Value co-creation in the digital media landscape

Exploring organizing logic shaped by layered modularity

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Abstract

In a time of pervasive digitalization, technology is constantly reshaping contemporary society. Because digital product architecture allows for unprecedented flexibility in terms of design, production, distribution and use, significant shifts are seen in how firms organize to create value. As disruptive technologies enable novel ways of operating in the media industry, new actors are entering the stage, capitalizing on the affordances associated with digitalization of content. Established in 2013, multi-channel network United Screens build a business around online video creators posting original material to social media platforms such as YouTube, helping them with anything from audience growth to rights management. Connecting content creators with brands looking to market themselves through online video, United Screens provide an illustrative example of how relative positions of new and established actors are changing as an effect of digitalization. Because little research has previously been directed at multi-channel networks, this study set out to explore how United Screens organize themselves and their partnerships to create value in the digital media landscape. By interviewing employees and partners of the company, themes covering roles, offerings, affiliation and control were identified and subsequently discussed in relation to previous knowledge of business logic and digital product architecture. The study provides an empirical illustration of how digitalization enables new ways of creating value, and how this affects organizational arrangements. Concluding that more research is required in the field, the study serves as a starting point for theory generation concerning emergent actors and their organizing logic following pervasive digitalization.

Keywords: Digitalization, value co-creation, organizing logic, layered modularity, platform architecture, multi-channel networks

1. Introduction

In a time of pervasive digitalization\(^1\), technology is constantly reshaping contemporary society, at the same time causing major shifts in the way firms organize and do business (Nylén, 2015; Tilson, Lyytinen & Sørensen, 2010; Yoo, Henfridsson & Lyytinen, 2010). Over the past few decades, the media industry has experienced significant disruptions challenging traditional ways of structuring business, which has paved the way for new actors entering the field.

Broadcast television has traditionally been the natural arena for video-based shows. In the last years, however, the position of linear TV has come to be challenged by new forms of online media (see for example Deloitte, 2015). Especially young viewers are increasingly turning to

\(^1\) Whereas *digitization* usually refers to the process of encoding analog data into digital form, *digitalization* is here used to describe the broader adoption of digital technology and its sociotechnical effects for individuals, organizations, industries and society (Tilson, Lyytinen & Sørensen, 2010).
streaming services like YouTube for video consumption, through which they are given a larger freedom to choose and engage with the material they watch. As people spend more and more time consuming online, short-form content through mobile devices, “video spending is starting to shift from TV to digital” (Vollmer, Blum & Bennin, 2014). In recent years, this change in viewing habits has given rise to new forms of collaboration, where firms for example partner with individual content creators in order to tap into the audiences of the same.

Following this development, new actor categories are emerging, reaping the benefits associated with the new media landscape. As advertising through online video has started to become lucrative, we have seen the advent of so called multi-channel networks, building their business on top of the extensive user bases of digital video platforms by aggregating multiple online channels (Vollmer et al., 2014). Connecting content creators and advertising companies, multi-channel networks aim at optimizing the their partners’ respective businesses, at the same time offering help with anything from video production and audience growth to rights management and education.

Apart from changing viewing habits, a prerequisite for the emergence of multi-channel networks has been the architecture of digital products, enabling new ways of designing, producing, distributing and using technological artifacts (Yoo et al., 2010). Whereas analog data has traditionally instigated tightly coupled layers of devices, networks, services and content, digitalization loosens these couplings, in that allowing for greater flexibility than before (ibid.). For example, broadcast television has historically left little or no control to its viewers, who have been bound to consume certain shows, produced by media corporations and distributed by service providers, at specific times and through dedicated devices. In contrast, platforms like YouTube allow people to watch video material when and how they like, as well as create their own content and share it for others to view.

By loosening the couplings between product layers, digitalization allows for new ways of doing business. Enabling collaborative and distributed innovation, the digital landscape causes shifts in how control is distributed across different actors, in that giving birth to novel ways of organizing (Yoo et al., 2010). Although the relationship between digitalization and organizational performance has received widespread attention (see for example Chesbrough, 2010; Kohli & Grover, 2008), little academic research has been directed specifically at how certain emergent actors organize for value-creation in the digitalized media landscape, and it is therefore of large interest to begin exploring how multi-channel networks structure their business. Hence, the research question is: How does a multi-channel network organize for value-creation in a digitalized environment?

In order to answer the research question, an explorative case study has been conducted. By interviewing employees and partners of Swedish multi-channel network United Screens, the researcher has sought to explore the emergent business logic of new actors operating in the digital media landscape. In the upcoming sections, related research, research context and methodology are presented, followed by findings revolving around three themes; key roles and offerings, organizing affiliation and dispersion of control. Based on these themes, the results
are discussed in relation to previous research, in the end leading up to a number of conclusions focusing the emergent business logic of new actors capitalizing on digitalization of media. Finally, the study points to a need for more research to be conducted in the field while suggesting possible themes to explore.

2. Related research and research context

In this section, research related to the object of study is presented along with a description of the context of research. First, business logic in the digital era is described, covering aspects related to the emergence of ecosystems of platforms and social media networks. Second is a depiction of digital product architecture and the effects it has for value-creation in the contemporary media landscape. Third and finally, the specific context of multi-channel networks is portrayed, explaining the rationale for such businesses emerging.

2.1 Business logic in the digital era

The emergence of information technologies has amplified academic as well as practical interest in business models and organizational structures (Agarwal & Sambamurthy, 2002). As pervasive digitalization enables new opportunities for firms to gain strategic and competitive advantages, they must organize themselves in ways that nurture innovation (ibid.). This requires them to revisit their organizing logic, being the “rationale for designing and evolving specific organizational arrangements in response to an enterprise’s environmental and strategic imperatives” (Sambamurthy & Zmud, 2000, p. 107), or, put differently, “the structuring of internal parts of the firm; its organizational design, and the influence that relationships with external parties, especially customers, have on the design” (Alajoutsijärvi, Mainela, Salminen & Ulkuniemi, 2012, p. 78).

