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**The specifics of advertising through online celebrities.**

**A perspective of users and experts**

**- PhD Thesis Summary -**

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## KEYWORDS

Influencer marketing, advertising, social media, teens, experimental research

## SUMMARY

### **The role and the relevance of digital celebrities (social media influencers) for advertising. Theoretical considerations**

The paper also includes theoretical chapters, one chapter for methodology and two chapters for presenting the results of the empirical research. At the end of the paper are the conclusions, recommendations, research limits, as well as further research directions.

The first theoretical chapter is dedicated to social media, with focus on the evolution of online socializing platforms and emphasis on the most relevant ones for the targeted generations. Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok facilitate the communication between the users and with the brands, offering facile access to the promotion of a company's products. In addition, they are the most used means for carrying out influencer marketing campaigns. All this is due to the generations that spend most of their time on social platforms, being the segment targeted by brands in online communication.

In the second chapter, the emphasis was on defining the concepts influencer and influencer marketing, on the classification according to the literature of influencers in social media. Concepts such as the authenticity or the credibility of influencers and their role on the variables including cognitive advertising effect (brand memory), affective advertising effect (attitude towards the brand) and behavioral advertising effect (intention to buy, intention to disseminate online) are discussed. This paper relates to the definition of influencers in relation to their advertising role (Balaban, 2021), that of key characters in persuasive online communication. Their advertising role is to influence consumers' attitudes, their consumer behavior, by producing creative, authentic content that is as credible as possible. American researchers Colin Campbell and Justine Rapp Farrell (2020) talk about the complex role of an influencer in advertising, which equals to a communication channel, a content producer, while also being manager of an online community. Brands and marketing and communication agencies choose to work more often with influencers due to their access to certain audience groups that would otherwise be difficult to contact and because of the increased role of recommendations in purchasing products (Balaban, 2021). In this chapter, one of the models often used in researching the effects of advertising through influencers was presented, namely

the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestadt & Wright, 1994). Although this model was developed in the context of traditional communication channels, it proved to be appropriate in investigating the effects of advertising through native advertising tools, such as influencer marketing.

Communication through social networks has developed a lot in recent years due to the users' need to be informed and to socialize. Thus, social media is about people who create and maintain relationships with the help of technologies, having the opportunity to produce their representative content that they share with others (Freberg, 2019; Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010). At the end of this paper, 4.66 billion people are Internet users worldwide. More than 4.20 billion are active on online social networks (Kemp, 2021).

At the beginning of 2019, the most frequently used social networks on a global scale were Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Instagram (Ahmad, 2019). This classification does not consider users in China who use their own social networks (e.g. Weibo). However, the ranking is constantly changing, thanks to users who constantly change their content preferences and to the tools that the platforms provide. The competition is strong, and the battle for new users and for keeping those already registered on the platform is serious (Yoon et al., 2018). Companies have to adapt to the online revolution, which is why attracting online celebrities (social media influencers) is an asset in mediating communication between brands and consumers (Sons, 2015), while generating significantly higher revenues compared to classical advertising media (Eroğlu & Bayraktar Köse, 2019; Carbone, 2019).

Social media is defined as a group of applications based on web 2.0 technology (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), which allows users to interact with each other (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010). Social media is part of the user-generated content paradigm, the content that is created by users and published on networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and blogs (Greysen, Kind, & Chretien, 2010). Nowadays, there are different platforms, each and every one having their peculiarities (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Social media is the virtual space where an increasingly number of people spend their time, being absorbed by the posted content and the virtual interactions generated by it.

Social media platforms can be described as “tools and devices based on the Internet and mobile communication that integrate technology, telecommunications and social interaction, allowing the construction, reconstruction and dissemination of words, images (static and moving) and audio content (Dabner , 2012, p. 69). Social media is about people who create and maintain relationships with the help of technology, having the opportunity to publish their own

content that they share with other users. The online environment allows them to communicate with hundreds or thousands of other people, thus facilitating the interaction between them (Freberg, 2019).

