

# THE INFLUENCE OF PRODUCT PLACEMENT ON VIRTUAL INFLUENCER: ANALYSIS OF AUDIENCE ATTITUDES

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the influence of attitudes towards influencers on attitudes towards product placement and brands, as well as explores the relationship between attitudes towards product placement and Nike brand. Utilizing a sample of 273 students, the research leverages @allysagladys as a virtual influencer on Instagram. The results indicate that attitudes towards influencers affect attitudes towards product placement and brands, while attitudes towards product placement also influence attitudes towards brands. These findings provide valuable insights into understanding the interactions among consumers, influencers, and product placement in the context of social media marketing. The practical implications of these findings can help industry players to optimize their marketing approaches and increase the effectiveness of product promotions through influencers, especially virtual ones.*

**Keywords:** Product Placement, Attitude, Promotion, Advertising

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of human life, facilitating digital interactions without the need for physical presence (Zuniga *et al.*, 2018). This trend is prominent in Indonesia, the country with the world's largest population, where over 50% actively use social media (Cited by We Are Social, 2022). The use of social media extends beyond networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to various platforms such as forums and blogs (Taprival & Kanwar, 2012). Instagram, ranking second in usage in Indonesia, has witnessed rapid growth, making it an ideal space for building brand images (Cited by We Are Social, 2022) (Delafrouz *et al.*, 2019). Initially human-dominated, the influence of artificial intelligence (AI) is now evident with the emergence of virtual influencers. AI has proven effective, achieving engagement levels three times higher than humans and at a more efficient production cost (Chan, 2023).

Virtual influencers, collaborating with global brands like KFC, Netflix, and Nike, have demonstrated significant impact (Sands *et al.*, 2022). Their presence benefits brands by minimizing scandal risks (Chan *et al.*, 2023). Fostering positive credibility, a pivotal factor for both human and virtual influencers, shapes consumer attitudes towards brands and product placements. The authenticity of product placements in influencer content is crucial for cultivating positive audience attitudes (Jin & Muqqadam, 2019) (Min *et al.*, 2019).

Prior research, as indicated by Srivastava (2016), has brought attention to the relatively new focus on product placement in developing countries. This literature exploration highlights the need for further investigation into the impact of social media influencer posts on marketing and branding, as suggested by Jin & Muqqadam (2019). Therefore, bridging this knowledge

gap becomes crucial in deepening our understanding of both product placement's influence, especially in developing countries, and the impact of social media influencer posts in the realms of marketing and branding. Consequently, considering the nascent stage of utilizing AI influencers in marketing, the limited research available on the consequences of employing them underscores the importance of further exploration. Moreover, the absence of research to guide brands in addressing AI-related controversies accentuates the need for more comprehensive studies in this area (Thomas & Fowler, 2020).

This research concentrates on empirically examining the relationship between consumer attitudes towards virtual influencers, product placement, and brands. The primary focus will be on the virtual influencer "Allysa Gladys" on Instagram, aiming to understand its influence on consumer attitudes towards the Nike brand. The study is poised to provide a fresh perspective on the evolving dynamics among consumers, influencers, and brands in the era of social media.

### **Product Placement**

Product placement, a marketing strategy that seamlessly integrates a brand into entertainment media to captivate the audience by blurring the lines between advertising and entertainment, has evolved into a highly significant form of advertising. Scholars like (Russell & Blech, 2005). (Ghosh, 2021) concur that product placement exists at the intersection of advertising and entertainment, making it a "hybrid advertisement." (Peter & Leshner, 2013) defines brand placement as the highlighting of a brand in mass media, while (Gupta & Lord, 1998) describes it as a paid product message intentionally and inconspicuously inserted into films or television programs to influence the audience.

As a tangible example of a mixed message, product placement it's a clear example of a hybrid message strategy, as outlined by (Balasubramania, 1994), where marketers try to persuade consumers through a paid message without explicitly revealing the sponsor. This perspective reflects a shift in marketing paradigms, where product placement has achieved "celebrity status" (Homer, 2009), emerging as a form of media considered effective in shaping consumer attitudes. Particularly in the saturated and fragmented advertising environment, product placement proves to be a relevant and effective means of maintaining connection with the audience.

