Case 8: Is it a recommendation or an ad?

Gia loves a novel that a publisher sent her for free, and her video review does not mention the free copy yet.

On your own Read What happened. Underline what the publisher sent Gia and what it asked for. About 4 minutes.

Gia, Caio and Mari set up a camera in a bright studio.

Your role: You're the viewer with the sound off who checks the first three seconds. **New skill:** Spot and disclose a material connection.

What happened

At 1:30 p.m. on Saturday, Caio finishes editing Gia's short video review of a new novel. Gia made the review for BookTok, where people recommend books on TikTok. She stayed up until 2 a.m. to finish the novel, and she loves it.

Two weeks ago, the book's publisher emailed Gia. The publicity team offered her a free copy of its spring novel for review. The email said she did not have to post, but it asked for a tag if she did. In the first cut, Gia never says the book was free. The only sign of the publisher is a tag in the caption below the video.

Caio wants to watch the cut the way a stranger would, on a phone with the sound off. He wants to know whether the first three seconds say the book was free. Gia wants to keep her honest opinion in the video. She also wants viewers to know how she got the book.

Your question: Do Gia's viewers need to know the book was free, and how should she tell them?

Key terms

On your own Read each key term and its example. Then write your first guess in the box. About 4 minutes.

Material connection A material connection is a relationship with a brand, like payment or a free product, that viewers might not expect.

En español: conexión material

In this case: The publisher sent Gia a free copy of its spring novel for review. That free copy is a material connection.

Disclosure A disclosure is a clear statement that tells people about a relationship or fact they would want to know.

En español: divulgación

In this case: Gia's first cut has no disclosure. The tag in the caption names the publisher but never says the book was free.

Endorsement An endorsement is a message that shares someone's opinion or experience of a product to promote it.

En español: respaldo

In this case: Gia's video review promotes the novel with her own opinion: she stayed up until 2 a.m. to finish it.

Who is involved

Gia

Made the video review

"I stayed up till 2 a.m. finishing it. That part's real. The publisher sending it free is also real, and right now it's nowhere in the video."

Caio

Editing Gia's video

"The publisher's email literally says 'free copy for review.' That's the sentence. It's just not in the video yet."

Your first guess

Before you look at the evidence, does Gia need to tell viewers the book was free?

My first guess is ___, because ___.

Notes

Reading passage

Disclosure, trust and the creator economy

On your own Read the passage. At each Stop and think box, pause and answer the question in your head or with a partner. About 5 minutes.

Words to know

- **Material connection**: A material connection is a relationship with a brand, like payment or a free product, that viewers might not expect.
- **Disclosure**: A disclosure is a clear statement that tells people about a relationship or fact they would want to know.
- **Endorsement**: An endorsement is a message that shares someone's opinion or experience of a product to promote it.
- **Framing**: Framing is choosing which parts of a situation a message brings forward.

The story: A sincere review with a gap

Gia made a short BookTok review of a novel she genuinely loved. She stayed up until 2 a.m. to finish it. Caio edited the video and finished the cut at 1:30 p.m. on Saturday. The review omits one fact. The publisher's publicity team sent Gia a free copy two weeks earlier, with no obligation to post but a request for a tag if she did. The first cut's spoken opening is pure enthusiasm. The video has no on-screen text. The only reference to the publisher is a tag in the caption below it.

The case is designed around a common and understandable mistake. Gia is not trying to deceive anyone, and her opinion is not for sale. She believes the tag discloses the relationship. Caio, who edits freelance video projects, knows how people watch: quickly, on phones and often muted. His edit notes are blunt. Most viewers will not open the caption, and a tag names a brand without stating a relationship.

Your role is to be the viewer with the sound off who checks the first three seconds.

Stop and think. Why does a disclosure placed in a caption function as no disclosure for many viewers?

The anatomy of an adequate disclosure

The analysis rests on three terms. An **endorsement** is a message that shares someone's opinion or experience of a product to promote it. A **material connection** is a relationship with a brand, like payment or a free product, that viewers might not expect.

