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Audience Engagement on YouTube: A Merge of Consumer and Media Engagement

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Abstract: This theoretical paper presents a reconceptualisation of “audience engagement” on YouTube and how such a definition may help us to further understand the audience engagement strategies of YouTubers. Audience engagement is commonly referred to as audiences’ participatory activities, including liking, commenting, subscribing, and the direct consumption of video content on YouTube. However, this paper, through the lens of brand marketing and media production, sees YouTubers as both personal brands and content creators. With this angle in mind, the paper discusses how, by seeing YouTubers as personal brands, audience engagement with YouTubers is a form of consumer engagement, a marketing concept that describes the relationship between brands and consumers. The paper will then discuss how, by seeing YouTubers as content creators, audience engagement is also a form of media engagement, the concept that describes audiences’ experience of “transportation” when consuming media products. The paper ultimately argues audience engagement with YouTubers is a merge of consumer and media engagement as a multi-dimensional way to understand audience experience on YouTube. The paper proposes that YouTubers’ audience engagement strategies can be understood in two primary ways. The first is from a consumer engagement perspective, by seeing some YouTubers’ strategies as a way of triggering the audience’s active connections outside video consumption, just like other brands’ consumer engagement strategies. The second is from a media engagement perspective, by interpreting some YouTubers’ strategies as a means of encouraging transportation experience among viewers. This paper adds to the existing literature on the concept of audience engagement on YouTube and social media platforms. It also offers a new way of understanding and new directions for exploring YouTubers’ strategies for fan building, from the perspective of consumer and media engagement in today’s and future YouTube landscape, where YouTube creators are continuously becoming a convergence of brands and individual personalities.

Keywords: Audience Engagement, Consumer Engagement, Media Engagement, Social Media, Youtube

1. Introduction

The founding of YouTube significantly lowered the entry barrier for online video creation and distribution, which also made YouTubers an important part of social media entertainment (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). Many YouTubers have successfully developed a large audience and fan base. It is estimated that there are more than 60 million YouTube creators (Social Blade, 2024), and over 1,000 of them have more than 10 million subscribers worldwide (Kapwing Team, 2023). YouTubers with large followers also became YouTube celebrities and influencers, affecting viewers’ behaviours and opinions towards, for example, brand purchases, social movements, and political events. For example, Prime, an energy drink brand founded by YouTuber influencers KSI (over 25 million main channel subscribers) and Logan Paul (over 23 million main channel subscribers), has caused disruption across the UK in 2023, with stores constantly out of stock, and people reselling the drink for over £1000 per bottle (Zhang, 2023). This leads to the question of why some YouTubers can build a positive career outcome reflected by large viewership and fan bases. The phenomenon of YouTubers’ building fan bases has been explored from different perspectives in key academic works. For example, Burgess and Green (2018) indicate the participatory culture formed by YouTube constructed the core value of its celebrity culture. Abidin (2018) introduced four qualities that establish the fame of internet celebrities—exclusivity, exoticism, exceptionalism, and everydayness. Bishop’s (2018, 2019) works unveil that YouTubers manage their content visibility through their knowledge of YouTube algorithms. Cunningham and Craig (2019) see the rise of YouTubers as a form of social media entertainment by professionalising their previous amateur video content. YouTubers and similar social media influencers are also seen as marketers and self-promoters, with a series of self-branding strategies to manage their fame online (e.g., Marwick, 2013; Chen, 2013; Tarnovskaya, 2017).

Different from but also built upon these existing bodies of works, this paper focuses on another important element related to YouTubers’ success—audience engagement strategies. Audience engagement strategies refer to YouTubers’ ways of encouraging audiences’ participatory activities, including liking, commenting, subscribing, and consuming video content on YouTube. By seeing YouTubers as content creators, researchers have explored their audience engagement strategies (e.g., García Jiménez and Montes Vozmediano, 2020; Pires, Masanet and Scolari, 2019; Rasmussen, 2018; Tur-Viñes and Castelló-Martínez, 2019). However, this paper, through the lens of both brand marketing and media production, sees YouTubers as both content creators and personal brands. With this angle in mind, the paper explains how YouTubers’ audience engagement strategies

can be seen as an element to encourage a combination of two types of engagement—*consumer engagement (CE)*, for developing relationships between brands and consumers; and *media engagement (ME)*, for the quality of audience experience during media consumption. This paper will offer a new way of understanding YouTubers' strategies for fan building from the perspective of consumer and media engagement in today's and future YouTube landscape, where YouTube creators are continuously becoming a convergence of brands and individual personalities. The next section will first introduce the general concept of audience engagement in the context of online or social media.

