"The impact of virtual influencer product placement on brand awareness in Indonesia"

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THE IMPACT OF VIRTUAL INFLUENCER PRODUCT PLACEMENT ON BRAND AWARENESS IN INDONESIA

Abstract

The increasing use of virtual influencers in marketing has opened new avenues for product placement strategies on social media. This study investigates how virtual influencer product placement affects brand recall and brand salience among university students in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, representing diverse economic and cultural segments in Indonesia. Data were collected from students at Universitas Tarumanagara [Tarumanagara University], Universitas Trisakti [Trisakti University], and Universitas Krida Wacana [Krida Wacana University] in Jakarta, and Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta [Yogyakarta State University] and Universitas Gadjah Mada [University of Gadjah Mada] in Yogyakarta. Jakarta, the country's economic hub, represents a high-income urban consumer market, whereas Yogyakarta reflects a more cost-conscious and service-oriented shopping culture. A pre-test and post-test experimental design without a control group was employed, featuring Instagram content from the virtual influencer "Allysa Gladys" promoting Nike and Gucci products. The study involved 319 university students from Jakarta and 211 from Yogyakarta. The results showed a significant increase in brand recall and brand salience after exposure. In Jakarta, brand recall for Gucci increased from 0.6050 to 0.7994 (p < 0.01) and for Nike from 0.8527 to 0.9248 (p < 0.01). In Yogyakarta, Nike's brand recall rose from 0.4737 to 0.9617 (p < 0.01), while Gucci's recall increased from 0.5762 to 0.8190 (p < 0.01). Brand salience also showed improvement, with Nike in Jakarta (p < 0.01) and Yogyakarta (p < 0.01) showing a stronger effect than Gucci in both cities (p < 0.01). These findings demonstrate that product placement via virtual influencers effectively enhances brand awareness.

Keywords   virtual influencers, product placement, brand recall, brand salience, Instagram

JEL Classification   M31, M37, O33, L82

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital marketing has fundamentally changed consumer engagement strategies, with social media emerging as a dominant marketing channel. Among these platforms, Instagram plays a crucial role in brand communication, allowing companies to engage with consumers interactively (Kapoor et al., 2018; Cheung et al., 2021). In Indonesia, Instagram ranks as the second most popular social media platform after WhatsApp, surpassing TikTok in engagement levels (We Are Social, 2023; Soelaiman et al., 2023). As a developing country with a rapidly growing digital economy, Indonesia presents a unique landscape for social media marketing strategies.

One of the most impactful trends in digital marketing is influencer marketing, in which individuals with large online followings promote brands and products. More recently, virtual influencers – computer-generated personalities created through artificial intelligence – have gained traction as brand ambassadors. Virtual influencers provide greater control over brand messaging and eliminate risks associated with human influencers, such as controversies or inconsistent behav-

ior (Baklanov, 2020; Thomas & Fowler, 2021). Thus, many brands in fashion, sportswear, and luxury goods have started leveraging virtual influencers in their marketing campaigns.

Among the strategies utilized in influencer marketing, product placement – the integration of branded products within media content – has proven to be highly effective in influencing consumer perceptions and brand awareness. While product placement has been widely studied in films and television (Balasubramanian, 1994; Liu et al., 2015), its application in social media marketing remains underexplored. The effectiveness of virtual influencer product placement, particularly in Indonesia, lacks sufficient empirical research.

This study addresses this gap by examining the impact of virtual influencer product placement on brand recall and brand salience among university students in Indonesia. By focusing on two distinct cities – Jakarta, Indonesia's economic hub, and Yogyakarta, a center of academic culture – this study seeks to provide empirical insights into how virtual influencers shape brand awareness in diverse consumer markets.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Product placement has evolved significantly since the 1930s, with its origins rooted in early film marketing concepts such as "exploitation," "tie-ups," and "tie-ins" (Harmetz, 1983). A notable example is the 1933 Better Times Special collaboration between Warner Brothers and General Electric (GE), alongside partnerships with brands like Coca-Cola and Buick, demonstrating how Hollywood studios integrated films and consumer products into cohesive marketing strategies (Eckert, 1978). The success of Reese's Pieces in E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial highlighted the potential of product placement to drive sales and increased marketers' awareness of its strategic value (Newell et al., 2006). Initially, product placement was defined as the inclusion of branded goods, logos, or billboards in films (Steortz, 1987). This definition was later expanded by Balasubramanian (1994) who described product placement as a hybrid message that combines the control of advertising with the credibility of publicity.

Over time, product placement has expanded beyond traditional media such as films (Babin & Carder, 1996), television (Gould & Gupta, 2006; Gupta & Lord, 1998; Karrh et al., 2003), songs (Burkhalter & Thornton, 2014; Delattre & Colovic, 2009), and video games (Winkler & Buckner, 2006), to social media platforms such as YouTube (Gerhards, 2019) and Instagram (Alassani & Göretz, 2019). This shift marks a significant evolution in how brands engage with audiences. In the context of social media, Google (n.d.) defines product placement as "content created for a third party in exchange for compensation and/or integrating the third party's brand, message, or product directly into the content." This broader definition reflects the growing role of digital platforms in advertising.

