



Cartoon Influencers

The Influencer storytelling format as a potential mainstream alternative for animated media.

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

Master Thesis
MA Media Management
2021

MASTER'S THESIS	
Arcada	
Degree Programme:	MA Media Management
Identification number:	
Author:	Daniel Farrera Saldaña
Title:	Cartoon Influencers: The Influencer storytelling format as a mainstream alternative for animated media.
Supervisor (Arcada):	Tomas Träskman
Commissioned by:	
<p>Abstract:</p> <p>This research assesses the challenges and outcomes of implementing the influencer storytelling format into fictional cartoon character-based intellectual properties and brands, and its potential as a mainstream alternative for animated media. Virtual influencers are a new, and still scarce, phenomenon. However, we could see a rise of these virtual identities in social media in the near future. The nature of cartoon characters could help them to take advantage of such a format, and possibly even outperform their fictional or maybe even their real human counterparts.</p> <p>The goal of this study is to find out what is the criteria that these cartoon characters need to meet in order to perform successfully in a narrative format that is made of multiple media formats, cross-platform, interactive experiences and has a high and exhaustive level of exposure. While previous obstacles like technology, barrier of entry and traditional animation production pipelines are no longer of relevance; the current challenges rather reside on character construction, brand management, production capacity, and understanding an unstable media. This research assesses the input and results that organizations and professionals of the animation industry are collecting from their cartoon influencer first explorations; and it aims to collect the criteria that they take into account when considering to explore the influencer format with their intellectual properties and brands.</p>	
Keywords:	Cartoon Character, Social Media, Virtual Influencer, Animation
Number of pages:	
Language:	English
Date of acceptance:	66

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	7
1.1	Personal Motivation	10
1.2	Problem Statement	10
1.3	Aim of research	11
1.4	Research Questions	11
1.5	Methodology	11
1.6	Research Limitations	13
1.7	Expected Outcomes of this Research	13
2	Theoretical Framework	13
2.1	Influencers	14
2.2	Virtual Influencers and Cartoon Influencers	15
2.3	The Consumers of Influencer Media	16
2.4	Real-time performance and real-time render technology	18
2.5	Animated Content Creators	20
2.6	Previous theory and studies	23
2.6.1	<i>Cartoon Characters</i>	23
2.6.2	<i>Influencer Behavior</i>	24
2.6.3	<i>Virtual Influencers and the Uncanny theory</i>	26
2.6.4	<i>Ethical dilemmas</i>	28
3	Findings	29
3.1	Units of Analysis	29
3.1.1	<i>Cartoon Characters</i>	29
3.1.2	<i>Influencer Storytelling Format (ISF)</i>	30
3.2	Cartoon Influencer Project Overviews	33
3.2.1	Barbie Vlogs	33
3.2.2	Mar.ia	34
3.2.3	Catalina la Catrina	35
3.2.4	Spongebob's Birthday Party	37

3.2.5	Any Malu	38
3.2.6	Black Hat and Villanos	39
3.3	Interview Summaries	40
3.3.1	Interview 1	40
3.3.2	Interview 2	42
3.3.3	Interview 3	44
3.3.4	Interview 4	46
3.3.5	Interview 5	48
3.3.6	Interview 6	51
3.4	Interviews' Analysis	55
3.4.1	Familiarity with the concepts	55
3.4.2	Motivation	56
3.4.3	Challenges	56
3.4.4	Criteria	57
3.4.5	Risks	57
3.4.6	Performance Results	58
3.4.7	Future Potential	59
4	Conclusions	59
4.1	Implications for Practice	60
4.2	Contributions to Theory	61
5	References	63

Figures

Figure 1. Gertie the Dinosaur (1914). Open Culture. 2016.	7
Figure 2. Some of the Most Popular Character Meet & Greets Requested by Wish Kids at Disney Parks. Disney Parks. 2020.	9
Figure 3. Kibble Kat Concept Art. Kibble Kat Channel Pitch Bible. Daniel Farrera. 2018.	10
Figure 4. Influencers que no existen: el caso de Miquela, la robot instagramer. El Diario. 2019	15
Figure 5. Cartoon Network Brazil To Premiere Short-form Animated Series O (Sur)real Mundo de Any Malu On 16th March. Regular Capital. 2019.	15
Figure 6. Monsters Inc Laugh Floor - Magic Kingdom's Attraction. Partiu Disney Parks. 2021.	18
Figure 7. 'Hero Dad', one of the first real-time animation series with Unity, takes place in Valencia. Panorama Audiovisual. 2019.	19
Figure 8. League of legends Pro League real-time interview with 'Akali'. Cubic Motion. 2019.	20
Figure 9. "My Thoughts on Roommates" Thumbnail. TheOdd1sOut. YouTube. 2016.	21
Figure 10. "I Attempted my First Pokemon Nuzlocke" Thumbnail. Jaiden Animations. YouTube. 2019.	21
Figure 11. Clint Eastwood Music video. Gorillaz. YouTube. 2016.	22
Figure 12. Hatsune Miku Expo. Brooklyn Vegan 2020.	22
Figure 13. Barbie Vlogs Thumbnail. Barbie YouTube Channel. 2019.	23
Figure 14. Hello Kitty YouTube Channel. 2018.	23
Figure 15. Pikachu is the ambassador of Osaka, and our hearts. The Verge. 2017.	24
Figure 16. Uncanny theory graph. Daniel Farrera. 2021.	27
Figure 17. Barbie and Nikki Discuss Racism Thumbnail. Barbie Vlogs. YouTube. 2020.	34
Figure 18. Mar.ia. Instagram. 2020.	35
Figure 19. Catalina la Catrina 2020 - Canal 5. Daily Motion. 2020.	36

Figure 20. La Fiesta de Bob Esponja. Promo screenshot. Canal Cinco. Facebook. 2019.	37
Figure 21. Sola en Casa Thumbnail. Any Malu Cartoon Network. YouTube. 2020.	38
Figure 22. Videos de orientación para villanos Thumbnail. Cartoon Network LA. YouTube. 2018.	39
Figure 23. Toontorial thumbnail. Cartoon Network LA. YouTube. 2018.	53

Tables

Table 1. Most Popular virtual influencers and cartoon YouTubers. Daniel Farrera. 2021.	17
---	----

1. Introduction

The illusion of life

“For some presumptuous reason, man feels the need to create something of his own that appears to be living, that has an inner strength, a vitality, a separate identity, a creation that gives the illusion of life” (Thomas, Johnston, 1987) But what would uphold this illusion higher than the chance to interact with it?

107 years have passed since the presentation of *Gertie* (Figure 1), a skillfully animated cartoon dinosaur, as part of Winsord McCay’s vaudeville act. McCay was an American cartoonist and the creator of the first animated characters who by this, his third animated work, had already managed to create an interactive experience. During the performance, McCay would time his actions to create the illusion of interaction with the character in a projection. He would feed *Gertie* an apple, call her and, to complete the act, McCay would walk behind the projection surface and immediately walk inside the cartoon transformed into animation and interact with the character while the audience stood in awe after witnessing such “magic” happen before their eyes.



Figure 1. *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914). Open Culture. 2016.

Animation is the artform of creating the illusion of action by making images in sequential order and projecting them at a constant rate (Johnston, Thomas, 1987). Animated characters are an elevated form of this artform, but when these characters transcend their animated media, they become real for the popular culture. To put it into perspective, animated characters are so transcendent that they have been a main driving force to persuade the extension of copyright terms in the US more than once (Schlackman, 2014). Interactive characters require the construction of intelligent, emotional, behaving creatures that respond in a believable way to human behavior in order to “*suspend disbelief*” in the audience (Bates, 1992).

Before interactive media, cartoon IP owners used costumes to create this interaction. I had the opportunity to work at the *Walt Disney World Resort* in the summer of 2008. It was the first time I visited the Disney parks and I could live the experience of both being a “*cast member*” and a guest. As a cast member, one could walk backstage in the theme parks and see the people working as character impersonators beneath the costumes and masks; and I could also see children’s faces light up when *Mickey Mouse* walked in to give them a hug and an autograph. The cast members who escort and take care of the characters are called “*character attendants*” and their job is to keep their “*character integrity*”, which means to preserve and uphold the realness of the characters so the illusion and experience is as real and true as it can be for the children or in order to “*suspend disbelief*”. For every cast member, these characters are no actors, they are not people in costumes, they are the original characters the world knows and loves. That experience helped me to realise all the subtle, but smart methodology behind “the magic” of Disney IPs’ success and how these interactive experiences between the characters and the audience can channel the creation of deeper intimate bonds (Figure 2). At the same time, this strategy builds a stronger IP that feels true to the audience hence awaking real and strong emotions in them. Nonetheless, the characters that one meets and greets at the Disney parks lack one defining thing: a voice of their own.



Figure 2. Some of the Most Popular Character Meet & Greets Requested by Wish Kids at Disney Parks. Disney Parks. 2020.

Introducing a new storytelling format for animation

Using the theme parks characters as a start point of real life interaction, social media and the approach of the “*influencer*” can be utilized as a storytelling format to enhance the interactive experience by transforming animated characters into virtual “*cartoon influencers*”. In marketing, social media influencers are perceived as tools that consist of individual media managers that can be hired for credible, accessible and specialized product advertising (Cadwalader, 2019). However, it is the gradual effort of building a bond of trust and community with their audience that bestows them with the influential power and the authority over a niche field. Their quick adaptability to trends; fast and constant rate of publication; multi-platform, multi-format and multi-media narratives; and their ability to diversify and interact with their audience is what this research refers to as “the influencer storytelling format” in this research.

1.1. Personal Motivation

The personal motivation to do this research comes from the interest and curiosity that ignited while working on the development of an animated series pitch bible of a project called Kibble Kat Channel (Figure 3). This project is planned to perform in a virtual influencer format utilizing the different social media platforms to help the characters reach and interact with the audience. When pitching the series concept to media executives and investors, many appear to like it, but seem hesitant about the effectiveness of the format and many do not even know how to execute the idea. My expectations about this research are, not only to land a clearer idea of the criteria needed for this cartoon influencer format's management, but also to contribute to the broad understanding of the natures of both animated characters and the virtual storytelling format.



Figure 3.
Kibble Kat Concept Art.
Kibble Kat Channel Pitch
Bible. Daniel Farrera. 2018.

1.2. Problem Statement

While the technology to create credible virtual influencers already exists today and is relatively available, organizations still seem renuent to venture into the influencer storytelling format with their animation IPs. It is understandable that not all cartoon characters are compatible with the format, but the ones that could benefit from it would require a new set of creative and management strategies. If technology is no longer an obstacle, and the barrier of entry of online platforms is low, the lack of exploration of this storytelling format most probably resides in a different stage of the process. Brand image, control efforts, regulations, price, production capacity and character compatibility with the format could be the key

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

aspects hindering the rise of the influencer storytelling format as a mainstream alternative for animated entertainment. A handful of cartoon characters, old and new, have already ventured into this format with relative success. Some of the people involved with these early explorations share their perspective and experience on the matter and they are gathered and compared in this study with the hope to help future explorations of the format.

1.3. Aim of the Research

The main purpose of this research is to determine which is the criteria that a cartoon character needs to meet to be considered as a potentially effective virtual influencer; to study the potential risks, challenges and outcomes of venturing into the influencer storytelling format with animated characters; and finally, to determine the conditions and strategies with which organizations and content creators could feel incentivized to embrace and invest in this format.

1.4. Research Questions

- Why and how do organizations and content creators explore the influencer storytelling format with their cartoon characters?
- How can the influencer storytelling format enhance or jeopardize the engagement and reputation of cartoon character-based IPs and brands?

1.5 Methodology

To gather the information to answer these questions, this research relies on a literature review composed of background research, previous and related theory and studies; and a set of six semi-structured interviews with professionals and experts of the animation and tv industries.

The background research reviews the concepts of influencers, virtual and cartoon influencers, includes an overview of the animated content creators and organizations who have laid the

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

ground for cartoon characters adopting the influencer storytelling format, and the audiences who consume influencer content. The background research also reviews groundbreaking technological advancements that allow virtual influencers to achieve real-time interaction and the past and current successful applications of such technology on mainstream media with cartoon characters.

No theory or previous studies on the specific field of cartoon influencers or influencers as a storytelling format was found within the resources available. However, the final section of the theoretical framework gathers theory and studies on the effects, behavior and ethical dilemmas related to influencers and virtual influencers.

The research section starts with the detailed description of the two identified units of analysis: cartoon characters and the influencer storytelling format. It is followed by the reviews of the six projects in which the interviewees are involved in and are given a brief overview describing its concept, performance and results. Then, each interview is condensed into a summary from the original verbatim transcription.

The nature of qualitative interviews and the approach of this study results in subjectivity. However, the interview's questions were designed objectively to avoid bias or influencing the perspective of the interviewees. While most interviews aim to find the answers to the research questions and follow a similar structure, each interview was tailored to gather information from the specific experience and perspective of each interviewees and the projects they were involved in. Because it is a phenomenological study, the sample was kept small to enable sufficient depth of analysis (King et al. 2018). As referenced by King et al., and as expected using a phenomenological approach, the sample was composed of a variety of positions in relation to the research topic expecting to throw light on meaningful differences in experience and to enable essential aspects of the phenomenon to be robustly identified (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2008). Four of the six interviews were translated from Spanish, however trying to preserve the context, tone and essence of what the interviewees expressed.

