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Children's Perceptions of Sponsorship Disclosures in Online Influencer Videos

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1 Introduction

As sponsoring in online influencer videos is gaining popularity, advertising- and media regulators are tightening the guidelines for commercial content in YouTube videos (e.g., the European Union's Audiovisual Media Services Directive [AVMSD], and the United States' Federal Trade Commission). An important part of these stricter guidelines is the obligatory inclusion of disclosures, in order to increase the transparency and fairness of sponsored online influencer videos (European Commission, 2018; Einstein, 2015; Federal Trade Commission 2010). In these videos, persuasive messages are embedded into the entertaining content of influencers which makes it hard for audiences to recognize its persuasive nature. Disclosures can help audiences to better recognize the commercial nature of sponsored online influencer videos and potentially facilitate more critical processing of these videos. Minors in particular are in need of sponsorship disclosures as they have greater difficulty than adults to recognize the persuasive nature of

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embedded advertising formats (De Veirman et al. 2019; Hudders et al. 2017; De Pauw et al. 2017). Therefore, the tightened regulations stress the importance of including disclosures in online influencer videos with an underage audience, in a way that is adequate in light of minors' capacity to understand them (CAP, 2017; Stichting Reclame Code, 2014).

Several studies have experimentally investigated the effect of disclosures in sponsored content on minors (e.g., An & Stern, 2011; De Jans 2019; De Pauw et al. 2017; Panic et al. 2012; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2017). However, only a few of these studies specifically focused on disclosures in online influencer videos (De Jans et al. 2019; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2020). Moreover, these studies showed mixed effects of disclosures regarding enhancing minors' recognition and understanding of sponsored content, including influencer videos. In order to interpret and theoretically explain these mixed findings, more insight into minors' perceptions of sponsorship disclosures is needed. Based on the Motivation-Opportunity-Ability model (MacInnes et al. 1991) it is expected that minors' perceptions and understanding of sponsorship disclosures drive their motivation, opportunity, and/or ability (MOA) to process the disclosure and the sponsored content and, as such, may help or hinder the effectiveness of disclosures. For example, the extent to which children perceive disclosures to be helpful in recognizing sponsored influencer videos likely determines their motivation to pay attention to the disclosure. And, the extent to which children understand the purpose of sponsorship disclosures, likely determines their ability to critically process sponsoring in influencer videos.

Unfortunately, existing research fails to provide a deep understanding of how minors perceive sponsorship disclosures, mainly due to the experimental nature of the studies. Qualitative research is more suitable to expose minors' perceptions. Therefore, using a qualitative research approach (i.e., interviews), the main aim of the present study is to provide in-depth insights into 10- to 16-year-olds' perceptions of various types of sponsorship disclosures in sponsored online influencer videos.

One earlier study explored adolescents' perceptions of disclosures for sponsored influencer videos, showing that disclosures are appreciated as long as they do not disturb the entertaining value of the sponsored video (Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019). The current study extends this existing research by focusing not only on children's perceptions of the relevance and usefulness of sponsorship disclosures, but also on their awareness and understanding of such disclosures. Moreover, the current study extends the study by Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal by focusing on children's perceptions of a wider variety of disclosures that are currently part of disclosure guidelines, namely a disclosure presented in text

before the start or at the start of the video, a disclosure in the description below the sponsored video, and a spoken disclosure by the influencer. These insights are not only valuable for our theoretical understanding of disclosure effects among minors, but are also necessary to guide the development of regulatory guidelines on age-appropriate disclosures with the ultimate aim of making the commercial nature of online influencer videos transparent to minors.

