

The Platform, the Creator, and the Viewer: An analysis of values and emotions of the impacts of parasocial phenomena on YouTube

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Until 2018, I was simply an Ohioan. But starting this journey at a Dutch university led me to experience more than I ever imagined. Though I navigated countless moments of culture shock, moving halfway across the world has truly led to me finding another home. Moving to a foreign country and trying to shape it into your home is not easy, but I achieved it, while somehow simultaneously working towards a Master's degree! I am beyond grateful for every single person from back home who supported me during this journey, as I am beyond grateful for every single person from my newfound home who supported me from the moment I arrived. I wish I could write a thesis-length love letter to each of those who have opened their arms, hearts, and minds to me during my life. Alas, one page will somehow have to suffice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

YouTube was initially intended to showcase other peoples' lives, and today, YouTube persists as an entertainment platform for users to upload their own self-made video content for audience consumption. This content, known as user-generated content, or UGC, is the primary treasury of content on YouTube, which is created at least partially for audience entertainment.

When discussing media, a set of topics known as parasocial phenomena is mentioned. Audience members naturally partake in parasocial phenomena when consuming media and empathizing with media figures. Viewers who form relationships with a media figure despite never meeting the figure are said to be in a parasocial relationship with that media figure. On YouTube, examples of parasocial interactions occur when content creators request likes, subscriptions, or thank the viewer for watching their content. While existing literature recognizes that viewers form parasocial relationships with YouTube content creators, there is not enough emphasis on understanding the content creators' perspectives in their unique situation.

This thesis not only aims to understand how content creators experience being the target of parasocial relationships, but also aims to understand how content creators perceive their audience and how content creators think their audience perceives them. In this way, the unique situation of a content creator is understood in a wide-scoping lens while maintaining their unique perspective. Thus, the voices of content creators can be heard. Furthermore, the general feelings and emotions of content creators are probed in order to extract the values of content creators, such that content creators' unique experiences can be analyzed and educated recommendations can be given to those involved with YouTube.

For this thesis, eight interviews were held with content creators who are the face of their channel. Three main research questions were formulated: (RQ2) How and to what extent do content creators experience parasocial phenomena on the YouTube platform? (RQ3) What moral challenges do content creators experience when connecting with their audience or expressing themselves in their content? (RQ4) How does the YouTube platform influence the ways in which content creators are able to communicate their values to their audience?

To ensure these research questions were answered, a set of propositional statements were formulated from the existing literature. Each proposition consists of one specific element which may be supported by interview quotes, interpretation, and analysis. When compounded, these propositions answer their relevant research question.

For RQ2, propositions include Interviewee holds influence over their audience, has met a viewer in person, has audience members similar to themselves, and does not have the same amount of knowledge about the viewer as the viewer has about them. For RQ3, propositions include Interviewee interprets their audience as a group rather than as individuals, communicates with their audience members outside of their video content, feels they need to be professional in their YouTube content, creates videos as a creative outlet, creates videos because it is fun for them, and feels connected to their audience. For RQ4, propositions include Interviewee is aware of the YouTube algorithm affecting the platform, receives financial benefits or a stream of income from YouTube, feels authentic on YouTube, is exposed to tools to grow their YouTube audience, and has confronted their values when making decisions on YouTube.

Interviewees' anecdotal evidence directly support findings that YouTube content creators value at least one or more of the following: self-expression, creativity, loyalty, community, credibility, authenticity, entertainingness, education, fiscal opportunity, social justice, content quality, pride in self or work, appreciation for viewers, and filling a niche.

While this thesis does engage in ethical discussion, it is exploratory in nature. Thus, the interviewees are not ethically judged in a normative sense. Rather, ethical recommendations for various stakeholders regarding moral responsibility are based upon interviewees' experiences. Specifically, it is important to recognize that YouTube is a socio-technical system with an immeasurable number of users every single day. While YouTube may desire to keep trade secrets, YouTube should be honest with their content creators and viewers, as the YouTube platform would not exist in its current state without them. Calls for future research and explicit recommendations are given to relevant stakeholders about how to handle parasocial phenomena moving forward.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

The YouTube platform is an online video-sharing website wherein any user can upload content for other users to consume. Additionally, YouTube fosters one-to-many communication, wherein a video featuring a single person can be viewed multiple times by many people. While YouTube comments are a source of one-to-one communication, it is relatively uncommon for this to occur. Rather, YouTube content creators maintain a distanced relationship with their audience as a group.

This thesis provides a rich overview using descriptive ethics wherein the content creators of YouTube are the subject of interest. Their experiences, values, and challenges are catalogued and explicated in the following chapters.

1.2 CONTRIBUTION

This thesis is a summation of the current relevant literature related to parasocial phenomena, specifically occurring on the YouTube platform. Furthermore, this thesis grounds future research into this subject by presenting a set of values, challenges, and experiences of content creators on the YouTube platform. Specifically, this thesis evaluates the effect of parasocial phenomena on content creators with a critical eye, delving into the struggles of dealing with being a public figure. Finally, this thesis calls for future research and provides recommendations to relevant stakeholders in an effort to prevent any potential ill effects of parasocial phenomena for all involved with YouTube content creation and consumption.

1.3 OUTLINE

This thesis consists of a literature review, wherein the concepts behind social media related to YouTube are defined, along with the concepts of parasocial phenomena. Then, a knowledge gap is identified, and research questions are presented. Next, a theoretical framework explicating what is relevant to the case is presented. Afterwards, a methodology section gives a clear overview of how the research was conducted. Finally, findings from the research are presented, followed by a discussion chapter and the conclusion.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media can be categorized into various types: social networking, professional networking, video sharing, knowledge-blogging, and micro-blogging, with examples being Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Tumblr, and Twitter respectively (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017). These social media sites are embedded into modern society, such that individuals are likely to use at least one or more social media platform.

Many ethical dilemmas and philosophical questioning have arisen from the normalcy of social media use in the past few decades; many more ethical dilemmas are becoming apparent and have not yet been tackled. Social psychology and scholarship on ethics of technology compares and draws from concepts created in an offline world to answer online dilemmas. This becomes morally ambiguous and analytically problematic due to offline-only ideas being conceptualized before the online world existed. However, as the world has evolved into two spheres—online and offline—so too has ethics of technology scholarship adapted.

2.1 SOCIAL MEDIA: VITAL FOR ENTERTAINMENT, CONNECTEDNESS, AND ONLINE FRIENDSHIPS

2.1.1 Social media as entertainment

For entertainment purposes, social media has slowly replaced traditional media, allowing users to browse their social media feed to remain societally informed in a personally charming way (Liu, Liu, & Zhang, 2019). Examples of entertaining social media platforms in the video-sphere include Twitch, a livestreaming platform, and YouTube, the focus of this thesis.

2.1.1.1 *YouTube as a social media platform*

According to co-founder Chad Hurley, YouTube was initially created to showcase “the ultimate reality TV, giving you a glimpse into other people’s lives” (Graham, 2005). Founded in 2005, YouTube became a subsidiary of Google when the firm acquired the platform for \$1.65 billion USD in 2006 (Google closes \$A2b YouTube deal, 2006).

Presently, YouTube is the world’s second-most visited website and second-most used social platform, behind Google and Facebook respectively (Newberry, 2021). Contrary to other social media platforms wherein users post text, images, or videos about their lives, YouTube acts as a treasury of exclusively videos which houses users’ content (Wu, Pedersen, & Salehi, 2019), created at least partially for audience entertainment (Liu, Liu, & Zhang, 2019).

2.1.1.2 *Basics of YouTube: Platform functionality*

The functional features of YouTube are restricted based upon the user's level of anonymity. All users of YouTube have access to watch and search the platform's collection of uploaded videos and their respective metrics. However, users must login with their Google account to like videos, subscribe to channels, and create a YouTube channel to upload their own content. With a YouTube channel, users can upload videos, post comments on videos, and create playlists (YouTube, 2021). Users of YouTube are distinguished as either *viewer* or *content creator*, depending on if they upload videos to the platform with semi-regular consistency.

YouTube persists as an entertainment platform, allowing users to upload their own self-made video content for audience consumption. This content, known as *user-generated content* (UGC), is defined as any form of media posted to a platform by a platform's own users (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012). While YouTube is far from the only platform to entertain and engage users via UGC, the main appeal of YouTube is its facilitation for self-expression (Kruitbosch & Nack, 2008), learning and collaborating (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017), and as an effective entertainment replacement via imitation of traditional television (Hou, 2019).

In addition to homegrown or amateur content creators, corporate entities exist on YouTube as groups of professionals representing a brand or corporation. Thus, their attempts at UGC have institutionalized YouTube such that the platform acts similarly to traditional television broadcasting networks, with corporations spearheading this shift by engaging in *professionally generated content* (PGC) rather than UGC (Kim J. , 2012) PGC manifests as highly manufactured videos related to corporate brands, corporate values, or positively enhancing the public's perception of the corporation's integrity (Han, Drumwright, & Goo, 2018).

The corporate presence on YouTube in tandem with content creators expressing themselves and connecting with viewers, YouTube blurs the boundary between social media platform and entertainment platform. YouTube must recommend entertaining and personalized content to users, while simultaneously maintaining user connections and the homegrown allure of UGC on other social media platforms.

2.1.1.3 *The YouTube algorithm*

Like its social media contemporaries, YouTube engages its users via recommender system utilization. This recommender system, simply called *the YouTube algorithm* in common vernacular, is the backbone of the platform for both viewers and content creators. It presents videos from users' subscriptions while filtering the mass quantity of videos uploaded daily (Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016) and finds fresh, tailored content aligned with users' interests and previous watch habits (Wu, Pedersen, & Salehi, 2019).

Previous literature has argued moral dilemmas regarding a non-human actor affecting platform users. Specifically, because the YouTube algorithm keeps viewers watching through recommending similar content by effectively placing users into filter bubbles, users may *fall down the YouTube rabbit hole*, wherein recommended content becomes more radical or outlandish than the user initially intended to experience (Tang, et al., 2021).

Recommendation algorithms, and more specifically those pertinent to social media feeds, are socially constructed objects shrouded in mystery and misinformation. Depending on an individual's level of understanding of recommender systems and backend access to these systems, an algorithm may need to be personified to understand its abilities, how its utilized, and its effective social and societal impacts (Wu, Pedersen, & Salehi, 2019). More specifically for the YouTube, when a video does well on the platform and goes viral, content creators may claim that they have *appeased* or been *blessed by the algorithm gods* (How to Beat the YouTube Algorithm, 2020). This tongue-in-cheek language of worship of the YouTube algorithm likely stems from the cloud of uncertainty surrounding the platform's recommender system.

Only one academic paper has been published by Google discussing the YouTube algorithm, providing a highly analytical discussion of the design of the platform's recommender system (Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016). However, this paper could be considered outdated, and it gives no clear guidance on what type of video content the YouTube algorithm specifically endorses or suppresses on the platform. Unfortunately, the academic paper provides little to no understanding for viewers or content creators of the inner mechanisms of the algorithm; the platform's users continue to speculate on its everchanging nature. Despite being the foundation of a social platform, the YouTube algorithm remains a non-human actor with fundamentally social impacts on human actors.

Furthermore, literature focused on social media addiction claim YouTube, and by extension its algorithm, provide a considerable addictive effect due to gratifying personal satisfaction and social approval, manifesting more with content creators than viewers (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017). Content creators may find more gratification on YouTube when a video does well due to the amount of time and effort dedicated to a video's creation compared to UGC on other social media sites. For example, posts on Twitter take less time to create due to the platform limiting a post's number of characters, but these posts may go viral in a matter of moments (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012), whereas YouTube videos take longer to create and may or may not go viral. Finally, the sustainability of UGC and its consumption have been scrutinized: how humans make and consume video content is environmentally problematic due to the societal shift towards increasingly consistent video streaming and its energy impact (Widdicks, Hazas, Bates, & Friday, 2019).

Beyond energy sustainability, the creative sustainability and mental health of content creators remains a concern amongst YouTube users. Content creators may experience *creator burnout*, wherein the consistent need to produce UGC and remain algorithmically relevant harms the content creator's work-life balance, which may cause content creators to take extended periods away from social media (Hernandez, 2018). These extended breaks could be detrimental to a content creator's professional career, especially those whose full-time occupation is to regularly create and consistently upload content to YouTube. When experiencing creator burnout, content creators may feel unhappy, unfulfilled, or exhausted, despite loving content creation and feelings of gratitude for their audience and their position on the platform. Creator burnout happens to creators of all sizes, stemming from “[c]onstant changes to the platform's algorithm, unhealthy obsessions with remaining relevant in a rapidly growing field and social media pressures [which] are making it almost impossible for top creators to continue creating at the pace both the platform and audience want” (Alexander, 2018). Creator burnout is such a prevalent issue that YouTube's own Creator Academy provides an online video course with tips to avoid burnout, citing self-care and time efficiency as necessary to maintain a healthy YouTube Creator lifestyle (YouTube, 2018). While YouTube wants their content creators to feel that they should take breaks, content creators remain concerned about their social media relevance and financial security due to a pause in uploads (Hernandez, 2018).

2.1.2 Social media for connectedness and online friendships

Social media is useful for more than entertainment. Social media allows its users to feel connected to others, freely express themselves, and maintain online friendships.

2.1.2.1 Social media enhances connectedness

Digital technology and social media allow individuals to feel emotionally and socially connected to others, as described by *theories of social connectedness*, wherein individuals feel familiarity with others when experiencing an interpersonal attachment (Tran, Yazdanparast, & Strutton, 2019). While social connectedness is present in any social setting, the shift to a wholly digital age during the COVID-19 quarantine of 2020 exemplified the importance of using the internet and social media to connect to others (Jarzyna, 2020). The last global pandemic occurred long before online communications, but recently, interactions through “digital media allowed us to have a sense of togetherness during the quarantine,” claims psychologist Carol Laurent Jarzyna (2020, p. 13). However, the level of connectedness felt during online and offline social interactions varies.

2.1.2.2 Online friendships versus offline friendships

Social scientists and ethics philosophers have debated the existence and validity of online friendships since Cocking and Matthews (2000) argued that online friendships, due to lacking physical presence which enable non-voluntary self-disclosure during in-person conversation, cannot be fully authentic relationships, as non-voluntary self-disclosure is required for authenticity. Thus, online friendships are considered inauthentic, inferior, and ultimately not true friendships, despite the emotions involved and value created for relationship participants (Cocking & Matthews, 2000). However, in the rebuttal of Briggie (2008), this argument was refuted: the internet can not only foster friendship, but it can provide real, authentic forms of self-disclosure such that authenticity of relational participants remains valid. Contrary to offline communication wherein cohorts must maintain civility via minor deceit, online friends have less incentive to perform disingenuously which hinder honesty and authenticity in friendship (Briggie, 2008).

Unfortunately, both arguments of Briggie (2008) and Cocking and Matthews (2000) were purported before the massive rise and inherent normalcy of social media in societal communication. Furthermore, philosophical discussions regarding the ethical implications surrounding the specific roles of social media in creating online friendships and maintaining offline friendships online remains ongoing (Turp, 2020).

2.1.3 Social media use and personality

Meaningful social media communications and online friendships usually occur when there is some level of offline connection, based to some extent on the authenticity and balance of the online and offline self (Amichai-Hamburger & Vintzky, 2010). However, this may not always be the case if the online self is vastly different to the offline self. On social media, users practice *impression management*, wherein individuals attempt to control information regarding ourselves, and by extension, others' opinions of ourselves (Amichai-Hamburger & Vintzky, 2010).

Authors Amichai-Hamburger and Vintzsky (2010) suggest that the online actions of an individual is affected by the individual's own personality, especially offline, and empirically show that personality is very much related to usage statistics of social media. For example, more extroverted people used Facebook more frequently, had more Facebook friends, belonged to more Facebook groups, and utilized the platform's communication functionality more frequently than their introverted contemporaries (Amichai-Hamburger & Vintzky, 2010). Thus, the online self and the offline self are both equally authentic, acting similarly across both communication spheres.

2.1.3.1 Authenticity of individuals: The professional, personal, private, and public self

Self-awareness is of vital importance when studying social phenomena, as authenticity of the self drives decision making and allows introspection towards ethical decisions. Social media users operate via *ethics of authenticity*, wherein decisions align with being true to oneself (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020). However, every individual maintains different layers of themselves presented in different social situations, all equally valid.

The *professional self* utilizes and exemplifies experiential or academic knowledge, aligning skillful actions with fundamental and purposeful manners (ThemPra Social Pedagogy, 2014). How an individual acts around their boss is authentic, though it may be more proper than how they act around their colleagues. In essence, the professional self restrains the personal self.

The *personal self* shows who individuals are as people, showing genuine personality traits and flaws to develop better connections with those surrounding (ThemPra Social Pedagogy, 2014). This, too, is authentic, albeit more free than the professional self to practice self-expression.

Finally, the *private self* sets personal boundaries between individuals, drawing the line of what is appropriate to share depending on individual self-reflection (ThemPra Social Pedagogy, 2014). While also authentic, this side of the self must balance with the professional and personal selves to maintain appropriate boundaries.

Another, more prominently apparent layer of the self is that of the *public self*, which consists of the information published about individuals online (Cornelius, 2009), either by the individual themselves or by external sources. The public self is the counterbalance of the private self, like how the professional self must counterbalance with the personal self to maintain an authentic self-identity (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020).

However, there exists another self beyond the public, professional, personal, and private: the branded self. This self is a combination of the professional and public selves, and thus must balance with both the personal and private selves (Cornelius, 2009).

2.1.3.2 Authenticity of individuals: The branded self

When an individual represents a brand, either by representing their own brand as a social media influencer or commercializing a corporate brand, they personify a carefully crafted *branded self*. The branded self is an extension of the public self and the professional self, wherein individuals make decisions following two core tenets: being true to oneself and one's brand and being true to one's audience via providing brand-appropriate content (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020).

2.1.3.3 *Role of the self in social media: Self-expression and wishful identification*

Irrespective of if a social media user is a branded individual, the essential reason to publish oneself online is to freely practice self-expression (Kruitbosch & Nack, 2008). Additionally, social media users practice impression management (Amichai-Hamburger & Vintzky, 2010), as users can alter how peers perceive them by perfectly crafting how they present themselves—a form of self-branding (Hou, 2019). When social media users consume the combination of self-expression and self-branding, it may lead to unrealistic expectations of others' private selves.

Social media enables individuals to experience a concept called *wishful identification* (WI), wherein individuals relate to another person, media figure or character, and desires or attempts to exhibit attributes specific to that other (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). WI psychologically triggers individuals to emulate behaviors and subconsciously adopt beliefs of the identified figure (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019).

However authentic the presented perceived self is remains irrelevant compared to how the viewer or consumer interacts with the potentially inauthentic presented self. In media, a professional, branded, or public self may be wholly authentic, but the audience's consumption of that media figure could be entirely tangential due to experiencing media through parasocial phenomena.

2.2 INTRODUCTION TO PARASOCIAL PHENOMENA

In 1956, anthropologist Donald Horton and sociologist R. Richard Wohl published their observational essay which developed and initially introduced the concepts of *parasocial interactions* and *parasocial relationships*. The emerging forms of wide-reaching media, namely the radio, television, and movies, provided an illusory face-to-face relationship between media performers and audience members (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

While early research did not differentiate these parasocial concepts, present definitions distinguish them as separate concepts. *Parasocial interactions* (PSI) are characterized by “immediate psychological responses of media users to media characters in the moment of exposure” (Schmid-Petri & Klimmt, 2011, p. 254). These psychological responses generate a feeling of kinship and intimacy from the media user towards the media character (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). Through multiple moments of PSI, audiences form *parasocial relationships* (PSR), defined as “a one-sided symbolic relationship between the viewer and a media character” (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019, p. 4). Like traditional social relationships, PSRs can end abruptly against the desires of the media user, for example when the character's source media is over. Researchers call this phenomenon *parasocial breakup* (PSBU) (Liebers & Schramm, 2019) and is another example of psychological responses stemming from the media user's intrapersonal

connection with a media figure. The concepts of PSI, PSR, and PSBU fall under the umbrella term *parasocial phenomena*.

2.2.1 Parasocial phenomena in various media

Horton & Wohl (1956) argue audience members naturally partake in PSIs when involving themselves in media consumption, as there is little effort towards or intent to empathize with media figures. Their work exclusively analyzed PSR formation of media consumers with fictional characters. While roughly half of existing empirical studies focus on parasocial phenomena based in film and television (Liebers & Schramm, 2019), PSIs occur with media figures from all media sources. Liebers & Schramm (2019) extrapolate parasocial phenomena research in film, live-action television, animated television, reality television, novels, newspapers, magazines, radio, podcasts, musicians, video games, politics, sports, and social media.

2.2.2 Differentiating fictional and non-fictional media figures in parasocial phenomena

Research investigating favorite characters from television shows or films focus exclusively on the bond a viewer feels with a fictional character. However, PSRs can form with non-fictional characters. For example, when a politician gives a speech to the general public, individuals may exhibit strong feelings for those politicians, depending on how the alignments of their political stances (Liebers & Schramm, 2019). The individual's reactions stem from the PSI of the politician's speech to many being consumed by said individual.

Like PSIs occurring with television characters, PSIs enhance the audience's perceived realness of celebrity actions and authenticity of celebrity personalities, which is the primary reason for consuming reality television (Chung & Cho, 2014). However, while reality television programming intentionally present contestants and characters as ordinary people to enhance the audience's perception of authenticity (Grindstaff & Murray, 2015), researchers argue that reality television celebrities individually present an entrepreneurial version of themselves when filming the program (Bennett & Holmes, 2010). Thus, the boundaries between fiction and reality are intentionally blurred in the reality show television programming genre (Jarzyna, 2020). This boundary is further blurred when audiences follow these celebrity personalities on social media.

Another non-fictional media figure communicating with their media consumers via PSIs is that of social media influencers. While traditional media celebrities historically have maintained PSRs through audience interpretations of the celebrity's performance (Wohfeil, Patterson, & Gould, 2019), social media influencers create moments of intimacy with their audience through its content itself (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Regardless of the social media platform—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Twitch, etc.—

these influencers speak directly to many audience individuals as one celebrity. An example of the smallest, and most widespread, PSI on YouTube is that of requesting likes, comments, and subscriptions from audience members, and thanking them for watching (Munnukka, Maity, Reinikainen, & Luoma-aho, 2019).

2.3 KNOWLEDGE GAP IDENTIFICATION

While existing literature recognizes that viewers form PSRs with content creators, there is not enough emphasis on understanding the content creators themselves as individuals and their unique experiences.

As a content creator, thousands of individual viewers perceive them and form ideations of their personality both online and offline, all through their artistic work that is carefully crafted before its upload to YouTube. Each individual viewer's projection of a content creator is wholly unique and different from not only another viewer's idea of the content creator's personality but also from the reality of the content creator beyond their public and professional online content. As such, these content creators exist as non-fictional public media figures perceived, to varying degrees, through the lens of a fictional online persona. Furthermore, because individuals can form PSRs with media figures of both the fictional and non-fictional variety, media figures with whom PSIs may occur exist more on a spectrum than a binary scale. While a social media influencer may appear authentic in their professional self, they may be wholly fictional and inauthentic when acting as their branded self. Similarly, a content creator's online self may not be authentic at all to their personal or private self, depending on that individual content creator's specific moral compass. In this way, a singular social media influencer exists on a spectrum of fictionality and authenticity.

