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**DOI**

[10.1016/j.chb.2019.09.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.09.015)

**Publication date**

2020

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Computers in Human Behavior

**License**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Boerman, S. C. (2020). The effects of the standardized instagram disclosure for micro- and meso-influencers. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 103, 199-207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.09.015>

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# The effects of the standardized instagram disclosure for micro- and meso-influencers

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Influencer marketing  
Instagram  
Disclosure  
Persuasion knowledge  
Parasocial interaction  
Online behavior

## ABSTRACT

Social media influencers – such as the ‘Instafamous’ – are required to disclose any commercial relationship. To achieve transparency, Instagram has introduced a standardized disclosure (‘Paid partnership with [brand]’). This study examined whether this disclosure effectively raises ad recognition, and how this consequently affects consumers’ responses to the message, influencer, and brand. Additionally, the effects of the disclosure were compared between micro- (< 10,000 followers) and meso- (10,000–1 million followers) influencers. Results of an online experiment ( $N = 192$ ) with a 2 (no disclosure vs. standardized disclosure)  $\times$  2 (micro-vs. meso-influencer) between subjects design showed that the disclosure did achieve its goal of increasing ad recognition. Furthermore, the disclosure positively affected brand recall and intentions to engage with the post, via ad recognition. The parasocial interaction with the influencer was not affected. Moreover, influencer type did not moderate the effect of the disclosure and did not affect people’s responses to the message, influencer, or brand.

## 1. Introduction

Influencer marketing is increasingly gaining the interest of advertisers and scholars. Social media influencers are opinion leaders who communicate with a sizeable social network of people following them (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Uzunoğlu & Misci Kip, 2014). The current study focuses on Instagram: With more than 800 million active users, the online photo- and video-sharing social media app is one of the most popular social networks worldwide (Statistica, 2018). Instagram is of particular interest because it is the most popular platform for influencer marketing (Mediakix, 2019) and the home of the ‘Instafamous’: individuals who became famous via their profile on Instagram (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). For some of these Instafamous, being an ‘influencer’ has become their profession (Lin, Bruning, & Swarna, 2018; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2019).

Influencers – such as the Instafamous – are interesting for brands because they are seen as personal, credible, easy-to-relate-to sources, and their network enables brands to reach a large audience (De Veirman et al., 2017; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Schouten et al., 2019). Advertisers’ interest in influencer marketing is growing rapidly, and they are spending increasingly more of their budgets on influencer marketing (Mediakix, 2019). In these collaborations between influencers and brands, influencers function as brand ambassadors by creating sponsored content (e.g., pictures of [themselves with] the brand or product), by mentioning the product or brand in picture captions or

tags, or by sharing or being part of larger advertising campaigns and events (Abidin, 2016; Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018).

The issue with influencer marketing is that commercial social media posts resemble and blend with non-commercial posts, and thus people often do not recognize it as advertising (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017; Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun 2017; Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015). To help consumers identify native advertising, several (self-) regulatory parties recommend using a disclosure (e.g., European Advertising Standards Alliance [EASA], 2018; Federal Trade Commission [FTC], 2017a; Word of Mouth Marketing Association [WOMMA], 2017). Prior research has shown that hashtags that disclose a commercial relationship, such as #paidad and #sponsored, can increase ad recognition (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; Evans et al., 2017). However, the FTC noticed that many influencers did not clearly and conspicuously disclose their relationships to brands. Therefore, in 2017, they sent out 90 letters and 21 subsequent warning letters reminding influencers and marketers of their obligation to disclose commercial relationships and initiated one case against an influencer (FTC 2017b, 2017c). As a response to the FTC, Instagram introduced a standardized built-in disclosure in June 2017 (Instagram, 2017). This disclosure has a standardized format (‘Paid partnership with [brand]’) and is positioned at the top of the Instagram post. However, the FTC suggested that this standardized disclosure does not suffice because it might not attract attention (FTC 2017a, 2017d).

This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it aims

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.09.015>

Received 3 May 2019; Received in revised form 8 August 2019; Accepted 18 September 2019

Available online 19 September 2019

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to gain insight into whether the standardized disclosure suffices and can effectively increase ad recognition. It is important to gain insight into the effectiveness of the standardized disclosure as it differs from hashtags with respect to its position, visual prominence, and language.

Second, this study examines how the disclosure and subsequent ad recognition affect consumers' responses to the message, influencer, and brand. One important benefit of influencer marketing is its ability to stimulate engagement with the sponsored content (e.g., in the form of comments, likes, and shares; Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018). Prior studies addressing Instagram have shown mixed effects of ad recognition on people's intention to engage with the sponsored content. Evans et al. (2017) found that people are less likely to spread electronic word of mouth (eWOM) about the brand when they recognize an Instagram post as advertising, whereas Johnson, Potocki, and Veldhuis (2019) found no effect on behavioral intentions. Therefore, this study aims to gain more insight into how the standardized disclosure and ad recognition might influence users' intention to engage with the sponsored post. Furthermore, this study adds two new outcomes that might be influenced by a disclosure: parasocial interaction (PSI) and brand recall. Influencers are interesting brand ambassadors because people can develop a relationship (also referred to as parasocial interaction, PSI) with them via social media (e.g., Chen, 2018; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Tsai & Men, 2013). Until now, it remains unclear whether the realization that the influencer posts advertising damages this PSI. Finally, regarding the brand, prior studies addressing Instagram did investigate the effects of disclosures and ad recognition on affective brand responses, such as brand attitudes and purchase intentions (e.g., De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; Evans et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2019), but not on brand recall. Because social media are useful for raising consumers' awareness of brands and products (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Wood & Burkhalter, 2014), it is important to gain insights into whether a disclosure influences brand recall.

