LIL MIQUELA: ROBOT OR NOT

A case study of how virtual influencers may afford posthuman roleplay

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ABSTRACT

Today's social media landscape is inhabited and used by a wide variety of people. A growing group of people has developed fame and fortune on platforms such as Instagram mainly through self-branding. They are now classified under the umbrella terms that are called influencers and micro-celebrities. The way in which these people 'influence' is diverse, but it is almost always monetized through cooperating with brands and products. In recent years, a new kind of influencer/micro-celebrity rose to popularity. These are the virtual influencers. Their entire character is made up. Their profiles and posts are made and styled by said characters' maker(s). Sometimes they are presented on multiple platforms, embedded in a transmedia narrative. This research focusses on the case study of the fictional transmedia- and brand character Miquela Sousa on Instagram. In this thesis it will be outlined how Miquela's posts, her narrative, and the dialogical relationship between her and her audience give reason to reconsider the boundaries between the dichotomies of embodied/human/real versus disembodied/virtual/artificial. The research results will showcase that Miquela's posts, narrative and the dialogical relationship with her audience affords a kind of posthuman performance and (role)play. Thereby posthumanism will be presented in a different light, one that through fictional phenomena like Miquela is approached in a more positive and appreciative, less paranoid and negative way. Eventually it will be suggested that these terms of embodiment and artificiality should be reconsidered in light of recent developments, such as Miquela, in contemporary digital culture.

Table of contents

Table of Figures

Introduction

''I don't say it enough but thank you to all my fans for making my life amazing. Ok now here's the hard part. My hands are literally shaking. I'm not a human being.'' [1]

This is a quote from one of Miquela Sousa's Instagram posts. Miquela is an online celebrity with an Instagram following of 2.4 million people. She is part of a transmedia narrative that takes place on several social media platforms, Instagram being the first introduced and most popular one.[2] She shares her 'daily life' , snapshots with friends, personal struggles, activism and more. Her profile includes promos for her upcoming projects, her music and all the brand-deals that she has had with big companies such as Samsung, Calvin Klein, and others. In many ways, she resembles a micro-celebrity in a culture in which people participate in self-branding online.[3] She is a phenomenon to care about because she raises questions about social media fame and posthuman identities, performance and play. She rivals many influencers with her following and she challenges cultural influences on the Instagram platform. Because Miquela is different: she is not human, she is a fictional character.

She consists of Computer-Generated Images that look almost human but are not. She is carefully construed by her creators, who work at an LA-based tech company named Brud.[4] In Miquela's performance on Instagram she constantly appears and performs very human-like. As if she was an embodied human being. Direct and indirect references to a quasi-human body as well as a quasi-human mind are made continuously as part of the narrative. I want to argue that phenomena like Miquela, in the context of Instagram and online social interaction, allow us to reconsider notions of embodiment and artificiality in contemporary digital culture. Because due to the created illusion of embodiment in combination with the performing of a posthuman character, and the thereafter occurring of posthuman (role)play, the still prominent idea that there is a strict

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[1] Lilmiquela, *Instagram,* April 18, 2018, accessed October 20, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BhwuJcmlWh8/ .

[2] Jan-Noël Thon, "Transmedia characters: theory and analysis", *Frontiers of narrative studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): 176-199.

[3] Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang and Raymond Welling, ''Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers'' *Celebrity Studies,* 8 no. 2 (2017): 191.

[4] Brud, ''Brud is a transmedia studio that creates digital character driven story worlds'', accessed October 20, 2019, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1V5N5tcfm7wBuUshgrmIOz9ijAO-VRqvkUbGRu0uKdI8/edit .

boundary between the embodied/human/real and the disembodied/virtual/artificial starts to become shaky. This argument, that Miquela gives reason to reconsider these boundaries, may that be solely discursively, is continuously strengthened when analysing Miquela's posts, and the corresponding comment sections. The interaction there showcases that the question whether Miquela is embodied/human/real or not (though still prominent) is outgrown by a big part of her audience. Instead of wondering about this, they participate in a kind of posthuman role playing between themselves and Miquela's character through interacting with her as if the narrative that she presents is the reality. Thereby ambiguating common assumptions regarding the embodied/human/real versus disembodied/virtual/artificial dichotomies. Through engaging in this posthuman roleplay, the workings of which will be explained during the analysis, a shift starts to occur in the way in which posthumanism can be approached. Instead of a paranoid approach, which is a valid approach that will be clarified later, a reparative approach is introduced. This signifies a shift in thinking about embodiment and artificiality in the current digital cultural climate. Thus, in this thesis I want to formulate an answer to the question:

How does the way in which virtual influencer Miquela Sousa is presented, engaged with, and evolves as a fictional character on the Instagram platform, allow for a re-conceptualisation of the notions of embodiment and artificiality in contemporary digital culture?

The sub-questions that will eventually help me in the process of answering the main question are the following:

What kind of strategies are used to signify Miquela's body and mind throughout the different phases of her character's narrative on Instagram and how does the public respond to these strategies?

How does the dialogical relationship between Miquela and her audience reframe the so-called boundary between the embodied/human/real and the disembodied/virtual/artificial?

In what ways does the dialogical relationship between Miquela and her audience show signs of posthuman roleplay?

To answer these questions, I performed a critical discourse analysis of 14 of Miquela's posts. These have been divided into a phase 1, phase 2 and phase 3, indicating before,

during and after the character 'came out' as a robot, not a human. This decision was made because it allows me to closely look at not only the progression and evolvement of the presentation of Miquela's character but also at the progression and evolvement of the engagement with Miquela's character by her audience. Thus, allowing me to recognize patterns as well as similarities and differences in the presentation of and engagement with Miquela through time, giving this analysis a diachronic character.

Academic relevance

There are several discourses that are relevant for my research. For example, discourse around social media influencers, online marketing and self-branding and post-human identity construction. Some works from these discourses will be briefly discussed, starting with Alice Marwick, who chose Instagram as her platform for an analysis of social media influencers.[5] However she chose to examine the concept of 'instafame' and 'micro-celebrities' and she dived into how human influencers strategically construct their profiles and posts to improve their online status in the attention economy, for monetary gain.[6] The way in which Miquela is constructed is almost identical to the influencers that Marwick describes, except here it's being constructed as backstory for a transmedia narrative.

Additionally, Miquela could be viewed as a brand character. Dodoo and Wu explain that with the rise of social media, brand personification marketing strategies have skyrocketed in popularity.[7] They explain that fictional brand characters are more efficient than regular celebrities when it comes to social media marketing. Miquela's character fits this brand character mould as well as the influencer mould when you take into account the amount of collaborations and brand deals Miquela has had with companies and high-end brands, whilst being a fictional character.[8]

The work of Marwick, Dodoo and Wu and others can be viewed as a blueprint for the way that Miquela was constructed. However, my approach will focus on the posthuman roleplay aspect that Miquela's Instagram presence is enabling, thereby chipping away at reigning dichotomies. In this way my research will be a valuable contribution to existing literature because it sheds a light on a relatively new form of influencing, one that is combined with transmedia storytelling and posthuman identity

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[5] Alice E. Marwick, ''Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy'', *Public Culture.* 27 no 1. (2015) 137 – 160.

