

A CASE STUDY OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS FOR SPONSORED POSTS

by

Meagen Rockenbach

Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Liberty University, School of Business

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Abstract

The use of social media changed consumer behavior and how company leaders conduct business, including the way that they promote products and services. Instagram is a social media platform that many companies use to promote products and services. In the beauty and lifestyle industry, company officials hire social media influencers for influencer marketing campaigns. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission has rules for these sponsored posts that influencers must disclose that they are working with a brand within the sponsored post. This study was to establish a connection between Instagram influencers and their use of disclosed sponsorship in the United States for a sponsored post and the resulting negative priming effect on their followers. This was a case study on Fashion Box and its use of social media influencers on Instagram to bring awareness to its brand through its affiliate program.

Keywords: social media influencer, influencer marketing, Instagram, influencer disclosures

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Approvals

_____	_____
[Enter Name], Doctoral Candidate]	Date

_____	_____
[Enter Name], Dissertation Chair]	Date

_____	_____
[Enter Name], Committee Member]	Date

_____	_____
Alexander Averin, PhD, MBA Chair, Doctoral Programs	Date

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to God. Thank you to God, who loves me unconditionally and who has guided and encouraged me throughout this dissertation journey. God allowed me to believe in myself enough to finish this journey. God has taught me to take hold of His teachable moments and opportunities, as they are the best knowledge one can have as one navigates through this world and serves God.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Nick, for continuing to cheer me on to finish my dissertation voyage. This dissertation is also dedicated to my son, Jasper, for giving up time with me so that I could finish my dissertation. Both are my biggest cheerleaders. Thank you for your words of encouragement and sacrifices during this journey. I would not have survived this journey without family love and support. I love you both very much.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the participants, who, without this study, would not have been possible. Thank you for taking time out of your busy lives and willingly sharing personal information with me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The use of social media changed consumer behavior and how company leaders conduct their business (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In the cluttered beauty marketplace, brands must compete for the attention span of consumers. Influencer marketing is a technique brand marketers use to create awareness about products and services (Sharma, 2023). Researchers indicate that influencer marketing generates a Return on Investment (ROI) 11 times higher than any traditional marketing tool (Sharma, 2023). Brand marketers reach out to social media influencers and provide them with monetary or material compensation in return for a sponsored post with their products or services (Sundermann & Munnukka, 2022). However, researchers indicate that the disclosure of sponsorship on social media posts from social media influencers can lead to negative feelings toward the brand that is sponsoring the post (Pfeuffer & Huh, 2020).

According to Sundermann and Munnukka (2022), when social media influencers expose audiences to brand-related content on Instagram and the post contains advertising, these posts are likely to evoke an attitudinal process. This process will negatively impact the consumer attitude toward the endorsement on Instagram, translating to more negative advertising responses such as negative priming. This study was to establish a connection between Instagram influencers and their use of disclosed sponsorship in the United States for a sponsored post and its resulting negative priming effect on their followers. This case study on Fashion Box and its use of social media influencers on Instagram brings awareness to its brand through its affiliate program.

This paper includes three sections. Section 1 is an introduction to the background of the problem, the problem statement, and the purpose statement. The nature of the study, including a discussion study method and the design of the study, is in section one. Next are the research questions and the conceptual framework, looking specifically at native advertising. Included in this section are the persuasion knowledge model and the psychological reactance model as the

main concepts of the research study. A brief description of the terms, followed by a discussion on assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, is in this section. Section 1 includes an explanation of the significance of the study, implications for biblical integration, and the relationship to the field of study. Section 1 ends with a comprehensive review of the academic and professional literature reflecting the three concepts of the perceptual framework.

Section 2 includes the research in greater detail, reflecting how the researcher conducted the study outlined in Section 1. This section includes the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, the research methodology, a discussion of the participants, and the population and sampling method. The data collection and analysis plan reflect emergent ideas, coding themes, interpretations, data presentation, and triangulation. Section 2 concludes with a discussion of the reliability and validity of the data in the study.

Section 3 includes the findings of the study. The findings include a comprehensive illustration of the themes discovered, the interpretation of the themes, and a representation and visualization of the data. A detailed explanation of the relationship of the findings reflects the relationship of the research questions, conceptual framework, anticipated themes, the literature, and the problem statement. Section 3 concludes this study. Section 3 allowed me to reflect on the overall research study process, review the findings that emerged during the data analysis, share what I learned, and highlight any new insights gained from the study.

Background of the Problem

Social media changed the way that brands communicate with their consumers. An area that emerged is social media influencers. According to Kim and Kim (2021), social media influencers attain a high responsiveness from their followers that typical marketing messages

cannot. Consumer avoidance and negligence of a brand message are reasons for non-responsiveness. Brands overcome this response by sponsoring a social media influencer's post.

Janssen et al. (2022) indicated that Instagram is a popular social media influencer platform. Influencers collaborate with brands in several ways. The collaboration includes sharing sponsored content, sponsored posts, product placement, documenting an event, or making event appearances (Janssen et al., 2022). Martínez-López et al. (2020) asserted that more consumers use social media platforms to help their buying decision process. Researchers studied how followers react to the brand when they see a non-branded disclosed sponsored post on Instagram in the United States. However, not enough research is on the priming of those followers. According to Stubb and Colliander (2019), the disclosure of the sponsored post exists to inform the follower that the message is a type of advertising that may trigger the followers' previously acquired persuasion knowledge and coping strategies. This disclosure may change how the follower perceives the Instagram influencer and their intentions to continue to follow that influencer.

Bruhn et al. (2023) posited that priming abounds in marketing, from manipulating the color in advertisements to priming the consumer's emotions, highlighting the consumer's goals to pursue a particular goal. Researchers studied the priming of consumers through marketing. Social media influencers are a new way for companies to market to customers. This causes a lack of research into how priming has a role in the disclosures of these sponsored posts by beauty Instagram influencers.

Fashion Box is famous for its seasonal Fashion Box. The box divides into spring, summer, fall, and winter and includes eight to ten full-size products. The products range from beauty, fashion, wellness, and home to technology. These products are from premium and

emerging brands. Fashion Box customers can add more products to their seasonal box and customize the products in the box. The standard box is five to six full-size items depending on the season.

Fashion Box has an affiliate program for social media influencers with a large enough following. The affiliates can receive twenty percent off their first box in return for posting a sponsored post on their social media outlets. Regarding Instagram, the affiliate posts a picture of their Fashion Box and a code for \$10 off the first box ordered by a follower. The affiliate then explains in the photograph's caption that the link is in their bio on Instagram. This link is a personal link that will keep track of the number of sales of each affiliate. The more sales an affiliate creates the more benefits that Fashion Box offers that affiliate in return for their sponsored post.

Problem Statement

The general problem addressed was using social media influencers' posts for disclosed, sponsored content about Fashion Box, resulting in reverse priming in their followers against the brand. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission requires that any sponsored post include a disclosure if the social media influencer has any financial, employment, personal, or family relationship with a brand. The disclosure must appear visible so that it is hard for the viewer to miss, and the language used must include a simple and straightforward message (FTC, 2019). According to Bruhn et al. (2023), priming is any item or action that manipulates knowledge activation, with the target being the consumer to whom the prime applies with an effort to produce a specific outcome. Luoma-aho et al. (2019) asserted that by disclosing sponsorship, the Instagram influencer selectively directs a follower's attention, priming, and guiding the interpretation of the production information, which can further influence the

followers. Luoma-aho et al. (2019) posited that consumers may automatically behave in a contrary manner rather than the manner implied by the marketing tactic. The priming effects reverse when consumers perceive a marketing tactic as a source of persuasion. Nicolao et al. (2016) indicated that people are not always aware of the influence of their subsequent behavior. When they become aware, they may try to correct it, consciously or subconsciously changing their behavior or thoughts towards the priming action. The specific problem addressed was the use of Instagram social media influencers by Fashion Box in the United States and their sponsored Instagram posts, resulting in reverse priming in their followers against Fashion Box.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand better the reverse priming effect on Fashion Box, which uses Instagram influencers in the United States to bring awareness to its brand by partnering with influencers to post disclosed sponsored content. In return, those posting the content receive a discount on products from the company. This study explored how those sponsored or affiliated posts may impact consumers' thoughts on Fashion Box. The priming effect of social media posts often occurs entirely unconsciously; as a result, the consumer is unaware that they are interpreting the information they are receiving differently (Luoma-aho et al., 2019). The study explored how these sponsored ads can negatively prime a consumer toward Fashion Box. Exploring whether the type of compensation individuals receive in return for these sponsored posts has any impact on negative priming was important.

Research Questions

RQ1: How is the Fashion Box impacted by the negative priming of the followers of the Instagram beauty influencer when that influencer posts a sponsored post about Fashion Box?

RQ2: What role does the type of compensation that Fashion Box offers its Instagram influencer have on the priming of the followers?

RQ3: How does the disclosure on the sponsored Instagram post impact the follower's intent to purchase any of the products in a Fashion Box?

RQ3a: How does the disclosure on the sponsored Instagram post impact the follower's intent to subscribe to the Fashion Box?

Discussion of Research Questions. The first research question directly related to the problem by asking how the brand is affected by negative priming. Negative priming happens when the followers of a social media influencer realize that the post they are viewing on Instagram is sponsored by that brand. The second research question included the role compensation might play in this negative priming. This question also explores whether the type of compensation that the influencer receives has influence in the negative priming. According to Stubb et al. (2019), a social media influencer might receive different types of compensation. The compensation includes a monetary payment, free products, samples, or coupons. Investigating whether compensation played a part in negative priming was important. The third research question explored the role of sponsorship disclosure in the decision to purchase products or subscribe to Fashion Box's quarterly box. The third research question addressed the effect of negative priming on purchase intentions.

The three research questions, as well as the sub-question, fully addressed the specific problem statement. The specific problem addressed in RQ1, inquired whether any reverse or negative priming once the followers of the social media influencer realized the post they were viewing on Instagram was sponsored affected the brand. In RQ2, the problem addressed exploring what part the disclosure that the sponsored post had on reverse priming. In RQ3 and

RQ3a, addressing the problem included asking about the type of compensation and the role that the kind of compensation plays in reverse priming against the brand sponsoring the post.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was a qualitative method. According to Cheong et al. (2023), qualitative research generally includes exploring the meanings and insights in given situations. Unlike quantitative methods, this method reflects words rather than numbers (Cheong et al., 2023). The study reflected on the negative priming of followers when they viewed a sponsored post on Instagram by a social media influencer that Box Fashion Box sponsored. The emphasis of the study was priming; therefore, words and not numbers were necessary to find common themes within the research.

Discussion of Method

The study included a qualitative method rather than quantitative because a qualitative method utilized the participants' voices through interviews and focus groups. This method allowed me to gain a clearer picture through in-depth interviews and questioning. Quantitative methods would not provide the rich data needed to understand the perceptions of the followers of Fashion Box as it deals more with numbers than words. Corbin and Strauss (2015) posited that qualitative research is about people's lives, experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings. Qualitative research can also describe an organization's functions, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between people, corporations, and nations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Morse (1991) indicated that qualitative research is valuable when the researcher is uncertain of the variables to study.

Discussion of Design

Several qualitative research designs applied to this study. The first design was the ethnography method. Ethnography studies include social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions within groups, teams, organizations, and communities. The central aim is to provide rich, holistic insights into people's views and actions, along with the nature of the location in which they inhabit (Reeves et al., 2008). This process occurs by collecting detailed observational interviews. Ethnography was inappropriate for this study because relatively long periods were necessary to spend talking to the participants and observing their actions (Reeves et al., 2008). Grounded theory is inappropriate because it provides an explanation or theory behind certain events (Sommer, 2021). Conducting interviews and reviewing existing documents to build a theory based on data is the process of grounded theory. This was part of why this research method was not appropriate for this study. The large sample size is another reason grounded theory was not appropriate for the study. Narrative research offers rich insights into the lived experiences of individuals (Abkhezr et al., 2020). This method sheds light on the meaning of a personal experience. However, the in-depth interviews take much time and do not allow for a large enough sample size.

A case study research design was the chosen method to study the subject. Yin 2016 asserted that case study research includes explaining a social phenomenon because it allows an extensive inquiry within a real-life context. In this study, the research revealed how negative priming may happen when a beauty Instagram influencer posts sponsored content from Fashion Box. A case study was the best way to conduct this study because researchers explore a real-life bounded system (Stake, 2010). Priming can become an experience in how the follower interacts with the brand sponsoring the content. Therefore, this study included a holistic case study.

Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated that a qualitative holistic single-case study is best when the researcher needs to understand the experiences of the people they are studying and describe these experiences. This study's specific type of case study research method was an illustrative case study because it is descriptive.

Summary of the Nature of the Study

Starman (2013) posited that case studies include analyzing and describing a person's activities, special needs, life situations, and history. Starman (2013) also claims that case studies highlight a developmental factor. Cases generate and evolve. Case studies are a series of specific and interrelated events that occur in a particular time and place (Starman, 2013). While case studies can appear in qualitative or quantitative research or even to substantiate a quantitative study with a qualitative case study, this study included only a qualitative case study method. This method was appropriate to describe how followers perceive priming by Fashion Box-sponsored posts. The selection of participants was from Fashion Box affiliates.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was how sponsored Instagram posts can negatively prime followers towards a brand. In this study, that brand is Fashion Box. Fashion Box includes affiliate programs to get Instagram influencers to post about its products. These posts flow seamlessly into regular posts. The first concept explored was native advertising. Native advertising has existed for many years and became more popular with the advent of social media. Native advertising fits someone consuming products or services (Johnson et al., 2019). The second concept was the persuasion knowledge model. The theory reflects how consumers realize what they are watching, reading, or listening to is an advertisement, and persuasion knowledge begins (Brüns & Meißner, 2023). The third theory was the psychological reactance model, which

ties in with the persuasion knowledge theory. This theory reflects how consumers realize what they are seeing, hearing, or watching as an advertisement causes them to react (Almazayad et al., 2023).

Native Advertising

According to Johnson et al. (2019), native advertising on Instagram naturally occurs with user-generated conversations about brands. These can happen in the form of online recommendations or electronic word-of-mouth. Native advertising is not a new concept. Native advertising existed for many years, especially in print. Native advertising is paid for in print or online news articles or social network feeds (J. A. Lee et al., 2022). Through this type of advertising, individuals can play an influential role in online interactions about brands or products (Johnson et al., 2019). This process contributes to the formation of digitally mediated consumer-to-consumer conversations about products and brands. This attention is more genuine than traditional advertising. Johnson et al. (2019) asserted that native advertising has product diffusion through electronic word-of-mouth with durable effects on sales. Johnson et al. (2019) found that followers of Instagram influencers are more receptive to this type of marketing because it is subtle and connects to their peers..

The sponsored posts by Fashion Box on Instagram are a potential consideration of native advertising. Knowing that the Instagram post is a form of native advertising could change the followers' perceptions towards the post. According to Luoma-aho et al. (2019), when an influencer discloses the sponsorship, it could make that post less persuasive, as that disclosure may cause a strong recognition as an advertisement. This process is an example of priming. According to Luoma-aho et al. (2019), priming can influence how the followers might think about the topic of the sponsored post, or it can direct them to use only a part of their knowledge

when evaluating that topic. Kim et al. (2021) asserted that the likelihood of native advertisements is manipulation that can cause followers of the social media influencer to have negative responses. This leads to the following theory about persuasion knowledge.

Persuasion Knowledge Model

According to Brüns and Meißner (2023), persuasion knowledge refers to a consumer's knowledge and beliefs about various advertisements. Consumers will gain an understanding of the goals and tactics marketers use in persuading them to the extent that they will find these techniques effective and appropriate (Brüns & Meißner, 2023). Persuasion knowledge is also how the consumer copes with these tactics and goals.

Persuasion knowledge emerges in time for a consumer (Brüns & Meißner, 2023). Brüns and Meißner (2023) defined persuasion knowledge as the consumers' knowledge and beliefs about various advertising issues and the extent to which the consumers find the techniques effective and appropriate. Social media, particularly Instagram, includes a new opportunity for marketers to reach their target groups. Using Instagram to reach the target audience, marketers are completing the campaign in a less obtrusive way by sponsoring an influencer's content than traditional media. Consequently, this method is less intrusive, and it becomes more difficult for the followers of an Instagram influencer to differentiate commercial content from non-commercial content. While persuasion knowledge develops throughout life, adults can distinguish advertisements from non-commercial comments (Brüns & Meißner, 2023).

Disclosure in the sponsored posts informs the followers of that influencer about the commercial purpose of the message. According to the persuasion knowledge model, followers who see this disclosure can distinguish the sponsored content from the non-commercial content (Brüns & Meißner, 2023). Brüns and Meißner (2023) suggested that the persuasion knowledge

model includes the suggestion that when the follower recognizes a persuasive attempt in the message, they will develop beliefs about the appropriateness and the fairness of the sponsored content, and the tactics used to post that content. The persuasion knowledge model (PKM) reflects how three knowledge structures interact to determine and shape the outcomes of persuasive attempts by marketers. These three knowledge structures are persuasion knowledge, agent knowledge, and topic knowledge. Agent knowledge is the beliefs about the persuasive agent's traits, competencies, and goals, including the advertiser or salesperson (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). The topic knowledge is the beliefs about the topic of the message, such as the product, service, social cause, or candidate (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022).

Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) indicated that when consumers become aware of persuasion, their coping strategies begin. These coping strategies refer to how the consumers or followers respond to the persuasion attempt to meet their goals. Dhanesh and Duthler (2019) contended that these coping strategies can be of resistance or resource. When individuals perceive a message as persuasive, their persuasion knowledge will activate. They will process the message differently as if they were unaware of the persuasive intent of the message or if there was no persuasive intent in the message (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019). Eisend and Tarrahi (2022) indicated that persuasion knowledge enables a person to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and then remember persuasive attempts. In response, the person selects and executes the coping tactics that they believe are effective and appropriate (Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022). The persuasion knowledge model leads to the next concept about psychological reactance, which posits that consumers react psychologically when they assume they see a persuasive message (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019).

Psychological Reactance Model

The psychological reactance model, or PRM, premises on how individuals react when they perceive their freedom when they feel a threat in a specific behavior (Almazyad et al., 2023). The PRM relates to reverse priming., A person's thought patterns and actions change because they feel a threat to their autonomy. Youn and Kim (2019) asserted that the psychological reactance model is a motivational state that causes consumers to act against threats to their freedom in a way that reaffirms their autonomy. When a follower of an Instagram influencer realizes that they are reviewing a sponsored post, they may react negatively, either consciously or subconsciously. The follower may do the opposite of the intended purpose of that post. According to Youn and Kim (2019), after exposure to a persuasive message and reactance occurs, individuals may resist the message altogether or change their attitudes or behaviors in the opposite direction advocated in the message. These actions are done to regain the freedom the follower sees as a threat. When a beauty Instagram influencer posts sponsored content, their followers might see this post as threatening their freedom or autonomy to consume media content how they want (Youn & Kim, 2019).

Youn and Kim (2019) explained that negative cognitions may occur when individuals contest the message content, resulting in counter-arguing, critical, or skeptical thoughts about freedom-threatening messages. According to Almazyad et al. (2023), individuals believe it is their right to be autonomous agents when engaging in various behaviors. They also believe that they have the freedom to select amongst the choices as they please when they are on Instagram. When seeing a sponsored post, this might cause an upsetting reaction.

