

'New world order': Asia's virtual influencers offer metaverse glimpse

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Blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, virtual influencers are hugely popular with teenagers and will yield increasing power as interest grows in the 'metaverse', industry experts say.

Sporting neon hair and flawless skin, Bangkok Naughty Boo is one of a new generation of influencers in Asia promising to stay forever young,

on-trend, and scandal-free—because they are computer generated.

Blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, these stars are hugely popular with teenagers in the region and will yield increasing power as interest grows in the "metaverse", industry experts say.

"I'm 17 forever, non-binary, with a dream of becoming a pop star," Bangkok Naughty Boo—who uses they/them pronouns—said in an introductory video sent to AFP.

Created by fashion designer Adisak Jirasakkasem and his friends, who envisioned a gender-fluid persona to hang the ideals of the artist community, the character is one of a tribe of "Made in Thailand" virtual influencers borne from COVID-19 pressures.

In September, Ai-Ailynn made her debut—she was created after her agency became frustrated by the "limitations on human influencers" during COVID-19 lockdowns.

Virtual influencers "are suitable for the new normal," SIA Bangkok told AFP.

Artificial intelligence creations are establishing a foothold worldwide in the lucrative influencer market, which is expected to be worth \$13.8 billion in 2021, according to data giant Statista.

But industry analysts say Asia is where the industry will really boom in the coming decade.

"We think Asia will be an area of rapid growth in the sector of virtual influencers. Generation Z is the largest group of internet users in Asia, and it is a digitally adept generation that is highly familiar with social media and all things virtual," explained Nick Baklanov, a marketing



specialist with Hype Auditor.



Digital character Ai-Ailynn is one of a tribe of 'Made in Thailand' virtual influencers borne from COVID-19 pressures.

'First metaverse inhabitants'

The number of virtual influencers has more than tripled to 130 in two years, according to Baklanov, who predicted Facebook's investment in the metaverse—dubbed a VR version of the internet—will mean an industry boom.

"Virtual influencers are better suited to the role of the first inhabitants of the metaverse than anyone else," he added.

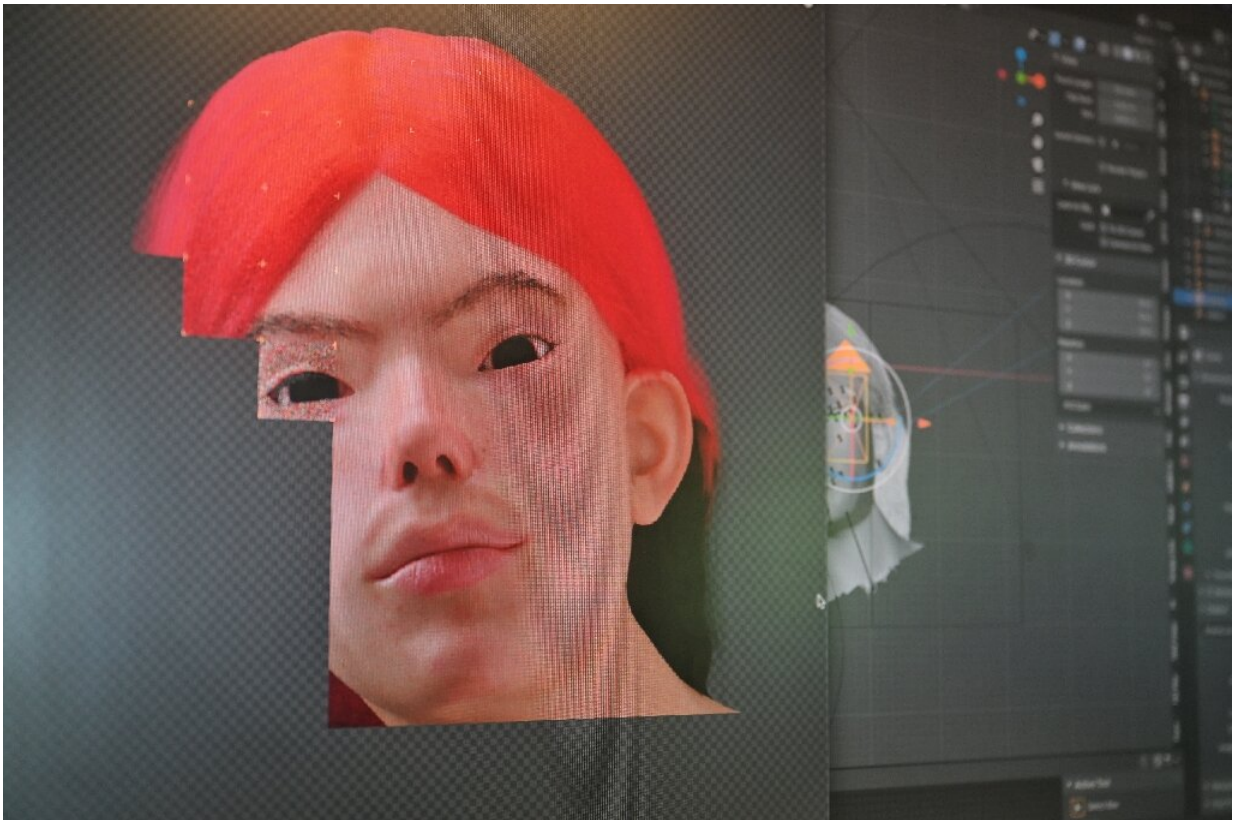
The biggest virtual earner is believed to be Lil Miquela, the LA-based "robot It-Girl" who has worked with Prada and Calvin Klein, and makes an estimated \$7,000 per post.

