

A Qualitative Research on the Influence Mechanism of Influencer Sponsorship Disclosure on Corporate Brand Marketing

Zhen Zhang

School of Economics and Management, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing
210094, China

Abstract. The prevalence of hidden grass-root marketing advertisements posted by social-media influencers has prompted platforms and regulators to mandate sponsorship disclosure labels for sponsored content. Nevertheless, existing quantitative empirical studies have yielded completely contradictory conclusions regarding the communication effects of such disclosures. Traditional questionnaire-based quantitative research presupposes causal relationships among variables and struggles to restore consumers' genuine, multi-layered native psychological experiences when confronted with promotional labels; accordingly, there is a lack of bottom-up qualitative explorations in this research field. This study conducted one-on-one online semi-structured interviews with 40 social-media users meeting predefined screening criteria. Among them, the transcripts of the first 32 interviews served as core materials for coding analysis, and the remaining eight transcripts were used to test theoretical saturation. Adopting the classic grounded-theory approach, this paper completed three-stage coding including open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The findings indicate that influencer sponsorship disclosure simultaneously triggers two parallel but opposite psychological processing logics for consumers. On the one hand, drawing on their accumulated persuasion knowledge, audiences quickly identify the commercial profit-seeking motives behind influencers' posts, perceive that their consumption decisions are being deliberately manipulated, and consequently generate psychological reactance, which reduces their acceptance and repurchase intentions toward the corresponding brand. On the other hand, explicit and clear sponsorship disclosure acts as transparent self-disclosure behaviour, which significantly improves audiences' perceived authenticity of influencers and shortens parasocial-emotional bonds between followers and bloggers, thereby positively fostering consumers' favourable attitudes toward promoted brands. Furthermore, the fit between an influencer and the promoted product (in terms of personal persona and product category) functions as a core situational constraint that moderates the strength of the two psychological paths. Under high-fit conditions, perceived manipulation induced by disclosure is greatly weakened, and the positive gain effect brought by perceived authenticity is further amplified. In low-fit cross-border promotion scenarios, audiences are more likely to detect marketing tactics, and the trust-enhancing effect of transparent disclosure almost disappears. From a qualitative perspective, this study reconciles conflicting conclusions from prior quantitative research, compensates for the deficiency of existing literature that over-emphasises quantitative analysis, and provides solid qualitative empirical evidence for corporate influencer marketing placement and compliant advertising governance on social-media platforms.

Keywords: Influencer marketing, Sponsorship disclosure, Hidden advertising, Grounded theory, Psychological reactance.

1. Introduction

Driven by the rapid development of new-media social platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu and Kuaishou, hidden influencer grass-root marketing advertisements built upon bloggers' personal personas and parasocial relationships with followers have become a dominant brand-communication mode. This type of promotional content embeds commodity information into daily-life-themed texts and short-video posts while concealing the commercial nature of paid brand collaborations, blurring the boundary between organic user content and commercial advertisements and violating consumers' right to know. Consequently, domestic and international advertising regulators and social-media platforms have successively introduced regulatory rules requiring all paid grass-root marketing

content to carry standard disclosure labels such as *#Ad* and *#Sponsored* to clearly inform audiences of the commercial nature of posts. However, academic literature presents obvious divergences over the actual communication effects of sponsorship disclosure. Some scholars have conducted quantitative experiments based on psychological-reactance theory, arguing that disclosure labels explicitly expose marketing-inducement purposes, activate consumers' persuasion-knowledge reservoirs, trigger audiences' resistant psychology and weaken brand favourability. Other scholars adopt an interpersonal-transparency perspective and propose that voluntarily disclosing commercial collaborations can demonstrate influencers' candid personalities and improve audience trust and brand evaluations. Most existing empirical studies adopt questionnaire-driven quantitative designs that presuppose causal, mediating and moderating relationships between variables, and cannot capture consumers' subtle and dynamic real-world psychological changes. Moreover, prior literature mostly tests either the positive or negative effects of disclosure in isolation, lacking integrated analyses of psychological mechanisms, and pays insufficient attention to the critical situational constraint of influencer-product fit.

