ENHANCING BRAND SALIENCE THROUGH PRODUCT PLACEMENT ON VIRTUAL INFLUENCER'S INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the impact of product placement by virtual influencers on the brand salience of two prominent companies, Gucci and Nike. The research involved the participation of 207 students from Tarumanagara University, employing a convenience sampling technique. Utilizing a pre-test and post-test experimental design without a control group, the study incorporated Instagram content featuring a virtual influencer, Alissa Gladys, created by the researcher. Data were collected through Google Forms distributed during fieldwork and subsequently analyzed using SPSS. The findings of the study reveal a positive influence of virtual influencer product placement on brand salience for both Gucci and Nike. Notably, the effect is characterized as moderate for Gucci and small for Nike. This variance is attributed to the distinct product categories represented by the two brands: Gucci, a luxury fashion brand, and Nike, a ubiquitous sportswear brand integral to everyday life. The study contributes to the understanding of the dynamics between virtual influencers and brand awareness, shedding light on how different product categories may be influenced to varying degrees. The utilization of a controlled experimental design and statistical analysis through SPSS enhances the rigor of the research, providing valuable insights for marketing strategies in the context of virtual influencer product placement.

Keywords: *Product Placement, Brand Salience, Virtual Influencer, Instagram*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid transmission of information facilitated by the Internet has spurred businesses to leverage various digital marketing channels, with social media being a prominent component. Data Reportal in 2023 emphasizes that Instagram emerges as a preferred platform for brand interaction, with users actively seeking information about products and brands (Kemp, 2023). A total of 58% of Instagram users utilize the platform for such informational searches (GWI, 2023). In the Indonesian context, Instagram stands out as the second most utilized social media platform by a substantial 86.5% of internet users aged 16-64, with an additional 18.2% identifying it as their second most frequented platform, contributing to an average annual social media usage time of 15 months in Indonesia (Kemp, 2023).

Numerous luxury fashion brands strategically employ social media platforms to enhance their brand visibility. A luxury brand is characterized by attributes like superior quality, elevated pricing, rarity, prestige, authenticity, and the provision of a symbolic and emotionally resonant customer experience—an experience often defined as a service. Maintaining exclusivity through controlled product distribution, luxury brands place a premium on uniqueness, resulting in products and services commanding premium prices (Jin & Ryu, 2018). The top echelons of luxury fashion brands are actively expanding their presence on Instagram to engage with consumers, cultivate new facets of luxury, and augment brand equity. The allure of these brands extends beyond the tangible, as fashion enthusiasts find

gratification in donning luxury fashion products and bask in the recognition they receive from their Instagram followers. Consequently, they frequently share images featuring themselves adorned in high-end accessories and clothing, incorporating brand-specific hashtags such as #Gucci (Jin & Ryu, 2018).

Gucci, a leading luxury fashion brand, ranks third in luxury fashion sales at $17.839 billion uses Instagram (@gucci) as the channel of its marketing campaign partnering with Harry Styles and Kai, along with Nike, the second-largest sportswear brand in Indonesia (Brand Directory. 2023) also leverages Instagram for marketing, partnering with athletes such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Serena Williams. Advancements in technology introduce artificial intelligence (AI) as virtual influencers, replacing humans. This cost-effective and scandal-resistant approach is exemplified by virtual influencers like Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela), who boasts 2.7 million Instagram followers and an estimated annual income of $11 million (Forbes, 2023).

Virtual influencer Lentari Van Lorianne (@lentaripagi), of Indonesian-Dutch descent with 100,000+ followers, practices product placement marketing on Instagram. Integrating local Indonesian brands into her content, Lentari showcases product placements, a strategy where influencers seamlessly incorporate advertisements. This technique, also known as embedded marketing, involves mentioning a product or brand within a marketing program (Liu *et al.,* 2015). Product placements can be overt and noticeable or subtle and challenging to achieve, impacting brand acceptance, recall, and recognition in the minds of consumers. Marketers leverage product placement to shape a brand's image aligned with consumer perceptions and preferences (Amanda *et al*., 2022).

