



Department of Business and Management

Master of Marketing – Marketing relationship & customer engagement

Chair of Neuromarketing

**Tik-Tok...time is over:**

**are number of followers and language used drivers of  
this new influencer marketing frontier?**

*Thesis supervisor*

Prof. Rumen Ivaylov Pozharliev

*Candidate*

Federica D'Angelo

737141

*Thesis co-supervisor*

Prof. Emanuele G. Margherita

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## Introduction

As a result of the outbreak of COVID-19 over the last two years, the world has experienced an acceleration in communication, both online and offline. Taking into consideration the online environment, it can certainly say that Tik-Tok has become THE social platform not only for personal use but also and especially for promotional use by companies.

Tik-Tok is a social network born in China in 2016, initially as Musical.ly. At first, it was baptized Duoyin (in China is still called like that) and its purpose was to allow to practice languages. Since its users were mainly teenagers, they began to change its use, and entertainment became their goal. From then, this rapid growth led to a new worldwide re-launch under the name TikTok.

Tik-Tok app is based on the concept of short format video, offering users a wide selection of sounds and pieces of music, as well as the option to add special effects and filters. It also provides an option to directly add videos created on your phone; a reaction feature, which allows users to record their reactions to other videos and share; and also, a digital wellness feature that sends an alert when users spend more than two hours on the app.

Since its launch, the application's popularity has grown a lot. The platform has become popular around the world and has gained most of its popularity during the start of the pandemic reaching 2 billion downloads worldwide across IOS and Android (Leskin, 2020). It has allowed artists to launch their career outside the traditional path, by creating a music video, choosing background music from a wide variety of music genres, edit with a filter and record a 15-second or 60-second video with speed adjustments before uploading it to share with others on Tik-Tok or other social platforms. They can also film short lip-sync videos to popular songs. The songs go viral and are used for multiple challenges before being skyrocketed to the top of the charts (Leskin, 2020).

. Tik-Tok's mission as explained on their website is “*to inspire creativity and bring joy*” and the shift toward Instagram and Tik-Tok, as well as sites such as Snapchat or Twitch, has, in recent years, given rise to an entire industry of social media influencers and influencer marketing agencies.

Nowadays Tik-Tok maintains the most famous position on every platform among teenagers. The popularity of Tik-Tok gave the opportunity many people the capacity to obtain many followers. Therefore, gaining the title of an influencer.

Nowadays, as stated by Sinha *et al.* (2020), modern marketing practices heavily rely on using sales promotion tools. Businesses use social media as a tool to advertise their products, which aims to convey marketing communication messages in order to attract attention and persuade online audiences. Among the first to experience the use of this social media, as a potential marketing tool, there is also a well-known fast-food chain: in Malaysia this App was viral already in 2018, and McDonald took the opportunity to launch a dance challenge<sup>1</sup>, which was a successful campaign.

Different insights on Tik-Tok show how important it can be as a marketing tool, especially to reach the younger generations, which are more difficult to reach in terms of marketing, they also are more critical of the content, they are looking for authenticity more than any generation. Concerning the authenticity, Tik-Tok has been known for this, brands have to let the influencer the complete control over the content because *TikTokers*, as they are called, know their audience and know how to reach them in a way that stays in line with their typical content (Nicolaes & Stellar, 2020), using visual storytelling.

The social platform is particularly interesting for marketers because it attracts younger consumers, and those younger consumers are more receptive to a specific type of marketing communication: influencer marketing (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). But even though this platform has experienced exponential growth, influencer video advertising on Tik-Tok has been understudied.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://youtu.be/Gz0slN5pRCI>

The study focuses on micro-influencers and macro-influencers and their performance in the commercial publications concerning credibility.

The aim is to examine which different factors affect the credibility of micro-influencers' and macro-influencers' commercial collaboration post. The influencers are studied globally but the quantitative research of the thesis concentrates on Tik-Tok influencers. The study is comparative in that it aims to understand which type of influencers, micro-influencers and macro-influencers, users' reactions. The study is focused on users' reactions because important metrics to note for marketers are that engagement and shareability on Tik-Tok have increased by 15% between 2017 and 2019 (Haenlein *et al.*, 2020). TikTok itself also shared an interesting metric in 2019: 90% of their users go on the app at least once a day, if not more. This is one of the major pros for companies to be active on Tik-Tok because 25% of apps are only opened once after their download and after that are never used again (Statista, 2019). An average user spends 52 minutes per day on the app. Since research show that video marketing is not going away: 86% of people wish to see more videos created by brands (Alexandra, 2020).

Considering previous research, the influencers that create more engagement are the micro influencers (Wissman, 2018), being perceived as more authentic and near to the normal people.

From a theoretical perspective, research has yet to analyze the role of influencers and their credibility in the social media context. Moreover, previous studies have never explored this aspect on Tik-Tok. This study aims to understand if the research about micro influencer, their credibility and engagement could be valid also on this new platform. To achieve this goal, the study investigates the effect of influencer type on engagement actions and intention to share, specifically analyzing the effect of two main type, micro influencer, and macro influencer. Moreover, the role of influencer's perceived credibility in this relationship wants to be uncovered and something totally new wants to be analyzed: the role of language used.

In the present study, we propose that micro influencers may be perceived as more credible, with respect to macro influencers. Specifically, this characteristic serves as a cue that leads to a higher users' engagement on the platform.

Moreover, the language used should reinforce the relationship between micro influencer and users' actions and the credibility.

To attain so, one main study is conducted, divided in two parts. The first one aims at understanding all the effect on engagement actions and the other one on uses' intention to share.

In the next section, literature pertinent to the research is discussed. Then the conceptual framework is built for the hypothesized effects and describe the conducted study in detail and results. Finally, to conclude it's addressed specific contributions of the research, both from an academical and managerial point of view, and presenting limitations and suggesting future research directions in the area.



# CHAPTER I: Literature Review and Hypotheses

## *1.1 Literature Review*

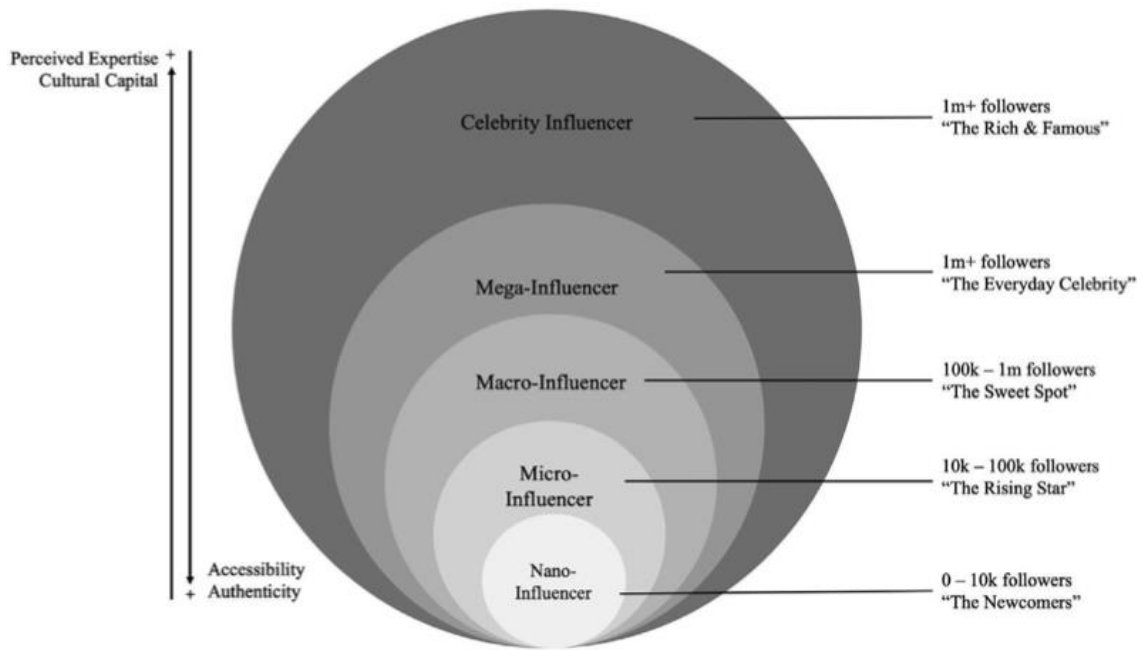
### *1.1.1 Micro and Macro influencers*

Influencers are specialists at generating content consumers interact with, which helps it spread more widely on social media. An influencer is someone who posts to social media in exchange for compensation (Campbell & Grimm, 2019). Influencer marketing is a form of native advertising that involves presenting online content to consumers with advertisements that resemble, in format and content, the non-advertising content that is published on the same platform (Wojdyski, 2016, p. 203).

The recent growth of influencer marketing can be attributed to the intersection of several different forces. First, consumers have shifted their media consumption from print to online media. Second, consumers react differently to advertising when they are online.

Influencers attract millions of followers by sharing content curated from their daily lives on platforms like Instagram and YouTube, evolving around one particular domain of interest (Chapple and Cownie 2017; MediaKix 2017).

Influencers differ significantly in branding and focus, follower base, engagement rates, monetary requirements for collaboration, and skill sets. Taking into account these differences, it is possible to identify five distinct influencer categories shown in *Figure 1*.



**Figure 1:** Types of social media influencers

Celebrity influencers (1m+ followers) are individuals who enjoy public recognition outside of social media and are leveraged by brands for their large follower base (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

Mega influencers (1m+ followers) are individuals who have experienced significant follower growth on social media and who have created a celebrity status from an established expertise. (Campbell and Farrell 2020) Unlike celebrity, this influencer category lacked celebrity status prior to his/her becoming social media mavens: mega influencer may be famous on Internet while unknowns outside their sets of followers.

Macro influencers (100k – 1m followers) are influencers who have yet to gain celebrity but nevertheless are extremely successful (Campbell and Farrell 2020).

Micro influencers (10k – 100k followers) are successful enough to make a career out of being an influencer, but they are smaller than macro influencers in both scale and scope (Campbell and Farrell 2020). As compared to more popular influencers, ‘micro-influencers’ may be experts in a relatively small field and engage with their audience more and may therefore be seen as more similar to their followers (De Veirman *et al.*,

2017; Gräve 2017).

Lastly, nano influencers are at the beginnings of their influencer careers, and their followers are mostly friends, acquaintances, and others who live close by.

As previously mentioned in the introduction, this study focused on micro and macro influencers on Tik-Tok platform. Because of the Covid-19, Tik-Tok begun to acquire many influencers from other social platform but most of all it creates some new ones. It is among the major online platforms blurring the line between content and commerce. Some influencers on Tik-Tok through their videos, simultaneously entertain their audiences and sell them products. The key difference between micro and macro influencers relay in the consequences that their videos, posts, can have on their audiences:

- Macro influencers achieve strong engagement rates, and they are dominant within their subject domains (e.g., travel, music, fashion) and their followers aspire to be like them.
- Micro influencers videos can influence sales significantly, as many followers find micro influencers' recommendations more genuine than those made by larger celebrities, whom they may view as more prone to "sell out".

For this reason, marketing managers are increasingly working with micro influencers, who harness greater authenticity and trust and often are more connected to the needs and interests of their followers (Wissman, 2018).

Moreover, macro influencers usually have gained their fame through their social media platforms (Ismail 2018) and they make contents as occupation behind a remuneration from the social platform, on which they post, or from brands that bridal.

They are high profile people that expertise at raising awareness amongst people and for this reason it can be difficult to reach a specific target audience, but the followers can be very large.

