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Virtual influencers: a challenge to trust and authenticity

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MA Applied Ethics for Professionals

VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS: A CHALLENGE TO TRUST AND AUTHENTICITY

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Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Applied Ethics for Professionals, in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Signed _____

Name LUTHFIA KALLA

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Introduction

"I've never fooled anyone. I've let people fool themselves.

They didn't bother to find out who and what I was. Instead they would invent a character for me. I wouldn't argue with them. They were obviously loving somebody I wasn't."

Marilyn Monroe.

Influencers have come in many shapes and forms through the ages. Pre-social media had us voraciously attentive to the songs, films and/or relationships of the likes of Elvis Presley, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe amongst others. Social media expanded on that attention by bringing the lives of celebrities closer and made it possible for us to become voyeurs in the lives of celebrities like Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian, and Bonang Matheba. Celebrities have become known as influencers in the social media space. An influencer is "someone who affects or changes the way that other people behave", (Cambridge Dictionary 2021) and this ability has been translated into a tool to market products. This rise of social media influencers, whilst no doubt fun and entertaining, has led to a new breed of influencers, Virtual Influencers (VI). A VI according to Travers (2020) is "a digital character created in computer graphics software, then given a personality defined by a first-person view of the world and made accessible on media platforms for the sake of influence." Of significant importance is that presently a VI is a product made by a team of creatives to fulfil a commercial function. VIs seek to commercially influence us for personal or commercial gain and in the process of doing so, our traditional norms of whom we trust to influence us and how we lay our bases for that trust are disrupted.

Already teams of software creators have presented us with versions of ourselves with human influencers where they have been given a licence to use the identity of a human influencer in corporate branding and marketing. This raises the issue of trust and authenticity in human influencers who engage in this type of branding because when human influencers contract with consumer brands to make virtual avatars of themselves, these virtual avatars communicate independently of the 'original' human and are 'controlled' by the respective brand. iYanda is the VI for South African actress and radio personality Ayanda Thabethe made by a company called Avatar Company. Her individual brand of authenticity will confront challenges because the commercial brand iYanda exists simultaneously on social media. This issue of a blurring of authenticity and trust is further complicated when the VI is an entirely fictional identity created by a team of creators, who already have access to our online representations of self. The democratization of the internet has allowed for these representations to be copied and molded to suit their creators' purpose, and in so doing, allow for biased, gendered representations of a new, constructed self for commercial gain which puts pressure on our current conception of authenticity

The focus of this report will revolve specifically around the significance and impact of commercialised VIs in their online relations with humans on social media platforms. The research in this thesis will further bring together the questions around the capitilisation of these images, where our representations of self have become commodified and which problematises our traditional conception of authenticity. Coupled with this commodification of self, this thesis will examine the related issues of trust and sincerity in relation to online content and explore how these concepts intertwine when dealing with a commercial virtual influencer. This report seeks to expose the extent and perhaps limits of our trust in online

content and how we should approach online curation of same, given that we currently use a framing of sincerity and authenticity to build trust relationships.

In doing so, this report will examine both VIs and their team of creators against these values of authenticity, trust, and sincerity that we traditionally use as humans in our inter-personal and intra-personal relations in society. It will also highlight the levels of choice present in these interactions as well as in the representation and creation of the VI. Furthermore, this report will raise the issue of how our traditional approach to values like authenticity, trust, and sincerity in our current structure of society where humans and state exist in a co-operative will require something more to cater for these simulations, an inclusion of another structure perhaps, the simulated reality, where commercialised VIs represent one of simulations that exist in it.

Online content needs to be credible if we are to place our trust in these creators who, via their VI identities seek to appeal to our commercial [and social] desires in various ways. The issue of sincerity of the team of creators alongside that of authenticity of the VI becomes important and means that in the representation of a VI we may increasingly need to seek out the team's sincere intentions in order to lend credence and credibility to their creations. Sincerity and authenticity are separate but related as proffered by Lauryn Bialystok (2011) where she claims that the element of sincerity will involve the avoidance of deceiving others about oneself, whilst authenticity refers to the avoidance of self-deception. Sincerity refers to those inter-personal relationships that are based on honesty about your self-expression with others (ibid).

We therefore see that VIs represent at this time, a version of humanity. Whether they represent an authentic, sincere, and trustworthy reflection of the creators remains to be seen. More so, should the creator remain invisible. This is especially poignant in our evolution towards more ethical technological development.

The concepts of authenticity, trust and sincerity require further development to determine how we should approach VIs. If authenticity has [until recently] been understood as a combination of expressing ones' personality and living a morally responsible, autonomous life in a state of eudaimonia (Varga, Somogy and Guignon 2020) then our ideal of authenticity will have to be revisited given the rise of a VI alongside the lack of responsibility associated with the team behind its simulation. Underlying the arguments on authenticity is the assumption that authenticity is a virtue (personal or social) that is achieved in the journey toward good. This assumption of the good is not always clear in the case of a VI. Human influencers exploit themselves for marketing as well but what sets the VI apart is the intentional manipulation of seemingly authentic traits for exploitation by a team. Shudu[1] is an example of a black African VI who models for a well-known clothing brand and iYanda is the alter-ego of a South African DJ Ayanda Thabethe[2] whose image, likes, dislikes and social media profile is controlled by the team that created it.

VIs are currently used to harness market capitalisation for products, by using our trends, likes dislikes and tropes on social media. Shudu (@shudu.gram) the first digital model wears Fenty

[1] @shudu.gram for a look at the simulation of black female authenticity. Her creator is a white male who has idealized the representation of a black model female form.
[2] It is not the intention to question the veracity of the extent and nature of control contained in this commercial legal contract between the parties, but merely to question the ethical significance of same.

products. Miquela (@lil miquela.gram) plays at being a singer [she released a collaborative song with a real-life artist] and weaves her story on Instagram to leverage advertisement and sponsorship deals from brands such as Samsung, Prada, Calvin Klein and YouTube. The markets are enamoured by these VIs, and so are we. Unbridled markets can resemble a form of "wild capitalism" (Taylor 1991:110) with the resultant exploitation and inequalities that follow. A VI is an exploitation of a human personality and the growth in this phenomenon of a VI for market and influence has a bearing on freedom. What remains to be seen is whether that freedom is worth sacrificing for a simulation. Charles Taylor, in his book *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991) provides insight on democratic institutions and how our cultural struggle can result in a weakening of common purpose. It raises the question of what our common human purpose should be in the wake of these highly successful virtual commercial simulations.

Who tells the story and whose story it is to tell is complicated further by our gradual understanding that we do not exert much control over what is portrayed online and progressively less control over our own individual identities. The truth does not seem to be an active role-player in these online portrayals. However, probing questions around truth fall outside the scope of this thesis.

The chapter on Authenticity will raise the issues of identity creation and social construction that these VIs exploit for a commercial purpose whilst employing the very social tools that we as humans use to leverage our manners of influence on social media. What is seen to be authentic is further complicated by our current notions of trust that we ascribe to such representations of authenticity. Is trust, as we currently employ it, sufficient for the way in

which a VI and/or its team of creators operate online? The chapter on Trust will seek to expose the limits of our current trust values. To be authentic intra-personally [and develop your self] bears some relation to our inter-personal relations which is currently how sincerity of motive and intention are understood. Can we have a sincere VI if we have a team that we do not know inter-personally. These are the questions that the Chapter on Sincerity will unpack. In these ways, authenticity being the principal notion behind the creation of a self, called a VI, forms the focus of this report with Trust and Sincerity, as components of Authenticity in this format of a VI self and its team operating online will be examined.

The research on authenticity, trust and sincerity will reveal the challenges that we face in; confronting versions of ourselves [simulated and primed for a purpose] and in questions on true selves, social construction, and intention, all of which are deeply ethically significant and for which we owe VIs great thanks for challenging us to be better version of ourselves.

Authenticity

"The quest for authenticity cannot but become a political act, an act engaged in with others, which mutually shapes our individual possibilities"

Andrew Pierce. "Authentic Identities" Social Theory and Practice (2015:439)

Research on authenticity in relation to Virtual Influencers (VI) is still scant. To arrive at a working definition of authenticity in relation to a VI, this chapter will briefly trace the modern philosophical development of the concept of authenticity and extend it to its eventual relation to a VI. This philosophical background is not intended to be an exhaustive critique on authenticity as an ethical ideal. It is rather an overview of what I have determined to be the key salient features of this philosophical development in keeping with a user-specific working definition on authenticity that will be used in the arguments that this chapter will tackle in relation to Virtual Influencers (VI). Authenticity is currently conceived as that way of life expressive both of one's personality as well as of responsible morality whilst simultaneously involving a [personal or social] journey of self-creation towards the good (Varga, Somogy and Guignon 2020). This framing of authenticity is called into question with the emergence of a VI. In furtherance of this aim, this chapter will provide some insight into this phenomenon of a VI, specifically as a brand influencer primed for commercialisation, so that we can link our current post-modern understanding on authenticity to the emergence of this new influencer.

A VI is intrinsically a product of a creator or a team of creators who imbue it with characteristics and traits that may tend to show embedded or intentional biases, gendered or otherwise, and not just because of its intended use as a marketing and/or commercial tool.

It is my contention that the very nature of a VI, in its simulated self is a biased representation, be it, unintentionally from the team creating it or intentionally from the entity that deploys it. Embedded biases already exist in technology in the ways in which gender roles are presented as avatars in video games for boys and girls. Norms, it has been argued have already crept into software and there is support for the contention that technology is not neutral (Van den Hoven 2010:61). The increasing use of avatars is a well-known development in the technological arena, whether in the form of gaming or in the aspirational metaverse foreshadowed by the re-naming of parent company Facebook to Meta.[3] What is novel, and challenging is that the VI occupies a space where it is an imitation of a human with human characteristics and opinions that attract followers on Instagram, whilst being entirely simulated by a team of human creators. There does not appear to be any moral responsibility for the creators of the VI to portray an authentic version of a VI since the VI can be developed and "nurtured" to portray a wide range of social and political issues depending on the milieu at the time. Interestingly this VI will remain "alive" beyond its current creators, *ad infinitum* and will be able to influence and attract followers in multiple ways through the passage of time (and different creators).

So, it is argued here that authenticity despite its current post-modern form of a rejection of current social norms, as will be discussed in this chapter, can still find a relevant social application. This is expressed in how the VI chooses to operate in the very social milieu that allows it to exist so that it can exert a social influence on the 'audience' around it much in the

[3] Meta, a nod to the notion of a metaverse is "the name for a shared online 3D virtual space.. a future version of the internet." See more on the nature of personal holograms and virtual identities in Chris Walker's (2021) article; "Why has Facebook changed its name to Meta and what is the metaverse?".

same way that Charles Guignon (2004)[4] concluded that humans find that their 'brand' of authenticity is informed by our dependence on others around us. However, it will be shown that the role of authenticity needs extending to cater for the needs of a VI, who is a representation of a cultivated commercial collective and inhabits a form of stylised authenticity that is more social rather than personal. A VI takes us on a journey that is outward rather than inward and upward in a form and manner that goes beyond the post-modernist rejection of mere social strappings and adherences. Instead, it turns to embrace those very social strappings that propel it towards more influence.

Modern framing of authenticity and autonomy.

This section does not intend to be a treatise on the rich history of authenticity that has developed over the years. This falls outside the scope of this thesis. Instead, this section is meant to provide an overview of the salient characterstics of authenticity insofar as it relates to the framing of same to a VI.

A dominant approach in current literature on authenticity comes from an Existentialist approach where the focus on authenticity has been chiefly an individualistic goal (Varga, Somogy and Guignon 2020). Andrew Pierce, in his article "Authentic Identities" (2015) refers to this historical link as one grounded in subjectivity. Pierce submits Kierkegaard's reconstruction of the truth from an objective notion to one where truth is a purely subjective, "individual [notion]- something inside of us, given by our own experiences, rather than outside of us, in the world" (2015:438) as an illustration of how authenticity becomes mired with personal subjectivity. This focus on the subjective leads, as Pierce (2015) argues, to a simplified understanding of the varied factors that play a role in the pursuit of the authentic.

[4] [Authenticity is]… "fundamentally a *social* virtue, one of a group of character traits that play a key role in fitting us for membership in a society of a particular sort (Guignon 2004:161)."

Charles Taylor in *The Ethics of Authenticity* decries the purely subjective self-reflective drive of the modern approach to authenticity because it does away with notions of common values and social commitment (1991). This section will reveal the progression of authenticity from one that is rooted in the purely individualistic endeavours to be better versions of oneself to the consequent problems that such a subjective stance can bring to the fore using Taylor's and Pierce's arguments on authenticity. Pierce himself puts forward a conception of authenticity that is intersubjective, with trust being the relational ideal. This linking of authenticity to trust is a worthy notion and will play a significant role in online interactions with a VI since it is this very authenticity that a VI portrays that serves to leverage off our current notions of trust in order to gain commercial influence.

