

How an Advertising Disclosure Alerts Young Adolescents to Sponsored Vlogs: The Moderating Role of a Peer-based Advertising Literacy Intervention through an Informational Vlog

Steffi De Jans, Liselot Hudders & Veroline Cauberghe

This document is an extended abstract of an article that was submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal and forms part of the 'AdLit' (Advertising Literacy) research project. AdLit is a four-year interdisciplinary research project on advertising literacy, which is funded by VLAIO (Flanders Innovation & Entrepreneurship). The main goal of the AdLit project is to investigate how we can empower children and youth to cope with advertising, so that they can grow up to be critical, informed consumers who make their own conscious choices in today's new media environment.

Objectives. Young adolescents currently view hours of online videos from their favorite *vloggers*, which is a short term for video bloggers (Bacescu 2017). The most popular vloggers have built impressive communities consisting of millions of followers and have become known as “influencers” or “YouTube celebrities.” Many children and young adolescents admire these influential youths and aspire to attain their lifestyles. Hence, advertisers have begun approaching influential vloggers to promote brands in their online videos (Coursaris and Van Osch 2016). The integration of sponsored content into vlogs (i.e., sponsored vlogging or vlog advertising) is an example of influencer marketing, a form of marketing where brands forge alliances with social media influencers to promote their products or services (De Veirman, Cauberghe, and Hudders 2017; Evans, Phua, Lim, and Jun 2017). This rather new advertising format fully blurs the boundaries between commercial and entertaining content, which makes it difficult for children and young adolescents to activate their advertising literacy. *Advertising literacy* is defined as an individual's abilities and skills to cope with advertising (Boush, Friestad, and Rose 1994).

Recognizing the sponsored content in vlogs is crucial to trigger advertising literacy and enables young adolescents to critically reflect on this commercial content (Hudders et al. 2017). However, they must be aided to do so, such as by implementing an advertising disclosure (John 1999). This is reflected in practice by many legislative and self-regulatory principles (e.g., Article 9 of the ICC Code) that prescribe that advertising has to be recognizable as such and that sponsors should be identified (Verdoodt, Lambrecht, and Lievens 2016). On an international level, however, a coordinated approach on how advertising disclosures to disclose sponsored vlogs should be designed, implemented and monitored is currently lacking. In combination with the fact that advertisers are hesitant to implement advertising disclosures because they believe these disclosures will lead to



negative advertising effectiveness, the disclosures currently used for sponsored vlogs are meaningless, too subtle, and often hidden in the description boxes of the YouTube videos (Wu 2016).

This raises concerns about fairness and appropriateness, especially regarding young adolescents, because young adolescents are the main target group of sponsored vlogs, as YouTube is their preferred content provider (Ofcom 2017), whereas their advertising literacy is not yet fully developed with regard to non-traditional advertising (van Reijmersdal, Boerman, Buijzen, and Rozendaal 2017), which makes them vulnerable for subconscious persuasion. The current study therefore examined whether a clear and meaningful ad disclosure that alerts young adolescents (eleven to fourteen years) to sponsored vlogs is effective in enhancing their advertising literacy and subsequently in influencing influencer and advertising effects. It was expected that young adolescents' increased advertising literacy, due to an advertising disclosure, would trigger reactance and result in more negative influencer and advertising effects, as previous studies (among adults) have shown that advertising literacy for influencer marketing triggered resistance and subsequently decreased persuasion (Evans et al. 2017; van Reijmersdal et al. 2016).

Apart from the negative impact on ad effects, it is thus proposed that ad disclosures may also negatively affect how viewers evaluate the influencers posting the sponsored vlogs. Therefore, the current study also examined how advertisers and influencers can integrate sponsored content into vlogs both in a transparent and effective manner, by investigating whether a peer-based advertising literacy intervention through an informational vlog about advertising may attenuate the negative effects on both influencers and ads. Hence, when young adolescents are informed about advertising before exposure to a sponsored vlog, advertising disclosures may not necessarily trigger reactance but may be perceived as honest disclosures that positively affect influencer effects and subsequently advertising effects via advertising literacy.

The current study aims to examine (1) the effect of an advertising disclosure on young adolescents' advertising literacy (recognition of advertising and affective advertising literacy) for sponsored vlogs, (2) the way their advertising literacy further affects the evaluation of the influencer's trustworthiness and PSI, (3) the way these influencer effects then impact advertising effects (i.e., purchase intention), and (4) the moderating impact of a peer-based advertising literacy intervention through an informational vlog about advertising.

