I Like Their Autonomy and Closeness to Me: Uncovering the Perceived Appeal of Social-Media Influencers

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of influencers on social-media platforms has drawn considerable research attention, particularly in the field of marketing. Nevertheless, there is limited understanding among HCI and communication researchers of what leads these social-media influencers' (SMIs') audiences to favor and choose their content over traditional media. To fill this gap, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 SMI audience members. Our findings revealed a total of eight categories of SMIs' appeals, i.e., factors that made the interviewees favor their content over traditional media. These appeals can further be grouped into three categories: content, presentation, and closeness. In particular, we identified the key role of SMIs' perceived high autonomy and independence, which led both their content and their presentation styles to be seen as distinct from and more appealing than traditional media. Likewise, four closeness appeals made our participants feel emotionally attached to SMIs, resulting in sustained engagement.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**.

KEYWORDS

social media influencer; traditional media; appeal; qualitative

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1 INTRODUCTION

Social-media platforms including Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are now central to online entertainment [100, 166], social activities [23, 100], and acquiring news and other updates about the world [100, 198]. In addition to the variety of their content, one well-known feature of these platforms that renders them distinct from traditional media is their democratization of content and participatory culture [19, 70, 161], which welcomes and encourages everyone to become content creators. Importantly, the content produced in this bottom-up way becomes an important asset for these platforms' survival and competition with others in the era of the attention economy.

Content creators on these platforms are of various kinds, including amateurs, "professionalising amateurs" [33], professionals, and brands [23]. Some content creators have successfully appealed to a number of users and built their own networks on these platforms [10, 25, 49]. These "famous" content creators include not only those who specialize and are knowledgeable in a particular subject [8, 186] and/or have strong self-promotion skills [51, 99], but also "ordinary people" who post and upload content out of personal interest [2]. In Marshall's [133] words, they are "individuals with no prior fame who become famous on one or several social media platforms". Through consistent and continuous creation and uploading of content that sustains their appeal to their respective audiences, they cultivate communities on the platforms, often tiered (e.g., a mixture of regular audience members, followers, and subscribers), who watch and are influenced by their opinions and content [10, 25, 86, 182]. Due to such influence, they are frequently termed social-media influencers (SMIs) [42, 43, 61, 118, 137, 148, 182, 196], though they are also called by many other names including social media stars [73, 86] and micro-celebrities [45, 49].

The explosive rise of SMIs and their remarkable impacts on their networks have drawn considerable public attention. Numerous market reporters and other commentators, scholars and practitioners have noted that the emergence and proliferation of these content

providers have transformed marketing ecology [40, 86, 182, 184], and coined the term "influencer marketing" to help describe this transformation [22, 24, 42, 69, 77, 92, 101, 104, 126]. Brands and companies increasingly use SMIs for marketing, advertising, and branding because they often achieve better results than traditional celebrities do [142, 159]. SMIs' audiences are also growing. A recent survey by Pew Research Center indicated that YouTube, which is notable for its vast numbers of content creators, has had dramatic increases in its user population in recent years [13]; and YouTube and Tiktok, as another survey shows, has become the most common two online platforms teens use [181].

Nevertheless, the question of what factors are enabling SMIs and their content to erode the audiences for traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers remains largely unanswered, as the large body of research on these content creators has focused disproportionately on their marketing, advertising, and branding effectiveness. Efforts to fill the resulting gap in our knowledge, i.e., to understand what audience members feel they are looking for (and finding) when consuming SMI content, seem long overdue. Thus, our research question is: What are the appeals of SMIs and/or their content to their audiences that lead the media audience to choose SMI content over content produced by traditional-media?

To answer it, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 regular consumers of SMI-generated content, and analyzed the resulting data using a constructivist grounded approach guided by [27]. Our main findings, which are also the key contributions of the current paper, are threefold. First, we identified a total of eight appeals that contributed to our interviewees' preference for SMI content over traditional media content. These appeals fall into three main categories: content, presentation, and closeness. Second, we identify the critical role of SMIs' high autonomy and independence, which from the participants' perspective render their content and presentation style both distinctive from, and more desirable than, those of traditional media. Third, and most importantly, we highlight the role of four interpersonal appeals – all related to the participants' perceptions of their "closeness" with SMIs – in sustaining consumption of their content via strong feelings of emotional attachment. In light of these insights, we argue that glance [200], a shallow level of media consumption, should not be the main objective for optimization in the era of the influencer economy; instead, to sustain long-term engagement and gain users' trust, SMIs should devote their time and effort to creating a sense of closeness with their audience.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Social-media Influencers

2.1.1 Overview and Classification of Social-media Influencers. SMIs are content creators who have achieved fame on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok [42, 43, 61, 98, 118, 137, 146, 148, 182, 196]. They are distinct from traditional celebrities in the sense that their fame is self-created [65, 178, 179]: they attract an audience, often including subscribers, via original content production and self-distribution [83], whereas traditionally, industry gatekeepers decide who is given an opportunity in the spotlight [50].

Many alternative terms have been applied to these content creators, including social media stars [73, 86], micro-celebrities [45, 49], the Internet famous [72], and digital influencers [72, 177], all highlighting that their fame, stardom, and influence arise within social-media platforms. The term key opinion leaders [191] has also been adopted to refer to these content creators, as they also drive changes in public opinion, at least within social media. Other terms for these individuals merely reference the platforms or platform types on which they distribute their content: e.g., bloggers [68, 165], vloggers [115, 119, 132], YouTubers [91, 134, 176], the Instafamous [49, 92, 148], TikTokers [89, 141], and so on. As Gómez [72] has pointed out, there is no consensus among either scholars or practitioners about this terminology, which is still used interchangeably in the literature as well as in our daily lives. Moreover, the term SMIs is also sometimes used to refer to amateur content creators who have not achieved fame and only have small followings [72]. Therefore, for simplicity's sake, we will hereafter use this term to refer to all content creators whom our study participants perceive as having a certain level of influence on them, regardless of their number of followers. Gómez [72] distinguished proposed a three-part classification of SMIs: as micro-influencers, macro-influencers, and mega-influencers, where as Campbell and Farrell's [24] proposed five levels, i.e., nano-, micro-, macro-, mega-, and celebrity, both of which are normally distinguished from one another by specific follower-numbers thresholds. Although some early research suggested that a higher number of followers is likely to make people view SMIs more favorably [40], more recent studies have shown that SMIs with fewer followers can achieve better marketing and advertising outcomes (e.g., [97]), as well as level of followers engagement [149].

2.1.2 The Appeal of Social-media Influencers. Dramatic growth in the numbers and popularity of SMIs has drawn considerable scholarly attention, primarily in a research area referred to as *influencer marketing* [7, 9, 28, 38, 42, 78, 79, 86, 150, 164, 175, 182, 189, 195]. Specifically, a large and growing body of research investigates the characteristics of SMIs that make them distinct from traditional celebrities and traditional media [64, 73, 159]; that make their messages effective in persuading people to take action and form certain attitudes [106, 159]; and that drive their audiences to engage with them [82, 173]. For example, Schouten et al.'s [159] comparison of SMIs against traditional celebrities showed that consumers identified with, felt similar to, and trusted the former more than the latter; and, unsurprisingly, that SMI product-endorsers were more effective than celebrity ones. And Zimmerman et al. [198], who focused on content rather than personalities, found that young audiences perceived YouTubers' videos about political and societal topics to be more entertaining, emotionally resonant, funny, exciting, modern, and motivating than TV news was.

Other studies have investigated specific attributes or perceptions of SMIs that lead them and their content be perceived as more trustworthy, leading to better message persuasiveness. Among others, these have included authenticity [33, 64, 104, 151, 187], intimacy [17, 18, 132, 153], homophily [2, 104, 115, 119, 165, 174], expertise [31, 104, 115, 138], attractiveness [4, 76, 102, 123, 174, 188, 194], personality [8, 61], uniqueness [25, 30, 117], and entertainment value [166, 198]. Below, we provide an overview of those widely studied SMI attributes/perceptions that are most relevant to the current study and its contributions.

Authenticity is one of the most-studied, perhaps the most-studied, SMI attributes, and can be broken down into image authenticity and message authenticity [11, 12, 15, 33, 57, 64, 104, 111, 118, 120–122, 129, 139, 151, 169, 187]. In the context of product endorsement and branding, authenticity has been found to enhance consumers' message receptivity and the quality of their perceived relationships with particular SMIs [114], as well as boosting their purchase intentions [120, 121, 139, 151]. Audrezet et al. [12] presented two strategies SMIs adopted to manage authenticity: *passionate* authenticity and *transparent* authenticity. The former refers to showcasing motivations for endorsement that are intrinsic (i.e., driven by inner desire and passion) rather than extrinsic (i.e., commercial). Transparent authenticity, on the other hand, refers SMIs being truthful about the products being endorsed and about the facts of their sponsorship by and/or partnership with the brand; and it too has been found instrumental both in gaining consumers' trust and in increasing their purchase intentions [21, 39, 41, 54, 94, 97, 120, 136, 171].

