Vlogging: The Future of Brand and Consumer Relationships

Kaylin Skipwith
Elon University
Elon, North Carolina, USA
kskiwpith@elon.edu

ABSTRACT
This literature review outlines the main concepts and theories that have shaped the analysis of YouTube vlogs and their new-found participation in the marketing industry. Currently, most research that has been conducted on product-review vlogs have focused on the social dynamic between the vloggers on YouTube and consumers. Specifically, the research explores how these vloggers may successfully market and promote services and products to viewers. Based on current research, this social dynamic has been defined by four main theories - user generated content, eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth), the source credibility model, and parasocial interaction theory. Each of these components explore the reasoning as to why consumers are using the reviews of vloggers to help guide and confirm their purchase decisions. As marketers increasingly tap into vlogs as a means to reach large consumer audiences, it is critical to understand the components that play into a vlogger's success in purchase persuasion.

Author Keywords
Vlog; user generated content; parasocial relationship theory; eWOM; Source Credibility

ACM Classification Keywords
• Information systems~Social advertising • Information systems~Trust   • Information systems~Internet communications tools   • Human-centered computing~Social content sharing

INTRODUCTION
By a simplistic definition, vlogs are a rich expansion of blogging in that it conducts and publishes information in a pre-edited video format online. Vlog entries are typically published on regular basis and are complimented with supporting text and links (Gao, Tian, Yang & Huang, 2010). Similar to the concept of blogging, vlogs allow creatives to publish their thoughts and ideas to an online audience with similar interests. This new form of expression has caught the attention of millions of viewers and content creators. A survey conducted by ICM Research commissioned by Marketing Week confirmed that nearly a quarter of 18 to 24-year-olds follow a YouTube blogger, or vlogger (Nieto, n.d.).

Currently, one of the most successful social platforms to host vlogs has been YouTube. Since November, 2006 when Google first purchased YouTube for $1.6 billion, YouTube has been one of the leading global social channels of the internet (Gao et al., 2010). As YouTube has increased the popularity of vlogs, more 'vloggers', creatives who record and publish vlogs, have been able to amass large numbers of video views and channel followers. Some vloggers have gained more than 100 million followers (Lee & Watkins, 2016). As a result, successful YouTubers have made both social and economic capital from developing online video channels. Along with publishing videos focusing on various subjects like lifestyle, DIY, and entertainment, many vloggers have established their platforms by publishing public reviews of products and services they have bought and experienced themselves. Beauty and fashion themed vlogs have become popular over the last few years, often showcasing the vlogger's review of their favorite products or publishing makeup tutorials (Wu, 2016). As Wu explains, "The YouTuber shares his or her favorite products, or a "haul" video, showing recent purchases such as cosmetics products, clothing, and accessory items" (p. 5).

In congruence with the rising trend of vlogging, vloggers have become a frequented resource of information for consumers during their purchase decision making. Consumers who wish to learn more about certain brands or products are now able to research information about their future potential purchases. With a simple YouTube search, consumers can navigate through various videos showcasing and reviewing everything from hair products, cellphones, makeup, and laptops. Seeing online reviews from other individuals who have tried out the product or service helps consumers feel better informed and prepared to make their next purchase. This particular form of product review vlogging has understandably gained the interest of business and marketing specialists.

MARKETING PARTNERSHIPS AND VLOGGERS

Marketers have begun to accept the trend of product review vlogging as a promising outlet to promote their own services and products through established vloggers (Harnish & Bridges, 2016). As a result, vloggers are being utilized as an effective tool of persuasion for promoting products by companies. Businesses have already begun to incorporate

vlogger reviews into their marketing strategies by partnering with YouTubers to advertise their products. It has nearly become a common practice for retailers to send free samples and products to popular vloggers to comment on and share with their viewers. Some vloggers have gone so far to include retailer-supplied discount codes to their video links for the products they review (Harnish & Bridges, 2016).

