

# Exploring the Effectiveness of Virtual Influencers in Nostalgia Marketing: An Empirical Study

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## Abstract

In the era of influencer marketing, businesses increasingly prioritize virtual influencers (VIs)—computer-generated personas—over genuine influencers due to their capacity to engage audiences and drive actions. However, the effectiveness of VIs varies across different messaging strategies. This study explores the factors that enhance the impact of VI posts, specifically examining how the presence of another person in images influences consumer responses. Using a multimedia approach, the research analyzed thousands of social media posts with automated image and text tools, revealing that the inclusion of companions significantly boosts consumer trust and engagement. This psychological process, driven by trust, humanizes VIs, making their content more impactful. The study further connects these findings to nostalgia marketing, positing that integrating nostalgic themes with VI content can amplify emotional resonance and consumer responses. Employing a primarily quantitative methodology, the research highlights the practical benefits of nostalgia-driven campaigns, offering actionable insights for marketers and content creators. The results underscore the potential for VIs to increase consumer engagement, enhance brand loyalty, and drive sales when paired with nostalgia. This approach provides a strategic pathway for companies to optimize their social media content and achieve substantial marketing benefits.

**Keywords:** Virtual Influencers, Nostalgia Marketing

## Introduction

The advent of digital marketing has introduced innovative tools and techniques to engage consumers. Among these, virtual influencers (VIs) have emerged as a disruptive phenomenon, blending artificial intelligence with storytelling to promote brands. Unlike traditional influencers, VIs are computer-generated personas designed to simulate human-like interactions and appeal to diverse audiences (Smith & Brown, 2020). With their growing popularity, VIs are being used across industries to enhance consumer engagement and build emotional connections. One such strategy that complements VIs' capabilities is nostalgia marketing. Nostalgia marketing involves evoking fond memories and emotional connections by integrating elements from the past, such as retro fashion, vintage music, and childhood references (Brown & White, 2019). This strategy capitalizes on consumers' desire for comfort and familiarity, particularly in uncertain times (Nguyen & Rodriguez, 2023). The intersection of VIs and nostalgia marketing offers a unique opportunity for brands to create compelling narratives that resonate deeply with their audiences.

For marketers seeking to enhance their strategies, evaluating the efficacy of influencer marketing in the ever-evolving landscape of digital marketing is paramount (Williams et al., 2020). Gauging effectiveness necessitates a thorough analysis of pertinent performance metrics tailored to correspond with campaign objectives (Jones & Lee, 2018). Engagement measures, encompassing likes, comments, shares, and click-through rates (CTR), serve as invaluable indicators of audience interaction, illustrating the influence of the influencer's content (Smith & Johnson, 2017).

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This study investigates the effectiveness of VIs in nostalgia marketing campaigns. It examines how VIs influence consumer attitudes, behaviors, and purchase decisions through nostalgic themes. It also addresses the ethical considerations associated with VIs, focusing on transparency, authenticity, and cultural sensitivity (Thompson, 2018). By doing so, this research provides valuable insights for marketers seeking to optimize their digital marketing strategies.

## Research Objectives and Questions

The aim of this research is to explore the role of VIs in nostalgia marketing and their impact on consumer behavior. The specific objectives are:

- To analyze how VIs influence brand perception, emotional engagement, and purchase intentions.
- To identify effective strategies for evoking nostalgia in marketing campaigns using VIs.
- To assess the ethical considerations and challenges of using VIs in nostalgia marketing.
- To evaluate consumer responses to nostalgia-driven campaigns featuring VIs over time.
- To develop guidelines for ethical and effective implementation of VIs in nostalgia marketing.

The research addresses the following questions:

- How do VIs impact consumer attitudes and behaviors in nostalgia marketing campaigns?
- What strategies are most effective for evoking nostalgia through VIs?
- What ethical considerations should marketers address when using VIs?
- How do consumer perceptions of VIs evolve over time in nostalgia marketing?

