Seismo

# Why context matters in a changing social media environment: The role of placement prominence as a moderator of disclosure effects in sponsored influencer content

Johannes Beckert* and Thomas Koch
Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Department of Communication, Germany
*Corresponding author: johannes.beckert@uni-mainz.de

## Abstract

Social media influencers have marked a significant change in advertising in recent years. By integrating sponsored content from advertisers into their feeds, they create awareness and favorable attitudes for products and brands. The effectiveness of this sponsored content builds on close adaptation to the original content of the specific media platform. To ensure transparency, influencers are required to disclose sponsored content. While effects of such disclosure labels and disclaimers have been widely examined, less attention has been paid to context factors that may influence these effects, such as placement prominence. Building on the propositions of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), this study aims to investigate the role of placement prominence as a moderator of disclosure effects. Results of an experimental study revealed that prominent placements support disclosure labels in reducing perceived deceptiveness of sponsored content, which positively affects influencer credibility and recipients' attitudes toward the promoted brand. In contrast, disclosure effects on perceived persuasive intent vanished, when placement prominence was high. The results emphasize the importance of context factors in the processing of sponsored content and disclosures in a constantly changing social media environments.

## 1 Introduction

The proliferation of social media and social networks has changed media use as well as the media landscape. Media users create media content themselves and thus become a source of information for others (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2013; Bruns, 2008). On the basis of the content they share, some of these content creators come to be seen as credible experts on specific topics and establish considerable reach through their social media feeds (Abidin, 2015). In recent years, these social media influencers have received broader attention in communication research and practice; these individuals mark a significant change in advertising (Hudders, de Jans, & de Veirman, 2021). Collaborating with influencers allows organizations to benefit from the influencers' credibility,

expertise, and reach. By integrating sponsored content into social media influencers' feeds, organizations can place brands, products, and persuasive messages in an unobtrusive and trustworthy setting and easily target specific groups of stakeholders (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017). As organizations spend billions on influencer-supported advertising (Geyser, 2021), influencer marketing is also a lucrative business for the influencers involved.

Although influencer marketing is profitable for both organizations and influencers, the practice is not without risks for social media users. The effectiveness of sponsored content builds on close adaptation to the original content of the specific media platform (Beckert, Koch, Viererbl, & Schulz-Knappe, 2021; Ferrer Conill, 2016). Transferring this idea to social media influencers, this means that product place-

ments and advertising messages are seamlessly woven into the influencers' everyday content (de Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017). For recipients, it is difficult to distinguish this sponsored content from unpaid recommendations (Evans et al., 2017). In several countries (e.g., Germany and the United States), influencers are therefore required to disclose sponsored content. Previous studies have shown that such disclosures generally increase recipients' ad recognition of sponsored content (e.g., Boerman, 2020; de Veirman et al., 2017). However, public and regulatory discourse is divided as to whether current disclosure practices adequately disclose the persuasive intent of sponsored content. For example, in the United States, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which is responsible for the regulation of sponsored content, has raised doubts about the effectiveness of disclosure labels (e.g., #sponsored, "Paid partnership with [brand]"), especially with regard to the social media platform Instagram (FTC, 2017a, 2017b).

Existing research on the disclosure of sponsored content and advertising has revolved around the question of how disclosure labels should be designed and placed to guarantee maximum transparency (Amazeen & Wojdynski, 2020; Wojdynski et al., 2017). Less attention has been paid to how contextual factors contribute to sponsorship transparency. In particular, brand prominence may be a crucial factor in this process. The extent to which recipients perceive sponsored influencer content as advertising may depend on how prominently products and brands are placed in the sponsored content. Prominence refers to whether placements become "a central focus of audience attention" in sponsored content (Dens, de Pelsmacker, Wouters, & Purnawirawan, 2012, p. 37; Gupta & Lord, 1998). Prior research on the effects of product placements in movies and television has suggested that, compared with subtle placements, highly prominent placements are more likely to be perceived as irritating and as a more obvious form of promotion (Cowley & Barron, 2008; Dens et al., 2012; Homer, 2009).

The main objective of this study was to examine how effects emanating from placement prominence affect the effectiveness of disclosure labels in sponsored influencer content. On the basis of the propositions of the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994), we hypothesized that disclosures would affect recipients' activation of persuasion knowledge in terms of perceived persuasive intent and perceived deceptiveness, which, in turn, could increase reactance and ultimately result in negative evaluations of both the influencer and the promoted brand. Our research primarily adds to previous research by considering contextual factors in disclosing sponsored content and recipients' processing of such content. Based on the findings, we discuss implications for practitioners (i.e., advertisers and influencers) and regulators.

## 2    Literature review

In the following sub-sections, we review the relevant theoretical concepts and the state of research on which we build the research hypotheses for this study. The first sub-section (2.1) defines basic concepts such as social media influencers and sponsored content. The sub-sections that follow then discuss the propositions of the PKM by Friestad and Wright (1994) in the context of influencer communication (2.2) and give an overview of the current state of research on the effects of brand placement prominence (2.3).

