

BUILDING BUYER PERSONAS TO CREATE VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS AS A DIGITAL MARKETING STRATEGY IN TOURISM CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: *Buyer personas*, semi-fictional representations of customers, have become essential in digital marketing to personalise strategies and improve the relationship with consumers through greater precision in segmentation. The objective of this work is to develop *buyer personas* to propose the profile of a virtual influencer for the city of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. **Methodology:** The multiple cross-sectional descriptive research design is based on collecting official qualitative and quantitative data published by the “Ministry of Tourism” and the “Guanajuato State Tourism Observatory”, to know the profile of the tourist of the city of San Miguel de Allende, and analysing online behaviour to identify behavioural patterns and develop *buyer personas* to refine the initial proposals using techniques of digital ethnography and data analysis, thus creating detailed and accurate profiles of ideal customers. **Results:** Through the proposed methodological framework, it is possible to provide marketers with a practical tool to create virtual influencers based on *buyer personas*. **Discussion:** The *buyer persona* can be the basis for building a virtual influencer to promote destinations and tourism.



Conclusions: *Buyer personas* are a powerful tool for understanding and delivering personalised customer service in a dynamic digital environment and are now even more essential in the implementation of digital marketing strategies.

Keywords:

Digital marketing; virtual influencer; segmentation; buyer personas; San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

1. INTRODUCTION

The New Economy market is characterised by dynamism and uncertainty, aspects that must be considered by anyone wishing to participate and succeed, and the number of propositions involved exceeds the number of inhabitants of the planet. Segmentation is a fundamental technique for identifying opportunities and targeting strategies to specific groups of consumers with similar characteristics and needs. In an international context, according to Grunert (2019), segmentation involves identifying groups of consumers with similar needs and wants in different cultural units, which is essential for developing effective global marketing strategies.

The use of *buyer personas* offers many advantages, including that buyer personas help to develop a marketing strategy (Lehnert et al., 2021), however, at the same time pose challenges in responding with relevance to the demand for personalisation. To overcome these challenges and help achieve marketing objectives this research explores advanced methods for creating and using buyer personas in digital marketing campaigns to maximise their effectiveness, as suggested by several authors (e.g., Chaffey & Smith, 2022; Martín et al., 2023).

The objective of this research aims to develop *buyer personas* and propose a practical framework to facilitate their implementation in digital marketing strategies and digital influencer modelling to improve campaign segmentation and targeting. This work involves the monitoring of data on the tourist profile of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, published by official bodies related to the tourism sector, and digital ethnography to collect the perceptions of tourists and visitors to the city.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This work focuses on the pursuit of customer recognition and requires the study of related concepts in the context of digital marketing, an ecosystem that dominates the markets and becomes the starting point for understanding the evolution of the consumer approach, from segmentation to the pursuit of *buyer personas*.

2.1. Digital Marketing

Technological advances have brought new media related to the Internet, which is now a necessity for many people around the world, as the Internet can transmit information quickly and easily (Adiyono et al., 2021). The term 'digital marketing' first emerged in the late 1990s, becoming more sophisticated during the first decade of the 21st century (Gazca Herrera et al., 2022). Digital transformation, driven by technological advances and changing customer demands, has stimulated the use of digital marketing (Peter & Dalla

Vecchia, 2021). In this sense, digital marketing refers to a set of practices that include the use of digital communication channels such as websites, search engine marketing, digital advertising, social media, email and mobile; to acquire, retain and build relationships with customers (Setkute & Dibb, 2022). Today, the digital world is booming and adapting to this reality is essential for companies to remain competitive (Valdez Palazuelos & Sánchez Beltrán, 2019).

In its application to the business world, digital marketing has become a tool widely used by small and large companies to raise awareness of the products or services they offer (Gómez et al., 2024). Digital marketing will be successful if the adoption of digital marketing technology improves business culture, performance, and profits (Deb et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important for companies or businesses to use information technologies and keep up to date with the range of tools offered by the market (Lozano-Torres et al., 2021). In addition, emphasis must be placed on designing specific strategies for the numerous interactive online media (Viteri Luque et al., 2018). And, as a preventive measure against Covid-19, technology acted as a tool for companies to adapt to the needs of consumers, thus strengthening their brand and market positioning through social distancing (Mera-Plaza et al., 2022).