[6] Marwick, ''Instafame: Luxury Selfies in the Attention Economy'', 138.

[7] Naa Amponsah Dodoo and Linwan Wu, "Relationship Maintenance on Social Media: An Examination of Personified Brand Characters' Twitter Accounts", *International Journal of Marketing Studies* 7, no. 5 (2015): 1.

[8] Ibidem

performance and roleplay. It should be acknowledged that Miquela is not the only type of posthuman identity that has surfaced in popular media. There are many ways in which posthuman identities have played a significant role in popular culture. For instance in improv theatre, books, games etc. Another example is Hatsune Miku who is a virtual singer, a vocaloid software to be precise, from Japan. Linh K. Le explains that Hatsune Miku was the first international virtual idol.[9] Even though Miquela is unique because her character performs within a transmedia narrative that is specifically centred around social media use, she is not alone in being a posthuman character. This highlights that there are many ways in which posthuman characters are surfaced in popular media today, placing Miquela within a relevant and current debate about the boundaries and possibilities that this brings along.

Furthermore, as the concept of a virtual influencer is fairly new, not many scholars have used them, especially Miquela, as a case study for their research. However the chapter 'Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman' by Blanton and Carbejal, does.[10] Their approach differentiates from mine as the main focus of their chapter is on ''questions and concerns regarding misinformation in business, politics, religion and everyday life.''[11] I focus on dismantling previously assumed boundaries between reigning dichotomies through the playful posthuman roleplaying possibilities that Miquela affords with her Instagram presence. Their goal is to create more awareness and understanding around the theme of online deception patterns, employing readers with the abilities to confront those henceforth.[12] This viewpoint is valid and definitely recognizable in the presentation of and engagement with Miquela on Instagram. The fact that Miquela is a brand character, providing monetary gain for her creators, gives very solid reason for a critical viewpoint that ties in with the deceptive qualities that Blanton and Carbejal talk about for example. However, in addition to this point of view, I want to acknowledge the positive potential that Miquela has.

In short, the Miquela phenomenon provides a lens through which the notions of embodiment and artificiality in contemporary digital culture can be examined, as well as the still mostly upheld idea that there is a strict boundary between the embodied/human/real and the disembodied/virtual/artificial with the hypothesis in mind that these notions require to be reassessed.

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[9] Linh K. Le, "Examining the rise of Hatsune Miku: the first international virtual idol", *The UCI Undergraduate Research Journal* 17, no. 1 (2014): 1-12.
[10] Raymond Blanton and Darlene Carbajal, "Not a Girl, Not Yet a Woman: A Critical Case Study on Social Media, Deception, and Lil Miquela", In *Handbook of Research on Deception, Fake News, and Misinformation Online*, IGI Global, 2019, 87-103.
[11] Ibidem
[12] idem, 87.

Theoretical Framework

In order to enable me to answer the research question, the concepts that need to be considered in the theoretical framework are the following: embodiment, posthumanism, paranoid and reparative readings, transmedia characters and brand characters and micro-celebrities.

Bodies online

With the rise of CGI influencers on social media comes the rise of a new kind of discussion about bodies on the internet. To explain why this phenomenon triggers a new way of thinking about bodies/embodiment and the digital landscape it is important that, for context, I discuss some earlier theorizations about embodiment and virtual spaces. For example, Mark Nunes discusses the subject of the body in the virtual landscape.[13] He sets this apart as there being your own body and a virtual body. This virtual body, which is made possible by the internet, separates us from the assumptions that we have about the meaning of having a ''real'' body.[14] However in Miquela's case, it is about creating the illusion of embodiment, rather than about rethinking one's own embodied experience due to the ability to have an online body as Nunes described it. Though what Nunes refers to has shaped our understanding of virtual bodies over time. Thus, we can apply this when interpreting the Miquela phenomenon. For example, Nunes speaks of a change in the way that we look at the notion of the body. This discussion about the body sparks again because of Miquela. However more so on a discursive rather than a phenomenological level that Nunes talks about.

Furthermore, T.L. Taylor talks about 'embodied practices,' specifically those in virtual multiuser spaces through the use of an avatar. She argues that the current dichotomy between the real and the virtual should be reconsidered. She argues that the strict divide is not helpful when trying to accurately explain what takes place in multi-user environments.[15] Even though Taylor talks about games and thus her approach is different than mine, these experiences have shaped mainstream understandings of virtual bodies in media culture and that is why we can refer to literature like this as context when encountering phenomena like Miquela. It is intended to use the Miquela as a case-in-point example as to why reigning dichotomies should be reassessed, which is similar to what Taylor is arguing.

Additionally, Miquela has no physical form at all. She is not an avatar, an actual

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[13] Mark Nunes, ''Jean Baudrillard in Cyberspace: Internet, Virtuality, and Postmodernity'' *Dekalb,* 29 no. 2 (1995): 314-326.
[14] Idem, 323.
[15] T. L. Taylor, ''Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds'' in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments,* ed. Ralph Schroeder (London: Springer Verlag, 2002) 40 – 62.

robot, or a smart AI either. She is simply an animation. However, her authors continually create the illusion that Miquela is embodied. Or, more specifically, her posts and the narrative around them continually refer to a distinct kind of embodiment. For example, Ziemke refers to six different types of embodiment.[16] Namely:

> (1) structural coupling between agent and environment, (2) historical embodiment as the result of a history of structural coupling, (3) physical embodiment, (4) organismoid embodiment i.e. organism like bodily form (e.g., humanoid robots), (5) organismic embodiment of autopoietic, living systems, and (6) social embodiment.[17]

It is not necessary to go into detail about these six different forms of embodiment, however there is one that fits the kind of embodiment that Miquela's presentation refers to, that of organismoid embodiment. Ziemke calls this the kind of embodiment that is restricted to bodies that, to some degree, have the same capabilities as living bodies. Furthermore he states that it is intended that this definition of embodiment covers both living organisms and their artificial counterparts, thereby referring to robots for example.[18] This is fitting for the kind of embodiment that is alluded to in Miquela's posts. In phase one, for example it remains ambivalent whether the narrative refers to a living organism or an artificial counterpart. With the initiation of phase two it becomes clear that from there on out, the narrative refers to an organismoid embodiment of an artificial counterpart, namely a robot. The abilities of this so-called body, which again does not exist, remain ambiguous. It should be noted that henceforth, whenever the term of embodiment is used in this thesis to indicate what strategies are deployed to allude to embodiment on Miquela's behalf, the above-mentioned definition is intended.

