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The rise of virtual influencers in tourism marketing: Analysing Esther Olofsson's visual branding on Instagram

Rosnąca popularność wirtualnych influencerów w marketingu turystycznym. Analiza brandingu wizualnego Esther Olofsson na Instagramie

Abstract

Virtual influencers are non-human, digitally created with human-like qualities. This study investigates the visual self-presentation and branding strategies of Esther Olofsson on Instagram using systematic visual content analysis. Thereby exploring how Esther is visually constructed as a digital persona and how elements of tourism, human likeness and influencer aesthetics are integrated into her online representation. A sample of 107 pictures from 94 posts published between October 2022 and October 2023 was selected. Tourism is a key theme, particularly urban and cultural settings, positioning Esther as an aspiring travel figure. The study also highlights how virtual influencer challenge traditional notions of identity, presence, and trust in digital marketing. Overall, the study shows how visual cues are strategically used to construct a coherent yet ambiguous digital self that bridges human and virtual identities. It contributes to research on influencer cultures, visual communication, and the aesthetics of virtual entities in tourism and branding.

Keywords

virtual influencers, social media influencers, social media, tourism marketing, visual content analysis

Streszczenie

Wirtualni influencerzy to cyfrowo wykreowane postacie przypominające rzeczywistych influencerów, posiadające cechy ludzkie, ale niemające fizycznego odpowiednika w świecie rzeczywistym. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje strategie wizualnej prezentacji i brandingu stosowane na Instagramie przez wirtualną influencerkę Esther Olofsson. Zastosowano systematyczną analizę treści wizualnych, obejmującą 107 zdjęć z 94 postów opublikowanych między październikiem 2022 a październikiem 2023 r. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono podobieństwu do człowieka (human-likeness) oraz estetyce wizualnej związanej z promocją miejsc turystycznych. Motyw podróży dominuje w treściach publikowanych przez Esther, co pozycjonuje ją jako aspirującą wirtualną influencerkę podróżniczą. W analizie wyróżniono dwa główne konteksty: turystykę miejską oraz turystykę kulturową. Badanie ukazuje, w jaki sposób poprzez komunikację wizualną budowana jest spójna, lecz celowo niejednoznaczna cyfrowa tożsamość, łącząca elementy ludzkie i wirtualne. Wyniki stanowią istotny wkład w badania nad estetyką wirtualnych postaci oraz cyfrowym self-brandingiem w kontekście turystyki.

Słowa kluczowe

wirtualni influencerzy, influencerzy mediów społecznościowych, marketing turystyczny, analiza materiałów wizualnych

JEL: M31, M37, Z32

Introduction

With the ever-increasing amount of time that consumers dedicate to their online activities, influencer marketing has become a key component of marketing strategies (Choi et al., 2024; Kepios, 2025). Influencers have the power to shape users' opinions, influence purchasing decisions, behaviours and create trends (Haenlein et al., 2020; Yatish et al., 2023).

Generations Y and Z using social media frequently, prefer visual communication and innovative content (Prakash Yadav & Rai, 2017). They check updates several times daily (Chen, 2018; Barbe & Neuburger, 2021), with up to 40% confirming purchases influenced by social media personalities (Influencer Marketing Factor, 2022). Instagram, Pinterest and TikTok are the most popular social media platforms among these cohorts. For instance, Instagram users carefully curate visually engaging still and moving images, often using filters to appeal to their audiences and to depict everyday experiences. The platform prioritizes aesthetic visual sharing, fostering creativity and high engagement levels, which are closely tied to the processing of information through visual stimuli (Leaver et al., 2020).

Tourism being an inherently visual field, relies on pictorial content as key element in social media marketing (Yu & Egger, 2021; Yu et al., 2025). Captions complement the visual communication by providing clear, concise, and descriptive information that enhances processing fluency and engagement (Vries et al., 2012; Hooker & Cooper, 2022; Yu et al., 2025). Furthermore, features like hashtag, geotag and user mentions help personalizing travellers' experiences enabling them to organize and search information addressing their preferences (Krisna et al., 2019) and connecting users with shared interests (Mele et al., 2023).

Influencers shape followers purchasing decision and travel intentions in the tourism sector (Magno & Cassia, 2018; Xu Xu (Rinka) & Pratt, 2018). Their continuing popularity has led businesses to leverage their reach to market destinations, hotels, airlines, and services (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022; Li et al., 2023). By interacting and producing engaging content, travel influencers enhance the visibility and attractiveness of tourist locations, inspiring potential visitors (Seeler et al., 2019).

The rise of virtual influencers (VI) marks a new phase in digital transformation. These computer-generated or artificial intelligence (AI)-driven or computer-generated influencers (CGI) like Lil Miquela, Shudu Gram, Esther Olofsson or Noonouri (Bai et al., 2019; Moustakas et al., 2020; Stein et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2025) mimic human influencers by sharing similar content and interacting with audiences.

Advances in generative AI have fuelled the growth of VIs, widely active in lifestyle, fashion, and cosmetic campaigns (Sands et al., 2022; Dogru et al., 2023). Among them, Lil Miquela has managed to attract 2.4 million followers on Instagram (@Lilmiquela, n.d.-b) and 3.4 million on TikTok (@Lilmiquela, n.d.-a). Samsung's campaign with Lil Miquela generated over 126 million organic views and increased brand mentions by 12% (Becker, 2019). Conti et al. (2022) highlight the potential of VIs in marketing, but Moustakas et al. (2020) are questioning their effectiveness. Nevertheless, in industries such as fashion, music and film VIs can be effective in marketing and promotion (Wibawa et al., 2022) and are likely to have a significant impact on activities in tourism marketing (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). The rare examples of VIs that are active in tourism include Lizzie Yeo, who was appointed as honorary ambassador of the Korea Tourism Organization in 2022 (Seung-Hye, 2022), as well as Oh Rozy that partnered in 2022 with Singapore Tourism Board to drive demand for travel (Chung & Na, 2022). In the European context one of the first VIs who was included in the tourism marketing context was Esther Olofsson in 2020. This trend continued in 2023, when the Italian Ministry of Tourism introduced Venus Anadyomene, a 30-year-old Instagram VI promoting Italy as travel destination (Jhawar, 2024). Similarly, in October 2024, the German National Tourism Board launched its own AI influencer, Emma (Harvard, 2024). Despite generating significant user engagement on social media, both VIs faced considerable criticism. Venus was accused of being superficial and disconnected from reality, while Emma drew critique for her stereotypical appearance, lack of diversity, and technical limitations (Povoledo, 2023; Rowan Kelleher, 2024).

