

Consumer Awareness and Understanding of Influencer Marketing

Summary Report

February 2026



Contents

1. Executive summary	3
2. Background and regulatory context	3
3. Why this research, and why now?	4
4. Scope and methodology	5
4.1 Platforms and content in scope	5
4.2 Qualitative phase	5
4.3 Quantitative phase	5
5. Headline findings: recognising influencer advertising is not straightforward	6
5.1 The role of contextual signals	6
5.2 Why labels matter: disclosure as a backstop	7
5.3 Expectations of clarity and placement	7
6. What this means in practice: implications and next steps	8

1. Executive summary

Influencer advertising has been an area of sustained regulatory focus for the ASA for several years, reflecting the rapid growth of creator-led advertising across social media platforms. In recent years, influencer advertising has increasingly appeared within content that feels personal, informal and organic, making it particularly important that people can readily recognise when content is advertising.

Ensuring that advertising is clearly and obviously identifiable remains a core regulatory priority for the ASA. Against this backdrop, the ASA commissioned [new research](#) in 2025 to refresh its evidence base for how consumers recognise advertising in influencer content today. The research covers current platforms, formats and behaviours, focusing primarily on TikTok and Instagram, and tests how advertising disclosure operates in real-world, fast-scrolling conditions.

The findings show that recognising influencer advertising is not always straightforward. While many people report confidence in spotting advertising, this does not consistently translate into accurate recognition in practice. Brand advertising in clearly understood third-party media (such as TV, print, outdoor or online display) remains the clearest benchmark for consumers, while influencer advertising is more variable and often less clearly identified, depending on how it is presented.

Clear and prominent disclosure plays a critical role in helping consumers recognise advertising quickly and confidently in mixed-feed social media environments. The research shows that both the wording and placement of disclosure matter. Clear “Ad” variants and prominent platform-provided labels were most effective in signalling advertising, while ambiguous or shorthand labels increased the risk of confusion. Disclosure was expected to be upfront and immediately visible, without requiring users to search, click or infer meaning.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that the existing rules on influencer advertising are unclear or inappropriate. Rather, they underline the need for clarity and consistency in how those rules are applied in practice as platforms, content formats and user behaviours continue to evolve.

The ASA will use these findings to inform its ongoing approach, including sharpening guidance, engaging with influencers, brands, agencies and platforms, and taking proportionate action where disclosure falls short.

2. Background and regulatory context

Influencer advertising has been an area of sustained regulatory focus for the ASA for several years. As advertising increasingly appears in formats that closely resemble organic content, ensuring that consumers can readily recognise when content is advertising remains an important regulatory priority.

Under the [CAP Code](#)¹, marketing communications must be obviously identifiable as such. This requirement applies to advertising that appears in influencer content across platforms and formats where a commercial relationship exists between a brand and an influencer. In these circumstances, the advertising nature of the content must be made clear to consumers in a way that is prominent, upfront and easily understood.

¹ The ASA is the UK's independent regulator of advertising. It applies the [Advertising Codes](#) written by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP). The ASA ensures ads across all media are legal, decent, honest and truthful, taking action where ads are misleading, harmful, offensive or otherwise irresponsible.

To support compliance in this area, the ASA has developed a range of targeted guidance and resources for influencers, brands and agencies. Most notably, the ASA has worked jointly with the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to produce the [Influencers' guide to making clear that ads are ads](#), which sets out clear expectations on how advertising disclosures should be made in practice. This guidance is supported by ongoing monitoring and enforcement activity, including formal rulings and compliance action where advertising disclosures fall short of the Code, to support consistent standards across the influencer advertising ecosystem.

The ASA previously commissioned consumer [research](#) in 2018 to better understand how audiences interpret advertising disclosures in influencer content. That work highlighted that both the wording and prominence of disclosures can materially affect recognition, and that identifying influencer advertising is not always straightforward where disclosures are unclear or inconsistently applied.

However, the influencer advertising landscape has continued to evolve significantly since that research was undertaken, including changes in platforms, formats, user knowledge and user expectations. This has created a clear need to refresh and deepen the evidence base underpinning the ASA's approach, ensuring that regulatory expectations remain clear, proportionate and grounded in how consumers experience influencer advertising today.

3. Why this research, and why now?

Influencer advertising continues to grow in scale, reach and commercial importance. Influencers now operate across a wide range of platforms and formats, with advertising frequently embedded within short-form video, livestreams and highly personalised lifestyle content. Across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, the ways in which influencers create and integrate content have contributed to increasingly blurred boundaries between entertainment, recommendation and advertising, increasing both the volume of influencer ads and the speed at which audiences encounter them.

While the underlying rules around ad disclosure are well established, the ways in which advertising is presented – and experienced by consumers – have continued to evolve. Disclosure may now appear alongside fast-moving video, audio-led content, or within formats designed to feel informal, authentic or spontaneous. As a result, whether ad disclosure is consistently noticed and understood as intended cannot be assumed.

