Designed to engage: sexualization and audience response to @fit_aitana

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This study explores engagement dynamics and audience responses to virtual influencer (VI) @fit_aitana, examining how body-revealing content drives interaction and how users negotiate authenticity and objectification. Using a mixed-methods approach, it analyzes 69 Instagram posts through engagement metrics (likes, comments) and qualitative comment coding. Body-revealing clothing and leisure-oriented contexts generate the highest engagement, confirming that sexualization is structurally rewarded within Instagram's attention economy. User comments reveal ambivalent responses: while some engaged with Aitana as an aspirational figure, others expressed concerns about objectification, unattainable standards, and negative impacts on well-being. This study demonstrates that VIs function less as posthuman innovations and more as optimized products, where sexualization is imposed by creators rather than a personal choice, complicating existing frameworks of self-sexualization and highlighting the commercialization of virtual femininity for algorithmic visibility.

Keywords: virtual influencers (VIs); gender stereotypes; sexualization; social media; digital marketing; body image