Third, this study is the first to compare the effects of disclosure between different types of influencers. Influencers are often categorized based on the number of followers. Although prior research showed that the number of followers of an influencer does influence people's perceptions of the influencer's popularity, likeability, attractiveness, and credibility (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014), there has been no study comparing the different types of influencers that are used within the field of influencer marketing. Therefore, the third aim is to examine whether the effects of the disclosure vary between micro- (< 10,000 followers) and meso- (10,000–1 million followers) influencers, and to compare consumer responses to posts sent by the different types of influencers.

## 2. Effects of disclosures on ad recognition

Influencer marketing is a form of native advertising that involves “presenting online content to consumers with advertisements to that resemble, in format and content, the non-advertising content that is published on the same platform” (Wojdyski, 2016, p. 203). Native advertising is often linked to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994). The PKM proposes that people develop personal knowledge about persuasion and the tactics used in persuasion attempts. Only when people recognize a persuasive attempt, such as an advertisement, can they use this knowledge to interpret, evaluate, and respond to this persuasion attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The problem with native advertising is that people have difficulties recognizing the persuasive attempt (e.g., Hoofnagle & Meleshinsky, 2015; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016).

Disclosures are designed to help consumers identify an advertisement and thus to activate persuasion knowledge. Disclosures have been shown to be a helpful cue to instigate advertising recognition in various contexts, such as television programs (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012, 2015), movies (Tessitore & Geuens, 2013; Van Reijmersdal, Tutaj, & Boerman, 2013), online news (Amazeen &

Wojdyski, 2018; Krouwer, Poels, & Paulussen, 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016), blogs (Carr & Hayes, 2014; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2016), and Facebook (Boerman, Willemsen, Van Der Aa, & Eva, 2017). More importantly, research revealed that the hashtags #sponsored and #paidad can effectively increase ad recognition for influencer marketing on Instagram (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; Evans et al., 2017).

However, the effect of a disclosure depends on its position, visual prominence, and language (e.g., Wojdyski et al., 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Disclosures positioned in the middle of a news article are more likely to be noticed and to increase ad recognition, compared to disclosures at the top of an article (Krouwer et al., 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Additionally, the visual prominence of a disclosure (which depends on the disclosure's size, font, and contrast between the text and background) affects ad recognition (Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018; Wojdyski et al., 2017).

Regarding language, research suggests that a disclosure should clearly and directly convey the paid relationship between the producer and the sponsor (Evans et al., 2017; Hyman, Franklyn, Yee, & Rahmati, 2017; Wojdyski et al., 2017). In line with this reasoning, disclosures that are more explicit have been shown to be more likely to increase ad recognition (Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018; Boerman et al., 2015; Tessitore & Geuens, 2013; Wojdyski et al., 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). The language also seems important in the context of Instagram, as Evans et al. (2017) found that only #paidad increased ad recognition, and the hashtags #SP and #sponsored did not.

Thus, disclosures can help audiences to recognize advertising, such as influencer marketing. However, there is a lack of standardization within the industry (Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2018). Interestingly, by introducing the built-in disclosure, Instagram hope to achieve standardization and increase transparency (Instagram, 2017). It remains unclear whether this standardized disclosure effectively communicates its message to consumers and can increase ad recognition. The standardized Instagram disclosure (‘Paid partnership with [brand]’) is highly explicit and does directly convey the paid relationship between the influencer and the brand. The disclosure is positioned at the top of the Instagram post, which is not ideal based on research. However, unlike a hashtag, the disclosure does have its own position and is not mixed with other information, increasing its prominence. The size, font, and contrast of the disclosure do not make it highly visually prominent. Thus, based on language, the disclosure should be able to increase ad recognition, but based on its position and visual prominence, this may not be the case. To investigate the effectiveness of the standardized disclosure compared to no disclosure, the first hypothesis proposes:

**H1.** The standardized disclosure on Instagram (‘Paid partnership with [brand]’) increases ad recognition, compared to no disclosure.

## 3. Effects of the disclosure on message, sender, and brand responses

The realization that a message is actually a persuasion attempt can prompt a ‘change-of-meaning’; the activation of persuasion knowledge alters the response to the message (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The present study examines whether the Instagram disclosure can trigger this ‘change-of-meaning’ and influences responses to the message, sender, and brand. Fig. 1 shows an overview of the conceptual model.

### 3.1. Online sharing behavior

One of the reasons why influencer marketing is so attractive to brands is because influencers can stimulate engagement, such as comments, likes, and shares (Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018). When many people engage with a message, it is more likely that the message will be visible to others on Instagram, increasing the post's reach. However, a disclosure and the subsequent recognition of the post as being advertising might make it less appealing for people to engage

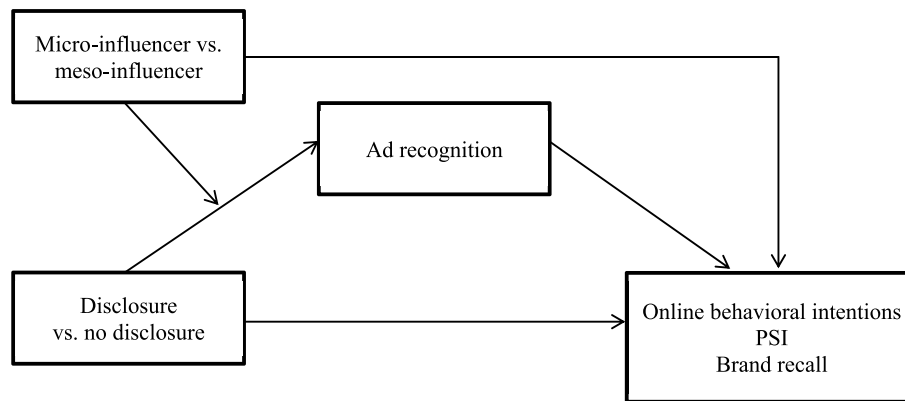


Fig. 1. Proposed effects of sponsorship disclosure and type of influencer on online behavioral intentions, parasocial interaction (PSI), and brand recall via ad recognition.

