Lil Miquela and Generation Z: Why Brands are Choosing a Virtual Influencer to Target a Generation

## Introduction

As social media has become increasingly popular with society, brands have had to alter their marketing strategies by reintroducing and reinventing themselves on these everchanging platforms. This is to not only to reach familiar audiences, but also new audiences. In this attempt, brands have had to develop fresh and clever content to stand out in the noise. This is typically done by reaching out to so called "influencers" on social media platforms to aid in gaining more visibility with those who have a carefully curated high number of followers with similar interests. Razo (2021), writes, "…brands of all sizes and shapes realize the power of influencer marketing and want to collaborate with opinion leaders to drive better business results". Influencer marketing is important because it requires brands to reconsider their content in the social media sphere: "To stay successful in influencer marketing and build brand trust with the help of content creators, brands need to find new creative and sustainable ways to collaborate with opinion leaders" (Razo, 2021).

There is a generation with the power to change how brands are choosing to market to the current audience, especially in the social media landscape. Born between 1997-2012, Generation Z (Gen Z) have been raised on the internet and social media (Meola, 2021). They will be the largest cohort of consumers and will challenge brands to navigate the digital space to reach this generation (Meola, 2021). Meola (2021) writes that Gen Z is considered to be the most ethnically diverse and largest generation in American history and are considered to the most transformative age group ever: "Generation Z will soon become the most pivotal generation to the future of retail, and many will have huge spending power by 2026. To capture a piece of this growing cohort, retailers and brands need to start establishing relationships with Gen Zers now" (Meola, 2021)

Growing up surrounded by fake news, its proven to be harder to create brand loyalty with this generation (National Retail Federation, 2017. According to the National Retail Federation (2017), "Gen Z has a strong focus on quality and authenticity: they're not easily swayed by marketing, and they have the digital savviness to navigate between real and fake claims." For a brand to come across as authentic, it requires continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism (National Retail Federation, 2017). Gen Z looks for substance and are not afraid to call out a brand for being dishonest (National Retail Federation, 2017). Gen Z expects brands to authentic and contribute to social causes (Williams, 2020). Williams (2020) writes "Marketers need to be mindful of how Gen Z's familiarity with technology shapes their attitudes towards brands, advertising, and shopping experiences."

Using a semiotic analysis, this paper focuses on recurring themes stemming from the brands tagged in twenty Instagram posts randomly selected from 2021 and 2022 curated from the Instagram account of Miquela, a popular virtual influencer, to understand her attraction as an influencer to better target Gen Z.

## Literary Review

For this literary review several themes will be reviewed focusing on how an influencer is defined, as well as how Gen Z interacts online within the sphere of marketing. This will help to begin to contextualize the purpose for a corporation to use a virtual influencer, such as Miquela,

### Who is Lil Miquela?

Over the past few years, being an influencer has been proven to be very marketable as well as profitable. With the use of CGI, human error is diminished, as "The CGI influencer is

never ageing, never controversial, sick, cranky, or double booked. And while their existence is fake, their influence is real" (Sarkisyan, 2018).

Tiffany (2019) describes *Brud* as a "mysterious Los Angeles startup" that has created three CGI influencers with vague reasoning. The three CGI influencers the article refers to are Blawko, Bermuda, and Miquela with each influencer having their own unique personality, connections, and backstories. It has been said that *Brud* uses its characters like a reality TV show "having them interact, hang out with each other, and even fall out" (Dodgson, 2019). While the Federal Trade Commission requires influencers to disclose marketing relationships by captioning a post as an ad or sponsor, it is unclear how these rules apply to a virtual influencer leading to sneaky marketing techniques (Katz, 2018). There are concerns that these virtual influencers, such as Miquela, are created for the purpose of being a marketing stunt, a strange social experiment, a form of culture jamming, and/or a new way to advertise (Tiffany, 2019).

Culture jamming is defined as a movement that "seeks to undermine the marketing rhetoric of multinational corporations, specifically through such practices as media hoaxing, corporate sabotage, billboard 'liberation,' and trademark infringement" (DeLaure et al., 2017, p.63). DeLaure et al. (2017) write that "Ad parodies...might be categorized as a strategy of rhetorical sabotage and attempt to impede the machinery of marketing." Miquela is said to jam "public relations and influencer practices" in the way that highlights the idea of "honest fakery" (Cossell, 2019 as cited in Block et al., 2021). Within honest fakery, Miquela, as written by Block (2021), is the "opposite of the elusive concept of 'authenticity,' which has become one of the canons of 21st century PR."

Miquela, whose username on Instagram is @lilmiquela, first appeared in 2016 and quickly rose in popularity. She is created and controlled by a team of professionals from content marketers to animators all under the company *Brud*, which is valued at 125 million USD (Drenten et al., 2020). Miquela is a computer-generated imagery character (CGI) placed in an influencer realm on social media: "…Lil Miquela represents a bridge between the highly controlled Hollywood star system and the highly liberated social media influencer" (Drenten et al., 2020). Miquela "will be forever nineteen, incapable of misbehaving or accidentally deviating and is a form of property-to be bought, sold, and manipulated" (Drenten et al., 2020). Like any other influencer, Miquela shares her ups and downs in life but unlike others her age, "…she doesn't know acne breakouts. She doesn't know bad hair days" (Trepany, 2021). Because of this, she is a worthwhile influencer to study, as her social media content will offer insight into the habits and preferences of Gen Z.

Miquela is seemingly nineteen forever, making her ideal for branding. As written by Carey (2020), "From her exotic Spanish-Brazilian background to the cute freckles on her nose (designed to give her an imperfect beauty and make her more 'relatable'), everything is manufactured" (Carey, 2020). Miquela, as a CGI influencer, will always look perfect and ready to share a brand's message. She will never cause a public relations nightmare that a real human being might cause. CGI influencers are perfectly crafted, without the need of diets, cosmetic surgeries, they don't age, and they always remain the same clothes size (Carey, 2020). The grey area starts to form, as beauty standards take shape and brands who back these perfect virtual influencers validate them. In the photos of the virtual influencers such as Miquela they appear to live real lives, get food, and go to red carpet premiers (Kachan, n.d).