One prime example of these marketing partnerships being conducted between vloggers and marketers can be seen in the case of Michelle Phan. Phan, who began her YouTube channel by publishing makeup tutorials, partnered with L'Oréal, one of the biggest cosmetic companies in the industry (Wu, 2016). In agreement with her contract with L'Oréal, Phan began a series of videos focusing on the promotion of Lancôme products through tutorials and makeup reviews. Since 2010, one of Phan's Lancôme makeup tutorials has gained over 6 million views (Wu, 2016).

There are four social theories that help frame what components play into the success of vlog product reviews and the vlogger's ability to influence consumer perceptions towards brands. These concepts also explain why consumers trust and favor vlogger product reviews more than a traditional marketing advertisement.

USER GENERATED CONTENT

User generated content (UGC) is defined as digital media that has been created by individuals of the general public (Kim & Johnson 2016). User generated content is often shared through social media and consist of messaging around brand-related subject matter. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter rely on the creation of user generated content from their users to help maintain consumer engagement. As stated by Smith, Ficher, and Yongjian (2012), "UGC takes on many different forms, such as Twitter tweets, Facebook status updates, and videos on YouTube, as well as consumer-produced product reviews and advertisements" (p. 1). YouTube has been one of the leading forces in the cultivation of user generated content due to its strategy to encourage users to create and publish content. As explained by Smith, Fischer and Yongjian (2012), YouTube's culture of self-promotion is what drives the influences in brand related UGC. YouTube's tag-line "Broadcast yourself" speaks to the site's cultivated environment for user content creation.

Distinguishing vlogs as user generated content is especially significant to the success of vlog product reviews in its ability to influence consumer perceptions. User generated content, without the blatant influence of retailers or marketers, gives consumers the perception of a more honest and relatable resource. Verhellen, Dens and De Pelsmacker (2013) explain that consumers find user generated content more credible than content that is producer-generated. Recent studies have confirmed that user generated content engages and persuades consumers more than traditional

advertising as consumers are more likely to identify with and relate to the source (Verhellen et al., 2013). Wu (2016) agrees with this statement, adding that YouTube celebrities are perceived as more relatable and genuine to consumers than actors in a professional advertisement. In the analysis of user generated content, it is suggested that it is much easier for consumers to relate to and accept messaging that comes from a peer online than a big business whose goal is to persuade you to buy their product.

Verhellen et al. (2013) supports the claim that UGC can have an positive and convincing marketing response to consumers. After comparing viewer responses to a video which highlighted a regular student promoting a product, and that of a local celebrity promoting the same product, they found that viewers were less skeptical of the student's endorsement suggestions. Verhellen et al. (2013) explains further stating, "As consumers are used to amateurs appearing in online user-generated videos, there seems to be a positive effect of word-of-mouth by these amateurs. Users of video-sharing websites are likely to be wary of celebrities appearing on YouTube content." While this strategy of using vloggers to influence consumers perceptions of brands has been beneficial to both vloggers and businesses, this transition to user generated content has also changed the dynamic of marketing communication constructs, shifting the power from the marketers to the consumers. (Harnish & Bridges, 2016).

WOM AND EWOM

In relation to the concept of user generated content, the studies behind electronic word-of- mouth (eWOM) have a similar but distinctly different involvement in a vlogger's ability of persuasion. Cheong and Morrison (2008) outline the difference between UGC and eWOM stating, "Although UGC has been closely aligned and confused with eWOM, the two differ depending on whether the content is generated by users or the content is conveyed by the users." For example, content created by a public user is UGC, while content shared by a user is a form of eWOM. Moreover, if the content has both been created and shared by a user, it is considered both UGC and eWOM (Cheong & Morrison, 2008).

