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Technology and Selfhood

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## Avastars: Digital Recreation and the Future of Celebrities

### **Introduction**

Miquela Sousa, more commonly known as “Lil Miquela” is an Instagram model who has amassed over three million followers. She has brown hair, bangs, and a gap between her front teeth, but what truly sets her apart is the fact that she is computer-generated. As a self-proclaimed “19-year-old robot living in LA,” she represents a new age of influencers. A computer-generated person can’t get “canceled” and will always look perfect; they are a standardized good.

These computer-generated people have become increasingly prevalent in society, and their applications have become more widespread. For example, with this technology, we can digitally recreate celebrities both dead and alive. These recreations have been used in movies, commercials, and to maliciously superimpose faces onto pornography (Deepfakes). Many people also believe these computer generations to be harmful as they could worsen the ever-impossible beauty standard.

In an increasingly digital world, these digital people are essentially human; they have many followers, give “relatable” information about their nonexistent lives, and participate in modeling and advertising campaigns. With photoshop and cosmetic surgery on the rise, why is a computer-generated model any more harmful to unrealistic beauty standards? Furthermore, what are the ethics surrounding digital recreations of celebrities, both dead and alive? For example, can you use a person in your movie (albeit a recreation) for profit when they cannot be paid or give consent? This could have terrifying implications for actors going forward and raises more

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ethical questions about human autonomy in the digital world. When we think of technology replacing human jobs, our minds go to cubicles or factories, but it appears that the next job in danger of becoming obsolete is influencers and celebrities.

In this paper, I will first discuss what it means to be real, delving deeper into digital influencers and providing additional context on them. Next, I will explain how these computer generations are becoming more human and developing aspects of “Factor X.” I will then explore different paths of digital recreation of celebrities both dead and alive and their impacts on society. Finally, I will demonstrate how the culmination of these factors creates an environment in which human celebrities will have trouble competing.

### **What Does it Mean to be Real?**



Here we see Lil Miquela (left) posing with a wax statue of Ariana Grande. The picture is accompanied by the caption “everyone in LA is fake.”

Though intended to be lighthearted, the meaning is far

deeper. Los Angeles is a city full of celebrities and influencers alike, who get cosmetic procedures and act a certain way to fit societal expectations. Is someone who surgically alters their appearance, and then photoshops it further before posting a picture, fundamentally

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different from a computer-generated person? Furthermore, people rarely meet said celebrities but more commonly see them online. When the celebrity only exists in videos seen on social media, they are no different from Miquela. So, while many people consider her to be “fake” because she is computer-generated, her claim that everyone is fake puts the situation in a different perspective. Finally, this wax figure of Ariana Grande is not really her, but an artificial recreation of her, demonstrating that every celebrity is simply selling their image, and Miquela is no different.



Similarly, this image of Miquela in sweatpants that say “I <3 real life” provides further societal commentary. Jenna Drenten, a professor who researches digital consumer culture and identity, published an essay entitled

“Celebrity 2.0: Lil Miquela and the rise of a virtual star system” where she studied this phenomenon further. She explains that “Authenticity is used as a ‘currency of realness’ to commodify Lil Miquela’s persona in the post-feminist attention economy.” Essentially, the team responsible for Lil Miquela has perfected a feel of authenticity, primarily through the elaborate backstories and life details provided, that hooks people in as fans. When she posts these photos joking about being fake, she comes across as more real and relatable. This is because viewers

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feel as if they are in on an inside joke, and these jokes create a personality for Miquela that viewers can relate to. One example of this is seen in the following image, where Miquela jokes about how she is perpetually nineteen. Even though everyone knows that she is not real, she



lilmiquela • Following

lilmiquela • Material Gwori Feeling timeless for my seventh 19th birthday. Thank you guys for all the love! 🎉  
Edited · 1w

veryharryhill • I always celebrated my 6th 19th birthday  
1w 45 likes Reply

allthatjazzmin • HAPPY BIRTHDAY! Love you so much ❤️  
1w 9 likes Reply

corned • Happy happy birthday, Miq!!!! ❤️  
1w 12 likes Reply

lilmiquelafashion • HAPPY BIRTHDAY ONGGG ❤️🎉  
1w 2 likes Reply

harperstale • HAPPY BIRTHDAY LOVE U

78,796 likes APRIL 22

received hundreds of comments

both complimenting her and wishing her a happy birthday.

