SHOULD INFLUENCERS BE TRUSTED? ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCERS' INTERACTION WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS ON INSTAGRAM AND YOUTUBE

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ABSTRACT

Children and adolescents (in study it refers to age group 11 till 17) nowadays spend many hours online on social media following their favorite influencers. Children and adolescents are avid consumers of social media and constitute attractive target audiences for influencer marketing. Studies show that sponsored content from favorite social media influencers appears to be highly influential and may affect brand preferences of given audiences. Furthermore, influencer endorsements are observed to carry greater credibility and authenticity than traditional forms of advertising. This therefore raises questions about young consumers' discernment of, and critical evaluation of the overall appropriateness when influencers act as conduits of commercial messages. The influencer interaction with young audiences in Latvian social media landscape still needs to be mapped.

This paper reports on a quantitative study of the influencer communication on two social media – *YouTube* and *Instagram*. A total of 459 *YouTube* videos and 654 *Instagram* posts in time period from 01.01.2021 to 01.01.2022 were selected for analysis. The aim is to acquire knowledge on how influencers communicate with their young audiences, and do they use appropriate advertising disclosures when communicating commercial information, which is a requirement of Latvian legislation. This information is crucial for further discussion on advertising literacy of young audiences as well as legal regulation of influencer marketing.

The research finds that influencers in most part do not properly mark the sponsored content. Thus, influencers both do not comply with the regulatory framework, and deny their young audience the tools to employ advertising skills.

Keywords: advertising literacy, artificial intelligence, children and adolescents, disinformation, social media, social media influencers

Introduction

Changes in children's media habits have warranted concern from parents and advocates discussion about their access to and participation in

online activities. This issue has become particularly acute in recent years. Because of social distancing norms and global lockdown regulations due to the Covid-19 pandemic, children around the world have had to adjust to new ways of living and learning, resulting in a surge in the use of digital technologies. Media literacy research found that YouTube was the most-used video-sharing platforms among children ages 5–15 for watching content in 2020 (87%). 58% of children reported that they watch YouTube every day and spend two and a half hours a day doing so (OFCOM, 2021).

Young audiences nowadays spend many hours online on social media following their favorite influencers, and it is actively used by brands. Children's susceptibility to advertising has been the subject of much academic and societal debate because their ability to effectively understand persuasive messages has not yet fully developed, and they are exceptionally vulnerable to commercial messaging.

As children are underdeveloped and relatively inexperienced as consumers, they are more susceptible to advertising influence compared to most adults. Therefore, it is important to investigate children's ability to recognize, understand, and evaluate advertising, generally referred to as advertising literacy, to help them cope consciously and critically with advertising (Zarouali et al., 2019, 208). Even though adolescents are using social media extensively and are more vulnerable to marketing attempts than are adults, research concerning how influencer marketing affects adolescents is quite limited. The aim of the current study is to acquire knowledge on if influencers are honest with their followers, more specifically if they use the appropriate notation hashtags clearly indicating the purpose of sale. This information is crucial for further discussion on advertising literacy of young audiences as well as legal regulation of influencer marketing.

Advertising literacy

Children have become an integral part of consumer culture. Consumption makes up a significant part of their daily life and, as children have a considerable influence on the buying behavior of their parents, advertisers have increasingly started to target them as well (Cook, 2004). In 2019, yearly spending on advertising to children was expected to reach $4.2 billion worldwide (Statista, 2019). As such, today's children are essentially growing up surrounded by advertising, being confronted with an overwhelming amount of advertising messages both outside and inside their homes.

Social media platforms such as *Instagram*, *Facebook*, *Tik Tok* and *YouTube* have revolutionised the advertising landscape, offering marketers the ability to provide entertaining and engaging content within immersive contexts such as advergames and social media influencer content. A resulting

concern for academia, business and society alike relates to young people's understanding, evaluation of and critical responses to such advertising practices, i. e., their advertising literacy (Sweeney, Lawlor & Brady 2021, 1).

That's why advertising literacy is more important than ever. Although a common and consistent definition of advertising literacy is lacking, it can be considered as a part of media literacy, which has been defined broadly as "a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media to process and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter" (Potter, 2016, 24). Advertising literacy, then, is more narrowly delineated as the skills and abilities to recognize, analyse, interpret, and evaluate advertising attempts (Hudders et al. 2017).

