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PHD THESIS

Advertising endorsed by digital celebrities. A
Comparative perspective of Instagram and TikTok usage

SUMMARY

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Social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok are an integral part of the media consumption behaviour of young people around the world. Romania is no exception. These new communication channels, which emerged in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, have undergone a process of maturation and diversification in recent years. Thus, it is not only young people who use social networks, as other age segments of the population are also present on certain platforms (Balaban et al., 2018; Phua et al., 2017a, 2017b). Young people's consumption behaviour increasingly includes less and less consumption of traditional media, with smart TVs being used more and more for watching the generous offerings of streaming platforms such as Netflix, Disney Plus or HBO Max. The smart mobile phone has become a veritable appendage of individuals, a sort of remote control that they always keep close to them. They use a range of apps, the most used of which are social networks. Advertising has found a special place on these social networks, first in the form of sponsored posts or posts on brand accounts, and later the phenomenon of digital celebrities, or influencers, as they are still called, emerged, although they prefer the syntagm of content creator (Balaban, 2021a; Schaefer, 2016).

In recent years, using the theoretical framework of the Persuasive Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), several studies have been conducted examining the impact of ad disclosure on advertising content posted by influencers (e.g., Evans et al., 2017; Naderer et al., 2021). The relevance of disclosure advertising in a clear, audience-understandable, strongly visual manner has been highlighted to enable recognition of native advertising, such as through influencers (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Mureşan, 2022; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). In addition, young audiences value disclosure advertising as a gesture of transparency (Wojdyski et al., 2018), and any initial negative impact on brand attitudes fades over time (Evans et al., 2022). Research on the impact of ad disclosure on advertising outcome variables (brand attitude, purchase intention, brand recall) has been frequently conducted testing content posted on Facebook (e.g. Mayrhofer et al., 2020), Instagram (e.g. Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Naderer, 2022; Boerman, 2020; Evans et al., 2022; Janssen et al., 2022) and YouTube (e.g. Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020). To date,

no research has been conducted that tracks and analyses video content posted on Instagram and TikTok in a comparative manner; this is the most important contribution of the present work.

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of digital celebrities and their advertising relevance, investigating the effects of advertising disclosure on Instagram and TikTok. The central perspective of the paper is a comparative one, which has at its core the use of social networks by young audiences. The paper aims to comparatively analyse the impact of advertising through influencers or digital celebrities on young adults, those aged 18-26. The disclosure of advertising as such and its effects on the audience, within this new advertising tool of influencers, is also investigated in this thesis. Similar to advertorials or product placement, influencer advertising needs to be branded accordingly. A fundamental principle is that any ethical advertising practice involves marking it for recognition by users (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Mureşan, 2022; Boerman, 2020; Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2016). In this context, it is worth recalling that it was only in 2008 that the European Commission issued a directive obliging Member States to mark this tool as advertising during television broadcasts or other media formats. Until 2008, this tool was in a grey area and was often labelled as misleading advertising (Balaban, 2021b).

Influencer marketing is a tool that has gradually penetrated the Romanian market in recent years. It is a global trend and Romania is also part of this trend (Mureşan, 2022). An influencer is a person, a user who has a high audience on social networks, in other words, enjoys popularity online (Marwick, 2015a). Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter (renamed X), are the most commonly used social networks for exercising online influence by digital celebrities (Levin, 2020). Influencing power refers to the fact that followers respect the influencer's opinions, take their opinions into account and, not least, feel that they can relate to them. Most of the time influencers expose their lives, in other words, a part of their daily activities are presented through platforms. The concept of social influence as highlighted in the work of psychologist Cialdini (2001, 2004) has given the name of influencers to these digital personalities. The concept of social influence encompasses a range of phenomena that stem from socialization, including obedience, compliance and persuasion (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Basically, influence is achieved at the cognitive, affective and conative or behavioural level. People can exert their influence on others and contribute to changing opinions and attitudes or even cause certain behaviours. As we have shown above, users of social networking platforms spend much of their time online, where they

interact with other users. Therefore, a large part of social interactions and also social influence phenomena happen online (Balaban, Szabolics & Chirică, 2022).

