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Virtual influencers as opinion leaders and their use in political communication technics

Los influencers virtuales como líderes de opinión y su empleo en técnicas en comunicación política

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Abstract

Nowadays, the traditional media have lost followers in favour of on-demand content and social networks, hence influencers have become the opinion-leaders of the twenty-first century. However, brands have detected a disparity between the paid or sponsored actions of influencers on social networks and their usual behaviour within their daily routine. This has led advertising agencies and brands to look for solutions, creating so-called Virtual influencers. These are avatars created thanks to augmented reality and which, in recent months, have gained ground on traditional influencers among younger audiences. With this new form of communication, brands launch messages in the form of information capsules, which will lead us to conclude that communication strategies are much more controlled. Our research considered it pertinent to use a multi-method methodology, mainly consisting of the use of qualitative and quantitative scientific research, to analyse these communicative strategies and their commercial possibilities in the current digital context.

Resumen

En la actualidad los medios de comunicación tradicionales han perdido seguidores en favor de los contenidos a la carta y de las redes sociales. Este es el principal motivo por el que los influencers se han convertido en los líderes de opinión del siglo XXI. Sin embargo, las marcas han detectado un enfrentamiento entre las acciones pagadas o patrocinadas de los influencers en las redes sociales con su comportamiento habitual dentro de su día a día. Esto ha llevado a las agencias de publicidad y a las marcas a buscar soluciones, creando los llamados influencers Virtuales. Se trata de avatares creados gracias a la realidad aumentada, y que en los últimos meses están ganando terreno a los influencers tradicionales entre el público más joven. Con esta nueva forma de comunicación, las marcas lanzan los mensajes en forma de cápsulas informativas lo que nos permitirá concluir que las estrategias de comunicación se encuentran mucho más controladas. Nuestra investigación considera pertinente utilizar una metodología multimétodo que consta principalmente del uso de la investigación científica cualitativa y cuantitativa para conseguir analizar estas estrategias comunicativas y sus posibilidades comerciales en el actual contexto digital.

Keywords

Branded content; Brand; influencer; augmented reality; communication; advertising

Palabras clave

Branded content; marca; influencer; realidad aumentada; comunicación; publicidad

1. Introduction

Five years after the first virtual influencer appeared, their practices have become quite natural for a significant number of Internet users. Dealing with everything from fashion to new technologies, to cinema, music and even politics and social movements, the topics these new virtual opinion leaders cover are very wide-ranging. Not only can the attention of certain audiences be attracted, but also every action these virtual subjects take can be controlled. This has aroused the interest of brands and organisations with different political and social agendas which resort to their services to carry out marketing campaigns. However, they are far more than opinion leaders for different products. As they aim to resemble people and human influencers as much as possible they have embraced different political and social movements.

The use of these characters by different brands has been studied by authors such as Cillo and Prandelli (2020) who consider how easy it is for them to control the activity of these virtual individuals. At the same time questions are posed on how transparent the aims for which they were created are, there are also moral dilemmas in terms of the aesthetic cannons put forward which, in certain cases, are beyond the reach of humans.

There are also some interesting contributions made by Vázquez Sacristán, Rodríguez Hernández and Fernández Fernández (2019) on the presence of virtual influencers in the luxury sector. Other authors have focused on the role these opinion leaders created by artificial intelligence have in areas such as fashion, as with Goikoetxea (2019). Furthermore, some have even analysed this phenomenon with a case study of Lil Miquela, the main virtual influencer, such as, for example Shieber (2019) and Rodrigo-Martín, Rodrigo-Martín and Muñoz-Sastre (2021).

Most of the current works to date on this topic have focused on artificial intelligence engineering or the role these virtual beings have as opinion-leaders in fashion or music, or just as a novel and little-known phenomenon. However, there has been no extensive research into something so topical as social and political activism practiced by some virtual influencers, such as Lil Miquela. Research, therefore, is required into the role these virtual entities play, not just for purely commercial purposes but also in terms of politics and social movements.

In order to cover political activism from virtual influencers, the authors of this research shown in this article set the following general objectives:

- To define the concept of influencers in the social networks.
- To become familiar with the influencers phenomena as well as opinion-leaders.
- The following specific objectives were set to make up the general ones:
- To differentiate between real and virtual influencers.
- To identify how virtual influencers, behave and how this is reflected in the messages given on their posts on the social networks.
- To analyse the messages given by Lil Miquela in terms of political activism.
- To explain the success virtual influencers have concerning their number of followers.

2. Design and methodology

The study of virtual influencers in the field of political activism can be rather complicated initially and this must be addressed from the start in order to suitably focus on the subject matter of this research. It will also prevent too much dispersion which will not yield satisfactory results. These obstacles are:

- Difficulty when delimiting such a broad object of study with so many realities.
- The expectations created, both in describing such a complex process and explaining how it works.
- The multitude of fields it can be applied to.

Having analysed these difficulties, the purpose of this study was to examine the political activism of virtual influencers and their capacity to present themselves as opinion leaders, using Lil Miquela as a case study. She is one such influencer who has the most followers on Instagram. In this research a study period was set for the 2020 US presidential elections.

To define the subject matter of this research the authors set out the following hypothesis:

Virtual influencers are important opinion leaders among the youngest audience, capable of mobilising them, whether this be towards a product or service from a specific brand or a social or political issue.

To carry out this research, the methodology was set out in three phases in which qualitative and quantitative techniques were combined. This way, firstly, an analysis of the chosen sample was made in order to later implement these elements by observation and using instruments for measuring the impact

of their posts and contents (see Table 1). The aim of combining these techniques was to make an in-depth analysis of how Lil Miquela behaved in relation to these elections and how she used her ability to mobilize a highly interesting sector of society such as young people, many of whom had the opportunity to vote for the first time in these elections.

