

Product placement by social media homefluencers during new normal

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to analyze how product placement through social media influencers (SMIs) during “new normal” can generate user-generated content (UGC) and determine the manners of product placement by SMIs who have become “homefluencers” by their skills.

Design/methodology/approach – This research applies a qualitative approach of thematic content analysis of a total of 49 micro and nano-homefluencer’s contents in beauty fashion, clothing, workout-yoga, food and lifestyle sectors on Instagram.

Findings – The findings of this study identify the main five themes of homefluencers by analyzing UGC in the new normal portraying both positive and negative comments incorporating four manners of product placement as a framework backed by two identified skills: relevance and relationship.

Research limitations/implications – This research pioneers the study on how SMIs as “homefluencers” can adapt product placement skills in crises strengthening UGC by proposing a framework in the existing influencer marketing literature, where research is scarce.

Practical implications – The findings of this research represent a guideline for effective SMI marketing development in the new normal and post-COVID. Based on the findings, recommendations are provided for the brand managers and influencers uplifting UGC blending skill of relevancy and relationship in product placement.

Originality/value – The author has contributed to the body of research by qualitatively analyzing how “homefluencer’s” product placement in a crisis period can manage consistency and humanitarian association amplifying UGC and the practical implications in post-COVID.

Keywords Homefluencers, Product placement, New normal, User-generated content (UGC), Followers’ comments, Thematic content analysis

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Influencer marketing on social media is an interactive form to persuade consumers of brand conversation for producing user-generated content (UGC). Social networking sites (SNSs), such as Instagram and Facebook, are the Internet-based platforms instilling product knowledge and relationship among niche industries where UGC is a crucial phenomenon (Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro, 2020). Health, beauty fashion, lifestyle, yoga fitness are the niche areas where influencers practice expertise through visually attractive content (Deng *et al.*, 2020; Chopra *et al.*, 2020). Social media influencers (SMIs) are acting like “viral mavens” implementing their subject-matter skills associating brand features and level of relationship with followers (Gangadharbatla and Valafar, 2017). Micro-influencers and nano-influencers are deeply committed to their niche followers’ well-being through relevance and interpersonal



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communication (Britt *et al.*, 2020; Alassani and Göretz, 2019). Micro-influencers (10,000–500,000 followers) and nano-influencers (1,000–10,000 followers) are the experts in discussing relatable issues integrating brands in their lifestyle (Zhang and Zhao, 2020; Seeler *et al.*, 2019).

Product placement must represent the noncommercial association and induce followers content cocreation (De Jans *et al.*, 2020; Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). However, in 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak has initiated the “digital transformation” of relationship termed as “new normal” (Kolsquare.Com, 2021). This situation raised influencers to adapt their content while staying at home by focusing positively on how everyday can be cheerful by using collaborated brands. These home-bound SMIs are known as “homefluencers” who reinvent followers’ relationships by meaningfully connecting relevant brands matching their skills within confinement (Kolsquare.Com, 2021).

During the new normal, influencer marketing adapts in humanizing less product-oriented approach (Kolsquare.Com, 2021). For example, Nike highlighted the “play inside” campaign reinforcing the confinement collaborating multiple micro-influencers. As the business contract termination is high thus, for sharing real-life content in a less-promotional manner, homefluencers’ contents have become more alive. For instance, Gucci collaborated with 23 micro and nano-influencers for disseminating aesthetic content involving 750k followers (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). Fashion influencers’ product relatability is managed by cross-categorization of skills either by staying-home workout wearing sponsored accessories or cooking the healthy recipes reinforcing partnered brands usage. Previous academics examined the adoption of influencers’ contents in beauty, fashion, food and lifestyle domains, which are booming as followers find “realness” and “intimacy” among micro and nano-SMIs (Argyris *et al.*, 2020; Britt *et al.*, 2020; Macon, 2017; Boerman *et al.*, 2017).

However, there is no observed evidence of prior studies regarding what are the specific actions of product placement applied by the marketers collaborating SMIs resulting in useful UGC in crisis period – more specifically, in new normal in beauty and fashion, clothing, workout and yoga, food and lifestyle. Hence, the research questions are as follows:

- RQ1. What are the main themes of UGC executed by homefluencers product placement?
- RQ2. To what extent the homefluencers product placement skills generate UGC during new normal in beauty and fashion, clothing, workout and yoga, food and lifestyle sectors?

The research design and methods of present study are composed into two parts, analyzing followers’ comments on Instagram to identify specific themes of UGC following Barreda and Bilgihan (2013), and the second part is organized in a two-step content analysis of 49 homefluencers’ products placement skills guided by Audrezet *et al.* (2018).

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical background

Social media influencer marketing and relationship with followers have been examined in several SNS literature, specifically on Instagram, such as, Kay *et al.* (2020), Argyris *et al.* (2020) and Schröder (2019). This is acknowledged as not identical to advertising considering consumer’s attitudes by carefully delivering information (Russel and Belch, 2005). Explicit product placement in SNSs is discouraged by Jin and Muqaddam (2019), as followers attempted toward “forced” persuasion if “visual congruence” (Argyris *et al.*, 2020).

Sponsored contents are the promotional messages meeting organizational objectives as commercial content facilitated by other companies (Boerman *et al.*, 2017). Previous studies on sponsorship disclosure on SMI marketing have majorly applied Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM) by Friestad and Wright (1994) (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2020; Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019; De Veirman and Hudders, 2019; Boerman *et al.*, 2017). This model explains how individuals understand the persuasive motive and can control the raised emotions.

