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**Sinergie SIMA**  
Management Conference



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*Short Papers*

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# **Management of sustainability and well-being for individuals and society**

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## *Conference Proceedings*

Short Papers

edited by

*Arabella Mocciaro Li Destri, Marta Ugolini,  
Guido Cristini and Beatrice Luceri*

# Virtual influencers in tourism marketing: insight or oversight? The case of “Open to Meraviglia”

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## Abstract

*Virtual influencers (VI) are increasingly being applied to different industries, extending their reach into the tourism context as well. Despite their growing popularity and use, consumer reactions to VIs are ambivalent. In particular, the Italian Ministry of Tourism’s recent ‘Open to Wonder’ project, which employed Botticelli’s Venus to promote Italian tourism, elicited a wide range of criticisms among users. The aim of this study is to investigate the underlying motives in terms of salient source (influencer-related) and content (post-related) attributes that drive Instagram users’ negative feelings. We find that inexpressive versatility, low-quality images, impersonal and inadequate caption discourse, as well as perceived lack of professionalism, significantly reduce her potential to engage with the audience. We discuss these results within the context of source credibility theory, trying to unveil the motivation underlying negative feedback from users. Managerial implications are provided with recommendations on how tourism practitioners can harness VI marketing effectively to avoid criticism from the public.*

**Keywords:** *virtual influencers; tourism; digital communication; social media campaigns; case study; source credibility theory*

**Framing of the research.** *Virtual influencers are AI influencers (i.e., those generated using AI technology) computer-generated characters (i.e., created by the computer-generated imagery technology), or digital influencers/personas/entities. By engaging in activities such as modeling, socializing, post content, sharing opinions, promote brands, VIs project a human-like persona (Arsenyan and Mirowska, 2021). Consequently, capitalizing on their advantages, businesses are partnering with these entities to endorse their products and services (Campbell and Farrell, 2020; Gutuleac et al., 2024).*

*Past research found that VIs are achieving different outcomes from brands in terms of attracting new audience segments, increased awareness, favorable publicity, and increased consumer engagement (Franke et al., 2023; Thomas and Fowler, 2021). Specifically, integrating VIs into a brand’s marketing strategy can position the company as innovative and tech-savvy, leading to a positive impact on its brand reputation among users (Conti et al., 2022). Moreover, virtual influencers remain permanently under the auspices of the company, thus eliminating the likelihood of any negative and unethical surprises (Deng and Jiang, 2023). In particular, companies can use VIs to enhance the credibility and authority of their product endorsements, as VIs can exclusively be created or commissioned to mirror a brand’s image and values (Yan et al., 2022; Sands et al., 2022). Due to their adaptability, they do not depend on physical and time limitations. Specifically, they can be leveraged for promotional purposes in a wide range of contexts and moments, making them an attractive option for brands seeking versatility (Ferraro et al., 2024). Although there is no lack of significant concerns (Conti et al., 2022), such as authenticity, high costs, and unrealistic expectations, these issues are generally mitigated by users’ tendency to not hold virtual influencers directly responsible for negative outcomes. Instead, they direct their criticism towards the creators or companies behind their development (Liu and Lee, 2022).*

*Although they are widely and profitably being introduced in product advertisements, it remains to be proven whether they are also effective in tourism sponsorship. In fact, just lively scholarly research explores the potential use of VIs in the context of tourism marketing. In this vein, Xie-Carson et al. (2023) found that humanlike VIs are preferred over 3D animated VIs and the least preferred influencers are 2D animated VIs. Furthermore, Instagram posts from humanlike VIs that combine images of tourism settings with rational messages attract the most engagement from the audience. More generally, Block and Lovegrove (2021) focused on the post content, by conducting textual and sentiment analysis on Lil Miquela’s posts and listed intriguing identity, innovative storytelling, and emotional engagement as core communication*

