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2021-08-19

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Recommended Citation

Sweeney, E., Lawlor, M.A. & Brady, M. (2021). Teenagers' moral advertising literacy in an influencer marketing context, *International Journal of Advertising*, DOI: 10.1080/02650487.2021.1964227

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International Journal of Advertising

The Review of Marketing Communications

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rina20>

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To cite this article: Emma Sweeney, Margaret-Anne Lawlor & Mairead Brady (2021): Teenagers' moral advertising literacy in an influencer marketing context, International Journal of Advertising, DOI: [10.1080/02650487.2021.1964227](https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1964227)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2021.1964227>



Published online: 19 Aug 2021.



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Teenagers' moral advertising literacy in an influencer marketing context

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ABSTRACT

Teenagers are avid consumers of social media and also constitute attractive target audiences for influencer marketing (IM). Teenagers can perceive strong, parasocial relationships with influencers, frequently regarding them as being akin to a peer or a friend. 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 on behalf of brands. This paper reports on a qualitative study of 29 teenagers aged 15–17 years. The aim was to explore the participants' moral advertising literacy, namely their evaluations of the fairness and appropriateness of IM. The findings indicate whilst the participants were critical and sceptical towards the practice of IM in general (i.e. their dispositional advertising literacy), they were positively disposed towards specific commercial content emanating from specific influencers, (i.e. their situational literacy), often on the basis of the parasocial relationship that was seen to prevail between influencer and follower. This study therefore illustrates a gap between the teenagers' moral AL in the context of IM in general, and a corresponding willingness to apply this critical reflection, to known influencers.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 November 2020
Accepted 30 July 2021

KEYWORDS

Advertising literacy;
influencer marketing;
teenagers;
social media;
ethics

Introduction

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 advergaming and social media influencer content. A resulting concern for academia, business and society alike relates to young people's understanding, evaluation and critical responses to such advertising practices, i.e. their advertising literacy. The objective of fostering advertising literacy in children and teenagers is to encourage scepticism and invoke defence mechanisms so that advertising claims and brand messages are not accepted

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at face value and without critical thought (Rozenaal et al. 2011). In order 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. It follows that if a young consumer cannot properly decipher and respond to an advertising episode, then the act of targeting them is unethical (Kunkel et al. 2004; Spiteri Cornish 2014; Young 2003). Yet, there is a dearth of research that explores not only young consumers' understanding of the nature of advertising in non-traditional contexts such as influencer marketing, but more especially their perspectives on the ethicality of such advertising.

Influencer marketing is a rich area for exploration in the context of advertising literacy. It has been observed that teenagers can perceive strong, parasocial relationships with influencers, frequently regarding them as being akin to a friend (Van Dam and 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.

Furthermore, where the extant research has examined children and young consumers' advertising literacy, it has focused overwhelmingly on the first manifestation of AL, namely the conceptual understanding, and to a slightly lesser extent on a second manifestation, the affective or attitudinal aspect. A third type of AL is that of moral literacy which refers specifically to the child's ability to reflect on the moral appropriateness of advertising tactics (Zarouali et al. 2019). This is an area that has attracted very little research attention to date, even though there have been calls for further exploration of young consumers' ability to discern commercial messages that are presented in a covert form (e.g. Zarouali et al. 2019) How young people feel towards, and morally evaluate advertising is critical because this ability to critique incoming advertising may facilitate the deployment of defence filters or coping mechanisms such as scepticism, avoidance or self-regulation measures (e.g. to ignore persuasive attempts).

To address these research gaps, this paper presents findings from a study of 29 teenagers aged 15–17 years which sought to investigate their moral advertising literacy with regard to the practice of influencer marketing. The first contribution of this paper is to explore a substantive gap in the literature, namely young consumers' moral AL, specifically their ability to reflect on the moral appropriateness of advertising tactics. A second contribution of the paper is to explore the concept and practice of AL in a platform that has received relatively little research attention to date, namely influencer marketing. The latter is significantly different to traditional advertising in that consumers opt to follow a specific influencer and to actively consume their content. This 'pull' approach where the consumer chooses to search for such content contrasts with the 'push' approach of more traditional advertising. A third contribution is the paper's focus on teenagers' (15–17 years) advertising literacy. This age-group is important in terms of their consumption of social media and their significant exposure to influencer marketing.

Advertising literacy and persuasion knowledge

There is broad agreement in the literature that advertising literacy (AL) is a key life skill involving the ability to read and understand advertising in a critical manner, as well as using that comprehension to evaluate and respond to the message (Lawlor and Prothero 2008; Spiteri Cornish 2014). AL has been broadly defined as ‘children’s understanding of advertising and their critical attitude toward it’ (Rozendaal, Buijs, et al. 2016, 1). It has been described elsewhere as ‘the ability to acquire, to utilise understandings about advertising, and to understand the advertiser’s point of view’ (An and Kang 2013, 656). Meanwhile, Hudders et al. (2017, 335) define advertising literacy as ‘an individual’s knowledge, abilities, and skills to cope with advertising’. Therefore, a common theme is the ability to understand advertising and to also deploy that understanding as a coping mechanism or defence filter when being exposed to incoming advertising messages. Furthermore, all of the definitions above identify the consumer’s ability to reflect on the marketer’s perspective which is germane to the context of influencer marketing where the social media influencer is essentially working as a partner with the brand owner, in order to disseminate the brand message in an engaging manner to their social media followers.

In the specific context of influencer marketing (IM), two specific elements of advertising literacy are worthy of attention: the ability to identify the source of the advertising message and the ability to recognise the specific tactics being deployed. These two abilities are encompassed in the concept of persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), a prerequisite to the development of advertising literacy. Persuasion knowledge refers to a consumer’s understanding of persuasion attempts, i.e. that agents (e.g. advertisers) use tactics (e.g. sponsored content presented by social media influencers) to influence a target’s (e.g. consumer) attitudes, beliefs, decisions and actions (Friestad and Wright 1994).