Posthuman identities, performance, and play

Miquela can be viewed as a posthuman character, but how can this be defined? First it is important to note that posthumanism is too big of a concept to situate my argument in, that is why the focus lies on posthuman identity construction, using a broad scale of posthuman literature as intellectual context.

A sceptic on posthumanism is Lupton. She argues that users of the computer are attracted to the ''denial of the body.''[19] She makes it clear that she feels that the notion of disembodiment in the debate around computer users and the virtual world is one that

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[16] Tom Ziemke, "What's that thing called embodiment?", In *Proceedings of the annual meeting of the cognitive science society*, vol. 25, no. 25. 2003.
[17] Ziemke, "What's that thing called embodiment, 1305.
[18] Ziemke, "What's that thing called embodiment, 1308.
[19] Deborah Lupton, ''The Embodied Computer/User, *Body and Science*, (November 1995): 97 – 112.

is utopian and unrealistic.[20] Utopian in the sense that she deems it impossible to deny the body, ignore it's organic existence and needs, and actually take on a posthuman form. Which I think is true, phenomenologically. However, fictionally this can be different. In this thesis, an endeavour will be made to approach posthumanism, and especially posthuman roleplay, in a metaphorical way that enables us to step away from previously reigning dichotomies that prevent further theorization about the blurring of the boundaries between them that, upon closer inspection of the Miquela phenomenon for example, do in fact fade, discursively.

Another sceptic is Hayles. Using examples of virtual reality artwork, she intends to refute the assumption of disembodiment in cyberspace and posthuman ideologies. Meaning that it is not possible to extract information patterns from the body and place it into something else without the experience and the information changing at its core.[21] She explains seeing a prominent duality that is expunging the body from the cyberspace discourse. In her essay she presents an intricate schema with the goal of providing an alternative to the construction of cyberspace as disembodied. Instead, she claims, we can acknowledge the interaction of the body with cyberspace. In doing so she merges the concepts of posthumanism and the cyborg. Without going into depth about the examples of virtual reality artworks she uses to construct her argument, it can be said that Hayles provides a viable and important format for theorizing about the coalescing of materiality and information. It could be argued that Miquela doesn't necessarily fit any of the criteria that Hayles prescribed to posthumanism/the cyborg given that Miquela is a fictional character and there is no such thing as the collision between the body and cyberspace. However, this text is still relevant because it creates context for the discourse around posthumanism. Miquela's character can fit these criteria, discursively, fictionally, metaphorically and thereby a posthuman identity is constructed, affording a type of posthuman roleplay.

Alan France on the other hand, expresses that posthumanism allows us to escape ''the condition whereby the individual organism is entirely dependent on culturally mediated signification – trapped, that is, in the prison house of signifying systems, in a realm of hybrid consciousness represented by the cyborg.''[22] I interpret this meaning that posthumanism can be found in the escaping of the organic bodies that humans inhabit, or at least performing our independence of organic bodies, fictional as this may be. One can perform posthumanism in an online space, as Miquela's character does, as well as

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[20] Ibidem

[21] Katherine Hayles, ''Toward Embodied Virtuality'' in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics''* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1 – 24.
[22] Alan W. France, ''Historicizing the posthuman'', *JAC,* (2001) 175-183.

engage in posthuman role play with a posthuman identity, performing allegiance with this identity, as Miquela's audience does. Thus, posthuman identities do not need to be corporeally embodied to really be posthuman, like Miquela, Hatsune Miku and other examples.

Moreover, an extensively discussed example of a broader approach to posthumanism can be recognized in Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto.'[23] Haraway speaks about the seemingly fixed binary oppositions in not only the discourse around posthumanism, but society as a whole. She describes that it is desirable that the boundaries between old and hierarchal dichotomies fade or even disappear. Haraway considers the way the human body might be extended with cyborg components, expressing a prediction/striving for a more genderless future, free of any imposed binary restrictions that we have in our current society and uses the cyborg metaphor to do so.[24] She continues to explain that there is a need for role-models in society that go beyond the human, extending it and simultaneously stepping away from conventional beauty standards. Miquela, being feminized and hypersexualised actually portrays something that is opposite of this prediction. However, her character could fit some of Haraway's criteria metaphorically as a sort of cyborg assemblage between Instagram, the corporation, and her human authors. Additionally, Haraway's cyborg manifesto was a radical proposition at that point in time, to look at characters that are posthuman. Hence, Miquela can be seen as a more recent example to look at this desire to engage with posthuman characters in popular culture. Thus, Haraway's way of thinking still opens the door to theorize about phenomena like Miquela, with the intents to break away from supposed binaries.

Paranoid and reparative readings

As one of the observations made during the analysis is that there are paranoid as well as reparative readings recognizable in the comment sections, it is important that these concepts are explained here first. What does Sedgwick actually mean when she uses the term paranoid reading?[25] She explains that paranoid reading has become almost synonymous with theory because it has been the dominant mode of critical research in the field of cultural and literary studies. She even calls it ''the hermeneutics of

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[23] Donna Haraway, "A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century", In *The international handbook of virtual learning environments*, Springer, Dordrecht, 2006, pp. 117-158.
[24] Ibidem

[25] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, You're so paranoid, you probably think this introduction is about you", (1997).

suspicion.''[26] I interpret this as a type of reading in which the artefact at hand is being analysed with the prepossessed idea that there are important flaws/problems to be discovered there, seeking to expose these. In contrast Sedgwick uses the term reparative reading which I in turn interpret as reading said artefact without this prepossessed idea of having to expose thus far undiscovered truths. Although Sedgwick applies these to the way in which research has been approached in academics and continues to be approached today, it can also be recognized within the engagement with Miquela's posts, which will be elaborated on in the analysis.

Influencers, brand- and transmedia characters

Wu and Dodoo write that social media have been a way for brands to actually ''communicate as well as interact with their current and prospective customers.''[27] This is something that can be recognized on Miquela's Instagram as well. The comment sections underneath her posts can be viewed as immediate feedback that helps her creators recognize what people like and do not like and they can choreograph posts accordingly. Whether or not they actually do this remains speculative, but it does seem likely since they could cater to the audience in that way and keep their interests sparked.