Referring to the advertising relevance of online communication and especially of social media, this paper aims, firstly, to understand the role of social media influencers in the Romanian advertising market. Moreover, the paper falls within the scientific sphere of the effects of advertising through social media influencers. This research explores the role of credibility, authenticity and transparency of social media influencer communication, both in relation to the brand and to the consumers. We pay special attention to the way in which branded content is viewed by brands, marketing agencies and users.

The study of the concept of influencer marketing, defined as advertising through influencers in social media, is relevant primarily for companies and specialists in marketing and communication who use the support of influencers to promote products or services. We want the contribution of this paper to be made both theoretically and practically. The paper contributes to the development of the Persuasion Knowledge model (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Boerman et al., 2018) by exploring the role of understanding the sponsored communication model on the perception of advertising transparency. At the same time, the paper aims to paint an overview of how influencer marketing is practiced nowadays in Romania and offers recommendations for profile agencies, brand representatives, social media influencers and finally, for legislators.

Companies can use the results of this research to streamline the promotion of their products or services in a transparent manner. Thus, they can carry out influencer marketing campaigns based on the established marketing objectives, defining the target audience, the strategy or the creativity of the online message and content, choosing the influencer that fits their needs and correctly establishing the planning and budgeting part (Levin, 2020). In addition to this, the paper focuses on advertising content marking in relation to consumers, especially adolescents. Its purpose is to correctly inform users about the sponsored content and to guide them in making the purchase decision (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019).

The introduction in the European legislation of the stipulations of the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) has contributed to create some personal control over the access of such data by third parties. Social ethics comprises the code of conduct under which society judges behaviour and in order for people and organizations to evolve, it must be rigorously

drafted and respected (Lundgren & McMakin, 2009). The essential ethical aspects in online communication that we must take into account are identity, used language, consent and online privacy (Capurro & Pingel, 2002).

Given the role of credibility in the success of influencer marketing campaigns (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019), content creators strive not only to gain public trust through the activities they carry out, but also to achieve a partnership with different brands. These have both positive and negative effects on the activity of virtual celebrities. Ethical conflicts, respectively undesirable effects occur when there is a lack of honesty from the influencer and an inappropriate behavior in the online environment. These problems are reflected through the transfer of image on the promoted brands. Thus, the company that conducts influencer marketing campaigns is also affected by the loss of real and potential customers (Geiger, 2014).

According to the FTC's Endorsement Guides (2017), the truth is important to all the backgrounds a company chooses to promote itself on. Even if some people are not remunerated for the advertising they do on their own social networks, they choose to do it because they believe in those products or services, becoming part of their daily routine. Normally, promoters, influencers and all those who endorse products on social media have the obligation to specify whether or not the disseminated content is advertising. If a person uses these promotional practices voluntarily, there are no provisions that require him to specify. In order to be fair to followers, influencers are advised to use the hashtag #ad, #adv #sponsored, "paid partnership with BRAND" or other forms of ad disclosure in public posts. Whether at the beginning, at the end of the post or among other texts, it is essential that the disclosure appears clearly, so that the community is informed about the persuasive nature of the communication approach and about the sponsorship of that message (Ombudsman, 2017).

The terms "influencer" and "influential person" date back to the post-war period, when researchers Riley, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1956) studied the influence of media coverage on presidential elections (Hepp, 2018). The two-stage communication flow theory laid the foundations for the concept of opinion leader, the literature emphasizing that these virtual celebrities are, to a large extent opinion leaders (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019).

Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg (2021) define influencers as "a new type of independent third-party advocate who shapes public attitudes through blogs, tweets, and other social media applications" (Freberg et al., 2011, p. 90). Influencers are creators of authentic content (Childers, Lemon, & Hoy, 2018) who enjoy large communities of followers, online communities receptive to their recommendations (Haenlein et al., 2020). Advertising is not the only domain that uses social media influencers, but they are also used as a public relations tool



(Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2020). Campbell and Grimm (2019) define influencers as people who post on social networks, in exchange for a remuneration, whether we are talking about money or the products and services promoted.