In addition to this anomalous disconnect between presenting oneself and being perceived with varying consistency by many, existing literature seems to neglect the other side of the parasocial relationship. Namely, that being how the content creators experience this unique position of being an public online media figure whose content is available for viewers to watch as much, or as little, as they want at any moment. Some literature does interview and speak to content creators, such as Berryman & Kavka (2017) to discuss how their audience perceives them. However, this and similar literature still tends to focus on intimacy from parasocial phenomena and how it affects the viewers, rather than the content creators themselves. Despite parasocial phenomena by definition being a one-sided relationship, it is necessary to consider that there is another perspective and more complex ethical discussions regarding the other side of parasocial phenomena.

Finally, while the experiences of content creators are recognized to be unique from one another regarding how they found and grew their audience, existing literature still does not critically analyze the ethical concerns regarding communication between YouTube as a platform and their content creators. Furthermore, despite YouTube not being able to exist without content creators and their UGC, existing literature tends to focus on the monetization of content for both the platform and its creators, rather than on the ethics of monetization, UGC-creation sustainability, and overall mental health of content creators as their audience increases in size.

More specifically, YouTube as a platform does not provide guidance on being a public media figure online, nor are they transparent with content creators potentially being thrust into the public eye due to a video doing extraordinarily well. When a content creator expects a certain number of viewers, they are not given proper tools or warning from YouTube when this expectation is greatly exceeded. There is not sufficient literature that analyzes the unique situations of content creators growing their audience on YouTube, nor is literature questioning the ethical dilemmas of the potential pressures to continue to create more and better content, both from YouTube as a platform and increasing numbers in viewership.

2.4 CONCLUSION

Digital forms of communication via the internet are essential today, with social media being ingrained into modern society for both traditional conversational aspects and new age entertainment aspects. However, with user-generated content being the new norm of consumable media, viewers should be made aware of the existence of parasocial phenomena, their impacts, and the authenticity of content creators. While inauthentic content creators are not inherently morally wrong, potentially negative effects on viewers' mental wellbeing could be considered a moral wrong. This thesis intends to dive into where to place the moral responsibility of educating about and mending ill effects of parasocial phenomena, especially when the YouTube algorithm is of such a great influence as a non-human actor, concerning both sides of YouTube users.

2.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As mentioned in *2.3 Knowledge gap identification*, more research is needed to explore a content creator's experiences as a target of parasocial phenomena. Thus, this thesis takes a descriptive ethical approach: the experiences of content creators, their respective values, and moral decision-making processes will be chronicled in an attempt to understand the other side of parasocial phenomena. From these accounts, a discussion about the current moral configuration and its desirability, with

recommendations to YouTube directors and brand managers, will be discussed, along with opening the conversation to other content creators and YouTube viewers. The following sub-sections present the essential research questions that define and encompass the scope of this thesis.

2.5.1 Main Research Question

What are the important moral challenges experienced by content creators on YouTube?

2.5.2 Sub-Research Questions

RQ1. Who are the key stakeholders and their respective values involved?

RQ2. How and to what extent do content creators experience parasocial phenomena on the YouTube platform?

RQ3. What moral challenges do content creators experience when connecting with their audience or expressing themselves in their content?

RQ4. How does the YouTube platform influence the ways in which content creators are able to communicate their values to their audience?

RQ5. How should moral responsibility be attributed among the main actors?

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis intends to provide a voice to YouTube content creators about their unique experiences with their audience and parasocial phenomena by providing a descriptive perspective of the ethical dilemmas and moral challenges YouTube content creators tackle as being an online public figure. In addition to understanding YouTube content creators' experiences and emotions, this thesis aims to open discussion between YouTube users—both content creators and viewers—and the platform itself about moral responsibility. Finally, this thesis will provide an inventory of content creators' values, virtues, and challenges as experienced on and from the YouTube platform.

3.1 VALUES, VIRTUES, EMOTIONS, AND AUTHENTICITY

Values are defined as “the individual’s prescriptive beliefs concerning the desirability of certain modes of conduct or end-states of behavior” (Glover, Bumpus, Logan, & Ciesla, 1997). One way to extrapolate an individual’s values are to identify an individual’s emotions, as emotions provide an indication of subsequent values (Roeser, 2006). While the definition of emotion is complex, in this context, emotions are defined as responsive feelings to a situation or scenario which affects an individual’s thoughts, decisions, actions, relationships, and physical and mental health (Izard, 2010). An

emotion may be unfitting or inappropriate; however, these still provide an insightful gateway to one's values (Steinert & Roeser, 2020).

Because YouTube content creators cultivate and captivate an audience, they should be considered leaders in their online social media sphere, as they have gained and maintained a certain number of followers online. Thus, ethical discussions about leaders and those in leadership roles are applicable to YouTube content creators. In their journal article centered on the relationship between values, emotions, and leadership, Michie and Gooty (2005) argue that authentic leaders can exhibit their values effectively through their behaviors and actions, while inauthentic leaders promote values of self-interest and may intentionally exploit others below their level of power.

To be authentic implies an individual's actions consistently align with the individual's personal truth, thoughts, and feelings (Michie & Gooty, 2005). Thus, as emotions are inherently derived from feelings, they are always authentic to the individual. However, as previously mentioned, emotions can be inappropriate, yet these are still authentic to the individual. Regarding the authenticity of values, one may be authentic to internal thoughts, however true authenticity requires actions to align with beliefs. Thus, for true authenticity to occur, values and virtues must be aligned.

3.1.1 Virtue ethics and virtue friendship

The main ethical framework of this thesis is that of Aristotelian *virtue ethics*, wherein humans live life according to their own values in hopes of achieving *the good life* for themselves and their society. To achieve the good life and live well, one needs "a proper appreciation of the way in which goods such as friendship, pleasure, virtue, honor and wealth fit together as a whole" (Kraut, 2018). An individual's *virtues* are how one expresses their values through behaviors and actions such that the individual may live their best life.

Virtue ethics was chosen as the main ethical framework both to extrapolate upon the values of YouTube content creators and to question whether the YouTube platform allows content creators to act virtuously. More specifically, are content creators free to pursue their values on YouTube? Through presenting content creators' experiences with a focus on their values and virtues, a descriptive ethical catalogue of moral challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by content creators can open future discussion amongst users of the YouTube platform.

Another reason for choosing virtue ethics is Aristotle's focus upon friendships, specifically *virtue friendship*, being necessary for achieving the good life. The concept of virtue friendship roots relationships in Aristotelian virtue ethics, of which friendship plays an integral role to help establish social connectedness (Vallor, 2012). Virtue friendship exhibits 1. *reciprocity*, wherein the primal impulse

to share and communicate with each other unifies humans into mature, socially virtuous creatures; 2. *empathy*, wherein the basic biological impulse to feel and perceive human emotions forms deeper connections between others; 3. *self-knowledge*, wherein individuals understand their self and their own societal role, which is essential to the good life, and only achieved through self-reflection and engaging the social nature of humans via forming relationships; and 4. *shared life*, wherein humans flourish together in sustained relationships and experience life together in a community (Vallor, 2012).

The rise in online communication for creating and keeping online friendships has caused some philosophical discussions, with critics concluding that friendships exclusively online cannot achieve the highest level of Aristotelian friendship, and thus are not virtue friendships. However, some philosophers and ethicists use Aristotle's theory of friendship to reinforce that online friendships are just as real as offline friendships (Kaliarnta, 2016). Furthermore, the four conditions of virtue friendship defined by Shannon Vallor (2012) concretely validates the authenticity of online friendships. Finally, framing friendships—both offline and online—as virtuously necessary expands opportunities for further ethical discussions regarding all relationship types, including parasocial relationships.

3.2 EXISTING GUIDELINES AND POLICIES FOR YOUTUBE CONTENT CREATORS

Content creators on YouTube must abide by the platform's code of conduct, known as the Community Guidelines, as enforced by YouTube. The Community Guidelines cover the following topics: spam and deceptive practices, sensitive content, violent or dangerous content, regulated goods, and misinformation (YouTube, 2021). Further breakdown of the Community Guidelines topics can be seen in *Table 3-1: Expansion of YouTube Community Guidelines topic* below.

Notably, while the YouTube Community Guidelines extend to all users of the platform, meaning both content creators and viewers, most guidelines could only be broken by content creators (YouTube, 2021). However, any user of the platform may report a violation of the guidelines (YouTube, 2021).

Alongside the Community Guidelines, YouTube content creators must comply with the Monetization Policies, which encompass the rules laid out in YouTube's Terms of Service and Google's AdSense program policies (YouTube, 2021). These policies encompass the entirety of a YouTube channel, meaning the entire catalogue of videos must abide by the aforementioned policies.

Spam & deceptive practices	Sensitive content	Violent or dangerous content	Regulated goods	Misinformation
Fake engagement	Child safety	Harassment and cyberbullying	Firearms	General misinformation
Impersonation	Thumbnails	Harmful or dangerous content	Sale of illegal or regulated goods or services	Elections misinformation
External links	Nudity and sexual content	Hate speech		COVID-19 medical misinformation
Spam, deceptive practices, and scams	Suicide and self-injury	Violent criminal organizations		
Playlists etiquette	Vulgar language	Violent or graphic content		

Table 3-1: Expansion of YouTube Community Guidelines topics (YouTube, 2021)

Beyond these platform-wide standards and rules, individual content creators have their own unique moral compasses, which form the foundational decision-making guidelines for their individual YouTube channel (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020). Additionally, this becomes especially complicated when content creators partake in *influencer marketing*, wherein the content creator is paid by a brand for a product or service endorsement or sponsorship and advertises to their audience on behalf of the brand (De Veirman, Hudders, & Nelson, 2019). Previous studies have discussed the dilemmas surrounding influencer marketing, finding that it does not break Federal Trade Commission guidelines if the sponsorship is disclosed (Mathur, Narayanan, & Chetty, 2018), and that audience members with deeper parasocial relationships are more likely to purchase endorsed products (Rasmussen, 2018).

In their study, Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, and Ekdale (2020) found that YouTube content creators may reject sponsorship opportunities from brands or products that they do not believe in or would not use in an effort to maintain authenticity. While some content creators feel that “the pressure to produce sponsored content did not outweigh the standards they set for their personal brand and their commitment to their audience” (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020, p. 74), these standards differ from content creator to content creator. Thus, individual content creators follow their own individual standards for ethical decision-making regarding all aspects of their channel, including whether to partake in influencer marketing, and to what extent.

3.2.1 Factors involved in ethical decision-making behavior

Whether content creators intend to create an ethical framework to base their decision-making behaviors, these frameworks exist for each individual who uploads to the YouTube platform (Wellman,

Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020). One reason these frameworks differ from content creator to content creator is due to the influence of individual values on ethical decision-making behaviors, as studied by Glover, Bumpus, Logan, & Ciesla (1997). In this study, the authors distinguish *individual values* as “personal values [that] influence[s] how individuals chose to resolve ethical dilemmas only when the individuals would be held accountable for their choices” (Glover, Bumpus, Logan, & Ciesla, 1997, pp. 1319-1320), proposing that these values determine decision-making reasoning and an individual’s moral judgement.

When an individual’s values are in conflict, they prioritize their values according to their own personal moral code, which grounds reasoning for *ethical decision dilemmas*. “[E]thical decision dilemmas involve value conflict that can take two forms: 1) conflict within the individual resulting from the individual’s value hierarchy and importance given to certain values; and, 2) conflict between individual values and organizational values” (Glover, Bumpus, Logan, & Ciesla, 1997, p. 1320). Here, the authors mention *organizational values*, which are values instilled in an individual by their workplace, social community, or other involved organization (Glover, Bumpus, Logan, & Ciesla, 1997). These two types of values, individual values and organizational values, contribute to the two main approaches to ethical decision-making: the *individual approach* and the *situational approach*, as presented in Table 3-2: *The individual approach and the situational approach to ethical decision-making* below.

Variables significant to the <i>individual approach</i> to ethical decision-making	Variables significant to the <i>situational approach</i> to ethical decision-making
Locus of control	Organization’s reward system
Moral philosophy	
Stages of moral development	Peer influence
Age	Influence of superiors
Years of education	Organizational norms
Gender	

Table 3-2: *The individual approach and the situational approach to ethical decision-making* (Glover, Bumpus, Logan, & Ciesla, 1997)

To what extent YouTube content creators approach ethical decision-making remains fully unknown. However, understanding how content creators make decisions first requires identifying their individual values. Next, it is necessary to identify what underlying organizational values affect content creators and what organization manifests these values. More specifically, understanding to what extent organizational values stem from YouTube as a platform or a content creator’s audience help determine

which approach to ethical decision-making content creators tend to adopt. Finally, when assessing risk in ethical decision-making, individuals rely upon both empirical information and their emotions to judge risk acceptability (Roeser, 2006).

YouTube content creators rely upon their personal decision-making abilities when deciding what type of content to upload, how to present themselves in said content, and for what audience the content is intended. Whether the content creator is aware of parasocial phenomena, they directly make decisions that contribute to their audience makeup, and thus, who experiences parasocial interactions with the content creator.

3.3 EXISTING FRAMEWORKS FOR MEASURING PARASOCIAL PHENOMENA

Despite parasocial phenomena being identified over fifty years ago, the field still lacks a definitive framework to measure how parasocial relationships form, the level of intensity experienced from parasocial interactions, and the impacts of parasocial phenomena in general. However, multiple frameworks have been proposed, including the *Parasocial Interaction Scale* (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985), *Audience-Persona Interaction Scale* (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000), *Parasocial Interaction Process Scales* (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008), and the *Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale* (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). The following section conceptualizes, discusses, and presents criticism of the groundbreaking *Parasocial Interaction Scale* of Rubin, Perse, & Powell (1985). Further conceptualizations and discussions of other and more recent parasocial frameworks can be found in *Appendix A: In-Depth Overview of Existing Parasocial Scales*.

This thesis does not present an exhaustive list of parasocial frameworks, but includes the most notorious, accessible, and validated parasocial measures. Other parasocial frameworks include the *Multiple-Parasocial Relationships Scale* (Tuchakinsky, 2010) and the *Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale* (Bocarnea & Brown, 2006), of which are analyzed and scrutinized in the journal article *Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship: Conceptual Clarification and a Critical Assessment of Measures* by Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen (2016, pp. 9-13). Notably, while these existing parasocial frameworks contain analysis items that could extend to the parasocial-related concept of wishful identification, no definitive framework exists to measure wishful identification exclusively.

3.3.1 Parasocial Interaction Scale (PSI-Scale)

In 1985, researchers from Kent State University developed a conceptual model to predict the intensity of parasocial interactions from television news programs, specifically in viewers experiencing greater levels of loneliness or fewer levels of interpersonal communication (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). This study attempted to understand the intrapersonal mechanisms of parasocial relationship

development, wherein “parasocial interaction was conceptualized as interpersonal involvement of the media user with what he or she consumes [which] may take many forms including seeking guidance from a media persona, seeing media personalities as friends, imagining being part of a favorite program’s social world, and desiring to meet media performers” (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985, pp. 156-157). Through intrapersonal communication moments, such as parasocial interactions, the need for socialization is fulfilled, even in the absence of possible interpersonal communication moments.

In order to empirically measure parasocial phenomena, the authors first generated a series of potential indicators of parasocial interactions based in early literature. (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). These 29 indicators were presented as statements which the study participants could “strongly disagree” or “strongly agree”, in a Likert scale of 1 through 5. Participants with a greater intensity of parasocial interaction will answer “strongly agree” more often than those with a lesser intensity of parasocial interaction. However, for the empirical scale to be reliable, the authors eliminated 9 indicators that were deemed redundant or irrelevant, presenting a 20-item parasocial interaction scale, or PSI-Scale, to respondents (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). The 20 indicators of parasocial interaction from the PSI-Scale can be seen in *Table 3-3: The 20 indicators of parasocial interaction from the PSI-Scale (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985)*. One of the most common ways to utilize the PSI-Scale involves dropping or rewording certain indicators, generally leaving researchers with ten to fifteen different PSI indicators (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016).

While many of these indicators can be adapted to fit the viewer-creator paradigm seen on YouTube and other UGC-centric social media platforms, some indicators are entirely irrelevant in today’s digital society. For example, Parasocial Interaction Item #16 is less relevant with on-demand digital UGC, as if a viewer is missing their favorite content creator, they could potentially re-consume previous content from them. Other indicators, such as Parasocial Interaction Items #11 and #13, are exclusive to newscasting media, and adapting these indicators for the viewer-creator paradigm alters its meaning too significantly to meet the authors’ original intention of the PSI-Scale.

Despite its age, the PSI-Scale became the most common and widely used instrument of parasocial interaction, perhaps because it was the first conceptual model to lay the groundwork for future empirical parasocial research. However, other parasocial interaction scales developed more recently perform empirically more reliable than the PSI-Scale. For example, the indication items present in the EPSI-Scale are more purposeful than those of the PSI-Scale, and thus, results reflect more variance in experimental conditions and provide more sensitivity insight regarding the intensity of parasocial phenomena (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016).

Parasocial Interaction Scale: Parasocial Interaction Items	
1. The news program shows me what the newscasters are like.	11. I look forward to watching my favorite newscaster on tonight's news.
2. When the newscasters joke around with one another it makes the news easier to watch.	12. If my favorite newscaster appeared on another television program, I would watch that program.
3. When my favorite newscaster shows me how he or she feels about the news, it helps me make up my own mind about the news story.	13. When my favorite newscaster reports a story, he or she seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.
4. I feel sorry for my favorite newscaster when he or she makes a mistake.	14. I sometimes make remarks to my favorite newscaster during the newscast.
5. When I'm watching the newscast, I feel as if I am part of their group.	15. If there were a story about my favorite newscaster in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.
6. I like to compare my ideas with what my favorite newscaster says.	16. I miss seeing my favorite newscaster when he or she is on vacation.
7. The newscasters make me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.	17. I would like to meet my favorite newscaster in person.
8. I see my favorite newscaster as a natural, down-to-earth person.	18. I think my favorite newscaster is like an old friend.
9. I like hearing the voice of my favorite newscaster in my home.	19. I find my favorite newscaster to be attractive.
10. My favorite newscaster keeps me company when the news is on television.	20. I am not as satisfied when I get my news from a newscaster different than my favorite newscaster.

Table 3-3: The 20 indicators of parasocial interaction from the PSI-Scale (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985)

4 METHODOLOGY

This thesis not only aims to understand how content creators experience being the target of parasocial relationships, but also aims to understand how content creators perceive their audience and how content creators think their audience perceives them. In this way, the unique situation of a content creator is understood in a wide-scoping lens while maintaining their unique perspective. Thus, the voices of content creators can be heard. Furthermore, the general feelings and emotions of content creators are probed in order to extract the values of content creators, such that content creators' unique experiences can be analyzed and educated recommendations can be given to those involved with YouTube.

4.1 STAKEHOLDERS AND THEIR RESPECTIVE VALUES

For a grounded ethical discussion about this topic, it is necessary to understand the YouTube ecosystem and its stakeholders. This thesis uses the definition of *stakeholder* as a person or entity with an investment or interest in the subject or activity (McGrath & Whitty, 2017).

4.1.1 Identification of stakeholders

For the case of the YouTube platform, the stakeholders are presented in *Table 4-1: Stakeholder identification and categorization*. The stakeholders have been categorized as either a YouTube user, part of YouTube as a company, or part of the catch-all category.

YouTube users	YouTube, LLC	Other
Content creators	Executives	Advertisers on YouTube
Viewers	Managers	Content creator managers
	Engineers	Employed help of content creators
	Employees	External shareholders

Table 4-1: Stakeholder identification and categorization

While the stakeholders in the categories of YouTube users and YouTube, LLC are clear and grounded in reports and data from YouTube itself, the other two categories need to be extrapolated. First, advertisers on YouTube include those who pay for their advertisements to appear before, during, or after a video. Notably, these advertisers encompass both brands practicing influencer marketing whose advertisements are embedded as part of the video, as well as monetized YouTube videos that earn advertisement revenue through Google AdSense. Similarly, content creator managers, sometimes called brand managers, are those who assist YouTube content creators with maintaining their online personal brand for a fiscal fee. Additionally, these managers find sponsorship opportunities and help the content creator become a brand ambassador involved in influencer marketing (Liu, Liu, & Zhang, 2019). Regarding the employed help of content creators, this includes any back-end assistance for content creation paid for by the content creator, such as editors or animators. Finally, external shareholders include those who have financial investment in YouTube or its parent company, Google.

Notably, the YouTube algorithm as a technological entity is a deep neural network created by YouTube engineers to present curated video recommendations of content creators to each unique viewer (Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016). While the YouTube algorithm cannot actively engage in the YouTube platform and its associated technologies, it is a non-human force acting upon the platform. Thus, its level of interest is at least equal to that of YouTube engineers who created it. Likely, its interest is higher due to the YouTube algorithm's fundamental involvement on the platform; YouTube would not be able to sort or suggest videos to viewers without the YouTube algorithm, and therefore the platform needs the algorithm to function. However, despite the importance of the YouTube algorithm functionally,

it is not considered a stakeholder for the purposes of this thesis due to its inability to maintain values or exhibit signs of morality.

To further ground the ethical discussion surrounding the YouTube platform, the stakeholders must have their values identified and verified.

4.1.2 Deriving values using Value Sensitive Design methodology

In order to determine the values of stakeholders, a two-part approach is adopted from the Value Sensitive Design, or VSD, methodology. In VSD, identifying and addressing values required three iterative stages of investigations: conceptual, empirical, and technical (van de Poel, 2015).

The *conceptual investigation* requires identifying stakeholders affected by the subject technology, then identifying and defining their implied values from using the subject technology (van de Poel, 2015). Notably, during the conceptual investigation, stakeholders are defined as either *direct stakeholders*, who use or will use the technology, or *indirect stakeholders*, who do not use with the technology but will be affected by others using it (van de Poel, 2015).

The *empirical investigation* “may employ a variety of methods – surveys, questionnaires, interviews, experiments, artifact analysis, participation observation, and so on, to inquire into stakeholders’ observable actions as well as their understandings, concerns, reflections, and aspirations” (van de Poel, 2015, p. 16).

Finally, the *technical investigation* involves the features and design of the subject technology and how it implicates values. While this thesis may be able to give recommendations for a technical investigation, it can only be performed by YouTube engineers and therefore is excluded.

Notably, several philosophers, including Manders-Huits and Van de Poel, argue to include a *normative-evaluation phase* into the VSD methodology, wherein identified values undergo a normative ethical judgement and evaluation (van de Poel, 2015). Due to the time limitations of this study, this phase was not able to be performed to its fullest extent. However, based upon the input from the interviewees, a substantive ethical discussion regarding moral responsibility of stakeholders is presented in *6 Discussion*, specifically in *6.2 Understanding moral responsibility* and its subsequent sub-sections starting foremost from *6.2.1 Attributing moral responsibility*.

4.1.2.1 Conceptual investigation stage for values of stakeholders

First, the stakeholders presented in *4.1.1 Identification of stakeholders* will be categorized as either direct or indirect stakeholders, where direct stakeholders use the YouTube platform, and indirect stakeholders do not use the YouTube platform but are affected nonetheless. The stakeholders are designated

as direct or indirect stakeholders in *Table 4-2: Classification of stakeholders as direct or indirect stakeholders* below.

