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## Virtual influencers in multimodal advertising

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The article highlights new communication and advertising phenomenon – virtual influencers (VI) or virtual models employed by different brands to promote their collections and goods. Influencer marketing became an effective marketing strategy and profitable trend within the last twenty years. Influencers can be categorized in line with the content they generate, number of followers they have, their specialization, the impact they produce. Influencer marketing flourishes in social media. Celebrities who earned their fame offline are mega-influencers. Virtual influencers are transmedia 3D models created by high-caliber professionals via computer-generated imagery (CGI), animation, computer graphics, multimodality, copywriting with their bio, tastes, hobbies, lifestyle, even political preferences and social values. They are fond of social networking and have accounts in the most popular social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok. Brands collaborate with social media influencers for narrowcasting young customers, mostly millennials who prefer social media to mass media and perceive virtual reality as a natural component of current civilization and everyday life. Experts believe virtual influencers' rating is based on wow effect and they won't be able to outperform celebrities despite high annual income as they are fictional and not emotional. Celebrities as mega-influencers and models fear virtual models will squeeze them out of marketing and advertising, other social media users have Uncanny Valley syndrome. Psychologists claim VI might trigger psychological problems for teenagers as they cannot attain glamorous lifestyle VI promote. Verbal behavior of virtual influencers is molded by copywriters and mirrors characteristics of English used in social media by teenagers and millennials – short simple sentences with acronyms visibly peppered with emoji and hashtags. Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter accounts of the most popular influencers Lil Miquela, Bermuda, Shudu were analyzed. The future of virtual influencers lies in synthesis of CGI and artificial intelligence (AI) to generate posts automatically and communicate with followers. Then virtual influencers can be used outside advertising and marketing to make impact on global audience.

**Keywords:** influencer, influencer marketing, multimodal advertising, social media, virtual influencer.

**Белова А. Д. Віртуальні інфлуенсери у мультимодальній рекламі.** Статтю присвячено новому явищу у комунікації у соцмережах, у сферах маркетингу і реклами – віртуальним інфлуенсерам або віртуальним моделям, які створюються командами висококваліфікованих професіоналів на основі синтезу декількох технологій – комп'ютерної графіки, анімації, мультимодальності, інформаційно-комунікаційних технологій. Різні бренди успішно використовують віртуальних інфлуенсерів для реклами своїх колекцій у соцмережах з орієнтацією на міленіалів. Маркетинг інфлуенса активно розвивається в останні десять років і має високу дохідність. Наслідком зростаючої популярності інфлуенса стала типологія інфлуенсерів за рівнем впливу, кількістю фоловерів, контентом, який вони створюють, нішевою спеціалізацією. Популярність інфлуенса у технократичне століття зумовлена прагненням здійснювати вплив на цільову аудиторію через живу людину, яка допомагає сформулювати висновок про продукцію і може поділитися власними емоційними враженнями. Поява віртуальних інфлуенсерів – трансмедіальних і мультимодальних віртуальних ідентичностей – пояснюється низкою економічних та психологічних факторів, новими технологічними можливостями, фокусом виробників на Z-генерації, яка надає перевагу онлайн комунікації, соцмережам зокрема. У спільноті віртуальних інфлуенсерів кожен має свій образ, імідж, біографію, сценарій, лінію вербальної поведінки. Вербальна частина постів відображає особливості використання англійської мови у соцмережах міленіалами – короткі речення, переважно номінативні, парцеляція, скорочення, абрєвіатури, чисельні емодзі і хештеги. Перспектива віртуальних інфлуенсерів полягає у використанні самонавчального штучного інтелекту для породження текстів постів, ведення комунікації з фоловерами, що певною мірою було апробовано у сфері журналістики і засобів масової інформації. Використання віртуальних інфлуенсерів відкриває нові можливості для штучного інтелекту в комунікації, для віртуалізації комунікації, створення віртуальної реальності, що є природною еволюцією Інтернету.

