

## “It’s Selling Like Hotcakes”’: Deconstructing Social Media Influencer Marketing in Long-Form Video Content on YouTube via Social Influence Heuristics

**Purpose** – The study examines the ability of social influence heuristics framework to capture skillful and creative social media influencer (SMI) marketing in long-form video content on YouTube for influencer-owned brands and products.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The theoretical lens was a framework of seven evidence-based social influence heuristics (reciprocity, social proof, consistency, scarcity, liking, authority, unity). For the methodological lens, a qualitative case study approach was applied to a purposeful sample of six SMIs and 15 videos on YouTube.

**Findings** – The evidence shows that self-promotional influencer marketing in long-form video content is relatable to all seven heuristics and shows signs of high elaboration, innovativeness, and skillfulness.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study reveals that a heuristic-based account of self-promotional influencer marketing in long-form video content can greatly contribute to our understanding of how various well-established marketing concepts (e.g., source attractiveness) might be expressed in real-world communications and behaviors. Based on this improved, in-depth understanding, current research efforts, like experimental studies using one video with a more or less arbitrary influencer and pre-post measure, are advised to explore research questions via designs that account for the observed subtle and complex nature of real-world influencer marketing in long-form video content.

**Practical implications** – This structured account of skillful and creative marketing can be used as educational and instructive material for influencer marketing practitioners to enhance their creativity, for consumers to increase their marketing literacy, and for policymakers to rethink policies for influencer marketing.

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Originality/value – Prior research has created a body of knowledge on influencer marketing. However, a conceptual disconnect has hampered the advancement of the field. The social influence heuristics framework is a highly functional conceptual bridge that links the qualitative and quantitative evidence and will advance our understanding of influencer marketing more effectively.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media influencer (SMI) marketing is a highly relevant contemporary marketing area because it can reach large audiences, comparable to those of TV programs. For example, the social media influencer “PewDiePie” attracted over 322 million views on YouTube in February 2019 across all his uploaded videos (SocialBlade, n.d.-a). A SMI is defined as a person who passes certain social influence thresholds, evaluated based on social media metrics (e.g., followers and/or engagement rate) beyond those of an average person. The marketing strategy and budgets of corporations have recently shifted towards social media influencer marketing (hereafter: influencer marketing) and found it effective in terms of brand awareness and product sales (LINQIA, 2020). As a result, corporations pay a considerable amount for sponsored high-reach influencer posts. A SMI with one to three million followers can charge around \$125,000 for a post on YouTube, \$62,500 for a post on Facebook, and \$50,000 for a post on Instagram or Snapchat (Captiv8, 2016).

The paper is focused for several reasons on self-promotional influencer marketing in long-form video content, in particular, video blogs (hereafter: vlogs), on YouTube made by high-reach SMIs. The term “vlogs” refers to video content in which the influencer is talking to the camera about personal topics and/or showing their daily life in several scenes (Frobenius, 2011; Harnish and Bridges, 2016). First, influencer marketing in vlogs on YouTube has attracted marketing practitioners and researchers alike because it combines high user popularity with opportunities to integrate marketing with more elaborate narratives compared to shorter types of content (Lee and Watkins, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Munnukka *et al.*, 2019). For example, in two non-academic surveys, more than half of Chinese and American participants indicated that they watched vlogs (China Daily, 2019; Nguyen, 2018), and, in an academic survey, 69% of the children reported that they watched vloggers (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019). Vlog marketing has become an important type of product-, service-, and brand-related information influencing consumers (Chu and Kamal, 2008; Lee and Watkins, 2016). For instance, more than half of the children in the survey mentioned above reported buying or asking their parents to buy brands or products shown in

vlogs (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019). Second, SMIs promote not only the brands and products of other organizations but also their own commercial brand(s) and product(s) (e.g., Jake Paul, 2017; Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017; Tanner Fox, 2018). The ten most commercially successful SMIs on YouTube earned an estimated average of 18 million US dollars between June 2017 and June 2018, and some of them earned most of their income from the sales of their own brands and products (Berg, 2018; Robehmed and Berg, 2018). These new revenue opportunities led to a rise in micro- and small-sized organizations based on influencer entrepreneurship. For example, there are at least 5000 YouTube channels with over 1 million subscribers (SocialBlade, n.d.-b), and, according to Wojcicki (2018), the CEO of YouTube, “the number of channels with over 1 million subscribers has increased by 75% in the last year.” Similar to the top-reach SMIs mentioned above, high-reach SMIs with over 1 million followers will likely work with some employees or freelancers, who facilitate the recording and editing of videos and pictures (Perelli, 2020). As a result, marketing scholars should acknowledge SMIs as important practitioners not only in their role as endorsers for other organizations but also as promoters of their own brand(s) and product(s).

This paper builds on previous work and advances our understanding of long-form video influencer marketing in vlogs on YouTube. SMIs marketing brands and products in long-form videos to over 1 million consumers daily undoubtedly have a very high economic and social impact. For this reason, we conducted an in-depth and theory-informed deconstruction of marketing-related and self-promotional communications and behaviors of influencers in long-form video content. The theoretical lens was a framework of seven evidence-based social influence heuristics (reciprocity, social proof, consistency, scarcity, liking, authority, unity). The methodological lens was a qualitative case study approach applied to a purposeful sample of six SMIs and 15 videos on YouTube.

The paper contributes to theoretical and practical understandings, as well as future research efforts, by providing researchers, consumers, educators, organizations, and influencers with a novel and useful evidence-based framework and insightful, in-depth case studies. The study contributes to our theoretical understanding of how various well-established theoretical marketing concepts (e.g., source attractiveness) are expressed in real-world communications and behaviors within self-promotional influencer marketing in long-form video content. Based on this improved, in-depth understanding, current research efforts, like experimental studies using one video with a more or less arbitrary influencer and pre-post measure, are advised to explore

research questions via designs that account for the observed subtle and complex nature of real-world influencer marketing in long-form video content. For example, (young) consumers have often invested a considerable number of resources (e.g., time, emotion, or money) into watching the videos of specific YouTubers. Consequently, the knowledge that is often generated by consumers who have watched one video and thereby invested very little into a YouTuber with unclear marketing competencies does not fully capture the marketing-relevant real-world consumer dynamics. The structured account of skillful and creative marketing can be used as educational and instructive material for influencer marketing practitioners to enhance their creativity, for consumers to increase their marketing literacy, and for policymakers to rethink policies for influencer marketing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Influencer Marketing**

The widespread and intensive use of social media network sites has led to consumers being both recipients and creators of this “electronic word of mouth” (eWOM; Bao *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, some of them are so successful that they regularly reach and influence a significant number of followers (Arora *et al.*, 2019). This influence can be achieved in various ways, and marketing scholars have started to embrace a broader notion of people with strong social influence (Hughes *et al.*, 2019; Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). In this context, “influence” is the ability to inspire action and motivate people to agree with a post shared by a strong social influencer on social media or in real life (Freberg *et al.*, 2011). Influencers address their target group directly and have thus become important collaborators for advertisers. In their posts, they include brand and product recommendations in entertaining content that is relevant to the target group. In this context, influencer marketing refers to a contractual relationship in which influencers advertise brands or products in exchange for payment, free products, or invitations to exclusive events (De Veirman *et al.*, 2019)

### **Typologies of Influencers**

The level of social influence of an influencer is evaluated and categorized based on various typologies. For example, some distinctions are related to the origin of social influence, such as “political,” “religious,” “intellectual,” “traditional,” or “social media” (e.g., Khamis *et al.*, 2017), the geographical distribution of social influence, such as “local,” “national,” or “global”

(e.g., Backaler, 2018), or the numerical extent of social influence, such as “micro,” “meso,” and “macro.” For example, Boerman (2019) used the Instagram follower count as a single, social-media-based, numerical, social influence capital threshold to create a three-type influencer typology: micro-influencer (less than 10,000 Instagram followers), meso-influencer (between 10,000 and one million), and macro-influencer (more one million).

The common distinction between the origin of social influence for traditional influencers and SMIs appears to lack conceptual clarity. Generally, traditional influencers are equated with celebrities, such as actors, musicians, athletes, or politicians, who obtained their social influence from the traditional entertainment and media industry or other traditional paths to authority and fame (Pöyry *et al.*, 2019). While traditional influencers achieve public recognition based on their talent (e.g., actors and athletes), social media influencers have “created” themselves on social media by posting highly engaging, relatable, self-generated content in which they present themselves as an expert, or more broadly, by presenting their lifestyle as a whole (De Jans *et al.*, 2017). SMIs often emphasize their closeness to their followers. Since many followers assume that peers have no commercial interests, they are considered authentic and trustworthy sources of information (Jiménez-Castillo and Sánchez-Fernández, 2019). Accordingly, a common assumption of many studies is that every social media influencer automatically has a higher quality of relationships with the consumer than a traditional influencer or celebrity (de Vries *et al.*, 2012; Yang, 2017). In fact, Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu (2019) found that consumers perceive brand posts by SMIs to be more trustworthy than brand posts by celebrities.

However, determining the origin of social influence is problematic because more and more influencers fall within a hybrid or blurred category. For example, the famous actor and traditional influencer, Will Smith, regularly uploads social media content on YouTube featuring his personal life and would pass most threshold metrics for influence on social media (Will Smith, n.d.). Additionally, many social media influencers also cross over into traditional industries. For example, the SMI “King Bach” appeared in various TV series and movies (IMDb, n.d.).

Overall, it is more useful to think of the effect as being based on the relationship the audience (i.e., consumers) has with the communication source (i.e., the influencer), which does not need to depend on the origin of social influence distinction. As a result, the comparison between broad influencer types should be used only for exceptional cases. Instead, we should pursue an investigation into the relationship between influencer characteristics (e.g., personality traits)

and audience characteristics (e.g., perceived similarity with influencer), or social media platform characteristics (e.g., content focus) and the specific content characteristics (e.g., entertainment value), as some recent studies have done (e.g., Ki & Kim, 2019; Shan, Chen, & Lin, 2019).