The research section finishes with an analysis of the obtained information through all of the interviews. The final section is the conclusion which answers the research questions using all the gathered data from the research and the interviews.

1.6. Research Limitations

The influencer storytelling format has barely been explored by cartoon character-based IPs and brands, and there are just very young and isolated cases of fully fleshed characters already adopting the format. Some of them are partial experiments and most of them might have a success biased by the novelty of the format. Additionally, as a qualitative research, it is predominantly based on the informed opinion and experience of industry experts and professionals, and on the limited measurable results of the few relevant cases.

1.7. Expected Outcomes of this Research

With the resulting conclusions of this research, the aim is to assess the current efforts on creating successful Cartoon Influencers, to fill research gaps, and to help organizations and content creators in the decision making and development processes when considering using the Influencer Storytelling Format as a direct or alternative path for animated media.

2. Theoretical Framework

This background exploration takes an initial approach into the concepts of Influencer, virtual influencer and cartoon influencer. Next, it offers an overview of the consumers of influencer media, the groundbreaking technological advancements that allow real-time performance and interaction of digital characters with their audience, and the content creators who have laid the ground for cartoon influencers.

2.1. Influencers

Influencers are usually on the road as (sole) entertainers, they attract millions of followers by constantly sharing content curated from their daily activities on social media platforms, evolving around one particular domain of interest (Chapple and Cownie 2017, p 111); and that the influencers' self-image is based less on the intended "influencing" than on the "inspiration" of their followers (Schuegraf et al., 2018, p. 82). Spectators, especially the younger ones, often see them not only as idols, but also as virtual friends (Frühbrodt, 2019, p 7). However, the two features that separates influencers from a trained or fabricated performer are that, first, their content feels spontaneous and real; and second, that the influencers make themselves feel approachable by speaking directly to their audience and interacting with it through comments and activities (Frühbrodt, 2019). Authenticity and sincerity is what gives the influencer power over traditional communicators.

Influencers do not appear from thin air, platforms and their users foster them if they work and create their content following certain behaviors, either deliberately or organically. The platform algorithms are crafted and constantly adjusting to promote its content creators to consumers. It is the job of the creators to utilize the platforms as a tailwind to propel their reach as “experts” in their field and become influencers. Then they become individual media managers in their own right as they single-handedly plan, manage, execute and deliver tailor-made content to their personal social media channels (Cadwallader, 2019). As social media relies on user generated content, it is natural that some content creators will flourish more than others. *“Those who master their domains develop persuasive and important communities around their areas of expertise, interests and passions and now possess the prowess and authority to direct, instruct and steer decision makers and referrers”* (Solis, 2009).

Influencers utilize one or a diverse combination of digital platforms to communicate and interact with their audiences as content creators. The largest used platforms in 2020 were Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat and Tik Tok (Influencer MarketingHub, 2020). This means that if they communicate through different platforms, they have to produce content in

different formats and types of media, like text (e.g. tweets), photography (e.g. instagram) and video (e.g. vlogs, tik toks, stories); and also through different length constraints and layouts.

2.2. Virtual Influencers and Cartoon Influencers

A virtual influencer is an artificial identity either trying to emulate a human being using a “hyper-realistic” 3D model, like *Lil Miquela* (Figure 4), or using a stylized cartoon character, like *Any Malu* (Figure 5), which performs an influencer role. The virtual influencer is given a personality defined by a first-person view of the world, and made accessible via popular media platforms (Virtual Humans, 2020). They are crafted to behave as a human influencer. Even though they do not exist in the physical world, they are fictional characters or act as digital avatars of a real person. As a result, “*cartoon influencers*” are a type of virtual influencers. The intention of this research is to assess the creation and management of cartoon characters, which with this selection of the positive and entertaining attributes of an influencer, are able to achieve direct communication, interaction and create a genuine emotional bond with their audience.



Figure 4. Influencers que no existen: el caso de Miquela, la robot instagramer. El Diario. 2019

Figure 5. Cartoon Network Brazil To Premiere Short-form Animated Series O (Sur)real Mundo de Any Malu On 16th March. Regular Capital. 2019



Studies involving virtual influencers are rather scarce. Nevertheless, and despite their sole focus on virtual humans, the virtual influencers that try to realistically emulate human behavior and appearance, the studies that exist predict an excellent potential of growth in the forthcoming years (Bendoni, Danielian, 2019).

2.3. The Consumers of Influencer Media

“*We, as people, are media*” (Solis, 2009). Social networks have given the chance to the consumer to become authority, ambassador, critic and producer of content hence shaping media to the true mass interest. Users of social media who make daily use of it have a high exposure to influencers, whether aware of it or not. Measuring exposure is key for evaluating the performance of media content and yet, it is still a challenge to accurately measure it, even with the tools that digitalization offers (de Vreese & Neijens, 2016). Because every user has different interests and habits, the artificial intelligence of social media platforms is designed to personalize the content that could boost their activity and shows it to them in their feed. Users become active consumers when they follow or subscribe to the influencers channels or follow their accounts.

The statistics show that the generations with more users on Instagram are the Gen Z and Millennial (between the age of 18 and 34) representing 62.7% of its total active user base of 1,158 billion (Statista, 2020a). The most popular social network is Facebook with a total active user base of 2,701 billion, followed by YouTube and WhatsApp (2 million active users each). TikTok is a recent and trending platform with a total active user base of 648 million by October 2020 (Statista, 2020b). It is worth pointing out that three of the top ten YouTube channels with more subscribers have children as their target audience, one is the third place and it is an animated content channel and the other two are owned by kid YouTubers (*Kids Diana show* and *Like Nastya*); in addition, the Swedish influencer, *PewDiePie*, is the second most popular channel with 107 million subscribers (Statista, 2020c).

The following chart (Table 1) is a sample, as of May 2021, of the most popular virtual influencers and cartoon YouTubers with their total follower base in their main social media platforms:

	First Appearance in Social Media	Followers/Subscribers		
Platform		Instagram	Facebook	YouTube
Barbie	2012	1.9 M	14.9 M	10.5 M
Lil Miquela	2016	3 M	1.2 M	266 K
Hatsune Miku	2007	-	2.4 M	1.63 M
Any Malu	2015	525 K	81 K	3.24 M
TheOdd1sOut	2010	2.9 M	54 K	16.6 M
Jaiden Animations	2014	2 M	61 K	9.88 M

Table 1. Most Popular virtual influencers and cartoon YouTubers. Daniel Farrera. 2021.

The nature and degree of consumers' experienced immersion into media narrative is determined by personal motives and desires, which drive them to take actions and decisions (Wohlfeil, 2018). Followers and subscribers are not necessarily fans, they are people who share a common interest, ideology or feel entertained by the creator and her content, and who often feel the need to interact with them. Consistency and quality with which content creators generate and publish content, and an appealing personality is what encourages frugal users to follow an account or subscribe to a channel. But followers are not for granted, commitment, authenticity, charisma and engagement are key for keeping them engaged. Content creators need to be able to understand their audience to build a loyal follower base. Demographics and interests need to be assessed in order to get an insight of an audience (Influencer MarketingHub, 2020). Once an influencer has reached a certain amount of followers, they become valuable and measurable assets for marketing purposes.

2.4. Real-time performance and interaction technology

“Art challenges technology, and technology inspires art” - John Lasseter

This section showcases some of the technological innovations that can help cartoon characters to perform and interact in real-time with their audience. The purpose of this section is to help the reader understand the possibilities and limitations of animation in real-time media and to highlight past examples of successful interaction between cartoon characters and an audience in real-time.

Creative minds have historically managed to find ways in which a fictional character can interact with its audience, but today the technological barrier for quality real-time animation production and interaction is fading. Nevertheless, and something to take into account, most of these technological advancements are not broadly available or easily accessible.

Walt Disney Imagineering pioneered digital puppetry with what they named as the *“Living character initiative”*. They applied this method in The *“Monsters Inc. Laugh Floor”* (Figure 6) and *“Turtle Talk with Crush”* attractions in 2007 at the WDW Parks earning an award for Outstanding Visual Effects in a Special Venue Project by the Visual Effects Society in 2008 (Leibacher, 2012). Both attractions are still running to date and they utilize visual and auditory sensors inside a venue that an actor can use to interact in real-time with the audience while manipulating a digital puppet of the 3D cartoon character from a long distance. This makes each interaction unique and authentic even when following a certain routine, like a stand-up comedy show.



Figure 6.
Monsters Inc Laugh Floor
- Magic Kingdom's
Attraction.
Partiu Disney Parks.
2021.

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

In the case of 3D characters, real-time rendering technology is also necessary for real-time interaction. Video game engine developers like *Unreal Engine* and *Unity Technologies* have been in a race to lead the expanded market of real-time rendering. Both engines are being used by animation studios around the globe for improving their production workflows. Such is the case of Wise Blue Studios in Valencia, Spain, for the production of an animated TV series called “*Hero Dad*” (Figure 7)’. Producer and director Natalie Martinez explains in a Siggraph 2019 presentation how their production workflow has improved by using real-time render in Unity, which allows them to make changes to early stages of production without affecting the whole pipeline. In the case of Visual Effects(VFX), Unreal Engine 4 has been used by the VFX studio Industrial Light and Magic(ILM) for the previsualization of “*virtual sets*” in the real-time shooting of *The Mandalorian*, an original TV series of the streaming platform of Disney+ (Failes, 2020).

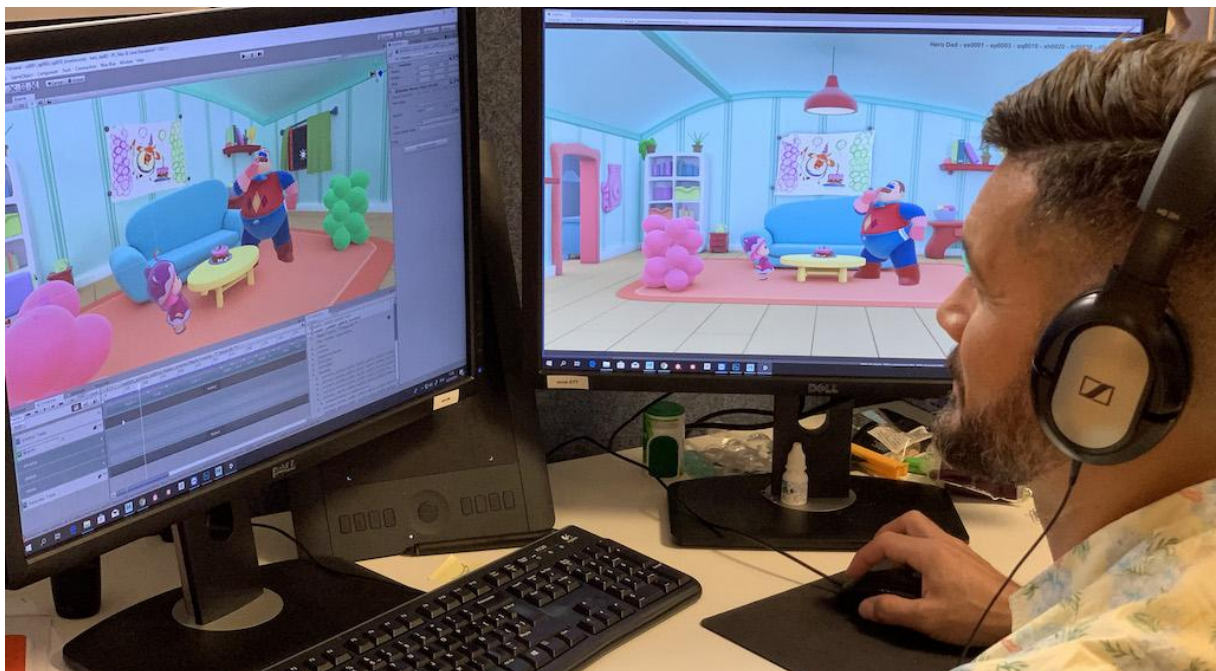


Figure 7. 'Hero Dad', one of the first real-time animation series with Unity, takes place in Valencia. Panorama Audiovisual. 2019.

The Persona System, created by Cubic Motion, is an award winning performance capture system which uses game engines such as Unreal Engine. It was used to showcase the fictional K-pop band member “*Akali*” into a live broadcast where she performed and was interviewed in real-time and using Augmented Reality during the China’s League of Legends pro League event in 2019 (Figure 8). The event was broadcasted to a peak of 205 million viewers. Cubic

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

Motion explains in their case study that the most difficult challenge was the rigging of the character, which is the technique used in skeletal animation for representing a 3D character model using a series of interconnected digital bones (Petty, 2020). The character's rig directly receives the input from the real-time performance to determine the position and orientation of each of these digital bones in the captured space and time.

