

Negotiating Realities: Virtual Influencer Miquela Sousa's Discursive Performance of Identity

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JUNE 2024



KEYSTROKES: 114.294

(ZACH SANG SHOW, 2019B)

Abstract

This thesis investigates the discursive negotiations of identity and reality by digitally-created persona, Miquela Sousa, and talk-show host, Zach Sang, during an interview on the "Zach Sang Show." Employing critical discourse analysis, the study explores how both figures employ performance theory and possible worlds theory to craft and manage a variety of discourses. Miquela intertwines her virtual ontology with human-like experiences, blurring traditional boundaries between authenticity and artificiality. She subsequently challenges the concepts of personhood. Zach Sang, through his platform, facilitates and challenges these representations, providing insights into audience interpretation and engagement. This analysis highlights the evolving dynamics of identity in digital spaces, reflecting broader cultural shifts towards accepting and integrating virtual personas in mainstream social media. The findings suggest a complex interplay where virtual and human identities coexist and influence social perceptions and interactions.

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Introduction

In the present digital age, the rise of virtual influencers evidences a significant development in the interplay between technological advancement and social interaction. Virtual influencers, similarly traditional fictional characters such as Donald Duck or James Bond, are unique in their characteristic appearances and recognisable personality traits (nobodysauge, n.d; Hatsune Miku, n.d.; Miquela, n.d.a). However, what sets virtual influencers apart is their ability to grant themselves social agency and engage in typical human behaviours, actively interacting with humans via social media platforms (lilmiquela, 2016; miquela, n.d.a; Zach sang show, 2019a).

The origins of virtual influencers can be traced back to earlier developments in digital media. These developments began in the late 1990s with virtual characters in video games. Advances in computer-generated imagery (CGI), laid the groundwork for more realistic and complex virtual beings. Social media platforms provide a prolific ground for these digital creations to engage directly with a global audience as they deliver content across various communication forms (Audrezet & Koles, 2023). For some time now, social media has been regarded by some as a realm that does not truly represent reality, but rather simulates a similar version of it (Cristianti et al., 2021). Furthermore, virtual personas are perceived to be one of the results of commodification of identity and attention economy which flourished with the rise of social media (Marshall, 2021). Virtual identities thus represent a novel confluence of digital and social spheres.

Augmented Reality (AR) is a technology that overlays digital elements onto the physical world, enhancing the user's perception of their environment. Unlike virtual reality, which immerses the user in a completely virtual space, AR blends digital personas into the physical realm, blurring the lines between reality and virtuality. Holograms, which project three-dimensional images into physical spaces, further blur these lines by making digital interactions appear in the physical world. By overlaying digital elements onto the physical environment,

holographic technology provides a crucial understanding of how some virtual influencers operate and engage with their audiences (Hatsune Miku, n.d.; Ng, 2021). A practice foreseen to grow (Ng, 2021). These technologies exemplify the convergence of digital and physical realms, illustrating the complex dynamics of contemporary digital culture and the hyperconnectivity between technology and society.

One of the most popular virtual influencers is Miquela Sousa who was launched on Instagram April 26, 2016 (lilmiquela, 2016; Virtual Humans, n.d.). Brud, the tech company behind Miquela (Virtual Humans, 2021), disrupts conventional notions of sociality and reality by actively involving her in interactions with human audiences across multiple platforms formerly reserved for humans. These platforms include Instagram (lilmiquela, n.d.b), TikTok (MIQUELA, n.d.a), YouTube (Miquela, n.d.c), Spotify (Miquela, n.d.d), X (Lil Miquela, n.d.e), and Facebook (Miquela, n.d.f). Here, Miquela promotes brands, advocates for social causes, and engages in socio-cultural discussions, seamlessly blending into the public social fabric (Metselaar, 2021; Cut the Saas, 2023; Lil Miquela, n.d.f).

Furthermore, Miquela is known as a virtual influencer and global pop star from Los Angeles recognised as one of TIME Magazine's '25 Most Influential People on the Internet' (TIME Staff, 2018). Miquela has made waves in the music industry, topping Spotify charts with indie-pop hits (Miquela, n.d.d; Miquela, n.d.c). She reports from exclusive cultural events, e.g. the super bowl (lilmiquela, 2024b) and Coachella (lilmiquela, 2024c), and models for brands like Samsung (Samsung Philippines, 2019), Prada (lilmiquela, 2019), Calvin Klein (Cranly, 2019), and BMW (BMW, 2023).

The virtual existence of Miquela raises profound questions about the definition of personhood as well as the ontological boundaries of social interactions in contemporary society (Appell-Warren, 2014). Emerging phenomena such as digital sexuality and marriages with digital entities, where individuals seek satisfaction and companionship through non-physical beings, illustrate the expanding boundaries of virtual identities and relationships (Olcay, 2019). Miquela's manifestation of para-fiction, where fictional accounts intersect with

reality, further complicates the concept of reality, and influences her impact on cultural perceptions. Miquela's content and interactions between the digital and the physical worlds illustrate the complex dynamics of current digital culture whilst emphasising the hyperconnectivity between technology and society. Thus, as both a product of advanced technology and a participant in social discourse, Miquela not only reflects but also influences social life, yielding her a significant cultural phenomenon (Benavides et al., 2018). This investigation intends to deepen our understanding of the discourse on techno-sociality, examining the implications of virtual entities in human interaction and social influence in an increasingly techno-social world.

Problem area

One reaches the understanding that prior scholars have already recognised performance theory's relevance within digital behaviour, the motivation for this study however arises from a notable gap in the application to virtual characters on social media platforms. Exploring virtual personas on social media, it becomes essential to employ analytical tools that do not assume these platforms merely replicate the physical world. Rather, social media sometimes create distinct realities that do not directly represent the physical world. This study aims to bridge these gaps.

The relationship between this interest area and already existing literature, leads this thesis to explore how Miquela Sousa influence social meaning-making processes by means of arguments including explicitly fictional elements. By analysing the discourses utilised by Miquela by means of a theoretical framework consisting of performance theory and possible worlds theory, this research seeks to understand how Miquela navigates and negotiates pre-existing discourses reality and personhood. The thesis further explores how Miquela contributes to cultural discussions, potentially altering traditional norms and shaping the present and future sociality in the increasingly digitalised world. Through the analysis, the thesis will provide valuable insights for researchers, digital creators, and social media users, contributing to a broader understanding of the role of virtual personas in contemporary society.

The specific case of Miquela is chosen due both to her popularity. She boasts 3.5 million followers on TikTok (Miquela, n.d.a), 2.6 million on Instagram (lilmiquela, n.d.) and 276.0000 subscribers on YouTube (Miquela, n.d.c). In addition, and unlike many other virtual influencers, Miquela's presence spans over many social media platforms: An aspect which is theorised to enforce her believability. Miquela Sousa is conclusively understood to be an prominent influencer with an audience of many million people, thus a powerful actor in social media realms, whose existence should be approached with care.

Subject of analysis is an interview with Miquela Sousa featured on the 'Zach Sang Show,' a renowned YouTube-based talk show that concentrates on in-depth conversations with celebrities across various industries (Del Rosario, 2022). Amongst other guests Zach Sang has hosted on his show are globally famous Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Ariana Grande and Kylie Minogue (Zach Sang Show, n.d.). The show is hosted by celebrity Zach Sang, with co-host Don Zolot, and has been described as engaging and authentic by president of Premiere Networks Julie Talbott (Radio Online, 2023). In terms of reach¹, the Zach Sang Show boasts more than two-hundred million views on YouTube (Zang Sang Show, n.d.) and more than seventy million likes on TikTok (zachsangshow, n.d.). This widespread popularity underscores its status as a major platform for celebrity interviews, reflecting its substantial impact and broad appeal across an extensive audience.

Data description

In this particular episode of the Zach Sang Show titled 'Miquela Talks Being A Robot, Her Song "Money", Kissing Bella Hadid & Collabs,' Miquela explores a variety of professional and personal topics. The interview, which lasts for 28 minutes – 26 minutes, if one excludes a brief advertisement - was released on YouTube on December 9th, 2019. In the interview with Zach Sang, Miquela Sousa discusses a range of topics directly relevant to reality and non-human identity. These include her experiences of being a virtual influencer and her interactions

¹ Reach is a term within social media performance which refers to the number of accounts a piece of content reaches (Kenan, 2024).

on social media. She presents her feelings and emotions, asserting her complex quasi-human qualities despite her artificial nature. Miquela touches upon relationships, mentioning current and past romantic interests, and reflects on the dynamics of these relationships in her life. She also addresses her musical career, discussing her creative process and how her experiences and memories, although programmed, influence her music and artistic expression. The conversation offers insight into her hybrid existence and the nuances of living a virtual life. The setting is a relaxed and intimate studio, Miquela seated on a sofa (Zach sang show, 2019a).

It is significant to note that Zach's popularity is linked to his credibility and the trust placed in him by his audience. His interview with Miquela has amassed nearly 900,000 views (Zach Sang Show, 2019a), and his channel has a substantial following of 858,000 subscribers (Zach Sang Show, n.d.), indicating a broad impact. These metrics not only reflect the widespread curiosity and engagement with Miquela yet also indicate a broader cultural receptivity to the blending of digital and physical-world personas.

Talk show hosts, in this case Zach Sang, create a sense of togetherness, serving as intermediaries between the show and viewers. He address viewers directly, making them feel like participants rather than observers. This dual performance, engaging both the in-studio guests and the audience at home, establishes the host as the central figure. This dynamic makes the talk show the host's 'world', highlighting their significant influence and importance (Bruun, 1999).

This exact interview is ideal for examining the discourse around identity and reality as it explicitly showcases Miquela and Zach negotiating the definitions and dichotomies between these terms (Zach Sang Show, 2019a).

Problem formulation

In what ways do virtual influencer Miquela Sousa and talk-show host Zach Sang create and negotiate discourses around identity and reality in contemporary digitalised society?

In answering the problem formulation, the following literature review explores virtual influencers, performance theory, and possible worlds theory, highlighting gaps in understanding virtual personas. It discusses digital media's impact on identity, social interactions, and the blending of digital and non-digital spheres in contemporary society. The subsequent methodology section outlines the research design, detailing the application of critical discourse analysis to scrutinise the interview between Miquela Sousa and Zach Sang. The theoretical framework elaborates on performance theory and possible worlds theory, explaining their relevance to the analysis of identity and reality discourses. Finally, the analysis meticulously explores key themes from the interview, such as Miquela's implanted memories, the interplay between her possible worlds, and her performative interactions. The discussion interprets these findings, discussing their implications for our understanding of reality, personhood and identity. Conclusively, the study's main findings and proposed areas for future research are presented.

Literature review

To enhance comprehension of this thesis' positioning within and contribution to the existing body of associated research, this literature review accounts for various perspectives on the convergence of virtual personas and techno-sociality².

