# Virtual influencers in corporate communications

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**Abstract.** The use of virtual influencers in corporate communications is an innovative tool for strengthening the company image, attracting new consumers, and forming a positive impression of the brand. ***Aim.*** To study the perception of virtual influencers as a communication tool. ***Methods.*** Focus groups with two moderators. The Fishbowl Discussion facilitation technique and force field analysis were used as part of a focus group study. ***Results.*** The authors have stated and grouped factors determining the attractiveness and reference of virtual influencers. The paper highlights distinct set of factors directly related to the image of the digital persona. The psychological attractiveness of digital influencers is largely determined by their innovativeness, technological advancement, and uniqueness. Consequently, the authors defined the stages involved in designing a virtual influencer agent. The practical significance of these research outcomes lies in considering all crucial aspects, enabling the creation and effective use of virtual influencers for strategic and tactical communication purposes.

**Keywords:** digital influencer, consumer perception, influence, attractiveness factors, stages of creating a digital character, focus group

**Conflict of interest:** none.

# Виртуальные инфлюенсеры в корпоративных коммуникациях

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**Аннотация.** Использование виртуальных авторитетов в корпоративных коммуникациях является инновационным инструментом для укрепления имиджа компании, привлечения новых потребителей и формирования положительного впечатления о компании. ***Цель:*** изучить восприятие виртуальных инфлюен-

серов как инструмента коммуникации. ***Методы:*** фокус-группы с двумя модераторами. В рамках фокус-группового исследования применялись фасилитационная техника Аквариум и анализ поля сил. ***Результаты.*** Сформулированы и объединены в группы факторы, определяющие привлекательность и референтность виртуальных инфлюенсеров. Была выделена группа факторов, непосредственно связанных с образом цифрового персонажа. Психологическая привлекательность цифрового инфлюенсера во многом связана с его инновационностью, технологичностью и уникальностью. Определены этапы проектирования виртуального агента влияния. Практическая значимость результатов исследования заключается в учете всех значимых аспектов, что позволит создавать и применять виртуальных инфлюенсеров в стратегических и тактических коммуникационных целях.

**Ключевые слова:** цифровой инфлюенсер, восприятие потребителей, влияние, факторы привлекательности, этапы создания цифрового персонажа, фокус-группа

## Introduction

The media industry is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing spheres in terms of technological innovation, where the methods used to influence target audiences are constantly being updated. Such innovative activity is conditioned by several factors, the most significant of which are: competition for user attention in the markets of communication exchange, innovative policy of actors, consumer preferences of participants of information interaction.

Some researchers highlight a significant increase in attention to the issue of perception of not only technological, but also psychological components affecting the comfort of the communication exchange environment:

- dependence on digitalization policies and practices in social and professional contacts, globally affecting all aspects of life of an individual, small group, collective and society;
- generational changes in values, lifestyles and attitudes towards commercial and other content [1];
- complete immersion of Internet users in virtual reality, and the formation of a new type of communication – virtual communication [2];
- increasing stressful environment, which entails actualization of content users' needs to find strategies to cope with information overload. One such strategies is conscious consumption of content; selection of information that evokes positive emotions [3];
- constant emergence of increasingly dynamic and versatile new platforms with diverse content [4];
- multiplier effect achieved through engagement and sharing of content between brand and user, as well as between users [5];
- development of artificial intelligence technologies facilitates the creation of entertainment communications of various formats [6].

At the same time, the format of corporate communications deserves special attention, where the issue of introducing innovations in the media environment directly affects both the competitiveness of projects and teams, and becomes a significant process of impact on the digital security environment, the effectiveness of interaction within internal and external communications and the basis for the development of the HR brand of the organization.

