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UsTube — An Exploration of the Relationship

Between YouTube and Influencers

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
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Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

UsTube — An Exploration of the Relationship
Between YouTube and Influencers

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Since YouTube's launch in 2005, it has grown into one of the most visited social media platforms in the world. It launched with the slogan "Broadcast Yourself" with the promise that the content sharing site would allow anyone to post, share, and interact with videos from anyone around the world for free. Many people took advantage of that promise and became Internet celebrities, or "influencers," in a short amount of time, amassing millions of subscribers and billions of views. The success of these YouTube stars has led them to land roles on TV and in films, launch music careers, write books, and many other avenues. However, these stars have also had their fair share of public controversies that have caused advertisers to pull their content from YouTube's platform. This has forced YouTube to change their algorithm and other procedures so that YouTube stars' videos are no longer boosted to the front page, which in turn hurts their budding careers. This puts YouTube at a crossroads between billions of dollars in advertising revenue and the homegrown celebrities that helped make YouTube what it is today. The research in this study examined what YouTube influencers value and would change about YouTube's affordances to help make the website a better opportunity for anyone and everyone to grow their Internet careers. Using qualitative methods to gain insights from several YouTube influencers, this study explored what YouTube and other future social media accounts can do to help those that know and utilize their platforms best.

The findings of this study show that while social media oftentimes acts as a conduit for online content sharing, YouTube doubles as an investor who will back videos with advertising revenue, front-page access, and algorithmic preference to boost a video's success and reach. This venture capital-style system comes with challenges as influencers can both benefit greatly from these affordances, but also be hurt when these affordances block their videos from finding audiences. Because of this, money-making on YouTube can be highly rewarding, but also discouraging and risky. Influencers are often stuck finding other ways to make money such as external sponsorship, platform diversification, and independent merchandising. This puts YouTube and influencers in a constant state of renegotiation where YouTube toes the line of pleasing advertisers and influencers while influencers struggle to work around YouTube affordances, policies, and terms. These findings show that YouTube is a rich, immersive medium with significant potential for influencers. The findings also show that affordances, while often viewed as beneficial to all parties, may at times be beneficial and detrimental depending on the individual. Future research can build off the foundation this study lays to learn if this model exists on other platforms and media.

Keywords: YouTube, social media, influencers, Internet celebrities, affordances

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Introduction

On October 26, 2016, popular social media app Vine announced its parent company,

Twitter, would be shutting the app down for good. Though Vine's popularity began to wane in

its final year, the announcement still came as a surprise to many users of the app (Gajanan,

2016). Several factors played into Twitter's decision to shut down Vine. Among the many

reasons contributing to the app's premature demise was a meeting held between Vine's top stars

and the creative team of the platform. While the stars of the app made considerably high

financial demands, the intervention disguised as a meeting still stood as a symbol for a larger

problem – Vine had lost touch with its users. Even though the 6-second video platform played a

critical role in launching the careers of many of today's social media stars, the stars themselves

found that they no longer had use for the platform and moved their videos to other platforms

such as YouTube (Lorenz, 2017).

Vine serves as a cautionary tale to other social media platforms about the importance of

influencers (Kosoff, 2016). Internet celebrities are quickly becoming the most recognized faces

of both Millennial (Pitta, Young, & Hinesly, 2012) and Generation Z youth (Dunkley, 2017). A

study conducted among U.S. teens found that Internet celebrities were more recognizable and

popular than mainstream film or music celebrities (Ault, 2014). As Alexander (April 2019)

recently noted, YouTube stars play a critical role in the success of the platform. Because of this,

YouTube has gone to great lengths to make the influencers' experience a positive one that keeps

them around. Where Vine may have failed to meet the needs of the Internet's most popular

celebrities, YouTube has excelled in meeting the needs of stars who want to share their moments

and messages with millions of subscribers (Lorenz, 2017).

However, YouTube has had to make difficult decisions regarding how its algorithm prioritizes trending videos. Controversies from different YouTube stars' content (Herman, 2017) have led YouTube to favor making safer corporate videos trend instead of YouTube stars' original content (Bradley, 2018). YouTube influencer Michael Philippou (known from his YouTube channel *RackaRacka*) lamented in April 2019 that YouTube is becoming so biased against original content creators that influencers may have to make a mass exodus to a new platform, much like Vine stars did in 2016 (Alexander, April 2019).

YouTube's seeming trend away from favoring content creators is well documented and, in some ways, justified (Alexander, February 2019). YouTube account *Coffee Break* found that YouTube creators needed nearly 11 million views to qualify for the YouTube trending section, whereas a video from an account such as *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* only needed roughly 500,000 views for the same qualification (Alexander, May 2019). This shows that while it may not be intentional or purposeful, YouTube's algorithm is rewarding corporate accounts with virality far more than it is rewarding influencer accounts.

This preference toward promoting more traditional media accounts is not without justification. Controversies have followed YouTube creators since YouTube began in 2005. One of the first YouTube celebrities, Jessica Lee Rose (known online as "lonelygirl15"), sparked controversy when fans discovered her online vlogs were faked: the 16-year-old Internet celebrity was played by a 19-year-old actress (Heffernan & Zeller, 2006). In 2017, top YouTube vlogger "PewDiePie" was accused of anti-Semitism after *The Wall Street Journal* reported several of his videos contained anti-Semitic jokes and Nazi imagery. While Felix Kjellberg, the man behind the *PewDiePie* account, denied anti-Semitic beliefs, he lost his YouTube series *Scare PewDiePie* as well as his contract with the Disney-owned Maker Studios (Winkler, Nicas, & Fritz, 2017).

Because of this controversy, many companies pulled advertising from YouTube since YouTube could not guarantee that advertising would be attached to channels or videos with agreeable content. As a result, YouTube changed their algorithm to automatically pull advertising revenue that contained sexual content, profanity and rough language, and content covering sensitive social issues – an event that many YouTubers now call the "Adpocalypse" (Weiss, 2017).

YouTube was forced to alter their algorithm again when vlogger Logan Paul filmed a dead body in one of his videos in January 2018. This controversy forced YouTube to change its Google Preferred program, which chooses specific accounts to be preferred for advertising revenue. Paul was cut from the program, and the program began to favor safer accounts (Brockington, 2018). These changes have drawn ire from YouTube stars who formerly used YouTube as a primary source of revenue. Many of them complain that YouTube now favors late-night shows and other TV channels over original user-created content, which is hurting their career aspirations as online celebrities (Cava, 2018).

This war for virality has put YouTube at a crossroads between honoring those who choose to broadcast themselves on their platform, and easier, safer companies whose videos are far less likely to spark controversy (Bishop, 2018). If YouTube chooses to favor advertising and corporate videos, what will happen to YouTube's original content creators? YouTube stars have played a significant role in the success of YouTube, so their opinion is vital in the conversation about YouTube's future. Could YouTube see a demise akin to Vine should these Internet celebrities choose to abandon the platform and go somewhere else? So far, little scholarly research has been done to explore what affordances YouTube has that brought content creators to the site in the first place.

This study explores the relationship between YouTube and influencers by examining affordances that YouTube has for influencers to connect with their audiences and build their brand. This study uses in-depth qualitative interviews to examine how YouTube's affordances helps influencers build a level of celebrity other social media sites cannot rival. The findings of this study are useful for future social media developers to see how YouTube has become a primary source for aspiring influencers to build their brand and reach greater audiences. This thesis will explain the theories associated with this field of research, lay out the body of existing research on various fields surrounding YouTube, present the methods that were employed to gather information, demonstrate the findings observed through the responses of interviewed influencers, discuss the implications of the findings, and illustrate the need for further research in this growing area.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

Media richness theory. Media richness theory posits that individuals "driven by the instrumental goal of task efficiency, choose media based on the match up of message equivocality and media richness" (Sheer & Chen, 2004). In other words, managers of media content are inclined to use certain media over others because of these advantages (Daft & Lengel, 1984). Media richness is derived from four characteristics: the availability of instant feedback; the capacity of the medium to transmit multiple cues such as body language, voice tone, and inflection; the use of natural language; and the personal focus of the medium. This theory will be critical to this thesis because all users of social media judge each individual platform by this model (Sanchez-Cartas & Leon, 2018). An effective social media platform

needs to provide means of interaction, demonstrate the ability to express cues, and allow users to express themselves naturally and personally (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Media richness theory is especially relevant to YouTube because of how "rich" social media are. Kaplan and Haelein (2010) looked at how social media platforms provide an unprecedented richness in the media world for casual users and large global businesses alike. Because these platforms are a common ground where large- and small-scale entities can gather and interact, businesses are seeking to take advantage of these platforms to better level with consumers. Social media come in many forms such as collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs (e.g., Blogger), content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life). Despite the differences between these platforms, each has the common goal of connecting people and content around the world.

Media richness theory suggests that each of these different genres of social media will offer a unique niche to draw in users, and, as such, each genre will have different advantages and disadvantages compared to other platforms (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010). This explains why companies like McDonalds and Apple have a Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube page. Each platform gives the companies different way to reach out to their audiences, as well as a higher likelihood of reaching a larger audience. Media richness theory will be useful to this thesis because it will help us see in what ways YouTube excels over other social media options.

Media richness theory has been used to examine YouTube in a variety of ways. Szetso, Chang, and Hong (2016) found that the richness of YouTube afforded a high level of adaptability in teaching settings. YouTube's malleability in many aspects of the teaching environment created an immersive participatory setting that gave the students who participated in the study

flexibility to learn at a more individual pace and with a customizable structure. Barczyk and

Duncan (2011) found similar results when applying this theory to business administration. Their

study found YouTube videos to be an effective method for distributing training videos to

employees in the workplace. Not only did they find YouTube videos just as effective as face-to-

face training, but they found that these videos can be honed by the individual employee to allow

them to self-train in a way that best meets individual learning approaches.

The richness of YouTube also affords many other opportunities for business ventures.

Businesses have used YouTube as a promotional tool for their companies. Dehghani, Niaki,

Ramezani, and Sali (2016) found that its combination of entertainment, information, and

customization made YouTube a highly effective tool for distributing promotional material via

social media. Although there was a negative correlation between irritation and YouTube

advertising (i.e. advertisements placed before videos on YouTube), advertising through YouTube

worked positively for brand awareness and purchase intention. Karaduman (2013) found that

while self-promotion among CEOs was better served through social networking sites such as

LinkedIn and Facebook, YouTube was more useful than Twitter and blogging sites to promote

CEOs' efforts to promote their businesses; this is due to YouTube having a low level of self-

disclosure coupled with a high level of richness bested only by virtual social worlds like World

of Warcraft and Second Life. Understanding media richness as it relates to YouTube helps

explain why YouTube is a target platform for people aspiring to have a significant online

presence, including advertisers, both digital and mainstream influencers, and other mainstream

corporate outlets.

Social presence theory. Another theory that helps explain the effectiveness of YouTube

in the social media realm is social presence theory. This theory says that "media differ in the

degree of 'social presence'——defined as the acoustic, visual, and physical contact that can be

achieved——they allow to emerge between two communication partners" (Kaplan & Haelein,

2010, p. 61). Presence is measured in part by how immersive a medium can be. That immersion

is defined through three measures: immediacy, intimacy, and efficiency. Presence afforded by

YouTube's media richness is vital to YouTube influencers. The ability of an aspiring YouTube

celebrity to connect with their audience can be the difference between a star and a dud

(Cunningham & Craig, 2017). In this sense, social presence theory can be useful in defining what

characteristics YouTube has that helps influencers connect with their audiences on a more

personal level.

There are different lenses through which to observe presence, and it is important to note

the difference between these lenses and how they relate to this study. Social presence generally

refers to the connection and interaction between users and influencers within that social network.

Although YouTube is more commonly considered a social content sharing site (Kaplan &

Haelein, 2010), its social networking features such as the community tab and comment sections

allow it to qualify for consideration under this definition of social presence. Another lens through

which to study presence is *telepresence*. Lee (2004) defines telepresence as "the possibility that

human operators could feel the sense of being physically transported to a remote workspace via

teleoperating systems" (p. 29). While the more general term of presence can be used as a

substitute for telepresence, it does not specify the phenomenon within a digital space.

Telepresence better illustrates presence within digital spaces, particularly in relation to

parasocial relationships. Parasocial relationships are defined as psychological relationships that

audience members develop with an individual or character, either real or fictional, presented in

mass media (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In a parasocial relationship, audience members feel a real

and personal connection to a mass media figure even though they have never met (and may never meet) that figure in real life purely because they feel they have experiences with that figure through their media consumption. Because YouTube viewers develop these parasocial relationships with influencers, they feel more drawn into the environment they are watching and thus feel that they have a personal bond with the influencers they watch (Lombard, 2010). In other words, they feel more present within the digital room the that YouTube video places them in. While parasocial relationships are not the core focus of this study, an understanding of this theory helps underscore the persuasive power that influencers have over viewers. This will be further explored later in this review.

