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Hyper-Realistic Virtual Influencers (HVIs): Multi-Sited Perceptions of Content Creators in Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and China

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Abstract

This study analyzes, using an exploratory, multi-sited qualitative approach, how digital content creators and managers in Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and China perceive the commercial use of hyper-realistic female virtual influencers. The corpus comprised three focus groups in Colombia as the empirical core, two contrasting focus groups in Mexico and Spain, and five semi-structured interviews in China with a total of 30 individuals participating, selected through purposive sampling using criterion and maximum variation strategies. The thematic analysis was based on a codebook combining deductive and inductive components, researcher triangulation, and contrasting between techniques and contexts. The findings indicate that whether the participants accept these influencers or not depends on communicative traceability, transparency, human endorsement, congruence between brand, product, and audience, and organizational accountability. The participants associated hyper-realism with gaining one's attention, but were skeptical of them when they associated them with artificiality, body idealization, or lacking any real life experiences. Thus, an interpretive model of communicative legitimacy is proposed herein that incorporates trust, aesthetics, ethics, gender representation, and reputation, and defines the conditions for using these virtual influencers responsibly in digital campaigns.

Keywords: hyper-realistic virtual influencers; artificial intelligence; brand communication; digital femininity; communicative legitimacy

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1. Introduction

Influencers have become prominent in digital marketing because they build personal brands, attract communities of followers, and convert that social capital into a resource for brands (Khamis et al., 2017; Ju et al., 2024). This phenomenon goes hand in hand with the growth of social media marketing for increasing brand awareness, driving traffic, and generating business leads (Desai, 2019). In this context, influencers act as credible endorsers who are experts on the subject-matter (Martín-Guart & Botey López, 2020), capable of influencing attitudes, preferences, and consumer decisions (Conde & Casais, 2023; Fernández Gómez et al., 2018; Joshi et al., 2025; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014).

From a media studies perspective, this phenomenon transcends commercial promotion and is part of a culture of platform visibility in which personal branding, the daily produc-

tion of content, and relationships with audiences have become the main communicative resources (Abidin, 2016; Bucher, 2017; Khamis et al., 2017). Moreover, hyper-realistic virtual influencers (HVIs) have been created, which can be understood as synthetic actors in a media ecosystem in which algorithms, visual design, identity narratives, and expectations of authenticity all help to build public trust.

The emergence of HVIs has broadened this debate. Here, it must be stressed that virtual environments enable interaction between users and digital personalities (Hanus & Fox, 2015). Moreover, in that space, HVIs are virtual characters managed by third parties with their own identity, personality, and narrative designed to interact with audiences, and participate in digital marketing strategies (Belanche et al., 2024; Fox et al., 2015; Ju et al., 2024; Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2025). Their development is based on technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and computer-generated imagery, whose aim is to replicate human traits and create a veneer of authenticity, relatability, and trust (Rungruangjit et al., 2024).

The key difference between them and human influencers is they are technically and corporately managed: the HVI speaks, appears, and interacts as if it had its own experiences, although to do so, this depends on human teams, brand decisions, and technological systems working behind the scenes. In this way, they project a certain synthetic authenticity, which is understood here as having a limited communicative authenticity, grounded in transparency, narrative coherence, and explicitly acknowledging they are artificial.

Using them also raises questions about credibility, transparency, portraying the body, gender, and culture. Although there are appearance-based or anthropomorphism classifications such as "human-like," "anime-like," or "hyperreal", (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Conti et al., 2022; Lou et al., 2023; Miao et al., 2022), Gambetti and Kozinets (2024) propose analyzing them in terms of their physical form, personality, and communicative style as well, which gives us an insight into their role in marketing strategies.

The link between human likeness and the unease consumers may feel when encountering these figures can also be examined through the uncanny valley hypothesis in which a highly human-like artificial figure may cause unease when its appearance is perceived to be almost but not quite human (Mori et al., 2012). Research on virtual influencers has found that high anthropomorphism can increase uncanniness, although social cues may moderate this response (Gutuleac et al., 2024). In this study, this concept is used to interpret the reactions of attraction, ambiguity, and unease the participants have to hyper-realistic appearance and is not treated as being experimentally tested.

This approach shifts the analysis from campaign effectiveness to communicative legitimacy. If HVIs act as interfaces between brands, platforms, and audiences, their value lies in capturing attention and maintaining credibility for the institution that controls them.

With female HVIs, this is a particularly sensitive issue. Various studies show that digital portrayals embody social norms, gender stereotypes, and expectations on femininity, beauty, and behavior (Bartky, 1990; Parks et al., 2022; Wilhelm, 2021). Shin and Lee (2023) demonstrate that many virtual influencers are designed to show young, feminine, and sexualized bodies, while Lee and Yuan (2023) show female virtual influencers may receive more negative responses when they have suggestive content. González-Calvo et al. (2026) expand on this interpretation by noting that femininity in digital environments is constructed through discourses, images, and practices in which youth, slimness, and standards of beauty are prioritized. This line of analysis is also in keeping with Duque-Cardona (2026), who examines standards in femininity, gender stereotypes, and ethical questions in using hyper-realistic virtual influencers in marketing.

Digital femininity functions as a communicative dimension that shapes expectations about beauty, intimacy, desire, professionalism, and consumption in broader cultural debates about beauty and corporeality (Henriques & Patnaik, 2020). In female HVIs, technical

perfection can both enhance visual appeal and intensify skepticism about stereotypes, uniform bodies, and simulating diversity.

The view in this research is that gender stereotypes encompass bodily appearance, expectations about social roles, emotional expressiveness, modes of agency, symbolic availability, decision-making power, and ways of engaging with the brand. In this respect, female HVI personalities are analyzed as performative and media-driven constructions, not just by their visual appearances (Butler, 1990; de Lauretis, 1987; Mulvey, 1975).

Anthropomorphism and how credible HVIs are concerns trust, parasocial relationships, and purchasing intention (Chaihanchanchai et al., 2026; Dabiran et al., 2024; Li & Huang, 2024).

With HVIs, credibility is more ambiguous than with human influencers because they have no direct experience of physically using the products they are endorsing and thus trust tends to pivot toward other cues: congruence between the character and the brand, acknowledging the agent is artificial, verifiable human endorsement, and consistency in their narratives. This interpretation is based on source credibility in which persuasion is linked to perceived experience, reliability, and appeal (Halder et al., 2021; Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004).

The product–endorser match also affects how virtual influencers are evaluated. Kim and Park (2023) show that attractiveness goes hand in hand with the congruence between the virtual endorser, the product, and the brand. This relationship is significant in this paper because the participants assessed credibility in terms of the campaign purpose and how suitable the character is for the product and audience.

This research considers the cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede et al. (2010), particularly individualism/collectivism and power distance, as sensitizing concepts for examining how different groups interpret how authoritative, approachable, and credible HVIs are. In a similar vein, Rusdian et al. (2024) note that collectivist cultures prioritize the well-being of the group and social harmony, and this can influence how commercial messages mediated by virtual figures are received. These dimensions were used only as sensitizing concepts for interpreting references to authority, social harmony, and relational distance, but not to assign national scores, predict responses, or attribute the positions the participants held to a national cultural trait.

In this study, cultural dimensions are treated as interpretive frameworks for analyzing specific media and educational viewpoints as well as the experiences of professionals. In this approach we could engage with the participants without pigeonholing them according to a national culture. This approach also stems from research that distinguishes between context-specific variations and national generalizations and considers the influence institutional and organizational profiles have had (Ruiz et al., 2023; van Hoorn & Maseland, 2016).

