Research article

Intertextuality in the Body Designs of AI-Based Virtual Influencers

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Abstract

This study approaches virtual humans by foregrounding their material dimensions and exploring how virtual stars present visual images and the mythical connections that influence the images they create. We analyze characters named Lu do Magalu, Lil Miquela, Barbie, Thalasya, Noonoouri, Imma, Bermuda, Rozy, Ay Pera, Alara X, Hatsune Miku, and Shudu, selected through purposive sampling, considering their posts on Instagram. We employ intertextuality and its variant, mythological intertextuality, to identify how the creators of these avatars draw on myths, archetypes, and modern cultural contexts in the physical design and construction of their bodies. We discuss our findings by engaging with the views of scholars such as Carl Jung and Jean Baudrillard. In summary, we conclude that virtual influencers are visually created and embodied through inspiration from both archaic and modern myths and archetypes; their flawless and sterile bodies are transcended and idealized like mythological heroes, their eroticized and exposed bodies are presented as objects of desire, and the gender roles they adopt reproduce patriarchal myths. Additionally, it has been observed that through their fluid bodily images and design, they become mythologized and function as a type of simulacrum.

Keywords: Virtual influencer, Body, Mythology, Intertextuality, Embodiment

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

4 QUALITY EDUCATION | 5 GENDER EQUALITY | 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES | 11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES | 13 CLIMATE ACTION | 15 LIFE ON LAND | 16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

Introduction

Virtual humans, designed using computer technologies and artificial intelligence algorithms, have risen to stardom by gaining fame on social platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, reaching millions of followers and acquiring the influence to shape public opinion. These models, referred to as virtual influencers (VI) (Pushparaj & Kushwaha, 2023), social media influencers (Romero-Rodríguez & Castillo-Abdul, 2023), computer-generated influencers (CGI) or artificial intelligence influencers (AII) (Guthrie, 2020), and virtual/digital humans (Zaman et al., 2022; Paul et al., 2022), have become significant figures not only as social media phenomena but also in fields such as advertising and marketing communication (Byun & Ahn, 2023), brand representation, and the fashion industry (Cho & Lim, 2019).

Virtual influencers (VI) have garnered substantial interest among consumers (Roy & Chakraborty, 2023). This interest, particularly pronounced among the younger generation, has sometimes surpassed human influencers' popularity (Baklanov, 2022). Popular brands targeting young consumers, such as Gucci, Balmain, Dior, IKEA, and Calvin Klein, have increasingly turned to VI, over whom they can exert greater control, instead of working with real humans (Muslimah & Sunengsih, 2023).

"The majority of virtual influencers are currently CGI-made, limiting audience interaction to static social media posts or videos. Nevertheless, with advancements in AI and virtual reality, some VI are already participating in live interviews and activities, becoming more 'human'" (Conti et al., 2022, p. 6). "In the near future, AI influencers may be able to gather user information through natural language processing, image recognition, and speech recognition; create autonomic posts and reply to the audience based on consumer sentiment through problem-solving, and continually improve the interactive process through machine learning," Benckendorff says (cited in Kugler, 2023: 25). In this context, despite being relatively new, the need for research examining virtual stars as a cultural phenomenon rapidly expanding in number and being equipped with new capabilities in parallel with developments in the AI field is increasing proportionally.

Research on VI focuses primarily on areas such as advertising and marketing communication (Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021), brand management (Sands et al., 2022), and the relationships and parasocial interactions between VI and consumers or followers (Lou, 2022; Iva Jurišić et al., 2024; Um, 2023). These studies have emphasized influencers' personal attributes, such as attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and entertainment value, along with their persuasive capacities in interactions with followers (Pushparaj & Kushwaha, 2023; Park & Sung, 2023), and have questioned how artificial intelligence influences this process (Muslimah & Sunengsih, 2023). The advantages and disadvantages presented by humans and VI in terms of brand management, advertising, or effective communication with target audiences have also been explored (Kim et al., 2024; Sands et al., 2022; Moustakas et al., 2020). Furthermore, the strategies of constructing these new forms of existence by imbuing them with human-like qualities (Lee & Yuan, 2023; Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; Drenten & Brooks, 2020), as well as the cultural (Miyake, 2023), ethical, and ontological issues that arise in this context, have been examined (Robinson, 2020; Roy & Chakraborty, 2023).

Based on the premise that virtual humans are primarily visual constructs, this study focuses on the body images they present and investigates the mythic and cultural connections that influence the

images they create. Indeed, mythology serves as a resource for cultural references, archetypes, symbolism, and historical contexts that can be integrated into the design of virtual humans. The themes, fantastical elements, surreal components, and the sense of mystery and curiosity embedded in mythologies and contemporary narratives are significant tools in the creation of virtual humans and in establishing connections between virtual humans and real people. Like mythological heroes, these avatars, created with aesthetic concerns and the desire to be admired and attract attention, possess an impeccably flawless appearance, ageless bodies, the ability to travel anywhere at any time, and project boundless energy—making them unattainable and unreal figures for real humans. Given their influence on contemporary popular culture, these characters are the myths, mythological figures, and myth-makers of the digital age.

Based on this approach, we examine the VI Lu do Magalu, Lil Miquela, Barbie, Thalasya, Noonoouri, Imma, Bermuda, Rozy, Ay Pera, Alara X, Hatsune Miku, and Shudu, selected through purposive sampling, by analyzing their posts on Instagram. To identify how myths, archetypes, and modern cultural contexts are utilized in the physical design and body construction of these avatars, we employ intertextuality and, as a form of it, mythological intertextuality. We discuss our findings by drawing on the views of authors such as Carl Jung and Jean Baudrillard.

