

MARKETING

Will virtual livestreamers replace humans in China?

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Originating in Japan, the virtual idol trend is spilling over to mainstream livestreaming sites like Douyin and Taobao Live. Image credit: YouTube

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Term/phrase:

Virtual livestreamer

About the trend:

On video-sharing Web sites such as Bilibili.com, content involving **anime** and virtual idols is proving particularly popular with **Gen-Z** audiences.

Now, the trend is spilling over to mainstream livestreaming sites such as Douyin and Taobao Live.

Over the last couple of months, ecommerce players seeking new ways to tackle **COVID-19** have been tapping into this trend by collaborating with new and pre-existing virtual idols on these platforms.

In April, the virtual singer Luo Tianyi co-hosted a campaign alongside China's top livestreamer, Li Jiaqi. By May, their second combined session generated almost 3 million viewers at its peak.

The following month, a Japanese virtual idol and "vocaloid" a virtual anime character that uses a synthesizer software for their voice named Miku, who is arguably the most global and popular of her kind, joined Taobao's live-streaming platform.

During the 618 festival, Miku's popularity surpassed even top celebrities such as Wang Yibo on **Alibaba's** platform, attracting more than 10 million page visits and virtual gifts.



On April 20, virtual singer Luo Tianyi became the co-host of a campaign alongside China's top livestreamer Li Jiaqi. Image credit: YouTube

Additional context:

This is not the first time virtual livestreamers have made headlines in China's mainstream news.

The Chinese anime idol Luo Tianyi promoted the **Huawei** Nova 7 phone alongside actress Guan Xiaotong, and the Chinese video-sharing platform **Douyin** in April released its first virtual livestreamer, Momo Chan ().

Rooted in anime and Japanese idol culture, the first virtual idol, Lynn Minmay, dates back to the 1980s. She was a fictional singer from the animated film adaptation, "Macross: Do You Remember Love?" and the first fictional idol to garner major real-world success.

As holography and sound-related technology advanced, even more "fictional celebrities" were brought to life. They are largely popular with Gen Zers and have inspired Chinese interpretations of Japan's original virtual idols.

According to a report by iResearch, there are now 490 million **Chinese netizens** interested in ACG (anime, comics and gaming) and 390 million with a targeted interest in virtual idols.



In 2018, CCTV recognized the impact of the creative medium of virtual idols and invited Luo Tianyi to perform a traditional Chinese song with famous Peking Opera artist Wang Peiyu. Image credit: 163.com

Why Gen-Z consumers like it:

The fast pace of social media has made Gen Z highly beauty conscious, and the idealized appearances of virtual idols tend to fare well with younger audiences.

Twenty-one-year-old Jerry Sun, an avid virtual idol fan, told *Jing Daily*, "Anime fans love the images of virtual livestreamers. Human livestreamers might have appearance issues once in a while, but ACG idols are designed to be flawless."

Mr. Sun noted that people over the age of 30 tend to hold negative attitudes towards ACG content, while Gen Zers often have a more diverse interest range and greater acceptance towards creative media.

What makes this trend significant to China's Gen Zers is the combination of ACG culture and traditional Chinese art forms.

Vocaloids such as Luo Tianyi own sound databases that tech-savvy Gen Zers can freely access, inspiring them to create content on Web sites such as Bilibili.com.

In 2018, China's central television network CCTV recognized the impact of this creative medium and invited Luo Tianyi to perform a traditional song with famous Peking Opera artist Wang Peiyu. The collaboration sparked heated

discussions, particularly among younger netizens.

The post-90s generation, which was raised during a period of heightened nationalism and "cultural confidence" a buzzword referring to the country's rising cultural self-esteem are generally more passionate about Chinese culture.

The impact of this patriotism can be seen in online comments like, "It's a tear-jerking moment to see ACG culture combine with traditional Chinese art forms, especially as this niche reaches mainstream audiences."



In 2016, former Givenchy design director Riccardo Tisci designed a haute couture dress for Hatsune Miku. The gown included lace, tassels, fur, and Swarovski crystals. Image credit: Vogue.com

How luxury brands should approach the trend:

Virtual idols have transformed from a niche interest into a global phenomenon, and they offer excellent potential to a fashion industry that has already birthed some examples of their potency.

Examples of cross-genre collaborations between luxury houses and virtual idols include Givenchy's haute couture dress for Hatsune Miku and the checkerboard two-piece Miku wore for her first vocaloid opera, *The End*, which was designed by Marc Jacobs and **Louis Vuitton's** studio team.

According to Miro Li, founder of Chinese consulting company Double V., luxury brands that wish to monetize the virtual livestreamer trend must be creative when evaluating their marketing campaigns. That is particularly true for companies promoting designs that are available to buy and wear in real life but will be modeled by virtual idols.

"Instead of merely including products in the livestream, brands should design limited edition items for the virtual idol," Mr. Li said. "Otherwise, it's no different to using a human livestreamer."

Moreover, before launching any campaign, brands must first identify their target consumer and carefully match it to the virtual idol's fan base.

According to Mr. Li, female virtual idols such as Luo Tianyi and Miku target male Gen Zers, and they work well with electronics or brands that sell figurines, gaming supplies or other ACG merchandise.

Meanwhile, most male characters, like those in the Chinese dating simulation game "Mr Love: Queen's Choice" (), target female consumers and are more suited for beauty, fashion and food-related companies.

The aforementioned dating game has already collaborated with the personal care company Lux on a product launch livestream, which resulted in \$714,000 in sales. In fact, this partnership laid the groundwork for more companies to work with virtual livestreamers in China.



The well-known Chinese dating game "MrLove: Queen's Choice" () collaborated with the personal care company Lux. Image credit: adquan.com

But collaborating with virtual livestreamers, as opposed to influencers such as Li Jiaqi, poses its own set of complex challenges.

Virtual livestreamers come without physical location limitations, time restrictions and, most notably, do not make mistakes.

But Mr. Li has found one big flaw with virtual presenters.

"It's hard for them to relate emotionally to audiences," he said, "especially when they cannot try on the product endorsements."

Additionally, there have been pricing roadblocks when linking a product to these idols.

Luo Tianyi's fee, for example, is much higher than those of top livestreamers or celebrities.

Nevertheless, **livestreaming** continues to gain traction in China, and virtual livestreaming is the next dynamic step.

Though it is still largely unexplored ground, virtual idols' usefulness in creating a fresh experience for consumers is guaranteed.

"In short, I don't think virtual livestreamers will replace humans," Mr. Li said, "but with the development of new technology, we will definitely see more of them in the future."

*Virtual Livestreamer is the next highlight in Jing Daily's new series, What Gen-Z Wants, which reports on the booming **Gen-Z** luxury consumer in China. The series analyzes microtrends and styles that are contributing to the empowerment of young Chinese fashion communities.*

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