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A Matter of Taste

A study on the influences of YouTube's influencers



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Abstract

To better understand the relationship between influencers within YouTube's beauty channels' community and their audiences this thesis looks to *Distinction*, a theory introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1979) focused on the role of taste within society. By means of ethnographic and semiotic methods, this research has been able to conclude that effects of personal taste have manifested themselves within the community found on the digital platform of YouTube, yet differ from Bourdieu's theory on its influence on society. Concurrently, findings on trust, authenticity and semiotic constructs emerged as important factors in building and maintaining a following as an influencer.

Key words: YouTube, social media, influencers, beauty, lifestyle, taste, Bourdieu, *Distinction*, social class, trust, authenticity

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1 Introduction

In today's online media consumption we have become the editors. By interacting with content, the consumer performs a public act, adding to its metric value and validating an increase in creation of similar content. Due to the substantial following creators have gained, specifically within social media networks and blogs, the value of their popularity has become so significant that they have been able to turn 'the act of sharing online' into their profession. We must keep in mind though that none of these creators start earning money immediately or are guaranteed a social media career, they all have to build up their community until the data is suasive enough for third parties to take notice and start offering collaboration opportunities. This turning point is also a turning point in the dynamic of the relationship between creator and consumer as the motivation behind creating content alters with the newly introduced incentives.

1.1 Goal

The objective of this thesis is to examine the rise of *social media influencers* (Freberg et al 2011) and its professionalization in terms of the relationship between them and their audience. In order to have an effective scope, the research will focus on the community of beauty and lifestyle YouTube channels. The creators produce video content about their personal taste in those areas and connect with their audience based on a mutual interest. The goal is therefore to better understand the audience by specifically examining the role that taste plays in both distinguishing and connecting this community.

1.2 Research aim and research question

Intrigued by the phenomenon of "YouTube influencers", I noticed how these (mostly) women share several qualities yet simultaneously seek out ways to differentiate themselves within the community. This developed the awareness that taste influences the image building of these influencers. A noted French scholar, Pierre Bourdieu, conceptualized a theory on the development and effect of taste. Published in English as *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), his work has both been criticized and praised since its publication ("Books of the XX Century - ISA" 2017). His theory and that of scholars who have built on it, provides the foundation to analyze taste within the framework of beauty and

lifestyle Youtubers active as influencers on YouTube. This aim has led to the following research question: To what extent is Bourdieu's notion of taste and distinction applicable to influencers within YouTube's beauty and lifestyle community? This main question is then followed by several sub-questions such as how viewers perceive the influencers and their own viewing behaviors. Another area that will be looked at closely within the main research question is what other attributes are important for image building of an influencer; how much do they have in common, what is the role of authenticity and how important is it that viewers trust the influencers? As the uploaded content of influencers is imaged based, the semiotic aspects of the imagery will also be examined in order to better understand the effects of taste on the content creation.

1.3 Motivation

As many scholars have tested and updated Bourdieu's findings beyond the scope of his original work, this research probes further into yet another area of social engagement that has not yet been explored and continues to rapidly develop. The popularity of these Youtubers has also created a completely new type of celebrity. They have not been introduced through traditional media and many do not possess any skills traditionally associated with fame such as acting or singing. Therefore taste is a suitable starting point to examine the relationship between them and their audience. By examining the possibility of taste establishing a link between the influencer, her audience and class and culture portrayed, new insights can be gained into what propels certain individuals into the spotlight and what motivates the audience to support these individuals.

YouTube has developed into a new communication tool where opinions and culture can be shared with a worldwide audience. Notwithstanding the digital divide and a possible language barrier, there are millions of people engaging with content through the platform. Their impact can even be observed outside of the digital space as many influencers have expanded into brand collaborations and business ventures such as merchandising. Concurrently, the accountability of the influencers is much higher due to the immediacy of the interactivity of the platforms they are active on, highlighting the power of the audience. This dynamic link adds to the importance of investigating the roles taste and distinction play, as they are interdependent.

1.4 Positioning

A quick overview of the significance of YouTube on the Internet; the platform has over a billion users and hundreds of millions of hours are watched on YouTube daily. YouTube also claims “the number of channels earning six figures per year on YouTube is up 50% y/y” (YouTube, n.d.). These numbers show that the platform is heavily used worldwide. The subject matter of the videos ranges as wide as the collective imagination of its users. The type of content created by the beauty gurus on YouTube includes sitting in front of the camera whilst discussing cosmetics, fashion and homeware items they have acquired, otherwise referred to as *haul* videos. These women manage to demonstrate that they have in-depth knowledge of the cultural segment of beauty by sharing their opinions. Some of these channels have millions of subscribers and viewers. This thesis will utilize a case study, selecting three of these beauty channels, where both the audience and the video content will be examined closely, led by Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984). Other than Bourdieu’s work, the thesis also connects and elaborates on the existing academic discourse of YouTube such as the exploration of personal branding (Chen 2013) and the authenticity of the celebrity (Tolson 2010). The notion of online identities and its construction has also been extensively discussed in existing literature (Baudrillard 1988), (Junco 2014), allowing this thesis to position itself within these discourses. The main theories will be discussed in-depth in the following chapter.

2 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I will review the literary components of the relevant academic works with regard to YouTube and the perspectives on taste in relation to the social media influencers. These academic works will create the theoretical framework and in part be applied in terms of analysis for this thesis. I will also substantiate my choices for additional research methods such as semiotics and ethnography that will be applied in order to draw academic conclusions.

2.1 YouTube in Perspective

The book *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2009) written by Jean Burgess and Joshua Green is a suitable foundation as it is one of the first to focus on YouTube as a

platform in relation to the production of culture, in particular through the participation of individuals who traditionally only functioned as viewers. The authors analyze a total of 4320 randomly selected videos and divide them into three separate categories: professionally generated content, user generated content and indefinable content. They come to the conclusion that content created and uploaded by professional media companies is still the most consumed type of video on YouTube, despite user generated videos being the majority of the content that is available on YouTube.

Burgess and Green also argue that despite the following of some YouTube stars being immense they are largely unable to cross over to traditional media celebrity status. It is important to remember however that their research was published in 2009 and YouTube celebrities have made these transitions happen in several different fields. Despite the book being outdated in some aspects, it still provides insights into the main structure of the platform and aids in recognizing the evolution that has taken place over the years.

Another journal article written by Alexandra Juhasz in 2009 outlines five short but powerful “*Lessons of YouTube*”. She voices strong opinions on what she sees as YouTube’s shortcomings. Her critical perspective allows for a better understanding of what consequences the platform’s structure has on its interactivity with the users. In order to discuss her work I will highlight two of her lessons that are most significant to this thesis. The lesson that is most thought provoking for this thesis reads:

Lesson #3: YouTube reifies distinctions between professional (or corporate) culture and that of amateurs (or citizens) even as it celebrates its signature form, the vlog, and the flattening of expertise. (Juhasz p.148)

Juhasz proceeds to differentiate between two specific video styles that can be found on the platform: the *vlog* and the corporate video. This differentiation is mainly based on the production quality of videos (Juhasz 2009). She claims that YouTube purposely ensures that this gap stays in place and that a blurring of these lines could mean a significant development in media. This is an interesting observation, as a blurring of the lines Juhasz describes is exactly what has happened since her writing. *Vloggers* have increasingly aimed to improve on quality. The people that make a living from YouTube through vlogging use increasingly professional equipment but also employ intriguing storytelling techniques and have developed distinctive editing styles. For example, vlogger Jon Olsson purchased a RED camera for filming his YouTube content (Olson and Valeur 2016). This camera shoots in 8K

resolution and was used to shoot recent releases such as *Allied*, *Guardians of The Galaxy Vol. 2* and *Transformers: The Last Knight* (“Shot On Red” 2016) were all filmed on RED cameras. A Google search shows that these cameras sell at around \$50,000. Using equipment such as drones, studio lights, detachable microphones are all a substantial evolution since the beginning of YouTube when most content was filmed via webcams or home recorders. The caveat to this is that not all creators use equipment that is typically found in production houses, many still have a simple setup in comparison, but production quality is definitely a point of concern for the “professional Youtuber”.

Juhasz’ fifth lesson puts forward the notion that: “Lesson #5: YouTube may be DIY, but it just ain't punk. That is, unless you hack it” (p.149). The author is calling the users to take a stance against YouTube as a company. Users have a voice that can demand change, as both groups grant YouTube its success and should therefore be able to influence the progress and improvements of the platform.

The works by Burgess and Green and Juhasz cover very different aspects of YouTube. Where Burgess and Green focus on the types of content and its impact in terms of cultural production and make no significant reference to advertising and corporate influences, Juhasz takes a critical stance and uncovers the ways YouTube delivers its user experiences. Taken in conjunction their work gives an overview of why and how YouTube works and continues to grow in terms of quantity and quality.

2.2 Bourdieu’s *Distinction*

As mentioned in chapter one, I look to the influential work of sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* that was published in 1979. Bourdieu contends that taste is indisputably linked to social class. The social class one is born into dictates how one’s taste will develop over time, through influences such as cultural background, surroundings, education, social interactions, etc. The expression of taste can therefore also become a way to purposefully distinguish oneself in terms of position and class.

The social sense is guided by the system of mutually reinforcing and infinitely redundant signs of which each body is the bearer – clothing, pronunciation, bearing, posture, manners – and which, unconsciously registered, are the basis of ‘antipathies’ or ‘sympathies’; the seemingly most immediate ‘elective affinities’ are always partly based on the unconscious deciphering of expressive features, each of which only takes on its meaning and value within

the system of its class variations (one only has to think of the ways of laughing or smiling noted by ordinary language). Taste is what brings together things and people that go together. (Bourdieu p. 238)

Several critics have tested his theory researching different areas of culture such as art, fashion and music, garnering varying conclusions, as will be discussed in the next chapter. As aspects of culture migrate to the digital world and manifest themselves through content creation and interaction, this is the juncture of influencers and taste I intend to examine.

For individuals to become successful and profitable on YouTube, they need to find points of mass appeal. They require a massive following and reach to prove their popularity in metrics for any brands to see value in associating their products with them. In terms of Bourdieu this would indicate that the influencers benefit more if they exhibit largely aspirational cultural capital regardless of their true lifestyle. Both the influencers and the brands have to take into consideration that numbers of followers, subscribers, likes and comments give no indication of who is behind the “clicks”. The influencer must balance between appealing to the taste of the masses and to individuals with sufficient disposable income, as they are the main interest of marketing campaigns involving influencers. This is why examining this phenomenon from Bourdieu’s point of view is intriguing. The influence taste has on the content produced by influencers creates a push and pull effect in the way they distinguish themselves. If Bourdieu were correct in his point of view this would mean that these influencers are constantly balancing between their “realistic” representation and their most “aspirational” representation.

Those who are held to be distinguished have the privilege of not worrying about their distinction; they can leave it to the objective mechanisms which provide their distinctive properties and to the ‘sense of distinction’ which steers them away from everything ‘common’. [...] bourgeois discretion signals its presence by a sort of ostentatious discretion, sobriety and understatement, a refusal of everything which is ‘showy’, ‘flashy; and pretentious, and which devalues itself by the very intention of distinction. (Bourdieu p. 246)

This quote exemplifies Bourdieu’s understanding of how class distinction walks a fine line between the “new” and the “old”. He also mentions that the bourgeois would never be “showy”, whilst being “showy” is exactly the manner in which influencers build their businesses. Videos published by beauty Youtubers often review their recent beauty and

lifestyle purchases at length. Videos titled “*What’s in My Bag?*” tend to feature luxury handbags and often discuss the bag itself more than its contents (Liana 2016). The way the audience perceives how the Youtubers conduct themselves will therefore be explored further.

2.3 *Distinction* Reviewed

Despite the fact that Bourdieu supported his findings with empirical data, academics such as Gartman (1991), Bennett et al. (2009), Brubaker (1985) and Bottero (2004) have challenged these findings. It is therefore imperative to include an update on *Distinction* that is relevant to the scope of this thesis: how the interactions between taste and class have manifested throughout modern day.

By utilizing Bourdieu’s work I am not attempting to comment on the development of class distinction per se but rather employ his work to comment on the changes these influencers are undergoing in terms of the way they identify with their cultural capital and prolific taste.

Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright discuss Bourdieu and *taste* in their book *Practices of Looking, An Introduction to Visual Culture* (2009). They show through examples that *taste* can be more fluid than the class constrictions Bourdieu attaches to it. Sturken and Cartwright state that particularly the artifacts to which society and classes attach “good” or “bad” taste markers are potentially subject to change throughout time. They use the example of the *lava lamp* as it has fallen in and out of grace over time since its introduction in the 1960’s (p.57). They go on to list many more examples such as: B movies, comic books, graphic novels and music (p. 61).

