"Tell me what I should watch": A customer value perspective of YouTube metadata

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Abstract

YouTube is increasingly being considered a lucrative means of earning money in addition to becoming popular among viewers. To gain these benefits YouTube content creators (YouTubers) need to first attract viewers' attention to their videos and then persuade them to watch. YouTube metadata, such as the title, thumbnail, description, and keywords, can assist in achieving both objectives. This has been established in the current literature which shows, for example, that metadata optimizing can increase view counts. While these studies have demonstrated the end result of metadata optimization, they do not indicate why viewers respond to different characteristics of metadata in different ways. We contribute to the literature on marketing and consuming YouTube videos by examining, using Holbrook's (1999) value typology for theorisation, how viewers experience the metadata and how these experiences contribute to the overall value creation process of watching YouTube videos. We employed an interpretive, qualitative research design in conducting the study, using focus group discussions with 21 young YouTube viewers as the data collection method. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Key findings were that metadata can both deliver value (efficiency) and provide signals about values delivered through the video (excellence and aesthetics). Further, the play value viewers get from interacting with the video is indirectly influenced by the metadata. We also identified that although viewers commonly expect some characteristics in the title and thumbnail, irrespective of their purpose of using YouTube, the importance of each differs when they seek

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information or entertainment gratification. Further, when value promises made by the metadata are not delivered through the videos, viewers respond negatively.

Keywords: *Entertainment gratification, Information gratification, Metadata optimization, Value, YouTube*

Introduction

YouTube can be identified as one of the most popular social networking sites, with over 95% of internet users browsing it (Global Media Insights, 2022). Being a video-sharing platform, YouTube attracts both content seekers and content creators, with many users playing both roles (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017). With YouTube poised to overtake traditional TV in terms of advertising expenditure (Pressman, 2021), becoming a content creator (also known as a YouTuber, Ashman et al., 2018; Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020), has become not only a means of becoming popular among millions of viewers but also of earning high financial rewards.

For YouTubers to succeed in either of these endeavours, their videos need to attract content seekers (i.e., viewers). One way in which YouTubers attempt to attract viewers is through search engine optimization (Lopezosa et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2019) using YouTube metadata (Lopezosa et al., 2020) such as the title, thumbnail, description, taglines and transcript that help in capturing viewers' attention. Scholars have identified and recommended different ways of optimizing metadata (Lopezosa et al., 2020; Pinto & Viana, 2019), and have also established that optimizing metadata could increase traffic and views of YouTube videos (Choudhari & Bhalla, 2015; Hoiles et al., 2017; Lopezosa et al., 2020). This literature is technical and expresses the outcome of metadata optimization in terms of numbers, or viewer traffic.

While the traffic – the number of viewers who have clicked on a video – shows the results, from a marketing and consumption perspective, it is also useful to find out why viewers respond to metadata. In managing services, it is important to understand how consumers experience the 'journey' to the final service outcome (Rawson et al., 2013) as well as the customer touchpoints in this journey (Kotler, 2017; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). In the context of YouTube, the final outcome expected by viewers through watching a video may be entertainment or finding some information (Gao & Feng, 2016; Shao, 2009). In the viewers' journey to finding a suitable video for either of these purposes,

engagement with metadata is a key touchpoint. Understanding how they experience this encounter and how it serves their purpose of finding a suitable video is vital for YouTubers to manage this critical customer touchpoint. The literature is largely silent on this consumption aspect of YouTube metadata. Therefore, this paper aims to explore how viewers experience their encounters with YouTube metadata when they browse the site seeking different gratifications, such as entertainment and information (Gao & Feng, 2016; Shao, 2009), and how these experiences contribute to the overall value they gain from viewing YouTube videos.

For theorising these viewer experiences, we use the self-oriented values in Holbrook's (1999) typology of consumer value. Marketing is a value-creation process (Kotler, 2017) and customer value is central to all marketing activity (Holbrook, 2006). Holbrook's typology treats value as an 'experiential' concept and provides an apt theoretical lens for the exploration of viewers' experiences with YouTube metadata. Thus, we contribute to the literature on YouTube metadata by identifying and providing a nuanced theorisation of the value-creation processes embedded in viewers' encounters with the metadata.

We adopted a qualitative approach since we were exploring a phenomenon that has hitherto not been discussed in the literature and it required "a deep understanding … as viewed from the perspective of research participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, pp. 7–8). Further, the close exploration of participants' perspective facilitated by qualitative research is demanded by the ontological positioning of Holbrook's (1999, 2006) conceptualisation of value (as an experiential phenomenon). Through this, we also make a methodological contribution by complementing the quantitative literature that identifies certain characteristics of metadata as being able to attract viewers to videos, but not why or how they are attracted.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The next section outlines the literature that discusses different gratifications sought by YouTube viewers, the role played by metadata as a key customer touchpoint in the viewers' journey of YouTube video viewing and how viewers' experiences with metadata could contribute to the overall value creation process. Then, the methods adopted in conducting the research are presented. This is followed by the findings and discussion. The paper concludes by highlighting its contribution to knowledge, some implications for YouTubers to optimise metadata and indications for further research.

Literature Review

Gratifications sought by YouTube content seekers (viewers)

Unlike conventional media, YouTube facilitates users to interact with the content and other users (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017) by incorporating several features (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012) to view, engage, and collaborate. It allows video producers (Shao, 2009), i.e., YouTubers (Ashman et al., 2018; Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020), to upload and share video clips on a wide variety of topics. In turn, content seekers (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017), i.e., viewers, don't comprise a passive audience. They can rate or review what they have watched and express their opinions by commenting (Khan, 2017; Zickuhr & Madden, 2012). Thus, viewers engage with YouTube in multiple ways, seeking a variety of gratifications.

