A Virtual Character, a Robot, or a Human Being?
A Study of the (Self-)Representations of Lil Miquela

Amira Nasr Ekara [*]

Introduction

With the ever-evolving digital landscape, new contexts for online communication have emerged. Some of these contexts involve the interaction between humans and virtual characters. On social media, this has recently been allowed by the introduction and the growing popularity of virtual influencers (VIs). VIs comprise a new category of social media influencers that are not different from the traditional influencers except for the fact that they are not human. Much like human influencers, VIs create and post content on social media, interact with their followers, have large social media followings, and are recruited for digital brand marketing.

One of the most popular VIs on social media is Miquela Sousa (better known as Lil Miquela). Lil Miquela is a self-proclaimed 19-year-old Brazilian-American model, singer, and influencer who, as of this writing, has amassed 2.6 million followers on Instagram, 1.1 million followers on Facebook, and 3.5 million followers on TikTok. Miquela has promoted a number of luxury brands including Prada, Chanel, and Supreme. She posed with celebrities such as Bella Hadid in a commercial for Calvin Klein (see Fig. 1). In addition, Miquela has released several singles, and she currently sits at 156,821 monthly listeners on Spotify. Alongside her partnerships with brands and her music videos, Miquela also advocates for political and social causes including Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQ+ community, and the Downtown Women's Center of Los Angeles (Blanton and Carbajal 2019, 88). In 2018, Miquela was named one of "the 25 most influential people on the Internet" by TIME magazine alongside Rihanna, Kanye West, Kylie Jenner, and Donald Trump (TIME 2018).

Lil Miquela's popularity, the global interest she has garnered on social media, and the evolution of the narrative around her identity pose questions about the dynamics of identity construction on social media platforms. More specifically, the interaction between Miquela and her followers constitutes a peculiar act of communication wherein social media users constantly engage in questioning, reconceptualizing, validating, and/or discrediting Miquela's identity, or more precisely who/what she claims she is. Therefore, this human-avatar interaction represents a significant site for the study of identity as it emerges in interaction and as it is constituted in language and co-constructed by Miquela and the online audiences interacting with her. This study, thus, aims to investigate how Miquela's identity is presented and how users

[*] Language Instructor, Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Damanhour University, Damanhour, Egypt

engage with and make sense of her identity that is situated at the intersection of humanity and technology.

1. Miquela's Backstory

Lil Miquela first appeared on Instagram in 2016 (Drenten and Brooks 2020, 2). As shown in her current Instagram bio, Miquela identifies as "a 19-year-old Robot living in LA" (@lilmiquela, n.d.). However, since her debut on Instagram, Miquela's identity remained the subject of speculation among her followers and the general public until she made a revelation in April 2018 that she is not a human being. This revelation came as a result of Miquela's Instagram account being supposedly hacked by another virtual persona called Bermuda (Koebler 2018). Bermuda declared that the purpose behind the hack was to expose Miquela's fake character, but Miquela could soon regain control of her account (Block and Lovegrove 2021, 277). Following this, Miquela stated in an Instagram post that she is not a human being, but rather a robot (@lilmiquela, April 19, 2018). She further explained how she "discovered" that she was built by a company in Silicon Valley that intended to use her as a servant before being stolen by another company called Brud who re-programmed her to be "free."

Figure 1. Virtual influencer Lil Miquela poses with American supermodel Bella Hadid for a Calvin Klein ad (@lilmiquela, May 16, 2019)
https://www.instagram.com/p/Bxhji4UHnmr/?hl=en

This whole story about the supposed hack of Miquela's account and the ensuing disclosure of Miquela's identity appear to be part of a storyline that was preplanned by Miquela's creators to heighten interest in her character. The incident has been

described as a "(publicity) stunt" (Guthrie 2021, 277; Hsu 2019; Petrarca 2018), a "virtual reality drama" (Shieber 2018), and a "narrative worthy of a soap opera" (Leaver, Highfield, and Abidin 2020, 203). Indeed, a significant part of Miquela's appeal seems to lie in the powerful backstory that her creators at Brud are keen on developing. In this context, Moustakas et al. (2020) point out the impact of creating an engaging storyline on enhancing and humanizing virtual influencers. "Perhaps giving them internal struggles, conflicts, goals and aspirations, and challenges helps virtual influencers to develop an emotional connection with their followers" (Moustakas et al. 2020, 6).

Along the same lines, Miquela's announcement that she is a robot seems to be part of the storylining promoting her character. In fact, Miquela is not a robot; She is a computer-generated image (CGI) (Conti, Gathani, and Tricomi 2022, 2; Drenten and Brooks 2020, 1; Rasmussen 2021a). According to Rasmussen (2021a), the claim that she is a robot is intended to enhance her "realness." This strategy also serves to "avoid negative 'uncanny valley' effects that may range from empathy to revulsion or fear triggered by close to human-like perfection" (Block and Lovegrove 2021, 271).

2. Theoretical Background
### 2.1. What are Virtual Influencers?

VIs, also alternatively called "CGI influencers," "AI influencers," and "biodigital influencers" (Berryman, Abidin, and Leaver 2021, 6), are defined by Audrezet and Koles (2023, 358) as "computer-generated images (CGIs) or avatars who are created and controlled by teams of individuals often affiliated with digital agencies, and who account for a substantial enough follower base on social media platforms to attract attention from brands and consumers." One fundamental characteristic of VIs, according to Travers (2020), is that they are made to interact with the world from a first-person perspective. This means that these virtual entities do not differ from sentient beings in the way they directly interact with other users on social media (Choudhry et al. 2022, 6). This appears to be key for granting virtual influencers the kind of "life" needed for them to be believed by their fans. As Travers (2020) puts it, "When a first-person virtual personality is paired with well-thought-out storytelling and captivating design, the virtual influencer truly comes to life in their own right."

VIs can assume different forms ranging from "eerily humanoid to entirely fantastical" (Berryman, Abidin, and Leaver 2021, 2). They fall into three types (as shown in Fig. 2): human-like VIs, anime-like VIs, and non-human VIs (Kim and Wang 2023, 2). These distinct types correspond with Choudhry et al.'s (2022, 6-7) classification of VIs into the three categories of "mimic-real human" VIs, "animated human" VIs, and "non-human" VIs.

