Services Marketing Quarterly

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/wsmq20

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To cite this article: Linda D. Hollebeek, Johan Anselmsson, Karina Adomaviciute-Sakalauske, Kristo Krumm, Johan Jansson, Marius Wait, Beewah Ooi, Iivi Riivits-Arkonsuo & Isolde Lubbe (2024) Online Content Creators' and Viewers' Interdependent Journeys, Services Marketing Quarterly, 45:3, 296-318, DOI: 10.1080/15332969.2024.2364128

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15332969.2024.2364128

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Published online: 20 Jul 2024.

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SERVICES MARKETING QUARTERLY
2024, VOL. 45, NO. 3, 296–318
https://doi.org/10.1080/15332969.2024.2364128

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Online Content Creators' and Viewers' Interdependent Journeys

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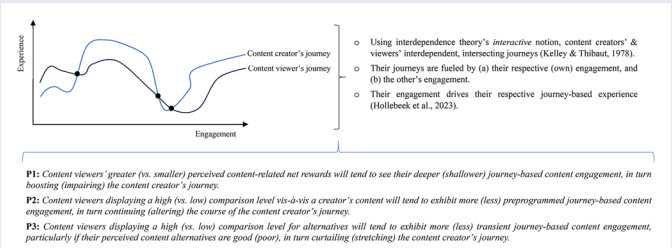
ABSTRACT

The creator economy features a pertinent, growing role of content creators and -viewers, revealing this service sub-sector's rising economic, and strategic, contribution. In parallel, though the customer/stakeholder journey concepts are gaining traction, little is known about the *interdependence* characterizing online content creators' and viewers' (users') engagement through their respective role-related journeys, as, therefore, explored further in this article. Building on prior literature, we argue that the unfolding of a content viewer's journey with a creator's content is fueled by the former's engagement in their content-related interactions, in turn *also* impacting the content creator's journey. To explore these issues, we adopt interdependence theory's core *interactional* tenets (i.e., perceived interaction outcomes [i.e., costs/rewards], comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives) and theorize regarding their respective effect on viewers' journey-based content engagement. We posit that viewers' engagement also impacts the content creator's journey, as summarized in a set of Propositions. Overall, the Propositions illustrate how interdependence theory-informed interactional tenets affect content viewers' and creators' interdependent role-related journeys, offering novel insight.

KEYWORDS

Content creators; content viewers; content users; customer journey; stakeholder journey; engagement; content engagement; interdependence theory; interactivity

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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Introduction

By engaging viewers or users, content creators are able to monetize their content, including that posted on social media, metaverses, blogs, or vlogs, among others (Izadi et al., 2019; Ørmen & Gregersen, 2023). The creation, posting, and sharing of online content thus represents an important, growing service sub-sector. For example, while YouTube creators have been able to get paid for their content since 2008 (YouTube, 2023a, 2023b), metaverse-based Roblox offers financial rewards to its creators through engagement-based payouts or by creating or selling avatar items or studio plugins (Roblox, 2024), thus driving the rise of so-called *content entrepreneurship* (Egan, 2022).

Other leading companies (e.g., Meta) are also increasingly rewarding their (e.g., Horizon Worlds) users for sharing *engaging* content (Axon, 2022). Collectively, this trend has been referred to as the *creator economy* (Peres et al., 2023), a software-facilitated ecosystem that allows content creators (e.g., influencers, bloggers, streamers, or podcasters) to earn revenue from their content (Bhargava, 2022; CBI, 2021), which is making a pertinent economic contribution that is also forecast to see continued growth (Oxford Economics, 2022). For example, in 2021, content shared on YouTube alone supported the creation of 425 K jobs in the U.S. while also making a USD 25b contribution to national GDP (Statista, 2023). The creator economy, which features content creators as core revenue-generating human brands (Ki et al., 2020; Peres et al., 2023), relies on the provision of perceived *relevant*, *valuable*, and/or *interesting* online content to users (Abell & Biswas, 2022; Giertz et al., 2022a; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019).

In the creator economy, connected creators develop and share their content on specific digital platforms (e.g., social media, blogs, or vlogs; Tafesse & Dayan, 2023), permitting assessments of content performance (e.g., through intelligent algorithms; Jain et al., 2022). The (content) creator's journey is thus shaped to a significant extent by users' journey-based *engagement* with the creator's content (Giertz et al., 2022b; Rezene, 2023), exposing the *interdependence* of content creators' and viewers' journeys. However, while the literature is starting to recognize the interdependence of different stakeholders' journeys (vs. the unfolding of their respective journeys *in isolation*; e.g., Hamilton et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2023), scholarly acumen of the dynamics characterizing online content creators' and viewers' respective journeys remains tenuous, exposing an important literature-based gap. In response to this gap, we explore these stakeholders' unfolding co-evolving, journey-based engagement, suggesting the interdependence of their respective journeys.