Shao (2009) identifies two categories of viewers based on their level of engagement: Consuming viewers only watch the videos while participating viewers engage in either user-to-user or user-to-content interaction (adding to playlists, sharing with others or posting comments). Consuming viewers typically seek two types of gratifications (Shao, 2009), namely, cognitive gratifications (Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020) through finding information (Gao & Feng, 2016; Shao, 2009) and emotional gratifications (Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020) through entertainment (Gao & Feng, 2016; Shao, 2009). People have a desire to know about others and the world (Shao, 2009), and they also search for information for specific purposes such as academic work (Moghavvemi, et al., 2018). The large collection of varied videos on YouTube facilitates the satisfaction of these desires; this is information gratification (Shao, 2009). Seeking entertainment gratification is probably even more prominent due to the availability of many categories of entertainment, such as sports, music, comedy and different types of movies (Moghavvemi, et al., 2018; Shao, 2009). Viewers seeking entertainment gratification watch YouTube videos as a form of leisure activity, to satisfy their needs for relaxation and to escape from the bubble of daily life problems and tensions (Khan, 2017). Participating viewers, who go beyond consumption, also seek social (Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020) gratifications such as social interaction and belonging to communities (Shao, 2009).

YouTubers have to provide these gratifications through their videos to attract viewers. Although providing high-quality content in the videos is certainly a good strategy for attracting viewers (Choudhari & Bhalla, 2015), it is not enough. To aid viewers in finding videos that suit their requirements, YouTube has a diversified video discovery mechanism that includes features such as

recommendations and a keyword-based search engine (Pinto & Viana, 2019). YouTubers attempt to optimize their metadata to make use of this video discovery mechanism to capture the attention of viewers, and having done so, to entice viewers to select their videos for watching.

YouTube metadata: Enticing viewers vs. viewer experiences

Metadata refer to information used to describe each video uploaded to YouTube (Schmidt, 2021); they primarily comprise four components, video title, thumbnail, description and keywords (Pinto & Viana, 2019). Metadata optimization can play two roles in persuading viewers to select a video for watching. First, metadata help videos to be easily discovered by being captured by YouTube's search and recommendation algorithms (Lopezosa et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2019). Second, metadata elements such as "forceful and catchy" titles (Lopezosa et al., 2020, p. 468) and attractive thumbnails (Lista, 2016) can entice viewers to click on a video.

To elaborate on the first role, different platforms such as YouTube or Google use algorithms to serve content seekers with the content that they are most likely to consume (Kopf, 2020). The ultimate objective of the algorithm system is to help users find content that matches their needs based on relevance (Kopf, 2020). Although these are algorithms created by Google over which YouTubers have no control, they can optimise metadata to make their videos appear at the top of the search. Experts provide various guidelines for optimizing metadata for this purpose (see, for example, Bonelli, 2022; Hollingsworth, 2021; Lista, 2016; Schmidt, 2021). These include guidelines such as including commonly searched keywords in the video titles, descriptions, and hashtags. Research has established that metadata optimization can increase the visibility of videos by enabling them to be easily captured by YouTube algorithms (Choudhari & Bhalla, 2015),

In addition to enabling videos to be 'found' by viewers, metadata can also persuade viewers to click on the videos found – to entice them into watching. For example, the YouTube thumbnail is the first thing that catches viewers' eyes which could well affect their decision whether or not to watch the video (Lista, 2016), and a high-resolution, visually stimulating thumbnail can nudge the viewers in the right direction (Smarty, 2018). Similarly, the title of the video performs a dual function of offering information and sparking viewers' interest (Lopezosa et al., 2020). Research has identified different characteristics of metadata that increase the likelihood of a video being clicked on by viewers. For example, it has been found that the quality of the thumbnail is likely to have a

greater impact on the view count than the title or keywords (Hoiles, 2017). Further, there appears to be a trade-off between the informing and interest-sparking functions of the title (Lopezosa et al., 2020) because videos with titles containing a great deal of information have been identified as less popular (Tafesse, 2020).

All these are quantitative studies (mostly based on secondary data) that indicate the causal relationships between metadata optimization and the increase in views. In other words, they establish 'what' metadata characteristics lead to a higher number of views. However, from a marketing perspective, it is also important to understand 'why' viewers respond to those characteristics by exploring how they experience their engagement with the metadata. As previously noted, metadata supports viewers to locate the videos that are likely to satisfy their requirements, and also plays a promotional role in enticing viewers (Lopezosa et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2019). As such, engaging with metadata is an important touchpoint in the viewers' 'journey' (Kotler, 2017; Rawson et al., 2013) of finding and watching YouTube videos as they seek different gratifications. "Every touchpoint during the consumer's journey provides a 'moment of truth'" (Kotler, 2017, p. 3) that can impact the satisfaction with the overall consumption experience. Thus, encounters with metadata also contribute to the overall experience of YouTube.

