*"**Picture this**: **Finding a match made in heaven**"*

The effects of sponsorship disclosure on brand attitude and source

credibility

Preliminary Master Thesis Report

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of disclosure in sponsored posts on Instagram. There are currently several ways to distribute sponsored content on Instagram, with posts and product placements. Little is known about how consumers´ actually perceive and process sponsored native advertising content. In addition, there is currently done little research on the aforementioned, with regards to Instagram, and visual disclosure labels regarding language and display practices. In addition, little is known about how disclosure can be effectively communicated and how this might affect what the audience pay their attention to in processing the information. This study makes theoretical contributions to understanding the effect on how disclosers on Instagram, influences the perception of the consumer, with regards to brand attitude and source credibility. The research aims at examining how to mitigate the negative impact of advertising recognition on attitude and credibility, while maintaining efforts at increasing consumer understanding and recognition. A model is proposed in which seeks to detect whether sponsorship disclosure enhances or mitigates the following effect on brand attitude and source credibility. The effort and frequency of brands sponsoring influencers on Instagram, demonstrates the need to examine how disclosure, brand attitude and source credibility are interrelated.

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1. Introduction

"There is no need for advertisements to look like advertisements. If you make them look like editorial pages, you will attract about 50 per cent more readers. You might think that the public would resent this trick, but there is no evidence to suggest that they do." - David Ogilvy

With the development of different social media platforms, a new way of practising and distributing advertisement has emerged. As social media platforms expand and evolve, the advertising industry has had to change and adapt to be present where the consumers are spending their time. Marketing researchers and practitioners therefore show great interest in understanding the opportunities and usage of the phenomenon of social media and its usage in marketing, as it has become an important advertising platform for brands looking to reach consumers online (Evans, Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017).

Instagram, a photo- and video-sharing mobile-based social media app, is currently one of the most popular social media platforms for influencer marketing and sponsored posts (Evans, et al., 2017). As consumers rely heavily on the recommendations of others, in the decision making process and electronic word-of mouth, the sharing of information, experiences and opinions online, have become a trusted source of information for consumers (Lee, & Youn, 2009). There are currently several ways to distribute sponsored content on Instagram, with posts and product placements, documenting an event or experience, and making event appearances (Mediakix, 2017). These sponsored posts on Instagram can be viewed as a form of paid eWOM (Lee, & Youn, 2009). The advantage of promotional posts on Instagram is the influence on consumers and the trust consumers place in the influencers (Braatz, 2017). The aforementioned factors often prevent consumers from recognizing the persuasive attempts of the message.

However, native ads and influencer marketing has also received criticism, as it may be deceiving, being paid sponsored posts appearing as organic content. While profitable and popular, it is criticized that much of the practice's success is not due to the fact that the content is better, but because consumers do not adequately understand that what they are seeing is advertising. Users most likely avoid or ignore advertising, but as native advertising resembles organic content, it attracts the attention of the reader, hence it can also generate more income (Evans,

Phua, Lim & Jun, 2017). Including labels or disclosures that effectively convey the nature of the message to the consumer is therefore both necessary and demanded by law. In Norway, The Norwegian Consumer Council states that all advertising in social media must be disclosed in line with The Marketing Control Act (Forbrukertilsynet, 2017). However, previous theories indicate that disclosures using clear language have a positive impact on advertising recognition and disclosure memory, which in turn can negatively impact attitudes and behavioral intention (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). How does one mitigate the negative impact of disclosure placement?