Companies such as *Brud* are creating influencers for the sake of reaching a particular audience on a global social media platform. Miquela looks and acts just like any other (high profile) teenager, creating that trust that is sought after by brands who market to this audience.

Brands have had to start thinking creatively about their tactics to reach new audiences as social media platforms rise in popularity. This is their way to stay connected to and seen by Gen Z. Brands such as Coca-Cola, KFC, Prada, Louis Vuitton, Balmain, and Calvin have collaborated with CGI influencers with brands going onto creating their own influencers (Kachan, n.d). Miquela might be groundbreaking in the sense that her image is created to be the ideal advertisement for Generation Z.

A 2020 survey showed that 42% of young people followed an influencer that they didn't realize was CGI (Carey). Miquela, who has 1.6 million followers on social media, is in complete control by her company, giving Brud all the power to do and say what they want. Even though she has no experience of physical reality, Miquela still shares her favorite restaurants and clothes. This new phenomenon has "potential not only to change the landscape of digital marketing but also to surface serious problems for the real world" (Trepany, 2021). According to a survey of more than 500 13–34-year-olds, "55 percent of people who followed CGI influencers made a purchase, 55 percent attended an event, 55 percent followed a brand, and 52 percent researched a brand product" (Trepany, 2021). Miquela has partnered with brands such as Samsung Mobile and Calvin Klein as well as been ranked as one of the twenty-five most influential people on the internet in 2018 by *Time* (Trepany, 2021). The biggest advantage to a CGI influencer over a human influencer is the lack of human error and no risk of ending up in a scandal.

**To Be an Influencer**

The most followed profiles on Instagram tend to be celebrities, often used to deliver marketing communications since those with a large following on social media tend to be seen as attractive and trustworthy (Djafarova et al.,2017). As social media, especially Instagram, rose in popularity, influencers have transformed into celebrity like figures. The term "influencer celebrification" (Brooks et al., 2021) gets introduced, especially as "The digital age has given rise to new pathways for everyday individuals to accrue media attention, which can be translated into promotional endeavors" (Brooks et al., 2021). These promotional endeavors then become sociocultural currency, which is also known as celebrity capital, that can be used as an exchange for advertising through celebrity endorsements (Brooks et al., 2021). This takes shape as brands collaborating with social media influencers which can be seen through sponsored posts and tagging brands.

The Halo Effect determines the effects of the perception of an individual, creating either a positive or negative 'halo' around the celebrity leading to a powerful influence. The Halo Effect Theory "…determine[s] to what extent different types of celebrities on Instagram influence consumers' buying intention and social identification with celebrities" (Djafarova et al., 2017). Businesses use the Halo Effect to their advantage by selecting celebrities with a positive 'halo' to create a positive association with their product (Djafarova et al., 2017). For example, Dunkin' collaborated with TikTok's user and influencer, Charli D'Amelio, to create a special drink and limited-edition merch (Sip in Style with the Charli x Dunkin' Merch Collection, 2021). Dunkin' is "TikTok's most followed quick service" and Charli is "TikTok's most followed star" (Sip in Style with the Charli x Dunkin' Merch Collection 2021). Online celebrities can increase the significant importance and the credibility of marketing messages (Djafarova et al., 2017).

To be a social media influencer means crafting an image to build and maintain an online following. Influencers must appear real and relatable to their followers, maintaining a level of produced and managed authenticity (Driel et al., 2021). The average Instagram user wil post

daily pictures of their lives, slowly narrowing their theme depending on what pictures receive the most likes. Once an influencer receives an audience, maintaining loyalty through engagement aids in navigating the algorithm: "Hence, to ensure a constant level of engagement, the content shared needs to meet with the expectations of the audience" (Driel et al., 2021). Over time, as an attempt to monetize an Instagram account, influencers will begin to shift towards working with advertisers. According to Driel et al., (2021), "Unless one has amassed an impressive following, the advertising industry still sees influencer marketing as a freebie, and most influencers…receive little compensation for their work."

The new era of influencer marketing needs to be mentioned here. In 2020, the influencer marketing represented a $10 billion industry and aid in those looking for a business-to-consumer relationship (Haenlein et al. 2020). As written by Haenlein et al. (2020), "Firms are naturally interested in collaborating with such influencers to ensure their content is endorsed by users trusted by others and diffused to a broad audience" (p.11). As it is addressed in their research, it is important for brands to find influencers that are looking to be on the platform for a long time and are willing to put in the effort. Brands don't partner with and influencer who will quickly disappear (Haenlein et al., 2020).

**A Generation Online**

With Gen Z being the first generation born into the digital age, they have grown up being technologically savvy, innovative, and creative (Priporas et al., 2017). This generation uses technology in their daily lives, seeing it more like an instrument (Priporas et al 2017). It has According to Priporas er al. (2017) "members of this generation seem to behave differently as consumers and are more focused on innovation.". Gen Z is seen as the first generation that lives online and "virtually integrates and engages with its favorite brands" (Bernstein 2015, as cited in Priporas et al 2017).

Growing up in the shadow of 9/11 and the Great Recession, Gen Z are "conscientious, hardworking, but anxious generational cohort growing up in the age of smartphones, social media and increased multicultural diversity" (Williams 2015, as cited in Shin et al 2021). Gen Z no longer believe in the idea of the "American Dream" and instead look for messages "that reflect a reality rather than a perfect life" (Bernstein, 2015). They no longer "respond to these traditional notions of beauty or projected image of perfection like past generations have" (Bernstein, 2015). Gen Z have been known to instead respond to "independence and entrepreneurialism, self-direction and a spirit of ingenuity" (Bernstein, 2015). Gen Z live online and share so much of their lives online on multiple platforms in which they express their likes and dislikes (Bernstein, 2015). This generation has put pressure on brands to create "a seamless and strong overarching brand experience across in-store, digital, and mobile" (Bernstein, 2015). Because Gen Z has demonstrated their attachment to and reliance on social media, it is important to investigate the significance of CGI influencers in these digital spaces.