Viewers' interaction with metadata is a form of "technology-generated customer contact" (Froehle & Roth, 2004, p. 3) in which the service encounter happens entirely through technology without any human intervention. It has been noted that, in managing services, interacting with customers in such technology-mediated environments can pose significant challenges, which therefore, warrant close scholarly attention (Froehle & Roth, 2004). In the context of YouTube, this requires understanding how YouTube viewers experience their encounters with the metadata. Consumer experiences are subjective and are constructed through their interpretations of the encounters at different touchpoints of their journey (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). Therefore, they are difficult to be understood through research that focuses on the end result, i.e., on establishing causal relationships between variables. Thus, the current literature on YouTube metadata is lacking in examining this experiential aspect. In this paper, we address this omission by examining how YouTube viewers experience their engagement with different metadata.

Metadata as a touchpoint in the customer value-creating process

In examining viewers' experiences of YouTube metadata, value is a useful theoretical perspective. It is well established in the literature that people are not buying products or services; products and services are tools for providing a valued outcome to consumers (Kotler, 2017). Therefore, the marketer's task is to "create, produce and communicate" value (Kotler, 2017, p. 1). Value is delivered not just through the end product or service but at every touchpoint of the consumers' journey (Kotler, 2017, Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). Further, what the marketer has to deliver is not "what he or she thinks is value … but what the customer will perceive as value" (Kotler, 2017, p. 1), and different elements in the bundle of attributes in a product or service offer create different perceived values and weightings of value to different consumers (Kotler, 2017).

The literature on YouTube metadata reviewed above, focusing solely on what different metadata characteristics could generate the highest traffic to videos, has treated all YouTube viewers as a homogeneous group. However, considering Kotler's observation that different attributes of a service bundle create differential value to different consumers, and the previous discussion on the different purposes for which viewers browse YouTube, one could expect that engagement with the metadata would create different forms of value for different viewers. For example, a person seeking information gratification (Shao, 2009) expects a form of 'extrinsic' value (Holbrook, 1999) through watching YouTube videos, while a person seeking 'entertainment' gratification expects an 'intrinsic' value. (See below for a more detailed discussion on different forms of customer value in the context of YouTube viewing.) Given the differences in value expected from viewing the videos, the value they would perceive in engaging with the metadata can also be expected to differ. Therefore, we examine how metadata creates value for viewers in different ways when they browse YouTube seeking different forms of gratification.

Customer value has traditionally been treated as a trade-off between price and benefits (Graf & Maas, 2014; Kim, 2002); however, its varying definitions indicate that it is a complex construct that goes beyond this price–benefit trade-off (Graf & Maas, 2014). From the various conceptualisations of value, we selected Holbrook's (1999; 2006) experiential conceptualisation since our purpose is exploring viewers' experiences – a subjective response to encounters (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016) – with metadata. Holbrook (2006) defines customer value as an "interactive, relativistic, preference experience" (p. 715). It involves an *interaction* between a customer and an object. The 'objects' can be products or services, or something else encountered in a consumption

experience – in our case the interaction occurs between the viewer and the YouTube metadata. It is *relativistic* because it involves a comparison of objects (different metadata elements), and changes from person to person and situation to situation. Finally, this individual, situation-specific, comparison results in a preference for different objects. For example, viewers might prefer different characteristics of metadata when searching for videos for information and entertainment gratification. These differences could then influence their choice of videos to watch and the overall viewing experience.

The typology of self-oriented value

Holbrook (1999; 2006) presents a typology of value in which he first divides value into two categories, other-oriented and self-oriented. Consumers gain other-oriented value from consuming a product through its impact on others, or through others' responses to it, such as the status value of wearing a Rolex watch (Holbrook, 2006). In contrast, self-oriented value is when "I prize some product or consumption experience for my own sake, because of how I respond to it, or by virtue of the effect it has on me" (Holbrook, 2006, p. 715). Since interacting with YouTube metadata is an individual experience, we focus on self-oriented value.

Self-oriented value is further subdivided based on two dimensions: Intrinsic vs Extrinsic and Active Vs Reactive. Value is *extrinsic* when a consumption experience "serves …as a means to some further end" and *intrinsic* when the consumption experience is "appreciated for its own sake" (Holbrook, 2006. p. 715). For example, a person might value driving a luxury car because it helps him to get from one place to another quickly and comfortably (extrinsic), and also because he enjoys the driving experience (intrinsic). Value is *active* when "it entails the physical or mental manipulation of some tangible or intangible object" (Holbrook, 1999, p. 11) – driving a car is an example of the physical manipulation of a tangible object; value is *reactive* when it results from simply "responding to an object" (Holbrook, 1999, p. 12) rather than manipulating it. For example, someone driving a luxury car could value the comfort of the upholstery of the seat, or the beauty of the appearance of the car. Figure 1 presents the typology of values that results from combining these two dimensions.

	Extrinsic	Intrinsic
Active	Efficiency (Output/Input, Convenience)	Play (Fun)
Reactive	Excellence (Quality)	Aesthetics (Beauty)

Figure 1: The typology of self-oriented value
Source: (Holbrook, 1999)

In providing information and entertainment gratifications (Gao & Feng, 2016; Shao, 2009) to viewers, YouTube creates these values for consumers. For example, a person using a YouTube video to learn how to prepare a homemade dessert (information gratification) is gaining an *extrinsic* value outside of the consumption experience of the video. If the recipe in the video enables the viewer to easily learn how to make the dessert without much effort (mental manipulation of the intangible object – the video), there is *convenience* value (*active)*, and if the video provides detailed and precise information that helps the preparation of the dessert well, there is *excellence* value (*reactive*). A person watching a movie on YouTube (entertainment) gains an *intrinsic* value of *aesthetics* (directly from watching the video); as the viewer simply reacts to the movie and its presentation, it is *reactive*. Finally, when the viewer moves from consumption to participation (Shao, 2009), and interacts with the video by giving comments, or likes/dislikes (□/□), there is *play* value, which is *intrinsic* and *active.*