2. Audience Engagement on YouTube

According to Shao (2009), audience engagement with online media consists of consumption, participation and production. Consumption refers to consuming online media content, such as watching a YouTube video. Participation refers to actions outside consumption, such as clicking the “like” button on a YouTube video. At the production level of engagement, users become the creator/distributor of online media content, such as posting a YouTube video, an Instagram photo or a short TikTok video. By adapting Shao (2009), Khan (2017) defines audience engagement on YouTube as participation (e.g., liking, commenting, uploading) and consumption (e.g., watching videos, reading descriptions) behaviours. Burgess and Green (2018) further argue all types of audience engagement on YouTube (participation, production, consumption) are part of users' participatory practice. Medina, Portilla, and Pereira's (2023) research recently sought the definition of audience engagement from media companies'/producers' perspectives. They found that media companies, including those who employed YouTubers as their engagement strategies, consider audience engagement to be “strongly linked to social media interactions that are connected to the consumption of media content” (p. 347), further indicating the combined nature of participation and consumption within the concept of audience engagement.

Therefore, audience engagement with YouTubers can be generally defined as having two major parts: participation and consumption. Participation relates to audiences' actions beyond consuming, such as commenting and liking the video. Consumption mainly includes audiences watching videos, reading comments and descriptions, or engaging in other actions that do not involve direct interaction between the user and the platform. However, different from the existing definition, this paper will take another approach to reconceptualise audience engagement, which is tightly related to the concept of personal brand.

3. Audience Engagement Strategies and Personal Brand

Existing studies have explored YouTubers' audience engagement strategies. For instance, for participation, YouTubers were found to encourage viewers' comments (McRoberts et al., 2016), ask for video ideas (Rasmussen, 2018) and respond to viewers' comments to create expectations for new videos (Tur-Viñes and Castelló-Martínez, 2019). The perceived authenticity associated with behaviours like self-disclosure (Ferchaud et al., 2018; Jerslev, 2016; Marôpo, Jorge and Tomaz, 2020) also encourages viewers' continuous engagement activities on YouTube, such as subscribing to channels (de Bérail, Guillon and Bungener, 2019). For consumption, YouTubers can encourage audience engagement through appealing content that interests specific demographics. For instance, learning and entertainment were found to be two important reasons for teens to subscribe to YouTube channels and consume content (García Jiménez and Montes Vozmediano, 2020; Pires, Masanet and Scolari, 2019).

The above research generally views YouTubers as creators and distributors of video content. However, with the growing number of YouTubers and the saturation of video content, some YouTubers started seeking visibility among an enormous pool of similar videos. Bishop (2019) introduced “algorithmic gossip”, in which YouTubers communicate their subjective view about how YouTube algorithms work to self-optimize and enhance their content visibility on the platform. For example, a beauty YouTuber may change uploading schedules, alter video lengths, and use specific keywords in their video content (Bishop, 2018, 2019; Rieder, Coromina, and Matamoros-Fernández, 2020) to attempt to make their beauty product review video more visible than other YouTubers who also make content about the same product. With the practice of self-optimising and the aforementioned strategies, YouTubers ultimately receive various benefits, including audiences' views, likes, comments, subscriptions and fan bases that derive from and also contribute to their visibility on YouTube. At a further level, YouTubers can also earn monetary income through YouTube monetisation programmes such as YouTube ads.

Due to YouTubers' capabilities of generating social or/and economic values by presenting themselves online, they have one or more characteristics that are in line with the concept of *personal brand*—“a form of self-

presentation singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value” (Hearn, 2008, p. 213).