This study makes theoretical contributions to understanding the effect on how disclosers on Instagram, influences the perception of the consumer, with regards to brand attitude and source credibility. The research aim at examine how to mitigate the negative impact of advertising recognition on attitude and credibility, while maintaining efforts at increasing consumer understanding and recognition. The authors further study the moderating effect of message sidedness on advertising recognition, ultimately, detecting an approach in which yields the best results with a new set of parameters for the success of the usage of sponsored post on Instagram.
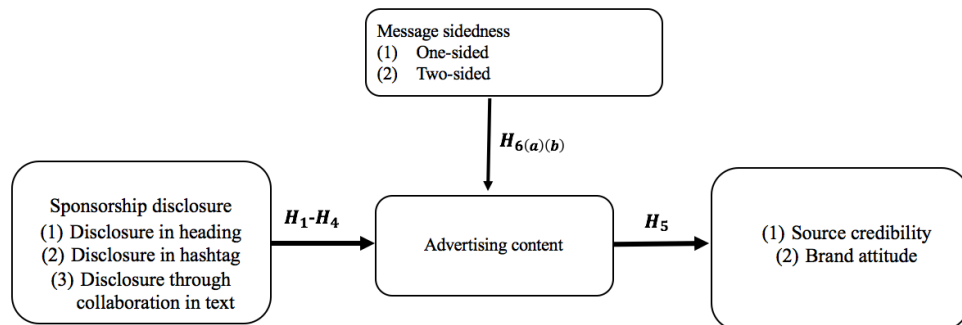

Figure 1 represents the conceptual framework.

2. Literature review

2.1 Native advertising and the role of disclosure

In recent years, native advertising has gained attention, as a way for advertisers to differentiate and elevate their revenues (Benton, 2014). Native ads can be defined

as sponsored content or paid advertising, which takes the form and appearance of editorial content (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). According to Forskning.no, Norwegian companies annually use 3,5 billion on sponsorship in general. Furthermore, native advertising accounts for a majority of advertising spending.

Instagram has over 700 million monthly active users, and the number is continuously growing. Ergo, is Instagram the fastest growing media application (Abidin, 2014). According to BI Business Review, soon, one million Norwegian will have an Instagram account. On Instagram one can create content in the form of an image, with a following caption. Specifically, these posts can be sponsored and brand-related information spread to others in the social network that is Instagram, to help spark the eWOM. Typically, eWOM consist of unpaid, organic communication by consumers who act as brand advocates (Evans, et al., 2017). However, brands may often utilize paid eWOM to strengthen brand messages through opinion leaders, for instance through an "Instagrammer" with a large follower-base (Evans, et al., 2017).

For brands, the niche interests of the sponsorship align with their target audience, while the producer of the content, the owner of the Instagram-account, in turn broadcast their brand-related posts to their many followers. This leads to a mutually beneficial relationship between sponsors and sponsee (Evans, et al., 2017). Marketers who have used influencer marketing and sponsored posts judge it to be effective, whilst giving better retention and reach of right segment, as consumers trust «peers» and influencers more than traditional ads from the brand itself (Evans, et al., 2017). According to Mediamix, influencer marketing ´s projected revenue is expected to reach $15-$20 billion by 2020.

Given the success of the operation, the viewers lack of awareness, may be explanatory for the increase in popularity of native advertising. Its effectiveness might derive from the fact that viewers are overlooking that the content is paid and sponsored. Users most likely avoid or ignore advertising, but as native advertising resembles organic content, it attracts the attention of the reader, hence it can also generate more income (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). Nevertheless, when brands use influencers for sponsored native ads in social media, they must disclose the advertisements as such. The guidance given by the Norwegian Consumer Council accounts for all who gets sponsored in either monetary or non-monetary means, when reviewing and posting about a product, service or other business on social medias. A study conducted by The Norwegian Consumer

Council showed that four out of five commercial posts published by Norway's most popular influencers either lacked disclosure or were disclosed inadequately. Several incidents in the blog sphere in Norway have led the Norwegian Consumer Council to enact stricter guidelines for the disclosure of paid posts in social media, especially on Instagram (Vixen, 2017). Violation of the regulations results in economical consequences and fines. The disclosure must be present for both positive and negative reviews, ergo sidedness. In addition, following factors of the disclosure type must be present: prominent placement, in addition to clear font and size. Affiliate links should be disclosed separately. In addition, the name of the brand and sponsor should be stated (Forbrukertilsynet, 2017).

