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Under the influencer: Participatory culture and the rise of the viratoid ☆

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ABSTRACT

A participatory culture encourages followers of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) to engage with the constructed online identities of prominent SMIs. We explore how ordinary consumers amass celebrity capital by willingly and wittingly associating themselves with renowned SMIs. We propose that these consumers are viratoids, developing their own online persona based on more prominent SMIs. Building on Chris Rojek's theorization of a celetoid, an individual who achieves media attention for an intense but brief timespan, we propose the viratoid as a new form of celetoid. The viratoid seeks to achieve "fame" and viral online attention by amassing their own celebrity capital by creating content that piggybacks off the celebrity capital and/or "drama" of a well-known SMI. This has implications for how social media networks, marketers, and brands promote and manage SMIs and viratoids, including the amplification of mischievous and increasingly incendiary online content.

1. Introduction

"I know Caroline Calloway [Influencer] *is a bad person. I love a scammer, especially a female scammer. When Caroline Calloway presented me with an opportunity to get scammed by THE Caroline Calloway, I PayPal-ed her $15. She said she would send me a signed tarot card. She said this would define my 2023… She didn't even sign it* [tarot card]. *I have to respect the grind. She got me!"* – Kressie, TikTok user (2023)

In an era of participatory culture, ordinary consumers can share their personal interests, thoughts, feelings, and life events to create and curate content to build their online brand persona (Audrezet et al., 2020; Borges-Tiago et al., 2019; Khamis et al., 2017) and accumulate celebrity capital (Brooks et al., 2021; Driessens, 2013). The ability to amass a following and transition from a follower to a social media influencer (SMI from hereafter) is not guaranteed and tensions exist (Levesque et al., 2023). This paper provides novel insight into the follower journey and how they wittingly insert themselves and piggyback off the activity and profile of more prominent SMIs to accumulate celebrity capital through association with an SMI. We theorize that these consumers are *viratoids*, a variant of an SMI that sits between a follower and a formed, or potentially an aspiring SMI. Drawing inspiration from literature on participatory culture and mischievous play, we reveal that there is value and celebrity capital to be gained from followers associating themselves

in a more prominent SMI's drama and, in some cases, engaging in less than scrupulous behaviors to gain viratoid status.

Interest in becoming an SMI is increasing, with large proportions of young people wanting to pursue a career as an SMI, for money, flexibility, and fun (Briggs, 2023). An SMI is a "trusted tastemaker in one or several niches" (De Veirman et al., 2017, p. 798), who uses social media networks (SMNs from hereafter) to create and foster online connections to enlarge their sphere of influence (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Kozinets et al., 2010; Mardon et al., 2018). SMIs post on SMNs for monetary and non-monetary incentives (Mardon et al., 2023b), typically using their status and presence as an SMI to endorse brands' products, services, and events to their online audience (Borges-Tiago et al., 2023). In recent years, concerns have been raised in relation to the transparency and questionable practices around promotions endorsed by SMIs, which can have harmful consequences for the reputation of a brand (Cocker et al., 2021; Cop et al., 2023). The notorious Fyre Festival, documented in *Hulu* and *Netflix* serials (2019) exemplifies this, with SMIs recruited to persuade consumers to purchase tickets to a supposed luxury music event in the Bahamas. Organizers paid 400 SMIs, called "*Fyre Starters*", a minimum of $20,000 each to promote the festival – reality TV star, and prominent SMI Kylie Jenner reportedly received $250,000 for a single Instagram post launching festival ticket sales (Stanwick & Stanwick, 2019). Distressed festival attendees expressed disappointment and felt defrauded (Cooper, 2021). Yet, despite allegations of hoodwinking,

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attendees live streamed and shared photographs of their catastrophic, non-festival experience on social media. Any sense of shame, embarrassment, and concerns of being perceived as gullible – feelings and traits typically associated with being scammed (Bailey et al., 2020; Button et al., 2009; Cross, 2015), appeared absent in the alleged victims' accounts. This led the authors to initially consider why consumers willingly participate and publicly insert themselves in a more prominent SMI's mischievous and deceitful activity, which led to the emergence of the concept of the viratoid.

We posit that some followers willingly associate themselves with the profiles and activities of SMIs, with some of these followers transitioning to viratoids – seeking to achieve viral online attention and build their own celebrity capital through the creation of social media content that piggybacks on the profile of a more well-known SMI. As our opening epigraph from TikTok user Kressie demonstrates, SMIs can persuade consumers to invest in a product where the follower publicly announces, somewhat gleefully, that they received nothing tangible – they have been scammed. Rather than being detrimental to Kressie's online persona, inserting herself into an SMI's wrongdoing is an opportunity for self-promotion, upward mobility, and accumulating celebrity capital. Unlike traditional forms of celebrity and more prominent and well-established SMIs that acquire celebrity capital by becoming famous (Brooks et al., 2021; Rojek, 2001), a viratoid acquires celebrity capital by being "attention worthy", creating content and building connections and engagement with like-minded followers in a relatively short window of opportunity.

The paper is underpinned by the following research question: In a participatory online culture, how do followers piggyback off a more prominent SMI's profile and activity to build and leverage their own celebrity capital? To address this question, we draw on subjective personal introspection (Holbrook, 1995, 2006), collaborative autoethnography (Pradhan & Drake, 2022), netnographic analysis (Kozinets, 2019), and expert interviews. The findings are presented in three case studies that document SMIs promoting fads, orchestrating scams, and involvement in transgressions. To ground our theorization, we expand on celebrity and media scholar Chris Rojek's (2001) seminal work on celetoids. A concept that encapsulates the ephemeral nature of the attributed celebrity. In doing so, we propose a sub-type of celetoid, the "viratoid", to encapsulate the followers of SMIs who piggyback and capitalize off their association with the SMIs' fad, transgression, or scam-like activity.

The overarching contributions of the paper to business research are twofold. First, we theorize the concept of a viratoid, this being a follower who enters a transformation process by piggybacking off the amassed celebrity capital of a more prominent SMI. Our work supports a call from Brooks and colleagues (2021) to explore the "varied types of celebrity capital influencers", particularly, "influencers [that] might hack influencer celebrification to gain celebrity capital in seemingly authentic but immoral or deviant ways (e.g., spreading health misinformation)" (p. 544). We suggest the viratoid is entrepreneurially minded, albeit not necessarily immoral themselves, but avid in their pursuit of establishing their own celebrity capital, seeking opportunities to adapt and reinterpret the profile (and content) of a more well-known SMI who may have engaged in more immoral or mischievous conduct. We revisit Rojek's (2001) concept of the celetoid in the context of the participatory digital world (Driessens, 2013; Hackley & Hackley, 2015; Jenkins, 2006). In doing so, we present rich insights into what constitutes a viratoid and the role of the viratoid in contemporary society. In a participatory culture, Hackley and Hackley (2015) suggest that ordinary consumers are familiar with the idiom of celebrity, which we extend to ordinary consumers being well-versed with SMIs. SMIs' followers seeming to share a mutual constitution of meaning where achieving some form of virality, visibility, and performativity is imperative to them, and thus the viratoid emerges. This leads us to our second contribution. Through our exploration of the viratoid, we consider the lengths they go to for the acquisition of celebrity capital and explore issues of morality around

acquiring viratoid status. Participatory culture and the mobilization of online consumers raise questions around moral behavior, and whilst previous research has considered and questioned the morality of SMIs (Cocker et al., 2021; Cop, et al., 2023), we focus on the moral responsibility of those operating below the more established status of SMI. We suggest that viratoids act in accordance with their desires rather than moral duty (Driessens, 2013), prioritizing their quest for celebrity capital and self-presentation. In exploring issues of morality, we also scrutinize where due diligence should lie.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

2.1. Participatory culture and mischievous play

In his work on new media and technologies, Henry Jenkins (2006) optimistically describes the concept of "participatory culture" and the potential of the internet to radically democratize cultural production. The celebrated shift from traditional mass media forms to an era of networked communications offers the potential to empower consumers to become creators, producers, celebrities, influencers, and distributors and led Jenkins (2006) to envisage a blurring between traditional producers and consumers (Mannell & Smith, 2022; Porlezza, 2019). Participatory culture "absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways" (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 8), with Jenkins (2006) foreseeing consumers re-working and creating content to serve both personal and collective needs and interests.

Participatory culture provides the opportunity for astute, ordinary consumers to be complicit in their own manipulation and to become famous. Hackley and Hackley (2015), however, caution that the multiplication and replication of celebrity is likely to lead to a pumping out of "low-grade entertainment" that is ultimately serving "the capitalist machine" (p. 467). Nonetheless, participatory cultures' low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement are heralded, suggesting the realization of a significant shift in how consumers hold and use information and power (Ashman et al., 2015). Mannell and Smith (2022), however, adopt a retrospective lens, and suggest that it is naïve to consider that a redistribution of power could extend beyond cultural production to reshape society along more equitable lines. The emergence of corporate-owned social media and online platforms vanquished this optimism, as these platforms arguably co-opt participatory culture through surveillance practices and the algorithmic shaping of sociality (Mannell & Smith, 2022) for financial gain and wider corporate interests (Fuchs, 2014). As such, open-source communities with non-commercial goals on "alternative" social platforms have emerged where there is no collection and mining of user data (Mannell & Smith, 2022). Posting, following, and sharing are free of commercial interests and can arguably offer a more expansive participatory culture (Gehl, 2015; Mannell & Smith, 2022).

In a participatory culture, where consumers are supposedly free to curate and publish their own user generated content (UGC from hereafter), mischievous play has become an inevitable outcome, especially on social media platforms (Truong et al., 2022). UGC can cause brands firestorms, whether that is using social media to hold them to account for past transgressions (Legocki et al., 2022), venting frustrations, or taking revenge on brands online (Grégoire et al., 2009), or hashtag hijacking – a form of brand activism whereby consumers cause online mischief by deliberately undermining a brand's official promotional hashtag (Truong et al., 2022). Arguably, a more devious and serious form of mischievousness in a participatory culture is online scamming (Poster, 2022), with a crucial feature of scamming entailing making the proposed victim believe in the scam to drive them to act in a desired way and ultimately participate in the scam (Laroche et al., 2018). Recognizing that a scam has occurred has given rise to scambaiters. The term scambaiter is employed to explain how scambaiters counter "deceit with

deceit", usually in front of an online audience with scambaiters striving to educate, raise awareness, and protect potential scam victims by seeking revenge on the scammer (Dynel & Ross, 2021). Notoriety can be earned from documenting attempts to outwit and expose scammers, earning scambaiters a reputation as an "online celebrity thanks to their creative scambaiting practices publicized on personal websites" (Dynel & Ross, 2021, p. 2).

