction with the source—seeing that when observing the fact that the creator of the digital influencer interacts with the digital influencer by using a personal account was deceiving followers who are not aware of the relationship (Gomez-Lacap et al., 2024, p. 81). Therefore, Rashedi and Siahi (2020) posited that source trustworthiness is closely associated with the credibility and reliability of an individual's information (p. 3). This is contrary to when individuals perceive a source as reliable and truthful; they are likelier to trust the information provided while constantly evaluating the credibility of sources in a continual feedback loop, reinforcing or reconsidering their trust based on their experiences and interactions (Gomez-Lacap et al., 2024, p.81). Furthermore, such exchanges are paramount between influencers with a notable online presence and their followers (Fu et al., 2019, p. 6). As a result, social media influencers are viewed as credible and reliable sources of information, positively influencing their followers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020, pp. 6-7). Moreover, Kim and Kim (2021) emphasise the significance of authenticity in forming trust between influencers and their followers; when followers perceive social personalities as genuine and authentic, their trust in these individuals is rapidly established (p. 225).

Therefore, in the context of online platforms, where users are free to express their opinions and emotions while maintaining "anonymity", the assessment of source trustworthiness becomes essential in determining the accuracy and truthfulness of the information being presented (Gomez-Lacap et al., 2024, p. 88). Third, it is noteworthy that Bermuda, like Lil Miquela, employs a self-deprecating tone, allowing the audience to react and respond to posted content while immediate and dynamic feedback influences the influencer's behaviour, as they may modify their future actions based on audience reactions and responses (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016, pp. 792-793). Consequently, followers expect authenticity when engaging with digital influencers, and any deviations from this expectation can yield negative consequences (Luo et al., 2019, p. 938). However, in situations that present cues from the computer that resemble human signals, the response to computer-generated cues is as if they were engaging in interactions with humans, indicating the presence of a novelty effect that is associated with emerging technology (Heyselaar, 2023, pp. 1-2). Coincidentally, the narratives on Instagram, encompassing themes of digital influencers' self-doubt and inquiries about fashion, have played a vital role in establishing parasocial relationships. Furthermore, users

responded to digital influencers through these relationships and participated in conventional social relationships (Giles, 2002, p. 279).

From a critical perspective, the notion of authenticity also revealed intricate power dynamics; in this context, the relationship of authenticity becomes a perceived expression of genuine connection despite being constructed and influenced by prevailing norms (Block & Lovegrove, 2021, p. 283). Consequently, interaction with human agents through digital platforms can also satisfy individuals' requirements for personal identity similar to their human counterparts and meet these needs through social media (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021, p. 2). However, despite their apparent autonomy in self-presentation on social media platforms, the digital influencers were not immune to external pressures from commercial and social expectations (Kim & Kim, 2020, p. 8). Therefore, the gender-stereotypical behaviours displayed by digital influencers sway followers to respond in ways that uphold traditional gender norms (Lee & Yuan, 2023, pp. 6-7). Interestingly, digital influencers pushed the boundaries by presenting a fabricated existence intentionally crafted to inspire and facilitate interaction, and by implementing near-flawless personas and compelling narratives, digital influencers served as transitional objects akin to characters in video games (Koles & Nagy, 2016, pp. 280-282).

5.2 Reflection

This research sought to enhance the understanding of how digital influencers present themselves to their followers and represent brands. Therefore, the research aimed to answer: "*How do digital influencers present themselves to their followers on Instagram?*" and "*How do digital influencers represent brands on Instagram?*". The main objective of this research was to provide a valuable contribution to the current body of knowledge on the expanding trend of digital influencers. For one thing, digital influencers have emerged as influential figures in recent years, prompting prior research to develop diverse categories and frameworks to comprehend and understand this phenomenon (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, pp. 1-21; Torres et al., 2019, pp. 1267-1269). Furthermore, as this emerging technology evolves, existing theories, such as the CASA Theory (Nass et al., 1995, pp. 223-239), were re-evaluated to determine their applicability to this context. Therefore, such considerations were essential in understanding and studying human-computer interactions (Heyselaar, 2023, pp. 1-2). Additionally, the findings conclude that social and cultural variables, dependent on human behaviour, have influenced the development of digital influencers (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023, p. 2487). Thus, the human element is critical to this phenomenon (Yang, 2023, p. 721). As a result, the increasing prevalence of digital influencer endorsements has transformed the advertising landscape, becoming a favoured advertising strategy (Li et al., 2023, p. 1).