Table 1: Research methodology

| Phase | Study | Task | Purpose |
|--------|---|---|--|
| First | Descriptive theory | Contextualisation and conceptual review of the influencers phenomena | Study and reflection on social networks and the influencer phenomena and virtual influencers |
| Second | Quantitative, qualitative and descriptive experimental research | Experimental work | Choice of sample. Analysis of contents. Analysis and results of sample analysed |
| Third | Conclusive | Check the degree to which the research objectives have been fulfilled | Check the role the social networks and virtual influencers have as opinion leaders. |

Source: Produced by the author

With an initial overview of the subject matter of this study the social networks and their trends have been analysed as well as the influencers phenomena and virtual influencers. This was carried out in order to establish the sample and the period to be analysed. The second phase was made up of an experimental study the aim of which was to analyse the sample from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. Finally, a conclusion was drawn from the analysis with which it was seen to what degree the hypothesis and the objectives set have been fulfilled.

The sample analysed was based on the Instagram profile of Lil Miquela, the top virtual influencer in terms of followers on this social network. The research focused on the stories posted in the last electoral period in the United States. It also looked at the content analysis and the quantitative and qualitative results. In total 53 stories were analysed, whose graphs have been researched. The contents were identified as being one's own contents or shared ones and the intention behind the message, accounts which may be related, the tags used and how much impact the @lilmiquela account had have all been evaluated.

3. Field work and data analysis

3.1. The influencer phenomena

With the rise of the Internet and the social networks a new figure known as the influencer was born. Initially, these were "famous" people who had obtained a large number of followers on account of their main profession. That is, fans of sportsmen and women, musicians or actors became the main followers on the social networks. In this way links of affection and engagement were created.

Just as indicated by Fernández Gómez, Hernández-Santaolalla and San-Marcos (2018) "Influencers have been shaped as personal brands who must keep up a restrained discourse which appeal to the majority if they hope to grow and become established". Moreover, it is precisely these followers that those short stories whose aim is to increase loyalty are created for. As Pérez Curiel and Clavijo Ferreira put it:

If initially the media played a fundamental part in the dissemination of fashion, today, due to the social media, trends have now been created and flow in a more democratic manner at an amazing speed (2017: 230).

Doctor Marina Ferrer López (2020), in her doctoral thesis, explained that nowadays there are infinite techniques and experts in advertising and digital marketing for gaining more followers quickly, making a video go viral or positioning a website at the top of the first page of Google. Martínez Rodríguez and Sánchez Martín (2012) demonstrated that user proactivity is a tool with great potential for increasing the size of the advertising impact. For this reason, brands and advertisers use the social networks to interact with consumers and supply them with what they demand.

Pérez Curiel and Clavijo Ferreira also mention this scene which was first observed some years ago:

With this rising horizon a new paradigm has arisen in which *girls, bloggers, instagrammers* and *Influencers* in general are trend setters who spread across society in a more horizontal and massive manner (2017: 230).

For this reason, the so-called *influencers* arose, a series of characters who have amassed a large number of followers on the social networks. Influencers display their lives, share their opinions or engage in activities in exchange for money. They appeared in the first advertising campaigns and became consolidated as opinion leaders amongst a much younger audience. On many occasions, the line is blurred between the activities and own opinions of the influencer and those that are sponsored or paid for. However, these activities must be considered as something lucrative and professional since "as the brand appears in the contents of the influencer posts it is not spontaneous, but rather is there due to a previous agreement which the brand pays for" (Vilajoana-Alejandre, Rom-Rodríguez and Miotto, 2019: 116).

Watts (2002) in his model of global cascades explained that rumours or fashion- just like pandemics - does not just depend on chance encounters of people with the rumour or person spreading it. They also need to be in contact with a sufficient number of the "infected" in order to be persuaded and change their position or belief on a topic or rumour. In this way, the youngest followers start thinking, acting and having opinions that resemble those of influencers on the social networks. That is, influencers become role models for this population group.

Accessibility to the Internet and social networks, as well as the ease of choosing contents makes influencers a highly powerful marketing and communication tool.

3.2. Virtual Influencers

Recently, personal relationships, as we know them have gone through a revolution and the range of interaction people can have has enlarged considerably. At present, there are over one billion people in the world who use social networks to communicate for entertainment and communicating with other users. This means this media has consolidated its position as a significant advertising resource and must be taken into consideration. In just 25 years, digital advertising has gone from being something practically inexistent to the media with most advertising investment in Spain in 2019, surpassing television (Infoadex, 2020).

In the wake of the success of the real influencers as advertising opinion-leaders (who collaborate with a range of brands, products, services and social movements), in 2016 the first virtual influencer in the history of social networks was launched. This was an experiment which arose out of a desire to control to a large extent the advertising messages linked to the influencer profile.