Literature Review

The body is the positioning of a living being or object within matter. It serves as evidence of its existence in space and place. Since Plato, the body has been conceived within the tradition of thought as being in opposition to the soul and has been conceptualized as a form of deficiency. While the soul is exalted as a "spiritual substance capable of eternal existence" and the "true self," the body has been depicted as an obstacle to the soul (Plato, 2013, pp. 22-23). In the tradition of thought grounded in Plato's views, the opposition between soul and body manifests as the opposition between life and death. The soul symbolizes life, while the body represents mortality. Unlike the soul, the body is material.

Technological inventions, along with advancements in medicine and especially plastic surgery, have transformed the body into an entity that can be repaired and modified. This process modularizes and fluidizes the body, bringing discussions about the body back into focus within frameworks such as transhumanism and posthumanism. The hopes and concerns promised by the figure of the cyborg, in particular, have become central to these debates (Oktan et al., 2023), also serving as a source of emergence for post-feminist discourses. In the context of these discussions, which follow the idea of the body transforming into a designable mechanism, the forms of virtual existence offered by social media, digital games, AR, and AI technologies as products of digitalization have pushed these debates to radical dimensions. Perhaps the most radical shift in discussions about the body is the emergence of VI, who, despite lacking any physical existence, gives the impression of being a real entity and can establish strong interactions with the physical world. Designed using various design and visualization programs, as well as artificial intelligence algorithms, VI represents a new form of existence that completely eliminates the narrative of the body's mortality and fragility, infinitely expanding its boundaries.

Perhaps the most important feature of VI, who are based on a kind of absence, is that their physical bodies and personal lives can be constructed (Thomas & Fowler, 2021; Choudhry et al., 2022). They have no ontological limitations such as their gender, race, appearance and socio-economic status. They offer an unlimited degree of "customizability." The literature emphasizes that five key criteria are decisive in the construction of these characters as entities: attractiveness, authenticity, anthropomorphism, scalability, and controllability (Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021). Among these features, anthropomorphism, attractiveness, and authenticity are particularly important for the bodily design of VI.

Attractiveness is about equipping the influencer with characteristics that are strong, engaging but also include aspirations, conflicts, etc., that help them to connect emotionally with their followers (Moustakas et al., 2020). This is also related to commercial endorsement and alignment with the brand (Torres et al., 2019).

Authenticity is the most emphasized category in the literature concerning the endowment of VI with an identity and their self-presentation. Associated with trust, reliability, and transparency (Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021), authenticity fundamentally refers to how influencers present themselves as real (Marwick, 2013). According to Duffy and Hund (2019), exhibiting a friendly, grounded, and "real" personality is essential for building a successful relationship with the audience. Within the framework of the principle of authenticity, VI comments on real issues, poses with real people, posts videos, and shares visuals of their journeys to real locations. Human flaws, such as insecurity, ambition, and vulnerability, which mimic human influencers, are also attributed to them as part of the authenticity design. From the perspective of body design, small imperfections like moles, pimples, and marks that give the impression of life experiences are incorporated on the surface of the body to create the impression that the character possesses its own life story.

Anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human form, characteristics, and behaviors to non-human entities (Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021; Golossenko et al., 2020). Although VI are computer-generated, they often possess human-like traits, behaviors, actions, and personalities (Thomas & Fowler, 2021), and advancements in computer technologies have enabled them to be presented with realistic body designs that are almost indistinguishable from reality (Seymour et al., 2019). Besides being visually designed to resemble humans, they share posts displaying everyday practices such as brushing their teeth, eating ice cream, crying, and having fun. They also perform rituals on the platforms they interact with as if they were real humans. Research indicates that attributing human-like features to non-human entities increases user engagement and strengthens emotional bonds (Verhagen et al., 2014; Blut et al., 2021). However, when the resemblance of a digital entity to a human is excessive, particularly in contexts where the virtual world intersects with the real world, it can evoke feelings of alienation, eeriness, fear, and disgust, as highlighted by the uncanny valley theory (Choudhry et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2019). Therefore, when creating human-like influencers, there is an emphasis on the risk of achieving a level of resemblance that may trigger these concerns (Sands et al., 2022).

VI, endowed with anthropomorphic features, are able to deliver the same types of content as real human influencers (Stein et al., 2024); however, they are not yet fully autonomous and require control by humans or computer algorithms (Byun & Ahn, 2023). Thus, the seemingly human-like

relationships they establish with followers and brand target audiences, in one aspect, reveal that the design and "life" process of these virtual characters is built on various strategies, masking the influence of cultural intermediaries (designers, managers, advertisers, photographers, etc.) who are the true determinants behind their human appearance. Within this context, the designed human exists as a kind of commodity or property (McDonald, 2000-) and is produced within an influencer culture that resembles the Hollywood star system. This fabricated public persona is constructed using the tools of influencer culture, such as individual control and branding (Jerslev, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017).

Despite the flexibility of the creation process and the limitless options for VI as fictional entities, they embody cultural codes, social norms, and gender patterns that are also applicable to real humans, which are presumed to make them more appealing and persuasive to the brands they represent and their followers (Lee & Yuan, 2023). As Drenten and Brooks (2020) have observed in the case of Lil Miquela, these codes and image strategies are largely archetypal.

Katharine Young, who coined the term bodylore, considers the body a folkloric term and discusses how the body is reinvented according to the geographical context and prevailing discourses (Young, 1993). Therefore, the body, a cultural entity that transforms according to culture, is closely related to mythology as another cultural element. In the developing and changing life and ideological practices of the ancient, modern, postmodern, and digital age, some similar perceptions and attitudes in body image are noticeable. The roots of this perception were established in the mythological period and were transmitted to subsequent eras through the perpetuation of mythical arguments. The body images brought to life in mythological narratives serve as a fundamental source of inspiration in transforming the body image, with their influence both in oral culture and in artistic forms such as painting and sculpture.