Electronic word-of-mouth relates to the analysis vlogging and its participation in marketing as researchers have observed eWOM to be a heavily utilized resource to inform consumers on potential future purchases. Cheong and Morrison (2008) agree to the significance of the word-of-mouth style of communication on consumer's decision-making process explaining that early research has shown word-of-mouth to be a major factor in a consumer's search for information about products, brands, and services. Verhellen, Dens, and Pelsmacker (2013) explain that the effect of word-of-mouth by a peer has a more persuasive effect on consumers as it showcases "people like them." As a result, consumers will have a higher intent to purchase. Marketers are increasingly tapping into and utilizing social

network sites to help promote their own brands and services through the use of electronic word-of-mouth. In 2010, over $1.5 billion was invested in online video website advertising alone (Verhellen et al., 2013).

Notably, as opposed to the word-of-mouth (WOM) style of communication, electronic word-of-mouth is comprised of a uncapped number of contributors and audiences that expand beyond interpersonal limitations or geophysical locations (Verhellen et al., 2013). eWOM is also devoid of time limitations; consumers can access these online reviews and discussions at any time of the day. These benefits of eWOM work in favor of most modern-day consumers who use the internet to help guide their purchase decisions. As Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen (2009) explain, the easy accessibility of electronic word-of-mouth is the leading component of what makes it so attractive to internet users. The ability to search and tap into the information they need at any time of the day is what has made eWOM the favored tool in today's consumers.

However, Cheung et al. (2009) also suggests that eWOM is not blindly accepted by consumers as some may believe, but rather has a number of influential factors that attribute to the consumer's perception and acceptance of the information. After conducting a survey on an online consumer discussion forum in China, it was found that aspects of information such as argument strength, source credibility, and confirmation with the receptor's prior belief all play into the eWOM message acceptance by the consumer. In order for a consumer to accept the information being presented, the information had to meet a list of criteria in terms of its strength and credibility. As Cheung et al.(2009) explain, even when consumers come across strong and practical information, the receivers are still likely to hold onto their own belief and opinions when backed by strong and valid arguments.

SOURCE CREDIBILITY MODEL
Credibility can be described as a factor heavily influencing a receiver's reception and acceptance of a message based on the source's validness (Wang, 2015). The source credibility model proposes that the more positive social characteristics a communicator has, the more likely his or her message will be positively received by others. It is one of the most frequently researched social theory in persuasion studies (Wang, 2015). The source credibility model plays a very active role in the context of online and offline persuasion. When consumers need to evaluate the validness of online reviews that may have been manipulated by company interests, consumers are likely to use the credibility of the source as a determining factor (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2013). Consumers are aware that not all online reviews they come across will be honest or unbiased. Evaluating the source credibility of the messenger helps the customers determine the truthfulness of the message. The main social characteristics used to shape and analyze the source credibility theory are expertise, authenticity, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Chapple, Callum & Cownie, 2017).

Within the scope of the source credibility model, part of the vlogger's ability to persuade their viewers to purchase a product or alter their perception of a brand comes from their perceived social traits. For example, the attractiveness of a vlogger may hold credible weight in the consumer's readiness to accept and adapt the vlogger's suggestions and feelings towards a brand. Aran, Beil and Gatcia-Perez (2013) confirmed this hypothesis stating that after an interview conducted on ten lifestyle vloggers, it was found that vloggers who were considered attractive received higher numbers of views than others. Vloggers who are visually appealing to their viewers may be perceived as more honest and credible than those who are not. It is important to note however that attractiveness is not an overall determining factor of the vlogger's ability to persuade. Aran et al. (2013) research found that all the hypothesized dimensions of endorser credibility (expertise, authenticity, trustworthiness and attractiveness) were present in the vlogger's confirmation of credibility. All of these components influence the perception of the vlogger; however, they are not equivalent in their weight of influence. The results of their survey also showed that the most prominent dimension of endorser credibility was trustworthiness and the least was expertise. Consumers valued trustworthiness the most out of the four outlined traits.