### 2.1  Social media influencers and sponsored content

Although social media influencers are occasionally referred to as "Instafamous" (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019), they are essentially "everyday, ordinary Internet users" (Abidin, 2015, para. 3). What makes these ordinary Internet users famous on social media and beyond is the content they create and share with their followers through their social media feeds on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. This content is often dedicated to specific topics (e.g., fashion, lifestyle,

fitness, food) and is typically highly personalized through an influencer's personal appearance and narration about their everyday life (Abidin, 2015; Enke & Borchers, 2019). This personal touch makes influencers appear to be authentic and credible experts on the topics they represent and earns them a relatively large following (Abidin, 2015; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

According to Abidin (2015), another characteristic of influencers is that they monetize their following by integrating sponsored content into their social media feeds. By definition, sponsored content is a type of advertising that is closely adapted to the media environment in which it appears (Ferrer Conill, 2016; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). In the influencer context, this means that advertisers' products, brands, or persuasive messages are seamlessly woven into an influencer's original content with the aim of fitting in with the influencer's personal nature (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). Cooperating with famous endorsers to promote products and brands is not new in organizations' marketing activities. However, in contrast to celebrity endorsers, influencers provide a media environment in which brands and products can be placed more authentically and unobtrusively. Moreover, social media users can more easily identify with influencers and perceive them as a more credible source than traditional celebrities (Jin, Muqaddam, & Ryu, 2019; Schouten, Janssen, & Verspaget, 2020). Because of their close and trusting relationship with their followers, influencers have a strong impact on their followers' opinion formation and purchase decisions (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Hudders et al., 2021). Organizations have quickly begun to see the potential of influencer marketing for reaching their advertising objectives.

In conclusion, advertising cooperation between organizations and influencers is mutually beneficial. Organizations can borrow influencers' authenticity and followers' identification with the influencers to place brands, products, and persuasive messages in an unobtrusive and trustworthy setting. Additionally, influencers'

thematic focus and reach make it easier for organizations to target specific audiences (Evans et al., 2017). Influencers, in turn, can monetize the documentation of their everyday lives and turn their content production into a professional business (van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021).

## 2.2 Processing sponsored influencer content: The Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM)

Research has shown that the promotional placement of brands and persuasive messages in influencers' content can negatively affect social media users' perceptions of the influencers and the products they endorse (e.g., de Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2021). These effects can be explained by how people process and respond to advertising. The PKM, proposed by Friestad and Wright (1994), is a theoretical framework that explains these coping mechanisms. According to the PKM, individuals acquire specific beliefs and knowledge about advertising and other persuasive tactics throughout their lifetime. Using this "persuasion knowledge," people can more easily identify persuasion attempts and decide how to "skillfully cope with these" (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 1). Persuasion knowledge is a multidimensional construct that includes conceptual and evaluative components. Conceptual persuasion knowledge refers to the understanding of motives, strategies, and tactics related to persuasion attempts, as well as the ability to identify the persuasive intent in communicative encounters (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal, & Dima, 2018; Campbell & Kirmani, 2008). Evaluative persuasion knowledge, in contrast, refers to evaluations of persuasion attempts with regard to, for example, their appropriateness, manipulativeness, or deceptiveness (Beckert et al., 2021; Boerman, van Reijmersdal, et al., 2018; Xie, Boush, & Liu, 2015).

Friestad and Wright (1994, p. 3) stress that that "the term 'cope' is neutral with respect to the direction of targets' responses," meaning that they "do not assume that people invariably or even typically use their persuasion knowledge to resist a

persuasion attempt." Nevertheless, most empirical studies building on the propositions of the PKM have expected individuals to respond to persuasion attempts with defensive coping behaviors (Campbell & Kirmani, 2008; Ham, Nelson, & Das, 2015). A common explanation for the focus on defensive coping is that individuals experience persuasion attempts as restrictions of their personal freedom of choice (Burgoon, Alvaro, Grandpre, & Voulodakis, 2002; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010). The motivation to restore this freedom is known as reactance, which, in turn, negatively affects behaviors and attitudes toward the advertised object and the persuasion agent (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Several studies have found empirical support for these assumptions. For example, Moyer-Gusé and Nabi (2010) showed that the perception of persuasive intent (i.e., conceptual persuasion knowledge) triggered reactance, which, in turn, reduced behavioral intentions related to the persuasive message. In another study, Koch and Zerback (2013) found that reactance following persuasion knowledge activation decreased the credibility not only of a persuasive statement but also of the source of the statement. In influencer communication, source credibility (i.e., influencer credibility) is a key factor in the influencer-follower relationship as well as for the persuasive effectiveness of influencer messages (e.g., Lou & Yuan, 2019). Accordingly, messages from influencers who are considered trustworthy and credible (e.g., as a result of a long-lasting parasocial relationship) trigger less reactance (Breves, Liebers, Motschenbacher, & Reus, 2021). Vice versa, this suggests that messages that evoke reactance (e.g., by highlighting their persuasive intent) could negatively affect influencer credibility.

