THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER'S CONTENT FORMAT ON THE CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT ON INSTAGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The Effect of Social Media Influencer's Content Format

on the Customer Engagement on Instagram

In recent years, influencer marketing has grown its popularity as a communication strategy for brands to reach their target audience and achieve desired brand outcomes through social media. Despite the growing importance of influencer marketing, a comprehensive understanding of the factors that impact engagement remains inadequate, particularly at the social media platform level. To address this gap in the literature, this study investigates the impact of content format on social media engagement with both sponsored and non-sponsored social media influencer (SMI) posts on Instagram, as well as the effect of brand endorsement on engagement in a market where sponsorship disclosure is legally mandatory. The results show that sponsored content created by influencers has a lower engagement rate than non-sponsored content, regardless of the content format. The study also explores the impact of content format on engagement and reveals meaningful distinctions between each content format such that consumers engage more with carousel posts than reels and more with reels than photo posts. Using a secondary data approach, we analyze users' actual social media engagement behaviors with sponsored and non-sponsored content on Instagram, as well as individual content formats. Our research provides valuable insights for advertisers and brands to make informed decisions about selecting influencers and developing successful influencer marketing campaigns.

ÖZET

Sosyal Medya Etkiliyicileri'nin İçerik Formatinin Instagram'da Müşteri Etkileşimine Etkisi

Son yıllarda, markaların hedef kitlelerine ulaşmak ve sosyal medya aracılığıyla istenen marka sonuçlarını elde etmek için iletişim stratejisi olarak influencer (etkileyici) pazarlaması popülerlik kazanmıştır. Influencer pazarlamanın giderek artan önemine rağmen, özellikle sosyal medya platform düzeyinde etkileşimi etkileyen faktörler hakkında kapsamlı bir anlayış oldukça sınırlıdır. Bu literatür boşluğunu doldurmak için yaptığımız bu çalışmada, sponsorluk durumunun sosyal medya influencer (SMI) içeriklerinin etkileşime olan etkisinin yanında carousel, post ve reels içerik formatlarının etkileşim anlamında farklılıklarını araştırdık. Araştırma sonuçları sponsorluk açıklamasının yasal olarak zorunlu olduğu bir ülkede, sponsorlu influencer içeriklerinin kullanılan içerik formatı ne olursa olsun, sponsorsuz içeriklere göre daha az ilgi çektiğini ve daha az etkileşim sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma ayrıca her bir içerik formatının etkileşim üzerindeki etkisi açısından anlamlı farklılıklar ortaya koymaktadır. Tüketiciler, en fazla carousel içeriklerle etkileşime geçmekte, bunu sırasıyla reels ve post (tekil gönderiler) içerikler takip etmektedir. Geçmişte yapılan çalışmalardan farklı olarak ikincil veri yaklaşımı kullanarak, gerçek sosyal medya etkileşim davranışlarının incelendiği bu araştırma reklamverenlere ve markalara, doğru influencer seçimi yapma ve başarılı influencer pazarlama kampanyaları geliştirme konusunda bilinçli kararlar almaları için değerli içgörüler sunmaktadır.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Web 2.0 has enabled the development of various new communication technologies that allow generation, editing, sharing and dissemination of content. Social media has emerged as a critical component of integrated marketing communications (IMC), allowing brands to connect with customers where they naturally spend time (Kietzmann et al., 2011). The extensive adoption of social media has provided a new channel for brands to influence consumer perceptions and establish strong relationships with their consumers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.61) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." Through the creation, sharing, and consumption of content between peers, social media promotes dissemination of ideas, and information among people through social interaction. This social interaction creates dialogue, enables democratization of knowledge and transforms individuals from mere content consumers to potential content producers (Constantinides, 2014).

According to Dwivedi et al., 2019, p.7, "Social media has fundamentally changed the way people interact with each other and how businesses reach their target audience". With the rise of social media platforms over the last decade, brands found opportunities and new ways to connect with their audiences (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) utilizing social media marketing tools. Over time, these platforms got overly saturated with brand messages lowering the returns of social media marketing for brands due to user fatigue (De Vries et al., 2017; Jacobson et al., 2020)

and growing consumer skepticism towards messages from brands directly (Gerdeman, 2019). On the other hand, it has been widely recognized in the marketing literature that eWOM (Online Word of Mouth) has a stronger impact on consumer decision making than traditional advertising (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008) which has several shortcomings such as avoidance and resistance (Fransen et al., 2015). The advent of social media which has boosted the effects and the reach of eWOM, and the rise of individuals as independent opinion leaders on social media have manifested new ways to influence consumer behavior for brands.

Influencer marketing, which involves brands partnering with individuals who have a sizable number of followers on social media platforms in order to drive positive brand attitude, has emerged as a new strategy for businesses to cut through the clutter and uniquely connect with their audiences. These individuals, known as social media influencers (SMIs), are seen as inspirational, trustworthy and relatable by their followers, making them ideal partners for brands looking to increase their awareness, build trust, engage with consumers and drive other positive brand outcomes. Brand endorsements by SMIs are interpreted to be more credible than traditional advertising as they are seamlessly integrated into the day to day story telling of influencers (Abidin, 2016). Research has found that sponsored content by influencers are considered to be their genuine recommendations resulting in higher message credibility and positive brand attitude (Schouten, Janssen and Verspaget, 2020; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Similarly, industry reports highlight that influencer marketing ranks high among global consumers as a trustworthy marketing channel (Nielsen, Global Annual Marketing Report, 2022).

Over the last decade and specifically in the last five years, the use of influencer marketing has become widespread across different industries and markets,

with businesses partnering with influencers in various niches to reach their target audience. As of 2023, global market size of influencer marketing is expected to grow by nearly 29% compared to 2022, reaching $21.1 billion from a mere $1.7 billion in 2016 (State of Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report, Influencer Marketing Hub, 2023). While influencer marketing has been on the rise for almost a decade now, social circumstances during and after pandemic have triggered a stronger need for interpersonal connection among consumers, and many brands have leveraged the power of influencers to foster their relationship with consumers. Therefore, to achieve marketing goals and drive business success, companies have found they need to select powerful influencers (Haenlein and Libai, 2017).

Given the increasing importance of SMIs as a new approach to engaging online consumers, burgeoning academic research has begun to examine the issues surrounding SMI marketing. Researchers have focused on understanding influencer related variables such as source credibility, attractiveness and expertise as well as emotional mechanisms influencing consumer outcomes including purchase intention, brand attitude and engagement (e.g. De Jans et al., 2018; De Veirman et al., 2017; Fink et al., 2020; Torres et al., 2019; Ki and Kim 2019; Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Jin and Muqaddam, 2019; Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020; Jin and Ryu, 2020). These studies agree that influencer endorsement has distinct characteristics that could make SMI marketing a highly effective form of brand communication.

While there's a theoretical and managerial consensus on the effectiveness of influencer marketing, there are several areas that remain underexplored in this field due to the nascent state of the topic. First of all, the research looking into the non-commercial content performance is very limited even though influencers build their network through their organic content over time to demonstrate their potential for

brand collaborations and majority of influencer content still being non-commercial (Ki et al., 2020). Even though practitioners evaluate both commercial (sponsored posts) and non-commercial (non-sponsored posts) content when choosing an influencer to collaborate, the majority of the former research have only studied the impact and performance of influencers' product endorsements. Secondly, outcomes of influencer marketing are highly dependent on the mediating social media platform that the collaboration takes place in and the content types available on these platforms.

Instagram, which is the focus of this study, is the second most preferred platform (50.8%) for influencer campaigns globally, and the number one platform among advertisers in the US according to the Influencer Marketing 2022 Report published by Insider Intelligence. In Turkey, a similar report published by data-driven Influencer Marketing Agency CreatorDen finds that 97% of all surveyed brands had engaged in influencer collaborations on Instagram followed by Youtube (48.8%) and Tiktok (46.5%). Even though, Instagram also is the most commonly researched platform by scholars according to a recent systematic review by Vrontis et al., (2021), the ever-changing nature of the platform in terms of features, content types and other monthly updates (Embed Social, Top New Instagram Updates and Features 2023) call for new research avenues. Based on these changes, the content strategy of both influencer and brand accounts, and the content preferences in influencer collaborations are shifting frequently. Therefore, there will be a continuous need to understand the impact of available content formats on the engagement of sponsored and non-sponsored posts by influencers.

Our research aims to address these gaps by investigating how sponsorship status and influencer content format impacts follower engagement behavior on

Instagram which has two billion active users per month as of February 2023 (Statista, 2023). By developing a set of hypotheses linking engagement outcomes for sponsored and non-sponsored posts moderated by the current available content types on Instagram as of March 2023, this study will help advertisers, influencers and scholars understand how SMI marketing can be used more effectively to achieve desired engagement outcomes.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Emergence of influencer marketing

Over the years, advancements in technology have allowed consumers to access a substantial amount of information, making them more knowledgeable and discerning, and less subject to brand control (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).The prevalence of social media has transformed the way consumers obtain information and establish relationships, with traditional mass communication channels no longer serving as the primary sources of information (Hair, Clark,and Shapiro, 2010). Social media helped consumers develop new ways of searching, evaluating, choosing and buying goods and services (Albors et al., 2008) as well as engaging with brands. The level of connectivity people experience today through social media platforms have given consumers the power to voice their opinions about brands and control the decisions of masses (Vrontis et al., 2021), and have reshaped the role of consumers in traditional power structures (Evans, 2019). Today's consumers have taken on the role of sharing their own experiences about brands, products and services with others and leveraging others' impartial experiences to make informed decisions.

The behavior of exchanging experiences and opinions is a form of non-marketer driven communication and considered as eWOM (Electronic Word of Mouth) on social media. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) defined eWOM as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet" (p. 39). The behavior of exchanging experiences and opinions are characterized as eWOM on social media and the social media platforms

such as Facebook, Instagram, Youtube and recently Tiktok have contributed to the reach of eWOM exponentially. In the marketing and consumer behavior literature, eWOM is well recognised with its stronger effect on the decision making of consumers than conventional advertising methods (Goldsmith and Clark, 2008). Especially, when the eWOM is initiated or facilitated by an individual who has a sizable network on social media, these ideas and opinions have a further reaching impact.

2.2 Defining social media influencers and influencer marketing

Individuals who have built a large social community are referred as Social Media Influencers (SMIs). SMIs can be defined more specifically as independent third parties who have developed a large follower base social networking platforms by creating and sharing content about their day to day lives, opinions, experiences and/or know-how publicly in the form of images, texts and videos (Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu, 2019; De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders, 2017). By crafting an online persona through their highly personal content (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020), SMIs have accumulated a dedicated follower group (Casalo et al., 2020), built deeper psychological bonds and they are perceived to be attractive, authentic and similar by social media users (Ki et al., 2020; Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu, 2019). As a result of them being perceived positively by their followers, they are capable of generating positive brand outcomes as well (Lou and Yuan, 2019).