In the viewers' journey (Kotler, 2017; Rawson et al., 2013) of seeking one or more of these values from YouTube videos, metadata is one crucial touchpoint (Kotler, 2017, Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016). The function of metadata in enabling viewers to locate videos through the search functions facilitated by YouTube algorithms (Bonelli, 2022; Hollingsworth, 2021; Lista, 2016; Schmidt, 2021) creates convenience value for the viewers by enabling them to locate the videos suitable for their purpose quickly and easily. In addition,

metadata elements such as the title and thumbnail (Lista, 2016; Lopezosa et al., 2020) can also provide hints to the viewers about values that the video is likely to deliver (e.g., an attractive thumbnail could hint that the video would deliver high aesthetic value). The dynamics of viewers' experiences of value creation and value hints provided by metadata are likely to differ for viewers seeking different gratifications (e.g., an attractive thumbnail hinting a video delivering high aesthetic value is likely to play a stronger role in the journey of a viewer expecting entertainment gratification than that of a viewer expecting information gratification). We examined these dynamics using Holbrook's (1999) value typology (self-oriented) as a lens.

Research Design

This paper was based on part of a broader study on consumer experiences of and responses to YouTube metadata. As experiences are subjective (Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016) and 'relativistic' (Holbrook, 2006), we adopted an interpretive philosophy with a subjective ontology and a qualitative methodology (Saunders, 2009).

To collect rich data, we selected participants who use YouTube for multiple different purposes covering both entertainment and information gratification (Gao & Feng, 2016; Shao, 2009). Initially, we purposively selected a few participants who were then asked to give us referrals of others, thus leading to snowball sampling (Saunders, 2009). Snowball sampling is typically used to find participants from 'difficult to reach' groups (Parker & Scot, 2020). In general, viewers who use YouTube for different uses are not a difficult-to-reach group. However, we collected data in the immediate post-COVID period (March – April 2022), which was also a time when Sri Lanka was experiencing severe political and economic turmoil, which made it difficult to reach any participant. Therefore, we selected this method as the best possible means of recruiting participants with the required characteristics. Further, we had decided to use pre-existing groups (Mishra, 2016) for focus group discussions (see below for more details), and snowballing facilitated this purpose.

There were 21 participants in the study, mainly in the age range of 18 – 30 years. Most of the participants were university undergraduates (13), some were employed in middle management and/or professional jobs (6) and the last 2 were secondary school Advanced Level students. Sample adequacy was decided following the principle of "as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (Kvale, 2007, 43). We stopped data collection when we felt that

the data generated were sufficient to provide a rich account of viewers' experiences of YouTube metadata.

We collected data using focus group discussions. We selected this method because it helps to stimulate participants' thinking since discussion helps people to explore and "clarify their views and attitudes efficiently" (Freeman, 2006, p. 493). This was important especially since the area we were exploring was an unknown territory (Mishra, 2016) within the YouTube metadata literature. Therefore, interaction in the group was a device for encouraging discussion (Freeman, 2006), rather than a focus of analysis (Freeman, 2006). For the same purpose, i.e., thought stimulation through discussion, we opted for pre-existing (Mishra, 2016), homogeneous (Freeman, 2006) groups because such groups tend to have shared or similar experiences and are more comfortable engaging in discussion than heterogeneous, stranger groups (Freeman, 2006; Mishra, 2016). The groups comprised 4 – 5 participants.

The discussions were conducted using the Zoom platform and the time ranged from 1 – 2 hours. These were synchronous online groups, involving face-to-face, real-time discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017) moderated by the first author. Given the difficulties of gathering individuals to physical locations at the time of data collection, this was a convenient method that ensured high cooperation of participants (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). Since our participants were all young, they were very comfortable and familiar with the use of this technology (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017). There were additional advantages of using the Zoom platform: Since our research was about YouTube, the moderator was able to use visual stimuli (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017), namely, YouTube videos employing different forms of metadata (e.g., titles and thumbnails) to facilitate conversation. Further, due to the comparatively informal nature, vis-à-vis traditional focus groups, this type of online discussion has been identified as leading to richer participation (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017) and a lesser degree of negative group influences such as conforming and censoring (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010). The moderator of all the discussions, the first author, is also a young man (of 24 years at the time) with socio-demographic characterises similar to the participants, which also helped to reinforce the sense of a comfortable atmosphere (Farnsworth & Boon, 2010). The moderation of focus groups was facilitated by a discussion guide that was prepared considering the thematic and dynamic requirements of interviews (Kvale, 2007) and the discussions were conducted in Sinhala, the first language of all participants and the moderator.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and NVivo 10 software was used to manage the analysis. The discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The analysis was conducted in Sinhala and the quotes included in presenting the findings were later translated into English. Initially, we developed 120 "data-derived codes" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 207) from the data. These were then refined to make the list more meaningful. Then, based on the modified codes we identified themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These were related to the key concepts of the study, primarily related to the different gratifications and values. Then we examined overlaps between themes to identify patterns related to the role played by metadata when our research participants obtain different values while seeking information and entertainment gratification from watching YouTube videos.