Understanding presence is critical to social media because of how much social media rely on gaining capital in the attention economy (Terranova, 2012). Attention economy describes the value, or symbolic currency, of users' attention on a digital platform. The more a site can grab and retain the attention of users, the more social capital is gained, and thus, the more value and merit a medium has in attention economy (Bucher, 2012). Many algorithms are designed with the attention economy in mind. Where several timelines on social networking sites originally relied on a chronological layout of posts and shared items, these sites found that users would depart once they had reached familiar territory (Huberman, 2013). Thus, algorithms on Facebook and Instagram today rely on a sophisticated and complicated system that is constantly presenting new, unseen content while simultaneously learning the behaviors of the user in real-time. The longer these sites can retain the attention of users, the more merit they gain in digital attention economy (Huberman, 2013). One tactic commonly used in algorithmic theory is basing content on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Cao et al. (2013) found that a social medium is most successful when it focuses its algorithm on content aimed at meeting social and self-actualization needs.

YouTube's algorithm has also undergone similar changes to retain the attention of users. This will be discussed in greater detail further on in this review.

Many businesses have recognized the high level of presence that social media afford. In order to create a more intimate, personal connection between them and their fans or consumers, these businesses create a presence on various social media platforms and operate within the culture of that platform (particularly memetic culture) to gain further credibility and a sense of being up to date with cultural trends. While general audiences have both applauded and criticized attempts to connect with younger consumers, Lind (2019) found that when correctly executed, these businesses gained a deeper, more personal level of authenticity and transparency that is difficult to obtain with lay audiences. This example underscores how interactive settings allow businesses to interact with sometimes millions of followers on what is perceived as an individual level while simultaneously broadcasting that personal intimacy to the world and providing those same fans with an area where they can interact with each other (Kaplan & Haenlem, 2010).

YouTube's audio/visual medium is important for sharing messages, but the comment section allows fans to respond back to the content creator in hopes of getting a response from their favorite Internet star. For example, Marwick (2015) studied how YouTuber Colleen Ballinger (known online as her "talentless" character "Miranda Sings") often took requests from her videos' comment sections to learn what her fans wanted, then made subsequent videos to pay off her fans' requests. YouTube affordances allowed her this level of intimate interaction where the fans not only felt like they could talk directly to Ballinger but felt like Ballinger was responding directly to them through the intimate communication afforded by YouTube's platform. Social presence theory posits that this form of pseudo-interpersonal communication is effective due to the high degree of social presence offered.

YouTube has been studied through social presence theory to help illustrate the manner of different ways that YouTube's immersive capabilities can aid various subjects. Pace (2008) found that marketers can approach advertising on YouTube differently than traditional advertising because, much akin to traditional filmmaking, YouTube's telepresence affords more narrative storytelling. Classical storytelling elements such as plot, character, structural pattern, rhetoric, and organization are common in YouTube videos. Having these elements and structure helps create a sense of familiarity that makes it easy for consumers to be drawn in and hooked.

YouTube telepresence is especially relevant to online gaming videos. Postigo (2006) found that not only are gaming videos, or videos where vloggers play through games (often with their commentary), immersive enough to make viewers feel like they are having a similar experience to playing the game themselves, but they are also immersive enough to persuade viewers to buy the game. The latter phenomenon is the draw for game development companies to allow YouTubers to profit off their products. Nintendo tried to share profit off their games from 2013 until they ended the program in 2018 after YouTubers began to play more non-Nintendo games (Lawler, 2018). Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme, and LaGroue (2018) found that gaming videos yielded the second highest levels of vulnerability and disclosure, only being beat by vlogs. Even though the focus of gaming videos is on the game that vloggers are playing, they are commonly accompanied by self-disclosure commentary provided by the vloggers. This creates a more present environment for the viewer; as they listen to the commentary by the YouTube gamer, they feel more like they are there watching the gamer play in the same room as them instead of just watching on their own device.

Scholars have also studied YouTube presence in other categories such as education. Barry, Marzouk, Chulak-Oglu, Bennett, Tierney, and O'Keeffe (2016) found that modern

university students are embracing online learning because it does not impede on their ability to learn in a personal way. In fact, the study found that YouTube videos educating students on different disciplines were just as effective for them as traditional classroom learning. The ability for students to learn at their own pace made them feel like they were being tutored one-on-one, which made the experience feel more immersive and easier to stay engaged in. These examples show how YouTube's ability to make videos immersive and engaging creates an immersive environment that hooks viewers and keeps them watching additional videos. This study will seek to show how both YouTube and influencers on YouTube take advantage of that characteristic to create a meaningful connection with their viewers.

Social Media and Persuasion

Social media derives much of their influence from their ability to persuade. Since the birth of MySpace and Facebook in the early 2000s, social media have risen to become one of the most powerful tools of influence in the 21st century (Shrum, 2017). Facebook has over two billion international users, YouTube has nearly two billion, and Instagram has one billion (We Are Social, 2018). Since the era of early Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, people have used different elements of persuasion to influence the masses (Bybee, 1993). Unlike writers, orators could grab the attention of scholars and common folk alike because their messages weren't limited to the small population of capable readers (Higgins & Walker, 2012). In addition to this advantage, written word was limited in its spread because of the inability to mass produce text.

New technological advances that came about in the centuries that followed would aid in increasing the footprint of one's ability to share their messages with larger audiences in more convenient and accessible ways (Fussel, 2001; Johnson, 1988; Edwards, 2005; Mott, 1962;

Barnouw, 1990). However, mass content was still controlled by larger corporate gatekeepers

such as news media outlets, companies, and governments (Benjamin, 1992). The Internet

completely flipped the notion of who could be a persuasive influencer on its head within years of

its commercial availability (Turner, 2010). Email was a simple, intuitive way that anyone with

Internet access could share messages of value to mass audiences. Email provided one of the first

channels for viral sharing by the spread of stories, videos, and page links. More than ever before,

common people had the power to become mass influencers (Mohr, 2014). They also were

empowered to tell gatekeepers what they wanted to see and learn about. In a sense, regular

Internet users became gatekeepers themselves (Marwick, 2007; Weeks, Ardèol-Abreu, & de

Zúñiga, 2017).

This idea of bottom-down agenda setting (Searles & Smith, 2016) did not truly take over

modern communication until social media began to take the communications spotlight in the

2000s. MySpace began a new movement of individual online presence where users had their

own realms of influence, created by their personalized profile page (Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de

Zúñiga, 2016; Goodings, 2012). The ability to create an online self presented a completely new

angle on persuasion. Radio and television influencers were often managed by producers, writers,

directors, and agents to help create the perfect influencer. Today, social media takes the realm of

influence that radio and television afforded and blends it with the individuality that pre-

technological persuasion relied on (Rethinking localization, 2012).

Social media today are viewed as the next step in communications evolution. Younger

demographics are much more inclined to lean toward social media platforms for influence than

professional marketers, and older demographics are, who were much more inclined to do so in

the past (Gillin, 2007; Nazeral, 2017). Personal branding (or self-branding) of social media

influencers has subverted the traditional model of large marketing influence. Because social media breeds viral content, content creators do not need to rely on traditional business partnerships with larger global corporations to share messages, content, opinions, or personal ventures (Khamis, 2016).

YouTube is a significant example of social media's ability to persuade; its ability to influence perception and public opinion, both in positive and negative ways, is noteworthy. Scholars have studied how YouTube videos can sway video consumers' perceptions of various topics. This can be seen though two studies that looked at YouTube consumers' perceptions of smoking. Studies by Romer, Jamieson, Jamieson, Jones, and Sherr (2017) and by Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, and Anthony (2010) found that anti-drug campaigns on YouTube had both positive and negative effects on viewers. While these campaigns did positively influence viewers' perceptions of the dangers of smoking and marijuana abuse, they also gave viewers a skewed perception of the prevalence of drug abuse in the United States. The results also found comment sections to be effective in changing perception of the effectiveness of the videos instead of changing the viewers' attitudes of the dangers of drugs. This is one example of the different ways YouTube can persuade audiences in various ways. More affordances of YouTube will be further explored in the next section of this review.

YouTube's ability to persuade is best illustrated through YouTube influencers themselves, who have been able to use these persuasive tools in a variety of ways. For example, Lee and Watkins (2016) examined how YouTube influencers showing off different brands not only changed the perception of which brands should be considered luxury brands in the eyes of the video consumers, but also increased the likelihood that consumers would go out and purchase those brands. For brand marketers, using influencers to subtly market their products increases the

likelihood that consumers will consider the products that their favorite influencers show off as luxury brands. This, of course, is merely a microcosm of the same pattern seen in mainstream society, exemplified by the late 2010s resurgence of Champion brand through mainstream celebrities (Holman & Bhasin, 2019). The fact that YouTube influencers can dictate what should be a luxury brand, even if it is only to the audiences they broadcast to, speaks to the affordances of YouTube lending themselves to significant persuasion of consumers' likes and interests (Lee & Watkins, 2016). YouTube influencers also use the affordances of their broadcasting platforms to promote their own products and interests, as this review will show further on.

Social Media Affordances

To understand social media's persuasive influence, it is important to understand the meaning and significance of an affordance. Affordances for this study are defined as individual features on a platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). These features are not set in stone, as changes from developers (as well as symbolic meaning derived from the users) make these features both malleable and significant to the future of the platform. As Bucher and Helmond (2018) noted, even something as simple as Twitter's change from a star symbol to a heart symbol indicating a favorited or liked tweet was enough to ignite controversy in the Twitter community. This change went beyond a simple cosmetic or verbal change to a total change in meaning altogether. To some Twitter users, the favorite button marked an interest in revisiting the tweet at a later time, but changing it to the like button lost the unique meaning that only Twitter's favorite button held.

For social media, affordances are elements of the platform that users feel make the platform unique and distinct from other platforms. While affordances can develop a shared meaning, they also develop meaning relative to the individual (Gibson, 2015). Different types of

affordances include user-based perceived affordances, technological affordances, social

affordances, and communicative affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

Looking at social media through their affordances can be beneficial to scholars in

understanding why different platforms are preferred by different practices. Vaast and Kaganer

(2013) found that as businesses' employees became more familiar with the affordances of a

social platform, the more the businesses became better exposed to and experienced with that

platform as well. In this sense, the company grows in its collective knowledge of social media

affordances as its employees individually learn these affordances. Those businesses that do take

advantage of implementing social media in the workplace found that while social media could

help with communication to potential consumers and customers, media also enabled inter-

workplace communication in previously less advantageous affordances such as visibility,

persistence, editability, and association (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). It is worth noting that Gibbs,

Rozaidi, and Eisenberg (2013) found that social media affordances can both enhance and inhibit

knowledge sharing between organizational members in the workplace. Even still, these examples

show how social media generally possess affordances that have the potential to enable better

inter-work communication, education, and experience that would not be otherwise available or

easily accessible.

At times specific social platforms have affordances that make them preferable over other

platforms in achieving various objectives. It is in this spirit that social platforms such as

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and LinkedIn all have different ways to engage

with posts. From like buttons to upvotes to favorites to celebratory marks, these paralinguistic

digital affordances (PDAs) are all considered affordances, yet each of them is honed and

optimized for the platform is was designed for (Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016). From there,

businesses can choose which platform's PDA is most effective in achieving the aims of the

organization's goals for engagement with consumers.

Because each social media platform has different affordances that draw in users, social

media apps are not completely competing against each other in a traditional way. For example,

Facebook's affordances are designed with social network goals in mind rather than content

sharing like YouTube. Because of that, affordances such as the like button spread beyond

Facebook to other websites so that Facebook's reach grows larger as more websites are

integrated into the platform's network (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013).

Social media affordances could also be considered tools to help the platform better use

the users instead of vice-versa. Facebook's algorithm is used to alter and update the user's

timeline with content the algorithm deems interesting to the user. For instnace, the "Memories"

notification teaches the algorithm about previous interactions with Facebook that the user finds

interesting. This information helps the algorithm fill the user's timeline with content that will

keep the user on the site longer (Aziz and Paluri, 2016). This raises the question as to whether

affordances are designed for the benefit and convenience of the user, or if affordances are

designed exclusively for the benefit of the platform (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). In YouTube's

case, these changes in affordances have raised questions as to whether the platform prioritizes

pleasing advertisers over users (Bradley, 2018). This question of affordance benefit is at the heart

of YouTube's battle between advertisers and original content creators. YouTube's changes to its

algorithm appears to make affordances more beneficial to the platform itself rather than the

creators who originally benefited from it the most (Bradley, 2018).

More theoretical concepts will be introduced later in this literature review. These further theories will be used to assist in interpreting the data presented in the findings and discussion sections.

Affordances of YouTube

YouTube's affordances are unique due to the audio/visual nature of the format. As suggested by media richness theory, YouTube is a powerful tool for persuasion because audiences can both see and hear content in the videos. Other platforms like Facebook and Twitter lean more in favor of text-based content sharing (though both platforms do utilize sharing photo and video).Platforms like Instagram and Pinterest tend to lean more toward sharing visual content (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010). YouTube certainly favors visual content sharing, but since the nature of YouTube is a content sharing platform rather than a social networking site, its affordances are more linked to conveying emotion (Montes-Vozmediano, García-Jiménez, & Menor-Sendra, 2018; Sandlin & Gracyalny, 2018; Raun, 2018), interacting in a more intimate way (Tolson, 2010), and communicating messages in a variety of ways unique to different audiences (Cunningham & Craig, 2017).