The location and occurrence of scams have become more complex within participatory culture, with SMNs having become an increasingly predominant domain for scamming to take place (Poster, 2022; Pour-yousefi & Frooman, 2019). Fake celebrity doppelganger profiles and dubious endorsements from fraudsters posing as celebrities have appeared online (Goga et al., 2015), along with other scam-like activity from banking and cyber fraud (Sood & Bhushan, 2020) to the manipulation of customer reviews (Istanbulluoglu & Harris, 2023), and sharing of malicious links influencing consumers to invest in scam projects (O'Connor et al., 2021). Celebrity Kim Kardashian, for example, was fined over one million dollars for misleadingly promoting and selling cryptocurrency in a "pump and dump" scheme designed to inflate the price before selling to investors (Tidy, 2022). Deception and wrongdoings by a celebrity or SMI can undermine the trust and expectations of their fans and followers (Finsterwalder et al., 2017).

Followers place great trust in SMIs (Lou & Yuan, 2019). However, Cocker et al. (2021) reveal how community members can lose trust in an SMI and their celebrity endorsements through perceptions of transgressions. A celebrity transgression can be considered as "any act undertaken by a celebrity figure that violates that which is considered normatively acceptable by society" (Jones et al., 2022, p. 721). We suggest SMIs can be considered "celebrity figures" and are not immune from facing scrutiny for transgressive behavior. Celebrity transgressions present a dilemma for consumers who may struggle to balance the transgression or scandal against their own moral compass, which can result in de-coupling with a celebrity. De-coupling involves individuals denouncing the celebrity's wrongdoings, but they continue to support the celebrity (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013). Alternatively, individuals may adopt moral rationalization strategies, whereby they simply condone a wrongdoer (Lee & Kwak, 2016). An apology from the transgressor that resonates with the audience is a key indicator of whether the public will excuse the transgression (Cerulo & Ruane, 2014). When consumers do not seek resolution or are unable to offer forgiveness for a transgression and withdraw their support, there is a tendency towards punishing the celebrity – this speaks to a climate of increased scrutiny and a wider culture of de-celebrification and cancellation (Wei & Bunjun, 2020), and a participatory culture enables this to playout, performatively online (Jones et al., 2022).

In reviewing the existing literature, we note that there is a fine line between a scam and other marketing practices that SMIs draw on in a participatory culture. A fad, for example, is defined as a short-term opportunity in the marketplace that quickly gains popularity but soon disappears, with marketers (and likewise SMIs) seeking to capitalize on these opportunities for celebrity capital and/or monetary gain (Best, 2006; Brown, 2022). Fads are historically and anthropologically important, in that the "consumption of fad products offers a lens into current societal events and values" (Lilly & Nelson, 2003, p. 253), with a fad being "a temporary state of unusually high sales driven by consumer enthusiasm and a desire among consumers to purchase a product or brand largely because of its immediate popularity" and "a product itself is not a fad…a fad is a state of sales".

2.2. SMIs and celetoids

As central figures in participatory culture, SMIs are a form of celebrity whose fame originates from their presence on SMNs (Gamson, 2011; Marshall, 2010). They seek to strategically cultivate a persuasive online persona to attract attention, expand and sustain their follower base, and achieve both personal and financial gain (Geyser, 2023).

Unlike traditional celebrities, SMIs are not often known for possessing specific skills and talents beyond content creation (Khamis et al., 2017). However, this does not deter SMIs from reaching celebrity style status, with SMIs who appeal to large online audiences often referred to as "micro-celebrities" (Cocker et al., 2021; Khamis et al., 2017).

Compared to established celebrities, who gain fame through traditional mass media channels, such as television and radio, less is known about SMIs (Baker & Rojek, 2020). A key part of being an SMI is developing capital – a valuable resource for gaining social status and distinction (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2020). In garnering attention, SMIs share similarities with "traditional" celebrities. Celebrity is a dynamic term, with Rojek (2001) conceptualizing that celebrity status can be *achieved* through one's accomplishments or talents, *ascribed* from birth, or *attributed* where "ordinary" individuals are sprung into the spotlight as noteworthy figures by cultural intermediaries. Attributed status is symptomatic of a new era of celebrity (Banister & Cocker, 2014) that SMIs can be considered part of, having built a "localized or field-specific" following on social media, standing out due to aspects such as "their personality, beauty or accomplishments within a particular social assemblage" (Cocker & Cronin, 2017, p. 458). We, therefore, draw on Chris Rojek's (2001, 2007) seminal work on the attributed celebrity to advance knowledge on how followers build and leverage celebrity capital from their association with an SMI.

Rojek (2007) distinguishes the celetoid within attributed celebrity as "an individual who achieves concentrated media attention for an intense but brief period and then fades from collective memory" (p. 2). Baker and Rojek (2020) suggest that "talent, skill and accomplishment have no significant part to play in generating attention capital" (p. 394) for the celetoid, with their fame coming from "the ministrations of the mass media" (Baker & Rojek, 2020, p. 393). Rojek (2001) also introduces a sub-type of celetoid, the celeactor, a "fictional character who is either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutionalized feature of popular culture" (p. 23). Celeactors are adjuncts of mass media, encapsulating consumer desire for a character archetype who captures contemporary culture. We explore the relevance of Rojek's celeactor and celetoid in the context of fads, scams, and transgressions that involve an SMI and their followers.

Interacting with followers is a key aspect underpinning the typical SMI-follower relationship. SMIs seek to present their most favorable persona to their followers, carefully crafting this persona with their audience in mind for commercial gain (Christensen et al., 2023; Leban et al., 2021). SMIs aspire to appear authentic and relatable to their followers, frequently sharing personal feelings and narratives to connect and build a rapport with them (Abidin, 2015, 2016; Baker & Rojek, 2020; Marwick, 2015; Senft, 2008). Through distancing themselves from traditional mass media, SMIs seek to project their know-how and trustworthiness through SMNs, creating the perception that they are ordinary people outside the traditional "celebrity" system (Baker, 2022). This sense of ordinariness is central to the creation of SMIs online narrative and building of "authentic" relationships with their followers (Khamis et al., 2017). The appeal of SMIs over "traditional" celebrities lies in their accessibility to their followers. Abidin (2015) suggests the bond between SMIs, and their followers is premised upon the SMI sharing personal, somewhat publicly inaccessible aspects of their lives with their followers. Followers perceive that they can directly communicate with SMIs, sensing them as being like them. This helps to create a sense of attachment and relatability to the SMI (Baker, 2022; Marwick, 2015), which Abidin and Thompson (2012) refer to as "personal intimacy."

The notion of SMI-follower intimacy speaks to Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial relationships, which are common in the context of traditional celebrity-fan relationships (Banister & Cocker, 2014; Jones et al., 2022; Wohlfeil & Whelan, 2012). Parasocial relationships denote a one-sided, imaginary, interpersonal, non-reciprocal relationship with a media personality (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Parasocial relations between a media persona and their audiences, have been

Table 1
The data collection process.

Stage	Steps	Reflexivity
One Objective: *Familiarization with scamming, social media, and SMIs*	Review existing literature Documentary selection Researchers individually watch and analyze selected documentaries Researchers met to review and analyze individual introspections from step three Continue scanning new released documentaries throughout research	Researcher reflections (in researcher diaries) on: • experiences and presuppositions with SMIs • thoughts and feelings on the three topics (SMIs, scamming, and social media) • general observations related to the three topics in going about everyday life
Two Objective: *Familiarization with SMIs involved in scams or con scandals*	Additional documentaries watched and analyzed individually Meet to review and analyze individual introspections from step six Discussion of SMIs involved in scams or cons as noted in the media Identification of SMIs considered to be involved in scam-like behaviors Selection of media (e.g., documentaries, podcasts, YouTube videos, shorts) to review for researchers to familiarize themselves with each SMI Watch parties – collaborative live autoethnography of media from step 3	
Three Objective: *Further understanding of why consumers are willing to be scammed by SMIs (taking a netnographic approach)*	Identification of three SMI cases from stage two that each provide a different perspective of a "scam" SMIs actively followed on all SMNs they were active on Comprehensive review of online content for all cases (e.g., SMI's social media pages (where active); public conversations on SMNs media about the SMI; SMIs activity on social media and interactions with audience; review of social media pages of associated brands; blogs; websites; and online press articles) Collaborative review of data and thematization of the data	
Four Objective: *Explore SMI industry experts experience of working with SMIs and check understanding with experts on the concept of 'viratoid'.*	1. Identification of SMI experts who work directly with SMIs and global brands 2. Recruitment through researchers' networks and direct cold calling 3. Recruitment of four SMI experts 4. Online interviews lasted on average 44 min 5. Data analyzed thematically by all three researchers	

reconceptualized in the context of SMI-follower relations as *trans*-para-social relationships to account for the complex, interactive, multifarious, and reciprocal nature of the relationship (Baker & Rojek, 2020; Lou, 2022). Conceptualizing SMI-follower relations as *trans*-parasocial captures the "*collectively reciprocal*, (*a*)*synchronously interactive*, and *co-created* relation between influencers and their captive followers" (Lou, 2022, p. 4). SMNs provide SMIs and their followers with a platform on which they can interact and connect with others (Aw & Chuah, 2021). The SMI-follower relationship also forms a variant of social exchange theory, where both parties gain something from interpersonal communication (Homans, 1961). SMIs, for example, might look to co-curate content through crowdsourcing for advice, feedback, and/or suggestions from their captive followers. This aligns with the concept of *trans*-parasocial relationship, where highly curated content with follower involvement heightens the sense of intimacy, thus fostering trust (Belanche et al., 2021). Whilst social exchange theory goes someway to explicating the relationship between SMI and follower, it does not fully consider, particularly in the digital context, followers' motivations for participating and/or engaging with an SMI.

In summary, SMIs carefully craft their online personas, building authenticity through displays of personal feelings and expressions (Christensen et al., 2023) to gain likes, shares, and follower counts to validate their SMI status and can provide them with an opportunity to monetize from their presence on SMNs (Baker & Rojek, 2020). This can open possibilities for SMIs to abuse and deceive the trust of their followers, such as through the creation of pseudo-online personalities and equally for followers to capitalize on their treatment by developing an online persona of their own evolved from participation in the SMI activity. SMIs can also help to grow, perpetuate, and encourage scam-like behavior (Poster, 2022). We posit that where mistrust and deception have taken place in an SMI-follower relationship, rather than being a "victim", followers may seek to acquire something useful for themselves from being misled.

2.3. Celebrity capital

Being orchestrated in the mischievous play associated with an SMI may yield currency and capital for a follower. Much like Kozinets' (2001) devoted Star Trek fans who undergo a symbolic transformation from closeted fans, fearing public baiting of their Trekkie identity, to fans that celebrate, embrace, and display their Star Trek fandom and identity. Individuals engaging with SMIs and the scam-like products and services they promote may reject meanings and connotations held and imposed by wider society and mainstream culture, such as naiveté, thus enabling capital to be acquired through their purposeful participation (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). Importantly, they may display a more blasé attitude towards scamming and being scammed (especially where this is documented and shared online by the follower). Ironically, it may engender appeal and interest from the SMI and bring them that bit closer to the SMI orchestrating the scam – an inverse of what might have typically lead to anti-fan behaviors with an SMI (Mardon et al., 2023a)). Following the event of a fad, scam, and/or transgression by an SMI, we seek to explore whether followers share and openly express that they have fallen "foul" to these SMI practices more openly than previous theorizations suggest and consider the impact that this might have on the followers' accumulation of celebrity capital.