SMIs act as online opinion leaders who exert a strong level of influence on others and they can impact attitudes, behaviors, perceptions and decisions of their followers (Godey et al., 2016, Moldovan at al., 2017) through eWOM on social media. The idea of harnessing the influence of opinion leaders originated from a

study conducted by Lazarsfeld et al. (1948). The study showed that mass media had an indirect effect on the audience through opinion leaders who impacted the behavioral patterns of specific segments of the population. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) followed up on this two-step-flow model and discovered that consumer response to mass media messages is channeled through opinion leaders who provide their own interpretation of the message in group interactions. In today's era, social media has the power to create a viral effect on the dissemination of these messages to the masses through online opinion leaders or SMIs, who have the potential to influence not only their followers but also the social networks of their followers (Thomas, 2004).

In the last ten years, brands who have recognized the impact of eWOM on consumer decision making and the role of online opinion leaders tapping into larger audiences have started collaborating with SMIs. By incentivising SMIs to integrate brand related messages into the content they create and share in a relevant, authentic manner, marketers engage in a new form of marketing communication practice which is called Influencer Marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017). The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines influencer marketing as the practice of collaborating with individuals who possess the power to influence potential consumers and structuring a marketing plan around these individuals with the purpose of disseminating a brand message to a larger market (AMA, 2023). In the literature, influencer marketing is described as the use of individuals who have accumulated a large follower network based solely on their social profile and activities to stimulate positive brand responses from the consumers who follow them and contribute to the creation of the brand image on social media (Giles and Edwards, 2018; Evans et al., 2017). In that regard, the power of SMIs lies in their

ability to generate valuable content, their well recognised reputation in certain topics (Cha et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2017), and their large number of followers on online social networks (De Veirman et al., 2017). These individuals are uniquely positioned to provide highly customizable (Kumar and Gupta, 2016) targeted messages as their content is actively sought after and consumed by their audience, in contrast to traditional advertising. Brands that engage in influencer marketing aim to leverage the trust that SMIs have built with their followers, in order to enhance their audience reach and impact (Childers et al., 2019).

2.2 Customer engagement on social media

According to the AMA, engagement in marketing refers to "a means of capturing the attention or establishing connections with an audience" (AMA, 2023) and in social media literature, it is is defined to be "an expression of consumers' cognitive and emotional attitudes via their brand-related engagement behaviors in social media" (Pentina, Guilloux, and Micu 2018, p. 57). Social media engagement occurs when consumers feel interested enough to take action and interact with the content (Muntinga et al., 2011; Yoon et al., 2018) such as by liking and writing a comment below. Research has shown that the types of social media content that drive engagement behavior among consumers may vary in each platform, suggesting that marketers need to tailor their strategies based on each platform's unique characteristics (Tafesse and Wood, 2020). Therefore, understanding the nuances of social media engagement experiences across platforms can help marketers create effective content and drive meaningful interactions with their audience.

From an influencer marketing point of view, the interaction of consumers' with SMIs sponsored content is considered as engagement and it is one of the key

performance indicators for such sponsorship by brands. Lee et. al., (2018) names customer engagement as one of the most frequently mentioned desired brand outcomes and according to recent global and local surveys among brands (Influencer Marketing Hub Benchmark Report, 2023; CreatorDen 2023 Report, 2023), engagement is the second most common measure of success after reach. Influencer's success can be determined by engagement since it is a clear sign of their ability to generate reactions from their followers on the content they shared and an indication of interesting content (Grave and Greff, 2018). By computing the number of likes, comments, shares, retweets and favorites on SMIs content, we can have a measure for engagement according to Arora et. al., (2019). On Instagram the standard measure for engagement is the sum of likes and comments since other types of engagement such as resharing and saving influencer content are not publicly visible.

In addition to this, on Instagram, due to the vast amount of users and the ever growing number of content shared by these users slowly made it impossible for people to see most of the content from the people they are following and by 2016 people were missing 70% of all the posts in their feed and 50% of the posts from their close connections (Instagram, 2021). Therefore, the platform introduced a feed that ranked posts based on what the users are interested in analyzing several performance signals from each content and the account who shared the content. The more engagement a content has the more likely it is to be ranked higher on the feed which eventually improves the reach and may generate even higher engagement. According to Tafesse and Wood (2021), the greater the level of engagement obtained by influencers on social media platforms, the larger the audience they can potentially reach, leading to a consequent increase in their visibility and influence. Among influencer marketing practitioners also, it is common knowledge that engagement

rate on Instagram has a positive impact on the reach of shared content and it is a key decision criteria when choosing influencers.

2.3 Impact of follower count

SMI's follower count on social media platforms reflect their public exposure as well as their potential reach. According to De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017), follower size shows the popularity of the SMI and reflect on their network. Therefore, an SMI with higher number of followers will be able to deliver the content they shared to a larger audience compared to an SMI with a lower number of followers. Industry sources define influencers into four categories based on their follower count (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2022).

Table 1. Influencer Types by Follower Count

Influencer Type	Follower Count
Mega Influencer	1.000.000 + followers
Macro Influencer	100.000 - 999.999 followers
Micro Influencer	10.000 - 99.999 followers
Nano Influencer	0 - 9.999 followers

Follower count of an influencer is a key criteria that marketing professionals consider when they design influencer marketing campaigns. Former studies on the impact of follower count on influence has revealed that micro influencers are perceived as more relatable and trustworthy due to their smaller network size compared to macro influencers (Britt et al., 2020) and in the context of sponsored posts, micro influencers are perceived as more authentic and honest (Gross and von Wangenheim, 2020). Recent research showed that SMIs with fewer followers have

higher parasocial relationship and interaction (Brewster and Lyu, 2020). Tafesse and Wood (2021) found that the number of followers have negative association with social media engagement and micro influencers positively affect engagement (Marques, Casais and Camilleri, 2021). According to Wies et al., (2022), the relationship between follower count and engagement demonstrates an inverted-U shaped graph, indicating that low to moderate follower count yields increasing engagement and as follower count rises, engagement starts to diminish due to lower perceived tie strength. As a general practice, advertisers often prioritize the influencers' follower count when selecting SMIs for a brand endorsement. However, this approach has its limitations because an influencer's follower count may not reflect the actual level of interest that their audience has in their content. Having a substantial number of followers does not guarantee that an influencer's audience is actively engaged with their content or interested in the topics they cover. On the other hand, an influencer with a smaller following but a higher engagement rate may be more effective for a brand's campaign. This is because an engaged audience is more likely to be interested in SMIs content and therefore more likely to take action. In addition to this, follower count does not really determine how many people will see the content of an SMI. As previously discussed, engagement rate of a post on Instagram can have a significant impact on its reach since the platform considers engagement as one of the most critical factors in determining the visibility of a post to a wider audience. When a post receives a high level of engagement, Instagram interprets it as a positive signal indicating that the content is relevant and engaging to the audience.

2.4 Sponsored vs. non-sponsored content on social media

SMIs produce and disseminate content regularly to stay connected and maintain engagement with their audiences. Sponsored and non-sponsored influencer content are two distinct types of content that SMIs share on their social media profiles. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders (2017) define sponsored content as content that is created by SMIs and includes a clear advertising message or endorsement of a brand or product. This type of content is compensated for by advertisers, either through material gain such as free products or services, direct payments or performance commissions, and is intended to enhance brand awareness, generate leads, and drive sales. On the other hand, non-sponsored content, as defined by Evans et al. (2017), is content that is created and shared by SMIs but does not contain any brand endorsements or advertising messages. They usually include glimpses from SMIs daily lives, interests or experiences and are primarily shared to stay connected with their followers. In case of a brand sponsorship, influencer content can drive more attention from consumers compared to ads from brands themselves (Pereira, Salgueiro, and Mateus, 2014). However, when the influencer shares too many sponsored content, people tend to unfollow the influencer (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019) and when the commercial orientation of the content is too high, making it seem like traditional advertising, effectiveness of the collaboration is undermined (Martinez-Lopez et. al., 2020).

The distinction between non-sponsored and sponsored content is critical since it affects how followers perceive its authenticity and credibility (Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019). Various studies have shown that when SMIs indicate the content is sponsored, persuasiveness is negatively impacted and therefore attitudes towards the content are less favorable (Carr and Hayes, 2014; Boerman et al., 2012).

However, as influencer marketing has developed as a major communication and advertising strategy for brands in the last decade, the practice of SMIs sharing sponsored content without indicating it as a brand endorsement in exchange for material gain has been subject to legal regulations in many countries, mandating sponsorship disclosure to provide transparency into the SMI content. In the United States, influencers are required by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to clearly and conspicuously disclose their relationships with brands by using designated phrases such as "#sponsored", "#paidpartnership", or "#ad" (Federal Trade Commission, 2013). In Turkey, various initiatives have also been implemented to ensure that sponsorship status and the nature of the sponsorship are clearly communicated to consumers. As of 2021, failure to disclose sponsorships may lead to legal action against both the influencer and the brand (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Commerce, 2021).

2.5 Content format

On social media platforms, available content formats have evolved over time, and understanding the impact of these formats on user engagement has become increasingly important. Some of the most common ones across different platforms are text-based content, image posts and video posts. Research has shown that different content formats can impact user engagement in different ways such as images receiving 120% more engagement than text alone (Hsiao & Chen, 2019), while videos receiving 2.1 times more comments than images (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). However, the impact of content formats on engagement can also depend on the preferred social media platform. Instagram offers a range of content formats that allow users to engage with their followers in a variety of ways and users can choose

the format that best suits their needs. In Turkey, as of 2023, Instagram offers four main content formats to its users. These are photo posts, carousel posts, reels, and stories.

A photo post is a single photo that appears on the user's Instagram home feed.

A carousel post, on the other hand, is a collection of up to ten photos and videos that show up as a single post on the home feed.

Reels are short-form, vertical videos up to 90 seconds in length that can be viewed on both the Instagram feed and dedicated reels feed.

Finally, stories are temporary video and/or image content that appears above the Instagram feed, separately, for 24 hours. If users want to keep a particular story permanently, they can add it under story highlights on their profile. However, for this particular type of content, Instagram does not publicly provide engagement metrics such as likes and comments. Therefore, we will not be including stories in this study.

2.6 Relationships studied in the literature

Historically, the emergence of online influencers can be traced back to the emergence of blogging platforms, followed by other social media platforms (Borchers, 2019) such as Facebook (in 2004), Youtube (in 2005), Twitter (in 2006), Instagram (in 2010), and Tiktok (in 2016). While the 2007 publication of Watts and Dodds is considered to be the first significant contribution to the influencer marketing research stream (Vrontis et. al., 2021) and has served as a basis in understanding optimal seeding strategies (Hinz et. al., 2011), the first major study in the influencer marketing domain focusing on SMIs as endorsers was presented by Kapitan and Silviera (2016). By developing a conceptual endorser effectiveness framework based on former research on celebrity endorsements, Kapitan and Silviera

argue that such effectiveness depends on the perceived endorser/product fit leading to greater engagement and positive brand attitude. Kim and Kim (2020) suggest that, SMIs "can promote a commercial entity by providing a reasonable relation to their identity and making it a plausible extension of their preexisting organic contents" (p. 2). Since followers get to know the SMIs based on the content they share, they are informed about their behaviors, values and beliefs in a way that, if the endorsed product does not match the perceived identity of the SMI, the collaboration will not generate the expected results for the brand and will negatively impact the credibility of the endorser (Silva et. al., 2020). Furthermore, higher influencer-product congruence increases influencer trustworthiness and content credibility, as well as greater interest in content and higher intent to search for more brand information (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020).

