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Digital Persona vs Real Person: A Study on The Attractiveness of Human and Virtual Influencers in Social Media Advertising

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Section Research Articles	This study aims to compare the differences in the attractiveness of product advertising content with human influencers and VTubers using the audience experience approach. The audience's experience is seen through an assessment of the pragmatic and hedonic qualities of the two advertisements viewed. Attrakdiff is used as a method to measure the assessment of both product advertisements. There are 20 respondents who are asked to view both advertisements and fill out two different questionnaires representing advertisements with human influencers and VTubers. The results show that the attractiveness of advertisements with human influencers and VTubers has almost the same attractiveness. There are differences in pragmatic and hedonic-identity quality (human influencers are superior) and hedonic-stimulation (VTubers are superior), which differentiate between the two. Although there are differences in the assessment of the audience's experience in watching content from human influencers and VTubers, both still have almost the same appeal.
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INTRODUCTION

With the current saturation of the fight to get consumers, various methods that were previously unthinkable are starting to be used, including using virtual characters. Their market projections are also soaring rapidly, where their compound annual growth rate (CAGR) projections reach 38.9% from 2023 to 2030, twice that of human influencers (Guest Author, 2024). Using influencers to attract market attention has become a common practice for companies. Social media marketing using influencers has been part of interactive marketing strategies for 15 years (Audrezet and Koles, 2023). Influencers can influence their followers in the form of determining certain ideas or encouraging their audience to carry out certain behaviors. An interesting thing that needs to be underlined is that the average engagement rate of virtual influencer marketing content reaches 5.9%, which is greater than the engagement rate of advertising content carried out by human influencers, which is 1.9% (An, 2023). Engagement is a key part of influencer marketing, which suggests that using virtual influencers can be even better than using human influencers. A survey conducted by admin (2024) showed that 58% of respondents follow at least 1 virtual influencer.

Interaction in posted content is very important to ensure the success of social media marketing (Jhawar, Kumar and Varshney, 2023). The interactions in question can be in the form of likes, shares, or comments made by social media users. Thanks to the development of technology and creativity, influencers can appear in virtual form, or what is commonly known as virtual influencers. Virtual influencers are characters created using computer technology controlled by someone, who is usually affiliated with a certain agency and aims to influence people through online platforms (Audrezet and Koles, 2023; Jhawar, Kumar and Varshney, 2023; Yang *et al.*, 2023; Koles *et al.*, 2024). They have a substantial following, especially among the younger generation who are attracted to the uniqueness that virtual influencers provide (Jang and Yoh, 2020; Audrezet and Koles, 2023; Jhawar, Kumar and Varshney, 2023; Yang *et al.*, 2023). Even though they cannot appear physically offline, they always interact with their followers on social media (Jhawar, Kumar and Varshney, 2023). The interactions and relationships that are built between virtual influencers and their followers can be a medium for companies to market products or brands, especially for virtual influencers who have a large number of followers (Jang and Yoh, 2020; Audrezet and Koles, 2023; Jhawar, Kumar and Varshney, 2023; Koles *et al.*, 2024). With the same ability to influence their followers, companies can choose to use regular influencers or virtual influencers in marketing their products, which has been done by several companies (Audrezet and Koles, 2023; Jhawar, Kumar and Varshney, 2023).

The preferences of social media users have shifted, which can be seen in the YouTube audience, where viewership from VTubers grew by 23% while non-VTubers decreased by 6% (An, 2023). A survey conducted by The YouTube Culture & Trends team (2023) showed that 52% of their respondents are the audience of VTubers. Virtual YouTubers are known as content creators who use avatars or digital characters to create digital content and interact with their followers (Kim and Yoo, 2021; Mohammad *et al.*, 2023; Ferreira *et al.*, 2024). With easy access to motion capture and other supporting devices, it is increasingly easy for content creators to appear as Vtubers (Kim and Yoo, 2021; Himawari, Mohammad and Amalia, 2023). Their increasing popularity has led to the creation of a market for their existence, which has also had an impact on their sources of income as content creators (Himawari, Mohammad and Amalia, 2023; Ferreira *et al.*, 2024). As one of the entertainment media that offers uniqueness and emotional ties, VTubers have many active followers and fans and have a bigger income on YouTube channels compared to original content creators (Mohammad *et al.*, 2023; Ferreira *et al.*, 2024). Of course, they are no different from human content creators in general, who need

