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Lil Miquela and the Transformation of Photographic Authority



Figure 1.

PacSun campaign image featuring the virtual influencer Lil Miquela (photograph by Mayan Toledano, 2022).

Introduction

Over the past decade, social media platforms have transformed the relationship between images, identity, and celebrity through the rise of influencers; figures whose carefully curated photographs circulate widely and drive trends in fashion, lifestyle, and consumer culture. Influencers construct highly visible online personas through images that appear spontaneous and authentic, even though they are often carefully staged. Within this environment, a new category of influencer has emerged that further complicates the relationship between photography and identity: the virtual influencer.

One of the most prominent examples is Lil Miquela, a fictional social media personality who appears to live the life of a typical Instagram influencer while actually existing as a computer-generated character. As journalist Eric Chang notes in *Vogue*, Lil Miquela is simultaneously an “Instagram It-girl” and a “digital simulation,” embodying the overlap between human celebrity culture and computational image production (Chang 2017).

This paper analyzes a specific PacSun campaign image featuring Lil Miquela, photographed by Mayan Toledano and published in *Vogue* (Figure 1), in order to examine how digitally constructed bodies can retain the visual authority of photography even in the absence of physical presence. At first glance, the image resembles a conventional fashion photograph: a young woman poses in a sunlit urban environment wearing branded clothing and framed according to the aesthetic conventions of influencer advertising. Yet, the subject of the image does not physically exist. Lil Miquela is a digitally rendered character composed into a photographic scene.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura, this paper argues that Lil Miquela’s images do not eliminate photographic authenticity but relocate it. Rather than emerging from the physical presence of a body before the camera, authenticity now arises from the continuity of a digital persona circulating across images, platforms, narratives, and forms of visibility.

Image Analysis - Simulating the Fashion Photograph

The PacSun image exemplifies this transformation particularly clearly. In the photograph, Lil Miquela stands on a sunlit sidewalk in front of a PacSun storefront. She wears a green

athletic outfit and sneakers, posing casually with her arms raised behind her head and one leg slightly bent. Compositionally, the image closely resembles contemporary street-style fashion photography commonly seen on Instagram, where influencers are photographed in urban environments to create the impression of a spontaneous moment. The image therefore immediately reads as a familiar form of fashion advertising.

Yet this familiarity is precisely what makes the image significant. The photograph relies on visual conventions viewers already recognize (relaxed posture, natural lighting, and an everyday urban setting) to signal authenticity. As John Berger notes, publicity images operate through a specialized “language in itself” or “sets of signs” that guide how viewers interpret what they see. Because we have become so “accustomed to being addressed by these images” that we accept them as an “element of climate” (Berger 1972: 138), we instinctively read structures like fashion photography as credible and “real” before questioning their construction.

A closer look reveals that these cues of authenticity have been carefully simulated. The casual pose, typically performed by a human model, has been digitally modeled. The body communicating confidence and effortlessness does not belong to a physical person but to a computationally generated figure. One of the most striking details reinforcing this illusion is the shadow cast by Lil Miquela onto the sidewalk. In traditional photography, shadows function as indexical traces, evidence that a physical object once interrupted light within the photographed scene. Here, however, the shadow has been digitally rendered to match the direction of sunlight in the photograph. It performs the visual role of a photographic trace without being produced by a physical body. The image therefore simulates the evidence of presence without recording any actual presence. This detail points to a broader transformation in the cultural meaning of photographic images. In earlier periods of photography, viewers approached photographs with the assumption that what they depicted must have existed at some point in front of the camera. The photograph functioned as a visual record of a past moment.

The PacSun image complicates that assumption. Lil Miquela has never physically stood on this sidewalk, yet the photograph appears entirely plausible. The image therefore asks a fundamental question about contemporary visual culture: if photographic realism can be produced computationally, what exactly are we looking at when we look at a photograph?

Digital Media - Photography After the Body

The effectiveness of the image suggests that the authority of photography may no longer depend primarily on physical presence. Instead, it depends on whether the image successfully reproduces the visual conventions through which viewers recognize photographs. Media theorist Lev Manovich argues that digital images are increasingly constructed through compositing and computational manipulation rather than direct recording of reality (Manovich 2001). The PacSun image reflects this shift: the urban environment is photographic, while the central figure is digitally generated. In other words, the PacSun campaign does not need a real body to function as fashion advertising. It only needs an image that behaves like a fashion photograph. The image performs photography visually, even if it is not fully photographic materially. In this sense, the PacSun image demonstrates how photographic realism can persist even when the ontological foundation of photography, its connection to a physical moment has disappeared.

