

Virtual influencers: The future of digital marketing?

In the past, we would observe famous individuals and ordinary folks on TV utilising products and advising us to follow suit. Over time, we began relying on social media users with thousands or millions of followers for product recommendations. In the near future, we'll seek guidance from digitally produced influencers in a similar fashion

By [Ronald Magondo](#) 26 Apr 2023



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This is the rise of virtual influencers – people or anthropomorphised animals or objects that do all the things humans do online, only better, faster, and at a substantially lower cost.

More and more virtual influencers are being created every month, gaining hundreds of followers every other day and making impressive brand deals with major companies.

But virtual influencer marketing is still in its infancy, and not all companies want to use them just yet.

Ultimately, now is the golden age of influencer marketing, and South African companies have a better opportunity than most to harness the power of influencers to connect their brands with their target markets. For example, around 34% of South African social media users follow influencers or other experts – considerably higher than the 22% global average.

But many companies are not ready to make the transition to virtual influencers just yet, and still want to work with real-life influencers while leveraging advanced digital technology to gain the competitive edge.

This said, working with influencers is infamously difficult. Fortunately, newer generations of AI is helping marketers and companies to easily overcome some of the industry's biggest obstacles.

Combating influencer fraud

A major concern for digital marketing agencies and brands has been influencer deception or fraud. An estimated 42% of South African influencers use follow/unfollow tactics and tools to boost their follower count, while another 5.9% of Instagram influencers buy followers and a third have inauthentic comments.

It is hugely problematic when, at the close of a campaign, influencers report high engagement rates but sales conversion numbers remain noticeably low because of falsified follower and engagement counts. The industry inevitably becomes plagued with distrust, and companies that have had a bad experience with influencers will likely avoid similar campaigns in the future.



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To combat the problem, digital marketing agencies must implement intensive vetting processes to ensure that influencers are who they say they are, and that companies get what they pay for. Unfortunately, the process is usually expensive and can absorb a large amount of time and resources.

However, with the rise of AI, counteracting potential influencer fraud is more cost-efficient and effective. Certain AI tools can analyse an influencer's profile and detect signs of fraud that might be missed by the human eye.

By going beyond superficial statistics such as the number of followers and recent content, AI can identify any sudden spike in followers which may be an indication of purchased followers, or find any previous content across influencers' various platforms which may not match the message the brand wants to send.

Aligning follower demographics with brand's requirements

Using AI, marketers can go a step further and even determine if an influencer's followers align with the brand's target demographics.

Platforms often have built-in analysis tools which provide in-depth demographic data on specific users. This information can help marketers ensure that they reach the right audience and that the influencer's followers match their desired customer profile.

By leveraging AI-powered audience analysis tools, marketers can optimise their influencer campaigns by reaching more of the right audience at the right time, while gauging levels of engagement to tweak content and messaging.

This helps us choose influencers who have a higher likelihood of driving meaningful engagement and conversions and maximising results for clients.

Making influencer marketing more financially viable

In addition to influencer selection and campaign optimisation, AI tools can significantly reduce the costs associated with influencer campaigns.

Determining the appropriate compensation for an influencer can be challenging, as there is often no set standard for influencer rates. However, by leveraging historical data and performance metrics, AI tools can determine an influencer's value based on past performance and compare that with other influencers in the same niche.

This information is priceless for marketers, supporting data-driven decisions about how much to pay an influencer, reducing negotiation times, and ensuring that companies get the most bang for their buck.

AI is truly transforming the digital marketing landscape at a rapid pace, providing companies with the opportunity to improve their influencer campaigns and generate higher value outcomes for clients.

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