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strategies. In their semiotic analysis, De Brito Silva and colleagues (2022) concluded that the most important marketing strategies of VIs depend on the alignment of their posts with their lifestyle, personality, and the narrative of their personal lives. From a consumer perspective, previous studies suggest that individuals interact with VIs as they interact with human influencers (Lou et al., 2023; Sands et al., 2022). However, some research suggests that credibility is still a significant barrier for companies using VIs (Arsenyan and Mirowska, 2021; Franke et al., 2023). In this vein, influencers' success in influencing the user's behavior depends on credibility. In the social media context, source credibility refers to the extent to which content creators are believed to be credible, knowledgeable, and trustworthy by their audiences (Zha et al., 2018). The four-dimensional definition of source credibility is composed of expertise, trustworthiness, attractiveness and similarity. Expertise signifies that the source possesses adequate knowledge and skills in a specific domain, while trustworthiness reflects the source's honesty, and integrity as perceived by the user (Colliander and Marder, 2018). Attractiveness is frequently related to the physical appreciation of the source, while similarity involves the common traits that audiences share with media figures (Yuan and Lou, 2020; Schiappa et al., 2007). For instance, Lou and colleagues (2023) found that most followers perceive virtual influencers as uncanny and authentically fake. Despite their effectiveness in enhancing brand awareness, VIs often fail to inspire purchase intentions due to their lack of authenticity, low similarity to followers, and their weak parasocial relations with followers. Choudhry et al. (2022) explain that followers' attraction to virtual influencers arises from a persuasive combination of visual appeal, mystique and innovative storytelling. However, there is a perceived reluctance to attribute trustworthiness to these virtual entities. Furthermore, Yang et al. (2022) demonstrate that virtual influencers characterized by a higher degree of perceived humanness are associated with enhanced levels of trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness. Here, source credibility theory is addressed to explain how the sub-dimensions (attractiveness, expertise, trustworthiness and similarity) might explain negative feedback from users.

Given that the tourism sector is increasingly influenced by influencer marketing trends, there is a significant opportunity to leverage VIs engagement to market tourism experiences. However, research into how users interact with and respond to VI marketing in the tourism industry is still lacking.

**Purpose of the paper.** The aim of this research is to analyze the underlying motives in terms of salient source (influencer-related) and content (post-related) attributes that drive Instagram users' negative feelings towards *VenerItalia23*, a digitally designed influencer created with the intention of promoting the international attractiveness of Italian tourism. Specifically, we intend to investigate the causal factors that contribute to the prevailing negative feedback within the campaign's reception. By conducting a qualitative assessment of the interactions and sentiments expressed by the audience, we try to unravel the underlying mechanisms that have negatively influenced public perception. The final purpose is to provide a more in-depth understanding of the complexity and potential drawbacks associated with the application of VIs in the tourism marketing context. Drawing on our findings, the study shall offer valuable recommendations for enhancing and optimizing future marketing strategies within the tourism context.

**Methodology.** Given the limited attention the previous literature has placed on the role of Vis in promoting tourism initiatives, this paper adopts an exploratory case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989). The case under investigation is *Open to Meraviglia*, an Italian tourism promotion campaign launched by the Italian Ministry of Tourism and the Italian National Tourist Board (ENIT) in 2023. This case study is relevant for the aim of our research due specific reasons. First, 'Open to Meraviglia' leverage a virtual influencer in the context of tourism marketing - an area still unexplored; second, the campaign leverages Italy's historical heritage through a well-known figure (i.e., *Venere*) compared to VIs; third, has elicited significant negative sentiment among its audience. To answer our research questions, we employ a netnographic approach, enriching our qualitative analysis by engaging deeply in the digital interactions around *VenerItalia23* on Instagram. Netnography "as a marketing research technique, netnography uses the information that is publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups" (Kozinets, 2002, p. 61). We chose a netnographic approach primarily due to its unobtrusive nature, allowing us to observe consumer behavior as our unit of analysis, rather than the person, in an environment unaffected by market research intervention (Kozinets, 2002). This method provides a transparent window into consumers' organic interactions, revealing the essence of their information-seeking behavior and the natural flow of word-of-mouth communication within online communities. In line with the approach proposed by Kozinets (2002), we followed these steps: 1) *entrée*; 2) data collection and analysis; 3) trustworthy interpretation. We began our investigation by formulating specific research questions aimed at understanding the negative responses to the *VenerItalia23* campaign. Identifying Instagram as the most relevant online forum for our study, we dedicated ourselves to thoroughly understanding this platform, the dynamics of the specific groups involved, and the individual participants contributing to the discussions. Next, we moved to the data analysis phase, firstly, we documented data from the computer-mediated communications of online community members, including the posts, comments, and interactions related to the *VenerItalia23* campaign on Instagram. Secondly, we recorded our observations concerning the community dynamics, member interactions, and the overarching meanings and sentiments being expressed. In line with Glaser and Strauss (1967), we collected data as long as new insights related to our research question emerged. The coding of the posts covered both data analysis and data interpretation (Spiggle, 1994), where each category later became a theme (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994).

