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Callum Chapple and Fiona Cownie

An Investigation into Viewers' Trust in and Response Towards Disclosed Paid-for-Endorsements by YouTube Lifestyle Vloggers

This study investigates viewers' trust in and response towards disclosed paid-for endorsements by YouTube lifestyle vloggers. With the law now enforcing disclosure of sponsorship within vlogger endorsements, this research is topical. This study explored the credibility of lifestyle vloggers, viewers' attitudes towards paid-for endorsements and disclosure, and viewers' responses towards endorsements. The research employed a qualitative method and found that lifestyle vloggers are considered by their viewers as highly credible and influential individuals. Disclosure was seen to increase vlogger credibility, improving the acceptance of the endorsement message. This was however only seen where the viewer had a positive pre-existing relationship with the vlogger. Where the viewer did not have a positive pre-existing relationship with the vlogger, a perception of opportunistic behaviour commonly arose in association with the paid-for endorsement. Thus, the research found the disclosed sponsorship can still be effective where the recipient is an avid viewer.

Keywords: Trust, Credibility, Disclosure, Lifestyle Vloggers, Paid-for Endorsements.

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INTRODUCTION

YouTube vloggers are an ever-growing force within today's society. Their continual increase in popularity follows with many now being included within the prestigious Debrett's 'most influential' list (Debrett's 2015). With the increase in popularity linked to younger audiences seeking 'relatable' and 'accessible personalities' to follow (Mintel 2015), many brands have seen this as a key opportunity to reach 'the ever-important youth demographic' (Mintel 2015). One marketing tool used to achieve this, is paid-for endorsements, paying popular vloggers to endorse a product/ service. As user generated content (UGC) is perceived by viewers to be more credible than brand-generated content, endorsement is believed to be an effective tool in influencing consumers (Johnson and Kaye 2004).

A recent change to advertisement laws however may have affected this strategy. The change requires vlogger sponsorships on YouTube to be disclosed clearly. With vloggers charging £20,000 to £50,000 to advertise a product or service (The Daily Mail 2015), it is important to understand if this disclosure of payment will influence endorsements' effectiveness.

A handful of vloggers obtain "internet superstar status" (Susarka et al. 2012, p.24). Of these, the most commonly used for paid-for endorsements are lifestyle vloggers. As a development of lifestyle blogging (Burgess and Green 2009), these individuals produce content "inspired and curated from their personal interests and daily activities" (MidiaKix 2015), often tracing back to a specific category or topic. "As their viewership...and affinity increase, these once niched [vloggers] expand their [vlog] content...in order to share more and more of their personal lives" (MidiaKix 2015). Nissan, Mulberry, and Google have all been endorsed by these vloggers (Econsultancy 2015). Mintel (2015) found that viewership is evenly split between genders and comprises younger individuals, 68% of 16-24s using YouTube (Mintel 2015). Existing literature has focused on such topics as vlogger identities (Morris and Anderson 2015), vlogger monologs (Frobenius 2014) and haul vlogs (Jefferies 2011; Harnish and Bridges 2016). There is yet to be academic research focusing on these 'lifestyle' vloggers and their use in paid-for endorsements.

In November 2014, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) changed the law on advertising through YouTube. Following the suggestion that "when it comes to vloggers...the assumption is that any mention of a brand is an independent decision of the vlogger"(CAP 2015), the change in law focused on vloggers requirement to declare paid-for endorsements (Telegraph 2014):

"If the content is controlled by the marketer, not the vlogger, and is written in exchange for payment... then it is an advertisement feature and must be labelled as such (rule 2.4)" (CAP 2015)

This sought to ensure that viewers were not being misled (CAP 2015). Obvious disclosures now must be referenced through the video's key touch points (e.g. thumbnails, subject line) and mentioned clearly by the vlogger (CAP 2015). Disclosure has a particular impact on the source's perceived trust and credibility (Nekmat and Gower 2012; Martin 2014) suggesting its focus for exploration within this study.

Morgan and Hunt (1994:24) highlighted that in communications literature the key construct 'source credibility', is defined in terms of trust in the speaker. As vloggers are a form of communication, trust and credibility can be described as one. With trust and credibility being found to be a highly important aspect in the success and continuation of relationships (Crosby et al. 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Andaleeb 1996), it can be seen that this plays an important role in the relationship between vloggers and their audience. Although these concepts have been explored numerously alongside endorsements (Hovland et al. 1953; Ohanian 1990; Lee and Koo 2015), there is no research within the context of lifestyle vloggers. This study will thus investigate viewers' trust in and response towards disclosed paid-for endorsements by YouTube lifestyle vloggers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Endorser Credibility

Source credibility theory suggests:

“That a communicator’s positive characteristics can enhance the value of information in a message, and... the receiver’s acceptance of a message.” Duo et al. (2012, p. 1556)

This demonstrates why specific sources are used to communicate messages and corroborates academic literature (Johnson et al. 1968; Ohanian 1990; Roy 2012). Hovland and Weiss (1952) first suggested that source credibility is derived from two factors, expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise is the “perceived ability of the source to make valid assertions” (McCracken 1989, p.311), and trustworthiness is the perceived confidence in the source’s intent to make valid assertions (Hovland et al. 1953; McCracken 1989). Ohanian’s (1990) research additionally found attractiveness to be a driver of source credibility, developing the tri-component model. Even though the study could be suggested as being outdated, Ohanian’s (1990) research is still one of the most cited within endorsement literature (e.g. Priester and Petty 2003; Dou et al. 2012; Bhatt et al. 2013; Reichelt et al. 2014; Lee and Koo 2015). Reichelt et al. (2014) found that trustworthiness had the greatest influence on message acceptance.