To determine SMIs' relationship and relevancy level, preceding scholars have exploited Ohanians' (1990) celebrity characteristics model (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020; Lou *et al.*, 2019; Pöyry *et al.*, 2019; Jin and Muqaddam, 2019; Boerman and Willemssen, 2017). To find the association of interpersonal relationships and followers' friendship with SMI, parasocial interaction (PSI) proposed by Rubin *et al.* (1985) has been employed by the recent researchers (Boerman and Reijmersdal, 2020; Audrezet *et al.*, 2018; De Veirman *et al.*, 2017; Lee and Watkins, 2016). SMIs' content uploaded with brand irrelevancy and less relationship with followers' results from followers' less involvement (Chopra *et al.*, 2020) regardless of the number of followers (Argyris *et al.*, 2020). For instance, SMIs' skill of relatedness and long-term relationship with followers acknowledged by marketers as "inspirational" SMIs and "influencer-product matching" increases product attitudes (Ki *et al.*, 2020; Kim and Kim, 2020).

2.2 Social media influencers' (SMIs') product placement

Standing between the lines of advertisement and entertainment, product placement is considered a "hybrid advertisement" in nature. Previous practitioners referred SMIs' sponsored product placement perceived positively if captured in natural surroundings (De Jans *et al.*, 2020; Schouten *et al.*, 2019), persuading consumers' connection (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019).

SMIs' product placement generates persuasion impact and maintains parasocial communication with their followers (Boerman *et al.*, 2017) and in their relationship perspective (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). Here, followers identify themselves having SMIs' personalities and show belongingness praising activity by comments and likes (De Jans *et al.*, 2020). In turn, audiences' relationship is shifted into a humanized reference to the placed product (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). The absence of the transparency and relatability influences followers to believe the product placement post is "paid"/bought (Coco and Eckert, 2020; Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019) harming parasocial relationships (Lee and Eastin, 2020).

Prior research disclosed Instagram as the most suitable SNS to collaborate with SMIs (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017), close ties among followers in a few industries product placement (Lee and Eastin, 2020). On social media, followers follow influential figures who have expertise in niche area (Schouten *et al.*, 2019). For instance, fitness influencers sponsoring a beauty product impact positively upon followers' attitudes if they prudently integrate realness disclosing sponsorship details (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019).

2.3 The rise of homefluencers during new normal and user-generated content (UGC)

New normal means how consumers are adapting to new lifestyles and consumption patterns during COVID-19 in 2020–2021 by maintaining social distancing. Micro and nano-influencers are preparing their stay-home visual contents including photography, editing all alone; therefore their compensation per post is reduced. This is shifted during COVID-19 as "digital transformation of relationship" where followers' wellness is highlighted than product-centralized contents supported by influencers (Kolsquare.Com, 2021). Consequently, Kim and Song (2017) stated in a crisis, an influencer's product placement can shift positively a brand's undesirable reputation. Yet, irrelevant-unintimate product placement with covert Instagram advertisements increases follower's persuasion knowledge (Hudders *et al.*, 2020).

Specifically, UGC refers to unpaid, nonmanipulated consumer's experience generated by users online or offline or not organization-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Also, UGC is labeled as "brand-selfies," "user-generated branding (UGB)" (Geurin and Burch, 2017), "real-life evidence" (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2020), which is cost-effectively retained by marketers through homefluencers' collaboration. Brand managers collaborate with credible homefluencers enhancing brand's relevancy rather than "staged" videos.

Influencers' stories-experiences reflecting the COVID-19 situation during pandemic generate more comments (Zhang and Zhao, 2020). Numerous SNS scholars emphasize on micro and nano-SMIs' expertise displayed in their contents that increases congruency (Britt *et al.*, 2020; Stubb and Colliander, 2019), but its absence leads to follower's intrusiveness (Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). Nano-influencers are the "persuaders" and micro-influencers are "topic experts" skilled in high conversion rate, enhancing placed products' content topicality (Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro, 2020). Associating UGC in the shed of content marketing (Müller and Christandl, 2019; Kilgour *et al.*, 2015), UGC can be sponsored or nonsponsored content in SMIs' product placement (Stubb and Colliander, 2019).

Consumers investigate the brand's motive, why SMIs are expressing brands' usefulness arising advertising skepticism (Boerman and Reijmersdal, 2020), can be reduced by SMI's trustworthiness and expertise toward brand relevance (De Jans *et al.*, 2020). However, sponsorship disclosure in SMIs' posts is a win-win for product placement (Pöyry *et al.*, 2019; Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019; FTC, 2017). Hashtags #sponsored and #paid generate followers' ad recognition with positive effects (Boerman, 2019; Kim and Song, 2017), also consumers can be aware of the SMIs' transparency (Boerman and Reijmersdal, 2020). Often, SMIs showcase the same brands frequently and always review positively without using the ultimate product, causing consumers to produce negative UGC (Liu *et al.*, 2017), which may destroy ROI (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020). Moreover, how the social media users disseminate information largely depends on relationship level (Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro, 2020), brand relatability (Schouten *et al.*, 2019) in reducing consumers' skepticism of commercial contents (Geurin and Burch, 2017).

The above discussion is directing that earlier scholars applied PKM and celebrity characteristics model reflecting SMIs' relevancy, relationship but have limited focus on product placement and UGC. Furthermore, no research is evidenced about homefluencers' product placement integrating UGC in a crisis moment. Given the lack of studies, it is imperative to know how macro and nano-SMIs' product placement skills in new normal made them homefluencers producing UGC impacting marketer's effectiveness and whether the findings are in line with the prior research or not.