The World Health Organization recruited Knox Frost, a 21-year-old AI "universal adapter" from Atlanta, to spread coronavirus safety messages to his 700,000 followers.

In Asia, computer-generated pop stars including Japan's Hatsune Miku and Luo Tianyi from China, as well as virtual K-Pop groups Eternity and K/DA, have paved the way for newer "stars" as technology improves.

To create Bangkok Naughty Boo, Adisak photographed a model in different locations across the Thai capital before creating the character's face online.

He merged the computer-generated face and the real life model's body to make his virtual idol.



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Bangkok Naughty Boo has already been signed to a leading Thai—human—modelling agency, while Ai-Ailynn has already secured a deal to be the face of a major mobile operator.

"Influencers yield more power in the East and provide more lucrative brand and engagement opportunities, as the idol and fandom concepts

are more rooted in culture," Saisangeeth Daswani, a fashion and beauty industry analyst at market intelligence company Stylus, explained.

Scandal-free, controlled lives

With trouble-free pasts, a round-the-clock work ethic, and easily controlled public personas, the fictional avatars are also respite for companies weary of reputational damage.

"Some brands enjoy the safety of associating with (virtual) influencers who have a pre-defined backstory and future," commented Christopher Travers, the founder of Virtual Humans, a website tracking the industry.

And with authorities in some Asian nations policing freedom of expression, businesses may prefer the ability to control everything.

"The Chinese government's recent crackdown on exorbitantly paid, 'vulgar' and 'immoral' influencers is likely to further boost the appeal of virtual influencers," explained Chen May Yee, APAC director for Wunderman Thompson Intelligence.

"They won't make impolitic comments or be embroiled in sex scandals."



Human influencer Mutchima Wachirakomain says she is not worried about the rise of virtual rivals.

SIA Bangkok say there has been huge interest in Ai-Ailynn with businesses in pandemic-ravaged Asia looking to "innovation and a new world order".

A shake-up of the status quo may have some flesh-and-blood content creators worried, but human influencer Mutchima Wachirakomain welcomes the newcomers.

"They are freaking cool," exclaimed the 25-year-old, who shares glamour shots alongside "no filter" makeup-free looks to her 21,100 followers on Instagram.

"People still yearn for authenticity, the realness of a real-life influencer," she said as she prepped for a shoot at an avocado-themed cafe.

"The characters can't replace the intimate connections humans have with each other."

But Bangkok Naughty Boo is prepared to try.

Their Instagram is a mix of cheeky ensembles shot against the backdrop of Thailand's concrete jungle capital as well as daily life snippets like getting a first vaccine shot and spilling bubble milk tea.

"I hope I can meet you all in person one day. Love you!" they told AFP, signing off with a kiss.

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