An SMI behavior closely linked to authenticity is self-disclosure, which includes disclosing one's personal information, photos, life events, emotions, and so on; and it tends to lead the audience to believe that the SMI is being sincere, honest, and "real" [14, 57, 68]. However, the perception that an SMI endorser is being truthful about the product seems to have an even stronger positive influence than self-disclosure does. Lee and Johnson [120], for example, found that an SMI who provided both positive and negative information about a product was perceived as significantly more authentic and credible than another who posted only one-sided product messages; but the same study did not identify any significant impact of self-disclosure on audience perceptions. Finally, it should be noted that authenticity is not valued solely in brand-/product-endorsement contexts, but also in others such as journalism [190].

A *sense of intimacy* with SMIs has also been widely reported to motivate viewership of their content and increase audience trust in them [17, 18, 88, 93, 105, 132, 153, 160]. In particular, parasocial interaction, defined as the one-sided relationships audience members develop with media celebrities, has been found to cultivate this feeling [85]. Although parasocial interaction can also occur in traditional-media contexts, social-media platforms afford audiences opportunities to interact with SMIs directly, making parasocial relationships seem more intimate [24, 36, 112]. For example, Rasmussen [153] showed that parasocial interaction with SMIs on YouTube led people to develop feelings of familiarity with the SMIs, which in turn cultivated audience perceptions of those SMIs' trustworthiness. Similarly, Kim [105] showed that the makers of YouTube product-unboxing videos could increase their audiences' purchase intentions by fulfilling their entertainment and interpersonal needs via parasocial interaction. Moreover, when interaction became actually reciprocal – e.g., when comments were exchanged – the existing sense of intimacy could be strengthened. Marôpo et al. [132] showed that vloggers gained the trust of peer audiences through interaction, which allowed them to build a sense of proximity, relatability, and even relationship exclusivity. A sense of intimacy can also be strengthened through SMIs' self-disclosure, including negative affect, as Berryman and Kavka [18] noted.

According to Lazarsfeld and Merton [116], individuals prefer to interact with others whom they perceive to be similar to themselves. *Homophily*, defined as audience members' perception that a media-content communicator is similar to them in attitudes, values, background, experience, and/or appearance, has also been linked to positive evaluation of SMIs. For example, Lee and Watkins [119] found that audiences' homophily perceptions of YouTube vloggers had a positive influence on their parasocial interaction with SMIs; and moreover, that homophily's influence was larger than that of the SMIs' physical attractiveness. A similar link to parasocial interaction was also reported by Sokolova and Kefi [165], who further showed that attitude homophily was closely and positively related to SMIs' perceived credibility, and thus to purchase intentions. Kim and Kim [104] found that perceptions of SMIs' preference homophily, value homophily, expertise, and authenticity all had positive impacts on marketing outcomes, albeit mediated by trust. Ladhari et al. [115] studied four distinct types of homophily (attitude, value, background, and appearance), and found that except in the case of background homophily, all had a significant positive influence on audience members' perceptions of a vlogger's popularity. In addition, Al-Emadi and Yahia [2] identified two kinds of image homophily, including actual image and aspired image to harvest outcomes. Whereas the former was related to influencers' culture, passion, and interest, the latter was about the perception of the influencers being "ordinary", that makes people feel that they could also become influencers in the future.

Lastly, *wishful identification* involves audience members seeing SMIs as role models and wishing to emulate them [84], in part because doing so contributes to their own sense of efficacy [131]. Kim [106] found that when SMIs were seen as role models, their viewers were more motivated to take action, and their product purchase intentions increased. Likewise, Schouten et al. [159] showed that not only similarity and trust, but also wishful identification, influenced SMIs' advertising effectiveness.

To sum up, prior research on SMIs has discussed a number of their attributes and audience perceptions of them that lead their viewers to trust and like them, and therefore to accept their advice, including but not limited to product recommendations. However, the main body of this literature has focused on the narrowly commercial domains of marketing, advertising and branding; and thus, the influence of these SMI attributes/perceptions has largely gone unstudied across the much wider range of reasons people have for consuming media content. As a result, the ways that SMI attributes and/or perceptions are related to media users' choices of media content – and particularly, their choices between SMI-generated content and traditional media – remains unclear.

Accordingly, the present study complements this body of research by exploring a wide range of needs that people consume media content to fulfill. While some of our findings regarding SMIs' appeal resonate with the key attributes mentioned above, others modify this general picture considerably.

2.2 Media Use and Information-channel Selection

2.2.1 Choice of Media and Media Technologies. Previous research on media choices has focused chiefly on traditional mass communication [108]. A number of theories have been developed to explain how audiences choose media content and media technologies. Due to space limitations, this section can only provide a short

overview of several well-established and long-tested theories; a more comprehensive review on media choices and use can be found in Knobloch-Westerwick [108].

A number of relevant theories are related to the concept of *selective exposure* [81], i.e., that people select messages that are in line with their preexisting beliefs and attitudes. It can occur in different forms (e.g., news vs. entertainment, content vs. medium), and prior research has provided a variety of explanations for its occurrence [168]. In recent years, this theory has been examined in the context of online information consumption; but its influence on the selection of media content appears to vary across different groups of media users. For example, it has been said to have a larger impact on frequent online-news users than on infrequent users [109].

Uses and gratifications (U&G) theory [96] is another established theory that has been widely used to explain users' motives behind their selections of media content and technologies [157]. It posits that such selections are made to satisfy needs [96]. Researchers have used this theory as a framework for studying and comparing people's motivations for using specific media platforms and technologies, and thus, how they choose among them. In particular, Dimmick's [48] U&G-based theory of the niche sought to explain competition and coexistence between different media technologies in a media ecosystem [48]. Specifically, it holds that three core elements – *niche breadth*, *niche overlap*, and *competitive superiority* – govern media competition. When there is a perceived overlap (i.e., high similarity) in the gratifications obtained from two media, those two media come to be considered substitutable for each other; and when one medium is perceived as superior to another, it will eventually displace it. In addition, niche theory holds that new media can be successful not only because they are better at fulfilling specific gratifications, but also because they are perceived by users as supplying more extensive *opportunities* for fulfilling gratifications. This theory has been usefully deployed to explain competition between older and newer media, including between newspapers, radio, TV, and cable [48] and between e-mail and telephony [47]. Specifically, newspapers, television, and cable are all superior to radio in terms of cognitive gratifications [48], whereas e-mail and telephony are not closely substitutable, because although the former provides greater gratification opportunities, the latter still serves a wider range of needs [47]. When the theory of niche was adopted to examine competition between traditional media and the Internet [46], it was shown that the latter mainly displaced television and newspapers and that it provides more gratification opportunities than any type of traditional media.

U&G theory has also been used to explain and compare users' choices of and motives for using social-media platforms. For example, Pai and Arnott [145] showed that belonging, hedonism, self-esteem, and reciprocity are the four main gratifications users fulfill through social-networking site adoption. Other researchers compared the specific gratifications users perceived platforms as allowing them to fulfill. For example, Quan-Haase and Young [152] showed that people used Facebook mainly for fun and to learn about social activities in their social networks, but used instant-messaging services mainly to maintain or develop relationships. Gan and Wang [67] concluded that, whereas WeChat was best at helping its users obtain social gratification, microblogs were best at helping theirs obtain content gratification. Gan [66] reported that Sina Weibo was perceived to be better at providing information and hedonic gratifications, but WeChat better at providing social and affective ones. Sheldon et al. [162] showed that older adults on Facebook and Instagram relied on these two platforms to compensate for their lack of face-to-face interaction and social activities. Pelletier et al. [147] found that Twitter was preferred for informational purposes; Twitter and Instagram for social purposes; and Instagram for entertainment purposes. However, it has been argued that U&G theory focuses less on outcome variables such as behavioral intentions and behavior than other motivational theories such as technology acceptance model (TAM) [110]; thus, prior work has also proposed synthsizing both theories to explain online consumers engagement with brands on social media platforms [59].

Finally, a large body of research has discussed the impact of social media platform affordances on users' choices and uses of the platforms such as [20, 52, 53, 55, 124, 130], and annalysis of affordance has also been employed as a framework to understand specific use of platforms (e.g., [103, 143, 170]). Due to our focus on the appeals of SMIs and their content, a more comprehensive review on affordances in social media research can be found in this recent article [156].

2.2.2 Media Use as Information-seeking. Finally, a common motivation for seeking media content is to obtain information as a means of reducing uncertainty [60]. In this information-seeking context, media content such as a post or a video is considered an information source or channel for obtaining the sought information. Various studies have been conducted and theories established to explain users' choices of channels, media, and sources to accomplish information tasks, and have generally focused on *utility* and *cost* [46, 48, 62, 197].

The utility of information is directly influenced by its perceived qualities. If several aspects of such quality are considered low, then the information as a whole may not be considered useful or trustworthy, and is unlikely to be chosen [107, 167]. Such aspects that have been studied to date have included accuracy [140, 185], reliability [107, 140, 192], credibility [95, 180], completeness [107, 140], richness [35], and relevance [107, 140, 192]. A more comprehensive review of information quality can be found in Knight and Burn [107].