In their paper, Kádeková & Holienčinová (2018), define the concept of influencer as “an individual with a significant number of followers on social networks, who is paid by brands to promote their products among communities, in exchange for free products, travel or for cash per every promoted post (Kádeková & Holienčinová, 2018, p. 92). Campbell and Farrell (2020) point out that influencers can be more than just individuals. In the virtual environment we may find babies and seniors, pets, flowers and even robots as celebrities. However, the better they know their categories, the greater the advertising benefits they offer to the promoted brand (Balaban & Racz, 2020).

Referring to the number of followers of the community created on social networks, the spectrum of influencers extends from nano-influencers to celebrities. Thus, the main categories comprise nano-influencers, micro-influencers, macro-influencers, mega-influencers and celebrities (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

Influencer advertising came as a response to the needs of promotional companies due to the fact that traditional methods no longer generated the desired results (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2020), being an extension of traditional Word of Mouth Marketing campaigns. (WOM) (Chopra, Avhad, & Jaju, 2020). The social media role of influencers in the advertising industry is becoming increasingly relevant. With their expanding popularity on the global level, with the developing trend of young people to use social media more frequently than the traditional media, the advertising sector has begun to quickly consider social media influencing as one of the basic options when designing promotional campaigns. Therefore, brands have understood the role of social media influencers and we see the growing number of requests to include them in their advertising campaigns. Consequently, the need for specialized advertising and public relations agencies was born and the companies specialized in influencer marketing were also created (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). This observed trend is in line with previous developments in the advertising sector aimed at diversifying and separating agencies (Balaban, 2009). In addition, influencer marketing agencies have a strong influencer career management component, thus bearing a strong resemblance to artistic entrepreneurship. Romania, in turn, is part of this trend noticed in many countries around the world.

Influencer marketing is one of the fastest growing tools for new customers. Using blogging, vlogging, short videos or photos, influencers provide followers with a perspective on

the personal and everyday life, share with them experiences and opinions on various activities, products, services or other topics of interest (De Veirman, Cauberg, & Hudders, 2017). It is considered the most effective strategy that uses individuals, respectively influencers, to increase brand awareness (Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk, & Jones, 2020), based on their power of influence, with the main purpose to impact consumers in terms of purchase decision (Lou & Yuan, 2018).

The results of an influencer marketing campaign are closely related to the factors that contribute to its efficiency. Thus, the influencer is chosen according to the purpose of the campaign, the available budget, its community, because it represents the target, and last but not least, its original content (Haenlein et al., 2020). When it comes to choosing an influencer, the decision is directly related to user interaction and engagement (Rios Marques, Casais, & Camilleri, 2020). Researchers show that attractiveness also plays an essential role in choosing the influencer, because a stronger attractiveness generates positive attitudes towards him and the intention to purchase promoted products (Taillon, Mueller, Kowalczyk, & Jones, 2020).

When it comes to measuring the marketing activities of influencers, specialists often rely on elements such as the number of interactions or the community they have (Gräve, 2019). In order to resort to the purchase action, first of all, the consumer must have a favourable attitude towards the influencer and towards the brand, later they must positively influence his purchase intention (Tobias-Mamina, Kempen, Chinomona, & Sly, 2020). However, there is also research that proves the opposite, namely that there is a side effect on the attitude towards the brand when promoting with the help of influencers (Wirtz, Sparks, & Zimbres, 2017).

The main effect that the influencers have in marketing campaigns, from the point of view of brands, is to influence the consumer's decision. This influencing factor produces a significantly greater impact if consumers identify with influencers (Shan, Chen, & Lin, 2019).

Referring to the categories of influencers mentioned above, the studies state that sponsored posts of micro-influencers have a greater impact on the purchase intention of users compared to those of mega-influencers that are lower. Instead, posts by mega-influencers increase brand awareness (Petrova, Kähr, Malär, & Hauert, 2019).