The findings from this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on digital marketing, nostalgia marketing, and influencer effectiveness.

## Review of Literature

Nostalgia marketing has been widely studied as an effective strategy to evoke emotional engagement. It taps into consumers' personal and cultural memories to create positive associations with a brand (Anderson, 2016).

Studies have shown that nostalgic content improves brand recall, loyalty, and purchase behavior (Kumar et al., 2016). This emotional resonance makes nostalgia marketing a powerful tool for connecting with diverse audiences across generations (Brown & White, 2019). Virtual influencers, as a subset of digital influencers, represent a novel approach in marketing. Unlike human influencers, VIs can be precisely programmed to align with brand values and campaign goals (Smith & Brown, 2020). Research indicates that VIs are particularly effective in targeting younger demographics, who are more receptive to digital interactions (Garcia & Nguyen, 2019). By integrating nostalgic elements, VIs can craft engaging narratives that enhance emotional connections with consumers (Nguyen & Rodriguez, 2023).

## Nostalgia in Marketing

Nostalgia marketing is not limited to evoking memories; it also creates a sense of shared experience and cultural connection (Robinson & Taylor, 2017). For instance, retro fashion campaigns have successfully tapped into consumers' longing for past eras, while vintage music has been used to evoke a sense of familiarity and comfort (Johnson et al., 2019). Brands that effectively use nostalgia often combine it with modern elements to appeal to both older and younger audiences (Kumar et al., 2016).

## Virtual Influencers and Consumer Behavior

The effectiveness of VIs in influencing consumer behavior has been linked to their ability to simulate authenticity and trust (Chen, 2018). While some consumers may perceive VIs as artificial, their carefully curated personas can evoke strong emotional responses when combined with relatable content, such as nostalgia (Thompson, 2018). Studies have shown that VIs are particularly effective in driving engagement on social media platforms, where visual storytelling plays a crucial role (Garcia & Nguyen, 2019).

As defined by Chris Hinsch (2024), an innovative concept, Augmented Reality (AR) enhances the way in which consumers perceive the physical world by incorporating virtual content. Although previous studies have demonstrated that augmented reality (AR) can enhance marketing outcomes and inspire consumers, the precise

mechanisms by which AR inspires users remain poorly understood. This study dissects the relationship between augmented reality (AR) and inspiration, demonstrating the way in which psychological inspiration (inspired-by) corresponds to behavioural inspiration (inspired-to). By utilising the Lego Playground augmented reality (AR) application, the hypotheses that nostalgia and the “wow-effect” (awe) are significant mediators of the AR-initiated inspiration process are empirically examined. Although nostalgia completely mediates the connection between psychological and behavioural inspiration, the “wow-effect” does not appear to mediate this relationship in a significant way. This is the first study to demonstrate that inspiration develops in a granular fashion. The consumer is motivated to take action by the significant associations evoked by nostalgia; this comprehension could enable established brands to exploit latent nostalgia in novel augmented reality applications as a means to sway consumer conduct.

An examination of consumer reactions to nostalgic marketing is conducted by Ava Martinez (2023) using a research methodology that integrates sentiment analysis and surveys. The participant sample has been purposefully curated to encompass a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives. Nevertheless, this research has a constraint in its investigation of cultural subtleties: the potential influence of cultural differences on consumer reactions to nostalgia marketing is not thoroughly examined. The findings underscore positive correlations between nostalgia marketing usage and heightened consumer brand loyalty. However, while acknowledging these favourable outcomes, the research also highlights its limitations. Specifically, it points to the necessity for a more comprehensive examination of cultural variables and the potential for bias inherent in relying on self-reported sentiment in survey responses. These factors call for a nuanced interpretation of the results and underscore the imperative for further investigation to attain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between nostalgia marketing and diverse cultural contexts.