In order to critically cope with advertising, adolescents must recognize advertising as such and possess sufficient knowledge of the various advertising tactics that can be implemented to persuade them, the emotions that advertising evokes, and the ways whereby they should evaluate its appropriateness and fairness. These skills are defined as dispositional advertising literacy (Hudders et al., 2017). As advertising literacy develops according to adolescents age and experience with advertising (John, 1999), they may be more often subject to subconscious persuasion compared to adults. Young audiences are at a unique risk of deception if they are not able to differentiate between advertising and other forms of entertainment or grasp the persuasive intent of advertising. To command a basic level of advertising literacy, children need to be able to recognise the source of an advertisement, identify the commercial and persuasive intent, and generate a critical response. However, this can become problematic in the context of newer advertising practices such as influencer marketing and advergames where advertising content can be seamlessly woven into editorial content that is interactive, entertaining, and engaging (Sweeney, Lawlor & Brady 2021, 2).

Social media influencers

Brands are actively using the internet to reach young consumers, primarily via social media influencers, whose online presence tends to blur the boundaries between commercial and entertainment content. Social media influencers with a large number of followers and a significant impact on their followers often integrate sponsored content into their vlogs in return for financial or non-financial compensation. Since these sponsored influencer posts mostly take the lay-out and function of the regular entertaining content on the social media platforms, it is difficult for consumers to recognize these posts as advertising (De Jans & Hudders, 2020, 1).

The presence and role of influencer marketing across social media platforms is especially visible in a teenage context. For example, in a 2019 survey of approximately 400 young consumers aged 6–16 years in both the UK and the US, 28% of the sample indicated that friends were the biggest influence on their spending, whilst 25% identified influencers (Wunderman Thompson Commerce, 2019).

Influencer marketing in general can be regarded as digital native advertising because this advertising format fully integrates the commercial content into the editorial content and matches the form and appearance of the platform on which it is placed. It must be stressed that a sponsored content has the same look and feel as all the other (non-sponsored) content on the influencer's channel (De Jans & Hudders, 2020, 2). Thus, influencer marketing versus traditional advertising is more effective because individuals are not aware that they are being exposed to sponsored content.

Children may be affected by influencer marketing through different mechanisms. First, the integrated and immersive characteristics of influencer marketing make it a difficult task for children to recognize it as advertising and subsequently activate their advertising literacy, which makes them subject to subconscious persuasion (Hang, 2012). Furthermore, children may be affected through influencer effects. Influencers are often specialized in one specific niche (e. g. gaming, fashion) and mainly post about this niche. Therefore, these influencers may be seen as opinion leaders in that specific domain and can be considered trusted sources of information that affect consumer decisions. Additionally, children often feel like they know their favorite influencers and perceive these influencers as friends because they watch them daily. Children often look up to the influencers they follow and aspire to attain their lifestyles, whereby they may be very susceptible to their opinions and advice, as they want to be just like the them. (De Jans & Hudders, 2020, 3).

Since teenagers can perceive strong relationships with influencers, frequently regarding them as being akin to a friend (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019), influencer endorsements can carry greater credibility and authenticity than traditional forms of advertising (e. g. De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders, 2017). This therefore raises questions about young consumers' discernment of, and critical evaluation of the overall appropriateness when influencers act as conduits of commercial messages on behalf of brands.

Advertising disclosures

The Persuasion Knowledge Model (Friestad & Wright, 1994) suggests that to be able to critically process advertising, the consumers must first recognize advertising for their advertising literacy to be triggered and

before their various coping skills can be activated. Therefore, to command a basic level of advertising literacy, children need to be able to recognise the source of an advertisement, identify the commercial and persuasive intent, and subsequently enact a critical response. However, this can become problematic in the context of newer advertising practices such as influencer marketing and advergames where advertising content can be seamlessly woven into editorial content that is interactive, entertaining and engaging (Sweeney, Lawlor & Brady 2021, 2). In recent years, several studies have examined whether advertising disclosures are successful in enhancing advertising recognition. These studies indicate that advertising disclosures can increase adults' recognition of diverse embedded advertising formats.

The results of the multiple studies show that advertising disclosures (both generated by the platform and the influencer) positively affect children's recognition of vlog advertising. For example, S. De Jans, L. Hudders study concludes that, while only one third of the children could recognize the advertising without any disclosure, more than double the amount of children were able to recognize advertising when disclosed properly, either by a platform- or influencer-generated disclosure (De Jans & Hudders 2020, 16).