with and share an Instagram post. In line with the ‘change-of-meaning’ principle, research has shown that the realization that a message is advertising negatively affects people’s attitude toward a sponsored blog post (Hwang & Jeong, 2016), makes people more critical toward the sponsored post (Boerman et al., 2017; De Veirman & Hudders, 2019), and lowers the perceived credibility of the influencer on Instagram (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019). Thus, it is likely that people become more negative toward the message itself as soon as they recognize it as advertising, making it less likely that they engage with it. Research has indeed found that people are less likely to forward an online video (Hsieh, Hsieh, & Tang, 2012) or share an advertising campaign on a social networking site with their friends (Van Noort, Antheunis, & Van Reijmersdal, 2012) when they understand its persuasive intent. More importantly, ad recognition evoked by a disclosure has also been shown to reduce people’s intention to share influencer marketing posts on Facebook (Boerman et al., 2017) and Instagram (Evans et al., 2017). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H2a.** The standardized disclosure on Instagram (vs. no disclosure) increases ad recognition, which consequently leads to less online behavioral intentions.

### 3.2. Parasocial interaction (PSI)

A disclosure might also affect the PSI that someone perceives with an influencer. A PSI is the illusion of having an intimate, personal relationship with a media personality (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956; Tsai & Men, 2013). Developing PSI takes time and is reinforced by each interaction with the person. Following a person for a long time enables the follower to get to know the person, interact with that person, develop attitudes toward that person, and experience feelings of intimacy. This type of long-term contact resembles the development of real relationships (Russell, Stern, & Stern, 2006).

Social media are perfectly suited to developing PSI. Via social media, followers are continually exposed to details of a person’s life and have the opportunity to directly interact with that person (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). These functions create an illusion of a sense of intimacy and closeness between influencers and their followers (Chen, 2018; Munnukka, Maity, Reinikainen, & Luoma-aho, 2019). However, consistent with the idea of PSI, the friendship between the follower and influencer remains one-sided (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Research has indeed found evidence for experiences of PSI with influencers on YouTube (Folkvord, Bevelander, Rozendaal, & Hermans, 2019; Lee & Watkins, 2016; Munnukka et al., 2019), Facebook (Tsai & Men, 2013), blogs (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015), and Instagram (Chen, 2018).

The inclusion of a disclosure and subsequent activation of persuasion knowledge might negatively influence PSI. The realization that the influencer did not post a genuine message, but rather a commercially-

motivated message, can create a sense of unfairness or deception (Boerman et al., 2017), which might challenge the perceived friendship with the influencer. This negative effect of the revelation that an influencer was paid to post a message has been found to lower PSI in the context of blogs (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015).

Additionally, qualitative research has indicated that people say that they would ‘unfollow’ influencers who post too much advertising (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). This suggests that people would even end their friendship with an influencer when the content becomes overly commercial. Thus, the following hypothesis proposes:

**H2b.** The standardized disclosure on Instagram (vs. no disclosure) increases ad recognition, which consequently lowers parasocial interaction.

### 3.3. Brand recall

In addition to message and influencer responses, disclosures also affect people’s responses to the advertised brand. Interestingly, research into disclosures of influencer marketing has mainly focused on evaluative consequences, such as brand attitudes and purchase intentions (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; Evans et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2019). However, disclosures also affect cognitive outcomes, such as the attention people pay to sponsored content and their recall of the advertised brand (Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2016). This effect can be explained by the Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing (Lang, 2000). This model proposes that people have limited capacity to encode, store, and retrieve information. A disclosure puts more emphasis on the advertising in a message, making it more likely that the consumer pays attention to it (Boerman et al., 2015; Guo, Ye, Duffy, Li, & Ding, 2018). Also, the standardized disclosure on Instagram includes the name of the brand, increasing brand name exposure. Furthermore, the activation and application of persuasion knowledge require elaborate processing of a message, increasing the encoding, storing, and retrieval of the brand (Buijzen, Van Reijmersdal, & Owen, 2010). Thus, the Instagram disclosure and subsequent ad recognition are expected to increase people’s ability to recall the advertised brand:

**H2c.** The standardized disclosure on Instagram (vs. no disclosure) increases ad recognition, which consequently increases brand recall.

## 4. The effect of the type of influencer

Based on the number of followers, scholars and practitioners in the field of influencer marketing distinguish different levels of influencers: micro-, meso-, and macro-influencers. Micro-influencers are ‘normal’ people who turned Instafamous and typically have dozens to hundreds (up to 10,000) of followers (Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal,

2018; Hatton, 2018; Pedroni, 2016; Revell, 2017). This is the largest group of influencers. Meso-influencers have 10,000 to a million followers and often have national visibility. These influencers have entered the field of ‘webcelebrities’ and are characterized as full-time professional influencers (Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018; Pedroni, 2016). They are, however, not as big as macro-influencers (or mega-influencers), who are often established, international celebrities with over one million followers such as Nikkie Tutorials, Kylie Jenner, and Cristiano Ronaldo (Hatton, 2018; Pedroni, 2016; Revell, 2017).