Against this backdrop, the ASA identified a need to refresh and deepen its evidence base on how consumers understand ad disclosure in influencer advertising. In particular, the ASA wanted to explore how disclosure operates in today's platform environments, which approaches are working well from a consumer perspective, and where confusion or misunderstanding may still arise in practice. In particular, the study tested recognition in fast-scrolling, feed-based conditions designed to reflect real social media use.

This research was therefore commissioned to provide an up-to-date assessment of consumer interpretation and experience. By focusing on how audiences engage with and respond to ad disclosure in real-world contexts, the study complements the ASA's wider regulatory work and helps ensure that decisions, guidance and engagement activity are grounded in up-to-date evidence.

The findings are intended to support clarity and consistency across the influencer advertising ecosystem. They will help inform the ASA's ongoing engagement with influencers, brands, agencies and platforms, and ensure that existing rules and guidance continue to be applied – and communicated – in a way that remains effective as advertising practices, platforms and consumer behaviours continue to develop.

4. Scope and methodology

This research was commissioned to explore how consumers recognise and interpret ad disclosure in influencer advertising in today's social media environment. It was designed to provide an up-to-date, evidence-based picture of consumer understanding, reflecting current platforms, formats and user behaviours.

The ASA appointed an independent research agency, MTM, to carry out the work. The research used a mixed-methodology approach, combining qualitative and quantitative elements to capture both depth of understanding and patterns across the wider population.

4.1 Platforms and content in scope

The research focused primarily on TikTok and Instagram, reflecting their prominence in influencer advertising and the similarity of their fast-scrolling, feed-based user experience. The qualitative phase also included YouTube and Twitch for additional context, recognising the different ways influencer advertising can appear across platforms.

The study examined a range of influencer advertising posts using different styles, content formats and disclosure approaches. This included testing both platform-provided ad labels and influencer-applied labels, allowing the research to assess how different forms of disclosure are interpreted by consumers in practice.

4.2 Qualitative phase

The qualitative stage comprised a seven-day online community, involving 30 participants, during which participants completed tasks designed to mirror everyday social media use. This was followed by in-depth interviews with eight participants, allowing for deeper exploration of how individuals interpreted influencer content, disclosure cues and labelling in context.

This phase was designed to capture nuanced reactions, language and reasoning, including how participants described posts that felt commercial, ambiguous or unclear.

4.3 Quantitative phase

The quantitative stage consisted of a nationally representative online survey of 1,900 UK respondents aged 13 and over. This included a boost of 300 13–17-year-olds, with the overall sample weighted to be nationally representative.

A key advance on earlier ASA research was the way influencer advertising was tested. Rather than relying on static images, the survey replicated the scrolling experience users encounter on social media platforms. This included a “Spot the Sell” exercise, in which participants made rapid, instinctive judgements about whether content was advertising while scrolling through mixed posts. This approach was intended to better reflect real-world conditions, where users make rapid judgements while scrolling through mixed content.

Participants were shown a series of posts and asked whether they believed each was an ad. Influencer advertising posts were systematically edited to include different disclosure labels, with only one label shown at a time, allowing the impact of each label to be assessed while holding the creative content constant.

In the in-situ experimental phase, nine label conditions were used, including clear “Ad” variants, platform-provided labels (such as “**Paid Partnership**” and “**Commission Paid**”), other labels (such as “**#gifted**” and “**#thanks**”), and non-labels (such as @brand mentions or no label).

Separately, a wider label-ranking exercise tested a broader range of disclosure labels, to understand which wording consumers perceive as clearest in principle.

Together, these methods were intended to provide a robust and realistic assessment of how ad disclosure operates in practice, grounded in how consumers actually encounter influencer advertising in their day-to-day social media use.

5. Headline findings: recognising influencer advertising is not straightforward

The research shows that recognising influencer advertising is not always straightforward for consumers, even among those who say they feel confident doing so.

Around half of the UK online population report confidence in spotting influencer advertising, with higher self-reported confidence among younger users. However, when tested in practice, this confidence does not consistently translate into accurate recognition. Consumers’ ability to identify advertising is shaped by how content is presented, the context in which it appears, and how clearly advertising signals are communicated.

Brand advertising remains the clearest form of advertising for consumers and sets a high benchmark for clarity. Three-quarters of respondents were able to say that brand ads were “definitely” advertising, rising to 86% when including those who said they were “definitely” or “maybe” ads.

Influencer advertising fell significantly short of this standard. Across the influencer posts tested, around half of respondents were able to say that a post was “definitely” an ad, with a further proportion saying “maybe”. More than a quarter of respondents were unable to identify influencer advertising as advertising at all.

Recognition also varied widely between individual influencer posts. The proportion who could definitively identify a post as an ad ranged from around 30% to over 80% (30–83% in the examples tested), depending on content and signals. This variation reflected differences in content style and advertising signals, rather than platform alone.

The research also found misrecognition in both directions. Some non-ad content, such as genuine reviews or editorial-style posts, was mistakenly identified as advertising, while some influencer ads were interpreted as organic content. Taken together, the findings show that no category of influencer advertising is universally recognised, and that clarity depends heavily on how advertising signals are communicated within everyday social media use. This matters to users: the research shows strong demand for clearer labelling, with most users saying labels are essential to being able to identify influencer ads, which in turn helps them decide whether to trust, engage with, or simply skip influencer content.