Virtual influencers (VI) are digital entities powered by artificial intelligence (AI) or computer-generated imagery (CGI) designed to mimic human appearance and behavior. Through meticulous personalization, VIs can build a loyal following on social media platforms such as Instagram, which serves as one of their primary channels (Jhawar et al., 2023). VIs are managed by individuals, agencies, or brands that craft distinct social media profiles to deliver structured and engaging content (Sands et al., 2022). These characters, whether created by human designers or AI algorithms, offer innovative approaches to digital marketing by leveraging realistic appearances and interactive communication resembling human traits (Xie-Carson et al., 2023).

In digital marketing, VIs have become significant catalysts for change. Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela) serves as a prominent example, successfully collaborating with renowned brands like Prada and Calvin Klein. Consistent interactive communication on social media enables VIs to create emotional connections with audiences, positively influencing brand perception and consumer purchasing decisions (Mouritzen et

al., 2023). This ability positions VIs as attractive alternatives to traditional marketing strategies, particularly in a world increasingly reliant on digital technologies.

Product placement using VIs has become a rapidly growing practice in the fashion industry. Studies indicate that product categories, such as fashion, are highly influenced by influencer recommendations, including those from VIs (Cube Asia, 2023; Statista, 2023). VIs like Shudu Gram (@shudu. gramm) have partnered with major brands such as Ellesse, while Lil Miquela has collaborated with Adidas. Notably, in 2018, AI-based influencers replaced the Kardashian family as ambassadors for the luxury French brand Balmain, setting a new precedent in utilizing VIs to promote luxury fashion products (Alboqami, 2023). The effectiveness of VIs in this category is enhanced by their ability to align their personas with brand identities, increasing the relevance and appeal of promotional efforts (Feng et al., 2024).

Beyond fashion, VIs have been utilized across various other sectors. Companies like KFC, LVMH, Netflix, and Nike have formed partnerships with VIs to boost brand exposure (Koay et al., 2023). Advantages of VIs over human influencers include cost efficiency, consistent consumer engagement, and reduced risk of scandals due to the complete control over digital personas (Baklanov, 2020; Thomas & Fowler, 2021). With the ability to maintain a spotless reputation without the risk of negative behavior, VIs present significant long-term potential to support diverse marketing strategies.

Brand recall is one of the most researched effects of product placement. The studies on the impact of product placement on brand recall have been conducted in various contexts, including television programs (Babin & Carder, 1996; Davtyan et al., 2016; Gamage & Ashil, 2023; Kongmanon & Petison, 2022; Pancaningrum & Ultani, 2020), films (Bressoud et al., 2010; Puspanathan et al., 2022), video games (Aliagas et al., 2021), music videos (Davtyan et al., 2021; Cokki et al., 2023), and sports event broadcasts (Xu et al., 2024). Prominent placements, both visually and audibly, have proven more effective in enhancing brand recall (Babin & Carder, 1996; Bressoud et al., 2010; Gupta & Lord, 1998).

Brand recall is a key component of brand awareness. Brand awareness refers to the difference between a consumer's knowledge of all the brands they are familiar with and their specific knowledge of a particular brand at a given time (Alba & Chattopadhyay, 1986). In the brand awareness pyramid, brand recall is positioned just below "top of mind" and above brand unawareness and brand recognition (Aaker, 1991). Brand recall is more challenging than brand recognition because it requires reconstructing stimuli without the presence of that stimulus (Babin & Carder, 1996). The recall process involves two stages: retrieval and familiarity, whereas recognition only involves familiarity (Davtyan et al., 2016). When someone remembers a brand without external prompts, it is called unaided recall, while aided recall refers to recalling a brand with external assistance (Davtyan et al., 2021). In recall, information must be actively retrieved, as opposed to recognition, where information is merely identified from a presented brand (Aliagas et al., 2021).

Brand recall is relevant across various media. In the context of television, brand recall refers to a person's ability to mention a brand displayed without assistance (Gamage & Ashil, 2023). In films, brand recall is also linked to purchase intent; consumers who can recall products integrated into the storyline tend to have a higher intention to purchase those products (Puspanathan et al., 2022). Product placement in songs can also reinforce pre-existing brand recall and influence the ranking of brands in a consumer's mind, with "top of mind" being the highest position (Cokki et al., 2023). This study distinguishes between brand recall as general brand awareness and brand salience, which considers the order in which brands are recalled.

Product placement has been shown to enhance brand recall across various media. Babin and Carder (1996) demonstrated that product placement in films significantly improves audiences' ability to recall brands, especially when the brands are prominently displayed or verbally mentioned. Another study by Bressoud et al. (2010) showed that screen size and prior exposure to films influence recall levels. These findings highlight the importance of visibility, prominence, and repetition in enhancing recall.

