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YouTube Vloggers as Brand Influencers on Consumer Purchase Behaviour

ABSTRACT

Objective: The increasing influence of YouTube vloggers on consumer purchase behaviour and the specificity of the vloggers – viewers/subscribers relationship are under-researched. Addressing this gap in knowledge, this paper explores the role of vloggers as brand influencers on consumer (their viewers) purchase behaviour. It aims to investigate the interaction between vloggers and viewers/subscribers in terms of brand awareness and consumers' purchase behaviour.

Methodology: A mixed-method approach (often connected with netnography) incorporated non-participant observation of vloggers' activities and vloggers-viewers interactions within selected popular vlogs, supported by an online survey with both vloggers and viewers.

Findings: We have observed specific brand endorsements and experiences, depending on the vloggers' context, leading to both positive and negative feedback. This interaction and the consistently positive perception of reasons behind the vloggers' choice of the endorsed brands underpin the credibility of the vloggers – viewers/subscribers relationship.

Value added: Our results show not only the significance of vloggers as brand influencers, providing their audiences information perceived as trustworthy and convincing in terms of purchase recommendations but also explore the factors affecting this process.

Recommendations: This research directed our attention into the viewer-viewer interaction on the vlogs platforms. It is a very dynamic and challenging (difficult to control) part of vlog marketing activities (including various eWOM aspects) which can be very influential in the analysed context and stays a task for the future research.

Key words: YouTube vloggers, vlog, brand, consumer behaviour, purchase behaviour

JEL codes: M31, M37

Introduction

Social media has become a communication channel attracting advertising and product information by many organisations (Edosomwan et al., 2011; Leitch & Merlot, 2018; Zhang, Luo, & Boncella, 2020 ; Sułkowski & Kaczorowska-Spychalska, 2018). YouTube is currently the second most accessed social media website, following Facebook (Statista, 2019). Some YouTube

uploaders (also known as vloggers, YouTubers or content creators) interact in a structured way with their audiences becoming well known in the YouTube community. These vloggers (for video bloggers) influence their audience to engage with marketing activities, not only to promote themselves but also the brands they endorse.

Understanding the role of vloggers as brand influencers is important for marketers who wish to develop a relationship with consumers via social media (in this case YouTube). The role of vloggers as brand influencers from the perspective of consumer behaviour is thus an important academic endeavour and is the aim of this paper. We address both vloggers as brand influencers and viewers/subscribers as consumers. We investigate factors influencing vloggers' marketing engagement and viewers' trust towards them. We analyse the impact of the vloggers' marketing activity supporting the endorsed brand/product on their viewers' brand awareness, purchase decisions and level of satisfaction after purchasing the recommended brands/products/services.

This introduction is followed by the literature review discussing the current state of the field of vloggers as brand influencers and explaining the gap in knowledge that we address. Then the methodology provides information concerning the approach and research procedure. The findings and discussion section presents the results of the research and contextualises them within the literature. Further interpretation and practical implications appear in the conclusions, which is followed by the limitations.

Literature review

YouTube Vloggers as brand influencers

While consumers have always valued others' opinions, the growing popularity of social media has intensified the effect of peer recommendations as it has empowered consumers to share their opinions and experiences broadly. This is word-of-mouth influencing in the digital era (Rybczewska,

Sparks, & Sułkowski, 2020, pp. 102-123). De Veirman et al. (2017) suggest that online platforms and social networks directly influence the consumer-brand relationship. Social media, which is all about building relationships and enabling conversations within the marketplace (Booth & Matic, 2011; Heinonen, 2011), creates a platform for this engagement. The launch of YouTube in 2005, promoting the sharing of video content, provided opportunities for video-blogging (vlogging) to large audiences (Wiseman, 2014). Through social media activities opinion leaders/influencers can engage with and stimulate the attitudes, decisions, and behaviours of their audience/followers (Watts & Dodds, 2007; Lyons & Henderson, 2005). Strong social relationships have been formed between users/followers through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram as well as YouTube (Hwang & Zhang, 2018). These parasocial relationships are psychological associations that the audience builds unilaterally with the performers (here vloggers), and their feelings reflect a real social relationship i.e. they are 'followers' (Dibble et al., 2016).

