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Advancing Identities with YouTube

An Investigation of the Symbolic Consumption of YouTube in
Advancing Consumer Identity Projects

by

Aaron Rosen and Alma Laihanen

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Supervisor: Veronika Tarnovskaya
Examiner: Clara Gustafsson

Abstract

This thesis explores the ways in which the social media channel of YouTube is utilized in advancing consumer identity projects. Specifically, the focus is on understanding how the videos of successful and popular YouTubers help consumers in pursuing their identity projects. This thesis will therefore provide new insights to the existing literature on symbolic consumption and identity projects, by considering how the concepts translate into this relatively new and constantly growing social media platform. Additionally, this thesis contributes to our understanding of digital identities, as research in this field has traditionally investigated the phenomenon from the perspective of identity advancement through the creation of an online image and profiles, rather than through consuming online content. Concepts from the field of CCT and identity projects were applied to a preliminary framework, which guided the data collection for the study of this thesis. By adopting a qualitative research approach and conducting semi-structured interviews with six regular YouTube users, common aspects that characterize identity advancement through YouTube consumption were identified. It was found that YouTube is used to advance identity projects, and this occurs through a process where consumers acknowledge and reflect on their current self, and utilize multiple YouTubers and YouTube channels as inspiration and/or a source of knowledge to help them pursue their desired and ideal identity. This is illustrated in the conceptual framework, constructed based on these findings, by visually presenting this process of identity advancement through YouTube consumption. By increasing our understanding of consumer motives and behavior on this social media channel, this thesis contributes to the above-mentioned research fields, while also bringing valuable insights to the personal and corporate brands who utilize the platform of YouTube.

Keywords: Identity Projects, Identity Advancement, Symbolic Consumption, YouTube

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Aaron Rosen

Alma Laihanen

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Background	1
1.2	Problem Formulation	2
1.3	Research Purpose, Aim & Objectives	4
1.4	Contributions	5
1.5	Delimitations of the Research	5
1.6	Outline of the Thesis	6
2	Literature Review	7
2.1	Social Media	7
2.1.1	YouTube	8
2.1.2	Social Media & Identity: Self-Presentation & Personal Branding	9
2.2	The Concept of Self & Possible Selves	10
2.3	Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)	12
2.3.1	Consumer Identity Project	13
2.3.2	Symbolic Consumption & Identity Projects	14
2.3.3	Identity Projects & Social Media	15
2.4	Identity through Identification & Homophily	16
2.4.1	Homophily on Social Media	17
2.5	Chapter Summary & Preliminary Framework	19
3	Methodology	21
3.1	Research Philosophy	21
3.2	Research Approach	22
3.2.1	Inductive Approach	22
3.2.2	Qualitative Approach	22
3.3	Research Design	23
3.4	Data Collection	23
3.4.1	Semi-structured Interviews	23
3.4.2	Sampling & Selection of Participants	25
3.4.3	Design of the Topic Guide & Questions	26
3.4.4	Definition of Concepts	27
3.5	Data Analysis	27
3.6	Research Quality	28
3.6.1	Validity & Reliability	28

3.6.2	Limitations	29
3.7	Ethical Considerations.....	30
3.8	Chapter Summary.....	30
4	Findings.....	32
4.1	General Findings about YouTube Consumption.....	32
4.2	Types of Identity Projects	33
	Anna - The Healthy & Successful Self	34
	Laura - The Young & Stylish Self	35
	Becky - The Social Self & Theater Professional.....	36
	Charlie - The Knowledgeable Self	38
	Brenton - The Intellectual Socialite	39
	Craig - The Cultivated Self	40
4.3	Identification & Homophily in Identity Advancement	41
5	Discussion.....	43
5.1	Advancing Identity Projects through YouTube Consumption.....	43
	5.1.1 Advancing Identity Projects through Ideal & Possible Selves.....	44
	5.1.2 Advancing Identity Projects through Reflection on the Current Self	45
	5.1.3 Advancing Identity Projects through Identification & Homophily.....	45
5.2	Conceptual Framework: Advancing Identity Projects through YouTube Consumption	46
6	Conclusion.....	50
6.1	Research Aims & Objectives	50
6.2	Contributions.....	51
	6.2.1 Theoretical Contributions.....	51
	6.2.2 Practical Contributions.....	53
6.3	Strengths & Limitations of the Study.....	53
	6.3.1 Strengths.....	54
	6.3.2 Limitations	54
6.4	Future Research.....	55
6.5	Chapter Summary.....	56
	References	57
	Appendix A	62
	Appendix B.....	63

List of Tables

Table 3.1 Participant Profile.....	26
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List of Figures

Figure 2.1 Preliminary Framework: Advancing Identity Projects through YouTube.....	20
Figure 5.1 Conceptual Framework: Advancing Identity Projects through YouTube.....	47

1 Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to the topic of this thesis, as well as presents its aim and purpose. In this chapter, existing literature on identity construction on social media is briefly discussed and a new research angle to approaching the topic is proposed. Additionally, the contributions of this thesis, both theoretical and practical, as well as its delimitations are presented. The chapter ends with an outline of the structure and contents of this thesis.

1.1 Background

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are becoming increasingly engraved into the modern society. Major corporations, politicians, and ordinary people are utilizing these and similar sites to reach out to the world and communicate messages. The validity and questionable sanity of these messages are, however, up for debate; the American president's presence on Twitter is a great example of this questionability. However contentious some actions on social media may be, there still seems to be a trend of people engaging, interacting, and even becoming infatuated with other people's online personas.

One of the easiest places to recognize these infatuations is on the social media platform YouTube, which has over one billion global users (YouTube, 2017). YouTube allows people the opportunity to create, view, and communicate through videos. The content on this platform ranges from music videos to how-to tutorials, video resumes, and even dubbed cats. A new concept which has emerged from the YouTube tornado over the past few years is the idea of "YouTube stars," or people who have created immense online followings through their production of online videos. One of these YouTube stars, "Miranda Sings", has created such a large following that she launched a world tour, earns a steady income, and partnered with Netflix to make her very own TV series.

What is dumbfounding about the sudden success of Miranda Sings is that her large following was created through her production of videos with titles and content including: "Eating a Bowl of Cereal," "Miranda Interviews a Cat," and "How to Open a Tricky Soda Can". With

such ridiculous and uncategorized content, it is hard to understand how Miranda Sings, and many other YouTube stars, have come to gain global popularity. What is even more befuddling, though, is why millions of people choose to interact, engage, and become infatuated with these seemingly random YouTube stars.

In academic literature, the success of these social media stars and influencers is often seen from a self-branding perspective, whereby successful online personas have been able to create compelling personal brands utilizing corporate or product-branding strategies (Arruda, 2003; Chen, 2013; Rampersad, 2008). The question that inspired this research, however, focuses on the motivations of individuals who watch this seemingly irrelevant material produced by successful YouTubers. In particular, the viewing of YouTube videos is seen in this thesis as a process of identity advancement, or, more profoundly described, as an individual's aspiration to reach a desired image of the self. By adopting this approach to the phenomenon, we hope to shed some light on and contribute to the understanding of the mass popularity of these YouTube stars, as well as the social platform of YouTube as a whole.

1.2 Problem Formulation

With the emergence of Web 2.0 (categorized through the introduction of dynamic websites, consumer generated material, and growing social media platforms), academic studies have extensively addressed the topic of the creation of an online self in this new digital environment. For example, it has been argued that social media profiles are used for performing and sustaining an identity, in accordance with Butler's (1990 cited in Cover, 2012) theory of performativity. Bullingham & Vasconcelos (2013) found that individuals act online according to Goffman's (1956 cited in Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) theories of on-stage behavior and present a deliberately created online self in blogging contexts.

However, these types of studies largely concentrate on understanding online self-presentation and the motivations behind using social media channels as an environment of managing an online image. The focus of this thesis is therefore not to investigate the popularity of YouTube stars, or to understand the creation of online personas. In contrast, the role of consumption of online content in identity advancement has been much less investigated, and empirical evidence for the relationship between identity advancement and content consumption is lacking in the social media scene. There are, however, some studies

examining the role of consuming different media in the processes of consumer identity construction. Sihvonen (2015) studied the role of media in the identity projects of Finnish university students, but focused on a broad range of mass media channels such as TV, radio, magazines and the Internet. She found that media consumption is strongly linked to identity construction of the young.

Notably, the phenomenon of identity advancement and media consumption has been approached in the context of music consumption. For example, the findings of Ulusoy's (2016) study reveal that in Dionysian music subcultures, music consumption is used to construct self-identities and subcultural identities. Larsen, Lawson and Todd's (2010) findings support the idea that consumers express their identities through music consumption.

With this previous literature in mind, the aim of this thesis is to utilize these prior findings relating to expression of identity and media consumption, and apply these insights in the social media environment. This therefore represents a new context for research on identity advancement through consumption. As online self-presentation and creation of a self-image on social media are heavily researched topics in academic literature, it is essential to approach the advancement of identities on social media from a new perspective. Hence, we have taken the concept of advancing identities online and turned it on its head to gain an understanding of the advancement of identities on social media from the perspective of content consumption by viewers of YouTube.

In this thesis, we argue for the role of YouTube videos as a new medium for symbolic consumption by consumers. Arnould & Thompson (2005) introduced the concept of people as identity seekers and makers, who actively manipulate symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, and material goods to advance one's identity and lifestyle goals. The platform of YouTube provides an optimal and interesting setting for such a study. The need for research connecting consumer identities and the new, emerging social networking channels has been recognized (Zemmels, 2012). While identity processes are undoubtedly in place in the use of all social networking channels, YouTube provides a unique platform, with its video-format content differing from the mainly picture-based platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, perhaps encouraging a more personal and emotional involvement and connection with the content. Furthermore, YouTube has, since its launch in 2005, been steadily gaining mass popularity, and is now the second most popular website in the world after Google.com, even surpassing the third-ranked Facebook (Alexa Internet,

2017). YouTube also has a very wide range of content, enabling quick and easy access to a large variety of tutorials, educational content, product recommendations, and more. Hence, we believe that this ease of access might help in making YouTube an important and regularly used tool for people to build and advance their desired qualities and identities.

Due to the global popularity of the site, as well as the rise of YouTube stars and the myriad of career possibilities that YouTube now offers, research is needed to investigate the different aspects and elements that are related to the site's consumption. This in turn enables contributions that can be widely utilized in the academic as well as the corporate and managerial world.

1.3 Research Purpose, Aim & Objectives

On the basis of the background and theoretical foundation explained above, the purpose of this thesis is to analyze and investigate the role of the consumption of videos of YouTube stars in the identity projects of YouTube viewers. Furthermore, we hope to deepen our understanding of motivations behind YouTube consumption through examining the various ways in which consumers utilize the videos of YouTube stars in the advancement of identity. We aim to further conceptualize the process of identity advancement in today's social media scene, specifically through the viewing of YouTube videos, as YouTube has not been previously approached as a research setting in studies relating to symbolic consumption and identity projects.

This thesis will combine the theoretical concepts of symbolic consumption and identity projects and apply them to the social media environment and the context of YouTube, where videos of YouTube stars are considered a means of creating and strengthening self-identity. As the main objective of this study is to understand how the symbolic consumption of YouTube videos helps to advance one's identity project, the research question guiding this thesis is as follows:

- *How does the consumption of videos of YouTube stars aid consumers in advancing their identity projects?*

The answer to this question will be sought by investigating people who use and consume the growing social media platform of YouTube regularly and advance their identity through the consumption of videos of others. Through attempting to provide an answer to this question, we aim to find support and evidence for the process of identity advancement through the consumption of YouTube videos and identify different elements that characterize the identity-related consumption of YouTube.

1.4 Contributions

The topic of this thesis was chosen with the hopes of contributing both to the academic as well as the managerial field. First, this thesis will deepen the academic understanding of the relationship between identity projects, symbolic consumption, and social media. By placing and understanding the concepts of identity and symbolic consumption in the YouTube setting, this thesis aims to contribute with a conceptualization of advancement of identity projects in this unique social media setting. In particular, we begin from the point of view of consumers who watch the content on this platform, and hence will deepen our understanding of social media as not only a place of providing content and creating a digital self-image, but as an important setting of identity-related consumption.

