

# Reducing Resistance to Sponsorship Disclosure: The Role of Experiential Versus Material Posts

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the growing relevance of influencer marketing, recent research suggests that consumers have negative reactions to social media ads. Our research investigates how different types of disclosure (paid partnership vs. in-text disclosure) and post content (experiential vs. material) mitigate consumers' negative reactions to social media advertisements. Four preregistered studies, drawing on the social exchange theory, reveal how the post content shapes the sponsorship disclosure effects. In particular, we show that a paid partnership (vs. in-text) disclosure has a positive impact on consumers' responses (engagement and purchase intent) and that persuasion resistance mediates the effects. Furthermore, Study 3 reveals that the type of content (experiential vs. material) moderates the effect, such that consumers' negative reactions to sponsorship disclosure are mitigated with experiential (vs. material) content. Overall, our results provide actionable implications for tourism marketers on how to create advertisements in social media, minimizing negative reactions to sponsorship disclosure.

**Keywords:** engagement, disclosure, paid partnership, social exchange theory, social media, travel experiences.

## 1. Introduction

Influencer marketing is viewed as an effective tool for driving customers' purchase decisions and engagement (e.g., Harrigan et al., 2021; Tafesse & Wood, 2021), and it is widely used by marketers (Cohen et al., 2021; Yu & Egger, 2021). Today, companies rely on social media influencers more than ever to promote their products and services. For instance, 42% of U.S. daily Instagram users bought something based on influencer recommendations (Augustine, 2019), and up to 86% use social media for purchase advice (Digital Marketing Institutions, 2020). Thus, it is unsurprising that tourism players, including Starwood Resorts and Ritz-Carlton, rely on influencers to leverage their brands (Social Tables, 2020).

In practical terms, influencers are required by law to disclose any material connections when endorsing brands (Federal Trade Commission, 2019; 2022). Although disclosing brand sponsorship is necessary to help consumers recognize the commercial content of the post (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017; Giuffredi-Kähr, Petrova, & Malär, 2022), it increases advertising recognition, thus having a negative effect on post evaluations (De Jans & Hudders, 2020). Notably, prior research demonstrates that consumers react less favorably to sponsorship disclosure (e.g., Boerman et al., 2017; Campbell & Evans, 2018), as it might reduce the influencer's credibility and trustworthiness (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022; Karagür et al., 2021), leading consumers to react less favorably to the content (e.g., Boerman et al., 2017; Campbell & Evans, 2018). However, it is less clear under which conditions such resistance can be mitigated. Hence, the current research examines two main research questions: (1) Which factors mitigate the

negative reactions to sponsorship disclosure? and (2) What is the psychological mechanism and the moderators shaping this effect?

Our investigation is grounded on the Social Exchange Theory (e.g., Holiday et al., 2020; Kim & Kim, 2021; Schumann, von Wangenheim, & Groene, 2014), persuasion resistance literature (Laran, Dalton, & Andrade, 2011; Ivanov et al., 2018), and experiential versus material content (e.g., Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). We propose that disclosure type (partnership vs. in-text) influences customers' responses (engagement and purchase intent) and that resistance to persuasion drives such an effect. Prior research indicates that a successful exchange of social resources depends on the satisfactory interaction between two relationship partners (e.g., the influencer and followers—Kim & Kim, 2021a), and the likability of the exchange is determined by the value and reward (Pulles & Hartman, 2017). Since paid partnerships focus on their relational nature and transparency – e.g., “paid partnership with Hilton” (Dreghorn, 2020; PR Week, 2019), we expect that consumers react more positively to paid partnerships (vs. in-text disclosure using “#hashtags”). Conversely, we expect that in-text disclosure would strengthen consumers' beliefs about the commercial nature of the post (De Jans & Hudders, 2020), increasing consumers' persuasion resistance.

Furthermore, this paper suggests that priming the post as experiential (vs. material) reduces the negative effect of sponsorship disclosure leading to more favorable reactions, and this effect is driven via persuasion resistance. Since social exchange theory focuses on relational benefits and cost-benefit analysis, we expect that consumers perceive material posts as more manipulative compared to experiential posts. Whereas experiences are more desirable than material objects (Bastos, 2019; Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014), leading to

more favorable outcomes. As such, we expect that priming a post as experiential (vs. material) lessens consumers' negative reactions to sponsorship disclosure.

By doing so, this work provides guidelines that help brands when collaborating with travel influencers and how they should consider branded content as a tool to increase online engagement. Hence, this research adds to the literature on sponsorship disclosure (Boerman et al., 2017; Hwang & Jeong, 2016) by revealing how consumers evaluate the nature of disclosure through the lenses of social exchange. In particular, our findings encourage brands to rely more on paid partnerships and further to consider priming the posts as experiential (vs. material) while collaborating with influencers due to their ability to drive engagement and avoid the persuasive resistance generated by sponsored ads.

From a managerial perspective, the results suggest that brands and their managers can influence how consumers react to sponsorship disclosure by framing social media posts as experiential. Specifically, a simple strategy for reducing persuasion resistance is framing sponsored social media posts as an experiential (vs. material), potentially reducing consumer persuasion resistance and thus positively boosting consumers' responses.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Travel Influencers and Endorsements***

Social media influencers are independent third-party endorsers who engage with their audience on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Gorry & Westbrook, 2009). A social media influencer is often perceived as an expert in some specific field of interest, such as travel, fitness, or food (Haenlein et al., 2020). Social media influencers often become brands (Karagür et al., 2021; Kapoor et al., 2022) and have

the power to affect their followers' attitudes (Chu, Deng, & Cheng, 2020; De Veirman et al., 2017), credibility (Lou & Yuan, 2018; Pop, Săplăcan, Dabija, & Alt, 2022), authenticity (e.g., Audrezet et al., 2017; 2020; Pop et al., 2022), and purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2018). Notably, social media influencers have gained popularity in firms' online marketing strategies (e.g., Pop et al., 2022) and changed the advertising landscape (Hudders, De Jans, & De Veirman, 2021), combining both paid and earned media (e.g., Kapoor et al., 2022; Xu & Pratt, 2018).

Particularly relevant to our research, travel influencers use social media platforms to share personal travel experiences, suggestions, and recommendations that can influence consumers' destination choices (Kang & Schuett, 2013; Schroeder & Pennington-Gray, 2015). Travel influencers provide insight into their latest travel experiences (De Veirman et al., 2017) while also offering recommendations and suggestions (e.g., airlines, hotels, and restaurants). Unlike traditional media, travel influencers are believed to be more personal, social, and authentic when communicating content around a destination (Tratt, 2018). Thus, major travel and hospitality establishments, including Alaska Airlines, Marriott, and Hilton, have invested in influencer campaigns. For example, Marriott co-created travel videos with the vlogger Jack Harries (i.e., 24 hours in New Orleans), resulting in almost 900,000 views on YouTube (Gretzel, 2018).