Historically, significant attention has been devoted to how firms organize their activities and structure themselves in relation to acquisition, deployment and management of IT (Sambamurthy & Zmud, 2000). In the 1980s and 1990s, debates revolved around the virtues associated with centralized, decentralized and federal modes of administration; however such concepts seem inadequate when looking at contemporary society and practice (ibid.). As IT has become increasingly integral to and integrated in organizations, “enabling rapid and continual business innovation in products, services, channels, and supply and demand chain management” (Agarwal & Sambamurthy, 2002, p. 2), firms of today are more of ecosystems of partnerships than separate corporate units. An ecosystem in this case can be described as a technological environment building on symbiotic relationships that are continuously reshaped to create reciprocal value for its members, where actors simultaneously compete and cooperate with each other (Selander, Henfridsson & Svahn, 2013). This aligns with an increasingly large interest in open innovation, as well as with what Scott (2015, p. 106) describes as the development of an open systems view focusing “the complexity and variability of the parts - both individual and subgroups - as well as the looseness of connections among them”.

3
Hand in hand with the movement towards ecosystems of interconnected organizations and increasingly open digital innovation efforts goes the development of platforms (Nylén & Holmström, 2015). In technology and innovation management research, a platform is usually described as a modular technological architecture (Baldwin & Clark, 2000; Gawer, 2014), partitioning a system into “(1) a set of components whose design is stable and (2) a complementary set of components which are allowed - indeed encouraged - to vary” (Baldwin & Woodard, 2008, p. 21). The combination of these components allows for on the one hand a robust foundation that remains solid over time, and on the other variability in the sense that novelty can be created without the development of entirely new systems. Because of this architecture, and unlike traditional standalone software, platforms allow for different actors to connect to larger communities with “skills and an appreciation of user needs that platform owners might not possess - to creatively develop new capabilities unforeseeable by the platform’s original designers” (Tiwana, Konynski & Bush, 2010, p. 675). For example, Apple owes much of its success to the third-party developers using the iPhone platform and its boundary resources to develop novel applications (Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2013).

In the last decade, we have seen a rapid diffusion and adoption of what is usually referred to as social media. Building on Internet-based platforms, tools like Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube attract hundreds of millions of people by supporting interpersonal communication and collaboration, and according to Kane, Alavi, Labianca and Borgatti (2014, p. 275), “application [of social media] for organizational purposes, including marketing and knowledge management, has only just begun”. By connecting diverse groups of people in two-sided networks, allowing for firms to harness external competences, social media platforms are challenging conventional conceptions of firm boundaries (Arvidsson & Holmström, 2013), thereby opening up for new sources of product and process innovation (Selander et al., 2013). At the same time, platform-enabled collaboration gives rise to a conflict regarding how to balance control and external contribution (Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2013), and in order to fully understand the complexity of such collaboration, it is necessary to explore the mesh of social processes and technical artifacts that platform-enabled networks embody (Tilson, Sorensen & Lyytinen, 2013).

Following the proliferation of digital platforms and social media networks, new actor categories are emerging. In a three-year case study, Vaast, Davidson and Mattson (2013, p. 1070) explored the role that technology bloggers have come to play for traditional fields having “gained the attention of established actors such as technology firms and journalists”. Based on the insight that widespread use of new media is changing the relative positions of established and new actors, they conclude that such media provide vast opportunities for organizations as well as individuals to partake in public and private discourses by diminishing the technological barriers to access (ibid.). Because of the “transition to increasingly digitized and modularized design and production practices, coupled with the availability of very-low-cost, Internet-based communication” (Baldwin & von Hippel, 2011, p. 1399), the new media landscape has significant implications for organizing logic in the digital era, where value-creation is no longer
restricted to producers but of an increasingly distributed and collaborative character (Gawer, 2014).

### 2.2 Digital product architecture

To more specifically theorize the IT artifact (Orlikowski & Iacono, 2001) in relation to organizing logic, this thesis draws on a framework based on what has been termed the layered modular architecture (see Figure 1). By allowing for greater flexibility than before, Yoo et al. (2010) argue that this architecture, building on four loosely coupled layers of devices, networks, services and contents, drastically changes the way firms create value. Here, the device layer is separated into two elements of on the one hand physical components such as computer hardware, and on the other logical capabilities like operating systems, where the latter connects the former to other layers. Similarly, the network layer is constituted by physical transport via cables and transmitters, as well as logical transport made possible by network standards like the TCP/IP protocol. More visible to end users is the service layer, handling functionality that enables creation and consumption of digital content, as well as the contents layer, referring to the data being created and consumed, for example in the form of text, image or video (ibid.). Whereas analog data instigate tight couplings between the layers described above, digitalization loosens these couplings, in that opening up for a more flexible approach to product design, production, distribution and use (Yoo et al., 2010). Traditionally, broadcast television has been firmly connected with (1) specific services and channels provided and governed by media corporations, (2) distribution by air or cable, enabled by transmitters and receivers converting radio wave signals into perceptible audio and video or cables made of for example copper and fiber optics, and (3) physical devices, i.e. television sets, along with their logical interfaces. In contrast, platforms like YouTube allow for novel arrangements by drawing on the benefits associated with digitalization of media. Here, video content is consumed through a number of different services including websites, applications and extensions, and distributed via different online networks with the help of Internet protocols, routers etcetera. Instead of

![Figure 1. The layered modular architecture (Yoo et al., 2010)](imageURL)
requiring users to engage with a certain platform through a specific device, content can be reached and uploaded using a plethora of hardware and operating systems.

Having presented the layered modular architecture, Yoo et al. (2010) argue that digitalization gives rise to what they call doubly distributed networks. By allowing for external actors to expand the functionality of products, they claim, layered modular products are distributed in the sense that “the primary source of value creation is the generativity that comes from the unbounded mix-and-match capability of heterogeneous resources across layers”, and doubly so because “control over product components is distributed across different firms” while “product knowledge is distributed across heterogeneous disciplines and communities” (ibid., p. 730).

Operating in the digital landscape, firms should invest in platform solutions that cater to the emergence of multi-sided markets and support in building dynamic ecosystems in order to maximize the generative benefits associated with the layered modular architecture (Yoo et al., 2010). Following the loosening of couplings between product layers, actors today simultaneously rival and complement each other; for example, Apple and Google directly compete with their iOS and Android devices and operating systems. At the same time, Apple’s iPhone is a significant component for Google’s search services, and Google Maps an important service on the iPhone platform. Because of such simultaneous competition and coexistence, actors “drawing on doubly distributed networks as the organizing logic need to consider how to distribute organizational control in a new way and how to cope with the increased heterogeneity of knowledge resources” (ibid., p. 732) stemming from multiple and oftentimes conflicting goals and strategies.