The consumer knows that the public figure is likely to have been paid or otherwise benefited from making the recommendation and the publication. Today's media-critical audience can recognize the sponsored post and might not perceive those that credible ((Lee *et al.*, 2020).

On the other hand, micro influencers create their own content and most often do not get paid for their publications. They typically chat with their followers, respond to comments, share personal difficulties as well as topics their everyday life. Thus, they create close interaction with their followers and discuss with them like friends to each other. (Vodák *et al.*, 2019).

Even though influencer marketing is always planned and discussed with the influencer, macro-influencers post can be perceived more as advertising than the micro-influencers' posts. (Lee *et al.*, 2020).

The effectiveness of the message could be also influenced by the type of language uses by the influencers.

### *1.1.2 Language: assertive and non-assertive*

People communicate with each other both verbally and nonverbally. We transmit our thoughts and feelings through words - verbal and nonverbal through body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and actions. Through brand management strategies, consumers are often exposed to forceful messages and imperative slogans, such as Nike's "Just do it" or U.S. Airways "Fly with US" (Kronrod *et al.*, 2011).

The use of this type of communication, in a world of ever-depreciating attention span, can allow brands to engage their audience and have a capacious creative potential.

Even if unlimited combinations between language used and image/video are possible, brands need to understand the right combination to compose social media posts (Farace and Ordenes, 2022) to affect consumer engagement effectively and positively. Specifically, the focus of this study is on the composition of Tik-Tok post with micro influencer video and assertive language. Assertive language is defined as direct and persuasive communication that by adopting an imperative tone call consumers to action.

While non-assertive Language is an indirect communication that convey an impression of providing options and asking audience point of view.

Research has found that people in positive mood tend to use more assertive language in their requests (Forgas 1995; Sinclair and Mark 1992).

Correspondingly, people in positive mood expect to be addressed with more direct and assertive language (Bloch 1996; Forgas 1999a, 1999b). This matching pattern appears consistent with language behavior literature, which demonstrates that higher compliance occurs when the language of requests fits the receiver's expectations (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987; Forgas 1998). As a consequence, assertive messages are more persuasive than nonassertive messages when they relate to contexts that induce positive mood.

So far, research on language has neglected to investigate the role assertive and non-assertive language may play in the context of online media strategies and even fewer studies have been conducted in the context of Tik-Tok platform. This study aims therefore to fill this gap by advancing the idea that consumers perceive as assertive direct and persuasive communication that by adopting an imperative tone call consumers to action when observing online video promotions. Indeed, when looking at the online methods used by influencers, they always use a direct language to promote a deal on their profile, to be near to their audience.

### *1.1.3 Influencer's Perceived Credibility*

The perceived credibility of an influencer refers to whether an individual perceives the influencers' recommendations as unbiased, believable, true, or factual (Hass, 1981).

Perceived credibility of an influencer explains that the effectiveness of a message depends on perceived level of expertise and trustworthiness of an influencer (Hovland et al., 1953; Hovland and Weiss, 1951; Ohanian, 1990). Ohanian (1990) referred that "source credibility" is often used to pick attention to the influencer's positive characteristics that influences the consumer's acceptance of a message. Because the influencer is the principal source of information, his perceived credibility is an important aspect for the advertiser (Friedman et al., 1979).

The interpretation of credibility diverges in the related literature. For example, according to Hovland et al. (1953) credibility consists of two components called

perceived expertness and trustworthiness. Trust is a relevant element in several studies (Bowers and Phillips, 1967; White et al., 2009; Applbaum and Anatol, 1972; 1973).

Further, Applbaum & Anatol (1972) and Desarbo & Harshman (1985) consider that besides trust, expertise is also a crucial factor of perceived credibility of an influencer. In more recent studies the attractiveness of an influencer is also considered as a dimension of credibility (Ohanian, 1990; 1991; Goldsmith et al., 2000).

To conclude, Ohanian (1990) developed three constructs to measure the effectiveness of influencers through looking at the perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness of the influencer, specifically in the advertisement course. Subsequently, fifteen items of perceived credibility of an influencer have been extensively accepted, and used by several researchers (Pornpitakpan, 2003; Till and Busler, 1998; 2000).

For the purpose of this study, only two of three dimensions defined by Ohanian (1990) will be considered and analyzed: expertise and trustworthiness. Indeed, the social media context should be taken into consideration.

The trust paradigm in communication is the listener's level of confidence in, and level of acceptance of the influencer and the message (Abdulmajid-Sallam and Wahid, 2012).

Trustworthiness can be defined as "the honesty, integrity and believability the endorser possesses" (Van der Waldt et al., 2009). Trustworthiness is also defined as the degree of confidence that consumers place on influencers' intent to convey the assertions, they consider most valid (Ohanian, 1990).

Instead, expertise is defined as "the degree to which the endorser is perceived to have the adequate knowledge, experience or skills to promote the product" (Van der Waldt et al., 2009). Influencers might be perceived as having more expertise than created spokespersons (Van der Waldt et al., 2009: 104). Influencers' expertise is "the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be a source of valid assertions" (Erdogan, 1999).

#### *1.1.4 Engagement actions and Intention to share*

Engagement is a central concept in social communities. User engagement goes beyond a mere behavioral response, but it comprises, also, cognitive processing and affection.

Ananda et al., (2016) proposes two types of active Social Media Marketing (SMM) communications which leads to a different users' engagement actions:

- Representation-centered communication focus on the brand and the products
- Engagement-centered communication aim at directly engaging audiences and encourage users' co-creation or content sharing.

Social media networks are bidirectional communication channels that make tools available for users to express their reactions and respond to any content posted to the platform. Engagement actions (e.g., “like,” “retweet,” “share,” “comment,” etc.) are included in these tools, and they usually embedded as click-based buttons on social media platforms. Users can then share their interest, convey their attitude about content posted by anyone take inspiration for their own posts.

Some engagement actions differ in the cognitive process behind. “Like” or “Share” require less effort and reduce cognitive load, compared to other types of behavior, such as commenting or replying (Swani et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2017). Albeit similar, there are also slight differences between the cognitive load associated with the use of “Like” and “Share” buttons, as the latter – if not broadcast – may require an additional effort to select specific recipients or add an extra message (Liu et al., 2017).

Another important component for the evaluation of the effectiveness of an influencer message in the social media context is the intention to share.

User sharing is “a socially visible and undirected action as long as the shared content is pushed to all followers of the sharer without addressing anyone in particular” (Li and Xie, 2020, p.3). Today, users voluntarily turn to online social networking services and publicly share brand-related content (Klostermann et al., 2018), which can turn to be a major advantage for companies due to the potential virality that the message can reach at no cost to firms (Jalali and Papatla 2019). The reasons behind user sharing (i.e., retweet

of Twitter, repost on Instagram, etc.) are multiple, including the related usefulness of the content, the reduction of dissonance, the willingness to deepen social connections (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1973; Peters and Kashima 2007; Rime et al., 1991), but also for self-presentation purposes (Wojinicki and Godes 2008).

## **1.2 Hypotheses Development**

### *1.2.1 Influencer's perceived credibility as mediator of the relationship between influencer type, engagement actions and intention to share*

Nowadays, we live in a society in which consumers are constantly overwhelmed with advertising messages (Till et al., 2008). As described in the study conducted by Till et al. (2008), this has resulted in consumers trying to avoid as many advertising messages as possible. Similarly, consumers have the power to skip a commercial or install an ad-blocker software, to avoid an advertisement on the Internet (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Therefore, influencers have to present themselves on social media as “normal”, approachable and real people. Schouten et al., (2019) conducted a study in which participants felt more similar to and trusted influencers more than celebrities. This may be due to the fact that influencers also share similarities with their followers, since some are just ordinary high school or university students (Chae, 2017).

Tik-Tok is the platform which reflects these new trends: it is a user generated content platform (UGC) Moreover, posts and videos by influencers often are more candid and real, especially posts from micro influencers, and these characteristics can make influencer content feel more authentic than traditional ads (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

Specifically, micro influencers are often perceived like friends on social media, and they are easy to identify with. For this reason, their followers tend to be much more receptive to marketing messages than the followers of big celebrities. (Kay et al., 2020).

Micro influencers have followers with the same interests, and they might even share similar values which increases the credibility of their videos.

Current research supports the conclusion that micro-influencers have a higher



engagement rate which means the number of actions and reactions (like commenting, sharing) to the publication is relatively high compared with the macro influencers. When the engagement rate is high can also be deduced that the post is perceived as credible. (Friedman & Friedman, 1979).

Focusing on the context under study, the Tik-Tok platform, it is essential to consider the key aspect of this social media: to attract users' attention and increase users' actions on the videos, influencers must be spontaneous, creative, and credible. Therefore, in this study, we expect that facing users with a micro influencer video will boost on the influencer's perceived credibility. This suggests that using micro influencer video may be a more powerful strategy for convincing users of the credibility of the influencers.

Engagement actions aim at directly engaging audiences and encourage users' co-creation or content-sharing (Ananda *et al.*, 2018). In this study, we are talking about an eWOM engagement actions because we are in the social media context. there are some additional considerations about the social media behavioral responses that constitute eWoM engagement. Liking and sharing are also considered akin to eWoM because users automatically share the messages, they like with each other (Swani et al., 2013). If a certain user clicks on a "Like" button on a post, other users that visit the post might see that the user liked it, and a story might even appear on the user's timeline showing that he or she liked the post (Facebook, 2016). Users can then "Share" their interest or convey their attitude about content posted by anyone using these buttons (Swani et al., 2013).

Even though these social plugins vary across different social media platforms, they share common underlying motivations and cognitive processes.

As a matter of fact, it has been argued that influencer's perceived credibility affects users' engagement actions and intention to share.

In the context of social media, several studies have tested the impact of source credibility on consumers (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Kim et al., 2020; Bao and Wang, 2021). Bao and Wang (2021) show that source credibility of a brand microblog can enhance consumers' community commitment, trust towards the microblog and promote their participation. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) further described that Instagram

consumers' trust in eWOM messages was formed by celebrities' expertise and their relevance to consumers. Prior studies indicate that influencers' credibility affects consumer reactions (Barney-McNamara et al., 2020; Cuevas et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the analyses were not conducted in a Tik-Tok context. To contribute to the enhancement of the literature in this field, this study suggests that influencers' perceived credibility may have a positive effect on engagement actions and intention to share. Therefore:

**H1a:** The micro influencer (vs macro influencer) positively affects user's engagement actions. A perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between micro influencer and engagement actions.

**H1b:** The micro influencer (vs macro influencer) positively affects user's intention to share. A perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between micro influencer and intention to share.

### *1.2.2 Moderated mediation relation of language, as moderator, and influencer's perceived credibility, as mediator*

Previous research demonstrated that influencer marketing, persuasion and disclosure are strictly connected.

According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994), people develop personal knowledge about persuasion and the tactics used in persuasion attempts. Only when people recognize a persuasive attempt, such as an advertisement, can they use this knowledge to interpret, evaluate, and respond to this persuasion attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Disclosures are designed to help consumers identify an advertisement and thus to activate persuasion knowledge.

However, the effect of a disclosure depends on its position, visual prominence, and language (Wojdyski *et al.*, 2017; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). Regarding language, research suggests that a disclosure should clearly and directly: disclosures that are more explicit have been shown to be more likely to increase users' reactions.

At the same time, the language used does not have to make the user understand that the message is advertising, but it must describe the influencer opinion. This because, the realization that a message is advertising negatively affects people's attitude toward a sponsored blog post (Hwang & Jeong, 2016), makes people more critical toward the sponsored post (Boerman *et al.*, 2017; De Veirman & Hudders, 2019), and lowers the perceived credibility of the influencer on Instagram (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019). Research has indeed found that people are less likely to forward an online video (Hsieh *et al.*, 2012) or share an advertising campaign on a social networking site with their friends (Van Noort, Antheunis, & Van Reijmersdal, 2012) when they understand its persuasive intent.