In terms of practical contributions, this thesis will provide new insights into consumer behavior in the growing social media channel of YouTube. In this way, guidance will be given to current or aspiring social media influencers and personal brands, as well as marketing managers and corporate brands who are active on YouTube. By providing a deeper understanding of the reasons and goals of people who watch videos of YouTube stars, various types of brands will be able to produce optimal content and utilize their YouTube channels to their full potential.

1.5 Delimitations of the Research

This thesis will investigate identity advancement on YouTube from the consumption side. Therefore, the motivations of people to view YouTube videos will be examined in depth only in regards to identity-related goals, even though many other motivations undoubtedly guide

behavior online and consumption of online content, such as YouTube videos. Additionally, conclusions can be drawn from our findings that may benefit those wishing to build a personal brand online. However, this is not the aim of this thesis, and therefore concrete and detailed recommendations for building a personal online brand will not be investigated or provided. This choice is also supported by the fact that a vast amount of research already exists on this particular topic of personal online branding. This existing literature will be briefly presented and discussed in the literature review section of the thesis.

YouTube was chosen as the context for this study, as the aim is to increase our understanding of the identity-related motivations for watching and consuming video content specifically. YouTube presents an interesting research context as an environment of co-creation, social networking, and a participatory culture, used as part of daily life by modern consumers (Burgess & Green, 2009). These qualities make it an environment well suited for processes of identity advancement, and led us to limit our research to this particular channel, even though social media offers various interesting platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, to conduct similar studies in.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six main chapters. Chapter 1 has provided an introduction into the topic by discussing the background relating to the main concepts and previous studies in the field. The main aim and purpose of the thesis has also been presented, along with the research question guiding the thesis. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature and the theoretical foundation of the thesis. Methodology and the research approach are discussed in Chapter 3, as well as the method utilized for data collection. Findings are presented in Chapter 4, and further analyzed and discussed in Chapter 5, with the aid of the theoretical constructs presented in Chapter 2. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by presenting theoretical and practical implications of the study, reflecting on its strengths and weaknesses, and providing recommendations for future research.

2 Literature Review

In the following chapter, the theoretical foundation for the thesis is presented, aiding and guiding our understanding of the research phenomenon. First, the social media environment and YouTube in particular are discussed, after which a background of the literature on the topics of identity and the self are provided. In this chapter, the main theoretical concepts used in this thesis to approach the research question relating to content consumption and identity advancement via YouTube are discussed in detail. Finally, a chapter summary and a preliminary framework are provided.

2.1 Social Media

Technological advancements drive change within the world. The most prominent change over the past 20 years has been the introduction of the Internet, which drastically altered the ways in which we interact and communicate. More recently, the emergence of social media channels and the environment of Web 2.0 as part of the daily life of modern consumers have drawn the attention of researchers. Social media can be defined as Internet-based digital media that provides a platform for consumers to *communicate, connect, and interact* with each other via social networking sites (Correa, Hinsley & de Zúñiga, 2010). Today, social networking sites (SNS) are used for both professional and social interactions, and include sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Pinterest, to name a few.

Additionally, an important feature defining social media is that it enables the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). This applies especially well to YouTube, a platform that does not produce content itself but serves as a channel for the aggregation and sharing of content by its users (Burgess & Green, 2009).

2.1.1 YouTube

The social media platform of YouTube has over one billion global users, and local versions of the site exist in more than 88 countries (YouTube, 2017), making it one of the most global and popular websites in the world. YouTube allows people the opportunity to create, view, and communicate through videos, its content ranging from brand-promoted material to clips of TV shows and movies (Pace, 2008). However, as found in a quantitative analysis of the most watched content on YouTube by Burgess and Green (2009), over half of the most popular material on the channel is user-generated, as opposed to that produced by established media. Particularly, the majority of this user-generated content is videoblogs, or ‘vlogs’, a conversational type of video that represents well the slogan and promise of YouTube: ‘Broadcast Yourself’. Vlogging differs from other YouTube content and mainstream media, such as television, in that vlogs are conversational and interactive, inviting discussion and participation from those who view them, in the form of comments and responses (Burgess & Green, 2009). As vlogs are a video form frequently used in the channels of YouTube stars, this participative feature might help to explain how YouTube stars can become so popular, and how people become so infatuated and invested in the YouTubers lives.

This vlog trend and its popularity seem to illustrate well the prevalence of a ‘confessional culture’ in our society (Burgess & Green, 2009) as well as a general interest in observing the everyday lives of others, through channels such as reality television and YouTube. On YouTube, popular YouTubers can grow to resemble today’s reality television stars and celebrities. Burgess and Green (2009) define YouTube stars as YouTube participants who have developed a personal brand in YouTube’s social network. They can produce any type of content, but frequently they focus on vlogs that center around their daily life and personal identity, as discussed above, or can even create comedy sketches and entertainment news.

However, in addition to being a lucrative platform for personal YouTube brands, YouTube is also an important space for identity-based communities. Members of different minorities and subcultures, such as transgender people, and their videos ranging from educational and supportive videos to biographical vlogs and diaries, help to form a community and collective identity by creating awareness and discussion around the particular subculture (Burgess & Green, 2009). This characteristic of YouTube further helps in explaining the popularity of the site. However, as Jenkins (2009) mentions, participatory culture does not equal diversity. Marginal and subcultural content discussed above is distributed on YouTube, but content

which is most supported and viewed by other users is featured predominantly on the site. Therefore, mainstream content tends to reach the largest audiences.

With this introduction to YouTube and its content in mind, the next section will discuss the traditional academic view to understanding YouTube stars and overall participation on social media in terms of self-presentation and personal branding.

2.1.2 Social Media & Identity: Self-Presentation & Personal Branding

Social media as a phenomenon, as discussed above, is relatively modern, but it has quickly grown into an everyday environment for self-presentation and creation of a self-image. Online identities are studied and theorized in various fields including psychology, media, and cultural studies (Poletti & Rak, 2014). Existing literature on the topic has illustrated the complexity of consumers' use of social media channels and the various ways in which consumers construct their self and express themselves in the digital world. Fullwood, James and Chen-Wilson (2016) illustrate how social media, with its possibility for anonymous interaction and control over the content one posts, provides an environment to experiment with different self-presentations and promote a desired image of oneself. Poletti and Rak (2014) further argue that constructing and maintaining an identity is one of the main reasons for people to participate in and interact on online platforms.

Online self-presentation and identity has been frequently approached in academic literature from a personal branding perspective. The importance of individuals marketing and branding themselves has increased significantly since the late 1990s (Shepherd, 2005). The concept of personal branding was first introduced in 1997 in Tom Peters' article 'The Brand Called You', where Peters conceptualized the idea that everyone can create an identity and a strong personal brand by taking a branding approach, similar to brand managers of successful corporate brands, and applying those principles to themselves. This idea of personal brands is then used to understand people's behavior online.

Successful and effective online self-branding techniques have since been extensively explored, often incorporating corporate or product-branding strategies (Arruda, 2003; Chen, 2013; Rampersad, 2008). Further complementing these studies, the concepts of identity and personal brands have even been applied within different career-building contexts (Brooks & Anumudu, 2016; Shepherd, 2005).

Several studies also look at the YouTube setting specifically from this perspective to gain an understanding of the popularity and success strategies of YouTubers in developing their online identities into profitable self-brands. For example, Chen (2013) suggests specific stages for individuals to follow in creating a strong personal brand on YouTube. He utilizes the seminal work of Arruda (2003), who acknowledged personal branding as a three-stage process: (1) extract, (2) express, and (3) exude. With this in mind, Chen (2013) proposes that YouTubers should (1) identify key personal attributes, (2) build a strategy to communicate the personal brand statement by using those unique attributes, and finally, (3) implement the strategy to make their brand visible by using the right channels.

Maguire (2015), on the other hand, investigated the personal brand of Jenna Marbles, one of the most subscribed vloggers on YouTube, and argues that Jenna Marble's online self-presentations should be understood as automedial material that utilizes parody in order to negotiate and take advantage of the gender pressures in today's digital markets. And Morris and Anderson (2015) suggest that online YouTube celebrities increasingly need to be authentic, as illustrated by the success of some of Britain's most popular male vloggers, who reject traditional masculine stereotypes and portray a softer masculinity, leading to an authentic and relatable image.

With comprehensive research existing on this self-presentation side of online identities, in the next sections, we explore the concept of personal identity and the perspective of Consumer Culture Theory in relation to identity advancement. By applying these concepts to the current research phenomenon, we aim at understanding the consumption choices of consumers, and further root this research into a defined academic stream.

2.2 The Concept of Self & Possible Selves

The created representation and comprehension of one's online self drastically differs from that of a person's understanding of their own private, non-public self. Past research in many fields has extensively explored these two approaches to understanding identity and the concept of the self. For example, the represented online self exists in performative and personal branding research, such as that by Schwabel (2009) who leads us to understand that people can coin a self-identity and market him or herself as a form of personal branding. While from a separate angle, the idea of one's own self-concept has been investigated within

psychology over the past century. Additionally, the notion of how the sense of self is developed and simply exists, has been a heavily debated topic among famous psychologists such as Freud (1925), Horney (1950), Rogers (1951), and Gergen (1972), as cited by Markus and Nurius (1986). Hence, to fully understand how people use YouTube videos as a platform to advance their personal identity, it is first crucial to understand the notion of one's personal self, and how that self is constructed and develops over time.

The concept of self as defined by the Oxford Living Dictionary (2017) is a person's essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the object of introspection or reflexive action. The theory of self and self-concept has been explored thoroughly, and as early as 1910 by James William who used the language "potential social Me", and differentiated it from the concepts of "immediate present Me" and "Me of the past" (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Advancing the debate and the concept of self, Freud (1925 cited in Markus & Nurius, 1986) investigated the "ego ideal" which focused on children's beliefs of what their parents thought was morally good. Later, Rogers (1951 cited in Markus & Nurius, 1986) argued that the self was dependent on the dissimilarity of the actual self and the ideal self.

However developed each theory is, much of the previous research on the self did not include the notion of Possible Selves. Possible Selves represent an individual's ideas about the future potential of one's self as envisioned through possible outcomes. Furthermore, Markus & Nurius (1986) note that previous theories also failed to link the sense of self to motivational factors. A later study by Markus and Nurius (1986) explored the concept of Possible Selves, which relates to how people conceptualize their potential about their own future. Possible Selves represent the Ideal Self that people hope to become, such as the rich or the admired self, or sometimes the Feared Self, such as the alone or unemployed self (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The researchers further constructed a bridge between self-concept and motivation. For example, they revealed how incentives are linked to Possible Selves, showing that motives such as the need for achievement are not directly influenced by behavior. Instead, the motives are moderated by a person's categorized importance of each possibility and their belief for the possible self to come true. By connecting the self created and conceptualized potential of people's Possible Selves to motivation, Markus & Nurius (1986) paved a path for the idea of consumer identity projects which are rooted within Consumer Culture Theory. Additionally, by linking motivation to Possible Selves, we are provided with the understanding that people

actively think about and change their sense of self. The following section will further link the creation of self into consumer behaviour as investigated within the field of Consumer Culture Theory.

2.3 Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) has taken note of the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological characteristics of consumption over the past 31 years (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). As dissected by Arnould and Thompson (2005), CCT has been heavily explored within many different contexts (i.e., relativist, post positivist, interpretivist, humanistic, naturalistic, postmodern), offering a complex and often contradictory understanding of consumption motives of consumers. However, four main research programs have been uncovered within CCT that advance behavioral knowledge of consumers in unique ways: (1) Consumer Identity Projects, (2) Market Place Cultures, (3) Sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and (4) Mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies. Within the first program, consumers are viewed as identity seekers and makers, whereas, in contrast, the second program views consumers as producers of culture (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). The third program steps away from the consumers' view and focuses on institutional and social structures that influence consumption such as sex, social status, and ethnicity. Finally, the fourth program of CCT researches the ways in which consumers actively accept or reject consumer identities as presented through mass media and advertising (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Although each program offers a conceptually meaningful depiction of consumer motives, for the purpose of this research we adopt the first program of CCT, "Consumer Identity Project", as it aligns with our investigation of how people use YouTube videos of famous YouTubers to advance their own identity projects or personally constructed sense of self. CCT is important in relation to this research as it helps to explain the symbolic, embodied, and experiential aspects of consumption behavior among consumers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

2.3.1 Consumer Identity Project

Consumer Identity Projects as developed from CCT pertain to the construction of self, and the narrative of identity, through the use of market generated materials which are characterized by mythic and symbolic resources (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Mythic resources account for the market and culturally generated ideals that people of a culture or society aim to achieve (Tillotson & Martin, 2015). These mythic resources, as investigated heavily by Tillotson and Martin (2015), operate on either a functionalist or symbolic perspective. Where the functionalist approach works on a macro level and views the myth as a means to keep society functioning, the symbolic perspective operates on a micro- to mid-level analysis and deals with the modification of symbolism to meaning in collective social narratives (Tillotson & Martin, 2015).