To be authentic is to be "true to oneself for one's own benefit" [rather] than to be "true to oneself [in order] to be true to others" (Varga, Somogy and Guignon 2020). This shift represents a move away from the previously held notion of being sincere and truthful in one's dealings with others so that, historically [in pre-modern times], to be true was only taken to be "a means towards a successful social ends" (Varga, Somogy and Guignon 2020). This modern rise of authenticity as an ideal can be seen as a necessary adjunct to the rise in the ideal of autonomy in which the individual came to be seen as an independent moral agent who can make worthy choices based on rational reflective decisions of her own choice unconstrained by outside pressures. Social freedom lies at the heart of this autonomy and authenticity too, but where the two part ways lie in the way that authenticity is meant to capture those moral values that a moral agent finds specific resonance with, a purely subjective, personal attachment that goes beyond autonomy. So, on these modern understandings, authenticity goes beyond a mere conforming to a social order to how an

agent's deep emotions can sometimes outweigh a rational deliberation of the social norms and values in society. By way of an example, where W, living at an old age home, refuses to be vaccinated against the SARS CoV2 virus despite the fact that senior citizens are more vulnerable to the virus. W does not want to be vaccinated for two reasons; one being her choice not to defer to authority and two because of her belief that vaccines are an unnatural interference in the natural order of the world and thus goes against her value system that she has exercised all her life. Her refusal to be vaccinated in this way, exhibits an aligning of herself to what she considers her autonomous and authentic values. Authenticity if taken to its extreme subjectivist stance can thus be seen to be critical of a blind adherence to such normative values just because they exist, because it can become mired in personal subjectivity and not truth, and so can come to represent the ultimate exercise in personal freedom and choice.

Taylor (1991) shows that whilst we as humans are obsessed with self-creation we can still self-create through a moral compass. He cautions that we must still strive to be a part of a whole even if we are searching for our true selves. Our self-creation must be viewed through the lens of an independent common bedrock of values that unite us as humans. Indeed our search for our true selves must, according to him, be "compensated by a stronger more inner sense of linkage" (91). He expands on this by arguing that authenticity has two parts; manner and matter; manner being the self-referential aspect of personal resonance, and matter being the content of an independent value that your manner should be addressed against. Matter, he says is not self-referential, in other words, personal goals must be measured against something else that is independent (1991). This something else is that part of a whole that we are inextricably linked to, or in simpler terms, our shared societal values that function as

that form of independent matter which bonds us together as humankind. So, Taylor says “we face a continuing struggle to realize higher and fuller modes of authenticity against the resistance of the flatter and shallower forms (1991:94).” In this way, Taylor would urge W to be vaccinated to realise that we are a part of a whole, a community of people with a larger goal of ensuring the survival of our species. W’s personal need for authenticity must be met with something more significant and independent of it using his construction of matter, through which W’s need for authenticity must be viewed.

Taylor’s critique aside, the modern value of authenticity conceivably lies in our independent pursuit for the understanding of self and our adoption of a self vs the world. This may involve using Pierce’s notion of intersubjective trust as the basis of such authenticity. This describes situations where trust between autonomous subjects forms the basis for the adoption of an authentic unfolding of self in the world. However how does this relate to a notion of authenticity for a VI operating in the domain of the internet? If we are to use a modern approach, then a VIs authenticity should be rooted in its independent self-expression and its autonomy to choose its own values and personal goals against a backdrop of independent common values that seek to connect all of us. This appears to be how Taylor, read with Pierce would like to conceive of it. Can there be a true VI on this notion of authenticity? There appears to be some discordance. This is because authenticity, as is traditionally understood above, stems from a foundation of autonomy. Our foundations of understanding in both these aspects of a character that is morally responsible is put to test in our encounters with VIs since these creations exhibit neither by themselves. What is key is to what extent the creator of these VIs takes responsibility for the authenticity of the VI that it portrays and to

what extent the non-autonomy of the creation bears significance for said portrayal. The post-modern developments may assist us with this.

Post-modern approach to Authenticity.

The modern approach was concerned with a human as a subject and with the notion of selfhood ("a contained, bounded individual, a centre of experience" (Guignon 2004:108)) which was a shift away from the pre-modern approach to humans being a placeholder in a hierarchical society (Guignon 2004). The post-modern approach has sought to show that humans are not subject to anything but are instead fluid autonomous selves capable of multiple and diverse choices based on the contexts that they find themselves present in (Guignon 2004). Humans, on this approach, seem to represent a self that is capable of a blended variety of selves. They are, through their individual experiences and the social milieu that they live in, construct a self that is subject to these experiences. They can be viewed as de-centred selves that stand outside of responsibility and integrity (ibid). This fluidity is evidenced in how the notion of a self is obliterated "by post-modern thought [going beyond] destabilising the binary oppositions" (Guignon 2004:126) of individual vs society that authenticity is rooted in. Where the modern approach had taken the self to be an identity that represented an unassailable core of values, the post-modern approach differs greatly in its acknowledgment that the self can be a mere construct, without an unassailable true core.

This apparent rootless post-modern approach has us viewing the human experience as an evolution of many selves where I see myself as "an ongoing event of self-creation that is answerable to no one, I can make up my own life story in any way… constrained only by what

is on the table in my culture and my own imagination" (Guignon 2004:116). This drive towards egotistical selfish individualism in the search for one's life story is an anathema to Taylor. It is what he feared most when he criticised the modern development of authenticity. Taylor brought his critique of the individualistic trend in the modern version of authenticity largely under the banner of the self-determining freedom of an individual. This type of freedom, according to Taylor goes beyond "negative liberty (being free to do what I want without interference from others)" (Varga, Somogy and Guignon 2020). For Taylor self-determining freedom means that your freedom to choose is not shaped by any forms of external influences or society. It is empty of matter and is, in his opinion, counterproductive to authenticity because it renders authenticity shallow and, in the process, fragments identities because it is rooted in self-centeredness (1991). Indeed, his fears may have already been realised in this post-modern turn of authenticity, where our online potrayals reflect a variety of shallow selves, primed for a commercialised purpose.

Does this render the post-modern approach to authenticity redundant, if there is no one true self under all the social masks that we don? Guignon believes that authenticity still has a valuable role to play by accepting the post-modern view that the self is socially constituted, but by also combining that with the narrative approach where we are "self-making and self-fashioning beings" (2004:127), created from the shared contexts that we find ourselves in. Guignon (2004) argues that authenticity in the post-modern form may still provide us with a viable self-making version of ourselves, where we become who we are through a constant "project of self-making that involves embellishing and refining what is given in order to create a self that is truly one's own" (131). This argument rests on the assumption that we are finite beings with an end in sight in which this finite existence must have some meaning to it, hence

our drive to self-create and self-fashion. It also rests on the assumption that we are, in part at least, a product of social construction so that we can indeed self-fashion and self-create. Social construction and infinity will be touched on in the Chapter on Sincerity.

This narrativist version of self is developed further by Alisdair Macintyre who links the stories that our lives are, with a beginning middle and an end, to the historical, social, and collective contexts that they are found in so that they make sense (Guignon 2004). This is a key turning point in the framing of authenticity as a life-storied journey that is compiled of personal, individual stories that must be inextricably bound together with the stories of others within a specific social setting of a community so that actions and journeys have meaning and significance (Guignon 2004). Thus "to say that a human agent is to be understood as a narrative, then, is to say that human existence is inescapably embedded in a wider context of meaning" (ibid: 135). This turn to the collective is emphasised by Pierce (2015) who argues for an intersubjective understanding of authenticity which is that authenticity is found not in the individual nor in the collective but exists in its relation to each other. This relation lies in his contention that we as humans are social so that "part of what it means to be authentically human is to join together with others in constructing collective identities that shape and explain who we are as individuals" (443).

Guignon further ties authenticity to democracy by arguing that the authority of a government lies in the consent of the governed and authenticity which allows one to publicly express one's feelings leads to a more effective and sustained democracy (Varga, Somogy and Guignon 2020). So it may be that Taylor's fears are being allayed by these current notions of

authenticity and individualism because these appeals to democracy may allow for his matter part of authenticity to take hold.

To summarise the post-modern approach to authenticity, is to recognise the notion that humans are self-fashioning, fluid, social beings. This notion is coupled with the further recognition that we have a choice to reinvent ourselves in the collective, democratic society that we find ourselves in and corral that in [hopefully] to meaningful, collective goals that exist outside our personal ones and which matter in our quest for our true selves. We have enabled ourselves, by choices afforded to us in the democratic evolution of our social and collective identities to reinvent those identities through values and beliefs that resonate whilst discarding those that do not. Whether we can translate all of this into a meaningful finite life remains a quest that we choose to autonomously undertake and made more challenging given the wide array of choices that social media has afforded us in our quest for self-fashioning and re-invention.

This kind of democratic access to social media profiles of human influencers has been a boon for another type of fashioning and invention. It has had the [un?] intended consequence of establishing a wide and varied array of selves in a 'human database' of information that teams of VI creators have access to. Our every stylised characteristic and iteration displayed on online platforms have become the repository that these creators use to create their VIs. Will authenticity in this post-modern form meet the challenge that a VI brings?

Authenticity in relation to a VI.

Whether our society is willing to cater for the needs of a purely subjective, narrow view of a VI that simulates authentic human traits depends on how we chose to view authenticity in relation to our ethical code of conduct together with our conception of our collective society. In fact, our need for blind personal resonance and democratic freedom to choose at any cost, may be the driving forces behind the simulated VI who captures human traits and characteristics to leverage influence on our human need for such resonance and choice. A VI can be viewed as a hyperreal unit, as understood in Jean Baudrillard's (1994) book *Simulacra and Simulation* where these notions of hyperreal units operate in a simulated environment. The hyperreal and the simulacra as described by Baudrillard will be expanded on in a later section to tie into our current notions of authenticity to a VI. Nonetheless, it must be emphasised that the traits that a VI currently captures are all our 'markers' of authenticity, which along with image, dress, hairstyle, clothes, likes and dislikes that a VI uses all point us towards a summation of a VI self in progress towards authenticity. So, does authenticity work for a VI?

In response, it will become necessary to locate authenticity as something other than only rooted in the traditional individualistic conception where one seeks to be "true to oneself". Rather it may become necessary, given the stable of technical experts who create the VI, to extend our definition of authenticity to one where the creative team takes responsibility to be true to their mission and vision for the VI.

Guignon (2004) has linked authenticity to a social virtue so that the narcissistic tendencies in this quest is tempered by one's social commitment to your community, area, locale, or politics, whilst Taylor (1991), in his ideal that we are destined for higher purpose argues against a fragmentation of a society because of an "adversarial [political system] in which citizen efficacy consists in being able to get your rights, whatever the consequence for the whole" (177). Both interpretations pit the individual integrally as a connected active unit in society. Pierce (2015) does the same with his notion of a group identity, with his contention that we are connected to something larger. Pierce holds that whilst group identity which has risen to the fore in his examples like, authentically black or authentically feminine run the risk of subsuming individuality it is a necessary feature in our understanding of authenticity. He argues that collective and individual authenticity both require trust to develop further. Because of this connection to trust, its limits, implications, and consequences on VI online content is discussed further in the chapter on trust.

We are, then, a dynamic sum of our personal journeys, framed and dependant on where we have had those journeys and how we are linked to them by our responsibilities to them to do good. So, authenticity can be viewed thus far as two-fold; it couples a journey inward for truth linked to beacons of responsibility and commitment to community so that we evolve into sincere and authentic contributing members of the society that our personal journey takes us on. An authentic life quest has been linked to the human recognition that our life story/stories must be made relevant and given meaning because we, as humans recognise that death is final and that our life is finite (Guignon 2004). Meaning, relevance, higher purpose, the good

life, and collective identity all intertwine in our understanding of what it means to be authentic.

How can this approach above cater for a VI and the team that creates it? It appears that, using this definition, a VI and the team currently do not meet this approach. At present a VI is literally a poster child for inauthenticity, since it is neither grounded in a journey inward, reflective of a personal journey, responsible nor committed to a community in which it assumes a duty for good. It seems to represent exactly what was feared by Taylor when he cautioned against the "shallow and dangerous" (1991:120) present in the culture of modernity that he framed, in that a VI represents that uber achievement of our obsession with self-fashioning and self-creation in a form that appears flat and shallow. It has taken on the form of an 'authentic' human so that it can claim appeal and influence on the very humans that it is imitating in a manner that is beyond post-modern in its approach; rejection of the social norms that seek to corral our identities combined with the quest for a non-human version of a self that rings 'true' for a specified commercial purpose. In other words, a manipulation by the creators of a VI of the journey for personal resonance that humans actively seek coupled with the base desire for more influence and appeal from those humans, in a form that appears socially acceptable despite actually discarding those very social norms that contribute to authenticity. This is because a VI operates outside of a collective which has a tradition of meaning beyond that of a VIs stated commercialisation. How are we to receive the authenticity of a black female model, like Shudu that has been created by a white male? What does this mean for the current push to further body positivity in our representation of the female form? VIs lack that form of ownership of values that distinguish humans from non-

humans, and in its creation, as a commercial tool, the creating team live out their commercialised desires for creation and fashioning to fuel that need.