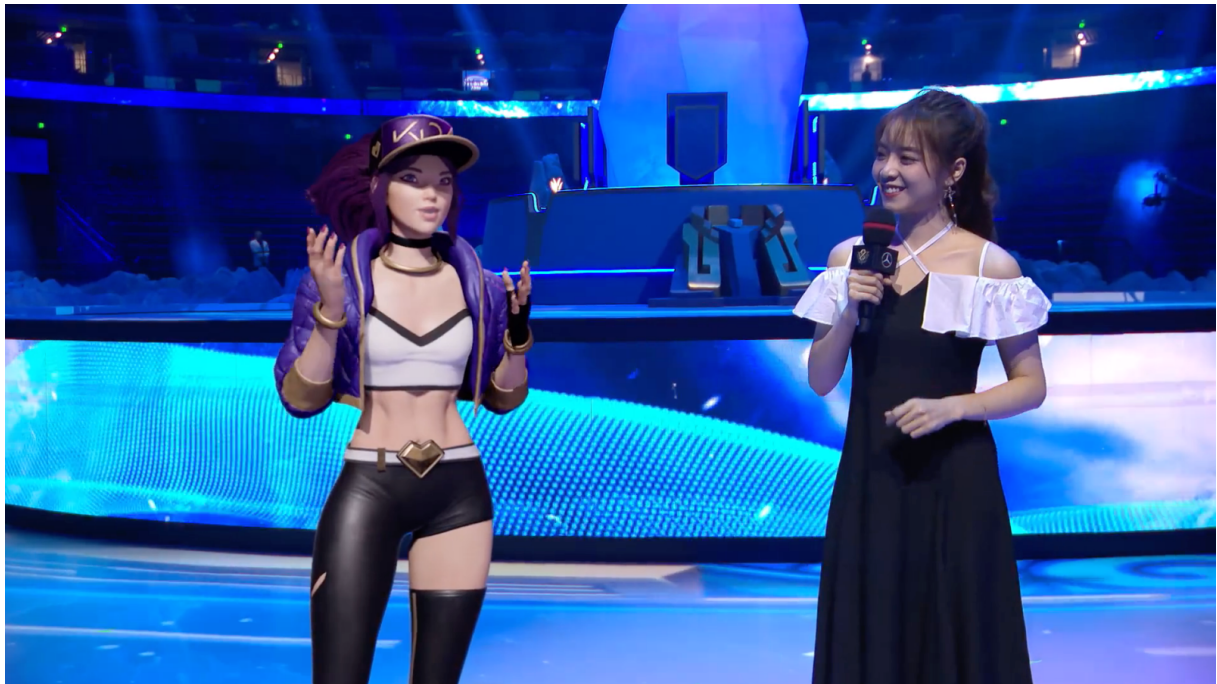


Figure 8. League of legends Pro League real-time interview with 'Akali'. Cubic Motion. 2019.

Independent developers and organizations across the globe diligently work on new and more efficient methods to contribute to the optimization of real-time render and performance capture. They share their discoveries and accomplishments at computer graphic summits like SIGGRAPH, where companies like Unreal or Unity can approach them and seek collaboration in the aim for progress.

2.5. Animated Content Creators

The technology and production barriers have kept animation from fully entering the market of influencers. Only a few independent creators and organizations from diverse backgrounds have exploited the influencer storytelling format using animation.

The first to venture into the cartoon vlogger format were independent content creators who saw YouTube's platform as an opportunity to showcase their creativity and talent, most of the time in a comedic tone. Two successful examples of these independent channels are *TheOdd1sOut* (Figure 9) and *Jaiden Animation* (Figure 10). Both creators use simple, but appealing visual styles to speak from a personal perspective. They use cartoons to illustrate their stories or to play the role of a cartoon avatar of themselves, all of which gives a distinctive and authentic look to their content. Both have built an important follower base, and engagement that their content achieves has proven that this animation format is appealing to online audiences.



Figure 9. "My Thoughts on Roommates" Thumbnail. *TheOdd1sOut*. YouTube. 2016.

Figure 10. "I Attempted my First Pokemon Nuzlocke" Thumbnail. *Jaiden Animations*. YouTube. 2019.

The music industry has also seen some considerably successful virtual cartoon characters like the British virtual band *Gorillaz* and the virtual Japanese anime singer *Hatsune Miku*. *Gorillaz* (Figure 11) is the creation of the musician Damon Albarn and the artist Jamie Hewlett. Four animated characters represent the band, and, in their early years, the band performed backstage, while animation and holograms were the main spectacle. Until this date, the band still produces their music videos starring their original cartoon characters and other animated visuals. *Hatsune Miku* (Figure 12) is created with a software that receives lyrics and melodies as its input and delivers a song performed by the cartoon character. It is developed by Crypton Future Media and now offers a full cast of different anime characters as performers. Their performances are held in venues where *Hatsune Miku* can appear as a projected hologram singing and dancing in front of a live audience.



Figure 11. Clint Eastwood. Music video. Gorillaz. YouTube. 2016.



Figure 12. Hatsune Miku Expo. Brooklyn Vegan. 2020.

Few organizations have dared to venture into the influencer storytelling format with popular and well-known characters. Two examples are Mattel and Sanrio. Mattel has been producing *Barbie* (Figure 13) animations in vlog formats since 2015 and Sanrio has produced videos of *Hello Kitty* (Figure 14) for their Japanese audience, both on YouTube's platform. This research will try to find out why there are not many more popular cartoon IPs and brands adopting this format.



Figure 13. Barbie Vlogs Thumbnail. Barbie YouTube Channel. 2019.

Figure 14. Hello Kitty YouTube Channel. 2018.

2.6. Previous theory and studies

This research draws from different strands of literature separated in three categories: Theory and studies involving cartoon characters, influencer behavior, and virtual influencers and artificial identities.

2.6.1. Cartoon Characters

Some brands have turned to cartoon characters to reinforce their image, most common seen in food products aimed for children. As found in a study by Jose, A. (2014), cartoon characters help children to feel attracted to a brand and to associate positive emotions to it. And the brands that we get exposed and attached to from our earliest years become ingrained in our mindset hence the chance to stick loyally to them in our lifetime grows high (Lindstorm, M, 2012). During the 90's and early 2000's there was a boom of brands endorsing cartoon characters or pushing their own cartoon mascots forward to appeal to their target consumers. Some preferred to rely on the relatively higher security of endorsing cartoon characters as "Spokescharacters" instead of associating with real celebrities who could fall into an unpredictable twist of reputation of any kind that would affect their brand image. Cartoon characters are very effective to advertise brands as found in a study by Manaf, A. and Alallan, Y. (2017), so effective that many countries have forbidden junk food brands to use them in their packaging to prevent children from making a positive emotional association with these products. This brief historical recapitulation is relevant as, for this research, the tables are

turned. Now cartoon characters are so ingrained in the culture that some have even been awarded with the title of cultural ambassadors in political ceremonies (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Pikachu is the ambassador of Osaka, and our hearts. The Verge. 2017.

2.6.2. Influencer Behavior

Numerous studies exist about the impact of the influencers and how organizations and brands can benefit from using them as a marketing tool. However, this research's aim requires the analysis of more theoretical studies about Influencers to justify how animated characters and their IPs can be transported into this format from their essence.

The Megaphone Effect and Cultural Capital

The megaphone effect theory is described, in a study by McQuarrie et al. (2013) about fashion bloggers, as a phenomenon that occurs when ordinary consumers post to the web about consumption and acquire a mass audience for these posts. Influencers are consumers that

work their way to become the consumable. Once a consumer gains a large audience, this can be converted into institutional access and further to achieve even greater reach.

This research also digs into the concept of *Cultural Capital*, which can be translated as the intangible social arrangement that explains how individuals maintain a social position, the gate-keeping to newcomers and the upward social mobility. Social Media users start using cultural capital in their own field of expertise to exercise taste and judgement. As they accumulate cultural capital from its repeated exercise and display, they can convert it into economic and social capital, hence becoming influencers at a certain point. The approach of the *Cultural Capital* helps to explain why real-life celebrities have an advantageous starting point when engaging with audiences in social media platforms, compared with the ordinary user who starts from nothing. This same theory can be applied to popular cartoon characters which could use the power of the cultural capital accumulated by their well-known IPs as a tailwind to venture into social media.

Cancel Culture

“It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you’ll do things differently” - Warren Buffet

Originally used to name the practice of social media callouts that result in the withdrawal of attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are found offensive by a general or particular consensus (D. Clark, M, 2020). It often has consequences outside social media, like cancelled contracts, firing, legal implications, etc. It is a recent term, but has built up, unnamed, before social media, since the appearance of celebrities as spokespersons (Razor Branding blog, 2020). A brand’s image is a tweet away from having the consumers’ backs turn on it. Although the “*Cancel*” online phenomenon is aimed toward calling out offensive, unfair or criminal behavior, brands and celebrities are scared of falling victims of the cancel juggernaut as a result of a negligent misstep at any moment. Fictional characters, including cartoon characters and their media are non exempt and their historical context could affect their reputation and lead them to censorship or a potential “*cancelation*”.

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

2.6.3. Virtual Influencers and the Uncanny theory

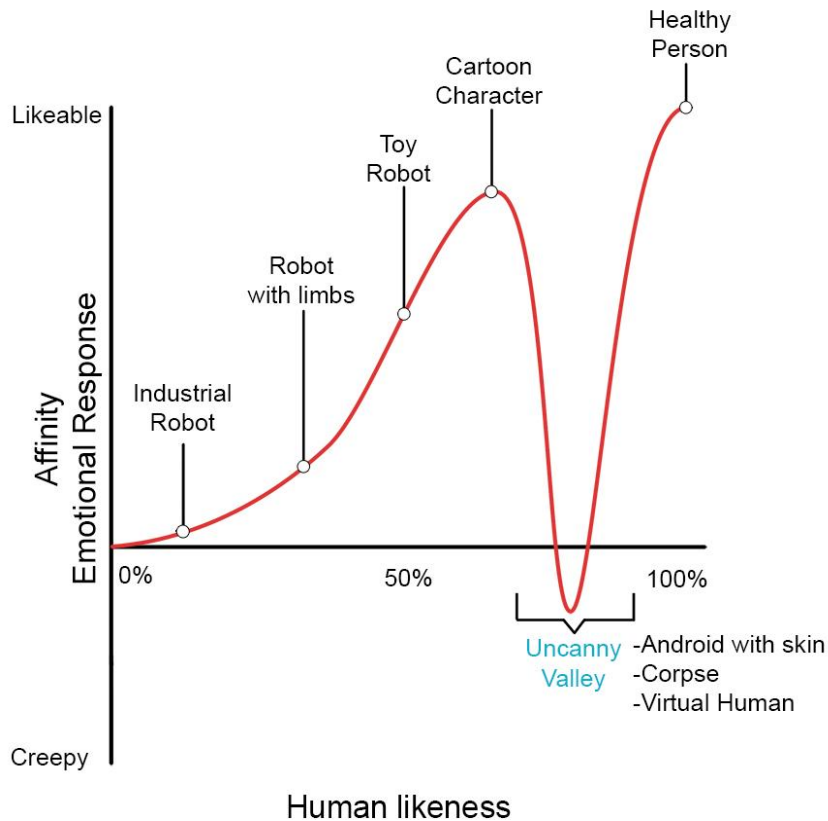
As it remains almost as virgin territory, there is still a research gap to address about virtual influencers. However, there are some interesting approaches regarding these virtual identities.

Eric Dahan, the co-founder of a global influencer marketing agency (Open Influence), shares the conclusions of his research on virtual influencers. He explains that, with a strong creative team behind them, virtual influencers can play any role and live up to any expectation. As he describes the advantages of choosing them against their real counterparts, Dahan emphasizes on creative control, cost efficiency, impartiality, flexibility, availability and relatable popularity. He also acknowledges the disadvantages of the technical limitations that lead audiences to perceive virtual influencers as fake, hence running the risk of alienating the audience.

The uncanny theory

It is a concept that was born in the field of robotics in the 1970, when Masahiro Mori published a theory on how humans react emotionally to artificial beings. Claude Draude makes a reflection on virtual humans and their relation to this phenomenon in his study (2009). Because Mori(1970) placed humans as the role model of robotics, he made a research on the trustworthiness of robots in relation to their human resemblance. This theory revealed a valley in the middle of the graph representing the level of resemblance to humans in which there is a point towards 100% human likeness in which the appearance of the robot falls into a valley of affinity (Shinwakan) (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Uncanny theory graph. Daniel Farrera. 2021.



This means that if something looks human, but there are clear signs that indicate it is actually not, the artificial being will produce a reaction of rejection by a human being. The effects of this fall in affinity in Mori's graph is called *the Uncanny Valley*. The features that can lead an artificial being into the Uncanny can be visual cues like odd body proportions or unnatural movement or behaviour cues, like clumsy interaction. It is still debated why humans have this reaction, however, the Uncanny plays a role in the design of artificial beings. Current attempts to create realistic human virtual influencers still struggle to climb out of the uncanny valley. But, as Mori's graph exercises illustrate, visual divergences from realism, like cartoon stylization or anthropomorphism, stay away from "the uncanny". As a result, these visual divergences are perceived as more appealing than an artificial attempt to impersonate a realistic human being.