### **Virtual Influencer**

The concept of "virtual influencer" or "AI influencer" has emerged as a significant focus of research, depicting digitally generated entities with human-like qualities, characteristics, and personalities. (Lou *et al.*, 2023) identifies them as fictional individuals creating highly recognizable representations in the online realm. (He & Zhang, 2023) highlights the role of technology in shaping relationships between humans and digital entities, while (Rodgers, 2021) emphasizes that virtual influencers not only mimic humans but also have the ability to learn and self-configure. (Mouritzen *et al.*, 2023) indicates that Virtual Influencers have strategic goals to influence opinions and consumer behavior. Overall, Virtual Influencers are not just technological achievements but also vital agents in the transformation of the digital landscape and human interaction with artificial intelligence.

### **Attitude Toward Virtual Influencer**

The influence and role of virtual influencers in digital marketing have become a focal point of research with diverse perspectives. According to (Leung *et al.*, 2022), online influencers are digital opinion leaders who build follower networks on social media, featuring crucial

elements such as incentives from companies and follower engagement for commercial purposes. (Immanuel & Alexandria, 2021) refers to the attitude toward influencers as an individual's assessment of specific behaviors, while (Jamil *et al.*, 2023) emphasizes that this attitude is influenced by influencers' behavioral motives and can impact consumer attitude formation. The perspective of (Li & Peng, 2021) indicates that attitudes toward influencers vary depending on the type of content generated, whereas (Moulard *et al.*, 2014) associates it with the evaluation of an artist's work. The alignment between a brand and a celebrity, as found by (Min *et al.*, 2019), also influences consumer attitudes. Thus, the attitude toward influencers is a complex viewpoint influenced by content, behavioral motives, and other factors.

### **Attitude Toward Product Placement**

Product placement, involving the integration of a brand into entertainment media to blur the lines between advertising and entertainment, has become a highly relevant form of advertising (Russell & Blech, 2005). Attitudes toward product placement, as per (Cokki *et al.*, 2019) (Kaur *et al.*, 2021), encompass assessments of film segments that promote specific brands and involve consumers' perceptions of regulatory, ethical, and realistic aspects. (Peter & Leshner, 2013) (Gupta & Lord, 1998) define product placement as a paid message that intentionally incorporates a brand into mass media without disruption. (Balasubramanian *et al.*, 2006) refers to product placement as a real-life example of a mixed message that doesn't always identify its sponsor. In recent developments, product placement is considered an effective form of media in influencing consumer attitudes, showcasing its relevance in an advertising environment that is saturated and fragmented (Homer, 2009). Thus, product placement remains a highly relevant marketing strategy in reaching audiences by seamlessly integrating with the entertainment content they enjoy, maintaining relevance and effectiveness in the ever-evolving world of advertising.

### **Attitude Toward the Brand**

Brand attitude is defined as an individual's tendency to respond favorably or unfavorably to a brand after exposure to an advertisement (Sallam & Algamash, 2016), as defined by (Kaushal & Kumar, 2016), which views brand attitude as feelings and beliefs formed through advertising activities. (Biehal *et al.*, 1992) states that brand attitude involves beliefs about brand attribute information and inferences from the content of advertising images. Consistent with this perspective, (Balasubramanian *et al.*, 2014) emphasizes that brand attitude reflects an individual's inclination toward a brand. Finally, (Martensen *et al.*, 2007) describes brand attitude as the overall evaluation of the brand by consumers, depending on attribute considerations and brand benefits. It can be concluded that brand attitude is an individual's evaluative response after exposure to advertising, influencing the overall consumer evaluation of the brand by involving feelings, beliefs, and specific considerations.

### **Hypotesis Development**

Literature on product placement indicates that a positive attitude towards influencers has a positive impact on brand attitudes. Consumer perceptions of an influencer can influence the brand image promoted by that influencer. If consumers have a positive view of the influencer, including acknowledgment of admiration and support, that attitude will be reflected in a positive view of the brand associated with the influencer. This finding aligns with the perspective of (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017), stating that influencers with a large following tend to have high popularity, are considered opinion leaders, and enhance audience favorability.