If we must accept that a VI does not 'own' its 'truth' then we have, in a VI, a representation of a unit that operates in that form of the hyperreal that Jean Baudrillard (1994) is known for. He proposes that hyperreality be viewed as a representation (a sign) without an original. This may be what the definition of a VI should ideally encompass. It is indeed a form of a hyperreal being operating in an online platform that does not really exist outside of the said platform. Furthermore, Thiago Braga (2021), in his film review article of the Matrix, recently summed up Baudrillard's notion of the hyperreal when he likened the hyperreal to the "creation of a whole set of signifiers that 'represent' something that does not actually exist, and that only makes sense in the very chain of signification to which they belong" (1). This is a helpful way to view the rise of the VI. It is not real because it does not represent something that actually exists external to it, yet it operates within a simulated reality without a real counterpart. It is as Baudrillard coined, a simulacrum where the simulacrum has no relation to reality "because it no longer measures itself against either an ideal or negative instance. It is no longer anything but operational" (1994:2). This seems to neatly tie into the current format of the operation of a VI. The VI represents this shift *away* from the reality and the multiple forces that shape us, into a form of the hyperreal where it seeks to establish a "hyperspace of the commodity where in many regards a whole new society is elaborated" (75) in what Baudrillard terms, a hyper-market. A VI primed for brand placement and perceived authenticity may be the siren call for Baudrillard's notion of that hypermarket, and the online social media platform that hypermarket where it operates.

If we view the VI as a tool for information and juxtapose it with Baudrillard's (1994) contention that information destroys meaning, we may begin to see how a VI may be well poised for its objectives; seek more influence. If, as he contends, information destroys its own content (and is consequently devoid of meaning and significance) in two ways; first by "staging communication" (80) and second, by using a medium, we can liken this to the VI. This medium can be viewed in two ways; on the one hand as a mass medium through which information is passed like Instagram, or on the other hand as an embodiment of a message, more specifically where the medium *is* the message. A VI seeks to influence humans by both staging communication and by using the markers of authenticity that we are familiar with, such as wearing certain clothes, affecting certain social styles and trends, and mimicking pop culture hashtags and it does so on a mass media platform whilst simultaneously being the message itself. This is because we are drawn to the image of the VI that we may relate to and want to emulate as well as the product/brand that it endorses. It is the essence of Baudrillard's contention that it will upend the real by becoming "more real than the real" (81). In its fragmentation of what is real it will create another layer towards the notion of authenticity that we seek.

This fragmentation of the self and of identity is highlighted in Santosh Patra's (2018) article on how an individual's sense of self and identity is being shaped by interactions with virtual reality, where virtual reality, according to Patra is an external entity as well as an internal one.[5] His article focuses on how the social production of space is a category of its own, its own form of virtual reality which levies influence on one's own notions of self. He argues that

[5] Santosh Patra uses young Facebook users to extrapolate their presentations of self and identity in virtual space in his article "Intersubjectivity World of Virtual Reality: Facebook Users Behaviour in the context of Privacy, Self and Identity."

we as humans are becoming accustomed to “multiple narratives of reality” (191) because reality is created in a virtual space via self-production on a mass media platform like Facebook. This argument correlates to some extent with Zoe Hurley’s (2019) contention in her article on female Gulf-Arab influencers on Instagram that these influencers mobilise “fantastical authenticity” (14) for themselves using various parasocial tools so that they can leverage more influence and attract more commercial brands. They immerse themselves through these techniques to construct different versions of reality which is insightful in that it explains “how visual representations on social media [can operate] to define real and imagined ways of being that are highly gendered yet differ according to socio-cultural context” (14). Hurley (2019) refers to a term known as parasocial relations (PSR) which refers to “followers’ relationships with influencer and the media being consumed” (9) in which a follower, through the use by the influencer of various modes of interaction, such as disclosure, intimacy and commercialisation can experience the illusion of a real and meaningful relationship. It appears that modification, self-creation, and re-creation are all acceptable forms of self in a virtual space.

It is also relevant to note that even if we have become accustomed to operating in differing and multiple versions of reality, we are doing so with autonomy and within a specific socio-cultural collective. Does the VI merely represent that artful playfulness that we as humans understand a virtual space to be? What does this mean for us as humans confronted with a VI who is already a virtual entity operating in a simulated reality and using these very modes to enhance PSR?

What makes the rise of the VI more so troublesome in this hyper- commercialised space is that is operates without any form of responsibility, nor any perceived furtherance of the good in society. Further it represents a tool for influence on the internet over thought, choices, and values, which makes it, in essence, political. This is compounded by the fact that the VI potentially can exist forever which puts a novel spin to the idea that life must be led to its best possible purpose because it is finite.

What is required is a conception of authenticity that can meet the needs of an evolving technological space where avatars and VIs will become more and more ubiquitous. The creator is as important as the subject that has been created. In this vein, authenticity requires re-examination: An authentic VI should be one that is grounded in a representation of a simulated human. Bauer cites Bernard Williams for his contention that authenticity "expresses the importance of the ideal of *truthfulness"* (Bauer 2017:577). Whether or not a VI is a true representation rests on the assumption that authenticity assumes a good representation of the human experience, and this will remain a point of contention with a VI. Authentic VIs cannot occupy the same truth space as a value we humans hold dear to authenticity. Truth in authenticity will be dealt with in the later chapter on Sincerity. Intrinsically, VIs are fake human agents without agency. Whether a VI can be trusted or truthful lies in the hands of the creators.

Since the VI itself is incapable (presently) of fashioning its own likes, dislikes, and comments[6], the onus lies with the creative team to put forward ethical and responsible presentations and

[6] It may be possible that these VIs will become more technologically adept and be able to, via algorithms and coding, to develop their own content within a defined set of coding parameters. For more on this see the new

content, so that their VI not only looks authentic in a way that can influence humans but also in a way that is meaningful *because* of its intended influence.[7] A VI is a mirror to our base desires, but it can also be much more. It is dependent on the creative who holds that mirror up to us to see what we want to be reflected in it.

So, in summary we are left with many possible idealistic avenues for further exploration, but nothing in the form of a definitive answer. We have seen how the notion of authenticity has developed from the social [man as a placeholder] to the personal and then to the 'uber-personal' in its formulation. We occupy a quicksand quagmire of individual choice and personal resonance, where our search for our true selves is hobbled by our inability to align ourselves with any concrete meaningful independent matter. A VI is this mirror of our multiple storied life and the creative team commodifies this mirror in ways and means that is patently inauthentic. A VI is not a true representation, with a true self, nor can it be a sum of its many and varied journeys and stories through its social setting. It is, presently morally neutral and does not operate within a collective socio-cultural community, nor does is attract responsibility. For this, we will need to turn towards the creators to create a more meaningful and ethical framework within which we will manage a VI collective community. Indeed, we may need to revisit and refashion the pre-modern triadic of human as a placeholder between King, man, and society in pre-modern times (Varga, Somogy and Guignon 2020). Our triad for authenticity could be human, society and simulation where we will, as humans need to blend

AI poet/artist who can do this using prior inputted content based on algorithm @ https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/27/tech/ai-da-robot-intl-scli-gbr/index.html

[7] This sounds idealistic. Our laws have not yet caught up with "virtual" scenarios that involve sexual harassment, so how to marry meaningful influence is still a noble dream.

our authentic life journeys with the truth of the inauthentic fakes in the simulated reality that simultaneously co-exist with us.

Possible objections and responses.

In attempting to hold both a VI and its creators to a standard of ethical values, it is apparent that there will be many objections.

There are three that warrant some response. One of them is that this is a nonsensical venture, since the VI is not human and cannot be held to a human standard. Another is that human influencers are also, to some extent, bespoke creations so why should VIs be treated differently. Finally, the third is that a VI is an art form and as such cannot be held to a moral standard.

I will deal with these objections separately. In so doing, it must be borne in mind that these objections form a springboard for important concepts such as truth and trust that will be unveiled while dealing with these objections and which will require further clarification in the chapters that follow.

A VI is not human. Why level human values at it?

This is true. A VI is not a human. So why should we hold it accountable to our norms of authentic self-expression and moral responsibility. Why should it not also be allowed to co-opt varied iterations of itself in its journey to a true self. If we allow this objection to succeed, then we are unintentionally allowing for a separate category of values to apply to a VI. This is presently not possible, as shall be argued. Furthermore, since the VI is created by humans, if

we choose to relegate it to a non-human status then we are also allowing for a distortion of values like authenticity, truth, and trust to be co-opted by a non-human via a human team whose motives are not known to us. This is problematic as it will be shown below.

Equally so, authenticity is still relevant for a VI because it purports to engage with humans on human social media platforms. So even if the objection stands, this exercise has not been wasted because the framework for holding a VI, as a simulation, accountable presently exists only on human values such as authenticity and other parasocial tools (PSR) that we are familiar with on social media. A VI presently uses these human values to wield its influence. The internet has become a separate realm of reality where interactions can take the form of conversations between humans whilst also facilitating the same between humans and bots. A VI is a social tool with a commercial purpose. What is essential for social activity and mutual co-operation is the idea of truthfulness and trust. "Social life is based on a mutual exchange of trust and truthfulness" (Bauer 2017:577). So, do we need another standard to deal with this alternate social reality playing out online? Maybe, or maybe we need to revise our current conceptions of trust and truth. This will be the focus of the next chapter. But why is authenticity so important to us in our portrayals online? It is because authenticity has become the selling card for online content as has been illustrated with the female Gulf-Arab Influencers in Hurley (2019). As such, a VI represents the intentional manipulation of this value for a commercial or social purpose. It has brought together commercial and social interests in ways that are deeply political and engenders meaning for its followers.

A VI is a sophisticated bot that either takes on the identity of human influencers or embodies a 'unique' human form. Its form dictates that it pursues values that resonate with humans so

that it can level the type of influence that it requires for its purpose. These values are actual inputs by its creative team, so a VI cannot be a 'free for all' bot that serves as an agent for wanton expressions of racial, identity and gender stereotypes. Take for example Shudu, a 'black African-looking' clothes model created by a team of white males who have embedded racial stereotypes into her image and are profiting from it (@shudu.gram). Or Iyanda, the alleged first African VI who is based on a real human but will have her clothes, hairstyles and opinions managed by a team of creatives that are not linked to the real human that she is based on (@iamiyanda.gram). These influencers already influence us, and we live vicariously through them. We already know how to enhance following on Instagram by enhancing our parasocial PSR relations with our followers that can serve to entrench certain cultural and lifestyle norms, and this is not unique to human influencers. VI's employ the same tactics, with lil'Miqaela[8] posting on her latest songs as well as her political viewpoint on Black Lives Matter. In so doing, the creative team of a VI have a duty and a responsibility to tread carefully with their simulation of our images (curated for a commercial benefit). And so, even if a VI is not human, it has human impact and for this reason we must endeavour to find and locate responsibility for this impact. This impact cannot go unquestioned and to this end, we cannot but use our current frameworks to measure its impact on our values, more especially if the team behind it is human. In this way we will have to go behind the VI and find the creative team responsible. They cannot be allowed to operate in a vacuum of morality and responsibility.

[8] @lilmiquela.gram For an example of another gendered female VI crafted by a team of creatives.

This response will face difficulties because the team of creators will, no doubt, cater for this eventuality or shut down a 'problematic' VI and recreate another in its place. The creators could even argue that, because the VI is an entity without an inner core of a self, it is morally more defensible to fashion it rather than a human influencer.

This leads me to the closely linked second objection

Human Influencers can also be bespoke portrayals. What makes a VI different?

This is true. There are many human influencers who have a team working on their image and their posts. Their public persona is a careful curation meant to leverage greater influence. This is not so different from a VI. What is crucial is that the VI lacks all autonomy of representation and agency, which can be understood in terms of orders of autonomy. Claire Chambers (2004) distinguishes between first-order autonomy; one's attitude towards the perceived good of the rules and norms which apply to life from second-order autonomy, which is an "active and willing choice to live one's life free from compulsion or influence which obscures that choice" (4). To illustrate the difference, she forwards an example of a nun who chooses to be a nun (second-order autonomy) and then also chooses to live within the confines of the rules applicable to nuns (first-order autonomy). If she cannot live within the confines of the applicable rules for a nun, then she has limited her first order autonomy. A human influencer, as described above, will be exercising forms of these types of autonomy on her gendered representation throughout her curation.

Where a human influencer at some point in their curation of their image can step back and re-evaluate what is essential to their own self in furtherance of their self-reflectiveness, in the way that exercises a form of second-order conception of autonomy that Clare Chambers (2004) presents, a VI is unable to do so. It is totally non-autonomous unlike a human influencer who has the agency to self-represent and to dictate, to a reasonable extent, her image be that in reliance on first-order conception of autonomy or second.[9]

Further, what is authentic for a human influencer, as borne out by research on authentic representations of same, is that there is a truthfulness and honesty about the representation. This can still take the form of severe curation as is evidenced in the female portrayals of Gulf women in the article by Zoe Hurley (2019). Hurley notes in her study of these influencers that "there is nothing instant about [their] posts on Instagram, [it occurs] through highly scripted, choregraphed, staged, digitally manipulated processes, involving extensive architectures of digital labour (3)." She further builds on the view that there is a blurring of the lines between commercial and authentic culture as support for her claim that "potential ways for being presented on Instagram are not necessarily realistic or authentic in terms of traditional conceptions" (3). Her claim seeks to deepen our understanding on authenticity since she finds that a human social media influencer can through Instagram and its modes of use such as filters, emojis, audio, etc, offer different versions of "idealized authenticity yet retain some sense of an identity thread across them" (5). Reliability was a core aspect of how the participants in the Hurley study differentiated between fake and genuine (Hurley 2019).

[9] The assumption being that this influencer is living in a democratic, liberal society.

