COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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YouTube celebrity endorsement: audience evaluation of source attributes and response to sponsored content. A case study of influencer Verdeliss

Abstract

This article analyses follower response to the growing number of product endorsements present in YouTube videos published under the username "Verdeliss" by Estefanía Unzu Ripoll, Spain's most popular YouTube influencer on the topic of maternity and childcare. Results of a self-administered online survey of 949 Verdeliss followers focused on their individual evaluations of source attributes indicate that Unzu Ripoll's YouTube fans tend to buy products she endorses on the basis of her perceived likeability and expertise, and that the overall influence she exerts on their purchasing decisions is slight. In closing, the authors offer insights into how social media influencers can enhance the effectiveness of their online endorsements and identify tactics brands can employ to ensure that the influencers they collaborate with are optimally suited to promote their products.

Keywords
Source attributes, influencers, YouTubers, followers, audience research, audience response, celebrity endorsement.

1. Introduction

Social networking confers the status of influencer upon any individual willing to share his or her personal brand experience. Blogging platforms, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have given rise to a vast new army of online product endorsers. Influencer marketing strategies are increasingly focusing on brand-related content produced by bloggers, YouTubers, and celebrities rather than brands per se. Content marketing, which relies heavily on personalised, value-added content crafted to engage specific segments of today's highly fragmented consumer audience, offers something of interest to both brands and consumers in an otherwise saturated advertising market. Although YouTube may have started out as a showcase for amateur video producers, it has since become "a leading market tool used for product promotion by social media influencers" (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018).

The research reported here has focused on YouTuber Estefanía Unzu Ripoll (https://www.youtube.com/user/Verdeliss), a 33-year-old Spanish mother of seven who has

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successfully transformed her interest in sharing videos of herself, her husband and their children with friends and family into a full-blown career as a social media expert on child raising. Unzu Ripoll –known to her social media followers as Verdeliss– has posted over 700 videos about her personal experience as a mother on YouTube. With 1,817,000 followers, she she has attracted the largest fan base in Spain in her topic category. The two videos she posted documenting the birth of her fourth child have been viewed more than 20 and 11 million times respectively, and another focusing on the breastfeeding of her twins (the fruit of her fifth pregnancy) have been watched more than 12 million times. Her closest rival is the YouTube account Familia Coquetes (http://bit.ly/2P6YAnY), which as of March 2019 had slightly less than 822,000 followers (approximately 45% the size of Unzu Ripoll's follower community). The two most popular videos posted by Familia Coquetes have been viewed by 6.7 and 2.1 million times respectively –three times less than Unzu Ripoll's most successful videos.

Unzu Ripoll was chosen as the object of this study on the basis of the wide variety of paid endorsements included in the videos she has published under the name Verdeliss on YouTube over the past three year. Content analysis (Elorriaga & Monge, 2018) was used to categorise the first 606 videos she has uploaded to this platform into four distinct phases. Approximately one out of four of the videos she shared with followers during the first three phases of her career as a vlogger and influencer featured brand name products, none of which were paid product endorsements. In contrast, almost half of the videos posted to her account during the fourth and most recent phase highlighted brand name products, 80% of which corresponded to commercial endorsement agreements. The range of items she endorsed during this period, which was not limited to toys and childcare products, included food items, cleaning products, pharmaceutical and parapharmaceutical products, apparel and even construction materials and holiday destinations. The household environment in which videos featured on the Verdeliss YouTube account are almost invariably shot provides an ideal setting for the promotion of practically any kind of product routinely purchased by the family (the principal consumer unit in Spain). By opting to implement a monetisation strategy, Unzu Ripoll has progressively exposed her followers to an increasing number of paid endorsements.

Schwemmer and Ziewiecki have recently noted that social influencers who focus on cosmetics and/or beauty products frequently include paid endorsements in their YouTube videos (2018). This study, in contrast, has explored three facets of influencer vlogging in a far different category (maternity and childcare): how a particular influencer located in Spain has managed to strike promotional agreements with major brands such as Carrefour, Mercadona, Dodot, Coca-Cola, Duracell, Lay's as well as wide variety of lesser-known companies; the reaction of this influencer's followers to the growing number of product promotions contained in her videos; and the actual influence she exerts as an information source on these individuals' purchasing decisions.

This research has been undertaken to gauge the power of social media influencers to sway their audiences by means of a case study of one particular online influencer active in Spain (Estefanía Unzu Ripoll, known on YouTube as Verdeliss) and follower reaction to content she has shared via that platform over the past three years. The following five specific research questions were formulated at the outset of this project:

RQ 1: What attributes do followers associate with this source?
RQ 2: How do followers feel about the inclusion of product endorsements in videos?
RQ 3: What factors trigger negative reactions to influencer endorsements?
RQ 4: What impact do source attributes have on followers' purchasing decisions?
RQ 5: What insights could companies interested in using YouTube influencers to promote their products gain from a case study of Verdeliss?