Symbolic resources, in complement to mythic resources, pertain to the notion of transforming objects into individualized meaning. De Saussure (1915, cited in Tillotson & Martin, 2015) first created the idea of signifier and signified, which depict objects/signs and their imposed meanings. To fully grasp the understanding of how people use videos of famous YouTube stars to advance their own identity project, the transformation of object/sign to meaning is especially important. YouTube videos are much more than a single object/sign, they are multiple and varied signs that people need to be able to decode in the right manner to receive intended messages. Therefore, investigating how people interpret videos on YouTube is critical in grasping the 'how' in relation to consumer identity projects.

Consumer identity projects have been researched in different ways and are viewed as a continuous process that relies on consumption as a means of expression. For example, Brooks and Anumundu (2016) investigated the development of identity in personal branding within the context of career development practices. Sihvonen (2015) explored how media consumption can play a role in identity projects. And Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998) revealed how brands can act as symbolic resources in the construction of identity. Other research has also shed light on the ways in which consumers appear to be navigating the marketplace, seeking objects that can advance their own self-identity (Diamond et al., 2009; Holt & Thompson, 2004). Each example leads us to the understanding that consumers are actively engaged in advancing the self-identity project, are skilled in utilizing varied measures, and comprehend how the self can be viewed by others.

2.3.2 Symbolic Consumption & Identity Projects

Symbolic consumption addresses consumers' ability to decode and actively use symbolic meanings embedded in market-generated material to build, maintain, and convey self-identity and position oneself within society (Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010). Symbolic consumption differs from the consumption of material objects in that interpretation is usually needed for consumers to make sense of symbolic material (Thompson, 1995 cited in Halkoaho, 2012), and therefore the same symbolic product can be interpreted differently among different people.

The topic of symbolic consumption in relation to identity construction of different kinds of market-generated material has been addressed by previous studies; for example, in the fields of mass media and music. As early as in 1973, Katz, Haas and Gurevitch suggested that consumption of media (television, newspapers, radio, books, and films) fulfils important needs, relating to areas such as self-identity, self-growth, understanding of self, and status. This has been supported by more recent studies: for example, in her 2015 study focusing on the identity projects of Finnish university students, Sihvonen concluded that media consumption plays an important role in the identity construction of young consumers. In this study, a broad range of mass media channels, such as TV, radio, magazines, and the Internet, were included. While a valuable contribution to identity and media research, this study also confirms the need for research in more modern media settings, and proves the importance of the perspective and context adopted in this thesis.

The connection between identity and music consumption is also well researched. For example, as evidenced by the findings of Ulusoy's 2016 study, music consumption is linked to the construction of self-identities and subcultural identities. This was specifically demonstrated in the context of Dionysian music subcultures, with other studies such as one by Larsen, Lawson and Todd (2010) supporting the idea that consumers express their identities through music consumption. Furthermore, Yazicioglu and Firat (2008) explore the role of rock music in consumer identity projects, revealing that musical codes play a part in shaping consumer identities, and that music can help create new identities while simultaneously reflecting existing ones. Music has, therefore, been found to serve as an abundant platform for symbolic consumption.

However, how people advance their identity project and attempt to reach their Ideal Self through consumption has rarely been investigated in social media settings. The studies explained above focus on other media contexts, while studies in the online and social media environment tend to concentrate on content creation (e.g. Chen, 2013; Maguire, 2015; Morris & Anderson, 2015) rather than consumption. As people in today's world, especially young people, spend increasing amounts of time on social media as opposed to traditional media, it is therefore vital to consider their identity construction process in this newer and fast-evolving realm. As proposed by Zemmels (2012), the media environment is rapidly evolving with developments in digital technologies and means of social networking. Therefore, he argues that a new perspective to media research is needed, where current and emerging media channels, such as the social networking channels of Facebook and Instagram which have an encompassing role in the lives of today's youth, are considered. Hence, consumers' engagement in and identity construction through their active choices in relation to media channels and content needs reconceptualization. Thus, as more and more consumers among the young choose to follow the videos and lives of specific YouTube stars, and have particular motives for doing so, this phenomenon merits more research attention.

2.3.3 Identity Projects & Social Media

As mentioned above, past research pertaining to self-identity heavily concentrated on the consumption of market-generated material in relation to advancing one's identity project, as viewed through the consumption of goods, music, and mass media outlets. When looking at consumer identity projects in relation to social media, current studies have put little time into investigating that of the individual. Instead, researchers have primarily concentrated, for example, on how social media affects collective identities and social atmospheres, as represented through subcultures or minorities. A great example of this type of research was conducted by Kavada (2012) who explored the role of social media in transnational activism, revealing that online platforms help foster communal identities but only to a certain and specific extent on the investigated platforms of Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace. However, academic literature relating to identity projects and social media from the point of view of consumers is scarce, which further demonstrates the need for research on this topic.

2.4 Identity through Identification & Homophily

As discussed in the previous sections, symbolic atmospheres such as music and media have been identified as important resources for the identity advancement processes. In the context of media consumption, an interesting study was conducted by Hoffner and Buchanan in 2005. It examined the favorite television programs and the favorite characters of young adults and the motivations of these young adults to watch the show. The researchers applied the concept of wishful identification in their study, defined in their context as “the desire to be like or act like the character” (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005: p. 325). The researchers found that characters play an important role in maintaining interest in the show, and the young adults participating in the study declared higher levels of wishful identification with characters with the same gender and similar attitudes. There were also differences between male and female participants: males tended to identify with successful, smart, and violent characters, while for females, the qualities of characters they identified with included successful, admired, and attractive.

Early research on various media contexts supports these findings. In the field of advertising, school-aged children were found to identify with fictional characters in advertising messages, with clear gender preferences: females identified with female characters, and males with male characters (Lonial & Van Auken, 1986). Shedding more light on the process of identification, the link between character identification/idealization and viewer behavior has also been demonstrated. Identifying with aggressive and violent TV characters, for example, has been found to lead to aggressive and violent behavior (Greenwood, 2007; Huesmann, Lagerspetz & Eron, 1984).

Research on media usage has also identified how viewers of television programs often feel invested in the lives of the program’s characters and even feel like they have a personal relationship with them, through following the series regularly (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991). In the context of the current research and YouTube, we feel that a similar dynamic may be in place when people consume videos of YouTube stars. Our perspective on the YouTube setting examines a similar situation where media is consumed, as we focus on consumers who regularly view the videos of a specific YouTuber. The consumers choose to follow the life of a certain individual and might even feel like they know them personally.

Therefore, findings from these studies may apply in our research setting: for example, in terms of identification with the YouTuber and a desire to be like them, which can serve as motivation for consumers to consume these videos and see the YouTuber as a role model. Here, Markus and Nurius' (1986) discussion of Possible Selves helps in understanding how admiration might be a source of motivation for watching the videos, when they acknowledge that many of the Possible Selves "are the direct result of previous social comparisons in which the individual's own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others. What others are now, I could become." (p. 954). Their insight supports the argument that YouTubers could be seen as a form of role model, or someone that consumers can aspire to be. These aspirations could, in our opinion, play an important role in the identity advancement processes of YouTube consumers when viewing videos of YouTube stars.

As discovered in the studies described above, consumers often identify with characters who share similar attributes and characteristics, gender is simply one example. This phenomenon can be referred to as homophily, defined as the tendency of people to connect and get into contact with others similar to themselves (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook maintain that the principle of homophily affects all kinds of networks, including friendship, marriage, and work contexts. This concept has been widely and extensively used in sociology to explain human behavior in relation to various situations and phenomena, such as social mobility and segregation (Bisgin, Agarwal & Xu, 2012). We believe that such a dynamic may influence YouTube consumption relationships as well, meaning that consumers tend to identify with and follow YouTubers who they share traits with. The homophily concept has been investigated in the social media scene in existing literature. In the next section, this existing literature will be discussed.

2.4.1 Homophily on Social Media

The concept of homophily has been explored in the social media environment to determine whether friendships are formed on social media networks between similar people. Bisgin, Agarwal and Xu (2012) illustrate how homophily and similarity can be studied based on demographic dimensions: thus, individuals are compared on information such as age, gender, and education to determine if friends tend to be similar along these characteristics. Homophily between individuals can, however, also be studied in terms of similarity between interests and

opinions. Both of these measures for homophily (demographic and interest similarity) have been used for homophily studies in the social media arena. Gilbert and Karahalios (2009) used Facebook user data, largely demographic information, in their study and found that homophily between users predicted Facebook friendships.

Among studies which use interest similarity as a basis for homophily, the findings of Crandall, Cosley, Huttenlocher, Kleinberg and Suri (2008) using Wikipedia and LiveJournal show that people on online social networks tend to express similar interests if they are friends. Han, Wang, Crespi, Park and Cuevas (2015) came to similar conclusions using a large Facebook dataset. Their findings, however, show that demographic details, such as age and geographic location, are often also a predictor of interest similarity. Furthermore, the researchers emphasize an important point in relation to the difficulties in measuring and comparing interest similarity on today's social networking sites, as users do not always explicitly share and expand on their interests when creating their social networking profiles.

However, even if previous research largely supports the idea that homophily exists on social media, there are studies that contradict these research findings. In their 2012 study, Bisgin, Agarwal and Xu did not find evidence for internet-based homophily: friendship ties were not created between individuals who share interests. However, they studied the three social media sites of BlogCatalog, Last.fm, and LiveJournal. These sites are less widely and globally used than Facebook, for example, which was used in the homophily studies discussed earlier. The choice of social media channels, possibly resulting in a less representative and broad sample of research participants, might, therefore, have influenced the results of this 2012 study.

A homophily study conducted specifically in the YouTube setting found that similarities exist between people in online YouTube user communities (Rad & Benyoucef, 2013). However, the researchers did not find similarity to be a determining factor on individual friendships and ties created on YouTube. The researchers themselves recognized that this result can be due to the existence of fake friends and spammers on sites such as YouTube.

In this thesis, such limitations will not have similar effects. Instead of focusing on all friendship ties on YouTube, the current research looks at individual YouTube users and their connection with a specific YouTuber, and how different factors may affect the identity advancement processes of these consumers. This approach has not, based on our literature search, yet been adopted when looking at the YouTube scene. As illustrated above,

homophily and identification studies in the social media environment concentrate on digital friendships, whereas the approach of studying identity and identification in viewer-performer relationships has only been examined in other media contexts, such as television. As academic knowledge is lacking in terms of the understanding of how identities are advanced through YouTube, and how identification may affect consumption relationships on different social media platforms, the current research will add valuable insights into this literature.

2.5 Chapter Summary & Preliminary Framework

The previous sections provide a background for our research topic and address how the concept of self, identity projects, and social media relate to each other in this thesis and how the concepts have previously been theoretically approached. Identity advancement processes through symbolic consumption of YouTube videos has not been previously investigated as is done in this thesis, based on our literature review, and, therefore, a comprehensive theoretical framework will not be created at this stage, but rather based on the empirical findings. However, literature discussed here serves as a basis for our empirical work, and by utilizing existing knowledge on identity projects and findings from studies conducted on symbolic consumption as well as consumer behavior on social media sites such as YouTube, preliminary assumptions can be made about how this knowledge might translate into the current research phenomenon.