## ***2.2. Sponsorship Disclosure: Paid Partnership (vs. In-Text Disclosure)***

Sponsorship disclosure refers to the act of informing consumers about the commercial intent of a message, which increases advertising recognition (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Sponsorship disclosure has evolved from product placements in TV shows (e.g., Gupta, Balasubramanian, & Klassen, 2000) to online blogs (e.g., Huang, 2015) and

most recently to microbloggers (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020). Social media users can generally differentiate between commercial (vs. non-commercial) posts due to the persuasion knowledge that sponsorship disclosure creates (Boerman & Müller, 2022). Prior research suggests that sponsorship disclosure increases persuasion knowledge (e.g., Boerman et al., 2012; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016), thus enabling consumers to recognize such posts as a form of advertising (e.g., Boerman et al., 2017).

Prior research on sponsorship disclosure has examined sponsorship duration (Boerman, Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012) and the comparison between sponsorship by celebrity endorsers vs. the brand (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Previous research has further explored the role of sponsorship in the social media influencer context, including the number of followers (Giuffredi-Kähr, Petrova, & Malär, 2022) and the impact of various types of disclosure (e.g., number of hashtags, paid partnership) on transparency, trustworthiness, and engagement (Karagür et al. 2021).

However, there is some tension in the literature about the role of sponsorship disclosure. Advertising disclosure in vlogs tends to result in negative attitudes (De Jans, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2018), as such marketing is associated with the commercial goals of the blog (e.g., Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Such disclosures tend to make social media users suspicious about the post's ulterior motives and infer calculative motives (Kim & Kim, 2021a), activating consumers' persuasion knowledge (e.g., Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Furthermore, recent research shows that disclosures can hurt the influencer's trustworthiness (Karagür et al., 2021; De Jans et al., 2018).

Consumers' reactions to disclosure tactics vary (Kim & Kim, 2021a; Giuffredi-Kähr, Petrova, & Malär, 2022; Jung & Heo, 2019). Prior studies on sponsorship disclosure report conflicting findings. For instance, in the sponsorship disclosure context, research shows that increasing persuasion knowledge reduces the credibility of the post (e.g., Narangajavana et al., 2017), increases counterarguments (Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2019), and results in greater skepticism and lower evaluations (Kim, Youn, & Yoon, 2019; Tsfat & Cappella, 2003). However, persuasion knowledge can sometimes bolster credibility (Isaac & Grayson, 2017). Hence, this research aims to reconcile prior conflicting findings by examining how different types of disclosure (partnership vs. in-text) influence consumers' responses to social media posts.

We draw on the social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Lee et al., 2021) to offer a novel perspective on how different types of disclosure (partnership vs. in-text) affect viewers' reactions. The social exchange theory provides a useful framework for examining sponsorship disclosure because it touches upon three key areas: (a) interpersonal relations, (b) interaction with the brand, and (c) content of the message (e.g., Hayes, King, & Ramirez, 2016; Holiday et al., 2021). Prior research has applied social exchange in various contexts, such as blogging (e.g., Liu et al., 2016), online advertising (e.g., Schumann et al., 2014), and social media platforms (Urbonavicius et al., 2021).

Relationships evolve over a series of satisfactory interactions between different parties or actors (Becker-Olsen, 2003). Social exchange theory focuses on how interpersonal relationships are constructed and maintained. Exchange on social media occurs in various ways. For instance, individuals tend to share information due to relational benefits such as self-expression or reciprocal benefits (Hayes, 2016), brand relationship

strength (Hayes & King, 2014), or altruistic motives (Dreisbach et al., 2021). Consumers develop relationships with the influencers they follow because they view them as a source of knowledge or entertainment (Asan, 2022; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Thus, engagement is reinforced when there is a relational exchange between influencers and followers (Kim & Kim, 2021b; Leung, Gu, & Palmatier, 2022).

In the social media context, influencers tend to show commercial content in various ways, such as sponsored disclosure by using in-text disclosure (e.g., #sponsored; #ad; #pub) versus indirect endorsement via partnership disclosures (e.g., a post about staying in a hotel, in partnership with @Marriot). We argue that the two types of disclosure (partnership vs. in-text disclosure) have a differential impact on consumer engagement with the post. The paid partnership is a branded content tool introduced by Instagram for more transparent advertising, enabling brands to expand their content and provide access to a wider consumer base in addition to the influencers' organic audience (Instagram, 2022). Using hashtags, however, refers to in-text disclosure, where the influencer discloses their commercial relationship with the brand through a hashtag. Although paid partnerships and hashtags are both persuasion tactics to increase brand exposure (e.g., Kim & Phua, 2020), consumers often recognize that sponsored disclosure is an attempt to hide the commercial nature of the post (De Jans & Hudders, 2020). Prior research suggests that individuals have positive reactions when relationships are built on recognition and transparency (e.g., De Cicco, Iacobucci, & Pagliaro, 2021).

For instance, a recent study shows that consumers or viewers react positively to social media influencers when they focus on relational exchanges, such as maintaining positive interactions (Holiday, Densley, & Norman, 2021). Nonetheless, this effect



backfires when viewers do not see any relational value in the interaction (Kim & Kim, 2021b). We argue that social media users recognize that a paid partnership highlights the relational aspect of the post (i.e., the relationship with the brands). Conversely, an in-text disclosure might make consumers feel skeptical as such disclosure signals that the influencer is strengthening the commercial content of the post. Sometimes the influencer uses multiple hashtags to hide sponsored content, while paid partnerships are highly transparent (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022; Holiday et al., 2020). Since a paid partnership is more transparent, users feel that they have gained intangible benefits from the post (Dreghorn, 2020; PR Week, 2019) rather than attempting to persuade consumers, which might lead consumers to react in a contrary manner. Hence, we propose that partnership (vs. sponsored) disclosure will lead to higher levels of engagement.

*H1. Compared to a sponsored in-text disclosure, a partnership disclosure will have a positive effect on consumer responses.*

### **2.3. Resistance to Persuasion**

Prior research shows that consumers are likely to resist persuasive attempts (e.g., Chen, Minson, JSchöne, & Heinrichs, 2013; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2010). The theory of psychological reactance is one of the most frequent theories explaining consumers' resistance to persuasion (e.g., Jenkins & Dragojevic, 2013). People have a fundamental need for autonomy; once they feel their freedom is threatened, their resistance increases (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

Persuasive attempts by social media influencers tend to lead to various types of resistance, such as counterarguing (Boerman, Van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2014; Van Der

Goot et al., 2021) and skepticism (e.g., Boerman et al., 2017). Van Reijmersdal et al. (2016) suggest that resistance occurs for two reasons; first, the content is perceived as advertising, and second, such persuasive attempts might interrupt the browsing experience. Thus, it is not surprising that consumers prefer user-generated content compared to disclosed advertisements and brand posts (Agustí, 2018).