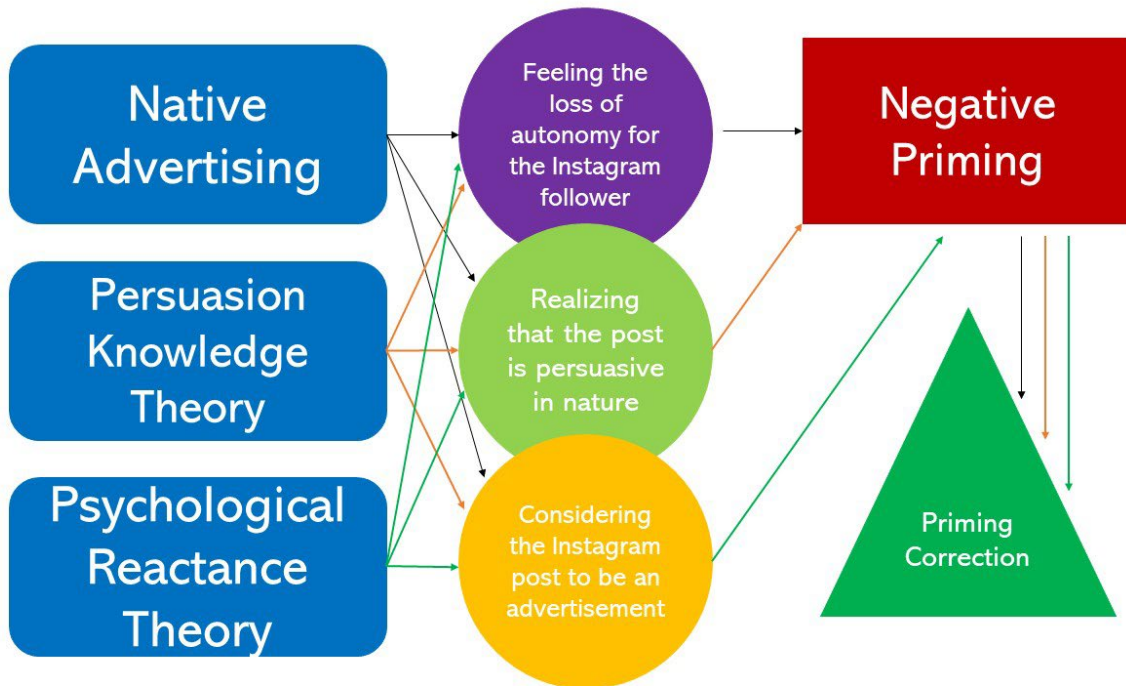


Figure 1. Relationships between concepts.

Discussion of Relationships Between Concepts

Native advertising is seamlessly part of the media channel the individual is consuming. The term is seamlessly embedded into what the consumer is already viewing. The individual may not know that it is an advertisement. Suppose the individual does realize it is an advertisement. In that case, chances are they will react negatively towards the ad. The persuasion knowledge model, or PKM, includes the premise that native advertising will awaken a consumer's persuasion knowledge (Almazyad et al., 2023). The follower of the beauty Instagram influencer will either consciously or subconsciously realize that the non-branded, sponsored post is a persuasive post to persuade the follower to try the product or service. The PKM causes individuals to not see the psychological reactance model. A follower of an Instagram beauty influencer realizes consciously or subconsciously that the non-branded sponsored post is persuasive, therefore they might feel a threat to their freedom and autonomy. A corrective

solution is a negative priming effect where the follower opposes what is wanted. Native advertising, the persuasion knowledge model, and the psychological reactance model can each relate to the follower feeling their loss of autonomy, realizing that the post is persuasive, and considering these posts are advertisements rather than regular posts. All these themes lead to negative priming.

Summary of the Conceptual Framework

Native Advertising, PKM, and PRM correlate in how they affect individuals. All can negatively affect the followers of beauty Instagram influencers when they post non-branded, sponsored content. These concepts helped to understand any negative priming on the followers of these Instagram beauty influencers when they post sponsored content through Fashion Box.

Definition of Terms

Followers

Followers are individuals who follow other individuals on social media, in particular Instagram (S. S. Lee et al., 2022).

Instagram

Instagram is a social media channel where people can post photographs and videos to share with their followers. Instagram also offers a twenty-four-hour story option to share photographs or videos (J. A. Lee et al., 2022).

Instagram Influencer

Instagram influencers are social media influencers who use Instagram as their primary channel to share posts, sharing products and services that may or may not have sponsored that post (S. S. Lee et al., 2022).

Native Advertising

Native advertising is a spectrum of online advertisements focusing on minimizing disruption to the consumer and their online experience by appearing like a friend's post (Johnson et al., 2019).

Persuasion Knowledge

Persuasion knowledge refers to a consumer's knowledge and beliefs about the advertising goals and tactics that marketers use to persuade them, the extent to which consumers find these techniques effective or appropriate, and their personal beliefs about how to cope with these advertisers' persuasion techniques (Brüns & Meißner, 2023).

Priming

Priming refers to the numerous environmental factors below the surface of conscious awareness that can influence judgments or goals (Nicolao et al., 2016).

Psychologic Reactance

Psychological reactance is a motivational state that causes individuals to act against their standard action and, in a reaction, that individual reacts to reaffirm their autonomy (Youn & Kim, 2019).

Social Media Influencer (SMI)

Social media influencers or SMIs accumulate a large following on social media networks by sharing their everyday lives through text, images, or videos and monetizing their following by posting sponsored posts (S. S. Lee et al., 2022).

Sponsorship

In this study, sponsorship is when a brand pays money, discounts the product or service, or sends a free product to a social media influencer in exchange for the influencer posting about the product or service (S. S. Lee et al., 2022).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

This section includes the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. Most researchers make assumptions related to their work to guide the study. The assumption explored in this study were that followers would react negatively towards that post, the brand, and the Instagram influencer who posted when challenged with persuasive posts. Limitations are the design flaws or potential weaknesses of the study. A limitation explored in this study was that the focus was only on Instagram and Fashion Box. Delimitations are the self-imposed boundaries that the researcher sets for the study. The delimitations in this study were also the limitations.

Assumptions

The first assumption explored was that when a follower of an Instagram influencer realizes that the post is sponsored content, they will react negatively. Eisend et al. (2020) asserted that studies have consistently found a negative effect when an Instagram influencer discloses a sponsorship that shows lower perceived credibility of the influencer, Instagram, and the brand itself. An assumption was that their persuasion knowledge kicked in when the follower realized that the post was a persuasive attempt. A persuasion attempt takes on meaning to people as a tactic only when or if they perceive a possible connection between the persuasion attempt and a psychological activity that they believe mediates persuasion (Friestad & Wright, 1994). The follower will attempt to cope with the persuasive knowledge of the sponsored post. Another assumption was that the psychological reactance would begin, and the follower would do whatever they could to maintain their freedom. Reactance is an unpleasant motivational arousal that may emerge when someone experiences a threat to or loss of their free behaviors, resulting in that person trying to restore their freedom (Jamal et al., 2023).

Limitations

The main limitation of this study was that respondents might not have answered the questions honestly. This assumption diminished by ensuring that the participant's information was confidential. Another limitation was the possibility that I might not receive enough responses for interview requests to create a complete picture of the study. The limitation diminished by sending out the interview invitations early and allowing ample time to receive a response. Sending out reminders to respondents who had not responded promptly was necessary. This process resulted in more responses to interview requests.

Delimitations

I delimited the study in several ways. A delimitation was that the only focus was on Instagram instead of all social media outlets. The focus was on Instagram social media influencers. I decided to focus on a specific brand as a case study rather than an industry to narrow the focus on the followers of a certain brand.

Significance of the Study

This study included an understanding of how sponsored content by Instagram influencers could have a reverse priming effect on Fashion Box. Research on social media influencers is prevalent; however, a gap exists when it comes to how the disclosures prime the followers of those social media influencers. According to Luoma-aho et al. (2019), the popularity of sponsored content lies in its persuasive power. This study helped understand whether this persuasive power was positive or negative and why.

Understanding how persuasion works is essential for brands and marketing. If an influencer does not receive a sponsored post well, it can impact the brand's reputation. If damage occurs to a brand's reputation, it can influence the economic health of that brand. Singh et al.

(2020) explained that inferences of a manipulative intent lower the perceived trustworthiness of a brand, which subsequently influences the reputation of that corporation. Marketers must understand how disclosures about sponsorship on Instagram posts affect the attitudes toward the brand sponsoring the post. If the disclosure has an adverse effect, marketers must change the message to impact the followers positively. Pfeuffer and Huh (2020) discussed studies on the effects of sponsorship and discovered that disclosures lead to a negative brand attitude by consumers. With the growing use of social media influencers, it is important to understand how brand sponsored posts affect the consumer psychologically. Therefore, it was essential to study the reverse priming that could happen when a brand (Fashion Box in this study) sponsors an Instagram post in the follower's mind.

Implications for Biblical Integration

“And you yourself must be an example to them by doing good work of every kind. Let everything you do reflect the integrity and seriousness of your teaching” (*New Living Translation Bible*, 2018, Titus 2:7). The Biblical Integration of this study reflected on the moral obligations that Fashion Box and Instagram beauty influencers have towards their followers. Self-evidence is apparent in the fact that they are posting sponsored content. This study should help influencers as a steppingstone to show them how to morally disclose a sponsorship in a way that will seem like they are tricking the follower.

Sponsoring a social media post is highly important and completely transparent. Social media influencers must be honest about the use of sponsorship in their posts and the compensation they receive. This study will help the brand and social media influencer understand how to make sponsored social media posts with more integrity. According to Proverbs 11:3, “The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their

duplicity” (*New Living Translation Bible*, 2018). Important brands and social media influencers create honesty when posting a sponsored post, and trust in the consumer is necessary.

“So, whatever you wish others would do to you, do also for them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (*New Living Translation Bible*, 2018, Matthew 7:12). Many marketers and social media influencers would not like deception. This study is essential in that it will help marketers understand how consumers think they are misled. Understanding this will help brands, social media influencers, and marketers understand how to create a better message they would trust, and consumers would trust.

Relationship to Field of Study

The Pew Research Center (2020) results indicated that the percentage of adults in the United States using at least one social media website has grown from 43 percent in January 2010 to 72 percent in February 2019. Of that 43 percent in January of 2010, nine percent used Instagram. In February 2019, 37 percent of the 72 percent of adults using social media use Instagram. The highest rate of adults using Instagram falls into the 18 to 29 age group at 67 percent. Followed by the 30 to 49 age group with 47 percent, then the 50 to 64 age group with 23 percent, and rounding out with the 65 plus age group with eight percent (Pew Research Center, 2020). As social media continues to grow and more consumers are becoming savvy in advertisements and how they consume them, this study will help further the research about using social media influencers as a marketing tool. A gap in the research exists about the psychology of how sponsored posts on Instagram prime consumers or followers. The collected research will show how sponsored posts create a reverse priming effect on the followers and how the followers correct psychologically and behaviorally for this reverse priming. Brands and

influencers could learn how to disclose sponsored posts by not creating reverse priming when they understand how the follower corrects the reverse priming.

Summary of the Significance of the Study

The study of how Fashion Box uses Instagram influencers by sponsoring content has a subsequent reverse priming effect on the brand, bridging a gap in marketing and social media influencer studies. While this study focused on Fashion Box, it will be useful to any brand that uses social media influencers to post sponsored content to further their reach online. This study was done to research a more ethical way to sponsor content on Instagram that will make the posts more transparent. With the growth in users on Instagram who use social media sites to find out about new products, it is important to understand how the disclosure may hurt the brand. Suppose a brand understands how the sponsorship is hurting the brand. In that case, sponsorship hurts the brand; it can find new ways of conducting sponsorships for Instagram influencers. The Biblical implications of this study consisted of ensuring that both brands and Instagram influencers post sponsored content that is moral and ethical in their standards. This study will help to understand how the Fashion Box-sponsored Instagram influencer posts cause a reverse priming effect and how followers will react to correct this reverse priming.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature Review

The literature review for this study covered several topics. The literature review revealed what Instagram influencers are and explained more about Fashion Box. The literature review also covered how Fashion Box uses influencers to spread the word about its products and services. The literature review revealed native advertising and how sponsored influencer posts are a form of native advertising. The literature review also examined how marketing can prime individuals, especially reverse priming. In addition, the literature review revealed how priming

or native advertising causes a psychological reaction by explaining the psychological reactance theory. The literature review included merging all these topics to show why this study was significant and how further research is necessary in marketing.

Social Media Influencers

Social media is becoming an integral part of any business strategy and transformed how businesses interact with consumers. The presence of companies on social media has become a crucial part of any marketing strategy. Promoting products online through business accounts and paid advertising on social media has proven efficient for companies (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Social media enables marketers to influence brand outcomes and purchase decisions through fan promotion and the popularization of brand content (Meire et al., 2019). Meire et al. (2019) postulated that creating popular brand content on social media can become challenging because of many online conversations between customers and excluding brands or marketers.

To interrupt these customer-to-customer conversations, marketers create brand pages and reach out to social media influencers to spread that brand's message. These online communities have become essential information sources that initiate or simplify consumer purchase decisions (Anatharaman et al., 2023). Anatharaman et al. (2023) argued that peer consumer purchases and reviews are popular social information cues commonly adopted to facilitate consumer purchase decision-making. With the popularity of social media, consumers are increasingly engaged in online social communities and actively share their experiences with, evaluations of, and opinions on products and companies with other consumers (Anatharaman et al., 2023). Consumers can now quickly learn from and be affected by the actions of a social media friend. According to Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019), engaging critical social media influencers

could inspire potential consumers as a social media marketing activity. Adding value for them increases the impact of the marketing actions and generates benefits for the company.

More people use social media for information, social connections, and entertainment. The stronger their participation is in communities around brands on social media, the more brand trust and loyalty they will generate. Social media influencers offer brands an opportunity to help build a solid fan base. According to Eckhardt et al. (2019), the internet includes no boundaries. This strategy gives rise to new forms of consumer behavior and marketing where geography is no longer a limiting factor, which is especially paramount for younger consumers. Additional indirect sources that are beyond their immediate domestic environment influence younger consumers. Pagan et al. (2021) contended that online media is an exceedingly consumer-centric space because consumers or individuals actively and autonomously seek out the most interesting resources. Media surplus, audiences have so much to choose from; therefore, a premium on distinctiveness and visibility exists because of this environment. (Eckhardt et al., 2019).

According to Eckhardt et al. (2019), marketers seek social media influencers to capitalize on their vast social networks. They could benefit from the intimate relationships that they created with their followers. Social media influencers believe that a greater influence exists than conventional advertising activities from a company (Pick, 2020). Pick (2020) argued that social media content is a preferred advertising medium for companies because the younger target group is becoming increasingly difficult to reach by traditional media. The rapid digitization increased consumer involvement in marketing. Social media users and businesses exploited this reality to promote online (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020). Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020) argued that this promotion increases access to a brand or product's information, thereby turning the information search into a critical stage of the shopping decision for the consumer.

Social media enables faster and more effective strategic implementation and facilitates sponsorships of social media influencers who are widely acknowledged as leaders of opinion and critical brand prescribers (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020). In addition to branded posts from companies and fan pages on social media, users actively generate and publish multimedia content that includes their opinions on brands and products (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). In this way, brands and customers engage in a collaborative effort to exchange product-related information sharing. According to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), certain users may become active online content creators, sharing their personal stories, ideas, reviews, opinions, feelings, and emotions intended for a particular audience. Sponsored advertisements by social media influencers have become a vital advertising medium that connects providers directly to consumers (Vrontis et al., 2021).

Consumers will refuse to believe a direct advertising message about brands from brands but tend to believe a social media influencer because they think that the goal of direct advertising from a brand is to sell products (Pick, 2020). Meanwhile, social media influencers do not have an objective to sell products. Social media influencers are personalities who have many followers across social media platforms who influence their followers (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Lou and Yuan (2019) contended that social media influencer-produced branded content could have more organic, authentic, and direct contact with potential consumers than brand-related advertising. Influencer marketing is a marketing strategy that uses the influence of a social media influencer or opinion leader to drive consumers' brand awareness and purchase decisions (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Brands can choose more affordable social media influencers rather than spend the exorbitant fees required to sign with a renowned celebrity endorser (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

These social media influencers have already established themselves by specializing in niche areas. Consumers are more likely to accept or trust an influencer's opinions when that influencer collaborates with brands that correspond well to their areas of expertise (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020) argued that consumer commitment to a brand grows from customer satisfaction and an emotional attachment. This closeness and emotional attachment can turn a loyal customer into a fan of that product, brand, or company online engagement (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020).

Influencer advertisements or sponsored social media influencer posts are significantly more emotionally intense and memorable than traditional advertising (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020). Social media influencer marketing is based on emotions and relies on that emotional connection between the social media influencer and their followers (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020). Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020) posited that as the exchange between an influencer and their followers becomes more emotional and the bonds strengthen, the followers will advocate for the influencer in their interaction with others, customers and non-customers. Social media influencers function as brand ambassadors by creating sponsored content and mentioning the product or the brand in the picture, captions, or tags (Boerman, 2020). According to Weismueller et al. (2020), with the recent growth of social media, social media influencer's importance increased, and many consumers seek their opinions when making purchase decisions.

Social media influencers are, in essence, modern-day opinion leaders who exert unequal influence on the decision-making processes of their followers (Belanche et al., 2020). Self-branding or personal branding involves individuals developing a distinctive public image for commercial gain (Kim & McDonald-Liu, 2023). Kim and McDonald-Lui (2023) argued that

central to self-branding is the idea that just like a commercially branded product, influencers benefit from having a unique selling point or public identity. This point is charismatic and responsive to the needs and interests of their followers. Branding instills personality in a product, service, or company (Kim & McDonald-Liu, 2023). A product, service, or company is given human-like qualities that make it more relatable. Kim and McDonald-Lui (2023) contended that at the basic level of brand identity, the brand represents the identity of a commodity (a product, service, or company), and its primary function is to convey a certain level of quality to the consumers. Influencers need to build their human brands to create a well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications efforts. Social media influencers generate celebrity capital by cultivating as much attention as possible while crafting an authentic personal brand on social media, which marketers can use for consumer outreach (Kim & McDonald-Liu, 2023). Unlike traditional celebrity endorsers, social media influencers are usually *grassroots* individuals who have created a likable online personality and achieved high visibility among their followers by creating viral content on social media (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social media influencers generate regular social media updates in their niches, disseminating persuasive messages to their followers with informational and entertainment value (Lou & Yuan, 2019).

Influencers and brands can benefit from influencer marketing actions. Influencers can increase their interactions on their accounts by sponsoring products, and brands can bring their products closer to the users and increase their interest in them with positive behavior and intentions (Belanche, et al., 2020). These digital celebrities have become an effective and cost-saving marketing model because of their strong social relationships with their followers to promote the followers' need to purchase what the influencers use (Kalam et al., 2024). Opinion leaders seem to score higher in innovativeness, defined as seeking what is new, and people will

follow these influencers to take advantage of these trends. According to Casaló et al. (2020), creating original and authentic content has been regarded as a way for social media influencers to resonate with their followers. In addition to seeking a unique perception, influencers could create a personal image that followers admire (Casaló et al., 2020).

Kalam et al. (2024) posited that through social media posts, social media influencers may influence many others, possibly indirectly, through a cascade of influence through their followers. According to Tafesse and Wood (2021), followers of a social media influencer actively construct and legitimize an influencer's identity on social media. These followers follow the influencer and engage to advocate for and support the influencer. The process plays a crucial role in an influencer's status while expanding the reach and impact of their messages (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Social media influencers typically adopt new products and services associated with their niche earlier than most consumers (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). The adoption gives consumers insights into how these products or services might fit into their lifestyles. Tafesse and Wood (2021) argued that by leveraging insight, influencers could review products and recommend them to their followers, enabling them to monetize their work as social media influencers. Social media influencers are opinion leaders who communicate with a sizeable social network of people who follow them.

According to Kalam et al. (2024), a new kind of digital celebrity emerged in recent years, such as a blogger, vlogger, or an Instafamous personality. These *celebrities* appeal to common reference groups, defined as people who serve as a reference to an individual in forming values and attitudes and providing consumers with a reference in their purchasing decisions and behavior (Kalam et al., 2024). These social media celebrities can transform an unknown product into a well-known product. Kalam et al. (2024) argued that brands may use these social media

celebrities to add value to the brand name, product, or service offering. The credibility of that influencer brings credibility to the brand or organization.