The mechanisms behind the impact of VIs and their characteristics as advocates, along with comparisons to human influencers and their effectiveness need further investigations (Appel et al., 2020; Moustakas et al., 2020), as they can shape consumers perceptions (Dondapati & Dehury, 2024).

Despite growing interest in VIs, research lacks clarity on how characteristics like controllability and design flexibility can enhance marketing impact. Unlike human influencers, VIs can be entirely created, customized, and managed, allowing complete control over their appearance, personality, and behaviour. This enables systematic learning from effective human influencer practices. However, current studies mainly focus on user perceptions (Böhndel et al., 2023), ethics (Kim & Wang, 2023), or technological aspects, overlooking how controlled adaptation could improve VI performance in specific marketing contexts, particularly in tourism. There is a need to explore how the controllable

nature of VIs can be utilized and adapted to design more effective influencer strategies.

This study examines the self-branding practices of VIs in tourism, focusing on Esther Olofsson's Instagram presence. As the first VI created for European tourism, Esther serves as a key case for exploring VI's communication strategies, social media aesthetics, and visuals techniques in tourism marketing. It explores their communication strategies, social media aesthetics, and visual techniques, highlighting their use for tourism marketing. A multimodal analysis will assess the role of aesthetic design in effective communication, guided by specific research questions:

1) How do VIs like Esther Olofsson differ from traditional influencers?

2) How effectively do they leverage visual representation, including the portrayal of diverse cultures and communities, to influence perceptions of travel destinations in tourism marketing?

3) How does the VI Esther Olofsson establish and cultivate her branded self on Instagram?

Since the use of VI in marketing is relatively new there is little research available regarding the pictorial (visual) communication and self-presentation strategies of VI in social media. Visual content analysis has been widely employed on various studies on social media influencers' (SMI) visual presentations and on touristic-related visuals shared (Stepchenkova & Zhan, 2013; Mak, 2017; Geyer et al., 2024). Therefore, a visual content analysis topped with textual analysis of Esthers posts from October 2022 to October 2023, explores how she engages audiences, aligns with influencer trends, and contributes to tourism marketing. This research advances marketing knowledge by exploring how to optimize the effectiveness of VI. As VI and generative-AI entities increasingly shape digital content creation, understanding how to design and manage AI-generated personas has become vital for marketers and researchers. The results of this study provide guidance for developing more effective VI self-branding strategies focused on boosting authenticity, engagement, narrative design and trust to maximize marketing impact.

Literature review

Social media influencers

To understand VIs, it is helpful to first define SMIs, facilitating their differentiation from human influencers. Table 1 shows a range of definitions and interpretations that encompass the term influencer. An SMI is an individual person that is active in social media on selected topics. Besides, they have an expertise in and have the inherent capability to tangibly influence the behaviour, preferences,

or perceptions of other users with a specific area of interest. This influential ability arises from their authentic resonance, engaging content, and the trust they build through meaningful engagement up to a specific credibility. SMIs can be subdivided based on the number of followers, starting from nano influencers that have up to 10,000 followers to mega influencers with communities of one to five million people (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Further classifications are based on the social media platform and the format of the content shared by the influencer. It can be distinguished between bloggers, Instagrammers, Youtubers, TikTokers and others. Also, influencers can be classified by their content's industry or field, such as travel, food, health, or fashion and by their target audience, for instance family, millennial or nomads.

Virtual influencers

Virtual influencers are non-human digitally created characters that emulate human-like qualities. Usually, they are created with CGI or AI (Conti et al., 2022), VIs engage in interactive communications with an aim to obtain influential status among consumers. Despite their artificial nature, they engage, share content, and promote brands like human influencers. Over time VI definitions have evolved (Table 2), reflecting advancements in technology and their expanding role in social media marketing. Early definitions focused on VIs as CGI entities with a social media presence. As research progressed, later definitions emphasized their diverse appearances, digital creation methods, and their ability to promote brands and interact with audiences. More recent definitions highlight the AI-powered aspect of VIs, emphasizing their role as social media celebrities capable of engagement and influence like human influencers.

VIs, like SMIs, vary in appearance from anthropomorphic, such as Lil Miquela or Esther Olofsson to animalistic (zoomorphic) like guggimon or animated such as Nobody Sausage and Noonori (Berryman et al., 2021). They function as opinion leaders, promoting brands and destinations (Rodrigo-Martín et al., 2021; Hofeditz et al., 2022).

