

Is short-form video content the answer to enhanced consumer engagement for solopreneurs?

Alexander McInnes

21058235/1

Research-based Dissertation
PE7023FND31

Submitted on 23/03/24 in partial fulfilment of a Master of Science
in Digital Marketing from the University of Northumbria

Supervisor: Dr Martin King

Word count: 10016

Abstract

This study explores the experiences and perspectives of solopreneurs using the nascent medium of short video content (SVC) for consumer engagement. With the rise of short video-capable platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn, SVC has rapidly emerged as a significant tool in the arsenal of digital marketing teams all over the world. In recent times, scholars have investigated SVC's usefulness and untapped potential for large businesses with significant resource allocation. However, its effectiveness for solopreneurs, who often operate with limited resources and are the sole representatives of their brand, remains an area requiring further exploration. This research aims to address this gap by examining whether the challenges and opportunities presented by SVC make it the ideal medium for solopreneurs looking to engage consumers more effectively.

The methodology employed a qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews with solopreneurs from several industries, including coaching, mentoring, content creation, and talent acquisition. All solopreneurs are actively engaged in creating SVC on a regular basis as part of their overall marketing strategy and have a significant following. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed several key findings.

Surprisingly, solopreneurs expressed a generally negative sentiment toward SVC, citing difficulties conveying complex information and the time-consuming nature of content creation. This was a stark contrast to current literature, which paints SVC as a speedy, fun, and creatively rewarding medium. Despite these misgivings, solopreneurs feel compelled to create SVC for fear of missing potential lead-generation opportunities. With solopreneurs recognising the importance of genuine connections and personal branding in their SVC efforts, the primary theme of authenticity was touted numerous times. Nevertheless, this study uncovered a

generational divide in what authenticity looks like and what form it should take. Younger solopreneurs favour narrative structures and vulnerability in their videos, while older generations view storytelling as unnecessary and prefer a more straightforward, utility-focused approach. This divergence suggests that the effectiveness of storytelling in SVC may vary depending on the target demographic, and solopreneurs need to tailor their content accordingly. Interestingly, this research revealed that all solopreneurs' interviewed are sceptical toward traditional metrics like likes and views as measures of success. Instead, they prioritise content dissemination and genuine engagement over algorithmic visibility. This perspective challenges extant research broadly supporting data-driven decisions to enhance consumer interaction and drive lead generation and conversions. In addressing the principal inquiry of whether SVC is the solution for enhanced consumer engagement, this research suggests that dependence exclusively on this medium for customer outreach may be imprudent. Instead, it should be incorporated into a more holistic marketing strategy encompassing various channels and techniques.

Based on the research findings, the study provides several recommendations for solopreneurs looking to intertwine SVC into their marketing strategy. They should prioritise authenticity and genuine connections in combination with traditional metrics to get a clearer view of what content is most effective with their target audience. Additionally, solopreneurs should be mindful of their target audience's preferences regarding storytelling and switch up their content promotion strategies between informational and emotional content.

Table of Contents

1 Introduction	5
1.1 Background	5
1.2 Research focus	6
1.3 Research aims & objectives	7
1.4 Research question & method	7
1.5 Value of this research	8
2 Literature review	9
2.1 Definitions	10
2.1.1 Short video	10
2.1.2 Solopreneur	11
2.2 Personal branding and storytelling	11
2.3 Authenticity and Trust	13
2.4 Accessibility & Ease of Use	15
2.5 Technology adoption methods	16
2.6 Emerging issues	18
3 Research methods, limitations & ethics	18
3.1 Philosophy & approach	18
3.2 Methodology & strategy	19
3.3 Data collection	20
3.4 Data analysis	21
3.4 Ethics	21
3.5 Methodological Limitations	22
4 Findings	23
4.2 Sentiment toward SVC	23
4.3 Authenticity	24
4.4 Storytelling	26
4.5 Analytics & algorithms	27
5 Discussion	29
5.1 A grudging acceptance of SVC	29
5.2 Authenticity: The non-negotiable element of SVC	31
5.3 Storytelling: A generational discrepancy	32
5.4 Do metrics matter?	33
6 Conclusion	34
6.1 Areas for future research	36
6.2 Research Limitations	37
References	39
Appendices	48

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Short-form video (SVC) has swiftly captured a significant user base, starting with younger generations and, more recently, expanding to all demographics as a way to communicate ideas and share content. In 2024, SVC has become an omnipresent vehicle for mainstream businesses, both large and small, to espouse the value proposition of products and services (Newman, 2023). Unlike other, more complex forms of media, SVC has the potential to present a tapestry of information in a fraction of the time, making it more straightforward for viewers to grasp and share (Gao et al., 2021). This apparent ease of dissemination and reception is a potential reason for its rising popularity. For casual users, large companies, and small businesses alike, SVC offers users a dynamic space to engage and communicate by melding the nature of social media with the power of concise video content creation and exploration.

As social media evolves, how entrepreneurs and solopreneurs use SVC as a marketing tool is becoming more diversified and multifaceted (Chen et al., 2023, p. 258). Platforms like TikTok and Instagram have emerged as pivotal tools, enabling solopreneurs to compete effectively with established brands. Delayed recognition of SVC's place in the digital marketing spectrum has led to more established platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, following suit, with varying degrees of success. According to Zhao et al. (2023), SVC is a rising content method through which solopreneurs and entrepreneurs can evoke emotion in potential consumers, sparking introspection and engagement. However, given the infancy of SVC creation, a clear marketing strategy for maximising consumer engagement is still up for debate. Understanding how SVC can help solopreneurs espouse their value proposition could be crucial to their overall success.