Consumers may therefore use persuasion knowledge to adaptively respond to persuasion attempts in order to achieve their own goals and to maintain control over the outcome of a persuasion attempt (Friestad and Wright 1994). As consumers’ familiarity with persuasion tactics and coping mechanisms increases, responses should become more automatic and refined, with less cognitive effort required. The possession of persuasion knowledge also presumes that when a persuasion tactic is identified as such, a ‘change of meaning’ will occur (Friestad and Wright 1994; Hudders et al. 2017). This refers to the realisation that an incoming communication is in fact a persuasion attempt, which subsequently triggers critical reflection. This alters the way the target evaluates and responds to the message, invoking the detachment effect, whereby the target may be irritated or indeed deterred by the recognition that the agent is attempting to exert influence over him/her and will alter their response accordingly (Friestad and Wright 1994; Hudders et al. 2017). In this manner, the consumer’s understanding of advertising (i.e. a conceptual understanding) may result in an attitudinal response (e.g. liking or dislike) and a related evaluation of the advertising (e.g. ‘that person is paid to promote a certain brand’). Therefore, AL can manifest itself in three forms - conceptual, affective and moral.

Conceptual AL refers to the ability to understand advertising, including aspects such as understanding advertising’s selling and persuasive intent, and the persuasive

tactics used in advertising (Friestad and Wright 1994; Livingstone and Helsper 2006; Rozendaal et al. 2011). However, conceptual advertising literacy, namely possessing the relevant knowledge about advertising, does not always equate with critically applying this knowledge as a defence mechanism (Rozendaal et al. 2011). There is a key difference between *conceptual* possession of knowledge versus active *retrieval and application*, and as such, it is unreliable to assume that knowledge is automatically applied as a defence mechanism (Waiguny, Nelson, and Terlutter 2014).

Therefore, it is important to consider a second form of AL, namely affective AL which encompasses a consumer's emotional responses to advertising (De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018) and herein, an emphasis has been placed on critical attitudes towards advertising such as dislike and scepticism (Rozendaal, Oprea, et al. 2016). The third form of advertising literacy is moral literacy which refers to the child's ability to reflect on the moral appropriateness of advertising tactics (Adams, Schellens, and Valcke 2017; Hudders et al. 2017; De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018; Zarouali et al. 2019). It has also been linked to the ability to consider perspectives outside of one's own (De Pauw et al. 2017; Hudders et al. 2017). The following section examines the nature and importance of moral AL.

Moral advertising literacy

Moral AL refers to the ability to evaluate the fairness of advertising (De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018). Specifically, it encompasses the capacity to form judgements about the appropriateness of advertising (Adams, Schellens, and Valcke 2017; Zarouali et al. 2019); the knowledge needed to do this, such as understanding of gender stereotypes (De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018); as well as the ability to notice when advertising is biased and to consider perspectives outside one's own (De Pauw et al. 2017; Hudders et al. 2017). For example, when judging the appropriateness of an advertisement, one may do so by taking the perspective of the advertiser, or opposingly, the consumer who is exposed to the message. A resulting evaluation may be that the advertisement is fair; or in contrast, that it is unfair, manipulative or morally inappropriate (De Pauw et al. 2017). Such evaluations may then shape responses to advertising, in that if an advertisement is judged as inappropriate, it may invoke a response of scepticism (Hudders et al. 2017). On the other hand, if an advertisement is considered fair, it may result in acceptance or tolerance (De Pauw et al. 2017). Therefore, moral AL can be considered as a knowledge structure (consisting of thoughts about what is appropriate/inappropriate in the context of advertising) which may be retrieved and applied as an evaluation during exposure to advertising (e.g., 'this advertisement is fair/unfair'), to trigger a response (e.g., scepticism or tolerance). As such, it is a multi-dimensional concept.

Indeed, research regarding moral AL is perhaps more pertinent than ever at present, given the popularity of influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is a form of eWOM undertaken by influential social media figures in exchange for compensation (De Veirman, Hudders and Nelson 2019). There are two areas of possible ethical concern associated with this strategy: the first relating to a possibility that it could be perceived as an objective and impartial form of eWOM by consumers; the second being the risk that consumers may fail to recognise it as a form of advertising due to its

integrated nature. Alongside this, consumers may be particularly receptive to recommendations posed by influencers since they have freely opted-in to their content on the basis of seeking information, entertainment or admiration from others (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Therefore, cognitive AL may not suffice as an effective defence against this strategy, as it is plausible that even if consumers recognise and understand influencer marketing, it might not be enough to enact the change-of-meaning since such figures are perceived as credible and trustworthy by their followers (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). Furthermore, questions could be raised about the likelihood of affective AL being applied as a defence mechanism in this context. Since consumers admire and opt-in to influencers, a question arises as to the feasibility of expecting these consumers to enact a learned disliking (Rozendaal et al. 2011) in response to advertising emanating from such sought-after opinion leaders. Therefore, it is plausible that moral AL is a particularly important dimension to explore in this context, as it could be the component of AL which is most effective in activating critical responses to influencer marketing.

Hudders et al. (2017) have highlighted the requirement for research to investigate how the different nodes of advertising literacy (cognitive, affective and moral) interact during critical reflection. They contend that if a tactic is judged as unfair, advertising effects should be diminished since this should prompt consumers to enact negative affective and critical cognitive AL. For example, if the embedding of advertising messages in immersive and engaging content on online platforms (such as product placement in an entertaining YouTube video) without a clear disclosure of sponsorship is identified as morally questionable, this may trigger a critical cognitive and negative affective response. In order for AL to be deployed as a defence, it is imperative that the change of meaning and detachment effect occur (Friestad and Wright 1994). When an advertisement is recognised as such, a consumer's opinion and response should alter (change-of-meaning) in that they are more critical towards it (detachment effect). These behavioural responses may undermine the success of a persuasion episode by invoking the use of persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994) and as a result, invoke advertising literacy to be employed as a defence mechanism (An, Jin, and Park 2014). However, moral evaluations of advertising not only include judgements of advertising as unfair/unethical, but on the other hand also include evaluations of advertising as a fair and ethical practice. For instance, De Pauw et al. (2017) found that children (aged 9–11) often considered advertising to be fair based on their ability to draw on perspectives of advertising stakeholders such as companies and economies.