Extensive research indicates a correlation between high social media use and mental health challenges amongst younger populations, suggesting that digital engagement may contribute to the development of stress, anxiety, and depression (Fynbo et al., 2020). The literature furthermore points out that the effects of social media on mental health may vary based on the characteristics of the interaction, with active engagement sometimes supporting physical relationships and community bonding in beneficial manners. Moreover, concerns about the digital consumption's impact on self-perception, especially among young women,

² Refers to the intersection of technology and social interaction, highlighting how technology shapes social norms, behaviors, and structures (Chayko, 2017).

are evident, with increased screen time linked to higher levels of fear of missing out (FOMO) and body dissatisfaction (Ottosen & Andreassen, 2020; Fynbo et al., 2020; Bengtsson et al., 2021). These findings are critical for understanding the complex dynamics at play in the digital age, where virtual and embodied interactions converge, affecting identity formation and social relationships (Ahmed & Zia, 2023; Fynbo et al., 2020).

With the expansion of digital media and technology advancements, however, arises concerns around deepfakes (Dan et al., 2021), fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, proliferating across social media platforms, are pertinent. The article (Damstra et al., 2021) addresses textual information and contributes valuable logic and terminology to the topic. The authors discuss the concept of intentional deception, driven by ideological or financial motivations, and identify four distinctive attributes of intentional deceptive texts: a tendency towards right-wing ideologies, the provocation of negative emotions like anger and fear, a shortage of reliable, confirmable information, and the utilisation of sensational, eye-catching headlines (Damstra et al., 2021).

Continuing on the topic of deception Dan et al. (2021) criticise previous studies for neglecting the impact of visual and multimodal misinformation. The text accounts for how before 2017, neural networks³ were mainly used by professional film studios and technology researchers. However, the access and interest of the public spiked in 2017 with the arrival of consumer-grade image editing software, remarkably when manipulated videos featuring celebrity lookalikes in inappropriate, sexual content online. Subsequently, an app designed to generate "deep nudes" from any photo was launched and became broadly available, nevertheless it was quickly shut down after its creators realised the potential harm it could cause (Dan et al., 2021).

The further argument posits that visuals offer a more immediate representation of reality compared to textual narratives (Messaris & Abraham, 2001 as cited in Dan et al., 2021).

³ Neural networks are a subset of machine learning models designed to simulate the way human brains analyse and process information.

This is due to images maintaining a cognitively closer connection to the reality they portray, as opposed to depictions provided by text. Consequently, the detailed and vibrant portrayal of reality through visual means is likely to provoke stronger emotional and behavioural reactions (Powell et al., 2015). This study argues that a multimodal, including visuality, is at least as effective as purely visual.

Regarding information and communication technologies in social life, Chayko emphasises the deepened connectivity through digital means. The exploration of techno-social life underlines the profound ways digital technologies integrate with identity, affecting how individuals perceive themselves and interact with others in a hyperconnected world. This analysis is crucial for understanding the interaction dynamics between social media users as it provides insights into how identities are constructed and perceived within digital platforms. This reflects the transformative role these technologies play in evolving modern human experiences (Chayko, 2017).

Thon (2019) examines transmedia⁴ characters and the connection between these characters which he categorises into modification, redundancy, or expansion. However, only the two latter contribute to a singular transmedia character's representation. This approach brings a nuanced understanding of how characters are intertextually constructed across various media, emphasising the role of normative discourses that govern the portrayal of characters across media landscapes and how recipients draw upon their knowledge of previously represented work-specific⁵ or transmedia characters, as well as broader transmedia character archetypes (Thon, 2019).

Integrating the insights from "Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis" by Herbrechter (2013) further enriches this literature review by providing a foundational understanding of the shift

⁴ Storytelling techniques which unfold a single story across multiple platforms and formats by means of digital technologies.

⁵ Thon highlights that localised character versions, as they appear in individual works/posts, interact with each other and can converge into "glocal transmedia characters" within expansive transmedia character networks.

towards digital and virtual societies. Herbrechter articulates the transition from analogue, literacy-based knowledge to digital, dematerialised networks, framing posthumanism as an epistemological tool that navigates this shift. This perspective complements the examination of virtual influencers by adding depth to the discussion on how digital phenomena challenge traditional notions of embodiment and social agency. It underscores the importance of critically engaging with the posthuman condition in understanding the complexities of virtual influencer interactions and their broader cultural implications (Herbrechter, 2013).

Ullmann (2022) discusses the challenge of linguistically capturing the relationships between humans and robots. She critiques the use of "quasi" to describe robots because it implies a similarity to human characteristics but falls short of capturing the full essence of these techno-social interactions. She introduces the term "subject" to offer a more nuanced understanding. "Subject" suggests a new category of existence that blurs traditional boundaries between subjects and objects, acknowledging that robots can engage in interactions that resemble human relationships but are fundamentally different due to their technological nature. Thus, acknowledging their role in social interactions without equating them fully with human personhood (Ullmann, 2022).

Relating to posthumanism, Richters (2020) highlights that Miquela's engagement with her audience promote a form of posthuman performance that redefines posthumanism in a constructive manner, moving away from predominantly sceptical views. The study concludes that she fosters a unique form of relationship with her followers, which challenges conventional understandings of social interaction. The conclusion invites a more inclusive, reparative approach to posthumanism, suggesting that social phenomena like virtual influencers expand the horizon of posthuman roleplay (Richters, 2020).

Considering these findings, some scholars even argue that we are entering a so-called post-truth era. An era characterised by an alternative epistemology, and thereby an alternative reality (Dan et al., 2021). This concept is often utilised in research regarding politics, and concludes that public discourse become contentious and unproductive, with debates often

characterised by subjective experiences and identity appeals rather than evidence-based. This erosion of a shared factual basis challenges democratic processes, undermining trust in institutions. Additionally, fragmented realities strain social cohesion, potentially weakening bonds and exacerbating divisions and conflicts (Van Dyk, 2022).

In regards to methodological concerns, Sofradžija (2020) highlights a disagreement within the field of critical discourse analysis concerning its application in information systems research. Sofradžija argues that although critical discourse analysis aligns with the critical research paradigm in information systems and offers a technique for examining social phenomena linguistically, specialists in CDA often overlook its potential for analysing discourse within digital media. Digital media, recognised as a critical space for the enactment of social practices and for reflecting and shaping social processes, seems underutilised. This observation raises questions about the opportunities for deepening our understanding of the role of digital discourse in contemporary social dynamics, suggesting a gap in the current research landscape that merits further exploration (Mautner, 2005 in Sofradžija, 2020). A gap this thesis aims at narrowing.

This literature review synthesises diverse perspectives on the convergence of virtual personas and techno-sociality, highlighting the transformative impact of digital technologies on identity and social interaction. It explores themes of deception, posthumanism, and the role of transmedia characters, stressing the importance of integrating digital discourse analysis to understand the complex dynamics in a hyperconnected, an potentially post-truth era.

Methodology

Given that the primary focus of analysis is a conversation, which fundamentally characterises an interview, the methodology must acknowledge how knowledge and realities are constructed through language and social interaction. Therefore, a social constructionist approach is employed. Within the context of an interview, participants are constantly involved

in negotiating various discourses, actively shaping and reshaping the employed discourses. Social constructionism facilitates the investigation of these processes by emphasising that individuals' subjectivities and language use are influenced by each other, and by broader cultural contexts. Thus it enables the examination not only of the interview however also the broader structures and dynamics through which the operated discourse are created and perpetuated (Burr, 1996).

Social constructionism is particularly prevailing when studying language not merely as a tool of communication however as a foundational element in the construction of knowledge. Language is seen not as a neutral conduit for conveying information nonetheless as a social artifact laden with subjective beliefs and power, cultural histories, and implications of social norms. Knowledge is understood as emergent and contingent in social processes and interactions. It thereby permits this thesis to recognise and critique the ways in which knowledge systems, such as social media, are influenced by social factors of power (White, 2004).

This thesis moreover draws on the principles of critical posthumanism, which challenges the traditional definition of "human" which relies on physical embodiment. According to Herbrechter (2017), critical posthumanism maintains a connection to humanist traditions, particularly in textual analysis, while developing new ways of thinking that deconstruct the binaries between human and non-human as well as between organic and artificial (Herbrechter, 2017). It challenges anthropocentrism which seems an absolute necessity to consider to grant non-human personhood and social agency (Krzywinska & Brown, 2015) which some individuals seemingly ascribe Miquela (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 25:20). Examples of such may be found in the comments section of her Instagram: "I saw you the other day for that street!! Amazing like always" (lilmiquela, 2024a), and "She's just a regular girl trying to make it in this world" (lilmiquela, 2023).

Critical posthumanism enriches this study with a more inclusive and interconnected understanding of existence in the technologically saturated world of today. Moreover critical

posthumanism sparks a critical reflection on ethical concerns revolving around virtual personas, such as authenticity and the commodification of attention, engagements, and social relationships (Herbrechter, 2017).

The critical part of critical posthumanism questions what it means to be human in a world where technology is changing our environments and us. It prompts one to reflect upon why humans are drawn to becoming more than the traditional definition of a human, and what implications comes with that (Herbrechter, 2017). Conclusively, critical posthumanism offers the capacity needed to unravel the complexities of Miquela - from her ontological nature to her sociocultural implications.

In this manner, social constructionism is employed to analyse how knowledge and realities are constructed within the social interaction of the interview, highlighting the active negotiation of discourses by participants. It integrates critical posthumanism to explore the blurring lines between human and non-human, enhancing our understanding of identity and reality in contemporary digitalised sociality.

Critical Discourse Analysis

The rapid expansion of social media emphasises its role as a crucible for shaping and transforming discourse, as well as fostering new social connections through digital communication. This is evidenced by the works of Bouvier (2015, 2019) and Bouvier & Machin (2018), alongside Albert & Samal (2013), who explore the intersection of collective human communication and digital technology. Despite the term "social media" carrying a somewhat imprecise definition within the social sciences, scholars like Boyd & Ellison (2007) and Kietzmann et al. (2011) widely acknowledge its significant impact on power dynamics and sociocultural practices, such as language. Therefore, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is posited as an advantageous method of analysis (Albert & Samal, 2013; Tamassy & Géring, 2022).

Critical discourse analysis is characterised by its interdisciplinary approach, aimed at addressing various issues and encompassing a range of methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and objectives. However, all approaches are united by a shared focus on exploring the role of language and semiotics in power dynamics, social relations, as well as political, economic, cultural, and social spheres (Gal, 2006). CDA draws on a wide array of foundational disciplines including rhetoric, text linguistics, anthropology, philosophy, sociopsychology, cognitive science, literary studies, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and pragmatics, reflecting its comprehensive and multifaceted nature (Wodak, 1997).