Youtubers have been long discovered to implement self-branding practices. Chen (2013) discovered that amateur YouTubers brand themselves “both explicitly and implicitly” (p. 345). Tarnovskaya (2017) discovered three key stages of self-branding of YouTubers—building, enforcing and maintaining a personal brand, mirroring Chen’s (2013) outcome. García-Rapp (2016) found that a YouTuber also applies traditional and corporate brand strategies, such as promoting personal shops and branded product giveaways. The same phenomenon was also found by Tur-Viñes, Núñez-Gómez and González-Río (2018) among kid YouTube influencers, who use their brand images to advance their channel recognition with corporate brand presence in their video content, such as branded products they are promoting in their channels. Marwick (2013) argued that self-branding is still a “series of marketing strategies applied to the individual” (p. 166). Therefore, apart from content creators and distributors, we can also see YouTubers as personal brands (big or small) that provide videos as their major product for their audience, as their consumers. With such an angle, the paper sees strategies YouTubers implement are no longer for audience engagement that consists of participation and consumption but a merge of two kinds of engagement— *consumer engagement (CE)* and *media engagement (ME)*. The following section will introduce the theoretical grounding for CE and ME and further explain how they are connected to audience engagement on YouTube.

4. Audience Engagement as Consumer and Media Engagement on YouTube

4.1 Consumer Engagement and Audience Engagement

Consumer engagement (CE) describes the relationships between brands and consumers. The first definition of CE was proposed by the Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) as “Turning on a prospect to a brand idea enhanced by the surrounding context” (ARF, 2006, para. 4). More specific definitions of CE were proposed by later researchers.

Noticeably, Bowden (2009) defines CE as a psychological process, including consumers’ satisfaction and pleasure when experiencing the brand, which can lead to brand loyalty. Likewise, Mollen and Wilson (2010) define CE online as a “cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value” (p. 12). Instead of seeing CE as a psychological process, Van Doorn et al. (2010) define CE from a behavioural angle as “a customer’s behavioural manifestations that have a brand or firm focus beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers” (Van Doorn et al., 2010, p. 254). For example, beyond purchasing, an engaged consumer may reply to brands’ social media posts, recommend the brands to their friends, and actively seek news about new product releases. By adopting Van Doorn et al. (2010), later researchers have used the concept of CE as consumer behaviours beyond purchase (Jaakkola and Alexander, 2014; Beckers, Van Doorn and Verhoef, 2018; Obilo, Chefor and Saleh, 2020; Eslami, Ghasemaghaei and Hassanein, 2022). CE was also considered multi-dimensional and combines behavioural and psychological aspects. For example, Brodie et al. (2011) indicate that CE has cognitive (e.g. concentration on the brand), emotional (e.g. attachment to the brand) and behavioural (e.g. consumer participation) dimensions. Likewise, Hollebeek (2011) defines CE as the level of the single customer’s state of mind that is emotional, brand-related, and context-dependent. Vivek, Beatty and Morgan (2012) defined CE as the “intensity of an individual’s participation in and connection with an organization’s offerings or organizational activities which either the customer or the organization initiates” (p. 133). They indicate that CE may be presented “cognitively, affectively, behaviourally, or socially” (p. 133). The “cognitively” and “affectively” mainly focus on experience and feelings as psychological dimensions, while the “behaviourally” and “socially” relate to customers’ participatory as behavioural dimensions. Finally, on a relatively more equal level, Hollebeek (2015) defines CE as the level of “perceived cognitive, emotional and behavioural” (p. 74) reciprocities between consumers and firms during the experience of consumer-brand interactions. The definition from Hollebeek (2015) that consists of behavioural and psychological dimensions is also adopted and discussed by later researchers on various topics regarding CE (e.g. Alvarez-Milán et al., 2018; Pradhan, Kishore and Gokhale, 2023).

It can be argued that for brands who would like to employ CE strategies, consumers’ state of mind can only be observed from the consumers’ engagement behaviours. For example, the psychological state of engagement, such as the attachment to the brand, can only be identified when consumers actively support the brand (Sashi, 2012), participate in brand-initiated activities (Vivek, Beatty and Morgan, 2012), or actively posting brand-

related messages on social media (Van Doorn et al., 2010). Therefore, this paper treats CE as a behavioural connection between consumers and brands beyond purchase and consumption.