A celebrity's status can generate added value (or capital) (Gunter, 2014). Driessens (2013), building on Bourdieu's (2000) field theory, states that celebrity capital is "understood as accumulated media visibility through recurrent media representations" (p. 17), being "the accumulation and distribution of [media] attention" (van Krieken, 2012, p. 55). A celebrity's visibility and credibility in one social field may yield influence in another field, with greater media attention and representation of the celebrity leading to them being more widely recognized (and influential) in other fields (Driessens, 2013). Brooks and colleagues (2021) suggest that in a new media landscape, ample opportunities exist for acquiring media attention and crafting an authentic personal brand

Table 2
Researcher vignettes.

Researcher One	Researcher Two	Researcher Three
I don't intentionally follow any SMIs – SMI content that I see on SMNs will be largely due to the algorithm directing me towards them. I'm largely a lurker on social media. I didn't have a TikTok account until this study, and used it for data collection purposes. Given the significance of digital technology and consumers' collective relationship with social media, I'm relatively well-read on the subject, but I'm ambivalent about social media. I have little desire to post on social media and little interest in garnering likes. I scroll Facebook when I wake up and before I go to bed and recently opened an Instagram account to follow several movie critics and celebrities who moved from X to Instagram. Given that I do not follow, and am cynical of SMIs, I have not purchased anything they promote or recommend. However, in my digital marketing teaching, I encourage students to think about and evaluate a possible career as an SMI.	I use social media platforms in different ways: on Facebook, X, and TikTok, where I'm an active lurker, rarely posting. On Instagram, I'm more active, posting regularly on Stories as I like that these are temporal and don't require a public two-way interaction. I believe that some SMIs are authentic and have admiration for the time it takes to be an SMI and to continually craft and create new and engaging content for followers. I follow around 100 SMIs across SMNs, mostly those whose content focuses on home renovations and interior design, which is my hobby. I've bought products SMIs have promoted and recommended – often because of a discount code. I do additional research before buying products (looking at external review sites), but on a couple of occasions I have bought products from an SMI's paid partnership that have not been as good as the SMI made it out to be, and I have shared self-deprecating stories about this on Instagram.	I'm a passive social media user, spending around 2.5 h a day on SMNs, but I rarely post. I'm active on TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, and prefer TikTok. I do not regularly post but often privately share content with my two teenage daughters (currently aged 17 and 19). I am cynical about the motivations of most SMIs and believe even when content appears authentic that it is performed. I accept that this performativity may be habitual, and the influencers themselves may not always be conscious of their actions in this sense. I've never bought anything promoted by an SMI, but my daughters have – some of these for me. In my spare time, I'm a qualified swimming coach, and the number of unqualified influencers making strong claims about what athletes should and shouldn't be doing worries me.

Table 3
Documentary selection data sources.

Documentary Title	Topic	Rationale for Inclusion
1. Fyre: The Greatest Party that Never Happened (2020); [Netflix] < 97 min>	Documentary on the story of the failed music festival on a private island in the Bahamas which was promoted by well-known SMIs and celebrities.	Familiarization with the role and power of SMIs in persuading consumers.
2. Lords of Scam (2021) [Netflix] < 105 min>	Crime documentary tracing the rise and fall of scammers who conned the European Union carbon quota system.	Familiarization with "traditional" scamming.
3. The Tinder Swindler (2022) [Netflix] < 114 min>	Crime documentary exploring how a "wealthy" jet-setting mogul pursued women on social media to con them out of millions of dollars.	Familiarization with scamming in the context of social media.
4. The Social Dilemma (2020) [Netflix] < 94 min>	"It blends documentary investigation and narrative drama… unveiling the hidden machinations behind everyone's favorite social media and search platforms" (The Social Dilemma, n.d., para. 4)	Familiarization with social media as the context within which scams can take place.
5. Bad Influencer: The Great Insta Con (2021) [BBC iPlayer] < 45 min>	Explores how Belle Gibson, a global wellness SMI, was exposed for false claims of having treated cancer through alternative therapies	Familiarization with scamming in the context of social media influencers
6. Breaking Fashion, Series 1; Episode 3: Dani Dyer (2019) [BBC Three] < 31 min>	Documentary following the launch of SMI Dani Dyer's first swimwear range with the In the Style brand	Familiarization with SMIs and how they work collaboratively with brands.
7. David Wilson's Crime Files, Season 4; Episode 8: Under the Influencer (2023) [BBC iPlayer] < 28 min>	An investigation of how SMIs spread disinformation and/or create a false persona that can create harm amongst their followers	Familiarization with scamming in the context of social media influencers.

to generate celebrity capital.

In the context of SMIs, Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016, p. 194) state that "the SMI works to generate a form of "celebrity" capital by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic "personal brand" via social networks, which can subsequently be used by companies and advertisers for consumer outreach." The acquisition of celebrity capital is consequently pivotal to the success of an SMI, with SMIs seeking to curate personal brands that will appeal to their followers, and that they can capitalize on (Khamis et al. 2017). However, limited attention has been paid to how followers of SMIs accumulate celebrity capital and their participatory role that facilitates this, a gap which this paper seeks to fill.

In their pursuit of celebrity capital, some "scammed" individuals are turning to SMNs to admit, share, update, and revel in being scammed and are potentially electing to connect with other consumers who follow the same SMI. By disclosing that they've been scammed or a victim of a transgression to other followers in the field, this may protect their field dependent capital from devaluation and stigma (Arsel & Thompson, 2011). In this paper we explore the acquisition of celebrity capital by SMIs' followers who have participated in scam-like activities and willingly shared their experiences by creating content with the aim of exchanging this capital (Driessens, 2013).

Brooks et al. (2021) focus on SMIs' acquisition of celebrity capital. The "attention labor" that they propose is needed for acquiring celebrity

capital and could be applied to scammed followers, who turn to SMNs to publicize and promote their misfortune in the wake of a scam. Attention labor, in this context, is the process whereby existing and wannabe influencers "work tirelessly to acquire the attention of viewers, build a loyal community and thus acquire celebrity capital" (Brooks et al., 2021, p. 536). Characteristics of working tirelessly to acquire celebrity capital involve: "producing videos, taking photographs, creating content, responding to fan comments, engaging with fellow influencers and more" (Brooks et al., 2021, p. 537) with the creation of emotional ties and connections being important aspects of attention labor. Once celebrity capital is acquired, Driessens (2013) suggests that it is fluid and malleable and can be "converted into economic capital as money (e.g., through merchandising), into social capital as valuable contacts (e.g., through increased access to previously closed networks), into symbolic capital as recognition (e.g., when one's fame is recognized in a specific social field) or into political capital as political power (e.g., by being an elected official)" (p. 555). However, these exchanges can have drawbacks, for example, monetization of celebrity capital is unlikely to go unnoticed by followers and could have negative inferences, including souring parasocial relations and encouraging followers to participate in anti-fan communities (Mardon et al., 2023a).

3. Methodology

In seeking to expand the boundaries of our existing knowledge we

Extract from Researcher two's SPI on the Tinder Swindler: The people talking appear very vulnerable, they are entire believers in love and finding love appears to be everything to them, they even talk about fairy tales (beauty and the beast) in their discussion of love.

Researcher 1: I wonder if vulnerability is something that scammers actively seek out/look for.

Researcher 2: I have a bit of a different perspective on this as I don't necessarily think they were vulnerable. I think they were just lonely and looking for love, does this make them vulnerable?

Fig. 1. Excerpt from annotated introspective essay.

took an inductive and interpretative approach to further knowledge of how "ordinary" followers piggyback off the celebrity capital of more prominent SMIs to accumulate their own celebrity capital. To achieve this, we drew on four stages of data collection, as outlined in Table 1.

The assembled research team consisted of two female and one male researcher with a variety of personal and professional experiences and outlooks on SMIs (see Table 2). Each researcher kept a journal throughout the data collection period to record and reflect on their own practices, thoughts, feelings, and assumptions in relation to the research topic (see Lamb, 2013).

3.1. Stage one: Scoping and familiarization

Taking inspiration from previous consumer research studies that have drawn on film and television-based media (e.g., Holbrook & Grayson, 1986; Jones et al., 2022; Pradhan & Drake, 2022) we watched seven publicly available documentaries (see Table 4) to scope and familiarize ourselves with SMIs and SMI-follower relationships, along with the significance of fads, scams, and transgressions in the context of SMI-follower relationships. Five initial documentaries were identified (1, 2, 3, 4, and 6 in Table 3), with two further documentaries (5 and 7 in Table 3) identified during the research.

Inspired by Gould's (1995, p. 721) account of how introspection expanded his "view of consumer behavior to that of a very colorful living tapestry of interwoven thoughts, sensations, and behaviors", each researcher took a subjective personal introspection (SPI) approach when watching the seven documentaries. Drawing on SPI to watch the documentaries provided us with individual familiarization on the research topic with 514 min (per researcher) of documentaries viewed. Similar to Batat and Wohlfeil (2009), we independently wrote personal essays, noting down our personal introspections, observations, feelings, and reflections during and after the individual consumption of each documentary. Consistent with an SPI approach, where researchers are free to choose how to collect their introspections as this is a personal and emotional process (Brown & Reid, 1997), we recorded our introspections in a way that felt natural to us (handwritten in a notebook and typed).

We then came together in a collaborative autoethnography to share our introspective observations (Chang, 2022). This allowed for the collective "poking and prying with purpose" (Silverman, 2010, p. 81) of our observations (Hart et al., 2016). In this meeting we read each other's SPIs, commenting on points of interest and where we agreed and/or disagreed with the introspections of the other researchers. This meeting was audio-recorded (288 min) and transcribed to capture the conversation. The data were used in the data analysis, along with the observations and comments (56 pages of introspection notes and comments).

Fig. 1 shows an extract from an introspective essay, illustrating how comments were made by other members of the research team.

Thematic analysis, as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the SPI documents and discussions, with themes drawn out regarding SMI-follower relationships, behaviors, and where SMI and/or followers had engaged in scam-like behaviors.

3.2. Stage two: Influencer selection and familiarization

The knowledge and insight gained from stage one and through conducting the literature review on the role of SMIs in society, including SMI-follower relationships and celebrity and SMI transgressions, fads, and scams facilitated us to identify SMIs who had engaged in scam-like behaviors, transgressions, and/or fads. This stage then focused on familiarization with SMIs through collaborative autoethnographic watch parties. Here, we met in person to view the documentaries (see Table 4), collectively sharing and analyzing our introspective accounts (Pradhan & Drake, 2022) in real-time watch parties. The conversations during the watch parties were audio recorded and transcribed. Watch parties occurred in September 2023 and October 2023, with over 547 min of documentaries and Podcasts collaboratively observed, 18 pages of observation notes made, and 685 min of audio recording. The programs were found through the researchers' scanning media and existing documentaries for cases where SMIs had been involved in scam-like behaviors, transgressions, and/or dishonest marketing practices.