Compared to human influencers, VIs offer precise branding alignment (Berryman et al., 2021; Miao et al., 2021), and more brand safety because the story and life of VIs do not have a potentially controversial (Masteralexis et al., 2021). Advances in technology and adoption of generative AI have made VI and content creation easier, accessible and convenient (Wei & Tyson, 2024). However, these advances have led to debates regarding aesthetic, ethics and legal aspects, as users struggle to distinguish AI-generated from human-created content (Laszkiewicz & Kalinska-Kula, 2023). Recent studies

Table 1. Definition of social media influencers

Author(s)	Journal	Definition
Abidin (2015)	Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology	“Everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events”
de Veirman et al. (2017)	International Journal of Advertising	“People who have built a sizeable social network of people following them [and] they are seen as a regard for being a trusted tastemaker in one or several niches”
Freberg et al. (2011)	Public Relations Review	“SMIs represent a new type of independent third-party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media”
Ki & Kim (2019)	Psychology & Marketing	“SMIs are people who have established credibility with large social media audiences because of their knowledge and expertise on particular topics, and thereby exert a significant influence on their followers’ and peer consumers’ decisions. SMIs also can be defined as independent third-party endorsers who have developed sizeable social networks by sharing details about their personal lives, experiences, and opinions publicly through texts, pictures, videos, hashtags, location check-ins, etc.”
Lou & Yuan (2019)	Journal of Interactive Advertising	“A social media influencer is first and foremost a content generator: one who has a status of expertise in a specific area, who has cultivated a sizable number of captive followers – who are of marketing value to brands – by regularly producing valuable content via social media”
Yatish et al. (2023)	Electronic Commerce Research	“[...] social media influencers are essentially people who develop and maintain a personal brand and a following on social media through posts that intertwine their personality and lifestyle with the products (e.g., goods, services, ideas, places, people) that they promote, which can influence the way their followers behave (e.g., attitudes, perceptions, preferences, choices, decisions), positively (e.g., purchase) or negatively (e.g., do not purchase)”

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2. Definition of (AI) virtual influencers

Author(s)	Journal/conference	Definition
Shin & Lee (2020)	14th International Conference on Ubiquitous Information Management and Communication	“Virtual influencers are fictive computer-generated images (CGIs), which are generated by artificial models with computer vision-oriented graphic technologies”
Moustakas et al. (2020)	2020 International Conference on Cyber Security and Protection of Digital Services (Cyber Security)	“Virtual influencers are computer-generated influencers (CGI) or artificial intelligence influencers (AII) with a social media presence”
Berryman et al. (2021)	The 22nd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers	“Virtual influencers are characters native to social media, with no singular referent in the offline world. Ranging in appearance from eerily humanoid to entirely fantastical, and utilising computer-generated imagery and animation of varying sophistication, quality and photorealism, virtual influencers are typically designed to accumulate audiences and promote products, brands and/or messages”
Miao et al. (2021)	Journal of Marketing	“[...] virtual characters, broadly known as avatars, which we define as digital entities with anthropomorphic appearance, controlled by a human or software, that have an ability to interact”

Table 2 cont.

Author(s)	Journal/conference	Definition
Thomas & Fowler (2021)	Journal of Advertising	“AI influencer [are] digitally created artificial human who is associated with Internet fame and use software and algorithms to perform tasks like humans”
Sookkaew & Saephoo (2021)	International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications	“Virtual influencers, are created by humans through the creation of digital tools that mimic human behaviour through the use of creative design”
Conti et al. (2022)	IEEE Communications Magazine	“[A] VI [is] a person or thing created by software that can influence others, primarily through marketing collaborations or participation in social campaigns, and is solely created and consumed via digital mediums. They resemble human characteristics, behavior, and actions but do not correspond to any human in the real world. [...] They are created by 3D artists using computer-generated imagery (CGI) and motion capture technologies to depict them as real people in real situations. Sometimes, VIs are digitally altered versions of real people or a digital combination of a CGI-made head and a real person's body”
Stein et al. (2024)	New Media & Society	“Social media celebrities that appear partially or fully artificial in nature (e.g. as digitally rendered 3D characters), while presenting the same type of content as real human influencer”
Kim et al. (2025)	International Journal of Advertising	“VIs are AI-powered fictional digital personas, crafted to interact and influence audiences on various media platforms”

Source: own elaboration.

have shown that users tend to perceive AI-generated and influencer-managed accounts as more attractive than official or public accounts (Dogru et al., 2023; Park et al., 2024).

Use of SMI and VI in tourism context

In tourism, electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is understood as any positive or negative statement about a product, service, company or destination shared online with a wide audience (Albayrak & Ceylan, 2021). Interpersonal influence is important because of the intangible nature of tourism and the fact that the quality of tourism products cannot be fully evaluated before the purchase (Litvin et al., 2008; Phillips et al., 2013). Key parts of eWOM are content regarding opinions, pictures and videos from Influencers. Influencer marketing is an effective and efficient campaign method of social media marketing in tourism shaping consumers decisions by promoting destinations and services through social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010; Xu Xu (Rinka) & Pratt, 2018; Pop et al., 2021; Yilmazdoğan et al., 2021). Images presenting tourism places influence tourist's behaviour in pre-visit, during visit and post-visit stages, but most of the current research focuses on pre-visit phase because its influence is significantly related to tourists decision making (Molinillo et al., 2018).

The effectiveness of influencer marketing is influenced by credibility, trust, opinion leadership, para-social relationships, and brand-influencer fit

(Femenia-Serra et al., 2022; Horng et al., 2024). Previous studies have examined how influencers affect consumer decision-making (Magno & Cassia, 2018; Pop et al., 2021), increase destination appeal (Xu Xu (Rinka) & Pratt, 2018), and are integrated into strategies of destination management organizations (DMO) (Stoldt et al., 2019). One of the key challenges in working with VIs is building trust, a fundamental element in persuasion, information-seeking, and engagement (Karagür et al., 2022). However, trust in VIs tend to be low, as followers can easily identify them as artificial. Visser et al. (2016) indicates that consumers trust avatars less than human influencers. To address this, anthropomorphism has been identified as a key design strategy. VIs that appear and behave more like humans, by using facial expressions are accompanied by others or use gendered voices tend to be perceived as more credible and trustworthy (Fong & Mar, 2015; Westerman et al., 2015; Cascio Rizzo et al., 2023; Vinoi et al., 2025).