Looking ahead to possible implementation, Kingsnorth (2022) emphasises the importance of understanding the consumer and using analytical data to optimise campaigns. Boufim and Barka (2021) argue that with customer-centric strategies, implementation frameworks need to adapt following the shift from mass marketing to personalised digital marketing. Rathna et al. (2023) outline a model of five stages that any digital marketing implementation goes through: (1) Initialisation: at this stage there is no 'official' framework orchestrating the implementation of digital marketing; (2) Expansion: where management is involved and aware of the potential of digital marketing implementation; (3) Formalisation; (4) Integration: where the evolution of the marketing strategy is integrated into the overall strategy of the company and the resulting strategies are followed; and (5) Maturity: characterised by the general adoption of digital marketing concepts. In this sense, Halkiopoulou et al. (2023) highlight techniques that they consider key to the application of digital marketing: (1) website creation; (2) affiliate marketing; (3) blog/vlog marketing; (4) display advertising; (5) email marketing; (6) online promotions; (7) search engine optimisation (SEO); (8) search engine marketing (SEM); (9) social media marketing; (10) viral marketing; and (11) customer relationship management systems (e-CRM) to optimise the entire digital marketing process. And with all this, according to Casanoves-Boix and Pérez-Sánchez (2021), it is important to create a document called "digital marketing plan", which specifies all the actions to be carried out, based on a specific time and manner.

2.2. Market segmentation

According to the World Population Prospects Report (ONU Noticias, 2022), the world's population will exceed 8 billion by 15 November 2022 and is expected to continue to grow, albeit at a more moderate rate, over the following decades. A full understanding of the diverse needs of the population is limited by the number of people to study, so segmentation is an important and essential part of participating in the market.

Authors such as Assael and Roscoe (1976) stated that market segmentation is a strategic marketing tool that matches products and marketing efforts to the needs of the consumer

or user. Years later, Beane and Ennis (1987) explained that market segmentation involves dividing a market into different categories such as geographic, demographic, psychographic, behavioural and image, using various techniques such as automatic interaction detection, conjoint analysis, multidimensional scaling, and canonical analysis.

In addition, there are several processes involved in segmentation, such as segmentation research, a process explained by Wind (1978), who states that...

Segmentation research involves problem definition, research design considerations, data collection approaches, data analysis procedures, and data interpretation and implementation, so organisations need to be very clear about their market share intentions to achieve a critical starting point for segmentation (Wind, 1978).

In recent years, rather than contradicting earlier writers, approaches to the concept of segmentation have validated the segmentation technique. For example, Fisher et al. (2020) explains that segmentation analysis divides a market into subgroups with unique needs and wants, allowing firms to target specific subgroups for maximum profitability. In this regard, Green & Krieger (1991) note that market segmentation identifies subgroups that are best served by treating them separately, especially for product positioning.

According to Fisher et al. (2020), the process of segmentation, in which companies divide a large market of consumers or organisations into smaller subgroups that share similar characteristics, such as common needs, interests, motivations, locations or demographic profiles, allows them to target specific subgroups more effectively with unique needs and desires. This interest is linked to the implementation of the *buyer persona*.

Traditionally, according to Green (1977); Beane and Ennis (1987), segmentation was carried out using multiple regression and discriminant analysis, but now more advanced techniques such as automatic interaction detection, factor analysis, cluster analysis, perception and preference mapping, conjoint scaling, among others, are used. In recent years, market segmentation has evolved into more sophisticated and diverse methods that continue to be refined (e.g., Zhang, 1997; Cooil et al., 2008; Berget, 2018; Aouad et al., 2019; Fujiwara et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2019). New proposals continue to be added to these techniques.

2.3. Outline of virtual influencer *buyer personas*

A *buyer persona* is defined as a semi-fictional representation of an ideal customer based on real data about existing customers and market research (Akre et al., 2019; Putri & Windasari, 2022; Dewi et al., 2024). It includes the traditional simple techniques of collecting socio-demographic and some psychographic and behavioural data as outlined by Beane and Ennis (1987), coupled with a more novel and comprehensive description of customer perception.

The findings of Ketamo et al. (2010) and Pasaribu et al. (2024) confirm that *buyer personas* improve consumer engagement and help to align marketing strategies with consumer motivations and attitudes, thereby enhancing consumer loyalty and brand identity. This alignment is critical to effective neuromarketing and can lead to increased consumer

loyalty and brand equity. In addition, understanding customer needs and wants must be part of business efforts and is reflected in all organisational actions, from the design of products and services that are brought to market to satisfy a target segment (Putri & Windasari, 2022; Dewi et al., 2024).