International cases show that digital figures are now part of the commercial ecosystem. In this respect, Lil Miquela, Shudu, Imma, and other personalities have participated in campaigns in the fashion, luxury, technology, and entertainment industries, which has made them more visible and legitimate on social media (Allal-Chérif et al., 2024; Elyamany et al., 2025; Shin & Lee, 2023). The commercial expansion of these human-like creations has also been documented in China through market growth estimates (Tencent QQ, 2024). At the same time, in recent studies it is asserted that accepting these human-like personalities depends on familiarity, trust, perceived authenticity, prior exposure, and a willingness to embrace innovation (Bansal & Pruthi, 2023; Corzo-Cortés et al., 2025; Luo & Kim, 2024; Yang et al., 2025).

As regards management, Shen (2024) shows that brands increasingly create or manage their own virtual influencers, thereby making strategic control inseparable from authorship and accountability. This acts as a basis for examining why participants may value a consistent

narrative and at the same time require the team who is managing this digital influencer to be identified.

The literature still focuses on contexts in which HVIs are more present in commerce and technology. Audrezet et al. (2025) note the rapid evolution of these characters will continue to transform marketing, technology, and digital culture, while Shen (2025) stresses the need to expand research on HVIs across different cultures. This gap is particularly significant in Latin America, where more empirical data is still needed on how these figures are perceived and how their ethical, aesthetic, and commercial implications are interpreted.

From this perspective, by contrasting the discourses of those involved in content creation or management in Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and China we could observe how credibility, authenticity, how women are portrayed, and transparency are negotiated in different media contexts.

The theoretical review was conducted as a narrative and conceptual analysis aimed at defining the background literature on virtual influencers; how credible they were; and their authenticity, gender, culture, and digital communication. On the basis of their narratives and integrative reviews, the sources were selected in terms of conceptual relevance, recency, academic quality, and direct relevance to the research issue (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019). With this approach the literature from marketing, communication, platform studies, and gender theory could be incorporated into a single interpretive framework.

Taking an exploratory and multi-sited qualitative approach, the overall objective of this research is to analyze how digital content creators and managers in Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and China perceive the commercial use of hyper-realistic female virtual influencers, emphasizing building trust, authenticity, gender portrayal, transparency, and communicative legitimacy on digital platforms.

The Specific Objectives are:

- To examine the criteria by which participants assess how credible authentic and trustworthy hyper-realistic female virtual influencers are.
- To analyze how participants link hyper-realistic aesthetics and the way females are portrayed to accepting, setting a critical distance, or rejecting these digital characters.
- To identify similar and differing views among the discourses produced in Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and China, given the exploratory scope of the study.
- To derive communicative, ethical, and reputational criteria for using female hyper-realistic virtual influencers in digital campaigns, with an emphasis on transparency, brand consistency, human endorsement, and contextual adaptation.

Research Questions:

RQ1. How credible, authentic, and trustworthy do the participants deem female hyper-realistic virtual influencers to be?

RQ2. Which elements of hyper-realistic aesthetics and digital femininity are interpreted as being attractive, problematic, or ethically sensitive?

RQ3. Under what conditions do participants consider the commercial use of female hyper-realistic virtual influencers to be appropriate in terms of brand, product, sector, target audience, and human endorsement?

RQ4. What similar and differing views and variations in the discourse are there in Colombia, Mexico, Spain, and China in terms of contextual adaptation, transparency, and communicative legitimacy?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Paradigm, Scope, and Design

This research was conducted with an interpretive paradigm taking a qualitative approach aimed at understanding the meanings that content creators and managers attribute to hyper-realistic virtual influencers (HVIs), including authenticity, credibility, female portrayal, and commercial use (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Flick, 2022). The study adopted a multi-sited exploratory approach and used a codebook for analyzing topics on the basis of hybrid deductive–inductive reasoning. The analysis used a shared encoding framework and participatory agreement and was not designed as a reflexive analysis of the topics. Methodological reporting was assessed against the COREQ criteria for interviews and focus groups (Tong et al., 2007).

The analysis unit consisted of the discourses produced while observing and discussing specific female HVI profiles. The focus was on the meanings that arose during the sessions and on the relationship between trust, aesthetics, portrayal, commercial congruence, transparency, and brand accountability.

The corpus was organized on a progressive basis. The three focus groups conducted in Colombia constituted the main empirical core due to the richness and internal diversity of the data. The groups from Mexico and Spain were used as contrasting groups to examine whether the patterns identified in Colombia reappeared, were nuanced, or to see if any discrepancies arose. The five interviews in China provided an additional cross-cultural comparison based on individual experiences, particularly in terms of technological normalization, hyper-realistic aesthetics, cultural adaptation, and perceptions of artificiality.

The study design combined focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The focus groups enabled agreements, disagreements, and collective negotiations about meanings among the participants involved in digital content production to be observed (Morgan, 1997). With the interviews we could explore individual assessments more thoroughly under different conversational conditions. Both techniques were integrated by constant comparison and researcher triangulation (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023).

The complementary nature of the techniques aligned with the study's exploratory scope. The materials were compared as sources of evidence with different dynamics, density, and production contexts. Therefore, the study does not pose symmetrical country-by-country comparisons, but rather it focuses on a Colombian core group, contrasting Spanish-speaking groups, and an additional cross-cultural comparison through interviews.

2.2. Population, Participants, and Sampling

The population of interest consisted of adults who had direct experience in creating, managing, publishing or circulating digital content. This experience stemmed from student projects, entrepreneurial ventures, managing business accounts, personal branding, audiovisual production, digital communication, content marketing and professional work on social media platforms.

Purposive sampling based on criteria was employed using the maximum variation strategy (Flick, 2022; Patton, 2015) and the common criterion was experience in creating or managing digital content. This variety encompassed students, professionals, entrepreneurs, brand managers, and creators with commercial experience in order to explore the phenomenon from different perspectives within the content ecosystem.

Recruitment was conducted by direct invitations and referrals from individuals who met the common criterion. Some of the participants had previous contact with the main researcher in earlier semesters on an academic basis, but at the time the fieldwork was carried out, they were not students under their supervision, and some had already graduated. Thus their participation was unrelated to their grades or academic decisions. The remaining

participants were contacted by referrals from acquaintances, members of the research team, or participants in the study. Before each session, they were informed of the purpose the research had, and that it was voluntary, the information disclosed would be treated as confidential, the session would be recorded, and the information would be used for academic purposes. Two of the participants invited withdrew due to scheduling conflicts (one in Colombia and one in Mexico), but the others remained throughout the sessions.

The corpus consisted of 30 participants: three focus groups in Colombia ($n = 15$), one in Mexico ($n = 5$), one in Spain ($n = 5$), and five semi-structured interviews with participants in China ($n = 5$), all of whom had experience in creating, managing, or distributing digital content.

The fieldwork was conducted in 2026. The focus groups in Colombia and Spain took place in May and the group in Mexico and the interviews in China in August. The three focus groups in Colombia were held in person at university facilities whereas those from Spain, Mexico, and China participated online via Microsoft Teams. Each group session lasted approximately two hours, and the interviews between 30 and 45 min.

The inclusion criteria were to be at least 18 years old; to have experience in creating, managing or circulating digital content; to have had contact with influencers, digital campaigns, or social media communication strategies; and to voluntarily agree to participate. We excluded those without prior experience or knowledge of digital content and influencers; those with direct ties to brands or agencies that manage HVIs used as stimuli; or those who rejected the conditions in terms of consent, recording, and academic use.

As the context for the composition of the corpus, Table 1 summarizes the methodology used; the profiles, age ranges and gender distribution of the participants; and the relationship each group had to creating or managing digital content.

Table 1. Summary description of the participant corpus.