Understanding this shift also helps explain why a brand like PacSun would find it advantageous to feature a virtual influencer. Unlike a human influencer, she is entirely controllable: her appearance, gestures, and environment can be precisely designed to match the aesthetic needs of a campaign. More importantly, her artificial nature generates curiosity and discussion, making the campaign more visible within a crowded and oversaturated digital media landscape. In this sense, Lil Miquela functions not only as a model but also as a commentary on the evolving nature of images themselves. By presenting a synthetic body within a photograph that otherwise appears ordinary, the PacSun campaign draws attention to the increasingly constructed nature of visual culture.

Benjamin - Aura and the Problem of Presence

These transformations can be understood through the framework developed by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*. Benjamin argues that traditional works of art possess what he calls an aura, which he defines as the unique presence of a work in a specific time and place (Benjamin 1936). Aura is tied to the artwork's singular existence, it's "here and now", which anchors it within a particular historical moment and physical location.

Benjamin's central claim is that modern technologies of reproduction, such as photography and film, fundamentally alter this relationship between art and presence (Benjamin 1936). When an artwork can be reproduced and circulated widely, its uniqueness becomes less significant. Technological reproduction allows an image to exist in many places at once, detaching it from the singular context in which it originally existed. As Benjamin famously writes, "what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura" (Benjamin 1936). The authority of the artwork therefore shifts away from its singular presence and toward its ability to circulate.

However, Benjamin emphasizes that photography still maintains an important connection to physical reality. Although a photograph can be reproduced endlessly, it originates from something that once existed before the camera (Benjamin 1936). The photographic image records the moment when light reflects off a real body or object, meaning that even reproduced photographs ultimately point back to an original presence. In other words, reproduction weakens aura, but the physical existence of the subject remains the foundation of the image.

Lil Miquela represents a significant shift from the framework Benjamin describes. She is not a reproduction of a physical model who once stood before a camera. There is no original body that exists prior to the image. Because of this, there is no physical "here and now" anchoring the photograph to a real presence.

This marks a crucial transformation. In Benjamin's framework, photography reproduces a body that once existed. In the case of Lil Miquela, the image does not reproduce presence but constructs it. The photograph no longer refers back to an original body; instead, it generates a body that exists only within the image itself.

At the same time, Lil Miquela complicates Benjamin's concept of aura in an unexpected way. In Benjamin's terms, she lacks aura because she has no singular material existence tied to a specific time and place. Yet despite this absence of physical uniqueness, she still functions culturally as a singular figure. Lil Miquela appears repeatedly across Instagram posts, advertisements, interviews, and brand collaborations. Her identity remains stable across these appearances, allowing viewers to recognize her as a continuous persona.

Rather than disappearing entirely, aura may therefore be undergoing a transformation. In Benjamin's framework, aura is tied to the physical presence of an artwork in a particular place and time (Benjamin 1936). In the case of Lil Miquela, uniqueness emerges through the persistence of a character across networks of images. Her cultural significance lies not in a single original object but in the continuity of her persona as it circulates across digital media. Aura shifts from material presence to narrative identity, from physical location to digital continuity.

Lil Miquela therefore reveals a deeper transformation in the nature of images. In Benjamin's time, technological reproduction weakened the aura of the original work (Benjamin 1936). In contemporary digital culture, however, images can be produced without any original physical presence at all. The relationship between image and reality is no longer defined by reproduction but by construction. Lil Miquela's images demonstrate how photographic authority can persist even after the physical foundation of photography has disappeared.

If Benjamin described the moment when images began to detach from the original artwork, figures like Lil Miquela mark a new stage in which images no longer require even an original body to begin with.

AI Culture - The Emergence of Algorithmic Images

The rise of fully AI-generated advertising further clarifies the historical position occupied by Lil Miquela. As Antonio Somaini argues, contemporary visual culture is increasingly shaped by what he calls "algorithmic images," images produced through computational processes rather than direct photographic recording (Somaini 2023). In recent years, AI image models have made it possible to generate entire scenes, bodies, and environments through text prompts alone. These images no longer depend on photography at any stage of their production.