The work of Akre et al. (2019) and Fenton et al. (2022) recognises that this tool enables the segmentation of customers into specific categories and the creation of more precise and targeted personalised marketing strategies, i.e., by understanding the specific needs, behaviours, and preferences of different customer segments. This aspect is particularly important in digital marketing, where personalisation can significantly increase engagement and conversion rates (Ratcliffe, 2014; Akre et al., 2019; Fenton et al., 2022). The *buyer persona* enables the creation and timely publication of value-added content through promotional and communication programmes, especially to achieve brand positioning (Ratcliffe, 2014); building customer experiences that can positively influence customer attitudes and behaviour towards the company (Jong, 2016).

Building *buyer personas* allows organisations to better understand what potential customers think, prefer, and do (Akre et al., 2019), so their implementation in marketing strategies is crucial. The use of data-driven personas allows marketers to use analytics to make better decisions. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, companies can refine their marketing strategies and improve their understanding of customer behaviour (Jansen et al., 2020; Fenton et al., 2022; Putri & Windasari, 2022). In addition, *buyer personas* are used in brand management to create a coherent brand identity that resonates with the target audience. They help to manage brand personalisation and ensure that all facets of the brand are aligned with consumer expectations and experiences (Ratcliffe, 2014; Dion & Arnould, 2015; Dewi et al., 2024).

In digital marketing, *buyer personas* are developed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, a combination that includes socio-demographic and psychographic data, lifestyle, aspirations, values and even frustrations, all of which provide a synthetic portrait of a real person's life, a proposal that is completed in a more fictional sense with the characteristics of the desired ideal customer; this approach allows marketers to target specific customer segments with relevant content through the right channels, increasing customer centricity (Fenton et al., 2022). It is also possible to create digital avatars that act as influencers on digital social networks, one of the most novel formats of the last decade.

Technological development has led to the creation of increasingly sophisticated, hyper-realistic virtual influencers with high human resemblance, mostly for commercial purposes (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2024). Virtual influencers are computer-generated characters (CGI) that mimic human influencers. These digital characters have gained popularity due to their ability to engage audiences and collaborate with brands, despite not existing in the physical world. Virtual influencers are created by professionals using advanced computer graphics and animation techniques and interact with audiences on social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Twitter (Belova, 2021; Choudhry et al., 2022; Conti et al., 2022).

The construction of the digital influencer based on *buyer persona* data can be supported by all the information happening in real time and continuously in digital social networks, but caution is suggested as unbalanced data could be found. As explained by (Fujiwara et

al., 2019), segmentation algorithms still face significant challenges, which are attempted to be solved by sub-sampling approaches to achieve more specialised segmentations.

Anvari et al. (2017) state that personas with personality traits can help software engineers tailor conceptual designs to the needs of specific personalities, influence user opinions, and prioritise needs. Personalisation of digital influencers is possible based on the knowledge and construction of *buyer personas*.

Self-congruence is achieved when a user perceives an advertiser's personalisation as like their own. It is defined as the compatibility between a consumer's perception of a brand and their self-concept. Zogaj et al. (2020) and Sario et al. (2024) explain that it is the degree to which a person's self-concept coincides with the image of the brand promoter, user, or virtual influencer. If the latter reflects their personality, individuals are more likely to develop an emotional connection to, and trust and preference for, the brands they promote. According to Sario et al. (2024), maximum compatibility between the two personalities should be sought, as self-congruence can reinforce deception and be strengthened by personalised marketing. Self-congruence also has the greatest impact on emotional brand attachment (Malär et al., 2011).

3. METHODOLOGY

The descriptive design of the research is based on a sequential mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach comprises two successive phases that build on the strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods. The first phase involves investigating official quantitative data generated by government institutions. This provides a solid, reliable, and representative basis for identifying the size, segmentation, and general characteristics of the target audience. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011), these institutional databases are supported by standardised methodologies and statistical validation, guaranteeing their credibility. The official data collected in the first phase then form the basis for the second phase: a netnographic analysis (Kozinets, 2020) of the same population in their digital environments, observing their daily behaviour.

This integration is based on the concept of complementarity in mixed methods research, as defined by Sandelowski (2000) and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009). While quantitative data reveals the 'what' and 'how much', qualitative data reveals the 'how' and 'why'. In other words, quantitative data enables us to define the population and its general behaviours, whereas netnographic data provides insight into the subjects' motivations, emotions, discourses, values, and lifestyles, as expressed voluntarily on social networks.

Furthermore, the proposed methodological strategy is supported by a substantial body of scientific literature on tourism, including the following studies: Mkono and Markwell (2014); Molina and Font (2016); Khoo-Lattimore et al. (2017); Truong et al. (2020); Mason et al. (2021); Sabharwal et al. (2021); and Su et al. (2023). It is presented as a rigorous, valid, and coherent approach within the mixed research paradigm, which assumes an intentional articulation between quantitative institutional evidence and qualitative digital evidence. This approach involves observing the same audience from different perspectives to enrich the analysis and reinforce the study's validity, thereby producing robust and detailed findings (Mason et al., 2021).