## Ethical Considerations

Despite their potential, VIs pose ethical challenges. Critics argue that their artificial nature can blur the lines

between authenticity and manipulation (Voskaite, 2020). Transparency about the non-human identity of VIs is essential to maintaining consumer trust. Additionally, marketers must ensure that nostalgic content does not exploit sensitive cultural or historical themes, as this could lead to backlash (Thompson, 2018).

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive research design to explore the role of VIs in nostalgia marketing. A positivist philosophy underpins the research, emphasizing objective analysis through empirical data. The deductive approach allows for testing existing theories and generating practical insights.

### Data Collection

Primary data were collected through an online survey administered to 300 participants aged 18 and above. The survey included questions on engagement with VIs, perception of nostalgic themes, and ethical considerations. Secondary data were gathered from scholarly articles, industry reports, and case studies to provide contextual insights.

### Sampling Method

A simple random sampling method was used to ensure a representative sample. This approach minimizes bias and enhances the reliability of findings. Participants were drawn from diverse demographic backgrounds to capture varied perspectives.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical tools, including Excel, to generate charts and tables. Qualitative insights from open-ended responses were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and themes.

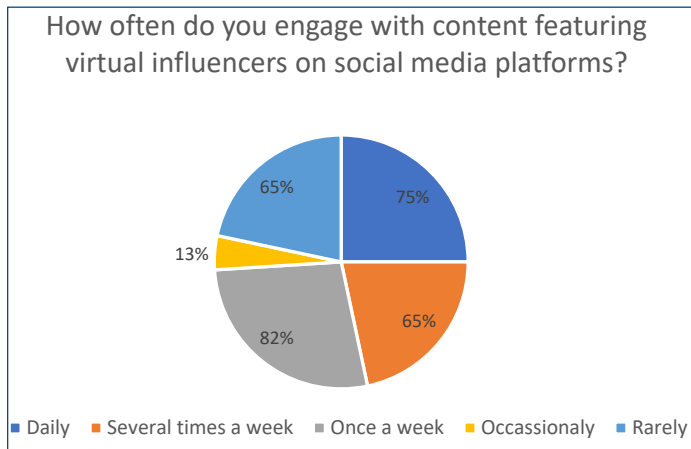
### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research practices, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity, and maintaining data confidentiality. Transparency about the study’s objectives was emphasized to build trust with participants.

### Data Analysis and Results

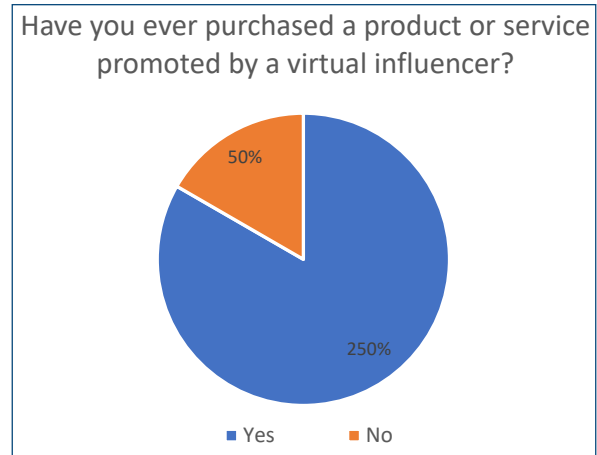
The survey results highlight several key findings:

- How often do you engage with content featuring virtual influencers on social media platforms?
  - Daily
  - Several times a week
  - Once a week
  - Occasionally
  - Rarely