This seems to tie in with Marina Oshana's definition of authenticity quoted by Bauer that it is:

> truthfulness towards oneself and about oneself in word and deed…[whilst] one is inauthentic or lives inauthentically when one is not honest with oneself, and perhaps, about one's position in the world and about one's ability to transform or even to take a stance with respect to that position. (Bauer 2017:574)

Responsible humans can and do this exercise of self-reflection but a VI is reliant on the self-evolution of a team who have monetary or commercial interests that dictate these needs. A VI cannot be true or authentic (in the traditional sense) whilst it is still a vehicle for these needs. At the same time, we must admit that there is also an assumption that most participants in the social media space, do so for a commercial purpose. Yet this cannot be a simple exercise of relegating a VI to a fake bot that lacks agency and thus relevance.

A VI occupies space online and must be seen to own that space in a relevant manner, since social meaning will be built through its online interactions. In this way, that ownership must be tied to a responsibility of the team of creatives to ensure that the ethics of representation, racial, gendered, national, or otherwise is carefully handled. In this way it may be possible to be an authentic simulation of a human without the moral responsibility of a 'person'.[10] Bauer (2017) develops her line of reasoning on authenticity with an authentic dictator who has been socialised and educated by his evil dictator father. She argues that whilst the child may grow up authentically as a dictator and be true to that socialisation, he can be authentic AND not

[10] A person in this sense being a morally responsible agent as understood in the Kantian sense.

morally responsible. She holds that his conclusion is only reasonable if the dictator is either insane or has no process of self-reflection coupled with an inability to learn about and understand differences between right and wrong. But a VI cannot yet understand or self-reflect and so it can be viewed as an authentic representation without moral responsibility. A form of "fantastical authenticity" that Hurley (2019) calls the carefully curated staged images of the female Gulf-Arab Influencers. However, the creative team is capable of this type of deeper insight and so this level of moral responsibility must be directed to them.

In so doing, transparency and understanding the nature of the monetary, social, or commercial interests by the team of creatives that "run" the VI goes a long way to meaningful online engagement with the VI by humans. This will ensure that our autonomy[11] in respect of how media is presented to ourselves and our ability to choose from options presented to ourselves is not constrained by the team in a way that limits or have negative implications for that choice so that our interactions with the VI in virtual spaces is not compromised. This is in keeping with Chambers' (2004) conception of social construction where these options that we can choose can have a negative impact on our liberty and our choices. Which means that our perceived freedom of choice is not a full, substantial one for our good, but rather a bald, thin one in that it is not for the achievement of good.

However, this response can still be met with a reply that we are humans, and we have the choice to interact with a VI and, impliedly with the team that created it. Our current

[11] "Those with control over the information can control how people perceive and interpret the world." For a more elaborate analysis on autonomy and threats to it see O'Brolchain et al (2016) in "The Convergence of Virtual Reality and Networks: Threats to Privacy and Autonomy. "

expectations of trust must surely cater for this. Whether this is the case will be dealt with in greater detail in the following chapter.

A VI is art. Art should not be held to a moral standard.

This is true is some respects. A VI is a curated, digitised, and technical process and it represents an achievement of skill, patience, and imagination. Art can serve to influence, mould, and inspire people. VI's can do the same. In fact, a VI has called herself a work of art in an interview on the documentary program, The Stream on Al Jazeera News (see Oke 2020). For many, art follows the same process of skill, patience, and imagination. It is conceivable that a VI can similarly be viewed as art. If the objection is that art should not be held to a moral standard, then this notion conflicts with my claim that the VI, by being a hyperreal simulation represents a 'form of art' that seeks to gain influence over our behaviour. The VI occupies a space where it is ensconced in leveraging influence over the very form of behaviour that morality seeks to influence: dictating societal conduct and creating norms of behaviour. A VI conceived of as art attempts to do exactly this. It should be held to a moral standard.
However, this objection also claims that a VI is art, and this contention is subject to debate. A VI is a copy. It is not original. For this objection to succeed we would need to re-define our parameters of what art can be.

To this end my response is as follows: Jon McCormack's (2019) article on computer generated art links an artist's intention and autonomy as critical to the authenticity and the aesthetic value of an artwork . "The trait inherent in the work of an artist [is] the necessity of sincerity, the necessity that he shall not fake or compromise" (2019:5). He claims that there are

different forms of autonomy present in computer-generated art and "human freedom [which includes] intention desire and belief (5)" still trumps that form of art that is completed by a prompt to a computer program. Autonomy [in this instance McCormack's (2019) use of autonomy is different from Chambers's construction and refers instead to a sense of mental/intentional autonomy "typified by human free will" (5)] and agency, in his opinion, is crucial to the development of computer-generated art, where that art is either created 'freely' by a computer program or even through a human using a program to create the art (2019).

If we are to accept his argument, then it is debatable to what extent the team of creatives of the VI can lay claim to their product being understood as art above. There appears to exist, in the creation of the VI, elements of sincerity to the human form and an intention to render a seemingly accurate representation of such form. To what extent the team can extend its sincere and free intention, in a way that exercises full, substantial choice is also debatable. There will be embedded biases, commercial directives, or social revisions to the image to enhance its following in a specific social milieu, and which further the commercial drive of the enterprise commissioning the VI. This must surely impact on the autonomy [in this sense, the way that second-order autonomy may be thin or bald, as described above] of the 'artists' in the creating team. The chapter on sincerity will deal with this in more detail because notions of sincere self-expression, true self, and the values that we ascribe to truth will be discussed.

In addition, one of the defining features of an artist is originality, to which a VI (and its team) cannot lay claim. A VI is a simulation, an image of a seemingly authentic representation of a human. So, it occupies a precarious position of being a fake human endowed with a fake

"stylised" authenticity which will be moulded and adapted over time to meet the needs of the commercial or social enterprise that is required of it. This is not art as we traditionally conceive it, but a social media tool primed for use. As such it attracts moral attention because of its social interaction with humans that traditional art may not do. Art, as is traditionally conceived of does not provide a daily, evolving simulation of life experience to intentionally achieve a desired end. It is for this reason that we can hold a VI to a moral standard of ethical responsibility.

Conclusion.

It has been shown that authenticity is a complex concept involving personal reflection, truth, trust, and social and political responsibility. In the case of the VI, it has been shown that autonomy is not required for a stylised version of authenticity that meets the base needs and desires of commercial manipulation. At its core authenticity remains as a noble social and personal virtue that, at its best, can encourage more meaningful societal engagement as part of a collective through our human self- (personal resonance) evolution. However, because it can also be manipulated, moulded, revised, and corrected through the evolution ('personal') of a virtual influencer, its related social virtue on the internet has become dubious. This 'personal' journey that a VI will take through its life is a [dis]representation. It is not just an inaccurate misrepresentation of an image, but rather an intentional deception calculated to manipulate. This is because it does not have a social collective that is promotes the good in nor does it belong to a community where the good can be promoted. It exists and will exist

to leverage influencers for pure commercial interests. It will not be authentic in the ways that we would like to be.

What the rise of the VI has shown us too is that, in essence, we have sacrificed authenticity at the altars of choice and truth in respect of the team that creates it. The choices and the true representations of a simulation that a team of creators must manage are driven by the commercial directives of a brand which has profit as its aim. In this way we have unwittingly allowed the team of creators free licence to package, commodify and engender representations of ourselves and do this in an inauthentic, untruthful manner that evades responsibility at present. This is the price that we seem to pay for the unchecked democratisation of the internet coupled with unfettered capitalism. Trust has featured in many instances through these objections. To this end, we will need to exercise some form of cautionary trust if we are to proceed with our personal and social evolution and growth through the continued consumption of online content. The focus of the next chapter will bring this need to the fore.

Trust

"We inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted"

Annette Baier. "Trust and Antitrust"(1986:234)

If we accept that authenticity is an ideal that impacts on our socio-political thinking (Varga, Somogy and Guignon 2020) and that a VI operates to influence thought and, to an extent, behaviour then a VI represents a form of conduct that must be believable as authentic to be successful at influencing. Such conduct must then in turn provide some level of accuracy and reliability to be believed. If we have to place reliance on the VI, then we find ourselves in the domain of trust since we require some levels of trust to rely on the accuracy of a representation.

Further if we accept that a VI is not an autonomous agent and does not present a self-representation borne from personal resonance (because it is a simulation), but rather

presents a stylised version of authenticity, a [dis]representation, then we are faced with a tension between the creator of the VI and the VI itself. Trust should lay at the feet of the team of creatives who bring the VI to the fore as shall be argued in this chapter.

This is more so relevant given Andrew Pierce's argument for such an integrated approach so that we view authenticity in a way where the individual is seen as part of a relation to a group, as discussed in the previous chapter (Pierce 2015). Granted Andrew Pierce's argument revolved around collective community identity vs a personal identity, but this argument can be extended to a VI whose team of creatives can be seen to represent a collective "community" in a sense that their influence, biases and values play a role in the stylised authentic representation that a VI becomes.

By their very nature VIs represents the ultimate exercise by its team of creatives of social freedom. This is possible because of the democratisation of the internet, where this social freedom seeks to upend the traditional rules for social structure that we have in real life. This social freedom is also political. If we understand authenticity "as a matter of trust, then it can play an important political role in resistance to dehumanising social systems" (Pierce 2015: 437). Whilst Pierce's argument is related to trust in the real world occupied by humans, I will use his argument to build towards a conclusion that whilst we must and should value trust in our social relationships, we cannot ignore the rising value of distrust in these relationships when they occur online. Trust must then involve something more for the institution of a virtual simulated reality. In what follows a synopsis of how trust plays out in relation to inter-personal relationships and in institutions will be outlined, followed by current literature on distrust and its role with regard to a simulated reality.

Nature of Trust and Trustworthiness.

In order to provide an overview on the nature of trust, I will begin with the traditional approach to Trust that has been followed in current literature on this topic. So this section will begin with an examination of trust with regard to inter-personal relationships (see McLeod 2021) and then extend it to the relationships that a VI has in its operation as a social media influencer.

"Trust is an attitude that we have towards people whom we hope will be trustworthy" (McLeod 2021). This is a noteworthy foundation for trust because it suggests that parties who trust each other must believe that they are each, in turn, trustworthy.

Adriaan Peperzak defines trust as belonging to a class of verbs that signify a "*turning toward* something or someone *without objectifying the intended reality* (2013:11)." He explains that this means that there are many ways to do this without objectifying the subject or person, by providing examples of turning toward someone by "writing a letter *to* someone, giving a gift [and even] … joining or threatening someone (ibid)." However, he cautions that this turning towards, whilst involving a joining to another, must be exercised every time that there is a new reality because the "character of the relation between the trusting person and the trusted reality depends on the particular character of the latter and perspective of the former's turn towards it (ibid)."

A VI is a new reality. In the Instagram relationship with a VI, the trust relationship is one-sided in that the VI (and its team) do not need to place any trust in the followers. Only the followers need to trust the VI and its curated content. There is no two-way relationship at present

where the followers can compel the VI team to 'self-correct' the VI because the team behind the VI is currently invisible and anonymous and successfully so at present. This relationship is expressed slightly differently with human influencers where a human influencer tends to place a level of trust in the responses from its followers. This can be seen when human influencers self-correct posts, stories or hashtags when their followers demand action or behaviour from them.

This new reality requires a re-examination of our framing of trust and the relationships that are created inside this new reality so that we can meet the challenges that it brings. This is a worthy cause because it is this relationship that Annette Baier, in her article "Trust and Antitrust" (1986) alludes to when she contends that co-operation and the relationship between people forms the core nexus between morality and trust. Whether we can turn to a VI team for trusted content and whether a relationship can be created between us and them remains to be seen.

Whom do we trust and what do we trust to them?

If trust involves a reliance on others, Baier (1986) has sought to distinguish ordinary reliance from trust, in that trust involves an invitation to rely (a dependence) on the goodwill of another with a thing that you value. This leads to the opening of vulnerability on the part of the trusting person since she is taking a risk dependent on the goodwill of another person to exercise the same/similar value over the thing that she values (ibid). In the same way that a mother trusts in the child minder when dropping her infant baby off at a creche before going to work. So "to trust includes the giving of credit" (Peperzak 2013:19). It appears to count on the predictability and regularity of behaviour in the trust relationship and involves a

deliberate choice between the parties. This appears to be the case where we deal with human habits and our penchant for behavioral patterns that make us characteristically behave a certain way so that we can be counted on or depended on (ibid). Peperzak (2013) goes on to identify free will, initiative and choice as requisites for a trustworthy person, but questions if reciprocity is also required. He uses the example of the total dependence of a new-born baby who cannot question that a mother will look after it and argues that there are instances when trust can rise unilaterally (2013).

If trust does not have to be reciprocal because there are instances when it is not, then we may have some space to argue for a unilateral trust relationship between us on the one side with the VI and its team on the other, because our interface with the VI is a largely unilateral, one-sided online relationship, where the team presently operates behind a veil of secrecy and is protected from social censure. This will bring with it revisions to our current conceptions of patterns of behaviour and reciprocity in our ability to lever trust because we cannot and do not know how the VI team impacts on our trust relationship via the VI.

He argues further that to trust is not a virtue because it does not make the trusted a good person and that to be trustworthy is not a given just because you are that trusted person (ibid). Baier adds an interesting dimension to the nature of trust with her contention that once the trusting parties are both aware of the conditions for why they trust each other coupled with their continued trustworthiness, they have reached a place of moral trust (1986:259). Moral trust is a noble goal which Baier admits is not always possible to achieve (ibid).

However, this notion of moral trust creates some tension in our ability to trust online content just because it comes from a trustworthy source, better still to even trust a VI team given their apparent lack of free will, regularity and predictability of behaviour or our complete lack of understanding on the conditions of that trust.

