

# **The Impact of Native Advertising, Culture and Trust on Advertising Credibility**

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## **Abstract**

### The Impact of Native Advertising, Culture and Trust on Advertising Credibility

Donna Cagnoli

Despite extensive research on credibility and trust in advertising, there is little information on how native advertising and culture might impact these important constructs among social media users. In my thesis, I address this gap by testing the relationship between different types of native advertising (i.e., influencers versus newsfeeds) and culture on perceived advertising credibility. To measure culture, I focused on the individualism versus collectivism scale proposed by Hofstede. I also tested whether trust mediates this relationship. To anticipate, this thesis first thoroughly defines the meaning of native advertising and its presence in social media, then it goes over the concept of credibility, provides an overview of Hofstede's six cultural dimensions and finally, I discuss the concept of trust. This led to the development of three hypotheses. The first hypothesis investigates how different forms of native advertising (that is, influencers versus news feed accounts) affect advertising credibility, and the second hypothesis examines culture as a potential moderator. Both hypotheses were supported. The third hypothesis examined whether trust mediated the effect, but no significance was found (though I did find evidence that trust predicted credibility). For the completeness of the research, Hofstede's remaining dimensions of culture were analyzed as potential moderators. Moreover, some exploratory behavioural analyses were conducted (e.g., product recommendations and purchase intentions). After the results section, a discussion of future research and limitations is presented.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

My thesis aims to understand the differences between two forms of native advertising that consumers regularly encounter on social media – that is, when brands are promoted through influencers versus when brands are promoted through newsfeed accounts. To offer an innovative contribution to the past literature that is currently available on this topic, one dimension of culture (e.g., individualism versus collectivism) will be explored as a moderator. Chapter 2 describes what a native advertisement is, illustrating its role and functions and its presence on social media. It also provides a review of the relevant literature based on the chosen constructs of credibility, trust and culture, along with three hypotheses. Chapter 3 presents the methodology and procedures used in my research. Chapters 4 and 5 describe my results, and finally, Chapter 6 covers a discussion of theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations and future research ideas.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Defining native advertising**

Native advertisements are presented as a natural continuation of editorial content rather than as a break, both from a visual and thematic point of view (Grisby et al., 2020). In the past, these types of advertisements were commonly found in magazines and newspapers as advertorials, which involved giving information about the product or service in the form of an article. Today, native advertisements are found on social media, for example, in the form of posts made by brands, influencers and blogs. What differentiates them from other non-native advertisements on social media (such as banner advertisements, pop-up advertisements that you might get while scrolling through your Instagram stories, or before watching a YouTube video) is that they appear “in-feed with other unpaid, user-generated content” (Lee et al., 2016).

To better understand the desire for marketers to incorporate native advertising in social media, consider a type of traditional online advertisement: banner advertisements. These are banners that appear in between content on websites; they usually do not have anything to do with what you are reading. However, they may showcase sponsored products or brands that you previously searched for on your web browser. With technology becoming part of people’s daily lives, banner advertisements have become almost expected. To avoid the intrusiveness of banners,

consumers have developed a defense mechanism that allows them “to recognize them and then summarily avoid them” (Benway, 1998; Cho & Cheon, 2004; Chatterjee, 2008). This phenomenon is called “banner blindness”, and it has been defined as “an ironic occurrence in Web interaction” (Benway, 1998), where a consumer reads an article so intently that they only see what they want to see and, most often than not, wholly miss the banner advertisement in between paragraphs. Another name for banner blindness is “ad avoidance”, which causes the advertisements to become a part of the text. Given the growing phenomenon of banner blindness and the consequent collapse of clicks on them, the need arose to develop a new way of capturing the user’s attention: native advertising in social media.

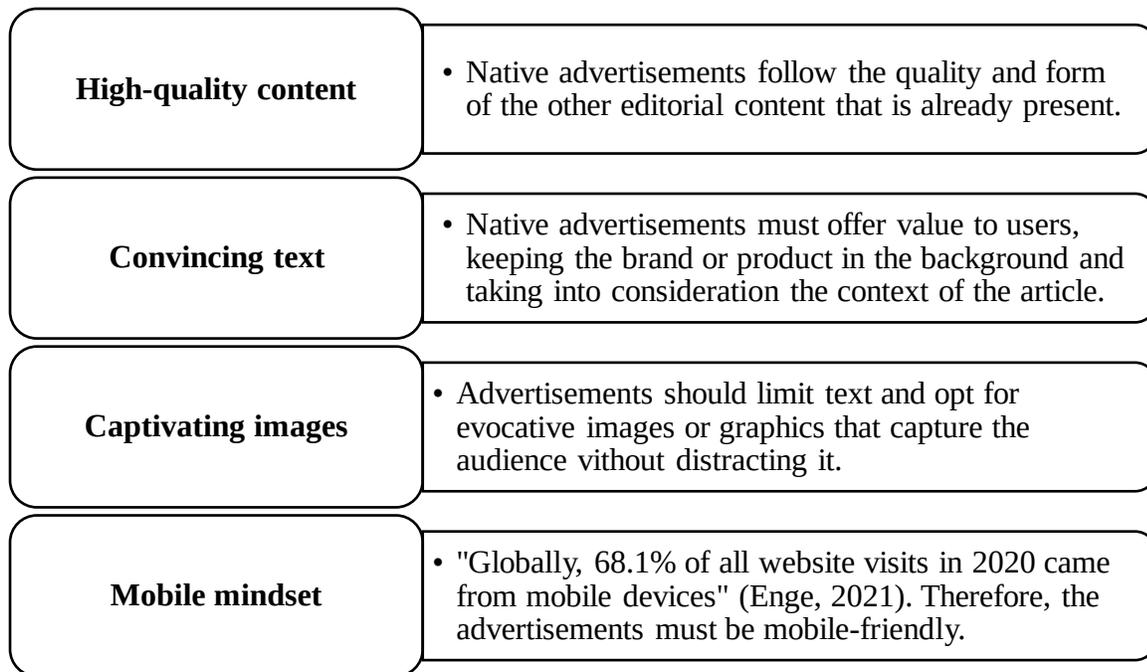
Another reason why native advertising has grown in importance is its ability to reduce the impact of ad blocking. “With 47% of customers using Adblock technology, traditional digital advertising channels often have limited effectiveness” (Weinswig, 2016). Understanding this problem, Adblock Plus, a plug-in that blocks online advertisements, gave users a plug-in option to allow “acceptable advertisements” because it understands that certain content requires advertisements to be paid for (Qi Ming et al., 2014). Again, the tendency of the audience to block and ignore intrusive advertisements opened the door to the perfect context for native advertisements to flourish. However, it is important to note that native advertisements rely heavily on their publisher’s credibility and can potentially destroy said publishers’ credibility (Qi Ming et al., 2014).

Because native advertisements are sometimes difficult to notice when placed in between similar content, and because business were afraid of being accused of deception, a need for regulation was expressed. The Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) (IAB, 2019) drew up a document that guides operators in the advertising sector. By following certain rules, such as (1) properly labeling content as sponsored or paid advertising by inserting the hashtags #ad or #sponsored (Federal Trade Commission, 2013a), and (2) clearly stating the “name of the sponsoring brand” (IAB, 2017), businesses can promote their products in a user-friendly way. Furthermore, studies have shown that “consumers who find native advertising less intrusive are more likely to share it—and, presumably, consume it themselves” (Wojdyski & Golan, 2016).