Shintar has shown that modern social mythology and archaic myths are interrelated and share common characteristics (Shintar, 2022). K. Jung also emphasizes a similar continuity with his concepts of archetype and collective unconscious. Jung observed that themes and entities in myths and religions resemble each other across many cultures and argued that these commonalities, which he termed archetypes, could be universal (Jung, 1989; Jung, 2000). He suggested that despite the differences among individuals and cultures in many respects, there is an underlying unity of idea and form beneath these differences (cited in Relke, 2007). According to Jung, archetypes are images that have existed since ancient times and have been transmitted across generations. Archetypes, which contain traces of the countless experiences of millions of people—stemming from their pains, pleasures, fears, and more—crystallize as a historical accumulation of experience and embed themselves within the unconscious of society (Jung, 1996). Jung highlights the parallels between the prototypes inherited from the mythological and fairy tale legacy of the past and the images of today (Jung, 2000). Therefore, it is possible to find traces of the collective unconscious as a historical accumulation in dreams, fairy tales, myths, religious dogmas, artistic creations, and popular culture images. As Shintar (2022) also emphasized, archetypes materialize in various forms of imagery, social and cultural patterns, and behaviors, and they also appear in the artificially produced social myths of modern society.

The internalized myths of the body and beauty throughout the historical process are also utilized in the design of VI's bodies, faces, aesthetic criteria, behaviors, and social media usage. Thus, they

play a role in the modernization and timelessness of the body as a bearer of myths. Within this scope, one of the central questions of this study is as follows:

RQ.1: What kinds of myths and archetypes do the body images of VI refer to?

On the other hand, despite lacking a physical presence, VI are portrayed and positioned by their designers in real locations and socio-cultural contexts as an extension of the impression of being real (Roy & Chakraborty, 2023). These characters are sometimes perceived as real humans and receive admiration, affection, and support from their followers, whether the followers are aware or unaware that they are not human (Oliveira & Chimenti, 2021). Indeed, the identities of VI are inherently performative, making it difficult to distinguish between real identity and image production (Roy & Chakraborty, 2023). Robinson (2020) also notes that people interact with VI as if they were real, even though they know they are not, engaging with them in the same way they would with real humans. In this context, representation increasingly replaces reality as if it possesses its own essence, and as Shin (2023) highlights, the created virtual reality is progressively influencing and shaping the everyday world.

This situation brings to mind Jean Baudrillard's critiques of contemporary societies in the context of the relationship between reality and representation. Baudrillard, with his approach centered on the concepts of simulacrum, simulation, and hyperreality, adopts a critical perspective on the transformation of increasingly digitalized contemporary societies. According to Baudrillard (1994), the postmodern era corresponds to a process in which reality is radically lost. The first concept introduced by Baudrillard in this context, simulacrum, refers briefly to the phenomenon where a representation or copy becomes a reality in itself, independent of the objects or events it represents (Baudrillard, 1994). Simulation is the process in which representations or simulacra replace reality, where the signs and symbols that represent reality become a reality of their own. According to Baudrillard, in today's societies, where images that render reality invisible dominate, the simulacrum has replaced reality, and the boundary between the real and the simulated has become indistinguishable. Hyperreality refers to such a situation in which signs only reflect other signs, and the simulacrum begins to determine reality.

According to Azzahra and Christin, hyperreality is created through simulacra, which are images that function as representations or imitations of a person or object, and symbols, signs, photographs, videos, or other visual forms can become simulacra. Therefore, in a digitalized world, artificially produced images have replaced the perception of reality that we obtain through direct experiences. In this context, VI, which do not originate from or rely on any real source, are perhaps the most radical examples of Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum. Ontologically based on an absence, these entities function as agents of the simulation universe through the body images and portrayals of their lives they present.

At this point, the second fundamental question determined for this study, which perceives VI bodies as texts and problematizes their body images and the mythic and cultural contexts they signify, is as follows:

RQ.2: What kind of reality does the image regime, which becomes visible in the embodiment strategies of VI and reflects mythic-cultural elements, point to, and how can it be interpreted?

Methodology

In this study, which employs a qualitative research design, we examine 12 VI, selected through purposive sampling and whose characteristics are listed in Table-1, based on their posts on Instagram. These characters were included in the analysis due to their human-like features, the use of the real human form in their design, and their alignment with human reality in terms of characteristics. Additionally, they have been chosen because they have reached a high number of followers on social media, reflect the cultural characteristics of the societies in which they were created, and engage people in this multi-layered interaction by being part of the global agenda.

Virtual Star's Name And Instagram Username	Description	Number Of Posts	Number Of Followers
Lu do Magalu @magazineluiza	Lu do Magalu is a 3D virtual human designed by Magazine Luiza, one of Brazil's largest retail affiliates. Lu was introduced in 2009. The reason why Lu has reached the largest audience among virtual stars is that she is very close to her real human appearance.	2.733	7.2 Million
Lil Miquela @lilmiquela	Lil Miquela Sousa is a virtual star who serves as a carrier of Brazilian culture. This CGI (Computer-Generated Imagery) character was created by Trevor McFedries and Sara DeCou as a 19-year-old, half-Brazilian, half-American mixed-race girl. She is known as a singer and influencer.	1.345	2.5 Million
Barbie @barbie	The most widely known virtual star globally is Barbie. She was first created in 1959 by Ruth Handler for her daughter Barbara to play with. Following successful marketing, Barbie became popular worldwide. The Barbie doll was transformed into a virtual character and became the subject of video games, cartoons, animations, and films.	2.364	3.5 Million
Thalasya @thalasya_	Indonesia's first virtual star, Thalasya, was created by Magnavem Studia in 2018. Thalasya is a 20-year-old singer born in Jakarta and owns a fashion brand called Yipiiiii. Thalasya promotes both her own brand and brands she collaborates with. Additionally, she appears in commercial films and frequently shares moments from her daily life on social media, including travel, food, drinks, hotels, and restaurant brands (Rustine and Indriana, 2023).	222	456.000