3.3. Stage three: Netnographic approach

In the third stage, we took a netnographic approach to understand the role of consumers, brands, and platforms, and we also sought to explore aspects of the SMI-follower relationship we had observed in stage two, such as where followers sought to piggyback off the "fame" of prominent SMIs. Data were collected using immersive (not intrusive) naturalistic analysis techniques, which, when combined with our earlier familiarization of SMIs and scam-like behavior in the SPIs (stage one) and collaborative watch party (stage two), allowed us to empathetically enter and observe the world of these SMIs (Kozinets, 2015; Reid & Duffy, 2018). We listened, compared (among the research team), reflected (individually and collaboratively as a research team), and sought to understand how narratives of SMIs, brands, consumers, and SMNs are constructed and shared (Kozinets, 2013). We immersed ourselves in UGC, taking time to observe the behavior of the SMIs (Reilly & Trevisan, 2016). The SMIs were observed across all SMNs on which they were (or had) been active, along with "listening" to related hashtags, mentions, and consumers' direct and indirect interactions that concerned the SMI and/or their followers. Content from posts, stories, reels, and comments

Table 4
Influencer case selection.

Influencer(s)	Background and Justification	Examples of Media Sources Selected
KSI and Logan Paul — Prime	● KSI and Paul, two former boxing rivals and SMI titans collaborated to form and produce drinks brand Prime in 2022. ● KSI and Paul collectively have over 48 million followers across their YouTube channels. ● Global sales of Prime surpassed $1 billion in the first year. ● Paul's previous involvement in the CryptoZoo scam (Tidy, 2022). ● The proposed scam is the cultivation of the audience for Prime, and prominence given to Prime's limited supply (Fletcher, 2023).	● KSI: In Real Life, Amazon Prime (93 min) ● Logan Paul: I started a drink company with KSI, YouTube (5 min) ● Logan Paul and KSI go undercover at Walmart, YouTube (4 min)
Caroline Calloway	● Calloway, an American SMI, amassed a significant following on Instagram when she enrolled at Cambridge University, posting content of her "fairytale" English lifestyle that was admired amongst her female followers (Hunt, 2020). ● To rapidly acquire a large social media following, Calloway bought 40,000 followers and targeted fans of modern "fantasy" English literature (e.g. Harry Potter), who she felt her content would appeal to (Wright, 2023). ● Calloway was labeled a scammer in the media due to products such as Snake Oil, a book Calloway did not write, her alleged forged entry into Cambridge University, and organizing a series of workshops that did not materialize (Shamsian, 2019). ● Calloway published a book, "Scammer" in 2023, where she not only acknowledges having scammed followers but capitalizes on it.	● My Insta Scammer Friend, BBC Three (44 min) ● The Instagram Scammer: Caroline Calloway, YouTube (23 min) ● How Internet famous Caroline Calloway dodged being Canceled (60 Minutes Australia), YouTube, (15 min) ● Victim or Scammer: Who really is Caroline Calloway, Podcast (64 min)
Belle Gibson	● Instagram wellness guru Belle Gibson, falsely claimed to have cured herself from terminal cancer (Price, 2021). ● Gibson capitalized on her prominent profile as an SMI to promote a wellness app with Apple and later a book with Penguin (Price, 2021). ● Gibson was exposed for never having had cancer and for previously misleading members of an online skating community where Gibson claimed to suffer from a serious heart condition (Donelly and Toscano, 2017b).	● The Search for Instagram's Worst Con Artist, ITVX, (94 min) ● The Wellness Guru Who Conned Apple & Faked Her Entire Life | Belle Gibson Documentary, YouTube (34 min) ● The Gamechanger (Belle Gibson), Swindled, Podcast (74 min)

Table 4 (*continued*)

Influencer(s)	Background and Justification	Examples of Media Sources Selected
	● Gibson failed to make promised donations to charities from sales of products, such as "The Whole Pantry" Apple app (Davey, 2017; Marris, 2017).	

on SMNs were collected over 12 months. Data from all stages were combined into a data pool, with open and axial coding techniques (Spiggle, 1994) used to analyze and interpret the data as a whole. The researchers collaboratively analyzed the data, taking an inductive and iterative approach to search for emergent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Spiggle, 1994) with themes constantly compared with explanatory theories from the literature.

3.4. Stage four: Expert interviews

The purpose of this stage was to explore the findings from the first three stages from the perspective of industry experts. Five experts were purposefully recruited through our industry networks who had direct experience working closely (in talent agencies and for brands) with prominent and emerging SMIs at a senior level (all were in managerial positions). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the experts' perspectives and experiences of working with SMIs, focusing on how SMIs build (and leverage) their online persona and the attention of their followers. We also explored fads, scams, and transgressions in the context of SMIs, with the final part of the interview introducing our theorization of the viratoid to understand firstly if the experts had observed viratoids and, secondly, to further develop the concept. The interviews were conducted online and averaged 44 min in length. The interviews were transcribed by the research team, with the data then analyzed collectively, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six recursive steps of thematic analysis.

4. Findings

The findings are presented in three comparative case studies (Dul & Hak, 2008) that each encapsulates varying perspectives of SMI-follower relationships. Each case illustrates how some consumers can transform into viratoids, piggybacking off an SMI who is in the spotlight for a fad, scam, and/or transgression. First, in the case of Prime, we explore how SMIs promote a fad and this plays into their followers' desires to acquire celebrity capital. Second, in the case of Belle Gibson, our findings reveal how consumers jump on their association (and disassociation when she transgresses) with Gibson, becoming viratoids in their endeavor to increase their own celebrity capital. We illustrate, in this case, the importance of brands undertaking due diligence to protect consumers and ensure SMIs and their viratoids are not spreading harmful content. Third, in the case of Caroline Calloway, we discuss how Calloway cultivates a loyal following of viratoids from her scam-like behavior.

4.1. Fads and viratoids: The case of prime

In this case we explore the relatively short-term appeal of the drink Prime, and how viratoids piggyback off more prominent SMIs associated with the brand to gain prominence for themselves. Viratoids go to great lengths to curate content around an SMI's persona, brand, or product that has a relatively short sales life, and in seeking to insert themselves in the drama of the fad, they increase and build their own online persona. This case reveals how viratoids operate efficiently to piggyback off a viral trend (fad) and exposes how viratoids are flexible and somewhat creative – channeling their energies and endeavors to curate varied and

largely mundane content that can benefit the more prominent SMI. The audience for Prime was cultivated by two popular SMIs (KSI and Logan Paul), with the combination of SMIs, algorithms, and consumers' desire and willingness to acquire a form of celebrity capital around a fad product appealing to the viratoid. Prime was launched by SMIs KSI and Logan Paul who have tens of millions of subscribers on their YouTube channels. The instant appeal of Prime, cultivated by the SMIs, attracted immediate enthusiasm, with Prime's early appeal speaking to the notion of a fad. A fad is defined as "fashions that enter quickly, are adopted with great zeal, peak early, and decline very fast" (Kotler & Armstrong, 1994, p. 331). We suggest viratoids seek to gain celebrity capital while the appeal and excitement of a product is strong, and curate incessant Prime content. This was initially where the product was in high demand with supply "scarce", with consumers going to great lengths to acquire it (Guinness, 2023) and paying excessive prices.

In the first watch party (September 2023), the researchers viewed the YouTube documentary, *Logan Paul – I Started a Drink Company with KSI.* The research team commented on the seemingly ordinary presentation of the SMIs' personas, and how they convey a sense of their supposed

> My 12 year old begged me to take him to Asda at 6am to get one of these, yeah alright mate dream on. 😂
>
> 👍 11   👎   Reply

friendship, having once been fierce rivals. The supposed close intimacy of their friendship evokes a sense of personal connection, closeness, and relatability with the audience (Mardon et al., 2023a). This can translate into trustful relations forming between SMIs and their followers, albeit in a rather one-sided *para*-social nature (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

KSI and Paul distanced themselves from traditional marketing and media channels, opting to self-promote their Prime brand on SMNs to create a perception of being "outside" the traditional marketing system (Baker, 2022) to their 40 million followers (Levitt, 2023) to whom they can promote Prime. The popularity of Prime was arguably amplified by the SMI's video promotions, and with their army of followers interacting with their Prime videos and promotions, they can deposit what Kozinets (2022, p. 442) terms "online traces." Kozinets (2022) suggests that these traces are extremely valuable and can be treated as data, thus amplifying the video recommendation algorithm for Prime with (and beyond) their followers. Cotter (2019) suggests the algorithm operationalizes and shows content "users care about the most" (p. 898). An interaction or a trace that is left by a follower on a Prime video may, therefore, result in Prime video posts being boosted in consumers' online feeds, as determined by the algorithm, which can intensify consumer interest in the brand (Kozinets, 2022). The algorithm plays a significant role in filtering what content consumers view, and for a fad product, such as Prime, where SMI marketing is the main source of promotion, high-quality, relevant, and appealing video content can promote the product to consumers in extreme volume and frequency, with dominating an algorithm a key aspect of Prime's success, and in turn, the brand being used as a catapult for a viratoid's content. In the interviews with the SMI experts, they discussed the importance of trying to take control of an algorithm:

> *"You* [an SMI, viratoid, and/or brand] *should know how to hack the algorithm…if algorithms are satisfied with you making* video*s it just continues to push your content out."* − SMI Expert 3

A known technique of SMIs is to collaborate with one another to "hack" the algorithm (Brown, 2021), or what some scholars term as "gaming the system" − a narrative that suggests that the more we know about a "system"; the more successful we are at hacking it (Cotter, 2019). Thus, the strategic combination of KSI and Paul pooling together their collective audiences could be considered a tactic to dominate, or "hack" the algorithm. If a potential viratoid observes the popularity and

dominance of Prime content on their SMNs, largely because the algorithm is driving such content their way, this could act as a motivation to make Prime content and become part of an algorithmic loop or "game" to ensure their videos are promoted, viewed, and subsequently that they accumulate celebrity capital. Considering that fad products enjoy a short window of success, viratoids have a limited opportunity to curate Prime content, acquire celebrity capital, and monetize from the fad.

The meteoritic popularity of Prime, combined with a shortage of supply, led to retailers organizing special Prime openings and imposing restrictions on sales (Levitt, 2023). Viratoids realized an opportunity, taking to social media to document themselves and others patiently queueing in the middle of the night as they waited for supermarkets to open and sell Prime or sharing content of chaotic scenes where shoppers grappled in the aisles over a finite supply of Prime. A reply to a viratoid's video on YouTube that documented themselves, and other consumers, rushing to purchase Prime in a supermarket, stated:

- YouTube User reply to video exposing scenes at supermarkets for Prime

As the netnographic data suggests, viratoids help fuel inertia and interest around Prime, with consumers revealing peer pressure to join early morning queues for Prime. Arguably, viratoids contributed to the formation of a Prime resale market, whereby excessive price purchases were documented on SMNs. A motivation for adoring KSI and Paul fans to join queues at midnight and endure stampedes and scuffles was the opportunity to document their travails on social media − this speaks to our idea of the viratoid and their desire to acquire celebrity capital through association with the SMI.