Attractiveness was initially defined “as the degree to which a stimulus person’s facial features are pleasing to observe” (Patzer 1983, p.229). Although it is believed that attractive sources have enhanced positive influences (Joseph 1982), this physical understanding of attractiveness could be considered outdated. McGuire’s (1985) original study of attractiveness additionally suggested that similarity, familiarity and likability generates attraction. McCracken (1989) backed this by finding that liked and similar sources present attractiveness. This has since been supported in the context of celebrities on Twitter (Jin and Phua 2014) and eWOM (Reichelt et al. 2014). Attractiveness therefore can be re-defined as:

“The degree to which a stimulus person’s [physical and emotional] features are [likable, similar, familiar, and] pleasing to observe.” (Chapple 2016, adapted from Patzer 1983)

This transfers to YouTube as lifestyle vloggers are personality focused. Trustworthiness, expertise, and attractiveness will therefore find a place within the conceptual framework (See figure 1). Recent literature has also suggested authenticity as a driver of source credibility (Tran and Strutton 2014). Authenticity has been defined as the concept of “being true to oneself, not others” (Avolio and Gardner 2005, p.332) and where a source “utilizes affective response to move others towards a shared good” (Palmer 2009, p.532). Authenticity has been found to be a separate concept and driver to trust (Avolio and Gardner 2005). In the specific context of vloggers, Morris and Anderson’s (2015) research demonstrated that vlogger authenticity is vitally important to their success. Features of authenticity have been seen as; consistency, customer orientation, congruency, morality, and originality (Eggers et al. 2013; Moulard et al. 2015). Eggers et al.’s (2013) research also found that authenticity builds and drives trust.

Brand attitude, purchase intentions and word-of-mouth (WOM) are all suggested positive outcomes of endorser credibility (Ohanian 1990; Wu and Wang 2011; Lee and Koo 2015; Dwivedi et al. 2014; Coker et al. 2015). Lee and Koo’s (2015) application of Ohanian’s (1990) dimensions within the athlete endorsements’ context, additionally

found that brand attitude acts as the mediator between the endorsement and consumer responses. Authenticity and brand attitude as drivers of vlogger credibility, have been applied to the conceptual framework.

WOM /Referral Marketing

Endorsements from vloggers have been considered to be a form of electronic WOM. Credibility in this context has been defined as “the extent to which one perceives a recommendation/ review as believable, true, or factual” (Cheung et al. 2009, p.12). WOM was first defined as:

“Oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service.” (Arndt 1967, p.190).

This definition, although dated, still usefully demonstrates how WOM focuses on opinionated communication between two individuals. This has since transferred to the internet as consumers now “prefer to seek out information about new products from... social media channels rather than a firm’s own website” (Hajli et al. 2014, p.674). Coker et al. (2015) states that because of this opportunity to brands, WOM has evolved from ‘naturally occurring’ to occurring through ‘marketing influences’ (p.170). Although this could be considered an overstatement, this still usefully highlights the partial movement that WOM has experienced. This links to referral marketing, where organisations “use incentives to stimulate referrals and to have greater control over message content” (Berman 2016, p.20). Schmitt et al. (2011, p.55) highlighted that ‘referred customers’ have higher contributions, higher retention rates and are ‘16% more valuable’. Incentivised referrals can be considered as parallel with paid-for endorsement by vloggers, with organisations desiring these perceived benefits. Martin’s (2014) ‘incentivised referrals’ research, found source experience, trustworthiness and authenticity to be determinants of referral effectiveness. Incentivised referrals can effectively influence consumers, however when the incentivised influence is discovered, the source becomes viewed as less trustworthy and motivated by self-interest (Martin 2014). A complication of incentivised referrals therefore is the hindrance that the knowledge of incentives can bring; this highlights disclosure’s influence on source credibility.

Disclosure

Disclosure of third party involvement and its effect on source credibility has received consideration in previous literature (Carl 2008; Nekmat and Gower 2012; Martin 2014). Disclosure is generally defined as the transparency of third party involvement/influence (Fang et al. 2007). Research has found that third party involvement can have a negative effect on source trustworthiness and consequently the outcomes (Netmat and Gower 2012; Verlegh et al. 2013; Martin 2014; Burkhalter et al 2014). Carl’s (2008) research of disclosed buzz campaigns, found that those made aware of the third-party involvement before participating, had either a positive or neutral response to the message; those who were informed later responded negatively. This was argued to be because recipients saw the disclosure of third party involvement as honest, open and more trustworthy, counteracting the feeling of being deceived (Abendorth and Heyman 2013). This has been backed by research conducted in the context of WOM (Tuk et al. 2009) and bloggers (Nekmat and Gower 2012). Verhellen et al’s (2013) research into YouTube product placements, found that “the prominence of the placement [was] a sign of transparency and openness on behalf of the advertiser and the celebrity endorser”, making it more

effective than subtle product placements (2013, p.297). Although not specifically studying disclosure, this suggested that transparency has a greater effect on consumer responses, demonstrating that transparency/ disclosure is of particular importance in the YouTube context. Alongside highlighting that knowledge of incentives can hinder source credibility, Martin's (2014) research also suggested that disclosure from the source can counter the negative effects on perceived authenticity and trustworthiness, increasing credibility. Thus, disclosure has a positive influence on both trustworthiness and authenticity. Carr and Hayes's (2014) research into disclosure of incentivised bloggers corroborated Martin's (2014) results. They found that disclosure of sponsorship has a small positive effect on source expertise, as the payment signifies a brand's recognition of the source as knowledgeable (Carr and Hayes 2014). It can therefore be seen that sponsorship disclosure from the source, increases source trustworthiness, authenticity and expertise, leading to increased credibility and reduced perception of 'self-interest'. As disclosure has been found to have a prominent impact on trustworthiness, and consequently the source's credibility, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of the literature surrounding trust.

Trust and Trustworthiness

Trust is considered as central when forming and sustaining long-term relationships (Crosby et al. 1990; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002; Cadwell and Clapham 2003). Trust is defined as "existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity" (Morgan and Hunt 1994, p.23). This was developed from Rotter (1992) who saw trust as an "expectancy held by an individual that the word of another can be relied on" (p.651). Trust has been found by many scholars to depend on two factors; ability and benevolence (Andaleeb 1992; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Doney and Cannon 1997; Michell et al. 1998; Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002). Ability refers to an individual being able to do what they say/are expected to do (Andaleeb 1992), and benevolence refers to "the extent [a] partner is genuinely interested in the other partner's welfare and motivated to seek joint gain" (Doney and Cannon 1997, p.36). These can also be seen as traits that lifestyle vloggers follow: their ability to vlog and the care that they have towards their audience. These will be explored as sub-features of source trustworthiness and drivers of lifestyle vloggers' credibility.