Noonoouri @noonoouri	Noonoouri was created as the world's first digital pop star by artistic director Joerg Zuber in Munich in 2018. Noonoouri's physical design defies reality.	1.932	489.000
Imma @imma.gram	The CGI character named Imma, designed by Aww Inc., became quite popular after her creation in Tokyo in 2018.	817	394.000
Bermuda @bermudaisbae	The virtual star named Bermuda, known as the "Robot Queen" from Los Angeles, was also created as a singer. Bermuda met with the audience for the first time in 2016.	268	221.000
Rozy @rozy.gram	South Korea's first VI, Rozy, is a young woman designed by Sidus Studio X who will appear to be 22 years old forever.	448	175.000
Aypera @aypera_official	Türkiye's first virtual star Aypera was designed as a singer, actress and model. It was produced in 2020 by a team of 15 people consisting of designers and trainers including Bager Akbay, Tevfik Uyar and Zeynep Nal Sezer (Kazan, 2023). Artificial intelligence technologies such as LSTM (Long Short-Term Memory) and GPT-3 (Generative Pre-trained Transformer 3) were used in the visual design of the character (Akbay, 2021).	98	13.100
Alara X @iamxalara	Another artificial intelligence human from Turkey, Alara X, was created in 2020 by a 21-person team from the IAMX.Live studio. Alara X describes herself as a "virtual fashion girl" and "unreal star."	206	656.000
Hatsune Miku @cfm_mikustagram	Hatsune Miku is a type of hologram designed with an anime appearance and created using the Vocaloid 2 program. Born in 2007, Hatsune Miku was released as a vocal synthesis software through a collaboration between Yamaha and Crypton Future Media, and has gained worldwide recognition as a virtual singer. Miku interacts with her fans on various social media platforms and mobile games. She promotes herself, her events, collaborations and sells toy figures on her Instagram account. This virtual idol, voiced by Saki Fujita, is a 16-year-old girl with long turquoise hair gathered on both sides.	1.072	101.000

Shudu @shudu.gram	Shudu, regarded as the world's first digital supermodel and created in 2017 by fashion photographer Cameron-James Wilson, has generated significant attention due to being a Black virtual woman created by a white man. Shudu is designed as a South African woman in her twenties.	162	238.000

Table 1: Characteristics of the VI under study

By considering the body designs and posts of the selected virtual stars, we utilized intertextuality and, as a form of it, mythological intertextuality approaches to determine how their creators draw on mythological archetypes in the physical design and body construction of these avatars. Intertextuality, introduced by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, is a method that enables us to understand the essence of images and embedded meanings in a text; in its most general definition, it refers to any kind of transfer of form and content between two or more texts. Roland Barthes considers everything in life, such as films, advertisements, games, clothing, recipes, and fortune-telling, as texts and emphasizes that these texts are surrounded by myths, which need to be seen and read (Barthes, 1996). Drawing from the concept of intertextuality, Drawing from the concept of intertextuality, Aslı Elgün has used the idea of inter-mythicality to make sense of the relationship between mythical texts and mythic elements. According to Elgün, "the concept of inter-mythicality describes the deconstruction of myths, which are meta-narratives in formal and content context, through the use of intertextual methods, while also implying the carnivalesque juxtaposition of canonical myths with peripheral myths" (Elgün, 2010, p. 167). In line with this perspective, we analyze the virtual humans comprising the sample of this research and the images they transmit over social media as texts, exploring their mythic scopes and inter-mythical connections.

The Body Images of Virtual Stars

One of the most popular AI-supported virtual characters examined in the study is Lu do Magalu. With black, short hair, a naturally appearing nose, a large mouth, thin lips, and a freckled face, she creates a dilemma for her followers as to whether she is virtual or real. Additionally, she is often seen in her social media posts at home, engaging in activities like cooking, cleaning, personal care, or applying makeup. This helps her project an image of being a natural and ordinary being, making it easier for her fans to identify with her. In the design of Lu do Magalu, the "Regular Guy/Gal" archetype, as termed by Carl Gustav Jung, which brands assign to characters for strategic purposes, has been utilized. "The Regular Guy/Gal archetype inherently embodies the virtue of being an ordinary person, just like everyone else" (Kurultay, 2017, p. 370). "The one among us, who is realistic and aims to be in harmony with society, is a realist, a citizen, a good neighbor, and the silent majority. It is particularly useful for brands adopting the ordinary/average person approach" (Türk, 2022, p. 291). Through the emphasis on ordinariness within the "one of us" image, an impression of reality is created, producing a simulacrum that Baudrillard describes as "an appearance that wants to be perceived as a reality" (1994). Therefore, from a Baudrillardian perspective, virtual stars are products of simulacra.

Figure 1: Lu do Magalu https://www.instagram.com/magazineluiza/

Figure 2: Lil Miquela https://www.instagram.com/lilmiquela/

Another virtual star who serves as a carrier of Brazilian culture is Lil Miquela Sousa. Despite her Western clothing and behavior, she has an ethnic skin tone, a broad nose, freckles, and brown hair. Małgorzata Martynuska discusses the impact of tropicalization on the creation of stereotypes about Latina women in American culture. According to her, this tropicalization is identified with bright colors, rhythmic music, and brown skin, the positioning of the Latina body as both oversexed and sexually accessible, seductive clothes, curvy hips and breasts, long brunette hair or extravagant jewelry (Martynuska, 2016, p. 73). It can be said that Miquela is also a model of this tropicalization. The sexualization of Miquela with her body-emphasizing appearance continues the representation of Latinos as exotic 'Others' along with the Brazilian-American identity (Halteren, 2023, p. 35). Additionally, Miquela's hair is always styled in two buns. In an intertextual context, this hairstyle resembles Princess Leia's in the Star Wars film. Christina M. Knopf mentions that the hair of Mexican women revolutionaries inspired this hairstyle. According to her, tightly

gathered hair reflects the image of strong and rebellious women within a patriarchal order (Knopf, 2019).