The present study focuses on children aged 10 to 16, an age group in which major changes are taking place in the development of advertising literacy, especially in the context of digital advertising and online influencer marketing (Hudders et al. 2017; Van Dam & Van Reijmersdal, 2019). This is on the one hand because children in this age group gain increasingly more experience with digital advertising, and on the other hand because their perspective taking skills are vastly developing. This allows them to better understand the intentions of others, including online advertisers and social media influencers (Moses and Baldwin 2005). However, insights from developmental and media psychology indicate that, even if children do have a well-developed level of advertising literacy, they still experience difficulty activating and applying this literacy when confronted with advertising. Because 10- to 16 year olds' executive functions (e.g., working memory, inhibitory control, attentional flexibility) are still emerging, they experience more difficulties with monitoring and controlling their thoughts, feelings, and actions than adults (Best & Miller, 2010). As a result, their ability to activate their advertising literacy and to elaborate critically on the commercial intent of digital advertising may be lower, especially when the advertising is integrated in attractive and engaging social media posts (e.g., sponsored YouTube videos; Rozendaal et al. 2011). Thus, 10 to 16 year olds are rapidly developing their digital advertising literacy, but still encounter difficulties to activate and use this literacy as a critical coping mechanism. This may influence the perceptions 10- to 16-year olds have of sponsorship disclosures in online influencer videos, making them an interesting group to study.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Disclosure Awareness

Experimental studies have shown that awareness and memory of disclosures tend to be low (for an overview see Boerman & Van Reijmersdal, 2016). Even in experimental settings with forced exposure, many participants do not notice or remember sponsorship disclosures. This is problematic since studies have shown

that awareness of disclosures is crucial for disclosures to have the intended effect on enhancing transparency (e.g., Van Reijmersdal et al. 2020; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). If disclosures go unnoticed, the opportunity for audiences to process the disclosure is low. As a consequence, viewers are less likely to critically process the sponsored content in light of the knowledge they have about the commercial nature of sponsored content (Van Reijmersdal et al. 2020). Experimental studies using eye tracking have indeed shown that visual attention to disclosures among children and adults is an important mechanism that underlies disclosure effects (Boerman et al. 2015; Guo et al. 2018; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2020; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016).

Research among adults has shown that the format of the disclosure impacts awareness (Boerman et al. 2015; Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). For example, an experiment showed that text accompanied by a logo gained more visual attention than only a logo (Boerman et al. 2015), and other studies showed that the position and prominence of the disclosure determined disclosure awareness (Wojdyski & Evans, 2016). In the present study, we focus on three types of disclosures that are currently part of disclosure guidelines: a disclosure presented in text before the video starts, a disclosure in the description below the sponsored video, and a spoken disclosure by the influencer. We explore children's awareness of these disclosures, and investigate whether awareness differs for the three different disclosure types. We pose the following research question:

RQ1: How aware are 10- to 16-year-olds of various disclosure types in sponsored online influencer videos?

2.2 Disclosure Understanding

The general purpose of sponsorship disclosures in online influencer videos is to help audiences recognize sponsoring. Experimental studies showed that sponsorship disclosures are sometimes successful and sometimes unsuccessful in helping minors to recognize and understand the commercial nature of sponsoring in influencer videos (De Jans et al. 2019; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2020). However, these studies did not take minors' understanding of the purpose of the investigated disclosures into account. This may explain the lack of clear evidence for the effectiveness of sponsorship disclosures among minors: Minors who do not understand the purpose of disclosures, are probably less able to process the sponsored influencer video in light of their general knowledge about the commercial nature of sponsored content, which makes disclosures less effective for these minors.

Besides minors' understanding of the *purpose* of sponsorship disclosures, minors' understanding of the *meaning* of the disclosures may also drive their ability to critically process sponsoring in influencer videos, and thus play a role in disclosure effectiveness. Influencers use a wide variety of disclosure messages in their sponsored videos. They, for example, disclose a commercial partnership by stating 'I created this video in collaboration with [brand x]' or 'I would like to thank [brand name] for this cool collaboration, thank you [brand name]'. The term 'collaboration' in these disclosures refers to the influencer marketing business model, which is based on a mutual agreement between a brand and an influencer (Federal Trade Commission, 2009, 2010). Agreements can range from the influencers receiving money (i.e., paid sponsorship) or free products (i.e., unpaid sponsorship). The term 'collaboration' in disclosures must be understood in the context of this business model, but the question is whether children possess the relevant background knowledge to interpret disclosures in this intended way.

In the present study, we explore children's understanding of the purpose and meaning of disclosure messages that refer to a collaboration between the influencer and a brand, since this type of disclosure message is most common. We pose the following research question:

RQ2: What do 10- to 16-year-olds understand about the purpose and meaning of disclosures?