Although the PKM originally referred to traditional advertising and sales conversations, it has been widely applied to more contemporary and covert forms of advertising such as sponsored content in influencer communication. Research by Beckert et al. (2021), for example, showed that the activation of conceptual persuasion knowledge (i.e., perceived persuasive intent) and attitudinal persuasion knowledge (i.e., perceived deceptiveness) in sponsored influencer content and blog posts evoked anger, which is the affective constituent of reactance. Results by Kim, Duffy, and Thorson (2021) indicated that commercials introduced by influencers on YouTube alert users about the manipulative intent and thus generate more persuasion knowledge. In turn, attitudes toward the persuasive messages and advertiser reputation impaired. De Veirman and Hudders (2020) found that identifying the persuasive nature of sponsored influencer content on Instagram increased recipients' skepticism toward this content, which, in turn, decreased the credibility of the influencer and damaged the recipients' attitudes toward the promoted brand. Taken together, these findings show that persuasion knowledge plays a crucial role in how recipients perceive the persuasion attempts of sponsored content in social media and in influencers' feeds. Identifying the persuasive intent of sponsored influencer content (i.e., conceptual persuasion knowledge) as well as skepticism or perceptions of manipulative or deceptive intent (i.e., attitudinal persuasion knowledge) can lead to defensive coping such as reactance. Consequently, influencers may suffer a loss of credibility, and advertisers may face a decline in the persuasive effectiveness of their sponsored content.

A key factor in the effectiveness of sponsored content is the blending of advertising with original (non-commercial) content (Schauster, Ferrucci, & Neill, 2016). This blending makes it difficult or even impossible to distinguish between non-commercial and promotional content. The placement of brands and products in influencers' social media content without proper disclosure is a deceptive and thus ethically questionable practice (Evans et al., 2017; Kuhn, Hume, & Love, 2010). Several countries have therefore established regulations requiring sponsored content to be disclosed (Boerman, Helberger, van Noort, & Hoofnagle, 2018).

Sponsored content is typically disclosed through the use of labels or disclaimers (Beckert et al., 2021). For spon-

sored influencer content, for example on Instagram, disclosure labels vary in form and position. They can be included either as hashtags (e.g., #sponsored, #ad) or as text placed at the top of the relevant influencer posts (e.g., "Paid partnership with [brand]") (Evans et al., 2017; Weismueller, Harrigan, Wang, & Soutar, 2020). Numerous studies have confirmed that disclosure labels help recipients identify sponsored influencer content as advertising – they activate conceptual persuasion knowledge (e.g., Boerman, 2020; Evans et al., 2017; Kim & Kim, 2021). Moreover, Beckert et al. (2021) found that the presence of disclosure labels in sponsored influencer posts on Instagram not only increased recipients' perceptions of persuasive intent (conceptual persuasion knowledge), but also simultaneously decreased perceived deceptiveness (attitudinal persuasion knowledge).

## 2.3 Effects of brand placement prominence

Whether recipients recognize promoted products placed in influencers' content and the extent to which they perceive such placements as advertising also depends on the prominence of these placements (Gupta & Lord, 1998; Hudders, Cauberghe, Faseur, & Panic, 2016). Prominence refers to whether placements become "a central focus of audience attention" in sponsored content (Dens et al., 2012, p. 37). According to Gupta and Lord (1998), compared with subtle placements or those with low prominence, highly prominent placements are characterized by high visibility of the promoted brands and products. High visibility can be achieved, for example, by using large brand logos or by placing products in the center of influencer posts.

Empirical findings suggest that placement prominence affects the processing of sponsored content and persuasion knowledge activation. With regard to conceptual persuasion knowledge, Cauberghe and de Pelsmacker (2010, p. 7) argue that "prominent placements have more obvious persuasive goals than subtle placements" and thus increase individuals' perceptions of persuasive intent. In line with this argumentation, Hudders et al. (2016) found that the more pronounced perceptions of persuasive intent resulting from prominent placements led to more negative attitudes toward the brands promoted in music videos. With regard to attitudinal persuasion knowledge, Cowley and Barron (2008) assert that, when placements are pulled from the background to the foreground, viewers feel irritated and perceive the placements as more inappropriate because of their manipulative and deceptive intent. These researchers showed that, consequently, prominent brand placements in a television program affected viewers' brand attitudes more negatively compared with subtle placements, especially when viewers had high levels of program liking. Dens et al. (2012) concluded from their study that prominent brand placements triggered persuasion knowledge, leading viewers to re-evaluate the appropriateness of the placements. Accordingly, their results showed that prominent placements in movies had a negative effect on viewers' attitudes toward the promoted brand.

Our review of the literature showed the main effects of both disclosure labels and placement prominence on persuasion knowledge activation and on the psychological processing of sponsored content. On the basis of the similarities and differences in how they affect advertising disclosure, we can draw inferences about the interaction of these two factors in the context of sponsored influencer content. Prior studies have confirmed that both disclosure labels and prominent placements make persuasion attempts in sponsored content more obvious and thus trigger recipients' conceptual persuasion knowledge (e.g., Beckert et al., 2021; Hudders et al., 2016). Further, research by Choi, Bang, Wojdynski, Lee, and Keib (2018) has suggested that prominent placements, compared with subtle placements, can boost the effects of disclosure labels on conceptual persuasion knowledge. Hence, we propose the following hypothesis (Figure 1):