Product placement is widely used by marketers to enhance brand exposure, leading to increased brand salience, recognition, evaluation, and attitude (Babin & Carder, 1996). Exposure to product placement reinforces a brand's presence, diminishing the dominance of competing brands in consumer memories and preventing brand fade (Babin & Carder, 1996). This study explores the impact of product placement on virtual influencers on brand salience. Brand salience, akin to top-of-mind awareness, refers to "which products a consumer thinks about" rather than "what a consumer thinks about a brand. This concept has similar characteristics to top-of-mind brands, where brand awareness is a measure of brand awareness and is measured using a ranked list of brands (Hong *et al.,* 2008; Miller & Berry, 1998).

Research on product placement is predominantly focused on traditional media, including films, games, and television programs. However, there is a notable scarcity of studies examining product placement in the context of online platforms, such as social media (Guo *et al.*, 2019). Despite brand placement garnering attention from researchers and practitioners in the Western world, knowledge about product placement remains limited in developing countries, leading to a paucity of research on product placement in developing nations (Balasubramanian *et al*., 2014).

Product Placement
Product placement serves as a hybrid communication method that adeptly merges facets of advertising and publicity (Balasubramanian, 1994). Product placement refers to the intentional inclusion of branded products or brand identifiers in mass media programs such as movies or television shows, utilizing both auditory and visual elements. The primary objective of product placement is to subtly introduce the product into society with a planned

and unobtrusive approach to influence audiences in a subtle and unobtrusive manner blending the advantages of both advertising and publicity messages existing at the intersection of advertising and entertainment (Balasubramanian, 1994; Balasubramanian et al., 2014; Ghosh, 2021). The objective of product placement is to present the product in a genuine and unforced manner that connects with the audience without conspicuously resembling a conventional advertisement. Typically, product sponsors collaborate with specialized agencies to identify appropriate avenues for product integrations within scripts long before production commences. These integrations undergo meticulous negotiation to guarantee that the product is showcased within a framework that mirrors the brand's identity and principles. (Balasubramanian, 1994).

The concept of product placement can be broadly categorized into two main aspects: visual and verbal or auditory (Russel, 1998). In the visual type, the brand is positioned in the background of the film, whereas in the verbal or auditory type, the brand is seamlessly integrated into the dialogue (Russel, 1998). This aligns with the definition of product placement as an advertising technique that promotes a product through its visual and/or aural presence in movies, television shows, games, and music videos (Ozturkcan & Okan, 2018). Product placement is strategically crafted to align with the characteristics and needs of the followers, fostering a natural and authentic association between the promoted products and the influencer's content (Ghosh, 2021). The primary objective of such product placement is to elicit natural persuasion among followers and encourage the creation of user-generated content (UGC). It is essential to uphold transparency and authenticity in the promotion of brands and products within this context. This ensures a genuine connection with the audience while effectively stimulating engagement and brand advocacy (Ghosh, 2021).

Virtual Influencer

Currently, an increasing number of virtual influencers are emerging on popular social media platforms such as Instagram, X, and YouTube. Virtual influencers characterized as digitally created entities, typically showcase computer-generated faces that can be linked to an artificial digital body or seamlessly integrated into a real human body. These digital personas are often portrayed as supermodels, artists, or everyday individuals, whether partially or entirely artificial (such as digitally rendered 3D characters). Despite their artificial nature, virtual influencers deliver content akin to that of human influencers (Stein et al, 2022).

A virtual influencer is an entity enhanced with a digital avatar, meticulously crafted to resemble a human or a digitally conceived artificial persona. This digital persona adeptly mimics human traits and activities through advanced software and algorithms, achieving widespread internet fame and establishing a robust social media presence by closely mirroring humans in both physical appearance and personality (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Thomas & Fowler, 2020). The primary distinction between human and virtual influencers lies in their origin and content creation. Human influencers, real individuals with a social media following, generate content based on personal experiences, fostering authenticity and audience engagement. In contrast, virtual influencers, computer-generated characters, are limited to programmed content, potentially hindering authenticity and user connection. Human influencers excel in building personal brands and establishing genuine connections with their audience, a challenge for virtual influencers due to their artificial nature. The latter may struggle to gain trust and engagement from users compared to real individuals (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021).

Virtual influencers offer unprecedented consistency and control in brand messaging, allowing meticulous calibration of their image without the risk of real-life indiscretions. Immune to human limitations, they provide a reliable stream of content creation without concerns related to issues such as anxiety or depression. Ethically, virtual influencers eliminate worries about the personal lives of individuals behind the brand, as they do not exist offline. Their sustainability and flexibility further enhance their appeal, enabling brands to easily modify or deactivate them without impacting personal well-being. In summary, the unique advantages of virtual influencers position them as a compelling choice for brands aiming for effective and ethical engagement on social media platforms (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021).