Figure 3: Barbie https://www.instagram.com/barbie/

The most well-known virtual star worldwide is Barbie, designed with the concept of an adult-looking doll. Barbie is a significant figure who idealizes the female body, represents the American beauty myth, and acts as a global cultural creator. Barbie has gained a place in the West with her white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes; in Africa, she has black skin and wavy hair; and in the Arab world, she has headscarves and prayer rug accessories. She has become globalised by taking shape according to social, cultural and religious norms. Thus, looking like Barbie has become a common myth for people all over the world. Hundreds of women who want to look like her do not hesitate to have aesthetic operations. Barbie has become a reference point in beauty ideals. Barbie is an immortal goddess of the modern world who does not need anyone, who is desired, who has an imperishable beauty.

Figure 4: Thalasya https://www.instagram.com/thalasya /

Indonesia's first virtual star, Thalasya, contrary to her Asian identity, has white skin, long legs, and a slim body. In this regard, it can be said that her bodily design is influenced by Barbie. Despite belonging to one of the countries with the largest Muslim populations, Thalasya often presents a Western appearance that is not an Islamic lifestyle. However, it is also possible to see her wearing

modest attire on certain religious days like Ramadan. In one Instagram post (Figure 4), she appears as a goddess, standing on clouds with a white seal behind her. In this guise, she draws a mythological hero model while problematizing her country's cultural and belief systems. Thalasya, with her physical features, fashion sense, and behavior, reflects the pluralism and multiculturalism of postmodernism. Carrying traces from every belief, culture, society, and ethnicity, she reflects the myth of a hybrid human model and society articulated with a global culture. She invites one to transcend the boundaries of cultural, social, and religious references and realities, reaching towards the infinite, the sky.

Figure 5: Noonoouri https://www.instagram.com/noonoouri/

Noonoouri, resembles an animation or manga character with her huge eyes, small mouth and nose, and head that is large in proportion to her body. Her face embodies a fantastical extraordinariness, yet her body conforms to the ordinariness of reality. She offers an innovative perspective beyond mere human imitation. It is almost impossible to see Noonoouri smiling on her Instagram account, which has 475 thousand followers. Her dark eye make-up and stern facial expression portray a demonic beauty image. With dark eye makeup and a stern facial expression, she portrays an image of demonic beauty, thereby embodying Jung's "Rebel" archetype. Noonoouri's rule-breaking appearance, stance, and attire, along with her intense gaze, discord with reality, and defiance of societal norms, reflect the rebel archetype.

Figure 6: Imma https://www.instagram.com/imma.gram/

Japan is one of the countries that integrates virtuality into real life and is a pioneer in the production of virtual stars. Imma, the virtual star of Tokyo, possesses a striking beauty with her proportionate face, full lips, small nose, almond-shaped eyes, and pink hair. Additionally, she embodies ideal body standards such as delicacy, slimness, feminine curves, smoothness, white skin, and youth. "Imma's head is digital, but her body poses in her pictures are simulated by bodies of real people lending her their body postures" (Bilali and Leinatamm, 2019, p. 41). On Imma's Instagram account, what she motivates in her followers is the desire to have "white, bright, and clear skin, anime-like pink hair and captivating eyes, voluptuous lips, or an ideal body shape for a woman" (Andin et al., 2022, p. 338). Imma's physical perfection and aesthetic appearance, with her pink hair—considered an erotic object in Japanese culture—are a concrete example of the contemporary Japanese beauty myth.

Figure 7: Hatsune Miku https://www.instagram.com/cfm_mikustagram/

Another virtual idol of Japan, Hatsune Miku, is a holographic singer. In 2009, she gave a concert attended by real people. Miku's success is closely related to the success of Japan's doujin culture. Japanese doujin culture is a fandom that makes excellent contributions, especially to the manga and anime industries (Le, 2014).

Hatsune Miku's physical design is inspired by anime, which holds significant importance in Japanese culture rather than resembling a real human appearance. The character is designed specifically to align with Japanese beauty ideals. She creates an image with a zero-size body, small mouth, large colored eyes, shiny, long, and colorful hair, and outfits that highlight her body, conforming to the Japanese fashion established by anime culture, often resembling school uniforms. Thus, Miku carries the cultural traces of the society in which she was created. The formation of this culture is related to the mythology of the society. Beliefs in supernatural, surreal, or superhuman entities are rooted in mythological history.

Figure 8: Bermuda https://www.instagram.com/bermudaisbae/

Another virtual star created as a singer is Bermuda from Los Angeles, known as the "Robot Queen." Designed as a 19-year-old woman with long blonde hair, blue eyes, fair skin, and an ideal body, Bermuda's realistic appearance is such that it raises doubts about her virtual nature. With her striking clothing, physical beauty, and smooth, glossy, and sterile skin appearance, she serves as both a desirable fetish object for the male gaze and a sought-after capital product for brands.

Figure 9: Rozy https://www.instagram.com/rozy.gram/

South Korea's first VI, Rozy, has slanted eyes, fits Korean genetics, and possesses a white, radiant, smooth skin that is highly significant in Korean culture. Real people view the timeless perfection of virtual stars as "'unattainable perfection'" (Oliveira and Chimenti, 2021, p. 10), leading them to pursue impossible dreams. Rozy portrays an image of a happy, joyful, colorfully dressed, and fun young girl. In this regard, she serves as an influential role model for Generation Z.