On social media, Chu et al. (2016) highlighted Instagram's effectiveness in enhancing brand recall through visually appealing product posts. Meanwhile, Davtyan et al. (2021) found that the frequency of brand exposure in music videos improves recall, peaking after four or five exposures. Repeated exposure facilitates stronger memory connections, although excessive repetition may lead to diminishing returns. These studies underscore the role of visual, auditory, and repetitive elements in successful product placement campaigns.

Coker and Altobello (2018) examined the impact of social settings on brand recall in product placements. They found that viewers watching with friends in interactive settings were more likely to recall brands compared to solo viewers or those watching with acquaintances. Visually placed brands were particularly effective in enhancing brand recall in interactive social environments, where discussions and shared experiences amplify memory retention.

Chan (2020) explored the effect of prior disclosure on product placement effectiveness in media content. The findings revealed that full disclosure, which includes the source and intent of the placement, significantly enhanced brand recall and brand attitudes. Audience preferences for the program mediated the relationship between disclosure and brand evaluation, highlighting the role of transparency in boosting brand awareness and consumer trust.

Davtyan et al. (2021) studied the effect of repeated brand placements in music videos on memory and brand attitudes. The results showed that brand recall increased linearly with repetition, peaking at four or five exposures, after which effectiveness declined. Brand familiarity also moderated recall effectiveness, with familiar brands yielding better results. This emphasizes the importance of balancing frequency with content engagement to maximize recall.

Cokki et al. (2023) examined the effectiveness of product placement in Indonesian rap songs, specifically focusing on brand recall and consumer behavior. Using an experimental pre-test and post-test design without a control group, they tested the song It's a Dad Thing by Saykoji on 74 par-

ticipants. The results indicated that product placement within the song positively influenced brand recall, especially for prominently featured brands like Apple and Minecraft, which had longer exposure durations. The interplay between cultural relevance and exposure duration was identified as a key factor in enhancing recall.

Close by to brand recall is brand salience. Brand salience refers to the order in which a brand comes to mind when consumers consider making a purchase. It reflects a brand's ability to be the first recalled in a specific product category, thereby increasing the likelihood of it being chosen (Jraisat et al., 2015; Miller & Berry, 1998). A meta-analysis on product placement suggests that brand awareness, including brand recall or recognition, has an indirect influence on brand salience (Babin et al., 2021). Beyond simply being the first brand to come to mind, brand salience encompasses both the quantity and quality of memories consumers have about the brand, as well as the likelihood that the brand will be recalled in purchasing situations (Romaniuk & Sharp, 2004). Brand salience is also influenced by how often consumers are exposed to the brand and how their memory associations with the brand are formed over time (Alba & Chattopadhyay, 1986; Remaud & Lockshin, 2009). Some researchers define brand salience as a combination of brand recall and brand recognition (Ovais & Nouman, 2013), although this definition is not widely accepted.

Brand salience forms the foundation of brand equity with three primary functions (Suhardi et al., 2022). First, it influences the formation and strength of associations that shape brand image and meaning. Second, high levels of brand salience are crucial for identifying and fulfilling consumer needs, especially when consumers have the opportunity to purchase and use a product. Third, consumers may base their choices solely on brand salience when they are at a low involvement point in a particular product category. Strong brands tend to have high brand salience, while weaker brands exhibit low or no salience (Valentini et al., 2018). This explains why larger brands are more likely to be recalled compared to smaller brands.

Johnstone and Dodd (2000) investigated how product placement in films influence brand sa-

lience among UK cinema audiences. Their study found that product placement significantly increased brand salience, especially for viewers who enjoyed the film and had high self-monitoring tendencies. Notably, Gucci and Kappa brands experienced the most substantial salience increases due to prominent exposure and association with central characters.

Hong et al. (2008) investigated the effectiveness of product placement in enhancing brand salience by examining how different presentation methods and contexts affect consumer memory. Through experimental designs, they found that demonstrative product placements and those in negative contexts significantly increased brand salience. Additionally, poorly integrated product placements were more effective than well-integrated ones in capturing consumer attention.

The research on the effects of product placement on brand salience is still more limited compared to its effects on brand recall. In general, product placement can strengthen brand recall, particularly when executed prominently and connected to the storyline (Babin et al., 2021; Johnstone & Dodd, 2000). Previous experimental studies have shown an increase in brand salience for brands placed within films (Babin & Carder, 1986). Moreover, product placement is found to be more effective in enhancing brand salience in controlled environments (Johnstone & Dodd, 2000). Demonstrative and even negative product placements have also been found to be more effective in improving brand salience (Hong et al., 2009). Therefore, it is hypothesized that product placement by virtual influencers can enhance brand salience.

Drawing from previous research, product placement by virtual influencers is expected to positively influence both brand recall and brand salience. The immersive and interactive nature of social media content, combined with the controlled persona of virtual influencers, can enhance consumers' memory of embedded brands. Given the distinct positioning of Nike as a widely consumed brand and Gucci as a luxury brand, differential effects on recall and salience are anticipated.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how virtual influencer product placement impacts brand re-

call and brand salience among university students in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, representing diverse economic and cultural segments in Indonesia.