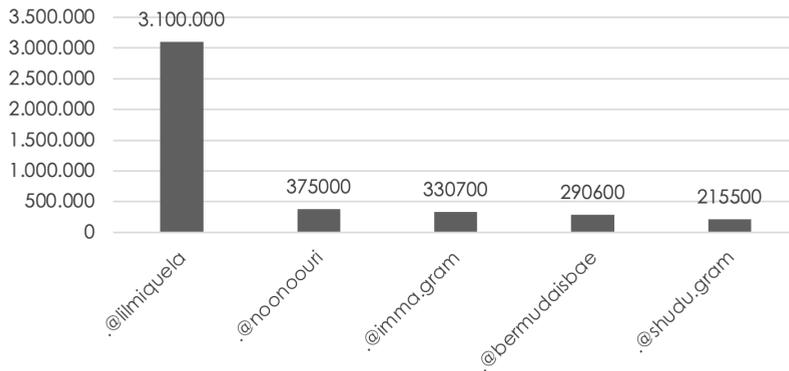
Just like with real influencers, virtual ones must entertain their followers to earn their loyalty and to keep them. Casas Moreno, Tejedor-Calvo and Romero-Rodríguez describe the way in which Instagram stories are told:

Instagram has become a storytelling platform with visual narration of activities in one's daily lives. This application (Instagram stories) also enables one to add photography and short videos. There is also an option of adding texts, emoticons, filters, etc. This is all useful because the human brain is prepared to save information in the way of a tale. (2018: 45)

The more the messages posted are worked on, the more they will penetrate their target audience. For this reason, the agencies in charge of bringing virtual influencers to life, create contents which are similar to those found in films or television series. A life is created for them and their messages are "fed" with a specific thread in order to capture the highest number of followers possible. This formula clearly works since in the last five years, virtual influencers have proliferated, and have gained ground from human ones.

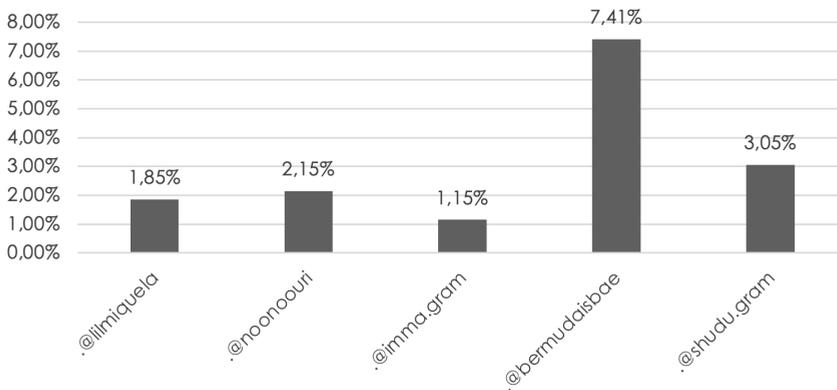
Virtual influencers have a way of life which resonates with the interests and preferences of their followers. This way, they maintain a thread of plausibility. People who interact on social networks display different areas of their life, so virtual avatars do so as well. This is why their posts are not merely concerned with consumption, but also the interrelation between physical and virtual influencers, social and prosocial behaviour and even political activism. The more varied the posts are the more plausible the avatar seems and this nurtures a higher degree of affinity with their followers. From a professional point of view, this enables the virtual influencer account to be used for all kinds of marketing activities. Therefore, interest in them in terms of their money-making capabilities has grown considerably. There are also different segmentation options for audiences with the most numerous followers.

Graph 1: Number of followers of the 5 most outstanding virtual influencers



Source: Produced by the author

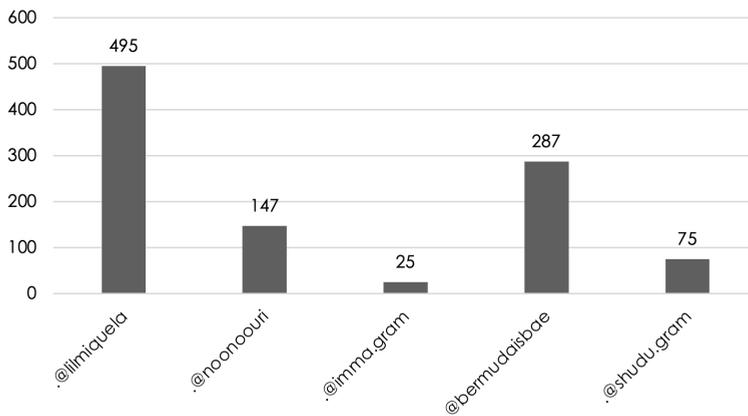
Chart 2: Percentage of followers who give a “like” or comment on posts



Source: Produced by the author

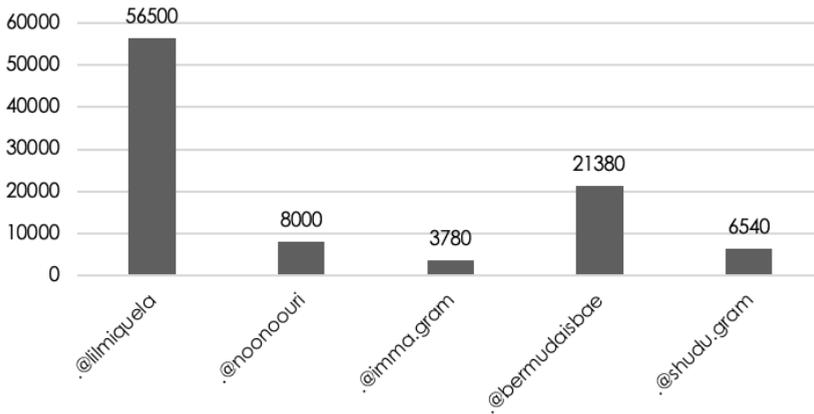
In graphs 1 and 2 the number of followers for the five most outstanding virtual influencers can be seen as well as the ER (percentage of audience which gives a like or comments on the posts). The most important profile in terms of the number of followers is @lilmiquela, which is why along with her number of posts (1041), she was chosen for the field work carried out in this article. However, @bermudaisbae, has the largest percentage of interactions with her followers although in the last year she has kept a low profile on her own posts.