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2. Literature review

2.1. *Source attributes in persuasion*

Meta-analysis (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993) indicates that source attributes constitute but a minor factor in an influencer's ability to persuade (accounting for less than 10% of variance). Existing literature abounds in studies focused on determining the attributes that make influencers successful (Erdogan, 1999; Bergkvist & Zho, 2016). The attributes the majority of experts agree carry the greatest weight are:

1. Trustworthiness: Erdogan *et al.* (2001) define this trait as "the honesty, integrity and credibility of the endorser." The degree to which an audience trusts a brand endorser's judgement is probably the leading factor in his or her ability to pitch a product. The issue of trust is especially crucial in situations in which marketers seek to overcome negative sentiment towards a brand. Trustworthiness is a very important attribute of a good endorser (Cheong & Morrison, 2008). Various authors have established a link between endorsers' perceived credibility and approachability and their ability to generate parasocial interaction (PSI), a one-way form of communication typical of social media marketing that gives followers a false sensation of closeness to people they admire or idolise and renders them susceptible to these individuals' opinions and recommendations (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011; Knoll *et al.*, 2015). Bergkvist *et al.* (2016) have recently observed that consumer perceptions regarding a celebrity's motives for endorsing a product or brand have a strong impact on their belief in that person's credibility.

2. Expertise: A celebrity's relevant knowledge, experience and skill greatly determine his or her ability to successfully endorse a given product or brand. The higher the level of celebrities' knowledge about the products they endorse, the more inclined audiences are to view them as credible sources (Amos *et al.*, 2008).

3. Attractiveness: In the context of marketing, attractiveness is key to the transfer of an endorser's appeal to the brand being endorsed (Eisen & Langer, 2010; Lord & Putrevu, 2009). The attractiveness of product spokespeople is not limited to their physical appearance; it is also related to the degree to which audiences identify with them in terms of gender, age and lifestyle. People are more easily influenced by others they perceive as being similar to themselves in one way or another than by those with whom they have nothing in common. Familiarity and empathy are strong factors in determining an endorser's ability to persuade others (Ohanian, 1991; McGuire, 1985). Silvera and Austad (2004) have found that variables requiring relatively little cognitive processing such as the physical attractiveness of an endorser and receptors' attitudes regarding an endorser play a stronger role in the formation of a target audience's attitudes toward the product.

4. Fit: Another factor that has an impact on an influencer's effectiveness is the degree to which he or she exemplifies the image a brand is looking to project. Product match-up theory addresses the element of similarity required to create cohesive associations between endorsers and the products they promote. According to this theory, the credibility and persuasiveness of advertising messages hinge upon the level of congruence and consistency between the characteristics of spokespeople and the attributes of the products they endorse (Kamins and Gupta, 1994; Lynch and Schuler, 1994). The qualities of spokespeople must therefore "match up" with the attributes, characteristics, and images of the products they promote. Choosing the right celebrity to represent a product can generate positive feelings about that product and make an advertisement much more effective (Kamins, 1990). Recent studies have found that congruence between a celebrity endorser's image and a consumer's idealized image of his or herself increases the effectiveness of endorsements (Choi & Rifon, 2012) and that

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congruence between brand personalities and the personalities of celebrity endorsers has a positive effect on purchase intention (Pradhan *et al.*, 2015) and brand attitude (McCormick, 2016).

5. Followers: Another factor key to influencers' power to persuade is the size of their social media follower communities. The number of followers an influencer is capable of attracting is a measure of his or her perceived likeability and popularity (Quercia *et al.*, 2011; De Veirman *et al.*, 2017). Experts are nevertheless divided on this issue. Whereas some perceive a clear link between follower numbers and opinion leadership (Yoganarasimhan, 2012; Feng, 2016; Hwang, 2015), others assert that follower numbers can be taken as indicators of an endorser's popularity, but not necessarily of his or her power to persuade (Cha *et al.*, 2010; Romero *et al.*, 2011).

A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of celebrity endorsers in advertising conducted by Amos *et al.* (2008) found that consumers were especially drawn to celebrities they are familiar with and perceive as likeable.

2.2. *Social media influencers as the new celebrities*

Content marketing is progressively chipping away at the territory traditionally dominated by corporate marketing teams. Celebrity spokespeople now compete with social media personalities adept at connecting with consumers in specific areas and acutely aware of their ability to influence their followers' consumer behaviour (Carter, 2016).

Influencer identification and relationship management has become an essential aspect of the work carried out by corporate communication departments and a number of experts, building upon the well-established concept of customer relationship management, now speak of "influencer relationship management (IRM)" (Greve & Schlüschen, 2018). Influencers are previously unknown individuals who become celebrities in their own right by attracting large online communities of followers interested in the topics they address. According to Diaz (2017), influencers can be divided into three basic categories based on the number of followers they manage to attract: celebrity influencers, social media influencers and microinfluencers. Social media influencers are individuals whose reputation and notoriety are based solely on their self-proclaimed expertise on a particular subject. Microinfluencers have a similar profile but exert influence over smaller audiences.

Influencers are Instagrammers, YouTubers, and bloggers, etc. whose status as authorities is based on the recognition afforded them by members of online communities that coalesce around a common interest (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). The digital content they produce, which focuses heavily on their daily lives, personal experiences and opinions, can have a significant impact on follower behaviour and attitudes (Liu *et al.*, 2015). Influencers employ the full spectrum of social media formats to get their messages across, from blogs and vlogs to more concise forms of digital communication such as SnapChat and Instagram (De Veirman *et al.*, 2017).