Nowadays, both foreign and Russian companies realize the importance of well-constructed communications, and therefore they start to pay much attention and spend resources on image enhancement. In a competitive market, the need to promote one's own corporate image is acutely felt. Such

an image becomes one of the company reputation, image and brand or trademark. This element is an important part of the intangible assets of the organization. With such an approach, the organization profit and investment attractiveness in the eyes of stakeholders grows. Influencers are an important component of corporate image. However, the process of working with influencers is quite long and difficult. The purpose of this process is to attract new consumers, strengthen positive perceptions in the minds of the target audience and form a favorable impression that corresponds to the company positioning in the market.

The initial perception of the concept of Influencers came from the premise that social media influencers are independent third-party sponsors who help shape the attitudes of their followers through videos, photos, comments, blogs, tweets, and other posts [7].

The popularity of influencers as communication channels for impacting audiences is very high. This is primarily due to the decreasing degree of trust in commercial sources of information and the search for reliable and trustworthy data [8]. Influencers provide unique advertising pitches that they have devised with a focus on their regular (non-advertising) content and an understanding of their audience's characteristics [9].

However, selecting the right influencer is a difficult task with commercial and reputational risks. Moreover, the organization as well as the Influencers themselves are becoming interdependent within the user experience.

The importance of influencers for marketing and communication tasks of the organization not only determines growing cost of their services, expensive selection of scenography and consumption of the resource of trust, requirements for expertise, but fundamentally transforms the very architecture of organizational communication, shifting it from a model of controlled message dissemination toward a hybrid ecosystem of co-created meaning and reputational interdependence. Mistakes in the selection and implementation of audience engagement tasks are costly for both the influencers and the content buyers. States, for consumer protection and tax optimization, seek to control this market for attention and impressions. Users and user groups are also forming protective mechanisms to limit advertising exposure and are clearly reacting to errors, deception and attempts to manage consumer behavior by organizations and the influencers that represent them. Positive triggers that activate the complex psychological process of buying, including trust, attractiveness, parasocial interaction and congruence of the influencer, cannot be ignored [10].

It is also important to note the existence of a communication gap – or structural barrier – between two sets of requirements. On the one hand, there is the need to ensure the independence and impartiality of the influencer, which directly increases audience attention, perceived credibility, and communicative effectiveness among user groups. On the other hand, organizations are compelled to safeguard their commercial and strategic interests, which presupposes the promotion and sale of products, services, lifestyles, and ideas within competitive markets. The tension between these imperatives generates a persistent contradiction that shapes both the ethics and the efficiency of influencer-mediated communication. Social media influencers are independent third-party sources that help shape the attitudes of their followers through videos, photos, comments, blogs, tweets and other brand messaging. Digital influencers are also often created as independent sources of information. Unaffiliationism (lack of sponsorship of a specific product/manufacturer) plays an important role in influencing the target audience [11].

The answer to this challenge for companies and organizations provides the transition to a new format. In some cases, companies decide to create their own virtual character. Corporate digital brand influencers are characters that convey brand values, have their own storyline (character, lifestyle, events and publications in their own name or created for the purpose of communicating with brand users within the framework of individual campaigns or projects) [12].

Based on the set of data, the following definition can be derived. Virtual influencers are computer-generated personas or avatars created and maintained by experts and digital agencies that help brands effectively engage desired target groups through their digital personas [13].

## Theoretical framework

Social media influencers are independent third-party sources that help shape the attitudes of their followers through videos, photos, comments, blogs, tweets and other brand messaging [7]. Several authors point out the problem of declining trust of audiences due to falsity and deception in communications with real opinion leaders [14, 15]. This fact became the reason for the spread and popularity of virtual influencers. Contacting a digital persona, the user knows the terms of the game in advance; he realizes the virtuality of the interlocutor and events, so he does not feel deceived.

Digital influencers are often created as independent sources of information. So digital influencers have been a kind of microcelebrity [16]. Using celebrity endorsements in traditional advertising is a popular strategy to improve brand promotion results. We were interested in whether a digital persona has such influence. We also wanted to know what characteristics a virtual influencer would need to have in order to appeal to target audiences.