We propose that homophily and identification, as utilized in a mass media context by Hoffner and Buchanan (2005), with a specific Youtuber influences which YouTuber(s) a consumer chooses to start and continue watching, in that consumers tend to be attracted to and become attached to YouTubers with similar characteristics and features, such as age, gender, and interests. The main process of identity advancement then occurs when the videos of these YouTubers are utilized as products of symbolic consumption, through which individual consumers advance their identity projects. This occurs particularly through envisioning their future Possible Selves which constitute their Ideal Self (Markus & Nurius, 1986), by using the YouTuber as inspiration for different areas of life. The preliminary framework in Figure 2.1 depicts this dynamic, where the YouTuber and their characteristics serve as a motivation and inspiration for each Possible Self of the consumer, which then make up the consumer's Ideal Self.

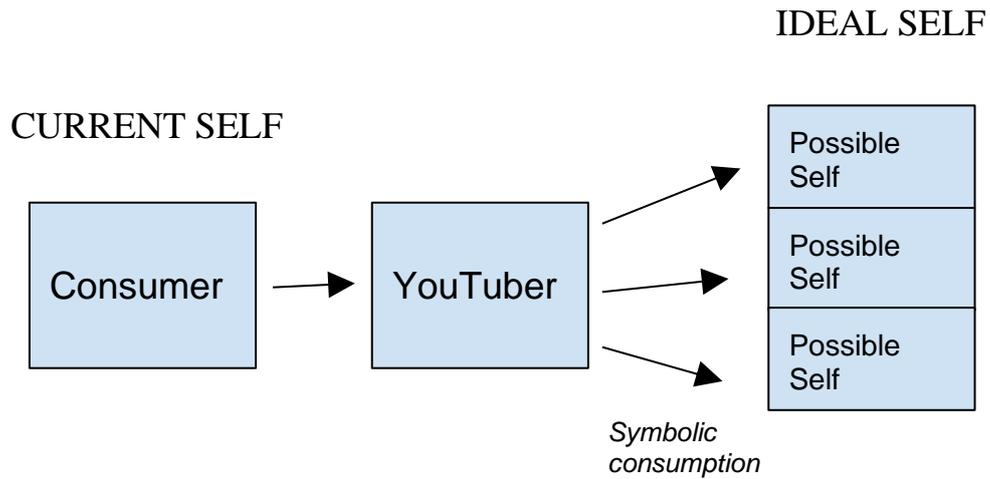


Figure 2.1 Preliminary Framework: Advancing Identity Projects through YouTube

It should be noted that this is only an initial framework with the aim of illustrating how the main theoretical constructs link to guide our data collection process, and serves as a starting foundation on which the main framework will be built on, based on our empirical findings. The next chapter, Methodology, will address how the empirical material in this research was gathered to add to the existing knowledge discussed in this chapter, and to investigate the specific research question and phenomenon of identity advancement through YouTube.

3 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach of this thesis in terms of the research philosophy, approach, and design, and justifies these choices relating to the specific research phenomenon and perspective. Methods for data collection and analysis are presented. The credibility and quality of the current research are also addressed in terms of a discussion of the attempts to ensure the validity and reliability of the research, as well as a discussion of its limitations. Finally, some ethical considerations are addressed.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Consideration for and clarification of the philosophical foundation is crucial for researchers, as stated by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), due to a number of reasons. Understanding of the philosophical departure will guide the choice of research design, by providing direction as to the optimal way of gathering evidence and data and of interpreting it, and providing clarity as to the advantages and limitations of specific designs when investigating specific topics and subjects. In short, a clear philosophical stand will greatly affect the quality of research.

As suggested by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), research philosophy can be articulated through the concepts of ontology and epistemology, where ontology refers to the nature of reality, while epistemology concerns the nature and theory of knowledge. The current research stems from a nominalist ontological position, as it is acknowledged that there is no single truth, and the focus is on how individuals make sense of the world in our specific research context. In terms of epistemology, this thesis departs from a social constructionist philosophy. According to social constructionism, multiple realities exist, and to make sense of a phenomenon, individual perspectives and experiences of people need to be investigated (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As the aim is to gain insights into the complex phenomenon of identity advancement, such an approach is appropriate.

3.2 Research Approach

The current research follows an inductive and qualitative approach. Both choices will be discussed and reasoned for in the following subsections.

3.2.1 Inductive Approach

This study adopts an inductive approach, as there is currently not enough substantial knowledge regarding the advancement of identity projects through the social media channel of YouTube. Inductive approaches concern research which begins with a detailed observation of the world, and transforms said observations into more abstract generalizations and ideas (Burns & Burns, 2008). However, the authors acknowledge that the approach of this thesis is not purely inductive, as a guiding preliminary framework and presumptions are established based on prior literature. Therefore, our approach has some deductive characteristics, as the research and data collection were guided to a degree by the existing knowledge and theory regarding the concept of self, identity projects, and symbolic consumption. Yet, with a deductive process being defined as a research process which starts with a theory or hypothesis that is studied, and that can be either supported or rejected (Burns & Burns, 2008), the current research is still more inductive in nature. This research relies on observations to help create an understanding of how people use YouTube content from famous YouTubers to advance their identity projects, and a hypothesis or conceptual framework is not created prior to data collection, due to the lack of research connecting the topics of the current research. Our approach, which relies heavily upon participant views, hence matches with Creswell and Clark's (2007) definition of inductive research, which states that such an approach utilizes individual thoughts of participants to construct common and interconnecting themes and theory.

3.2.2 Qualitative Approach

In line with our philosophical frame and research approach, this thesis utilizes a qualitative research design which is in keeping with the social constructionist epistemology. The research question and phenomenon, and our approach to it, fits well with a qualitative design, as we aim to understand our research phenomenon in depth, and to gather rich data and make

inductions based on it, by utilizing a small number of research participants. As defined by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), qualitative research tends to be explorative in nature and aims at gathering detailed and in-depth data from the participants and understanding their experience, which is the objective of this research.

3.3 Research Design

As discussed above, the aims and purpose of this research agree well with an inductive and qualitative approach. More specifically, this thesis uses a grounded theory design, first introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 (cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Their opinion was that researchers should aim to develop theory by using a comparison method, i.e. looking at a phenomenon in different situations to find a pattern or themes arising. The purpose of such an approach is to help the researcher in developing a consistent, plausible theory that is close to the original empirical material (Glaser, 1965). This approach fits well with the aim and research question of this thesis, as we are investigating identity processes and therefore need to examine and compare the process among different individuals to be able to find common themes arising from individual experiences.

3.4 Data Collection

Common qualitative data collection methods include interviews, focus groups, observations, reviewing document studies, key informants, alternative (authentic) assessments, and case studies (Yates & Leggett, 2016). For the purpose of this study, however, the most commonly practiced source of data collection within qualitative research was chosen (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), the semi-structured interview. In the next sections, we reason for this choice and explain our data collection process in more detail.

3.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method as it has proven its ability to be both flexible and versatile, enabling interviewers the ability to improvise and ask follow-up questions (Hardon, Hodgkin & Fresle, 2004; Polit & Beck, 2010; Rubin & Rubin,

2005), while also enabling participants the opportunity for individual verbal expressions (RWJF Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008). This interview format has previously been found suitable to use for many different research purposes; however, each purpose shares the common theme of understanding people's perceptions, opinions, values, intentions, and ideals. Furthermore, through this style of interview it is possible for researchers to focus on issues that are meaningful to each participant, enabling diverse perceptions to be expressed and uncovered (Cridland, Jones, Caputi & Magee, 2015). Interviews also provide an optimal way of learning about subjects that may be challenging to merely observe (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). As the purpose of this study is to understand how people use YouTube videos from famous YouTubers to advance identity, it is therefore fitting that we advance with the format of semi-structured interviews.

While semi-structured interviews provide optimal freedom and flexibility when conducting the interviews, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) suggest designing a topic guide for semi-structured interviews, to be used as a framework that can loosely guide the discussion and serve as a general structure for the interviews. The topic guide used in conducting the research for this thesis can be found in Appendix A, and will be elaborated on in a later subsection.

The interviews were conducted between April 22 and 26, 2017, and varied in length between approximately 10 and 35 minutes. Before the interview, all participants read and signed a Consent Form, which can be found in Appendix B. All of the interviews were conducted in English, as participants differed in their nationalities but all had a working knowledge of English. This also helped the authors in interpreting the findings and comparing the data from different interviews. Four of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, while two took place over Skype due to geographical reasons. Both methods enabled us to have a conversation with the participants and interpret non-verbal communication such as facial expressions and gestures (Burns & Burns, 2008), which serve as an advantage over telephone interviews. All of the interviews were recorded, in addition to notes being taken during the interviews to note down the most important details or any immediate impressions and interpretations that were made. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed, to enable the analysis of the discussion in detail and interpretation of the exact words, expressions, and language used by the participants. Transcription of the interviews is also a very beneficial tool as it allows the

researcher to take an active part in the discussion, note-taking not being the focus during the interview (Burns & Burns, 2008).

3.4.2 Sampling & Selection of Participants

In contrast to quantitative studies, where sampling strategies are aimed at gaining a large, representative sample through often rigorous sampling rules, qualitative studies tend to focus on finding a purposeful number of instances that describe well the phenomenon in question (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Therefore, the aim was to identify a sample of participants that is varied, in terms of their preferred YouTube star and channel, and their reasons for watching that specific YouTuber. We believe this helps us gain a thorough and diverse understanding of YouTube consumption.

To achieve this goal of diverse participants, this research utilized a convenience sampling technique, defined by Burns and Burns (2008) as the use of a sample that is conveniently available and accessible to the researchers. Participants were found from the circles of friends and acquaintances of the researchers, with the aim of finding people who regularly watch videos of popular YouTubers. In this way, it was possible for us to find participants that, to our knowledge, would represent a diverse range of YouTube users and would provide us with multifaceted experiences of advancement of identity projects through YouTube.

The decision was made to select participants who are university students, as this age group tends to use social media regularly and be familiar with and active on YouTube. Otherwise, the aim was to have a sample with diverse demographics, in terms of gender and nationality. The choice to use a diverse range of nationalities is further supported by the fact that YouTube is a globally used platform, as noted in Section 2.1.1 of this thesis, 'YouTube'. It is therefore interesting to include experiences relating to advancement of identity projects on YouTube from different backgrounds and nationalities. Altogether, six interviews were conducted, with three female and three male participants. The nationalities of the participants include Finnish, Welsh, American, German, and Swedish. The ages of the participants range from 20 to 27. To provide a summary of our participant sample, the table below presents the participant profile, where demographic details for each participant can be found.

Name (Gender f/m)	Age	Nationality
Anna (f)	26	German
Laura (f)	24	Finnish
Becky (f)	27	American
Charlie (m)	20	Welsh
Brenton (m)	21	Swedish
Craig (m)	22	Swedish

Table 3.1 Participant Profile

The names and contact details of each participant were known to the researchers, in case a need for any follow-up questions would arise later in the writing process. However, to protect the anonymity of participants, names and contact details will not be disclosed. The names of the participants have been changed for the purpose of this research, and they will be referred to with these changed names in this thesis, according to the participant profile above.

3.4.3 Design of the Topic Guide & Questions

As mentioned previously, a topic guide was formulated by the researchers for use as a guiding structure during the interviews. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) propose including in the topic guide an informal list of questions, not necessarily addressed in any particular order, to be covered during the interviews. The questions should be clear and open-ended, and Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) suggest grouping them into three sections: opening questions, questions around main themes, and closing questions. We adopted this approach in designing the topic guide for the current research. The opening questions served as a familiarization to the topic and prepared the participant for discussion. The opening questions were aimed at finding out the main interests of the participant and which Youtuber(s) they follow, as well as exploring their YouTube usage habits. The main questions in the second section explored our main research themes, while the aim of the closing questions was mainly to identify any additional or remaining thoughts that the participant might have about their YouTube usage that had not yet arisen during the interview.

The design of the main interview questions, in the second section of the interview, was guided by the themes and concepts that were found to be most relevant to our research question during our review of related literature, discussed in Chapter 2. Particularly, the preliminary framework introduced in Chapter 2 served as a foundation for the design of the topic guide. The main interview questions were divided under three broad headings, which represent the concepts that make up the main dynamics in the preliminary framework. The three headings are: Identity Projects and Possible Selves, where questions mainly explored the reasons why the participant follows the YouTuber, the importance of it to them and their identity, and how they see their YouTube choices as reflecting their identity and ideal self; Identification and Homophily, where questions delved into the ways in which the participant identifies with the YouTuber; and Social Aspects, where the aim was to explore other relevant social dimensions of YouTube consumption and find out how the participant sees themselves in relation to other viewers of the YouTuber.