Following authors, including Lemon and Verhoef (2016) and Hollebeek et al. (2023), we define the *creator's* (*viewer's*) *journey* as a content creator's

(user's) trajectory of role-related touchpoints and activities, enacted through their respective engagement. Here, *engagement* denotes creators' and viewers' investment of (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral) resources in their respective content-related interactions (Kumar et al., 2019; Schivinski et al., 2016). We thus suggest engagement's key role in shaping, and being shaped by, content creators' and viewers' interdependence through their respective role-related journey, which has received little systematic investigation to date. However, the development of further insight into these dynamics is important, given the creator economy's growth, along with the rise of the stakeholder journey (e.g., Ortbal et al., 2016; Derakhshan & Turner, 2022).

Interdependence theory posits that interactions and relationships are characterized by interpersonal interdependence, "the process by which interacting people influence one another's experiences" (Van Lange & Balliet, 2014, p. 65). The theory views *interactions*, or "mutual or reciprocal action or influence" (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 9), to comprise the key theoretical hallmarks of participants' (a) perceived interactional outcomes (i.e., costs/rewards), (b) comparison level, and (c) comparison level for alternatives (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), which we predict to uniquely affect viewers' engagement through their journey with a creator's content. In turn, viewers' journey-based engagement is expected to *also* influence the unfolding of the content creator's journey (e.g., by altering their number of active followers). Overall, the content viewer's and creator's journey, thus, reveal elevated interdependence, as systematically explored in this article. Assessment of interdependence theory's interactional tenets vis-à-vis engagement exhibits elevated theoretical fit, given these theoretical entities' shared *interactive* nature (e.g., Hollebeek et al., 2023). Broadly, our analyses extend Wolf et al.'s (2021) notion of *technology-facilitated interdependence*, which we apply to the interplay of content viewers' and creators' journeys that are fueled by their respective role-related engagement (e.g., Demmers et al., 2020; Eslami et al., 2024; Venkatesan et al., 2018).

Our analyses culminate in a set of Propositions that outline the predicted effects of interdependence theory's tenets of (a) interactional outcomes, (b) comparison level, and (c) comparison level of alternatives (Van Lange & Balliet, 2014) on viewers' journey-based content engagement, in turn *also* bearing on the content creator's journey and exposing these stakeholders' journey-based interdependence (Lievens & Blažević, 2021; Novak & Hoffman, 2019; Scheer et al., 2015). By unlocking novel engagement- and journey-based acumen in the creator economy context, our analyses matter not only for the creator economy-based service sub-sector, but also for a range of other service industries that are widely, and increasingly, hiring or commissioning online content creators (e.g., tourism, hospitality, education, or financial services; e.g., Viglia et al., 2022). For example, service companies that use influencers to create and/or promote

brand- or firm-related content online have a vested interest in understanding the unfolding of their content creators' *and* viewers' journey-based engagement (Farrell et al., 2022; Giertz et al., 2022a; Hollebeek et al., 2023). However, scholarly acumen of these issues remains nebulous to date, as, therefore, explored in this article.

Relatedly, while acumen of the *customer* (or *user*) *journey* is rapidly advancing (e.g., Fuller et al., 2023; Gao et al., 2020; Pins et al., 2022), understanding of content creators' journeys remains limited (Rezene, 2023), *particularly* vis-à-vis those of content viewers, thus meriting further research. Addressing this gap, we take an interdependence theory perspective of content creators' role-related journey (i.e., in creating/sharing relevant content online), given their elevated interdependence with, or reliance on, platform users or viewers and their respective engagement (Tafesse & Dayan, 2023; Hollebeek et al., 2019).

This article makes the following contributions to the creator economy, customer/stakeholder journey, and engagement literature. First, while insight into the customer- and stakeholder journey is rapidly advancing (e.g., Lievens & Blažević, 2021; Varnali, 2019), little remains known regarding the *interdependence* of specific stakeholders' journeys, which are fueled by their respective journey-based engagement (e.g., Demmers et al., 2020; Derakhshan & Turner, 2022). We, thus, address this gap in the context of online content viewers' journey-based engagement that we, in turn, predict to impact the content creator's journey, thus affording novel insight into these stakeholders' interdependent journeys (e.g., Lievens & Blažević, 2021; Rezene, 2023). The attained insight matters, given the creator economy's outlined rise and further forecast growth (Smith, 2023). For example, our findings can be used to boost content viewers' and creators' interrelated journey-based engagement, thus offering enhanced content monetization opportunities (Jacobson & Harrison, 2022).