The attitude towards a sponsored post is considered by specialists to be one of the strongest factors that can influence the effectiveness of advertising, and the more credible and reliable the post is, the less the public views it as commercial persuasion (Zarouali, Poels, Walrave, & Ponnet, 2018). The more the attitudes of consumers correspond to those of the influencer, the more their respect for the influencer increases. This is a factor that influences the followers in making the purchase decision (Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Fernández

Giordano, & Lopez-Lopez, 2020). The match between the influencer and the product is an asset that contributes to the influence of consumers. At the same time, the credibility and attractiveness of the source proved to have an insignificant impact on the attitude and the intention of the followers to buy (Lim, Mohd Radzol, Cheah, & Wong, 2017).

The emotional connections that are established between influencers and the community are based on the ideality, they are relationships formed over time and based on the competence of the influencer towards them (Ki, Cuevas, Chong, & Lim, 2020). It is about para-social relations because there cannot be a dialogue (Balaban, 2021).

In the context of advertising branding, both brands and influencers have to win, because they are perceived as more credible sources (De Jans, Van de Sompel, De Veirman, & Hudders, 2020). When the influencer community identifies sponsored content and perceives it as commercial for the sole purpose of selling, they may develop unfavorable attitudes for the influencer and the brand, thereby lowering their credibility (Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Fernández Giordano, & Lopez -Lopez, 2020). Researchers argue that explicit ad disclosure of sponsored content is mandatory to give consumers the opportunity to reflect critically on the messages they interact with (De Jans, Van de Sompel, De Veirman, & Hudders, 2020).

In order to generate the best results and achieve their goals, marketing and communication specialists, together with brands, must take into account some important aspects. It is important to have an ethical manner of communication, the researchers' recommendation being to mark sponsored posts in accordance with the guidelines and regulations in force (Ye, Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021). They also propose hashtags such as #ad, #sponsored or the use of elements provided by platforms such as Instagram for a clear and ethical marking (Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Fernández Giordano, & Lopez-Lopez, 2020).

One of the most commonly used models in analysing the effects of influencer marketing campaigns is the persuasive knowledge model, even if it was developed in the context of traditional advertising. The concept of persuasive knowledge is firstly mentioned in the literature by researchers Friestad and Wright (1994). Persuasion Knowledge Model is “the way in which persuasive knowledge develops and how people use that knowledge to refine their attitudes toward products and traders” (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 1). Another definition comes from Wojdyski and Evans (2015) who state that it consists in the ability of the consumers to perceive advertising messages and to deal with them effectively. Persuasive knowledge evolves throughout life and facilitates the distinction between commercial and non-commercial content (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, & Dima, 2018; Mikołajczak-Degrauwe & Brengman, 2014; Knoll & Matthes, 2016). It develops and changes over time,

which is why persuasive knowledge often differs from culture to culture or from time to time (Friestad & Wright, 1994). It is one of the most important areas of knowledge because it aims to identify persuasive attempts from an outer point of view (Friestad & Wright, 1999).

The reason most companies turn their attention to influencers on Instagram is because it represents the most popular influencer marketing platform. Because of this, marketing and communication agencies choose to work more and more with online opinion leaders, allocating considerable budgets to promote products or services through them (Mediakix, 2019). However, in order not to mislead followers, previous studies show that hashtags that reveal a business relationship, such as #paidad and #sponsored, can increase the recognition of advertisements (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; Jung & Heo, 2019 ; Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Fernández Giordano, & Lopez-Lopez, 2020; Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018). However, a hashtag is not considered a successful element for marking sponsored content, being considered as a lack in transparency (Weismueller, Harrigan , Wang, & Soutar, 2020). Nonetheless, there are studies showing that persuasive knowledge takes precedence over advertising content, rather than their explicit marking. (Jung & Heo, 2019).