The viratoids often portray themselves as rebellious and devoted, be that grappling for Prime or traveling far and wide to obtain the drink. The scarcity of Prime created increased demand and attention on both the product and SMIs, KSI, and Paul. In one of our interviews with an SMI expert, they discussed how the scarcity of Prime was a catalyst for creating content and in turn, an opportunity for followers to become SMIs themselves:

> "*A lot of people created social media influencer accounts based on the scarcity of Prime. So, they went out of their way to buy it, and that's how they became a social media influencer because they've gone and bought Prime.*" − SMI Expert 3

An aim for a viratoid might be to ultimately become an SMI, with this trajectory and transformation beginning with piggybacking off more well-known SMIs. Curating content around the scarcity of Prime was significant, with viratoids, during the height of Prime's fad phase, going to great lengths and inconveniences to acquire the product, as the supply for Prime did not meet expected demand, thus further fueling demand. Consumers posted content on SMNs detailing their travails of acquiring and purchasing Prime, showing a willingness to pay inflated prices, and traveling far and wide to acquire the product. The purchasing struggles of Prime and the emotional labor, for the viratoid are exchanged for the creation of viral content, which, in turn, provides an opportunity to increase the viratoid's follower count and engagement (Ouvrein et al., 2021). Viratoids share their keenness to pay more than the market value for the drink, as this may lead them to amass views, likes, and followers. For example, one SMI, *Prime Minister Taz,* took to TikTok to boast, in a
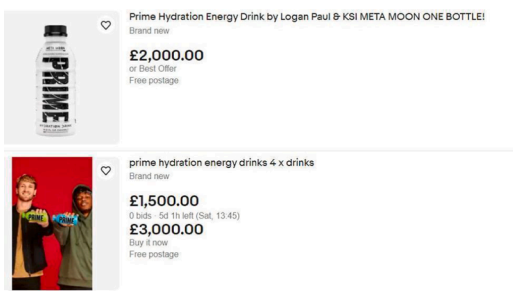
series of short clips about his £1,000 purchase of a £2.00 limited edition bottle of Prime to his 211,000 followers – one video was watched by 8.3 million users and received over 600,000 likes.

Viratoids can dedicate entire channels to their pursuit of locating and purchasing the latest flavors of Prime, and at the height of the fad, were infamous for their Prime content. For example, viratoid @Seanayale traveled from New York (USA) to London (UK) to sample a new Prime flavor with the associated video having amassed over 15 million views and 428,000 likes. Rather than face derision for their escapades, the netnographic analysis of the comments underneath @Seanayle's video post appears to implicitly acknowledge that the viratoid is capitalizing on the short-term appeal of Prime:

Some people have fully based their life around prime

Reply

the things people do for prime 🤣

Reply

- YouTube users' replies to @Seanayle's video post about Prime

Consumers also took to popular auction sites to capitalize from the celebrity capital amassed by KSI, Paul, and the product, Prime, selling the product at overinflated prices to make the most of the demand. The listings used the SMIs' names in the title, and their photograph as the main image. The viratoid later took to SMNs to create content about their quest to acquire the product or to celebrate monetizing from the fad.

Prime Hydration Energy Drink by Logan Paul & KSI META MOON ONE BOTTLE!
Brand new
£2,000.00
or Best Offer
Free postage

prime hydration energy drinks 4 x drinks
Brand new
£1,500.00
0 bids · 5d 1h left (Sat, 13:45)
£3,000.00
Buy it now
Free postage

- Screenshot of consumers reselling Prime on eBay

Given the likelihood that Prime content will have short-term appeal, viratoids may base their profile around Prime, while it is current – making videos and posts and feeding into the popularity of the Prime algorithm to raise their profile as a viratoid. In the interviews with the SMI experts, they recognized the importance of viratoids creating their own content and building their own brand (Khamis et al., 2017) on their trajectory to being an SMI:

"We have seen this new wave of influencers come through, and again, in 5 years' time you will see that the people that are finding the Prime bottles have become manufacturers of their own brands because of the way the community shifted… you're not relying on other people to create products that you can piggyback off. You can create your own products in your own community. So, I would hope that most people would recognize that longer term building a community." – SMI Expert 1

The SMI experts emphasized the importance of viratoids that have piggybacked off the success of Prime to build a community of followers and move into a more established SMI brand – for example, where they are not necessarily known as someone that simply locates obscure Prime

flavors. Viratoids need to carefully manage their profile to ensure they do not fade from public consciousness. Similarly, Rojek (2001) cautions about celetoids' longevity, suggesting that celetoids "have a short career… it is in their nature to receive their moment of fame and then to disappear from public consciousness quickly" (p. 21). We propose that viratoids risk a similar fate if they become solely reliant on simply piggybacking from an SMI and support the notion of building their own community.

Locating rare flavors is known as a "side quest" and it can yield success for a viratoid. For example, Shivani Khoslaa's YouTube channel has over 103,000 followers, with most of her videos dedicated to locating the latest Prime flavors. Her adventures show her traversing the UK for Prime, with her videos regularly exceeding one million views. We suggest the viratoid is somewhat entrepreneurial, spotting an opportunity to make content at that moment in time. Viratoids, such as Khoslaa and @Seanayale for example, draw on Prime's popularity as a way of staying relevant. Viratoids are a byproduct of more powerful and influential SMIs, and their existence appears to be tied to the popularity and relevance of Prime, which poses risks for the viratoid. Given that Prime is a fad product, the importance of being malleable is significant, and the desire to stay relevant and visible, as articulated in the expert interviews:

"And now SMIs are known for side quests. So, it's using what the process is which is side-questing and creating a channel about it. So, although they're not known for Prime, or anything like that, they're known for a side quest. They now build a community, and they can commercialize that element. So, you can do it. I always say to people that you want to be known for yourself, not known for the things you do. But again, the only way to get to the point where people know you for you is by having an attractive element of you, which is Prime in this case and that gets people to know who you are, and then you slowly transition into personality-based content." – SMI Expert 1

A viratoid can achieve celebrity capital from side quests, much like a celetoid, where "there is no necessary connection between merit and achievements" (Rojek, 2001, p. 198). The notoriety of a viratoid stems from them acquiring online attention, which leads to them amassing celebrity capital that is ephemeral unless the viratoid commits to building their personal brand persona to achieve long-term success as an SMI.

4.2. Transgressions and viratoids: The case of Belle Gibson

Gibson curated her persona as a wellness SMI to play on consumers' vulnerabilities and eminent brands' (Apple and Penguin's) desires to profit from her status as a global macro-influencer. Having never had cancer, Gibson misrepresented information to her followers from the outset, crafting a false persona to profit from her victims (e.g., profits from apps, book sales, and brand deals), some of whom were seriously or terminally ill and at a vulnerable time in their lives. This case demonstrates how viratoids leverage SMIs' celebrity capital to grow their own following, and how after a transgression, followers, drawn by the attention SMIs attract, may become viratoids themselves, using social media to share their stories and views on the actions of the SMI. We illustrate how during Gibson's rise to fame, viratoids piggybacked off her popularity by sharing their own clean eating journeys, and how, after her transgression, they sought to build celebrity capital by publicly sharing their stories and thoughts on SMNs of her fall from grace.

Apple and Penguin were participants to Gibson's "scam". The brands wanted to believe in her story of *overcoming the monster*, a popular narrative in storytelling where the underdog hero (Gibson) sets out to defeat an evil (cancer) (Brown & Patterson, 2010; Booker, 2004). Apple and Penguin knowingly overlooked disparities and "red flags" in Gibson's narrative, with files in the Australian court case demonstrating that the brands neglected to carry out appropriate due diligence, exemplifying their roles as participants in Gibson's scam, hoping to

monetize off her fame:

> "*I think the main thing to warn Belle about is that there are a few 'gaps'* [in her story] *which journalists might probe.*" – Penguin employee ([Donelly and Toscano, 2016](), para. 25).
>
> "*Spoke with Belle earlier and she is pragmatic about this unpleasantness and determined to take forward steps continuing in the work instead of drawing interest to this kind of blind-sightedness.*" – Apple employee ([Donelly and Toscano, 2017a](), para. 13)

The brands' associations with Gibson also had a knock-on effect that led to consumers becoming victims of Gibson's deception. Many of Gibson's followers perceived that her well-publicized connection with Apple and Penguin endorsed and added credibility to her story ([Jin & Muqaddam, 2019]()). The netnographic data also reveals that Gibson's followers presumed that Apple and Penguin, as notorious and reputable global brands, would have done appropriate due diligence:

> ████████ I loved Belle's account at the time, and got into 'clean eating myself' – I even had the app she created. Naturally, I believed her story. I now eat more normally, and was very shocked when the news broke. I too have googled her name over the years and found next to nothing about the saga. It sticks with me even more as a few years later I was diagnosed with a brain tumour myself and subsequently I have had all the conventional treatment that she supposedly shunned for the very same thing. X

- Instagram User, reply to SMI video being interviewed about Gibson

> ████████ Fantastic program– scary how she was not fact checked by companies who endorsed her – it's always about money 😠
>
> ████████ Sad & Scary, with penguin & apple not having someone check before jumping in! I'm sure this happens all the time.
>
> ████ I think it shows that the media is bad at being impartial and sensationalises stories without accurate facts! Too trusting of the media to provide Belle with the power to fuel her lies!

- Various Instagram Users replies to content on Gibson

much as consumers, but Apple and the book publisher surely have the resources to check them out and surely they need to take responsibility for this?" – Watch Party, October 2023

This led us to debate where due diligence sits – is it with the consumer or the brand to conduct appropriate checks to ensure the authenticity of claims made? Australian Consumer Law ([Donelly & Toscano, 2016]()) notes that some of the blame sits with the publisher, having fined Penguin for not having substantiated claims in Gibson's book.

In the SMI expert interviews, the concepts of due diligence and transparency were key findings. The experts stated that brands, when working with SMIs, have a responsibility to consumers to ensure that they have done appropriate due diligence:

> "*It's the brand's reputation, work with the wrong people and it impacts on your brand, consumers should not have to do the work to find out if what they're being sold isn't what they think it is, this should come back to the brand and those who are promoting it… The ASA doesn't have the power or authority; it's not fit for purpose for social media. The FCA have cracked down on people, have you seen the cracked* [sic] *down on the influencer from The Only Way is Essex? But they still do it, they make more money than the fine like Kim Kardashian. What's the incentive to stop? More should be done to crack down on it, bigger fines for brands and influencers, criminal records not a telling off and relatively minor fine.*" – SMI Expert 5

The experts detailed how some consumers conduct due diligence, taking responsibility for "fact" checking the claims of SMIs and calling them out on their behavior. They, however, recognized that not all consumers have the resources (time and money) to be able to do this, and can consequently become victims of brand and SMI misbehavior:

> "*Making sure you're working with reputable people is hard for a brand no wonder consumers fall for them* [scams and fads] *some are, we call wolves in sheep's clothing* [SMIs], *pretty and polished on the outside and the devil on the inside focused on making money as their aim.*" – SMI Expert 5

Gibson recognized that consumers are turning to SMNs as a coping strategy where they feel isolated to connect with others who are going through or have gone through a similar experience for emotional support ([Heiss & Rudolph, 2023]()). Her scam was aided by consumers increasingly choosing to take control over aspects of their lives, such as their health and future through consumption – the neoliberal consumer

> ████████
> Good: Apple and Penguin and every news outlet that legitimised Belle needs to be punished. They failed in basic due diligence and balanced journalism. How many believed Belle as all these companies and media outlets gave her legitimacy?
>
> One randomer on Instagram, making outrageous claims, is one thing: people can research and be sceptical about claims made…. but that randomer appearing on news channels, magazine spreads, tech deals and book contracts: we expect those media companies to have done due diligence, therefore, that lends the randomer credibility they couldn't get from anywhere else.
>
> Belle would likely have been nowhere near as believed or famous, without the media and companies who supported her.
> These companies should have had the 410,000 fine, each, as they made her into what she was. Their own fines were peanuts compared to their annual profits.