His idea that categories of taste and distinction trickle down from the upper, educated to the lower, less educated classes does not account for the dynamics of taste and judgment in the evaluation of those valued cultural forms that began as the expression of a marginalized culture or class, such as jazz in the 1920’s and hip-hop in the 1980’s. In the case of forms such as these, taste and distinction can trickle up to more affluent, culturally dominant groups. (Sturken and Cartwright p.61)

Sturken and Cartwright contribute to Bourdieu’s work by illustrating how cultural artifacts are not fixed to any particular social class. By doing so they disprove Bourdieu’s notion that “good” taste always trickles down from top to bottom. As different cultures and classes, especially in today’s digital age, are increasingly exposed to each other’s practices and

opinions, crossing over of influences is continuously more likely for those who have digital access. As other academics have done, this thesis will explore to what extent Bourdieu's concept is still relevant and where it can be updated.

2.4 Impression Management

I will compliment Bourdieu's theory with the work done by Leary and Kowalski in *Impression Management: A Literature Review and Two-Component Model* (1990). Their work is valuable to this thesis due to both distinguishing between commonly interchanged terms such as *impression management*, *self-representation* and *self-symbolizing* and providing a model of impression management that can be applied to the case of social media influencers. The authors distinguish two essential factors within impression management: impression motivation and impression construction. The two-factor model identifies the linkages between the private and the public self (p. 44). In this case study, the model is applied as it is valuable to acknowledge and further analyze the impression management that is at play in the content the influencers are publishing, even if the impression management taking place on YouTube virtually lacks any kind of face-to-face contact.

Erving Goffman's work (1956), the vastly cited *The Representation of The Self in Everyday Life*, connects to impression management and self-representation, as he introduced self-representation as an integral part of social interaction. Goffman wrote, "He may wish them to think highly of him, or to think that he thinks highly of them, or to perceive how in fact he feels toward them" (p.2), calling these interactions with objectives performances (Goffman 1956). His work is still utilized and discussed by many scholars to investigate social media (Maynard 2011). Therefore the relevance of the self-representation practices at play is not only from recent marketing academics but also originates from the sociological school of thought.

2.5 Authenticity

The question of being authentic arises when considering the portrayal of taste, especially when it is communicated through a medium that easily allows for editing and modifications. In many ways it should be the opposite of impression management and self-representation, the moment an individual can bring outward exactly what he is inwardly. Goffman (1956) also address authenticity by separating social interaction between the front stage and the back stage, referring to the back stage as the more 'authentic' self. It is also a concept that has been discussed by several different philosophers, many of whom conclude that 'true'

authenticity is not possibly to achieve because of many different factors. Because of the social sphere individuals need to separate their inner selves from the masks society force on them (Rousseau 1992), too much focus on the self could in turn lead to self-centeredness and narcissism (Lasch 1979) (Bloom 1987), Adorno (1973) in turn wrote about the word ‘authenticity’ itself carries too much connotation and is a flawed concept to accomplish being self-aware and transparent continuously. The conception of authenticity can be understood as “the “true self” [...] is an on-going narrative construction: the composition of one's own autobiography through one's concrete ways of acting over the course of a life as a whole” (Varga and Guignon 2016).

We can therefore come to the conclusion that authenticity is a construct, yet for the purpose of this thesis authenticity is not employed as a critical reflection of the self but rather a notion the audience imparts about the experience whilst consuming their content.

2.6 Trust

As was alluded to in the introduction, trust is a crucial component in the relationship these influencers build with their audience. Rather than sole admiration, their audiences need to trust that a review or recommendation is not influenced by anything other than their personal taste. I will therefore discuss several academic works that are centered on the notion of trust. Trust is an integral element in life; it is essential for both relationship building and continued communication (Dodgson 1993). When discussing knowledge, it can improve the acceptance of that knowledge or notion by another party (Krogh et al 1998). Trust is therefore a basic necessity of knowledge exchange (Davenport Prusak 1998).

Trust is an essential ingredient in social relationships (Brockner et al. 1997). Therefore it is also an essential ingredient for influencers to cultivate with their audience, they need to make the audience believe they have a genuine relationship with the influencer. A sense of trust also links to the sense of authenticity, despite this being a construct. According to Luhman (1979), trust helps to define an individual’s expectations and behavior. With social media influencers, the expectation is to find ‘good’ products through their content and induce purchasing-behavior in turn in the audience. In short, the greater the trust, the greater the amount of information the audience will seek from the influencer and see as truth (McDowell 2002). As an influencer, a trustworthy person and a trustworthy source of information become one. The study conducted by Merrilees and Fry (2003) showed a connection between increased interactivity between a website and a consumer and trust. It could therefore be argued that the more influencers interact with their audience, the more

they become a trusted source of information for their audience. Acting upon this trusted information is exactly what a brand is hoping for when they collaborate with influencers. The influencer, by building trust, can become a deciding factor in the purchasing process.

2.7 Semiotics

The study of semiotics cannot be excluded when examining the construction of taste, as the communication of taste Bourdieu refers to is arguably achieved through the use of semiotics. Scholars such as Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall popularized the field of semiotics by expanding theories from linguistic application to identifying meaning-making systems. Roland Barthes specifically wrote about the meaning-making system of fashion in *The Fashion System* (1985). He discussed how fashion, in particular one's choice of clothing sends a representational message to observers of who you are. Barthes carefully outlines how he goes about his analysis in terms of signifier and signified and clothing, this process is largely applicable to the way influencers use objects to give off representational messages. Bourdieu also comments on the role of clothing, specifically how clothing can allow one to differentiate between the different classes. In a sense, Bourdieu was meaningfully *decoding* – coined by Stuart Hall (1973), the message certain classes were sending through the way they dress.

A semiotic framework of analysis can therefore be seen as a textual analysis that can aid in the dissecting of the content that is posted by an influencer on YouTube. The particular way language is used; the influencer's clothing and the background colors can all be decoded for their intended and unintended meaning within our cultural knowledge. Barthes complements Bourdieu particularly well as his work was known to focus on the analysis of French bourgeois cultural habits in terms of semiotics.

3 Methodology

As the research aim of this thesis explores both the effects and role of taste and the sub questions delve further into the relationship between influencer and viewer, the methodology will not only rely on text-based data but rather combine two methods; a semiotic content analysis of uploaded videos and insights gained from a survey conducted amongst the viewers of the same channels as the analyzed videos. The results of both methods will garner

increased insight into the interplay between produced content and the reception of the content.

Semiotics takes on a hybrid position within this thesis, as it is both a theoretical approach and a linguistic tool of analysis. Semiotics is also situated within the realm of a qualitative research approach, which lends itself to the goal of this research more effectively than a quantitative research approach. As Brennen (2013) writes, “it is through our use of language that we make meaning and construct our own social realities” (p.2).

3.1 Content Analysis

The interest is therefore not with the numbers of followers but rather with the influence taste has on the content creation of the influencers and the relationship they consequently have created with their audience based on taste. Because of this, I have chosen to utilize content analysis and ethnography as qualitative research methods that will enable a deepened understanding of this phenomenon. Semiotics will therefore be employed as a tool to conduct a content analysis of a single YouTube video uploaded by three individual Youtubers.

Whilst this thesis acknowledges the existence of the interplay between personal taste and paid-for taste in the process of content creation, I will not attempt to analyze them separately. Instead, the analysis will focus on the distinguishable evidence of taste and the cultural capital associated with it, which can be observed in uploaded content. Having said this, content clearly marked, as paid-for work by the influencers will be treated as such.

3.2 Ethnography

Ethnography will be employed as a second method. Couldry (2004) proposes that virtual ethnography “addresses questions that are no longer questions about media as such [...] but rather questions about the contributions media practices make to social practice more generally” (p.130). This is exactly how insight can be garnered within the influencers’ own communities, analyzing interactions with their audience. It can then be identified if and how taste affects these online communities. I have therefore conducted a survey amongst the viewers of YouTube beauty influencers by posting a link to an online survey in the comment section of newly uploaded videos on nine different channels.

The survey questions were formulated with the intention of creating a better understanding of the relationship viewers have with the influencers and their viewing behavior on YouTube. The initial six questions provide an overview of the surveyed user group. The following questions include eleven open-ended questions in order to give the

respondents ample space to voice their opinions, providing valuable data in order to find results in the aforementioned research question.

Throughout the course of both preparing this thesis and writing it, I have continuously been watching beauty and lifestyle content on YouTube in order to stay updated on any developments. This has accumulated into hundreds of hours of viewing time and hundreds of individual videos by different influencers. I am therefore very well acquainted with the portrayed personalities, stylistic elements in their video production and preferences in terms of products and promotions. I made a selection of three different influencers to use as case studies for this thesis. Their channel names on YouTube are; *Fleur de Force*, *Amelia Liana* and *The Anna Edit*. I have also followed the blogs *The Anna Edit* and *Flora Isabelle* closely to look at their stylistic elements. The selection of these influencers was based on the significance of their subscribers, their consistency of uploading and my personal preference. Since narrowing down the selection I have been extra focused on following and logging the activity of these influencers. I have been aware of these specific influencers since 2014, when I first discovered the existence of this type of content on YouTube.

3.2.1 Limitations

There is a risk of ethnographer's bias, as the influencers I decided to analyze more closely create content that largely resonate with my personal preferences. It could be argued that I am naturally drawn to women that I can more easily relate to. For example, this research does not include any women of color, yet includes an Asian blogger because of my personal interests and the eight years I have lived in Asia.

The signifiers that are identified and interpreted by me are susceptible to bias and opposing readings. However, facts such as education, family backgrounds and living conditions can provide the foundation to further build an interpretation.

Because the people that participated in the research were found by means of general browsing on social media, there is always the possibility that crucial successful influencers have been omitted from the research. However, this research did have the advantage of computer-mediated fieldwork, in the sense that it allowed for repeated observation, anonymity and accessibility to a variety of sources for data.

Another issue that ethnographic research can face is the question of anonymity. Online representations have the ability to be completely disconnected from reality and therefore

produce invalid results. This study has ensured that all YouTube channels are linked to ‘real’ people due to the bulk and continuous addition of visual content.

4 Research results

4.1 YouTube Audience Questionnaire Discussion

To initiate the discussion, I will provide a succinct overview of the information that was garnered from the questionnaire. To reiterate what was stated earlier, the questionnaire totaled 631 respondents of which 461 were completed. Taking only the completed responses into account and a population size of 2,634,199¹, I have established that the survey has a 5% margin of error, which is considered acceptable for academic research (Barlett, Kotrlik, and Higgins 2001).

The link to the survey was actively posted over a two-week period in the comment sections of videos on nine preselected channels. I posted the link under four individual videos uploaded by *Fleur de Force* and *Amelia Liana* and under three videos by *The Anna Edit* and *Estée Lalonde*. The remaining five channels had the link posted once under their newest video. The aim was to post the link as soon as notifications alerted me of newly uploaded videos, ensuring that the link would be visible to people that were interacting with the new content instantly. The link varied in visibility depending on the amount of likes and comments it received. For example, people commenting to inform me of their participation, placed the link as a top comment on one of *Fleur De Force’s* videos. Other links may have lacked this visibility due to the influx of new comments as the view count on the video increased.

The questions have been formulated according to three general categories; insight into who they are and their viewing practices, the degree to which Youtubers influence them and how the viewers perceive the Youtubers. The discussion of the results will cover each question and follow the structure of the questionnaire.

¹ Population size is calculated by totaling the viewers of all videos the link was posted to, 4-5 weeks after the upload day.

4.1.1 Corpus

The questionnaire -in English- starts with basic questions. The succinct results are presented in the table below; greater detail of the results of every question can be found in the appendix.

Age range	12 – 55 with spikes: 22(9%) and 16 (5.8%)
Education	25.2% are at high school level 50% have a Bachelor Degree 23% have a Master Degree
Income	63.1% of all respondents earn their own income, this indicates that more than half of the audience have decision power on expenditures
Nationality	The top 5 nationalities in order are: British, American, German, Australian and Canadian. Notably, the Dutch nationality came in at 6 th place. Nordic and Asian nationalities are also represented amongst the respondents
Language	Viewers do not all exclusively watch YouTube videos in English; 24.6% also consume other European languages and 4.3% watches content in Asian languages.
Gender	98.7%. of respondents identifies as female: This is not surprising as the content mainly discusses female interests, such as fashion, beauty and home décor.

The differences in age, nationality and education could be a preliminary indication that the viewer's choice on which YouTube videos to watch is not solely based on the Youtubers being a reflection of their own image. This however does not exclude the possibility that the viewers find other similarities that might subconsciously attract them to specific Youtubers.

4.1.2 YouTube Usage

The number of Youtubers people watch varies greatly, with 3 respondents saying they watch 150 different Youtubers. 19.7% say they watch 10 Youtubers. The possibility that respondents do not precisely know the amount of channels they watch must be taken into

account. They might have checked their subscription feed to give a correct answer, however there are no guarantees that they are subscribed to everyone they watch. It might increase the probability of a respondent opting for a round, common number, e.g.: 10.

Vlogs are the favorite type of video people enjoy watching as 78.9%, of respondents chose that video style, Sit Down videos are a close second with 73.9%. How To videos were the third most popular at 32.1%. This might also be related to where the link to the questionnaire was posted. People engaging with the content and looking through the comment section are likely to enjoy the video style of the selected Youtubers.