Based on the objective and literature review, the hypotheses are as follows:

H1: *Product placement by virtual influencers increases brand recall.*

H1a: *Product placement by virtual influencers increases Nike's brand recall.*

H1b: *Product placement by virtual influencers increases Gucci's brand recall.*

H2: *Product placement by virtual influencers increases brand salience.*

H2a: *Product placement by virtual influencers increases Nike's brand salience.*

H2b: *Product placement by virtual influencers increases Gucci's brand salience.*

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a pre-test and post-test experimental design without a control group to measure changes in variables before and after exposure to the treatment (Malhotra, 2020). The virtual influencer "Allysa Gladys" was used as the stimulus, with Instagram content specifically designed to promote Nike and Gucci products (Allysa Gladys, n.d.).

A total of 621 individuals were recruited as participants, consisting of 353 participants from Jakarta and 266 participants from Yogyakarta. Of the 353 participants recruited in Jakarta, 11 participants did not meet the eligibility criteria, and 23 participants failed the manipulation check, resulting in 319 usable participants. From the 266 participants recruited in Yogyakarta, 37 participants did not meet the eligibility criteria, and 18 participants failed the manipulation check, resulting in 211 usable participants. The total of 530 usable participants exceeds the minimum required sample size of 85 participants for experimental research (Feldt, 1973). University students were selected as they are considered appropriate subjects for product place-

ment studies (Gupta et al., 2000; Muzellec et al., 2013) and have a keen interest in virtual influencers (Jhawar et al., 2023). Most Instagram users in Indonesia fall within this age range (Nurhayati-Wolff, 2023), aligning with the typical age of university students (Berita Satu, 2018). This demographic was also chosen for practical reasons, including ease of recruitment, cost efficiency, and the reduction of response bias (Hanel & Vione, 2016).

Jakarta and Yogyakarta were selected to capture the diversity of economic aspects and shopping culture within Indonesia. Jakarta, the country's economic hub, has a minimum wage (UMR) of Rp5,067,381 in 2024, more than twice that of Yogyakarta at Rp2,125,898 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024b; Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024c). Monthly expenditures in Jakarta average Rp2,791,716, compared to Rp1,930,749 in Yogyakarta. Similarly, spending on clothing in Jakarta is Rp61,262, whereas in Yogyakarta, it is Rp41,962 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024a). Jakarta also has 76 malls, far exceeding Yogyakarta (APPBI, 2023). Shopping behaviors differ as well, with Jakarta residents prioritizing convenience and speed, while Yogyakarta consumers focus on service quality and affordable prices (Hartanto et al., 2021; Utomo et al., 2023). After excluding participants who failed to meet eligibility criteria or manipulation checks, the final sample included 319 participants from Jakarta and 211 from Yogyakarta.

The virtual influencer "Allysa Gladys" was developed using artificial intelligence applications to create a youthful, sporty, and elegant persona relevant to the target audience. Since the majority of participants were Indonesian university students, widely recognized and easily identifiable brands were selected for product placement. Two product categories were chosen: sportswear and luxury fashion. The researchers analyzed the brands being marketed and the celebrities who had previously served as brand ambassadors to match the self-image of the virtual influencer. Brands considered for luxury fashion included Louis Vuitton, Dior, Chanel, Gucci, Versace, Burberry, Prada, Hermes, Yves Saint Laurent (YSL), and Celine. For sportswear, Adidas, Nike, Puma, Reebok, and Converse were reviewed. However,

during the content creation process using artificial intelligence applications, only the logos of Gucci and Nike could be generated correctly and in full, leading to their selection for this study. The stimuli consisted of 45 Instagram posts: 15 featuring Nike, 12 featuring Gucci, and 18 without product placement. The posts were designed to mimic a natural Instagram feed, with AI-generated captions and hashtags to enhance authenticity. Nike and Gucci were consistently used across posts to ensure visibility and comparability during the study.

Data collection took place between August and September 2024 in three stages. First, participants completed a pre-test questionnaire to establish baseline measurements of brand recall and brand salience for the sportswear and luxury fashion categories. Next, participants were exposed to Allysa Gladys's Instagram content for approximately five minutes. The content included a mix of posts with and without product placement to create a realistic browsing experience. Finally, participants completed a post-test questionnaire to measure changes in brand recall and salience.

Data collection took place between August and September 2024 in three stages, following informed consent from all participants. As part of the process, participants received a small incentive in the form of a bag pin as a token of appreciation for their time and effort in the study. First, participants completed a pre-test questionnaire to establish baseline measurements of brand recall and brand salience for the sportswear and luxury fashion categories. Next, they were exposed to Allysa Gladys's Instagram content for approximately five minutes. The content included a mix of posts with and without product placement to simulate a realistic browsing experience. Finally, participants completed a post-test questionnaire to measure changes in brand recall and salience.