Consumers are increasingly using social media networks to update themselves about brands and products in which they have an interest (Belanche et al., 2020). Social media allows users to develop and share their content on various topics such as technology, beauty, fashion, politics, and health (Audrezet et al., 2020). These contributors can post on various platforms to give their opinions, inform their network, share their expertise in a field, or express their passions. Over time, some of these contributors will gain an extended competency in creating sophisticated content through stories, videos, and other visuals. With the internet's scalability and the speed of online diffusion, these contributors may attract mass audiences and attain fame by posting their content online. Audrezet et al. (2020) posited that these content creators represent a new type of third-party endorser who shapes the audience's attitudes through social media. According to Kalam et al. (2024), social media influencers build a sizeable social network of people following them and regard them as influential. These social media influencers are tastemakers trusted in several niches (Kalam et al., 2024). Consumers tend to perceive individuals with larger subscribers or followers as more attractive and trustworthy (Janssen et al., 2022). Using social media makes approaching the audience directly and opens the media field to outsiders, characterized by a professional or hobbyist approach to social media production and promotion processes. This strategy creates a structured relationship with advertisers, an interconnectedness with audiences, and a desire to gain social visibility and prestige (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Social media influencers become brand ambassadors to their followers when they show devotion to companies that generally compensate them through free products, the promise of exposure, or a sum of money. Influencers can develop closer relations or ties with

their followers, which leads to establishing credible and trustworthy information exchanges (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Social media influencers generate brand-related content they turn around to share with their followers or other consumers; consumers then access this information that other customers generate through social media networks (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Many organizational leaders see customer engagement as creating, developing, and enriching their relationships with their customers and potential customers and achieving their business performance gains (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020).

Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) argued that social media influencers connect their target audience with brands while maintaining direct communication with their following. These social influencers are non-traditional celebrities because they are only famous to a niche group of people (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). According to Janssen et al. (2022), social media influencers, compared to traditional celebrities, are typical individuals who have become famous through online blogging, vlogging, or social media. Social media influencers are increasingly regarded as more powerful than traditional celebrities because followers perceive them as being more credible and accessible than traditional celebrity (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Social media influencers can forge deeper psychological bonds with their followers by sharing more personal content about their lifestyles and interests (Tafesse & Wood, 2021).

Social media influencers often present tested products and provide their opinions, or they might promote these products online to other users (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Pick (2020) argued that social media influencer marketing refers to influencers using their reach on social media to convey messages or information about a company or product to their community or followers. Social media influencers generally have expertise in a specific area, such as healthy living,

travel, food, lifestyle, beauty, or fashion (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Influencer marketing refers to digital marketing, where marketers and brands invest in a selected influencer and influencers to create and promote their branded content to the influencers' followers and the brand's target audience (Lou & Yuan, 2019). According to Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020), the focus of social media influencer marketing is to leverage individuals who have influence over potential consumers and orient the marketing activities around these chosen individuals to deliver the brand message through social media channels. Social media influencers and consumers share their views and comments on products and interests, which creates a culture of online *experts* and concurrent followers (Bi & Zhang, 2023). Bi and Zhang (2023) argued that social media influencers are diffusers of information, inspiration, and ideas to their followers. Consumers will associate specific brands with social media influencers, adding a dimension of attractiveness and trustworthiness that assists in building a brand's credibility (Janssen et al., 2022).

E-WOM refers to any positive or negative statement on social media about a product or company made available to many people (López et al., 2022). According to López et al. (2022), e-WOM, or electronic word-of-mouth, refers to the knowledge exchange consumers carry online through social media. E-WOM has a direct relationship with customer loyalty, which in turn affects the overall value of a company (López et al., 2022). E-WOM is a non-commercial message created by consumers rather than created as traditional advertising. These messages provide direct experiences for consumers, and they affect the purchasing decisions of other consumers (López et al., 2022). Visually enriched content can make e-WOM more enjoyable and appealing to the followers of social media influencers (Leong et al., 2022). López et al. (2022) argued that consumers generally believe that the credibility of e-WOM is higher than that of

commercial advertisements. E-WOM is a way for consumers to share and discuss their product and brand experiences with each other. Researchers have shown that the effectiveness of e-WOM on consumers' attitudes and behavioral intentions emerges, to some degree, from the perceived credibility of the communicator of the e-WOM. or, in this instance, the social media influencer (Leong et al., 2022). Social media influencers are part of the spread of e-WOM. As an integral part of an organization's promotional mix, social media facilitates brand-related e-WOM through various interactive practices and mechanisms, including influencer marketing (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Working with social media influencers allows organizational leaders to engage in a collaborative process of product-related information sharing with potential customers through the influencer's followers. According to Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019), the emergence of these social media influencers has led to a change in how companies and their target audiences relate through social media platforms. Social media influencers are an opportunity to extend the scope of an organization or brand-related information by electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

Across social media networks, online friends can enhance an effective medium for information dispersion, and e-WOM leads to a network of connected consumers (Leong et al., 2022). According to Belanche et al. (2020), individuals will seek congruence between the characteristics they associate with their personality or self-image and those associated with the brand or social media influencer. Individuals will positively value the fit between their personality and the personalities associated with the brands and products, and they positively value the congruence between the characteristics related to the social media influencer's personality and the products they promote. Followers will positively value the fit between the

traits associated with the social media influencer and those of the brands or products they promote (Belanche et al., 2020). Belanche et al. (2020) posited that previous research on communications found that a commercial message placed in a congruent versus incongruent context increases its effectiveness. In the context of social media influencers and sponsored posts, the followers' processing and evaluation of the information improves if it is congruent with the social media influencer's posts or niche. Social media influencer marketing is a unique form of e-WOM marketing that leads consumers to exchange favorable opinions of products, services, companies, or brands (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). The e-WOM leads to the passing along of promotional messaging to the followers of social media influencers.

Consumers increasingly use social media platforms to help their buying decision processes (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Consumers increasingly use online social platforms to communicate their opinions about products and exchange purchase decisions (Bi & Zhang, 2023). The peer consumer purchase decisions provide an informative signal of quality that may encourage other consumers to follow their actions, leading to herd behavior (Bi & Zhang, 2023). Bi and Zhang (2023) argued that this opinion-based information could contain positive or negative statements from potential, actual, or former customers about a product or a company. Martínez-López et al. (2020) argued that they consume more content generated from social media influencers as they become more hesitant about the content brands. Consumers often have an imperfect knowledge of the actual value of a product, so they tend to observe and consider others' purchasing behavior in their decisions.

Bi and Zhang (2023) posited that traditional consumer behavior research reveals that other consumers' purchasing behaviors provide an informative signal that encourages other consumers to follow the actions of their predecessors and make the same purchase decisions.

Technological advances such as social media lead consumers to access large volumes of information, making them better informed, more sophisticated, and less controlled by brands (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Martínez-López et al. (2020) posited that more consumers have control of their shopping experiences and have the freedom to flex in their informational searching processes. Consumers search for reviews by previous customers to inform themselves before purchasing (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). In this evolved context, the communication between a brand and a consumer becomes bidirectional through co-creation with customers or social media influencers (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Using social media, influencers can reduce the cost of advertising or reaching the target audience and provide benefits for the content of the message (Martínez-López et al., 2020). Dhun and Dangi (2023) argued that consumers are skeptical about traditional brand-driven advertising, bypassing it because it is intrusive and disruptive to their lives.

Reduced anonymity can make e-WOM information more trustworthy and dependable than traditional advertising because people cannot exchange opinions and experiences about products and services through social media (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). In these online environments, customers can publish and express their feelings about a product or a brand. Therefore, some users consider the expertise and trustworthiness of the contributors before adopting or rejecting the information (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). Social media influencers are thought of as opinion leaders. Casaló et al. (2020) argued that opinion leaders are important sources of advice for consumers. These opinion leaders play a crucial role in new product adoption and the diffusion of related information (Casaló et al., 2020). They have public recognition from their peers or followers on social media. Consumers recognize social media influencers as online opinion

leaders because of their authenticity, knowledge, and potential power of influence (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019).

Source credibility refers to the consumers' perception of the information source based on their attractiveness, trustworthiness, and knowledge of an endorsed product (Weismueller et al., 2020). Weismueller et al. (2020) argued that source credibility is the extent to which the target audience or followers of a social media influencer view the source to gain expertise and knowledge in their understanding of the product or service. This source's credibility reflects the communicator or social media influencer's trustworthiness, attractiveness, and expertise. The source's credibility is also dependent upon the argument's quality and the influencer's persuasive strength (Weismueller et al., 2020). According to Kim and Kim (2021), the congruence between the influencer and the brand is critical to the acceptance of the sponsored post.

Tafesse and Wood (2021) argued that social media users generally view social media influencers as attractive, authentic, and like themselves. This positive perception of social media influencers by their followers renders their messages highly effective in creating the desired impact of the brand (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) argued that opinion leaders such as social media influencers are intermediaries of the information followers may seek or receive. Once the influencer has developed and filtered that message to other people through e-WOM, it increases the potential influence on the followers. This influence process occurs because an opinion leader serves as a model through whom people can learn and develop beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors from the observed information and actions (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). The advantage of sponsored user-generated content is its ability to minimize the annoyance of and skeptical attitudes toward brand-related content on social media (Kim et al., 2018).

Influencer marketing is more effective than traditional marketing tactics because of higher authenticity and credibility, leading to lower resistance to the message (Weismueller et al., 2020). Breves et al. (2019) argued that a strong influencer-brand fit would increase consumers' brand attitudes and behavioral intentions, directly and indirectly, through perceived credibility. According to Audrezet et al. (2020), social media influencers can complement traditional branding communications by embodying the presentation of their personal taste and product choices. This process makes social media influencers particularly attractive to marketers. Social media influencers are role models to their followers because they trust their beliefs and opinions. Belanche et al. (2020) contended that these social media influencers differ from traditional celebrities because they were born on social media and established their reputations among their followers through the actions; they performed on these social media platforms. In contrast, the fame of a traditional celebrity often stems from their activities outside of social media (Belanche et al., 2020).

The fit of the social media influencer and the product they are sponsoring is essential for the perceived expertise and trustworthiness of the endorser (Breves et al., 2019). Lou and Yuan (2019) contended that the influencer's inherent characteristics are vital in enticing the brands to pursue them closely. Instead of directly targeting the market through traditional advertising, brands now aim to encourage highly followed and admired influencers who are trustworthy to talk about or recommend their products on social media (Weismueller et al., 2020). Influencer marketing leads to brands getting better engagement on social media and doubling return on investment or ROI (Martínez-López et al., 2020). According to Tafesse and Wood (2021), influencer marketing involves leveraging the trust and connection that social media influencers forge with their followers to extend the reach of brands on social media. When a social media

influencer collaborates with a brand, the followers may question the authenticity of the social media influencer. Audrezet et al. (2020) argued that commercial opportunities to promote a brand or product that would not ordinarily attract interest in a social media influencer's intrinsic nature might deflect the desire to create content about their passions. In this way, having a brand sponsor may threaten a social media influencer's authenticity. Pick (2020) argued that leaders should choose influencers who are not extremely popular in promoting divergent products. Popular influencers might negatively influence a consumer's perceptions of a brand's uniqueness and consequently negatively influence a consumer's attitude toward the brand. Companies' leaders use social media influencers to attract potential customers and to encourage them to engage with the brand on social media (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020).

Instagram

Instagram is a fast-growing social media site that uses online photo and video sharing. Kim and McDonald-Lui (2023) posited that Instagram provides users with video and photo-sharing possibilities and lends itself well for e-WOM purposes because the products and brands can be visually imaged and named. As messages disseminate rapidly and efficiently, a viral effect might occur (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). Therefore, a social media influencer's posts do not just flow to their followers but also spread among followers as they share viral messages on Instagram (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). Information is increasingly being conveyed from brands to consumers through images and videos posted on Instagram. Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020) argued that visual brand content is more effective at capturing customer attention than non-visual brand content. Organizations leaders have success at sharing product information and boosting consumer engagement on Instagram. According to Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020), Instagram relates to greater social profitability, a higher mean engagement rate, higher

ROI, a higher ratio of social participation to total exposure, and a broader target audience.

Despite this recognition, nearly seventy percent of posts remain unseen, which could indicate a degree of saturation and a need for more precise differentiation using social media influencers (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020).

The characteristics of Instagram include its visual nature, which allows users to publish visual content that they can edit with tools that are available directly on the platform (Blanche et al., 2020). According to Belanche et al. (2020), Instagram is a popular social media platform for brands to promote their products because it has a higher engagement rate than other social media platforms. After viewing a product on Instagram, Instagram users tend to perform more positive actions, such as searching for information on that product or brand, following the brand's account, or even making a purchase (Belanche et al., 2020). Belanche et al. (2020) posited that Instagram is the natural platform for developing social media marketing plans with influencers. Users engage in self-presentation through their posts and spend even more time viewing and liking others' posts appearing in their feeds of followed users (Johnson et al., 2019). In addition to friends and peers, Instagram users also follow celebrities, brands, popular lifestyles, and social media influencers. The visual modality of Instagram enhances the potential for e-WOM and social influence (Johnson et al., 2019).

E-WOM on Instagram has become persuasive and influential as an information source because of the emerging popularity of Instagram and the growing accessibility of smartphones and other devices (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). Dhun and Dangi (2023) argued that opinions formed from solid connections on Instagram are a part of the significant importance of its members or followers. The validation of quality Instagram posts is in terms of the strength of the public's

perception of the influencer and elements such as the relevance and timeliness of posts (Dhun & Dangi, 2023).

Marketers are increasingly interested in using Instagram for advertising because of its large reach among followers (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). Dhun and Dangi (2023) argued that the positive perception that an influencer creates on Instagram is likely to generate positive feedback from their followers. Critiques of traditional online advertising are a growing nuisance. Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020) contended that consumers' perceptions of online advertising are deteriorating, and marketers are questioning the effectiveness of social media advertisements. They are beginning to understand that a constant deluge of intrusive commercial information does not guarantee a consumer's attention. Marketers are finding sustainability on social media by using Instagram social media influencers. Social media advertisements have commercial objectives rather than direct sustainable objectives is the reason to use Instagram. According to Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020), sustainability stems from an awareness of the mindsets that govern our actions and influence our behavior. Social media influencers use their Instagram accounts to present new products encouraging followers to increase interaction with their accounts and their interest in the promoted products (Belanche et al., 2020). These social media influencers try to increase their interactions on their accounts because this is the key to the successful development of their online communities (Belanche et al., 2020). According to De Cicco et al. (2021), Instagram influencers tend to mainly brand themselves as a representative of a particular domain or niche. As a result, they create a unique conceptual thread in terms of their personal image, personality, and expertise. Posting history allows them to establish a strong link between their image and their sharing habits regarding content.

Instagram allows users to gather followers, connect with brands and entities, and facilitate consumer social interactions (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). Jin and Muqaddam (2019) argued that the phenomenon of Instafamous explicitly developed in Instagram because of its unique features. These features include its ability for social interactions and aesthetical presentation, allowing users to build personal narratives and highlight their identities to attract followers. In modern days, deploying influencers who are Instafamous for branding has become a defining element of any social media marketing campaign (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). These non-traditional celebrities' perceived realness and profound connectedness result in a higher purchase intention of the products they endorse because the followers personally identify with and try to imitate them (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). The perception of these influencers on Instagram is more authentic and relatable, so they become more approachable and compelling to imitate their followers (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019). Jin and Muqaddam (2019) contended that when followers perceive an influencer on Instagram as more trustworthy, they are more welcoming toward their recommendations and the products or brands they endorse. Instafamous influencers have a higher standard in picking their endorsed brands' emotional and meaningful attachments (Jin & Muqaddam, 2019).

Followers

Wies et al. (2023) posited that the larger the number of followers an influencer has, the greater their perceived social influence. Consumers increasingly demand authenticity from their products and brands (Audrezet et al., 2020). Most adults in the United States rely heavily on social media for news and information (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Consumers now encounter thousands of commercials daily on social media (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Social media influencers' generated posts offer followers information about product alternatives or other informative

content (Lou & Yuan, 2019). According to Lou and Yuan (2019), influencers stamp their posts with personal aesthetic touches and personality twists, usually creating an enjoyable experience for their followers. Traditional critics posit that the more consumers research a product, the more likely they are to purchase it. A prior product experience positively mediates the potential for future purchase behavior (Wies et al., 2023). Wies et al. (2023) argued that social media influencers could play a crucial role as a bridging and bonding mechanism for the millennial population because communication efforts are held necessary for the sustainability plight.

Social media influencers are in the public eye on social media and hold some power over the minds of consumers, particularly younger consumers who are quicker to notice the latest trends (Wies et al., 2023). Wies et al. (2023) posited that product perceptions can enhance as influencers become the tools to construct social images through branding and opinion, to compete for positions within the consumers' inner value systems. Consumers seek a sense of themselves from their consumption activity, so there appears to be a sense of belonging. They function as a social system of celebrity subculture concerning social media influencers (Wies et al., 2023). Ultimately, axiological considerations related to socially driven identity issues influence millennials to seek relevant information from credible online sources. (Wies et al., 2023). Wies et al. (2023) argued that this information-gathering process becomes more unconscious, naturally strained, and filtered by the consumers' identity claims.

A consumer must have a significant interest in the life of a particular social media influencer and a level of attraction and respect for an endorsement from an influencer's post (Du et al., 2023). The partnership between brands and social media influencers does not come without a risk for both parties. Initially, the followers of a social media influencer are attracted by an opportunity to access content that originates from other *ordinary* consumers that are

thought of as noncommercial (Audrezet et al., 2020). This authenticity improves message receptivity with the followers and enhances the perceived quality, which increases purchase intentions (Audrezet et al., 2020).

A follower's dependency on a social media influencer arises from the need to find online sources that provide them with valuable and reliable information that helps them in making decisions and guiding their actions (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) posited that through stimulating and inspiring content, social media influencers include opinions that arouse the followers' needs and interest. Influencers may increase their followers' susceptibility. The need for individuals to meet personal and social objectives or interests may explain the power social media influencers can exert on their followers' impressions and behaviors. The brands they endorse reinforce their role as brand-related e-WOM opinion leaders (Jiménez-Castillo & Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). According to Berne-Manero and Marzo-Navarro (2020), social media influencers maintain a permanent link with their followers with whom they share their lifestyles, tastes, and hobbies, shaping and spreading trends. These social media influencers constitute an essential promotional tool because of their trend-setting ability and influence on their follower's consumption (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020).

The motivation and abilities of the person processing the message may affect whether the argument quality or other peripheral cues in the sponsored post might influence the attitudes, intentions, or beliefs of the receiver or follower (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). This information may occur by using a central route with cognitive responses related to information, facts, and arguments or using a peripheral route using cues, which are cognitive shortcuts that are easy for followers to process (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). These cues would relate to the message and its

presentation to the source of the message (the influencer)(Sokolova & Kefi,2020). This process means that the communicator (social media influencer) and their perception can impact the persuasion of the followers. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) argued that three characteristics that social media influencers need for success in persuasion are authority, credibility, and social attractiveness. These three characteristics relate to compliance, internalization, and identification with the follower (Sokolova & Kefi). Sokolova and Kefi (2020) contended that credibility influences the followers through the internalization process. The followers share similar values and attitudes with the influencer (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Credibility is also thought to affect the content that followers may choose to view or ignore through selective exposure (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Sokolova and Kefi (2020) argued that similarity is also a persuasion factor, mainly if the similarity is relevant to the message or post. When people are like the influencer, this can inspire trust because the proposed solution has worked for the influencer and may also work for the follower. According to the social cognitive theory, people with similar attributes are more easily influenced by social media influencers (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020).