The three types of influencers are interesting for brands and agencies for different reasons. Meso- and macro-influencers are mainly interesting because of their large reach. Additionally, meso-influencers are typically seen as an authority in their field of expertise. Despite their low reach, micro-influencers are interesting because of their ability to create high-quality content (Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018). From a consumer perspective, research has shown that micro-influencers are perceived as more similar than meso- and macro-influencers (Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018). In addition, influencers with a high number of followers are perceived as more attractive, credible, and popular and are ascribed more opinion leadership (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014). The different perceptions of micro- and meso-influencers are expected to affect the activation of persuasion knowledge.

Qualitative studies show that Instagram users are familiar with advertising on Instagram (Chen, 2018; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). Therefore, Instagram users might have already developed persuasion knowledge about the types of advertising and tactics used on this social medium. Part of this persuasion knowledge might be the familiarity with marketer's tactics, such as celebrity endorsements (Friestad & Wright, 1994), and the understanding that the number of followers, and thus an influencer's reach, is important to brands. In addition, public figures such as meso- and macro-influencers often have a ‘verified’ account to show that Instagram confirmed that this is the authentic account of this person. Thus, when Instagram users have indeed developed persuasion knowledge about Instagram advertising, they might understand that people with verified accounts (i.e., meso-influencers) are professionals and celebrities with a large reach, and thus likely to make money with their Instagram account (Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018; Pedroni, 2016). Differences between micro- and meso-influencers, such as the number of followers and type of account, might thus function as peripheral cues that help activate persuasion knowledge. Therefore, this study proposes:

**H3a.** A sponsored Instagram post sent by a meso-influencer will lead to greater ad recognition than a post sent by a micro-influencer.

A disclosure is most likely to have an effect on ad recognition in a situation where other cues might not help to recognize advertising, such as Instagram posts by micro-influencers. If the number of followers and the type of account of a meso-influencer can indeed work as a heuristic cue that induces ad recognition, a disclosure might not be necessary in such cases or its effect is possibly less strong. The subsequent hypothesis, therefore, proposes an interaction effect of disclosure and type of influencer on ad recognition:

**H3b.** The type of influencer moderates the effect of the standardized disclosure (vs. no disclosure) on ad recognition: The disclosure has a stronger effect on ad recognition when the post is sent by a micro-influencer (vs. a meso-influencer).

Although the typology of influencers based on the number of followers is used in the field of influencer marketing (e.g., Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018; Hatton, 2018; Pedroni, 2016; Revell, 2017), little is known about people's responses to the different types of influencers. Research focusing on the number of followers does provide some relevant insight. As described before, De Veirman et al. (2017) showed that an Instagram influencer with a higher number of followers (21,200 vs. 2100) is perceived as more popular and is ascribed more opinion leadership, and therefore people have more positive attitudes

toward this influencer. In addition, the number of followers seems to increase the influencers' physical attractiveness, perceived credibility, and people's intention to build an online friendship with influencers on Twitter (Jin & Phua, 2014). These positive responses to larger numbers of followers are explained by social capital theory, through which influencers are described as *bridging social capital* (Jin & Phua, 2014). Bridging social capital consists of loose social connections that provide access to new information and resources. When an Instagrammer has a large number of followers, he or she is probably judged as having greater bridging social capital.

Based on these studies and this idea of social capital, it is expected that a commercial post by a meso-influencer will lead to more intentions to engage with the post and higher perceived PSI. However, there is no reason to assume that the type of influencer has a direct influence on brand recall. Therefore, the hypothesis includes only message and influencer responses:

**H4.** Compared to a micro-influencer, a meso-influencer will increase a) online behavioral intentions, and b) PSI.

Combining the expected effects of the standardized disclosure and the type of influencer, Fig. 1 presents a moderated mediation model combining all hypotheses:

**H5.** The standardized disclosure on Instagram (vs. no disclosure) increases ad recognition, which consequently leads to a) less online behavioral intentions, b) lower PSI, and c) more brand recall: These effects are stronger when the post is sent by a micro-influencer (vs. a meso-influencer).

## 5. Materials and methods

### 5.1. Design and participants

The hypotheses were tested with an online experiment with a 2 (disclosure: no disclosure vs. the standardized disclosure ‘Paid partnership with [brand]’) x 2 (type of influencer: micro-vs. meso-influencer) between subjects design. Data were collected in 2017, between November 27 and December 6, a few months after the introduction of the standardized disclosure. A convenience sample of 277 participants was recruited through invitations on social media and via personal communication. Participants ( $n = 85$ ) who did not have an Instagram account or did not complete the questionnaire were excluded, leading to a final sample of 192 Instagram users. The mean age was 23.44 (ranging from 18 to 53,  $SD = 3.92$ ; 96% was between 18 and 29), and 73.4% of the participants were female. This sample resembles the average Instagram user, as research showed that 18- to 29-years-olds are the core users of the medium and women use Instagram more than men (Chen, 2018; Statistica, 2018). Most participants used Instagram daily (86.5%), or weekly (11.5%). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions (no disclosure and micro-influencer  $n = 45$ , disclosure and micro-influencer  $n = 52$ , no disclosure and meso-influencer  $n = 56$ , disclosure and meso-influencer  $n = 39$ ).

### 5.2. Procedure

The study was presented as a study about people's responses to different Instagram posts. Participants first signed an informed consent and were then asked to look at the overview of an Instagram account (to manipulate the type of influencer), followed by a screenshot of a post of the influencer (to manipulate the disclosure). Participants could look at the materials as long as they wanted before continuing to the questionnaire. The questionnaire started with questions regarding PSI and online behavioral intentions, followed by ad recognition, brand recall, and manipulation checks. This order of questions made sure that responses to the influencer and post were not primed by the ad recognition question and manipulation checks that reveal the commercial

nature of the Instagram post. The questionnaire ended with control questions and demographics. Finally, participants were debriefed and thanked, and could leave comments or questions.