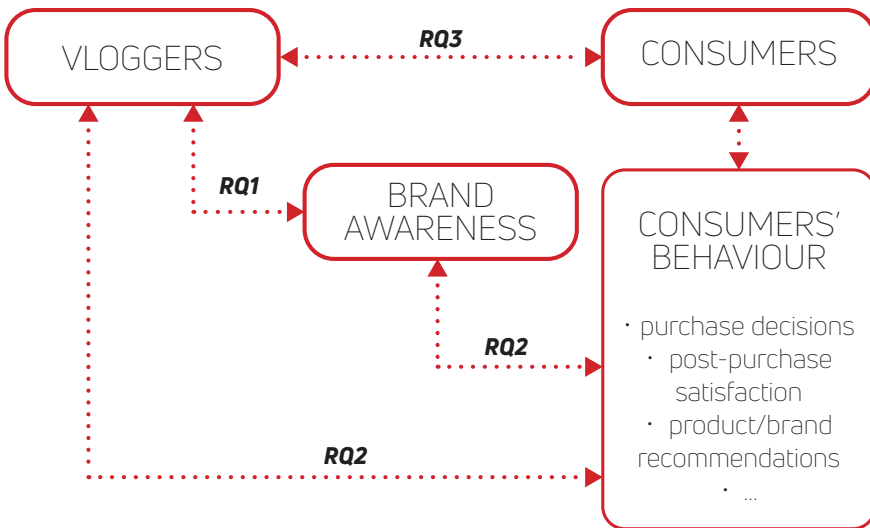
YouTube vloggers can be perceived as modern market mavens i.e. individuals who have information about many kinds of products, places, markets, and initiate discussions with consumers responding their requests (Feick & Price, 1987). Mavens are 'super-diffusers' of product information and stand as one of the most important groups of consumers to target with product and service information and particularly new product offerings. They are credible, objective and hence risk-reducing sources of product information as they introduce new ideas and norms to other consumers and hold considerably sway over their behaviours (Cleveland & Bartikowski, 2018). Firms can communicate marketing messages directly to influential consumers who in turn disseminate this information via frequent interactions with other consumers that seek and trust their advice about shopping and buying (Geissler & Edison 2005; Puspa & Kühl, 2006).

Vlogging entails various dynamics which contribute to the credibility of vloggers to their viewers. Vlogs are online publishing; anyone with web access and simple video production tools (a computer, camera, or a cell

phone with video capabilities) can create and post content (Molyneaux et al., 2008). Most vlogs are created by individuals or groups and focus on personal themes (Nardi et al., 2004). The use of video as a communication mode facilitates the process of personal identification, allows the reading of emotional expressions, aids with speech perception and enables viewers to read signals that express intimacy and power (Bruce, 1996). User generated content could contribute to stronger and quicker development of trust. This raises issues around eWOM, product and brand influence and endorsement (Jin & Phua, 2014). Therefore our first research question is:

RQ1: What is the role of vloggers as brand influencers?

Figure 1. Conceptual model



Source: own study.

The first research question is presented in our conceptual model addressing the mutual relationships between vloggers and viewers from the perspective of brand awareness and consumers' purchase behaviour (Figure 1). While conceptually we perceive vloggers' activities as the potential

source of brand awareness, we note that particular brands offer cooperation/endorsement to the chosen, already known, vloggers. Therefore we present this as a two-way relationship.

YouTube vloggers and consumer behaviour

There is general research on various aspects of brand equity (Anselmsson et al., 2016; Rybaczewska et al., 2020; Swoboda et al., 2013) and brand influencing on social media (e.g. Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Kavanaugh et al., 2006; Thakur, 2018), but research dedicated to YouTube vloggers as brand influencers is limited. Lee & Watkins (2016) examine how YouTube vloggers influence consumer perceptions of luxury brands but suggest that further exploration is needed. They note the significance of vloggers influencing consumer perceptions but also show why the context of analysis needs to be broadened. This paper contributes towards that.