While YouTube is primarily a video-sharing platform, the site's format has been adapted to create a unique experience that allows content creators to promote elements of their brand that reach beyond simple video sharing. Jarrett (2008) found that features such as playlists, annotations, link embedding in video descriptions, and in-video embedding make it possible for individuals and brands to sculpt the video-sharing experience they are looking for. In this way, YouTube is very adept at creating a distinct and unique brand while simultaneously allowing and promoting adaptability so that both content creators and viewers have a personalized experience that fills their individual needs.

Extensive research has been devoted to YouTube's affordances for various genres such as gaming (Postigo, 2016), music (Airoldi et al., 2016), and politics (Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). For news and current events, Arthurs, Drakopoulou, and Gandini (2018) found that YouTube has become more favorable than many live news broadcasts and sporting events. They noted that the insider, or eyewitness perspective, of user-generated content gave viewers a more favorable perspective on world events due to its more relatable format. Viral videos from eyewitness perspectives showed viewers new perspectives, angles, and emotions previously unavailable in traditional television formats.

The online gaming community, particularly live gaming and "Let's Play" videos (videos where the host plays the game with commentary), were developed in the early years of YouTube. Postigo (2016) found that YouTube had many affordances that make the platform an ideal space to blend original content creation with marketable commercialism in gaming. His study found that gameplay channels have developed into a highly profitable realm for YouTube. Gamers broadcasting their gameplay experience have excelled on YouTube due to the platform's ability to showcase the gameplay itself, market both the gameplay and the game player, and allow the game players to interact with their viewers. Live gameplay videos allow the player to accept advice and suggestions from their audience, which creates a more intimate and interactive gameplay experience.

Studies have also explored YouTube's advertising affordances beyond gameplay. Arthurs et al. (2018) found that plenty research has been focused on the relationship between popular vloggers and large business marketing. Many content creators look to other avenues, like direct sponsorship or self-promoting merchandise, to continue profiting off their vlogging lifestyle (Martinez, 2018). YouTube vloggers can also partner with businesses to sponsor products and

promotions through their videos. Bishop (2018) found that many beauty vloggers are using this system to boost views for themselves while boosting sales for beauty product lines promoted in their videos. Bishop (2018) also noted that changes in the algorithm are making this system less profitable for both parties.

YouTube has affordances available to many areas of education. Jaffar (2012) found that videos posted for students positively facilitated the learning process by letting them move at their own pace. Furthermore, the comment sections for these videos gave struggling students a place where they could feel comfortable enough to ask questions and find answers. Brook (2011) found that using YouTube to post videos in classes that allow students to share and comment on videos created by their peers facilitated in learning as well. However, Jones and Cuthrell (2011) warn against overuse of YouTube as a learning tool since similar issues that plague content creators, such as copyright, can make utilizing YouTube in educational settings difficult.

Political strategy has benefitted from YouTube since the platform launched in 2005. Marwick (2007) found that within two years of the site's creation, YouTube was already being used by political detractors to post videos exposing candidates in the act of making racist, misogynistic, and otherwise prejudiced remarks. She posited that YouTube's viral nature made it easy for people to spread content that could easily disrupt a political campaign, thus making YouTube a new and important platform for political discussion. Askanius and Uldam (2011) studied how YouTube played a role in climate change activism. They found that YouTube's free and simple nature made it easy for activists to spread their message in an emotionally compelling way with little planning and coordination.

YouTube itself has actively participated in the political process as well by starting the YouChoose campaign in 2008 (Church, 2010). The YouChoose campaign gave voters a simple

and easily accessible conglomerate of information about the 16 presidential platforms. The

campaign allowed the candidates to post videos as well as compile videos put out by other

organizations. However, it should be noted that this campaign almost took advantage of

YouTube's affordances to a fault as Church found the campaigns "may actually promote passive

engagement within the voter" (2010, p. 140).

YouTube Algorithm Affordances

Algorithms are a key feature in helping social platforms achieve objectives and continue

to grow and expand. In the context of social media, an algorithm is defined as "carefully planned

instructions that follow a sequential order" (Bucher, 2017). The role of an algorithm in social

media is to help platforms learn the behavior of an individual user when they are interacting with

the platform. As the algorithm learns patterns, interests, and attention-grabbers, it can better

determine what content to fill the news feed with as the user continues interacting with the

platform (Bucher, 2017). This design is aimed to keep users on the platform as long as possible

because, when executed correctly, the algorithm can continue to feed the consumer new

information and content while simultaneously filtering out uninteresting content for as long as

the user is on the platform (Lazer, 2015).

Social media platforms depend on algorithms not only to continually draw in the

attention of users, but also to learn about the user's behaviors and interests. This information can

help the algorithm propose new recommendations for pages and businesses that may be of

interest to the individual user (Hamilton, Karahalios, Sandvig, & Eslami, 2014). Algorithms use

many means to learn how to target curated content and advertisements to individual users such as

location services, photo and video views, and post engagement (Bucher, 2017). These various

methods are fraught with controversies, ranging from ethical debate to privacy concern. Lazer

(2015) observed that Facebook's algorithmic patterns tend to push opposing opinions out of users' news feeds and may be inadvertently creating echo chambers (a setting where the same opinion is repeatedly validated). Lazer questioned whether or not Facebook's algorithm should have such a considerable influence on public opinion, considering the enormous stream of data flowing through Facebook's systems. Bucher (2017) explored how often users are aware of social media algorithms' influence on users' daily Internet practices. User agreements on social media sites often grant the platform access to sell algorithmic data to other companies that can target curated ads based on location, visited websites, clicked links, and even browsing tendencies. Hamilton et al. (2014) were concerned that individuals were not educated well enough on how often algorithms customize their online experience and recommended making algorithmic awareness and literacy a more common practice.

For social media platforms, businesses and companies that advertise and promote themselves on social media as well as influencers who make a career out of a social media presence, understanding and optimizing algorithms is a critical part of their success. Lee, Hosanagar, and Nair (2018) looked at advertising practices for nearly 1,000 businesses through more than 100,000 Facebook posts. They found that Facebook's algorithm helps businesses target their ads to users who are more likely to interact with their product (though the study also found businesses use other means to promote products and services). Since most social media platforms are free to use, algorithms are a valuable asset for social media platforms as they encourage businesses to utilize their platform advertise directly to consumers who are most likely to purchase their products (Sinclair, 2016).

Influencers in particular are highly dependent on algorithms to draw traffic and views to their channels. Romero, Galuba, Asur, and Huberman (2011) found that because of the passive

nature of most social media users, algorithms can help influencers drive traffic to their page and

boost their pages' influence. This can in turn draw businesses to do promotional advertising

through these influencers' channels and increase revenue (Sinclair, 2016). Algorithms can also

hurt influencers if they are not optimized to draw traffic to their channel. On the other hand, if

users learn how an algorithm chooses to promote certain channels, they can manipulate the

algorithm to promote certain channels regardless of the integrity of the content on the channel

purely due to algorithm optimization (More & Lingam, 2019). For this reason, algorithm data is

often cryptic and ever-changing to avoid these potential pitfalls.

Little research has been done to study YouTube's algorithm or how its influencers are

impacted both positively and negatively by YouTube's algorithm. The algorithm is an important

part of YouTube's business model in advertising, public perception, and account hierarchy as all

vloggers are subject to its decision making (Bishop, 2018). While this study will examine how

YouTube's algorithm plays into the relationship between YouTube and influencers, future

research is needed to better understand how YouTube's algorithm affects influencers and how it

affects public opinion through user feed curation.

The Role of YouTube Influencers in Society Today

No one understands the affordances of YouTube better than YouTube influencers since it

is through those affordances that they built their career. Because of YouTube's slow separation

from content creators, one may wonder why it is noteworthy to care about content creators' roles

in the website at all. Original content creators play a large role in the identity of the current

YouTube landscape (Jerslev, 2016). While most popular YouTubers reach a status more akin to

what Arthurs et al. (2018) call "micro-celebrities" (or celebrities within only a niche group) their

influence and reach can often bleed into mainstream culture. In late 2018, YouTube's most

popular vlogger, Swedish gamer Felix Kjellberg (known by his profile name "PewDiePie") was in danger of losing his top subscriber crown to Indian music video account "T-Series". While many predicted a quick end to Kjellberg's reign as the top content creator, his followers began an international campaign recruiting YouTube viewers and non-viewers alike to subscribe to Kjellberg's channel. In only 5 months, Kjellberg gained an additional 30 million subscribers before finally losing the race to T-Series in April 2019 (PewDiePie vs T-Series Live Subscriber Count, 2019). Kjellberg's followers employed a variety of creative means to encourage others to subscribe including hacking printers, purchasing billboards, and taking signs to the Super Bowl (Alexander, February 2019). This campaign, masqueraded in meme format, illustrates the persuasive power of YouTube celebrities.

Vloggers have also extended their reach and influence beyond their video production alone. Lifestyle vloggers Logan Paul and Olajide Olatunji (known to his online audience as "KSI") embarked on a world tour to promote their boxing match, which was live streamed on YouTube in 2018. Even though neither Paul nor Olatunji had any professional boxing experience, the match was estimated to be the fifth highest Pay-Per-View boxing match of all time (Doyle, 2018; Jr., 2018). The two vloggers held a second fight in November 2019, but the second fight did not draw in as much viewership as the first (Kastowitz, 2019).

Vloggers have found other means to make money as well. Many popular vloggers design their own merchandise, apps, and other products and promote these items in their videos (Hladchuk, 2018). Others use their audiences to promote new record labels, convention visits, and concert tours (Mongeau, 2018). Some YouTube gamers collaborate with video game developers to make their own apps and games for their fans to enjoy (Kjellberg, 2017). Many vloggers today are collaborating with businesses to help promote special sales and deals on the

businesses' websites using discounts and promo codes (Klein, February 2019). Other YouTube

stars have gone on to star in feature films (Bansal, 2018) and even travel on international tours

(Lorenz, 2018). There is also an extensive list of successful recording artists who got their start

on YouTube, with Justin Bieber being arguably the most well-known YouTube success story of

all (Briones, 2017). While these ventures have had varying levels of success (Biswas, 2018;

Farokhmanesh, 2018; Tidy, 2018), the YouTube platform has afforded these Internet sensations

the ability to pursue just about any personal interest they want.

Abidin (2015) found an intimate interconnectedness between Singapore influencers on

YouTube and their audiences, due to influencers sharing personal moments from their daily

lives. Her study showed a clear mutual benefit between influencers and viewers that is at the

heart of YouTube's success. Chen (2013) looked at how YouTube stars can build their brand

through the platform. However, studies have yet to explore the relationship between YouTube

and YouTube celebrities to explore what does and does not work between the two parties.

YouTube Influencers and Parasocial Relationships

While the relationship between influencers and their viewers is not central to this study, it

is worth mentioning these relationships in order to explain how digital stars can be so influential.

Influencers on social media develop a deep personal connection with their audiences according

to parasocial relationships theory. This theory posits that audiences develop psychological

relationships with individuals, either real or fictional, that they see while consuming mass media

(Horton & Wohl, 1956). The affordances of social media—particularly comment sections, direct

messages, and audio/visual components—create an environment where individuals feel a

personal and intimate connection with social media celebrities (Nouri, 2018). This enables social

media influencers to promote products and events to their audiences, regardless of traditional

factors like attractiveness, because viewers feel like a close friend is making a personal

recommendation (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). This approach of sharing endorsements of products

through online influencers is known as electronic word-of-mouth and is becoming an

increasingly popular approach to digital marketing (Solokova & Kevi, 2019). Booth and Matic

(2011) found that social media influencers have a significant pull on corporate brand perception.

Therefore, it is important for corporations to identify who influencers are and how to gain their

favor. Current scholarly work still considers social media influencers to be micro-celebrities, or

individuals who consider themselves celebrities (Marwick, 2013). However, emerging studies

are showing that social media influencers in many instances can have a greater influence than

traditional celebrities since social media affords influencers a more personal relationship with

their audiences (Nouri, 2018).

For YouTube influencers, the affordances of YouTube create an especially intimate

setting that gives them a unique level of influence on audiences. Rasmussen (2018) found that

for YouTube beauty vloggers, promoting products came across to viewers less as an

advertisement and more as a close friend sharing their opinion. Nearly three out of four (68%)

participants in Rasmussen's study reported that they were likely to purchase a product reviewed

by a YouTube celebrity, while just over half (53%) reported they were likely to purchase a

product from a mainstream celebrity. Mertz (2019) found that factors such as perceived

credibility, authenticity, and genuine enthusiasm play into social media influencers' heightened

levels of trustworthiness with viewers. This illustrates the rising influence that YouTube

celebrities have on their viewers. While traditional celebrities likely have a larger influence on

casual YouTube consumers, those who follow specific influencers are more likely to be

persuaded by those influencers.