2.3 Disclosure Evaluations

Advertising- and media regulators have decided that disclosures are useful and beneficial for young viewers of influencer videos. But what do minors themselves think about this? Do they find sponsorship disclosures necessary and helpful? Insights into minors' opinions of and preferences for certain types of disclosures can help to gain a better understanding of the effectiveness of such disclosures. Although some research focused on adults' opinions about whether sponsored content in television programs and movies should be disclosed (Gupta et al. 2000; Hudson et al. 2008; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2013), no such research exists among minor audiences. The studies among adults show that disclosing sponsored content may be perceived as informative and helpful as audiences may become aware of something that used to be hidden in entertainment (Gupta et al. 2000; Hudson et al. 2008). However, disclosures can also be perceived as intrusive and patronizing as viewers may feel that their judgments are underestimated and that they are not taken seriously as authorities think they need to be warned and protected

(Reijmersdal et al. 2013). This may lead to resistance and negative evaluations of the disclosures (Brehm and Brehm 1981).

Another question is how disclosures should be formulated and formatted. To date, no research has shown what minors consider as the most appropriate and informative formulation, format, and place of disclosures in online influencer videos. Therefore, the present study investigates minors' attitudes toward and preferences for influencer video disclosure formulation (i.e., 'paid collaboration' or 'collaboration'), format (i.e., in text or spoken) and location (i.e., before the video, in the video, or in the description). This leads to the following research question:

RQ3: How do 10- to 16-year-olds evaluate various disclosure types in sponsored online influencer videos?

3 Method

3.1 Sampling and Procedure

A total of 38 children aged 10 to 16 with various backgrounds (level of education, gender, place of residence, ethnicity) were interviewed in friend duos. The children were recruited by a professional research company. All children were interviewed by the same professional female interviewer. The interviews lasted around 75 min. During the interview, children watched two videos, each with a different disclosure: one video with a textual disclosure ('this video contains a collaboration with [brand name]') and one with a spoken disclosure (e.g., 'I created this video in collaboration with [brand x]' or 'I would like to thank [brand name] for this cool collaboration, thank you [brand name]'). The order in which they watched the video with either the textual or the spoken disclosure was randomized. After each video, the interviewer asked the children about their perceptions of the video, the sponsoring and the disclosure. After talking about the second video, children were asked about the description below the video and the disclosure in this description.

Each friend duo watched two out of nine videos based on the videos' suitability for the friend duo's age and gender. We used nine existing sponsored videos of popular male and female YouTubers. The videos included a variety of genres: beauty videos, sketches, vlogs, and gaming. The sponsoring products were shampoo, make up, toys, games, household appliances, baking products, apps, and travels.

3.2 Analysis

We used procedures that are described in the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to open coding. We read the interviews in light of our research questions, and particularly looked for variation in children's perceptions. To enhance the credibility and transparency of our findings, we extensively discussed the coding with all three researchers (researcher triangulation), and we included the perceptions of a broad sample of children with various ages and backgrounds (data triangulation). We believe that new interviews would not result in substantially new insights regarding our research questions (saturation).

4 Results

4.1 Disclosure Awareness

Awareness was not the same for the three disclosure types. First, disclosures in the video description were noticed the least. Some children said that they usually do not read the descriptions and thus are not exposed to the disclosures in the descriptions.

'There is a lot of information (in the description), but we never read it'

(boy and girl, 10- and 12-years-old).

'Only in the description is bad because then they make it too easy for themselves: Like "I do it, but nobody sees it"'

(boys, 13-years old)

Second, textual disclosures before the start of the video are also barely noticed. Children feel like a screen with text before the video is not a part of the video itself. They only start paying attention once the video has started.

'Oh you mean that text at the beginning. I didn't read it'

(girls, 16-years old)

Third, awareness was highest for spoken disclosures. They said that a spoken disclosure somewhere at the beginning of the video has the best chance of being

noticed (compared to a spoken disclosure near the end of the video) because they rarely watch a video until the end.

'Usually everyone just watches the beginning [of the video] and if they don't like it then they go to something else. And sometimes people go away, halfway through the video, to watch another video'

(boys, 13-years old).