Vloggers are opinion leaders (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Vivek et al., 2012) providing 'a new communication channel for brands'. Opinion leaders are 'Individuals with wide sets of personal connections' (Weimann, 1994) with 'connective communication tissue' to their audiences (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009) and building an influential voice and meaningful engagement with their audiences (Burgess & Green, 2018). These studies though focus primarily on the communication elements while the effects of the communication remain underexplored. In this paper we address the vloggers' influence on their audience's (purchase) behaviour (Fig 1) and thus our second research question is: *RQ2: How do vloggers influence consumers' (purchase) behaviour?*

While the purchase behaviour of consumers being viewers/subscribers can be influenced directly by the vloggers through their activities and indirectly by brand awareness (the mediator here) we placed RQ2 twice in the created conceptual model (Figure 1). Sometimes suggestions of the consumers/viewers/subscribers decide the vlogs content and therefore these relationships are captured as two-way ones.

YouTube vloggers as a credible source of information about brands and products

Market mavens influence other consumers' purchase decisions through interpersonal communication of general marketplace information (Stokburger-Sauer & Hoyer, 2007). YouTube vloggers present information to their viewers on brands they (apparently) have already consumed; portraying the image of genuine user opinions. They are known to the public and their identification is based upon elements such as admiration, association, or recognition (Kutthakaptan & Chokesamritpol, 2013). YouTube as a highly commercial platform based on content shared by the vlogger denotes that honesty and authenticity are appreciated and even demanded by the consumers. Due to the visual nature of the delivery of the content, the personality of the vlogger and body language are cues that viewers are interested in. Vloggers may be regarded as celebrities by their viewers/subscribers and thus their endorsements are considered as credible sources in generating positive eWOM regarding particular products and services (Spry et al., 2011; Boyd et al., 2014; Dwivedi et al., 2014). A two-way interpersonal relationship of vloggers with viewers is possible through the comments section, which acts to build credibility and trustworthiness. Most vloggers present themselves as regular persons with interests/passions that can be shared with the viewers (e.g. beauty, fashion) rather than someone of high status and wealth. Our goal is to investigate online activities and mutual interactions to identify the methods making vloggers-viewers/subscribers relationships credible and positioning the vloggers as a credible source of information for their audience (Fig 1). Consequently our third research question is:

RQ3: How do vloggers gain their credibility as a source of information about the brands and products?

Methodology

A mixed-method approach was adopted. The core of our research procedure was the qualitative non-participant observation of the real life activities and interactions between selected vloggers and their viewers (May – June 2018). To capture the broad perspective of YouTube vloggers we identified the vlog categories attracting many subscribers and among these categories we searched for vloggers involved in brands endorsement; dynamic interaction in terms of the viewers’ feedback was also another criteria while choosing the vlogs. Six popular vlog categories were chosen (Table 1), all activities were transcribed and the analysis was conducted from the perspectives of both vloggers and viewers. Analysis took the form of coding and theme development using Miles and Huberman’s reduction logic and cross-cases matrix approach (Huberman & Miles, 1994), based on the primary information contextualised within the secondary sources.

Table 1. Investigated vlogs – overall picture

Identifier	Type of vlog	Number of subscribers	Endorsed Brand/Product	Number of views and comments
Vlogger A	Beauty and Fashion	108K	Revlon superstay foundation	36760 views and 222 comments
Vlogger B	Travel	2.02M	Egypt	84256 views and 108 comments
Vlogger C	Parenting	1.82M	Hello Fresh	277059 views and 1781 comments
Vlogger D	How-to/ Tutorial	112K	Magic Eraser	13692 views and 106 comments
Vlogger E	Product, unboxing, product reviews	2.83M	Not specified	539000 views and 3373 comments
Vlogger F	Fitness	1.79M	Gymshark	452000 views and 632 comments

Source: own study.