In sum, a SMI (or influencer in the social media space) is defined as a person who passes a certain predetermined social influence threshold, evaluated based on social media metrics beyond those of an average person. Social media metrics are used to approximate the level of social media influence of a person in terms of relationship quantity (e.g., number of followers) and relationship quality (e.g., engagement and liking levels via valence of comments and like to dislike ratio). Consequently, celebrities can become SMIs, but they are not automatically a SMI unless they pass specific social media threshold metrics indicating their extraordinary influence on social media.

### **Persuasiveness of Social Media Influencers**

Due to their huge importance for marketing, studies from various fields have investigated the effects of SMIs and the underlying mechanism of impact. Several constructs appeared to be significant for the persuasive effects. The focus was primarily on specific constructs and their impact on effect measures, such as influencers' materialistic views, message involvement, interest in influencer-promoted products, brand attitude, brand admiration, product interest, word-of-mouth, and online purchase intention.

Evidence was found for relationships between the influencer's perceived attractiveness, homophily, expertise, closeness, likability, and parasocial relationship, along with the entertainment value of content, the informative value of content, the procedural fairness, and the interpersonal fairness of interactions (Lim *et al.*, 2017; Lou and Kim, 2019; Lou and Yuan, 2019; Taillon *et al.*, 2020; Trivedi and Sama, 2020; Yuan and Lou, 2020). Recently, two qualitative studies advanced our understanding of the followers' perceptions of sponsored influencer content. The results show that this perception is related to emotions of disgust, annoyance, distrust, and support. Furthermore, the consumption motivation of influencer content seems to be associated with prior topic interest, escapism, community, relatability, influencer authenticity, attitudes towards the influencer, subjective norms related to the influencer, influencer-related perceived behavior control, personal relevance, trust, inspiration, and perceived risk (Chopra *et al.*, 2020; Coco and Eckert, 2020).

These studies provide important insights into the effect process of influencer marketing. Their results can also help advertisers to optimize the persuasion process. However, the results of these studies do not reveal how SMIs attempt to influence their followers. Since many consumers perceive SMIs as particularly trustworthy – and children especially may fail to recognize influencer content as advertising and cope with such persuasion tactics critically – knowledge of these persuasion strategies is crucial for consumer policy, consumer education, and advertising research (Mau *et al.*, 2014).

### **Social Media Influencers as Hidden Persuaders**

For the reasons mentioned above, other studies have specifically addressed the effects of SMIs on vulnerable target groups, especially children and adolescents (e.g., Boerman and Van Reijmersdal, 2020; Lee and Watkins, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Munnukka *et al.*, 2019).

Focus-group evidence indicates that young consumers perceive (1) influencer marketing to be effective on their attitudes towards products and brands because the communication source is familiar, trusted, and liked, and (2) the most important moderating factor of that relationship is the strength of the attitude towards the influencer (Coates *et al.*, 2020). In particular, young consumers reported that their attitudes towards the influencer impacted their acceptance and compassion for marketing (Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal, 2019). Moreover, Folkvord *et al.* (2019) found evidence for perceptions of effectiveness being grounded in actual behaviors. More than half of the children reported buying or asking their parents to buy brands or products shown in vlogs, and around three-quarters of the children reported gaining brand awareness through vlogs. Most children (72%) reported liking the brands and products more because they were shown in the vlog, and the majority of children (80%) reported believing that other children would buy brands or products seen in the vlogs (Folkvord *et al.*, 2019). One of the reasons for this may be that SMIs use deliberate strategies to appear trustworthy and authentic (Ferchaud *et al.*, 2018).

As a result of these strategies, children and adolescents are often unable to recognize the persuasive nature of SMIs' posts (Boerman and Van Reijmersdal, 2020). Consequently, a critical reaction to SMIs' messages by young consumers is reduced – and the brand-initiated endorsement of the influencers is perceived as a trustworthy recommendation (Cheung *et al.*, 2009).

Several studies subsequently found positive effects of trustworthiness, likeability, similarity, interactivity, argument quality, issue involvement, product knowledge, and information credibility on the influencers' brand-initiated endorsements (Xiao *et al.*, 2018; Pick, 2020; Munnukka *et al.*, 2019). In particular, influencers' credibility was positively associated with brand trust and purchase intention (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020).

So-called disclosure studies provide further evidence that SMIs are not often perceived as advertising communicators and thus have a persuasive effect. These results show that disclosure under various conditions can negatively influence the persuasive effect of a SMI's messages (Boerman and Van Reijmersdal, 2020). Moreover, the perceptions of the influencer and the marketing message are moderated by how the disclosure is communicated (Stubb *et al.*, 2019). For example, a researcher-constructed pre-video sponsorship compensation justification text generated more immediate positive attitudes toward the influencer receiving the sponsorship compensation and higher perceived influencer and message credibility than a simple sponsorship disclosure text (Stubb *et al.*, 2019). Similar to young consumers, parents exposed to a disclosure reported different attitudes and perceptions related to the influencer, sponsor, video, and advertising (Evans *et al.*, 2018).

Even though these studies show that SMIs are effective because of their high credibility and non-obvious advertising motive, they cannot shed sufficient light on the persuasive strategies used by SMIs to advertise without seeming to do so.

### **Persuasion Strategies of Social Media Influencers**

To the best of our knowledge, three studies specifically address the persuasive strategies of SMIs. The first study used the concept of "community of practice" developed in organization studies to categorize the communication and practices of 25 UK beauty bloggers and YouTubers (Gannon and Prothero, 2018). The three core characteristics of the concept of a community of practice (i.e., mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise) were identified within the sample (Gannon and Prothero, 2018). The second study employed the concept of "tribal entrepreneurship" from entrepreneurship studies to classify the communications and practices of 25 UK beauty YouTubers (Mardon *et al.*, 2018). Three strategies to influence the tribe's emotions were uncovered: emotional censorship to suppress negative emotions (e.g., removing negative comments), self-conscious emotional labor (e.g., expressing feelings of embarrassment and guilt), and other-praising emotional labor (e.g.,



communicating gratitude, awe, and praise) (Mardon *et al.*, 2018). The last study utilized the concept of “charismatic authority” situated in cultural studies to examine the communication and practices of 10 UK YouTubers (Cocker and Cronin, 2017). The YouTubers’ practices showed alignment with the practices of charismatic authorities (Cocker and Cronin, 2017).

These studies support that influencers use individual persuasive strategies to address their followers - and to achieve communicative effects. Although these results are significant, two aspects remain open: First, the studies listed here are only vaguely related to influencer marketing concepts. Second, there is so far no coherent framework in which the individual strategies can be related to each other and which takes into account the social context of influencer persuasion.

In the context of social influence strategies in advertising or personal selling, the social influence heuristic model was proposed by Cialdini (2008, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to test this analytical and conceptual framework that can capture the real-world marketing-related communications and behaviors of SMIs in a way that contributes to the contemporary theoretical and conceptual marketing landscape. To this end, the study will address the following research question:

- Can the social influence heuristic model as a framework inform the deconstruction of the hows (i.e., marketing strategies) and whys (i.e., potential underlying theoretical mechanisms) of real-world influencer marketing in long-form video content in a way that is educative and relatable to the present influencer marketing research?

We choose long-form video content because previous studies have often examined pictures, texts, and/or short-form videos (e.g., post on Instagram or Facebook). In contrast to these, the study of long-form video influencer marketing (in particular vlogs) is especially relevant and promising with regard to our understanding of marketing persuasion strategies in general and hidden persuasion in particular. This is because they provide SMIs with more time to combine and blur the lines between deliberate and elaborate marketing persuasion content and non-commercial content. By answering this question, we will make a substantial contribution to the development of evidence-based theoretical models that can inform the various stakeholders involved in influencer marketing.

Overall, researchers, practitioners, educators, parents, and policymakers will be provided with case study evidence facilitating a theoretical, ethical, and practical discourse based on real-

world influencer marketing in long-form video content. More specifically, the proposed evidence-based theoretical and conceptual framework reveals a high level of analytical value for categorizing and interpreting real-world influencer marketing strategies in long-form video content. Educators can use the case study as educational material and the evidence-based framework as an educational tool to teach young consumers how to detect and deconstruct real-world influencer marketing strategies. Influencer marketing practitioners can use the evidence for inspiration and the framework to enrich their marketing appeals. Parents could also use this to improve the marketing literacy of their children. Lastly, researchers can use the evidence, the hypotheses, and the framework as a foundation for further quantitative and/or experimental studies to improve the understanding of influencer marketing in relationship to persuasion and young consumers.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

A theoretical framework centered around the concept of social influence heuristics was judged to be the most useful to examine the research questions for various reasons. First, social influence is the essential concept for distinguishing between a person labeled as a (social media) influencer and a person who is not. Social media metrics are used to approximate the level of social media influence of a person in terms of relationship quantity (e.g., number of followers) and relationship quality (e.g., engagement and liking levels via valence of comments and like to dislike ratio). Second, the concept of social influence is relatable to and grounded in decades of robust empirical and theoretical advancements in marketing and beyond (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Hennigs *et al.*, 2013; Kenrick *et al.*, 2012; Pratkanis, 2007). Third, a wide variety of empirical social phenomena are accurately explained by the combination of social influence and heuristic thinking (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). The past 50 years of research have provided strong evidence that most of the time, humans are cognitive misers, which means the basic tendency is to default to heuristic processing of low computational expense (e.g., Kahneman, 2011; Simon, 1955; Taylor, 1981). For example, the perceived attractiveness of communication sources (i.e., a SMI) is a cue that positively affects the level of social influence, especially under conditions of heuristic processing (e.g., Pornpitakpan, 2004). Moreover, robust evidence indicates that heuristic processes can explain many internet-based findings (Chaiken and Ledgerwood, 2011; Metzger and Flanagin, 2013; Zhang *et al.*, 2014). For example, the internet is an information-rich environment, and participants reported that they often do not have the time or cognitive capacity to evaluate information systematically. Instead, they use

heuristic thinking, such as reputational cues, to evaluate source credibility (Metzger *et al.*, 2010). Lastly, the study of social influence heuristics in the context of influencer marketing in long-form video content could contribute considerably to the present theoretical and empirical marketing literature because social influence heuristics are the building blocks of the most cited theoretical frameworks in marketing (i.e., Elaboration Likelihood Model and Heuristic-systematic Model) and related empirical marketing studies (Cacioppo and Petty, 1984; Chaiken and Eagly, 1989; Kitchen *et al.*, 2014). In sum, the notion of social influence heuristics ensures that the selected framework is highly relatable and grounded in robust empirical and theoretical advancements in marketing and beyond.