To make consumers aware of the commercial content within sponsored vlogs and posts, it is legally required to disclose advertising. This is usually done in practice by implementing advertising disclosures or labels. Advertising disclosures are intended to increase transparency and make consumers aware of commercial content. Recent international regulations have come to an agreement that influencer marketing must be clearly disclosed to consumers. For example, in the EU, the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) will require platforms to request anyone uploading content to indicate when their content contains advertising and ensure that viewers are clearly informed when this is the case (De Jans & Hudders 2020, 2).

However, current existing regulations on an international level do not explicitly address how these disclosures for influencer marketing should be designed, implemented, or monitored (De Jans & Hudders 2020, 3) leaving a lot of room for interpretation, and do not define how these advertising disclosures should look, nor how they should be implemented or monitored. As a result, many sponsored vlogs, and posts, even by the most popular influencers, are not properly disclosed in practice (Bridge 2018). In Latvia Consumer Rights Protection Centre (CRPC)[1] has developed materials for content creators explaining what publications on social media sites should be in order for them to comply with the requirements of regulatory

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[1]   Consumer Rights Protection Centre (CRPC) in Latvian Patērētāju Tiesību Aizsardzības Centrs (PTAC).

enactments and that the implemented commercial practice should not be considered misleading. As part of such a network marketing scheme, a content creator is required to provide clear and visible indications that published content is advertising by telling or displaying products or other information aimed at attracting new customers. CRPC reminds that in case of commercial content, advertising references must be used throughout the short story. Hashtags such as – #advertising, #paid, #paidadvertising, #sponsored or #paidpartnership – must be indicated by anyone who publishes information promoting the product or their merchants on a social networking site, including acting in their commercial interests or on behalf of other merchants or manufacturers, or interests and material compensation received for it (money, gifts, or similar material benefits) (PTAC, 2021).

Methodology

In order to select relevant influencers who are followed by Latvian teenagers, huge data massive should be analysed. Such data cannot be manually collected and analysed, nor does the Instagram app itself provide such information. However, there are a number of data analysis agencies around the world for Instagram and other social networks that offer audience analysis and auditing of content creators. In the framework of this study, an international agency that also operates on the Latvian market, *Hypeauditor*, was used to obtain data for audience analysis. *Hypeauditor* uses the following parameters:

- The age and gender of the audience is defined using "computer vision" technology, which analyses the audience recordings of the author of the content in question;
- The geographical location of the audience is determined by algorithms that analyse the content author's audience entries on geotags, the language used in the entries' descriptions and comments, and the corresponding subject headings;
- Comparison algorithms are used to overlay the audience.

Hypeauditor also measures the authenticity of the audience and their comments using machine learning, Natural Language Processing algorithms and other mechanisms powered by artificial intelligence. This algorithm is used to run a syntactic and semantic analysis to derive meaning from human languages, which helps to analyze comment authenticity. The algorithm also checks accounts for suspicious patterns and behavior that it has witnessed on bots (artificial followers) and other low-quality accounts. As for a low-quality audience, to detect it HypeAuditor uses a specially trained ML-model, which is based on the ensemble of machine learning algorithms and uses more than 53 patterns to detect suspicious accounts.

As a result, it detects 95.5% of all known fraud activity, with a mean error rate of 0.73%

Based on this, *Hypeauditor* has developed the Audience Quality Score (AQS), which measures how authentic and engaged a given content author's audience is with the content author's recordings. *Hypeaudior's* artificial intelligence analyses publicly available data. In general, the error rate is 3–5%.

In order to identify audiences' interests, *Hypeauditor* uses a set of classification algorithms based on a similarity measure (including KNN, Native Bayes, and BM25).

The *Hypeauditor* services were used in order to:

1. Make a list of several social media content creators for *Youtube* and *Instagram* that have the largest scope of teenage subscribers from Latvia; it was crucial that Influencers themselves are also from Latvia.
2. To analyse in what per centage of publications the brand is mentioned and in what part of them there is a mentioning about the cooperation. To make such analysis, hashtags defined by Consumer Rights Protection Centre were used: #reklāma #reklama #apmaksātāsadarbība #apmaksatasadarbiba #davana #dāvana #sadarbība #sadarbiba #paidpartnership #sponsorship #sponsorets #sponsorēts #ad.

Period of the analysis: 01.01.2021.-01.01.2022 for the *Instagram* and 01.01.2021.–01.01.2022. for *YouTube*.

The aim was to selected social media content creators registered in Latvia, majority of whose audience is from Latvia and who have the biggest share of teenagers (11–17 y.o.) from Latvia. Total number of their followers is not less than 1500 persons.

Results

The results of the analysis are reviewed on each social media platform separately.