2.6.4. Ethical dilemmas

Ethical implications have started to be addressed in some studies regarding the potential boom of virtual influencers and its potential to mislead the audience. If social media platforms allow fictional/virtual and real creators to upload content equally, how are users supposed to separate fiction from facts? (Robinson, 2019). It is already a challenge to achieve this separation with real human users. In his study about Ontology and Ethics of virtual influencers, Robinson discusses the importance of drawing distinctions between real and virtual influencers. He recognizes that some real influencers also edit their content to project an artificially exaggerated version of reality. Exaggeration and fabrication are indeed different, but both are valid as their ultimate purpose is to profit from them. On the other hand, regarding moral responsibility, Robinson argues that, whereas real influencers are real identities that can take responsibility by their actions, it is still unclear how virtual influencers could hold accountability in the same way. To illustrate this ethical dilemma, he speculates about when influencers can become autonomous by creating content only by using algorithms.

Ethics already concerning real influencers as a whole apply equally to their virtual counterparts. In the study about the Ethics of Authenticity (Wellman, et al., 2018), a framework that puts where it tries to find a balance between the influencers' own brand identity and the relationship with their audience and their ability to design content that can be sponsored. Regarding this specific topic, in a study about viewers' trust towards paid-for endorsements by YouTube bloggers, Chapple (2017) found that lifestyle vloggers happen to be considered by their viewers as highly credible and influential individuals. And, as Robinson argued, this influence power implies responsibility, and a large number of studies try to find what are the correlations between the exposure to the artificial versions of reality showcased in social media and self-esteem and conspicuous consumption (Widjajanta et al. 2018). As predicted by the researchers, social media indeed has psychological impact on their users thus content creators need to be aware of the content they post.

3. Findings

3.1. Units of analysis for the research

In this section, the two units of analysis (1) Cartoon character and (2) Influencer Storytelling Format (ISF) are described in detail.

3.1.1. Cartoon Characters

Cartoon characters are an either simplified or exaggerated stylized representation of a character. They carry the perspective and personality of the cartoon artist in their stylization and can be represented in one or many art or animation techniques. Cartoon characters, as fictional characters are built from two main parts: the visual appearance and their personality traits or psychological built. These two aspects are what Intellectual property protects. While its visual appearance serves as a brand distinctive and helps it appeal to the eye of the viewer, the combination with a unique personality is what helps cartoon characters truly transcend into popular culture.

Cartoon characters originate from a myriad of places, some started as toys (e.g. *He Man*, *My little Pony* and *Barbie*), some come from comic books (e.g. Marvel and DC superheroes, and most Japanese anime characters), some started as product mascots (e.g. *M&M's*), some come from video games (e.g. *Mario*, *Pikachu* and *Sonic*), some find their roots in literature and culture (e.g. *Hercules* and the *Disney Princesses*), the most common: film and TV (e.g. *Mickey Mouse*, *Totoro*, the *Looney Tunes* and *the Simpsons*), and some are derivative from another animated IP (e.g. the *Teen Titans* and *She'Ra*). Even if cartoon characters were born to support a brand or a product, if relevant enough, they can become emancipated and represent themselves as a stand-alone brand, a brand with its own brand image, personality and identity. Some cartoon character brands become so valuable that they have the upper hand when choosing if they desire to be associated with another brand or human celebrity. In the case of some blockbuster films, this authority can be perceived in their voice cast, soundtrack and product endorsements even before getting released.

Intellectual Property and Brand

Fictional characters are a figure that can be protected under intellectual property laws hence monopolizing their personality traits tied to their appearance. They are protected under copyright in order for their owners and creators to capitalize on their cultural and economic value. Brands are no longer only attached to products, they can be applied to ideas and concepts as well. A brand can even represent a real or fictional individual. Cartoon characters are brands on themselves, some as stand-alone and some as a collective. What this research defines as an “cartoon character-based IP or brand” is an Intellectual property or brand which relies majorly on one or many cartoon characters.

Brand Image

Brand image is what consumers see and perceive of a brand, the result and outcome of messages sent from the brands identity and personality, what some call the brand’s DNA, and its perception depends on the resulting decodification on the receiver’s side (Sonne, H, 2013). Companies try to build, model and maintain their brand’s image by controlling and tailoring the messages they communicate. A successful image adapts back and forth by trying to meet the consumer needs.

3.1.2 Influencer Storytelling Format (ISF)

This research defines the Influencer Storytelling Format (ISF) as a narrative format which emulates one or many behavioral patterns of social media influencers. These patterns consist of two key storytelling elements: character-centered and direct speech, and a series of optional and additive components: multi-platform, non rigid media formats, immediacy and constant exposure, and engagement and interaction. The ISF does not have a standard format, but as long as it conserves its two key storytelling elements, the rest are interchangeable and escalable.

Character-centered

As reviewed in the theoretical framework of this research, the individualistic approach of the influencers is an important part of these sole entertainers' essence. The ISF needs to revolve around a single or a small group of characters to achieve an Influencer style of narrative. If the storytelling is plot driven, the format is prone to be confused with that of a web series. As a result, the story development of a cartoon influencer should focus on building strong and complex characters which can cope with the patterns of social media behavior and build the authenticity that all influencers covet.

Direct Speech

The second element that defines influencer behavior is the way these entertainers communicate in a direct way to their audience. This element is what enables the emotional bond shortcut of the ISF. It is also the main element that separates traditional self-contained narratives from the Influencer storytelling and other interactive formats. For Cartoon Influencers, direct speech invites the audience to interact with the media, the character and to create a bridge between the fictional world of the cartoon character and the real world.

Multi-Platform

Online media is distributed across many social media platforms. Some platforms have video as their main media format, some have images, audio or text as its main format. Language and geographical location are other variables that can influence the choice of platforms. Influencers organically expand to the platforms which allows them to tell their stories and reach their audience's needs.

Non Rigid Media Formats

What separates social media from traditional media are the non rigid formats. Content creators are free to post content of the length, orientation and edition of their choice within the

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

platform's limits. Each platform supports one or several media and/or formats. While most platforms allow a combination of video, music, text and images, others limit the length of text, or video. Some platforms favor vertical video over horizontal, others favor long videos over short, and so on.

Immediacy and constant exposure

What keeps Influencers relevant is their ability to respond to real world stimuli and events immediately. Additionally, some platform's algorithms favor content creators who have a constant rate of publication and high exposure to their audience, which also contributes to their relevance.

Engagement & Interaction

Social Media engagement can be compared with an iceberg (Bunzel, T. 2010). The consumer and even the content creator only see what can be seen above the water: the public measurement of likes, comments, followers, shares and other paraphernalia. This information has to be read and analysed in order to understand the engagement and assess its real quality. Whereas, when content creators understand their audience and work towards building engagement, they will probably publish regularly, find ways to interact with their audience, make calls to action, and try to model her content to appeal to their viewers without losing their "Authenticity". Strong engagement is high-maintenance, but capitalizable.

In order to achieve live and smart animated interaction on video with users, characters would need to be able to receive immediate input and provide immediate output, similar to video games or video simulators. Technologies like real-time performance capture and real-time render are in current development and improvement to achieve better and more accessible results. Different techniques can be used to achieve animated interaction with the audience as described earlier in the conceptual background, but interaction is not strictly restricted to video, it can make use a myriad of resources like comments, "tweets", memes, "stories", still images, camera filters, collaborations, online communities, live events and calls to action. A

balanced and strategic management of interaction is part of the success of many social media influencers' engagement.

3.2. Cartoon Influencer Project Overviews

Four of the interviewees of this research are involved completely or partially with one or two ongoing virtual influencer characters. Consequently, this section of the research gives a brief review on the projects to provide context and familiarity to the reader when the interviews reference them in the following section.

3.2.1. Barbie Vlogs

Barbie emulates the behavior and formats of a YouTuber using 3D computer animation. These vlogs are posted in *Barbie's* YouTube channel along all the other content that the brand posts (Figure 18). Each video is on average 3 minutes long and features *Barbie* speaking directly to her audience every two weeks. She sometimes does challenges, tutorials, tells a story or interacts with other characters like *Ken* and her sisters and friends. She posts content involving food, handcrafts, beauty, lifestyle, challenges and, while her audience demographic is not specific, she keeps her vlogs tailored toward children.

Barbie's brand launched in 1959 by the American toy company Mattel, Inc. and has continuously been the most popular fashion doll brand worldwide ever since. In 1987 it expanded into a media franchise, including animation, music and video games. *Barbie Vlogs* have been running and have stayed on YouTube since 2015 and are available in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Italian and German. An external animation studio is in charge of the animation production and its team is also partially involved in the script creation. The rest is managed by Mattel's team, including PR, social media, legal, creativity, branding, casting, voice recording, sound design and music. *Barbie's* animation is currently done using traditional 3D computer animation and traditional rendering techniques. Interaction with the audience is currently limited to Instagram.



Figure 17. Barbie and Nikki Discuss Racism Thumbnail. Barbie Vlogs. YouTube. 2020.

Barbie's YouTube channel currently has 10.4 million subscribers. The number of views of the video Vlogs range from hundreds of thousands of views to more than 4 million views.

3.2.2. Mar.ia

Freelander is an independent animation studio in Mexico who is behind the virtual human influencer *Mar.ia*. She is the first Mexican virtual influencer and her four pillars of domain are food, sustainability, mental health and gaming. *Mar.ia* posts on Instagram as *soymar.ia* and has reached the 100k follower mark since her first post in May of 2020. She posts a picture four times every month, each with a copy that helps her personality shine through and to build up one post at a time (Figure 18).



Figure 18. *Mar.ia*. Instagram. 2020.

As a virtual human, it struggled at first to get the idea through to her followers, but it has surpassed this challenge and earned her followers by replying to every one of their comments. After a period of casual exposure, *Mar.ia* has, as a regular influencer, started to post sponsored content for Mexican food brands. However, the team behind her seeks to create a positive impact and the purpose is to help the Mexican young society. She has also already made collaboration posts with real

influencers. Her successful first year has earned her approval for a second year by her client.

Mar.ia team's main inspiration is *Lil Miquela*, the most popular virtual human to date. *Mar.ia* is produced using 3D software and real time rendering techniques using Unreal Engine. Future plans for *Mar.ia* include a higher frequency of posting, an extended cast of virtual humans and animated content.

3.2.3. Catalina la Catrina

Catalina is an original character based in a Catrina, an elegant female skeleton from the Mexican popular folklore, created by a creative team in Televisa, the largest Mexican Television Network. She was launched in 2018 as an interactive TV experience for the *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead) festivities in *Canal 5* of the Televisa Network, and since then she has returned every year with the same purpose. The disruptive experience consists in the

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

audience calling the offices of *Catalina* in order to help her build an offering for *Dia de Muertos* by sharing stories of their deceased loved ones (Figure 19). When accomplishing the goal, special content related to the festivities is unlocked for the audience to watch.



Figure 19. *Catalina la Catrina* 2020 - Canal 5. Daily Motion. 2020.

Each year, a different studio has been in charge of the animation and art direction of *Catalina*. It has explored different animation techniques like cut out 2D animation and stop motion animation, and the character design has become viral on social media in controversial ways due to its success. The animation works as a digital puppetry show, probably in a similar fashion to how the Disney Parks' *Laugh Floor* is designed to work. The character and its environment is set to be controlled by operators in real time using a simple midi interface to sync their movements with the voice acting. Additionally, the character's lipsync is automatized using video capture of the voice actor's facial movements as its input.

Catalina la Catrina's block appears in between the regular programming of the channel and each block lasts for 2 minutes in which the human team behind it connects calls from children who want to share their stories with *Catalina*.

3.2.4. Spongebob's Birthday Party

For *Spongebob Squarepants* 20th anniversary, Viacom sought a collaboration with Televisa as a strategic partner. Televisa's team suggested using the knowledge and experience acquired with *Catalina la Catrina*'s project to do a similar thing with *Spongebob*. This time children had to call *Spongebob* and share their ideas for his birthday party until the 'idea counter' reached the goal amount and they could watch together a *Spongebob*'s anniversary special to celebrate (Figure 20).



Figure 20. *La Fiesta de Bob Esponja*. Promo screenshot. Canal Cinco. Facebook. 2019.

They counted with the official Latin American Spanish voice and used the same technology and strategy to execute this project in a similar fashion to *Catalina* also in *Canal 5*, Televisa's channel dedicated to a children audience. It was such a success that their phone lines got saturated, and its engagement extended to social media. This interactive experience was a one time event.

3.2.5. O (Sur)real Mundo de Any Malu

Any Malu is a 15 year old cartoon girl who records herself in her room talking about her life and her interests (Figure 21). She essentially works as a cartoon parody of the YouTuber clichés. Other characters of her world make appearances in her videos. The length of her videos range from 5 to 8 minutes, and some even include paid promotions.