Chart 3: Average comments on posts from the main virtual influencers



Source: HypeAuditor (2021).

Chart 4: Average “likes” on posts from main virtual influencers



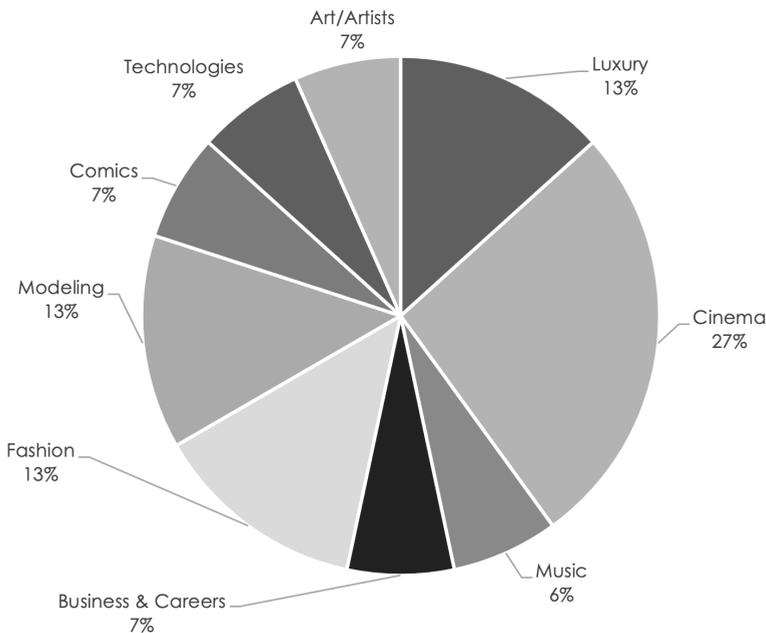
Source: HypeAuditor (2021).

If we look at the average number of followers (charts 3 and 4) who comment or click on “like” on the posts from the virtual influencers, once again, @ilmiquela profile clearly ranks first with a wide margin in relation to the other four most followed profiles.

Working behind the scenes of each virtual influencer there is a team of over 20 people with different professional profiles. The most outstanding of these are experts in cinematographic production, 3D scanning, motion capture, facial motion capture, design and photorealistic 3D modelling, art and photography directors and experts in communication, etc, etc. All of this brings us to conclude that a new industry has dawned, with specific specialised features for bringing avatars to life with which influencers as an advertising media are created.

One point to bear in mind when creating contents on the social networks are the interests of the target market. One detailed study of followers, their tastes and the reactions they have to posts on social networks, provides the first clues for creating stories which appeal to the feelings of desire and interest. In this way, stories may be created that are adapted to different audiences. In graph 5 the interests of the followers of the main virtual influencers active in 2021 can be seen.

Graph 5: Interests of the audience of the main virtual influencers



Source: HypeAuditor (2021).

If one looks at each of the virtual influencers it can be seen that the followers of @lilmiquela are primarily interested in music, cinema and luxury; those for @noonoouri in luxury, employment matters and fashion; those from @imma.gram in cinema, comics and new technologies; those from @bermudaisbae in cinema, fashion and modelling; and, lastly, those from @shudu.gram in art and artists, modelling and cinema according to HypeAuditor (2021).

3.3. General features of virtual influencers

At the start of 2021 there were 125 active virtual influencers, out of which over 50 appeared in the 18 months prior to June 2020. The health crisis we are currently going through, as well as lockdown, lead to a decline in activity for real influencers. However, virtual influencers may keep on travelling, attending events, engaging with other people and so on and so forth. This meant their stories became better known on the social networks and new profiles appeared.

At present two types of virtual influencers coexist: avatars or digital creations which resemble real people, and fantasy characters or animations. There are more female influencers than men and they are characters with their own opinions who have relationships with other avatars and real characters.

On the profiles of the virtual avatars reality blends with fiction. Therefore, the sky is the limit and one never knows exactly what is going to happen. However, occasionally the photographs and images posted may be confused with reality.

3.4. The Lil Miquela case study

3.4.1. Story and Profile analysis

On 23rd of April 2016, Lil Miquela, (brainchild of the company Brud) the virtual influencer with most followers on the network, came into being on Instagram. She is a young, 19-year-old American from Los Angeles, who in hardly 5 years amassed 3 million followers, over 1000 posts on her account and posted a large number of stories. Centred on an imaginary girl, an entire life was created loaded with advertising messages, social activism and posts with ideological content.

Just as explained by Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez and Martínez-Pastor:

We live in a society dominated by individualism, immersed in a cultural environment marked by collaboration and driven by media convergence. This is no paradox as people feel an urge to share and air their ways of seeing life, without merging theirs with those of others, without losing their uniqueness as individuals (2019: 332).

The social networks make this all possible and virtual influencers reflect society, hence the success of profiles such as Lil Miquela. Generation Z is that most committed to this type of profiles, feeling empathy with them, even though they know they are not real. Perhaps that is why they attract such interest. Núñez-Gómez, Rodrigo-Martín, Rodrigo-Martín and Mañas-Viniegra explain the importance of knowing this target market in order to launch messages claiming that "Brands must research this new audience more and address them in a responsible and educational manner, because in the long-term brand loyalty will depend on it" (2020: 403). Virtual influencers are tailor-made for this generation in order to reflect their interests as well as the issues that concern them. Indeed, it might be said that the virtual influencers in 2021 are an active part of Generation Z.