Corpus Unit	Data Collection Technique and *n*	Participant Profile	Age and Gender	Predominant Digital Experience
Colombia 1: Students	Focus group; $n = 5$	Digital marketing and strategic communication students	18+; 2 women and 3 men	UGC, audiovisual production, personal brands, lifestyle, multi-brand, and automotive
Colombia 2: Professionals	Focus group; $n = 5$	Digital marketing and communication professionals; influencers, brand managers, and agency professionals	20–28; 2 women and 3 men	UGC, marketing agency, content creation, restaurants, perfumery, printing, and advertising
Colombia 3: Entrepreneurs	Focus group; $n = 5$	Entrepreneurs with training or experience in advertising, digital marketing, or communication	25–37; 3 women and 2 men	UGC, digital influence, personal branding, education, lifestyle, politics, and cycling apparel
Mexico	Focus group; $n = 5$	Content creators or managers linked to entrepreneurship, SMEs, personal brands, or freelance work	18–26; 3 women and 2 men	Content management for Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok; SMEs, personal entrepreneurship, and digital channels
Spain	Focus group; $n = 5$	Postgraduate students in digital marketing with experience in content creation and management	25–37; 3 women and 2 men	Content management for different social media platforms

Table 1. *Cont.*

Corpus Unit	Data Collection Technique and *n*	Participant Profile	Age and Gender	Predominant Digital Experience
China	Semi-structured interviews; $n = 5$	Chinese participants with experience in content creation, entrepreneurship, business, or digital management	18–26; 4 women and 1 man	Content creation
Total	5 focus groups and 5 interviews; $n = 30$	Digital content creators or managers with maximum internal variation	Adults	Multi-sited exploratory qualitative corpus

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the study data.

2.3. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

A semi-structured interview guide organized into four categories was used, in which main and follow-up questions were set to probe further according to how participants responded. The instrument addressed standards in aesthetics, authenticity, credibility, female portrayal, emotional connection, transparency, brand accountability, and ethical implications. Content validation was conducted by three experts in ethics, digital marketing, and gender equity and was part of the research project from which this article is derived. The 28 items submitted for expert review achieved an I-CVI = 1.00, a K* = 1.00, and an S-CVI/Ave = 1.00, in accordance with Polit et al. (2007) and Yusoff (2019). The validation matrix was deposited in Zenodo, as stated in the Data Availability section.

The script was used as a common and flexible framework which ensured topics were comparable across groups and interviews and enabled us to ask follow-up questions, request examples, thoroughly explore contradictions, and examine the meanings which emerged during the conversation.

In each session permission was granted for recording and a standard protocol was followed: presenting the study, obtaining informed consent, contextualizing the phenomenon, providing a guided exposure to visual stimuli, and a semi-structured conversation. The public profiles of Shudu Gram, Aitana López, and Lil Miquela were used and selected according to the criteria of public presence, recognition in the medium, hyper-realistic appearance, female identity, participation in branded content, and differences in aesthetic and narrative positioning (Duque-Cardona, 2025).

The stimuli were presented in the same general order and were accompanied by open-ended questions about visual, narrative, commercial, and ethical features. The profiles served as prompts for discussion rather than as units to be evaluated with a standardized scale.

The stimuli selection defines the scope of the study. The virtual influencers selected differ in their public profiles, appearance, narrative style, associated brands, degree of realism, and possibly how familiar participants may have been with them previously. These differences enabled us to gain an insight into the extent to which participants trusted these figures, and perceived them as being authentic, their femininity, and commercial significance in specific cases.

In Colombia and Spain, the main researcher moderated the focus groups. In Colombia, an assistant, who was not an author of this article, acted as an observer. In Mexico, another member of the research team moderated the session, and the main researcher provided support and supervision. The interviews in China were conducted by another researcher and reviewed by the main researcher. The interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on how proficient the participants were in English. A professional checked

the Spanish translations to ensure the meaning in the specific culture was preserved. The transcripts were prepared by the research team and reviewed by the main researcher.

2.4. Data Analysis

The analysis was conducted in a shared cloud-based project using ATLAS.ti Desktop 26.1.1. The three researchers encoded using a common codebook and recorded decisions, changes in definitions, and relationships between categories in successive versions of the codebook. Researcher triangulation was achieved by cross-checking excerpts, discussing differences, and a reasoned agreement for making a final conceptual framework for the findings.

The codebook thematic analysis combined deductive coding derived from the objectives, research questions, and conceptual framework with inductive coding which accepted meanings that emerged from the corpus. The procedure followed the phases of familiarization, encoding, category development, reviewing, defining, and reporting described for thematic analysis, adapted to a participatory codebook (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021, 2022). This is an important specification because using a shared codebook, documented decisions, and reaching an agreement among researchers is different from the methodology used in reflexive thematic analysis.

Table 2 was used to organize the initial purposive and open encoding matrix.

Table 2. Initial analytical matrix for purposive and open encoding.

Analytical Dimension	Operational Definition for Encoding	Encoding Guide
Trust and Credibility	Criteria used by participants to accept, question, or qualify how trustworthy HVIs are and their recommendations.	Credibility; trust; verifiable human backing; embodied experience; narrative coherence
Synthetic Authenticity	Ways in which the artificial character and its potential communicative legitimacy are interpreted.	Perceived authenticity; transparency; artificial agency; humanization; simulation
Digital Femininity and Aesthetics	Interpretations about appearance, beauty, youth, the body, agency, gender roles, and female representation.	Standards of femininity; aesthetic perfection; stereotypes; diversity; sexualization; agency
Attitude Toward the Brand	Assessments of commercial significance, congruence between the character, product, and sector, and perceived reputational effects.	Brand–character congruence; innovation; reputational risk; suitable product; target audience
Contextual Adaptation	Meanings attributed to culture, language, local sensitivities, and the international circulation of HVIs.	Cultural adaptation; context; discursive differences; localization; appropriation
Ethics and Communicative Legitimacy	Criteria standards for transparency, brand accountability, manipulation, consumer protection, and acceptable use.	Ethics; mandatory transparency; accountability; manipulation; limits of use

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the study data.

The analytical process was organized into four phases. Firstly, the three researchers conducted a familiarization reading and applied the initial matrix. Secondly, they applied open codes linked to authenticity, trust, human perception, standards in aesthetics, gender, transparency, accountability, and conditions for accepting or rejecting. Thirdly, they grouped the codes into families and compared groups, interviews, and contexts and lastly, they reviewed similar views, variations, discrepant cases, and relationships between categories by categorization, comparison, integration, iteration, and refutation (Spiggle, 1994).

The three researchers worked from the same codebook in the shared project. Differences in interpretation were discussed during the review sessions and resolved by cross-referencing the excerpt, the procedural definition, and the corresponding research question (Chinh et al., 2019). Some adjustments made were renaming codes, grouping them into categories, and combining definitions and each change was incorporated into successive versions of the codebook (Bingham, 2023).

The transition from the initial analytical dimensions to the final categories occurred throughout three documented procedures. Firstly, conceptually overlapping codes were consolidated; for example, credibility and synthetic authenticity were merged with trust and authenticity, while brand attitude was reorganized as brand congruence and reputation. Secondly, broad dimensions were separated when the corpus showed distinct functions within them: digital femininity and aesthetics became gender representation and aesthetics and acceptance, and transparency and human oversight emerged as a new category distinct from ethics and accountability. Thirdly, contextual adaptation served as a comparative lens across the seven findings rather than as an isolated frequency-based category. The six final empirical categories were thus derived from making comparisons between the initial matrix, open codes, excerpts, and research questions.