### 5.3. Stimulus materials

A pre-test ( $n = 12$  Instagram users) examined whether the manipulation would sufficiently create a difference between the influencers. Participants were first shown the overview of the accounts of both influencers. Because participants were probably not familiar with the terms *micro-* and *meso-influencer*, these terms were avoided throughout the questionnaire. A text introduced them to the fact that Instagram distinguishes between famous people and smaller bloggers. The text further explained that famous people have more followers and a verified account (noticeable by a blue check behind the account name), while smaller bloggers with fewer followers do not have such verified accounts. Participants were then asked whether they thought the Instagrammer was a famous person or a less well-known blogger (0 = a famous person, 1 = a less well-known person), and to indicate the number of followers they thought the Instagrammers had (with a slider ranging from 0 to 500,000). Results showed that 100% recognized the micro-influencer as a less well-known blogger, and 50% recognized the meso-influencer as a famous person. The mean estimated number of followers was significantly lower for the micro-influencer ( $M = 40,800.92$ ,  $SD = 34,365.36$ ) compared to the meso-influencer ( $M = 251,237.50$ ,  $SD = 92,612.92$ ),  $t(11) = 7.48$ ,  $p < .001$ . Based on these findings, the text introducing the different accounts was adjusted to make sure it emphasized the number of followers and type of account (verified or not).

The final stimulus materials existed of two screenshots: An overview of an Instagram account and one post by that person. The materials depicted two real influencers who were similar in appearance, audience, and interests (i.e., fashion). They did vary in the number of followers. In both conditions, the materials were very similar except for the manipulations.

*Influencer type* was manipulated by two cues: the number of followers and the type of account (i.e., verified or not, and including the title 'famous person' or 'blogger'). The biographies in the accounts were the same. Each participant was shown an overview of the account (see Appendix A) and a text introducing the influencer. The introductory text for the micro-influencer was:

"You will now see an overview of an Instagram account, and afterwards an Instagram post, both from Britta Maxime. Britta Maxime is an Instagrammer with 9,000 followers. She does not have a verified account. Only famous people get a verified account."

The text introducing the meso-influencer said:

"You will now see an overview of an Instagram account, and afterwards an Instagram post, both from Claartje Rose. Claartje Rose is a very famous Instagrammer with 300,000 followers. She also has a verified account, recognizable by the blue check behind her name, so people know that she is not a fake account. Only famous people get this."

Following the account overview, participants were shown an Instagram post by the influencer. These posts were actual posts taken from the influencers' real accounts (see Appendix B). The pictures were very similar: The influencer was showing a comparable dress by the same brand (Loavies), the brand was tagged on the dress, the influencers hold a similar pose on the picture, and have very similar appearances (blond hair, sunglasses). The pictures had the same caption, the same comments by the same people, and a similar number of likes (2106 or 2113). Although the choice to use real influencers and real posts may have limited internal validity (the posts were similar but not identical), it was the only way to truly capture people's responses to the different types of influencers and to be able to measure PSI.

The *disclosure* was manipulated by adding the standardized disclosure 'Paid partnership with Loavies' on top of the post, between the account name and picture, or not.

### 5.4. Measures

#### 5.4.1. Ad recognition

Participants were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*) to what extent they agreed with the statement: 'The Instagram post that I saw was an advertisement' ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ; Boerman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Ham, Nelson, & Das, 2015).

#### 5.4.2. Online behavioral intentions

To measure participants' intention to engage with the post, they were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale (1 = *Very unlikely*, 7 = *Very likely*) how likely it was they would do the following: 'I would share the post with my friends on Instagram,' 'I would comment on the post on Instagram,' 'I would like the Instagram post,' 'I would share the post on Facebook,' 'I would share the post via a private message on Instagram,' and 'I would save the post on Instagram' (based on Boerman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). These items include all ways a person can engage with an Instagram post online. The measure of *online behavioral intentions* consisted of the mean score of the six items (Eigenvalue = 3.87, explained variance = 64.54%,  $\alpha = 0.87$ ;  $M = 2.07$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ).

#### 5.4.3. Parasocial interaction

PSI was measured by asking participant to indicate on a seven-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*) to what extent they agreed with the statements: 'The Instagrammer seems to understand the things I want to know,' 'I would like to meet the Instagrammer in person,' 'When I see a post of the Instagrammer, I feel as if I am part of the group,' 'The Instagrammer feels like an old friend,' 'I like to compare my ideas with what the Instagrammer says' (scales by Russell, Stern, & Stern [2006] and Colliander & Erlandsson [2015] applied to Instagram). The mean score of the five items was used as a measure of PSI (Eigenvalue = 2.60, explained variance = 52.00%;  $\alpha = 0.75$ ;  $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ).

#### 5.4.4. Brand recall

Brand recall was measured by asking participants whether they recalled seeing any brands in post. If answered yes, participants could fill out which brands. Brand recall was coded 1 (correctly mentioned the brand) and 0 (did not mention right brand); 65.6% of the participants correctly recalled the brand.

#### 5.4.5. Manipulation checks

*Disclosure recognition* was measured by asking participants whether they had seen a sponsorship disclosure ('Paid partnership with Loavies') in the post (0 = *No*, 1 = *Yes*). In addition, as in the pre-test, a text introduced the participants to the difference between a famous Instagrammer with many followers and a verified account, and a less well-known blogger with less followers and no verified account. Participants were then asked about the *type of Instagrammer* they thought they had seen (0 = a famous person, 1 = a less well-known person).

Furthermore, participants were asked to indicate the *number of followers* they thought the Instagrammer they were exposed to have (ordinal variable, recoded into dichotomous variable with 0 = 9000 or less followers, 1 = 10,000 or more followers). This cut-off was based upon the definition of micro and meso-influencers (Domingues Aguiar & Van Reijmersdal, 2018; Hatton, 2018; Pedroni, 2016; Revell, 2017).

