

# **TikTok influencers and food and beverage marketing: A recipe for disaster?**

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# TikTok influencers and food and beverage marketing: A recipe for disaster?

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## Abstract

The goal of this study is to understand how/how often influencers feature foods and beverages and disclose brand relationships in their content.

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## Original Manuscript

**TITLE PAGE**

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## Introduction

Food companies spend billions of dollars annually to promote their products and are increasingly focusing on social media marketing.<sup>1</sup> Food ads affect not only brand preferences but also eating behaviors.<sup>2</sup> Adolescents, who are avid users of social media, are susceptible to ads on these platforms, especially those from “influencers.”<sup>3</sup> Our goal in this study was to understand how and how often influencers feature foods and beverages and disclose brand relationships in their content.

## Methods

We collected the 100 latest videos from each of the top 100 influencers on *TikTok*, a popular social media platform, as of July 2022. For each video that contained a food/beverage product—in the video, audio, and/or caption—a team of research assistants coded whether the product was branded and/or sponsored, and, if sponsored, how the brand relationship was disclosed. (Figure 1)

Using ReCal3,<sup>4</sup> we calculated interrater reliability among coders using a small sample of “practice” videos (n=6) that reflected the range of disclosures used.<sup>5</sup> Average pairwise percent agreement was 92% and average pairwise Cohen’s kappa was 0.82. We deemed these to be acceptable given the descriptive and exploratory nature of this work.

From the initial potential pool of 10,000 videos across 100 influencers, we ended with a sample of 8,880 videos from 97 influencers (eFigure 1). We report descriptive statistics only.

## Results

We identified 1,360 videos (15.3%) featuring at least one food/beverage across the 8,880 videos included in our analysis. These 1,360 videos originated from 89 unique influencers (median of 9 videos per influencer, IQR 4-21), each with over 17 million followers, and were seen more than 9 million times each, on average.

Nearly half (47.6%) of the food/beverage videos featured a branded product, most commonly an energy drink (23.0%). Product brands and/or logos were featured in the video itself (93.5%), in the video caption (34.6%), and/or in the accompanying audio (19.4%). (Table 1)

**Table 1. Brand relationship disclosures among videos featuring branded food/beverage items (n=648)**

Characteristic		n (%)
Where the food/beverage brand/logo is featured		
	In the video	606 (93.5)
	In the caption	224 (34.6)
	In the audio	126 (19.4)
How brand relationships are disclosed <sup>a</sup>		
	No disclosure	449 (69.3)
	Caption hashtag: #[brand]	63 (9.7)
	Caption hashtag: #ad	30 (4.6)
	Caption hashtag: #[brand]ambassador	3 (0.5)
	Caption hashtag: #sponsorship	1 (0.2)
	Caption hashtag: #[brand]partner	22 (3.4)
	Caption hashtag: Other (e.g., brand slogan)	39 (6.0)
	Brand tagged in caption	182 (28.1)
	Brand tagged in video	4 (0.6)
	Official TikTok disclosure label	1 (0.2)
	Contractual agreement verbally disclosed	1 (0.2)

<sup>a</sup> Not all disclosures represent actual brand relationships; disclosures are not mutually exclusive

Most videos featuring a branded food/beverage (69.3%) did not disclose any brand relationship. Among videos that disclosed a brand relationship, influencers used 10 different types of disclosures (**Table 1**). Tagging a brand in the video's caption was the most common disclosure method (28.1%). Multiple different caption hashtags were used to disclose brand relationships, including #[brandname] (9.7%) and #ad (4.6%).

## Discussion

Most *TikTok* posts by top influencers featuring branded foods and beverages did not disclose a brand relationship, suggesting that no relationship existed or that they purposely/accidentally omitted its disclosure. Among videos with disclosures, the most frequently-used mechanism—tagging the brand

—did not clearly differentiate between sponsored content versus an influencer trying to attract a brand. The ambiguity around brand relationship disclosures makes it difficult for social media users, particularly adolescents, to make informed decisions about the products they see.<sup>3</sup> This concern has been highlighted by the Federal Trade Commission, the government agency that regulates marketing on social media platforms in the United States, in the most recent iteration (July 2023) of its Endorsement Guides.<sup>6</sup>

Study limitations include: 1) convenience sample of influencers and posts, 2) focus on only the most prominent food/beverage product in each video, 3) inability to infer intentionality in whether a product was meant to be featured in a video (e.g., when the only food/beverage product featured was in the background), and 4) inability to distinguish whether the presence/lack of a disclosure implied the presence/lack of a relationship.