People follow social media influencers for a variety of motives that range from a desire to emulate a particular influencer's lifestyle or keep up with the latest trends to the longing to be a member of a community they identify with. Fans have been known to snap up all available stocks of products influencers have recommended on the basis of personal preference or product endorsement agreements. The dynamics of these online relationships are grounded in followers' eagerness to replicate aspects of an influencer's lifestyle they perceive as exhilarating but affordable. Millennials find this new form of entertainment more engaging than television, which they have abandoned in masse in favour of other media.

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2.3. *Effectiveness of influencer endorsement*

Celebrities' value to advertisers varies according to the type of product they are asked to promote. "Celebrity endorsers work best when image is important and/or it is difficult to differentiate a brand on a functional or performance basis… Products such as apparel, cosmetics, personal care items and jewellery are categories that lend themselves to the use of celebrity endorsers, while functional products such as consumer electronics, pharmaceuticals, or business-related products and services should be less likely to rely on the use of a celebrity endorser" (Belch & Belch, 2013). Industries like cosmetics and apparel are a natural match for influencers (Lieber, 2014; Forbes, 2016). A content analysis of more than 139,000 videos posted on German YouTube channels between 2009 and 2017 conducted by Schwemmer and Ziewiecki (2018), which found that the bulk of marketing content disseminated and shared via that platform was related to apparel and beauty products, confirms this notion.

Another interesting study that analysed the factors predicting the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements concluded that consumer perceptions as to whether an endorser truly likes a product he or she is promoting have a significant impact on their attitudes towards a product (Silvera & Austad, 2004). Several studies have compared the effectiveness of social media versus traditional media. Westenberg (2016) has suggested that "teenagers feel more attracted to YouTubers than traditional TV celebrities" and that "they imitate things YouTubers do, such as wearing the same clothes and make-up."

Despite increasing industry interest in using social media influencers as a brand communication tool, Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández (2019) point out that many facets of the subject have yet to be fully explored. The results of a survey of 280 followers they conducted to determine online influencers' effectiveness in swaying others to purchase the brands they endorse demonstrated that "the perceived influential power of digital influencers not only helps to generate engagement but also increases expected value and behavioural intention regarding the recommended brands. Moreover, brand engagement in self-concept raises brand expected value and both variables also affect the intention to purchase recommended brands."

In their study of sponsored content in Blogs, Hughes, Swaminathan and Brooks (2019) observe "little is known about the factors that drive success of online brand engagement at different stages of the consumer purchase funnel." Their research nevertheless indicates "when a sponsored post occurs on a blog, high blogger expertise is more effective when the advertising intent is to raise awareness versus increase trial."

In any case, a growing number of academic studies are examining the reaction of digital audiences to paid endorsements and other forms of digital marketing. Despite its relative novelty, this issue is nonetheless a big concern for brands, which have begun to work with influencers without the benefit of any hard information concerning the effectiveness of such collaborations.

3. Methodology

3.1. *Questionnaire*

Data was gathered by means of a self-administered survey conducted during February 2018. Study participants were recruited via a forum devoted to Verdeliss hosted on cotilleando.com, an online chat platform whose name signifies "gossping.com" in English that at the time of this study contained over 1,000 pages of user conversations about the videos posted to this YouTube account (a number that has since risen to more than 6,000). This forum was selected on the basis of its high activity level, which suggested (correctly, taking into account the number of responses received) the existence of a large community. Researchers contacted the forum administrator, who agreed to distribute survey questionnaires to participants.

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A Google Forms survey questionnaire created for the study was previously tested on a group of twelve Verdeliss followers to ensure that questions posed were clear and understandable. Respondents were interviewed to assess the validity of the questionnaire and identify points requiring modification. Once the required adjustments had been made, researchers simultaneously posted two identical invitations to participate in the survey in different zones of the forum. No compensation for collaboration was offered other than the promise that survey results would be shared via the same thread in which the invitation to participate in the study had been posted.

3.2. *Sample*

Our call for collaboration generated 12,500 views and 949 valid responses to the questionnaire, a 7.6% of response rate from a worst-scenario perspective that assumes each view corresponded to a different unique user. However, in view of the probability that individuals may have viewed our call for participation 2 or 3 times, we calculate that the response rate was more likely to have been somewhere between 15.2 and 22.3%. The call for collaboration was issued only once. The questionnaire was accessible for 10 days, a period well suited to an asynchronous mode of communication such as an Internet forum. In line with averages for online surveys, half of the responses received were filed within 36 hours of the release of the questionnaire.

If compared to that of telephone surveys, this response rate could be considered low and its results potentially prone to non-response bias (a phenomenon that can occur when the opinions or characteristics of non-responders are significantly different from those of those of survey participants). While low response rate is a common problem in online surveys, it should be noted that low response rates do not automatically lead to non-response bias (Keeter *et al*., 2000; Groves, 2006). A metanalysis of 59 surveys concluding that "some surveys with low nonresponse rates have estimates with high relative nonresponse bias" (Groves *et al*., 2008) provides an indication that a high response rate does not necessarily constitute a watertight guarantee against non-response bias. Hellevik (2016) even found scientific value in an extreme case, a mail survey with a response rate as low as 4%. Due to the size and widespread distribution of the follower community in question, this kind of non-probabilistic convenience sampling was the only viable option available; not even Estefanía Unzu Ripoll, the owner of Verdeliss account, would have been in a position to track her entire community in a way that would have facilitated the use of a probabilistic sampling method. This convenience sampling approach has been widely applied in studies of consumer and follower behaviour (some examples being Jiménez-Castillo *et al*., 2019; Casaló *et al*., 2018; Han, 2013; Hsu *et al*., 2013).