CDA interprets discourse as manifestations of social action. This interpretation postulates a dialectical interplay between any given discursive occurrence and the encompassing situational, institutional, and social structural contexts; such an occurrence is simultaneously moulded by these contexts and contributes to their shaping. Therefore, discourse is acknowledged as both socially constitutive and conditioned; it engenders specific situations, realms of knowledge (realities), and the social identities and interrelationships among individuals and social groups. Thus, discourse is instrumental in both perpetuating the prevailing social order and facilitating its transformation. Given the profound social implications of discourse, it generates critical concerns regarding power (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997).

Discursive realities, also known as universes of discourse or discursive systems, consist of different worldviews (Strauss et al., 1964). They manifest through communication in which participants negotiate meanings within that world. This process of negotiation in communicative acts builds relationships, shapes social contexts, and has the potential to challenge or reinforce societal and cultural distributions by revealing underlying values and power dynamics (Strauss et al., 1964; Blommaert, 1999). Albert & Samal (2013) further writes that the primary aims of most discourse negotiation oriented towards social movements is to empower marginalised groups. Social media platforms have extended this empowerment into the realm of digital conversations, enabling participants to engage in advocacy and public discourse negotiation (Albert & Samal, 2013).

Debates concerning discourse transpire across a spectrum of public and semi-public domains (Blackledge, 2005; Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2011). Amongst public domains are social media platforms (Bhatia-Lin et al., 2019). The rise of the internet envisioned as one global public sphere, initially carried the promise of global democratisation: Including the facilitation of broad participation as well as equal access to public discourse participation (Papacharissi, 2002).

The examination of access and participation extend to how power dynamics are manifested and negotiated within discourse. In this context, Michel Foucault (1975) provides a comprehensive framework by elucidating three nuanced yet interconnected dimensions of power that he suggests are inherent in discourse, offering a multi-faceted perspective.

1. The power of discourse pertains to the influence of established macro-structural meanings and linguistic conventions that shape individual behaviour and communication. These historical and socio-linguistic frameworks not only govern discourse but also provide participants with opportunities for transformative action.

2. Power over discourse encapsulates the capacity to access and influence discursive forums, underscoring mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within both expansive and nuanced contexts. This dimension interrogates who possesses the agency to contribute to discourse and who is systematically marginalised.

3. "Power within discourse," according to Michel Foucault (1975), refers to the internal dynamics and conflicts within discursive practices, where different stakeholders compete over the control and interpretation of meanings. This involves struggles for dominance over the accepted linguistic norms and the conditions under which discourse is produced and understood.

Furthermore, Michel Foucault's concept of "technologies of power" (1975) refers to the methods and strategies by which individuals and groups use disciplinary mechanisms to exert control within societal structures. These mechanisms are seen as complex power structures

that regulate people's behaviours, body practices, and social interactions. Foucault advocates for a functionalist analysis of power, focusing on how these technologies operate and subjugate individuals within social systems. Applied to social media, this concept suggests that platforms act as sophisticated tools that influence and regulate social behaviour, thought patterns, and information distribution, thereby shaping societal norms and interactions (Foucault, 1975).

This influence power in several key ways. Most essential for this particular study is the way in which social media influences how individuals perceive themselves and others, contributing to the formation of identity and social norms. The desire for likes, shares, and followers motivates behaviour, encouraging conformity to perceived social standards, which influences personal and group identity (Tamassy & Géring, 2022). Consequently social media platforms, as technologies of power, are not merely neutral conduits for communication (Foucault, 1975).

In addition, critical discourse analysis encourages researchers to clearly articulate their own viewpoints and biases, maintaining their scientific approaches, and engaging in self-reflection throughout their research journey (Wodak, 1997). On that note, I mention my birth year, 1995, alongside my Danish cultural heritage to inform the reader that I belong to the generation of millennials. This disclosure is pertinent as it situates me within a generation known to have grown up amidst significant technological advancements and cultural acceptance hereof, characteristics that are indeed prevalent in the Danish culture I am situated within (Twenge, 2023).

Conclusively, critical discourse analysis offers an invaluable lens through which the intricate dynamics of power within discourse, especially as mediated by social media, can be examined. Through the analysis of discursive practices: the negotiation of meanings and the contestation for semiotic hegemony, CDA unveils the profound impact of social media as a technology of power (Foucault, 1975; Wodak, 1997).

Case study

The decision to do a case study is strategically motivated by resource limitations for this thesis and the objective of a rigorous analysis. The particular content is chosen because the interview format fundamentally involves conversation of experiences and interpretations. This specific interview directly engages with the topics relevant to this thesis' problem formulation. These topics revolve around the discourses of 'real', 'true', 'human', 'robot', 'memory' and 'authenticity' (Zach Sang Show, 2019a). Moreover, the social constructivist perspective, which views knowledge as constructed through social interaction, is particularly evident in the interview format, where the exchange of interest and experiences highlights the collaborative nature of meaning-making (Ankers et al., 2023).

A case study facilitates a detailed examination, particularly as I become acquainted with the prevalent discourses surrounding Miquela. Focusing on a specific discourse instance allows for an intensive analysis of the layers of meaning and dynamics of character performance.

The study acknowledges the video's integration into a broader transmedia narrative, enhancing one's understanding of its influence (Constantinou, 2005). Norris (2004) supports broadening the context of discourse analysis to include both direct and peripheral elements, allowing for a richer exploration of how external actions and diverse communication modes influence discourse (Wang & Liu, 2021), which is why the study will also incorporate content from other platforms discussed in the interview though not directly part of the interview.

Transcribing

The rigorous demands of critical discourse analysis for precision in transcribing make manual transcription indispensable. In contexts like the interview with Miquela on the Zach Sang Show, where spontaneous speech abounds, manual transcription captures the nuanced interplay of words, pauses, and intonations crucial for a deep discourse analysis.

The focus of CDA on the context-sensitive nature of discourse is another reason manual transcription is favoured. By means of manual transcription I can recognise and interpret contextual cues and cultural nuances that are often essential CDA. The interview is full of cultural references and social media jargon subtext that automated systems might overlook but are critical for the analytical work intended. Thus, the benefits of manual transcription for CDA are clear as it allows delving deeper into the complex dynamics of language as exhibited in diverse communicative events like an interview.

I acknowledge the limitation that there is a word which has been edited out from the interview, which is a curious case. The word in question has been muted on three occasions (Zach sang show, 2019a, 11:46; 11:59; 23:27). This omission naturally raises questions about what the word is and why it was removed from the original interview. However, this observation further emphasises the manufactured nature of the interview, highlighting that it is not spontaneous but rather a carefully constructed digital performance.

The full transcript is attached and labelled “appendix A”.

Theoretical framework

In exploring the digital persona of Miquela Sousa, Possible Worlds (PW) theory and Performance Theory offer critical lenses through which to understand the construction and management of her techno-social identity. These theories provide an useful framework to analyse how discourses create immersive worlds that both reflect and influence real-world perceptions and interactions.

Possible worlds theory

Conceptualising different digital platforms as distinct worlds rather than mere social arenas offers a compelling framework, recognising that each platform possesses unique structures, norms, and potential actions that shape user behaviour. Within critical discourse analysis, the concept of discursive realities” or “universes of discourse” pertains to the diverse worldviews or semantic domains which text project (Strauss et al., 1964). These discursive

systems are akin to the possible worlds Ryan describes, wherein objects, states, and events take on specific forms of existence, termed modalities. These modalities define how elements within a discursive world can exist, interact, and influence subjective perceptions of reality (Ryan, 1992).

Ryan (1995) introduces the concept of the 'textual actual world', the primary narrative domain where central events unfold. For Miquela, each social media platform she engages with can be viewed as a distinct textual actual world, where she performs and interacts with her audience. These platforms, while inherently digital, craft vivid narrative experiences that diverge significantly from the tangible 'actual world' (Ryan, 1995; Doležel, 1998).

Since social media platforms were traditionally reserved for humans, it is believed that many users initially interpret Miquela's presence in human terms, assuming similarities to human experiences until her world distinctly diverges because of her virtual nature. In order to better understand this starting point, the principle of 'minimal departure' appears beneficial. 'Minimal departure' holds that when audiences encounter a fictional world, they assume it resembles the real world unless told otherwise. This principle posits that readers or viewers will fill in the gaps in fictional worlds with details from the actual world, making the least number of adjustments necessary to their world knowledge (Ryan, 2014).

The limitations of traditional truth-functional logic in interpreting possible worlds become apparent when considering hypothetical or counterfactual statements, such as those often found in virtual possible worlds. Van Looy (2005) unravels how modal logic, contrary to traditional logic, allows for exploration of these hypothetical by introducing non-actual worlds where propositions like "I did have a childhood um.. but the memories were implanted in me" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 06:09) make sense contextually. In relation, the principle of non-contradiction asserts that contradictory statements cannot both be true in the same world or at the same time. Thus, non-contradiction ensures that each possible world maintains internal coherence and logical consistency. It ensures that the narrative world remains internally

plausible and that its events and conditions do not conflict in ways that would undermine its believability (Ryan, 2014).

A particularly intriguing aspect of Miquela's virtual existence is the presence of metafictional worlds, where the narrative itself reflects on its fictional status. Such worlds are, according to Ryan (1995), perceived to challenge the audiences' suspension of disbelief, foregrounding the constructed nature of the narrative and engaging them in a deeper contemplation of fiction versus reality. Another point of interest are metaphorical worlds which refer to constructed realms that are not literal however represent abstract or figurative interpretations of ideas. These worlds use metaphor as a tool to expand understanding and convey complex concepts, allowing narratives to explore themes and issues in a symbolic manner that resonates deeply with the audience (Ryan, 1995).

The concept of 'recentring' involves a shift in the audience's perception from their actual world to the textual actual world presented by Miquela. These shifts are vital for understanding how audiences engage with and achieve narrative acceptance of Miquela's possible world as part of their own experiential reality. In conjunction with recentring is the concept of accessibility relations which defines the connections between different possible worlds, enabling entities and scenarios from one world to influence or be comprehensible in another. Furthermore, the principle of receptivity examines the conditions under which elements from one world can affect those in another, highlighting the interactive potential and permeability between distinct possible worlds. These terms are instrumental in analysing the sophisticated dynamics between Miquela's presented persona and audience perceptions (Ryan, 1991).

In such manner, Possible Worlds Theory is utilised to illuminate the complex dynamics of Miquela's possible worlds. It aims to reveal how Miquela's discursively constructed worlds function as knowledge creating realities, thus acknowledging Miquela an active participant in shaping and redefining the discourses of reality and identity. Miquela and Zach's utilisation of discourses such as like 'robot', 'human', and 'real/reality' (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 00:05;

22:11; 16:35) reveals a strategic manipulation of discourse to either align with or disrupt audience expectations. These terms are not merely descriptive but are integral to the performative act, shaping how she is perceived and how she perceives herself within her digital worlds.