The repeated interactions between a social media influencer and their followers help to develop a relationship or a para-social relationship, which is strongly related to the identification process (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). According to Sokolova and Kefi (2020), the theory of para-social interaction defines the relationships between a spectator (follower) and a performer (social media influencer) with an illusion of intimacy for genuine interpersonal relationships. Individuals establish para-social relationships, and the influencer might remain unaware of the relationship and potential influence (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Du et al. (2023) argued that these para-social relations are psychological associations the media uses to build unilaterally with social media influencers or celebrities. These relationships form feelings of intimacy with media

characters, and their feelings mirror that of a social relationship (Du et al., 2023). Du et al. (2023) contended that in contrast to interpersonal relationships, para-social relationships in a social media environment might reduce anxiety in the users' genuine interpersonal relationships and enable them to form pseudo-friendships. As the followers of a social media influencer form intimate relationships with the influencer internally, they are influenced by the advertisements posted on social media (Du et al., 2023). When social media influencers post about their daily use of an advertised product and post-purchase evaluations on social media, the influencer's modeling becomes effective at promoting to their followers the need to purchase the advertised product (Du et al., 2023).

The relationship between a social media influencer on Instagram is not unidirectional because users can add comments and discuss the content. The content owner (influencer) has the possibility of replying to the messages and comments that relate to the comments that they post (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Social media influencers usually cannot respond to all their followers and reactions if they have a large following. Sokolova and Kefi (2020) argued that a fully bidirectional relationship and a genuine friendship are more illusionary than real between a social media influencer and a follower.

The consumption experience of consumers sharing information on the internet consists of hedonic and utilitarian elements (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). According to Dhun and Dangi (2023), hedonic e-WOM refers to a pleasant and gratifying product experience a follower receives. However, utilitarian e-WOM refers to product functionality and effectiveness (Dhun & Dangi, 2023). A social media influencer's actions are beneficial to their followers because they inspire and help them discover new products or brands that they might purchase (Belanche et al., 2020).

Belanche et al. (2020) argued that the opinion leader-opinion seeker dynamic ensures that the opinion seeker constantly seeks new information and advice from the opinion leader about promoted products. Brands need to find a way to foster these behaviors as the followers' information-seeking is a first step toward their potential purchase of the promoted product (Belanche et al., 2020). Buying behavior can appear as a signal of social identity (Croes & Bartels, 2021). People will follow an influencer with the motivation to gain or maintain a positive social identity that will contribute to their self-esteem.

Native Advertising

Sponsored Instagram posts may fall into the category of native advertising, as they may not appear as promotional when they are promotional. At the general level, native advertising is a term that can describe a spectrum of online advertising forms. For example, sponsoring social media influencers that minimize the disruption to a consumer's online experience by appearing in the stream as other content (An et al., 2019). An et al. (2019) contended that a means of disruption is crafting native advertisements that blend in with the surrounding content. According to Kay et al. (2020), in the case of native advertising, the source of the content decreases while the consistency of the content is consistent with the editorial or digital surroundings. Native advertising influences what appears as editorial and promotional material, and readers may appear less likely to recognize exposure to advertising (Kay et al., 2020). Part of the appeal of native advertising for marketers is the credibility of the publishers by their audiences (Kay et al., 2020). Kay et al. (2020) posited that when the source's credibility is high, the consumer is less likely to counter-argue the message and more likely to feel swayed. The sources rated higher in expertise (social media influencers) are likelier to induce attitude changes (Kay et al., 2020). The credibility of a social media influencer is minimal if people perceive it as

offering biased content or if it includes content with an ulterior motive other than informative (Kay et al., 2020). According to Boerman (2020), influencer marketing is a form of native advertising that involves presenting online content or posts to their followers or consumers with advertisements that resemble the non-advertising content they already post on the same platform.

On social media, native advertisements appear within a consumer's feed designed to look like a friend's post (Grigsby, 2020). Native advertising involves brands and marketers delivering promotional messages in a format identical to the user-generated content on social media sites, allowing consumers to perceive those messages as less intrusive (Romero-Rodriguez & Castillo-Abdul, 2023). Consumers tend to react positively towards native advertising because of its less interruptive nature. However, consumers could respond negatively to native advertising when perceiving its covert format as manipulative (Romero-Rodriguez & Castillo-Abdul, 2023). Research showed that even when efforts reveal transparency about the promotional efforts of native advertising, people often do not notice the paid advertising labels (Huang & Yoon, 2022).

Huang and Yoon (2022) argued that when labels exist, such as *sponsored content*, most people do not understand what the word *sponsored* means. Most social media users do not want to see branded content and can quickly unsubscribe. According to Huang and Yoon, results quickly discovered that overt sales and promotional messages were generally not the types of messages that consumers want to view on social media. Brands needed to include a subtle approach to promotional efforts on social media. Native advertising formats must remain consistent with the social media user's online experience (Huang & Yoon, 2022). In this format, promotional content is virtually indistinguishable from other online material and not disruptive (An et al., 2019). A problem with native advertising is that it includes minimal promotional

disclosure, possibly fooling the consumer into viewing the content without knowing it is an advertisement (An et al., 2019).

The success of native advertising reflects what consumers will tolerate seeing in their social media feeds (Kim et al., 2021). Native advertisers seek to connect with consumers rather than deceive them. In recognition of the importance of not interrupting the online experience of consumers, marketers are creating native advertising content that mimics the style of its context and becomes virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding content. Native advertising can appear as a double-edged sword for marketers. The perception of marketing being intrusive is a pessimistic prediction of attitudinal outcomes or an optimistic prediction of advertising avoidance (Park et al., 2023). According to Muda and Hamzah (2021), the message source credibility is an important factor affecting persuasive effectiveness and purchase intention.

In response to consumers closing advertising messages, marketers are developing communication methods consumers do not readily identify as persuasive marketing attempts (Yang, 2022). This covert messaging evades consumer resistance because consumers accept messages that do not appear from commercial sources. Wojdyski and Evans (2020) argued that many consumers and marketers agree that covert advertising tactics are deceptive by nature or execution. Most consumers mistrust sponsored content (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020). Research showed that consumers have a high advertising skepticism toward native advertisements. Wojdyski and Evans (2020) contended that recognizing native advertising as an advertisement is a crucial determinant for persuasive outcomes in the consumption of advertisement. When consumers recognize that an ad is a covert message that reaches them organically through social media, they may feel negatively toward the message, its content, and those responsible for seeing it (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020). When a native advertisement is on social media, it appears as a

social media post. According to Amazeen (2018), consumers are receptive to the content of native advertisements because they lack awareness of the need to view paid advertising rather than editorial advertising. Amazeen argued that these problems align with two aspects of native advertising: the obscurity of the persuasive intent and the ambiguity of the content source response to consumers shutting out advertising messages; marketers.

Disclosures

When readers recognize a native advertisement, they may respond to it with resistance because of its persuasive intent and masked nature. According to Wojdyski and Evans (2020), disclosures, depending on their implementation and characteristics, may impact consumers' activation of persuasion knowledge or their advertising recognition. Researchers revealed that disclosure leads to greater persuasion knowledge than covert advertisements without disclosures (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020). Wojdyski and Evans (2020) posited that contemporary research reveals that the presence of disclosure on advertising recognition in native advertising contexts affects when it appears, its duration, and the language used.

For disclosures to effectively convey information, two sequential processes must occur (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020). The first is that consumers need to notice the disclosures, and the second is to understand their messages (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020). Without a clear disclosure of a sponsored post, the persuasive intention of the content tends to disappear because such sponsored content presents paid advertising in the form of editorial content (Eisend et al., 2020). Disclosing these sponsorships affects two significant responsive variables in consumers: brand attitude and brand recall (Eisend et al., 2020). Eisend et al. (2020) contended that the chain of effects works through the activation of persuasion knowledge and the additional mediators of credibility and resistance. The goal of a disclosure is to inform consumers about the threat of

exposure to sponsored content intended to influence them (Eisend et al., 2020). Several studies revealed that disclosures enhance recognition of sponsored social media posts (Eisend et al., 2020). Disclosures on sponsored social media posts function as a priming function that makes the followers more likely to notice, process, and remember the brand (Eisend et al., 2020).

The issue with influencer marketing is that commercial social media posts resemble and blend in with non-commercial posts, and therefore followers often may not recognize the post as advertising (Boerman, 2020). Prior research revealed that hashtags that disclose a commercial relationship can increase the recognition of sponsored content (Boerman, 2020). Boerman (2020) posited that disclosures could help consumers identify a post as an advertisement, activating their persuasion knowledge. Disclosures are helpful cues to instigate advertising recognition (Boerman, 2020). Researchers suggest that disclosures clearly and directly convey the paid relationship between the brand and a sponsor (Boerman, 2020).

The proliferation of digital advertisements encourages consumers to ignore advertisements on social media. De Veirman and Hudders (2020) argued that empowered avoid unwanted advertising, and they aim to decide for themselves which information is necessary and used in their decision-making. Sponsored Instagram posts mimic and blend in with organic non-sponsored posts that appear in the users' feeds without interrupting their social media experience (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). Having a disclosure might trigger the consumers' ability to recognize the commercial contents of the sponsored post and subsequently activate a critical reflection of the post (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020). De Veirman and Hudders (2020) argued that having a disclosure might negatively affect brand attitudes and even the evaluation of social media influencers. Once a follower is made aware of the persuasive nature of a message through disclosure, resistance to the persuasive attempt is likely to occur (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020).

Effective disclosures need conscious processing (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2023). A disclosure on a sponsored post may stimulate the readers to think about the post more elaborately and critically (Van Reijmersdal et al., 2023). As social media influencers add value to brands, products, and services, the credibility of that influencer is an essential antecedent to advertising effectiveness (Lee & Kim, 2020). When a social media influencer partners with a brand, the influencer creates content to promote a product, service, or brand. According to Weismueller et al. (2020), an endorsement-based disclosure on these posts must have a prominent visual appearance from the ad content. User-generated content like sponsored posts blends into the editorial content of social media. Therefore, a post must include disclosure (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). Sponsorship disclosure that reveals the content as sponsored e-WOM would likely lead to differences in source credibility and source trust, which has different impacts on consumer attitudes and behaviors (Pfeuffer & Huh, 2020).

No distinction exists between commercial content and real authentic opinions, feelings, and experiences in native advertising, causing a needed disclosure (Naderer et al., 2021). Critics argue that native advertising is unethical and misleading because it is unclear whether it is a form of advertising masked as editorial content or regular social media posts (Naderer et al., 2021). Stubb and Colliander (2019) argued that research reveals that consumers react differently to content when they are aware of sponsors. Followers need to know that social media influencers are receiving compensation for their sponsorship (Stubb et al., 2019). Accountability and a responsible mindset form the basis of transparency on social media for a social media influencer. Social media influencers should make a disclosure visible within the process of that communication (Steils et al., 2022).

Discovered Themes

The first theme discovered in this study was the normalization of social media influencers as part of the Instagram experience. Lou and Yuan (2019) explained that social media influencers produce branded content with more organic, authentic, and direct contact with potential consumers than any brand related advertising. Participants expected sponsored posts as part of their user experience on Instagram. Participants explained that this type of advertising is less intrusive than traditional advertising. Janssen et al. (2022) posited that consumers actively seek out influencer content as it is seen as more relatable, credible, and less intrusive than traditional marketing. This means that sponsored social media influencers are an effective brand advertising instrument. Naderer et al. (2021) explored two reasons influencer marketing thrives on Instagram. The first reason was that the branded messages were seamlessly woven into the content that the influencers were already posting on their social media accounts (Naderer et al., 2021).

The second theme in this study was the trustworthiness of the sponsored Instagram post. Naderer et al. (2021) stated that the trustworthiness of the communicator (the influencer) is a relevant factor in the persuasive process of influencer marketing. Participants in this study indicated that they trusted social media influencers that they knew personally, whether in person or online, and those with a smaller following if they knew them personally. However, the literature review in this study revealed that the size of the audience either did not play a significant role in trustworthiness or the larger the following, the more trustworthy the influencer seemed. Janssen et al. (2022) indicated that influencers with a more extensive network of followers appeared more trustworthy when compared to influencers with a smaller network of followers. I could not find any literature on the trustworthiness of the brand because of the

follower size of the influencer. The participants considered the brand less trustworthy when they worked with more prominent influencers.

The third theme uncovered in this research study was the recognition that the post was sponsored. De Cicco et al. (2021) noted that increasing disclosure recognition could lead to resistance to an advertisement or sponsored post. Participants in this study indicated that once they realized a sponsored Instagram post, they would mostly ignore it. Participants also stipulated that they did not believe that others who had never done any influencer marketing could spot the disclosure on sponsored Instagram posts. This issue is an influencer marketing problem because the sponsored posts closely resemble and blend in with non-commercial posts, so people often do not recognize them as advertisements (Boerman, 2020).

The last theme that emerged in this study was the question of the honesty of the sponsored post. Most customers want social media influencers to recommend only genuine and trustworthy brands they genuinely believe their followers will be interested in (López et al., 2022). Participants in this study indicated that they were unsure whether they found the brand or influencer capable of honesty when there is compensation involved. However, Stubb et al. (2019) discovered that when influencers used a compensation disclosure, explaining the justification behind why they received compensation for the post, followers reacted more positively to the post than if there was no compensation disclosure.

Summary of the Literature Review

This comprehensive literature review reflected the critical concepts outlined in this study's conceptual framework section. Many researchers focused on the successes of social media influencer marketing, the trustworthiness of the influencers, and sponsorship disclosures. However, more current studies on the effects of using social media influencers on brands that

hire influencers for marketing campaigns are necessary. Therefore, I reviewed numerous scholarly articles on how disclosures affect a follower's persuasion knowledge and the psychological reaction that individuals might experience when viewing sponsored social media posts.

In addition, the literature review included current articles on how influencers could change how they disclose sponsorship to negate any negative priming that might occur. Additionally, peer-reviewed studies added to this section were part of the complete compilation of the literature review research. These scholarly articles were a benchmark for the completeness of findings within this study. Furthermore, I discussed discovered themes after completing research for the study.

Transition and Summary of Section 1

Section 1 covered the background of the study, how it happened, and why it was necessary. This section encompassed the background of the problem, which was that because of social media, marketers must find a new way to reach their target audience. Many of these marketers are using social media influencers. However, not much information exists about how the use of a social media influencer might prime the responses and behaviors of the consumer towards the brand. This section also contained information on priming and reverse priming and how marketers use them. This section also included information about social media influencers and their duties. Section 1 explained how posts by social media influencers might reverse a follower's behavior towards the brand sponsoring that influencer's posts. Section 1 also included how sponsored posts might fall into native advertising and the nature of native advertising. This section covered the persuasion knowledge model and how sponsored posts might make the followers of an Instagram influencer turn on their persuasion knowledge. Section 1 covered the

psychological reactance model, where a follower might react negatively once they realize that the sponsored post is a persuasive attempt.

The next section of the study covered the study that was done, how it was done, along with the results. In section two, the studied population is explored, which consists of followers of mid-level social media influencers who were part of the brand's sponsorship or affiliate program. This section also looked at how the sample was contacted and interviewed. The study reflected Instagram users who follow social media influencers who posted about the Fashion Box products as part of their sponsorship or affiliate program. Section 2 closes with the research.

Section 2: The Project

Section two introduces the methodology for the study. The research and how a researcher conducts and analyzes it is important to any study. The research included exploring any reverse priming effects that a sponsored Instagram post may have on the brand Fashion Box. I conducted a qualitative case study. In this section, the purpose and role of the researcher were outlined, the research methodology, population and sampling, data collection and data analysis, reliability and validity plan, and an ethical assurance plan.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was better to understand the reverse priming effect on Fashion Box. Fashion Box uses Instagram influencers in the United States to bring awareness to its brand by partnering with influencers to post disclosed sponsored content. In return, those posting the content receive a discount on products from the company. This study explored how those sponsored or affiliated posts may impact consumers' thoughts on Fashion Box. The priming effect of social media posts often occurs completely unconsciously when the consumer is unaware that they are interpreting the information they receive differently (Nagar,

2021). The study included exploring how these sponsored advertisements can negatively prime a consumer towards Fashion Box. Exploring whether the type of compensation a person gets in return for these sponsored posts has any impact on negative priming was essential.

Role of the Researcher

This study explained why people's thoughts and feelings may influence their behaviors. My role in this study was to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants. Qualitative research helped me enable the development of understanding of the meaning that people give to their experiences. Qualitative research requires my reflection before and during the research, and it requires understanding on the part of the readers. Stating any bias, I had about the research was essential. From this perspective, bias and subjectivity were not permanently negative. Biases are unavoidable. As a result of biases being unavoidable, they should be articulated up front clearly and concisely for the readers (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Qualitative research is about individuals walking in another person's shoes and seeing the world through their perspective. This process made data analysis and management very important as I was truthful to the participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). My attempt was to hear the participants' voices for interpreting and reporting to other learners and readers (Sutton & Austin, 2015). According to Fischer (2009), bracketing typically refers to a researcher identifying their vested interests, personal experiences, cultural factors, assumptions, and any hunches that could influence how they yield a study's data. Most qualitative researchers will regard all knowledge as formulated by humans and will always involve and engage in understanding everyday lives and research (Fischer, 2009). The reasoning behind researchers identifying and describing their backgrounds and perspectives is so that readers can consider the researcher's perspective and develop alternative readings of the data (Fischer, 2009). Bracketing

could help researchers and readers identify and examine perspectives, sometimes knowingly shifting their stance (Fischer, 2009). To bracket for this study, I explained my background and interest in this study in detail. I also explained any assumptions that she may have about the study and its findings. My role in this study was to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants. Reporting any biases that may have been present before and during the research process was crucial. The following section includes the research methodology employed for this research.

Research Methodology

The nature of this study was a qualitative method. According to Mohajan (2018), qualitative research generally explores the meanings and insights in given situations. Qualitative research reflects words rather than numbers like quantitative methods (Mohajan, 2018). The study reflected on the negative priming of followers when they view a Fashion Box-sponsored post on Instagram by a social media influencer. The study reflected on priming, therefore words and not numbers were unnecessary to find common themes within the research.

Flexible Design for the Research Study

I chose a flexible method instead of a fixed or mixed design because a case study was the method. Case studies are usually flexible (Robson, 2011). According to Robson (2011), fixed designs normally concern aggregates. In fixed designs, the results include groups rather than individuals. In this study, I sought out individual responses to the interview questions. I chose a flexible design to understand a problem rather than a causal relationship of variables or a comparison of groups (Robson, 2011). This flexible design included a rigorous approach to data collection, data analysis, and report writing (Robson, 2011). I verified the accounts' accuracy

during the interviews. The nature of the interviews was flexible. Therefore, the design was flexible.

Method

I chose a qualitative method over a quantitative method because a qualitative method utilized the participants' voices through interviews. This method allowed me to gain a clearer picture with in-depth interviews and questioning. Quantitative methods would not provide the rich data needed to understand the perceptions of the followers of Fashion Box. This method deals more with numbers than words. Corbin and Strauss (2015), posited qualitative research refers to the lives, lived experiences, behaviors, emotions, and feelings concerning people. Qualitative research can also describe an organization's functions, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between people, corporations, and nations (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Morse (1991) also indicated that qualitative research is practical when the researcher is uncertain of the variables to study.

I chose case study research to study the subject. Yin (2016) asserted that case study research often reflects a social phenomenon because it allows an extensive inquiry within a real-life context. Four different types of case studies exist. An illustrative case study includes examining a case that is familiar to the researcher to help the understanding of others. The second type is the exploratory case study, the primary project conducted before a large-scale investigation. Then there is the cumulative case study, which collects information from different sources at different times. Lastly, the critical instance case study is used to determine the cause and consequence of an event.

In this study, the research included seeking out how negative priming might happen when a beauty Instagram influencer posts sponsored content from Fashion Box. An illustrative

case study was the best way to conduct this study because the researcher investigates a real-life bounded system (Stake, 2010). Priming can become an experience in how the follower interacts with the brand sponsoring the content. Therefore, the study was a holistic case study. Creswell and Poth (2018) indicated that a qualitative holistic single-case study is best utilized when the researcher needs to understand the experiences of the people they are studying and describe these experiences. The specific type of case study research method in this study was an illustrative case study because it is descriptive. A qualitative holistic single-case study offers an in-depth look into several different viewpoints with several units of analysis. The holistic single-case study addresses *how* and *what* questions.