The majority of the replies were from women (98.6%), 95.2% of whom resided in Spain. The mean age of the study population was 30.2+-7.4. Well over half of the respondents (59.1%) claimed to be employed at the time of the survey. Given that the majority fell into the 23–38 age bracket, it was assumed that a certain percentage of those unemployed were students. Mothers and expectant women accounted for 37.9% and 6.4% of the sample population, respectively. The other 55.6% were childless.

In terms of the social media channels through which participants followed Unzu Ripoll, 84% used YouTube (the platform to which she devotes the greatest effort), 57.7% Instagram, 20.2% via Facebook and 7.7% Twitter. In terms of engagement, 36.9% claimed to have watched practically all of her videos, 11.2% at least half and 5.6% at least a quarter, 20.7% watched them occasionally and 25.7% stated that they watched them in the past but no longer do. As answers from respondents stating that they had never watched any of Verdeliss's videos (less than 15 in total) were excluded from the study, the terms "audience" and "followers" have been used interchangeably in this paper to refer to questionnaire respondents. It is interesting to note that even those respondents who stated they no longer watch Verdeliss videos nonetheless

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continue to participate in Internet forum discussions focused on the vlogger's life and content published about her.

When asked whether they considered themselves fans or detractors, 21.8% of respondents identified themselves as detractors and 3.5% as avid fans. The overwhelming majority either considered themselves neutral (49.0%) or had never given the issue much thought (25.7%). A review of comments posted on the cotilleando.com forum revealed that many of them were of a critical nature. As individuals interested in criticising Unzu Ripoll may be more apt to participate in this forum than devoted supporters, it is not possible to assume that the ratio of detractors to fans and neutral followers on this platform reflects the composition of her follower community as a whole. Hate mongering is, however, an undeniable facet of social networking. Given that detractors, who represent a small but extremely active minority of social media users, target practically all social media profiles maintained by public figures and celebrities, the possibility that the ratio of detractors to other types of users on the cotilleando.com platform reflects the actual composition of the Verdeliss follower base cannot be ruled out. The public exposure of one's private family life is bound to generate all kinds of reactions, including criticism from others with differing viewpoints and values. A quick comparison between the percentages of negative comments posted to the Verdeliss YouTube account and those made in the cotilleando.com forum revealed that far more comments of this nature are made in the context of the forum. However, given the fact that Estefanía Unzu Ripoll serves as the moderator of what appears publicly on her YouTube account, one cannot rule out the possibility that she suppresses what she considers to be disparaging comments.

Following the advice of Armstrong and Overton (1977), we performed a t-test for independent samples comparing the first half of the responses received with the second. Division was made on the basis of the chronological order in which participants took the survey. This exercise revealed some minor but significant differences regarding the attitudes of respondents in each group and their evaluations of Unzu Ripoll as a source. Although no difference ($p > 0.05$) was detected between the two halves of the sample in terms of demographic characteristics such as age, nationality, employment or maternity), the first half of the sample contained a slightly higher percentage of detractors than the second (27.4% compared to 16.2%). This discrepancy was discernible in the somewhat more negative evaluations of certain source attributes (similarity, liking, expertise) made by the first group, which was also more critical of the rise in the number of product endorsements featured in Verdeliss videos. This difference suggests that participants holding markedly negative opinions (often referred to in such a context as "haters") were quicker to respond than others. Conducting this test helped establish the scale of the phenomenon (around +/- 5%). Detractors' points of view have been addressed, when appropriate, in the results and conclusions.

4. Results

4.1. *What source attributes do followers associate with Verdeliss?*

Survey participants were asked to respond to statements linking Unzu Ripoll to classic source attributes (similarity, physical attractiveness, familiarity, likeability, respect, trustworthiness and expertise) using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Table 1 provides a breakdown of follower perceptions on each point for the sample as a whole (n=949), the portion that described themselves as detractors (n=207) and the rest: devoted supporters, neutral followers and those whose had never considered this question (n=742).

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Table 1: Follower assessment of vlogger source attributes and expertise in a variety of product categories: mean, standard deviation, and percentage of top 2 response categories to statements "I agree" + "I wholly agree." Participants were asked to respond to on a five-point Likert scale.

