**Influencer Marketing: Teenagers as Commercial Content Creators**

DE VEIRMAN MARIJKE, DE JANS STEFFI, VAN DEN ABEELE ELISABETH,

HUDDERS LISELOT

**Submission for 'Advertising literacy: Dealing with persuasive messages in a complex media environment'**

Department of Communication Sciences, Faculty of Political and Social Science, Ghent

University, Korte Meer 11, 9000 Gent, Belgium,

Contact details corresponding author: +3292649722, marijke.deveirman@ugent.be

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## Introduction and Research Aims

Influencer marketing is an increasingly popular advertising strategy which involves brands forging alliances with social media influencers to promote their products on the influencers' social media profiles (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017). Most academic research on influencer marketing focuses on the consumer perspective and examines how it is perceived and how it affects brand responses (e.g. De Veirman et al., 2017), or how the use of a disclosure increases the transparency of sponsored influencer posts (e.g. Evans, Grubbs Hoy & Carpenter Childers, 2018; De Jans, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2019; De Veirman & Hudders, 2019). However, research on how these young (and vulnerable) teenage influencers cope with their status is non-existent. The current study fills this gap by conducting a qualitative study with teenage influencers to get a better insight into the phenomenon of social media influencers from these influential youngsters' point of view.

First, the study aims to outline the process in which teenagers become social media influencers and how they aim to arrange commercial deals with brands and consequently become powerful intermediaries between brands and consumers. Second, the study elaborates on how social media empowers these youngsters in the light of the consumer empowerment model (Kucuk, 2009), which distinguishes four components within perceived consumer power, namely: internet technology competence, economic self-efficacy, social self-efficacy and legal self-efficacy. According to this model, teenagers should first gain sufficient knowledge and expertise about the different technological platforms and tactics they might use to become an influencer, including the algorithms social media apps use and practices to increase engagement. Next, economic self-efficacy refers to influencers' ability to negotiate valuable endorsement deals with brands. In addition, social self-efficacy refers to influencers' capability of building a community of like-minded followers and exercise influence over their followers' attitudes and consumer decision making. Lastly, legal self-efficacy includes influencers' legal knowledge, including both their rights and responsibilities as commercial content creators. Special attention was given to their responsibility to disclose their sponsored posts as advertising. To conclude, potential downfalls of being a teenage social media influencer are mapped. Social media may not only empower teenagers, but may also harm

their well-being (e.g. Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014; Woods & Scott, 2016). We will examine whether and how these young social influencers experience this.

**Method**

Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted with teenage influencers using a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. Thirteen teenage influencers between the age of 11 and 17 ($M_{age}$ = 15.15, $SD$ = 2.30) participated in the study, of which 11 girls and 2 boys. One interview was conducted with two influencers at the same time who share their social media profiles and are known as a duo. Two criteria were taken into account to select the influencers: 1) the influencer was between the age of 11 and 17 years, and 2) the influencer acquired at least one commercial deal with a brand. Two coders independently developed categories of information after which both coding schemes were compared and combined into a set of general themes that were the most central for answering the research questions.

**Major Findings[1]**

Being a social media influencer has become aspirational for many teenagers; however, none of the teenage influencers we interviewed intentionally started their social media profiles with this purpose. Once they noticed the content they posted was appreciated by many, expressed by an increasing number of followers and likes, the option of becoming a social media influencer arose and they started behaving accordingly. In order to enhance their number of followers and ultimately attract commercial deals, a variety of tactics that rely on what they think will be appreciated by their peers, are used. Awaiting commercial deals, most influencers reach out to brands they like and apply to be their endorser.

Influencer marketing can be perceived as a form of consumer empowerment. Each of the four components within perceived consumer power, as distinguished by Kucuk (2009), can be retrieved among the teenagers we interviewed, namely internet technology competence, economic self-efficacy, social self-efficacy and legal self-efficacy. First of all, influencers attach great importance to high-quality content and bringing a consistent story. Hence, they are not averse to using technology that may help them accomplish this. Rather than a collection of spontaneously uploaded content, their profiles are purposefully staged stories (Abidin, 2016). Although the influencers we interviewed were not fully aware of the

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[1] A table with interview results is added as appendix

algorithms behind the social media outlets they use, they do use tactics that unintentionally help them in dealing with these algorithms that reward direct engagement.

Second and with regard to economic self-efficacy, brands tend to clearly define their expectations toward influencers (e.g. number of posts) and what the influencers may expect in return, but influencers do feel and believe they can negotiate about the terms. One could however question this, as the used rewarding system is actually highly uneven, keeping in mind the time and effort these teenagers put in their social media posts (Duffy, 2016).

Social self-efficacy is strongly reflected among teenage influencers, as they believe that they certainly have an impact on their followers' opinions and even purchase decisions. Sometimes, a dilemma between being truthful toward their followers and being loyal to the brand arises.