While digital celebrities' influence on buying intentions has risen in the Web 2.0 era, the trend is not without criticism or concern. Daniel Jr., Crawford Jackson, and Westerman (2018) found that influencers who vaped had a significant presence in the vaping community. Vapers who followed influencers would reach out for opinions and advice from influencers, and these influencers often respond with their input. With rising concerns regarding the dangers of vaping (Larsen, 2020), this could prove to be of note in health scholarship. Mertz (2019) observed that while trust is a significant factor in YouTube viewers buying influencer-endorsed products, trust can quickly turn to mistrust if influencers are not straightforward and transparent with viewers. If viewers feel that the influencers are manipulating them to buy certain products without transparency, they are turned away from not only the product, but from the influencer as well.

Lou and Kim (2019) explored parental concerns over parasocial relationships among adolescents. They found that active parental mediation actually could curtail their adolescents' materialism, especially as it related to influencer-endorsed products. They did note, however, that parental mediation had no effect on adolescents' parasocial relationships with influencers. While there is significant research on influencers' effect on marketing trends, more research is needed to learn about influencers' effect on health, public opinion, political opinion, and other social topics.

Relations Between YouTube and Influencers

High levels of richness and presence on YouTube, together with strong relational ties between influencers and viewers creates the ideal platform for influencers to have great success, build a presence with advertisers, and lead a very profitable career. However, the relationship between YouTube and influencers has been rocky since the beginning. While YouTube stars have benefitted greatly from the affordances of the platform, they have grappled with YouTUbe

over how they fit in and have done so essentially since the beginning. When YouTube collaborated with Oprah in 2007 by sharing videos featuring the talk show giant on the front page, many rising YouTube stars began protesting these videos that they felt were an attack on their role in YouTube's attention economy (Burgess, Green, & Rebane, 2016). Nearly 15 years since the launch of YouTube, the platform continues to grapple with how original content creators fit into their future goals. This battle is why Jarrett (2008) felt there was a symbolic conflict between YouTube's original slogan "Broadcast Yourself" and the trademark symbol attached to it. He warned, "for users whose engagement with YouTube has been defined by the primacy of community, an over-reliance on professional, corporate content is likely to damage the all-important goodwill of the YouTube brand" (Jarrett 2008, p. 138).

　　　While it may appear that YouTube is trying to slowly distance itself from influencers, particularly when this rhetoric is being echoed by YouTubers (Alexander, Apr. 5, 2019), YouTube's fear of influencer action certainly is not without warrant. Top YouTuber Felix Kjellberg, known as "PewDiePie", shook up YouTube's platform when he posted a video with anti-Semitic content. While Kjellberg denied anti-Semitic views and claimed the content was made as a joke, YouTube drew criticism for not removing the video even though the platform demonetized the video (Winkler, Nicas, & Fritz, 2017). Months later, vlogger Logan Paul brought further controversy to YouTube when he posted a video featuring a man who had committed suicide in Japan. While YouTube did not endorse the video, they received criticism for allowing the video to reach YouTube's trending tab and for keeping the video on the site until Paul himself removed the video—though it is of note that with time, YouTube did temporarily suspend all ads on Paul's channels (Matsakis, 2018). YouTube faced arguably its most significant corporate crisis in 2019 when the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) fined

YouTube's parent company, Google, $170 million for violating the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) with its YouTube Kids content (Kelly, 2019). YouTube had promoted its platform as a popular site for children, but the FTC determined it had not approached COPPA compliance in that same spirit. In response, YouTube rolled out new policies and changes to the algorithm that heavily restricted content intended for children including videos depicting children's characters, themes, toys, and games (Alexander, 2020).

YouTube's changes in response to the FTC fine hit children's-content influencers especially hard. Because the COPPA policies restrict collecting data from children under age 13 without parental consent, influencers who target their videos to children were no longer able to collect advertising revenue from Google's advertising partners on their videos (Kelly & Alexander, 2019). Many influencers were left scrambling for a definition of what is considered "children's" content under these new policies since many of their videos are targeted to be family friendly even though they feature predominantly children's pop culture characters.

YouTube asked the FTC to help influencers by clarifying how influencers can be COPPA compliant (Perez, 2019) and the FTC responded with specific guidelines that laid out exactly what could and could not be done under the new COPPA rules on YouTube (Cohen, 2019). YouTube further said in a statement, "We recognize this won't be easy for some creators and are committed to working with them through this transition and providing resources to help them better understand these changes" (Wojcicki, 2020). YouTube also dedicated $100 million to supporting YouTube Kids creators over three years beginning in 2020 (Wojcicki, 2020).

YouTube and Crisis Communication

These examples are simple, yet significant examples of YouTube's approach to controversy and scandal. YouTube's crisis response could be viewed through situational crisis

communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007). SCCT provides a framework through which one can understand "how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication" (Coombs, 2007, p. 163). YouTube has approached all of the controversies they have dealt with in a different manner, each in a unique way that oftentimes results in a permanent change to protocol. These changes are typically made manifest through the algorithm that assists YouTube in carrying out new policies and procedures across the millions of videos that are uploaded daily (Bishop, 2018).

Most current scholarly work available looks at how corporations use YouTube to respond to their own crises (Cooley & Cooley, 2011; Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012; Graham, Avery, & Park, 2015). These studies show that YouTube is an effective platform available to corporations when their own reputations are at stake, but YouTube is a corporation with a reputation to uphold as well. This study will use the responses of YouTube celebrities to illustrate YouTube's approaches to crisis communication; however, more scholarly work is needed to explore YouTube's crisis response method in more depth.

Justification

Because so much scholarly work has proved that social media influencers play a significant role in modern online advertising (Booth & Matic, 2011; Daniel Jr. et al., 2018; Larsen, 2020; Marwick, 2013; Mertz, 2019; Nouri, 2018; Rasmussen 2018; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), and because of the rocky history between YouTube and influencers, learning more about where that relationship stands now is an important step in understanding the future of YouTube. While the idea of a social media celebrity is still a relatively new concept, YouTube celebrities are a vital element of the website's history, legacy, and future (Burgess, Green, & Rebane, 2016). Scholarly work highlighted in this study showed the significant role social media plays in

today's technologically driven society. Influencers shine a light on ways to optimize navigation

of social media sites for sharing content, promoting products, and persuading large followings.

While scholarly work has been done to see how influencers operate within the boundaries of

social media, little research has been done to understand the limitations and drawbacks of

building a career through social media from influencers' perspectives.

This study contributes to scholarly literature by illustrating how YouTube's affordances

aide influencers in building stronger bonds with their viewers, how YouTube's algorithm helps

and harms influencers' online careers, and how communication theories (such as media richness

theory and social presence theory) can help lay the theoretical groundwork that will explain the

dynamics between YouTube and influencers. Content creators have an increasing level of

influence that could have a significant impact on the future of social media because in many

ways, they are the face of social media. Learning about their experience building a career on

YouTube can help provide unique insight on the dynamic between YouTube and influencers.

This information could also contribute to future scholarly work in providing a different

perspective on social media research. The findings of this study can also provide valuable

information to social media developers in showing what features are useful in helping

influencers optimize their experience on social media platforms.

Research Questions

More research needs to be done to understand why influencers seem to prefer YouTube

as their platform of choice. YouTube is currently at a crossroads between celebrating original

content and becoming a channel aimed at traditional content. When YouTube's algorithm

changed to compete with Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu, YouTuber Carrie Crista felt like the

platform was "pushing content creators away instead of inviting them to a social platform that

encourages them to be creative in a way that other platforms can't" (Bradley, 2018). YouTube's

current place in the social media world is so large that a Vine-like exodus would probably not

kill the platform, yet many YouTube stars feel the platform's original message to "Broadcast

Yourself" (Jarrett, 2008) is being discouraged to the point that a large-scale departure from the

platform may be the only option (Alexander, April 2019; Bradley, 2018).

With that thought in mind, this study investigated the following research questions:

RQ1: What affordances does YouTube have that draw influencers in to use the platform?

RQ2: What is the valence of the relationship between YouTube and influencers?

Method

Data Collection

I used qualitative research in this study. Specifically, I used in-depth interviews to gather

information and insights on the relationship between YouTube and influencers. I chose

interviews in order to allow the interviewees to express their opinions and attitudes toward the

subject matter in a complete and thorough manner. I conducted all of the interviews in order to

maintain a holistic perspective on the data.

Because this study involved using the opinions and attitudes of live subjects, I acquired

approval from the Brigham Young University Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRB approval

involved a portfolio of information about the study, a review of the literature, justification for the

study, and forms outlining details of consent to participation and recording of responses. Once

this study obtained IRB approval, I began to reach out to individuals who were willing to take

part in this study.

Many of the strategical approaches to this method were approached through the

recommendations of John Creswell (2007). Because of the qualitative nature of this research, it

requires a more involved approach from the researcher in gathering the data as opposed to alternative forms of research. Because of this more personal approach to research, Creswell admitted that "How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social, gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research" (2007, p. 179). Therefore, all qualitative writing ends up within the framework of the writer and is backed by and founded on certain stances and biases. Creswell noted that "it is no longer acceptable to be the omniscient, distanced qualitative writer" (2007, p. 178), for to do so would conceal the truth of the narrative behind a stance that ideas cannot be challenged because of a lack of knowledge of the writer.

It is, therefore, important in qualitative research to acknowledge these biases, frames, and backgrounds to adequately eliminate the notion of protected, or as sociologist Laurel Richardson puts it, "privileged status" (cited in Creswell, 2007, p. 179). My initial draw to this study was my interest in the phenomenon I observed while watching YouTubers become famous and branch out to different avenues such as music and merchandising. My curiosity was admittedly piqued when some of the vloggers I watched would complain about their struggles to make money off their content, so my interest in this topic began in the negative light being shed on YouTube's business practices. While I have a great interest in YouTube as a frequent consumer, or as some would call it, "binger," of YouTube videos, I am far removed from the life of a YouTube influencer and the business of profiting from YouTube fame. I also have no ties to YouTube's corporate arm and am generally unfamiliar with their business approaches beyond the information presented in this study from interviewees. My aims in this study were exploratory, but it is admittedly difficult for me to fully grasp the nuances within individual relationships between YouTube influencers and the platform itself as a third-party observer. Because of this,

the observations and experiences of individual YouTubers are paramount in gaining insight on this dynamic relationship between platform and influencer.

Interview Participants

YouTube influencers are a scarcely researched subject in the communications world, but since these content creators have maximized their potential of the platform, their insight into understanding the advantages and disadvantages of YouTube is of the highest value. To gather this information, this study involved qualitative interviews with seven YouTube content creators whose subscriber counts ranged from 750,000 to 6.32 million. The mean subscriber count was 3.1 million subscribers. These influencers were comprised of vloggers who post videos of their daily lives, their opinions on current events, or any other topic of personal interest. Other influencers interviewed included high quality video producers, children's entertainment channels, and educational channels. Each of the participants began their endeavors on YouTube, though many of the participants have since branched out to other social media sites and other various business endeavors.

Participants were contacted through various means including email, social media public and private messages, posts on message boards, and word of mouth. At the conclusion of each interview, I employed the snowball sampling technique which entails receiving referrals of people the interviewee may know that could qualify for participation in the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). This approach yielded the most positive results in getting additional participants. Despite these various ways to contact influencers, only seven individuals responded to various requests which did limit the amount of data available in this study. However, I determined that the data was sufficient for the objectives of the study. Nevertheless, Creswell (2007) observed that in grounded theory methodology, saturation is best achieved through constant visitation of

the data. In other words, quality—not quantity—is key to grounded methodology saturation. After deliberation, I and the committee members determined there was enough information present in the seven interviews to justify saturation sufficient to the needs of this study. This was justified through rigorous and meticulous constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 2007). This will be discussed in more depth in the limitations section of this study. Because participants' identifying information is withheld from this study, each interviewee has been assigned a number, one through seven, with which they will be referred to throughout this study.

Participants were given consent forms in which they acknowledged that their interview answers would not be associated with any identifying information, that the interviews were being recorded, and that they would not receive any direct benefits for participating in the study, among other points. As is customary with IRB regulations, the interviewees' consent forms, along with their responses, will be stored in a secure location following the conclusion of the study.

Interviews

Due to the busy nature of YouTube influencers' schedules, interview lengths varied from 25 to 90 minutes, but each interview covered all the questions which will be discussed later in this section. The mean length of each interview was 47 minutes and 37 seconds. The interviews were conducted through the web chat app *Zoom*. Participants were connected to the digital meeting room I set up where they were able to both see me and talk to me like a *Skype* or *FaceTime* video chat. Before the start of the interview, I received verbal confirmation from each interviewee that they knew that the video and audio of the chat were being recorded.