Digital ethnography and data analysis techniques are employed to develop detailed and precise customer profiles. According to Fenton et al. (2022), digital ethnography can be used to create and refine buyer personas, equipping marketers with robust tools to analyse digital communications and update personas based on evolving consumer data.

The two phases of the sequential mixed design are outlined below.

3.1. Institutional databases

For this study it is considered the collection of official qualitative and quantitative data published annually by the Guanajuato State Tourism Observatory (OTEG, by its acronym in spanish). This Observatory is internationally recognised for its methodology and the information it collects on the tourism sector, which it makes available to the public free of charge through its official online portal. The OTEG is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Tourism, to know the tourism profile of the city of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

It should be noted that San Miguel de Allende is a colonial municipality located in the state of Guanajuato, in central Mexico. González Díaz (2022) describes the city, mentioning the cobblestone streets, art galleries, restaurants and colourful houses that attract the attention of tourists and visitors. According to the 2020 Population and Housing Census (National Institute of Statistics and Geography, 2022), the population of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, was 174,615 inhabitants. Of this population, 52.4% were female and 47.6% male. It is also home to thousands of foreigners, mostly US retirees, attracted by the pleasant climate and much lower prices than in their home country. In 2021, the city was voted the best city in the world by readers of "Travel+Leisure" and "Condé Nast Traveler" magazines. More recently, this city received the Condé Nast award as the World's Best Small City for the fourth time (San Miguel de Allende Gobierno Municipal, 2023).

Due to the city's importance to tourism, the OTEG publishes the visitor profile of San Miguel de Allende annually. This profile informs the qualitative phase of the sequential mixed-methods design, in which the target audience is observed in digital environments using a netnographic approach.

3.2. Netnography

This methodology, which is based on classical ethnography, employs qualitative and quantitative techniques to study cyber cultures on social networks that are united by shared interests, causes, or brands (Srivastav & Rai, 2022). As in real life, these cultures are characterised by codes and rituals (Carey, 2008) utilising text, visual elements, emojis and audio, among other things. These elements are archived on the platforms and can be extracted for analysis. Netnography enables the systematic study of consumption and social expression cultures that emerge on digital platforms while ensuring rigorous observation and interpretive analysis, as well as adherence to ethical criteria when collecting public data.

According to Fisher (2019), netnography enables us to understand the behaviour of online communities. Consequently, online communities are emerging as a distinct and increasingly important stakeholder group for many firms. Srivastav and Rai (2022) confirm this, pointing out that the objective of netnography is to understand how people interact, construct meanings, and form collective identities by observing and analysing their behaviour, language, and cultural dynamics.

Specifically in the field of tourism, authors such as Whalen (2018) and Gholamhosseinzadeh et al. (2021) have emphasised that social networks serve as spaces for the symbolic production of contemporary tourism when analysed using tools such as netnography. This approach supplements hard data with significant interpretive discursive layers. Netnography enables emerging markets and distinct cultural groups within tourism to be studied.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The collection of data related to the visitor profile for the years 2022 and 2023 in the official databases was carried out during the months of July and August 2024, through the review of the official data available in the “Guanajuato State Tourism Observatory”. Then, for the second phase and in order to locate the publications of tourists in the city of San Miguel de Allende, we searched them by using the #sanmigueldeallende, thus publications about the city were located and those made by tourists and visitors were selected, from which the digital ethnography was conducted, using the Phantom Buster software to collect the data, since it allows the collection of data at a detailed level and the application of digital ethnography. Furthermore, online behavioural analysis was carried out to identify behavioural patterns and develop *buyer personas* to refine initial proposals in the creation of the virtual influencer.

And the collection of digital data took place in social networks, specifically in Instagram, was carried out in September 2024. The analysis of the collected data was carried out in October 2024, which allowed the final reports to be completed at the same time.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Visitor profile of San Miguel de Allende from the OTEG database

Phase 1. Recognising the importance of the city of San Miguel de Allende and its touristic relevance for the Mexican country, the government of the State of Guanajuato through the Ministry of Tourism publishes every year the visitor's profile, data that is available to the public on the OTEG website (Secretaría de Turismo e Identidad del Estado de Guanajuato, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c).

Table 1 summarises the relevant aspects of the methodology used by the tourism observatory to collect data related to the profile of the visitor to San Miguel de Allende for the years 2021, 2022 and 2023.