Influencers can be classified according to the number of followers on social networks into several categories: nano influencers (who have under 10,000 followers), micro influencers (who have between 10,000 and 100,000 followers), macro influencers (with over 100. 000 followers) and mega influencers (over 1 million followers) (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). And for some of them, especially macro and mega influencers, what started as a hobby has become their profession and their job, which provides them with a substantial income (Liljander et al., 2015). The characteristics of influencer marketing differentiate it from traditional advertising. The most important aspect is that advertising reaches the target consumer anywhere in the world and at any time of the day, in spaces where previously advertising did not have access. Individuals carry their smartphone with them most of the time, social networks are used in moments of relaxation and as an antidote to boredom. The mobile phone is the first thing users touch early in the morning when they wake up and the last thing they see before they fall asleep. In addition, we are talking about the clear demarcation between the public and private sphere (Balaban & Mustătea, 2021). Advertising by influencers is a form of native advertising. Influencers mainly post stories on Instagram, videos on TikTok and YouTube, and the consumer sees content from celebrities' lives followed by content posted by friends, the distinction between what is advertising and what is not advertising is hard to perceive. Therein lies, in the view of some researchers, the effectiveness of influencer marketing (Mustătea, 2021). Empirical studies have highlighted the effectiveness of native advertising, especially on social networks (Johnson et al., 2019).

Countries with a longer history, by a few years of course, of this phenomenon of advertising via digital celebrities, such as the United States or Germany, have implemented a legislative framework conducive to the specific disclosure of these advertising tools and effective structures for monitoring the implementation of the legislation in force (Boerman, 2020; Hudders et al., 2021).

One of the misconceptions behind the reluctance to disclosure advertising in countries such as Romania is that once the user is confronted with a persuasive message, the rejection reaction is immediate (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Mureșan, 2022; Mucundorfeanu, 2021). The present paper aims to contradict this idea, both based on the literature in recent years highlighting the role

of sponsorship transparency (Campbell & Evans, 2018; Wojdyski et al., 2018) and on the basis of the online questionnaire experiment applied in this PhD research.

In order to understand how influencer advertising works, it is first necessary to understand how social networks came into being, what principles these social networks are based on and how they have developed over the last 20 years or so. It is necessary to understand how the Internet has transformed from a medium more akin to linear television in the Web 1.0 era to the user-generated content that marked the birth of social networks.

After a first chapter in the paper defines the notion of social influence (Cialdini 2001, 2004) that led to the name of influencers on social networks, and presents significant issues regarding the advertising activity of these actors and the implications for how advertising is created and distributed (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Campbell & Grimm, 2019), the paper continues with the second chapter, through a comprehensive description of the evolution of social networks, the evolution of tools and functions that are used on social networks. In this chapter it is presented how exactly user interaction interfaces emerged, how likes emerged, how microblogging emerged, how augmented reality filters emerged, and many other tools that today's youth use with ease in their daily lives when creating content and interacting on social networks.

The context of the present research is the phenomenon of influencer marketing in Romania, the focus being on the communication, public relations, and advertising industry in our country. The phenomenon of influencers presents them as opinion makers in the online environment. They can be seen as opinion leaders, in the sense of the definition of opinion leaders as conceptualized by the two-step communication flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). They are, as outlined above, not only individuals who have many followers online, but also personalities who develop a strong relationship with their community of followers. This relationship is quantified in cyberspace in the number of reactions, comments, likes and direct messages generated by the content they post on social networks. Unlike traditional opinion leaders researched by communication sciences since the mid-20th century, in analysis through face-to-face interviews and questionnaires (Balaban, 2009; Coman, 2016; Dobrescu et al., 2007), digital opinion leaders are easy to observe due to the aspects specified. Like the classic opinion leaders, they keep up with the news in their fields of interest and provide more or less exclusive information for their

followers. An online opinion leader shows interest in their community of followers which they consider as an entity (Lou, 2021). In this sense, there are obvious similarities with traditional opinion leaders. However, when it comes to their advertising activity, influencers perform complex functions as celebrities, audience managers and social media managers all at the same time. Influencers are perceived as celebrities, experts in an area of interest to their audiences and consumers. A relevant aspect is the so-called peer element, i.e., the user perceives the influencer as similar to him/her. This phenomenon is particularly observable in the growth stages of influencers, when they are at the beginning of their career or in the particular case of nano and micro influencers. Regarding audience targeting, influencers are interested in the process of targeting, attracting attention and increasing followers respectively. As a social media manager, an influencer is a strategist, content producer, and manager of his or her community of followers, respectively (Campbell & Farrell, 2020). The literature has pointed out that as influencers professionalize as advertising actors, they become involved in strategic communication activities (Borchers & Enke, 2021; Enke & Borchers, 2019).

There are similarities between influencer marketing and what in classic advertising we call celebrity endorsement. Celebrity endorsement is the involvement of traditional celebrities in advertising through their presence on billboards, in TV commercials or even as brand ambassadors. This is a phenomenon that emerged at the end of the 19th century (Erdogan, 1999).

Since the advent of media, the concept of celebrity and media persona has emerged. The influence of celebrities has had a significant impact on fashion, influencing lifestyles and the behaviour of the general public. Celebrities enjoy credibility among their admirers (Ohanian, 1991). Consumers began to copy celebrities' styles, aspiring to their lifestyle (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017). The internet, and especially social media, has led to significant changes in the notion of celebrity due to increased accessibility. The public has started to follow not only actors, athletes, musicians on social media, but also celebrities who have become famous overnight on social media. The public started following non-traditional celebrities who became known through social media platforms and online media consumption (Nouri, 2018).