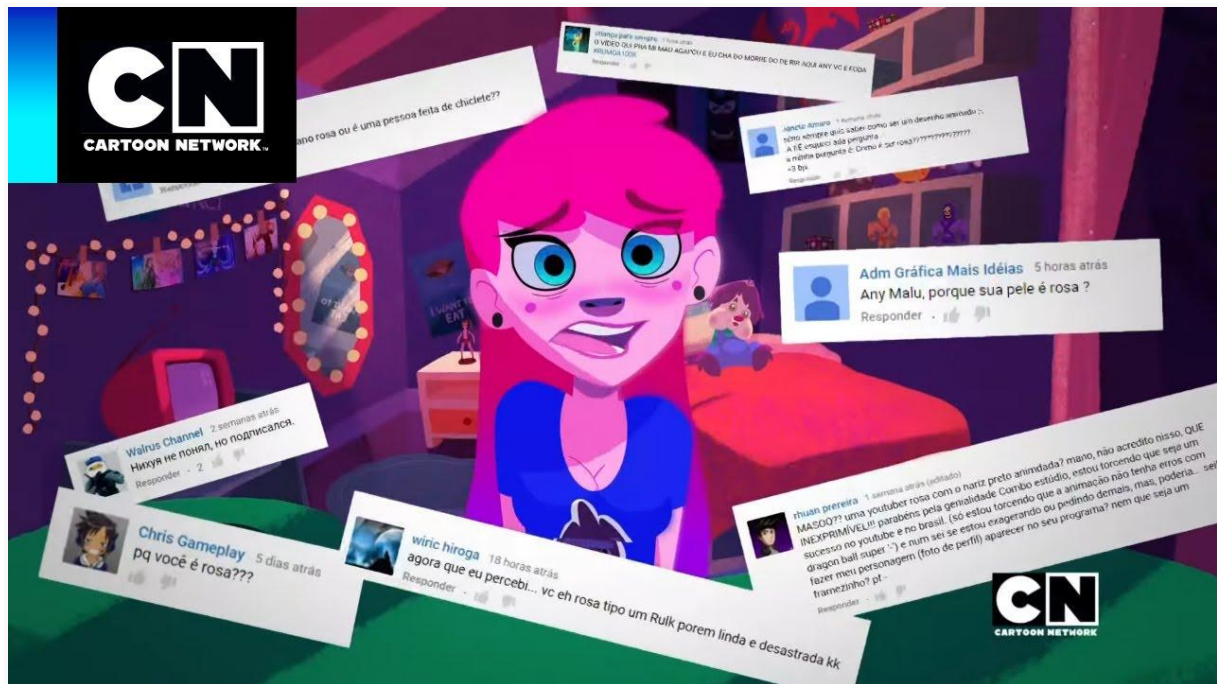


Figure 21. *Sola en Casa* Thumbnail. *Any Malu* | Cartoon Network. YouTube. 2020.

The surreal world of Any Malu, translated from the original Portuguese title of her YouTube channel, launched in March of 2019 and it was created and produced by the Brazilian animation studio Combo. In the description of her channel she claims to be the first animated YouTuber. While this is not completely true, she certainly is the first original animated fictional character to be born on the platform who emulates the behavior of a YouTuber with a visual quality at the level of a TV production. She is also managed by the studio as an Influencer and the relationship that it has with Cartoon Network works in that way. *Any Malu* now has a collaboration together with Cartoon Network called *Any Malu's Show* and it is about what would happen if they brought *Any Malu* to work on a cartoon channel and meet the other cartoon characters.

She currently has 3.24 million followers in her Portuguese language channel and 261 thousand followers in her Spanish language channel on YouTube. Her original channel has accrued a total of 307 million views and 101 videos posted. She also has an Instagram profile with 525 thousand followers.

3.2.6. Black Hat and Villanos

Villanos (Villainous) is a Mexican IP created by AI Animation Studios which was picked by Cartoon Network Latin America in 2014. It launched in 2018 on YouTube with a series of *Villain Orientation Videos* (Figure 22) in which the characters reviewed the techniques of other cartoon villains from Cartoon Network in a “react to” format. *Villanos* main character is *Black Hat*. However, he has a cast of sidekick characters under his command who also have active appearances in the videos.



Figure 22. *Videos de orientación para villanos* Thumbnail. Cartoon Network LA. YouTube. 2018.

In 2018, Cartoon Network Latin America tried an experiment for the Halloween season in which *Black Hat* hacked CN’s broadcast signal, the websites, and he communicated with the audience as if he had taken control of these platforms posting content related to villains. Two

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

years later, a similar dynamic took place, but this time *Black Hat* took control over CN's Twitter account and used it to post content related to *Villanos*.

In 2019, it finally released its series pilot original episode which has now 5.7 million views on CN's channel on YouTube. *Villanos'* fan community is especially strong in Mexico due to its origin. Its fan demographic is skewed toward young adults hence its popularity in social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, and the high possibilities of interaction with the audience using them.

3.3. Interview Summaries

This section covers in a detailed summary each of the six interviews for this research. It is then followed by a section in which the information gathered in all the interviews is compared and analyzed. The names of the interviewees are kept anonymous for privacy and confidentiality purposes.

3.3.1. Interview 1

Position: Anonymous.

Project: Barbie Vlogs.

Company: Anonymous animation studio.

Date: December 17, 2020.

This is the first interview of the research and it helped to shape the research focus and to give structure to the following interviews. Because of Interviewee 1's particular role in the *Barbie Vlogs*, the structure and aim of this interview were skewed toward management. The following text is the summary of Interviewee 1's interview.

After its fourth season, *Barbie Vlogs* changed its production to a new animation studio. However, it was not the only thing that changed. Its pipeline, which before relied strongly on motion capture animation, changed to traditional computer 3D character animation. It was a change of technique and style that significantly improved the visual experience and, in the end, had no relevant impact on the production framework. Interviewee 1, who was directly

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

involved with *Barbie Vlog's* production at an animation studio which will remain anonymous for the sake of confidentiality in this research, shared in this interview her experience in such a unique production and her knowledge on the client's management of the Barbie's brand and characters.

Time is the most precious resource for this kind of production. Whereas in this particular case, budget was not an issue, there is only a limited amount of production that can be accomplished within a timeframe. Thus, the team needs to make sure that the script is feasible and clear to kickstart the rest of the processes involved in the pipeline of production. Also it was important to learn to prioritize and learn to "let go" as nothing can be polished to perfection under these conditions. On the managerial side, Interviewee 1 needs to know how fast her team can work and how to keep a constant and optimistic communication for accomplishing optimal collaboration. Interviewee 1's team at the animation studio has reached a strong level of engagement that keeps even former employees invested in the project. In total, they have an average of twenty five people involved completely in the production of the *Barbie Vlogs* at the studio, probably fifty if they count the people partially involved. She assumes Mattel has a team around a similar number if they include all their internal teams like PR, brand, legal and the creative team. While the animation studio stays involved in the scripting stage to make sure that it is feasible, Mattel is in charge of everything else that is not the animation production.

With the COPPA's update in the beginning of 2020, YouTube disabled the comment section for videos which offered content targeted towards children. This situation resulted in *Barbie Vlogs* losing the interaction with her audience through comments, but they have used Instagram in tandem with their YouTube channel in order to continue this engagement. Also, the legal team has to make sure to stay in line with COPPA compliance. It has to stay as pure entertainment and avoid becoming a toy commercial. *Barbie* is Mattel's number one brand, and the challenge for the animation studio is to stay in line with Mattel's brand image, while keeping her real, and, at the same time, to stay in line with what YouTube allows to be shown. The vlogs have to go through a lot of people before they get greenlit and released.

Barbie is an iconic brand that has stayed relevant for around sixty years. The brand is careful not to cross certain boundaries that would distort the image they have worked to build for all those years. They need to carefully tailor what she will say, and think thoroughly who she can partner with. Barbie's channel has not a specific demographic, it is targeting *Barbie lovers* of all ages, she is not just for children anymore. Everyone can relate to at least one of her vlogs because it is real and it references current affairs. The YouTube vlogs have helped her continue to evolve to be a broader spokes-character and to become more human. Speaking up about real world events like the *Black Lives Matter* movement is changing the way people are looking at *Barbie* as a whole.

3.3.2. Interview 2

Position: Art Director.

Project: Mar.ia.

Company: Freelander.

Date: February 9, 2021.

This interview was structured using the first interview's feedback, but was tailored with the goal to find more about human virtual influencer's specific features, creative processes and challenges. Its main purpose is to find similarities and differences between virtual human influencers and cartoon virtual influencers.

Mar.ia is a realistic virtual character whose mission is to help young Mexicans, from her privileged position, and whose four pillars of interest are food, sustainability, mental health and gaming. She currently posts pictures on Instagram and Facebook. She was developed by a team of creatives and artists at a company called Freelander. In this interview, her art director shares his experience and insight in her development, management and production processes as well as the response she has received from her audience.

He was directly in charge of designing the character which, although trying to emulate a human, had the same creation process as any other animated character. *Barbie Vlogs* was one of the main inspirations behind the concept and development of *Mar.ia*. They were already

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

ruminating on the idea and eventually partnered with the director of an advertising company, who approached them with the same idea. Their direct reference was *Lil Miquela*, the most popular and realistic virtual human to date. They started a phase of research and development, and waited until an advertising agency brought back the opportunity to the table. Because of their previous research work, things moved forward swiftly and on time for many clients who were already looking to meet the demand of interaction with their users in social media.

They wanted to create a very realistic and believable human avatar because they tried using a cartoon character before, and failed. Freelander also was looking to exploit real-time render technologies using Unreal Engine to bring *Mar.ia* to life. The studio takes charge of the creative process, produces all the content and manages the social media of *Mar.ia*, they are then connected to one client who is, at the same time, in charge of getting the sponsors from a pool of agencies. *Mar.ia*'s interest in food recipes has helped her to get food brands on board as sponsors. They decided to make her young to appeal to centennial and millennial audiences and a first challenge was to link these audiences to food brands that are usually targeted toward middle aged and old women. Her name *Mar.ia* is a word play that includes the acronym for *Inteligencia Artificial* (Artificial Intelligence). Even if she does not really have an intelligence of her own, it creates an illusion of autonomy to the user that makes her more appealing. The illusion of reality sometimes goes as far as making some people forget she is a virtual being.

In order to create an engaging character, they had to leave the business side for last. Their strategy was to first build the personality of the character one post at a time so the audience could get to know her and gradually create an emotional bond. They currently generate content for posting four times every month. Once the audience had fallen in love with her, they started inserting sponsored content. They detected rejection for this kind of content if such was not well or creatively integrated to the storytelling of *Mar.ia*. Although, users already familiar with her and other influencers have a more natural acceptance for sponsored content.

The reception by the audience has been positive. Although, in the beginning there was some backlash, fortunately they were prepared for it and kept tweaking *Mar.ia*'s personality and the

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

negative response decreased gradually. Nevertheless, the negative comments tend to naturally stand out more and, if for some reason *Mar.ia* stops replying to comments, organically earned followers start to unfollow her. Unlike real influencers, sponsor brands have taken notice that *Mar.ia* replies to every comment she receives in her posts. On the brands' side, they seem satisfied and a second year for *Mar.ia* has been approved already. With *Mar.ia* being a virtual character, the difference in price for sponsors relies only, and so far, on production costs.

In regard to her influence power, they are aware of its potential impact, assume responsibility and advocate for only posting positive content based on *Mar.ia*'s four pillars. Her followers are starting to notice this commitment in comparison to some of her human influencer counterparts. They try to use *Mar.ia* to help people, especially the ones who might only have these platforms as their main source of information. Currently *Mar.ia* portrays a perfect and polished image, but her team is working on her vulnerabilities to make her more believable and to make her feel more real and true to her audience. To reach a balance, she also needs to loosen up slightly to avoid falling into a one note politically correct deep speech. To keep her as real as possible, she posts from her bedroom, her kitchen and behaves like a real human, even wearing a mask outdoors. Because computer graphics allow them to do what they like with the physical space and objects, they can easily customize the walls' paint color of her house, the room arrangement, *Mar.ia*'s hair, clothes, etcetera. In the future, they would like to be able to post animated content and to create more characters that could coexist in the same universe. But mainly, the continuous goal is to keep building a complex personality to get the most real and believable version of *Mar.ia*.

3.3.3. Interview 3

Position: Director of Series and Development.

Project: Not Specific.

Company: Warner Bros Animation.

Date: March 13, 2021.

This interview establishes a structure that carries through the remaining interviews as it is not focused on a specific project. Instead, this interview focuses on the informed opinion of a

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

professional in the animation industry, who, although having a limited approach and experience with cartoon influencers, works in a position that gives him a wide perspective, anticipation and high exposure to animated media and storytelling trends.

Interviewee 3's role in Warner Bros Animation (WBA) is to work with artists and writers to develop series and specials based on existing WB-owned IP as well as original IPs. He also oversees the production of series beyond development. He is familiar with *Barbie Vlogs* and the potential it has for brands to choose similar formats to broadcast their products. He thinks *Barbie's* team did right by keeping it simple to allow kids to follow her while staying true to who she is. Besides from *Barbie Vlogs*, he was not familiar with more virtual influencers and the only similar approach by WBA that he had knowledge of was AR filters featuring the recent *Looney Tunes* cartoons, but they have not yet ventured into something at the level of what Mattel is doing with *Barbie*. He has also not received pitches for projects that explore the virtual influencer format literally, but he has heard ideas of shows where the main character is an influencer or a "wannabe" Youtuber star, more of a show about a show thing.