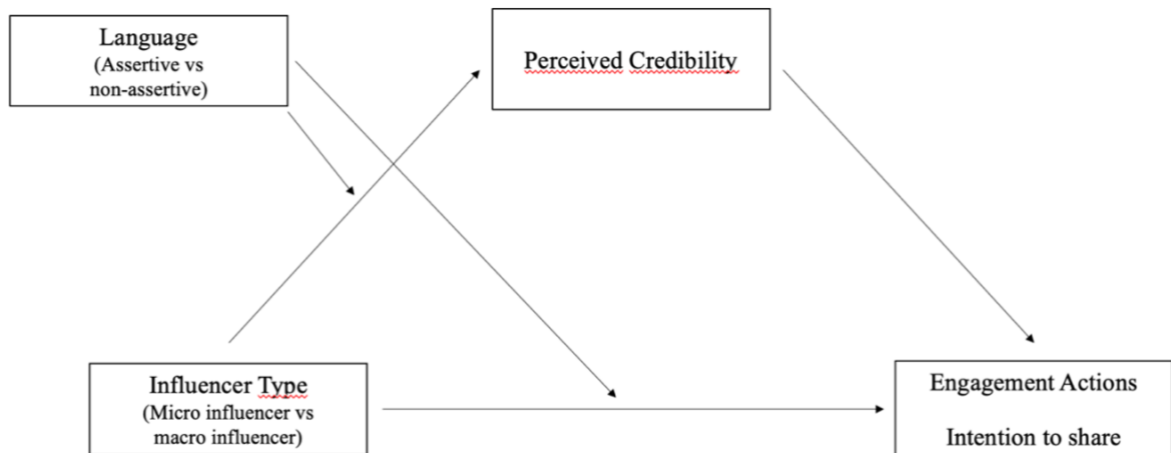
Since, users does not like intentional sponsoring, the message promoted by influencers in the online context must be as truthful as possible, as if it were the advice of a friend. From a user perspective, research has shown that micro influencers, compared to macro influencers, are perceived as friends, more similar, more authentic, and closer to the real world and this will enhance their credibility, which is one of the drivers of users' reactions. Moreover, as cited before, receivers in positive mood are likely to comply with assertive messages, because positive mood creates an expectation of assertive language, and the fit between expectations and reality elevates compliance (Kronrod *et al.*, 2011).

Accordingly, the study further suggests a moderated mediation of language and influencer's perceived credibility on the relationship between the influencer type, engagement actions and intention to share.

To conclude, this study proposes:

**H2a:** The moderating effect of language (assertive vs non-assertive) on the impact of micro influencer on engagement actions is mediated by perceived credibility which in turn will be stronger for assertive language.

**H2b:** The moderating effect of language (assertive vs non-assertive) on the impact of micro influencer on intention to share is mediated by perceived credibility which in turn will be stronger for assertive language.



*Figure 2: Conceptual Framework*

## **CHAPTER II: Literature Review and Hypotheses**

### ***2. Study***

In this chapter, the methodology of the experimental study to test the hypothesis is presented. To test the hypothesis, a study consisting of an online experiment was conducted.

Firstly, it has been conducted a pretest to verify the successfulness of the two manipulations: the independent variable (influencer type) and the moderator (language).

Then, through the main study, the aim was to test whether micro influencer (vs macro influencer) affects users' engagement actions and intention to share and also whether perceived credibility can mediate the relationship between influencer type, engagement actions and intention to share (H1a and H1b).

Moreover, the goal is to demonstrate the impact of moderated mediation effect of language and perceived credibility on the relationship between influencer type, engagement actions and intention to share (H2a and H2b).

For conducting the online experiment, it was created a fictitious Influencer account on Tik-Tok called @cloejefferson to avoid potential biases in the responses. Moreover, the influencer in the video is sponsoring a new glossy collection of a fictitious cosmetic brand called @beYOU always to avoid potential biases.

Before going to the pretest, it is essential to understand the stimuli design used both in the pretest and in the main study.

#### ***2.1 Stimulus design***

As previously mentioned, the independent variable (influencer type) and the moderator (language) were manipulated by creating four conditions:

- Condition 1: micro influencer and assertive language
- Condition 2: macro influencer and assertive language
- Condition 3: micro influencer and non-assertive language

- Condition 4: macro influencer and non-assertive language

In experimental research the manipulation of the independent variable allows the researcher to discover the cause-and-effect relationship with the dependent variable: if the manipulation causes a change in the measure of the dependent variable, then the researcher can assume that the independent variable was responsible (Perdue and Summers, 1986).

Moreover, assessing that the manipulation is well designed it is important to begin with a “careful pre-experimental explication of constructs so that the definitions are clear and in conformity with public understanding of the words being used” (Cook and Campbell, 1979, p. 60).

To understand if the manipulation is successful, respondents have been exposed to three different stimuli in each condition (from *figure 3* to *figure 6*):

- Influencer Tik-Tok profile: the manipulation relies in the number of followers:
  - Micro influencer with 5K followers
  - Macro influencer with 800K followers
- Video promotion: in which the influencer is promoting a new glossy collection
- Screen of the phrase used at the end of the video: the manipulation relies in the type of language (assertive vs non-assertive) used:
  - Assertive language: “*You MUST TRY the NEW Glossy Collection by beYOU & duet with me!*”
  - Non-assertive language: “*Why don’t you try the NEW Glossy Collection by beYOU & duet with me!*”

*Figure 3: Condition 1\_Micro Influencer – Assertive Language*



*Figure 4: Condition 2\_Macro Influencer – Assertive Language*



*Figure 5: Condition 2\_Micro Influencer – Non-assertive Language*



*Figure 6: Condition 2\_Macro Influencer – Non-assertive Language*



The video was focused on a launch of a beauty product because on Tik-Tok the hashtag alone has around 20 billion views and brands are starting to take note. (Kacey Culliney, 2020). Moreover, the hashtag makeup challenge counts 6.3B views (TikTok, November 2021) and, lastly, TikTok is buzzing with hyper-consumable content for skincare, haircare, and make-up addicts everywhere — and it's changing the way beauty is bought too: 52% of users now say they discover new products on TikTok (ELLE, 2021).



## ***2.2 Pretest***

As previously anticipated, to assess participants' perception of the stimuli and check the manipulation effectiveness, a pretest has been run. The pretest consisted of a digital survey designed on Qualtrics where, after a short introduction, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions and asked to rate on a 7-point bipolar scale, ranging from "Strongly disagree = 1" to "Strongly agree = 7" the following statements:

1. *"Please, indicate in a scale from 1(MICRO) to 7 (MACRO) the extent to which you perceived the subject of the video as Micro-Influencer".*
2. *"Please, indicate in a scale from 1(Non-Assertive) to 7 (Assertive) the extent to which you perceived the text of the video as Assertive".*

Moreover, to assess whether participants could pay attention to the video, they were asked to remember the product displayed in the video. Lastly, participants have been recruited through a convenience sample.

### ***2.2.1 Pretest Results***

A total of 82 participants were collected, of those 62 were analysed after the elimination of incomplete response. None was excluded for not meeting study criteria or attention checks. The 62 responses, aging between 18 and 65 ( $M_{age} = 25.03$  years;  $SD_{age} = 12.37$ ), where 49 of the respondents were females (79%) (vs 13 males – 21%).

As expected, the results of the pretest of the independent variable (influencer type) revealed that the micro influencer was perceived correctly ( $M_{micro} = 2,43$ ;  $SD = 1,794$  vs.  $M_{macro} = 4,38$ ;  $SD = 1,930$ ).

Thus, the manipulation of the influencer type was successful: to support this conclusion the independent sample t-test was conducted.

Test campioni indipendenti											
		Test di Levene per l'eguaglianza delle varianze				Test t per l'eguaglianza delle medie				Intervallo di confidenza della differenza di 95%	
		F	Sign.	t	gl	Sign. (a due code)	Differenza della media	Differenza errore std.	Inferiore	Superiore	
Please, indicate in a scale from 1(MICRO) to 7 (MACRO) the extent to which you perceived the subject of the video as Micro-influencer - 1 (MICRO):7 (MACRO)	Varianze uguali presunte	,283	,597	-4,095	60	<,001	-1,942	,474	-2,890	-,993	
	Varianze uguali non presunte			-4,105	59,997	<,001	-1,942	,473	-2,888	-,995	

Before we checked the Levene Test: since the sign  $> 0.05$ , the two variances are different. Now looking at the second line “Equal variances not assumed”: the p-value is  $< .000$  and alpha is  $0.025$ , meaning that the p-value is lower than alpha and so, the mean significantly differs.

Similarly, the results of the pretest of the moderator (language) showed a significant difference in terms of the perceived assertiveness between the two languages. Thus, the manipulation of text overlays was effective ( $M_{\text{assertive}} = 5.66$ ,  $SD = 1.862$  vs.  $M_{\text{nonassertive}} = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.875$ ).

Test campioni indipendenti											
		Test di Levene per l'eguaglianza delle varianze				Test t per l'eguaglianza delle medie				Intervallo di confidenza della differenza di 95%	
		F	Sign.	t	gl	Sign. (a due code)	Differenza della media	Differenza errore std.	Inferiore	Superiore	
Please, indicate in a scale from 1(Non-Assertive) to 7 (Assertive) the extent to which you perceived the text of the video as Assertive - 1 (NON - ASSERTIVE):7 (ASSERTIVE)	Varianze uguali presunte	,271	,605	5,245	60	<,001	2,509	,478	1,552	3,466	
	Varianze uguali non presunte			5,240	55,878	<,001	2,509	,479	1,550	3,468	

The pretested manipulations can be used for the main study.

## 2.3 Main Study

After having designed the experimental stimuli and verified that the manipulation worked successfully, to test the hypothesis, a study consisting of an online experiment was conducted. The field is the Tik-Tok platform, and the goal was to examine whether two different types of influencers could have an impact on engagement actions and intention to share through the mediating role of influencer’s perceived credibility.

Moreover, the study aimed at demonstrating the moderated mediation role of language and perceived credibility.

As mentioned before, Respondents were shown four different scenarios in which two variables were manipulated: independent variable and the moderator one:

- The independent variable is influencer type, manipulated as micro influencer vs macro influencer
- The moderator variable is language, manipulated as assertive vs non-assertive

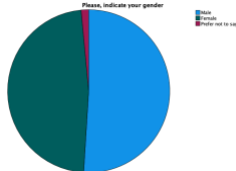
Then, respondents were asked to complete the survey by answering some questions. In order to better understand the outcomes uncovered, the analysis of the results of the study was split in two: study A focused on the results associated with the dependent variable engagement actions, whereas study B concentrated on the analysis of the dependent variable users' intention to share.

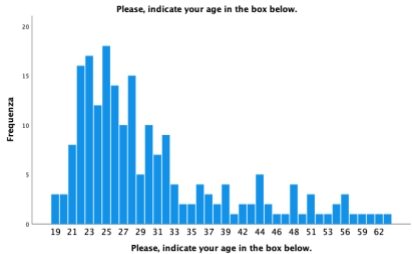
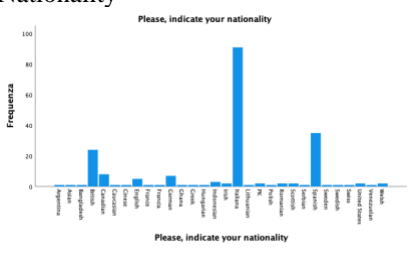
### 2.3.1 Methodology

#### 2.3.1.1 Participants

For the purposes of the study a non-probability sampling technique was employed. Specifically, a convenience sample design was adopted, and respondents were recruited through *Prolific* in exchange for a nominal payment. They were randomly assigned to one of the four different versions of the survey, and it took them about 6 minutes to complete it. A total of 253 responses were collected on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022. Of these, 202 ( $M_{age}= 30,80$ ;  $SD= 9,952$ ; 51% male and 47,5% female) data points were analyzed after the elimination of incomplete responses (from 253 to 231) and those who failed the two-attention check (from 231 to 202).