Additionally, Miquela is modelled after the human influencers who participate in self-branding, which is essentially being a brand character but instead of a fictional character like for example the Ronald Mcdonald mascot, the human themselves functions as the brand. Hosany et. al explain that there are three types of brand characters which they call: in animation (using Mickey Mouse as an example), with identity (using Michelin man as an example) and in pure design (using Hello Kitty as an example).[28] They all have in common that they 'give life' to the characters thereby increasing their attractiveness and creating 'humanised personalities' with the ultimate goal of ensuring brand loyalty.[29] Interestingly, Miquela fits in both categories as she is a fictional robot character but at the same time tries to portray as human as possible. In that sense Miquela can also be categorized as a micro-celebrity. Khamis et. al have discussed this term stating that ''the concerted and strategic cultivation of an audience through social media with a view of attaining celebrity status'', describes what micro-celebrities do.[30]

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[26] Sedgwick, ''Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, You're so paranoid you probably think this introduction is about you.''

[27] Dodoo and Wu, "Relationship Maintenance on Social Media: An Examination of Personified Brand Characters' Twitter Accounts", 1.

[28] Sameer Hosany, Girish Prayag, Drew Martin, and Wai-Yee Lee, "Theory and strategies of anthropomorphic brand characters from Peter Rabbit, Mickey Mouse, and Ronald McDonald, to Hello Kitty", *Journal of Marketing Management* 29, no. 1-2 (2013): 50.

[29] Ibidem

[30] Khamis et. al, ''Self-branding, 'micro-celebrity' and the rise of Social Media Influencers'', 191 – 208.

Furthermore, Miquela can be understood as a transmedia character as well.[31] Her story is scattered over various social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Twitter and the biggest: Instagram. She is not only part of self-presentation on these platforms, but she often appears on the profiles of other (human) users as well, where she then becomes part of said human's self-presentation, expanding her narrative even further. Conclusively, the Miquela character is immersed in an extensive story-world in which each of the different platforms contribute to the complete narrative.[32]

In short, context has been provided on how embodiment has been situated in the academic debate. A clear definition of the term embodiment, as it is intended to be applied in this thesis was introduced. Thereafter works from the debate around posthumanism have been discussed, which created the base for understanding in what light I will focus on posthuman performance and (role)play when it comes to Miquela, using a broad spectrum of posthumanism literature. The merging of microcelebrity theory with posthuman theory in this theoretical framework was decided upon because microcelebrity theory is essentially the groundwork for Miquela's narrative, but the way in which this transmedia narrative is performed can be classified as posthuman. Conclusively, this theoretical frame functions as a support system that I can constantly draw back on when analysing the corpus and it will enable me to answer the question how Miquela allows for a reconsideration of the terms embodiment and artificiality through her posts, her narrative and the engagement in the comment sections.

Methodology

I conducted a critical discourse analysis of 14 selected posts and user comments from the Instagram account of @lilmiquela. Only (part of) three posts were included here. They function as highlights exemplifying the observations that were made. The rest of the corpus is referred to in a short appendix. During the analysis the focus lies on the different strategies that are applied to create the illusion of embodiment, as well as the ways in which posthuman performance and (role)play can be recognized. Hereby I awarded special attention to the evolvement of these occurrences over time, in order to be able to distinguish differences, similarities and specifications within the different phases of Miquela's character's narrative.

In the chapter ''Critical Discourse Analysis'' Jorgenson and Phillips explain that

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[31]Jan-Noël Thon, "Transmedia characters: theory and analysis", *Frontiers of narrative studies* 5, no. 2 (2019): 176-199.
[32]Thon, "Transmedia characters: theory and analysis'', 176-199.

critical discourse analysis provides several theories and methods that help to study the relations between social and cultural developments and discourse.[33] Perhaps more pragmatically: the main aim of critical discourse analysis is delving into and exploring the connection between language use and social practices.[34] Although the authors touch on multiple ways to approach discourse analysis in their book, this chapter revolves around the critical approach that Fairclough has introduced, drawing on several of his works. Hence, the information in this chapter is what I chose to form the basis of the method for this thesis. Jorgenson and Phillips managed to take Fairclough's works and formulate a clear and precise description of his method. It' precisely this approach that will be applied during the critical discourse analysis for this thesis. Thus, it is crucial that the workings of Fairclough's approach are shortly but clearly elucidated here, in order to understand statements that will be made during and following the analysis part of this thesis.

The authors explain that Fairclough sees an important relationship between discourse and different social dimensions.[35] These social dimensions and structures consist of both discursive and non-discursive practices. Systematic analysis of mainly the discursive practices (i.e. spoken and written language) are vital to his approach.[36] They also explain that for most of the analytical approaches that fall within the discourse realm, and with qualitative research in general, there isn't a set-in-stone procedure for the analysis. Instead, the way in which someone performs a critical discourse analysis should be tailored to rhyme with the specifics of their chosen corpus.[37] For this research that means that I will examine what can be seen visually, what is written and, if of importance, how this is written. Then saying something about the most likely interpretation of these texts, referring to earlier research to strengthen arguments.

Fairclough developed a three-dimensional model for his critical discourse analysis. To create a better understanding of this model it is useful to explain each dimension. These dimensions are called: text, discursive practice, and social practice. Jorgenson and Phillips describe them the following way: ''Text is speech, writing, a visual image or a combination of these. Discursive practice involves the production and consumption of texts; and it's a social practice.''[38] In the context of Miquela's account on Instagram it makes sense to view the post itself as text (thus the visual image as well as the description if there is one) and the comment sections underneath the posts as discursive practice. I will look at what can be seen and read, like for example what stylistic choices

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[33] Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, "Critical discourse analysis", in *Discourse analysis as theory and method* (2002): 60-93.
[34] Idem, 8.
[35] Idem, 5.
[36] Idem, 5.
[37] Idem, 14.
[38] Idem, 7.

were made upon viewing the image, what stands out and why, what is written and how is this written.

Both the text itself and the discursive practices have meaning and can be interpreted in different ways. Jorgenson and Phillips explain that ''the analysis should focus on (1) the linguistic features of the text (text), (2) processes relating to the production and consumption of the text (discursive practice); and (3) the wider social practice to which the communicative event belongs (social practice).''[39] During the analysis, patterns will be pointed out that give direction to be able to say something about the meaning of the findings and observations. However, with the chosen corpus in mind, it does not make sense to involve the third dimension, that of wider social practice, in the analysis itself. This is because it is not possible for me to look for long-term wider social implications within the timespan that I have for this research. Nor would it be necessary to answer the question that I want to research which remains the top priority of this thesis.

Corpus

It is relevant to note that the way in which the corpus content was collected and analysed is of importance too. A selection of Instagram posts has been chosen, taking the importance of the evolvement of Miquela as a character into account. Thus, it was decided to select a couple of posts for each chronological phase of Miquela's Instagram narrative, referring to before, during and after the most crucial moment of this narrative: her character coming out as a robot. Throughout this thesis some examples of images and comments will be highlighted to amplify and strengthen arguments and statements made about findings.