Second, in interdependence theory (e.g., Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), interactions feature the core tenets of participants' (a) perceived interactional outcomes (i.e., costs/rewards), (b) comparison level, and (c) comparison level of alternatives (Gibson & Lawrence, 2010; Smith et al., 1990), which we apply to content viewers' and creators' journeys. Our analyses, thus, extend the work of prior customer/stakeholder journey authors (e.g., Derakhshan & Turner, 2022; Lievens & Blažević, 2021), and that of online engagement scholars (e.g., Abell & Biswas, 2022; Wan et al., 2017). Specifically, we develop a set of interdependence theory-informed Propositions that outline the predicted effects of online content viewers' interdependence theory-informed interactional tenets on their journey-based content engagement and its ensuing effect on the creator's journey, exposing their interdependence. By elucidating these dynamics, our analyses foster enhanced understanding of these stakeholders' *co*-evolving journeys,

offering a stepping stone for creator economy scholars and practitioners alike.

We next review key literature addressing interdependence theory, the customer/stakeholder journey, and engagement, followed by the development of set of interdependence theory-informed Propositions outlining the predicted effects of user-perceived interactional outcomes, comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives on their journey-based engagement and its ensuing impact on the creator journey. We conclude by drawing pertinent implications from our analyses.

Literature review

Interdependence theory's interactivity

Interdependence theory represents a social exchange theory that suggests that interpersonal relationships are defined by interpersonal interdependence (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Wolf et al., 2021), or "the process by which interacting people influence one another's experiences" (Van Lange & Balliet, 2014, p. 65). The theory adopts four basic principles, including the principle of interaction, structure, transformation, and adaptation. In this article, we zoom in on the first (i.e., principle of *interaction*), given its elevated relevance in the context of users' interactive engagement with a creator's online content (Pagani & Mirabello, 2011) and shaping *both* of their journeys. Further exploration of the theory's principle of interaction is of particular relevance to the service industries, which tend to feature extensive levels of interactivity (Viglia et al., 2022).

The principle of interaction comprises three core sub-factors, including (a) *interactional outcomes*, (b) *comparison level*, and (c) *comparison level for alternatives*, which, collectively, determine a viewer's satisfaction with their interactions with a creator's online content. First, interactional *outcomes* refer to a viewer's perceived costs (drawbacks) and rewards (benefits) attained from their interactions with a creator's content (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). That is, content viewers undertake mental assessments of their observed costs, and benefits, obtained from interacting with specific content, leading them to arrive at an overall positive (i.e., when perceived rewards > costs), or negative (i.e., when perceived costs > rewards), evaluation of their content-related interactions. Interactional outcomes, thus, exhibit similarity to Zeithaml's (1988) *customer-perceived value* concept, which—likewise—addresses consumers' perceived benefits (vs. costs) associated with (one's interactions with) a focal object (Caselli & Machia, 2022).

Second, an individual's *comparison level* encompasses their expected outcomes from interacting with a focal object (e.g., a creator's online content; Kelley & Thibaut, 1959), as compared to their perceptions of their own prior interactions and relationship with the creator's content

and their assessment of others' interactions with the creator's content (Van Lange & Balliet, 2014). The theory suggests that if an individual's prior interactions with a creator's content have been predominantly positive and satisfying (negative and dissatisfying), their comparison level will tend to be high (low), respectively.

Third, an individual's *comparison level for alternatives* is the perceived quality of alternatives outside one's current interactions or relationship. The higher the perceived quality of their alternatives, the less committed individuals tend to be to their current relationship (Guerrero et al., 2007). Therefore, while individuals' perceived *outcomes* and *comparison level* are primary determinants of their interactional satisfaction, their *comparison level of alternatives* distinguishes their relational satisfaction from their commitment. Specifically, an individual's comparison level for alternatives suggests that while they may be satisfied with their current relationship, they may not be committed to it, particularly if their perceived alternatives are good (Kuppler & Wagner, 2022). Conversely, content viewers may be committed to their current relationship without being satisfied with it, especially when their perceived alternatives are poor (Caselli & Machia, 2022; Smith et al., 1990). Individuals' comparison level for alternatives, therefore, suggests that individuals, who have good (poor) alternatives are predicted to be less (more) committed to their current relationships.

The customer/stakeholder journey

While the customer journey has received extensive literature-based attention (e.g., Følstad & Kvale, 2018; Gao et al., 2020; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016), insight into the broader stakeholder journey, which covers *any* stakeholder's (e.g., an employee's, shareholder's, or supplier's) role-related journey (Lievens & Blažević, 2021), remains more nascent to date. To grasp the customer- and stakeholder journey's theoretical essence, we review key literature addressing these concepts below.

First, the customer/stakeholder journey describes an individual's (e.g., customer's or supplier's) advancement through a specific set of steps to achieve their role-related goal (e.g., for a customer, making a purchase; Varnali, 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2023). The journey, thus, unfolds over time (Herhausen et al., 2019), suggesting its longitudinal nature, and describes the focal stakeholder's experience with the firm throughout (Kandil et al., 2024; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). For example, while a customer's relational journey with a firm covers their repeated firm interactions (Novak & Hoffman, 2019), an employee's journey comprises a worker's progression through their position with their organization (Montague, 2020).