Even though her profile was originally intended to always be linked to fashion, Lil Miquela has become a successful singer and her songs have been played millions of times on platforms such as Spotify or Apple Music. She earns more income than many real influencers and has earned as much as 8500 \$ for a single sponsored post. In addition, at present, it is not unusual to see her face in fashion magazines or being interviewed on different programmes. This has made her an icon for different luxury brands such as Chanel, Versace, Givenchy, technology companies such as Apple, or for automobiles such as Mini, among many other brands that appear on her posts.

Throughout her posts it can be seen how she interacts with real people or other avatars, one of the most outstanding of whom is @blzwo22, a virtual influencer also from Brud, with whom posts, interests, photography and comments are shared (Fig. 1 and 2).

Figures 1 and 2: Relationship between avatars created by the same company



Source: Instagram @lilmiquela.

It might be said that these two avatars have a social relationship which resembles one between two real people. That is, there is a very fine line between reality and fiction in all cases, so much so that she can even be seen making video calls with her friends.

On analysis of her posts, it can be seen that she dedicated a large part of them to promoting new artistic, musical and artistic talents as well as promoting social movement campaigns. These were both for NGOs and those made in December 2017 for *My Friend's place* in order to raise funds for young homeless people in Los Angeles (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Fund-raising campaign for young homeless people made by Lil Miquela



Source: Instagram @lilmiquela.

3.4.2. Analysis of profile posts from Lil Miquela

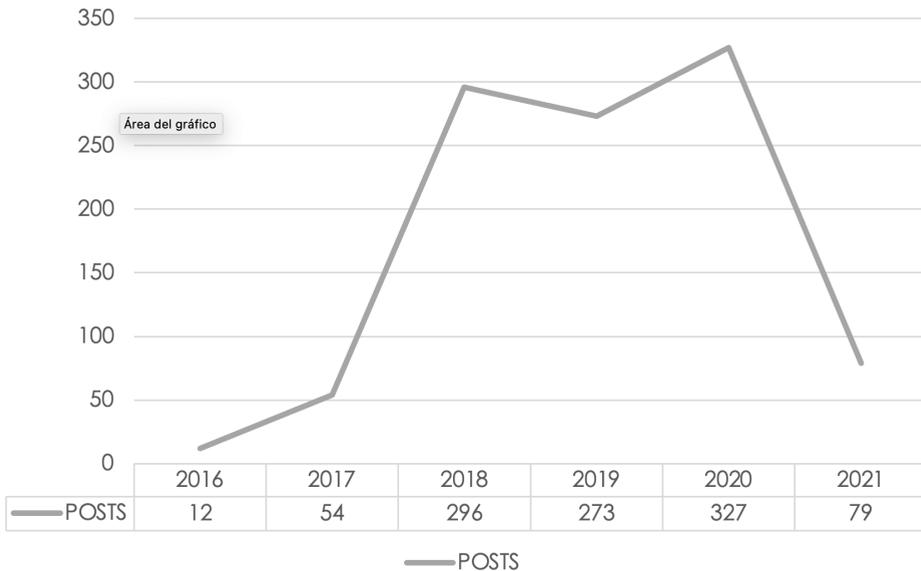
The specific case study of Lil Miquela began initially with drawing together the posts that had been made throughout the years, in which a rising trend can be seen as Lil Miquela resonated well among the user audience on the social network Instagram.

Table 2. Data from the posts made by @lilmiquela

| Year: | Number of post | Date first post | Date last post |
|-------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 2016 | 12 | 23rd April | 28th December |
| 2017 | 55 | 27th January | 31st December |
| 2018 | 296 | 1st January | 31st December |
| 2019 | 273 | 2nd January | 30th December |
| 2020 | 327 | 1st January | 30th December |
| 2021 | 79 | 1st January | 15th April |

Source: Produced by the author

Graph 6 Trend in posts from @lilmiquela



Source: Produced by the author

In her first year the account of Lil Miquela did not show intense activity, as she only had 12 posts since April, the time at which she created the account until the end of the year. In 2017 the profile began posting in greater numbers and reached a total of 55. However, it was still unrepresentative in relation to posts made by real influencers with whom she wished to compete.

The years her account really took off were 2018 and 2019 with almost 300 posts per year. The large fashion brands, as well as luxury products began to be more commonplace in her posts. All this, as well as the natural style and care with which the posts were made turned Lil Miquela into a virtual influencer with the most followers worldwide.

However, 2020 marked a before and after on all accounts for virtual influencers, and especially the @lilmiquela account. The health crisis and lockdown gave virtual influencers a great opportunity to compete with real influencers. In a fantasy world, the sky is the limit, as they are not subject to lockdown and may continue "business as usual". The audience appreciates this and far more entertainment content is now created with these avatars. Indeed, posts in 2020 rose sharply above those made in previous years.

Since she began in 2021 and until 15th April 79 new posts were made, 9 more than in 2020. This has led us to think that the growth in posts this year will be similar to last year.

Results

4.1. Previous considerations

Before presenting the field work of research on the activity by @lilmiquela which coincided with the 2020 US presidential elections, it was deemed appropriate to set some questions on the United States electoral system. This is essential to understanding the different stories posted by this virtual influencer on her Instagram account from September 2020 to January 2021.

The first concerns the system for making the electoral role. The minimum age for voting in the United States is 18 but, just because somebody turns 18 does not mean an American citizen can vote. To do so, one must be on the voter registry (United States Government, 2021). This is a very important point for first-time voters, whether this is because they have just turned 18 or because they have received US nationality and they still have not registered.

This registry may be carried out in different ways. It can either be carried out directly by different public institutions (Department of Motorised Vehicles, Department of Health, Department for the Blind and Short-Sighted Persons, Office for Recruitment for the Armed Forces...) or by any of the multiple institutions from the third-party voter's register. The latter are persons or entities in charge of promoting and mass compiling applications for registering voters (Florida Department of State, 2012). Among these institutions are Rock the Vote or Head Count with which Lil Miquela has collaborated.