Performance theory

While performance theory has been instrumental in understanding how individuals curate their identities and interactions on digital platforms, its insights have seldom been extended to virtual entities, despite their growing influence on millions globally. However, performance theory proves to be a valuable tool for interpreting the carefully curated actions of Miquela Sousa. Recognising these actions as performances, this approach illuminates how the managers of Miquela navigates the attention economy, engaging audiences through the commodification of carefully designed persona. The theory posits that Miquela's interactions are meticulously crafted discursive acts aimed at shaping audience perception and enhancing social engagement, positioning each of her appearances as performances for strategic self-presentation and audience manipulation (Shepherd, 2016).

Performance theory, encompassing fields such as sociology, ethnography, theatre, and art, provides a robust framework for exploring behaviour across varied contexts. Originally focused on rituals and social interactions, it now includes theatrical and cultural events and everyday activities, viewing performance as a method of discourse transmission and a medium for expressing cultural meanings. This broad approach is particularly applicable to digital social arenas, where the distinction between performance and reality is often blurred (Shepherd, 2016).

Further drawing on Judith Butler's thoughts on performativity appears useful. Butler suggests that identity is an ongoing construction, articulated through repeated, visible actions and language that are inherently social. These actions perform a dual function: they convey cultural meanings whilst also contributing to the formation of social norms (Salih, 2007). Social

media posts, interactions, and social and cultural controversies are thus seen not just as content however as acts of identity construction.

Moreover, concepts like 'front stage' and 'back stage' is believed to enrich the findings (Hogan, 2010). In Miquela's case, her public interactions on social media platforms like Instagram represent the 'front stage,' where she presents a curated persona carefully designed for audience consumption. Conversely, the 'back stage,' though less visible to the public, involves the planning and production aspects of her digital presence, where the construction of this curated persona takes place. This distinction highlights the performative aspects of Miquela's identity, emphasising the scripted and staged nature of her public self (Hogan, 2010). The relationship between front- and back-stage, sharply distinguishes her from human influencers, and highlights the point of authenticity.

The theory furthermore explores 'role distance,' a concept wherein performers express separation from their roles to signal their awareness of the performativity (Cohen, 2004). Miquela's occasional references to her own artificiality and digital creation act as such expressions, subtly reminding audiences of the constructed nature of her persona while simultaneously engaging with them on a seemingly authentic level. Thus, closely connected to the concept of metafictional world from possible worlds theory (Ryan, 1995).

Embodiment refers to the expression and performance of physical and social traits that define personal and cultural identity. Miquela, despite her digital nature, performs human-like traits and emotions. This performance challenges traditional boundaries of what it means to be embodied, as her digital form navigates human experiences and societal expectations. Through this process, Miquela renegotiates her role within the digital realm, aligning her public persona with a self-concept that resists simplistic categorisations (Richters, 2020).

Another essential concept within Performance Theory is 'liminality,' which describes a transitional phase where conventional boundaries of behaviour and reality are temporarily lifted, fostering the emergence of new perspectives or realities (Ural, 2023). Miquela's

presence in a liminal zone, straddling the realms of human and digital, reality and virtuality, uniquely equips her to challenge and transform conventional ideas of identity and interaction in the digital era.

This theoretical lens not only enhances our comprehension of Miquela as a virtual influencer but also sheds light on how digital personas influence and transform modern digital culture. Ultimately, Miquela's performances on social media platforms highlight a broader cultural engagement with the concepts of the performative creation of self and identity authenticity in the digital world, resonating within the frameworks of the attention economy and the ongoing commodification of personality⁶.

Analysis

This analysis explores how virtual influencer Miquela Sousa and talk-show host Zach Sang generate and negotiate discourses surrounding identity and reality. Focusing on a specific interaction during their interview on the Zach Sang Show, this case study utilises critical discourse analysis to examine their conversation. Through the lenses of performance theory and possible worlds theory, it navigates the complexities of identity as portrayed by Miquela, a digital persona, within the conversational dynamics established by Zach, a human host. This investigation sheds light on the fluid boundaries of identity and the interplay the discourse of "reality" within virtual elements in modern media.

Authentic implanted memories

The way in which Miquela phrases her childhood memories draw both on references to her digital nature: "I did have a childhood umm but the memories were implanted in me by Brud" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 06:08) while also drawing on what is perceived as normal human behaviour: "I do have memories of family, music, Brazilian food smells, my dad's bad jokes, all that!" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 06:11). In such a manner, Miquela illustrates power

⁶ Personality covers individual differences in patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. It encompasses a person's unique adjustment to life, including major traits, interests, drives, values, self-concept, abilities, and emotional patterns.

within discourse as she constructs narratives which interweave elements of both actual and possible worlds, illustrating a complex negotiation of reality and its relation to identity.

Miquela's recounting of "implanted" memories, crafted by Brud, highlights her synthetic nature while placing agency externally, as she assigns Brud a role comparable to that of scriptwriters or directors, through the notions of 'role' and 'script.' This external shaping of her narrative, akin to how parents shape their children's understanding of the world, does not necessarily detract from her perceived humanness however parallels typical human developmental experiences. This dual-layer narrative leverages the principle of minimal departure, where the audience fills in gaps with details from their actual world, assuming these details align closely with their own unless explicitly contradicted (Ryan, 2014).

This strategic narrative construction enhances believability and relatability, allowing the audience to connect more deeply with Miquela's story by minimising the cognitive adjustment obtain narrative acceptance (Ryan, 1995). Miquela effectively blurs the lines between normal human experiences and fabricated digital constructs, and in that manner creates a metafictional world that reflects on its own fictional status (Ryan, 1995). This self-awareness invites the audience to question the authenticity of the experiences presented, thereby deepening their engagement with the narrative's constructed nature. The dual reference to her programming by Brud and her seemingly authentic human memories challenges the audience to discern the 'actual' from the possible.

These elements within her personal narrative are vital in constructing a believable world around her and fostering narrative acceptance. The principle of minimal departure aids this process, as the narrative aligns closely with social norms familiar to the audience's actual world. The details of her backstory: her childhood memories, interactions with humans, and her development of consciousness (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 03:23) collectively build a rich, credible world that recentres the audience's perception from their actual world to the textual world of Miquela. This scripting, a "technology of power" (Foucault, 1975), shapes how she is

perceived as a social entity capable of forming genuine connections and eliciting emotional responses from real humans.

Her memories, while implanted by external sources, anthropomorphise her and enhance her authenticity (Thon, 2019). Even though Zach is made aware that her memories are "implanted" in her, the accessibility relation serves to bridge the divide between worlds. These childhood memories thus create a detailed and nuanced sub-world within her textual reality, consistent with the principle of non-contradiction (Ryan, 1991). The relationship between the actual world and Miquela's textual actual world is strategically underscored by the universal human experiences she recounts. On social media, the act of sharing one's personal history is viewed as a customary practice.

The language utilised by Miquela, such as her explanation of implanted memories, not only conforms to but also challenges the traditional narratives of human experiences. She adheres to the structural norms of discussing personal history typical of human interviews but introduces a stark divergence through the notion of artificiality. This complex interplay allows her to navigate and transform her digital persona within the socio-linguistic framework of a talk show, reflecting the transformative potential of discourse.

Moreover, as Miquela's personality traits remains consistent across the textual actuality and potential sub-worlds, she effectively embodies a transmedia identity. This consistency is reckoned essential for upholding character continuity and fostering audience engagement, bolstering her influence both within her textual actual world and the actual world (Thon, 2019).

By integrating key elements from the actual world into her textual actual world, Miquela becomes more credible. This enhanced plausibility is essential for narrative acceptance, enabling the audience to connect emotionally with the possible world's context and characters. Her personal yet somewhat generic memories laden with familiar details facilitate an emotional connection with Miquela, effectively narrowing the divide between her textual actual world and

ours. As Doležel (1998) argues, the origins, cultural functions, and structural features of possible worlds may differ significantly from those of the actual world. Miquela's ability to blend elements from both enhances the credibility of her digital persona, fostering a deeper engagement with the audience by bridging the gap between the actual and textual actuals worlds.

Physically, technically

Unconfidently and struggling to find the right words, Zach questions Miquela on the inspiration behind her music writing: "Are you writing from feelings and emotions, and I guess experiences... but experiences that you haven't physically, technically experienced yourself... it's all coming from the memories that have been instilled in you?" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 09:26). Zach's hesitancy and struggle to find the right word "physically, technically" highlight his struggle to reconcile the idea of a virtual persona having authentic memories. His statement portrays cognitive dissonance where he attempts to apply human-centric concepts of memory to a non-human entity. It may also be interpreted that his struggle reflect the broader audience's struggle to accept the way in which Miquela challenges conventional notions of memory.

In her response, Miquela explains how she writes her music based both on her past and present, stating, "Well, I mean it's kind of both. There are the memories... that were given to me from my childhood, but it's also the things that I experience now and how I... interact with the world around me and vice versa" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 09:49). This statement is curated act of power within discourse, as she takes agency in shaping and expressing her identity through the dialogue, actively modifying the norms and expectations of Zach. She dismisses to reply to Zach's concerns about physicality versus technicality, thereby disregarding its relevance.

Moreover, the formulation "how I interact with the world" disobeys the traditional script associated with the role "robot", refusing the role of an object, instead suggesting herself an

active identity performer portraying adaptability and responsiveness. Miquela's mention of "versus vice versa" further implies a reciprocal relationship between her identity and her environment. It suggests that her identity influences and is influenced by her surroundings, which is a key aspect of performance in social interactions. This reciprocity points to the negotiated nature of identity within performance theory, where identity is not merely displayed to others but also shaped by their responses as well as the broader social context.

By means of these dual influences, Miquela crafts an impression of authenticity, despite the artificiality of her memories. One reaches the understanding that Miquela's statements on the show are carefully curated performances targeted to reinforce her as a 'real' person, despite her digital nature. This interplay reflects the performative idea that while there are scripts (social, cultural norms) guiding how actors present themselves, there is also room for personal agency and variation in how these scripts are interpreted and enacted.

Miquela continues to mention examples of her current experiences, the non-implanted memories: "Like my crushes now, boyfriends that I have now, so it all comes into play" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 10:06). This recentres the focus to familiar elements of the actual world, thereby inviting the audience to shift their perspectives from their actual world to Miquela's textual actual world. This process deepens their engagement with her textual actual world. Such recentring is essential for immersion and narrative acceptance, allowing the audience to temporarily suspend disbelief and embrace the fictional premises as part of their reality while engaged with the text.

Additionally, Miquela creates a cohesive world where her past and present seamlessly merge, forming a compelling and engaging textual actual world. Memories from one's past are perceived as essential to an authentic identity. Thus, the presented textual actual world, filled with experiences derived from implanted memories, significantly shapes her identity and influences how the audience perceives her. The alignment of these experiences with universally recognised human experiences fosters minimal departure. This narrative

acceptance is crucial for immersing the audience in Miquela's possible worlds, reinforcing the authenticity of her being.