Qualitative analysis was underpinned by the investigation of quantitative data gathered through online surveys targeted at both vloggers and viewers. The vloggers' email addresses were obtained from the most popular YouTube channels (the 'About' section within their YouTube pages) and viewers' email addresses were drawn from the researchers' personal contacts (followed by snowball sampling). Emails including the project description, participant's consent form and survey link were then sent directly from Bristol Online Survey. We asked the respondents (both vloggers and viewers) about their YouTube activity and chosen aspects of their consumer behaviour; vloggers and viewers questionnaires varied. The response rate among the viewers was far higher than among the vloggers (85% and 39% respectively). Finally we conducted an analysis of 85 questionnaires fulfilled by the viewers (58 females, 26 males, 1 undisclosed; the dominant age group was 21 – 25) and 28 of those submitted by vloggers (17 females, 11 males, 1 undisclosed; the dominant age group was 26 - 30).

The overall goal of this approach was to benefit from advantages of both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Bell et al., 2018) and to be able to contextualise the real-life qualitative data with the quantitative data concerning not only the viewers' but also vloggers' perspective.

Findings and Discussion

Non-participant vlogs observation

Qualitative data and analysis focused on the content vloggers post and the feedback they receive. Vlogs content is analysed according to three themes: brand/product endorsement recognition, endorsed brand/product experience, endorsed brand/product details (Table 2).

Table 2. Non-participant observation themes – selected results

Theme	Observation	
brand/product endorsement recognition	- Vlog title	'Revlon colorstay foundation' (vlogger A) 'Cleaning hacks using a magic eraser' (vlogger D)
	- Vlog introduction	'Today we are doing the Revlon colorstay foundation' (vlogger A) '...If you guys are a little bit familiar with Gymshark...' (vlogger F)
	- Announcing sponsors	(@experienceEgypt) as the sponsor of the vlog (vlogger B) Hello fresh as 'our friends' (vlogger C)
endorsed brand/product experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - applying make-up foundation on face while vlogging (vlogger A); - visiting different tourist sites and discovering the Egypt culture through food and interacting with local people (vlogger B); - providing a history of using Hello Fresh in their home and demonstrating - one recipe using the ingredients sent to them (vlogger C); - using the Magic eraser product around home (vlogger D); - unboxing several brands but spending more time on her favourite brands (vlogger E); - wearing Gym Shark clothing in the vlog and having more collections that she has reviewed, directing viewers to links on the description box (vlogger F) 	
endorsed brand/product details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'I have actually got a discount code so hit the link in the description box, use the discount code jamienikki30 and you'll get thirty dollars off your first week of Hello Fresh.' (vlogger C); - 'I am going to show you a few of my favourites, a lot of these I have already done a full review on, I will put the links in the description box below. This is all happening on the second of July online. I will leave all the timings the sale will go live in all time zones. I will give a huge thank you to anybody who chooses to shop through my links in the description box or on my Instagram page. Remember if you do that, you are choosing to support your girl' (vlogger F) 	

Source: own study.

Vloggers included endorsed brands/products in the vlog title (e.g. vlogger A: 'Revlon colorstay foundation', vlogger D: 'Cleaning hacks using a magic eraser') or the introduction (e.g. vlogger A 'Today we are doing the Revlon

colorstay foundation', vlogger F '...If you guys are a little bit familiar with Gymshark...'). Vloggers willingly announce their sponsors. Vlogger B highlights Egypt only as a destination on the title of the video but mentions the sponsor at the beginning of the vlog (@experienceEgypt). Vlogger C does not mention anything related to the brand on the title, but details of the brand are mentioned later in the video (he thanks Hello Fresh for sponsoring, referring to the brand as 'our friends'). This corresponds with the regulations requiring product placement recognition.

The endorsed brands/products experience theme exposed various approaches towards sampling and presenting the brand/products. All these approaches aim to present the brand/product experience in an attractive and innovative way, possible thanks to the particular social media channel (here YouTube). At the same time vloggers try to keep the experience adequate to the type of product/brand endorsed and consistent with the overall image of the vlogger, vlog and the product/brand. Experience is also presented in a way that is as reliable as possible e.g. often by contextualising it within the real-life circumstances (application while creating a vlog, real home environment etc.).