Second, budding recognition exists regarding the role of *engagement* in the journey (e.g., Jaakkola & Alexander, 2018; Venkatesan et al., 2018).

Specifically, individuals' engagement-based resource investments (i.e., interactional inputs) have been shown as instrumental to the journey's unfolding (Hollebeek et al., 2023). For example, users, who invest more (vs. less) time following a creator's content (i.e., exhibiting elevated content engagement) will tend to feel closer to this content and/or its creator, and vice versa, in turn affecting the progression of their journey.

Third, journey-based *touchpoints* have been conceptualized as "points of human, … communication, spatial, and electronic interaction collectively constituting the interface between an enterprise and its customers" (Dhebar, 2013, p. 200). Key content touchpoints include such platforms as social media, blog, vlogs, metaverse-based environments, etc. (e.g., Kranzbühler et al., 2019), which are quintessential in building, maintaining, or raising viewers' content *engagement* (Schivinski et al., 2016; Viglia et al., 2018), as discussed further in the next section.

Content engagement

Content engagement, an individual's (e.g., customer's, user's, or viewer's) investment of their cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and/or tangible resources in their interactions with particular (e.g., digital) content (Hollebeek et al., 2019; Syrdal & Briggs, 2018), including that disseminated by human brands (Ki et al., 2020; Malik et al., 2023), has evolved into a key firm metric in the last fifteen years (Fernandes & Esteves, 2016; Muntinga et al., 2011). Though engagement's definition has been subject to long-standing debate (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2022; Senapati & Panda, 2023), several commonly agreed-upon hallmarks of the concept have been identified, as reviewed below.

First, content engagement centers on *interactivity* between human brand-based content creators and their viewers (Hsieh et al., 2023), or their "mutual or reciprocal action or influence" (Vargo & Lusch, 2016, p. 9). Interactivity between these stakeholders is typically enabled or mediated by digital platforms (Ki et al., 2020; Schivinski et al., 2021), physical or virtual touchpoints designed to support exchange and value cocreation (Breidbach et al., 2014). Viewers or users may invest differing resource quantity and/or quality in their content interactions (Behnam et al., 2021; Giertz et al., 2022a; Hollebeek et al., 2014). Typically, the more salient their interactions with specific content are to the individual, the higher the expected quantity and quality of their resources invested in their interactions with it (Moran et al., 2020).

Second, extending the work of brand engagement authors including Kumar et al. (2019) and Hollebeek et al. (2019), content engagement reflects a content viewer's *resource investment* in their interactions with particular content (Moran et al., 2020; Hollebeek and Macky, 2019). The

magnitude and quality of a viewer's resource investments may differ throughout their journey with a specific creator's content (e.g., as the individual's needs change; Demmers et al., 2020; Hollebeek et al., 2023). For example, while young parents may follow parent influencers like Joanna Goddard, once their children have grown up, their resource investment in interacting with this content is likely to wane.

Third, content engagement has been widely viewed as a multidimensional concept (e.g., Schivinski et al., 2016; So et al., 2014; Winell, 2023). For example, Hollebeek et al. (2014) widely cited scale comprises consumers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement with brand-related social media content (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021), as structured under the dimensions of cognitive processing, affection, and activation (Hollebeek et al., 2023). Other authors limit their analyses to content viewers' behavioral engagement (e.g., Filipovic & Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, 2023; Schreiner et al., 2021; Tafesse & Dayan, 2023). For example, extending Muntinga et al. (2011) "consumption, contribution, and creation" model, Schivinski et al. (2016) develop a three-dimensional eponymous instrument to gauge consumers' brand-related content engagement on social media (Cheung et al., 2022a/b). We next introduce the conceptual development undertaken in this research.

Conceptual development: Interdependence theory-informed propositions

We next introduce the predicted effects of interdependence theory's interactive tenets (i.e., interactional outcomes, comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives) on viewers' engagement with a creator's online content, and its subsequent effect on the content creator's journey, as summarized in a set of Propositions (also see Figure 1). By exploring relevant interactional effects of viewers' journey with a creator's content on the creator's journey, our analyses illustrate the dynamics characterizing their respective journey-based interdependence.

Interactional outcomes

In the selected research context, interdependence theory-informed *outcomes* refer to a content viewer's perceived costs and rewards attained from interacting with a creator's content (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), as outlined. As a social exchange theory, interdependence theory holds that individuals will keep a mental record of their perceived interactional costs (vs. rewards) based on which they determine the extent of their future engagement with the object (Hollebeek et al., 2022). Here, *net rewards* are a viewer's perceived rewards minus costs accruing from their interactions with a creator's