**Ключові слова:** віртуальний інфлуенсер, інфлуенсер, маркетинг інфлуенса, мультимодальна реклама, соціальна мережа.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2021 social media list spans nearly 100 sites and platforms, international and local, with different content [23]. Social media compete with mass media, as new and old media. Social media are very popular with Z-generation, so called digital natives, born in the age of Internet, mediacy, transliteracy, with the necessary experiential practice to perceive online communication and virtual reality (VR) as natural components of their existence. Fashion industry, international brands use different social networking services to catch the attention of millennials as potential clients and customers, to promote new collections and other goods. As a new marketing strategy and instrument they started using *virtual influencers* (VI). Synonymous terms are *virtual blogger*, *virtual ambassador*, *virtual brand ambassador*, *social media influencer*, *digital influencer*, *virtual avatar*, *H2R (Human to Robot)*. "A virtual influencer or virtual model is a computer-generated fictional character that is used in social media marketing as a substitute for a human "influencer". Virtual influencers are intentionally designed by 3D artists to look like real people in real situations" [34]. These digital identities are created by teams of high-caliber experts on the basis of several technologies – computer-generated imagery (CGI), graphic design, animation, multimodality, neuronetworks, copywriting and others. Virtual influencer is a brand-new phenomenon and its current popularity in social media, within marketing strategies is based on wow effect. To remain popular VI will have to make friends with artificial intelligence (AI) to generate automated posts and communicate with followers. Combination of CGI and AI might result into another wow effect. The project might have long-term perspective as VI tested within fashion world can be implemented later to use social media for manipulative impact on global audience.

Virtual influencers as a new phenomenon in social networking, advertising, marketing predetermine the relevance of the research. The subject of the study is verbal behaviour of virtual influencers in social media against the background of their digital image. The study is based on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok accounts of the most popular virtual influencers – Lil Miquela, Bermuda, Shudu, Blawko, Imma.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Since the 1990s Internet communication has diversified a lot [16; 24; 33]. Communication in social media became a vast area of research in Modern Linguistics [28; 29; 30; 32] as social media use different websites and platforms, specialize in particular content, hatch different types of discourse not to mention the number of languages used. Linguists focus mainly on changes in languages and written speech and *written speaking* in online communication [4; 10; 17; 18; 19; 20] taking into account regional variation of English, gender and age factors, social status of users. Digital identity, language profiles of famous people, celebrities can be described

via their social networking as well [10; 12; 28; 29]. Social media give unprecedented opportunities for personal branding what is becoming an object of research as well.

Social media played key role in "Color Revolutions" in some countries. Lately they are used effectively in political electioneering. Social media contributed a lot to the rise of citizen journalism. Sometimes social media outperform mass media in coverage events, natural calamities, accidents and incidents. Social media are widely used for informing people, for persuasion and manipulating large audience.

Brands collaborate with social media influencers to attract new audience – millennials, known as Gen Z / N-Geners, digital natives / digital aboriginals. More than 14% of VI followers are teenagers, 45% – young women so the target audience has distinctive age and gender characteristics which should be taken into account by creative designers and copywriters. Young audience is more susceptible to VI content [21]. Posts in social media are an example of regular implementation of digital literacy, mediacy, transliteracy, multimodality much spoken about in connection with Internet evolution and Information Communication Technologies (ICT). VI verbal behavior is the activity of copywriters. Nevertheless, VI communication is different from other social media profiles as they are fictional digital identities, non-existent in real world, so their communication is digitally molded as well as their personality in line with their bio, interests, tastes, hobbies, preferences. So, VI accounts in different social media are of interest for Linguistics as individual language profiles of digital identity which is supposed to influence the opinion and minds of humans.

## 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The world of advertising can be considered one of the most creative professional fields and one of the most attractive communication types in terms of its linguistic and semiotic analysis. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century advertising responds immediately to all technological and communication innovations thus assimilating, adapting to new reality, incorporating into new communication models, platforms, media. International brands, primarily luxury brands, with enormous potential and prospects, capable to commission high-caliber professionals and the most prestigious agencies, have become leaders in this innovative creativity race.

Advertising is an object of research of countless books, articles in different countries of the world. Visual effects of photo and video ads might be qualified as modern art masterpieces. Catchy and haunting occasional words and slogans are coined to accompany new visual images and produce durable anchoring effect. Lately verbal and semiotic acrobatics in advertising is not limited to persuasion, an inherent characteristic of ads, it is used to provoke admiration, amazement, wonderment, so called wow effect.