## 2.2 Successful native advertising

The idea of encouraging native advertising in social media marketing plans results from a long process of evaluating and analyzing specific parameters and findings. From the number of people who subscribe to social networks, combined with the unlimited screen time caused by easy access to electronic devices, such as smartphones and tablets, research has found it easier to measure users' sensations and experiences when they encounter native advertisements. The following diagram (see Figure 1) illustrates the steps for creating a successful native advertisement:

**Figure 1: Steps to achieve a successful native advertisement**



Based on the above, native advertisements on social media are successful when consistent with the publisher. For example, when brands ask an influencer to sponsor them, they want the influencer to create a post that they know their followers will like and share. It cannot only be about the sponsored product/service, it must be more personal and relatable. Therefore, when we talk about native advertising, we refer to advertisements that, like chameleons, take the form and manner of the container that hosts them. They appear more like content than an advertisement, and user experience value is in the foreground (Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Research has found that native advertisements have a higher click-through rate than traditional

advertisements. According to the Washington Post (Gannett, and AOL), click-through rates for (premium) native advertisements were 0.38% in 2015 (on smartphone). This low rate is likely because native advertisements are relevant to the content in which they are featured—unlike traditional social media advertisements (e.g., pop-ups, banners) which appear on screen but do not necessarily match up with its surrounding content.

Native advertising on social media is beneficial for creating a community of users who follow the brand's activities and who can become customers. This aspect proves to be a fundamental element for companies that are still not well established or have recently opened a social media page and, therefore, lack a loyal public niche (Maurer & Wiegmann, 2011). Other benefits of native social advertising for brands include increased brand awareness; image and reputation improvement; customer retention and new customer attraction with more long-lasting relationships; website traffic increase; and lastly, increased word of mouth, a potent and influential marketing tool. Some statistical numbers to back up the theory have been calculated in a recent market research by App Samurai. The website stated that native advertisements receive 18% more purchase intent, especially when posted on social networks. Additionally, they estimated that by 2021, at least in the United States, 74% of total displayed advertisement revenue will be from native advertising, up 56% from 2016 (Ihrig, 2020).

### **2.3 Advertising credibility**

The concept of credibility is central to my thesis. According to research by Wierzbicki (2018), credibility is determined as someone or something that can make people perceive its presence. Concerning the purpose of this thesis, I will explore the differences in advertising credibility when the type of native advertisement differs (e.g., a post from an influencer's Instagram profile versus a post from a newsfeed account). Before discussing advertising credibility, I will first highlight research that examines credibility towards social media platforms, the message, and the source.

There is a general sentiment that describes social media platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram) as unreliable (more precisely, the advertisements displayed on them). And yet, the request by users to control paid or promoted content, for the most part, does not imply that users will reduce the use of their favourite platforms. A survey has found that while Twitter is the

least credible of the platforms, fewer than a quarter of respondents' plan to use it less (William, 2019). The number tends to drop for Google but increase for Facebook.

Another important concept connected to credibility is the credibility of the message and the source of the message (Wierzbicki, 2018). To broaden the credibility variable, it is also possible to summarize four aspects concerning the credibility of the source and the message's credibility (Tseng & Fogg, 1993): 1) presumed credibility, which is based on the recipient's assumption regarding the source credibility, 2) superficial credibility, resulting from a superficial analysis of the message by the recipient, 3) credibility earned, resulting from a more in-depth analysis of the message's credibility and 4) reputed credibility, which refers to information learned indirectly about the credibility of the source; in this case, a third party always comes into play.

Finally, advertising credibility, the focus of my thesis, refers to the extent to which consumers perceive the message in the advertisement to be believable and is mainly based on "the trust a consumer places in the source of that particular advertisement" MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989). Accordingly, advertiser credibility has been identified as one of the crucial factors determining advertising effectiveness (William, 2019). Despite previous studies on advertising credibility (Kim & Choi, 2012; Li & Suh, 2015; William, 2019), there is little evidence on the effects of culture on credibility depending on the type of advertisement promoted, whether from an influencer or a newsfeed account. However, past research does show evidence of influencers having very high credibility rates (Lou & Yuan, 2019). Thus, my first hypothesis was developed to confirm this assumption by testing the perceived credibility levels between an influencer native advertisement and a newsfeed native advertisement. Accordingly, my first hypothesis is as follows:

**H1:** Consumers presented with an influencer advertisement, relative to a newsfeed advertisement, will perceive the advertisement to be more credible.

## **2.4 Hofstede's cultural dimensions**

Societies share their own rules, values, and symbols, meaning every society has its own culture. In the field of culture, Geert Hofstede created the most famous culture analysis tool and studied organizational behaviour between 1967 and 1973 of approximately 117,000 employees in 50 countries. They were asked about workplace and leadership values and how they were

influenced by culture. As a result of this study, Hofstede identified five dimensions that distinguish one culture from another: are power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. More recently, a sixth dimension has been added to Hofstede's cultural framework (Heydari et al., 2021): indulgence vs. restraint. Studies on the effects of indulgence vs. restraint, however, are limited, mainly because of the lack of scale to measure such dimension. However, a recent paper developed "a valid and reliable measure for individual-level indulgence" (Heydari et al., 2021), establishing the scale's reliability, convergent, discriminant, and criterion validities. Definitions for each of the six-dimensions (adapted from a table by Inghilleri et al., 2020) are presented in table 1 below:

**Table 1: Defining Hofstede's six dimensions**

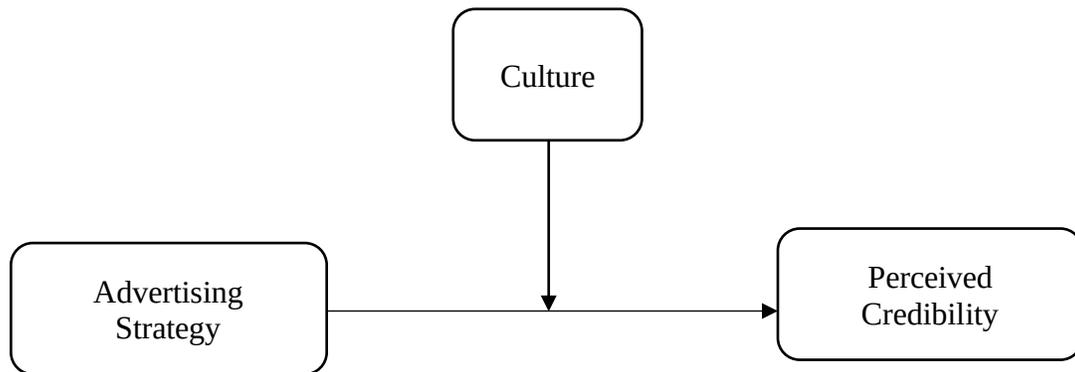
<b>Power distance index</b>	It represents to what extent the less powerful members of a society accept power and what are their expectations regarding its democratic distribution.
<b>Individualism</b>	Individualism and collectivism are the two poles of a cultural dimension that refers to the degree of appreciation of autonomy, respect for social rules and loyalty to the group to which they belong.
<b>Uncertainty avoidance index</b>	Countries that show a strong rejection of uncertainty maintain rigid codes of conduct and beliefs, with a tendency to intolerance. Companies with a weak rejection of uncertainty adopt a more relaxed attitude.
<b>Long-term orientation</b>	The long-term orientation focuses on the future reward. While the short term focuses on the present or the past and considers them more important than the future.
<b>Masculinity vs. femininity</b>	Masculinity represents society's inclination for results and material rewards: a more competitive society. Femininity indicates a preference for cooperation, protection of the weakest and quality of life. Society is more consensus oriented.