In a systematic review of studies published in peer-reviewed journals on influencers and influencer marketing, Hudders et al. (2021) point out that there are three categories of factors that

influence the persuasive effect of advertising messages posted by influencers. In this regard, the literature mentions influencer-related elements, message-related elements and user-related elements. The perceived credibility of the influencer, their attractiveness, the parasocial relationships they develop with the audience, the congruence between the values promoted and the brands for which the advertising is made (Naderer et al., 2021), are the most important influencer-related elements. Storytelling, the construction of a desirable image, is the main asset of content. The frequency of advertising messages also plays an important role, thus Borchers et al. (2022) point out that the promotion of a single brand by an influencer over a period of time is superior to the promotion of several brands simultaneously.

Content creator, multiplier, protagonist of advertising messages and moderator, the influencer is a relevant advertising actor of the present time that deserves research. Understanding how advertising in digital spaces is carried out in contemporary times is not possible without understanding how influencers are involved in the process of developing and disseminating advertising content. But before presenting the empirical approach of this paper, it is of interest to talk about the evolution of online communication, the development of social networks, which is the facilitator of the emergence of influencers.

The third chapter, the one dedicated to the theory addressed, is the chapter in which concepts such as native advertising are presented, models on the recognition of native advertising are presented, such as the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994), and at the same time the use and gratification model is presented which explains why media is used, in this particular case, why social media platforms are used.

One of the most commonly used theoretical models that allow us to understand why media is used is the Uses-and-Gratifications Approach Model (Balaban, 2009; Coman, 2016; Dobrescu et al., 2007). The Uses-and-Gratifications Approach (UGA) model aims to find an answer to the question of why recipients use media. The model was developed about half a century ago in the context of traditional media (Katz, 1959; Katz et al., 1973), but quickly found its applicability in the context of new media and social networks.

UGA talks about the needs of individuals that are met through media consumption and the social and psychological stages they go through when interacting with media, from the perspective

of the needs that media meet. It is a relevant model that addresses media use and consumption (Balaban, 2009; Coman, 2016; Dobrescu et al., 2007).

The five assumptions of the theory can be summarized as follows: the audience has an active attitude; media consumption is carried out for a specific purpose, to satisfy a specific need; the audience is the one that establishes a link between the need and the media offer that can bring gratification or reward; media consumption is only one of the possibilities to satisfy needs; receivers are aware of their own needs and can describe them; the appreciation of values and of the cultural meaning of communication are not relevant to this model (Balaban, 2009; Coman, 2016; Dobrescu et al, 2007).

With media diversification, the UGA model has added new motivations, especially in the context of social networks, where the need for interaction plays a key role in determining users to be active on these platforms. For example, the motivation for use and perceived rewards of using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat by students are diverse, respectively. Alhabash and Ma (2017) determine from empirical research conducted in the United States of America that the reason why students use the above mentioned platforms are: habit, the need for entertainment, to spend leisure time, due to the attractiveness of the environment, to share information, to express themselves, to self-document their lives, and for social interaction. These motivations are slightly different from platform to platform, so the need for entertainment drives users to use Instagram and Snapchat, while habit and the fact that many people use that platform are behind the motivation to use Facebook. It should be kept in mind that motivations may differ depending on age, and at certain life stages, differences may occur (Balaban et al., 2018).

This chapter also presents the further development of the Persuasion Knowledge model, differentiating conceptual and affective dimensions respectively (Boerman et al., 2018) and the Covert Advertising Recognition and Effects (CARE) model by American researchers Wojdyski and Evans (2020) which presents the process of interaction with native advertising in a complex manner.

The model was introduced by researchers Marian Friesdad and Peter Wright in 1994 in the paper "The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts". According to the authors, consumers have a set of beliefs about the goals, strategies and agents

used in persuasion attempts, and these beliefs influence how they react to such attempts. PKM also implies that advertisers may have views about how to influence customers that differ from those of the customers themselves. To create persuasion strategies that work, the model stresses the importance of understanding the persuasion expertise of customers. The agent refers to the entity trying to persuade the individual(s) through a persuasive message. For example, according to the model, the agent is the brand or marketing and/or advertising agency. Consumers referred to as targets, translated as "targets of advertising messages", are the individuals who are the subjects of persuasive attempts (Mucundorfeanu, 2021).

