

# Disclosed and covert advertising in Instagram influencer stories: Transparency, trust, and engagement intentions among young Tunisian followers

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**Abstract---**This article focuses on two formats of influencer advertising in Instagram stories: disclosed advertising and covert advertising. It seeks to understand how these two forms are perceived by young Tunisian followers in terms of message transparency, trust in the influencer, and desire to interact with the story. To answer this question, we combined a quantitative study, based on an online questionnaire completed by 120 young Instagram users divided between a disclosed advertising condition and a covert advertising condition, with a qualitative study using focus groups. This approach provided us with both quantitative results and more detailed testimonials. The results show that disclosed advertising is considered more transparent and strengthens trust in the influencer, while covert advertising generates more immediate engagement with the story. These findings suggest that a compromise should be sought between transparency, trust, and effectiveness, by embracing the advertising dimension while working on the format of the stories.

**Keywords---**Instagram stories, influencer marketing, disclosed advertising, covert advertising, perceived transparency, trust in the influencer, engagement intentions, young Tunisian followers.

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## Introduction

Today, Instagram is one of the most widely used social networks, with 2 billion active users worldwide in 2025<sup>1</sup>. This massive presence makes it an essential channel for brands in their advertising strategies. Initially known for photo sharing, Instagram has now expanded and offers a wide range of formats (live videos, Reels, stories, carousels) that shape consumer habits and the way brands communicate. In recent years, Instagram has established itself as one of the leading communication platforms for brands and businesses thanks to the many features and formats it offers. Among the most popular formats are stories, which are becoming increasingly important.

In this context, advertising content distributed via stories by influencers does not always take the same form. There are two main types: disclosed advertising and covert advertising. Disclosed advertising is when the influencer clearly states that the content is sponsored, whereas covert advertising does not include any mention of commercial collaboration when the product or service is promoted.

From an academic perspective, numerous studies have examined the transparency of sponsored content and covert advertising on social media, looking at the impact of sponsor disclosure on the perception of the message and the response of followers. However, research specifically focused on Instagram stories, particularly on the distinction between disclosed advertising and covert advertising, is still rare.

This question is particularly relevant for Tunisia, where Instagram use and influencer marketing are growing significantly, while academic research on this topic remains relatively limited. Current research focuses mainly on the impact of influencers on brand image creation and consumer purchasing habits. To my knowledge, no study has examined the distinction between disclosed advertising and covert advertising in stories.

In this context, an important question needs to be asked: how does disclosed advertising, as opposed to covert advertising, in influencer stories on Instagram affect perceived transparency, trust in the influencer, and engagement intent among young Tunisian followers? In the rest of this article, we will use the term "followers" to refer to these young Tunisian users who follow influencers on Instagram.

To answer this question, we conducted a study combining quantitative and qualitative data from young Tunisian Instagram users.

## I. Influencer marketing and the role of influencers

On social media platforms, influencer marketing has become a major strategic tool in brand communication plans. It refers to *"all methods that involve using influential people on the web to reach a specific audience"*<sup>2</sup> (Marketing Definitions, 2023).

It aims to leverage individuals with visibility on social media to promote a brand. These individuals, known as influencers, exploit their relationship of trust with their audience to promote products or services in an authentic way. This method of promotion is based on the idea that influencers' recommendations are considered more authentic, personalized, and relatable to the audience than traditional advertising carried out directly by the advertiser.

In this sense, influencer marketing revolves around the creation of partnerships between brands and influencers on social media. Freberg et al. describe influencers as *"independent third-party endorsers who shape the attitudes of their audience through blogs, tweets, and other forms of social media"*<sup>3</sup>. This highlights the intermediary role that influencers play between the brand and the consumer.

<sup>1</sup> Définitions Marketing, Marketing d'influence. Consulté sur le site Définitions Marketing, accessed February 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Freberg, K., Graham, K., McGaughey, K., & Freberg, L. (2011). "Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality," *Public Relations Review*, 37(1), 90–92.

<sup>3</sup> De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). "Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude," *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828.