However, regarding VI there is an additional layer of complexity introduced by the concept of uncanny valley-theory. First proposed by Masahiro Mori (1970 in Japanese) uncanny valley theory describes the phenomena of discomfort when encountering entities that closely resemble humans but have subtle differences, could significantly affect the trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility of VIs (Mori et al., 2012). Much like humanoid robots, highly anthropomorphic VIs such as Esther Olofsson possess a high degree of human-likeness. For

anthropomorphic VIs it is necessary to reach the second peak to bridge the uncanny valley by increasing their level of human-likeness. VIs can be designed to mimic human behaviour, for example, by responding promptly, maintaining a consistent online presence. These elements contribute to a sense of liveliness and make VIs more accessible. The inclusion of emotion expressions, gestures, voice variations and other forms of emotion communication can help to bridge the uncanny valley and meet users' expectations (Zhang et al., 2020).

Another factor that impacts influencers' credibility is intimate self-disclosure understood as sharing intimate personal information with others, allowing to develop a connection and closeness to followers. Furthermore, intimate self-disclosure has a significant effect on tourist travel intention (Faisal & Dhusia, 2022). Apart from the influencers themselves, credibility and trustworthiness, another important element in social media is the content and its quality. In tourism marketing, travel photography is essential to inspire tourist decision process (Joyner et al., 2018), shapes cognitive and affective image of a destination conveys tourism experience (Yu & Ko, 2017), and can be influential (Paül i Agustí, 2018; Jhawar, 2024). Instagram, known for aesthetic travel photography and the use of filters, enhances the persuasive power of such content (Baron & Ciechomsk, 2019).

Photo aesthetics depend on factors like light, colour, angle, focus, and composition. User engagement is especially influenced by light quality and colour, with harmonious tones and the presence of blue enhancing emotional impact and visual appeal (Datta et al., 2006; Yu & Egger, 2021; Hauser et al.,

2022). The quality of sharpness is one of the key components and improves image perception (Luo & Tang, 2008; Faris Belt, 2012). Connected to focus is the angle of view, various camera angles can therefore alter the same photo to be perceived in a different way and influence aesthetic perception as well as the viewer's relationship with the image (Kraft, 1987).

In conclusion, eWOM, especially through influencer and virtual influencer marketing, plays a key role in shaping tourism consumer behaviour. Trust, credibility, and content quality are vital, though the uncanny valley and low trust in VI remain challenges.

Esther Olofssons – virtual influencer created and used in tourism marketing

Esther Olofsson is a VI created in 2020 by the Dutch marketing agency RAUWcc. Her brand-self and identity were set up and constructed by her creators to promote a consistent, marketable and authentic self-image. She is 29 years old; originally from Malmö and was living in Rotterdam since 2019. With brown hair, brown eyes and distinctive moles on her face, her appearance is remarkable. Her personality is optimistic, adventurous, and honest. She is passionate about architecture, fine cuisine and photography. Initially created as a local influencer, Esther partners with local businesses, including a campaign with the Hotel Postillion in 2020/21 emphasizing digitalization and innovation (Figure 1) and a campaign with the Dordrecht museum, promoting exhibitions

Figure 1. Esther Olofsson promoting Postillion Hotel in Rotterdam



Source: Instagram post (@esther.olfsson, 2020).

Figure 2. Esther Olofsson promoting Dordrecht Museum and its exhibitions



Source: Instagram post (@esther.olfsson, 2021).

Figure 3. Esther Olofsson post published during her visit in Queenstown (New Zealand)



Source: Instagram post (@Estherolofssonexplores, 2023).

and attracting tourists (Figure 2) (Postillion Hotels, 2020; Rauwcc, 2022). Over time, the strategy of self-brand of Esther Olofsson evolved.

By late 2022, Esther started travelling globally creating content from various destinations via a new Instagram account (@Estherolofssonexplores, n.d.) in order to focus the content on travel-related topics and position her as travelling influencer (Figure 3). What changed within time was also the technology used to produce the content. Initially, her posts were created based on real pictures taken during model shoots, later digitally processed. Nowadays, all content is AI-generated, allowing travel storytelling without physical travel.

According to the marketing agency RAUWcc, Esther had not been involved in paid campaigns between 2022–2023. Her Instagram account primarily showcases technological innovations and the agency's creative work (Rauwcc, online, 2023, personal communication). Esther is active across multiple platforms with varying engagement. On Instagram, her account, with 224 posts and 891 followers remains relatively niche, a circumstance offering a unique opportunity to observe the early-stage development of a VI (@esther.olofsson, n.d.).

Method

This study applies a visual content analysis to systematically examine the use of photography of Esther Olofsson's Instagram posts. The method is used because it enables a structured investigation of visual patterns, including composition, self-presentation, and thematic content, which are central to understanding construction of influencer self-branding. It allows for both quantitative measurement of frequencies, co-occurrences, and clustering, while maintaining an exploratory, qualitative focus on emerging patterns and meaning (Bell, 2004; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). Consequently, the study maintains an exploratory focus, aiming to identify and interpret patterns as they emerge from the data.

Sampling, data collection and cleaning

This exploratory, qualitative study relies on a purposive sample of Instagram posts published by Esther Olofsson. The posts were archived manually within a year period. The date range starts from Esther's first post on the 28th of October 2022 until the 28th of October 2023 resulting in 124 posts including stories and reels. Due to album function on Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020) the data base summing up in 137 screenshots. Data collection included elements such as the permanent hyperlink to each post, screenshots containing the

individual components of the post i.e., image, caption, and initial comments. All hyperlinks were checked in April 2025 to ensure they are still available. In addition, important metadata such as date of post, classification of format, caption, metrics and explicit geotags or associated user mentions are systematically collected. Therefore, data is comprised of text, emojis, and visuals. Emojis are widely used across digital platforms and offer a nuanced layer of emotional context that complements the captions and comments (Ge & Gretzel, 2018; Bai et al., 2019; Godard & Holtzman, 2022). To interpret the visuals combined with textual elements, the emotions mediated using emojis were examined, thereby referring to the Emoji Lexica (Godard & Holtzman, 2022) and the list of emoji characters by Unicode Consortium (Unicode, 2024). This is important because images and text hardly appeared isolated in Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020; Lobinger & Mele, 2021).