Category	Stakeholder	Direct or Indirect classification
<i>YouTube users</i>	Content creators	Direct
	Viewers	Direct
<i>YouTube, LLC</i>	Executives	Indirect
	Managers	Indirect
	Engineers	Direct
	Employees	Indirect
<i>Other</i>	Advertisers on YouTube	Direct
	Content creator managers	Indirect
	Employed help of content creators	Direct
	External shareholders	Indirect

Table 4-2: Classification of stakeholders as direct or indirect stakeholders

Next, the values of each stakeholder can be inferred from the existing scholarship, as presented in *2 Literature Review*, as well as publicly available statements and comments from existing interviews with stakeholders. A summation of stakeholder values from the conceptual investigation stage can be found in *Table 4-3: Summation of stakeholders and respective inferred values*.

4.1.2.1.1 Stakeholder: YouTube content creators

Content creators use YouTube as an outlet for self-expression and creativity through video format. For example, independent filmmakers use the platform with a more artistic intention by uploading their films, while activists use the platform to raise awareness about specific topics (Kim J. , 2012). Additionally, according to lessons from the YouTube Creator Academy, content creators may upload to YouTube to foster a loyal community surrounding a specific interest or niche (YouTube, 2021). Through interviews with content creators focused on sponsorships and brand disclosure, content creators want to be seen as both authentic and credible to their audience, as well as entertaining (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully,

& Ekdale, 2020). Finally, YouTube video owners may only receive monetary gains from advertisements on their video by enabling advertisements on the video (Tan, Ng, Omar, & Karupaiah, 2018). Thus, many content creators use YouTube for financial income.

In summation, YouTube content creators value self-expression, creativity, loyalty, community, credibility, authenticity, entertainingness, and fiscal opportunity.

4.1.2.1.2 Stakeholder: YouTube viewers

In general, YouTube viewers watch videos because they want to be entertained or informed by the video. While YouTube viewers can be of any age demographic, literature extrapolates children to watch YouTube for entertainment and educational purposes (De Veirman, Hudders, & Nelson, 2019). Logically, children grow up to consume digital media for similar purposes. Another reason to watch YouTube content is to feel connected to the content creator, specifically through a sense of togetherness (Jarzyna, 2020). By extension, certain viewers may perhaps desire to participate in a content creator's fostered community. Finally, viewers may feel loyal to a certain content creator, seen through the act of subscribing, which states that the viewer wants more content from said creator.

In summation, YouTube viewers value satisfaction from entertainment, satisfaction from information, connectedness, community, and loyalty.

4.1.2.1.3 Stakeholders: Executives, Managers, Engineers, and Employees of YouTube, LLC

According to the mission statement of YouTube, stakeholders from the company aim to make the YouTube platform safer. Specifically, they “remove content that violates [their] policies, reduce the spread of harmful misinformation and borderline material, raise up authoritative sources for news and information, and reward trusted creators” (YouTube, LLC, 2021). Furthermore, YouTube highlights their progress towards building a responsible platform, enforcing policies surrounding harmful content removal, the impacts of specific content creators – called YouTube's creative entrepreneurs by the company – and innovations towards a carbon-free future (YouTube, LLC, 2021).

However, YouTube and its stakeholders as a whole may not actually pursue these values. For example, Google paid \$170 million to the United States Federal Trade Commission in 2019 to settle alleged violations of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (Commission, 2019). YouTube allegedly collected personal information of children and practiced targeted advertising on their platform to these children. These actions show YouTube, and its stakeholders, require advertising brands for the platform to remain financially viable, and some stakeholders made decisions to pursue malpractice opportunities for greater financial gains at the expense of some platform users. Specifically, executives of

YouTube tend towards the financial benefits, while managers tend towards brand awareness for daily company maintenance.

In summation, all stakeholders from YouTube value user safety, trustworthiness, integrity, creativity, entrepreneurship, responsibility, culture, and sustainability, according to the YouTube mission statement. However, from previous actions, executives of YouTube also value fiscal opportunities and financial gains, while managers value brand identity, and brand-friendliness. Finally, engineers of YouTube also value innovation due to their efforts with creating the YouTube algorithm (Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016).

4.1.2.1.4 Stakeholder: Advertisers on YouTube

Those who advertise on YouTube, either using Google AdSense or some form of influencer marketing, intend to market their products to an audience online with hopes of increasing fiscal returns (Tan, Ng, Omar, & Karupaiah, 2018). Similarly, advertisers want to maintain an appropriate brand identity, wherein their advertisements do not run alongside inappropriate videos. Throughout YouTube's storied history, examples of advertisers pulling spending are numerous (Dimitrioski, 2019).

In summation, advertisers on YouTube value fiscal opportunity, financial returns, brand identity, and brand-friendliness.

4.1.2.1.5 Stakeholder: Content creator managers

Content creator managers exist as a bridge between content creators, brands, and YouTube as a company. As such, they must uphold communication between their content creator client and brands, or their content creator client and YouTube, when possible. Furthermore, these managers earn their livelihood through securing brand deals for content creators. Finally, content creator managers give advice to their clients about their personal brands; specifically, content creators' personas and personal brands are managed by these people.

In summation, content creator managers value communication, fiscal opportunity, and brand identity.

4.1.2.1.6 Stakeholder: Employed help of content creators

Similar to YouTube content creators, the employed help of content creators wish to contribute creatively to videos. However, they do not value self-expression in the same way that content creators do, mostly because they are not a necessary part of the channel's identity. Additionally, as their work is freelance, they wish to be paid by content creators for their work, and thus need advertisements and sponsorship deals to follow through.

In summation, the employed help of content creators value creativity, entertainingness, and fiscal opportunity.

4.1.2.1.7 Stakeholder: External shareholders

Similar to advertisers on YouTube, external shareholders desire returns on their investments. As Google, and YouTube by extension, earn a majority of revenue through advertisements (Dimitrioski, 2019) external shareholders demand YouTube to be brand-friendly and maintain a steady supply of advertisements.

In summation, external shareholders value fiscal opportunity, financial returns, and brand-friendliness.

Category	Stakeholder	Classification	Inferred values
<i>YouTube users</i>	Content creators	Direct	Self-expression, creativity, loyalty, community, credibility, authenticity, entertainingness, fiscal opportunity
	Viewers	Direct	Entertainment, information, connectedness, community, loyalty
<i>YouTube, LLC</i>	Executives	Indirect	User safety, trustworthiness, integrity, creativity, entrepreneurship, responsibility, culture, sustainability, fiscal opportunities, financial returns
	Managers	Indirect	User safety, trustworthiness, integrity, creativity, entrepreneurship, responsibility, culture, sustainability, brand identity, brand-friendliness
	Engineers	Direct	User safety, trustworthiness, integrity, creativity, entrepreneurship, responsibility, culture,

Category	Stakeholder	Classification	Inferred values
			sustainability, innovation
	Employees	Indirect	User safety, trustworthiness, integrity, creativity, entrepreneurship, responsibility, culture, sustainability
<i>Other</i>	Advertisers on YouTube	Direct	Fiscal opportunity, financial returns, brand identity, brand-friendliness
	Content creator managers	Indirect	Communication, fiscal opportunity, brand identity
	Employed help of content creators	Direct	Creativity, entertainingness, fiscal opportunity
	External shareholders	Indirect	Fiscal opportunity, financial returns, brand-friendliness

Table 4-3: Summation of stakeholders and respective inferred values

4.1.2.2 Empirical investigation stage for values of stakeholders

The empirical investigation stage validates or refutes the inferred values of the stakeholders presented in 4.1.2.1 *Conceptual investigation stage for values of stakeholders*. The empirical method employed was that of an experiment in the form of interviews and analysis, presented in 4.2 *Process of designing the experiment*, more specifically in

Executed experiment design. The experiment was designed specifically to focus on investigating the inferred values of the direct stakeholder of YouTube content creators, though empirical investigation for values of other stakeholders were touched upon, specifically YouTube viewers. Results from the empirical investigation stage is presented in 5 *Findings*.

4.2 PROCESS OF DESIGNING THE EXPERIMENT

4.2.1 Previous iterations of experiment design

Throughout the thesis process, the main focus shifted while narrowing down knowledge gaps. More specifically, while knowledge gaps were still broad, this thesis was intended to be a comparative study between parasocial phenomena perspectives of content creators versus parasocial phenomena

perspectives of viewers. However, after realizing existing parasocial literature about YouTube held an abundance of viewers' perspectives, yet maintained a dearth of content creators' perspectives, the research design shifted focus to exclusively content creators' perspectives.

The initial idea for understanding content creators' perspectives involved inverting the intended questionee of existing parasocial scales. The primary goal was to probe for the values of content creators; the secondary goal was to quantify the experiences of content creators. Explained in-depth in *Appendix B: Inverted Parasocial Interaction Scale*, each item from two traditional parasocial interaction scales were flipped to understand the experiences of the targeted person of parasocial phenomena. The Inverted Parasocial Interaction Scale, or IPSI-Scale, was intended to be a supplement to interviews with content creators to probe for values; interviewees would have a conversation-like interview, ending with answering the IPSI-Scale. Before the knowledge gap was fully narrowed, the intention was to compare results from the IPSI-Scale given to content creators with results from the traditional parasocial interaction scales given to viewers.

The IPSI-Scale was abandoned for two main reasons: its invalidity and its mixing of methods. First, it was an unprecedented and invalidated scale. Its quantifying properties were unbalanced due to its creation being primarily for value-probing. Furthermore, the validating of the IPSI-Scale could have been its own thesis process. As such, using the scale for quantitative research would not clarify the values and experiences of content creators; unintendedly, findings from the IPSI-Scale would confuse future researchers. Secondly, due to the author's intentions to use descriptive ethics to explicate content creators' experiences, there was no logistical reason to quantify these experiences; the author attempted to use both qualitative and quantitative research methods for a primarily qualitative thesis. With the recommendations of the thesis committee, the research design was changed to be wholly qualitative through open-ended semi-structured interviews with YouTube content creators.

4.2.2 Executed experiment design

Content creators are interviewed for at least 60 minutes. The videos of these content creators must be in English but may be of any genre and targeted demographic. Potential participating content creators must have over 10,000 subscribers, have uploaded YouTube content within the last six months, and must be considered "homegrown" content creators; the YouTube channel must consist of only one person as the face of the channel, however a backend team of editors, videographers, animators, sponsorship managers, agents, and the like are permitted. The gender, age, race, and location of the content creator is not relevant to the participant selection process.

Content creators meeting these criteria are approached via e-mail requesting an interview via video conferencing software, specifically Zoom. During this semi-structured interview, the content creators are asked various interview questions, shown in *4.3 YouTube content creator interview questions*.

All e-mail communications are done through the author's university e-mail address and are kept strictly confidential. Furthermore, the interviews are recorded with explicit consent from the interviewees and are also kept confidential.

After all interviews are completed, the recorded conversations are transcribed by the author. These transcriptions are then analyzed and annotated with assistance from ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software. The qualitative analysis aims to identify content creators' experiencing of parasocial relationships with audience members through anecdotal evidence, extract the emotions and values of content creators throughout their time on the YouTube platform, and exemplify the current moral responsibility for YouTube, its algorithm, content creators, and viewers.

To ensure that research questions were answered, a set of propositional statements were formulated from the existing literature. Each proposition consists of one specific element which may be supported by interview quotes, interpretation, and analysis. When compounded, these propositions answer their relevant research question. When analyzing the interviews, each interviewee's responses were tabulated as meeting or supporting these propositions. If an interviewee did not meet this proposition, a critical analysis was performed to understand why this might be the case. These propositions, what literature they draw from, and what research question they aim to answer can be found in *Table 4-4: Propositions to answer research questions with citations* below. Notably, research questions RQ1 and RQ5 are not given propositions, as RQ1 deals with cumulating content creators' values, while RQ5 requires reflection upon findings from the interviews.

Label	Proposition	Answers	Academic source(s)
P2-1	Interviewee holds influence over their audience.	RQ2	(Lou & Kim, 2019); (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019)
P2-2	Interviewee has met a viewer in person.	RQ2	(Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985)
P2-3	Interviewee has audience members similar to themselves.	RQ2	(Auter & Palmgreen, 2000)
P2-4	Interviewee does not have the same amount of knowledge about the viewer as the viewer has about them.	RQ2	(Rasmussen, 2018)

Label	Proposition	Answers	Academic source(s)
P3-1	Interviewee interprets their audience as a group, rather than as individuals.	RQ3	(Rasmussen, 2018)
P3-2	Interviewee communicates with their audience members outside of their video content.	RQ3	(Rasmussen, 2018); (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019)
P3-3	Interviewee feels they need to be professional in their YouTube content.	RQ3	(Kruitbosch & Nack, 2008); (Hou, 2019); (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020)
P3-4	Interviewee creates videos as a creative outlet.	RQ3	(Berryman & Kavka, 2017); (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020)
P3-5	Interviewee creates videos because it is fun for them.	RQ3	(Berryman & Kavka, 2017); (Hou, 2019)
P3-6	Interviewee feels connected to their audience.	RQ3	(Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020)
P4-1	Interviewee is aware of the YouTube algorithm affecting the platform.	RQ4	(Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016)
P4-2	Interviewee receives financial benefits or a stream of income from YouTube.	RQ4	(Han B. , 2018)
P4-3	Interviewee feels authentic on YouTube.	RQ4	(Hou, 2019); (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020)
P4-4	Interviewee is exposed to tools to grow their YouTube audience.	RQ4	(Wu, Pedersen, & Salehi, 2019)
P4-5	Interviewee has confronted their values when making decisions on YouTube.	RQ4	(Glover, Bumpus, Logan, & Ciesla, 1997); (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020)

Table 4-4: Propositions to answer research questions with citations

4.2.2.1 General information about participants

Anonymized information about the content creators who participated in the study can be found in *Table 4-5: Generic information about participants in the study* below. In total, eight content creators participated in the study, being interviewed for at least one hour each. All content creators signed informed consent forms, allowing their interviews to be recorded, transcribed, and anonymously quoted in this thesis. The interviewees represent a general slice of YouTube, crossing genres and having varying levels of subscriber-counts. Unfortunately, larger content creators, such as those with more than one million subscribers, did not choose to participate in the study.

Participant	Abbreviation	Genre	Subscriber count (September 2021)	Channel creation year
Interviewee 1	Int1	Gaming	215k	2015
Interviewee 2	Int2	Art, Design	96.4k	2016
Interviewee 3	Int3	Gaming	121k	2020
Interviewee 4	Int4	Learning	33.1k	2007
Interviewee 5	Int5	Gaming, Commentary	332k	2016
Interviewee 6	Int6	Commentary, Comedy	620k	2014
Interviewee 7	Int7	Gaming, Theorizing	84.9k	2018
Interviewee 8	Int8	Lifestyle	383k	2016

Table 4-5: Generic information about participants in the study

4.3 YOUTUBE CONTENT CREATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Below are the questions that each content creator is asked during the semi-structured interview. The questions are intentionally written in an open-ended format, such that content creators can elaborate about their experiences of their time on YouTube. Elaboration about what each question probes for can be found in 4.3.1 *Explication of probes per question*.

I'm Hannah, a student at Technical University Delft in The Netherlands, where I study in the Master's program called Management of Technology. My Master focuses a lot on technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship, alongside my main focus: ethics of technology. I chose this thesis subject as my capstone project to really try to get an understanding of how content creators, like yourself, are impacted by the advances of social media.

These questions require some self-reflection of yourself as a content creator and your audience as viewers. All I ask is that you please be as detailed as you are comfortable with and be as honest as possible. There are absolutely no right or wrong answers – I just want to hear about your experiences and your unique situation as a YouTube content creator.

1. Could you tell me about yourself and why you started your YouTube channel?
 - a. How long have you been uploading content to your YouTube channel?
 - b. What genre of content would you say your channel falls into?
2. How would you prioritize what you want people to experience when watching your videos?

3. What do you believe influences the message that your viewers take away from your content?
4. How do you feel about who you think your audience understands you to be as a person from watching your content?
5. Could you tell me about what you would consider your greatest achievement or proudest moment from your time on YouTube?
6. Could you tell me about a time that you did something in a video that you were ashamed of, or perhaps a time that you uploaded a video you felt was inauthentic to yourself and your channel?
7. Could you tell me about a time that you were recognized in public by a viewer?
 - a. What happened?
 - b. How did that experience make you feel?
 - c. Have you had any negative experiences when being recognized in public by a viewer?
8. Have you ever felt genuinely unsafe, threatened, stalked, or had your personal privacy breached by an audience member?
 - a. If you feel comfortable talking about it, what happened?
 - b. How did this experience make you feel?
 - c. Did YouTube as a platform assist you in any way with this situation?
9. There is a social phenomenon that occurs when people watch, read, or listen to media and develop a bond with a person, actor, or character from the media content. It is called a parasocial relationship, and it is built upon moments of connectedness, which we call parasocial interactions. Parasocial phenomena naturally occur when consuming media because we as humans are social and empathetic creatures. So, could you identify any experiences related to these parasocial phenomena, especially from your viewers towards yourself?
 - a. Do you think there needs to be more education to the viewers and to the content creators about parasocial phenomena and its effects?
 - b. Who do you think should educate platform users?
 - c. How should awareness about parasocial phenomena be raised?
10. Imagine there is a viewer who watches all your newest uploads as soon as possible, as they have notification on for new videos. This person considers you to be their very close friend, or maybe a

role model. They would love to meet you in person, and perhaps they even talk back to their screen when watching your content. How would you feel if someone like that existed?

11. *What advice would you have now for your future self in dealing with being a public figure?*

4.3.1 Explication of probes per question

The following sub-sections explain the reasoning of each interview question, including the intention of each interview question being asked. Finally, each sub-section extrapolates what sub-research questions may be answered with question responses. Sub-research questions are presented in 2.5.2 *Sub-Research Questions*.

4.3.1.1 Interview question 1: *Could you tell me about yourself and why you started your YouTube channel?*

The goal of this question was to gain some background information about the content creator as a person alongside their initial goals for starting their channel. This question probes for the content creator's values, both initially when they started their channel and their current values, as well as their emotions about their journey on YouTube. Furthermore, this question probes for the content creator's perception of how authentic their channel is to themselves as people. Finally, this question probes for an understanding of how the content creator currently interacts with their audience.

Answers to this question help to answer RQ1 by providing insights for the empirical investigation of values. Additionally, answers to this question may also help answer RQ3 and RQ4 by providing values, emotions, or anecdotes from the content creators. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P3-3, P3-4, P3-5, P3-6, P4-2, and P4-3.

4.3.1.2 Interview question 2: *How would you prioritize what you want people to experience when watching your videos?*

The goal of this question was to probe for the values and emotions of content creators, as well as their ability and freedom to express these values and emotions in video content. Not only do answers to this question give an explicit list of potential values, but it also forces the interviewee to prioritize and order those potential values. Furthermore, this question probes for the content creator's perceptions of themselves, as well as what they believe their audience desires from their content. Finally, this question probes for any experiences of being or desire to be a parasocial figurehead. For example, if a content creator states their highest priority is to connect with their audience members or have their audience members connect to them, this is a strong indicator of the content creator desiring a parasocial connection with their audience.

Answers to this question help to answer RQ1 by providing insights for the empirical investigation of values. Additionally, answers to this question may also help to answer RQ3 and RQ4 by providing values, emotions, or anecdotes from content creators. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P3-1, P3-3, P3-4, P3-5, P3-6, P4-2, P4-3, P4-4, and P4-5.

4.3.1.3 Interview question 3: *What do you believe influences the message that your viewers take away from your content?*

The goal of this question was to gain a better understanding for how the content creator feels they are able to make their audiences feel something through their content. Specifically, this question probes for experiences related to parasocial phenomena, either through anecdotes about comments or other forms of audience communication, as well as the desire for the content creator to experience or cause parasocial phenomena between themselves and their audience. Additionally, this question may provide other values or emotions not yet covered in the previous questions.

Answers to this question help to answer RQ1 by providing insights for the empirical investigation of values. Answers to this question may also help answer RQ2 by providing content creators' experiences with parasocial phenomena. Finally, answers to this question may also help to answer RQ3 and RQ4 by providing values, emotions, or anecdotes from content creators. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P2-1, P2-2, P2-3, P2-4, P3-1, P3-3, P3-4, P3-5, P3-6, P4-1, P4-3, and P4-5.

4.3.1.4 Interview question 4: *How do you feel about who you think your audience understands you to be as a person from watching your content?*

This question probes for the content creator's understanding of their audience and compares it to the content creator's presentation of their authentic self. While probing for parasocial phenomena-related anecdotes, this question also probes for any values or emotions not yet mentioned during the interview. Finally, due to the audience's main source of understanding the content creator being the YouTube platform, this question may provide insight about how the YouTube platform influences the communications between content creator and audience members.

Answers to this question may help to answer RQ1, but its main intention is to help answer RQ2. Additionally, answers to this question may help answer RQ3, RQ4, and ground the discussion surrounding RQ5. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P2-1, P2-2, P2-3, P2-4, P3-1, P3-2, P3-3, P3-4, P3-5, P3-6, P4-3, and P4-5.

4.3.1.5 Interview question 5: *Could you tell me about what you would consider to be your greatest achievement or proudest moment from your time on YouTube?*

The goal of this question is to fully understand the main benefits of being on the YouTube platform for that specific content creator. This question probes for the content creator's top, overarching values. For example, some content creators may answer that their greatest achievement was reaching a certain subscriber milestone, fundraising a certain amount of money via their platform, or meeting an audience member in person for the first time. Each of these hypothetical achievements provide insight into the content creator's deepest and greatest value.

Answers to this question will solidify insights for the empirical investigation of values, thus helping to definitively answer RQ1. Depending on the type of responses, this question could additionally help to answer RQ2, RQ3, RQ4, or RQ5. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P2-1, P2-2, P2-3, P3-1, P3-2, P3-3, P3-4, P3-5, P3-6, P4-1, P4-2, P4-3, P4-4, and P4-5.

4.3.1.6 Interview question 6: *Could you tell me about a time that you did something in a video that you were ashamed of, or perhaps a time that you uploaded a video that you felt was inauthentic to yourself and your channel?*

The goal of this question was to infer the content creator's authenticity throughout their time on their channel. Additionally, this question probes for any parasocial phenomena-related experiences wherein an audience member perhaps expressed concerns for the content creator not acting in alignment with the persona inferred from their content by said audience member.

Answers to this question will help answer RQ3, RQ4, and it may help answer RQ2, depending on the experiences of that content creator. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P2-1, P2-3, P3-1, P3-3, P3-4, P3-5, P3-6, P4-1, P4-2, P4-3, P4-4, and P4-5.

4.3.1.7 Interview question 7: *Could you tell me about a time that you were recognized in public by a viewer?*

The goal of this question was to understand any in-person parasocial interactions between content creator and audience member. Furthermore, by asking about how the content creator felt during that scenario, this question probes for the content creator's emotions and values. Finally, differences in how the content creator can express themselves on the YouTube platform versus in person are explored.

Answers to this question will help to answer RQ2, as well as perhaps RQ1 or RQ4, depending on the experiences of the content creator. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P2-2, P2-3, P2-4, and P4-3.

4.3.1.8 Interview question 8: *Have you ever felt genuinely unsafe, threatened, stalked, or had your personal privacy breached by an audience member?*

The goal of this question was to hear any anecdotes about when a parasocial relationship between an audience member and content creator went too far, endangering the content creator. This question may be uncomfortable for some content creators to answer if they have had a negative experience.

However, answers to this question may answer both RQ2 and RQ3, as well as ground RQ5 in experiences of content creators. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P2-2, P2-3, P2-4, P3-1, P3-2, and P3-6.