The Appropriateness of the Chosen Method for Triangulation

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods of data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Santos et al., 2020). Santos et al. (2020) also posited that triangulation has been viewed as a qualitative research strategy to evaluate the validity of the research through the convergence of information from different sources. The data sources in this study came from interviews of individuals who were followers of beauty influencers who worked with Fashion Box. The study included interviews; therefore, data triangulation was the best method. Data triangulation involves using multiple data collection methods around the same phenomenon (Santos et al., 2020). Data triangulation is frequently used in qualitative studies, including interviews and field notes (Santos et al., 2020).

Summary of Research Methodology

The study reflected on the negative priming of followers when they viewed a sponsored post on Instagram by a social media influencer that had been Fashion Box sponsored. The study reflected on priming, therefore words and not numbers were necessary to find common themes

within the research. A flexible design was appropriate over a fixed or mixed design because of the case study method. Case studies, by nature, are usually flexible (Robson, 2011). An illustrative case study was appropriate for this study because it was the best way to show the situation to the readers. According to Robson (2011), fixed designs normally concern aggregates. A qualitative method was chosen over a quantitative method because a qualitative method utilized the participants' voices through interviews and focus groups. This method allowed me to gain a clearer picture with in-depth interviews and questioning. Data triangulation validated the study.

Participants

This study's participants were from the social media platform Instagram. They were followers of a social media influencer who participated in Fashion Box's affiliate program. According to Aw and Chuah (2021), social media's unprecedented interactivity empowered social media influencers to develop close relationships with their followers on Instagram. These relationships have essential marketing implications for social media influencers and their sponsor brands (Aw & Chuah, 2021).

The participants for this study resided within the United States. These followers had *liked* or commented on the social media influencer's sponsored post from Fashion Box. I could ensure that the follower had seen the post sponsored by Fashion Box before I contacted the participants. The participants were eligible for this study because they could answer the questions about their feelings and views of that sponsored post. The social media influencers had one post that stated that the post was a paid partnership with Fashion Box. The participants were followers of that specific social media influencer, and they had clicked on the heart icon to *like* or respond to the post.

Population and Sampling

According to Coyne (1997), sampling selection in qualitative research has a profound effect on the ultimate quality of the research. Sampling is an integral part of any research. In qualitative research, the type of sampling is usually determined by the methodology selected and the topic under investigation (Higginbottom, 2004). However, qualitative research sampling does not create generalizable findings like quantitative research (Czernek-Marszalek & McCabe, 2024). I sampled female Instagram users for this study. This group was followed by the ten influencers chosen for this study. These social media influencers partnered with Fashion Box for at least one sponsored post on their Instagram accounts. Before contacting the followers, I needed to ensure they saw the sponsored post.

Purposeful sampling was the method included in this study. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases that relate to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposeful sampling is a highly systematic research approach for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to generate a theory that furthers the understanding of social and psychological phenomena (Coyne, 1997). This study included researching the participants' social and psychological reactions to a social media post sponsored by a company rather than a standard, non-sponsored, or organic post.

In the initial stages of the study, I sought out the groups that I believed would maximize the possibilities of obtaining data and lead to more data from the questions. Purposeful sampling was appropriate in this study because it involved identifying and selecting individuals or groups who were exceptionally knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest. I intended to sample individuals familiar with social media influencers and Instagram and who had seen sponsored social media posts on Instagram. Purposeful sampling did not ensure

generalizability as in quantitative studies but by a desire to investigate the topic thoroughly and provide information-rich data on social media influencers and Fashion Box (Czernek-Marszalek & McCabe, 2024).

I chose ten social media influencers who partnered with Fashion Box in the United States. I searched the hashtag #fashionboxpartner on Instagram and chose ten social media influencers that used this hashtag and paid partnership status on one of their posts. Twenty followers of each influencer received an invitation for an interview. The size of the social media influencers was appropriate because it ensured enough diversity in the following. Each influencer was in a different area of expertise and had different followers based on their expertise and backgrounds. The reasoning behind choosing twenty followers of each influencer was that some were expected not to answer the researcher's request to interview them. Choosing twenty followers, opportunity allowed me to have enough responses to her requests for interviews. I reached out by emailing the participants at the email address listed on their Instagram profiles. For this study, I relied on data saturation. Saturation is commonly taken to indicate that further data collection or analysis is unnecessary based on the data collected or analyzed (Guest et al., 2020). I relied on the number of interviews needed until nothing new was apparent, and the information became redundant (Guest et al., 2020). Saturation was the point in data collection when all the critical issues or insights were exhausted from the data. This process signified that the conceptual categories that comprised the theory were saturated, and the emerging theory was well grounded in the data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). When the participants conveyed the same or similar answers to the questions in the interview, saturation succeeded in the initial interview process.

Concerns existed with sampling in qualitative research that reflected on discovering the scope and nature of the universe to be sampled (Guest et al., 2020). By using purposeful sampling, I hoped to negate any questions of transparency with sampling for the qualitative research study. The study was solely on Instagram users, specifically those who followed social media influencers within the United States who partnered with Fashion Box for a sponsored post. I used purposeful sampling to conduct interviews with participants who were active on Instagram. These participants were following a social media influencer who had a paid partnership post on Instagram with Fashion Box. Purposeful sampling allowed me to identify and select individuals who were incredibly knowledgeable about Fashion Box and the social media influencers until the saturation of the sample.

Data Collection and Organization

This section included an overview of the collected data. Member checking will also be discussed. The instruments used during the research were also explored. Finally, this section includes the data organization plan. I asked a series of questions during an interview to find out how the participants felt and viewed the Instagram post, the Instagram social media influencer, and the brand that had sponsored the post after realizing it was a sponsored post. I collected the data by interviewing each participant individually. The interviews were done through Zoom as the participants did not live in the state I resided in. While in-person interviews were the mainstay of data collection in qualitative research, video conferencing programs like Zoom provide researchers with a cost-effective and convenient alternative to in-person interviews (Gray et al., 2020). According to Archibald et al. (2019), advances in information and communication technologies offer new opportunities for interviewing research participants. Key advantages of this digital technology for researchers include improved internet access, convenience, and cost-

effectiveness of online methods. The understanding is that online methods can replicate, complement, and possibly improve upon traditional in-person interviews (Archibald et al., 2019). Researchers revealed that qualitative research participants have been more open and expressive through Zoom than face-to-face interviews (Gray et al., 2020). Several notable advantages to using Zoom exist for interviewing participants in qualitative studies include that Zoom does not require the user to have an account or download any software., Zoom has screen-sharing capabilities for the interviewer and interviewee, including password protection for confidentiality and it can record to the host's computer or the Zoom cloud (Gray et al., 2020). The interviews took half an hour to an hour, depending on the participants' responses. After the interviews, I transcribed the interviews and emailed them back to the participants to do a member check. If the participants had any other pertinent information, they added it to the document and emailed it back to me.

Instruments

According to Motulsky (2021), in qualitative research, researchers often collect and analyze the data, which gives the potential for researcher bias. For this reason, member checking occurred in this study. I sent each participant a transcript of their interview to look at and correct anything I may have gotten incorrect. This process ensured that the researcher did not impose their personal beliefs and interests on all stages of the research process, leading to the researcher's voice dominating that of the participants (Motulsky, 2021). The type of interview I used was a standardized open-ended interview. In this way, the interview structure was regarding the wording and questions so that each participant was asked the same questions. However, the questions were worded so that the responses were open-ended. The open-endedness allowed the

participants to contribute as much detailed information as they wanted, and it also allowed me to ask probing questions as a follow-up.

Every question in Appendix A addressed the issue of reverse priming on brands when they hire a social media influencer for a sponsored post on Instagram. The first couple of questions explored whether the participant was familiar with or even a customer of Fashion Box. The middle questions investigated how the participants felt about the sponsored post, which gave me an answer to the first and second research questions. The last couple of questions helped to answer the third research question. By using these questions, there was no need for any follow-up interviews.

When you saw the sponsored post, the first question in the interview was, have you heard of the Fashion Box brand before? This question explored whether the participant was familiar with the company Fashion Box or if they were not familiar with the company. The second question was whether the participant was a customer of Fashion Box. The third question asked whether the participants realized that they saw a sponsored post. This answer was necessary as the research was designed to find out how knowing the post was sponsored affected their feelings toward the brand. The fourth question explored whether the participant paid attention to whether a sponsored post was on Instagram. This answer was also essential to understand how the participants felt about sponsored posts. The fifth question in the interview asked how the participants felt once they realized the sponsored Instagram post. The sixth question explored whether compensation towards the social media influencer influenced the participant's feelings towards the brand. The seventh and eighth questions were to find out if the participants would be willing to become customers of Fashion Box after seeing this sponsored post.

Concerning triangulation, I employed data triangulation. Data triangulation involves using multiple data collection methods about the same phenomenon (Santos et al., 2020). I gathered data from various respondents in this study, including interviewing both respondents, followers, and social media influencers. I allowed the participants to read over the transcripts of their interviews to add anything they had forgotten or to remove anything they did not want in the transcript. This process also allowed the participant to say whether the research was correct.

Data Organization

I used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to help organizations organize the data. According to Dalkin et al. (2021), the software aids data management. The software contributes to the analysis through better ordering and categorization of the data than is possible by doing it manually. I sought to address a complex phenomenon by pulling out and pulling together detailed data and information. NVivo software helped the researcher analyze and code the data. This process involved making sense of large amounts of data by reducing the volume of raw information, identifying any significant patterns, finally drawing meaning from the data, and subsequently building a logical chain of evidence (Wong, 2008). NVivo is a CAQDAS developed by QSR International, the world's largest qualitative research software developer (Dalkin et al., 2021). NVivo allows qualitative inquiry beyond coding, sorting, and data retrieval (Alam, 2021). The software allowed me to ask critical questions about the data and find patterns and connections that would not have been possible if I had organized the data manually (Wilk et al., 2019).

Summary

I conducted interviews with each participant through Zoom. I then transcribed the interviews and sent the transcribed interviews back to the participants for member checking. The

interview allowed for open-ended, in-depth answers from the participants. The data was then organized into CAQDAS and NVivo for data analysis.

Data Analysis

I used NVivo to store the data I received during the research. I coded the raw data to look for themes. Coding these themes in NVivo finds emerging themes. According to Linneberg and Korsgaard (2019), coding is a fundamental aspect of the analytical process. I will break down their data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way.

NVivo helped search for emerging themes in the research. Transcripts were still read several times to identify themes and categories. Emerging themes emerged by studying the transcripts repeatedly and considering the possible meanings and how these meanings fit with the developing themes (Thomas, 2006). According to Thomas (2006), rigorous reading and coding of interview transcripts will allow significant themes to emerge. The first step to finding emerging themes is to sort and organize the data by coding it somehow (Lester et al., 2020). I found codes in the transcripts and then used NVivo to further the coding. Coding broke down the themes to understand the research text and to attach and develop categories to put them into an understandable order (Lester et al., 2020). I then gave codes for words, sentences, and paragraphs to find the emerging themes of the research.

The codes or categories allowed interpretation of the data. According to Younas et al. (2022), tracing the data back from themes to categories to codes is imperative. I also kept memos as an audit trail of the research process to help interpret the data. Memos enable stepping back from the data and moving beyond the codes to think reflectively and conceptually for interpretation (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Memos permitted accountability and transparency

during the research and interpretation (Younas et al., 2022). After data interpretation, data presentation was necessary. The data presentation was mainly in text.

I used quotations from the participants without using their actual names to protect their identities. Verbatim participant quotations helped reveal the respondent's words rather than the researcher's voice (Eldh et al., 2020). Besides textual data display, I used flow charts where necessary to show how the themes tied together. A flow chart allows the reader to acquire insights, develop an elaborate understanding, or appreciate new knowledge (Verdinelli & Scagnoli, 2013).

Triangulation refers to using multiple data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Kawar et al., 2024). Kawar et al. (2024) also posited that triangulation occurs as a qualitative research strategy to evaluate the validity of the research through the convergence of information from different sources. The sources in this study were the interviewed individuals who were followers of social media influencers who worked with Fashion Box. The study included interviews; therefore, data triangulation was the best method. Data triangulation involves using multiple data collection methods around the same phenomenon (Kawar et al., 2024). Data triangulation is frequently used in qualitative studies, including interviews and field notes (Kawar et al., 2024). Other sources in this study included past studies that had been done about and around the subject of reverse priming with social media influencers.

Summary of Data Analysis

I used NVivo to input and sort the data gathered from participants and secondary research. Coding through NVivo helped to find emerging themes in this data. I read the transcripts of the interviews several times and sent them back to participants to ensure that

nothing was missed in the emergent themes. Verbal quotes from participants revealed the respondent's voice. Data triangulation ensured the reliability and validity of the research.

Reliability and Validity

This section will cover proving reliability and validity within the research. The reliability and validity of qualitative studies are very important. I showed the study's reliability and validity in several ways.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency or replicability of the research findings and the degree to which the findings are stable and not the result of any accidental circumstances (Coleman et al., 2024). Validity in qualitative research is the extent to which the findings represent reality (Coleman et al., 2024). Critics of Qualitative research cite lacking the scientific rigor that quantitative research entails, the lack of transparency in the analytical procedures, and the findings as a collection of personal opinions subject to research bias (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Therefore, it was vital for me to prove the reliability and validity of my research.

I ensured the reliability of this study through construct validity and external validity. Construct validity included using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). The multiple sources of evidence included interviews and previous research studies from scholarly articles. Using multiple sources of evidence encouraged convergent lines of inquiry during data collection (Yin, 2018). External validity deals with the problem of knowing whether a study's findings will generalize beyond the immediate study (Yin, 2018). In this study, I asked the *how* questions. For example, the form of the initial research questions can influence the strategies used for external validity (Yin, 2018). I created a descriptive case study by asking *how* questions. The objective of reliability is to be sure that if a researcher follows the same procedures later as described in this

research, they should be able to conduct the study over again (Yin, 2018). I used a journal for field notes, member-checking, and gathering information from scholarly articles to prove reliability. The general need here was to document the procedures the researcher must follow in the case study (Yin, 2018). Credibility was safeguarded by accounting for biases before conducting the research and being aware of these biases during the research. Transferability was ensured by keeping meticulous records, which will also demonstrate a clear decision trail and ensure the interpretations of the data are consistent and transparent (Coleman et al., 2024). I demonstrated dependability and confirmability by including rich and thick verbatim descriptions of the participants' accounts to support the researcher's findings.

Validity

Confirming validity occurred by completing respondent validation, whereby the respondents were invited to comment on their interview transcripts. The researcher could see whether the final themes and concepts that had been created adequately reflected the phenomena (Coleman et al., 2024). Data triangulation was also employed to ensure validity within the study's different methods and perspectives, producing a more comprehensive set of findings. Writing memos was the method of bracketing that was done throughout this study. Bracketing is a method used by some researchers to mitigate any potential detrimental effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research, thereby increasing the rigor of the project (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). Writing memos throughout the data collection and analysis is a way of examining and reflecting on the researcher's engagement with the collected data (Thomas & Sohn, 2023). The memos took the form of methodological and theoretical. The notes were methodological in that they explicated the procedural aspect of the research and theoretical in that I explicated the cognitive process of conducting the research.

Data analysis was in-depth throughout this research process. I noted any emerging ideas while coding themes from the collected data. I then interpreted the data and represented it in a reliable and valid way. To do this, triangulation, bracketing, and transferability methods were necessary. Member checking was to ensure the validity of this study. Member checking is a quality control process where a researcher seeks to improve the accuracy, credibility, and validity of what has been recorded during the research interviews (Motulsky, 2021). The method was restating or summarizing the information gathered during the interview so that the participant could determine the accuracy. The second way member checking is by allowing the participants to read the transcripts of their interviews to verify the accuracy of said interviews.

Data saturation is difficult to assess in qualitative studies. Data saturation occurs when there is enough information to replicate the study when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible (Naeem et al., 2024). There is no standard qualitative research method to reach data saturation. I focused on gathering rich and thick data. Data saturation was reached when I could not gather any new information, and the coding was exhausted. Follow-up interviews were unnecessary in this study because of data saturation.

Summary of Reliability and Validity

Multiple sources of evidence ensured the reliability and validity of the research. The multiple sources of evidence included interviews and previous research studies from scholarly articles. I used a journal for field notes, member-checking, and gathering information from scholarly articles to prove reliability. I demonstrated dependability and confirmability by including rich and thick verbatim descriptions of the participants' accounts to support the researcher's findings. Confirmation of validity occurred by completing respondent validation,

whereby the respondents commented on their interview transcripts. Writing memos was the method of bracketing that was done throughout this study. I noted any emerging ideas while coding themes from the data collected. Data interpretation represented it reliably and validly. To do this, I undertook triangulation, bracketing, and transferability methods. Member checking occurred to ensure the validity of this study. Data saturation was reached when the researcher gathered any new information, and the coding was complete.

Ethical Assurances Plan

Many ethical challenges exist for have for qualitative research, and they arise primarily from the emergent and unpredictable nature of the methodology involved (Houghton et al., 2010). The first area I focused on was informed consent among the study participants. I fully informed the study participants of how I will use their information. They understood that they could withdraw from participating at any time during the research. Informed consent made it possible to negotiate and revise any arrangements throughout the research (Houghton et al., 2010). Another challenge that I could have encountered during the study was a potentially exploitative relationship that could have arisen between the researcher and the participant. The nature of data collection involving the interviewing meant that this personal relationship might raise a significant ethical issue (Houghton et al., 2010).

To mitigate this risk, I made sure that they did not use the data collected in any way other than the way described to the participant. I also treated the participants with respect during the interview process. The boundaries were made clear. The relationship did not become distorted in this research study. I remained mindful of the ethical implications of managing the relationships developed during the interviews. The third issue that might have arisen was confidentiality. Regarding the participants, pseudonyms replaced their real names. I informed the participants I

would protect their data. I also remained selective when there was any time when they needed to describe any defining characteristics of the participants. Member checking was to ensure that ethical standards existed. The participants had a chance to change what they said and if they would like to have any part of their interviews not in the research. An ethical assurance plan was in place for this research study. I wrote precisely how the participants' data would apply. The participants could review their transcribed interviews to ensure they agreed with the statements document. I ensured that the relationship between Myself and the participants was not blurry. In addition, I ensured that all data collected was confidential to protect the participants. I gained approval from the company to conduct a case study and kept the company's name confidential.

Summary of Section 2

The qualitative case study was appropriate for understanding the reverse priming effect on Fashion Box. I sought to convey why people's thoughts and feelings may influence their behaviors. My role as the researcher in this study was to access the thoughts and feelings of study participants. The participants for this study were from the social media platform Instagram. These were followers of a social media influencer participating in Fashion Box's affiliate program.

The population sampled for the study were users of the social media platform Instagram. Nineteen participants were in the study. The population was female. The females were followers of social media influencers partnering with Fashion Box for at least a single sponsored post on their Instagram accounts. The followers had to see this post before I contacted them. The participants had liked or commented on the sponsored post. The data collected during the research confirmed the participant's gender, and they resided within the United States and saw the specific questioning. During the interviews, I asked a series of questions to determine how

the participants felt and viewed the Instagram post, the Instagram social media influencer, and the brand sponsoring the post.

I sent each participant a transcript of their interview to correct anything that I omitted. The type of interview used was a standardized open-ended interview. Consequently, the interview structure ensured that each participant received the same questions. In addition, I utilized computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to organize their data. Specifically, I chose to use NVivo for data organization in the study, a robust tool with a solid foundation for the data analysis process.

I used NVivo to keep the data that the participants received during the research. I used codes to look for themes within the data. I coded the themes in NVivo to find emerging themes. I ensured reliability in this study through construct validity and external validity. I used a journal for field notes, member-checking, and information from scholarly articles to for reliability. I confirmed validity by completing the respondent's validation, whereby the respondents received an invitation to comment on their transcripts to see whether the final themes and concepts adequately reflected the phenomena studied (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Data analysis was in-depth throughout this research process. I noted emerging ideas while coding themes from the data collected. I reliably interpreted and represented the data by undertaking triangulation, bracketing, and transferability methods.