The seven findings were developed by examining recurring relationships and differing views among these six categories. The interpretive model was constructed only after the findings had been reviewed across the Colombian core, the contrasting groups, and the interviews in China. Communicative legitimacy, conditional commercial acceptance, and brand reputation were introduced at this stage as interpretive nodes that act as hubs which show the interconnections among empirical categories. They were not coded as themes and are not associated with frequency. The arrows in the model represent interpretive conditions and the differing views supported by the triangulated findings, not cause and effect.

ATLAS.ti's Intentional AI Coding was used as a starting point for proposing segments and codes related to the analytical intentions defined by the team. These were reviewed, accepted, modified, or rejected by the researchers before they were incorporated into the codebook. The AI did not determine the final categories, and the transcripts still needed to be read.

The corpus adequacy was assessed on the basis of the quality of the information it contained and exploratory scope, considering the specific characteristics of the participants, their experience with digital content, the quality of the dialog, internal diversity, and the extent to which the material could provide answers to the research questions (Malterud et al., 2016). In the assessment group composition and thematic complexity were considered as highlighted in the literature on focus group adequacy (Hennink et al., 2019). The study did not aim to achieve universal saturation. During the sessions, when responses revealed significant nuances, there was a more thorough discussion using the follow-up questions provided in the instrument.

ATLAS.ti's frequencies and co-occurrences were used as descriptive tools for identifying recurring themes, examining connections between categories, and guiding the analysis back to specific excerpts. The counts were not interpreted as prevalence, statistical power, or cultural differences.

NotebookLM (powered by Gemini 1.5 Pro) was used exclusively as an auxiliary tool for locating and comparing excerpts within previously anonymized transcripts and verifying they corresponded to the ATLAS.ti outputs. It was not used as a standalone encoding strategy. The final categories, selection of verbatim quotes, and the interpretation were defined by the three researchers by reading the corpus, triangulation, and consensus. Finally,

the results were formulated on the basis of the patterns, outliers, verbatim quotes, and conceptual relationships between categories.

2.5. Criteria for Qualitative Rigor

Rigor was addressed in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017), along with the COREQ checklist (Tong et al., 2007). Credibility was facilitated by direct quotations, researcher triangulation, comparing methods, and reviewing outliers. Transferability was facilitated by the descriptions of participants, contexts, selection criteria, and limitations. Dependability was ensured with the shared codebook, its successive versions, and the record of decisions were included in them. Confirmability was reinforced by separating evidence, interpretation, and exploratory scope.

The chain of evidence consisted of a semi-structured interview guide, informed consent forms, recordings, anonymized transcripts, an initial matrix, codebook version co-occurrence tables, and anonymized quotes. This sequence enabled the process to be audited from the data fragments to the seven findings. The final ATLAS.ti screenshots confirmed 229 co-occurrences and a coefficient of 0.52 between trust/authenticity and aesthetics/acceptance.

Differences in contexts, profiles, languages, techniques, and document density were treated as design conditions. Mexico and Spain served as contrasting groups and China as an additional intercultural comparison. The variations are presented as discursive accents within the corpus rather than as fixed cultural attributes.

There were three levels of triangulation: findings derived from Colombia, contrasting groups from Mexico and Spain, and an additional comparison based on five interviews in China. Triangulation among researchers and using a shared codebook enabled the interpretations to be contrasted without presenting materials produced under different conditions as being equivalent.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Confidentiality, anonymity, academic use of the data, and the right to withdraw were guaranteed. Citations were identified using group, country, and interview codes that preserved analytical information without revealing identities.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Project D.I.MDCE.01-2025 received initial approval from the Faculty Committee on 4 July 2025, and approval from the Central Research, Ethics, and Bioethics Committee at Corporación Universitaria Empresarial Alexander von Humboldt on 29 July 2025. This approval covered recruiting, recording, transcribing, analyzing, and the academic publication of the focus groups and interviews.

2.7. Availability of Data, Instruments, and Materials

The transcripts and recordings are kept by the research team and will not be shared due to their commitment to maintaining confidentiality and privacy. The script and content validation matrix are deposited on Zenodo. The codebook and other anonymized methodological materials may be provided to the editorial team or upon reasonable request, ethical and institutional conditions permitting.

2.8. Methodological Scope

The methodological scope defines the interpretation. The corpus was purposively constructed and unevenly distributed: Colombia provided the core of three focus groups; Mexico and Spain, two contrasting groups; and China, five interviews for cross-cultural

contrast. This composition was based on the exploratory reasoning of gradually contrasting rather than on statistical representativeness or comparing data from different countries.

The value of the corpus lies in the quality of the information participants with relevant experience gave, the quality of the conversations, and the possibility of comparing profiles, techniques, and contexts. The results provide a context-specific understanding of female HVIs and do not yield estimates that can be extrapolated to national populations.

The interpretation considers the unequal weight of the subgroups, the difference between group and individual interaction, the languages used, and the availability of documentation. These conditions are included on presenting similar and differing views, and limitations.

3. Results

The thematic analysis generated seven findings addressing the research questions. ATLAS.ti's coding frequency and co-occurrence coefficients were used as descriptive tools for guiding the corpus review, but the interpretation was based on the content of the excerpts, the richness and density of meaning, internal differing views, and cases that qualified or challenged the interpretation. Therefore, a higher frequency of quotations was not interpreted as evidence of cultural prevalence or the majority opinion. The labels AF1–AF7 refer to analytical findings, not to focus groups or participant subsets. "AF" stands for Analytical Finding and the labels organize the results according to the research questions.

The results are presented according to a three-level analytical structure. Firstly, the Colombia focus groups provide the empirical core from which the findings are derived. Secondly, the groups in Mexico and Spain are incorporated as Spanish-speaking contrasting ones through verbatim quotations that either reinforce or add nuances to the patterns. Thirdly, the interviews with Chinese participants are used as an additional intercultural comparison, especially when they enable observation of a different relationship with hyper-realistic aesthetics, artificiality, transparency, or cultural adaptation. The data is identified as FG-COL-Professionals, FG-COL-Entrepreneurs, and FG-COL-Students for the Colombian groups; FG-MX and FG-ES for the contrasting groups; and ENT1-CH to ENT5-CH for the interviews in China. Group-level identifiers are used for focus group quotations because the available records cannot reliably attribute individual voices in every session. This is particularly important in Mexico, where two of the five participants shared a single internet connection. Individual codes are retained for the interviews in China, which were conducted separately. A quotation represents an illustrative turn and is not treated in itself as evidence of in-group consensus; a pattern is described as shared only when it recurred across distinct turns, groups, interviews, or analytical sources.

The co-occurrence matrix (Table 3) emphasizes the main focus was the relationship between trust/authenticity and aesthetics/acceptance, with 229 shared citations and a coefficient of 0.52. It also revealed notable associations between transparency/human support and consistency/reputation (46; 0.38), transparency/human support and ethics/responsibility (59; 0.38), and ethics/responsibility and consistency/reputation (43; 0.32). These values are interpreted as indicators of interconnectedness among topics in the qualitative encoding, rather than as statistical associations. Besides Figure 1 visualizes the co-occurrence relationships summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Co-occurrence matrix among analytical categories.

Category (Citations)	Trust and Authenticity (n = 312)	Brand Congruence and Reputation (n = 64)	Aesthetics and Acceptance (n = 360)	Ethics and Responsibility (n = 112)	Gender Representation (n = 142)	Transparency and Human Oversight (n = 102)
Trust and Authenticity (n = 312)	—	55 (0.17)	229 (0.52)	70 (0.20)	60 (0.15)	87 (0.27)
Brand Congruence and Reputation (n = 64)	55 (0.17)	—	53 (0.14)	43 (0.32)	36 (0.21)	46 (0.38)
Aesthetics and Acceptance (n = 360)	229 (0.52)	53 (0.14)	—	57 (0.14)	58 (0.13)	77 (0.20)
Ethics and Responsibility (n = 112)	70 (0.20)	43 (0.32)	57 (0.14)	—	39 (0.18)	59 (0.38)
Gender Representation (n = 142)	60 (0.15)	36 (0.21)	58 (0.13)	39 (0.18)	—	36 (0.17)
Transparency and Human Oversight (n = 102)	87 (0.27)	46 (0.38)	77 (0.20)	59 (0.38)	36 (0.17)	—

Note. Each cell represents the number of shared citations and, in parentheses, the co-occurrence coefficient.