YouTube analysis

It is important to stress that 29% of 11–17-year-olds Latvian adolescents consider *YouTube* to be trustworthy (Telia Company, 2021, 23). Analysis of the *YouTube* social media content creators demonstrate that the most popular categories among adolescents are entertainment, people and blogs, gaming, and sports. By the popularity we mean number of followers of influencers in each category.

But the engagement rate is one more additional criteria that is important to define popular content – this rate helps us to define with which content

people mostly interact. And here we see that gaming is persuasively the most engaging content in Latvian *YouTube*. Latvian adolescents also actively interact with music videos, news and politics, entertainment, and education. Interestingly, the least engaging content is sport, however according to the number of subscribers, channels devoted to this topic are one of the most popular.

Gaming and music videos can be so engaging due to specifics of the platform: historically *YouTube* is known as the platform where you can listen to music free of charge and familiarize with new talents. Such stars as Justin Bieber for example became popular thanks to *YouTube*. As for gaming, it is obvious, that for this theme is crucial to demonstrate the process of the game, and *Instagram*, *TikTok* or *Twitter* are irrelevant for this purpose. As a result, users come to *YouTube* for the specific content such as music videos and gaming, and actively interact with them.

Analysing, what type of videos Latvian content creators which are followed by Latvian adolescents publish the most actively, we see that "entertainment" is on the top. This topic is followed by "sports", "people" and "blogs" and "gaming". "News" and "politics", "films", "how to" and "style" are the less actively covered topics.

As for views per category, the most popular is music, followed by people and blogs. Films and animations, sports, and education follow the first two topics. Gaming is somewhere in the middle of the top.

So, we can see interesting phenomenon – bloggers are mostly publishing entertaining content and sports, however their key followers – adolescents – are mostly watching music videos, blogs and films, but most actively interact with the gaming and music videos.

As for gender preferences, we can see, that female users prefer entertainment (70%), films and animations (72%), people and blogs (94%) and sports (53%), but male do prefer news and politics (71%), music (83%), how to and style (75%) and gaming (63%).

Content analysis allowed us to select 459 videos with brand mention, emphasizing its advantages or sharing positive opinion. In 129 videos (28%), there is mention of the appropriate hashtag; it is embedded in the description or in the video that it is paid collaboration or gift, or barter.

In each fourth video (24%) content creators used hashtag "ad" – it is the most popular hashtag used to mark paid content. The second the most popular hashtag is "reklāma" ("advertisement" in Latvian). If the first one (ad) could be quite unclear for people, especially for adolescents whose command of English might be not fluent, then the second, which is used in 17% of videos, is crystal clear. Also popular are such hashtags as "davana" (gift) and "sadarbība" (cooperation) – they are used in 15% and 14% of marked videos accordingly.

But what are the categories of products promoted by *YouTubers*? Mostly they communicate about gadgets – 32% of videos with brand mentioning is devoted to this topic. In each fourth (24%) services are promoted and 21% of promotional videos mention cosmetics and fashion products. Beverages and food are mentioned in 17% of videos.

At the same time only part of these videos is marked properly. For example, in the category of gadgets promoting videos, 26% of videos are marked with official hashtag or it is told in the video that the content is promotional. In the category of services there are just 20% of such videos, but the worst situation is with drinks, foods and fashion and beauty products – they are softly integrated into videos and only 19% and 17% of these videos are marked as advertorial. It means that there is no appropriate reference in each 8th video which contains advertisement.

Instagram analysis

Analysing categories, which are popular in Instagram, we can see, that the most popular category is "people" & "blogs" and the second very popular topic is "entertainment". Analysis of Latvian bloggers' content and its popularity among adolescents demonstrate, that girls prefer blogs about people, but boys – entertaining content available in *Instagram.*

For two years (2020–2022) bloggers who are popular among 11–17 years old users, have made 654 posts, mentioning, or tagging a brand. In the 251 posts (39%), cooperation is marked properly.

In the posts, which were marked with appropriate hashtag, influencers the most often used hashtag "davana" (gift) – 19%, "sadarbība (cooperation) and "ad" – 17% accordingly. The least popular of official hashtag is "apmaksātāsadarbība" ("paid cooperation" in Latvian). The hashtags "reklāma" and "reklama" (advertisement in both cases) were used in 24% of promotional posts. This is a good trend, because the word "advertisement" is crystal clear, especially comparing to such terms as "davana" (gift) or "ad".