The responses to the question how long they spend watching YouTube content per week, could potentially also be influenced by people's tendency to answer in round numbers. 15.9% of respondents answered with 10 hours a week and 12.6% said they only watch 5 hours a week. 7 respondents went as high as saying they consume 30 hours of YouTube content a week.

An array of names was provided for the question of who their favorite Youtuber is. Yet there was one name that stood out: *Fleur de Force* was named as a favorite 85 times out of the 526 responses. The second most mentioned name *Lily Pebbles* was only referred to 32 times, a considerable difference. Other names in order of popularity were: *The Anna Edit*, *Zoella*, *Michalaks*, *Sunbeamsjess*, *Kathleen Lights*, *Estée Lalonde*, *Tati*, *Samantha Maria*, *Sprinke of Glitter* and *Amelia Liana*. It must be noted that these results might be slightly skewed due to the fact that the questionnaire's link was not posted in the same frequency on certain channels. In order to get a better sense of potential consequences of this irregularity, the last question of the questionnaire asks who they were watching when they clicked on the link. This might further explain why *Fleur De Force* is the most liked Youtuber as roughly 242 out of 440 responses answered they clicked the link to the questionnaire via her channel. 108 responses cited *The Anna Edit* whilst *Amelia Liana* had 63 clicking the link. However, most respondents could clearly name a favorite, this points to viewers actively engaging with the Youtubers and shaping opinions on them.

The respondents were able to answer the question "how long have you been regularly watching YouTube videos?" by moving a slider that gave values from less than a year to 7 years. 14.9% of the responses said they have been watching for 3,5 years whilst 12.8% have been watching a mere year and a half. The third most frequent value at 10.1% on the other hand answered that they have been watching YouTube for a full 7 years. Interestingly, the least answered value was "less than a year" at 0.7%. The combination of their weekly watch

time and their long-term engagement with YouTube indicates that the respondents are committed to staying updated on the videos.

4.1.3 Youtubers as Influencers

4.1.3.1 Purchasing recommendations

The highest percentage of respondents indicated that they make purchases based on Youtuber recommendations 50% of the time. 5%, 10% and 60% of purchases were all provided as answer by 4.2% of the respondents. Other responses vary from people saying they never purchase products based on recommendations and others saying they buy all of their products based on YouTube recommendations. The question: “Why have you OR why haven't you made purchases based on a Youtuber's recommendation?” was an open ended question and therefore required in-depth examination in order to understand both the array of responses and common responses. The word *trust* was overwhelmingly used, 105 out of the total 418 answers mentioned that they trust the recommendations of Youtubers. It was by far the most cited reason for making purchases. This indicates that the audience's trust is great enough to compel them to action. As Brockner et al. (1997) defines trust: “First, trust entails risk, that is, a willingness of the trustor to be vulnerable. Second, trust is based on the expectation that the trustee will perform certain desired behavior”. This in turn proves that the taste of the Youtuber resonates with the viewers to such a degree that they are willing to assume the financial risk and become vulnerable to the possibility of disappointment.

By contrast, only 8 respondents stated explicitly that they do not trust the reviews and opinions of Youtubers. Another 63 of the responses mentioned that price is a key factor as many items are too expensive for the average consumer. It seems that price point and availability go hand in hand as quite a few mentioned both of these factors in the same response. For example:

I live in Romania and some products are not available here. Also I buy only drugstore brands while most of the products recommended by my favorite youtubers are high-end.

The quote indicates that she shares the taste of the Youtuber but not their spending power, this points to people in varying classes watching the same content. Bourdieu (1979) recognized that certain occupations cause a discrepancy between economic capital and

cultural capital, “If the professionals do not always have the tastes to match their means, the teachers hardly ever have the means to match their tastes” (p.285). He addresses that it is not necessary to have financial means in order to have highbrow tastes. The audience therefore keeps watching despite potentially not being able to afford the recommendations.

It also became apparent that despite many stating that they trust the Youtubers that they watch, awareness of advertising in the content and/or recommendation, ceases the credibility or trustworthiness of the Youtuber. 42 individuals stated this opinion on sponsored content. The response below gives a clear insight. The taste portrayed is no longer seen as the taste of the Youtuber.

There are certain youtubers' opinions that I trust more than others. [...] If a youtuber has a lot of sponsored content on their channel I would be more wary of the veracity of what they are saying. Also, I have come to realise that I seem to trust the opinions of Irish and UK youtubers more so than American youtubers but I think this may be to do with the fact that American youtubers are generally louder and more brash than their European counterparts . I would always be drawn to quieter people in my own life and I see this reflected in my Youtube preferences.

Other responses of why purchases are made based on recommendations included that they have a similar physique, which 28 people mentioned. 23 respondents said that they make purchases due to their taste being the same as that of the Youtuber. Both of these responses indicate that viewers enjoy being able to relate the content they watch. That YouTube introduces them to new products and lets them see products in action whilst able to judge quality and fit of a product were all mentioned around 19 times. Eighteen others replied to the question that they do not buy recommendations, as they prefer to do their own research and have their own opinion on what products they purchase.

The predominant response to the question if they are happy with the products they have purchased because of recommendations is either “yes” or “mostly”. Besides this, responses stated “N/A” and only 4 out of 412 said they are unhappy with the products. This could also be a further indication that trust is growing, as they are happy with the risks they have taken. As Brockner et al. (1997) concluded, “The receipt of relatively favorable outcomes provides some evidence that [...] can be counted on to perform behaviors desired by the trustor”. When the risk pays off, this does not only solidify the trust that is imparted

onto the Youtuber in question but also further allows the viewer to align their taste with the taste portrayed by the Youtuber. As sharing an opinion is a prerequisite to establishing trust.

71% of respondents indicated that they have never bought any Youtuber released merchandise. The other 29% have, as many Youtubers have merchandise such as T-shirts and posters whilst others have released full make-up lines or home décor items.

4.1.3.2 When They Stop Watching

When asked about channels that they have stopped watching, another open-ended question, it seems that type of content is the biggest issue. The most frequently cited reason is that they have lost interest in the content, this was repeated a total of 62 times out of 424. Losing interest could be related to the 2nd, 5th and 6th most repeated answer, namely; the Youtuber being too “childish/immature”, “becoming bored” and “I outgrew the content”. This indicates that Youtubers and their audience’s long-term commitment to watching content, requires them to develop together and maintain similar interests. The 4th most common response is also linked to losing interest in content as it cites the content being “too repetitive”. In contrast to losing interest in content, people also answered about 30 times that they stopped watching because the Youtuber decided to change the content’s subject. The 3rd most recurring reason that the audience stops watching content is when the Youtuber posts “too many sponsored videos” (48 times), it seems as though it does turn off a fair amount of viewers when they get the sense that the channel is too commercialized. The question remains what exactly is considered “too much”. The response below echoes this:

I stopped watching the 'Zoella' crew a long time ago (i.e. Alfie Deyes, Marcus Butler, Sprinkle of Glitter, ThatcherJoe, Jim Chapman, Casper Lee etc. etc.) because I feel like they have all gotten too big for their boots and cater mainly towards young teenage girls because they know that's where the money is. They are just a pain to watch. I also stopped watching FunForLouis, he is getting way too old to be doing it and it's cringey to watch him.

The notion that Youtubers have become “too popular” to continue to enjoy watching, as the quoted response indicates, was shared by 20 other respondents. It appears that Youtubers become less appealing as they grow in fame. This might also be related to 23 people citing they stopped watching because the lifestyle portrayed is too different from theirs. This relates to fame but also fortune; some Youtubers end up traveling the world or continuously buying high-end products, which makes them less appealing to some. This phenomenon relates to

Bourdieu's observation of the classification struggle. He acknowledges that the division of social groups is caused by the production of concepts and therefore these concepts can also change in perception, "a group's presence or absence in the official classification depends on its capacity to get itself recognized, to get itself noticed and admitted, and so to win a place in the social order" (p.483). Within the YouTube community, the viewers are aware that they have the power to recognize one Youtuber over another. This might explain why some viewers turn off when they witness the Youtuber gain access to a completely different lifestyle to their own because of their recognition of them. Sensing the difference in classification and simultaneously the power to cease this recognition. It seems as though some take this action when the line is crossed from aspirational to unobtainable content.

People also mention insincerity as a reason to stop watching certain Youtubers. This links to a question that will be discussed in a later paragraph, as many respondents point out they truly appreciate a Youtuber being authentic and true to themselves, whereas insincerity is a cause for them to turn away from a channel.

4.1.3.3 Commitment

The questionnaire also inquires what other social media platforms they follow Youtubers on. They could select any or all of the following platforms; *Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Facebook* and *Spotify*. The popularity of the platforms follows the same order: 90.2% answered that they also follow Youtubers on Instagram, 62.8% on Snapchat, 40.1% are following them on Twitter and a mere 24.7% and 6.3% follow Youtubers on Facebook and Spotify respectively. This again exemplifies the high level of commitment the viewers have to consume the content uploaded by the Youtubers. The content therefore likely matches their own tastes in order for them to remain interested and consume their aesthetic on several platforms.

4.1.3.4 Admired qualities

The next question inquired what the respondents admire most about their favorite Youtuber. An enormous range of descriptive qualities was mentioned. To name a few less-mentioned attributes: classy, entertaining, brave, grateful, consistent, ambitious, friendly, sincere and unique. The response below stood out amongst all of the distinctive responses as it gives some insight into the interactions between the audience and the Youtuber.

I admire her eloquence. Of course, visually, her makeup is amazing, and she's given me countless product recommendations that have become my ride or dies (she's even sent me a box full of makeup after i joked on her instagram that I was far too unemployed to be so obsessed with makeup! how much sweeter can you get??). however, the thing that I love most is just how damn smart she is. she explains everything so clearly. she's definitely responsible for the boom in my makeup skills.

The above quote supports previous research on trust by Merrilees and Fry (2003) who concluded, "There is a nexus between interactivity and e-trust". It exemplifies how an influencer reached out to a viewer, which now has increased her trusts and admiration for the Youtuber. The respondent also voices in what high regard she holds the Youtuber in her description.

Despite the abundant variation in answers, certain qualities were repeated more than others. The most repeated answer happens to be a tie between "honesty" and "down to earth", both were mentioned 54 times. As the list of answers is extensive, other answers list qualities similar to honesty and being down to earth only worded differently. For example, "authenticity" was mentioned 30 times and is related to both honesty and being down to earth. Whilst "relatable" was cited 27 times, this can also be tied to the quality of "being real" which was reiterated 16 times. "Transparency" recurred 11 times and can, in a sense, be associated with honesty. Other more-frequently repeated qualities include: style, personality, creativity and humor. Many answers explicitly state that they find the Youtuber funny, whilst others indicate they find the positivity (24 times) of the Youtuber their most admirable quality. 41 responses state that they admire how hard working the Youtuber is; other similar qualities were also mentioned such as "drive" (17 times), "dedication" (18 times) and "professionalism" (11 times). 13 individuals also mention that they admire the Youtuber's ability to turn YouTube into a career path, again related to working hard. The overall sentiment of the responses and the great variations within it reminds of Bourdieu as he wrote:

The social sense is guided by the system of mutually reinforcing and infinitely redundant signs of which each body is the bearer – clothing, pronunciation, bearing, posture, manners – and which, unconsciously registered, are the basis of 'antipathies' or 'sympathies'

To each individual viewer some attributes resonate more than others, they create both loyalty and aversion through mere observation of online content. Bourdieu sees this behavior as the

groundwork of class creation, where differences in taste produce concepts of class. Within the realm of YouTube, this mechanism also seems to be at work, however rather than perpetuating class, it is amplifying the difference between audience and Youtuber. The Youtubers are relying on their portrayal of personal taste to gain popularity and differentiate themselves. These differences function as the groundwork of audience building, subscriber counts and ultimately product sales, widening the gap between influencer and audience.

4.1.4 Authenticity on YouTube

4.1.4.1 Relatability

The following question explicitly asked whether they find they can relate well to their favorite Youtuber. More than 50% answered “yes”. Only 55 respondents write they cannot relate to them. The remaining responses varied between sentiments such as, “mostly”, “to a certain degree” and others can only relate to them a little. The quote of one of the responses gives an indication of these sentiments:

I feel like we have quite similar personalities and could be friends, but since we come from different financial backgrounds I sometimes find it hard to understand certain purchases that she makes.

As the questionnaire’s link was mostly posted to beauty channels, 6 respondents specified that they can completely relate to the Youtuber when it comes to their mutual interest in make up but do not see a connection beyond that.

4.1.4.2 Sponsored content

Despite many respondents stating that they trust the Youtubers they watch and many also indicate “honesty” to be their most admirable quality, when asked whether they think Youtubers are always upfront about featuring sponsored content on their channels, the majority said “no”. 224 “no” responses as opposed to 128 respondents answering “yes”. Other responses again included a variation of: “mostly”, “sometimes”, “not everyone”. Notably some respondents differentiate between British Youtubers and other nationalities, as they believe Youtubers in the United Kingdom are held to stricter laws. As this question is no longer specific to their favorite Youtuber, some also specified that they believe the

Youtubers that they watch exclusively are honest but not the YouTube community in general.