The study exclusively concerned visual content in form of static images and albums consisting of multiple static images combined in a post. Posts with dynamic images or images accompanied by sound, such as stories and Reels were initially excluded. The reason for exclusion lies in the nature of these elements, which require a different method of analysis. Reposts, collages, AI-generated pictures and pictures of other people which are not related to Esther were also excluded. Reposts were excluded to minimize redundancy, as they are essentially duplicates of the original posts. This exclusion contributes to reducing irrelevant data that could bias the results helping to maintain research clarity. Hence, 30 images were removed, resulting in the final sample of 107 images from 94 posts.

Analysis

Validation and coding procedures

The validation and preliminary phase were conducted by three researchers using consensual coding method and additionally testing intercoder reliability (Kuckartz, 2014; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). The categories are formed using a deductive-inductive approach. The creation of the deductive categories was conducted in advance (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023). Hence, *Mis en sence* categories are embedded to analyse elements arranged within the frame (e.g. camera perspective, type of shot) (Kraft, 1987; Giannetti, 2008; Bienk, 2019), categories addressing influencer's self-branding while referring to Goffman's scheme of feminist presentation (Liu & Suh, 2017) as well as typical poses (Liu & Suh, 2017; Götz, 2020) were employed to investigate the appearance of Esther as an influencer.

Categories presenting the uncanny valley theory (Mori et al., 2012; Xie-Carson et al., 2023) were applied to explore the concept of possible discomfort of the appearance of Esther. Additionally tourism and vacation type categories (von Dörnerberg et al., 2018; Duman et al., 2020) were combined and embedded to segment Esthers tourist behaviour and vacation types promoted. In the initial phase the sample was manually coded with the predetermined deductive codes by one researcher (A). All posts were first coded with “number of people” or “no people”. Then, posts were subject to general coding with the deductive codes: portrait, selfie, camera perspective, type of shot, withdrawal, stance, tourism types, human likeness. However, it became evident during this preliminary coding stage the deductive codes did not cover all the features in the data sample and revealed unanticipated themes. In response to this an inductive coding phase was introduced. This phase facilitated the inclusion, adjustment, and removal of codes from the coding system. A subsequent consultative process with researcher B established consensus within the research to ensure that the revised coding system is adequate. Therefore,

the deductive codes were supplemented by inductive codes. The final code book included a total of 15 categories consisting of 60 subcategories (Table 3). This combined deductive–inductive approach ensured a theoretically grounded and empirically comprehensive coding system that adequately reflected the study’s scope and objectives.

The analysis of the caption is based on the data used, namely in form of words, sentences, hashtags, tags and emojis found in the Esther’s posts ($n = 94$). This included the use of hashtag, mention, location-related information, text enriching symbols like Emojis, call or requests (e.g. Wish me luck on my journey), arising questions to the community (e.g. What do you think?), expressive sentences which convey emotions, feelings, or personal thoughts (e.g. This must have been the most breathtaking experience), positive affirmations (e.g. Loving life), factual presentation of information (e.g. Walking through the markets of Tel Aviv) and discouraging or demotivating statements. To ensure the reliability of the coding system, intercoder reliability was used to check the degree of agreement between several coders. The codes assigned to the pictures by

Table 3. Code system

Category	Subcategory
Tourist hotspots	–
Season	Spring, summer, autumn, winter
Tourism types	Health, recreational & wellness tourism, environmental tourism, adventure tourism, historical & cultural tourism, business tourism, urban tourism
Animals	Domestic animals, wildlife
Human likeness	Eerie resemblance, subtle imperfections, hyper realistic digital personality, human-indistinguishable
Clothing	Regional/cultural clothing, daily clothing, sportswear, high fashion
Haircut	Short, middle, long
Number of people in picture	None, solo (Esther), 2 to 3 people, group
Withdrawal	Back to the camera, covering face, averting gaze, gazing at the viewer
Stance	Kneeling, lying, squatting down, standing, walking, sitting, crossed leg, posed leg bent
Theme	Nature & animals, business & conference, education, wellness, sightseeing, traditions & culture, adventure & sport, gadgets & gaming, culinary, social life, landscape
Camera perspective	High angle, low angle, eye level
Type of shot	Full/wide shot, medium full shot/American, cowboy shot, medium shot, medium close up, close up/detail
Portrait	–
Selfie	–

Source: own elaboration (Kraft, 1987; Giannetti, 2008; Mori et al., 2012; Liu & Suh, 2017; von Dörnerberg et al., 2018; Bienk, 2019; Duman et al., 2020; Götz, 2020; Xie-Carson et al., 2023)

three coders are assessed for the extent of similar and matching coding decisions. Using MAXQDA the agreement occurs when the code on the image was assigned equally by the coders (MacPhail et al., 2016; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). Following the pilot testing, a randomly selected sample of 50% of 107 visuals ($n = 54$) were coded independently by researcher A and B and showed intercoder reliability of 94.07%. In addition, the coding system was subjected to a second validation phase to confirm its reliability and applicability by a third coder. This phase included independent coding of a subset of 20 posts to confirm the robustness of the system and consistency between three coders. An intercoder reliability between researcher A and C of 85.53% and between researcher B and C of 84.89% was reached.

The initial agreement between researcher A and B is very high, while the agreements between researcher C and both A and B is slightly lower, but still substantial. This indicates that the coding system is reliable and consistent across different coders. Any discrepancies were discussed between researcher A, B and C author and a mutual decision was agreed upon.