In the context of product placement, a positive attitude towards influencers also contributes to a positive attitude towards product placement. If consumers see influencers as positive, attractive, and highly credible figures, this positive impact will be reflected in their attitude towards products placed by influencers. Product placements that are done naturally or organically are more likely to be accepted by consumers. This finding aligns with the research of (Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2011), which found the influence of the credibility and attractiveness of celebrities on attitudes towards product placement.

Furthermore, attitudes towards product placement have a positive influence on brand attitudes. Positive responses to product placement by influencers can shape a positive perception of the promoted brand. This result is consistent with the findings of (DEMIREL & Yildiz, 2020), indicating that product placements that align with character can create relevant brand awareness and positively influence brand image. Therefore, this study formulates the following hypothesis:

- H1 : Attitude towards Influencer positively affects attitude towards brand.
- H2 : Attitude towards influencer positively affect attitude towards product placement.
- H3 : Attitude towards product placement positivieiy affect attitude towards brand.

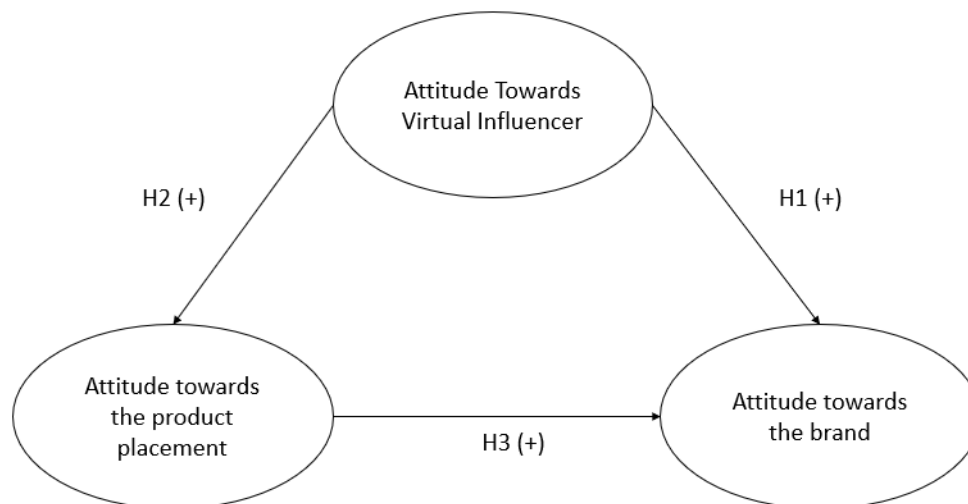


Figure 1. Research Model

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a post-test experimental design. A total of 308 students from Tarumanagara University participated, with 273 participants successfully passing the manipulation check. The experiment was conducted directly at Tarumanagara University. The majority of participants were 19 years old, with the majority being females. Most participants had been using Instagram for 6-7 years, spending 2-3 hours per day on the platform, and using Instagram primarily for sharing photos and videos.

The experiment was conducted from October 16, 2023, to October 18, 2023. Participants were recruited using convenience sampling, where the researcher observed their activities and selected those who seemed available and not engaged in activities that would be disrupted by participating in the experiment. The researcher started the experiment by introducing themselves and explaining the purpose and objectives of the study. Subsequently, participants were shown Allysa Gladys's Instagram account. The questionnaire session began after participants experienced this exposure. The distributed questionnaire included consent

availability sheets through Google Form, manipulation check questions, and questions related to the experiment. After completing the series of questions, the researcher expressed gratitude to the participants and provided rewards in the form of keychains, along with an opportunity to win e-money in a draw at the end of the experimental period. The entire experimental process took approximately 10 minutes.

The treatment used in this study involved presenting the Instagram account @allysagladys, which is a virtual influencer created by the researcher. On this account, Allysa wears various Nike-branded clothing in a natural context.

Attitudes toward the virtual influencer were measured through 18 indicators divided into four dimensions. These dimensions encompass respondents' assessments of virtual influencer Allysa Gladys using a 5-point scale, where a score of 1 indicates a "very disagree" evaluation and a score of 5 indicates a "very agree" evaluation. This measurement was developed by referring to previous research, such as the works of (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2015) (Calvo-poral *et al.*, 2023), which examined celebrity credibility aspects.