The classification framework of social influence heuristics developed by Cialdini (2008, 2016) was selected because it provides a broader basis for the deconstruction of social influence heuristics. It does so by combining the source-based social influence heuristics from the most cited theoretical marketing frameworks with other well-established evidence-based social influence heuristics, such as scarcity (Chaiken and Ledgerwood, 2011; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). Seven broad social heuristics are proposed: reciprocity, social proof, consistency, scarcity, liking, authority, and unity (Cialdini, 2008, 2016). Each of the seven heuristics is supported by its own body of theoretical and empirical literature (see Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). For example, the reciprocity heuristic is supported by social exchange theories and related empirical studies (for a recent review see, Cropanzano *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, the influencer marketing studies reviewed here can be related indirectly or directly to the seven heuristics. For example, perceived influencer familiarity, similarity, and physical attractiveness are all sub-heuristics of the liking heuristic, and expertise is a sub-heuristic of the authority heuristic (Coates *et al.*, 2020; Lee and Watkins, 2016; Munnukka *et al.*, 2019; Pick, 2020; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020; Stubb *et al.*, 2019; Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal, 2019; Xiao *et al.*, 2018). Because there is no evidence on which factors increase or decrease heuristic processing of influencer marketing, heuristic thinking is reasonably assumed to be the default process. The seven heuristics can be described as follows:

The reciprocity heuristic states that most humans feel the need to repay a valuable gift with something of similar value (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). For example, customers give their permission to be targeted online more often when companies previously provided free services to them (Schumann *et al.*, 2014).

The heuristic of social proof proposes that most people imitate other people's cognitions, emotions, and behaviors (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). For instance, the reading of positive audience comments about an influencer has a significant effect on the reader's positive perceptions of the influencer (Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020).

The consistency heuristic suggests that most humans want to behave consistently with their previously exhibited attitudes and behaviors (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). For example, consumers who created branded user-generated content were subsequently more likely to become brand advocates, sharing opinions about brands and products (Daugherty *et al.*, 2008).

The scarcity heuristic posits that most people consider something as more valuable when it is perceived as rare. Marketing practitioners commonly employ this heuristic when using the "limited number" and "deadline" tactics (Cialdini, 2008). More recently, perceived high social demand has increased consumers' online referral intentions (Koch and Benlian, 2015).

The heuristic of liking proclaims that liked individuals are more persuasive. Perceived physical attractiveness, familiarity, similarity, and the process of positive pairing (or conditioning) have been associated with liking (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). For example, when the influencer was a trusted, attractive, and liked celebrity, consumers showed more favorable brand attitudes and behavioral intentions (Xiao *et al.*, 2018).

According to the authority heuristic, most people are more persuaded by perceived high-authority communicators. Well-established high-authority cues are official credentials (e.g., diplomas) signaling high expertise and luxury goods and/or experiences signaling high status (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). The perceived expertise of celebrities increases the effects of their endorsements (Thomas and Johnson, 2017).

Finally, the unity heuristic proposes that most people are more likely to be persuaded by in-group communicators (Cialdini, 2016). For example, consumers feel more positive towards ads that feature their in-group members than those featuring individuals that violate the group's positive image on some traits (Harmon-Kizer, 2016).

## **METHOD**

The case study methodology was developed to inform researchers seeking to understand the communication and behaviors of cases in depth (Yin, 2018). For example, in marketing and business studies, the case study methodology was used to understand the communications and

behaviors of CEOs or celebrities (Beverland and Lindgreen, 2010; Boddy, 2017; Henneberg and Chen, 2008; Jowdy and McDonald, 2002). Recently, marketing and business journals have acknowledged the importance of SMIs as case studies (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018; Cocker and Cronin, 2017; Gannon and Prothero, 2018; Mardon *et al.*, 2018).

## **Case Selection**

The selection criterion for the cases was their high level of expected social and economic impact and how practically and theoretically informative they were for marketing-related communications and behaviors (Yin, 2018). YouTube appears to be the platform where most high-reach SMIs currently upload their long-form video content. Consequently, high-reach SMIs on YouTube, who create long-form video content, were selected as cases. It is not expected that educational marketing-related communications and behaviors are randomly distributed amongst the population of high-reach SMIs on YouTube in terms of skillfulness and creativity. As a result, purposeful sampling with the core selection heuristics for social and economic impact was used. Informativeness was based on current commercial success and meaningful individual differences between cases.

To this end, in early 2018, the Forbes list of the ten “Highest-Paid YouTube Stars 2017” was examined to identify SMIs on YouTube (hereafter: YouTubers) with exceptional commercial success (Berg, 2017). Three YouTubers from the list were included. First, Jake Paul and Logan Paul (brothers), who predominantly create vlogs (hereafter: vloggers), were included because they were the most commercially successful YouTubers. Second, PewDiePie, who primarily produces either “talking-head” or gaming videos, was included because he was the most subscribed YouTuber.

More meaningful variation was introduced by including three other successful high-reach YouTubers that were not on the list (i.e., two vloggers and one talking-head YouTuber). At that point in the study, RomanAtwoodBarelyVlogs was added because he had the most subscribed daily family vlog channel, and Tanner Fox was included because he was the youngest daily vlogger with a high reach. Lastly, the talking-head, high-reach YouTuber RiceGum (2017) was incorporated because he had engaged in meta-communication on the merchandise of the other included YouTubers (i.e., PewDiePie, RomanAtwoodBarelyVlogs, and the Paul brothers) when introducing his own merchandise (for details on the six YouTubers see, Table 1).

## **Video Selection**

The study will focus on vlogs on YouTube in which influencer-owned commercial brand(s) and product(s) are promoted. This is because it is expected that the intrinsic motivation is higher for influencer-owned brands and products and will lead to more deliberate, skillful, and creative influencer marketing. For this reason, the keywords “merchandise” and “merch” (commonly used terms for influencer-branded products) were typed into the search function on the channel page to increase the likelihood of finding marketing-related videos. First, video viewing was based on commercial references and surrounding themes in the titles and thumbnails. For example, one viewed and included video featured a title and thumbnail that combined the vlogger-owned merchandise with the theme of an ice cream truck (“*OUR NEW MAVERICK ICE CREAM-MERCH-TRUCK! (pranked)*”), which was especially interesting considering the young age of the primary viewers (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b). Second, video inclusion was based on added value in terms of theoretical saturation for the seven heuristics as the focus of analytical and theoretical categories. For example, Tanner Fox’s (2018a) vlogs were included because, compared to other included vlogs, they strongly focused on communication and behaviors related to the building process of his own merchandise warehouse. This viewing and inclusion process was conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved as “the point in analysis when all categories are well developed in terms of properties, dimensions, and variations” (Corbin *et al.*, 2014, p. 263). We reached the point at which an informative research article could be written after a sample of 18 videos. Three videos from each selected SMI were included and analyzed but, due to space limitation, the findings will focus on 15 videos (for a detailed description of videos, see Table 2).

## **Data Analysis**

The data were examined and interpreted using qualitative deductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an umbrella term for methods designed to capture patterns or “themes” across qualitative datasets (Braun *et al.*, 2019). The methods have proved useful within qualitative marketing studies (e.g., Holliman and Rowley, 2014; Roberts and Pettigrew, 2007). Thematic analysis can be guided by deductive, inductive, or mixed reasoning (Braun *et al.*, 2019). The selection of the deductive thematic analysis approach was motivated by the intention to provide a theory-informed, evidence-based, and relatable description and interpretation of real-world influencer marketing (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Brooks *et al.*, 2015). The present

deductive themes are the seven evidence-based social influence heuristics that informed and structured the analysis of the influencer marketing contained in the vlogs.

More specifically, template analysis (TA), a subtype of deductive thematic analysis, was used because it offers an alternative to qualitative researchers “who find that other methods of analysis come with prescriptions and procedures which are difficult to reconcile with features of their own study” (Brooks et al., 2015, p. 217). First, an initial version of a tentative template was created. TA is flexible concerning the style and format of the template (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). The study used a minimalistic template containing the name of the heuristic, a definition, and examples. Second, the template was iteratively updated to mirror and align with the evolving understanding of the seven categories and potential subcategories. Instead of “consensus” coding reliability measures, the focus was on consensual template development in order to avoid stifling organic and nuanced analysis (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). Third, TA encourages researchers to refine and develop themes more extensively where the richest data related to the research question is found (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). In this sense, all the heuristics were developed to some extent, but some were developed more elaborately. As a result, certain heuristics contain more subcategories than others. Lastly, TA does not prescribe an explicit distinction between descriptive and interpretive themes (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). The descriptive-interpretative analysis and finding report mirror this.