The following question further inquires about sponsored content as it asks specifically if they click on the affiliate links found in the description box. To clarify what this question refers to precisely: directly underneath every video on YouTube, you can find a description box, a space for extra information in text format that professional Youtubers often use to provide links to websites that sell the products they mention or review. The Youtuber earns an agreed percentage per item sold through this link. The respondents answered by checking a “yes” or “no” box. 53.2% clicked yes whilst 46.8% said no. This gives a general indication whether the audience is concerned about Youtubers profiting from their purchases.

The opinion on sponsored content was gauged by asking respondents to indicate on a scale from very dissatisfied to very satisfied about the amount of it they encounter. 58% indicates that they feel neutral about it whilst 18.9% feels satisfied and 17.6% feels dissatisfied. Only a small percentage of 3.5% and 2% are very satisfied and very dissatisfied respectively. From this it can be derived that there is no real irritation towards Youtubers earning an income through their channel.

4.1.4.3 Viewers input

When asked what changes they would like to see on YouTube, a range of different opinions was once again expressed. The majority indicated they are fine with the status quo or wouldn't know what they would change. If they want to see anything change, many mention sponsored content. Either they want to see less of it or want increased transparency. Others mention changes such as reverting back to about 7 years ago when YouTube's popularity started booming. The opposition wants an increase in production quality. Respondents also mention that they would like to see more innovation from their favorite Youtubers as some video types are recycled monthly;

I'd like to see more diversity. Everyone seems to be doing things that have already been done.

Or some upload content that they aren't happy with, just because it's what the audience wants.

Some responses also acknowledge that with the vast array of content on YouTube, everyone can probably find videos they are happy to watch.

4.1.4.4 Authentic construct

The second to last question inquires to what degree the respondents feel that the Youtubers they watch share their authentic personalities with them. People seem to be realistic about authenticity as they indicate awareness of the filming and editing process. Only seven out of the 399 answers said they believe Youtubers to be 100% authentic, whilst fifteen responses claimed that exclusively the Youtubers they watch are completely authentic. The general sentiment was rather that it isn't feasible to show a completely authentic personality on YouTube. As the response below points out, a sense of authenticity is either built up or broken over time:

It depends on the person I am watching. I've watched people for 7 years now and to me, they have stayed the same. Of course they have grown older, just like me, but their personality stayed the same and that's why I continued watching them over the years. I feel that they are really authentic. Of course, we only see a small portion of their lives, the best of them, but I think most of them stay authentic and that's why people watch them. There are youtubers I watched, and when they gained more popularity, they changed. I just stop watching them since they don't feel authentic to me anymore.

Because the majority of the responses show that they do take into consideration that content is edited and only offers a window into the lives of Youtubers, it can be said that authenticity is something that is felt by the audience and thought about. Although it seems to be a contradictory notion as many respondents listed it as the quality they admire most about their favorite Youtuber, along with honesty and being down-to-earth, yet when asked about authenticity specifically they are more critical towards the notion of authenticity. This exemplifies how authenticity is a construct, either subconsciously or actively construed. The audience has well-considered reasons why they chose to watch some Youtubers over others of which the impression of authenticity and honesty seem the most important qualities a Youtuber can exhibit. Filming snippets of their daily lives, editing and planning content allows Youtubers to present an identity that “remains within the bounds of reality” (Leary and Kowalski 1990). In terms of taste, the more authentic and honest a Youtuber can come across, the more likely it is that the taste portrayed is believed to be their own rather than sponsored in some way.

The last question of the questionnaire asks how often they feel like a video is trying to sell them a product. The most common response (8.2%) was that they feel they are being

sold a product 50% of the time. The other two peaks in the chart are at 40% of the time (4.8%) and 60% of the time (3.6%). Other responses are spread across the chart with 0.9% saying they never feel like they are being sold a product and 0.7% say they always feel like they are being sold products. Overall, the majority of the responses seem to be below the 50% mark rather than over it. This could indicate that the audience still prefers to see YouTube as an amateur content platform (Juhasz 2009) and believes in the autonomy of the influencer over the influence of brand collaborations. Viewers feeling as they are sold products roughly half of the time also matches with their estimation of Youtubers not being completely authentic yet this sensation is limited enough for viewers to still see them as trustworthy.

4.2 Semiotic Discussion

4.2.1 Video Analysis

All three channels uploaded the video I have selected to analyze more closely by utilizing semiotics. It is a sit-down video where the best beauty products of 2016, in their opinion, are discussed. This is a popular video to do amongst beauty and lifestyle Youtubers as it gives their audience an overview of the products they have enjoyed the most that particular year. As this video is repeated yearly and produced by many, it allows for a straightforward comparison between all three channels. It will allow for better identification of similarities or dissimilarities. However, a comparison is not as important as an individual analysis of each video.

Semiotic analysis of video content is not simple as video allows for the simultaneous sending of signs. It can be complicated to distinguish between signifying units as the breakdown of signifiers can be accomplished in a myriad of ways. Whilst Barthes (1985) focused on the written text that accompanied images in fashion magazines, there are still signified meanings to be derived from the images themselves.

In order for the reader to better follow the analysis I have included screenshots of the opening scenes of each of the three videos. The following subheadings will primarily focus on the dissecting of the signs and signifieds, followed by summary (heading 4.2.6) of the analysis in relation to the other theories discussed.

The image shows a YouTube video player interface. The video frame displays a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a white sweater with a subtle pattern, sitting in a room with a green sofa and a colorful pillow. The video player controls at the bottom show a progress bar at 0:00 / 13:21, along with icons for play, volume, and full screen. Below the video frame, the title "EPIC 2016 FAVOURITES! Beauty, Fashion & Jewellery! | Amelia Liana" is displayed. The channel name "Amelia Liana" is shown with a "Subscribed" button and a subscriber count of 456,036. The video has 103,309 views, 2,869 likes, and 53 comments. The publication date is "Published on Jan 5, 2017".

Fig. 1 (Sopher 2017)

The image shows a YouTube video player interface. The video frame displays a woman with blonde hair, wearing a red sweater with a white heart pattern, sitting in a room with a white bookshelf and a window. The video player controls at the bottom show a progress bar at 0:00 / 12:42, along with icons for play, volume, and full screen. Below the video frame, the title "BEST BEAUTY PRODUCTS OF 2016! | Estée Lalonde" is displayed. The channel name "Estée Lalonde" is shown with a "Subscribed" button and a subscriber count of 1,181,035. The video has 260,216 views, 8,152 likes, and 176 comments. The publication date is "Published on Jan 1, 2017".

Fig. 2 (Lalonde 2017)



Fig. 3 (Bell, 2016)

4.2.2 Physical Appearance

Firstly I am going to discuss their physical appearance in terms of different elements that are observable in the video. Throughout the discussion I will be referring to the three images. At first glance the general appearance of all three girls is quite different, however they have a lot in common.

4.2.2.1 Clothing

As there is no written language about the garments, the analysis will focus on the vestimentary code, which Barthes (1985) defined as the relationship between the real garment and fashion. The images show the women all wearing clothing with a high neckline. When 'top with a high neckline' is the signifying unit, the signified meaning can include terms such as: classy, modesty, discretion and prudence. Although warm and covered clothing is more prominent during the winter months, not showing much skin in these more formal sit-down videos is quite common. It could be related to these women frequently working with brands and therefore having to maintain a broadly acceptable image, avoiding issues with potentially too revealing or sexualized outfits. The color of the clothing is

different in all three examples. *Amelia*'s white sweater as a signifying unit can be associated with signifieds such as purity, cleanliness and freshness. This color choice also helps her stand out from her background as it features darker colors. From the overall image I get a sense of honesty and openness.

Estée's outfit in fig.2 on the other hand has a bold print of red hearts with a pink base color. The color red is often associated with love but also anger and caution. It is a color people tend to pay attention to, choosing to wear this in her video may have helped her stand out amongst other videos on YouTube's homepage as she features herself in the thumbnails. The overall vestimentary code of her fashion choice signifies to me ferocity and authority.

Fig.3, *Fleur* has a very soft and subtle color palette, as she does not contrast with her background. Her top is a soft pink, salmon color. Here the main vestimentary codes that I pick up on are sweetness, softness and general positivity. Instead of purposely standing out from the background she becomes harmonious with it. The colors are in keeping with each other and therefore the overall sense is pleasant, friendly and sophisticated.

4.2.2.2 Make Up

As the main topic of their videos concerns beauty, it is of course important to ensure their make up looks like it has been given thought and attention. Whilst the make up is noticeable, some choose a more natural look than others. Out of the three, *Amelia* is wearing the boldest look, with a heavy eye that includes darker eye shadows, eyeliner and fake eyelashes. Her lipstick is a softer pink color. When 'bold make up' is the signifying unit, the signified meaning includes notions such as: statement, confident and skilled. *Estée*, fig.2, has the most natural look out of the three with minimal eye make up and a bright pink lip color. This make up look can signify meanings similar to: natural and simple. Fig.3, *Fleur* has also opted to focus her efforts on her eye make up as she has lined both her upper and lower eyelids but has refrained from using dark eye shadows, instead using pink hues that match her light pink lip-gloss. The signifying unit of 'soft pink make up' include the signified meanings of: feminine, soft look and sweet. The main semiotic observation that can be drawn from their make up is that they are communicating their expertise in that field. The make up is flattering and well applied and helps to showcase their knowledge and therefore boost their credibility in the subject of the video.

4.2.2.3 Hair

All three women have different hairstyles. *Amelia* has dark long hair that has been curled, *Estée* has short blonde hair that has also been slightly curled and *Fleur* has her long blonde hair straightened. It shows that they have spent time and attention on their overall styling, which gives a “put-together” impression. Therefore it could be argued that the sign “hair” and the signifier “styled” in the context of these images create a signified of notions such as stylish, chic, sophisticated.

4.2.2.4 Facial Expressions

Facial expressions vary greatly throughout the video and will not be observable through screenshots. However, in general their facial expressions are animated. They are much less concerned with “perfection” in the way a TV commercial would come across. You can see them looking away from the camera on occasion and they vary between serious, thoughtful expressions and jokingly smiling expressions. Out of the three examples *Estée* gives off the least amount of excited energy.

4.2.3 Background

The background of each of the videos can help to set the scene in a similar way that a set and props are used in commercial filming in order to better communicate the portrayed characters. Items such as furniture, plants and flowers, art and lighting can all contribute to the overall impression the viewer has of a video and thereby how the subject that is being discussed comes across to the audience.

4.2.3.1 Furniture

The main observable object in the background of Fig.1 is a velvet, teal colored couch. Taking today’s fashion trends into consideration, as a sign, the signified encoded into the item are notions such as contemporary, trendy, modern and sleek. In a more historical sense, velvet is a fabric that is often associated with luxury. The side table (in the popular materials of copper and glass) next to the couch can also be considered a trend item. Taking the furniture as signs and the signifier as trendy, the signified becomes an understanding and engagement with popular trends and desirable living space. Here, the throw pillows on the couch signify a touch of homeliness and the signified could therefore be an informal setting. By seeing the furniture in the background the overall setting signifies that she is sitting in her living room, a space that is most commonly used to host visitors. This might help augment the impression

that the viewers are sitting in the living room with *Amelia* discussing these products, as friends would do together.

In Fig.2, *Estée* is seen with a bookshelf corner behind her. The shelves are filled with books and ornaments. Books are often associated with knowledge, work and education. This setting can therefore help signify to her audience that she is cultured. Other than the book shelving there is no furniture to be seen in the frame other than decorated wood that I assume to be part of the fireplace's mantelpiece. These types of fireplaces are often found in older, upper scale homes and add a touch of old-school luxury yet it is painted white and on the opposite side of the frame a modern radiator is visible, a juxtaposition that comes across as luxurious design elements. The overall background leaves me, as a viewer with the impression she lives in a well maintained, old yet modernized home despite only seeing a corner. The signified of this overall signifying unit is a strong sense of knowledge and almost business-like feel, which in turn creates a notion of a trustworthy source of information.

Fleur in Fig.3 has the most blurred background out of the three examples. This is a filming technique that allows her to “pop” on screen without necessarily using color or objects. Despite the blur effect we can still see that she is seated in front of a large bed. The sign of a bed in the room signifies that *Fleur* is in a bedroom. The signified in turn is a sense of intimacy. The bedroom is not a space that people commonly share with visitors and therefore gives the sensation that she is allowing viewers into what is sometimes referred to as ‘the sanctuary of a home’. This allows the audience an even greater sense of intimacy than *Amelia* has in her living room setting. The most prominently used colors are white and grey. Whilst white is a neutral color, grey has become a trendy color to use in home decoration over the last few years. The headboard, throw blankets and pillows are all shades of grey and therefore can also be associated with fashionable design. The overall soft and friendly setting as a signifying unit, the signified is intimate and comforting, as if she is sharing her “secrets” with you in her bedroom.