The layered modular architecture and the doubly distributed networks it is said to instigate provide a lens for understanding organizational configurations and relationships in the contemporary media landscape. Building on the findings presented by Yoo et al. (2010), this thesis seeks to extend theories of business logic and generate insights into how new actors operate in multi-sided markets enabled by platform architecture and social media networks.

2.3 Research context

Linear television is increasingly losing ground to new forms of digital media (Deloitte, 2015). As of 2015, 53% of all video consumption among people aged 16-34 occurred through smartphones, tablets and laptops (Ericsson, 2015), and the number continues to grow. Launched in 2005, Google-owned video-sharing platform YouTube is one of the world’s most visited websites, today exceeding one billion users. Hitting 15 billion daily views, YouTube attracts one billion unique visitors each month, in that reaching 40% of the online population (Vollmer et al., 2014). The most subscribed channel on the platform is run by Swedish video game commentator PewDiePie, who, as of April 2016, has over 43 million subscribers and a total of more than 11 billion views (Socialbakers, n.d.). While YouTube was initially intended as a platform for creators to post original content they found worth sharing, it has since then become a platform on which different actors capitalize. Following the drastic increase in online video content - in July 2015, over 400 hours of video was uploaded on YouTube each minute (Statista, n.d.) - firms as well as
individual creators are exploring new ways to organize themselves in order to reap the benefits associated with the contemporary media landscape, and to generate profit based on the same.

The rapid development in online video consumption has paved way for new actors to enter the market (Vollmer et al., 2014). Since the late 2000s, when YouTube creators began to generate considerable revenue from advertisement, there has been a large increase in “entities that affiliate with multiple YouTube channels, often to offer content creators assistance in areas including product, programming, funding, cross-promotion, partner management, digital rights management, monetization/sales, and/or audience development” (Google, n.d.). These entities are generally referred to as multi-channel networks, or MCNs, and help content creators to monetize on their material in exchange for a percentage of the channel’s ad revenue. Multi-channel networks are separate from YouTube and Google, but operate on the YouTube platform by utilizing its technological capabilities (Kozlowski, 2013). Aggregating the content they curate from digital video creators, market-leading networks like Maker Studios and Fullscreen attract billions of views each month (Vollmer et al., 2014).

Established in Sweden in 2013, United Screens currently ranks among the top 75 MCNs worldwide based on their total number of subscribers (Socialblade, n.d.). Partnering with around 450 Swedish, Nordic and international content creators, United Screens is home to influential profiles including gamer Jonas “Sp4zie” Ring, comedian Magnus Betnér and beauty and lifestyle vlogger Therese Lindgren. By supporting their partners and connecting them with advertisers, United Screens is an illustrative example of a company that is born digital, building its business on evolving online platforms and networks. Because little research has previously been devoted to the emergence and business logic of multi-channel networks, it is of large interest to examine how United Screens and their partners organize in relation to the layers of digital product architecture in order to create value. While academic and practical interest has often centered how IT investments enhance organizational performance, contemporary settings call for a focus drawing attention to the structuring of businesses in a dynamic climate where digital technology is interwoven with basically any activity. Furthermore, as previous research has tended to focus large corporations in the media industry, being reflected in the frequent use of the word firm, the increasingly open and distributed character of innovation makes it necessary to investigate the emergence of other actors, like YouTubers, and the role they play for organizing logic in the digital era.

3. Research design

This section addresses the research design guiding the study. In so doing, it addresses the process of data collection and analysis, while discussing methodological limitations of the study. Because of the nature of the study, aiming at generating an understanding of how United Screens and their partners organize for value-creation, a qualitative approach has been adopted. In contrast to a quantitative design, where broader patterns of phenomena are studied and understood through the use of numerical measurements, a qualitative method is better suited for
uncovering the motivations, experiences and perceptions that are of interest in this specific research context (see for example Bryman, 2008). By enhancing richness, depth and nuance (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), a qualitative approach has been deemed the most appropriate for exploring the complex phenomena of organizing logic and value-creation.

### 3.1 Data collection

Seeking to understand and explicate the ways in which multi-channel network United Screens and their partners organize to create value, a total of eight interviews were conducted. Firstly, six employees of the company were interviewed. Three of these interviews were with partner managers, helping YouTubers with everything from choosing video thumbnails and interpreting analytics to establishing and developing collaborations with external companies. The other three interviews were with sales personnel, managing branded content and commercial exposure from a more customer-oriented perspective. The interviews at United Screens took place at the company’s Stockholm office, primarily because the respondents found this to be the most convenient option. Secondly, complementing the interviews conducted at United Screens, two interviews were made with YouTube creators partnering with the company. Each of the eight interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, and although it would have been favorable to speak longer to each informant, practical reasons restrained the time they were able to spare. A summary of the interviews can be found in Table 1.

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<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Team/genre</th>
<th>Respondent</th>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Partnering content creator</td>
<td>Social experiments</td>
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<td>Partnering content creator</td>
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*Table 1. Summary of interviews*
Informed by the aim of the thesis and previous knowledge in the field, selection of interview subjects has been consistently purposive, focusing people’s potential contribution to the study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Sample units have therefore been chosen because of their “particular features or characteristics which ... [to] enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes and puzzles which the researcher wishes to study” (ibid., p. 78). Adopting a semi-structured approach, interviews were guided by a set of questions covering fundamental themes. While ensuring some consistency among the data, this approach allowed the researcher to be flexible (Bryman, 2008); by remaining open throughout the interviews and probing when relevant, interesting and sometimes unanticipated topics could be picked up and elaborated on (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Before interviews were initiated, informants were advised of the ethical aspects associated with participating in the study (see for example Bryman, 2008; Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Having been provided details about the purpose of the thesis, they were informed of data usage, confidentiality and anonymity principles, making them aware that their statements would not be traceable to them as individuals unless otherwise explicitly agreed upon. Knowing that participation could be interrupted at any time, respondents gave their informed consent as well as permission for the researcher to record the interviews. Rather than focusing on extensive note-taking, audio recordings enabled the researcher to fully engage in the conversations, at the same time aiding in subsequent transcription processes. Some notes were also taken to highlight particularly interesting aspects and to acknowledge extra-verbal cues such as body language and gestures.