In some cases, companies decide to create their own virtual character. Corporate digital influencers also have varieties: (1) brand influencers are characters that broadcast brand values, have their own storyline (character, lifestyle, events and publications on their own behalf); (2) virtual mascots that do not have their own storyline; created for ongoing communication with brand users [17].

The digital format has a very significant advantage over real influencers. The virtual character is created in full compliance with the brand values. At the same time, the authors highlight the problems associated with the use of digital influencers. The most significant of them are limited communication and lack of authenticity. Digital avatars are created for brand development. Their content is affiliated, so it is difficult for audiences to fully trust them [18].

## Methods

Through their social media posts, influencers not only affect the decisions of their followers, but also build relationships with them, so that the follower identifies with those who influence them [19]. Previous research found audiences follow virtualized characters driven by curiosity, intrigue, perceived similarity to a real person, human-like connection, and shared life interests [20]. Other researchers proposed a model of how virtual influencers interact with audiences. According to this model, trust in the information source is determined by factors such as perceived reliability, perceived attractiveness of the image, presumed experience and perceived similarity [21].

In our study, we did not discuss the different points of view with the respondents but allowed them to give their own free-form opinions on what affects the perception of the digital influencer. Hypothesis of the study: a character created based on digital technologies can be attractive to specific target audiences; it is able to influence them and form an attitude to the brand. Marketers are always interested in information about the factors impacting the effectiveness of social media promotion campaigns [22]. Digital influencers and their communications are created using AI tools; that is, corporate communications in this case take on the character of human-machine interaction. According to researchers, this interaction includes elements such as persuasion, attractive design and game mechanics [23]. Since a study of quantitative type on the perception of virtual influencers by target audiences has already been conducted by the Institute of Public Opinion Anketolog [24], we resorted to qualitative methods. In addition, we were interested not so much in statistical data as in spontaneous assessments of attractiveness and referentiality of virtual characters with subsequent reflection. A focus group was chosen as the method of data collection. A total of five focus groups were conducted with two moderators in each group. The number of subjects in each group was 9–12 people, the age of respondents was 18–23 years old (two focus groups), and 15–17 years old (three focus groups). The composition of participants is mixed – young men and women.

The topic guide for the focus groups included the following sections:

1) Introducing the participants, explaining the rules of group work.

2)   Introductory part: immersion into the problem, clarification of participants' attitudes towards bloggers. Key questions for discussion: Are there blogs/accounts that you follow regularly? Are there personalities in the media space that you trust? Can you name bloggers whose opinion is authoritative for you? How do you feel about advertising on blogs, native advertising? Do you think it is appropriate/useful? What have you heard/know about virtual influencers? Do you find digital personas interesting? What do you think is the reason for this interest? How do you feel about fictional/fantasy characters? Are they more appealing to you than realistic images? Why?

3)   Individual work: getting to know the accounts of digital influencers Emvi[1] and Mr. Metapreneur[2]. At this stage, participants used their own mobile devices. This was followed by a free-form discussion on the questions: Do you think the image chosen by the creators is successful/unsuccessful? Why? In your opinion, does this image meet the expectations/preferences of the blog target audience? What emotions does this image evoke in you? Do you find the blog content interesting/useful? Are you willing to trust information from this source? Why? Do you like the style/presentation of the material?

4) Free discussion. Consideration of the relevance/appropriateness of using digital influencers in brand communications.

5) Participants' statements "in a circle". Discussion of factors that determine the success of virtual influencers and their ability to create a positive attitude towards the brand. Discussion of the importance of individual elements (visual image, character and lifestyle, way of presenting information, communication style, sense of humor, etc.).

We used free discussion, statements in a circle, Fishbowl Discussion, and force field analysis to organize joint work of the research participants [25].

The results of the study are summarized below.