Interestingly, most children did not notice the disclosure spontaneously, which means that they did not talk about it unless the interviewer directly asked questions about it. Typically it was only then that children realized that they had come across the disclosure somewhere. When asked if they ever notice these kinds of disclosures in YouTube videos, the children said they rarely see them. An explanation for this may be that many children say they usually also do other things (put on makeup, do homework, eat, send WhatsApp messages) when they watch YouTube videos. Because of this multitasking they do not process the content of the YouTube video for the full 100%. In addition, they watch YouTube videos mainly because of entertainment and relaxation and therefore do not seem to have a critical attitude while watching.

4.2 Disclosure Understanding

The interviews reveal a divide in children's level of understanding of the disclosures. On one end of the spectrum there are children who show a good understanding of the purpose and meaning of disclosures. When confronted with disclosures that refer to collaborations between influencers and brands, these children show a well-developed understanding of the business model of influencer marketing. The analyses indicate that these children are typically older or higher educated. Some children are confused about the meaning of "collaboration" and "paid collaboration". Others seem to understand well that with a paid partnership the YouTuber is paid by a brand or has received products.

'Collaboration' is enough ("paid" does not need to added). Then I understand that it is advertising. It is clear to me that it is paid'

(boys, 12- and 14-years-old)

'Paid collaboration can be two different things. It is also possible that he has received products [in addition to having received money]'

(boys, 13-years-old)

Interviewer: 'But how did you know it was advertising?' *'It was stated in the beginning: "In cooperation with XXX"'*

(boys, 12- and 13-years-old)

Interviewer: 'And what does it mean, that he said that it is a collaboration?' *'That he got big money for this. "I will use all this stuff, so that I get even more money"; that's it basically'*

(boys, 15- and 16 years-old)

On the other end of the spectrum there are children who have difficulty understanding the purpose of disclosures, and who do not understand that brands are featured in influencer videos for commercial reasons and that often (financial) compensation is part of the deal. For these children, the term "collaboration" means that the YouTuber and the brand help each other and support each other (just like at school); they do not think it has anything to do with money. Even when the disclosure states that there is a financial collaboration, these children are confused about the process behind the video or show no understanding of the business model of influencers. Some children even think that paid collaboration means that the YouTuber had to pay the brand for showing it in the video.

'I think collaboration is a good name. Because that is what it is, they help each other. Advertising is different.'

(boys, 10- and 12-years-old).

'Paid collaboration means that he [the YouTuber] had to pay for it...'

(boy and girl, 10-years-old)

An interesting finding is that some children see the textual disclosure as a form of advertising for the brand rather than a "warning" for the fact that the video is sponsored. Especially for the textual disclosure, they think it is a promotional message from the brand. As a result, they find it annoying to see the disclosure.

'I think such a text in advance in a black screen is a bit too much .. then I think it is really too much advertising.'

(boy and girl, 10-years-old)

4.3 Disclosure Evaluations

On the one end, there are children who do not care whether disclosures are present or not. They feel they do not need that information, and they do not really care whether a video is sponsored or not.

'I totally don't care (whether there is a disclosure or not)'

(girls, 15- and 16-years-old)

Interviewer: 'What do you think about such a text [disclosure] at the start of the video?'

'Fine, I did not see it anyway.'

(girls, 15- and 16-years-old)

'I don't think it's [the fact that the video is sponsored] important to know myself. If other people want to know, I think that's fine, but I don't know why they would want to'

(boy and girl, 11- and 10-years-old)

On the other end, there are children who do acknowledge the need for disclosures.

'If they do not disclose it, I think it is annoying, because then I start thinking: is this commercial or not?'

(girls, 15-years-old).

'I think you should always say it. Otherwise it feels like you are secretly being persuaded'

(boys, 12- and 14-years old)

'I think it's good, because it's also better for viewers because they don't have to think [about whether a video is sponsored or not]'

(boys, 10- and 12-years old)

These children want to know whether a video is sponsored or not, not only for themselves but they think it is important for others too.

'It is especially important for younger children, because they are more vulnerable'

(girls, 16-year-olds)

With respect to disclosure types, there are children who prefer a textual disclosure before the start of the video over a spoken disclosure, because this stands out the most and because then they know what they are watching from the beginning

'I prefer the first option [text before start of the video]. Because it is faster (...) If it is in the end, often I am not watching videos till the end'

(girls, 11- and 14 years-old)

There are also children who prefer spoken disclosures over textual disclosures and disclosures in descriptions. They feel that a spoken disclosure is more sincere than a textual disclosure.