Given the above research gaps, this paper adopts grounded theory as an exploratory qualitative method, without setting pre-established research hypotheses, and constructs concepts and theories bottom-up purely from original interview data. Two core research questions are addressed: first, what differentiated inner feelings are evoked among consumers by influencer sponsorship-disclosure labels, and how do such psychological perceptions shape consumers' brand-purchase preferences; second, how does the fit between influencers and promoted products constrain and alter the above-mentioned psychological processes. This study builds a holistic qualitative interpretive framework based on native interview data to resolve contradictory findings in previous research and deliver practical references for corporate influencer marketing and platform advertising governance.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

A review of domestic and international literature on influencer hidden advertising, sponsorship disclosure and consumer perceptions reveals a broad consensus on the definition of influencer hidden advertising: influencers embed products into daily-life posts on social-media accounts without marking paid collaborations, featuring two core attributes of concealment and content integration. Such advertising leverages parasocial interaction to lower audiences' advertising defences, yet its concealment of commercial partnerships violates regulatory requirements for advertising transparency [1]. Existing research on sponsorship disclosure mostly focuses on quantitative effect tests and defines sponsorship disclosure as compliant behaviour in which bloggers proactively mark commercial-cooperation hashtags or text labels as required by regulators [2]. Prior empirical studies separately examine two consumer-psychological constructs: perceived manipulation and perceived authenticity [3]. Perceived manipulation refers to consumers' subjective perception that marketing agents deliberately induce their consumption decisions [4], whereas perceived authenticity represents audiences' comprehensive judgement regarding whether bloggers' sharing motives and personal dispositions are candid [5]. Influencer-product fit describes the alignment between an influencer's specialised domain and personal persona and the positioning and usage scenarios of a brand's product, constituting an important situational factor for advertising persuasion [6].

This study takes psychological-reactance theory as its core theoretical pillar and adopts persuasion-knowledge theory for theoretical dialogue [7]. Psychological-reactance theory holds that individuals intrinsically value their right to autonomous choice and develop negative resistant emotions once they perceive their decisions are deliberately interfered with or induced by external forces [8], which explains the negative psychological path triggered by disclosure labels. Persuasion-knowledge theory posits that consumers accumulate sophisticated marketing-recognition cognition through long-term exposure to diverse advertisements. When confronted with the explicit commercial cue of sponsorship disclosure, consumers may form two distinct modes of information processing: interpreting disclosure either as manipulative sales tactics or as evidence of an

influencer's candour and transparency, corresponding to two opposite psychological transmission paths [9]. Nevertheless, existing literature displays notable shortcomings: first, research methodologies are heavily dominated by quantitative questionnaires, and qualitative studies adopting grounded-theory interviews to explore consumers' native inner thoughts remain scarce [10]; second, research perspectives are fragmented, with most studies verifying only unidirectional positive or negative effects of disclosure instead of constructing an integrated interpretive framework for dual perceptions[3]; third, situational-factor research is inadequate, as most literature focuses on intrapersonal consumer traits while overlooking the critical external constraint of influencer-product fit[6]. Accordingly, drawing on the two core theories, this paper adopts the grounded-theory qualitative approach to fill multiple gaps in extant research.

3. Research Methodology and Data Collection

This research employs classic grounded theory, whose core principle is to suspend all pre-formulated research hypotheses. Starting purely from primary interview transcripts, the study implements open coding, axial coding and selective coding in sequence to extract basic concepts, generalise categories, sort out logical relationships between categories and construct a holistic theoretical interpretive framework. Nvivo 12 qualitative-analysis software is utilised for text decomposition, concept classification and coding documentation. Clear inclusion criteria were set for interviewees: participants aged 18-50 years who frequently use Douyin, Xiaohongshu or Kuaishou, regularly follow consumption-oriented influencers covering beauty, apparel, food and digital-product sectors, and have encountered #Ad and #Sponsored disclosure labels and can distinguish posts with and without commercial markers. Participants covering students, young professionals and middle-aged groups were recruited to ensure sample heterogeneity. In total, 40 one-on-one online semi-structured voice interviews were completed. Open-ended questioning was strictly followed throughout the interviews to avoid leading prompts, and follow-up questions were used to explore deep-seated psychological motivations behind respondents' answers. Each interview lasted 40-55 minutes. Prior to recording, participants were informed that data would be used solely for academic coursework, would remain anonymous and that audio recordings would only be transcribed into written text; recording commenced only after obtaining consent. All audio files were transcribed within 24 hours after each interview; personally identifiable information such as account names and real-world names was removed, and respondents were coded sequentially from S1 to S40. Theoretical saturation was achieved after interviewing the 32nd participant, as no new concepts or categories emerged from subsequent interview content. The transcripts of the remaining eight interviews were used for secondary theoretical-saturation verification. The full semi-structured interview outline is provided in the appendix. All qualitative-analysis materials originate exclusively from primary interview transcripts, without supplementary data such as online public comments or secondary textual sources.