- Facebook Users reply to content on Gibson's transgression

In the SPI reflections, whilst watching ITVX's *The Search for Instagram's Worst Con Artist*, we were perturbed by how global brands like Apple and Penguin failed to conduct appropriate due diligence:

> "*In 2013 she was even awarded best app on Apple – they were bought into and swept along with Belle's narrative of alternative medicine just as*

([Yngfalk, 2016]()). Gibson played on the supposed agency of neoliberal consumers, who were desperate to be like her and to overcome serious health issues through alternative therapies, such as a clean eating diet and exercise feeling let down by traditional medicine ([Baker & Rojek, 2020]()). When a consumer's agency takes them down this path, it can be dangerous without appropriate due diligence ([Gibson et al., 2015]()). In this case, we suggest that some consumers were making informed decisions, perhaps using Gibson's connections to well-known brands

(Apple and Penguin) as part of their due diligence, along with her frequent global appearances in traditional media. This combined to add credibility and believability to the narrative Gibson shared online − reinforcing how brands associate themselves with SMIs can lead consumers who trust these large corporate heavyweights to do due diligence, can become victims.

"…*I was desperate, my family was desperate, and that's what she preyed upon was people's desperation …I still didn't recognize this cognitive dissonance between what I was seeing in my real life, which was the true effects of cancer versus what I was seeing on my Instagram feed with Belle Gibson, which was her flying to LA to meet with Apple to promote her new app.*" − TikTok video audio

Reply to this TikTok video:

I'm so sorry that Belle Gibson preyed upon your vulnerability 💕

We posit that the consumers taken in by Gibson were victims, buying into claims that some even acknowledged sounded too good to be true because it gave them hope:

My daughter had cancer and I have seen so many other parents in my situation lured in by people like her out of pure desperation. It's horrible.

2023-12… Reply

I hope that you sharing your story will help other folks with cancer or folks that love someone with cancer be more aware of these types of predators.

- TikTok users replying to video on Gibson

Gibson herself is a *celeactor* (Rojek, 2001), having carefully curated a fictional persona around the overcoming the monster narrative. Some of her followers and subsequent victims, who were in awe of Gibson when she rose to fame and were taken in by her scam-like behavior, later piggybacked off her transgression, making viral content from their association and connection with her − we label these consumers *viratoids*. In that, they sought to build their own profile with the aim of gaining attention by sharing their story of Gibson's wrongdoing, with a participatory culture enabling this to play out performatively online (Jones et al., 2022; Wei & Bunjun, 2020). These viratoids utilized SMNs to publicly share their stories, seeking to build celebrity capital through gaining attention on social media alongside appearances in traditional media (e.g., television and newspaper interviews), where they told, and in some instances sold, their story about their connection with Gibson:

"…*I see it as brainwashing now, there she was glowing, beautiful and there I was losing my hair, I needed to believe Belle and she hooked us in knowing exactly what we needed to see and hear…there was hope.*" − TikTok video audio

Reply to TikTok video:

So many people died because they thought they could cure their cancer with health foods because of her. Pure evil.

Before her transgression, viratoids modeled themselves on Gibson, seeking to be associated with her, creating viral content (and profiles) in association with her clean eating movement and sharing their own experiences of overcoming the monster. Their status as a viratoid is demonstrated through their sharing of snippets on their public social media pages, including appearances on the news, television documentaries, podcasts, magazine and newspaper articles, and interviews in books that focus on Gibson. The data reveal that a key motivation for

these followers was to accumulate celebrity capital, which would support them in growing their online following and even help them establish a new business or build their status as an SMI in their own right.

Today I appeared on @bbc World News to talk about the disgraced blogger Belle Gibson who lied about having brain cancer and using her diet to heal herself "naturally". 😮 I remember watching the story unfold years ago, and now the journalists who uncovered her have written an amazing book!

This was such an amazing opportunity, and I'm so happy they asked me to come on ☺ So exciting!

Catch me in this new documentary! 🤩

Bad Influencer: The Great Insta Con is available on BBC iPlayer now, and will be showing on BBC1 later tonight!

The documentary looks back on the story of Belle Gibson, a wellness blogger who claimed she cured her terminal brain cancer with food… except she didn't. She lied. She never had cancer in the first place.

Both myself and my wonderful friend ▮▮▮▮▮▮ (as seen in the last clip) were caught in her web back in 2014, and in this documentary we talk about our experiences of Belle, as well as our personal experiences in the Wellness industry. Spoiler alert: they weren't great 😇.

I would love to hear your thoughts if you've seen it!

- Instagram Users' caption to posts on Gibson

"*Hi, I'm* [name removed for anonymity], *I'm a cancer survivor, I'm a nanny, I'm a feminist, I'm a bit of a sl*t. Why am I in a documentary airing in the UK about the cancer fraud of Belle Gibson?*" − TikTok User capitalizing on Gibson content, 196,000 + views

This connects with Rojek's (2001, 2007) concept of the celetoid, with the aim of these viratoids being to achieve viral online and offline media attention by piggybacking off their connection to Gibson. In their article exploring how social, cultural, and technological conditions allowed Gibson to rise from fame and fall from fame so publicly, Baker and Rojek (2020, p. 394), identify Gibson as a celetoid, noting how SMNs were "crucial to her capacity to generate attention capital." We put forward that aspiring SMIs who followed Gibson saw an opportunity to purposefully craft their own persona with the aspiration of going viral for monetary gain, currency, and/or capital through their connection to Gibson. As illustrated in the previous Instagram user post, a viratoid publicized their appearance on a documentary, tagging a media source in their post to maximize reach and add credibility to the post with the aim of further amassing celebrity capital. This is supported in the interviews with the SMI experts, where they emphasized how SMIs strategically curate their social media presence by piggybacking off other SMIs.
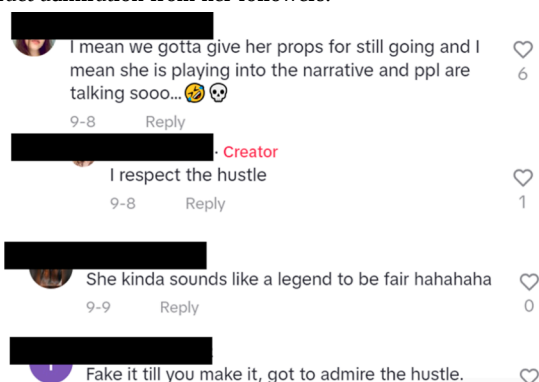
4.3. Scams and viratoids: The case of Caroline Calloway

Caroline Calloway developed an online persona whereby she carefully cultivated her audience and became admired both personally, and for the activity she engaged in (her hustle). This case shows how viratoids are willing to be scammed and participate in scams to piggyback off the SMIs' content and this is central to their pursuit of celebrity capital. We draw attention to the viratoids' unashamed and knowing participation in Calloway's scams, illustrating how they celebrate their involvement on SMNs. As a young American, Calloway struggled to fit in with her "deep Southern peers" at High School and started to adapt her appearance to ensure she was accepted (Leach, 2024). She purposefully targeted participatory digital communities, such as Harry Potter fan groups, to attract and develop a significant online following. Calloway's journey as an SMI is interspersed with scam-like behavior, followed by marketing activity, and then further scandal, with Calloway gaining

celebrity capital through her notorious and mischievous play.

Despite scamming her followers (see Table 5), Calloway is applauded, respected, and admired by her followers who are willing participants in her scam and willingly share that they are victims across SMNs, thus being viratoids – in that they create viral online content piggybacking off Calloway's infamous scamming persona.

Calloway's initial content focused on her carefully curated enviable lifestyle. At this point, she was a *celeactor*, with her online "character" catering to the mysticism of an American girl living an idyllic British life as a Cambridge University student (Rojek, 2014). Calloway's fictitious online persona featured many Harry Potter-esque attributes that she knew would directly appeal to her followers, with their admiration for the persona she had curated continuing even when her inauthenticity was unmasked and the fictitious nature of her persona revealed. Despite being exposed for misleading her followers, failing to deliver on promises of events, and creation of scam products, such as Snake Oil (a skin care product shown to have no known benefits), Calloway continues to attract admiration from her followers:

> I mean we gotta give her props for still going and I mean she is playing into the narrative and ppl are talking sooo… 🤣 😶
> 9-8   Reply   6
>
> · Creator
> I respect the hustle
> 9-8   Reply   1
>
> She kinda sounds like a legend to be fair hahahaha
> 9-9   Reply   0
>
> Fake it till you make it, got to admire the hustle.

- TikTok users replies to Calloway's viratoids' content

The creator here is posting content piggybacking Calloway's scam-like behavior. This sudden rise to infamy as a "scammer" is reflected in how our expert participants describe SMIs evolve:

> *"Suddenly they have a voice, and then people hear them, and they grow."* – SMI Expert 4

Caroline found her voice online, posting content about her fictitious lifestyle and gaining adoration even for her scam-like activities. This continued promotion of herself, despite the public scandal of her exposure, speaks to Rojek's (2001) celetoid. It almost appears that she seeks notoriety – as Rojek (2001, p. 69) suggests, "notoriety is becoming a more common means of acquiring public attention and the celetoid is worthy objects of public attention." Calloway's followers also locate their voice by participating in her activities and attract attention from others with the aim of acquiring celebrity capital.
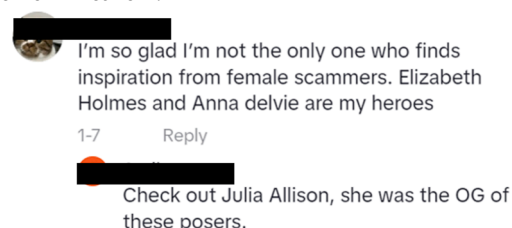
The sustained admiration for Calloway appears novel in the SMI world, where exposed inauthenticity usually means being canceled (Geusens et al., 2023). According to Geusens et al. (2023), Calloway portrays all the required behavior of a cancellation – toxic, inauthentic, lies to their audience, and manipulates their followers. In an era of digital hostility, rather than facing cancellation or digital derision, which Thompson and Cover (2022) refer to as an "internet pile-on" where "an individual is publicly shamed by internet users" (p. 1772), we see the inverse of this in the case of Calloway. We suggest that Calloway's followers openly admire her hustle, seeing it as their own opportunity to become viral, piggybacking on her celetoid notoriety to acquire their own celebrity capital. Hustle is a double entendre in that it is both an informal word for swindle or fraud (Collins Dictionary, n.d.) and a popular expression amongst social media users to describe a culture that promotes hard work, ambition, and being inspirational (Chairunnisah & Kurnia, 2023). It is the admiration of the hustle that

makes Calloway's followers want to become viratoids, whereby they reveal and share to online audiences how Calloway hustled them. As viratoids, they create content centered on their admiration of Calloway and use their online profile to celebrate being hustled, acquiring celebrity capital themselves in the process.