'I think spoken is better than just text. With a spoken disclosure you can check whether he is sincere'

(boys, 13-years-old).

'The text before the video appears to be a less sincere, more like: this has to be done'

(boys, 12- and 14-years old)

Other children prefer a spoken disclosure, because in a text it is too obvious that a brand is being promoted in the video. These children see the disclosure itself as a form of advertising, rather than as a warning that a video is sponsored.

The children think disclosures in the video description are less sincere.

'(A disclosure) only in the description is bad, because then you take the easy way out: like "I do it (use the disclosure), but no one will notice"'

(boys, 13-years-old).

5 Conclusion and Discussion

This study aimed to give insight into children's perceptions of disclosures in sponsored influencer videos. It shows that there are differences between children in their awareness, understanding, and evaluations of disclosures. Better awareness and understanding of disclosures seem to be associated with better developed advertising literacy, in particular a better understanding of the business model behind influencer marketing.

In addition, children's perceptions differ between disclosure types. Children express relatively more awareness, better understanding and more positive attitudes toward spoken disclosures than toward textual disclosures before the video or in the description below the video.

5.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The present study has several theoretical implications. First, it provides explanations for the mixed findings found in experiments investigating the effect of disclosures among minors (e.g., An & Stern, 2011; De Jans 2019; De Pauw et al. 2017; Panic et al. 2012; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2017). In the interviews, children indicated that they hardly pay attention to textual disclosures, which is likely to explain the lack of effects of disclosures on advertising recognition found in previous studies (An & Stern, 2011; Panic et al. 2012). Our study also shows the confusions regarding the formulations 'collaboration' and 'paid collaboration,' which may explain why some studies found effects whereas others did not (e.g., De Jans et al. 2019; De Pauw et al. 2017; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2017). If children do not notice or do not understand the meaning of a sponsorship disclosure (due to vague or complex formulations), their *opportunity* to process and make sense of the disclosure is low. As a result, the disclosure will be less effective in triggering children's advertising literacy and critical coping strategies (Van Reijmersdal et al. 2020).

The second theoretical implication is that our study reveals important differences between children in their perceptions of disclosures. For example, children differ greatly in the extent to which they consider sponsorship disclosures necessary and relevant. Our findings show that there are children who do see the need for disclosures. However, in line with earlier research by Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal (2019), our findings also show that there are also children who seem to prefer to be left in the dark with regard to the content's sponsorship rather than to be informed about it. Children who find disclosures less important are probably also less motivated to pay attention to disclosures and think about its meaning and purpose. They also processed the sponsored influencer video less critically. Our study also showed that children differ in their level of advertising literacy with regard to sponsored influencer videos. Children who are less aware of the business model of influencer marketing are also less able to understand the purpose and meaning of sponsorship disclosures in online influencer videos. These individual differences in children's *motivation* and *ability* to process and understand sponsorship disclosure need to be taken into account in future theory

building and empirical research, to refine our understanding of how disclosures affect children.

For legislators and in particular for the implementation of the European AVMSD, our study implies that spoken disclosures somewhere at the beginning of the video have the highest chance of being noticed and appreciated. In addition, explicit terms such as 'paid' are helpful for children to understand the persuasive intent of sponsored influencer videos.

5.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Our study has several limitations worth noting. First, children talked about a variety of sponsored online influencer videos in this study. However, the study is limited to the specific genre of influencer videos. Future research is needed to illuminate minors' perceptions of disclosures for other types of sponsored videos (e.g., music videos) and other types of influencer content that are not audio-visual (e.g., Instagram posts).

Second, the findings of our study offer some insights into the characteristics that make disclosures more or less noticeable and understandable (e.g., formulation, location, modality). However, more systematic research is needed to explore how sponsorship disclosures should be formulated and implemented in order to be noticeable and well understood by children.

Finally, this study provides rich qualitative insights into children's perceptions of disclosures and their role in the transparency of sponsored influencer videos. A next step would be to conduct a quantitative study (for example a survey) in which these perceptions can be examined on a larger scale. Similarly, some of the preferences for specific types of disclosures may be tested in experimental studies for actual effectiveness in enhancing children's understanding of the persuasive nature of sponsored influencer videos.

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