We expect that social exchange theory is relevant in investigating persuasion resistance. Relational benefits and cost-benefit analysis drive social exchanges (e.g., Lee & Cranage, 2011; White, 2004). Consumers engage in social exchange with social media influencers when they expect to receive reciprocal benefits (Holidays et al., 2021). In the social media context, consumers follow social norms when they evaluate the content online (Hayes et al., 2016;2021; Qu & Lee, 2011). We propose that consumers exhibit higher levels of resistance to partnership (vs. in-text) disclosures due to lay beliefs that sponsorship disclosures are intended to show that the influencer is hiding that they have been paid or otherwise rewarded to endorse the product or experience (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Moreover, in-text disclosure may encourage viewers to critically evaluate the content itself, the persuasive strategies of the content, and the source of the content, or being paid for posting sponsored content (e.g., Fransen, Smit, & Verlegh, 2015; Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Conversely, we argue that a paid partnership provides higher intangible benefits, that the influencer is collaborating with the brand and is allowed to promote branded content ads and increase the transparency of the post (Instagram, 2022; The Right Fit, 2020).

Prior research indicates that sponsored disclosure can alert users' attention to the fact that they are confronted with a persuasive message, thus triggering persuasion

knowledge (e.g., Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens 2012, 2015; van Reijmersdal et al., 2016). Since in-text disclosure signals the commercial intents of the post or the influencer, we expect that it would trigger higher levels of persuasion resistance. Conversely, the relational aspect of a paid partnership might not induce the same level of resistance as in-text disclosure. The social exchange theory suggests that interactions and engagement are reinforced and strengthened when relationships are built on transparent sharing (Jiang & Men, 2017). Recent research further explores the idea when sponsorship disclosure is highly explicit; it could enhance the relationship between the influencer and the consumer (Holiday et al., 2021). Consistent with prior research, we expect that consumers will react more to persuasion with sponsored (vs. partnership) disclosures, which in turn will reduce customer engagement. Thus, we hypothesize that:

*H2. In-text disclosure (vs. partnership) will result in higher persuasion resistance and reduce consumer responses.*

#### ***2.4. Moderating effect of post type: experiential (vs. material) content***

Finally, we expect that the consumers' engagement with sponsored posts is contingent on the post's content: experiential versus material. Since social exchange theory focuses on relational benefits and cost-benefit analysis (Schumann et al., 2014), we expect the nature of the post (experiential vs. material) can shape reactions to sponsorship disclosure. Prior work on sponsorship disclosure found that consumers sponsorship disclosure increases advertising knowledge (Boerman et al., 2012), inferring the manipulative intents of the influencer (Karagür et al., 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021a), because it simply implies the (monetary) motive of the influencer (Stubb, Nyström, & Colliander,

2019), leading consumers to believe that the influencer is financially driven to persuade them, which in turn affects their trust (Pfeuffer & Huh, 2020). Thus, drawing on the literature on experiential versus material content (Carter & Gilovich, 2012; Caprariello & Reis, 2013; Lee, Hall, & Wood, 2018), we suggest that consumers infer a manipulative intent of the post for material (vs. experiential) posts.

Seeking experiences is essential in the travel context (Karagöz & Uysal, 2022; Yang, Zhang, & So, 2020). Prior work on experiential (vs. material) purchases shows that the two lead to different outcomes (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). For example, consumers tend to be more willing to accept price increases for experiential (vs. material) goods (Bastos, 2019), and purchasing experiences lead to greater happiness (for a review, see Nicolao et al., 2009). Additionally, experiential (vs. material) purchases can boost social bonds if they are received as gifts (Chan & Mogilner 2017). Furthermore, experiences provide more meaningful content (e.g., Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015) and are higher in conversational value (Bastos & Brucks, 2017). For these reasons, consumers should exhibit more favorable reactions to a partnership (vs. in-text) disclosure in an experiential (vs. material) context. Notwithstanding this, how does priming the post as a material (vs. experiential) affect persuasion resistance and consumer responses?

Individuals make inferences about others' posts on social media. In general, posting about any type of purchase may be seen as a more self-expressive act (Valesia & Diehl, 2022; Kumar & Gilovich, 2015). However, prior research suggests that discussing material purchases can be considered conspicuous consumption (Ferraro, Kirmani, & Matherly, 2013). Additionally, recent research shows that social media posts about experiential purchases create more positive overall impressions than material purchases (Valesia & Diehl, 2022).

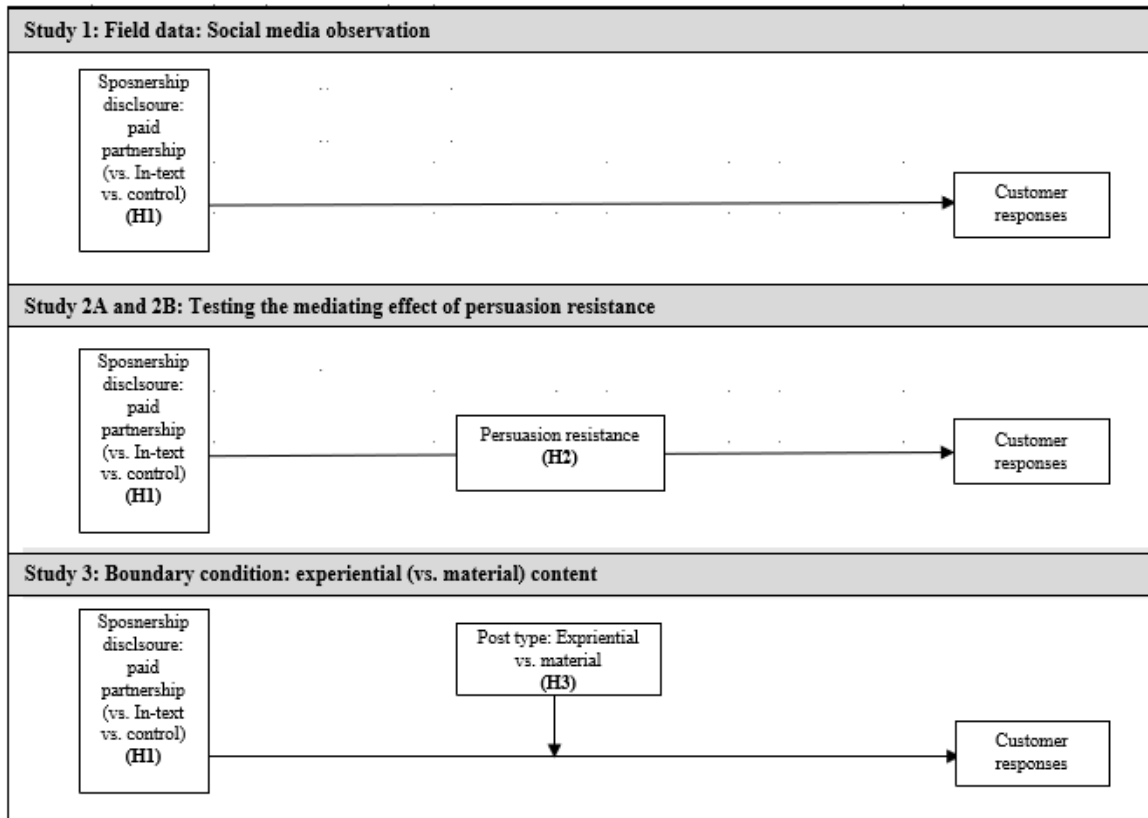
Since social exchange theory focuses on relational benefits and cost-benefit analysis, we portray that consumers perceive material posts as more manipulative compared to experiential posts. Whereas experiences are more unique and satisfying than material objects (Bastos, 2019; Bastos & Moore, 2021; Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012), leading to more desirable consumer responses such as engagement and purchase intentions. As such, we expect that priming a post as experiential enhances consumer responses to paid partnership (vs. in-text) disclosure. In contrast, priming a post as material results in a similar responses to paid partnership (vs. in-text) disclosure because when the posts highlight the material aspect, they might be viewed as a form of self-promotion (Scopelliti, Loewenstein & Vosgerau 2015). Hence, framing the post as material might be less engaging for both paid partnership and in-text disclosure.