I focused on the consent among the study participants and informed them how the information was appropriate. The participants understood they could withdraw from the research study at any time. To mitigate the risk of a manipulative relationship with the participants, I ensured the participants that the data collected was not for anything other than the purpose of the research. In addition, I treated the participants with respect during the interview process.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implication for Change

In the previous section, I outlined the research methodology for this study and my role in this study. The section outlined how I conducted this study and the population involved in the study. I included the reasoning why the study was necessary to conduct in a certain way. The study included exploring the negative feelings that the audience might have towards brands that use social media influencers to market products through influencer marketing on Instagram. The sample pool for this study was 19 female adults who followed social media influencers on Instagram and had worked with Fashion Box in creating a sponsored post.

One-on-one interviews occurred through Zoom. The participants answered eight open-ended questions during the interviews. Each participant answered the same questions. I took notes, and recorded each interview, with participants' permission, to ensure transcription accuracy. The 19 participants expressed their lived experiences on the research topic of brands hiring social media influencers for marketing on Instagram. Section 3 presents an overview of the research study and its findings. In this section, I discuss how the findings can relate to professional practice and recommend further study. Finally, I share my professional, personal, and biblical reflections. Section 3 is the final section of this research study and conclusions.

Presentation of the Findings

In this section, I presented the study's findings. This study established a connection between Instagram influencers' use of disclosed sponsorship in the United States for a sponsored post and the resulting negative priming effect on their followers. This case study on Fashion Box and its use of social media influencers on Instagram was to bring awareness to its brand through its affiliate program.

I chose ten Instagram social media influencers to focus on that partnered with Fashion Box for a partnered post. Twenty followers of each influencer who liked or commented on that partnered or sponsored post participated. Of the two hundred people contacted, nineteen participants gave interviews. The participants were women who lived in the United States between the ages of 20-years-old to 45-years-old and were of mixed races and ethnicities. The conduction and the recording of the interviews were through Zoom and lasted approximately thirty minutes each. During these interviews, I took part in taking memos to ensure reflexivity. I asked questions from the interview guide and probing questions where needed. I transcribed the interviews, listened to the recorded interviews, and completed the transcriptions. All the participants consented to the recorded interviews. I was also able to go back and watch the interviews to make memos where needed for the transcriptions. After the transcription, NVivo software helped code and make themes from the data. The themes broke down even further into sub-themes.

Overview of Themes Discovered

Four themes emerged during the interview process. The themes included the normalization of brands using social media influencers to market products and the trustworthiness of sponsored Instagram posts. In addition, themes included the recognition that the Instagram sponsored posts; and how honesty plays when a person admits they receive compensation for the sponsored post. Each theme has subthemes to elaborate the findings. What follows is a detailed discussion of each theme.

Table 1

Themes and subthemes for all data sources

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Participants
RQ1: How is Fashion Box impacted by the negative priming of the followers of the Instagram beauty influencer when that influencer posts a sponsored post about Fashion Box?	Normalization	TV Commercials	P3, P6, P8, P9, P12, P13, P16, P17, P18
		Good marketing	P1, P4, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P19
		Further research	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P10, P13, P16, P17, P19
RQ2: What role does the type of compensation that Fashion Box offers its Instagram influencer have on the priming of the followers?	Trustworthiness	Smaller influencers	P1, P3, P4, P7, P8, P10, P11, P14, P17, P18, P19
		Authenticity	P2, P4, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11,
Research Question	Theme	Subtheme	Participants
			P12, P14, P16,

			P17, P18
		Scripted	P1, P5, P7, P9, P11, P15, P16, P17, P19
RQ3: How does the disclosure on the sponsored Instagram post impact the followers' intent to purchase any of the products in a Fashion Box subscription?	Recognition	Ignores post	P4, P5, P7, P8, P11, P12, P13, P15, P19
		Depends on the influencer	P1, P2, P3, P6, P9, P10, P14, P16, P17, P18
RQ3a: How does the disclosure on the sponsored Instagram post impact the followers' intent to subscribe to Fashion Box?	Honesty	Compensation	P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19
		Personal experience	P1, P3, P5, P7, P9, P10, P12, P13, P16, P17

Discussion of Themes

Theme 1: Normalization of Social Media Influencers. Many social media influencers gained online fame in the past decade by establishing a strong online identity and sharing their interests and opinions (Hudders, et al., 2021). Social media influencers can have a substantial impact on their followers when they are making decisions because of online fame (Hudders, et al., 2021). Participants in this study answered how they viewed sponsored posts from social media influencers when it came to Fashion Box. Three subthemes emerged in the data: (a) social media influencers' sponsored posts like television commercials, (b) using social media

influencers as a good marketing tactic for Fashion Box, and (c) social media influencers affected further research of the products and the subscription..

Television Commercials

Nine of the 19 participants (P3, P6, P8, P9, P12, P13, P16, P17, P18) explained that they viewed sponsored posts from social media influencers on Instagram as being similar or the same as a commercial that you would see on television. P3 explained, “To me, it’s no different than commercials on TV,” when asked how they felt about the brand sponsoring the post on Instagram. This statement highlights how sponsored posts on Instagram have become common, and people expect to see sponsored posts when scrolling through their Instagram timelines. P16 equated brands hiring social media influencers to hire actors for television commercials. P18 stated, “Sponsored posts are just a normal part of Instagram now. Everyone is doing it.” Thus, many participants have normalized sponsored social media posts from social media influencers.

Table 2

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P6	“It’s [sponsored posts] just like watching TV”
P8	“There are ads everywhere, TV, YouTube, billboards. Instagram is no different.”
P9	“Influencers are just commercials on social media.”
P12	“I just scroll past [sponsored posts] like I skip over commercials on TV.”
P13	“It’s [sponsored posts] just like a freaking commercial. It’s annoying!”
Participant	Quote

P17

“Those posts just remind me of other ads...like commercials.”

Good Marketing. Fourteen of the 19 participants (P1, P4, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P19) described using social media influencers as a good marketing tactic for brands, especially Fashion Box. When asked where they had heard about Fashion Box, all the participants answered that they found out about the brand through social media influencers at some point. P2 said, “They [Fashion Box] always use influencers. That is how I heard about them [Fashion Box].” P6 went on to say, “I’m pretty sure I found out about Fashion Box from this influencer I’ve followed for a long time.” Moving into talking about marketing, P1 exclaimed,

I think it [using social media influencers] is good marketing, honestly, because I look at my phone more than I look at TV or more than I look at anything else. Seeing them constantly on my [Instagram] feed promoting that similar thing is what is slowly starting to push me to do it.

According to a study published by the Consumer Technology Association members, user-created content accounts for 39 % of Americans’ weekly consumed media hours (Spangler, 2022). The results mean that more consumers are spending time on social media rather than watching television, which highlights the importance of using social media influencers for marketing purposes. This highlights another way that using social media influencers by sponsoring Instagram posts is normal for consumers. P10 added, “Influencer marketing is powerful, and you want to harness that as a brand.” Therefore, many participants emphasized that they expect brands to use social media influencers, which is a good marketing tactic.

Table 3

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P4	“As annoying as those posts [sponsored posts] are, it’s good marketing, I think.
P6	“It [sponsored posts] does help get the products in front of people that would probably just ignore it.”
P7	“I think it’s genius using these influencers.”
P9	“It’s whatever. I guess they [sponsored posts] are good. Yeah, it’s [sponsored posts] a good idea.”
P11	“Yep. They [Fashion Box] are marketing the products pretty good using all of these influencers.”
P12	“I mean, I guess I think it [sponsorship] is a good way to market products.”
P13	“As much as I hate to admit it, and having done some influencing myself, influencer marketing is where it’s at in today’s world.”
P14	“So, I mean, it’s good [using social media influencers]. I guess it’s kind of smart to market that way.”
P15	“Ah. Sponsored posts. Annoying, but brilliant marketing.”
P16	“I see it [sponsorship] as just a company trying to sell it’s products. It’s good, I guess.”
P17	“Girl, it’s [sponsored posts] a great way to spread the word about your brand, even if it’s annoying.”
P19	“Eh. I guess it [sponsored posts] is a good idea.”

Further Research. Ten of the 19 participants (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P10, P16, P17, P19) in the study explained that the sponsored posts from Fashion Box caused them to go online and research further a particular product that came in the subscription box or the subscription box itself. Six participants (P6, P9, P11, P13, and P17) previously subscribed to Fashion Box, and

Participant 14 (P14) just signed up for a subscription. The participants (P6, P9, P11, P13, P14, and P17) signed up after seeing a sponsored post from a social media influencer and going online to find out more information. P17 said, “I saw it [Fashion Box] being advertised on a post from this girl I follow, so I went to the website and checked it out. Long story short, I signed up for a bit.” Going online to find out more information by going to the Fashion Box website and searching Instagram for other subscribers to see their reviews of the product. P5 declared, “They’ve [sponsored post] influenced me to look into the product more and like find out more about it.” Therefore, participants explained that social media influencers influenced them to further research the products, leading to a purchase half the time.

Table 4

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P1	“I won’t lie. I checked them [Fashion Box] out after seeing a post from a friend on Instagram. I nearly signed up too.”
P3	“I did go to the website and took the quiz, but I didn’t want to spend that much money.”
P4	“There was a product I saw in the post [sponsored by Fashion Box] that I was interested in and I looked into it. I ended up finding something cheaper though.”
P6	“I’ll admit it right now. The post worked on me. I fell for it. I bought a box [Fashion Box].”
P10	“They [Fashion Box] almost got me! For real. I got to the check out before I backed out.”
P13	“I signed up after seeing this chick from [show detracted] posting about it on Instagram. I was a member for a year, but it’s too expensive.”
P16	“Oh yeah. I looked into it [Fashion Box]. Those posts are pretty geared towards me.”
P19	“I’m still thinking about signing up. The more posts [sponsored] I see, the more I want to sign up. I just can’t spend that money.”

Theme 2: Trustworthiness of Sponsored Posts. Study results in academic literature show how trustworthy social media influencer posts are when sponsored by a brand. These studies yielded mixed results. Some studies show that followers of Instagram influencers trust them because they feel they can relate to them and strive to imitate them (Breves et al., 2019). However, other study results show that followers of social media influencers are becoming skeptical when they see a sponsored post mixed in with a social media influencer’s organic or

personal posts and brand sponsors (Ki et al., 2023). With the continual evolution of digital media, trustworthiness continues to change. Three subthemes emerged within the second theme as well. These included smaller-sized social influencers who are more trustworthy than prominent influencers, as in the audience size. In addition, the authenticity of the social media influencer and post comes into question when the post receives sponsorship. Lastly, the question is whether the sponsored post is a script or the social media influencer's words. The questions will receive an analysis individually.

Smaller Influencers. Eleven of the 19 participants (P1, P3, P4, P7, P8, P10, P11, P14, P17, P18, P19) exclaimed that the social media influencers with smaller audience sizes were trustworthy and believable. P4 explained, "I think it would be more believable if it's like a person that doesn't have as many followers." Five of the participants (P1, P7, P8, P14, and P19) explained that they were less trustful of a social media influencer's sponsored post if they had over 10,000 followers. P14 stated, "If they [the influencer] have over 10,000 people following them, I'm not listening to a word they say." The participants questioned the post's authenticity regarding whether the influencer used the product. Therefore, the smaller the audience size that an Instagram beauty social media influencer had, the more trustworthy they were to the participants.

Table 5

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P1	“I think I’m more trustful of someone who doesn’t have a bazillion followers.”
P3	“Influencers that are just starting out and don’t have a ton of followers are more honest, I think.”
P7	“Those big influencers just lie. I’m telling you, they don’t even care.”
P8	“I don’t think any influence is honest. But, I do think the nano or micro influencers are at least a bit more trustworthy than those huge influencers.”
P10	“Yeah. I don’t even follow those influencers that have a million followers. I like the ones that have the little followers. They at least, I think, care about what they post about and can at least be a bit more honest.”
P11	“So, if someone has over 5,000 followers, I don’t think they are truthful in their reviews. They are just doing it for the money.”
P17	“I like the nano influencers. [They are] much more personable, more trustworthy.”
P18	“I do pay attention to how many followers someone has. I think when someone doesn’t have any many followers they are more honest.”
P19	“Those big influencers aren’t trustworthy at all.”

Authenticity. Twelve of the 19 participants (P2, P4, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P14, P16, P17, P18) mentioned authenticity when trusting a social media influencer. A belief exists that if an influencer receives compensation for a sponsored post, it is no longer authentic. Questions exist as to whether the social media influencer uses the products they advertise in their sponsored posts, “So if you’re getting compensated, they’re [the brand] isn’t going to let you say negative

things [about the brand or product].” Several of the participants reiterated this same sentiment.

In general, the participants questioned whether the social media influencers used the products or enjoyed using them if they did use them when they posted a sponsored post and received compensation. P4 asked, “Has this person even used this product or just taken it out of the box to show it off for the post?” This led to questions about the trustworthiness of the brand and the social media influencer.

Table 6

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P2	“Are they [influencers] authentic though? I just don’t think so.”
P4	“I feel like I’m authentic when I talk about a product, but I don’t think others are as authentic.”
P7	“Honestly, I don’t think anyone can be authentic when they are being paid.”
P8	“How authentic can one be when they are being paid to say good things about a product? Especially when that product is a crap product.”
P9	“I think anyone being paid to do a review for a brand is being fake. You can’t be honest when you’re being paid.”
P10	“When I think about influencers, I don’t think about authenticity. That makes me want to laugh.”
P11	“No. No they [influencers] aren’t authentic.”
P12	“I haven’t met many influencers that are authentic. I’m not even authentic when I’m being paid to say something. I’m saying what they’re paying me to say.”
P14	“Authenticity? Influencers? Noooooo. They are not.”
P16	“Those posts [from Fashion Box, sponsored] are so fake. There is no authenticity at all.”
P17	“Sponsored posts are just advertisements. All advertisements are fake.”

Scripted. Nine of the 19 participants (P1, P5, P7, P9, P11, P15, P16, P17, P19) mentioned scripted posts. Some of the participants (P5, P16, and P19) said that they know a scripted post because it is different from the social media influencer’s other posts. Others

sponsored posts themselves and were familiar with these scripts because they used them previously. Other participants had questions about the script of the sponsored post. P9 said they have mixed feelings about the brand sponsoring the post, “especially when you can tell it is scripted.” P19 vocalized, “I’ve seen some of the scripts myself, and they are ridiculous. You can tell when someone is writing something that they don’t mean.” Several of the participants (P1, P9, P11, and P15) stated that they would trust the sponsored post more if the brand included the social media influencer writing in their own words about the brand that is sponsoring the post. Thus, the participants based the trustworthiness of the post on whether they could determine if a social media influencer were using their words in a sponsored post, or a script given to them.

Table 7

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P1	“I think if they [Fashion Box] would let the influencer use their own words, I would pay attention and maybe trust it more.”
P5	“I’ve done sponsorships. I’ve gotten scripts. You learn to spot who is using a script and who isn’t. When someone speaks one way and then posts something speaking a completely different way, well, you just know they are using a script.”
P7	“Oh come on. Those posts [Fashion Box sponsored posts] are so scripted it isn’t even funny.”
P11	“Let us [influencers] use our own words. Let us speak to our followers. They [Fashion Box] doesn’t do that. I have friends that have worked with them before. It’s all fake.”
P15	“I get why some brands make you use a script. But most influencers know how to talk to their audience. That is what they do. Let them do their job. It’s less fake.”
P16	“I hate when the posts [sponsored] sound so fake. I want to know what they [the influencer] likes about the product, not what the company is telling them to say.”
P17	“I think scripted posts are stupid.”

Theme 3: Recognition that the Post is Sponsored. According to the leaders from the Federal Trade Commission (2017), Any sponsored post on social media must disclose to viewers that it was a paid advertisement. The realization that a message is persuasive can prompt a change in the meaning of the post (De Cicco et al., 2021). The promotion could occur at a lower credibility of the influencers themselves or an adverse reaction to the brand sponsoring the post (De Cicco et al., 2021). Therefore, participants received a question on how they felt towards the

brand once they realized that the post was a sponsored post. Three subthemes emerged here that include (a) ignoring the sponsored post, (b) depending on the influencer, and (c) questioning how honest the post remains.

Ignoring the Post. Nine of the 19 participants (P4, P5, P7, P8, P11, P12, P13, P15, P19) stated that when they discover a sponsored post, they tend to ignore it and scroll past it on their Instagram timelines. P11 noted, “When I see the sponsored disclosure, it almost makes me scroll past it to get to the organic posts on my feed.” P13 said, “Sometimes if I see it’s a sponsored post, I almost scroll faster because I automatically think they’re just trying to sell me something.” These statements highlight the potential negative priming when a brand sponsors an Instagram post. This process seems to align with the research that social media users are not confident in social media (Li & Shen, 2023). Therefore, many participants emphasized that the disclosure of the post would cause them to ignore the post.

Table 8

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P4	“I saw the post from them [Fashion Box]. But for real, I ignore most sponsored posts.”
P5	“If it’s [influencer] someone I know personally, I will pay more attention to the post. If I don’t know them, I just scroll past the post. Unless the product looks interesting. But most of the time I don’t see the product though.”
P7	“Once I see that hashtag ad or sponsored or partnered or whatever it is they use, my brain turns off and I don’t pay attention. Onto the next post.”
P8	“I think because sponsored posts are everywhere now, people just ignore them. They just don’t jump out like when it was new.”
P12	“I’m on there [Instagram] to see what my friends are up to. I want to see what the latest gossip is with the celebrities I follow. I don’t want them to shill me something. I’ll keep scrolling thank you.”
P15	“Do I pay attention [to sponsored posts]? No, not really.”
P19	“Oh goodness. So many sponsored posts. I just ignore them now.”

Dependent Upon the Influencer. Ten of the 19 participants (P1, P2, P3, P6, P9, P10, P14, P16, P17, P18) noted that whether they pay attention to a sponsored post is dependent upon the social media influencer posting it. Suppose the follower knows the social media influencer on a personal level. In this case, the followers will pay attention and interact with the sponsored post because they understand that the more engagement that a post gets on Instagram, the more of a chance others will see the same post. Consequently, the followers see this process as helping a friend, with an agreement in place at some point. P6 explained, “You agree to help your friends

by engaging in their posts.” However, the same participants reported that if an influencer does too many sponsored posts, they will ignore the posts, even if they still follow them. P17 said, “I feel like if it’s just constant brand deals [coming from an influencer], I’m wondering how reliable they are, and I am scrolling past without giving it a second thought.” Therefore, who the brand is working with matters to the followers in terms of how they will react to a sponsored post.

Table 9

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P1	“If I know the person, especially in real life, I will definitely pay more attention to their posts, even if it’s an ad.”
P2	“I know how social media works. The more likes a post gets, the more it shows up in the feeds. If it’s my friend, you bet I’m helping them out by liking those posts [sponsored posts].”
P3	“I guess for me, if it is someone that I trust, I will check out their sponsored posts. It just really depends.”
P9	“I don’t know. It’s hard to say. If I know the influencer, I might scroll more slowly past the sponsored post. I would still scroll past it though.”
P10	“I mean, ugggh, I guess I would pay more attention to it [sponsored post] if it is coming from a friend.”
P14	“My friends and I make sure to like each other’s posts when we work with brands. It’s kind of a pact we made...it’s six of us.”
P16	“You bet I’m liking my friends’ posts [sponsored posts]. I’d even go out and check out the products. If it’s my friend, I can trust they are telling the truth...well at least most of the time. There are some I don’t trust.”
P18	“I mean, I’ll trust a friend more when they are posting an ad. But it’s like, I know they aren’t exactly telling the truth either.”

Theme 4: Honesty of the Post. Participants questioned how honest a person can appear in a sponsored post if they receive compensation. Some participants (P1, P5, P8, P11, and P18) who completed sponsored posts informed me that the brand gave them a script to use, and they had to sign a contract for compensation. These participants, as in the contract, could not stray

from the script. The participants had to create a video or a photo and use that script.