4.2.3.2 Plants/Flowers

Only Fig.1 and Fig.3 have a hint of greenery in them. You can see *Amelia* has flowers in the shot, in the vase standing on the copper side table. In Fig.3 *Fleur* has a small Christmas tree on the far bedside table. As plants generally need to be cared for and fresh flowers need to be regularly purchased, plants can have the signified of attention to detail and a well kept home. The Christmas tree shows that *Fleur* has attention for detail and makes small thematic changes according to the season.

4.2.3.3 Lighting

The overall lighting in all three videos shows a clear picture of the women themselves and the products they showcase throughout the videos. However there are some differences. Fig.1 uses artificial lighting; this is evident by her face being much brighter than the background, a look that is achieved by placing lights on either side of the camera (“21 Photographs And Lighting Setups For Every Occasion” 2011). Fig.2 uses a combination of both natural and artificial light as you can observe natural light to the right side of the image, especially highlighted in her hair. When strong natural light comes from the side, artificial light must be used to compensate for it. Commercial photographers and videographers commonly use artificial lighting as it provides the most flattering portrayal of a subject. Here, it allows the women to highlight their make up and hair styling efforts. Fig.3 is the only image that utilizes an extra lighting “trick” as a string of soft lights is draped across the headboard. Using soft lighting such as fairy lights and candles creates a dynamic yet soft look. This trick became so popular it was standard practice for YouTube beauty videos to include a lit candle in all of their videos (“13 Things in the Background of Literally Every Beauty Video on YouTube” 2016).

4.2.4 Audio

In terms of video content audio also plays an important role in the overall impression that viewers have. It is therefore also worth discussing a few auditory elements that can be heard in the three videos that are being analyzed. There is surprisingly little music incorporated into all three videos, *Fleur* is the only one that starts the video with a short musical introduction: a short upbeat mix of a xylophone and ukulele. By consistently using the jingle in her intro, she has associated the upbeat, sweet sound to herself as a brand and channel. The overall tempo of all three women is best compared to that of women engaged in an enthusiastic discussion, by not speaking too slow or deliberate they are able to create a sense of excitement about all of the products they are discussing.

4.2.4.1 Voice

The voices and in particular their manner of speaking is mostly very upbeat. Especially the introduction of each and every video is a standout element for all three women. Youtubers engage in a one-sided conversation with the camera whilst seeming to have a conversation with each individual viewer. Every video includes an intro and outro. The intro frequently commences with a big and happy ‘Hello!’ similar to how one reacts to seeing a friend.

Whilst the outro often prompts viewers to interact with the video by asking them to comment, like and subscribe to their respective channels.

4.2.4.2 Laugh

Smiling and laughing is essential for Youtubers to bring across positivity and friendliness. Arguably the most important factor for any viewer to return to the channel is to first and foremost like the individual they are watching. This is commonly achieved by interjecting their discussion of products with jokes or quick anecdotes. By laughing at themselves they can also create a sense of humility and integrity.

4.2.5 Nonverbal communication

All three women have chosen to position themselves the exact same way; seated and centered in the foreground of the frame. This design of the scene is not limited to these Youtubers or even these videos; it is the most common way for beauty and lifestyle Youtubers to arrange their set up. Seated, besides being comfortable, can also be seen as a signifying unit itself, sitting is consequently signified as a relaxed, conversational position. It is the most common way to interact with friends and family when socializing face-to-face.

You can see they lean forward slightly, which is known as an engaging way to position oneself whilst in a conversation with someone. They are emulating this with similar body movements towards the camera. Another common behavior for both *Fleur* and *Amelia* is adjusting their hair. They also engage in natural hand gestures, as is common practice for people both in dialogue and during presentations.

4.2.6 Summary

By utilizing items, colors, fashion and mannerisms that already have meaning embedded in them through our social constructs Youtubers are in turn creating a social construct of their own, knowing how to stage themselves specifically as a beauty and lifestyle Youtuber. They communicate to the subconscious of the viewers that they are knowledgeable, trustworthy individuals that are ultimately interesting enough to devote time to watch, listen to and follow. Bourdieu stated, “Those who are held to be distinguished have the privilege of not worrying about their distinction; they can leave it to the objective mechanisms which provide their distinctive properties and to the ‘sense of distinction’, which steers them away from everything ‘common’.” This is the practice that the Youtubers are engaging in, however there is a difference. Bourdieu specifically says they have “the privilege of not worrying about their distinction”, which is not the case for these women. It seems they are deliberate

and thoughtful in every piece of content they produce, to maintain their image. Therefore, rather than being innate to a certain class, they may be creating a class of their own. Because they are all simultaneously engaging in using similar triggers in their content they are now an identifiable group labeled as Youtuber, blogger, vlogger and *influencer*. This sentiment is also strengthened by the metrics embedded in social media platforms. The amount of subscribers, views, comments and followers such an individual has is visible to everyone, which can effectively add to their credibility. It unites people that have mutually decided that certain individuals are credible enough to pay attention to.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to deepen the understanding of the influence taste has within the scope of YouTube's beauty channels' community. The research was conducted through both ethnographic and semiotic methods. The online questionnaire was distributed through preselected YouTube channels and garnered a total of 463 completed responses by members of the audience of these channels. The semiotic analysis focused on the content of individual videos on the same preselected channels. Bourdieu first introduced the main theory on taste explored throughout this thesis in 1979; I applied this construction to the digital space of YouTube's beauty and lifestyle channels.

5.1 The Influence of Taste

YouTube has developed into a platform that allows people to share their experiences and personal preferences in video format. View counts, subscriber numbers, thumbs up and shares function as a sign of approval to both the audience and the Youtuber. Simultaneously the competition to gain followers is high, causing audience standards to steadily increase in terms of beautiful imagery, sound quality and editing. The questionnaire results show that there are caveats to this progression both in building success initially and maintaining a following concurrently. The most prevalent reason for a follower to stop watching is either that the content has become too immature or the Youtubers themselves have become too popular. This indicates that it is important for the audience to be able to develop and maintain similar interests; the Youtubers need to ensure that their lives still relate to the lives

of the audience. Bourdieu also indicated this as he wrote the bourgeois refuse “everything which is ‘showy’, ‘flashy; and pretentious” (p.246). They need to strike the right balance between showcasing aspirational and realistic elements in their content. The qualities the audience admires in a Youtuber are a nexus of relatability and “honesty”; this is only achieved if there is some form of recognition between what is portrayed by the Youtuber and the viewers' lives.

As discussed in chapter two, the underlying idea of Bourdieu’s *Distinction* is that people influence and educate each other throughout life. I can conclude that this part of Bourdieu’s work is still valid within the framework of this thesis. However, Bourdieu’s further conclusion that this learning of taste causes the perpetuation of class distinctions has become outdated within the digital space of YouTube. As the questionnaire shows, people from different ages, backgrounds, nationalities and levels of education all watch the same YouTube channels. The circle of individuals we interact with, learn from and that help shape our likes and dislikes has become significantly larger through the existence of digital content. We are able to discover and consume cultural artifacts that we might otherwise not have been exposed to. Watching YouTube videos, in the beauty and lifestyle category, has therefore become a two-way street; the audience consumes content that matches their personal taste but also allows them to discover new likes and dislikes. Through this interaction the tastes of the audience and the Youtuber can influence each other. Thus, taste is no longer as restricted to class boundaries as it once was.

The highest percentage of respondents said they make purchases based on Youtuber recommendations 50% of the time. Thus, it can be concluded that viewers are willing to assume the risk of spending money on disappointing products or experiences, placing a high level of trust in the YouTube influencers they follow. This notion of trust is strengthened by the fact that respondents indicated a high percentage of satisfaction with the purchased products. Some responses even indicated that they watch despite not being able to afford the recommendations, therefore a conclusion can be drawn that a matching cultural capital outweighs any differences in economic capital. They are able to recognize either their similar tastes or other similarities that motivates them to watch. Indicating once again that Bourdieu’s claim to the perpetuation of class distinctions purely based on taste is no longer valid.

The questionnaire results highlight that besides appearing trustworthy the audience requires the Youtuber to exhibit honesty. In other words, the audience enjoys watching authentic personalities. In relation to Bourdieu's *Distinction* this means that the style the women on YouTube share with their audience needs to be as close to a 'true reflection' of their personal taste as possible. This simultaneously points to the biggest problem the professional influencers have: incorporating sponsored items into their content. The audience questionnaire clearly indicates that the audience does not enjoy watching sponsored videos. Bourdieu reasoned the following when discussing the ability for an individual to move between social classes:

The correlation between a practice and social origin is the resultant of two effects (which may either reinforce or offset each other): on the one hand, the inculcation effect directly exerted by the family or the original conditions of existence; on the other hand, the specific effect of social trajectory, that is, the effects of social rise or decline on dispositions and opinions, position of origin being, in this logic, merely the starting point of a trajectory, the reference whereby the slope of the social career is defined. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 105)

It can thus be contended that the influencers are encountering the effect "social rise" and are presented with opportunities to advance their professional careers as influencers. The difficulty is that they leave their audience the task of distinguishing between their intrinsically motivated personal taste and extrinsically motivated brand collaborations. When the audience is left in doubt this can jeopardize the construct of authenticity of the influencer. Transparency on sponsored content and business model are consequently important to maintain the audience's impression of the influencer's trustworthiness and honesty. Whilst Bourdieu clearly indicates in the above quote that he believes in a "slope of the social career", this point of the research indicates that it is a complicated matter to differentiate between intrinsic taste and extrinsic motivations in displaying taste. The viewers are also the ones with the power to strip the recognition of the Youtuber away from them.

The semiotic analysis provides another dimension to these updated academic views on *Distinction*. Many still seem to enjoy experiencing a sense of belonging within a community both off and online. They achieve this by either emulating the people they surround themselves with or surrounding themselves with likeminded people. As Bourdieu stated: "Taste is what brings together things and people that go together" (p. 238). The influencers are engaging in this exact behavior by constructing signs that communicate to

their audience that they are trustworthy, knowledgeable and relatable. As Barthes examined this construction in *Fashion System* (1985), influencers have embraced this capacity beyond clothing. They both attract likeminded people to commit to watching what they have to say and construct the content to “look” like it is a part of the beauty community on YouTube. This follows the research by Leary and Kowolski (1990) that “people can develop desired identities by publicly claiming attributes that are consistent with those identities” and Goffman’s (1959) ‘performance of the self’. The fact that these appropriated attributes resonate with each individual viewer, becomes the reasoning for the audience to continue to watch their content and for the Youtuber it becomes the groundwork of building their subscriber counts, views and likes.

Bourdieu concluded in *Distinction* that the sum of our experiences and interactions with the various institutions of life inscribes the social order in people’s minds “social divisions become principles of division, organizing the image of the social world” (p.173) and is applicable to this day. However, at the time of Bourdieu’s writing the Internet and the digital culture brought with it was yet to emerge. Through social media, individuals are enabled to curate taste in a more meticulous manner. This digital social world has also been enhanced with metrics such as the views, likes and followers; in the scope of this thesis it has reorganized “the image of the social world”. The distinction has shifted from the traditional upper and middle class divisions to the distinction between the influencer and the audience or in other words, ordinary social media user. Within the beauty and lifestyle category on YouTube, the tastes the influencers share in their content often resemble each other and therefore could be likened to Bourdieu’s notion of the upper class: a select group with greater means decides on what is to their liking whilst a larger group of people is inspired by the lifestyle of the few. Bourdieu’s notion of class distinction has thus resituated itself, the mechanism of distinction still exists yet manifests itself through the relationship of creator and viewer.

The results of this thesis seem to point to the broader conclusion that digital culture does not have the same restrictions as traditional culture to share and disseminate its aesthetic and taste. Instead it has broadened access to culture and simultaneously assigned metric values to the individuals showcasing it. The influencers active on YouTube have become “the distinguished” yet the taste that sets them apart simultaneously binds the audience to them.

5.2 Further Research

This thesis has limited itself to looking at the influencers that are active on YouTube as a platform only, however there are other social media platforms that have equally successful individuals sharing content on a range of different cultural texts. Although it seems likely that those platforms see a similar shift from Bourdieu's thinking, this cannot be concluded without further inquiry.

The 'real-life' sphere of influence has not been accounted for, which has the ability to push back on what may be shaping one's taste through online influencers. For example, if family or friends respond negatively to potential purchases that were influenced by YouTube videos, it might stop someone from making the purchase. The propagation of the taste the influencer shares through social media is inadvertently limited by its own technological existence. A further investigation into the specific push-pull effect that might be happening between the content the audience seeks out to consume online and actual purchases made might garner interesting results.

As the research did not include speaking to the Youtubers themselves, it would be beneficial to gain insights from their side of the process and interview Youtubers, managers and marketers that work on the content to ensure a complete picture of the process. This would also allow for a better understanding on how they attempt cultivating honesty and transparency in a world that is meticulously constructed, especially as it is becoming an increasingly professionalized industry.

Due to the type of content of the channels, the respondents were overwhelmingly female and therefore it only provides a female perspective. It would be interesting to see if there are any gender discrepancies concerning taste and distinction.