Many scholars have looked at trust as a single construct (Moorman et al. 1993; Morgan and Hunt 1994), however in more recent years research has focused on trust as a complex multidimensional paradigm (Doney and Cannon 1997; Michell et al. 1998; Sekhon et al. 2014). Michell et al.'s (1998) research demonstrated this by separating trust into two dimensions: affective, "confidence in the probity and equity"; and cognitive, "confidence in the reliability and performance satisfaction" (Michell et al. 1998, p.159). Trustworthiness has also been explored as a separate and driving concept alongside trust (Smith and Barclay 1997; Sekhon et al. 2014). Sekhon et al.'s (2014) research highlighted that trustworthiness is the 'characteristic' of a source and trust is 'the resultant willingness to depend' by the recipient (Sekhon et al. 2014, p.411). This therefore supports the relationship between trustworthiness and credibility within the conceptual framework. Morgan and Hunt (1994) additionally found opportunistic behaviour to be a negative antecedent of trust. Opportunistic behaviour is defined as "self-interest seeking with guile" (Williamson 1975, p.6). This can be transferred to YouTube, where viewers perceive lifestyle vloggers as promoting the product solely to be paid. Martin (2014) found that self-interest had a negative influence on

trustworthiness and authenticity. It is therefore suggested that perceived opportunistic behaviour has the same negative impact and that disclosure acts to counter this negative effect. This has been applied to the conceptual framework.

Trust Online

When considering trust in vloggers, it is important to look at trust specifically online. This has attracted researchers as it is believed to have unique implications (Kim and Ahmad 2012). Research has examined blogger contexts (Chai and Kim 2010; Doyle et al. 2012; Haung 2015), social commerce (Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold 2013; Chen and Shen 2015) and online communities (Armstrong and Hagel 1996; Kozinet 2010; Hajli et al. 2015). Kim and Ahmad (2012) highlighted:

“Information seekers [online] have to validate the quality of social media content further to personally judge the reliability of the content.” (Kim and Ahmad 2012 p.438)

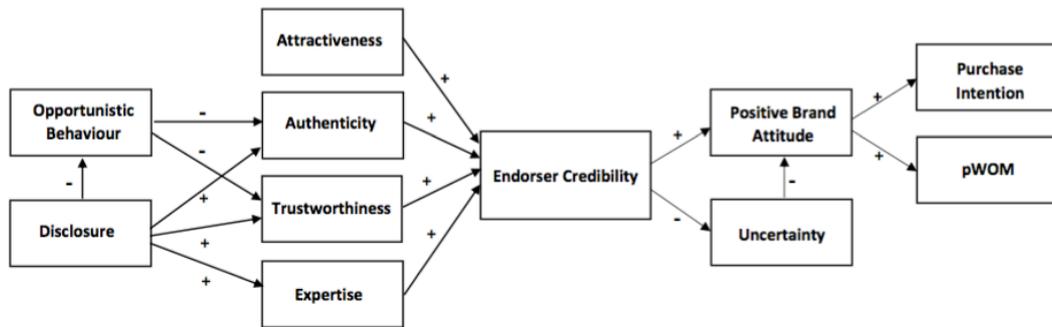
This additional validation to content means that users have greater barriers to trust online, developing a sense of uncertainty (Kim and Ahmad 2012). Morgan and Hunt (1994) first introduced the concept of uncertainty as the extent an individual believes that another could have a lack of knowledge or confidence in their decisions. Haung's (2015) research into bloggers, found that self-disclosure had a direct influence on trust, with high self-disclosure generating higher trust and low generating uncertainty. This transfers to lifestyle vloggers, suggesting that their transparency similarly effects vloggers' viewers' trust and uncertainty.

In the context of bloggers, Doyle et al. (2012) found that ability and benevolence were of greater importance to trust formation online. In Colliander and Dahlen's (2011) study of magazines and blogs, source credibility was found to be the most important variable to readers online. Additionally, they introduced the idea that bloggers develop a greater sense of credibility through the formation of para-social interactions (PSIs) (Colliander and Dahlen 2011). PSIs are one-sided relationships, where an individual develops an emotional bond with another through media (Horton & Wohl, 1956); under the impression that they are involved in a personal relationship, the individuals develop an enhanced sense of trust. This is present with vloggers as the medium creates a digital face-to-face experience, where the viewer is spoken to and given the opportunity to interact, such as being asked by the vlogger to leave comments. Thus, online platforms can both increase trust formation, through PSI, and also present barriers to trust through uncertainty.

Conceptual Framework

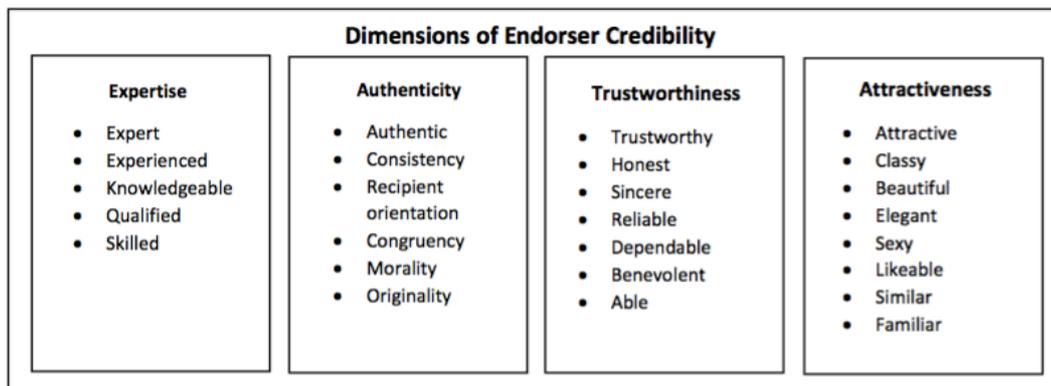
From the literature review a conceptual framework has been developed (See figure 1). This framework provides understanding and guidance for the exploration into disclosure and vlogger endorsements. Through analysing qualitative research, the conceptual framework will be confirmed or adapted. The framework conceptualises how disclosure and opportunism are suggested to affect the drivers of endorser credibility, and how disclosure influences opportunistic behaviour. The framework also presents endorser credibility outcomes.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Sponsorship Disclosure of YouTube Lifestyle Vloggers



Sub-Features of Endorser Credibility Dimensions

The literature review permitted the sub-features and sub-themes of endorser credibility dimensions to be identified (McGuire 1985; Ohanian 1990; Doney and Cannon 1997; Eggers et al. 201; Reichelt et al. 2014) (See Figure 2). This was developed from Ohanian’s (1990) variables of credibility. The features of ‘likeable’, ‘similar’ and ‘familiar’ for attractiveness (McGuire 1985; Reichelt et al. 2014), features and concept of ‘authenticity’ (Eggers et al. 2013), and features of ‘benevolent’ and ‘able’ for trustworthiness (Andaleeb 1992; Doney and Cannon 1997), have been added. These will be used for the thematic coding, acting as guidance on the possible sub-themes presented.