**Table 1** summarizes the demographic characteristics of the sample under study.

Variable	Content	Frequency	%
Gender 	Male	103	51.0
	Female	96	47.5

<p><b>Age</b></p> 	<p>19-25</p> <p>26-32</p> <p>33-39</p> <p>40-46</p> <p>47-53</p> <p>54-59</p>	<p>77</p> <p>70</p> <p>21</p> <p>13</p> <p>11</p> <p>7</p>	<p>38.1</p> <p>43.7</p> <p>10.5</p> <p>6.5</p> <p>5.5</p> <p>3.5</p>
<p><b>Nationality</b></p> 	<p>Italian</p> <p>Spanish</p> <p>British</p> <p>Canadian</p> <p>German</p> <p>English</p> <p>Indonesian</p> <p>Irish – PK France</p> <p>Romanian – Scottish</p> <p>United States – Welsh</p> <p>Argentina – Asian</p> <p>Bangladesh – Caucasian</p> <p>Chinese – Ghana</p> <p>Greek – Hungarian</p> <p>Lithuanian – Polish</p> <p>Serbian – Swiss – Swedish</p> <p>Sweden – Venezuelan</p>	<p>91</p> <p>35</p> <p>24</p> <p>8</p> <p>7</p> <p>5</p> <p>3</p> <p>All 2</p> <p>All 1</p>	<p>45.0</p> <p>17.3</p> <p>11.9</p> <p>4.0</p> <p>3.5</p> <p>2.5</p> <p>4.0</p> <p>All 1.0</p> <p>All 0.5</p>

*Table 1: Sample's demographic characteristics study*

### 2.3.1.2 Procedure

A 2 (influencer type: micro influencer vs macro influencer) X 2 (language: assertive vs non-assertive) between-subjects experimental design was implemented to perform the current study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four different versions of the questionnaire utilized for the manipulation of the independent variable and the moderator.

The stimuli to which the participants were exposed are the same as those used in the pretest. Respondents were asked to answer a series of questions after reading the experimental scenarios in order to determine the language, the influencer’s perceived credibility, engagement actions, and user’s intention to share. Finally, they answered a few demographic questions.

### 2.3.1.3 Data acquisition

To evaluate the constructs under study and in order to perform an accurate analysis, three pre-validated scales were utilized. To assess influencer’s perceived credibility, two scales, for the two dimensions into consideration, were used:

- To assess *expertise* from Torres *et al.*, (2019) five-items questionnaire with a seven-point Likert Scale (from 1= Strongly Disagree to 7= Strongly Agree) was used (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  0.864;  $M_{PC}$ = 3.843;  $SD$ = 1.038).
- To assess *trustworthiness* from Ohanian (1990) and Wiedmann & von Mettenheim (2020) four-item with a seven-point Likert Scale (from 1= Strongly Disagree to 7= Strongly Agree) was used (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  0.864;  $M_{PC}$ = 3.843;  $SD$ = 1.038).

To measure engagement actions, Ananda *et al.*, (2017) four-items Likert Scale (from 1= Strongly Disagree to 7= Strongly Agree) was employed (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  0.709;  $M_{EA}$ = 4.188;  $SD$ = 1.173). Lastly, to rate the users’ intention to share, Chua & Banerjee (2018) two-items Likert Scale (from 1= Very Impossible to 7= Very Possible) was utilized (Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  0.955;  $M_{IS}$ = 1.868;  $SD$ = 1.369).

**Table 2** shows the scales used to measure each construct.

Variable	Items	Source
Perceived Credibility	The text is factual The video is relevant The video is high quality	Torres <i>et al.</i> , (2019)

	The influencer is entertaining I find the influencer professional/expert	
	The influencer uses right commercial marking The influencer has good reputation I perceived the influencer as friend I perceived the influencer as celebrity	Ohanian (1990) Wiedmann & von Mettenheim (2020)
Engagement Actions	Encouraging users to post content about personalities (e.g., celebrities) or influencers and duet with them Encouraging users to share their brand experiences Encouraging users to share personalities or influencers' posts and endorsements of the brand and its products Giveaway promotions or contests (encouraging winners to share their experiences on social media)	Ananda et al., (2017)
Intention to Share	I shall share this article with others on social media I intend to share the article with others on social media	Chua & Banerjee (2018)

### 2.3.2 Results Study A

The results study A focused on the analysis associated with the dependent variable engagement actions.

The results of a one-way ANOVA revealed that respondents expose to micro influencer did not have a higher engagement actions than those expose to macro influencer (MMicro Influencer= 4.100, SD = 1.204 vs. MMacro Influencer = 4.274, SD = 1.141,  $F(1,200) = 1.12, p = .29$ ). These preliminary results demonstrated that the micro influencer does not directly lead to an increase in engagement actions.

*Perceived credibility.* To test the hypothesis under study (H1a), PROCESS MACRO model 4 was employed (Hayes, 2017). Influencer Type (0 = macro influencer; 1= micro influencer) served as the independent variable, engagement actions as the dependent variable, and influencer's perceived credibility as the mediator.

The results of the regression analysis showed that the effect of the influencer type (IV) on perceived credibility (M), which correspond to the “a path”, is negative and not statistically significant ( $b = - 0.13$ ,  $t = - 0.89$ ,  $p = 0.3763$ ) suggesting that micro influencer didn't lead to a higher perception of credibility than macro influencer. Whereas, influencer's perceived credibility, in turn, positively affected engagement actions ( $b = 0.48$ ,  $t = 6.69$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), implying that a higher perceived credibility increases engagement actions on video (b path). The statistical significance of this relationships provided initial evidence of the mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility in the relationship between the influencer type and engagement actions.

The effect of independent variable on engagement actions when considering the perceived credibility (c' path) was negative and was not statistically significant ( $b = - 0.11$ ,  $t = - 0.746$ ,  $p = 0.46$ ). Similarly, the total and main effect of influencer type on engagement actions was negative and not significant ( $b = - 0.17$ ,  $t = - 1.07$ ,  $p = 0.29$ , 95% CI = - 0.50, 0.15). On the bright side, the indirect effect (a\*b) of influencer type on engagement actions via influencer's perceived credibility was negative and not statistically significant ( $b = - 0.63$ , 95 % CI = - 0.20, 0.80) suggesting that influencer's perceived credibility does not mediate and therefore does not explain the relationship between the influencer type and the users' engagement actions, rejecting H1a.

*Moderated mediation.* To test H2a, PROCESS MACRO model 8 was employed (Hayes, 2018). The analysis not only assessed the mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility in the relationship between the influencer type (0= macro influencer; 1= micro influencer) and engagement actions, but also if the moderator, language (0 = non-assertive; 1 = assertive), changed the strength of the indirect effect and the direct effect between influencer type and engagement actions.

The analysis showed that when the mediator is in the model, influencer type has a negative and not statistically significant impact on engagement actions ( $b = - 0.24$ ,  $t = - 1.22$ ,  $p = 0.22$ ), particularly when the influencer is micro. Moreover, consider the moderating role of language on the relationship between influencer type and perceived credibility, it is a not statistically significant predictor ( $b: - 0.11$ ;  $t = - 0.51$ ;  $p = 0.61$ ) of

influencer's perceived credibility. The interaction between influencer type and language also is not significant ( $b = 0.25$ ;  $t = 0.83$ ;  $p = 0.41$ , 95% CI = - 0.33, 0.83), specifically the assertive language does not moderate the relationship between micro influencer and influencer's perceived credibility. Now, focusing on the moderating role of language on the main effect and looking at the interaction term, it has a not statistically significant predictor ( $b = 0.40$ ,  $t = 1.31$ ,  $p = 0.19 > 0.05$ , 95% CI = - 0.20, 0.99) of engagement actions. The interaction does not lead to a significant change in engagement actions. Whereas, when there is the moderator, perceived credibility continues to have a positive and statistically significant impact on engagement actions ( $b = 0.48$ ,  $t = 6.60$ ,  $p = 0.0000$ , 95% CI = 0.33, 0.62). Moreover, both the independent variable and the moderator has no impact on engagement actions because the p-value is greater than 0.05.

The goal of the analysis is to understand the moderated mediation: if the indirect effect of influencer type on engagement actions through perceived credibility is moderated by language or not. Specifically, if micro influencer (vs macro influencer) has a higher effect on engagement actions, through the mediation of credibility and the moderation of assertive language (vs non-assertive). The conditional indirect effects shows that the indirect effect is high at high level of assertiveness, and further reduced at low level.

However, the conditional indirect effects are not significant at both level (low level:  $b = - 0.12$ , 95% CI = - 0.33, 0.68 – high level:  $b = 0.00$ , 95% CI = - 0.20, 0.22). The H2a is rejected as the index of moderated mediation (index = 0.1177, 95% CI = -0.1583, 0.4116) is not significant since the 95% CI includes zero.

In conclusion, assertive language does not change the strength of the indirect effect from influencer type to engagement actions through perceived credibility.

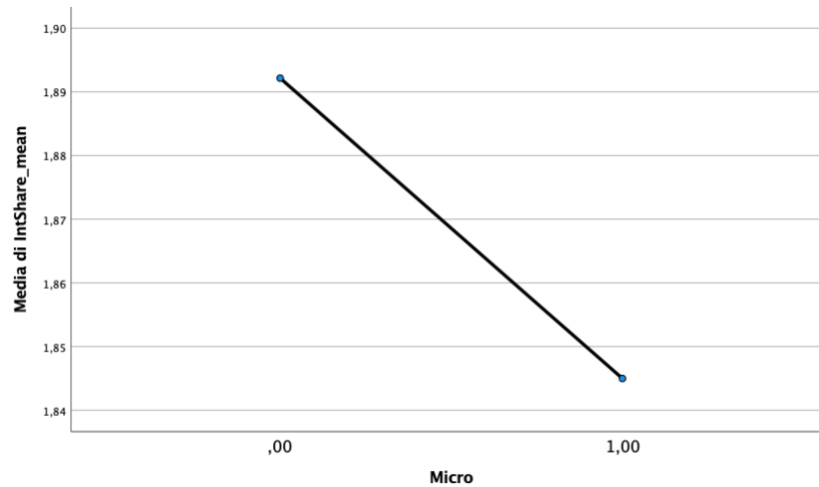
### 2.3.3 *Results Study B*

The results study B focused on the analysis associated with the dependent variable intention to share, which show similar results as the one obtained in Study A.

The results of a one-way ANOVA revealed that respondents expose to micro influencer did not have a higher intention to share than those expose to macro influencer



(MMicro Influencer= 1.845, SD = 1.312 vs. MMacro Influencer = 1.892, SD = 1.429,  $F(1,200) = 0.60$ ,  $p = .80$ ). These preliminary results demonstrated that the micro influencer does not directly lead to an increase in intention to share.



*Perceived credibility.* To test H1b, PROCESS MACRO model 6 was employed (Hayes, 2018). The study assessed the mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility in the relationship between the influencer type (0= macro influencer; 1= micro influencer) and users' intention to share.