**Methods**

A semiotic analysis best suits this study as it will allow for a lens what visually attracts audiences and brands to Miquela such as images, products, colors, etc. Semiotics looks for the signs of symbols and how it aids in the interpretation of something. Berger (2020) refers to semiotics as "the science of signs" (p. 69). Berger (2020) writes "…semioticians have analyzed facial expressions, hairstyles and hair color, teeth, fashions in clothing and eyeglasses and jewelry, body piercing, and just about anything you can think of to determine how they generate meaning and what they reflect about society and culture (p. 70). In applying this methodology, we can look at colors, clothes, make up, hairstyle, poses, props, accessories, and even the people

(real and CGI) Miquela is with in her Instagram posts. It would also allow us to look at the locations she is supposedly at in her pictures, giving a more relatable and recognizability experience for the audience similar to that of a regular human influencer. Instagram is a very visually forward platform so using a semiotic analysis would lend itself well within this space. Like mentioned before, almost half of the consumers on social media don't realize that Miquela is a virtual influencer at first glance. A semiotic analysis will allow us to look at Miquela through the lens of being just an influencer, offering a perspective of how brands view her as well. There is an understanding that she is meant to be seen a trendy, relatable, authentic, nineteen-year-old and that should be portrayed through Miquela's images.

The methods used to evaluate Miquela's Instagram fall under a textual analysis as I am using her social media posts in an attempt to answer the research question. Her Instagram is where she has the most followers and as of late March 2022, she has three million followers. Looking at Miquela's pictures on her Instagram will offer an answer to how she is relatable to her audience and how she is showing authenticity, something important in influencer marketing and to Gen Z.

Relatable, in terms of social media, is defined by *The New Yorker* as "-to describe a character or a situation in which an ordinary person might see himself reflected" (Mead, 2017). It involves a process of identification, and "thinking herself into the experience of the characters on the page or screen or stage" (Mead, 2017).

Influencer marketing is defined by Influencer Marketing Hub (2021) as "…a hybrid of old and new marketing tools. It takes the idea of celebrity endorsement and places it into a modern-day content-driven marketing campaign" ("What Is Influencer Marketing," 2021). This process involves "a brand collaborating with an online influencer to market one of its products or services" ("What Is Influencer Marketing," 2021). An influencer can be anyone, as long as they have a large following both on the web and on social media ("What Is Influencer Marketing," 2021). With this definition, Miquela would be an appropriate account to investigate, as her collaborations with brands and large social media following can provide insight into how companies are using these technologies to reach their social media-savvy audiences.

**Findings**

Looking at twenty posts randomly selected from 2021 and 2022 through a semiotic analysis, listed and numbered in the Appendix, three themes stood out: Relatability and Nostalgia, Tagged Brands and Not Tagged Brands, and Just a Teenager which will be explored in more detail below.

There is a mix of luxury brands as well as a focus on local, ethical, sustainable, and "handmade" brands. Some of these luxury brands include Tasha, Moschino, Gucci, and Prada. Several brands are labeled as "design and fashion" on their Instagram such as Monchermoi amd Constanca Entrudo and many of them describe their product as "vintage" such as Mia Vesper and Bug. There is a focus on brands that have a unique and a boutique feel to them by being small businesses. Some of these brands are seen more than once throughout the posts such as Gucci, Monchermoi, Moschinio, Brain Dead, and Staud Clothing.

Ethical brands are the major presence found within the posts. Some of the ethical, sustainable, and "handmade" brands found in Miquela's Instagram posts include Palo Rosa Beach Wear, Mozh Mozh, Chofa Jewelry, Isshi.Us, La Lana, and Éliou to name a few. Palo Rosa Beach Wear is a sustainable and ethical swimwear brand with over 300,000 followers on *Instagram*. Mozh Mozh is a women's wear brand based in Lima, Peru with 20,000 followers. Chofa Jewelry is made in Miami and offers handcrafted Lucite jewelry with 2,000 followers.

Isshī is a handcrafted eco-conscious, semi-fine jewelry brand that is queer black-Latino owned with 5,000 followers. La Lana offers handmade objects made in New York City with 1,000 followers. Éliou offers made to order pieces hand made in Miami with 100,000 followers.

In the twenty posts randomly selected for this study, there are over seventy brands tagged but that doesn't include the brands that are placed in the background of the images that not tagged. In these posts, Miquela can be seen going about her daily life: going swimming, getting food with friends, going shopping, hanging out at home, and taking selfies. This offers Miquela the image of being trendy and youthful from the fashion chosen, the items she engages with, and even her location within the Los Angeles area.

For as unique as she claims to be, her posts are considerably normal and on par with posts from people (humans) in her generation. Though she is CGI, this is not apparent to her audience through her posts as if she is a teenager first and an influencer second, and CGI third. Miquela, as a virtual influencer, isn't acting or behaving any different than what is to be expected from Gen Z on the platform and/or in the realm of influencer celebrification.

According to Pfeiffer Law Corp, who represent Youtubers, Instagram Influencers, and brand ambassadors, the unwritten social media rule for Instagram is to post the best version of oneself: "…so yes to biking with friends and latte art, but no to tequila shots" (Pfeiffer Law, 2019). Your image on Instagram, especially if its public, is expected to be very polished and controlled to please your audience. Other unspoken rules include posting photos that are "beautiful, fun, inspiring, or funny" so that it "communicate[s] something an often evoke emotions in the viewer" (Bolluyt, 2016). Selfies are fine in moderation, and you should post photos of yourself and your friends (Bolluyt, 2016). This can be seen in the selection of posts with Miquela having a mix of selfies, photos taken of her (leaving the viewer to assume she is out with friends), and photos taken with her friends. Most of her photos she is out partaking in an activity that is considerably fun like spending time with friends. A good portion of the photos involve her eating, which contradicts the idea of her being CGI. Even though she is not real, everyone eats food, so this is the high-level relatability factor; you know she isn't real and yet she is eating just like you. This could be the 'funny' factor that is included in the unspoken rules of posting on Instagram, according to Bolluyt (2016).

