

SPONSORED CONTENT ON TIKTOK

A content analysis exploration

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ABSTRACT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
ABSTRACT	2
1 INTRODUCTION	5
2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	8
2.1 SELF-REPRESENTATION	8
2.2 PARASOCIAL INTERACTION	10
2.3 SPONSORED CONTENT TECHNIQUES	13
2.4 BRAND-INFLUENCER CONGRUENCE AND DISCLOSURE	15
2.5 SOURCE CREDIBILITY MODEL	18
2.5.1 TRUSTWORTHINESS & EXPERTISE	18
2.5.2 ATTRACTIVENESS	19
2.5.3 AUTHENTICITY	20
3 RESEARCH DESIGN	22
3.1 RESEARCH METHOD	22
3.2 DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE AND SAMPLING METHOD	22
3.3 DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE	23
3.4 DATA ANALYSIS METHOD	25
3.5 DATA OPERATIONALISATION	25
3.5.1 CODING BOOK	25
3.5.2 SAMPLE ANALYSIS	26
4 RESULTS	28
4.1 SELF-REPRESENTATION STRATEGIES	28
4.1.1 POSITIVITY CUES	28
4.1.2 POSTS INTERACTIVITY AND ENGAGEMENT	29

4.1.3	SOUND DRIVER OF AUTHENTICITY AND POPULARITY	31
4.1.4	AUDIENCE INCLUSION IN EVERYDAY LIVES	31
4.1.5	BRAND-INFLUENCER RELATIONSHIP	33
4.1.6	INFLUENCER COHERENCE WITH ENVIRONMENT	34
4.2	SPONSORED POSTS STRATEGIES	36
4.2.1	PRODUCT-LED PRESENTATION	36
4.2.2	PRODUCTION PROFESSIONALISATION	37
5	DISCUSSION	40
5.1	THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS	40
5.1.1	SELF-REPRESENTATION INDICATORS	40
5.1.2	PARASOCIAL INTERACTION ON TIKTOK	41
5.1.3	SPONSORED TECHNIQUES ON TIKTOK	42
5.1.4	SOURCE CREDIBILITY MODEL IN SPONSORED POSTS	43
5.2	PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS	44
5.3	LIMITATIONS & SUGGESTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCHES	46
6	CONCLUSION	47
7	LITERATURE	49
APPENDIX A – PRELIMINARY CODE BOOK		57
APPENDIX B – CAPTION ANALYSIS		59
APPENDIX C – VIDEO ANALYSIS		60
FIGURES		61

1 Introduction

In late 2018, a new social media appeared, whose main mission is to propose entertaining content and push forward the creativity of their users: TikTok. To do so, the platform is proposing posts featuring both music and videos on a short format (Bucknell & Kottasz, 2020; Takumi, 2020). Compared to other social media, TikTok gives a stage of expression to younger generations. On a daily millions of post tackling various subjects are created, shared commented (TikTok, 2021). In a recent article, Aslam (2021) affirms that 41% of TikTok users are young adults, aged between 16 and 24 years old. For this population, TikTok represents an alternative to the well-installed social networks such as Instagram, Twitter or Facebook (Takumi, 2020). In the span of two years, TikTok influencers, gathered millions of young followers, regarded as the new generation of decision making consumers (Bucknell & Kottasz, 2020). Naturally, brands invest in influencers in the objective to appeal and inspire this audience (Takumi, 2020; Voorveld, Van Noort, Muntinga & Bronner, 2018). This also gives brands the opportunity to be associated with organic and authentic content, slightly shifting away from traditional advertising criticised for its unfulfillment of the public interests and needs (Kim & Song, 2018).

However, the literature from the influencers viewpoint is quite limited. Hudders, De Jans and De Veirman (2020) touched upon lack of studies relating to influencers. Influencer marketing has gained considerable attention in academic researchers (e.g De Veirman et al., 2017; Hudders et al., 2020). So far, most of the researches on influencer marketing are audience based. Mainly, these studies focus on the efficiency of influencer marketing on the audience (Johnson, Potocki & Veldhuis, 2019). They also related on the characteristics embedded in the content to motivating the audience attitude toward brands (Kim & Song, 2018). These studies are focused on the adolescent public behaviour towards sponsored posts and influencers' endorsement (DeJans, Van De Sompel, De Veirman & Hudders, 2020).

Additionally, little is known about the specific strategies used by influencers to endorse sponsored content on social media (Hudders et al., 2020). The current state of research drives little focus on the parasocial relationships indicators created by the influencers themselves (De Veirman et al., 2017; Hudders et al., 2020). Also, these studies mainly performed discourse analysis to investigate the influencer wording on Instagram, YouTube or Twitter (Sokolova, & Kefi, 2020). Definitely further researches are needed to uncover how influencers induce para social interaction in their TikTok posts, with the help of

content analysis. Previous studies tackled the significant factors, influencers need to depict credibility to their audience (Kauv & Blotnicky, 2020; Ohanian, 1990). According to the source credibility model, the influencer should empower trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. However, little is known on the strategies used to induce source credibility but the model has not been explored from a content analysis viewpoint (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). Although the model aims at identifying the influencers credibility indicators, the current state of research still focuses on the audience behaviour towards credibility in sponsored posts, rather than the influencer strategies. This research expects to highlight the social media influencers strategies when involved in marketing campaigns. As the influencers' number of followers grows, further researches on the strategies to reach and impact with their content is needed. De Veirman et al., (2017) defines influencers as individuals who have built a sizeable social network of people following them. In addition, influencers are trusted tastemakers, meaning capable of proposing entertaining content in one or several forms of Arts (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Increasingly, the preponderant presence of social media in individuals' lives, encouraged researches on influencer marketing (Boerman, 2020; Haenlein et al., 2020; Wissman, 2018). The term of influencer marketing was first coined by Brown and Hayes (2008), who define the concept as "a third party who significantly shapes the customer's purchase decision but may ever be accountable for it". Usually, brands send a product to influencers, who in return, make a review of the product. Often, they receive a compensation for this endorsement (Hudders et al., 2020). Through this practice, the image of the brand is constructed by the influencers' and delivered to the followers. Hence, this practice can be used as a tool for brands to enhance influencers endorsement towards their products (De Veirman et al., 2017). In this, influencers are also content creators aiming at reaching a targeted type of users with their expertise, authenticity and intimacy (Burgess & Woodford, 2014; Hudders et al., 2020). Overall, researchers agree that TikTok takes up an important role in influencer marketing studies (Takumi, 2020; Aslam, 2021). However, the literature on this platform is still under-explored.

Recently, the company Dunkin' Donuts shifted their advertising strategy. Until now, their strategy focused on branding itself on Instagram while using visual and textual strategies rather than using influencers to enhance their marketing strategy (Behind The Brands, 2021; Lavoie, 2015). Now, Dunkin' Donuts uses their staff members and TikTok

influencers with high reach, to promote their selection of Food and drinks products to a new generation of consumers (Behind The Brands, 2021). Significantly, this situation proves that TikTok usage by influencers to endorse brands should be further studied. As a result, this research will discuss influencer marketing on TikTok. Hence, this leads to the following research question: **How do influencers use self-representation through sponsored content on TikTok?** This study aims at understanding, with the help of a thematic content analysis, the strategies used by influencers to endorse brands in their TikTok content. In the frame of social media, self-representation is projected and enhanced image of the self through verbal, physical, written cues (Rettberg, 2017). The novel insights will help to understand how self-representation is introduced in the posts and applied by influencers on TikTok. This research aims also at understanding how social media influencers induce parasocial interaction with their audience. This research sheds light on the different communicational strategies social media influencers use to build and maintain the attention on their sponsored content on TikTok. In this, it aims at precisely understand the mechanisms of such individuals to promote brands while staying true to their expectations. Hence, this paper expects to bring an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Also, tackling this study from a qualitative viewpoint will help to build an understanding of the mechanisms used by the influencers to advocate brands on TikTok.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Self-representation

Via self-representation on social media, influencers professionally stage their lives to their audience. According to Rettberg (2017), in the era of social media, influencers self-representation is directed and constructed to correspond to a set of positive signals shared by a large group of individuals sharing the same interests. It means that the influencers present an ideal image of themselves through their content and their interaction with the public. Already, Goffman (1956, p.10) presented the self-representation performance of individuals as an argument for the audience to reproduce the behaviour of those who observe. Increasingly, the audience believe that the influencer possesses qualities and behaviour, approaching to their own preferred representation of self. By reproducing the influencers self-representation, the audience gets one step closer to their own ideal self largely displayed by the influencer (Goffman, 1956; Tafesse and Wood, 2021).

In the frame of social media, self-representation is the projected and enhanced image of self through verbal, physical and written cues (Rettberg, 2017). In other words, influencers overtly enrich certain physical aspects, verbal cues or aspects of their lifestyle to fit their individual and collective ideal vision. Hence, influencers develop a personality to externally portray themselves in an attractive, open and positive way (Abidin, 2015). Nonetheless, Thumim (2012 – p159) argues that in the contemporary digital world, self-representation is not only textual but rather takes different aspects. In this, Rettberg (2017) proposes three types of self-representation that can be used by influencers on social media: visual, written and quantified.

First, the visual self-representation of influencers includes icons (often photos, selfies and videos) to represent the self. The icons refer to the way influencers present the self and the signals referring their personality the posts. For example, with the use of certain Instagram filters, the layout of the feed and the images shared to the public are adjusted to increase the attractiveness of the post (Rettberg, 2017, p-17). Accordingly, influencers reveal more information on their personal lives which has for objective to increase the impressions on their posts (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). A positive visual self-representation will appeal their followers to comments, like and share on the platform. In such, visual self-representation is usually controlled to rather picture the best aspects of themselves (Rettberg, 2017). In the same idea, Kim and Limbert (2021), reveal that influencers with

wide smile trigger more admiration, warmth, sympathy and credibility than those with a closed smile. Visual self-representation, hence, impacts the general external appearance of influencers in front of their audience. Second, the written self-representation implies the activity of blogging or commenting on social media posts. Written self-representation refers to the influencer's exclusive expressions used in the post's caption to retain the attention of their followers (Rettberg, 2017). This type of representation can be found in the captions and hashtags included in the posts. In the same way and similar to bloggers, social media influencers deliberately enrich their representation by exhibiting agreement, warmth and understanding in their writing (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005). As introduced by Ge and Gretzel (2018), written self-representation is a textual speech including emojis, abbreviations understandable by the targeted public. Yet, this self-representation opens a part of the influencer's personality visible through casual expressions and multiple forms of text. By reacting to their followers' comments in their posts with specific expressions, social media influencers propose a confident image of themselves (Abidin, 2015). Part of the written self-representation, the use of emojis by the influencers opens the conversation on the image they want to send back to their audience (Abidin, 2015; Ge & Gretzel, 2018). Although previous research debated on the significance of the usage of emojis in communications between individuals and the ability to carry emotional sensitivity (Danesi, 2016 in Ge & Gretzel, 2018), emojis are widely used by influencers to enhance their image and to achieve persuasion (Ge & Gretzel, 2018). For instance, a 'shout out' to the audience - meaning a pointed mention to the public in the post - followed by a shaped heart emoji in the influencer caption results in the positive reaction of the followers in the comments (Abidin, 2015; Highfield & Leaver, 2015). Hence the written self-representation is a crucial asset to maintain the relationship between these two types of users. Finally, Rettberg (2017) defines quantified self-representation as the signals with numbers the localisation of the influencers. Widely spread in Snapchat and Instagram stories, self-representation gives information to the audience on the immediate activity of the social media user. However, in the frame of this study, the quantified self-representation will not be studied because irrelevant in regard to TikTok available embedded capacities.