*H3. Post type (experiential vs. material) moderates the effect of paid partnership (vs. in-text) disclosures on consumer responses.*

*H3a. Priming a post as experiential enhances consumer responses to paid partnership (vs. in-text) disclosure.*

*H3b. Priming a post as material results in similar consumer responses to paid partnership (vs. in-text) disclosure.*

Our conceptual model and the studies addressing each hypothesis are shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual model

### 3. Overview of the Studies

We relied on two well-established methods (experimental design and content analysis) to test our predictions. In the first study, we used content analysis. Content analysis is an appropriate research methodology used to study a wide range of social media posts. It is widely established in tourism research (e.g., Cohen et al., 2022; Volo and Irimiás, 2021). In particular, content analysis provides a realistic assessment of posts (paid partnership vs. in-text disclosure). It enables the measurement of real engagement on social media (number of likes and comments). Furthermore, to be consistent with prior sponsorship disclosure analyses, studies 2A, 2B, and 3 relied on experimental design.

Experimental design allows for measuring cause-and-effect relationships in advertising (Vargas & Duff, 2017, Viglia & Dolnicar, 2020). Therefore, this approach was used to investigate whether a paid partnership (vs. in-text) disclosure is more engaging. In this research, we operationalize sponsored disclosure as in-text disclosure posts with "#sponsored #ad" and partnership disclosure as posts with "paid partnership with the brand." The experimental studies reported in this research were pre-registered using the AsPredicted platform: Study 1 (#98490), Study 2A (#93715), Study 2B (#94013), and Study 3 (#121195). Consistent with pre-registration, we targeted a minimum of participants per experimental condition in the online experiments using the GPower tool with power  $\geq$  0.90 to determine our sample size (Erdfelder et al., 1996; Viglia, Zaefarian, & Ulqinaku, 2021). Table 1 provides an overview of the studies.

<b>Study</b>	<b>Sample and size</b>	<b>Procedure</b>	<b>Measures</b>	<b>Main findings</b>
<i>Study 1. Social media observation</i>	N=208 Social media posts	Observation of social media posts, categorized with paid partnership (vs. in-text disclosure vs. control)	Engagement (Number of likes, and comments)	H1 supported
<i>Study 2A</i>	N=170 US consumers from Prolific	Assigned to social media posts using two types of disclosure (partnership vs. in-text disclosure vs. control).	Engagement (scale, adapted from Eigenraam et al., 2021).	H1 and H2 supported
<i>Study 2B Replication using Covid-19 context</i>	N=170 European consumers from Prolific	Assigned to social media posts using two types of disclosure (partnership vs. in-text disclosure vs. control)	Engagement (scale, adapted from Eigenraam et al., 2021). Persuasion resistance adapted from Laran et al. (2011).	H1 and H2 supported
<i>Study 3</i>	N=200 US Prolific	Experiential (vs. material) posts x paid partnership (vs. in-text disclosure)	Purchasing intent (Morwitz, 2014). Persuasion resistance adapted from Laran et al. (2011).	H3 supported

Table 1. *Overview of the Studies*

### ***3.1. Study 1. Field Observation of Social Media Disclosure Types***

Study 1 provides initial evidence for our hypothesis that influencers' disclosure type influences their followers' engagement on Instagram. Specifically, we examine whether the influencer's sponsored posts: paid partnership vs. in-text disclosure – lead to a greater number of likes or comments. Prior research indicates that posts using in-text disclosure tend to be perceived as less authentic and lead to negative evaluations of the influencer (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020; Hwang & Jeong, 2016). Sponsorship disclosures influence perceived authenticity (Kim & Kim, 2020a), leading followers to believe such posts are based on monetary rewards.

#### ***Procedures and Measures***

We used a systematic sampling procedure. First, we identified a number of travel and lifestyle influencers with a follower range of 50,000-5,000,000 followers. The criteria were (1) some of their posts containing hashtags<sup>1</sup> and (2) paid partnership disclosures. This step resulted in 16 travel influencers being chosen for the investigation. We asked an independent research assistant, who was not aware of the study objectives, to collect three different types of posts from each influencer (1) containing hashtags (in-text disclosure), (2) paid partnerships (partnership disclosure), or (3) non-sponsored posts (control). Two hundred and eight travel-related posts were selected. In-text disclosure ( $n = 70$ ) paid partnerships ( $n = 62$ ), and non-sponsored posts ( $n = 72$ ).

Examples of paid partnerships include “*My favorite part of this trip is staying at the four-season hotel, paid partnership with Four seasons*,” whereas hashtags post, “*Ready for new travel adventures with our new phone Galaxy #ad.*”

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<sup>1</sup> Some posts that contained both hashtag ads and paid partnerships, were excluded from the data collection.



## **Results**

Results from an ANOVA table indicate that both non-sponsored posts ( $M = 166176.69$ ;  $SD = 684086.88$ ) and paid partnership posts derived significantly more likes ( $M = 22362.62$ ;  $SD = 22542.38$ ) than in-text posts ( $M = 6879.70$ ;  $SD = 8177.504$ ;  $F(2, 205) = 3.366$ ,  $p = .036$ ).