With regard to legal self-efficacy, most of the teenage influencers are not aware of the regulations concerning the disclosure of advertising and, hence, do not disclose their sponsored posts. The commercial deals influencers make with brands are usually made via direct message and rarely involve a formal contract.

Finally, teenage influencers tend to be very positive about their influencer status and do not experience major downsides, except from negative reactions from strangers online. They do experience pressure to regularly post appealing content, make their followers happy and remain prominent among brands.

In sum, teenage influencers are considered an important factor in the advertising process, as they believe to affect their followers' consumer-related decisions. Although teenagers experience some downsides of being a social influencer, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages whereby they would never give up their life as a social influencer and the accompanying celebrity status.

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**Table with Interview Results**

| Research questions | Sub-themes | Example of illustrative quotation |
|---|---|---|
| Becoming an influencer | Intentions | 'The more photos I made, the better my Instagram posts became. I got more reactions, more followers and I started noticing which posts they liked to see. I found it very nice that they liked my photos a lot and that they found I did well. And then I started to learn by watching others on YouTube and Instagram. Although I didn't intentionally aimed to be an influencer, I did start to become one and then I realized, okay I can really do something with this.' (11, f) |
| | Popularity strategies | 'What I also do a lot is adding locations and tagging so-called girls pages, on which models or beautiful photos are placed. I always tag 20 profiles in my photos because my photos will then appear on their profile. When I look at the analysis of my photo, I see that many likes come from a different profile. This means they have actually seen my picture on a different profile. That's why I always do that, because I know that my picture will spread faster.' (17, f) |
| Attracting brand collaborations | Initiation | 'In the beginning, nobody knows you, you may have many followers but companies are not looking for you, so you actually have to start sending emails to brands and to companies, you just have to dare. So then I started sending mails with proposals, asking if they have an assignment, want to cooperate,… And after I got my first assignment, more brands were following and I really started unboxing and started promoting. Now brands start to contact me instead of me having to actively search for partnerships and the first time this happened, I was like "yes, we have a lift-off".' (17, f) |
| | Commercial strategies | 'I tell brands I am very flexible, so if they have a specific assignment, I will do it. I'm also a perfectionist, I always make sure their product is nicely pictured. When I'm doing a commercial post, I'm doing the very best I can, maybe even more than when I'm making a regular post.' (15, f) |
| Technology competence | Devices | 'I try to take as many pictures as possible with my camera. But if I do not have it with me and I have an image in mind which I really want to put on Instagram, I just take it with my smartphone.' (17, f) |

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| | Software | '*I use a lot of filters to adjust brightness, sharpness and blur. I use everything that I can. But I don't use Photoshop to make my face look thinner when, for example, I think my face looks fat on a photo. No, I don't do that.*' (17, m) |
| Economic self-efficacy | Expectations | '*They wanted me to do three stories: one in which I unboxed the product, one picture in which product was clearly visible and one picture of me using the product.*' (17, f) |
| | Rewards | '*Of course, I charge the most for a video on TikTok. In previous months I think it was 800 euros per TikTok. On Instagram I actually have no idea, but that is less because I have less followers on Instagram. I ask quite a lot for YouTube because it takes a lot of work to make a long video.*' (17, f) |
| | Negotiations | '*I do take into account what the brand wants, but if that is really too much then I will say 'I am sorry but this is a bit too much', but most of the time they have reasonable demands.*' (17, f) |
| Social self-efficacy | Social impact on followers | '*Many of them really see me as an example, which I find funny, but also nice.*' (17, f) |
| | Economic impact on followers | '*If I promote something, people will also buy that because I have that.*' (17, f) |
| Legal self-efficacy | Disclosure requirements | '*I mostly put this under my posts because it is not so clear that it is an advertisement and most people do not know what it means.*' (17, f) |
| | Labor contracts | '*Brand X contacted me through direct message and I quickly thought I should give it a try. There was no contract or whatsoever.*' (17, f) |
| Downfalls | Negative reactions | '*I am a rather insecure person, but I get a lot of positive comments. It is very unfortunate that I sometimes also get negative comments.*' (16, f) |
| | Psychological pressure | '*In the beginning I really wanted to post three times a week, and that really gave me a lot of stress. Now I am calmer because I know that it is really difficult to combine with school. I still try to post more than once a week.*' (15, f) |
| | Social comparison | '*It motivates me, as long as my own Instagram continues to grow, because I know that if they come from this far, I can do it as well. That is not jealousy, but just wanting what someone else has. I also want to achieve that. It is not that they don't deserve it; it is just that I want it myself. So it is more in a positive way.*' (17, f) |
| | Questionable practices (e.g. Instapods, buying fake followers) | '*That is so hopeless. When you join such a group, that is so forced.*' (17, f) |