The other side of the coin of information utility is information cost: i.e., the negative impacts of using a particular information source or channel to obtain information. One well-studied facet of information cost is the channel/source's perceived *accessibility*, or *ease of access* [1]. An early study Hardy [80] examined the principle of least effort, first proposed by Zipf [199], in the specific context of information-channel selection; and its results suggested that accessibility is an even more important determinant of channel choice than information quality is. Fidel and Green [58], meanwhile, investigated which accessibility factors most affected people's choices of information sources, and found that familiarity, time cost, and physical proximity were the top three. Agarwall et al. [1], on the other hand, showed that people used more accessible sources earlier and more frequently than less accessible ones.

Finally, the question of whether the cost, or the utility, of information matters more to an individual may depend on the characteristics of his/her current task. For example, both Xu et al. [193] and

Agarwal and Xu [1] reported an interactive effect of task importance and information quality on people's choices of information sources/channels; The media-richness theory [35] argues that the use of a given medium is effective when its characteristics match the information requirements of the task at hand. Media-richness theory thus resonates strongly with U&G theory, in the sense that both highlight people's content-seeking for needs-fulfillment.

To sum up, the existing literature has provided various theoretical lenses through which we can view audiences' choices and uses of media, tools, and platforms for obtaining specific media content. However, hardly any use of these lenses has been made as part of explanations of how people choose either between SMIs and traditional media, or among SMIs. The present paper is intended to help fill that gap.

3 METHODOLOGY

To achieve our aim of developing an in-depth understanding of how media users choose between SMIs (and their content) and traditional-media celebrities (and content), we conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 informants. For the sake of simplicity and succinctness, in the following sections, when we make statements such as "comparing SMIs and traditional media", "SMIs vs. traditional media", or similar, we mean comparing SMIs as people with those who present content on traditional media (TV show hosts, news anchors, etc.) *or* comparing the content respectively produced by these two groups; i.e., no comparisons of persons to content or content to persons were performed or described. Both the recruitment of these participants and the ensuing data analysis followed the constructivist grounded approach [1] suggested by Charmaz [27]. Further details are presented below.

3.1 Participants

We recruited our study participants by distributing recruitment ads on social-networking sites popular in Taiwan (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, PTT, Dcard, and Xiaohongshu), through the authors' personal network, and word of mouth. Each ad contained a link to a sign-up form, enabling us to screen participants. Finally 45 regular consumers of SMI-generated content participated in our research. The distribution of their age ranges was as follows, which is also shown in Table 1: 27 in 20-29; 7 in 30-39; 7 in 40-49; 4 were above 50. Their occupations were very diverse and all were regularly accessing SMI-generated content as of the time of data collection. While 28 of them reported in interview that they were regular users of traditional media, 17 said that they formerly consumed traditional media but rarely did so now. Participants recruitment proceeded in parallel with the data-analysis process, as will be explained in more detail below.

[1]Although we based our data collection and analysis on the grounded theory approach outlined by Charmaz et al. [27], we deliberately omitted the term "theory" to emphasize that our objective was not to construct a theory, but rather to gain an empirically rich and testable understanding of the phenomenon under examination.

3.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Each participant took part in a semi-structured, two-hour interview either in-person or via Google Meet [2] or Jitsi Meet [3]. In each, the interviewer, assisted by one of the other research-team members, opened with general questions regarding the media platforms and content the interviewee used and consumed, both in recent days and typically. Then, more detailed questions were asked about the participants' choices of content, channels, and platforms, and the rationales and other factors driving those choices. To capture the appeals the participants perceived as affecting such choices, when they were reflecting on specific content or its source/creator, the researchers asked them to compare it with its counterpart: i.e., SMIs' content vs. content on traditional media, and SMIs vs. people appearing on traditional media. This line of questioning allowed us to explore how the gratifications the participants were seeking were related to their perceptions of, preferences for, and choices regarding a wide range of SMIs and their content vs. traditional-media equivalent. To make it easier for participants to recall their experiences of watching particular SMIs' content, we encouraged them to check their viewing histories on their phones and/or computers. We also provided, via an online-collaboration tool called Whimsical [4], cards listing the names of media topics and platforms as a memory aid, and told the participants that they could use this tool whenever they felt it would be helpful. During interviews, as well as the participants' motivations, reasons, and concerns behind their choices of media, content, and platforms, we explored their feelings about them. In the final phase of each interview, the interviewer asked the participant to sum up his/her likes and dislikes about and perceived pros and cons of SMIs and SMI content, on the one hand, and traditional media presenters and content, on the other, as well as any changes they thought SMIs/SMI content had brought about in their lives.

3.3 Exploring SMIs' Appeals: The Grounded Approach

In line with the constructivist grounded approach, our data transcription and analysis were undertaken in parallel with the recruitment process [27]. Accordingly, in this section, all three of these research activities are presented together.

Our goal for the initial sampling was to explore different kinds of SMI audience members and observe how they differed in their perceptions and usage of SMIs and traditional media. Therefore, we selected our first group of participants for diversity in their self-reported media usage and consumption behavior and demographic backgrounds. The behaviors we looked at in this phase included their use of media technologies (including traditional media and social-media platforms) for receiving and consuming media content; the frequency and duration of their consumption of SMI-generated content; and the types of media content they typically consumed

[2]Google Meet is a video-communication service developed by Google: https://apps.google.com/meet/.
[3]Jitsi Meet is a free, open-source multiplatform voice, video-conferencing and instant-messaging application: https://meet.jit.si/.
[4]Whimsical is a visual workspace for thinking and collaboration, combining flowcharts, wireframes, sticky notes, mind maps and docs: https://whimsical.com/.

Table 1: The demographic background and SMIs' contents consuming frequency of our participants

ID	Age & Gender.	Occupation	SMI Frequency[a]	Platforms for Consuming Media Content[b]	TM Usage[c]
P1	25-29 M	IT	2-3 Hr/5D	FB, IG, YT, PC, BB, MD, WC, PTT, DR	Rare
P2	20-24 F	Student	<1 Hr/2D	FB, IG, YT, LINE, WP, BB, RED, TT, DR	Current
P3	25-29 F	IT	2-3 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PC, BB, MD, RED	Current
P4	20-24 F	IT	3-4 Hr/2D	FB, IG, YT, PC, MD, TR, PTT, CH, DR	Rare
P5	25-29 F	IT	3-4 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, MD, NL, PTT, RED	Current
P6	20-24 M	Student	<1 Hr/4D	FB, IG, YT, LINE, CH	Current
P7	20-24 M	Student	<1 Hr/6D	FB, IG, YT, LINE	Current
P8	20-24 M	IT	<1 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PC, MD, TH, NL, TR	Rare
P9	20-24 F	Student	1-2 Hr/5D	FB, YT, BB	Rare
P10	20-24 M	Student	<1 Hr/6D	FB, IG, YT	Current
P11	40-44 F	Govt EMPL	<1 Hr/5D	FB, IG, YT, PC, LINE, CH, TR	Current
P12	40-44 F	IT	1-2 Hr/3D	FB, IG, YT, PC, MD, NL, TG, PTT	Rare
P13	20-24 F	Student	5-6 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PC	Current
P14	25-29 F	Art	<1 Hr/4D	FB, YT, PC, LINE, NL	Current
P15	20-24 F	Financial	1-2 Hr/3D	FB, IG, YT, PC, BB, MD	Rare
P16	20-24 M	Student	4-5 Hr/4D	FB, IG, YT, PC, BB, DR, DC, TT, TH, TR, WP	Rare
P17	25-29 M	Svcs	1-2 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PC, DC, LINE	Current
P18	20-24 M	Student	<1 Hr/4D	FB, IG, YT, PC, DR	Current
P19	25-29 F	IT	<1 Hr/5D	FB, IG, YT, DR, MD, RED, PTT	Current
P20	20-24 F	Student	2-3 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, TT, TH, WB, DR, BB	Rare
P21	35-39 M	Media	<1 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, TT, TR, RD, DR, PTT	Current
P22	45-49 F	Govt EMPL	<1 Hr/5D	FB, YT, TT, LINE	Current
P23	35-39 F	IT	1-2 Hr/4D	FB, PC, YT, LINE	Current
P24	50up F	Svcs	<1 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PC, RED, WP	Current
P25	50up M	Retiree	5-6 Hr/7D	YT, PC	Current
P26	50up F	Retiree	2-3 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PC, WP, LINE	Current
P27	50up F	Retiree	5-6 Hr/6D	FB, YT, PC, TT, LINE, WC, NL, WP	Current
P28	25-29 M	Mfg	<1 Hr/7D	YT, BB	Rare
P29	30-34 M	IT	1-2 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PC, TH	Rare
P30	40-44 M	Financial	2-3 Hr/7D	FB, YT, PC, BB, PTT	Current
P31	40-44 F	IT	<1 Hr/3D	FB, IG, YT, PC, BB, MD, TT, TH, TR, SP	Current
P32	35-39 M	IT	1-2 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PC, PTT, MD, WC, TT	Rare
P33	30-34 M	Animal	3-4 Hr/7D	FB, YT, PC, MD, DC, TR	Rare
P34	20-24 F	Student	1-2 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PC, TT, RED	Rare
P35	20-24 F	Student	1-2 Hr/6D	FB, IG, YT, PC, TT, DR, DC, LINE	Rare
P36	20-24 M	Student	<1 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, MD, TR, TT	Rare
P37	25-29 M	IT	<1 Hr/3D	IG, YT, PC, TH, CH, AT	Rare
P38	20-24 F	Student	2-3 Hr/3D	FB, IG, YT, BB, DC	Rare
P39	25-29 M	Student	>8 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, DR	Current
P40	20-24 M	Student	2-3 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, TH, PTT	Current
P41	30-34 F	Mfg	2-3 Hr/7D	FB, IG, YT, PTT, LINE, NL, DR, WP	Current
P42	35-39 M	IT	1-2 Hr/5D	FB, YT, PC	Current
P43	25-29 M	Svcs	5-6 Hr/7D	YT, TT, CH, DR	Current
P44	45-49 M	Govt EMPL	1-2 Hr/4D	YT, PC	Current
P45	45-49 M	Consultancy	<1 Hr/2D	YT, PC	Current