In online native advertising, the disclosures vary in frequency, size, language and position (Wojdynski & Evans, 2016). Research show that middle or bottom positioning and wording using «advertising» or «sponsored» led to increased advertising recognition which furthermore leads to more negative evaluations. However, how much of sponsored native ads´ effectiveness is due to the fact that consumers do not acknowledge it as advertising at all? Questions remain about how native advertising is perceived and processed by consumers.

2.2 Persuasion Knowledge

Persuasion knowledge is defined as the knowledge that enables consumers to understand and respond to persuasive messages, and to furthermore select and execute tactics to cope (Friestad and Wright, 1994). Persuasion knowledge suggest that consumers´ ability to process advertising messages is determined by how the consumer observe the persuasive nature of the message. Research shows that disclosing such content in advertising, affects the use of persuasion knowledge only for consumers who pay visual attention to the content, and who effectively recall the disclosure content (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2014). This knowledge develops over lifetime and can explain how consumers respond to information that is perceived as persuasive, which will affect their attitude towards products and marketers. Persuasion knowledge shows that advertising recognition, or the absence of it, affects attitude and intention (Friestad and Wright, 1994). According to Friestad and Wright the knowledge structure regarding persuasion knowledge, is the knowledge about the sales agent's goals, traits, and competence. When a message is perceived as persuasive

the message will change meaning. The perceiver can pay attention to the reason why the persuasive tactics are used, which can lead to the assumptions of that the information about the product is missing substance. This will affect the perceiver's attitude towards the product in a negative way (Friestad & Wright,1994). When a tactic is being noticed this will take the attention from the other parts of the massage, that may could have influenced the consumer's attitude in a positive way otherwise. This is referred to as a "detachment effect". This will simply lead to a disruption in the interaction (Deighton,1992). Persuasion is expected to be activated when a post is a product review and even more when a disclosure has been made (Tessitore & Geuens, 2013: Van Reijmersdal, 2015).

Disclosing on Instagram communicates the nature and intent of the post. However, little is known about how consumers´ actually perceive and process native advertising content. In addition, there is currently done little research on the aforementioned, with regards to Instagram, and visual disclosure labels regarding language and display practices. In addition, little is known about how disclosure can be effectively communicated and how this might affect what the audience pay their attention to in processing the information.

2.3 The effects of disclosure type and language advertising

In native advertising the presence of a disclosure is often the only piece of information that delineates the communication presented as an advertisement. Therefore, the effectiveness of the disclosure plays a very important part in regards to how the consumer both understand and recognize the content as commercial. For a disclosure to be effective at conveying information, two sequential processes must occur, (1) a consumer must notice the disclosure and then further, (2) be able to understand the message it conveys (Evans et al., 2017). These labels or cues, which are referred to as disclosures, are designed to clearly identify the persuasion attempt of an advertisement and protect consumers from being deceived or misled (Hoy and Andrews 2004). Henceforth, we predict that consumers who are exposed to an advertising disclosure will have a greater recognition of advertising, compared to a non-disclosure condition.

H1: Exposure to an advertising disclosure will lead to higher advertising recognition compared to no advertising disclosure.

Prior research that have investigated the impact of disclosures indicates a significant negative effect between advertising disclosure on brand related attitudes, brand memory and recall, purchase intention, credibility perceptions and online sharing intention (Wojdynski and Evans 2016). In addition, the studies has mainly focused on disclosure characteristics such as duration, timing, position and language. Instead of attempting to address the effectiveness of the mentioned disclosure characteristics, we choose to examine the three different disclosure conditions that the *Norwegian Consumer Council* (2017) recommends influencers to practice. The three conditions are (1) disclosure through a sub-header, (2) disclosure through a hashtag, and (3) disclosure in text (see appendix I).