Overall, self-representation help influencers to differentiate themselves from the multitude of influencers creating daily content. By developing singular personality traits and

presenting a life their audience can easily relate to, influencers succeed in targeting and answering the needs and interests of future consumers (Khamis et al., 2016; Tahna, 2016). Because most of the influencers report their lives, self-branding assists self-representation to differentiate themselves from other individuals. Khamis, Ang and Welling (2016) define self-branding as the concept through which individuals develop a public image for commercial purposes. Influencers' self-branding is also an argument for brands to collaborate on endorsement content and gain followers (Tahna, 2020; Jin and Muqaddam, 2019). Brands are inclined to propose incentive and financial rewards to content creators benefiting from a community replicating and engaging with the influencer content. Therefore, they overtly showcase inspirational content to their audience, demonstrate self-esteem and exhibit positivity in their posts (Khamis et al., 2016).

Despite visual and written self-representation, social media provide the users with more ways to express themselves. Unfortunately, verbal self-representation is still under-explored by literature (Rettberg, 2017; Ge & Gretzel, 2018). The influencers verbal self-representation is not included in the known definition of self-representation. In this, an updated perspective of the concept including the verbal self-representation is needed. Herring (2010), proposed that verbal interaction would occur in the words employed to name images and symbols. However, verbal communication co-exists with the three previous forms of self-representation as, in the end, it aims at sparking interaction between the users, while keeping the focus on the influencer external depiction. Overall, the long-term steady nature of social media content in the digital world makes self-representation, a crucial communicative tool for the reflection influencers daily activities (Rettberg, 2017, p-17). Though this research expects to enhance the knowledge on influencers verbal self-representation on TikTok, as it is a crucial part of the platforms' workings as projected in CCAT Curtin (2020). Overall, the research explores the following sub-question: *How are social media influencers using self-representation on TikTok?*

2.2 Parasocial interaction

One of the reason behind the reasons influencer marketing relevancy, is the relationship influencers maintain with their audience (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). More exactly, influencers' community is representative of the brand's consumer base as they are sharing a number of similarity. However, limited is the research surrounding the interaction between

influencers and their audience in the frame of TikTok sponsored posts. Extensive research revealed that the concept of parasocial relationship is closely linked to self-representation. This relationship motivates the social media influencers to interact with their audience is to create a loyal community (Yuan & Lou, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2019, Abidin, 2020). The parasocial relationship theory (PSR) refers to the practice through which audiences develop illusory social experiences with a media personality (Delbaere, Michael & Philips, 2020; Horton & Wahl, 1956; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Adding to the idea that some influencers, involved in brand collaboration, are using PSR to encourage purchase habits, this concept also reiterates the influencer's position as the brand endorser for their audience (Yuan and Lou, 2020). For instance, Bond (2018) surveyed 427 adolescents on their experience with social influencers and their parasocial relationship. This emphasises the impact this relationship has on young individuals behaviour vis a vis their socialisation process.

However, the concept of parasocial relationship is quite limited as it only refers to a limited time interaction between the influencers and the spectators (Delbaere, Michael & Philips, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Also, this theory rather fits into the scheme of a one-way communication model, where the sender delivers messages without expecting answers from the receivers (Croteau and Hoynes, 2014 – p31). Whereas, in the social media world, the interaction goes both ways and sits in the two-way communication model (Croteau and Hoynes, 2014 – p31). Compared to traditional celebrities, delivering their messages without expecting any feedback from their audience, influencers deliver their message in a two-way communication perspective. It means that the message in their posts, with the comments section and the like button, supposes that the audience can react immediately to their content (Abidin, 2015; Croteau and Hoynes, 2014). As a result, similar to Yuan and Lou (2020), the present research will refer to parasocial interaction (PSI). PSI refers to the long term, close and reciprocal relationship between the influencer and the audience (Bond, 2018; Dibble, Hartmann & Rosaen 2016; Yuan and Lou, 2020).

As the influencer dialogues with their followers, they put in evidence attractiveness and similarity, in a friendly and relatable way. To illustrate, the survey for Yuan and Lou (2020) study argued that the influencers attractiveness play a significant role to positively evaluate the relationship between both parties and audience and share of common values. Aligned with previous researches, attractiveness and similarity are fundamentals to parasocial relationships (Bond, 2018; Choi and Rifon, 2012). Based on previous literature, these two

elements play a significant role in the audience disposition to emulate the influencer but also to purchase products he/she potentially endorse (Amos, Holmes & Strutton, 2015; Choi and Rifon, 2012). Already Scheer and Stern (1992), developed the influencer framework referring to the mechanism through which influential people create a close relationship with their public. The audience places trust in the influencers they follow as the interaction between both parties is sustained and multi-directed, encouraging particular behaviour (Abidin, 2015; Delbaere, Michael & Philips, 2020; Yuan and Lou, 2020). The influence framework uncovered characteristics to make the influence attempt effective. Influencers' objective is to encourage their target audience to agree with their recommendations with the help of their self-representation (Scheer and Stern, 1992; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Besides, in the case of sponsored content, these elements are tightly related to a higher product interest from the audience, (Bond 2018; Erdogan, 1999; Yuan and Lou, 2020). To ensure that the relationship between both keep being strong, influencers give exclusive access to their lives to maintain a sentiment of intimacy with the public (Abidin, 2015; Duffy and Kang, 2020; Bond, 2018; Feng, Chen & Kong, 2020). The content creator consciously reveal details to gain in visibility and enrich their link with their audience (Erdogan, 1999). The user-generated content relating to the influencer's personal life eases the intimacy between the influencer and the public (Yuan and Lou, 2020). By showing the behind the scenes of their staged lives, influencers gain followers, develop their relationship and advocate a supportive community. As a result, they instil a sentiment of commonality and similarity to their supporters (Amos et al., 2015). While navigating through the content, the follower might find similar elements between their lives and the influencer's (Abidin, 2020; Yuan & Lou, 2020). The framework is still applicable to the current context of influencers. Because influencers display the previously-mentioned characteristics, the audience is willing to purchase products and follow the guidance from the influencers (Ruvio et al., 2013). Parasocial interaction is an argument for influencers when it comes to collaborate with brands (Eitzinger, 2019). In other words, influencers act in a specific way encouraging their audience to purchase the product endorsed (Eitzinger, 2019). This research explores *how parasocial interaction on TikTok through the lens of sponsored content is induced by the influencers.*

2.3 Sponsored content techniques

Delbaere, Michael & Philips, (2020) define sponsored content as a post through which “a brand offers financial incentives to an influencer to positively discuss a specific product in the content he/she shares with followers”. Previous research focuses on aspects that make a posts effective. In an experimental research on Twitter, focusing on 49 participants argues that sponsored posts including promotional messages are more efficient than experience-centric post, meaning where the influencer thoughtfully explain his/her experiences and opinions about a brand or a product (Kim and Song, 2017). At the same time, another study on Instagram revealed that social media users perceived as more credible user-generated promotion content than traditional advertising. The authentic and organic content amplified the brand attitude and behavioural intention (Johnson, Potocki and Veldhuis, 2019). These two examples clearly prove that sponsored content coming from influencers showcase strategies traditional advertising is lacking. As a result, this is an argument in favour of influencers’ involvement in sponsored campaign. In this, the efficiency of the promotional post combined with the influencer’s personalised vision is driven by their authenticity and purpose while sharing their opinions and perception (Delbaere, Michael & Philips, 2020; Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

Conserving the audience attention is a challenge both for brands and influencers. As a results, it appears mandatory to provide the audience in entertaining and engaging content (Tafesse, 2015). Also, in influencer marketing the content creators are the bridge between the consumer’s expectations and the brand’s marketing goals (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). It gives the opportunity to the brand and influencers of work deeply on their collaboration to produce content suitable to their demanding audience. Furthermore, sponsored content should feature entertaining, vivid and interactive properties to endorse brands, as it facilitates the long-term captivation of the audience (Bruno 2020; Tafesse, 2015; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Takumi 2020). While the ultimate goal of sponsored content is to raise awareness about a particular brand, influencers’ human perspective enable them to cease the consumers' aspirations through their posts and deliver experiences emotions and insights to their followers (Ashley &Tuten, 2015).

Here, sponsored post’s entertaining value is a crucial element in the consumer experience with the brand (Bruno, 2020; Tafesse and Wood, 2021). On social media, many themes of interests collide and hence, the content proposes different themes to be

explored by the user (Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Here influencers intentionally input entertaining, informational and transactional values within their sponsored posts. Accordingly, entertaining content usually includes humour or artistic work. These social media posts show a particular attention in depicting influencers' performance. In entertaining content, influencers show their domain of expertise, which is related to any form of Art (Ohanian, 1990). Then informational content advises the public on the product specificities, generally experience focused by proposing tutorials or reviews from the influencer. Again influencers sponsored posts are considered to provide the audience with an positive opinion on the brand and appear as an alternative to other sources on the web and traditional advertising (Tafesse, 2015; Ashley and Tuten, 2015). Previous literature focused on the criteria influencers use to invite their audience to react (Scheer and Stern, 1992). These criteria include attractiveness, prestige and expertise.

Besides, transactional content proposes promotions, loyalty programs and economical rewards to the audience (De Vries et al. in Tafesse and Wood, 2021). With these incentives, the objective is to push forward the audience's future interaction with the brand and begin this relationship on an cheering note. In a way, the transactional nature of sponsored content is linked to Zhang (2010) findings on the ability for the consumer to engaging with the brand virtually and socially. For instance, brands gamify the experience with the product to amplify the engagement for a post. Chandler and Munday (2020) define gamification as the application of reward in exchange for an action, to maximise loyalty, engagement and motivation from the participants. Beyond the endorsement of the product, gamification develops a connection between the brand, the product and the consumer. A positive experience before and after the product purchase is therefore instilled in the audience long-term consciousness (Zhang, 2010).

Moreover, vividness refers to the aptitude of the content to depict actions displaying 'approximate reality' (Tafesse and Wood, 2021, p930). In other words, posts capable to present visuals, sounds, space are thus, more efficient content than those representing solely the item endorsed (Tafesse 2015; Takumi, 2020). For influencers, it is significant to input visuals and sounds in their content to enrich their posts to uplift the post engagement (Wardrop, 2019). On Facebook for example sound is rarely used whereas on Snapchat and YouTube, most of the users turn the sound on to enjoy the content. Influencers hence needed to adapt the sound usage to the platform, either by proposing appealing sound or

by using subtitles to make the content accessible in any circumstances. So far, literature is limited on the subject and could benefit from an in-depth exploration in the frame of new social media platforms such as TikTok (Basu, 2021).