Further, an ANOVA on comments indicates that non-disclosure posts derived significantly more comments ( $M = 714.99$ ;  $SD = 454.99$ ) than paid partnership disclosures ( $M = 254.95$ ;  $SD = 423.929$ ) or in-text disclosures ( $M = 100.17$ ;  $SD = 170.17$ ;  $F(1, 205) = 3.723$ ,  $p = .026$ ). These results support our predictions that non-disclosure posts induce higher social media engagement levels than sponsored posts. More importantly, paid partnership disclosure resulted in higher engagement levels than in-text disclosure.

Next, we conducted planned contrasts to compare the effect of in-text (vs. partnership) disclosures. An ANOVA table shows that paid partnership disclosures derived significantly more likes ( $M = 22362.62$ ;  $SD = 24452.384$ ) than in-text disclosure ( $M = 6897.70$ ;  $SD = 8177.504$ ),  $F(1, 134) = 25.039$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, paid partnership disclosures resulted in significantly more comments ( $M = 254.95$ ;  $SD = 423.929$ ) than in-text disclosures ( $M = 100$ ;  $SD = 170$ ),  $F(1, 134) = 7.972$ ,  $p < .005$ ). These results are visualized in Figure 2 and Figure 3.

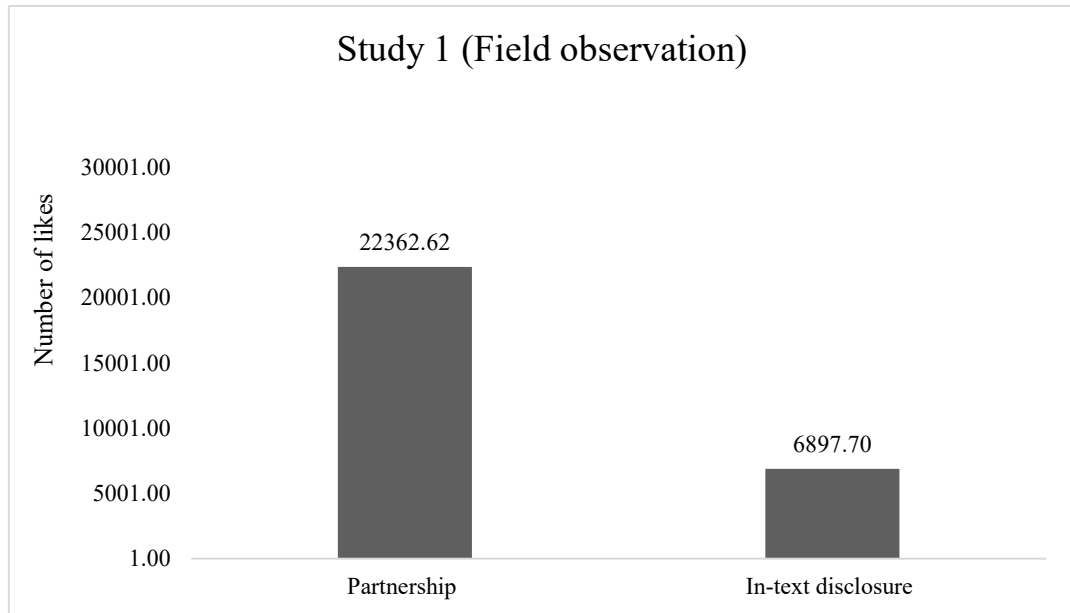


Figure 2. *Number of likes on Instagram posts*

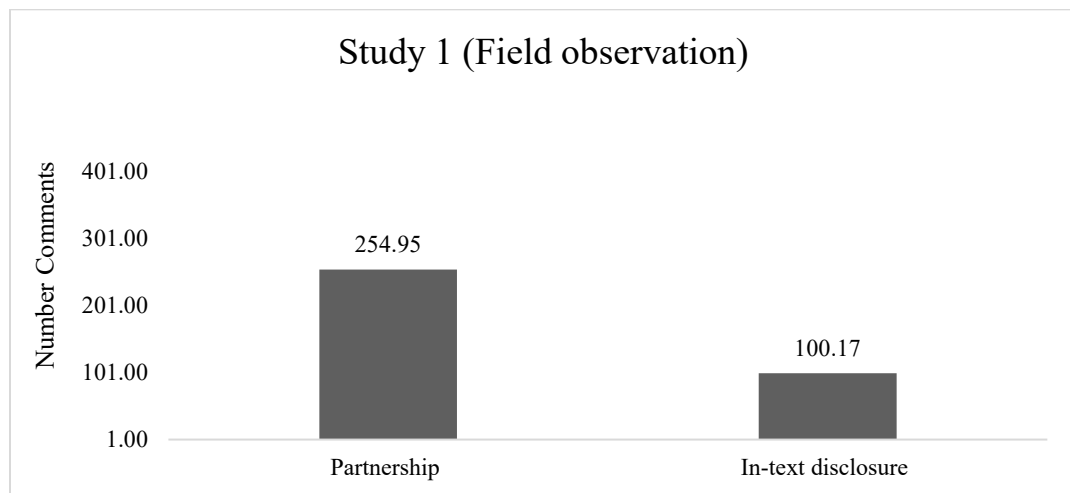


Figure 3. *Number of comments on Instagram posts*

### ***Discussion***

The study findings provide preliminary real-world evidence for our hypothesis that partnership (vs. in-text) disclosures result in higher levels of engagement. In particular, we show that partnership disclosure was more engaging than sponsored disclosure both in terms of likes and comments). A key limitation, though, is that social media influencers

vary in the number of followers and levels of engagement. Studies 2A, 2B, and 3 overcome this limitation by testing the sponsorship disclosure effect in a controlled lab environment.

### ***3.2. Study 2A. Disclosure type (partnership vs. in-text vs. control)***

This study aims to examine whether disclosure type (partnership vs. sponsored vs. control) affects customer engagement. We used fictitious influencer posts to manipulate sponsorship disclosure.

#### ***Procedures and Measures***

One hundred and seventy US social media users were recruited from Prolific. Prolific is viewed as a more trustworthy and reliable source compared to Amazon Mechanical Turk (Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2021). Six participants were excluded from the analysis due to failed attention checks. The final sample size of 164 participants ( $Women = 41.4\%$ ,  $M_{age} = 36.72$ ,  $SD = 9.75$ ) completed the study in exchange for a nominal payment. 99.4 % of the participants had followed travel influencers on social media.

The study was a single factor (in-text disclosure vs. partnership disclosure vs. control) between-subjects design. First, participants were told that the research team was interested in learning about their perceptions of social media influencers. Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three experimental conditions.