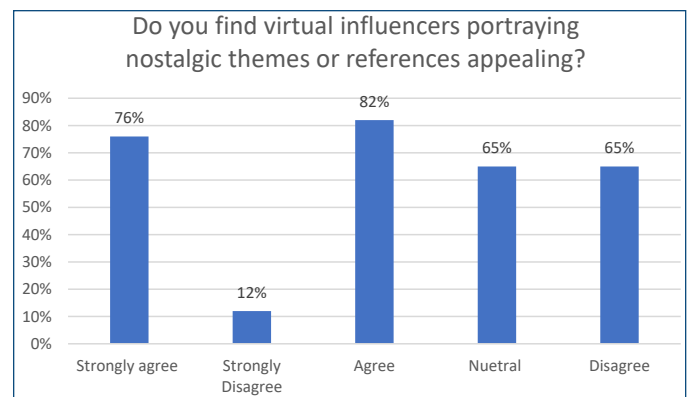
From the above explanation it is clear that 65% of the people engage in shopping after being influenced by the virtual content creators. These creators are who have become an integral part of the consumers lives and they account for 75% of the entire business marketing. On the other hand, 82% of the consumers are following the influencers once a week while 13% of them do it occasionally.

- Have you ever purchased a product or service promoted by a virtual influencer?
  - Yes
  - No



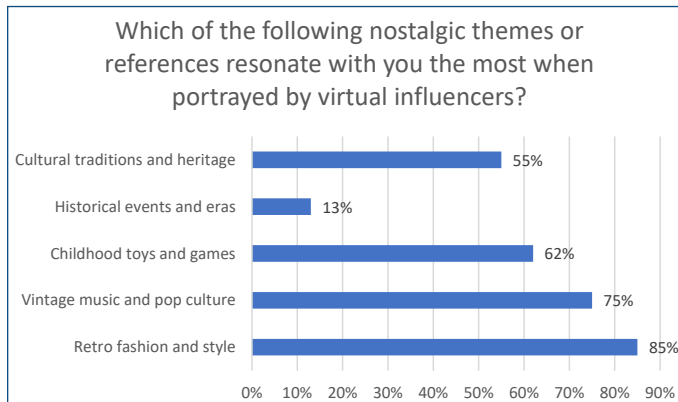
From the above explanation it is clear that 250 of the people engage in shopping after being influenced by the virtual content creators. While there are 50 people who do not engage in the product or service promoted by the influencers.

- Do you find virtual influencers portraying nostalgic themes or references appealing?
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree



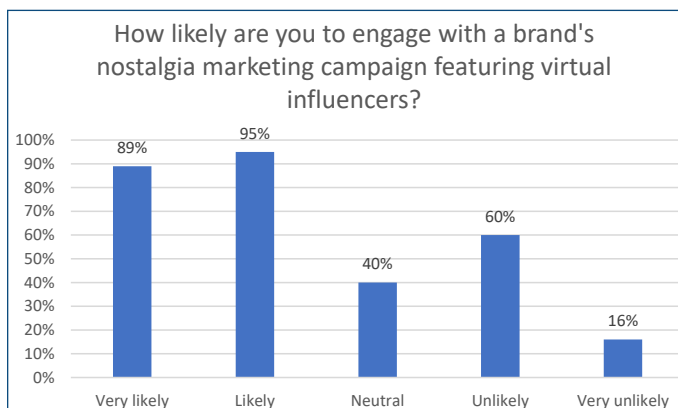
As per the respondent there are 76% who strongly agree with the facts that the nostalgic themes or references are appealing. On the other hand, there are 82% people who have agreed to the fact that the influence is more on them. 65% of the people are saying that they want to remain neutral. 65% of the people have been disagreeing with the fact that they do not find the nostalgic references appealing.

- Which of the following nostalgic themes or references resonate with you the most when portrayed by virtual influencers? (Select all that apply)
  - Retro fashion and style
  - Vintage music and pop culture
  - Childhood toys and games
  - Historical events and eras
  - Cultural traditions and heritage