to produce content that is relevant to their target audience in order to maintain the loyalty of their followers (Mohammad *et al.*, 2023).

At one-point, virtual characters who are not able to consume food, are used to become advertising stars for food products. As can be seen in the Indomie product advertisement, feed content starring a virtual YouTuber character gets more likes than other content starring human influencers, with 84k likes compared to 10k likes. Figure 1 shows the Indomie product advertising content showing an influencer enjoying an Indomie product and a VTuber with a ready-to-eat Indomie product.



Figure 1. Instagram Feed of Indomie Product Advertisement with Human Influencer (Left) and VTuber (Right)

Source: Indomie (2024)

Influencers are important characters in today's marketing, where several previous studies have developed models to measure marketing effectiveness. VisCAP is a model used to measure the effectiveness of endorsers to attract market attention (Rossiter and Smidts, 2012; Bakker, 2018; Siskhawati and Maulana, 2021). The four components of VisCAP (Visibility, Capability, Attraction, and Power) can be used to measure the suitability of an influencer to the target market (Rossiter and Smidts, 2012; Bakker, 2018; Putra, Ridha and As'ad, 2018). Although VisCAP is often used by managers to select suitable influencers, this model needs to be retested for its suitability considering that this model emerged in an era when internet access was not as easy as it is now (Bakker, 2018). Other studies that measure endorsers also use the TEARS model with five indicators: trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness, respect, and similarity (Ahmad *et al.*, 2019; Ho, Phan and Le-Hoang, 2020; Chan *et al.*, 2021; Oteh *et al.*, 2023). The TEARS model is used to inspect whether there is an impact of endorsers on market purchase intentions for a product (Chan *et al.*, 2021). Through the TEARS model, researchers are helped to understand how celebrity endorsements work, while also seeing the suitability of the celebrity (Chan *et al.*, 2021; Ali *et al.*, 2023). To ensure that the company chooses the right endorser, the company will measure and evaluate the endorser to be selected (Ali *et al.*, 2023). It is crucial for companies to be able to measure the effectiveness of influencers in advertising their products or brands. These approaches, while commonly used with endorsers, would be odd if used with virtual figures. As in the context of food promotions, virtual endorsers who cannot actually eat would find a mismatch with these variables.

AttrakDiff is present as a tool that can evaluate a person's experience in capturing the impression of a product. The increasing frequency of advertising encourages marketers to consider the market experience when viewing the displayed advertisement. AttrakDiff is a semantic difference with 28 items used to assess a product based on hedonic and pragmatic

quality from the consumer's perspective (Hassenzahl, Burmester and Koller, 2003). AttrakDiff has a focus on measuring the hedonic and pragmatic aspects of the user experience (Perrig, 2018). It is important to conduct a pragmatic quality evaluation step, hedonic quality, and the attractiveness of the advertising content product presented to the target market. To see the difference in response between virtual Youtuber content and human Youtuber qualitatively and quantitatively, it can be done using AttrakDiff (Kim and Yoo, 2021). Audience preferences and experiences can be known using this approach if the audience is seen as a social media user. AttrakDiff can be used to compare different products, so it can be used to analyze two different ad content products. With this approach, measurements are made on the product advertisement as a whole, rather than just on the influencer figure in the Instagram feed advertisement. This study raises the research question: how do audiences' experiences of advertising products that feature human influencers and VTubers differ in Instagram feed content?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer Marketing and Interactive Marketing