Table 1. *San Miguel de Allende Visitor Profile Methodology (2021-2023).*

Year	Methodology	Number of tourists	Sample	Level of Reliability and error	Time period
OTEG					
2021*	Quantitative study that included 2 tools: physical surveys 29% and digital panel surveys 71%.	1,500,000 tourists	285 visitors. People aged 20 and over who visited the city in 2022	Confidence level 95% and Error 5.81%.	From 26 May 2021 to 1 January 2022
2022	Descriptive study including 2 on-site tools: tourist flow survey 89% and face-to-face surveys 11%.	1,864,771 tourists	906 visitors. Tourists and day-trippers aged 20 and over visiting the city in 2022	Confidence level 95% and Error 3.3%.	From April a december 2022
2023	Descriptive study including 2 on-site tools: tourist flow survey 80% and face-to-face surveys 20%.	2,055,981 tourists	1,452 visitors. Tourists and excursionists over 20 years of age who visited any of the destinations in the State of Guanajuato during 2023.	Confidence level 95% and Error 2.6%.	From January to december 2023

*2021 was a newly opened year after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: The author's elaboration based on the 2021–2023 databases from the “Observatorio Turístico de Estado de Guanajuato” visitor profile studies in Mexico.

In addition, it is worth noting that the data collection instrument has been maturing and broadening its spectrum year by year. The following aspects were observed in 2021: socio-demographic profile, travel plan, experience and recommendations, expenditure, stay and distribution, and hygiene protocols. Then, in the years 2022 and 2023, the following elements were investigated: socio-demographic profile, reason for travel, experience and recommendation expenditure, type of accommodation and stay.

After observing the three years of the tourist profile of San Miguel de Allende through the 2,643 data collected by the OTEG, the data and predominant characteristics of the tourists were extracted, and the design of the tourist profiles began.

The data in Table 2 shows the predominant characteristics of the male and female profiles of tourists of the city.

Table 2. *Sociodemographic data of the SMA visitor profile.*

Age	Education	Origin	Expenses at the destination	Way of traveling	Trip planning
Women					
29% (18-29)	22% Bachelor	16.2% state	Gastronomy 62%	39% travel with family	Self-managed 80% more digital
43% (30-39)	58% Degree	59.23% nationals	Crafts and art 64%	31% travel as a couple	Self-managed 62% digital 48% assisted by professionals
28% (40 or more)	20% Postgraduate	24.6% internationals	Culture, traditions and festivities 90%	26% travel with friends 4% travel alone	Assisted by professionals 13%
Interest in cultural destination	Includes visits to museums	Interest in nightlife	Glamor and interculturality	Romantic trip	Collective travel experience
Men					
28% (18-29)	36% Bachelor	260 regionals	Gastronomy 82%	35% travel with family	Self-managed 90% More digital
44% (30-39)	44% Degree	180 nationals	Crafts and art 64%	24% travel as a couple	Self-managed 66% digital 34% assisted by professionals
28% (40 or more)	20% Postgraduate	76 internationals	Traditions and festivities 90%	34% travel with friends 7% Travel alone	Assisted by professionals 7%
Interest in cultural destination	Includes visits to museums	Interest in nightlife	Traditions and festivities	Celebration of an event	Learn about gastronomic and wine routes

Source: The author's elaboration based on the 2021–2023 databases from the “Observatorio Turístico de Estado de Guanajuato.” visitor profile studies in Mexico.

The grey rows in Table 2 represent the main interests of women and men. It is important to highlight that more women than men have participated in these studies, on average 62.2% are women, while men only 37.93%. There are important changes in 2023 compared to the previous two years, for example: culture surpasses leisure as a reason for visiting the destination; the rental of houses, rooms, or apartments has equaled the number of hotel rooms. It should be noted that, noting the lack of details about both profiles, we consulted research works that also look at the profile of the tourist in San Miguel Allende, such as Echeverri Lugo (2018); Soto de Anda et al. (2019); and Esquivel Ríos et al. (2022). These data, predominantly socio-demographic, constitute the classic form of segmentation.

It should be noted that to participate and remain in today's market, every organization must fine-tune its segmentation techniques to achieve a fine profile of the visitor. In this way, it is possible to further emphasize the focus on the consumer, client, or tourist, and achieve one-to-one marketing, to achieve personalized communication and the construction of experiences.