Finally, AL can manifest itself in two forms - dispositional and situational. Dispositional AL refers to one's general knowledge, attitudes and judgements regarding advertising which develops over time (Hudders et al. 2017; Zarouali et al. 2019). On the other hand, situational AL refers to the recognition of an advertisement during exposure to a specific persuasive attempt and the accompanying critical reflection which takes place (Hudders et al. 2017). Therefore, the cognitive, affective and moral nodes of AL can occur within two different spheres – those relating to knowledge about advertising which is formed and learned over time, but also relating to the use of this knowledge situationally when exposed to advertising. In conclusion, further research is warranted in this area to investigate the presence of moral AL. In the context of

influencer marketing in particular, it is important to explore if and how young consumers critically evaluate the actions and practices of influencers (moral AL) who are admired and actively sought out, within social media.

Influencer marketing and young consumers

The contemporary advertising ecosystem has grown to encompass non-traditional techniques such as branded websites, advergames, social network games, and sponsored endorsements from 'vloggers', 'bloggers' and 'influencers' (Nairn and Fine 2008; An and Kang 2013; Lawlor, Dunne, and Rowley 2016; De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017). The presence and role of influencer marketing across social media platforms is especially visible in a teenage context. For example, in a 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).

Since SMIs are perceived as both credible and trend-setters, the product recommendations they share are perceived as more authentic (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; Shan, Chen, and Lin 2020; Lee and Eastin 2020). While young people turn to SMIs for entertainment purposes, they also use information gained from them to assist purchase decision-making (De Veirman, Hudders, and Nelson 2019; Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Marketers have recognised this value and often contract SMIs to endorse brands within their own social media profiles – a strategy known as influencer marketing (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Such endorsements have been labelled as a form of native advertising, since they generally appear as embedded within the narrative of the SMI's editorial content (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; De Veirman and Hudders, 2020; ; Van Reijmersdal and Van Dam 2020).

Empirical research on this practice within the field of advertising literacy is emerging. For example, Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal (2019) reported that adolescents (aged 12–16 years) had a limited level of cognitive AL concerning influencer marketing. Furthermore, based on the perception of SMIs as being trustworthy, their participants displayed a favourable moral AL towards influencer marketing and considered it appropriate (Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal 2019). The majority of other studies in this area have focused on consumers' ability to recognise influencer marketing, namely their cognitive advertising literacy in this context, and how disclosures may aid in this process (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021).

The present study is concerned with young consumers' ability to recognise and reflect upon the perspectives of others, such as the brand owner and the SMI. It is therefore useful to further parse the concept of teenagers' cognitive development. The ability to think flexibly and reflectively is a key aspect of one's executive functioning, namely the set of cognitive processes that underpin goal-directed behaviour such as cognitive flexibility (Apperly, Samson, and Humphreys 2009). For example, one's ability to think flexibly (e.g. 'Influencer X is a good role model' but also 'Influencer X is being paid to speak on behalf of a brand'), may lead to an accompanying process of reflection i.e. pausing to stop and think before making a response (e.g. 'Influencer X is promoting an interesting brand offering but can I afford it?'). As such, consumer

AL is predicated on a capacity for perspective-taking, namely one's ability to understand that other people may think and feel differently in comparison with oneself (Sommerville, Bernstein, and Meltzoff 2013). It is important to note that the development of executive functioning skills starts in childhood but also continues into adolescence (Prencipe et al. 2011; Berthelsen et al. 2017).

Another aspect of teenagers' predisposition to recognise and critically evaluate the nature and appropriateness of influencer marketing is the development of moral reasoning in young people. A framework which may explain how children and teenagers develop moral reasoning is Kohlberg's (1984) moral stage theory (De Pauw et al. 2017). Kohlberg (1984) proposed that moral reasoning develops linearly, from a focus on the self to eventually consider others (De Pauw et al. 2017). This framework involves three stages: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional (Naito 2013). It is suggested that teenagers are in the conventional stage (Murphy and Gilligan 1980), meaning moral judgements are made based on maintaining interpersonal relationships (Naito 2013). Individuals in this stage understand that their actions should align with shared expectations of 'known' other people such as family members and friends and 'generalised' other people, namely, society at large. At this point, the emphasis is placed on serving the social system as well as sustaining positive relationships with others (Naito 2013). Therefore, it is important to consider the possibility that if a teenager feels as though they have a positive (parasocial) relationship with an influencer, it could indeed result in the teenager exhibiting greater tolerance and lenience towards the influencer's messaging. This is because judgements in this stage are impacted by the desire to maintain positive relationships (Naito 2013). In the context of the present study, such relationships take the form of the parasocial relationship with the influencer, as well as the 'real world' relationship that a teenager shares with their peers who may also align with the same influencer.

Overall, there is consensus in the literature that there is a marked lack of research addressing the nature and presence of AL amongst teenagers (e.g. Zarouali et al. 2019). One possible explanation is a perception that they are more advanced in terms of the consumer socialisation journey and also in their cognitive maturity than younger children. However, a note of caution is sounded by both Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal (2019) and Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave, and Ponnet (2016) who highlight that teenagers' cognitive development and information processing skills are still developing, and therefore higher levels of AL might not necessarily prevail. Similarly, Zarouali et al. (2019) warn that an assumption that adolescents are able to understand and evaluate advertising claims, may not automatically apply in the context of the non-traditional advertising approaches that are currently being used, for example, influencer marketing.

Method

This study employed an interpretivist, qualitative methodology with a view to exploring the presence and nature of moral AL amongst a teenage sample aged 15–17 years. Two research objectives were generated. Specifically, the first objective was to investigate the participants' evaluations of the appropriateness and fairness of influencer

marketing. The second objective was to explore their propensity to apply such evaluations in the case of specific influencer marketers, and also with regard to the nature and type of content posted by the influencer.

The study employed a sample of 29 teenagers aged 15–17 years. Teenagers are avid social media users. In a Pew Research Centre (2018) study, 85% of U.S. teenagers aged 13–17 years used YouTube, whereas 72% were Instagram users and 69% were Snapchat users. In terms of social media usage, another survey of US teenagers revealed that they check their social media accounts on an hourly or more frequent basis (Statista 2020). Of particular interest to the present study, a UK and US survey of young consumers aged 6–16 years revealed that 28% of the sample indicated that friends were the biggest influence on their spending, with social media influencers being the second largest influence for 25% of the sample (Wunderman Thompson Commerce 2019).

