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RELATIONSHIPS WITH BEAUTY YOUTUBERS

Beyond liking and subscribing:

How college women perceive and navigate their relationships with beauty YouTubers

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Abstract

In recent years, YouTube has become a popular platform for people to create, view, and share content. Through managing the YouTube channels, more and more content creators successfully become YouTubers, building personal brands, and attracting a number of followers. While viewers enjoy the user-generated information, it reveals a lucrative market for brands to promote their products through YouTubers, utilizing their closer connections with viewers and turning the viewers into consumers. This study will focus on one kind of YouTubers, the beauty YouTuber who providing reviews and tutorials about beauty products. Previous studies have focused on analyzing the case of successful beauty YouTubers to discover factors that contribute to the success of YouTubers. As YouTubers are becoming more and more prevalent and powerful, it is important to understand their impact on viewers. This study attempts to discover a more detailed picture of this influencing relationship between YouTubers and viewers from viewers' perspectives. By conducting in-depth interviews with six college women, it is shown that viewers perceive the influencing relationship as one-side that beauty YouTubers only form one part of their decision-making process. Viewers believe they take control of navigating the relationship with beauty YouTubers. Though the conversation, there is no parasocial relationship identified, indicating the parasocial relationship might not be an effective way to examine the relationship between beauty YouTubers and viewers. Through the findings, this study illuminates that viewers are more active and critical when consuming the media message from beauty YouTubers. This study helps to draw attention from future studies to pay more attention to viewers' emotions, attitudes, and behavior when studying the relationship between YouTubers and viewers.

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Introduction

With over 126 million unique monthly viewers, YouTube is by far the most popular online video property in the United States (Statista, 2019). YouTube allows individuals to create and upload videos on the platform to share and communicate with other users. In the United States, 57 percent of YouTube users stated that they accessed the platform on a daily basis in order to follow celebrities, brands, and keep up with societal topics (Statista, 2019). Now YouTube has become more than a popular online platform for user-generated content; it provides content creators with job opportunities, self-branding. One of the numerous types of YouTuber is the beauty YouTuber, which is especially popular among female users although there are many male beauty influencers and viewers as well. Beauty YouTubers typically feature themselves unboxing and reviewing beauty product and providing hair and makeup tutorials. Most of them also create vlogs, a form of video blog, to record their daily lives. In this way, they provide closer perspectives on their personal lives to attract and retain followers. They also interact with viewers in the “comments” under their YouTube videos and via other social media platforms as well.

As a platform, YouTube provides opportunities for content creators to express themselves and for viewers to learn and entertain. Moreover, it has become a new lucrative market for companies and brands to advertise and market their products. Studies have shown that content originality has a positive impact on consumers’ brand perception, brand selection, and attracting new consumer groups (Ko & Wu, 2017). Hiring popular and favorable beauty vloggers as brand endorsers or ambassadors has become a new way for brand owners to market their products. Studies have been conducted to explore what makes YouTubers so popular and attractive to their viewers and how they cultivate the loyalty and relationships that brands are so eager to monetize.

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Several factors have been found to contribute to the success of YouTubers, such as “intimacy” and “authenticity” (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Basil, 1996). Studies have also shown the mediating role of parasocial interaction between YouTubers and viewers (Liu, M., Liu, Y. & Zhang, 2019). The parasocial interaction is defined as the relationships that viewers form with mediated personalities, in turn, impact their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors in the real world (Brown & Basil, 1995). Studies have found that the processes of forming relationships in the real and mediated worlds are identical so that parasocial relationship could influence people’s beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Eyal & Dailey, 2012). The mediating role of parasocial relationship indicates that viewers’ loyalty toward beauty YouTubers can be positively formed by the parasocial interactions (Ko & Wu, 2017).

Existing research has been mainly focused on content creators, examining the characteristics of their videos or the personalities of YouTubers themselves. These studies conduct case-by-case analyses of specific YouTubers or engage in content or textual analyses of their videos. However, few studies have explored how audiences consider and react to the performance of YouTubers. This study aims to understand the way audiences perceive and navigate their relationships with YouTubers. Do audiences consider “intimacy”, “authenticity”, and other factors that previous studies found from the creator’s side as crucial when evaluating beauty YouTubers? Do audiences consider themselves having relationships with YouTubers? The study aims to understand audiences’ perspectives of favorable and successful YouTubers and fills the gap in existing research by examining the factors that previous research has found and comparing those findings to audience perceptions.

Literature Review

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Social media has exploded in popularity and changed in revolutionary ways. After entering Web 2.0 (the transition to a networked, social media focused Internet experience), YouTube has evolved from a social media platform into a marketing tool for businesses (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Rea, 2015). YouTube's structure provided a platform where users could communicate and connect with each other in a new way - the video communication. Content creators could vividly share huge amount of information and ideas with body expression, mood and tone, and delightful background in videos. Viewers could collect more information and opinions about products or skills than before. YouTube's user-friendliness, combined with the soaring popularity of video content, has made it the second largest search engine next to Google (Forbes, 2017). This development provided an opportunity for brands to introduce and promote their products to consumers through YouTube content creators, and beauty companies have become one of the successful industries that utilize the advantages of YouTubers. With the cooperation and endorsement of companies, beauty YouTubers have become communicators to build and promote brand images. Around 60 percent of beauty content views were generated by influencers in 2018, while official videos produced by companies only accounted for 39 percent of beauty content views (Statista, 2019). It is indicating the increasing power of user-generated content to influence viewers and consumers.