The segmentation data observed in Table 2 provides an overview of the characteristics of actual tourists who have visited the city of San Miguel de Allende in the last three years. To the data are added the characteristics that tourists and visitors to the destination should ideally have. In the case of San Miguel de Allende, the population most attracted to the city are people between the ages of 30 and 39, mostly from different states of the Mexican Republic. If we add to this the fact that, according to the Mexican Internet Association (Asociación de Internet de México, 2023), there are currently 96.87 million internet users in Mexico, accounting for 80.8% of the country's population. Most of these users belong to Generation X, Generation Z, and the Millennial groups, and connect to multiple devices via data or Wi-Fi. Notably, between 20% and 25% of those surveyed purchase tickets and tourist services online. The same study found that the most common activity is connecting to social media to keep up to date, stay in touch with family and friends, and consume digital content. The most popular social networks in Mexico are the same as the most popular ones globally in 2024. According to Statista (2025), these are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok, although Twitter is more popular in Mexico.

The addition of more data on the visitor's profile will allow for more accurate targeting and a higher level of personalization. Mixing the actual data with the ideal impressions and some psychographic descriptions results in the *buyer persona* for the city. As stated, the implementation of the *buyer persona* allows for more precise segmentation and personalisation of marketing campaigns (Reutterer et al., 2006; Gavurová et al., 2018), thereby increasing their effectiveness (Shah et al., 2024). For these reasons, once segmentation is more precise, subsequent decisions can be based on monitoring trends in digital channels and media. Therefore, a netnography is carried out.

4.2. Netnography results

Phase 2. By conducting netnographic research on Instagram, we were able to observe 312 tourist profiles in San Miguel de Allende who posted travel information on their Instagram profile. People related to advertisers were removed. By analysing their comments, interactions, reactions, and emoji usage, we identified their personality traits, aspirations, desires, dreams, and travel-related frustrations, as well as their preferred destinations. This data is summarised in Table 3., and informs the development of the buyer persona, thus enriching the creation of the virtual influencer.

Table 3. offers a synthetic overview of the characteristics that would strengthen a virtual influencer's presence on social networks.

Table 3. Virtual influencer based on *buyer personas*.

Characteristics	Dreams and aspirations	Frustrations	The next trip
Women			
Cheerful	Travel	Do not go to all the advertised fairs,	I will stay longer,
Insightful	See more places in the world	They do not accept credit cards	will be to the same destination
Fun	Improve her economic status	When a low-quality purchase arrives,	I will travel with my friends
Very sociable	find the partner of your dreams	The poverty of the outskirts in tourist destinations.	It will be soon
Men			
Adventurous	Live an adventure	Lack of a good culinary offer	I carry cash with me it
Friendly	To be free every weekend	That the websites are not updated	it will be to another cultural Mexican city
Traveler	To finish his studies	The pollution of the cities	I would arrive before the holiday
Confident	Speak several languages	It bothers me to wait	Escape as soon as possible

Source: The author's elaboration.

The data collected is presented in summary form in Table 3. and is considered in the strengthening of the buyer persona and to enrich the construction of the virtual influencer. The buyer persona, according to Dondapati and Dehury (2024), allows the creation of virtual influencers with greater precision, because based on the needs, interests, and desires of the audience to be influenced, it is possible to design a personality, a style of communication and a choice of values that generate identification, credibility and para-social relationships.

By incorporating the *buyer persona* into the digital marketing plan, it is proposed to create virtual influencers that give the city an attractive, novel, and renewed presence, considering that travellers are increasingly digital, and their agenda has been built by digital management itself. The virtual influencers can then appear in a timely and attractive manner to capture their attention and provide valuable information in a format that will undoubtedly outperform the future traveller in terms of innovation, impressions, and recall.

According to researchers such as Lou et al. (2022), Gerlich (2023) and Davlembayeva et al. (2025), followers of virtual influencers tend to be digitally active individuals who value innovation, authenticity, interaction, and a sense of affinity with a brand's values. They also seek novel, personalised experiences on social networks. The proposal responds is in line with the trends and formats in digital marketing, among which stand out the popularity of virtual influencers, that according to Dondapati & Dehury, (2024), their

emergence is increasing, and with technological advances, especially artificial intelligence, it is possible that their emergence will multiply, and their presence will become more and more noticeable.