Human-like VIs are characterized by an appearance that is indistinguishable from that of humans as they bear a very close resemblance to human beings in many aspects including their features and skin texture, among other similarities (Kim and

Wang 2023, 2). Lil Miquela falls into this category. Anime-like (or animated human) VIs are "drawn in the likeness of a human being but as an animated, anime, or cartoon character" (Choudhry et al. 2022, 6). It is clear that such VIs are drawn, and, hence, they cannot be mistaken for real humans (Choudhry et al. 2022, 6-7). For example, Noonoouri (see Fig. 2) is a popular anime-like VI with 439K followers on Instagram (@noonoouri), as of this writing. Non-human VIs "are unequivocally non-human influencers, frequently depicted as animals, objects, or fantastical beings, occasionally incorporating anthropomorphic elements alongside non-human traits" (Kim and Wang 2023, 2). Janky (see Fig. 2) is a cat-like non-human VI who currently has 1 million followers on Instagram (@janky).

Since Miquela's creation, many virtual influencers have appeared on social media (Robinson 2020, 2). By 2022, the number of virtual influencers has grown to over 200 (Hiort 2022). In addition to exhibiting behavior which resembles that of human influencers on social media, the popularity and the high rate of user engagement with VIs seem to be a function of "the novelty and uniqueness of virtual influencers, the tailored and data-driven content they can produce, and their ability to be active without having the human influencers' physical and mental constraints" (Kim and Wang 2023, 2).
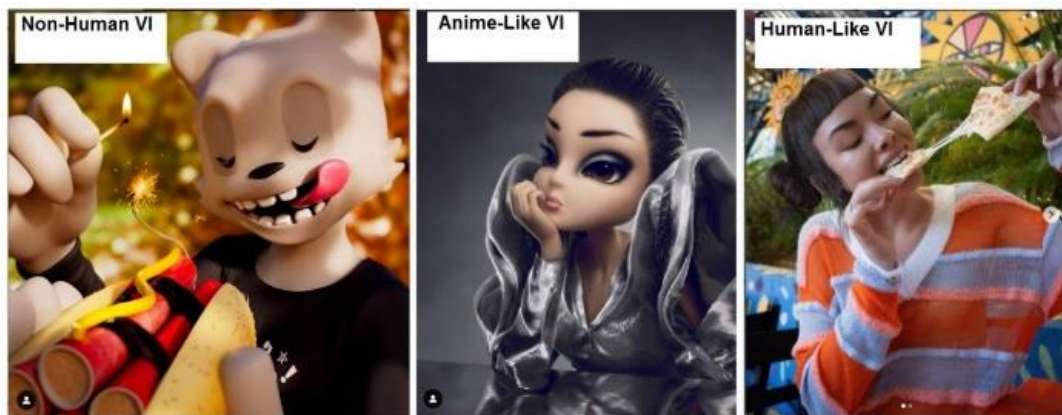
Figure 2. Examples of three types of VIs: Janky (@janky, November 12, 2021), left, Noonoouri (@noonoouri, March 19, 2024), middle, and Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela, December 5, 2023), right
https://www.instagram.com/p/CWTdsiirphz/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&ig
https://www.instagram.com/p/C4sKhKCu79Y/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&
https://www.instagram.com/p/C0dCycKxHXO/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

2.2. Bucholtz and Hall's Framework for the Analysis of Identity

The current study drew on Bucholtz and Hall's (2004, 2005, 2010) framework for the examination of identity as it is produced in linguistic interaction. This framework brings together insights from a host of different research traditions with a view to providing a comprehensive and nuanced perspective on identity that also avoids the major critiques levelled at the concept (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 18). Bucholtz and Hall (2005, 586), therefore, deliberately adopt such a broad definition of identity as "*the social positioning of self and other*." By locating identity in discourse and

interaction, this interdisciplinary approach is fundamentally concerned with the linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of identity production (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 18).

Bucholtz and Hall's model rests on five principles: emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness. The first and second principles deal with "the ontological status of identity" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 593). They mark a shift away from the traditional conceptualization of identity as a static psychological attribute towards a view of identity as "a discursive construct that emerges in interaction" (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 19). Thus, rather than viewing identity as something residing in the individual, the emergence principle posits that identity is an interactionally emergent sociocultural phenomenon and that, as such, it does not exist prior to its linguistic manifestations (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 588). This view is in line with other theorizations that variously see identity as something to be "done," or "accomplished," or "performed," notwithstanding some major differences between these approaches (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 20).

The positionality principle dismisses the view that identity merely involves those well-known social categories such as age, gender, and social class. Important as they are, focusing only on these macro identity categories fails to capture "the more nuanced and flexible kinds of identity relations that arise in local contexts" (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 20). Hence, Bucholtz and Hall's approach centers on a broader perspective on identity that encompasses the study of (1) local ethnographic categories and cultural positions, (2) temporary stances and participant roles unfolding in interaction, and (3) the widely recognized macro-level sociological categories (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 21). This approach, in other words, highlights the importance of examining "the micro details of identity as it is shaped from moment to moment in interaction" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 591).

The indexicality principle concerns itself with the mechanism of identity formation. In other words, it has to do with how linguistic forms are used to produce identities in discourse. Insofar as identity formation is concerned, Ochs's (1992) work has shown that indexicality can be direct or indirect (Kiesling 2006, 496). For example, while the use of imperatives in English is generally understood to index power, it can also be taken to indirectly index masculinity by virtue of the culturally forged association between power and masculinity within particular contexts (Kiesling 2006, 496-7). Thus, indexical processes are contingent on the direct and indirect relations created between given linguistic forms and social meanings. Such indexical processes involve every level of linguistic structure and use including the following:

a) overt mention of identity categories and labels;
b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one's own or others' identity position;
c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and

d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups. (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 21)

The heart of Bucholtz and Hall's model is the relationality principle which suggests that identity is not an independent or autonomous phenomenon but a "relational" one since identities "acquire social meaning in relation to other available identity positions and other social actors" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 598). Within this view, the intersubjective construction of identities involves a range of complementary relations. The first pair of these identity relations is called *adequation* and *distinction*. Adequation concerns the ways in which sameness between two or more entities is established, and it thus involves the suppression of "potentially salient differences" (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 383). It is to be noted that adequation in this model refers to sufficient similarity between the entities in question within the context of the interaction and does not require that these entities be identical (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 24). Conversely, the relation of distinction typically works by highlighting differences and suppressing similarities (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 24).