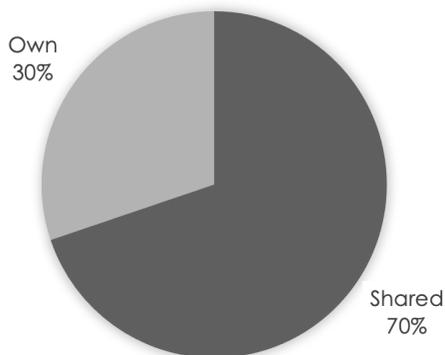
When a citizen registers as a voter, apart from providing their personal data (name and surname, address...) they have the option of indicating if they subscribe to any particular political party which will enable them to participate in the primaries of their party. Both personal data and this membership may be changed as many times as the voter deems necessary.

In order to promote the registry for new voter's different events were held, such as, for example, the National Day for Voter Registration. This, which, since 2012, is held on the fourth Tuesday of September and supported by different institutions such as the National Association of Secretaries for State, the National Association for Directors of State Elections, the US Commission for Electoral Assistance and the National Association for Electoral Officials (National Voter Registration Day, 2020) is not linked to any party.

4.2. Research results stories from Lil Miquela

The first question analysed was the type of message which was according to authorship. Just as can be seen in graph 8 most of the stories studied were shared messages created by accounts from institutions with whom Lil Miquela collaborates or artists who were also promoting the voter registry or participation in the general elections. In this way, out of the 53 stories analysed 53 were shared while the remaining 16 were created under the Lil Miquela brand name.

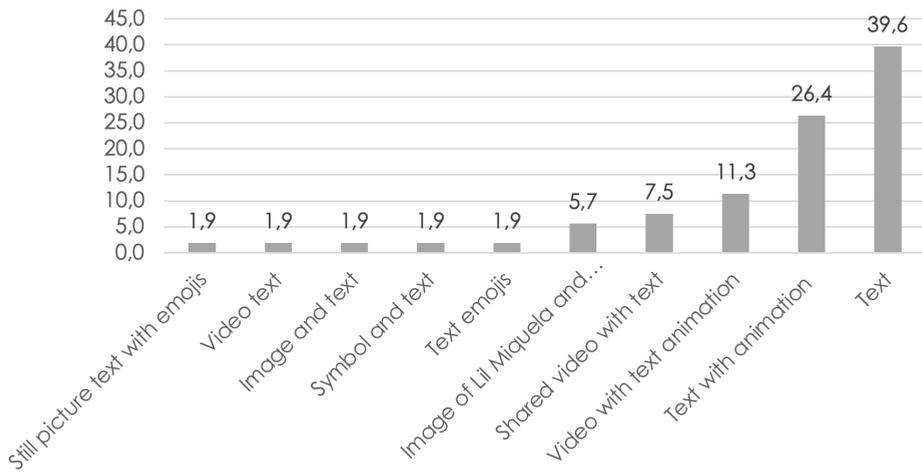
Graph 7 Type of message according to authorship



Source: Produced by the author

Below, the analysis is presented according to the type of message in terms of the communicative elements it included. In this respect, it must be stressed that out of the 53 stories 21 were made up of text, while the other 14 combined text and still drawings. These two types of messages alone now represent 66% of all the elements studied. The remaining stories contained text and animations (6), text and shared video (4), a photograph of Lil Miquela herself with a text (3), text with emojis (1), symbol and text (1), image and text (1), video and text (1) and a still image with text and emojis (1) (see graph 8).

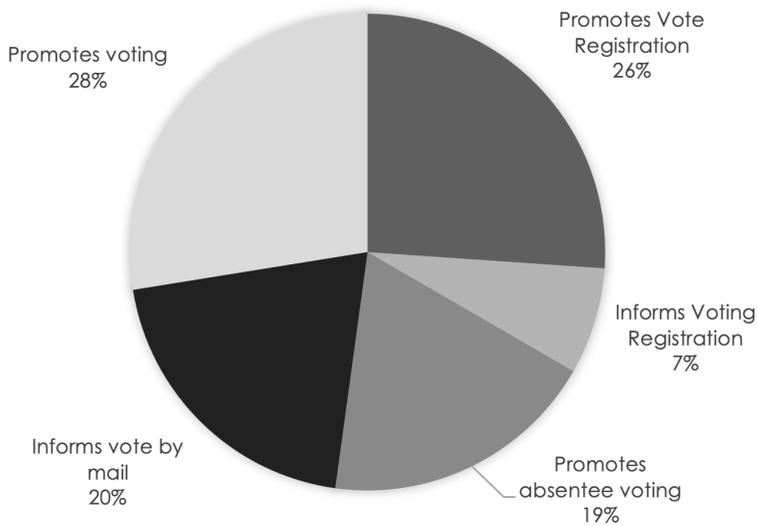
Graph 8 Elements of message (%)



Source: Produced by the author

One of the issues which was most interesting in this research is that concerning the intention behind the stories posted by Lil Miquela on her Instagram account. 18 of the stories analysed exclusively promoted voting in general. That is, participating in the November 2020 elections while 14 just promoted voter registration. A total of 11 of these messages promoted postal voting while informing about how to make use of it. Out of the other stories, three exclusively informed about postal voting, two just made references to promoting this distance voting modality, a report on voter registration and another promoted voting while encouraging postal voting (see Graph 9).