Participants were told to imagine themselves browsing on Instagram and that they had come across a post by a social media influencer who shared their travel experiences. In the post, the influencer endorsed a hotel. We relied on a procedure from Karagür et al. (2021) by manipulating disclosure type by showing that the influencer has a paid

partnership (vs. in-text disclosure vs. control). See Appendix A for the experimental stimuli.

### ***Measures***

Customer engagement with the endorsed brand was measured on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) by using a three-item scale adapted from Eigenraam et al. (2021), “*I’m willing to visit the brand page,*” “*I will follow the brand social media,*” and “*I will like the post*” ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Please see Table 1 for full items.

### ***Manipulation Checks***

Our manipulation checks worked as intended. To a large extent, participants in the paid partnership condition agreed that the post contained a paid partnership ( $M = 6.48$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) compared to participants in the in-text disclosure condition ( $M = 5.38$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) or the control condition ( $M = 5.60$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ),  $F(2, 160) = 10.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### ***Main Effect of Engagement***

An ANOVA table indicates that consumers displayed higher levels of engagement in the control condition ( $M = 6.09$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) compared to the paid partnership post ( $M = 6.17$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), or the in-text disclosure condition ( $M = 5.52$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ); ( $F(1, 162) = 4.441$ ,  $p < .014$ ).

### ***Discussion***

Study 2A provides additional evidence for our prediction of the disclosure type influencing customer responses. Notably, it seems that participants in the paid partnership condition exhibited a higher level of engagement than their counterparts in the in-text

disclosure condition. Study 2B extends our theorizing by testing the underlying process of resistance to persuasion as a mediator between disclosure type and engagement.

### ***3.3. Study 2B. Covid-19 Context***

Study 2B extends study 2A in various ways, (1) it provides a conceptual replication in a “Covid-19” environment, (2) tests the underlying process of persuasion resistance, and (3) it enhances external validity by using a sample from a different culture. During the past two years, the travel markets have been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Farzanegan et al., 2021; Shuqair et al., 2022). Indeed, the pandemic hurt travel influencers (Femenia-Serra, Gretzel, and Alzua-Sorzabal, 2022). Since influencers are viewed as powerful content creators and have an impact on their audience, several health authorities have collaborated with influencers to create health awareness (e.g., vaccination). In this context, we investigate whether sponsorship disclosure (paid partnership vs. in-text disclosure) affects consumers’ responses.

#### ***Participants and design***

One hundred and seventy European participants from Prolific (49% women,  $M_{\text{age}} = 28.08$ ,  $SD = 8.57$ ) participated in this study in exchange for financial compensation. Six participants were dropped from the analysis for failing attention checks, leaving the final sample size of 164 participants. Participants were assigned to three types of sponsorship disclosure: paid partnership (vs. in-text disclosure vs. control). They viewed three fictional Instagram posts about an influencer’s endorsement of the safety measures of a fictitious hotel called “BlueBay hotel.”

#### ***Measures***

We used the same measures of our previous studies, engagement ( $\alpha = .78$ ), and persuasion resistance ( $r = .182$ ,  $p < .019$ ).

### ***Manipulation checks***

Participants in the in-text disclosure condition agreed that the post included hashtags ( $M= 6.24$ ;  $SD=.1.14$ ) compared to their counterparts in the paid partnerships ( $M= 3.27$ ;  $SD=1.82$ ) or the control condition ( $M= 3.62$ ;  $SD=1.85$ ;  $F(1, 163) = 52.185$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, participants under the paid partnership condition had higher levels of agreement that the post involved a paid partnership with the hotel ( $M=6.45$ ;  $SD=.87$ ), compared to the in-text disclosure condition ( $M= 6.24$ ;  $SD=1.14$ ) and to the control condition ( $M= 5.80$ ;  $SD=.1.20$ ;  $F(1, 163) = 5.181$ ,  $p < .007$ ).

### ***Results***

ANOVA results show a significant main effect of disclosure type on engagement. Specifically, participants in the control and paid partnership conditions reported a higher level of engagement ( $M=3.36$ ;  $SD=1.43$ ), paid partnership ( $M= 3.13$ ;  $SD= 1.32$ ) compared to their counterparts in the in-text disclosure condition ( $M= 2.75$ ;  $SD=1.14$ ).  $F(1,163) = 3.013$ ,  $p = .052$ ).

### ***Mediation analysis of persuasion resistance***

We ran the same mediation analysis as in Study 2B. The results show a significant effect of disclosure type (2= paid partnership; 1 =in-text disclosure; 0=control) on persuasion resistance ( $b = -.25$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $t(162) = 2.03$ ,  $p = .05$ ), and persuasion resistance predicted engagement ( $b = 0.53$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(162) = 7.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, the indirect effect was significant ( $b =- 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI = [-0.27,-.00]).

### ***Discussion***

By using a sample from a different culture and a different context (Covid-19), the study's findings offer a conceptual replication of our previous studies 2A-2B. It further

shows that consumers have higher persuasion resistance to in-text disclosure (vs. paid partnership), which ultimately affects customers' engagement.

### **3.4. Study 3. Moderation of post-type experiential (vs. material) content**

Study 3 tests the moderating of experiential (vs. material) posts on sponsorship disclosure: paid partnership x in-text disclosure. We expect that experiential posts magnify the negative effect of sponsorship disclosure and reduce persuasion resistance.

Furthermore, Study 3 aims to test another important outcome, purchasing intents, and finally aims to test the mediating effect of persuasion resistance and uniqueness.

#### ***Participants and design***

The following introduction to the study was adapted from Giuffredi-Kähr et al. (2022). *Alberto is a famous influencer from Barcelona; he shares his daily travel experiences with his Instagram followers and focuses on sharing his travel lifestyle.* After reading the script, participants were randomly assigned to one of our four fictitious Instagram posts. In the caption, participants read our manipulation of experiential (vs. material) posts by whether the influencer shares surfing experiences or surfing board “objects “adapted from Bastos (2019, 2020). *The unique surfing experience [board is all you need while you travel* – see Appendix A for all four experimental posts.

#### ***Procedures and Measures***

We conducted an online experiment with a 2 (disclosure type: in-text vs. partnership) × 2 (post type: experiential vs. material) between-subjects design, among 200 participants from Prolific online panel for a nominal payment. Out of those participants, 4 were excluded from the sample for failing the attention check, which resulted in our final sample of 196 (44.4 % women,  $M_{age} = 39.68$ ,  $SD = 13.76$ ).

### **Measures**

To measure purchasing intents, we used three items on a Bipolar scale from (1) definitely do not intend to buy (9) definitely intend to buy, adapted from Morwitz (2014) ( $\alpha = .97$ ), and persuasion resistance as in study 2B ( $r = .382$   $p < .01$ ).