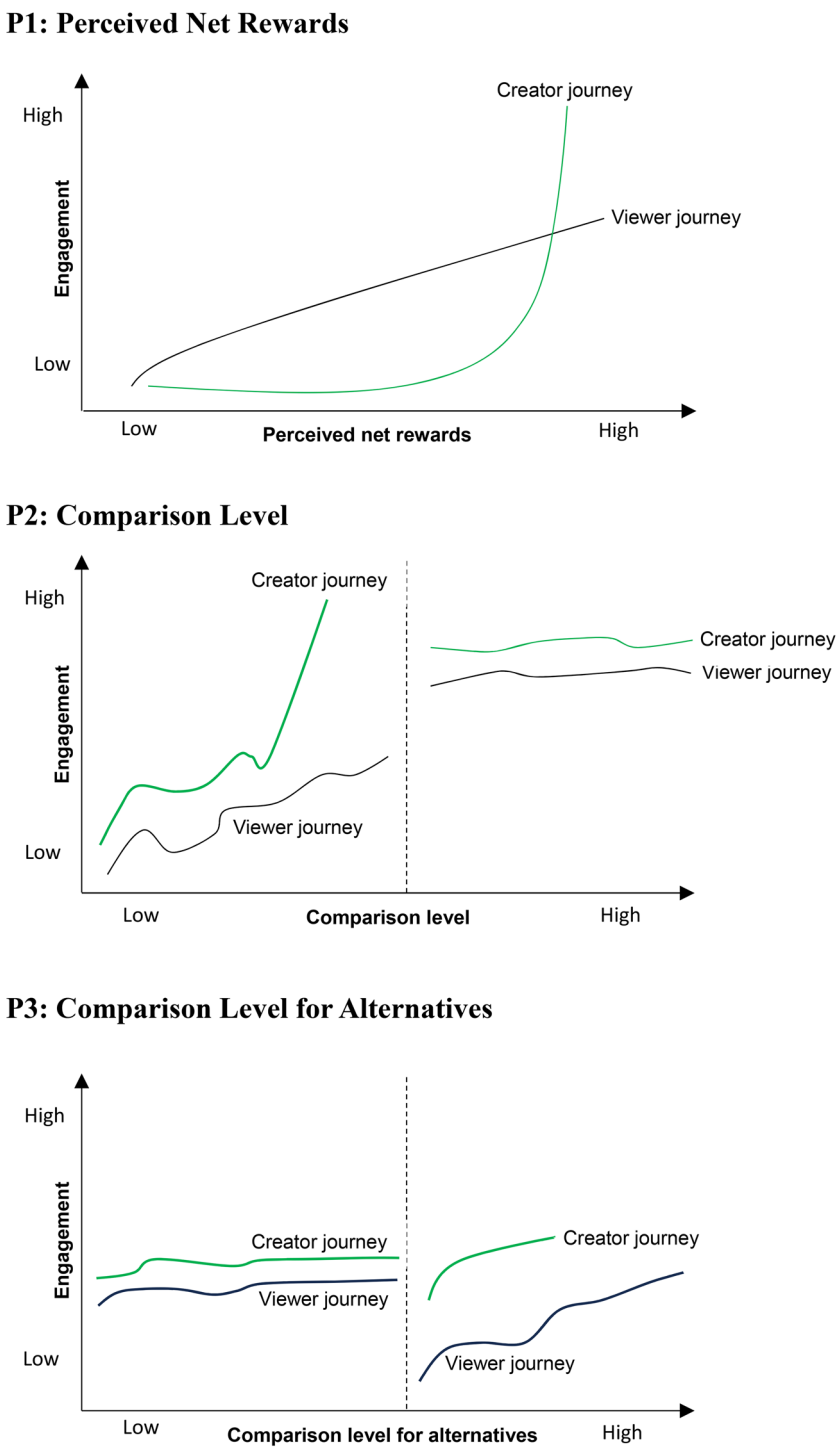

Figure 1. Sample Scenarios Illustrating the Propositions.

content (Baldwin, 1978). When perceived net rewards are positive and salient (negative and non-salient), viewers' deeper (shallower) journey-based content engagement is expected to emerge (e.g., given viewers' greater (lower) content-related motivation in this instance; Shen & Pritchard, 2022), respectively, as shown by the upward-sloping viewer journey in the sample scenario depicted in Figure 1: P1.

In other words, a viewer's rising perceived net content-based rewards will see their deepening, or rising content engagement (Hollebeek, 2016), as illustrated by the increasing engagement (i.e., y-) values in the portrayed viewer's journey in Figure 1: P1. In turn, viewers' deepening engagement with a creator's content will also exert a favorable effect on the content creator's journey (e.g., by retaining their active followers, acquiring new active followers, by creating buzz, and/or by raising their content monetization; Ausique et al., 2022), and vice versa, as shown by the, likewise, upward-sloping content creator's journey depicted in Figure 1: P1. Accordingly, we posit:

P1: Content viewers' greater (vs. smaller) perceived content-related net rewards will tend to see their deeper (shallower) journey-based content engagement, in turn boosting (impairing) the content creator's journey.