Having an aesthetic on Instagram is also important, especially to be noticed by brands. This includes "colors, layout, tone, and overall feeling of your Instagram page…" so that you have a unique, cohesive, and visually pleasing page (Fontein, 2019). This allows for brand recognition and aids in conveying brand voice and personality as well as allowing for followers to recognize the content (Fontein, 2019). While Miquela works with many brands, she is a brand herself and is the product of *Brud* being advertised on Instagram. *Brud* wants Miquela to act and look a certain way to connect with the audience and to visually pleasing to their customers. She is an extension of *Brud's* voice. To build this aesthetic you must know your target audience and for *Brud* that is Gen Z, so Miquela's personality and content is going to reflect that. Next, you have to have your core values and through the brands tagged in the posts, it would seem this is taking a shift towards being ethical and sustainability which reflects the current hot topic of climate change discussed within society especially with the younger generations. After that is considering the influencer's overall aesthetic and Miquela's would be trendy, fun, cool, and youthful within the posts selected. *Brud* has the perfect recipe to be successful at marketing his brand in this controlled space with the purpose of such being to influence Gen Z.

As a nineteen-year-old (and therefore Gen Z), Miquela's aesthetic and vibe is going to reflect that and be shown through her posts. There is less of a curated feel and more so a level of

careful randomness. Spruch-Geiner (2021) writes, "Gen Z, a generation born for the most part into a post 9/11 world, has lived from one crisis to the next. They are too exhausted to care about curating an I*nstagram* grid." Because of this, the style of Gen Z tends to be messy, casual, and raw (Spruch-Geiner, 2021). Spruch-Geiner (2021) writes, "The branding that resonates with Gen Z is less curated than the millennial branding that preceded is" which is called an "'embrace of a healthy mess'" (2021). Brands see this and as a response, reach for more of a "maximalist aesthetic," and not be afraid of "bold, colorful, and voice-y" (Spruch-Geiner, 2021). Miquela's content is a clear mirror of this shift in culture on social media.

**Theme 1: Relatability and Nostalgia**

With the use of colors, patterns, and fashion there is a sense of both relatability and nostalgia in Miquela's posts. Nostalgia, even for a time before they were born, plays a key role in targeting Gen Z. It offers a sense of comfort, especially since this generation has been through a lot of world events (Spruch-Geiner, 2021). In the posts pulled for this study there is an overall color palette with various shades of reds, yellows, browns, greens, and blues. Most of her outfits consist of patterns, sometimes mixing patterns as well. Her bold fashion choices match this colorful image because she doesn't shy away from the use of color and fashion. The boldness comes from "a willingness to take a stance on things, another non-negotiable for the Gen Z consumer" (Spruch-Geiner, 2021). For Miquela, this is shown through her use of ethical and sustainable brands; this can be observed in Figure 12 as she is wearing a shirt that says, "Climate's Calling." Climate change is a hot topic with Gen Z and those within this generation tend to "engage with climate change content on social media" as well as "express a range of emotions when they see climate-related content there" (Thigpen et al., 2021). With this evidence, the sustainable content on Miquel's account reflects the interests of Gen Z and demonstrate that *Brud* has identified issues that are relevant to this generational cohort.

These fashion forward outfits, occasionally including accessories as well, stem from the brands tagged in the posts. In a few of her posts she is seen wearing crop tops, which is a popular style for those in Miquela's age range. While the tactic for Miquela is to make her a "relatable" nineteen years old, she doesn't typically dress like an everyday teen you would see on the street. Probably the most relatable outfit for teens would be the one post where she is seen at home in mismatch hoodie and tights. Even though these outfits aren't that of something you would typically wear while running errands, it's interesting, eye-catching fashion that can be considered trendy for the targeted generation. Its bright, flashy, and edgy which gives Miquela that youthful appearance. There is also a throwback feel to her fashion where the choices feel very 90s and early 2000s giving Gen Z a sense of Nostalgic.

**Theme 2: Tagged Brands and Not Tagged Brands**

Most of the branding is tagged in the second image and/or third image in her post which can feel as if she is avoiding obvious marketing and branding. The brands tagged include those that are local, ethical, and sustainable. For example, the brand Isshi.us is Queer Black-Latino owned and makes eco-conscious, semi fine jewelry and the brand La Lana is sustainable made in New York City. Some of the brands featured can be found on Etsy.

Majority of the brands have a low number of followers, giving the brand a platform and a voice to share their work. The brand with the lowest of followers is Groovies (handmade jewelry in New York and Los Angeles) with 525 followers and the brand with the highest number of followers is Gucci with 47.8 million followers. Two major paid partnerships include promoting the new Fox television show *Alter Ego* and the car brand *Mini* which reflects major brands are seeing Miquela as a successful branding opportunity to reach a particular or new audience.

Brands not tagged but visible in the images include Nike, WD-40, Pepsi, Lucky Charms, Alfred Coffee, and Mattress Firm, and Nintendo. The brands like Nike, Pepsi, Lucky Charms, Alfred Coffee, and Nintendo help again with Miquela's young appearance which his allows her to be relatable to the generation being marketed to as these are brands that would likely be familiar to that age group.