Boerman et al. (2018) postulates six dimensions of PKM, namely recognizing sponsored content, understanding persuasive intent, recognizing the commercial source of sponsored content, understanding persuasive tactics and strategies, understanding the economic model of sponsored content, and awareness of the self-efficacy of sponsored content (Boerman et al., 2018, p. 671). In recent years, as reflected in the dimensions presented, the model has emphasized the role of three levels of effects manifestation: the cognitive level marked by message recognition and the media user's knowledge of advertising, the affective level marked by reactions of scepticism, and the behavioural level (Boerman et al., 2018). The six dimensions refer to cognitive effects and are referred to in the literature as conceptual knowledge of persuasive communication.

According to Boerman et al. (2018), sponsored content recognition refers to the user's ability to separate and identify sponsored content from other media content. Especially in the current context of native advertising, this practice is essential to increase the likelihood of consumers to activate the other components of PKM. In order to evaluate an advertising message, the first step is to identify it (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Naderer, 2022). This probability decreases significantly when individuals are unaware of the persuasion attempt. It is difficult for users to distinguish between sponsored content and content for which an influencer receives no remuneration in return. This is where advertising disclosing policies come in. Thus, disclosing sponsored content needs to be done transparently and clearly (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Naderer, 2022; Evans et al., 2022; Evans et al., 2017; Janssen & Franssen, 2019; Naderer et al., 2021).

With the development of the influencer marketing field, empirical research has highlighted that ad disclosure does not automatically lead to negative emotional reactions, and audiences increasingly value the transparency of sponsored content (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Mureşan, 2022; Campell & Evans, 2018; van Reijmersdal et al., 2023). This is why the CARE model (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020) has been extensively presented in this chapter. This model is complex because, in addition to the elements of persuasion knowledge, it also adds certain message components; for example, the presence of a brand or intent to sell something and the time in which exposure to this message is achieved, which allow native advertising to be recognised as advertising. In addition, the model also provides for certain factors that contribute to mitigating the negative effects of advertising recognition, such as, firstly, the transparency of the message and, secondly, certain intrinsic factors related to the user and their motivations for pursuing native advertising (e.g. discount codes, offers that interest them). The model clearly shows the types of effects that can occur when advertising is recognised and affective reactions such as scepticism set in. The effects can be cognitive reactions (on memory), affective reactions (on attitude towards brand, product, influencers) and behavioural reactions (e.g. decrease in purchase intention or intention to follow an influencer).

Chapter four discusses legal and ethical issues regarding the disclosure of advertising posted by influencers on social media platforms . Examples of countries such as the United States of America, Austria, Belgium and Germany are shown. Then the ethical perspective on advertising disclosure is discussed, and not only because it also refers to the work of influencers in general and their responsibility as opinion leaders.

This work has the following **research** objectives:

- O1. Explore how the two platforms Instagram and TikTok are used, which are the most commonly used platforms by teenagers and young adults in Romania.
- O2. Testing the effectiveness of influencers' advertising disclosure on recognition.
- O3. Researching the impact of influencer advertising on Instagram and TikTok platforms on influencers' perceived credibility and further on advertising outcome variables (attitude towards the brand and purchase intention respectively).

The thesis aims to answer the following research **questions**:

- I1. From a user perspective, what are the special features of Instagram and TikTok platforms in terms of advertising content created and distributed by influencers?
- I2. What are the features of Instagram and TikTok that are reflected in the motivation to follow influencers on both platforms and the way they view their content?
- I3. What effect does influencer advertising disclosure have on advertising recognition on the two platforms TikTok and Instagram?
- I4. What effects does advertising disclosure have on the influencer's credibility and how does the influencer's credibility influence the brand attitude and purchase intention of the promoted brand?

The research methods that were used to answer these research questions were the focus group and the online questionnaire experiment. The answers to the first two research questions (I1-I2) were obtained on the basis of focus groups, and the answers to the last two research questions were given using the online questionnaire experiment (I3-I4). Although it started from the research questions, the following hypotheses were tested **in the questionnaire experiment**:

- H1. Disclosure advertisements for influencer-generated content helps to recognize the advertisement.
- H2. Advertising recognition triggers the activation of persuasion knowledge of users.
- H3. Advertising recognition helps to increase users' scepticism of the respective content.
- H4. Activating persuasive knowledge has negative effects on a) the attitude towards the promoted brand and b) the purchase intention of the promoted brand.
- H5. User scepticism has negative effects on a) the attitude towards the promoted brand and b) the purchase intention of the promoted brand.
- H6. Disclosure advertisements for content generated by an influencer helps to increase their credibility.
- H7. The credibility of an influencer has a positive effect on a) the attitude towards the promoted brand and b) the purchase intention of the promoted brand.