The first condition "disclosure through a sub-header", allows the influencer to "tag" the business they are sponsored by in a heading exceeding the picture, with a text that states "paid partnership with (…)" (default setting). No prior research has been done on this type of disclosure, as Instagram presented this default setting during the second half of 2017. Nevertheless, Wojdynski and Evans (2016) did research on disclosure positioning in news stories and suggest that the traditionally recommended top-of-the-page position is less effective than disclosures in the middle of the article or further down the page. While previous studies on online reading behaviour have confirmed that information near the top left corner of a page is more likely to be seen (e.g., Nielsen 2006; Shrestha and Lenz 2007), does newer research discover that the most common effect of top-disclosure position is relative ineffective in generating advertising recognition (Wojdynski and Evans 2016). Although some of the studies by Wojdynski and Evans (2016) fell short of statistical significance, does the pattern of recognition results in all studies suggests a likelihood that the bottom disclosures also may be superior to top disclosures. In addition, research also indicate that disclosure language that uses unclear or ambiguous terminology as "presented by", "Brand Voice", or in our condition "paid partnership with", leads to a lower likelihood of advertising recognition than words like "advertisement" or "sponsored" (Evans et al., 2017). Therefore, we predict that a "disclosure through a sub-header", will attract significantly less attention than a middle-positioned disclosure using ambiguous advertising language in text, or a bottom-positioned hashtag disclosure using the word sponsored.

H2: Exposure to an advertising "disclosure through a sub-header", will lead to lower advertising recognition compared to disclosure through a hashtag, and disclosure in text.

The second condition "disclosure through a hashtag", allows the influencer to use "hashtags" to state that the post is advertisement. This is usually positioned at the bottom of the post, below the picture and the caption, through words like #sponsored, #ad, #advertisement, commercial and etc., and often also positioned through a series of other non-related hashtags. In the following experiment this condition will be manipulated so that the disclosure is worded #advertisement, it will be positioned at the bottom of the post and among three other un-related hashtags, as the *Norwegian Consumer Counsel (2017)* states that this is the most common way to disclose through hashtags. Prior studies indicate that the presence of disclosure labels featuring clear language such as "advertisement" or "sponsored" result in higher advertising recognition, as opposed to more ambiguous language such as "in collaboration with" (Wojdynski an Evans, 2016). However, newer research suggests that disclosing through a hashtag may be less effective then disclosing through regular text, as consumers may overlook or ignore a disclosing hashtag as they often are positioned with a series of other non-related hashtags (Wnent, 2016). Further, consumers may fail to understand the message the disclosure conveys, because the original purpose of a hashtag was to create and simplify searches within social media networks by providing consumers with a convenient way to label posts and categorize content (Federal Trade Commission, 2017). Consequently, we predict that a "disclosure through a hashtag" at the bottom of the post, will attract significantly more attention than a top-of-the-post "disclosure through a sub-header", with using ambiguous advertising language. Nevertheless, we further predict that a "disclosure through a hashtag" at the bottom of the post, will attract significantly less attention than a middle-positioned disclosure.

H3: Exposure to an advertising "disclosure through a hashtag", will lead to higher advertising recognition then "disclosure through a sub-header", but lower then "disclosure in text".

The third condition "disclosure in text", allows the influencer to write the disclosure in texts, as opposed to through a sub-header or a hashtag. The text is

usually positioned right under the picture, which means that the disclosure is middle-positioned. In the experiment will the following condition be manipulated so that the disclosure is worded "Advertising", and listed before the pictures caption. Prior research provide evidence that a middle-positioned disclosure featuring clear language attracts more attention compared to a top-, or bottom-positioned disclosure (Wojdynski and Evans, 2016). Further, it provides viewers with an opportunity to process and elaborate, which again increases the odds of advertising recognition. Wojdynski and Evans (2016) find that a potential explanation for the effectiveness of a middle-placed disclosure can relate to its ability to break up the story content. We therefore predict that a "disclosure in text", with a middle-position, will attract significantly more attention than a top-of-the-post position, "disclosure through a sub-header" and a "disclosure through a hashtag", due to both its position, it is clear use of advertising language and non-hashtag form.