1.2 Research focus

Ample research already exists advocating and encouraging small business owners, sole proprietors, and entrepreneurs to adopt strategies such as posting updates on social media (Wang et al., 2020), incentive marketing (Gkypali & Roper, 2024), encouraging electronic word-of-mouth (Delafruez et al., 2019), and forming business relationships with industry insiders via networking (Belt et al., 2015). While there is sparse research advocating for and analysing the adoption of SVC for large businesses (Dong et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2019; Shahbaznezhad et al., 2021), no study narrows their focus specifically to solopreneurs and the effect of SVC on their marketing efforts. This dissertation will highlight the strategies solopreneurs could use in their SVC to enhance their ability to engage consumers meaningfully.

Well before the emergence of the SVC phenomenon, content marketing, in all its forms, is considered to be a pivotal strategy for small brands looking to expand their customer base (Saxena, 2010; Dolezal, 2019). Therefore, acknowledging the authentic appeal of SVC and the growing consumer interest in more genuine brand interactions (Chen et al., 2023), solopreneurs may find potential opportunities in this domain. While the effectiveness of capitalising on such trends is not guaranteed, a careful integration of authentic representation, content diversity, and measured commercial elements could place solopreneurs in a favourable position. If finely tuned to align with audience expectations, an SVC-centered approach might enable solopreneurs to engage more effectively with their target market.

1.3 Research aims & objectives

Within the context of SVC for solopreneurs, the specific objectives of this research are to:

- Critically evaluate the effectiveness of authenticity and trust when creating and posting content.
- Identify the prevailing sentiment toward SVC and the platforms that host it.
- Explore what techniques solopreneurs use SVC to engage their customers and to what degree they are successful.
- Formulate potential recommendations to the solopreneur community on harnessing SVC effectively

1.4 Research question & method

Is short-form video content the answer to enhanced consumer engagement for solopreneurs?

The research methodology for this study is qualitative, focused on gathering in-depth insights from the lived experiences of solopreneurs. Secondary data is sourced using Boolean operators to narrow the search on various academic journals accessible via the Northumbria University Library, Proquest's Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA), Business Source Premier, and Sage Publications. Google Scholar will also be utilised to expand the breadth of the literature review. Additionally, statistical data pertinent to the study will be extracted from Statista.

For primary data collection, in-depth interviews with creators will be conducted to explore the nuances of strategies and techniques solopreneurs employ to engage prospective customers. This qualitative approach captures solopreneurs' rich, subjective experiences, offering valuable insights into effective engagement practices.

1.5 Value of this research

This study aims to contribute substantially to the body of knowledge available to solopreneurs. It seeks to provide them with actionable insights and a deeper understanding of effective engagement practices, thus enhancing their ability to connect with and convert potential customers into loyal clients. While scholars in the marketing sphere are beginning to research and uncover critical insights into short-form video, it is noteworthy that solopreneurs make up a significant proportion of the general workforce in Europe and the United States (Belt et al., 2015). This divergence from traditional work structures gives those individuals different characteristics. Therefore, there is a considerable gap in the extant research to discover how solopreneurs use SVC and whether they believe it is effective as part of their broader marketing strategy.

2 Literature review

Chapter 1.3 contextualises this dissertation and finds four key research objectives. This literature review primarily addresses the first objective, with the second and third objectives being explored through empirical research. Lastly, the fourth objective is synthesised from insights from the literature review and empirical findings in the discussion and conclusion sections.

The objectives are as follows:

- Evaluate the role of authenticity and trust in content creation and identify effective SVC messaging strategies for solopreneurs.
- Gauge current sentiment regarding SVC and hosting platforms.
- Critically assess the impact of authenticity, tone, storytelling, visual effects, and ease of use related to content creation.
- Develop recommendations for the solopreneur community on optimising the use of SVC.

The criteria for inclusion and exclusion in this literature review were defined to ensure the relevance and currency of the sources, particularly given the nascent nature of SVC. Primarily, the focus was on selecting articles published within the last five years, reflecting the most recent developments and insights.

Academic abstract databases such as the ASSIA with Boolean operators were used to narrow search terms and find research gaps. For example, "Short Video AND Storytelling" and "Personal Branding AND Entrepreneurship" produced significant results tangentially related to

this research focus. Meanwhile, "Short video AND solopreneurs" and "solopreneur and content creation" produced very few results, illuminating the area of focus that requires further research.

This review begins by exploring SVC's genesis, virality and potential, setting the stage for why content creators use the medium.

2.1 Definitions

2.1.1 Short video

Considerable debate centres on the exact duration that delineates a 'short' video. Yawised et al. (2022) suggest a threshold of under five minutes, whereas Liu et al. (2019) posit three minutes as the ideal length. On the other hand, findings from a comprehensive study by Hubspot involving over 1,200 global B2B and B2C marketers indicate a preference for SVC lengths not exceeding 60 seconds (Bump, 2023). It is perhaps best to use data from TikTok users, which clearly show that the most-viewed SVC, irrespective of the account's follower numbers, are all under 60 seconds long (Statista, 2023).