Consequently, the participants questioned whether Fashion Box was using scripts for its social media influencers.

Compensation for the Post. Thirteen of the 19 participants (P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19) questioned the honesty of the post when the social media influencer received compensation for the post. When an influencer creates a sponsored post, they receive compensation, in some way, for the post. An item might appear as a gift from the company to create a review. P8 said that only a few influencers gave honest reviews. Most of the paid influencers you can't trust." P15 declared that "If you are getting compensated, they [the brand] is not going to let you say anything negative about the product." Therefore, upon seeing a sponsored *post*, the question of how honest the influencer is *regarding* how great a brand is *will emerge*.

Table 10

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P2	"If someone is being paid, that post isn't honest. It just isn't. There's no way."
P4	"It's laughable that some people think these influencers are being honest when there is money involved. I do influencing. Do you think I'm always honest in my reviews? Nope. Not when I'm being paid to say something nice."
P5	"Honestly? I think when compensation is involved, even if that person is getting free product and not getting paid, I don't think they are honest in their post about how great that product is."

Participant	Quote
P6	“I’m going to tell you the truth. I’ve worked with brands. It is hard to tell the truth about a product when they are paying me money. If I’m being paid, I’m going to talk that product up. I bet other influencers are the same. I know my friends are.”
P7	“I take everything online with a grain of salt. Even Amazon reviews when they say the reviewer has actually bought the product. Money speaks.”
P11	“If I’m being compensated, I’m going to give a good review. I don’t think you can be honest when money is involved. If I buy a product and then I review it, then I’m honest. If I’m using my own money, I will let people know if it is worth the money. If I’m getting it for free or being paid, I’m giving it a good review regardless if it sucks or not.”
P13	“Oh, I don’t think any of those posts [sponsored] are honest. Whether they are being paid or not, they just aren’t honest.”
P14	“Nope. It’s all about the money, not being honest for your followers.”
P16	“I don’t believe any influencer is honest. I also don’t believe you can be honest if you are being paid. To me, it’s like those ads with celebrities talking about hair dye. You know those celebrities aren’t using box dye on their hair. Come on now.”
P18	“I have friends that are influencers. One of them got a rash from this deodorant they were working with. Guess what. They are still talking about that stupid deodorant like it’s the best dang deodorant out there. That is what money does.”
P19	“Honesty isn’t a thing when someone is being compensated.”

Personal Experience with Product or Brand. Ten of 19 participants (P1, P3, P5, P7, P9, P10, P12, P13, P16, P17) mentioned the subject of having prior experience with the product

or the brand. Some of the participants used the products before on their own and knew what the product was like, or they did sponsored posts. Others had experience with the brand. A single influencer (P7) talked about an app that many influencers use to send the same products around the same time. Hence, a barrage of influencers may occur reviewing the same product within a short time frame. “They basically sent out all the things you see on the [beauty store] sign. So, it’s not a coincidence when you see a bunch of influencers reviewing the same lipstick this week.” If an individual did not work with the product or brand before, they still could question that post knowing how other brands work. The non-influencers have influencer friends, so they hear about how the posts work. The non-influencers questioned the posts’ authenticity. Thus, knowing that the person receives compensation for their post creates feelings of distrust towards the brand. The problem leads to the conclusion that while many of the participants appreciate social media influencer marketing, they have a tough time finding it credible.

Table 11

Rich Text Data

Participant	Quote
P1	“I saw a product in the latest box that I had tried. I had even read reviews on the dry shampoo. The reviews were horrendous. Yet, this person was saying it was the best thing since slide bread. I’m like yeah right!”
P3	“I’ve used some of the products they [Fashion Box] advertise. They aren’t that good. I can get something better at [drug store].
P5	“Oh, they [Fashion Box] had this one curling iron in one of the boxes. Someone gave me that same curling iron for Christmas one year. I used it once. It didn’t work. The influencer didn’t even show it in use. Just said, oh this is great.”

Participant	Quote
P9	“The products in their [Fashion Box] boxes are always so expensive. I look at reviews. Some of these products have really bad reviews. I think I’ve saved myself a lot of money by reading reviews rather than listening to the influencers. I did buy one of the products when they [Fashion Box] first came out. It was a ring. It was expensive. It turned my finger green. Never again!”
P10	“I’ve used many of the products they [Fashion Box] put in their boxes. I’ve worked with some of the brands they work with. None of those products have been as great as what the influencers they work with say.”
P12	“Oh gosh. I haven’t used any of the products they [Fashion Box] have in their boxes, but I’ve used products from those same companies. I’ve found better products for half the price.”
P13	“I was a subscriber at one point. At first, their [Fashion Box] boxes were really nice. Now it’s just junk. They say they work with all of these great brands. I can walk into a [chain grocery store] and buy something similar that works much better.”
P16	“It’s hit and miss with the boxes. If I could choose all of the products I want in one box, I might actually sign up. But it’s not worth it to spend all of that money to get products you’ve already used and didn’t work for you.”
P17	“I ended up canceling my membership because it was the same products over and over. It wasn’t anything new. It wasn’t exciting. I was just wasting money. I see these posts [sponsored Fashion Box] and I laugh. How fake.”

Representation and Visualization of Data. The previous section included each research question in terms of themes and subthemes. I created a table to show how many participants’ sentiments fit into each theme and subtheme. As indicated by the table, many of the themes arose in repetition throughout the exploration of feelings towards the brand and social media influencers. To visualize the coding patterns, word cloud maps were appropriate to the larger size

of the word, reflecting that the word was more frequent than the smaller words. The results are in Figure 1.



Figure 2

Word Cloud Representing Frequency of Coded Words Found in This Study

The word cloud in Figure 1 reflects that trust, honesty, disclosure, and authenticity were among the words frequently coded in this study. The process highlights the importance of the concepts in how reverse priming in social media influencers includes sponsored posts. The analysis reiterates what is in the individual interviews, namely that people enjoy seeing sponsored posts from social media influencers. However, people do not trust the reviews of the posts. A word cloud representing the frequency of all the words over the size of six characters similarly highlights the lack of trust in sponsored social media posts.

Table 12

Frequency of Coded Words Present in Interview Transcripts

Coded Word	Number of Times Word Appeared in Codes
Trust	29
Honesty	28
Disclosure	26
Honest	25
Authenticity	20
Paid	20
Commercials	19
Truth	19
Compensation	18
Questionable	16
Sponsored	15
Authentic	14
Scripted	14
Marketing	13
Sponsorship	11
Experience	10
Influencing	10
Researched	9
Recognized	8
Purchase	5
Ignored	5

Relationship of the Findings

The following section includes information regarding the relationships in the previous section. Some key elements of the research proposal are the research questions, the conceptual framework, the anticipated themes, the academic literature review, and the problem statement. A detailed analysis includes how the research findings relate to these elements.

Relationship of the Findings to Research Questions. The questions align according to the research question the participants fully or partially answered. In the analysis of the research questions, several themes were similar for each but slightly different. Notably, many of the same subthemes emerged through the analysis. The process reflected a congruence between sponsored

social media posts and how the person viewing the posts feels about the brand that is sponsoring the post. This repetition of themes between similarly worded questions lends credibility to the notion that the study had data saturation as themes and subthemes began to repeat in the data analysis process. I broke down an interpretation of each of the themes as they related to each research question.

RQ1: How is Fashion Box impacted by the negative priming of the followers of the Instagram beauty influencer when that influencer posts a sponsored post about Fashion Box?

One theme comprised RQ1: the normalization of social media influencers. Participants expected to see sponsored posts as part of their experience on Instagram. P12 stated, “I expect to see sponsored posts when I go on Instagram. It’s all part of scrolling now.” Participants related sponsored posts from Instagram social media influencers to video advertisements such as commercials. P3 concurred, “I’m an 80’s baby. Sponsored posts remind me of watching TV in the 80’s. They are just commercials.” While participants thought of the situation as good marketing, they reiterated that they get annoyed with commercial advertisements, attempting to skip over them when they occur. P14 explained, “When I see a sponsored post, I pretty much ignore it. It is annoying.” Sometimes, as with commercials, the sponsored posts cause the participants to research the products or the subscription box. P17, a previous subscriber, said, “I learned about Fashion Box from a sponsored post, which is what got me to sign up.” In looking at how this process relates to the research question, participants sometimes were welcoming to sponsored posts from Fashion Box, and others were unhappy with the sponsored posts. However, most participants could agree that social media influencer marketing is a normal part of the Instagram experience. However, some negative priming of the followers of the Instagram beauty influencer occurred when the influencer posted a sponsored post about Fashion Box.

RQ2: What role does the type of compensation that Fashion Box offers its Instagram influencer have on the priming of the followers?

A theme emerged when analyzing RQ2: the trustworthiness of sponsored posts. Trustworthiness was a subtheme within the analysis. Participants questioned how trustworthy the post was when seeing a sponsored post from Fashion Box. P8 asked, “How honest can someone be about their reviews when they are being paid for them?” Participants were likely to trust a post if it was coming from a smaller social media influencer who had a smaller following. P1 explained, “I believe someone who has a smaller following than, say, someone like a celebrity, that they actually have used the products.” However, trust was still in question because Fashion Box was compensating the smaller influencers to post about the brand. P12 vocalized, “I don’t think anyone getting paid can be honest in a post, not even the small influencers.” In addition, the participants questioned whether the brands scripted the sponsored posts, knowing other brands send scripts to their sponsors. P17 stated, “I’ve never worked with Fashion Box, but I’ve worked with other brands. I wonder if Fashion Box creates a script for their posts like others do.” Thus, compensation played a negative role in priming the followers of that Instagram social media influencer.

RQ3: How does the disclosure on the sponsored Instagram post impact the follower’s intent to purchase any of the products in a Fashion Box subscription?

While analyzing RQ 3, I recognized that the post received sponsorship. Some participants completely ignored the post upon realizing the sponsorship. Some participants, upon seeing the sponsorship, ignored the post completely. P11 said, “If I see the post is sponsored, I will scroll faster to get past it.” Therefore, the participants were not able to make a purchase of any of the products shown in the sponsored post. Other participants said that making a purchase was

dependent upon the influencer showing the products in a sponsored post. P6 exclaimed, “If the post is from someone I know personally, I will pay attention to it.” If sponsors were trustworthy, the participants would investigate making a purchase of a product that appears in a sponsored unboxing post. P10 concurred, “There are influencers that I trust and will make purchases because of their reviews.” However, none of the participants said that they for sure would make a purchase of any product seen in a sponsored Fashion Box post. Therefore, the disclosure did play a part in whether the participants acknowledged, watched, or saw the post.

RQ3a: How does the disclosure on the sponsored Instagram post impact the followers’ intent to subscribe to Fashion Box?

An emergent theme occurred when analyzing RQ3a, reflecting the honesty of the post. Compensation, again, came to the forefront of topics with participants. Many participants said that they would not subscribe to Fashion Box after seeing a sponsored post because they did not think that the influencer was honest in their review because they received compensation from Fashion Box. P2 explained,

I see so many Fashion Box posts and I know they [the influencers] are being paid, but I don’t think they are telling the truth about the products in the box. They are being paid to say the good stuff.

Other participants who were influencers brought up their experiences with some of the products in some of the sponsored posts. Some of the participants had bad experiences with the products and found the influencer dishonest with their review of that product. P13 said, “There was a product in the fall box that I had used before. I knew it wasn’t as good as what the person on Insta was saying it was.” Others were previous subscribers and did not believe the influencer when describing the products as quality products. P9, “I used to get their [Fashion Box] boxes.

The products aren't that special. You can find them in any drug store, or something even better." Thus, the sponsoring and disclosure of the post by Fashion Box did influence whether a follower would subscribe to the quarterly box in a negative way.

Relationship of Findings to the Conceptual Framework. An analysis of the study's results through the theoretical lenses of native advertising, the persuasion knowledge model, and the psychological reactance model revealed that the participants highlighted tenets of each theory in discussion-sponsored Instagram posts from Fashion Box. Collectively, the three concepts align with the problem statement about using social media influencers' posts for disclosed sponsored content about Fashion Box, resulting in reverse priming in their followers against the brand. These interrelation concepts were appropriate when developing this research.

Native Advertising. Social media influencer marketing is like native advertising. Native advertising involves advertisers paying within the media content, such as an Instagram feed, rather than interrupting the content (Asquith & Fraser, 2020). While most participants could recognize an influencer-sponsored post, they still commented that it mixed in with the regular content on their feed. Sometimes, the participants had to double-check to see if the post had sponsorship. P8 exclaimed that sponsored posts are recognizable at times. "I think for average consumers though, unless it says 'sponsored' in a big box, I think it's hard to spot sometimes when posts are paid for." P7, a participant who did some influencing, said, "I know all of the markings for sponsored posts and can spot them pretty easily, but I think the general audience doesn't spot it as easily." When an average consumer scrolls through their Instagram feed, they determine sponsored feeds by reading the caption below the photo or video. Influencers rarely state in the video the sponsorship of the post. However, they use a hashtag to show the sponsorship. The participants might use the words *partner*, *ad*, or even *sponsored*. The theme of

trustworthiness ties into the conceptual framework of native advertising. As P7 stated about recognition before, P16 explained,

Once I realized that this post [Fashion Box sponsored post] was not just a regular post, I knew I was being sold to. I mean, it looks like every other post out there, but it's not. It's not an innocent post, but it looks like it.

Therefore, these posts mix in with the regular Instagram timeline.

Persuasion Knowledge Model. The sponsorship disclosures enhance consumers' ad recognition which is desirable from a consumer protection perspective. However, the process can negatively impact the users' affective and conative reactions to social media influencer endorsements (Brüns & Meißner, 2023). Many participants, upon realizing that the post had sponsorship, knew that they were sold something. P2 explained, "When I see the hashtag that the post is sponsored, I know they are selling to me. That is not a normal post." The participant's persuasion and knowledge came from seeing the influencer's sponsored post by Fashion Box. P19 noted that upon seeing a sponsored post, "I pretty much scroll faster because I know they are trying to sell me something." The same participant stated that Fashion Box "does too many sponsored posts," and that the posts are "too salesly." P16 was excited about seeing the sponsored post explaining, "I'm a one hundred percent consumer. I am clicking on that sponsored post because I know that I'm probably going to order." In the thematic analysis, I talked about the theme of normalization. The theme ties into the persuasion knowledge framework. Adding to the quotes before, P11 stated, "Once I saw that this post [Fashion Box] was a partnership with Fashion Box, I was like, okay, here we go. They want me to buy this." Thus, people can see that the followers' persuasion knowledge comes in once they realize that the post has a sponsor.

Psychological Reactance Model. When people look at the persuasive nature of sponsored social media posts with the product placement within them, they have the potential to trigger the audience's reactance because of the perceived threat to their freedom. The process might cause rejection and a negative product evaluation (Du et al., 2023). Some participants found a psychological reaction to the post and the brand once they realized that the post had a sponsor. P5 stated that seeing that the post had a sponsor, "made me trust them [Fashion Box] less." P14 exclaimed, "I put a little less credibility on Fashion Box when I see that they are sponsoring the post." P18 found sponsored posts from Fashion Box as, "disingenuous." In the thematic analysis, I talked about honesty, which ties into the conceptual framework of the psychological reactance theory. P3 stated, "I almost get a gag reflex when seeing these posts [Fashion Box sponsored posts]. They are just ads. They aren't honest. They just want me to buy their stuff." Therefore, the participants did have negative reactions to the brand once they realized that Fashion Box sponsored the posts that they saw from Instagram social media influencers. The qualitative case study of followers of beauty Instagram social media influencers sponsored content from Fashion Box showed negative priming regarding feelings about Fashion Box and the sponsorship of posts. The conceptual framework reflected how the participants saw the posts as native advertising. The participants knew they were part of the marketing strategy, and some negative feelings existed toward the brand when the persuasion knowledge began.

Relationship of Findings to Anticipated Themes. I uncovered predicted and unanticipated themes using the data collected in Sections 1 and 2 of the study, including interview questions, conceptual framework, literature review, and research questions. Anticipated themes emerged from the literature review's analysis of reverse priming from the disclosure of sponsored posts on the followers of Instagram social media influencers. Lou and

Yuan (2019) contended that social media influencers producing branded content have more organic, authentic, and direct contact with potential consumers than any brand-related advertising. The participants expected sponsored posts as part of their user experience on Instagram. They considered this type of advertising to be less intrusive than traditional advertising. The practice of native advertising disguises the frames surrounding what appears editorial or promotional. Therefore, the readers are less likely to recognize their exposure to advertising (Asquith & Fraser, 2020). In this study, participants conceded the difficulty of discerning whether a post had a sponsor on Instagram because of the disclosure disappearing in the hashtags. Research revealed that the presence of disclosure leads to greater persuasion knowledge compared to covert advertisements without disclosures (Wojdynski & Evans, 2020).

Participants did react to the post once they realized it had a sponsor. Once they realized the sponsored Instagram post, they realized the selling technique. In this aspect, the disclosure did enact their persuasion knowledge. Lastly, De Veirman and Hudders (2020) argued that having a disclosure might negatively affect brand attitudes and even the evaluation of social media influencers. The participants did have a negative reaction to Fashion Box after realizing that the sponsored post. In summary, these anticipated themes specifically included native advertising, psychological reactance, and persuasion knowledge. Similarly, themes related to the anticipated themes emerged, such as questioning the honesty of the sponsored post, ignoring the sponsored post, and annoyance with sponsored posts. I expected to find participants who questioned the honesty of the sponsored posts, that some participants would find sponsored posts annoying, and that some participants would ignore sponsored posts like they do traditional advertising.

One unanticipated theme emerged. Consumers tend to perceive individuals who have larger numbers of subscribers or followers as more credible and attractive (Janssen et al., 2022). When questioned, all participants said that the larger the social media influencer, the less trustworthy they appeared. P19 stated that they were more apt to believe and listen to an influencer with a smaller following than an influencer who has a larger following. “I just find those influencers with a ton of followers to be so disingenuous.” The participants were more willing to believe an influencer with a smaller follower count would use the products seen in a Fashion Box sponsored post. P7 exclaimed, “I think the influencers that are just starting, those with a small audience, are more honest. They haven’t been jaded yet.”

Relationship of Findings to the Problem. The general problem addressed was using social media influencers’ posts for disclosed, sponsored content about Fashion Box, resulting, in reverse priming in their followers against the brand. According to Luoma-aho et al. (2019), when sponsorship discloses, it might lead to the message being less persuasive as the disclosure may produce a stronger recognition of the content as advertising. Also, many consumers do not understand that social media influencers must disclose when they have a relationship with a brand (Woodroof et al., 2020). Many of the participants did understand that disclosures were necessary but did not believe that other consumers would know this information. P8, “I know you have to disclose that you are working with a company. I’ve worked with companies, so I know this. But if someone hasn’t worked with a company, they don’t know that it’s the law, I think.” P6 concurred with this sentiment, saying, “Average consumers aren’t looking for those hashtags. They don’t know to.” These disclosures that are on sponsored posts, when recognized, should activate persuasion knowledge within the audience. That activation of persuasion knowledge generally associates with negative effects on the performance outcomes of the brand

that is sponsoring that post (Woodroof et al., 2020). Researchers revealed that the presence of disclosure can seriously affect viewers' attitudes towards the brand and reduce their willingness to share or follow recommendations (Passebois et al., 2023). This case study examined if there was any negative priming towards Fashion Box when the audience realized that the social media influencer's post they were viewing had a sponsor. The study also examined the purchase intentions of both the products and the subscription service after viewing a sponsored post. The research addressed the problem by conducting participant interviews with followers of social media influencers who partnered with Fashion Box on sponsored content on Instagram. The data analysis's conclusions and outcomes corroborated results connected to the problem of the study.