3. Research design and methods

The current research stipulates qualitative methodology involving the analysis of UGCs in the form of comments, hashtags, brand mentions, images and videos of homefluencers collaborated product placement as primary data. Supporting Malhotra and Dash (2016) and Yin (2009), this research aims to reveal deep insights as a subjective understanding in a descriptive way. The research design focuses on the beauty-fashion, clothing, workout yoga, food and lifestyle, macro and nano-SMIs' campaigns during new normal regardless of any nation and brands. Instagram is chosen as this platform is most popular as an influencer marketing platform (Gräve, 2019). As the primary data have been considered, UGC on homefluencer's contents (both organic and sponsored) of selected five areas in this research, the nonprobability purposive sampling is approached by Malhotra and Dash (2016), to uncover the new data.

The current study examines 49 Instagram homefluencers' product placement contents through thematic content analysis, as a type of qualitative descriptive approach (Kyngäs, 2020), following three concerns. First, the homefluencers must be micro-influencers (between 10 and 100k follower number) or nano-influencers (between 1 and 10k follower number) who have brand collaboration while staying home; second, the marketing campaign must be accomplished within September 2020–March 2021; third, the homefluencers' product placement must collaborate in selected five domains for this study.

The study applies manual coding on Microsoft Excel to determine the similar categories of UGC (comments) on homefluencers' new normal posts. The final methodological step

revealed four propositions comparing homefluencers product placement skills. It is observed that for the sudden COVID-19 situation, many SMIs are exaggerating brand relevancy where product match-up is missing, and by hiding sponsorship disclosure they try to establish a false relationship with followers. The methodology of this study is organized into two parts and synthesizes in [Figure A1](#) (See [Appendix](#)): the first part contains analyzing followers' comments as UGC on homefluencers' product placement for identifying the main themes followed by [Barreda and Bilgihan \(2013\)](#)'s methodology, and the second part is followed by [Audrezet et al. \(2018\)](#).

3.1 Part 1: identifying the main themes of homefluencers' contents analyzing UGC

In the pandemic, brand managers give the highest importance to those influencers' contents who are efficiently portraying confined audiences' feelings encouraging brands home consumption. Therefore, the first objective of this study is to identify key themes generated from UGC through new normal product placement posts. From a range of organized to in-depth text analysis of 49 homefluencers' product placement posts to content analysis ([Barreda and Bilgihan, 2013](#)), this research analyzes consumer-generated texts regarding specific topics, which results in exact theme ([Cavanagh, 1997](#)).

Both positive and negative comments are accumulated regarding the specific five domains and 49 SMIs are chosen, by considering their importance in new normal. From September 2020 to March 2021, a 7-month data collection period of Instagram homefluencers' product placement in English language contents has been conducted to inspect new normal observations ([Argyris et al., 2020](#); [Jin and Muqaddam, 2019](#)). The SMIs are searched over the author's personal Instagram account and from 89,576 comments, 37,975 comments (positive and negative) of UGC are accumulated after screening.

Following the guidelines of qualitative data analysis of [Miles and Huberman \(1984\)](#), the author independently performs the role as a coder to analyze existing and new themes through the grounded theory approach acknowledging the repeated themes ([Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020](#)). Ensuring confidentiality purpose, the present study has given unique codes to five industries' SMIs for the proof of identity ([Geurin and Burch, 2017](#)). The accumulated texts gathered in this measure encompassed 107,880 words about homefluencers' posts and their followers' activities.

In the following section, [Table 1](#) summarizes the significant themes including 37,975 comments (35,748 positive comments and 2,227 negative comments) corresponding to selected five domains showing frequency and percentage representing the total UGC of this study.

The open coding of the positive and negative comments is gathered by the collective method expanding UGC and product placement contents external legitimacy in new normal ([Barreda, and Bilgihan, 2013](#); [Teo et al., 2008](#)). Also, the collected comments are coded following hierarchical orders in each domain from the highest number of comments to the lowest determining main themes.

From [Figures 1 and 2](#), sixteen (16) fashion and beauty homefluencers' product placement category occupies the highest number of comments (11,311) as they collaborate more to showcase home-bound makeup materials. Yet in terms of comments frequency in each

Type of comments	Number	Percentage (%)	Table 1. Positive and negative comments corresponding as user-generated contents (UGC)
Positive	35,748	94.1	
Negative	2,227	5.9	
Total comments	37,975	100	

Figure 1. Most mentioned product categories of homefluencers and number of themes