Brand Salience
Brand salience encompasses the level of customer awareness regarding a brand, evaluating how readily and frequently it comes to mind in various situations. It measures the brand's prominence in consumers' consciousness, assessing its ease of recall and recognition. The strength of brand awareness is a crucial element of brand salience, serving as the cornerstone for brand equity and fulfilling three key functions. Initially, brand salience shapes the formation and robustness of brand associations, contributing to the development of brand image and meaning. Subsequently, maintaining a heightened level of brand salience in identifying and fulfilling needs within a specific category becomes crucial for capitalizing on purchase opportunities and consumption scenarios. Lastly, brand salience plays a vital role in situations where consumers, navigating the lowest point in a product category, may rely solely on brand prominence when making choices (Suhardi et al., 2022).

Brand salience represents the succession of brands that immediately come to mind, signifying top-of-mind awareness among consumers. It is a pivotal dimension of consumer-based brand equity, illustrating the degree to which a brand stands out in memory and is effortlessly recalled in a given context (Miller & Berry, 1998; Pike et al., 2010). Brand salience denotes the prominence or degree of brand activation within memory. This encompasses the memory associations that consumers form with a product or brand during a specific point in the purchasing process, emphasizing the goal of the brand being recalled rather than merely achieving general brand awareness (Remaud & Lockshin, 2009; Jraisat *et al*., 2015; Valentini *et al*., 2018). A robust brand typically exhibits elevated brand salience, while a less formidable brand is likely to possess low or even nonexistent brand salience. This discrepancy clarifies why sizable brands tend to enjoy greater brand salience compared to smaller ones. Importantly, if a brand fails to capture consumer attention at the moment of purchase, it runs the risk of being overlooked and going unnoticed (Suhardi *et al*., 2022).

Hypothesis Development
Building on prior experimental studies, the investigation conducted in 1996 (Babin & Carder, 1996) exposed participants to films featuring product placement as a treatment, while a control group received no such exposure. The results demonstrated a significant increase in brand salience among participants subjected to product placement. This highlights the efficacy of product placement in influencing brand recall, with the recency of brand exposure contributing to heightened brand availability during recall. In a subsequent study in 2008 (Johnstone & Dodd, 2000), which delved into the impact of product placement in the film Rocky III within a controlled environment, the effectiveness of product placement in elevating brand salience was reiterated. However, the study acknowledged the variability of this effect, emphasizing that brand recall is highly contingent on factors such as the type, length, and context of product placement. Moreover, audience characteristics, including

attention, preferences, and self-monitoring levels, were identified as significant influencers of brand recall.

A more comprehensive investigation into the influence of product placement on brand salience (Hong *et al.,* 2008) explored factors such as demonstration, integration, and the overall context of product placement within a film. The study revealed that demonstrative product placements were particularly effective in increasing brand salience. Remarkably, the research found that placing a brand in a negative context significantly enhanced brand salience after exposure, with negative contexts exhibiting a more potent effect. This phenomenon was elucidated by affective transfer, suggesting that negative stimuli tend to reinforce negative associations with the product itself, contributing to a more robust impact on brand salience.

Therefore, this study formulates the following hypothesis:
H_1 : Product placement by virtual influencers positively affects brand salience.
H_{1a} : Product placement by virtual influencers positively affects brand salience the Gucci Brand.
H_{1b} : Product placement by virtual influencers positively affects brand salience the Nike Brand.
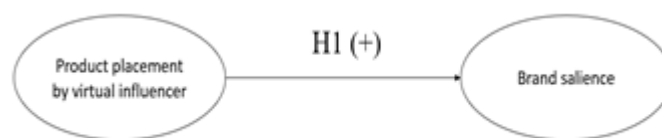

Figure 1. Research Model

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a pre-test and post-test experimental design, involving 308 students from Tarumanagara University. Among them, 207 participants passed the manipulation test, while 101 did not respond to research queries. Sample collection was carried out through a field survey utilizing an online questionnaire created on Google Forms. The majority of participants were women aged around 21, using Instagram for less than 8 hours per day and having used the platform for less than 12 years. Most participants reported using Instagram for various purposes, including seeking product information, posting daily activities, sharing photos and videos, staying informed about the latest updates, following celebrities, and engaging in communication with family and friends.