### **Manipulation checks**

Our manipulation checks worked as intended. Participants in the material framing condition perceived the post as more material than participants in the experimental framing condition ( $M_{\text{mat}}=8.36$ ,  $SD= 1.66$ ;  $M_{\text{exp}} = 5.42$ ,  $SD = 2.89$ ),  $F(1, 195) = 68.384$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, participants in the experimental framing condition perceived the post as more experiential compared to participants in the material condition ( $M_{\text{exp}}=7.27$ ,  $SD= 2.12$ ;  $M_{\text{mat}} = 5.08$ ,  $SD = 2.73$ ),  $F(1, 195) = 39.037$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, participants in the in-text disclosure condition agreed to a larger extent that the posts have a hashtag ( $M=7.92$ ;  $SD=1.78$ ) compared to participants in the partnership condition ( $M=5.76$ ;  $SD=2.60$ ,  $F(1, 209) = 45.303$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### **Results**

We conducted a 2x2 ANOVA to investigate the joint impact of sponsorship disclosure (partnership vs. in-text) and post type (experiential vs. material) on purchasing intents. First, there was a non-significant main effect of sponsorship disclosure on purchasing intents ( $F(2, 192) = .064$ ,  $p = .801$ ,  $\eta^2 = .000$ ;  $M_{\text{paid}} = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.71$  vs.  $M_{\text{in-text}} = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 2.08$ ), and a significant effect of post type experiential (vs. material) on purchasing intents ( $F(2, 192) = 7.547$ ,  $p < .007$ ,  $\eta^2 = .038$   $M_{\text{exp}} = 2.71$ ,  $SD=2.08$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ). More importantly, there was a significant two-way interaction between



sponsorship disclosure and post type on purchasing intents ( $F(2, 192) = 3.896; p < .05, \eta^2 = .020$ ).<sup>2</sup>

A planned pairwise comparison shows that priming the post as experiential led to higher purchasing intents for in-text disclosure ( $M_{\text{in-text}} = 3.02, SD = 2.39$ ), and to paid-partnership ( $M_{\text{partnership}} = 2.42; SD = 1.71$ ), compared to priming the post as material ( $M_{\text{partnership}} = 2.22, SD = 1.75; M_{\text{in-text}} = 1.76; SD = 1.54; 2.11; F(2, 192) = 7.54 p < .08$ ). Figure 4 presents the moderating effect of experiential (vs. material) posts.

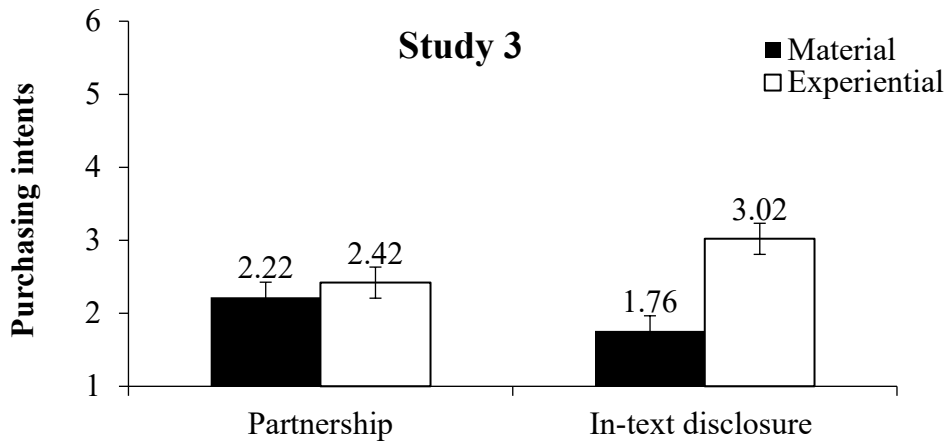


Figure 4. Sponsorship disclosure and experiential (vs. material) posts

Additionally, a 2x2 ANOVA to test the interplay between post type and sponsorship disclosure. First, there was a non-significant main effect of sponsorship disclosure on persuasion resistance ( $F(2, 192) = .533, p = .446, \eta^2 = .003; M_{\text{paid}} = 4.03, SD = 1.85$  vs.  $M_{\text{in-text}} = 3.80, SD = 2.02$ ), and a significant effect of post type experiential (vs. material) on resistance ( $F(2, 192) = 3.775, p < .019, \eta^2 = .024 M_{\text{exp}} = 4.18, SD = 1.96$  vs.  $M_{\text{mat}} = 3.66, SD$

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note, that mean scores were low across all condition, this might be related to the nature of the product (surfing).

= 1.88). Most importantly, there was a significant two-way interaction between sponsorship disclosure and post type on persuasion resistance ( $F(2, 192) = 4.677; p < .05, \eta^2 = .032$ ).

### ***Moderated mediation of persuasion resistance***

Using PROCESS (Model 8 in Hayes, 2017), with 10,000 samples, we examined whether the moderating effect of post type and sponsorship disclosure on purchase intent is mediated by persuasion resistance. First, we found a significant interaction effect of sponsorship disclosure (in-text = 1; partnership = 0) and post type (experiential = 2; material = 1) on purchase intent ( $b = .55, SE = .216; 95\% CI = [.10, 2.26]$ ). More importantly, the conditional direct effects were insignificant. Finally, as predicted, the index of moderated mediation was significant ( $b = -.64, SE = .30; 95\% CI = [0.06, 0.12]$ ), providing further support for our moderated mediation hypothesis.

### ***Discussion***

This study shows that people react more positively to two types of sponsorship disclosure (in-text vs. partnership), when the post is primed as an experience versus a material good. This outcome might reflect the nature of travel as being more experiential. Our findings are consistent with recent research on the halo effect of experiential consumption (e.g., Bastos, 2019; 2020; Gilovich & Gallo, 2020). Prior research shows that purchases of experiences (vs. objects) lead to more positive emotional outcomes (Nicolao et al., 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Our mediation analysis suggests that when priming the post as experiential (vs. material) mitigates the negative impact of in-text disclosure on persuasion resistance.

## **4. General Discussion**

The current investigation examines the effect of sponsorship disclosure (partnership vs. in-text) on social media posts. Overall, our findings show that consumers respond differently to the two types of sponsorship disclosure, and this effect is driven by persuasion resistance. Notably, this research provides important implications for theory and practice by showing that priming social media ads as experiential mitigates consumers' negative reactions to sponsorship disclosure.

#### ***4.1. Theoretical Implications***

Overall, the current research contributes in three ways to emerging studies on the impact of sponsorship disclosure by social media influencers (e.g., Boerman et al., 2012; 2017; De Jans et al., 2018; Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022; Jung & Heo, 2019), travel influencers (e.g., Cohen et al., 2021; Kapoor et al., 2021), and experiential versus material literature (Caprariello, & Reis, 2013; Nicola et al., 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003).