Sponsored content, known as native advertising, is increasingly common on social networks, which is why we identify effective methods of conducting information in the most transparent way possible. The advertising and the organic contents are separated by a thin line, the only obvious distinction between them consisting of the mark on the advertising content (Stubb, Nyström, & Colliander, 2019). In order for ad disclosure to be as effective as possible, the consumers must first observe the tagging in the sponsored content, so that they can later understand the message and its intent. However, for the recognition of native advertising, identifying elements that display paid content, while being adequately visible are recommended to be included. Previous research has shown a certain consumer behavior when reading information in online content. The consumers expect sponsored messages to appear at the top of the screen or on the right side of it, while the most analysed sections of a web page are F-shaped (Wojdyski & Evans, 2015).

## **Research methodology**

The young generation is constantly present in social media, which grants them easier access to information. Today's youth, who grew up with technology, avoids traditional media and is more focused on social networks, therefore becoming the target audience for marketing and communication specialists in their campaigns (Serazio, 2013; Pick & Sarstedt, 2021;

Calvert, 2008). The aspects that young people pursue in an influencer are its authenticity, credibility and transparency. They tend to make decisions based on the relationship they develop with them and look for the need to identify with them (Santiago & Castelo, 2020; Balaban & Mustache, 2019; Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020; Martínez-López, Anaya - Sánchez, Fernández Giordano, & Lopez-Lopez, 2020).

Finally, the present research points out the importance of an advertising literacy, which could be achieved by marking the sponsored content in order to encourage the development of persuasive knowledge (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, & Dima, 2018; Mikołajczak-Degrauwe & Brengman, 2014; Knoll & Matthes, 2016). Teenagers are not able to understand the cognitive nature of sponsored content yet, finding it difficult to interpret it (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019). This behavior could change if the advertising messages would contain advertising marking elements, such as hashtags or the standard marking provided by dedicated platforms (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; Jung & Heo, 2019; Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Fernández Giordano, & Lopez-Lopez, 2020; Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018).

The main objective of the research is to achieve an overview of the use and the effects of influencer marketing campaigns in Romania. The specific objectives are: 1) testing the effectiveness of ad disclosure on its recognition by adolescents, followed by determining the role certain characteristics of an influencer have on the effects of advertising through this tool and 2) determining how agencies that mediate the activity of influencers, respectively brand representatives who pay influencer marketing campaigns, perceive the role of influencers in conducting these campaigns from different points of view. It is also essential to bring out the importance of ad disclosure.

In order to achieve these objectives, the following research questions were asked:

Q1. What is the most effective way of ad disclosure as referred to its recognition by users in social media advertising through influencers?

Q2. What are the effects of marking sponsored content on advertising outcome variables: memorizing the promoted brand, attitude towards the brand, intention towards the influencer, intention to disseminate online information about the promoted brand (eWOM) and the intention to buy the promoted brand?

Q3. To what extent do users understand the economic model of sponsorship on Instagram and how is the transparency of sponsorship perceived by teenagers?

Q4. How is ad disclosure seen by specialists from the marketing and communication agencies or by brands that work with influencers without the mediation of an agency?

Q5. Is there a link between the influencer chosen for a marketing campaign and elements such as the target audience segment, the allocated budget and the communication channels used in the marketing strategy?

The research aimed to determine the role it has for adolescents: understanding the economic model of sponsored content (Boerman et al., 2018), transparency of sponsorship (Evans et al., 2019) and finally, identifying the perception of marketers and communication, regarding the realization of campaigns with influencers, respectively ad disclosure.

