

INSIGHT & STRATEGY 8 OCTOBER 2020

## Insight & Strategy: Ikea Harajuku with imma /

*IKEA*

**Why a furniture retailer partnered with a virtual influencer to promote its latest shop in Japan**



Recently, Contagious reported on how **Ikea** promoted the opening of its latest store in Harajuku by creating a show window display installation featuring Ikea products and a popular virtual influencer called imma who has almost 300,000 Instagram followers.

Together with **Wieden + Kennedy Tokyo**, Ikea replicated a living room in its ground floor storefront. The space featured real Ikea furniture in the foreground, while the background consisted of LED screens, creating an illusion that imma was there too.



From 28 August to 30 August, people could watch imma chatting on the phone, vacuuming, lounging on the couch, etc. Light meters tracked the brightness and temperature of the outside world so that her activities could be adjusted depending on the time of day.

On the second floor of the store, Ikea erected an LED screen that also displayed imma in her bedroom. The entire event was live streamed on imma's social channels, on [Ikea.jp](https://www.ikea.jp), and a highlight reel was released on her Instagram account at the end of the **Ikea Harajuku with imma event**.

We caught up with **Eri Hirose**, communications planner at Wieden + Kennedy Tokyo, and **Max Pilwat**, the creative lead behind the campaign, to talk about the popularity of virtual influencers in Japan and how Ikea is leveraging the trend to reach a new target audience.

▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R95HDiUbb84>

**How is Ikea viewed by consumers in the Japanese market?**

**Eri Hirose:** Everyone knows Ikea in Japan. North European designs are quite popular here and people consider it a stylish Swedish furniture brand with fashionable products.

### **Who are Ikea's main competitors in Japan?**

**Hirose:** Ikea's biggest competitor is a brand called Nitori, which is a giant domestic furniture brand that offers products at a similar price to Ikea and goes by the tagline 'more than you pay for'. Ikea's other competitor in Japan is Muji, which is a domestic lifestyle brand that has a home furnishing offering but also provides products beyond that like fashion items.

### **What are the brand's key challenges in this market?**

**Hirose:** Ikea is known to some degree by everyone in Japan, but top of mind awareness is still low; most people think of Nitori first. Our challenge is to make Ikea top of mind in the home furnishing category by doing things to differentiate it in the market. As I mentioned before, Nitori is known for being an affordable home furniture brand, so we can't win if we just communicate Ikea's prices.

Instead, we are trying to make Ikea stand out from its competitors by injecting a more inspirational and emotional tone to the brand. That's why Ikea Japan's brand platform is 'Happy to be Home' (a direct translation from the Japanese tagline 'I Love This Home').



**In what ways is the home viewed differently in Japan and how has that changed?**

**Max Pilwat:** The home is seen very differently in Japan compared to the west. In Japan, hard work determines not just schedules but also how much time you really spend at home. Up until now it always has been more of a functional place where you solely sleep and recharge between workdays. Home furnishing solutions and life at home, in general, weren't top of mind. The global pandemic has been a major shift as it reframed the importance of the home as a whole. Now that we spend more time at home it has become more important than ever. Our brand platform 'Happy To Be Home' became increasingly relevant to the consumers.

**Presumably the brief for this campaign was to promote the opening of Ikea's Harajuku store, can you tell me about the specific business objectives?**

**Hirose:** The main business objective was to attract new, young customers to the store that Ikea hadn't traditionally connected with before.

**Can you describe the target audience a bit more specifically?**

**Hirose:** The client brief was 18- to- 34-year-olds, the young urbanites living in small spaces. Most young people in Tokyo live in tiny one-bedroom or studio apartments and they are looking for solutions to maximise their spaces. The idea is to make them think that Ikea is the brand that can fulfil their needs with affordable solutions for organisation and personalisation.



**Did you/Ikea set out any KPIs? What does success look like for this campaign?**

**Hirose:** The interesting thing about this was that the main KPI wasn't about getting people to visit the store. It's located right next to the station in Harajuku which is a big area in Tokyo, so people naturally go there. The main priority was to maximise the PR. We had no budget for paid media so we knew that we had to create something that was really shareable on social media; getting earned impressions was very important.

**What was your initial response when you heard the brief?**

**Pilwat:** We were excited! Ikea opening a shop in one of the most vibrant districts of Tokyo was an incredibly exciting starting point for us. There is a lot that is connected to Harajuku as a place, especially from a visual point of view: it's colourful, it's *kawaii* ['cute'], there's noise everywhere you go, it's alive. But if

you're going to be seen then you really need to create something that cuts through and makes you stand out.

We knew we needed to help young people find happiness at home, so we set out to take them on a step-by-step journey to resolve their issues with small spaces in a way that felt engaging and relatable. At first we thought about doing a before and after influencer video series but that quickly evolved to the idea to get a virtual influencer into a real home for the first time.