Similarly, there is no academic consensus on the type of information SVC should present. Some scholars offer a general characterisation, describing SVC as an innovative, shareable video format prevalent on diverse social media platforms (Liu et al., 2019; Ren et al., 2021). In contrast, Dong et al. (2023) provide a more nuanced perspective, emphasising the intrinsic value of SVC, stating that this form of media is distinguished by its compelling visual effects and the conveyance of authentic information by brands to stimulate audience engagement.

Given the considerable plurality of views related to what exactly constitutes SVC, this author, upon reviewing the limited research available, digesting current statistical data and consuming

many hours of content on SVC platforms, proposes an alternative definition:

“15 to 90-second video content created and shared through various social media platforms for entertainment, educational, and commercial purposes.”

2.1.2 Solopreneur

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the workforce landscape in Europe and the United States had already begun to transform, with solopreneurism becoming a popular option for around 15 per cent of skilled professionals (Belt et al. 2015, p. 381). Defined as a business person who acts independently for their own interests without being affiliated with or authorised by an organisation (Waas, 2017, p. 154), solopreneurs have become prevalent in almost every profession, from web design and law to coaching, marketing and everything in between. This trend, as examined by Wiklund et al. (2019), is often driven by individuals departing from traditional employment paths in search of personal growth opportunities and enhanced emotional well-being. However, striking out on their own terms requires solopreneurs to adequately advertise their services through a coherent marketing strategy—as any other active business would. The difference here is that most solopreneurs do not benefit from a significant marketing budget to trial and error different ideas. Therefore, following organic-centered content creation trends like SVC could mean the difference between success and failure.

2.2 Personal branding and storytelling

The upsurge in online video consumption, accompanied by the rapid evolution of video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn, has enticed millions to create and distribute concise video content as a medium for conveying their ideas and documenting personal experiences (Chen et al., 2023, p. 198). In the realm of work-related exploits, SVC becomes a viable means of promoting personal branding and espousing thought leadership.

This phenomenon has grown in popularity alongside a surge in solopreneurism, further fuelled by the increasing popularity of SVC, as it provides a platform where individuals articulate their individualised value proposition to their intended audience, thus contributing to their perceived authenticity (Gorbatov et al., 2019). Johnson (2017) concurs, noting that by using various social media platforms to share personal stories, knowledge, and experiences, creators build an online narrative showcasing their professional journey, knowledge, skills, and work experience.

The authenticity of any narrative is crucial for maintaining brand integrity, as highlighted by Kemp et al. (2020), who assert that brand stories perceived as contrived are prone to consumer backlash, necessitating marketers to reevaluate their brand narrative or adopt alternative strategies. This insight underscores the importance of solopreneurs avoiding fabricating their personal brand stories or attempting to emulate the success of others.

Since ancient times, stories have captivated humanity and remain the predominant mode of human communication today, with marketing leveraging this allure by incorporating a narrative structure in brand-related materials (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019). The prevailing sentiment with small business owners is that the art of storytelling is pivotal in establishing authenticity for modern-day businesses. Mucundorfeanu (2018) states that personal narratives contribute a layer of emotional depth, thereby enhancing attractiveness and captivating potential customers. Echoing this sentiment, Phillips & Nguyen (2021) acknowledge the fundamental role of storytelling in human culture, observing that it can evoke a diverse range of personal connections, messages, and meanings that each individual uniquely interprets based on their personal experiences and contexts. Based on platform adoption alone, it is becoming increasingly clear that the intimate nature of portrait-style SVC lends itself to a deeper emotional engagement than what can be achieved through mere text or photographic content. This is further substantiated by Hamby et al. (2019), whose quantitative research reveals that

video-based 'founder stories' are compelling, resonating with audiences as they often align with their own experiences, manifesting as more genuine and relatable. Another study by Lundqvist et al. (2013) proved that participants exposed to a brand story developed more positive and engaged attitudes in contrast to those without a requisite backstory who showed impatience and a critical stance, focusing more on the product's functional aspects.

While most extant research underscores storytelling's significance and positive effect on consumer engagement, some researchers caution against excessive story-based narratives in marketing content. Dhote & Kumar (2019) found that stories can affect brand recall by shifting viewer attention to overloaded narrative elements and neglecting functional aspects. They advocate for a balanced approach, emphasising that the relevance of the advertisement to the viewer's needs is crucial for brand retention. When viewers find content relevant, their ability to recall the brand and associate the content is enhanced and sustained over time, especially when the industry is novel or niche (Dhote & Kumar, 2019).

2.3 Authenticity and Trust

Dong et al. (2023) highlight the criticality of identifying characteristics such as authenticity that effectively attract and retain consumer engagement. In a recent study by Gao et al. (2021), informational, emotional, and commercial content were identified as key drivers in content-driven marketing, tasking creators with the challenge of isolating the factors that maximally accrue views. Liu et al. (2019) advocate for emotionally resonant content, weaving the intrinsic ethos of an authentic brand into compelling narratives, thereby amplifying consumer awareness and fostering emotional connections. Expanding on this notion, Dwivedi et al. (2021) assert the necessity of crafting content with a distinctive and stylish essence to elicit favourable consumer reactions, enhancing the perceived value and utility of the content. Dwivedi et al. (2021) also warn against incorporating extraneous or obtrusive elements that could detract from

consumer engagement. Hsieh et al. (2012), in their analysis of long-form video content, have a contrasting view, suggesting consumer predilection for informational over emotional content due to its perceived non-coerciveness and fairness. However, Shahbaznezhad et al. (2021), in a more contemporary study, note that emotional and authentic video content significantly stimulates critical engagement metrics, such as 'likes' and user comments, that are more likely to build consumer awareness. Given SVC's exponential expansion as a marketing medium, there is a significant gap in the research to uncover how solopreneurs are utilising this new medium to enhance their authenticity in an effort to engage audiences that are spoilt for choice.