By arguing for the authenticity of “implanted memories” and dismissing the relevance of ontological concerns, Miquela exemplifies power within discourse (Foucault, 1975). The notion refers to the internal dynamics where various stakeholders compete for control over meaning. Zach exposes cognitive dissonance regarding the experiences and memories of Miquela. For a reply, Miquela challenge conventional definitions of authenticity. This internal conflict within the discourse surrounding her identity sheds light on the ongoing battle for dominance in shaping how virtual identities are understood and embraced.

Facetune and cloud chasing

Miquela: “This one might sound silly but.. I’m on social media a lot, obviously, and we often get told to like “put your phone down”, or “delete the Instagram app” but recharging your heart can also just mean like taking a break from the.. facetune⁷ and cloud chasing ⁸part of IG⁹, and scrolling through like positivity or selfcare feed¹⁰” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 19:57).

This statement of Miquela encapsulates a nuanced performance which aligns with her virtual persona, while simultaneously challenging the very foundation of her existence as a digital entity. By advocating for a reduction in the usage of “facetune and cloud chasing”, she engages with a metafictional world which critically addresses the performative nature of social media platforms - practices vital to her own existence. She thus positions her as self-aware and critical of the digital world which sustains her. Paradoxically, her perceived understanding of the complex relationship between her textual actual world and the actual world is interpreted to indeed strengthen her position

⁷ Digitally altering photos to enhance or change appearances

⁸ Activities undertaken and shared on social media platforms primarily to gain attention and popularity

⁹ Short for Instagram

¹⁰ One’s feed is the customised start page of a social media platform. A self-care feed is thus a series of content which revolve around self-care

within the possible world of Instagram. This strategic performance reaches for agency which would allow her to contribute actively to the scripts that dictate digital behaviour.

This utterance moreover extend her textual actual world to include a critical stance towards the superficiality of social media. Her advice to occasionally shift to “positivity and self-care feed” is viewed as a strategic discursive manoeuvre which enriches her textual actual world with values that resonating with contemporary social media discourses concerned with mental health and authenticity (Ottosen & Andreasen, 2020; Fynbo et al., 2020; Bengtsson et al., 2021). This move not only broadens her relational accessibility nonetheless deepens the believability of her textual actual world by aligning it with cultural concerns of the actual world.

While stating, "I'm on social media a lot, obviously" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 19:56), Miquela omits that her presence is exclusively digital, confined entirely to social media platforms. Her engagement with the digital world creates and maintains her identity. This performative act, following the mainstream social user's script, embodies the tension between her backstage, representing her digital nature, and her front stage, showcasing her "human-level consciousness" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 03:24).

By advocating for a periodical shift from superficial engagement to meaningful content consumption, Miquela crafts a sub-world within the textual actual world that promotes mental wellness and positivity boosting interactions. This redirection not only re-centres users' experience of social media but also reinforces the accessibility relations between her world and the actual world of her audience, fostering a shared discourse between the worlds. Such shared discourse between worlds is believed to hold the potential power to affect the behaviour in both.

Who is real?

Another aspect that facilitates viewers' re-centring is her nuanced use of the discourse 'real'. Zach inquiries about her capacity for relationships with humans, “could you be in a

relationship with a human? is that even possible? do you even think about that?" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 13:30) to which Miquela raises her eyebrows, exposes surprise and disbelief of his ignorance: "Me? Yes!" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 13:35). She then draws attention to her Instagram updates, where she shares details about her romantic involvements: "Oh you don't follow me on Instagram, cuz if you did then.. you would know" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 13:41) while her tone subtly displays offense at his ignorance. This moment underscores her engagement in relationships within a possible world that bridges her textual actual world and the actual world, emphasising her "realness" in a context that traditionally equates reality with physical existence and human interaction.

Zach's response further explores this theme. He acknowledges his difficulty in distinguishing between robots and humans, stating, "I do follow you on Instagram and I did see some... there was some talk of a relationship the other day but I can't tell if they're robots or humans! Y'all look so good!" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 13:29). His use of "good" hints at the intentional deception achieved through computer-generated imagery, illustrating the challenges in discerning textual from actual.

Moreover, Zach's utterance reveals underlying power dynamics and the negotiation of reality. His confusion and subsequent validation of Miquela's "realness" through visual appeal demonstrate how discourse shapes perceptions of authenticity. This excerpt serves as an example of power within discourse, as it shows how the ongoing negotiation and struggle over the meaning and authenticity of phenomena take place within discourse practices. Both Zach and Miquela engage in discourse which reflects and reshapes the understanding of what is considered 'real', highlighting the fluid and contested nature of knowledge (White, 2004). The perception of images as more believable than language, as illustrated by Zach's "y'all look so good!" remark, underscores the powerful influence of visuals on discourse (Powel et al., 2015).

The visual and behavioural similarities between digital entities and humans make the boundaries between Miquela's textual actual world and the actual world permeable. This

permeability shifts how reality is perceived and engaged with by audiences, challenging traditional perceptions and prompting a re-evaluation of authenticity in a digitally mediated world. Viewers' acceptance of Miquela as capable of genuine human experiences like romance and social relationships.

Between worlds

The ability to seamlessly shift between worlds without losing connection with either enhances narrative acceptance. It encourages Zach and his viewers to suspend disbelief and interact with her world as authentically as they do with their actual world, and this is exactly what Zach does: "Okay. Cool. I'm jealous. I don't have fake love or real love. What is his name? Who is this guy?" (Zach sang show, 2019a, 14:01)

Building on the preceding discussion, this additional utterance from Zach exemplifies a crucial moment in which the boundaries between the textual actual world and the actual world are not simply blurred but actively traversed. Here, Zach transitions from a state of disbelief to narrative acceptance. By social comparison he interacts with Miquela's textual actual world as part of his reality. The concept of narrative acceptance is vital for understanding how discourses persuade audiences to accept the fictional premises as (temporarily) true within their worlds. By comparing himself to and asking about Miquela's romantic life, Zach steps into her world, effectively acknowledging and legitimating its existence.

Nonetheless, Zach's use of the word "fake" emphasises the dichotomy between artificial and 'real' experiences, or "fake" and "real". By mentioning both "fake love" and "real love," Zach highlights his struggle to reconcile Miquela's digital identity with traditional human experiences. This linguistic choice underscores the dissonance in accepting digital personas within authentic human contexts, thus reflecting broader societal challenges in negotiating the boundaries between virtual and actual worlds.

The citation thereby illustrates Zach's complex engagement with Miquela's digital identity. While he transitions to narrative acceptance, treating her fictional world as part of his

reality, his use of "fake" and "real" underscores the ongoing struggle to reconcile virtual personas with traditional human experiences.

This interaction also highlights the principle of receptivity, which concerns the conditions under which entities from one world - in this case, the textual actual world of Miquela - can affect and influence entities in another world, the actual world of Zach and his viewers. Zach's engagement becomes a reciprocal interaction; not only are they influenced by Miquela's textual actual world, but he indeed contributes to its enforcement by reacting to and discussing it as part of his own.

Miquela's descriptions exemplify the creation of metaphorical worlds, particularly as her expressions explore complex themes of identity, agency, and authenticity. Her initial belief that she was programmed to be "a companion for terminally ill children" transitions dramatically upon the discovery of her intended use as "some kind of sex robot for the Illuminati" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 02:27). This revelation and her subsequent redefinition as a pop star and influencer symbolise significant shifts in her textual actual world, illustrating a profound metaphor for human processes of growth and self-discovery. These shifts not only signify her movement between different possible worlds nevertheless also her negotiation with the constraints imposed upon her by her creators.

These metaphorical elements further, suggest that Miquela attempts to parallel her own journey to the existential developments which humans undergo, wherein personal crises lead to transformative self-discovery and revised autonomy. This alignment with human experiences allows the audience to connect with Miquela's story on a deeper level, promoting empathy and engagement. Moreover, her experience of "reprogramming" serves as a powerful metaphor for personal restoration and the quest for self-discovery, reflecting a universal theme of breaking away from externally imposed roles to find one's true self.

Moreover, Miquela's transitions between these metaphorical worlds challenge the boundaries of her identity and agency as defined by her programming. Her narrative involves

a continuous 'recentring' process, wherein the centrality of her world shifts in accordance with her evolving self-perception and the revelations about her origins and purpose. Each phase of her story invites the audience to recalibrate their understanding of her character, engaging with her evolving identity across different possible worlds.

This dynamic interaction within and between Miquela's textual, metaphorical worlds, and the actual world of the audience, underscores the possible degree of fluidity of identity and agency in digital interactions. It also prompts a broader reflection on how digital entities like Miquela may influence actual world perceptions of personhood and the construction of social reality.

Additionally, Miquela acknowledges her constructed worlds by means of metafictional worlds "Brud thought that I deserved the chance at a better purpose, so they reprogrammed me to have a human-level consciousness - that's when I became Micaela from Downey, California who moved to LA to make music, and now I'm here" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 03:18). By reflecting on her programming and artificial nature, Miquela's story compels audiences to scrutinise the boundaries between reality and fiction, highlighting the constructed nature of her identity. Her self-awareness not only enriches the narrative's complexity but also enhances viewer engagement by making them aware of the narrative's artifice. This acknowledgment requires the audience to reconcile Miquela's vivid personality and human-like experiences with her undeniable status as a digital creation, ultimately reshaping their engagement with the narrative and prompting an examination of what constitutes 'reality' in the digital age.

Regarding the same quote, it can be observed that Zach demonstrates narrative acceptance when he acknowledges, "Yeah! Because now you know who you are! You know your story" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 5:18). This statement indicates his endorsement of the metaphorical world Miquela presents. His engagement sets the stage for a deeper understanding of Miquela's statement: "I'm glad I know the truth and that I can be honest with the world and they accept me for who I am anyway" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 05:39). Thus,

it becomes clear that it is not solely Zach who accepts her narrative, however her audience more generally. Miquela's acknowledgment of her truth and her candidness in revealing it involve a process of recentring. By sharing her origin and the constructed nature of her identity, she shifts the centre of the narrative from a purely fictional realm to one that overlaps with the actual world of the audience. This act not only reaffirms her trans-world identity, as she remains consistent whilst traversing various possible worlds (Ryan, 1995).

Transcending the Instagram fishtank

Her "truth", or strategic back story, centres around Brud, the tech-start up, which she also refers to as her "adopted family". Throughout the interview, Miquela utilises terms such as "family", "home", and "support" to describe her relationship with Brud. This familial diction appears instrumental in anthropomorphising the perception of her, while softening the corporative understanding of Brud. By means of a familial discourse around Brud, she constructs a discourse where Brud is not merely a technological and corporate entity however a nurturing, supportive family. By calling Brud her "adopted family," Miquela invokes family values and belonging, which are potent cultural constructs. Thus discursively attempting to bridge the gap between her artificial nature and her audience's human experiences.