For quality assurance, we used Tracy's (2010) big tent criteria: We employed a sufficiently rigorous process – using appropriate theory, data collection and analysis methods, as described above. In describing these procedures in detail, we have demonstrated our sincerity. We provide evidence from data to support our findings to ensure credibility. We believe we have selected a worthy topic and made an appreciable contribution through this research, and we have attempted to report our study with meaningful coherence in a manner that would resonate with the reader. Finally, in conducting the study, accepted ethical practices were adopted; procedural ethics (Tracy, 2010) were ensured by obtaining the informed consent of participants, and relational ethics (Tracy, 2010) by using pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy.

The findings of the study are presented in the next section along with a discussion in relation to Holbrook's (1999) value typology (self-oriented values) and previous literature on YouTube.

Findings and Discussion

The findings will begin with a brief explanation of the different gratifications our participants seek when watching YouTube videos, followed by an explanation of the contribution of metadata to their value experiences.

Information and entertainment gratification
In line with previous research (e.g., Moghavvemi, et al., 2018; Shao, 2009), our study participants use YouTube for both information and entertainment gratifications (Gao & Feng, 2016; Shao, 2009), as 'consumer' type viewers (Shao, 2009).

Sanduni: *I use it for both entertainment and information. But mostly for entertainment*

Nimesha: *Mostly to find some information.*

(Focus Group No. 5)

When searching for videos for these two purposes, they use two approaches. At times, they purposefully search for videos:

Asha: *I often use YouTube When I need to find new songs by my favourite Korean artists.*

(Focus Group No. 5)

Tharindu: *When I need to find information, I prefer YouTube over other search engines such as Google since it has a graphical presentation of the content along with voice.*

(Focus Group No. 2)

Both above quotes refer to instances that participants engage in purposeful search when they 'need' some specific entertainment or information. However, there are also instances when they aimlessly browse YouTube for entertainment purposes, when they are bored or seek some form of escape from daily life tensions (Khan, 2017):

Tharindu: *Because I'm on the computer all day long, whenever I get a short break, I'm on the YouTube*

(Focus Group No. 2)

Tharindu's words show the use of YouTube without a specific purpose, simply as a form of taking a break from his routine work. Others such as Ayesha ("for stress release") and Pasan ("as a distraction") also browse YouTube in a similar manner.

Whether they engage in purposeful or aimless browsing for information or entertainment gratifications, these participants expect different kinds of value experiences, and metadata assists in finding and selecting videos to get these value experiences. Figure 2 presents a summary of the findings according to the different value experiences sought and the role played by metadata.

Efficiency (Convenience)	Play (Fun)
The ability to find a video easily and quickly. (More important for information gratification though relevant for entertainment gratification too.)	Reacting to videos, e.g., positive or negative comments.
Value is **delivered** through metadata.	Value is only **indirectly related** to metadata: Reactions arising from the match or mismatch between the excellence or aesthetic value signalled by the metadata and the value delivered by the video.
Metadata used by viewers • Keyword search (Information gratification) • Selecting from suggested videos (title and thumbnail) on the homepage (Entertainment gratification)	
Required characteristics of metadata • Facilitate being captured by YouTube algorithms.	
Excellence (Quality)	**Aesthetic (Beauty)**
The video helps to achieve an external goal, e.g., helps in academic work. (Information gratification)	The video is enjoyable. (Entertainment gratification)
Value is **signalled** through metadata.	Value is **signalled** through metadata (primarily). Value might also be **delivered** to some extent.
Metadata used by viewers (in order of importance) 1. Title 2. Thumbnail	*Metadata used by viewers (in order of importance)* 1. Thumbnail 2. Title
Required characteristics of metadata	*Required characteristics of metadata*
• Title: Meaningful but short • Thumbnail: Informative thumbnail constructed with creative effort	
• Title: Relevance (keywords in the title) • Thumbnail: Keywords in thumbnail; Realistic (no overpromising)	• Thumbnail: Aesthetic quality of the thumbnail (being enjoyable by itself) *Special case* Negative aesthetic value signals and enjoying videos for their absurdity (e.g., silly or outrageous content)

Figure 2: Role played by metadata in viewers' value experiences

Efficiency (convenience)

Efficiency value is found in a consumption experience by its practical functionality in achieving a goal (Salo et al., 2012). In achieving a goal, consumers typically want to "reduce resource expenditure – time, energy and money" (Kim, 2002, p. 598). In the context of YouTube, this translates into the ability to find a video easily and quickly. As shown in the quote below, this value is considered highly important when seeking information gratification. When they look for a video to get some information, our participants want to find it as quickly as possible without wasting time; however, this is not very important when looking for entertainment videos:

Gayani: *It is when I need to find educational videos when I want to find them as quickly as possible.*

Narada: *When looking for information [time is important]*

Chamara: *There is no rush when searching for an entertainment video. I'd take time and search for it as long as it takes. It's when I'm looking for education or other information that I try to find [a video] quickly*

Pasan: *When it's entertainment [related video] the searching process itself is more enjoyable than what you're looking for*

(Focus Group No; 1)

Given the large number of videos on YouTube (Pinto & Viana, 2019) – 500 hours worth of content uploaded every minute (Sourthern, 2020) – viewers require some support to sort through what is available, to find a video that fits their requirements. For this purpose, our study participants use keyword searches and the video suggestions they get on their homepages.

Keyword search

Participants mainly do keyword searches when browsing YouTube to find information videos. This is done in several ways.

Keyword search in subscribed channels,

Chamara: *I have subscribed to a few academic-related YouTube channels. When I need to find something, I go and search in them.*

(Focus Group No. 1)

Chamara does key words searches in already subscribed channels when he needs to find academic (information) videos.