The anatomy of an adequate disclosure, continued

A **disclosure** is a clear statement that tells people about a relationship or fact they would want to know. The case keeps two judgments apart. Whether Gia's opinion is honest is one question. Whether viewers can weigh it with full knowledge is another.

The Case 1 concept of **framing**, choosing which parts of a situation a message brings forward, explains why placement matters as much as wording. A disclosure that exists but is not brought forward functions, for most viewers, as no disclosure. Caio's solution moves the relationship to the first three seconds, "Quick heads-up, the publisher sent me this free," spoken and on screen, and then lets Gia's hook run. He also builds in a validation step. Someone who did not work on the video watches once, muted, and answers whether the book was free. Hesitation counts as failure.

Gia's own revision shows the limit of disclosure. She drops a superlative she cannot support, the best book of the year, in favor of a claim she can: two nights, could not put it down. Disclosure addresses how the endorser got the product. It does not verify the endorser's claims about the product.

A viewer comment on another creator's review, "wait was this sponsored?? kind of feels like an ad now," shows the reputational logic. Late discovery damages trust more than early disclosure does. The case also carries a caution. That comment is about someone else, and there is no evidence that review was sponsored. Do not accuse real creators on a guess.

> **Stop and think.** Caio defines success as a stranger answering without hesitation. What are the strengths and limits of that test?

Law, enforcement and research

The FTC's Endorsement Guides, 16 CFR Part 255, apply federal law against deceptive practices to endorsements. Their current text states that material connections "can include monetary payment or the provision of free or discounted products … to an endorser, regardless of whether the advertiser requires an endorsement in return." It defines "clear and conspicuous" as "difficult to miss (i.e., easily noticeable) and easily understandable by ordinary consumers" (16 CFR Part 255, as revised 2023). The FTC announced that update, which addresses free products and tags, in June 2023 (Federal Trade Commission, June 28, 2023).

Enforcement has targeted placement directly. In November 2023, the agency warned two trade associations and a dozen influencers over posts promoting aspartame or sugar, and it stated that disclosures must appear in the video rather than in a caption (Federal Trade Commission, November 14, 2023). Coverage emphasized that sponsors share responsibility (Food Dive, November 27, 2023).

Research supports the premise that disclosure changes perception. A study of 3,149 Taiwanese high school students found that full sponsorship disclosure helped them recognize posts as advertising (Lin et al., PLOS One, May 27, 2026).

Law, enforcement and research, continued

Earlier research examined age differences in how adolescents respond to disclosures in sponsored influencer videos (van Reijmersdal and van Dam, Journal of Youth and Adolescence, January 18, 2020).

Communicators have their own standard. The PRSA code asks practitioners to "preserve the free flow of unprejudiced information when giving or receiving gifts by ensuring that gifts are nominal, legal, and infrequent" (PRSA Code of Ethics, October 2000). Publishers who send review copies and creators who accept them both sit inside that principle.

Stop and think. Should platforms be required to build disclosure tools into video apps? What would that change?

Sources

Real source | Federal Trade Commission (FTC) | 2023

FTC Endorsement Guides (16 CFR Part 255)

Real source | Federal Trade Commission | June 28, 2023

Federal Trade Commission Announces Updated Advertising Guides to Combat Deceptive Reviews and Endorsements

Real source | Federal Trade Commission | November 14, 2023

FTC Warns Two Trade Associations and a Dozen Influencers About Social Media Posts Promoting Consumption of Aspartame or Sugar

Real source | Food Dive | November 27, 2023

FTC crackdown could change influencer marketing for food and beverages

Real source | PLOS One (Lin et al.) | May 27, 2026

Effects of social media sponsorship disclosure on adolescents' advertising literacy and purchase intention

Real source | Journal of Youth and Adolescence (van Reijmersdal & van Dam) | January 18, 2020

How Age and Disclosures of Sponsored Influencer Videos Affect Adolescents' Knowledge of Persuasion and Persuasion

Real source | Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) | 2000

PRSA Code of Ethics

Look at the evidence

On your own Read each document. For each one, write what it shows and what it leaves out. About 8 minutes.