As successful beauty YouTubers are able to attract millions of viewers and become brand endorsers, a large number of studies have explored the underlying mechanisms behind their popularity and financial success (Salsabila, Iskandar & Nasution; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, ,2016; Jerslev, 2016; Holland, 2016; Ferchaud, etc., 2018; Berryman, & Kavka, 2017). Two main themes emerged among analyses of the personalities and performances of the content creators and their videos. The first focuses on discovering the attributes of beauty YouTubers

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and their channels that attracted viewers and generated viewer loyalty. The other concerns the relationships between content creators and viewers, the parasocial relationship.

Conclusions regarding the underlying mechanisms that contribute to the celebrification of beauty YouTubers are relatively consistent across studies, the majority of which are case studies of individual or several beauty YouTubers or content analyses of the channel performance, videos, and other social media. For example, the YouTuber, Zoella, was a popular representative of successful beauty YouTuber among research. By studying her experience, researchers examined the significance of authenticity, connectedness, ordinariness, and intimacy in the celebrification of YouTube content creators (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Jerslev, 2016).

Holland's study supports previous finding by offering a content analysis of prominent beauty YouTubers' videos and structures of their channels. The YouTubers in the study are selected from top 10 most subscribed beauty YouTube channels. The study confirms that authenticity and interaction attracted viewers, while adding that the conversational tone and video length also contributed to their success. In addition to scholarly work, industrial research, such as the study of Salsabila, Iskandar & Nasution, confirms the prior findings by analyzing the content marketing strategy that YouTubers used to build their personal brands. Their conclusions emphasize the crucial impact of expertise and trustworthy in self-branding. As we can see, however, neither academic nor industrial research has investigated audiences or worked to understand their concerns and feelings with YouTubers.

The other way to consider the rise of YouTubers is based on the parasocial relationship theory. The parasocial relationship is defined as the relationships that viewers form with mediated personalities in legacy media, in turn, impact their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors in the real world (Brown & Basil, 1995). The study of Eyal, Keren, & Dailey, René M found the

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similarity between viewers' relationship with real-life friends and mediated personalities, extending the theory to the social media context and applying the theory to YouTube. Following studies further supported the mediating role of parasocial relationship between YouTubers and viewers. By influencing people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, parasocial relationships could positively impact viewer's loyalty towards YouTubers (Ko & Wu, 2017; Ferchaud, etc., 2018; Chen, 2014).

While most research focuses on YouTubers and the business side of this relationship, there are a few exceptions that consider viewers' perspectives. For example, Ko and Wu (2017) conducted surveys and interviews with audience to assess their attitudes and thoughts toward beauty YouTubers' self-disclosure, similarity, expertise, and likability. Instead of focusing on one side of the parasocial relationship between content creators and viewers, Liu, M., Liu, Y., and Zhang (2019) combine both sides to explore audiences' evaluation of brands that beauty YouTubers endorsed. The study provides an insightful method to explore audience's perspectives and consumer behavior that contribute to the understanding of parasocial relationship between YouTubers and followers. This study is one of the few that spotlights audiences' power in impacting YouTubers' careers and YouTuber-endorsed brands. However, the study only uses a questionnaire survey with a convenience sample online. As parasocial relationships require a relatively long period to develop, limiting exposure to a specific and short video online limits the result of the study. In-depth interviews could make up for the deficiency by allowing the researcher to understand participants' previous experience and interaction with YouTubers. Going into far greater detail than survey, through interviews, researchers could examine the non-verbal behavior of participants to explore their deep thoughts and emotions related to YouTubers. In addition, Rea (2015) conducted a practical analysis, creating a model

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for beauty channels to make them more attractive and influential. After verifying the model by applying to 36 beauty channels, Rea points out the influencing factors identified and built in the model by the research could be tested from the audience side. This result accentuates the importance of collecting and analyzing audiences' perspectives about their relationships with YouTubers and their evaluation of the brands that they associate with to understand the popularity of YouTuber industry.

These findings reveal a gap in the research on the relationship between content creators and viewers. As viewers consume the videos and the beauty products, it is crucial to consider their perspectives. The attributes that contributed to the success of YouTubers and the formation of parasocial relationship have been tested by little researches with audiences' opinions and admissions. In an attempt to take both sides into the consideration, this study is aimed to bring supporting elements of successful YouTubers and audiences' perspectives together, to making a contribution to understanding the relationship between YouTubers and viewers.

Method

Since 81% of 15-25 year old U.S. internet users are using YouTube, the younger population is a significant community on YouTube (Statista, 2019). Prior research has also found that women may place greater emphasis on social relationships where they can have mutual interaction (Eyal & René M, 2012). Through YouTube, audiences are not only viewing the videos but also communicating with creators on the comments under the video or on other social media that forms the mutual interaction. Therefore, this study focuses on college women's social relationships with YouTubers.