Each video was downloaded from YouTube and imported into NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2018). Next, the speech in the videos was transcribed in the software. With the video and transcript visible next to each other, coding began. Visual and verbal data were coded simultaneously, and every verbal or visual observation that matched with one of the seven template categories was coded accordingly. For example, the following verbal and visual observation was coded for the heuristic of scarcity, “*usually, we would get a shipment that fills this whole area*” [camera shows the “small” space of the available products] (RomanAtwoodBarelyVlogs, 2018). All videos were coded by both researchers separately based on the initial template.

After the first round of coding, the assigned codes for each heuristic were discussed, and subcategories were added to the template to inform the second round of coding. Each subcategory had a consensual definition and two identified examples. For instance, the fan-reward category was defined as observations in which the SMI provides the fan with a gift, and fan gifting was linked to commercial activities. For example, Logan Paul rewarded one fan for

his superior fan commitment by spending the day with him. However, during that day, one of the fan's "rewarding" activities was the participation in a photoshoot as a "brand ambassador" for Logan Paul's clothing line (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017c). After coding all videos again with the refined template, a final discussion was held on how to present the findings that were most closely aligned with the educational purpose.

First, the findings are reported in a heuristic-centered way with the sub-headlines representing the developed subcategories. Second, quotes are frequently used to maintain personal voice and accurate real-world influencer marketing communication. Third, while some judgments regarding frequencies and interpretations regarding effectiveness were made, they are tentative, evidence-informed hypotheses for future validation. Fourth, the decision was made to mix the most elaborate, skillful, deliberate, and potentially ethically questionable findings from smaller and broader analytical scopes (across videos and within videos). While this mixing of analytical levels causes a less clear-cut analytical approach, it is more valuable for the exploratory educational purpose. Ultimately, additional information beyond the video content was included, such as the design of the video thumbnails, because they are part of the video context and are very relatable to the heuristics.

## FINDINGS

There are various important contextual considerations to keep in mind when reading the findings. First, YouTube provides every YouTuber with demographical data (i.e., gender and age of the viewers based on the Google profile) and non-commercial behavioral data for each video (i.e., watch time and click-through rate) (YouTube, 2020a). Moreover, YouTubers promoting their own brand and products should have accurate daily commercial behavioral data (i.e., shop views and sales). Consequently, YouTubers can establish a robust experimental feedback loop between demographical and behavioral data and the video content that enables them to learn how to tailor and combine marketing effectively with more elaborate narratives to optimize different metrics. Second, the audience of YouTubers appears to be mostly young people. For example, in an interview, Jake Paul states that his "*audience [are mainly] (...) 8 to 16-year-olds*" (Good Morning America, 2018) and children and teenage fans are often seen in the videos (e.g., Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b; Tanner Fox, 2018b). Third, YouTubers have high incentives to create videos that are perceived as authentic, non-scripted, and "raw" (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018; Khamis *et al.*, 2017). However, they financially benefit from including scripted parts that are deliberately designed to increase commercially relevant activities.



## **(1) Heuristic of Reciprocity**

From a macro perspective, all YouTubers foster reciprocity by creating valuable social media content and providing free access to most of it. Consequently, the free received value might lead some recipients to engage in reciprocal actions, such as liking, buying, or producing fan art.

*Fan rewards.* One strategy was to reciprocate certain actions of fans by providing the chosen fans with rewards and integrating the whole process of rewarding them into their regular content (e.g., Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017a, 2017c; RiceGum, 2017). Logan Paul displayed the most elaborate execution of fan-rewarding strategies. In the first case, Paul chose (i) to reward a highly committed fan that produced a celebratory music video of him, (ii) the reward to be the co-creation of another self-celebratory music video, and (iii) to cover the whole fan-rewarding process in multiple vlogs. The narrative started with a music video entitled “*Logan Paul (My Hero)*” by the teenage fan Noah Tesh becoming popular (Flobros, 2017a). Shortly after, in a vlog, Logan Paul started the fan-rewarding narrative by reacting to the video with words of appreciation (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017d). In return, the fan reacted with another video, showing his surprise and happiness about his idol’s acknowledgment (Flobros, 2017b). Ultimately, Logan Paul reacted again with an invitation to spend a day with him in Los Angeles to produce a music video together, covering all his travel and accommodation expenses (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017e, 2017a). During that time, Paul produced two vlogs with him, covering a day with activities and one behind the scenes of the music video production (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017f). Interestingly, even in the day with the activities, the fan was used to promote Paul’s commercial brand. In the sequence, Tesh is shown posing with influencer-branded clothing in a mansion while pictures are taken of him (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017f). In other words, one of the “rewards” the fan received for his commitment was to be a promotional model for Logan Paul’s clothing brand. Through a broader narrative lens, the sequence of multiple videos seems to be an effective practice in providing the fan community with multiple opportunities to identify and build a relationship with a new and previously unknown narrative character, Noah. In consequence, Noah’s social status could rise to that of a role model, and this would make his endorsements, such as wearing Logan Paul-branded clothing in all the videos (e.g., Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017a) and being happy after receiving more branded clothing from Logan Paul (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017f), more persuasive.

In the second case, Logan Paul created an elaborate standalone video using the reciprocity principle. The vlog featured him rewarding his most generous fans – “(...) *who spent the most on merch in Los Angeles. Who are the biggest Logangsters? Who are the biggest mavericks? (...)*” – by hand delivering influencer-branded clothing to them (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017a). Compared to the previous example, the video narrative focuses strongly on product-related marketing. In fact, from a psychology lens, the video is about establishing the association between purchasing an extraordinary amount of influencer-branded clothing and being rewarded with face-to-face time with the idol. Consequently, in combination with the high value of face time, seeing these examples might increase a fan’s subjective probability expectation of the event happening to them and, in turn, increase the motivation to buy influencer-branded clothing, hoping to win the face time lottery. From a narrative perspective, Logan Paul frames the entire video through reciprocity. As a result, the influencer-branded clothing promotion is overshadowed by the reciprocal intention of rewarding his most supportive fans. In fact, this framing strategy seems to be an effective way to market because it maintains the impression that the video is “authentic” and his behavior is selfless. The conversations are naturally centered on the fan’s brand-positive interaction with the product and Logan Paul.

Besides the offline time with the vlogger, symbolic reward strategies are also used. Expressions of gratitude and appreciation for their communities’ supportive commercial and non-commercial actions are particularly noteworthy (e.g., PewDiePie, 2017c). PewDiePie created the most elaborate execution of this symbolic rewarding strategy. From a video structure perspective, PewDiePie (2017c) used the symbolic reward strategy in a “sandwich” by starting and ending with gratitude and appreciation practices focused on non-commercial fan action while focusing in the middle on commercial fan action and product promotion. At the start of the video, the appreciation and gratitude frame is directly proposed as he “*really just wanted to say thank you. Things have been going well lately. I’m really enjoying seeing the outcome of how you guys enjoy the videos. Reading all the comments.*” After expanding on this theme, he switches to the action of buying and its meaning for him, “*I’m super grateful that you guys are buying my merch. I make money out of it, obviously, but I’m so happy that you guys are just interested in the stuff that I put out. It’s a very humbling thing that someone chooses to support you publicly by wearing something that represents me. I think, I think that makes me really, really proud.*” He ends the more commercial sequence with surreal humor involving a bizarre juxtaposition – “*Now it sounds like I’m just trying to sell you a bunch of stuff. Maybe a little bit. I’m gonna be honest. Maybe a little bit, but mainly I want to say Namaste. Which means*

*apparently nice to meet you? But I mean it in the context of thank you.*” These rewarding strategies can also be linked to conditioning theories as fans learn to associate the purchase of influencer-branded products with positive (symbolic) rewards, such as praise from their idol.

*Fan-oriented rationales.* The fan-oriented rationales strategy emphasizes that the product was made solely to serve the fans. In other words, the products are framed as gifts to the fans with no relevant monetary gains attached. For example, in a sequence, Atwood (2014) shifts the responsibility for the creation of the product from himself to the fans: *“These (products) are all coming from your comments. I have not come up with these. These are all from your comments (...) don’t think I’ll add anything to the store that you guys haven’t requested. So hit me with anything you want to see ‘smile more’ on.”* With this frame, he is “just” providing fans with the products they want. Another noteworthy example is that of RiceGum (2017): *“The thing that I don’t like is YouTubers know that their fans love them. Fans on YouTube are just so supportive. That being said, it doesn’t even matter what you sell them because your fans love you so much. They will literally buy anything. (...) I do not understand how YouTubers are letting their viewers go to school dressed like this. Like I care about you guys. You guys are my kids, and I will never sell you guys anything that I would not wear.”* In other words, his influencer-branded clothing is a gift to his “supportive” fans that enables them to look attractive. All in all, the basic strategy is to use a real (proactively created) or hypothetical fan need as a rationale to offer influencer-branded products.

## **(2) Heuristic of Consistency**

*Non-commercial, popular, and emotional thumbnails and titles.* The video’s thumbnail and title are highly important because they are closely linked to the click-through rate and subsequent watch time. YouTube uses those two metrics to estimate the recommendability of a video (YouTube, 2020b, 2020c). As a result, YouTubers have incentives to design thumbnails and titles that are optimized for both metrics. Based on the data-driven feedback loops of high-reach YouTubers, this optimization strategy is likely informed not only by intuitions or theoretical considerations but also by robust empirical data. Against this backdrop, one observed strategy is particularly relevant. The thumbnails and titles were designed to suggest the content’s non-commerciality and reference popular and emotional topics. The associated videos ranged from being partially (one third) to fully commercial (e.g., RiceGum 2017, PewDiePie 2017a). For example, in a video entitled *“RETURN TO SLENDER”*, the viewer is attracted to the video with a title and thumbnail of the previously popular game *Slender*, but the first three minutes of the

video are spent promoting a newly launched branded gaming chair (PewDiePie, 2017a). In another instance, RiceGum (2017) entitled a video “*ROASTING YOUTUBERS (Jake Paul, Logan Paul, Roman Atwood, AND MORE)*” and created a thumbnail showing small pictures of other YouTubers surrounded by flames. Roasting refers to “*the act of criticizing someone in an angry way*” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-b). The vague title leaves the viewer unclear about the object of criticism. Only after clicking is the viewer told that criticism is directed at the influencer-branded clothing of other YouTubers. Further, the tone is not especially angry as he exclaims that “*I just need you guys to know it’s just a joke*” (RiceGum, 2017). While this comparison-oriented marketing lasts for three minutes, the remaining seven are used to market his own newly launched clothing brand.