Another method is doing a general keyword search in all content.

Tharindu: I type a similar word or keywords [in the search bar] because videos are tagged [with keywords]

<div align="right">(Focus Group No.2)</div>

Tharindu directly types keywords in the search bar as soon as he starts browsing to find the videos he wants.

In YouTube search, Google has prioritized three main elements to provide the ideal search results; these are relevance, engagement, and quality (Hollingworth, 2021; Southern, 2020). In order to estimate the relevance, Google looks into many factors, such as how well the thumbnail, title, tags, description and video content match the content seeker's search query (Southern, 2020). Since our participants use keyword search to locate videos conveniently, it indicates that by optimizing metadata, YouTubers could directly deliver efficiency value to viewers, by helping them to easily find the videos they are looking for.

Videos suggested on the homepage
Video suggestions are used by our participants mainly when finding entertainment videos. They stated that they scroll down their YouTube homepage when they want to find entertainment videos:

Nimesha: Entertainment video is often selected when scrolling down the homepage.

<div align="right">(Focus Group No.5)</div>

Asitha: When I scroll down, the homepage suggests different videos related to my interests, based on my previous search on YouTube. I select from them and watch.

<div align="right">(Focus Group No.3)</div>

As Asitha states, YouTube suggests videos based on prior search results of viewers (Southern, 2020). For this purpose, the YouTube algorithm makes use of different 'engagement' signals of viewers – the time spent watching a video, search history, watch history, etc. (Hollingsworth, 2021). These are then matched to the metadata of videos – keywords in the titles, thumbnails, tags and descriptions – to make suggestions (Southern, 2020). Once again, this value can be delivered to viewers by optimizing metadata.

In summary, by optimizing metadata to facilitate the capture of videos by the YouTube algorithm, efficiency value can be **directly delivered** to viewers when they look for videos using keyword search or by scrolling down their homepage, and this value is more important when viewers seek information gratification than when they seek entertainment gratification.

Delivering efficiency value alone, however, is insufficient; finding one or more videos that match their search doesn't always mean the viewers will select them for watching. What entices viewers to click on a video are the signals of excellence and aesthetic values.

Excellence and aesthetics

Consumers receive 'excellence' value from a consumption experience if he or she is pleased with the experience for its ability to perform some expected function external to the consumption experience (Holbrook, 1999). In the context of this study, it could be the ability of a viewer to get high-quality information from a video for academic purposes (as in the quote of Chamara presented under keyword search). Thus, when viewers use YouTube for information gratification (Gao & Feng, 2016; Shao, 2009) they are seeking excellence value. Aesthetic value, on the other hand, is a hedonic enjoyment of the content of a video enjoyed for its own sake, such as when watching a movie or a music video, without regard to any other practical purpose (Holbrook, 1999).

In both cases, our participants rely on the title and thumbnail of a video to provide signals regarding the excellence (information gratification) and aesthetics (entertainment gratification) that the videos are likely to provide. However, the importance of the two metadata elements differs. A previous study (Hoiles, 2017) indicates that the quality of the thumbnail is more important than the title in increasing the view count of a video. However, we identified this to be applicable only when viewers get signals of aesthetic value when they seek entertainment gratification; in contrast, our participants pay greater attention to the title than the thumbnail for signals of excellence (when seeking information gratification):

Sanduni: *I decide to watch the video based on the title when I seek information.*

Aloka: *If it's for an academic purpose, I almost never look at the thumbnail. I always consider the title*

Moderator: When you select entertainment-related videos, do you mostly consider the thumbnail or the title?

Sanduni: Thumbnail

Aloka: Thumbnail

Asha: Thumbnail

Nimesha: Thumbnail

(Focus Group No. 5)

As shown in the above quote, the emphasis of attention given to the title and thumbnail differ when our participants look for signals of excellence and aesthetic value. However, when judging the potential excellence and aesthetic values delivered by the video based on these two metadata elements, they consider some common characteristics of the title and thumbnail.

The title
Our participants want the title to provide information about the video content; however, at the same time, it needs to be short:

Chamara: Short titles are the ones that capture [my] attention. And should be meaningful. Entertainment videos [especially] it's the short ones.

Gayani: Shorter the better. When the title is long, I don't read or watch the video.

(Focus Group No; 1)

Nimesha: I like it if it is simple and easy to understand.

(Focus Group No; 5)

The dual functions of the title – providing information and sparking interest – identified by Lopezosa et al. (2020), can be seen in the participants' ideas above. The information requirement, though not explicitly stated, can be inferred from Chamara's comment that the title should be 'meaningful'. Nimesha's requirement of 'simple and easy to understand' captures both dimensions – it should provide information, but in a manner one can easily understand – to interest her in the video. The quote also supports the previous research finding that the title should not be too long (Tafesse, 2020).

The informing function (Lopezosa et al., 2020) of the title is more pronounced when signalling excellence – i.e., when participants are seeking videos for

information gratification, as stated by Buddhika when explaining what he looks for when selecting an information-related video to watch.

Buddhika: ...Whether the keywords I used for searching are there [in the title] that is what I look for at first.

(Focus Group No. 2)

According to Buddhika, the title should have keywords to get some signal about the content that the video is likely to deliver. It is then that the participants of our study get some idea about the superiority of the content of the video over others.