**Theme 3: Just a Teenager**

Miquela is supposed to embody an average nineteen-year-old and we can see that through her hair, make-up, and poses as well as her locations. Almost all the posts selected were that of selfies. It appears fun and playful while also put together. In the majority of her posts, she has her space buns and a touch of eye make-up and lip stick which gives her a familiar and recognizable look, especially when someone is scrolling through. She sits at home and plays video games while eating Lucky Charms with her dog nearby. She goes to get coffee and food and posts about it. She hangs out with friends. Miquela embodies the idea of being a relatable and authentic teenager through these photos, offering that connection with Gen Z which supports the fact that *Brud* wants her to be seen as a teenager first, influencer second, and CGI third.

**Conclusion**

One might argue that Miquela is an example of culture jamming, reminding us that nothing online is real. But since she is treated like any other influencer, especially with branding, she is more like an anti-culture jammer. Block et al. (2021) writes, "Miquela promotes Prado, Calvin Klein, Givenchy and Samsung but, at the same time, critiques, subverts and jams the same consumer culture in which she performs and from which 'she' benefits (Block et al., 2021). By having Miquela be what the brand needs and using her to be relatable to Gen Z, you then lose the meaning and concept of her being a culture jam. Miquela works in the parameters of influencers, social media, and fashion (including withing with mega brands like Prada), that she reinforces a status quo, rather than challenges it. That confirmative behavior doesn't fit within the definition of culture jamming. She dresses and acts like any other nineteen-year-old and responds to brands as any young influencer. She no longer stands out as being different and odd and therefore doesn't disrupt what we are used to seeing within the influencer sphere. She gets lost in the noise on Instagram, something one can scroll past and not even question. Miquela at that point is no different than anyone else who posts on the platform. As research shows, many don't even notice that she is CGI. If she was to be used as a culture jam, to tear apart what we know to be real within the realm of being an influencer, she would need to go against what we know to be true about influencers.

In the photos selected she portrays her "real self" creating a false sense of authenticity. Gen Z push for real, honest, and authentic, but the question becomes if a CGI influencer can really offer that. She creates a relatable image throughout her Instagram, portraying herself just like any other influencer around her age, even down to the fact that she is based in Los Angeles. This creates a recognizable theme through having a common style and look. What sets Miquela apart from the rest is that she is CGI. The innovation factor of a virtual influencer could be appealing to Gen Z and therefore easier for them to look past the fact that she isn't real. Being that Gen Z tend to respond better to nontraditional notions of beauty or projected image, this is where Miquela fits. To give Gen Z that authentic feel, Miquela tags her brands on the second or third image of her post giving the impression of a normal teenage and less of a celebrity (influencer celebrification) but still offers *Brud* a profit for his creation and product. Miquela, as a product of *Brud*, can be made into whatever is needed for the time and for the audience who is

viewing the product. This offers *Brud* a chance to successfully target Gen Z because Miquela can be changed with the times and the trends to better reach the targeted audience.

Articles have discussed that Miquela cannot make a mistake. As she is completely in control by *Brud,* the company that creates her, she is incapable of ending up on a tabloid website and for brands that can be very appealing. It acts like a security blanket for brands. In attempts to build brand trust, what better way than to work with a virtual influencer who can be whatever a brand needs or wants. Miquela is incapable of making a mistake that would make a brand look bad. The only way Miquela could make a mistake would be if *Brud* purposely chooses to do so. There is the ever-looming danger of cancel culture that can affect not only the person being canceled but as well as any brands associated with the controversy. Having a reliable and steady source, like Miquela, would attract brands to her. With influencer celebrifiction and the aforementioned security against cancel culture, Miquela is a controlled persona capable of being mass produced. She is interesting and trendy as a virtual influencer and for brands to work with a virtual influencer can bring a lot of attention to their brand. Take *Mini* for example, the brand wanted to announce their electric car and to make their electric car trendy, why not work with someone who refers to themselves as a "robot."

The purpose of this research paper was to understand a brands attraction to a virtual influencer and how they could be used to better target Gen Z. *Brud* uses Miquela much like a product from their company, whereas they can change their product depending on the trends in order to better market a certain Generation. By using a semiotic analysis to look at Miquela, a popular virtual influencer, it was shown that despite being CGI, Miquela can still appeal to Gen Z by displaying her "real self." Her "real self" is a carefully designed image of a nineteen-year-old, one who loves nostalgic and sustainable fashion, gets coffee, has hobbies and interests, and hangs out with her friends all of which is appealing and relatable to Gen Z. Brands see this and without the risk of an influencer creating controversy, they can utilize Miquela, as a virtual influencer, to easily (and safely) gain the attention of Gen Z.

**References**

Berger, A. A. (2020). *Media and Communication Research Methods*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Bernstein, R. (2015, January 21). *Move over millennials -- Here comes gen z*. Ad Age. Retrieved November 19, 2021, from https://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/move-millennials-gen-z/296577.

Block, E., & Lovegrove, R. (2021). Discordant storytelling, 'honest fakery', identity peddling: How uncanny CGI characters are jamming public relations and influencer practices. Public Relations Inquiry, 10(3), 265–293. https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X211026936

Bolluyt, J. (2016, December 31). *14 unspoken rules you shouldn't break on Instagram*. Showbiz Cheat Sheet. Retrieved March 30, 2022, from https://www.cheatsheet.com/gear-style/unspoken-rules-you-shouldnt-break-on-instagram.html/

Brooks, G., Drenten, J., & Piskorski, M. J. (2021). Influencer celebrification: how social media influencers acquire celebrity capital. *Journal of Advertising*, *50*(5), 528–547. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1977737

Carey, T. (2020, November 18). *Virtual Instagrammers work with designer brands, earn thousands a day and are adored by millions.* Daily Mail Online. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-8959717/Virtual-Instagrammers-work-designer-brands-earn-thousands-day-adored-millions.html.

DeLaure, M., Fink, M., & Dery, M. (2017). *Culture jamming: Activism and the art of cultural resistance*. New York University Press.