From the consistency perspective, the click-optimized thumbnails and title lead to securing an initial commitment to the video, and the fast-cuts, entertainment, and humor immediately from the start might make it more likely for viewers to be consistent with the initial action and watch the video till the end, despite the marketing and different initial expectations. For example, PewDiePie (2017a) starts with: “*Before this video begins, I have an exciting announcement (...). I designed my own chair. Bam. Look at that. Sexy, sexy. Oh, it is so soft in the butt. Now, I did not know about these chairs first, but as soon as I had it. I was like, oh, man. This is comfortable. This is the best thing ever. My ass has been thanking me every single day.*”

*Call-to-action.* The “foot-in-the-door” strategy is a well-established evidence-based consistency strategy that showed effectiveness in offline and online environments to achieve compliance (Barbier and Fointiat, 2020; Beaman *et al.*, 1983; Eastwick and Gardner, 2009; Gamian-Wilk and Dolinski, 2019; Lee and Liang, 2019). The strategy’s effectiveness is explained by the human tendency to be consistent with prior investments (Cialdini, 2008). More specifically, if a person has fulfilled smaller requests in the past, they are more likely to fulfill other (larger) future requests to be consistent with past behaviors (Freedman and Fraser, 1966). Similarly, YouTubers’ ‘calls-to-action’ are requests for the audience to engage in positive actions related to the human brand, the commercial brand, and associated products. Regularly, YouTubers formulate a wide range of action requests from small efforts (i.e., “liking” or “subscribing”) to high efforts (i.e., “commenting,” “viewing,” “sharing,” “suggesting,” or “buying”). For example, Tanner Fox (2018b) asks his viewers to “*check out some of the designs and just comment on this video. I want to get your guys’ feedback. I want to make sure you guys like all the stuff.*” Similarly, RomanAtwoodBarelyVlogs (2014) involves his fans by asking for

product suggestions – “(...) if you could have any product that says smile more on it, what would it be?” Viewers who engage in the small effort request to view the product page or comment on product suggestions may be consistent later with high effort requests of buying the product.

However, YouTubers do not stop with buying as a highly effortful type of request. They ask their fans to endorse the brand and products publicly and thereby show public support and appreciation. For example, PewDiePie (2017b, 2017d) and RiceGum (2017) encouraged public commitment by asking fans to post pictures of them wearing influencer-branded clothing on their social media and tag them so that they could share it. Tanner Fox (2018a) used a very elaborate call-to-action strategy that combined two heuristics (i.e., social proof and consistency) and encouraged both non-commercial and commercial brand positive actions. Fans were motivated to send him short videos of their call-to-actions based on the possibility that they might be selected to appear at the end of his videos as endorsers. For example, one fan encouraged other fans to “(...) like down below, subscribe to his YouTube channel and get his merch. Link in the description” (Tanner Fox, 2018a).

Interestingly, YouTubers often make smaller and larger requests within one video, and the number of smaller requests is usually greater than the number of larger requests. That observation may suggest a new, interesting theoretical difference. An explanation for the difference could be that due to the mass communication context of influencer marketing (vs. one-on-one sales), it might be more effective to encourage the audience repeatedly in every video to select the request that matches their current level of compliance.

### **(3) Heuristic of Scarcity**

*Verbal cueing.* One common strategy is the verbal cueing of scarcity. Compared to other social influence strategies, the verbal cueing of scarcity does not require much effort or skill to use. For example, Jake Paul (2017a) used scarcity remarks in a reoccurring standardized marketing sequence at the end of most of his videos, “Check out this new merch. Whoo, that merch is hot, boy. New items of merchandise limited-time. Click the link.” This example informs the user about the newness and limited time, directly linking the information to the buying action. The verbal scarcity cue can also be placed within a video, such as “It’s a limited edition with limited quantity, so don’t wait and you won’t be disappointed” (PewDiePie, 2017a).

*Social and visual-verbal cueing.* The strategy of using social and visual proof with verbal requires more effort. In an elaborate example, Roman Atwood (2018) combines both tactics by recording a sequence in a warehouse used to store his influencer-branded products for visual proof and with his friends for social proof. Roman Atwood (2018) starts by noting that the shipment they received of the branded hats “*doesn’t look like many*” and asks his wife if “*that’s all the hats.*” A friend directly uses this to point out that “*chances are if you don’t get one right now, they’re gonna be gone before, so just hit it up.*” Later, Atwood points to the physical packages in the warehouse and says, “*On a real note, this is all the hats we have right here. It is not the usual amount. Usually, we would get a shipment that fills this whole area. Brittany said that she ordered all the hats that they had. This is all we have for now. So, if you want one you know what to do, a link in the description, you can get one now*” (RomanAtwoodVlogs, 2018). In another elaborate instance, Logan Paul (2017b) first verbally cues scarcity at the beginning of the video by stating that “*I didn’t know if you know if I updated you, but the merch is selling like hotcakes. You guys are eating it up.*” This statement is followed up by showing fans screaming euphorically at him and influencer-branded clothing as he throws it into the crowd.

#### **(4) Heuristic of Liking**

In line with current theory, liking for the human brand, commercial brand, and the products is evoked by positive associations, familiarity, and similarity. Overall, liking strategies were widely used across the sampled videos. It seems reasonable to expect that most subscribers already like the SMI and the videos.

*Positive associations.* Positive associations can be expected to be more effective than traditional celebrity advertising for two reasons. First, the human brand is inherently and closely associated with the commercial brand and the products. Consequently, the proximity should evoke a stronger meaning transfer for SMIs endorsing their own commercial brand and products. Second, the frequency and duration of potential endorsement experiences are much higher because the YouTube videos are much longer than, for example, TV commercials and new videos are often published daily (e.g., Logan Paul Vlogs, n.d., in 2016 and 2017). Also, the perceived brand personality is established in a different way than traditional celebrity brands. The perceived brand personality results from the associations based on the many emotions and cognitions that occurred while viewing the SMI-mediated behavior over many videos. As a

result, the valence of associations based on the experienced emotion and cognition during the watching experiences are critical for building a meaning-transfer-worthy influencer personality.

In the context of emotions, SMIs use in-video strategies that can be associated with positive emotions, such as humor or surprise (e.g., PewDiePie, 2017a). On the more observable spectrum, a common association strategy is to use in-group and individualized phrases or general positive messages about the commercial brand and the products. For example, Roman Atwood used his common vlog ending phrase “*smile more*” as his brand logo and to add a design element to it, for example, with the other common affirmative phrase of “*You’re Beautiful, You’re One of a Kind*” (RomanAtwoodVlogs, 2018; The Smile More Store, n.d.). Similarly, Logan Paul and Jake Paul integrate unique, reoccurring personal phrases such as “*It’s everyday bro*” (Fanjoy, n.d.) or “*You need a survey, bro?*” (Maverick by Logan Paul, n.d.) with their products. In the case of Logan Paul (2017b), his brand name “Maverick” seems to be the most meaning-rich commercial brand name. First, “maverick” is a concept that is culturally loaded with meaning. A maverick is “*a person who thinks and acts in an independent way, often behaving differently from the expected or usual way*” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-a). According to Logan Paul (2017a), a maverick is someone who “*(...) paves his own path. He does not listen to the haters.*” Second, he increases positive brand association by repeating the positive traits across many videos, “*Go out, be a maverick, be unique, be different*” (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b). Third, another layer of meaning is added by his colorful parrot, with whom he has regular talks in the videos, being named Maverick and functioning as his brand symbol (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b, 2017c; Maverick by Logan Paul, n.d.). With the visual features of having multiple colors, the parrot is linked to diversity and “being different.” Further, the parrot likely has positive valence due to humorous “interactions” between the parrot and Logan Paul in every vlog. Unlike the previous SMIs, Jake Paul (Fanjoy, n.d.) and Tanner Fox (Tanner Fox Brand, n.d.) use variations of their names as brand logos. This represents the closest and most obvious association between the commercial and the human brand.

Moreover, the speed of positive meaning transfer is likely fostered by the common strategy of the YouTuber wearing their own branded clothing in every video, thereby creating an uncomplicated and ever-present link between the SMI and the commercial brand (e.g., Jake Paul, 2017a, 2017b; Tanner Fox, 2018a, 2018b). Overall, SMIs not only use juxtaposition as a strategy but also autobiographical associations of meaning. The autobiographical association is established by linking the commercial brand and product to the characteristics of the SMI. For

instance, PewDiePie's Swedish nationality was linked to a shirt by printing a pattern of Swedish meatballs on it (2017b), and his specific video niche, gaming, was used to promote gaming headphones (2017d) and a gaming chair (2017a). A more elaborate strategy is to tell an autobiographical narrative to establish a more personal link between the SMI and the brand/product. For example, PewDiePie (2017d) exclaimed that "*Today is very special. Seven years ago, before I started making videos, I needed to get a microphone, so I spent some of my last money went out and bought the Razor (...) and I used it to make a ton of my videos. You have seen it, and now seven years later, I have my very own Razor headphones. Designed by me! It feels unreal. I never thought something like this would happen.*" The autobiographical narrative provides insight into his celebrity journey and the meaning attached to the marketed product.