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6 Appendix

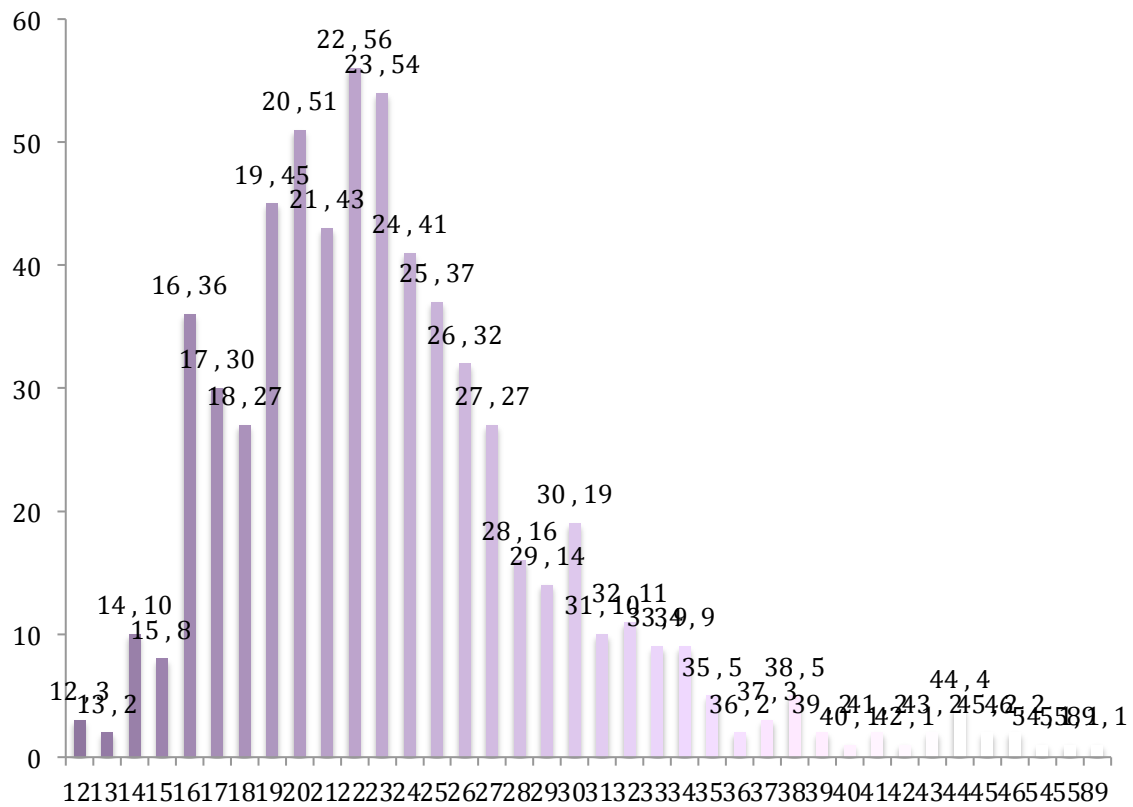
Report for YouTube Audience Questionnaire

The questionnaire was conducted via SurveyGizmo and the report is structured per question the respondents answered and also follows the same order.

Response Statistics

	Count	Percent
Complete	461	73.1
Partial	170	26.9
Disqualified	0	0
Total	631	

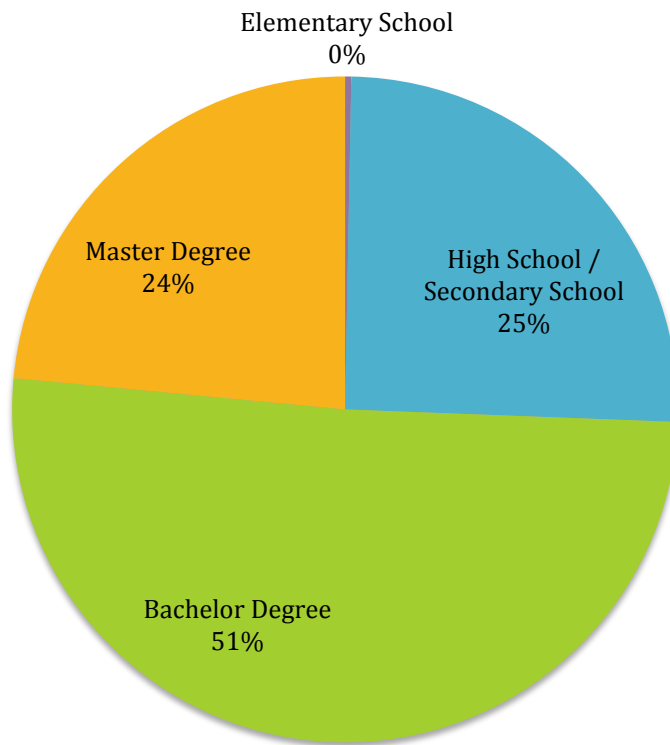
How old are you?



Count	Response
3	12
2	13
10	14
8	15
36	16
30	17
27	18
45	19
51	20
43	21
56	22

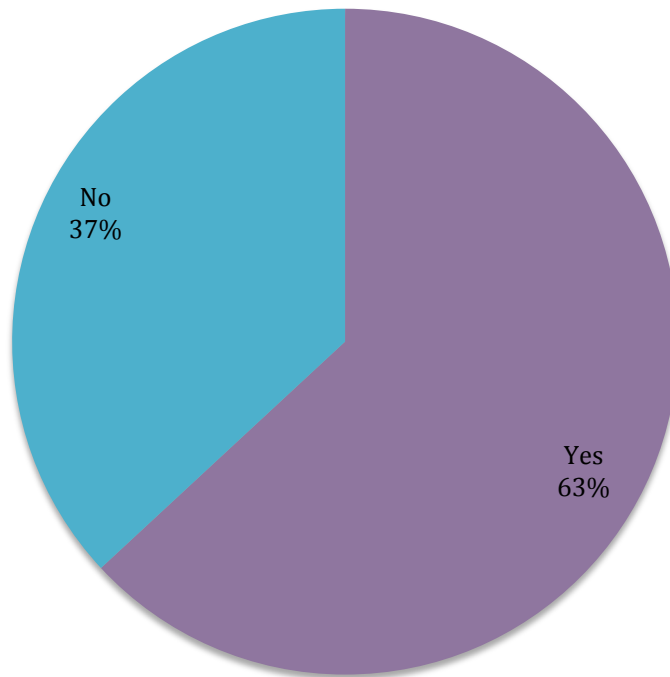
54	23
41	24
37	25
32	26
27	27
16	28
14	29
19	30
10	31
11	32
9	33
9	34
5	35
2	36

What is your level of education? - currently attending OR highest achieved



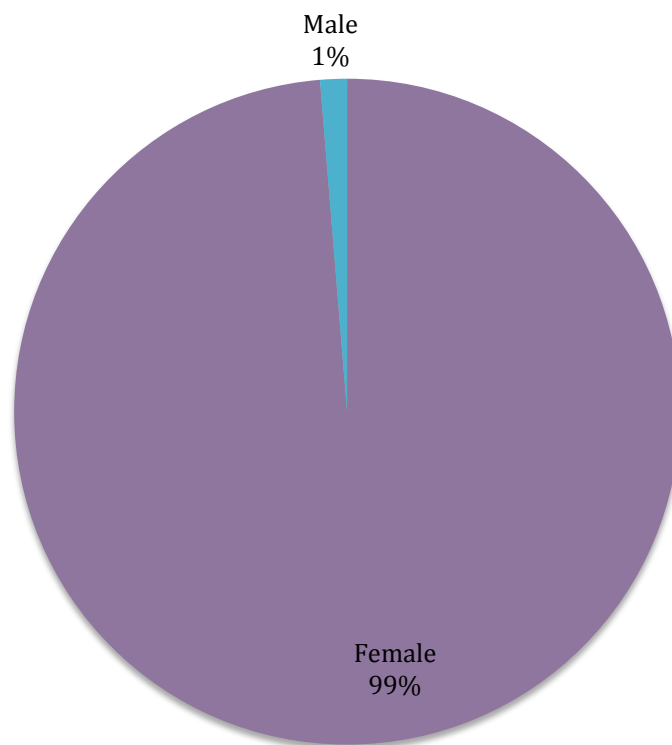
Value	Percent	Count
Elementary School	0.3%	2
High School / Secondary School	25.3%	158
Bachelor Degree	50.9%	318
Master Degree	23.5%	147
	Total	625

Do you earn your own income?



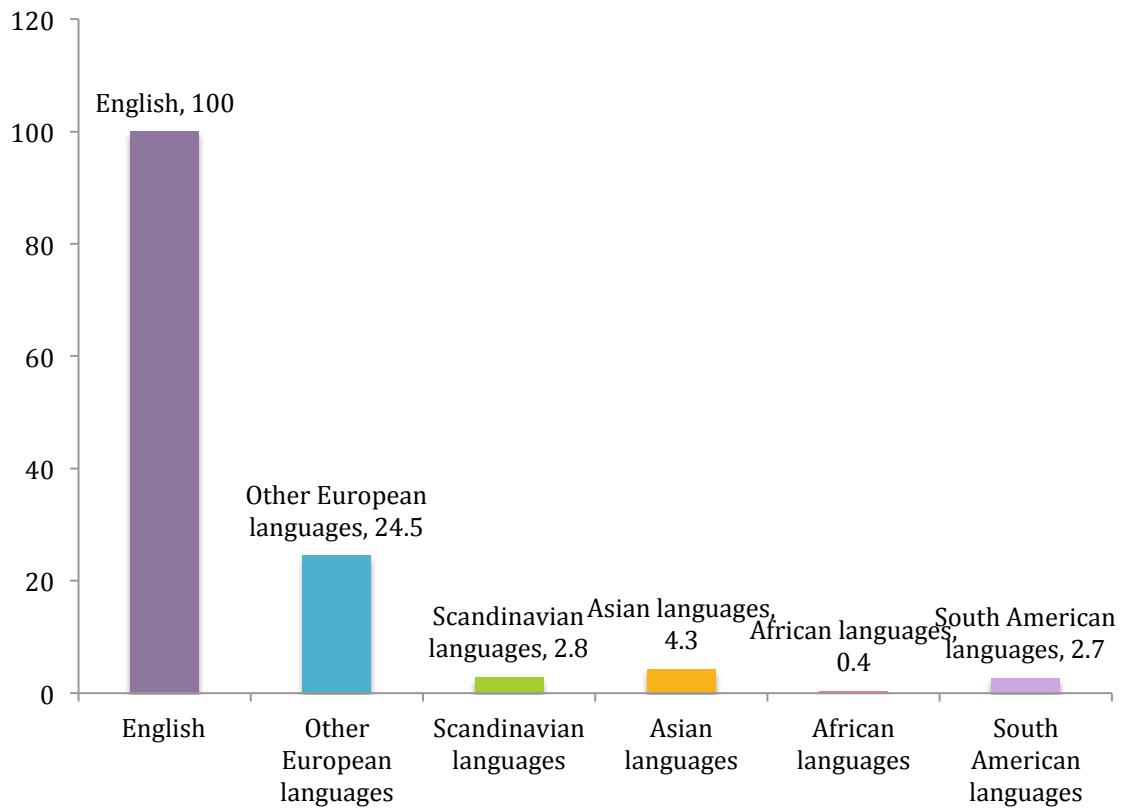
Value	Percent	Count
Yes	63.1%	395
No	36.9%	231
	Total	626

What is your gender?



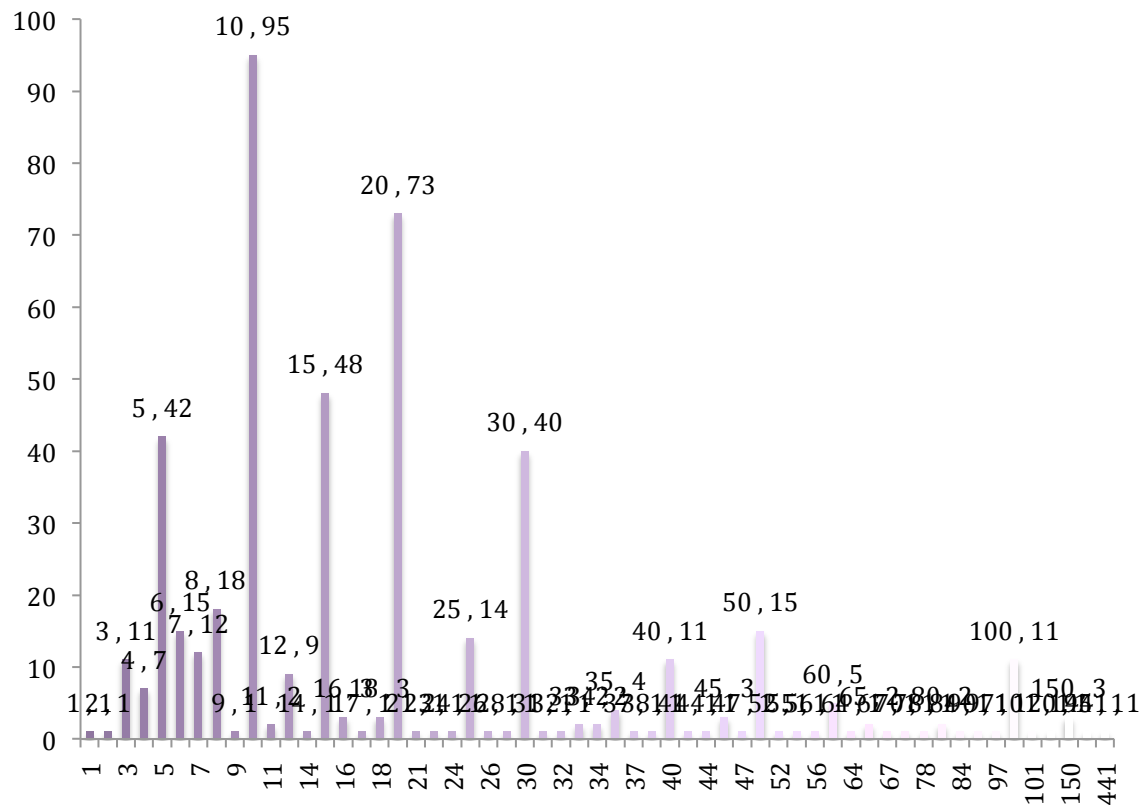
Value	Percent	Count
Female	98.7%	618
Male	1.3%	8
	Total	626

Which languages do you watch Youtube videos in?