The regression analysis, as in the previous one, demonstrated that micro influencer didn't lead to a higher perceived credibility than macro influencer ( $b = - 0.13$ ,  $t = - 0.89$ ,  $p = 0.3763$ ). Instead, influencer's perceived credibility positively affect intention to share ( $b = 0.67$ ,  $t = 8,26$ ,  $p = 0.0000$ ); these results highlight the importance of the influencer credibility for users (b path). When analyzing the direct effect (c' path), which is the direct relationship between influencer type and intention to share in presence of influencer's perceived credibility, it is positive but not statistically significant ( $b = 0.04$ ,  $t = 0.24$ ,  $p = 0.82$ ).

Similarly, the total effect and main effect of influencer type on users' intention to share was negative and not significant ( $b = - 0.05$ ,  $t = - 0.24$ ,  $p = 0.80$ , 95% CI = - 0.43, 0.33).

Lastly, the analysis shows a negative and not significant indirect effect ( $a*b$ ) of the influencer type on intention to share through influencer's perceived credibility ( $b = - 0.09$ ,

95% CI: -0.295, 0.099) suggesting that there is no mediation, rejecting the H1b. These results replicate and confirm the ones obtained in Study A but support the importance of credibility so that a user can feel confident and enticed to create engagement.

*Moderated mediation.* To test H2b, PROCESS MACRO model 8 was employed (Hayes, 2018). The analysis not only assessed the mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility in the relationship between the influencer type (0= macro influencer; 1= micro influencer) and intention to share, but also if the moderator, language (0 = non-assertive; 1 = assertive), changed the strength of the indirect effect and the direct effect between influencer type and users' intention to share.

The analysis has the same results of the previous part when the relationships between influencer type, perceived credibility and language are considered. To sum up, there is not statistically significance neither on the relationship influencer type and intention to share ( $b = - 0.24$ ,  $t = -1.22$ ,  $p = 0.22$ ), neither on the relationship between influencer type and perceived credibility, considering the moderator ( $b: - 0.11$ ;  $t = - 0.51$ ;  $p = 0.61$ ). finally, also the interaction between influencer type and language also is not significant ( $b = 0.25$ ;  $t = 0.83$ ;  $p = 0.41$ , 95% CI = - 0.33, 0.83).

Focusing on the moderating role of language on the main effect and looking and the interaction term, it has a not statistically significant predictor ( $b = 0.30$ ,  $t = 0.89$ ,  $p = 0.37 > 0.05$ , 95% CI = - 0.36, 0.97) of intention to share. The interaction does not lead to a significant change in the intention to share content. Whereas, when there is the moderator, perceived credibility continues to have a positive and statistically significant impact on users' intention to share ( $b = 0.66$ ,  $t = 8.25$ ,  $p = 0.0000$ , 95% CI = 0.51, 0.82). Moreover, the independent variable and the moderator has no impact on engagement actions because the p-value is greater than 0.05 and CI include the zero.

The goal of the analysis is to understand the moderated mediation: if the indirect effect of influencer type on intention to share through perceived credibility is moderated by language or not. Specifically, if micro influencer (vs macro influencer) has a higher effect on users' intention to share, through the mediation of credibility and the moderation of assertive language (vs non-assertive).

Similarly, to the results A, the conditional indirect effects shows that the indirect effect is high at high level of assertiveness, and further reduced at low level. However, the conditional indirect effects are not significant at both level (low level:  $b = -0.16$ , 95% CI = - 0.44, 0.94 – high level:  $b = 0.00$ , 95% CI = - 0.28, 0.29). The H2b is rejected as the index of moderated mediation (index = 0.1635, 95% CI = - 0.2178, 0.5643) is not significant since the 95% CI includes zero.

In conclusion, assertive language does not change the strength of the indirect effect from influencer type to intention to share through perceived credibility.

HYPOTHESIS	ACCEPTANCE / REJECTION
<b>H1a:</b> The micro influencer (vs macro influencer) positively affects user's engagement actions. A perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between micro influencer and engagement actions.	<i>Rejected</i>
<b>H1b:</b> The micro influencer (vs macro influencer) positively affects user's intention to share. A perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between micro influencer and intention to share.	<i>Rejected</i>
<b>H2a:</b> The moderating effect of language (assertive vs non-assertive) on the impact of micro influencer on engagement actions is mediated by perceived credibility which in turn will be stronger for assertive language.	<i>Rejected</i>
<b>H2b:</b> The moderating effect of language (assertive vs non-assertive) on the impact of micro influencer on intention to share is mediated by perceived credibility which in turn will be stronger for assertive language.	<i>Rejected</i>

## Chapter III: Discussion and Conclusions

### 3.1 *Discussion*

This study explored the influencer's perceived credibility, language, and behavioral responses, namely engagement actions and intention to share, to two different influencer type (micro influencer vs. macro influencer) in the context of the new social media platform: Tik-Tok.

We started from the premise that in other social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) users usually share content and feel engaged who believe it comes from an influencer who is credible and authentic and who use direct and imperative communication, namely assertive language. According to previous research, influencers who are perceived more credible are the micro ones. We tested, therefore, this type of influencers when promoting an online sale and we leveraged the language to predict an interesting outcome: online users don't show a higher engagement and a higher intention to share after being exposed to micro influencer video. Our results contrast all the previous research in the field of social media, but at the same time bring to light a new way of communicating and new areas to study.

Two experimental studies have proved to not support the hypotheses formulated. Specifically, the results of study do not support H1a, H2a (Results A), H1b and H2b (Results B), demonstrating the not significant mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility on the relationship between the influencer type and the two dependent variables, engagement actions and users' intention to share. Furthermore, the moderated mediation, in both cases, is not significant, meaning that the indirect effect of influencer type on the two dependent variables, engagement actions and users' intention to share, through perceived credibility is not moderated by language.

Hence, our results show that the Tik-Tok drivers are not the same ones that drive engagement on other social media. Tik-Tok, being a new platform, is based on other factors: creativity, content and also credibility, but not the credibility of that influencers

who already have a higher number of followers, for example on Instagram, but of those who have grown thanks to the continuous development of the platform. To support the assumption that credibility is one of the drivers, our results demonstrated that credibility always affects both dependent variables, engagement actions and users' intention to share. Our findings contribute to the understanding of the potential difference between old social media platform and this new one: is no longer the type of influencer that increase credibility but is what the user posts on the social, that through the algorithm of Tik-Tok can become viral and therefore popular. As matter of fact, is no longer the number of followers that drive the virality, but anyone could be viral if choose the right content and the right way to communicate it. This is the reason why many users who were completely unknown on Instagram, for example, can go viral on Tik-Tok, by posting their short, friendly, and catchy video. This because, the form of the video is easier to understand, especially in a rapid pace of life, people are more inclined to respond to short but explosive content.

The future and the evolution of social media marketing is undoubtedly uncertain, but a surprising and seemingly lasting growth like the one in question has certainly shown that there is the possibility of innovating and competing with platforms already consolidated success, through a deep understanding of user needs.

Likewise, the results raise novel research opportunities about which are the new drivers of this new marketing frontier.

### ***3.2 Theoretical Contributions***

Overall, this study presents compelling theoretical contributions. First and foremost, the research contributes to the literature by introducing a new theoretical framework based on TikTok for Business, to help understand the impact of influencer marketing videos may have on consumers' engagement actions. This framework sheds light on a new and understudied social platform that may be applied in the online context in order to increase the consumers' actions and their intention to share a video. Indeed, our results supply empirical evidence for the concept that, when Tik-Tok platform is considered, there are new metrics that has to be considered.

De Veirman et al., (2017) contributes to the quest for influencer selection on Instagram by indicating that an influencer's number of followers affects consumers' attitudes towards him/her (e.g., likeability, sharability) and that this is mainly explained by perceptions of popularity, in line with the findings of Quercia et al., (2011) and Romero et al., (2011). Our findings, instead, demonstrated that this procedure cannot be applied on Tik-Tok platform because there is no relationship between the number of followers and credibility. This study appears to be among the first ones to analyze all these variables in the Tik-Tok context. Hence, this study contributes to the literature by revealing the change of direction we are living: it is no longer the number of followers who drive authenticity and credibility, but that on Tik-Tok anyone can become popular being himself/herself and capturing the trend of the moment. This study appears to be, indeed, the first to disrupt the relationship between number of followers as driver of the engagement.

### ***3.3 Managerial Contributions***

This study offers some interesting recommendations for marketers and online retailers as well. According to FourWeekMBA (2022) TikTok accumulates over 1 billion video views per day and continues to rapidly grow the scale of use. Thanks to some FourWeekMBA statistics, it was found that the time spent on Tik-Tok is 19.6 hours a month in 2022 compared to 13.3 hours a month in 2020 (47% more). The time spent on the app also indicates that users are likely to make some purchasing decisions while on the app because of the potential time that brands have available to bring potential buyers on a trip.

Online retailers and marketers must be aware to understand which is the best strategy they can leverage in order to have successful results. First of all, our findings suggest that online Tik-Tok promotion could not pry on a specific type of influencer type, micro influencer one. Indeed, this research has demonstrated that users, when exposed to micro influencer video, as it is on other social media, may not have a more positive response showing no growth in both engagement and intention to share.

Thus, as shown by the study, brands, who want to enter in this new reality, must completely change direction: it is not possible to apply the marketing knowledge acquired over time on Tik-Tok platform, but they must modernize all their business model by focusing on those who have reached the top through Tik-Tok. Marketers may, additionally, boost the users' engagement actions through perceived credibility of those who have been able to create content and appear in the "For You" page, through the TikTok's artificial intelligence (AI).

Therefore, understanding that anyone could generate engagement on Tik-Tok, this may represent an effective tactic when sales are in place. According to a recent survey conducted by the Influencer Marketing Factory, 82% of respondents confirmed that they discovered products on social media and purchased it directly from their phone. Moreover, another 57% make a purchase while watching live streaming on Tik-Tok. Users, being accustomed to the previous format of interactivity, are looking for something that will amaze them, and Tik-Tok is just what they were waiting for. Thus, the second implication to be considered is that marketers and online retailers should bet on this new type of communication that makes the promotion unusual and out of the ordinary. While influencers' perceived credibility in the context of promotion typically stems popularity and knowledge on other social, the current study suggests that it cannot arise from the number of followers and the language used. Therefore, retailers should rely on a different and new kind of communication that helps leverage the users' perceived value of the product.

### ***3.4 Limitations and future research***

The current research has uncovered interesting results that advance prior research, it nonetheless features some limitations that can inspire future studies.

First, for what concerns influencers' perceived credibility, Ohanian definition has been taken into consideration for the analysis. Future studies may try to deepen the alternative perceived credibility dimensions that have been uncovered such as the attractiveness, likability, and similarity dimensions (Clow & Baack 2007).

Second, our study did not deepen the users' motivations that may explain attachment to Tik-Tok. Indeed, social media research has extensively demonstrated that users may approach this type of interactivity with different motivations which can be generally categorized as external and internal (Amatulli et al., 2018; Eastman and Eastman, 2015). Research conducted by Mikhael (2019) shows that the reason Tik-Tok is a current trend is to fulfill social interaction as well as a means of self-expression. This study does not investigate the role of emotions, therefore future research could investigate the role of personal emotions.

Additionally, the research has mainly focused on the beauty product, but future research may use a stimulus (e.g., food) that may appeal to both males and females in terms of purchase intention or find a way to engage males as well within the same framework. Moreover, it will be interesting to study which type of content and ads format best suited the new trend: future research may use the five ad formats provided by TikTok for Business to better understand which one is the most effective of all.