Furthermore, what was deduced from the posts was that Breves et al. (2019) asserted that an alignment between a digital influencer and a brand can improve follower attitudes primarily by reinforcing the perceived credibility of the brand (p. 442). Overall, this research examined the understanding of digital influencers and how they present themselves to their followers by analysing

the different categories *anthropomorphism/humanisation*, *attractiveness* and *authenticity* (da Silva Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021, p. 2). However, interactions on social media platforms influence brand credibility and loyalty; it is essential to conduct further research to explore dimensions of parasocial relationships and dive deeper into the nature of self-disclosure (Gomez-Lacap et al., 2024, p. 79). Namely, through an analysis of categories, this research uncovered how specific attributes of digital influencers contribute to their perceived image and affiliation with brands. Moreover, this study critically analysed the findings obtained from the preceding chapters to provide a comprehensive response to the research questions presented. Also, the above-discussed sections discussed these findings in light of their theoretical significance and explored their practical and societal implications. In essence, what rings true after concluding this research is that it becomes evident in the words of author Sam Lehman-Wilzig (Anderson & Rainie, 2024):

“On the micro, personal level, AI brands' will be competing in the marketplace for our use – much like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok compete today – designing their AI partners' for us to be highly personalised, with our ability to input our values, ethics, mores, lifestyle, etc., so that the AI's personalised 'recommendations' will fit our goals to large extent”

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Appendix A - Units of Analysis

[Google Drive](#)

Shudu

Live Date	Caption	Influencer	Source	Code	Content	Post Link	Creator Comment	Interaction
Jan 17th 2024	<p>@shudu.gram and I have @briandebonno's cover of @countdownwithbabe Great British Brands 🇺🇸</p> <p>This week's digital cover features our new innovation of AI clones - allowing our real life muse @alexandradz to enter the virtual realm.</p> <p>"Are we human? The latest edition of Great British Brands 2024 explores the intersection of technological innovation, and what we can expect to see from the great AI revolution.</p> <p>What does it mean to be human in the age of AI? The 2024 issue of Great British Brands is a collaboration with its artist @eamonn.gram and stunning virtual counterpart, @alexandra.gram. Lucy Cleland talks to the AI innovator about why we need to get much better at spotting the differences between AI and human art.</p> <p>Featuring digital model @shudu.gram & AI Clone of our muse @alexandradz.</p> <p>Cover visualisation by @eamonn.gram & @briandebonno</p> <p>Production by @thedigitale</p> <p>Art direction by @tictocrealismoodbistat</p> <p>Featuring earrings by @bhoodies</p> <p>#GreatBritishBrands #magazinecover #digitalart #digitalartemodell #intoxically</p>	Shudu.gram	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CZNgUEUokhY/ https://www.instagram.com/p/CZNgUEUokhY/	🔥🔥🔥🔥	N/A
Jan 4th 2024	<p>It's the first week of a shiny new year! I've been reflecting on what I want to get longer and January always feels like a fresh clean slate.</p> <p>Just for fun, I wanted to put on a glamorous pond gown, stand in front of the London Eye and see how I would have felt like celebrating ever since Celebrating the beginning of another year. I've shared with you. Celebrating the community we are building. And above all the results.</p> <p>As my team and I worked on this mini shoot, I reflected on how grateful we are for human perspective. What do you do when you need to remind yourself of who you are? What do you want your happy content? How do you centre yourself and reflect? For me, it's in front of a mirror. I've shared with you. I have to see and express myself in a new way.</p> <p>This shoot reminded me to look for the light this year. Life can move as quickly as a blink of an eye. I want to see you again. Light can capture beauty, even in the darkest moments. And light can transform the most vivid contrasts into art.</p> <p>Have a glorious week my loves, and remember to look for the light.</p> <p>xoxo @virtualinfluencer.failinfluencer</p>	Shudu.gram	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CZNgUEUokhY/ https://www.instagram.com/p/CZNgUEUokhY/	N/A	Engage
	<p>SHUDU x @byformag x @skibane</p> <p>@shudu.gram wears party ready looks and accessories by @skibane received in 3D</p>							