*Familiarity.* Studies found that the repetition of an object (e.g., brand, celebrity) typically leads to a more positive attitude towards the object, also known as the mere-exposure-effect (e.g., Schmidt and Eisend 2015). On the meta video level, a high frequency of uploads and video duration can be observed. Except for RiceGum (n.d.), the other sampled creators were producing daily videos, and except for PewDiePie (n.d.), the videos portray daily habitual and punctual events in a video diary style. Compared to traditional (celebrity) marketing, if viewers utilize the possibility of daily consumption, it seems likely that they quickly grow a strong feeling of familiarity. On the video level, there is a common repetitive structure of video elements, such as the same welcoming phrase, e.g., "*Ayo, good morning, Logang. What's popping?*" (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b, 2017c), recurring settings, such as the house of the SMI (e.g., Jake Paul, 2017a, 2017b), recurring individuals, such as friends (e.g., Tanner Fox, 2018a, 2018b), and reoccurring positive references to the influencer-branded clothing (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b, 2017c). For example, Jake Paul (e.g., 2017a), Logan Paul (e.g., 2017b), and Tanner Fox (e.g., 2018a) had a pre-edited marketing sequence at the end of every investigated video and the phrase "*link in bio*" or "*link in the description*" was found at least once in every video. Influencer-branded products are also institutionalized into the setting, and the promotional behavior it habitualized. For example, Tanner Fox institutionalized vlogger-branded products by frequently visiting and documenting the construction process of his future warehouse for his branded products (e.g., Tanner Fox, 2018a, 2018b). In addition, most SMIs were wearing influencer-branded clothing almost in every video.



*Similarity.* Typically, a person perceived as similar is more liked (Alves et al., 2016, 2017) and attractive (Montoya et al., 2008). While physical characteristics, such as age or gender, are usually less changeable, other characteristics, such as behavior and language, can be more easily adapted to create the perception of similarity between the target audience and the SMI. There is evidence for the assumption that most of the viewers are young people and that the SMIs are aware of this. For example, in an interview, Jake Paul states that his “*audience [are mainly] (...) 8 to 16-year-olds*” (Good Morning America, 2018) and children and teenage fans are often seen in the selected videos (e.g., Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b; Tanner Fox, 2018b). Additionally, YouTube provides every channel owner with analytical data on the gender and age of the viewers based on the viewer’s Google profiles. Consequently, SMIs can use the audience demographics to tailor their content in various ways. Because perceived similarity is desirable from a social influence perspective, the expectation is to find different strategies.

SMIs very frequently acted in impulsive and not typical “adult-like” ways. For example, Logan Paul (2017c), 21, starts a video by admitting that he is “*a mess. I’m a big hot mess. Here is how I feel right now*” and throwing an object at the ground. The object shatters strangely, and his cameraman enthusiastically asks, “*Did you know it was going to shatter like this?*” and he replies with similar enthusiasm, “*Bro, I didn’t know plastic shatters like glass*” (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017c). When his assistant asks him, “*What did you do?*”, he answers in a casual, light-hearted way, “*When?*” In a half-serious tone, she replies with, “*I walked out for literally 5 seconds, and there is already another mess,*” and he smilingly confirms that “*I said I’m a mess. I’m a big hot mess.*” Stereotypically, adults may not find such behavioral patterns relatable, entertaining, or interesting. However, young people may find these wilder behaviors more relatable, as evidence shows that adolescence is a developmental stage in which humans are more curious and likely to engage in social deviant, impulsive, and risky behaviors (Braams *et al.*, 2015; Hendry and Kloep, 2012; Igra and Irwin, 1996; Romer, 2010).

A similar second social deviant behavioral pattern is pranking. A prank is “*a trick of an amusing, playful, or sometimes malicious nature*” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). YouTube pranking videos are especially popular among young consumers (Hobbs and Grafe, 2015). For example, Jake Paul combines the prank theme together with his highly visible self-branded clothing. In one video, Jake Paul “pranked” regular clothing shops by putting his self-branded clothing on the mannequins (Jake Paul, 2017a) and, in another video, he pranked his brother by renting a billboard on which he put a photoshopped picture of his brother on wearing

Jake Paul's self-branded clothing and exclaiming "*I love this merch. Link in Bio*" and showing his brothers "shocked" reaction to it (Jake Paul, 2017b). The pranking theme was also featured in various video titles, for example, "*OUR NEW MAVERICK ICE CREAM-MERCH-TRUCK! (pranked)*" (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b). Third, language patterns and words less common among adults were often used. For example, common colloquial language phrases were "bro," "dab on dem haters," "merch," or "savage" (e.g., Jake Paul, 2018b; Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017c). In addition, another similarity-emphasizing strategy is to narrate the pre-celebrity past that might be similar to the current or past situation of the viewers. For example, Logan Paul (2017a) uses remarks on his ordinary origin as being "*(...) just a boy from Ohio. Following his dreams,*" while PewDiePie (2017d) emphasizes his humble financial beginnings, "*Seven years ago, before I started making videos, I needed to get a microphone, so I spent some of my last money went out and bought the Razor.*"

#### **(5) Heuristic of Authority**

*Celebrity lifestyle.* The SMIs indicate high status by demonstrating a celebrity lifestyle that involves high-status symbols, practices, and people. High-status symbols, such as expensive supercars (e.g., Tanner Fox, 2018a; Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017a) or upper-class housing (e.g., Jake Paul, 2017a; RiceGum, 2017), appear frequently. The symbols are passively embedded in the recording settings or actively interacted with in the video. There are various practices associated with high-status individuals, such as interacting with fans (e.g., Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017a; Tanner Fox, 2018b), professional acting (e.g., Jake Paul, 2017a), professional music production (e.g., Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017a), or exceptional business activities, such as building a big warehouse for influencer-branded products (Tanner Fox, 2018a). It is very common for SMIs to display interactions with other high-status individuals. SMIs often feature other SMIs in their videos or even live together with them (e.g., Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b; Jake Paul, 2017b). It is noteworthy that SMIs often highlight that they earned success through very hard work and not because of external forces, such as their parents' money. Logan Paul (2017b) uses small and big communicative reminders to portray his personal success journey from being "*a kid from Ohio*" who made his dream come true through hard work. Consequently, the narration of the journey from a similar pre-celebrity past to current celebrity life frames the SMIs as a credible role model.

*Obedience.* For SMIs, it is uncomplicated to record content with experienced friends or hired actors in which they model a complying response to the requests. In the Ice-Cream-Truck video,

Logan Paul asks a SMI-friend, “*What is this disgusting shirt? (...) are you good bro?*” and his friend immediately undresses and throws his shirt away, asking Logan if he has “*got a shirt I can use by any chance*” (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b). Then Logan hands him a branded shirt. This models obedience to Logan Paul and the low value of all non-Maverick-clothing.

## **(6) Heuristic of Social Proof**

*Extreme brand-positive emotional and behavioral modeling.* A common social proof strategy is to show extreme positive behaviors and emotions of fans. For example, the music video of Logan Paul (2017a) and the build-up videos (Flobros, 2017a, 2017b) show a fan idolizing the YouTuber as a hero. Initially, the fan-created a two-and-a-half-minute-long music video dedicated to praising Logan Paul as his hero (Flobros, 2017a). This extreme positive attitude is communicated on the audio level with lyrics such as “*Logan, you are my hero. You mean the world to me (...) You help inspire me,*” and on the visual level with idolizing practices, such as happily jumping in front of a pedestal with pictures of Logan Paul (Flobros, 2017a). After the initial video, Logan Paul invited the fan to visit him, and the face-to-face interactions in the vlogs show the fan modeling strong positive behaviors and emotions (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017e, 2017f). The climax of the fan visit is a music video produced by the fan and Paul (2017a). The music video adopts the same perspective, celebrating Logan Paul as a hero. For example, the chorus the fan sings is, “*Everyone has a hero. Zero people shouldn’t have a hero. Logan is my hero, he is really nice. So I went and made a song about him twice (...) Everybody needs someone to idolize*” (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017a). The lyrics frame the practice of idolizing in general and Logan Paul in specific as a positive social norm. In another video, the extremely positive reactions of over 20 fans are shown towards the influencer-branded clothing and Logan Paul, which ranged from screaming to running behind the departing car (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b).

*Explicit social endorsements.* Fans were also very explicitly and deliberately integrated as endorsers. For example, Tanner Fox (2018a) uses the strategy very routinely at the end of every video. A sequence is inserted with a fan endorsing specific brand-positive actions, “*If you like this video that you just watched, then like down below, subscribe to his YouTube channel and get his merch. Link in the description*” (Tanner Fox, 2018a). Similarly, friends, who are often also SMIs, routinely endorse the positive features of the YouTuber and influencer-branded clothing (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b; Jake Paul, 2017a; RiceGum, 2017).