The credibility of social media influencers (SMIs) is another crucial factor in determining their success as their primary responsibility is to communicate brand-related messages to consumers and persuade them. In his work, Ohanian (1990, p. 41) examines the concept of source credibility which refers to "a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message". The theoretical framework of Ohanian outlines the evaluation process that individuals undertake to assess the credibility of a message source, which consists of three key elements: trustworthiness, expertise and attractiveness. Expertise refers to the level of knowledge of the source, experience, and skills on a specific topic, while trustworthiness reflects the perceived degree of honesty, reliability, and lack of bias and finally attractiveness encompasses the likability, similarity, and physical appeal of the source. The perceived level of an endorser's attractiveness, trustworthiness, and expertise has a strong influence on the effectiveness of a brand endorsement

(Dholakia and Stemthal, 1977; Ohanian, 1991). This impact is manifested in brand outcomes such as purchase intention, brand attitudes, and attitudes towards the advertisement (Wang and Scheinbaum, 2018; Phua et al., 2018). A recent study by Fink et. al., (2020) has suggested evidence that perceived credibility of SMIs positively affects purchase intention and is proven to have a long-lasting effect.

Although the initial source credibility framework aimed to propose a measurement scale for celebrity endorsers, many scholars have considered the success of SMI campaigns to be a result of high perceived credibility (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020; Reinikainen et. al., 2020; Djafarova and Trofimenko, 2019; Torres et. al., 2019). Many scholars have used the same dimensions to describe influencer credibility (Schouten et al., 2020; Wiedmann and Von Mettenheim, 2020) and have examined the effectiveness of influencers in comparison to celebrities in brand endorsement. In fact, they found that social media influencers, such as "Youtubers" and "Instafamous", are more powerful than traditional celebrities as a result of higher perceived credibility and relatability (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017).

According to Ki et al. (2020) SMIs' influential power arises from the emotional attachment they have with their followers. This emotional bond, stemming from favorable parasocial interaction (PSI), acts as a persuasion cue, leading to an intention to purchase (Sokolova and Kefi, 2020). Parasocial relationships (PSR) refer to the sense of closeness or intimacy that people develop with media figures, despite the lack of face-to-face interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956) and such relationships can manifest in influencer marketing when consumers perceive that they have a one-sided, personal relationship with the influencer, leading to increased trust and credibility (Muntinga et al., 2011). The theoretical framework of PSI posits that social media users may view their favorite influencers as trusted friends or advisors

and develop a sense of PSR through engaging in pseudo-social interactions (Bond, 2016) which makes it more likely to trust the influencer's product recommendations (Reinikainen et al., 2020).

Studies have shown that beyond the factors of product-influencer fit, influencer credibility, and parasocial relationship (PSR), the attributes of the content itself can impact the effectiveness of influencer marketing campaigns. When the content posted by an SMI visually appeals, conveys a sense of status, shows expertise of the influencer, is informative and interactive, followers perceive the influencer as a taste and opinion leader, which results in positive brand outcomes (Ki and Kim, 2019). According to research by De Vries, Gensler, and Leeflang (2012), social media posts that are vivid and interactive tend to generate higher levels of engagement among consumers. Similarly, novelty and originality of content are also important for gaining followers' attention and increasing user engagement (Carmel et al., 2012; Casaló et al., 2018). Furthermore, the content characteristics such as relevance, message clarity, and tone, can have a significant impact on engagement (Stephen, Sciandra, and Inman, 2015) while informational appeals tend to generate higher purchase intentions (Akpinar and Berger, 2017).

CHAPTER 3

HYPOTHESES AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Hypotheses

In recent years, social media and influencer marketing has emerged as an major platform for brands to connect with their target audience and drive positive brand attitude. When selecting influencers for a brand collaboration, advertisers may consider many factors such as source characteristics, product-endorser fit and other performance related data such as follower size and engagement. While in general follower size is an important indicator of the popularity and potential audience reach of an SMI, currently on Instagram, engagement of a content is a driver of reach (Instagram, 2022). Therefore, social media engagement has become a key performance indicator (KPI) that brands consider while selecting influencers to collaborate with, evaluating the efficacy of sponsored content, and making informed choices regarding future campaigns. Despite the growing prevalence of influencer marketing and performance-focused influencer campaigns, a comprehensive understanding of the factors that impact engagement remains inadequate especially at social media platform level. Recent research suggests that engagement is contextual and multifaceted, encompassing diverse experiences across each social media platform (Voorveld et. al., 2018). Thus, it is imperative to study each platform individually, recognizing that each platform is experienced in a distinct manner.

In this study, we address this gap in the literature by analyzing the social media engagement performance of sponsored vs. non-sponsored content and how content format decisions impact engagement in case of a brand endorsement on Instagram. The distinctive contribution of this study is its secondary data-driven

approach towards achieving the research objectives. Rather than concentrating on consumer attitudes and intentions, this research initiates an exploration of users' actual social media engagement behaviors with non-sponsored and sponsored content as well as individual content formats on Instagram. Our study will provide valuable insights for advertisers and brands to make informed decisions about selecting influencers and developing successful influencer marketing campaigns. The findings of this study will not only enrich the current understanding of social media engagement driven by influencers but will also serve as a valuable resource for marketers, researchers, and practitioners engaged in this domain.

3.1.1 Effect of sponsorship on engagement

Non-sponsored content is usually a snapshot of the SMI's personal life, experiences and opinions, presented in their unique style, while sponsored content is created in collaboration with brands using advertising messages for the purpose of driving positive brand attitude. While formerly, sponsorship disclosure in influencer marketing was optional, in the recent years, it became common practice to legally require SMIs to explicitly show the commercial nature of the content in order to ensure transparency for consumers. In Turkey, as of March 2021, it is mandatory for SMIs to clearly indicate the sponsored content they post by using certain description tags which will be discussed further in the research methodology section.

When followers are informed that the content has commercial orientation and is considered as an advertisement, ad skepticism is triggered which refers to an inclination to dismiss advertising claims (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 2000), resulting in being less persuaded by sponsored content as well as developing negative attitudes (Boerman et al., 2017; Hwang and Jeong, 2016). Former research

in this context found that sponsorship disclosure can trigger awareness of persuasive nature of the content which results in increased ad skepticism, resistance to message, lower influencer credibility and other negative attitudes towards the brand, content and influencer. (Carr and Hayes 2014; Wojdynski and Evans 2016; De Veirman and Hudders, 2020; Jin et al., 2019; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2020). Based on the literature, we expect non-sponsored content to have higher engagement compared to sponsored content per each Instagram content format. Hence our hypotheses are:

H1: Engagement rate of non-sponsored photo posts is higher than sponsored photo posts.

H2: Engagement rate of non-sponsored carousel posts is higher than sponsored carousel posts.

H3: Engagement rate of non-sponsored reels is higher than sponsored reels.

3.1.2 Effect of content format on engagement

In the domain of digital marketing and advertising, scholars have arrived at a consensus regarding varying degrees of media richness, which is also referred to as media vividness, that can exert an influence on audience engagement (De Vries et. al, 2012; Cvijikj and Michahelles, 2013). As a result, we expect different content formats impacting engagement outcomes significantly differently and therefore analyze each sponsorship status/content format pairs separately in order to gather insights for social media content design.

Former studies on the impact of content format on driving customer interactions on social media platforms report that media richness and interactivity are factors positively influencing the engagement performance (Coelho et al., 2016;

Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021). Although such studies had only covered photos and videos as content format, we can assume that carousel posts may have a similar effect since they can be composed of multiple photos and/or videos which can exert higher media richness and interactivity. A more recent study, by Wahid and Gunarto (2022) revealed that carousel posts have significant contributions in enhancing likes in the case of a higher education industry in an emerging market. We expect similar outcomes both for sponsored and non-sponsored content, therefore our hypotheses are:

H4: Engagement rate of sponsored carousel posts is higher than sponsored photo posts.

H5: Engagement rate of non-sponsored carousel posts is higher than non-sponsored photo posts.

As of August 2022, Instagram announced that all new video posts under 15 minutes will be shared as reels (Instagram, 2022). Reels are currently the only video type content that can be shared on Instagram, replacing the video posts which can now only be shared as part of a carousel post along with images or photos. Former studies on online engagement agree that video format contents are the richest since they offer a large amount of information reducing the uncertainty and ambiguity for the audience (Cuevas-Molano et al., 2021). The hedonic value of a post is driven by the enjoyment, vividness, and entertainment a user experiences from consuming the post (Hughes, Swaminathan, and Brooks, 2019) and in online advertising the vividness of the content is defined as the characteristics which aim to stimulate different senses of the viewer by images, dynamic animations or color contrasts (Steuer, 2010; Fortin and Dholakia, 2005). Therefore, we can assume that reels have

higher hedonic value due to their vivid, enjoyable and entertaining nature compared to carousel posts. We expect this assumption to be true for sponsored reels due to the informational nature of the content as well as the effort SMIs put into such content. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H6: Engagement rate of sponsored reels is higher than sponsored carousel posts.
H7: Engagement rate of non-sponsored reels is higher than non-sponsored carousel posts.

Bringing together all aforementioned hypotheses, we propose two final hypotheses in order to rank the content formats according to engagement rate performances:

H8: Engagement rate of sponsored reels posts is higher than carousel, and engagement rate of carousel posts is higher than photo posts.
H9: Engagement rate of non-sponsored reels posts is higher than carousel, and engagement rate of carousel posts is higher than photo posts.

3.2 Research methodology

Based on the literature, this study attempts to: (1) assess the impact of sponsorship status per content format on engagement; (2) assess the engagement performance of the content format.

To test our hypotheses and answer the research questions, we have used secondary data from the CreatorDen Influencer Marketing Analytics Tool and analyzed the actual engagement performance of 4214 Instagram content posted

between August 2022-January 2023 by “Momfluencers” to focus on a homogenous influencer group in terms of influencer gender and topics covered.

The contemporary phenomenon of "momfluencers" or "Insta Moms" refers to women who have garnered a substantial following on social media platforms by sharing their experiences as mothers. These individuals possess a unique ability to connect with other parents and exert an influential impact on their consumer behaviors. By utilizing their social media platform, “momfluencers” provide a range of parenting advice, support, and camaraderie to their fellow mothers, along with sharing heartwarming stories and photos of their families. Furthermore, they dispense relatable recommendations and parenting "hacks" to their audiences. Apart from sharing personal narratives and guidance, “momfluencers” frequently collaborate with various brands to endorse products that align with their lifestyle, especially those that appeal to families and mothers.

Using CreatorDen’s influencer database we have identified 982 “momfluencers” in Turkey, excluding traditional celebrities, with follower sizes ranging from 5000 to above 2.500.000. More than 52% of these influencers either had none or very few brand endorsements during the research period. Majority of sponsored content (72%) in this distinct influencer group were identified among macro influencers (see Table 1), therefore we narrowed down our sample to 72 Macro Momfluencers in Turkey in order to further enhance homogeneity of the sample.