Figure 1:    Conceptual model and research hypotheses
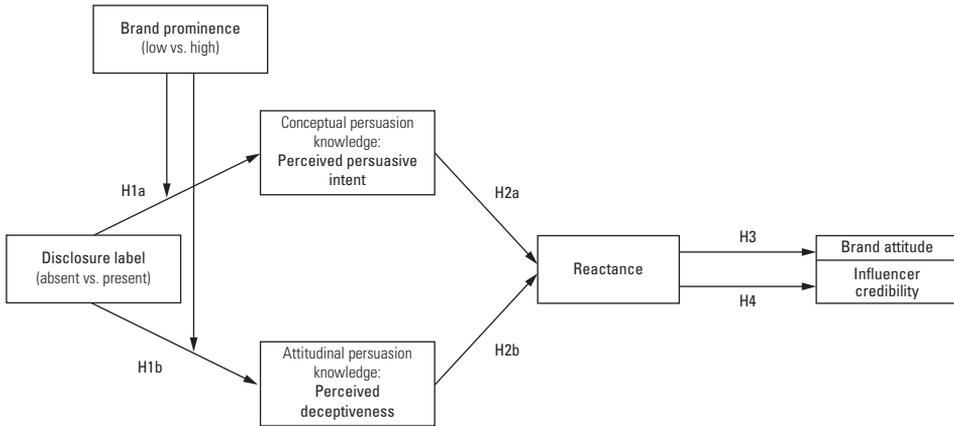


H1a: Disclosure labels in sponsored influencer content increase recipients' perceptions of persuasive intent (i.e., the activation of conceptual persuasion knowledge). This effect is stronger for prominent placements than for subtle placements.

Whereas disclosure labels have been found to decrease perceptions of manipulative intent and deception in sponsored content (e.g., Beckert et al., 2021), prominent placements have also been found to affect recipients' attitudinal persuasion knowledge (e.g., Cowley & Barron, 2008). In line with findings by Choi et al. (2018), we assume that, when disclosure labels are present, prominent placements will not irritate recipients but will rather reinforce the perception that the content is not deceptive, by making its commercial nature transparent (Figure 1).

H1b: Disclosure labels in sponsored influencer content decrease recipients' perceptions of deceptiveness (i.e., attitudinal persuasion knowledge). This effect is stronger for prominent placements than for subtle placements.

Following the propositions of the PKM and the empirical findings outlined above, we hypothesize that recipients who recognize the persuasive intent of sponsored influ-

encer content (i.e., conceptual persuasion knowledge) and perceive it as deceptive (i.e., the activation of attitudinal persuasion knowledge) will respond with defensive coping behaviors such as reactance (Koch & Zerback, 2013; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016; Figure 1).

H2: Higher levels of a) perceived persuasive intent (i.e., conceptual persuasion knowledge) and b) perceived deceptiveness (i.e., attitudinal persuasion knowledge) increase recipients' reactance.

As outlined above, we further hypothesize that reactance is negatively linked to evaluations of both the promoted brand and the source of the persuasion attempt (Breves et al., 2021; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016; Figure 1).

H3: Higher levels of reactance have a negative effect on recipients' attitudes toward the promoted brand.
H4: Higher levels of reactance decrease the credibility of the influencer.

## 3    Method

In the following sub-sections, we give an overview of the methodological procedure of this study. This includes explanations of the sample (3.1), the experimental design

and procedure (3.2), the stimuli (3.3) and measures (3.4) used in this study, as well as the treatment check.

## 3.1 Sample

We recruited 183 participants via social media (65.0 % women, 34.4 % men, 0.5 % other; age: $M=26.87$ years, $SD=8.22$). The participants did not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

## 3.2 Design and procedure

We conducted an experiment using a 2 x 2 between-subjects design. As a first factor, we manipulated the presence of a disclosure label (factor 1: disclosure label absent vs. present). As a second factor, we varied the prominence of the presented brand (factor 2: low vs. high brand prominence). Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four conditions.

Figure 2: Stimuli used in the study



## 3.3 Stimuli

We asked subjects to view an Instagram post made by a fictious influencer, Finn ("finn.on.the.track"), showing a picture of him standing in front of a forest landscape. The picture was taken from behind so that the participants could not see his face – only his back and the back of his head. This setting and perspective were used so that the appearance of the influencer would not exert strong effects on the participants. Finn carries a backpack made by the fictitious brand "ekorn," with a black brand logo of a squirrel, which we designed for the study. We created a fictitious brand to avoid the potentially confounding effects of pre-existing brand attitudes and to eliminate biased responses from subjects' past brand experience. We used a fictitious influencer to ensure that participants did not have prior knowledge and strong attitudes toward him to increase the study's internal validity.

Regarding our first experimental factor (disclosure label), either the Instagram post was not disclosed as an advertisement, or the label "Paid partnership with ekorn" was displayed at the top of the post and a short note was included in the caption stating that the post was an advertisement.

Regarding our second experimental factor (brand prominence), the influencer presented the backpack either prominently or subtly. In the highly prominent version, the influencer carries the backpack with one strap over his left shoulder, pointing it directly at the camera; the product is in the center of the photo, the brand's logo is clearly visible, and the brand name is clearly legible. In the subtle version with low brand prominence, the influencer is carrying the backpack casually in his right hand and does not point it directly at the camera; the backpack is more unobtrusively placed and not presented as the focus of the picture. The logo and the brand name are visible but not prominently placed. All other parameters were kept constant. Figure 2 presents an overview of the stimuli used in this study.

### 3.4 Measures

We measured the participants' *attitudes toward the brand* ("ekorn") using a five-point semantic differential scale developed by Matthes, Schemer, and Wirth (2007) with five polar adjective pairs in response to the item "In my opinion, the brand 'ekorn' seems to be…" The bipolar adjective pairs were "pleasant / unpleasant," "appealing / unappealing," "interesting / uninteresting," "attractive / unattractive," and "bad / good." The items were combined into an index, $M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.70$, $\alpha = .87$.