Value	Percent	Count
English	100.0%	564
Other European languages	24.5%	138
Scandinavian languages	2.8%	16
Asian languages	4.3%	24
African languages	0.4%	2
South American languages	2.7%	15

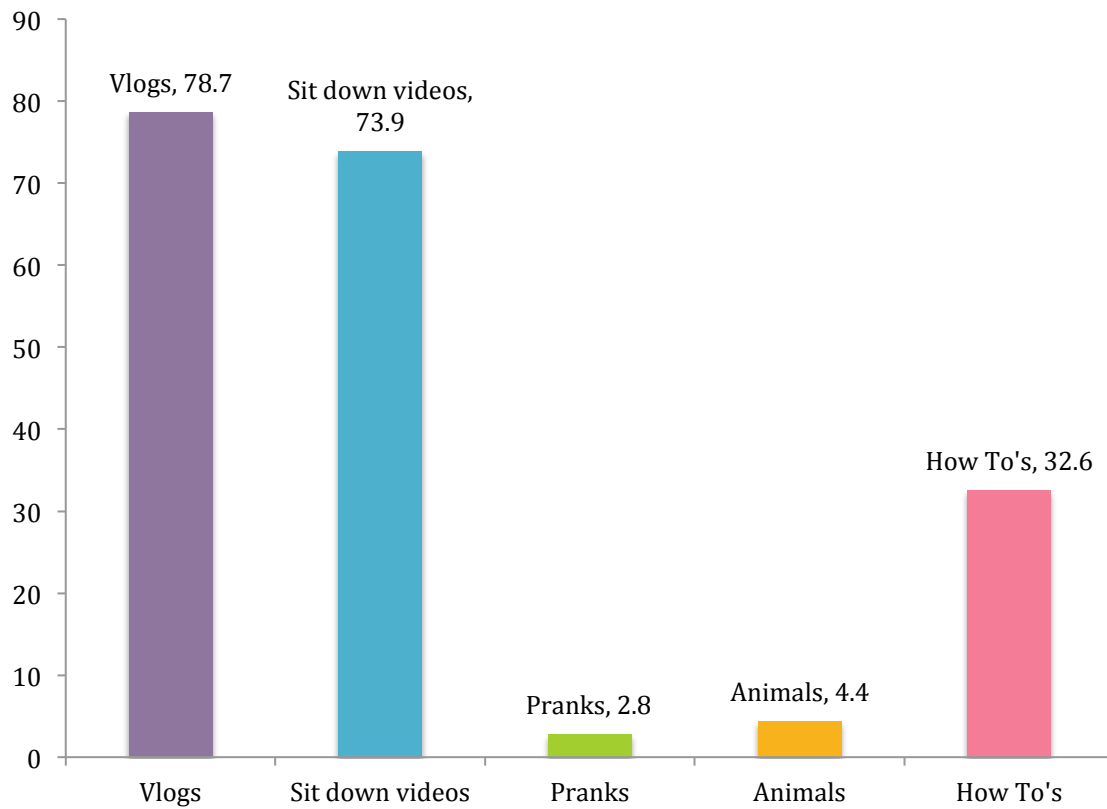
How many Youtubers do you watch?



Count	Response
1	1
1	2
11	3
7	4
42	5
15	6
12	7
18	8
1	9
95	10
2	11

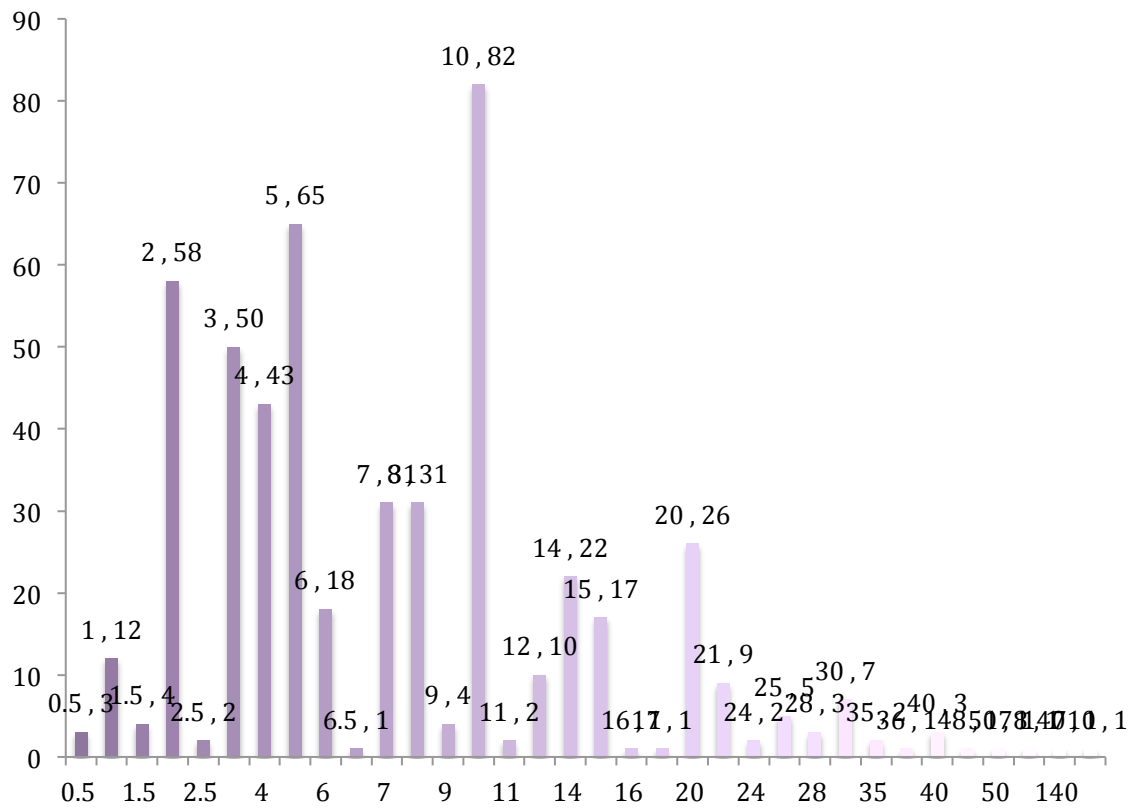
9	12
1	14
48	15
3	16
1	17
3	18
73	20
1	21
1	23
1	24
14	25
1	26
1	28
40	30

What is your preferred type of content to watch?



Value	Percent	Count
Vlogs	78.7%	444
Sit down videos	73.9%	417
Pranks	2.8%	16
Animals	4.4%	25
How To's	32.6%	184

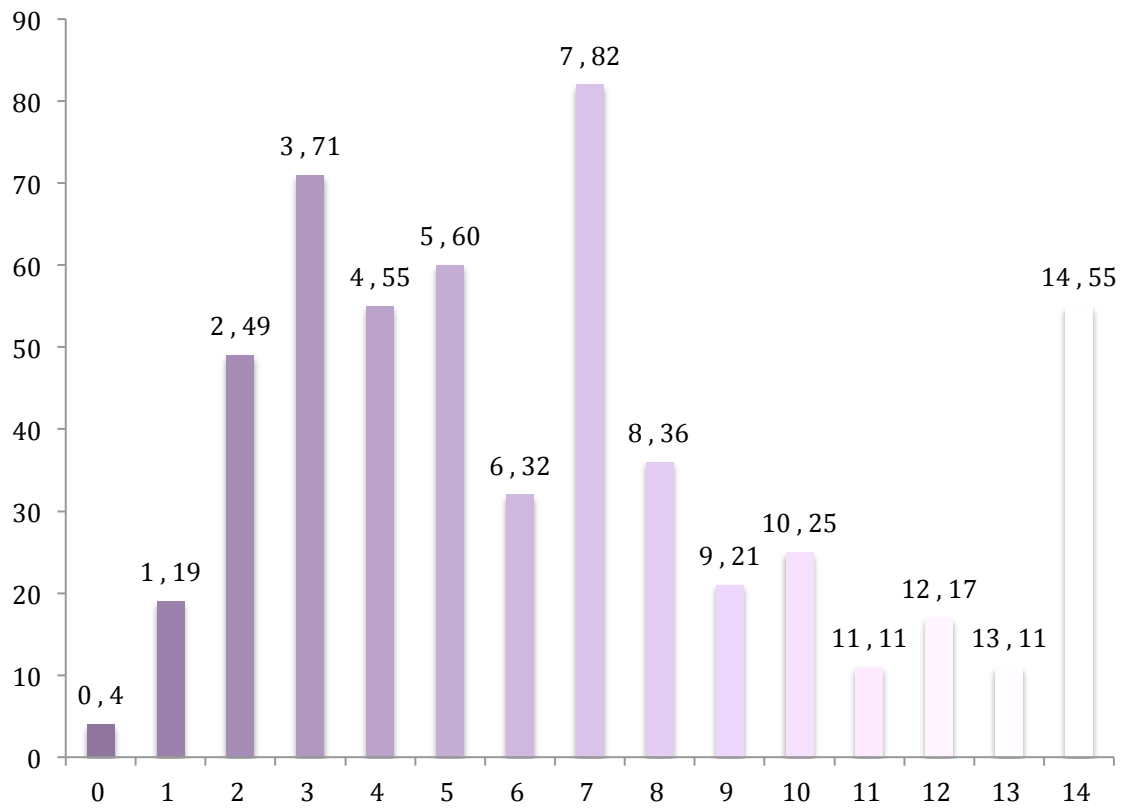
How many hours a week do you approximately spend watching Youtube content?



Count	Response
3	0.5
12	1
4	1.5
58	2
2	2.5
50	3
43	4
65	5
18	6
1	6.5
31	7

31	8
4	9
82	10
2	11
10	12
22	14
17	15
1	16
1	17
26	20
9	21
2	24
5	25
3	28

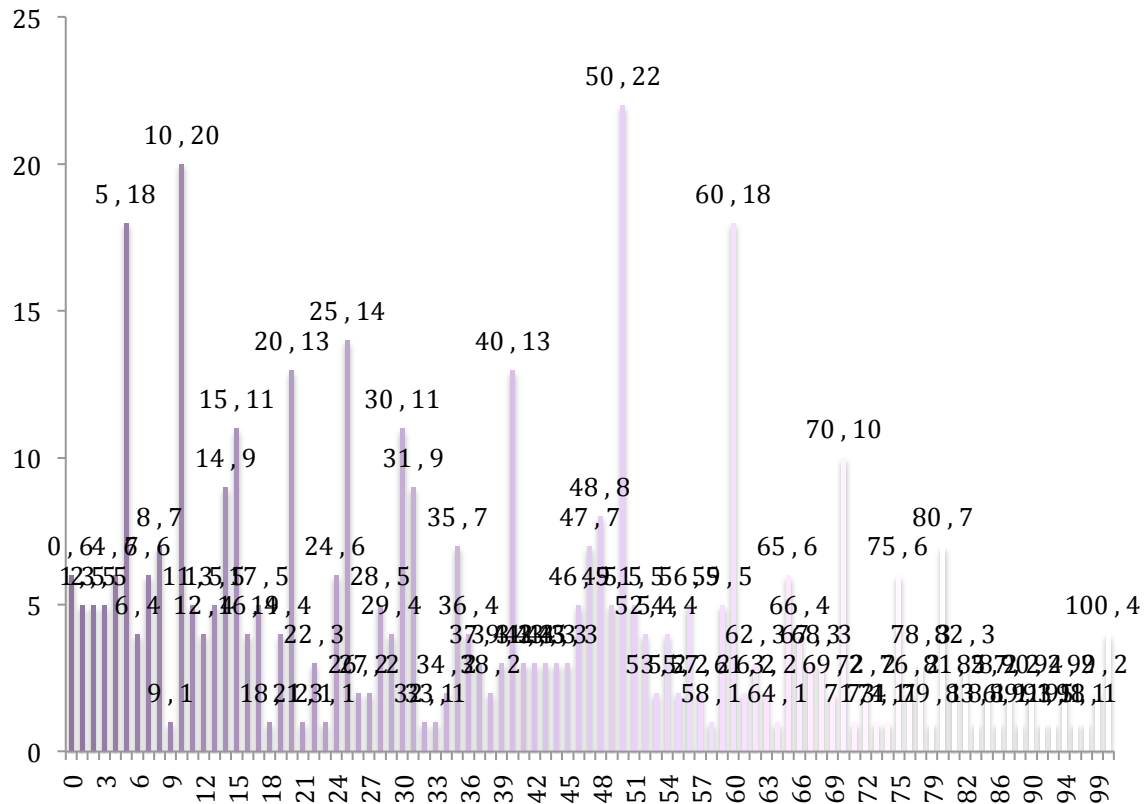
How long have you been regularly watching Youtube videos?