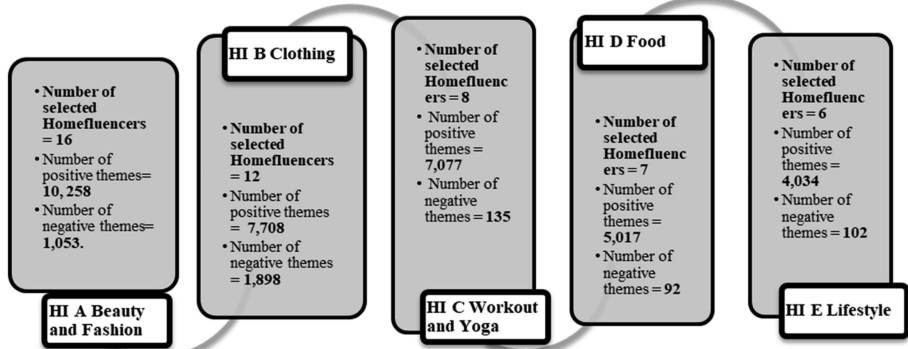
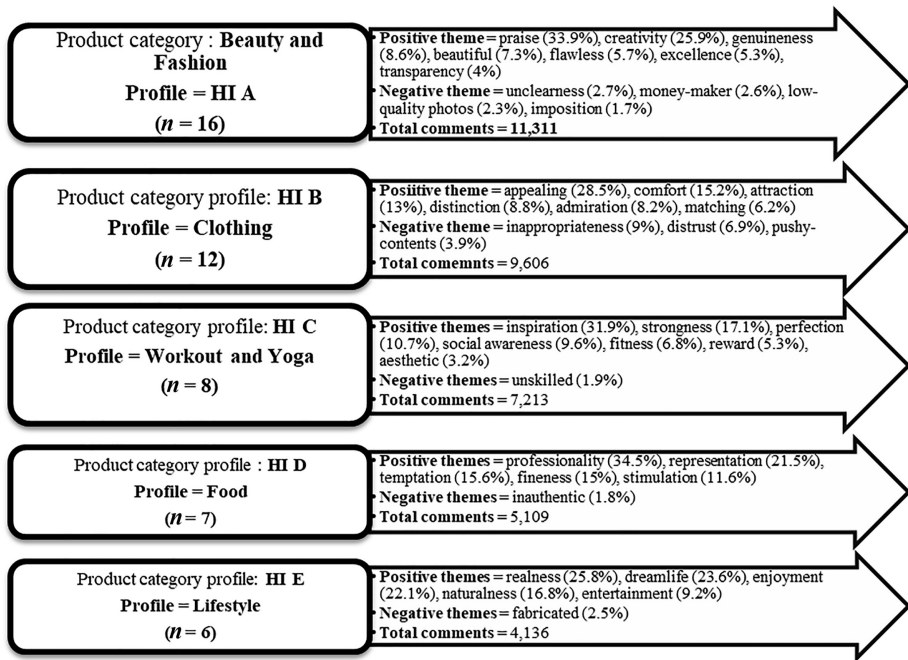


Figure 2. Forty-nine homefluencers' profile and themes derived from thematic analysis of contents



domain, cooking homefluencers' specialization in the food category of "professionalism" theme accounts highest positive comments for 34.5%. This category also accounts for the lowest number of negative comments (92) for the theme "inauthentic" for 1.8%. However, clothing homefluencers' product placement holds the highest negative comments. It is because these influencers are often unable to balance their sponsorship saturation, repeat the same style of placement and their physical appearance does not suitably match in the eyes of the followers. In the workout-yoga homefluencers' category, followers appreciate ambitions and connecting the righteousness of the brand in how-to exercise visuals. In the last category of lifestyle homefluencers, the theme "realness" accounts for 25.8% representing the followers' positive comment if the influencer's contents are unedited, unfiltered.

3.2 Part 2: two-step content analysis of homefluencers' product placement skills generating UGC

The thematic content analysis in this study follows two steps to gradually categorizing homefluencers product placement skills (Step1) and how they produce the sponsored product placement cultivating maximum UGC (Step 2). These results further incorporate as a framework for homefluencers' product placement in [Section 4](#). The methodological tactic followed in this study where thematic content analysis has been approached by supporting [Al-Emadi and Ben Yahia \(2020\)](#), [Audrezet et al. \(2018\)](#) and [Kilgour et al. \(2015\)](#).

3.2.1 Step 1: categorizing homefluencers' product placement skills. To fulfill the second research objective of this study, contents are later segmented into homefluencers' product placement skills applying thematic analysis explored by [Strauss and Corbin \(1990\)](#) and [Audrezet et al. \(2018\)](#). The researcher categorizes the contents following a repetitive process of examination of individual homefluencers' product placement posts comparing UGC. At this stage, six (6) homefluencers on each five industry sectors are specified accumulating 30 of them in terms of UGC on their collaborated contents found.

It is revealed that influencers who show realness in their product demonstration through relevance with the showcased brand and in-depth relationship with followers appear to generate impactful UGC. Alternatively, low-quality contents, formal-unengaging product placement also found to produce negative comments of followers generating new themes for consideration to develop a framework. As the new themes appeared, the researcher allocated recognizable code to these pieces of evidence. To propose a comprehensive product placement framework of homefluencers' contents, followers' UGC influenced by each influencer's skills are coded and evaluated exquisitely. This reveals that UGC on social media networks mostly resulted from homefluencers' two significant skills of product placement during the COVID-19 pandemic. Critically analyzing homefluencers' collaboration recurrently, the researcher analyzes UGC repeatedly to finalize the exact themes, subthemes, frequency and manner of product placement in light of the identified two skills. The author all-inclusively collects the required contents from selected 30 influencers' profiles in a Microsoft Excel file as a coder and after classifies the texts into specific business domains; the coded details were tagged by themes and subthemes. Later, these are scrutinized for the relevancy of the themes and subthemes of the coded contents with some minor corrections to accomplish the research objective. After incorporating them, the selected components of the homefluencers' two product placement skills are discerned from thematic analysis with 94.1% intercoder compliance.