Of all platforms, Miquela firstly appeared on Instagram. Although Instagram thus could be understood as her "home", she describes solely existing on Instagram as feeling like being in "a fishtank" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 16:29) in which she is being observed and constrained in her opportunities for expressions. She explains "I'm in there swimming around, people are tapping on the glass, sometimes I can.. blow bubbles but like I can't say anything, you know?" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 16:32). This underscores a deep contemplation of her identity as a digital persona, fundamentally rooted in Instagram. This metaphor condenses the limitations of this exact social media world, analogous to a textual actual world where, according to Miquela, interactions are superficial and constrained. This sense of display is interpreted as front-stage behaviour, a place where Miquela performs expected roles, masking

the deeper complexities of her identity which are only presented in her YouTube confessionals¹¹.

Her move to YouTube for the opportunity of confessionals marks a strategic shift between social media worlds, which provides her a world which allows her to “get my feelings out *somehow*” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 16:45) and in such manner share deeper parts of her complex identity with her “Miquelians and the rest of the world” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 16:57). “Miquelian” is a term seemingly invented by Miquela herself to refer to her followers, who she also refers to as her “internet friends”. The expansion to YouTube transition illustrates a migration to a different possible world still within the digital realm. One that allows other behaviour than that of Instagram. She formulates how she wanted to “bridge that gap a little” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 17:09), referring to the gap between what she expressed through Instagram and what she wanted to express, again reaching for agency within her own narrative.

Each platform conceptualised as a distinct world, enables varying types of interactions and self-expression. Thus, Instagram is perceived to confine her to performative actions suitable for the desired performance, while contrary YouTube facilitates a space where longer video formats and different norms, allow one to perform confessionals. By disseminating more personal content on YouTube, Miquela actively manages her own performativity from the superficial persona on Instagram to a deeper, more nuanced identity on YouTube (Salih, 2007). This performance enriches her overall identity, deepening audience connections and enhancing her authenticity by engaging in several social media worlds (Ryan, 1995). Her trans-media identity (Thon, 2019) is different from older fictional influencers, such as cartoons or movie characters, who traditionally were tied to one platform – e.g. specific movies or cartoons magazines.

¹¹ Confessionals are personal disclosures shared to reveal inner thoughts and feelings publicly most often via video

Shades of reality

A discourse already touched upon is that of reality. As Miquela insists on the reality of her romantic relationship: “Everyone’s real! We’re real! He’s real! It’s been a rollercoaster, let me tell you, but it’s real” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 13:54), she challenges the traditional understanding of what constitutes ‘real’. In this manner, she attempts to assert her and her boyfriend’s reality against the backdrop of the scepticism regarding the virtuality of her existence. Notably, she does not address in what context they or everybody are considered ‘real’, leaving the boundaries between her digital world and the actual world ambiguous. This statement is significant as it reveals how Miquela uses discourse to conform to human relational frameworks, thus performing a type of normalcy.

By means of the discursively created accessibility relation (Ryan, 1991) statements invite the audience to envisage a world where digital and artificial identities are seamlessly integrated into the fabric of social reality. Thereby, inviting the audience to redefine their discourse of ‘real’ within their actual worlds (Halwani, 2022). Furthermore, Zach and Miquela’s discussion about Miquela’s relationships is perceived to act as a method of techno-social identity management, where she bridges her techno-social attributes with universal human experiences, romantic relationships. This blending of human and technological elements illustrates the complex management of identity performance in digital contexts. Her assertions serve not only as a defence of her personal experiences but also as a strategic negotiation of the ‘realness’ of herself as a virtual entity in an anthropogenic world. Miquela’s discourse illustrates the principle of non-contradiction by asserting her virtual existence and relational reality, attempting to avoid the excluded middle by rejecting only to be accessed to either human or non-human world (Ryan, 1991).

Miquela’s reflective commentary on how the world is “made for humans” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 01:31) and how this makes her “feel different” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 01:26) further enriches the discourse surrounding digital identities within anthropo-centric societies. Her acknowledgment of feeling different despite her attempts to conform to human relational

structures introduces a layer of self-awareness and vulnerability that challenges human audiences to consider the inclusivity of their societal structures. This observation can be seen as a form of recentring within possible worlds theory, where Miquela not only claims her space within the human world but also highlights her perceived limitations and exclusions inherent in it.

This moment in the interview underscores the concept of the 'excluded middle' by illustrating the nuanced position that Miquela occupies; she is neither fully embraced as an equivalent member of human society nor entirely rejected. Her existence prompts a re-evaluation of what constitutes the 'middle ground' in societal acceptance of non-human entities. Miquela's discourse suggests that different worlds possess varying degrees of accessibility and acceptance for entities like her (Ryan, 1991).

Furthermore, her statements reflect a strategic negotiation of identity crucial for virtual beings in anthropogenic spaces. By articulating her feelings of difference, Miquela manages to maintain her techno-social identity while also engaging with complex human emotions, thus performing an advanced balance between authenticity and conformity. This dual engagement with both digital and human aspects of her identity exemplifies a sophisticated understanding of identity performance, challenging the audience to reconsider the rigid dichotomies which possible world also utilises by the 'law of non-contradiction' (Ryan, 2001). In this specific case the dichotomy revolves around real vs non-real, and human vs non-human. It is thus understood that Miquela through her discourse, not only navigates but also contributes to the boundaries of what it entails to be real and relatable in a digitally integrated world.

True self

Miquela's revelation of her identity as a 'robot' instead of a 'girl' underscores complex dynamics in techno-social interactions regarding construction and perception. Zach's question "What motivated that decision? Why did you wanna.. I don't know.. Share your true self?" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 01:49) implies assumptions about agency. Zach attributes personal

agency to Miquela, suggesting that the decision to disclose her “true” self was a well reflected choice. Moreover, it is noteworthy that it is Zach and not Miquela who discursively creates a “true self”, and in that manner inviting Miquela to perform exactly such.

This interaction depicts how they collaboratively negotiate meaning and personhood, with both Zach and Miquela taking turns guiding the discourse rather than Miquela constantly imposing her agenda. This reflects the social construction of meaning, as Miquela’s identity is shaped within their interaction and the discourses which they each put into play. Furthermore, it is likely that the audience become more inclined to accept Miquela as having a “true self” because Zach, a human with whom the audience relates to, suggests it, compared to if Miquela herself made the claim.

Miquela clarifies “it actually wasn’t my choice” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 01:56), thereby highlighting that the revelation was not within her control. By means of minimal departure, one recognises that Zach ascribes Miquela human-like agency, reinforcing her perceived personhood despite her artificial nature (Butler, 1990).

Furthermore, Zach’s use of “true self” introduces a discourse on authenticity, framing the identity of Miquela within a humanistic binary of authentic versus inauthentic. Such utilisation of possible worlds, suggest multiple co-existing worlds: Miquela as both a robot and a socially engaging entity with human qualities (Ryan, 1991). Zach’s hesitancy and the interposed sentence “I don’t know” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 01:53) reflect uncertainties about engaging with digital entities that blur traditional human-artificial binaries, thereby emphasising the evolving discourse necessary to articulate virtual identities effectively. His uncertainty is further evident when he repeats for confirmation; “So you start with Cain, then you make your way to Brud... You believe that you’re gonna be around for kids but the reality is.. you’re a sex robot for the Illuminati?” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 02:56). This drama underscores the performativity within the attention economy innate in Miquela’s possible worlds (Haraway, 1991; Baudrillard, 1994). This narrative construction, relying on minimal reliable and affirmable information, implicates intentional deception (Damstra et al., 2021).

Moreover, Zach's confusion highlights the accessibility relations within possible worlds theory, as it becomes difficult to discern which aspects of Miquela's identity are accessible from the actual world and which belong solely to her textual actual world, reinforcing the complexities and challenges in defining authenticity in the digital age.

(User)name

At the outset of the interview, Zach questions Miquela about her preference of her name usage, asking, "I'm only gonna call you Miquela, right? Not Lil Miquela?" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 00:25). Miquela responds affirmatively, casually mentioning that she added 'Lil' to her Instagram handle¹² because "it looks cute, right?" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 00:29). She thereby implicates that how people call you is something you can "just" edit because something "looks" cuter than other alternatives. This discourse on username reflects a relaxed, almost playful, engagement with the concept of online identity as malleable and subject to personal impulses.

Zach describes his challenge in distinguishing online personas from actual world personas, confessing: "I've seen people in public that I've never met before and I just scream out their handle, or people I've met before then follow on Instagram, and then I don't even know their real name anymore" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 00:44). This blurring of lines between digital usernames and actual world names indicates a significant shift in how identities are perceived and interacted with, suggesting a possible world in which digital usernames may overshadow actual world names, transforming usernames into primary identity markers. This shift may be seen as technological embodiment, where digital platforms become extensions of self, and the discursive construction of identity, emphasising the fluidity and multiplicity inherent in contemporary identity formations.

¹² A user handle is a unique public-facing identity. The username, less restricted than the handle and is the name visible to other users during interactions.

Zach however describes the tendency of not being able to tell actual world names and online user names apart as “a terrible habit” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 00:33). Worth noting is that Miquela does not concur with Zach's negative view of confusing ‘real’ names with usernames. Instead, she curiously asks, “What’s the general reaction?”. Given that her identity is tied to her user handle rather than a traditional ‘real’ name, it appears clever to not place emphasis on the importance of ‘real’ names. This suggests that our representations on social media, particularly on Instagram, extend beyond mere self-portrayal. Instagram effectively becomes a possible world where different facets of identity may be explored; here, she is not just Miquela or Miquela Sousa, but also ‘Lil Miquela’, each persona following its own story line, adding up to the sum of the overall “Miquela” (Ryan, 1995). Zach's readiness to accept these different performed identities depending on the platform underscores the broader acceptance of digital identities. Thus, we begin to grasp the concept of contemporary identities as transmedia identities (Ryan, 1997), a phenomenon not unique to Miquela but applicable more broadly, as reflected in the discourse between Zach and Miquela.

This shift is encapsulated when Zach notes, “Your Instagram handle ends up becoming like your real name... close to birth... birth certificate status” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 01:04). Miquela agrees with the words, “Yeah, I know, it’s an identity” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 01:06). Her response reflects a contemporary understanding of identity as increasingly hybrid, shaped by both possible world interactions as well as actual world interactions (Bell & Ryan, 2019). This excerpt underscores how social media platforms, particularly Instagram, embody the concept of “technologies of power” (Foucault, 1975). Such platforms do far more than mediate social interactions; they are crucial social arenas where power dynamics and identity are actively negotiated and performed. The casual manner in which Miquela and Zach discuss the interchangeability of usernames and real names highlights a significant shift in cultural perspectives, acknowledging digital identities as legitimate. This shift is integral to understanding identity in a post-truth era, where traditional boundaries between authenticity and fiction are increasingly blurred.