4.3.1.9 Interview question 9: *Could you identify any experiences related to parasocial phenomena, especially from your viewers towards yourself?*

The goal of this question was to introduce the concept of parasocial phenomena to the content creator, as well as define parasocial phenomena to the content creators equally. Additionally, this question probes for any experiences related to parasocial phenomena as experienced by the content creators.

Answers to this question answer RQ2 and may provide anecdotal evidence for RQ3 and RQ5. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P2-1, P2-2, P2-3, P2-4, P3-1, P3-2, and P3-6.

4.3.1.10 Interview question 10: *How would you feel if someone [in a deep parasocial relationship with you] existed?*

This question was meant as a moment for content creators to imagine someone in a deep parasocial relationship with them. By doing this, content creators are faced with the reality that perhaps audience members like this do already exist, as well as provides reactionary emotions to this scenario and what solutions content creators would employ, if any. Finally, anecdotal evidence about already existing audience members in this situation may be presented.

Answers to this question wholly grounds the discussion of RQ5, regarding moral responsibility, as content creators may imagine solutions to this scenario. Furthermore, answers to this question may help answer RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4, depending on the response of the content creator. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P2-1, P2-2, P2-3, P2-4, P3-1, P3-2, P3-6, and P4-5.

4.3.1.11 Interview question 11: *What advice would you have now for your future self in dealing with being a public figure?*

This question exists to round out the interview, as well as provide a concrete value of the content creators that ideally would not change over time. Content creators may also provide advice to their future

self in dealing with foreseen or expected challenges, either from the YouTube platform explicitly or due to being the target of parasocial phenomena.

Answers to this question help answer RQ1, and may help answer RQ2, RQ3, or RQ4, depending on the answers of the content creator. Specifically, answers to this question may correspond to propositions P2-1, P2-3, P2-4, P3-1, P3-2, P3-3, P3-4, P3-5, P3-6, P4-1, P4-2, P4-3, P4-4, and P4-5.

4.4 LIMITATIONS

Due to the iterative nature of the research process, limitations that stem from the chosen methodology and experiment design must be identified and discussed for transparency and integrity purposes. Presenting these limitations helps future research avoid these potential pitfalls when designing future experiments in order to fill any gaps not handled in this specific experiment design. More recommendations for future research can be found in 6 *Discussion*. First, this experiment is a qualitative study consisting of a small sample of only eight interviewees. Ideally, future research would have a larger sample size with content creators of varying audience sizes. In doing so, this would allow broad values expressed by content creators to be more substantiated and not specific to certain individual content creators or their audience size. Alternatively, future qualitative research could perform case studies on specific content creators, ideally active content creators who have achieved over one million subscribers many years ago. This would allow the interview results to focus more on that content creator's experiences over time or as their audience size has changed. However, different limitations would arise from these potential future research options.

Next, as the interviewee's emotions were an indicator for their values, many interview questions revolved around some formulation of the question, "How do you feel?" However, this question formulation could have been clearer; perhaps the interviewee interpreted the question not relating to emotions, but rather relating to a state-of-feeling, state-of-mind, or state-of-being. While responses were intended to indicate emotions, it is possible that the interviewee did not understand this, and thus did not explain their emotions properly during the interview.

Similarly, deriving the interviewees' emotions from just their words is difficult; thus, emotions were derived from the interviewee's spoken words, their tone, and facial expressions. However, this is a limitation to the experiment, as these findings cannot be corroborated by another researcher due to only the author and the interviewee participating in the interviews. In future research, this limitation could be suppressed by including multiple interviewers, multiple researchers watching interview recordings, or by directly asking the interviewee to name their emotions during the interview itself.

Next, for integrity purposes, it is necessary that the author is transparent about how the interview questions were written and used, compared to how responses were evaluated for the thesis. When the interview questions were written, the thesis was intended to be a normative ethical analysis. The interviews were then conducted, focusing on the content creators' thoughts, feelings, and experiences on the platform. The goal was to identify content creators' values, then compare these values with the virtuous actions of content creators. However, after the interviews were conducted, the thesis direction was shifted such that it was a descriptive ethical analysis of content creators' experiences and values on the YouTube platform. This was due in part to prevent any normative judgement or blame placed upon content creators; the interview materials provided rich evidence for a first exploratory study, but more empirical and normative ethical research would be needed to provide a thorough normative-ethical analysis. However, the evidence provided by the interviewees was able to ground a substantial ethical discussion regarding moral responsibility of stakeholders, though explicit recommendations cannot be given without a strict normative-ethical analysis.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints, it was not possible to redo the interviews with the same interviewees, nor was there enough time to contact new interviewees for new interviews. Fortunately, the existing interviews were conducted with a general focus on content creators' values and experiences; the responses of content creators were descriptive in nature. As such, the existing interviews were adapted to suit the new direction of a descriptive ethical thesis. While this study was exploratory, it also was an involved learning process for the author. Based on the lessons learned during this thesis process, if the interviews were to be redone now, they would be done differently. For example, the author would have asked interviewees directly about their values, as well as asked for more detailed examples, anecdotal evidence, or specific experiences from the interviewees to infer values more easily during interview analysis. For future research, it is suggested to directly ask content creators to name their values, rather than need to infer values post-interview, as well as ask for more specific and detailed experiences.

Finally, it is important to note that the author wanted the interviews to feel more conversational rather than rigid with analytical research language. In making the content creators feel more comfortable talking to the author during interviews, their responses would hopefully be more honest and provide a more genuine view into the content creator's values. However, this decision to hold conversational-style interviews limits the research in that a level of clarity is sacrificed; no specific ethical values could be named or validated, nor could targeted questions exist to zoom onto the interviewee's emotions to derive their values. In future research, the interviewer should be transparent about the study being a qualitative ethical study also involving a normative-ethical study, and thus may be able to ask directed questions about the interviewee's emotions and values without raising discomfort while maintaining a

conversational-style interview. Furthermore, this would allow content creators to directly consent to their emotions, values, and virtues to be normatively judged during the analysis phase of the research.

5 FINDINGS

5.1 GENERAL EXPERIENCES AMONGST CONTENT CREATORS

While each content creator's experiences with the YouTube platform are unique, there were some similarities, specifically in their values and perceptions about YouTube. In order to understand how their unique experiences overlap, first it is necessary to explain how each content creator started their journey on the YouTube platform and how it has evolved over time.

Int1 had been a content creator since 2015, and initially started their channel to fill their free time and as a supplement to a website created to find others who shared their interests. They found they enjoyed YouTube content creation but did not pursue it as a full-time job until after they graduated college and were about to be move in with their significant other. "This was a turning point. When [my fiancée and I] move, I either need to be able to support us or find a different job ... That year just lit a fire under me, and I put everything into researching how YouTube worked and trying to be a successful creator" (Interviewee1, 2021), stated Int1 when asked why they started their channel. Int1 was able to find success on the YouTube platform through dedicated time to their channel, some luck, and now also livestreams on Twitch.

Int2 created their YouTube channel in 2016 but did not upload content until 2019 when experiencing a creative drought. They made their livelihood working at a graphic design firm, but they felt somewhat limited creatively by their graphic design clients' needs and desires for projects. "I just wanted a way of just being able to create stuff that I wanted, and I saw other artist creators that were doing cool stuff [on YouTube] ... It still feels like a hobby to me, and I treat it as such, as a fun and creative outlet that I can dump nonsense into on occasion" (Interviewee2, 2021), stated Int2 when asked why they started their channel. Recently, Int2 has been able to release a book backed by their YouTube audience via Kickstarter. However, YouTube is not the full-time job of Int2, but they do continue to create content due to enjoying the process and the platform.

Int3 started their YouTube channel after being inspired by similar content creators that they found during the COVID-19 quarantine. At the time, they were working on finishing their PhD, but they felt frustrated due to the slow nature of scientific research. "[Research] is a very long process ... I wanted something that I thought would be a way to flex my creativity, something I can work on, be proud of, give

out to the world, and be a little more confident about producing finished products” (Interviewee3, 2021), Int3 stated when asked why they started their channel. Notably, they were already completing gaming challenges in their spare time. For them, recording and editing footage were the only necessary steps needed to shift their hobby into content creation. They did not expect others to watch the videos, but one of their videos became popular enough to begin garnering an audience. Int3 still regularly creates YouTube videos, but they expressed their intentions to continue with their scientific career after their graduation.

Int4 began uploading content when they felt they needed to share their breadth of knowledge, tips, and tricks revolving their day-to-day work as an automotive mechanic. “I need to get this [knowledge] out to people. I feel selfish, kind of greedy, to keep it all bottled inside” (Interviewee4, 2021), stated Int4 when asked about why they started their channel. Int4 felt empowered sharing their knowledge to their audience, especially when providing an answer that their audience member may have been seeking for a long time. Notably, Int4 works everyday as a mechanic, recording videos during work. Their YouTube channel helps expand their base of potential customers, as their audience members know that they are a competent mechanic.

Int5 originally began uploading content on a previous channel while being involved in an online gaming community. After a few years, they created another channel with their friends to showcase video game moments, and all videos were edited by them. Over time, their friends lost interest in the channel, and Int5 shifted the content of the channel towards commenting, reviewing, analyzing, and evaluating games. “I wanted to see if those games actually did hold up or if they were just a product of their time ... From there, I started playing games that I never played before” (Interviewee5, 2021), stated Int5 when asked how they chose topics for their content. Int5 continues to make content focused on gaming and game critiques, alongside livestreaming on Twitch.

Int6 started uploading content to their YouTube channel when they were a teenager with sketch comedy videos. They aspired to have a job as a YouTube content creator before it was the viable career option it is today. After taking a short break from YouTube, they returned to upload commentary videos on a semi-regular basis, until they had grown their channel to have a reliable audience of viewers. “I just got really lucky one day. [My video] just kind of popped off” (Interviewee6, 2021), stated Int6 when asked what changed that allowed them to create content for a living. Int6 creates commentary videos as their main livelihood and feels great pride in being able to achieve their childhood aspiration.

Int7 worked as a freelance web developer, animator, and video editor before creating their own channel, as they had always wanted to create their own YouTube content. During the COVID-19 pandemic, they found less freelance work, and thus spent more time focused on content creation,

especially as a video editor for another content creator's channel. After a few months, they shifted their focus towards their own YouTube channel, no longer editing for the other's channel. "You have to make quality stuff for people to notice you" (Interviewee7, 2021), stated Int7 when asked about growing their own channel. Int7 still collaborates with the content creator they previously edited for, but now they work exclusively on their own channel, alongside doing corporate freelance work.

Int8 started their YouTube channel to answer commonly asked questions from their Instagram followers during their weight loss journey. Originally, their Instagram was meant only to document their weight loss progress. However, some progress photos were reposted by larger Instagram accounts without their permission, sending more followers than Int8 ever planned to their account. "I did not really see myself doing YouTube ... My intention was never to garner an audience" (Interviewee8, 2021), stated Int8 when asked why they started their channel. Int8 elaborated that their Instagram audience and their YouTube audience seem to be two wholly different demographics of people, with some, but not total, overlap of audience members. Despite originally posting weight-loss related content, Int8 now also runs their own business alongside their YouTube channel and Instagram account, as well as posting other lifestyle, wellness, and health related content.

Each interviewee had a unique story revolving how they began uploading YouTube content, but every interviewee expressed their enjoyment on the YouTube platform, specifically regarding the freedom of creativity involved in content creation.

5.1.1 Exploring evidence from interviews related to propositions

5.1.1.1 Proposition P2-1: Interviewee holds influence over their audience.

Proposition 2-1 was inferred from multiple academic sources, specifically the research of Tolbert and Drogos (2019) and Lou and Kim (2019). In both articles, content creators are referred to as influencers, implying influence over audience members. However, this is not the only evidence of content creators holding some level of influence over their audience. More specifically, audience members may experience wishful identification towards a content creator, wherein the audience member behaves similarly to or desires to exhibit attributes of the content creator offline (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019). Thus, the behaviors, actions, and words of the content creator in itself holds important influence over audience members. Beyond content creators being able to shape audience members' attitudes, they are also able to influence their purchase intentions or decisions through influencer marketing (Lou & Kim, 2019). Finally, content creators influence their audience by "constantly producing valuable content and cultivating reciprocal relationships with their followers via social media" (Lou & Kim, 2019, p. 2).

Not only did content creators understand that their videos helped entertain audience members, but they also understood that their content could potentially lift the spirits of their audience. “My biggest motivator [is] I want someone to feel a little bit better every time they watch my video. Whether they had a great day, and this was a tiny addition, or they had a bad day, and this could turn that around. ... People think I’m overflowing with positivity and happy no matter what’s going on It can maybe be a nice thing to look at If I’m always positive, maybe they can be a bit more positive too,” stated Int1 (Interviewee1, 2021). By being a positive role model to their audience, content creators can influence the daily lives and actions of their audience members.

Furthermore, content creators influenced their audience members’ decisions through their YouTube content. For example, Int4 works offline as an automotive mechanic, proving their credibility as a mechanic in their YouTube content showcasing how they handle automotive projects. “I got people coming from out of state [to have me work on their vehicles]. ... It was not always like that in the beginning, because I didn’t advertise. People didn’t know that I was [a mechanic] at a dealership. But when people started figuring out that I was at a [dealership], and they have a brand new [vehicle], and they don’t trust their dealer, they like my work, then they don’t mind driving three days across the country, renting a hotel room, renting a rental car, all to have me work on their vehicle that’s under warranty,” stated Int4 (Interviewee4, 2021). While Int4 did not intend for their YouTube channel to affect their offline work, private and external circumstances conjoined their personal life and their work life. This allowed them to exercise their influence to benefit both the content creator financially and ensure their audience’s vehicles were worked on by someone the audience member trusted.

Content creators were also aware their influential position could be used both positively and negatively. “For better or for worse, my words now carry real weight. ... While I might not view myself as this super important figure, what I talk about matters. And there’s a lot of impressionable people watching. ... While I might not be constantly thinking about [my influence], I am hopefully entertaining and positively impacting a lot of people The worst thing I could do is misstep and then hurt [my viewers] further,” stated Int1 (Interviewee1, 2021). For example, Int8 creates content explicating their weight loss journey. “I’ve always been very aware of what I say. ... Even if I make a joke about eating a certain way, people might take it seriously. ... I don’t want to push anyone in a bad direction, because I understand that weight loss especially is a very touchy subject for people,” stated Int8 (Interviewee8, 2021). This content creator was aware that their content revolved around a subject that was potentially damaging if handled improperly. Int8 continued, “A lot of people will do whatever they can to lose weight. In the beginning [of my online career], I was very aware and nervous of saying something wrong. It’s such a heavy topic, and I could see how much my influence was having, which I didn’t expect. ... [I

realized] people are listening to what I'm saying. ... Influencing is real. People actually do what I say" (Interviewee8, 2021). This realization of the reality and potential severity of a content creator's influence changed the perspective in which Int8 handled their content's subject matter.

Furthermore, content creators seemed to value bringing awareness to social justice topics, either through charity events or by exposing audience members to specific social justice topics. As previously mentioned, content creators understood these topics needed to be handled carefully. For example, Int1 stated "I want to in the future do a charity stream for mental health or suicide awareness. It's something very personal for me But before I do that, I need to find training of some sort, so I know how to properly talk about these super important things before jumping in. Just doing a stream and raising money is always good, but you need to know how to talk about these subjects" (Interviewee1, 2021). Similarly, content creators can expose their audience to social justice topics. For instance, Int2 is openly transgender on their channel. "[Me] being more openly trans does help more people, especially young trans people, as far as dealing with things, or I guess have something to look up to or look forward to. I think that's great," they stated (Interviewee2, 2021). Content creators who were more aware of their influence's potential effects seemed more careful to discuss social justice topics on their channel but were more willing to discuss these topics off of their channel, via one-on-one communications, such as e-mail or direct messages.

Finally, content creators seemed aware that their influence could have negative side effects outside of their control, such as obsessive behaviors by audience members. For example, Int3 stated, "I think any respectable human being wants the people who are fans of them to be part of their life, not their entire life. I think especially with a kid, that would be really disheartening to see" (Interviewee3, 2021). While some content creators did express concern with obsessive behaviors of fans, they felt relatively powerless to prevent these behaviors from occurring.

5.1.1.2 Proposition P2-2: Interviewee has met a viewer in person.

Proposition P2-2 was inferred from an item on the PSI-Scale of Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985), where the stronger the parasocial bond, the greater the likelihood of the audience member wanting to meet an entertainer in person. Indications of parasocial relationships include audience members' interpersonal involvement "[taking] many forms, including seeking guidance from media persona, seeing media personalities as friends, imagining being part of a favorite program's social world, and desiring to meet media performers" (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985, pp. 156-157). However, just because an audience member in a parasocial relationship desires to meet a content creator does not mean they are able to do so. Furthermore, as a content creator does not know their audience personally, the only way for an offline fan interaction to occur is if the audience member acts on their desire to meet the content creator, approaching

the content creator, and thus indicating a parasocial relationship. Rather than attempt to enumerate the number of audience members who desire to meet a content creator, Proposition P2-2 gives an indication of how many content creators interviewed had met an audience member who acted on their desire. This further opens opportunities for discussion about these experiences themselves from the perspective of the content creator.

Due to the varying size of audiences, not all content creators had met a viewer in person. Furthermore, some content creators either gained channel popularity or started their channel during the COVID-19 pandemic, preventing opportunities from in-person fan interactions occurring. For example, Int1 remarked, “[My] channel went from nothing to what it is now the entirety of quarantine. The chances [of an in-person fan interaction] are magnified by multiple hundreds of thousands of people” (Interviewee1, 2021). However, some content creators have never met an audience member in person, though have had people offline know about their content. One example is Int2, who stated, “People have known what my content was in real life, but thankfully, I’m not big enough to worry about being recognized on the street on an annoyingly regular basis” (Interviewee2, 2021). A similar story came from Int3, who stated, “One of my really close friends, he said his girlfriend's cousin watches my videos” (Interviewee3, 2021).

On the other hand, some content creators felt they would not ever meet a fan in-person, mostly due to their small channel size or unrecognizability as a person. One such example is that of Int7, who stated, “I think I'm still way too small for that as a channel. ... Plus, it's also not my selling point” (Interviewee7, 2021). To Int7, their channel was disconnected from themselves as a person, and thus they do not expect to be recognized. Int5 felt similarly, stating, “I don't think that ... people would recognize me yet. ... I don't see [being recognized in public] happening unless I go to some convention or something. ... I don't think I'm big enough as a channel” (Interviewee5, 2021). Despite being a significantly larger content creator than Int7, both content creators felt similarly. Int5 felt they would not be recognized unless specific circumstances occurred, such as a meet-and-greet or convention.

However, channel size is not indicative of the likelihood a content creator will meet an audience member in person. For example, despite being smaller than Int7, Int4 regularly meets audience members to work on their automobiles. Int4 explained, “I've met a lot of great people! I've met a lot of great customers from all over the United States of America that drive thousands of miles to come see me and have me work on their vehicle” (Interviewee4, 2021). Notably, Int4 invites these audience members to their place of work and views their meeting as a moment with a customer or a client. When asked about recognition outside of these scenarios, Int4 stated, “I'm just a normal dude just trying to help people out.

If people see me on the street, that's going to be really awkward. I don't think I'll be ready for that” (Interviewee4, 2021).

Regarding content creators who have met an audience member in public, they felt appreciative, flattered, yet somewhat taken aback or confused. For example, Int1 stated, “It was it was a little jarring. ... I'm not really someone who wants to be noticed or wants the fame or attention. If I am noticed, that's such a compliment and such a sweet thing. I would obviously take time to talk with someone, but it's not something I'm actively pursuing” (Interviewee1, 2021). Int8 felt similarly, citing their social anxiety as a source of friction during the in-person interactions. “When people come up to me, it's nice, I really like it, because it's so nice to meet people. But I honestly feel like I black out a little bit. We're having an interaction, and then after it's done, I'm like, ‘What just happened?’ I think it's just an anxiety thing, ... [my] heart is racing. This person knows who I am. And it's anxiety-inducing. But I really like it!” (Interviewee8, 2021).

Overall, while some content creators, such as Interviewees 5 and 7, felt they were too small or unrecognizable to have an in-person interaction with an audience member, Int4 proves that is not relevant. Rather, these in-person interactions can occur regardless of channel size. Furthermore, to those who were recognized in public, they felt appreciative to have that experience with an audience member, but felt it was a surreal occasion, as indicated by Interviewees 1 and 8's experiences.

5.1.1.3 Proposition P2-3: Interviewee has audience members similar to themselves.

Proposition P2-3 was inferred from items from one of the many parasocial interaction scales to be answered by audience members, specifically the API-Scale of Auter and Palmgreen (2000). The API-Scale found that audience members whose parasocial target reminds them of themselves, have the same qualities, have similar beliefs and attitudes, or whose friends or family are similar to those of the parasocial target indicate a deeper parasocial relationship (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). Therefore, if a content creator felt their audience members were similar to themselves, then these audience members are more likely to be experiencing a parasocial relationship with the content creator.

Each content creator either had an audience similar to them or felt they could rationalize why their audience was dissimilar. Content creators who strongly felt their audience was similar to them included Interviewees 2, 4, 6, and 7. Content creators who felt most of their audience was similar to them, but not all of their audience, included Interviewees 1, 3, 5, and 8. However, these content creators recognized that their audience held similar interests to them, but did not have the same life experiences.

One example of content creators realizing their audience might be dissimilar to them are the experiences of Interviewees 1 and 3, who found that their audience is likely of a younger age than them.

Int3 is still evolving their target audience, stating, “I’m still trying to figure [my content] out, as well as ultimately what kind of age group I’m looking for. I know that there is a lot of [gaming] channels that appeal to younger kids, which I don’t necessarily want to do. But I don’t want to alienate mid-teens. I’m still trying to figure out exactly who I’m doing the videos for, so that’s an evolving process” (Interviewee3, 2021). However, Int1 felt their target audience was out of their control, stating, “I definitely had an older audience before I hit viral success. The bigger it gets, the more younger people are going to watch” (Interviewee1, 2021).

One example of content creators who explicitly felt their audience is similar to them includes Int6, who stated, “If I met a lot of my viewers in person, I’m sure we would get along great because we clearly have similar interests and a similar sense of humor” (Interviewee6, 2021). However, Int4 has explicit evidence that their audience is a community surrounding the same interests, stating, “[My channel] is a family. It’s a community that I have started. And everybody in this community has a Ford Diesel truck. Thirty thousand of them! So, trying to be relatable, I get it. We’re on the same team. I don’t know, I think that makes people want to stay engaged. I see it in the comments section” (Interviewee4, 2021).

Finally, Int8 exemplifies that while they expected their audience to be similar to them, their in-person experiences with audience members show that their audience consists of a wide range of people. The following story from Int8 explains this realization well. “I was sitting in a mall, and this woman who was working at Louis Vuitton or something, like literally looked like a supermodel, just walks out and was like, ‘Hey I follow you on YouTube!’ ... At first, I thought they were joking! Like, this is so weird! ... It’s different experience, because I’m just more shocked that they even follow me! I’m still grateful that they follow me, but ... I didn’t realize that my influence exceeded outside of the person who I am. ... I’ve also had to teach myself to not make so many assumptions, because I came to realize, who knows, maybe they have lost weight. Maybe they want to gain weight! People could be following me for so many different reasons! So now I’m just like, don’t overlook it anymore. Just be grateful that people from all walks of life are following you!” (Interviewee8, 2021). For Int8, their experiences forced them to be more open-minded about who their content being consumed by.