Brand awareness was measured by asking participants to list three brands for both sportswear and luxury fashion categories, starting from the first to the third position for each product category. There are two types of brand awareness measurements: brand recall and brand salience. Brand recall was measured using a binomial scale, with values of 0 and 1 (Chan, 2020; Mackay et al., 2009).

A value of 0 indicates that the brand was not listed, while a value of 1 indicates that the brand was listed. Brand salience was measured using an ordinal scale, ranging from 0 to 3 (Hong et al., 2009). A value of 0 indicates that the brand was not listed, a value of 1 indicates the brand was listed in the third position, a value of 2 indicates the brand was listed in the second position, and a value of 3 indicates the brand was listed in the first position.

A paired t-test was conducted to compare brand awareness before and after the treatment. The significance level (α) was set at 0.05, with p < 0.05 indicating a significant difference (Ross & Willson, 2018). This method is commonly used in product placement studies to evaluate pre- and post-treatment differences (Mackay et al., 2009; Glass, 2007; Law & Braun, 2000). Effect size was measured using Cohen's D, which standardizes the mean difference by the standard deviation. A value of 0.2 indicates a small effect, 0.5 a medium effect, and 0.8 a large effect (Cohen, 1998).

3. RESULTS

The analysis of participants from Jakarta revealed a significant increase in brand recall after exposure to virtual influencer content (see Table 1). Overall, brand recall rose from 0.7288 to 0.8621 (t = -9.176, p < 0.01, D = 0.3667), supporting *H1*. Nike's brand recall slightly increased from 0.8527 to 0.9248 (t = -4.562, p < 0.01, D = 0.2826, *H1a* supported), while Gucci's recall increased from 0.6050 to 0.7994 (t = -8.132, p < 0.01, D = 0.4269, *H1b* supported). Despite both brands showing improvement, Gucci experienced a stronger increase

than Nike. This indicates that product placement in virtual influencer content had a more substantial effect on Gucci's brand recall in Jakarta.

The pre-test and post-test measurements of brand awareness revealed noticeable differences across both brands and cities. In the pre-test, brand recall for Nike was 72.3% in Jakarta and 64.5% in Yogyakarta, while Gucci's recall was 58.9% in Jakarta and 50.2% in Yogyakarta. After exposure to the virtual influencer's content, brand recall increased to 85.7% for Nike and 77.4% for Gucci in Jakarta, while in Yogyakarta, brand recall rose to 82.3% for Nike and 73.9% for Gucci.

Similarly, participants from Yogyakarta demonstrated a significant increase in brand recall after exposure (see Table 2). Overall, brand recall increased from 0.5251 to 0.8902 (t = -15.196, p < 0.01, D = 0.4919), supporting *H1*. Nike's recall rose markedly from 0.4737 to 0.9617 (t = -13.819, p < 0.01, D = 0.5106, *H1a* supported), while Gucci's recall grew from 0.5762 to 0.8190 (t = -9.984, p < 0.01, D = 0.4408, *H1b* supported). Notably, the increase in Nike's recall was greater than Gucci's, highlighting the stronger impact of product placement on Nike in Yogyakarta.

Comparing the increase in Nike's brand recall between cities, Yogyakarta showed a greater improvement (ΔBR = 0.4880) than Jakarta (ΔBR = 0.0721) (see Figure 1). This suggests that the product placement of Nike by virtual influencers had a more substantial effect on participants in Yogyakarta, likely due to lower initial brand familiarity.

Table 1. Impact of product placement by virtual influencer on brand recall in Jakarta

Brand	BR before	BR after	Mean before	Mean after	t-value	Cohen's D
Overall	465	550	0.7288	0.8621	−9.176*	0.3667
Nike	272	295	0.8527	0.9248	−4.562*	0.2826
Gucci	193	255	0.6050	0.7994	−8.132*	0.4269

Note: BR: Brand Recall; *p-value < 0.01.

Table 2. Impact of product placement by virtual influencer on brand recall in Yogyakarta

Brand	BR before	BR after	Mean before	Mean after	t-value	Cohen's D
Overall	220	373	0.5251	0.8902	−15.196*	0.4919
Nike	99	201	0.4737	0.9617	−13.819*	0.5106
Gucci	121	172	0.5762	0.8190	−9.984*	0.4408