The interviews delved into topics regarding the content creators experience on YouTube. These topics were prompted by prepared questions to help steer the conversation toward useful

information, though there was enough flexibility for interviewees to share thoughts and

experiences that they felt would be useful for this study. Below are the questions participants

were asked:

- What originally drew you to starting a video career on YouTube?

- What are the benefits of using YouTube as a platform to communicate with your

  audience? What are the disadvantages of using YouTube?

- How do you feel YouTube has supported you in your career? Has it supported other

  creators in ways different from how it has supported you?

- How has YouTube changed since you joined the platform in [the year they joined]? How

  has it stayed the same?

- There has been controversy surrounding YouTube recently regarding its relationship with

  content creators. Some feel the relationship is getting more out of favor with content

  creators, while others feel it is still strong. How do you feel about the current relationship

  YouTube has with content creators?

- How do you think your relationship with YouTube will be in the next 5 years? How will

  that relationship be with content creators in general?

- If you could change any one thing about how YouTube's algorithm promotes videos,

  what would it be?

- Do you see yourself leaving YouTube for another platform? Why? Do you see other

  creators leaving YouTube?

- What does the ideal platform to promote your work look like? What features does it

  include?

Due to the agreement stated in IRB forms, any identifying information of the interviewees was excluded to honor privacy.

Coding and Analytical Procedures

Because scholars have yet to conduct this form of research with YouTube celebrities, this study employed grounded theory to draw conclusions from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory "is an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data (Martin & Turner, 1986, p. 141). Using grounded theory suggests that the existing data may be too abstract or too remote to sufficiently compare research; consequently, this study used a bottom-up approach to learn about the relationship between YouTube and Internet celebrities. While grounded theory traditionally sets aside previous theories to present new theories, previous work regarding YouTube was considered in this study. However, due to the remote and highly specific nature of previous studies on YouTube, grounded theory was an essential approach to understanding this unstudied field of information.

Constant comparative analysis. The coding process was completed using constant comparative analysis, as is customary to grounded theory (Creswell, 2007). This process involves taking gathered data and comparing it to developing categories to find common themes and patterns. This approach helps find deeper meanings within the data and provides further clarification for the respondents' answers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Constant comparative analysis involves three steps: open coding, axial coding, and development of a coding paradigm to assist the researcher in connecting categories (Creswell, 2007). Constant comparative analysis was used on this study to help make sense of the diverse answers provided by the interviewees

during the research phase of this study. Coding tables can be found at the conclusion of this methods section.

Open coding. The first step of coding in grounded theory is open coding, which involves examining the gathered data for major categories, or themes, of information (Creswell, 2007). For this study, these categories were derived from the commonalities and repeated ideas found in the interviewees' answers. Each of these themes can develop subcategories that bring further clarification and depth to the coding, which will later ease the process of deriving meaning from the data. In order to assist in transcribing the information in the study, I loaded all audio files into *Otter*, an online service that transcribed the audio of the interviews, then separated researcher commentary from interviewee commentary and made necessary edits to maintain the integrity of the data. The final transcription document was 109 single-spaced pages containing the statements of the interviewees.

Following this process, I used the coding program *NVivo* to assist in finding these themes and patterns. *NVivo* assisted in synthesizing the data by highlighting common words and phrases which helps researchers to categorize the interviewees' answers in a more efficient way. In this study, I followed a step-by-step procedure recommended by Creswell (2007) to maximize my depth of understanding of the data. First, I imported the transcripts into the program, then scanned the transcripts for themes and patterns; these were organized into compiled categories called nodes. After themes began to develop, I searched for these themes throughout the data until a point of saturation, or redundancy, was reached in each category.

Axial coding. After open coding was complete, axial coding was used to create a major category to focus on. Axial coding involves grouping together the themes found during open coding, then analyzing these groups to create subcategories from these grouped themes. Creswell

(2007) recommends that these subcategories consist of causal conditions (factors that caused the

core phenomenon), strategies (actions taken in response to the core phenomenon), intervening

conditions (situational factors that influence the strategies), and consequences (outcomes from

using the strategies). The first subcategory of axial coding was that YouTube's affordances are

designed to sometimes help influencers, but to always help YouTube. Table 1 shows the

subthemes that contributed to this subcategory.

Table 1
[*Axial Coding Category One*]

YouTube Affordances
Category One Subcategories
FTC/COPPA Issues
Influencer Diversifying Presence
YouTube Advantages
YouTube Algorithm
YouTube Changes
YouTube Disadvantages
YouTube Influencer Non-Support
YouTube-Influencer Relationship
YouTube Money Making
YouTube Origins
YouTube Partner Program
YouTube Staying the Same

The second subcategory of axial coding was that YouTube is a hegemonic platform that

helps influencers so long as it benefits YouTube to do so. Table 2 shows the subthemes that

contributed to this subcategory.

Table 2
[*Axial Coding Category Two*]

YouTube Hegemony
Category Two Subcategories
Copyright
FTC/COPPA Issues
Influencer-Audience Relationship
YouTube Advantages
YouTube Algorithm
YouTube Changes
YouTube Community
YouTube Disadvantages
YouTube Future
YouTube Non-Support
YouTube Origins
YouTube Partner Program
YouTube Support

The third subcategory of axial coding was that influencers depend highly on gaining

favor with YouTube if they plan on making significant money on the site. Table 3 shows the

subthemes that contributed to this subcategory.

Table 3
[*Axial Coding Category Three*]

Making Money on YouTube
Category Three Subcategories
Copyright
FTC/COPPA Issues
Influencer-Audience Relationship
Influencer Diversifying Presence
Leaving YouTube
Making Money on YouTube
Origins on YouTube
YouTube Advantages
YouTube Algorithm
YouTube Changes
YouTube Community
YouTube Disadvantages
YouTube Future
YouTube Influencer Support
YouTube Influencer Non-Support
YouTube-Influencer Relationship
YouTube Partner Program

The fourth subcategory of axial coding was that influencers want to use YouTube, but

they do not feel that YouTube supports their efforts. Table 4 shows the subthemes that

contributed to this subcategory.

Table 4
[*Axial Coding Category Four*]

YouTube-Influencer Relationship
Category Four Subcategories
Copyright
FTC/COPPA Issues
Ideal Platform for Influencers
Influencer Diversifying Presence
YouTube Advantages
YouTube Algorithm
YouTube Changes
YouTube Community
YouTube Disadvantages
YouTube Future
YouTube Influencer Non-Support
YouTube Influencer Support
YouTube-Influencer Relationship
YouTube Money Making
YouTube Origins
YouTube Partner Program
YouTube Staying the Same

Once all subcategories were created and classified, the third step of the coding process was

initiated.

Selective coding. Selective coding is determining a main theme from each of the

subcategories. This main theme is found by drawing patterns and commonalities present within

the subcategories until the overarching main theme, known as the "core phenomenon," surfaces

from the data (Creswell, 2007). This core phenomenon of this study tied all of the subcategories

together and provided the contextual framework for this study's argument.

The core phenomenon of the findings is that YouTube approaches interactions with

influencers in a venture capital model where influencers essentially pitch their videos to

YouTube in hopes that YouTube will select their videos to be featured prominently on the site.

The subcategories organized during axial coding will be expounded in the findings section to

explain the details of this phenomenon.

Findings

The following section will illustrate the core phenomenon through different examples

using the quotes and experiences derived from the data gathered through the in-depth interviews.

Table 5 shows the core phenomenon along with the subthemes that led to it. The findings section

will follow the order of the subthemes presented in Table 5.

Table 5
[*Core Phenomenon*]

YouTube Venture Capital
Core Phenomenon Subthemes

YouTube Affordances
    YouTube Hegemony
    YouTube Money Making
    YouTube-Influencer Relationship

Core Phenomenon – YouTube as a Venture Capital System

The key finding of this study is the model with which YouTube runs its platform. While

most social media platforms operate as a conduit for users to post and share content, influencers

said YouTube couples its conduit features with partnership opportunities. These partnership

opportunities come in multiple tiers: the YouTube Partner Program, and the Google Preferred

Lineups program. These programs will be discussed later in this section. Influencers' responses

showed that YouTube's model of partnering with creators operates more like a venture capital

business system than a traditional employer-employee relationship. To explain the venture

capital model for this study, entrepreneurs sell startup business ideas to investors in hopes of

gaining funding to launch their products. The investor will hear the sales pitches of the

entrepreneurs and will decide which of these small businesses to invest in. The small businesses

that receive funding have a higher likelihood of gaining great success and reach than those that

choose to launch independently and without larger company funding. The venture capital system

was popularized, and is best visualized, by the reality television show *Shark Tank*.

Influencers responses suggest YouTube operates a system comparable to that of

traditional venture capital. In this setting, YouTube is the investor and influencers act as content

entrepreneurs. In YouTube's Partner Program model, each time an influencer posts a new video,

they have to proverbially sell that video to YouTube before it can take off with general

audiences. YouTube acts as a gatekeeper that will hand select which videos it deems worthy of

monetization, virality, and promotion. Affordances such as the front page, the trending tab, the

subscription and notification icons, and the algorithm all directly and indirectly aid YouTube in

deciding which creators will make the most money and which videos will be the most viral.

Influencer 2 described the opportunities of virality this way:

> I thought maybe in a year our video would have like 100,000 views, that'd be cool. And
>
> then in two months it reached 19 million views, and by December I've reached 100
>
> million views. Just crazy. So, then we realized that we could make a living off YouTube.

YouTube also revisits certain successful videos and, if YouTube chooses to do so, will make the

videos trend again. Influencer 2 said,

> They're like, "Okay, so if we recommend this video, then people … are likely to click on
>
> it, and they're going to watch the whole thing. So, we're going to recommend the crap
>
> out of this video." And then it got like, millions of views so it had like, in one day, it got
>
> more views than it did for last like three years. And so that's really cool at YouTube. And

… old videos aren't dead for you, which is cool. I spent a lot of time … on this project

and then it gets reborn or re-trending again, which is cool.

If YouTube chooses not to select a video to trend, or if the video does not meet YouTube's

regulations for viral videos, it may face demonetization (where a video is ineligible for AdSense

revenue through YouTube), or as Influencer 4 put it, "if it doesn't take off right away, it's dead."

If the video is too controversial or inappropriate for YouTube's community guidelines, it will be

removed from the site altogether. Influencer 2 continued:

YouTube is not … as stable as a job. It has high rewards, obviously. But about a year and

a half ago, our views were cut down to like a third of the views, which are a third of the

money. So, we thought, like, "Oh, we're doing great." We even bought a house. It's like,

"Psych!" We're only getting a third because…well…we don't even know. They don't

really tell you, the algorithm changes, or content's not relevant anymore.

Not being able to successfully convince YouTube to promote your video can lead to significantly

lower revenue for influencers. Influencer 6 described the challenge of making money on

YouTube as a "roller coaster":

The first time when we started, we were going along and then when we first started

making money and we got to the holidays, it started really ramping up. We got to

November and I was like, "Oh my gosh, we're going to be able to retire at the end of next

year." Because it was just going like this [draws upward in the air] and we had never seen

a do that. We got to the day after Christmas and it was like the bottom fell out and I was

like, "Oh my gosh, that is so unreal."

To combat this, many influencers diversify their content through other platforms both digital and

non-digital. This will be discussed later in the findings section.

Influencers are tasked with learning what YouTube is trying to promote, but due to controversies surrounding high-profile influencers in the past, YouTube is very secretive about who and what content they choose to promote.[1] Influencer 7 described their experience with this ambiguous communication as follows:

> YouTube definitely picks channels that they do want to support. … I think they still have a monthly theme. So, October is Halloween, but September is like reading month. … And YouTube would tell some creators, they mail out this calendar of like, "Hey, this month, this is this theme, and this month, this is this theme. So, if you film this kind of video, then we'll put [it] on the app." So, when I went to YouTube headquarters, everyone was talking about this monthly calendar, like 'I don't have the monthly calendar' and my YouTube rep's like, "Oh, I guess I could send it to you." And I'm like, "what?" And then I came back and I told all my other YouTube friends and no one else had this calendar.

While this venture capital model can be highly profitable for influencers, it can also be an inconsistent and confusing source of income. The subthemes within the finding section will further illustrate in what ways YouTube's partnership model is both helpful and detrimental to influencers. The forthcoming subthemes will also show how YouTube's affordances sometimes help influencers but always help the platform, how influencers struggle to make money on the platform, and how YouTube and influencers feel about each other based on how both parties negotiate content sharing on the platform.

The Selective Affordances of YouTube

While this introduction to the relationship between YouTube and influencers may seem inherently negative, influencers actually see great benefit to promoting their material on

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[1] See the *Relations Between YouTube and Influencers* section of the literature review for more on influencer controversy.