The experiment conducted from October 16 to 18, 2023, utilized a field survey methodology to investigate the impact of virtual influencer content on consumer perceptions of product placements. The participants were approached to partake in the study and were initially requested to complete a questionnaire provided by the researcher. The questionnaire gauged their willingness to participate in the experiment and collected demographic information. Upon agreeing to participate, participants were furnished with a link to an online questionnaire and detailed instructions. This questionnaire encompassed a set of research-related inquiries and treatment. The treatment phase involved exposing participants to Instagram content featuring a virtual influencer. The content was pre-created by the researchers and strategically embedded with product placements. After participants were given treatment, participants were queried about the virtual influencer's perceived gender, and

their ability to identify product placements within the content was assessed. This served as a crucial manipulation test to evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment. Upon the completion of the experiment, participants were expressed gratitude and provided with incentives in the form of souvenirs. Additionally, they had a chance to win e-money, enhancing participant engagement and motivation throughout the study. The entire research process spanned 3 days, with participants spending an average of 7 minutes completing the questionnaire. In this study, the treatment involved exposing participants to Instagram content curated by the researcher, Allysa Gladys, identified by the Instagram username @allysagladys. Alissa's Instagram content showcased product placements from two distinct categories: Gucci, representing luxury fashion, and Nike, representing sportswear (Figure 2 & Figure 3).

The incorporation of these brands into the content aimed to illustrate how Allyssa seamlessly integrates them into her daily life. The process of creating the treatment began with developing the virtual influencer's face. To ensure recognition and differentiation from other influencers to possess a memorable face. A face-creation trial was conducted using Midjourney and Leonardo AI. Leonardo AI was chosen for content creation due to its ability to generate more realistic and stable faces. Subsequently, the researcher defined the character of the virtual influencer—an Asian woman with a passion for travel and sports, leading a luxurious lifestyle. Once the character concept was solidified, the researcher proceeded to identify brands that aligned with Allysa's persona. Following this, brands were selected to align with the virtual influencer's personality, and the researcher identified brands that resonated with her character.

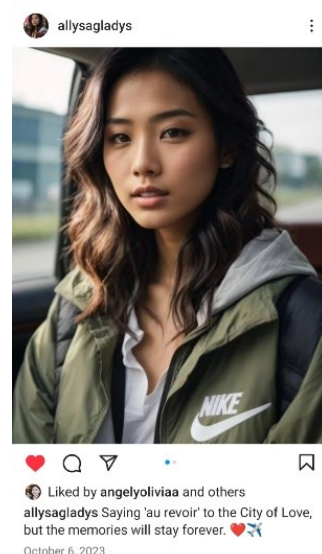Figure 2. Gucci Product Placement on @allysagladys Instagram

Figure 3. Nike Product Placement on @allysagladys Instagram

After conducting multiple trials, Gucci and Nike were chosen for their prominence in their respective product categories. The virtual influencer was then named Allysa Gladys, and an Instagram account was established under the username @allysagladys set to private. Brand salience was measured before and after the participants received the treatment. In this study, brand salience was assessed by asking respondents to name three brands in the category of luxurious fashion and sports apparel they could recall before and after the exposure (Hong *et al.,* 2008). The data analysis technique utilized in this research involves the paired t-test, conducted using SPSS ver. 29. Brand salience is measured using an ordinal scale ranging from 0 to 3, wherein participants rank three brands for the luxury fashion category, with 0

denoting non-mention of the brand, 1 indicating the brand is ranked third, 2 representing the brand in second position, and 3 signifying the brand as first in rank.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 Results of Brand Salience Analysis

Brand	Mean Before	Mean After	t-value	p-value	Cohen's D
Overall	1.628	2.241	-10,01	<0.001	0.531
Gucci	1.082	1.918	-2.865	<0.001	0.667
Nike	2.174	2.565	-0.573	<0.001	0.468

The findings from the hypothesis testing underscore a compelling and statistically significant influence of product placement by virtual influencers on brand salience with a moderate effect. Upon examining the collected data, a discernible upswing in brand salience is evident following participants' exposure to product placement on Instagram through virtual influencers (Mean before: 1.6280, Mean after: 2.2414, t-value: -10.011, p-value: <0.001, Cohen's D: 0.5310). This robust statistical evidence underscores the potency of virtual influencer product placement in shaping audience perceptions.