Several comments pictured even say “I love you” which demonstrates that her fans feel a deep personal connection to her.

Drenten also explains that celebrities have always been cultural fabrications, and Lil Miquela simply shows that with the proper technology (to both generate her image and utilize it on various social media platforms), celebrities can now be similarly fabricated in the digital realm (Drenten, 2020). Miquela has modeled for Burberry, Chanel, and Prada, appeared in a music video at Lollapalooza, starred in a Calvin Klein campaign with Bella Hadid, and been named one of Time’s Most Influential People on the Internet. It is clear that her lack of physical existence does not take away from her success. Miquela is not a real person and is carefully managed by a team of various professionals, but it is still noteworthy that they can profit off of managing a nonexistent celebrity.

### Digital People Can Have “Factor X”

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This feeling of personal connection opens the door for concern because a computer-generated depiction of a person typically does not produce feelings of love or receive birthday messages. Francis Fukuyama, a prominent political thought leader, wrote a book called *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (2002) that contains a chapter entitled “Human Dignity.” In this chapter, he explores a concept called “Factor X” described as “the human essence, the most basic meaning of what it is to be human.” He also explains that advancements such as gene editing or cloning violate human dignity by going against the natural order of things. Although it is not cloning, creating digital representations of people and formulating fake lives similarly violates human dignity. When these celebrities are only needed in commercials, movies, or social media, they don’t even need to be cloned; now they just exist digitally and serve the same purpose.

People know Miquela is computer-generated, but her curated authenticity makes her *feel* like a real person, and isn’t that what Factor X is all about? Though Miquela may lack some key aspects of Factor X, such as sentience and morality, the way others interact with her indicates that she is treated as a human. Fukayama discusses the implications of advancements in biotechnology, but purely digital humans lack the biological aspect, so it is clear that this is even more against human dignity than what Fukayama feared. Instead of genetically editing people, we are creating ideal depictions of them, with perfectly curated personalities, to fill these roles of celebrities and influencers. We have moved in the direction where these uniquely human jobs are no longer uniquely human, and you no longer need to be human to have Factor X; it is possible to create a digital depiction that people will treat as a person.

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### **Deceased Celebrities May Live Online**

Miquela is a computer-generated depiction of a person, but one noteworthy issue in society is the *regenerated*. What was once nearly impossible has become increasingly easy. In an article called “Your Own Kevin Spacey” author Paul Marks, the Senior Technology Correspondent for New Scientist Magazine states that “...for celebrities at least, there are more than enough paparazzi photographs online to capture digitally what they look like from just about every possible angle.” This means that with relative ease, you can have a “puppet” of just about any celebrity. He also states that “The face of someone who has died could be recreated and driven with one of the emerging breed of chatbots trained -- using the deceased's tweets and emails -- to converse like them.” The digital recreation of personality is where we should acknowledge a line has been crossed. Digitally recreating a dead celebrity and their personality has lots of potential for abuse. For example, these recreations are being used in commercials to endorse products. The Cleveland State Law Review has a publication called “Mad Men and Dead Men: Justification For Regulation of Computer-Generated Images of Deceased Celebrity Endorsers” that delves deeper into these concerns. The main idea is that there is clear harm in digitally recreating deceased celebrities for endorsements because it is false advertising to the viewer and inherently unfair to competition. For context, the paper states “...rights to the deceased James Dean’s image can be purchased for \$15,000, whereas the living David Beckham’s endorsement of Gillette razors cost the company over \$35 million.”