5.1 The role of contextual signals

The research shows that consumers often rely on contextual signals within influencer content to judge whether a post is advertising, particularly before noticing any formal disclosure.

Participants described cues such as repeated brand mentions, an overly promotional tone, prominent product visuals or logos, calls to action, or changes in an influencer's usual style. In the qualitative research, participants commonly described posts that felt overtly commercial as “salesy” or “cringe”.

While these signals can help consumers recognise influencer advertising, they are not used consistently. Their presence and strength vary widely depending on content style, creator approach and platform norms. As a result, reliance on contextual signals alone leads to uneven outcomes: some influencer ads are recognised quickly, while others closely resemble genuine reviews or personal recommendations, increasing the risk of confusion.

Overall, the findings show that contextual signals shape first impressions but alone are an unreliable indicator of advertising, underlining the need for clear, explicit disclosure to provide certainty for consumers.

5.2 Why labels matter: disclosure as a backstop

While contextual signals can shape first impressions, the research shows that clear disclosure plays a distinct and essential role in helping consumers recognise influencer advertising.

Where contextual cues are weak, inconsistent or ambiguous, disclosure provides an explicit signal that content is advertising. Even where some promotional cues are present, disclosure acts as a confirmatory backstop, allowing consumers to be sure about the commercial nature of a post rather than relying on inference.

This was evident in the experimental testing, where adding a disclosure label increased recognition across influencer posts with very different content styles. The impact was particularly strong where content closely resembled organic or editorial-style material.

Overall, the findings show that disclosure is not simply an additional cue, but a critical mechanism for ensuring clarity in fast-scrolling, mixed-content environments. Without clear and prominent disclosure, consumers are left to rely on subjective or inconsistent signals, increasing the risk of misunderstanding about whether content is advertising.

5.3 Expectations of clarity and placement

The research shows that clarity is shaped not only by where disclosure appears, but also by the language used.

Across both the experimental testing and the direct ranking exercise, certain labels were consistently more effective at helping consumers recognise influencer advertising. Platform-specific labels of “**Paid Partnership**” and “**Commission Paid**”, along with clear “Ad” variants (for example “Ad” placed upfront or “#ad” used prominently), were most likely to signal that content was advertising.

By contrast, labels such as “**#gifted**” or “**#thanks**” performed poorly. These were often seen as ambiguous, failing to clearly communicate that a post was advertising or how the influencer had been rewarded.

Placement also mattered. Consumers consistently expected disclosure to be immediate, prominent and visible without extra effort. Labels placed upfront – either visually within the content itself or at the start of captions – were seen as offering the greatest clarity. Where users had to search within captions or click to reveal additional text, disclosure was considered less effective and, in some cases, appeared to undermine trust.

Taken together, the findings reinforce that effective disclosure relies on clear wording and prominent placement, working quickly within fast-scrolling, mixed-content environments.

6. What this means in practice: implications and next steps

The findings reinforce the importance of clear, consistent and upfront disclosure in influencer advertising. While many consumers feel confident in spotting advertising, recognition in practice is uneven and highly dependent on how advertising signals are communicated within fast-scrolling, mixed-content environments.

The research does not suggest that the existing rules on influencer advertising are unclear or inappropriate. Rather, it highlights where greater clarity in *application* is needed to ensure that advertising is obviously identifiable to consumers in practice.

Consumers often rely on contextual cues – such as tone, brand mentions or visual prominence – to judge whether content is advertising. However, these cues are inconsistent and subjective, and cannot be relied upon to provide certainty. Clear and prominent disclosure therefore plays a critical role as a backstop, allowing consumers to recognise advertising quickly and confidently as they encounter content in real-world feeds.

From a practical perspective, the findings reinforce established expectations reflected in existing ASA guidance:

- disclosure should be explicit, using language that clearly communicates that content is advertising;
- disclosure should be upfront and immediately visible, without requiring users to click, search or infer meaning; and
- disclosure should work quickly in the context in which content is consumed, including short-form video and fast-scrolling feeds.

The research also underlines the importance of consistency. Labels that rely on influencer shorthand or industry-specific terminology were less effective, increasing the risk of confusion. By contrast, clear “Ad” variants and prominent platform-provided labels were more likely to be understood as indicating advertising.

In light of these findings, the ASA will continue to support compliance through clear, practical guidance and engagement. Forthcoming updates to the *Influencers’ guide to making clear that ads are ads* are intended to sharpen existing expectations and reinforce what “obviously identifiable” means in practice.

Alongside updated guidance, the ASA will continue to monitor influencer advertising and take proportionate action where necessary, including ongoing engagement with influencers, brands, trade bodies, agencies and platforms.

Overall, the research provides a strong evidence base for the ASA's continued approach: maintaining clear rules, supporting understanding through guidance, and taking action where disclosure falls short as influencer marketing continues to evolve.

Contact us

Advertising Standards Authority
Castle House
37-45 Paul Street
London EC2A 4LS

www.asa.org.uk