The third theme i.e. endorsed brand/product details revealed how vloggers provide information to their audience. Also in that context, details are aimed to be interesting and engaging. Above all, vloggers are trying to encourage the viewers to follow them i.e. to use/buy the endorsed brands/products and often provide the exact and specific recommendations how to do it. Vlogger A provides details of all the products she used in the vlog including other products used that are not being endorsed directly in the vlog (including the brand details, market descriptions, sellers' details etc.). Vlogger B emphasises the travel destination and contextualises the sponsors within the places presented. Vlogger C provides details of the brand on the description box including the discount code that the viewers can use. Vlogger D provides links to the products she has been using while cleaning around her home. These details are provided in the description box. Vlogger E has unboxed 21 different products in this vlog and has included the links on the description

box. Vlogger F also includes sale details including the sale prices, the time the sale opens in all different time zones. Being an online retailer the vlogger mentions an affiliate link on the description box and on her Instagram page.

According to our analysis of the viewers' perspective (Table 3) the most dynamic and brand related interaction took place in the context of Vlogger A (specific questions and comments (mostly positive but also negative) were observed e.g. 'Where can I get the Revlon foundation?', 'How much is this foundation?', 'I have heard good things about this foundation. I use Black Opal but definitely going to try this one.', 'I tried this and got rid of it, I prefer Maybelline Fit-Me... This just seem to sit on the skin for me and did not feel skin-like.') and Vlogger F (both positive (52%) and negative (18%) comments were observed e.g. 'Just bought so many things through your link. So excited to get these babies in the mail!!', 'Gymshark is always out of stock of everything I'm sick of them. But love you girl!'). Some vloggers tried to get viewers to share their feedback online but it very seldom or never addressed the endorsed brands (e.g. Vlogger C with only 4% of comments mentioning the Hello Fresh brand, still often in the negative context i.e. 'I love you guys but please enough with the HelloFresh promos already. It is like every day. It's a bit too much').

Table 3. The viewers' comments – overall picture

Identifier	Endorsed brand-related comments		Comments unrelated to the endorsed brands		Neutral/ Difficult to say
	positive	negative	positive	negative	
Vlogger A	45.9%	11.2%	17.3%	0.0%	25.6%
Vlogger B	40.6%	0.0%	34.4%	0.0%	25.0%
Vlogger C	3.5%	0.4%	89.5%	4.4%	2.2%
Vlogger D	62.0%	0.0%	6.0%	0.0%	32.0%
Vlogger E	53.0%	0.0%	47.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Vlogger F	52.0%	18.0%	15.0%	10.0%	5.0%

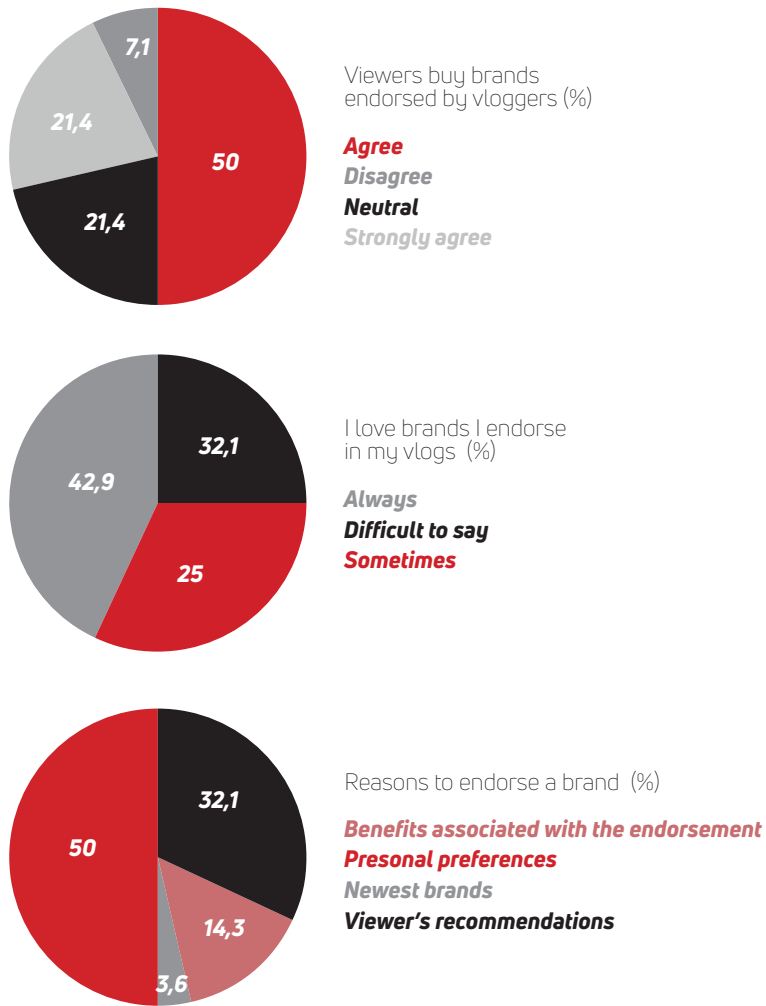
Source: own study.