Within the empirical part, an experiment based on an online questionnaire with a 1x3 design was performed, with a number of  $N = 241$  participants, teenagers aged between 14 and 18, from four high schools in Romania. They were chosen depending on the accessibility to reach the students. The participation was made on a voluntary basis, clearly mentioning that it is a research carried out in a doctoral thesis. The necessary condition to participate in this experiment was the status of user of the online social network Instagram. Each questionnaire had a number of 24 questions (and scales that measure certain variables according to the literature), the difference being given by the experimental stimulus. Thus, the participants were randomly divided into three groups that viewed different photo-video materials. A number of  $N = 81$  respondents, saw the audio-story materials of Instagram story type without marking the advertisement,  $N = 78$  participants saw the identical material, but with the marking of the advertisement with the wording “Advertising”, and  $N = 82$  participants seen the material identical to the marking “Partnership paid with Garnier”, the latter being a way of ad disclosure that appears as an option of the Instagram application designed to disseminate partnerships in promotion.

As is natural in an experiment, a series of hypotheses were formulated based on the literature, hypotheses to be tested. Testing these hypotheses also provides an answer to the first two research questions. These hypotheses are:

H1. Marking the advertisement as such determines the recognition of the advertisement, in the sense that the disclosure in Romanian will have a stronger impact than the standard marking proposed by the application in English.

H2. Ad disclosure has positive effects on brand memorization.

H3. Ad disclosure determines a) increasing the credibility of the influencer, b) the perception of the influencer as an opinion leader, c) increasing the degree of sympathy for the influencer, d) increasing the level of perceived similarity of the influencer and e) increasing para-social interaction with the influencer.

H4. The credibility of the influencer a) determines a positive attitude towards the promoted brand, b) contributes to the consolidation of the intention towards the influencer, c) increases the intention to disseminate the information about the promoted brand (eWOM) and d) increases the intention to buy the promoted brand.

H5. The perception of the influencer as an opinion leader positively influences a) the attitude towards the promoted brand, b) the intention towards the influencer, c) the intention to disseminate the information about the promoted brand (eWOM) and d) respectively the intention to buy the promoted brand.

H6. The perceived degree of sympathy of the influencer has a positive effect on a) the attitude towards the promoted brand, b) the intention towards the influencer, c) the intention to disseminate the information about the promoted brand (eWOM) and d) respectively the purchase intention of the promoted brand.

H7. The similarity of the influencer with his followers has a positive effect on a) the attitude towards the promoted brand, b) the intention towards the influencer, c) the intention to disseminate the information about the promoted brand (eWOM) and d) respectively the intention to buy the promoted brand.

H8. A strong para-social interaction between the influencer and his followers has positive effects on a) the attitude towards the promoted brand, b) the intention towards the influencer, c) the intention to disseminate the information about the promoted brand (eWOM) and d) the purchase intention of the promoted brand.

H9. Advertising recognition has negative effects on: a) attitude towards the brand, b) intention to buy, c) eWOM and d) intention towards the influencer.

After the effects of advertising through social media influencers were observed through the experiment, we have found how ad disclosure influences dependent variables. In the second part of the empirical research, interviews were conducted with experts in the field of marketing and communication working in influencer marketing campaigns. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives of N = 10 brands that work with social media influencers, without agency mediation.

For both interviewed groups, which totaled 20 participants, a semi-structured interview grid was prepared and the questions were divided into five relevant categories. Therefore, in the first part we discussed the importance of influencer marketing campaigns, addressing discussions about the most relevant promotion methods for such marketing strategies. Then, the discussion turned to the segmentation part of the targeted users within these campaigns, respectively, the budgeting part necessary for conducting them. The main focus of the interview

was on the ethics part, highlighting the perspective of specialists and brands in terms of compliance with the rules of law or the code of ethics on the appropriate marking of sponsored content. Finally, we turned our attention to informative questions, specifically which are the brands with which the agencies collaborated most frequently in carrying out influencer marketing campaigns, but also the influencers most often approached, which generated the best results and collaborations.

### **Relevant results**

The present research has both theoretical and practical implications by contributing to a better understanding of the complex processes behind the social media phenomenon of influencers. The results contribute to shaping the Persuasion Knowledge model. The results are important for both influencers and the industry and why not for policy makers or legislators in the sense of adopting legislation that requires the marking of advertising. The present study contributes to the destruction of the myth that ad disclosure automatically has negative results on brand advertising. Recent research in countries such as Belgium, the United States and Australia has highlighted the positive role of transparency (Kay, Mulcahy, & Parkinson, 2020; Evans, Wojdyski, & Hoy, 2019; Woodroof, Howie, Syrdal, & VanMeter, 2020). Such effects could be observed through the experiment described above in Romania as well.

