

THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

Departmental Research Seminar

What Drives Virtual Influencer's Impact? By



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Date : 3 Mar 2026 (Tue)
Time : 10:30 am – 12 noon
Venue : N001, PolyU

Abstract

Amid the influencer marketing boom, companies are increasingly shifting resources from real to virtual (computer-generated) influencers. While virtual influencers have the potential to influence consumers, what makes their content more (or less) impactful? The current research examines whether appearing in pictures with humans with whom they seem to have social interactions (i.e., social tie presence) shapes consumer engagement. A multimethod investigation, combining automated image and text analysis of thousands of social media posts with controlled experiments, demonstrates that social tie presence boosts impact. These effects are driven by anthropomorphism and trust. Social tie presence makes virtual influencers seem more human, which makes them seem more trustworthy and thus increases engagement and choice. Supporting our theorization, the results indicate that the effects of social ties are stronger when the virtual influencer looks less humanlike, while attenuated when the human companion is merely present, when the companion is a virtual other, and when the poster is a human influencer. These findings shed new light on consumer responses to virtual influencers, explain why social ties affect consumer perceptions, and provide actionable insights for designing more impactful social media content.

Prof. Luca Cascio Rizzo studies how language, voice, and body movement shape communication and human behavior. To investigate this, he employs a multimethod approach, combining automated text, visual, and audio analysis in the field with controlled experiments.

Prof. Rizzo's research has been published in leading academic journals including *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Journal of Marketing*, and covered by popular press outlets such as *Harvard Business Review* and *Fast Company*, among others. In 2024, Prof. Rizzo received the Rising Star Award from the American Marketing Association.

All interested are welcome.



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