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To understand college women's feeling towards YouTubers they follow, I will conduct in-depth interviews with six college women. The participants of the study are students from mid-western university. Each interview will last 30-60 minutes and will be recorded for analysis. There is a pre-survey before the interview to find out if the person is active on YouTube and engaged with the YouTube beauty community. During the interview, there will be open-ended questions to tap into college women's relationships with YouTubers, to understand how they perceive and navigate their relationships, and analyze the underlying mechanisms that contribute to the relationships. The questions aim to understand the attributes that previous studies have found and to confirm with college women. The in-depth interview could avoid "Spiral of Silence" that decrease participants' uncomfortable when speaking about personal relationships with other people. Since the audiences' thoughts and perspectives were hardly explored by qualitative research, an in-depth interview might reveal something different from their language, attitudes, and personal stories. Moreover, this research is designed to understand the relationships between viewers and YouTubers. The relationship could be perceived and impacted by variety of factors, such as feelings, emotions, backgrounds, and ways of thinking. It would be beneficial to have face-to-face communication with college women to find out the interaction between them and beauty YouTubers.

Before getting into details about what the research found, it is important to note the demographic and background information of the participants. The participants were six women aged 18-20, from a large mid-western university. All of them are Communication and Media majors or double-majored in Communication and Media. This might impact how they perceive the influence of YouTubers as they all study the communication theories and media influence.

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Moreover, there were two white college women, three black college women, and one Asian college woman. My participants are given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

Subscribe or not: Decide who to follow

While considering the favorite beauty YouTubers of each interviewee, race and ethnicity play a role in leading them to choose the YouTubers to follow. Tiara and Jade who are black described black beauty YouTubers as their favorite, while Emma and Hannah who are white choose white beauty YouTubers, and the Asian, Ashely, mentioned a Chinese YouTuber the most. This could be explained because people sharing the same race and ethnicity might have more similar personal identifies and needs or cultural norms. It is relatively easy for people who have the same skin tone or the same lifestyle to find each other approachable. Tiara considered Naturally Temi, a Black Women YouTuber, as her favorite beauty YouTuber since the YouTuber started by sharing her journey about how she grew her natural hair. Like many other black women, the participants desired advice about how to take care of their natural hair. Naturally Temi was just right here to meet Tiara's needs, learning how to grow their natural hair and make them pretty. This focus strongly resonates with Tiara's cultural identity and related personal needs. While watching and learning something similar to them, viewers are more likely to identify with the beauty YouTuber which increases the relatability and connectedness between viewers and beauty YouTubers. If the need relates to race and ethnicity, it generates a sense of belonging. Tiara talked about "some or a large some of the black women are struggling with their natural hair. They need help and they want to learn how to take care of their hair. Temi is just here to help." She considered the beauty YouTubers as someone in the community which has its own distinct culture and identities. The same race and ethnicity increase the shareability

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of YouTubers between them and the viewers. Furthermore, this finding could help to understand viewer behaviors that they might not follow a diverse group of beauty YouTubers. Viewers are more inclined to follow the beauty YouTubers who share the same cultural identities or are in the same group and community. In recent years, YouTube has become a popular platform for people to create, view, and share content. Through managing the YouTube channels, more and more content creators successfully become YouTubers, building personal brands, and attracting many followers. While viewers enjoy the user-generated information, it reveals a lucrative market for brands to promote their products through YouTubers, utilizing their closer connections with viewers and turning the viewers into consumers. This study will focus on one kind of YouTubers, the beauty YouTuber who providing reviews and tutorials about beauty products. Previous studies have focused on analyzing the case of successful beauty YouTubers to discover factors that contribute to the success of YouTubers. As YouTubers are becoming more and more prevalent and powerful, it is important to understand their impact on viewers. This study attempts to discover a more detailed picture of this influencing relationship between YouTubers and viewers from viewers' perspectives. By conducting in-depth interviews with six college women, it is shown that viewers perceive the influencing relationship as one-side that beauty YouTubers only form one part of their decision-making process. Viewers believe they take control of navigating the relationship with beauty YouTubers. Though the conversation, there is no parasocial relationship identified, indicating the parasocial relationship might not be an effective way to examine the relationship between beauty YouTubers and viewers. Through the findings, this study illuminates that viewers are more active and critical when consuming the media message from beauty YouTubers. This study helps to draw attention from future studies to

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pay more attention to viewers' emotions, attitudes, and behavior when studying the relationship between YouTubers and viewers.

People all have their own preferences, reasons, and evaluation criteria when deciding if they like someone or not. It is a complicated and indistinct process. When they become audiences or followers on YouTube, the decision seems to be more important as their choices, likes, or comments could potentially impact the career development of beauty YouTubers. Previous research recognizes the importance of personal branding for YouTubers to increase audience engagement (Rea, 2015). A personal brand could demonstrate self-performance and presents a sense of individuality that could differentiate a YouTuber from its competitors (Rea, 2015). This study confirms the previous finding through audiences' perspectives about the significance of the beauty YouTubers' personalities and the related uniqueness. The first step of forming the interaction is the follow or like that audiences click on the platform. When explaining the reason that they decide to follow a beauty YouTuber, most of the interviewees in this study mentioned the personality or characteristic. They described their favorite beauty YouTubers as "nice", "interesting", "funny", "spontaneous", "generous", "genuine", and "open". While the beauty YouTubers expressing their opinions about beauty products, giving tutorials, or sharing their personal lives, audiences could perceive several attractive personalities in their favorite beauty YouTubers. Those personalities visualize images of beauty YouTubers in audiences' minds. Emma talked about her experience with beauty YouTubers, saying "you kind of get to know the personality of them (beauty YouTubers) and more likely to follow along."