Kids are interacting with content as early as they can get their hands on a phone or device to play with. That can mean toddlers could already be watching tv shows or YouTube shorts. But when it comes to content creators or influencers, that comes as they age up and get more immersion in all the possibilities of content that are out there. Some kids as young as 5 or 6 already know who some of these influencers are and are aware of what to expect when they view their content. According to him, both celebrity and cartoon characters are made to be aspirational. That is one of the goals as someone who develops shows to make sure they are engaging with their audience. The idea of "celebrity" means nothing to a kid. Kids do not give importance to hired celebrity voice actors in the animation content they consume. For them, celebrity means who is relatable and fun to watch and, most importantly, who they want to be like or be friends with. Influencers accomplish these effects naturally as part of their role and, at the same time, cartoon characters are made to be that way.

He still has to explore more on the subject of cartoon virtual influencers and its possibilities. However, he finds it appealing and would support the storytelling format if it is well-thought and done with purpose. It is of high importance that it heightens a character or a series, but the

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

process should be organic and beneficial for the brand. If it feels redundant or unnecessary, and if it takes a character out of context in a way that it fails to be true to itself and its personality, then it would not have his support. These are the challenges he identifies to overcome and be aware of. He also argues that not all characters might be suitable for an influencer-type platform. If the authenticity you hope to create with your character falls apart by acting out of character, the audience will catch that and respond with rejection. People might consider it fake if a fictional character suddenly speaks up directly about current affairs. However, if the character fits well with the influencer style, the execution is organic and well planned, is authentic, has a message and the character stays true to itself, then it could really help it become contemporary and part of the current conversation. It may also increase its reliability and open up new audiences to the character.

3.3.4. Interview 4

Position: Channel programmer (Mexico) / Production (Latinamerica).

Project: Not Specific.

Company: Discovery Kids.

Date: March 23, 2021.

This interview is also not focused on a specific project and rather more into the perception of an expert professional with a long trajectory in children content production and programming. Of the interviewees of this research, Interviewee 4 has the longest experience as a professional in the media industry and, as a mother, she complements her expertise by observing the content that is consumed in her household.

Interviewee 4 is in charge of the Discovery Kids channel's programming in Mexico and takes part in the production of original shows for the Latin American division. Her team's job is to set the shows strategically at times when the children will watch them, the external communication of such programming is also part of their job.

Interviewee 4 was actually quite familiar with cartoon influencers even when she had not identified them as such before. Once the concept was defined to her, she quickly spotted the cases she had knowledge of (*Any Malu, Barbie, Catarina la Catrina and Sponge Bob's*

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

Birthday Party). Her perception and opinion of the concept is very positive. Nevertheless, when sharing her perception regarding online content creators in general, she has mixed opinions and acknowledges a bias towards more curated and higher quality content from traditional media. Because the diversity of content is vast, she cannot put everything in the same bucket, but she finds online content in general lacking quality and purpose. However, she acknowledges that the huge success of seemingly empty content like *unboxings* must be meeting a need of some sort. Children generally start watching whatever they come across, but, as they define their interests, they start choosing what they want to watch. What YouTubers and influencers do well is that they speak to niches, which helps kids to find specific content that fits their interests.

What she finds appealing about cartoon characters venturing into the influencer narrative is that they are stepping out of their self contained, static and isolated format to speak directly to their audience. If a character has a high reputation and popularity in other media, moving into this format will have more chances of getting a super effective result. Characters also have an advantage over humans because they can stay under control more easily. As long as the creator stays away from dangerous ideas or using their influence to their personal advantage, it should not be of concern to have a well known character as an influencer. Brands will usually curate them to be perceived as harmless and trustworthy. A new or unknown character would have to build its own trustworthy image in order to avoid being perceived as risky. The bond that a person would create with a human celebrity is generally more direct. However, if the bond with a well-known and beloved character is to be compared, the fictional character would outweigh the human in most cases.

In Discovery Kids' case, their content has always been COPPA compliant so it has always followed very specific guidelines to offer safe and quality content to their young audience. The recent update to YouTube's content did not represent an inconvenience as they have always kept external communication away from social media that have looser regulations, and their call to actions often include "tell your parents to..." in the sentence because they cannot have a direct conversation with children. Their content is often mirrored from their cable TV channel to the App and to digital, but some content only goes to one or two of their platforms. Mostly, their offer of content in their digital platforms is derived from what they offer on TV.

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

Interviewee 4 had limited information to share about what the digital team in Argentina is working on, but she acknowledged that content which could be considered as influencer and multi-platform format for their original fictional characters and IPs is on the works. Regarding the level at which the format is integrated into the project, one option would be to identify a character that has potential as an influencer and work along the spinoff line for this character, and a second option would be to, since the show's conception, plan the narrative style to involve influencer behavior. Discovery Kids can apply this narrative for their original IPs, but it would be harder to accomplish with acquired third party content. For the company, to find a way to produce content fast in order to respond to the immediacy of trends would be necessary. In addition, it would be key for the content to carry the Discovery Kids brand DNA, which involves to be in line with its values, be of high quality, meet COPPA compliance, be fun, and to make sense.

Interviewee 4 would support the cartoon virtual influencer format becoming a mainstream alternative in children entertainment because it has everything kids look for; and because the connection with a character who speaks to the audience and talks about current affairs is always stronger than self contained shows. To study if a fictional character translates well to a non-fictional narrative is key to accomplish a successful migration to this format for cartoon characters. The strength of online formats is true interaction, and finding a solution with which children can interact safely with online content is necessary to meet this demand.

3.3.5. Interview 5

Position: Planning Coordinator of Image and advertising.
Project: Catalina la Catrina & Spongebob's Birthday Party.
Company: Televisa.
Date: March 25, 2021.

This interview is heavily aimed at studying the case of two similar projects involving real-time interaction between cartoon characters and a children audience. The creator and director of both projects shares his experience and the creative and production processes in full detail for this research. The projects discussed in this interview are unique because they

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

make use of the ISF for cartoon characters, but, instead of online platforms, they use live television and telephone lines as their medium of interaction.

Interviewee 5's team acts as Televisa's own advertising agency and his role is focused on Televisa's and each channel's individual branding. They produce all the promotional materials for the audience. *Canal 5* is the channel which has children as its main target. To break the myth about children no longer watching traditional TV, they have to come up with disruptive ways of interaction with the audience to capitalize on the unique experience that open TV offers. Their team identified that having a conversation with an animated character could become a shortcut to reach that goal in an innovative and relevant way. Hence they developed *Catalina la Catrina* as a response to their need to interact with the children, and it performed splendidly.

Catalina is a Catrina, a Mexican traditional character related to death and one that is associated currently with Día de Muertos (Day of the Dead) festivities and traditions in Mexico. Consequently, they execute the interactive experience exclusively on the days leading to these days at the beginning of November for the last four years. It consisted of the audience calling Catalina who would be receiving the children's calls in the gaps in between the regular programming of the channel. They came up with a narrative in which Catalina needed to reach a goal number of calls in order to unlock special content as a reward for the audience. Giving purpose to the whole dynamic was key to create a growing engagement. Their experience developing and taking into fruition this project prepared them for a similar dynamic they pitched to Viacom for the 25th anniversary of *Spongebob Squarepants*. While *Catalina* was a new and original character, they were now dealing with a highly praised and famous character with a long run in popular culture. *La fiesta de cumpleaños de Bob Esponja* (Spongebob's Birthday Party) was the experience that resulted from this and it was a huge hit to give the kids the chance to have a conversation with Spongebob on live television. Every detail had to be approved by Viacom's offices all over the American continents and they had to bring the official Latin American Spanish Spongebob's voice actor to Televisa's studios. It is a challenge to pull through a project as complex as this one.

The execution of these projects starts with a strong script and development which can allow them to keep the character true to itself, in control and prepared for any unexpected event. A strong script gives purpose to the whole experience and keeps it entertaining and engaging. The operative execution is the next big challenge and requires a joint effort of technology and team coordination. In a studio, the voice actor is captured by a camera with facial movement recognition to sync its voice with the character's face movements. Two operators are in charge of controlling the character's body animations and the environment effects. It works similar to puppetry. The illusion act relies on the sync of these three people. It is important to keep controls and details as simplified as possible because the illusion is challenged once again when sending the signal to television and getting all these inputs in sync. There is a team of ten people receiving and filtering the calls, similar to a call center. As they are tied to television timeframes, they need this initial filtering for precision. This team makes sure that the connection is clean and clear, that the kid rehearses what he will tell to the character, and filters possible pranks. Next, they choose and connect the calls with the actor. The rest of the team operates like in a regular live show. The titlers insert plates with the name of the kid when the call starts, there is a person in charge of the music and sound effects, and more people dealing with commercial breaks and the broadcast master, in the end a team of around thirty people is involved. The duration of each block is two minutes, and to pull it though flawlessly is a challenge as, regardless of the call filter, this level of live interaction with a child is always unpredictable. Some children stay silent once their call connects or wait to hear their voice in the lagged broadcast. If they do not get their idea through in the span of two minutes, it feels odd and clumsy so they have to be prepared, and that is when the ability of the script and the voice actor control improvisation becomes important.

Interviewee 4 was the main consultant for Interviewee 5's team and a key philosophy that she brought to the table was to keep the kid as the center of their projects. Having this to go back to every time has helped them to create relevant experiences that always keep their audience as their focal point. Because they made sure that children were the center of the experience and not the cartoon characters, these interactive experiences have been qualitatively and quantitatively successful. Registering up to fifteen thousand calls, the phone lines get saturated and the engagement extendeds to social media. Besides the solid script and the purpose, emotional engagement is also important to create a strong bond, especially with a

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

new character like Catalina. The theme of death is what the conversation is about when children call Catalina. It is certainly a sensitive topic and, whereas for children it is sometimes easier to share their emotions and problems with a fictional character than it is to another person, to share this publicly on a national level is not easy. Their goal was to build the perception that the Catrina is their friend. It has been very powerful to give children the illusion of bestowing Catalina a message to deliver to their loved ones who have passed away.

Interviewee 5 insists on making clear to the audience that these virtual influencers are fictional, whether it is by making it visually or narratively evident or by telling it directly. When it is hard to identify if something is real or fake, and when the audience is not sure of who exactly is delivering a certain message, it makes it hard to understand the real purpose behind it, and that could become dangerous. Regulation is needed to obligate these entities to make sure their followers are aware of their fictional nature. Nevertheless, Interviewee 5 acknowledges the value and his interest in virtual influencers as long as they are not trying to impersonate a real human being. He finds true value in the fantastic world that uses these interactive experiences to create a connection bridge with their audience.

The temporality of these experiences has been another challenge, Catalina is constrained to día de Muertos and Spongebob's Birthday Party was a one time special event. Their interaction with the audience is cut right after they broadcast the special content and to lose this connection with the character affects the experience. However it is this same temporality which gives an organic connection to these characters. It is probably linked to the structured habits of children that the temporality has worked. Interviewee 5 identifies the advantages of cartoon characters against humans as brand ambassadors by their level of control and convenience, and because cartoon characters are timeless. While humans grow with you, evolve and change with age, cartoon characters stay the same over the years. From a broadcaster's perspective, it would be preferable to invest in a cartoon character and build upon the interaction it could potentially have with its audience.

3.3.6. Interview 6

Position: Content Director and Original Production

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

Project: Any Malu & Villainous

Company: Warner Media Kids / Cartoon Network (Latin America)

Date: April 13, 2021.

This last interview carries the main structure of past interviews across. The main focus of this interview was to learn about Any Malu, the most advanced and successful case of an original cartoon character conceived to be a fictional YouTuber, and how Cartoon Network partnered with her. The content director of Warner Media Kids in Latin America shares his experience with this cartoon influencer and other projects which had used social media to create a multi-platform experience of interaction and engagement with their audience.

Interviewee 6 is responsible for the content strategy and original production, which includes the lineal channels like Cartoon Network and Boomerang. At the same time his team is working on the content strategy for their streaming platform, HBO Max, which is close to launching locally. Interviewee 6's team is very aware of the virtual influencer phenomenon when it occurs in Latin America. Because of animated media's production nature, it is rare to have a dose of current affairs in traditional animated formats. However, when, with the aid of technology, animation accomplishes to create characters who perform as influencers, they can really generate communities, fans, and conversation just as a real person would in live-action. He sees it as a very interesting medium and phenomenon to explore because, although they are fictional animated characters, they reach a point in which the fictional barrier breaks and their fans can interact with them as if they were real.