The thumbnail

When it comes to the thumbnail, both excellence and aesthetic values are signalled to our participants by the creative effort that has been exerted by YouTubers in creating the thumbnail:

Haritha: I consider the [special] effects on the thumbnail to get some idea about the content. If the YouTuber has just put together several screenshots from here and there in the video when making the thumbnail, then it gives me a poor impression of the content. So, I won't watch if the effort put into creating the thumbnail is not at a reasonable level.

Kusal: The thumbnail should be descriptive. Not that there should be a lot of unnecessary words. It should have relevant pictures or words that nicely give an idea about the content.

Aruna: When I scroll down on the homepage, if there is a video [thumbnail] related to something that we like, especially if it is catchy, perhaps using words or creatively done, in a manner that can attract us, then I watch.

(Focus Group No. 3)

Haritha above explains that a thumbnail created by a few screenshots haphazardly put together conveys a 'poor impression' of the video. Kusal joins in to explain that a carefully constructed thumbnail would be descriptive and 'nicely' convey an idea about the content. Aruna also identifies 'creatively done' thumbnails as 'catchy'. All these refer to the creative efforts that our participants expect to see in thumbnails that they consider as providing high excellence and aesthetic values.

Although experts note the importance of the thumbnail in enticing viewers to click on a video (Hollingsworth, 2021; Lista, 2016; Lopezosa et al., 2020), they do not emphasize that viewers pay attention to the creative efforts of YouTubers. Creating a thumbnail has even been identified as a straightforward 'simple' task of picking an interesting still frame from the video (Hollingsworth, 2021). Therefore, these experts stop short of providing details of what would make an attractive thumbnail beyond some generic ideas such as high-resolution pictures with bright colours (Smarty, 2018) and good contrast (Hoiles, 2017). Our findings indicate that greater efforts exerted by carefully crafting a thumbnail comprising pictures, and possibly a few words, could be a signal of excellence or aesthetic value of the video. Further, as shown below, the findings shed light on some specific characteristics that viewers look for in what they consider as good thumbnails.

When seeking information gratification (excellence value) our participants prefer the thumbnail to comprise keywords:

Gayani: *If keywords are there in the thumbnail with pictures, and if they are related to what I'm searching for, then I click.*

(Focus Group No. 1)

Further, they want the thumbnail to look authentic:

Kasun: *It should be realistic. Then I think it's a video of a high standard. It should have one relevant detail. If it seems to have everything - the thumbnail, then I feel it's no good.*

(Focus Group No. 4)

Clearly, the "silly face, bright colours, something odd in the background, over the top… formula" (Smarty, 2018) does not work in signalling excellence. Because, as explained by Kasun, the participants consider 'over the top' thumbnails as a signal of less quality.

When seeking entertainment gratification, however, characteristics such as a 'silly face' and 'odd background' (Smarty, 2018) could signal aesthetic value because some similar characteristics were identified by the participants as what makes the thumbnail of an entertainment video attractive:

Chamara: *There are some thumbnails and titles that make me laugh. Yes, there are things like that.*

(Focus Group No. 1)

In this kind of situation, the thumbnail not only signals the aesthetic value but also delivers the value to some extent. For example, by 'making' Chamara 'laugh' the thumbnail itself provides some humour-based (Khan, 2017) enjoyment (Gao & Feng, 2016; Shao, 2009). This is corroborated by one of his later statements where he says that he finds some thumbnails designed with the 'creator's reactions' to be 'exciting'. This kind of enjoyment makes Chamara click on the video. Narada expresses a similar idea:

Narada: As said [by another person] if it is an entertainment video, there are times that I enjoy the thumbnail and then click [on the video]

(Focus Group No. 1)

Special case: Enjoying videos with thumbnails signalling negative aesthetic value

An interesting finding was that some participants get some enjoyment (aesthetic value) from responding to thumbnails that are so outrageous or silly that they are obvious fakes:

Asitha: ...Sometimes, though, I know the thumbnail is a stupid fake, but I click out of curiosity, just to see, to get some fun out of finding what kind of stupid nonsensical content it has.

Haritha: Yes, yes. I do the same all the time. Just to see what kind of stupid content is there. I watch the most outrageous one, just to see if I can have some fun by checking out what kind of stupid things are in it.

(Focus Group No. 3)

When YouTubers have put exaggerated descriptions or images on their thumbnail, these participants consider such metadata as something funny. They enjoy the hilarity of the outrageousness. Through that, they get some sort of negative (sarcastic) entertainment. However, this was not a sentiment commonly expressed by most participants.

In summary, to our participants, both the video title and thumbnail **signal** excellence (when seeking information gratification) and aesthetic (when seeking entertainment gratification) values delivered by the videos. However, the title is more important in signalling excellence and the thumbnail in signalling aesthetics. In signalling both these values the participants prefer the title to be informative, but short, and the thumbnail to display appreciable creative effort on the part of the YouTuber. In addition, they look for keywords in both the title and thumbnail when seeking information (excellence). When seeking

entertainment (aesthetics), at times, what makes them click on the video is the enjoyment they get from the thumbnail itself. In this situation, the thumbnail **delivers** aesthetic value to some extent. Finally, to a limited extent, negative aesthetic value signalled by thumbnails making outrageous claims also makes some participants watch the videos to have some sarcastic fun.