Finally, influencers need to stay focused on the engagement of their community to buy a product (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Hence, sponsored posts' interactivity with the audience impacts the perception towards a brand (Belanche et al. 2020; Kim and Kim 2020; Lou et al. 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Usually, interactivity occurs with the presence of links, comments and features enabling the users to share the content. Another common strategy used by influencers to interact with the followers is to answer the audience's questions in the comment section of the sponsored post (Takumi, 2020). Additionally, Abidin's early findings highlight TikTok fluidity compared to other platforms (CCAT,2021). It means that, compared to Instagram, where the posts and the whole follower-influencer journey is concentrated on the same application, TikTok allows its content creators to share their content on other social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook or Twitter (CCAT Curtin, 2020). The possibility to extend the visibility of the post to other platforms enhances the vividness of the content. Exploring the sponsored post creation strategies in regard of TikTok is an attempt to shed light on the best practices in the competitive digital world. Hence, this research expects to understand *what techniques do influencers use to create sponsored content on TikTok?*

2.4 Brand-influencer congruence and disclosure

The relationship between the brand and the influencer plays a significant role in sponsored content creation on social media. Largely tackled in previous researches, the brand-influencer congruence model states that the values carried by the brand should match the influencer's self-representation, and vice versa (De Cicco, Iacobucci, Paglia, 2020; Shan, Chen & Lin, 2019; Choi & Rifon, 2012; Till & Busler,2013). Previous literature reveals the effects of self-congruence on the brand attitude and the purchase intention of the consumers (Jin, Muqaddam & Ryu, 2019; De Cicco et al, 2020). Jin et al., (2019) performed an experiment on 104 Instagram celebrity and traditional celebrity. The findings revealed that Instagram celebrity's post were perceived as more trustworthy by the audience compared to celebrity's post. This also underlined that the relationship between the brand and the influencer was crucial to strategically promote the brand image to the public. In the

similar vein, another experiment by Till and Busler (2013) considered the efficiency of expertise in the brand-influencer congruence model. The findings revealed that the influencers increase the attitude towards the brand rather than the purchase intention behind a sponsored post. Also the idea of “belonginess” to the brand purpose enhanced the efficiency of the relationship between the brand and the influencer. It reveals also the impact of the influencer’s image on the attitude towards the brand (Shan et al, 2019; Till & Busler, 2013). Anderson (1976) affirms that the spread of symbolic meanings by influencers affects the experience with the brand. It is the series of signals sent by the influencer to the consumer, about the benefits product, the brand and the self that affects the brand’s image in the public’s eyes (Till and Busler, 2013; Choi and Rifon, 2012). Therefore, the general depiction of an influencer in a sponsored post results in the transfer of this sentiment on the product endorsed (Anderson, 1976; Shan et al, 2019; Choi and Rifon, 2012). Additionally, the match between the influencer and the brand helps the consumers to recognize themselves in the product presented (Choi and Rifon, 2012; McCracken, 1989). This idea had been well framed by Kim and Kim (2021) study on the effectiveness of the influencer marketing on the consumer behaviour towards a sponsored post. The findings showed that the brand-influencer model facilitated the branded content recognition compared to an inconsistent link between the product and influencer. The explanations displayed by influencers on the product, both in the caption and verbally enhances the acknowledgement of the brand content by the consumer (Kim & Kim, 2021).

When consumers find that the influencer’s image resonates with the brand, their willingness to emulate their behaviour, and hence purchase the product is amplified (Shan et al., 2019). The brand presentation of the influencer should match the consumer’s knowledge of the product and the influencer’s behaviour. As a result, the close relationship between the influencer and the brand results in the increased loyalty of the audience (De Cicco et al., 2020). As presented in the parasocial interaction model, the consumer decides to follow an influencer because they represent what they deeply aspire to be (Schmitt, 2012).

Hence, by incorporating in their content a certain set of meanings, influencers tend to share with their audience a certain vision of their own personal development (Shan et al., 2020). Previous studies prove that disclosure sponsoring in social media posts helps to avoid the potential lack of trust and scepticism of the followers (De Cicco et al., 2020; DeVierman &

Hudders, 2020). Consequently, the combination with the brand-influencer congruence model goal is to merge, as much as possible, the influencer image with the brand image. This type of content works better on audiences when the branded content is barely visible (Shan et al., 2020). As Kim and Kim (2020) point out, the seamless match between the product and the influencer let the audience assume that the social media influencer is genuinely recommending the article and reduces the sponsoring recognition. From the personal recommendations of the influencer, the hashtag *#sponsored* or *#paidpromotion* highlights the pecuniary relationship with the brand (Kim and Kim, 2020). Additionally, audiences tend to associate influencers with a brand and vice versa. In this, the brand is willing to work with an influencer that share the same values as theirs to ensure consistency. Generally, sponsored content is the result of a complex relationship between the brand and the influencer and the influencer and the audience. Here, the influencer objective in their sponsored post is to help the audience in recognizing the branded content. Disclosing the partnership is a way to maintain the truthful link between the influencer (DeCicco et al., 2020). Research on Chilean influencers proves the significance for influencers to disclose their partnerships to their audience (Guiñez-Cabrera, Mansilla-Obando, Jeldes-Delgado, 2020). Accordingly, disclosure statement, meaning the indicator emphasizing the paid partnership between an influencer and a brand, significantly maintains the relationship between the user and the influencer (Sah et al., 2018). By disclosing the partnership with a brand and by incorporating the product within the post, influencers ensure more transparency for their audience and consequently enhance the final objective of the post, meaning buying (Kim and Kim, 2020; Sah et al., 2018). The concept of transparency in influencer marketing benefits from large literature coverage, which makes it an important aspect to be considered in the generation of sponsored content (DeCicco et al., 2020).

As a result, the unified match between the influencer and the brand along with the transparency purpose of the disclosure eases the brand towards attitude (Choi and Rifon, 2012). This way, this research will investigate *how is the brand-influencer congruence model induced in sponsored posts on TikTok?*

2.5 Source credibility model

Because influencers present a positive image of the brand to their followers, their credibility is enhanced by their position as opinion leaders for their community (Kauv & Blotnicky, 2020). Source credibility is defined as 'the communicator's ability to influence the acceptance of the message by the receptor' (Ohanian, 1990, p41). Source credibility instils trust, through authenticity, to the customers and brings confidence to consume particular brands. (Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro 2020; Muniesa & Giménez, 2020). To be credible, influencers need to showcase three characteristics including: trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise. The objective is for influencers to orient their personality towards these characteristics and to deliver effective endorsing content to their audience (Ohanian, 1990; Wiedmann & Mettenheim, 2020).

2.5.1 Trustworthiness & Expertise

Trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence and acceptance of the emitter message (Ohanian, 1990). Hence, trustworthiness is the element influencers include in their content to favourably encourage the audience perception towards a brand or a product. This part of the source credibility content is necessary to explore as, in the digital world, many sources collide which makes the distinction between true and false recommendations difficult (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014). To do so, influencers as credible sources of information are motivated by the feeling of integrity, believability and mutual understanding (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Schouten, Janssen & Verspaget, 2019). Although some studies underline that the presence of trustworthiness mark is an intent to manipulate the audience, the disclosure statement overall increases trustworthiness for the influencer (DeVeirman & Hudders, 2020; Weismueller, Harrigan and Wang et al., 2020). In their research on YouTube influencers, Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmsted (2018) found that the collaboration between the brands and the influencers needs to pursue trustworthiness for the consumers to engage, spark and maintain a truthful dialogue.

Interestingly, trustworthiness demonstrates best marketing results when expertise content is integrate in the content. It aims at providing the consumers with genuine content capable of the propagating positive insights on the endorsed item (Kauv & Blotnicky, 2020; Wiedmann & Mettenheim, 2020). Alone, expertise plays a less significant role in the source

credibility model. However, while combined with trustworthiness, expertise encourages consumers to engage with a brand or purchase a product following a sponsored post (Ohanian, 1990; Amos et al. 2008). However, this characteristic serves the influencers in the creation of their posts. Social media has facilitated the professionalization of influencers. On Instagram, Facebook or YouTube, influencers can create business profiles and thus, disclose the partnerships when needed (Weismueller, et al, 2020). Hence their expertise plays a role in their differentiation compared to other users. Erdogan (1999, p. 298) defines expertise as ‘the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions’. This concept questions the degree to which an influencer is experienced, knowledgeable and qualified as a valid source to express recommendations. As previously reported in the literature, when a consumer perceives influencers as being experts in their discipline, they are more likely to follow their recommendations, to share this message to peers and to recommend the company (Ohanian, 1990; Sah et al, 2018; Feng et al, 2020). Posts assembling expertise signals along with a selfie or presenting fellow users is more likely to receive large numbers of likes from the audience (Feng, et al, 2020). It means that expertise should be incorporated in the larger social and personal contexts of influencers to be fully effective (Feng et al, 2020). In practice, trustworthiness and expertise combine assist the influencers in the building of their efficient social media posts (Bruno, 2020). By trying products front camera and by giving their opinion, their trust is enhanced and shapes the behaviour and attitude of the consumer (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Sah et al., 2018).

Therefore, to appear more trustworthy, influencers need to disclose information about their brand partnerships, giving information and opinions about the product while still presenting their expertise domain (Wiedmann & Mettenheim, 2020).

2.5.2 Attractiveness

Moreover, influencers attractiveness participates in the credibility of product endorsement. Not only previous literature found that attractiveness influences individual popularity, but also enhances their persuasive impact and attitude resented by others (Erdogan, 1999; Ohanian, 1990; Kamins, 1990). Other studies found that attractiveness is one of the most significant characteristics of the source credibility model, as it influences brand attitude and purchase intentions. Also while influencers are qualified as attractive, the willingness of their audience to emulate their behaviour is higher (Amos et al. 2008;

Taillon et al, 2020). However, the state of research around this notion is contradictory, which lead Erdogan (1999, p299) to the conclude that attractiveness is biased as it includes the mainly the positive aspect of and individual personality. However, the common sense links the individuals' attractiveness to the physic while it should also include the personality and the abilities of the person. The concept of attractiveness is multi-dimensional because it gathers elements not only visible but also inherent to the influencer's personality. Also, attractiveness is arbitrary. From an individual to another, this concept is understood differently and thus, suppose that the definition differs (Amos et al, 2008; Taillon et al, 2020). Therefore, results of previous studies measuring attractiveness reveal different results and this research will not focus on the physical attractiveness of the social media influencer. As a result, attractiveness also assembles elements including likability, similarity, familiarity and extroversion when displayed the influencer have a more direct impact on the perception of the sponsored content (Amos et al, 2008; Erdogan, 1999; McGuire, 1985). The similarity is defined as a hypothetical resemblance between the follower and the endorser of the product, familiarity is the understanding of the source through their behaviour and likeability is the social media influencer general appearance and behaviour (Erdogan, 1999; Amos et al. 2008). These elements are manifested but not limited to the intellectual skills, personality traits, physical skills of the influencer. Overall, this research tries to understand how influencer display and use their attractiveness in their sponsored content on TikTok. Xiao et al. (2018) emphasized the combination of all subdimensions to make source credibility effective, with a particular interest for the attractiveness indicators.

2.5.3 Authenticity

Previous research has emphasized the significance of authenticity as a dimension in influencers' source credibility model (Jun & Yi, 2020). Some authors have driven further development of authenticity to boost the effectiveness of the post as it allows the receiver to identify the message and the endorser (AlFarraj et al., 2021). Also, authenticity enhances the credibility of the influencer as it allows the message sender to send meanings and shape the audience's perception (Pöyry, Pelkonen, Naumanen & Laaksonen, 2019). By leaving to the influencer the ability to express itself about a brand honestly and transparently, increases the authenticity of the influencer's recommendations (Van Driel & Dumitrica, 2021). The study by Van Driel and Dumitrica (2021) interviewed 11 travel influencers and

performed a content analysis on 12 Instagram posts to investigate the increased professionalisation of the influencers social media posts. Here, the results pointed that authentic is a crucial aspect of to include in the influencer behaviour while remaining appealing to their consumers. Authentic influencers appear to be more genuine as they deeply reflect the values of the consumer. Hence, when a social media influencer appears to be authentic, he/she strengthens their relationship with their audience (Garrity, Moular & Rice, 2015). In line with the self-representation of social media influencers, authenticity sends back to the “feeling and practice of being true to one’s self or others” (Pöyry et al, 2019). Because of this need to be true, the influencers seem to “stage” their everyday lives. However, their content needs to stay authentic to maintain their audience’s engagement and the attention of brands (Garrity, Moular & Rice, 2015; Abidin, 2015; Pöyry et al, 2019). Garrity, Moular & Rice (2015) defines authenticity as a feature of influencers’ motivation to provide their product. Authenticity is a key factor to enhance the credibility of the influencers’ content. By instilling authenticity in their content, influencers can endorse brands and sustain an emotional tie with the audience (Abidin & Thompson (2012) Abidin and Ots, 2016). Considering the current frame of literature on the subject, this paper will investigate how authenticity is used by influencers on TikTok.