If we instead accept that we must trust the VI team to portray representations of ourselves in the form of a VI, then we must ask what are we entrusting to them? We are entrusting our image, our representation, our identity to them to use it in a way that is not immoral or destructive to our social and moral fabric that we have carefully crafted in the real world. Can they be depended on to do this online? Should we care about how our images are represented online? There is already a dearth of literature acknowledging both the convergence of the online and the real as well as the influence (negative and positive) that the online world wields over us. Our need to trust representations of ourselves online is the next step towards building better relationships with the online engineers of these portrayals. Since it is not possible to involve ourselves in the legal and commercial contracts that create these VIs and thus not possible to set out a trust-specific relationship, we are left with a form of discretionary trust that Baier canvasses in her article. She pits discretionary powers alongside the restrictive powers of actual trust that a trusted has when they hold your trust. Baier (1986) holds that this discretion is relative to what the truster values and how they determine the standard of care to that thing. Discretionary power, states Baier, must not intentionally mislead us or be used in a non-malicious way (1986:238). She adds the following caveat that "the more extensive the discretionary powers of the trusted, the less clear-cut will be the answer to the question of when trust is disappointed (1986: 238)."

What is clear is that we have already left our simulations of an online representation largely to the discretion of a VI team, whether we conceived of it as a form of trust or not. This discretionary power that the community of creators wield over our trust is extensive and we assume that they will render authentic representations of ourselves. We seem to exist in the interregnum between trust and distrust in relation to this type of content. What is left is how to deal with the VI going forward using the tools of trust that we have, given that our expectations of how the VI is portrayed may inevitably disappoint us.

Trust in Institutions as feature of social trust.

If we accept that the VI exists in an institution/collective community that is starkly different[12] from that of the traditional institutions that we are already familiar with, like the State, the schooling system, the medical hospitals and the judiciary, amongst others, then we must also accept that our traditional and "trusted" ways of levelling trustworthiness in them must be different for such a VI's collective community. If trust is dependent on a given reality at a time and place and context, then a VI and its reality confounds our ability to leverage trust in the ways that we are accustomed to. This is more so if we accept Peperzak's (2013) notion that our trust is a product of our culture, sub-culture and society at large which, through our freedom, allows us to develop an "imprint that [makes] us what and who we are" (52) because we have trust in our community legacy. A VI is not a free[13] autonomous agent, as has been described in the previous chapter. Similarly, its collective/community's legacy and culture is

[12] Different because besides being an influencer 'like a human can' it is an entirely non-autonomous, curated figment of a creation primed for a specific purpose and positioned to disrupt our notions of identity, gender and authenticity in order to engender targeted influence over society as we know it.

[13] The nature and scope of actual vs perceived freedom, whether in or outside of traditional democracies, is outside the scope of this discussion, save to say that for our immediate purposes, we as humans living in western-styled democratic societies have more freedom and autonomy over our lives than the VI.

as yet unknown. What we do know for certain is that, given the differences, we should proceed with caution. Complete distrust cannot be the solution because “to live in complete social distrust without finding any refuge for living in agreement with my own deep convictions is certainly an awful form of pressure” (ibid:56). Social trust requires us to maintain, then, a basic trust in our institutions says Peperzak, but he advises that this basic trust must be joined with some distrust too so that we can hold institutions and people accountable to a standard that seeks the common good (2013:57). So it is essential that features of distrust in collective institutions and society propels us forward into the realisation of a better more meaningful reality.

Features of Distrust

There does not appear to be much attention on distrust as a value, and it has, until recently been “an afterthought”(McLeod 2021). Whilst trust should not be viewed as a virtue warns Peperzak (2013), because the converse, distrust, would mean that you are not virtuous, there is some strength in his argument that distrust tends to disassociate and trust to connect. If Instagram is meant to create connections and increase influence then there is an assumption of trust that appears to be already built in even though, from the above descriptions, this assumption is not based on any solid behaviour linked to trustworthiness.

Peperzak (2013) does not delve too deeply into distrust in his book save to accept the notion that cautious distrust is preferable to naïve trust, and that distrust cannot be defined as the sum of all negations of trust, as defined. Indeed, there seems to be a lack of any definitive definition on the nature of distrust, and it appears to be something more than non-reliance but less than actual non-trusting (McLeod 2021).

Distrust must most certainly form a part of the political landscape of human interaction because a healthy distrust is called for in these post-modern societies where individuals must operate against the tyranny of both state and corporate culture. This tyranny is exhibited in the ways in which our perceived freedom to choose online content can be insidiously and intentionally manipulated either by the state or by social media companies. This can be achieved in a spectrum of ways; from state-sponsored limits on the internet and firewalls through to product and group suggestions via online tracking of our behavior by internet companies. If this type of manipulation already exists in this real world that we occupy as constantly evolving moral beings, why should it not find similar application in the online simulated world of a simulated corporatized VI primed to place and promote brands and products for such a corporate? More especially if the VI is an infinite being with many more evolutions (moral or otherwise) that we will encounter in our lifetimes.

In other words, if our trust relationships have so far been largely based on inter-personal relationships, what do we make of an entire network of relationships that exist online in a virtual space? Can trust suffice for these relationships? We would need something more robust than those values of predictability, choice, free will and reciprocity that we have traditionally used for assigning trust. We will need to place a value on a different aspect of trust simply because the very nature of these online relationships appears to operate in a way that is not personal and individual but rather communal and collective. This is evident in the way that a VI is created through a collaborative collective of creators all of whom with their differences in biases and opinions, cannot be expected to be relied on for the current conception of social trust. Current opinions on distrust seems to imply that to distrust has a

normative component because to distrust someone means that the person is bad (McLeod 2021). Distrust is that value that seeks to, in Jason D'Cruz's formulation, "withdraw from reliance or vulnerability in contexts of normative expectation, based on a construal of a person or persons as malevolent, incompetent or lacking integrity" (D'Cruz 2019:936 quoted in McLeod 2021). D'Cruz has helpful and valid features in his current formulation on distrust but what is problematic for my purposes is that his description is dependent on a normative expectation (McLeod 2021).

My contention is that the online virtual world of the VI should not hold any normative expectations, of good or bad simply because of the very nature of the beast, in the form of a VI that we are dealing with. A VI is yet to become a regulated collective of VIs that attract ethical standards of conduct to it. Neither it nor the team presently exist as part of a recognised collective community [a social institution of trust-forming and trust-making ability] with its own norms of behaviour that we can hold it to account to.To invoke Baudrillard's (1994) critique of electronic media culture, it is a copy sans the original.

In light of the curated content that we encounter in online communities of collective networks via a similarly "community-created VI", we cannot expect to rely on a VI for more than what it purports to be at present, i.e. virtual "commercial community-driven simulations of stylised authenticity." D'Cruz's balance of the definition (see McLeod 2021) is accurate with regard to the values that we need to inculcate on curated content that we see online, i.e. lacking in integrity, incompetent and malevolent until proven otherwise by the community of creatives from which the VI is borne. In an ideal VI world, created by humans, we should strive for a community of creators to put the best human values forward in their representation of a VI

for the common good. To this end, we can, and should seek to hold the team of creators to a set of normative expectations at some stage in the development of this community of VI creators. More so in light of the valuable socio-political role that they are inadvertently playing with in the creation and engendering of language and [dis]representation of our images through social construction. If there is hope for trust in such an institution of creators driven by commercial needs, then we should work towards that hope rather than turn away from it. Whether this can be realistically achieved remains to be seen.

If we apply discernment[14] as a corrective feature to distrust then we may find ourselves at a place where we begin with something less than reliance and, with discernment, arrive at something more than distrust but less than full-blown trustworthiness. This element of discernment, keen judgement, as a filter tool is valuable in our consumption of online content generally and VI content specifically. It will involve a gathering of all relevant information in order to arrive at a suitable position regarding trust of the online content. Suffice to say that it is a valuable social skill in identifying trustworthiness in ordinary interpersonal trust relationships (Peperzak 2013:49). Lest we forget, trust is important for our journey towards authentic selves since it is through our social interactions that "we become selves whose inner episodes are given enough steadiness and cohesiveness so that our relations to others can build on cooperation and trust" (Guignon:2004:155)

If we are truly to engage socially with a VI in this simulated reality then we must place simulation in the triadic with human and society and consider the following in our life

[14] From "discern (*vb*) To recognise or perceive clearly > discernment (*n*) keen perception or judgment". Collins English Dictionary (2014).

narrative: that it is a misrepresentation of our image in a careful and curated manner that seeks, through its team of creators, to use that image to confuse, mould and manipulate our ideas of authenticity, truth and trust for a commercial purpose. To this end both trust and authenticity require a more nuanced approach with regard to the simulated reality; nuance in how we judge authenticity against a [dis] representation of a self and nuance in trust with how we need to place more value on distrust coupled with discernment.

Possible objections and responses.

In setting out the above, there will no doubt be some objections to my contentions. The first may be that my stance on distrust as a value that needs elevation in our society is ill-conceived. The second is that VIs are simulated agents and it is obvious that they cannot be trusted, so why bother. I will deal with each separately.

Distrust with discernment as an elevated value is ill-conceived.

If this objection stands, then it implies that we should not use distrust as our starting point in our online relationships because trust is more preferable since it encourages cohesion, unity and peace (Peperzak 2013). Trust builds strong inter-personal and societal relationships. So it is the preferable approach with regard to societal relationships. This is a desirable ends and so this objection may be correct. However this objection [and its desired end] is still problematic for me because of the nature of online relationships which may require a different approach.

The objection will have the following to canvass support for it. Trust appears to form the basis of social and interpersonal relationships and in many instances drives the society forward

(Baier 1986). Where would we be, holds Baier, if we cannot trust one another to drive properly, look after our children in day-care, package food responsibly and a myriad of other minutiae of social detail that require unconscious trust (ibid). There exists different types of trust relationships as there are different types of powers in respect of trust.

However in response to the above and in order to frame a direct response to our relationship with an online VI, we will need to locate our trust relationship and the type of power that we entrust in that relationship.

The relationship is not reciprocal. There is no joint turning towards each other so that we can form a joint relationship based on conduct, values and choice. Rather it is a unilateral one-sided affair with the VI presented as a complete package that cannot, by its very nature, be turned to. With this in mind, there cannot be a traditional approach to inter-personal trust where we assume that the other is acting in goodwill, as we do when we pass a stranger on the road (Baier 1986). Our level of trust needs to be detangled from that traditional conception and we need to start afresh with the limitations that we accept with our unilateral, non-reciprocal relationship. We need to reconceptualise trust because these reasons show us that distrust has a valuable role to play especially if we are to hold this simulated reality to normative expectations. This aspect of distrust with discernment shares characteristics and features with what we understand with distrust but we cannot place any more reliance on a simulated reality than our current expectations on reliance in trust presently allows.

This is key to our navigation of such online content. We are recipients of curated content that is “stylised” by a community of creatives which we cannot assume is based on goodwill or

values that are similar to ours. In this vein we need to foster a healthy distrust of such content because trust, as we traditionally understand it, is based on a reciprocal relationship of shared entrusted commitments "so that the entrusted task must be performed for the benefit of the entrusting person" (Perperzak 2013:41). None of the content by the community of creators lends itself to shared entrusted commitments yet.

We have, with the VI team, no meaningful prior knowledge on behaviour patterns, habits or reasons to hang our values of trustworthiness onto. Nor do we have these conditions met with trusting the VI either. Until that changes we will have to discard trust as a starting point with our online VI's in the virtual space.

Distrust is not ill-conceived. Distrust should be our meaningful starting point for such content. We need a clear, keen eye on the target. Distrust cannot be viewed as a normative bad value if it is applied in a space that VI's occupy which we accept is morally neutral to begin with. In so doing we will learn to lean on our social skill of discernment after initially beginning with distrust if we are to engage meaningfully with the online content.

A VI is a simulated agent. It is obvious that it cannot be trusted.

If we accept that a VI is morally neutral and that it is just a simulation why have I ventured into this domain of trust? If we know that something is simulated and we know that it is an agent, is it naturally obvious that it cannot be trusted?If this objection is allowed to stand then we are accepting that simulations must always be treated with distrust as a starting point. This is a good starting point but cannot be the conclusion of the objection because if it is obvious that we should not trust it why have I spent time on trying to show why we should

care about trust. Current research ventilated below will show that it is not obvious that simulations are not trusted and that a discussion on trust does really matter.

We should care about trust, even if we do know that something is simulated. This is because the simulation (VI) operates in our real world, with real world consequences and its influence may not always be that obvious. Social construction and our crafting of our selves using this tool is the same currency that a VI team uses to engender influence. This is worrisome. It may be obvious that a VI should not to be trusted but this implies that the team creating this online content should then not attract any responsibility either and are allowed to operate in a moral vacuum where they [the team] know that they are not to be trusted.
So whilst it may be obvious that we should not trust a simulation, the consequences of doing so are not desirable, especially if they are not immediately discernible.

Humans function in social settings with varying levels of interpersonal (dispositional) trust based on their socialisation (Peperzak 2013). Trust and responsibility for action matters because a VI and its team operate to mould our thoughts, values and desires in our journey towards our own authenticity. If these are driven by pure commercial aims, where will this lead our collective community and what does it say about our striving for meaning?