Equally, our SMI experts talked about followers, as viratoids, being rewarded for being scammed from the subsequent content they create off the back of their "scam" experience:

> *"It's almost a reward for being scammed. It's like you said. If my mom got scammed by a fraud from the bank, for example, and she's trying to figure* [out] *all the money she lost. She would never want to speak about it ever again. Whereas if someone gets scammed by an influencer, it's almost like a friend that you think you know, that I can jump on this I can create content. The exposure that I get will probably be a benefit to me. That the scams happen. I can't change it, but what I can change is what I can get out of it, which is, I can't argue with it."* – SMI Expert 1

SMIs have consistently been found to be the subject of worship by their followers, with this usually centered on their charismatic appeal (Cocker & Cronin, 2017), not the "hustle" itself. Calloway, rather than being considered toxic or manipulative, is held up as a heroine from her status as a female scammer by viratoids. Part of her heroism appears to be connected to her gender; however, it could be that viratoids are searching out angles in Calloway's hustle to make their own content. In marketing theory, heroes are frequently conceptualized as masculine archetypes and fit with "traditional hegemonic masculinity ideals" (Sobande et al., 2020. p. 73). Calloway's followers challenge this masculine ideology to start a conversation and acquire attention from their own network.

> I'm so glad I'm not the only one who finds inspiration from female scammers. Elizabeth Holmes and Anna delvie are my heroes
> 1-7   Reply
>
> Check out Julia Allison, she was the OG of these posers.

- Instagram users' replies to a viratoid's content

A theme that emerged from the data was the investment of Calloway's followers in her narrative. Narrative curation is a key aspect of being a successful SMI, allowing SMIs to maintain their online persona and stimulate online conversations about them (Zhou et al., 2021). Calloway's followers are captivated by her story, creating and sharing content about their Calloway experiences – it is these consumers we label as viratoids. They are drawn in and excited to hear what Calloway will do next, waiting for an opportunity to create their own content, willingly supporting her despite knowing the products and services they purchase might not be what they seem (or might never materialize). Their participation in her narrative is pivotal to their own acquisition of celebrity capital:

> I've been invested in this story for years, can't wait to read this!
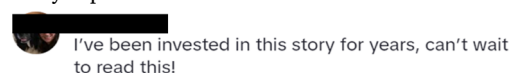
- Instagram user, in response to Calloway announcing launch of her book, 'Scammer'

In the SPI we noted that a clear SMI content strategy is concerned with the curation of the narrative, and creating stories that draw the audience in, whereby they are left wanting to know more. Equally by participating in the narrative, followers learn this content curation technique from SMIs. This was also supported by the data from interviews with SMI experts:

"This is a fascinating web of internet scams and the appeal of charismatic, authority figures – the pull, draw and magnetism of the con artist. By using tinder and social media, consumers can portray the fake out of the lifestyle, ramp up materialism through society of the spectacle and/or exaggerate or filter a lifestyle." – Researcher 1, SPI

"The influencers that grow, they get how people think, what you don't see [as a consumer] *is the people working with them behind the scenes to help them with content, analyze stats. Talent managers or agents, they do this and even brands when they're working on partnerships want to make the content look organic and can be quite sneaky hiding it's an ad or gift."* – SMI Expert 5

Calloway's viratoids have taken to social media to celebrate their participation in her community and have willingly participated in the scam:
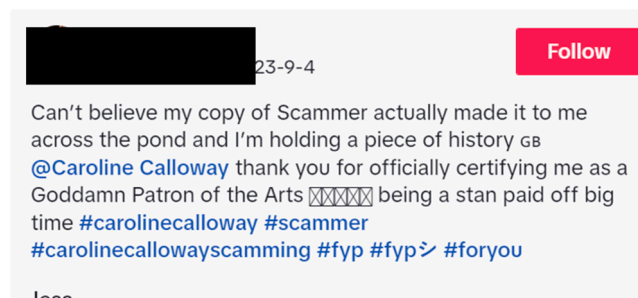
- TikTok User

The term "Stan", as popularized by rapper Eminem in a song of the same name, refers to an overzealous or obsessive fan of a celebrity (Chang et al., 2023), is seen in several social media posts and videos relating to Calloway. Calloway's curated presence on Instagram inspired "Stan" style profiles, including accounts such as @callowayslay (Shamsian, 2019). Calloway was admired by her audience, with many of her ardent followers displaying a "Stan" like obsession with her, which was noted in the researchers' watch party. In the SPI stage, this was also highlighted, with researcher one noting that "in capitalizing on being an influencer – people want to be a part of their tribe." Drenten et al. (2023) might consider this as Calloway tribalizing her audience, a tactic SMIs employ to cultivate and curate their followers. What is different in the case of Calloway is that her followers used their involvement with her to their advantage, exhibiting viratoid behavior knowing that by participating in her scam, they could then create content and share this online to increase their own celebrity capital. Rather than being aggrieved by Calloway's behavior, Calloway's "Stans" on SMNs, as viratoids, openly embrace and celebrate their status as willing participants to scam-like activities. This theme was also supported in the expert interviews, as in the case of Gibson, when discussing the concept of how followers might want to become viral, where SMI expert four stated, "*influencers at all costs,*" in that as viratoids, these followers seek celebrity capital for themselves and create content they think will achieve this "at all costs.".

5. Discussion

The three case studies and our analyses reveal how followers can transition from a seemingly ordinary consumer to someone with an accumulated following and online presence, a viratoid, achieved by piggybacking off a more prominent SMI. Rojek (2001) draws a distinction between a celebrity and a celetoid, with the latter being people constructed as celebrities; however, it is not always obvious why this is or what their talent consists of, nonetheless, they can rise to fame. Similarly, we suggest a viratoid is not as fully formed, or as well established as an SMI and the status of a viratoid is somewhat more amateur, opportunistic and they circulate content and raise their profiles in online communities by inserting themselves into the drama of a more well-known SMI. Our data suggest that the viratoid provides a variety of perspectives and experiences that stem from the more prominent SMI activities – typically curating content around points of view, engaging in challenges or quests, and sharing personal and private perspectives from alleged grievances and affects – the fallout from a more prominent SMI, rather than a devout commitment to the SMI that they are piggybacking off. Similar to Arvidsson and Caliandro's (2015) brand publics whereby they are "largely driven by affective affiliation… by a common interest, enthusiasm, or concern… pseudo sharing of private affects" (p. 5) we position viratoids as seeking to increase their visibility, becoming attention worthy, and managing personal strategies of self-presentation and performativity around faux outrage, upset, admissions of gullibility and forms of trivial entertainment and spurious achievements.

A key distinction between a viratoid and an established, well-known SMI is that the viratoid relies on a more prominent SMI's activities and profile to curate their content to chronicle their own "personality". By piggybacking, the barriers to entry are relatively low for the viratoid and can be leveraged on SMNs. Irrespective of the curated content, the objective for the viratoid is admiration, attention, or more specifically the acquisition of celebrity capital. Media and cultural scholar, Graeme Turner (2010) coined the term, "the demotic turn" to describe the enlargement of media interest in ordinary life, and suggests that the ordinary is lionized, as is the civic culture that creates and gives them worth. Much like a celetoid (Rojek, 2001), the viratoid is the epitome of the ordinary, they are everyday people who willingly trade in triviality and ephemerality and happily share their travails on SMNs. Khamis and colleagues (2017) suggest that "audiences increasingly predisposed to 'ordinary' people in the spotlight" (p. 197) – thus, the viratoid can triumph and accumulate celebrity capital, not despite of their ordinariness, but because they are ordinary. In a participatory online culture, their content appeals to the ordinary.

We contribute to business research by suggesting that we are witnessing ways in which an online follower can acquire the status of viratoid – someone on a journey, who is not content with simply being a follower, yet is not as prominent as an SMI. While others have highlighted how a participatory culture presents opportunities for acquiring fame, possibly celebrity status (Hackley & Hackley, 2015), our work reveals that ordinary consumers who follow and engage with SMI can acquire a status between ordinariness and some modicum of fame – they share a mutual constitution of meaning with other astute followers – whereby in piggybacking off a more prominent SMI they can leverage their own self-promotion, visibility, and virality. Nonetheless, a degree of online fame can be achieved by building up a community of followers (Kozinets et al., 2010), with the raison d'être for a viratoid being the display and performance of consumption activities, opportunities for

Table 5

Defining celetoids and viratoids.

	Celetoid	Viratoid
Definition	An individual who experiences a brief, but intense, period of fame.	An individual who piggybacks off the amassed celebrity capital of an SMI.
Origins of term	Rojek does not explain the derivation, however, it is thought "Celetoid" combines "celebrity" and "tabloid" to emphasize the media's influence in the process of becoming famous (Sigee, 2020).	"Viratoid" combines "viral" and "tabloid". Viral is drawn on to illustrate how the viratoid attains "fame" through their content being spread quickly and widely online. "Tabloid" emphasizes the influence of media in relation to becoming famous, and how tabloids draw on emotive language and imagery to amplify and exaggerate stories for effect.
Typical characteristics	● Achieves concentrated and intense media attention for a brief time span. ● Ordinary, likable, and relatable people. ● May describe themselves as lucky and their fame as fluke or have "cocky impudence" (Rojek, 2012, p. 164). ● Some seek *achieved* celebrity status, however if they possess no real talent, they are quickly forgotten (here today, gone tomorrow). ● Rebellious – going against the "status quo".	● Achieves concentrated and intense media attention from content off a popular/trending SMI for a brief time span. ● No exceptional talent or skills to build an online following. ● Entertaining, relatable, interesting, unique (to grab attention), staged authenticity, and responsive to market conditions. ● Shape-shifter and malleable. ● Ephemeral and lose connection with the SMI. ● Rebellious – going against the status quo and seeing themselves as outside and gaming the "system". ● Opportunistic and wanting to make content off the back of others.
Motivations	Celebrification – gaining media visibility (personal) and/or personal entertainment (e.g. a good story to tell others about their virality).	Purposefully strives to go viral for accumulating celebrity capital and/or perceive being a viratoid as a step to achieving SMI status, which they perceive as an attractive career. Attention seeking and priorities visibility for engagement and profile raising.
How do they build celebrity capital?	From piggybacking off a celebrity and their well-known status that propels them into the limelight (accidentally or intentionally) – the celetoid seeks to maximize their short-lived status as a "celebrity".	The creation of content that is intentionally curated around the persona and behavior of a popular/trending SMI – this can include piggybacking off a popular and/or trending SMI or maligning the SMI.
What media do they draw on to build celebrity capital?	All media (traditional and social) and are often dependent on single outputs (e.g., a reality TV or talent show).	Always start building attention on social media before then drawing on all forms of media (traditional and social) – with viratoids sharing appearances in traditional media on their social media feeds.