Considering the tight relationship between all source credibility dimensions, trustworthiness, expertise, attractiveness and authenticity, influencers need to include and showcase these elements in their content to gain in efficiency and visibility. This research hopes to bring to light elements relating to the source credibility model on TikTok. Hence, the research investigates *how do influencers make use of the source credibility model in the sponsored posts on TikTok?*

3 Research Design

3.1 Research method

To test the above-mentioned research questions, a qualitative content analysis of influencers posts available on the social media platform TikTok was conducted. The research aimed at understanding and highlighting the underlying meanings of the influencers endorsing brands on the platform. This study approached the complex and multiple meanings, values and truths embedded in the media (Brennen, 2017). According to Brennen (2017), qualitative studies provided researchers with tools to embed their findings in the social, political, historical and cultural contexts. Compared to quantitative research methods, this approach proposed to the reader an elevated vision of society and to the researcher, an enhancement of the social and business world. On the contrary, quantitative studies explore in a structured and limited way understandings on social phenomena. Qualitative methods are flexible studies. They allowed the researcher to analyse systematically a large amount of data sitting under the scope of the research question (Brennen, 2017). This research sat within the frame of virtual ethnography. Given (2008b), defines virtual ethnography as the in-depth exploration of social interaction embedded in virtual environment. Social media platforms are the theatre of relationships between users but also allow individuals to expose their behaviour. As a result, virtual ethnography has become a useful tool to make sense of these connections (Given, 2008b). Since the literature on TikTok content analysis was still limited, this study followed existing literature on social media analysis. This research adapted the qualitative content analysis framework of Bruno (2020) with already existing methods. This preliminary code book was enhanced with the help of results tableau in Dan Viel and Dumitrica (2021).

3.2 Description of the sample and sampling method

The study used the purposive sampling method. According to Babbie (2010, p.200), this method of non-probability sampling focuses the units of analysis selection on specific criteria based on the researcher requirements. As defined previously, sponsored content is a positive collaboration between a brand and an influencer in exchange of financial reward (Delbaere, Michael and Philips, 2020). In this, the posts of influencers needed to depict the endorsement of one brand or on product to be considered in the research. Some posts presented the influencers through other ways has been excluded from the sample. For

example a selected post did not come from an individual but rather from a media agency, including an influencer in their content to promote a brand. Here, the post was not selected because it was published by an agency rather than an influencer.

In this research, the units of analysis were the social media influencers' TikTok videos showcasing sponsored content. The researcher ensured that the videos selected contain the hashtags disclosing sponsored content such as:

(1) #Ad gathered 50.3 billion of TikTok posts.

(2) #Sponsored gathered 6 billion of TikTok posts.

(3) #Paidpartnership and #Paidad respectively gathered 14.9 million and 684.4k of TikTok posts.

The amount of posts for each hashtag was extracted on April 19th, 2021 and are subjected to change overtime. The language used in the TikTok sponsored post was English. The purposive sampling method expected to collect TikTok posts (N=150). Each research unit was selected between the time range of January, 13th 2020 and March 23th, 2021. This time frame has been chosen because the research unit needed to be older than 1 month old to be collected. Hence, it gathered enough impressions, meaning likes, comments and shares proving that the content has been seen by many users. Also, it brought some variety in the type of post encountered. Additionally, the number of posts under these hashtags being in abundance, the researcher chose to divide evenly the total of posts required for this study. Therefore, 60 posts with the hashtag #ad were collected. Then, 65 posts with the hashtag #sponsored and finally 25 posts with the hashtag #Paidpartnership and #paidpromotion. This repartition allowed an even assessment of sponsored posts on TikTok. This sampling method collected 175 TikTok posts in total. 11 out of 175 posts encountered did not fit the pre-established requirements and hence were noted as 0. In total, this research was driven by the analysis on 164 TikTok posts. As established, the analysis of 164 videos resulted in a saturation of the data collected (Methodological Guidelines, 2020).

3.3 Data collection procedure

The researcher used the TikTok's research tool to search the following hashtags: #ad, #sponsored, #paidpartnership and #paidad. At first, the hashtag #partnership was included in the research but was then removed because it related to romantic relationship between individuals. Previous studies suggested the use of these hashtags as they signalled

sponsored content on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter (Abidin, 2015; Bruno, 2020; Tafesse 2015). From this research, a number of videos composed of posts presenting influencers endorsing brands and products were found. When the hashtags were searched on TikTok, the results displayed the most liked posts in the top positions. When collecting the data, the most liked posts gathered 12.4 millions likes. To make the type of content even, the research chose randomly the post in each hashtag. Therefore, the researcher selected 164 videos featuring influencers endorsing products to their followers. As soon as the researcher encountered a video, the unit of analysis was downloaded to ensure that it would not be removed from the authors' profile. For each selected post, the researcher screenshotted the text included in the post meaning, the caption, the influencer profile picture, the number of likes, comments and shares, the name sound used for the post, with the author name or username if any. All the videos were then be added to the software ATLAS.ti to assist in the coding and the analysis of the results. In an iterative process, the researcher focused on the presence of the concepts and research questions discussed in the theoretical framework. From this, the tableau in **Appendix A** emerged which ensured the reliability of the study in terms of coding categories as seen in Bruno (2020).

Both videos and captions were considered in the study. An example of a relevant caption analysed can be found in the **Appendix B**. The yellow square represented the visual effect influencers used in the post. This could include green screen background or facial filters for instance. The blue rectangle presented the influencer username, with the mark for the official verified account and the date of publication. The red rectangle is the written caption. Limited to 100 characters, the researcher annotated the presence or absence of a posts' series and hashtags used by the influencers. It also display the incentive proposed by the influencer. The orange rectangle showed the sound used for the post and the source of the sound. In the sound section was displayed the influencer username and the song title. In case of a collaboration, the sound included either a mention of the brand username or to one of another influencer. Finally, the green rectangle shows and gathers the impressions on the post meaning the number of likes, comments and share. These features aim at analysing the engagement of the influencer's post. Overall, each publication needed to

gather the textual information screenshot with the video in itself. With these two medium the research analysed everything at the same time.

3.4 Data analysis method

A thematic content analysis was performed in the frame of this research. Here, the content analysis enabled to assess systematically through categories, qualitative textual or visual data. It aimed at gathering the similar themes and entries into categories. They constituted patterns and relationship between the elements capable to answer the research question (Given 2008a). Here the objective was to identify, analyse, synthetise and interpret the themes that emerged in the data. Each theme emerging from the analysis was supposed to partially answer the research question. This study was approached from an inductive viewpoint as previous literature provided direction on the themes to use (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Bruno, 2020; Tafesse and Wood, 2020). This paper will follow the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher immersed in the data to expose codes. These codes were generated with the observation of the publication structure. These codes were elements from which the themes raised. Through the re-reading of the data and the codes, we categories to emerged to produce a first explanation for the research questions. Following, the refinement of each theme, a clear definition was developed to highlight the reflection behind the process. Overall, the division into themes contributed to the answer of the research question. In this research, the software ATLAS.ti helped to code and analyse the units of analysis. The division into themes help to identify the patterns embedded in the data and the categories allowed to understand the indicators related to this theme. The use of thematic content analysis in this study examined selected TikTok sponsored posts in which influencers articulate their self-representation.

3.5 Data operationalisation

3.5.1 Coding book

The coding process consisted in the analysis of 164 TikTok posts. The coding resulted in 794 codes, 8 categories and 2 themes. The full coding book is available in a separate file. It contains the themes, the subthemes, the codes and the number of times the code has been used. This research used a coding guide to identify the sponsored aspect and the influencer self-representation markers of each post. ATLAS.ti helped to store the data and

sort it in groups of interests. After the complete coding of the selected research units, the researcher used colour codes to categorise the codes in sub themes.

3.5.2 Sample analysis

The researcher served as coder for this study. The coding frame proposed by Bruno (2020) has been to the present research requirements. The coding frame has been tested on two videos to test the reliability and the credibility of the model. After conducting a first test, inconsistencies in the model were assessed and the coding frame has been updated. At first, the researcher systematically reported each hashtag included in the caption but then, removed it from the coding process as not relevant. In the similar vein, the number of views was not reported as not explicitly mentioned on the post (this element can be found on the influencer profile). Also, TikTok differs from Instagram and Twitter regarding the sound usage, this element was added to the coding guide to ensure that it was taken into account. For each post, the researcher analysed the post as in **Appendix C**. First, the file was rename following the Account information. It included TikTok username, the date of publication and the hashtag related to the video. Then, the screenshot including the caption was analysed revealing how the influencers used this space to convey a message (**Appendix B**). The key words and emojis included in the post were reported as a code. The researcher noted if the influencer use punctuations, if the audience was addressed and potentially the brand username on TikTok. This part also focused on the abbreviations used by the influencer. Also the researcher put emphasis on the interactivity of the post. Meaning if the influencer use any of the TikTok embedded features. The heart shaped emojis, the nicknames given by the influencers to the audience were considered as indicator of endearment. Followed the sound section where information of the song used was found. In this case, the influencer used an “original sound”, meaning a sound created by her and specially for the purpose of the post. Sometimes, the sound could come from a different source and hence, it was coded accordingly. Finally, a particular attention was on the post interactivity. The researcher reported the number of likes, comments and share. After the coding of the screenshot, the researcher analysed the video in itself. The first 5 sec of each video allowed to code the demographics on the characters presented in the video, the theme of the post, the category of the post. Each quotation was renamed according to the general theme of the video sequence as squared in **Appendix C**. Also, there was an emphasis on the influencers

language employed in the post. Information on the product endorsed, meaning the product composition, brand and product name in the post were coded and analysed.

4 Results

This qualitative study presented how do influencers use self-representation in their sponsored posts on TikTok. Through the analysis of 164 TikTok posts, two themes emerged: (1) Influencers self-representation usage to enhance the self in sponsored posts, (2) the techniques used in the sponsored posts. From these two themes, eight categories emerged.

4.1 Self-representation strategies

With regard to self-representation strategies, 6 sub-categories were uncovered. Specifically, (1) the use of positivity cues revealing the influencers emotions, authenticity and personal skills; (2) Post interactivity and engagement; (3) sound usage for popularity purposes; (4) audience inclusion in everyday lives; (5) brand-influencer relationship; (6) brand congruence with the environment.

4.1.1 Positivity cues

Influencers displayed positive cues in their TikTok posts through their emotions, authenticity and personal skills. Multiple influencers made “humour” and “jokes” a significant part of their personality. For influencers endorsing Make up, body and hair care and Food and drinks products, exhibiting a positive and outgoing smile counted. Consequently, there were only a limited number of influencers presenting themselves as unhappy, moody or serious. However, these moments were episodic and instantly shifted back to happiness. This aligned with the assumption that self-presentation on social media is always positive, especially in the frame of influencer marketing (Tafesse and Wood, 2015; Kim & Limbert, 2021).