*Modeling buying.* A social proof strategy is to integrate content in which fans or other influencers demonstrate or verbalize how and why they purchased influencer-branded clothing. For example, Logan Paul (2017b) has one video in which he hand-delivers his self-branded clothing to three addresses. All three cases verbalized that the influencer-branded clothing was ordered with their parents' help (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2017b). In the two first cases, teenagers open the door and, in the last case, a SMI-friend of Logan Paul, Mark Dohner (2 million subscribers) (Mark Dohner, n.d.). The last case seems to be designed in a very questionable and deliberate way. At the beginning of the sequence, Logan Paul's assistant tells him that the influencer-branded clothing is for Carol. Logan rings the bell and seems confused upon seeing his friend opening the door. He asks his assistant if this is the right address. This sequence is clearly scripted because Logan Paul lived in the apartment two years ago in a shared arrangement with Mark Dohner (Logan Paul Vlogs, 2016). Logan Paul explains what they were doing, "*We are giving fans who ...*," but abruptly stops as his friend, who is already wearing Logan Paul self-branded clothing, interrupts him by saying, "*It's hot in here, isn't it?*" and takes off his shirt, revealing that he has second Logan Paul branded shirt below. Both then start celebrating his attitude of wearing two influencer-branded shirts. Quickly turning to his assistant, Logan Paul says, "*Real talk Ayla (...) How did we end up here? Is this a joke?*" The assistant answers with "*I don't know, it says Carol,*" and his friend resolves the name confusion by stating that, "*I lost my credit card last week. So I used my mom's to buy the merch.*" Logan Paul reacts with confusion to the explanation, saying, "*Wait, what? You bought my merch?*" Dohner explains the behavior with highly supportive intent, "*I'm always going to support you. Logang for life, bro. We have been roommates for two years.*" Logan responds gratefully with, "*You are one of my best friends, you could have just asked,*" and emphasizes verbally and visually that the friend bought many influencer-branded items by emptying the bag on the floor. His friend picks up the newly launched influencer-branded clothing item from among all the possible items and overly happily shouts that "*This is the new one,*" and euphorically hugs Logan Paul. The sequence finishes with a short dialog between Logan Paul and his videographer, in which he re-emphasizes that "*It was under Carol,*" and his friend repeats that "*He used his mom's credit card.*" In the first two cases, awareness was raised for a less controversial way to obtain influencer-branded products, namely young consumers asking parents. In contrast, the last case elaborates on a more ethically questionable way, namely using the parent's credit card.

## **(7) Heuristic of Unity**

*Community language.* This strategy addresses the fans repeatedly with either a created compelling, unique community term or a pre-existing strong community term. For example, PewDiePie addresses his community in terms of generic groups such as “family” (PewDiePie, 2017a), “army” (PewDiePie, 2017d), and “squad fam” (PewDiePie, 2017c), while Logan Paul uses a more elaborate compound: “*Join the strongest and fastest-growing family on YouTube*” (Logan Paul, 2017b, 2017c). In addition, SMIs create group labels grounded in a SMI-based group identity, such as “Logang,” “Logangsters” (e.g., Logan Paul, 2017c), “Jake Paulers” (e.g., Jake Paul, 2017b), or “Fox Fam” (e.g., Tanner Fox, 2018a).

*Community praise.* Another common strategy is to praise the community. For example, Logan Paul (2017b) praises “favorable” group behavior, such as “*Logang goes hard, bro,*” or revealing his positive affection towards being part of the group, such as it “*feels go to be in the Logang.*” Further, he associates “*the movement of mavericks*” with “*people with a goal, who are passionate and will not let anything get in the way to achieve that goal*” (Logan Paul, 2017b). The self-centered in-group names may foster very high in-group identification with him directly and allow people in the group to use his achievements to increase their self-esteem. This effect is known as basking in reflected glory and is found, for example, in football fans (Cialdini *et al.*, 1976). The frequent telling and showing of extraordinary achievements might be beneficial not only to the self-esteem of the SMI but also to the fan community (e.g., Jake Paul, 2017a, 2017b).

*Community associations.* Ultimately, positive associations can function as a community-building strategy. For instance, in the hero-themed music video, Logan Paul (2017a) associates his “movement” and his “hero status” with the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King. The association is established through lyrics, such as “*I’m somebody’s hero? Wow, that’s amazing. And if you really believe it, you can do anything. You can go and start a movement. Look at Martin Luther King,*” and visuals, such as green screening frames of Martin Luther King’s famous “I have a dream” speech in the background of the scenery.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that SMIs use marketing strategies relatable to all seven social influence heuristics, and their application is very different from traditional TV marketing. Some marketing strategies were extremely deliberate, innovative, skillful, systematic, and sometimes ethically questionable. The observed marketing involved elements of thoughtful planning,

designing, and execution, such as providing daily novel content in which covert marketing is blended with entertainment, humor, and authenticity.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

### **Research Contribution**

The role of influencers in social media marketing has been widely discussed in previous research. The presented study extends the diverse findings by a coherent framework in which individual persuasion strategies can be related to each other and which takes into account the social context of influencer persuasion. To test the applicability of the framework, we chose a qualitative approach and analyzed the content of selected long-form videos.

The selected high-reach cases with exceptional commercial success clearly show how much skill and creativity are involved in real-world influencer marketing in long-form video content. Moreover, the number of skillful and creative behaviors and communications contained in one video and displayed across one YouTuber's videos is substantial and diverse. Despite that, the behaviors and communications are highly relatable to the social influence framework and associated concepts studied in the marketing literature.

The focus-group, cross-sectional, and experimental studies of influencer marketing in long-form video content found that perceived influencer familiarity, similarity, liking, expertise (related to authority heuristic), physical attractiveness, social attractiveness (related to social proof heuristic), audience participation (related to consistency heuristic), and positive audience comments (related to social proof heuristic) affect marketing-relevant consumer outcomes, such as purchase intention (Coates *et al.*, 2020; Lee and Watkins, 2016; Munnukka *et al.*, 2019; Pick, 2020; Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020; Stubb *et al.*, 2019; Van Dam and Van Reijmersdal, 2019; Xiao *et al.*, 2018). The present study makes a clear contribution to understanding how these specific theoretical concepts can be expressed in real-world communications and behaviors. Moreover, the case studies show that the contribution made by the most common current experimental studies, which use one video with a more or less arbitrary influencer and pre-post measure, to understanding the reality of the complex dynamic between consumers and influencers is often not enough to reflect the real usage situations (e.g., Reinikainen *et al.*, 2020). For example, (young) consumers have often invested a considerable number of resources (e.g., time, emotion, or money) into watching the videos of specific YouTubers, and YouTubers use different

strategies to promote their personal brand and self-owned commercial brand. Consequently, the knowledge that is often generated by consumers who have watched one video and thereby invested very little into a YouTuber with unclear marketing competencies does not fully capture the marketing-relevant real-world consumer dynamics.

The evidence-based, conceptual framework with the seven social influence heuristics and the presented case studies clearly contributes not only to the quantitative literature but also to the qualitative studies. It appears to be a highly functional conceptual nexus for the current evidence. First, this study shows how previously identified marketing strategies can be linked to relatable high-level concepts and provides additional examples of highly skillful and creative applications. For instance, gratitude and praise were previously identified as important marketing strategies of beauty YouTubers (Mardon *et al.*, 2018). So far, however, the relationship of these concepts to common high-level marketing concepts, such as liking, has not been explained theoretically. The link between abstract high-level explanations (or heuristics) and their specific applications (i.e., types of marketing strategies) improves theoretical, conceptual, and practical clarity and integrability because it distinguishes between a strategy (or intervention), the underlying theoretical mechanism of action (i.e., specific heuristic), and theories integrating them (Carey *et al.*, 2019). Second, our study extends previously studied concepts related to the persuasive impact of social media influencers to include alternative and previously unconsidered mechanisms.

For example, Cocker and Cronin (2017) conclude from their analysis of YouTube videos that Weber's concept of charismatic authority results "through collaborative, co-constructive and communal interdependence between culted figure and follower," (p. 455). Our analyses suggest additional ways in which authority may be constructed: Authority could be passively facilitated through the daily viewing experience of the SMI's high-status luxury lifestyle or authority could be actively facilitated by using role models showing obedience behaviors at the request of the influencer. Third, the present study has advanced our theoretical understanding of influencer marketing pathways by introducing and finding evidence for the practical and theoretical value of two well-established theoretical notions, namely consistency (e.g., Bernritter *et al.*, 2017; Gopinath and Nyer, 2009; Vaidyanathan and Aggarwal, 2005) and scarcity (e.g., Goldsmith *et al.*, 2020; Hannah *et al.*, 2014; Shi *et al.*, 2020). For example, SMIs make deliberate use of verbal and visual scarcity cues in their video narratives (e.g., "*This is all the hats we have right here. It is not the usual amount. Usually, we would get a shipment that fills this whole area,*")

RomanAtwoodBarelyVlogs, 2018). Fourth, the study tested whether the framework of the seven social influence heuristics holds promise as a theoretical and analytical tool for influencer marketing and found support for it. Thus, future influencer marketing research can benefit from using a framework that is not only tested but also grounded in robust empirical and experimental evidence and the latest theoretical advancements from the social and cognitive psychology literature, such as the vital distinction between the consumer's Type 1 heuristic-intuitive processes and Type 2 processes. Overall, the previous qualitative endeavors tended to use one interesting theoretical notion without grounding and framing it within a wider theoretical perspective, such as different cognitive processes. For example, charismatic authority may be more influential under emotional-intuitive Type 1 than deliberate-rational Type 2 processes. In the source characteristics literature, robust evidence was found for the important moderating role of processing type on source characteristics (e.g., attractiveness vs. expertise) and product characteristics (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian) (Balabanis and Chatzopoulou, 2019).

Lastly, this study is the first tentative inquiry into the theoretical notion of ethically questionable marketing behaviors in the context of influencer marketing, expanding the current ethical discussion beyond disclosures (Bellizzi and Hasty, 1984; Fukukawa and Ennew, 2010; Hsu *et al.*, 2008).

In sum, this study provides an evidence-informed, broad, and analytically clear theoretical framework of seven social influence heuristics and applies the framework to highly educational case studies.