4. Three-stage Coding Procedure and Research Findings

The full three-stage coding procedure was carried out on the 40 interview transcripts. First, open coding was performed: sentence-by-sentence decomposition of all interview content was conducted to extract native oral statements from respondents; semantically redundant and substantively meaningless sentences were eliminated, yielding 43 basic native concepts. Items were clustered according to similarities in sentiment, behaviour and events, generating 29 initial categories. Representative native statements for negative perception include "When I see a sponsorship label, I feel the blogger only wants commission and tries to trick me; I feel resistant and do not want to buy". Representative statements for positive perception include "Marking advertisements voluntarily is honest; there is no concealment, making me more inclined to trust recommendations". Statements

related to fit include “The blogger normally uses products of this category; cross-border product promotion looks incongruous”.

Second, axial coding was implemented. The 29 initial categories were further merged and summarised to derive five core main categories: influencer sponsorship disclosure (external commercial stimulus cue), perceived manipulation and psychological reactance (negative psychological-processing procedure), perceived authenticity and parasocial bonding (positive psychological-processing procedure), influencer-product fit (situational-constraint condition), and consumers’ brand-purchase preference (attitudinal-behavioural outcome). Logical relationships among categories were identified: sponsorship disclosure acts as an external informational stimulus that simultaneously activates two independent and parallel psychological-processing pathways. Influencer-product fit moderates the strength of both pathways, and the two types of psychological perceptions jointly shape consumers’ brand preferences in opposite directions.

Third, selective coding was conducted. “Dual consumer-perception effects of influencer sponsorship disclosure” was identified as the core category that unifies all main categories, and a complete theoretical storyline was constructed: when influencers attach sponsorship-disclosure labels to grass-root-marketing posts, audiences develop two diametrically opposed inner interpretations based on their persuasion knowledge. On the negative path, disclosure exposes bloggers’ profit-driven motives, leading consumers to perceive deliberate manipulation of their consumption choices and triggering psychological reactance, which reduces brand acceptance and repurchase intentions. On the positive path, voluntary transparent disclosure manifests influencers’ candid dispositions, enhances audiences’ perceived authenticity and strengthens parasocial-emotional bonds between followers and bloggers, thereby improving consumers’ brand attitudes. Influencer-product fit alters the magnitude of both pathways: under high-fit conditions, perceived manipulation is substantially weakened, and the positive effect of perceived authenticity is enhanced; under low-fit cross-border-promotion conditions, audiences are more likely to detect marketing tactics, and the trust-building benefit brought by transparent disclosure nearly disappears.

The remaining eight saturation-check interview transcripts were recoded using the full three-stage coding workflow; no new concepts, categories or logical relationships emerged, confirming the stability and reliability of the theoretically derived framework. Two core conclusions are drawn: first, sponsorship disclosure simultaneously activates two parallel psychological-processing pathways exerting opposite effects on consumers’ brand preferences; second, influencer-product fit constitutes a key situational constraint that bidirectionally moderates the magnitude of negative and positive psychological effects triggered by sponsorship disclosure.

5. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

This study makes three key theoretical contributions. First, it supplements existing literature from a methodological perspective. Most empirical studies on sponsorship disclosure adopt quantitative questionnaires; this paper applies grounded-theory qualitative analysis and builds a theoretical framework bottom-up from consumers’ native interview experiences, enriching qualitative empirical materials in this research domain and remedying the limitation of quantitative research that cannot capture subtle psychological processes. Second, it advances mechanism-oriented research by integrating conflicting findings from prior studies and identifying two parallel opposite psychological-processing pathways triggered by disclosure, constructing a holistic dual-perception interpretive framework that overcomes the limitations of one-sided unidirectional research perspectives. Third, it expands the boundary of situational research by incorporating influencer-product fit as a critical constraining condition and extending the application scope of psychological-reactance theory and persuasion-knowledge theory to the social-media-influencer hidden-advertising context. Corresponding practical implications can be derived for brands, social-media platforms and industry regulators. For brands: priority should be given to collaborating with vertical influencers whose personal personas are highly aligned with product positioning to