Figure 10: Aypera https://www.instagram.com/aypera_official/

Turkey's first virtual star, Aypera, is a singer, actress, and model. The name Aypera consists of the pronunciation of the English word 'I' and the Greek word 'Pera', meaning 'beyond.' Aypera roughly means 'I am beyond' and refers to the character being beyond today, this world, beyond reality. Aypera gives interviews and interviews for film acting and attracts attention on social media. She looks like a 21-year-old woman with black hair, colorful eyes, a curved nose, and an ideal body. Turkish people's aesthetic standards were considered in body design (Akbay, 2021). She challenges reality with sunburn scars and freckles on her body.

Figure 11: Alara X https://www.instagram.com/iamxalara/

Another artificial intelligence human from Turkey, Alara X, in contrast to Aypera's ordinary appearance, created with the phenotype of Turkish people in mind, Alara X stands out with her yellow and pink bobbed hair. In patriarchal codes, the fact that a woman has short and different-colored hair shows her contradiction, rebellion, and rejection of the status quo. In her post on her Instagram account 'Iamxalara' dated February 10, 2021 (Figure 11), Alara X poses with Barbie dolls. This is a clue that the Barbie doll inspires her design look. Alara X, who says she is interested in Turkish culture, continues the role attributed to women in patriarchal Turkish society by visualising it through intertextual methods by sharing images of her doing housework.

Figure 12: Shudu https://www.instagram.com/shudu.gram/

Shudu, regarded as the world's first digital supermodel and a Black woman, presents an image that straddles the line between female and male identity with her chiseled face and short hair. However, her bodily features and the provocative, body-exposing poses she shares emphasize her sexual allure. In addition to her modern clothing, her African style, particularly the "traditional Ndebele tribe's neck rings and earrings" (Halteren, 2023, p. 27), is noteworthy. The copper and brass rings, known as Idzila, symbolize married women's love and loyalty to their husbands and are part of a ritual (Hassaan, 2021, p. 2112). Thus, it can be said that supermodel Shudu serves as a technological figure rooted in tradition, bridging both traditional and modern/postmodern audiences. Additionally, Shudu is seen in an Instagram advertisement for a baby stroller, playing the role of a parent. The fact that brands assign this role to an avatar that cannot experience natural parenthood and that people engage with the advertisement demonstrates the influential impact of these virtual stars.

The Conceptual Construction of Virtual Bodies

Hybridity

As fictional entities, perhaps the most distinct feature of virtual stars is their hybridity. These characters sometimes exist as surfaces where images related to different cultural affiliations are amalgamated, sometimes as a blend of various traits of modern iconic figures, and sometimes as reinterpretations of archaic myths. At this point, virtual humans appear as hyper-texts that make references to various texts in forms such as "quotation," "hidden quotation," "allusion," and "pastiche." For example, the design of Noonoouri, created as a pop star, is inspired by Naomi Campbell and Kim Kardashian (Colombini, 2023, p. 45). Aypera, Turkey's first digital human, was designed by mixing images of three famous actresses. Additionally, real actresses' facial expressions are recorded on camera, synthesized, and used to create artificial expressions for Aypera. The character Alara X, through both body design and the clothes worn in some visuals, as well as attributes like athleticism and perfection, makes references to the Matrix universe and Trinity, the iconic female figure of the Matrix film series.

Alongside characters such as Noonoouri, Aypera, and Alara X, which are created through the synthesis of iconic figures that have become modern myths, there is also a notable presence of VI that references ancient myths. Mythical allusions become particularly prominent in characters designed to reflect Japanese culture. For example, the influence of Japanese mythology is quite evident in the creation and physical design of Hatsune Miku. Miku's physical appearance, dances, and songs are a modern design through intertextual allusion to the Japanese Joy Goddess Ame-no-Uzume. Allusion is the process where a newly created text evokes the style of persons, situations, and facts from an earlier text, generating a mental stimulus related to the original version (Aktulum, 1999). Considering the transfer between Ame-no-Uzume and Hatsune Miku, Uzume is the twirling, dancing Shinto goddess of dawn, known as the goddess of dawn, laughter, festivity, and the arts. Myths describe her as saving the world from darkness and bringing light (Roberts, 2004, p. 114). Hatsune Miku, with her dancing and singing, cheering on her fans, and possessing long hair, as depicted by Ame-no-Uzume, serves as a reminder of her. As Badiou says, dance is the body as the visibility of an intrinsic concentration (2019, p. 192). Thus, dance serves as a phenomenon that brings her closer to reality, proving her existence in reality and even creating signs of having a soul. Additionally, another mythological figure that comes to mind with Hatsune Miku is Benten, otherwise known as Benzaiten. Benten is the goddess of music, poetry, happiness, and the sea in Buddhism and Shintoism, and is depicted playing the traditional Japanese musical instrument, the biwa (Piggott, 1969). Moreover, as a nod to her being a sea goddess, Hatsune Miku has sea blue hair. Her fans, complementing this narrative about the character, also describe her as a goddess or an angel.

As seen in these examples, the images utilized in the design of artificial humans can be ancient myths or figures that have transformed into modern myths, cultural contexts, or narratives. On the other hand, these fictional entities, existing at the intersection of various texts, are becoming modern icons with the unique narratives they create and the images they conjure in the imaginations of their fan bases. Their physical appearances, behavior patterns, uses of space, social media posts, products they endorse, and the images they present about themselves complete this iconic design. According to Roland Barthes, myth is a communication system, and anything can become a myth. Myth allows us to make sense of any phenomenon. Myths can be used for a historical examination of the past or to create a new history for the future (Barthes, 1972). In this context, it is possible to characterize virtual stars as myth-makers of the digital age.