Figure 2: Sub-features of Endorser Credibility Dimensions

The literature review seeks to provide an understanding of the current research surrounding endorsement credibility, referrals, disclosure and trust. From this, a conceptual framework has been developed for vlogger endorsements. This context is still relatively new for scholarly study, with significant gaps (Burges and Green 2009). Verhellen et al.'s (2013) study into YouTube product placements, presented the need for further research into responses towards full sponsorship disclosures on YouTube. This study will therefore explore consumer attitudes towards disclosure in the context of lifestyle vloggers, to attend to this gap.

METHODOLOGY

Research Aim

An investigation into viewers' trust in and response towards disclosed paid-for endorsements by YouTube lifestyle vloggers.

Research Objectives

Objective 1: To explore whether lifestyle vloggers are considered by their viewers as trusted credible sources*;

Objective 2: To explore whether and how disclosure of paid-for endorsements affects source credibility;

Objective 3: To explore whether the disclosure of paid-for endorsements affects viewers' responses** to paid endorsements.

* Perceived trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise and authenticity.

** Responses include: uncertainty, brand attitudes, purchase intentions and WOM.

Research Philosophy

An interpretivist philosophy was undertaken, focusing on "understanding the social world" (Blaikie 2000, p.115) and allowing a deeper understanding of individual

perspectives towards lifestyle vloggers. This philosophy does not privilege objectivity, data can be misinterpreted or altered through bias (Mason 2002). Actions to counter this have been presented in the limitations.

Research Approach

The use of literature to formulate a conceptual framework can be seen as a deductive approach. This study also openly explored new insights into the attitudes and opinions of viewers: an inductive approach. This movement between deductive and inductive is commonly accepted as an abductive approach (Blaikie 2000; Mason 2002; Timmermans and Tavory 2012); defined as where:

“Theory, data generation and data analysis are developed simultaneously...moving back and forth between data analysis and the process of explanation or theory construction.” Mason (2002, p.180)

The aim of this abductive approach is to build a conceptual understanding through literature and to then “identify data that [may be] beyond the initial theoretical premise” (Meyer and Lunay 2013, p.12).

Population and Sample

As the key population of this phenomenon comprises ages 16-24, evenly split between genders (Mintel 2015), the study's sample comprised ten regular viewers of lifestyle vloggers who fitted this demographic. Daymon and Holloway (2011) highlight that modest sample sizes are still able to provide rich data and insight. Braun and Clarke (2013, p.56) add that within qualitative research the sample size importance relies on ensuring “you have enough data to tell a rich story”, which is believed to have been accomplished.

Non-probability sampling allowed the selection of participants through ‘subjective judgement’ (Saunders et al. 2009, p.233); thus, purposive sampling was implemented. This meant thinking critically about the population and choosing the sample accordingly (Silverman 2013, p.148), with the aim to gain “information-rich data to analysis” (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.56). Self-selection sampling was also employed; individuals volunteered to participate through responding to advertisements. The participants were then chosen based on their fit of the population (Saunders et al. 2012, p.289).

In-Depth Interviews

A qualitative research method was applied to this study, focusing on a “subjective assessment of attitudes, opinions and behaviour” (Kothari 2004, p.5). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to conduct the qualitative research. The semi-structured format enabled the collection of “defined answers to defined questions, while leaving time for further development of those answers” (Walliman 2011, p.193). Stimulus material was used initially as an icebreaker, through showing a generic lifestyle vlogger. It was additionally used to elicit responses to disclosed sponsorships, through showing two different vlogger endorsements. These were popular lifestyle vloggers: Zoella's GAP endorsement; and Marcus Butler's Samsung endorsement.

An interview pilot was carried out to test the potential errors, weakness and limitations of the interview structure (Kvale 2007). This led to several amendments, reducing question ambiguity and improving effectiveness (Kothari 2004). One key amendment to the interview design was the changing of stimulus. The initial ‘generic lifestyle vlogger’

stimulus was changed as it was less captive of the 'concept' of lifestyle vlogging. Instead a vlog by FunForLouis was used as it demonstrated greater elements of lifestyle vlogging: socializing; aspirational locations; and engagement in fun activities. Interviews were conducted through Skype within the participant's home or a location of their choice. This ensured that the participant felt comfortable and safe (Braun and Clarke 2012, p.90). Skype enabled the researcher to "interview participants who it would be difficult or impossible to meet face-to-face" (Bell and Waters 2014, p.186) whilst still eliciting the important face-to-face experience (Minocha and Petros 2012). This also provided the benefit of countering participants' geographical and time constraints. Ethical research was conducted focusing on providing information, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality (Hennink et al. 2011; Saunders et al. 2012). The consent form ensured that participants were aware of the nature of the study, its process, including security and privacy, and ethical considerations (Hennink et al. 2011).

Data Interpretation

Ten interviews were collected, lasting between 32 minutes to 1 hour. Thematic analysis was conducted, using a coding system to identify "themes and patterns of meaning" presented by participants (Braun and Clarke 2012, p.175). A mixture of 'inductive' and 'theoretical thematic analysis' was applied, linking to the abductive approach. This incorporated the guidance of "existing theory and theoretical concepts", as found in the literature review, and the discovery of new emerging themes, to build a coding system (Braun and Clarke 2012, p.175).

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

To ensure the credibility of the research, the researcher pursued a trustworthy and authentic stance (Gilbert 2001; Daymon and Holloway 2011). Dependability and conformability of the research has been found to improve researcher trustworthiness (Robson 1993). Conformability is shown through the adoption of used practices, such as the interview guide (Saunders et al. 2012). Dependability is presented through the consistency within collection of data (Gilbert 2001; Hennick et al. 2011). Marriam and Tisdell (2015, p.260) additionally highlighted that trustworthiness can be presented through the "ethical stance of the researcher". Authenticity of the research relates to the researcher being true to participants' perspectives (Daymon and Holloway 2011; Flick 2014). Through sharing the transcripts/summaries the researcher was better able to capture participants' perspective, increasing the authenticity and credibility.