mitigate audience resistance induced by sponsorship disclosure. Brands need not deliberately avoid compliant disclosure markers; naturally phrased transparent labelling can shape influencers' candid images. For low-fit cross-border promotions, sales-oriented rhetoric should be attenuated to reduce consumers' sense of being manipulated. For social-media-platform operators: the presentation format of sponsorship-disclosure labels can be optimised to reduce user resistance caused by rigid advertising prompts; platforms can also popularise basic knowledge regarding influencer commercial collaborations among ordinary users to mitigate natural public aversion toward paid promotional content. For industry regulators: acknowledging the dual-sided communication effects of mandatory-disclosure rules, regulators can disseminate practical insights concerning the mitigating role of influencer-product fit to market participants while enforcing compliance requirements, balancing consumer-rights-protection objectives with legitimate corporate-marketing demands.

6. Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has three notable limitations. First, the sample exhibits structural bias: interviewees are dominated by young students and working-age participants aged 18-30 years, while middle-aged and elderly respondents are under-represented; accordingly, the explanatory power of the theoretical framework for middle-aged and elderly consumer groups requires further validation. Second, qualitative-data sources are singular: only online voice-based semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data, and triangulation with platform-public comments or offline focus-group interviews was not performed, limiting data diversity. Third, the study does not differentiate effects across platform types or product categories, and does not compare the magnitude of dual-sided disclosure effects for Xiaohongshu text-based posts versus short-video content on Douyin, or for product sectors including beauty, digital goods and food. Based on these limitations, three avenues for future research are proposed. First, mixed-methods research can be conducted: scenario-based questionnaires and experiments can be designed on the basis of this qualitative theoretical framework to quantitatively test the magnitude of effects for the dual-perception pathways and fit-related constraints. Second, comparative qualitative interviews across segmented scenarios can be implemented to contrast consumer perceptions of sponsorship disclosure under different platforms and product categories. Third, additional intrapersonal situational variables such as consumers' persuasion-knowledge level and parasocial-attachment intensity can be incorporated for further qualitative exploration to refine the complete set of theoretical boundary conditions.

References

- [1] Chen J. Mechanisms By Which Implicit Advertising on Short Video Platforms Erodes Consumer Trust[J]. *Journal of Education, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2025, 60: 16-21.
- [2] Eisend M, Van Reijmersdal E A, Boerman S C, et al. A meta-analysis of the effects of disclosing sponsored content[J]. *Journal of Advertising*, 2020, 49(3): 344-366.
- [3] Shen P, Nie X, Tong C. Does disclosing commercial intention benefit brands? Mediating role of perceived manipulative intent and perceived authenticity in influencer hidden advertising[J]. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 2025, 19(4): 673-693.
- [4] Evans N J, Phua J, Lim J, et al. Disclosing Instagram Influencer Advertising: The Effects of Disclosure Language on Advertising Recognition, Attitudes, and Behavioral Intent[J]. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 2017,17(2):138-149.
- [5] Audrezet A, de Kerviler G, Moulard J G. Authenticity Under Threat: When Social Media Influencers Need to Go beyond Self-presentation[J]. *Journal of Business Research*, 2020,117:557-569.
- [6] Kim D Y, Kim H Y. Influencer Advertising on Social Media: The Multiple Inference Model on Influencer-product Congruence and Sponsorship Disclosure[J]. *Journal of Business Research*, 2021,130:405-415.
- [7] Friestad M, Wright P. The Persuasion Knowledge Model: How People Cope with Persuasion Attempts[J]. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 1994,21(1):1-31.

- [8] Brehm J W. A Theory of Psychological Reactance[M]. New York: Academic Press, 1966.
- [9] Boerman S C, Willemsen L M, Van Der Aa E P. “This Post is Sponsored”: Effects of Sponsorship Disclosure on Persuasion Knowledge and Electronic Word of Mouth in the Context of Facebook[J]. Journal of Interactive Marketing, 2017,38:82-92.
- [10] Belanche D, Casaló L V, Flavián M, et al. Understanding influencer marketing: The role of congruence between influencers, products and consumers[J]. Journal of business research, 2021, 132: 186-195.