[a]SMI Frequency refers to the frequency at which participants reported consuming SMIs and the content of the SMIs (hours per day and days per week

[b]AT: AfreecaTV, BB: Bilibili, CH: Clubhouse, DC: Discord, DR: Dcard, FB: Facebook, IG: Instagram, MD: Medium, NL: Newsletter, PC: Podcast, RD: Reddit, RED: Xiaohongshu, SP: Spotify, TG: Telegram, TH: Twitch, TR: Twitter, TT: TikTok, WB: Weibo, WC: WeChat, WP: Web Portal, YT: Youtube

[c]TM Usage depicts the participants' current involvement with traditional media, which is divided into two groups: "rare" consumption and "current" consumption. The latter group includes both frequent and occasional usage.

(health, local, politics, financial, entertainment, sport, career, life and beauty, etc.). This assured us that we could observe representative as well as relatively extreme cases among a broad range of behaviors and situations related to consuming SMIs' content.

The research team conducted open coding on the first group of participants, resulting in an initial set of codes that informed us of the potential bias in the initial sample and the adjustments we needed to make in our subsequent sampling. For example, after finding that the initial group of participants had little experience of consuming traditional media, which limited their comparisons of SMI-generated content against traditional-media, we added more participants who either had often consumed traditional-media content in the past, or were still consuming it regularly, and who would therefore be more capable of reflecting on 1) the differences between the two types of media and 2) what specific needs their consumption of SMIs' content might be fulfilling. In addition, we observed that participants who had experience of the content-creation process, either on social-media platforms or in traditional media industries such as journalism, provided us with deeper reflections on and speculations about the intentions behind content production, which in turn affected their perceptions of and preferences for the two broad types of media we were interested in. For that reason, we also recruited participants who had experience as amateur content creators and/or had worked in the traditional media.

Alongside this ongoing recruitment process, data from new participants were coded, and the resulting codes compared against existing ones. The research team's focus during such comparison was, firstly, on the applicability of existing codebooks, and secondly, on similarities and discrepancies between the old and new data. Whenever new codes were added or existing ones revised due to the features of new data, those new codes were tested against all the existing data. Through this iterative process, the research team identified important concepts that appeared to have resulted in the discrepancies, and identified the relationships among such concepts.

The research team met regularly to discuss emerging concepts and determine which topics to focus on. Such discussions also established our next targets for sampling, and whether our code categories and codes had achieved saturation: a process referred to as theoretical sampling [27]. For example, we once developed a code category that described types of interaction and relationships between the audience and SMIs, and observed that participants' perceptions and needs for having different types of interactions/relationships with SMIs varied significantly both across types of gratifications and between non-streamers and streamers. This led us to recruit participants who watched streaming videos of different types and forms, and in particular, followers of Vtubers [128].

All interview data were transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti [5], an online collaborative qualitative-analysis tool. Our final codebook contained 142 codes grouped into 10 code categories, i.e., Media Type, Gratification, Appeal (Content, Presentation, Closeness), Constraint, Changes by SMIs, Audience Feeling/Perception, Audience Action, Content Characteristic, Organization/SMI Characteristic, and Platform Affordances/Features.

[5]Atlas.ti is a computer program used in qualitative research or qualitative data analysis: https://atlasti.com.

4 PERCEIVED APPEALS OF SOCIAL-MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND THEIR CONTENT

Our participants reported a variety of attractive characteristics of SMIs and reasons for watching their posts, articles, photos, videos, and podcasts rather than traditional-media equivalents. We grouped these characteristics into a total of eight appeals that fell into three conceptual categories: content, presentation, and closeness. We present each of the eight appeals with examples to illustrate how and why they drove our participants to select their content over traditional media.

4.1 Appeals of Content

All participants mentioned at least one of the following two SMI content appeals: 1) *Variety and Richness of Content*, and 2) *Specialized and Niche Content*. Each is explored in turn below.

4.1.1 Variety and Richness of Content. Many participants mentioned that they favored SMIs' content over traditional media because the former covered a broader and deeper range of domains, topics, and types. Some reported that the variety and abundance of content from SMIs enabled them to easily satisfy their needs; made them feel that they only rarely had to consume the same content more than once; and, incidentally, enabled them to discover various new content topics. When reflecting on these perceptions of specific features of SMIs' content, participants often contrasted them to those of the content produced by traditional media. For instance, P33, who preferred SMIs' videos for learning about electronics, said, *"I could just search my mouse's model, search 'fix' or 'disassemble' and then you can see someone's videos exactly about the same mouse or same computer and disassemble them. It's impossible to find these things through traditional media."* On the variety of topics available from SMIs, P15 noted how the emergence of SMIs' content had changed her life : *"The information I'm exposed to is broader and more diverse. I probably wouldn't have known these things before."*

When consuming information to learn about specific topics, some of our participants said that they especially appreciated being able to learn about one topic from many different SMIs. This was deemed beneficial because it allowed them to learn information efficiently, as P30 commented on exploring places to visit: *"I can learn about one thing from different people in a short time, like if a restaurant is worth waiting in a line for. You can't do this from traditional media."* In the context of acquiring knowledge and skills, many participants also noted that they could cross-reference, compare, and combine information from a variety of SMIs teaching the same skill or topic, which made their learning more comprehensive, because, as P33 noted, *"different SMIs prioritize different aspects."* P26, who had learned piano via SMIs, said, *"I'd combine [what SMIs teach ...]. When the part one of them teaches was more complicated to learn, but others use a simpler way to introduce it, then I would use the simpler one."* They also perceived that traditional media did not give them as many options or alternatives.

Some participants followed or subscribed to certain SMIs to learn particular skills or about particular topics, but – probably due to the great abundance of similar content from SMIs – many others mainly searched keywords or relied on recommender systems

to find similar content without following or subscribing. As P26 noted, *"I can't recall exactly from which [SMI] teachers I learned this song, because I watched so many of them."* Many interviewees also had a hard time remembering which SMI(s) they had consumed certain content from. P2, for example, said: *"I feel bad. I only remember what I learned from them but don't know what they are called"*. She later reflected, *"I think that's because what I wanted was their content, not them personally."* Many other participants provided similar comments: e.g., *"to me, TikTok is just a place for relaxing, so I don't pay attention to any particular SMI"* (P36). However, we observed that reliance on recommender systems did not apply universally, and that other SMI appeals were more specific to SMIs personally, as explained below.

4.1.2 Specialized Content Offered by Social-media Influencers. The second commonly cited reason for SMIs being more appealing than traditional media was that they provided specific kinds of content that rarely, if ever, could be found on traditional media. For example, several participants told us they liked SMIs' content that summarized or highlighted the key takeaways from existing content, such as short/condensed versions of movies and books, because of the time it saved them. Others said they enjoyed summaries by SMIs of complex societal issues or news events, because the mass of relevant articles would be too time-consuming to investigate on their own. P1 commented, *"I will absolutely read the [SMI-]summarized version. How would I have time to investigate this nuclear-power topic?"* These participants particularly appreciated those SMIs' summaries that incorporated multifaceted perspectives that made them seem unbiased, because they rarely saw such balance provided by traditional media. As P9 said, *"These YouTubers would gather more perspectives and look for more sources. And so their content is more thorough, detailed, and from more angles."*

When consuming information that helped them make better daily-life decisions and choices – about shopping, investment, places to visit, and so on – many participants preferred analyses that covered pros and cons, and/or positive vs. negative sides. They perceived that this kind of analysis was rarely available via traditional media, because the companies that produced such media tended to avoid making criticisms that might conflict with the interests of their sponsors (P16) or any other third party who might feel harmed by negative comments. P30, as part of his explanation of why he chose to consume SMIs' content when seeking restaurant-related information, said:, *"I rarely saw a TV show that would criticize a place's food, but on YouTube, you see a lot of these criticisms and 'not recommended'. Traditional media would tend to say something nice. [...] Even when the food is really bad, you can barely tell that from their expressions."* He also observed that investment advisors avoided making negative comments about certain stocks on TV shows, because *"there's just some things you can't say on TV"*; but noted that SMIs who talked about investment were honest in this regard on their own channels. Other participants similarly mentioned that traditional media companies' audiences take in *"the general population"* (P31) and thus, media companies need to be more careful about their content and avoid analyses that might bring about a public-relation crisis (e.g., P32).