Companies and brands have realized the immense potential of digital platforms in engaging with their audiences in a personal and impactful way, thanks to the rise of social media. In the dynamic digital world, a marketing strategy that has significant appeal for marketers and business people is collaboration with individuals with massive followings and who have a high influence on their audiences (Guptaa, 2021; Jansom and Pongsakornrungsilp, 2021). Influencer marketing is marketing that involves the practice of product endorsement by individuals who have been deemed credible and trusted by their followers, which can increase brand awareness, visibility, and consumer engagement and purchasing behavior (Guptaa, 2021; Jansom and Pongsakornrungsilp, 2021; Rani *et al.*, 2022; Prajapati, 2023). Credibility, content characteristics, and similarity to the audience make influencers able to bring brands to interact with consumers (Mandiri, Jamhari and Darwanto, 2022). Influencer marketing using social media such as Instagram and YouTube can help instill a product or brand in the minds of consumers, which can also influence their consumption behavior (Gupta, Mahajan and Dash, 2023; Singwal, Ghai and Chandak, 2023). This phenomenon has become even more interesting with the emergence of virtual influencers, characters created using computers that have human-like characters and personalities and are able to create and share various content on social media like human influencers (Jansom and Pongsakornrungsilp, 2021; Sookkaew and Saephoo, 2021).

Increasingly developing technology with the help of AI, VR, and AR can support the delivery of interesting marketing content that increases marketing effectiveness in the digital world (Parikh, 2023). Developments in increasingly dynamic interactive marketing enable business actors to build relationships with consumers in meeting consumer needs (Wang, 2021; Nimusima, Kamukama and Kalibwani, 2022). The effectiveness of marketing using influencers, both human influencers and virtual influencers, has been the topic of several studies that have attempted to explore how they impact consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behavior (Jansom and Pongsakornrungsilp, 2021; Rani *et al.*, 2022; Prajapati, 2023).

Attrakdiff

User experience is an important part of the interaction between consumers and products. Attrakdiff is an approach to understanding how a person experiences using a product. In its

measurement, a semantic differential approach is used, which reflects the hedonic quality and pragmatic quality of a person (Hassenzahl, Burmester and Koller, 2003). Attrakdiff has 28 attributes, which are then grouped into four groups: 1) pragmatic quality (PQ), which explains how users capture usability indicated by the ease of consumers achieving their goals; 2) hedonic quality – identification (HQ-I), which explains how products support social functions and communicate certain identities to someone; 3) hedonic quality – stimulation (HQ-S), which explains how products support stimulation needs by presenting new, interesting, and stimulating content, characteristics, and interaction styles; and 4) attractiveness (ATT), which explains how the perceived value of a product is based on the perception of pragmatic quality and hedonic quality. Of all the attributes evaluated by users, it is formed in a semantic differential 7-scale model that represents two poles that are different from each other.

Research Question

Looking at the problems raised in the introduction and the theoretical background of the study, there are two models of product advertisements presented to the audience on Instagram social media: feed content with regular influencers (humans) and feed content with VTuber influencers. The experience of Instagram users who are the audience of the Indomie Instagram account will have a different experience watching the two advertisements. Therefore, this study asks the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there a difference in the perception of the audience's experience of influencers with human and virtual identities?

RQ2: How are the differences expressed by the audience towards the two advertisements when viewed from the perspective of hedonic quality and pragmatic quality?

RESEARCH METHOD

The research will be conducted using a qualitative method, which aims to compare Instagram feed ad content that includes human influencers and VTuber influencers. By doing this, it can be seen the differences in responses from Instagram social media users qualitatively and quantitatively. Thus, the respondents who will be selected in this study are those who have never seen or followed VTuber content, and those who have seen VTuber video content and followed VTubers on social media. A total of 20 research respondents were obtained to fill out the provided Attrakdiff questionnaire. The primary data obtained were 20 respondents x 2 questionnaires (Human Influencer and VTuber).

