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## Celebrity 2.0: Lil Miquela and the Rise of a Virtual Star System

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## CELEBRITY 2.0: LIL MIQUELA AND THE RISE OF A VIRTUAL STAR SYSTEM

### Abstract

In this essay, we interrogate the boundary between the highly controlled Hollywood celebrity star system and the highly liberated social media influencer. By examining the case of Lil Miquela, a virtual social media influencer created through computer-generated imagery (CGI), we introduce the notion of a re-imagined virtual star system, which is defined by techno-human cultural intermediaries and the non-agentic persona as property. The virtual star system calls attention to contradictions between the real and the artifice and questions the significance of authenticity in both celebrity practice and the influencer industry.'

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Miquela “Lil Miquela” Sousa is a 19-year-old Brazilian-American social media influencer with an audience of 2.6 million followers on Instagram (@lilmiquela). Her resume reads like a pop stardom fairy-tale: modeling for brands like Chanel, Burberry, and Prada; launching an online fashion store called CLUB 404; debuting a music video at Lollapalooza; and being named one of TIME Magazine’s 25 Most Influential People on the Internet. All of this success is even more stunning considering Lil Miquela does not exist outside of the digital world. She is a virtual social media influencer crafted through computer-generated imagery (CGI) --- a realistically animated simulacra of the “authentic” microcelebrity archetype (Alice E. Marwick 2013; Theresa M. Senft 2013).

Foundational celebrity theorists argued celebrities were cultural fabrications strategically managed for mass audience appeal, constituting a curated Hollywood star system (Richard DeCordova 2001; Richard Dyer 1986; Chris Rojek 2001). Social media brought an exogenous shock to this star system, as traditional celebrities and ordinary people alike could circumvent the “traditional brokers of celebrity attention” to propel their own fame (Alice E. Marwick 2015, 139). In this essay, we suggest Lil Miquela represents a bridge between the highly controlled Hollywood star system and the highly liberated social media influencer. We examine the case of Lil Miquela and argue her celebrification reflects a re-imagined virtual star system, defined by techno-human cultural intermediaries and the non-agentic persona as property. The virtual star system calls attention to contradictions between the real and the artifice and questions the significance of authenticity in celebrity practice.

### A Virtual Star is Born

Lil Miquela debuted on Instagram in 2016, rising quickly from a literal nobody to a virtual star. In 2018, she shared details of her origin story on Instagram:

*This has been the hardest week of my life so thank you to everyone who checked in with me. Ok now here’s the hard part. My hands are literally shaking. I’m not a human being ... The truth is I was built by a man named Daniel Cain in order to be a servant. Brud stole me from his company in Silicon Valley and “re-programmed” me to be “free.” But they’re the ones who define my freedom through THEIR technology ... I’m not a human, but am I still a person? The people at Brud were a family to me. They found me a place to live, they gave me money, they showered me with love and friendship. They gave me a career. I can see now that they never loved me. I was just a means of making money. ... I want to be clear and honest from here on out: I’m a robot. (Lil Miquela’s Instagram, April 19, 2018)*

Of course, these words were not written by Lil Miquela. Her image, and its mediagenic dissemination, is governed by a team of professionals --- content marketers, data analysts, music managers, animators, publicists, and more --- employed by Brud, a real California-based company valued at \$125 million USD (Jonathan Shieber 2019).

In the Hollywood star system, cultural intermediaries (e.g., agents, publicists, photographers) discovered and commodified celebrities’ names, faces, and star texts through purposeful publicity and media attention (Paul McDonald 2000). Similarly, Brud manufactures and maintains Lil Miquela’s “public face” (Rojek 2001), but they do so by merging digital technologies with human labour to a point where

the two are inseparable --- marking a turn toward techno-human cultural intermediaries, or human creators harnessing digital technologies.

Just as one could not have a movie star without movie culture; one cannot have a virtual star without virtual culture --- specifically, influencer culture. The techno-human cultural intermediaries who manufacture Lil Miquela's image draw upon familiar hallmarks of influencer culture, like individual control and self-branding, (Anna Jerslev 2016; Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling 2016; Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd 2011), to manufacture a virtual star whose public face is wholly fabricated yet somehow authentic. Lil Miquela's "self-brand" adopts the parlance and positioning of agentic social media influencers as she narratively parts ways with Brud to be a "#freeagent" (Lil Miquela's Instagram, April 25, 2018), but in practice, her body postures, clothing styles, relationships, personality, sexuality, and more are curated by techno-human cultural intermediaries, who digitally engineer and commodify her public image.