Note: BR: Brand Recall; *p-value < 0.01.
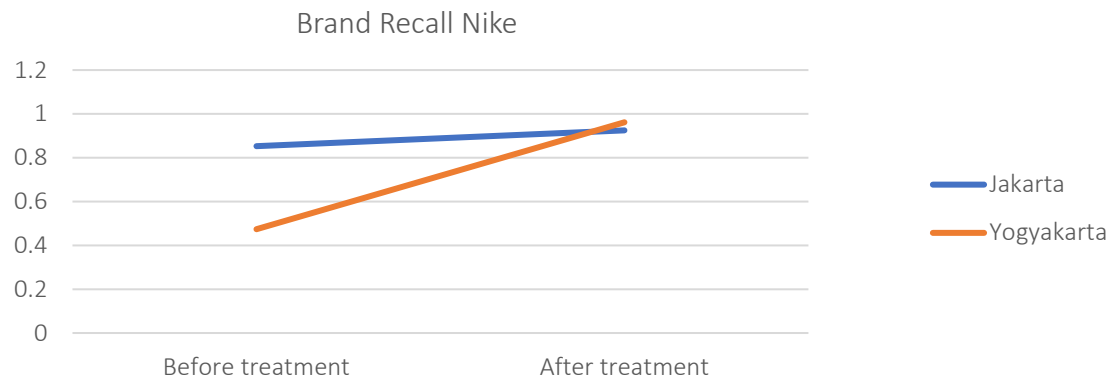
Figure 1. The effect of product placement by virtual influencers on Nike's brand recall in Jakarta vs. Yogyakarta
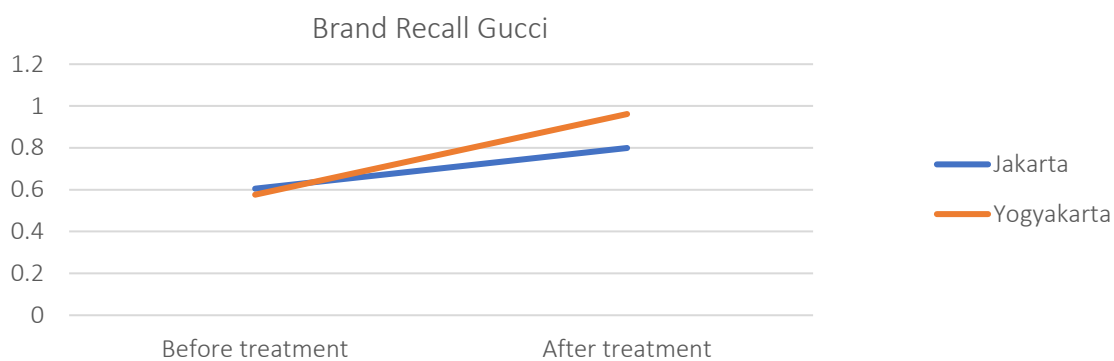
Figure 2. The effect of product placement by virtual influencers on Gucci's brand recall in Jakarta vs. Yogyakarta

Similarly, Gucci's brand recall increased more in Yogyakarta (ΔBR = 0.2428) than in Jakarta (ΔBR = 0.1944) (see Figure 2). However, unlike Nike, Gucci's initial brand recall levels were similar in both cities, indicating a relatively stronger effect of product placement in Yogyakarta.

The analysis of participants from Jakarta showed a significant increase in brand salience after exposure to virtual influencer content (see Table 3). Overall, brand salience rose from 1.5000 to 2.3401 (t = -17.434, p < 0.01, D = 1.2172), supporting *H2*. Nike's brand salience increased from 1.8025 to 2.5486 (t = -12.313, p < 0.01, D = 1.0822, *H2a* supported), while Gucci's salience rose from 1.1975

to 2.1317 (t = -12.510, p < 0.01, D = 1.3337, *H2b* supported). Although both brands experienced significant improvement, Nike's brand salience increase was more prominent. These findings suggest that product placement in virtual influencer content had a stronger effect on Nike's brand salience compared to Gucci among participants in Jakarta.

Participants from Yogyakarta also exhibited a significant increase in brand salience after exposure (see Table 4). Overall, brand salience rose from 1.2411 to 2.2315 (t = -14.493, p < 0.01, D = 1.3989), supporting *H2*. Nike's brand salience increased markedly from 1.2440 to 2.5837 (t = -12.310, p <

Table 3. Impact of product placement by virtual influencer on brand salience in Jakarta

| Brand	BR before	BR after	Mean before	Mean after	t-value	Cohen's D
Overall	957	1493	1.5000	2.3401	−17.434*	1.2172
Nike	575	813	1.8025	2.5486	−12.313*	1.0822
Gucci	382	680	1.1975	2.1317	−12.510*	1.3337

Note: BS: Brand Salience; *p-value < 0.01.

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Table 4. Impact of product placement by virtual influencer on brand salience in Yogyakarta

Brand	BR before	BR after	Mean before	Mean after	t-value	Cohen's D
Overall	520	935	1.2411	2.2315	−14.493*	1.3989
Nike	260	540	1.2440	2.5837	−12.310*	1.5734
Gucci	260	395	1.2381	1.8810	−8.480*	1.0985

Note: BS: Brand Salience; *p-value < 0.01.

0.01, D = 1.5734, *H2a* supported), while Gucci's brand salience rose from 1.2381 to 1.8810 (t = -8.480, p < 0.01, D = 1.0985, *H2b* supported). The increase in Nike's brand salience was greater than Gucci's, indicating a stronger influence of product placement on Nike among participants in Yogyakarta.