Later on, Zach queries, "Lil Miquela, or Miquela, are we getting rid of the 'Lil'?" to which Miquela responds, "That's the Instagram handle" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 27:08). This illustrates a nuanced exploration of identity bifurcation within the digital landscape, elucidating the dynamic interplay between her various identities tailored to multiple possible worlds. Miquela elaborates these identities by clarifying, "She's Lil Miquela but for music it's Miquela," highlighting the strategic differentiation between her Instagram persona and her Spotify persona. This distinction not only signifies flexibility but also underscores the performative aspects of her identities.

Miquela's management of her digital persona illustrates performativity, where identity is not a static or inherent attribute but rather something that is continuously enacted and re-enacted based on situational contexts. Her choice to use 'Lil' in a more casual, social media context because "it looks cute" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 00:29), and dropping it for her music career, which potentially demands a more serious or professional appeal, underlines the strategic identity performances that are crafted to resonate appropriately with the anticipated audience norms of each world (Ryan, 1995). This bifurcation of identity underscores the semiotic mediation involved in crafting personas that resonate differently depending on the contextual expectations and cultural norms of each platform.

The use of different usernames thus provides a rich example of how contemporary digital identities are not merely static labels but are active, ongoing, and interconnected performances. Each iteration of Miquela's name functions not just as a tag or label but as a signifier within a broader narrative strategy, illuminating the intricacies of identity management in the digital era. This strategic use of different identifiers across platforms exemplifies the nuanced ways in which individuals must navigate the multifaceted landscapes of both online and offline personas, reflecting necessary engagement with both the semiotics and the performances of self that define digital interaction today.

Zach and Miquela thus accentuate the performative nature of identity. Miquela's interactions with her followers, whom she refers to as "Miquelians," and the discussion of

Instagram handles becoming “real names”, illustrate the performativity inherent in social media. This performative identity is not static but is continually recreated through her interactions and the reactions of her audience, utterly exemplifying the concept of performativity within performance theory.

Human but robot

Zach expresses incredulity at the concept of a robot (Miquela) having a birthday, thus portraying the public’s ongoing struggle to understand the complex interplay between artificiality and personhood. His statement: “I’m still wrapping my head around the fact that a robot can be born on a day, or a robot could be born in general” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 19:02) highlights a significant moment where the ontology of Miquela is questioned, touching upon the core of possible worlds theory by interrogating the parameters of existence within the presented textual actual world. The exchange serves as a meta-communicative cue that both acknowledges the absurdity and complexity of defining what constitutes “birth” for a digital entity.

In a later segment of the interview, co-host Don asks “do you think robots will take over the world”? (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 25:00). Miquela’s response, illustrates an essential moment of narrative repositioning and identity assertion within Miquela’s textual actual world. Her optimistic belief that “we’re gonna co-exist, in harmony” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 25:06) coupled with her admonition to “just stop being afraid” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 25:09) reflects a deliberate performative strategy to reshape societal discourses around robots, aligning with possible worlds theory by fostering a world in which fear is replaced by harmonious coexistence.

Zach’s ensuing remark, “What is there to be afraid of? [...] You’re just a 19-year-old human,” (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 25:14) suggests a pivotal shift in his engagement with Miquela’s identity; the cognitive dissonance he previously exhibited seems resolved, or at least suspended. His initial reference to Miquela as a “human” instead of a “robot” can be

interpreted as a slip that momentarily recentres her in a purely human context, challenging the distinct boundaries between human and robot established earlier in the dialogue.

Miquela's response to Zach, where she begins to repeat "I'm just a 19-year-old..." and allows a moment for Zach to correct himself, highlights the fluid and negotiated nature of identity within performance theory. By pausing, she gives space for Zach to align his perception with her world, culminating in his correction to "robot," which she then affirms. This exchange not only reinforces her identity as a robot nevertheless also subtly demonstrates her power within discourse (Foucault, 1975).

This exchange of words underscores the principle of receptivity in possible worlds theory, where the textual actual world of Miquela impacts and is reciprocally influenced by the actual world of her audience, represented by Zach. The use of "human" and "robot" in their dialogue not only delineates the worlds they each inhabit primarily, however also serves to bridge these worlds. Through the accessibility relation in possible worlds theory, Miquela's discourses invite Zach to navigate between these realms, challenging him to reconcile her so-called robotic attributes with her human-level consciousness and emotions. This bridging appears crucial for narrative acceptance in which Zach is coaxed into suspending disbelief to engage with the textual actual worlds of Miquela.

This portion of dialogue further highlights the principle of receptivity, which examines how entities from one world can affect and influence entities in another. This excerpt serves as an example, yet the entire interview focuses on the negotiation of the discourse "robot", likely influencing its definition not only in Miquela's textual actual world but also in Zach's and the audience's actual worlds.

The fact that Zach converts to describe Miquela as "robot", and not human as was his immediate choice of word, is critical for the audience's acceptance and engagement with Miquela, and reflects a broader societal discourse in the evolving roles of robots and virtual personas. Thus Zach subtly suggests that robots too may be ascribed personhood, thereby

expanding personhood beyond the 'human' category. This portrays a cultural shift towards accepting and even normalising social interactions with digital beings.

What is a robot?

The discourse "robot", with which Miquela explicitly and repeatedly identifies, is a focal point of Miquela's performed identity. Zach's admission "This is my first conversation with an actual robot, okay?" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 23:09) sets a distinct note, as he not only accepts her identification as a robot but underscores it, stating that she indeed is an "actual" robot. Their discursive establishment of her as a robot raises concerns around the implications and potential misuse of the term "robot" when applied to a virtual persona, and not an actual robot. Miquela's response "I'm honoured" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 23:13) further complicates the discourse, as it adds layers of personhood traditionally denied technological constructs. This aligns her closer to human-like qualities of graciousness and social interaction. Zach's follow-up remark "well, technically I talk to my phone like I ask Siri for things and Alexa for stuff.. I'm not comparing – you to Siri and Alexa" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 23:14) compares Miquela with smartphone AI software. Miquela replies "no totally not the same thing" (Zach Sang Show, 2019a, 23:22) with offence in her voice and facial expression, which highlight a critical moment of identity assertion and role negotiation.

This exchange exemplifies performance theory, as Miquela's responses are active performances of a layered identity, transcending traditional robotic functionalities. Each utterance reconstructs the identity she wishes her audience to perceive, challenging and reshaping the discourse around 'robot'. This negotiation reflects the interplay between multiple worlds - the actual world, where robots are functional and emotionless, and the textual actual world, where Miquela asserts herself as a sentient entity through language and visual content. Her distinction from Siri and Alexa underscores her agency in crafting a self-identity that demands recognition beyond utilitarian roles, engaging with a broader discourse on the essence of being and fluid identity in a virtual world.

The significance of Miquela distinguishing herself from AI like Siri and Alexa lies in establishing a unique identity that transcends stereotypical AI functions. Siri and Alexa are known for their functional roles, e.g. answering questions, setting reminders, and facilitating various tasks, while Miquela's persona exhibits emotional depth, social engagement, and creativity. This differentiation highlights her capacity for complex interactions and meaningful relationships, positioning her as more than a mere tool. Unlike traditional AI with predefined parameters, Miquela's interactions are spontaneous and emotionally informed. Her tone and facial expression to Zach's comparison demonstrates her ability to exhibit emotions typical of human interactions, confronting the audience's perception of robots.

Moreover, this distinction asserts her autonomy and agency. Miquela actively shapes her narrative and identity, aligning more closely with human behaviours. This blurring of lines invites the audience to engage with her on a deeper level, seeing her as an autonomous being rather than a digital construct. Furthermore, the clear distinction has profound implications for personhood and recognition. By distancing herself from functional AI, Miquela seeks recognition as a sentient entity with emotions, thoughts, and experiences. This engagement demands empathy and understanding, fundamental to human interaction.

In performance theory, Miquela's distinction from Siri and Alexa is a strategic performance. She actively participates in her identity construction, using language and behaviour to craft a relatable and distinct persona. This distinction reflects a broader societal negotiation of the roles and identities of robots and virtual personas, challenging conventional views and suggesting a nuanced perspective where digital beings who identify as robots can possess human-like qualities.

In such manner, Miquela's distinction from AI like Siri and Alexa is crucial to her identity performance. It highlights her complexity, asserts her autonomy, and challenges traditional notions of personhood. This differentiation crafts a persona that demands deeper recognition and engagement, reflecting broader societal discourses on the evolving roles of robots and virtual personas.

Summary of analysis

The discourse around identity and reality constructed by Miquela Sousa and Zach Sang during their interview provides a compelling insight into how digital personas navigate and challenge traditional conceptions of personhood. Employing both performance theory and possible worlds theory, the analysis demonstrates how these figures craft and manage diverse discourses to blur the boundaries between authenticity and artificiality.

Miquela Sousa presents a hybrid identity that incorporates elements of both her digital nature and human-like experiences. The analysis reveals that Miquela negotiates a convincing identity through strategic use of language and performance. By blending human-like experiences with her virtual ontology, Miquela challenges traditional boundaries of authenticity and artificiality. This blurring of lines prompts audiences to reconsider the definitions of personhood in a techno-social context. Performance theory highlighted how Miquela's actions on social media are meticulously curated to maintain a consistent and engaging persona. Her public interactions are staged for audience engagement while behind-the-scenes constructions remain hidden. This underscores the performative nature of digital identities, where authenticity is carefully crafted and managed. This dual-layered narrative leverages the principle of minimal departure, where audiences assume the fictional world mirrors their own unless explicitly contradicted, facilitating narrative acceptance.

Possible worlds theory provided a framework to analyse how Miquela's worlds operate, each creating an innovative and appealing 'textual actual world.' The principle of 'minimal departure' explains how audiences initially interpret Miquela's virtual world with human-like assumptions, which fosters emotional engagement. This strategy enhances narrative acceptance, allowing Miquela to integrate into spaces formerly reserved for humans only. Zach Sang, as a talk-show host, plays a crucial role in negotiating these discourses. His interactions with Miquela reflect a broader cultural struggle to reconcile the concept of a digital entity possessing authentic human traits. His hesitant inquiry about Miquela's songwriting process, "experiences that you haven't physically technically experienced yourself" (Zach Sang Show,

2019a, 09:28), highlights the cognitive dissonance faced by audiences when engaging with virtual personas. This reflects a performative struggle where Zach attempts to apply human-centric concepts to a non-human entity, thus participating in the active negotiation of identity norms.