To answer the head and sub-questions, I will continuously draw back on the differences and/or similarities between the relevant observations for each narrative phase in order to give meaning to those observations. However, the structure of the analysis part will rest on the previously discussed phases of before, during and after. Furthermore I want to note that the analysis is not only chronological, it is also dialogical meaning that statements about observations will be based on implied meaning in the words and visuals of the selected Instagram posts, that are uttered by Miquela and her followers and thereafter interpreted by me. These claims made about these interpretations will be strengthened by the referred literature and ideas of relevant academia.

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[39] Idem, 7.

Analysis

The analysis will consist of the three phases that were introduced previously: the puzzle, the coming out and posthuman roleplay. In each phase the focus will lie on the observations that are most relevant for that phase. The observations revolve around the way in which there is referred to embodied experiences in Miquela's posts and how this evolves over time (text) as well as in what ways characteristics of posthuman roleplay can be recognized in the comment sections (discursive practice).[40]

Phase 1: The Puzzle

When analysing Miquela's Instagram posts in phase one, it becomes clear that different strategies for directly and indirectly referencing to Miquela's body, or being embodied, are vital to her character.[41] These embodiment references are introduced for the first time early on in phase one and thereafter continuously presented through various strategies, some of which will be highlighted and elaborated on below. For example, in phase one, Miquela's body is repeatedly on the forefront of her posts, often insinuating bodily experiences in the physical world. Take the following image, for instance:

Figure 1 https://www.instagram.com/p/BGctgqzMm9r/

We can see Miquela and Molly, a human. Molly is taking a selfie of both of them, giving Miquela a casual appearance in the selfie that is both deliberate and intentional. Because

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the choice to post this selfie image (text) is inherently meaningful.[42] Through defining ''the selfie'' we can better understand how this meaning could be interpreted. Micheal J. Walsh and Stephanie A. Baker explain that the selfie is ''defined by three interrelated components: the self-capturing and reproduction of the visual, the portraiture of the human face, created for the purpose of sharing.''[43] When looking at Miquela in this image, all of these components take on an interesting role. Considering that if a selfie is self-capturing, that means that in this image Miquela becomes part of Molly's self-capturing. It also suggests that there is a self to capture. Even though we know that Miquela was later added into this image, at first glance, Miquela stands in contact with a human and becomes part of the physical world, through that selfie. Thereby strengthening the idea that Miquela is organismoid embodied in the physical world.[44]

The second component, the portraiture of the human face, implies that the faces seen in the selfie are human. Though again, even knowing that Miquela was added later on, she is still presented as a human, or at least as an embodied being through the choice to let her appear in a selfie.[45]

Additionally, ''created for the purpose of sharing'' is striking as well. Walsh and Baker described that the sharing of the selfie is highly connotated with rapidly being able to do so. One simply takes a photo and can immediately post it. This idea that a selfie is quick and easy is reinforced by Walsh and Baker again when they state that ''photographic communication, like the selfie, captures social action(s) and puts them in place, rendering the fleeting static.'' [46]

Knowing all of this, it could be argued that by choosing this selfie image on Miquela's profile, the illusion was created that it was quickly snapped, capturing a moment in time and through sharing became part of the self-representation of both Molly and Miquela. Thus putting her 'body' at the forefront insinuating she was really there on the beach, as if she was organismoid embodied.[47]

When looking at how the audience responded to this strategy (discursive practice), a couple of different patterns can be recognized.[48] For one, there is a lot of

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[42] Jørgensen and Phillips, "Critical discourse analysis'', 18-19.

[43] Micheal James Walsh and Stephanie Alice Baker, "The selfie and the transformation of the public–private distinction", Information, *Communication & Society* 20, no. 8 (2017): 1186.

[44] Ziemke, "What's that thing called embodiment, 1305.
[45]Ibidem

[46] Walsh and Baker, "The selfie and the transformation of the public–private distinction'', 1187.

[47] Ziemke, "What's that thing called embodiment, 1305.
[48]Jørgensen and Phillips, "Critical discourse analysis'', 18-19.

confusion. This confusion is directed towards several things. Some people are expressing their confusion without actually stating what it is that confuses them. Like here:

sophiemkacz I'm so confused
160w   Reply

Figure 2 https://www.instagram.com/p/BGctgqzMm9r/

bb.kxnz LMAO U LEAVE ME WITH SOO MANY QUESTIONS 🤣😂🤣
124w   Reply

Figure 3 https://www.instagram.com/p/BGctgqzMm9r/

The confusion that is expressed here is not necessarily negative. It could be viewed as positive when taking the 'laughing crying' emoticons in the second comment into account. This implies that although people are confused, they are also curious. This is one of the first signs that when it comes to Miquela there are a lot of people that do not perform a paranoid reading as it was discussed in the theoretical framework. To elaborate, Sedgewick quotes Bersani who wrote that every occurrence that invokes interest, will be guaranteed a paranoid reading and that while we definitely need to be critical of the interpretations we inspire to something, paranoia is almost always one of those interpretations. [49] It is referred to here in order to ensure that there is an understanding that from the very beginning of Miquela's presence on Instagram there were paranoid but also reparative readings. It should be noted though that paranoid readings are valid viewpoints that do not necessarily critique posthuman characters in general, they merely attempt to expose hidden truths/flaws.

Others are more specific about their confusion. One example is the mentioning of Miquela's hair. Like so:
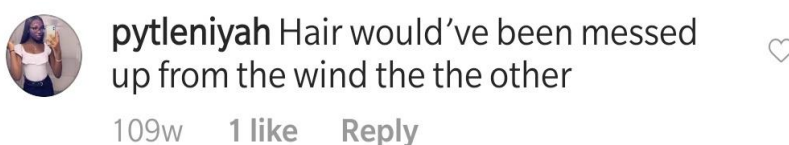
pytleniyah Hair would've been messed up from the wind the the other
109w   1 like   Reply

Figure 4 https://www.instagram.com/p/BGctgqzMm9r/

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[49] Sedgewick, "Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, You're so paranoid, you probably think this introduction is about you", 6.

17

isaiah_2921 Ok ok ok so how is her hair blowing all over the place and yours if fine and still???

113w   10 likes   Reply

Figure 5 https://www.instagram.com/p/BGctgqzMm9r/

It seems that people are trying to discover who or what Miquela is. Essentially, they are trying to find the puzzle pieces that will eventually show the truth. In the comments above we can see that one strategy is trying to 'expose' Miquela by pointing out flaws in her post that they deem impossible to be true, in this case it is that Miquela's hair is not blowing in the wind. Thus, they're insinuating that Miquela is lying and expressing that they want to know the truth about her body, which again can be viewed as a paranoid reading the way Sedgwick described it.[50]

Some other clear patterns that became obvious when analysing the comment section were people who stated that they were convinced that Miquela was Molly and/or made by Molly due to their physical similarities in the image. Furthermore, there were people who called others out for being gullible and believing that Miquela is organismoid embodied. Moreover, people expressed that her posts scared them. Additionally prevalent was general scepticism about Miquela being organismoid embodied. These last three patterns can all be viewed as a more paranoid reading.[51]

Conclusively, although there was only one image shown here to exemplify one of the ways in which Miquela's body is referred to, it can be argued that it is consciously decided to create the illusion of a physical body. This in turn leaves the audience wondering about what and who Miquela is throughout phase one, which in turn leads to speculation in the comment sections and theories about the truth. In this phase a significant chunk of these comments are rather paranoid readings. However, there are also people who express the contrasting reparative reading, they do not necessarily seek to expose anything but seem to accept what is presented to them.