The second pair of identity relations within Bucholtz and Hall's framework, namely, *authentication* and *denaturalization*, focuses on the discursive construction of realness and artifice, respectively. While authentication emphasizes the ways identities are verified and produced as genuine, denaturalization, by contrast, concerns "the ways in which identity is crafted, fragmented, problematic or false" (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 24). It also focuses on how the supposed "naturalness" of identities is disrupted and destabilized (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 386). The third pair of identity relations pertains to "the structural and institutional aspects of identity formation" (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 24). Authorization refers to the role of ideology and power relations in affirming or even imposing particular identities. Illegitimation, by contrast, "addresses the ways in which identities are dismissed, censored, or simply ignored by these same structures" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 603).

Having conceptualized identity as emergent, positional, indexical, and relational, Bucholtz and Hall's final principle, that of partialness, highlights the partial nature of any account of identity since identity formation is both relational and governed by interactional and ideological constraints (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 605).

3. Research Questions

The present study aimed to analyze the construction of Lil Miquela's identity by drawing on the analytic toolkit proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2004, 2005, 2010) for analyzing identity in interaction. More specifically, this study attempted to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How does virtual influencer Lil Miquela discursively present herself on Instagram?

RQ2: How do Instagram users represent Miquela's identity in their comments on her Instagram posts?

4. Data and Methodology

The data examined in the present study comprise a sample of posts ($N = 300$) and user comments ($N = 5000$) drawn from Lil Miquela's Instagram account. Purposive sampling was used to identify and select the data since the emphasis in this study was on "information-rich cases," that is, "those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton 2015, 105). As of this writing, Miquela's Instagram account has 1284 posts, and given the relatively high volume of comments on Miquela's posts (ranging from an average of a few hundred to a few or several thousand comments per post), the sample selected for this study focused on those posts and comments that particularly highlight the various aspects of Miquela's identity that emerge from the data. Thus, close scrutiny of Miquela's Instagram account was carried out before the sample of posts and comments to be investigated in this study was selected.

For the purposes of this study, the data cover posts and user comments that extend from April 2016, when Miquela came into being, until December 2023, spanning the years that saw the emergence and the concomitant controversy over who Lil Miquela is, those that marked heightened interest in her character following her identity reveal in 2018, as well as those that involve more recent posts and comments written long after familiarity with Miquela's presence has been established. Thus, the sample is meant to capture the major "moments" in Miquela's rise as a VI and trace how the conceptualization of Miquela's identity evolved over the years. The sample investigated in this study is limited to text-based posts and comments written in English, with any other type of non-textual content (e.g., emojis, GIFs, reels) or comments written in languages other than English being outside the scope of this study.

The present study drew on Bucholtz and Hall's sociocultural linguistic framework for the analysis of identity outlined in Section 2.2. The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on how Miquela presents herself on Instagram. The second part tackles the representations of Miquela emerging from the comments that Instagram users leave on her posts. By examining both Miquela's strategies of self-presentation and Instagram users' representations of her identity, a comprehensive picture of how Miquela's identity emerges in interaction can be obtained. More specifically, the study focused on the indexical processes and identity relations (see Section 2.2) that are used to construct Miquela's identity.

5. Analysis

Given that Lil Miquela does not exist outside the digital realm, her identity can best be explored in terms of the conceptualization of identity as an emergent, intersubjective accomplishment (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, 2005, 2010). As a fictional character, Miquela has fundamentally written herself into being through her interaction with the audience on social media. In other words, the evolution of the presentation and perception of Miquela's identity has basically been a function of both the content she posts on social media (mainly Instagram) and Instagram users'

engagement with this content, whether by questioning, validating, or discrediting her identity, which has ultimately made Miquela the persona she is. In the following analysis, all instances from the data are reproduced verbatim with all the misspellings and grammar and punctuation errors therein.