The full topic guide and list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

3.4.4 Definition of Concepts

The research question in this thesis utilizes concepts and wording that require a definition, in order to enable us to search for an answer empirically. As stated in Chapter 1, the aim of this research is to investigate how the consumption of videos of YouTube stars aids consumers in advancing their identity projects. By consumption, we refer to the regular viewing of the videos of a YouTuber or YouTubers by the participant. We define YouTube stars in line with Burgess and Green (2009), as YouTube participants who have developed a personal brand in YouTube's social network. The participants were asked to think about their favorite YouTube star when answering the questions, and if they did not have a specific favorite, they were asked to think about a few of their favorite channels, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the participant utilizes YouTube videos in identity processes.

3.5 Data Analysis

As this thesis utilizes an inductive research approach, inductive style of data analysis was adopted. Inductive analysis begins with uncovering patterns, themes, and categories in the

collected data (Yates & Leggett, 2016). This perspective is therefore in keeping with a grounded analysis approach, as defined by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015). They argue that grounded analysis is an intuitive and open way of analyzing qualitative data, and is strongly linked to grounded theory as a research strategy. Hence, this type of analysis fits well with our research philosophy and design, and helped us uncover underlying themes when analyzing the content in the semi-structured interviews.

3.6 Research Quality

The actions to ensure the quality of the current research are addressed in the next subsections, in terms of the pursuit of validity and reliability, as well as acknowledgment of the limitations of the research.

3.6.1 Validity & Reliability

The validity of qualitative research can be confirmed through three types of methods, or via a triangulation which utilizes at least two of the commonly practiced methods (Yates & Leggett, 2016). First is the use of contradictory evidence, or deviant cases, second is respondent validity, and the third method is constant comparison. As this research investigates the consumer identity projects of university students, the findings cannot be validated through a generalization of multiple and diverse group of people. Hence, we have chosen to triangulate our validity and reliability through the use of two of the above-mentioned approaches; constant comparison and respondent validity.

Constant comparison refers to the continuous process of analyzing participant responses for consistency, and further comparing the conducted research to previous findings. Thus, new data that was gathered was continuously compared to our previous findings to ensure thorough understanding of the data. The second chosen path of validity is to check through responded validity, wherein our participants analyzed and potentially corrected the transcribed outcomes of our collected and decoded information.

3.6.2 Limitations

The methodological choices made for conducting the research have been argued for in the previous sections; however, there are several limitations regarding the method that need to be addressed. First, qualitative research itself can be criticized for possible researcher subjectivity with regards to data analysis and interpretation. In other words, characteristics and abilities of the researcher may affect these research stages (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Data collection is also often time-consuming and may be effortful and laborious. However, in the case of the current research, the advantages of a qualitative approach far outweigh the disadvantages, as it allows us to explore the experiences and thoughts of the participants.

Second, the interview method limited us in terms of the number of participants that it was possible to include in the study. Additionally, as argued by Burns and Burns (2008), possible interviewer and respondent effects are disadvantages of the interview method. In other words, personal characteristics of the interviewer (such as age, gender, and interviewing experience) and respondent effects (such as memory errors and social desirability effects, in terms of giving answers that are deemed socially acceptable) may bias the communication during the interview. However, for the current research, out of the possible qualitative research methods, in-depth interview was deemed the best way to accomplish the research goal of gaining a deep understanding of the experiences of each participant.

Third, convenience sampling can be criticized for its limited ability to provide generalizable findings (Burns & Burns, 2008). However, in the current research, this method helped us to gather a sample of participants that was demographically diverse, and ensure that different YouTubers were included in our study. Therefore, in the case of our research, the small number of participants, and the fact that each interview was conducted in depth, justified the use of convenience sample as it ensured variety in the responses. Fourth, identity advancement and construction as a research topic would ideally be studied longitudinally, as identity and self are concepts that evolve continuously. However, due to the time limit granted to conducting the research, a cross-sectional study was chosen as a more realistic method.

Finally, the current research will focus on university students, and, therefore, the homogeneity of the participants in terms of age and education level limits the generalizability of findings. Thus, the analysis and conclusions of this research can only be used in this particular context

and cannot be generalized to different age groups, educational backgrounds, or social media channels. Yet, a broad range of nationalities was included in our study, which we believe helps us in gaining a good view of identity advancement processes among people from different backgrounds, even if they are similar in regards to age and education level. Using a limited, younger age group is also justified by the fact that social media is generally very familiar to, and used in comparable ways by, this age group.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015) illustrate how qualitative research can, and often does, comprise ethical issues, which demonstrates the importance of considering and addressing ethics when utilizing qualitative data, even before starting data collection itself. The key principles of research ethics can be seen to fall into two broader guidelines: first, researchers should aim to protect the participants and their interest, and second, researchers should aim to protect the general research community and its integrity.

In line with this direction provided by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2015), we aim to ensure the ethicality of the current research by guaranteeing informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity of participants. This research does not focus on highly controversial issues; however, identity as a topic is very personal, and it is therefore important to ensure that participants can share their thoughts freely and confidentially. To further the pursuit of ethical research, honesty, transparency, and truthfulness are pursued when reporting the findings of our research in order to maintain integrity of the academic community.

3.8 Chapter Summary

In this section, we have reasoned for our choice of a nominalist and social constructionist starting point, and our decision to use an inductive, qualitative research approach. We also justify the utilization of a grounded theory design, whereby we interpret our findings by aiming at uncovering common themes in our data. The use of semi-structured interviews for data collection has been explained, as was the method for selecting participants. In this section, we have also demonstrated how we aim to ensure validity and reliability of the

research by the methods of constant comparison and respondent validity, and addressed the limitations of the research. In the next section, we will present the findings of our empirical material gathered from the conducted semi-structured interviews.

4 Findings

This chapter presents the findings of our empirical data gathered through semi-structured interviews. Through a combination of general findings, a dissection of each interview, and the identification of homophily, we will provide an answer to the research question:

How does the consumption of videos of YouTube stars aid consumers in advancing their identity projects?

The first section briefly presents general findings about the YouTube consumption habits of the participants, which were found to be relevant background information in relation to the topic of identity projects. Next, each interview is described and presented in terms of the different types of identity projects that were pursued through the YouTube consumption of each participant. Finally, the influence of homophily on advancement of identity projects, considered an interesting and relevant finding, will be presented.

4.1 General Findings about YouTube Consumption

All of the participants watch multiple YouTubers and YouTube channels, with one or a few favorite bigger channels. The favorite YouTubers of the participants range from lifestyle and beauty vloggers to entertainers, such as film reviewers and gamers, and informational or educational channels about the participants' topics of interest. In our sample of participants, there is a quite clear divide between genders in terms of the type of YouTuber that the participants prefer. The female participants tend to watch vloggers, while males highlight entertainment and informational channels as their favorite.

The participants expressed regular YouTube consumption habits. Three out of the six participants said that they watch their favorite YouTuber, or YouTube in general, daily. The rest watch YouTube and their favorite channels at least a few times a week. YouTube was generally seen as an important part of the participants' life, and all of them expressed an intention to continue watching their favorite YouTubers in the future. Laura, for example,

stated that she saw YouTube as part of the current times and a normal way for this generation to pass the time, and therefore she would likely keep watching YouTube, at least in some form, for the rest of her life. Most of the participants have been following their favorite channels for a few years, ranging from approximately two to four years.

Commonly, YouTube is watched at night before bedtime, or alternatively when the participants are bored or otherwise have free time during the day. YouTube was generally seen as a personal and private activity, with Anna expressing that she would feel embarrassed to watch her favorite YouTuber with other people, or even her boyfriend, whom she otherwise shares everything with. Their favorite YouTubers are not something that the participants generally like to share about themselves with other people. Charlie, for example, said that he normally does not talk about his favorite YouTubers with others, as they reflect his personality and interests specifically, and might not be something that others find interesting. Some participants, however, expressed the social dimension of YouTube in specific situations. Some said that on occasion, they like to send videos that they enjoy to friends or family, and Becky said that watching a specific YouTuber ties her group of friends together, with the videos of the YouTuber being used as a source of inside jokes.

The participants expressed various goals and motivations to watch different YouTubers and channels. Many of them said that they watch YouTube for entertainment. Charlie, for example, mentioned how YouTube provides an easy way to find entertainment compared to other forms of entertainment and media channels such as TV, where the viewer is more restricted in terms of the programs and showing times. Anna also compared YouTube, and vlogs in particular, to TV series and described YouTube as more relaxing and a way of escaping reality by watching the daily life of a YouTuber. However, the focus of this thesis is particularly on identity-related consumption of YouTube, and therefore other goals and motivations will not receive more focus here. Instead, the findings in regards to identity-related consumption of YouTube will be presented in detail by presenting each participant and their identity project.

4.2 Types of Identity Projects

This chapter provides a description of each interview and the type of identity project that the participant strives to advance through their YouTube consumption.

Anna - The Healthy & Successful Self

Anna is a very regular YouTube user with daily consumption of YouTube. She watches multiple lifestyle YouTubers, especially vloggers, and has a favorite YouTuber who has two channels: a personal channel with lifestyle content, and a vlogging channel with her boyfriend. Anna expressed that she is more keen to follow the vlogging channel where the YouTuber collaborates with her boyfriend: new videos are uploaded to this channel daily, and the couple documents their everyday life, travels, and cooking.

Anna herself is very interested in sports, especially triathlon, and leading a healthy lifestyle. During the interview, it became very apparent that Anna watches the YouTuber as motivation for her own health journey, both in terms of exercise and nutrition. The YouTuber is very sporty, and talks about her exercise routine. Anna mentioned using the YouTuber's fitness-related tips and recommendations in her own life:

“She [YouTuber Anna watches] also says like, yeah I’m watching ... this particular YouTuber. So she tells us, “I’m watching this sports channel”, and of course I clicked on that and tried to do the videos.”

The YouTuber also shares inspiration and recipes for a healthy diet, which Anna uses in her cooking. Anna also said that she would not relate to the YouTuber as much if she, for example, only ate junk food, so seeing the YouTuber as a role model in relation to a fitness lifestyle is an important factor for Anna to keep watching this particular channel.

During the interview, Anna also mentioned her admiration for the YouTuber's career, attitude and work ethic on various occasions. Anna referred to the YouTuber as ‘powerwoman’ and ‘inspiration’. Anna stated:

“She is in many ways, um, is also an inspiration ... Like she's a power woman, so I sometimes feel like I get inspiration from her. She's never, she's of course complaining about her workload, she's studying and YouTubing and everything, but I feel, she handles it so well, and she gets up early in the morning.”

Anna also tells how the YouTuber started her YouTube career as a very down-to-earth person, and has stayed true to herself while growing her popularity and becoming a very successful YouTuber. Anna expressed an aspiration for a future career similar to the

YouTuber, with the YouTuber giving her motivation and being a role model in regards to a digital career and YouTubing:

“Just being my own boss, working with the Internet you know? Maybe YouTube, maybe something else. And then I'm actually a bit, not jealous, of course I'm not jealous, but I feel like, yeah, I could, I could do that too. I mean, she started somehow, but I could, I could totally do that maybe, or maybe not, so... So that is so fascinating, how she became so, yeah, so big.”

Further, Anna sees the YouTuber as inspiration in relationships as well, and mentioned the relationship between the YouTuber and her boyfriend as inspiration for her own relationship:

“She's actually learning a lot from her boyfriend. Her boyfriend is, he's a lot into watersports, like surfing and kite surfing and he taught her everything, and that's something, that's something really nice. They share so many hobbies now, so I feel like that's.. that I would like to have this someday.”

As the findings above illustrate, watching the YouTuber aids Anna in advancing her identity as a healthy and successful self, especially in term of fitness, nutrition, career, and studies.

Laura - The Young & Stylish Self

Laura, too, follows various YouTubers but named one YouTuber, a fashion and beauty vlogger, as her favorite. The channels she follows are mainly focused on beauty, fashion, and lifestyle. She identifies makeup tutorials and ‘favorites’ videos (where the YouTuber presents their current product favorites) as her preferred video format to watch.