From the participants' widespread perception that traditional media avoided making negative comments, it followed that they saw analysis offered by SMIs as more authentic, truthful, and factual, as they gave it *"only on behalf of themselves"* (P31) and thus had more freedom and autonomy in producing it (P42). Exposing negative aspects was perceived by several participants as highly risky, yet enjoyable: *"I have paid attention to this [SMI] since quite long ago. He's mainly disclosing some corporate scandals [...]. Like this time he was exposing some conversations among the vendors, sometimes with recordings"* (P45). However, the same participant acknowledged that the purpose of such muckraking might be *"attracting traffic"* rather than justice for its own sake.

A number of participants also perceived that in-depth knowledge in highly niche and specific areas was rarely available in traditional media because such areas were *"minority"* (P19), *"not profitable"* (P32), *"unpopular"* (P36), or *"improper"* (P37). In addition, these topics required people with highly specialized knowledge and expertise, or from specific domains, to provide relevant content, meaning that in practical terms, only SMIs could do so. Traditional media companies were perceived as profit-driven, instead of interest- or passion-driven, and thus many participants perceived traditional media as primarily reporting *"quick updates about events"* to draw traffic (P9) and under pressure to *"publish regularly"* (P8), which further prevented them from offering in-depth analyses regarding niche topics. Because of their need to watch specialized content, the participants preferred SMIs who were specialist experts such as doctors, lawyers, professors, or people who had many years of experience as practitioners. As P32 said, *"You really need that background [to talk about law and medicine ...] not just a superficial understanding of it."* P17, whose goal was to learn more about new gaming trends, made these comments about following a game channel: *"One of the [SMI] hosts had worked at Blizzard before and was able to analyze the impact of some gaming news on the industry. [...] They would talk according to their experience in the gaming industry, like analyzing the probability of an in-game raffle and whether it was reasonable."*

4.2 Appeals of Presentation

The second category of SMIs' appeal involved their presentation of content, and can be subdivided into 1) *Authenticity*, and 2) *Liveliness/Creativity*. Each is explained in detail below.

4.2.1 Authentic Presentation. As the prior literature has suggested, authenticity is an important attribute of SMIs that makes them effective marketers [33, 104, 118, 120, 151, 187]. Resonating with such findings, a common presentation-related appeal often mentioned by our participants was SMIs' authenticity. Our findings augment the existing literature through the identification of three elements in perceptions of high authenticity. The first was SMIs' use of vocabulary in their content. Several participants said they felt that certain SMIs were authentic because they used highly colloquial vocabulary, which they would only see in daily life and natural conversations. P13, for instance, praised the interactions of a particular group of SMIs as *"very natural."*

Second, some participants expressed a sense that, because SMIs' content was delivered in real-life, unstaged, and casual settings their reactions seemed natural, part of their daily routines, and reflective of their real thoughts, as opposed to following a script. As P35 noted, while explaining why she liked SMIs' videos in general, *"I like that [SMIs] talk about topics in their daily lives, like on the*

balcony of your house, responding to your followers, chatting a little bit, instead of having a talk show where you invite various guests." P34 also mentioned that SMIs' product demonstrations *"would make you feel that the product was one of those they normally used in daily life. Their moves looked so natural and spontaneous"*. During such unscripted content, some participants especially valued seeing unscripted, unexpected incidents, which they felt made such content even more realistic and interesting. For example, about a live streamer he liked, P40 said: *"I was curious why the number of watchers was so high, and then I clicked in, and found the streamer and his buddies were having a fight. I found it very interesting, seeing two brothers having trash talk there."* Interestingly, VTubers – who are represented by virtual characters – were thought by our participants to be more authentic than they would have been otherwise. As P28 explained, *"you can't see their face and they only present themselves in a virtual image, [so] their reaction is more natural and loosened up."* Other participants noted that, as compared to SMIs, many traditional celebrities' images were not authentic, and that shows on traditional media were *"arranged in advance and looked deliberate"* (P36).

The third element in our participants' perceptions of high authenticity was that SMIs provided concrete, real-life examples and evidence, which made their comments seem grounded and based on real experience. For instance, when talking about product introductions, P34 said that one SMI would *"give you concrete evidence, like how long it took him to run out of the product, the changes the product had made, and sometimes 'before and after' comparisons. [...] So I found it quite believable."* Live streaming, in particular, was perceived as a great means of seeing concrete examples, as P22 commented regarding a streamer who sold tea. *"You can see people cut the tea leaves there. It's a real tea garden, not a scene like you see in a TV show."* Even when SMIs disclosed that the product, tool or service they were introducing was subject to a sponsorship deal, many of our participants still saw the SMIs' messages as more genuine and sincere than those from traditional media and celebrities, provided that they were transparent about the sponsorship and talked about their own real experience. As P34 commented, on SMIs' videos about skin care products, *"If they [SMIs] had already used it [the product], and they deliberately conducted a test [of the product], then I'm willing to see the advertisement for the products."*

4.2.2 Lively, Creative, and Unrestricted Presentation. Many participants told us they liked the lively and vivid styles with which SMIs presented their content, and speculated that these styles were made possible by SMIs being unrepressed by the formality, structure, convention, and regulation of traditional media companies. As P35 noted, *"traditional media can't have such level of flexibility and freedom [...]. There are too many things involved, like sponsorship or the image of the media company."* Some participants told us they enjoyed watching or listening to certain presentation styles that aligned with their own subcultures, but that were infrequently seen in traditional media, such as the use of *"dirty words"* (P21). Without disputing that content moderation in traditional media was acceptable, or even necessary, our participants said they could not help but prefer watching more lively, creative, and unrestricted presentations from SMIs. In particular, they appreciated SMIs' lively and creative presentation styles when the content itself was relatively serious and formal, such as news, analysis or knowledge. As P7 put it, *"The way that Kelly and her partner talked about news would make me feel the content was more lively and vivid. [...]. I think they liberate the presentation of news from the traditional media's formality, from which you can feel a more enjoyable atmosphere."* P18 commented similarly on why he liked certain SMIs' analysis of ball games. *"They could use a humorous way like telling a joke to present these things. Because the fans were happy to hear [. . .] more trash talk and be more relaxed."*

4.3 Appeals of Closeness

Our participants were also highly attracted by a feeling of "closeness" with SMIs. P35 provided a statement representative of this phenomenon: *"If I feel close to [an SMI], I would want to watch almost all his videos. However, if I feel distant, I'd only watch the videos I'm interested in."* In particular, our data allowed us to identify four distinct kinds of closeness appeals: *similarity*, *attainability*, *immediacy* and *intimacy*. We present each in detail below.

4.3.1 Similarity. The most commonly mentioned closeness appeal of SMIs was their perceived similarity to the participants. As discussed in the prior literature, audience members often selectively expose themselves to similar opinions, viewpoints, and attitudes [56, 115, 119]; as P45 said, *"I would regularly watch one or two [SMIs] because we have similar viewpoints"*. However, our participants mentioned a much broader range of similarities that they valued in SMIs, including their status in the social hierarchy, culture, preferences/personal tastes, habits/daily routines, feelings, life journeys/experiences, current lifestyle, current physical condition, and location.

Specifically, the majority of our participants found SMIs appealing because they were *"ordinary people"* (P20) just like them, who lived similar lives, in similar environments, experiencing similar life events, and using similar kinds of commodities. For instance, P30 commented, *"they are closer to our lives, because they're also ordinary people. So you'd feel that we're closer. The things we watch, the things we eat."* P44 commented similarly on an SMI he followed: *"The main reason I found him attractive is he's nothing different from us, just a normal person, not a big star. So you feel he's not as distant. When I watch his videos, I see him just like seeing people around us, just like your friend."* This perception is in strong contrast to perceptions of traditional celebrities, whom our participants deemed *"distant"* (P28) or even as living *"in an entirely different world"* (P23). As P37 commented, *"He didn't realize that he's so far from the general population. We just can't feel the beauty of the reality he said in our own reality."* On the other hand, several participants mentioned that they would gradually feel distant from SMIs who became more popular. About two of them, P35 commented: *"I've started treating them as someone very famous [...] I feel that you've been successful, and so even though you had a difficult past, this past was not so close to us people who have not succeeded."*