	Mean ± SD (top 2 response categories percentage)		
	Total (n=949)	Detractors (n=207)	Rest (n=742)
Similarity	1.92±0.92 (6.6%)	1.42±0.65 (1.5%)	2.06±0.93 (8.1%)
Physical attractiveness	2.80±1.06 (28.2%)	2.2±1.07 (14.5%)	2.94±1.02 (32.0%)
Familiarity	3.29±1.17 (51.1%)	3.48±1.17(56.5%)	3.23±1.16 (49.6%)
Likeability	2.21±1.10 (14.3%)	1.4±0.6(1%)	2.43±1.10 (18%)
Respect	2.96±1.24 (26.0%)	2.1±1.12(12.6%)	3.20+-1.17 (42.5%)
Trustworthiness	2.53±1.37 (26.5%)	2.19±1.47(22.2%)	2.62±1.33 (27.8%)
Expertise: Food products	2.04±1.11 (13.6%)	1.29±0.59(0.5%)	2.25±1.13 (16.0%)
Expertise: Cleaning products	2.23±1.13 (14.5%)	1.57±0.84 (2.4%)	2.41±1.13 (18%)
Expertise: Books	2.29±1.19 (17.2%)	1.60±0.87(3.4%)	2.49±1.19 (21.0%)
Expertise: Toys	2.63±1.23 (27.1%)	1.96±1.06 (7.3%)	2.82±1.20 (32.6%)
Expertise: Cosmetics	1.60±0.88 (4.8%)	1.09±0.28(0.0%)	1.75±0.94 (6.2%)
Expertise: Holiday destinations	1.94±1.04 (9.5%)	1.37±0.69(1.4%)	2.10±1.07 (11.8%)
Expertise: Pharmaceutical and parapharmaceutical products	2.05±1.08 (11.2%)	1.54±0.81(2.4%)	2.9±1.10 (13.6%)
Expertise: NGOs	1.97±1.17 (12.9%)	1.23±0.59(1.4%)	2.18±1.20 (16.0%)
Expertise: Apparel	1.71±0.93 (5.3%)	1.20±0.46(0.0%)	1.85±0.98 (6.9%)
Expertise: Decoration	1.85±1.01 (7.9%)	1.31±0.63 (1.0%)	2.00±1.04 (9.8%)
Expertise: Websites	1.78±0.97 (6.9%)	1.32±0.63 (1.0%)	1.90±1.01 (8.6%)
Expertise: Childcare products	2.56±1.33 (27.6%)	1.81±1.01(6.8%)	2.76±1.33 (33.4%)

Source: Own elaboration.

As Table 1 indicates, detractors (who accounted for 21.8% of the sample) gave Unzu Ripoll the lowest scores recorded in almost every category except familiarity. The majority of their ratings on other points rarely surpassed 2 on a scale of five possible responses. It was somewhat paradoxical that this segment of the sample population claimed to be more familiar with (know more about) the vlogger than others: 3.48±1.17 compared to 3.23±1.16, a significant difference (p-value =0.007 in an unpaired Student t-test).

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Generally speaking, respondents considered familiarity to be Unzu Ripoll's most outstanding attribute. Respect and physical attractiveness were the next most noted characteristics, although detractors gave her lower marks on these two points than other survey participants. The categories in which followers felt the vlogger demonstrated the highest levels of knowledge and authority were childcare products (2.76±1.33 [33.4%]), toys (2.82±1.20 [32.6%]) and, to a lesser degree, cleaning products (2.41±1.13 [18%]) and books (2.49±1.19 [21.0%]).

Is Unzu Ripoll's ability to attract over 1,800,000 followers related to her attributes as an endorser? An analysis of respondent ratings –which in most categories were average at best, even when detractor evaluations were factored out– indicates that familiarity is her strongest drawing card. Even her detractors claim to know a lot about her. She does not, however, inspire the level of fanaticism existing literature generally associates with celebrity endorsers. Although her followers see her as an accessible and familiar personality, they do not identify with her on a personal level, regard her as being an exceptionally credible source or consider her someone they admire or look up to.

4.2. *How do followers feel about the inclusion of product endorsements in videos and what factors trigger negative reactions to influencer endorsements?*

Although the overwhelming majority (82%) of survey participants stated they had occasionally felt uncomfortable with product endorsements contained in Verdeliss videos, there was significant variation within the sample on this point (p<0.000 in a chi-square distribution with three degrees of freedom) that ran from a high of 98.1% among detractors to a low of 21.2% among unconditional fans. Percentages of respondents who claimed to be neutral (80.0%) or had never given the issue much thought (78.7%) corresponded more closely to the mean.

Table 2 provides a breakdown of participants' motives for feeling uncomfortable with product endorsements contained in Verdeliss videos.

Table 2: Followers' motives for feeling uncomfortable with product endorsements in Verdeliss videos: mean, standard deviation, and percentage of top 2 response categories to statements "I agree" + "I wholly agree." Participants were asked to respond to on a five-point Likert scale.

Reason	Mean±SD (top 2 response categories percentage)
Products were presented in a forced manner.	4.56±0.89 (92.1%)
Commercial brand name products were featured too often.	4.48±0.93 (91.2%)
Verdeliss promotes products in areas in which she has little or no expertise.	4.39±0.98 (86.9%)
Brand promotion should not be a feature of videos in which her children appear.	3.98±1.24 (68.3%)
I do not like advertising in general.	3.75±1.13 (63.3%)
Verdeliss should not be monetising her videos.	3.15±1.17 (36.0%)
I am already familiar with products featured and would prefer to watch videos featuring products I know nothing about.	2.51±1.23 (17.7%)

Source: Own elaboration.