The perceived *credibility of the influencer* (Finn) was assessed using a five-point semantic differential scale developed by Koch and Peter (2017; see also Infante, 1980). The three bipolar adjective pairs in response to the item "Finn seems to be…" were "dishonest / honest," "untrustworthy / trustworthy," and "noncredible / credible." The three items were combined into an index, $M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.90$, $\alpha = .86$.

We also assessed the participants' activation of conceptual persuasion knowledge, measuring the *perceived persuasive intent* evoked by the Instagram post on a five-point Likert scale similar to the measures used by Tutaj and van Reijmersdal (2012) and Beckert et al. (2021). We asked the participants to indicate their level of agreement (*strongly disagree – strongly agree*) with the following four items: "The aim of Finn's post is to make me believe that the backpack is great," "The aim of Finn's post is to convince me to buy the backpack," "The backpack was shown in the post so that I would think positively about the product," and "Finn is trying to get me to buy the backpack with his post." We created an index of these four items, $M = 3.95$, $SD = 0.93$, $\alpha = .90$.

Additionally, we assessed the participants' activation of attitudinal persuasion knowledge, measuring the *perceived deceptiveness* of the Instagram post on a five-point Likert scale. The items were retrieved from the "deceptiveness" dimension of the Sponsorship Transparency Scale developed by Wojdynski, Evans, and Hoy (2018; see also Beckert et al., 2021). The participants were asked to rate their level of agreement (*strongly disagree – strongly*

*agree*) with the following four items: "Finn was trying to trick me into thinking the post was not advertising," "Finn tried to obscure the fact that his post was an ad," "Finn tried to deceive me about the fact that the post was advertising," and "Finn informs the reader about the real purpose of his post" (reverse-coded), $M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.27$, $\alpha = .91$.

The measure of *reactance* builds on the conceptual understanding of an affective component (anger) and a cognitive component (negative cognitions, counterarguing) (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Dillard & Shen, 2005). We measured both components with the scale used by van Reijmersdal et al. (2016; see also Zuwerink Jacks & Cameron, 2003). To assess negative cognitions, we asked the participants to what extent they agreed or disagreed (*strongly disagree – strongly agree*) with the statements that, "while reading the Instagram post," they "contested," "refuted," "doubted," and "countered" the information in the post. To measure the affective component, the participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the following four items: "While reading the Instagram post, I felt …" "angry," "enraged," "irritated," and "annoyed." All items were assessed on five-point Likert scales. We built an index using these eight variables, $M = 2.54$, $SD = 0.93$, $\alpha = .89$.

Finally, as a *treatment check*, we asked the participants to rate the prominence of the placement using a five-point semantic differential scale in response to the item "In my opinion, the backpack was placed…" with the polar adjective pair of "subtle / prominent," $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.25$. We also asked the participants whether there was a label disclosing that the post was advertising.

### 3.5 Treatment check

We tested whether the experimental groups correctly remembered the presence of a disclosure label. Crosstabulations showed that 71.4 % ($n = 65$) of the participants in the condition without a disclosure label and 84.8 % ($n = 78$) of participants in the condition with a disclosure label responded correctly when

asked whether they had seen a disclosure label, $\chi^2(2, n = 183) = 82.69$, $p < .001$. 14 participants indicated that they do not remember. The participants who responded incorrectly on this item ($n = 26$) were excluded from further analysis. Additionally, we also checked whether the manipulation of placement prominence was successful. An independent samples *t*-test showed that the participants perceived the prominent placement as significantly more conspicuous, $M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.67$, compared with the more subtle placement, $M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.32$), $t(181) = 8.54$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the manipulation was successful.

## 4   Results

Two moderated mediation analyses with 10 000 bootstrap samples were performed (PROCESS, customized model; Hayes, 2018) to test the hypotheses. The first analysis tested the effects of disclosure labels and placement prominence on the participants' brand attitudes. Disclosure was dummy coded and included as an independent variable, brand attitudes served as the dependent variable, and perceived persuasive intent, perceived deceptiveness, and reactance were used as mediators. The perception of the placement as subtle / prominent served as a moderator. We decided to include the perception measure instead of our experimental factor as the moderator variable in our models. This decision was based on the idea that the metrically scaled perception measure estimates the magnitude of the effect more precisely than the binary scaled experimental factor. A post hoc comparison confirms that using the perception measure as the moderator variable instead of the experimental factor does not substantially affect the results of the study. The results are shown in Figure 3.

The analysis showed a significant interaction effect of placement prominence and disclosure label presence on perceived persuasive intent, $b = -.27$, $p < .05$. Contrary to H1a, the disclosure label increased perceived persuasive intent only when the placement was perceived as subtle, $b = .96$,

$p < .001$. When the placement was perceived as prominent, the effect vanished, $b = .30$, $p > .05$. There was also no support for H2a, as perceived persuasive intent did not affect the participants' reactance, $b = -.01$, $p > .05$. However, in line with H3, reactance decreased the participants' brand attitudes, $b = -.26$, $p < .001$. Taken together, the findings of the mediation analysis showed no significant indirect effect of the presence of a disclosure label on brand attitudes mediated by perceived persuasive intent or reactance when the placement was perceived as prominent, (–1 *SD*), $b = .00$, 95 % CI [–.05, .04], or when it was perceived as subtle, (+1 *SD*), $b = .00$, 95 % CI [–.01, .02].