Research on AL has tended to focus predominantly on younger children, while teenagers have received substantially less research attention. However, recent studies focusing on adolescent samples have emerged (e.g. Lawlor, Dunne, and Rowley 2016; Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal 2019; Van Reijmersdal and Van Dam 2020). While teenagers are more cognitively advanced and have greater consumer experience compared to younger children, their cognitive development and information processing skills are still developing (Vanwesenbeeck, Walrave, and Ponnet 2016). Specifically, within the reflective stage of consumer socialisation (i.e. ages 11–16) a heightened awareness of other people's perspectives exists, as well as the desire to shape one's own identity, which results in more attention paid to the social aspects of consuming and conforming (John 1999). Further defining features of adolescence are heightened self-consciousness and peer pressure (Livingstone and Helsper 2006; Nairn and Fine 2008). Taken together, these factors suggest that teenagers may be especially susceptible to social media advertising which often employs tactics which attempt to emphasise conformity.

The research was conducted in four schools in Ireland and involved individual, semi-structured interviews. The open, flexible nature of qualitative interviewing allows the participant to explain their social reality, but also allows the researcher to interact with the participant in order for meaning to be brought to consciousness (Ponterotto 2005). The authors were interested in exploring AL in two ways – both as a knowledge repository to draw upon (dispositional AL), but also as a skill retrieved during exposure to influencer marketing. With regard to their situational AL, photo elicitation was utilised towards the end of each interview so as to generate insights into how participants responded and activated their AL in the context of a specific persuasive attempt. Photo elicitation is a technique that uses images as a springboard for discussion concerning their meaning and significance (Bryman 2016). Visual images of well-known influencers in Ireland were introduced, including James Kavanagh, Suzanne Jackson, and Rob Lipsett. These influencers were chosen on the basis of their strong brand recognition and popularity in Ireland in areas such as health and wellness, lifestyle, cosmetics and sport. The participants were also invited to discuss their own examples of influencers. Therefore, exploration was achieved of both AL as a knowledge source (dispositional AL) as well as AL as a skill retrieved during exposure to advertising (situational AL).

In terms of arriving at a sample size, the study applied the principle of data saturation, namely identifying the point in the interview process whereby little or no new information or themes were emerging (e.g. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006). Therefore, a sample size of 29 was deemed to have achieved the saturation criterion as well as being able to provide a novel and 'richly textured understanding' (Sandelowski 1995, 183) of the teenagers' interaction and experiences with social media brand communications.

A host of ethical parameters were applied in this research (ALLEA 2017). For example, in line with recommendations from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2012), permission for the teenagers' participation in the study was sought from their parents/guardians. As recommended by the Irish Universities Association (2013), the participants were given full information about the purpose of the study, the research topics and themes to be addressed, and how the data would be stored and eventually deleted. Permission was sought to record the interviews (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2012). The interviews took place during the school day in the school setting (four schools) so as to provide a familiar and neutral environment for the participants (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2012). All four school principals allotted a dedicated classroom in their school for the purpose of the interview. Each student who had agreed to participate, was invited to this classroom to take part in the interview which was conducted by the first author. Upon completion of the interview, the student was accompanied back to their main classroom, and the next participant was invited for interview. Appendix A provides an overview of the participants in terms of their age, gender, stage of education/grade in school, as well as the breakdown of the participants from each of the four schools.

This study also secured ethical approval from the host university as well as Garda Vetting which is the vetting of researchers by the national police and security service in Ireland. This vetting requirement applies to any individual working with or conducting research with young people under 18 years in Ireland.

To reflect the exploratory nature of the interviews, a theme sheet was used to address key areas for discussion such as 'who do you follow on social media? Why?' Pending the participants' introduction of influencers, subsequent questions were asked such as 'How do influencers work? How do you feel about that? What do you think about influencers?' Furthermore, if the participant referred to influencer practices such as type of content or use of sponsored posts, they were then invited to give their views about these practices.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Specifically, the data was coded (e.g. using descriptors such as 'fair', 'concern', 'hidden'). The transcripts were then examined with a view to identifying and generating themes. A decision was taken to analyse the data manually as well as to use a computer software package (MaxQDA) so as to optimise the mining of the data. Thus, it is recognised that manual coding of the data accounted mainly for two initial steps within Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggested process for carrying out thematic analysis (i.e. familiarising oneself with the data and generating initial codes). MaxQDA assisted in the remaining steps, as it streamlined the process of managing the data and helped to identify and interpret themes in

the data. Discussion of the findings now follows, which utilises anonymised excerpts from the primary data so as to illustrate the participants' perspectives.

Discussion

Influencer marketing as a resource - information, utility, escapism

The 29 participants were avid users of social media, and their discussions overwhelmingly focused on Instagram and YouTube. Having explained their usage of social media, the participants then proceeded to explain why they used social media and who they liked to interact with in these digital spaces. In this manner, the discussion naturally turned to influencer marketing. The participants named specific influencers of whom they were aware, and/or followed. These influencers spanned a wide range of interests including cooking, cosmetics, clothing, fitness and exercise, and specific sports such as football. A prevailing theme in the interviews was the enjoyment, escapism and utility (e.g. in terms of providing product information) that influencers were deemed to offer their followers. For example, participants such as Naomi described the enjoyment to be gained from accessing content relating to the influencer's area of expertise but also about the influencers' own lives and lifestyles.

I follow like mostly make up [cosmetic] ones, they'd be the most interesting to me anyways ... Suzanne Jackson or Pippa O'Connor [Irish influencers], they're both good ... I feel like they're very genuine ... they talk about make-up and I also like interior design and Pippa O'Connor is doing up her house, so I find that interesting too.

Naomi, aged 16

[I like] when So Sue Me [Irish influencer] puts up ... a new product I just really like all them bloggers ... I just think they're great ... like their lifestyle and what they write and their blogs and what they say about life ... So Sue Me [Irish influencer] ... had a post about her wedding and I just really enjoyed ... reading that and her pictures ... that she put up for her wedding.

Rachel, aged 16

A related theme was the actual influence or impact on one's behaviour that an influencer can have. For example, the participants frequently suggested that they used influencer content to acquire new information and also to adapt their behaviour:

I like cooking so I follow a lot of cooking blogs ...just getting to know more stuff and like learn things

Kelly, aged 16

... make-up artists ... I like ... watching them do make up and you learn how to do it

Aisling, aged 16

I play with [my local football team] and we do the gym work and sometimes it's quite helpful to ... look at what I should be aiming to do.