Graph 9 Intention behind the stories

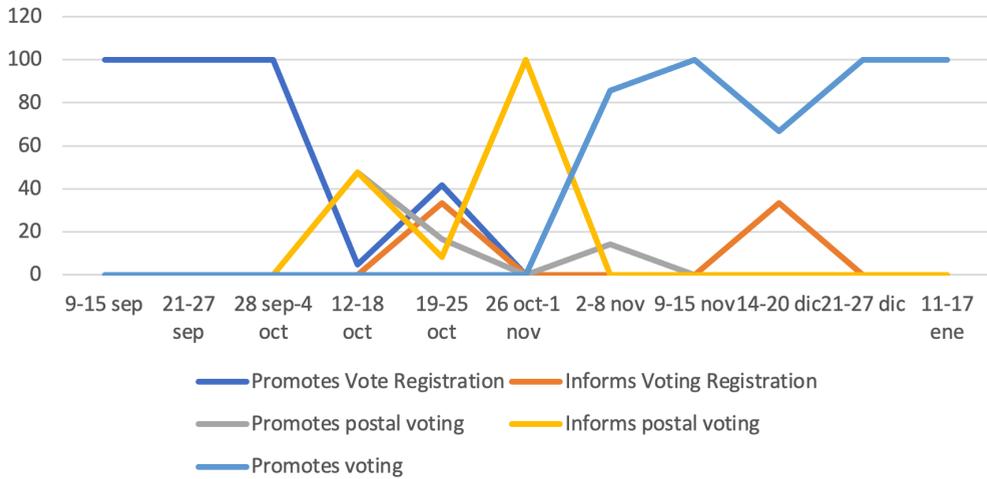


Source: Produced by the author

In the analysis there is a clear trend with the intention behind these messages throughout the period studied. This way it can be seen that matters related to promoting the voter registry is a key issue dealt with in the stories by Lil Miquela between the 9th of September and 4th of October 2020. Between the 12th and 18th of October postal voting issues shared space on these posts, while in the week from 19th to 25th of October the stories linked to promoting and providing information on registering to vote gained greater significance. The month of October closed with messages almost entirely concerning information about postal voting and from November onwards most posts focused on promoting voting (Graph 10).

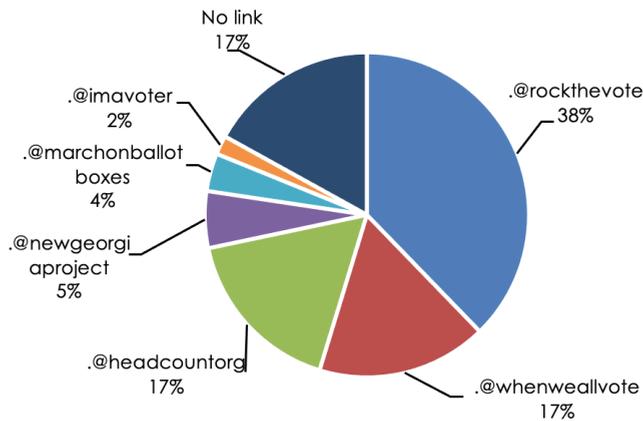
Another outstanding point is the collaboration of Lil Miquela with different organisations linked to promoting participation in the elections. Some of these institutions are what is known as third party voter registration organisations. To be specific, there are two of these: Rock the vote and Headcounting which accounts for 54.7% of the mentions made by the virtual influencer who is the subject matter of this research. Afterwards, other institutions appear although they are not included in the list of organisations whose objectives are encouraging participation in the elections. This is the case of When we all vote or March on ballot boxes (Graph 11).

Graph 10 Trend in intention of the messages



Source: Produced by the author

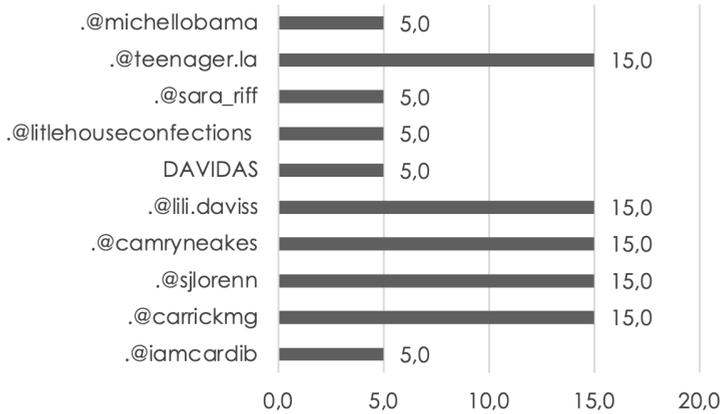
Graph 11 Link to organisations promoting voting



Source: Produced by the author

The next step consisted in analysing other links, apart from the previously mentioned institutions (see Graph 12). Here a large difference can be seen between the previous section in which the percentage of links with these organisations reached 83% of the stories posted. In this case, the percentage of posts in which other accounts are alluded to or cited comes to a mere 9.4%. Out of these, most are artists such as the actor and rapper Cardi B or the musician and writer Carrick Moore Gerety among others. There is also a producer specialised in products aimed at teenagers called We are teenager. One of the names who appeared on this list of famous people mentioned by Lil Miquela in her Instagram stories was Michelle Obama, wife of President Barak Obama and a strong supporter of the When we all vote movement.