The analysis revealed a significant interaction effect of placement prominence and disclosure label presence on perceived deceptiveness, $b = -.26$, $p < .05$. The presence of a disclosure label decreased the perceived deceptiveness when the placement was perceived as more subtle, $b = -1.37$, $p < .001$. In line with H1b, this effect was significantly stronger when the placement was perceived as prominent, $b = -2.00$, $p < .001$. Perceived deceptiveness triggered reactance, $b = .46$, $p < .001$, supporting H2b. Finally, as reported above, reactance worsened brand attitude, $b = -.26$, $p < .001$, supporting H3. Taken together, the findings of the mediation analysis revealed a significant positive indirect effect of the presence of a disclosure label on brand attitude, mediated by perceived deceptiveness and reactance, both when the placement was perceived as prominent, (–1 *SD*), $b = .16$, 95 % CI [.07, .29], and when it was perceived as subtle, (+1 *SD*), $b = .23$, 95 % CI [.11, .40].

Furthermore, the analysis showed a direct effect of the presence of a disclosure label on reactance, $b = .66$, $p < .01$. In addition to the direct effect of reactance on brand attitude, $b = -.26$, $p < .001$, the mediation analysis revealed another significant negative indirect effect of the presence of a disclosure label on brand attitude, $b = -.17$, 95 % CI [–.32, –.05].

The second moderated mediation analysis with 10 000 bootstrap samples (PROCESS, customized model; Hayes,

Figure 3:     Moderated mediation analysis of disclosure effects on brand attitudes
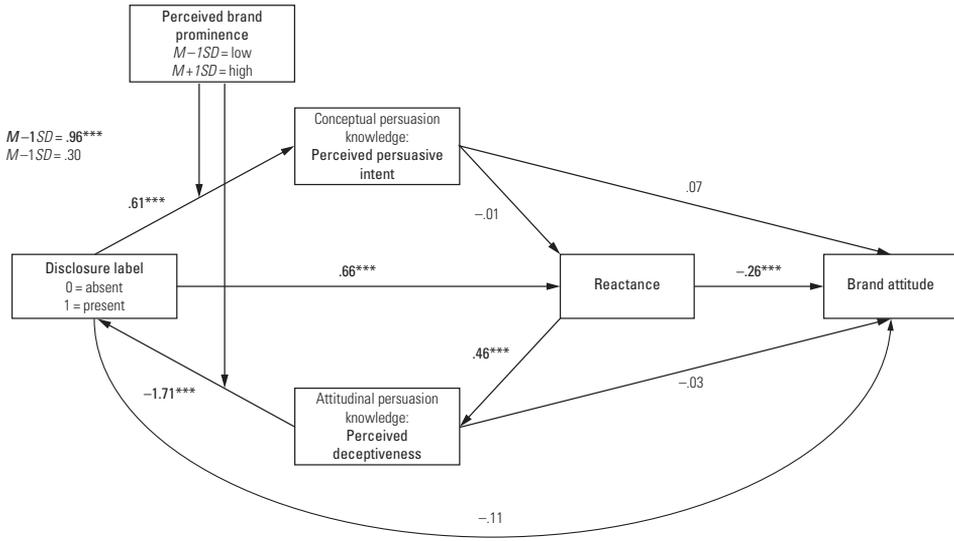


*Notes:* $n = 157$. PROCESS (customized model), 10 000 bootstrap samples, unstandardized path coefficients.
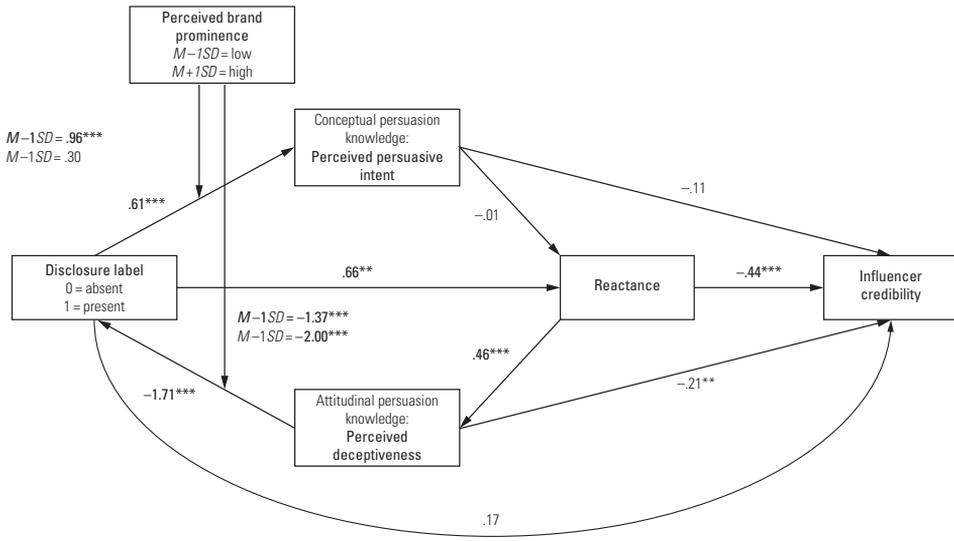$*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$.