3.2.1 Identifying sponsored and non-sponsored content

As discussed earlier, in Turkey as of March 2021, it is mandatory for SMIs to clearly indicate the sponsored content they post by using one of the appropriate tags in Turkish in the below table.

Table 2. Branded Content Description Tags Recommended by Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Commerce

Turkish	English Translation
#Reklam	#Ad
#Reklam/Tanıtım	#Ad/Promotion
#Sponsor	#Sponsor
#İşbirliği	#Collaboration
#Ortaklık	#Partnership
“@[Reklam veren] ile işbirliği”	“In collaboration with @[Advertiser Instagram Handle] ”
“@[Reklam veren] tarafından sağlandı.”	"Provided by @[Advertiser Instagram Handle]"
“@[Reklam veren] tarafından hediye olarak alındı.”	"Gifted by @[Advertiser Instagram Handle]"

Our secondary data provider CreatorDen uses a text analysis of the caption by searching for the above tags in the list to reliably detect whether a content was sponsored or not. While our data set had already indicated the sponsorship status of each content, we performed a manual control of a subsample of 450 content to verify and we did not detect any error in these tags.

We operationalized sponsorship as a binary variable:

If sponsored = “1” and otherwise = “0”

3.2.2 Content format measures

The 3 content formats covered in this study are reels, photo posts and carousel posts. CreatorDen's data clearly indicates and labels the content shared by each SMI by using Instagram APIs. Content format is re-coded numerically for the purpose of analyses as below:

Carousel Post = 1

Photo Post = 2

Reels = 3

3.2.3 Engagement measures

In our study, we differentiate between two types of engagement on Instagram that relate to interactions with influencer content: likes and comments. We measure likes as the number of times users express their liking for a post and comments as the number of times users add their remarks to a post. These two types of engagement are publicly available below every influencer content shared on Instagram and total engagement is calculated by summing the number of likes and comments, while engagement rate is calculated by dividing the total engagement by the number of followers at the time content is shared:

Total Engagement = Total Likes + Total Comments

Engagement Rate = Total Engagement / Total Number of Followers

This approach is in line with the perspective of industry experts and marketing practitioners who consider post engagement as a sum of various relevant publicly available interactions on the platform.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Preliminary analysis

In this study, we have collected 4214 (N= 4214) Instagram content shared by 72 macro mom influencers based in Turkey between August 2022-January 2023. The number of sponsored content in our sample is 679 and non-sponsored content is 3535. The mean engagement rate of all the content analyzed was 2.63% with a SD of .117%. It was observed that reels (61.34%) were the most common content format followed by carousel posts (22.54%) and photo posts (16.11%) during the research period independent of sponsorship status.

Table 3. Frequencies

Sample Statistics		
N	Valid	4214
	Missing	0

Table 4. Frequencies for Sponsorship Status

Sponsorship Status		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Sponsored	679	16.11%
	Non_Sponsored	3535	83.89%

Reels were by far the most commonly used content format observed with 61.34% share in our total sample (N=4212), followed by carousel posts (22.55%) and photo (16.11%) posts respectively.

Table 5. Frequencies for Content Format

Content Format		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Carousel	950	22.54%
	Photo	679	16.11%
	Reels	2585	61.34%

Table 6. Frequencies by Sponsorship Status and Content Format

Sponsorship Status and Content Format			Frequency	Percent
Valid	Sponsored	Carousel	106	2.52%
		Photo	71	1.68%
		Reels	502	11.91%
	Non_Sponsored	Carousel	844	20.03%
		Photo	608	14.43%
		Reels	2083	49.43%

4.2 Assessing normality of the data

Before moving forward with hypotheses testing, several normality tests and analysis were conducted on the engagement rate data for each group of sponsorship status and content format (i.e. Sponsored_Carousel, Non_Sponsored_Carousel) to identify the appropriate tests to be used.

The Shapiro-Wilk test was used to test normality of the data, and the results indicated that the p-values for all groups were less than .001 ($p < .001$), leading us to reject normality at the 0.05 level of significance. Similarly, histograms and scatter plots (see Appendix A) support the results of the Shapiro-Wilk normality test indicating the data is skewed left.

Table 7. Shapiro-Wilk Test for Normality of Sponsorship/Content Format Groups

Tests of Normality				
		Shapiro-Wilk		
Engagement Rate		Statistic	df	Sig.
Sponsorship Status and Content Format	Non_Sponsored_Carousel	0.425	844	<.001
	Non_Sponsored_Photo	0.565	608	<.001
	Non_Sponsored_Reels	0.184	2083	<.001
	Sponsored_Carousel	0.636	106	<.001
	Sponsored_Photo	0.604	71	<.001
	Sponsored_Reels	0.658	502	<.001

Thus, we can conclude that engagement rate did not follow a normal distribution for any of the sponsorship status and content format groups that will be compared in hypothesis testing.

4.3 Testing the hypotheses

Based on the Shapiro-Wilk test results, where observed the data was not normally distributed in any of the sponsorship/content format groups, therefore we will be using the non-parametric alternative to test independent samples which is Mann-Whitney U to test our hypothesis as suggested in Pallant's SPSS Guideline (2016), instead of independent sample t-test.

In the first part of our study (H1,H2,H3) we aimed to understand whether sponsored or non-sponsored contents perform higher in terms of engagement per each one of the studied content formats; photo, carousel and reels respectively.

For H1, we compared the engagement rates of sponsored (N=608) and non-sponsored photo (N=71) posts. Mann-Whitney U test result had a value of 13505 and a Wilcoxon W value of 16061, and a two-tailed asymptotic significance level of less

than 0.05 (p-value <.001) which indicates that there is a statistically significant difference in engagement rate between sponsored and non-sponsored photo content. The negative value of the test statistic (Z = -5.166) indicates that the difference between the two groups is significant and in favor of non-sponsored photo posts.

Table 8. Mann Whitney U Test for H1 (Sponsored vs. Non-Sponsored Photo Posts)

Test Statistics (a)	
	Engagement_Rate
Mann-Whitney U	13505
Wilcoxon W	16061
Z	-5.166
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
(a) Grouping Variable: Sponsorship Status and Content Format	

When the mean ranks are compared, it is observed that the engagement rate of sponsored photo posts is significantly lower (226.21) than the engagement rate of non-sponsored photo posts (353.29). Hence, H1 is supported based on these results confirming that non-sponsored photo posts generate more interactions by the follower delivering a higher engagement performance.

Table 9. Mean Ranks for Sponsored vs. Non-Sponsored Photo Posts

Ranks				
	Sponsorship and Content Format	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Engagement_Rate	Non_Sponsored_Photo	608	353.29	214799
	Sponsored_Photo	71	226.21	16061
	Total	679		

For H2, we compared the engagement rates of sponsored (N=106) and non-sponsored carousel (N=844) posts. The results show that the Mann-Whitney U value is 36845 and the Wilcoxon W value is 42516. The test statistic (Z) is -2.962, which indicates a significant difference between the two groups. The significance level (p-value = 0.003) is less than the standard alpha level of 0.05, indicating that the difference in engagement rate between sponsored and non-sponsored carousel posts is statistically significant. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in engagement rate between sponsored and non-sponsored carousel posts, with non-sponsored carousel posts having a higher engagement rate compared to sponsored ones.

Table 10. Mann Whitney U Test for H2 (Sponsored vs. Non-Sponsored Carousel Posts)

Test Statistics (a)	
	Engagement_Rate
Mann-Whitney U	36845
Wilcoxon W	42516
Z	-2.962
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.003
(a) Grouping Variable: Sponsorship Status and Content Format	

When the mean ranks are compared, it is observed that the engagement rate of sponsored carousel posts is significantly lower (401.09) than the engagement rate of non-sponsored carousel posts (484.84). Based on these results, H2 is supported.

Table 11. Mean Ranks for Sponsored vs. Non-Sponsored Carousel Posts

Ranks				
	Sponsorship and Content Format	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Engagement_Rate	Non_Sponsored_Carousel	844	484.84	409209
	Sponsored_Carousel	106	401.09	42516
	Total	950		

In order to test H3, we compared the engagement rates of sponsored (N=2083) and non-sponsored reels (N=502) reels. The test resulted in a Mann-Whitney U value of 431175 and a Wilcoxon W value of 557428, with a test statistic of -6.106 and a two-tailed asymptotic significance level of less than 0.001 (p-value < .001). These results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in engagement rate between sponsored and non-sponsored reels, with non-sponsored content created by influencers having a higher engagement rate than sponsored content, regardless of the content format.

Table 12. Mann Whitney U Test for H3 (Sponsored vs. Non-Sponsored Reels)

Test Statistics (a)	
	Engagement_Rate
Mann-Whitney U	431175
Wilcoxon W	557428
Z	-6.106
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
(a) Grouping Variable: Sponsorship Status and Content Format	

The negative value of the Z-statistic (Z=-6.106) suggests that the difference between the two groups is significant and in favor of non-sponsored reels. The mean rank

comparison confirms the result showing a higher value for non-sponsored reels (1337.00) compared to sponsored reels (1110.41) meaning that in case of a brand endorsement, reels content format generates less engagement. Hence, the third hypothesis is also supported.

Table 13. Mean Ranks for Sponsored vs. Non-Sponsored Reels

Ranks				
	Sponsorship and Content Format	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Engagement_Rate	Non_Sponsored_Reels	2083	1337	2784977
	Sponsored_Reels	502	1110.41	557428
	Total	2585		

Based on the outcome of our first three hypotheses, we can conclude that SMIs engagement rates differ significantly under different sponsorship status and their organic, non sponsored content perform better in general compared to sponsored ones independent of the format of the content. The results further suggest that advertisers and influencer marketing practitioners should analyze the past engagement performance of these two sponsorship status separately with a strong focus on former brand endorsement content.

In the second part of the study, we will be testing comparative engagement performances of content formats under each one of the two sponsorship status conditions separately. Based on the earlier shared descriptive analysis and Shapiro-Wilk normality test indicating that comparison groups (sponsorship status/content format) are not normally distributed, we proceed with Mann-Whitney U to test H4, H5, H6 and H7.

For H4, where we proposed that sponsored carousel (N=106) posts would deliver higher engagement rates than sponsored photo (N=71) posts, our test result show a Mann-Whitney U value of 22915 and a Wilcoxon W value of 4847, with a test statistic of -4.406 and a two-tailed asymptotic significance level of less than 0.001 (p-value < .001). Therefore, it's concluded that there is a significant difference in engagement rate between sponsored posts and sponsored carousel posts, with sponsored carousel posts having a higher engagement rate than sponsored photo posts.

Table 14. Mann Whitney U Test for H4 (Sponsored Carousel vs. Photo)

Test Statistics (a)	
	Engagement_Rate
Mann-Whitney U	2291
Wilcoxon W	4847
Z	-4.406
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
(a) Grouping Variable: Sponsorship Status and Content Format	

Mean rank comparison confirms that the engagement rate of sponsored carousel posts is significantly higher (102.89) than the engagement rate of sponsored photo posts (68.24). Hence, H4 is supported.