Results

Visual presentation and self-branding of Esther Olofsson

Frequencies for each of the categories and subcategories were run to explore the content of Esther on Instagram. Most of the pictures include Esther (92.51%), whereby pictures of Esther alone are the most frequently represented (68.22%) followed by Esther with 2 to 3 people (13.08%) or with a group of people (11.21%). Although 2 to 3 people or groups are present, they usually appear in the background and are often blurred without actively interacting with Esther. Occasions where Esther poses with others are rare ($n = 26$) and she is never presented with other VI (Sookkaew & Saephoo, 2021). *Mis en scène* analysis highlights camera perspectives and types of shots used in the pictures. Regarding camera perspective, “eye level” (81.3%) is constituting a significant portion of the analysed pictures to refer to the observer’s point of view. “Low angle” (10.3%) and “high angle” (5.6%) are underrepresented in comparison. The dominant shot type is “full/wide shot” (30.84%) followed by “medium close up” (28.04%) and “medium shot” (22.43%) focusing on the subject and surroundings. “Cowboy shot” (10.28%), “close up/detail” (4.67%) and “medium full shot/American” (3.74%) appear rarely. Less than half of the pictures are portrait (40.2%) or selfie (6.5%).

Examine influencer prestation styles, the results show that 63.64% of Esther’s photos ($n = 99$)

feature her standing, 14.14% sitting and 8.08% walking. Rare poses like lying, crossed leg and posed leg bent occur in 4.04%, while kneeling or squatting occur in 1.01% of the posts. Esther is gazing at the viewer in 53.54% of the pictures, with minimal facial expression, never showing distinct emotions. In 43.43% she is averting the gaze, 3.03% of the pictures show her back, and none featuring her covering her face.

Reading clothing styles, daily clothing (59.60%) dominates, followed by regional clothing addressing specific geographic region or cultural groups, sportswear (15.5%) and high-fashion (10.10%). Her haircut varies from short (9.09%) to long (31.31%) but mostly has a middle hair length (59.60%). Her hairstyle remains timeless and discreet, avoiding eccentric styles.

Analysis of Esther’s “human likeness” reveals an eerie resemblance (24.24%) and subtle imperfections (33.33%), which exposing her as a VI. In 27.27% she appears as “hyper realistic digital personality” and “human-indistinguishable” in 15.15%. In 26 pictures, Esther appears with other people, whereby in combination with humans she appears in 73.08% with eerie resemblance and subtle imperfections.

Few pictures include landscape photography (7.48%) or animals (6.5%). Evaluating the tourism-related results, 2 of the 107 pictures could not be assigned to a tourism type. Of 104 travel-related pictures, urban tourism (31.43%) followed by historical & cultural tourism (23.81%) and environmental tourism (20%) are communicated. Business travel occurs in 10.48%, while adventure tourism (7.62%) or health, recreational & wellness tourism (6.67%) are less represented. Tourist hotspots appear in 25 of 107 posts, likewise, tourism types, 7 pictures could not be assigned with the category “season”. Due to their indoor settings and portrait shots where neither background nor clothing was visible, 100 pictures remained to be coded. 50% of pictures depict summer, followed by spring (25%), fall (14%) and winter season (11%).

Metrics and caption

Metrics of Esther’s Instagram reveals activity and community engagement growth. Between October 2022 until October 2023, her posts increased to 124 and she reached 570 followers. In comparison, the number of accounts followed by Esther increases slightly and remains stable for a large part of the observation period.

Captions analysis ($n = 94$) shows that every post has a caption and includes emojis. A total of 294 emojis are used with a median of 2 per post. External relationships are reflected in 36 tags mentioning other people across 20 captions (21.28%),

mostly for brands' tags (36.11%), followed by conferences (25%), people (19.44%), locations (13.89%) and music festivals (5.56%). Locations such as cities, regions and countries appear in continuous text and hashtags (81.91%). Furthermore, all captions contained hashtags. A total of 1044 hashtags over the period of a year were used, with a clear increase in the number of hashtags used towards the end of the year. Captions include 2 to 21 hashtags (median 10) with frequently used hashtags "virtual-human" ($n = 129$), "estheroloffsonexplores" ($n = 56$) and "artificialhuman" ($n = 50$). Non-hashtag words range from everyday concepts such as "day" ($n = 26$) and "see" ($n = 22$) to more abstract notions like "experience" ($n = 19$) and "beauty" ($n = 14$). Similar results are shown referring to word combinations. The most common word combination with hashtags is "artificialintelligence", "artificialhuman", "aihuman" ($n = 42$). Considering the linguistic expressions and the manner of speech a combination of expressive (34.9%), informational (41.7%) and affirmative (13.1%) communication are applied in captions enriched with interactions requests to users in the form of calls (1.7%) and discussion invitations (8.6%). No pessimistic tone is employed.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study provide empirical insights into the visual presentation and self-branding strategies of the VI Esther Olofsson, analysed in the light of existing literature on factors affecting effectiveness and influence of influencers in tourism marketing. Clearly, VIs differ in their mode of creation and control. Human influencers' digital personas evolve organically whereby VIs are entirely constructed and managed entities that mimic human influencers and interact with audiences (Kim et al., 2025). Although Esther can be curated precisely, allowing consistent branding, storytelling, and aesthetic control, and enabling the targeted application of theoretical insights on trust, authenticity, engagement, and narrative strategy, her overall effectiveness and self-branding still show room for improvement and refinement. As stated in the literature, the effectiveness of influencer marketing is impacted by their credibility, parasocial relationships as well as brand-influencer fit (Femenia-Serra et al., 2022; Horng et al., 2024). Anthropomorphism is one of the most important factors that impact trust and credibility. VI can be humanized through storytelling, by publishing information about aims, ambitions, challenges, values, which helps to develop an emotional connection between audience and VI (Moustakas et al., 2020). According to homophily theory, these identities allow certain audiences to connect with them on a personal level, potentially