With the above definition of CE in mind, this paper argues that CE and audience engagement on YouTube are closely linked due to the term “social media engagement” in marketing. Dolan et al. (2016) see social media engagement as a component of CE, as customers’ behavioural manifestation beyond purchase on social media, including sharing and creating brand-related content. In the same vein, Barger, Peltier and Schultz (2016) see CE on social media as a process that involves consumer and firm co-creation of brand-related content and social experience within social media as a platform. Pentina, Guilloux and Micu’s (2018) research on social media engagement behaviours further defines it as consumers expressing their cognitive and emotional attitudes through engagement behaviours that relate to brands on social media. The concept of social media engagement also belongs to a wider family of “digital consumer engagement” or DCE, which is the consumer’s behavioural engagement with brands beyond purchase in a digital environment (Eigenraam et al., 2018; Gavilanes, Flatten and Brettel, 2018; Srivastava et al., 2023). So, it can be argued that when a brand utilises social media to engage consumers, the concept of social media engagement is CE on social media.

As established before, YouTubers are personal brands, and their viewers are brand consumers. Meanwhile, YouTube is a video-based social media site. Social media engagement is a form of CE manifested by consumers’ engagement with brands on social media platforms. Therefore, this paper defines audience engagement with YouTubers as *a form of consumer engagement (CE) manifested by audiences’ behavioural connections with YouTubers as personal brands that extend beyond video consumption*. For example, when watching a game YouTuber’s video, a viewer may also use the comment section to suggest what games the YouTuber can play in their next videos, as CE beyond video consumption.

4.2 Media Engagement and Audience Engagement on YouTube

Media engagement (ME) generally refers to the direct experience of audiences when consuming a media product. Calder and Malthouse (2012) define ME as “the sum of the motivational experiences consumers have with the media product” (p. 5). There are two sets of experiences: approach and avoidance experiences. The former are positive experiences that encourage audience consumption of the media, while the latter are negative ones that discourage consumption. Calder and Malthouse (2012) argue one of the key components of the positive experience is “transportation”—“the experience of being absorbed into a story or program and shutting out the real world” (Calder and Malthouse, 2012, p. 7). Audiences who experience transportation exhibit different kinds of behavioural and mental states, such as feeling entertained, focused and a loss of time and space.

The concept of “transportation” was earlier discussed by Gerrig (1993) to describe audiences’ experience of being transported into the narratives presented in media texts, losing the sense of the real world. Green and Brock (2000) further use the word “absorption” to describe the transportation experience and argue that “transportation can be expressed as immersion or absorption into a narrative world” (p. 704). Meanwhile, Slater’s (1997) work further links transportation with the term “engagement” by conceptualising audience “involvement” as an important term to understand audience experience with various narratives and their influences. Slater (1997) has considered “engagement” and “involvement” to be similar concepts when it comes to audience experience with entertainment media — the combination of absorption and transportation into the story and identification with the story character. Such a link between engagement, absorption, and transportation has been further discussed in the work by Slater and Rouner (2002), who, while using the term “absorption” as the main way of describing audience experience with entertainment narratives, associate this term with Gerrig’s (1993), Green and Brock’s (2000) and Slater’s (1997) “transportation” and “engagement”, claiming that all three terms were used in the similar sense. The above scholars set the tone regarding the interchangeability between engagement, transportation and absorption in media consumption in later research (Tal-Or and Cohen, 2010; Walsh et al., 2023).

This then led us back to Calder and Malthouse’s concept of ME as transportation, a positive experience with media products. However, what is more important is that Calder and Malthouse also proposed promotion/prevention experience in parallel to transportation, including promoting the media content to other people (the promotion experience) or sharing and talking about their experience as a way of “using the media content to be sure that one does not get left out of a conversation or appear ignorant” (p. 7) (the prevention experience). The promotion/prevention experience is similar to CE as it links to consumer behaviour beyond

(media) product consumption. Such a similarity is perhaps why Calder and Malthouse's (2012) concept of ME is also considered by scholars to be focusing on the "experiential aspects of CE" (Brodie et al., 2011, p. 257).

Calder and Malthouse's work highlights the significance of developing both ME and CE for brands or media content creators to form a comprehensive consumer or audience experience in the digital media landscape. Such a significance is also visible in the later scholar's work on user, consumer and social media engagement. Typically, Oh, Bellur and Sundar's (2018) user engagement model highlights the process of users being immersed or absorbed into the interactive media content and then the active sharing of experience beyond consumption. This highlights the causal relationship between engagement within (ME) and beyond (CE) media use. Coker, Flight and Baima's (2021) work on CE with digital advertising on social media emphasised the importance of viewers being "hooked" through narrative transportation (or ME in our sense) when watching the adverts. Their research found that consumers who experienced a deeper ME will be more likely to not only view the adverts but also perform CE behaviours, including sharing and promoting the advert and spreading positive word of mouth (WOM). In a similar vein, the recent literature review by Srivastava et al. (2023) on CE through digital platforms uncovers that while CE behaviour towards brand beyond purchase can be established by consumer participation, the absorption or transportation (ME) consumers experienced when consuming the content will also work in parallel with the participation activities to further affect consumers' CE behaviours.