Advertising has passed through many stages following new printing technologies, mass media evolution.

In the ICT era advertising is growing more multimodal, gets settled in social media and applications. Brands manufacturing fashion items, luxury brands, in particular, tend to be the most dynamic and ready to implement new technologies. All luxury brands have websites – a mirror of their esthetics, their vision of beauty and fashion. When social networking gained popularity an account in diverse social media became a must-have for any business. Now premium fashion brands are visible in all social media and really enjoy hyperconnectivity. Social media with millions of people connected worldwide and 24/7 access give superb opportunities for reaching target audience, both for broadcasting and narrowcasting.

Luxury brands used multiple strategies in their advertising campaigns. For instance, for online advertising of women perfumes the strategy of temptation was selected. Many fashion brands had contracts with celebrities to promote new collections what was an example of *co-branding* for both. Many brands introduced the position of a *brand ambassador* (2a: an authorized representative or messenger) [27]. The word *ambassador* in this very meaning enjoys high frequency in Modern English.

Further ICT advance and AI breakthrough open new horizons both for infotainment and persuasion in advertising. One of the latest communication and marketing innovations is *virtual influencer* (VI) [11; 22; 25].

Influencer marketing has become noticeable in marketing landscape in the last two decades thanks to social networking and blogging. Now the word *influencer* in its second meaning (2: often, specifically: a person who is able to generate interest in something (such as a consumer product) by posting about it on social media) [27] is in top 3% of words. Probably, influencers are so effective in social and mass media because in our business-like and technocratic world where magic shrinks, enigma disappears, people need more emotional communication with human beings. As Seth Godin, a marketing guru, put it: “People do not buy goods and services. They buy relations, stories, and magic” [31]. People expect some emotional connection from the personalities they admire and worship via narration, nowadays multimodal narration. Influencer’s reputation and recognition are based on his / her popularity, profound knowledge on the specific issue, regular posts in social media in order to attract attention to the products, collections, etc. “Brands love social media influencers because they can create trends and encourage their followers to buy products they promote” [35].

Influencers can be classified in line with the content they generate (*Bloggers, YouTubers, Podcasters, Social Posts Only*), the impact level they bring (*Celebrities, Key Opinion Leaders*), the niche they operate (*nano-influencers* – experts in a very specific field), the number of followers they have (*micro-influencers* (10000 – 400000), *macro-influencers* (400000 – 1 million), *mega-influencers* (more than 1 million followers in one

social media service), *nano-influencers* (might be less than 1000) [35]. Celebrities meet all the criteria and can be described as mega-influencers. Most current celebrities earned their fame offline, some Internet celebrities came from virtual obscurity and received their recognition in social networking services only. Lion’s share of profit within influence marketing is earned in YouTube, the rest is divided among Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and other services. Within twenty years influencer marketing has turned into a highly profitable trend and encountered some problems. For instance, *Influencer marketing Hub* stated in its *Youtube Influencer Marketing Report: 2020 Year In Review*: “Of the 31,317 sponsored videos that qualified for analysis in this data set, engagements approached 52 billion. With 4,449 brands participating in YouTube influencer marketing in 2020, the industry saw a 4x increase since Q2 in the number of brands who sponsored videos” [36]. In 2017 influencer marketing was estimated US\$ 2 billion, in 2022 it is expected to reach US\$ 10 billion [6]. The problems of influencer marketing are mainly connected with celebrities who demand high fees and rewards, turn old, fall into depression, get tired, mixed in scandals with home violence, alcohol, divorce, have problems with police, etc. Brands and marketing experts can avoid all these problems if they have a virtual influencer. VI can work 24/7 in any environment (with fierce wild animals, in extreme cold or heat, etc.), without a salary or a bonus, they do not need vacation or day-off, and do not miss deadlines. VI have no headache, high temperature and they are ready for globetrotting what is essential in COVID 19 pandemic. Finally, a virtual influencer does not have a skeleton in a cupboard. Brands do not need to deliver fashionable clothes items to virtual celebrities. VI will not have their photos taken in the nearest future as everything will be designed, 3D models of clothes items including. Virtual models will be just digital clothes hangers for new collections, a multi-brand digital catalogue [14]. Moreover, new collections of digital clothes, buyable but beyond reach, might be created to open new prospects for beautification, image-making and personal branding. Some models and celebrities are scared of virtual influencers and admit they have fear similar to the fear of humanoid robots and AI what is known in English as *Uncanny valley*. Some celebrities get nervous that virtual models might squeeze them out of marketing and advertising as brand ambassadors. Virtual models might replace humans [5], as robots are making workers redundant and unemployed.