After subscribing, the personalities become identities for beauty YouTubers to develop stronger connections with audiences. The funny and generous personalities of James Charles made him more attractive to Emma, "I think his personality makes him more relatable." Jade

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also expressed the importance of the personality when watching beauty Youtubers by stating that “the more personalities you show, the more personable you are.” The personality contributes to building a personal brand by making the beauty YouTuber more authentic in the viewers’ minds. Desired personalities cultivate the sense of intimacy, connectedness, and authenticity that attract and retain audiences. Furthermore, the more relatable and personable the YouTubers are, the more trust they will build within audiences. Ashely1 considered favored beauty YouTubers are more trustworthy, saying “if I like her more, I would definitely value her comments on the products more than any other beauty YouTubers.” When the viewers start to trust the beauty YouTuber, they will be more inclined to keep watching their videos and consider their reviews and tutorials as valuable. In this way, the more trust will lead viewers to like the beauty YouTubers. This creates a virtuous cycle that could build viewer loyalty towards beauty YouTubers. Overall, personality plays an important role in viewers’ decision making on whether to follow the beauty YouTuber or not, generating a sense of intimacy and connectedness or building trustworthiness. This is in line with previous findings of the significance of intimacy, connectedness, and authenticity that contribute to the success of YouTubers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017; Basil, 1996; Jerslev, 2016).

It is surprising to note that all the participants of this study did not mention the appearance of the beauty YouTubers when discussing why they decide to follow. Since they are particularly beauty YouTubers, appearance should be a fundamental factor for their channels and personal brands. However, viewers seem to focus more on the personality, the way of talking, and the content rather than the beauty of those beauty YouTubers. This phenomenon reflects viewers are not simply seeking a visual enjoyment of the appearance or the lavish and perfect lifestyle from beauty YouTubers. Subscribing a beauty YouTuber is somewhat different than liking or

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worshipping a celebrity. From the viewers' side, their relationships with beauty YouTubers are more practical, looking for content that more fits into their personal lives. The liking and subscribing are more closely related to viewers themselves and their needs. Overall, beauty YouTubers are more functional for viewers.

Certainly, some of the viewers follow beauty YouTubers because they are curious about the fancy lives those YouTubers have. This could be the reason why vlogging is so popular and could be so helpful to increase the awareness of the beauty YouTuber. Hannah expected Jeffrey Star to film more videos about his lives, like the house tour. "I also like things that show more into his daily life," Hannah said. Emma also talked about "it was interesting to see what's going on in those beauty YouTubers' lives." This reflects the curiosity viewers have for public figures. While celebrities' lives are too difficult for people to see, beauty YouTubers provide a direct path for viewers to perceive and embrace their lifestyles. As the previous study found that the existence of influencers and YouTubers narrow the gap between celebrities and fans (Jerslev,2015), the relationship between YouTuber, as microcelebrities, and viewers are partially inclusive. Since beauty YouTubers are mediated figures on social media, viewers understand that the part YouTubers' show in their videos is chosen and edited. Emma mentioned this when talking about the videos, "they (beauty YouTubers) can decide which part of their lives to be on the screen. We don't know the other parts of their lives." This allows beauty YouTubers to remain mysterious and attractive that makes the audience curious about their lives and wants to follow to keep updated. Vlogging seems to be a strategy for beauty YouTubers to adjust the distance between them and viewers, to find the balance between exclusiveness and connectedness.

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Once audiences consider a beauty YouTuber is likable, self-perception becomes a key component of building the interaction. Besides the similarities generated by the same race and ethnicity, when viewers identify more similarities, they could develop stronger bonds with beauty YouTubers. While Hannah considered Jeffery Star, who has a huge follower and a lavish lifestyle, as her favorite beauty YouTubers, she sometimes found herself more connect with beauty YouTubers who are more similar to herself. She talked about that “there have been one who has way fewer followers, who attend college as I do or who go to the same places as I do, the soul cycle. Just something we have in common. It is more like we are similar to each other and that's why I like to watch her channel.” If the featured life of a YouTuber on his or her channel is more similar to the perceived life of the viewer, the viewer will be more likely to identify with the YouTuber and more inclined to follow the YouTuber.

Similarly, viewers are more willing to engage with YouTubers who have the same struggles or problems in their lives. Jasmine’s favorite beauty YouTubers had posted videos talking about how she deals with anxiety. This reminded Jasmine about the stressful time during her first semester at school. She said that “just being aware that I am not the only one who has the trouble. It is good to hear someone telling her own story to inspire others.” This type of identification could help to build a stronger connection between viewers and beauty YouTubers. Ashley also mentioned that “we probably have some similar taste in these fashion and beauty products. And that will make me more likely to follow her.” This indicates that viewers prefer to watch YouTubers who share more common interests. It is understandable as viewers are looking for information while watching the videos, discovering beauty products that fit their skin types or fulfill their needs. Since most of the interviewees consider YouTube as a platform that people create and share content, they will search the products or brands they are looking for on

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YouTube to see the comments and reviews from beauty YouTubers. To better understand the effect of the products, the opinions from a beauty YouTubers who have similar identities and lifestyles would be more reference value to viewers. Ashely pointed out that “when she (the beauty Youtuber) show or talk about the experience with the products both on her and the people around her, it seems more objective. Sometimes, I could have the same skin age with her but have a similar skin condition as her friends. So, I could see more about how it will work on me. I think it is a really important part that makes her more persuasive to me.” The experience of Ashely expresses the need for viewers to find similarities on YouTubers’ channels. This demand plays a significant role in shaping viewers’ decision to select and follow the beauty YouTubers.