3.2 Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of transcription and three cycles of coding. Transcription was carried out concurrent with data collection in order to keep the memory of the interviews vivid and to allow for continuous improvements of the interview guide (Bryman, 2008). As all interviews were done in Swedish, so were the transcriptions, meaning that all citations in this thesis are translations of respondents’ statements. In order to account for non-verbal expressions, cues like sighs, laughter, pauses and hesitations were documented together with the spoken words of the informants. Once the data had been transcribed, qualitative content analysis was applied to extract meaning from the raw material (ibid.). Starting with an initial open coding, aiming at running the data open, concentrated characteristics and meaning-bearing units were identified (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Subsequently, selective coding was performed, focusing on sorting and prioritizing codes and generating aggregated categories. Finally, theoretical coding was applied to distinguish relationships between different categories of codes. These analytical procedures made it possible to identify similarities and differences in the data, and allowed the researcher to interpret the material on different levels of abstraction (ibid.).

Throughout the data analysis, an explorative approach was aimed for. However, while seeking to remain open towards the data, analysis was carried out building on the knowledge presented
in sections 2 and 3, acting as a lens for viewing the material. Furthermore, because of the researcher's prior experiences and understanding of the field, a completely objective standpoint would not have been attainable.

3.3 Methodological limitations
As with all qualitative research, a considerable drawback of this study is its lack of generalizability (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Because of the small and targeted research sample, no inferences can be drawn to describe patterns applicable to larger populations, and although generalization has not been the aim of the study, the contributions could potentially have been greater if a larger or different sample had been selected. For example, it would have been valuable to capture additional perspectives by talking to advertising companies partnering with United Screens; however the researcher was unable to gain access to such. Another limitation stems from the fact that the focal organization themselves have proposed participants to be part of the study, and it can therefore be questioned whether the selection of interview subjects has been somewhat skewed towards the interests of the company. Furthermore, the collaborative character of this thesis could potentially be a source of objectivity bias on a more general level, although being aware of this should mitigate the risk of such bias occurring.

Although a semi-structured approach was found to be most suitable for collecting data, it is reasonable to question whether this approach has had a negative impact on the results (Bryman, 2008). While aiming to combine structure and flexibility, it is difficult to balance these two components in a way that allows for both exploration and consistency without making conversations either too open or rigid, and it is therefore possible that other insights would have emerged if another approach had been adopted. The fact that the interviews were recorded may also have inhibited the informants to disclose certain information, and the restricted length of the interviews might have affected conversations negatively as the researcher did not have much time to get to know the respondents or gain their trust (ibid.).

Regarding the analytical procedures, it can be argued that coding of data causes fragmentation of the same, thereby separating it from its context (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). On the other hand, abstraction is necessary in making the collected material manageable, and it is therefore a required step in reaching an analytical understanding. In order to cope with these conflicting views, the researcher has aimed at retaining links to the original data and its contextual properties when coding (ibid.).

4. Findings
This section presents the findings of the empirical research described above. Building on respondents’ views and reflections, the results are separated into three distinct yet interrelated themes associated with value co-creation. First, key roles and offerings of the actors involved are explained. Second, a description of how affiliation is organized is provided, identifying how
collaboration is initiated and executed. Finally, the third theme addresses how control is dispersed among the different actors working together.

4.1 Key roles and offerings

Defining firms like United Screens is far from simple. Because multi-channel networks are a relatively new phenomenon with no obvious equivalents or counterparts, a unified understanding of their business is yet to be established. In order to explore the way United Screens are organized, it is first necessary to define the different roles and offerings of the firm and its partners.

One key capability of United Screens is to act as a link between on the one hand digital content creators posting original material on platforms like YouTube, and on the other companies looking to reach out to certain crowds by marketing themselves through such material. The term content creators, also known as influencers, channel owners and content producers, here refers to the partners of United Screens, creating and posting their own material to YouTube and other social media platforms. Organizations working with United Screens to market their brand through social media channels, on the other hand, are referred to as either customers or advertisers.

By matching and connecting partners and customers, United Screens help advertisers to gain access to the many and targeted followers of influential content creators, while helping their partners to develop, grow and optimize their channels. From a customer point of view, there are essentially two ways of marketing oneself through online video. The first is to purchase pre-rolls, being skippable or non-skippable promotional video messages showing before a clip begins to play. Pre-rolls are practically shorter versions of TV commercials and leave production in the hands of the advertiser. Although YouTube has sophisticated algorithms in place for matching pre-rolls with videos published on the platform, these are not always capable of making ideal decisions. Due to the excessive amount of videos on YouTube, there are situations where matching of pre-rolls and video content are unfortunate; for example, Informant B tells the story of how airline company SAS had their advert rolling before a video showing a plane crash. United Screens make sure that such unfortunate matches do not occur by connecting advertisers with the most appropriate partners, thereby guaranteeing brand safety while increasing the impact of the advertisement. Informant A explains:

This means that you can reach out with your commercial in brand safe environments and on selected premium channels .... You can purchase exposure directly from YouTube, but then you buy from all of YouTube and YouTube has everything so you can find a lot of weird stuff. I mean you can find disgusting food that has been tagged with food, then a food advertiser goes to buy [the tag] food and ends up on those clips. If you go through a premium network then your brand is safe, you know which channels you can end up on and from there you can choose specific channels just like when you go to TV4 and purchase exposure during Idol.
The second way for brands to market themselves through online video platforms is to have content creators utilize or in some other way display products and service in their clips. This way, the exposure is in the actual video that attracts viewers, which requires companies to collaborate with content creators and let go of some of the control they have traditionally had of how their brand is portrayed. This kind of marketing is called branded content, and has a significant benefit compared to broadcast video advertisement; streaming media allows for companies to gear their marketing towards specific audiences. By being on platforms like YouTube, where information is collected about viewer demographics, advertisers can target their messages to certain crowds and fine-tune them based on the people they reach;

*In contrast to television, where you have like your spot ... I mean you decide that yourself but you have no idea who's watching. On YouTube, I mean we can steer everything towards registered users so we know exactly where they live, how old they are, their sex and everything, which enables you to really aim your campaigns at the specific target you're after. (Informant B)*