#### 5.4.6. Control variables

*The frequency of Instagram usage* was measured by asking participants how often they used Instagram (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Yearly*,

**Table 1**  
Mediation effect of disclosure on online behavioral intentions, parasocial interaction, and brand recall, via ad recognition.

	Disclosure > ad recognition	Ad recognition > DV	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect
Online behavioral intentions	0.60 (0.22)**	0.10 (0.05)†	-0.15 (0.17)	-0.21 (0.17)	0.06 (0.04) CI .01; .14
Parasocial interaction	0.60 (0.22)**	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.17 (0.15)	-0.17 (0.15)	-0.01 (0.03) CI -.07; .05
Brand recall	0.60 (0.22)**	0.42 (0.11)***		0.29 (0.33)	0.25 (0.12) CI .06; .55

Note: Unstandardized b-coefficients (with boot SE between parentheses); CI = 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval; DV = dependent variable (corresponding to row). Controlled for following the influencer and influencer credibility.  
\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , † $p < .10$ .

3 = *Monthly*, 4 = *Weekly*, 5 = *Daily*; 86.5% said daily). Additionally, participants were asked whether they were *familiar with the brand* Loavies (0 = *No*, 1 = *Yes*; 58.9% said yes), whether they *used the brand* (0 = *No*, 1 = *Yes*; 21.4% said yes), and whether they *followed the Instagrammer* they had been exposed to (0 = *No*, 1 = *Yes*; 8.3% said yes). The *perceived credibility of the influencer* was measured with four three-point semantic differential scales (Ohanian, 1990) asking participants to indicate to what extent they believed the Instagrammer was: *untrustworthy/trustworthy*, *dishonest/honest*, *unreliable/reliable*, and *insincere/sincere* (Eigenvalue = 2.47, explained variance = 61.82%;  $\alpha = 0.79$ ;  $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = 0.53$ ). In addition, people's *age* in years and *sex* were measured.

**6. Results**

**6.1. Manipulation checks**

In the no disclosure condition, 89.1% correctly said not to have seen a disclosure. In the disclosure condition, 65.9% correctly said to have seen the disclosure. This difference was significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 62.23$ ,  $p < .001$ . Although the disclosure was not correctly noticed by all participants, the manipulation was successful.

In the micro-influencer conditions, 90.7% correctly said to have seen a less well-known blogger. In the meso-influencer conditions, 61.1% said to have seen a famous person. This difference was significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 56.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . Furthermore, in the micro-influencer conditions, 96.9% correctly said that the Instagram account had 9000 or less followers. In the meso-influencer conditions, 83.2% said that the account had 10,000 or more followers. This difference was significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 56.63$ ,  $p < .001$ . The manipulation was successful: Participants perceived the two influencers to differ with regard to the type of account and the number of followers.

**6.2. Randomization check**

The four experimental groups did not differ with respect to sex,  $\chi^2(3) = 0.20$ ,  $p = .978$ , age,  $F(3, 188) = 1.57$ ,  $p = .199$ , Instagram usage,  $F(3, 188) = 0.66$ ,  $p = .579$ , brand familiarity,  $\chi^2(3) = 4.98$ ,  $p = .173$ ,

brand use,  $\chi^2(3) = 1.66$ ,  $p = .646$ , and perceived credibility of the influencer,  $F(3, 188) = 0.59$ ,  $p = .623$ . The four groups did differ with respect to whether participants followed the influencer,  $\chi^2(3) = 8.52$ ,  $p = .036$ . As could be expected from their actual number of followers, more participants followed the meso-influencer ( $n = 13$ ) than the micro-influencer ( $n = 3$ ). However, it is important to note that there was no difference in following the influencer between the two disclosure conditions,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.83$ ,  $p = .177$ . To control for any confounding effects, following the influencer and the perceived credibility of the influencer were included as covariates in all analyses.

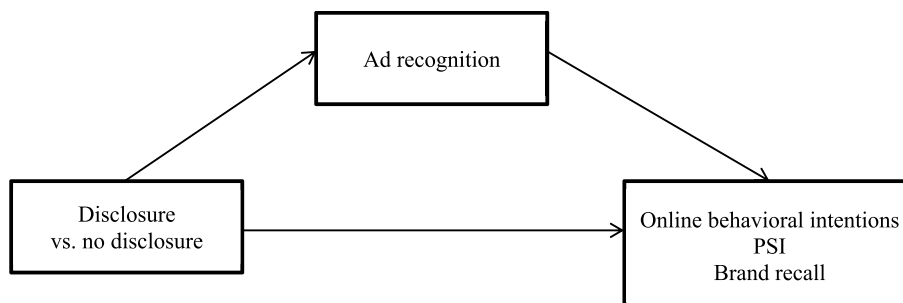
**6.3. Effects of the disclosure**

H1 was tested with an ANCOVA with disclosure as factor, ad recognition as dependent variable, and following the influencer and influencer credibility as covariates. The analysis showed that ad recognition was significantly lower without a disclosure ( $M = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 1.75$ ) compared to when the disclosure was present ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ),  $F(1, 188) = 7.43$ ,  $p = .007$ . H1 was thus supported: The standardized disclosure successfully increased the recognition of the sponsored Instagram post as advertising.

The simple mediation effects proposed in H2 were tested using Model 4 of the PROCESS version 3.3 macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2017). All analyses used 10,000 bootstrap sample to estimate bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. For each dependent variable, the model was run with the disclosure condition as the independent variable, ad recognition as mediator, and following the influencer and influencer credibility as covariates. Table 1 presents the results of these analyses, Fig. 2 shows the tested mediation model.