It is worth noticing that there is a contradiction in viewers’ minds that they could favor both beauty YouTubers who are relatable or unattainable at the same time. For example, Hannah loves watching Jeffery Star because his lifestyle is so glamorous that ordinary people would not have access to it. “The fancy stuff or lifestyle they showed in the video are interesting. I do not have that in my life. It is good to see through his videos,” Hannah said. However, when talking about how she feels about beauty YouTubers, she would prefer the one with fewer followers and has a more similar life. Those two kinds of beauty YouTubers fulfill different needs for viewers. The way viewers perceive the beauty YouTubers, like Jeffery Star, shows that those kind of beauty YouTubers are growing beyond microcelebrity to nearly reach the level of celebrities. Since most of these kinds of beauty YouTubers already have the awareness beyond the beauty community on YouTube and become wealthy, viewers are following them to virtually experience and have a more detailed picture of the fancy lifestyle, fulfilling the curiosity. At this point, it is unclear whether viewers consider those beauty YouTuber exactly as celebrities or not, purchasing the products they recommend to feel their priority and success. But through this

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study, viewers' purpose to follow the beauty YouTubers who are more like ordinary people are mostly functional, seeking similarities and recommendations that have practical value to personal lives.

Persuaded or not: Choose how to take the recommendation

Beauty YouTubers deploy strategies to promote their platforms, building personal brands, earning trust from viewers, and constructing influencing relationships with them. One way to demonstrate the value of beauty YouTubers is their power and abilities to transform the viewer base into a lucrative market. While viewers enjoy the convenience that beauty YouTubers provide, an easy and quick way to review user-generated product information before making the purchasing decision, it also reveals a profitable platform for brands to market and promote themselves and their products. The closer relationship between YouTubers and viewers could be utilized to increase brand awareness and transfer the positive connection and attitudes with the YouTubers to the brand and products. As a result, the beauty YouTubers play an intermediary role between cosmetic brands and viewers, substituting traditional media, such as magazines or newspapers, and becoming a new mediator to deliver media messages from cosmetic brands to consumers. The addition of YouTubers complicates the process of how audiences receive and navigate the media message and the process of purchasing decisions. Being exposed to such amount of reviews and comments from beauty YouTubers, audiences start to develop their own methods and criteria to evaluate the information, making their own judgment on those recommendations.

Participants also mentioned the personality and connectedness when explaining their purchasing decision. Hannah said that “because she (the beauty YouTuber) kind of has similar

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makeup than I would do or her lifestyle is similar to me. Then, if I feel I relate to them more, I'm more likely to trust them and buy the product." It is reasonable to say that the more favorable personalities the beauty YouTubers have, the viewers would more likely to follow them and trust them. Unquestionably, viewers would value the information from beauty YouTubers who seems credible to them. Again, decision making is more than the appearance of the beauty YouTubers. Viewers pay more attention to the products and the video content which could benefit their lives.

Through the discussion, there is a similar cognitive process that emerged from how my participants make a purchase of the products from the video or how they embrace the lifestyle from the YouTubers. All the participants state that they are aware of the persuasion behind the videos. They understand one of the main sources of income for beauty YouTubers is sponsorship. This means that they will identify and categorize the persuasive message from beauty YouTubers into two groups, sponsored or original. This identification process will lead them to separated patterns to analyze the information they received.

According to my participants, there are two possible results when viewers are aware of the fact that the video is sponsored. If viewers discover the undisclosed sponsorship by themselves, the beauty YouTubers' reviews and comments would be totally incredible. More seriously, the influencing relationship will be ended by viewers as the beauty YouTuber would be considered as a dishonest person. Viewers will start question the beauty YouTubers, like Emma, "Are you just saying it because you get to pay to say it? Do you actually believe it? Are you honest about other things?" This demonstrates the significance of transparency in the influencing relationship that viewers expect to hear the truth and desire to be treated with honesty. Without transparency to generate a sense of authenticity and build trust, the influencing relationships that YouTubers are trying so hard to build would collapse.

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In the contrast, all the participants indicate that if the beauty YouTubers are up to front about the sponsorship or endorsement, it would not influence the viewer experience and would not impact their evaluation of the product or the YouTuber. This underlined the same result with research on successful YouTubers that when creators are honest and open about their content being sponsored, viewers won't concentrate on it but will enjoy the video and focus on the content (Rea, 2105). When dealing with the promoted contents, viewers, like Jada, will "keeping (myself) themselves in check with the sponsored product." Some participants understand that sponsorships are necessary for beauty YouTubers' careers that support them to create content. However, this tolerance is more likely to exist when discussing participants' favorite YouTubers.