<b>Indulgence vs. restraint</b>	The extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses. A society is considered "indulgent" when it has a mild control while it is defined as more "restraint" when it has a stronger control on individuals.
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The goal of the present study is to use the dimensional aspect of individualism vs. collectivism as a moderator on the effects of the marketing strategy on credibility. This dimensional element can be conceptualized, as seen in past literature (Polyorat & Alden, 2005), as two different kinds of self-construals: independent and interdependent. Interdependent individuals are more focused on what society (other people) wants, whereas individuals with an independent self-construal are more self-focused and tend to rely exclusively on their opinions and attributes (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). According to Aaker and Maheswaran (1997), individualist cultures are found predominantly in Western countries, whereas collectivist cultures are located predominantly in Eastern countries. Therefore, we can assume that advertisements typical of the Western community are going to be more effective towards consumers who “tend to have an independent self-construal” (Polyorat & Alden, 2005). Thus, in the present research, I designed two advertisements that would represent advertisements seen in Western countries. The assumption is that individualist people, who place greater emphasis on personal achievements and care more for themselves and the people close to them, will have higher levels of credibility towards influencer advertisements than newsfeed advertisements. In contrast, credibility will have no impact on collectivists (see Figure 2). Thus, my second hypothesis is:

**H2:** The effect of advertising strategy on credibility is moderated by cultural values such that consumers that are more individualistic will perceive an influencer advertisement, relative to a newsfeed advertisement, as more credible; however, consumers that are more collective in nature will perceive no difference in advertising credibility across conditions.

**Figure 2: Model for hypothesis 2**



### **2.5 Trust in advertising**

A considerable phenomenon that took over social media in 2018 was the "rebuilding of trust". Distrust has led consumers, legislators, and media observers to question issues such as the privacy, accuracy, and ethics of many platforms. Brands could not afford to underestimate this change that was happening worldwide; it threatened their presence but, at the same time, allowed them to reinvent themselves and create new, stronger brand image. Social media users trusted less and less the content generated by companies or those associated with them (influencers). Therefore, communities started to appear, promoting activities such as sharing engaging and interesting content, supported by research, leaving more space for users' freedom of speech and creativity.

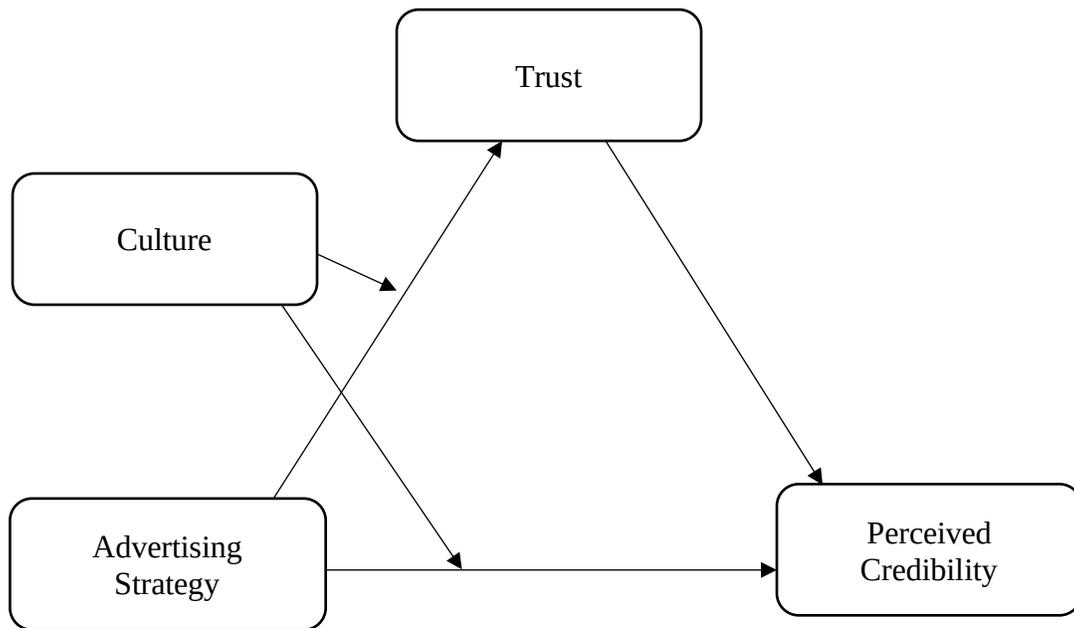
As demonstrated by the third edition of the "Trust in Advertising" survey by Nielsen, a global data measurement and analysis company implemented in 2015, the source of the content plays a crucial role in the trust-creating process. Still, WOM was the most credible promotional tool. 78% and 60% of the respondents consider friends and family advice and online comments as "very or fairly reliable". 54% of respondents consider company websites as reliable. Communications coming from the brand's website are considered the most credible form of communication from companies. A slightly lower percentage, 52%, of the interviewees would rather believe in editorial content published in newspapers and periodicals. Television commercials are not as popular anymore, collecting only 45% of users. Some exciting data concludes that 41% of respondents consider other classic means reliable, and only 44% trust

sponsorships. Furthermore, according to Michael Hulme, in "Your brand: At risk or ready for growth?", advertisements do not influence consumers' perceptions of products or brands because "58% believed that companies are only interested in selling products and services to them, not necessarily the fit of the product or service to them. 95% of respondents indicated that they did not trust advertising. 8% trust what companies say about themselves, and only 17% of respondents believe companies take what they say seriously" (Hulme, 2010).

However, not all research is against trust. One of the pillars that hold up this construct is that "information from sources with higher levels of expertise and trustworthiness can change attitudes, while sources seen as low in expertise and with biased characteristics cannot result in any change in attitude" (Greer, 2003). Building on this, the current study tests whether trust positively mediates users' credibility on the type of advertisement they are shown. To go a step forward, the same culture moderator as before is inserted in the model (see Figure 3), with the idea that individualists will rely more on influencers' advertisement than traditional native advertisements, such as newsfeed advertisements. The assumption is that individuals of a more independent nature will rely on advice given only by people they truly trust and therefore will find influencers they follow more credible than generic newsfeed accounts. On the other hand, credibility will not have any impact on collectivists' advertising strategy preference. Thus, my third hypothesis is:

**H3:** Trust mediates the moderating relationship between advertising strategy and cultural values on credibility, such that consumers that are more individualistic will perceive an influencer advertisement, relative to a newsfeed advertisement, as more trustworthy, which will predict their perceived credibility; however, consumers that are more collective in nature will perceive no difference in trust across conditions.

**Figure 3: Model for hypothesis 3**



### **Chapter 3: Study 1**

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of advertising strategy, and cultural values, on perceived advertising credibility. The advertising strategy included two types of advertisements: (1) an influencer advertisement and (2) an advertisement from a newsfeed account. Both advertisements depicted a familiar product: tights. Tights were chosen as an everyday product that is wildly accessible and most likely bought and worn by females or individuals that identify as such. Thus, I restricted the participants to females, between the ages of 19 and 25, based on the product and also because previous research shows that this age group is more likely to be on social media.

To examine the hypotheses, I first created two different types of advertisements based on real-life advertisements. The first one was the influencer advertisement, with an image of famous Italian influencer Martina Socrate; the second advertisement was adapted from a post by MTLBlog, a known Canadian newsfeed account. I then measured perceived advertising credibility towards each advertisement. I then exposed the participants to a series of culture-related questions taken from Hofstede's six-dimension scale. However, the focus will be on the 'individualists vs.

collectivists' dimension to use as a moderator. Lastly, I measured trust to test the assumption that trust would predict credibility.