## Results

The attractiveness of virtual influencers, according to the participants of the study, is primarily related to innovation or uniqueness (technological nature; "visual content that does not resemble the usual images"). At the same time, some images can cause negative reactions among content users. Having studied the video content in Mr. Metapreneur channel, the majority of participants said that this character causes rejection. Participants' statements about Mr. Metapapreneur digital influencer: "this image is repulsive"; "I don't want to perceive the information"; "the video is frightening"; "the video is of low quality"; "the voice is arrogant"; "there is no correlation between the channel content and the image of influencer"; "why is it necessary to replace a live person with a bad copy?"; "uncanny valley effect" (quotes).

Positive statements about Emvi cyber-influencer: "admiration for how Emvi adapts to the interlocutor"; "open nature, good-naturedness, pleasant intonations"; "pleasant impressions, looks like a Barbie doll"; "memorable image that cuts into the head"; "she is perfect"; "catches the eye".

A more positive perception of cyber-influencers was recorded in the younger age group. Respondents noted that the image of Emvi is associated with the characters of fairy tales and cartoons ("like in my favorite cartoon"), with a puppet theater, with a computer game ("the feeling that I visited a virtual world"). At the same time, more than half of the subjects noted a feeling of discomfort and tension from overly expressed emotions, unnatural gestures and gaze, artificiality and inanimation ("it's scary that it's not controlled by humans, but by AI"). Most focus group participants noted that fictional images (fantasy, fairy-tale or techno images) usually do not cause rejection. Respondents explained their positive attitude to fictional images by their uniqueness, fairy tale and associativity with entertainment.

Next, we summarize the results of the force field analysis technique (Fig. 1).

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[1]   Первый стрим с виртуальным блогером Эм.Ви // VK. URL: https://vk.com/video-14524722_456241803 (дата обращения: 17.08.2025).

[2]   Telegram-канал «MrMetapreneur» // Telegram. URL: https://t.me/mrmetapreneur (дата обращения: 17.08.2025).

- restraining forces/сдерживающие силы
- unnaturalness/неестественность;
- inanimate persona/ неодушевленный образ;
- lack of charisma/отсутствие харизмы;
- lack of humor/отсутствие чувства юмора;
- absence of sincerity and humanity/отсутствие искренности и человечности;
- poor tone of voice/неудачная тональность сообщений;
- lack of criticality (personal position) in the content
  отсутствие критического осмысления (личной позиции) контента;
- predominance of advertising in content/преобладание рекламы в контенте;
- lack of reputation/отсутствие репутации;
- lack of personal responsibility for the content
  отсутствие личной ответственности за содержание;
- risks of abuse of trust/риски злоупотребления доверием
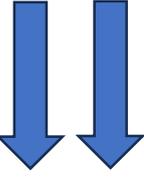
- driving forces/движущие силы
- image elaboration; unconventionality of image
  проработанность образа; нетрадиционность/нестандартность изображения;
- lifestyle and background design; legendizing
  проектирование харакера и бэкграунда, легендирование;
- creation of trends (influencer as trendmaker)
  создание трендов (инфлюенсер как трендмейкер);
- potential "memeability"/потенциальная «мемабельность»;
- public information about the expert or brand – the creator of the influencer
  (there must be someone behind the avatar)
  общедоступная информация об эксперте или бренде – создателе инфлюенсера
  (за аватаром должен кто-то стоять);
- content that is cited/цитируемый контент;
- own vision/собственное видение;
- collaborations with trusted brands/коллаборации с брендами, которым доверяют;
- two-way communication with audiences/двусторонняя коммуникация с аудиторией;
- transmedia and virality/трансмедийность и вирусность;
- predictive and strategic approach to communications
  прогнозный и стратегический подход к коммуникациям;
- AI development/развитие ИИ

*Fig. 1. Factors that determine the perception and influence of a digital persona*
*Рис. 1. Факторы, определяющие восприятие и влияние цифрового персонажа*

Of the deterrents listed above, the most significant is the lack of reputation and personal responsibility. Reputation takes years to build up. Cyber-personage evokes a sense of curiosity in the audience but has no history of professional development and personal growth, created in 3–4 months. What it broadcasts is not connected to personal beliefs and values. Developers of digital persona need to solve the problem of trust on the part of the audience. One obvious solution is open information about the expert or brand that created the influencer.