Chapter five is intended to introduce the methodology which is a mixed one, including a qualitative approach through group interviews (N= 25) and the online questionnaire experiment (

N=183) respectively. The two focus groups were held with a number of N=25 participants and took place in the period June– November 2021. The first focus took place online on April 21, 2021. There were 13 participants. The second focus group was also held online on December 6, 2021 with 12 participants. At the time of the focus groups' participation, the participants were students of the Department of Communication and Public Relations, year 1, at the Faculty of Administrative Political Sciences and Communication at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. The first group focus was carried out with students from the Romanian line, and the second group focus with students from the German line, in both cases being the bachelor's program Communication and Public Relations. Respondents were aged between 19–21 years, with 13 women and 12 men participating. Focus groups were held in Romanian, as this was the native language of the participants.

The empirical part of this work includes focus groups made with participants, both female and male, from the young adult age segment between the ages of 18 and 25. These group interviews discussed how the TikTok platform is used, the reasons for adopting it and how the interaction with digital celebrities takes place on the TikTok platform. An important focus topic for the groups was how influencers advertise and mark this advertising on Instagram and TikTok respectively. Since the work proposed from the outset a comparative approach to these two platforms that are loved by young adults, this discussion of the advantages and disadvantages and the comparative use of the two platforms was encouraged in the focus groups. The results of the group interviews are presented in detail in a chapter dedicated to them.

In conclusion, the main ideas that emerge from the focus groups show us that the TikTok platform is a relevant platform for young people, has its specificity, which is mainly the entertainment dimension. There is a new generation of active influencers on TikTok, and in the opinion of respondents, advertising tagging is less visible here than on other platforms.

When asked how young adult respondents became TikTok users, there are some answers that have been very frequent. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of the platform by users because it has created a favourable environment, namely a lot of free time and limited face-to-face interaction with friends. The decision to open an account on this platform was in most cases driven by friends already using the platform posting, cross-platform messages on

Instagram or the fact that they sent various videos and thus sparked the curiosity of their colleagues and friends to open an account on the app in order to be able to view more similar content directly. Social pressure, the theme of not being left out, the FOMO effect (Franks et al., 2018) we were talking about in the theoretical section certainly played an important role at the time when the platform was adopted.

The main motivations leading to the use of TikTok can fall into the four main categories postulated by the usage and reward model: information needs, i.e., cognitive needs, affective needs such as the need for entertainment and escape, socio-integrative needs and, respectively, usual needs. In this respect, the present research is in consensus with previous studies that had analysed other platforms (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). When talking about cognitive needs, the need for information in TikTok, the infotainment dimension should be emphasized because there is a need for information, but the information on that is presented as entertainment. Again, we emphasize the idea that entertainment is the essence of this platform and not any kind of entertainment, but short-lived entertainment where extremely short videos succeed and create an increased appetite for users who end up using the platform as our respondents have told us for extremely long. And in this respect, the results of qualitative research are in line with previous research (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Kennedy, 2020), the results of this research showing even 6–9 hours of daily interaction with this platform. The answers highlighted the relationship between TikTok and meeting socio-integrative needs, those related to the need to interact with friends and colleagues, as well as a kind of need for fame that this platform nurtures (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020). However, this is an extremely short-term reputation that manifests itself in a large number of views. Thus, the participants emphasized that the specificity of the platform's algorithm is to stretch a trap to users who want to become famous by the fact that certain videos without any logical explanation receive a large number of views, and others do not receive so much attention. As a user of the TikTok platform, the usual needs are also set up and the platform is differentiated by this entertainment, which is offered in an extremely short time frame. TikTok is therefore a platform that can be used in extremely short leisure time, such as during a break between two courses or when there is a waiting period for an activity.

Respondents broadly presented how they identified and tracked influencers on TikTok or not. Firstly, she thinks that the most successful influencers are those who have started on this

platform and understand its entertainment specifics, with extremely short videos that reflect authenticity and spontaneity, because unlike the Instagram platform, we don't have to deal with content where aesthetics come first. Respondents criticized an experienced influencer who, in the desire to attract new followers, simply entered the TikTok platform to post what they otherwise posted on Instagram. It is necessary to go on the path of diversification, on the path of adapting to the specifics of the platform. Advertising in turn makes its presence felt through influencers, and on the TikTok platform in the year these group interviews were conducted in 2021, respondents complained about the lack of advertising tagging. If this is marked, which happens quite rarely, it is marked by hashtags and lost in a larger text block. However, respondents spoke about their strategies for recognizing advertising and that they are not bothered to see such advertising messages on TikTok, because it is a completely normal presence in this context. These results are similar to what Phua et al. (2017a, 2017b) discovered about the advertising utility of platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat.

Participants illustrated some understanding of what the literature calls the influencer-sponsored content model (Boerman et al., 2018), an element of the persuasive knowledge model. The results reflect the comparative approach of platform users and in the case of TikTok, which they compare with Instagram in particular. In this regard, the results of previous research (e.g. Boczkowski et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022) are also confirmed by this study.