James, aged 17

IM and traditional advertising – perspectives on trustworthiness and reliability

The participants were aware that influencers can collaborate with brands and therefore viewed IM as a form of marketing communication. However, where the influencer identified their collaborations with brands, IM was viewed in some cases to be less biased than advertising. Participants also used their accumulated knowledge about specific influencers which in turn helped them to discern when more organic, non-commercial content was being posted, in comparison to commercially sponsored content.

The make-up people that I would follow, they get sponsored videos by different make up brands ... they usually do like honest opinions on them, which is really good because you know sometimes the ads themselves, like most of the time they're like biased enough ... Some of the make-up people are paid to say good things or whatever, but then some of them are really genuine as well and they actually will say what they think ... most of the stuff is positive but then they will give like a negative with it which is good because then you know that they're being honest and they're not ... doing it just for the money

Ava, aged 16

The participants were also positively disposed to sponsored influencer content when it was deemed to aid purchase decisions. Rachel in particular, describes an experience where she made purchases on the basis of acting upon an influencer's recommendation.

Terrie McEvoy [Irish influencer] ... put ... this outfit ... up [on social media] and I was like "ohhh that's really nice" so like I went on to the site and bought it ... She tagged ... Pretty Little Thing [online clothing retailer] in it ... the site it's from ... that's what [influencers] get paid for, that's why the company pays them so people can go and buy them.

Rachel, aged 16

Here, Rachel describes influencer marketing as not only serving the advertised brand or the influencer themselves, but also as serving the viewer. She acknowledges the brand's intent collaborating with the influencer in order to access their target market, as well as the influencer receiving compensation. However, instead of applying the detachment effect and feeling irritated or deterred by this knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994), she instead appreciates the introduction to relevant products.

Empathy for the influencer in terms of professional and career development

Once it was established that participants were aware of the presence and commercial nature of influencer content, they were then asked how they felt about the phenomenon of IM. A prevalent theme in the interviews was a sense of empathy for the influencer in terms of understanding that disseminating advertising for third parties is an important source of revenue for influencers.

I think [IM is] grand ... It's their job, like they're getting money for it, so I don't mind It's their best way of making money

Fred, aged 16

I don't mind [IM] really, it's just their way of doing business ... it's just their way of trying to earn a better living for themselves

Shane, aged 16

Overall, the participants agreed that the role of influencer is a profession in itself, and as such respected the influencers' right to access income. This empathy was fully grounded in an awareness that the influencer could receive payment from the advertiser, but again, there was a sense of realism in that 'up and coming' influencers were working hard and therefore deserved to be compensated.

It ... depends on the person, for the likes of Ben Kealy [micro influencer] who I mentioned earlier, like he's ... only working up the ranks. So when I see a paid promotion ... I think fair play cause you're actually getting up in the world a bit

Rob, aged 16

It is interesting to observe this level of tolerance towards IM in certain situations i.e. in the context of lesser known influencers who have yet to fully establish themselves, being given the chance to earn income through their SM content.

However, whilst participants were empathetic to certain influencers on the basis of their relative newness to the influencer market, their relatively small follower base and their need to earn a living, there also were certain parameters to be followed by an influencer. When influencers were seen to over-step certain parameters or 'rules of the game', the participants were less positively pre-disposed towards IM. This was particularly evident when covert approaches were in play, for example, when the influencer was perceived as seeking to 'hide' the commercial nature of their content.

IM – a covert form of advertising

A frequently occurring perception was that of IM as a covert marketing strategy used by marketers to 'hide' advertising. This emerged as the participants voiced struggles in being able to delineate between editorial and sponsored content with some participants describing IM as 'hidden'.

a lot of [advertisements] I've noticed now are mostly kind of hidden away within another photo ... it can get very irritating ... if they're almost trying to ... hide the fact that they're affiliated

Emily, aged 15

Similarly, Michael finds it difficult to discern between editorial and sponsored content, labelling IM as 'subtle advertising'.

a company ... could pay someone with like a million followers to put up a photo of them with [their product] in it, but it'd be like subtle advertising ... unless you really look out for it on each post ... someone could be sponsored to Nike so they might just be wearing Nike the whole time because they're sponsored but ... you wouldn't know if it's either advertising or just cause they like it.

Michael, aged 16

Michael highlights the confusing nature which influencer content posed for the participants at times in deciphering its true nature. It is also interesting to observe his perception that the onus is on the consumer to actively seek out and identify the sponsored post.

The perception of IM as a sneaky or deceptive practice caused some participants to be concerned for younger children in particular regarding their ability to identify this kind of advertising.

People younger than me ... on SM ... probably won't realise it's an ad and they'll probably think these [products] are cool cause he's using it

Owen, aged 16

Younger kids, some might not recognise [IM] ... I've a younger sister... [the influencer] doesn't specify that it's ... sponsored ... on the internet it's way more sneakier ... it's way easier to ... target youth and even my age group and below

Grace, aged 16

Therefore, although these participants felt confident in recognising IM themselves, they were concerned that younger children are not capable of recognising that they are being advertised to in this way and are therefore susceptible to it. This suggests a reflective manner of thinking, in that they consider the effect which IM may have on others, not only themselves. Interestingly, Grace focuses on the influencer's role in protecting the audience from underhand advertising tactics. She talks about a particular influencer whom her sister watches and claims that the influencer does not adequately signpost sponsored content, before going on to describe the practice as 'really wrong'. Therefore, she places the responsibility on the influencer to ensure that advertising is fairly signposted. In this way, her negative moral evaluations appear to be directed towards the influencer in particular, rather than the associated brand.

Scepticism towards sponsored content

According to Hudders et al. (2017), moral AL is linked to scepticism towards advertising, in that the ability to notice when advertising is biased or might not tell the truth forms part of an individual's ability to reflect on the moral appropriateness of advertising. Throughout the interviews, scepticism was apparent at times, most often in the context of influencers being compensated to recommend products. This led to an understanding that influencers utilise their profiles (and thus their audience) to earn income. Even though some participants were tolerant and empathetic towards this, for example, in the case of less-established influencers seeking to make a living, many other participants were sceptical towards IM on the basis that it exchanges a positive review for compensation.

they're probably getting paid, so they probably don't even like it ... [influencers] are gonna do anything for money (laughs) ... they probably never seen the product before and then they're going online saying "oh I use this everyday"

Hannah, aged 16

The [influencer] could hate [the advertised product] but cause they're getting paid enough money they'd literally say anything about it. "It's the best thing they've ever seen" or something like that.