Table 15. Mean Ranks for Sponsored Carousel vs. Photo

Ranks				
	Sponsorship and Content Format	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Engagement_Rate	Sponsored_Photo	71	68.27	4847
	Sponsored_Carousel	106	102.89	10906
	Total	177		

Similarly for H5, we compared engagement rates of carousel (N=844) and photo (N=608) posts but this time in case of no sponsorship. The results of the test show that Mann-Whitney U value is 232774.5, with a Wilcoxon W value of 417910.5. The test statistic is -3.02, and the two-tailed asymptotic significance level is 0.003. These results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between groups, with the non-sponsored carousel posts having a higher engagement rate than non-sponsored photo posts.

Table 16. Mann Whitney U Test for H5 (Non-Sponsored Carousel vs. Photo)

Test Statistics (a)	
	Engagement_Rate
Mann-Whitney U	232774.5
Wilcoxon W	417910.5
Z	-3.02
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.003
(a) Grouping Variable: Sponsorship Status and Content Format	

The negative value of the Z-statistic suggests that the difference is significant in favor of the non-sponsored carousel posts with a mean rank of 754.7 and non-sponsored photo content format with a mean rank of 687.35. Therefore, H5 is supported and the results are in line with H4, suggesting that carousel posts outperform photo posts in terms of engagement in both of the sponsorship status conditions.

Table 17. Mean Ranks for Non-Sponsored Carousel vs. Photo

Ranks				
	Sponsorship and Content Format	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Engagement_Rate	Non_Sponsored_Photo	608	687.35	417910.5
	Non_Sponsored_Carousel	844	754.7	636967.5
	Total	1452		

For H6, engagement rate performances of sponsored reels (N=502) and sponsored carousel (N=106) posts are compared. The outputs show a Mann-Whitney U value of 18624.00 and a Wilcoxon W value of 144877.00. The test statistic (Z) is -4.857, which indicates a significant difference between the two content formats. The significance level (p-value < 0.001) is less than significance level of 0.05, indicating that the difference in engagement rate between sponsored reels and carousel posts is statistically significant.

Table 18. Mann Whitney U Test for H6 (Sponsored Reels vs. Carousel)

Test Statistics (a)	
	Engagement_Rate
Mann-Whitney U	18624.00
Wilcoxon W	144877.00
Z	-4.857
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
(a) Grouping Variable: Sponsorship Status and Content Format	

When the mean ranks are compared, it is observed that the engagement rate of in case of a sponsorship, carousel posts (Mean Rank=379.80) drive more engagement from

the audience than reels (Mean Rank=288.60) which is the opposite of what was proposed in H6. Therefore, we reject our sixth hypothesis.

Table 19. Mean Ranks for Sponsored Reels vs. Carousel

Ranks				
	Sponsorship and Content Format	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Engagement_Rate	Sponsored_Reels	502	288.6	144877
	Sponsored_Carousel	106	379.8	40259
	Total	608		

To test H7, where we proposed that the engagement rate of non-sponsored reels (N=2083) is higher than non-sponsored carousel posts (N=844), we ran our tests which delivered a Mann-Whitney U value of 682912.50, a Wilcoxon W value of 2852498, and a two-tailed asymptotic significance level of less than 0.001 (p-value < .001). These results indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in engagement rate between these two content formats, with carousel contents created by influencers having a higher engagement rate than reels content.

Table 20. Mann Whitney U Test for H7 (Non-Sponsored Reels vs. Carousel)

Test Statistics (a)	
	Engagement_Rate
Mann-Whitney U	682012.50
Wilcoxon W	2852498.50
Z	-9.512
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001
(a) Grouping Variable: Sponsorship Status and Content Format	

The negative value of the Z-statistic (Z=-9.512) suggests that the difference between the two groups is significant and in favor of carousels confirmed by the mean ranks. Similar to H6, carousel content format outperforms reels in terms of engagement rate. Therefore, H7 fails.

Table 21. Mean Ranks for Sponsored Non-Sponsored Reels vs. Carousel

Ranks				
	Sponsorship and Content Format	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Engagement_Rate	Non_Sponsored_Reels	608	353.29	214799
	Non_Sponsored_Carousel	71	226.21	16061
	Total	679		

In order to conclusively rank the engagement rate performances of these three content formats we conducted further analyses. Since the comparison groups are not normally distributed, The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to determine if there is a significant difference between them.

H8: Engagement rate of sponsored reels posts is higher than carousel, and engagement rate of carousel posts is higher than photo posts.

First, A Kruskal-Wallis test was performed on the engagement rate of the three content types (Photo, Reels and Carousel) in the context of sponsorship. The test resulted in a H statistic of 30.068 and a two-tailed asymptotic significance level of less than 0.001, indicating that there are significant differences in engagement rate among the different types of sponsored content.

Table 22. Kruskal-Wallis H Test for H8 (Sponsored Reels vs. Carousel vs. Photo)

Test Statistics (a,b)	
	Engagement_Rate
Kruskal-Wallis H	30.068
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	<.001
a. Kruskal Wallis Test	
b. Grouping Variable: Sponsorship and Content Format	

Further analysis was done to compare the mean ranks of the different types of sponsored content. The mean rank for sponsored photos was 279.38, sponsored reels was 329.74, and sponsored carousels was 429.19. This shows that sponsored carousels had the highest mean rank, followed by sponsored reels and sponsored photos in order.

Table 23. Mean Ranks for Sponsored Reels vs. Carousel vs. Photo

Ranks			
	Sponsorship and Content Format	N	Mean Rank
Engagement_Rate	Sponsored_Photo	71	279.38
	Sponsored_Reels	502	329.74
	Sponsored_Carousel	106	429.19
	Total	679	

H9: Engagement rate of non-sponsored reels posts is higher than carousel, and engagement rate of carousel posts is higher than photo posts.

The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to determine if there is a significant difference in the engagement rate between non-sponsored Instagram posts created by social media influencers across different content formats. The test resulted in a Kruskal-Wallis H

value of 91.878 with a significance level of less than 0.001 and 2 degrees of freedom. These results suggest that there is a statistically significant difference in engagement rates among the different content formats of non-sponsored influencer posts on Instagram.

Table 24. Kruskal-Wallis H Test for H9

Test Statistics (a,b)	
	Engagement_Rate
Kruskal-Wallis H	91.878
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	<.001
a. Kruskal Wallis Test	
b. Grouping Variable: Sponsorship and Content Format	

Looking at the mean ranks of the different content formats, we see that non-sponsored photo posts have the lowest mean rank of 1639.58, followed by non-sponsored reels with a mean rank of 1844.77, and non-sponsored reels with the highest mean rank of 2029.63. This indicates that non-sponsored carousel posts performed the best in terms of engagement rate compared to non-sponsored reels and non-sponsored posts, rejecting our final hypothesis, H9.

Table 25. Mean Ranks for Non-Sponsored Reels vs. Carousel vs. Photo

Ranks			
	Sponsorship and Content Format	N	Mean Rank
Engagement_Rate	Sponsored_Photo	608	1844.77
	Sponsored_Reels	2083	1639.58
	Sponsored_Carousel	844	2029.63
	Total	3535	

Overall, these findings suggest that under a non-sponsorship condition on Instagram, the format of the content may impact the engagement rate performance, with carousel posts having the highest engagement rate among the three formats tested, followed by reels and photo posts respectively.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion

Influencer marketing has become a popular strategy for brands to reach their target audience in an authentic way and drive desired brand outcomes through social media. The exponential growth of this strategy has brought about significant changes in both the design and execution of marketing practices by businesses, as well as the way in which consumers engage with products and brands. As the consumers get more skeptical of traditional advertising methods, they are more prone to turning to SMIs they like and trust for product recommendations. This shift in consumer behavior has led to the increasing popularity of influencer marketing over the past decade, and it is expected to continue growing in the years ahead. While many marketing professionals and scholars have recognized the importance of influencer marketing, research on this emerging communication strategy remains limited. To address the research gap, this study investigated the impact of content format on social media engagement with both sponsored and non-sponsored SMI posts on Instagram. Additionally, our study examines the effect of brand endorsement on engagement in a market where sponsorship disclosure is legally mandatory. Through our findings, we provide operational guidance for advertisers to design more engaging and successful influencer marketing campaigns.

The findings of the first step of our investigation (namely, H1, H2 and H3) demonstrate that the engagement rate of sponsored content created by influencers is lower than non-sponsored content across all three formats studied in this research.

This observation suggests that the audience interacts less with sponsored content in comparison to non-sponsored content, regardless of the content format. These results confirm our hypotheses and align with expectations, given that all sponsored content examined in our dataset conformed to the "Influencer Marketing Guidelines" released by the Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Turkey, which legally mandates that such content clearly indicates its brand endorsement status. When the audience is informed that the content has commercial orientation and the recommendation of the SMI is initiated by the brand in exchange for a material gain, they are less interested with the content. Such outcome can be explained by ad skepticism which results in resistance to message as well as other negative outcomes for the brand and the influencer (Boerman et al., 2017). Moreover, the conceptualization and execution of a sponsored and non-sponsored content is significantly different for SMIs. While the SMI is the sole decision maker and creator of the organic, non-sponsored content they share; in case of a sponsorship, the brand is also involved in the design of such content in terms of the visual style and the messaging. When there is a high level of brand control over the content, perceived authenticity, post credibility and interest in the brand is reduced (Martinez-Lopez et. al., 2020) which can cause lower levels of engagement.

The second phase of our research (namely, H4, H5, H6, H7, H8 and H9) sought to explore whether there are significant differences in engagement across the studied formats of content on Instagram and, if so, which content formats generate higher levels of engagement. Our findings reveal meaningful distinctions between each sponsorship/content format pair in accordance with our expectations. Regardless of sponsorship status, photos generated lower levels of engagement compared to richer, more interactive, and vivid media types such as carousel posts

and reels, in line with prior literature. Despite the apparent differentiation between photos and videos, the carousel format can be considered a hybrid format between these two types of media, whereby a collection of multiple photos and videos can be shared as an album (Shahbaznezhad et al., 2020). Consequently, we anticipated that carousels would generate lower engagement compared to reels, which is the main video format on Instagram. However, our results indicate the opposite, suggesting higher engagement levels for carousels compared to both photos and reels. Several factors can account for this outcome. First of all, carousels fall between photos and videos in their sensory richness attribute, so they might be more engaging than reels. Secondly, since carousel posts enable users to share multiple photos or videos in one content, they provide greater opportunities to display various perspectives or facets of a particular topic, resulting in a higher level of user engagement as viewers may spend more time scrolling through the post and interacting with its various components. Finally, each image and/or video in a carousel is displayed one by one on a follower's feed, providing multiple chances for the audience to engage with the content, as opposed to single media type content such as photos and reels. Hence, the results indicate that consumers engage more with carousel posts than reels and more with reels than photo posts both in case of an endorsement and in case of a non-commercial, organic content.