There is research that shows that humans with low levels of interpersonal trust (for whatever reason) tend to trust automated anthropomorphized messengers more than human messengers. This is the conclusion of a study done by Toure-Tilley et al in their article “Who or What to believe: Trust and the Differential Persuasiveness of Human and Anthropomorphized Messengers” (2015) wherein they also found that respondents with high

levels of interpersonal trust did not differentiate too significantly between the two types of messengers.

They link the power of persuasion and influence to levels of trust and find that increased levels of faith in other people tend to raise trust levels in the messenger who looks more human (ibid). Further they find that "source credibility is a critical route to persuasion" (ibid: 96) wherein that credibility is rooted in trustworthiness and honesty. Hence if the brand is already trusted then the persuasive influence is greater and if there is a personal relevance then even more so (ibid).

So if personal relevance plays a key role in influence and a VI is curated in such a way to engender relevance, combined with a recognisable brand, then we have a really potent and effective tool in online persuasion and influence. Combined with a low truster in the real world, a VI can turn a significant number of them into keen trusters online when they are presented with a VI who looks and acts human. A VI could potentially impact and affect values and life choices of its followers in this way. It matters. This requires that we find different sets of trust tools to tackle such content online so that we can meet the demands of this influence in a responsible and ethical way. The objection cannot stand.

Conclusion.

Trust implies that there is a purpose in the trusting and it is reliant on a belief that the trusted person will perform competently (Peperzak 2013). Whether that implies that there can be trust between two parents regarding their child or two jewellery thieves regarding their stolen loot is irrelevant to the nature of trust. Trust can exist in these situations. What is relevant is the nature of the relationship between the parties and the intention that they

make with each other. A VI represents a feature of a collective virtual simulation. It seeks to make an impact on a platform that will tend towards influencing societal expectations and values. Its creative team that make up that collective community are role-players in the ethical, trustworthy representation of a VI if they are concerned with the common good in society. Perhaps they should be held accountable to building that legacy in this community.

What is the motive of the team behind the VI? If we are made privy to its purpose does it seek to lessen the impact of its authenticity or trust or will it do the reverse? To this end can there then be a sincere VI? Sincerity, according to Bialystok (2011) is concerned with the "avoidance of deceiving others about oneself [and] relates to truthfulness in inter-personal conduct" (210). It is one part towards a journey to true motives (Guignon 2004).

If we are to delve into motive, sincerity must be a necessary adjunct to this investigation. It is also a necessary corollary to the earlier development on authenticity and its relevance to a VI because a VI uses its online platform for inter-personal relations which is another aspect of sincerity as we currently understand it and which will be discussed in the chapter that follows.

Sincerity

"Sincerity and authenticity can plausibly be understood as intertwined endeavours, both issuing from an ongoing exploration of one's identity in a social milieu" Lauren Bialystok. "Refuting Polonius: Sincerity, Authenticity, and Schtick" (2011:225)

In attempting to build a framework of trust around the structure of a VI, it becomes necessary to establish it's, or its teams true motive given that a VI is involved in online inter-personal relationships. In doing so and given that we have established the limits in the current trust framework we would need to apply some discernment in our acceptance of this type of influencer. More so if we find that through this VI, modes of authenticity as we currently understand it, through the very parasocial tools that online followers are accustomed to in identifying with human influencers are being used by the VI team to gain similar online influence.

If sincere self-expression as Guignon (2004) has framed it, is one of the indicators of true motive then can we ascribe sincerity of expression to a VI or its team of VI creators? Similarly, if true self means that one must be inwardly "precisely aligned" (Bialystok (2011:215) quoting Trilling (1972:4), then can we find a meeting point between true self and true motive using sincere self-expression? This chapter will contend that sincere self-expression in a VI

confounds our current understanding of a true self in relation to trust and authenticity. It will show that outward manifestations of sincerity operate to ruthlessly commodify our notions of the truth and our notions of selves. This is because whilst the VI is sincere it lacks a self and whilst the team of creators can also be said to be sincere, they will appear to be sincere only to a commercial interest and not because they have a collective identifiable self yet. This confounds us because our current understanding of sincerity is linked to our understanding of an authentic true self. The VI [being a sincere fake] and its team, in this commercialised format are not capable of authenticity nor responsibility for a true self yet and exhibit a way in which sincerity can be neatly cleaved from authenticity and even, taken to the extreme, from trust in online content.

We require an understanding of sincerity because a VI is operating as a social agent on an inter-personal level in an online medium with other online human users. Its words and actions would appear to be sincere but because of the limits in our current understandings of trust and authenticity, what is necessary, is whether we can call the team behind the VI sincere and whether it ultimately actually matters for us to trust their influencer, as will be argued in this chapter.

We would require a relationship of trust in our relationship with the team to ascribe a level of sincerity to their actions. This is because it is through trust that we build and connect relationships (Perperzak 2013), and sincerity is reflective of that true relationship that we build on in our inter-personal relations. If sincere self-expression can be used to trace true motives, then these indicators may be problematised further because we may not be privy to the motive behind the team's 'self' expression that they imbue the VI with.

Sincerity is also linked to authenticity, because as we have seen authenticity rests on assumptions of a true self for one's own benefit and sincerity of self-expression rests on the assumptions of truth in relation to our relationships with others. So, both sincerity and authenticity, as indicators of what we use in our inter-personal relations and in our intra-personal journey respectively, are reflective of the factors that must be considered in our life journey towards our composite identity. This is complicated by the fact that a VI does not have an inward journey of self. It is a social agent used only for inter-personal relations. Can it be a *prima facie* sincere agent just because of this? Can we extend this sincerity to its team as well?

To this end, this chapter will examine whether the value of sincerity is a useful indicator of true motive against a VI, and then also against its team of creators. This is because it may be possible, given the current literature on sincerity to have a VI that is outwardly sincere just because it is truthful about what it is and what it does. Indeed, it has been noted in current literature (Varga, Somogy, Guignon 2020) that to be sincere, historically meant to be true and honest in relationships with others and it was viewed as an intrinsically important tool towards social success. This version of sincerity can certainly be said to be accurate for the current stated aim [a commercialised level of influence] of a VI in these post-modern times. Whether we can extend the value of sincerity [and its indication of true motive] to its team remains to be seen.

Given that the previous chapters have shown that there may be limits and even extensions to our current understanding of trust and authenticity, how does sincerity feature in our dealings with a VI and what, if any, sets it apart from a human influencer? The assumption

in the literature points to the notion that sincerity is a social virtue for the achievement of the good (Guignon 2004). Sincerity appears to aim at truthfulness in relation to others and according to him sincere self-expression that is based solely on what is immediately presented to the self will manifest one's true motives (ibid). This raises the question of what counts as a true motive and further, where it comes from. Are our motives shaped from a social milieu or a personal one? We are a product of both in our journey towards our exploration of our sincere and true expression of our fluid self in our social and personal milieus. This leads us to see that, authenticity, trust, and sincerity are all aspects of how we value the truth in these milieus especially if we are aiming for an identity based in truthfulness in relation to others. This is currently antithetical to the current format of a VI in the way that it is presented by the team. This is because a VI is an embodiment of a falsity created entirely for a primed commercial purpose and so the team's motive may be sincere in that stated objective but not possibly reflective of the truth. For example, a team of male creators may be tasked with creating an online female VI that markets facial products to a target market that is African. The VI can be created to appear to look outwardly like an African female so that it can be used for this purpose but its team may intentionally or unintentionally imbue this VI with characteristics that are not indicative of an African female simply because the team is male and/or not African. The related important questions around truth and its notions of objectivity and subjectivity are noted but they fall outside the scope of this report suffice to say that we will assume that the truth is objective for our immediate purposes.

It can be argued that whilst selfhood lies at the centre of influencing, this notion is challenged with the presentation of a VI. The notion of a fluid selfhood as established by Bialystok in her

article “Refuting Polonius: Sincerity, Authenticity and ‘Schtick’” (2011), and Guignon’s (2004) linking of sincerity and truth to an inner self is complicated when we examine a VI. The quest for an inner, true, human self may thus incorporate elements of fluidity and revisions through its journey, and whilst this is certainly true for humans in their lifetimes it is not analogous for a VI. This is because whilst a VI is fluid, through its many iterations from the team behind it, it is not a self, and while it is sincere it does not have to be a true self. Coupled with this, this chapter will reveal that despite the apparent sincerity of a VI, this attempt is thin. Whether this thin sincerity can be applied to the team will be examined below. This is because the creator of a VI cannot be assumed to be sincere if the VI that is created represents an ever-morphing amalgamation of trends and tropes. So, it is not reflective of an honest portrayal of self, that is consistent. In addition, a VI exists outside of a collective, as does the team in charge of creating it for its commercial purpose. There is presently no collective identity for either the VI or its team.

There is a collective identity for humans and when human influencers craft their trade for commercial purposes, they do so using our current framings of selfhood, truth, collective identity, responsibility, authenticity, and sincerity to influence us. This will be examined below as an illustration of how these operate to gain influence. In doing so, the extent to which sincerity plays a role in this type of influencing by a VI and consequently its team in relation to selfhood, truth, responsibility, authenticity, collective identity, and trust will also have to be examined.

Sincerity and Human Influencers

The matter of true self and true motive is problematised by how we have allowed our identity production to become "entangle[ed] [with] economic concerns within the networked social sphere" (Hall 2015). This contention finds further support in Hurley (2019) when she holds that Instagram has allowed a "blurring between personalities and commodities [which is further evidenced by the] consumer's alleged needs for more authentic online marketing campaigns" (4) which she identifies as a form of "calibrated amateurism that crafts an amateur aesthetic" (4) of identity performance by [human] influencers.

Put differently, human influencers can appear to be more 'influential' the less fake they seem to be. This implies that there are elements of sincerity [and impliedly, truth] in their posts that propels their followers to believe their story. This represents a shift from earlier online content curation where audiences were drawn to a vlog series in 2006 called lonelygirl15 (Hall 2015). Whilst this series aired a long time ago, we can still draw some significant lessons about truth and motive from it. Hall (2015) dissects how a non-genuine vlog can still succeed in garnering significant audience buy-in since the vlog went viral "in part to the almost immediate suspicion that the series was fake" (128). The series purported to follow Bree, a 15-year-old vulnerable and lonely girl with overbearing parents involved in a cult. It was, from its initial rise, suspected to be a hoax yet despite this mystery, successful with audiences which increased the profile of Bree and YouTube. Only when a group of fans of the series "determined to discover the truth about Bree launched a sting that led to the revelation that Bree was actually actress Jessica Rose, and the show a brainchild of an artistic collaboration" (p.129) was the content creator found to be definitively fake. The series of 200-million page views was largely labelled as disruptive and undermining of the supposed meaningful

potential that the YouTube user community felt the channel was meant to promote (Hall:2015). This need for meaningful and truthful content has become more pressing for today's content creation. Indeed, when there are indications of fake or curated content the content creator is usually called out as a fake by their online followers. This does not necessarily imply that human influencers need to promote the good in their content but there does appear to be a need for a level of sincerity [and impliedly, truth] in relation to their followers. This need for sincerity and truth ties in to some extent with the notion that there must be, in sincere expression with others, some meaning in this finite life that we lead and that we are meant to uncover in our journey towards a consistent, whole, and self-directed individual.

Similarly, whilst the creators of a VI are not necessarily promoting the good in their creation, there are however elements of sincerity [through their accurate portrayals of human likenesses and human-like actions] in their creation of a VI. This even though a VI is potentially infinite and can undergo many more iterations in its 'development' through a stable of creators in its lifetime than a human influencer ever could. Whether truth and sincerity must co-exist comes to a head when we examine how the team of creators choose to construct a VI. How these elements are expressed in a VI will be discussed next.

Sincerity in relation to Authenticity.

If sincerity is indicative of consistent and truthful inter-personal relationships and authenticity of the true inner self, this section will show that sincerity and authenticity do not have to co-exist when dealing with a VI and its team.

Bialystok (2011) provides a useful overview of the relation between sincerity and authenticity. She quotes Lionel Trilling's comparison on being true to oneself "as carpenters and bricklayers use the word, precisely aligned with him" (Bialystok 2011:215, quoting Trilling 1972:4). Her premise is that authenticity being "intrapersonal is more vexing because it implies divisiveness or dissimulation within the self" (ibid:211), which she explains is when the unit of the self is challenged because it is structurally unsound. She positions our current attitude to insincerity as less challenging because we do not traditionally link our self and what others think of it together thus it does not present itself as particularly vexing or challenging (2011).

What she contends is that one can be confused about which desires or values one is most aligned to but at the same time maintain honesty with other people (2011). Sincerity for her does not mean that one should be totally internally aligned (2011). This would mean that one could be sincere, and this sincerity will not be an indicator of true motive *because* one is confused. So, no matter your intra- personal angst, sincere and truthful dealings can still be maintained inter-personally. This is where sincerity parts ways with authenticity. In this way we can see how a VI can be sincere and not authentic. For example, Shudu is a simulated black fashion model made in South Africa. She is known as a simulation and is sincere and honest in this with her online relations. She is not African in the authentic sense of her inner self because she does not possess any inner self that could be vexed or confused, a matter that will be ventilated more fully below. The extent of the value that we place on sincerity must surely be challenged if we are to accept her as a fully employable fashion model, at the expense of real black, African women in our society.