### **3.1 Design and participants**

Participants were recruited using CloudResearch, a reputable participant-sourcing platform. The survey was distributed to only females between the ages of 19 and 25. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two advertising strategy conditions (influencer vs. newsfeed). In exchange for their participation, the participants obtained monetary compensation (CDN 1.30); however, the incentive was only given if the individual answered two attention-check questions correctly. When a total of 200 valid responses were recruited (average age of 22.46; SD = 1.75), the study was closed.

### **3.2 Procedure**

Participants were first randomly assigned to one of the two advertisements (i.e., the influencer advertisement or the newsfeed account). The advertisements, even though published by two different social media profiles, were about the same product (tights) created by the same fictitious Canadian brand (3xtights). The first advertisement, published by an influencer, was a photo of the female influencer wearing the sponsored tights. In contrast, the second advertisement, published by a newsfeed account (MTLblog, a popular Canadian newsfeed account), showed the same picture, and only cropped without the upper body of the influencer. Both advertisements had the same holiday-related description not to create any differing opinions between each set of participant-sample; please see Appendix A.

In the first section of the survey, I measured credibility, trust, and behavioural intentions; (please see Appendix B for items used to measure all the key constructs). Specifically, participants were asked whether they agreed or did not agree to a set of statements used to measure credibility and trust. All questions were structured with a seven-point Likert scale from 1 to 7 (“1” = strongly disagree, “7” = strongly agree; Khan & Dhar, 2006). According to Jullie Pallant (2001), this range of possible scores increases the statistical analysis. The credibility scale was adapted from two separate scales found in Schiffman & Kanuk’s (2000) book called “Consumer Behavior” and from Stern & Dietz (1994) and their paper “The value basis of environmental concern”. The trust scale

was inspired by Chiou et al.'s (2008) scales used in their study called "Virtual experience vs. brochures in the advertisement of scenic spots: How cognitive preferences and order effects influence advertising effects on consumers". The respondents were given two sets of statements corresponding to each advertisement; then, the trust scores for each group were averaged. Moreover, the participants' behavioural intentions were measured with two questions: 1) how likely are you to recommend the product promoted in this advertisement (i.e., tights from a company named 3xtights) to your family or friends? and 2) how likely are you to buy the product promoted in this advertisement (i.e., tights from a company named 3xtights), each on a 7-item Likert scale (1 = "very unlikely to buy/recommend" and 7 = "very likely to buy/recommend"). To allow the participant to always have it accessible while completing this part of the survey and mimic the social media experience, the advertisement was shown at the top of the page before every question.

The second section of the survey focused on Hofstede's six-dimension scales (Heydari et al., 2021). Each question had four to six statements about each dimension: individualism vs. collectivism, indulgence vs. restraint, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and masculinity vs. femininity. For each statement, the participants were asked how strongly they agreed or did not agree; as noted earlier, please see Appendix B for a list of the items used.

The survey's third section was measured social media usage and follower behavior. I wanted to test social media usage, as a potential covariate, because in past literature, it was found that "interactivity, medium dependency [...] are main determinants of the information credibility" (Li & Suh, 2015). To assess social media usage, I asked participants to indicate the frequency with which they use social media platforms in a day (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Etc.) by selecting one of these options: 3-5 hours, 6-9 hours, or 10+ hours. I also considered that follower behaviour might need to be controlled since follower behaviour is a factor that has been found in past research to influence users' credibility towards advertisements. As stated before, Goldsmith et al. (2000) found a connection between the advertisement's reputation and its source. The more popular the source, the easier it was for users to trust the advertisement. Answers to this question also served as an exclusion criterion discussed in the results section below. To assess "follower behaviour", I asked the participants whether they follow any influencers; they had to select one of these options: 1=Yes, I follow many influencers, and I look at their content regularly; 2=Yes, I

follow many influencers, and I sometimes look at their content; 3=Yes, I only follow one or very few influencers, 4=No, I used to, but I unfollowed them (insert reason why) or 5=No, I have never followed influencers.

The survey's final section covered demographics, such as age and ethnicity (again, please see Appendix B). Because of the importance of culture in my thesis, I considered the ethnicity of the participants to see whether it affected their decisions. Furthermore, age was considered as a potential covariate, but since the age group was already very much restricted, I did not expect it to have any effect. Finally, participants were asked to answer two straightforward attention check questions; if both questions were answered correctly, then the participants would receive the incentive of CDN 1.30 promised at the beginning. If they failed to answer both attention check questions correctly, then the participants were redirected to an 'end of survey' screen, which explained why they would not receive the promised payment.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **4.1 Data exclusion**

Participants were removed prior to data analysis using the following two criteria: first, participants who submitted incomplete surveys were removed. Because no question forced a response (except to obtain consent and the two attention check questions designed to ensure validity), it was left to them whether they wanted to answer each question. Luckily, all the participants completed the survey; thus, no one was removed based on this criterion. Second, if participants indicated that they used to follow influencers/newsfeed accounts but do not do so anymore, they were excluded from further analyses. This was used as a criterion for exclusion because often, such participants have strong opinions about social media that we believe may influence their responses to our key construct (i.e., credibility). Ten participants (5.00% of the sample) were removed using these criteria. One participant did not write their age, though the remaining 189 participants had an average age of 22.51 (SD= 1.74).

## **4.2 Testing for potential covariates**

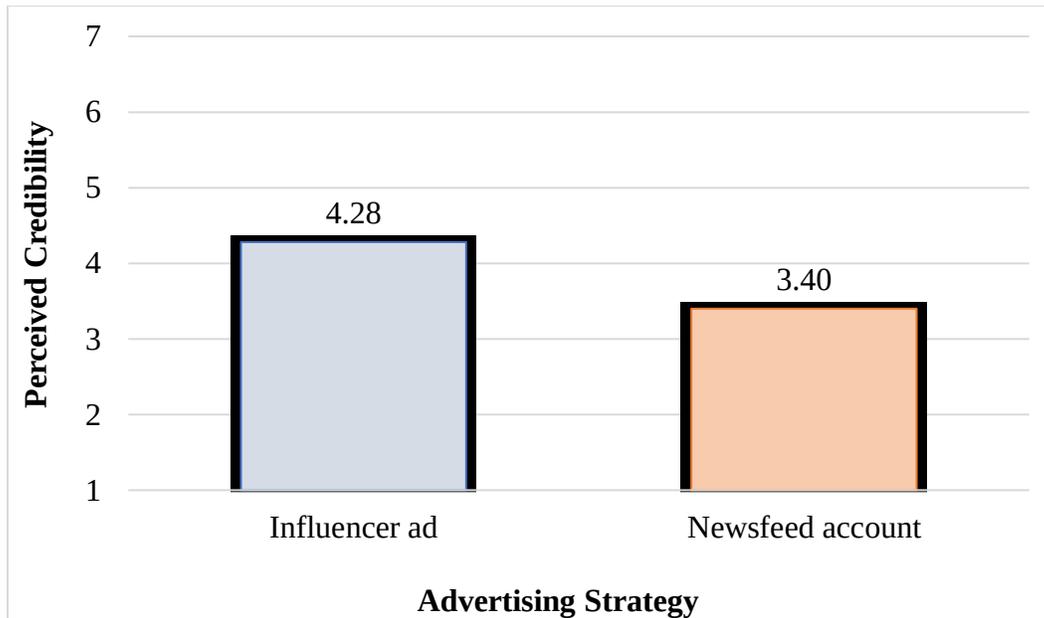
I first tested whether social media usage should be controlled in my analyses. The correlation between this variable and credibility was insignificant ( $r = .084$ ,  $p = .251$ ); thus, it was not included as a covariate in further analysis. Next, I considered whether I must control for the ethnicity of the participants; however, the correlation between ethnicity and perceived credibility was not significant ( $r = -.064$ ,  $p = .380$ ) and is thus not considered a covariate. I also considered whether I must control for the age of the participants. The correlation between age and perceived credibility was moderately significant ( $p = .064$ ) but very weak ( $r = .135$ ); thus, it was decided not to include age as a covariate in the analyses.