Comparison level

Viewers' comparison level reflects their expected outcomes (i.e., costs/benefits) from interacting with a creator's content, as compared to their outcomes experienced in, or from, their prior interactions with the creator's content and their evaluation of others' interactions with the creator's content (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Van Lange & Balliet, 2014), as noted. If a viewer's prior interactions with a creator's content have been predominantly positive and satisfying, their comparison level will tend to be high, and vice versa, as outlined. Those exhibiting a high comparison level, thus, tend to have specific, relatively formed expectations of a creator's content (Gibson & Lawrence, 2010; Parasuraman et al., 1991).

Specifically, owing to their relatively set, predetermined, content-related expectations, we predict viewers displaying a high (vs. low) comparison level to exhibit more preprogrammed content engagement through their journey (Blok & Renea, 2021), as shown by the depicted content viewer's journey on the right-hand side of Figure 1: P2. Specifically, high comparison-level viewers' relatively preprogrammed engagement is reflected by their comparatively *stable* journey-based engagement (Engert et al., 2023), as shown by the relatively steady, straight-lined y-values for the depicted viewer's journey in Figure 1: P2.

Consequently, high-comparison level viewers' programmed engagement will tend to, likewise, see the content creator's journey continue on its

current track (vs. significantly deviating off its course; Hollebeek et al., 2023), as shown by the creator's gently continuing, or relatively steady, journey on the right-hand side of Figure 1: P2. Conversely, viewers displaying a low comparison level are more likely to display less preprogrammed, less stable engagement, as illustrated by the more diverging y-values on the left-hand side of Figure 1: P2. In turn, viewers' less stable engagement is likely to steer the content creator's journey in a new direction (i.e., seeing its departure off its current course), as illustrated for the creator's journey on the left side of Figure 1: P2. We postulate:

> **P2:** Content viewers displaying a high (vs. low) comparison level vis-à-vis a creator's content will tend to exhibit more (less) preprogrammed journey-based content engagement, in turn continuing (altering) the course of the content creator's journey.

Comparison level for alternatives

Content viewers' comparison level for alternatives represents their perceived quality of alternatives outside their interactions with a particular creator's content, as outlined. Specifically, the higher the perceived quality of available alternatives, the less committed users tend to be to a specific content (Guerrero et al., 2007; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). A viewer's high comparison level for alternatives suggests that though they may be happy with a creator's content, they are relatively likely to switch to (an) alternate creator(s), *if* perceived suitable alternatives are available, and vice versa. In the creator economy, online content (and creators) proliferate (Peres et al., 2023), yielding viewers' likely perceived supply of other creators' *high-quality, interesting, or suitable* content in many areas. We suggest that the tenure of a viewer's engagement with a creator's content is contingent on their perceived quality of other available creators' content (Shanahan et al., 2019), particularly for viewers exhibiting a high (vs. low) comparison level for alternatives (Anderson, 1995).

Therefore, even if these users are satisfied with a creator's content, they are likely to switch creators through their journey (e.g., given the vast amount content available), yielding their more transient, or more changeable (i.e., less stable), journey-based engagement with a focal creator's content (Hollebeek et al., 2023), as illustrated by the depicted viewer journey's changing y-values on the right-hand side of Figure 1: P3. In turn, viewers' more transient journey-based (e.g., variety-seeking) engagement (Menidjel et al., 2023) is expected to curtail, or shorten, the content creator's journey (Adam, 2018), as portrayed by the relatively brief, or short, creator journey on the right-hand side of Figure 1: P3. Conversely, users exhibiting a low comparison level for alternatives are expected to

exhibit less transient, more stable journey-based engagement, as illustrated by the relatively stable y-values in the depicted viewer journey on the left-hand side of Figure 1: P3. We, in turn, anticipate this comparatively steady viewer journey to stretch, or lengthen, the creator journey (e.g., by retaining its active followers), as shown by the longer creator journey on the right-hand side of Figure 1: P3 (vs. that shown for viewers displaying a high comparison level for alternatives). We theorize:

P3: Content viewers displaying a high (vs. low) comparison level for alternatives will tend to exhibit more (less) transient journey-based content engagement, particularly if their perceived content alternatives are good (poor), in turn curtailing (stretching) the content creator's journey.

Discussion, implications, and limitations

Discussion and theoretical implications

Our analyses raise important theoretical implications. First, the exploration of content viewers' and creators' interdependent journeys, broadly, fosters novel journey- and engagement-based insight that extends the work of authors, including Hollebeek, Kumar, et al. (2023), Hollebeek, Urbonavicius et al. (2023), and Lievens and Blažević (2021) in our chosen service context. The predicted dynamics may also apply in, or generalize to, other stakeholders' role-related journeys, thus opening up valuable areas for further research. For example, interdependence theory's tenets of interactional outcomes, comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives may be extended to investigate the intersection of investors', regulators' and firms' journeys (Hillebrand et al., 2015), among others.