The quantitative approach is the online questionnaire experiment with four randomly distributed groups of participants: one group of participants watching advertisement on TikTok without tagging the advertisement, another group of participants watching advertisement on TikTok with tagging the advertisement, the third group of participants watching the same advertisement but on Instagram without tagging the advertisement, and finally a fourth group watching the same advertisement message with tagging the advertisement on the Instagram platform. In other words, research has taken place that includes two experimental factors, tagging or not tagging advertisement, respectively distributed advertisement on the TikTok platform versus the Instagram platform. The assumptions that have been tested in this research are based on the literature, the Persuasion Knowledge Model (Boerman et al., 2018; Friestad & Wright, 1994) and the theories about the efficiency and role of source credibility in digital celebrity advertising. The results showed that advertising disclosure is important, but there are other mechanisms than

advertising disclosure that allow users to recognize native advertising as advertising, according to the CARE model (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020). At the same time, the impact of advertising disclosure on the credibility of the source was found to positively influence the attitude towards the promoted brand and the purchase intention.

The online questionnaire experiment took place in April-May 2021 with a number of N=183 exclusively female participants, aged between 18 and 38 (M=21.21, SD=3.33), 68.3% high school graduates, 26.2% bachelor's degree graduates and 5.2% master's degree graduates, selected via Facebook and Instagram platforms. Table 3 shows the four groups. The participants participated voluntarily, being bachelor's, master's, and doctoral students of the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, the faculty within which the author of this work is registered as a PhD student.

The experimental material was developed with the support of a real micro-influencer, with 12,000 followers on Instagram at the time of the study (Ioana Todoran @ioanatodorann) and 3,000 followers on TikTok at the time of the experiment. This, as well as sharing the questionnaire link via social media after participation in this study was promoted in the seminar activities, contributed to increasing the external validity of the experiment. Group 1 (Instagram content without tagging) first viewed the influencer's Instagram account insights, followed by a story promoting the Moroccanoil brand, consisting of hair care products. This Instagram story video also features the influencer, with dynamic music in the background, and the influencer does not address users either verbally or in writing. There is no advertising disclosure. Group 2 (Instagram content with tagged ad) viewed the same content as group 1, with the only exception of tagging the ad as #ad. Group 3 (TikTok content without tagging) first viewed the TikTok Influencer's account insights, followed by the same Moroccanoil brand promotion video, consisting of hair care products. In order not to have unwanted differentiators between stimuli that could play the role of latent variables that would unwantedly influence the experiment results, such as the number of followers, we have changed the number of followers in the TikTok account information to be similar to that on Instagram (12,000). The literature has identified the effects of follower numbers on the effects of advertising through influencers (Janssen et al., 2022), which is why we found it important to have the same number of followers on both platforms. Basically, the video content distributed was in the form of a TikTok, without disclosure the ad. Group 4 (TikTok content with tagged ad) saw the

same stimulus as group 3, the only difference being the tagging of the ad as #ad. It should be noted that for reasons of internal validity the same disclosure formula has been retained. Experimental stimuli are presented as screenshots in Appendix 3 of the paper.

The most important conclusion from this experiment is that tagging advertising in the form of “#ad #sponsored followed by @BRAND” is not an effective type of tagging either on Instagram or TikTok, thereby producing recognition of content as advertising. In this respect, the results of the present research do not differ from the results of similar studies which showed that the Paid partnership with BRAND label (Balaban et al., 2020; Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Mureşan, 2022; De Jans et al., 2020; Naderer et al., 2021) is much more efficient. When the methodological design was made, hash tagging was chosen because after observing influencer accounts on TikTok and focus groups, it was found to be the most common type of hash tagging on this platform. ANOVA analyses showed that there are differences in advertising recognition on the two platforms analysed, on TikTok advertising recognition had higher values. Analyses showed that hypotheses **H2, H5a and H5b, H6 and H7a and H7b** are confirmed. Hypotheses **H1, H3 and H4a and H4b** are not confirmed.

In the case of participants who recognized the viewed video as of an advertising nature under these conditions, this recognition led to the activation of persuasive knowledge. In this respect, this research confirms the model of persuasive knowledge. The first serial mediation type analysis with as dependent variable advertising disclosure and moderators advertising recognition or activation of persuasive knowledge, and as dependent variables brand attitude and purchase intention, represents the path of cognitive nature according to the Persuasive Knowledge Model (Boerman et al., 2018; Eisend et al., 2020). Participants who have acknowledged advertising have activated persuasive knowledge that represents what they know about advertising. The persuasive knowledge led further to a significant impact on the brand attitude and purchase intention of the promoted product. Therefore, the research results are consistent with most empirical research that highlights that the cognitive, conceptual pathway is frequently activated. Ad tagging acts as a trigger for this process of advertising recognition, and when advertising is recognized, users remember their knowledge of advertising (Boerman et al., 2018; Mucundorfeanu, 2021).