Also, the participants of the study made a list of the most important parameters of the virtual influencer and evaluated their importance in points (Fig. 2 shows the average ratings based on the survey results).
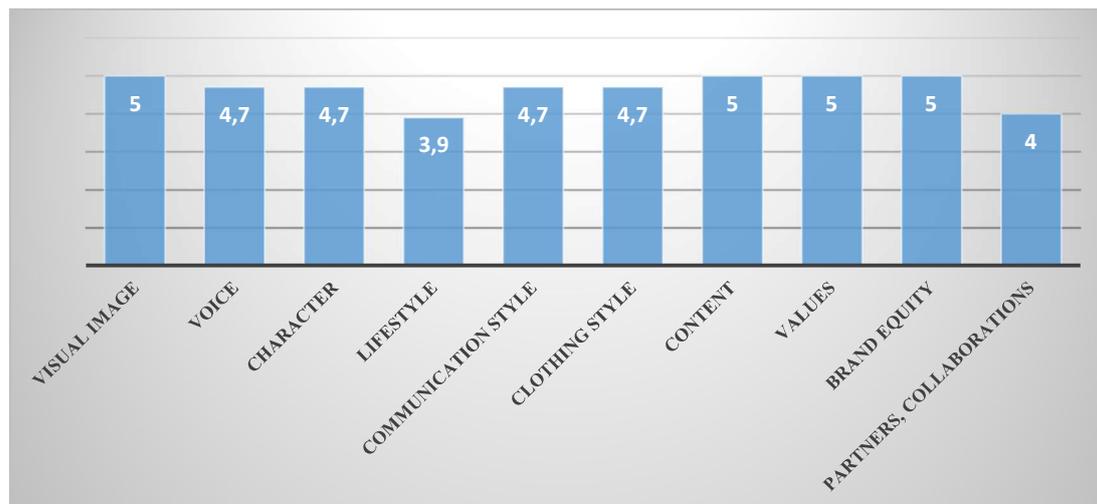
***Fig. 2.*** *Significance of virtual influencer parameters, points (results of the study)*
***Рис. 2.*** *Значимость параметров виртуального инфлюенсера, баллы (результаты исследования)*

