

Possibilities and Challenges of the Emergence and Development of Virtual Influencers on Social Media in Afghanistan

Abdul Basir Mesbah¹⁾

¹Editor in Chief of Pol-e Sorkh Media, Germany

Email: mesbah.abdulbasir@gmail.com¹

Abstract: *With the rapid growth of Internet technology and its related tools, the level of interest in and engagement with the virtual space has increased, and, among other things, marketing communication has undergone significant changes. This space has provided a favorable opportunity for influencers to produce and present the content they intend to use to influence decision-making and gain the trust of audiences. However, the rapid advancement of marketing and content production has led to the emergence of a new type of influencer in the Internet space, referred to in the literature of advertising and communication as “virtual influencers” or human-like influencers. Their activities include advertising, marketing, guidance, and entertainment in the Internet space, particularly on social networks. Despite the global expansion of this type of influencer, there is a noticeable lack of activity and research concerning them in Afghanistan. Therefore, the main question of this study is to address the possibilities and challenges of creating and developing virtual influencers in the Afghan context. Through in-depth interviews and semi-structured questions with seven journalists, marketing professionals, and public relations specialists, the opportunities and challenges of creating and developing this type of influencer in Afghanistan were examined. The findings identify the creation and activities of virtual influencers at the intersection of four major themes within the context of Afghanistan social networks: challenges, contexts, audiences, and professional ethics. According to the participants, due to the lack of educational and academic resources in the fields of digital marketing and studies of new technologies, there is still a considerable gap between social networks and the development of virtual influencers in accordance with global standards. However, if this type of influencer is established and promoted, the priority of the people of Afghanistan will be the promotion of the values of dialogue, participation, education, and tolerance.*

Keywords : Social Networks, Avatar, Technology, Communication, Censorship, Virtual Influencer.

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid growth of Internet technology and its related tools, the level of human interest in and engagement with the virtual space has also increased, and our lives have been transformed by digital technologies and artificial intelligence, to the extent that some of our actions are carried out under the influence of advertising in the virtual space. Nowadays, “platforms make content more attractive, visually appealing, and relevant to ensure that user engagement and participation remain consistently active” (Mesbah, 2026, p. 101). Previously, human influencers operated in traditional and later modern media and social networks for marketing, advertising, and influencing consumers’ decision-making. However, now, alongside the rapid development of the Internet and people’s dependence on the virtual space,

marketing communication in the virtual space has undergone transformation, and non-human personalities, also referred to as virtual influencers, have taken on a significant share of activities related to advertising, marketing, guidance, and/or entertainment in the Internet space, particularly on social networks. These social media influencers (SMIs) have attracted large audiences by sharing their views and opinions about their lives, experiences, brands, and products on social media platforms (Ju et al., 2024, p. 1).

Now, with the advancement of virtual influencers, this type of marketing has experienced significant growth on social media, with social media influencers at its core, sharing their views and opinions about lifestyles, products, and personal stories (Audrezet et al., 2025). As non-human characters such as virtual influencers (VIs), fictional characters, and avatars have become increasingly popular on social media and are changing the dynamics of online interactions and marketing, understanding users' interactions with non-human influencers is of great importance for both consumer researchers and marketers (Ju et al., 2024, p. 21).

In academic studies, virtual influencers are referred to as “virtual counterparts of human influencers” (Audrezet et al., 2025, p. 1), or digitally altered versions of real individuals, or digital hybrids consisting of a head created with CGI and the body of a real person (Conti et al., 2022). Despite their research importance, they have received less attention in research. Influencers are often known for having expertise in specific topics and for creating educational, entertaining, or inspirational content that provides value to consumers (Mouritzen et al., 2023). With the evolution of digital technology, virtual influencers are becoming increasingly popular; however, they still largely face difficulties in gaining audience trust, as their levels of engagement are lower than those of human influencers, something that may increase with the evolution of artificial intelligence (Hussain et al., 2026).

Among the advantages of these influencers compared with human influencers are greater flexibility and adaptability to brand requirements, greater logistical control, and reduced public relations risks (Audrezet et al., 2025). The emergence of virtual influencers marks the beginning of a new era in marketing that integrates creativity with technology and redefines interactions between brands and consumers. Understanding the impact of virtual influencers' characteristics on audience responses and engagement is highly important for fashion brands so that they can maximize social media engagement, develop effective marketing strategies, and produce engaging content (Ju et al., 2024, p. 3).