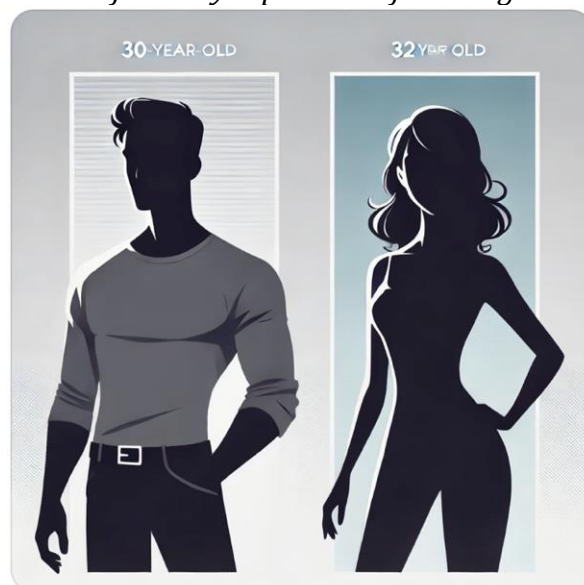
4.3. The initial construction of the virtual influencer

The clarification of the *buyer persona* starts with the mix of data from the real databases and the ideal characteristics, which can be created to cover all the data that are not available but are desired as a tourist characteristic for the destination, which in turn provides inputs to outline the visual profile of the virtual Influencers for the city of San Miguel de Allende.

The free version of ChatGPT was asked to produce a first draft of a virtual influencer that would appeal to young people heavily involved in digital activities. The following prompt was used to generate the initial draft (Figure 1): "Hello, I would like to create a first draft of a young virtual influencer, both male and female, with a human background. Can you help me?"

Figure 1 shows the first sketch of the female profile and the male profile.

Figure 1. First outline of the buyer persona of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.



Source: The author's elaboration based on ChatGPT Artificial Intelligence.

The next step is to perfect the image to promote on the *buyer persona*, adding features and phenotypes to create an anthropomorphic digital representative.

The new version was generated using Gemini Version 2.5 Flash, a free artificial intelligence tool developed by Google. The following prompt was used: 'Create an image of two virtual influencers (one male, one female) who are young adults aged between 30 and 39. They are Mexican nationals belonging to Generation Z, and they both have bachelor's degrees and come from middle- to upper-middle-class backgrounds. They enjoy new experiences and are part of the digital generation that independently plans and organises trips. They travel to cultural cities in Mexico to enjoy festivities, traditions, museums, gastronomic heritage, and nightlife.' Emphasise the following differences: she

is interested in glamour, shopping, and romance, while he enjoys new experiences and learning about gastronomic and wine routes. They respect the cultural and natural heritage of the destinations they visit and look for the cleanest and most efficient means of transport. They also educate themselves about tourist destinations before visiting and appreciate value for money. They are concerned about the future and believe in sustainability, making them responsible tourists.

Various artificial intelligences were employed to demonstrate the advantages of these developments and illustrate how proposals can continually be refined by leveraging free, global technological advances. More powerful AI enables the creation of virtual influencers that embody the characteristics desired by organisations, allowing for greater diversity of character in prompts.

Figure 2 shows an example of the virtual influencer model that could be used to represent the city of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

Figure 2. *Model of the Digital Influencer of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.*



Source: The author's elaboration based on Gemini Artificial Intelligence.

All the semi-fictional persona's characteristics are observed. The perfect virtual influencer must understand the motivations, aspirations, daily lives, and frustrations of tourists. Each proposal should be refined to create an image that accurately represents the desired tourist profile. The more data recognises the different facets of travellers, the better it can inform the construction process.

Virtual influencers are created using artificial intelligence, 3D modelling and other technologies. These digital entities are refined until the desired level of humanisation and realism is achieved. Companies, advertisers, and digital agencies interested in

communications can use this technology to create their own virtual influencer. The aim is to attract a more desirable type of visitor to the city.

The more consumers are studied and the more precisely the target segment is defined, the closer one can get to one-to-one marketing and the personalisation demanded today. It becomes possible to add more elements of individuals' personalities, lifestyles, and values to their profiles. Additionally, communication campaigns and marketing strategies can be planned more effectively in terms of the media used, time of day, and frequency of contact. Therefore, the better we understand consumers, the more effective our buyer persona profiles will be, enabling us to implement the most appropriate digital marketing strategies and create virtual influencers with the most suitable personalities.

4.4. Discussion

Adapting to digital trends is essential for companies to maintain a competitive position in the market (Valdez Palazuelos & Sánchez Beltrán, 2019). This adaptation involves observing and acting in digital social networks (Setkute & Dibb, 2022), to the point of building strong and lasting relationships with customers and gaining trust through the publication of valuable content. In this way, the market position is expected to deliver the expected benefits to the organisation, as confirmed by Deb et al. (2024).