**Case study: Open to Meraviglia.** 'Open to Meraviglia' is an innovative tourism promotion campaign launched by the Italian Ministry of Tourism and ENIT, with the support of the Department for Information and Publishing of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. This campaign represents a novel approach to marketing Italy's rich cultural heritage and diverse tourist offerings to the world, with Sandro Botticelli's *Venus* serving as its exceptional ambassador. At the heart of this initiative is the transformation of Botticelli's *Venus* into a modern virtual influencer, a figure that

personifies Italy's deep historical roots and modern appeal. This new Venus travels across Italy, from its iconic art cities to its quaint villages, promoting the country's breath-taking landscapes, culinary delights and vibrant array of tourist attractions. Designed by the Armando Testa Group, it unfolds through a multi-faceted strategy that includes a promotional video and a geographically diverse billboard campaign spotlighting the beauty of southern, central and northern Italy. As Venus travels through the different regions and municipalities participating in this digital campaign, new destinations, suggestions and itineraries will be unveiled, thereby enriching the storyline and inviting a worldwide community to discover Italy. The initiative is funded by a considerable investment from ENIT, which aims to reach key international markets through targeted promotional activities on multiple channels, including airport hubs, European railway stations with direct connections to Italy and digital ecosystems.

**Results.** From our analysis, the following three points emerge. We include some supporting comments that have been anonymized for privacy reasons.

### 1. Image quality and repetitiveness

The critique centers primarily on the low quality and repetitiveness of the imagery used in the campaign. The feedback ranges from disappointment to irony regarding the execution.

User 1: Ah well, it's really tiring to poorly cut out images from stock photo sites and have the captions translated by Google Translate, poor little Venus.

User 2: Oh, still rolling with stock photos, huh? Fantastic job there.

User 3: Venus, why the same face all the time? Your feed is a bit repetitive.

User 4: Photo taken with a 2005 cell phone with a 2-megapixel camera?

User 5: People who'd take better pics just by snapping them randomly.

These comments collectively illustrate a perception of the campaign as lacking in authenticity, creativity, and quality-key elements for engaging and inspiring potential tourists through a virtual influencer.

### 2. The lack of care, attention, and professionalism in a campaign worth 9 million euros

The second critical observation revolves around the perceived lack of meticulousness, attention to detail, and professionalism in a campaign that commands a substantial budget of 9 million euros.

User 6: So adding a location tag was too hard? Guess the 9 million euros couldn't cover that too, huh?

User 7: Besides the awful pics, I thought this page was all about getting tourists to Italy. Why are we even mentioning a tourism fair in Germany?

User 8: Just 4 random pics without even saying where they're at

User 9: Immerse yourself in medieval history," but Sutri was founded by the Etruscans, though

User 10: Anyway, no matter what you think, our Venus has 260K followers. I won't judge the content (though I'm tempted), but as an influencer, well, let's just say she's not exactly at the top of the popularity charts

The discourse surrounding the challenges encountered in a 9 million euro tourism campaign illuminates significant gaps in strategic planning and execution. The omission of geolocation tags, engagement with unrelated content such as a tourism fair in Germany, and the utilization of nondescript imagery are notable deficiencies. Moreover, the inaccuracies regarding the historical foundation of Sutri highlight a concerning oversight in content accuracy. Despite the virtual influencer Venus commanding a sizeable digital following, these missteps underscore a pivotal issue: the quantitative metrics of social media influence are insufficient substitutes for quality and relevance in content.

### 3. The quality of posts' description

The quality of the translation is another aspect that emerged from the analysis.

User 11: Seriously, who's doing your English translations? I've got a degree in language mediation and have been living in London for 13 years. If you need, I can help you out? For free, just for the love of our country.