Recent years have seen an explosion of studies on virtual influencers from a marketing, communication, branding, and consumer psychology perspective (Hussain et al., 2026, P. 3). Despite the studies conducted on consumer behavior, trust, and interactions in relation to virtual influencers, the possibilities and challenges of adopting this new technology across different cultures and geographies are another issue that needs to be taken into consideration. In this regard, the position and status of

virtual influencers on Afghan social networks is a particular subject for study that has not yet been addressed. Afghanistan is a country where, despite security, political, and economic problems and the prevalence of government censorship, people use the Internet and its services for cultural, social, and commercial purposes. Although in August 2021, with the withdrawal of international forces and the escape of the President, the government once again came under Taliban control, resulting in changes in media and communications affairs (Mesbah, 2026). But despite economic problems and existence of concerns, “currently, three new methods of marketing; LinkedIn, Google Ads, and artificial intelligence” are being used in the country (Mirzaie, 2024).

The growth of some online marketing platforms such as “Azpag” and marketing on social networks, including Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, in traditional or animated forms, are among the active marketing methods in the Afghan context. These platforms constitute part of the gradual changes in the economic behavior of users in Afghanistan’s digital space, where, in some digital teams, girls play roles in management, reviewing advertisements, and producing digital content (Sultani, 2026). Nevertheless, at the end of 2025, 11.3 million people in Afghanistan were using the Internet, with an Internet penetration rate of 25.5%; while there was a total of 22.4 million active mobile phone connections, with the difference being that some of these connections included only voice call and SMS services.

The Taliban government’s action to utilize the Afghanistan Internet Exchange Center (NIXA) project, which involves the installation of traffic monitoring systems and the management of Internet network data, has raised concerns about strengthening the group’s surveillance and expanding Internet censorship in Afghanistan (Rohani, 2026). However, given the rapid growth of artificial intelligence and the formation of digital marketing, the possibilities for creating and developing virtual influencers in the Internet space have still not emerged among activists in this field in Afghanistan. Therefore, the important question that arises here is not a judgment about why these influencers do not exist or have not been developed, but rather addressing the possibilities and challenges of creating and developing virtual influencers in the Afghanistan context. In this regard, an effort is made to raise these challenges by conducting in-depth interviews and posing semi-structured questions to journalists, marketing professionals, and public relations specialists. This research is important in that, on the one hand, a new scientific study is conducted in the field of marketing in Afghanistan’s virtual space and, on the other hand, the possibilities and challenges of this industry are studied within the context this country. What are the major cultural and communication challenges in the formation and development of virtual influencers within the context of Afghanistan social networks? What contexts and possibilities can create and strengthen the virtual influencer industry within the Internet context in Afghanistan?

The main objective of this study is to identify the most important cultural and communication challenges involved in the creation and development of virtual influencers in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, this study will also identify the most important contexts and possibilities through discussions with experts in this field.

Previous studies have primarily focused on human influencers in the digital environment, digital literacy, consumer attitudes, and factors influencing online purchase intention. Mirzaei (2025), in an ethnographic study of Afghan migrant influencers on Instagram, identifies eight types of them. Most of them are familiar with impression management techniques and, in order to attract followers, cross the red lines of traditional Afghan culture and commodify and make their privacy public to a great extent. They measure power and superiority by the number of followers and likes, and in their view, whoever has attracted more followers possesses greater social capital and popularity. Hakimi et al. (2025) studied the level of digital literacy among Afghans and found that there is a significant gap in higher-level digital skills among young people. They also found that digital literacy is not uniformly distributed across demographic groups based on age, gender, and geography. Osmani et al. (2022) showed that Afghan women, when making decisions about online shopping, take four major antecedents into consideration: perceived trust, perceived risk, perceived web quality, and electronic word-of-mouth. When these factors provide benefits, they prefer online shopping over traditional shopping.

Haqmal et al. (2026), showed that perceived quality, perceived value and price, availability and distribution, social influence, and consumer ethnocentrism have significant effects on consumer awareness on east Afghanistan, whereas packaging and labeling, marketing and digital exposure, and brand trust and reputation were not statistically significant. Ghafourzay and Pariltı (2020) studied the impact of social media marketing on customer inspiration and customer purchase intention in the telecommunications sector of Afghanistan and found that social media marketing has a significant positive impact on customer inspiration and customer purchase intention.

Shah and Jabarkhail (2022) examined the major factors affecting trust in online purchasing and found that company reputation, service quality, security and privacy policy, and relationship commitment predict online trust, which ultimately leads to repeat purchase intention. Hasnat et al. (2023) identified the components that influence Afghan consumers' attitudes toward advertising on social media. They showed that information, entertainment, credibility, economy, and value corruption are among the important components.