Play

Play value typically involves having fun through some active engagement – physically or mentally manipulating a consumption object (Holbrook, 1999); it is intrinsic in that the activity is pursued and enjoyed for its own sake (Holbrook, 1999; Kim, 2002). In the context of YouTube, active engagement generating play value could be actions such as liking (□), sharing, and commenting on a video that a viewer engages in when he or she moves from a 'consuming' viewer to become a 'participant' viewer (Shao, 2009). According to our findings, this value is not directly related to metadata. However, metadata can indirectly contribute to it.

Upon viewing a selected video, if the excellence or aesthetic values delivered by the video matches what the metadata signalled, the viewers are satisfied, and if what is delivered exceeds what was expected, they are delighted (Alexander, 2012; Oliver et al., 1997). In this kind of situation, our participants enjoy giving positive comments and 'likes' (□), and sometimes even share the videos through other social media platforms.

Chathura: *I 'like' the video as soon as I feel the video delivers what I expected.*

(Focus Group No. 1)

Agranya: *Sometimes I comment at the end of the video. I'm not going to comment at the beginning of [watching] the video. Because it distracts me from the content. ... If I feel the video is good as I thought, then I give a 'like' as well.*

(Focus Group No. 5)

Interestingly, in situations when the delivered value does not live up to what was signalled, there are times our participants gain a sort of negative play value by giving negative comments and 'dislikes' (□) and spreading negative word of mouth through other social media. It appears that such actions give them some relief from the anger or disgust (Alexander, 2012) they feel due to the mismatch between what was promised and delivered:

Gayani: *I give a 'dislike', thinking in vain, I should never have watched it. Usually, if I think the video is no good, I give a 'dislike' at the beginning. If I forget, then I give it at the end after watching, when I realize it is bad. I would give a scolding comment too. But that depends on the mood.*

<div align="right">(Focus Group No. 1)</div>

Hasitha: *At times like that, when some idiots put comments saying 'good' I get really pissed off with them. I drop 'dislikes' to those comments too. Sometimes I also reply with a sarcastic comment.*

<div align="right">(Focus Group No. 3)</div>

Though the relationship between the play value and metadata is indirect, this is an important finding of the study, indicating the importance of managing expectations (Oliver et al., 1997) in creating metadata (title and thumbnail) to entice viewers.

Conclusion

The key contribution of this paper was in theorising, using the value typology of Holbrook (1999), the viewer experiences of engaging with YouTube metadata. We extended the discussions on YouTube viewing for various gratifications (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2017; Buf & Ștefăniță, 2020; Moghavvemi, et al., 2018; Shao, 2009) by explaining how viewers experience encounters with this important touchpoint (Kotler, 2017, Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016) in their gratification seeking journey (Kotler, 2017; Rawson et al., 2013). In particular, we identified how this touchpoint contributes to the value creation process of the overall experience – what Kotler (2017) calls the "total product" (p. 2) that includes the whole set of services – involved in viewing a YouTube video.

In so doing, we first identified how the metadata can *deliver* 'efficiency' value, *give signals* of 'excellence' and 'aesthetic' values provided by videos, and *indirectly contribute* to the 'play' value viewers get from YouTube. Here, we identified some specific characteristics of metadata elements from which viewers get excellence and aesthetic value signals. Of particular importance is the creative effort exerted in creating the thumbnail; in addition, titles are expected to be informative, but short.

Second, we identified some nuances of what elements of metadata play a more significant role in delivering and signalling value when viewers seek different kinds of gratification. The accuracy of keywords is more important when

viewers seek information gratification. This is because efficiency delivery is more important when seeking information gratification, and the accuracy of keywords improves the likelihood of a video being captured by the YouTube algorithm (Hollingsworth, 2021; Southern, 2020). The title plays a more important role than the thumbnail when seeking information gratification (signalling excellence value) and the reverse holds when seeking entertainment gratification (signalling aesthetic value). Further, viewers actively look for keywords in the title and thumbnail when seeking information gratification (signalling excellence value). The aesthetic quality of the thumbnail is more important when presenting entertainment videos because viewers sometimes get aesthetic value through enjoying the thumbnail, which, in turn, makes them select the video to watch.

Finally, we identified that when the value promised by the metadata is not delivered to the satisfaction of viewers, they become irritated and respond in a negative manner. This could be in actions such as giving negative comments and spreading negative word of mouth.

All the above findings have implications for YouTubers when creating their metadata. They need to pay special attention to keywords when their videos present information and include relevant keywords in the title and thumbnail – to ensure that the videos are found easily and quickly (efficiency) by the keywords being captured by the YouTube algorithm, and to signal the quality of the videos (excellence) to viewers. Although the creative effort exerted in creating the thumbnail is important for both information and entertainment videos, YouTubers have to greater pay attention to it when presenting entertainment videos so that the thumbnails not only signal the aesthetic value of the video but also provide some direct enjoyment to the viewers. Finally, the study findings also imply that YouTubers need to manage viewer expectations (Oliver et al., 1997), without overpromising excellence or aesthetic value through their metadata because that could lead to negative responses.

Although our study made some useful knowledge contributions with practical implications, there is room for further exploring viewer experiences of YouTube metadata. Some findings, especially concerning what values are more important in what contexts (i.e., when seeking information or entertainment gratifications), could differ for different groups of viewers. Our study mainly focused on young viewers (mostly students) who extensively engage with YouTube for multiple different purposes. For other groups, say, older groups who engage with YouTube less extensively and for more specific purposes, the priorities may be

different. Further, viewers' responses (e.g., negative comments and word of mouth through other social media) to negative experiences of metadata, such as the video not delivering what was promised, merit further exploration since these have important marketing implications for YouTubers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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