Influencers are defined by De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders as individuals who *"have a large number of followers on social media and are perceived as opinion leaders in their field."*<sup>4</sup>

Subscribers' choices regarding influencers are based on their personality and the type of content they offer. In this sense, influencer recommendations can influence subscribers' consumption choices. Influencers are considered to be key players in the dissemination of advertising messages integrated into stories in various ways, particularly in the form of disclosed advertising or covert advertising, which are the focus of our study.

## II. Influencer stories on Instagram

Introduced in 2016<sup>5</sup>, stories are now one of the main formats on social media, particularly on Instagram. According to figures provided by Meta, *"approximately 500 million users use Instagram Stories every day"*<sup>6</sup>. This ephemeral format, which lasts only 24 hours, is designed for internet users to share snapshots of their day.

With the rise of influencer marketing, stories, thanks to their nature, have become a real advertising space. Brands see this as an opportunity to incorporate their products or services into users' daily lives, relying on influencers. This format has several features that make it so appealing to brands. The fact that stories only last 24 hours encourages users to consume content quickly and repeatedly so they don't miss anything. As a result, they open stories every day to see what's new and make sure they don't miss anything that's happening.

In addition, they offer a wide range of interactive and creative features, such as polls, quizzes, stickers, and links, which facilitate communication and interaction between influencers and their audience. Stories, with their instantaneous nature, also fit seamlessly into users' daily lives, creating a special connection and authenticity between influencers and their audiences. These advanced features make stories *"a central space for visibility and engagement for brands"*<sup>7</sup> as confirmed by Amra and Elma (2025).

In this context, brands today are increasingly collaborating with influencers to offer content that is considered less formal and less intrusive than traditional advertising. And since stories are a space for sharing everyday moments, influencers follow this logic and integrate advertising into these moments of their day. For example, they show a beauty product in their morning routine, or a food product at mealtime; this is called product placement.

This strategy allows them to integrate commercial messages spontaneously into their daily lives, reducing the overly commercial nature of advertising and benefiting from their close relationship with their followers. Professional analyses emphasize that this format allows for *"combining personal storytelling, real-time interaction, and integration of sponsored messages"*<sup>8</sup>, making it a particularly attractive tool for influencer campaigns.

## III. Disclosed and covert advertising in influencer stories

In influencer stories on Instagram, there are two main types of advertising: disclosed advertising and covert advertising.

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<sup>4</sup> De Veirman, M., & Hudders, L. (2020). "Disclosing sponsored Instagram posts: The role of material connection with the brand and message-sidedness when disclosing covert advertising," *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(1), 94–130.

<sup>5</sup> Boerman, S. C., Van Reijmersdal, E. A., & Neijens, P. C. (2012). Sponsorship disclosure: Effects of duration on persuasion knowledge and brand responses, *Journal of Communication*, 62(6), 1047–1064.

<sup>6</sup> De Jans, S., Vanwesenbeeck, I., Cauberghe, V., Hudders, L., & Van Reijmersdal, E. A. (2018). The development and testing of a child-inspired advertising disclosure to alert children to digital and embedded advertising, *Journal of Advertising*, 47(3), 255–269.

<sup>7</sup> Lou, C., & Yuan, S. (2019). Influencer marketing: How message value and credibility affect consumer trust of branded content on social media, *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 19(1), 58–73.

<sup>8</sup> Evans, N. J., & Wojdyski, B. W. (2019). "Going native: Effects of disclosure position and language on the recognition and evaluation of online native advertising," *Journal of Advertising*, 48(3), 1–16.

Disclosed advertising refers to situations where the influencer, when promoting a product, service, or brand, clearly indicates that the content is paid for. This indication can be made verbally by referring to a "partnership" or "collaboration," but also through hashtags or information about the brand, such as promo codes or the website. This form of indication is referred to in the literature as "sponsorship disclosure," defined by Boerman et al. (2012)<sup>9</sup> as information given to followers to indicate that the content has been paid for by the brand to the influencer.