The factors determining the attractiveness and referentiality of virtual influencers, named by the test subjects, we combined into two groups (Fig. 3).
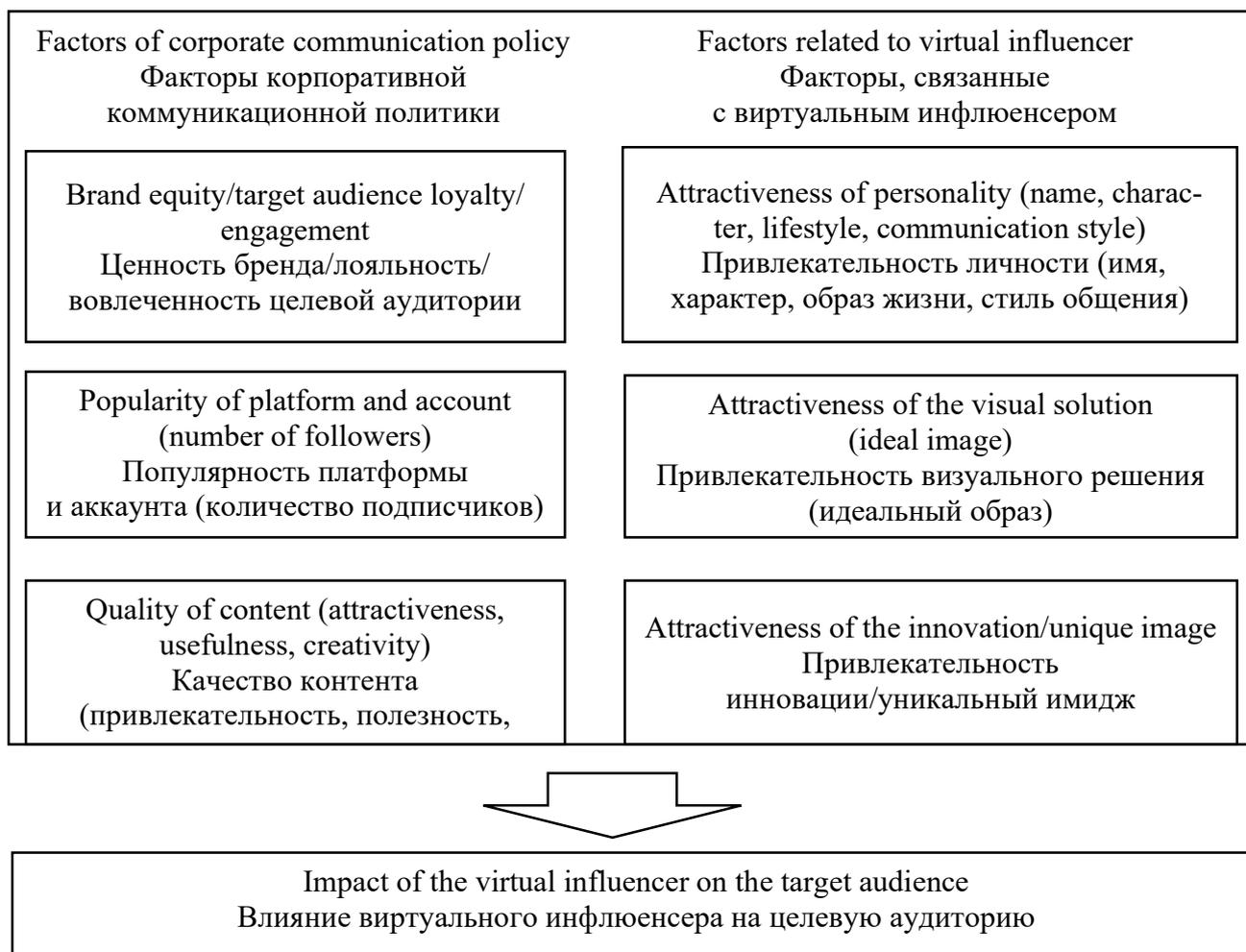
| Factors of corporate communication policy Факторы корпоративной коммуникационной политики | Factors related to virtual influencer Факторы, связанные с виртуальным инфлюенсером |
|---|---|
| Brand equity/target audience loyalty/ engagement Ценность бренда/лояльность/ вовлеченность целевой аудитории | Attractiveness of personality (name, character, lifestyle, communication style) Привлекательность личности (имя, характер, образ жизни, стиль общения) |
| Popularity of platform and account (number of followers) Популярность платформы и аккаунта (количество подписчиков) | Attractiveness of the visual solution (ideal image) Привлекательность визуального решения (идеальный образ) |
| Quality of content (attractiveness, usefulness, creativity) Качество контента (привлекательность, полезность, | Attractiveness of the innovation/unique image Привлекательность инновации/уникальный имидж |

Impact of the virtual influencer on the target audience
Влияние виртуального инфлюенсера на целевую аудиторию

***Fig. 3.*** *Model of digital persona influence on target audiences*
***Рис. 3.*** *Модель влияния цифрового образа на целевую аудиторию*

The respondents consider the creation of a corporate virtual avatar for communication with the target audiences of the brand to be relevant and useful. This tool is interesting and will be demanded by innovative consumers who are interested in everything new and non-standard. Given this fact, we can assume that the time horizon of its effective use is limited by the emergence and spread of other innovative solutions. Focus group participants also noted that digital influencer is an effective communication tool for startups and small companies with limited resources.