Count	Response
4	0
19	1
49	2
71	3
55	4
60	5
32	6
82	7
36	8
21	9
25	10

11	11
17	12
11	13
55	14

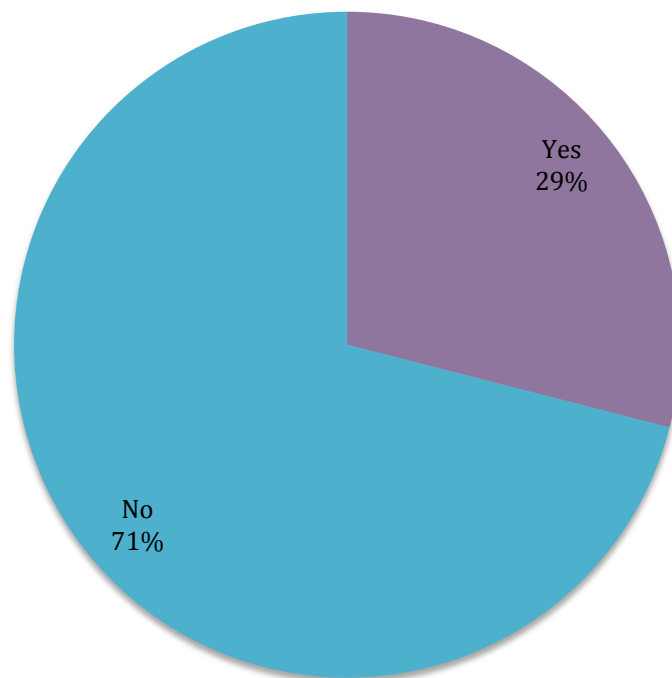
How often have you made a purchase based on a Youtuber's recommendation?



Count	Response
6	0
5	1
5	2
5	3
6	4
18	5
4	6
6	7
7	8
1	9
20	10

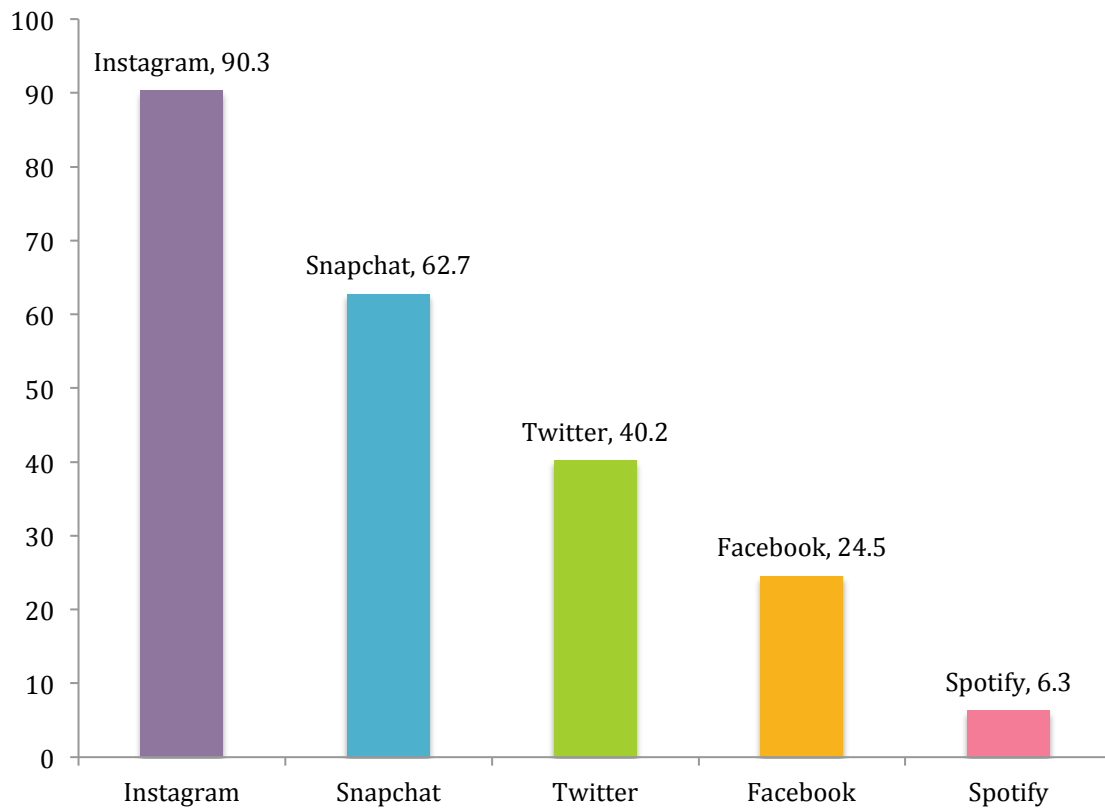
5	11
4	12
5	13
9	14
11	15
4	16
5	17
1	18
4	19
13	20
1	21
3	22
1	23
6	24

Have you ever bought Youtuber's own released merchandice?



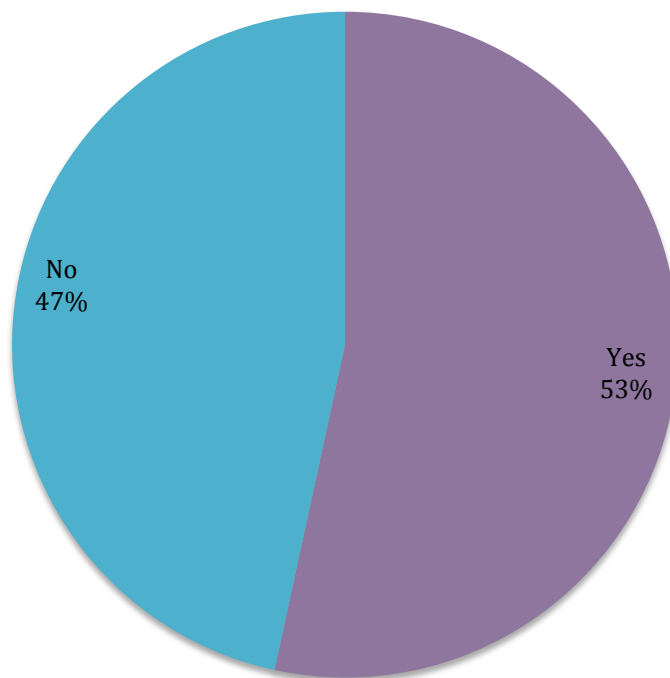
Value	Percent	Count
Yes	29.0%	141
No	71.0%	345
	Total	486

What other social media platforms do you follow Youtubers on?



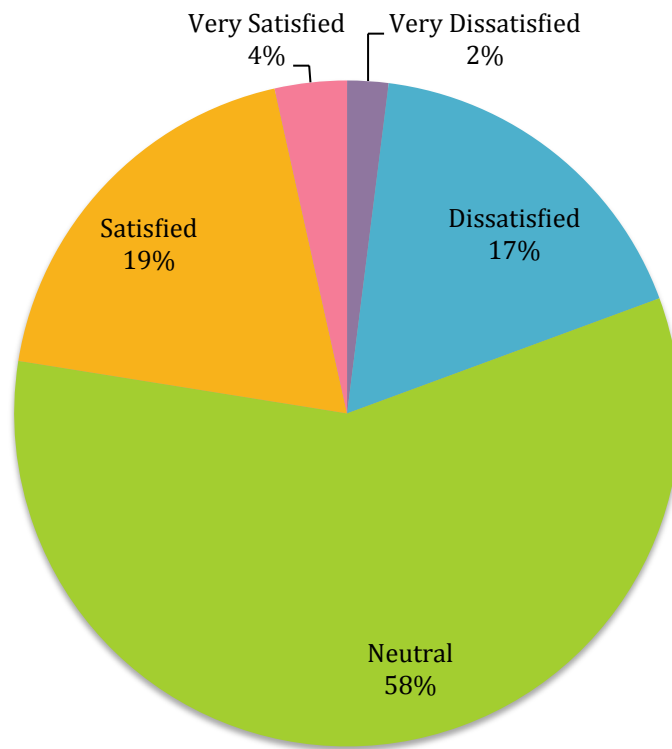
Value	Percent	Count
Instagram	90.3%	402
Snapchat	62.7%	279
Twitter	40.2%	179
Facebook	24.5%	109
Spotify	6.3%	28

Do you click the affiliate links found in the Description Box of videos?



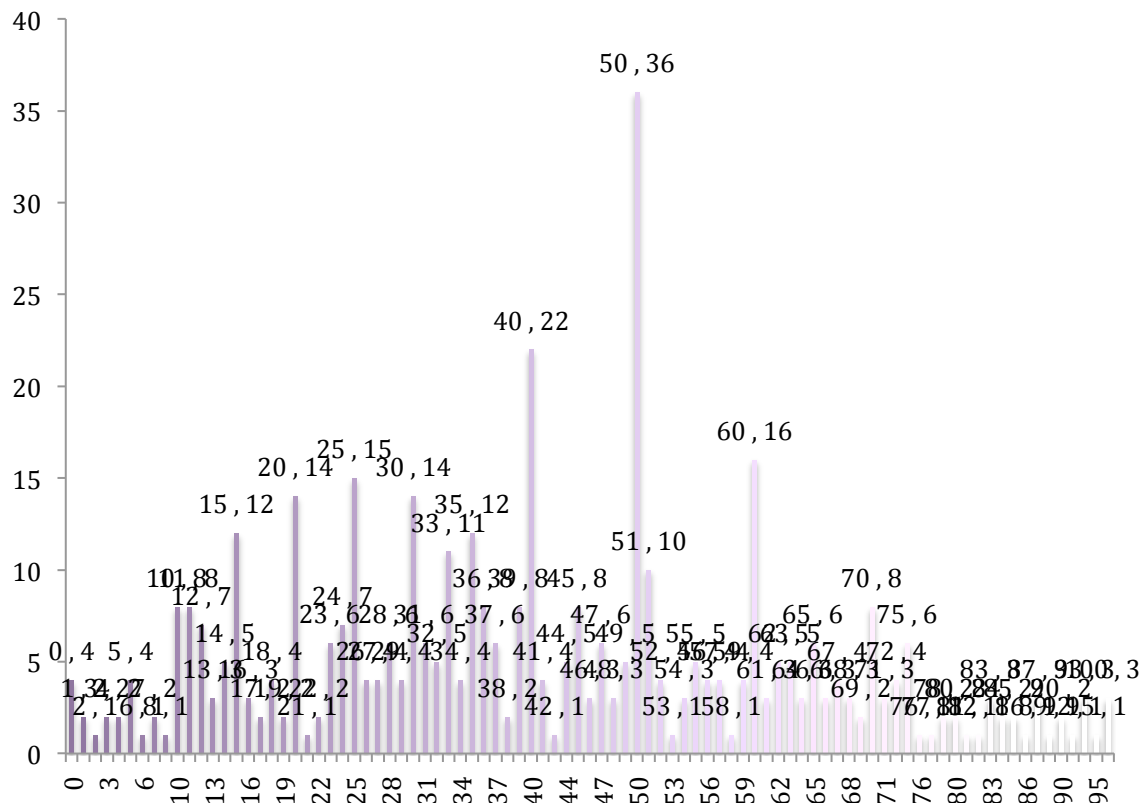
Value	Percent	Count
Yes	53.4%	244
No	46.6%	213
	Total	457

How do you feel about the amount of sponsored content on your Youtuber's channels?



Value	Percent	Count
Very Dissatisfied	2.0%	9
Dissatisfied	17.4%	80
Neutral	58.2%	267
Satisfied	19.0%	87
Very Satisfied	3.5%	16
	Total	459

How often do you feel like the videos are trying to sell you a product?



Count	Response
4	0
2	1
1	2
2	3
2	4
4	5
1	6
2	7
1	8
8	10
8	11

7	12
3	13
5	14
12	15
3	16
2	17
4	18
2	19
14	20
1	21
2	22
6	23
7	24
15	25