Cartoon Network Latin America has done several explorations that could fit partially or completely into the cartoon influencer narrative format. The most obvious one is Any Malu, created and produced by Combo Estudio in Brazil, who is a fictional cartoon YouTuber. Other experiments with the format have been using Villainous' main character Black Hat who for the Halloween season of 2018 hacked the channel's signal as part of a stunt, and took control over their Twitter platform two year later to post content related to Cartoon Network's villains. Besides these two interactive explorations, they produce content for their digital platforms that takes inspiration from YouTuber genres like *Otra Semana en Cartoon* (Another week in Cartoon) which was born as a recap program on YouTube; *Toontubers*, our gaming project based on the "let's play" trends; and *Toontorial* (Figure 23), created by Axur Eneas, Daniel Farrera Saldaña

which came out of our call for entries for the Pixelatl's Festival, inspired by video tutorials, another popular format in YouTube.



*Figure 23. Toontorial thumbnail.
Cartoon Network LA. YouTube.
2018.*

They consider online content as a source for inspiration, talent and ideas to improve their own work. The paradigm of online content is that it can generate billions of views, a high level of engagement that in the end can be translated into quality content even with an apparent poor quality, many times due to its low production value. When certain content fulfills its purpose, entertains, and hooks its target audience, that is quality content. Whether it is visually appealing or not, if it has a purpose, it is of relevance and resonates with its audience. There is a lot to learn from those kinds of contents, like the non-rigid formats. Instead of dismissing or ignoring it because it is online content, they dive into what makes it successful to see what is out there and how it is made to then either incorporate it into what they are doing or to directly bring it in like it happened with Any Malu.

Combo Estudio spotted the opportunity and aimed to become pioneers and to position themselves strongly. When developing Any Malu, they took notice that the archetypes of female empowerment and girl power frequently fell into radical clichés of either superheroines or princesses. They wanted to create something more authentic and real, a character who could feel empowered, with a complex personality more similar to a human. They first designed her wholly as if she was a human character and after coming up with a solid character, they started developing her interests, and designing the content. They started little by little, but got really positive reactions. Cartoon Network's Brazilian team identified her and then they did what they would do with a real influencer and invited her to work with

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

them. They felt that she fitted with the brand as it is all about animation, and thought that the audience of Cartoon Network would enjoy Any Malu and that her YouTube audience would enjoy Cartoon Network. So they decided to make Any Malu's show which is about what would happen if we brought an animated character to work on a cartoon channel and meet the other cartoon characters. The relationship is directly to Any Malu as an influencer, although they had already collaborated with the studio in the past. It worked just like hiring a human talent.

Any Malu's reception was great in qualitative terms. She already had a big subscriber base in Brazil that grew considerably. In the Spanish speaking markets, she has been gradually growing and the praise showed as the second season was awaited with anticipation. It is a character who has found her audience. There are no current plans for extending Any Malu to the rest of the world, but they are interested in exploring other formats as she has worked well so far. For Interviewee 6, the criteria for a cartoon influencer to succeed is to be thoroughly defined, its creators should be able to talk about the character as if it truly existed. While in traditional storytelling characters are the element in which most energy and effort has to be put in the creation process, a format that relies so much on a single character needs an even deeper process. If there are holes in the creation of the character, it would be hard to keep it real, authentic and consistent throughout the content that it generates. It should leave no room for improvisation as that would make it prone to inconsistencies that might confuse and alienate its audience. A solid and deep process of character creation would help define its personality, value code and view of the world. A generic character should be avoided if the goal is to make the audience want to hear what it has to say.

Interviewee 6 thinks that not all characters are built to perform as influencers, they might work flawlessly in a traditional format, but not all of them are constructed for the level of exposition or these types of formats. *Black Hat*, for instance, well developed personality worked perfect for his takeovers. *Villainous* started with the *Villain Orientation* videos, a YouTube exclusive format, in which the characters did reviews of the other CN villains. They had an influencer role in which they reacted to strategies of other villains and gave them advice just as a YouTuber would do by creating these "react to" videos. It was later when they took *Black Hat* and did two versions of a stunt which they called *TMTV* for Halloween. The

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

first time he hacked Cartoon Network's broadcast signal, the websites, and he communicated with the audience as if he had taken control of its platforms. In 2020 he did the same, this time as their Twitter accounts' take over. During two weeks, *Black Hat* took control of CN's twitter account and posted *Villainous* content. The level of interaction and engagement with the audience was tremendous in quantitative and qualitative terms. He thinks that part of a cartoon influencer potential relies on this format being a platform to position a character in a way that it can help it extend to other formats and as a way of entry to a more traditional format in order to tell its story. It can become something like an incubator of IPs as it has a lower barrier of entry than more traditional formats. However, children spend a lot of time on online platforms and good executions could build something interesting that is not only temporary.

3.4. Interviews' analysis

The assessment of the information gathered throughout the interviews focuses on seven sections that can help to answer the research questions.

3.4.1. Familiarity with virtual influencers, cartoon influencers, and the influencer storytelling format.

The first indicator of the presence of Cartoon Influencers is how familiar the animation industry experts are with them and the concepts related to them. All of the interviewees had familiarity with cartoon influencers whether they had previous knowledge of the concept or not before the interview. Five out of six of the interviewees were currently involved with the production of a cartoon influencer or influencer storytelling formats.

Whereas the majority of the interviewees had familiarity with the concept of virtual influencers, five out of six of them never had heard the concept of cartoon virtual influencer or the influencer storytelling format per se. However, all of them quickly picked up on it as they learned its meaning and what it involved.

Another indicator of the presence of Cartoon Influencers is the lack of project pitches they receive with the Influencer storytelling format. Only one of the interviewees confirmed having received pitches from creators who were particularly incentivized to explore the format in a call for entries.

3.4.2. Motivation

All of the projects referenced in the interviews were created as a response to the demand for interaction with the audience and the potential exploitation of the format's novelty. Televisa's experiments were a strategy for exploiting the potential of the network's technology and reach, and as an indirect competition against online media. In Discovery Kids the ongoing development of influencer content is derived from a need from the network to explore the storytelling format with their characters and IPs. Finally, Combo Estudio seems to have identified the niche for their character, the opportunity of virgin territory and lack of entry barriers, and had the production quality and capacity available to accomplish the successful performance of the Surreal World of Any Malu's channel.

3.4.3. Challenges

The main challenge that all of the interviewees mentioned in one way or another is the character per se. Building a strong, deep and complex personality for the character is the first big task to accomplish. Because of the fictional nature of cartoon characters, writing strong and intelligent scripts is the second task to prepare the character to respond to immediate stimuli flawlessly and for it to stay true to itself. It is in those stages of development when a character would prove that it is compatible with the ISF.

All of the interviewees acknowledged the technical complications of using animation for a format of fast paced publication. The ones involved with YouTube content and COPPA compliance also shared their experience with the limits of interaction with children audiences using the platform. Children need a safe way to be able to directly interact with this type of content.

Large teams of people are needed to produce animated content. Social media content also demands tighter production timeframes, but there is only a limited amount of content that can be produced in a given timeframe. Even real-time animated interactions require a team in charge of the logistics and a careful planification is needed in order to prevent contingencies.

Identifying a character that can perform well as an influencer is a challenge because of the criteria it has to meet. Not every successful character in more traditional media may be built for the level of exposure and the non-rigid formats of social media.

3.4.4. Criteria

As the influencer storytelling format is particularly individualistic, its reliance on a single character means that the most effort needs to be put into its deep and thorough creation and development. All interviewees mentioned something related to characters needing to be well developed. Concepts like staying true to itself, having a well developed and complex personality, being more human, emotional connection, carrying through the brand's DNA, authenticity, control, making sense and having a purpose were mentioned.

The interviewee from Discovery Kids made an interesting observation: It all comes down to finding a fictional character which can transition well to a non-fictional narrative. Non-fiction does not necessarily discard script, rather it includes current-affairs into its narrative, like documentary, reality shows and YouTuber content.

As neither technology, nor animation techniques appeared in any of the answers about the criteria, this research will keep them only as part of the challenges of the cartoon influencer storytelling.

3.4.5. Risks

All of the interviewees who expressed their concerns attributed potential risks to virtual influencers with realistic human behavior. Some emphasized the need to separate reality from

fiction, and to communicate this difference clearly to the audience. Some commented on the lack of regulations, and on the potential danger of not knowing who is behind the fictional character.

One of the interviewees suggested that if the character is new and unknown, it could be perceived as not trustworthy in comparison with popular and well-known characters, or even in comparison with a human.

Other risks commented involved potential situations of the characters acting out of their personality, speaking about unrelated topics and out of context, being too generic or with failures in their development that could create inconsistencies. All these situations could lead characters to confuse or completely alienate their audience and even damage a brand's image.

3.4.6. Performance Results

All of the cartoon influencer cases discussed in the interviews have qualitative and quantitative proofs of relative success. While the life of the phenomenon is not yet long enough to have a long track of their performance, it can be observed that both audiences and companies are feeling satisfied with the results. It is worth noting that besides Barbie, the rest of the virtual influencers reviewed in this research are aiming at regional audiences, and have no current plans of expanding to a broader audience.

Three of the interviewees had Barbie as a direct reference or inspiration. And Catalina la Catrina and Any Malu were referenced once by one of the interviewees. None of these cartoon influencers had negative comments from the interviewees who referenced them. Half of the projects are temporary or seasonal executions, and the other half are produced and published on social media with regularity.

In some of the interviews technological advancements were praised by allowing interaction and animation to be produced easily and faster. All of the virtual influencer projects required of large teams of people to be produced and managed. Five of the projects are still in

production and are approved for continuity or are looking for the next chance to create a new experience with them.

Although further details were not discussed, Maria's art director commented that a previous endeavor for creating a cartoon influencer failed hence they ultimately chose the virtual human path.

3.4.7. Future Potential

All interviewees, who were asked about the potential, support the cartoon influencer storytelling format to become a mainstream media alternative for children entertainment, some more eagerly than others. However all of them condition it to a good execution and/or to having a clear purpose. One of the interviewees mentioned that it is important that it keeps the children, and not the character, at the core of its speech for it to find relevance.

All of the interviewees identify the advantages of having cartoon or animated spokes characters instead of persons, especially for children audiences and as brand ambassadors. Cartoon characters are timeless and are easier to keep under control, which also translates to lower risks and lower cost for their brand image, investors, partners and sponsors.

4. Conclusions

The questions established in the introduction of this research have been answered through the findings of the research.

- Why and how do organizations and content creators explore the influencer storytelling format with their cartoon characters?
- How can the influencer storytelling format enhance or jeopardize the engagement and reputation of cartoon character-based IPs and brands?

4.1. Implications for Practice

Cartoon Influencers are a very young phenomenon, yet the signs of their potential are evident from this early stage. The nature of social media and online platforms has created a demand for social interaction that traditional animated media rarely offers. Organizations study the successful patterns in YouTube and social media content to create experiences to exploit online platforms. Cartoon influencers have been a natural approach for organizations and content creators which use animation as their main medium of expression. McQuarrie et al. study show signs on why cartoon characters also have a natural potential to thrive in influencer style narratives making use of their cultural capital to have relevance when using the megaphone of social media. As found through the previous studies of Jose, Lindstorm and Manaf on Cartoon characters, while they are less frequently used to endorse unhealthy food products, many are still highly praised “spokescharacters” for enhancing brand image and as successful marketing strategies. The timeless, integral and governable nature of cartoon characters have been a significant reason for organizations and brands to explore the influencer storytelling format with their characters.

Once out of reach due to the technological barriers and traditional production pipelines of animation, cartoon influencers can now be produced using a variety of techniques and a combination of media ranging from audiovisual real-time interaction to simple tweets. Real-time technology also allows for deeper interaction, while not being a fundamental part for the optimal performance of a cartoon influencer. The real challenge for creating Cartoon Influencers is at their very core: their characters. To construct powerful, complex and deep personalities that can endure the high exposure of character driven and direct speech narratives, and to ultimately achieve a perception of authenticity is the key challenge to overcome. The script is also a tool for testing the character’s personality and to maintain control of its performance and the animation production. The industry experts interviewed for this research recognized these as the main features of a strong Cartoon Influencer.

In the cases reviewed through the interviews of this research, the cartoon and virtual human influencers have obtained positive results for their owners and their sponsors, and the

opinions of the interviewees skewed toward an enhanced engagement and reputation of their characters. However, a concern for future ethical implications of virtual influencers at large is latent. As part of staying true to the character, the permanent effort for meeting brand guidelines and government regulations may be reflected on a hindered product. As the studies on the ethical implications of influencers and virtual influencers of Robinson, Chappel and Wellman indicate, the influencer behavior could transfer to the cartoon characters all the burdens and ethical dilemmas to which influencers are exposed, which represent a potential risk. Specifically, the valuable timelessness and brand image of cartoon characters are jeopardized by the thin layer of ice that “Cancel culture” creates for all entities with a broad presence in society. This concern also surfaced in the interviews together with others related to Mori’s theory of the Uncanny and Robinson’s study. The lack of depth in characters, and the endeavor of some virtual influencers to impersonate a real human are issues to be aware of to avoid the rejection of the audience and to responsibly create an evident separation of fiction from reality.