Through the online experiment, we managed to sketch the image of an influencer who can be successful among young teenagers: a trustworthy person, with a high degree of sympathy, with true leadership qualities, who will succeed in successfully promoting products through social media. Transparent, accurate, easily recognizable disclosure contributes to the success of an influencer among consumers who are digital natives familiar with this type of advertising practice, even if it are not so common among local influencers. The present study describes relevant aspects of the relationship that adolescents have with influencers in social networks and with advertising within them. The participants in the research, teenagers between 14 and 18 years old, proved to have a certain understanding of the role that advertising has in financing influencers on social networks, mainly Instagram, as an interaction platform. The presence of sponsorship ad disclosure in the Instagram story viewed significantly increased the recognition of advertising. For teenagers, we can say that revealing promotional content using the term “advertising” as a marker in their mother tongue has increased its degree of recognition. Moreover, the participating adolescents proved an average and above average level of understanding of the economic model of the sponsored content and appreciated the



transparency of the sponsorship. The online questionnaire experiment has enabled the formulation of documented answers to the first three research questions highlighting the user's perspective, in this particular case, the teenagers' perspective. The next chapter is based on the interviews with experts and the perspective of the marketing industry in Romania regarding the influencer marketing phenomenon.

Analyzing the interviews from the perspective of the means of advertising functions that social media of influencers use (Campbell and Farrell, 2020) we notice the outlining of the audience component. Both agency and brand representatives pointed out that an influencer is chosen for a campaign based on his loyal target audience consisting of followers on social networks. Hence, the influencer manages to communicate with a well-defined segment. The influencer's notoriety was not questioned, but his role as an expert in the field in which he works and his role as a consumer testing products for his community were emphasized. In terms of the management dimension, the importance of strategy elements and the production of quality content have been highlighted and are important for agencies.

The overall picture and trends in the influencer marketing market that emerge from the qualitative approach of discussing with representatives of brands and agencies is that of a dynamic field, in which the degree of professionalism of communicators differs depending on social media experience and the size of the following community.

The ad disclosure was associated with a gesture of transparency, of honesty, something that remains exclusively up to the social media influencer. The positive role of international brands that manifest good practices in ad disclosure is worth emphasizing. One of the most important conclusions is that clear legislation governing ad disclosure, as is the case in other countries, is more than necessary.

Through thematic analysis of the experts interviews we wanted to offer an answer to the research questions Q4 and Q5. Even though, clearly, there are limits to this research that come from the theoretical sample, without pretensions to generalize the results, we managed to outline some ideas that allow us to understand how efficient the influencer marketing practice is in Romania and especially how transparent communication of advertising content is perceived through this new tool.

### **Conclusions, limits and future research directions**

Influencer marketing is the answer of specialists and brands when it comes to creative and original campaigns, aimed at young audiences who avoid the use of traditional advertising

communication channels. However, the decision is up to the users, who receive their recommendations. The present research manages to present some conclusive aspects regarding the effects of advertising through influencers on teenagers. In order to have a more complex vision, not only from the user's perspective, the semi-structured interviews allow us to see the experts' point of view on carrying out influencer marketing campaigns.

This study contributes to a better understanding of how influencer marketing works. Thus, through the online questionnaire-based experiment, it was observed that the participating adolescents appreciate the transparency of advertising and understand the economic model of sponsorship that lies behind advertising campaigns through influencers.

Ad disclosure has significant effects on the perception of the influencer as a leader. The research results are in the sense of information from the literature (Yuan & Lou, 2019). The perceived credibility and sympathy of an influencer has effects at emotional level, translated by high values of attitude towards the brand (Balaban & Mustătea, 2019). Participants' digital behavior was also significantly influenced. Thus, the influencer's leadership qualities and a strong para-social relationship lead to an increase in the intention to disseminate (eWOM) and the intention towards the influencer (eg to follow his / her content on social media).