5.2 Limitations and future research

The concept of customer engagement on social media platforms is a topic that should be investigated in a broader perspective considering the emergence of various other ways to interact with content. While likes and comments are widely accepted as the two main interaction ways that make up engagement rate in the literature and in the

industry, users can also save content, repost them and share them with another user. These types of interactions are not publicly available like the comments and likes that are shown below the content, however they clearly indicate interest in the brand and are signals for Instagram that people are interested in this content and this may have an influence on the reach. Thus, all types of interaction can be studied in detail in order to define the actual scope of customer engagement along with their impact on influencer marketing effectiveness.

A recent study conducted in Europe by Gross and von Wangenheim (2022) utilized a comparable data collection method and actual data from an influencer agency to scrutinize sponsored content on Instagram. Their findings revealed that sponsored content generates greater levels of engagement compared to non-sponsored content. The authors concluded that social media influencers (SMIs) encounter a challenge to creatively integrate brand messages in a compelling way in sponsored posts, necessitating greater investment of time, effort, and thought in crafting sponsored content. Consequently, the content produced is of higher quality and has a greater hedonic value for social media users, leading to increased consumer engagement. Such difference in the results may be due to the cultural context of the studied market, the topics influencers cover and influencer indegree. Therefore, we believe that it is necessary to explore the performance of sponsored vs. non-sponsored SMI content across various moderating factors.

Since influencer marketing is an evolving space and the content formats across platforms are ever changing, the current results are not conclusive and there still will be a need for future research in the context of the impact of content format on engagement. We propose further research avenues for SMI driven brand engagement in the areas of influencer selection, content design with a focus on

formats, engagement performance measurement, and direct impact on engagement on brand outcomes. In order to evaluate such outcomes more accurately, researchers can employ advanced technologies and rely on actual performance data by collaborating influencer marketing intelligence and data agencies. Utilization of secondary data will provide greater precision in evaluating the SMI performance however if it can be complemented with focus group studies we can have a more comprehensive and complete understanding of how and why the studied factors impact interest and therefore engagement.

To enhance the generalizability of the findings to all social media influencer marketing scenarios, future research should extend the scope to include a diverse range of influencer types in terms of follower size, topics covered and on various social media platforms across multiple countries.

5.3 Managerial implications

Results of this study have important have various implications on the way advertisers and influencer marketing practitioners can utilise eventhough the results of this study cannot be generalized to every market due to cultural nuances, and SMI marketing disclosure regulations. However, our findings bring useful perspectives in approaching influencer performance data in order more accurately estimate potential sponsorship engagement outcomes.

First of all, it is standard practice for brands to evaluate and compare the engagement performances of potential influencers they will work with. Our study highlights the importance of separating former sponsored and non-sponsored content while analyzing engagement performances. Therefore, we propose employing the average engagement performance of sponsored content as a reference point,

considering the substantial disparities observed between the engagement rates of sponsored and non-sponsored SMI content across all existing content formats. In this study, sponsored content consistently exhibits lower engagement rates across all content formats on Instagram.

Another critical decision advertisers make is choosing the content format that the influencers will share in a campaign, which significantly impacts engagement performance based on former studies and the results of this research where we found significant differences in engagement outcomes of each format. Similar to separating sponsored and non-sponsored content for accurate evaluation, practitioners should evaluate each content format individually to obtain a benchmark.

Our findings also reveal that eventhough reels have been the most frequently used content format globally in the recent years and within our sample data set, it was observed that the carousel content format delivers the highest engagement rate among the three content formats studied. Although as a video format, reels are expected to drive more interest and perform the best due to their richness and vividness, they are also bearing an inherent sensory overload due to the frame size and potentially the sound/music attached to them which is highly mitigated in carousel format. Therefore if the purpose of an influencer campaign is to increase brand's engagement, we suggest to prioritize carousel posts.

While the scope of this research did not cover the costs associated with these individual content formats, it is common knowledge that SMIs are charging a higher fee for reels compared to other content formats since they are more difficult and time consuming to produce them. As a result, carousel content format can be seen as a highly cost effective way to generate engagement through influencer marketing.

APPENDIX A

TABLES

Descriptives

Sponsorship and Content Format				Statistic	Std. Error
Non_Sponsored_Carousel	Engagement_Rate	Mean		2.94%	0.17%
		95% CI for Mean	Lower Bound	2.61%	
			Upper Bound	3.26%	
		5% Trimmed Mean		2.17%	
		Median		1.71%	
		Variance		23.161	
		Std. Deviation		4.81%	
		Minimum		0.02%	
		Maximum		46.44%	
		Range		46.41%	
		Interquartile Range		2.03%	
		Skewness		5.683	0.084
		Kurtosis		38.473	0.168

Table C1. Descriptive Statistics for Sponsorship/Content Format Groups: Non-Sponsored Carousel

Descriptives

Sponsorship and Content Format				Statistic	Std. Error
Non_Sponsored_Photo	Engagement_Rate	Mean		2.54%	0.14%
		95% CI for Mean	Lower Bound	2.26%	
			Upper Bound	2.82%	
		5% Trimmed Mean		2.07%	
		Median		1.60%	
		Variance		12.106	
		Std. Deviation		3.48%	
		Minimum		0.00%	
		Maximum		39.46%	
		Range		39.46%	
		Interquartile Range		2.40%	
		Skewness		5.458	0.099
		Kurtosis		46.228	0.198

Table C2. Descriptive Statistics for Sponsorship/Content Format Groups: Non-Sponsored Photo

Descriptives

Sponsorship and Content Format				Statistic	Std. Error
Non_Sponsored_Reels	Engagement_Rate	Mean		2.93%	0.22%
		95% CI for Mean	Lower Bound	2.50%	
			Upper Bound	3.37%	
		5% Trimmed Mean		1.78%	
		Median		1.19%	
		Variance		102.772	
		Std. Deviation		10.14%	
		Minimum		0.01%	
		Maximum		348.75%	
		Range		348.75%	
		Interquartile Range		1.76%	
		Skewness		21.569	0.054
		Kurtosis		668.179	0.107

Table C3. Descriptive Statistics for Sponsorship/Content Format Groups: Non-Sponsored Reels

Descriptives

Sponsorship and Content Format				Statistic	Std. Error
Sponsored_Reels	Engagement_Rate	Mean		1.29%	0.06%
		95% CI for Mean	Lower Bound	1.17%	
			Upper Bound	1.42%	
		5% Trimmed Mean		1.10%	
		Median		0.94%	
		Variance		1.984	
		Std. Deviation		1.41%	
		Minimum		0.01%	
		Maximum		15.47%	
		Range		15.46%	
		Interquartile Range		1.09%	
		Skewness		4.003	0.109
		Kurtosis		26.337	0.218

Table C4. Descriptive Statistics for Sponsorship/Content Format Groups: Sponsored Reels

Descriptives

Sponsorship and Content Format				Statistic	Std. Error
Sponsored_Photo	Engagement_Rate	Mean		1.48%	0.27%
		95% CI for Mean	Lower Bound	0.94%	
			Upper Bound	2.02%	
		5% Trimmed Mean		1.13%	
		Median		0.73%	
		Variance		5.227	
		Std. Deviation		2.29%	
		Minimum		0.01%	
		Maximum		9.82%	
		Range		9.81%	
		Interquartile Range		1.14%	
		Skewness		2.534	0.285
		Kurtosis		5.698	0.563

Table C5. Descriptive Statistics for Sponsorship/Content Format Groups: Sponsored Photo

Descriptives

Sponsorship and Content Format				Statistic	Std. Error
Sponsored_Carousel	Engagement_Rate	Mean		1.87%	0.19%
		95% CI for Mean	Lower Bound	1.51%	
			Upper Bound	2.24%	
		5% Trimmed Mean		1.63%	
		Median		1.39%	
		Variance		3.637	
		Std. Deviation		1.91%	
		Minimum		0.04%	
		Maximum		15.66%	
		Range		15.63%	
		Interquartile Range		1.27%	
		Skewness		4.247	0.235
		Kurtosis		26.274	0.465

Table C6. Descriptive Statistics for Sponsorship/Content Format Groups: Sponsored Carousel