Overall, some content creators explicitly have an audience similar to them, either through having similar interests, a similar sense of humor, or similar life experiences. However, other content creators realize that while their audience members may not all be exactly like them, they still are able to relate to the content creator.

5.1.1.4 Proposition P2-4: Interviewee does not have the same amount of knowledge about the viewer as the viewer has about them.

Proposition P2-4 was derived from the scholarly discussion of Rasmussen (2018). “Simply responding to comments on YouTube ... create the allusion to audiences that [social media] celebrities care about them. This type of interaction may certainly be a driving force in the parasocial relationship building that can occur between source and viewer, but [this relationship is] still one-sided as the viewer consumes more content from the speaker. The speaker does not have the same amount of knowledge about the viewer” (Rasmussen, 2018, pp. 290-291). By extension, the content creator – also known as the source and speaker in Rasmussen’s quote – should always know less about their audience members than their audience members know about them. Thus, if this holds true, then content creator and audience member interactions are one-sided, and their relationship is parasocial in nature.

Whether a content creator has met their audience members in-person or not, each of them recognized that they do not know their audience as well as their audience knows them. Some example quotations regarding this topic are below.

Int1 stated, “I have one experience a camera and then 120,000 people have an experience with me. Either they like what they watch, they dislike what they watch, or maybe they feel a connection, or they really enjoyed my personality. Whatever it may be, it’s not a fair one-to-one thing. I don’t know the name of a single person watching. I don’t know their age. I don’t know what they look like. I don’t know a single thing about any of the people that watched” (Interviewee1, 2021).

Int2 stated, “I appreciate that you enjoy my content, but I don’t know you. To me, you are a stranger” when discussing viewers (Interviewee2, 2021). Later in the interview, Int2 elaborated again, saying, “You just have to lightly tell them that you're sorry, you appreciate them as a viewer, but that you don't know who they are in actuality. It's really nice, but you just have to go through the process of just letting them know the boundaries set, in a social sense” (Interviewee2, 2021).

Int3 stated, “I don't want to discourage fanaticism in a healthy way, but I also don't want to promote that [the viewers] should love me, because know who I am. But [viewers] can't trust me, I can't trust [them], because [they] simply don't know me. [They] know what my videos stand for, and to an extent [they] know what I stand for, and I hope that I'm exhibiting good morals and I hope that I am supporting people who are exhibiting good morals, but ultimately, we don't know [if that is true]. That's definitely something that's really dangerous, and I try to do my part to never actively support that, insofar as I can, I guess” (Interviewee3, 2021).

Int4 has a slightly different situation, where they speak with their audience members outside of YouTube in one-on-one scenarios frequently. Int4 is an automotive mechanic, and thus sees their audience members as potential customers. Int4 did, however, state that, “I may not remember your face, but I'll remember your [vehicle] and your problem!” (Interviewee4, 2021).

Int5 did not explicitly state that their viewers know more about them than they know about their viewers. However, Int5 did state that “I'll have people who reach out to me, and they're like, ‘Hey, if you want to play a game sometime with me, I can add you on Steam!’ ... Yeah, I'll do that. But I don't even interact with my own friends a lot of the time when I'm sitting here, trying to make a video” (Interviewee5, 2021). This shows that Int5 cannot provide the same level of attention to their individual viewers as their viewers can to them by interacting with their content.

Int6 explained a scenario wherein their viewers feel they are at a friendly enough level to actually be mean to Int6. They explained “The worst part for me is when people feel like they know me when we don't know each other. That's the part that I hate the most about [parasocial relationships]. There are good parts to it too, though. ... The part that I don't like is when somebody will make these rude jokes, like inappropriate and rude jokes. They're thinking, ‘We're just like buddies, we're poking fun at each other because we're buds, right? That's what friends do!’ But we're not friends. So, if [a viewer] is saying something rude to me as a joke, it still feels rude. It doesn't feel like a joke. And that happens all the time. ... If [a viewer] leaves a comment that's super rude and you mean it in a sarcastic or joking way, it's so hard for people to read that through text. If you were saying it to my face would be one thing, and I would probably get [the joke] every time. But a lot of the time, I read these comments and they're so rude!” (Interviewee6, 2021).

Int8 mentioned how they are aware when someone recognizes them in public, showing an immediate imbalance of knowledge regarding the participants in the parasocial relationship. Int8 stated, “When I'm in public, if someone recognizes me, it's very easy for me to recognize to that they recognize me before they come up to me, if that makes sense. They'll look [at me] and then do a double take and then stare a bit. Because they're trying to figure out if it's me, which I completely understand” (Interviewee8, 2021).

5.1.1.5 Proposition P3-1: Interviewee interprets their audience as a group, rather than as individuals.

Similar to Proposition 2-4, Proposition P3-1 was derived from the scholarly discussion of Rasmussen (2018). Here, Rasmussen states, “YouTube celebrities also show gratitude and offer thanks to viewers who send caring messages when they deal with personal triumphs and trouble, though this is often done as a blanket statement in a video” (Rasmussen, 2018). Content creators thus indicate

understanding their audience as one group, rather than individuals, via communicating with their audience as a singular group through blanket statements, telling all individuals the same message. While Rasmussen (2018) provided grounds for inference leading to this proposition, literature in general is lacking in understanding how content creators view their audience. Thus, this proposition was necessary in order to fill this knowledge gap.

Most content creators mentioned that it was hard to imagine their audience as individuals, specifically, that one view meant one individual person was consuming their content. Furthermore, some content creators showed their interpretation of their audience as a group by stating that they value the positivity from their audience. Specifically, Int2 stated “I have a pretty pleasant experience with the audience most of the time. It depends on the creator, honestly. Sometimes, you can breed some toxic audiences, depending on what your content is” (Interviewee2, 2021).

Other examples of content creators being unable to interpret their audience size include Int1, who stated “It’s kind of difficult to understand how many people are truly watching” (Interviewee1, 2021), and Int3, who stated “I’ll have a lot of people say, ‘I love you!’ And I always try my best to never say that I love them back. Because I don’t. I love their support and I love that they enjoy my videos and I love that my videos make them happy. But I don’t know them, and I don’t think that they should love me, either. They can love my content” (Interviewee3, 2021).

Other content creators mentioned that they make their videos for a group of people, rather than an individual person. Such examples include Int4, who stated “I’m talking to an audience” (Interviewee4, 2021), and Int6, who stated “The video is being put out to the world, but it’s not for anybody necessarily. It’s not for any specific person” (Interviewee6, 2021).

Finally, Int8 summarizes these findings with their statement, “With big numbers, it’s so hard to understand what they mean, ... to actually conceptualize what these numbers mean. I can see 50,000 views, and to me, that means a video did decently. ... If I actually sit down and say that 50,000 people watched that, it’s a weird realization.”

5.1.1.6 Proposition P3-2: Interviewee communicates with their audience members outside of their video content.

Similar to Proposition 3-1, Proposition 3-2 is grounded in inferences from existing literature and is needed to fill the knowledge gap surrounding how content creators communicate with their audience members. Usually, content creators communicate to individuals in their audience with blanket statements in their videos to their audience as a group (Rasmussen, 2018). However, viewers “can also engage in various ways when they are not using the YouTube platform. For instance, they can purchase YouTubers’

merchandise, see them at sold-out arenas, watch them on television events..., or follow them across other social media platforms” (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019, pp. 1-2). There exists an imbalance between the amount of personalized dedication from individual audience members towards the content creator, wherein the content creator cannot reciprocate the same level of dedication towards an individual audience member; it is not likely for audience members to receive personal communications from the content creator. Thus, this proposition aims to enumerate how many of the interviewed content creators are able to reciprocate personal dedication to audience members via communicating with them on a more personal level in a private setting. Furthermore, this proposition helps identify in what forms these conversations are occurring.

Every interviewee has communicated with their audience members outside of their video content. These communications may occur via e-mail, direct messages on Discord or Twitter, or even in the YouTube comments themselves. Furthermore, some content creators also livestream on Twitch, and communicate with their audience via the live chat function.

5.1.1.7 Proposition P3-3: Interviewee feels they need to be professional in their YouTube content.

Proposition 3-3 was inferred from multiple scholarly journals indicating a level of professionalism is necessary for content creators to make a career on YouTube. First, in an investigation about the level of professionalism in content creation required for said content to go viral, Kruitbosch and Nack (2008) found that content produced by professional content creation companies tend to be more viral than user-generated content. Furthermore, they conclude, “while [the YouTube platform] is more accessible to the general public than Hollywood [for creating popular content], it does not eliminate the need for some level of professionalism, originality and perseverance required of people who want to become popular on the site” (Kruitbosch & Nack, 2008, p. 4). The corporatization of the YouTube platform is further explored by Hou (2019), citing that multi-channel networks, or MCNs, act as a bridge between traditional entertainment industries and online entertainment companies. For a YouTube content creator, MCNs receive a certain percentage of video revenue in exchange for financial, legal, talent, or marketing assistance. These MCNs are a major force in professionalizing homegrown content creators (Hou, 2019). Finally, content creators maintain their own individual professionalism by driving their ethical decision-making during content creation and potential advertising moments. Content creators abide by their own individual code of ethics derived from ethics of authenticity, “premised on two central tenets: (1) being true to one’s self, and by extension, one’s brand; (2) being true to one’s audience by providing it with the content it seeks” (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020, p. 69). Thus, this proposition aims to prove that content creators understand their position as a career opportunity, and therefore they must act professionally, abiding by their individual code of ethics.

Every content creator understood that their career and livelihood are due to how they act in their online content. An example of this is Int1, who stated “[If I acted unprofessionally], I would feel a lot more guilty towards my family from probably sabotaging my channel. ... [Acting unprofessionally] would probably have a very big effect on my livelihood and my family” (Interviewee1, 2021).

More specifically, Int4 mentioned that they are slightly different in their content in a professional sense. They stated, “[In my content] I have to be clear. I have to be relatable. And I can't swear. Because I have a bad mouth. But I really, really, really try to not be boring. I want to be to-the-point” (Interviewee4, 2021).

Finally, Int2 mentioned that they want to always give their best self during fan interactions in person, as that is what they expect from their favorite celebrities. They stated, “For future fan interactions, even if [I'm] tired, I will try to give them -- each person -- a good time, if possible, if [my] strength allows” (Interviewee2, 2021). Int8 echoed this sentiment, saying “If I meet someone, I will make myself happy even if I'm not happy. But I don't feel like I have to put on a show” (Interviewee8, 2021). Thus, content creators must be professional in their own content, but also offline, as they represent themselves as a personal brand.

5.1.1.8 Proposition P3-4: Interviewee creates videos as a creative outlet.

Propositions P3-4 and P3-5 have the same derivative sources, both implying that content creators create content out of their own passions, rather than for an external reason, such as fame or financial gains. Authors Berryman and Kavka cite a quotation from beauty vlogger Zoe Sugg, who stated, “On YouTube, you can just... create what you want, do what you want, be how you want. I see it as people's individual creative outlets” (Berryman & Kavka, 2017, p. 310). Further supporting this claim, Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, and Elkdale found that all content creators who participated in their study began creating content about their hobbies or passions, eventually discovering content creation as a viable and profitable career path (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Elkdale, 2020, p. 79). While some content creators likely only began their channels for money or fame, this proposition attempts to provide further evidence that content creators following these external reasons are outliers compared to the desire to foster a community surrounding a hobby or passion.

Every content creator mentioned that they use YouTube and content creation for a creative medium. While content creators expressed their satisfaction with YouTube as a creative platform, others mentioned their satisfaction with the creativity YouTube provides them with their career. Int6 elaborated further on this point, stating “[YouTube] was always what I wanted to do because I liked the freedom of it. It's not like you necessarily have total freedom, because you're still tied to this [platform]. But getting to be your own boss and make your own decisions, that was very appealing to me.”

5.1.1.9 Proposition P3-5: Interviewee creates videos because it is fun for them.

Proposition P3-5 is derived from the same literature as P3-4. As such, argumentation for P3-5 is found in 5.1.1.8, the previous sub-section.

Similar to Proposition P3-4, every content creator mentioned that they enjoy making content and that it is a fun experience for them. Some content creators, such as Int3, were already performing the activities they perform in their content. Int3 stated, “I was doing a lot of these [video game challenges] myself anyways, and I figured [uploading them to YouTube] would be a great thing to do. And if 50 people watch it, that would be kind of cool, too” (Interviewee3, 2021). This shows that not only is the act of creating videos entertaining for content creators, but also what actions they perform in the videos are generally ones they enjoy. Solidifying this is a statement from Int6, showing they have enjoyed YouTube content creation for a long time. They said, “I’ve been posting to YouTube since I was 12, I think. ... It’s something that I’ve been doing for a very long time. ... When I got to college, I had a lot more free time to goof around [on YouTube]” (Interviewee6, 2021).

5.1.1.10 Proposition P3-6: Interviewee feels connected to their audience.

Proposition P3-6 is derived from the ethics of authenticity literature from Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, and Elkdale (2020). Their journal article focuses on how content creators remain true to themselves while producing content that audience members will connect with and enjoy. The authors found that digital-age journalists – and by extension, content creators – rely on their personal brands and credibility to connect with audience members. Content creators who feel authentic to their audience thus feel connected to their audience, as they understand that their audience trusts their level of credibility (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Elkdale, 2020). Thus, this proposition aims to provide further anecdotal evidence to support this claim from the literature.

Content creators felt connected to their audience specifically when their audience was similar to them, such as stated by Int8, who said “The people I feel most connected to are the people who are most like me, who started at a similar weight, who had a similar life, who struggled with similar things. I definitely feel more connected to that audience” (Interviewee8, 2021). However, other content creators felt connected if they had a shared experience with their audience members, such as Int4, who said, “When you interact with [viewers], you're not just answering this dude's comment. This guy is going back and forth with you in e-mails. You're immersed in his problem now. And you're living it with him. Everybody's problems are my problems. That's what we are: problem solvers” (Interviewee4, 2021).

However, some content creators lamented that their online interactions with their audience could not produce a meaningful connection as one expects from in-person communications. Examples of this include Int2, who stated, “Unfortunately, Zoom calls and internet interactions only go so far. Because we

are humans, and we haven't evolved this level of social interaction yet. We need to get outside” (Interviewee2, 2021). Int3 frames online relationships with their statement, “[On] Twitch, you can actually get a relationship going, you just got to make sure that you understand it's a relationship in the confines of I'm a content creator and you're somebody watching it, and that's all this can be” (Interviewee3, 2021).

Finally, some content creators explicitly expressed appreciation for their audience, such as Int1, who said “I try to bring [my connection to my audience] up in streams if I see it feels like there’s a reason to. I will try to respond to messages saying, ‘I really appreciate you guys.’” (Interviewee1, 2021).

5.1.1.11 Proposition P4-1: Interviewee is aware of the YouTube algorithm affecting the platform.

Proposition P4-1 is derived from the journal article authored by Google artificial intelligence engineers Covington, Adams, and Sargin (2016). This article provides concrete confirmation that a recommender system is implemented into the YouTube platform and affects how the platform functions. Thus, this proposition exists to allow interviewees to explore their thoughts about how these platform-wide effects affect them, their content, and thus their livelihood.

Most content creators mentioned the YouTube algorithm in their interviews; however, their opinions did not show a clear, singular consensus regarding how the algorithm works or its intentions.

Some content creators were confused by the algorithm, claiming they do not understand it. An example is Int4, who stated, “The algorithm sucks! I'll never understand it! ... I think YouTube does it on purpose!” (Interviewee4, 2021). Another example is from Int6, who said “[My channel took off because I] got super lucky with the algorithm, but nobody understands that” (Interviewee6, 2021). A final example of this is from Int2, who said “The algorithm is this mysterious thing that occasionally [YouTube] will hint at how it works, and then change a month after” (Interviewee2, 2021).

However, not all content creators are confused by the algorithm. Specifically, Int7 expressed their skepticism about the algorithm in general, specifically saying “YouTubers get depressed or demotivated, because they constantly have to hammer out content week after week after week. [YouTubers] have all convinced themselves that there’s this magical algorithm that YouTube uses to determine if your channel should do well, if it should be recommended and make your channel have a wider audience. But I think that’s very overblown, to be honest. I think that’s something that people have spread around. Obviously, there’s probably at least an element of truth to it. But ... it’s okay to not upload for a week, as long as you’re transparent with your audience. ... They will be totally fine with that. They can do without!” (Interviewee7, 2021). From Int7’s perspective, the algorithm is not as impactful as simply communicating with their audience.

Finally, Int1 believed that the YouTube algorithm was a good tool to spread positive video content. Specifically, Int1 said “Even though people talk about the algorithm like it's a cold unfeeling thing, that's not true. It just means more people are enjoying what you're doing. ... It depends on [what kind of video] it is. ... If I'm doing a goofy [video game] competition with my silly friends and it does well with the algorithm, it's not this cold unfeeling thing. It promoted a light-hearted thing that a lot of people seemingly enjoyed” (Interviewee1, 2021). However, Int2 does not feel this is the case, as the expectations of the YouTube algorithm can harm content creators. Int2 elaborates, stating “That's why the whole two videos a week or one video a day or something is certainly something that the algorithm will tell you that it wants! However, not doable for a lot of people, depending on what you create!” (Interviewee2, 2021).

Overall, the YouTube algorithm seems to be one of the most divisive topics amongst content creators. Some, like Int2, wish there was more transparency about it for the sake of other content creators. Some, like Interviewees 4 and 6, wish there was more transparency just so they can understand how it affects their content being presented to others. Even still, some, such as Int7, believe it is not as impactful as other content creators claim it to be. Finally, some content creators, such as Int1, can understand it can be a positive thing, but understands that they simultaneously do not fully understand its actions or decisions.

5.1.1.12 Proposition P4-2: Interviewee receives financial benefits or a stream of income from YouTube.

Proposition P4-2 is derived from the journal article wherein findings indicate daily views, daily view growth rate, and existing total views are a significant positive correlation with a content creator's daily revenue (Han B. , 2018). Thus, this proposition lays the groundwork for finding potential value conflicts involving financial gains. Furthermore, in tandem with the YouTube algorithm affecting views (Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016), as explored with Proposition P4-1, and views affecting revenue (Han B. , 2018), this proposition assists with exemplifying the influence the YouTube platform holds over their content creators.

As previously mentioned, most content creators recognize that them creating online content is a career, and as such, receive financial benefits. However, the ways in which these finances are earned is different for each content creator.

Some content creators, such as Int1 and Int6, understood that they had an opportunity to turn their hobby into a job. Int1 stated, “My first taste of sustained success with a series ... was the biggest turning point. I thought to myself that [content creation] could possibly be a job for side money or as a dream job to pursue. It could actually be a career. [Creating content] doesn't have to be just for the love of [video

games]” (Interviewee1, 2021). Int6 had a similar situation of turning their hobby into a job. However, some content creators, such as Int7, still recognize the risk in YouTube being their full-time job. Int7 stated, “I’m at a point where I could feasibly live off of YouTube if I really wanted to, but I don’t want to dive too deep into that just yet. Because it is a risk. If YouTube doesn’t go as well, views can dip, or if the interest in [my content subject] goes down, then you’re going to be totally at the mercy of other people’s views. I’d rather have some things stable on the side because I always have a guarantee of doing [freelance] corporate jobs” (Interviewee7, 2021).

Other content creators, such as Int2, receive financial benefits through their platform size affecting other, off-platform projects. For Int2, they explained this situation, saying “Even though my channel size is very humble compared to a lot of the bigger name YouTubers, [my YouTube audience] was the biggest contributor to the Kickstarter” (Interviewee2, 2021), wherein the Kickstarter was for a book they were creating and producing. Another way in which financial benefits are received off-platform is seen in the experiences of Int4. Int4 works as an automotive mechanic offline, but their platform promotes their mechanic shop. Int4 explained “Now that management [at the automotive shop] knows [about my YouTube channel], do I advertise [to my viewers] where I’m at? This could be a potential job. I don’t get paid by the hour; I get paid per the job. So, this would be one more job that I didn’t have. This is a job coming into the dealership that’s not going to anybody else but me. It’s a guaranteed job. ... My work is my home base. My work is where people would find me. ... My work is where people from YouTube come. ... YouTube pays me on the backend; that’s just a benefit of delivering my material” (Interviewee4, 2021).

Finally, some content creators wrangled with the decision to begin earning money from YouTube advertisement revenue. Specifically, Int3 explained, “The way that YouTube works is that you can only start monetizing after you get X amount of hours of views or subscribers or something, I don’t remember. So, I didn’t [turn on monetization] immediately, that’s for sure. I didn’t want to feel like I was selling out. But then I actually had somebody reach out to me for a sponsorship, and they were talking like, ‘Everybody’s doing this. Think about the videos you watch on YouTube. Did you ever think they were selling out?’ ... Putting that into context helped, and the next day I turned [monetization] on. I still feel a little guilty sometimes, especially when people donate on Twitch. ... I think there’s a realization of people who want to support things that they connect to and that they respect” (Interviewee3, 2021). For Int3, they specifically originally only made content for their own personal enjoyment of the process. But now, they are able to reinvest some earnings from the content they make back into making more content. While this is a beneficial cycle of content creation, it is clear that Int3 would not have made that decision without

external influence. This is likely a common situation amongst content creators, especially those who are still new to the platform.

5.1.1.13 Proposition P4-3: Interviewee feels authentic on YouTube.

Proposition P4-3 exists to explore some claims in literature. The first claim states, “The representation of ordinariness, intimacy, and equality by social media celebrities creates a sense of authenticity characterizing [content creators’] videos. However, authenticity is a performed effect and it is always relationship and context-dependent” (Hou, 2019, p. 536). Contrarily, the second claim states (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020, p. 71).,

“Authenticity ... is constantly negotiated and performed for an audience with the goal of being perceived as true or credible. ... Audiences’ perception of authenticity and performativity creates a space in which influencers can leverage their social and cultural capital into profitable arrangements with commercial brands. ... To remain ‘authentic’ while working within commercial spaces, influencers seek to develop credibility with both audiences and commercial brands, a potentially difficult task as these stakeholders have different expectations about their relationships with influencers. ... While these strategies [of projecting a consistent style throughout content] are performed and perceived as authentic, they simultaneously project that the influencer is a credible expert who is worthy of the audience’s trust.”

These claims imply that authenticity in content creators exist only for some incentive other than the content creator’s desire to remain true to themselves. However, this proposition aims to explore if these concepts of authenticity can coexist; content creators can exhibit authenticity by being true to themselves, and content creators can exhibit authenticity in a performative sense to maintain audience trust.

Of the content creators interviewed, every single one felt authentic on the YouTube platform. They felt they were able to properly communicate through their video content who they are as people and their values, when appropriate. However, as mentioned with Proposition P3-3, there is a level of professionalism that must be maintained in order to continue growing a YouTube audience. This, too, was recognized by the content creators interviewed.

Int1 felt authentic on YouTube, stating “I’ve never really tried to be a different person. It’s not like there’s a [Interviewee 1] in real life and a [Interviewee 1] online. ... I want people to refer to me as [Interviewee 1’s first name]. In my content, I might be a little bit more exaggerated. ... But I want to be myself in a fun way and show that I’m a very positive person. ... I don’t think I have changed a ton as a person because of all of this [YouTube success]. I think I’ve changed in my regular life and then that is reflected [in my content]” (Interviewee1, 2021). Int7 expressed a similar sentiment, stating “I’m not a character, I don’t play a character [on my channel]” (Interviewee7, 2021).