The second form is covert advertising, which is effectively the opposite of disclosed advertising. This is when the influencer promotes a product or service without indicating that it is a collaboration. According to Evans and Wojdowski (2019), covert advertising refers to the absence of a clear identification of the advertising nature of the content.

It is presented as simple advice or a spontaneous sharing of experience. Sometimes, the influencer even explicitly states that it is not a collaboration, when in reality it is indeed an advertising initiative. From what we can observe, this type of practice is based on the idea that by stating that the content is not paid for, subscribers will perceive the opinion as more sincere, which will increase their engagement with the story.

Several studies have been conducted on the disclosure of sponsored content and indicate that brand mentions using hashtags increase recognition of the brand's advertising nature. On the other hand, the absence of brand mentions leads followers to believe that it is a spontaneous recommendation that does not hide an advertising strategy (De Jans et al., 2018; De Veirman & Hudders, 2020).

In our study, this distinction between disclosed advertising and covert advertising will help us analyze how young Tunisians perceive the transparency of content and their attitude toward the influencer who carries the message in these two forms of advertising.

#### **IV. Perceived transparency**

In the context of our research, perceived transparency corresponds to the impression a consumer has when viewing an influencer story. They may feel that the content is advertising based on a collaboration, or conversely, that the collaborative aspect has gone unnoticed.

Research on influencer content conducted by De Veirman and Hudders (2020)<sup>10</sup> highlights that the presence of mentions enables the audience to identify the presence of a brand behind the published content.

They also show that labels such as "sponsored," "#ad," or "Paid partnership with..." reinforce the audience's ability to recognize advertising and identify the presence of a sponsor. Sometimes these labels are accompanied by statements from the influencer reminding viewers that this is a collaboration. In the same vein, Boerman (2016) asserts that communication is perceived by subscribers as more honest and less misleading when this label is clearly visible. This research shows that perceived transparency is higher when the advertising intent is clearly shown.

From this perspective, and in the context of our study, perceived transparency corresponds to the degree to which the subscriber believes that the story clearly shows the collaborative relationship between the influencer and the brand, without seeking to hide it.

In our study, we will seek to determine the extent to which this perception varies between disclosed and covert advertising. We therefore formulate the following hypothesis (H1): disclosed advertising increases the transparency perceived by subscribers compared to covert advertising.

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<sup>9</sup> Amra & Elma (2025). "Top Instagram Stories statistics 2025," Amra & Elma Digital Marketing Agency.

<sup>10</sup> De Veirman, M., & Hudders, L. (2020). Disclosing sponsored Instagram posts: The role of material connection with the brand and message-sidedness when disclosing covert advertising. *International Journal of Advertising*, 39(1), 94–130.

## V. Trust in influencers

Several studies have shown that trust in influencers is an essential pillar of the effectiveness of their recommendations. In this context, we can cite the research conducted by Lou and Yuan (2019)<sup>11</sup>, which emphasizes that the perceived credibility of the influencer reinforces trust in their published content and consequently generates positive reactions. Along the same lines, De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017)<sup>12</sup> assert that influencers are more likely to gain trust when they are perceived as well-liked and opinion leaders. However, to our knowledge, no study has examined the impact of disclosed advertising and covert advertising on trust in influencers.

In our study, we will not be basing our findings on a real influencer, but rather on a "typical" profile that respondents to our questionnaire imagine a content creator might follow on Instagram.

In the context of our research, we will examine whether the format of advertising, whether covert or disclosed, influences trust in the influencer. We therefore formulate the following hypothesis (H2): disclosed advertising strengthens trust in the influencer compared to covert advertising.

## VI. Intention to engage with the story

Intention to engage in the context of stories refers to the actions taken by the audience when they see the story. These actions may include clicking on a link, using a promotional code, or reacting to the influencer.

The intention to engage can be seen as the most concrete translation of a story's impact: beyond what we think of it, does it make us want to take a closer look?

The literature on social media shows that when content is considered credible and attractive, it elicits more of this type of reaction. On the other hand, formats where advertising is disclosed and the format is very commercial can limit subscribers' desire to interact.