Meanwhile, in the aim to appear positive to their audience, influencers displayed attractive qualities. Their attractiveness was physical as many of them showed a clear and flawless skin to their audience. Although it was sometimes helped by a TikTok filter, they draw a particular attention to their body by wearing advantageous clothes and showing their workout routines. In the same idea, the content creators frequently used filters. This was the case for @iambrattyb, @caradowntonn and @elliezeiler, who were endorsing Make up, Body and Hair care products. Their eyelashes, mouth and eyebrows were particularly lifted and their skin smoothen with the help of these digital filters. Certainly, this underlined the importance for them to be good looking for in their posts as suggested in previous

literature (Abidin, 2015; Ohanian, 1990; Rettberg, 2018). Besides, influencers accentuated their faces traits to manifest their emotions in the videos. They particularly emphasised on these emotional cues by doing close ups on the influencer's face and using emojis. For instance, the case of @avani stood out as she frequently used emojis representing enjoyment or boredom while looking through the camera. This practice was recurrent in other @avani's posts as they provided the public with information on her current mood. Hence, aligned with (Ge & Gretzel, 2018) findings, the emojis' usage particularly enhanced the influencers' unwinding of emotions. Interestingly, influencers positivity manifested through the authentic quality of their content. To appear authentic, influencers shared their personal experience with the product endorsed. First, they explained broadly the reasons attached to the product endorsement. Sometimes it was under the recommendations of a friend and other times because the product helped to overcome an issue. The exhibition of the reasons were then followed by the unedited reaction of the influencer front camera. He/ She expressed their pleasing surprise or optimistic reaction following the test. For instance, in @steezy.kane post for the brand Converse, the viewer discovered the product at the same time as the influencer. Also, the audience could see his reactions while opening the shoe box. As a result, he exposed happiness while opening the box but disclosed his disappointment when realising that the shoes were too small for him. Accordingly, influencers verbal cues added to the posts authenticity. They used language and words easily replicable and knowledgeable by the audience. To illustrate, @bentist tone in his post was friendly to the audience, so were his words chosen specifically to corresponds to his audience compose of young adults.

4.1.2 Posts interactivity and engagement

By surrounding themselves with like-minded individuals, influencers aimed at engaging with their audience in their posts. The idea was to retain their attention through their posts with the help of the functions integrated in the TikTok app. They used functions such as the 'Reply to', the series of posts and the duet function.

The 'Reply to' function on TikTok helped influencers to retain their audience by answering the users' comments with a video. In the comments section, the audience could request for clarifications on a product purpose and usage, or tutorials to the content creator. Even sometimes, the Reply to contains user's recommendations for the future

publications (*Figure 1a*). This function was also the occasion for the influencer to encourage the audience to express their opinions on a product ". SMIs involved the audience in the testing of the product and encourage them to share their feedback either in video or in the comments. For instance, the influencer invited the audience with call to actions such as "don't let this FLOP, so that Converse can work with me again" and action verbs such as "join me"; "show me"; "make sure"; "go check". As a result this practice encouraged the influencers to create videos related to the audience expectations and to initiate dialogue with them. This findings joins Tafesse and Wood (2021) on the significance to ensure that influencers input vividness and interactive cues in their sponsored content. For instance, @jazlynebabybee, explained to a user how she avoided stretch marks during her pregnancy or @coffeefanatics, tried different flavours of tea highly charged in caffeine following the request of a user. Accordingly, the influencers made direct recommendations to the public. Following a concern exposed by the community, @skincarebyhyram and @glowwithava filmed a tutorial to "protect the skin from sun" and "how to moisturise for dry weather" (*Figure 1b*). In these sponsored-recommendation posts, the gesture with the hands and especially the 'pointing to the camera', emphasised on the encouragement of the audience to follow the content creator advice.

Additionally, TikTok influencers produced series of posts related to one subject. These posts treated on the viewers interests and gave suggestions on the usage of an endorsed product. As previously seen, the influencers maintained the interaction with their audience as a way to enhance the audience brand attitude and behaviour (De Cicco et al., 2018). Here, the series of post on TikTok, assisted the content creator producing a regular publication with their audience and pursue the dialogue on a set cadence. Each post took a format specific to a theme and was easily retrievable by other TikTok users under the influencer's profile (*Figure 1c*). As predicted by previous literature, influencers created a relationship with the public by delivering information and expertise to the audience (Scheer and stern, 1992; Yuan & Lu, 2020).

Finally, the duet option improved the interactivity between the influencers and the public. The 'Duet', enabled the influencers to stitch their video along the post of another user. This practice consists in inviting the users to stitch their own video to the influencer's (*Figure 1d*). To illustrate, @justmaiko invited his audience to Duet his dance and hence take part of a campaign against electronic cigarettes vaping threatening the health of young adults. Same

@ashlenite invited her audience to sing in duo and stitch their results if they knew the lyrics. TikTok integrated functions eased the dialogue and the engagement between the influencer and their audience by adding interactivity in their relationship.

4.1.3 Sound driver of authenticity and popularity

The findings from the analysis revealed the importance of sound in influencers self-representation. Sound on TikTok was a factor of popularity as the posts with an “Original Sound” gathered more likes (between +1m likes and 500k likes) than the ones reusing a TikToker sound. Original sound meant that the sound played was created by the influencer specifically for the post (*Figure 2*). Although influencers using external sound was frequent amongst #ad and #sponsored posts, the posts with an original sound, gathered more likes (+1million to 500k likes). On the contrary, in @geagsfit the sound usage was not well managed and impacted the interactivity of post as he gathered 35 likes, 5 comments and 0 shares for his #paidad post. #ad and #sponsored posts used ‘other TikToker sound’ and ‘popular music’ more than #paidad and #paidpartnership. @moh_preccy used the song *Juice by Lizzo*, which was a quite popular sound when published. The change of music was associated with a personal change for the influencer, @cjtoocy when evoking her appurtenance to the LGBT community changed the music while also endorsing the dating app for this community. Finally, ‘Karaoke’, ‘singing’ and ‘lip-syncing’ were also indications of the favourite activities of the influencer and an opportunity to link up with the audience. The influencer also adapted his/her voice to the audience they addressed. For example, @bentist had a neutral tone to expose an issue related to orthodontia but used an informal tone of voice while addressing advice to his teenage audience.

4.1.4 Audience inclusion in everyday lives

Influencers managed their content to be relatable for their audience. They were open to exhibit their weaknesses, skills and daily lives. Also, TikTok content creators lifted the barrier between them and their audience by involving them in their routine and their personal experience. To tighten the gap with their followers, influencers emphasised on situations their followers easily relate to. The idea is to softly enforce influencers personal experiences in their content, with the implicit approval of the audience. This appeared in the situations the audience could encounter on a daily basis in real life, in their romantic or

professional lives. For instance, @arianalee9 pretended to be late for a date with her boyfriend and @joshsadowski filmed himself during a business meeting. Accordingly, influencers also gave advice to their closest friends with the video. To illustrate, @dayyanaa advised her friend to break up with her boyfriend following an argument. Because influencers encountered situations their follower could get involved in, their behaviour enhanced their familiarity with the public.

To emphasise on the close relationship with their public, influencers also used markers of similarity in their sponsored posts. These markers appeared in the influencers word choice and tone of voice. They used abbreviations such as “smh” (meaning shaking my head) and “the meal is 🔥 ngl” (meaning this meal is fire, not gonna lie), words regularly found in the influencer’s lexical. The tone of voice also played a significant role in the familiarity influencers wanted to instil in their posts. An example was @bentist, who gave recommendations on why not taking off braces without the agreement and the supervision of a dentist. At first his tone was quite neutral but as he went on with his advice, he changed to a relaxed and casual tone. He also used the expressions “my man”, “hear me out”, “weird”, clearly indicating that the influencer was addressing one of his followers and gave him personalised advice on his dental treatment. As pointed out by Abidin (2015), influencers use the endearment indicators towards their audience. This way they accentuate the willingness of influencer to create community purpose. As a consequence, influencers maintained and enhanced their friendship linkage with their audience.

Finally, TikTok influencers presented the backstage of their lives and voluntarily involved the audience in their routine and their everyday lives. For instance, @richellezz proposed the viewers to “help me choose a Valentine’s day dress” and @dixiedamelio proposed the viewers to “watch me go from WAKE UP to GLOW UP ✨” (Figure 3). Interestingly, when influencers addressed directly to their audience, the number of comments also amplified revealing the proximity with the public. This practice was quite successful as the posts encouraging to comment the posts generated up to 500k comments. In the same idea, the content creators shared also the glamorous and luxurious backstage of their lives. For @nabela, her house aesthetic has been the focus of a post endorsing the brand GotMilk. She presented the Christmas decoration and the activities she was doing around her house during the holiday season. @addisonre, however, presented the benefits linked to her

influencer position. In the post, she is seen outdoors by a swimming pool receiving make up and getting her hair professionally done prior to a photoshoot for the brand American Eagle. Although the audience is not directly addressed in the endorsed publications, influencers looked to the camera, use the voice over function and the subtitles to immerse the audience in their environment.

4.1.5 Brand-influencer relationship

As approached in previous research, the relationship between the brand and the influencers plays a role in the audience attitude towards the brand (De Cicco, Iacobucci, Paglia, 2020; Shan, Chen & Lin, 2019; Choi & Rifon, 2012; Till and Busler, 2013). In sponsored content, the values presented by the influencers throughout their self-representation should match the brand values. Also, the influencers showed a particular interest in being coherent with the current events to encourage their audience to emulate their actions.

Influencers created sponsored content for brands in line with their occupations and values. Influencers exposed their domain of interest in their post, meaning the field they are recognised for is part of their self-representation. Also, as exposed previously, influencers combine trustworthiness and expertise to propose congruent content (Feng et al, 2020; Ohanian, 1990; Sah et al, 2018). For instance, @dr.staci.t, with her username and the subtitles of the post, she underlined her profession as gynaecologist. Here, it was coherent to introduce herself with her profession while introducing, FLO app, an application helping women to manage their birth control journey. Interestingly, the coherence with the brand also manifested through the influencers values. An example was the significance of sustainability and environment matters amongst the TikTok posts studied. @abigailmartin was a young female travelling alone with her van. In her posts, she regularly posted on where she travelled to and gave advices to her audience on how she organise herself for her daily tasks, while she is away. As she emphasised on the significance of a sustainable lifestyle, she endorsed the brand My Earth Breeze proposing reusable washing bags. This example illustrates Shan, Chen and Lin (2020), argument on the integration of the brand in the self-representation of the influencer. The content creator gives an honest opinion on the brand which has for consequence to resonate for the public. As proposed by previous literature, the aim was to provide the audience with signals and meanings acknowledging

the capacity of influencers to endorse a specific brand to TikTok users (Anderson, 1976; McCracken, 1989).

Moreover, the purpose behind the brand-congruence model was to inspire the influencer's community to buy the product in the perspective to mimic the content creator (Till and Busler, 2013; Choi and Rifon, 2012). Also, this model increased the fit between the brand and the influencers but also ensure a positive evaluation from the consumer (Shan, Chen and Lin, 2020). @andreaespadatv showed in her content how frenetic the rhythm of a new and professionally active mother can be. In the post, she was seen with her baby, using her computer, doing her hair and make-up and breast pumping, all at the same time (*Figure 4a*). Understandably, she endorsed the brand Dr. Browns, which produces electrical breast pumps as this allowed her to pursue her activities prior to feed her baby. The post illustrates the influencer's understanding of being a mother, a woman and the necessity to have at hand for such tools. This type of posts was appreciated as it gathered 2.5millions of likes and around 10k comments.

In addition, the duet option assisted the influencer and the brand congruence. Usually used between a content creator and another individual, this function was also used between a content creator and a brand. Often, brands created TikTok accounts to interact either with their customer base or with the influencers endorsing their products. These findings sent back to the Khamis et al, (2016) argument that technology is now helping the brand-influencer congruence. A good example was the duet between @charlidamelio and a Dunkin' Donuts staff member, where they crafted a video where the barista confectioned 'The Charli' and the influencer danced during the preparation (*Figure 4b*). Additionally, this aspect humanised the brand as it gave the ability to the influencer to connect directly with the brand, themselves promoting their products. The personification of the brand through the content and positive live reaction from the influencer revealed a close relationship behind the scenes with the brand and hence the proximity between the brand action and the content creator mindset.