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION THEORY
Parasocial Interaction Theory (PSI) is explained as a the study of one-sided friendships between consumers and a media personality or persona (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Interestingly enough, parasocial relationships can develop in the same manner as a normal interpersonal relationship. As the consumer engages with the persona, the consumer's uncertainty with the persona lessens over time. The consumer and vlogger relationship can grow and strengthen to the point that the consumer feels they know the persona on an intimate level and sees them as a friend (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Consumers who regularly engage with and follow vloggers they feel are similar to them are likely to show signs of this parasocial relationship.

Brujin (2016) explains how some vloggers and YouTube celebrities appropriate and exploit feelings of intimacy to further establish a parasocial relationship with their followers. These feelings of intimacy, authentic or not, are the essential building blocks to establish a relationship of trust between the vlogger and the viewers. In Brujin's study (2016), an analysis of the YouTube vlogger Bonaldi was conducted – collecting qualitative data on the vlogger's communication methods to convey intimacy and honesty to her viewers. It was noted that Bonaldi's disclosure of personal and relatable everyday life events added to the viewer's perception of the vlogger's personal and honest persona. As vloggers publish their lifestyle and daily events

to their viewers, consumers are able to relate to them more and understand them on a more intimate level.

Wu (2016) agrees to this theory adding that the consumer is placed in a more vulnerable position for possible influence as the parasocial relationship strengthens. The viewer's ability to communicate with vloggers in the comments section of the video interweave the elements of trust and friendliness to fulfill the feelings of friendship, even if the vlogger and the viewer have never personally met before (Wu, 2016).

Wang (2015) conducted a survey of 240 YouTube watchers and concluded that as a viewer increased their interactions with vlogs, the likelihood that the viewer had a strong parasocial interaction with his or her favorite vlogger increased. This in result, also meant that viewers were more likely to be persuaded by the vlogger's suggestions and opinions. The consumers who developed a parasocial relationship with their favorite vlogger would be heavily influenced in their purchase decisions based on the vlogger's review (Wang, 2015),

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the relationship between YouTube vloggers and consumers, as it relates to product persuasion and marketing, can be shaped by understanding user generated content, electronic word-of-mouth, the source credibility model, and parasocial relationships. As this literature review shows, there has been a considerable amount of research conducted to better understand and evaluate these frameworks as it specifically ties to YouTube vloggers' methods of persuasion. Most, if not all, researchers who have engaged in conversations on this topic agree with the understandings of the vlogger's influence in the consumer's purchase decision making process. By attributing the perception of a user generated peer-to-peer review, coupled with a feeling of friendliness and honesty by means of the parasocial theory, vloggers are able to establish feelings of an interpersonal relationship with consumers. This parasocial relationship strengthens the vlogger's level of credibility among his or her viewers and thus results in higher consumer persuasion power.

This ability of consumer persuasion is heavily sought after by marketers and businesses who wish to brand themselves to their online audiences. As vloggers are rising in popularity and number, marketers have developed a strategy to partner with successful YouTuber's to help promote their products and services. Previously independent vloggers, like in the case of Michelle Phan, have been able to benefit in both social and economic capital due to partnerships with big companies to promote and review their products within their videos.

This strategy of using vloggers to influence brand perceptions, while effective, can also be ethically challenging as it leaves consumers who trust their vloggers vulnerable to these marketing strategies. As Wu (2016) states, cosmetics companies who wish to target under-aged females in North America can easily partner with a vlogger whose viewership is based in that demographic. However, researchers such as Cheung, Luo, ad Chen (2009), argue that consumers are not completely vulnerable to the influence of the reviews they find on the internet. As explained by the review of eWOM, consumers have a list of criteria to help them decipher what messages and sources they find to be credible.

By analyzing the communication practices and social constructs that shape the relationship between vloggers and viewers, we can better understand the influences that vlog product reviews have on consumers during their purchase decision making process. This is significant as the marketing trend is increasingly favoring the use of these YouTube celebrities and vloggers. Research on this topic will not only inform marketers and YouTubers on best practices to engage and persuade their audiences, but will also help inform consumers on how to better decipher and navigate vlogger marketing messages.

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