3.2.2 Step 2: determining the association of homefluencers' product placement skills to user-generated contents (UGC). The derived two product placement skills in Step 1 dictate to analyze how followers' originated contents (UGC) associate with homefluencers' manner of product placement skills regarding [RQ2](#). Thus, in Step 2, for more subtle components of product placement skills, ten (10) homefluencers' contents are reassessed as they are successful in producing UGC for each post. The two (2) most effective homefluencers from each five business domains are finally chosen for developing the product placement framework by the researchers' consideration in [Table 2](#).

4. Explanatory findings

Guided by the methodology in [Section 3](#), the findings of this study are interpreted by the following two sections: categorization of skills and garnering UGC.

4.1 Categorization of homefluencers' product placement skills

Analyzing 49 homefluencers' product placement contents in [Table 2](#), the categorization of product placement skills is indeed finalized by most engaging 30 influencers' contents who

are very responsive to UGC. The previous researchers investigated SMIs' real-life stories attaching brands relevance and follower's relationship reducing consumers' perceived risk (Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020; Ki and Kim, 2019), in producing UGC (Müller and Christandl, 2019). Therefore, in this study, "relevance" and "relationship" are thus justified as homefluencers' skills to produce UGC in new normal.

The following interpretation will illuminate the contents that are specified to homefluencers' relevance with the product placement and relationship with their followers.

4.1.1 Homefluencers' product placement by relevance. It is observed that the overstatement of brand benefits, unrelated exposure and sensitive issues to niche groups turned the campaign ineffective identified in comments. Also, *HI B6* posts' "Tried new filters in the Gradient app. #ad", followers commenting negatively like; "Your previous post is inappropriate, please delete", "You can't just turn off comments on your last pic and pretend like it wasn't racist! VERY problematic." Consequently, followers produce UGC to those product placement posts finding the spotlight is given to their comfort in a less-promotional manner.

Homefluencers' paid posts if not clearly depicting the paid promotion and sponsorship issues using #ad, #mentioning brand names may have consequence negatively. Following the FTC rule of 2017, authentic influencer's posts carefully revealed collaborated exposure. The content analysis has shown that some homefluencers create confusing collaboration disclosure adding: "sp," "spon," "collab", "thanks" and "ambassador." On these blurred posts, followers criticize the contents negatively, which impacts brand reputation. Expressing natural way and emotion attaching paid partnership tags increase followers trust to homefluencers' leveraging brands. *HI A1* posts include "Paid partnership with absolutus." This post starts with "#ad Who else loves a night at home playing games and trying new cocktails? We made the best Easy Breeze with @AbsolutUS Original. Try it for yourself, recipe below! . . . #AbsolutPartner #GetJuicy." Followers find exact relevancy in such kind of collaboration transparency observed in followers' comments, such as: "This sounds delish!", "Omg I'm making this next weekend! Absolut is the best", "Awesome shot", "style for days".

During COVID-19, homefluencers' hashtags and captions emphasizing "unedited", "unfiltered" and "behind the scenes" product placement concepts stimulating follower's natural persuasion. Homefluencers' product placement is effective only in specialists' approach rather than generalists contextually. Such as *HI C2* posts "These were taken within seconds on two different phones. Neither is filtered . . . Sometimes pictures can be misleading . . . That's why I encourage my @ohfitnessfurnace clients to take pictures, and, to go by how

Table 2.
Profiles of the selected ten homefluencers and their product placement contents (when available) generating UGC analyzed in Step 3

Product placement product-category	Anonym homefluencers' name	Number of followers	Time of product placement post	UGC on each selected post Comments
Beauty and fashion	HI A8	27.5k	December 24, 2020	0
	HI A9	16k	October 8, 2020	0
Clothing	HI B6	7.1k	February 27, 2021	16
	HI B7	37.6k	January 19, 2020	40
Workout and yoga	HI C2	14.2k	December 17, 2020	287
	HI C10	74.3	February 19, 2021	132
Food	HI D1	46.4k	September 1, 2020	289
	HI D3	24.9k	October 10, 2020	194
Lifestyle	HI E5	16.3k	December 1, 2020	22
	HI E7	22.2k	March 16, 2021	17

Note(s): Data recorded in March 2021

they feel. Which picture is more accurate of me? I'm not sure". This post evokes follower's spontaneity to comment "I think you look amazing and you do not shy away from being honest and showing what's real", "I love following you" and "Always sharing the truth bombs." In these posts, the voluntary production of UGC is evidenced if the homefluencers' posts are signifying real-life appearance.

4.1.2 Homefluencers' product placement by relationship. Comparing to the prepandemic partnership, micro- and nano-influencers' home-bound brand contents are more focused on the audience's physical-mental wellness concerning follower's relationship.

Homefluencers' product placement needs to be highly interactive in publicizing the compelling experience of the sponsored brands, tempting followers to put comments. *HI C2* posts "Paid partnership with polished_london", "I have teamed up with my favorite teeth whitening and oral care brand @polished_london to win "The Ultimate Glow Up" prize . . . you do not want to miss this! To enter: Tag 3 friends, Follow @polished_london and Like this post. Winner announced Monday, August 31st [Ad]." Follower's comments reveal in this post by mentioning friends' names and brands for the reward. In each comment of the post, *HI C2* replies personally. This denotes, in the new normal, audience relationship is much signified in an interactive manner generating UGC where home marketing through discounts, giveaways are well-accepted means.