### **Can you tell me a bit about the popularity and role of virtual influencers in Japanese culture?**

**Hirose:** It's getting more and more popular in this market. Digital consumers are enjoying content from virtual influencers on social media just as much as they do the content from real human influencers. There are even talent agencies for virtual models now as well.



### **Is the trend for virtual influencers on the rise in Japan, or has it reached a saturation point?**

**Pilwat:** Virtual humans or influencers are part of the landscape in Japan. You might see a billboard with a human and then right next to it, one with a virtual influencer. The acceptance and the following is there too. So far, the experiences and interactions with virtual influencers you can have are quite limited: the usual print, social posts, etc. That's why we wanted to go one step further.

Personally, I think that the market for virtual influencers is just getting started and that there's a lot to watch out for in the future.

**imma is created by Tokyo-based company Animation Cafe/Aww Inc, which specialises in CG modelling. How did you go about approaching them to use imma in the campaign? Were they on board immediately?**

**Pilwat:** Just like with any influencer campaign, we talked to imma's management first. We were in constant exchange throughout the project and had an amazing partnership with Aww Inc. One thing that was important was making sure that imma's values aligned with Ikea's. We immediately connected and were on the same page – not just because of imma's taste in fashion, culture and design or her love for the Ikea plush animals, but even more so when talking about imma's values from sustainability to LGBTQ+ rights.

**You mentioned earlier that the original idea was to go with a real influencer as opposed to a virtual one. Why did you change your mind?**

**Pilwat:** We realised very quickly that it's a lot more interesting and visually arresting to follow someone virtual around their home. imma was also unique as no one had seen her private life prior to this campaign. On top, it made sense given the neighbourhood that the shop was in; imma's look, feel and fashion sensibilities felt very Harajuku fashion mecca.

We weren't looking to just tie an influencer to a product, we wanted to unlock the next level of influencer marketing. It was truly integrated from the in-store installation to the three-day live stream and the student apartment and Ikea product range that was curated by imma. She even left comments on the price tags in the Harajuku shop.

## Virtual humans were part of a sci-fi plot in Black Mirror just a few years ago and now we're collaborating with them to show off home furnishing expertise in real life

Max Pilwat, Wieden + Kennedy Tokyo

▶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sned2GGZS5g>

### What challenges does working with virtual influencers present advertisers?

**Pilwat:** The challenges were probably similar when compared to the usual influencer campaigns. Management is always a part of the equation and decisions need to be made not just with our client but also with the talent and their management in mind. Naturally, everyone was very close to and involved in the process which was great.

### imma engages in a range of activities (none of which can be said to be particularly exciting) like vacuuming, chatting on the phone, etc. Why did you pick those?

**Pilwat:** We worked closely with imma and her team to portray her just like the rest of us. Her life reflected our own over the last few months; we've all learned to cook, do yoga, relax during this new normal. It was really important to see the mundane, real-life moments that we never see models doing, whether they are CGI or not. Her life became almost a mirror into ourselves.

### What challenges did you face along the way and how did you overcome them?

**Pilwat:** The biggest challenge was that the imma project was something that we had never done as an agency before. There was no blueprint or path to follow, it had never happened. It was also quite ambitious to tell someone's life for three full days.

Not just because there were two windows (one into her bedroom, the other the living room), but all of the in between bits on imma's social channels with the Instagram Stories, responding to social comments in real time, etc. There was a



lot of meticulous planning involved. Above all, we had to make sure that it was a seamless and believable blend between the virtual and real world.



**You used imma’s Instagram account to promote the activation and had her post about what she was up to throughout the campaign. Why did you think this was the most effective way to raise awareness?**

**Pilwat:** Everything that imma did in the real world had a digital connection. Her main platforms are Instagram and lately TikTok. That’s why we worked with these platforms, as it’s how her fans interact with her (the very demographic we were looking to reach with the campaign).

imma is Japanese for ‘now’, which was also the filter for how we and our partners wanted the campaign to be seen and followed on social media. imma kept her fans updated in real-time to paint an even more intimate picture of her as a virtual model at home.

**How does this campaign benefit Ikea’s long-term brand strategy in Japan?**

**Hirose:** This was the first time in Ikea's history in Japan that we tried to do something that was different from the home furnishing content that we would normally post. The whole purpose of this was to connect with young new customers and I think we can use this as a benchmark for future campaigns geared towards this audience.

**What has been your single greatest learning from the campaign?**

**Pilwat:** On a personal level, this campaign has shown me that there is no limit to where we can go and that the online and offline worlds are becoming increasingly blurred. Virtual humans were part of a sci-fi plot in *Black Mirror* just a few years ago and now we're collaborating with them to show off home furnishing expertise in real life.