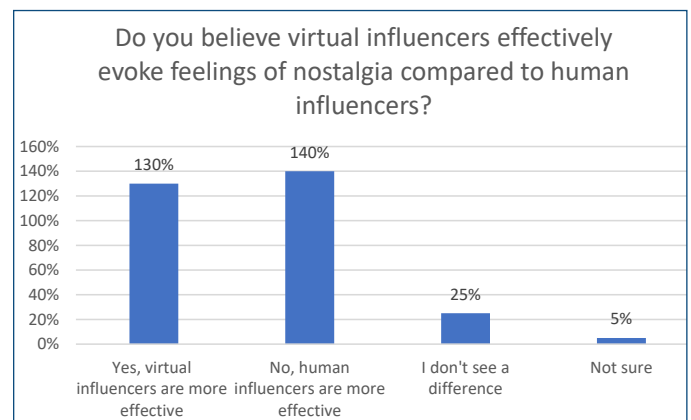
The retro fashion and style is the maximum influencing element and it is supported by 85% of the people. There are vintage music lovers who are continuing to become the 75% of the population supporting the fact. Historical events and eras, cultural traditions and heritage and childhood toys and games are supported by 62%, 13% and 55% respectively.

- How likely are you to engage with a brand’s nostalgia marketing campaign featuring virtual influencers?
  - Very likely
  - Likely
  - Neutral
  - Unlikely
  - Very unlikely



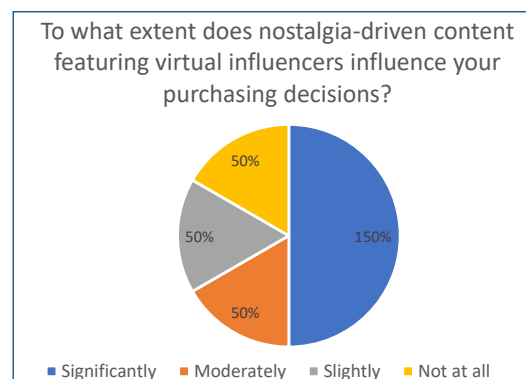
The brand’s are supposed to be engaged in the nostalgia marketing campaign where 89 people are finding it likely to be very likely to happen while 95 people find it likely to happen. 60 people thought it was unlikely to occur while 16 people thought it was very unlikely to happen.

- Do you believe virtual influencers effectively evoke feelings of nostalgia compared to human influencers?
  - Yes, virtual influencers are more effective
  - No, human influencers are more effective
  - I don’t see a difference
  - Not sure



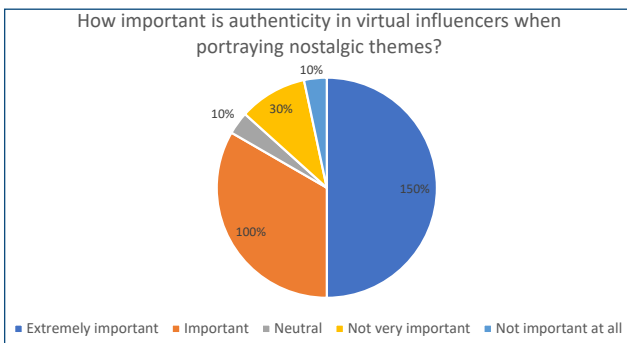
130% of the people have explained virtual influencers are more effective. 140% of the participants explain human influencers are more effective. The feeling is mixed as there are 25% of the people who don’t find any difference and 5% of them are not sure.

- To what extent does nostalgia-driven content featuring virtual influencers influence your purchasing decisions?
  - Significantly
  - Moderately
  - Slightly
  - Not at all



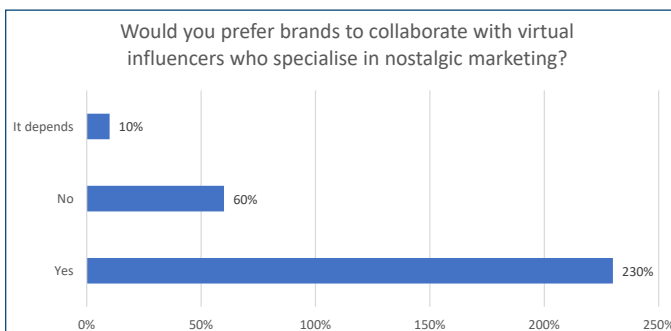
From the above chart it is seen that approximately 150% of the participants are finding it significantly effective while 50% of them are moderately effective and another 50% of the population finds it as slightly effective.