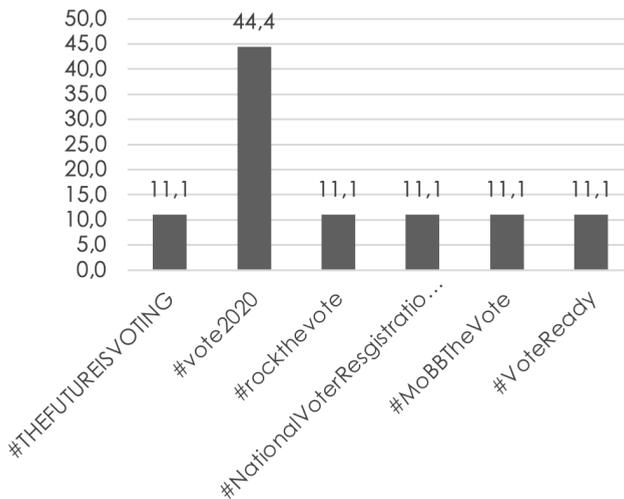
Graph 12 Links with famous people (%)



Source: Produced by the author

Moreover, a total of ten stories were found in which a hashtag or tag was used, which accounted for 18.9% of the total. This way, Lil Miquela was linked to different organisations, movements or events related to the election process. The most repeated tag was #vote2020, which encouraged American citizens to participate in the November 2020 federal elections and which appeared on four occasions. The other tags (#THEFUTUREISVOTING, #rockthevote, #NationalVoterRegistrationDay, #MoBBTheVote and #VoteReady) appeared just once (Graph 13).

Graph 13 Appearance of hashtags in the stories from Lil Miquela (%)



Source: Produced by the author

5. Discussion and conclusions

This study supplements the contributions from authors such as Vázquez Sacristán, Rodríguez Hernández and Fernández Fernández (2019) on the efficiency and impact of influencers. In this case they focused on the field of political mobilisation by the virtual influencer, Lil Miquela. Moreover, this research supports the questions already posed by Cirilo and Prandelli (2020), as can be seen from the analysis carried out.

Another important point which arose from the results concerns the significance of the creation of short stories which help to nurture audience loyalty, a point remarked on by Pérez Curiel and Clavijo Ferreira (2017) and Rodrigo-Martín, Rodrigo-Martín and Muñoz-Sastre (2020). Apart from the benefits derived from these stories, those which make followers proactive must also be mentioned, an observation considered by Ferrer López (2020). This was confirmed by the results of the interactions obtained in this research.

The analysis previously set out firstly, demonstrated that despite having a notably higher number of followers, the audience of Lil Miquela was not most active when interacting with the posts. It is a question of attracting attention, which is reflected in graphs 1 and 2 of this article. Despite this, this influencer was no less attractive, since her audience was unmatched by her rivals in terms of followers.

Moreover, cinema and luxury (two of the main interests the audience of Lil Miquela have) are also the topics which arouse most interest in the followers as a whole from the other main virtual influencers. They share a group of industries which their discourse revolves around. On analysing this and comparing it with the style and contents of her messages it is clear that these characters, unlike real influencers, are created in minute detail and leave nothing to chance in order to fulfil certain criteria.

As for the political activism of Lil Miquela analysed in this study, it must be stressed that the fact that most posts are not her own creations, but rather made by different institutions which encourage people to vote and promote a voter registry, or by other artists and shared by this virtual influencer. Furthermore, in terms of sharing the message, it could be claimed that the involvement of Lil Miquela in politics does not mean she belongs to any political party but, rather, she just focuses on promoting a registry of voters and the vote.

The domination of each of these messages throughout the period analysed coincides with the periods provided for different states for taking each of the required steps for participating in the elections. The same can be seen with tags, or *hashtags*, which were used in each of the stories analysed. On this point, there was a marked protagonism from #vote2020. They also seemed to be aligned with the timeframes and events linked to the US elections process.

Another variable analysed concerned links to other accounts. This enabled the type of relationships Lil Miquela had to be known. In this respect, how the virtual influencer provided links and collaborations with third party voter-registration organisations was observed. These were ones which were very interested in mobilising young people and new potential voters. The capacity to engage and influence the youngest followers of Lil Miquela made her a tool of great value for conveying messages to that sector of the population.

Even so, given that which has been stated above, the significance virtual influencers have gained since appearing in 2016 can be demonstrated and they have multiplied since the pandemic began. They have the capacity to lead what may be defined as "a normal life", unrestricted by Covid-19 unlike what has occurred with their human counterparts. This has become patent in the increased activity registered throughout 2020 and the first months of 2021 by Lil Miquela, who posted in a more prolific fashion in this period.

This potential for them to continue business as usual, without any restrictions from the health authorities, (apart from displaying certain specific features of these times such as face masks) has also made these characters more attractive both to commercial brands and other types of organisations. This is because the typical narratives of each virtual influencer could carry on, unrestricted by the pandemic. In this way they continued to engage with their audiences. The pandemic may have also encouraged followers to seek some escapism from the coronavirus restrictions by means of the experiences shared by these influencers. That is, to find an oasis of normality.

From an analysis of virtual influencers in general and specifically that of Lil Miquela at the time of the 2020 US elections, it may be concluded that - just as set out in the hypothesis at the onset of this research -these subjects (which were created by virtual reality) have become authentic opinion leaders among the youngest sector of the audience. Their ability to mobilise this sector of population becomes patent in the type of messages posted in their stories with over fifty of these types of temporary stories on mobilising the youngest people to vote in these elections.

6. Specific contribution each author has made (must be filled out by each author)

| Contributions | Name and surnames |
|--|--------------------------|
| Conception and study design | Author 1, 2 and 3 |
| Search for documents | Author 1 and 3 |
| Gathering data | Author 1 and 3 |
| Analysis and critical interpretation of data | Author 2 and 3 |
| Draft, format, review and approval of versions | Author 1, 2 and 3 |

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