By posting stories with disclosed advertising and covert advertising, our study seeks to determine whether the form of the advertising message influences Tunisian subscribers' intention to engage. We therefore formulate the hypothesis (H3): covert advertising generates a higher intention to engage than disclosed advertising.

## VII. Methodology

The methodology adopted in this research is mixed. It combines a quantitative study using an online questionnaire and a qualitative study using focus groups in order to collect both quantitative results and more detailed testimonials on the perception of different advertising formats in stories.

### 1. Quantitative study

The quantitative study is based on an online questionnaire designed to obtain quantitative results on the impact of two formats of influencer advertising in stories: disclosed advertising and covert advertising, on transparency, trust in the influencer, and engagement intention. A sample of 120 young Tunisian respondents who use Instagram was randomly divided into two groups. Half were exposed to disclosed advertising where the collaboration was clearly indicated. Conversely, the other half were exposed to covert advertising, where the advertising intent was not disclosed.

### 2. Qualitative study

The qualitative study is based on focus groups conducted with young Tunisian adults who use Instagram, have an Instagram account, regularly view stories, and report having been exposed to influencer stories.

<sup>11</sup> Meta (2023). "Instagram Stories usage statistics," data accessed on the Meta website.

<sup>12</sup> De Veirman, M., Cauberghe, V., & Hudders, L. (2017). Marketing through Instagram influencers: The impact of number of followers and product divergence on brand attitude. *International Journal of Advertising*, 36(5), 798–828.

A semi-structured interview guide addressed the uses of stories and the perceived difference between disclosed advertising and covert advertising, as well as reactions in terms of transparency, trust, and desire to interact.

## VIII. Results

### 1. Perceived transparency

Based on the results obtained, we can validate our first hypothesis (H1: disclosed advertising increases perceived transparency compared to covert advertising).

The results show a significant difference between the two advertising formats. In fact, 78% of participants agreed with the statement *"This story is clear about its advertising nature."* In contrast, only 26% of those exposed to covert advertising agreed with this statement. These results therefore prove that when the collaboration is explicitly mentioned, it greatly enhances the perceived transparency of the story. On the other hand, if the advertising is not mentioned, this makes the advertising aspect unclear and ambiguous.

The qualitative results shed light on this finding. Several participants said they appreciated the fact that the advertising was explicit in the story, as this meant they did not feel they were being misled. One of them summed it up as follows: *"Honestly, when I see the word 'partnership' written, or when the influencer says it, at least I know where I stand."* Others mention feeling uncomfortable when they realize that content presented as spontaneous is actually undisclosed product placement.

Another participant said: *"When it's not clear, I feel a bit like I'm being taken for a fool."* We can therefore interpret that when advertising is disclosed, it is perceived by users as a sign of honesty and even respect towards them, whereas when it is covert, it creates a feeling of doubt and deception.

### 2. Trust in the influencer

The results indicate that the format of the story has a significant effect on trust in the influencer, but this effect is less pronounced than that of transparency. In fact, 64% say they trust influencers who explicitly indicate the presence of a collaboration. Meanwhile, 42% say they trust covert advertising.

Qualitative exchanges confirm these results, with the majority of respondents stating that they consider the influencer to be "more credible" when they explicitly show the advertising. In this context, one of the respondents confirms: *"When the influencer is transparent in their words, I trust them."*

On the other hand, trust in the influencer can diminish when they do not emphasize the collaboration and pretend to be using the product or service spontaneously. In this context, one of the participants states: *"When I discover that it was covert advertising, I mistrust everything they say after that."*

Trust therefore results from the influencer's degree of transparency: the more transparent the influencer is, the more users trust them. H2 (disclosed advertising strengthens trust in the influencer compared to covert advertising) is therefore confirmed.

### 3. Intention to engage with the story

Contrary to the results for perceived transparency and trust in the influencer, which are higher in the case of disclosed advertising, the intention to engage appears to be higher when the advertising is covert. In fact, 69% of respondents exposed to covert advertising say they would want to watch the story to the end and react to this type of content. In contrast, 29% of respondents said that when advertising is disclosed, they skip the stories.