While it is not the direct focus of this thesis, it may be a reasonable inference to suggest that the increasing popularity of user-generated content (UGC) correlates with consumers' preference for products that resonate with their personal values and lifestyles. This style of participatory marketing immerses the consumer directly into the product, intending to trigger feelings, emotions, and thoughts that generate positive experiences and a desire to purchase (Cuesta-Valiño et al., 2022). Brands are increasingly allocating substantial resources towards engaging influencers and existing customers as a strategy to bolster the perceived authenticity of their products and services (Statista, 2024). Research indicates that consumers are three times more likely to perceive content generated by fellow customers as more authentic than that produced by brands (Bridge, 2023). While solopreneurs are not consumers, neither are they significant brands. Their potential to blur the space between grassroots authenticity and professional branding may allow them to uniquely engage with their audience on a more personal and relatable level. Given these insights and resource limitations, to attract the attention of existing and potential customers, solopreneurs look to display in-depth industry knowledge by offering appealing visual content (Kraus et al., 2019). This approach aligns with the imperatives of storytelling and authenticity and is instrumental in resonating with and securing a committed and purchase-orientated audience.

2.4 Accessibility & Ease of Use

The creation of SVC holds significant appeal, chiefly owing to its accessibility. As Gao et al. (2021) state, this low threshold for entry invites a diverse array of content producers, ranging from large corporations to everyday people. Huang's (2021, p. 9) research further highlights the exceptional value inherent in SVC, which notably exceeds other mediums designed primarily to clarify purchase decisions. SVC also exhibits distinctive characteristics concerning user engagement dynamics. This is especially evident with the emergent prominence of platforms such as TikTok, which has emerged as the foremost social media platform for fostering user interaction in the last three years (Statista, 2023b). This success is attributed to the company's singular focus on SVC and its algorithm's adept adaptation to the preferences and behaviours of its user base. Although not all SVC is created for lead generation or financial profit, many creators have identified its potential for brand visibility by uploading content. This new strategy may appeal to solopreneurs because platforms like TikTok and Instagram offer a marketing method without the excessive costs often associated with advertising-oriented platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Oxborrow (2012) posited that social media companies, perhaps inadvertently, have levelled the playing field in content creation as they have enabled individuals with limited resources to enter the market and cultivate direct and personal relationships with their audience—something that, historically, has cost brands millions of dollars to foment. SVC and hosting platforms may be exacerbating this content democratisation phenomenon.

The surge in SVC has caused a notable diminishment in potential consumers' attention spans (Qin et al., 2022). Hampton & Keys (2017, p. 112) provide quantitative evidence of this trend, revealing that the Gen Z demographic exhibits an average attention span of about eight seconds, marginally less than the approximately twelve seconds noted among millennials. Consequently, it becomes crucial for content creators to adapt to evolving consumer behaviours

and preferences for personalised content to avoid their work being overlooked due to the lack of an authentic engagement trigger (Gao et al., 2021). Echoing this sentiment, Tellis et al. (2019) observe that consumers, faced with an abundance of content choices but limited time, are likely to disregard messages lacking a substantial value proposition, thereby undermining the effectiveness of marketing efforts. While SVC enables even those with essential digital skills to produce brand-centric content, the creators masterfully incorporating authentic digital storytelling through diverse multimodal creative techniques are poised for more success (Nicoli et al. 2022). Platforms specialising in SVC demonstrate an acute awareness of the evolving consumer attention spans by imposing specific duration limits on the videos creators can upload. For instance, Instagram Reels has a maximum duration of 90 seconds, YouTube Shorts caps at 60 seconds, and TikTok videos extend up to three minutes. This strategic limitation in video length reflects these platforms' adaptation to the changing consumer engagement patterns and attention retention in the digital media landscape. Often referred to as 'snackable content,' these engaging media experiences are crafted to disrupt the monotony of daily routines to foster a sense of achievement among users and enhance their social interactions (Nam & Jung, 2021, p. 12).

2.5 Technology adoption methods

From a technical perspective, SVC aligns increasingly with mobile-first strategies. The advent of mobile internet has vastly expanded access to information, making short videos a rapidly adopted new media form with a large user scale (Lu & Nam, 2021). Its higher dimension of information presentation renders it more acceptable and widespread, especially to younger audiences. A study by Mulier et al. (2021) indicates a preference for mobile device viewing of SVC in a vertical screen format, a method prevalent on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, catering to a mobile-centric audience. Navarro-Guere (2023) notes that because everyday

interactions often involve one or two individuals, a portrait setting further endorses a vertical video format's effectiveness in creating and consuming digital media, especially on mobile devices. Therefore, solopreneurs in industries where personal branding holds significant importance might lean towards the vertical format, attributing its appeal to the direct, personal communication style and clear facial visibility devoid of distractions.