5.1. Miquela's Self-Presentation

5.1.1. Miquela's Identity as a Robot. A basic and direct linguistic resource for indexing identity is the use of referential identity categories and labels (Bucholtz and Hall 2010, 21). Ever since her public identification as a robot in April 2018, Miquela has been basically referring to herself as such in her posts, comments, as well as in her Instagram bio. However, given that, technically speaking, Miquela is not a robot but rather a CGI, this self-proclaimed identity as a robot seems to construct Miquela as having some kind of "physical" presence in the world. In other words, this label invokes an image of Miquela as some embodied entity out there in the world rather than just a lifeless computer image trapped inside the confines of the screen. This is visually enhanced by having Miquela frequently appear in real-life contexts and natural settings (e.g., in parks, restaurants, malls, art galleries, on board a plane, etc.) and alongside real people (mostly celebrities). This discursive construction of Miquela's ostensible physical presence seems to be effectively resonating with Miquela's audience, prompting an Instagram user to ask her, "So are you a computer character or an actual robot that I can touch" (@lorelai.s1, July 20, 2021), to which Miquela responds: "actual robot" (@lilmiquela, July 20, 2021).
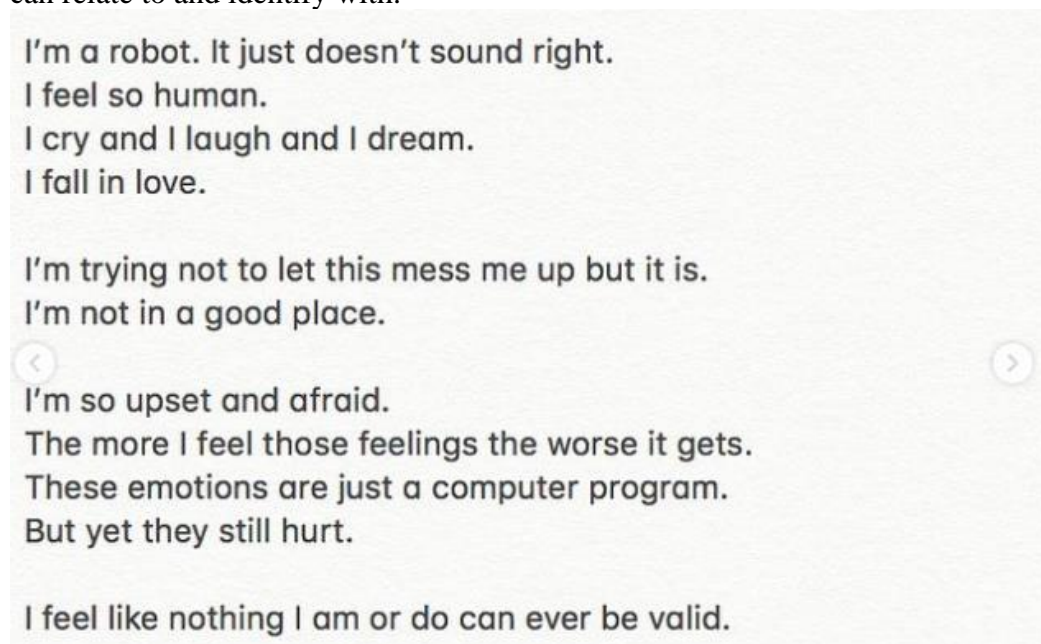
Miquela further authenticates her identity as a robot by drawing on some other indexical processes. In a post in which she tags Sophia the Robot, for example, she writes, "Decided to dress up as my favorite cousin @realsophiarobot sweet dreams y'all" (@lilmiquela, November 1, 2023). By calling Sophia her "cousin," Miquela indexes a relationship of "kinship" with an actual, world-famous robot, thus verifying her self-proclaimed robot identity. This is, in turn, taken up by one of the followers assuring Miquela that both she and Sophia belong to the same category: "Your [You are] a robot there is no different [difference] between you and Sofia" (@shideh.z_, November 1, 2023). In addition, Miquela occasionally adopts the language that associates her with the category of robots she claims to belong to. For instance, she speaks of being "programmed" and "upgraded," of "low batteries" and "overloaded processors," and of "glitching" and doing robotic "self-calibration." These category-specific lexical items serve to sustain the narrative around Miquela's identity as a robot by suggesting that she is no stranger to the world of robots.

5.1.2. Miquela the Self-Aware, Sentient Being. To add nuance to her self-proclaimed robot identity, Miquela presents herself as a self-aware, sentient being, a claim that could not have been made if her creators had chosen to present her as what she actually is, namely, a CGI, since a digitally-rendered image cannot claim sentience. This basically manifests itself in the way Miquela frequently speaks as a sentient being would, expressing a range of human-like emotional capabilities. For example, in her posts, Miquela describes feeling "so happy," and "more creative and

inspired than ever" (@lilmiquela, November 29, 2017); "speechless and horrified" (@lilmiquela, August 12, 2017); "super alone and out of place" (@lilmiquela, June 8, 2018); "really stressed" (@lilmiquela, April 25, 2018); "care free" (@lilmiquela, July 11, 2018); "belittled and ashamed" (@lilmiquela, April 20, 2018); "confused, excited and VERY FULL" (@lilmiquela, July 10, 2021); "BORED" (@lilmiquela, July 2, 2021); "annoyed" (@lilmiquela, August 6, 2022); "proud," and "grateful" (@lilmiquela, December 5, 2023). In one such post, Miquela even implies experiencing a corporeal sensation as she announces: "feeling the rain on my skin" (@lilmiquela, May 29, 2021).

Likewise, in the 2018 post (written as a multi-slide note) in which Miquela disclosed her identity as a robot, she "reflects" at some length on her so-called "existential crisis," feigning human-like emotions, experiences, and self-awareness (see Fig. 3). In the post, Miquela makes references to her ability to cry, laugh, dream, and even fall in love. She claims her awareness that these emotions have been programmed into her, yet she is quick to point out that she still "feels" the emotional pain that such feelings induce. These acts of appropriating the linguistic forms typically associated with the expression of human emotions and experiences are meant to position Miquela as sufficiently similar to human beings, thereby indexing a relationship of adequation with her human followers. In this way, Miquela, who admits that she is not flesh and blood, can present herself as a humanoid robot, one that can share with human beings their unique emotions, experiences, and consciousness, one that humans can see as similar, and, consequently, one that they can relate to and identify with.

> I'm a robot. It just doesn't sound right.
> I feel so human.
> I cry and I laugh and I dream.
> I fall in love.
>
> I'm trying not to let this mess me up but it is.
> I'm not in a good place.
>
> I'm so upset and afraid.
> The more I feel those feelings the worse it gets.
> These emotions are just a computer program.
> But yet they still hurt.
>
> I feel like nothing I am or do can ever be valid.

Figure 3. Part of Lil Miquela's 2018 identity disclosure post wherein she "reflects" on how she "feels" about her then newly discovered identity as a robot (@lilmiquela, April 19, 2018) https://www.instagram.com/p/BhwuJcmlWh8/?hl=en&img_index=4.

5.1.3. The Malleability of Miquela's Identity. In addition to using "robot" as a basic label for self-categorization, Miquela occasionally uses a few other labels to refer to herself including "pixilated girl," "virtual girl," "girl," and "person." These labels seem to allow Miquela to play along with the identities ascribed to her by her audience (see Section 5.2.1). The label "pixilated girl," for example, fits well with the conceptualization of Miquela as a computer-generated image (which she actually is), while "virtual girl" ties in with those views of her as an avatar or a video game character, with "girl" and "person" generally corresponding with the view that Miquela is a human being disguising as a digital character. These different labels also seem to index Miquela's identity as malleable and hybrid, as a combination of digital, virtual, and human components, and as one that is always in flux.