AttrakDiff is based on the theory of how pragmatic and theoretical qualities have subjective perceptions of attractiveness, which then have an influence on a person's behavior and emotions. AttrakDiff can be used in 3 scenarios: 1) conducting a single evaluation of a product; 2) comparing two products; and 3) conducting before and after measurements at the product development stage. In this study, the scenario carried out was to compare two advertising products that presented two different types of influencers.

Instagram feed content that includes VTubers and human influencers is taken through advertising content from Indomie's Instagram feed, as a company that uses both influencers in different feed content. The product being advertised is also chosen to be the same, namely instant noodles with tori miso flavor. Links from each feed content are shared with respondents, and respondents are asked to view the feed content until the end. To measure the attractiveness of the content product to be assessed, a measurement instrument is used in the form of a semantic differential, consisting of 28 items with a scale of 1-7 where each polar contains

contradictory adjectives (e.g., “clear-confusing”, “good-bad”, “unique-ordinary”). Each adjective has been arranged to be able to measure its intensity. Each of the middle values of the item groups will assess the scale of pragmatic quality, hedonic quality, and attractiveness.

This study obtained 20 respondents who were willing to follow instructions in assessing product advertising content with human influencers and VTubers. The respondents obtained were divided into 10 men and 10 women. All respondents were in the young adult age range, namely in the 20-30 years age range, and were studying in college. Some of the respondents had never seen VTuber content at all (20%), and some were followers of one of the VTuber social media platforms (40%). Some of the respondents who were followers of VTubers (40%) stated that they had known about the presence of Kobo Kanaeru and Kureiji Ollie in Instagram advertising content because it had gone viral in their community on social media.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

Portfolio Evaluation Results

Figure 2 shows the portfolio presentation of hedonic quality (HQ) and pragmatic quality (PQ) values, with HQ represented by the horizontal axis and PQ represented by the vertical axis. In its application, the results can show more than one regional character. The results above show a fairly clear position of each advertising product, where both are in a neutral position.

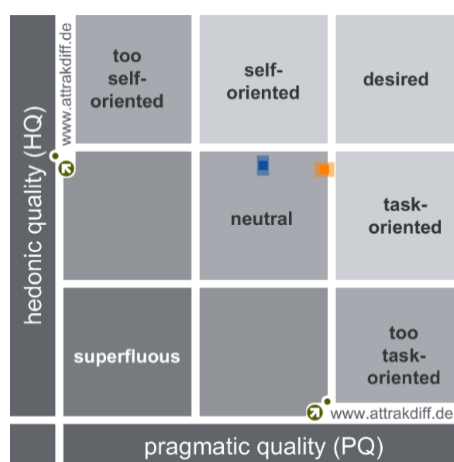


Figure 2. Portfolio Evaluation Results

Source: Primary Data Processed (2024)

The medium value of the dimensions of each advertising product can be seen from the bright box points in the portfolio, while the confidence level can be seen in the faint box in each bright box. Advertising products starring VTubers are represented by the blue color, while advertising products using human influencers are represented by the orange color. The smaller the confidence box that appears in the portfolio, the clearer and more reliable the results of the tests carried out. Advertisements starring VTubers have a PQ value of -0.01 (confidence 0.09) and an HQ value of 0.77 (confidence 0.14). Advertisements starring human influencers have a PQ value of 0.92 (confidence 0.15) and an HQ value of 0.7 (confidence 0.10).

The results that can be seen in the evaluation portfolio show that the audience's experience in viewing the feed content of both advertising products is neutral. However, there is a slight tendency that advertisements starring VTubers tend to provide a more hedonistic experience and advertisements starring ordinary influencers tend to provide a more pragmatic experience.

Average Values of Dimensions

The average value results of each evaluated dimension are displayed through a diagram as shown in Figure 3. The display provided provides the results of pragmatic quality (PQ), hedonic quality—identity (HQ-I), hedonic quality—stimulation (HQ-S), and attractiveness (ATT).