Overall, limited attention was paid to research on virtual influencers between 2016 and 2020; however, after 2020, researchers increasingly examined this phenomenon in greater depth, particularly in terms of authenticity and trust (Hussain et al., 2026). Looia and Kahlor (2024) examined the use of positive and negative emotional sentiment in Instagram posts by human and virtual influencers. Their

findings showed that, compared with human influencers, virtual influencers were more likely to use words with positive emotional sentiment in their Instagram posts.

This study, using a conceptual framework and a technology localization approach, examines the contexts, challenges, and limitations of the formation and development of virtual influencers in Afghanistan. Localization is a process through which a technological or informational product is adapted for use in a cultural or technical environment (Agbozo, 2022). localization is typically defined AS the linguistic, cultural and technical adaptation of digital content produced through modern ICTs so that it can be suitably used by end-users in their own languages (Folaron, 2020, P. 209).

METHOD

This study has used a qualitative method and, through thematic analysis, studied the challenges and opportunities of the formation of virtual influencers within the context of the Afghan Internet. Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analyzing and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Through conducting this method, the most important challenges and possibilities have been identified in the form of main and sub-themes through discussions with experts in the field of marketing and public relations specialists. The participants in this study were specialists in the fields of journalism, marketing, and public relations, who were purposively selected based on their professional experience and higher education. The study has included three public relations specialists, two journalists, and two specialists in the field of marketing, as shown in Table 1. Among them, two were women and the other five were men. The semi-structured questions were shared with the research participants through the WhatsApp social network, and their responses were received in written form until reaching the stage of theoretical saturation. Then, the researcher accurately and impartially studied the participants' responses and, finally, through coding and the formation of main and sub-themes, prepared and arranged the table of themes and a report ultimately from their opinions.

Table 1. Research Participants by Code, Gender, Education, and Field of Work

No.	Interviewee Code	Gender	Education	Field of Work
1	P1	Male	Master's	Public Relations
2	P2	Male	Bachelor's	Public Relations
3	P3	Male	Bachelor's	Marketing
4	P4	Female	Master's	Marketing
5	P5	Male	Master's	Journalist
6	P6	Female	Master's	Journalist
7	P7	Male	Bachelor's	Public Relations

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The interviewees' responses to the researcher's questions were studied several times accurately and impartially, and were then coded and consequently divided into main and sub-themes. Overall, the interviewees' responses to six major questions were divided into four main themes or axes. These four major axes, as shown in Figure 2, were the challenges of creating virtual influencers in Afghanistan, the contexts or opportunities for creating virtual influencers in Afghanistan, the audiences of virtual influencers in Afghanistan, and the issue of ethics in the Afghan virtual space. Table 2 shows that the participants in this study considered the most important challenges to be technical challenges, the absence or shortage of facilities, and/or censorship by the ruling system. As shown in Table 2, the most important issues of concern identified as areas of activity for artificial intelligence influencers are education, entertainment, and product marketing. Meanwhile, the issue of Afghan consumers or audiences of these influencers was also identified as a theme. According to the participants, the majority of the audiences in this country are illiterate or have low levels of literacy, and for this reason, they have less trust in social media, while at the same time, they judge advertising content primarily from a cultural and value-based perspective. The participants in this study also describe the issue of ethics and governance in the virtual space as a very important topic.

Table 2. Main and Sub-Themes of the Participants' Responses

No.	Main Themes	Sub-Themes
1	Challenges of Creating Virtual Influencers	Technical challenges, such as the lack of infrastructure, the absence or shortage of artificial intelligence tools, and the shortage of specialists in the field of the virtual space and artificial intelligence, have caused Afghanistan to fall behind in this area. The lack of access to stable Internet, the high cost of Internet, and the rising cost of production are among the economic challenges of virtual influencers. Censorship by the Taliban has caused people to be unable to produce all types of free content.
2	Contexts for Creating Virtual Influencers	Education, particularly education for girls, is considered one of the most valuable contexts in this area. Advertising educational tools, advertising educational resources, as well as advertising educational scholarships and language courses, are considered among the good opportunities in this area. Due to the lack of entertainment and the atmosphere of censorship and repression inside the country, influencers can produce attractive and useful entertainment.

		Marketing for domestic products of Afghanistan, particularly local clothing, local products, and electronic tools.
3	Audiences of Virtual Influencers	The people of Afghanistan, due to illiteracy and the lack of appropriate scientific infrastructure, do not have a high level of media literacy. Artificial intelligence and the virtual space are not yet trusted by the general public, and there is a pessimistic view toward the phenomenon of artificial intelligence. Some audiences consider influencers who are not compatible with the culture and religious values of the people to be contrary to their social traditions.
4	Ethics in the Virtual Space	The cultural and scientific contexts for the expansion of professional ethics in the Afghan virtual space have not been established. Therefore, false information, defamation, and disrespect toward individuals may be disseminated. Due to the absence of a specific legal mechanism, there is a possibility of misuse and/or violation of the privacy of others. In the event of the development of virtual influencers, employees of the current government may use them extensively for their propaganda. Deception and identity forgery may increase. Artificial intelligence!!!