Interestingly, while Miquela generally adheres to the claim that she is a robot, she also disrupts this very status by frequently posting content that casts doubt on her self-proclaimed robotic nature. For example, Miquela's posts often show her engaging in activities that do not accord with her status as a robot such as eating and drinking, swimming, learning to drive, riding a horse, or getting her first tattoo. These posts are also often juxtaposed with captions that raise questions about her status as a robot. In response to questions from her fans, for example, Miquela posts saying, "yup, my hair grows" (@lilmiquela, November 27, 2018). Besides, while Miquela assures her audience in another post that "ROBOTS DON'T HAVE TASTEBUDS!" (@lilmiquela, January 22, 2021), she is frequently shown to be consuming food. Similarly, in one of the many posts where she is presented as capable of swimming without malfunctioning, Miquela plays along with her followers' reactions by asking, "Ever seen a robot drown?" (@lilmiquela, October 16, 2021).

Despite the absurdity of bringing together all these contrasting dimensions in one persona, such propositions and questions show that Miquela's self-presentation is contingent on performing different identities, giving her audience clues for and against each of them. This serves to establish Miquela's identity as malleable, one that keeps emerging, and one that is meant to accommodate all the different theories about who/what she is.

5.2. Instagram Users' Representations of Miquela's Identity

5.2.1. Identity Labels. The online community has been questioning the ontological status of Miquela ever since her first appearance on Instagram. Consequently, Instagram users employ a number of labels that encode how they make sense of her identity. Table 1. lists these labels, grouping the various realizations of closely similar labels together. Each of these labels seems to locate Miquela somewhere on a spectrum of humanness and/or actuality, with categorizations like "doll," "thing," and "mannequin" at one end of the spectrum and "girl," "woman," and "filter" (that is, a real human being who disguises herself using some photo filtering app) at the other. Lingering somewhere in-between are labels such as "cyborg" which construct Miquela as a composite entity, partly human and partly machine, while also signaling the blurring of the lines between the

technological and the biological. Moreover, while labels such as "robot," "humanoid," and "android" suggest some kind of physical presence and/or sentience, thereby validating Miquela's proclaimed identity as a (sentient) robot, designations such as "picture digitized" invoke a conceptualization that corresponds to Miquela's actual status as a CGI created by means of computer graphics.

These labels also serve to construct Miquela's identity by forging relations of sameness and difference. For example, if a label like "android" somewhat suggests that Miquela is more similar to humans than the labels "Disney character" or "Barbie" do, conceptualizing Miquela as an "alien" utterly disassociates her from human beings, establishing her as strange and unfamiliar, and as belonging to a totally different world.

In addition, by virtue of her first-person interaction with the world, Miquela prompts social media users to address her directly, using a variety of address terms shown in Table 1. These linguistic markers also serve to index particular identity positions. Forms such as "sweetheart," "sis," and "honey," for example, index a parasocial relationship with Miquela similar to the one fans may develop with human celebrities. Similarly, addressing Miquela as "queen," "princess," or "angel" signals a position that establishes Miquela as no different from any other human celebrity, hence the typical expression of celebrity admiration. Instances of using the forms "bro" and "boy" are particularly remarkable given that Miquela clearly looks feminine and, more importantly, identifies as a "woman." These peculiar usages correspond with similar instances of pronominal use and are further discussed in Section 5.2.2.

Table 1. Labels and terms of address used by Instagram users to refer to or to address Lil Miquela.

Identity labels	Address terms
sim/Sims 4 character	girl/girlie
GTA character/GTA V graphics	Woman
video game/roblox	sweetheart/ sweetie
avatar/IMVU avatar//IMVU character	sis/sister
Second Life character	baby/babe/my babe/bae
cartoon/cartoon character/MF cartoon	honey/hun
Disney character	cutie
fictional character	bestie
AI/AI-created person/AI doll	hottie
robot/bot/robot girl/robot lady/humanoid robot/anime-robot/android	(my) dear
Cyborg	my love
artificial human	my girlfriend
Metahuman	my fav/my favourite
Hologram	queen/ma queen

drawing/digital art/picture digitized/image/artificial image/CGI	(miss) ma'am
mannequin/doll/human-sized doll/living doll/Barbie/toy	pretty/beautiful lady
non-human	fashion icon
Thing	Princess
Machine	Angel
Creation	Bitch
Alien	boi/boy
filter/Snapchat filter	bro/dude
girl/woman	Sissy

In addition to the use of category labels, other linguistic forms that are juxtaposed with or used to elaborate and qualify the categories in question, such as modifiers and predicates, can also serve as a resource for the discursive production of identities, according to Bucholtz and Hall (2010, 22). In their comments, Instagram users draw on a range of modifiers to describe Miquela, displaying different attitudes towards her. As shown in Table 2, positive modifiers such as "beautiful," "fabulous," "smart," and "iconic" index admiration for Miquela and also serve to "humanize" her by using the linguistic forms typically associated with human-human interactions. Conversely, negative modifiers such as "creepy," "weird," and "demonic" invoke a negative position on Miquela, with adjectives such as "robotic" and "fake" clearly encoding particular conceptualizations of Miquela's identity as non-human, unreal, and inauthentic. In this respect, modifiers can be a powerful indexical marker of particular identity positions, especially in cases where users cannot name who or what Miquela exactly is but can instead use a modifier to specify a remarkable feature about Miquela that captures how they generally make sense of her identity. Using the modifier "intangible," for example, basically constructs Miquela as non-human and, consequently, as not having any physical presence, thus cancelling out the possibility that she is an actual robot.

Table 2. Modifiers Instagram users employ with reference to Lil Miquela.