David, aged 16

Knowledge of the incentive present within sponsored content caused some participants to question the legitimacy of claims made within. The understanding that influencers are in receipt of compensation to feature particular brands distorts the credibility of sponsored recommendations and causes the participants to evaluate it as a disingenuous form of advertising at times. They each refer to the influencers' role in agreeing to accept financial compensation for endorsing a given brand. Again, in doing so, they detract moral responsibility away from the brand, and place it on the influencer instead.

However, although participants were often sceptical of the practice of IM in general, they were reluctant to apply this to known influencers.

It depends on the person really ... it's hard to know really ... some people, if you follow them on Snapchat or Instagram ... and you watch their stories every day ... you don't get to know them, but you get to know their ... personality ... so you can tell if they're being honest or not. But that only happens with some people

Ava, aged 16

It appears as though Ava is sceptical towards IM in general which would reflect the presence of dispositional AL. Although she understands that IM is a form of advertising and that it is likely to be biased, her positive affective AL leads her to trust specific influencers and to be less critical towards their sponsored content as a result. As such, she discerns between the practice of IM in general (which she appears to be sceptical towards), and specific influencers (who she feels she knows).

Indeed, this was also apparent elsewhere. For instance, during Natasha's interview (before photo elicitation) she appeared to be highly sceptical towards the practice of IM.

[If given the chance to create sponsored content for a brand]... I'd give my honest opinion and ... an honest review about it. Not gonna lie to people just to waste money

Natasha, aged 17

Therefore, it was clear that Natasha felt strongly about IM in that she compares it with lying and sees it as influencing consumers to 'waste money'. However, when shown an example from a familiar influencer during photo elicitation, she did not apply this dispositional evaluation situationally.

I've actually liked this video before (laughs) ... HiSmile [teeth whitening company] asked him to do it ... But he's using them months, so I think ... he liked it, he just kept using it

Interviewer: ... what do you think this part means here, "paid partnership"? Would you notice that?

He got paid to do it ... I'm only after noticing that now.

Interviewer: Ok and does that make you think about it differently?

No ... if he's getting paid to do it fair enough ... he was not acting one bit different there like he was just being his pure self ... I look at that and I think ... I'd probably go and try it out, be good for myself

Natasha, aged 17

Because Natasha is familiar with and enjoys following this particular influencer, she is reluctant to apply her dispositional moral AL (i.e. her understanding and attitudes towards influencers in general) to a specific influencer recommendation (situational AL). Even though her dispositional AL tells her that IM is immoral, she does not apply this in practice to admired influencers. As such, it seems that negative moral evaluations are not always applied situationally in the context of admired influencers. Positive affective evaluations appear to be inhibiting the change-of-meaning and detachment effect (Friestad and Wright 1994).

IM as an exploitative practice

Alongside disbelief or scepticism towards IM, some participants also perceived IM as an exploitative practice, due to the knowledge that influencers earn money from recommending products to their followers, and indeed from their followers' behaviour through the use of affiliate links. Whereas some participants considered this as a fair practice which allows influencers to make content creation a full-time job, as discussed above, other participants believed that the primary incentive behind IM was for influencers to earn money. As a result, the influencer was deemed to engage in advertising for products/brands which they do not use and would not normally recommend. On this basis, they questioned its moral appropriateness.

For instance, Naomi feels uncomfortable that her purchasing behaviour is a source of income for influencers through affiliate links. For this reason, she strives to avoid using them.

I probably wouldn't buy it if it was a paid promotion. Because they can ... earn something from it ... they do [affiliated] links ... I wouldn't buy it from the [influencer's] link ... Say it was ... ASOS [online fashion retailer] ... I'd go on to ASOS and not use their link because they can earn something from the link ... if they are getting paid ... it's kind of annoying.

Naomi, aged 16

Naomi suggests feeling used by influencers in their pursuit of earning income. When she identifies that there is an incentive present for influencers (e.g. commission when sharing affiliated links), she describes going out of her way to avoid making purchases associated with such content. As such, the application of the 'stop-and-think' response is apparent here, since Naomi stops to recognise the persuasive tactics at play and chooses a response of avoidance (Rozendaal et al. 2011).

Similarly, although Ava continually empathised with the influencer throughout her interview, she does admit feeling troubled by the idea that influencers earn money through sponsored recommendations and admits that it can be exploitative.

Sometimes you're ... like "awh he's gone so commercial" ... his vlogs they're just not him anymore ... he's taking advantage of the forum that he has ... his following ... and using it then to promote stuff ... you feel like you're being used ... and like he's not like that at all ... well I don't know him personally (laughter).

Ava, aged 16

Ava is therefore troubled by the overall concept of IM, as she conceptualises it as a way for influencers to become '*commercial*' and betray their authenticity by taking advantage of their audience. Her deliberation between affective and moral AL is apparent, as she condemns the influencer's actions for taking part in sponsored content, while at the same time defending him ('*he's not like that at all*'). As such, she is reluctant to apply her negative moral judgements to a specific influencer, again discerning between IM in general, and specific influencers. This phenomenon was also observed elsewhere.

Cause you can just see [influencers are] totally different [within IM] ... cause they know they're getting money for it. But I don't really watch people who are like that ... I just watch people who are ... real nice

Natasha, aged 17

Natasha conceptualises the practice of IM in general as inauthentic and exploitative. She describes sponsored content as '*totally different*', as a contrived form of content designed to exploit followers. However, she counters this by contending that the influencers whom she personally follows do not act in this way. Therefore, similarly to Ava, Natasha is reluctant to apply her judgement of the practice of IM in general (i.e. as an inauthentic and exploitative practice) to the influencers whom she follows herself. As such, a gap appears to exist in terms of dispositional moral AL towards IM in general, versus situational AL with regard to specific influencers. In all, it can be concluded that dispositional moral AL may not always be applied in the same way situationally.