### **Practical and Social Implications**

From a practical perspective, the study provides practitioners with an evidence-based theoretical and conceptual framework. Thus, SMIs and organizations collaborating with SMIs can explain relevant marketing relationships and facilitate their thinking and decision-making to plan, design, and execute influencer marketing. Therefore, the study contributes to popularizing the notion of evidence-based persuasion principles in marketing (Armstrong, 2010; Armstrong *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, the skillful and creative examples of the heuristics in action provide educational and instructive material that could facilitate the creativity of SMIs and organizations collaborating with SMIs. For example, corporations could use the elaborate multiple video fan-rewarding-



narrative of Logan Paul by picking a very loyal customer and creating a compelling reciprocity-based narrative around the customer. The strategies of daily YouTubers, such as Logan Paul, might be especially effective because they can conduct quasi-experiments by changing the marketing strategies in their videos daily and tracking the changes in sales. This would be similar to what O’Keefe (2016) called the “brute-force” message design procedure for evidence-based marketing effectiveness, “in which, in situ, alternative ads can be compared for effectiveness” (p. 299). However, the tests conducted within the videos obviously entails more variation than clear A/B ad testing. Until there are more experimental studies and meta-analyses on the marketing strategies of SMIs, the application of evidence-based heuristics and emulation of successful cases seems the best choice for practitioners.

From a consumer and educator perspective, the framework, combined with the example, can be instructive material to educate oneself or others on influencer marketing in long-form video content. Based on this, interventions could be designed, and their effectiveness tested for building domain-specific and -transcendent persuasion knowledge and marketing literacy.

From the social perspective, the current study shows the subtle nature of real-world influencer marketing and the potential limitations of the current marketing ethics approach to influencer marketing, which is based on disclosures that should improve the recognizability of marketing. For instance, in one of Logan Paul’s (2018b) videos, his friend “spontaneously” throws his own shirt away, then asks for a branded shirt and happily embraces the new branded shirt. This example raises three important marketing research and ethics questions: (1) Do consumers recognize such short, fast-paced, scripted, in-video sequences as marketing? (2) Does a pre-video disclosure change the consumers’ perception of such in-video sequences? (3) Is an influencer allowed to use other people (i.e., SMIs or professional actors) as brand endorsers in long-form video content without disclosing their commercial affiliation or interest at any point?

Overall, the concept of the intentionally masked scriptedness of fast-paced in-video endorsements needs further theoretical and empirical research. As was seen, SMIs can deliberately script in elements indicating the video’s non-scripted nature by exclaiming, for example, that “*I should have written a script for this video*” (PewDiePie, 2017d). SMIs have high incentives to create videos that appear authentic, deliberately non-scripted, and “raw” while still being elaborately scripted to optimize commercial outcomes (Audrezet *et al.*, 2018; Khamis *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, the video in which Logan Paul (2018c) delivers his merchandise to fans shows the different ways young viewers might obtain influencer-branded clothing. The first two examples depict rather ordinary cases of the parents ordering influencer-branded clothing for teenage fans, but the last example depicts a questionable case of using the mother's credit card to obtain influencer-branded clothing. Consequently, further questions should be added to the previous ones: (4) How do such sequences translate to young consumers' cognitions, emotions, and behaviors related to obtaining influencer-branded merchandise? (5) Is creating a potentially unrealistic social norm concerning influencer-related product consumption ethically acceptable (i.e., parents typically buy merchandise for their children, and give their children their credit cards)?

Overall, these examples and related questions suggest that the current focus in practice and research on pre-video disclosures might considerably underestimate the subtlety of self-promotional influencer marketing in long-form video content in terms of the subtle exploitation of social influence heuristics. Research on the proposed questions is encouraged to provide policymakers with robust evidence on the effects of ethically questionable influencer marketing strategies and effective counter-interventions. The current FTC guidelines indicate that it is either unaware or lacking evidence to cope with questionable, native, self-promotional influencer marketing in long-form video content (Campbell and Grimm, 2019; FTC, 2017, 2019).

If policymakers and researchers explore the subtlety of influencer marketing, (young) consumers could be considerably empowered in the future.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

There are several noteworthy limitations. First, deductive thematic analysis has analytical benefits but also limitations. More specifically, the pre-defined deductive categories (i.e., the seven social influence heuristics) might have led us to miss other relevant observations because they did not fit into these categories. Second, the descriptive-interpretative analysis of the video in terms of social influence heuristics is based on theoretical reasonableness. Thus, the theoretical claims made concerning the viewers' processing of the videos could be inaccurate. Third, TA focuses on between-cases rather than within-case analysis, which leads to some unavoidable loss of holistic understanding concerning the individual cases. Lastly, a sample-based limitation arises because the sample comprises six male YouTubers from western

cultures and countries, five based in the U.S., and three being fairly controversial (i.e., Jake Paul, Logan Paul, and PewDiePie). As a result, the observed influencer marketing could be confounded by gender, country regulations, culture, and “controversiality.” For example, female YouTubers or vloggers from eastern countries may market differently.

Three promising directions for future research arise that lead to advancing the developed framework. First, the expansion of the theoretical and analytical landscape of the framework is a promising direction. To this end, researchers could use more inductive approaches to the development of social influence categories like grounded theory, conduct more theoretical work that identifies further useful distinguishable categories from the social psychology or marketing literature, or examine the communicative and behavioral strategies within one particular heuristic in greater depth. Second, the theoretical claims made concerning the impact of the heuristics and strategies on the audience should be examined by using interviews and experiments. Third, the framework would benefit from more research on the relationship between larger macro characteristics like stricter national policies for marketing or different cultural values and individual characteristics like gender and their influence on the use of social influence heuristics and strategies. To this end, researchers could investigate samples of SMIs with different demographical and cultural backgrounds or focus on the comparison of two high-profile SMIs in greater depth.

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| Genre                       | Vlogging<br>Entertainment<br>Commentaries<br>Gaming   | Vlogging<br>Podcasting  | Vlogging  | Vlogging  | Vlogging<br>Entertainment<br>Music  | Vlogging  |
|-----------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Biographical<br>information | <a href="https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/PewDiePie">https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/PewDiePie</a>           | <a href="https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Logan_Paul_Vlogs">https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Logan_Paul_Vlogs</a>                                 | <a href="https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Jake_Paul">https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Jake_Paul</a>                               | <a href="https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Roman_Atwood_Vlogs">https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Roman_Atwood_Vlogs</a>       | <a href="https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/RiceGum">https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/RiceGum</a>           | <a href="https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Tanner_Fox">https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Tanner_Fox</a>     |
| Statistical<br>information  | <a href="https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/pewdiepie">https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/pewdiepie</a> | <a href="https://socialblade.com/youtube/channel/UCG8rbF3g2AMX70yOd8vqIZg">https://socialblade.com/youtube/channel/UCG8rbF3g2AMX70yOd8vqIZg</a> | <a href="https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/jakepaulproductions">https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/jakepaulproductions</a> | <a href="https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/romanatwoodvlogs">https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/romanatwoodvlogs</a> | <a href="https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/ricegum">https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/ricegum</a> | <a href="https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/mtfilms">https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/mtfilms</a> |

Table 2. Description of the sample of videos

| Channel name and video title                                 | Views in millions<br>(10.06.2019) | Date posted | Duration | Summary   | Reference   |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------|----------|---|---|
| <i>PewDiePie</i>   |                                   |             |          |   |   |
| <u>RETURN TO SLENDER</u>                                     | 3.8                               | 29.09.2017  | 14:14    | Advertising and introducing new co-branded chair                            | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7vheRVUbZE">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7vheRVUbZE</a> |
| <u>HOW TO: MAKE SWEDISH MEATBALLS</u>                        | 10.8                              | 08.10.2017  | 10:09    | Advertising and introducing new mono-branded meatball t-shirt               | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4awKvTfgKfU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4awKvTfgKfU</a> |
| <u>We Need To Talk.. (Important) (Clickbait)</u>             | 2.3                               | 20.10.2017  | 04:37    | Gratitude for fan support and advertisement chair and shirt                 | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szfuo1m6uJ8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szfuo1m6uJ8</a> |
| <i>Logan Paul Vlogs</i>                                      |                                   |             |          |   |   |
| <u>Logan Paul - HERO (Official Music Video) Feat. Zircon</u> | 61.6                              | 20.06.2017  | 04:03    | Portraying Logan Paul as a Hero in a Song with a fan                        | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0DcYxwK1VU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0DcYxwK1VU</a> |
| <u>HAND DELIVERING MAVERICK MERCH TO FANS! (speechless)</u>  | 3.5                               | 28.06.2017  | 14:13    | Delivering merchandise to fans with high purchase orders                    | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUter01LcLM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUter01LcLM</a> |
| <u>OUR NEW MAVERICK ICE CREAM-MERCH-TRUCK! (pranked)</u>     | 7.5                               | 02.08.2017  | 11:54    | Changing an ice cream truck to a merch truck and giving merchandise to fans | <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7fWWn-m5Es">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7fWWn-m5Es</a> |

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*Jake Paul*

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MY MERCH IS NOW IN STORES?!

3.7      13.05.2017      13:05      Putting the merchandise on the mannequins in public stores      <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NQBSVYNnik>

EMBARRASSING BILLBOARD PRANK ON MY BROTHER (HE FREAKED)

10.6      07.07.2017      15:15      Jake painted a billboard with his brother wearing his merch      <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDb2pB5wTWo>

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*Tanner Fox*

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WE GOT MATCHING CARS! \*\*bestfriend goals\*

0.7      02.02.2018      15:56      Showing the merchandise warehouse construction      [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wavTn7\\_e2xk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wavTn7_e2xk)

WE FOUND OUR DREAM HOUSE!!

2.7      06.02.2018      18:28      Showing the merchandise warehouse construction      <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sZR8PG8B7w>

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*RiceGum*

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ROASTING YOUTUBERS (Jake Paul, Logan Paul, Roman Atwood, AND MORE)

5.2      30.06.2017      10:01      Advertising and introducing new merchandise      <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORr5572NzZE>

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*RomanAtwoodBarelyVlogs*

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THE NEW TOY!!

2.2      08.02.2018      15:28      Advertising new mono-branded hat      <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SwfakRHCE1s>