Costing a fraction of the price, these deceased celebrity endorsers are the most desirable option for companies on a tight budget, and a good indication of the direction society is moving.

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The clearest issue is the fact that a digital recreation of a dead person should not serve as a valid endorsement. The publication is pushing for regulation, stating “Not only was Bruce Lee never a bona fide user of Johnnie Walker Scotch during his life, but he certainly was not a bona fide user forty years after his death.” Endorsements such as these should be considered “false advertising” and “deceptive trade practice.” If people can be persuaded to make purchases by someone who is clearly not real, then it is not celebrities that are important, but rather the idea of them. Overall, this law review shows that even real celebrities are getting replaced by digital recreations. In the new Ghostbusters movie, actor Harold Ramis (who is deceased) was digitally recreated, down to the way his face makes various expressions. If this trend continues, actors may start to become obsolete. If the process of recreation becomes more efficient, it could one day be easier to manipulate an actor’s image to act in a movie than to go through the typical process of filming.

Despite these concerns, there is still hope for traditional human celebrities to persevere. The American Bar Association has a publication entitled “‘Delebs’ and Postmortem Right of Publicity” where they outline the laws and regulations surrounding the use of celebrity imagery after death. My previous point about false advertising has clear laws in certain states, but some are contingent on residence or year of death. Some states such as Hawaii and Nevada have broad statutes protecting the use of one’s likeness after death, but key states such as New York do not recognize postmortem rights. Overall, we are making progress towards protecting celebrities from digital recreation, but the narrowness of the statutes could still leave many unprotected, so there is still lots of room for improvement.

### **Further Potential For Misuse**

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Celebrities have more to worry about than being recreated after death; Deepfake technology is actively plaguing them. As discussed earlier, photos can be compiled to create a digital celebrity with relative ease. People have been using this technology to create fake, often incriminating content of celebrities. Graphic pornography videos that are not real could be edited to look like anyone, and celebrities have very little legal protection in these cases. The Duke Law and Technology review has a publication entitled "Deepfakes: False Pornography Is Here and the Law Cannot Protect You." The journal sets the scene by beginning with "There is a video of you having sex on the internet. You do not remember being with this person because it never happened. Others are watching the video online, too." before delving deeper into the lack of support within the legal system. The same technology that could create a harmless fake video of Barack Obama wishing someone a happy birthday could also create a video of him declaring war or spreading dangerous misinformation. The ability to digitally recreate people is harmful beyond the scope of celebrities, and there is little that can be done about it legally.

### **What This Means For Society**

Society is becoming toxic for celebrities with the rise of Deepfakes, digital recreations, photoshop, and general competition with influencers like Miquela. The earlier Jenna Drenten article states "Brand partners benefit from commodifying this perfectly imperfect, forever 19-year-old who will never accidentally deviate or misbehave" which encapsulates the reason celebrities will have trouble competing. The things that make us human- aging and making mistakes- are two undesirable traits that can be mitigated by digital influencers. They have cracked the code for a perfect feel of authenticity, utilizing humor and backstories to foster

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a sense of humanity (Factor X), which is likely to be the turning point for computer-generated influencers. Furthermore, this technology has become advanced enough that deceased celebrities are being recreated to endorse products and star in movies. With little legal protection against harmful Deepfakes or deceitful endorsements, human celebrities are likely to face many challenges.

In addition to these obstacles, celebrities face other threats of becoming obsolete. Using a computer-generated deceased celebrity (a “deleb”) costs a fraction of the price, and financial incentives have the power to set the trends. In an increasingly digital world, celebrities no longer need a physical form. For social media posts, commercials, and movies, digital renderings serve the same purpose and are not prone to human error. An influencer who exists online and has every move calculated by a team of professionals is a commodified good. These Avastars (a portmanteau of “avatar” and “stars” colloquially referring to computer-generated influencers) are here to stay and are rapidly becoming more desirable than a traditional human celebrity.

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