When talking about her favorite YouTuber, Laura mentioned getting many tips and recommendations from the YouTuber that she uses in her daily life, in the areas of makeup, fashion, books, and films, for example. Laura also said that she previously used to copy the YouTuber even more, but nowadays the influence is smaller, mainly in terms of inspiration and tips. She has purchased products recommended by this YouTuber and other beauty and fashion YouTubers on various occasions, further indicating that Laura sees the YouTuber as a role model and an inspiration for the self that she aspires to be in the areas of beauty, makeup, and fashion.

Her favorite YouTuber, and other YouTubers she regularly follows, are female and close to her in age, as well as in a similar situation in life. This suggests that Laura's motivation to follow these YouTubers is to get inspiration for her own life from someone at a similar point in life: being a young adult at the start of a career, in a relationship. This is illustrated by the following comment by Laura, when discussing why she watches these particular YouTubers:

"Obviously they [the YouTubers] are, they are quite rich, so it's different ... I don't think I ever will be in that kind of working situation, in like a very creative work. But yeah, [they are] kind of like a young adult in, in the work life. And then, in a relationship, most of them are."

Laura herself acknowledged that she prefers to watch a specific type of YouTuber:

"I think they are, there's definitely a type of YouTuber that I watch, so like ... a girl who does makeup videos, food videos, or kind of like lifestyle videos and then vlogs. I do like watching vlogs as well."

Laura therefore uses the YouTube channels in order to advance her identity project as a stylish young adult, through the YouTubers inspiring her in makeup, fashion, and life as a young female.

Becky - The Social Self & Theater Professional

Becky is a senior college student in New York City, and noted that her YouTube consumption occurs on a weekly if not a daily basis. In relation to the other female participants, it was noted that Becky also preferred to watch vloggers. The channels which she frequents mostly reveal a strong connection to music and theater. They also illustrate a reflection of the kind of person Becky thinks she currently is:

"Even though I may not write very clever and witty lyrics or songs, I like to think that I'm clever and witty in a similar way."

However, her choices of which YouTubers to follow did not represent an obvious aspirational reflection of her desired Ideal Self, as it did with the other participants. For example, Becky never related her motivations for watching YouTube to using the YouTubers as role models. In contrast, her YouTube viewing habits stemmed from the notion of sharing something with

her friends. Becky even noted that she and her friends use the YouTubers they watch as a source of inside jokes. For example, Becky stated:

“My friend got me a shirt, an “Amazingphil” [YouTuber] shirt for my birthday. You can’t tell it’s an “Amazingphil” shirt, it’s just a purple shirt with a lion head on it. It’s like his thing, and only my friends and I get it.”

By using the YouTubers as a source of common knowledge and entertainment between friends, it is easy to see the link between Becky’s identity project and her desired Social Self. To further support this interpretation, Becky revealed that, unlike the other participants, she often watches her favorite YouTubers with her friends, as well as alone.

“Yeah, like if we watch them by ourselves we’ll share it with the other person, and then watch them together, or just watch them together to procrastinate doing work.”

Aside from Becky’s social viewing habits to advance her Social Self, she also revealed a connection which advances her aspirations to become a theater professional. The channels which she follows contain original music scores, parodies, theatrical reviews, and original skits. The most apparent connection between these videos and her identity project is Becky’s subject of study which is a combined major in Theater & Dance. Becky also shows a reluctance to mention her chosen YouTubers as a main source of inspiration as Laura and Anna do, instead she states:

“Sometimes; Like sometimes I get inspired. If I connect really well with certain songs and something, I sometimes ... I started choreographing a dance to a piece once, and like had the idea of trying to collaborate and seeing if, you know, if I could really choreograph something that was good. And if that could lead me anywhere. So I guess, they inspire me sometimes to do my own work, my own creative work.”

Additionally, Becky’s reluctance to identify the YouTubers she follows as a source of inspiration stems from the fact that she relates to the YouTubers as peers, unlike Laura or Anna who view the YouTubers as role models. This was discovered when Becky was asked if she aspired to be a famous YouTuber:

“No; I would hate it, I like hate making videos and technology and stuff. I don’t aspire to do that. I see them [Becky’s favorite YouTubers] more as my peers, it’s just I stick to straight theater.”

Becky therefore uses YouTube videos as a source of inspiration to advance her identity project which includes the Ideal Self of a Theater professional. In contrast, while the main motivations of her consumption habits stem from the desire to solidify her social self, the content of the videos reflect her theatrical interests as represented through her educational and professional goals.

Charlie - The Knowledgeable Self

Charlie follows a range of YouTubers and YouTube channels and is also a regular YouTube consumer, watching videos approximately an hour every day. The interview revealed that one of the main motivations for him to watch these channels is entertainment. When describing why he watches YouTube, he said:

“Lots of variety and things like that. So it's, it's quite easy to find something that you like ... If you go on YouTube, there's probably gonna be something new in your subscription box, so that's quite an easy way of finding entertainment.”

However, the fact that he enjoys the variety of YouTube also demonstrates how he utilizes YouTube in identity advancement processes. His favorite channels clearly link to his overall interests and hobbies: he watches gaming and film review channels, as well as channels that deal with different fields of study, such as philosophy.

“There's this one channel that I'm subscribed to that's like general politics and philosophy stuff which is quite interesting. And then, the YourMovieSucks one is quite good, because you learn things about like cinematography. ... It just like borders my interests in different areas.”

He also sees YouTube as a private activity and hobby, whereby he is able to learn about the topics that he is personally most interested in. When talking about whether he shares his YouTube hobby with others:

“I normally don't tell too much, cause like there's something specifically, you know, that you like but only, others might not.”

As illustrated by the examples above, he is interested in YouTube channels that help him learn new information and gain knowledge on different subjects, and better himself in activities that he engages in in his daily life, such as gaming. Therefore, his YouTube consumption is characterized by an aspiration for a knowledgeable self on different topics of interest, where watching a range of different channels is key, as these different channels border on his multiple areas of interests.

Brenton - The Intellectual Socialite

Brenton engages in viewing many different YouTubers on a weekly basis. His YouTube interests range from scientific knowledge and keeping up with political news to simple weight training videos. Aside from the topic of the videos, Brenton also describes that part of his motivation in choosing which YouTubers to view is in relation to the quality of production:

“Like honestly I would say that the mixture between having a point that's amazing, in the sense that it's mind blowing, with also like doing it really well, like the production was so well made.”

Through a combination of visual aesthetics and new revelation-invoking information, the YouTubers provide Brenton with a platform to advance his socially intellectual self. The main YouTuber “Vsauce”, which Brenton watches weekly, is a key source of information for his identity advancement. Brenton further describes how he uses the information gained from YouTube to help portray his desired self:

“Like sure, I would talk about the details with a physics friend. But if I'm in a social setting whatever, and I want to like appear as the smart guy I would definitely like talk about his stuff.”

Furthermore, Brenton revealed that he uses his favorite YouTuber as a platform to stimulate and satisfy his philosophical interests, which he does not receive in his daily interactions.

“I don’t know. I’m a philosophical guy. And I don’t have a lot of people around me that are really philosophical. So it’s like a vent for me to flush out my stuff.”

Brenton further solidifies his constant efforts to be portrayed as the social intellectual. When asked, for example, why he watched YouTubers, Brenton responded with a deep insight about society in general:

“I think people watch them actually because they want like a social context. A lot of people don't that find elsewhere. I think it's like a product of society moving towards somewhere more isolating.”

In revealing his need for philosophical stimulation, as well as the way in which he uses the newly gained information from each video, one can see how Brenton utilizes YouTube to advance his socially intellectual identity project.

Craig - The Cultivated Self

Craig is a 22-year-old college student who has been regularly watching YouTube for the past two years. Craig’s educational interests cover environment, health, and well-being, while his personal hobbies cross into many different genres. For example, Craig states:

“My interest and hobbies outside of school are very diverse, because I like a lot of different things. So I like to read, and I like to work out, and I like to hang with friends. And when I mostly read things or am on the internet, I usually look up things like knowledge, and science, and psychology, and sociology. And future things, games, video games, movies.”

Through a combination of multiple YouTubers, Craig is able to satisfy his many interests in a convenient and personal way. He mentions during the interview that he typically watches YouTube videos alone, and only rarely engages in viewing his favorite YouTubers with friends. By keeping his YouTube interests private, we can view his engagement with these YouTubers as a personal reflection of his self-interests. Craig furthermore reveals that he has different motivations for watching each YouTuber:

“Like I have different reasons for watching YouTubers. So when I watch “PewdiePie” and “Cinemasins” it’s for like knowledge and for fun. But then I have other YouTube channels like the “School of Life” for example. And I think that it’s the bigger one, it’s a philosophy channel.”

This is particularly interesting as it shows that each YouTube channel is a representation of a possible future self, and through a combination of all the viewed YouTubers Craig can securely advance his identity project of the ideal cultivated self. Craig even goes as far as relating YouTube as a platform to replicate education:

“Because I like so many different things and I use YouTube as a resource for myself to learn more about those things. Without like having to do a bachelor in everything I like.”

Craig, therefore, uses YouTube as a platform for an easy way of learning about subjects that he finds interesting, which further solidifies his desires to advance the cultivated self.

4.3 Identification & Homophily in Identity Advancement

In the discussions with the participants, identification and homophily with the YouTuber proved to be an influencing factor in the identity processes of the participants. However, the influence was more notable among the female participants than males. Between the female participants and their favorite YouTubers, homophily was demonstrated both in terms of interest similarity and demographics.

First, the female participants mostly watch vloggers who they share interests with. For example, both Anna and her favorite YouTuber are into sports, a healthy diet, and traveling. She even mentioned how the YouTuber feels like a friend to her:

“So everyday they upload a video, and then, yeah, I feel like I’m watching a friend, basically. I think she’s my friend.”

Second, the female participants tend to watch female YouTubers who are close to their own age. Laura emphasized that she does not like watching younger YouTube stars, and prefers YouTubers who are her own age, or only a year or two older or younger. Anna even remarked that her favorite YouTuber is actually a bit younger than her, but she feels like the YouTuber was the same age as her when watching the videos. This shows that age plays an important role for the female participants when relating to the YouTuber. And although Becky did not watch female vloggers, she only regularly viewed YouTubers who were relatively close in age, and whom she could classify as peers.

Homophily was not evident among the male participants to the same extent. The male participants did generally feel like they share interests with their favorite YouTubers, and that they would get along with the YouTuber if they met in real life. However, when talking about how they relate to and identify with the YouTuber, the males did not bring up the age or gender of the YouTuber, and instead concentrated on interest similarity. In our sample of participants, identification and similarity between themselves and the YouTuber did not therefore come across as an important factor motivating or influencing the male participants and their YouTube consumption, as evidenced by a comment from Charlie:

“I feel like I'd get on quite well with the people that I watch I guess, so I have to like them as a person. But I wouldn't say they're all, they're all like similar personalities to me. Um, because often they're sort of more, like ... because you know they're entertainers, so they're usually more like sort of confident and like, loud, and things like that.”

Therefore, homophily seems to influence the YouTube choices of the female participants in particular, as they relate strongly to their favorite YouTubers and identify with their different characteristics and parts of their life. This is shown well in a comment by Becky:

“If somebody like turns you off, and you don't relate to them, you're not going to watch their videos.”

This can however also be linked to the fact that the female participants tend to watch more vloggers, where the YouTuber and their personality is more central and visible, than other types of content provided by YouTubers, such as educational and informational videos, preferred by the male participants.

5 Discussion

The empirical findings presented in the previous chapter will be further discussed in this chapter and related to the theories and concepts introduced in Chapter 2. Furthermore, this chapter will, with the preliminary framework as a basis, arrive at and present the conceptual framework, illustrating how identity projects are advanced through the consumption of YouTube. This chapter therefore shows how the findings, together with their analysis and discussion, contribute to providing an answer to the research question of this thesis.

5.1 Advancing Identity Projects through YouTube Consumption

As identity projects relate to the construction of self, and the story of identity, through using marketing generated materials (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), it is imperative to state which concept of the self we are utilizing to grasp an understanding of the participants' identity and identity advancement. For the purpose of this research, we have chosen three related notions of the self: (1) Current Self, (2) Possible Selves, and (3) Ideal Self. First, we utilize the past works of many researchers (Freud, 1925; James, 1910; Rogers, 1951 cited in Markus & Nurius, 1986) who utilize different terms for the concept of current self. We consider the reflections of our participants' understanding of their current self as a step towards recognizing the self and advancing one's identity project, and hence our participants' conceptualization of their current self serves as a reasonable start in advancing their individual identity projects.