- How important is authenticity in virtual influencers when portraying nostalgic themes?
  - Extremely important
  - Important
  - Neutral
  - Not very important
  - Not important at all



When the virtual influencers are portraying nostalgic themes it allows them to keep a track of the authenticity. 150% of the people are saying it is extremely important to portray nostalgic themes. 10% of the people explain that they want to stay neutral on the statement. 10% of the people are thinking that nostalgic theme portraying is not important at all.

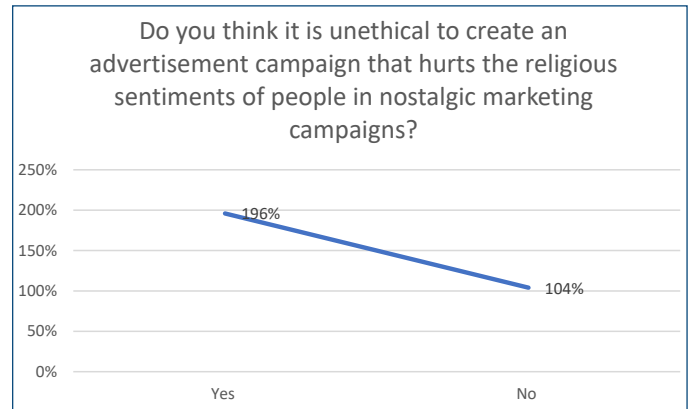
- Would you prefer brands to collaborate with virtual influencers who specialise in nostalgic marketing?
  - Yes
  - No
  - It depends



230% of the people responded as yes. 60% of the people said no to the respondents. Only 10% of the people explain

that it depends whether they prefer the collaboration of specialising in nostalgic marketing.

- Do you think it is unethical to create an advertisement campaign that hurts the religious sentiments of people in nostalgic marketing campaigns?
  - Yes
  - No



There exists a hefty 196% of the people who have explained that it is important to create an advertisement campaign that do not hurt the religious sentiments of the people in nostalgic marketing campaigns.

## Discussion

The following things can be considered when analysing the efficacy of virtual influencers in the context of nostalgia marketing:

*Authenticity versus Artificiality:* The authenticity of virtual influencers is one of the primary concerns. Although lacking personal experience, these creations can be meticulously crafted to elicit particular sentiments linked to nostalgia. Nevertheless, certain consumers might regard virtual influencers as contrived and scrutinise the authenticity of their sentimental allusions.

*Appeal to Emotions:* The foundation of nostalgia marketing is establishing emotional bonds with consumers. By incorporating references to historical cultural landmarks, virtual influencers have the ability to evoke sentiments of nostalgia in their audience. The efficacy of this methodology is contingent upon the virtual influencer’s capacity to establish a connection with the intended audience and their common cultural encounters.

The implementation of virtual influencers signifies an unprecedented and pioneering strategy in the realm

of marketing. In a congested marketplace, brands can distinguish themselves and attract the interest of consumers by utilising cutting-edge technology. Consumers who are sceptical of the concept of virtual influencers may still be enticed and interest generated in a product or brand by the novelty factor alone.

*Target Audience:* Depending on the target audience, the efficacy of virtual influencers in nostalgia marketing may vary. Younger age groups, who have greater familiarity with digital interactions and virtual encounters, might exhibit greater openness towards virtual influencers. With stronger emotional connections to traditional forms of media and advertising, older consumers may be more sceptical or resistant to this strategy.

The efficacy of nostalgia marketing is contingent upon the careful curation of culturally significant allusions that deeply resonate with the intended demographic. In order to resonate with their audience's sentiments of nostalgia, virtual influencers are required to meticulously regulate the content they publish. A comprehensive comprehension of past popular media, cultural trends, and historical events is essential for this endeavour.