Evidence A | **Email**

The publisher's email

"Hi Gia, we love your book reviews! We'd be glad to send you a free copy of our spring novel for review. There's no obligation to post, but if you do, we'd appreciate a tag. Best, the publicity team"

Look closely: What did the publisher give, and what did it ask for?

What it shows

What it leaves out

Evidence B | **Video script and caption**

Gia's first cut

Spoken: "You guys, I have to tell you about this book because I literally could not put it down!" On-screen text: none. Caption below the video: "@publisher #booktok

Look closely: Where in this video would a viewer learn about the free copy?

What it shows

What it leaves out

Look at the evidence, continued

Evidence C | **Edit notes**

Caio's edit notes

"Watch once as a stranger, phone on mute. 0:00—0:03: does anything say free copy? Caption sits below the video; most people won't open it. Tag = brand name, not relationship."

Look closely: What does Caio want to test before uploading, and why the first three seconds?

What it shows

What it leaves out

Evidence D | **Viewer comment**

A comment on another creator's review

wait was this sponsored?? kind of feels like an ad now

Look closely: When does this viewer start to wonder about a sponsorship?

What it shows

What it leaves out

What is still missing from the evidence?

Key idea: material connections

On your own Read the key idea and the FTC guide. Then answer the question in the box. About 10 minutes.

An **endorsement** is a message that shares someone's opinion or experience of a product to promote it. Gia's video review is an endorsement, and her opinion in it is honest. A **material connection** is a relationship with a brand, like payment or a free product, that viewers might not expect. The free copy from the publisher is a material connection. Knowing about it gives viewers context, but it does not prove that Gia's opinion is false.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) is a federal agency. Its Endorsement Guides explain how a federal law against deceptive practices applies to endorsements. A **disclosure** is a clear statement that tells people about a relationship or fact they would want to know. For a video, the FTC says the disclosure belongs in the video itself, ideally both spoken and on screen. A tag in the caption only names the brand, and it sits below the video.

A disclosure answers one question: how did Gia get the book? Viewers can still ask what supports her claims about the book itself. A clear disclosure does not make every claim in a review accurate. Do not accuse a real creator of hiding a sponsorship based on a guess.

Professional standards

Real source | Law or regulation | Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

FTC Endorsement Guides (16 CFR Part 255): § 255.5 Disclosure of material connections

"They can include monetary payment or the provision of free or discounted products … to an endorser, regardless of whether the advertiser requires an endorsement in return."

In plain words: The FTC says a free product can be a connection that reviewers must clearly disclose, even if the brand asked for nothing in return.

Question: The publisher's email says there is "no obligation to post." Does that change whether Gia has a connection to disclose?

Professional standards, continued

Your answer

The email's wording ___, because ___.

In the news

Real source | NBC News | November 15, 2023

Influencers warned by FTC over 'inadequate' disclosures of artificial sweetener promotions

Real creators were warned for not clearly saying they were paid, the exact question this case asks.

Real source | ABC News | November 6, 2019

Popular YouTuber chimes in on federal product disclosure guide for influencers

A creator reacts to the FTC's disclosure rules, showing how the guidance lands for people who actually post.

Notes

Sort the evidence

On your own Follow each choice to its results. Then write whose view is missing. About 6 minutes.

Follow both choices forward. Which consequences can Gia control, which depend on viewers, and what test tells her the disclosure worked?

Post the first cut with only a brand tag in the caption

Sound-off viewers never learn the book was free

Who is affected

Disclose aloud and on screen in the first seconds

Viewers weigh the recommendation knowing the relationship

Who is affected

Some viewers may discount the review as an ad

Who is affected

Whose perspective is missing?

Whose view is missing from these documents? What would you ask them?

The view that is missing is ___. I would ask ___.

Practice: choose a response

On your own Choose the change that makes the relationship clearest. Then fix the two marked phrases. About 6 minutes.

Gia loves the novel the publisher sent her for free. Which change to her video makes the relationship clearest to viewers?

- ☐ **A** Tag the publisher in the caption.
- ☐ **B** Say and show at the start of the video that the publisher sent her the book for free.
- ☐ **C** Leave the video as it is, since the email said there was no obligation to post.