Our findings confirm that the level of the viewers' engagement varies, evolves in numerous directions and is difficult for the vloggers to 'control'/address. It proves, though, the credibility and lack of censor of the online interaction. All the studied comments confirm the relationship aspects of the social media (Booth & Matic, 2011) and widen the understanding of vloggers specificity as opinion leaders (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014; Vivek et al., 2012).

Quantitative online survey

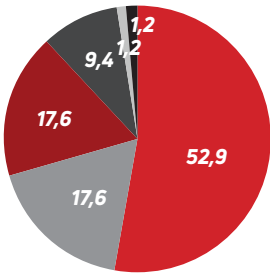
When vloggers were asked about their reasons to endorse a brand, 50% of them stated that their main motivation resulted from personal preferences and 32% emphasised viewers' recommendations (Figure 2). Benefits associated with the endorsement were chosen as the third reason (32% of respondents) and 'newest brands' were the last choice (3%). This corresponds with 42% of vloggers admitting that they love the brand they endorse (no one states that they rarely or never love the brand they endorse). Importantly for the focus of this paper, 57% of vloggers agree/strongly agree with the statement that viewers buy the brands/products endorsed by the vloggers (50% and 7% respectively). At the same time only 43% of vloggers disagreed or strongly disagreed with that (in both cases equally 21%).

Figure 2. Vloggers' perspective - chosen aspects



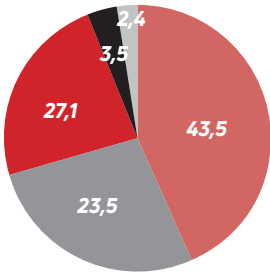
Source: own study.

Figure 3. Viewers' perspective – overall picture



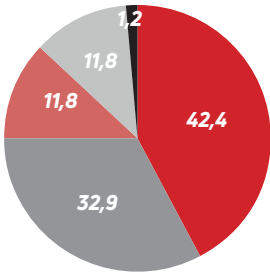
How was your perception of the endorsed brands different after watching a vlog? (%)

- Much more positive**
- More positive**
- Much more negative**
- More negative**
- The same**
- Difficult to say**



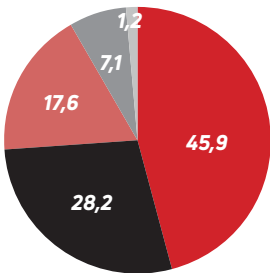
Do you buy products endorsed by vloggers? (%)

- Always**
- Sometimes**
- Rarely**
- Never**
- Never thought of it**



Vloggers love brands they endorse (%)

- Strongly agree**
- Agree**
- Neutral**
- Disagree**
- Strongly disagree**



How likely are you to recommend the brands endorsed by vloggers (%)

- Very likely**
- Likely**
- Unlikely**
- Very unlikely**
- Difficult to say**

Source: own study.

This was supported by the viewers (Figure 3) since only 2% of them have never thought of buying the brands/products endorsed by the vloggers. Additionally only 27% of the viewers have never bought the endorsed brands/products. At the same time 71% of the viewers do buy the endorsed brands/products always, sometimes or rarely. Moreover, the vast majority of viewers (64%) declares that they are likely or very likely to recommend the brands endorsed by the vloggers to their friends or family and only 8% of them states that they are unlikely or very unlikely to do that. In terms of the trustworthiness of vloggers it is important to note that over 54% of viewers agree or strongly agree with the statement that vloggers love brands they endorse and 33% of them have a neutral opinion. At the same time only 13% of viewers disagree or strongly disagree with this statement. Meaningfully, the vast majority of viewers (71%) admit that after watching a vlog they perceive the endorsed brand/product in a more/much more positive way, only 18% of them perceive it in the same way and 2% of viewers perceive it in a more/much more negative way (in both cases equally 1%).