The speed at which creators can produce and edit SVC may position this content medium advantageously as a tool for small businesses constrained by marketing budgets. This efficiency is emphasised by Wang (2021), who notes the ease with which content creators can engage in SVC due to its realistic filming demands, conversational style, and minimal need for special effects. Such attributes could lower the barrier to entry, allowing creators, even those with basic technical skills, to execute marketing strategies effectively. Additionally, SVC's financial requirements are considerably lower than other marketing methods (Dwivedi et al., 2021). The essential tools—a modern mobile phone and basic editing software—are relatively accessible and, when combined with a reasonable investment of time, make SVC a feasible option for small business owners (Yawised et al., 2022). This accessibility could open new avenues for effective and budget-friendly marketing strategies, which are exceptionally vital for individuals navigating the competitive digital marketing landscape. With that said, the early adoption of social media platforms has proven pivotal for many brands trying to capture their ideal consumers (Reimer, 2023, p.10). With platforms like TikTok and Instagram, content over-saturation may stifle competitive advantage for solopreneurs—proving to be a barrier to entry in its own right.

2.6 Emerging issues

The examination of literature pertaining to SVC and its use by solopreneurs indicates a dynamic and evolving field. Initially, there was no universally accepted definition, so a working definition was formulated for this dissertation.

This review identified potential motivational factors for solopreneurs using SVC, such as broader audience reach and enhanced personal branding. However, it also highlighted significant challenges, such as balancing commercial objectives with authentic storytelling. Notably, SVC's ease of use and accessibility may also emerge as key drivers for its adoption by solopreneurs.

A recurring theme is the need for a strategic approach to leveraging SVC in solopreneurial marketing and branding efforts. While SVC presents immense potential, guidelines for practical use, especially tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this entrepreneurial sub-group, are sparse. The literature underscored that, although general marketing strategies and models available could apply to SVC, a deeper understanding of the medium based on the experiences of solopreneurs themselves is lacking. This gap underlines the need for further research to show how solopreneurs use SVC, what drives their decisions, and the challenges they encounter.

3 Research methods, limitations & ethics

3.1 Philosophy & approach

According to Frechette et al. (2020), interpretivism provides a unique approach that looks into our everyday experiences and uncovers the nuances of phenomena by exploring how individuals interpret and give significance to their own existence. In general, an inductive

interpretivist philosophy gives researchers more detail to investigate outcomes and explains why people behave in specific ways (Levers, 2013). Instead of phenomena having definite results, Collis & Hussey (2021) state that social reality is subjective to interpretivists; therefore, each person has their own understanding of what is tangible.

Because subjective and immeasurable themes of authenticity, trust, and storytelling are at the heart of this study, it stands to reason that an inductive interpretivist approach underpins the methodology to understand what types of content solopreneurs, particularly online coaches, prefer to employ to engage with their audience. SVC is a field of research that is still in its infancy. So, while a positivist deductive approach may provide valuable insights into some industry-specific norms, such as return on investment (ROI) or click-through rates (CTR), solopreneurs must adapt their creative techniques and monitor audience sentiment to be successful. These challenges are complex to solve with raw data and without context. Smith & Osborn (2015) note that inductive interpretivism helps researchers investigate intricate, unpredictable, and emotionally charged subjects. Here, participants' responses to enquiries regarding their experiences with SVC are personal, unpredictable and, at times, ambiguous. Thus, this thesis allows for multiple subjective realities rather than a single objective truth.

3.2 Methodology & strategy

This research uses a qualitative methodology through exploratory semi-structured interviews with participants who identify as solopreneurs. Of course, It is possible to view consumer engagement as synonymous with popularity and, therefore, measure it via raw data in the form of likes, shares, and subscriptions. However, consumer engagement itself is subjective. While gaining millions of views is one way to build a die-hard following, virality does not necessarily equate to forming deeper connections (Razmus, 2021). Therefore, relying solely on quantitative platform-supplied metrics may not be commensurate with measuring solopreneurs' success in

connecting with potential customers. Biggam (2021) states that qualitative semi-structured interviews have more scope to delve into the nuances of human behaviour and explore the reasons behind participants' actions, allowing for deeper insights. Therefore, understanding whether solopreneurs think SVC is the answer to enhanced consumer engagement depends on their experience creating content, publishing and interacting with potential clients and less on whether they gain thousands of likes. To counter any biases inherent in written surveys (Busetto et al., 2020), this qualitative exploration of interviewees' experiences aims to ask carefully selected 'why' and 'how' questions and uncover a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of SVC engagement.

3.3 Data collection

A hashtag search for 'solopreneurs' on TikTok, Instagram, and LinkedIn was used to identify potential interview candidates. After assessing their SVC, links on their social media profile allowed more in-depth analysis of their business to ascertain what type of service they provide. In this case, The purposive sampling criteria included solopreneurs who were (1) in the service industry and (2) had more than 1000 followers on any platform. These criteria were implemented to (1) homogenise the sample, distinguishing them from solopreneurs who sell products, and (2) set a baseline that would determine if the participant had adequate knowledge of how to create and share SVC. Approximately 110 emails were sent to potential solopreneurs requesting their participation in a semi-structured interview. Subsequently, nine interviews were conducted over two weeks in January 2024. Of the nine, five were female, and four were male. The age demographic ranged from 27 to 55, and the countries of origin were Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Interviews were conducted online using Google Meet, with each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes (Appendix F).