YouTube. All of the interviewees spoke highly of YouTube, citing many of the affordances as things they saw helping them grow their audiences and achieve their goals as content creators. Many respondents cited YouTube as the best platform for "getting your name out there faster" (Influencer 1), "a culture of authenticity and vulnerability" (Influencer 5), "the algorithm and how they recommend videos" (Influencer 6), "feedback from looking at the stats" (Influencer 3), "a tighter and stronger connection to people than any other medium" (Influencer 7), "constantly trying to reward creators" (Influencer 2), and "helping people out or helping out the creator and partnering with you" (Influencer 4). All of these affordances are part of, as Influencer 6 said, "the massive amount of potential YouTube already has baked into it." These quotes all indicate that influencers like and appreciate the value of YouTube affordances, and they do feel that YouTube offers them the best opportunity to share their content with their audiences. Influencer 6 said,

> YouTube, on a whole has created a relationship with me as a creator to make me actually feel like a partner to like they really do invest in me. When we reached - I can't remember how many subscribers, a thousand I think - they assigned me a partner manager. So, they meet with me once a month, and sometimes twice a month. And then yearly we'll go through the whole channel and create reports for us, picking out things that we're doing well and things that we could be working on. So, on a personal level, I felt like they've really invested in me by providing that type of a resource like a one-on-one person that we can communicate with and ask questions and stuff.

However, the results of this study also show that there is a challenge of ambivalence with YouTube affordances; while they will always help YouTube, they can be disadvantageous to influencers without warning. Many of the influencers that participated in this study cited how

YouTube will make changes to their affordances without warning that can have significant

consequences to the success of their channels. Influencer 1 said,

> I think now it's kind of all about the algorithm. At any minute, YouTube can push a
>
> button, and they can favor one kind of content over another kind of content. So, I feel
>
> you're substantially more at the mercy of the algorithm now than it was in the past where
>
> before we're just creating good content and it gets seen. Now I've seen a lot of incredible
>
> content that just isn't getting seen because it doesn't fit the requirements of the algorithm
>
> or they favor longer content, so you're at the mercy of the algorithm I think substantially
>
> more than it has ever been.

YouTube's algorithm was a significant finding in this study. Many of the influencers that

participated mentioned the algorithm as the most significant hinderance to their success. While

most of them understood its purpose, they were left confused about its method and decision-

making process. Influencer 7 believed that the algorithm changes to purposely kill off certain

channels:

> They change the algorithm to like, kill off channels. Like, I know several channels that
>
> dropped like 80 or 90 percent of views overnight. Like, everybody all within the same
>
> day. And then they'll contact you, they're like, "Oh, the audience must have changed"
>
> and you're like, "No, it's not like the entire world at 2 a.m. decided they don't like me
>
> anymore."

Influencer 4 mentioned the frustrations of trying to learn the algorithm when there appears to be

no rhyme or reason to its decisions:

> I think because [YouTube] is totally algorithmically driven, and the algorithm is so
>
> massive and such a mystery, you really can't guarantee anything. So you can do

everything right, theoretically, and still, something just doesn't work. … I would hate to

be [a] professional person who helps people start YouTube channels because you can …

do everything right but because we don't really know what's inside that black box, you

just don't really know what the secret sauce is. And I think it's just harder than other

platforms to build that returning community type of thing. And people will find you once

and then they'll never find you again if they don't subscribe.

The algorithm is just one example of changes to YouTube affordances that can harm YouTube

influencers. Recent changes in response to COPPA violations with the YouTube Kids platform

have throttled some influencers' accessibility to their audiences. Influencer 6 said,

The comments will be taken away, the community tab will be gone. And also, our

subscribers won't get an alert when we post a new video. And so, some of that stuff could

definitely, you know, hurt us as a business.

Influencer 2 described how these changes might hurt the future of their kid-content channel:

Having comments turned off the last year has been hard. I don't even know if people like

the videos. Obviously, I got likes, but like, are people raving about it? Like, there's a lot

of motivation to do it sometimes. I mean, we're trying to make a living, but sometimes

it's hard to make these for a living and not get any money back.

Some influencers were worried that the recent changes to YouTube affordances are making it

lose its unique edge in the world of video content sharing. Influencer 4 said,

It's just become so much more sophisticated as a platform. I mean, I joined during the

time period when you had to be invited to the YouTube Partner Program. So not

everybody was a YouTube partner. So, the content was just so wonderfully raw, and

unprofessional … I think it's so slick now. Everybody's so slick. And it used to be just so

like, raw and off the cuff. And, you know, so different from traditional media and now

it's like every year it just inches closer to being more like traditional TV.

Influencers also worried that the changes to YouTube's partnership program have made it more

difficult to be successful. Influencer 6 expressed concerns that regulations are making it more

difficult for aspiring influencers to try to launch a channel on YouTube:

> In the beginning, when we first started, it just seemed like there was no regulation. It was
>
> like, every video was potentially monetized. The barrier to enter YouTube's partner
>
> program was extremely low at the very beginning, it was like elite, you had to be invited
>
> specifically from YouTube. Then when we joined, I remember a lot of YouTubers
>
> saying, "Oh, I can't believe it's so much harder now." And this was like seven years ago,
>
> I remember hearing them say, "It used to be so easy to get on the front page or trending
>
> on YouTube." But when I started, it seemed like it was really easy to get the partnership
>
> invite. And now it just seems like they're kind of slowly raising those requirements. So
>
> that makes it a little bit more challenging for people to start a business.

Not all of the changes in the evolution of YouTube affordances over the years have been

negative, however. Influencer 2 mentioned changes that have made YouTube more accessible for

all users:

> It used to be like for the most part, you'd have to be a big channel to get viewed. And
>
> then there were a thousand channels that were really trying would get picked up. So, now
>
> YouTube says anyone can make a big video for the most part. If it's trending enough, it
>
> doesn't matter if you don't have a lot [of] subscribers or other views on your video,
>
> YouTube is going to test out each video and give it a chance.

An important note from these findings is that these responses point out how changes to affordances have affected individual influencers, the changes as a whole improve YouTube because YouTube is not reliant on individual creators—as long as YouTube has creators at all, the company can promote being a platform by the people and for the people. Influencer 7 said:

> Oh, yeah, I mean, it just kind of depends, like, I feel like YouTube definitely picks … channels that they do want to support. … If you look at YouTube Rewind, you know, the people who are on there, like some of them have like 100,000 subscribers, but they're "cool." Like, [one account] had like, maybe 15,000 subscribers, like nothing. But since it was a unique thing, YouTube promoted them, you know? In reality, their top 10 most viewed channels are usually like kids or gaming … but they completely would ignore those altogether.

Because YouTube has such a high saturation of content creators, they do not have to rely on specific accounts to promote the idea that one can broadcast themselves on YouTube. This is beneficial to YouTube and the accounts they choose to promote but can be detrimental to accounts that have not gained YouTube's favor.

YouTube's Hegemonic Power Structure

Influencers' responses to this study suggested that YouTube's system of curating trending videos while working to promote specific online talent is indicative of a hegemonic power structure. Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci adopted the term *hegemony* from Greek origins while imprisoned under the rule of Mussolini in the 1920s. He used the term to describe one power holding political and ideological dominance over another. The key to hegemonic rule is control. A hegemonic leader has complete control over power, ideas, production, and economy.

Influences believe YouTube does demonstrate hegemonic tendencies when selecting

videos and influencers to promote. Consider the previous affordances outlined in this study.

Influencer 6 felt that many of YouTube's changes have come as a result of trying to control the

face of their brand:

> With every dramatic conflict that's happened on the platform more regulations have been
>
> introduced. So, with every little thing it seems like it started with [Logan Paul's dead
>
> body incident]. I don't know what actually started it, I don't think it was one big thing,
>
> but it was a lot of, maybe a lot of big things. So, I think they're narrowing what is
>
> appropriate for advertising. So that seems to be getting smaller and smaller, like cleaner
>
> language, less polarizing topics, and stuff like that. … We've seen YouTubers smaller
>
> than our channel just explode and you're just like, "Well, why them? Our quality of
>
> videos are so much better. Why are these like quality YouTubers often getting put on the
>
> sidelines?"

Influencer 1 observed that, while not affecting their channel directly, past incidents such as

Logan Paul's and PewDiePie's controversies have "kind of screwed it up and put a lot of red

flags." These incidents have forced YouTube to put more control on trending videos in part as a

protectant against controversial videos becoming the face of their brand. Influencer 5 said,

> I think they're also now introducing these like celebrity channels or these creative things
>
> that are already like pre-cleared for ads. And so therefore there's not that like, "Oh, can
>
> we run ads on this?" Or "Is this going to get demonetized?" Like, they already know that
>
> they can put ads on there because it runs on TV. … The people that started in the
>
> beginning were doing it for fun, not to be rich. So, once it started that everyone's like,
>
> "Oh, I want to get rich, I want to get rich," then it kind of actually grew until there was

more content on YouTube than people can watch. It's oversaturated and it just kind of

makes more fake people on YouTube, more money-grubbing.

While controls are helpful to save the family-friendly approach to the YouTube brand,

influencers say it can be difficult for them when these controls begin to limit affordances to

individual channels. Influencer 5 said,

I'm sure YouTube doesn't have time to raw watch every single video. But I've seen

several channels that have, like clean, wholesome videos and their channels have been

totally disabled. And I would only imagine as a content creator that would just make me

so mad. Because I think half the interaction of YouTube is seeing what other people think

of the video.

While favoring traditional broadcast media and mainstream celebrities does help protect

YouTube from controversy, influencers believe YouTube still relies on them to fulfill the

promise of their slogan, "Broadcast Yourself." Influencer 2 said,

The fact is like, we are their business, like we are the creator. So, they do need us, you

know? I mean, we're making good money but like, we're cheaper than paying $30,000 or

probably $100,000 for an episode of a Disney Channel TV show or whatever. So, I think

YouTube knows that and I think they know they need to reward their creators and make

sure that it is worth it for us to continue to make content.

Because of this reliance on influencers to balance the traditional media promoted, YouTube is in

a constant state of negotiation with its influencers. In this setting, negotiation is more than

bargaining and compromise. Negotiation between YouTube and influencers is a continual

redefining of terms, expectations, and preferences. Influencer 4 said,

I think YouTube makes you a little paranoid because of the algorithm thing, and because

things can just shift. I mean, you're on shifting sand. You never know. They can just

tweak one little thing in the algorithm, then everything changes. I think [influencers] tend

to be paranoid. So, as they see more and more traditional media stuff showing up, they're

interpreting it as, "Oh, YouTube likes them better than us" when that's not actually the

case at all. And you know, what makes YouTube different is the "hot mess endemic

[long-standing] creators" and the "professional endemic creators"; the ones that do a

really good job because you're still not going to find them on TV.

While YouTube may rely on non-traditional influencers to preserve its unique edge, they still

maintain most of the leverage at the negotiating table with influencers. Influencers say they are

in a constant state of relearning YouTube's latest policies, trends, and preferences. These updates

often come without warning, leaving influencers to adapt as quickly as possible in order to

maintain relevancy on the "shifting sand."

Preferential YouTube Monetization

As mentioned earlier in the findings section, this negotiation process is also a venture

capital pitch meeting. As influencers learn what YouTube's latest trends and promotional

preferences are, they try to convince YouTube that their latest videos fall in line with what

YouTube is trying to sell to mainstream audiences. This is YouTube's responsibility to

advertisers who, in a sense, are investing in YouTube by trusting them to put their

advertisements with videos that will best reach their audiences. Influencer 6 said,

If [influencers] want to be in the monetization area and business, then they should just

kind of bend with what YouTube sets as the guidelines instead of trying to fight it. I don't

think it's something that YouTube's doing to try to hurt creators. It's definitely a move to

try to appease the advertisers, but I think also it is in the best interest of the platform as a

whole, even though I think a lot of creators see that as censoring or we're trying to tame

down opinions and content … or direct it. But I think you could still build a business and

be monetized on YouTube and still be who you are even [with] the new guidelines.

Because YouTube has such an important loyalty to advertisers, influencers believe the company

has to optimize the website to best match the advertisers' interests. This challenges influencers to

stay within an undefined zone of channels that YouTube wants to advertise for. Influencer 2 said

that this is a difficult zone to get into:

The sad thing [is] like we try to make all of our content family friendly, but it doesn't

mean it's targeting kids. It's like, "Are you targeting kids?" Like, well, we're making

Frozen covers, but our intention is not to be like, "Let's target these kids." Like, I watch

Frozen, I really enjoy it. But yeah, there's been talk like, "Well, I guess I better start

dropping f-bombs in my videos, so it's not classified for kids." I always said you can't be

too edgy, but same time we can't be too clean. So, you're just going to try and fit in this

very safe area.

While creativity is a significant factor with creators making YouTube videos, influencers believe

money is ultimately the driving factor. If the money is taken away, making YouTube videos is no

longer a viable option for influencers since making the videos is not just a passion, but a primary

source of income as well. Influencer 5 said,

I have another YouTuber friend, and her entire channel got completely demonetized. So,

any time before she even posted, no matter what type of video she posted, it would

automatically not make money. And you know, that's her job. So, she was stressed, and

she would tweet YouTube to try and get in contact. She finally got it fixed, but like, I

know it's super stressful for her because it was down for a while, like about a month that

her channel was demonetized. And that's a big deal, you know?