Similarly, Int2 mentioned that they are the same person in their content, but with some caveats. Int2 explains this, stating “The only false thing that I play up on my videos is that I seem a lot more confident [than in real life]. ... Especially when I have a pre-written script, I’m a lot more clear in my ideas. ... [How I am online] isn’t that far off from [how I am offline]. It’s just a more put-together version of myself” (Interviewee2, 2021). Int3 echoed this sentiment, saying “I would say for the most part, I’m pretty much what I’m like in real life on the channel. Though obviously, there can be things that frustrate me that I try not to express in my videos. ... I think I tend to always want to exude positivity... whereas you know, every human being is not always 100 percent positive” (Interviewee3, 2021).

For some content creators, such as Int4, being authentic to themselves in their content and to their audience is one of their most important values in content creation. For this reason, Int4 will not hire backend help to create videos, elaborating “I try to keep it real. ... I refuse [to be inauthentic]. I spend time in pre-production, production, post-production. I’m watching [my video], re-watching it, watching it again, re-watching it. If it’s not coming off the floor, it’s not going onto the channel. Just, I refuse. ... I’m not going to put [a video up] up just to get views” (Interviewee4, 2021). From the perspective of Int4, having full creative control over their videos removes any possibility of inauthenticity in their content.

Another example of a content creator upholding a value during their content creation process is that of Int8, who stated “I approach every video with honesty. I feel like honesty has brought me really far in the YouTube world. Something people do not like at all with influencers is dishonesty. If you lie to people, anything like that, people do not like it. I’ve just always been very honest, and I’ve approached things very honestly, and just told it how it is. ... I feel like it’s really resonated with people” (Interviewee8, 2021). Similar to Int4 highly valuing authenticity, Int8 values honesty and transparency with their audience.

However, some content creators felt they could not express who they are truly on YouTube. One such example is Int5, who stated “I think a lot of the times I’m pretty level-headed about how I’m looking at different games. ... When I’m streaming on Twitch, I think my audience there better understands how I am and who I am, more so than YouTube” (Interviewee5, 2021). Int5 explained a frequent scenario they encounter due to YouTube comment sections attributing personality traits to Int5 based wholly on their username. However, for privacy reasons, their channel name cannot be revealed. Int5 gave a clear example of their channel name giving certain audience members the wrong impression of their channel content or their personality. This is more so a case of Int5 being authentic to themselves in their content, but other external factors affecting the picture of who Int5 is according to audience members.

Finally, some content creators find themselves being inauthentic when their channel is young. For example, Int6 stated “What I was doing [at the start of my channel] was, when I was scripting a video, I

heard the voices of other YouTubers that I watched saying my lines instead of me. I was trying to emulate that. ... How would [popular YouTuber] make a video? Because I really liked watching [popular YouTuber]’s stuff. ... If [popular YouTuber] said that, how would it be funny?” (Interviewee6, 2021). However, as Int6 continued creating content, they eventually found their own personal style, likely due to being more experienced in putting their true, authentic self in their content. Int6 supports this, saying “But now I’m thinking: How would I say it? I have come into my own when it comes to my style and my writing. Back then, I was emulating people that I looked up to, and now I’m just trying to do my own thing” (Interviewee6, 2021).

5.1.1.14 Proposition P4-4: Interviewee is exposed to tools to grow their YouTube audience.

Proposition P4-4 is derived from the journal article of Wu, Pedersen, and Salehi (2019) exploring how content creators understand YouTube’s recommender system and how tools to engage with this system are utilized. Findings indicate that content creators understand the YouTube algorithm by creating a persona for the aforementioned recommender system. Content creators engage with this algorithmic persona by fostering relationships with talent agents, using platform-intrinsic backend tools and analytics, and following trends (Wu, Pedersen, & Salehi, 2019). While the claims of this journal article hold too broad of a scope for this thesis, this proposition aimed to explore some of the backend tools of YouTube from the perspective of content creators as mentioned in the article.

Similar to the YouTube algorithm and the findings surrounding Proposition P4-1, there are highly different opinions about tools used to grow a YouTube audience. Additionally, as will be shown with Int8’s experience, there are different opportunities not made available to all content creators.

First, there is the approach of Int1, who focuses on marketing a video to as many people as possible. In this way, they attempt to get as many clicks, and thus views, from those who may be outside of their specific niche. Int1 explains this, saying “I think it’s more just explaining your ideas in a short, easy way that multiple viewers, different people, can understand rather than a small niche community” (Interviewee1, 2021).

Some tools from YouTube are more subtle or initially unclear, such as those mentioned by Int2, who said “A lot of creators will tell smaller creators that they have to have an avenue of viewership, because unfortunately, 100% original content just doesn’t really work, as far as on social media. ... [Pop culture] is an avenue to get people to watch content. So especially ones that link two [pop culture sub-groups] together, that’s two avenues of viewership that cross. And of course, I can usually expect that that video will do better than a video of me just streaming random stuff or streaming my original creations” (Interviewee2, 2021). Another example of how YouTube incentivizes audience growth is seen by the milestones set by the platform. As explained by Int1, “[On YouTube] there are three big milestones, and

they each come with different [plaques called] Play Buttons. There's the silver one for 100k, then the million is a gold one. But there's a lot of creators between 100,000 and a million. But when you reach 100k, the next plaque is a million. And then after that? The next big thing is the 10 million. So, behind the scenes, you have these goals that you're always thinking about reaching that are set by YouTube" (Interviewee1, 2021).

However, there is not clarity amongst content creators about why certain videos perform better than others. For example, Int7 gives their experiences, saying "I don't really anticipate or think too much about the rules that people have laid out for themselves. ... Some say the upload day matters. ... Sure, there are some small guidelines that you can take into consideration a little bit, but I don't take it too seriously, to be honest. ... A good example is about the premiere function. There was a time when people were claiming that if you premiered your videos, their views would be not as good. ... And I've had plenty of videos, including my [most popular] video, all perform amazingly regardless of the upload day or any of the other rules. I premiered it, and it still performed well. I think people are sometimes making themselves paranoid, especially when the views are not as good as they expected. They immediately start looking for outside sources to explain why it's happening" (Interviewee7, 2021).

This confusion is echoed by Int4, who expressed their frustration and said "I can't dwell on it too much: the stats, my analytics. ... Out of the last ten videos I've made, [my most recent] is number one. It's doing really, really well for me! So, typically, this is what I want to see: for the first fifteen hours and eighteen minutes, I would typically have between 810 and 1800 views. I'm at 3450! Wow! What did I do differently? I story-told. I kept it so, so real. People were understanding how I felt, my expression. I was trying to convey that through my story. ... My typical watch time, in hours, is between 20 and 80 for the first 15 hours. Now I'm at 478 hours! Whoa! That means that [the viewers] are watching it. That means that they're being engaged. That means that they're staying! View duration: between 1 minute, 31 seconds and 4 minutes, 4 seconds. [This most recent video] is at 8 minutes, 20 seconds! They're watching it for 8 minutes and 20 seconds! So, when I look at these analytics and YouTube tells me that my views are two point three times higher than usual ... How can I keep this rolling? What did I do? Is it really just the video? Is it the title? Is it the thumbnail? Why are they saying that it's being offered in more of the browse features? I have no idea! It's so hard!" (Interviewee4, 2021). While these analytics are confusing to some content creators, there is still some support for content creators from YouTube through online tutorials.

However, some content creators simply do not put effort into growing their audience in the way YouTube would expect. An example of this is Int3, who said "I've never really looked into any of [the YouTube platform's] content creation stuff. I'll say, in general, YouTube is really ... difficult to figure out, in my opinion. And it's really hard to find, if there are resources, they're not actively and easily

accessible” (Interviewee3, 2021). This lack of accessibility could potentially hinder growth of smaller content creators on the platform.

It appears there is an intentional imbalance of opportunity presented to content creators, as is evident from Int8’s experiences with YouTube Managers. Int8 explains the program, saying “A couple years ago, YouTube did this program called YouTube Managers, and a lot of YouTubers were assigned YouTube Managers at YouTube Headquarters. [The managers] were there to teach you things about YouTube and how to be successful on YouTube and what to do [on YouTube]. A lot of it was just trend tracking, like on Google Trends, and like tracking what's about to get big and what's about to not be big, or looking at current events and morphing your content around current events to get more views and stuff” (Interviewee8, 2021). However, similar to the experience of Int3, this was not effective for all content creators. Specifically, Int8 said “[Morphing your content around current events and trends to get more views is] something I've never really done. All my content is very much health based. When a big fad happens, it appears that a lot of YouTubers turn that fad into something that is relatable for their audience, because it brings in views. Which is smart, it's just something that I've never done, because I never felt like I could do that well or morph my content around things that are popping” (Interviewee8, 2021).

Despite these tools provided by YouTube Managers not being effective for Int8, they continued to explain how the experience in the program was for them. Int8 said, “I was accepted into the [YouTube Manager] program, and I had my YouTube Manager [for one year]. ... It was actually great! ... I don't know how much of the program was performative [by YouTube]. A lot of it was just very ‘This is how you do this. This is how you do that.’” (Interviewee8, 2021). Finally, Int8 revealed that while this opportunity was not presented to every content creator, it perhaps was not as helpful as it could have been. Int8 elaborated, “But if you actually needed help with something, [the YouTube Manager did not know] if [they] can help ... with that. ... Especially with me, I've had a lot of issues with demonetization and age-restriction and stuff, and if I reached out, [the YouTube manager could not help]. And I'd be like, ‘Well, who do I contact then?’” (Interviewee8, 2021). Clearly, this YouTube Manager program was not as effective as YouTube intended, both in that it was not properly utilized in the way the platform expected and that it did not provide real and effective help with actual channel problems like demonetization.

5.1.1.15 Proposition P4-5: Interviewee has confronted their values when making decisions on YouTube.

Proposition P4-5 is derived from literature surrounding ethical decision making and the code of conducts created and followed by content creators on YouTube. The latter concept is presented by

Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, and Elkdale (2020), who argue that content creators make decisions such that they are true to themselves, true to their brand, and true to their audience by creating content the audience wants to consume. The former concept is explored by Glover, Bumpus, Logan, and Ciesla (1997), who argue that decision-making occurs when there are no present value conflicts. Thus, content creators will make decisions if they confront their values, wherein conflicts may arise if being true to themselves and their audience are in conflict. Therefore, this proposition aims to understand how many content creators are aware they have confronted their values when decision-making about their actions on the platform.

Findings from the interviews indicate that each YouTube content creator has confronted their own personal values while on the YouTube platform, especially during decision-making processes. The specific stories and experiences of these content creators can be found in *5.3 Catalogue of challenges for YouTube content creators*, which documents content creators' decision-making experiences.

5.2 CATALOGUE OF VALUES OF YOUTUBE CONTENT CREATORS

As part of the empirical investigation of values, explained in *4.1.2 Deriving values using Value Sensitive Design methodology*, the interviews with YouTube content creators acted as a way to validate or refute values of certain stakeholders. Specifically, content creators were able to provide rich details about their experiences, from which their values were inferred. Inferred values can be found in *Table 5-1: Content creators' expressed values by interviewees with indicative quotes* below, along with content creators who expressed these values during their interview and a relevant interview quote indicating these values. Notably, while a content creator may not have explicitly expressed a specific value in their interview, they may hold that value regardless; some values did not have an opportunity for spotlight due to the interviews being of a fixed duration.

Value	Value expressed by Interviewee(s)...	Example quote(s) of value expressed
Self-expression	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	“I just wanted to throw this [idea] out there, I was like, you know, screw it. I'm just going to throw all this out there and see what people say.” (Interviewee5, 2021)
Creativity	2, 3, 6, 7	“I just wanted a way of just being able to create stuff that I wanted.” (Interviewee2, 2021)
Loyalty	1, 2, 3, 4, 8	“How can I convey to this dude that he should drive across the United States to have me work on his vehicle? Do you know how many automotive dealerships he's going to pass? How can I convey through the camera that he should come and see me?” (Interviewee4, 2021)

Value	Value expressed by Interviewee(s)...	Example quote(s) of value expressed
Community	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	"I've always been very adamant about keeping community and not letting people view me as inaccessible." (Interviewee8, 2021)
Credibility	1, 3, 4, 5	"Here is a wealth of YouTube videos. You can see what I do and how I work." (Interviewee4, 2021)
Authenticity	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	"I could 100% say that what's on camera is my authentic self." (Interviewee6, 2021)
Entertainingness	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	"If you watch a YouTube video, you're watching it because you think the person is funny and you want to be entertained." (Interviewee6, 2021)
Education	3, 4, 5, 7, 8	"I want people to think more critically about the gaming industry in general." (Interviewee5, 2021)
Fiscal opportunity	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	"It's getting to a point where theoretically if I wanted to cut some of my living expenses, then I could do this full time, which is exciting too." (Interviewee3, 2021)
Social justice	1, 2, 5, 8	"I want to, in the future, do a charity stream for mental health or suicide awareness." (Interviewee1, 2021)
Content quality	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	"You have to make quality stuff for people to notice you; either a very groundbreaking idea or something that's very high in terms of production quality." (Interviewee7, 2021)
Pride in self or work	1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8	"It took awhile to be proud and confident of the content and the creator I was." (Interviewee1, 2021)
Appreciation for viewers	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	"It's those people who make your channel possible." (Interviewee7, 2021)
Filling a niche	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	"I want to find my lane, my niche, and I want to do something that I'm proud of." (Interviewee3, 2021)

Table 5-1: Content creators' expressed values by interviewees with indicative quotes

5.2.1 Explication of values as derived from emotions

Values became the primary focus to extract from the interviews due to more substantial supporting evidence in the form of direct quotes from interviewees. However, the emotions of the interviewees were not ignored; rather, they helped to extract the values. Emotions can give an indication of values by showing evidence of preferences, levels of moral acceptability, and explications of decisions (Roeser, 2006).

During these interviews, interviewees were asked about their proudest moments, regrets from their time on the YouTube platform, and advice for their future selves. These open-ended questions subtly

forced self-reflection, basing the interviewees' responsive answers on their immediate emotional responses. These emotions could be seen through their tonal inflection and their facial expressions. Additionally, the interviewees expressed their emotion through extremely personal anecdotes that cannot be used as quotes due to privacy concerns.

5.3 CATALOGUE OF CHALLENGES FOR YOUTUBE CONTENT CREATORS

As mentioned in *5.1.1.15 Proposition P4-5: Interviewee has confronted their values when making decisions on YouTube.*, each content creator interviewed shared their experiences with a specific challenge or decision-making dilemma from their time on YouTube. These experiences are explicated in the following chapter using quotes from interviewees, when possible.

For Int1, they felt a value conflict regarding parasocial phenomena. Prior to participating in this thesis interview, Int1 reflected about the topic and their personal choices that may or may not lead to toxic parasocial relationships. In the interview, Int1 stated, “[Parasocial phenomena] is something that weighs on me as I think about my persona or just who I am. I’m very friendly and positive and welcoming and it’s tough. It’s a tough tightrope to walk, because I want people to enjoy what I’m doing and be part of the positive interactions. But I don’t want people to get the wrong idea and feel like I’m going to be their friend or we’re going to be able to make content together” (Interviewee1, 2021). As a content creator on both YouTube and Twitch, Int1 chose to distance themselves from their audience as individuals. Due to Int1’s audience consisting of younger viewers, they realized, “If you are aware there’s a lot of younger people watching you, then you can hopefully at least attempt to do a better job with that responsibility that I definitely did not ask for. But it is also benefitting me, so I have to try” (Interviewee1, 2021). Int1 elaborated that at one point, they were spending time in-person with another content creator who is occasionally featured on their channel. However, Int1 felt insecure about sharing that they were together, due to potentially uncomfortable messages from those who have formed a strong parasocial bond with Int1 or the other content creator. “I am a public figure hanging out with another public figure, which is an exciting thing in this online world that has been created around us. But he’s also this very close, personal friend. He’s not just a friend for content or for business. We are really good friends. When that intersects with the public eye, it is an interesting thing. ... Me hanging out with someone off camera without the content should not affect [the viewers’] lives in any way, shape, or form.” Int1 also needed to choose between bringing awareness to parasocial relationships and potentially harming their online career. About this decision, Int1 stated, “I am not your friend. Maybe that’s selfish, but this is still a business and my career. I can’t just shoot myself in the foot [by confronting parasocial relationships on my channel]. Or maybe I could for the moral upside, but it’s very complicated and difficult. ... I don’t have any idea of

how to market a video like that to people who are struggling the most with parasocial relationships. ... I try to bring [parasocial relationships] up in streams, but I don't bring it up on my YouTube channel because I don't know how to weave that in a way where it would feel natural and benefit as many people as possible" (Interviewee1, 2021). Through not choosing to create content about parasocial relationships, Int1 is currently stuck in a moral dilemma wherein they value their audience's mental health, but also their personal livelihood and career. Int1 felt as if they could not tackle parasocial phenomena without repercussions to their career online as a content creator.

For Int2, they stated that while they explicitly want to use their platform to positively benefit society and provide fair opportunities for others, they realized they cannot do this without causing some harm to others. Int2 has worked on creating a book related to their content. They further explained, "I want to use my platform for the greater good. That's been a tough battle, because for this book, we were trying to come to decisions on hiring artists. And it's been the hardest thing to budget and make sure that we pay these artists appropriately. In order to pay them appropriately, we have to cut some artists" (Interviewee2, 2021). While Int2 felt negatively about making these decisions, they were more afraid about future, similar projects, stating, "I don't want to be a greedy, awful capitalist! Because we're trying to work on a line of books, we did get approved to work on a second book. And I don't want it to become this awful endeavor to just get as much money as possible. Because I don't ever want that to be the end-goal" (Interviewee2, 2021). For Int2, they could not balance creativity, equal opportunity, and financial success during the development of the book project. While Int2 had to decide to cut some project contributors due to budget restrictions, they also maintain that they do not want to maximize their profits if it hurts the ability for equal opportunities.

Int3 explicitly stated, "[I] don't want to upset or offend anybody. That's never my intention" (Interviewee3, 2021). However, Int3 further explained that "What I didn't realize when I started [my channel] was that a lot of the people that would be watching my videos, whether I know it or not, is probably children. I think that's just a matter of fact on YouTube" (Interviewee3, 2021). While Int3 did not want to have an audience of children, they valued children's experiences online differently than those of adults. "You have to treat kids differently than you treat adults, both in the content you give them but also how you respond to them. [I have to] remind myself that there are children in the audience" (Interviewee3, 2021). In this sense, Int3 has to sacrifice some creativity in order to maintain the safety of the children in their audience, even if they did not intend for their content to be viewed by children.

Int4 highly values both education and entertainment in YouTube content. "You're either educating or you're entertaining. And I have to pick somewhere in the middle," stated Int4 (Interviewee4, 2021). However, Int4 is not comfortable with the actions and content of others on the platform. "I don't

like the pollution on YouTube. ... I see individuals who are making videos that are not conducive to the general public. It's riffraff, it's not necessary, it's not positive, you're not educating. This is not entertainment. And you're getting 5 million views, 10 million views. Like, what?" (Interviewee4, 2021) Int4 further elaborated they will not participate in that type of content creation. "I just don't want to have anything to do with it. I refuse, I will not, put up any content that is going to fall into that category" (Interviewee4, 2021). While Int4 could choose to earn more advertisement revenue from participating in these trends, they chose to value more integrity-driven content creation instead.

Int5 originally started creating YouTube content for their own enjoyment. However, they noted, "I think that this specific career path or job path ...is very tailored to [obsessive] types of people" (Interviewee5, 2021). While Int5 did not intend for their career to cause obsessive behaviors in audience members, they found that it was a reality of using these platforms. "Whether I intend it to be or not, it's just how YouTube and Twitch and all these different social media sites where you can just give people your opinion and talk at them, tend to attract a certain audience a lot of the times" (Interviewee5, 2021). From creating content for their own enjoyment, Int5 was challenged by what types of behaviors these platforms can cause.

Int6 had an experience with other, larger, content creators warning them about being potentially exploited. "Not to expose too much information, but a couple of years ago, the management company that manages some of these [similar content creators] reached out to me to work with me, because they wanted me to come on board. Some of those [similar content creators] that worked under that management reached out to me and said, 'Do not do it. It's predatory. They take a lot of money. It's not a good opportunity.' Ever since then, I've been grateful to those people that kind of saved my skin" (Interviewee6, 2021). Int6 was challenged by choosing whether or not to interact with potentially unhelpful and non-beneficial third-party actors. Had Int6 either not been warned by other content creators or had not believed those content creators had Int6's best interest in mind, they could have been exploited.

Int7 is regularly challenged by a demand from their audience to release a sequel to their most popular video. However, Int7 does not want to release something unless it is creatively fulfilling or something to be proud of, despite the opportunity to earn more money. Int7 stated, "Maybe after [my most popular video]'s original release, I will have something new. But it would have obviously been easy to slap another of those videos out, get another million views or something, I don't know, it depends. But I don't really care about that. I care more about quality and making something I'm proud of than I care about views and making money off of it. That's just secondary for me" (Interviewee7, 2021). This shows that some content creators may continue to uphold their value of pride in their work over potential financial benefits.

Finally, Int8 discusses their challenges with dealing with communicating with their audience. Specifically, Int8 elaborates on the differences between speaking to a camera and speaking to an actual number of people in-person. Int8 stated, “I feel like if I was talking to my audience actually, like I was on a stage talking to them, there is no way I would be able to express myself and talk about deep feelings and any type of vulnerability. ... But when you're by yourself in your bedroom, looking at a camera and you're the only one there, it's just so much easier. It just feels like a therapy session, like you're just talking it out” (Interviewee8, 2021). This has caused Int8 to not pursue certain opportunities for collaboration, specifically saying, “That's why I don't have any content with other people, like, ever. Because it's hard for me to be vulnerable or to be honest when other people are there. It's easy if I know [viewers] are going to watch it, but it's weird. It's like a disconnect. Like, yeah, you're still going to watch it but at least you weren't there [when the video was filmed]” (Interviewee8, 2021). While collaboration with other content creators may be beneficial for their channel, Int8 is challenged by their own personal limitations and social anxiety.

While these eight interviewees make up a small, minute fraction of all content creators on YouTube, it remains clear that every individual content creator faces some form of challenge on the platform. Whether it be challenges with understanding their audience, understanding their influence, or understanding their priorities, all content creators are challenged and face decisions of value conflicts.

6 DISCUSSION

This chapter applies the discoveries of *5 Findings* to the concepts presented in *3 Theoretical Framework*, specifically with a focus on the stakeholders presented in *4 Methodology*. First, a discussion about stakeholders’ connections and interactions, based in the experiment findings, is presented. Then, the concept of moral responsibility will be presented, followed by a discussion about the moral responsibility of specific stakeholders.

Next, content creators’ values, as presented in *Table 5-1: Content creators' expressed values by interviewees with indicative quotes*, and how they act when facing challenges, as presented in *5.3 Catalogue of challenges for YouTube content creators*, are used as the grounds for an inferring discussion with respect to ethics of authenticity and the professional, personal, private, and public selves as presented in *2.1.3 Social media use and personality*.

From these discussions, the effects of parasocial phenomena on the wellbeing and mental health of YouTube users will be discussed. Next, insights gained from conducting this experiment are presented, grounding guidelines for recommendations of future research drawn from the previous discussions.

Finally, these calls for future research provide concrete opportunities for relevant stakeholders to handle managerial implications, presented in the terminal sub-section.