The mediation analyses confirmed the significant effect of the disclosure on ad recognition ( $b = 0.60$ ,  $se = 0.22$ ,  $p = .007$ ).

The disclosure did not have a significant total ( $b = -0.15$ ,  $se = 0.17$ ,  $p = .356$ ) or direct effect ( $b = -0.21$ ,  $se = 0.17$ ,  $p = .205$ ) on **online behavioral intentions**. The disclosure did have a significant positive indirect effect on online behavioral intentions via ad recognition (indirect effect = 0.06, boot se = 0.04, CI 0.01; 0.14). Ad recognition had a marginally significant effect on online behavioral intentions ( $b = 0.10$ ,  $se = 0.05$ ,  $p = .068$ ). This means that H2a was not



**Fig. 2.** Tested mediation model: Effect of sponsorship disclosure on online behavioral intentions, parasocial interaction (PSI), and brand recall via ad recognition.

supported: The positive indirect effect of the disclosure via ad recognition on online behavioral intentions was in the opposite direction of what was hypothesized.

The disclosure had no significant total ( $b = -0.17$ ,  $se = 0.15$ ,  $p = .241$ ), direct effect ( $b = -0.17$ ,  $se = 0.15$ ,  $p = .269$ ), and indirect effect (indirect effect =  $-0.01$ , boot  $se = 0.03$ , CI  $-0.07; 0.05$ ) on *PSI*. Ad recognition also did not significantly influence *PSI* ( $b = -0.01$ ,  $se = 0.05$ ,  $p = .823$ ). H2b was not supported.

Lastly, the disclosure did not have significant direct effect on *brand recall* ( $b = 0.29$ ,  $se = 0.33$ ,  $p = .378$ ), but did have significant, positive indirect effect on brand recall via ad recognition (indirect effect =  $0.25$ , boot  $se = 0.12$ , CI  $0.06; 0.55$ ). Ad recognition significantly increased brand recall ( $b = 0.42$ ,  $se = 0.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ). H2c was supported: the disclosure has a significant positive indirect effect on brand recall via the recognition of advertising.

#### 6.4. Effects of type of influencer

H3 and H4 proposed that the type influencer affects and moderates people's responses to the influencer marketing. These hypotheses were tested with a MANCOVA with disclosure and type of influencer as factors; ad recognition, online behavioral intentions, and *PSI* as dependent variables; and following the influencer and influencer credibility as covariates. Table 2 shows the means for the conditions of disclosure and influencer type for all variables.

The analyses showed no significant main effect of the type of influencer on ad recognition,  $F(1, 186) = 0.02$ ,  $p = .881$ . The level of ad recognition did not differ between the micro-influencer ( $M = 5.39$ ,  $SD = 1.62$ ) and meso-influencer ( $M = 5.36$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ). H3a was not supported.

In addition, the interaction between the disclosure and type of influencer on ad recognition was not significant,  $F(1, 186) = 0.69$ ,  $p = .408$ : The disclosure did not have a stronger effect for the micro-influencer compared to the meso-influencer (micro-influencer:  $M_{no\ disclosure} = 5.16$ ;  $M_{disclosure} = 5.60$ ; meso-influencer:  $M_{no\ disclosure} = 5.02$ ;  $M_{disclosure} = 5.85$ ). This means that H3b was also not supported.

H4 proposed that the type of influencer affects online behavioral intentions and *PSI*. The results showed no significant differences between the micro- and meso-influencer regarding online behavioral intentions,  $F(1, 186) = 0.11$ ,  $p = .737$ , and *PSI*,  $F(1, 186) = 0.34$ ,  $p = .562$ . H4a and H4b were not supported.

#### 6.5. Moderated mediation model

H5 proposed a moderated mediation model, which was tested using Model 7 in PROCESS (see Fig. 1 for a depiction of this model). In line with the finding that there was no interaction of disclosure and type of influencer on ad recognition, all indexes of moderated mediation were not significant. H5 was not supported.

### 7. Discussion

This study explored whether the standardized Instagram disclosure ('Paid partnership with [brand]') effectively raises ad recognition, and

how this consequently affects consumers' responses to the message, influencer, and brand. In addition, the effects of the post and disclosure were compared between micro- and meso-influencers. The results lead to three main conclusions.

First, the findings show that the standardized disclosure effectively increases ad recognition, compared to when no disclosure is provided. The disclosure's explicit language and position on top of the post seem to build an effective disclosure. Prior research has already shown that #sponsored and #paidad can increase ad recognition (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019; Evans et al., 2017). This study adds to the literature by showing that the standardized disclosure also seems to achieve its goal. The findings also provide new evidence for the idea that an ideal disclosure will clearly and directly convey the paid relationship and the sponsor (Evans et al., 2017; Hyman et al., 2017; Wojdowski et al., 2017).

Second, in line with the PKM, this study shows that a disclosure and subsequent activation of persuasion knowledge instigates more biased processing and a 'change-of-meaning', influencing people's responses to the message and brand. Regarding the message, the results suggest that – although online behavioral intentions are generally low – people are *more* inclined to share, like, or comment on the post when they recognize it as advertising. Thus, the 'change-of-meaning' is positive. This is not in line with prior studies that found a negative (Evans et al., 2017) or no effect (Johnson et al., 2019) of the recognition of an Instagram post as advertising on behavioral intentions. The positive effect on online behavioral intentions might be due to the product and brand used in this study. Prior studies that found negative effects of a disclosure on the intention to engage in eWOM about the brand have used well-known brands that are interesting to a wide audience (Boerman et al., 2017; Evans et al., 2017). The brand in this study was a rather new fashion website. Instagram users have indicated that advertising by influencers can introduce them to something new (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). The sponsored post could thus have introduced the participants to a new brand and/or a likable product (a dress), making it worth sharing the post. The caption was also not overly persuasive as it did not mention the brand or tried to sell the product, which may also influence intentions to engage with the post. Further research should investigate how brand, and product, and message characteristics influence disclosure effects on online behavioral intentions.