2018) tested the effects of disclosure label presence on influencer credibility. Again, disclosure label was dummy coded and included as an independent variable. Here, influencer credibility served as the dependent variable, and perceived persuasive intent, perceived deceptiveness, and reactance were used as mediators. As in the analysis described above, the perception of the placements as subtle / prominent was included as a moderator. The results are shown in Figure 4.

The results of the analysis indicated effects similar to the effects of disclosure label presence on brand attitude. Both interaction effects, the effect of perceived deceptiveness on the participants' reactance, and the lack of an effect of perceived persuasive intent on reactance were the same in the two analyses. In addition, the model demonstrated that reactance decreased influencer credibility, $b = -.44$, $p < .001$, supporting H4. We found no significant indirect effect of the presence of a disclosure label on influencer credibility mediated by perceived persuasive intent or reactance when the placement was perceived as prominent, (+1 SD), $b = .00$, 95 %

CI [–.08, .06], or when it was perceived as subtle, (+1 *SD*), $b = .00$, 95 % CI [–.02, .03]. However, the analysis revealed a significant negative indirect effect of disclosure label presence on influencer credibility, mediated by perceived deceptiveness and reactance. This effect occurred both when the placement was perceived as prominent, (–1 *SD*), $b = .27$, 95 % CI [.13, .46], and when it was perceived as subtle, (+1 *SD*), $b = .40$, 95 % CI [.22, .63].

We also found a significant negative indirect effect of disclosure label presence on influencer credibility, mediated by reactance, $b = -.29$, 95 % CI [–.52, –.08]. Additionally, there was a direct effect of perceived deceptiveness on influencer credibility, $b = -.21$, $p < .01$. This led to another positive indirect effect of disclosure label presence on influencer credibility, mediated by perceived deceptiveness, both when the placement was perceived as prominent, (–1 SD), $b = .29$, 95 % CI [.08, .56], and when it was perceived as subtle, (+1 SD), $b = .45$, 95 % CI [.11, .77].

Figure 4:    Moderated mediation analysis of disclosure effects on influencer credibility

## 5   Conclusion

The rise of social media influencers has expanded and partly changed the marketing strategies of organizations. Organizations aim to promote brands and raise awareness for products and services by co-operating with influencers. For this purpose, influencers integrate these products and services into their original (non-commercial) content. While such partnerships are lucrative for organizations and influencers, they are also ethically problematic, if not properly disclosed. Therefore, a clear disclosure of the commercial nature of sponsored content in the feeds of social media influencers is required. Sponsored influencer content is usually disclosed using disclosure labels (e. g., "Paid partnership with…", #ad) that are intended to help users recognize the persuasive intent and to reduce the deceptiveness of sponsored content. In this study, we investigated how such disclosure labels affect users' processing of sponsored influencer content and how contextual factors such as placement prominence moderate these effects.

The results of our analyses revealed joint effects of the presence of a disclosure label and placement prominence on persuasion knowledge activation. Contrary to our assumptions, prominent placements did not boost the effect of the disclosure label on conceptual persuasion knowledge. Although the disclosure label significantly increased users' perceptions of persuasive intent when the placement was subtle, this effect vanished when the placement was prominent. When products are prominently placed in sponsored content, users seem to make inferences about the persuasive intent of the content only based on placement prominence, while disclosure labels did no longer play a role. This effect could have occurred because users' attention on social media platforms like Instagram is primarily focused on the (visual) content, whereas disclosure labels are usually placed outside of the platform-specific content, for instance close to the title or in the caption of an influencer post (Weismueller et al., 2020). This finding further contributes to a better understanding of the mechanisms of the PKM in the context of sponsored influencer con-

tent. Accordingly, both disclosure labels and placement prominence may function as cues that trigger change-of-meaning processes within recipients and affect their perception of persuasive intent (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Interestingly, when multiple cues are available at the same time, their change-of-meaning effects do not add up. Instead, recipients seem to infer the persuasiveness of the content from individual cues that are more accessible than others. Future studies should therefore focus more extensively on change-of-meaning processes in the consumption of sponsored content and continue investigating scenarios of concurring cues that indicate the persuasiveness of such content. Moreover, influencers also commonly recommend products and brands that are not related to paid collaborations with advertisers. With regard to the PKM, future work should clarify whether recipients equate prominent placements with paid collaborations and advertising.

Another central finding of the study was that perceived deceptiveness was reduced by the presence of a disclosure label and this effect was strengthened when the promoted product was placed prominently in the sponsored influencer post. This result is in line with earlier findings (Choi et al., 2018) and demonstrates that prominent placements do not necessarily impair the persuasive effectiveness of sponsored content as shown, e. g., by Cowley and Barron (2008). Users may activate an advertising schema because of highly prominent placements in influencers' content (Evans & Park, 2015). If influencer content presents prominent placements but lacks explicit disclosure labels, this may be perceived as incongruent with the users' advertising schema and thus cause irritation. The combination of prominent placements and disclosure labels, in contrast, is perceived as less irritating and deceptive because it is more congruent with the users' advertising schema. The combination of subtle placements and the lack of disclosure labels, in contrast, could be congruent with a specific schema of original and non-commercial influencer content (Kim, Choi, & Kim, 2019). This has

also conceptual implications for the PKM, as the activation and use of persuasion knowledge substantially depends on the schemata that influencer content triggers in recipients (Evans & Park, 2015). Thus, it is important that future studies aim to analyze specific schemata in the context of influencer content and how they relate to recipients' existing advertising schemas.