Quantitative findings add another dimension and details to the aspects of admiration, association and recognition investigated by Kutthakaptan & Chokesamritpol (2013). They direct the attention into the perception of the motivation to endorse a brand contextualised within the personal circumstances of the vloggers and particular brand experience (while creating the content). Our results concerning the purchase decision aspects support the consumer-brand relationship building through social media discussed by De Veirman et al. (2017). Both research stages show that the real-life and declarative findings are consistent in the investigated field and correspond with the perception of vloggers as modern market mavens (Cleveland & Bartikowski, 2018).

Conclusions

Vloggers provide various information to their viewers (including those concerning the endorsed brands) in a specific and innovative way of short You-

Tube videos oriented towards mutual interaction (following their audiences' recommendations), which is appreciated by their viewers and underpins the overall credibility of the vloggers-viewers/subscribers relationship. Vloggers create a particular platform where subscribers come to their opinions based on their favourite vlogger's view contextualised within the feedback of other subscribers (as discussed by Spry et al., 2011, all eWOM aspects play their role here). Additionally their own recommendations and feedback are taken into consideration while creating the vlogs content in the future. Therefore the viewers-vloggers relationship becomes two-way and gains credibility (RQ3). The type of content was observed as being dependent on the vlogger's interests/vlogs category. This leads to important practical implications since not only the specific target group can be reached this way, but also the trustworthiness and power of the shared information is underpinned (RQ2 and RQ3). It corresponds also with the business practice to reach the specific vloggers as brand influencers (depending on such criteria like: the vlog category/type, popularity etc.).

Potential benefits of the vlogger-viewer two-way communication (RQ3) can be undermined though by a 'noise' connected with the real-life circumstances (e.g. when vlogger C's partner was unwell the comments shifted to wishing her well and the brand message was 'overlooked'). Therefore, despite the meaningful results from both viewers' and vloggers' perspectives suggesting close relatedness between the vlogs content/vloggers' recommendations and purchase behaviour of their audience (RQ2), there are business risks to be taken into consideration by marketers. It raises also doubts around ad-hoc decisions of brands to engage vloggers to their marketing activities – their personal circumstances are increasingly powerful from the point of view of the final results of their brand endorsement (in both positive and negative context).

Vloggers used different triggers to engage their viewers (e.g. discount codes, give-aways, a demonstration on how to use products, reviews ranging from positive to negative reviews). Our findings show that the power of all these depends on the vlog popularity and reputation i.e. credibility built

through the two-way interaction, allowing both positive and negative feedback and the perception of the motivation to endorse a specific brand for genuine reasons (RQ3). The possibility of capturing and sharing the innovative way of experiencing the brand (e.g. unboxing) positively affects not only the vlog attractiveness but also the interaction dynamics (RQ1 and RQ3). At the same time lots of details and specific instructions (how to, tutorials vlog here) increase the positive and brand-related feedback (RQ1). Taking into consideration the effects of this interaction and feedback on the credibility and therefore power of the vloggers' recommendations (RQ2) all these would be suggested as criteria for marketers while choosing the vlog to endorse a brand.

Limitations and Future Research

While our intention was to maximise the benefits of the mixed-method approach we acknowledge the limitations of the conducted research. Due to the practicalities and feasibility we were not able to analyse more than 6 vlogs while the non-participant observation. Quantitative data served here only as the context for the qualitative investigation. The wider group of respondents during the both stages of the study is planned in the future.

Furthermore, conducted research directed our attention into the view-viewer interaction on the vlogs platforms. It is a very dynamic and challenging (difficult to control) part of vlog marketing activities (including various eWOM aspects) which can be very influential in the analysed context and is still underexplored. It stays a task for the future research.

Conflict of Interest Statement

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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