Future studies may analyze the role of creativity because it has the task of keeping our users attached to the video. One thing that is important to highlight, is that the creativity in the way of communicating the content that will make users remain glued or not to the video. This aspect of creativity should not be underestimated because in Tik Tok the attention of users is very low and therefore the ease of switching from one content to another is much higher than in other social networks. To prevent this from happening, it is essential that creativity supports the content and enhances it, it must not be a creativity that is admired but lowers the focus on our content. It would be interesting to study the relationship between creativity and attention: to understand when attention goes from bottom-up or top-down attention, when from involuntary it becomes voluntary and measuring it through neuromarketing methods.

Lastly, other types of social media may be taken into consideration in order to understand whether the new type of communication may be applied in other settings.



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# Summary

## INTRODUCTION

As a result of the outbreak of COVID-19 over the last two years, the world has experienced an acceleration in communication, both online and offline. Taking into consideration the online environment, it can certainly say that Tik-Tok has become THE social platform not only for personal use but also and especially for promotional use by companies.

TikTok is a social network born in China in 2016, initially as Musical.ly. At first, it was baptized Duoyin (in China is still called like that) and its purpose was to allow to practice languages. Since its users were mainly teenagers, they began to change its use, and entertainment became their goal. From then, this rapid growth led to a new worldwide re-launch under the name TikTok. TikTok app is based on the concept of short format video, offering users a wide selection of sounds and pieces of music, as well as the option to add special effects and filters. It also provides an option to directly add videos created on your phone; a reaction feature, which allows users to record their reactions to other videos and share; and also, a digital wellness feature that sends an alert when users spend more than two hours on the app.

Since its launch, the application's popularity has grown a lot. The platform has become popular around the world and has gained most of its popularity during the start of the pandemic reaching 2 billion downloads worldwide across IOS and Android (Leskin, 2020). It has allowed artists to launch their career outside the traditional path, by creating a music video, choosing background music from a wide variety of music genres, edit with a filter and record a 15-second or 60-second video with speed adjustments before uploading it to share with others on TikTok or other social platforms. They can also film short lip-sync videos to popular songs. The songs go viral and are used for multiple challenges before being skyrocketed to the top of the charts (Leskin, 2020).

The shift toward Instagram and TikTok, as well as sites such as Snapchat or Twitch, has, in recent years, given rise to an entire industry of social media influencers and

influencer marketing agencies and in October 2020, TikTok surpassed over 2 billion mobile downloads worldwide.

Nowadays TikTok maintains the most famous position on every platform among teenagers. The popularity of Tik Tok gave the opportunity many people the capacity to obtain many followers. Therefore, gaining the title of an influencer. TikTok's mission as explained on their website is "to inspire creativity and bring joy".

Nowadays, as stated by Sinha et al. (2020), modern marketing practices heavily rely on using sales promotion tools. Businesses use social media as a tool to advertise their products, which aims to convey marketing communication messages in order to attract attention and persuade online audiences. Among the first to experience the use of this social media, as a potential marketing tool, there is also a well-known fast-food chain: in Malaysia this App was viral already in 2018, and McDonald took the opportunity to launch a dance challenge, which was a successful campaign.

Different insights on TikTok show how important it can be as a marketing tool, especially to reach the younger generations, which are more difficult to reach in terms of marketing, they also are more critical of the content, they are looking for authenticity more than any generation. Concerning the authenticity, TikTok has been known for this, brands have to let the influencer the complete control over the content because TikTokers, as they are called, know their audience and know how to reach them in a way that stays in line with their typical content (Nicolaes & Stellar, 2020), using visual storytelling.

The social platform is particularly interesting for marketers because it attracts younger consumers, and those younger consumers are more receptive to a specific type of marketing communication: influencer marketing (Haenlein et al., 2020). But even though this platform has experienced exponential growth, influencer video advertising on Tik-Tok has been understudied. The study focuses on micro-influencers and macro-influencers and their performance in the commercial publications concerning credibility. The aim is to examine which different factors affect the credibility of micro-influencers' and macro-influencers' commercial collaboration post. The influencers are studied globally but the quantitative research of the thesis concentrates on Tik-Tok influencers. The study is

comparative in that it aims to understand which type of influencers, micro-influencers and macro-influencers, users' reactions. The study is focused on users' reactions because important metrics to note for marketers are that engagement and sharability on Tik-Tok have increased by 15% between 2017 and 2019 (Haenlein et al., 2020). TikTok itself also shared an interesting metric in 2019: 90% of their users go on the app at least once a day, if not more. This is one of the major pros for companies to be active on Tik-Tok because 25% of apps are only opened once after their download and after that are never used again (Statista, 2019). An average user spends 52 minutes per day on the app. Since research show that video marketing is not going away: 86% of people wish to see more videos created by brands (Alexandra, 2020).

Considering previous research, the influencers that create more engagement are the micro influencers (Wissman, 2018), being perceived as more authentic and near to the normal people.

From a theoretical perspective, research has yet to analyze the role of influencers and their credibility in the social media context. Moreover, previous studies have never explored this aspect on Tik-Tok. This study aims to understand if the research about micro influencer, their credibility and engagement could be valid also on this new platform. To achieve this goal, the study investigates the effect of influencer type on engagement actions and intention to share, specifically analyzing the effect of two main type, micro influencer, and macro influencer. Moreover, the role of influencer's perceived credibility in this relationship wants to be uncovered and something totally new wants to be analyzed: the role of language used.

In the present study, we propose that micro influencers may be perceived as more credible, with respect to macro influencers. Specifically, this characteristic serves as a cue that leads to a higher users' engagement on the platform. Moreover, the language used should reinforce the relationship between micro influencer and users' actions and the credibility. To attain so, one main study is conducted, divided in two parts. The first one aims at understanding all the effect on engagement actions and the other one on uses' intention to share.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Influencer's perceived credibility as mediator of the relationship between influencer type, engagement actions and intention to share.

Nowadays, we live in a society in which consumers are constantly overwhelmed with advertising messages (Till et al., 2008). As described in the study conducted by Till et al. (2008), this has resulted in consumers trying to avoid as many advertising messages as possible. Similarly, consumers have the power to skip a commercial or install an ad-blocker software, to avoid an advertisement on the Internet (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Therefore, influencers have to present themselves on social media as "normal", approachable and real people. Schouten et al., (2019) conducted a study in which participants felt more similar to and trusted influencers more than celebrities. This may be due to the fact that influencers also share similarities with their followers, since some are just ordinary high school or university students (Chae, 2017).

Tik-Tok is the platform which reflects these new trends: it is a user generated content platform (UGC) Moreover, posts and videos by influencers often are more candid and real, especially posts from micro influencers, and these characteristics can make influencer content feel more authentic than traditional ads (Kowalczyk & Pounders, 2016).

Specifically, micro influencers are often perceived like friends on social media, and they are easy to identify with. For this reason, their followers tend to be much more receptive to marketing messages than the followers of big celebrities. (Kay et al., 2020).

Micro influencers have followers with the same interests, and they might even share similar values which increases the credibility of their videos.

Current research supports the conclusion that micro-influencers have a higher engagement rate which means the number of actions and reactions (like commenting, sharing) to the publication is relatively high compared with the macro influencers. When the engagement rate is high can also be deduced that the post is perceived as credible. (Friedman & Friedman, 1979).

Focusing on the context under study, the Tik-Tok platform, it is essential to consider the key aspect of this social media: to attract users' attention and increase users'

actions on the videos, influencers must be spontaneous, creative, and credible. Therefore, in this study, we expect that facing users with a micro influencer video will boost on the influencer's perceived credibility. This suggests that using micro influencer video may be a more powerful strategy for convincing users of the credibility of the influencers.

Engagement actions aim at directly engaging audiences and encourage users' co-creation or content-sharing (Ananda et al., 2018). In this study, we are talking about an eWOM engagement actions because we are in the social media context. there are some additional considerations about the social media behavioral responses that constitute eWoM engagement. Liking and sharing are also considered akin to eWoM because users automatically share the messages, they like with each other (Swani et al., 2013). If a certain user clicks on a "Like" button on a post, other users that visit the post might see that the user liked it, and a story might even appear on the user's timeline showing that he or she liked the post (Facebook, 2016). Users can then "Share" their interest or convey their attitude about content posted by anyone using these buttons (Swani et al., 2013). Even though these social plugins vary across different social media platforms, they share common underlying motivations and cognitive processes.

As a matter of fact, it has been argued that influencer's perceived credibility affects users' engagement actions and intention to share.

In the context of social media, several studies have tested the impact of source credibility on consumers (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017; Kim et al., 2020; Bao and Wang, 2021). Bao and Wang (2021) show that source credibility of a brand microblog can enhance consumers' community commitment, trust towards the microblog and promote their participation. Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) further described that Instagram consumers' trust in eWOM messages was formed by celebrities' expertise and their relevance to consumers. Prior studies indicate that influencers' credibility affects consumer reactions (Barney-McNamara et al., 2020; Cuevas et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the analyses were not conducted in a Tik-Tok context. To contribute to the enhancement of the literature in this field, this study suggests that influencers'

perceived credibility may have a positive effect on engagement actions and intention to share. Therefore:

*H1a: The micro influencer (vs macro influencer) positively affects user's engagement actions. A perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between micro influencer and engagement actions.*

*H1b: The micro influencer (vs macro influencer) positively affects user's intention to share. A perceived credibility will mediate the relationship between micro influencer and intention to share.*

Moderated mediation relation: language, as moderator, and influencer's perceived credibility, as mediator, affect the relationship between influencer's type, engagement actions, and intention to share.

Previous research demonstrated that influencer marketing, persuasion and disclosure are strictly connected.

According to the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM; Friestad & Wright, 1994), people develop personal knowledge about persuasion and the tactics used in persuasion attempts. Only when people recognize a persuasive attempt, such as an advertisement, can they use this knowledge to interpret, evaluate, and respond to this persuasion attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Disclosures are designed to help consumers identify an advertisement and thus to activate persuasion knowledge. However, the effect of a disclosure depends on its position, visual prominence, and language (Wojdynski et al., 2017; Wojdynski & Evans, 2016).

Regarding language, research suggests that a disclosure should clearly and directly: disclosures that are more explicit have been shown to be more likely to increase users' reactions.

At the same time, the language used does not have to make the user understand that the message is advertising, but it must describe the influencer opinion.

This because, the realization that a message is advertising negatively affects people's attitude toward a sponsored blog post (Hwang & Jeong, 2016), makes people more critical toward the sponsored post (Boerman et al., 2017; De Veirman & Hudders, 2019), and lowers the perceived credibility of the influencer on Instagram (De Veirman & Hudders, 2019). Research has indeed found that people are less likely to forward an online video (Hsieh et al., 2012) or share an advertising campaign on a social networking site with their friends (Van Noort, Antheunis, & Van Reijmersdal, 2012) when they understand its persuasive intent.

Since, users does not like intentional sponsoring, the message promoted by influencers in the online context must be as truthful as possible, as if it were the advice of a friend. From a user perspective, research has shown that micro influencers, compared to macro influencers, are perceived as friends, more similar, more authentic, and closer to the real world and this will enhance their credibility, which is one of the drivers of users' reactions. Moreover, as cited before, receivers in positive mood are likely to comply with assertive messages, because positive mood creates an expectation of assertive language, and the fit between expectations and reality elevates compliance (Kronrod et al., 2011).

Accordingly, the study further suggests a moderated mediation of language and influencer's perceived credibility on the relationship between the influencer type, engagement actions and intention to share.