Conclusion

This study sought to address a major research gap in the literature by exploring moral AL, namely young consumers' propensity to question the practice of, and perceived appropriateness, fairness and ethicality of IM. The latter can be considered an emerging and pertinent area for exploration given the predominance of covert advertising tactics in use by marketers (Zarouali et al. 2019). The sample of 15–17 years was chosen due to their active use of social media (e.g. Pew Research Centre 2018), as well as their extensive interaction with influencer marketing (Wunderman Thompson Commerce 2019). According to John (1999), young consumers aged eleven years and above are in the reflective stage of consumer socialisation whereby their information processing and social skills lend themselves to an ability to consider perspectives outside their own. In this study, the participants' ability to reflect on the perspectives of other stakeholders such as the influencer and to a lesser extent, the brand partner, illustrates this stage of consumer socialisation at play.

It is useful to reiterate the importance of the little-researched area that is moral AL. Within their seminal paper on persuasion knowledge, Friestad and Wright (1994) proposed that consumers evaluate the behaviour of persuasion agents in two ways: the perceived effectiveness of tactics utilised, as well as the perceived appropriateness. They describe the latter as having to do 'with whether the marketer's tactics seem

to be moral or normatively acceptable (i.e., within the boundaries of the “rules of the game”)’ (Friestad and Wright 1994, 10). Therefore, the ability to morally evaluate marketers’ tactics has been noted as a hallmark of persuasion knowledge for more than two decades, yet it has received scant research attention (Zarouali et al. 2019). Indeed, moral AL has been largely ignored in the literature, with an acknowledgement of its presence only emerging within recent literature (Hudders et al. 2017). This is surprising given that the appropriateness of many child-targeted marketing approaches has been questioned within the literature for years (e.g., Kunkel et al. 2004; Owen et al. 2013; Spiteri Cornish 2014). Given that academics, regulators and policy makers have long questioned the morality of such marketing approaches, it follows that the views of young consumers themselves on the morality of such tactics are equally deserving of examination.

In terms of their evaluation of the appropriateness of influencer marketing, most participants demonstrated fluidity within their moral AL, in that they could acknowledge the necessity and therefore appropriateness of IM in some ways, but they also questioned the ethics of some of its tactics. Similar findings have been reported elsewhere, with De Pauw et al. (2017, 15) describing this fluidity as ‘based on reasoning that transcends individual consequences.’

For instance, although some participants were sceptical about IM as a genre (i.e. their dispositional AL), they were more accepting of it in the case of specific influencer content to which they were exposed (situational AL). As such, they were seen to weigh up the cost of being exposed to it (e.g. the possibility of being exploited by exaggerated recommendations) against its benefits (e.g. learning about new products). As a result, although the practice of IM was largely open to question, the participants were lenient where they felt that an influencer met certain standards e.g. being a young ‘up and coming’ influencer starting out on their career, or where the influencer used signposts to signal commercial content with regard to brands that they were known to usually recommend.

This means that the ability of the marketer to co-create advertising with influencers which is enjoyable or useful may evade critical reflection in some cases. While this is similar in some ways to extant research (Nairn and Fine 2008; De Pauw et al. 2017) which reported that children positively evaluate new advertising formats where they provide fun and/or are immersive in nature, it diverges in others. Specifically, the teenagers in this study appeared capable of understanding the tactics which were used, but still made a conscious decision to accept such advertising where it offered them information, entertainment and social capital (e.g. learning about new products that might win peer approval). As such, these participants were seen to make a conscious trade-off, perceiving influencer content through a transactional lens, whereby the benefits of being exposed to such content, outweighed the costs.

This finding is important in that it extends the findings of Van Reijmersdal, Rozendaal and Buijzen’s (2012) study with 7–12-year-old children. They concluded that whilst the children in their study were in possession of persuasion knowledge in the context of advergaming i.e. an understanding of the persuasive and commercial nature of advergaming, they were *unable* to recover and apply this knowledge when exposed to specific advertising attempts. In the present study, the older sample of 15–17 years possess such persuasion knowledge in the context of influencer marketing, but they

are *choosing* not to retrieve and apply the knowledge, and instead are positively disposed to advertising content that is perceived to benefit them, for example, the attainment of social capital that may accrue from learning about influencer-endorsed products that might win peer approval.

Therefore, a key conclusion is that whilst IM was widely accepted where it followed certain parameters, such as an influencer starting out in the profession, having a smaller number of followers, judiciously using sponsored posts that were consistent in terms of the products that they would normally consume, IM also attracted moral opprobrium in three ways. These related to perceptions of it as a covert form of advertising, leading to scepticism towards sponsored content, and a perception that the financial motive for engaging in brand collaborations was exploitative to the follower base.

These findings add to the scant body of research on moral AL in the context of IM. There appears to be only one other study which specifically explores moral AL in the context of IM and that study reported only positive moral evaluations towards IM (Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal 2019). Furthermore, within the present research, it was found that attitudes towards a specific influencer can mediate the application of negative moral evaluations of IM in general. This diverges from other studies, namely De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe (2018) who examined adolescents' (12–18 years) self-reported levels of dispositional AL in the context of advertising in general. They found that 'more sceptical attitudes toward advertising ensure more advertising avoidance, more contesting and more empowerment' (De Jans, Hudders, and Cauberghe 2018, 416). However, the present study found that participants were reluctant to apply their negative moral judgements of IM in cases where they felt positive about the specific influencer from which it emerged, even when they displayed scepticism at other times.

This finding also must be viewed through the lens of cognitive control, which in this context, relates to not only the possession of persuasion knowledge, but more importantly, the ability to retrieve and use this knowledge (Moses and Baldwin 2005; Büttner, Florack, and Serfas 2014). Specifically, it is important to consider whether a consumer *has* the cognitive ability to exercise such control, or whether they *choose* to exercise such control. It is accepted that cognitive control is an ongoing developmental process during childhood and adolescence (Büttner, Florack, and Serfas 2014). Regarding the 15–17 year olds in this study, their scepticism towards some influencers is suggestive of the 'stop and think' manifestation of cognitive control. On the other hand, their enthusiastic acceptance of certain sponsored content emanating from other influencers, suggests a lack of critical reflection or the afore-mentioned 'stop and think' response.

It is proposed that their positive affective evaluations of influencers whom they enjoy following, leads them to be less critical, regardless of the moral AL they possess about the advertising format itself. In this way, they tended to accept IM when it emerged from familiar influencers yet condemn the practice in general. Therefore, it appears as though a gap exists between moral AL in the context of advertising in general, and a corresponding willingness to apply this to known influencers.