However, participants' feelings of closeness with SMIs seemed to be further reinforced when they saw more specific similarities, i.e., beyond just occupying a similar position in the socioeconomic hierarchy, especially when these other similarities made them feel emotionally connected to the SMIs, resulting in a feeling that they

were not alone. For example, P23 said: *"We shared the same hatreds, for example, our issues with our mothers-in-law, and the things they had done. [...] So that makes me keep following her."* P21 reported his feelings about an SMI with a similar life situation as follows: *"I often felt I was being discriminated against, whether sexually or racially. [... By watching his content], you feel that you're not alone. If someone like you can live great, maybe I can too. So that's why I watched these kinds of videos."* P38 said that seeing a game steamer encountering a similar difficulty *"let me feel that it's not only me that encountered this situation. The streamer can always speak our inner voices. [...] Unlike other streamers who only show good things, this streamer gave me a feeling that he's also imperfect, not that lucky in drawing cards, just like us."* Participants also reported feelings of similarity with VTubers, and favored their content for that reason, as P29 explained: *"The actresses in the characters, probably also around 20-30 years old, would also chat about health issues with us. Like feeling uncomfortable or getting a sore lower back after sitting too long [...]. Something you'd feel the same way about. So, yeah, I would feel some sort of emotional connection with these VTubers."*

Finally, our participants mentioned valuing content from SMIs who had similar life conditions specifically because they perceived the SMIs' experience would be applicable to their own cases. P12 commented: *"Compared to more senior people who would say something more abstract or about ultimate goals, these young and junior people in their earlier career would share things they encountered during career transitions, which is closer to my needs."*

4.3.2 Attainability. Prior literature has suggested that the audience is likely to see SMIs as role models and engage in wishful identification with them [106, 112, 134, 159, 176, 198]; and we, too, observed similar perceptions among some of our participants. However, we found that only those SMIs whose status felt attainable were especially favored. That is, our participants did aspire to be like certain SMIs, but mainly if they found these SMIs' accomplishments and levels of success to be within their own reach. By watching and listening to such SMIs' experience-sharing and advice, participants felt they could learn how to follow in their footsteps to attain similar positive outcomes. For example, P4 said of two SMIs she followed, *"The reason I was attracted by Mr. George was [... that] his level was what I expected myself to reach, which is working in an international company. [... He] had already achieved that stage, and so the information he provided would serve as guidance to reach that position. [... The reason the other SMI] is getting even more attractive to me, is that her achievements, compared to Mr. George's, are relatively achievable and easier for me."* Similarly, P6 said, *"I very much admire the [SMIs'] lifestyle and workstyle. [... They] do some logging of their lives and clever tips in the activities they held. They are the source of my inspiration for my own life."* Some other participants mentioned that they would favor SMI content in which they could find tips that were both immediately implementable and probably implementable in the future, as P35 explained: *"sixty percent of the videos I watch are for applying to my current reality. And the remaining forty percent are an aspiration for myself. [...] Watching their lives would let me imagine what kinds of life I want to live in the future, or what kind of person I want to become."*

4.3.3 Immediacy. The third type of closeness participants felt with SMIs was being able to directly and immediately communicate with them and see their responses – an affordance they saw traditional media as not offering; and even when traditional media did provide channels for feedback, they rarely saw responses to theirs, resulting in a feeling of being ignored and distanced, even in cases where they had highlighted mistakes in content. Many SMIs, in contrast, were perceived as responsive to viewer feedback and willing to make adjustments because of it, which led our participants to feel that their voices were heard and valued. This feeling, in turn, prompted them to proactively make suggestions and ask questions to obtain more information from SMIs: for example, *"I'd asked him professional questions, and he always replied"* (P18); and *"In the moment, she was able to answer my questions. It was about painting skills, and I would hope to get answers when I watch her streaming"* (P39). SMIs' habit of responding to their audiences' comments and adjusting their content accordingly also made the participants feel that such content was more trustworthy and reliable. P30, for instance, explained why he subscribed a Facebook Page to read sports commentary as follows: *"Some people would correct him in the comments [...]. He would correct the content and tell his audience which part was wrong and that he had corrected it. And yeah, this would make me more willing to read his articles."* Similarly, P36 explained that he followed a sports SMI in part because *"Some people would criticize the [SMI, saying...] 'You only say good things about the Warriors,' and then he gradually adjusted his content and started also saying negative things about that team."* Willingness to receive feedback and make adjustments was seen as vital to the audience, because it let them know that SMIs had the courage to admit *"their limits and weaknesses"* (P5), which enhanced their trustworthiness, and because the audience could provide *"inspiration"* to the SMIs through their interactions that tended to make their content more appealing (P44).

4.3.4 Intimacy. Finally, many participants said they followed certain SMIs and liked their content because they liked feeling intimate with them. In this regard, we observed two particular patterns that resonate well with the existing literature. One consisted of sensing intimacy based on SMIs' self-disclosures about their daily lives (P18, P42), emotions (P35), or life journeys (P26). In the other, the feeling of intimacy developed via parasocial and reciprocal interactions [112, 113, 125, 132, 153]. We further found that many participants were not satisfied solely with parasocial interaction, which they could also engage in with traditional celebrities (P41). Instead, they found SMI content distinct from traditional media offerings, and SMIs distinct from traditional celebrities, because both were likely to foster two-way, reciprocal interaction that fulfilled their relational needs. In particular, we identified three levels of intimacy that our participants pursued with SMIs that made them feel gratified and led them to favor watching those SMIs' content.

The first level comprised SMIs recognizing their presence, and included responding to their comments, mentioning their names, greeting them, or even expressing caring words. Not only did our participants feel happy when this happened; some developed strategies to sustain the phenomenon. For example, P21 told us how he grabbed the attention of an entertaining YouTuber he subscribed to: *"I left a comment there. And then [the SMI] responded to me. This made my day. [...] You know, it's not special if you just say 'Haha this is funny.' To let him respond to me, I'd find a very specific point that*

other people have not mentioned, like the character he played and ask 'Who picked this, brilliant!' and then he'd reply to me."

The second level consisted of the SMI remembering who they were from one session to another, and expressing care and attention to them. This made them feel acquainted with the SMI, or even something more, as P39 explained. *"I think it's probably because a 'goddess' like her is far from us. And so when she interacted with me, I'd feel like she was paying attention to me. And then I'd want to continually watch. This is a feeling I want to have when watching her channel. If she can remember you, know what you do, and get us closer, I feel that we're building a good relationship."* Our participants' pursuit of this level of reciprocal interaction occurred not only with streamers, but also with VTubers. About one VTuber, P38 told us: *"If you greet her several times, she'd remember you. [...] One reason for doing this is that I want a feeling of being attended to and cared about. I have a feeling that no one really cares about or pays attention to me in reality, but when I watch this VTuber, I feel that she does. [...] I think it's a desire to be loved [...]. She remembers me and knows that I've been gone for several days, and says 'long time no see' and some other caring words."*

The third and final level comprised SMIs treating their viewers as friends. As P34 said, *"She was a lively and funny person, thus I'd like to continually watch. She would not let me feel distant, you'd feel that we're just like friends."* Similarly, P40 mentioned that *"When I watched their stream, it's not like watching a show but more like a group of friends having small talks."*. P43 even shared a story about desiring to have a romantic relationship with an SMI. *"I really liked her presentation, appearance and personal style. [...] I also helped her translate languages when foreigners joined the stream."* However, after a period of watching her stream less frequently due to being busy at work, he returned and found someone else seemed to have replaced him, and felt upset that he was not the *"special one"* to her anymore: *"I had no problem that she needed someone to interact with when I was away. But I feel really bad when I see these people"*.

Rather than the experiencing or seeking feelings of intimacy with SMIs themselves, some participants mentioned that they watched certain SMIs because they liked the atmosphere co-created by those SMIs and their audiences as a whole. For example, P28, reported that whenever a particular SMI made a gaming error, *"there would be a string of comments saying that he 'sucked'. Then he'd have a dramatic reaction, very hilarious."* Other participants mentioned that they enjoyed a sense of companionship and belonging to SMIs'audience communities. For instance, P29 commented on why he regularly watched a game streamer's live show: *"Why would the audience want to watch the streamers play the game? I think, to some extent, we want to see someone experience this thing with us, they're like companions. No matter if it's the streamers or the other audience members, what I want is the sense of community. So even the live chat is important to me."*

5 OTHER FACTORS IMPACTING THE CHOICE BETWEEN SOCIAL-MEDIA INFLUENCERS AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA

In addition to the eight appeals, participants mentioned several other factors that affected their choices of content. We present them below.