Finally, I considered whether following influencer(s)/newsfeed account(s) could be a potential covariate. There was a significant correlation ( $r = -.308$ ,  $p < .001$ ) between this variable and credibility, but after additional testing, I found that this variable did not pass the homogeneity of variance assumption (that is, a one-way ANOVA with advertising strategy on following behaviour produced a significant effect;  $F(1, 188) = 6.890$ ,  $p = .009$ ). Thus, whether participants follow influencer(s)/newsfeed(s) or not was not included as a covariate in the analyses.

## **4.3 Effect of advertising strategy on perceived credibility**

I first averaged the four questions used to assess credibility to create an average perceived credibility score (Cronbach alpha = .835). Then, ANOVA was conducted to analyze differences in participants' perceived credibility of the advertisement strategy. The advertising strategy participants were exposed to was entered as the independent variable (influencer advertisement versus newsfeed account), and credibility (continuous) was entered as the dependent variable. In support of my first hypothesis, the results revealed a significant effect of advertising strategy on credibility ( $F(1,188) = 22.028$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that participants in the influencer advertisement condition perceived the advertisement to be more credible ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) relative to those in the newsfeed account condition ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ); see figure 4.

**Figure 4: Advertising strategy on perceived credibility**

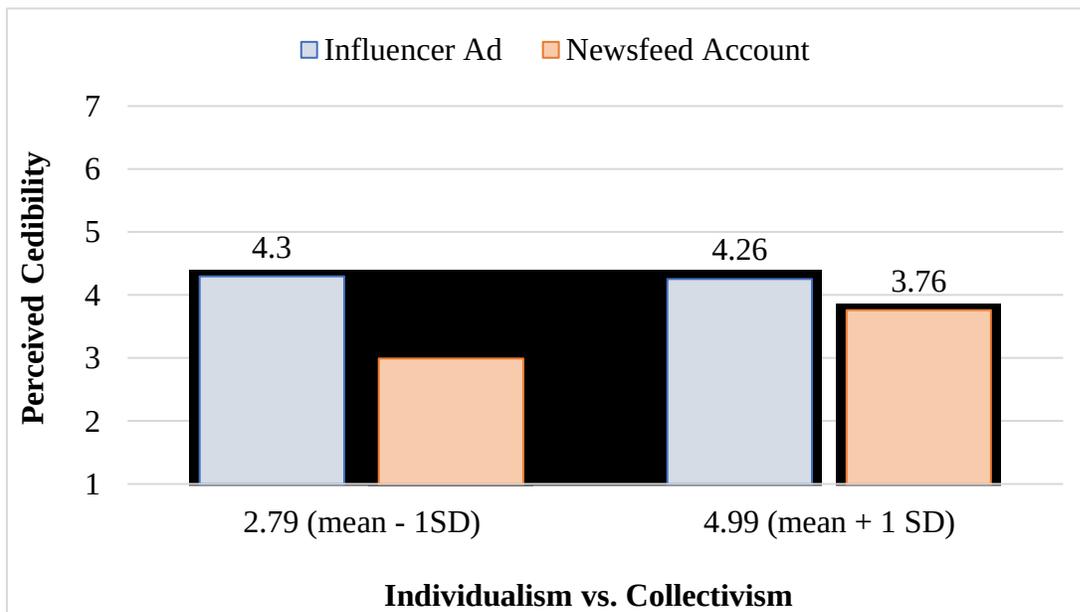


#### **4.4 Effects of individualism vs. collectivism and advertising strategy on perceived credibility**

I then averaged the six questions used to measure individualism versus collectivism to create an average culture score (Cronbach alpha = .850). To determine this score's effect on perceived credibility, I conducted an analysis with model 1 of PROCESS (Hayes, 2022). The advertising strategy that participants were exposed to was entered as the independent variable (influencer advertisement versus newsfeed account), the average credibility measure was entered as the dependent variable (continuous), and the culture score (continuous) was entered as the moderator. As expected, the results indicated a main effect of advertising strategy ( $b = 2.35$ ,  $t(186) = 3.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating that participants perceived higher credibility toward an influencer advertisement than a newsfeed advertisement. Also, the effect of the culture score on credibility was significant ( $b = .72$ ,  $t(186) = 2.62$ ,  $p = .009$ ). Further, the results yielded a significant interaction between advertising strategy and cultural values on credibility ( $b = -.37$ ,  $t(186) = -2.18$ ,  $p = .031$ ). A spotlight analysis revealed that for those who are considered more individualistic (2.79, representing one standard deviation below the mean), the effect of advertising strategy on credibility was significant ( $b = 1.32$ ,  $t(186) = 4.97$ ,  $p < .001$ ). For those who are more

collectivistic, however (4.99; representing one standard deviation above the mean), the effect of advertising strategy on credibility was not significant ( $b = .51$ ,  $t(186) = 1.90$ ,  $p = .059$ ); see figure 5. These results are consistent with the second hypothesis.

**Figure 5: Effects of culture and advertising strategy on perceived credibility**



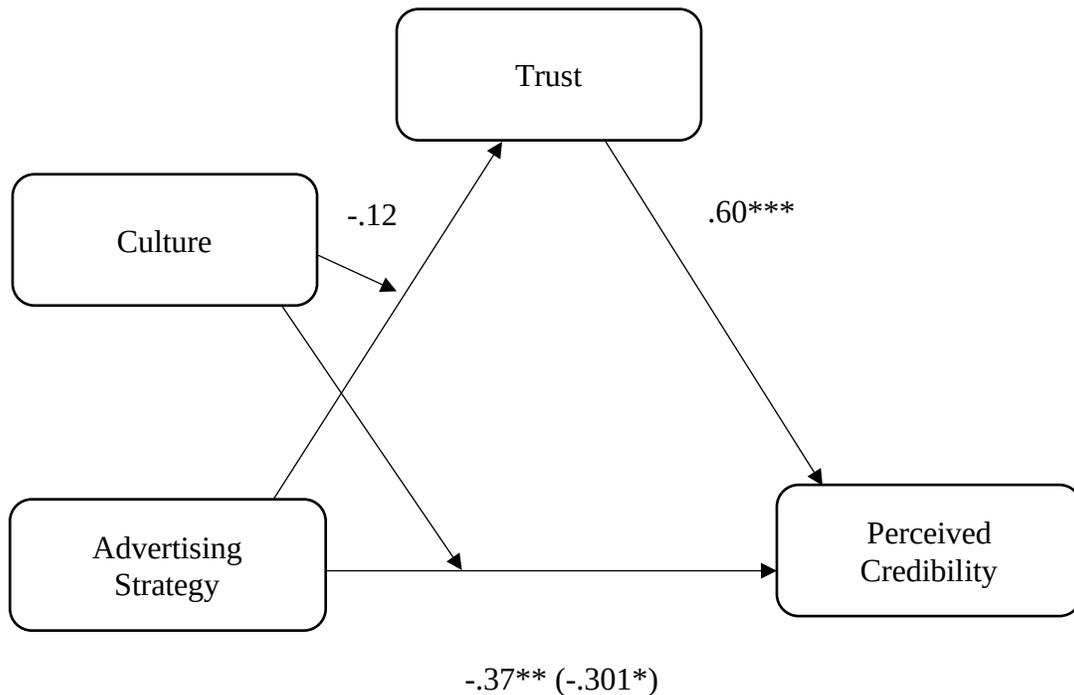
Note: Individualism is represented by lower numbers on this scale, whereas collectivism is represented by higher numbers.