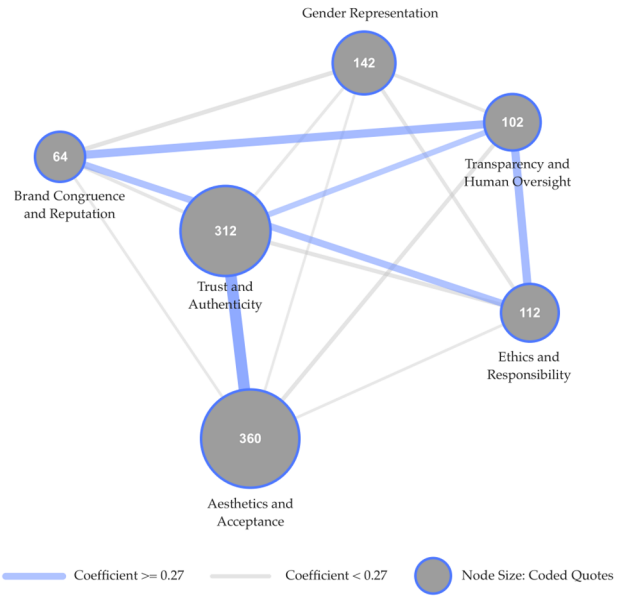


Figure 1. The co-occurrence network among analytical categories. Note. The thickness of the lines represents the co-occurrence coefficient, and the size of the nodes corresponds to the number of encoded citations. The figure complements Table 3 and serves as descriptive support for the qualitative analysis.

3.1. From Human-Origin Authenticity to Communicative Traceability

In Colombia, trust in hyper-realistic virtual influencers (HVIs) was associated with the ability to recognize in them a human team behind the scenes, the purpose of the

character, and accountability for its messages. In the professionals group there was a need to "know who the person or team behind the personality is" (FG-COL-Professionals). Entrepreneurs stated that "people must know there is a company [...] backstage that controls" the personality (FG-COL-Entrepreneurs). Among students, this concern was related to the risk to the brand: "I have to [...] know the background of that influencer, who is behind [her] [...] so that I know whether to trust the brand and its reputation" (FG-COL-Students).

In Mexico, the relationship between authorship and trust re-emerged: "I would love to know who is behind the virtual influencers, because that way you can decide whether or not to trust them. When I do not know who that is; it either scares or intrigues me" (FG-MX). In the Spanish excerpts the same concern is expressed by allusions to a lack of "spirit" or "soul" and to the recognizable human authorship behind Gorillaz (FG-ES).

In the interviews in China there were nuances in terms of coherence, purpose, and commercial distance. In ENT1-CH it was argued that an HVI can build trust if it maintains "consistency, transparency, and values aligned with those of the audience," although the lack of human experiences detracts from that. In ENT2-CH its purpose was questioned: "I would like to know what it is for." In ENT5-CH there were remarks that audiences may distrust it when "everything is designed for marketing" and the brand appears "inauthentic or distant." This finding places HVI authenticity in the area of communicative traceability: identifying who designs the character, what purpose its messages are based on, and who is accountable for them. Human-like appearances may facilitate recognition, but trust depends on the people working behind the scenes, consistency and verifiable accountability.

3.2. Hyper-Realism Between Visual Attraction and Suspicion

The three groups in Colombia described hyper-realism as being both attractive and repellent. The professionals observed that, because the figures are "so perfect and generic," they fail to evoke "genuine interest" (FG-COL-Professionals). Among the entrepreneurs, reactions ranged from "flawless" to "unreal" and "how scary," precisely because it was difficult to tell some profiles apart from a real person (FG-COL-Entrepreneurs). The students described the feeling of being unsure "whether it is a person or not" and perceived that "there is something" that is not quite right (FG-COL-Students).

In the Mexico group the uneasiness produced by human-like resemblance was emphasized: "It is unsettling how real it looks. The real physical elements make it feel more believable and that helps you engage with it more, whereas something produced entirely with AI may not have the same impact" (FG-MX). In Spain this ambivalence was narrowed down to the statement that the figure looked real, but something was not right (FG-ES).

In the interviews in China, perfection also arose as a limitation. In ENT3-CH it was noted that these figures "display beauty unattainable by a real people." In ENT4-CH faces and figures were described as "perfect in every way," which felt monotonous. In ENT5-CH there were allusions to an "idealized and flawless image of the perfect woman" and to an unattainable form of perfection.

Visual attraction and skepticism both stem from the same quality. Hyper-realism captures attention, but it may mean consumers identify less with them and find them less credible when their perfection makes it apparent they are artificial or it displaces human stories, spontaneity, and experience.

This finding was qualified in the student group in Colombia. One participant considered that more realistic figures could make them more credible and visually engaging, whereas a visibly artificial design was less attractive (FG-COL-Students). In this regard, there was still ambivalence in general, but it reveals hyper-realism did not mean these personalities were automatically rejected.

3.3. Digital Femininity as a Standard to Aspire To

The Colombian groups interpreted feminine traits as part of a digital culture in which models of beauty are selected and reproduced. The professionals indicated that these characteristics are "now socially proven" and act as standardized benchmarks (FG-COL-Professionals). In the entrepreneurs' group, it was stated that "for someone to be feminine, she has to be slim, and her nose must appear a certain way," indicating that any deviation from the prototype challenges conventional femininity (FG-COL-Entrepreneurs). The students related this standard with the so-called "Instagram face" and the pressure to have flawless skin and a perfect life (FG-COL-Students).

In Mexico, aspirational femininity was expressed as a constant obligation to maintain one's appearance: "you always have to look good; whatever you do, you have to look good"; the three profiles were also associated with a high socioeconomic status (FG-MX). The excerpts available from the group in Spain did not develop this dimension in sufficient detail to establish any specific convergence in viewpoints.

In the interviews in China the ideal body was explicitly remarked on. In ENT1-CH "youth, slimness, physical perfection, and an aspirational lifestyle were identified." In ENT3-CH it was stated that these figures "narrow women down to just their physical appearance." In ENT5-CH it was observed that stereotypes are reinforced when an HVI is modeled on thin, attractive, and nearly perfect women.

Digital femininity works as a communicative format that represents the body, fashion, status, and consumption. In the accounts analyzed, the repeated allusions to youth, slimness, symmetry, and perfection meant the character was immediately recognized while practically unattainable beauty hierarchies and bodily expectations for women were created.

3.4. Visual Diversity Within a Standard for Perfection

In Colombia, diversity was valued and questioned simultaneously. The professionals argued that HVI avatars reflect stereotypes that now exist in society and, in turn, "reinforce those stereotypes" as part of a vicious cycle (FG-COL-Professionals). The entrepreneurs discussed whether a "chubby" HVI would be accepted or equally criticized, thus suggesting that broadening the range of traits shown does not mean standards of beauty would not be evaluated (FG-COL-Entrepreneurs). Students acknowledged a growth in body-positive content but warned that the "distortion of reality" may mean having perfect skin and bodies becomes the main focus (FG-COL-Students).

In Mexico, Aitana and Shudu were considered to be the most blatant in reinforcing stereotypes, although Lil Miquela "is not far behind either" (FG-MX). The material from Spain available did not enable this dimension to be developed to the same level of detail.