5.1 Perceived Main Limitation of SMIs: Lack of Resources

There were several varieties of content our participants deemed SMIs unable to produce, most of which were characterized by high financial-, human-, equipment-, and/or other resource demands (e.g., P33). For example, P44 perceived that *"traditional media has more money and can invite superstars to their shows."* Similarly, P30 noted that *"SMIs can't play NBA games because of copyright issues. You can only see them in traditional media."* Moreover, almost all participants reported that SMIs could not replace the journalism conducted by traditional media because of issues such as not having the correct ID cards (P17), or lacking resources – including specialist vehicles and personnel – to report news events in all the places they occurred (P10). As P17 commented, *"Every place can have news events happening. Traditional media companies also have reporters in other countries. It's impossible for [SMIs] to report these events."*

5.2 Main Concerns about SMIs: Inconsistent Information Quality

Despite favoring SMI content, most of our participants expressed concerns about its quality, especially when it came to facts, news, or other such classes of knowledge. For example, P19 said, *"If you don't watch it carefully, you don't know where their information comes from and how they synthesize it. Their sources could be right or wrong. [...] It's very likely that you will receive incorrect information."* Some participants expressed worries that some other audience members, such as their parents (P32) or children (P11), would not be able to tell whether the delivered information was factual or mainly the SMI's *"personal opinion"* (P8). For instance, P11 said: *"If children are addicted to them but can't think carefully, they might be influenced by these [SMIs], which is not great."* Several participants attributed this drawback to the low threshold of becoming an SMI, as P23 explained: *"the wide spread [of SMIs] makes it look so easy to become a public celebrity."* Moreover, as P27 commented, a general perception that everyone can become an SMI would tend to *"make the quality of SMIs inconsistent."*

5.3 Perceived Constraints against Choosing Particular Content

Finally, it is noteworthy that our participants' choices of content were sometimes an outcome of the constraints they perceived – even, in some cases, after such constraints had been resolved. One such example was the lack of availability of traditional-media content on social-media platforms. This perceived constraint was crucially important, insofar as it was the specific affordances of certain social media platforms that made SMIs' distinctive appeals perceptible by and prominent to the participants. For example, participants appreciated "comment" features that enabled them to give feedback to SMIs directly; easy-to-access livestream features that enabled the SMIs to "go live" easily in their daily lives, and notification features that enabled them to know about new livestream events immediately; and the live-chat and "donate" features in livestreaming that allowed them to grab SMIs' attention. Other affordances were perceived as facilitating the participants' discovery of a wide range of specialized and generalist content (e.g., searching specific content, browsing recommended and personalized content), or related to

making their consumption of media content more efficient (e.g., skipping certain parts or skipping advertisements). Although some traditional-media companies had made their videos available on social-media platforms as of the time of data collection, many of our participants were unaware of this. Moreover, due in part to such unawareness, they reported that TV programs' rigid schedules, and such schedules' conflicts with their own schedules, meant that they were only able to consume SMI content, which they could watch whenever they wanted to, as P9 stated, *"[traditional media]'s schedule of programs are fixed, but I'm not necessarily available at that time. "*

In addition, they commonly mentioned social and other factors that constrained their consumption of content via TV or radio. For example, some mentioned that their TV was shared with family members or roommates, and thus that they had to consider those other household members' preferences and coordinate viewing times accordingly. Consuming content via social-media platforms, in contrast, was more personal and private, and mainly took place on their own devices that were not shared, and it was therefore less effortful.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 "Closeness" is the Key in the Era of Social-media Influencers

Amid sharp growth in usage of a proliferating array of social-media platforms, scholars have argued that the audience's relationship with media has been transformed from passive reception of content to active participation [90], including content production as well as behaviors such as "liking", commenting, and following/subscribing [3, 23]. Regarding this shift from passive to active participation, our findings about closeness appeals suggest that, regardless of whether the audience's relationship with SMI content is passive/receiving or active/producing, their sense of closeness with SMIs is the key driver of their ongoing consumption of such content. On the one hand, when receiving content, our participants' perception of SMIs as being ordinary people just like them made them feel SMIs' content was more applicable to their own cases, and also more attainable, than celebrity and traditional-media content. This perception was especially critical for audience members who consumed media content to explore and enlighten their life decisions and lifestyle choices, as distinct from the marketing outcomes that have been the primary focus of previous studies [32, 106, 159, 176]. Moreover, beyond the perception of applicability and attainability, participants' feeling that SMIs' cases and situations were similar to theirs also created an emotional bond with SMIs. This feeling, in turn, gave the participants a sense that they were not alone when watching SMI content, and to some extent, attached them to the SMIs emotionally.

On the other hand, when actively participating, many of our participants particularly liked being able to have immediate reciprocal interactions with SMIs and thus build a sense of closeness, rather than being satisfied with a typical one-way para-social celebrity relationship [112, 113, 125]. That is, they appreciated SMIs' direct responses to their participation, and perhaps more importantly, the feelings this engendered of 1) being attended to and cared about by an SMI, or even that they were friends with him/her; and 2) companionship and inclusion, not merely due to direct SMI interaction, but also from the atmosphere co-created by the SMI and all members of the audience. The desires and needs behind the appreciation of these two-way and community interactions and relationships were essentially social and relational, i.e., go well beyond the effect of closeness on marketing outcomes that has been the primary focus of the previous literature on influencers [105, 153, 165].

It is noteworthy, however, that such feelings of closeness were not necessarily sustainable after an SMI's fame or popularity exceeded a certain threshold. This was because the main basis of SMIs' interpersonal appeals was the audience's perception of them as being just ordinary people – a perception that could easily disappear once they became dramatically more famous and had many more followers.

The identification of these interpersonal appeals represents an important new contribution to research on SMIs, and has critical implications for content creators on social media. Regarding its scholarly contribution, we expected that each of the four kinds of closeness was likely to positively affect marketing outcomes, given that such correlations have been mentioned and supported in several quantitative studies (e.g., [104, 105, 119, 165, 194]); but the pathways whereby these different kinds of closeness lead audiences to continually choose specific SMIs' content have seldom been discussed or clarified in the literature before. Our in-depth inquiry into audiences' perceptions of SMIs' appeals helps fill that gap by explaining why certain SMIs not only attract many followers/subscribers, but also sustain their ongoing attention.

As to implications for content creators, recent years have seen arguments regarding the optimization of user glance (e.g. [200]) – i.e., attracting users' attention as much as possible to increase audience metrics [74, 75, 183] – on the grounds that glance functions as a precursor to social and economic capital in the attention economy [72, 200] In parallel to those arguments, "clickbait", for the purpose of attracting attention has also been controversial [26, 34, 127, 155]. However, research has suggested that optimizing glance and click-through metrics tends to decrease content quality [29, 63, 135, 158] and is not even always an effective means of attracting attention [34]. Therefore, and on the basis of our own results, we argue against the prevailing focus on glance, as it will tend over the longer term to be a suboptimal approach in an SMI economy rooted in sustained engagement. As explained above, many of our participants had particularly high and sustained engagement with several specific SMIs because those figures gratified their social and relational needs. Moreover, it was this attachment that drove our participants' high levels of trust in certain SMIs; and, as past research has shown, trust is readily convertible into real-world actions [113, 154, 159]. However, such an attachment to and trust in SMIs could not be established by optimizing user glance, as such optimization does not necessarily entail a sense of closeness; rather, closeness grows through engagement with the SMIs' content and reciprocal interactions with SMIs themselves.

Given that sustained user engagement is crucial both to effective marketing [76, 173] and to the success of social-media platforms [23, 100], we argue that enhancing closeness appeals is the key to SMIs standing out, being remembered, and retaining their audiences, despite the vast number of other active SMIs. In practical

terms, we found that sustained engagement could best be facilitated by SMIs being authentic, attentive, and caring; engaging in reciprocal communication; and fostering a sense of community and belonging among their audience members. All these elements take time, effort, and SMIs' wholehearted commitment, and thus may not be achievable if they are focusing on glance. However, to make these elements sustainable over the long term would require social-media platforms to continue their efforts to foreground SMIs' appeals.

Looking forward, social-media platforms ought to consider SMIs as more than platform *users* [16], and instead, as important assets – not only because they can grab attention, but also, and more importantly, because they can sustain audiences' long-term attention and engagement. To make attention and engagement sustainable, therefore, such platforms should, on the one hand, satisfy the SMIs' needs to make their appeals stand out; and on the other, given that different audiences may be attracted by different appeals afforded by different platform features [44], platforms ought to offer flexible ways for SMIs to present their different appeals to sustain engagement by various audiences.

6.2 What Makes SMIs' Content and Presentation Distinct from Traditional Media? And What Comes Next?

Looking beyond the four closeness appeals, the other four appeals our participants perceived were related to content and presentation styles that were rarely found in traditional media. When probed about this, most attributed this distinction ultimately to SMIs' high autonomy and relative independence. This autonomy – particularly, from the profit motive implicit in traditional media – enabled SMIs to produce content in highly specialized and niche areas, and deliver it in authentic, lively and creative ways. Being driven by their innate passion and interest, SMIs were seen as more willing/likely to create content that might be viewed by only a small, niche group of audience members interested in that topic. Lack of third-party moderation and other forms of interference also tended to make SMI content seem more authentic and truthful, especially when it acknowledged both the positive and the negative sides of an issue, service, or product. This perception of authenticity, in regard to products and services in particular, led many of our participants to believe that SMIs' messages were based on their own real experiences and thus more genuine. Although our study design did not allow us to observe the extent to which this perception increased the participants' intention to purchase or use the mentioned items, which has been discussed in many prior studies of influencer marketing [120, 139, 151], we did note that the participants found these SMIs' messages more persuasive and trustworthy than those from celebrities and/or on traditional media, which they speculated or presumed were more scripted and artificial. Notably, this sense of authenticity could be strengthened by social-media platforms. The constantly available livestreaming feature on several such platforms allows content creators to livestream anytime and anywhere, and in that context, their in-the-moment reactions to their surroundings were perceived as even more natural, unstaged, and spontaneous than their recorded videos were; and this, in turn, made their messages appear even more authentic and trustworthy.