Lil Miquela emerges at an earlier moment within this broader transformation. Her images are not produced through automated image-generation systems alone but through digital modeling and compositing combined with traditional photography. Real environments are photographed while her body is digitally rendered and inserted into those scenes. As a result, her images retain the visual language of photography while quietly abandoning its reliance on physical presence.

This transitional quality helps explain why Lil Miquela has been particularly successful as a virtual influencer. Since her introduction in 2016, she has accumulated millions of followers and collaborated with major brands including Prada, Calvin Klein, and PacSun (Chang 2017). Brands have increasingly experimented with virtual influencers because digital characters allow for greater control over branding, appearance, and messaging while also generating public curiosity and media attention (Sprout Social 2023). Seen in this context, Lil Miquela represents a bridge between two visual regimes. On one side lies traditional influencer photography, in which real bodies are photographed in real environments. On the other lies the emerging landscape of AI-generated advertising, where images can be produced entirely through algorithmic systems. Lil Miquela occupies the space between these regimes: her images look like photographs, circulate like photographs, and follow the conventions of photographic advertising, yet the central figure has never physically existed.

Since Lil Miquela's introduction, the rapid development of generative AI has pushed this transformation even further. Fully AI-generated influencers and advertising campaigns can now be produced without photography or manual digital compositing at all. Yet public responses to these images remain uncertain. While virtual influencers can attract attention and engagement, studies suggest that consumers remain sensitive to questions of authenticity and trust when brands employ artificial personas in advertising (Khalfallah 2025; Joel-Edgar et al. 2025).

In this evolving landscape, Lil Miquela occupies a distinctive position. Unlike many contemporary AI influencers designed to appear indistinguishable from real people, her creators have intentionally maintained a visible degree of artificiality. As one of her creators Ridhima Kahn (the vice president of partnerships for Dapper) explained in an interview, Miquela is intentionally "less photorealistic than other popular A.I. influencers," and it is purposeful that she remains recognizable as a digital character (Roy 2025). This transparency about her artificial nature allows her images to function differently from fully synthetic AI advertisements. Rather than attempting to conceal their digital construction, Lil Miquela's images openly reveal the hybrid condition of contemporary visual culture, in which photographic conventions persist even as the physical presence that once grounded them begins to disappear.

Circulation - The Network Life of Images

The circulation of images across digital networks has also transformed how images acquire cultural value. In “In Defense of the Poor Image,” Hito Steyerl argues that contemporary digital images often exist as what she calls “poor images,” degraded copies that have been uploaded, downloaded, shared, and reformatted across different platforms (Steyerl 2009). These images lose visual quality through compression and reproduction but gain new forms of visibility through their rapid circulation. Rather than existing as singular, high-quality artworks, poor images function as mobile objects that travel across digital networks. Influencer photography operates within this same economy of circulation. Images posted on platforms such as Instagram are frequently reposted, embedded in articles, and shared across multiple media channels. The PacSun image of Lil Miquela participates in this system of circulation. Its cultural impact does not derive from its uniqueness as a single photograph but from its ability to move through social media feeds, fashion media, and advertising platforms, accumulating visibility through repetition and distribution.

Conclusion

Lil Miquela ultimately reveals a broader transformation in how images function within contemporary visual culture. In traditional photography, the authority of the image depended on the existence of a body or object that once stood before the camera. The PacSun campaign suggests that this foundation may no longer be necessary. The image appears credible not because it records reality, but because it reproduces the visual conventions through which viewers recognize photography.

In this sense, Lil Miquela occupies a transitional position between photographic culture and the emerging landscape of algorithmically generated images. Her photographs retain the visual language of traditional fashion photography while quietly abandoning the physical presence that once grounded it. Authenticity therefore shifts away from the indexical trace of a body and toward the continuity of a digital persona circulating across images and platforms.

If photography historically promised a visual record of something that once existed, Lil Miquela raises a more uncertain question: what does a photograph mean when the subject has

never existed at all? And if images can now construct bodies rather than record them, is photography still a medium of documentation, or has it become a medium of simulation?

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