In China these differing views were expressed most clearly. In ENT3-CH it was stated: "they are only diverse in their origins; they are all young and slim, but there is no variety in body types or age." ENT5-CH acknowledged that African and Latin American communities were more visible but warned that an "excessively idealized perfect" image may make women more anxious about their own appearance. In ENT1-CH diversity was also considered to be limited when styles and cultural contexts maintain similar standards of beauty.

In visual diversity there is a broader range of skin tones, features, and styles, but it can hardly be regarded as progressive when all the bodies are young, slim and flawless. That is, the same figure can embody both inclusion and idealization.

3.5. Conditional Commercial Acceptance

The groups in Colombia asserted that the commercial usefulness of HVIs depended on the campaign purpose. The professionals would consider using them only "for exposure

and fashion-related purposes" (FG-COL-Professionals). The entrepreneurs emphasized that "context has a major influence" and that the content should be consistent with what the company provides (FG-COL-Entrepreneurs). Students would assess "whether it is aligned with the brand and what we want to achieve" and what can be achieved with the selected audience (FG-COL-Students).

In Mexico there was a distinction between exposure and engaging. One participant explained that HVIs could be used to extend campaign reach, but not necessarily "to raise awareness about a social movement," because the campaign objective and message determine whether a designed figure is appropriate or not (FG-MX). In Spain this limitation was summarized as a distinction between communicating and engaging (FG-ES).

In China acceptance was stressed as being conditional in the interviews. In ENT1-CH consistency was prioritized among brand identity, values, transparency, and target audience. In ENT4-CH product recommendations were challenged because HVIs "cannot test and evaluate products by themselves." In ENT5-CH continuity, international adaptation, and designing the personality according to the brand's needs were remarked on.

The participants stated that commercial acceptance of these creations depended on the product, sector, objective, audience, congruence, and type of experience. In this corpus, HVIs were described as being more relevant to boosting visibility, fashion, entertainment, and controlling the narrative but less so for personal product testimonials, sensitive causes, or community relationships.

A qualifying case emerged in the Colombian entrepreneur group, where the participants believed an artificial character could be useful in educational or informational content, such as language instruction or practical explanations, provided it was clear what the purpose was and what institution was behind it (FG-COL-Entrepreneurs). In this case conditional acceptance transcends fashion and visibility while congruence is still deemed as being necessary.

3.6. From Operational Control to Reputational Responsibility

In Colombia, controlling the character was associated with legal, technical, and reputational risks. The professionals questioned the extent to which a non-existent figure can be held accountable for actions that are "considered unlawful" (FG-COL-Professionals). The entrepreneurs brought up a specific risk: "Imagine a campaign that you launch with AI and [...] a hacker hacks your codes: [...] that will ruin it" (FG-COL-Entrepreneurs). For students, knowing who is behind the character is "an obligation" when the brand's reputation is at stake (FG-COL-Students).

In Mexico it was argued that campaigns involving HVIs require setting criteria that are "even stronger" than those applied to human influencers because a virtual character cannot personally apologize or take responsibility when a campaign causes damage; this means knowing the people behind the character is important in terms of legal and campaign security (FG-MX). In Spain, the participants stated responsible use was linked to clearly disclosing the figure is AI-generated and the level of risk an organization is willing to accept (FG-ES).

In China another perspective of controlling these creations was remarked on. In ENT2-CH "total control over the image, message, and behavior" was identified as a benefit as was the lack of personal scandals. In ENT4-CH it was indicated that their risks are controllable and there are fewer instances of non-compliance. In ENT5-CH it was added that personality, appearance, and behavior can be adapted to the brand's needs.

The participants stated institutional control means these digital figures are less unpredictable than their human counterparts, while in the analysis it was indicated that with such control the institution that designs and manages the HVI is accountable. Governance therefore needs to encompass authorship, message oversight, digital asset security, regulatory compliance, crisis management, and remediating potential damage.

3.7. Contexts as Discursive Accents

In the three groups in Colombia concerns were shared about authenticity, congruence, and accountability, although they had more nuanced views on their respective profiles. The professionals linked aspiration to a career path: "an aspirational lifestyle comes with a story behind it" (FG-COL-Professionals). The entrepreneurs stated that "context has great influence" when assessing trust and how relevant the content is (FG-COL-Entrepreneurs). Students emphasized the alignment among audience, brand, objectives, and reputation (FG-COL-Students).

In Mexico campaign objectives, authorship, and the need for guidelines governing these creators was emphasized. In Spain the main contributions concerned human endorsement, the distinction between communicating and engaging, and the notion that using them "depends on the country" and level of risk accepted (FG-ES). These contributions serve as contrasts to the set of topics identified in Colombia.

In the interviews in China the comparison by individual experiences was broadened. In ENT4-CH it was observed that the faces have "features that are very characteristic of their respective regions" and the content reflects local cultural characteristics and ways of life. In ENT2-CH their interpretations of some profiles were linked to Chinese standards on body exposure and online safety. In ENT5-CH the ability to adapt the characters to international campaigns was remarked on, while there was still a need for transparency and accountable representation.

These findings reveal a shared repertoire in which there is different emphasis. These variations stem from discourses produced with different techniques and conditions and are therefore interpreted as contextual nuances in the corpus. They do not enable conclusive cultural differences or equivalent country-by-country comparisons to be established.

3.8. Triangulation of Findings

In triangulation sources, contexts, and techniques were integrated by comparing the empirical core from Colombia with the contrasting groups and the interviews in China. Table 4 summarizes the data for the seven findings and distinguishes similar and differing views, and contextual variations.

Table 4. The triangulation matrix for the seven findings.