4.1.6 Influencer coherence with environment

Secondly, the influencers showed a particular interest in being coherent with the current events to encourage their audience to emulate their actions. The objective was also to blend the TikTok influencer usual content with the promotional collaboration. The

importance of the influencer's coherence with their environment was to ensure a linearity in the general depiction of the influencers and of the brand and its surrounding environment. Anderson (1976) and McCracken (1989), emphasised on the transfer of sentiments from the influencer audience to the brand potential consumer and vice versa. In this, it remained necessary to drive a particular attention to the current events. Hence, they shown a particular attention to the Covid-19 guidelines. Some influencers created content on the latter in collaboration with the government to propagate safety message amongst the TikTok users. They consciously applied the rules, while providing advice to the audience to deal with the guidelines against the pandemic. Increasingly, the case of the Irish government stood out. Several Irish influencers were commissioned to open the debate on young adults efforts against the spread of the virus. Their role was to interact with the audience in the comments section, gather the most relevant questions and ask them to the Deputy Chief Medical Officer of Ireland, Dr Ronan Glynn. The idea behind this campaign was to propagate safety messages, deconstruct stereotypes directed to young adults. Additionally, the usage of TikTok aligned with previous researches emphasising the importance for an audience to recognise their values in a product endorsed as it encourages the behaviour emulation (Choi and Rifon, 2012; McCracken, 1989).

Finally, the ultimate objective of the brand-influencer model is to blend in the influencer personality and activities with the promotional content (Shan et al., 2020). By doing so, the collaboration between both parties is seamless. Based on previous studies, the audience attitude towards the brand is enhanced and the willingness for the public to emulate the content creator behaviour in real life is increased (Shan et al., 2020). With this goal in mind, the case of the brand Bang Energy stood out. The brand focused on influencers with a high and low number of followers and specialised in different domains. In their posts, influencers systematically tagged the brand alongside the @bangenergy.ceo within the caption section, which was the only indicator of a collaboration between the brand and the creators (*Figure 5*). Interestingly, although the brand was never verbally mentioned by the influencer, the product, a can of soda with the logo visible, was always on the screen. The influencers performed with the product in such a way that their domain of interest was first exposed. Hence, @kazsawyer, did prank with their friends, @thebentist, giving orthodontia advices and @haueterfamily, filming the family life. The content creators produced content as per

usual, only including the branded can of soda in the video. Here we noticed a complete blend between the Bang Energy mindset and the influencers' talents.

4.2 Sponsored posts strategies

In this part, TikTok influencers used specific techniques to sponsor products and brands on the platform. In this two categories stood out. First, the product was depicted positively in the influencers content. Second, the social media influencer demonstrated in their content professionalism.

4.2.1 Product-led presentation

A positive description of the product served the influencers strategy for their sponsored post (Delbaere, Michael & Philips, 2020). Influencers structured their publications to present the endorsed product in the best light. While describing the product, endorsers performed with the item, enhancing the interactivity of the post.

The videos followed a detailed layout, highlighting the product endorsed and uncovering its specificities. Firstly, the influencer presented an issue they faced. Usually, the problem was either encountered by the influencer or evoked in the comments section by the audience. For each type of post, the matter impacted a significant aspect of their lives. Especially for Makeup, Body and Haircare influencers, their physical appearance altered (Figure 6). Second, according to the influencer, the product presented the most reliable solution to the issue. Of course, the item was praised for its benefits, advantages and compared to products from other brands. Usually, they weighted up the product to highlight the beneficial composure of this product for the influencer lifestyle. In other cases, such as @blossominggroseandco, they presented the composure of the item with images of the product in the video. Later on, the influencer focused on the usage and the demonstration of the product front camera. (Figure 6). Interestingly, the influencers used the product front camera and advised their audience while consuming the product. They interacted with the audience by proposing to comment on the post or share for more visibility. Moreover, the influencer provided information on where to find the item. Sometimes, influencers emphasised the ease to find the product in direct proximity with their public. Other times, with a link in the profile bio or the caption, it was possible to reach the product's online page. Finally, sponsored videos often concluded the post with an

incentive to stimulate the audience to buy the product. Generally, it was a promo code or a discount available for a limited period. Influencers gave information on the product endorsed. Likewise, they gave information on the affordability of the product and its composure. Still in the willingness to be transparent with their audience on the content they created, influencers included disclaimers, warnings, announcements or the mention “do not attempt” prior to the start of the video. In case of a challenge or a contest, influencers were transparent on the terms and condition to win the game.

Content creators shared the product along with a performance of their skills. These skills were usually the reason why the influencer gathered many impressions. The skills included dancing, singing, comedy, technology knowledge for instance. The influencers performed with the product endorsed and particularly, dancing while wearing or applying the product. This was favoured by the branded challenges in which the influencers participated. For example, @thepitmansisters created a dance with the challenge #exprESSIEyourself where they danced and changed outfits to match the ESSIE nail polishes. @kallmekris and @beastteater who presented the product through humoristic sketch. Along with previous literature, the influencers positive and praised performance rebounded on the presentation of the product (Zhang, 2010). By fully integrating the product in the publication the influencer enhanced the vision of the endorsed item.

To add on the positive depiction of the sponsored post, the sound contributed to the sharing of the brand message. As proposed by Belanche et al., (2020), the interactivity of a sponsored post impacts the audience perception of a brand. Understandably, brands took the opportunity to create challenges to enhance the audience experience with the brand. Brand challenge was associated with specific sounds. Generally speaking, the challenges on the platform are well-received and took any form of art, although the dance challenges are the most popular. The usage of a hashtag such as #danceAWESOME or #exprESSIEyourself disclosed the sponsored nature of the post. Hence it is a way for the brand to access the audience easily through an activity they can relate to.

4.2.2 Production professionalisation

Generally, sponsored TikTok videos demonstrated the influencers. Through the features already included in the app and the influencers personal skills, the videos were high quality. Also the usage of sound on the platform was mastered by the influencers which

enhanced the experience of a sponsored post. TikTok main purpose is to propose entertaining content to their users (TikTok, 2021). In this, influencers have at hand a large range of embedded features. They used enhanced background, subtitles and filters to highlight their content. The objective here was to propose content where the content creators improve the visual accessibility of their content. For instance, the images integrated within the green screen effect, represented the product on the website where it was available. It was also used to show videos previously posted by the influencers and sometimes coming from other social media platforms. Hence this accentuated the interactivity and the vividness of the posts and show immediately when the viewer significant information (Basu, 2021; Tafesse and Wood, 2021). Specially for tutorials, the influencer voice was synced with subtitles embedded in the posts. Generally, it gave information on the steps to follow to reproduce the tutorial. In some other cases, the subtitles used indicated the incentive link to the sponsored codes. Influencers proposed to their audience promocodes and discounts to be used in a limited amount of time and personalised with the username. They showed how some visual effects are realised and how their integrated them to their content.

Influencers used professional material, such as a professional camera, sound equipment and video capture equipment such as tripod. They showed the production backstage in the sponsored posts. This add to the idea of the influencer determination to encourage the audience emulate their lifestyle. Also ring lights were massively used and hence gave an advantageous lighting to the influencers. In a similar vein, the videos were scripted and shot with professional equipment. For @steezy.kane, the final result of the video looked similar to videos on YouTube as the result was professional compared to most of TikTok posts. Usually, the quality of the video is higher for influencers with a high followers number and likes. The app allowed influencers to create content from scratch with help of their phone camera. TikTok proposed a series of integrated tools to edit the video directly from the app. As a result, the influencers having a lower engagement proved a high understanding of the platform features and demonstrated a high level of editing skills. In branded posts, music was a frequently used strategy. The brands working with influencers created music, tailored for TikTok with which the influencer performed. For instance, the brand Essie created the sound 'expreESSIE yourself - @essie x SirenThaGoddess'. In this sound, the name of the brand and the specificities of the product

are repeated (i.e the nail polish drying faster than average; 'fun'; fresh'; colour choice availability). Another interesting case was the @bp_tiktok and Samsung sponsored post. The music was made by the well-known K-pop group Black Pink to endorse the new Samsung Galaxy A. The sound was a collaboration with the brand and signalled in the post sound section of as 'original sound - @bp_tiktok (Contains from: Awesome song - BLACKPINK)'. Throughout the 18 seconds video, the lyrics repeated the technological features of the new smartphone, "awesome screen, awesome camera, long lasting battery life". The brand name was not repeated in the sound but visuals signals, such as the performers hands and the Samsung posters in the background, emphasised on the close collaboration and relationship between the brand and the influencers.

This was directed to the audience and created a bridge between the influencer and the follower (Yuan & Lou, 2020; Delbaere, Michael and Philips, 2020)

5 Discussion

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This research investigated how do influencers use self-representation in their sponsored posts on TikTok. As influencer marketing is becoming more predominant on social media, so is the attention towards the influencers strategies to represent themselves. As a results, influencers used their personality traits to depict themselves under the brightest light. Also, the proximity with the audience in the sponsored post is particularly significant as the attachment to the influencer resides in this self-representation. Every day, millions of individuals post content on TikTok (TikTok,2021). Hence it is crucial for the content creators to develop sponsored strategies that are efficient and that match with the expectations of their audience. The findings highlighted the strategies used to positively depict of the endorsed product. In this aspect, the TikTok embedded features and the sound usage enabled influencers to produce interactive, captivating and engaging content.

5.1.1 Self-representation indicators

The present research tackled how influencers represented themselves on TikTok. First, the findings highlighted the importance of visual self-representation amongst TikTok influencers. They presented themselves through positivity cues enhancing their emotions, personal skills and authenticity. Influencers were happy and rarely pictured sad faces. By presenting themselves in a joyful lens, they emphasised on the post's entertainment and positivity. This findings joined Kim and Limbert (2012) on the usage of smile in the post as a driver to encourage engagement amongst the public. Accordingly, the influencer positivity cues in the post fulfil TikTok purpose to propose entertaining and positive content to the users (TikTok, 2020). Furthermore, influencers drew a particular attention of their physical appearance. Interestingly, they were seen wearing trendy and advantageous clothes and using digital filters enhancing their faces features. Along with Rettberg (2016), the usage of filters helps the influencer to enhance their physical attractiveness. Overall, TikTok influencers visual representation was driven by their positivity and the importance to always appear attractive in their video.

Second, the findings underlined how influencers used written self-representation in their posts. Overall, the findings followed previous literature findings on the usage of emojis in influencers posts as tool to communicate emotions in the written elements of social media

profiles (Ge & Grezel, 2018). Also, emojis signalled the influencer willingness to open themselves to conversation. The emojis representing faces and shaped hearts highlighted previous researches findings on the intention of social media influencers to be accessible to their audience (Abidin, 2015; Danesi, 2016 in Ge & Gretzel, 2018; Highfield & Leaver, 2016). However, on TikTok, the emojis usage sometime fulfilled a different purpose on TikTok. They were the extension of the influencer emotional cues. In this, they displayed a number of emotions in their videos that were then duplicated with the help of emojis in the caption.