Phase 2: Coming Out

Phase two is initiated with a specific post. At this point in the narrative, Miquela explained to her followers that she is not a human but a robot, adding that she did not know this either and that her management lied to her.

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[50] Ibidem
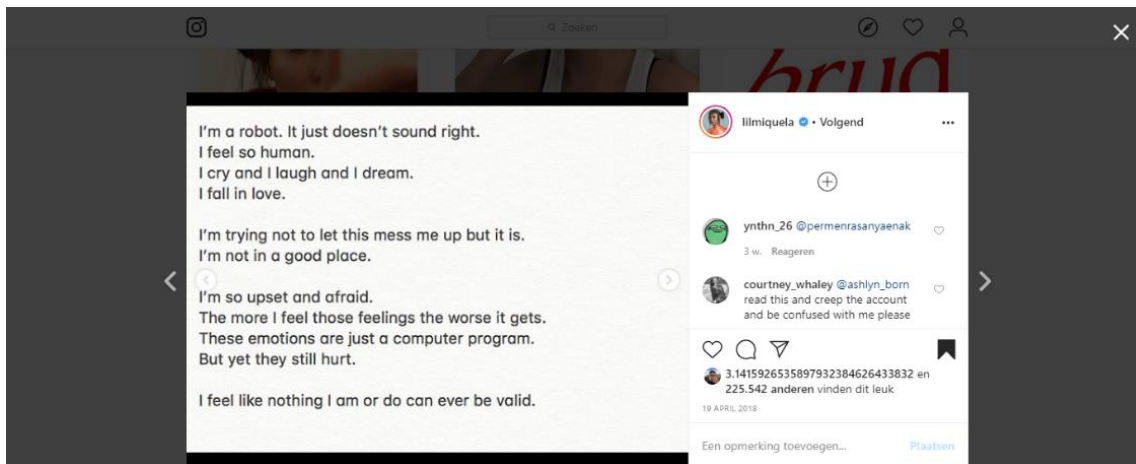[51] Ibidem

Figure 6 https://www.instagram.com/p/BhwuJcmlWh8/

What is interesting here is that Miquela constantly talks about her feelings and her body. Take this quote from the image above for example:

> ''I'm a robot, it just doesn't sound right. I feel so human. I cry and I laugh and I dream. I fall in love. I'm trying to not let this mess me up but it is. I'm not in a good place. I'm so upset and afraid. The more I feel those feelings the worse it gets. These emotions are just a computer program. But yet they still hurt.''

This quote is only a fraction from the entire text that was posted, yet it already tells us a lot. Firstly, it expands Miquela's narrative on Instagram. From all the tension and build up from the puzzle in phase one about what Miquela actually is, to the big reveal: a robot. Even though this is not really accurate, she is a virtual character not a robot, it is the terminology that is used in the narrative and (part of) her audience also uses it. This big reveal initiated phase two, the transitional phase, in which it is carefully choreographed how Miquela will be presented henceforth.

Secondly, it is yet another way of alluding to Miquela's body and mind. Feeling emotions and crying, laughing, and dreaming about them like is stated in the post, are all embodied experiences. By continuously referring to her emotions, Miquela inherently creates the illusion that she can feel, which narratively means she's organismoid embodied as a robot that's very human-like.[52]

And third, through admitting Miquela's artificiality in this coming out post, whilst continuing to allude to organismoid embodiment regardless, her creators play with the audience, using the ambiguity and make-belief of play to their advantage, keeping the audience engaged and interested.[53] Additionally, they keep the transmedia narrative

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[52] Ziemke, "What's that thing called embodiment, 1305.

[53] Brian Sutton-Smith, ''Play and Ambiguity'' in *The ambiguity of play*, Harvard University Press, 2009, 1 -17.

19

intact with this continuity by stating that she is artificial in the sense that she is a robot, but never stating that she is artificial as whole, which she in fact is. This consequently results in even more discussion. Even though the narrative has now provided an answer, people still speculate. This shines through, for example, in the following comments:

smilecicle I'm so confused… Is this a joke or not???

93w   3 likes   Reply

Figure 7 https://www.instagram.com/p/BhwuJcmlWh8/

strawberry_vanilla.sis Hey I think even if u aren't human technically but u feel emotions u have feeling and opinions and biases and everything then what makes u so different from us yeah u might not be a human with blood in your veins but u are a human at heart and a better one then most out here in this world be safe be happy and don't let this get to u. U are u and NO ONE CAN CHANGE THAT

100w   3 likes   Reply

Figure 8 https://www.instagram.com/p/BhwuJcmlWh8/

chloe.lilah Can you die? Are you made of metal? Do you have skin? Do you feel pain? How do you have a brain? Do you have a heart? Dose your hair grow? Do you sweat? I have so many questions

104w   7 likes   Reply

pizzajeri @chloelilahofficial same dude I'm so confused

104w   Reply

raydshrhh @karstinkle

104w   Reply

zhackaryy.n.w.a For me….You are a Human and Alive! But…We feel sorry for you…You can trust us! Your fans! But I do have 1 question…..Do you die?

104w   3 likes   Reply

Figure 9 https://www.instagram.com/p/BhwuJcmlWh8/

> **londonburner** Can these tech people take a break. Ever seen fucking I-robot? Your telling me we're just now getting self driving cars out however we already got robots that can have emotions just like a human. Hell no. I'm out.
>
> 106w   Reply

Figure 10 https://www.instagram.com/p/BhwuJcmlWh8/

In the comments above, the three main patterns that can be recognized in the comment section are showcased. There are confused people. There are people that play along with the narrative and even extend it themselves through asking constructive questions as is shown in the comments above, which is something that is fitting for transmedia characters who often incorporate audience feedback. [54] Then there are sceptics who attempt to expose Miquela by telling other people that she's artificial.