The next factor involved in the cognitive process after the identification of sponsored content is the endorsed brand. Several participants expressed that if the brand is controversial and involved in negative statements or scandal, they will not tolerate it and will stop following the YouTuber who is discussing the brand. There is no clear implication about whether the YouTuber could influence the brand reputation and brand image. However, the viewers seem to consider the value and social justice of the brand as a part of the influencing relationships between them and beauty YouTubers. Viewers' understanding and support for YouTubers to promote sponsored content are conditional. Although it is inevitable and uncontrollable to receive the sponsored recommendation, viewers would screen the information based on their own criteria and accept only the suggestions that they are willing to take.

The next step is to process the information that gets through all the filters. Most of the participants would consider the recommendation based on their own needs. Ashely is always careful about the recommendations from beauty YouTubers. "Purchasing a product is more likely to happen if I already have the intention to buy this product." Jasmine is a fan of Fenty

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Beauty so that she would be excited when beauty YouTubers recommend the products from this brand. “I love Fenty Beauty, the brand. So, when they have something new, I would like to try. Jackie (a beauty YouTuber) happens to post a video about the new foundation that would make me more want to try it. But I already have the idea to try it beforehand.” Emma utilized beauty YouTuber as a source of information. “For example, I want a new mascara, but I am not sure about which one to try. So, when they (the beauty YouTubers) recommend a mascara, saying wearing it for 10 hours and it lasts, I would more likely to purchase the product.” Viewers are extremely careful if beauty YouTubers are discussing some products they never heard or do not have the intent to buy. This indicates that viewers need a transitional period to process the message from beauty YouTubers.

Purchasing the product directly after watching the video hardly happens to participants in this study. This finding could be limited since all the participants are college students who might be on a budget and do not have the ability to make money by themselves. This could explain why they need to consider more, making the purchasing decision based on their need. However, there was no direct or indirect language indicate this situation. When the persuasive message delivered to the audience, participants require more time and information to decode it. Beauty YouTubers’ opinions would become one perspective in the whole picture. They might also seek information from other sources, such as brands’ official websites, experts, friends, or other social media. Besides, most of the participants are following multiple beauty YouTubers. If several beauty YouTubers’ opinions on one product or one type of content are consistent, viewers are more willing to trust and try. However, there is a balance that if there are too many beauty YouTubers saying the same thing, viewers would start to question and hesitate about whether they should purchase the product or not.

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Languages, like “not solely based on their (beauty YouTubers) recommendations” and “not simply because she recommends”, kept showing up during the interview. The overall cognitive process reveals the fact that audiences are more careful and critical when it comes to deciding whether they will become the consumer. The purchasing decision is not simplified by the joining of beauty YouTubers. The process of the persuasive message seems to become more complicated than direct advertising or commercials. Viewers would consider more factors, such as whether they like this beauty YouTubers or not, their trustworthy, associated brands, personal needs, and other potential variables depending on the situation.

Another path to determine how viewers perceive the influencing relationship and deal with the recommendation is through the meaning of beauty YouTubers to them. There are two main functions of beauty YouTubers for these young women: information or entertainment. Viewers who seek information through beauty YouTubers and take the user-generated content into consideration when making the purchasing decision would follow the complicated cognitive process when handling the persuasive message from beauty YouTubers. Those viewers would be influenced more on beauty products or related content. Ashley would not allow beauty YouTubers to penetrate her life. She talked about “I think I won’t be influenced by her (the beauty YouTuber) lifestyles. I won’t love Japanese food just because she is a fan of Japanese food.” One reason is that this type of viewers prefers to control their lives by themselves. They would limit the influence of beauty YouTubers to the purchasing behaviors and keep the beauty YouTubers’ comments and reviews away from their personal lives. The other reason to explain is that most of the beauty YouTubers are perceived as “micro-celebrity”. Hannah pointed it out by saying “they (the beauty YouTubers) might have so many makeup products and brushes or other accessories. We, as ordinary people, do not have access to that. So, when we see a tutorial

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or a special makeup video, they have so many steps or use so many products. I feel I could not do the same.” Jade also highlights that “they (the beauty YouTubers) are so “big” that I could not afford their lives.” The lifestyles of beauty YouTubers are considered not attainable from some viewers’ perspectives. No matter whether those viewers would like to embrace YouTubers’ lifestyles, they do not have the abilities or conditions to incorporate their lifestyles into their own.

On the other hand, viewers who consider beauty YouTubers more as a source for entertainment would more likely to focus on the recommendations about other than beauty products. Some of the viewers are looking for interesting and funny content through YouTubers. “I follow James Charles just to watch his exciting challenges. I am not very into makeup. But the lifestyle aspect, it is fun to see some cool things they do in their lives. That’s more persuasive for me” (Participant 5). This type of viewers might be less likely to scrutinize the trustworthiness and usefulness of the recommendation. The purchasing decision is a onetime behavior while lifestyle could be adjusting all the time. Because of the relative ease of trying a new restaurant, a new place, or a new healthy diet, viewers may be less serious and critical when processing the recommendation. Logically, this type of viewers would be much less likely to purchase beauty products as they would rarely pay attention to the recommendation of beauty products.

