

Parasocial relationships with virtual influencers (excerpt)

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Excerpt

Social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter have introduced novel forms of mediated communication between humans. One interesting consequence of this is that it has allowed for celebrities to connect with their fans in a more personalized way—evoking feelings of connectedness [6]. This has been described as increased social presence [5] having a positive effect on relationship satisfaction [4]. The increased popularity of such mediated online communication has made way for the development of the social media influencer (SMI)—an independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes towards brands and ideas through the use of social media. In recent years, a new type of influencer has emerged: the virtual social media influencer (VSMI). This is an artificial persona who is shaped to be human-like, charismatic and relatable towards humans. Although they do not exist in the real world, their online presence suggests that they do through their convincing human-like appearance and online behavior.

The sophisticated social lives of humans evolved from primates' social structures where the maintenance of social relationships was of great importance for their chances of survival [1]. This holds up today for humans as weak social relationships have been linked to higher risk of mortality [2]. With influencers on social media facilitating a new platform to form parasocial connections with our idols, this research tests whether Instagram users express more positive sentiments towards virtual influencers than they do towards human influencers. As individuals' interactions with computers are found to be inherently social [3], this inquiry could make way for future studies exploring whether VSMI's and similar modern humanoid social robots could fill the void of insufficient human companionship and help cope with feelings of loneliness.

References

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