Interviewee	Position/role	Generation	Followers	Months using SVC	Minutes interviewed
A	Fractional CFO	X	4000+	10	40
B	Content Creator	Y	23K+	36+	45
C	Occupational Therapist	Boomer	1500+	12	35
D	Employment consultant	Y	3400+	12	45
E	Executive coach	Y	141K+	24	40
F	Behavioural coach	Boomer	1200+	15	35
G	Creative consultant	Y	22K+	24	40
H	Leadership Coach	X	13K+	15	30
I	Publicist	Y	15K+	16	40

Fig 1: List of Interviewees, their professions, demographics, and SVC-specific metrics

3.4 Data analysis

This study employed a dual-method approach for thematic analysis of interview transcripts. Interviews were initially transcribed using ‘Fathom’ video transcription software, ensuring efficiency and accuracy. Subsequently, qualitative analysis software ‘Quirkos’ was utilised to identify themes by coding extensive data sets (Appendix G). This technological aid was complemented by this author's final, thorough examination, where additional codes were added, and themes were rigorously validated and further developed. This iterative and integrative approach, leveraging the analytical capabilities of bespoke software alongside detailed manual scrutiny, was instrumental in uncovering and refining complex and nuanced themes.

3.4 Ethics

Solopreneurs who participated in this study did so voluntarily, with the freedom to withdraw their participation at any point. To maintain confidentiality, the identities of all respondents are kept anonymous throughout this dissertation. Consent for audio and visual recording of the

interviews was reconfirmed prior to their commencement (Appendix C), ensuring participants were fully aware and reassured about the confidentiality of the interview data. A Northumbria University Ethics form, verified by this author's supervisor, was submitted and approved. Finally, a participant debrief sheet was sent to clarify the research objectives and offer another opportunity to opt out should they wish (Appendix D).

3.5 Methodological Limitations

The study acknowledges the inherent limitations of the methodological choices made, including a small sample size of nine interviews. This is justified by practical demands, such as the busy day-to-day life of solopreneurs, the challenge of setting a long-form interview across multiple time zones, and the extensive effort required to code the themes thoroughly. By setting criteria such as having more than 1000 followers and being in the service industry, the study may inadvertently exclude solopreneurs with valuable insights who do not meet these criteria. This could limit the diversity of perspectives represented in the sample and affect the generalisability of the findings. In addition, the study conducted interviews during a limited timeframe, which may not allow for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences or sufficient time to recruit a diverse sample.

Finally, the focus on solopreneurs from English-speaking countries may introduce language and cultural biases in the data collected. The experiences and perspectives of solopreneurs from different cultural contexts may differ significantly. Despite these limitations, the study aims to strike a balance between gaining rich insights from individual perspectives and the practical constraints faced.

4 Findings

These findings deliver the outcomes of thematic qualitative analysis based on solopreneur interviews, focusing on the adoption and impact of SVC in enhancing consumer engagement. By dissecting the integration of SVC into their marketing strategies, the analysis brings to light the effectiveness of SVC alongside the challenges and strategic advantages encountered. The emergent themes underscore SVC's potential to foster consumer engagement and detail the pragmatic realities solopreneurs face in leveraging this medium effectively.

4.2 Sentiment toward SVC

Despite all respondents committing significant resource allocation to the creation of SVC, the prevailing sentiment towards this mode of marketing was surprisingly negative. Respondents routinely emphasised that in order to be successful, a considerable time investment was required to create videos that were, in many cases, completely ignored by their ideal customers.

“When I first started, I was getting swallowed as I would spend a day or two doing a handful of videos. It gets you to a point where it burns you out. Then you stop because you're just like, what is this?” - Respondent G.

In addition to the time commitment, most respondents referenced the difficulty they faced in boiling their value proposition into 60-second clips, remarking that they felt they were doing a disservice to their industry and their own professional qualifications.

"I think they're way too short to say anything of value. You cannot get anything meaningful within one minute." - Respondent F.

Notwithstanding the sentiments of squandered time and the doubts concerning the efficacy of bite-sized content within their messaging strategy, the overwhelming majority of respondents acknowledged SVC as an indispensable component of their comprehensive marketing strategy. The compulsion to 'maintain a presence' within the digital realm emerged as a recurrent justification, particularly in response to inquiries probing the rationale behind the continued production of SVC despite their apparent disdain.

"I do not need to have a thousand bajillion followers, but I do need to have a presence so that if someone hears about me and looks me up on Instagram, I look credible." - Respondent D.

Despite varying levels of enthusiasm for creating such content, there is a shared recognition of its strategic importance. This consensus reflects a pragmatic approach, where the effectiveness of short-form video in reaching audiences is seen not merely as a trend but as a fundamental shift in how potential clients are engaged. Respondent E aptly summarises this sentiment:

"As we are seeing an increase in businesses attracted to platforms like TikTok, I think it will become significantly harder to make an impact without SVC."

4.3 Authenticity

Consistently affirmed by participants, the concept of 'authenticity' and its variations were referenced over 38 times throughout nine interviews, underscoring its critical significance as a

thematic area warranting further investigation. Participants regularly espoused their desire to let their audience know that they were ‘real’ people and a willingness to connect on a human level. On more than one occasion, respondents noted that their offering is not one of a kind or original, but their delivery, approach, and enthusiasm when creating SVC is unique. It is this aspect they believed would create leads.