Methods. A two-by-two, between-subjects experimental study (advertising disclosure: no disclosure versus disclosure; peer-based advertising literacy intervention: regular versus informational vlog) was conducted among 160 young adolescents between eleven and fourteen years ($M_{age} = 12.41$, $SD = .60$), from which ninety-six (60%) were female.

One group of young adolescents was exposed to an informational vlog about advertising, while another group was exposed to a regular vlog that was unrelated to advertising. After watching the vlog, both groups completed the same filler task. Next, the young adolescents of both groups watched another vlog (of a different vlogger) that contained advertising (i.e., sponsored vlog). This was the same vlog for both groups, and within each group, a subgroup watched the sponsored vlog with an advertising disclosure and one without disclosure. Then, they completed the same questionnaire. The participants watched the vlogs, conducted the filler task and completed the questionnaire on computers in a classroom setting.



Results. First, the results showed a significant main effect of advertising disclosure on advertising recognition ($a_1 = .52$, $SE = .22$, $t = 2.42$, $p = .017$). Young adolescents' recognition of a sponsored vlog as advertising was higher after exposure to the advertising disclosure ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.39$) compared to no disclosure ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.27$). In addition, the results also showed a main effect of advertising disclosure on affective advertising literacy ($a_2 = .46$, $SE = .15$, $t = 3.06$, $p = .003$). This indicates that young adolescents had a higher level of affective advertising literacy for sponsored vlogs after exposure to the advertising disclosure ($M = 3.11$, $SD = .97$) than after exposure to no disclosure ($M = 2.65$, $SD = .88$).

Furthermore, there was a significant indirect effect of advertising disclosure on purchase intention via affective advertising literacy, influencer trustworthiness, and PSI ($B = -.01$, $SE = .01$, $95\%CI = [-.0277, -.0001]$). The advertising disclosure increased young adolescents' affective advertising literacy for sponsored vlogs. Furthermore, affective advertising literacy negatively affected influencer trustworthiness ($b_2 = -.26$, $SE = .07$, $t = -4.02$, $p < .001$). This lower influencer trustworthiness further decreased PSI ($e = .36$, $SE = .08$, $t = 4.30$, $p < .001$), which resulted in a decreased purchase intention ($b = .22$, $SE = .11$, $t = 2.02$, $p = .045$).

Finally, the results showed a significant moderated mediation analysis with advertising disclosure as independent variable, purchase intention as dependent variable, PSI as the only mediator, and peer-based advertising literacy intervention as moderator ($B = .19$, $SE = .12$, $95\%CI = [.0075, .4601]$). A significant interaction effect was found of advertising disclosure and peer-based advertising literacy intervention on PSI ($B = .87$, $SE = .25$, $t = 3.55$, $p < .001$). The results of the conditional effects indicated that when the young adolescents were first exposed to the informational vlog, the disclosure increased PSI ($B = .11$, $SE = .07$, $95\%CI = [.0031, .2884]$), which positively affected purchase intention ($b = .22$, $SE = .11$, $t = 2.02$, $p = .045$). When the young adolescents were not exposed to the informational vlog, the disclosure had a negative effect on purchase intention via PSI; however, this was not significant ($B = -.08$, $SE = .06$, $95\%CI = [-.2153, .0016]$).

Discussion. To conclude, the current study shows that an advertising disclosure increased young adolescents' recognition of and affective advertising literacy for sponsored vlogs, and that only affective advertising literacy negatively affected influencer effects (influencer trustworthiness and PSI) and subsequently purchase intention. Regarding the moderating role of a peer-based advertising literacy intervention, this study showed that an advertising disclosure can also have positive effects on the influencer and subsequently on advertising effects when young adolescents are informed about advertising through an informational vlog.

The current study provides evidence for the underlying theory that may explain how advertising disclosures affect advertising effects. Whereas past research mainly focused on the impact an ad disclosure has on advertising literacy and subsequently on advertising effects (e.g., Panic, Cauberghe, and De Pelsmacker 2013), the current study adds the effects a disclosure may have on source evaluations. In addition, the current study extends past research by showing that advertising disclosures do not necessarily trigger reactance and lead to negative influencer and advertising effects. If the aims and purposes of influencers are clear to young adolescents, they may perceive an advertising disclosure as an honest disclosure reflecting the fairness of the vlogger, which may hamper the negative effects of advertising disclosures and may even lead to positive influencer and advertising effects.



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