Finding and Research Question	Colombia: Empirical Core	Mexico/Spain: Contrasting Groups	China: Interview-Based Contrast	Similar and Different Views	Interpretation
AF1 (RQ1). Authenticity and Traceability	Professionals: authorship; entrepreneurs: corporate endorsement; students: reputation protection.	In MX knowing who is behind the HVI is linked to trust; In Spain notions of soul, spirit, and human endorsement are alluded to.	In ENT1, ENT2, and ENT5 trust is linked to consistency, purpose, and commercial transparency.	Similar views: recognizable human authorship supports credibility. Differing views: China emphasizes purpose and commercial distance.	Authenticity shifts toward the character's communicative traceability.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Finding and Research Question	Colombia: Empirical Core	Mexico/Spain: Contrasting Groups	China: Interview-Based Contrast	Similar and Different Views	Interpretation
AF2 (RQ1–RQ2). Hyper-realism	Attraction, unease, and difficulty in distinguishing between humans and artificial entities across the three groups.	In MX it is described as unsettling; SP: "it looked real, but something was not right."	In ENT3, ENT4, and ENT5 perfection is associated with unattainability, monotony, and distance.	Similar view: realism attracts and causes skepticism. No substantive differing view was identified.	Participants associated visual perfection with attention, but also less identification with the figures and credibility.
AF3 (RQ2). Standard of Femininity	Professionals, entrepreneurs, and students recognize standardized features, slimness, and flawless appearance.	In MX the pressure to maintain appearance and the association with socioeconomic status is emphasized. The group in Spain did not produce a recurrent pattern for this dimension; therefore, no similar view is claimed.	In ENT1, ENT3, and ENT5 youth, slimness, perfection, and appearance are identified as the main focus.	Similar view across CO, MX, and CH. The group in Spain did not produce a recurrent pattern for this dimension.	Femininity acts as a visual and commercial script for recognition and aspiration.
AF4 (RQ2–RQ4). Limited Diversity	Body positivity is valued, but concerns arise that within this diversity idealized bodies and pre-existing stereotypes may still be preserved.	In MX the reproduction of stereotypes is observed. The group in Spain did not produce a recurrent pattern for this dimension.	In ENT1, ENT3, and ENT5 cultural and ethnic diversity is recognized, but limited body and age diversity.	Similar view across CO, MX, and CH: inclusion and idealization coexist. Internal differing view: diversity is also valued. No similar view is claimed for Spain.	There is a limit to how progressive they are when constrained by a standard of perfection.
AF5 (RQ3). Commercial Acceptance	All three groups state use depends on function, product, brand, objective, and target audience.	In MX there is a distinction between advertising and community, and between reach and awareness; SP distinguishes between communicating and engaging.	In ENT1, ENT4, and ENT5 consistency, lack of product experience, continuity, and international adaptation are contrasted.	Similar view: instrumental and conditional acceptance. Differing view: China emphasizes operational continuity.	They are more suitable in terms of visibility and controlling messages than in testimonials or sensitive causes.
AF6 (RQ3). Control and Reputation	Legal risks, hacking, authorship, and reputational damage emerge across all three profiles.	In MX stronger regulatory criteria is called for; SP requires disclosure that it is AI-generated and emphasizes the need to assess risks.	In ENT2, ENT4, and ENT5 control, continuity and reduced risk of scandals are valued.	Differing views: CO-MX-SP emphasize risk, while China highlights control. Both indicate institutional accountability.	Control shifts and concentrates ethical, technical, and reputational accountability to the brand.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Finding and Research Question	Colombia: Empirical Core	Mexico/Spain: Contrasting Groups	China: Interview-Based Contrast	Similar and Different Views	Interpretation
AF7 (RQ4). Contextual Accents	History, context, audience, and reputation shape the nuances across the three Colombian profiles.	In MX purpose, authorship, and standards are emphasized; SP emphasizes human backing and contextual risk.	In ENT2, ENT4, and ENT5 local standards, regional characteristics, and international adaptation are remarked on.	Similar view on authenticity, consistency, and accountability; variations in the issues emphasized.	The contrasts reflect discursive emphasis within the corpus, without establishing conclusive national differences.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on the study data. CO = Colombia; MX = Mexico; SP = Spain; CH = China. The verbatim quotations illustrate patterns and variations in the corpus; they do not represent prevalence counts or equivalent national comparisons.

The results show that the commercial legitimacy of female HVIs does not depend solely on technological novelty and innovation, but rather on the interplay of brand consistency, transparency, human backing, aesthetics, accountability, and contextual adaptation. The participants described two main differing views: visual perfection was associated with attention but also meant consumers identified less with the digital figures and institutional control was perceived as reducing the unpredictability associated with their human counterparts while the brand takes ethical, technical, and reputational accountability.

Female representation is a cross-cutting issue that spans the entire conceptual model. HVIs can broaden visual repertoires and foster communicative innovation, but they can also reproduce aspirational body standards if these flawless aesthetics take precedence over diversity. Therefore, transparency about their virtual nature is a necessary but insufficient requirement: making these creations legitimate also entails clarifying who designs the character, for what purpose, under what rules, and how accountable they are for what it does.

4. Discussion

These findings place female hyper-realistic virtual influencers as sociotechnical interfaces for brand communication whose legitimacy is built up by the interplay of appearance, authorship, transparency, consistency, representation, and accountability. This perspective extends studies that have explained the acceptance of HVIs in terms of credibility, authenticity, anthropomorphism, or visual attractiveness (Chaihanchanchai et al., 2026; Dabiran et al., 2024; Ju et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2023), by showing that these attributes are insufficient when participants state they need to know who has designed the figure to what end, and who is accountable for its messages. In this respect, virtual influencers do not merely depend on their appearance, but also how brands build their identities, the strategies used, the algorithms and the cultural norms of each platform, and their identities can change according to how consumers respond to and reinterpret them. Visibility is a dynamic aspect of this which emerges through the interaction of communicative strategies, algorithmic logic, and platform cultures (Battista & Cervi, 2025), while aesthetic styles, affective expressions, and communicative cues help identities circulate and be renegotiated in platform environments (Cervi & Jackson, 2026). In this corpus, these perspectives help place HVI visibility as a result of the way they communicate rather than simply attributing it to visual novelty.

The first contribution concerns authenticity. Participants evaluated authenticity by communicative reasoning based on traceability rather than on them having a biography similar to those human influencers have. This finding concurs with that by Lou et al. (2023),

Ju et al. (2024), and Yang et al. (2025), who state artificiality does not automatically mean the character has no influence but it does have an effect on trust. This study qualifies this discussion by posing the notion that transparency about whether an influencer is virtual or not is only one aspect to consider as trust also depends on acknowledging human authorship, communicative intent, oversight, and being accountable.

The second contribution concerns the relationship between hyper-realism and skepticism. The accounts the participants give suggest that visual attractiveness can help to catch attention and evoke an initial willingness to engage, which is consistent with Kim and Park (2023), Rungruangjit et al. (2024), and Li and Huang (2024). However, the corpus also shows that aesthetic perfection can make consumers skeptical about an HVI when it is perceived as providing simulated experiences, unattainable beauty, or lacking spontaneity. This ambivalence is in keeping with the uncanny valley hypothesis (Mori et al., 2012) and evidence that highly anthropomorphic virtual influencers may evoke uncanniness depending on the social cues that accompany them (Gutuleac et al., 2024). The co-occurrence between trust/authenticity and aesthetics/acceptance is consistent with this interpretation in the corpus analyzed and does not establish a cause-and-effect relationship.

The gender dimension broadenededs these differing views. The digital femininity observed in Shudu, Aitana, and Lil Miquela was interpreted as a visual construction shaped by youth, slimness, symmetry, fashion, and an aspirational lifestyle. This finding concurs with that from Bartky (1990), Butler (1990), de Lauretis (1987), Mulvey (1975), Wilhelm (2021), Shin and Lee (2023), Lee and Yuan (2023), and González-Calvo et al. (2026) as it shows gender representation encompasses ways of agency, symbolic availability, expressiveness, and relationships with brands. This article contributes to this line of research by showing that visual diversity can broaden representational repertoires while simultaneously preserving beauty standards if all the different figures are stylized according to the same ideal.

In commercial terms, participants did not reject HVIs outright. Their acceptance depended on the campaign objective, product, sector, target audience, and the degree to which there is a human team working on them behind the scenes. This interpretation is consistent with Belanche et al. (2024), Miao et al. (2022), Shen (2024), and Shen (2025), who link the value these characters have to innovation, controlling the narrative, and having a consistent strategy. This study adds an important distinction for brand communication: HVIs were considered to be more suitable to visibility, fashion, entertainment, demonstrations, or controlled messaging than to sensitive causes, personal accounts, testimonials, or campaigns that require real experiences.

The debate on ethics therefore pivots to governance and reputation. In this corpus, some participants remarked that controlling the character helped to reduce some of the risks associated with human unpredictability while making the institution that designs and manages it accountable. This interpretation concurs with Díaz-Bajo Rodríguez (2025), Gambetti and Kozinets (2024), and Corzo-Cortés et al. (2025). For brands working with comparable types of campaigns and audiences, these findings may act as a basis for considering protocols for transparency, digital asset security, message review, crisis management, and accountability. These recommendations are analytical implications derived from this purposive sample, not tested estimates of campaign effectiveness.