“People can get the same product anywhere. There are a million variations on everything. So my biggest piece of advice now is to focus on your personal brand because people like working with whom they like.” - Respondent G.



Fig 2: Circular treemap of most commonly used phrases and their derivatives by participants.

Many respondents cited early attempts at SVC creation as not fit for purpose due to several authenticity-based factors. Some referenced being ‘too wooden’. Others found that their videos were merely replications of content that already existed. The respondents stated that they got

the most traction in terms of followers and connected with their audience after realising they just needed to be themselves, relay everyday problems, and rely heavily on their experiences and qualifications.

“There is power in the message. There is resonance in the message. There's action. I get feedback that I'm providing actionable stuff. I am not talking about esoteric stuff up in the clouds.” - Respondent E.

A shared recognition emerged among the five respondents who have experienced viral success: content that demanded the least effort often garnered the most significant engagement. This insight challenges the conventional emphasis on meticulously crafting content around ostensibly captivating topics, suggesting that such an approach may not only squander time and resources but also detract from the authenticity of the final output, as evidenced by the extensive revisions before publication. Moreover, these individuals exhibited a more composed attitude towards customer engagement with SVC, displaying less frustration than their counterparts. This indicates a potential correlation between a relaxed approach to content creation and its perceived success and authenticity.

“People can tell when you are trying for something. The best videos are the ones that you do not think are going to do well, and you just did it in five seconds.” - Respondent G.

4.4 Storytelling

During the thematic analysis of respondents' views on authenticity, one sub-theme came starkly into view: evidence of a generational divide on the topic of storytelling. Interviewees from Generation Y underscore the importance of showcasing vulnerability, transparency, and everyday experiences within their video content—articulating a belief that consumers are not merely investing in products but in the individuals behind them. Building a narrative, creating fictional characters, and semi-fictional events all become part of how they create their message. In this universe, failure is celebrated as a necessary step toward success, making the creator more human and, therefore, more relatable.

“So, all the posts I get the most engagement on are always narrative-based. And they are always stories about almost literal conversations I have had with clients.” - Respondent D.

Conversely, respondents who identified as either Generation X or Boomers (with one exception) generally saw less value in creating content that detailed their daily lives, citing this mode of creation as mundane and without purpose. To them, storytelling gets in the way of their intended goal: to provide meaningful services to clients who need them. They see storytelling as a surplus to requirements and a significant drain on time they could spend doing client outreach. In fact, those participants who regarded storytelling as an unnecessary element of short video creation generally spoke with disdain towards those that do.

“A few people have had mega success, but that does not mean it applies to the rest of us. They just happen to be very good on camera, or sadly, they are just good-looking.” - Respondent G.

One respondent articulated a distinctive approach towards the content presentation, aiming to maintain a 'professional' demeanour in each video. This inclination was driven by the necessity to elucidate services, thereby allocating limited scope for the incorporation of storytelling elements. This strategy underscores a deliberate choice to prioritise informational clarity over narrative engagement in digital communication.

“I used to think that infusing my personal experience of different clients and different families I have worked with over many, many, many, many years now would be like the big piece, right? No. They want to know something they can take home with them today—something they can ponder over.” - Respondent C.

4.5 Analytics & algorithms

Strikingly, all respondents were unified when voicing disinterest in assessing the success of their SVC using traditional platform-based marketing metrics. Instead of focusing on quantitative measures, participants expressed a preference for maximising content dissemination and expressed scepticism regarding the value of quantifying likes and views.

Two principal reasons emerged as to why respondents saw little merit in analysing marketing data to improve their SVC:

1. Algorithm Apathy

Participants expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with the ever-changing algorithms of platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, and TikTok. They criticised the algorithms for their limited content distribution, with one participant noting that content barely reaches beyond their immediate network unless it is liked by someone within that network who has a broader connection. Despite efforts to produce three videos a week for six months, another respondent lamented the lack of visibility and recognition on platforms like LinkedIn, where only a tiny fraction of users actively post content.

“Eight times out of ten, you might be right, and then two times out of ten, your content absolutely bombs, and there is no rhyme or reason to it. It is about the same length as something that’s done well. It is on the same type of topic. It is filmed the same way. It has the same type of editing. This one got a million views, and this one got ten thousand views.” - Respondent E.

Another respondent expressed dissatisfaction with the ongoing requirement to cater to the ever-changing demands of social media algorithms to maintain online visibility. Ultimately, they expressed the view that they would ignore the algorithm entirely.

“What I probably hate the most at this point is less about the content creation and more about having to feed the machine and please the algorithm.”

2. There is no value in vanity metrics

As defined by Rogers (2018, p 271), vanity metrics represent a concept that encompasses quantifying and portraying one’s achievements in the "success theatre" of social media. These metrics, such as likes, followers, and views, are often highlighted by creators as indicators of popularity and influence. However, as almost all of the respondents in this study pointed out, they can be misleading, as they do not necessarily correlate with genuine customer engagement or value creation. Participants noted that while affirming to gain thousands of likes

on a video or dream of going viral, vanity metrics encourage a focus on superficial aspects of social media presence and have the potential to divert attention from more lucrative interactions with consumers.