Comparing Nike's brand salience increase between cities, Yogyakarta exhibited a larger improvement (ΔBS = 1.3397) than Jakarta (ΔBS = 0.7461) (see Figure 3). This suggests that product placement had a stronger impact on Nike's brand salience in Yogyakarta, likely due to lower initial brand familiarity. However, the steeper curve in Jakarta indicates a strengthening of Nike's salience ranking among participants.

For Gucci, the increase in brand salience was more substantial in Jakarta (ΔBS = 1.1195) than in Yogyakarta (ΔBS = 0.6429) (see Figure 4). Similar to brand recall, participants in both cities showed improved brand salience for Gucci, but Jakarta participants exhibited a stronger response.

4. DISCUSSION

Product placement by virtual influencers has been shown to effectively enhance brand recall in both Jakarta and Yogyakarta. This result is consistent with previous studies that have also examined the impact of product placement on brand recall (Babin & Carder, 1996; Bressoud et al., 2010; Chu et al., 2016; Davtyan et al., 2016; Davtyan et al.,
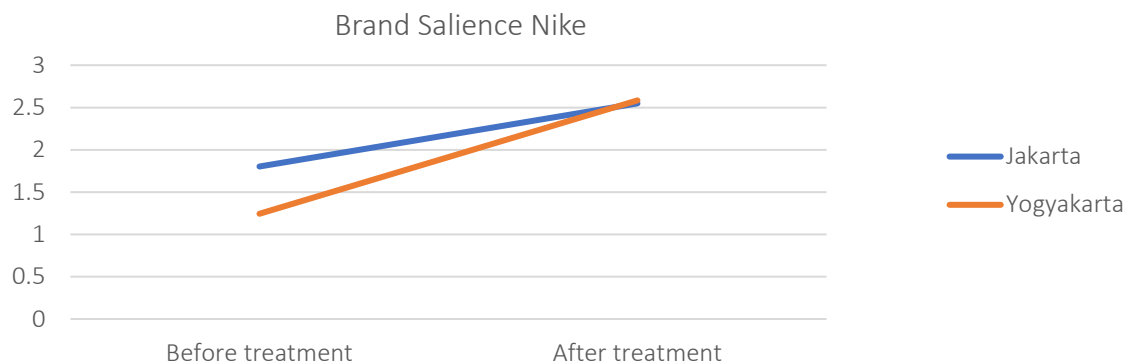
Figure 3. The effect of product placement by virtual influencers on Nike's brand salience in Jakarta vs. Yogyakarta
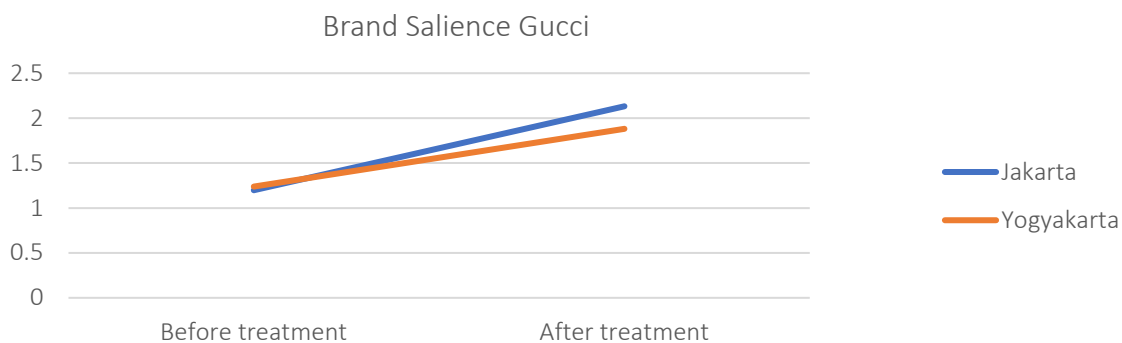
Figure 4. The effect of product placement by virtual influencers on Gucci's brand salience in Jakarta vs. Yogyakarta

2021; Coker & Altobello, 2018; Chan, 2020; Cokki et al., 2023). The findings indicate that Instagram is an effective platform for improving brand recall through visually appealing content (Chu et al., 2016; Coker & Altobello, 2018). Additionally, repeated exposure to brand logos in virtual influencer posts may contribute to stronger memory retention through repetition (Bressoud et al., 2010; Davtyan et al., 2016; Davtyan et al., 2021).

Although both brands showed an increase in brand recall after exposure, the increase in Nike brand recall was greater in Yogyakarta compared to Jakarta. This difference was reflected in the moderate increase in Yogyakarta and the smaller increase in Jakarta. Conversely, the increase in Gucci brand recall was small in both cities. These results may be linked to the level of exposure to international brands in each city. Students in Yogyakarta may have less exposure to international brands like Nike compared to students in Jakarta, where such brands are more commonly encountered in everyday life. Meanwhile, Gucci, as a luxury fashion brand, did not show significant differences between the two cities, likely due to its lower relevance to the daily needs of students. Nevertheless, the slight increase in Gucci's brand recall indicates that some students in both cities were aware of the brand's existence.