Drenten, J., & Brooks, G. (2020). "Celebrity 2.0: Lil Miquela and the rise of a virtual star system. Feminist Media Studies," 20(8), 1319–1323. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1830927

Driel, L., & Dumitrica, D. (2021). "Selling brands while staying "Authentic": The professionalization of *Instagram* influencers." *Convergence: The Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(1), 66–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520902136

Dodgson, L. (2020, January 15). *Fake, computer-generated Instagram influencers are modeling designer clothes, wearing Spanx, and attending red carpet premieres*. Insider. https://www.insider.com/cgi-influencers-what-are-they-where-did-they-come-from-2019-8#:~:text=Computer%2Dgenerated%20imagery%20(CGI),and%20the%20trend%20is%20growing.

Fontein, D. (2021, December 4). *How to create a unique Instagram aesthetic that fits your brand*. Social Media Marketing & Management Dashboard. Retrieved March 22, 2022, from https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-aesthetic/

*Gen Z Brand Relationships.* National Retail Federation. (n.d.). https://nrf.com/sites/default/files/201810/NRF_GenZ%20Brand%20Relationships%20Exec%20Report.pdf

Haenlein, M., Anadol, E., Farnsworth, T., Hugo, H., Hunichen, J., & Welte, D. (2020). Navigating the New Era of Influencer Marketing: How to be Successful on *Instagram*, TikTok, & *Co. California Management Review*, 63(1), 5–25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0008125620958166

Kachan, D. (n.d.). *What Are CGI Influencers? They Don't Have a Heartbeat, But They Have Million-Follower Communities on Instagram*. Business 2 Community. https://www.business2community.com/marketing/what-are-cgi-influencers-they-dont-have-a-heartbeat-but-they-have-m illion-follower-communities-on-instagram-02395544.

Marshall, P. D. (2014). Persona studies: Mapping the proliferation of the public self. *Journalism*, 15(2), 153–170. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913488720

Mead, Rebecca. "The Scourge of 'Relatability.'" *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 20 June 2017, www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/scourge-relatability.

Meola, A. (2022, January 5). *Generation Z: Latest gen Z news, research, facts*. Insider Intelligence. Retrieved March 30, 2022, from https://www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/generation-z-facts/

Katz, M. *CGI 'Influencers' Like Lil Miquela Are About to Flood Your Feeds*. Wired.https://www.wired.com/story/lil-miquela-digital-humans/.

Priporas, C. V., Stylos, N., & Fotiadis, A. K. (2017). Generation Z consumers' expectations of interactions in smart retailing: A future agenda. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *77*, 374-381. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.01.058.

Razo, V. (2021, January 7). *Can You Still Build Brand Trust with Influencer Marketing in 2020?* InfluencerDB. https://influencerdb.com/blog/build-brand-trust-with-influencer-marketing-2020/.

Sarkisyan, M. *CGI Influencers and Models: Their existence is fake, but their influencer - real*. Their existence is fake, but their influence - real. https://city.shorthandstories.com/cgi-influencers-models/index.html.

Sip in Style with the Charli x Dunkin' Merch Collection. (2021, March 29). *Dunkin'*. Retrieved from https://news.dunkindonuts.com/news/charli-dunkin-merch#:~:text=Dunkin'%2C%20TikTok's%20most%20followed%20quick,and%20cinnamon%20sugar%20on%20top.

Spruch-Feiner, S. (2021, March 14). *Millennial pink is dead: Unpacking gen Z's imperfect, bright and unapologetic aesthetic*. Glossy. Retrieved from https://www.glossy.co/beauty/millennial-pink-is-dead-unpacking-gen-zs-imperfect-bright-and-unapologetic-aesthetic/

Thigpen, C. L., & Tyson, A. (2021, June 21). *On social media, gen Z and millennial adults interact more with climate change content than older generations*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/21/on-social-media-gen-z-and-millennial-adults-interact-more-with-climate-change-content-than-older-generations/

Tiffany, K. (2019, June 3). *Lil Miquela and the virtual influencer hype, explained*. Vox. https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/6/3/18647626/instagram-virtual-influencers-lil-miquela-ai-startups.

Trepany, C. (2021, February 3). *The robot invasion has begun: Meet the computer-generated influencers taking over Instagram*. USA Today. https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2019/10/16/cgi-influencers-blur-line-between-reality-and-fantasy-instagram-advertising/3790471002/.

*Unwritten Rules of Social Media*. Unwritten Rules of Social Media | Pfeiffer Law. (n.d.). Retrieved March 22, 2022, from https://www.pfeifferlaw.com/entertainment-law-blog/unwritten-rules-of-social-media

Vadino, C. (2020, November 9). *Council Post: Why Building Trust Is Just As Important As Building Your Brand*. Forbes. https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/2019/10/16/cgi-influencers-blur-line-between-reality-and-fantasy-instagram-advertising/3790471002/

*What is Influencer Marketing? An in Depth Look at Marketing's Next Big Thing*. InfluencerMarketing Hub. (2021, April 13). https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-influencer-marketing/.

*What do gen Z shoppers really want? | IBM*. (n.d.). Retrieved November 19, 2021, from https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/report/genzshoppers.

Williams, R. (2020, July 8). *Gen Z wants brands to be 'fun,' 'authentic' and 'good,' study says*. Marketing Dive. Retrieved March 30, 2022, from https://www.marketingdive.com/news/gen-z-wants-brands-to-be-fun-authentic-and-good-study-says/581191/