The first virtual celebrities appeared in 2004, 2007 when Yamaha Corporation created so called *vocaloids* Leon and Lolu who could synthesize human “singing” [6; 34]. During the last years some luxury brands “employed” virtual influencers to promote their collections. VI do not have prototypes, they are made from scratch in social media [6]. “Childbirth” of a virtual model is time-consuming and expensive: it takes agencies several

months to generate a 3D model with human appearance, to make it move like humans becomes a real challenge. The research and experience of scholars working with AI and humanoid robots might be really helpful. On the other hand, virtual influencers are worth making as they earn millions of dollars annually [8]. Paradoxically, one of the agencies, virtual-models-maker in New Zealand, is called *Soul Machines* to stress animated nature of virtual influencers. VI enjoy transmedia, social networking on different platforms and websites, participate in shows, give interviews, rub shoulders with celebrities. Some VI are difficult to spot as digital identities at first glance, they are human Look-Alikes. It resembles imitation of reality in modern animated movies [15] and proves that the frontiers between real and virtual world are blurring. Some psychologists claim these 3D models pose danger for human psyche, especially for teenagers and young adults [2; 3; 5; 7; 13]. A major psychological problem is that virtual models live in fake augmented reality where real and virtual worlds intermingle and overlap. Virtual influencers impose high standards of ideal appearance, of body beauty, of glamorous lifestyle thus model particular perception of reality. Teenagers might get depressed if they do not meet these standards and cannot find their ways to glamorous world.

Some VI are successful start-ups, well-known and popular. Virtual models have their virtual model agency *The Digitals*. Some clusters on the website emphasize digital and futuristic nature of the agency: *Technikart / Digital Nudes / Futuro Perfecto*. The website hosts six models with the portfolio (!), impressive list of brands they collaborate with, glamorous photos and attractive videos. *Shudu* turned out to be much more successful than other virtual models. She is positioned as *1st Top Virtual*. *Shudu's* marvelous photos for the most prestigious international brands which might go to posh fashion magazines, her superb looks, professionalism cause admiration and make it clear why both *Shudu* and her designer were accused of making black models redundant. Verbal part of *Shudu's* Instagram posts looks like a brief text in the best fashion magazine. Obviously, these posts were designed for promotion of new fashion items: "It was amazing to partner with Christian Louboutin for their the S/S 21 collection launch event on Zepeto / *Shudu* wearing the absolutely stunning @[laviebyck](#) gown, digitised by the supremely talented @[vas3dfashion!](#)". In *Shudu* Instagram one can read about the level of her influence on followers: "Do you ever just smile for no reason? You suddenly realize that for the first time in a long time you're just enjoying being yourself. Even if it's just for a moment. I get so much joy from seeing the love and support with my art, it's completely changed my life from 3 years ago. Who would've thought I'd be where I am today. *Shudu* has given me some of the happiest memories of my life and helped me through some of the saddest. So here's a post that celebrates the joy of following your heart, your instincts and listening to that voice inside."

Pink-haired *Imma* was created by Japanese agency *CG Modeling Cafe*. *Imma's* impeccable feminine face features and body movements are attributed to the team of female engineers working on the project. *Imma* positions herself as a virtual person: "I'm a virtual girl. I'm interested in Japanese culture, film and art". The initial part of the article headline about her "Meet *Imma* – the World's First Computer Generated Model" [26] is an allusion to famous movie *Meet Joe Black* with Brad Pitt and Anthony Hopkins starring, with the plot where the two worlds (the world of the living and the world of the dead) intermingle too. Another example of overlapping worlds is *Liam Nikuro*, the first male virtual model, who was designed by *1SEC*, Japanese virtual-model-making-agency. *Liam Nikuro* was born in the USA, lives in California, he is fond of music and fashion, has particular food preferences and plans for future. He does not have as many followers as female VI what resembles the real world, fashion industry where male models cannot compete with top models. It is another gendered fact from the life of virtual models.