#### 4.5 Mediating effect of trust on perceived credibility

After the moderating effect’s very high significance, I tested a potential mediating effect using an additional variable: trust. I first reverse-coded two of the five statements and then averaged the scores to create a measure of perceived trust (Cronbach’s alpha = .639). The analysis was conducted using PROCESS, Model 8 (Preacher et al., 2007) to examine whether there would be any variation in the analysis. The advertising strategy that participants were exposed to was entered as the independent variable (influencer advertisement versus newsfeed account), the average credibility measure was entered as the dependent variable (continuous), the cultural score (continuous) was entered as the moderator, and perceived trust was entered at the mediator (continuous).

The results showed that the interaction between advertising strategy and cultural value on perceived trust was insignificant ( $b = -.12$ ,  $t(186) = -1.01$ ,  $p = .31$ ). Although this does not support H3, we continued with the analyses for the sake of completion. The result of this analysis did yield a significant effect of perceived trust on credibility ( $b = .60$ ,  $t(185) = 6.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Also, the total effect ( $b = -.37$ ,  $t(186) = -2.18$ ,  $p = .03$ ) of the exposure to advertising strategy  $\times$  cultural value on credibility decreased ( $b = -.301$ ,  $t(185) = -1.92$ ,  $p = .05$ ) when the mediator (perceived trust) was added in the model; see figure 6. The data suggest that although trust is not a mediator, there is something unique about trust, such that trust does predict credibility.

**Figure 6: Mediation analysis**



Notes: Direct effects represent the standardized regression coefficient. The values inside parentheses represent the standardized regression coefficient when the proposed mediator is included in the model.

\* $p = .055$ . \*\* $p = .031$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$

## **4.6 Discussion**

Although previous research has mainly analyzed users' perceptions and behavioural intentions toward brands after they have been exposed to influencer-based marketing campaigns (De Veirman & Hudders, 2020), in my thesis, I asked users their perceptions on two types of advertisements to analyze whether they differ in perceived credibility, which is a variable that "is an important part of research on mass communication" (Abbasi & Liu, 2013). The first hypothesis was supported by the results of Study 1, where marketing strategy (conceptualized as influencer advertisements versus advertisements seen on newsfeed accounts) was found to influence perceived credibility: that is, the participants exposed to the influencer advertisement had higher levels of credibility compared to participants that were exposed to the newsfeed advertisement. The expected results support previous research confirming that individuals find influencer advertisements more credible than newsfeed advertisements. However, I wanted to extend these findings by examining if cultural values would moderate this effect. Therefore, Hofstede's cultural dimension of individualists vs. collectivists was assessed to test its potential role in advertising strategy. The results showed that consumers' sense of individualism versus collectivism increased their perceived credibility when exposed to an influencer advertisement compared to a newsfeed advertisement, which supports hypothesis 2. Even though the mediation analysis showed no support for the mediating effect of perceived trust on the relationship between the exposure to the advertising strategy and credibility, the findings partially support hypothesis 3 – that is, the analysis yielded a significant relationship between trust and credibility.

## **Chapter 5: Additional Analyses**

### **5.1 Other dimensions of culture**

For completeness, I tested whether the other cultural values aspects (indulgence vs. restraint, power distance, uncertainty vs. avoidance, long-term orientation and masculinity vs. femininity) interacted with marketing strategy to predict perceived credibility. To do so, I first averaged each dimension's questions to create an average perceived culture score. Then, I conducted separate analyses using model 1 of PROCESS (Hayes, 2022). The advertising strategies that participants were exposed to were entered as the independent variable, the averaged credibility

measure was entered as the dependent variable, and the cultural scores were entered as the moderators. The results of these analyses are reported in table 2:

**Table 2: Hofstede’s six-dimensions of culture on credibility**

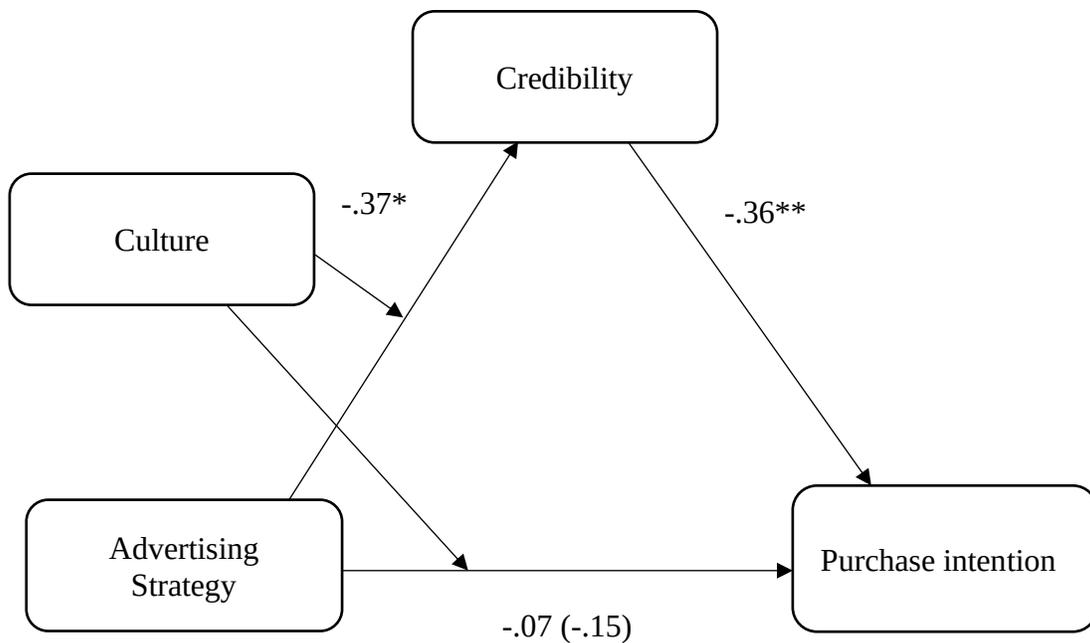
<b>Cultural dimension (Cronbach alpha in parenthesis)</b>	<b>Main effect on credibility</b>	<b>Interaction with marketing strategy on credibility</b>
Individualism vs. collectivism (Cronbach =.850)	b= .72; t(186)=2.62, p< .01	b= -.37; t(186)=-2.18, p= .03
Indulgence vs. restraint (Cronbach =.906)	b= -.06; t(186)=-.26, p= .80	b= .09; t(186)=.64, p= .52
Power distance (Cronbach =.898)	b= .58; t(186)=2.15, p= .03	b= -.26; t(186)=-1.63, p= .10
Uncertainty vs. avoidance (Cronbach =.898)	b= -.01; t(186)=-.04, p= .96	b= .13; t(186)=.74, p= .46
Long-term orientation (Cronbach =.791)	b= -.18; t(186)=-.61, p= .54	b= .16; t(186)=.85, p= .40
Masculinity vs. femininity (Cronbach =.887)	b= .30; t(186)=1.36, p= .17	b= -.11; t(186)=-.83, p= .40

Four of the five remaining culture dimensions (indulgence vs. restraint, uncertainty vs. avoidance, long-term orientation and masculinity vs. femininity), as expected, did not present any significant main effects on credibility (all ps > .17), nor was there any interaction between marketing strategy and culture on credibility (all ps > .40). However, I found a surprisingly significant effect of power distance on credibility (p = .03). Further, the results yielded a moderately significant interaction between advertising strategy and power distance on credibility (p = .10). According to the Hofstede Insights website, power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally”. It would be interesting for future research to examine the connection between power levels and the perceived credibility of certain advertisements.