Limitations

"A challenge for interpretivist approaches centres on...not misrepresenting your research participants' perspectives." Mason (2002, p.76)

To counter this limitation it is important "to record fully and explicitly...the route by which you came to the interpretations, questioning your own assumptions" (Mason 2002, p.76). Flick (2014) adds that to improve interpretive validity, it is important to "focus more on how far the meaning of statement...is developed, used and presented adequately to the participant's [perspective]" (p.485). Therefore, detailed explanations of the analysis were generated. Another limitation is the inability to generalise results to a full population, due to the sample size and interview method (Braun and Clarke 2013, p.56). Future quantitative research, testing this study's findings, will need to be applied to a larger sample in order to generalise findings (Saunders et al. 2012). The sampling method of 'self-selection sampling' and 'non-probability purposive sampling' also

increases the potential bias of the results (Hennink et al. 2011). To minimise this and to improve diversity of perspectives, a variety of participants within the population were selected (Brassington and Pettitt 2006). The research used an interpretivist philosophy and abductive approach. Ten semi-structure, in-depth interviews were conducted in total, from a 50:50 split of males and females, aged 16-24. Thematic analysis was conducted using a coding system to explore themes and insights, addressing the research objectives. Ethical standards were met, the trustworthiness of the research was considered, and foreseeable limitations presented.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Objective One

To explore whether Lifestyle Vloggers are Considered by their Viewers as Trusted Credible Sources

This objective focused on establishing if lifestyle vloggers are perceived as trusted and credible sources by their viewers. The literature review suggested ‘trustworthiness’, ‘attractiveness’, ‘expertise’ and ‘authenticity’ to be characteristics that build source credibility (Hovland and Weiss 1951; McGuire 1985; Ohanian 1990; Tran and Strutton 2014; Reichelt et al. 2014).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of lifestyle vloggers was the most dominant theme throughout the research. Participants referenced sub-themes such as ‘honesty’ and ‘sincerity’, backing Ohanian’s (1990) study:

“The relationship they’ve built with their audience is on trust....they appreciate that people watch them so they wouldn’t want to lose them through lying or being...fake...because of this they are really open and honest about their lives”
(Participant7/male/age24)

One participant stated that this honesty stems from YouTube being an “honest platform”, built upon individuals selflessly sharing content (participant4/male/age23). Vloggers are therefore expected to follow be honest as YouTube is a community (Prendergast and Ko 2010). ‘Reliability’ was another sub-theme highlighted:

They are always there for you if you need them. Probably more so than a friend...you can always turn to YouTube and you don’t have to respond back...You just feed off what they *give you*. (Participant4/male/age23)

Reliability enables vloggers to be seen as a source of help and comfort, generating trust. Additionally, the sub-themes of ‘benevolent’ and ‘able’ (Doney and Cannon 1997; Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002; Doyle et al. 2012) were also highlighted, seen through vloggers being considerate towards their viewers and being effective at creating content. This led to vloggers being seen as more trustworthy. From this it was found that trustworthiness is a notable attribute of lifestyle vloggers, acting as a driver of their credibility.

Attractiveness

The research found vlogger attractiveness is built more on emotional cues than physical (McGuire 1985; Jin and Phua 2014; Reichelt et al. 2014); participants presenting a lower focus on physical attributes. Even when positive physical attraction was presented, participants still didn’t reference extreme, desirable beauty:

“All of the girls are pretty, but not like models more just naturally pretty which I

like. You don't feel intimidated by their looks...Louise is a bigger girl but she's still confident and doesn't care... I think it's her confidence that I like most."

(Participant 8/female/age22)

Instead emotional attraction seemed the key focus of lifestyle vlogger attractiveness; shown through the sub-themes of 'likability', 'similarity' and 'familiarity' (McGuire 1985; Jin and Phua 2014; Reichelt et al. 2014). Participants gave the vloggers 'likable' characteristics such as 'funny', 'cool', and 'kind' (Doney and Cannon 1997). Participants also commented on how similar the vloggers are to them, referencing age, style, and ambition. Familiarity was identified by the fact the vloggers were watched regularly. This demonstrated greater attraction to the vloggers' personalities; all participants referenced 'friendship', backing the theory of PSI:

"They kind of look...like what my friends are like and they are around my age and I can kind of see us...being friends and having a good chat."

(Participant1/female/age22)

From this it can be seen that lifestyle vloggers contain attractiveness through emotional cues, building their credibility.

Expertise

Expertise was the least referred-to dimension. Sub themes of expertise included 'experienced', 'knowledgeable' and 'qualified':

"She's very accomplished in what she does...the things that she's gone through in her life...you kind of get that advice as well, she's kind of an advice column for some things I'll be going through." (Participant6/female/age18)

Expertise was usually referenced regarding the source being effective at vlogging, with almost uncertainty around the idea of them as 'experts'. Participant 1 (female/age22) even added that she didn't "really know if they are knowledgeable or not". This could relate to lifestyle vloggers lack of specialism in single topics. As vloggers cover multiple topics, it seemed to come down to the individual vlogger, their interests and skills, which linked them as experts:

"It would depend what kind of topic they are on, if Colleen turned around and started lecturing me on astrophysics that wouldn't have much credibility. But she has good make up, if she was giving me an eyebrow tutorial I'd take that."

(Participant3/female/age19)

This hierarchy of dimensions could also be said to link with the research of Reichelt et al. (2014) who found that trustworthiness was most dominant and expertise the weakest. Future research might empirically test these dimensional strengths in the context of lifestyle vloggers.

Authenticity

Authenticity, a relatively new concept within source credibility (Tran and Strutton 2014), was interestingly found to be one of the most prominent themes:

"He's quite open...everything comes back to him being authentic...coming across how you would in person...the ability to be yourself, opposed to just acting on the camera." (Participant5/male/age24)

This prominence be explained by viewers' demand for authenticity in order to trust reality media (Tran and Strutton 2014). Participants referenced how lifestyle vlogging centres on sharing personal information, allowing viewers to feel as though they really know the vlogger:

"They are really authentic and share a lot about themselves....a video vlog is a

video diary essentially, you kind of expect them to pour everything into it....to get an honest representation of someone everyday life." (Participant4/male/age23)
 This nature of lifestyle vlogging means that viewers see all aspects of the vlogger, the good and the bad:

"They talk about personal stuff more, and they are kind of open about that or they kind of disclose stuff that you think 'Oh I wouldn't expect them to share that' and then that does make me trust them more." (Participant3/female/age19)

This links to the emergent sub-theme of 'transparency', where participants regularly referred to lifestyle vloggers as 'open'. Thus, lifestyle vloggers are considered to be authentic by their viewers and this builds their credibility.