Thus, the present research gives influencers and specialists in marketing and communication an additional reason to consider ad disclosure as a relevant and important practice that has no negative effects. In addition, policy makers are advised to amend existing legislation, making it compatible with international and European law, in order to impose the marking of advertising through social media influencers.

Bearing in mind the semi-structured interviews conducted with marketing and communication specialists, they offer us another perspective of ad disclosure. There are hesitations although firm intervention through a law would be the solution. Before choosing the influencer they work with, the specialists need to follow a clearly defined process that primarily addresses the target audience of both the campaign and the influencer. They see ad disclosure as a gesture of transparency on the part of the influencer for their community, therefore it is not being stipulated in the contract signed between the two parties. International brands are true examples of good practice in implementing advertising branding.

Even if we aimed for an optimal balance that ensures a high degree of internal and external validity, aspects presented in the methodology part and in the experiment presentation, the experimental research has **its limits**. First, we mention the lack of control over the time that the participants spent watching the stimuli and the fact that it was not possible to control whether they did so with sound or not, even if the auditory ad disclosure was not included. The

results should rather be understood as trends and cannot be generalized to the entire population of Instagram users in Romania. In addition, the participants are high school students, coming entirely from urban areas and have a relatively high degree of education compared to the entire population of adolescents in Romania (some of them not being high school students).

Another limitation of the research is that the results come from a study that, although it used a carefully developed experimental material and took into account the external validity, it displayed a single exposure of the participants. In real life, users of social media applications are subjected to multiple exposures that sometimes happen even daily. The multitude of exposures certainly has effects not only on the effect-type variables of advertising (at the cognitive, affective and behavioral level) but also on the way an influencer is perceived in terms of credibility, sympathy, similarity, of leadership qualities (Reinikainen, Munnukka, Maity, & Luoma-aho, 2020).

The implications of the study are relevant to decision makers governing ad disclosure and to marketers. The number of followers, the engagement and the field, are not the only aspects that must be taken into account when choosing an influencer to promote a brand. His leadership qualities, credibility and his degree of sympathy perceived by followers are factors just as relevant that contribute to the success of a campaign. The relationship quality between followers and the influencer is a good predictor of the success of a campaign aimed to increase sales and brand awareness.

The study in question reminds the influencers about the responsibilities they have in relation to themselves, if they want to be successful in the medium and long term. The transparency of sponsorships increases their appreciation among the created community.

The research results are relevant for advertising experts, social media influencers and lawmakers. The consumer should not be excluded from this equation because with the help of “advertisement” and “paid partnership” type disclosures, he can acquire advertising literacy skills and is educated in the sense of recognizing sponsored content. Thus, their purchase decision will be an informed one.

Based on previous research (De Jans, Van de Sompel, De Veirman, & Hudders, 2020) the experiment justifies the use of appropriate ad disclosure in Instagram stories. As shown above, the results of this study have implications for policy makers and monitoring institutions, for influencers in social networks and for marketers.

The honesty of the communicator, in this particular case of the influencer, is relevant and appreciated. Sponsorship transparency is something that influencers need to keep in mind in order to build a long lasting relationship with their communities. In line with previous studies,

this paper highlights the positive (empirically proven) effects of the practice of so-called “transparent authenticity” (Audrezet, Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020) as an opportunity for influencers and as evidence of not only honesty, but also respect to their followers, who have proven that they recognize the economic model of sponsored content.

The image that the experts interviews managed to outline is that of a dynamic and emerging field. The experts have confirmed what the theoretical model of American researchers Colin Campbell and Justine Rapp Farrell (2020) stated, namely the complexity of the activity of an influencer, that of producer and content distributor, who is also a manager of the relationship with his community of followers.

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