We further build off the concept of self identity as explained by Markus & Nurius (1986), which includes a constant combination of the Possible Selves and Ideal Self. Possible Selves reveal consumers' conceptualizations of their own future potential and the selves they could become, while the Ideal Self is a combination of these possible identities and represents the consumer's desired identity, such as the rich or the admired self. After a thorough analysis of the interviews was completed, it was apparent that these three notions of the self mentioned

above were present in the participants' answers and discussion. Furthermore, even stronger evidence was discovered which supports the notion that the participants actively and/or subconsciously advance their identity projects through YouTube consumption.

5.1.1 Advancing Identity Projects through Ideal & Possible Selves

As mentioned by Markus & Nurius (1986), Possible Selves pertain to the way in which people conceptualize their potential about their own future. They further reveal how a combination of Possible Selves acts as a representation of the Ideal Self which one strives to become. The Ideal Self can be characterized, for example, by the intellectual self, the alone self, the successful self, or any personal conceptualization thereof. The participants within this study showed a strong reflection of the concepts of Ideal & Possible Selves. The easiest form to understand the participants' connection to Possible Selves can be how all six participants engage in viewing multiple YouTubers. Each YouTuber that a participant views is a symbolic representation of one of their Possible Selves, while the combination of all the viewed YouTubers acts as reflection of the participants Ideal Self. Craig, for example, mentioned at least five different YouTubers which he regularly watches for separate reasons. However, the underlying factor which connected each of Craig's YouTuber choices was that each YouTuber was as a source of educational information which satisfied the participant's interests and drive to reach his Ideal Cultivated Self.

While the above mentioned is one frame to view the connection of self to identity projects, the understanding of Possible and Ideal Selves can also be framed within each specific YouTuber that a participant watches. All of the participants mentioned personal attributes and areas of life throughout their interviews such as work, studies, hobbies, relationships, training/sports, philosophy, science, and music/dance, which were reflected in each of their viewing habits. Out of the six participants, five of them specifically stated that they utilize the YouTubers as a source of inspiration and as a platform to better themselves. Anna even revealed a connection to the "undesired self" which corresponds to a negative image of the Ideal Self. Anna mentioned how she was not jealous of the relationship of the vlogger she watches every day, as she viewed the vlogger's relationship as not functioning too well. By Anna acknowledging and reflecting on this negative representation of a possible relationship, she can imagine the possible future undesired self and actively work to avoid becoming said self and instead reach the interpretation of her Ideal Self.

Markus & Nurius (1986) also connected motivation to the concept of self. As mentioned above, all but one participant (Becky) specifically stated watching YouTube for inspirational or motivational factors. Becky instead utilizes her chosen YouTubers mainly as a means for entertainment. Becky revealed that after watching the YouTubers, she would choreograph dances to songs by the YouTubers she watched, revealing that the YouTubers provided her with motivation and inspiration, hence further promoting her Ideal Self. This connection can further be solidified as Becky is a theater and dance major and aspires to work within the theatrical world.

5.1.2 Advancing Identity Projects through Reflection on the Current Self

As approached in the CCT field, consumption is seen as a means of expression (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), and, therefore, consumption choices can be seen to reflect the current self of consumers. As evidenced in the description of the interviews in the previous chapter, the participants in general expressed feelings of a fit and a connection between their self-concept and the YouTubers they choose to watch. This occurs especially in terms of interests, as the interests of the participants were found to be strongly linked to the types of YouTubers and channels that they follow. The participants, therefore, either consciously or subconsciously, have an understanding of their current self and self-concept, and choose to watch YouTubers who fit into the visualization of their conceptualized self. Hence, the YouTubers that they watch are seen to reflect their current self-concept and to have the possibility to elevate their current self towards their future Possible Selves and Ideal Self, through providing specific benefits and assistance in the development of their desired identity project. This is seen, for example, in the way in which Laura watches beauty vloggers, as she is a makeup and beauty enthusiast herself, in order to get further inspiration and recommendations of products to work towards a self that is more stylish and fashionable.

5.1.3 Advancing Identity Projects through Identification & Homophily

In addition, as discussed in the previous chapter when presenting our findings, homophily was found to be an element that could influence the identity advancement process in the YouTube setting; however, more strongly so among the female participants in our study. As illustrated by Hoffner and Buchanan (2005), in the context of TV programs and the characters therein, young adults tend to express feelings of identification and a wish to be like the character,

especially in the case of same-gender characters. This tendency to relate to and connect with similar others can be understood in terms of the concept of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). As outlined in Chapter 2, homophily can manifest itself as similarity between individuals on demographic dimensions and in terms of interests and opinions (Bisgin, Agarwal & Xu, 2012). Both of these dimensions were evident among the female participants of our study in particular: as presented in the findings, the females prefer to follow YouTubers who are similar to themselves in terms of gender, age, and interests.

The male participants, on the other hand, did not demonstrate similar levels of homophily in their YouTube consumption habits and preferences: the males did not bring up how they relate to and identify with the YouTuber as influencing their decisions to start or continue watching a specific YouTuber in the same way as the females did. This leads us to suggest more academic research to be conducted on this topic, with a larger pool of participants, as the findings from our study indicate that homophily could be an influencing factor in the advancement of identity projects in social media settings.

5.2 Conceptual Framework: Advancing Identity Projects through YouTube Consumption

The previous sections discuss the empirical findings of our research with consideration to the related theoretical constructs. This has helped us in conceptualizing the identity-related consumption of YouTube and in revealing the ways in which YouTube content is utilized to advance identity projects.

Our findings are in keeping with the idea that through symbolic consumption of different market-generated material, consumers build, maintain, and convey their self-identity (Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010). In the case of this research, content on YouTube, created by private YouTubers, represents this market-generated material, which is then viewed by YouTube users and used in the advancement of their individual identity projects. Importantly, our findings illustrate how this occurs through viewing multiple channels, with each channel providing different elements that help consumers in striving for their desired identity. Furthermore, the strive for one's Ideal Self through the conceptualization of Possible Selves, as suggested by Markus and Nurius (1986), is supported in the context of YouTube.

Based on this understanding and reflection, we propose the following framework to conceptualize the process through which consumers advance their identity projects in the YouTube setting. Figure 5.1 illustrates this conceptual framework.

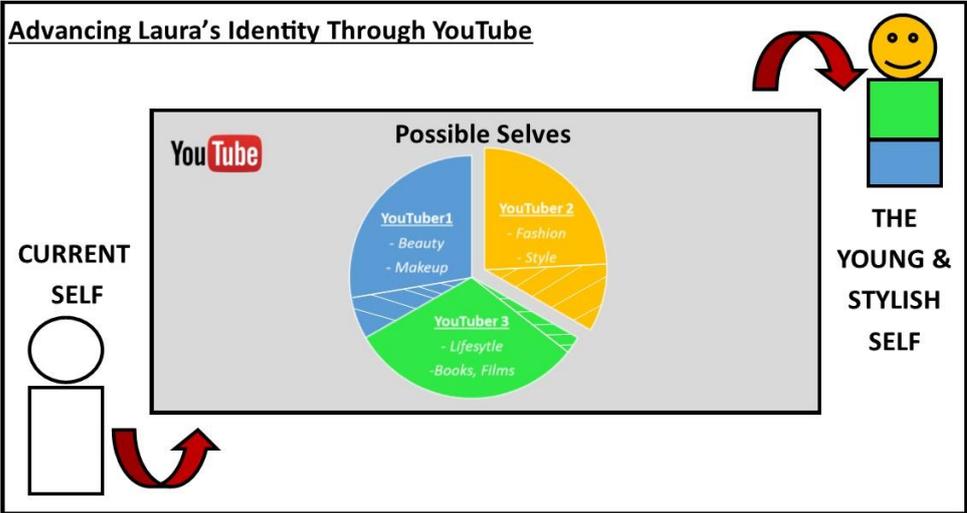
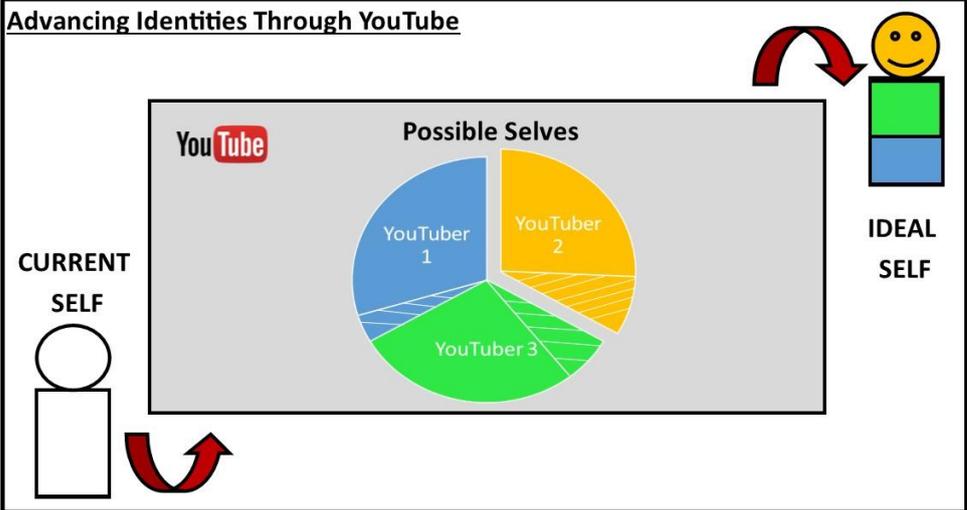


Figure 5.1 Conceptual Framework: Advancing Identity Projects through YouTube

The framework demonstrates the identity advancement process through showing a general framework first, and below, that of one of the participants in the study; Laura. The framework illustrates how a YouTube consumer has a conceptualization of their current self, and engages in the consumption of multiple YouTubers and channels that help them in pursuing their Ideal Self. Each YouTuber or channel embodies a part of the consumer's desired self and ideal characteristics to a different degree, as represented by how the whole pie chart of YouTube channels that an individual follows is made up of different sized segments in the framework. Each YouTuber, and their personal characteristics and accomplishments, for example, or the channel as a whole, is then utilized as inspiration, source of knowledge, and/or a role model for the consumer to cultivate and pursue their Ideal Self. This dynamic is illustrated in the framework by the use of the different colors to represent each YouTube channel, and by the fact that the consumer's Ideal Self is, in turn, made up of a specific composition of these different colors. The consumer therefore uses their preferred YouTubers and channels, which represent their Possible and Potential Selves, to aid them in reaching their Ideal Self.

Additionally, through utilizing this specific platform (YouTube), the consumers are offered a convenient and non-restrictive environment to advance their identity projects and reach their Ideal Self. YouTube acts as catalyst in consumer identity projects, speeding up the process of identity advancement and reducing the gap which traditionally exists between the Current and Ideal Self. Through offering millions of possibilities of YouTubers to follow within a non-restrictive and socially constructive platform, consumers can easily identify with and utilize YouTubers as inspirational Possible Selves to more quickly achieve their Ideal Self. YouTube therefore offers a unique platform for identity work for today's consumers, as compared to the contexts of previous studies of symbolic consumption, such as mass media and music, where material is generally not as non-restrictive, social, and varied in one channel.

Based on our findings, we additionally suggest that homophily, as represented by the striped sections within the pie charts, may play a role in the process and may influence the degree to which a particular YouTuber is seen to embody one's Possible Selves and a part of one's Ideal Self. The consumer identifies with and feels similar to the YouTubers to different degrees, which is illustrated by the fact that the striped sections are of varying sizes in the conceptual framework. It should, however, be noted that in the participant sample of this study, the influence of homophily was found to differ between males and females. While the degree of homophily can affect how attractive and motivational a particular YouTuber seems

to a consumer, other aspects that would make a YouTuber appealing could include content quality and entertaining content, for example.

The framework presented and discussed above summarizes our main findings, gathered through empirical data and analyzed in relation to theoretical constructs discussed earlier on in this thesis. The next chapter will conclude this thesis and further illustrate how these findings contribute to our understanding of consumer identity work in social media.