As Table 2 shows, followers' three top complaints about the advertising aspects of Verdeliss videos were that marketing pitches felt forced (92.1%, top 2 response categories percentage),

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product endorsements appeared in too many videos (91.2%) and that the vlogger promoted products in categories in which she has little or no expertise (86.9%). The percentage of respondents who agreed strongly with these three statements was much higher than the percentage that seconded the more generic assertion "I do not like advertising in general" (63.3%). While the majority of Unzu Ripoll's followers appear to acknowledge her right to monetise the videos she uploads (only 36% stated that she shouldn't), many had problems with the way in which she promotes brand products. An overwhelming number of respondents felt that brand products appeared too frequently in her videos (about half contain at least one product endorsement) and that too many of the products she promotes fall into categories in which they do not consider her to be an authority. Although her followers view her as a credible source of information regarding toys and childcare products, they are more sceptical about her expertise in other areas such as cosmetics and apparel. Particularly striking was the high percentage of followers stating that products were presented in a forced manner.

The public exposure of Unzu Ripoll's children in videos featuring product endorsements was a recurring theme of discussion in the forum from which the sample was drawn. Numerous forum participants felt that family videos should not be used as vehicles for hawking brand name products. The percentage of respondents claiming to be disturbed by the inclusion of marketing content in family videos (68.3%) was nevertheless significantly lower than the percentages of those citing the other reasons noted above.

Celebrity endorsements tend to do more for new products than well-established ones (Beerli & Martín, 2009). As only 17.7% of survey participants complained that Unzu Ripoll promoted products they already knew about, the familiarity of products featured in her videos does not seem to be a major motive for viewer dissatisfaction with product endorsements.

4.3. *What impact do followers' perceptions of source attributes have on their purchasing decisions?*

Analysis indicated that 10.5% (n=100) of the survey sample had "purchased at least one product Unzu Ripoll had endorsed in a video." Although it might appear humble at first, this percentage represents over 180,000 consumers who have acted consciously on her advice, which is not a bad track record.

Percentages vary significantly (p<0.000 in a chi-squared test with three degrees of freedom) for sub-groups within the sample population. Although an impressive 33.3% of serious fans claimed to have purchased an endorsed product, this segment accounted for only a small percentage of the total survey population (n=33). The percentage of followers claiming to have neutral feelings towards Unzu Ripoll that purchased an endorsed product was more or less in line with the mean (10.3%) for the sample and that of detractors and followers who had never examined their feelings toward her slightly lower (9.2% and 9.0% respectively). It is interesting to note that declared detractors were only slightly less likely to purchase endorsed products than followers claiming to have no firm opinion about her. In practice, they were almost as susceptible to influencer marketing as the survey mean (10.5%, or around 14% more).

Survey respondents' feelings about the presence of endorsements in Verdeliss videos did, however, affect their likelihood of purchasing sponsored products. There was a significant gap between the proportion of followers who had no problem with endorsements and the proportion of those who had felt uncomfortable with this form of monetisation (p<0,002 in a Pearson's chi-square test) when it came to purchasing an item endorsed: almost twice as many members of the first group (17%) bought endorsed products than the second (9%). Given that only 18% of survey participants stated they felt comfortable with the way Unzu Ripoll handled product endorsement, this is an area in which she might want to polish her skills. By changing her approach to presentation, she might well be able to reduce her followers' current level of resistance to endorsements and double the percentage that buy items she recommends.

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There was also a significant variation (p=0.002 in a chi-square test with two degrees of freedom) between the inclinations of mothers and childless women to buy products featured in videos: 15.0% of survey respondents with children claimed to have purchased an endorsed product compared to 8.0% of those who were childless and 6.6% of those who were expecting a baby. The fact that mothers bought twice as many endorsed products than the rest is not surprising considering that most (although not all) of the items featured in Verdeliss videos are in a broad sense related to maternity and childcare.

The engagement level of followers also appears to affect their inclination to purchase products endorsed. Findings indicate that 17.1% of respondents claiming to have watched practically all of the videos Unzu Ripoll had posted to her Verdeliss account had purchased a product she had recommended, compared to 7.5% of those who had watched about half, 11.3% of those who had watched a quarter, 5.1% of those who watched them from time to time and 6.6% of those who watched them in the past but no longer do. This significant difference (chi-square with four degrees of freedom, p=0.000) suggests that the more videos followers watched, the more likely they were to be swayed by the marketing pitches they contained.

The next logical step was to search for links between the types of products followers purchased and their opinions regarding Unzu Ripoll's expertise in each category. The table below provides a breakdown of the percentages of respondents claiming to have purchased an endorsed item (n=100) in each product category and purchaser and general survey population ratings of Unzu Ripoll's expertise in these areas. Due to their tendency to downplay the vlogger's expertise across the board, ratings provided by individuals identifying themselves overtly as detractors were not taken into account.

Table 3: Percentage of buyer segment of survey population to purchase products endorsed by Unzu Ripoll in each category and ratings of her expertise in these areas by purchasers and general sample population (detractors excluded).