*With these channels, people go there because they want to .... That way, if I am to sell a fishing rod, and there is this channel talking about this rod or has, say I have commercials about this rod, then only people interested in fishing will see it. (Informant E)*

This means that brands can be much more specific in their marketing approaches and tailor them to fit certain purposes, at the same time allowing them to follow up their efforts almost immediately. Like Informant F says, you are able to see comments, likes and other kinds of reactions only a minute after a video goes live. This direct feedback along with analytics covering viewer habits and demographics provide a clear picture of what customers actually pay for when buying online video exposure, and a part of United Screens’ offering is to collect and evaluate such insights. Since YouTube productions are also cheap and easy to make, marketers do not have to stick with one single way to advertise their brand;

*If you broadcast to four million Swedes, and have this message like go buy Gevalia coffee, then you have to make that message appeal to as many of them as possible, otherwise it will be money wasted, right. With streaming media you don’t need to have one message, you can have ten different messages in different channels, and they don’t have to overlap. (Informant E)*

From a partner’s perspective, United Screens offer expertise in anything from channel development and audience growth to content production and digital rights. Being YouTube specialists, their aim is to help their partners with everything concerning the platform, and in exchange for a part of the ad revenue, they help YouTubers increase their income by optimizing their channels. For some content creators, this means partnering with external companies
looking to market themselves with the help of YouTubers, while for others it can be about completely different things:

Because all of our partnerships are very customized depending on the needs of the specific partner, it’s like, if I talk to a partner who needs a lot of rights-related work, then that’s what I’ll highlight but maybe if it’s more about content and commercial collaborations, then that will be what I focus and help with. (Informant D)

Whereas practically all of United Screens’ 450 partners work with pre-rolls in order to maximize their revenue, around 25% of them do branded content collaborations. Regardless of the reasons for being part of the network, the benefits are often associated with the security of having a knowledgeable expert that can offer guidance in whatever questions may arise in relation to online video. Apart from audio and visual rights management, United Screens can help with areas like idea generation, content development, studio production, platform education and administration. In cases where partners want to do branded content collaborations with external companies, they also make sure that such processes are being handled professionally and in ways that are beneficial for all actors involved:

We come in as a kind of expertise in regards to the platform and how to work with, like what influencer is suitable for what [kind of collaboration]. We also warrant that this is handled professionally and that it’s done in the right way by managing these projects, and we make sure that our influencers are never treated bad or paid too little …. We act as some sort of guiding light in all this. (Informant E)

Content creators confirm the benefits of working together with a multi-channel network. If they want to do external collaborations, they do not have to chase such opportunities themselves, and because they know their partners, United Screens can handle requests from companies wanting to initiate affiliation. That way, their partners can focus on what is important to them instead of dealing with administrative tasks or evaluating incoming proposals:

We have our partner manager who handles everything in case it’s something we’re unsure of, he’s available 24/7. He helps us with negotiations, with equipment, there is a studio. Yeah, everything, they solve it and spare us the hassle, like invoicing and shit, that’s just gone. They take care of it and we don’t have to think as much, we can just focus on being creative and yeah, they get paid for doing it... Of course. They get exposure through us and we’re kind of a flagship for them. (Informant G)

Most of the time United Screens contact me when they have a brand that fits my target group and my audience and maybe wants to do humor and be a bit funny, then they reach out to me and say we have this company, they wanna do this and this and then I decide if I want to go with it. I get a brief saying do this or don’t do that, which I approve or reject. From there I write a synopsis, like a loose manuscript, if they approve it I go to do the real one. Then I publish it .... It’s usually
a really quick process …. It’s quite a procedure to talk about what’s okay and what’s not and they do it for you, then when it’s done they contact you. It’s really nice not having to email back and forth. (Informant H)

In conclusion, the offerings of United Screens are manifold, and their role differs depending on who they work with. Therefore, one of their key capabilities is to constantly adapt to new situations and adjust their business to fit the needs of their partners and customers.

4.2 Organizing affiliation

Internally, collaboration is managed by five divisions at United Screens; sales, partner management, project management, production and rights management. The sales team handles everything connected to external customers looking to market themselves through platforms like YouTube. This includes selling their services to new clients, dealing with incoming requests and taking care of established collaborations. When United Screens was first established, they tried to sell complete concepts, however they soon realized that this is not an ideal strategy. Instead, they had to tailor their approach completely based on the specific client and their goals.

Much of the sales work consists of reaching out to different companies and teach them about the benefits of online video marketing and how it is beneficial compared to broadcast media advertisement. However, firms are slowly realizing that TV commercials are no longer as effective as they once were, and that there are other options for reaching out with video content. It turns out that there is no outspoken strategy for how to identify potential customers, but there are certain traits that are considered to be a good starting point:

We try to find advertisers that we feel like, believe in YouTube so to speak. I mean, companies who get it, and that’s like, necessary. Everyone we work with once dared to take the leap, so the firms we do business with are maybe a bit braver than others. (Informant B)

While sales efforts were initially focused on encouraging companies to do online video marketing at all, today they are just as geared towards matching incoming requests with potential partners: “[a] normal procedure is that we receive a brief, and then based on that brief, we are to find like, someone reaching 15-25 year old girls that could be interested in this, then we present these proposals” (Informant E). Similarly, if there is an idea about a concept that a partner would like to do, the task is to match that concept with a potential customer.