Furthermore, the Instagram disclosure and subsequent ad recognition were found to improve brand recall. With this finding, this study again provides evidence for the idea that a disclosure puts more emphasis on the brand making it more likely that people use their limited capacity to process it. Because the effect of the disclosure on brand recall is only indirect, via ad recognition, this supports the notion that the activation of persuasion knowledge requires systematic processing of the post, increasing people's memory of the advertised brand (Buijzen et al., 2010). Thus, the activation of persuasion knowledge is an important underlying mechanism that explains the positive effect of the disclosure on brand memory. Although research showed that a disclosure can increase the attention people pay to the advertised brands in television programs (Boerman et al., 2015; Guo et al., 2018), this is the first study to show that this positive memory effect also applies to Instagram. This is an important contribution because the disclosure and sponsored post are visible at the same time on Instagram

Table 2

Means of ad recognition, online behavioral intentions, parasocial interaction, and brand recall for the conditions of disclosure and influencer type.

	No disclosure	'Paid partnership with [brand]'	Micro-influencer	Meso-influencer
Ad recognition	5.08 (1.75)	5.70 (1.32)**	5.39 (1.62)	5.36 (1.56)
Online behavioral intentions	2.17 (1.15)	1.96 (1.17)	1.98 (1.14)	2.17 (1.19)
Parasocial interaction	2.92 (1.08)	2.65 (1.08)	2.71 (1.06)	2.88 (1.11)
Brand recall	61.4%	70.3%	68.0%	63.2%

Note: \*\* Means differ significantly between disclosure conditions at  $p < 0.01$ . All other comparisons were not significant.



and are thus competing for people's cognitive resources.

Finally, although prior research has shown that the hashtag #sponsored can indirectly decrease the perceived credibility of influencers on Instagram (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019), the standardized disclosure does not seem to damage the relationship with the influencer. The current study did not provide evidence for an effect of the standardized disclosure on PSI. This could be explained by the generally low PSI in the sample ( $M = 2.80$ ). A small part of the sample (14.5%) had developed PSI with the influencers (scores 4 or higher). The disclosure and ad recognition are unlikely to influence PSI when people do not perceive a high PSI in the first place (Colliander & Erlandsson, 2015). To understand how disclosures and ad recognition influence this relationship, future research could focus on a more select sample of people who have developed more PSI with an influencer.

Third, this study was the first to compare responses to sponsored content sent by micro- and meso-influencers. Although the number of followers of an influencer does influence people's perceptions of popularity, likeability, and credibility (De Veirman et al., 2017; Jin & Phua, 2014), the present study did not find any differences between micro- and meso-influencers regarding the experienced PSI or intentions to engage with the post. Contrary to expectations, meso-influencers do not seem to be judged as having greater bridging social capital compared to micro-influencers. Moreover, the type of influencer does not seem to moderate the effects of the disclosure. The disclosure raises ad recognition regardless of whether the post was sent by a micro- or meso-influencer. This means that the type of influencer does not seem to function as a peripheral cue that activates persuasion knowledge. Future research could aim to gain more insights into people's perceptions of the different types of influencers, for instance by comparing responses to micro-, meso-, and macro-influencers.

The study's findings have practical implications for different stakeholders. Instagram users seem to be well aware of advertising on Instagram (Chen, 2018; Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019). The high level of ad recognition among users, even without the disclosure, confirm the idea that consumers have already developed persuasion knowledge regarding influencer marketing on Instagram. The questionnaire in this study prompted participants to consider whether the post they just saw was advertising. In real life, there is rarely such an external cue. In addition, given the focus on images, Instagram content is likely to be processed rapidly and with low involvement. Therefore, it is unlikely that consumers always use their persuasion knowledge in response to influencer marketing. A disclosure seems to be an effective external cue to trigger this use. For the regulators, such as the FTC, and Instagram, this study demonstrates that the standardized disclosure does raise ad recognition. Thus, although the FTC doubts whether the built-in Instagram disclosure attracts sufficient attention, this study suggests that the standardized disclosure is an effective tool that increases transparency. Further research is needed to compare the effects of this standardized disclosure to hashtags, such as #paidad, to establish which disclosure is more effective in increasing ad recognition.

For brands and influencers, the standardized disclosure on Instagram also seems to be positive, as it makes consumers pay more attention to the brand, and more inclined to engage with the post. A disclosure and ad recognition also do not seem to harm the PSI people perceive with an influencer. The positive effect of the disclosure on online behavioral intentions might indicate that sponsored influencer posts are not necessarily seen as a bad thing, but also as a way to inform users about new products or brands. Influencers could actually be followed because they are opinion leaders who can inform, and perhaps people do not mind them being paid or compensated for this (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2018). In addition, the number of followers is used to classify micro-, meso-, and macro-influencers. Based on this study, advertisers can choose to collaborate with both micro- and meso-influencers to promote their brand; the distinction between these types of influencers does not seem to affect Instagram users' responses. More

research is needed to gain insight into people's perceptions of influencer marketing as a whole, and how different types of posts and influencers affect people's responses to influencer marketing, the influencer, and the advertising brand. Because this study only focused on ad recognition, which is a cognitive aspect of persuasion knowledge, future research could also consider attitudinal dimensions of persuasion knowledge such as appropriateness.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lotte Luijten for collecting the data, and dr. Eva van Reijmersdal for her valuable suggestions on the paper.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.09.015>.

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