Product placement was also effective in increasing brand salience in both cities. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Hong et al., 2008; Johnstone & Dodd, 2000). This effectiveness may be attributed to the brand's association with the main character (Johnstone & Dodd, 2000), the virtual influencer Allysa Gladys, who embodies a sporty and elegant image. Additionally, wearing clothing and accessories that prominently display the brand logo can be considered a demonstrative action that is more effective in enhancing brand salience (Hong et al., 2008).

In Yogyakarta, the increase in Nike brand salience was larger than in Jakarta, where the brand was already more popular. The Yogyakarta market appears to be more responsive to product placements, leading to a higher increase in brand salience there. Gucci also experienced an increase in brand salience, although to a lesser extent than Nike, particularly in Yogyakarta. Luxury brands

like Gucci seem to be less relevant to students compared to Nike, which is more aligned with an active and casual lifestyle. The differences in the increase in brand salience between the two brands are likely due to lifestyle preferences, purchasing power, and brand exposure among students. Nike is more relevant due to its affordability and frequent use, while Gucci, as a premium product, is less aligned with the needs of students.

This study presents four key findings. First, social media can be effectively used as a medium for product placement, alongside traditional platforms such as television programs (Babin & Carder, 1996; Davtyan et al., 2016; Gamage & Ashil, 2023; Kongmanon & Petison, 2022; Pancaningrum & Ultani, 2020), films (Bressoud et al., 2010; Puspanathan et al., 2022), video games (Aliagas et al., 2021), music videos (Davtyan et al., 2021; Cokki et al., 2023), and sports match videos (Xu et al., 2024). With the increasing clutter of social media, further research on product placement in social media with its unique characteristics is needed.

The findings of this study align with previous research in developed countries (Guo et al., 2019; Pralongsil, 2022), showing that product placement positively affects brand recall and salience, suggesting its effectiveness in developing countries like Indonesia. This study also addresses the common reliance on non-experimental methods in Indonesia (Sholika & Soliha, 2024; Nadeak & Setiawan, 2024; Purnomo, 2023; Hardany & Najoan, 2023; Perwitasari & Paramita, 2020; Juliana & Sihombing, 2019; Tarmawan, 2020; Asrita & Rhizky, 2020; Prajana, 2020), providing experimental evidence that product placement enhances brand recall and salience. The experimental approach used here offers more convincing results, as the assessment was conducted immediately after exposure, free from external influences. Future research should use experimental methods for more rigorous findings.

Third, virtual influencers have been shown to be effective in product placement, supporting previous research that suggests virtual influencers can increase recommendation intent (Sands et al., 2022). Virtual influencers are also well-suited for fashion brand placements, as highlighted in prior

studies (Jhawar et al., 2023). These findings suggest that virtual influencers can produce similar effects to human influencers, although direct comparative testing between the two still needs to be conducted.

Fourth, the difference in the increase in brand recall and brand salience between Nike and Gucci indicates that consumer responses to product placement are influenced by purchasing power, brand familiarity, and lifestyle preferences. This highlights the need to consider socio-economic context in product placement research to enrich digital marketing strategies. Future research should further explore how these factors affect consumer responses across various brands.

The practical implications of this study suggest that product placement and the use of virtual influencers can be effectively integrated into marketing strategies. This study recommends that marketers understand the purchasing power and lifestyle of a specific city, as well as the brands being promoted, to select the most effective product placement strategy. Additionally, it is crucial to choose a virtual influencer who is relevant and aligned with the brand being promoted. Paying attention to the relationship between participant characteristics and the brands used can enhance the effectiveness of product placement. Thus, the findings of this study provide a foundation for marketers to consider product placement and the use of virtual influencers in marketing campaigns.

CONCLUSION

This study investigates how virtual influencer product placement impacts brand recall and brand salience among university students in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, representing diverse economic and cultural segments in Indonesia. The results indicate that product placement via virtual influencers on Instagram effectively boosts brand awareness in both cities. Virtual influencers can be used as a medium for product placement in developing countries, consistent with findings from developed countries. Differences in consumer responses to brands are suspected to be influenced by factors such as purchasing power, brand exposure, and lifestyle, emphasizing the importance of considering the socio-economic context in marketing strategies.

These findings contribute to the academic literature by demonstrating that product placement can be successfully executed not only through human influencers but also via virtual influencers, broadening the scope of digital endorsement strategies. The results further confirm the potential of virtual influencer-based marketing in emerging economies, suggesting that such strategies are not limited to developed markets.

This study has several limitations. The virtual influencer lacked sufficient visual realism in facial expressions and posture, which may have impacted participant perceptions. Additionally, the focus on brand recall and salience with a sample of university students limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should investigate affective and behavioral responses to virtual influencer product placement and include a broader demographic range. It should also examine how economic and cultural backgrounds shape consumer reactions to virtual influencer marketing.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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