The second division handling affiliation is the partner management team, dealing with everything concerning their partnering content creators. There is no fixed strategy for how partnerships are initiated or managed; rather these processes depend on the character of the affiliation. In general, there are two ways partners are enrolled to United Screens; either the organization reaches out to content creators they deem have large potential, or content creators contact United Screens requesting to be part of their network for one or several reasons. In the former case, a dedicated recruiter approaches the potential partner, asking to set up a meeting to
discuss what United Screens can offer, and in the latter, a qualitative assessment is made to evaluate the prospective partnership. Informant D tells that the number of partners is more or less irrelevant to United Screens; instead, they prioritize working with selected partners to which they deliver top-quality services. The partners, in turn, must be dedicated and motivated:

We don't work with anyone. We have to see some sort of potential, but ... even if a person has one hundred subscribers, and another ten thousand, we can still see potential in the one with one hundred. It's clear that those who make it are the ones who are enduring, who keep making videos .... It's obvious that they want to do this and that they want to continue growing. (Informant B)

While United Screens work with relatively few selected partners, they also aim at reaching a broad audience. By covering genres including food, music, beauty, gaming, fitness and parenting, they want to attract a diverse crowd of viewers:

Working with selected partners lets us widen our reach, both interest-wise and age-wise. Traditionally, like when YouTube was launched, everyone thought it was all about cats on skateboards and shit like that, and only that. We work really hard with promoting premium content on YouTube, not only for ages 15-20 but 15-35, at least. (Informant C)

Every partner of United Screens has their own partner manager. Partner managers help content creators with everything from choosing the best thumbnail for a video to handling branded content collaborations, and ensure that all affiliations are initiated and executed professionally. They also match incoming collaboration requests from advertisers with content creators that fit the genre and who have expressed interest in working with branded content. In essence, a partner manager's job is to help partners optimize their channels and to act in their best interests, making certain that they are not harmed or taken advantage of.

Tying sales and partner management together is the project management team. Their function is to act as a mediating link between customers and partners, assuring that collaborations live up to the expectations of all actors involved:

The aim of the project managers is to make a great deal. That means catering to the needs of both a partner but also an advertiser to make both parties satisfied. It's important that we as partner managers don’t try to affect this and that sales don’t either. A project manager is completely neutral in finding the best combination. (Informant D)

The main task of the project managers is to mediate between the parties and assure they share a mutual understanding of the campaign they work with. Depending on the character of the collaboration, project management can play a significant role, for example in terms of handling questions or disagreements regarding the tone and language to be used in a specific context, but this is not always necessary:
How much the project manager does differs. Sometimes we play a smaller part, other times we play a huge one. The same goes for the production team, sometimes they film and edit and deal with audio and lights and everything like that, so it differs a lot. It's impossible to say what one role we play, it's always different. (Informant D)

In the quote above, Informant D mentions the production team, being involved in cases where customers and partners wish to receive help with aspects related to the actual making of a video. Similarly, rights management can be extensively involved if campaigns require intense rights-related work; however this is not always the case. A simplified illustration of the actors and divisions involved in affiliations is presented in Figure 2. Here, lines represent the most fundamental relationships, but as respondents make clear, these relationships are fluid in the sense that they constantly change to fit their dynamic context. As several respondents point out, everyone at United Screens is a little bit of everything, and it turns out that there are few fixed strategies for how work is arranged and conducted. Informant E adds: “[i]t's not like McDonald’s. We don’t have one person cooking the fries, another one handling checkout and a third one doing something else. We continuously learn how things can be done”.

![Figure 2. Illustration of actors and divisions involved in affiliations](image-url)
4.3 Dispersion of control

Whereas firms previously used to control almost every element involved in the marketing of their brands, the emergence of digital platforms and social media networks is drastically changing the rules of advertising. Although word of mouth has always had a large impact on how organizations are perceived, digital and interactive media platforms allow for unprecedented opportunities in terms of reaching out to people by allowing anyone to upload and share material. For example, firms have traditionally governed and regulated the exact wording used to describe their products through advertisements, as well as the channels and services used to distribute their messages. However, in a time where single individuals with basically no resources can reach out to millions, companies choose to partner with content creators in order to tap into the audiences of the same. In doing so, they automatically transfer some of the control they have traditionally had to the content creator conveying the message. The most important aspect in this process is for companies to let the content creators take control, and realize that this is necessary in order to achieve successful results:

Many customers want to be involved the whole way, and they can, however they cannot control the influencer. If someone comes with a manuscript, like here’s what they should say, then I tell them that we simply don’t work that way. And they’re starting to get that now but it’s still, marketing managers are scared, being used to decide everything themselves. (Informant E)

What you’re after is organic reach, an organic match with the viewer. That’s what the customer wants and to achieve that, the video has to be believable. They have to let the partners do it the way they want to, otherwise it won’t work. What we do is try to make them understand that this relationship is fundamental - you can record a traditional video commercial with a YouTuber and push it out in how many impressions you like, but it won’t have the same effect. (Informant C)

Because content creators know their viewers, in the end they should have the final say when designing campaigns. Because they make a living off of online video, and because their followers know their style and tone, it is essential for channel owners to stay true to themselves. As one respondent says, if a YouTubers speak of new brands every day, or if they promote hamburgers despite being vegans, they lose trustworthiness as well as followers.

We can’t have some posh PR agency telling Sp4zie what to say or do in his videos. They don’t know his audience, they don’t know his tone. They know nothing so they shouldn’t be there. They can be creative around a lot of stuff but not around his content, around his channel .... All of our partners who have become successful, there’s nothing as important as their viewers; they’d never do anything to upset them. (Informant E)
The content creators interviewed say that this can be frustrating to advertisers at times, however they usually understand when they are presented with the arguments: “at first they object but then we explain to them, and they have to understand that we are experts on our platform, then you always have to compromise” (Informant G). Concerning Unites Screen’s share of control, Informant A describes it as simultaneously large and small. Considering their involvement in forming concepts in terms of number of videos, profile, theme and line of argument, they do control some aspects of a campaign, however not as much as partners or advertising brands:

*We make sure everything works, what we actually control is the beginning of a campaign where we match brands with content creators. When it comes to content, we can come up with ideas but it always boils down to what advertisers and partners want to do and achieve. (Informant F)*

In contrast to traditional media, online video can be said to challenge hierarchical structures. By allowing for anyone with a smartphone to record content and upload it on different online platforms, services like YouTube require no such thing:

*For TV, there has always been a program director deciding what people should watch at eight on Thursday evenings, and record labels have had A&Rs deciding what everyone should listen to this fall... They have controlled this, but they no longer own the distribution. And if they don’t own the distribution, why should you go with them? Two years ago, I met a production company saying that 30 minutes of recorded material costs half a million, everyone knows that, that’s standard. Well yeah, but Sp4zie records with his webcam and reaches more viewers than your entire season of Let’s Dance .... He doesn’t need you to reach out with his material; an artist doesn’t need a record label. Previously you needed a record label to sell records on the other side of the globe; you needed them to print your CDs and you needed them to transport your CDs by some tired truck, through smog and out to a shop that has someone who sells stuff and pays the rent. That’s not necessary today, I upload my video or my song through a mouse click, if it’s good enough there’s nothing saying that I can’t reach 20 million streams. There are no gatekeepers anymore. (Informant E)*