While this can be a dangerous situation for YouTubers, they do understand that this is the high-

risk, high-reward situation they signed up for. Influencer 6 said, "I feel like if creators use

YouTube in a way where it wasn't like their sole business like 'I'm a YouTuber,' then they

wouldn't be as—they wouldn't be on this huge roller coaster." Many influencers are aware of

this risk and have taken certain precautions to diversify their social media presence and make

sure they are not investing their entire careers in the inconsistencies of YouTube success.

Influencer 6 said,

> That's the main reason why we … built the website and the app was to help with that
>
> rollercoaster of feeling when you're on YouTube. I feel like it's been able to help us just
>
> kind of keep an even keel because if everything was just relying on YouTube, you're
>
> going to lose all your income. I'd be like, "Now I have to find a different platform." I
>
> don't know what's going to come in the next five years. We want to have something
>
> where, you know, if those apps get deleted, like Vine did all of a sudden, then we have
>
> something else to fall back on. So, we don't put all our eggs in one basket.

Along with designing their own sites and apps, many YouTubers have put their content on other

social platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Influencer 5 said,

> I remember specifically we had created a YouTube account and my sister was like, "You
>
> need to create an Instagram account now." Why? She's like, "We need to like build both
>
> platforms." I had no clue what that meant, but I remember creating the account which I
>
> felt like really helped us grow on both because we're trying to build both of them like a

dynamic duo. We never had to transfer Instagram followers or transfer YouTube

followers, just they grew together.

Influencers have also found that getting a large YouTube following has helped them have an

audience to whom they can introduce other projects beyond video sharing. Influencer 5

continued,

I really wanted to start a clothing line. That's what we're working on right now. I think

we'll still be doing YouTube as well because that's where we started out, where you grew

your audience to allow you to do whatever else you choose to end up doing. And so, I

understand not everyone has the time to continue doing YouTube, but I think it is sad

when people do leave YouTube because you're abandoning all those people that kind of

grew up with you.

Using the success of their YouTube presence, many influencers expanded their media footprints

by creating diverse modes of income. This not only cultivated stability and security when

YouTube numbers were consistently inconsistent, but it also opened up new opportunities for

influencers to branch out, to try things that would not have been previously possible, and to build

their digital celebrity status by appealing to a diverse range of audiences.

Need for YouTube Support

So far, the findings have explored how YouTube deals with influencers, why they do so,

and how influencers navigate around this dynamic. This section will look at how influencers feel

about the relationship and what they want to gain from YouTube. As the findings have shown,

influencers do play a significant role in giving YouTube a unique edge over other traditional

broadcast media. However, many feel frustrated—even betrayed, in some ways—by the way

YouTube seems to cast them aside without warning. Influencer 2 said,

I think when I started on YouTube, I want to say there was like around 100 YouTubers

that had a million subscribers. And obviously now I'm not sure what the exact number is,

but I would imagine it's thousands more that have that much, and they can only have so

many people that can manage that. I just think they're just losing that personal

relationship, because it's getting so many top influencers where they can't manage all

those people. So, a lot of us kind of get bumped to the side left and right, and I think that

the issue's only going to get worse.

Even though many influencers felt that they no longer had a personal connection to YouTube

like they once did, they did not anticipate leaving YouTube for a different platform, though

Influencer 3 claimed that "everybody wants to." Influencer 5 said, "I feel like YouTube is such a

giant monopoly that I feel like … YouTube's not the best for content creators, but it's as good as

we can get." Some influencers stayed on YouTube because they did not feel like there was

anywhere else for them to go. Influencer 4 said,

It's weird being a YouTuber. You don't have a lot of options, and there isn't

[competition]. Who's the competitor out there for YouTube? Like, where else am I going

to go with my stuff? Nobody else wants my videos. So, I don't see people leaving. People

threaten to leave, but I don't see that happening. Viewership just isn't there. I mean,

there's just no rival to YouTube. There's nothing that even comes close.

While some influencers believed that their own accounts may not be part of YouTube's future

interests, they did believe that influencers would, in one way or another, always play an

important part in YouTube's master plan. Influencer 4 added,

I think that endemic creators are always going to be YouTube's bread and butter. I mean,

you know, it looks it looks like they're embracing traditional media, but I think it's

actually the opposite way around. I think the traditional media is embracing YouTube.

Influencers also believed there were simple improvements that YouTube could make to help

their individual accounts without getting in the way of advertising interests. One such example

Influencer 6 suggested was allowing influencers to promote exclusive paid content as part of

their pages:

One feature that I've kind of asked for on YouTube is they released memberships, which

allows creators to offer exclusive content to members. If a subscriber chooses to become

part of their membership, then they pay like $5.99 or $4.99 a month, and then they get

access to like unique emojis and unique content that the creator posts. I think that it

would be a great way for YouTube to also just to support their creators a little bit more

and actually drive more membership. That's probably one thing I really wish YouTube

would do.

Another idea posed was to improve on blending the social community side of YouTube with the

content sharing aspect. Influencer 4 said,

I would want there to be more of a social community aspect to the platform and more of

an opportunity for viewers on the platform to suggest content to each other, rather than

the machine suggesting content to people that viewers could be like, "Oh, if you liked

this, go check out this" and that viewers could follow each other. And, you know, they

could have watch parties together and things like that.

Some influencers simply wished for YouTube's "subscribe" and "notify" features to work

properly and preferentially for followers. Influencer 1 said,

I just wish videos could go out to our followers, so the biggest feature where if someone

was subscribing to us, and they jumped on to YouTube, they would see our content. It

would pop up in the news feed, now it doesn't do that. That's what YouTube was 10

years ago. If I were to describe a perfect platform, like I do feel YouTube had it perfect

for creators, but it's a different game now.

Influencers, while frustrated, did recognize YouTube's obligations to advertising revenue.

Consequently, many of their suggestions were more focused on giving viewers the control over

what they were watching and planning on watching next. They felt confident that giving more

power to the viewer would benefit influencers because, as Influencer 5 put it, "YouTube

followings are super loyal." They believed their followings were strong enough to keep their

viewers coming back which would allow influencers to better reach the goal of connecting with

their audiences. As Influencer 6 said, "I think that video really does create a connection, a tighter

connection and stronger connection to people than any other medium."

Discussion

Research Questions Revisited

RQ1 asked what affordances YouTube had that drew influencers to use the platform. The

findings of this study showed that YouTube is filled with many unique affordances that

influencers value. While most influencers do not maintain a singular footprint on YouTube

alone, they did cite YouTube as the primary platform they use to connect with their audiences

due to YouTube's unique affordances. The trending tab, the partner program and ability to

monetize videos, the audio/visual format coupled with comment section interaction, and

subscription and notifications options all contribute to YouTube's ability to be a rich, engaging

platform (Kaplan & Haelein, 2010).

This confirmed what the literature has already discovered about YouTube. Media richness theory suggests that the more affordances a medium can offer, the higher the likelihood that users will choose that medium specifically for those affordances (Sheer & Chen, 2004). The findings of this study showed that influencers prefer using YouTube because it allows them the best opportunity to connect with their audiences. Other social media sites such as Instagram and Facebook do not partner with users the way YouTube does, which makes YouTube's venture capital model unique to the world of social media. This model is a significant draw for many influencers to either start their careers on YouTube or expand their social media footprints to YouTube. Many responses from the in-depth interviews indicated specific elements of YouTube such as the partner program, the trending tab, and subscription and notification options as affordances that not only drew them to the platform in the first place, but have kept them there in spite of the ever-changing landscape of the platform. As Influencer 4 said, "There's just no rival to YouTube. There's nothing that even comes close."

This study also drew on social presence theory as a strong indicator of YouTube's ability to attract influencers to use their platform. Many interviewees cited YouTube's affordances as valuable because the affordances are ideal for connecting with their audiences. Social presence theory posits that media gain their value from the ability to grab and retain the attention of users (Cunningham & Craig, 2017). As the literature suggests, influencers acknowledge that their success or failure is highly dependent on the connection they develop and maintain with their viewers. Originally, YouTube's affordances helped create a stronger sense of community between viewers and influencers (Rotman & Preece, 2010). This may indicate why influencers felt so discouraged by recent YouTube's policy and procedural changes. Interviewees felt that these changes, while beneficial to YouTube's business ventures, were impeding influencers'

ability to connect with their audience. In other words, YouTube affordances were now standing

in the way of influencers getting to their audiences instead of acting as a meeting ground for

influencers and audiences like other social media platforms. When influencers were asked what

they envisioned on a perfect platform, their responses often pointed at features and affordances

that would help create a better feeling of community between influencers and viewers.[2]

Social presence theory connects to this phenomenon because as YouTube limits the

ability for influencers to connect with viewers, it weakens the telepresence on the platform which

is disadvantageous to its influencers. However, it is important to note that while this may be

disadvantageous to influencers, the method behind YouTube's algorithm and trending tabs

retains a high level of presence for viewers. This is because YouTube will continuously feed

videos of interest to them, thus keeping viewers immersed for an extended amount of time (Cao

et al., 2013). Influencers would prefer that viewers continue to watch more of their content, but

YouTube's algorithm often recommends videos that push viewers to different channels. As a

result, influencers lose the presence of viewers despite their best efforts to retain them. The fact

that affordances can be advantageous to YouTube while simultaneously being disadvantageous

to influencers is a significant finding from this study. Affordances have often been viewed in

scholarship as inherently good (Conole & Dyke, 2004), but the findings of this study suggest that

affordances may have different effects for different parties. This will be further explored later in

the discussion.

RQ2 inquired about the valence of the relationship between YouTube and influencers.

The simple answer is that the relationship is ambivalent. The findings prove that there is a certain

codependency between YouTube and influencers. Influencers need YouTube because, as RQ1

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[2] See *Need for YouTube Support* in the findings section.

demonstrated, YouTube offers the best opportunities currently available online for influencers to connect with their audiences. YouTube needs influencers because they are the thing that makes YouTube a unique video sharing place. YouTube has released official statements confirming that they believe influencers are a critical element to the success and identity of their platform:

> Creators are the heart of YouTube, and they're pioneering new content by vlogging about their lives, covering topics like gaming, fitness, comedy, hobbies, makeup tutorials, and every kind of How To imaginable. … Creators are at the cutting edge of culture and also becoming next generation media companies, boosting local economies with new jobs. … YouTube is unique as a platform since we share the majority of revenue with our creators. Going forward, our goal is to continue to grow revenue and audiences of YouTube creators. We appreciate everything creators do to inspire, educate, and entertain their audiences (Wojcicki, 2020).

Losing influencers, particularly since traditional media and traditional celebrities now have a larger presence on YouTube than ever before, would make YouTube even more of a broadcast site akin to Netflix and Hulu. As Influencer 4 said, "I think that endemic creators are always going to be YouTube's bread and butter. It looks like they're embracing traditional media, but I think it's actually the opposite. I think that traditional media is embracing YouTube."

In spite of this codependency, the relationship is often unsteady and frustrating, hence the ambivalence. At times, the relationship is one of mutual respect and teamwork. At other times, it is one of resentment and tension. From the findings in this study, influencers believe YouTube has the advantage over influencers in the relationship because while most influencers depend on YouTube to successfully make a career out of posting videos, YouTube only needs the holistic influencer community, rather than any individual influencers, to succeed. As long as YouTube

has popular influencers to feature on their site, the site can maintain the idea that anybody can be

somebody on YouTube. This is evident by how YouTube handled controversies surrounding

some of its biggest stars: PewDiePie and Logan Paul. When each of them made headlines for

negative reasons, YouTube almost immediately severed ties with both influencers by removing

them from the Google Preferred program (Matsakis, 2018; Winkler, Nicas, & Fritz, 2017). While

their channels were not suspended, YouTube put clear distance between them and the influencers

by ending significant partnership agreements.

Situational communication crisis theory (SCCT) explains YouTube apparent approach to

dealing with issues surrounding creators. SCCT illustrates how post-crisis communication can

help maximize reputational protection after significant public issues (Coombs, 2007). YouTube

may want to have a positive relationship with influencers as official statements emphasize.

Ultimately, influencers believe its primary responsibilities and obligations lies with its

relationship with advertisers since many of their policy changes appear to lean in favor of

advertiser preferences. Advertisers provide the revenue that keep YouTube operating and keep

influencers profiting, so they have a significant pull with both YouTube and influencers alike.

YouTube, however, shares a larger responsibility since the site is entrusted with putting

advertisements where the advertisers want them to be. This may explain why YouTube made

such swift and drastic changes to its algorithm when advertisers began pulling content from the

site in 2017 after advertisements were blindly assigned to extremist content (Stanford, 2018).

YouTube's immediate response indicated a strong desire to maintain a positive relationship with

advertisers. However, interviewee responses suggest that YouTube does not act as quickly or

directly to influencer requests. Even though influencers are a large part of YouTube's overall

platform, they do not influence overall decision making for the structure of the platform. Instead,

advertisers determine these decisions since they provide the income that YouTube operates on. This suggests that YouTube may not be as devoted to maintaining a positive reputation with influencers as it is to advertisers.