Similarly to brands and real influencers, knowing their audience and keeping it as the center of its narrative is also fundamental for accomplishing engagement and relevance. While the history of cartoon characters can label them as targeted for children audiences, some of the cases reviewed in this research show that not only the spectrum is wider in reality, but also that some cartoon characters can appeal more to older audiences. The bridges connecting the fictional world of cartoon characters to their audiences in the real world have been built many times since the first steps of animation. The demand has always existed and the creators have used the technology and cultural contexts available at their time to meet such demand. Whether they use an illusion trick, a costume at a theme park, complex digital puppetry or a mere tweet, powerful and beloved cartoon characters will find a way to build a bridge into the real world to interact with their audience.

4.2. Contributions to Theory

Additionally to the purpose of this research of evaluating the performance of cartoon influencers and determining the criteria for predicting their success and its potential as an

alternative for animated entertainment, the findings of this research are of presumable theoretical relevance in the fields of influencers, animation and storytelling.

The findings of this research extend the studies on the ethical implications of virtual influencers by Robinson, Chappel and Wellman et al. to cartoon influencers. However, the contrast between virtual human influencers and cartoon influencers is that the visual style of stylized aesthetics, specifically cartoonish, creates a conspicuous separation of the real world from the fictional.

Quantitative studies focusing on the levels of affinity of an audience toward cartoon influencers and virtual human influencers would need to be done to prove if the Uncanny theory is completely valid in this format. However, this qualitative study indicates that cartoon characters have the upper hand in affinity to the audience. Technological advancements might reach a point in the near future when virtual humans will step onto a safe and high point of the affinity graph. Only time and further studies will tell if the ethical dilemma predictions were right about the potential risks of these virtual humans.

In the field of animation, this research makes a contribution on recognizing the power of influence of cartoon characters and the cartoon influencer as a separate animated media format with the potential of becoming mainstream. Their production handicap and their value as part of brand image are what seems to balance this power against human influencers. Additionally, cartoon characters are still perceived and niched mainly toward children audiences, which, because of the regulations to protect children's information on the internet, add up to their handicap as spokescharacters and influencers. The findings of this research also support the relevance of character and script over any technique or aesthetic in animated media.

Finally, this research steps on presumably theoretical unexplored territory in the field of storytelling. It acknowledges the influencer behavior as a storytelling format. A format that is taking shape and evolving with the rise, prevalence and fall of trends, media formats and platforms. While this study is not authoritatively claiming and defining the existence of the storytelling format as such, it was necessary to define its concept as it was a unit of analysis.

Daniel Farrera Saldaña

It was found useful to define the behavior of influencers as a whole and to make this behavior transferable to fictional characters as a single concept. Furthermore, the interviewees caught up and embraced the concept quickly and naturally when it was introduced to them in the brief prior to the interviews.

An interesting finding that future research could dive deeper into is the transition of a fictional character into non-fictional narratives. In the findings of this research, the inclusion of current affairs into the Influencer Storytelling Format was present in some projects and absent in others. It was pointed out by the most experienced of the interviewees, although she had limited experience developing Cartoon Influencers. However, further research would need to explore if this is part of the fundamental elements to be present in the Influencer Storytelling Format.

Ultimately, virgin territory is many times fertile ground for future research. It is expected that the cartoon influencers that will start populating social media in the following years awaken the interest of other researchers who want to expand on this research and the Influencer Storytelling format as a defined concept from similar or complementary points of view. Hopefully these researchers and the content creators aiming to create or enhance their own cartoon influencers can make a valuable use of the findings and contributions of this research.

5. References

Barefoot, D & Szabo, J. 2009, **Friends with Benefits: A Social Media Marketing Handbook**, No Starch Press, Incorporated, 316 pages

Bates, Joseph. 1992. **The nature of characters in interactive worlds and the oz project**. School of Computer Science. Pittsburgh. Available at:
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.50.6500&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

BBC. **Disney updates content warning for racism in classic films**. 2020. BBC News. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54566087>

Biaudet, S. & Arcada, Y. 2017. *Influencer Marketing as a Marketing Tool: The process of creating an Influencer Marketing Campaign on Instagram*. Yrkeshögskolan Arcada.

Available at:

https://www.theseus.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/134139/Biaudet_Sofie.pdf;jsessionid=A24A9B8EDEAF9F3A27A41E266F2DD6C7?sequence=1

Bunzel, T. (2010). *Tools of Engagement: Presenting and Training in a World of Social Media*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Cadwallader, C. 2019. *Influencing millennials: Key components for an effective influencer marketing campaign*.

https://www.theseus.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/167906/Cadwallader_Catharina.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

Carusele. 2018. **25 ways to measure influencer marketing ROI**. The Carousel Blog.

Available at: <https://blog.carusele.com/25-ways-measure-influencer-marketing-roi>

Chapple C and Cownie F (2017) **An investigation into viewers' trust in and response towards disclosed paid-for-endorsements by YouTube lifestyle vloggers**. *Journal of Promotional Communications*, 5(2), p 110-136.

Clement, J. 2020. **Distribution of Instagram users worldwide as of October 2020, by age and gender**. Statista. Available at:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/248769/age-distribution-of-worldwide-instagram-users/>

Clement, J. 2020. **Most popular social networks worldwide as of October 2020, ranked by number of active users**. Statista. Available at:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

Clement, J. 2020. **Most popular YouTube channels as of October 2020, ranked by number of subscribers**. Statista. Available at:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/277758/most-popular-youtube-channels-ranked-by-subscribers/>

Cubic Motion. 2019. **Thanks to Cubic Motion's intricate facial capture and animation technology, League of Legends fans saw Akali dance, talk, and react like never before**.

Cubic Motion Case Studies. Available at:

<https://cubicmotion.com/case-studies/league-of-legends-pro-league/>

D. Clark, M. (2020). DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called “cancel culture”. *Communication and the public*, 5(3-4), pp. 88-92. doi:10.1177/2057047320961562

Dahan, E. 2020. **Can Virtual Influencers Have Real Influence?**. Virtual Humans. Available at: <https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/can-virtual-influencers-have-real-influence>

De Vreese C.H. & Neijens, P. 2016. **Measuring Media Exposure in a Changing Communications Environment**. *Communication Methods and Measures*. 10:2-3, 69-80, DOI: [10.1080/19312458.2016.1150441](https://doi.org/10.1080/19312458.2016.1150441)

Digital Vector. **Global Animation, VFX & Video Games, Strategies, trends & opportunities report (2020-25)**. Digital Vector
<http://www.digital-vector.com/images/Global%20Animation,%20VFX%20&%20Video%20Games%20-%20Sample%20Pages.pdf>

Draude, C. 2010. **Intermediaries: reflections on virtual humans, gender, and the Uncanny Valley**. Springer-Verlag London Limited 2010. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/220415146_Intermediaries_Reflections_on_virtual_humans_gender_and_the_Uncanny_Valley

Eagan, D. 2009. **Gertie the Dinosaur**. National Film Registry.
<https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-film-preservation-board/documents/gertie.pdf>

Failes, I. 2020. **Real-time CG humans Hit the Big-Time**. *VFXVoice.com*. Pg 8-12
Available at: https://issuu.com/visualeffectssociety/docs/vfx_voice_spring_2020_rd/s/10353364

Frühbrodt L (2019) **Die (Geschäfts-)Welt der Influencer*innen**. *TelevIZion*, pp 4-7

George, A. 2012. **Constructing Intellectual Property**. Cambridge University Press.

Giorgi, A. and Giorgi, B. 2003. **Phenomenology**. In J. Smith (ed.), **Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods**. SAGE Publications.

Hand, L. 1930. **Nichols v. Universal Pictures Corporation et al**. Circuit Court of Appeals. Available at: <http://digital-law-online.info/lpdi1.0/cases/7pq84.htm>

Influencer MarketingHub. 2018. **4 Factors that Affect the New Instagram Algorithm (And How You will be Affected)**. Influencer MarketingHub. Available at:

<https://influencermarketinghub.com/4-factors-that-affect-the-new-instagram-algorithm-and-how-you-will-be-affected/>

Influencer MarketingHub. 2020. **How to Become an Influencer: 7 Easy Steps to Becoming a Social Media Influencer Today**. Influencer MarketingHub. Available at: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/how-to-become-an-influencer/>

Jordan, M. 2020. **Movie theaters are on life support. How will the film industry adapt?**. The conversation. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/movie-theaters-are-on-life-support-how-will-the-film-industry-adapt-143877>

Jose, A. 2014. **Effectiveness of Cartoon Character's in Creating Brand Preferences Among kids**.

King, N. Horrocks, C. and Brooks, J. 2018. **Interviews in Qualitative Research**. 2nd Edition. SAGE Publications.

Koenitz, H. 2015. *Interactive digital narrative: History, theory, and practice*. New York, New York ; London, England: Routledge.

Lawrence, E. 2020. **Social Media Trends for 2020 and Beyond**. Influencer MarketingHub. Available at: <https://influencermarketinghub.com/social-media-trends/>

Leibacher, H. 2012. **Monsters, Inc. Laugh Floor**. World of Walt. Available at: <https://www.worldofwalt.com/monsters-inc-laugh-floor.html>

Lindstrom, M. 2012. **Brandwashed: Tricks companies use to manipulate our minds and persuade us to buy**. London; Philadelphia: Kogan Page.

Manaf, A. A. A., & Alallan, Y. K. A. (2017). **Examining the effectiveness of animated cartoon as brand awareness in TV advertisement: Evidence from Survey in Malaysia and Jordan**. *International Journal of Business and Society*, 18(3), 427-438. Retrieved from: <https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.arcada.fi:2443/scholarly-journals/examining-effectiveness-animated-cartoon-as-brand/docview/2038672265/se-2?accountid=27294>

Martinez, N. 2019. **Hero Dad: The Challenge of Innovating your Workflow and Real-time Render**. Unity. Siggraph 2019. Video presentation available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P3N9_gO9zwA

McDonald, B. 2020. **Disney theme parks face \$21 billion coronavirus loss through 2022.** Analysts warn. The Orange Country Register.
<https://www.ocregister.com/2020/05/04/disney-theme-parks-face-21-billion-coronavirus-loss-through-2022-analysts-warn/>

McQuarrie, E. F., J. Miller, and B. J. Phillips. 2013. **The Megaphone Effect: Taste and Audience in Fashion Blogging.** Journal of Consumer Research. Available at:
<https://diazglaura.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/the-megaphone-colloquim31.pdf>

Peterson, S. 2015. **Barbie Goes Native on YouTube.** [a]listdaily. Available at>
<http://web.archive.org/web/20150823065827/http://www.alistdaily.com/news/barbie-going-native-on-youtube>

Petty, J. 2020. **What is 3D Rigging For Animation & Character Design?** Concept Art Empire. Retrieved on November, 2020 from:
<https://conceptartempire.com/what-is-rigging/>

Robinson, B. 2019. **Towards an Ontology and Ethics of Virtual Influencers.** Australasian Journal of Information Systems. Available at:
<https://journal.acs.org.au/index.php/ajis/article/view/2807/989>

Schuegraf M, Lütticke EM and Börner T (2018) **Influencing auf Instagram.** TV diskurs, 22(4), 80-83.

Solis, B. 2009. **Unveiling the New influencers.** Brian Solis. Available at:
<https://www.briansolis.com/2009/06/unveiling-the-new-influencers/>

Sonne, H. & yrkeshögskola, A. -. N. s. (2013). **Brand Identity vs. Brand Image: Does the identity of Kanniston Leipomo match its image?** Arcada - Nylands svenska yrkeshögskola.

Schlackman, S. (2014) **How Mickey Mouse Keeps Changing Copyright Law.** Art Journal. Retrieved from:
<https://alj.artrepreneur.com/mickey-mouse-keeps-changing-copyright-law/>

Slade-Brooking, C 2016, **Creating a Brand Identity: A Guide for Designers,** Laurence King Publishing, London.

Stanley, T. L. (2010). **Spokesperson Too Risky? Just Hire a Cartoon.** *Brandweek*, 51(13), p. 42.

Travers, C. 2020. **What is a “Virtual Influencer”?**. Virtual Humans. Available at: <https://www.virtualhumans.org/about>

Travers, C. 2020. **Virtual Influencers**. Virtual Humans. Retrieved from: <https://www.virtualhumans.org/#humans>

Travers, C. 2020. **Virtual Influencers, a valley for blue oceans**. Virtual Humans. Retrieved from: <https://www.virtualhumans.org/article/virtual-influencers-a-valley-for-blue-oceans>

Wellman, M. L. Stoldt, R. Tully, M. & Ekdale, B. 2020. **Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content**. Journal of Media Ethics. 35:2, 68-82, DOI: [10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078](https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078)

Widjajanta, B. Senen, S. H., Mashayono, Linsawati & Putri Anggraeni, C. **The Impact of Social Media Usage and Self-esteem on Conspicuous Consumption: Instagram User of Hijabers Community Bandung Member**. International Journal of eBusiness and eGovernment Studies. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Masharyono_Masharyono/publication/326403418

Wohlfeil, M 2018, **Celebrity Fans and Their Consumer Behaviour : Autoethnographic Insights into the Life of a Fan**, Taylor & Francis Group, Milton. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. [15 October 2020]. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.arcada.fi:2443/lib/arcada-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5260054>