Finally, SMIs' autonomy gave them the ability to present content in ways that felt attractive, interesting, realistic, and lively to the audience; and some of our participants even speculated that, had the same SMIs delivered the same basic content in traditional media-company contexts, their presentation, notably including language use, would have been regulated in ways that made them markedly less appealing.

On the other hand, our participants did not all appreciate the unrestricted autonomy of SMIs. Beyond relations with stakeholders, participants also attributed traditional media's caution about its content and presentation to the fact that it faced the public as a whole, and thus had public duties to fulfill and a positive public image to sustain. Therefore, the participants felt broadly positive about traditional media use of and/or status as gatekeepers for filtering out inappropriate and misleading content. Indeed, many participants expressed concerns that, in an "everyone-can-be-an-SMI" world, SMIs' unrestricted autonomy would eventually render their content low-quality and misleading, even if unintentionally; and that this would have a negative influence on populations with relatively low media literacy, especially when the information is intended to manipulate the audience and contains mis/disinformation [172]. As a result, while the majority of our participants appreciated SMIs' independence and credited it with making their content more authentic, lively, and intriguing than its traditional-media counterparts, they were not unaware of the societal dilemmas that would arise if a Wild West atmosphere in content creation and distribution were to prevail indefinitely.

Finally, as traditional media companies have started to leverage social-media platforms to deliver their own content, such companies can take our results as a reference (see Fig.1) when deciding which aspects of content can most effectively compete with SMIs. For example, in addition to cooperating with SMIs, they might wish to consider creating multiple channels, with some delivering content that is niche and/or interactive. Traditional celebrities, meanwhile, could consider engaging in more interaction with their fans on social-media platforms as a means of boosting attachment [125]. However, it is crucial that the anchors or performers of any such channels remain authentic, truthful, natural, and have high autonomy in their presentation (within reason), as those are the key attributes that lead audience members to believe that content is not artificial or fabricated. On the other hand, as many of our participants noted, there are many gratification opportunities [46] that SMIs cannot fulfill, such as quick news updates and other content that can only be produced by organizations with large-scale resources. Moreover, the participants rarely associated these particular types of gratification with closeness appeals, but rather, valued the content for its own sake. In this sense, according to Dimmick's [46] niche theory, while SMIs are likely to displace traditional media in certain spheres of gratification, there are other such spheres in which traditional media companies are, and will likely remain, superior to SMIs. Given that it might be relatively difficult for traditional media to transform quickly, it would be beneficial for it and SMIs to work out new ways in which their content can be complementary.

6.3 Limitations

The current study is subject to several limitations. First, it relied on semi-structured interviews and qualitative analysis, and thus was

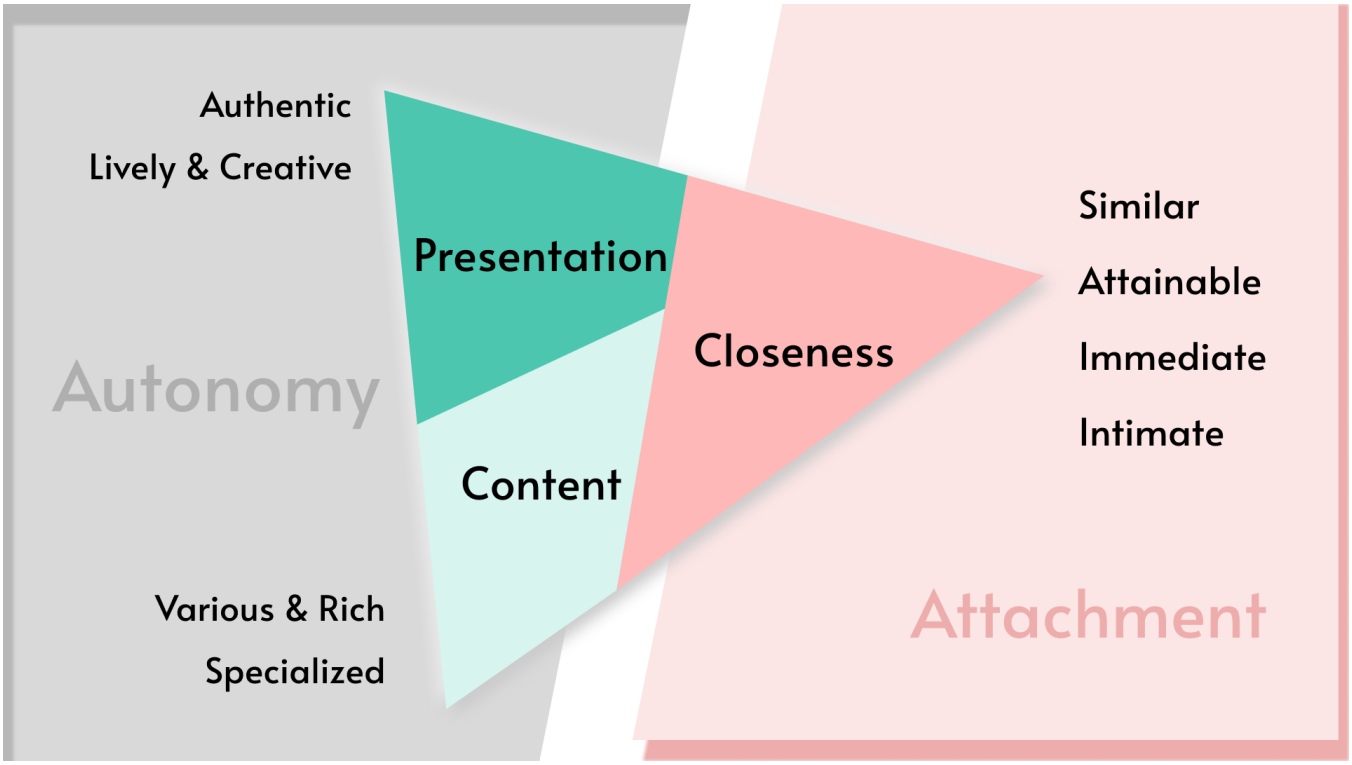

Figure 1: Eight categories of SMIs' appeals that made the interviewees favor their content over traditional media.

not able to quantify the relationship between participants' specific gratifications and particular SMI appeals. Moreover, we are unable to make any assertions about which appeal(s) or characteristics resulted in the rise of specific SMIs, as again, doing so would demand a quantitative approach(e.g. [5, 144]). We therefore recommend that future researchers incorporate quantitative measures into their investigations of audience-SMI relationships.

Second, though we recruited participants with experience of working in traditional media companies, our research team members' knowledge of traditional media production processes was limited. Thus, our interpretations of and recommendations about traditional media output may be naive. Third, our participants were all Taiwanese, and most lived in Taiwan at the time of data collection. Given that country's generally collectivist culture, we are unsure about the extent to which our findings, and especially the importance of closeness appeals, can be generalizable to other, broadly individualist cultures (despite the similarities between our results and previous studies of influencer marketing, many of which were conducted in Western countries). In addition, every platform has different kinds of content and its own unique population of SMIs, but in this study, we could only cover those platforms commonly used in Taiwan. Also, due to our observation that most adolescents in our country lack experience of watching traditional media, and might not have been able to articulate why they chose SMIs over traditional media, we did not include them in our study; yet, research among them might reveal additional SMI appeals that our existing, older participants did not mention. Due to these limitations on generalizability, we encourage future researchers to validate our findings across different countries, platforms, and audience age groups. Fourth, while platform affordances have been long discussed as influencial on media audience's and SMI's choices of media for consuming and delivering their content, respectively, [20, 44, 52, 53, 55, 87, 124, 130, 130], due to our primary focus on the appeal of SMIs and their content, our ability to elaborate on the impact of platform factors on media audience's choices of media is limited. In light of our observation that certain SMI appeals may be more or less prominent due to the presence of specific features (e.g., fostering a sense of intimacy via real-time responses during livestreaming), future research should dig deeper into how platform factors such as support of real-time interaction in livestreaming, of self-presentation [44], and of content recommendations [6, 37, 71, 163] affect audience perceptions of SMIs and their content as appealing.

7 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have presented the results of semi-structured interviews with 45 SMI audience members, which reveal a total of eight aspects of SMIs that made the interviewees favor their content over traditional media. These eight appeals fall into three categories: content, presentation, and closeness. Of these, the former two are closely related to SMIs' high autonomy, which made their content and presentation style seem distinctive from and preferable to those of traditional media; while the latter relates to interpersonal appeals that made our participants feel emotionally attached to SMIs, resulting in sustained engagement.

In light of these results, we conclude that, in the new influencer economy, sustaining engagement is critically important, and demands SMIs' commitment to spending time interacting with and paying attention to their audiences; i.e., it cannot be achieved simply by attracting audience glance. We therefore recommend that traditional media and SMIs both take our results as a reference to enhance these appeals, but stress that it is vital for both these groups to understand their different respective appeals and other advantages from an audience perspective, as this will allow them to coexist profitably in the coming era of the SMI economy.

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