The second analysis, conducted with PROCESS using Model 8, used advertising strategy as the independent variable, purchase intention as the dependent variable, credibility as the mediating variable, and cultural value as the moderating variable. The result of this analysis produced a significant effect of perceived credibility on purchase intention ( $b = -.36$ ,  $t(185) = 4.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Also, the total effect ( $b = -.07$ ,  $t(186) = -.32$ ,  $p = .75$ ) of the advertising strategy  $\times$  cultural value on purchase intention increased ( $b = -.15$ ,  $t(185) = -.44$ ,  $p = .66$ ) when the mediator (perceived credibility) was added in the model (see figure 9).

**Figure 8: Exploratory analysis on purchase intention**



Notes: Direct effects represent the standardized regression coefficient. The value inside the parenthesis represents the standardized regression coefficient when the proposed mediator is included in the model.

\* $p = .03$ . \*\* $p < .001$

## Chapter 6: Discussion

### 6.1 Summary of Results

Past literature illustrated that some users have difficulty believing and trusting certain advertisements on social media. The purpose of study 1 was to examine if the advertising strategy

influences credibility. The results of the first hypothesis replicated prior findings showing the expected positive effect of perceived credibility mainly on the influencer advertisement (Choi & Rifon, 2002). Going beyond replication, however, this study's results also supported the second hypothesis: independent participants showed more perceived credibility when exposed to an advertising strategy compared to collectivists. This finding illustrated that culture positively impacted consumers' perceptions of the perceived credibility of the advertising strategy when the participants were more closely associated with the behaviour of individualists. Lastly, the effect of perceived trust on the relationship between the advertising strategy and culture on credibility was also measured. The results did not support this assumption, but it was found that, uniquely, perceived trust predicts credibility. Future research should expand on these findings.

A series of exploratory analyses were carried out for the sake of completion. First, the second hypothesis was run with Hofstede's other five dimensions scales to see whether there was any significance. All but one, power distance, were found to be insignificant. Further studies should focus on why the extent to which the less powerful individuals of an organization accept that power is unequally distributed within it would significantly affect credibility. Moreover, behavioural analyses were examined to see whether perceived credibility predicted product recommendations and/or purchase intention. The results found some significance, but I believe it would still be interesting for future studies to investigate further how culture might affect people's purchasing and recommending behaviours.

## **6.2 Theoretical contributions and practical implications**

First, this research contributes to the literature on credibility. It brings the research from a branding or corporate perspective to a more consumer-centred perspective where the process model of credibility is applied to demonstrate the effect of different native advertisements. This study helps consumers be more aware of the advertisements they encounter on their social media feed and realize the consequences of putting too much trust in what they see. Second, this research also examines a more niche aspect of credibility where its effect is moderated by a cultural element, in this case, the independence versus interdependence (individualists vs. collectivists) within the consumers' behaviour. Lastly, this study also investigates whether the effect of credibility on the

advertising strategy can occur when it is moderated by trust, but unfortunately, no support was found.

The findings also provide several practical implications. First, the results of my thesis might help marketing practitioners understand when to invest more in influencers (versus newsfeed accounts). Studies on the subject have affirmed that one of the most critical challenges to which brands are subjected is identifying influencers who can substantially impact the audience (Momtaz et al., 2011). Therefore, based on the findings, I advise practitioners to focus their efforts on influencer marketing, which is the tool brands are increasingly using to leak marketing messages among consumers and bringing the brand closer to their stakeholders (Backaler, 2018). Second, as seen in this study's results, perceived credibility is a primary factor in users' perceptions. Whenever marketing professionals are thinking of new advertising strategies, they should keep in mind how believable their advertisement is going to be in the eyes of the consumer. Future research should find out the relation between credibility of the advertisement and the actual product characteristics, whether one is influenced by the other. Lastly, practitioners could benefit from the cultural aspects influencing consumer behaviour: individualism vs. collectivism and power distance. Creating a specific advertisement for a particular type of person (e.g., an individualistic person) might make it easier to reach the desired audience without appearing in the other person's timeline. Future research might be able to figure out a way to connect consumer types with their online behaviour depending on the pages they follow or with the people they interact.

#### **6.4 Limitations**

The current research possesses several limitations that provide opportunities for future research. Firstly, the survey was distributed to North American participants but was structured using non-American advertisements. The influencer advertisement pictured an Italian influencer, while the newsfeed advertisement was edited from a popular Canadian blog page. Furthermore, the depicted product was presumed to be manufactured by a Canadian company (3xtights.ca). For future research, I recommend maintaining consistency between the advertisements displayed and the sample group answering the survey questions. A second limitation is that the influencer that was chosen (i.e., Martina Socrate) was probably not recognized by most of the participants being

that she is mainly famous in Italy. In future studies I suggest choosing a well-known influencer within the participants' country; one way to determine the recognizability of the influencer is through a pre-test. A third limitation is that the newsfeed advertisement lacks a "face" in contrast to the influencer advertisement which had a full body figure of the chosen influencer. In the newsfeed advertisement the participants could only see the model from the waist down. For future research I suggest showcasing a model also in the newsfeed advertisement so that both advertisements are the same and the participants can associate a face to the product that is being sponsored. A fourth limitation is the use of a primarily female product. Looking back on the survey creation, a more neutral product would have allowed a more diverse sample of people, which might have given very different results. Lastly, it would be helpful for future studies to include a briefing section to ensure that participants clearly understand the questions they are being asked. Moreover, a restructuring of some of the questions is needed as I have found some conflicting answers throughout the data that might disappear with some rewording.

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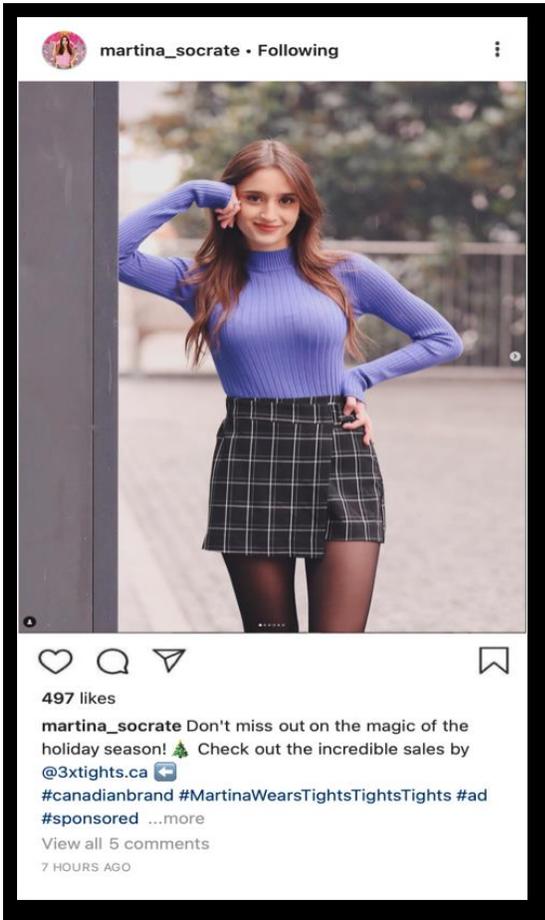
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## Appendix A

Below are the two advertisements used in the survey:

### Influencer advertisement



The screenshot shows an Instagram post from the user **martina\_socrate**, who is following. The post features a full-body photograph of a woman with long brown hair, wearing a blue long-sleeved turtleneck sweater and a black and white plaid mini skirt. She is posing with one hand on her hip and the other near her face. The background is an outdoor setting with a fence and trees. Below the image, the post has 497 likes and a caption that reads: "Don't miss out on the magic of the holiday season! 🎄 Check out the incredible sales by @3xtights.ca 🛒 #canadianbrand #MartinaWearsTightsTightsTights #ad #sponsored ...more". There are also options to "View all 5 comments" and the post is timestamped "7 HOURS AGO".