In an environment where access to content and decision-making is democratized, businesses must adapt to shifting power relations. A reason United Screens have managed to grow a successful business lies in the fact that they are a startup:

*Because we are a small and young, we have been able to view things differently than record labels or TV4, and we have been able to build an organization based on new conditions where creators have a reach of their own. Everyone working with this has to adjust their splits and business models based on this new reality, and that’s tough for an organization with a turnover of 4.5 billion in television - they can’t translate it or re-organize. It’s not the big that eat the small; it’s the fast that...*
eat the slow. We have built a completely different kind of organization that is much more beneficial for the creator and that’s our advantage. (Informant E)

It is becoming very clear that agility and adaptability are key components in United Screens’ business. Rather than formulating detailed strategies or designing advanced organizational configurations, their focus is to remain open towards dynamic conditions and relationships. As an effect, their focus today is directed at YouTube because it is the most prominent platform in terms of reach, rights and monetization. However, respondents make clear that they are where their partners are, or would want to be, meaning that they are likely to become more focused on other platforms as competition increases. By being receptive to change, and by embracing emergent technologies, tools and behaviors, United Screens continue to create value together with their partners.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to begin exploring how multi-channel networks and their partners partake in value co-creation. In this section, the findings are discussed in relation to the research presented in sections 2 and 3. In so doing, the author first relates the emergence of multi-channel networks to the affordances associated with digitalization. Next, it is discussed how organizational configurations and partnerships are arranged in order to create value in the digital media landscape. By connecting the empirical data to previous knowledge about business logic and digital product architecture, the thesis takes a first step towards understanding and theorizing multi-channel networks and their relationships to their partners.

It is clear that multi-channel networks benefit from the increased flexibility that digital product architecture instigates (Yoo et al., 2010). Specializing in open platforms like YouTube, United Screens are born digital, and can be said to exist thanks to the effects that digitalization bring about. Unlike traditional, broadcast media, the digital material United Screens work with requires no specific hardware or operating systems to function but can be viewed on any modern device, and standardized formats and protocols make online video available to practically anyone with an Internet connection. This enables individual content creators to compete with large corporations reaching massive audiences, and gives rise to a myriad of services related to creation, distribution and consumption of video material. Following this development, advertising companies choose to partner with influential content creators, causing three significant changes to the contents layer of digital video. First, as data is collected about viewers, online video can be customized and targeted towards specific audiences. Second, as online video is generally both cheaper and easier to make, more videos can be produced, thereby allowing for messages to be expanded reaching different target groups. Third, as online video allows for instant and interactive dialog around material, content can be adapted and improved as the creator receives feedback and gets to know the viewers.

Thanks to the increased flexibility stemming from digitalization of video, United Screens and their partners harness many of the affordances associated with platform architecture. Working
with open and interactive platforms like YouTube, they are given a large degree of freedom and variability in terms of content, at the same time having a robust and well-functioning environment that either content creators or their business partners have to give much thought to. Like Baldwin and Woodard (2008) contend, this combination allows for different actors to create novelty while relying on solid systems, that in turn benefit from having engaging material being uploaded to their digital library (Tiwana et al., 2010). Although a somewhat different example, belonging to the service layer, this is comparable to the way Ghazawneh and Henfridsson (2013) argue that third-party application developers are extending the offerings of the iPhone platform.

On a similar note, the social nature of media-sharing platforms like YouTube allow for different actors to connect around content in new ways, something that United Screens and their partners exemplify very well. Whereas advertising has traditionally been characterized by highly linear relationships, the interactivity of social media networks allows for new sorts of configurations, thereby challenging traditional roles of companies and consumers. As different actors can easier connect to each other, new opportunities emerge in terms of value co-creation, at the same time challenging traditional conceptions of firm boundaries (Selander et al., 2013).

The proliferation of digital platforms and social media networks is changing perceptions of how different crowds are best reached, and similar to the tech bloggers referred to in section 2, individual content creators are starting to be recognized as important players in the market. Vaast et al. (2013) contend that this causes shifts in positions of new and established actors; a claim that is strongly supported by the respondents describing how companies are gradually taking a step back, acknowledging the expertise of channel owners and platform specialists. As the findings reveal, control over content, production and distribution is no longer a matter for companies only, which goes well with the emergence of what Yoo et al. (2010) term doubly distributed networks. Drawing on the generativity that modular product architecture enables, such networks distribute control of product components across different actors and expand product knowledge across different disciplines and communities. This causes what Selander et al. (2013) call coopetition, where different actors simultaneously compete and coexist. The study shows that such coopetitive relationships are common in the case of multi-channel networks, where partnering actors constantly negotiate and reshape their respective value propositions in relation to one another.

Building their business on constantly evolving relationships to others, United Screens is an empirical example of the movement from isolated firms to interconnected actors forming reciprocally value-creating ecosystems (Selander et al., 2013). As Scott (2015) points out, this movement requires organizations to emphasize the complexity and variability that these systems instigate, two aspects being highly prominent throughout the empirical data. As it turns out, employees of United Screens are reluctant to speak in terms of systematic strategies; rather they highlight how different activities call for different methods and configurations. Similarly, several respondents point to the fact that although everyone in the company has a certain role, this role can vary greatly depending on the work at hand.
Because of changes in technology, perception, behavior and control, multi-channel networks are able to grow successful businesses focusing the needs of digital content creators, where two of the most important capabilities are adaptability and agility. Contrary to the researcher’s preconceptions, United Screens have few fixed strategies for arranging and structuring partnerships; instead they focus on handling all partnerships in the best way possible depending on the specific context. By working with a number of loosely defined departments and roles with dynamic goals and responsibilities, United Screens are continuously learning by doing, trying to find the best configurations based on real-time conditions.