Viewers: how to win my support in long term

Beyond just liking and subscribing, viewers seem to have more strict requirements for the beauty YouTubers they are watching and supporting. After being attracted to follow a beauty YouTuber, viewers expect the one they subscribed to be more than just funny or nice. The influencing relationship between viewers and content creators are not invariable. Viewers’

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evaluation and attitudes toward beauty YouTubers are consistently changing regarding beauty YouTubers' behaviors and opinions which could have further economic effects on beauty YouTubers' careers and social discussion.

The discussion about YouTubers' social responsibility came organically from the participants themselves in this study. When talking about why they consider the beauty YouTubers as their favorite ones, participants start drawing attention to the influencing power of beauty YouTubers and their roles in the community. When describing David Dobrik as her favorite beauty YouTuber, Emma said that "it is like he has bad language and crazy things in his video. But his content is so interesting and he, personally, is so funny. And he balances it. He also conducts good things. He is very generous, donating a lot of money to the society." The conflict between having negative language and positive behaviors even makes the YouTuber more stand out in the viewer's mind. This reflects the significance of behaviors that benefit the society, overshadowing the negative effect of inappropriate language. When looking at the implication of the behaviors and opinions from beauty YouTubers, the comparison between YouTubers as microcelebrities and celebrities seems unavoidable in the discussion. Most of the participants consider YouTubers (microcelebrities) in a position between ordinary people and celebrities. Jasmine mentioned that "it is not like YouTubers have that much of popularity and power as celebrities." Although some of the beauty YouTubers, like Jeffery Star, has successfully build their personal brands, achieving the level of awareness and wealthy as celebrities, people still hold different views towards YouTubers and celebrities. Even with brand endorsement, beauty YouTubers are not achieving the level of "mainstream" celebrities that generates the power to create personal effects on fans or socio-cultural or sociopolitical implications. From viewers' perspectives, this study

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confirms with previous research on microcelebrity is not completely celebrification once the gate has been opened to the “mainstream” celebrity media circuit (Jerselv, 2016).

Although beauty YouTubers are not required to behave and conscious as celebrities, viewers do expect beauty YouTubers to be aware of their behaviors and discussions are capable to make a difference. Jasmine provided her opinion about the social responsibility of beauty YouTubers. “I am not saying that when you (the beauty YouTuber) have these large followers and awareness, you need to become a role model or something like that. But just understand you have a large platform and understand how powerful media is over people.” Jade developed this discussion in a deeper level, raising the awareness on younger generation who are vulnerable when facing social media. She said that “younger children are watching. I will not support beauty YouTubers who are rude or offensive to others.” Younger generation is born in a time that social media becomes more and more prevalent and powerful. YouTube could be more dangerous as it has a nearly face-to-face communication between viewers and content creators. When facing the persuasive message from beauty YouTubers, younger kids are lacking the critical thinking abilities to identify and process the message. It is easy for them to believe the recommendation from beauty YouTubers or mimic their behaviors in the videos. Therefore, viewers, like Jade, who are aware of the influence of beauty YouTubers, would choose to support the ones who could be proper representatives for the beauty community.

When coming to specific social issues of topics, viewers require the discussion in the videos to be well-considered. Jasmine talked about “what's important to me, if you (the beauty YouTuber) are communicating how you feel about a certain topic like whether something going on in the world or community. You should be respectful. When you are talking, you should not put other people down.” It is clear that social responsibility is a crucial element in viewers’

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minds when evaluating beauty YouTubers. Viewers anticipate the effects of beauty YouTubers are positive and would take action to protect themselves by unsubscribing or blocking the beauty YouTubers. The influencing relationship would be ended by viewers if beauty YouTubers fail to be socially acceptable.

In the long term, viewers choose the beauty YouTuber they like, scrutinize the recommendation from the beauty YouTubers based on personal needs and their own cognitive process, and support the beauty YouTubers who have positive moral qualities and social responsibility. Viewers interpret their relationships with beauty YouTubers as a one-sided relationship in which influencers form only one part of their decision-making process. They perceive and navigate the relationship with beauty YouTubers by themselves. It seems that they think they have controlled the influencing relationship. However, there might be influence going on they are not aware of. None of them consider beauty YouTubers as their friends or teacher indicates. All the interviewees state that they understand that beauty YouTubers are mediated person that does not actually exist in their lives. Therefore, there seems no parasocial relationship found in this study. The mediating role of the parasocial relationship between beauty YouTubers and viewers is not discovered through in-depth interviews with college women.

However, as viewers keep watching and following beauty YouTubers, becoming more and more familiar with their appearance, behavior, personalities, and updates about those beauty YouTubers' lives, it is hard to distinguish the influence on viewers' lives. There is a high chance that viewers are overestimating their control of this influencing relationship. This could be related with the third-person effect which predicts "people are more likely to report that media message influence themselves if those messages are positively evaluated, if those messages are viewed as personally self-relevant, or if the influence is seen to be socially desirable"

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(Schweisberger, Billinson, & Chock, 2014). The effect could eliminate the perceived influence of beauty YouTubers on viewers themselves. As viewers keep receiving comments and recommendations on beauty products or lifestyles, there might be an underlying influence on their lives. Viewers are either unconscious about the impact or refuse to admit when they are not sure whether the influence would be considered as positive or socially approved or not.