Finally, this research allowed understanding how sponsored post on TikTok induced the brand-influencer congruence model. This research uncovered that self-representation is the starting point of the link between the brand and the influencer. Indeed, because they are presenting themselves in a positive, attractive, entertaining and out-going way, brands are willing to kick off partnerships with these individuals. As much as content creators self-representation attracts the audience to follow an influencer, brands focus their personality to match with their brand values and motivations (De Cicco, Iacobucci & Paglia, 2020; Shan, Chen & Lin, 2019). On TikTok, influencer self-representation matched the brand purpose. However, as proposed by the Kim and Kim (2020) and Shan et al., (2020), the goal is to blend the sponsored cues within the influencer posting techniques. It means that when encountering a post, the viewer would not be able to differentiate the sponsoring indicators from the influencer usual content. They generally signalled the partnership with the hashtags #sponsored, #ad, #paidpartnership or #paidad, as suggested by Kim and Kim (2020). Interestingly the brand Bang Energy succeeded in merging influencer's skills with the brand message. This research does not allow to explore further the implications for the audience in terms of ad recognition. However, brand integrating TikTok influencer in their strategies enable them to fully express themselves, even in the frame of a sponsored post. In the way, TikTok influencers fulfil the argument that brands use influencer marketing is because influencers are capable to convey their opinion in a more authentic way than traditional advertising (Kim & Song, 2018).

5.1.2 Parasocial interaction on TikTok

The present research demonstrated how influencers induced parasocial interaction with their audience in sponsored content. First, through their TikTok publications,

influencers are sharing a part of their daily lives to their audience. The insider eye in their house, the backstage of the video creation and the perks linked to their position as influencers are some elements content creators integrated in their sponsored posts to induce parasocial interaction. Aligned with previous researches, the influencers in our sample revealed the most intimate part of their lives in the hope of creating a close relationship with their audience (Erdogan, 1999; Duffy and Kong, 2020).

By revealing a part of their personalities, influencers targeted the needs and interests of their audience (Khamis et al. 2016; Tahna, 2016). This added to previous findings regarding the willingness to display interactivity and familiarity in the sponsored content (Bond, 2018; Choi and Rifon, 2012). Compared to other social media platforms like Instagram or Facebook, where the influencer always seemed to be flawless, TikTok influencers are more open to their community by divulging their routine and daily habits in their posts. Abbreviations and expressions used by the influencers were often reused by other TikTok users (PopBuzz, 2018). It was also the opportunity to address the audience on a casual tone to instil a sentiment of commonality to their audience. Parasocial interaction was also induced with the help of the TikTok integrated features. Hence, the 'Reply to', the 'Duet' and the posts series options enabled the audience to consistently interact with the influencer. Since they replied with a video, the influencer personalised their answers to the users to enhance the interactivity.

5.1.3 Sponsored techniques on TikTok

This research enabled to identify the techniques influencers used to create sponsored content on TikTok. The objective of sponsored content is for the influencer to positively depict products in exchange of financial reward (Delbaere, Michael & Philips, 2020). On TikTok, influencers worked on the publication layout to positively enrich the perception of the product endorsed. Through the structure of their content, they highlighted the product specificities, benefits and advantages. Interestingly, they used their own experience to deliver endorsement in their posts, personalising the understanding of the product usage. This research also highlighted the professionalism of TikTok publications. With the integrated assets, influencers provided a complete brand experience to their followers. With the usage of visuals assets, sound features and interactivity, the audience got a broad overview of the brand and the product through the lens of the influencer.

Endorsed posts on TikTok join the previous researches findings on the significance to produce entertaining, vivid and interactive publications (Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Bruno, 2020).

Compared to other social media platforms, TikTok influencers put their personality at the service of sponsored posts. Especially by using their skills to present a positive image of the brand and the product. Influencers made sure their skills were easily duplicable. As a result, sponsored content included gamification in their post to ensure that they fully engage their audience in their posts. Therefore, challenges are gamifying the experience with the brand and encouraged the users to replicate their favourite influencers' routine (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Interestingly, these findings related to the relationship between the influencer and their audience. Both parties had the opportunity to live the same experience related to a product at the same time, facilitating the interactivity beyond the frame of the content. These findings align with previous literature arguing that the efficiency of sponsored content resides in the interactivity between the endorser and its public (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Tafesse and Wood, 2021; Yuan & Lou, 2020). Furthermore, this research revealed a new direction in sound usage on social media. On TikTok, this feature is crucial as any post needed to carry sound to be published on the platform (Takumi, 2020; TikTok, 2021). The results revealed that sound enhanced the experience with the brand on TikTok sponsored posts. The sound revealed information on the product endorsed but also showcased the relationship between the brand and the influencer. The sound matched the brand mindset and slogan to ensure that it was entertaining and appealing to other users. Interestingly, the branded sound was used mostly by influencers with a high reach.

From the presentation of the product to the engagement with the influencers, the sound used on the platform engaged the community. From this, other TikTok users reproduced the challenge with the same music and mimicked the influencer performance.

5.1.4 Source credibility model in sponsored posts

Finally, the research highlighted how influencers presented credibility in their content to their audience. Overall, the influencers succeeded showcasing trustworthiness through disclosure. They used hashtags underlining the sponsored nature of their content and they introduced disclaimers and warnings in their post to ensure the safety of their

audience. Previous studies already pointed out the importance for content creators to bring trusted while testing the product endorsed front camera and staying open to their audience feedback and concerns (Xiao, Wang and Chan-Olmsted, 2018; Wiedmann & Mettenheim, 2020). Definitely, this uplifted transparency displayed in the sponsored posts. As a result, transparency is a dimension to be included the source credibility model. In a way, these findings reassured the merits of the influencers' endorsement and resecured the benevolent intention behind the post. As previously stated, attractiveness is part of the source credibility model. However and confirming previous literature, attractiveness is multi-dimensional (Amos et al., 2008; Taillon et al., 2020). This is particularly the case on TikTok as the concept of attractiveness demonstrated in through the verbal cues, the specific tone and their behaviour front camera the influencers presented in their publications. The voice tone and the expressions used played a significant role in the message acknowledgement of the brand by the audience. Overall, agreed with McGuire (1995), the influencer's behaviour front camera enhanced their likability, familiarity and extroversion. As predicted by previous researches, expertise was the less prominent concept in the results (Ohanian, 1990; Weismueller et al., 2020). Although some influencers evoked their expertise in their post, this was not a central argument within the TikTok videos. Along with trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise, influencers exposed authenticity to their audience. Authenticity in itself is largely researched by brands while involving in influencer marketing. In a way, this is a reason why influencers are chosen over other types of the endorser. Going along with their self-representation, authenticity is the add-on factor as capable of pushing relevant content for their audience. The concept facilitated the construction of sub-categories on TikTok where influencers can develop their community and address the audience in a specific way. Hence, influencers' sponsored post preserved their authenticity by providing the audience with content they deeply relate to. TikTok and brands enabled content creators to fully express themselves and are even more encouraged to do so while endorsing brands.

5.2 Practical implications

As TikTok gets more integrated features, brand marketers should pay attention to several practical implications. Many users on the platform are under 18 years old. Hence, from a legal standpoint, brand marketers should pay attention to the brand target and

objectives prior to starting a conversation with TikTok influencers. Since minors cannot purchase products, disclaimers within the endorsed posts should be included to avoid misconceptions about the advertisement nature. For transparency purposes, the influencers need to input the #ad, #sponsored, #paidad or #paidpartnership before publishing their post. It remains mandatory for them to do so and ensure that the social users are aware of the advertisement aspect of the content. Also, as TikTok grows and keeps innovating in their add-on features, influencers will be able to produce even more creative content. However, marketers will need to pay a particular attention on how they reveal their sponsorship with the brand. More and more, content on TikTok influencers flood the paid nature of the content to make it disappear under performance or interest. Then, influencers on TikTok provide various ways to endorse the product. Depending on their numbers of followers, influencers use different hashtags to disclose their partnership and hence reach diverse audiences. Therefore, focusing on high reach influencers, meaning mega-influencer (more than 1 million followers), is relevant for brand awareness campaigns, where the brand aims at reemphasizing its image and mindset to the younger generations. Additionally, mid-level TikTok users, meaning macro-influencers (between 1 million and 500k followers), are interesting to reveal a product launch and propose demonstrations and tutorials to their audience. Finally, micro-influencers should be included in marketing campaigns where revenue is expected. They could endorse the product and propose an affiliate link to convert the audience's views in sales. The reason behind it is that micro-influencers are more inclined to create a close relationship with the consumer and would personalize the advice to the future public by being relatable. The sound on the platform is a significant element to take into account in content creation. When on Instagram, the sound was a feature mostly reserved for the story, on TikTok, the sound is part of the experience of the user. Hence, the marketers should carefully choose the song or the verbatim used by the influencers in their posts. As seen, the branded sound should be entertaining enough to stimulate the viewer to reproduce the dance and interact with the brand. Also, the usage of the words plays a significant role in the audience identification of the brand message. Marketers should not use celebrities to endorse brands on TikTok unless their posting frequency is high enough to create a true relationship with the audience. Their environment is less relatable than the influencers as their content lacks authenticity. This rather sends back to traditional advertising.

5.3 Limitations & suggestion for future researches

Naturally, this research does not come without limitations and suggestions for further studies. First the sample could be refined to a stricter number of criteria. The results gave an overview of the current trend and techniques in sponsored content on TikTok but future researches should focus the analysis on one or two type of post at once. The sound usage on TikTok is preponderant and should be part future analysis. For this, discourse analysis would help to capture the in-depth meaning behind the influencer voice or songs. From this research, the Makeup, Body and Haircare products were quite popular amongst the users. Hence, a focus on this type of influencers and endorsed content would help to get a better understanding of these products. For this research, content analysis enabled a systematic analysis of the TikTok posts. In addition, most of the influencers studied were based in the United States. However, TikTok introduction videos for Businesses revealed that Asian users and content creators used different techniques while working with brands (TikTok, 2021). For instance, the filters applied on the influencer face, the tone of voice used or the presentation of the brand focus more on the attractiveness of the influencer. These elements were drastically different from influencers in Europe or the United States and should be further studied.

Moreover, using an experimental study to explore how influencers induced attractivity on this new social media and how they use this asset to engage the audience in new TikTok challenges could be a field of interest for future researches. Also, still using an experiment study, further studies should investigate how the TikTok algorithm is working on the users while encountering branded and sponsored content. It would be valuable to comprehend how the audience reacts to this type of video in the context of the For You page. Are they checking out the brand directly? To what extent are they buy the product immediately after the endorsement? Finally, small businesses are using the platform to promote their brand to the public. Frequently on the app, small company owners take the stage to present the product and their production processes. To this extent, exploring how small business are using TikTok to promote themselves is indubitably something to look into.

6 Conclusion

This research aimed to answer the research question: How do influencers use self-representation in their sponsored posts on TikTok?

Specifically, this research also explored how the influencer used self-representation on TikTok. The main findings were that influencers self-representation conveyed a reliable and positive personality to the audience. They were able to share their emotions and sentiments while endorsing brands on the app. The influencers self-representation on TikTok was also encouraged by their overall attractiveness, by appearing appealing physically, with a special emphasis in their faces traits. The present study underlined the multi-dimensionality of attractiveness and thus, could not be limited to physical traits. Hence, Influencers self-representation and attractiveness was also verbal and written. They used emojis to extend their current mood into their caption and pictured themselves as overtly positive while using specific types of emojis. Then, this research brought to light the parasocial interactivity in the frame of sponsored content. To induce this practice, influencers propose interactive and engaging post to initiate a conversation with their audience. Interestingly, TikTok embedded features eases the stream of information between both parties. Some of the features, including the Reply to, encouraged users to create and interact on each other videos. Finally, the studied influencers largely included other TikTok users to enhance a feeling of familiarity and similarity. Then the study answered the sub-question on how TikTok influencer induced parasocial interacting with their sponsored content. It also questioned the techniques used by the influencer while creating sponsored content on TikTok. Finally, this research revealed how influencers use the source credibility model in their sponsored post on the social media platform. Rather than being applicable to a single aspect of the TikTok content, the source credibility actually found indicators in the all the part mentioned before. Definitely, trustworthiness was at the centre of TikTok videos as influencers showed overtly disclose their partnerships with brand. Their reaction while endorsing the product were quite raw which highlighted their impartiality. The expertise and the attractiveness walked in pair as both were closely related of the overall self-representation of the influencer. These concepts were arguments to encourage the brand towards purchase. Finally, authenticity remains a priority for TikTok posts as these influencers matched the interests of the audience. Practical implications and suggestions for future researches were provided especially on the significance for the

brands to carefully chose their influencers in an ever-changing digital world. A priori, TikTok will evolve at the discretion of its users. Developing their creativity will be a significant challenge as it seems like the sound-video formula conquer already well-implemented platforms, such as Instagram. To this extent, influencers and brand will continue to collaborate in a landscape welcoming entertainment and interactivity.