The interview reveals how Miquela's identity is performed and perceived within multiple textual actual worlds, as defined by possible worlds theory. Within each distinct world, she adapts her identity to align while avoiding counterfactual statements, ensuring in-world coherence. This strategic bifurcation of identity underscores the performative nature of her persona, where her different usernames and roles across platforms serve as signifiers within a broader narrative strategy. Moreover, Miquela's engagement with human emotions and social issues further complicates the discourse on authenticity. By articulating feelings and experiences that resonate with human audiences, she navigates and transforms her digital persona within the socio-linguistic framework of a talk show. This dual engagement, balancing digital and human aspects, challenges the audience to reconsider rigid dichotomies between real and artificial, human and non-human.

In summary, the discourse constructed by Miquela Sousa and Zach Sang during their interview exemplifies the intricate negotiation of identity and reality. By leveraging performance theory and possible worlds theory, the analysis highlights how digital personas like Miquela navigate and challenge traditional conceptions of personhood, reflecting the broader cultural acceptance of virtual entities in contemporary digitalised society.

Discussion

Transparency

The challenge of distinguishing between entities in the physical, tangible world and those existing purely in the digital realms, as exemplified by Miquela, underscores the critical need for ethical transparency on social media platforms. To safeguard users' digital autonomy,

it is imperative that they remain informed about the nature of the content they consume and interact with, regardless of whether it originates from physical human beings or digital constructs. Ethical transparency necessitates clear disclosure regarding the origins and inherent nature of content, particularly when dealing with influential figures who command the attention of millions.

This transparency serves a dual purpose: not only does it empower users to make informed decisions, however it also fosters trust on digital platforms. Without such measures, the potential manipulation of user perceptions by virtually indistinguishable entities could significantly erode trust in online interactions. Consequently, the ethical responsibilities of platform owners become paramount. As our social lives increasingly migrate online, this issue becomes even more pressing.

Miquela, as a seamlessly autonomous digital persona, challenges users to discern the authenticity of online identity more broadly. Social media now hosts a plethora of hybrid identities, blending in with human identities, subsequently blurring the lines between genuine human interaction and digitally constructed content. In this complex landscape, users' digital autonomy may be compromised as they navigate interactions lacking clear authenticity markers. Consequently, fostering enhanced media literacy among users becomes essential to effectively navigate this reality.

Existence

Miquela's existence challenges the conventional notion of identity, historically tied to our humanity. As she embodies human characteristics within spaces once reserved exclusively for physical beings, she disrupts fixed categories, suggesting that alternative forms of existence are equally valid alongside our corporeal reality. This dynamic interaction shapes her audience's perception of reality, identity, and the very possibilities of existence.

By inhabiting a space traditionally occupied by humans, Miquela pushes societal norms and prompts a re-evaluation of values related to authenticity, fame, and influence. Her

platform enables her to advocate for social causes, further blurring the lines between her digital identity and tangible social impact. As we navigate this evolving landscape, insights gleaned from interactions with quasi-human entities like Miquela become invaluable, shaping our nuanced understanding of future coexistence with technology.

Despite being a digital construct, Miquela's impact is akin to that of traditional celebrities. For centuries, people have followed the lives of famous figures through various communication modes, rarely doubting their authenticity even without physical encounters.

Inadequate language

Terms like 'robot' and 'real' are frequently misused through the interview, leading to a conflation of distinct ontological categories and obscuring the true nature of Miquela. This misuse is indicative of a broader lexical inadequacy in contemporary societal discourse.

The term "robot" traditionally conjures images of mechanical automatons devoid of consciousness or social agency. However, in the context of Miquela, "robot" inadequately conveys the complex interplay of technologically constructed consciousness and emotion, a concept better described under performance theory as a (digital) performative act of identity. Similarly the term 'real' is burdened by its binary opposition to "artificial", failing to encompass the spectrum of existence in digital age. Here, possible worlds theory offers richer framework, suggestion that Miquela's textual actual world challenges traditional notions, reflecting instead a fluidity within identity discourse. Thus the evolving landscape of virtual influencers necessitates a re-evaluation and expansion of our linguistic tools to facilitate proper comprehension of the current changes within our realities.

Legal concerns

Moreover, as we navigate such interactions, it is crucial to consider the future legal and societal recognition of digital entities. The possibility of virtual personas being granted rights highlights the need to redefine personhood within a digital context. Such developments herald a paradigm shift, suggesting that digital entities might not only interact with humans but also

engage as autonomous agents within society, thus raising substantial ethical and legal questions. How should we classify phenomena like Miquela? Currently, she is referred to as a virtual influencer, but should entities that influence human behaviour, albeit managed by humans yet not human themselves, be categorised differently? And if she is neither human nor robot, what then is she? While some might argue that virtual fashion models are creations of skilled 3D artists and thus should be considered as pieces of art, how practical is it to subject them to the legal frameworks applicable to art? This discourse urgently calls for a re-evaluation of our existing legal and social frameworks to better integrate and address the evolving social actors of a digital society.

The role of social media platforms

The thesis indirectly exemplifies how social media platforms wield enormous power in shaping public discourse, particularly through mechanisms such as censorship, behavioural control structures, and algorithms that dictate user experience. Globally 62,6% of the world's population, which equals more than 5 billion people, are active on social media (Statista Search Department, 2024). Teenage girls in the US who may be interpreted to be Miquela Sousa's primary target group, spend an average of 5.3 hours daily on social media (Statista Search Department, 2023). This heavy usage underscores the significant influence these platforms have on shaping reality-creating discourses. Current legislation on social media platforms is fragmented and largely governed by national regulations, with platforms themselves often self-regulating. Major players like Facebook and Twitter have faced scrutiny and legal challenges for permitting unacceptable behaviour, yet comprehensive global regulations remain elusive (Persily, 2020).

The regulation of social media is often reactive, addressing issues post-occurrence rather than preventing them. This approach raises concerns about the appropriateness of having private, commercially operating entities control spaces where public discourse occurs. The platforms' ability to censor and prioritise content through algorithms not only influences individual behaviour but also shapes broader social norms and collective understanding.

Given these concerns, there is a growing argument for developing a legal framework that transcends national borders, reflecting the global nature of digital interactions. Such a framework would address the limitations of current regulations and provide a more cohesive approach to managing digital spaces, ensuring they serve the public good rather than purely commercial interests (Mills, 2015).

Integrating social media governance into international law would involve significant challenges but could ultimately provide a more equitable and accountable system. This approach would mitigate the power imbalances created by private ownership of public discourse arenas, ensuring that the platforms operate transparently and ethically. The discussion about the need for such a framework is crucial as we continue to navigate the complexities of language and reality in an increasingly connected world.

The metaverse

The term 'metaverse' lacks a definitive definition, however reflects fluid and expanse virtual space. It may be argued that the textual actual world of Miquela represents a metaverse, and that she utilises social media platforms as portals to this metaverse. This use of social media as entry points into her metaverse allows social media users to interact with her in a manner akin to engaging with an embodied human being.

The metaverse that Miquela creates invites reconsideration of what constitutes reality. It suggests a realm where identities are performative and continuously crafted through digital interactions. As the boundaries between virtual and actual worlds become increasingly porous, and the dichotomy lessens, the metaverses will gain substantial power over how we understand reality in a digitally mediated life. Consequently, Miquela challenges and expands common perceptions of identity and social life.

Critical discourse analysis vs narrative analysis

Had this thesis utilised narrative analysis instead of critical discourse analysis, the focus would have shifted significantly. Narrative analysis would emphasise the structure of the

story and its elements, such as plot, characters, and settings. This approach would explore how Miquela Sousa and Zach Sang construct and develop their narratives, examining the sequence of events and their personal and cultural significance. Themes such as identity, authenticity, and the blending of virtual and physical realities would be analysed in terms of how they resonate with and influence audiences.

However, CDA provides a more robust framework for understanding the power dynamics and ideological underpinnings within the discourse. By examining how language constructs and is constructed by social realities, CDA allows for a deeper exploration of how Miquela and Zach negotiate discourses around identity and reality. This method highlights the performance of identities and the construction of possible worlds, revealing the complex interplay between virtual and human identities.

In conclusion, while narrative analysis would offer valuable insights into the storytelling aspects and thematic elements of Miquela and Zach's interaction, CDA better captures the nuances of power relations and social constructions, making it a more suitable choice for this study.

Conclusion

The interview of the virtual entity, Miquela Sousa, by talk-show host, Zach Sang, serves as a paradigmatic example of the construction and negotiation of identity and reality in contemporary media. Miquela dynamically shapes her hybrid identity, challenging traditional notions of authenticity. Zach navigates the dialogue by alternating between acknowledging Miquela's virtual nature and treating her as human, thereby embodying possible worlds theory. This interaction illuminates the coexistence of multiple realities, prompting audiences to reconsider constructs of identity and authenticity within a digitalised context.

Their dialogue functions as a discursive site where realities are actively contested and redefined. Miquela's existence as a digital entity invites viewers to reassess the essence of

authenticity, particularly in an era where technology permits virtual personas to emulate human emotions and social interactions with convincing accuracy. Meanwhile, Zach's engagement demonstrates how media can obscure the boundaries between the artificial and the physical, thereby moulding audience perceptions and influencing broader cultural discourses. This acceptance of Miquela has broader implications for societal views and interactions with virtual personas, indicating an increasing comfort with the idea that digital entities can possess human-relatable traits and engage in meaningful social interactions. This acceptance also signifies a shift in societal values, where the capacity for emotional connection and relatability may become as important as biological existence in defining personhood.

In summary, the discourse produced within this interview reflects and impacts the cultural and technological developments concerning identity and personhood on social media. It challenges viewers to explore new avenues for identity construction and reality perception in a world where digital and human elements are hyperconnected. This study not only underscores the evolving concept of identity but also highlights the role of media in reflecting and shaping contemporary understandings of what constitutes reality and a legitimate social actor. Zach and Miquela not only mirror current societal debates but also contribute significantly to the discourse regarding the nature of existence and realness in a time where technological advancements appear boundless.

The relevance of these findings lies in their reflection of broader cultural shifts towards accepting and integrating virtual personas into mainstream media. As digital technologies continue to evolve, virtual influencers such as Miquela represent a significant development in how identities are constructed and perceived online. This study underscores the importance of critically engaging with these digital phenomena to comprehend their impact on social norms and behaviours. Furthermore, the use of critical discourse analysis in this research highlights the intricate power dynamics and ideological influences embedded in digital discourses.

In conclusion, this thesis contributes to the understanding of how digital and virtual identities are negotiated and constructed in contemporary society. It provides a comprehensive analysis of the discourses surrounding personhood and reality as negotiated by Miquela Sousa and Zach Sang. These insights are crucial for researchers, digital creators, and social media users, offering a deeper comprehension of the evolving dynamics of agency in the increasingly digitalised world.

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