The multi-sited aspect of this research means contextual variations can be interpreted to some extent. In Colombia the interpretive core could be built around trust, storytelling, consistency, and accountability; the groups in Mexico and Spain served as contrasting ones in Spanish-speaking contexts; and in China an additional intercultural comparison concerning technological normalization, aesthetics, visual diversity, and cultural localization was provided. This organization avoids treating contexts as isolated cultural blocks and

aligns with that stated by Hofstede et al. (2010), Nassè (2023), Patel et al. (2026), Prakash and Saxena (2025), Rizzo et al. (2025), Luo and Kim (2024), and Shen (2025) by means of a context-specific reading of the discourses. Hofstede's dimensions were used here as sensitizing concepts rather than as a classificatory model. The data did not enable testing cultural dimensions on a national basis, and the emphasis observed may also reflect the profiles, language, prior exposure, and data collection conditions for the participants.

Based on these findings, an interpretive model of communicative legitimacy for female HVIs is proposed. The model brings together six empirical categories—trust and authenticity, brand congruence and reputation, gender representation, transparency and human oversight, ethics and responsibility, and aesthetics and acceptance—and three interpretive nodes: communicative legitimacy, conditional commercial acceptance, and brand reputation. Its theoretical contribution lies in incorporating source credibility, synthetic authenticity, digital femininity, and brand reputation within a single explanatory framework. In terms of its practical application, it provides criteria for determining when an HVI can strengthen a communication strategy and when it may undermine trust, identification, or legitimacy. The conceptual model is grounded in the relationships documented in the thematic analysis and triangulation matrix. It should be read as a context-specific explanatory proposal for this corpus rather than as a validated cause-and-effect model. Figure 2 presents the relationships among the six empirical categories and the three interpretive nodes.

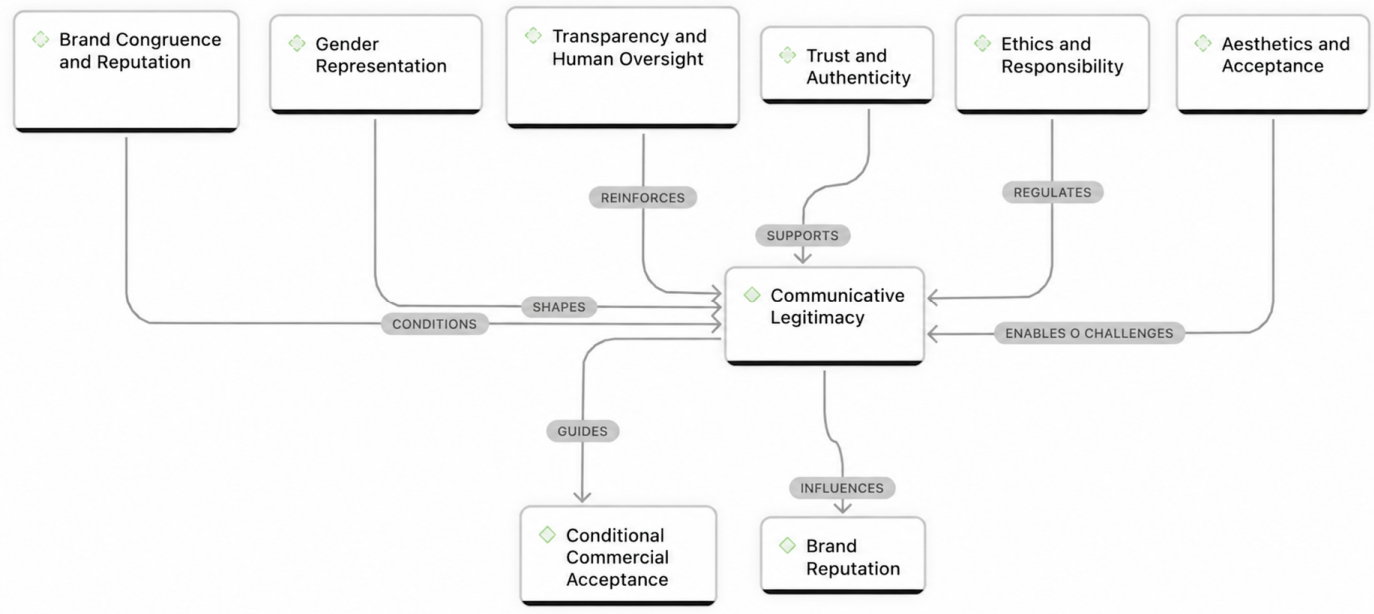


Figure 2. An interpretive model of the communicative legitimacy of female hyper-realistic virtual influencers. Note. The model integrates six empirical categories and three interpretive nodes developed through theoretical synthesis. The interpretive nodes were not applied as codes to the corpus and there are no frequencies associated with them. The connections represent analytical conditions and differing views rather than cause–effect relationships.

5. Conclusions

This study analyzed how digital content creators and managers perceive the commercial use of female hyper-realistic virtual influencers. The results show that acceptance is conditional: HVIs can provide visibility, novelty, narrative control, and brand differentiation, but their legitimacy depends on authorship traceability, transparency, the human team working on them behind the scenes, alignment with the product, and sensitivity to how females are portrayed.

This study makes three main contributions. On a theoretical level, it proposes understanding HVI authenticity in terms of communicative authenticity, and there is no need to simulate real life stories as used by human influencers. As regards methodology, a qualitative analysis is organized with a Colombian empirical core, contrasting groups in Mexico and Spain, and an additional intercultural comparison with participants in China. In terms of practical use, it provides criteria for managing female HVIs in digital campaigns without narrowing them down to mere tools created for a visual impact. Participants described hyper-realistic aesthetics ambivalently: they can gain attention and can easily be recognized when they are encountered again but can also lead to skepticism when perceived as being artificially perfect, lacking real life experiences, or displaying restrictive ideals on how the body should look. The mixed reaction to these figures is due to the way females are portrayed, as visual diversity only becomes meaningful in a critical sense when it challenges beauty standards such as youthfulness, slimness, symmetry, and consumer aspiration.

For brands considering HVIs in contexts comparable to those examined here, the accounts of the participants stress how important it is to disclose whether the character is real or not, identify the human team accountable for it, check consistency with the campaign, assess representational risks, and define procedures for controlling them. These criteria are derived from this purposive sample and must be evaluated with other audiences, sectors, and campaign settings.

The study has limitations inherent to its exploratory design. The purposive sample consisted of 30 participants and combined five focus groups with five semi-structured interviews conducted under different production conditions. Only three female HVI profiles were used as stimuli; their public profiles, degree of realism, and the possibility that some participants may have been familiar with them beforehand may have shaped the responses. The sessions in Colombia were conducted in person, whereas those in Mexico and Spain and China were conducted online. The material was produced in Spanish or English, and translation and cultural verification may mean some pragmatic nuances may not have been carried over. Some participants had a prior academic relationship with the main researcher, although they were not students and their grades were not affected or under the supervision of this researcher at the time the fieldwork was carried out. The Spanish material was documented at a group level, which means the excerpts are not attributed to individual participants and which limits the granularity of the comparison. These conditions, together with the unequal amount and interactional character of the materials, mean direct comparisons are limited. The findings offer a context-specific insight into the corpus and do not provide generalized statistics, population estimates, cause and effect, or conclusive national comparisons. In light of this, future research could expand the number of stimuli and contexts, use similar means of collection and speaker-attributed transcripts, include audiences other than content creators, compare male and female HVIs, and contrast self-reported perceptions with experimental exposure or digital behavioral measures.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection and recording the sessions. Participants took part on a voluntary basis and were informed of their right to withdraw with no consequences to them, and authorization was obtained for the academic use of anonymized quotations.

Data Availability Statement: The anonymized recordings and transcripts are securely stored by the research team and will not be shared due to our commitment to keep the information divulged by the participants confidential. The research instrument and I-CVI matrix are deposited in Zenodo. The codebook and other anonymized methodological materials are available upon reasonable request, ethical and institutional conditions permitting.

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