Relationship of Findings to the Literature. Prior literature research reflected on the negative effects of sponsorship on the brand and the influencers. When consumers recognize that an advertisement is a covert message that reaches them organically through social media, they may feel negatively toward the message, its content, and the reviewers of the message (Wojdyski & Evans, 2020). The similarities to the negative feelings felt towards the message, its content, and reviewers, including the influencer and the brand, remained the same as prior research stated. Participants did not only react negatively towards Fashion Box, but the influencer and the content along with its messaging. Participants highlighted a dislike for the number of sponsored posts that Fashion Box does, with several stating that they do too many sponsored posts and not enough organic content on their page.

Duivenvoorde and Goanta (2023) contended that influencer marketing is a form of native advertising. Participants in this study expected sponsored posts as a part of their experience while on Instagram. The sponsored posts from social media influencers blend right into the Instagram feed, with the followers not always able to tell a sponsored or unsponsored post unless

they read the caption. Participants agreed that it could be hard to spot a sponsored post if you did not know what you were looking for. The goal of a disclosure is to inform consumers that they were under exposure to sponsored content and intended to influence them (Eisend et al., 2020). Participants in this study recognized marketing once they saw the sponsored post. Once they realize a sponsored post, they know that the goal of that influencer is to sell that product.

Some findings in this study did not align with prior literature research. For example, I pointed out in the previous section that influencers with a smaller following were more trustworthy than social media influencers with larger followings. According to Lou and Yuan (2019), influencers also stamp their posts with personal aesthetic touches and personality twists, which usually create an enjoyable experience for their followers. Participants in this study brought up that, often, most sponsored posts are scripts rather than allowing the influencer to talk about the product in their language. P7 explained, “I have a friend who worked with Fashion Box. The post she did for them didn’t sound like her at all. It stood out so bad! I even told her so.” Participants did mention Fashion Box as sounding more scripted than other sponsored posts. P1 stated, “You can tell these posts [Fashion Box sponsored posts] are scripted. They all sound exactly the same as the last one.” This means that influencers cannot stamp their posts with their personalities. The participants believe that this is one of the leading causes of the lack of trust and negative emotions toward the brand that is sponsoring a post. P19 exclaimed,

I think I’d trust Fashion Box more if they would just let the influencers speak their minds in their own words. It makes them look bad when they make them say something, especially when they’re making like fifty different people say it at the same time.

Summary of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to add to the body of knowledge about the effects of sponsorship disclosure on sponsored Instagram posts on the brand that is sponsoring the post. I conducted a qualitative case study to understand the role that sponsorship has in the feelings towards the brand that is sponsoring the Instagram post. The research provides a comprehensive analysis of the experiences of the followers of Instagram social media influencers who partnered with Fashion Box and their feelings towards Fashion Box once the realization that the Instagram post the sponsored Fashion Box post changed. The findings of this study produced significant insight into this problem. Prior to conducting this study, a review of the literature revealed that several studies revealed the effects of sponsorship on influencers. However, there was a gap in the study of how sponsorship affects the brand sponsoring the Instagram post. This obvious gap in the research provided a focus for this study. The analysis was to identify any negative effects that sponsorship might have on the brand. There were 19 participants who participated in the interviews. Follow-up interviews were not necessary.

The findings in this study aligned with what was previously in literature research. Negative priming existed when the followers of an Instagram social media influencer realized that they were looking at a sponsored post. The disclosure did initiate the followers' persuasion knowledge and psychological reactance. A negative priming existed towards the brand, Fashion Box, but also the influencers that were posting the sponsored posts.

Application to Professional Practice

This qualitative case study included understanding the general problem of using social media influencers' posts for disclosed, sponsored content about Fashion Box, resulting in reverse priming in their followers against the brand. Four themes emerged from the findings that I

developed through a detailed analysis of the data collected from the participants. The application to professional practice section extends the general themes into practical knowledge that can help improve general business practices and provide potential application strategies for other organizations that use social media influencers to market their products or services on social media. The application of the findings of this research to professional practice highlights the significance of the study.

Improving General Business Practice

The results of this study directly apply to improving general business practices. I aimed the initial study at beauty brands that use social media influencers; however, the findings can apply to any industry that uses social media influencers, such as fashion, health and wellness, and food. Like the beauty industry, these other industries also use social media influencers to market their products. And like beauty social media influencers, some social media influencers specialize in other areas.

Implication includes brands that use social media influencers to market products must prioritize allowing them to talk about the products or services in their voices while touching on the important features of said products and services. Leite and Baptista (2022) argued that how social media influencers speak to their followers is critical to the success of their endorsements. Therefore, if a sponsored post sounds scripted, it might garner less trust than a sponsored post where the social media influencer speaks about the product or brand in their words (Xie & Feng, 2023). The findings in this study indicated that speaking about the product was critical in being able to trust the brand sponsoring the post. This study revealed that allowing an influencer to use their language when talking about a brand would heighten their chance of purchasing the product that the influencer is referencing. Therefore, if a sponsored post does not sound scripted by the

brand, it might get more attention and be more trustworthy than a post that does sound scripted by the brand.

Another implication of this research is the significance of normalizing brands using social media influencers. When the social media influencer industry was in its initial stage, most consumers demonstrated unconditional trust in influencer marketing and social media influencers (Ki et al., 2023). As influencer marketing matured as an industry, it has reached a trust threshold. The followers are beginning to question the motives of not just the social media influencer but the brand that is sponsoring the post as well (Ki et al., 2023). This study showed that followers would like to see Fashion Box post more content to its Instagram profile rather than using social media influencers. Therefore, brands should look at striking a balance between sponsoring social media influencers and posting their content to social media.

The results of this study indicated that participants found social media influencers with smaller audiences more trustworthy than social media influencers with larger audience sizes. According to Pittman and Abell (2021), micro-influencers (those with ten to one hundred thousand followers) are more trustworthy and authentic. These micro-influencers are more authentic than the larger macro and celebrity influencers, causing higher perceptions of authenticity on the endorsed brand (Park et al., 2021). The study revealed that followers did not believe that the macro and celebrity-sized influencers used the products in a Fashion Box subscription. This study also revealed that the micro and even nano sized influencers are more authentic and honest.

Brands continuously strive to improve their efficacy when using social media influencers and to understand how best to execute an influencer marketing campaign (Weismueller et al., 2020). Based on the findings in this case study, it is extremely important to choose social media

influencers wisely and to allow these social media influencers to talk about the brands and products in their way. To ensure that an Instagram post is more than just a product placement, organizations need to identify influencers who can reach the relevant community and who actually and authentically use the products they are promoting (Haenlein et al., 2020). Not to mention that excessive control over what the influencer posts greatly reduces the creative freedom of influencers (Haenlein et al., 2020). Therefore, brands that require an approval of content before publication. This process is more efficient than controlling the production of content from influencers (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Potential Improvement Strategies

In accordance with the recommendations and improvements to general practice, the findings of this study offer potential application strategies that organizational leaders can use towards bettering social media influencer campaigns and creating more profits from these campaigns. In this study, I focused on the possible negative influence that a sponsorship disclosure and compensation might have on the brands that are sponsoring the Instagram social media influencer post. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) mandated that social media influencers must correctly reveal sponsorship, using simple and clear language in the disclosure and making it hard to miss (Xie & Feng, 2023). However, the FTC does not mandate that influencers reveal the source or compensation method in the sponsored post. I highlighted several operational strategies in the findings. Brands in any product sector that use social media influencers could successfully implement to create more trust in sponsored Instagram posts and to create more of a standardized approach to sponsorship disclosure.

The research case study outcomes suggest potential application strategies for more proactive brands in creating sponsored posts with social media influencers without being overtly

controlling. The results of this study revealed that while participants could find the disclosures on Instagram, they did not believe that the average consumer would see that same disclosure. Furthermore, participants also expressed that they would like to know the compensation source of the influencer's post. The findings of this study also highlighted the participants' sentiment that they would like to see social media influencers explain why they decided to work with that specific brand beyond the obvious commercial reasons. These were some tactics that the participants believed would create a more authentic and trusting relationship with the brands that use social media influencers.

Sponsorship disclosure rules from the FTC are vague in conveying specific information about the types of disclosed sponsorship (Xie & Feng, 2023). Social media influencers are responsible for disclosing the sponsorship. The disclosure is an afterthought when creating a post for a brand, not just for the influencer; but for the brand (Giuffredi-Kähr et al., 2022). Two types of disclosures could exist. The first is a brand influence disclosure in which the influencer explains that they are following the requirements of the brand, of the created post (Xie & Feng, 2023). The second type of disclosure is an honest opinion disclosure, where the influencer gives their honest opinions about the product, and the compensation (Xie & Feng, 2023).

Brands should encourage the social media influencers that they work with to give their honest opinions in their sponsored posts. Brands should also motivate the influencers to state that they are giving their honest opinions. An emphasis on honest opinions can improve the source's (influencer and brand) credibility and message attitudes as opposed to an influencer just disclosing the sponsorship (Lee et al., 2021). By emphasizing honest opinions, influencers may effectively obstruct the audience's persuasion knowledge. Therefore, the intent of that sponsored

post seems less persuasive, and the audience tends to attribute more trust and credibility to the message, influencer, and brand sponsoring that post (Lee et al., 2021).

Additionally, brands using social media influencers for sponsored posts should consider working with influencers that include sponsorship compensation justifications. A sponsorship compensation justification is when a social media influencer continuously posts to Instagram the explanations for why they incorporate original content with sponsored content (Stubb et al., 2019). When an influencer uses a compensation justification disclosure and a sponsorship disclosure, it might make the audience contemplate the underlying reasons that the social media influencer and the brand are engaging in sponsorship activities. Thereby increasing their understanding and acceptance of that sponsorship (Stubb et al., 2019). Studies revealed that justifying and disclosing the compensation method of an influencer generates more positive consumer attitudes toward the social media influencer and the brand (Stubb et al., 2019).

Summary of Application to Professional Practice

This section outlined the significance of the qualitative case study by examining its application to add value to or improve general business practices and providing potential application strategies. The finding can apply to any brand that uses social media influencers on Instagram because of the nature of why brands hire social media influencers. In addition, the reasoning behind hiring a social media influencer is mainly because the influencer already has a relationship with their followers. Sponsored Instagram posts will fit in seamlessly with the rest of the influencer's content. The results from this case study strengthen the need to solidify trust between the influencer's audience and the brand sponsoring the post. In summary, the research findings and proposed pathway serve as an instrumental tool for brands hiring social media influencers.

Recommendations for Further Study

The results of this study demonstrated a need for more academic research into how the different disclosures of sponsorship affect the brands sponsoring social media posts. For example, Xie and Feng (2023) conducted a study on the effects of two types of sponsorship disclosures on Instagram. Within this study, Xie and Feng noted similar further research comments throughout their study. Xie and Feng's study also reflected primarily on the beauty industry and on how the disclosure affected the influencer. As part of the findings in this study, future research should examine how different types of disclosures on Instagram posts affect the brand sponsoring the post.

The findings show that there is distrust towards the brand that is sponsoring the Instagram post. Future research could include why there is distrust and what brands can do differently to overcome this distrust when sponsoring social media posts. Although this study shed light on the issue of negative feelings towards the brands, it does not fully highlight the issues that may be a challenge to many brands that hire social media influencers. I discussed the topics of sponsorship disclosure and compensation in addition to discussing negative feelings. However, further research could narrow down what it is about the disclosure or compensation that creates feelings of distrust. This process could occur by widening the research to other industries and other social media platforms. This method may entail more interviews to dig deeper into followers' feelings towards the brands.

Reflections

This qualitative case study research project provided me with multifaceted opportunities for personal, professional, and spiritual growth. I gained a wealth of knowledge, patience, and perspective while conducting this research, which has changed how I conduct my professional

and personal life. In the following sections, I will review my professional growth and the Biblical implications of the results of this study.

Personal and Professional Growth

I experienced personal and professional growth while planning, conducting, and navigating the research process. I learned the value of patience throughout this research project. When sending out invitations to potential participants to participate in this study, it was a lesson in not only patience, but in prayer. I had to rely on my faith that I would get enough responses to finish the study. I also learned how to put biases aside for the sake of research. I reinforced mindfulness in keeping my biases hidden to conduct and finish this research. These virtues have spilled over into my personal life. I learned to rely on faith and have patience when dealing with everyday situations. I also learned to avoid biases when it comes to dealing with people in their everyday lives. This has led to me feeling happier and more loving towards the world in general.

Professionally, I work in market research within the pharmaceutical industry and teach marketing courses at two local colleges. This case study helped me further develop my skills in my career. In working with my dissertation chair, I learned to become a better mentor to my students. This process has led to better outcomes with my students in class. Within my professional career, one of the biggest lessons that I learned from this study is that my clients appreciate and are backing up my work. Whenever I created a project for a client, I made sure to back up my work with credible sources. This includes always citing my work back to its source so that the client can go back to the source if they'd like to investigate the issue more deeply. I conducted nineteen interviews for this study. Each interview went more smoothly than the last. Since then, I have taken some moderation courses and am now one of the only four associates within my marketing research role who can interview patients. This research study taught me

that I have a passion for helping and speaking to others. Furthermore, the interviews taught me how to actively listen, which has been invaluable to my career working with patients in the pharmaceutical industry.

Biblical Perspective

The Bible's teachings about business are that God's plan centers around stewardship, service, and integrity. God has entrusted people with the task of stewardship over resources. God has also provided people to generate riches and to be responsible stewards of His resources that He provides. The biblical goal for businesses is to conduct business in a way that glorifies Him and reflects His nature (Keller & Alsdorf, 2016). Therefore, to conduct business in a biblical manner is to conduct business honestly, ethically, and fairly.

Brands that hire social media influencers to create marketing campaigns on Instagram should represent the grace of God, and brands should manage these interactions and posts with honesty, fairness, and regard for all parties involved. All the parties involved include the brand, the influencer, and the influencer's audience on social media. The study revealed the need for trust and honesty in sponsored posts on social media. Proverbs 14:22-23 states, "You will earn the trust and respect of others if you work for good. If you work for evil, you are making a mistake. Work, and you will earn a living: if you sit around talking, you will be poor" (*New Living Translation Bible*, 2018). This verse shows the need for transparency between the brand the influencer, and the influencer's audience. Participants in this study explained that they did not feel like the influencers were honest when compensated for a sponsored post. The participants also exclaimed that they saw the influencers as having an ulterior motive behind these posts rather than sharing the product because they used or liked the product or brand. Second Corinthians 8:21, "For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the

Lord but also in the eyes of man” (*New Living Translation Bible*, 2018). While brands are paying influencers to create content and post sponsored posts with their products, brands should not allow false reviews of their products. Brands should also want the influencer to explain the compensation process and why the influencer chose this partnership with said brand.

Transparency is key when building trusting relationships with consumers. Individuals can look to James 3:17 to concur with transparency. “But the wisdom from above is first pure. Wisdom from above is also peace loving, gentle always, and willing to yield to others. Wisdom is full of mercy and the fruit of good deeds. Wisdom shows no favoritism and is always sincere” (*New Living Translation Bible*, 2018). Brands that act in a Christian way, will welcome honest reviews and transparency about how they are compensating influencers. Even if a review might not be a glowing review, allowing criticisms in sponsored posts shows vulnerability and honesty. This could, in the end, work out better for the brand in the ways of the audience purchasing the products.

Huyser (2023) asserted that Christians work with different inner motives than non-believers and that this can make a difference in the quality, spirit, and honesty of their labors. Not every brand works with the same degree of moral principles. However, those who do work with these moral principles should strive to create bonds of trust with their audience on social media and the audience of any social media influencer that they hire to create sponsored posts. They should also strive to create those bonds with the social media influencers that they hire and only use social media influencers who share those same morals. In doing so, the created content will speak for itself as being honest and authentic.

Summary of Reflections

I grew personally and professionally during this qualitative case study, and I also grew spiritually. The reflections of this study are multi-dimensional as they synthesize thoughts and feelings from participants with different backgrounds and worldviews. In the influencer marketing industry, trust, honesty, and authenticity are of utmost importance. In my eyes, a sufficient and reliable level of qualitative research devoted to pulling together all the proposed concepts into a singular pathway for brands that hire social media influencers for marketing purposes was necessary. Finally, I believe that God blesses me to lead me down this academic journey.

Summary of Section Three

Section 3 offered a detailed review of the case study research its findings, and its application to professional practice. I interviewed 19 participants who were 18 years or older within the United States; and who followed a social media influencer that Fashion Box had worked with to create a sponsored Instagram post. In addition, they interacted with the sponsored post. The interview questions reflected on their feelings towards the brand upon learning that the post was a sponsored post and that the social media influencer received compensation for the post.

After careful data collection, line-by-line coding, and broad view coding, and analyzing the data, four themes emerged from the data: (a) the normalization of brands using social media influencers to market products, (b) the trustworthiness of the sponsored Instagram posts, (c) the recognition that the Instagram posts are sponsored, and (d) how honest one can be when they are being compensated for the sponsored post. These themes and subthemes directly related to the foundational elements of this study, which involved the research questions, the conceptual

framework, the anticipated themes, the current literature on the subject, and the problem statement. Section 3 included the application of the study's themes to professional practice. In addition, section 3 outlined recommendations for further study and described my personal, professional, and spiritual reflections on this overall research project. In addition, provided a discussion on integrating the biblical worldview of the research connected to the research themes and results.

Summary and Study Conclusion

This study explored the potential reverse priming of the audience of social media influencers who worked with Fashion Box on an influencer marketing campaign by posting a sponsored post by the brand. The objective was to determine if there were any negative feelings towards the brand after the followers of the influencer realized that the post they were seeing on a sponsored Instagram post rather than an organic post. This study revealed that negative feelings existed towards the brand when they realized that the sponsored Instagram post. This study also highlighted the complexities of influencer marketing and sponsored Instagram posts. Additionally, the findings provide guidance and support for future research to better understand the effects of sponsorship on attitudes towards the brand that is sponsoring the post on Instagram.

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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate Email

Dear [Recipient]:

As a student in the School of Business at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to better understand the reverse priming effect on Fashion Box, who uses Instagram influencers in the United States to bring awareness to its brand by partnering with influencers to post disclosed sponsored content, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years old, live in the United States, and have used Instagram in the last 60 days. Participants, if willing, will be asked to take part in a recorded Zoom one-on-one interview and then to review their transcripts from said interview to make sure everything is correct. It should take approximately an hour and a half to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] for more to schedule an interview/etc.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Participants will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card.

Sincerely,

Meagen Rockenbach
Doctoral Candidate

[REDACTED]

Appendix B: Consent Form

Title of the Project: A Case Study of Using Social Media Influencers for Sponsored Posts

Principal Investigator: Meagen Rockenbach, Doctoral Candidate, School of Business, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, live in the United States, and have used Instagram in the last 60 days. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to better understand the reverse priming effect on FabFitFun, who uses Instagram influencers in the United States to bring awareness to its brand by partnering with influencers to post disclosed sponsored content.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a Zoom interview that will take no more than 30 minutes. The interview will be audio- and video-recorded for my records.
2. You will be emailed a copy of your transcript to look over. You may change anything or add to what you have already said, then sign it to confirm it is correct. This should take no longer than an hour.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include a better understanding to marketers of how sponsored Instagram posts affect brands.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies and/or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years then erased. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the interview participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Meagen Rockenbach. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Elsie Cook, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. When you saw the sponsored post, had you heard of the Fashion Box brand before? (If yes, move to question 2. If no, move to question 3).
2. Are you a current customer of Fashion Box?
3. Did you realize that this was a sponsored post?
4. Do you pay attention as to whether a post is sponsored or not on Instagram?
5. When you realized this was a sponsored post, how did you feel about the brand?
6. The Instagram influencer is being compensated in some way for this sponsored post, how does that make you feel about Fashion Box?
7. Would you purchase any of the products that you have seen in the post?
8. Would you subscribe to Fashion Box?

Appendix D: IRB Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 5, 2023

Meagen Rockenbach
Elsie Cook

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-826 A Case Study of Using Social Media Influencers for Sponsored Posts

Dear Meagen Rockenbach, Elsie Cook,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us

at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

- Reply
- Reply all
- Forward