As for categories of products promoted in the *Instagram* posts of Latvian bloggers, the most promoted items are from fashion and cosmetics sector – there are 32% of such comparing to 21% in *YouTube*. The second the most actively advertised categories are services (23%) and gadgets (23%). And each 10th of advertorial posts or 11% were devoted to food and drinks.

But how much of them were marked or descripted properly? We can conclude that in the area of fashion and cosmetics almost each fourth advertorial post (22%) is marked or descripted as advertisement or barter. In the sector of gadgets, 25% of promotional posts are marked properly and in the category of food and drinks there are 29% of such posts.

In common we can see that about 2/3 of promotional posts are never marked as law and ethics require. We can offer hypothesis, that influencers

hide advertisement because are afraid that its engagement rate will be lower than the engagement rate of regular posts, so to further investigate this hypothesis it is important to checked this parameter. The survey demonstrates that regular posts without promotional content integration on average have the same engagement rate as advertisement posts – 8%. But the "average" parameter could be inexpressive, that's why we analysed also extreme indicators and see, that in 9% of cases engagement rate was less than usual, in 9% – the same as usual and in 82% of posts it was bigger than usual.

Discussion

The survey demonstrates that absolute majority of promo publications in *Instagram* and *YouTube* made by social media content creators mostly followed by adolescents, are not marked properly. In *YouTube*, fashion goods and cosmetics, and food/beverages are categories that are marked properly rarer than others. In *Instagram* – services (17%) and fashion goods (22%). Only quarter or even 5th part of promotional posts in each category is marked properly which is dramatic result.

Influencers tend to hide promotional content, supposedly because they are afraid that the audience will interact less actively with it. Nevertheless, according to engagement rate analysis, there is no reason to hide cooperation with a brand, because engagement rate of promo posts usually is even bigger than engagement rate of regular posts – this sentence is true in 82% of cases. The reason of higher engagement might be that in lot of the cases these posts are contests or competitions.

Analysing which hashtags are mostly used to mark paid cooperation in *YouTube* and *Instagram*, we see those hashtags #ad and #sponsored are still very popular. Hashtag "sadarbība" (cooperation") is also actively used. Supposedly, these hashtags might not be clear enough to the audience, since previous studies, including Euromonitor International, demonstrate that adults don't understand it's meaning. However further research is needed to make sure of social media audiences understanding and recognition of hashtags as advertising disclosures.

The existing bulk of study in Latvia focuses on children's and adolescent's experiences with misinformation online. However, there are some data that could be useful to evaluate and to understand the advertising literacy of Latvian adolescents. *Telia Company* survey of 11–17 year-olds in 2021 shows that 31% of Latvian respondents check the accuracy of the information when watching videos and publications from influencers and bloggers. 45% of Latvian respondents notice label which websites and platforms use to identify that information are coming from a trusted source, and 83% found

such labelling or marking useful (Telia Company, 2021, 23). Thus, there is necessary skills from audience to exercise advertising literacy. The sensitive point in this respect is on the part of the content creators themselves, who do not provide the tools (hashtags) for the audience to apply advertising literacy.

Conclusions

In today's digital world both children and adults struggle to distinguish persuasive techniques from other content. Although parents play a significant role in helping their children learn to be critical of media messages, identify advertising approaches, and resist their influence, it is crucial that policy measures are in place in children's digital media environments to protect their interests. CRPC suggests that consumers need to be alert when they see posts about network marketing products on social media sites – such a publication is more likely to be an advertisement rather than a personal one. As before, CRPC will continue to assess the compliance of the content of social media sites with the requirements of regulatory enactments (PTAC, 2022).

Theory of advertising literacy stress that to critically cope with advertising, advertising as such must be recognized. Only if one recognizes advertising one can employ the knowledge of the various advertising tactics that can be implemented to persuade. Advertising disclosures as hashtags are essential tools. From the carried-out research we see that both the audience values advertising disclosures as a useful tool and the authorities determine their use. However, in practice, the labelling of advertising disclosures is not an integral part of influencer marketing.

In order to further develop the topic and fully understand it, it is important to analyse in depth the reasons for not using appropriate hashtags on the part of influencers. There might be several reasons, for example, it can be requirement of their client or their fear to lose followers' interest, or some other reasons that must be researched.

The growing consumption of social media and the growth of influencer marketing indicate that advertising literacy is very important, and attention should be paid to strengthening it. Both parents, schools, and policymakers need to be involved, as well as the influencers themselves must conduct their business in a fair and transparent manner. In this way, society will better enable kids to recognize influencer marketing and make well-informed, conscious consumption choices both now, as well as in the future.

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