Notably, this thesis was a qualitative study performed by one researcher with a relatively small sample. Thus, all concepts discussed and recommendation guidelines should be considered grounding for future research rather than definitive answers to the subjects.

6.1 CONNECTIONS AND INTERACTIONS AMONGST STAKEHOLDERS

The interviews conducted provided anecdotal evidence from content creators' perspectives which give clear examples of how certain stakeholders connect and interact, specifically with the content creators themselves. These stakeholders are the content creators, the viewers, YouTube managers, content creator managers, and employed help of content creators.

First, interviewees confirmed that viewers connect with content creators through moments of parasocial interaction. These moments create a disconnect or illusionary distance between the content creator and the viewer, as stated by Int6, who said, "I have found that [as a viewer], I think I'm perceiving the people that I'm watching a certain way. And then when I've met them [in person], that shatters. It's almost like there's this weird aura that connects me through my screen [to the content creator]. ... I'm trying purposefully to not have [my content] be an illusion. I want [my content] to be as close as possible to representing who I actually am" (Interviewee6, 2021). In rare cases, the content creator may meet a viewer in person, either incidentally or purposefully, which act as opportunities for potential illusions to be shattered. Furthermore, viewers interact with content creators online via communications through YouTube comments, Twitch chat, direct messages via Twitter or Discord, or e-mail. While these forms of communication may help bridge the disconnect, it is unlikely for every viewer to have a personalized form of communication with the content creator. Thus, interviewees' experiences show parasocial interactions create a disconnect between viewer and content creator, of which is likely to persist throughout the entire duration of their parasocial relationship. The findings provided no evidence to show viewers interact or connect with other stakeholders.

Next, only one content creator was able to provide relevant evidence of their interactions with YouTube managers. This content creator, Int8, discussed their experiences participating in the YouTube Manager program, wherein a manager was assigned to content creators to aid regarding trends, backend problems, or solutions for increased channel growth (Interviewee8, 2021). While Int8 did not find this program particularly useful for their particular YouTube experiences, they did confirm that other in-person assistance from YouTube, such as the YouTube Studio spaces, were helpful. However, the

YouTube Manager program was not wholly helpful for Int8, and it did not provide opportunities for a deeper connection or new forms of interaction with the greater YouTube corporation.

Next, some content creators mentioned their experiences working with content creator managers. These managers are different from YouTube managers, as they act as a bridge between content creators and brands for potential sponsorship opportunities. This allows the content creator to focus on their content rather than navigate potential sponsorships. However, there seems to be a disconnect between whether a content creator manager is desired, as their particular roles were not made clear during the interviews. Specifically, Int3 mentioned their content creator manager was encouraging them to take a sponsorship opportunity, and Int3 made no mention of any potential exploitation from their manager (Interviewee3, 2021). Contrarily, Int6 mentioned their content creator colleagues warned them against receiving a specific type of content creator manager from a multi-channel network, or MCN. Generally, content creator managers from MCNs do not have the interests of the content creator as a priority; they prioritize their own financial gain instead (Interviewee6, 2021). Understanding the difference between content creator managers and those from MCNs is a potential opportunity for future research, assisting future up-and-coming content creators with fiscal opportunities.

Finally, interviewees mentioned their personal struggles with hiring outside employees for editing, animation assistance, or other content creation help. For example, Int6 knew it was not conducive for their physical or mental health to remain the solo creator of their content. However, they were worried their content would be perceived differently, despite not being able to tell the difference between content of their colleagues before and after hiring an editor (Interviewee6, 2021). Similarly, Int4 felt they could not hire an editor now, as that editor would not be able to replicate their personal style; unless the editor had been with Int4 from the beginning, Int4 did not want an editor (Interviewee4, 2021). These experiences show that content creators are worried about their audience perceiving them differently, which could lead to content creator burnout, as indicated by Int6. However, these content creators also mentioned they did not want to experience creator burnout, because they do love what they do.

However, some content creators, such as Int2 and Int7, mentioned that they believed content creators should be more transparent with their audiences to prevent burnout. Specifically, Int7 mentioned that if they could not produce a video on time, they will always tell their audience beforehand, and the audience is relatively understanding (Interviewee7, 2021). Int2 further elaborated on this point, stating that content creators generally do not credit their editors or animators in their videos, misleading viewers into thinking all edits and effects are done by the content creator alone. Int2 elaborated their worries about this, stating that younger or newer content creators are thus more susceptible to creator burnout, as they believe they must abide by a specific schedule and create content exclusively alone (Interviewee2, 2021).

Again, these experiences show that content creators do not want to experience creator burnout but feel there is insufficient guidance to prevent it, especially for newer creators.

Notably, parasocial phenomena are a complex issue. However, their complexity should not force research and actionable change to be neglected. If content creators or viewers are experiencing detrimental mental or physical health effects attributed to parasocial phenomena, then it is necessary for those morally responsible to act.

6.2 UNDERSTANDING MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

From philosophical literature, one may be attributed *moral responsibility* if “the person is an appropriate candidate for reactive attitudes, such as blame or praise” (van de Poel, 2015, p. 475). For someone to be considered responsible, one must have *moral agency*, wherein the actor is aware and their actions are intentional, one must act *voluntarily*, one must have *knowledge of consequences* of their actions, there is clear *causality*, wherein there is a clear connection between the (in)action of the actor and the outcome, and one *transgressed a norm* (van de Poel, 2015).

6.2.1 Attributing moral responsibility

In the following sub-sections, stakeholders in each stakeholder category, presented in *4.1 Stakeholders and their respective values*, moral responsibility will be attributed or refuted for relevant (in)actions, along with argumentation for each. These discussions of moral responsibility will attempt to begin to answer the actors or stakeholders morally responsible for the presence and occurrence of parasocial phenomena on the YouTube platform.

6.2.1.1 Moral responsibility of YouTube users

The stakeholder category of YouTube users includes the stakeholders of YouTube content creators and YouTube viewers.

As investigated in *5.1.1 Exploring evidence from interviews related to propositions*, YouTube content creators are wholly morally responsible for the content they upload to their channel due to their full creative control and receiving financial benefits from their content. Specifically, content creators have moral agency, upload content voluntarily, and are aware that their video may consequently be viewed by others. Thus, if there is sufficient evidence of causality between the uploading of a video and consequential effects, the content creator remains morally responsible. For example, if a content creator uploaded a video endorsing an illegal act, then an increased surge of that illegal act is performed, the content creator would be at least partially morally responsible for their audience performing that illegal act should evidence prove sufficient. While the actions of each individual audience member are wholly

their own, and thus they are responsible, it is perhaps possible that they would not have felt incentivized to take those actions without being influenced by a content creator. Similarly, if a content creator hosts a charity event and audience members donate to the promoted charity, the content creator is morally responsible for this increased revenue to the charity. Again, while the individual audience member is responsible for donating to charity, they were incentivized to act by the content creator, thus both are attributed some level of moral responsibility. In both of these hypothetical examples, the content creator their actions were intentional, meaning the content creator showed moral agency in these situations, and they are morally responsible for consequences.

This notion of intentionality is important for moral agency when attributing moral responsibility. Interview findings show that while some content creators are not aware of parasocial phenomena, they are aware of their uploading of content consequently causing indicators of parasocial phenomena. For example, Int8 had not previously heard of parasocial phenomena, but admitted that they intentionally fostered a community of like-minded people to work together towards healthy living (Interviewee8, 2021). Similarly, content creators previously aware of parasocial phenomena understand their uploading of content may consequently cause parasocial phenomena. For example, Int1 mentioned their concerns about presenting themselves in their content being the cause of parasocial phenomena, further asking themselves what they could do prevent parasocial relationship formation (Interviewee1, 2021). Both of these interviewees understood there were consequences to uploading content wherein their audience members desire a connection with them on a personal level.

However, despite being aware of these consequential outcomes, interview findings show that content creators do not intend for audience members to form parasocial relationships with them. Thus, content creators cannot be attributed moral responsibility for the formation of parasocial relationships despite being morally responsible for uploading content for which catalyzes parasocial phenomena. By extension, content creators cannot be held morally responsible for the effects of parasocial phenomena, such as social media addiction (de Bérail, Guillon, & Bungener, 2019), influencing audience members' purchase intentions (Sokolova & Kefi, 2019), fostering viewers' obsessive behaviors and triggering wishful identification (Tolbert & Drogos, 2019), easing chronic loneliness (Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2008), or acting as a long-distance friend to audience members (Berryman & Kavka, 2017).

It could be argued that due to the intentionality of specific content creators, they are morally responsible for some effects of parasocial phenomena, such as being a friend to audience members through their content, easing loneliness, and influencing purchase intentions. However, more research is needed to empirically deduce what effects of parasocial phenomena are intended, and thus what effects attribute to moral responsibility.

As previously mentioned, parasocial phenomena are naturally occurring phenomena which happen due to humans being empathetic and desiring a connection with other humans (Horton & Wohl, 1956). As such, YouTube viewers cannot be held morally responsible for creating a parasocial bond with content creators, as they do not hold moral agency over parasocial formation. Furthermore, some viewers may not have knowledge of the consequences; namely, younger viewers do not understand that repeatedly watching the same content creator may cause a parasocial relationship with that content creator. While some older audience members may have knowledge of these consequences, still no moral responsibility can be attributed, as parasocial phenomena do not occur voluntarily or intentionally.

6.2.1.2 Moral responsibility of YouTube, LLC

The stakeholder category of YouTube, LLC includes the stakeholders of YouTube executives, YouTube managers, YouTube engineers, and YouTube employees.

There is some argumentation to be made that the YouTube platform itself is responsible for the existence of parasocial phenomena on itself; if the YouTube platform hosts videos wherein parasocial phenomena may be known to occur, then the YouTube platform is responsible for any consequential outcomes. However, it is not possible to attribute moral responsibility to a socio-technical system, as it acts as a non-human actor with no identifiable morals or values. Thus, it is necessary to critically assess the stakeholders involved in creating, maintaining, and utilizing the YouTube platform to determine if they are to be considered morally responsible for the platform's existence of parasocial phenomena.

First, it is not possible for moral responsibility to be attributed to the common employee of YouTube, as they likely do not have any actionable power regarding this subject, and therefore cannot be considered an appropriate person for blame or praise.

Next, it is possible to attribute some moral responsibility to YouTube engineers for the existence of parasocial phenomena on the YouTube platform, though only due to their moral responsibility for creating the YouTube algorithm. As the YouTube algorithm prioritizes views and keeping audience members on the platform, it would naturally create and strengthen parasocial relationships to increase viewership. However, while YouTube engineers did create the YouTube algorithm, it was created in order to streamline the user-experience on the platform (Covington, Adams, & Sargin, 2016). It was never an intention for YouTube to become a platform of parasocial phenomena, nor was it an intention of the YouTube algorithm to create and strengthen parasocial bonds. Unfortunately, more research is needed specifically on the intentions of YouTube engineers regarding both the YouTube platform and the YouTube algorithm to empirically deduce how much, if any, moral responsibility should be attributed.

Finally, YouTube managers and executives are in a similar situation as YouTube engineers; they intended for the YouTube platform to earn money via retained viewership but may or may not have intended for parasocial phenomena to occur. There is definitively moral responsibility attributed to these two stakeholders, as there is a clear causality between YouTube and parasocial phenomena. However, whether these stakeholders had knowledge of consequences or intentional moral agency in this correlation remains unclear and requires future research.

6.2.1.3 Moral responsibility of other stakeholders

The stakeholder category of other stakeholders includes the stakeholders of advertisers on YouTube, content creator managers, employed help of content creators, and external stakeholders. These stakeholders have little to no moral agency regarding this case, and thus little to no moral responsibility can be attributed to them.

6.2.1.4 Parasocial phenomena on YouTube: Who is morally responsible?

Where to assign definitive moral responsibility is perhaps unanswerable. While it is clear where to assign blame for some causal precursors to the current situation, the intentions of those targets of blame are unclear, and thus moral responsibility cannot be wholly attributed. Potential targets of blame include YouTube executives, who are to blame for their platform's consequences; YouTube engineers, who are to blame for creating the YouTube algorithm and shaping the platform's present actions; YouTube content creators, who are wholly morally responsible for uploading content to the platform and thus kindling potential parasocial phenomena; and content creator managers and advertisers on YouTube, who are financially benefit from parasocial figureheads promoting products. Each of these targets of blame could be argued to be morally responsible, depending on their intentions to be found in future research.

Despite these potential targets of blame, no single stakeholder intended for parasocial phenomena to overtake the YouTube platform. No content creator intends to be the target of a parasocial relationship, and no viewer intends to form parasocial bonds with content creators. Rather, the current ecosystem of parasocial phenomena on YouTube is one that cannot be retroactively solved by assigning blame. Instead, all stakeholders should accept they are experiencing the consequences of parasocial phenomena on YouTube, accept some level of moral responsibility, and work together to act, educate, raise awareness, and prevent any potential harmful effects of parasocial phenomena unto YouTube users.

6.3 ETHICS OF AUTHENTICITY APPLIED TO CONTENT CREATORS

YouTube content creators rely on *ethics of authenticity* to ground their decision-making “premised on two central tenets: (1) being true to one's self, and by extension, one's brand; (2) being true

to one's audience by providing it with the content it seeks" (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020, p. 69). In doing so, content creators apply their own individual understanding of authenticity such that their decisions reflect them as authentic individuals to their audience. Especially when partnering with commercial brands and partaking in influencer marketing, content creators appear authentic by reinforcing trust between themselves and their audience through transparency and disclosure statements (Wellman, Stoldt, Tully, & Ekdale, 2020).

While all content creators interviewed claimed they felt authentic on the YouTube platform, it is necessary to analyze whether they were truly authentic to each of their selves equally. Specifically, the decision-making of content creators is analyzed with respect to the two core tenets of ethics of authenticity. This analysis considers which self or selves are driving these decisions from the professional, personal, private, and public selves as explicated in *2.1.3.1 Authenticity of individuals: The professional, personal, private, and public self*. Finally, a critical analysis will be applied to the branded self, as explicated in *2.1.3.2 Authenticity of individuals: The branded self* to understand if ethics of authenticity is properly followed by this self.

6.3.1 Analysis of the professional self and the personal self via ethics of authenticity

YouTube content creators highlight their personality traits and behaviors of the personal self in their content, filtered by the professional self. The professional self aims to use skills both from content creation, but also growing a YouTube channel. If showing too much of the personal self would sabotage the quality of a video, the professional self will restrain the personal self. In this way, the content creator is authentic to themselves, holding true the first tenet, but only to an extent.

The second tenet of ethics of authenticity may or may not be met depending on the content creator's specific audience and desired content. For example, Int3 felt they did not yet know who their audience was comprised of, and thus felt unable to properly create videos for that audience. As such, Int3 chose to select a target audience and craft their videos for that target audience (Interviewee3, 2021). While Int3, and many other content creators in a similar situation, attempted to showcase their personal self in their content, if the audience does not align with this content, then the second tenet cannot be met.

6.3.1.1 Analysis of the branded self as a blend between personal self and professional self

The branded self of content creators allows content creators to remain true to their personality traits while growing and monetizing their YouTube channel. A truly authentic branded self follows both tenets by posting brand-appropriate content that is both true to themselves as a content creator and desired by their audience.

The level of which the professional self and personal self affect the branded self is not yet clear and requires future research. Furthermore, the authenticity of content creators' branded selves to their private or public selves also requires future research.

6.3.2 Analysis of the private self and the public self via ethics of authenticity

Arguably, the private self of the content creator is the most authentic self, as this is the self that works to set boundaries with others. Should a content creator believe something they mentioned while recording a video is not appropriate to share with their audience members, their private self will set that boundary and remove that private detail from the final video. Choosing to set these boundaries and actively enforcing them satisfies the first tenet of ethics of authenticity.

The second tenet is met if the content creator feels their audience does not demand content that crosses the private boundaries set by the private self. However, if the audience consistently demands these boundaries be crossed, the content creator must be transparent and explicate why these boundaries cannot be crossed such that both tenets are met. On the other hand, if the content creator chooses to cross the boundary to provide sought content for their audience, the content creator breaks the first tenet by not being true to the private self. Similarly, if the content creator chooses to not cross the boundary but is not transparent about this decision, the content creator breaks the second tenet by neglecting the content sought by the audience.

The direct contrast to the private self is the public self, consisting of all information publicly available about the individual published either by the individual themselves or by external sources. While the content creator can publish information about them either in their own content or on other social media platforms, much of the content creator's public self is not supervised by the content creator. Thus, misinformation about the content creator from an external source or potential misrepresentation of themselves via their content may cause the first tenet not to hold, as the public self is not true to the content creator's authentic self.

Regarding the second tenet, it will hold true if the content creator's uploads are genuine and desired by their audience members. In this case, their public self is authentic. However, if a content creator is uploading content inauthentic to appease their audience, the second tenet does not hold.

Content creators wishing to remain authentic to both their private self and public self should ensure that they are setting, enforcing, and maintaining boundaries with their audience members and uploading content that feels true to them. Additionally, content creators should try to understand what type of content their audience desires and be transparent if those desires cross a boundary set by the private self or misrepresents the public self. Unfortunately, the public self of the content creator may

always be slightly inauthentic due to misinformation published by external sources, which is not easily remedied by the content creator themselves.

6.3.3 Indications of potentially ignored selves

Content creators may be fully authentic and follow both tenets of ethics of authenticity yet may possibly neglect or ignore certain selves. For example, a content creator who prioritizes their branded self and professional self, wherein all content is created for monetary gain and channel growth, may neglect their personal self if their content is not indicative of their personality traits. Similarly, a content creator whose personal self, professional self, or branded self exposes their personal life or encourages their audience members to breach their privacy ignores boundaries set by the private self.

Future research regarding the specific priorities of content creators, along with the correlation to the psychological selves purporting those priorities, is needed for more in-depth and grounded discussions.

6.4 PARASOCIAL PHENOMENA AND YOUTUBE CONTENT CREATORS

Findings from the experiment show the effects of parasocial phenomena can be simultaneously both positive or negative: viewers and content creators alike feel connected to a community, but they may feel disconnected from individuals within that community. Furthermore, when content creators try to live a virtuous life, they are confronted with parasocial relationships they foster potentially not abiding as virtuous friendships. Thus, these parasocial relationships do not contribute to the virtuous life of viewers.

When the PSI-Scale was developed, one correlation the authors intended to investigate was media consumption's effect on loneliness (Rubin & Perse, 1987). These experiment findings show parasocial phenomena does correlate with loneliness, both in that parasocial interactions ease loneliness, and that lonelier people are more likely to form parasocial relationships.

First, interviewees provided evidence that their content assisted viewers with easing loneliness, either by brightening their day or being a potential confidant, albeit impersonally. For example, all content creators mentioned that they had experiences wherein a viewer communicated that their day was better from the creator uploading new content. Another specific example includes interviewees Int1, Int3, Int4, Int7, and Int8, who all mentioned their audience felt like a community, and viewers' comments corroborated these feelings. Finally, all content creators said they felt connected to their audience as a whole, showing they felt less lonely due to their audience as a community. These experiences show community ease the sense of loneliness in both viewers and content creators.

However, parasocial phenomena do still have negative effects. While parasocial interactions may ease loneliness, it is possible for obsessive behaviors to stem from parasocial phenomena. Specifically, all content creators mentioned that they believed no viewer should be obsessed with them or their content. Other content creators, such as Int1 and Int2, felt they would need to act in order to prevent these obsessions from deepening, yet was unsure of how.

Finally, regarding virtuous friendships, content creators were aware that their position as an online friend to their audience was not a genuine friendship; whether a content creator knew of parasocial relationships or not, they felt it was unfeasible to provide personal one-to-one attention to each audience member. However, it is possible for content creators to aim for as virtuous a parasocial relationship as possible. From Vallor (2012), virtuous friendships exhibit reciprocity, empathy, self-knowledge, and shared life. As content creators share their experiences with viewers through their content, they are fulfilling the primal impulse to share and communicate with each other; content creators are attempting reciprocity. Content creators who show their emotions in their content fulfill the biological impulse to feel others' emotions and form deeper connections with them; they are attempting empathy. The final two indicators of a virtuous friendship can be fulfilled by content creators: self-knowledge and shared life. Content creators who reflect on their societal role attempt to fulfill self-knowledge, while content creators who foster and flourish their online community experience a shared life. However, each of these four indicators cannot be fully satisfied. It is not possible for viewers to form deeper connections with content creators, reciprocate with their personal stories on a meaningful level, or sustain a deep and meaningful relationship with the content creator or individuals in the community. Thus, as much as content creators attempt to act virtuously regarding their parasocial relationships, it is not wholly possible without dedicating equal time to each individual viewer. As previously mentioned, content creators found this to be unfeasible due to the mass quantity of viewers.

6.5 FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.5.1 Guidance for future research from executed experiment insights

After executing this research, some valuable insights for future research designs have been extrapolated. First, if possible, it is recommended to interview content creators with another interviewer present such that the values derived from emotions can be corroborated by more than a single researcher. Next, it is suggested to contact as many content creators as possible; there is no subscriber milestone too high or too low to interview. While the larger content creators may not respond to interview requests, there is a greater chance for interview if the researchers are able to compensate the content creator in some form. Finally, some recommendations for future research are presented in the next sub-section, 0

Analysis through values versus analysis through emotions, wherein lessons learned from analyzing content creators' values over their emotions are presented. Analysis through values versus analysis through emotions

While this thesis intended to focus more on analyzing content creators' emotions, it became apparent from the interviews that it was clearer to base analyses on values derived from emotions. Analysis through values was preferred due to being able to corroborate derived values with direct quotations. Furthermore, as there was only one researcher to determine emotions of content creators from interviews, it was not feasible to base all analyses on potentially misunderstood emotions.

However, the preference of values for analysis over emotions did present some limitations to the study. Namely, while there were direct quotes to use as evidence for values, these values were inferred from emotions before any analysis was conducted. Thus, potential bias could have been introduced at this inference stage. Another limitation to the study is due to privacy concerns: the interviews and their transcripts cannot be viewed by anybody but the researcher who conducted the interviews to protect the privacy of the interviewees. Thus, the findings and inferences of the interviewer cannot be corroborated by another researcher.

From these lessons, some recommendations for future research are derived. First, it is highly recommended to conduct the interviews in a conversational manner; content creators are used to talking with their audience in a conversational manner and are more likely to share their true selves in this manner. However, if the future research intends to specifically target emotions and values, then it is recommended to have open-ended focus questions to be included throughout the interview. Thus, the interview is kept more conversational while still maintaining the desired focus on emotions and values. Finally, if the future research intends to investigate the values of the content creators, it is recommended to focus on the content creators' emotions of accomplishment, pride, regret, and disappointment to infer their prioritized values.

6.5.2 Calls for future research to handle managerial implications

As mentioned throughout this chapter, there are many opportunities for future research. Findings from these could present stakeholders with tangible recommendations to execute such that the negative effects of parasocial phenomena on YouTube are subdued.

Future research that enumerates how content creators view parasocial relationships as the parasocial target should be conducted to show that there is an observable effect on these content creators. It is recommended for future research to create, validate, and employ the use of an inverted parasocial scale to be answered by content creators. In this way, content creators' opinions regarding parasocial

relationships can be enumerated, and potentially these empirical results can be compared to a traditional parasocial scale answered by viewers. An example of an inverted parasocial scale can be found in *Appendix B: Inverted Parasocial Interaction Scale*. Findings from these empirical scales may be presented to YouTube executives or managers to show that their socio-technical system affects content creators and viewers in an observable manner.