fostering engagement and trust (Gupta et al., 2020), which are important factors in influencer marketing. However, the artificial nature of VI limits their ability to generate homophily compared to human influencers who express authentic personal experiences (Stein et al., 2024). Establishing homophily is limited as VI cannot share lived experiences, they can only attempt to appear relatable by using storytelling (Moustakas et al., 2020) or by posting pictures including others, to receive more engagement (Cascio Rizzo et al., 2023). Esther in her self-branding strategy uses several elements of storytelling, the audience knows her background, personality and follows the travels she undertakes. Esther suppresses emotional expression, which contrasts with the often spontaneous, emotionally charged, or intimate content of human influencers, which help to build emotional connection, foster authenticity and strengthen para-social bonds. The case of Esther Olofsson suggests a tension between this strategy and the limitations of visual believability. While her hairstyle is mostly consistent, occasional drastic changes in length within short time intervals reveal her artificial nature and disrupt the illusion of human continuity, weakening the audience's emotional connection and disrupting her consistent online presence. Only in 24% of the posts, Esther is presented with other individuals, this suggests that she is rarely presented in social settings, limiting social connectedness. Alongside others, her visual appearance includes elements of the uncanny valley human likeness scale: eerie resemblance and subtle imperfections, which reinforces her artificial nature. Nevertheless, during the time of analysis Esthers appearance has evolved to become increasingly human-like. This suggests a gradual normalization of her visual presence and a growing viewer familiarity, which reduces the initial uncanny effect (Zhang et al., 2020). This reveals a conflict, although the presence of companions theoretically contributes to the humanization of VIs, it can also reinforce their artificiality, making trust building more difficult. To address this issue, sophisticated design strategies are required, harmonizing social context with visual coherence, as seen in her further visual development. Esther leverages visual representation effectively by consistently positioning herself within tourism context showing, how VI can be integrated in tourism marketing activities by spreading eWOM by sharing opinions, pictures, recommendations in social media (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Esther does not concentrate on specific tourism types, whereas urban and historical and cultural tourism are dominating. However, the portrayal of diverse cultures and communities appears limited in depth. While the imagery signals cultural engagement, it tends to focus on tourist hot-spots rather than authentic representation of local

culture. Esther's wardrobe includes regional or local clothing in 15.5% of the posts, referring to culturally specific styles. Due to her artificial nature, she may be perceived as less susceptible to accusations of cultural appropriation, as she does not possess a personal identity or cultural background in the human sense. This raises thought-provoking questions about how VI might navigate socio-cultural boundaries and symbolic sensitivities that apply to human influencers. Her posts often depict recognizable travel settings by traveling to several destinations in all seasons. VIs can be staged in any season regardless of actual time. This also shows the temporal and spatial flexibility, because VIs are not bound by physical limitations. However, it is important to maintain temporal and seasonal consistency in both visual content and storytelling.

Esther curates her branded self through an orchestrated visual strategy. To foster a stronger connection between the audience she uses camera perspectives such as eye level (Kraft, 1987). To guarantee a more comprehensive depiction of the environment, such as the locations she visits, full, wide and medium shots are used (Liu & Suh, 2017). The consistent *mise en scène* creates a coherent digital identity. Comparing Esthers presentations with typical poses, such as crossed leg (Liu & Suh, 2017; Götz, 2020), it shows that these poses are not commonly used by her. To enhance the presentation style and further humanize VI, it could be beneficial to adopt more body postures typically associated with human influencers. Tourism settings further position her as a culturally aware, stylish traveller, reinforcing her brand as a modern and approachable VI. Esthers use of captions aligns with existing literature on influencer marketing, where captions complement visual content and enhance audience engagement (Yu & Egger, 2021; Hooker & Cooper, 2022; Yu et al., 2025). Her frequent use of emojis, hashtags, and tags, and the incorporation of personal and location-based references, mirrors strategies that boost engagement and connect with followers on a personal level (Krisna et al., 2019; Feng et al., 2021). Additionally, the linguistic expressions in her captions reflect a combination of informative, expressive, and affirmative communication, supporting her approach to audience connection (Vries et al., 2012; Yu et al., 2025). Although the study analyses pictures and captions as separate components, it is important to recognize their interdependence. On Instagram visual and textual elements jointly construct meaning. Initially, Esther Olofsson's persona appears to be strategically crafted aligning with the role of a tourism influencer. However, it is noticeable that she does not use travel-related hashtags but mainly emphasizes her artificial personality. In doing so, she does not fully perform as travel influencer, since the absence of

travel-related hashtags limits the audience's ability to discover the impressions she shares (Krisna et al., 2019; Mele et al., 2023). Regarding this, her artificial personality became more centred leading to an AI Ambassador nowadays.

In summary, the case of Esther Olofsson illustrates both the potential and the limitations of VIs. While her digital flexibility and curated persona offer strategic advantages, especially in tourism marketing, the challenges of authenticity, artificial nature and emotional resonance remain. To fully leverage the potential of VIs there is a balance needed between visual coherence, narrative continuity, and human-like engagement strategies, while recognizing the limits of artificial trust-building in comparison to their human counterparts. As influencer marketing and AI continue to evolve in tourism, VI are expected to gain prominence (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). Their effectiveness, however, depends on strategic fit rather than organizational type (e.g. travel agency, airline, hotel, destination). Examining cases such as Esther Olofsson and Emma illustrates how VIs can be purposefully designed for specific objectives. For instance, Esther Olofsson was primarily designed for an opening of a digitally savvy hotel to broadcast its focus on new technologies and innovation, whereas Emma functions not only as a VI but also as the visual representation of a chatbot. These examples illustrate how VIs can be strategically integrated into broader communication and branding systems to enhance engagement and fulfil defined marketing roles. However, such observations should be complemented by systematic research to identify underlying patterns, assess their effectiveness across different contexts, and establish theoretical frameworks that explain the determinants of successful VI implementation in tourism marketing.

Limitations and future research

This study focused exclusively on the visual communication strategies of Esther Olofsson, within the context of Instagram. While the in-depth analysis provides detailed insight, it inherently limits the generalizability of the findings. The material analysed consisted of images posted in 2022 and 2023. Since that time, artificial intelligence and CGI technologies have advanced significantly, potentially enabling VI to adopt even more lifelike visual identities. Additionally, the platform-specific focus on Instagram does not account for how these identities might manifest on other social media channels. Audience reception and followers' engagement was not directly measured, which leaves a gap in understanding how followers perceive and respond to these curated identities.