Delving into brand-specific impacts, the study observed a substantial increase in Gucci's brand salience, marked by a noteworthy medium effect size (p-value: <0.001, Cohen's D: 0.6669) before and after exposure to virtual influencer product placement. This outcome suggests that the luxury fashion brand, considered non-essential, experienced a more pronounced enhancement in brand salience. The strategic alignment of Gucci with the virtual influencer's content appears to have resonated strongly with participants, fostering heightened brand salience.

Conversely, Nike, a ubiquitous sports apparel brand encountered in daily life, also demonstrated a significant rise in brand salience, albeit with a smaller effect size (p-value: < 0.001, Cohen's D: 0.4675). Notably, Nike exhibited notable brand recognition even before exposure, indicating a pre-existing awareness among participants. This nuanced contrast in results between Gucci and Nike underscores the impact of product placement effectiveness, considering the distinct nature of each brand's category.

The study's findings shed light on the nuanced relationship between virtual influencers and brand salience, revealing how the inherent characteristics of brands shape the effectiveness of product placement strategies on platforms like Instagram. The stark contrast between Gucci, a luxury fashion brand, and Nike, a well-established sports apparel giant, underscores the importance of considering brand identity and consumer perceptions when devising virtual influencer marketing campaigns. Gucci's luxury status and aspirational appeal make it particularly receptive to virtual influencer product placement, capitalizing on the platform's ability to enhance brand salience within a non-essential, lifestyle-oriented context. Conversely, Nike's widespread recognition and daily presence in consumers' lives suggest that while virtual influencer product placement can still yield positive effects, its impact may be more incremental due to the brand's already strong position in the market. These insights not only deepen our understanding of the dynamics between virtual influencers and brand salience but also offer valuable guidance for marketers seeking to optimize their strategies in the virtual landscape. By tailoring product placement efforts to align with brand identity, audience demographics, and product attributes, marketers can leverage virtual influencers

more effectively to enhance brand salience and forge meaningful connections with consumers in the ever-evolving digital sphere.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This research delves into the utilisation of the virtual influencer @allysagladys in digital marketing through social media and its impact on the brand salience of Gucci and Nike. Employing a pre-test and post-test experimental design with virtual influencer Allysa Gladys' social media content, students participated as subjects. The findings revealed a positive and significant influence of virtual influencer product placement on the brand salience of both Gucci and Nike, indicating that this impact extends beyond human influencers to virtual counterparts.

Brand salience in this study was assessed through measurements conducted before and after treatment, involving exposure to virtual influencer Instagram content. The hypothesis underwent testing using a paired t-test, and to quantify the post-treatment effect's magnitude, Cohen's d was employed to gauge the extent of influence received. The results of the hypothesis test indicate a positive impact of product placement by virtual influencers on the brand salience of both Gucci and Nike. The recent exposure to product placement enhances recall through short-term memory, while repeated stimuli over time increase the likelihood of a brand being recalled through the stimulation of long-term memory (Johnstone & Dodd, 2000).

Consistent with previous research, the results highlight that appropriate management of product placement practices, particularly through demonstrative placements that seamlessly integrate with the storyline, can strengthen brand salience. In the context of contemporary product placement via social media, these findings suggest that embedding demonstrative product placements aligned with the influencer's self-image can create a natural and unintrusive promotional approach (Hong *et al*., 2008).

The statistical analysis comparing data for the Gucci and Nike brands reveals that participants' brand memories were strengthened following exposure to product placement. This enhanced brand salience is attributed to the recent exposure of the brand, making it more readily available at the moment of recall. Product placement, occurring within a non-promotional context, exerts a positive influence on the placed brand by facilitating acceptance without excessive critical scrutiny (Babin & Carder, 1996). In this context, product placement seamlessly integrates the brand into the audience's experience, fostering a natural insertion that creates a positive impression and establishes a connection between the brand and the content without causing distraction. Consequently, product placement plays a pivotal role in reinforcing brand impressions, contributing positively to brand salience.