APPENDIX B

FIGURES

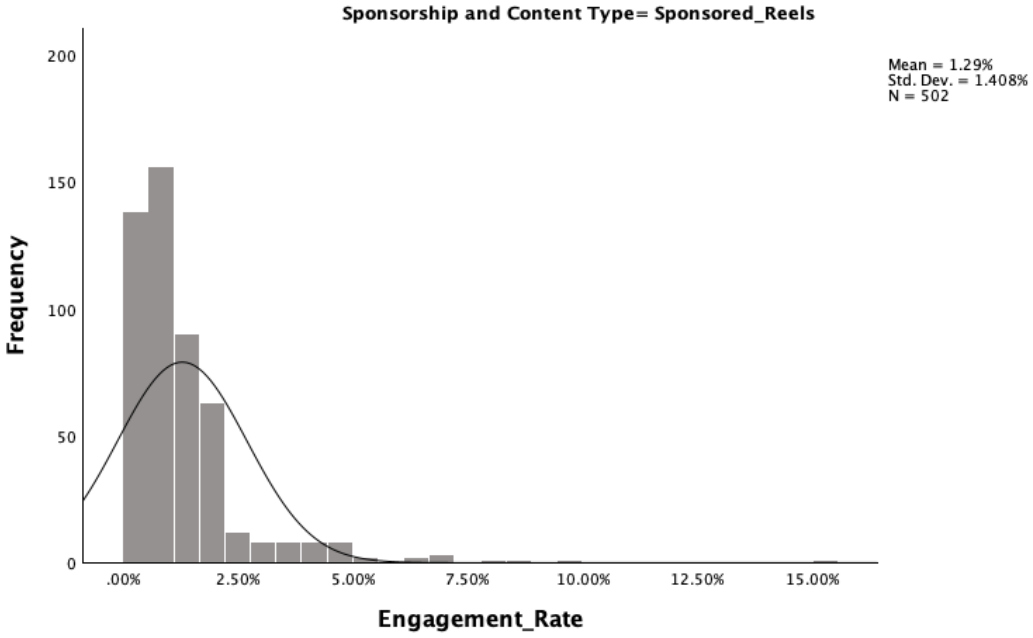

Figure C1. Histogram for sponsored reels

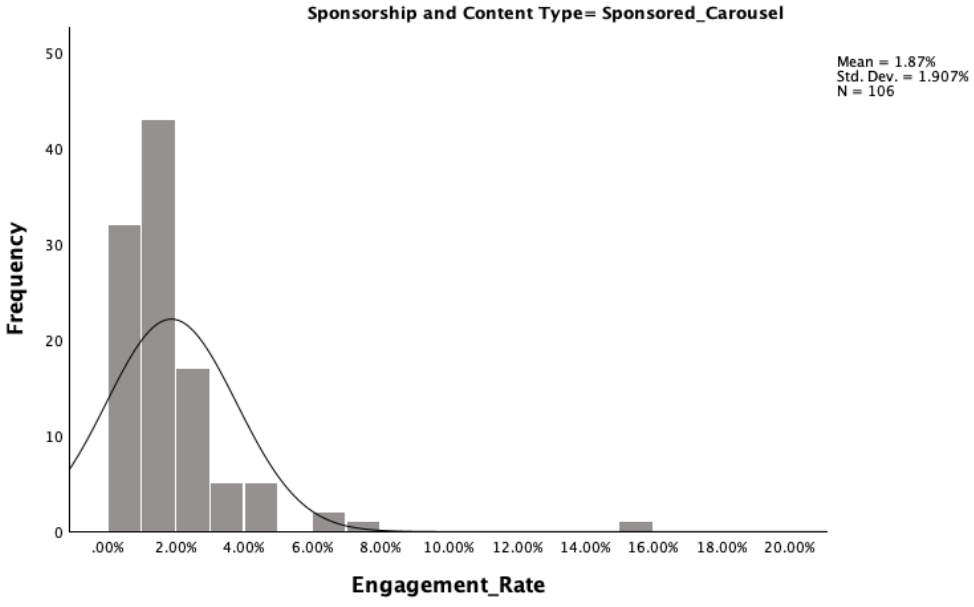

Figure C2. Histogram for sponsored carousel

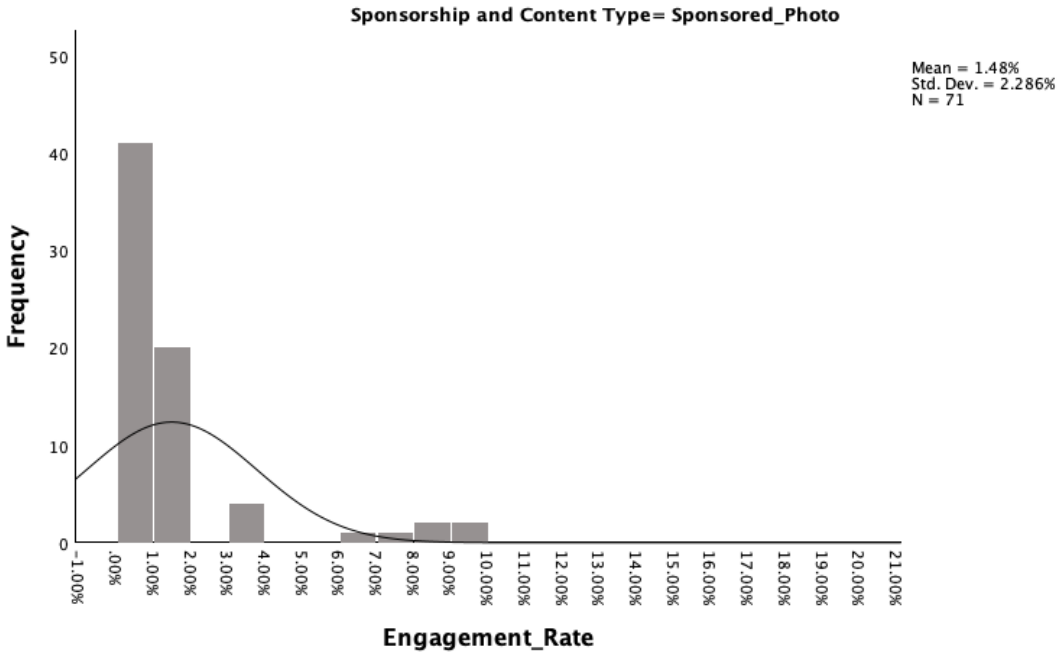

Figure C3. Histogram for sponsored photo

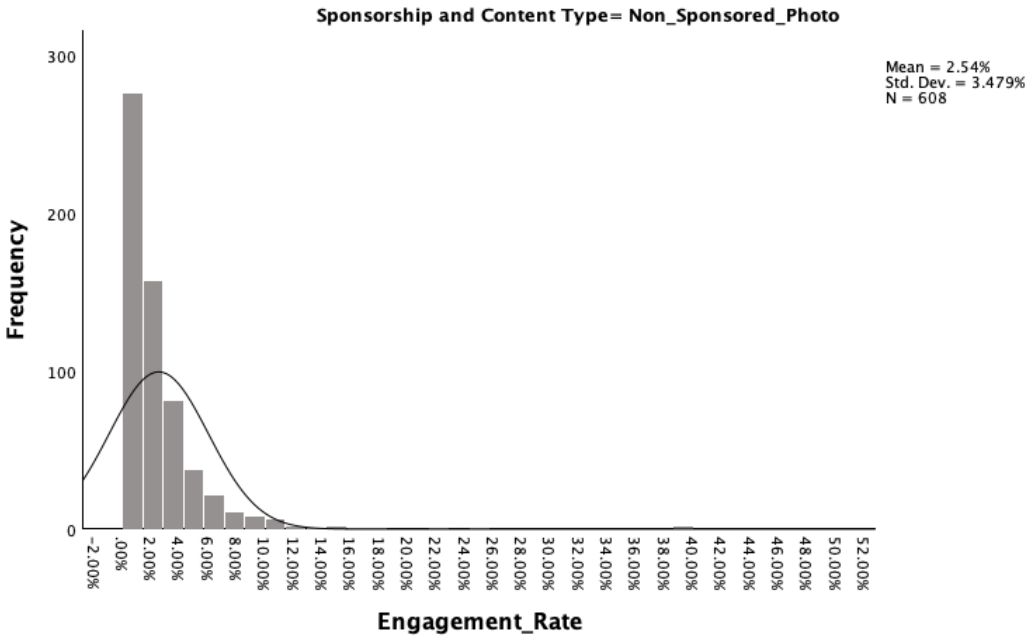

Figure C4. Histogram for non-sponsored photo

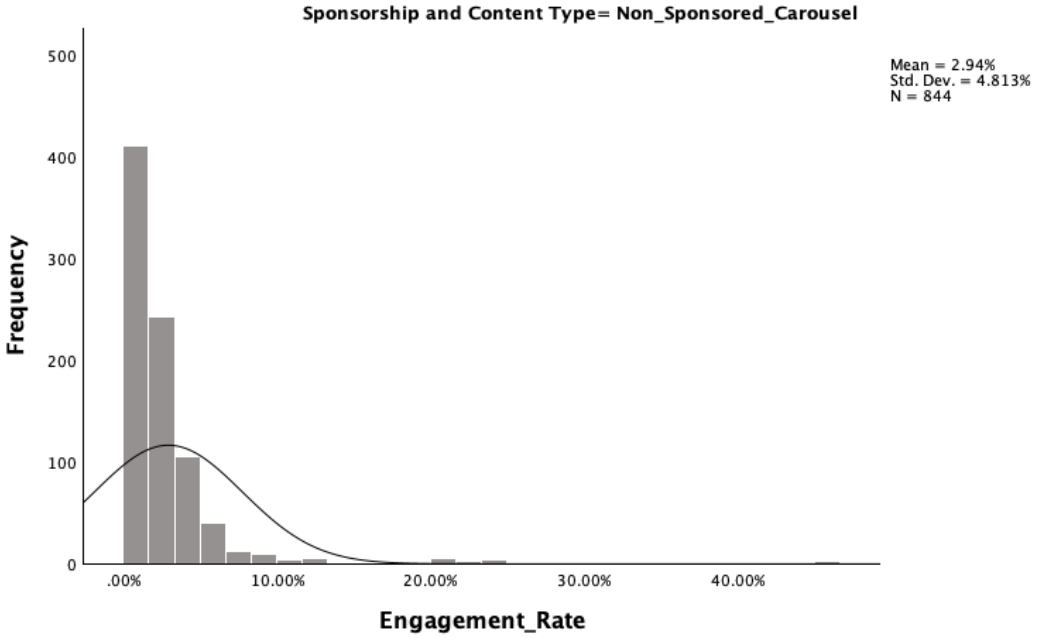

Figure C5. Histogram for non-sponsored carousel

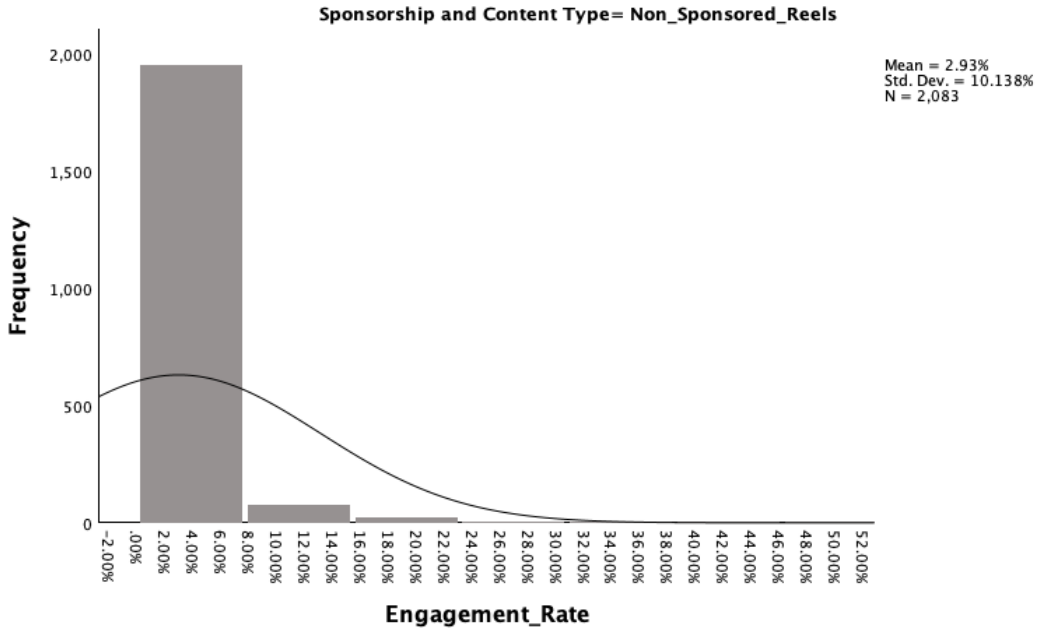

Figure C6. Histogram for non-sponsored reels

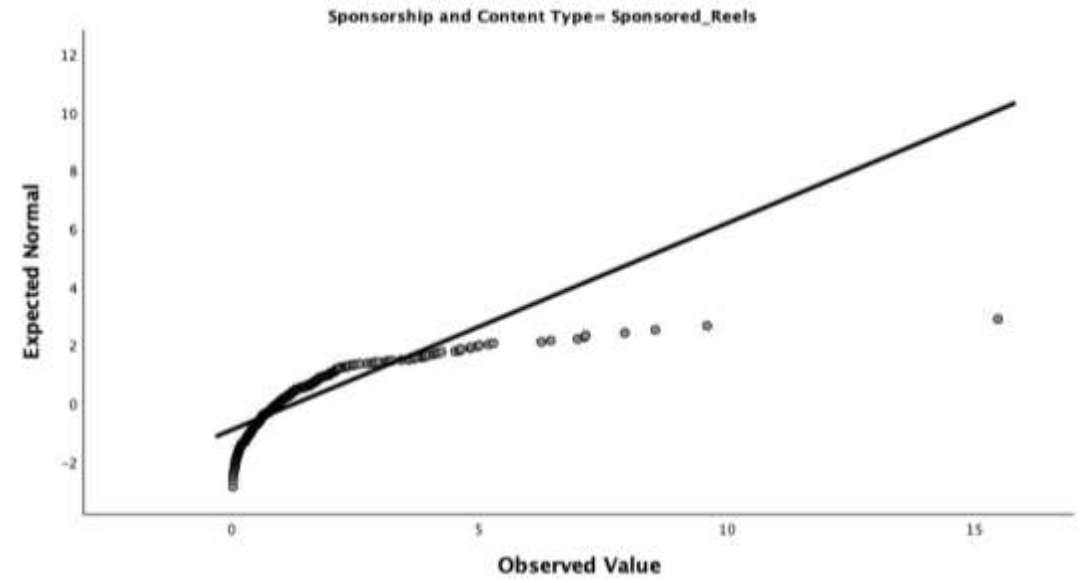

Figure C7. Scatter-plot for engagement rate of sponsored reels