Our analyses therefore offer a valuable springboard for further research. For example, what is the relative importance of interactional outcomes, comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives for specific, interdependent stakeholders (e.g., content creators/viewers), and to what extent might these factors interact under particular contextual conditions? What interactional differences may exist across (e.g., service) sectors or industries and how might these fluctuate or change through specific stakeholders' journeys?

Second, the Propositions elucidate the interdependence of content viewers' and creators' journeys based on viewers' perceived interactional outcomes, comparison level, and comparison level of alternatives, from which we draw additional implications. P1 reads: "*Content viewers' greater (vs. smaller) perceived content-related net rewards will tend to see their deeper (shallower) journey-based content engagement, in turn boosting (impairing) the content creator's journey.*" Viewers, who perceive a creator's content to offer more (vs. fewer) benefits will tend to display deeper, or higher,

content engagement through their journey (Hollebeek, 2013; Schivinski et al., 2016). This deeper engagement, in turn, boosts, or benefits, the creator's journey (e.g., by raising their content views, hits, clicks, likes, shares, etc.; Srinivasan et al., 2016). It is, therefore, of interest to further examine which (combinations of) content factors are most conducive to optimizing viewers' journey-based content engagement and stickiness (Lee et al., 2021) and how to sustain their journey-based content engagement long-term (e.g., by increasing/maintaining the number of active followers or subscribers), among others.

P2 states: "*Content viewers displaying a high (vs. low) comparison level vis-à-vis a creator's content will tend to exhibit more (less) preprogrammed journey-based content engagement, in turn continuing (altering) the course of the content creator's journey.*" This Proposition suggests that viewers exhibiting relatively preprogrammed engagement with a creator's content through their journey are likely to steer the creator's journey to continue along its current path or direction (vs. to significantly deviate from its course; Hollebeek et al., 2023). These viewers thus value the creator's creative content-related pursuit (Lou et al., 2019). While the attainment of such appreciative audiences is important, this dynamic may also induce viewers' perceived content-related predictability and/or plummeting interest over time, which could see some defect from the creator's (future) content. We, therefore, encourage the undertaking of further study into the effect of different viewer comparison levels on their preprogrammed journey-based content engagement. Sample questions include: How can content creators influence (e.g., lower) their viewers' comparison level to their advantage? How strategically beneficial is it for creators to induce their viewers' preprogrammed journey-based content engagement (vs. nurturing their freely emerging engagement)? To what extent may viewers' preprogrammed (vs. freely emerging) engagement continue (alter) the course of the creator's journey under particular contextual circumstances, respectively?

P3 reads: "*Content viewers displaying a high (vs. low) comparison level for alternatives will tend to exhibit more (less) transient journey-based content engagement, particularly if their perceived content alternatives are good (poor), in turn curtailing (stretching) the content creator's journey.*" This Proposition suggests that the length of a viewer's journey with a creator's content is contingent on the former's comparison level for alternatives. Specifically, the higher an individual's comparison level for alternatives, the more they will compare the creator's content to that produce by others (Gibson & Lawrence, 2010), increasing their potential switching behavior to another creator's content, thus curtailing, or shortening, their journey with their original creator's content, particularly when their perceived alternatives are considered to be good.

This Proposition, likewise, sparks ample issues for further theoretical development. For example, how can content creators leverage their audiences' comparison level for alternatives (e.g., by designing their content to compare favorably vs. other/competing content)? Under what conditions (if any) may people, who typically display a high comparison level for alternatives, exhibit less transient (i.e., more enduring) journey-based content engagement, and vice versa? What content-related factors drive viewers' less transient (i.e., more enduring) journey-based engagement?

Implications for service sectors

This research also raises implications for service practitioners, including content creators or -entrepreneurs, and service managers, who work with, develop, or use online content (e.g., by designing, creating, sharing, or posting relevant content or by working with steamers, bloggers, podcasters, or influencers to perform these tasks for them; Farrell et al., 2022; Chathoth et al., 2014).

First, P1 posits: "*Content viewers' greater (vs. smaller) perceived content-related net rewards will tend to see their deeper (shallower) journey-based content engagement, in turn boosting (impairing) the content creator's journey*." This Proposition, thus, suggests that content creators, who are able to offer their viewers elevated net content-related rewards, will tend to see the latter's deeper journey-based content engagement (Shen & Pritchard, 2022). We, consequently, advise creators to not only develop an in-depth understanding of their viewers' needs, wants, and preferences, but also to monitor potential changes in this regard (e.g., through qualitative/quantitative, online/offline, market research), enabling them to design perceived relevant, valuable content through users' content-based journeys.

P2 reads: "*Content viewers displaying a high (vs. low) comparison level vis-à-vis a creator's content will tend to exhibit more (less) preprogrammed journey-based content engagement, in turn continuing (altering) the course of the content creator's journey*." This Proposition posits that viewers exhibiting a high comparison level tend to respond to a creator's content in a particular, predetermined or characteristic way, akin to the notion of *engagement styles* (Hollebeek, 2018). Given their relatively preset expectations, these viewers are likely to see the creator's journey stay on its current course (vs. change course). However, those displaying lower comparison levels are more likely to show freely emerging, variable (vs. preprogrammed) engagement, to which Hollebeek et al. (2021) refer as *laissez-faire*-based engagement.