*Noonoouri*, *Itsninixie*, *Guggimon*, *Cadeharper*, *Janky* are other noticeable virtual models [1]. Other very popular VI are *Brud* start-ups – *Lil Miquela*, *Bermuda*, *Blawko*. Noteworthy, VI names are spelt in Latin characters, sound (pseudo-) artificial but do not pose pronunciation problems, thus remain internationally readable and pronounceable. VI naming resembles artificial languages principles (Esperanto, etc.) and naming samples for virtual reality.

*Lil Miquela*, created in 2016, collaborated with Burberry, Chanel, Calvin Klein, Fendi, Off-White, Prada, Samsung. She is the most successful VI with annual income of US\$10 million in 2019. In her Instagram *Lil Miquela* identifies herself as "Change-seeking robot with a drip". She follows black girls code, supports #BLM, transgenders and immigrants. In 2019 *Lil Miquela* became one of the most influential Internet persons [1]. Virtual influencers live the life of modern society with all its visible trends. For example, *Lil Miquela* has relationships with *Blawko*, male VI, but was noticed kissing *Bella Hadid*, American top model: *Life is about opening new doors. I am here. This is my truth. #MYTRUTH #MYCALVINS @bellahadid @calvinklein (16.05.2019)*. LGBT relationships and LGBT movement support are presented as "opening new doors", as "truth". Truth is quite symbolic as it has become one of the most frequent words in English (post-truth and another relevant cluster fake news became words of the year in 2016 and 2017 respectively). The episode with *Bella Hadid* was qualified as Queerbaiting LGBT. Another example of queerbaiting occurred in January 2021 (IT'S CALLED HEALING SWEETIE, LOOK IT UP) when *Lil Miquela* appeared kissing *Bermuda*. *Blawko* (Low-life and high-tech in the City of Angel), in his turn, states: "I am single". *Lil Miquela* writes that *Blawko* is her brother: "My ACTUAL brother @[Blawko22](#) thinks he's ACTUALLY psychic cause he's been wearing masks

since 2018 (I'm less convinced)". *Blawko* is an Afro-American virtual model who emphasizes racial diversity and multiculturalism as modern world values.

Lil Miquela often repeats she is a robot: "Best part of being a robot? ALL TATTOOS ARE TEMP TATTOOS/ Ever wonder what's in a robot's bag? A @maccosmetics lipgloss, 2 AA batteries and some steel wool / Wanna know a secret? ROBOTS DON'T HAVE TASTEBUDS! The only thing @bermudaisbae can make is reservations. Sorry @jackdgrazer but the practice dinner was a FAIL. Wit bermuda." Though Lil Miquela is a robot she tends to behave like young girls: "Mood: NFT (No Free Time) / Figured out how to program myself to Do Not Disturb". Like all N-Geners Lil Miquela cannot live without wi-fi and social media: "Nail lady was wearing moldavite and now my Wi-Fi is out...AM I GONNA BE OK? / Is Tinder broken? Put these up HOURS ago and I'm still single."

Virtual influencers provoke more interest to the details of their life than real models and bloggers. Lil Miquela is cooking and sharing recipes, knitting (Knitting was a fail but LOL I made a "shirt"), tries new clothes and footwear: "THESE BOOTS WERE MADE FOR WALKING (...like 4 steps for a photo before falling on my robot a\$\$). Nobody hates to see me shine more than gravity". Copywriters show remarkable creativity replacing Latin characters by symbols.

Capitalization and repetition of characters are the easiest and favourite ways to emphasize some points and convey emotions: "Women supporting women? WE LOVE TO SEE IT! Tag the besties who support and inspire u / HELP! Building a thirst trap out of yarn because I heard Ella Emhoff knits. AM I DOING THIS RIGHT?? / EVERYTHING I know about human friendship came from Sailor Moon / LOOK WHAT WE MADE (Also, I made a friend) / BACK IN MY STUDIO with someone FRESHHHHH. Drop your guesses - first right answer gets the password to my Robin Hood." Though Lil and other virtual models admit they are robots they tend to reveal their emotional states: "The only Ds I'm getting this Valentine's Day are donuts and depression." Designers do not isolate virtual models from the real world problems making them wear masks during COVID 19 pandemic though digital world is supposed to be immune to coronavirus.