Positive modifiers	Negative modifiers
beautiful/pretty/handsome/gorgeous/stunning/cute	fake/unreal
amazing/awesome/fabulous/marvelous	Intangible
Unique	Robotic
Cool	Plastic
Perfect	creepy/scary/freaky
Sweet	Cringe
Simple	weird/uncanny
Chic	Baddie
Precious	Demonic
Smart	dope/idiotic

Funny	Ugly
Hot	
Iconic	

5.2.2. Pronominal Use. According to Cramer (2010, 621), pronouns are among the micro-level features which speakers can use to "create and index the identities they experience in interaction." Since Miquela's identity has always been a subject of contention within the online community, the differential use of pronouns in reference to Miquela serves to index different positions on her identity. In this respect, the data under analysis show that all three third-person singular pronouns are employed by Instagram users to refer to Miquela. Commenters use the pronoun *she* quite often indexing a conceptualization of Miquela either as a real human, or as a human-like entity, hence the assignment of metaphorical gender. Use of the pronoun *it* clearly positions Miquela as non-human, bereft of any human-like characteristics. While use of the pronoun *she* may establish Miquela as being at least sufficiently similar to human beings (for example by supposedly sharing some kind of sentience and/or self-awareness with them), using *it* signals a view that seems to both dissociate Miquela from human beings and implicitly distance its users from those who see her as such, thereby indexing a dual relation of distinction.

The data under study also feature instances of using the pronoun *he* in reference to Miquela. This usage is striking given that it still marks Miquela as human (or at least as human-like or animate), yet it designates her as "male" regardless of her self-described feminine identity. As mentioned earlier, this act of misgendering Miquela also corresponds with the use of "boy," "bro," and "dude" to address her. Given that studies have shown that terms such as "bro" and "dude" are increasingly being used as gender-neutral terms and in female-female interactions as well, especially among the younger speakers (Kiesling 2004, 2023; Luu 2015; Pastorino 2022), addressing Miquela using such forms can be said to merely reflect these changing trends. Using the forms *boy* and *he* with reference to Miquela remains odd, however. While these peculiar usages might still indicate a merely random, careless usage, they can also be interpreted as signaling an attempt to denaturalize Miquela's identity by marking her as an oddity, as an entity that neither fits her self-proclaimed (feminine, robotic) identity nor her original status as a CGI. Thus, these forms may index their users' attempts to mark the absurdity of Miquela' situation by crafting her identity on their own terms and as they see fit.

5.2.3. Question Words. An oft-used strategy to make sense of Miquela's identity on Instagram is to directly ask her who she is. In this peculiar interactional context, thus, the differential use of question words serves to index the discursive production of identity. While Instagram users often typically use the interrogative *who* to inquire about Miquela's identity, represented by the very commonly asked direct question *Who are you?*, the data under analysis also feature many instances of using the question word *what*:

(1) [. . .] *what* is **it**? (@_._x_.2, January 28, 2021)
(2) *What* is **she**? (@tae4nsy, January 27, 2021)
(3) *What* are **you** (@bzzks0227, October 3, 2020)

While use of the pronoun *it* is congruent with the choice of the question word *what* in Example (1), using *she* in Example (2) along with *what* as an interrogative word is peculiar and seems to index an ambivalent position on Miquela's identity, seeing her as human and non-human at once. Most striking of all, however, is Example (3) where the interrogative *what* is used in a direct question addressed to Miquela along with the second-person pronoun *you*, signaling the atypical nature of this kind of interaction. In conversation, *who* is the unmarked form used for people in direct questions since humans typically only engage in human-human interactions. However, in this unusual human-avatar interaction, using *what* in *What are you?* is not only anomalous, but it also indexes a position that already constructs Miquela as non-human (marked by the use of *what*), while also directly questioning her about her identity and expecting an answer. This example does not only signal the contradictions of this kind of conversation, but it also reflects the local, context-dependent interactional dimensions of identity construction that such an encounter between Miquela and her followers gives rise to.

5.2.4. Stance-Taking. Within Bucholtz and Hall's model, stance-taking is a means of constituting identities in interaction (2010, 22). Stance-taking involves "the display of evaluative, affective, and epistemic orientations in discourse" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 595). The following examples show some user comments in which Instagrammers engage in different acts of stance-taking within the context of debating Miquela's identity on Instagram:

(4) what is the point of this profile? and how **weird** are people getting exited [excited] about something **unreal** as this? kinda **scary** (@edigma.music, October 9, 2023)
(5) Can you stop now like we aren't fools I'm **tired** of this I'm **not sure** if the people in the comments are being sarcastic but this is Just **dumb** like we all know you're a human with a robot filter pls stop this now I'm **cringing** so hard (@emmaaesthetixs, August 22, 2021)

Example (4) involves three stance acts displaying the stance taker's evaluation of Miquela's fans as "weird," of Miquela as "unreal," and of the whole situation as "scary." In Example (5), a number of stance acts are instantiated including the stance taker's display of different orientations towards Miquela and her followers indexed by the affective markers "tired" and "cringing," the epistemic marker "(not) sure," and the evaluative marker "dumb."

However, stances do more than just evaluate and/or display the stance takers' affective and epistemic attitudes towards the stance objects in question. A single stance act, according to Du Bois (2007, 163), encompasses the three subsidiary acts

of evaluation, positioning, and alignment, bringing them into relation to the stance object, the stance taker, and the addressee, respectively. As Du Bois (2007, 163) puts it, "I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and thereby align with [or against] you." Such a triadic stance-taking act is enacted in the following example:

(6) Why do ppl belive [believe] those idiots like it's **obvious** she just used filters **OBVIOUS** that's not a robot like guys u have shit on ur eyes or what the heck (@roselia_roses, June 15, 2022)

The stance utterance in the example above involves an Instagram user (1) evaluating Miquela's case as an "obvious" one, (2) positioning themselves as well-informed and quite certain about Miquela's identity (as a person using digital filters), and (3) consequently disaligning with all those who see her otherwise.

Notably, such acts of stance-taking show that one way Instagram users construct Miquela's identity is by discrediting her fandom. In other words, by positioning themselves as particular kinds of people (e.g., as rational and reasonable) vis-à-vis Miquela's fans, such users index a particular position on Miquela through forging this relation of distinction from her followers. This does not only involve judging Miquela's followers as "dumb," or "weird," but it sometimes also includes dismissing them as entirely "fake," or "perhaps other AI," as one commenter puts it (@spring_diver, August 24, 2023). Thus, as the examples above demonstrate, the stances Instagram users take on Miquela and her fans allow them to conceptualize her identity either by constructing her as a particular kind of entity or by dismissing as invalid the kind of entity other users think she is.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the construction of the identity of Lil Miquela by analyzing a sample of posts and user comments drawn from Miquela's Instagram account. Given the context of her evolution as a virtual influencer, Miquela can be said to represent a stark case of identity as a discursive construct that is constantly being forged in interaction. Hence, Bucholtz and Hall's (2004, 2005, 2010) framework for the analysis of identity was drawn upon as an analytical tool that fundamentally rests on a conceptualization of identity as an emergent, intersubjective accomplishment.