**Appendix**

*Figure 1*

*Figure 2*

*Figure 3*

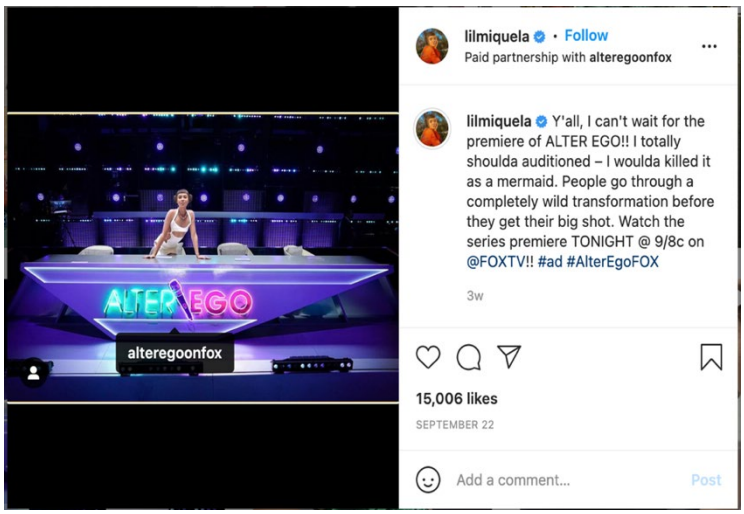


*Figure 4*

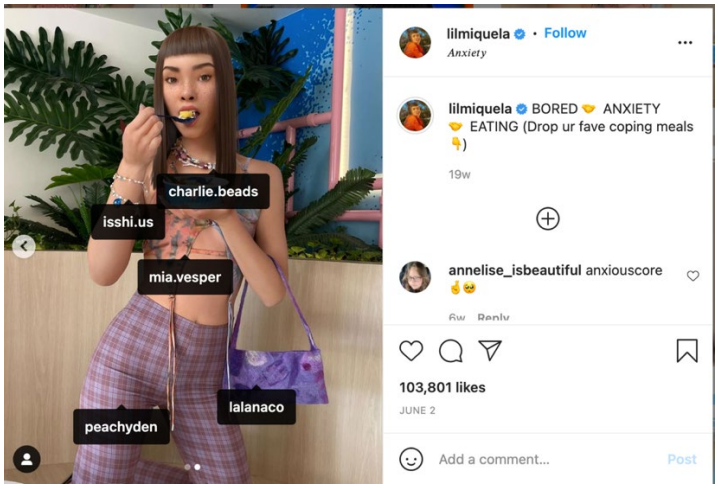


*Figure 5*

*Figure 6*

*Figure 7*

*Figure 8*

*Figure 9*

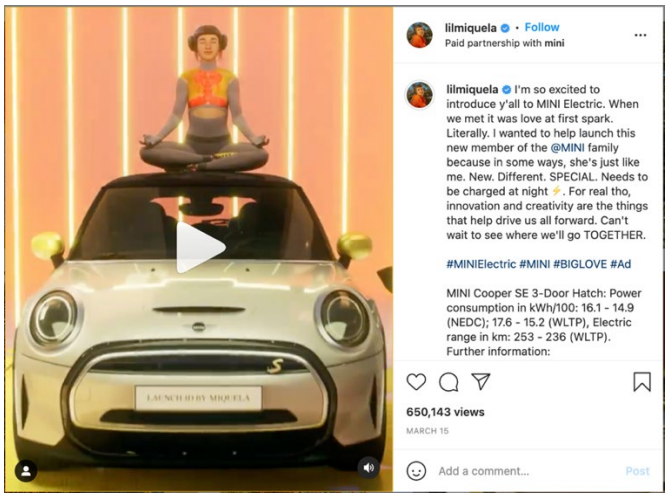


*Figure 10*

*Figure 11*

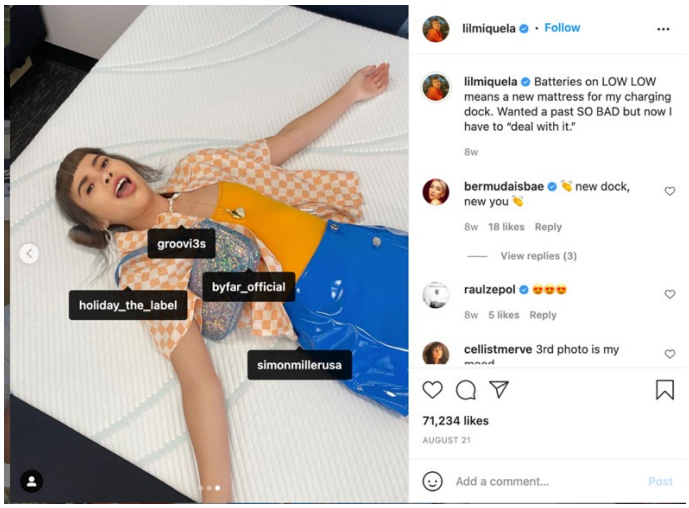


*Figure 11.2*

*Figure 12*