User 12: Oh, it's really a hassle to badly crop out images from stock websites and have Google Translate do the captions, poor little Venus.

User 13: Your English has gotten better, finally you guys used ChatGPT like I suggested a while back.

User 14: Translating into English is tough, too.

User 15: A smooth translation, I would say...

The comments on the *VenerItalia* profile are full of irony, reflecting a critical yet humorous approach to the translation quality of the posts. From offers to help 'for the love of our country' to teasing remarks about relying on Google Translate and suggestions that improvements could be made by using ChatGPT, each comment is layered with irony.

**Preliminary discussion and conclusion.** These preliminary results represent a starting point as the research is still in progress. Yuan and Lou (2020) indicate that elements of source credibility significantly influence the parasocial relationships that develop between social media influencers and their followers. Our findings are linked to the four-dimensional definition of source credibility: attractiveness, similarity, expertise, and trustworthiness (Ohanian, 1990; Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Specifically, criticism has been directed at the repetitiveness and low quality of the images employed, noting that *VenerItalia23*, as a virtual influencer, lacks versatility in her expressions, rendering her presence static and unnatural. Our findings contradict prior research, which found faces of influencers in Instagram photos to

enhance engagement (Bakhshi et al., 2014; Jaakonmäki et al., 2017). Conversely, Xie-Carson and colleagues (2023) report that in the tourism context users prefer tourism images without the presence of the influencer.

Despite expectations that *VenerreItalia23* might inspire followers to engage in similar experiences, mainly negative feedbacks are reported. Schiappa et al. (2007) explain that similarity involves the common traits that audiences share with media figures. The monotonous portrayal of *VenerreItalia23*, particularly due to the repetitive expression in each post, might impede the audience's ability to connect with *VenerreItalia23* as a genuine, authentic and persuasive character reflecting common values and interests. This observation detracts from the virtual influencers' attractiveness, a key driver of followers' mimetic behavior (Kim and Park, 2023). In terms of caption discourse, users even mock the caption, finding it to be quite impersonal.

Moreover, observations on the perceived lack of care and professionalism in this high-budget campaign reflect negatively on the perceived expertise behind *VenerreItalia23*. In contrast to Liu and Lee's (2022) findings that users tend to absolve virtual influencers of responsibility for negative outcomes and instead direct their criticism at the creators or companies, in this case, our analysis suggests that users direct their criticism both at the VI itself and at the ENIT campaign. Furthermore, the feedback on the perceived negligence in campaign execution directly challenges her expertise. Expertise refers to the level of knowledge or skill in a specific field (Bargoni et al., 2024). In this case, the audience's perception is that the campaign lacks a deep understanding of effective tourism promotion. Specifically, they highlight that the campaign lacks thoroughness and attention to detail - high use of translation programs, little knowledge about historical backgrounds, and inappropriate content for promoting tourism. For instance, the presence of inaccuracies in posts that should be promoting Italian beauty, or the fact that the campaign aims to promote Italian tourism to an international audience, but then uses language that is not appropriate. The lack of expertise is closely linked to the perceived trustworthiness of the audience. Trustworthiness (Wiedmann and von Mettenheim, 2020) pertains to the honesty, genuineness, and truthfulness of the source. Issues such as the use of inadequate translations, lack of geographical tagging, and inaccuracies in historical information not only reflect a disregard for detail but also reduce the perceived trustworthiness of the information in the post.

Our findings highlight the importance of considering three main attributes that users may influence consumers' reactions to any post: source, image composition, and caption discourse.

**Conclusion and research limitations.** We provide some insights for embedding VIs in tourism promotion. Specifically, our investigation examines the Italian 'Open to Meraviglia' campaign, with the aim to unveil the motivation underlying negative user comments. Although the potential of VIs to open new marketing opportunities with their flexibility and control, this case study reports a high number of critiques.