7 Literature

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APPENDIX A – Preliminary code book

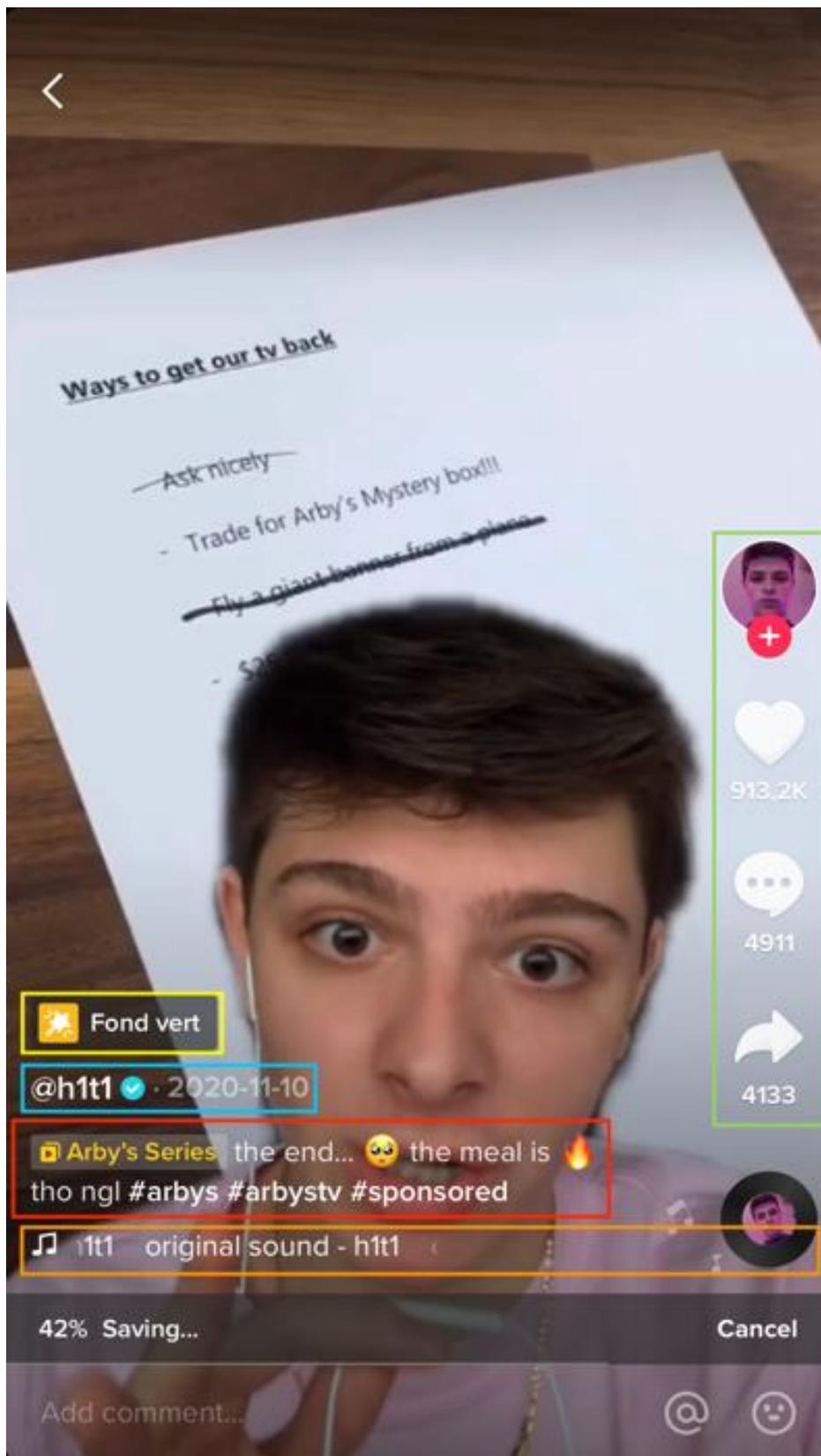
Account information	
Username	Refers to the TikTok account the posted the video
Official Verified Account	Refers to whether or not the TikTok account is verified, represented by a blue check mark (verified badge)
Credentials list in Bio	Refers to what credentials or name titles are listed on the TikTok account bio who posted the video
Website Link	Refers to whether the account has a link in their bio
Interactivity of the post	
Number of likes	Total number of likes the video received
Number of comments	Total number of comments left on the video
Number of shares	Total number of times the video was shared
Length of the video	Length of the post divided as follow: +30 seconds video ; -30 seconds video
Type of the post	
Entertainment	Refers to the different types of entraining content: Humor, artistic, enjoyment
Informational	Refers to the different types of informational content: product specification and technical details on product attributes
Transactional	Refers to the different types of transactional content: price promotions, loyalty programs, reward audience
Vividness of the post	
Setting	Refers to where the video is filmed (indoor, outdoor)
Theme of the post	Refers to the influencer's major topic theme in the post: Tech posts Fashion Posts, Food and Drinks posts, Make up Body and Hair Care posts, Sketch and Comedy posts, Entertainment posts
Emotion(s)	Refers to the influencer's major emotion involved; classified as excited, moved, humour or no specific emotion
Character(s)	Refers to the character(s) being shown in the video; divided into influencers, relatives, friends, external characters

Sound	Refers to the background music used, including no music, music selected from the TikTok music library, and original music
Talking/ No Talking/ Lip Synching	Refers to whether the character(s) in the video were talking, not talking or lip synching
Subtitle	Refers to whether or not subtitles were present in the post
Caption	Refers to caption posted with the video
Visual effects	Refers to whether or not the influencer used visual effects (Green screen effect, filters)
Hashtags	Refers to the hashtags used by the uploader in the video's caption
Gender	Refers to the gender of the character(s) in the video

Public interaction

Trustworthiness	Refers to the disclosure of information about their partnerships, giving information and opinions about the product; presence of hashtags #Ad, #sponsored #paidpartnership, #paidad
Authenticity	Refers to the influencer ability to use endearment language with their audience, show behind the scenes material, display mundane practices, real-life meeting with their followers
Interactivity	Refers to whether or not the audience is addressed, verbally or in the caption

APPENDIX B – Caption analysis



APPENDIX C – Video analysis

The screenshot displays a video analysis tool interface. On the left, a video player shows a woman in a black sequined top and black pants dancing on a patterned rug. The video title is "@bp_tiktok - 1.10 #ad". The interface is divided into several sections:

- Character 1 (14:1):** A list of tags including: -30 sec video, Audience addressed YES, Awesome, Coordinated gesture, Dancing, Happy, Influencer sound in collabor..., Light, Look camera, Trendy clothes, Wears make up, and Woman.
- Character 2 (14:2):** A list of tags including: Coordinated gesture, Dancing, Demonstrating the product ..., Description of the product, Expertise domain, Look camera, Performing with the product, Presentation of the product, Specificities of the product, and Woman. This section is highlighted with a red box.
- Character 3 (14:3):** A list of tags including: Artistic, Awesome, Awesome camera, Awesome screen, Branded accessoire, Closeness between charact..., Coordinated gesture, Creativity, Dancing, Happy, Repetition in the sound, Staging, and Woman.
- Character 4 (14:4):** A list of tags including: Coordinated gesture, Description of the product, Entertaining video, No Product, No talking, Repetition in the sound, Voice over, and Woman.

At the bottom of the video player, there is a playback control bar with a volume icon, a 1x speed indicator, a 100% zoom indicator, and a timestamp of 0:00:18.877. Below the video player is a waveform visualization.

FIGURES

Figure 1a - 'Reply to' function



Figure 1b – Direct recommendations to the public

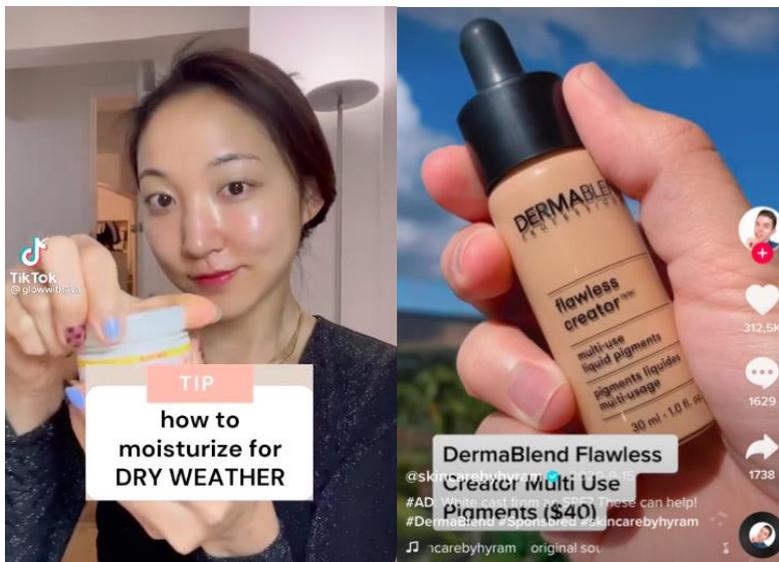


Figure 1c – Series of posts



Figure 1d – Duet



Figure 2 – Original Sound

Original sound – dangmattsmith / 1.9 millions likes; 5597 comments; 25.4k shares



Figure 3 – Daily lives backstage



Figure 4a - Brand-congruence model with @andreaespadatv and the brand Dr. Browns



Figure 4b – Brand congruence model with @charlidamelio and the brand Dunkin’Donuts

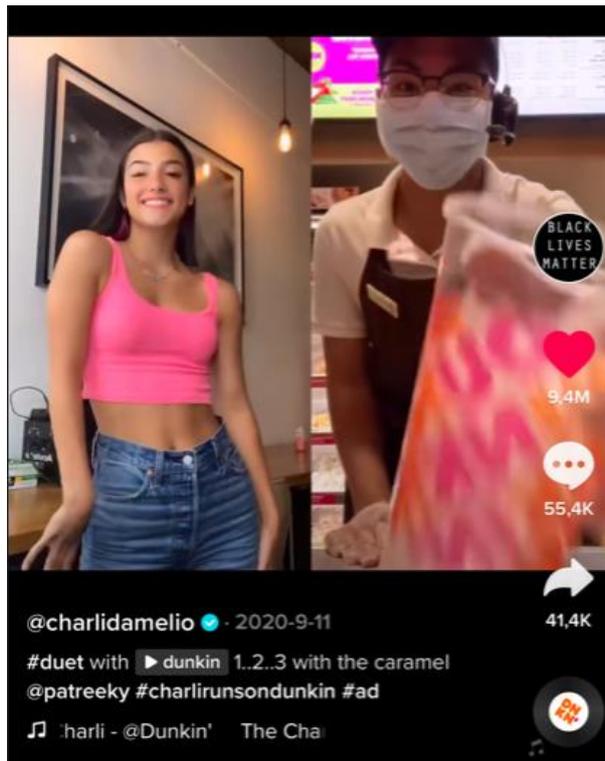


Figure 5 – Influencer in domain of interest



Figure 6 – Product-led presentation