Relationship Features

Lastly, an emergent theme of 'relationship features' was also found to drive vlogger credibility. The sub-themes of 'length of relationship', 'network size', 'knowledge of individual', and 'reputation' were all cognitive cues that influenced perceived credibility. All participants spoke about watching their favourite lifestyle vlogger for a substantial length of time and believing that they knew a lot about them:

"You begin to understand whether they are someone who will just say good thinks about everything, or if they are someone who is quite opinionated. And if so when they do say something...then you know that that's what they are actually truly thinking."(Participant5/male/age24)

This showed that the participants viewed the vloggers that they watched as more credible than those they did not. Additional to this, the participants also stated that reputation and network size made a difference:

"Their reputation would be something, if there's any sort of history with previous recommendations...Their follower base, if I could see that they are popular and they've got followers." (Participant1/female/age22)

This emergent theme can be linked with Doney and Cannon's (1997) research into the trust building process, which recognised trust-building factors such as reputation, size, and length of relationship. Sekhon et al. (2014) also made reference to cognitive features and how these build a specific cognitive trust. Therefore, a vlogger's cognitive relationship features help build trust with their viewers.

Summary

Lifestyle vloggers exhibit all elements of Ohanian's (1990) dimensions of source credibility. The most prominent being trustworthiness, the least prominent being expertise. Attractiveness was shown to be more concentrated on emotional attraction. Authenticity was one of the most mentioned aspects, noting the openness of lifestyle vloggers. A new emergent theme was shown as cognitive 'relationship features', which found that the more watched and known the vlogger, the greater their level of credibility. When asked if they believed and acted on vlogger recommendations, all participants stated that they did, showing that lifestyle vloggers are considered to be highly credible. This research suggests that trustworthiness, attractiveness, expertise, authenticity, and relationship features, are all drivers of lifestyle vlogger credibility. These will be presented within the conceptual framework.

Objective Two

To explore whether and how disclosure affects the elements of source credibility.

This objective focused on exploring how sponsorship disclosures by lifestyle vloggers affects perceived credibility. The literature suggested that source trustworthiness, authenticity, and expertise would be positively affected (Tuk et al. 2009; Nekmat and Gower 2012; Abendorth and Heyman 2013; Carr and Hayes 2014; Martin 2014). Disclosure from the source was also suggested to reduce the perception of opportunistic behaviour, countering the negative influence that opportunism can have on source trustworthiness and authenticity (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Martin 2014).

Disclosure

Emerging sub-themes of disclosure were highlighted when exploring the participants' attitudes towards lifestyle vloggers' sponsorships. These included message valence, transparency, benevolence and involvement/ care. All sub-themes were found to influence viewers' attitudes towards sponsorship:

“She made it quite clear obviously that they had asked her to do that...it was like in our best interest...I kind of trusted what she said...purely because she introduced it quite well and she made it sound very selective.”

(Participant1/female/age22)

Transparency has a positive influence, the earlier and more obvious the disclosure, the more positively accepted the message (Carl 2008; Tuk et al. 2009; Abendorth and Heyman 2013). The participants' responses to the Zoella clip also showed this appreciation of transparency. Additionally, participants' responses confirmed that message valence also makes a significant impact on endorsement acceptance (Nekmat and Gower 2012; Carr and Hayes 2014; Burkhalter et al. 2014). Where the vlogger was engaging and showed care and benevolence within the disclosure, the participants became more accepting of the message. The relevance of the endorsement also made an impact:

“She's the representation of females on YouTube and you know she stands up for women. She embodies that kind of [campaign] notion anyway. It goes hand in hand.” (Participant4/male/age23)

This positive response to product-endorser congruence, links with the research of Lee and Koo (2015), where congruence enhances influence.

Opportunistic Behaviour

Participants also demonstrated an awareness of opportunistic behaviour (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Martin 2014). Speaking about the vlogger caring more about receiving payment one participant commented:

“He'll just be getting phones for doing the advert. It didn't play relevant to his whole persona and channel...It was obvious he was doing [it] for a lot of money.”

(Participant2/male/age21)

This was evident where the participant had no pre-existing relationship with the vlogger and where the disclosure was not presented effectively. A connection with message valence emerged:

“It... Might of been a little bit bias because I think it was more direct...at some point he did sound like a salesman in like a phone shop which kind of put me off.”

(Participant1/female/age22)

And frequency:

“They constantly kept promoting it in every single video and I mean one off is fine, but constantly...It’s not about their relationship with the audience any more...they are doing it as a money maker.” (Participant4/male/age23)

In circumstances where the sponsorship disclosure was presented well and towards viewers with pre-existing relationships, disclosure was able to reduce the participant’s perception of opportunistic behaviour. This was shown through the fact that hardly any participants referenced endorsements from their favourite lifestyle vloggers as being opportunistic. Thus, disclosure is a highly complex concept, able to reduce opportunistic behaviour in certain circumstances, and in others having no affect.

Endorser Credibility

The results found multiple effects on vlogger credibility. Firstly, as the literature review suggested, disclosure seemed to have a positive effect on the vlogger’s trustworthiness and authenticity:

“I liked his openness, and I liked the fact that he was a bit nervous...I do appreciate his honesty as well, for me it shows that he’s obviously trying to make the best video he can.” (Participant5/male/age24)

This confirmed that by disclosing the sponsorship, the vloggers were consequently considered more trustworthy and authentic, making them more credible (Martin 2014). This was supported by all participants in contexts where a positive, pre-existing relationship existed.

Only a couple of participants suggested that the disclosure increased a sense of knowledge and expertise:

“Steve Brooking, he did an advert with cannon where he kind of went around London and reviewed the camera which was pretty cool.” (Participant4/male/age23)

Brand recognition of the vlogger as a relevant endorser reinforces vlogger expertise. This loosely supports disclosure having a weak, positive effect on source expertise (Carr and Hayes 2014).

Finally, where disclosure was unable to reduce perceived opportunistic behaviour, a negative impact on credibility was seen. This again was commonly connected with lifestyle vloggers with whom the participant did not have a pre-existing relationship:

“I think they don’t care, or it’s a fake front to make money...I think it would result in me likely them less and definitely me not wanting to buy the product.” (Participant3/female/age19)

The participants suggested that opportunistic behaviour makes the vlogger less trustworthy and authentic, leading to vlogger credibility being hindered. From this it can be seen that the relationship strength between the vlogger and the viewer plays an active part in the overall endorsement effect on credibility.