The findings of this study define the creation and activities based on virtual influencers at the intersection of four major themes or elements within the context of Afghan social networks: challenges, contexts, audiences, and professional ethics. According to the interviewees of this study, marketing, content production, and/or influencing the decisions of Afghan consumers in the digital space, above all, require an in-depth pathology of the state of the audiences' media literacy or knowledge, as well as their trust in artificial intelligence. Overall, this finding is consistent with the study by Hakimi et al. (2025), which emphasizes that digital literacy is not distributed according to age, gender, and geography.

The interviewee with code p6 says: "Creating content through virtual influencers on social networks is not difficult, but gaining the trust of the audience, who views artificial intelligence with skepticism and looks at it with a prior negative judgment, is an important issue. The Afghan consumer accepts traditional commercial advertising more than online advertising or advertising based on artificial intelligence. It takes time for people to become accustomed to such advertising." Here, the findings of Jabarkhail & Shah (2022) are indirectly taken into consideration; because in virtual influencers, the consumer or audience not only pays attention to the service provider, but the identity of the content produced is also placed under scrutiny.

Based on the findings of this research, verbal and non-verbal manners and communication in content production and/or marketing should, in terms of cultural and social bias, be compatible with the culture and values of Afghanistan; in particular, attention to the religious values of society is considered a fundamental principle. The interviewee with code p3 says: "Many people see advertisements and

content that focus on sexual and religious issues. But they do not watch them with a mindset of acceptance or approval. However, if we want to succeed, let us not forget continuity and value-orientation.”

The findings of this research have identified the most important challenge in the formation of virtual influencers as the absence of technical and service infrastructures. The interviewee with code p4 says: “Marketing is not simple, especially when you want to use artificial intelligence in the virtual space. You need continuous and stable electricity. You need sufficient facilities and equipment. Even if you do not have a standard sound recording device, you cannot produce a quality program. We do not have 8 hours of stable electricity in 24 hours. For this reason, producing virtual content is difficult for us. But despite that, we deal with it.”

On the other hand, the imposition of severe governmental restrictions on content production in terms of religious and faith-related matters, censorship, as well as the harsh treatment of social media activists by government officials, has created a kind of fear and concern among influencers. Fear has caused the virtual marketing industry in Afghanistan to remain a weak and marginalized industry.

Nevertheless, Afghanistan is a land that, from various dimensions, has the potential for producing cultural and socio-political content in the virtual space. The findings of this research show that the most important principle required in the agenda of influencers, whether virtual or human, is a focus on education through various methods. The interviewee with code P1 says: “Due to being less biased than human influencers, virtual influencers can take action in promoting and encouraging reading, introducing cultural and educational works, and creating opportunities for education for girls deprived of education. Today, the main discourse in Afghanistan is education, and this should be on the agenda of influencers.”

Nevertheless, the participants in this study identify the most important concern and limitation as the absence of ethical and legal frameworks for media activities in the virtual space. In their view, the Afghan virtual space has now become a site of ethnic, linguistic, and regional conflicts. In addition, with the rule of the Taliban, religious conflicts in this country have intensified; therefore, under such volatile conditions, the possibility of neutrality is difficult, but deception and expediency are greater. The interviewees with codes P4 and P5 believe that the Afghan virtual space is currently inflamed by ethnocentrism and religious sectarianism. Virtual space influencers can gain greater and more long-term importance if, instead of emphasizing polarization, they strive for empathy and convergence.

CONCLUSION

The conditions for the emergence of virtual influencers in Afghanistan remain limited and in need of support due to the lack of technical infrastructure, the high cost of electricity and internet, as well as

poverty and unemployment in the country. Due to the lack of educational and academic platforms in the field of digital marketing and studies of new technologies, there is still a considerable gap between social networks and the emergence of virtual influencers according to current global standards. However, in the event of the formation and promotion of content production based on the functioning of social media influencers and artificial intelligence, content production on education constitutes Afghanistan's most important need. Although Afghanistan's discursive space on social networks is influenced by ethnicity, religion, and linguistic tensions, the priority of the people of Afghanistan is the promotion of the values of dialogue, participation, education, and tolerance. With this approach, focusing on education, particularly girls' education, should be one of the most important agendas of virtual and human influencers on social media. Although the level of media literacy among consumers of social networks in Afghanistan is low, the issue of trust in artificial intelligence and new technology is also one of the most important discussions in this country, and institutionalizing modern tools in traditional societies, both because of technological bias and because of the lack of audience trust, is an important issue that should be researched. Nevertheless, the factor behind the success of real or virtual influencers on social networks is adherence to the values of professional ethics, maintaining neutrality, as well as respecting privacy.