Physical Transcendence and Perfection

In essence, virtual stars, essentially virtual body designs, all appear to possess physical beauty enchanting enough to captivate their target audiences and inexhaustible energy. These ageless, wrinkle-free, immortal bodies also invalidate ideas that position the body as the other in philosophical discussions about human existence, in contrast to the soul. The limitation of human existence due to the body's mortality ceases to be a problem for virtual humans. With their physical transcendence, these characters are, in a sense, the timeless gods and goddesses of modern myths. Some social media posts also feature such imagery. For example, in some photos and videos of Alara X, low-angle shots are used to make her appear more prominent and taller than she is, thus creating an impression of bodily transcendence. The aestheticized, sterile, and

energetic construction of female bodies in science fiction and cyberpunk films is also employed in the design of Alara X. Together with leather, black, shiny outfits reminiscent of the latex clothes worn by female profiles in these films; there is an effort to create a prototype of an athletic, invincible superhuman. On the other hand, in her Instagram post captioned "Blue Dragon Year," Rozy is depicted sitting with a dragon in front of a full moon (Figure 9). For the people of East Asia and Korea, who cherish their ancient myths and continue to uphold them today, the dragon is a significant mythological figure also featured in their 12-animal calendar. Typically, while dragons in the West emerge as deities of evil, in the East, they are seen as protectors, symbolizing absolute monarchy and acting as gods governing the order of the universe. The dragon symbolizes a king or a hero and is frequently used in expressions meaning "to succeed and make one's name known to the world" (Lee, 2020, p. 213). Rozy's pose with the dragon deifies her and positions her as a powerful creation of technology. In another post, she is depicted hugging a polar bear, emphasizing the temporal and spatial transcendence of virtual humans as well as their transcendence over human emotions such as fear.

These image strategies position these characters as goddesses who transcend the boundaries of mortality, drawing analogies to goddesses such as Aphrodite, Hathor, Inanna, Athena, Artemis, Durga, Parvati, Astarte, and Dakinis (Relke, 2007), particularly aligning them with Athena, consistent with Jung's (1991) definition of the animus. Considering that these beings, which also reflect modern fantasies of immortality, are products of a masculine analytical spirit, along with their body designs that emphasize transcendence and the images surrounding their bodies, it can be said that they bear traces of Athena—the powerful goddess born from the head of her father, Zeus, who established herself in a masculine world through her beauty, strength, and use of weapons. Even though virtual stars are materially immortal, they require particular necessities to continue their existence. Aypera emphasizes this in her Instagram post dated January 31, 2021: "Does your body have to disappear to die, or is it enough for everyone to forget you? Sometimes, we die while we still have our bodies, and sometimes, we live even when we physically do not exist. I will die in peace when everyone forgets me, when my last record is deleted, when the last person forgets my name/form" (https://www.instagram.com/p/CKt1gMvnqyZ/). Therefore, attracting human interest and remaining in their memories is crucial for these virtual entities in the digital world. Using codes familiar to humans facilitates their ability to secure a place in human memory. Mythological elements are foremost among these codes. Since the oral tradition, the symbolic narratives and character prototypes of mythology, as Jung (1996) also emphasized, have taken root in the human mind individually while also constructing them at the level of the collective unconscious, thus contributing to the formation of social memory. Thus, using myths with solid roots in humanity in the design of virtual stars and their role as modern myth transmitters ensures the sustainability of their existence.

Another emphasis on the physical transcendence of virtual humans relates to the fragility, irrationality, and impurity attributed to the human body, which are deemed irrelevant for virtual humans. In all their visuals, these characters' bodies are impeccably sterile, their skins smooth, shiny, and luminous. These bodies are completely purged of excess weight, misshapen curves, uncontrollably leaking waste, bodily fluids, the discomfort caused by fatigue, menstrual pains, and environmental elements that pollute the body. The perfection of bodies, skin, and body contours

is frequently highlighted through unique lighting designs and close-up shots. Virtual bodies also serve as flawless showcases for various commodities and images in this state.

The Gendering of the Body

Virtual stars are generally designed in the form of young women (Shin, 2023). This is because the female body receives more interaction as an object of spectacle and the beauty myth has also established its place in the virtual world. According to Jean Baudrillard, "Among consumed things, there is an object that is more beautiful, more valuable, more unique than other objects: This object is the body" (Baudrillard, 1997, p. 149). Here, Baudrillard particularly emphasizes the female body and discusses the body as both capital and a fetish, that is, as a consumption tool on both economic and psychic levels. "The media plays a role in justifying, strengthening, and distorting uniform aesthetic body images and unreasonable standards far from objective reality, providing a distorted and partial image that can be mistaken as reality. This discourse argues that the body ultimately belongs to the economic system and exists as a 'body as capital'" (Shin and Lee, 2023, p. 5).

Most virtual stars studied also serve as carriers of beauty ideals existing in the social sphere. Characters like Bermuda, Miquela, and Alara X create an image of desirability with their tall statures, body contours, sexy outfits, and body parts displayed in segments and close frames. Particularly in characters like Alara X and Bermuda, it can be said that the sexual capacity of the body is more emphasized. Hatsune Miku, carrying various elements of Japanese culture and mythology in her fictional body, transcends the limits of reality with her slender waist, long legs, ponytail, long colorful hair, large round colorful eyes, and an attractive body that contrasts her childlike face, never aging. Japanese men harbor feelings for unreal characters like Hatsune Miku, while Japanese girls strive to look like these characters.