Summary

The research found that disclosure is a complex concept, with many influencing factors. In general, where the lifestyle vlogger had a positive pre-existing relationship with the viewer, disclosure was accepted in a positive way, noted as more ‘honest’ and ‘open’. Participants believed that even if their favourite lifestyle vlogger was getting paid to endorse a product/ service, the vlogger would still be honest in their endorsement. This generated greater perceived trustworthiness and authenticity of the lifestyle vlogger. Carr and Hayes’s (2014) notion that disclosure could increase the perception of expertise was only loosely backed within the research, with only a small number of participants

suggesting that there is a relationship. Finally, where disclosure was unable to reduce the perception of opportunistic behaviour, there was a negative effect on the participant's perception of the lifestyle vlogger's trustworthiness and authenticity.

Objective Three

To explore whether the disclosure of paid-for endorsements affects viewers' responses to paid endorsements.

This objective focused on viewers' attitudes towards responding to paid endorsements. The literature suggested brand attitude was a direct outcome of endorser credibility which mediated between the endorsement and consumer responses (Lee and Koo 2015). The literature then suggested that purchase intention and WOM were common responses (Ohanian 1990; Wu and Wang 2011; Lee and Koo 2015; Coker et al. 2014; Dwivedi et al. 2014).

Positive Brand Attitude

When talking about disclosed endorsements, all participants stated that they would still be inclined to listen to their favourite lifestyle vlogger, believing the vlogger to still be honest in their endorsement:

"You've built up a relationship [with them], you're more willing to give them the time of day and the benefit of the doubt." (Participant6/female/age18)

When responding to the endorsement, the majority of participants made reference to a positive brand/ product attitude as a result:

"What he was saying about the product, how he was selling it, the way he looked as a result... I could see exactly what I was expecting... he proved it through what he was doing." (Participant5/male/age24)

This suggests that endorsements from vloggers do generate a positive brand attitude, supporting Lee and Koo (2015). Some participants did not make reference to a positive brand attitude, but as a qualitative study, a positive brand attitude may have still been considered but simply not expressed. Future quantitative research may wish to test this relationship.

Purchase Intention

When focusing on a specific past experience of a paid-for endorsement from a watched lifestyle vlogger, nearly all participants stated that they then bought into the product or service, or had the intent to. This suggested that where the lifestyle vlogger is a trusted source, viewers are still inclined to believe the endorsement and proceed to purchase. The high response rate, suggesting that the endorsements receive a high level of credibility, could be down to the fact that the relationship between the lifestyle vlogger and viewer is almost a 'friendship':

"If you speak to your friend you believe it, it's the same principle I think really." (Participant1/female/age22)

Positive Word-of-Mouth

Many participants stated that they either previously shared an endorsement or would be inclined to recommend the product/ service to their friends:

"Me and my friends actually went and did it...I've got a few friends that watch his videos, I would definitely tell them about it and show them the video" (Participant2/male/age21)

This corroborated the literature; WOM is a positive outcome to sponsored endorsements

(Coker et al. 2015; Dwivedi et al. 2014). This suggests that the disclosure of sponsorship does not have a negative impact on viewers' responses, but only in cases where the vlogger has a positive pre-existing relationship with the viewer.

Uncertainty

Uncertainty related to online content is common (Kim and Ahmad 2012). Participants highlighted that unfamiliar vloggers generate this uncertainty:

"I got the feel like he was just going along with it, like maybe he liked it...I don't actually think he was using it." (Participant3/female/age19)

This was most commonly seen when there was no pre-existing relationship between participant and vlogger:

"How do I start trusting you? I don't know, it would just be kind of a random person's opinion that I don't really value." (Participant1/female/age22)

This suggested a negative two-way relationship where low credibility generates uncertainty and uncertainty generates a perception of low credibility. When uncertain about an endorsement, usually related to perceived opportunistic behaviour, the majority of participants responded negatively:

"It's hardly going to inspire you to go buy that product, you would want to make sure...that it's something they are actually interested in and it's a sponsorship that that video maker is passionate about." (Participant10/male/age23)

Uncertainty therefore is a negative outcome of low endorser credibility which affects the ability of the viewer to generate a positive brand attitude.

Summary

The findings suggested a positive brand attitude was generated when the disclosed endorsement was from a known lifestyle vlogger. This led to participants purchasing into and/or sharing the endorsement. This indicated that sponsorship disclosure can encourage more positive responses from avid viewers, as the increased credibility of the lifestyle vlogger enhances message acceptance. Alternatively, when the source was unknown or considered as being opportunistic, uncertainty arose which consequently hindered message acceptance and the development of a positive brand attitude. This shows that disclosed sponsorships are most effective when presented to avid viewers.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate viewers' trust in and response towards disclosed paid-for endorsements by YouTuber lifestyle vloggers. Trust was explored in terms of viewers' perception of vlogger credibility (Morgan and Hunt 1994). The research demonstrated that lifestyle vloggers are considered as highly credible sources by their avid viewers, with Ohanian's (1990) drivers of source credibility, trustworthiness, attractiveness and expertise. Additional driving factors, authenticity and relationship features, were also highlighted. Perceived trustworthiness and authenticity were most evident in perceptions of vloggers, linking to the open and honest nature of recording and sharing one's personal life.