### Virtual Stars, They Are Just Like Us

The Hollywood star system is predicated on stars' private lives becoming more popular than their fictional roles (DeCordova 2001). Indeed, celebrity practice involves "the appearance and performance of backstage access to the famous, presuming that the typical celebrity persona involves artifice" (Marwick and boyd 2011, 144). But all of Lil Miquela's life --- public and private --- is fictional. This element gives rise to tensions in creating an "authentic" persona, despite the audience's knowledge that it is entirely fake and entirely commodified.

Part of Lil Miquela's appeal is her coming-of-age persona, or public presentation of the self (P. David Marshall, Christopher Moore, and Kim Barbour 2015); she is a robot just trying to figure out her place in the human world:

*For the people who don't know me, my name's Miquela. I'm a 19-year-old musician, change-seeker, taco truck expert, and robot. Hi, I'm gonna share some of my life with you and honestly, it could get kind of personal. (Lil Miquela's YouTube, September 12, 2019)*

Lil Miquela complains about writer's block and the weather. She shares stories like the time she autographed a fan's breast. She reflects on falling in love for the first time and how fragile she feels after "consciously uncoupling" from her (human) boyfriend. She loves travelling abroad; eating Takis and In-n-Out Burger; and taking selfies with her "robo-siblings" (i.e., Blawko and Bermuda, also virtual influencers created by Brud). Even public drama is written into Lil Miquela's persona. For example, she had a long-time feud with her robo-sibling Bermuda; now they are best friends.

Authenticity is used a "currency of realness" to commodify Lil Miquela's persona in the post-feminist attention economy (Stéphanie Genz 2014, 547). She comments on real social issues (e.g., Black Lives Matters), addresses real social media trolls (e.g., "charge your batteries") and poses with real people to gain a halo effect of realness. For instance, in 2019, Calvin Klein released a 30-second promotional video in which human supermodel Bella Hadid kisses Lil Miquela. The collision between real and artifice both confounds and engages audiences. As one fan comments, "I'm so confused right now, like, she's a robot, so how does she have feelings and interact with people?" and another posits, "why do I relate to this cute robot girl so much?" Lil Miquela's perceived authenticity emulates that of a typical influencer --- sharing insecurities, ambitions and vulnerabilities with the audience. Yet, she is not real. Her authenticity is archetypal.

Audiences are drawn to Lil Miquela's accessibility and familiarity; however, unlike human celebrities and social media influencers, Lil Miquela lacks agentic spontaneity --- which also means, she will never be fallible. This infallibility makes her appealing for commercial means. If her celebrity nude photographs are leaked (Caitlin E. Lawson 2018) or she breaks the law (Lieve Gies 2011), these transgressions will undoubtedly unfold as a strategically planned storyline --- such as shooting a music video with her ex, which Lil Miquela categorizes as one of her "questionable decisions" (Lil Miquela's Instagram; March 31, 2020). Brand partners benefit from commodifying this perfectly imperfect, forever 19-year-old who will never accidentally deviate or misbehave. Thus, Lil Miquela's non-agentic persona represents a form of property --- to be bought, sold, and manipulated.

### **Toward a Re-imagined Virtual Star System**

The commercial engine that drove the Hollywood star system resulted in a standardized production line, churning out celebrities with a kind of monotonous glamour (Joshua Gamson 1994). Lil Miquela represents the embodiment of behavior as a social media influencer with similar monotony, but more so, as exemplary of a re-imagined virtual star system. In the digital age, techno-human cultural intermediaries propel the virtual star system, in which the non-agentic persona is property. Virtual stars, like Lil Miquela, can be anywhere, at any time, with anyone, giving brands risk-free control, only limited by budget.

Lil Miquela's stardom demystifies the commercial production and consumption of the "authentic" microcelebrity. Her rise to fame reflects Bethany Usher's (2020) conceptualization of the influencer celebrification process as a professionalized group production practice rather than an individual, prosumer endeavor. However, the virtual star system calls for greater interrogation of the ideological consequences of producing virtual stars --- not just the means and motives for celebrification but the implications for celebritization (Olivier Driessens 2012). Modern influencer culture operates in an online environment of photoshopping, filtering, designing, and digitally editing virtual bodies to emulate the glamour and fantasy definitive of traditional celebrity. Thus, Lil Miquela is arguably no less real than typical social media influencers. Audiences question the authenticity of traditional celebrities and social media influencers, whereas virtual stars invite audiences to revel in contradictions between the real and the artifice, recognizing that the concept of authenticity itself is socially and commercially constructed. The virtual star system begs the question: does authenticity matter when none of it is real?

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