The second mediation, which starts from the independent advertising disclosure variable and mediates advertising recognition and user scepticism, the independent variables being brand attitude and purchase intention, represents the affective path in the persuasive knowledge model (Boerman et al., 2018). As the literature shows (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Mureşan, 2022), it is not enough for individuals to be aware, as users, of the persuasive nature of native advertising as is influencer advertising. In other words, it is not enough to recognize advertising, another important side is the affective component, i.e. scepticism. The analysed empirical data does not allow conclusions to be drawn that this affective route is activated. It was noted that the disclosure of the advertisement did not lead to its recognition, nor did the participants who acknowledged the advertisement develop any feelings of scepticism. Only participants who were sceptical of the message (but not necessarily because of the recognition of it as advertising) reported lower attitudes to the brand and lower buying intent than participants who were not as sceptical. It would be interesting to take a deeper look at why this phenomenon happens where the cognitive pathway is activated, and the affective pathway is not activated. Balaban, Mucundorfeanu and Mureşan (2022) noted the same phenomenon in the case of influencer advertising for a group of female teenagers. One possible explanation would be that at this stage, when the audience is already familiar with influencer advertising, it has probably started to become aware of this phenomenon and at the same time to develop an attitude of acceptance of this phenomenon. Influencer marketing no longer elicits adverse affective reactions, as probably happened at the beginning of this phenomenon, which has been demonstrated in previous research. This is a phenomenon worth looking at in future research.

In the experiment, the effects of advertising disclosure on the influencer's credibility were also analysed. Advertising labelling thus has a positive effect on the influencer's credibility through mediation through advertising recognition. Moreover, advertising disclosure has indirectly positive effects on brand attitude and purchase intention. The analysis of this route, mediated by the influencer's credibility, illustrates that the results are significant. This research confirms the results of previous studies that highlight the positive role of influencer credibility on the advertising outcome (Balaban & Mustăţea, 2019; Munnukka et al., 2016; Nafees et al., 2021; Reinikainen et al. 2020).

This study confirms the importance of advertising disclosure and is part of the series of studies that contradict the hypothesis that advertising disclosure generates negative effects on advertising. The transparency of sponsorship probably plays a positive role, as previous studies have shown (Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Mureşan, 2022). The present research did not measure the transparency of sponsorship as a separate indicator, however, there are certain aspects that lead to participants appreciating this kind of honest behaviour. According to this study, there are no significantly different effects on advertising on the two types of platforms, Instagram and TikTok. Regarding the question of whether similar messages presented in different forms on different platforms lead to different results, the answer, allowed by the conceptual model that focused on advertising disclosure, is no. This is only an overview.

The online questionnaire experiment has certain limitations. Firstly, it's a single exposure experiment, which reflects the situation where a social media user first sees content generated by an influencer. Of course, the assessment of their credibility is different when followers of an influencer rate them after viewing more content. Secondly, this study only looks at the immediate effects, short-term effects of exposure to influencer-generated content, and not long-term effects. Thirdly, the sample, even if it allows conclusions to be drawn and strong effects to be presented (as per the a priori analysis carried out), still represents a convenience sample, without gender diversity. Future research needs to be implemented at a diverse audience level. All these limits also represent opportunities for future deepening of the topic.

The results of experimental research have both theoretical and practical implications, so that based on these data, recommendations can be drawn up for influencers, brands, users, and policy makers. Firstly, influencers are encouraged to mark advertising for each format, in other words to practice an ethical and honest approach to their followers. It is also recommended that brands encourage such transparent practices. As regards political decision-makers in Romania, it is necessary to develop a legislative framework adapted to the current situation in the social media advertising market. Moreover, it is recommended to monitor the application of regulations regarding advertising disclosure. Last but not least, it would be advisable for users to look responsibly at how advertising on social media is marked or not. Thus, what the literature calls advertising literacy is a kind of advertising knowledge that develops not only through everyday

experience in interaction with advertising messages, but also through an active information process (Rozendaal et al., 2011).

The work has theoretical implications, because the results help to nuance the Persuasion Knowledge model and support the importance of transparency in advertising on Instagram and TikTok. The work is one of the few empirical researches conducted in the indigenous area that applies an online questionnaire-based experiment with young adult respondents from Romania (e.g. Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Mureşan, 2022; Balaban, Mucundorfeanu & Naderer, 2022). In addition, it is one of the first works in Romania that looks at the two networks, Instagram and TikTok, from a comparative perspective.