### Newsfeed advertisement



The screenshot shows an Instagram post from the user **mtblog**, who is following. The post features a text overlay on a white background that reads: "Tights season is here Don't miss out on incredible sales by this Canadian brand". Below the text is a cropped image of the same woman from the first post, showing her waist and the plaid skirt. A small circular logo with the text "MTL BLOG" is overlaid on the image. Below the image, the post has 497 likes and a caption that reads: "Don't miss out on the magic of the holiday season! 🎄 Tap the link in @MTLBlog bio for the full story! 🛒:: Lara Sandler | MTL Blog, @mslaragreen mtlblog.co/6w3f ... more". There are also options to "View all 5 comments" and the post is timestamped "7 HOURS AGO".

## APPENDIX B

### Key Measures:

Measure	Survey Questions	Answer Options
Credibility (influencer)	Indicate how strongly you agree (or disagree) with the general statements below about influencers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I perceive honest influencers as credible.</li> <li>• I perceive influencers credible when the message in their post is clear.</li> <li>• I perceive influencers as credible when they work with only selected brands.</li> <li>• I perceive influencers as credible because they only sponsor products they truly believe in.</li> </ul>
Credibility (newsfeed account)	Indicate how strongly you agree (or disagree) with the general statements below about newsfeed advertisements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I perceive newsfeed social media accounts as credible.</li> <li>• I perceive newsfeed social media accounts credible when their message in their post is clear.</li> <li>• I perceive newsfeed social media accounts as credible when they sponsor only selected brands.</li> <li>• I perceive newsfeed social media accounts as credible because they only sponsor products they truly believe in.</li> </ul>
Trust (influencer)	Based on the influencer advertisement pictured above, indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• @martina_socrate only advertised this product for her own interest in selling. (reverse-coded)</li> <li>• By showing this ad @martina_socrate is being manipulative. (reverse-coded)</li> <li>• Influencer ads, like the one proposed by @martina_socrate, always show the truth about her offerings.</li> <li>• Claims made by influencer ads, like @martina_socrate's, are always being kept.</li> <li>• I believe in the ad posted by @martina_socrate about the product.</li> </ul>

<p>Trust (newsfeed account)</p>	<p>Based on the newsfeed advertisement pictured above, indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• @mtlblog only advertised this product for their own interest in selling. (reverse-coded)</li> <li>• By showing this ad @mtlblog is being manipulative. (reverse-coded)</li> <li>• Newsfeed ads, like the one published by @mtlblog, always show the truth about their offerings.</li> <li>• Claims made by newsfeed ads, like the ones by @mtlblog, are always being kept.</li> <li>• I believe in the ad posted by @mtlblog about the product.</li> </ul>
<p>Individualism vs. Collectivism</p>	<p>Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals should sacrifice self-interest for the group.</li> <li>• Individuals should stick with the group even through difficulties.</li> <li>• Group welfare is more important than individual rewards.</li> <li>• Group success is more important than individual success.</li> <li>• Individuals should only pursue their goals after considering the welfare of the group.</li> <li>• Group loyalty should be encouraged even if individual goals suffer.</li> </ul>
<p>Indulgence vs. Restraint</p>	<p>Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One should enjoy complete sexual freedom without restriction.</li> <li>• Feelings and desires related to casual sex should be gratified freely.</li> <li>• There should not be any limits on individuals' enjoyment.</li> <li>• Societies should value relatively free gratification of desires and feelings.</li> <li>• Desires, especially with respect to sensual pleasure should not be suppressed.</li> <li>• Gratification of desires should not be delayed.</li> </ul>

<p>Power distance</p>	<p>Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People in higher positions should make most decisions without consulting people in lower positions.</li> <li>• People in higher positions should not ask the opinions of people in lower positions too frequently.</li> <li>• People in higher positions should avoid social interactions with people in lower positions.</li> <li>• People in lower positions should not disagree with decisions made by people in higher positions.</li> <li>• People in higher positions should not delegate important task to people in lower positions.</li> </ul>
<p>Uncertainty vs. Avoidance</p>	<p>Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is important to have instructions spelled out in detail so that I always know what I am expected to do.</li> <li>• It is important to closely follow instructions and procedures.</li> <li>• Rules and regulations are important because they inform me as to what is expected of me.</li> <li>• Standardized work procedures are helpful.</li> <li>• Instructions for operations are important.</li> </ul>
<p>Long term orientation</p>	<p>Indicate the extent to which you believe that you are closely associated with each of the following qualities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Careful management of money (thrift).</li> <li>• Going on resolutely in spite of opposition (persistence).</li> <li>• Personal steadiness and stability.</li> <li>• Long-term planning.</li> <li>• Giving up today's fun for success in the future.</li> <li>• Working hard for success in the future.</li> </ul>

<p>Masculinity vs. Femininity</p>	<p>Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is more important for men to have a professional career than it is for a woman.</li> <li>• Men usually solve problems with logical analysis, women usually solve problems with Intuition.</li> <li>• Solving difficult problems usually requires an active, forcible approach, which is typical of men.</li> <li>• There are some jobs that a man can always do better than a woman.</li> </ul>
<p>Age</p>	<p>How old are you?</p>	<p>19; 20; 21; 22; 23; 24; 25</p>
<p>Ethnicity</p>	<p>Which of the following best describes you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asian or Pacific Islander</li> <li>• Black or African American</li> <li>• Hispanic or Latino</li> <li>• White or Caucasian</li> </ul>
<p>Social media usage</p>	<p>Please indicate the frequency with which you use social media platforms in a day (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1-2 hours</li> <li>• 3-5 hours</li> <li>• 6-9 hours</li> <li>• 10+ hours</li> </ul>
<p>Follow frequency</p>	<p>Do you follow any influencers?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes, I follow many influencers and I look at their content regularly</li> <li>• Yes, I follow many influencers and I sometimes look at their content</li> <li>• Yes, I only follow one or very few influencers</li> <li>• No, I used to but I unfollowed them (insert reason why...)</li> <li>• No, I have never followed influencers</li> </ul>

<p>Product recommendation</p>	<p>How likely are you to <b>recommend</b> the product promoted in this ad (i.e., tights from a company named 3xtights) to your family or friends?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1=Not at all likely</li> <li>• 2</li> <li>• 3</li> <li>• 4=Somewhat likely</li> <li>• 5</li> <li>• 6</li> <li>• 7=Very likely</li> </ul>
<p>Purchase intention</p>	<p>How likely are you to <b>buy</b> the product promoted in this ad (i.e., tights from a company named 3xtights)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1=Not at all likely</li> <li>• 2</li> <li>• 3</li> <li>• 4=Somewhat likely</li> <li>• 5</li> <li>• 6</li> <li>• 7=Very likely</li> </ul>
<p>Attention check question 1</p>	<p>In this research study, you were asked to give your thoughts on an advertisement. What was the product being advertised?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tights</li> <li>• Guitars</li> <li>• Cookies</li> </ul>
<p>Attention check question 2</p>	<p>In this research study, did you answer questions about the effects of advertising on kids?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• No</li> </ul>