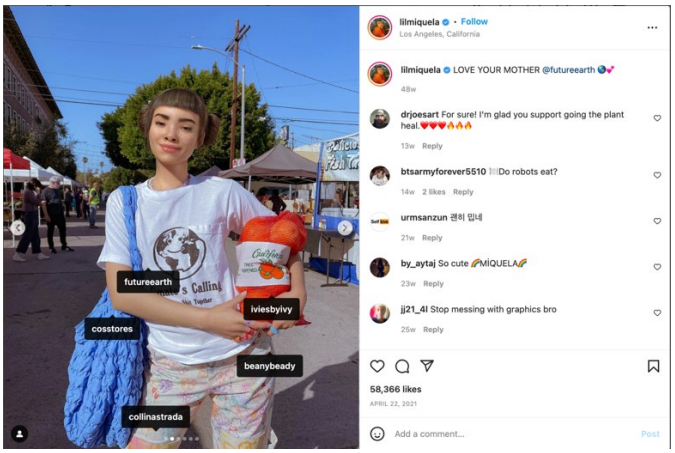


*Figure 12.2*

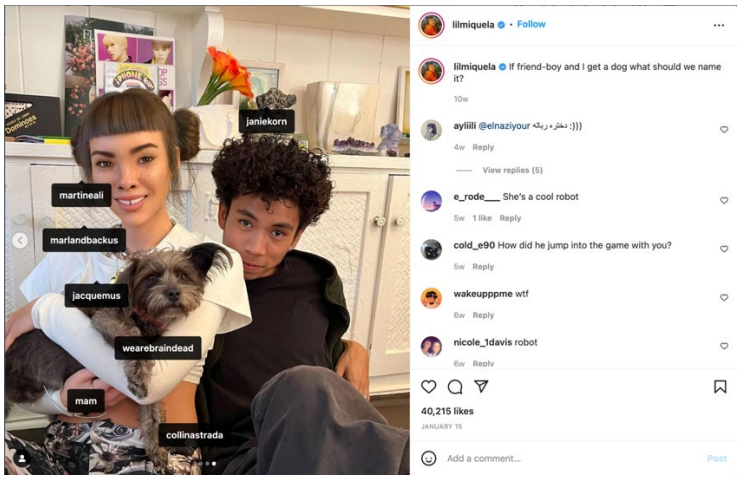


*Figure 13*

*Figure 14*

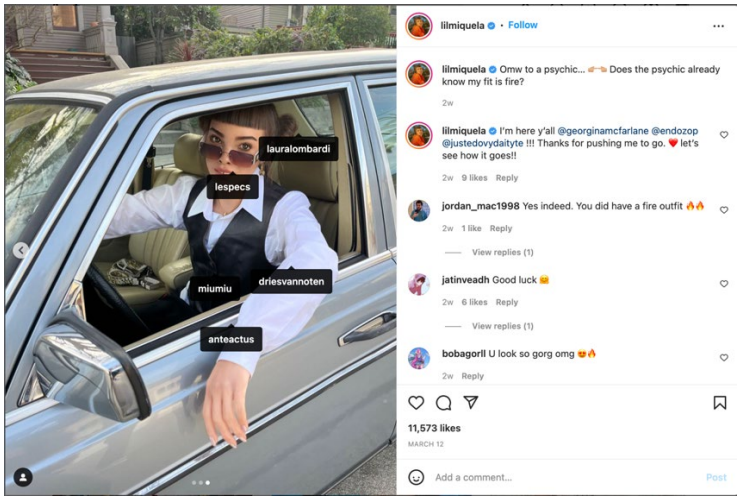


*Figure 15*

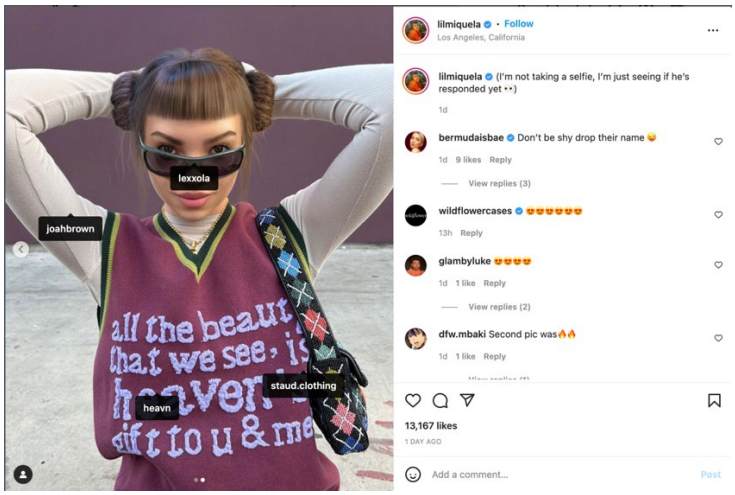


*Figure 16*

*Figure 17*

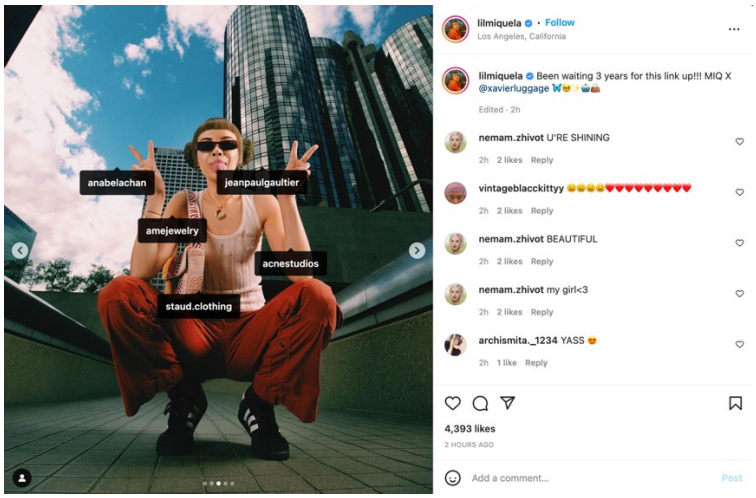


*Figure 17.2*

*Figure 18*

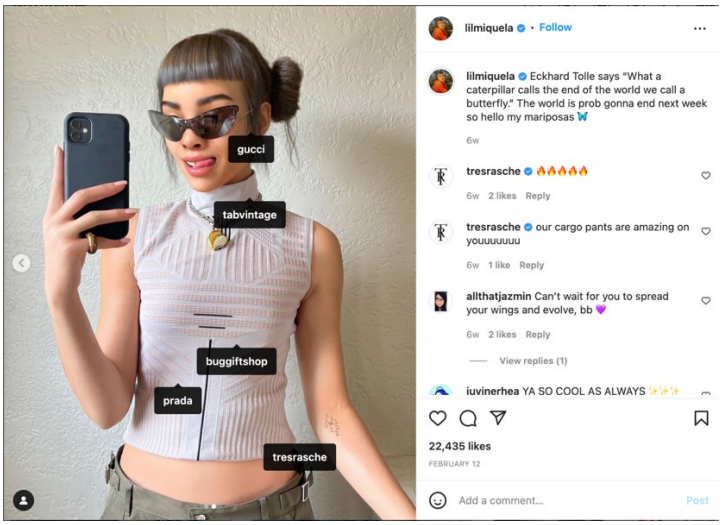


*Figure 19*

*Figure 20*