REFERENCES

- Agbozo, G. E. (2022). Localization at users' sites is not enough: Ghana Post GPS and power reticulations in the postcolony. *Technical Communication*, 69(2), 17. <https://doi.org/10.55177/tc041879>
- Audrezet, A., Koles, B., Moulard, J. G., Ameen, N., & McKenna, B. (2025). Virtual influencers: Definition and future research directions. *Journal of Business Research*, 200, 115647. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2025.115647>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Conti, M., Gathani, J., & Tricomi, P. P. (2022). Virtual influencers in online social media. *IEEE Communications Magazine*, 60(8), 86–91. <https://doi.org/10.1109/MCOM.001.2100786>
- Folaron, D. (2020). Technology, technical translation and localization. In M. O'Hagan (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of translation and technology* (pp. 203–219). Routledge.
- Ghafourzay, H., & Parilti, N. (2020). The impact of social media marketing on customer inspiration and customer purchase intention: A case study on Kabul-Afghanistan telecom industry. *İşletme Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 12(3), 2721–2732. <https://doi.org/10.20491/isarder.2020.1003>
- Hakimi, M., Sediqi, M., Kohistani, A. J., & Quraishi, T. (2025). The role of digital literacy and technology adoption in facilitating social transformation in Afghanistan. *Journal of Integrated and Development Studies*, 9(2), 175–191. <https://doi.org/10.38043/jids.v9i2.6809>

- Haqmal, H., Hemat, W., & Bayazid, N. (2026). Determinants of consumer awareness of Afghan domestic products: Evidence from Eastern Afghanistan. *Tabesh International Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.64505/tijss/v02issue01/0020>
- Hussain, A., Narula, A., Singh, G., Sinha, M., Raj, R., & Nandal, N. (2026). Virtual influencers in digital marketing: A PRISMA-based systematic literature review and thematic synthesis of engagement, trust, and ethical challenges. *Future Business Journal*, 12, 210. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-026-00910-w>
- Ju, N., Kim, T., & Im, H. (2024). Fake human but real influencer: The interplay of authenticity and humanlikeness in Virtual Influencer communication? *Fashion and Textiles*, 11, 16. DOI: [10.1186/s40691-024-00380-0](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40691-024-00380-0)
- Looi, J., & Kahlor, L. A. (2024). Artificial intelligence in influencer marketing: A mixed-method comparison of human and virtual influencers on Instagram. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 24(2), 107–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2024.2313721>
- Mesbah, A.B. (2026). Algorithmic Governance and Critical Engagement in Digital Platforms. *NEBRAS Academic and Research Quarterly*, (13). <https://doi.org/10.68138/nebras-005>
- Mesbah, A. B. (2026). Ethical Codes in Media Laws Across the History of Journalism in Afghanistan. *Senergi International Journal of Communication Science*. 4 (3), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.61194/ijcs.v4i3.963>
- Mirzaei, H. (2024). Netnography of the taste system of Afghan migrant influencers on Instagram. *Journal of Social Problems of Iran*, 15(2), 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.22059/IJSP.2025.389511.671292>
- Mouritzen, S. L. T., Penttinen, V., & Pedersen, S. (2023). Virtual influencer marketing: The good, the bad and the unreal. *European Journal of Marketing*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-12-2022-0915>
- Osmani, A., Zazai, S., Gul, H., & Shams, M. S. (2022). Antecedents of Afghan women towards online shopping in Afghanistan: An evaluation. *Management*, 5(1), 55–77. <https://doi.org/10.31841/KJEMS.2022.110>
- Rohani, W. (2026). *Afghanistan's internet under the Taliban: New data exchange center ready for operation*. Independent Persian. <https://www.independentpersian.com/node/422374>
- Shah, R., Jan, B., & Jabarkhail, I. M. (2022). Factors influencing online trust and repeat purchase intention: a study of afghan consumers. *International Journal of Information, Business and Management*, 14(1), 17-37.
- Sultani, K. (2026). The Role of Women and Girls in Afghanistan's Digital Market: A Growing Experience Emerging from Constraints. Nimrokhmedia. <https://nimrokhmedia.com/the-role-of-women-and-girls-in-afghanistans-digital-market-a-growing-experience-amidst-limitations/>