## Discussion

The obtained results allow us to evaluate the importance of different parameters that affect the perception of a digital influencer. Summarizing the obtained data, we identified the stages of projecting virtual characters (Table).

**Table.** *Stages of creating virtual influencers*
**Таблица.** *Этапы создания виртуальных инфлюенсеров*

| Stages/Этапы | Description/Описание |
|---|---|
| Goal setting<br>Постановка целей | strategic communication goals (communicating brand values) стратегические коммуникационные цели (донесение ценностей бренда); tactical goals (informing, maintaining interest, answering questions, etc.) тактические цели (информирование, поддержание интереса, ответы на вопросы и т. д.) |
| Selecting a platform and account<br>Выбор платформы и учетной записи | Selection is based on the communication goals and popularity of the accounts; the composition, interests, expectations and information needs of the accounts audience; and audience engagement metrics/Отбор осуществляется на основе коммуникационных целей и популярности аккаунтов; состава, интересов, ожиданий и информационных потребностей аудитории; а также показателей вовлеченности аудитории |
| Choosing a neural network to create a virtual character<br>Выбор нейронной сети для создания виртуального персонажа | Runway ML – provides tools for creating 3D characters and animating them using artificial intelligence/Runway ML – предоставляет инструменты для создания 3D-персонажей и их анимации с использованием искусственного интеллекта;<br>DeepMotion – focuses on creating real-time character animation using motion capture technology/DeepMotion – специализируется на создании анимации персонажей в реальном времени с использованием технологии захвата движений;<br>NVIDIA Omniverse – 3D content creation and animation platform, uses AI to generate animations and visualizations/NVIDIA Omniverse – платформа для создания 3D-контента и анимации, использующая искусственный интеллект для генерации анимации и визуализаций;<br>MetaHuman Creator from Epic Games – a tool for creating highly realistic digital characters, with Unreal Engine animation capabilities/MetaHuman Creator от Epic Games – инструмент для создания высокореалистичных цифровых персонажей с возможностями анимации Unreal Engine;<br>Daz 3D – allows you to create and animate characters using an extensive library of models and textures/Daz 3D позволяет создавать и анимировать персонажей, используя обширную библиотеку моделей и текстур;<br>Character Creator by Reallusion – allows you to create realistic 3D characters with animation and customization tools/Character Creator от Reallusion – позволяет создавать реалистичных 3D-персонажей с инструментами анимации и настройки;<br>Poser – 3D character creation and character animation program that allows you to use AI to enhance your animations/Poser – программа для создания 3D-персонажей и анимации персонажей, позволяющая использовать искусственный интеллект для улучшения анимации;<br>Other/Другое |