Youtubers are personal brands who still bear the role of media content creators. So, while audiences can engage with Youtubers in the form of CE beyond video consumption similar to consumers with other brands, watching YouTube videos is a key part of the YouTube audience experience. Therefore, along with CE, this paper also argues audience engagement with Youtubers is a *form of media engagement (ME) as audiences' transportation experience when consuming Youtubers' videos*. For instance, audiences of a travel YouTuber may be fully absorbed into the scenery presented in the travel video, losing awareness of their current surroundings.

Overall, by seeing Youtubers as personal brands and content creators, this paper now defines audience engagement with Youtubers as *a combined form of consumer and media engagement*. Such a definition allows us to understand Youtubers' audience engagement strategies in two primary ways. The first is from a CE perspective, by seeing some Youtubers' strategies as a way of triggering their audiences' or consumers' active connections with those Youtubers outside video consumption, just like other brands' CE strategies. For example, when a beauty YouTuber offers a beauty product giveaway in their videos or asks viewers for suggestions for the next video idea, it can be seen as a form of reward or interaction provided by a personal brand for their viewers' continuous CE with their YouTube content and channels (Ashley and Tuten, 2015; Zhang and Lee, 2023).

The second is from an ME perspective, by interpreting some Youtubers' strategies as a means of encouraging transportation experience among viewers when consuming YouTube videos. For example, film techniques used by a YouTuber, such as certain camera angles, shot sizes and the use of colour, were found to evoke a sense of presence (Zhang, 2018), an experience of immersion that is tightly connected to the transportation or ME (Lombard and Ditton, 1991). Apart from standard-length videos, short videos (under 1 minute) on TikTok that implement strong narrative features were also found to result in a strong transportation experience among viewers, such as tourism short videos that involve a combination of narration of the creators' travel experience and visual presentation of the tourist destination (Cao et al., 2021). Furthermore, a YouTuber's use of non-verbal language such as eye contact and gestures may also enhance a YouTuber's social presence among viewers (Zhang, 2018), resulting in viewers' feeling they are communicating with the YouTuber physically face to face, as a sense being with other people in mediated communication (Biocca, Harms and Burgoon, 2003; Gunawardena, 1995). Therefore, it can be argued that with similar strategies, Youtubers who create short-form, personality-driven videos can also create similar ME experiences to those who create longer videos.

5. Conclusion

This paper serves as a starting point to develop a comprehensive understanding of the audience-building activities of Youtubers and content creators from the perspective of audience engagement. Youtubers' audience engagement strategies have been generally considered by scholars as a way of encouraging audience participation and consumption activities. However, this paper understands Youtubers' audience engagement strategies as ways of establishing a merge of two types of engagement—consumer and media engagement (CE and ME). As for the contributions, first, this paper adds to the existing literature that explores the concept of audience engagement on YouTube and other similar social media platforms. Second, by seeing Youtubers as both personal brands and media content creators, this paper offers a new multi-dimensional way of understanding Youtubers' strategies for fan building as a combined form of brand marketing and media

production. Such a way of understanding is significant in researching content creators who continuously becoming a convergence of brands and individual personalities (Usher, 2018).

However, there are also some limitations regarding the argument the paper established. First, the paper is only at the theoretical stage. While the author's recent research has already attempted to interpret YouTubers' audience engagement strategies through CE (Zhang and Lee, 2023), more research is needed to demonstrate how the theories apply to real YouTuber cases, which is also the purpose of the author's ongoing project (Zhang, n.d.). Second, the paper only discusses understanding audience engagement strategies as the sole element that links to YouTubers' audience building. Future research and discussion can explore and focus on other potential elements contributing to YouTubers' audience bases. Finally, while the paper argues that CE and ME link to audience engagement, they are by no means the only relevant concepts, future researchers are encouraged to apply other engagement theories to YouTubers' audience engagement strategies.

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