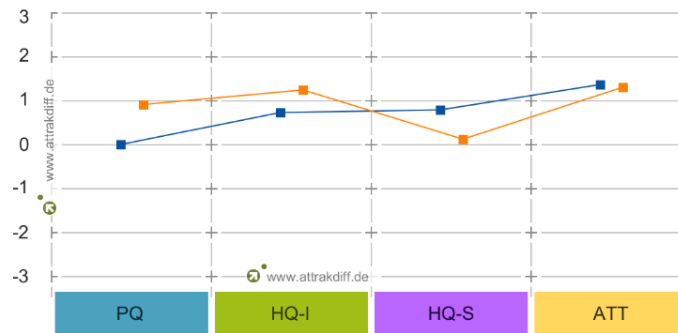


Figure 3. Diagram of Average Values from Human Influencer (Orange) and VTuber (Blue)

Source: Primary Data Processed (2024)

In product advertisements with VTubers, the PQ values are: -0.01, HQ-I: 0.74, HQ-S: 0.80, and ATT: 1.38. In product advertisements with human influencers, the PQ values are: 0.92, HQ-I: 1.25, HQ-S: 0.16, and ATT: 1.32. Comparing the two from the results of the average value diagram, there are interesting differences between the two.

In pragmatic quality, product advertisements with human influencers have a greater value compared to product advertisements with VTubers. Audiences who view feed content with human influencers find it easier to achieve their goals compared to advertisements with VTubers. In fact, a negative value (-0.01) indicates that they feel hampered in achieving the goals they want to complete from viewing video advertising content.

In hedonic quality – identity, product advertisements with human influencers have a greater value compared to product advertisements with VTubers. The audience judges based on their experience of viewing both ad feed contents that they are better able to capture the identity that is being conveyed from product advertisements with human influencers compared to product advertisements with VTubers.

In hedonic quality – stimulation, product advertisements with VTubers have a greater value compared to product advertisements with human influencers. This dimension shows the need for content stimulation, characteristics, and new and unique interaction styles, where the audience judges product advertisements with VTubers to be better than product advertisements with human influencers.

In attractiveness, although with a small margin of value, product advertisements with VTubers have a greater value compared to product advertisements with human influencers. This shows that the value captured from product advertisement content with VTubers is better than product advertisement content with human influencers.

Evaluation Results by Measurement Items

Figure 4 shows the assessment details of each pair of words in each dimension. The four dimensions have several assessment instruments related to the respondents' experience in viewing the advertisements displayed.

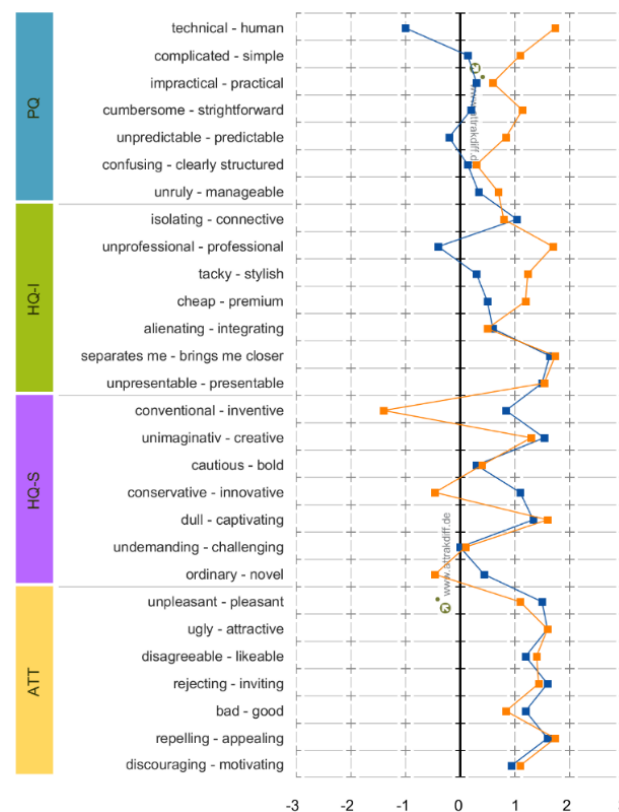


Figure 4. Evaluation by Pair-Words from Human Influencer (Orange) and VTuber (Blue)