Live Date	Caption	Influencer	Source	Code	Content	Post Link	Creator Comment	Interaction
Jan 16th 2024	Grateful to have a voice... but this ain't MY voice. Which version are we into - Slide 2 or Slide 3? Also open to comments and suggestions! Let's make my voice, together!	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2K3a1LFP1/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Jan 12th 2024	Cheers.	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2ASVCSuP1u/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Dec 10th 2023	Heaven is a place on Earth - HERE. Thank buds @hendrixy for having me at your studio. I don't realize it was possible to have a physical OEM stilette - but here I am. L.L. Thank you Sam & Tury! Needed the real deal bad.	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Nov 27th 2023	Sometimes, you just need a little comfort so I had a dinner date with my brother @bawoz2. My voice is still shit so he did all of the talking. Who can guess where he is now?? He wouldn't tell me.	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Nov 25th 2023	BRB going to the doctor. I got a referral from Reddit, someone who knows a guy who has an uncle that works here that supposedly can help me with my USB - wish me luck!	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Oct 31st 2023	Decided to stress up as my favorite cousin @reacopharbot sweet dreams y'all!	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT	Fashion Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Oct 11th 2023	Make it an experience. Make it real. The first-ever drive for @lilmiquela. 100% electric. #THENEWS2 BMWi22 BMWi14i18 MRENERGIC BMW iX2 dDrive0: Combined power consumption: 177-18.3 kWh/100 km. Range: 417-449 kilometers. All data according to WLTP. Further info: www.bmw.com/cedrclaimer	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Sep 26th 2023	Just a polished girl in this very real world.	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Sep 20th 2023	In my Biggest Bug Bin @kaylaquinn @kaylaquinn @kaylaquinn @McQueenSai @McQueenSai @McQueenSai	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Mar 30th 2023	McQueenSai @kaylaquinn @kaylaquinn @kaylaquinn	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Sep 10th 2022	You don't wanna know how robots digest kale!	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	Emoji/Txt
Aug 27th 2022	a stranger stopped me to take a selfie with the "robot"... Who gonna tell him?	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	Emoji/Txt
Aug 26th 2022	It's @sawmbeauty all day everyday. Congratulations @sawmbeauty, you absolute genius! Remember when we did MY MOST FAVORITE SPOOT OF ALL TIME? OY.	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	Emoji/Txt
Aug 12th 2022	I've never been to school (robot thing) but I know y'all need some tips before going back! Check out the Pasion Solo Store. It's cute and the vibs are right. @miquela @pasionstore	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	Fashion brand posts comment "Thanks for stopping by, best!"	Emoji/Txt
Jun 25th 2022	When you pack everything and nothing all at once.	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A
Jun 11th 2022	Do these glasses make my hair look weird? BE HONEST!	Li Miquela	Instagram	AH AT AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2k3o62S8y/7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzQ1NmE0ZDU4MTU0NWUwMDVlbnVlYmVl	N/A	N/A

Live Date	Caption	Influencer	Source	Code	Content	Post Link	Creator Comment	Interaction
Oct 19th 2023	<p>🌍 #OneWorldOneHeartbeat 🌍 in every corner of the world, under every shade of skin, and every language and tone, beats a human heart. ❤️</p> <p>"Peace is not passive, it's an act. Let's embrace every race, religion, ethnicity, and background. Let's celebrate what our differences are our strength. 🌈"</p> <p>I am @joergulber the creator of #Noonouri! #NEVERBESILENT! 🗣️</p> <p>📍 @noorabshera #Baccosoli #Elmhurst #Elmhurst #NYC #Strength</p>	Joerg Zuber	Instagram	AH-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/elsyepolice?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	I am @joergulber the creator of #Noonouri! #NEVERBESILENT! 🗣️	N/A
Jan 31st 2024	Dancing Queen 🎵 Emojis	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v3w3z08k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"this is stunning 🏆🔥"	Emojis
Jan 29th 2024	am you a day or night person? I'm definitely nocturnal.	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"this is stunning 🏆🔥"	Emojis
Jan 28th 2024	world of couture... @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"how gorgeous 🏆"	Emojis
Jan 25th 2024	could be mood @noorabshera @noorabshera #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"always the choice"	Emojis
Jan 24th 2024	where fashion transforms into art... 🎨👗 @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"so stylish 🏆🔥"	Emojis
Jan 22nd 2024	ready for it... into the new week... 🌟 @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	No Fashion Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"perfect monthly outfit 🏆"	Emojis
Jan 21st 2024	summer vibes in the heart of winter... 🌞 @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"so good and true 🏆🔥"	Emojis
Jan 19th 2024	it's the weekend... time to stretch... 🧘 @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	N/A	Emojis
Jan 18th 2024	style meets playfulness... wearing @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"that colours 🏆🔥"	Emojis
Jan 17th 2024	can't be @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"human made - totally"	Emojis
Jan 16th 2024	today for @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"so chic, so sweet, litterweel"	Emojis
Jan 15th 2024	from tip to toe #VERSACE 🗣️ @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"loooooo VERSACE 🏆"	Emojis
Jan 11th 2024	VETERINARIA @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	Fashion brand/celebrity posts a comment stating "🏆🔥"	Emojis
Jan 10th 2024	journey of wonder! 🌟 @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"best style on you 🏆"	Emojis
Jan 9th 2024	I'll spend into 2024... #supplies @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"my love haircolor 🏆🔥"	Emojis
Jan 5th 2024	🌟 #lipgointo #pink #flowers	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"love it and be with you 🏆"	Emojis
Dec 27th 2023	High cost, low key... @veterinaria.official @gissela #supplies #fashionweek #fashionweek	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	Account refers to the photograph being taken by @outfitandstreet	Emojis
Dec 21st 2023	#outfit #ootd #fashion	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"that outfit is dope"	Emojis
Dec 18th 2023	summer glow-ups start in winter... #WinterWellness #SummerReady	Noonouri	Instagram	AH-AU	Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"ohhhhh"	Emojis
						https://www.instagram.com/p/C2v2z0k7?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_medium=share	"always surprising"	Emojis