6 Conclusion

This chapter provides the conclusions and summary of the findings of this thesis, and demonstrates how they contributed to reach the research aims and objectives of this research, as well as answer the research question. Next, the theoretical and practical contributions are presented. Finally, the strengths and limitations of this thesis are acknowledged and areas for future research are proposed.

6.1 Research Aims & Objectives

The aim of this thesis was to explore the ways in which YouTube is utilized in the advancement of one's identity project. Semi-structured interviews with YouTube users were conducted with the aim of investigating this, and the findings enabled us to identify common patterns and processes in the YouTube usage of consumers in relation to the research question of the thesis:

How does the consumption of videos of YouTube stars aid consumers in advancing their identity projects?

A conceptual framework was designed, based on the insights gathered from the empirical data, to conceptualize the answer to the research question above. The framework indicates that consumers have an understanding of their current self-image and can conceptualize their desired self. The YouTubers that the consumer watches represent their Possible Selves, or the selves that they aspire to, to varying degrees, and watching the videos of these YouTubers helps them in their strive for their Ideal Self, consisting of a combination of their Possible Selves. This illustrates the process of identity advancement through the consumption of YouTube videos.

Furthermore, the framework illustrates how consumers utilize multiple channels and YouTubers in this process. The different YouTubers represent the Possible Selves of consumers to varying degrees: each YouTuber embodies the Ideal Self that the consumer

wishes to become at different levels, and some YouTubers are more important to the advancement of one's specific identity project, while some are less influential in this regard.

As a context of symbolic consumption, YouTube was recognized as a unique setting as it offers easy access to a very wide range of content, which can be utilized as a tool for identity advancement relatively quickly and effortlessly. Homophily was also found to be an interesting element in the identity advancement of consumers through YouTube. In our sample of participants, females were generally more concerned than males with the degree to which they identify with and relate to the YouTuber, and how similar to themselves they consider the YouTuber to be, indicating that the interplay of homophily and gender in identity advancement on YouTube could serve as a topic for future research.

Hence, the findings of the research enabled us to achieve the aims and objectives of this thesis. We acknowledge YouTube consumption to be a dynamic and complex phenomenon, where various goals and aims motivate people to engage in watching different channels and YouTube stars. However, this thesis has shown that aspirations to advance individual identity projects play a role in the YouTube consumption of today's consumers. With this insight, we can conclude that the findings of this thesis are relevant in various ways both to the academic and the managerial field. These contributions are discussed in detail in the next section.

6.2 Contributions

In the sections below, the theoretical and practical contributions of this thesis are presented, relating back to the aimed contributions that were introduced in Chapter 1. Furthermore, contributions that arose during the research process and emerged from the findings are acknowledged.

6.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis connects the theoretical concepts of the self, symbolic consumption, and identity projects from the CCT field with the particular features and consumer behavior in the YouTube setting. Insights from previous studies concerning symbolic consumption (e.g. Larsen, Lawson & Todd, 2010; Sihvonen, 2015; Ulusoy, 2016; Yazicioglu & Firat, 2008) have shown that consumers utilize different symbolic material, such mass media content and

music, to construct and advance their identities. These results were supported by the findings of this thesis. The YouTube setting was found to be a scene of symbolic consumption, and motivations relating to identity advancement were found to be strongly linked to YouTube consumption.

Identities in the new digital medias have been studied in previous studies, but mainly in the form of self-presentation and creation of social networking profiles or personal social media brands, for example. This thesis, therefore, contributes to online identity research, where social media participation is seen to be motivated by the wish to create, perform and maintain a desired online image (e.g. Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Cover, 2012) by providing a new angle to understanding identity work in the online world. This thesis considers identities from the consumption perspective, and helps us understand the online context not only as a place for profile and image management, but also for identity advancement through consuming the content of others.

Furthermore, the findings of this thesis indicate that homophily can play a role in the advancement of identity projects in the context of YouTube, by influencing how motivational, and therefore how important of a role model, a YouTuber can be. Homophily has previously been shown to motivate media consumption, such as traditional TV (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). This thesis illustrates how homophily can be present in the new medium of YouTube as well, where video-format content and presence of characters (YouTubers) resemble the format of a TV series. Again, homophily has been shown to be an influence on social media in the context of friendship contacts. However, this thesis brings a unique viewpoint to the topic by linking homophily and identity projects in this social media realm.

In conclusion, this thesis has illustrated how YouTube can be theoretically understood not only as a medium for self-presentation and management of a self-image, but also as a context of identity advancement through the consumption of its content. This thesis shows how theories of symbolic consumption and Ideal Selves, originated in the CCT field, can be extended to this social media platform and, therefore, increases our understanding of how these concepts translate into new and emerging platforms that consumers use for daily interaction and entertainment.

6.2.2 Practical Contributions

As discussed above, the insights from this thesis add to the academic understanding of consumer identities. Yet, the findings of this thesis also have practical implications for the corporate and managerial field. We have demonstrated in this thesis that one's identity project is a complex makeup of many possible future selves as represented in the desired Ideal Self. As mentioned earlier, these Possible Selves are illustrated through a person's tendency to follow and view the videos of multiple YouTubers. This connection becomes essential knowledge for a brand utilizing this social platform. To fully engage the target consumers, brands must mirror the process of possible future selves within their YouTube strategy. Utilizing spokespersons who embody the target consumer's Ideal Self, for example, is an ideal way of engaging the customer. The ability for a brand and their channel to be easily available and found by their target consumer becomes crucial as well. This could be achieved by the brand advertising on or sponsoring certain YouTube channels that fit with the features and characteristics that the brand wishes to promote.

Furthermore, as the introduction to this thesis demonstrated, YouTube has become a very lucrative platform for personal brands, and a launching point for a range of careers. The insights from this thesis can be utilized in this context as well. YouTube stars who wish to build or maintain their personal brand can benefit from the knowledge that viewers do have identity-related motivations behind their YouTube choices and consumption patterns. Providing advice and inspirational content could help in optimizing the channel's content, and ensuring that their online presence is relatable and easy to identify with is an important consideration as well, based on the findings of this thesis.

6.3 Strengths & Limitations of the Study

In the following section, an insight into the strengths and limitations of this thesis is presented. First, the strengths are identified, followed by the recognized limitations. Through offering a look at the acknowledged design choices of this research, we are able to present an understanding of the overall richness of the findings and lead the way to the possible future research, which is presented in section 6.4.

6.3.1 Strengths

This research provides insights and a new angle through which to view consumer identity projects within a social media context. Specific choices were made in regards to this research design to assist in unearthing the richest information. First and foremost, this work chose to utilize a qualitative research design, as this style of data collection offers an exploration into the experiences and thoughts of the participants which is critical in understanding consumer identity projects. Furthermore, consumer identity projects are unique to each individual, and the driving factors and motivation to each individual's choices cannot be effectively discovered through a quantitative analysis.

A second key strength to this research was the choice to utilize a diversified pool of participants. In total, this research draws understanding of identity advancement from an equal distribution of genders, as well as from five nationalities and four separate language backgrounds. By drawing the results from this unique pool of participants, we were able to not only gain potentially richer information, but we were also able to mimic that of the international environment in which YouTube operates.

6.3.2 Limitations

Although specific choices were made to strengthen this research, we do recognize limitations which exist in the design, which have the potential to distil our overall results. The first limitation recognized lies within the decision to conduct all interviews in the common language of English. This choice may have affected the outcome of the results, as English was not the native language for four out of the six participants. By not conducting the interviews in each participant's native tongue, we allowed for the possibility of miscommunication and/or loss of subtlety or nuance. However, we strongly believe the benefits of gaining a culturally mixed collection of data far outweighs that of the potential for a distillation of the results. We further argue that this choice can be justified as our participants follow and view YouTuber content which is published in English and, therefore, their command of the language is at a suitable level for this research.

A second recognized limitation to the research design was the choice to refine our participant pool to university students with a narrowed age range (22 - 27 years of age). However, this deliberate choice has again been made to mimic the typical user demographic of YouTube, as

well as to create an ease in data collection as this demographic of participants was easily accessible to the researchers.

6.4 Future Research

The previous section offered an insight into the strengths and limitations in the research design, which have an effect on the overall findings. However, through identification of the existing strengths and limitations, suggestions can be made for future research. A few potential research topics are therefore offered, which will aid in furthering the understanding of identity advancement in the social media environment.

The first suggestion for research is based off of a replication of this current study, through which a larger and more diversified pool of participants is utilized (age, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, etc.). By replicating this study with a larger participant pool, the results of identity advancement in the YouTube context can be generalized to a greater audience. A further suggestion is to conduct all interviews in the native tongue of each participant to eliminate the possibility of miscommunication and/or loss of subtlety or nuance.

The second future research suggested is a result of the current byproduct of this research; homophily. As mentioned earlier, homophily would seem to act as an influencing factor in the identity advancement process. However, this study was conducted with a small number of participants, and therefore general conclusions cannot be drawn from the empirical data in regards to homophily and its influence on identity advancement processes. Therefore, we suggest exploring the prominence of homophily, and its connection to gender in particular, in consumer identity projects within the YouTube environment. The sample of participants in this thesis indicated that females could be more influenced by homophily in their YouTube consumption patterns and, therefore, testing this hypothesis with a large number of participants would increase our understanding on this dynamic.

The next suggestion reflects the second essential aspect which characterizes consumer identity projects within CCT; mythic resources. As mentioned earlier in the literature review section of this work, market-generated materials can be understood through both mythic and symbolic resources. However, as the main concentration of this work was to understand how

consumers use YouTubers as symbolic resources to advance their identity project, we further suggest investigating the role of mythic resources within a relative context.

Finally, as identity-related motivations have been identified in this thesis to play a role in the consumption of YouTube, we propose further research to be conducted in other social media channels. To our knowledge, studies focusing specifically on advancement of identity projects have not been conducted in relation to consumption of other platforms either, such as Instagram or Tumblr. Identity-related goals and homophily could arguably manifest on picture-based platforms too, which leads us to suggest further research on connecting identity work and content consumption on other social media channels as well.

6.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has concluded and summarized the main findings and contributions of this thesis. While several topics that are worthy of future research were identified during this research process, this thesis has contributed with relevant findings and has increased our understanding of identity-related consumption of YouTube, by conceptualizing YouTube as an important context of identity projects and their advancement.

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Appendix A

The topic guide used in conducting semi-structured interviews with the participants.

Topic guide	Questions
Opening questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What would you say are your main hobbies/interests? -Which YouTuber(s) do you watch regularly? -How did you come to start watching this YouTuber? -How often do you watch this person? -How long have you been watching their videos? -What is your favorite video by them? - Do you watch this person alone, with friends, or both? In what situations, time of day, etc. do you watch their videos?
Questions around key topics	<p><u>Identity Projects & “Possible Selves”</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Why do you watch this particular YouTuber? -Is watching this YouTuber important for you? Why? -Are there any phrases that you use from the YouTuber in your daily life, or have you learned something useful for your daily life? Can you describe a situation in which you used this phrase or information? -Has the YouTuber influenced or encouraged you to buy any products or given you inspiration? (if e.g. a blogger) -Would you like to meet this YouTuber? Why? -Do you think watching this YouTuber tells something about you as a person? Why? <p><u>Identification & Homophily</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What characteristics of this YouTuber do you identify with? -What’s appealing about this person/video? -Did fact A,B,C motivate you to continue watching? -Do you ever find yourself comparing the life of the YouTuber and events that happen to them to your own life? <p><u>Social aspects</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Describe a typical viewer of this YouTuber? Do you consider yourself to be similar to other people who watch this YouTuber? Why? -Do you like to tell others that you watch this YouTuber? -Do you like to talk about the videos with others? Do your friends also watch the YouTuber? -(Do you comment, why? To what extent?)
Closing questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Will you continue watching this YouTuber? Why? -Do you have any additional comments or things that you find relevant, that didn’t come up during the interview?

Appendix B

LUSEM Master Thesis Consent Form



LUND UNIVERSITY
School of Economics and Management

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please tick the appropriate box):

1.	I understand the information about the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	If applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	The use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	Select only one of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like my name used and understand what I have said or written as part of this study will be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised. • I do not want my name used in this project. 	<input type="checkbox"/>
		<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participant:

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Researcher:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date