In exploring their sponsorships, it was found that the vloggers' disclosure enhanced the avid viewers' perception of trustworthiness and authenticity, whilst reducing the perception of opportunistic behaviour. This increased the lifestyle vloggers' credibility,

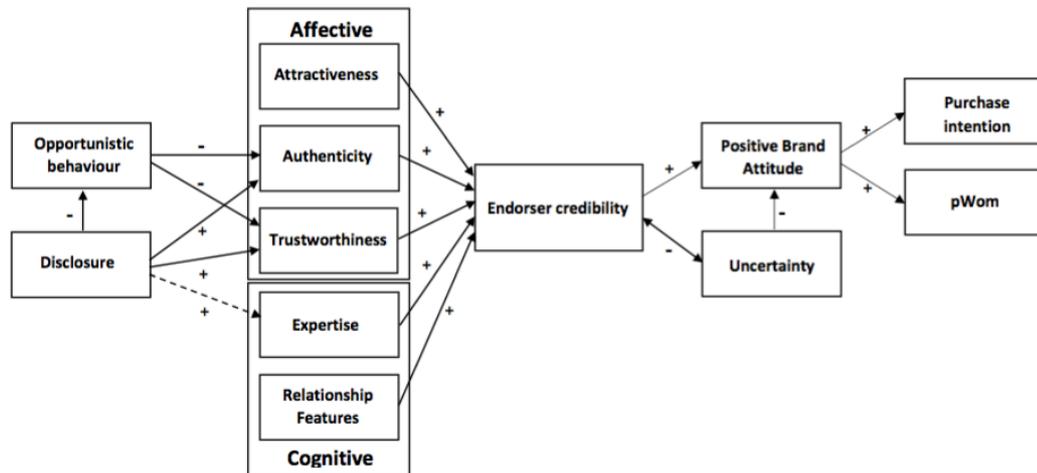
resulting in increased acceptance of the endorsement message. Vlogger expertise loosely increased due to sponsorship disclosure. Where there was no pre-existing relationship with the vlogger, the perception of opportunistic behaviour dominated. This arose as viewers were unable to judge credibility, resulting in greater focus on financial incentives. Additional features such as message valence, transparency and frequency were also seen to affect disclosure acceptance.

Where disclosure increased vlogger credibility, positive brand attitude was more likely to develop, leading to increased purchase intention and positive WOM. Where disclosure was unable to counter perceptions of opportunistic behaviour, lowering credibility, recipients appeared to develop a sense of uncertainty in the message and source, reducing positive viewer responses. This shows the complexity of disclosure. As these endorsements are targeted specifically at the avid viewer, this marketing tool can still be seen as effective in influencing consumers. The research ultimately demonstrates that disclosure does not in fact hinder the effectiveness of paid-for endorsements by lifestyle vloggers, but instead increases its effectiveness through presenting a sense of honesty and transparency.

Revised Conceptual Framework

The adapted conceptual framework is shown in figure 3. The framework developed from analysis of the literature, was largely supported by the qualitative research, alongside identification of new insights and in-depth conceptual understanding. The first adaptation related to the relationship between disclosure and expertise. Lee and Koo's (2015) finding that disclosure increases expertise was only loosely supported in this study. As this research is not backed by quantitative data, this relationship can only be suggested. The second adaptation was the addition of 'relationship features' as a driver of vlogger credibility, backed by Doney and Cannon (1997). Additionally, the antecedents of endorser credibility were separated to show that trust and credibility are both affective and cognitive (Doney and Cannon 1997; Mitchell et al. 1998; Sekhon et al. 2014). 'Uncertainty' was amended: the study found a two-way relationship between uncertainty in the message and vlogger credibility.

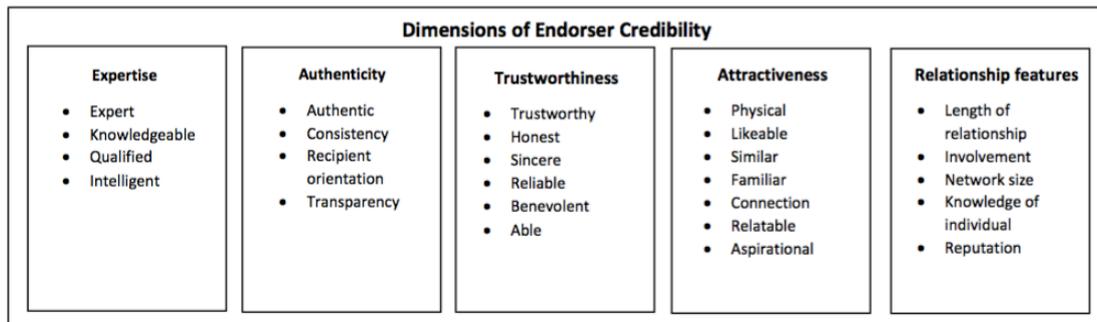
Figure 3: Adapted Conceptual Framework: Sponsorship Disclosure of YouTube Lifestyle Vloggers



Revised sub-Features of Endorser Credibility Dimensions

Adapted sub-features of endorser credibility dimensions are provided in figure 4. Sub-features within figure 2) that did not arise within the study, were removed. New sub-features of the existing concepts, such as ‘Intelligent’ for expertise, ‘open’ for authenticity, and the development of physical and emotional attractiveness, were added. Finally, the emergent ‘relationship features’ dimension and its sub-features have been added.

Figure 4: Adapted Sub-Features of Endorser Credibility Dimensions



Implications

Many brands are looking to popular lifestyle vloggers to endorse their products or service. Because of this, the results of this study have many practical implications. The study suggested that with vlogger endorsements, the disclosure of the sponsorship was considered as better than if no disclosure is given. This is because it enables the viewer to be aware that they are not being tricked or misled. Where the vlogger has a pre-existing relationship with the viewer, the disclosure can improve credibility and viewer responses. Vloggers should therefore promote clear and honest disclosures.

The research suggests that when selecting endorsers, lifestyle vloggers are good candidates to use as they are considered as highly credible by their viewers. The vloggers that the participants responded most positively towards, were those who contained the multiple dimensions of credibility as well strong relationship features (e.g. long relationship, high reputation). Brands should therefore focus on those who not only have a mass audience, but also contain strong perceptions of trustworthiness and authenticity. Through having these key credibility drivers, the positive effects of disclosure can be harnessed and perceptions of opportunistic behaviour minimised.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

A key limitation to this study is that the findings are built upon a limited number of participant opinions and cannot be generalised. The development of the framework is built upon by theory and insights, meaning it lacks empirical backing. In order for the results to be fully applicable to the study’s population, quantitative research, testing the findings and using a larger sample, should be carried out. Additionally, another limitation is that disclosure was found to be such a complex concept; many of its influencing factors may not have been considered. Additional research should explore disclosure further, focusing on all its features.

Future research may want to explore if the developed framework is transferable to sponsorship disclosures on other UGC platforms (e.g. Instagram, Twitter) or additionally, explore how disclosure of sponsorship on different UGC platforms differ in terms of endorser credibility and responses. Future research could also examine further the influence that relationship strength plays on disclosure. Finally, future research could empirically test recipient responses to disclosure in comparison with response rates where sponsorship is not disclosed. This would give a greater indication of how the change in law has affected this marketing strategy.

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