Grounded on the source credibility model (Ohanian, 1990), we found that *VenerreItalia23* as a VIs ambassador in charge of promoting Italian tourism abroad, is failing to engage the public positively. The criticisms leveled at *VenerreItalia23* - from the repetitive and poor quality of the pictures to the impersonal nature of the captions - highlight a failure to harness the distinctive capabilities of VIs and to create a genuine, intimate connection with the audience. Specifically, we report that her lack of expressive versatility, low-quality image, and impersonal caption discourse reduce her attractiveness, similarity, expertise and trustworthiness. In particular, the low level of attention to detail and professionalism in terms of accuracy of content and use of language suggests a significant underestimation of the audience's expectations of authenticity and expertise in storytelling. At first glance, users prefer authentic and engaging storytelling, high-quality images and potentially without the intermediary of a virtual influencer. Virtual influencers, like *VenerreItalia23*, should be considered not only as marketing tools but as storytellers who embody the essence of the destination they represent. Moreover, our findings do not exclusively ascribe the negative feedback to the digital nature of *VenerreItalia23* as a virtual influencer, potentially distinguished from a genuine, real influencer. They instead highlight the initiative to resurrect the essence of Botticelli's *Venus*, thereby indicating that the primary intent is not to persuade the audience of its authenticity as a real-life influencer embodying human-like physicality and behaviors. Despite this, our analysis suggests that introducing variability in expressions to foster an element of surprise for the audience could be more advantageous. Such an approach may mitigate the audience's habituation to an unchanging expression.

The limitations of this study lie primarily in its exploratory nature and methodological approach. Furthermore, the analysis is limited to a singular campaign and its acceptance among Instagram users, which may not entirely reflect the multiple ways VIs influence tourism marketing in different cultural contexts, platforms and audiences. Also, sentiment and thematic analysis can be opened up to interpretation by the researcher, which introduces a degree of inherent subjectivity into the findings. A larger sample of Instagram accounts of VIs specifically designed to promote tourism and chosen as symbols, rather than any virtual influencer, should be used to replicate this research to validate and generalize the preliminary results.

**Managerial implications.** When interpreting these findings to offer some managerial implications, it is important to note that they are in a preliminary stage. Drawing on these preliminary findings, we argue that tourism managers should clearly communicate the role of the VI and the fictional nature to meet and manage users' expectations. Specifically, they should be transparent on the role of the VI, by explaining the creative choices behind the choice to leverage a historical figure and clarify that a VI serve as a storytelling tool rather than a "traditional" influencer. Furthermore, they should invest in high-quality imagery, ensuring different and expressive content, and avoiding repetitive faces of VI on the posts that can lead to user disengagement. For instance, a video of *Venus* tasting local Italian cuisine or participating in traditional events can make the content more engaging and relatable. Moreover, managers may encourage followers to share their own experiences with the campaign's featured destinations and tag the VI. Highlighting user-generated content on the VI's profile can increase her authenticity and create a supportive community. For example, followers could

be invited to share their photos of destinations that were previously posted by VenereItalia23, and she could then “react” or “comment” the posts. Furthermore, to avoid monotony in facial expressions, managers could leverage animation software to create smiles, winks, and other emotive gestures that humanize the VI, and enhance Vi’s expressive face. Importantly, the congruity between the facial expression and the emotional tone of the post should be considered. For instance, for a joyful landscape, a look of awe could be implemented. From a content perspective, agencies and managers leveraging VI as tourism brand ambassadors could collaborate with historians, artists, chefs, and other local experts to ensure authenticity and accuracy in the posts. We would therefore recommend posting narratives that capture the audience’s interest, using a mix of historical facts, cultural curiosities, and personal stories

**Originality of the paper.** This research, though at its preliminary stage, presents elements of originality in the investigated topic. The originality of this paper lies in its exploration of virtual influencers (VIs) within tourism marketing, particularly focusing on their influence and reception in promoting national tourism through social media campaigns. Specifically, this study leverages the ‘Open to Meraviglia’ campaign, initiated by the Italian Ministry of Tourism, which employed Botticelli’s Venus as a VI to enhance Italian tourism globally. This approach of utilizing a historically significant figure as a VI, specifically designed to promote the essence of a nation’s heritage, sets a novel precedent in the field. Furthermore, our analysis examines the underlying motives of mixed reactions from the audience, especially the negative ones in the tourism context - a still little investigated area. In addition, by highlighting the specific challenges of the use of a cultural icon as a VI in tourism marketing, our preliminary findings contribute to the academic discourse on digital marketing and influencer campaigns, aiming to provide insights that could be applicable beyond the Italian context to the global use of VIs in promoting tourism.

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