

Expectations of online communities mean adverts can damage both social media influencers and brands

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The expectations of some online communities can cause product endorsements by influencers to backfire, causing reputational damage to

the individuals and the brands they represent, research from Lancaster University Management School (LUMS) reveals.

Led by LUMS and supported by academics at Cardiff University, the study, published in the *European Journal of Marketing*, examines 12 prominent UK beauty vloggers on YouTube over a six-year period, including Zoella, Tanya Burr and Patricia Bright, who together amass millions of subscribers.

Authors identify five common mistakes or recurring situations where endorsements are received negatively by fans, who direct blame towards brands rather than the [influencers](#) themselves in more than half of the cases:

1. Underhand endorsement—Where an influencer is perceived to have been secretive or dishonest about endorsement activities. Community expectations of this go beyond requirements of regulatory bodies
2. Over-endorsement—when community members feel the influencer have gone against a moral responsibility to ensure that the majority of their videos remain organic and unbiased by endorsements
3. Over emphasis—When the endorsed product is over-emphasised in influencers' content. Fans blame brands who are perceived to be demanding and controlling over video content if influencers appear to include too many mentions of products in videos
4. Over saturation—Community members claim to be 'turned off a company' if they witness similar endorsements for a brand in quick succession within the community, perceiving them as repetitive and boring
5. Over indulgence—Community members sympathise with influencers who are gifted lavish trips or products by brands, but trust in the brand and influencer is compromised as they feel they

are obligated to give positive reviews

Dr. Hayley Cocker from LUMS is the lead researcher. She said: "Research suggests that many consumers—especially younger generations—are more influenced by online influencers than traditional celebrities and place greater trust in their recommendations. This is something brands are capitalising on, with global spend on influencers predicted to reach a massive \$15 billion by 2022.

"However, the difference between traditional celebrities and social media influencers is that influencers' fame stems from their very [social media presence](#). Their peers and fellow community members can become their [target audience](#) overnight—and with this change comes a certain level of duty and expectation that they will continue to do what is morally right for the wider group. This goes above and beyond regulatory requirements."

The UK's Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) introduced regulations in 2015 that state social media influencers are to disclose paid advertisements. In 2019, further regulation demanded the disclosure of brand partnerships or ambassadorships, as well as the receipt of complementary or discounted products, services and experiences.

"What is interesting about our study, is that we found that where endorsements were considered inappropriate by [community members](#), brands often fared worse when it came to proportioning blame," Dr. Cocker continued. "Rather than just being guilty 'by association,' fans would often perceive the brand to be overpowering or controlling, and in some instances led to threats to boycott the brand completely."

The paper outlines recommendations for [social media influencers](#), management teams and brands who employ influencers, to avoid these common mishaps:

- Brands should ensure that endorsements are disclosed in a way that not only adheres to regulations but also meets the community's expectations. Examining comments on influencers' prior endorsements can reveal these expectations and can also help brands identify and avoid influencers who are perceived by the community to be guilty of both underhand endorsements and over-endorsement.
- Over-endorsement can be avoided by paying attention to the ratio of organic vs. endorsed content on the influencers' social media, and, for instance, asking influencers to post an endorsement following an organic post.
- Brands should grant influencers a level of creative freedom over how the product/[brand](#) is featured in the content to avoid perceptions of over-emphasis.
- Brands should avoid selecting a large number of influencers within the same online community to endorse products at the same time. If they use multiple influencers that are likely to share the same audience, brands should pay attention to the scheduling of these endorsements to ensure they don't occur in quick succession.
- Brands should either scale back the incentives they give to influencers or ensure that these endorsement activities benefit members of the community through the use of competitions or giveaways.

The paper, "Social media influencers and transgressive celebrity endorsement in consumption community contexts," is published in the *European Journal of Marketing*.

More information: Hayley Cocker et al, Social media influencers and transgressive celebrity endorsement in consumption community contexts, *European Journal of Marketing* (2021). [DOI: 10.1108/EJM-07-2019-0567](https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-07-2019-0567)

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