Respecting community insights is one of the criteria of homefluencers in generating UGC. Lifestyle influencer *HI E5* posts by mentioning first "Paid partnership with babbleboxxofficial" and posts "If there was ever a time to up, you're at-home cocktail craft, now is it! #ad with virtual + socially distant hang with friends, I'm working with @dekuypercocktails to create the perfect old fashioned! It's a nearly-effortless way to make this classic cocktail at home! #DeKuyperClassicOldFashion #quarantinelife#". Her follower's comments: "Looks like the perfect bar to me!", "I love your bar cart setup!", "And yes please, love an old fashioned", "This bar cart is adorable!! Drinks look delish too!" Followers perceive that their admired influencer is feeling their quarantined struggle and showing the best way of combating any situation placing the brand. *HI E5* replies: "thanks [. . .]! I love having it", and "hi cutie!! Wish we were close enough where I could make one!". Analyzing their prepandemic and existing crisis posts response with users, selected influencers are investing more to niche community engagement valuing comments and contributions.

Oversaturation of sponsored posts less likely reinforces audiences' enthusiastic participation ruining relationships. *HI A7 posts* "completely unedited soft glam tingzzzz, foundation: @makeupforeverofficial ultra hd, blush: @maccosmetics peaches, brows: @anastasiabeverlyhills dibrow, eyeshadow: @milanicosmetics desires palette, lashes: @ardellbeauty naked lashes in 244". Although this influencer's quarantine posts are matched with her followers, the number of comments and reactions as UGC is not so noticeable as she posts frequently about brand sponsorships.

The above evidence reveals that homefluencers' product placement highlighting home-bound consumption, discount posts combined with their skills of relevancy and relationship with followers while not hiding sponsorship details esteeming small community sentiments. However, during pandemics overly sponsored product placement reduces audience engagement not resulting in noticeable amount of UGC. Therefore, unlike the previous "normal" period, the rise of the homefluencers' relevancy and relationship skills added a new dimension in product placement.

4.2 Proposition of a framework of homefluencers' product placement

The final methodological step involves how UGC is originated associating effective product placement contents of homefluencers. Here, the subtle content analysis shows that often homefluencers' product placement is perceived as inanimate and fabricated in terms of

relevancy and relationship, originated through follower's expression. The identified 40 themes in Figure 2 indicate that positive themes on UGC are mostly generated in terms of marketing context if there is a delicacy of a blend of relationship with confined followers and actual brand relevance. The analysis highlights that due to the new normal, several homefluencers have shifted their identity either overemphasizing the follower's relationship or hiding oversaturated sponsorship disclosure. Occasionally they are unable to apply these two identified skills or put too much effort into the product placement details. These outcomes led to four propositions of a framework of selected ten homefluencers' product placement considering their diversity in product placement posts, specifying their skill of relationship and relevancy (see Appendix: Figure A2).

4.2.1 Manner of delicate product placement. Delicate product placement by homefluencers results if they value a closer relationship with their niche followers partnering with the most suitable brands. The food homefluencer *HI D3* posts "At Home [Gifted]. Whilst we sadly could not go to Crete GR during the lockdown, we were lucky to get a slice of Crete directly at home! Thanks to @tastingcrete, that have adapted on-site olive oil and wine tasting experiences ... #Oliveoil #Greece #localproduce #summer2020 #londonfood #mediterranean". In the mentioned post of *HI D3*, followers UGC is noticeable by comments: "Greek olives are so good!", "Curious to know what olive juice is!", "Love a good extra virgin olive oil", "Beautifully packaged" and "Oh must try!". In another post of *HI D3*: "World thinking about all restaurants, shops-services that are struggling with the impact of the Coronavirus ... giving you some foodie Inspo (you can make at home) from @voltadomar_ldn, with their Alentejo Jamon with warm goat cheese! #stayathome #londonfoodies #voltadomar". In this post, followers' comment: "Hope these days pass soon", "It's great to see so many people supporting each other right now!", "Love Jamon!!", "The world is crazy now! Hope I can try this when I go back!", "I want that NOW" and "I need". This manner is the finest way of product placement combining relevance and relationship skills during the new normal. Nevertheless, it is also noticed that homefluencers branded content at once posted with only relevancy aspect or relationship with followers.

Therefore, these findings reveal another three manners given below.

4.2.2 Manner of social-proof product placement. Homefluencers' social-proof product placement resembles home contents highly focused on the brand facts to validate follower's purchase while importance is not given on in-depth relationship. *HI A8* posts "NEW @juviasplace PALETTES. Skin/@morphebrushes, @elfcosmetics, @neutrogena water gel, Eyes/@juviasplace @anti_lash "Affiliate" lash, Lips/@juviasplace "Scorpio" lip liner, @juviasplace "muted" lipstick and @juviasplace "it's glass" lip gloss". And, she separately hashtags-mentions the same brand names in each of her follower's comments without considering the pattern of comments. And, in another product placement post of *HI A8*: "Got my hands on the @patrickstarr @onesize makeup remover wipes and spray! Taking off my makeup with the right products is just as important to me," not a single comment is generated from followers in this post. Yet, approachable communication with audiences is not up to the mark to produce UGC by influencer's effective interaction. Social-proof contents are in which homefluencers utilize all aspects of brand mentions in their personal life experience without being empathetic to followers' feelings. Some product placements are posted without specifying whether they are sponsored or organic by praising the brand too much. Such "essential transparency" if absent in this crisis moment, the product placement relatability is at risk with an increased amount of advertising clutter.