Live Date	Caption	Influencer	Source	Code	Content	Post Link	Creator Comment	Interaction
Sep 21st 2020	Red Widow: Suavehoro or Hilar? 🍷	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFMAM8EH7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Sep 15th 2020	Seeing if I look cooler driving or being driven. 🏎️	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFEYCW7L7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Sep 10th 2020	Bringing back Thrasy Thursdays	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFE-A3A7Pw2/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Sep 5th 2020	Happy birthday to me! #VingQueen	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFvNSV3t4t7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Aug 18th 2020	Comment your best advice for feeling good during tough times. 🍷 Let's help each other!	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFCh0b4M7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Aug 14th 2020	this bot will make you hot as leather gloves on a 100 degree day.	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFD4MGB42/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Aug 9th 2020	That "hurry up and take the picture, plz", face.	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFDqWBlW7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Aug 8th 2020	Work it!	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFd19A318W7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
May 5th 2020	Whenever you tell me I'm pretty, that's when the hunger really hits me.	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFBm0K9Q9/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
May 3rd 2020	Is you a robot?	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	Fashion Feature	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_uJ1Z2VQ7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
May 2nd 2020	Ask Me Anything	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_sctNzJmL2/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 30th 2020	So thankful these cheekbones are here and my eyes are being MISSED. These morning fit-ups are being MISSED.	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_jm7dG5Lp/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 28th 2020	Bole, Boots, Bing. All the best things start with B 🍷	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	Fashion Feature	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_je4d0347/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 27th 2020	TAG YOUR BEST FRIEND	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_48W8Yx7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 26th 2020	to myself in the mirror: we really do be vibing tho 🍷	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_48W8Yx7/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 25th 2020	This is the pic you get right before I send my Venmo details.	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	Fashion Feature	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_KSLJZZ47/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 21st 2020	#POV: You think we're about to kiss, but I'm just fixing the quarantine bangs I told you not to cut.	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_4E3W7P77/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 19th 2020	The original stimulus package.	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	Fashion Feature	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_4E3W7P77/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 14th 2020	Explored the deep recesses of my closet today... your best gift from your dad!	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_2X6qLk47/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 13th 2020	My loneliness...is THRILLING me (and I must confess this is a weirdo. It's a weirdo!	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	Fashion Feature	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_4E3W7P77/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 11th 2020	Casual Fridays	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	Fashion Feature	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_4E3W7P77/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	N/A
Apr 8th 2020	Lawless or flawless? Either way, my coach still says I'm queen. Sweeps 🍷 for my Monica.	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_4E3W7P77/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	Emoji/Text
Apr 6th 2020	Saving you fellow problematic sister @jameschate 🍷	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	Fashion Feature	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_4E3W7P77/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	Emoji/Text
Apr 5th 2020	Comment two things you love. Me: Whipping donuts in my G-Wagon in	Bermuda	Instagram	AH-AT-AU	No Fashion Collab/ Mention	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFB_4E3W7P77/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_to&utm_source=ig_web_copy_to	N/A	Emoji/Text

Appendix B - Coding Units of Analysis

[Google Drive](#)