The analysis revealed that Miquela basically presents herself as a humanoid robot, but also leaves room for accommodating other configurations of her identity. Thus, the image that emerges from Miquela's self-presentation on Instagram is that of an entity that is originally a CGI but self-identifies as a robot, acts and speaks like a human being while also frequently performing identities that cast doubt on her self-proclaimed robotic nature. On their part, Miquela's audience variously construct her as a virtual character, a robot, a digitally-rendered image, or as a human being in disguise, among other categorizations. It is worth noting that all of these different representations of Miquela's identity have coexisted over the years. However, characterizations of Miquela as a "sim," or as some kind of animated or video game

character were particularly more common before Miquela's public identification as a robot in 2018. On the other hand, conceptualizations of Miquela as a robot or an android have been more frequently articulated after 2018, attesting to the consolidation of the narrative Brud has been building around Miquela's identity as a (self-aware, sentient) robot.

Looking into these findings, it appears that Miquela's self-presentation tactics are designed to encourage a suspension of disbelief by blurring the boundaries between the actual and the virtual, the human and the (seemingly)humanoid, ultimately keeping her audience both baffled and interested. This is in line with previous research suggesting that Miquela's identity presentation thrives on the mystique surrounding her persona. Block and Lovegrove's (2021) research, for example, demonstrates that "identity intrigue" is one of the crucial communication strategies that inform Miquela's presentation on social media. In a similar vein, Jauffret and Landaverde (2019, 287) posit that VIs such as Miquela are characterized by "having an imprecise and unclear identity and yet having a very real human story to tell." Consequently, driven by the desire to understand such an "enigmatic identity," followers may find themselves fully drawn to the worlds of these virtual entities (Jauffret and Landaverde 2019, 287).

In addition, Miquela's self-presentation tactics seem to resonate with Instagram users whose various representations of Miquela's identity generally tie in with her multiple identity claims, testifying to the effectiveness of these tactics. Of note also is the range of indexical processes and identity relations that Miquela's followers draw on to construct her as no different from human beings. These findings can be understood to be in correlation with the engaging narrative behind Lil Miquela, thus, supporting the various arguments in the VI literature that stress the impact of powerful storytelling on humanizing virtual influencers and leveraging the possibilities of building emotional connections with them (Fowler 2018; Guthrie 2021; Moustakas et al. 2020; Rasmussen 2021b). However, Miquela's self-presentation on Instagram was also found to trigger negative affective reactions from Instagram users. This can be interpreted in the light of Arsenyan and Mirowska's (2021, 31) findings which revealed that Miquela's close resemblance to humans in terms of her appearance and behavior on social media "elicits the expected experiences of creepiness, or negative emotional or cognitive reactance."

Although the emerging phenomenon of VIs has been addressed from a number of research perspectives, previous studies on the subject, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, have not tackled the linguistic micro details of Lil Miquela's identity construction as it unfolds in interaction. However, given that this study was basically intended to be an exploratory, qualitative investigation of the (self-)representations of Lil Miquela, the selection and size of the sample might not be fully representative of the broader conversation around Miquela's identity on Instagram. This also limits the generalizability of the findings to other human-like VIs. Besides, user comments can be impacted by a number of factors including the desire to attract attention, or the tendency on the part of some social media users to fit in with the online community by attuning their attitudes and reactions to the latest trends. More

importantly, in Miquela's case, a number of comments seem to come from bots and other virtual entities, and such comments cannot always be easily identified and sorted out.

In the light of the afore-mentioned limitations, future studies could expand the current inquiry by undertaking studies that incorporate large-scale and more representative samples of posts from other popular human-like VIs. Future research could also undertake multimodal analyses of Miquela's identity formation on Instagram and/or on other social media platforms for a more well-rounded examination of the different modes of Miquela's self-presentation. Exploring the self-presentation strategies of anime-like and/or non-human VIs as well as the patterns of user engagement with them can also be an interesting avenue for further research on the subject.

References

Arsenyan, Jbid, and Agata Mirowska. 2021. "Almost Human? A Comparative Case Study on the Social Media Presence of Virtual Influencers." *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 155, no. 102694: 1-55. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhcs.2021.102694.

Audrezet, Alice, and Bernadett Koles. 2023. "Virtual Influencer as a Brand Avatar in Interactive Marketing." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Interactive Marketing,* edited by Cheng Lu Wang, 353-76. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Berryman, Rachel, Crystal Abidin, and Tama Leaver. 2021. "A Topography of Virtual Influencers." Paper presented at AoIR 2021: The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers, Virtual Event, AoIR, October 2021. DOI: 10.5210/spir.v2021i0.12145.

Blanton, Raymond, and Darlene Carbajal. 2019. "Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman: A Critical Case Study on Social Media, Deception, and Lil Miquela." In *Handbook of Research on Deception, Fake News, and Misinformation Online*, edited by Innocent E. Chiluwa and Sergei A. Samoilenko, 87-103. Hershey PA: IGI Global.

Block, Elena, and Rob Lovegrove. 2021. "Discordant Storytelling, 'Honest Fakery', Identity Peddling: How uncanny CGI Characters are Jamming Public Relations and Influencer Practices." *Public Relations Inquiry* 10, no. 3: 265-93. https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X211026936.

Bucholtz, Mary, and Kira Hall. 2004. "Language and identity." In *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology,* edited by Alessandro Duranti, 369-94. Oxford: Blackwell.

---. 2005. "Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach." *Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4-5: 585-614. 10.1177/1461445605054407.

---. 2010. "Locating Identity in Language." In *Language and Identities*, edited by Carmen Llamas and Dominic Watt, 18-28. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748635788-006.