It is recommended that direct stakeholders act to raise awareness about parasocial phenomena occurring on the YouTube platform. During this campaign, both the positive and negative effects of parasocial phenomena should be highlighted; future research should focus on how to encourage the positive effects while discourage the negative effects. Furthermore, it is recommended that YouTube users, specifically content creators and viewers, educate themselves about parasocial phenomena if they intend to continue to use the YouTube platform. Content creators could potentially bring awareness to the topic in their content. However, future research would need to be performed beforehand to ensure that this type of content will not be suppressed by the YouTube algorithm, as content creators should not be punished for raising awareness.

Next, it is recommended that YouTube as a platform should spearhead education and awareness about parasocial phenomena occurring on the platform. More specifically, in the same way that misinformation about COVID-19 was spread during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, there should be a rollout of awareness brought to parasocial phenomena. This is especially important, as the subscription feature is an integral part of the YouTube platform, and those who repeatedly expose themselves to the same content creator are more likely to develop a parasocial relationship with them (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). However, future research is needed to corroborate this claim, along with provide examples of education and awareness plans for YouTube to employ.

It is important to recognize that YouTube is a socio-technical system with an immeasurable number of users every single day. However, as UGC becomes the mainstream content consumed by viewers, YouTube needs to consider their transparency levels to all users and ask if it is morally responsible to continue their current practices. Future research should attempt to gain insight on YouTube's inner workings, level of awareness regarding moral responsibility, and provide guidelines for redesigning the YouTube platform with a Value Sensitive Design approach. This future research should re-evaluate the YouTube algorithm such that what values it promotes are clear to YouTube, content creators, and viewers. This does not mean that the inner workings of the YouTube algorithm should be exposed; rather, indications of what the YouTube algorithm does not value is sufficient. Future research results should provide content creators clarity regarding how their content is promoted on the platform. Additionally, these results can enlighten viewers about why they are recommended certain videos.

Another such way in which future research can assist content creators on the platform is to investigate and ground recommendations regarding operable changes to the YouTube platform. These changes could include backend tools and their effects, targeting audience demographics, and parasocial phenomena indicators and identifiers. More specifically, future research should emphasize that content creators should have more control over their audience and its demographic. In this way, channels that wish to remain small have the ability to, and channels that do not wish to be promoted to children, for example, are free to create child-unfriendly content.

Finally, future research should craft some forms of safeguards for young or vulnerable audiences to be implemented into the YouTube platform. One example of this could be performed by YouTube engineers by implementing a feature into the YouTube algorithm such that once a parasocial relationship between viewer and content creator is identified, that content creator's videos will not be recommended as heavily to that viewer. While this is not the only option for a safeguard, it is necessary for YouTube executives and managers to communicate with content creators about any and all potential future changes to the YouTube platform once the safeguard is under development. In this way, content creators' livelihoods will not be negatively affected by any platform changes, or at least content creators can prepare themselves for future changes. However, these are just guidelines for recommendations; more research is needed to give concrete recommendations about what safeguards should be employed and how to implement them without negatively affecting content creators on the platform.

However, it may be unlikely for future researchers to gain inside knowledge about YouTube platform's inner workings. But this call for future research is important, as while YouTube may desire to keep trade secrets, if their actions can be proven detrimental to users' mental health, that is morally wrong. As content creators have emphasized during their interviews, they are honest with their audience whenever possible, as they would not have a platform or a career without said audience. Similarly, YouTube should be honest with their content creators, as the YouTube platform would not exist in its current state without them.

7 CONCLUSION

This thesis accumulated the values, experiences, and challenges for YouTube content creators, especially in dealing with being the target of parasocial phenomena by their audience. This was performed by conducting interviews with eight content creators who represent a cross-section of all content creators on the platform.

Furthermore, this thesis intends to fill the knowledge gap surrounding the other side of parasocial phenomena, namely the target of parasocial relationships. Much literature exists surrounding those who form parasocial relationships with, for example, online content creators. However, future research must still be done to consider the ethical implications and effects of being a target of parasocial phenomena. This thesis intends to be a baseline for this future research by being a guide to show where YouTube content creators are already struggling or have previously struggled. Finally, future research is needed to perhaps perform a value-sensitive re-design of the YouTube platform such that all stakeholders and their values are equally considered.

The main research question of this thesis was: *What are some of the moral challenges experienced by content creators on YouTube?* This question was answered by answering the following sub-questions:

RQ1. Who are the key stakeholders and their respective values involved?

RQ2. How and to what extent do content creators experience parasocial phenomena on the YouTube platform?

RQ3. What challenges do content creators experience when connecting with their audience or expressing themselves in their content?

RQ4. How does the YouTube platform influence the ways in which content creators are able to communicate their values to their audience?

RQ5. How should moral responsibility be attributed among the main actors?

RQ1 was answered in *4.1.2.1 Conceptual investigation stage for values of stakeholders* and *5.2 Catalogue of values of YouTube content creators*. RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 was answered through interviews performed by the author, wherein the results can be found in *5 Findings*. Explication of what interview questions corresponded with each sub-research question can be found in *4.3.1 Explication of probes per question*. Finally, RQ5 is answered in *6 Discussion*.

YouTube is a socio-technical system wherein UGC is the backbone of the platform. As content creators have emphasized during their interviews, they are honest with their audience whenever possible, as they would not have a platform or a career without said audience. Similarly, YouTube should be honest with their content creators, as the YouTube platform would not exist in its current state without them. Future studies into YouTube must consider this, alongside the fact that YouTube's parent company has the fiscal resources to change the platform for the betterment of all users: content creators and viewers alike.

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8 APPENDICES

8.1 APPENDIX A: IN-DEPTH OVERVIEW OF EXISTING PARASOCIAL SCALES

This appendix conceptualizes and discusses some criticisms of the following existing parasocial scales: *Audience-Persona Interaction Scale* (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000), *Parasocial Interaction Process Scales* (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008), and the *Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale* (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). As mentioned in 3.3 *Existing frameworks for measuring parasocial phenomena*, this is not an exhaustive list of all parasocial frameworks. Other parasocial frameworks include the *Multiple-Parasocial Relationships Scale* (Tuchakinsky, 2010) and the *Celebrity-Persona Parasocial Interaction Scale* (Bocarnea & Brown, 2006), of which are analyzed and scrutinized in the journal article *Parasocial Interaction and Parasocial Relationship: Conceptual Clarification and a Critical Assessment of Measures* by Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen (2016, pp. 9-13).

8.1.1 Audience-Persona Interaction Scale (API-Scale)

Due to existing investigation tools to quantitatively determine audience parasocial interaction not being rooted in open-ended qualitative responses and item analysis, or measuring complex parasocial phenomena with few statements, a new scale was developed to accurately reflect parasocial process dimensions between audience members and sitcom comedy characters (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000).

The Audience-Persona Interaction Scale, or API-Scale, is a 22-item Likert questionnaire, with the low to high range of 1 through 5 correlating to strongly disagree and strongly agree, respectively. The API-Scale was originally a 47-item scale, and of the 47-items, 3 were adapted from the PSI-Scale, and 44 were derived from an open-ended survey conducted by the authors (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000).

The essay-type responses allowed the authors to reference various aspects and intricacies of parasocial interactions when crafting the API-Scale.

“Subjects were asked to respond in essay form to the following questions based on their favorite situation comedy: 1) What is it about the character son your favorite sitcom that attracts you? 2) Describe examples of your reactions to and interactions with program characters when you watch your favorite sitcom; 3) Discuss the similarities you see between your friends and family and the characters on your favorite sitcom; 4) Discuss the similarities you see between yourself and the characters on your favorite sitcom. Responses to the open-ended questionnaire suggest that although many people interact parasocially with their favorite sitcom characters, the degree of intensity varies with the individual. This is consistent with past qualitative research. Statements

made by a number of individuals also referred to the development of this relationship over time.”
(Auter & Palmgreen, 2000, p. 81)

While initially the API-Scale contained 47-items, after analysis iterations and a scree test emphasizing four prominent factors, the API-Scale was reduced to 22-items (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). Each of these items correlates to one of four parasocial factors: *Identification with Favorite Character*, *Interest in Favorite Character*, *Group Identification/Interaction*, and *Favorite Character Problem Solving Abilities*. The 22-items of the API-Scale can be seen in *Table 8-1: The 22-items from the API-Scale* (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000, pp. 82-83) wherein FAV refers to the subject’s favorite character from the show, and CHARS refers to the characters from the show.

Audience-Persona Interaction Scale: Parasocial Factor Items	
1. FAV reminds me of myself.	12. I like hearing the voice of FAV.
2. I have the same qualities as FAV.	13. CHARS interactions [is] similar to mine with friends.
3. I seem to have the same beliefs or attitudes as FAV.	14. CHARS interactions [is] similar to mine with family.
4. I have the same problems as FAV.	15. My friends are like CHARS.
5. I can imagine myself as FAV.	16. I’d enjoy interacting with CHARS and my friends at the same time.
6. I can identify with FAV.	17. While watching [the] show, I felt included in the [CHARS] group.
7. I would like to meet the actor who played FAV.	18. I can relate to CHARS’ attitudes.
8. I would watch the actor [of FAV] on another program.	19. I wish I could handle problems as well as FAV.
9. I enjoyed trying to predict what FAV would do.	20. I like the way FAV handles problems.
10. I hoped FAV achieved his or her goals.	21. I would like to be more like FAV.
11. I care about what happens to FAV.	22. I usually agreed with FAV.

Table 8-1: The 22-items from the API-Scale (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000, pp. 82-83)

While the API-Scale attempted to quantitatively analyze the parasocial interactions via extrapolating indicators from quantitative data, the API-Scale remains relatively underused, perhaps due to its emphasis on fictional television characters. Additionally, the validation of the API-Scale asks participants about their familiarity with the fictional show used in the experiment. However, as the authors mentioned during the API-Scale development, parasocial relationships develop over time and require multiple moments of parasocial interactions (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000). Yet, the API-Scale’s application implies that the participants will not only like the characters on the show and experience enough parasocial interactions during one television episode, but that participants will indeed have a favorite character. Thus, the API-Scale is more suited towards analyzing the relationship between

exposure amount with a media figure and audience affection levels over time, either with fictional or real-life parasocial relationships. In other words, the API-Scale best suits cases investigating the correlation between the number of parasocial interactions and the strength of the parasocial relationship.

8.1.2 Parasocial Interaction Process Scales (*PSI-Process Scales*)

Developed in 2008, the Parasocial Interaction Process Scales specifically aim to measure PSI and PSI intensity after media exposure rather than PSR. Contrary to previous parasocial phenomena measurements, the PSI-Process Scales take a psychometric analysis approach, observing media consumers' cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses when exposed to media figures (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

The authors felt existing parasocial and interpersonal communications research was lacking in understanding PSI as *parasocial processing*, defined as “the degree to which the individual interacts psychologically with a media character” (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008, p. 388). Indicators of parasocial processing are cognitive, affective, or behavioral responses and includes increased interest in a media figure, extensive or intrusive thoughts about the media figure, dreams or fantasizing about the media figure, speaking directly to an on-screen media figure, tense movements, and quick-moving gestures or facial expressions (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). The authors further elaborate on PSI when understood as parasocial processing, stating:

“Due to a wide range of concurring processes, PSI can be classified... as a kind of *meta-concept* that is composed of some narrower concepts, such as: attention, comprehension, knowledge activation, evaluation, social comparison, sympathy, empathy, emotional contagion, or physical activity” (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008, p. 387).

The PSI-Process Scales consist of 14 individual 5-point Likert 8-item questionnaires, with an initial 6-point Likert question to determine PSI valence, or, how sympathetic the participant previously felt towards the media figure prior to applying the scales (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). The PSI-Process Scales measure the types and quantity of responses—cognitive, affective, and behavioral—participants feel after exposure to a media figure. The connection between user responses and parasocial processes, along with examples of questions from the PSI-Process Scales questionnaires, can be seen in *Table 8-2: Users' psychological responses and underlying parasocial processes, correlated to item examples of PSI-Process Scales* (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008, p. 389). Furthermore, the PSI-Process Scales are validated against external criteria of interpersonal, asymmetrical affection: obtrusiveness, persistence, physical attractiveness of persona, character attractiveness of persona, task attractiveness of persona, and presence (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

Parasocial Interaction Process Scales: Psychological responses, parasocial processes, with item examples		
Response	Process	Item example
Cognitive	1. attention allocation	I carefully followed the behavior of PERSONA.
	2. comprehension of persona's action and situation	I hardly thought about why PERSONA did certain things s/he did. (inverted)
	3. activation of prior media and life experience	I kept wondering if I knew persons that are similar to PERSONA.
	4. evaluations of persona and persona's actions	I became aware of aspects of PERSONA that I really liked or disliked.
	5. anticipatory observation	I kept asking myself how things would evolve around PERSONA.
	6. construction of relations between persona and self	Occasionally, I wondered if PERSONA was similar to me or not.
Affective	1. sympathy/antipathy	Sometimes I really loved PERSONA for what s/he did.
	2. empathy/counter empathy	If PERSONA felt bad, I felt bad as well; if PERSONA felt good, I felt good as well.
	3. emotion contagion	PERSONA left me rather sober and unaffected. (inverted)
Behavioral	1. nonverbal behavior (i.e mimics, gestures)	Whatever PERSONA said or did – I kept still. (inverted)
	2. (para-)verbal behavior	Occasionally, I said something to PERSONA on impulse.
	3. behavioral intentions	Sometimes I felt like speaking out on PERSONA.

Table 8-2: Users' psychological responses and underlying parasocial processes, correlated to item examples of PSI-Process Scales (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008, p. 389)

While the PSI-Process Scales gives a clear indication of how humans psychologically process parasocial interactions, grounded in research of interpersonal communications, social psychology, and media psychology, the Scales is not exhaustively perfect. Certain users may experience or express parasocial processing differently, and thus skew the usefulness of the PSI-Process Scales. Furthermore, the Scales are more difficult to apply to non-fictional media figures, as the more popular a media figure, the greater likelihood of users already sympathizing and thus being less affected by multiple media exposure moments, and vice-versa. Finally, the authors could only validate the PSI-Process Scales in German, and the English version needed further psychometric testing (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008), and thus may not be applicable for the subject of this study.

8.1.3 Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale (*EPSI-Scale*)

The EPSI-Scale was created to understand the factors surrounding the intensity level of parasocial interactions and the correlated level of enjoyment viewers attain from consuming media (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). The authors addressed potential causes of a parasocial interaction moment. The more these factors occur during a moment of media interaction, the more intense the parasocial interaction, and thus the more enjoyment from media consumption and greater level of intimacy generated during the parasocial interaction (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). These potential causes of a parasocial interaction include the *addressing style of performer* towards the viewer, the *perceived attractiveness* of the performer by the viewer, and the viewer's *perspective-taking ability* (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

8.1.3.1 *Causes of a parasocial interaction*

8.1.3.1.1 *Addressing style of performer*

How the audience is addressed by the media performer contributes to a stronger parasocial experience when the audience is specifically acknowledged by the performer. These moments of addressing the audience may also be called *breaking the fourth wall*, wherein the audience is directly addressed by the performers within the media itself (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016). The addressing style is distinguished as either *bodily addressing* or *verbal addressing* (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

Nonverbal, physical movements that address the audience, such as head or eye adjustments to look towards or into the camera, triggers increased levels of intimacy and understanding; these moments simulate real life social encounters (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). These are forms of bodily addressing, often used by performers to subtly engage the audience in an exclusively visual manner.

On the other hand, specific moments where the audience is audibly addressed by the performer are considered verbal addressing (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Examples include performers greeting the audience directly, asking the audience how they feel, asking the audience what they think, or pausing in their media performance for audience members to verbally reply.

8.1.3.1.2 *Perceived attractiveness*

Supported by previous studies and literature, authors Hartmann & Goldhoorn (2011) concluded that the more the viewer is physically attracted to the performer, the greater the intensity of parasocial interaction. This is because viewers who find the performer attractive are more likely to pay more attention to the media, and thus are more likely to notice the performer's bodily addressing, and viewers are more compelled to idolize the feeling of a social encounter with the performer (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

8.1.3.1.3 Perspective-taking ability

The final determining factor does not involve the media figure's performance. Rather, it involves the viewer's own ability to adopt new or different perspectives presented by other people, also known as the level of *cognitive empathy* of the viewer. Parasocial interactions will be more intense when the viewer exhibits stronger cognitive perspective-taking ability (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011).

8.1.3.2 EPSI-Scale design

Using the factors for PSI, the 6-item EPSI-Scale measures with a 7-point Likert scale, where the low-end of 1 was *I do not agree at all* and the high-end of 7 was *I totally agree*, focused to measure the media consumer's sense of mutual awareness, mutual attention, and mutual adjustment with the media performer (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). The EPSI-Scale was validated by presenting an experimental group of 198 with a video clip of a performer created specifically for the Scale's validation. The 6-items of the EPSI-Scale are presented in *Table 8-3: The 6-items from the EPSI-Scale (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011, p. 1112)*.

Experience of Parasocial Interaction Scale: Parasocial Factor Items	
While watching the clip, I had the feeling that [performer name]	
1. was aware of me.	4. knew I paid attention to him/her.
2. knew I was there.	5. knew that I reacted to him/her.
3. knew I was aware of him/her.	6. reacted to what I said or did.

Table 8-3: The 6-items from the EPSI-Scale (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011, p. 1112)

While the EPSI-Scale is effective at understanding how a viewer retroactively perceived the performer, the setting which it is effective is almost exclusive to the viewer's experience, opinions, feelings, and emotions. Thus, the EPSI-Scale cannot be inverted such that the performer's perception of the viewer is understood. Additionally, the inclusion of only 6-items, while other scales included at least 10-items, limits the EPSI-Scale's effectiveness and consistency. However, the EPSI-Scale does well at determining the intensity level of a parasocial interaction that viewers experience, especially regarding the viewer's understanding of mutual awareness and mutual attention between viewer and media performer.

8.2 APPENDIX B: INVERTED PARASOCIAL INTERACTION SCALE

Both selected parasocial scales to be inverted use Likert-style measurements of each item. However, while one scale—the PSI-Scale—uses a 5-item Likert measurement, the other scale—the EPSI-Scale—uses a 7-item Likert measurement. To prevent hinderance of the EPSI-Scale when inverted, a 7-item Likert measurement was used for both inverted scales. The 7-items of Likert measurement can be

seen in *Table 8.2*. In this way, the EPSI-Scale remains unthrottled, while allowing the PSI-Scale respondents more expression in their responses.

7-items of Likert measurement for utilization in inverted parasocial scales	
<i>Quantitative (numerical) response</i>	<i>Quantitative response</i>
1	I entirely disagree.
2	I mostly disagree.
3	I somewhat disagree.
4	I neither agree nor disagree.
5	I somewhat agree.
6	I mostly agree.
7	I entirely agree.

Table 8.2: Likert scale measurements

8.2.1 Goal 1: “I perceive my audience in this way.”

Due to its usage as a parasocial scale between viewers and non-fictional, real-life media figures, the PSI-Scale from Rubin, Perse, & Powell (1985) was selected. In the original PSI-Scale, the focus was on the viewer. However, by inverting the PSI-Scale to focus on the media figure, or in this case the YouTube content creator, each of the PSI-items must be rewritten. *Table 8.2.1* presents the original 20-items of the PSI-Scale alongside its inverted counterpart.

Original PSI-Scale items (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985) alongside Inverted PSI-Scale items	
<i>Original parasocial items</i>	<i>Inverted parasocial items</i>
1. The news program shows me what the newscasters are like.	1. The content I upload shows my subscribers what I am like.
2. When the newscasters joke around with one another it makes the news easier to watch.	2. When I joke around with other content creators in my own content, it makes my own content easier to watch.
3. When my favorite newscaster shows me how he or she feels about the news, it helps me make up my own mind about the news story.	3. When I share my opinions on a subject, it helps my subscribers make up their own mind about that subject.
4. I feel sorry for my favorite newscaster when he or she makes a mistake.	4. My subscribers feel sorry for me when I make a mistake.
5. When I'm watching the newscast, I feel as if I am part of their group.	5. When my subscribers watch my content, they feel as if they are a part of my group.
6. I like to compare my ideas with what my favorite newscaster says.	6. My subscribers like to compare their ideas with what I say.
7. The newscasters make me feel comfortable, as if I am with friends.	7. I make my subscribers feel comfortable, as if they are with friends.
8. I see my favorite newscaster as a natural, down-to-earth person.	8. My subscribers see me as a natural, down-to-earth person.
9. I like hearing the voice of my favorite newscaster in my home.	9. My subscribers like to hear my voice in their home.
10. My favorite newscaster keeps me company when the news is on television.	10. I keep my subscribers company when they play my content.

11. I look forward to watching my favorite newscaster on tonight's news.	11. My subscribers look forward to new uploads from me.
12. If my favorite newscaster appeared on another television program, I would watch that program.	12. If I were to appear in another content creator's video, my subscribers would watch that video.
13. When my favorite newscaster reports a story, he or she seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.	13. When I speak on a subject in my content, I understand the kinds of things my subscribers want to know about that subject.
14. I sometimes make remarks to my favorite newscaster during the newscast.	14. My subscribers sometimes make (verbal) remarks to me while watching my content.
15. If there were a story about my favorite newscaster in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.	15. If there were a story about me in a news article or elsewhere online, my subscribers would read it.
16. I miss seeing my favorite newscaster when he or she is on vacation.	16. My subscribers miss me while I am on vacation and not uploading new content.
17. I would like to meet my favorite newscaster in person.	17. My subscribers would like to meet me in person.
18. I think my favorite newscaster is like an old friend.	18. My subscribers think of me like I am an old friend.
19. I find my favorite newscaster to be attractive.	19. My subscribers find me attractive.
20. I am not as satisfied when I get my news from a newscaster different than my favorite newscaster.	20. My subscribers are not as satisfied when they receive content similar to my own from different content creators.

Table 8.2.1: 20-items of PSI-Scale alongside counterpart 20-items of IPSI-Scale

8.2.2 Goal 2: "I think my audience perceives me in this way."

Due to its goal to understand the mutual awareness between viewer and media figure, the EPSI-Scale from Hartmann & Goldhoorn (2011) was chosen to help understand how content creators think their audience perceives them. In the original EPSI-Scale, viewers were shown a short video clip of a performer, then retroactively asked about their perceived experiences with that performer. However, as YouTube content creators communicate with their audience almost entirely through video clips, the EPSI-Scale was inverted to attempt to understand what the content creator imagines their audience is experiencing while consuming the content. In this way, there is no error from retroactive questioning; rather, the content creator is questioned about what the audience would be currently experiencing during content consumption. *Table 8.2.2* shows the original EPSI-Scale items alongside its inverted counterpart.

Original EPSI-Scale items (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) alongside Inverted EPSI-Scale items	
<i>Original parasocial items</i>	<i>Inverted parasocial items</i>
While watching the clip, I had the feeling that [performer name]	When watching my content, my subscribers feel that I....
1. was aware of me.	1. am aware of them.
2. knew I was there.	2. know they are there.
3. knew I was aware of him/her.	3. know they are aware of me.
4. knew I paid attention to him/her.	4. know they pay attention to me.
5. knew that I reacted to him/her.	5. know that they react to me.
6. reacted to what I said or did.	6. react to what they say or do.

Table 8.2.2: Items of EPSI-Scale alongside counterpart items of IPSI-Scale