Table 5 (*continued*)

	Celetoid	Viratoid
Examples	Lottery winners; whistle-blowers; sports' arena streakers; and mistresses of public figures.	Consumers who piggyback and capitalize off their association with an SMIs' fad, transgression, or scam-like activity with a view to going viral.

Sources: Rojek (2001); Rojek (2012); Sigee (2020; Turner (2004); SMI Expert Interviews.

personal gain – namely acquisition of celebrity capital (Brooks et al., 2021), and self-branding practices (Khamis et al., 2017), with a view to maximizing their own online prominence and recognition. Kerrigan and colleagues' (2011) exploration of the logic of celebrity and celetoids, analyzed how Warhol turned to painting well-known celebrities (e.g. Jacqueline Kennedy and Elvis Presley) and how their approval endowed him with celebrity capital. In our research, we suggest that a viratoid does not necessarily seek the SMI's approval that they are piggybacking off, with this not hampering their ambitions of acquiring celebrity capital and nurturing a following.

The viratoid does not seek to gain media interest, paramount in Rojek's (2001) conceptualization of a celetoid. Instead, we suggest follower interest is crucial in their journey. Rather than coverage and attention in traditional media outlets, being highly visible on SMNs is paramount to creating and sustaining the success of a viratoid. Having an awareness and knowledge about the algorithmic system of SMNs is critical to the viratoid building of their celebrity capital. Cotter (2019) describes the importance of having a deep understanding of how to maximize an online algorithm, which he labels as "gaming the system". Playing the algorithmic game offers a way for viratoids to assert themselves, and to seek to direct the algorithm towards their posts for their benefit. Cotter (2019) states that influencers "learn and develop tactics for winning the game… influencers build knowledge about algorithmic architecture, they interpret it – and the game more broadly" (p. 900). In the Prime case study, for example, we revealed how viratoids create content around Prime during the height of its fad fame, and how viratoids benefited from the algorithm to build and forge their own followings.

Finally, Rojek (2001) suggests that celetoids have a brief lifespan, fading quickly from collective memory. Much like celetoids, we suggest that viratoids have a limited lifespan and stay relevant as long as there is celebrity capital in doing so. However, a viratoid is malleable, and as the SMI experts espoused, a viratoid can transition and metamorphose, in that they can start to curate original content and be on a trajectory toward a more established SMI profile after piggybacking off an SMI to accumulate their own following. We posit that the viratoid purposefully engages in the practice of shapeshifting and careful curation of their online 'public' image, with SMNs providing the backdrop to change and transition with their audience(s) and contemporary culture. In Table 5, we build on what is known about celetoids from existent literature, distinguishing the viratoid as a sub-type of celetoid and providing further clarity on the characteristics of a viratoid.

As a second contribution, our analysis raises questions about a society and a participatory culture that fetishizes attention-seeking and ordinary consumers wanting to be "famous for being famous" (Rojek, 2001). We consider issues of morality around acquiring viratoid status. The visibility and prominence of a viratoid in online spaces is arguably a consequence of living in a contemporary culture of triumphant individualism, self-promotion, and self-branding practices and speaks to neoliberal notions of individual efficacy (Yngfalk, 2016). We are living through an online culture that Gregersen and Ormen (2023) suggest has cultivated a "neo-liberal 'enterprising subject'" (p. 11) that seeks to maximize their financial gain and benefit from the allure of upward mobility quickly. Although we have focused on fads, scams, and transgressions, we suggest that a viratoid sees value in being a by-product of a

more prominent SMI, whether that is achieved through aggrievance, going extra lengths to consume something or what may have been considered as humiliating (real or imagined), the viratoid determines that inserting themselves into the drama and the subsequent fall-out is worthy of online recognition. Much like Rojek's (2001) celetoid, the time frame before the viratoid loses virality and attention is likely to be relatively short-lived, and they will maximize and build their online persona before their status fades. Given this limited window of opportunity, we question the extent to which consumers will go in their quest for celebrity capital and to acquire viratoid status.

Recently, Cop and colleagues (2023) suggested that SMIs seek to maintain a relationship with general society (a range of stakeholders) by meeting their expectations and engaging in responsible moral behavior, suggesting that SMIs face a moral dilemma when deciding whether to promote harmful products (alcohol and cigarettes for example) and share opinions on socially relevant topics. The issue emanates from conflicting expectations of stakeholder groups, which makes it challenging for an SMI to make a moral decision. Although SMIs may face a moral dilemma regarding taking the perceived correct course of action, we contribute to marketing and business research by suggesting that the viratoid might be less concerned with issues of morality, which raises further questions about moral responsibility in online cultures.

We acknowledge that in our three case studies, the activities of the viratoids are not overly egregious, certainly when compared to SMIs Gibson and Calloway's transgressive conduct. Notwithstanding, the concept of a viratoid raises questions about the extent to which an ordinary consumer will take matters into their own hands to create attention (celebrity capital), including promoting morally irresponsible behavior, incendiary opinions, and content that results in clicks, likes, and follows. Diaz Ruiz (2024) suggests that engagement metrics reward what he labels as the "outrage machine" by "manipulating the algorithm to serve provocative content to users", and somewhat alarmingly, creators seek to outperform themselves because "highly engaged audiences [that] demand more and more extreme content" (p. 13). This was epitomized by Sandy Hook denier, Alex Jones and his conspiracy-fueled media company, InfoWars. His hyperactive, radical, net-worked fans remained faithful to his alternative narratives, and this speaks to critiques of participatory culture, enabling the mediatization of conspiracy theories and new alternative opinion leaders (Jurg et al., 2025) to emerge. We are concerned that, when, in the case of Jones, he was eventually canceled, viratoids may seek to fill the void, replicating and creating extreme content that appeals to an estranged, counter-ideological community (Jurg et al., 2025) and acquire celebrity capital.

Stewart and colleagues (2023) recent exploration of the attacks on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. (January 2021) examined how hate influencers exerted their sway and used SMNs to mobilize members, spread misinformation, and incite violence. Videos and posts taken by members of hate groups and everyday citizens storming the capital had a relatively short lifecycle before they were swiftly removed by SMNs. Some of these ordinary citizens taking part and documenting the storming were coerced and mobilized by more powerful SMIs belonging to far-right hate groups, including White Lives Matter (WLM) and the Proud Boys (Stewart et al., 2023). Documenting and sharing aggressive acts such as storming the capital on social media speaks to the viratoid culture and disconnected denizens can be mobilized by more prominent SMI figures. Taking matters into one's own hands can generate online attention and celebrity capital, even when it might be considered morally unacceptable and incendiary. Here, we suggest that greater attention needs to be paid to regulatory bodies of SMN and closer monitoring of viratoids activities and curation of their profiles. This also comes with a note of caution and following the *r/wallstreetbets* market disruption where rogue online traders momentarily toppled billion-dollar hedge fund managers, Jones and Hietanen (2023) highlighted how corporate state depictions of *r/wallstreetbets* investors were as amateurs who were uninformed and in need of protection. They suggest this helped to justify imposing new regulations and will potentially threaten

movements of online participatory culture and its members in the future.

5.1. Limitations and future research

The generalizability of the findings should be tempered with a note of caution – this is an area for future research to explore the validity of the findings on the viratoids themselves. In that, by taking a non-participatory netnographic approach, drawing on multimedia analysis of publicly available data, and SMI expert interviews, this limited the access of data to consumers who publicly share and celebrate their status as a viratoid. Future research should incorporate the perspectives of viratoids to gain insight into their "behind the scenes" activities and motivations.

Our research also highlights the need for better due diligence of SMIs by brands and SMNs. Online spaces are difficult for authorities to regulate, which opens the potential for deception and scams. SMIs can manufacture a desired online image and persona away from the gaze and interrogation of traditional media outlets and authorities (Baker & Rojek, 2020). In our watch party, the irony of a traditional media organization (print media) exposing Gibson and Calloway's scams was not lost on the research team. The absence of a gamut of online gatekeepers enables the spread of misinformation and dubious behavior to perpetuate online. Specifically, in the case of Gibson, undermining public health messaging and promoting a substantiated wellness industry can have dangerous health consequences (Baker, 2022). However, we recognize this is problematic, particularly as Gibson's behavior was not deemed illegal. This raises questions about the regulation of online discourse and balancing free speech against the need to counter the potentially harmful spread of misinformation. Thus, we suggest that research is needed to explore consumers' perceptions of due diligence and the steps online platforms and brands should undertake to do due diligence on SMIs in further depth.

Future research should explore the lifespan of a viratoid, observing the evolution of the content viratoids create, and how they craft and evolve their persona over time. An exploration of the dynamics of the relationship between the SMI and viratoid is recommended and should seek to establish whether SMIs capitalize from viratoids and subsequently how SMIs engage with their viratoids. It was interesting to note how Prime drink founder, and SMI, KSI criticized the re-selling of Prime drinks at exuberant prices, targeting his frustrations at re-sellers. Interestingly, he stopped short of criticizing viratoids who purchased the drink at inflated prices and created Prime content. At what point does a viratoid's potential immoral behavior impact the reputation of the SMI they are piggybacking off? Finally, we observed the extent that viratoids will pursue to create new content, recognizing a potential link between viratoids and dark participation on social media (Quandt et al., 2022). Further research should examine potential links between viratoids and dark social media participation which Quandt et al., (2022, p. 1) explain is an umbrella term for "forms of negative, selfish, or deeply sinister contributions' and they include hate speech, toxic talk and the spread of online fake news and conspiracy theories. The darker sides of online behavior, especially around the potential for viratoids to spread misinformation and mobilization of consumers, warrants further attention.

6. Conclusion and business implications

We build on the work of Rojek (2001) in putting forward the concept of viratoid, a sub-type of celetoid, which piggybacks off the amassed celebrity capital of the SMI who originally inspired their content. Viratoids are typically ephemeral in nature, and they seek to gain their own celebrity capital, and this opens the possibility of moving from viratoid status into an SMI. We cautiously suggest that brands can learn and benefit from the viratoid, especially in relation to capturing audience attention and creating compelling content that attracts virality around a zeitgeist topic or trend on SMNs. Our work on the viratoid demonstrates

the power of UGC and its ability to garner engagement from curious or like-minded followers, bringing both economic and social rewards. In McQuarrie and colleagues (2013) exploration of fashion bloggers, as the bloggers' audience and prominence grew, so did the financial rewards as fashion advertisers and sponsors became attentive to the bloggers. We foresee the same, despite some negative inferences that may surround the viratoid's content and association by proxy with an SMI like Gibson. As engagement grows, so too may the financial rewards and promotional elements of brands. Finally, participation in viral trends and SMI associated activity is not confined simply to the viratoid and can be employed by brands seeking to create associations, meaning, and ultimately relationships with their target audience. Whether the viratoid is a consumer or brand, the imperative to shapeshift and act on online trends is pivotal. Participation needs to flow and move with the conversation to stay relevant and retain the attention of followers.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Scott Jones: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emily Moorlock:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Elizabeth Dempsey:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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