Bialystok (2011) further distinguishes between a thin sincerity, which is that form of honest, truthful dealings without any deep self-knowledge [that comes from authenticity] from a thicker account of sincerity which requires meaningful and accurate self-knowledge. This is a helpful account because it allows us to see the VI as presenting us with a thin veneer of sincerity without any meaningful values behind it. This leaves us to question the actual extent of sincerity with a VI and apply a level of discernment to it as we would with trust. A VI at this moment presents itself as a thinly sincere, inauthentic commodification of a self. In the same way, the team that presents the VI in its form is sincere in its motive to leverage as much influence as it can to fulfil its commercial objective. It is sincere because it understands on a deeper level how to gain influence using the current social language and construction that is necessary to gain that influence. As a team it appears to be sincere as well. Thin or thick remains to be seen.

Sincerity in relation to trust.

If sincerity involves inter-personal relations and trust has a "tendency to connect and unite" (Peperzak 2013:14) there is relation between sincerity and trust. If we are clearly made aware of the motive behind a VI's self-expression, can we expect to trust it? Furthermore, can we then trust the team behind the VI? In other words what prevents us from trusting a sincere, yet inauthentic commodification of a hyperreal self?

The answer to this lies in our ability to morph our understanding of trust to this type of commodification of our selves. To use the caveat from Peperzak, "the idea that trust is a virtue must consequently be avoided" (2013:17). A VI is an expression of the things that we covet in a form that we can relate to, the archetype of human exploitation of itself *for* itself. It is driven

by our commercial need for more. Our recognition of its sincerity and perhaps even its stated motive cannot be a panacea for trust in it. Trust should require more than just sincerity of online content curation, especially when that curation involves gendered representations that have the capacity to shape our thoughts, language, and behaviour. The extent to which these representations reproduce "formulaic, dominant discourses and ideological sociocultural scripts "(Hurley 2019:5) should make us even more wary given that the VI is not an autonomous self unlike the many human influencers who engage in the same behaviour.

Likewise, its team of creators working for a company will be constrained by the directives and scope of their brief. The VI is an entity, a conglomerate of creation, curation and commercial desires driven by, amongst others, its team of creators. It is its own type of 'online society' backed by its conglomerate team. So, to tackle the relevance of this we must question how much faith we place in our values of sincerity and trust in this specific type of conglomerate that has become our online society. Sincerity is already thinly applied, should we hold the same for trust?

If we find that trust, as we would like to understand it, is based on our expectations of truth then, given the intentional fakeness of the VI's [dis]representation of our images, we should extend our trust parameters to include a distrust of such simulations until otherwise proven trustworthy. Distrust, as has been canvassed in the previous chapter has not been fully ventilated in the current literature. In some ways it can consist of a 'turning away from' rather than a turning towards (Peperzak 2013). Peperzak (2013) does not, however, provide a full account of distrust suffice to state that distrust cannot always infer all the negative aspects of trust. Hawley (2014, see McLeod 2021) places non-reliance as an indicator of distrust,

where distrust is something less than reliance but more than total non-reliance and, which does not require any feeling of ill will towards the distrusted. This account of a version of non-reliance may work with a VI. If a VI apparently shows elements of thin sincerity, it may still be relied upon to do what its intended objective may be. But because it is a [dis]representation and an entirely non-autonomous simulation it requires something more than the level of reliance that distrust currently calls for: a level of keenness coupled with distrust's level of 'less than reliance'.

This keen distrust of online content which, further, cannot be relied on is made all the more pressing if we apply it to the team behind the VI. This is because the team creates the VI as a non-autonomous simulation and the team cannot be relied on to be trusted even if we know their motive because we do not have an online relationship with the team to which we can hang our reliance onto. This is made even more prescient if we have traditionally come to accept that there should, in addition to trust, be other indicators of true motives that sincerity relies on in its framework of inter-personal relations.

Sincerity in relation to Truth.

Individual truth, according to Bialystok (2011) is purely subjective. This affects how we view our interactions online through the lens of a VI in relation to both sincerity and truth.

Bialystok (2011) states that truthfulness today "is highly valued, both in self-regarding and other-regarding conduct" (2011:207) and goes on to label sincerity as other-regarding conduct with authenticity being self-regarding conduct. Sincerity she says is more about ensuring that others are not deceived by you about who you really are (2011). This is not the case with a VI. From the onset, we are made aware of what a VI is by its affiliate company.

So, we can tentatively assume that a VI is sincere. The same could be said for the team behind it insofar as we understand their commercial motive.

If sincerity is further described as "ensuring truthfulness in our relations to others" (Guignon 2004:157) and the self, in this post-modern world, where the self is just "a construct [with] no true self" (Ibid:120) then we have, in a VI, reached an interesting juncture in our quest for a true self. There is no true inner self for a VI. If there is no outward deception on its nature [as a simulation] in relation to its online relations it can thus appear to exist as a true outward version of a self. A self that is transient because it is constructed and tweaked by its team based on a current social milieu. A VI can however still be viewed as being sincere in some ways, even if it is not always true. It is sincere because it makes it known that it is a computer-generated image. It is also most certainly an embodiment of a construct of a self in ways that Guignon (2004) may not have envisioned at the time of his writing on the topic.

What is troublesome is that in this apparent sincere outward manifestation, the relationship that exists between the VI and its creator creates a dilemma for our understanding of an unfolding of its true 'inner' personality as embodied in a VI because the social setting that a VI finds itself in is entirely bespoke and its 'personality' is entirely non-autonomous. It does not have a true inner self. It is the embodiment of a multiplicity of selves, patchworked, curated and bespoke. It is in fact, a very sincere fake. We know *what* it is, but we cannot ever know *who* it is despite its influence over us. This is an illustration of how a VI can exist to undermine the link between sincerity and truth because it is a product of a team of creators. Further these creators do not have to exhibit aspects of the truth in their online relations because they do so behind a VI. They do not have to be truthful about their representations

of a self in a VI and only exhibit sincerity to the extent of their stated aims. This is because they do not interact in the same space as the VI. They are sincere only to their commercial directives driving the creation. There is no inner self that they are beholden to or that is in the process of being fashioned. What then do we make of selfhood with regard to the team in relation to the online content if we cannot find a homogenous self for them? Are they not compelled to exhibit any form of a true or sincere 'self'? Can we then also seek to ascribe a sincere selfhood to a VI

Sincerity in relation to Selfhood of the team.

If being sincere is based on a true and spontaneous outward manifestation of what our inner selves are so that the "whole person [will be revealed] in a way that is coherent and steady" (Guignon 2004:152, quoting Bernard Williams' 2002:178 criticism of Rousseau), then what to make of a VI whose inner self is not reliant on any real social milieu or personal values save for those driven by the creators' embedded biases and the commercial interests that drive this team of creators. A VI in this sense becomes an embodiment of the hyperreal self, where the hyperreal is a "generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1994:1) because it relies on nothing. It was shown in the previous chapter on Authenticity how the VI is primed for brand placement with its perceived authenticity because it fragments the real into layers of perceived realities using current parasocial tools that can be used to leverage more influence.

A VI is true only to the needs of the interests that drive it. It does not misrepresent itself to us nor can it have a form of "truthful self-relation" (Bialystok 2011:210) because it does not have a self. Sincerity according to Bialystok (2011) relies on an assumption that we can choose

to show our true self or not based on our unflappable understanding of our self in relation to the outside world. This cannot be the case for a VI. It represents a way in which a team of creators can visually define and construct a reality, which becomes politicised once we can see how that representation "defines real and imagined ways of being that are highly gendered yet differ according to socio-cultural context[s]" (Hurley 2019:14). If we accept the fact that its true motive is purely to increase market capitalisation for a company, then we are faced with a hyperreal self that has a personal motive for gain, set to work/capitalise that motive in a social setting where it can wield influence using the very trends and tropes that social media popularises.

Neither it nor the team operate as a meaningful self. The team can also be said to be true only to the specialised function that it operates in its commercialised enterprise of 'self creation'. In this way it represents how late capitalism operates to commodify things that previously could not be bought or sold: our multiple selves, neatly packaged and presented in ways that we appear to identify with. The team operates in a way that uses sincerity to disrupt our current notions of how we value the truth in ways that achieve not only social success [in the way in which the VI is an influencer], but also commercial success for the team.

Since a VI occupies a space of influence amongst human influencers, it can with apparent seamlessness be employed to do work that humans traditionally do. VIs can easily be employed as brand ambassadors and models in guises and forms that, seemingly appear to present diversity and gender representations. This becomes problematic for the team behind the VI and their sincerity. Indeed, if it is even possible to place reliance on this value of sincerity given the obvious problems encountered with truthful representations of selves

enmeshed in the VI coupled with the commercial briefs that such teams will no doubt embark on when creating these VIs. Concomitant to this is the need for responsibility of representation by these teams.

Since a VI can be employed it can pose interesting conundrums in South Africa where racial redress is still in its infancy. For example, a company that markets and leverages off a black African-looking female VI who is their brand ambassador but who is created by a team of white male creators can become problematic. In this vein, we will need to reassess how valuable sincerity is as a social virtue based on the above because of the inevitable politicisation that it brings.

Even more so in this post-modern idea of self where the self is already a "pastiche self characterised by fluid boundaries and a multiplicity of actors" (Guignon 2004:118). We have allowed ourselves, in this reality where social constructionism takes place through the social practices and languages that we absorb, to become that "dynamic multiplicity of selves" (Ibid:122) as humans, and inadvertently, because of the democratisation of the internet allowed that to rise ubiquitously with the VI and its team of creators. Responsibility for sincere and truthful representations of a VI by its team becomes even more pressing, especially if we are to allow the continuation of racialised and gendered representations of selves for successful commercialised ends.

Sincerity in relation to Responsibility.

Guignon (2004) does not in his construction of authenticity canvass how responsibility for action [human action in his case] fits into this dynamic and fluid self. This is more so

problematic with a VI. It appears that with the creation and use of a VI, we are dealing with a situation where non-responsibility for personal action has been taken to its ultimate extreme version. A VI cannot be held morally responsible albeit sincere [and sometimes true to an extent] and neither can the creative team because they are merely acting out a version of a self, primed purely for commercial use. Their sincerity of intention in the creation of the VI could even just be their thin choice, as discussed in the chapter on Authenticity previously, where the autonomy of that choice has been manipulated, coerced, or dictated to. A VI can just as easily be terminated, re-built, reworked and emerge with a new self that is more suited to its current social setting to create more influence and drive this commercial interest. Through equality of access to our personal images on social media, we have allowed unfettered access to a multiplicity of selves in all our iterations so that the very notion of self has become a commodity. Thus, allowing our many selves to be hired out as multiple social selves in the form of a somewhat sincere VI to meet the needs of unbridled capitalism.

Presently there does not appear to be any responsibility on the part of the team for a thicker account of sincerity since they operate behind the VI. Their level of sincerity extends to a representation of the VI. They can create multiple VIs for multiple commercial purposes. Can they be held to a collective identity so that we may seek to extend responsibility for sincere expression to them? Equally so, would this multiplicity of selves of a VI be connected somehow to a collective identity that a VI could present us with? Is it possible that since a VI represents a 'conglomerate' of trend and tropes, it can lay claim to a form of collective identity? This will depend on whether we are willing to see a VI through the eyes of its particular social milieu and accept that the milieu contributes to the identity. Whether we can hold the team to the same standard remains to be seen.

Collective Identity

Social construction is a joint effort made possible through social and personal factors (Chambers 2004). The social milieu that one finds oneself in, the collective community that allows us to make and weave our stories in towards our journey for authenticity may also play a role in achieving a collective identity. Sincerity can also play a role in that journey towards a collective identity (Pierce 2015). He uses the example of a white South African student who claims to be African American on an application to a U.S.A university application to take advantage of a grant targeting that group of students. If it is found that the student only did this to claim this advantage and does not "*really"* (444) consider herself to be a member of this group, then this insincerity points to her inauthenticity of identity. This shows that sincerity can be aligned with authenticity for subjective terms, but not for collective identity formation, according to Pierce (2015). He submits that because of the changing and adapting that we do during this story of our lives with our values and thoughts, it can look insincere because it is fleeting. We will need, according to him something more to hang our collective identity on, which is consistency (Pierce 2015). It must appear that the identity that one has is lasting and significant for it to be recognised and validated by others who share this identity (Pierce 2015). He concludes that sincerity coupled with consistency "contributes to one's *trustworthiness* in relation to one's expressed identity" (445). How Pierce's account of consistency and trustworthiness can be extended to a white human woman who believes that she is black because of her social milieu may be problematic if she is both consistent *and* sincere about her belief. Especially if she is part of a collective identity in the collective community that she finds herself in that lends itself to her social construction.

However a VI cannot yet do this. It is not part of a collective identity. This is problematic. It will not [by its very nature of primed, bespoke commercialisation] be consistent. Its very social milieu is bespoke by its team. It builds, through its team, on an identity with characteristics and values that are separate from a collective human identity, yet it appears to resemble various types of these identities. It is not consistent and it is insincere as a member of a collective identity using Pierce's definition above.

Equally so, the team of creators do not belong to a collective identity either, save for their identity as a function of commercialised specialists. Furthermore, through their continued employment as a team of creators, they may not be consistent about their collective identity either if they are to meet the expectations of their clients' directive and so may tend to exhibit elements of insincerity in this regard. Key to keeping sincerity as a value for teams of creators would be their ability to create a consistent collective identity within a collective community of creators, where they can seek to build towards aspects of consistency and sincerity in this community around identity. This would greatly assist in locating responsibility and accountability for sincere, untruthful representations or even sincere ones that are inauthentic.