| | |
|---|---|
| Generating and selecting the visual image<br>Создание и выбор визуального изображения | fictional images (fantasy, fairy tale, alien creatures)/вымышленные образы (фантастические, сказочные, инопланетные существа);<br>techno images, robots/техно-образы, роботы;<br>realistic stylized/non-stylized images (mascot copies of living people, animals; images of people and animals generated by artificial intelligence)/реалистичные стилизованные/нестилизованные изображения (копии-маскоты живых людей, животных; сгенерированные искусственным интеллектом образы людей и животных). |
| Designing other elements of the character<br>Разработка других элементов персонажа | name, voice, character, values, lifestyle, clothing style, communication style<br>имя, голос, характер, ценности, образ жизни, стиль одежды, стиль общения |
| Testing virtual character prototype(s); adjusting as necessary<br>Тестирование прототипа(ов) виртуального персонажа; внесение необходимых корректировок | focus groups/фокус-группы;<br>interviews/интервью;<br>UX research/UX-исследования;<br>prosumer surveys/опросы просьюмеров;<br>online voting/онлайн-голосование;<br>hall-tests, etc./ hall-тесты и т. д. |
| Creating and posting content<br>Создание и публикация контента | video broadcasts and video reviews/видеотрансляции и видеообзоры;<br>unboxing videos/видео распаковки;<br>audio podcasts/аудио подкасты;<br>posts/посты;<br>memes/мемы;<br>promotional information/рекламная информация;<br>native advertising/нативная реклама;<br>sponsorships and endorsements, etc./спонсорство и поддержка и т. д. |
| Designing and implementing dialog with target audiences<br>Разработка и реализация диалога с целевой аудиторией | chatbots/чат-боты;<br>interactive polls and quizzes/интерактивные опросы и викторины;<br>e-newsletters/электронные рассылки новостей;<br>online consultations; point-of-sale consultations<br>онлайн-консультации; консультации в точке продаж;<br>video conferencing/видеоконференции;<br>partnerships, collaborations/партнерство, коллаборации;<br>immersive technologies (using AR and VR to create a unique audience interaction experience)/иммерсивные технологии (использование дополненной и виртуальной реальности для создания уникального опыта взаимодействия с аудиторией);<br>metauniverses/метавселенные |

The success of such a tool as a digital influencer is based on the knowledge of expectations and interests of the target audience. Since the digital influencer is perceived as an innovative and technological solution, the subjective attitude of the participants in communication is very important. This determines the iterative process of creating a virtual influencer; in each iteration, it is advisable to contact the target audiences both by involving them in image creation and by testing prototypes.

We're assuming that the main stages of design (including the search for ideas) should be realized in the mode of group discussions with the involvement of representatives of target audiences. These can be facilitation sessions or traditional methods of idea generation, such as "6-3-5", synectics, the method of focal objects, mental maps. To ensure greater involvement, it is possible to organize contests for the best visual image, the best mascot name, etc.

Also, it is advisable to consider the issue of providing omnichannel use of the virtual influencer (creating a 3D character and using it for presentations, collaborations and other events in external and internal communications).

## Conclusion

Opinion leaders have the power to influence others while shaping perceptions, feelings and experiences about a recommended brand. Digital influencers, like other innovations, are undoubtedly interesting and attention-grabbing. Whether they can have a significant impact on brand perception and purchase behavior is a matter of future research. Also of interest is the research on the use of virtual personas in b2b communications.

The results obtained in this study are directly related to the youth audience. Nevertheless, representatives of this segment are already independent market actors (making their own choices, making purchases, leaving recommendations and reviews). Also, the selected segment is more important for forecasting and strategic planning of communications than representatives of other age groups. The younger consumer groups, which in the future will determine the demand in the market, according to our assumptions, have more similarity to modern youth in terms of perception, sources used and ways of information processing. These groups are more active and advanced users of social networks. According to Levada Center data, participation in social network communications is not regular in older age groups, despite the fact that the number of Internet users among them is growing [26]. Thus, we consider the opinions and assessments of young people to be more important in determining trends and creating digital tools for brand communications. The exception is communications where other audiences (partners, investors) act as recipients of information. These cases require separate research and other data collection tools, as mentioned earlier.

The use of digital personas in corporate communications is an issue that requires consideration of several aspects (purposes of use and target audiences, visualization of the image, choice of name, the need to create a story and the choice of events, choice of communication style, thematic concept of content, etc.). In the authors' opinion, most of these decisions require preliminary testing. We also consider it necessary to evaluate the perception of the prototype (a set of significant elements of the virtual personage) in a natural context (i. e. in combination with the text and visual content of the blog). The reasonableness of the choice will ensure the effectiveness of interaction with target audiences. The economic aspect of this problem is also important. Since creating a digital influencer is costly, considering all factors that affect perception will ensure return on investment and increase brand equity.

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