According to Yoo et al. (2010), actors drawing on the doubly distributed networks enabled by digitalization must find strategies to deal with distribution of control following the large heterogeneity of knowledge resources. However, based on the findings of this study, it is reasonable to ask the question: is the best strategy, perhaps, to not have a strategy at all? Are the chances of remaining agile and responsive to new opportunities better if step-by-step instructions and manuals for how to create value are avoided? Not locking in certain processes, but encouraging them to vary depending on situation, is likely improving the odds of remaining competitive as newer and even less tradition-bound actors and technologies emerge. In order to create value in a dynamic climate, it is essential to be able to continuously reshape roles and offerings, and doing so is presumably a lot easier if organizational configurations are not firmly fixed.

In the case of United Screens, organizing logic and strategies are subject to constant change. Because the company is by no means an isolated island but part of a larger and highly dynamic ecosystem aggregating different types of knowledge, their business is dependent and shaped by external actors and services. Based on this, it is possible that conventional conceptions of organizational configurations are insufficient when looking at new actors drawing on doubly distributed networks, and it is therefore necessary to deeper engage with this subject of study.

**6. Conclusion**

The main contribution of this thesis is a starting point for theory generation concerning emergent actors and their organizing logic following pervasive digitalization. By exploring the ways in which United Screens together with their partners create value in the digital media landscape, this study provides a much needed stepping stone for future studies focusing multi-channel networks. By exploring the relationships between United Screens and their partners, an initial understanding of multi-channel networks is starting to take form, thereby paving the way for further research in the field.

The study exemplifies how digital product architecture enables new ways for firms as well as individual actors to create value. As digitalization largely impacts how video content is produced, distributed and perceived, significant changes are seen in how traditional roles and positions are arranged. This development calls for new ways to describe and conceptualize business strategy that cater to the emergence of new actor categories, and in order to understand how
contemporary settings affect digital innovation, more research must engage with actors like multi-channel networks and individual content creators.

The study also shows that conventional conceptions of strategy might be insufficient when looking at actors like United Screens. In order to stay competitive in the highly flexible and complex environment that digitalization creates, the most important capabilities are agility and adaptability. As conditions and relationships are constantly reshaped, it appears reasonable to focus on remaining open towards changing contexts rather than designing advanced organizational configurations or strategies.

Having identified themes related to roles, offerings, affiliation and control as significant for value creation in the digital era, these topics should be further explored in order to create an understanding of how these aspects and mechanisms work on a deeper level. Furthermore, it is necessary to extend these themes to cover other aspects as well. Due to the complexity associated with the field of study, this thesis has only just begun to establish an understanding of multi-channel networks. To fully comprehend the sociotechnical mesh of processes shaping how new actors create value in the digital era, it is important to study more contexts; partly other multi-channel networks and content creators, but also different actors, for example companies marketing themselves through online video.

In order to be more specific about the actual effects of multi-channel networks, quantitative and observational studies would be beneficial to complement the more subjective views that this study is based on. To widen the scope of this kind of research, it would also be valuable to use different framings in studying multi-channel networks. It is, for instance, possible that other frameworks than the layered modular architecture would have been equally or more beneficial in terms of reaching a theoretical understanding of the empirical data.
References


Appendix 1: Interview guide, United Screens

Interview guide: United Screens employees

Initial questions

- How long have you been working for United Screens?
- Why did you start working at United Screens? Can you describe your background and previous positions?
- What is your role at United Screens? What responsibilities do you have?

Organization and value-creation

- Can you describe United Screens as an organization? What roles and divisions are there internally? What are the main responsibilities of your team and do you have any specific strategies for how you work?
- How do you define your organization to others? Can you describe your view of your business and the offerings you provide?
- How do you differentiate from other, perhaps more traditional companies in the media industry?
- What differentiates you from other multi-channel networks?
- What does the process usually look like when you initiate collaborations with content creators and/or advertisers? Who initiates a collaboration and for what reasons?
- On what premises do you build your collaborations? Do you look for certain characteristics among your partners? Do you have specific strategies in place for initiating collaborations?
- Can you describe the different kinds of collaborations you have with advertising brands and/or content creators and the role you play in these collaborations?
- How do you connect advertising brands with content creators? Do you have any guidelines for how this is carried out?
- What role do you play in terms of design and production of the content that channel owners and advertising brands create and distribute? To what extent do you partake in the production and distribution of this material?
- How has the management of collaborations and partnerships evolved over time?
- How would you describe the collaborations between content creators and advertising brands? Is there usually a shared understanding of what is to be achieved, or can there at times be incongruences regarding expectations and outcomes?
- Generally, how do companies perceive advertising through digital and social media channels? Is it something they prioritize or do they focus their efforts on more traditional types of media exposure? Has this changed over time?
Appendix 1: Interview guide, United Screens

- How do creators generally perceive working with advertising brands? Is it a large part of their business or one of many ways of monetizing on the content they create? Has this changed over time?

Final questions

- Would it be okay to contact you if any further questions arise?
- How would you like to be referred to in the thesis?
Interview guide: content creators

Initial questions

- How long have you been publishing original content to social media channels?
- How would you describe your channel? How has it evolved over time?
- For what reasons did you establish your channel?
- Are the reasons for running the channel the same today, or have they changed over time?

Organization and value-creation

- Can you describe the ways in which you collaborate with external companies and/or organizations?
- How are collaborations usually established? Who initiates them and why, and what does the process usually look like?
- What types of collaboration do you prefer to do and why? What kinds of collaboration would you not agree to do?
- How have the collaborations you do changed over time since you started your channel?
- When did you connect to United Screens and for what reasons?
- How would you describe your partnership with United Screens? In what ways do you and United Screens help each other?
- What role does United Screens play for the collaborations you do with advertising brands?
- How do you manage your channel today compared to when you were not part of United Screens’ network?
- How do you work with content design and production; what does the process look like when you create material? Who partakes in this process?
- What is your general experience of working with advertising brands? In which ways do they influence you and the content you publish? To what extent do they want to be part of the design of your content?
- Do you do collaborations beyond your partnership with United Screens? If yes, can you please describe them?
- What does your media presence look like in different channels? How do collaborations vary across different platforms? Are there actors similar to United Screens that you partner with for certain purposes? If not, would such actors be of help to you?
- What do you think your channel will look like in the future? How do you think external collaborations will evolve over time?
Appendix 2: Interview guide, content creators

Final questions

- Would it be okay to contact you if any further questions arise?
- How would you like to be referred to in the thesis?