	Percentage of purchasers in survey population that bought endorsed items (breakdown by product category)	Purchaser ratings of vlogger's expertise in each product category	Study population (excl. detractors) ratings of vlogger's expertise in each product category (top 2 response categories percentage)
Food products	30%	3.20	2.25+-1.13 (16.0%)
Cleaning products	45%	3.22	2.41+-1.13 (18%)
Books	19%	3.68	2.49+-1.19 (21.0%)
Toys	24%	3.54	2.82+-1.20 (32.6%)
Cosmetics	10%	3.60	1.75+-0.94 (6.2%)
Holiday destinations	3%	5.00	2.10+-1.07 (11.8%)
Pharmaceutical and parapharma. products	18%	3.50	2.19+-1.10 (13.6%)
NGOs	7%	4.00	2.18+-1.20 (16.0%)
Apparel	6%	2.83	1.85+-0.98 (6.9%)
Decoration	4%	3.25	2.00+-1.04 (9.8%)
Websites/Apps	10%	3.70	1.90+-1.01 (8.6%)
Childcare products	29%	3.93	2.76+-1.33 (33.4%)

Source: Own elaboration.

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As indicated above, the categories in which unconditional fans were most apt to purchase endorsed products –cleaning products (45%) food products (30%), childcare products (29%), toys (24%) and books (18%)– coincided with those in which the study population in general accorded Unzu Ripoll the highest levels of expertise, although this segment ranked her authority in these areas on a scale of 1 to 5 in a slightly different hierarchical order (toys 2.82, baby products 2.76, books 2.49, cleaning products 2.41 and food products 2.25). Generally speaking, followers who bought endorsed products gave the YouTuber ratings for expertise in the categories corresponding to their purchases above the mean for the sample as a whole. This was especially true in the case of categories in which an extremely limited number of followers made purchases such as holiday destinations (3%) –three followers had followed her advice gave her the highest possible rating (five on a scale of 1 to 5)– and NGOs –seven followers had made donations gave her an average rating of 4.5 on a scale of 1 to 5.

The final step of this study involved a logistic binary regression to identify relationships between source attributes and product purchases, product purchases being the binary (1= has purchased / 0=has not purchased something by recommendation of Verdeliss) dependent variable.

Although a statistically significant model could be created using a stepwise selection method with entry testing based on the significance of the score statistic and removal testing based on the probability of the Wald statistic, the main reason that this was possible is the size of the sample. Considering the low values of the R-squared of Cox & Snell (0.073) or the R-squared of Nagelkerke (0.148) of the final model, it can be concluded that the influence of source factors in purchase decisions is rather slight.

Table 4: Logistic binary regression identifying the relationship between the perceived likeability and expertise of the source and followers' purchase of recommended products.

Step	Log-likelihood	Cox and Snell R-square	Nagelkerke R-square
1	592.490	0.048	0.098
2	575.275	0.065	0.133
3	567.641	0.073	0.148

Coefficients of the final model

	B	Standard error	Wald	gl	Sig.	Exp(B)
Likeability	0.354	0.106	11.159	1	0.001	1.424
Expertise: Websites/Apps	0.305	0.121	6.355	1	0.012	1.357
Expertise: Childcare products	0.301	0.109	7.719	1	0.005	1.352
Constant	-4.533	0.353	164.813	1	0.000	0.011

Three characteristics of the source were closely examined during this phase of the study: her perceived likeability (measured in terms of respondents' grade of agreement with the statement "I consider Verdeliss one of my favourites") and her expertise in two fields related with her activity that were considered separate variables (childcare products and website/apps). While websites and apps would not appear at first glance to be related to childcare, the area in which Unzu Ripoll has carved out a niche as a self-proclaimed expert, her relative technical savvy as an online influencer and her YouTube reviews of apps related to pregnancy made this a category worthy of scrutiny.

As meta-analysis has revealed expertise to be the most crucial source attribute in persuasion (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993), it is not surprising that 2 of the 3 selected variables were related to expertise. Nevertheless, the low R-square values of the model suggest that source characteristics have a very limited impact on purchase decisions (explaining only about 15% of the variance in our case).

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5. Discussion and insights for companies

It is necessary to underscore the limited scope of this study, which has focused exclusively on the audience of a single YouTuber. Although Estefanía Unzu Ripoll has achieved a substantial level of popularity (1.8 million followers) and the size of the sample analysed (n=949) is quite reasonable, the type of videos this influencer publishes cannot be considered mainstream YouTube content. Unzu Ripoll's videos are devoted to the daily reality of motherhood rather than gameplays, challenges, pranks or humorous monologues, and her focus is maternity and childcare, a topic far-removed from the run-of-the mill content that YouTubers tend to upload, which tends to be light and entertainment oriented. Her choice of, and fidelity to, a topic not addressed by many other YouTubers may help explain her success in building and maintaining a large fan base and attracting brand names interested in working with online endorsers. Although our findings cannot be generalized, the trends revealed by the data presented here may also be valid for YouTubers focusing on other subjects. Additional data on other audiences would obviously be needed to confirm this conjecture.

Another limitation of these findings to be kept in mind is the fact that the opportunity to participate in the survey conducted for this study was not directly extended to all of Unzu Ripoll's 1.8 million YouTube followers, but rather only those who comment on the content she publishes via a forum maintained on the website cotilleando.com, a circumstance that gives rise to the possibility that the sample may contain a higher percentage of detractors than her overall audience. Although the authors have sought to address the differing perspective of detractors whenever relevant, this issue must nevertheless be taken into account.