In their seminal paper, Hudders et al. (2017) posit that moral AL may be the determinant of whether cognitive and affective AL positively or negatively affect advertising

effects. They contend that if a tactic is judged as unfair, advertising effects should be diminished since this should prompt consumers to enact negative affective AL and critical cognitive AL (Hudders et al. 2017). However, within this research, regardless of whether participants considered a particular advertising strategy to be inappropriate, if it was found to be useful or convenient to them, they were sometimes accepting of it and judged it as fair. In these cases, even when negative moral AL about a tactic was in place, it did not appear to necessarily increase critical reflection if benefits were seen to outweigh disadvantages. As such, in these instances, affective AL appears to play a bigger role in advertising response than moral AL, even if negative moral evaluations are in place.

Suggestions for future research

As native advertising practices continue to innovate and expand onto new platforms, academic research needs to keep pace. In a context where many influencers have now become advertising sounding boards, it is plausible that advertising has taken on new, positive meanings for young people. For example, consider how traditional AL has focused on children's ability to discern and understand advertising being transmitted to them using a 'push' approach. On the other hand, consumers choose to become followers of online influencers who are in effect, role models, content creators and taste-makers. Therefore, further research is required to explore whether young consumers (a) are able to fully understand the nature of IM as a form of advertising and brand communication and (b) deploy this understanding as a defence against this advertising, in the case of influencers whom they actively seek out, and relate to very closely.

Moral AL has attracted very little research attention to date. The present study found that participants tended to apply different standards of moral evaluation to IM as a genre, compared to specific influencers. In this way, they tended to accept IM when it emerged from familiar and enjoyable influencers yet on the other hand, they were also seen to condemn the practice in general. Therefore, further research could explore the gap that seems to exist between moral AL in the context of advertising in general (dispositional literacy), and willingness to apply this to known influencers and specific influencer communications (situational literacy).

This also yields a related area for research, namely the parasocial nature of the influencer-follower relationship. Many participants spoke as if they personally knew the online influencers even though one participant subsequently corrected herself, acknowledging that whilst she knew a lot about the influencer, she did not know him personally. Therefore, the contradictory and nuanced nature of the parasocial relationship lends itself to further research in terms of, for example, exploring consumers' motives for following specific influencers. Furthermore, the literature has highlighted the 'friend' and 'peer' status that an influencer can enjoy (Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal 2019; Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Such close ties can increase the perceived trustworthiness and persuasive appeal of an influencer (Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021). Therefore, further research could explore at what stage such close bonds are tested, or when the influencer is seen to over-step their

relatable peer status, for example, with regard to excessive posting of content relating their brand collaborations, or indeed their overall communication approach (e.g. use of a more natural speaking style versus curated content, working to a brand template).

Practical implications

With regard to how influencers disclose their commercial collaboration arrangements with brands, the participants observed that whilst disclosures may be put in place by the influencer, they were not always fully visible. Equally, some participants spoke of having to be alert for and actively look out for such disclosures. Therefore, public policy attention should revisit, not just whether disclosures are in place but also if they are in full view and clearly comprehensible. This also reflects the US Food and Drug Administration's (2020) recognition that different forms of disclosure can be used, namely direct language (e.g. use of 'paid ad') and indirect language (e.g. '#sp' meaning sponsored).

In keeping with previous studies, when influencers offer disclosures that are highly explicit, this can result in more positive consumer attitudes towards the promotional message. For example, Holiday, Densley, and Norman (2020) highlight the importance of trust as a key foundation of the influencer-consumer relationship. They proceed to explain that consumers often view the influencer as a credible and trustworthy source of information and advice, and when influencer content is clearly labelled as being promotional in nature, such transparency can serve to reduce the consumer's perception that a manipulative intent is at play. Equally, the consumer acknowledges a *quid pro quo* where the influencer is recognised as receiving financial remuneration from a brand whilst continuing to provide relevant content to their community of followers.

Another key implication arising from the present study was that some participants viewed the practice of disclosure as being incumbent on the influencer, and to a far lesser extent, the brand. This would suggest a certain amount of insulation for brands but also raises ethical considerations regarding brands' responsibilities in this area. Equally, it follows that influencers who seek to monetise their content creation, should be careful to preserve their own personal brand and resulting brand equity. This speaks to both ethical and commercial considerations. For example, judicious attention should be given to the amount and nature of commercial collaborations they engage in, and also how they integrate them into their content.

In conclusion, the area of moral advertising literacy is of key significance to consumers, influencers, brands and regulators alike. The area of influencer marketing is distinct from other forms of advertising because consumers (followers) opt in to receive and consume influencer content. Equally, the parasocial nature of this relationship means that consumers may knowingly be more open to persuasive attempts from influencers, and therefore the ethicality of this practice deserves to be further debated and researched.

Disclosure statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix A: Overview of participants

School & location	Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Year in School
School 1 (Dublin, Ireland)	David	Male	16	4 th Year (Transition Year) (Comparable with High School – Sophomore year in U.S.; Secondary School - GCSE in UK)
	Kate	Female	17	5 th Year (Comparable with High School – Junior year in U.S.; College - 6 th form in UK)
	Dawn	Female	16	4 th Year (Transition Year)
	James	Male	17	5 th Year
	Alice	Female	16	4 th Year (Transition Year)
	Jack	Male	16	4 th Year (Transition Year)
	Natasha	Female	17	5 th Year
	Rachel	Female	16	4 th Year (Transition Year)
	Sarah	Female	17	5 th Year
	Ciara	Female	17	5 th Year
	School 2 (Dublin, Ireland)	Grace	Female	16
Ruth		Female	15	
School 3 (Leitrim, Ireland)	Rob	Male	16	4 th Year (Transition Year)
	Fred	Male		
	Owen	Male		
	Kelly	Female		
	Tracy	Female		
	Ava	Female		
	Naomi	Female		
	Una	Female		
School 4 (Leitrim, Ireland)	Hannah	Female	16	4 th Year (Transition Year)
	Shane	Male		
	Conor	Male		
	Michael	Male		
	Aisling	Female		
	Ellie	Female		
	Shauna	Female		
	Ross	Male		
Emily	Female	15		