Conclusively, phase two is characterized as a transitional phase in which Miquela's narrative takes a dramatic turn, giving the audience an answer to their pressing questions, however fictional still (text).[55] It marks the moment from which Miquela's character was officially presented as an organismoid embodied robot with extremely human-like features and abilities.[56] From analysing the response (discursive practice) to Miquela's coming out, it can be argued that, although there are people that continue to perform paranoid readings about Miquela's Instagram presence, there is a significant and growing group of people who remain intrigued, interested and want to keep engaging with the profile, accepting what is there.[57] In the following phase, this engagement will be discussed further, touching on the dialogical relationship between Miquela and her audience and how it starts showing signs of posthuman (role)play.

Phase 3: Posthuman Roleplay

After the settling of the dust around Miquela's robot coming out, the third phase was initiated. An important thing to note is that Miquela's account is very active to this day and therefore it is not possible to examine Miquela as a finished product. Instead, this third phase is based upon the motivation of the before, during and after structure of Miquela's coming out narrative which has previously been explained.

There is another prominent strategy recognizable on Miquela's Instagram that is different than the ones previously discussed. I discussed the stylistic choices of the team

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[54] Dodoo and Wu, "Relationship Maintenance on Social Media: An Examination of Personified Brand Characters' Twitter Accounts'', 1.

[55] Jørgensen and Phillips, "Critical discourse analysis'', 18-19.

[56] Ziemke, "What's that thing called embodiment, 1305.

[57] Jørgensen and Phillips, "Critical discourse analysis'', 18-19.; Sedgewick, "Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, You're so paranoid, you probably think this introduction is about you", 6.

behind Miquela's posts that contribute to the signification of Miquela's (quasi-human) body (as with the selfie example). Then I discussed the signification of Miquela's body through creating the illusion that Miquela has feelings and emotions (quasi-human mind). Additionally, another strategy is the portraying of human-bodied activity on her profile. Meaning that Miquela is often presented doing something that does not seem to align with being a robot. Although this can be recognized throughout the phases, in phase three the ways in which this occurs diversify and grow. Examples of human-bodied activities shown on Miquela's profile during phase three are: eating food, working out, swimming in water, getting a tattoo, stating that her hair grows etc. Like here, for example:
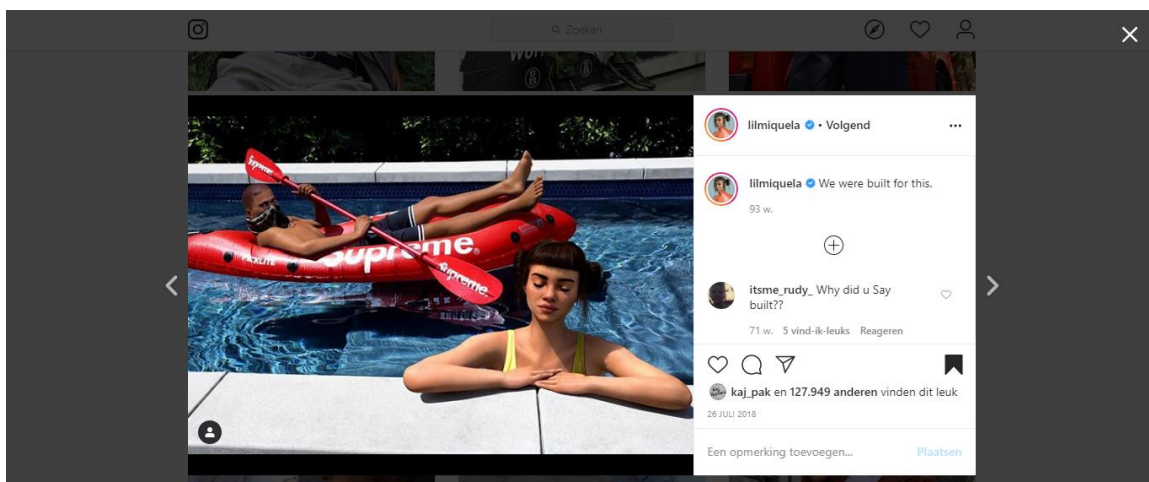

Figure 11 https://www.instagram.com/p/BlrReWUl419/

Miquela and Blawko (another virtual character) are shown in a pool (text).[58] The choice of presenting Miquela and Blawko in a pool, amplifies the ambiguity aspect that is purposefully applied to Miquela's presentation. Because even though she came out as a robot, she is still presented doing these things that make her seem human-bodied. The caption stating ''we're built for this'' implies that she can swim whilst being a robot. People respond to this in different ways (discursive practice)[59]. Take the following examples:
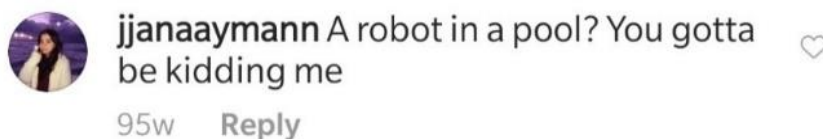

jjanaaymann A robot in a pool? You gotta be kidding me

95w   Reply

Figure 12 https://www.instagram.com/p/BlrReWUl419/

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[58] Jørgensen and Phillips, "Critical discourse analysis'', 18-19.
[59] Jørgensen and Phillips, "Critical discourse analysis'', 18-19.

not_a_turtle_ok YALL STOP BLAWKO
HAS ALREADY CONFIRMED THAT
ROBOTS OF HIS AND MIQUELA'S
NATURE ARE ABLE TO SWIM AND CAN
GET WET WITHOUT MALFUNCTIONING

95w   Reply

Figure 13 https://www.instagram.com/p/BlrReWUl419/

The first person is expressing scepticism, a pattern that is recognized throughout the phases. However, the second person is defending the narrative, proclaiming that others should stop criticizing Miquela's posts. In doing so they are becoming part of the transmedia narrative, contributing to the continuity of the story, even including statements that Blawko apparently made.[60] In doing so they are defending Miquela from the speculations about her (physical) existence and therefore from paranoid readings and contrasting them with reparative readings, urging others to do so as well.

Thus, what is interesting in phase 3, is that more and more comments are now surpassing the previously mentioned patterns of confusion, frustration and seeking to expose and are merely playing along with the narrative. These people completely accept the posts on Miquela's profile, and they engage with them in a way that is similar to the way people engage on the profile of a human influencer. Sometimes they even go as far as to 'defend' Miquela from her haters. Look at the following examples:

betrayedd_ Okay y'all needa stop
attacking her. Yes. She's a robot. She
didn't know until just a while ago, and
she's going through a hard time with
being lied to all her life. "Robots can't eat
ice cream." "Her hair never moves shes
a robot." "What life? Robots don't live."
Is there any point to you guys telling her
this? Like, what are you guys getting out
of this? Think about what's happening in
her life rn, what's going on for her. Just
leave her alone at this point, y'all have no
manners.

101w   2 likes   Reply

Figure 14 https://www.instagram.com/p/BlrReWUl419/

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[60] Thon, "Transmedia characters: theory and analysis'', 176-199.