Social media users, particularly adolescents, need clearer, more robust disclosures from influencers to protect against undue influence of social media marketing.



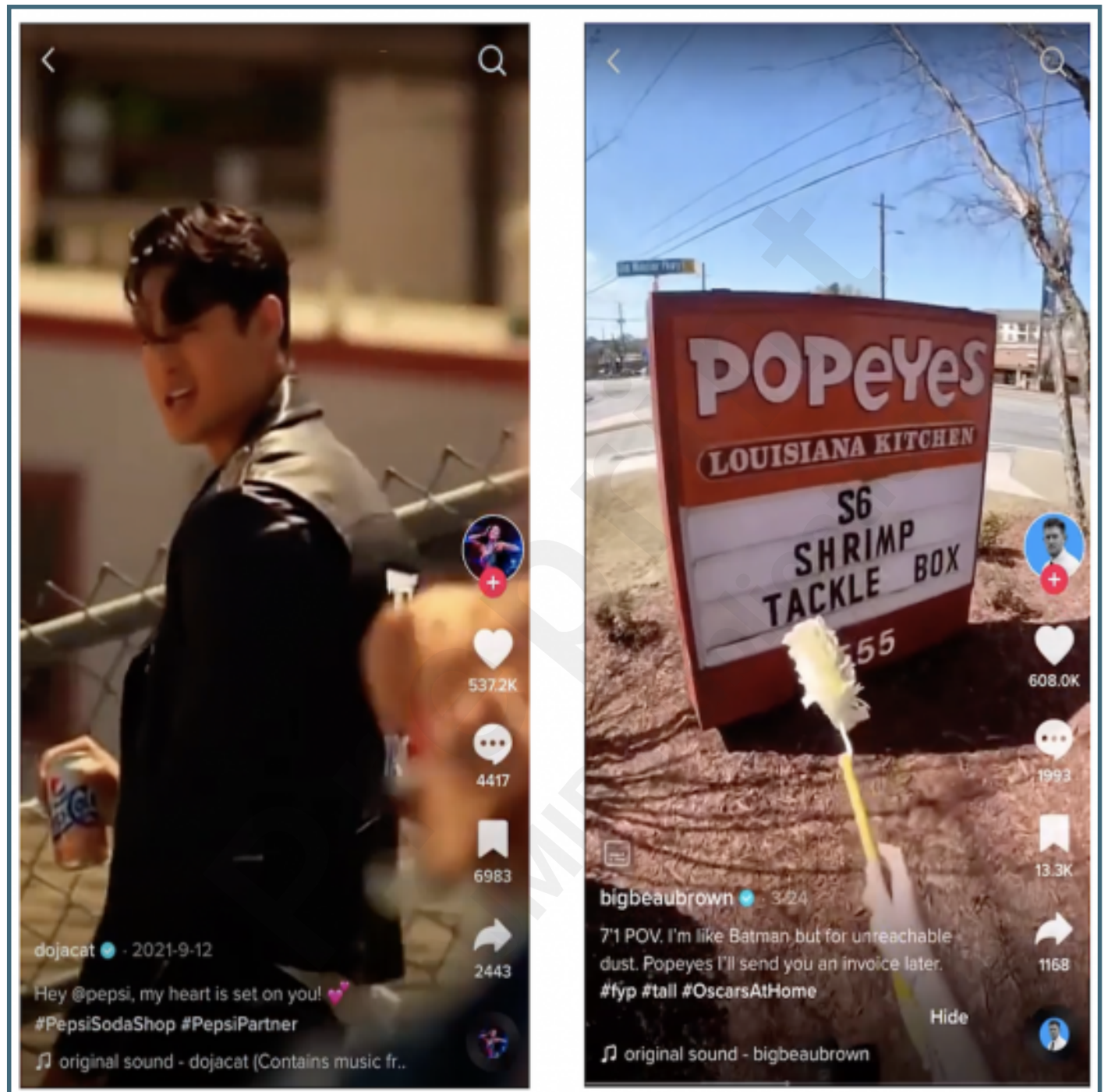
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## Supplementary Files

## Figures

Video screenshots of TikTok posts featuring food and beverages that include: 1) a clear brand partnership disclosure (left panel; #PepsiPartner) ; and 2) an unclear brand disclosure (right panel).



## **Multimedia Appendixes**

Data collection and cleaning flow chart.

URL: <http://asset.jmir.pub/assets/d6d873e61a705e6a0139aee783450112.pdf>