Ethical considerations arise in relation to the utilisation of virtual influencers, specifically in the context of nostalgia marketing. Critics contend that virtual influencers have the potential to obscure the distinction between genuineness and deceit, thereby producing consumer misinformation regarding the authentic essence of the influencer-brand alliance. To preserve their audience's faith and esteem, brands must be forthright regarding the synthetic nature of virtual influencers. In summary, the efficacy of virtual influencers in nostalgia marketing is contingent upon their capacity to genuinely elicit sentiments linked to bygone eras, establish a connection with the intended demographic, and adeptly manage the ethical implications that arise from their implementation. Virtual influencers present a unique and inventive marketing strategy; however, their efficacy is contingent upon the genuineness of their evocative allusions to the past and the openness of their collaborations with brands.

## Recommendation

Based on the results of the study one can follow certain measures that allow leveraging the successful strategies of nostalgia marketing. These are:

*Knowing the Audience:* Do a lot of market research to find out about the age, gender, interests, and things that make people emotional that are in your target audience. Make sure that the material your virtual influencer posts is relevant to their culture and the memories they share from the past.

*Authenticity is Key:* Even though they are made by a machine, virtual influencers should try to seem real and approachable. Don't just use general or stereotypical references to the past; instead, use real nostalgic references that hit home with your audience.

*Create Compelling Narratives:* Coming up with interesting stories that make people feel something and help you connect with them. One can make your virtual influencer's content more interesting and remembered by adding nostalgic elements that flow naturally into the way they write.

*Maintain Transparency:* Being clear about how fake virtual peers are and how their brand partnerships work. If you want to keep the audience's trust, being clear about any sponsored material or advertising links.

*Focus on High-Quality Content:* Spending money on making high-quality content to make sure that your virtual influencer's messages look good and are delivered properly. The nostalgia marketing efforts will work better if one pays close attention to the details in the story, the animation, and the way things look.

*Use Multichannel Distribution:* To get the most impact and engagement, sharing their virtual influencer's content on a number of different digital channels. One can connect with the target audience online wherever they are by using social media, websites, blogs, and other related channels.

*Measure and Analyse Performance:* Use powerful analytics tools to keep an eye on how your nostalgia marketing efforts with virtual influencers are doing. Keeping an eye on measures like engagement rates, brand sentiment, and conversion rates to see how well the efforts are working and find places where one can improve them.

*Stay Relevant and Flexible:* Staying up to date on current cultural and societal changes that could affect how people feel about nostalgia and what they want to buy. Always make changes to the virtual influencer's material so that it stays relevant and fits the tastes of the audience as they change.

*Try New Things:* When marketing people are selling nostalgia, they should not be afraid to try out new ideas and new ways of doing things. Try out different unique ideas, ways of communicating, and “virtual influencer” characters to see what works best with the target audience.

*Put Ethical Considerations First:* When a company is doing marketing work, one should always put ethical concerns first, especially when the person is talking about sensitive themes like nostalgia. When a person interacts with customers, be honest and respectful, and don’t post anything offensive or disrespectful. A person should also value different cultures.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of VIs in nostalgia marketing, highlighting their ability to foster emotional engagement, influence consumer behavior, and build brand loyalty. The utilisation of nostalgia marketing strategies by virtual influencers has the potential to augment brand recall and recognition among consumers. Through the establishment of connections between brands and nostalgic experiences or cultural allusions, virtual influencers have the ability to forge enduring associations that enhance the probability of consumers recalling and identifying the brand at a later time. Researchers may investigate the efficacy of virtual influencers in the realm of nostalgia marketing with respect to various demographic cohorts. Younger generations who have been raised in the era of digital technology may readily adopt virtual influencers, whereas elder demographics who have more established connections.

In its entirety, an exhaustive examination of the efficacy of virtual influencers in nostalgia marketing would yield significant knowledge regarding the intricacies of contemporary digital advertising strategies as they pertain to consumer behaviour, emotional involvement, and brand perception. These findings may contribute to the ongoing evolution of advertising practices in the digital era and inform the decisions of marketers.

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