To conclude, this study proposes:

H2a: *The moderating effect of language (assertive vs non-assertive) on the impact of micro influencer on engagement actions is mediated by perceived credibility which in turn will be stronger for assertive language.*

H2b: *The moderating effect of language (assertive vs non-assertive) on the impact of micro influencer on intention to share is mediated by perceived credibility which in turn will be stronger for assertive language.*

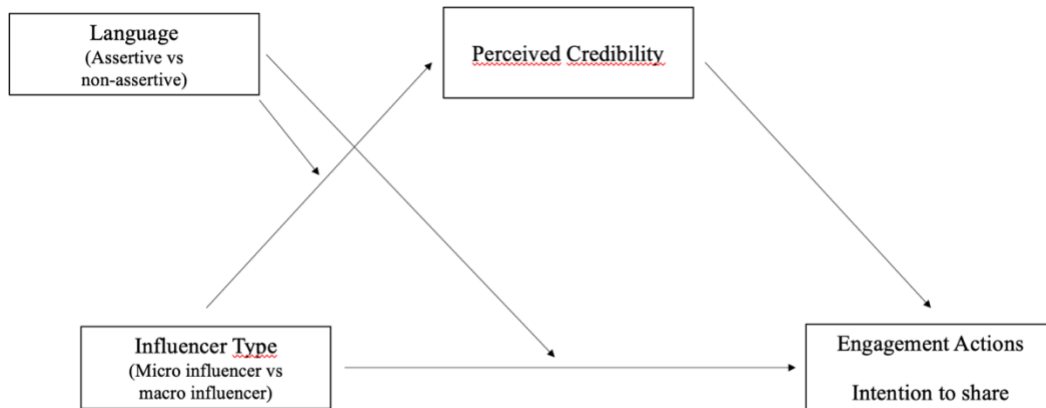


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

## STUDY

To test the hypothesis, a study consisting of an online experiment was conducted.

Firstly, it has been conducted a pretest to verify the successfulness of the two manipulations: the independent variable (influencer type) and the moderator (language).

Then, through the main study, the aim was to test whether micro influencer (vs macro influencer) affects users' engagement actions and intention to share and also whether perceived credibility can mediate the relationship between influencer type, engagement actions and intention to share (H1a and H1b).

Moreover, the goal is to demonstrate the impact of moderated mediation effect of language and perceived credibility on the relationship between influencer type, engagement actions and intention to share (H2a and H2b).

For conducting the online experiment, it was created a fictitious Influencer account on Tik-Tok called @clojefferson to avoid potential biases in the responses. Moreover, the influencer in the video is sponsoring a new glossy collection of a fictitious cosmetic brand called @beYOU always to avoid potential biases.

Before going to the pretest, it is essential to understand the stimuli design used both in the pretest and in the main study.



As previously mentioned, the independent variable (influencer type) and the moderator (language) were manipulated by creating four conditions:

- Condition 1: micro influencer and assertive language
- Condition 2: macro influencer and assertive language
- Condition 3: micro influencer and non-assertive language
- Condition 4: macro influencer and non-assertive language

### **PRETEST RESULTS**

A total of 82 participants were collected, of those 62 were analysed after the elimination of incomplete response. None was excluded for not meeting study criteria or attention checks. The 62 responses, aging between 18 and 65 ( $M_{age} = 25.03$  years;  $SD_{age} = 12.37$ ), where 49 of the respondents were females (79%) (vs 13 males – 21%). Before we checked the Levene Test: since the sign  $> 0.05$ , the two variances are different. Now looking at the second line “Equal variances not assumed”: the p-value is  $< .000$  and alpha is 0.025, meaning that the p-value is lower than alpha and so, the mean significantly differs.

Similarly, the results of the pretest of the moderator (language) showed a significant difference in terms of the perceived assertiveness between the two languages. Thus, the manipulation of text overlays was effective ( $M_{assertive} = 5.66$ ,  $SD = 1.862$  vs.  $M_{nonassertive} = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.875$ ).

### **STUDY**

After having designed the experimental stimuli and verified that the manipulation worked successfully, to test the hypothesis, a study consisting of an online experiment was conducted. The field is the Tik-Tok platform, and the goal was to examine whether two different types of influencers could have an impact on engagement actions and intention to share through the mediating role of influencer’s perceived credibility. Moreover, the study aimed at demonstrating the moderated mediation role of language and perceived credibility.

After seeing the 4 different conditions, respondents were asked to complete the survey by answering some questions. In order to better understand the outcomes uncovered, the analysis of the results of the study was split in two: study A focused on the results associated with the dependent variable engagement actions, whereas study B concentrated on the analysis of the dependent variable users' intention to share.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For the purposes of the study a non-probability sampling technique was employed.

Specifically, a convenience sample design was adopted, and respondents were recruited through Prolific in exchange for a nominal payment. They were randomly assigned to one of the four different versions of the survey, and it took them about 6 minutes to complete it. A total of 253 responses were collected on August 2nd, 2022. Of these, 202 (Mage= 30,80; SD= 9,952; 51% male and 47,5% female) data points were analyzed after the elimination of incomplete responses (from 253 to 231) and those who failed the two-attention check (from 231 to 202).

A 2 (influencer type: micro influencer vs macro influencer) X 2 (language: assertive vs non-assertive) between-subjects experimental design was implemented to perform the current study. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four different versions of the questionnaire utilized for the manipulation of the independent variable and the moderator. The stimuli to which the participants were exposed are the same as those used in the pretest.

Respondents were asked to answer a series of questions after reading the experimental scenarios in order to determine the language, the influencer's perceived credibility, engagement actions, and user's intention to share. Finally, they answered a few demographic questions.

To evaluate the constructs under study and in order to perform an accurate analysis, three pre-validated scales were utilized. To assess influencer's perceived credibility, two scales, for the two dimensions into consideration, were used:

- To assess expertise from Torres et al., (2019) five-items questionnaire with a seven-point Likert Scale (from 1= Strongly Disagree to 7= Strongly Agree) was used (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  0.864; MPC= 3.843; SD= 1.038).
- To assess trustworthiness from Ohanian (1990) and Wiedmann & von Mettenheim (2020) four-item with a seven-point Likert Scale (from 1= Strongly Disagree to 7= Strongly Agree) was used (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  0.864; MPC= 3.843; SD= 1.038).

To measure engagement actions, Ananda et al., (2017) four-items Likert Scale (from 1= Strongly Disagree to 7= Strongly Agree) was employed (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  0.709; MEA= 4.188; SD= 1.173). Lastly, to rate the users' intention to share, Chua & Banerjee (2018) two-items Likert Scale (from 1= Very Impossible to 7= Very Possible) was utilized (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  0.955; MIS= 1.868; SD= 1.369).

## **RESULTS STUDY A**

The results study A focused on the analysis associated with the dependent variable engagement actions.

The results of a one-way ANOVA revealed that respondents expose to micro influencer did not have a higher engagement actions than those expose to macro influencer (MMicro Influencer= 4.100, SD = 1.204 vs. MMacro Influencer = 4.274, SD = 1.141,  $F(1,200) = 1.12, p = .29$ ). These preliminary results demonstrated that the micro influencer does not directly lead to an increase in engagement actions.

To test the hypothesis under study (H1a), PROCESS MACRO model 4 was employed (Hayes, 2017). Influencer Type (0 = macro influencer; 1= micro influencer) served as the independent variable, engagement actions as the dependent variable, and influencer's perceived credibility as the mediator.

The results of the regression analysis showed that the effect of the influencer type (IV) on perceived credibility (M), which correspond to the "a path", is negative and not statistically significant ( $b = - 0.13, t = - 0.89, p = 0.3763$ ) suggesting that micro influencer didn't lead to a higher perception of credibility than macro influencer. Whereas, influencer's perceived credibility, in turn, positively affected engagement actions ( $b = 0.48,$

$t = 6.69, p = 0.000$ ), implying that a higher perceived credibility increases engagement actions on video (b path). The statistical significance of this relationship provided initial evidence of the mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility in the relationship between the influencer type and engagement actions.

The effect of independent variable on engagement actions when considering the perceived credibility (c' path) was negative and was not statistically significant ( $b = - 0.11, t = - 0.746, p = 0.46$ ). Similarly, the total and main effect of influencer type on engagement actions was negative and not significant ( $b = - 0.17, t = - 1.07, p = 0.29, 95\% \text{ CI} = - 0.50, 0.15$ ). On the bright side, the indirect effect ( $a*b$ ) of influencer type on engagement actions via influencer's perceived credibility was negative and not statistically significant ( $b = - 0.63, 95\% \text{ CI} = - 0.20, 0.80$ ) suggesting that influencer's perceived credibility does not mediate and therefore does not explain the relationship between the influencer type and the users' engagement actions, rejecting H1a.

To test H2a, PROCESS MACRO model 8 was employed (Hayes, 2018). The analysis not only assessed the mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility in the relationship between the influencer type (0= macro influencer; 1= micro influencer) and engagement actions, but also if the moderator, language (0 = non-assertive; 1 = assertive), changed the strength of the indirect effect and the direct effect between influencer type and engagement actions.

The analysis showed that when the mediator is in the model, influencer type has a negative and not statistically significant impact on engagement actions ( $b = - 0.24, t = - 1.22, p = 0.22$ ), particularly when the influencer is micro. Moreover, consider the moderating role of language on the relationship between influencer type and perceived credibility, it is a not statistically significant predictor ( $b: - 0.11; t = - 0.51; p = 0.61$ ) of influencer's perceived credibility. The interaction between influencer type and language also is not significant ( $b = 0.25; t = 0.83; p = 0.41, 95\% \text{ CI} = - 0.33, 0.83$ ), specifically the assertive language does not moderate the relationship between micro influencer and influencer's perceived credibility. Now, focusing on the moderating role of language on the main effect and looking at the interaction term, it has a not statistically significant

predictor ( $b = 0.40$ ,  $t = 1.31$ ,  $p = 0.19 > 0.05$ , 95% CI = - 0.20, 0.99) of engagement actions. The interaction does not lead to a significant change in engagement actions. Whereas, when there is the moderator, perceived credibility continues to have a positive and statistically significant impact on engagement actions ( $b = 0.48$ ,  $t = 6.60$ ,  $p = 0.0000$ , 95% CI = 0.33, 0.62). Moreover, both the independent variable and the moderator has no impact on engagement actions because the p-value is greater than 0.05.

The goal of the analysis is to understand the moderated mediation: if the indirect effect of influencer type on engagement actions through perceived credibility is moderated by language or not. Specifically, if micro influencer (vs macro influencer) has a higher effect on engagement actions, through the mediation of credibility and the moderation of assertive language (vs non-assertive). The conditional indirect effects shows that the indirect effect is high at high level of assertiveness, and further reduced at low level. However, the conditional indirect effects are not significant at both level (low level:  $b = -0.12$ , 95% CI = - 0.33, 0.68 – high level:  $b = 0.00$ , 95% CI = - 0.20, 0.22). The H2a is rejected as the index of moderated mediation (index = 0.1177, 95% CI = -0.1583, 0.4116) is not significant since the 95% CI includes zero.

In conclusion, assertive language does not change the strength of the indirect effect from influencer type to engagement actions through perceived credibility.

## **RESULTS STUDY B**

The results study B focused on the analysis associated with the dependent variable intention to share, which show similar results as the one obtained in Study A.

The results of a one-way ANOVA revealed that respondents expose to micro influencer did not have a higher intention to share than those expose to macro influencer (MMicro Influencer= 1.845, SD = 1.312 vs. MMacro Influencer = 1.892, SD = 1.429,  $F(1,200) = 0.60$ ,  $p = .80$ ). These preliminary results demonstrated that the micro influencer does not directly lead to an increase in intention to share.