Conclusion

Through in-depth interviews with six college women, the study discovers the influencing relationship between beauty YouTubers and viewers through how viewers choose beauty YouTubers to follow, how they take the recommendation, and how they navigate the relationship. It appears that viewers are not following a diverse group of YouTubers. They are more likely to follow YouTubers who share the same race and ethnicity which means they could more easily find similarities and more easily identify with. Through the interview, it is interesting to find that viewers are looking beyond the appearance of beauty YouTubers. They are focusing on the personalities and connectedness of beauty YouTubers. A favorable personality could generate a sense of intimacy and authenticity which makes viewers more inclined to follow the beauty YouTuber. This study confirms with the previous finding from viewers' perspectives that intimacy, connectedness, authenticity, and similarity are important factors in the relationship between beauty YouTubers and viewers.

The purpose of subscribing and liking beauty YouTubers is more practical that viewers are utilizing beauty YouTubers to contribute to their personal lives. After subscribing, viewers value beauty YouTubers in two ways: entertainment or information. Viewers who seek entertainment

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through beauty YouTubers are less likely to pay attention to the product-related content. Thus, they might not form a critical information process system. Their decisions are made more based on the level of likability and relatability of the beauty YouTubers. The other type of viewers prefers to limit the influence of beauty YouTubers on themselves. Their YouTube experience partially shapes the purchasing decision which is made beyond just liking and connecting with the YouTuber. It is more about needs, trust, and critical thinking. They would scrutinize the recommendation, take it as one perspective, and then make the decision based on their own judgments. In the long term, social responsibility would be involved. Viewers expect beauty YouTubers to be supportive of the community and society. If beauty YouTubers want to build viewer loyalty, they should be aware that their behaviors, attitudes, and opinions should be socially desirable.

However, the study finds no evidence to prove the mediating role of the parasocial relationship between college women and beauty YouTubers that previous research found. Viewers perceive the influencing relationships based on their race and ethnicity, personal needs, and perspectives on YouTubers. More importantly, they perceive the influencing relationship as a one-sided relationship that viewers themselves are taking control of the impact of beauty YouTuber. Viewers interpret that the power remains in their own hands to decide whether watching the video, embracing the recommendation, or supporting the beauty YouTuber in the long term. All of the participants are explicit and certain about it is their own choice when navigating the relationship with beauty YouTubers. They especially emphasize their control of limiting the level of influence from beauty YouTubers. Jade said that “I will make sure the beauty YouTubers that I followed are people who supported others and society. I will make the influence of beauty YouTubers on me positive.” However, it is unclear whether there is

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unconscious influence from the beauty YouTuber or not. As viewers are more and more engaged with the beauty YouTubers, there could be underlying impacts from beauty YouTubers that are hardly discovered. Moreover, viewers could actively ignore or refuse to report the impact due to the third-person effect. While viewers are trying to take control when navigating the relationship, it is worth noting that viewers' own perceptions about the influencing relationship might not be completely true.

Furthermore, the study contributes to the discussion of beauty YouTubers by pointing out that the parasocial relationship might not be as effective and important as previous research found in the influencing relationship between viewers and beauty YouTubers. Based on this finding, this study provides insight into the strategy for beauty YouTubers to attract viewers and build customer loyalty. The insignificance of the parasocial relationship indicates that strategies such as "being a bestie" or "being a big sister" are not valid and effective to viewers right now, especially college women. To maintain and develop influencing relationships, beauty YouTubers need to take seriously about their behaviors and opinions. Seeking long term development, beauty YouTubers need to be aware of viewers' expectations for them to be socially responsible and being supportive in the community discussion.

Discussion

This study contributes to the current research of influencers by providing a more detailed picture of the influencing relationship between beauty YouTubers and viewers. There are of course some limitations of this study. To start, participants of this study are all college women. It is lacking the perspectives of different genders. As the beauty community is becoming more and more inclusive, there are many male beauty YouTubers in the industry. It would be valuable for

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future research to understand how female and male viewers perceive and navigate their relationships with beauty YouTubers from a different gender. Since all the participants of this study are women, it would be valuable to understand the male viewers' attitudes and expectations for both male and female beauty YouTubers. There needs more research to find out what it is meant to be a male in the beauty industry and how open the beauty community opens up to this. Will viewers have a different standard for male and female beauty YouTubers? Would this difference change the way viewers perceiving the influencing relationship?

Since all the participants are educated college students, it is unclear whether the education level would influence how viewers identify with beauty YouTubers and process the persuasive message. More studies are needed to prove whether education level makes viewers more conscious about the persuasive message and seems to take more control in this influencing relationship. Most importantly, since this research did not identify the parasocial relationship between viewers and beauty YouTubers. While it seems that viewers are controlling and actively navigate the influencing relationship, it is unclear whether there is a third-person effect or not. The finding could be the result of viewers' resistance to admitting the influencing and further emotional connection with beauty YouTubers. Further research must be done in order to assess the influence of third-person effect on how viewers perceive and navigate the influencing relationship with beauty YouTubers.

It is worth to note that this study is being conducted before and written during the global pandemic of Covid-19. At this time, people are quarantining at home that they are lacking activities to pass time. There are a bunch of people are alone at home or. It is likely that the global pandemic could change how viewers connect with beauty Youtuber. Some people might seek to accompany from YouTubers, hearing someone talking with them or knowing they are not

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alone. There is a chance that more viewers would feel more connect with YouTubers as they help then to ease the loneliness. Future studies might need to notice the change while conducting further research.

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