Fisher et al. (2020) also highlighted the profitability of segmentation, if done well technically, to work with more homogeneous subgroups that can be better satisfied. Work to improve *buyer personas* should be a constant in organisations. According to Anvari et al. (2022) the benefits to organisations from the construction and operation of the *buyer persona* in management and decision making is important to confirm that the implementation of *buyer personas* the benefits are many, so it should be understood how the accuracy in the creation of *buyer personas* improves the alignment of campaigns with customer expectations. However, it also addresses the challenge of keeping these profiles up to date and relevant, a critical process to avoid misalignment of marketing strategies. Measuring the impact of *buyer personas* in terms of conversion rate, retention and engagement levels is possible and necessary to refine their delineation.

While *buyer personas* are valuable for understanding customer needs and improving marketing strategies, they must be carefully developed to accurately reflect the target audience. Factors such as personality traits, cultural differences, and specific customer behaviours must be considered to ensure that personas are effective and actionable (Anvari et al., 2017; Farrukh, 2022). Furthermore, the complexity and time required for methods such as digital ethnography can be a barrier for some practitioners. And as Anaya-Sánchez (2022) points out, virtual influencers are artificial images or interactive avatars that aim to resemble human influencers in various functionalities, such as creating and disseminating online content that can persuade followers. Jhawar et al. (2023) add that these virtual influencers can build credibility through interactions with users of digital social networks, an aspect that is more effective in younger consumer segments, influencing user perceptions and reactions (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2024). To conclude, destinations need to perfect the *buyer persona* but must also carry out in-destination studies to protect fragile expressions of culture or history.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Given the rapid and continuous growth of Internet users worldwide, in addition to users of digital social networks, it is essential to use techniques of observation and market segmentation, which, accompanied by the implementation of models and classified structures of digital marketing, can improve the participation of organisations in the market, but given the diversity of people involved, it is essential to segment the market.

As explained above, segmentation is a fundamental strategic marketing tool that allows companies and organisations to personalise their offerings to the extent that more specialised segmentation techniques can meet the needs of different customer groups while optimising marketing resources and efforts. Among these specialised techniques, *buyer persona* design stands out.

Buyer personas are a powerful tool for understanding and achieving personalised customer service in a dynamic digital environment and should be used when building the digital marketing plan. This study provides a structured basis for their development and implementation in digital marketing strategies, in this case related to the simulation of digital avatars that participate in social networks as virtual influencers. As with applied research of Gavurová et al. (2018), one of the most attractive findings is found in practice, where it was recommended to focus marketing campaigns with visual forms, such as virtual influencers.

It is worth noting how these detailed representations, like the digital avatar, can attract customers and draw attention by incorporating the obvious innovation, as well as how virtual influencers are increasingly popular and accepted as communicators representing a myriad of organisations in different sectors. In the tourism sector, there are virtual influencers dedicated to promoting travel and destinations; their creators have given them an attractive anthropomorphic figure with a certain personality, which, accompanied by a convincing and dreamy speech, achieves the generation of highly visualised content.

The use of *buyer personas* makes it possible to strengthen the company-customer relationship, in which, when they participate in digital entities, can cause interactions not indifferent to and improve results. The intervention of the Digital Influencer optimises the results of digital campaigns, because the optimised knowledge of the customer and of the characteristics of the target group allows the actions to be successful and to invest in the moments, channels, and communication media where the Internet user is connected.

Finally, this work identifies some limitations and suggests potential areas for future research. Firstly, there is limited publicly available information relating to travellers' psychographic, axiological, and lifestyle data. Most questions and items in surveys used to determine traveller profiles focus on sociodemographic data and interests or expenses incurred at the destination. Building on Pearce's (2019) work, it is recommended that future research and traveller surveys incorporate questions that explore participants' personal lives, motivations, dreams, aspirations, and frustrations, as well as their approach to trip planning. This would enable more precise buyer personas to be created. Secondly, based on Meng et al.'s (2025) work, which involved destinations with different cultural, geographical, and demographic characteristics, the feasibility of applying the proposal to other tourist destinations should be considered. The objective would be to

identify which elements of the strategy would be universal and which would need to be adjusted according to the local context. Thirdly, application to diverse communication areas should be considered. Following Hoai Lan et al.'s (2025) study, these could include cultural promotion, social awareness campaigns, events, and fairs. The aim would be to evaluate the strategy's impact on public interaction and perception.

Finally, it is worth noting that studies on virtual influencers should, in line with the suggestions of Kondekar et al. (2025), raise ethical concerns, and raise more questions about authenticity and the future of marketing. And as Robinson (2020); Mouritzen et al. (2024); Belanche et al. (2024), among others, point out, although ethics is a complex topic as it encompasses issues such as transparency, consumer manipulation, and the aforementioned authenticity, it should be studied in relation to the moral responsibility of those who create virtual influencers.

6. REFERENCES

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