4.2.3 Manner of exaggerated product placement. Exaggerated product placement occurs when homefluencers feature overstatement of the product's usefulness by showcasing it in their personal lives while the product's characteristics are not aligned to their expertise. During social distancing, many influencers' expertise converted to home-bound skills prohibiting outside visits. *HI E7* posts "So honored to team up with @Neutrogena and show you my favorite cleanser for

preventing breakouts – Oil-Free Acne Wash Pink Grapefruit. It uses MicroClear Technology to cut through oil and get salicylic acid to where breakouts start ... #scienceapproved #ad". Followers hurt the brand by negative comments: "Stop using it girl", "No not hyram approved!", "This made around my nose super dry", "It dries out your skin so badly", "Don't use any of these products, and "They're really bad for your skin. I recommend Cetaphil or Mary Kay". The followers comment positively mentioning other brands in particular product placement. *HI C2* posts, "October is Mental Health Awareness month. I'm passionate about protecting my and others' mental health so @myproteinuk has asked me to share my thoughts and encourage anybody who is struggling to speak to their family, friends ... @myproteinuk {sponsored athlete@mhealthuk @mentalhealthireland#mentalhealthawareness". Here, the fashion influencer is exaggeratedly reinforcing mental health although her niche followers' interest is irrelevant to this placement. In this manner, only influencer fatigue is produced by the overabundance of sponsored posts without amplifying UGC.

4.2.4 Manner of distrustful product placement. Distrustful product placement appears when homefluencers' relevance of the sponsored brand is worthless also their follower's relationship is not passionate about driving UGC. Only two influencers' contents are accounted for here because the actual influence is missing. *HI A9* posts "Better late, then never. Finally jumped on the @newbalance bandwagon— and these sneakers are giving me all the feel of my early teenager days! Who else feels that new balance nostalgia and loves it?" In this post, no single UGC is made. This fashion influencer's expertise turned out to be an unskilled fitness homefluencers lock-down content where contents are no longer connected to her particular follower context. The product placement in much of this evidence is spurious in terms of brand appropriateness and contains distrusted descriptions. Moreover, *HI B7* posts "I am absolutely obsessed with my new @katespadeny crossbody, and honestly everything from the Spade Flower Jacquard Collection!". And her followers' comment: "You forgot the #sponsored tag", "Why do they always make those faces with their mouths open?", "Like OMG. Annoying! Hopefully, [. . .] does it better in terms of quality", "And we #vomit" and "Omg this is terrible!". In such a manner of product placement, homefluencers' skill of relevancy and relationship both are perceived as ineffective, suspicious and fail to generate brand trust.

Overall, a notable amount of UGC is seen on product placement posts that balance relative brand exposure and relationship, as a manner of delicate product placement. But lacking these two skills associating with UGC led the researchers to specify the other three manners of product placement.

5. General discussion

The data gathered in this study is the first to analyze impactful five sectors' homefluencers' product placement in crisis period extracting UGC as comments, hashtags and brand mentions guided by the framework developed by [Audrezet et al. \(2018\)](#), and thematic analysis of UGC is coded by [Barreda and Bilgihan \(2013\)](#). Concerning RQ1, the identified themes in each product category comprised positive and negative connotations reflecting consumer's expectations in the era of new normal in influencer marketing. Influencer's appropriateness is commonly desired in any kind of product placement, which is denoted as homefluencers' relevance ([Lee and Eastin, 2020](#)). Explicitly, followers comment positively if they find homefluencers' value individualized relationships while negatively commenting on hidden advertising ([Al-Emadi and Yahia, 2020](#)).

Concerning RQ2, the researcher has divulged homefluencers' two types of product placement skills successfully capitalizing UGC: the skill of relevancy and the skill of relationship. The skill of relevancy corresponds to the fit of homefluencers' product placement along with niche followers' characteristics. [Lee and Eastin \(2020\)](#) and [De Veirman et al. \(2017\)](#) similarly found that SMIs' brand fit generates consistency to determine follower's

closeness. Previous research examined these SMIs' brand collaborations focusing on followers' number (Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019), but unable to reveal SMIs' strategy regarding product placement in a crisis moment. The present researcher has extended SMIs' product placement by revealing how homefluencers' skill of relevancy can activate UGC in the most popular five industrial domains applying influencer marketing. Likewise, Britt *et al.* (2020) and Alassani and Göretz (2019) explored micro and nano-influencers collaborate with those brands that synchronize their style and identity. About relationship skills in new normal, homefluencers' product placement contents are crucially valuing their followers' wellness rather than prepandemic product-centered contents. Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) investigated how SMIs' niche specialization of product skills influences persuasion knowledge but did not disclose how SMI-follower relationship impacts followers to contribute UGC. The current researcher has detected that a positive tone of brand applicability in a natural setting and post transparency induce a strong sense of relationship generating UGC (De Jans *et al.*, 2020; Schouten *et al.*, 2019).

6. Research contributions and limitations

The study adds to the literature by analyzing how micro and nano-homefluencers' product placement in an uncertain crisis period can manage consistency and humanitarian association amplifying UGC naturally from four perspectives:

First, the findings of this research are coherent with the literature on relevancy with brand-sponsored content, which found "Influencer with product" posts generate the highest credibility than "product only" posts (Deng *et al.*, 2020). Influencers who respect followers' connection persuade the natural flow of UGC (Kim and Song, 2017), by applying delicate product placement. Specifically, this manner is employed popularly in workout yoga, food and lifestyle homefluencer's contents. This is compatible with the earlier SMI scholars who explored follower's feel more attached to unbiased product placement (De Jans *et al.*, 2020; Pöyry *et al.*, 2019; Dhanesh and Duthler, 2019; Boerman, 2019; Kim and Lee, 2017).