First, our studies (S1, S2A, S2B) shows that paid partnerships exert higher engagement levels than in-text disclosure. That is, consumers exhibit positive reactions to the paid partnership because it focuses on a relational exchange, which leads to more favorable responses. Conversely, in-text disclosure increases the commercial nature of the post, thus reducing engagement. Extant research shows that sponsorship recognition leads to negative outcomes such as a lack of trust or credibility (Boerman et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2013; Nelson, Ham, & Ahn, 2017). By doing so, we extend the literature on sponsorship disclosure (Boerman et al., 2012; De Jans et al., 2018; Karagür et al., 2021) by showing that consumers respond more favorably to a partnership than to in-text disclosures based on a social exchange perspective (e.g., Hayes et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2018).

Second, this research adds to the literature by offering a social exchange lens to explain the underlying mechanism involved in resistance to sponsorship disclosure. In particular, this research shows that when social media influencers disclose the commercial intent of their posts (in-text disclosure), consumers offer resistance to persuasion intents, because they believe influencers violate the reciprocal forms of exchange present in social media. In contrast, when influencers engage in paid partnerships, they reinforce the impersonal nature of the relationship. Prior research suggests that individuals tend to resist persuasion attempts (Campbell et al., 2013; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Kim & Kim, 2021) because consumers perceive sponsored posts as less convincing (Stubb & Colliander, 2019), thus increasing skepticism (Boerman et al., 2012; 2021). Notably, our findings reveal that in-text (vs. partnership) disclosure activates consumers' persuasion resistance. By doing so, our findings help to explain the intricate relationship between sponsorship disclosure and persuasion resistance (e.g., Campbell et al., 2013; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016), adding to recent travel research (Karagür et al., 2021).

Finally, we provide important contributions on how to mitigate the sponsorship disclosure liability by using experiential (vs. material) priming (e.g., Bastos, 2019; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Prior research on experiential or material purchases has mainly focused on consumer emotions such as happiness (Nicolao et al., 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003) and regret (Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012). Moreover, experiential (vs. material) framing can translate into downstream consequences such as higher purchase intents (Bastos & Moore, 2021). This work extends the experiential and material literature into a new domain—social media influencer sponsorship disclosure. By exploring how framing social media posts as experiential (vs. material) affects impressions of sponsorship disclosure, we contribute to recent literature on experiential (vs. material) on social media

(Valesia & Diehl, 2022). Particularly, we show that individuals make negative inferences about the post when it is framed as material. Singling the experiential side of the post might reduce consumers' negative reactions to in-text (vs. partnership) disclosure. Indeed, much of travel and tourism activities are experiential, and when influencers frame the post as an experience, consumers tend to have more positive reactions, such as enhanced purchase intents. We thus reveal that priming the post as experiential (vs. material) reduces the negative effect of sponsorship disclosure leading to more favorable reactions and reducing persuasion resistance. By doing so, we offer a more nuanced understanding of consumers' reactions to sponsorship disclosure on social media and possible ways to reduce resistance to social media ads.

#### ***4.2. Practical Implications***

Influencers are required to disclose the commercial intents of the post (ASA, 2022). To illustrate, some brands require influencers not to show that their post is sponsored, suggesting that sponsorship disclosure would make the post less authentic or credible (e.g., Audrezet & Charry, 2019).

Therefore, for revenue maximization purposes, it is essential to understand under which condition sponsorship disclosure can be beneficial, and when and why this effect is magnified. Our findings guide tourism marketers and policymakers when collaborating with influencers. Several recent examples illustrate that hotels and airlines have increased online engagement by collaborating with social media influencers. For example, Four Seasons Hotels and Marriot launched their influencer marketing program to create travel content (Fortune, 2022). However, is it always beneficial?

One of the most common problems in sponsorship disclosure is that influencers may try to hide their commercial relationship with the brands. In some cases, brands request influencers to hide or not disclose the relationship, assuming that disclosing the sponsorship would damage the post and reduce authenticity or credibility (Audrezet et al., 2020; Audrezet & Charry, 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021a). Notably, sponsorship disclosure is associated with negative impressions (Audrezet & Charry, 2019). Therefore, brands sometimes encourage influencers to hide the sponsorship disclosure in an attempt to make the post appear more authentic (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). The lingering question is whether sponsorship disclosure hurts the post.

Our field study provides initial evidence that posts using in-text sponsored disclosure (hashtags) appear less engaging than partnership disclosure. Indeed, recent surveys support this assumption. For instance, it was found that 75% of consumers do not engage with advertising hashtags on social media (Marketing Dive, 2020). Regarding disclosure decisions, whether to use paid partnerships or in-text disclosure, we show that paid partnerships entail relatively smaller levels of persuasion resistance and higher engagement levels than sponsored disclosure. Therefore, paid partnerships might be more effective in the travel context. Moreover, paid partnership disclosure is consistent with the Federal Trade Commission sponsorship guidelines and rules on social media (FTC, 2022).

Our findings suggest that framing the post as an experience reduces negative reactions to sponsorship disclosure and increases engagement. We encourage influencers promoting travel materials (e.g., skiing boards) to frame their posts as experiential (e.g., skiing experience) to yield positive responses (e.g., Bastos & Moore, 2021).

Finally, since the travel industry has been hit hard by COVID-19, many consumers are no longer able to enjoy the luxury of traveling as before. Thus, it would be beneficial

for medical service providers to increase awareness about best health practices during trips due to the positive impact of paid partnerships. For example, the World health organization collaborated with Instagram to raise awareness about the best health advice (Moore, 2020).

#### ***4.3. Limitations and Future Research Agenda***

This research is subject to several limitations, which open an array for future research. We mainly focused on viewers' intention to engage with the influencer or the brand but did not examine other desired downstream consequences, such as return on investment. Future research should examine if investing in social media influencers can be financially beneficial.

Also, although Study 3 provided new insights into experiential (vs. material) framing in the context of sponsorship disclosures, our findings might be driven by the unique aspect of travel experiences (Bastos, 2019; Rosenzweig & Gilovich, 2012). Thus, future research should explore the underlying effect of uniqueness in explaining consumers' responses to sponsorship disclosures in the tourism context.

While our work draws insights into the social exchange theory, we did not examine the notion of cost-benefit analysis between social media influencers and consumers (e.g., Frenzen, & Nakamoto, 1993; Johar, 2005). Future research should consider each of the specific cost-benefits situations between the influencers and viewers (e.g., Viglia, Maras, Schumann, & Navarro-Martinez, 2019).

Finally, while we experimentally tested the impact of a few factors in a tight experimental design, other factors such as influencers' characteristics (e.g., number of followers, facial expressions), number of likes (De Veirman et al., 2017), facial expressions or new trends like hiding the number of likes (e.g., Chen & Wyer, 2020) might drive engagement.

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