This research contributes to the development of the persuasive knowledge model and is part of a series of recent studies that highlight that advertising disclosure and activating persuasive knowledge do not necessarily have negative effects on the advertising outcome. The original model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) has long been improved by current research, which has highlighted the role of transparency in sponsorship, so we are talking today about multiple paths in activating persuasive knowledge (van Reijmersdal et al., 2023; Wojdyski & Evans, 2020), and this research underlines this idea. In summary, the theoretical contribution of the present work to experimental research is that it is necessary for the model of persuasive knowledge to be rethought and nuanced, as some authors have done in previous years, to reflect a dynamic, fluid complex reality, such as the reality of advertising through influencers where formats change, but also the way users interact is in constant transformation.

From a practical point of view, this study has several implications for influencers as well as brands, marketers, and users. Last but not least, research has implications for public policies, legislators and those monitoring the processes of advertising disclosure implementation.

The implications for influencers are that disclosure advertising is a gesture of honesty, a gesture that loyal follower communities deserve. The fact that advertising disclosure increases the influencer's credibility is something that content creators think about. If they want to be perceived as trusted advertisers, credible sources of digital communication, it is necessary to mark the ad, regardless of the platform they use. It is also important for brands and advertising agencies to encourage such a practice, because such a practice shows that a certain outdated stage has been

passed where it was thought that disclosure persuasive messages automatically lead to reducing the effects of advertising. This is a misconception, it is an idea that reflects a lack of respect for the audience and a lack of understanding of the audience, an underestimation of the qualities and skills that the user acquires over the years through interaction with advertising. Let's not forget that this research was carried out on a sample of young users who, as they told us in group interviews, used social media as children. These users have high digital skills, they have increased social media skills. Their competencies become visible when they interact with native advertising messages, with less obvious advertising messages than traditional advertising. But let's not forget that, just as mature generations grew up with TV, the younger generation grew up with the social networks they know, understand, and can therefore recognize native advertising messages.

The Romanian legislator and the European bodies must have clear laws in mind with regard to advertising disclosure. There is a principle in many European legal systems that advertising must be properly marked, and that is why it may not be necessary to have a new legislative framework on every new platform, every new format that specifies how advertising should be done. This work is part of a broader collective effort by several researchers and civil society to emphasize the relevance of advertising disclosure, even if it is not necessary to specify this in a new law on every new tool, every new function that social networks develop. A homogeneous European legislative framework is needed, like the European Directive, which allowed the introduction in 2008 of the legislative framework that regulated the way in which product placement was marked, otherwise a form of advertising related to influencer marketing. It is not only legislation that leads to good practices, but also monitoring its application. In Romania, this monitoring is carried out by the ANPC, and the CNA has limited responsibilities regarding the monitoring of communication on the Internet. Why should classical advertising via CNA be monitored which has certain material and knowledge resources higher, and advertising via influencers is monitored by an institution dealing with the verification and control of the relationship between consumer and customer? We believe that this requires an investment of specific resources to assess the extent to which advertising practices in the virtual sphere are ethical and the consumer/media user is treated with respect.

Experimental research certainly has several limitations. For the focus groups, the participants were students, and the method was applied online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding the online questionnaire experiment, one of the limitations is that a study was made based on a single exposure to a single video presented in the form of a reel or TikTok, but it is still a single video. When using a single stimulus and exposure, only short-term effects can be discussed.

Another limitation of the present research is the sample which, although it meets the minimum criteria for showing high potency effects, remains a convenience sample and, moreover, is a sample composed exclusively of women. We motivated this decision on the basis of literature highlighting the importance of gender congruency between influence and user (Hudders et al., 2021) and at the same time the use of an influencer who is interested in hairstyling and who is normally mainly followed by a female audience, which led to the exclusive selection of female participants.

It is important that future research considers medium and long-term effects as a result of exposure to multiple advertising messages posted by influencers. Multiple exposures can affect how the influencers' advertising message is generally perceived, how persuasive knowledge is activated, but also scepticism, because after the user gains a certain experience with an influencer, they may also notice obvious left hands and persuasive actions, and then scepticism can be activated in a more nuanced manner. The effect of multiple exposures on credibility is as clear as possible: Just as in a real-world interpersonal relationship two individuals get to know each other over time, so does the virtual interaction with an influencer where the user gets to know the influencer better over time and recognizes his style and can appreciate his credibility in a documented way.

Future research should also focus on the peculiarities of gender diversity when interacting with influencers. The influencer whose materials have been used in this experiment works in an area specific to influencer marketing activities. It is recommended that future research considers other areas, some even niche areas, which may lead to different results.

If platforms change in terms of interface and introduce new features, testing the effectiveness of advertising disclosure remains a hot topic that needs to be studied further. The applicability of research into the role of advertising disclosure is also becoming increasingly important in the context of using artificial intelligence (AI) in advertising. The knowledge gained

from comparative research can also be applied to determine which forms of disclosure are effective for visual content generated by artificial intelligence.

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