Somewhat surprisingly, in this study, users' perceptions of persuasive intent (i. e., conceptual persuasion knowledge) were not significantly related to reactance. This finding is contrary to our hypotheses and to prior research that confirmed a strong link between these two constructs (e. g., Beckert, Koch, Viererbl, Denner, & Peter, 2020; Koch & Zerback, 2013). However, recent research suggests that the effectiveness of influencer marketing highly depends on the quality of the follower-influencer relationship. For example, Lou (2022) has shown that users are more likely to responding with acceptance instead of reactance when they feel connected to the influencer. Although the stimuli used in our study were completely fictitious, the participants may have easily identified with the presented influencer, or they may not have been concerned with his brand collaborations because they could not build a relationship with him at all. Either way, this thought implies that in terms of the PKM, recipients' agent knowledge could play a crucial role in how they cope with sponsored influencer content. It is thus important for future studies to consider the influencer-follower relationship as a potential moderator of advertising effects in sponsored influencer content.

The findings of this study have to be seen in the light of several limitations. First, as we discussed above, the influencer and brand presented in our stimuli were fictitious. On the one hand, this prevents bias caused by pre-existing attitudes toward influencer and promoted brand. On the other hand, fictitious stimuli can decrease external validity: Both influencer-follower relationship and influencer-product congruence play an important role in the processing of sponsored influencer content (Kim & Kim, 2021; Lou, 2022), but were

not considered in this study. Especially with regard to users' coping with influencer content, followers who maintain a substantial relationship with influencers could respond less defensive bur more affirmative to sponsored influencer content (e.g., Lou, 2022). Future research should therefore focus more specifically on how influencers' followers process and cope with sponsored content. Second, our sample comprised mainly young adults with higher education. Adolescents were quite underrepresented, although they have an extensive social media use and were found to respond differently to sponsored influencer content than adults (de Jans, van de Sompel, de Veirman, & Hudders, 2020). Third, the findings are limited to the specific disclosure stimulus used in the study. We presented participants with the label "Paid partnership with ekorn" that was displayed at the top of the post as well as a short note that was included in the caption stating that the post was an advertisement. Other disclosure types or other wordings could yield different effects: Studies show that language and positioning of disclosures affect ad recognition, participants' memory of the disclosure as well as attitudes toward the brand and the influencer (e.g., Evans et al., 2017; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). Thus, future studies are needed to further clarify whether different types of disclosures moderate these effects. A fourth limitation of our study was the manipulation of brand prominence. There are plenty of ways to make a brand the center of audience attention such as plot connection, duration of presentation, repeated presentation, visual / auditive obtrusiveness and others (Avery & Ferraro, 2000; Gupta & Gould, 1997; Russell, 2002). We chose to manipulate the visual obtrusiveness of the brand as this variation was easy to manipulate and also applied in previous research. However, other manipulations of brand prominence could be perceived differently and yield different effects. A plot connection of a brand placement could be perceived as rather prominent, but if the brand is integrated as an integral part into the story, the brand placement could yield different effects.

The results presented in this paper have implications for practitioners (i.e., advertisers and influencers) and regulators. First, advertisers as well as influencers should commit to disclosing sponsored content. This prevents user deception and preserves influencer credibility as well as the persuasive effectiveness of sponsored content. Second, openness and transparency are key components for professional influencers to appear as authentic and trustworthy communicators. In this regard, the integration of sponsored content that potentially deceives the followers bears always a certain risk for influencers. Our study shows that the deceptiveness of sponsored influencer content is most effectively reduced when sponsored posts contain disclosure labels and high-prominent brand placements. Influencers should therefore not only use disclosure labels to make paid collaborations with advertisers transparent, but also consider to present paid placements very prominently in their posts. Third, regulators who already prescribe the use of disclosure labels in sponsored influencer content should consider that the effectiveness of disclosures may vary upon other contextual factors, such as the prominence of promoted brands in sponsored posts. The interplay of disclosure labels and contextual factors and possible side effects could be part of practical guidelines regulators should offer to advertisers and influencers in order to ensure a correct and responsible implementation of the existing disclosure regulations. Fourth, it could be helpful for advertisers and regulators alike to monitor recipients' perceptions and evaluations of sponsored content. In doing so, they will better understand, which types of disclosure in sponsored content are effective and under which conditions recipients might accept and appreciate brand placements.

Social media influencers have significantly changed the advertising market and will have a lasting impact on the marketing strategies of many organizations. Influencers and advertisers profit from influencer marketing, but with integrating sponsored content that is potential-

ly deceptive for users, they may also risk their credibility and persuasive power. Disclosing the commercial nature of sponsored content is therefore indispensable. Regulators and research have focused on labels and disclaimers as the most effective means of disclosure. With the present study, however, we showed that effective advertising disclosure in sponsored content is about more than just labels. Accordingly, the prominence of brands and products placed in influencers' content is another key factor when it comes to prevention of user deception and detection of persuasive intent in sponsored influencer content. Our study may give an initial impetus for disclosure research and the regulatory discourse to broaden their focus and consider disclosure effectiveness as a function of context factors in sponsored content.

## Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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