> **H4: Exposure to an advertising "disclosure in text", will lead to higher advertising recognition then "disclosure through a sub-header", and "disclosure through a hashtag".**

2.4 The effects of advertising recognition on brand attitude and source credibility

Previous research indicates that people need to be aware of a persuasion attempt before they can activate persuasion knowledge (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, and Neijens 2012, p. 1049). According to the PKM, advertising recognition activates the persuasion knowledge and trigger the use of various coping mechanisms, which again can affect attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. No previous research has been conducted on the direct effect of advertising recognition on brand attitude and source credibility, using Instagram as a communication channel. Nevertheless, prior research that have investigated the impact of disclosures on advertising recognition, indicates a significant negative effect on brand related attitudes (Boerman et al. 2015; Campbell et al. 2013; Wojdynski and Evans 2016), and credibility perceptions (Wojdynski and Evans 2016). More specifically, Wojdynski and Evans (2016) found that the use of effective advertising language in disclosures that delineates the post as advertising can lead to less favourable brand attitudes and perceived news credibility as a result of higher rates of attitudinal persuasion knowledge.

H5: Participants who report a high level of advertising recognition will have (a) less positive attitudes toward the brand and (b) less positive perceived source credibility.

2.5 The effects of message sidedness advertising recognition

Research that investigate the effects of message sidedness in promotional posts on consumer response shows that message sidedness has a significant on source trustworthiness. Sidedness of reviewed posts refers to if the writer of the text includes both positive and negative reviews or just simply the positive (Eisend, 2013). How a sponsored post on Instagram delivers the advertising message and what kind of verbal information is contained are important variables affecting consumer responses. While most advertisers usually aim to highlight only the positive aspect of their products, persuasion literature suggests that presenting a two-sided message, with both positive and negative aspects, can increase persuasion (Eisend, 2013).

In high involvement conditions, two-sided advertising leads to positive effects on brand attitudes and intentions because recipients focus on the negativity of information in the message (Eisend, 2013). Eisend showed that up to fifty percent of all negative information does not harm and might even support the persuasiveness (2006). Research further found that two-sided messages led to higher ratings of source credibility (Braatz, 2017). However, the increased trust in the source of a two-sided message did not lead to heightened purchase intention. The negative effect of the two-sided message on brand attitude, might be stronger than the positive effect of the increased credibility of the source. If the inclusion of negative information into a message can have positive effect on source credibility, then a question is whether this could be a valuable practice when designing sponsored reviews for Instagram. If the effects of two-sided messages found in previous research can be replicated to sponsored posts on Instagram, this knowledge would help to write more effective captions (Braatz, 2017). In order to examine the effects of two-sided captions on Instagram on source credibility, based on the above discussion, this study hypothesizes:

H6: The differentiated effect of a one-, or two- sided message will moderate reported level of advertising recognition, and further

influence (a) attitudes toward the brand and (b) perceived source credibility.

Influencers might use two-sided messages to increase their credibility, whilst brands have an interest in the use of one-sided messages to better their brand attitude. Research found that consumers responded with lower trust of the source of a one-sided message. Consumers seem to look for the perfect product and respond favourably towards messages describing a product as such. Even though one-sided messages make consumers distrustful towards the source, they might respond with a more positive brand attitude. Based on previous research we therefore predict that the effect of a two sided message will report a lower level of advertising recognition, compared to a one sided-message. We further predict that a two-sided message will result in lower brand attitude, but higher source credibility, compared to a one-sided message.

> **H6a: Participants who are exposed to a one-sided message will report a high level of advertising recognition compared to a two-sided message, which again will result in (a) higher positive brand attitude, but (b) lower perceptions of perceived source credibility.**
>
> **H6b: Participants who are exposed to a two-sided message will report a lower level of advertising recognition compared to a one-sided message, which again will result in (a) lower positive brand attitude, but (b) more positive perceptions of perceived source credibility.**

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

To evaluate the hypotheses, using an exploratory approach, a 3 x (disclosure condition: "disclosure through a sub-header" vs. "disclosure through a hashtag" vs. "disclosure in text") x 2 (message sidedness: one-sided vs. two-sided) between-group factorial design will be used. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of the disclosure conditions, by one of the message sidedness condition and one of the fit between sponsor and sponsored object condition. Prior

to the formal experiment, two pre-tests where conducted to properly design the stimulus material for the manipulation variables. First, to control for the possibility that existing brand attitudes do not impact our hypothesized relationships, we will conduct a pre-test using 10 different brands, with a goal of finding a brand that elicited neutral brand attitudes (Evans et al., 2017). Secondly, a pre-test to control for the possibility that our influencer on Instagram will provoke overly positive or negative emotions, a pre-test testing for attitudes and emotions towards our influencer will be conducted to create an account for our influencer that elicit neutral likability.