The qualitative testimonials collected help to explain this result. Participants stated that they feel more attracted when stories share ordinary moments of life. On the other hand, when the story appears too commercial, they simply move on to the next story, as confirmed by one participant: *"When it's too much like an ad, I move on to the next story."* H3 (covert advertising generates a higher intention to engage than disclosed advertising) is therefore confirmed.

## IX. Discussions

The results show that disclosed advertising is considered more transparent than covert advertising. Young Tunisians accept advertising in stories, saying that it is normal and already part of influencers'

work, but they want this aspect to be acknowledged and visible. On the other hand, what makes them uncomfortable is when influencers hide the collaboration and integrate the product or service into the story as if it were something spontaneous. This approach is perceived negatively by young followers, who feel that the influencer is mocking them and is only interested in selling, in a way that is not sincere.

As for trust in the influencer, this is also sensitive to the form that the advertising takes. The results showed that trust is higher when the advertising is disclosed. The opinions gathered in the qualitative study point in the same direction: respondents believe that when influencers explicitly announce their collaboration with a brand, it is perceived as more "honest" and more "professional."

On the other hand, when the influencer hides this collaboration, respondents lose trust and no longer really believe what they say; they no longer know whether what they say is true or false. This undermines both transparency and trust.

Conversely, covert advertising was more effective in generating immediate engagement among young subscribers. This can be explained by their attraction to content that shares moments of everyday life. They feel that this content resembles their own lives and, moreover, they perceive it as a source of entertainment. On the other hand, they are more likely to skip stories when the advertising is disclosed, saying that "it's too much advertising." This can be explained in particular by the advertising fatigue that users suffer from today.

These results invite influencers to rethink how they advertise and also how they think about their audience, particularly in the Tunisian context. Far from being passive, young Tunisians today have developed a true digital culture. They have become aware of advertising logic and are familiar with social media codes and persuasion practices. They know that influencers collaborate with brands and understand that some stories are paid for. For this reason, they are increasingly resistant to the idea of advertising that presents itself as simply "spontaneous" content: they feel that they are being taken for fools and that influencers do not respect their intelligence, which can reinforce their skepticism and undermine trust.

The results show that, on the one hand, disclosed advertising has a more positive impact on perceived transparency and trust in the influencer, and, on the other hand, covert advertising has a greater impact on immediate engagement intent. The question is therefore not about choosing the best form of advertising, but rather understanding the strengths of each format. Indeed, disclosed advertising recognizes the consumer's right to know that it is advertising and, in doing so, can help build more lasting trust. Covert advertising, on the other hand, increases the chances of immediate response, but at the cost of lower transparency and a risk of mistrust.

The idea is therefore to strike a balance between transparency, trust, and engagement. Transparency must remain the primary requirement, but then you have to work on the format of the story to avoid it appearing too commercial. For example, you can limit the number of mentions: simply tag the brand page without covering the entire story, avoid putting the product in the foreground all the time, and try not to adopt an overly commercial tone. In this sense, it is important to indicate that there is a collaboration, while maintaining a tone similar to the narrative used in covert advertising.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this article was to analyze the effect of two advertising formats in Instagram influencer stories, namely disclosed advertising and covert advertising, on perceived transparency, trust in the influencer, and intention to engage in the context of young Tunisian consumers. By combining a qualitative focus group study with a quantitative experiment, the work highlights a dual movement: disclosed advertising clearly reinforces perceived transparency and helps to support trust in the influencer, while covert advertising tends to generate more immediate engagement with the story.

For influencers, these results invite us to move beyond the idea that transparency necessarily reduces the effectiveness of campaigns. In the Tunisian context, audiences are increasingly knowledgeable about advertising mechanisms and social media codes. Continuing with covert advertising risks creating even more mistrust and distance between young people and influencers. Conversely, embracing the advertising dimension while working on the tone, pace, proximity, and apparent authenticity of stories seems to offer a better balance between effectiveness and respect for the audience, paving the way for more responsible and credible influencer marketing.

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