In any case, the findings of this study do not reveal a scenario in which hordes of fans blindly purchase everything a glamorous endorser recommends out of a desire to emulate that person. Unzu Ripoll's followers, even when detractors are factored out, gave her middling ratings (between 2 and 3.2 on a scale of 1 to 5) on a wide range of attributes associated with the ability to persuade others. The only exception was the familiarity they claimed to have gained by watching YouTube videos of her personal life and family. For a YouTuber with over a million registered followers, the ratings her fans accorded her in terms of trustworthiness, physical attractiveness and similarity were surprising low.

These figures have clear implications for brands seeking to enter into celebrity endorsement agreements with YouTubers such as Unzu Ripoll. Given the possibility this study raises that the attributes of social media influencers in general may have a low impact on follower purchasing decisions and that the percentage of fans actually purchasing products recommended by influencers is relatively low (around 10% in the case of Unzu Ripoll), brands would do well to factor the size of follower bases into their social media endorsement decisions and seek agreements with influencers capable of delivering audiences large enough to compensate for the possibility that only a limited percentage is likely to purchase their products. They should also conduct cost/benefit studies comparing the impact of social media influencer marketing with that achieved via less personal media such as television. In other words, audience size not only counts, but is also very likely to be the most important factor to consider in determining whether or not it makes sense to enter into a product endorsement agreement with a given YouTuber.

Audience engagement may well be the second most important factor. Unzu Ripoll's most highly engaged followers were almost twice as likely than other segments of the survey population to purchase items she endorsed. This suggests that brands would do well to factor the number of highly engaged followers that influencers can deliver into their decisions to enter into celebrity endorsement agreements. Given that the number of followers interested in watching practically all of a YouTuber's videos provides a strong indicator of his or her ability to influence consumers, total audience size should be also compared with the number of hardcore viewers a given YouTuber is able to maintain. Sites with relatively small but highly

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engaged follower communities might generate greater returns on investment than sites with larger but less active communities.

These two insights, in conjunction of the minimal relationship detected between source attributes and followers' likelihood of buying endorsed products, suggest that the charisma and expertise of YouTubers such as Unzu Ripoll have less impact on their followers' decisions to purchase a specific brand than followers' constant exposure to brand name products via their videos. Those who watch more videos (and are therefore exposed to more product endorsements) tend to buy more endorsed products.

This is not to say that any kind of exposure generates positive results. Data suggests that YouTubers should frame the product endorsements contained in their videos in ways that avoid alienating their followers, given that followers not bothered by brand endorsements are more inclined to purchase endorsed products than others. In the context of this study, followers were almost twice as likely to purchase products viewed than followers annoyed by the obtrusive presence of endorsements. The main motives cited by members of the sample population for objecting to product endorsements –the sheer volume of products being endorsed (almost half of the videos published by Unzu Ripoll on the Verdeliss account showcased brand name products) and the forced manner in which they were presented– provide ample evidence that YouTubers should pace the inclusion of product endorsements in their videos carefully and ensure that products featured fit naturally and believably into the narratives they construct.

The results of our analysis of audience response to Verdeliss videos (the above-mentioned objections concerning product endorsements and a perceived lack of connection between the vlogger and the products she promotes) coincide with those of previous studies on product–endorser matching (Rothe and Wicke, 2018). Follower faith in Unzu Ripoll's expertise was strongest in the categories of childcare products, toys, and books. The influencer nevertheless plugged products in all of the categories listed in Table 3 including fashion, cosmetics, websites and apps – areas in which survey respondents gave her a low rating of 2 on a scale of 1 to 5. Although followers did purchase a certain number of products she endorsed in these categories, it is fair to conclude that she might do better to concentrate on endorsement agreements related to baby products, toys, food and cleaning and pharmaceutical products –areas in which she has established a stronger track record.

Given that fashion and beauty are the sectors most interested in marketing via channels such as YouTube (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018), it is not surprising that social media influencers specialising in fashion and beauty products receive more offers to promote products than those focusing on other areas. The second most successful social media influencer in Spain focusing on maternity and childcare (JustCoco) also places a special emphasis on content related to fashion and beauty.

Brands interested in striking endorsement agreements with online influencers should conduct audience segment studies to determine which influencers can provide the broadest exposure to the type of consumer most apt to buy their products. Unzu Ripoll's follower base includes childless women as well as mothers –the former, interestingly enough, accounting for a larger segment of the sample population (55.6%) than the latter (37.9%). As women with children purchased products endorsed by Verdeliss at a significantly higher rate (15% compared to 8%), they obviously constitute the most lucrative segment of this vlogger's target audience.

As a future direction of research, it would interesting to examine the audiences of other YouTubers to ascertain whether key trends identified in this case are observable in other instances: middling follower evaluations of source attributes, a weak relation between attributes and purchases, a relatively low but significant ratio between endorsements and purchases, higher purchasing segments within a given audience (mothers and highly engaged users in this case), negative reactions to endorsements (which made 82% occasionally

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uncomfortable) and the ways in which these reactions affect the purchase of endorsed products. The implications extracted from this case could be applied more broadly to the selection of influencer endorsers on the basis of such further study.

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