3.2 Stimuli development

Today, Instagram accounts vary greatly in style, content and popularity, thus it will be difficult to isolate independent variables and other explanations that can affect our result. Therefore, it is decided to use a fictitious influencer, so that subjects have no prior knowledge of the influencer (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). By manipulating the cause and observing the effect, we ensure that the experiment inhabits a high internal validity and also attempt to control for confound (Malhotra & Birks, 2007).

The Instagram account will consist of three posts, where the first and the third posts are unsponsored posts that are identical in every condition of the stimuli material. The second post is one of twelve versions of the sponsored post, manipulated by advertising disclosure and message sidedness. The first and the third post are meant to further confirm the ecological validity of the experiment, by mimicking the Instagram experience which most often consist of scrolling through several posts, as opposed to only being exposed to one post. By mimicking the Instagram experience, we hope to minimize the probability of the respondents detecting the research´s initial concern.

3.3 Procedure

To provide a test of the model in a natural environment, participants will be recruited through friends and family's social media platforms, hereby Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. This to mimic a real-life setting, and make the observations as representative to" normal behaviour" as possible. Although, this is more difficult to control for confound, the observations of spontaneous, natural

behaviour will ensure the experiments ecological validity, whereas we feel that a controlled environment could make the results too artificial for generalization (Malhotra & Birks, 2007).

Participants will be randomly assigned to one of the manipulated conditions, in order to passively control for some level of confound and help control multitude of extraneous variables at a time, in contrast to e.g. matching (Malhotra & Birks, 2007). Further, instructions were communicated to the participants before they viewed the post. After viewing the posts, subjects would proceed to answer questions in a chronological administered questionnaire, hence the study participants were not able to go back and change their answers. They will first receive questions capturing their demographic information and further, their previous experience with reading Instagram, before answering questions regarding perceptions of the content provided in the manipulated post. This, again, to minimize the probability of the respondents detecting the research́s initial concern.

Further, they will receive questions measuring their attitude towards the brand presented, the credibility of the influencer and questions checking for perceptions regarding sidedness. Lastly, the questionnaire will ask follow up questions regarding their prior knowledge to the sponsored. It is possible that the study will exclude participants with extreme high or low likability opinions on the product and the brand, hence those with a score of 1, 2, 6 and 7, ergo the lowest and highest score on a Likert scale of 1-7.

4. Progression plan

Date	Task
15.01	Preliminary delivery
15.02	Literature review, creating and testing scenarios
15.03	Pre-testing
15.04	Data collection
15.05	Data analyse
15.06	First draft
01.08	Master thesis delivery

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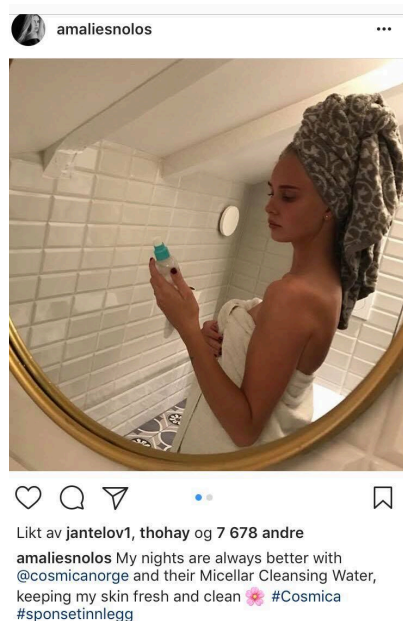
6. Appendices

1. Example of disclosure conditions:

(1) Disclosure through a sub-header

(2) Disclosure through a hashtag

(3) Disclosure in text

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