It is of note that, in spite of the clash of opinions from both YouTube and influencers, the research suggests that both parties do ultimately want to get along and work together. Though interviewees in this study felt that YouTube no longer cared about influencers, they did say they wanted things to work out because they saw great value in using YouTube.[3] YouTube continues to highlight influencer accomplishments through its annual "Rewind" videos (YouTube, 2019), though some influencers, such as PewDiePie and Ethan Klein (*h3h3Productions*), criticize YouTube for only highlighting select influencers regardless of actual accomplishments (a practice that this study confirms) (Kjellberg, 2019; Klein, 2019). YouTube's ongoing efforts to control their platform is frequently at odds with influencers efforts to connect with their viewers and maintain freedom of expression. While the possibility of negotiation with influencers certainly exists, it is not often a priority for YouTube as their focus lies in optimizing affordances for advertisers. Because of this, the valence of the relationship between YouTube and influencers is ambivalent.

Contributions

This study contributes to the body of literature in several significant ways. One of the more unique takeaways from the results of this study is the hegemonic structure of YouTube. The fact that YouTube has a unique venture capital system is of note in social media studies. This system is unique to YouTube as far as the current body of literature is concerned, but it is an easily replicable system that could be beneficial to future social media developers. This study

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[3] See *Need for YouTube Support* in the findings section

began by introducing the relationship between Vine and its influencers, which was different from

YouTube because Vine, in part, lived and died due to its relationship with influencers. When

Vine's parent company, Twitter, saw a decline in Vine's value, Vine influencers had an

opportunity to bolster the app that had given them their online celebrity status. However, Vine

influencers instead decided to take advantage its desperate and dying state (Lorenz, 2017).

       A key aspect of this example relates to YouTube's current situation. From the findings of

this study, YouTube appears to have learned an important lesson from influencers by not

investing in individual influencers, but rather in the influencer community overall. Because

influencers are a key bridge between YouTube and viewers, they will always play an important

role in YouTube, but many interviewees indicated that another app more honed to their needs

and wishes as influencers could easily pull them away from YouTube if the opportunity seemed

promising. In that light, YouTube's hegemonic structure of controlling the flow of money,

promotions, and trending videos is concerning. While YouTube works closely with and even

partners with influencers to optimize features that connect them with followers, influencers

believe YouTube's priority lies with advertising money. If influencers continue to feel as if

YouTube favors advertisers while treating influencers as lower-tier contributors to the site, the

groundwork may be prepared for social media developers to develop a site that is optimal to

influencers and their needs. YouTube currently appears to have a small monopoly on the video-

sharing section of Web 2.0, but influencers still play a large role in that monopoly. Designing a

site optimized to allow influencers unprecedented access to audiences could be a convincing

draw in persuading influencers to part wtih YouTube for a different site. There is already a great

wealth of literature highlighting the role influencers have in current digital trends for marketers

and advertisers (Booth & Matic, 2011; Daniel Jr. et al., 2018; Larsen, 2020; Marwick, 2013;

Mertz, 2019; Nouri, 2018; Rasmussen 2018; Sokolova & Kefi, 2019). Social media developers could greatly benefit from learning the interests and aims of the users on their sites who have learned how to navigate these platforms the best.

This study also contributes to the literature by delving into a largely untapped area in communications research: the opinions of influencers. As the previous section showed, social media influencers, particularly on YouTube, are deeply invested in the success of the platforms they promote themselves on. Because of YouTube's unique venture capital system, influencers work closely with YouTube to achieve virality and financial success. The success of influencers equals YouTube's success, but YouTube's success does not always mean that influencers as a whole succeed as well. Influencers on YouTube appear to be more dependent on YouTube's policies and decision-making than influencers on other social media sites. Because of this, the interviews paid attention to the goals of influencers trying to make money on YouTube. In noteworthy contrast to YouTube's hegemonic structure, the influencers interviewed in this study did not appear to want control or even widespread prominence on YouTube. They generally expressed desire to connect with viewers without the interference of YouTube components. Influencers value the sense of community between themselves and their viewers. While trending videos can lead to exponential success and profit, interviewees said they trust their audiences to bring them long-lasting success as long as they are able to connect to them. It is continual policy, affordance, and algorithmic changes that have throttled their videos' scope of reach, leaving them wondering if their videos are getting to viewers. One influencer said,

> Now you have a choice to say when you want to get notified. But then if you have too many things checked where you want to get notified all the time, the machine isn't going to notify you all the time even though you check the boxes, please notify me all the time.

Limitations on audience reach make it difficult for viewers to feel like they have a connection.

Parasocial relationship theory posits that a personal connection to media figures makes for

heightened presence when viewers interact with media online. In this sense, influencers need

YouTube's affordances to work for them, instead of against them, in order to connect them with

audiences. They believe their audiences will continue to watch videos and stay loyal so long as

the videos are making it to them.

Influencer opinion is also an important area for future research because influencers are, in

a sense, resident experts in the world of social media. They are the most intensive users of social

media platforms, and they are often the most familiar with the platforms they use to promote

their work. In this study, participants were asked what features they felt would best help them

promote their videos on YouTube. Answers shows a breadth of understanding about YouTube's

platform, the partnership program, community opinion, and limitations to affordances. Suggested

features such as exclusive content options, enhanced community affordances, and improvements

to the algorithm appeared to be aimed at helping the influencer community holistically rather

than being aimed at helping only the influencers' own channels. Influencer 4 said, "that's the

great thing about [the influencer community] is you do all support and people share tips with

each other. There isn't really competition on YouTube, because there's plenty to go around."

This study also sheds a different light on the idea of affordances. Current literature

typically looks at affordances as universally positive or negative (Conole & Dyke, 2004; Evans,

Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2017), but this study presents the idea that a single affordance can be

positive for one entity while simultaneously negative for another. Specifically, this study found

that affordances on YouTube are always beneficial to YouTube but can be negative for

influencers at the same time. These same affordances can be positive and negative within the

community of influencers, too. One example to illustrate this point is the YouTube algorithm

which was arguably the most significant and effectual affordance examined in this study. Since

all influencers' videos live and die according to the algorithm's decisions, videos that reach

trending status can thank the algorithm for boosting their video to wider audiences. However, if a

video does not get that same boost by the algorithm, it may die a quick death and be of little

worth to its creator. Because there is no way to understand or interpret the algorithm, influencers

are left at the mercy of machine learning in hopes that they can get lucky and find proverbial

favor with the algorithm's decisions. It is also important to remember that while the positivity of

the algorithm may vary from influencer to influencer, the algorithm's decisions will almost

always benefit YouTube because it boosts videos to trending areas and suggestion feeds that will

inevitably improve YouTube's reputation.

Gibson (2014), who coined the term, originally said affordances "provide or furnish,

either for good or ill" (p. 56). Therefore, the idea that an affordance can be to one's detriment

was present at the inception of the theory. However, affordances do carry a positive or beneficial

tone even though scholarly work commonly acknowledges the possibility of the opposite

(Conole & Dyke, 2004). The word "afford" connotes the idea of positive advantages, so it is

understandable that even scholarly work leans towards positivity at times. This study draws back

on Gibson's original idea that affordances can be good or bad, but also presents nuance to the

theory by suggesting the idea that an affordance can be simultaneously good and bad depending

on the individual and the circumstance. YouTube's affordances fit this definition because they

are so honed to a specific objective that, while their opportunities may draw influencers to the

platform, they may ultimately be what hurts those same influencers the most.

Conclusion

As YouTube continues to determine how it will prioritize original content creators on its platform, those content creators will have important decisions to make regarding the future of their careers (Bradley, 2018). In 2019, YouTube said, "Our core content strategy and investment remains centered on our endemic creators" (Alexander, April 2019). This study's information informs social media developers on what affordances content creators like and dislike. While the idea of a social media celebrity is still a relatively new concept, YouTube influencers are a vital element of the website's history, legacy, and future (Burgess, Green, & Rebane, 2016). This study highlighted how powerful of a tool social media can be, and influencers underscore that idea in how much success they have attained through mastery of these digital platforms. The findings of this study shed a unique light on social media affordances by sharing their benefits, and disadvantages, from the perspectives of those who have learned to use them best. These findings also built on the ideas of media richness and social presence theories by showing the ideas of these theories in practice on YouTube. This study demonstrated the ongoing negotiations between YouTube and influencers in addition to YouTube's hegemonic approach to its front page and trending sections. This information offered key affordances that can be beneficial to influencers while also showing the limitations of affordances that can get in the way of influencers' efforts to connect with and grow their audiences. Influencers' opinions, such as those shared in this study, are deeply important to understanding the power and potential of social media as they are the ones who have used it to their advantage better than anyone else.

When Twitter finally shut down Vine, YouTube became a refugee camp for Vine stars. Ironically, it is YouTube that acts as a memorial to Vine's memory today with Vine compilations abounding across the site (Glum, 2019). These compilations serve as a reminder of the popularity

of original content and its creators among social media users (Ault, 2015). These content creators have an increasing level of influence that could have a significant impact on the future of social media because, in many ways, they are the face of social media. As YouTube decides which direction to take its platform moving into the future, content creators will have to decide if their careers lie with YouTube or if it's time to move their businesses to another place. The results of this study demonstrate the important role influencers play in YouTube's identity and directives, and this is a micro-example that should be explored on other platforms. Influencers have established a deep understanding of social media affordances, business approaches, and persuasive potential. The results also highlight the ongoing struggle for control of content present in YouTube's affordances, partnership programs, and policy updates. YouTube's hegemonic structure has helped it gain and regain favor with advertisers to bring significant financial success to the platform, but this may have come at the cost of losing influencers' trust. This study shows influencers' preferences regarding what they would like to see in terms of optimizing the site to their content, thus improving the overall experience of cultivating a linked community of influencers and devoted followers on YouTube's powerful, rich medium.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that should be noted to maintain the integrity of the research (Creswell, 2007). First, because of the nature of qualitative research, the quality of the research spelled out in this study is heavily dependent on my individual skills as a researcher. Another limitation is the nuance of grounded theory which, again, is limited my personal interpretation of the data. Because of these potential limitations, the results risked being influenced by my personal biases and idiosyncrasies. Cross-analysis of the data with the

committee throughout the coding process helped to prevent bias from tampering with the results of this study.

Another limitation to the study, which is present in all qualitative research, is the potential for my presence during data gathering to affect the subject's responses. This was particularly relevant to this study because respondents were talking at length about YouTube, which for many of them is a primary financial provider and partner. Although this is often an unavoidable element of qualitative research, IRB forms included agreements of confidentiality to withhold any and all identifying information from participants' answers. I took care to clarify verbally before each interview that identifying information would be completely withheld from the final publication to assure the most genuine and honest answers possible were given during the data gathering process. While this does present an issue of anonymity, I purposely required a high subscriber count when selecting participants which assisted in maintaining the integrity of the data.

As mentioned in the method section, the most significant limitation to this study was the availability of eligible participants. I spent considerable time with committee members determining whether or not the limited number of respondents would rationalize the level of saturation necessary for this study. Due to the depth of the answers in each interview, coupled with the similarity and consistency of many of the responses, we determined the data expressed an acceptable level of saturation to make the claims posited in this study. Constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 2007) also helped achieve sufficient saturation. Additional research is recommended to further test the theories and ideas presented in this research.

Future Research

There are several ideas for future research that arose from the findings of this study. One area of further-needed research is the role of influencers on other social media platforms. Because this study indicates that influencers can play a significant role in a platform's success, more research would be valuable to test the portability of ideas posited in this study. Learning how influencers affect Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and other platforms would be valuable in learning how influencers will play a role in the future of Web 2.0, marketing, advertising, and other categories.

Influencers who participated in this study also frequently mentioned the importance of diversifying their presence across various social media platforms. While this study delved deep into strategies that influencers employ when posting content on YouTube, additional research is needed to learn more about how influencers approach the affordances of other platforms. Learning these different approaches would add to scholarly work done on influencers that indicates how they maintain an adaptable yet consistent brand for different audiences on different platforms.

This study showed that a hegemonic power structure may exist on YouTube's platform. Further research is needed to learn if this power structure exists on other social media platforms as well. Even though YouTube is one of the only social media platforms that partners with users, the hegemonic power structure seen through YouTube's curation of the trending tab and algorithmic tendencies may be present on other sites. Learning about the power structures on other platforms may lead to patterns that could lay the groundwork for new social media theory. Because this study looked at this structure through the lens of influencers, future research

challenging the ideas of this study through the lens of YouTube would be beneficial to develop these theories.

Scholarly work has been done to explore the ethics of freedom of speech versus policy control on other social platforms like Facebook (Hoadley, Xu, Lee, & Rosson, 2010) and Instagram (Myers, 2016), but in light of the findings of this study, future research should be devoted to expounding on this idea from the perspective of YouTube. Studying this and the other previously mentioned ideas for additional research would build on the foundation this study has established for learning more about YouTube, its influencers, and its audiences.

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