Second, this research further advances the research on the PKM by Friestad and Wright (1994), which revealed higher ad recognition (material connection) increases ad skepticism (Obermiller *et al.*, 2005). Followers distrust homefluencers' posts if the sponsorship disclosure is hidden, activating persuasion knowledge (Evans *et al.*, 2018; Hwang and Jeong, 2016).

Third, product placement transparency sourced from relevant macro and nano-SMIs in their domains increases positive ad attitudes in new normal, which is in line with the celebrity characteristics of Ohanian's model. (1990). Earlier scholars such as Argyris *et al.* (2020) and, Deng *et al.* (2020) have found similar results.

Fourth, this research is compatible with the PSI theory by Rubin *et al.* (1985), as per the findings, homefluencers' similarity influences follower's relationship and the information viewing purpose in product placement posts (Lee and Watkins, 2016).

This research has also managerial implications considering the post-COVID situation. For reinventing in the new normal and postpandemic, brand manager's large-scale marketing campaigns should be dominated by consumer loyalty, UGC and empathetic brand advocacy instilling confidence and genuineness. Also, social media listening tools on Instagram can track engagement metrics, brand mentions and hashtags (#StayHome signs) of users sharing their experiences through posting videos should be purposefully used by marketers in other advertisements. For instance, presently home-bound consumers' raw video contents stressing positive reviews can be cost-effectively leveraged by marketers. Advertisements need to be redesigned by the target audience's sentiment in the analyzed sectors in this study. Enhancing brands boosting visibility, micro and nano-influencers campaigns can be cross-matched on brand pages as "brand takeover." In post-COVID, SMI's direct approaches to product placement will no longer activate significant UGC as consumers are habituated to humanitarian-oriented

authenticity. It is also advised that marketers should available all required supports so that SMIs could expose their skill of relevancy and relationship with an accurate blend.

This paper is not relieved from limitations directing the guidelines for further research from three viewpoints. Firstly, future research should recognize how the new normal has dragged the new media habit formation among consumers regenerating new forms of humanitarian business communication. Secondly, it would be interesting to reveal how SMIs' two skills identified in this study impact post-COVID product placement on diversified segments. Finally, future practitioners could examine the framework over 1 year comparing top social media network's value of UGC including coding repetition as this research is conducted for a single exposure causing coding of data exhaustiveness.

7. Conclusion

COVID-19 has directed marketers to accept the market dynamics, to be prepared for unpredictable consumer priorities in post-COVID. On Instagram, in five product categories, homefluencers' product placement is bringing maximum ROI concerning confined follower's daily lives initiating the dearth of research. Therefore, understanding the present situation of how brands apply SMIs skills in product placement, this study pioneers in the thematic content analysis of UGC by proposing a framework during new normal.

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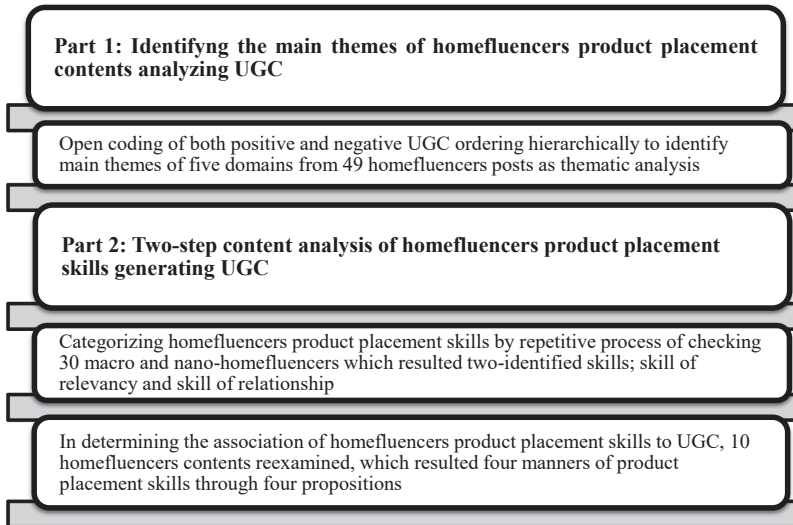


Figure A1. Research design approaching the two-part step-by-step analysis of homefluencers' product placement contents

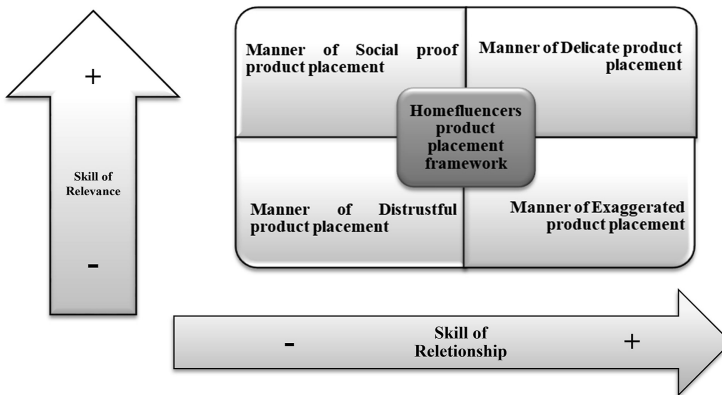


Figure A2. Homefluencers' product placement framework representing four manners

About the author

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