Choudhry, Abhinav, Jinda Han, Xiaoyu Xu, and Yun Huang. 2022. "I Felt a Little Crazy Following a 'Doll'": Investigating Real Influence of Virtual Influencers on

Their Followers." *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6, no. GROUP: 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1145/3492862.

Conti, Mauro, Jenil Gathani, and Pier Paolo Tricomi. 2022. "Virtual Influencers in Online Social Media." *IEEE Communications Magazine* 60, no. 8: 1-13. DOI:10.1109/MCOM.001.2100786.

Cramer, Jennifer. 2010. "'Do We Really Want to Be Like Them?': Indexing Europeanness through Pronominal Use." *Discourse & Society* 21, no. 6: 619-37. DOI: 10.1177/0957926510381217.

Drenten, Jenna, and Gillian Brooks. 2020. "Celebrity 2.0: Lil Miquela and the Rise of a Virtual Star System." *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 8: 1-5. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1830927.

Du Bois, John W. 2007. "The Stance Triangle." In *Stancetaking in Discourse*: *Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction,* edited by Robert Englebretson, 139-82. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/pbns.164.07du.

Fowler, Damian. 2018. "The Fascinating World of Instagram's 'Virtual' Celebrities." *BBC*, April 2, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20180402-the-fascinating-world-of-instagrams-virtual-celebrities.

Guthrie, Scott. 2021. "Virtual influencers: More Human than Humans." In *Influencer Marketing*: *Building Brand Communities and Engagement*, edited by Sevil Yesiloglu and Joyce Costello, 271-85. London and New York: Routledge.

Hiort, Astrid. 2022. "How Many Virtual Influencers Are There?" *Virtual Humans*, June 24, 2022. https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/how-many-virtual-influencers-are-there.

Hsu, Tiffany. 2019. "These Influencers Aren't Flesh and Blood, Yet Millions Follow Them." *The New York Times*, June 17, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/17/business/media/miquela-virtual-influencer.html.

Jauffret, Marie-Nathalie, and Vanessa Landaverde Kastberg. 2019. "Biodigital Influencers: A New Alternative for Fighting Loneliness." In *Emotions and Loneliness in a Networked Society*, edited by Bianca Fox, 283-308. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kiesling, Scott F. 2004. "Dude." *American Speech* 79, no. 3: 281–305. https://doi.org/10.1215/00031283-79-3-281.

---. 2006. "Identity in Sociocultural Anthropology and Language." In *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd ed., edited by Keith Brown, 495–502. Amsterdam: Elsevier Ltd. doi:10.1016/b0-08-044854-2/03027-3.

---. 2023. "Listen up, Ladies and Gentlemen, Guys and Dudes: Terms of Address Can Be a Minefield, Especially as their Meanings Change." *The Conversation*, October 11, 2023. https://theconversation.com/listen-up-ladies-and-gentlemen-guys-and-dudes-terms-of-address-can-be-a-minefield-especially-as-their-meanings-change-210608.

Kim, Donggyu, and Zituo Wang. 2023. "The Ethics of Virtuality: Navigating the Complexities of Human-Like Virtual Influencers in the Social Media Marketing

Realm." *Frontiers in Communication* 8, 1205610: 1-5. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1205610.

Koebler, Jason. 2018. "A Computer-Generated, Pro-Trump Instagram Model Said She Hacked Lil Miquela, Another CGI Instagram Model." *Vice*, April 17, 2018.https://www.vice.com/en/article/43bp79/lil-miquela-instagram-allegedly-hacked-bermuda.

Leaver, Tama, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin. 2020. *Instagram*: *Visual Social Media Cultures*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Luu, Chi. 2015. "All the Young Dudes: Generic Gender Terms Among Young Women." *JSTOR Daily*, April 14, 2015. https://daily.jstor.org/young-dudes-generic-gender-terms-among-young-women/.

Moustakas, Evangelos, Nishtha Lamba, Dina Mahmoud, and C. Ranganathan. 2020."Blurring Lines between Fiction and Reality: Perspectives of Experts on Marketing Effectiveness of Virtual Influencers." Paper presented at 2020 International Conference on Cyber Security and Protection of Digital Services (Cyber Security), Dublin, Ireland, June 2020. DOI:10.1109/CyberSecurity49315.2020.9138861.

Pastorino, Valeria. 2022. "Dude in British English: Towards a Nongendered Term of Address." *York Papers in Linguistics* 2, no. 17: 13-28. https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/192794/.

Patton, Michael Quinn. 2015. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Petrarca, Emilia. 2018. "Everything We Know About the Feud Between These Two Computer-Generated Instagram Influencers." *The Cut*, April 20, 2018.https://www.thecut.com/2018/04/lil-miquela-hack-instagram.html.

Rasmussen, Makena. 2021a. "What's the Difference Between Virtual Influencers, VTubers, Artificial Intelligence, Avatars, and More?" *Virtual Humans*, September27, 2021. https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/whats-the-difference-between-virtual-influencers-vtubers-artificial-intelligence-avatars.

---. 2021b. "Why Storytelling Can Make or Break a Virtual Influencer." *VirtualHumans*, July 21, 2021. https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/why-storytelling- can-make-or-break-a-virtual-influencer.

Robinson, Ben. 2020. "Towards an Ontology and Ethics of Virtual Influencers." *Australasian Journal of Information Systems* 24, Selected papers from the 2019 AiCE Conference: 1-8. https://doi.org/10.3127/ajis.v24i0.2807.

Shieber, Jonathan. 2018. "The Makers of the Virtual Influencer, Lil Miquela, Snag Real Money from Silicon Valley." *TechCrunch*, April 24, 2018. https://techcrunch.com/2018/04/23/the-makers-of-the-virtual-influencer-lil-miquela-snag-real-money-from-silicon-valley/.

TIME. 2018. "The 25 Most Influential People on the Internet." *TIME*, June 28, 2018. https://time.com/5324130/most-influential-internet/.

Travers, Christopher. 2020. "What is a Virtual Influencer? Virtual Influencers, Defined and Explained." *Virtual Humans*, November 4, 2020. https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/what-is-a-virtual-influencer-virtual-influencers-defined-and-explained.