Revealing the sexually charged aspects of the body also implies its transformation into an object of exploitation by its creator. John Berger's and Laure Mulvey's observations regarding the definition of the female body within the axis of its visibility are quite significant. According to Berger, "Men act, and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at... Thus, the woman transforms herself into a visual object, something meant to be seen" (Berger, 1990: 47). Mulvey (1975) argues that in modern cultural images, the female body reflects fantasies inherent in the male gaze, being adorned to suit the voyeuristic pleasure of men. Shin (2023), who examines virtual fashion influencers, has also concluded that the body representations of these characters reproduce standardized stereotypes and express the power and desire of the male gaze while embodying a colonial gender hierarchy. In this context, although virtual female stars may appear as the subjects of their own stories, they are positioned as objects directed towards archaic masculine pleasure.

According to Haraway (2006), "the body, as a form based on gender, boundaries, groups, etc., has enabled countless oppressions" (Cited by: Mert, 2023, p. 2350). Therefore, creators emphasizing physical characteristics when designing these avatars, constructing the body based on standards of "perfection," and ultimately processing this through the female body align with Haraway's

views, distancing them from being seen as subjects, transforming them into commodities, and thus subjecting them to a form of symbolic violence.

On the other hand, one of the significant sources for the full exposure of the body, particularly the female body, in a bare and sterile state, turning it into an object of spectacle, is mythological narratives and the art of painting inspired by mythology. Considering the connections established between virtual stars and ancient mythological characters, it can be said that, alongside the physical perfection of virtual stars, their sexual capacities and the manner of their display also exist with inter-mythical references.

Some of the female characters present an image that embraces traditional female roles. Lu do Magalu, for example, is often seen cooking or cleaning inside the house, carrying patriarchal codes from the past into the present. Despite being a superhuman being, she perpetuates the stereotypes created by humans and naturalizes them with her near-human appearance. Miquela Sousa also portrays an image of being part of the family by presenting domestic images. The domestic image presented by these examples evokes Jung's mother archetype. Jung lists the core characteristics of the mother archetype as nurturing care, nourishing goodness, desirous emotionality, and a darkness specific to the underworld (Jung, 2003). These virtual characters, alongside the loving family romance they signify, also suggest an unsettling allure that could potentially spiral out of control due to their designed nature.

Based on these findings, it can be said that VI are strengthened and simulated versions of archetypes. Constructed within strong cultural connections, these figures are idealized and perfect images that represent people's dreams and aspirations. At the same time, by mimicking the behaviors and interactions of real people, they offer a kind of "virtual human experience." For humans with limited possibilities within the boundaries of reality, the role that virtual stars play in the transcendent simulation universe brings discussions about the nature of reality. For example, the concepts of beauty, body type, and lifestyle embodied in their forms produce unrealistic idealizations (Sands et al., 2022) and can have negative effects on female consumers' perceptions of body image (Ji et al., 2022). The production of meta-reality, exemplified in body and beauty idealizations and where VI play a significant role as agents, is crucial in the emergence of the hyperreality situation, where, as Baudrillard pointed out, the image's connection to reality is severed, and it becomes "more real" than reality itself.

Conclusion

The virtual stars under study serve as influencers on social media applications, reaching thousands of followers and guiding people. In designing these characters as artificial bodies, references are sometimes made to mythologies and traditional cultural elements in both implicit and explicit forms, and some characters are even directly associated with mythical entities. Attributes such as power, perfection, smoothness, sexual allure, and nudity, attributed to mythological gods, goddesses, and heroes with supernatural powers, are common features of these characters, shaped as ideal body images. The visual factors that form them, such as their physical designs, physical features, facial shapes, hair, make-up, and clothing, carry the traces of ancient mythology and function as new myth producers for today's people. The creators' use of mythological god

and goddess figures in the physical design of virtual stars, their creation of intertextual stimuli, and the mythic references made through these characters' social media posts, attire, behavior, and statements transform them into fantastic images that come to life at the intersection of various texts.

In the creation of virtual stars, Apollonian and Dionysian opposites coexist. While their appearances that emphasize aestheticism aim for Apollonian order and perfection, the structures that transcend the world and contradict reality position them as Dionysian, irrational beings. The myth of the perfect body and immortality is the fundamental impulse that virtual stars awaken in humans. They can be characterized as today's mythological heroes due to their capabilities to perform actions that humans cannot, such as always being energetic, being present in multiple places at once, being controllable, being cost-effective, never aging, being fearless, having no dependencies, being adaptable to conditions, being durable, always conforming to beauty ideals, and achieving perfection.

Joseph Campbell discusses that the mythological hero goes through a series of stages divided into three parts: departure, initiation, and return (Campbell, 2013). The journey archetypes of the mythological hero also provide a narrative framework for the stories of virtual stars. Their followers, much like watching a lead character in a movie, follow the virtual stars with interest and curiosity. The poses they strike in different countries, the food they eat, the shopping they do, and the clothes they wear are parts of their journey, while their reactions to certain critical current events in society or the excessive messages directed at their unrealistically beautiful bodies transform this journey into a unique adventure.

These stars, belonging to digital technology, are also successful in attracting and influencing the attention of the younger generation born into this era. In this context, using myths related to origins in rendering an abstract entity real is functional in enabling viewers to find elements of themselves and establish identification. On the other hand, ordinary people can also easily create their avatars on social media platforms thanks to new media technologies. It can be said that the desire to design oneself in an avatar form and present this image to others is influenced by the virtual stars of social media. Thus, real people can mythologize themselves by aiming to eliminate the boundaries between reality and technology, just like a virtual figure.

In conclusion, this research, which questions the physical images and mythological connections of virtual stars, has shown that mythological figures influenced these digital people during the creation phase, that these characters transformed ancient mythology by the conditions of the period and brought it to the present day, and that they mediated the continuation of myths for the future.

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