Significantly, as it currently stands, neither a VI nor its team can thus, on Pierce's account be capable of trustworthiness about its identity, personal or collective. This is problematic if we are still to place a value on sincerity as a key indicator of true motive or true self in our online interactions with a VI and its team since true motive [it being a marker for reliance] can lead us to a place of trustworthiness.

So, in summary, we have seen how sincerity can be viewed as one of the elements relating to the journey towards authenticity, although not a sufficient one nor a necessary one. If we accept that sincerity points us toward a value of truth in the journey towards selfhood then we have seen how sincerity parts ways with truth in the exploitation of a simulated human for commercialised use. In this simulated reality, one part of a triad with human and society that is the domain of the VI and its team, we can arrive at some conclusions. A VI can be viewed from a personal perspective as thinly sincere. As a representative of a collective, as insincere. The team behind the VI is sincere too, in their stated commercial aims only. Whether they can be held to a level of sincerity as a collective community would depend on their consistent identity in their milieu. A VI also does not have a self, as we deduced above, and so can be viewed as a [dis] representation of our image, inauthentic, hyperreal, and intentionally primed for commercial interests. Of significance is that a VI, in its personal capacity as has been seen above, cannot be trusted, and equally cannot be trusted with its collective identity.

Whether a team of creators can lay claim to a consistent, sincere collective identity will dictate whether we can place value on their sincerity. This will lend itself to the creation of a more meaningful relationship of responsibility and accountability for the team and go a long way to fostering trust for the team. The lack of this will inevitably lead us to extend our levels of distrust to the team of creators in their community of creators of this simulated reality as well.

Possible Objections and Responses:

The objections to sincerity may revolve around issues of autonomy of human followers to choose what and who they follow coupled with the keen knowledge that these VI present themselves as artificial and this apparent 'truth' of their likenesses should not be a concern in online social media. Each shall be extrapolated further.

At least VIs tell us who they are. They are sincere about their motives. Is this a storm in a teacup?

This is a valuable objection because this goes to the core of the juxtaposition of self and identity. The objection assumes that since a VI is known as such to us we should accept *what* it is. But this objection does not consider the more problematic socio-political layer to the VI of whether in accepting *what* they are should we also be made to accept *who* they represent. If this objection succeeds, then we have confined ourselves to a narrow aspect of sincerity to appease our need for truth of online content. I accept that a VI can be sincere, but only to an extent that it makes it known what it is and what it may be selling. Sincerity of motive cannot always appease us when we deal with a VI and the team behind it. This is because sincerity and truth as values that we hold dear in relation to in inter-personal relations is undermined in the way in which a VI is operated by its team. Precisely because we do not know the team, its values or its biases, we cannot 'know' their motive. So even if we understand that a VI is a tool, and a brand, we should care about this type of marketing that is being employed because it links to our identity of self-construction.

The full response to this objection is in two parts; the first being the extent of sincerity that a VI can exhibit and the second, the way in which our version of selves is being employed to show sincerity.

Firstly, if sincerity is an indication of how we value truth, then at a very basic level, we do have truth. We know that we are dealing with a VI. But if truth depends further on the real, then we have an obstacle since the VI is neither real nor are its affectations. Granted, it is a form of a hyperreal and thus does exist as a virtual reality, but only presently as a copy. Its sincerity and truth appear relevant only to its classification and nothing else. Sincerity of motive inter-personally should not imply meaningful deep self-knowledge. Especially if we can accept that sincerity is a matter of degree (Bialystok 2011). This may be the flaw in this objection since it may be commonly misunderstood that sincerity somehow implies an all or nothing approach. Bialystok (2011) has a useful example in her article that illustrates how a deeply self-aware, authentic, and consistent individual such as Claudius in Shakespeare's Hamlet can still be an exceptional liar to everyone. He is "true to his own self while being false to every other man" (2011:218) and she thus shows how authenticity does not imply sincerity.

But what about an inauthentic yet sincere protagonist? Does this exist? According to Bialystok this is not possible and is "incoherent, except insofar as a person is ignorant of or mistaken about who she really is" (2011:218). However, I submit that one can have a sincere and inauthentic protagonist in the form of a VI. This is because a VI, being hyperreal and a simulation is not capable of ignorance or being mistaken about itself. In this way, it occupies this unusual space of sincerity sans ignorance, mistake or authenticity.

So, this objection stands in part because sincerity is a value that we hold dear, however I hope that I have shown the limits to sincerity insofar as it concerns truth and motive.

Secondly, we should indeed care about the way in which the VI is deployed as a sincere version of a self. A VI may be portrayed as sincere but is not real. They are presented as influencers for humans, yet they are only 'playing' at being human. Our value of sincerity is being used to 'play' at being authentic. But authenticity implies a self-knowledge of an inner true self which a VI does not have. They are not a who, they are a what, they are fluid, a pseudo-human-like form primed to harness social forces to construct our individual preferences in a social and commercial context. The team of creators are adept at using social media to mould our individual choices and preferences and there does not seem to be a limit on the types of moulding that they can undertake. All representations of all types of identities, cultural, religious, social and gender can be called upon equally, in an 'identity-free-for-all grab' to blend capitalism with social construction, that is disturbingly political. Indeed, the white male creator of Shudu is profiting from his deployment of an outwardly sincere black fashion model who works seemingly tirelessly for him. This should not be a storm in a teacup.

Why should we care so much about VI's influence? They tell us what they are and we, as autonomous humans have a choice to follow them or not.

This objection, closely linked to the first is that because of the apparent sincerity of the VI we, as humans should be able to make autonomous choices based on our individual preferences as free individuals with agency and autonomy. This objection is based on our ability to choose but is ignoring the concomitant power that we are allowing in the VI team to be able to mould that choice for us. If the objection succeeds, then we have allowed our absolute liberal ability to choose to supersede our other choice to harness appropriations of our selves for a commercial need. This is problematic.

The response to this objection is that despite the thin veneer of sincerity that is present in a VI, we cannot assume that its harnessing of the types of norms and forces that are present in our social milieu are always for the good, nor that the actual choices that we make based on these norms are optimal. This objection finds its roots in the construction of first and second order autonomy discussed by Chambers (2004) wherein she argues that preferences are socially influenced, and individual options can both be constrained and developed by such social norms. It may be that we will have the autonomy to choose our VI, but that choice may be thin because it is developed and moulded in ways that we may not realise is not beneficial for us.

If we extend autonomy to the team of creators, it follows that if we allow the team of creators the autonomy to create the VI, we are also then allowing them the choice [theirs or through their directives] to develop social, language, and gender representations that may have far-reaching impact on our current social construction. Simply put, we have allowed them the autonomy to choose to create a non-autonomous morally neutral agent not for the attainment of good. Our choices may be hollow if this is the case and whether we are equipped with tools to make choices to cater for this hollowness remains to be seen.

Conclusion.

Sincerity appears to have its limits as a value for a VI and its team of creators. They both appear to possess thin levels of sincerity but this type of sincerity on its own lacks the depth and meaning that we would like to ascribe to it in our search for a true and constant self in relation to a VI. Sincerity is problematic in the case of the team of creators. Given the current

format of how the teams operate, it is not clear if in holding them to a degree of sincerity it assists us in clearing the path to responsibility and accountability, or authenticity and trust. They are presently highly commercialised and specialised teams employed to create and fashion selves that can influence, which in their creation of a VI has shown them the means to a successful commercial end. They appear sincere to just that.

As humans it is possible to be true to your inner values, waiver in that belief, amend it and develop it whilst all the time keeping that aspect sincerely hidden from your peers. We can ultimately choose what we "show of others of ourselves" (Bialystok 2011:229). So, whilst we may tentatively attach a label of sincerity onto ourselves, it is harder to do that with a VI, even more for its team of creators. They are the agents of change in its journey, and they currently attract no moral responsibility to this venture, little sincerity and no trust because they operate outside of the confines of what we ordinarily choose to show of ourselves. They do not seek to show themselves at all whilst operating behind this VI, yet they profit from the very values of self that we hold dear through their simulation of these values in their VI.

Our human journey of role-playing and experimentation of identity, as Bialystok (2011) would have us do, to find something that resonates, is our "shtick" our inimitable style of performance in this journey of life. This style, this "shtick" can now be commodified and compartmentalised to become one of many sincere VIs to a team of creators

Conclusion

"Let's begin with the disappearance of the real"

Jean Baudrillard. *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* (2009: 10)

The chapters on Authenticity, Trust and Sincerity have illustrated how we require a deeper understanding of these notions if we have to exist side by side in the real world with these Virtual Influencers virtual simulation of reality. A VI is representative of a hyperreal primed and placed as a commodity in our online social media spaces AND simultaneously positioned as a gainfully employed self in this real world. They seek to challenge our current notions of an authentic, sincere, and trustworthy self. These chapters have attempted to find ethical relevance for such a development using our current understanding of our selves on these ethical values. In doing so it has been found that our quest for meaning and purpose in this life through our social and personal journeys has been made all the more prescient when we

are faced with a simulated self, an image of ourselves made in amalgamation of all things that we currently covet: in image, in style, in song in fashion, in popular politics and others. A mirror. This has been facilitated largely through the equality of access of our images and life stories that has been made possible through social media, and inadvertently through the unchecked democratisation of the internet. This access to our images and likenesses has been problematised further by the commodification of these images in the form of a self, a VI who is able to leverage this likeness for capitalistic use. More worrying, is the apparent success that it, and its team appear to be enjoying in doing this, and who can continue to do so seemingly forever given that the VI is infinite.

The chapter on Authenticity laid the foundation for the development of the argument of the inward journey that a VI seeks to simulate in its representation of self. To be authentic is to exhibit a truthfulness and honesty with yourself about your inward journey and to reflect that ability to own your opinions, choices, and positions together with your ability to change same to the world in a self-deprecating yet responsible manner. This is because we are finite beings, so we seek to imbue this finite life with meaning and purpose. Authenticity, as a social virtue is meant to promote meaningful societal engagement as a collective. This is not the case for a VI. A VI is infinite and therefore capable of constant change through its stable of creators, all of whom wield this capacity for change in a commercialised space. Yet it is entangled with social construction because it represents a human-like form that is gendered, racialised and interactive in a manner that seeks to influence us so that we are guided, through the VI [and its team], on our choices. In this way, our collective journeys that we place online, together with our likes and dislikes and trends and tropes are used by the VI team to create versions of ourselves that seek to influence us commercially. A commercial human influencer is

different because they will bear some responsibility for their online representation since their journey towards authenticity is based on our current framing of truth and trust. We cannot apply the same framing that we currently have for authenticity to a VI or its team.

Trust cannot be our starting point if we are to continue to interact with these types of simulations. The chapter on trust revealed that we cannot view trust as a virtue because then, the converse, distrust will be relegated to being non-virtuous. Trust must be viewed as a relationship that is built on mutual goodwill and shared values. This cannot be assumed with a VI or its team. A VI occupies a space where it is primed for commercial relevance through its social relevance. It cannot be approached in the same way that we approach our online relationships with other commercial human influencers. This is because there is a history, an identity and an honesty about the human influencer coupled with a capacity for self-reflection that a VI cannot have. We place our reliance on the human influencer to behave competently when we trust them. A VI is without a history, a story, or an identity, save for that version that best suits the commercial interest of its brand. Its competence is untested, and we cannot hang our traditional framing of trust relationships onto the current version. Neither can we do so with the team behind the VI since we do not have a relationship with them. At most a VI and its team exhibit a thin level of trust that we must accept with their stated commercial purpose. The more prudent step would be to start from a level of distrust coupled with keen discernment so that we can form a meaningful relationship with these VIs, irrespective of their apparent sincerity of motive or that of their team behind them.

The chapter on sincerity concluded that sincerity cannot always be a reliable indicator of true motive more especially if that true motive is not an indication of a true self as is the case with

a VI. In fact, a VI is only thinly sincere since it tells us what it is without deception. At best the team behind it can also be seen to be thinly sincere in presenting a VI because they are doing so without any deep meaningful engagement or knowledge of that representation. It is a plaything primed for commercialisation and it uses our current framing of sincerity in relation to inter-personal relationships to gain influence over us by making us trust it. It appears to be outwardly sincere in its expressions, but these 'self' expressions are curated by the team behind it. The team builds on these sincere expressions of a VI based on their commercial directives which implies that they represent a form of sincerity that is consistent, whilst simultaneously obfuscating how sincerity is meant to be an indicator of a true self. There currently does not appear to be any responsibility or accountability for their dis-representations of selves that resemble sincere fakes.

Our current conclusions on authenticity, trust and sincerity are challenged when we have seen in this dissertation, how a VI is a commercialised tool, a primed [dis]representation of an authentic self, incapable of trustworthiness at present, unreliable and insincere (to an extent). A morally neutral being. We have seen further how the team of creators occupy this heady, somewhat exciting space of independence from responsibility for the ways in which they are crafting our social construction coupled with no normative expectations at present. Exciting for them and worrisome for us if we are to move towards the achievement of good in our communities. On the flip side, it may appear to be more morally defensible to severely curate a VI *because* it lacks that authentic true self with agency, than it would a human influencer.

How do we feel with this mirror of multiple selves that has been held up to us? Perhaps the more relevant question should be, what do we plan to do with this mirror now that we know what it reveals about us?

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