Why I chose it

Improve a draft

A student's first draft

Okay you guys, I have to tell you about this book because I literally could not put it down!! ❶ #ad #booktok @publisher. The characters are so real and the ending destroyed me. I stayed up until 2 a.m. finishing it and then just sat there staring at the wall. Everyone needs to read this, trust me, ❷ it's the best book of the year and you won't regret it. Link is in my bio, go get it before everyone else does!

Rewrite each marked phrase so it says only what the evidence supports.

Rewrite phrase 1

Rewrite phrase 2

College

Your task

On your own Read the steps. Fill in the planner boxes before you start your draft. About 15 minutes.

Write a social media disclosure policy for a student organization whose members post reviews, and a one-page training handout. Then use the policy to rewrite the first three seconds and the caption of Gia's review.

Use: Case documents: the publisher's email, Gia's first-cut script and caption, Caio's edit notes and the viewer comment. Real sources: the FTC's Disclosures 101 page, its Endorsement Guides questions and answers, and the Endorsement Guides sections on material connections and "clear and conspicuous" disclosures.

You'll make: Policy, 300—400 words, a one-page handout and a revised opening and caption

Time: 75 minutes

1. List every kind of connection your policy covers, starting with free and discounted products.
2. Decide where the disclosure goes: in the video itself, spoken and on screen.
3. Add Caio's sound-off check as a step before anyone posts.
4. Write how members answer a comment like "was this sponsored??"
5. Draft the policy core and the revised opening on the Your draft page.
6. Write the full policy of 300 to 400 words and a one-page handout.
7. State that the policy guides members and is not legal advice.

Prefer typing? Scan to open the online workspace.

Connections the policy covers

Your task, continued

Where the disclosure goes

How members answer “was this sponsored??”

Notes

Your draft

On your own Write your draft in the boxes. Use your planner from the page before. About 30 minutes.

Policy core: what counts, where it goes, who checks

The law behind the policy

Your draft, continued

Revised first three seconds and caption

Notes

Check your work

On your own Answer the Check your work questions and mark your level in each rubric row. Then write one change you made. About 8 minutes.

Does your policy cover free and discounted products?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Does it require the disclosure in the video itself, spoken and on screen?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Does it include a sound-off check before posting?	☐ Yes	☐ No
Does your revised opening tell a viewer in three seconds that the book was free?	☐ Yes	☐ No

How your work is scored

Mark one box in each row.

Skill	Beginning	Developing	Proficient	Advanced
Evidence	☐ No disclosure or claim support.	☐ Tag only.	☐ Names the relationship clearly.	☐ Names the relationship and supports the product claim.
Reasoning	☐ Treats opinion as a substitute for disclosure.	☐ Discloses but can't explain why.	☐ Explains why placement and clarity matter.	☐ Distinguishes opinion, relationship and product claim.
Audience & purpose	☐ Ignores viewers.	☐ Assumes viewers read captions.	☐ Works for sound-off viewers.	☐ Works across channels with consistent wording.
Revision	☐ No change.	☐ Adds a hashtag.	☐ Adds spoken and on-screen disclosure.	☐ Explains each placement choice for different viewers.

Check your work, continued

One change I made after feedback

I changed ___ because ___.

Notes

Questions to discuss

On your own Write a short answer to each question. Then finish My take. About 10 minutes.

1 **Would knowing the book was free change how much you trust Gia's review? Why or why not?**

2 **Some viewers may treat a review with a disclosure as just an ad. How could Gia keep their trust?**

3 **Who should make sure disclosures are clear: creators, brands or platforms?**

My take

My claim: ___.

The best evidence is ___, because ___.

My take, continued

Someone who disagrees might say ___.

The limit of the evidence is ___.

I would change my mind if ___.

Notes

Talk about this case at home

Case 8: Is it a recommendation or an ad?

In this case, a publisher sends Gia a free novel, and her video review does not say the book was free. Your student read the email and the video script, then rewrote the opening so viewers learn about the free copy.

Questions to talk about

1. How can you tell when a video review is also an ad?
2. Where in a video would you look for a note that a product was free?
3. Why might a review still be honest if the reviewer got the product for free?

Nobody needs to share personal stories or private information to talk about this case.

See the case online.