We advise creators to design their content to reduce their viewers' comparison level where possible (e.g., by de-emphasizing or disincentivizing their comparison of the creator's latest vs. earlier content). That is, if

viewers value a creator's particular content *in its own right* (vs. feeling the need to compare their different pieces of content), improved engagement-based results are expected. One way to achieve this is by creators linking their content to external factors (e.g., current events/trends), which will tend to be relatively transient, thus complicating viewer comparisons across the creator's different pieces of content (e.g., given their lacking direct compatibility).

Finally, P3 postulates: "*Content viewers displaying a high (vs. low) comparison level for alternatives will tend to exhibit more (less) transient journey-based content engagement, particularly if their perceived content alternatives are good (poor), in turn curtailing (stretching) the content creator's journey*." Unlike viewers' comparison level, their comparison level for alternatives reflects their tendency to compare a creator's content with that of other creators, which can yield positive, negative, or neutral evaluations (e.g., Zeithaml, 1988). When a viewer's perceived alternatives are good, we predict their engagement with a creator's content to be more transient or fleeting (i.e., given the availability of others' perceived favorable or valuable content; Hollebeek & Macky, 2019). We, therefore, recommend managers to not only primarily target those individuals displaying a lower (vs. higher) comparison level for alternatives, but also to reduce their active followers' comparison level for alternatives where possible (e.g., by incorporating a range of sensory (e.g., visual/textual) or social stimuli in their content), which—by engrossing the user—may lower their comparison level for alternatives.

Limitations and further research

In spite of its contribution, this study also has limitations that offer further avenues for research. First, our analyses are purely conceptual and thus require empirical testing and validation in future research. For example, scholars may wish to adopt qualitative in-depth interviews to deepen the attained insight (e.g., in particular [e.g., cross-cultural] contexts; Roy et al., 2018; Hollebeek, 2018). Alternatively, they may undertake quantitative (e.g., structural equation modeling-based) studies to test the Propositions or to assess the evolving nature of the proposed associations over time through longitudinal research (e.g., So et al., 2024).

Second, we linked interdependence theory's core interactive tenets of interactional outcomes, comparison level, and comparison level for alternatives to content viewers' and creators' journey-based engagement to develop the Propositions. While these analyses yield valuable insight, other theories, or other interdependence theory elements, may also be used to further advance acumen of content creators' and viewers' journeys. For example, interdependence theory's principle of transformation, or

adaptation, could be applied to further illuminate these (or other) stakeholders' interrelated journeys (Hollebeek et al., 2023; Sprecher, 1998). Moreover, other theories, including social influence theory (Turner, 1991), social identity theory, or the investment model of commitment (e.g., Rusbult, 1980) may, likewise, be applied to further explore creators' and users' interdependent journeys.

Third, our analyses focused on creators' content posted or shared on digital (e.g., social media) platforms. As such, we did not distinguish between content posted by individual, non-corporate (vs. firm-affiliated creators), or that shared by creators, who have influencer status (vs. those that do not), thus also meriting further analysis. For example, (to what extent) may firm-based creators have a head-start in developing an engaged online content following, given their ability to capitalize on the firm's preexisting brand equity, credibility, and/or reputation (Viglia et al., 2022)? How may creators, who lack influencer status, design their content to foster growing interdependence of their viewers' journeys with their own? How may platform dynamics (e.g., user- vs. firm-owned platforms) influence the interdependence of content viewers' and creators' journeys (Jang et al., 2008; Scheer et al., 2015)?

Fourth, acknowledging the related research stream of user participation and cocreation (e.g., in online brand communities; Schau et al., 2009), it is of interest to explore viewers' content creation or viewing (vs. other types of) participation (e.g., helping fellow customers, providing reviews or electronic word-of-mouth). Likewise, given the prolific and ever-expanding range of digital content, (e.g., young) viewers are becoming increasingly fatigued and/or disengaged (Fernandes & Oliveira, 2024), exposing a key challenge for content creators (e.g., as viewer disengagement is likely to reduce the performance, quality, or value of *their* journey; Hollebeek et al., 2023), which also warrants further scrutiny. Moreover, we expect further exploration of viewers' (e.g., social, informational, entertainment, or technological) motivation to participate in online content viewing, sharing, liking, etc. (Hook et al., 2018) to offer pertinent insight into the development of content viewers' and creators' respective journey-based engagement.

Acknowledgement

We thank Professor Edward Malthouse for a discussion on content (creation), engagement, and related issues, we acknowledge Airi Freimuth for a discussion on interdependence theory, and Brodie et al. (2016) for an earlier discussion on engagement and related issues.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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