Additionally, attitudes toward product placement assess how respondents evaluate product placements visible on the Instagram page of virtual influencer Allysa Gladys. This measurement was derived from the research of (Gupta & Gould, 1997) and (Karrh *et al.*, 2001), which focused on the analysis of product placement effectiveness.

Furthermore, attitudes toward the brand were measured using four indicators to assess respondents' evaluations of the placed brand. This measurement was developed by referring to the findings of (Van Reijmersdal *et al.*, 2017) and (Uribe *et al.*, 2022) who discussed the impact of product placement on brand perception.

The data analysis technique used in this study is Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), an analysis technique that is a multivariate analysis method developed to overcome the limitations of the regression analysis models commonly used in statistical research.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Attitude towards the influencer, attitudes towards product placement and attitude towards the Nike brand passed the validity and reliability test with AVE values > 0.5, indicator loadings > 0.708 and CR > 0.7 (Table 1) (Hair *et al.*, 2019).

**Table 1. Validity and Reliability Test**

Construct and Items	FL	AVE	CR
Attitude towards virtual influencer		0.648	0.945
Attractiveness Dimension		0.691	0.917
Unattractive / Attractive	0.841		
Unbeauty / Beauty	0.866		
Unstylish / Stylish	0.853		
Inelegant / Elegant	0.873		
Unsexy / Sexy	0.712		
Trustworthiness Dimension		0.711	0.944
Dishonest / Honest	0.880		
Unresponsible / Responsible	0.886		
Untrustworthy / Trustworthy	0.899		
Unreliable / Reliable	0.866		
Insincere / Sincere	0.857		
Expertise Dimension		0.823	0.949
Unexpert / Expert	0.907		
Unexperienced / Experienced	0.893		
Unknowledgeable / Knowledgeable	0.916		
Skilled / Unskilled	0.913		
Congruence Dimension		0.775	0.932
Incongruence / Congruence	0.856		
Inappropriate / Appropriate	0.863		
Not fit / Fit	0.906		
Not match up / Match up	0.895		
Attitude towards product placement		0.583	0.847
I don't mind if Allysa receives money from sponsors	0.815		
I don't mind seeing branded products on Allysa's Instagram	0.830		
I don't mind if Allysa showcases branded products on Instagram as long as it's realistic	0.734		
I will look for new information about a brand after seeing Allysa's Instagram	0.662		
Attitude Towards the brand		0.802	0.942
I consider the Nike brand worn by Allysa to be a good brand	0.883		
In my opinion, the Nike brand worn by Allysa looks appealing	0.927		
I support Allysa's use of the Nike Brand	0.913		
I like the Nike brand worn by Allysa	0.858		

FL = Factor Loading; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; CR = Composite Reliability.

**Table 2. Hypotesis Testing**

Hypothesis	PC	p-value	f <sup>2</sup>
Attitude towards virtual influencer → Attitude towards the Nike brand	0.490	0.000	0.337
Attitude towards virtual influencer → Attitude towards product placement	0.669	0.000	0.810
Attitude towards product placement → Attitude towards the Nike brand	0.362	0.000	0.184
Attitude towards virtual influencer → Attitude towards product placement → Attitude towards the Nike brand	0.242	0.000	

PC = Path Coefficient; f<sup>2</sup> = Effect size

Based on the results of the first hypothesis test, the p-value indicates a value of 0.000, where this value is smaller than the maximum significance level of 0.05 (<0.05). This proves that

H1 is supported, and it can be concluded that the attitude towards the influencer (attraction, trust, expertise, and congruence) has a positive influence on the attitude towards the brand. This is consistent with previous research (Nafeesh *et al.*, 2001) indicating that social media influencers impact attitudes towards brands, and influencer credibility influences audience trust in a brand. Therefore, it can be concluded that influencers considered credible have the ability to influence consumer attitudes towards a brand.

The results of the second hypothesis test show a p-value of 0.000, where this value is smaller than the maximum significance level of 0.05 ( $<0.05$ ). This supports H2, concluding that a positive attitude toward the influencer significantly influences the attitude towards product placement. This means that how positively or negatively someone evaluates an influencer (in terms of attractiveness, trust, expertise, and suitability) has a significant impact on the attitude towards product placement. If someone has a liking for a particular influencer, the effectiveness of product placement also improves. This result aligns with (Van Vaerenbergh *et al.*, 2011), indicating the influence of celebrity credibility and attractiveness on attitudes towards product placement. In the experiment, it investigated how consumers' attitudes towards product placement by celebrities, where the result was that a celebrity with a perceived negative image would negatively impact product placement.