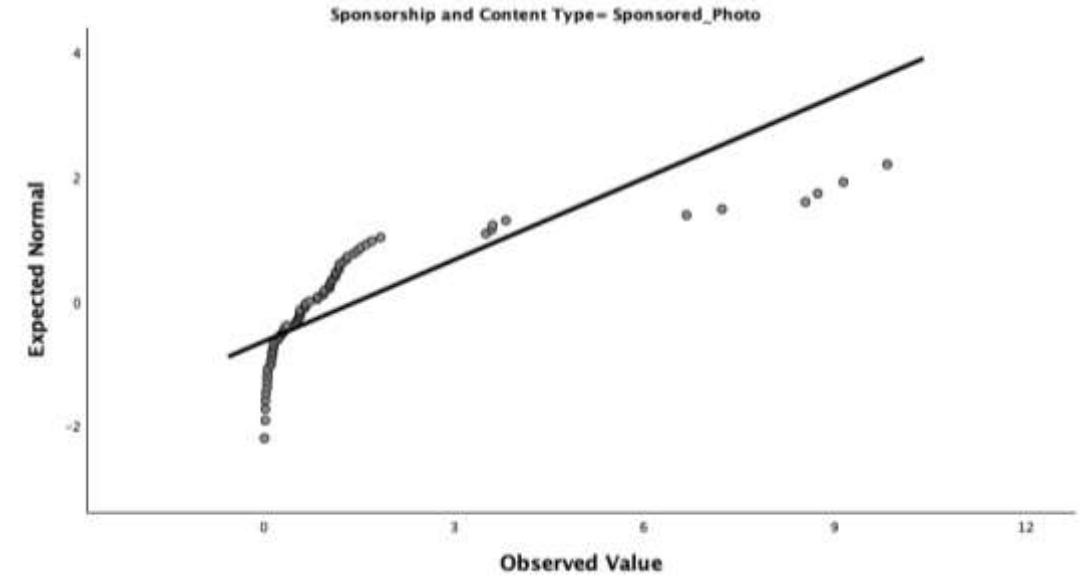

Figure C8. Scatter-plot for engagement rate of sponsored photo

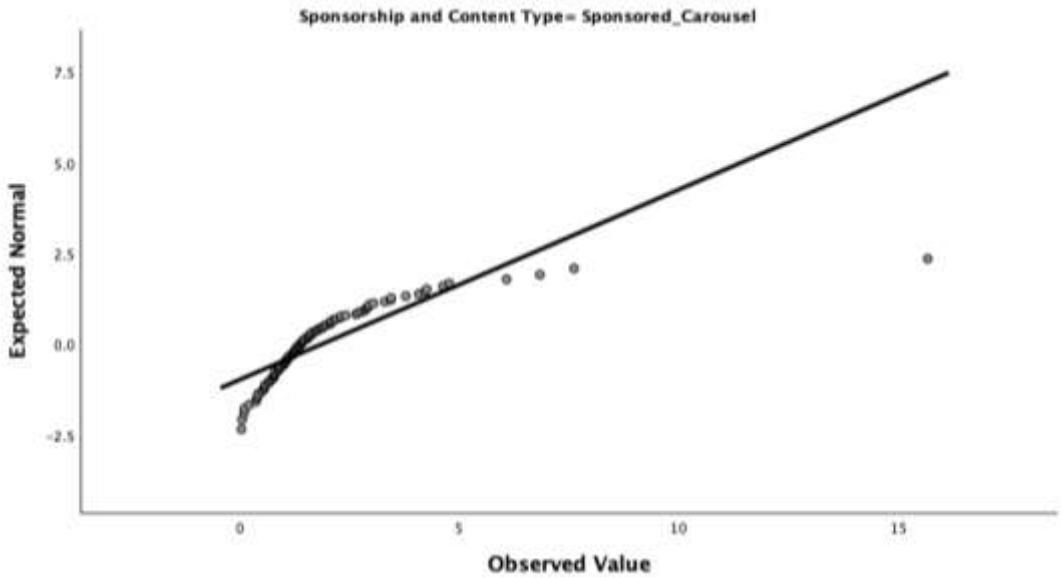

Figure C9. Scatter-plot for engagement rate of sponsored carousel

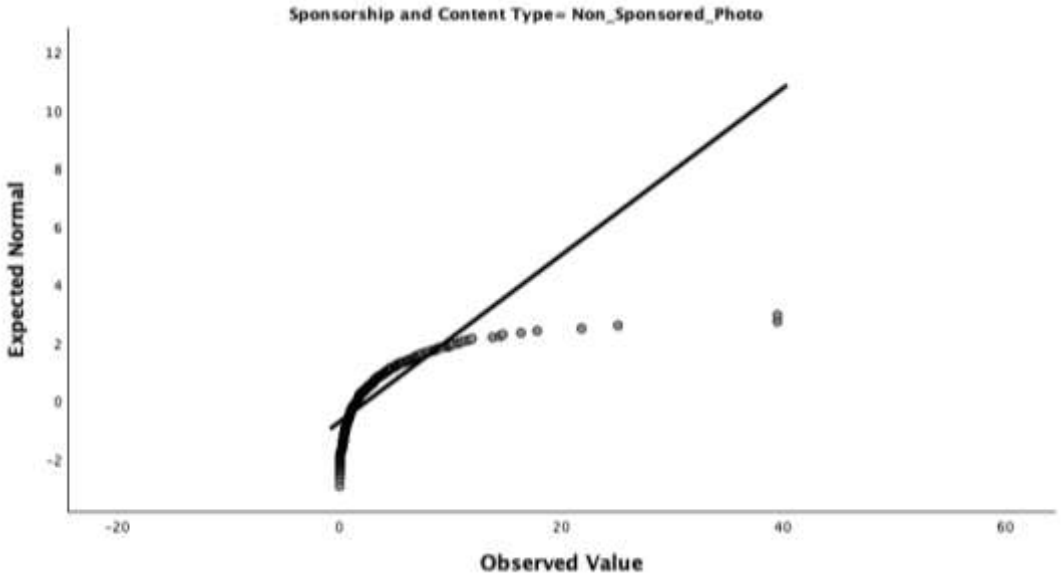

Figure C10. Scatter-plot for engagement rate of non-sponsored photo

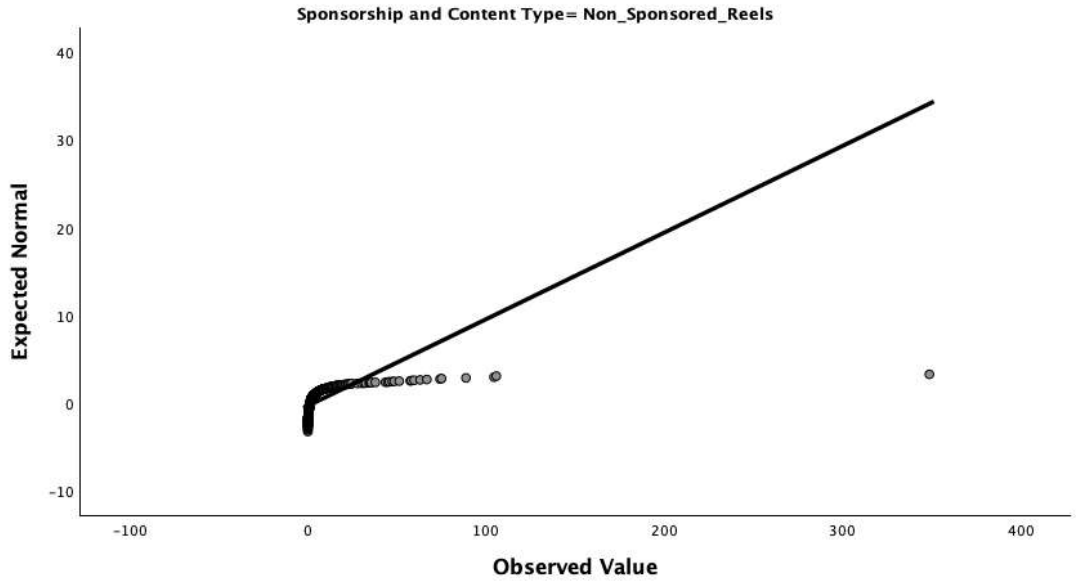

Figure C11. Scatter-plot for engagement rate of non-sponsored reels

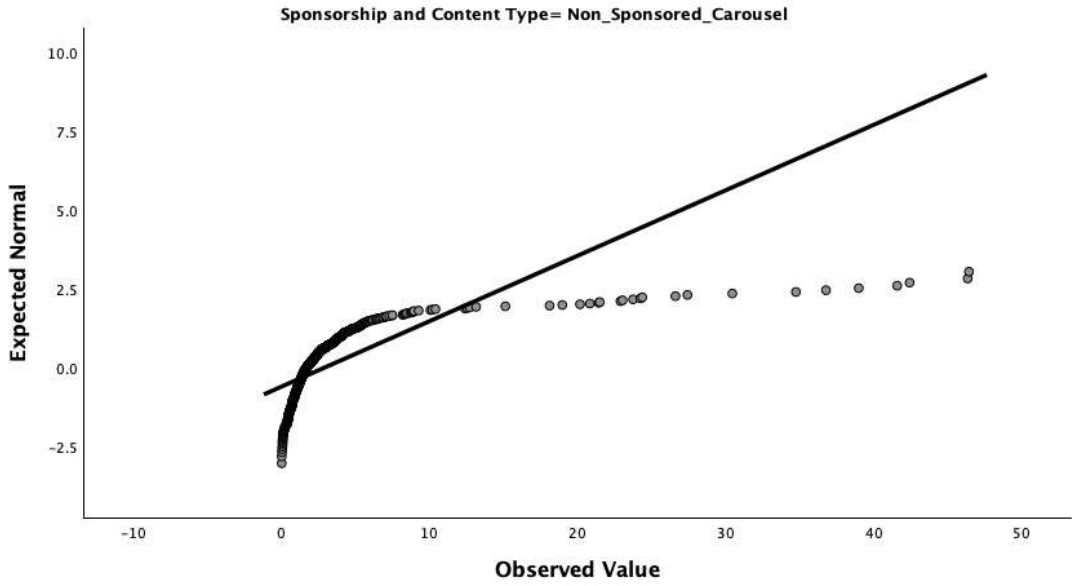

Figure C12. Scatter-plot for engagement rate of non-sponsored carousel

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