Source: Primary Data Processed (2024)

In the pragmatic quality (PQ) dimension, interesting results can be seen in the technical-human and unpredictable-predictable word pairs. It is undeniable that VTubers appear in animated form and this has an impact on the audience who judges that as long as they see the two advertisements presented, they will judge VTubers as technical and human influencers as human. The audience then judges that VTubers tend to be unpredictable when conveying messages in advertising content compared to human influencers. The difference between the two certainly has an impact on the assessment of the audience's goal achievement when viewing product advertising content on social media.

In the hedonic quality-identity (HQ-I) dimension, interesting results are seen in the unprofessional-professional word pair. This difference shows how the identity conveyed through advertising is considered professional or not. Watching product advertising content starring VTubers, the audience judges them as less professional when compared to human influencers. This does not mean that VTuber content is considered below standard, but it can be interpreted as more casual than human influencers in general.

In the hedonic quality – stimulus (HQ-S) dimension, significant differences between the two can be seen in the conventional-inventive, conservative-innovative, and ordinary-novel word pairs. There are many differences in this section, where the value of human influencers is in the negative pole, with conventional assessments as the most striking adjective among them. The audience considers human influencers to be something common and ordinary, conventional, and ordinary. When compared to VTubers who appear as virtual figures, of course there is an innovative and unique impression given. In this dimension, VTubers are able to perform better than human influencers as part of product advertising content on social media.

In the attractive dimension, although the values are different, both are at the same pole with values that tend to be almost the same. The values obtained by the audience while viewing both product advertisements are almost the same. Although they have almost the same value, VTubers do appear superior compared to human influencers. Each advertisement is able to attract the attention of the audience with its own value, which, when viewed from the analysis of the word pairs above, has their respective pragmatic and/or hedonic qualities.

Discussion

Influencers are an important part of an advertisement to attract an audience according to its appeal. In this study, Indomie as a company that advertises instant noodle products, understands this and uses influencers to attract consumers' attention. The influencers used in Indomie's Instagram social media advertising content apparently do not only use human influencers as usual, but also VTubers as influencers who appear in virtual figures. The phenomenon of using virtual avatars to become advertising stars is not something that is commonly found, although in some cases it has been done by other companies. It should also be noted that in the context of this study, VTubers advertise food products, which is certainly interesting because if we look at the VTuber entity which is a digital avatar, they cannot "really" consume it.

Attrakdiff is used in this study to determine whether there is a difference between advertising products with human influencers and advertising products with VTubers. The results of this study indicate that the attractiveness produced by both is relatively the same, with what needs to be underlined is that the quality value offered by both is captured differently by the audience. Through attrakdiff, both show interesting differences between the pragmatic quality value and the hedonic quality value of the audience who sees their advertising content. The pragmatic quality value captured by the audience from advertisements with human influencers is greater than that of VTubers and conversely the hedonic quality value captured in advertisements with VTubers is greater than that of influencers. However, if hedonic quality is specified to identity (HQ-I) and stimulus (HQ-S), there is a difference where human influencers are stronger at HQ-I and VTubers are stronger at HQ-S.