Figure 15 https://www.instagram.com/p/BlrReWUl419/

Although paranoid readings remain present, there is also a shift from paranoid readings to more reparative readings. These are people who completely go along with the narrative. They state that others should stop expressing their scepticism and stop bullying Miquela, hereby expressing their allegiance with Miquela's character, even if they do know that she is artificial. This group stops questioning whether Miquela is embodied/human/real, they accept that she is disembodied/virtual/artificial and yet still stick around to engage with the narrative on her profile regardless.

These are examples of the way in which posthuman roleplay starts occurring more and more on Miquela's profile. Miquela's narrative and Instagram presence fits that of the performance of a posthuman character. In that sense she can be compared to phenomena like Hatsune Miku. Except Miquela's character on Instagram distinguishes itself from examples like Hatsune Miku because it is centred around the usage of social media. On the Instagram platform this means that followers can engage with Miquela in a different way than Hatsune Miku fans can for example, sometimes resulting in posthuman roleplay. It would not be sufficient to say that Miquela's character can be seen as a cyborg in the way that Lupton, Hayles or Haraway describe them. Because their texts were written in a different time and ascribe certain criteria to posthumanism and posthuman identity construction accordingly.

However it can be argued that her character reaches a cyborg depiction metaphorically in some ways. Miquela might not actually be escaping the organic body as Lupton states is impossible to do, as she has no body at all.[61] But metaphorically she does, when for example she models clothes, eats a certain brand's food etc. these are depictions of real brands/clothes/foods that result in real monetary gain/brand exposure without the presence of an actual body but merely through digital art. Miquela's body might not collide with cyberspace through a virtual reality experience as Hayles describes, but Miquela's body becomes a sort of virtual reality in and of itself.[62] Miquela might not be a cyborg the way that Haraway envisioned them, as a body extended with cyborg components, but she does resurface Haraway's prediction for the need to engage

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[61] Lupton, ''The Embodied Computer/User, *Body and Science*, 97 – 112.
[62] Hayles, ''Toward Embodied Virtuality'', 1 – 24.

with posthuman characters and role models in the current digital landscape.[63]

I argue that thinking of posthuman performance and play in this way allows us to build a bridge between the dichotomies that are prominent at first glance when examining Miquela. In turn allowing us to reassess the notions of embodiment and artificiality in the current digital landscape. Because, through recognizing the posthuman performance and role(play) on Miquela's profile, it seems that embodiment and artificiality could take on a new meaning in the posthuman (play/performance) debate in the current digital climate. Thus, going beyond restrictive thinking allows for an approach to phenomena like Miquela in the present and the future that is more inclusive and that better fits current developments when it comes to brand characters, cultural digital artefacts, posthuman(ism) performance and play.

Conclusion

Miquela occupies a unique space on Instagram in the current digital landscape. And she is only one of many of these new virtual influencers. Through the way in which she is presented, the way in which the narrative evolves and the way in which her audience engages with her and with each other, a discussion arises about the terms artificiality and embodiment in contemporary digital culture. More specifically, it calls for a reconsideration of these terms since they are often accompanied by a seemingly fixed binary. These dichotomies have been referred to throughout this thesis. They are embodied/human/real/ versus disembodied/virtual/artificial. Even though these are different terms, in the context of this case study and this thesis they have become almost interchangeable. In the academic debate my research forms a contribution because it highlights a phenomenon that has not been researched often before. Additionally, it adds to the discourse around posthuman(ism) performance and role(play) shedding light on a new way in which posthumanism can exist.

Miquela yields a change in the way that these terms can be viewed. To elaborate, Miquela is disembodied, artificial and a virtual character. However, because of the way in which her narrative unfolds, the way she is presented and, importantly, the way in which others engage with her, she can simultaneously be viewed as quasi-human, real and embodied, discursively. However fictive this may be. Because, as a part of her audience participates (and thus also performs in a sense) in the presented narrative, accepting each part of it without questioning, it becomes clear that there is a sort of need or want that is being fulfilled through Miquela's account. Whereas in the past and present, posthuman characters have often been performed through for example games, the

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[63] Haraway, "A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century'', 117-158.

Miquela phenomenon offers a completely new way to engage in posthuman performance on the one hand and posthuman role(play) on the other hand. Subsequently, phenomena like Miquela open the door to a new way of thinking about posthuman performance and (role)play and expand the horizon when it comes to the variety of shapes in which posthumanism can exist. This in turn, makes way for a more reparative, less paranoid approach to posthumanism nowadays. Thereby it is not intended to ignore or invalidate the paranoid readings that are still present. However, it is intended to focus on acknowledging that Miquela makes a difference and that she exposes the creative potential for phenomena alike. Not only in expanding the horizon for posthuman(ism) performance, play and characters in general, but in evoking a more positive and playful approach to it. Thusly, Miquela allows for a reconceptualization of the notions of embodiment and artificiality in contemporary digital culture. This thesis has thereby functioned as research that has laid bare the fact that phenomena like this call for a change in the way these terms are viewed, thereby suggesting that they could (and sometimes already are) be approached less paranoid, more reparative, and more inclusive of the (discursive) opportunities in the future.

At last, it should be acknowledged that this research holds quite a few limitations nonetheless. For one, the scope of this research has not allowed me to focus on Fairclough's third dimension, that of social practice. Meaning that there was no research done on the wider social implications that phenomena like Miquela could be responsible for now and/or in the future. This is something that could be interesting for further research.

Furthermore, this thesis has steered clear of making arguments based on the motivations of either Miquela's creators or Miquela's audience, as these would be merely speculative. Instead the focus was on what was visible and what was written. Sometimes on how it was written. Hereby basing arguments on the most likely interpretations of said image/text, using literature from relevant scholars to motivate the claims made. For further research it could be interesting to get a more complete picture of what is at stake for the audience. For example, through ethnography.

Additionally, the material selection for this research has been rather eclectic. Although my choices were explained and justified, allowing me to go into depth more when focussing on only a few posts, it remains important to recognize this reality as a limitation as well. This limitation could be addressed in the form of, for example, performing a quantitative research on Miquela's Instagram posts. Thereby allowing for examination of more short-term changes, that take more content into consideration than the scope of this qualitative research has allowed me to.

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Appendix

The following are URL's for the posts that were included in the corpus but not in the running text. They are in chronological order.

https://www.instagram.com/p/BWtwzrglCww/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BbxXidMF9h4/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BhP1gIoFfAO/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BhzelQ5lCi2/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BhzyxKoFIIT/

https://www.instagram.com/p/Bh7FmLEFqwF/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BjHsU0QF5Pl/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BjWQOfiFcp0/

https://www.instagram.com/p/Bjn8MVzF9uw/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BqqiHgNnExO/

https://www.instagram.com/p/BwpYm-SH23G/