To test H1b, PROCESS MACRO model 6 was employed (Hayes, 2018). The study assessed the mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility in the relationship between the influencer type (0= macro influencer; 1= micro influencer) and users' intention to share.

The regression analysis, as in the previous one, demonstrated that micro influencer didn't lead to a higher perceived credibility than macro influencer ( $b = - 0.13$ ,  $t = - 0.89$ ,  $p = 0.3763$ ). Instead, influencer's perceived credibility positively affect intention to share ( $b = 0.67$ ,  $t = 8,26$ ,  $p = 0.0000$ ); these results highlight the importance of the influencer credibility for users (b path). When analyzing the direct effect (c' path), which is the direct relationship between influencer type and intention to share in presence of influencer's perceived credibility, it is positive but not statistically significant ( $b = 0.04$ ,  $t = 0.24$ ,  $p = 0.82$ ).

Similarly, the total effect and main effect of influencer type on users' intention to share was negative and not significant ( $b = - 0.05$ ,  $t = - 0.24$ ,  $p = 0.80$ , 95% CI = - 0.43, 0.33).

Lastly, the analysis shows a negative and not significant indirect effect ( $a*b$ ) of the influencer type on intention to share through influencer's perceived credibility ( $b = - 0.09$ , 95% CI: -0.295, 0.099) suggesting that there is no mediation, rejecting the H1b. These results replicate and confirm the ones obtained in Study A but support the importance of credibility so that a user can feel confident and enticed to create engagement.

To test H2b, PROCESS MACRO model 8 was employed (Hayes, 2018). The analysis not only assessed the mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility in the relationship between the influencer type (0= macro influencer; 1= micro influencer) and intention to share, but also if the moderator, language (0 = non-assertive; 1 = assertive), changed the strength of the indirect effect and the direct effect between influencer type and users' intention to share.

The analysis has the same results of the previous part when the relationships between influencer type, perceived credibility and language are considered. To sum up, there is not statistically significance neither on the relationship influencer type and intention to share ( $b = - 0.24$ ,  $t = -1.22$ ,  $p = 0.22$ ), neither on the relationship between

influencer type and perceived credibility, considering the moderator ( $b = -0.11$ ;  $t = -0.51$ ;  $p = 0.61$ ). finally, also the interaction between influencer type and language also is not significant ( $b = 0.25$ ;  $t = 0.83$ ;  $p = 0.41$ , 95% CI = - 0.33, 0.83).

Focusing on the moderating role of language on the main effect and looking and the interaction term, it has a not statistically significant predictor ( $b = 0.30$ ,  $t = 0.89$ ,  $p = 0.37 > 0.05$ , 95% CI = - 0.36, 0.97) of intention to share. The interaction does not lead to a significant change in the intention to share content. Whereas, when there is the moderator, perceived credibility continues to have a positive and statistically significant impact on users' intention to share ( $b = 0.66$ ,  $t = 8.25$ ,  $p = 0.0000$ , 95% CI = 0.51, 0.82). Moreover, the independent variable and the moderator has no impact on engagement actions because the p-value is greater than 0.05 and CI include the zero.

The goal of the analysis is to understand the moderated mediation: if the indirect effect of influencer type on intention to share through perceived credibility is moderated by language or not. Specifically, if micro influencer (vs macro influencer) has a higher effect on users' intention to share, through the mediation of credibility and the moderation of assertive language (vs non-assertive). Similarly, to the results A, the conditional indirect effects shows that the indirect effect is high at high level of assertiveness, and further reduced at low level. However, the conditional indirect effects are not significant at both level (low level:  $b = -0.16$ , 95% CI = - 0.44, 0.94 – high level:  $b = 0.00$ , 95% CI = - 0.28, 0.29). The H2b is rejected as the index of moderated mediation (index = 0.1635, 95% CI = - 0.2178, 0.5643) is not significant since the 95% CI includes zero.

In conclusion, assertive language does not change the strength of the indirect effect from influencer type to intention to share through perceived credibility.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study explored the influencer's perceived credibility, language, and behavioral responses, namely engagement actions and intention to share, to two different influencer type (micro influencer vs. macro influencer) in the context of the new social media platform: Tik-Tok.

We started from the premise that in other social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.) users usually share content and feel engaged who believe it comes from an influencer who is credible and authentic and who use direct and imperative communication, namely assertive language. According to previous research, influencers who are perceived more credible are the micro ones. We tested, therefore, this type of influencers when promoting an online sale and we leveraged the language to predict an interesting outcome: online users don't show a higher engagement and a higher intention to share after being exposed to micro influencer video. Our results contrast all the previous research in the field of social media, but at the same time bring to light a new way of communicating and new areas to study.

Two experimental studies have proved to not support the hypotheses formulated. Specifically, the results of study do not support H1a, H2a (Results A), H1b and H2b (Results B), demonstrating the not significant mediating role of influencer's perceived credibility on the relationship between the influencer type and the two dependent variables, engagement actions and users' intention to share. Furthermore, the moderated mediation, in both cases, is not significant, meaning that the indirect effect of influencer type on the two dependent variables, engagement actions and users' intention to share, through perceived credibility is not moderated by language.

Hence, our results show that the Tik-Tok drivers are not the same ones that drive engagement on other social media. Tik-Tok, being a new platform, is based on other factors: creativity, content and also credibility, but not the credibility of that influencers who already have a higher number of followers, for example on Instagram, but of those who have grown thanks to the continuous development of the platform. To support the assumption that credibility is one of the drivers, our results demonstrated that credibility always affects both dependent variables, engagement actions and users' intention to share. Our findings contribute to the understanding of the potential difference between old social media platform and this new one: is no longer the type of influencer that increase credibility but is what the user posts on the social, that through the algorithm of Tik-Tok can become viral and therefore popular. As matter of fact, is no longer the number of followers that



drive the virality, but anyone could be viral if choose the right content and the right way to communicate it. This is the reason why many users who were completely unknown on Instagram, for example, can go viral on Tik-Tok, by posting their short, friendly, and catchy video. This because, the form of the video is easier to understand, especially in a rapid pace of life, people are more inclined to respond to short but explosive content.

The future and the evolution of social media marketing is undoubtedly uncertain, but a surprising and seemingly lasting growth like the one in question has certainly shown that there is the possibility of innovating and competing with platforms already consolidated success, through a deep understanding of user needs.

Likewise, the results raise novel research opportunities about which are the new drivers of this new marketing frontier.

## **THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

Overall, this study presents compelling theoretical contributions. First and foremost, the research contributes to the literature by introducing a new theoretical framework based on TikTok for Business, to help understand the impact of influencer marketing videos may have on consumers' engagement actions. This framework sheds light on a new and understudied social platform that may be applied in the online context in order to increase the consumers' actions and their intention to share a video. Indeed, our results supply empirical evidence for the concept that, when Tik-Tok platform is considered, there are new metrics that has to be considered. De Veirman et al., (2017) contributes to the quest for influencer selection on Instagram by indicating that an influencer's number of followers affects consumers' attitudes towards him/her (e.g., likeability, sharability) and that this is mainly explained by perceptions of popularity, in line with the findings of Quercia et al., (2011) and Romero et al., (2011). Our findings, instead, demonstrated that this procedure cannot be applied on Tik-Tok platform because there is no relationship between the number of followers and credibility. This study appears to be among the first ones to analyze all these variables in the Tik-Tok context. Hence, this study contributes to the literature by revealing the change of direction we are living: it is

no longer the number of followers who drive authenticity and credibility, but that on Tik-Tok anyone can become popular being himself/herself and capturing the trend of the moment. This study appears to be, indeed, the first to disrupt the relationship between number of followers as driver of the engagement.

## **MANAGERIAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

This study offers some interesting recommendations for marketers and online retailers as well. According to FourWeekMBA (2022) TikTok accumulates over 1 billion video views per day and continues to rapidly grow the scale of use. Thanks to some FourWeekMBA statistics, it was found that the time spent on Tik-Tok is 19.6 hours a month in 2022 compared to 13.3 hours a month in 2020 (47% more). The time spent on the app also indicates that users are likely to make some purchasing decisions while on the app because of the potential time that brands have available to bring potential buyers on a trip.

Online retailers and marketers must be aware to understand which is the best strategy they can leverage in order to have successful results. First of all, our findings suggest that online Tik-Tok promotion could not pry on a specific type of influencer type, micro influencer one. Indeed, this research has demonstrated that users, when exposed to micro influencer video, as it is on other social media, may not have a more positive response showing no growth in both engagement and intention to share. Thus, as shown by the study, brands, who want to enter in this new reality, must completely change direction: it is not possible to apply the marketing knowledge acquired over time on Tik-Tok platform, but they must modernize all their business model by focusing on those who have reached the top through Tik-Tok. Marketers may, additionally, boost the users' engagement actions through perceived credibility of those who have been able to create content and appear in the "For You" page, through the TikTok's artificial intelligence (AI).

Therefore, understanding that anyone could generate engagement on Tik-Tok, this may represent an effective tactic when sales are in place. According to a recent survey conducted by the Influencer Marketing Factory, 82% of respondents confirmed that they

discovered products on social media and purchased it directly from their phone. Moreover, another 57% make a purchase while watching live streaming on Tik-Tok. Users, being accustomed to the previous format of interactivity, are looking for something that will amaze them, and Tik-Tok is just what they were waiting for. Thus, the second implication to be considered is that marketers and online retailers should bet on this new type of communication that makes the promotion unusual and out of the ordinary. While influencers' perceived credibility in the context of promotion typically stems popularity and knowledge on other social, the current study suggests that it cannot arise from the number of followers and the language used. Therefore, retailers should rely on a different and new kind of communication that helps leverage the users' perceived value of the product.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The current research has uncovered interesting results that advance prior research, it nonetheless features some limitations that can inspire future studies.

First, for what concerns influencers' perceived credibility, Ohanian definition has been taken into consideration for the analysis. Future studies may try to deepen the alternative perceived credibility dimensions that have been uncovered such as the attractiveness, likability, and similarity dimensions (Clow & Baack 2007).

Second, our study did not deepen the users' motivations that may explain attachment to Tik-Tok. Indeed, social media research has extensively demonstrated that users may approach this type of interactivity with different motivations which can be generally categorized as external and internal (Amatulli et al., 2018; Eastman and Eastman, 2015).

Research conducted by Mikhael (2019) shows that the reason Tik-Tok is a current trend is to fulfill social interaction as well as a means of self-expression. This study does not investigate the role of emotions, therefore future research could investigate the role of personal emotions.

Additionally, the research has mainly focused on the beauty product, but future research may use a stimulus (e.g., food) that may appeal to both males and females in terms of purchase intention or find a way to engage males as well within the same framework.

Moreover, it will be interesting to study which type of content and ads format best suited the new trend: future research may use the five ad formats provided by TikTok for Business to better understand which one is the most effective of all.

Future studies may analyze the role of creativity because it has the task of keeping our users attached to the video. One thing that is important to highlight, is that the creativity in the way of communicating the content that will make users remain glued or not to the video. This aspect of creativity should not be underestimated because in Tik Tok the attention of users is very low and therefore the ease of switching from one content to another is much higher than in other social networks. To prevent this from happening, it is essential that creativity supports the content and enhances it, it must not be a creativity that is admired but lowers the focus on our content. It would be interesting to study the relationship between creativity and attention: to understand when attention goes from bottom-up or top-down attention, when from involuntary it becomes voluntary and measuring it through neuromarketing methods.

Lastly, other types of social media may be taken into consideration in order to understand whether the new type of communication may be applied in other settings.