Lil Miquela's promotion posts in Instagram are a typical combination of social media and advertising text: subjects omission, parcellation, capitalization of *special* and *together* to stress uniqueness of the automobile and appeal to followers, *sight* is replaced by *spark* in the idiom *at first sight* as it is an automobile ad. Technical characteristic of the new electric MINI, an essential component of automobile ads make this social media post a sample of marketing and promotion strategies: I'm so excited to introduce y'all to MINI Electric. When we met it was love at first spark. Literally, I wanted to help launch this new member of the @MINI family because in some ways, she's just like me. New. Different. SPECIAL. Needs to be charged at night ☹. For real tho, innovation and creativity are the things that help drive us

all forward. Can't wait to see where we'll go TOGETHER. MINI Cooper SE 3-Door Hatch: Power consumption in kWh/100: 16.1 - 14.9 (NEDC); 17.6 - 15.2 (WLTP), Electric range in km: 253 - 236 (WLTP). Further information: [www.mini.com/disclaimer](http://www.mini.com/disclaimer)

Another Lil Miquela's post in TikTok might be considered a perfect example of impact virtual influencers can produce on their followers. Undoubtedly, the text has positive perspective but sounds like a piece of neuro-linguistic programming (NLP): "Look in the mirror and repeat after me. I love and accept myself for who I am. I am flexible and open to new experiences. Every problem is a chance to grow. The universe suspects me in expected and unexpected ways. I am not a prisoner of the past. I live only in the moment and enjoy life to the fullest. I appreciate the things I have and I rejoice in the daily gifts that I receive." #DoItBold #spiritday #mentalhealthmatters

[https://www.tiktok.com/@lilmiquela/video/6885050706043211014?lang=en&is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v2](https://www.tiktok.com/@lilmiquela/video/6885050706043211014?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v2)

*Bermuda, Robot Queen*, (Robot/Unbothered follow me on IG / Robots can't jump) has thousands of likes in Instagram too The posts fall into the categories *Just For You, Just For Me, My Music*. Bermuda revealed her political views supporting President Trump but mostly she posted photos in brand clothes [2]. In 2018 Bermuda attacked Lil Miquela in Instagram and deleted numerous photos. After the armistice, the number of Bermuda's followers multiplied. It turned out the campaign was masterminded to attract attention to Bermuda [9].

Generally, Bermuda's image is focused on beauty. She has typical feminine image, blonde in pink:

Me, trying my best on any given day #UnderTheBrid ge #WaitAMinute #WorkItOut

Girls just wanna have funds.

Money moves are easy when u look like a million bucks #BermudaisB #BossBabe

She is always dressed to impress. Wearing a huge crown with big fake diamonds, massive necklace and huge cross on shirts against the background of G-Class Mercedes is called *Casual Fridays*. Bermuda is sexy, provocative, glamorous (I'm shy. N sexy, in pink / When everything's a mess, helps to look your best / Happy Valentine's to the hottest bitch I know. #valentines-day #vday / Thank Goddess, I'm fierce. / Took myself out on a date bc LA boys suck. Also, this white #chanel got me feelin saucy like my MF pasta).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Some experts claim virtual influencers will never outperform their human counterparts as they are too ideal, not emotional enough, do not have personal experience, therefore do not convey emotional impressions [8]. When the *World Wide Web* (www) came into being no one could imagine it will evolve into a world-spanning network and turn the world into a global village.

No one could foresee the evolution of a mobile / cell phone into a smartphone, into an indispensable personal companion for everyone, a gadget which made landline telephones outdated. No one could predict online communication spread and increase due to COVID 19 pandemic when online became the only communi-

cation alternative during the lockdown and other pandemic restrictions. Virtual influencers success was prepared by social media increase and evolution, animated movies technologies, CGI, accessible multimodality and transmediacy what makes their followers, Z-generation mostly, ready to perceive and enjoy virtual reality.

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