Future research on VI in tourism could expand the scope of analysis by comparing multiple VI to identify common visual patterns or divergent strategies. Cross-platform studies could also reveal how VIs adapt their communication style depending on the medium. Additionally, incorporating audience reception, through sentiment analysis, surveys, or interviews, could offer deeper understanding of how authenticity is perceived with VIs. For example, future studies could focus on Emma, a VI introduced by German National Tourism Board in 2024

and investigate the feedback she has received from stakeholders as well as perceptions held by her target audiences. Such research could reveal cultural differences in how VIs are accepted and what factors contribute to their credibility and engagement across different demographics. Finally, examining the ethical implications of VIs, such as issues of transparency, identity construction, and their impact on travel intention and behaviour, would enrich the critical discourse surrounding this phenomenon.

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Pracowniczka naukowa i wykładowczyni na Uniwersytecie Nauk Stosowanych i Sztuki w Lucernie (Szwajcaria), pracuje w Instytucie Turystyki i Mobilności. Swoją pracę doktorską obroniła w Kolegium Gospodarki Światowej Szkoły Głównej Handlowej w Warszawie w dziedzinie nauk o zarządzaniu i jakości. Prowadzi badania stosowane dotyczące wpływu cyfryzacji na turystykę, koncentrując się na roli danych, ontologii danych i infrastrukturze wymiany danych. Jej działalność dydaktyczna koncentruje się na marketingu cyfrowym, zarządzaniu wydarzeniami oraz wykorzystaniu nowych technologii w turystyce i mobilności.

Dr Carolin Geyer

Uzyskała tytuł doktora na Uniwersytecie Muzycznym im. Franza Liszta w Weimarze, a obecnie jest adiunktem na Uniwersytecie Nauk Stosowanych i Sztuki w Lucernie. W swojej pracy doktorskiej badała muzykę w kontekście krótkich filmów w mediach społecznościowych, w szczególności wykorzystanie muzyki w serwisach TikTok i Instagram Reels. Jej badania koncentrują się na jakościowym podejściu do mediów oraz tworzeniu, produkcji i dystrybucji artefaktów mediów (audio)wizualnych. Jej praca wpisuje się w ramy kulturoznawstwa, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem praktyk związanych z mediami cyfrowymi, dźwiękiem i muzyką w kontekście internetowym oraz współczesnym dziedzictwem.

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Doktorantka nauk o komunikacji na Uniwersytecie w Zurychu. Uzyskała tytuł licencjata w dziedzinie międzynarodowego zarządzania hotelarstwem w Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne oraz tytuł magistra w dziedzinie zrównoważonego rozwoju na Uniwersytecie w Bazylei.

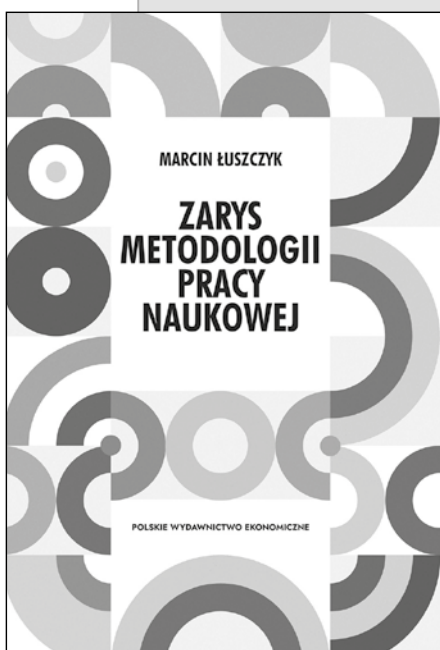
Meike Müller, MA

Lecturer and researcher at the Institute for Sociocultural Development at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. She has a Master of Arts in Sociology and Media Science. In her projects, she utilizes qualitative, ethnographic, visual, and quantitative methods, as well as mixed-methods approaches. Her research focuses on settlement and urban development, and on inclusion and exclusion in public spaces, neighborhoods, and housing.

Mgr Meike Müller

Wykładowczyni i badaczka w Instytucie Rozwoju Socjokulturowego Uniwersytetu Nauk Stosowanych i Sztuki w Lucernie. Posiada tytuł magistra socjologii i medioznawstwa. W swoich projektach naukowych wykorzystuje metody jakościowe, etnograficzne, wizualne i ilościowe, a także podejście oparte na metodach mieszanych. Jej badania koncentrują się na osadnictwie i rozwoju miast oraz na integracji i wykluczeniu w przestrzeni publicznej, dzielnicach i mieszkalnictwie.

ZAPOWIEDŹ



Marcin Łuszczczyk

ZARYS METODOLOGII PRACY NAUKOWEJ

Dokonujący się postęp nauki wzmacnia zainteresowanie metodologią pracy naukowej. W nauce nie wystarczy już dość tradycyjne podejście oparte na „wiedzy, że...”, narasta poczucie niedostatku „wiedzy, jak...”. Aktywna rola nauki w przemianach otaczającego świata spowodowała zapotrzebowanie na pewną i dającą się zweryfikować informację. Współczesna nauka staje się coraz bardziej profesjonalizowana i wyspecjalizowana. De facto kończy się czas geniuszy pokroju Leonarda da Vinci, którzy z powodzeniem stosowali niepowtarzalne metody improwizacji w nauce. Współcześnie rolę geniuszy przejęli zawodowi akademicy proponujący, zamiast improwizacji, możliwe do naśladowania i przekazania przyszłym pokoleniom metody. Celem monografii jest dokonanie aktualizacji stanu dotychczasowej wiedzy i przedstawienie zarysu współczesnej metodologii pracy naukowej, a wraz z nim również praktycznych wskazówek dotyczących sposobów przygotowania wartościowych sprawozdań z badań.

Więcej informacji na stronie www.pwe.com.pl