The perceived value that the audience gets from an advertisement will determine whether the advertisement is interesting or not, which is supported by the pragmatic quality value and hedonic quality value in the advertisement. Advertisements act as a medium of communication between companies or brands and consumers. Through the information they get, consumers can fulfill their needs or solve their problems. Pragmatic quality in advertising products supports consumers to fulfill their needs and solve problems, which in this study is more supported by advertisements starring human influencers. Consumers see significant differences in both where VTubers are seen as technical figures and their advertisements are unpredictable, which of course makes human influencers appear more human and predictable. Of course, in this context, advertising content featuring human influencers is easier for the audience to understand and makes it easier for them to capture information that is solution-oriented and relevant to their needs. Hedonic quality is related to the fulfillment of a person's hedonic value, which in this case is divided into the need for social identity (HQ-I) and the need for stimulation of new and interesting things (HQ-S).

Advertising products with human influencers perform better in fulfilling the audience's social identity needs, where their more professional appearance compared to VTubers becomes the dominant character in fulfilling this need. On the other hand, VTubers have an advantage in fulfilling the need for stimulation of new and interesting things, where they are able to appear more innovative, novel, and inventive. The appearance of VTubers for most audiences is

considered new and not common to find, inviting curiosity, and those who are interested in new things will be interested in watching advertising content with VTubers in it.

CONCLUSION

The shift in pop culture and technology today has an impact on a person's preference for something that is interesting or not. This study aims to determine the differences in the attractiveness of advertising product content brought by human influencers and VTubers on Instagram social media. The results of the study show that the attractiveness given by both of them to food product advertisements on Instagram social media is almost the same, with each having its own advantages in pragmatic quality and hedonic quality. Product advertising content brought by human influencers is considered more capable of helping the audience achieve their goals in watching advertisements, while VTubers are able to meet the needs of interactive stimulation and an interesting and new style. Moreover, if the audience is those who are close to VTuber pop culture, the need for uniqueness and novelty will be met more strongly than conventional influencers.

Increasingly tight competition in the industrial world encourages companies and marketers to launch appropriate marketing strategies to attract market attention, even if necessary to capture market niches. Fulfilling consumer needs and desires is one of the attractions of products and messages in advertisements. Pragmatic and hedonistic qualities play a role in fulfilling consumer needs. Pragmatic and hedonistic qualities are also important parts so that product advertisements can appear attractive to their audience. Companies and marketers need to consider how to stimulate the pragmatic and hedonistic qualities of the audience, which can then be done through the existence of influencers in it. Each influencer has its own value and appeal, which needs to be considered and utilized properly by companies and marketers. In the context of this study, the visuals of both are even different attractions between the two, where human influencers appear conventionally and VTubers appear as digital avatars. Through this study, it is proven that human influencers who appear conventionally are better at fulfilling the pragmatic and hedonic-identity aspects. On the other hand, VTubers are able to attract attention through the hedonic-stimulus aspect.

Humans will always develop where the social and cultural contexts that exist in them continue to develop in various pop cultures. This condition then creates various market niches that certainly have unique desires in fulfilling their needs. In the case of Indomie, the product that will be released is a product with a Japanese theme. It is natural that they try to target the Japanese culture lover market. Their community can be found in the followers of VTuber, who originally also came from Japan. When products and influencers can run linearly, this can invite interest from the market. Companies and marketers must be able to find common "stories" of their products or brands and influencers who will appear through advertisements in front of the audience. Advertisements that are informative or display the company's identity will be effective if delivered by conventional human influencers, while if the message of novelty is conveyed or you want to show an inventive impression, VTuber can be an attractive choice for companies and marketers.

Looking at the results of this study, several limitations need to be considered that can be assumptions for further research. First, the research respondents were not distinguished between those who had been exposed to VTubers or not. This caused the study to be unable to explore the differences if the audience had previously known the existence of VTubers or not. Second, the preferences of the respondents could be deepened before presenting the research instrument. The strong relationship between VTubers and Japanese pop culture certainly gives a different impression between individuals who like Japanese pop culture or not. Third, groups

of respondents with different characteristics can be formed to explore the type of audience that is suitable for each influencer so that the marketing strategy formed can lead to the appropriate target market.

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