The results of the third hypothesis test show a p-value of 0.000, where this value is smaller than the maximum significance level of 0.05 ( $<0.05$ ). This supports H3, concluding that the attitude towards product placement has a positive influence on the attitude towards the brand. This indicates that evaluative aspects assessed from product placement can affect someone's attitude toward the brand featured in the product placement. This result is in line with previous research (DEMIREL & Yildiz, 2020), which examined attitudes towards actors, characters, and films as components of attitude that can affect attitudes toward product placement and brands. It argued that product placement aligned with a character has the potential to create relevant brand awareness and positively influence brand image.

The result of the fourth hypothesis testing shows a p-value of 0.000, where this value is smaller than the maximum significance level of 0.05 ( $<0.05$ ). This supports H4, and it can be concluded that attitudes toward virtual influencers have a positive impact on attitudes toward the Nike brand, both directly and through attitudes toward product placement. In this study, it can be concluded that the general audience's attitude toward influencers influences their attitude toward product placement and, consequently, toward the brand.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**

This study aims to examine the influence of consumer attitudes towards virtual influencers on brand attitudes with the mediation of attitudes towards product placement on the social media platform @allysagladys. The research adopts a post-test experimental design, presenting Instagram content directly to participants who are students at Tarumanagara University. The study concludes that attitudes towards virtual influencers have a positive impact on attitudes towards product placement and, likewise, a positive impact on attitudes towards the Nike brand.

Virtual influencers, as digital characters, have the ability to shape the brand image in the minds of consumers. Positive attitudes, expressions of admiration, and support from consumers towards virtual influencers reflect their positive attitudes towards the associated brand. Influencers with a large following tend to have high popularity and are perceived as

opinion leaders, enhancing the audience's liking and significantly influencing attitudes towards the brand. The credibility of influencers also affects the audience's trust in the brand (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017) (Nafeesh *et al.*, 2001).

The credibility and attractiveness of influencers can also influence attitudes towards product placement. Influencers with a negative image can have a negative impact on product placement, while influencer support has a positive impact on advertising (Muda *et al.*, 2014)(Said & Napi, 2015). Attitudes towards product placement have a positive impact on attitudes towards the brand. Positive responses to product placement by influencers can shape a positive perception of a specific brand. Product placements that align with the character have the potential to create awareness of a relevant and positive brand (DEMİREL & Yildiz, 2020).

In this context, the interaction between attitudes towards virtual influencers, product placement, and the brand creates a positive dynamic in the eyes of consumers, especially concerning Nike. The implication of this research for the industry pertains to the potential application of product placement with virtual influencers. This strategic consideration is motivated by the virtual influencer's nature as a digital entity devoid of physical presence and personal life, rendering it a cost-effective option while mitigating the risk of negative scandals. The adoption of such a strategy is anticipated to uphold the credibility of virtual influencers, with their positive credibility directly influencing audience perceptions of product placements and their overall attitudes toward the associated brand.

In this context, the favorable sentiments garnered by virtual influencers from their audience can exert a direct impact on audience attitudes toward both product placements and the featured brand. Leveraging virtual influencers enables marketing practitioners to optimize this advantage for enhanced outcomes. Utilizing virtual influencers proves to be not only an effective approach for reaching audiences without associated risks but also a means for brands to exert more controlled influence over their image. Consequently, this strategic approach adds significant value for marketing professionals aiming to manage and enhance their brand image in the digital realm.

The experimental design commonly used in product placement research faces several challenges. Time constraints, limited human resources, and administrative considerations emerge as critical factors during the execution of this experiment. This is particularly evident due to the direct sampling procedures conducted in the field, where each respondent receives individualized treatment. Effectively addressing these constraints requires careful management to ensure the smooth execution and success of each stage of the experiment. Every manuscript should conclude with conclusions summarizing the research results, as well as suggestions or recommendations generated from the research activities.

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