However, in the comparison between the two brands, a notable disparity emerged. Before content exposure, significantly fewer participants recalled and mentioned Gucci compared to Nike. Following exposure, the number of participants referencing Gucci saw a substantial increase, whereas Nike experienced a more modest uptick. This discrepancy can be attributed to the distinct product categories of the two brands. Gucci, categorized as a luxury fashion item, falls into a non-essential product category, differing from Nike, which represents sportswear and is frequently used in daily life, serving a more utilitarian purpose. The familiarity of the audience with the product moderates the effect of product placement on brand salience. The impact of increased memory is more prominent and memorable for

brands within relatively unfamiliar product categories. Nevertheless, content exposure still contributed to reinforcing the strength of the Nike brand memory, evident in the shift in brand position within participants' memories after receiving content exposure (Karrh, 1998).

Promotional efforts through social media play a pivotal role in enhancing brand salience by elevating brand visibility, fostering positive brand associations, cultivating a favorable public image, and aligning the brand with the influencer's public image (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021). Product placement executed by virtual influencers mirrors the impact achieved through human influencers, providing a novel avenue for brands to promote their products. Virtual influencers contribute to heightened brand visibility, maintain a consistent and dependable brand image unaffected by human emotions, and offer promotional activities that are more cost-effective and sustainable. However, the selection of virtual influencers requires careful consideration to ensure alignment with the company's image and values, maximizing their impact on brand salience. Companies should exercise diligence in choosing virtual influencers who resonate with their brand identity to achieve optimal outcomes in brand salience.

Currently, research on virtual influencers remains relatively scarce. Over the past three years, studies on virtual influencers have primarily focused on topics such as purchase intention (Kim & Park, 2023), comparisons between virtual influencers and human influencers (Liu & Lee, 2024; Mouritzen, 2023; Fan et al., 2023; Barari, 2023), the impact of influencers' presence on social media (Melnychuk et al., 2024), trust in influencers (Qu & Baek, 2024), and attitudes toward influencers (Angmo & Mahajan, 2024). For future researchers, it is advisable to incorporate additional variables not examined in this study, such as brand attitude, influencer attitude, and the congruence between influencer and brand, based on the research by Balasubramanian et al. (2014), which investigates these variables in the context of film. This is because the findings suggest that several factors, including brand loyalty, audience exposure frequency, and audio-visual component placement during product placement, may influence brand attitudes. However, the limitations of this study, such as time, resources, and cost constraints, resulted in a smaller and less diverse sample scope. Therefore, it is recommended for future researchers examining product placement to utilize samples from a broader and more diverse population.

Additionally, researchers are advised to include more brands within a single product category in future studies, allowing for comparative data analysis within the same product category while considering the types and categories of brands to be tested. A research by Johnstone & Dodd (2000) showed varying levels of brand salience enhancement with different significances after comparing many categories of brands. This approach will ensure that the testing of brand salience is more effective and relevant to the target market of the brands under examination, as brand salience aims to enhance brand salience, particularly in purchasing situations, thus making the testing more appropriate for users of that specific brand category.

This research recommends that companies diversify their product placement strategies beyond traditional media, incorporating virtual influencers alongside human influencers. Virtual influencers, being devoid of human emotions, present a lower risk of involvement in scandals, alleviating concerns about the company's image. To leverage the potential of virtual influencers effectively, companies should carefully select influencers aligned with the target market and brand values, ensuring natural and well-received product placements.

Optimizing product placement on platforms where virtual influencers are active, such as Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube, while considering platform-specific characteristics, is crucial. Active interaction between users and virtual influencers, facilitated through comments, questions, and responses, is necessary to enhance engagement and brand exposure. Collaborations with virtual influencers through mutually beneficial partnerships and negotiations can broaden brand coverage. Although the practice of product placement by virtual influencers is not widespread in Indonesia, its adoption has the potential to enhance a company's uniqueness and promotional appeal, strengthening brand salience. Increased brand salience is more impactful for relatively unfamiliar brands, making exposure through virtual influencers particularly effective for less familiar brands. This allows companies to simulate product offerings before actual sales, gauging consumer responses (Karrh, 1998).

In considering the creation of virtual influencers and their content, companies must address various factors, including ethical considerations and compliance with applicable regulations (Duke, 2024) Ethical considerations involve the use of virtual influencers in content creation, impacting transparency, authenticity, and trust in influencer marketing practices. Legal implications include issues such as intellectual property in the use of virtual influencers and compliance with content-related laws and regulations. Companies must take responsibility for virtual influencer-generated content, ensuring alignment with ethical and legal standards.

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