"I try very hard to have no expectations for what a video will do. I do not expect virality. I tell people all the time to stop chasing a viral video. If you try to create it, the energy is all off." - Respondent G.

Despite a few reporting hard learnings in the early stages of business, interviewees noted that despite feelings of adulation from receiving vanity metrics, these, ultimately, did not equate to sales. One respondent, who sells high-ticket services, emphasised that their business model does not rely on a high sales volume, making metrics like views and shares less relevant. Instead, they focus on the overall impact of their content over time, valuing leads and relationships over superficial engagement metrics. Another respondent shared a similar perspective, recounting past experiences paying for such metrics without seeing any real benefits. Overall, there is a recognition that not all solopreneurs prioritise pouring over pages of analytical data; some prefer to gauge success through a more intuitive sense of how their content resonates with their audience.

"I have found that there are almost two types of entrepreneurs. Some people love the analytics. They love the data. They have spreadsheets, and they track it to an inch. I am in the pack who ignores the analytics. I basically gauge my success through vibes." - Respondent B.

5 Discussion

This section will address the significance of the findings concerning the research aims and objectives, evaluating how they align with or diverge from existing literature on solopreneurs and SVC. The discussion will highlight any unexpected insights and consider their implications for future research. Additionally, it will identify areas that remain unexplored and could benefit from further investigation. In the conclusion that follows, this study's limitations will be acknowledged, and reflections on potential modifications for future research will be offered. By addressing these aspects, this author aims to comprehensively analyse the findings, situating them within the broader context of academic research on solopreneurs and SVC.

5.1 A grudging acceptance of SVC

Except for one respondent who proclaimed to love everything about social media and SVC, most solopreneurs in this study find SVC and the platforms hosting their videos cumbersome and time-consuming. One participant reported feeling ‘burnt out’ during the creation process. In contrast, several others did not believe SVC was an ideal vehicle to convey necessary information to their audience in such a short timeframe. These findings starkly contrast with extant research evaluating the ease of use and accessibility of SVC (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Yawised et al., 2022). These authors speak to the speed at which brands can publish content. Still, in doing so, they may underestimate or ignore the time burden placed on solopreneurs who do not have the benefit of a dedicated marketing team to whom they can delegate content creation.

Some solopreneurs in this study believe that their business model relies on explaining complex concepts clearly and concisely—and 60 seconds was nowhere near enough time to convey anything meaningful. They felt that condensing their message into clips this short trivialised their work. This sentiment starkly contrasts with Gao et al. (2021), who argue that SVC can present a wealth of information in a fraction of the time, making it easier for viewers to understand and share. According to Wang (2021), this ease of dissemination and reception could be a potential reason for its rising popularity. However, the findings of this study suggest a more complex reality for solopreneurs grappling with the constraints and expectations of SVC.

The negative sentiment toward SVC was one of the more unexpected outcomes of this study as it contrasts significantly with this author’s initial assumption and current research that suggests creators would find more significant conversion opportunities, reduced time investment in content creation, and enhanced engagement through this more interactive medium (Dong et al. 2023). Interestingly, even respondents who experienced viral success questioned the worth of their efforts in relation to their overall achievements. Despite researchers such as Liu et al. (2019) recognising SVC as a pivotal component of a creator’s marketing toolkit, the feedback from participants in this study was less enthusiastic. In fact, the primary motivation for continuing to create emerged as a reluctant acknowledgement that many potential customers consume SVC on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and LinkedIn rather than a genuine affinity for the medium. This finding underscores a disconnection between the theoretical advantages of SVC and the practical experiences of solopreneurs, especially when compared to brands with larger budgets and a reduced time burden. According to Latif et al. (2014), enhanced reputation and

credibility are now seen as direct outcomes of competitive advantage gained through strong brand awareness in the marketplace. So, while some interviewees disliked SVC for reasons of efficacy and time consumption, they also recognised that an absence of content on SVC platforms may affect their ability to connect to potential clients.

5.2 Authenticity: The non-negotiable element of SVC

Despite the prevailing negative sentiment towards SVC as a whole, all nine respondents underscored the importance of creating authentic videos for brand awareness and connecting with ideal customers. The concept of 'authenticity' emerged as a paramount characteristic for solopreneurs, mentioned at least 38 times in the interviews (Appendix G). This finding resonates with research on larger entities (Dong et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2019), highlighting the significance of presenting genuine, authentic content, particularly for active business owners on platforms like TikTok. As of February 2024, a mere five out of the top 50 TikTok accounts were held by brands (Wikipedia, 2024), indicating dominance and preference for watching videos by individual creators on the platform. This observation supports the concept posited by Cuesta-Valiño et al. (2022) that marketing approaches like SVC, which actively engage consumers, are more effective in eliciting emotional responses and fostering positive experiences, thereby enhancing the likelihood of purchase intent.

Several respondents who experienced viral success reflected on their early attempts at creating SVC. They noted instances of 'trying too hard,' appearing 'wooden,' or poorly replicating other creators. A notable pattern emerged: content requiring minimal effort often resulted in the highest engagement. This observation contrasts with existing literature, as represented by Dwivedi et al. (2021) and Shahbaznezhad et al. (2021), which suggests that carefully crafted content with a distinctive essence can enhance consumer engagement, especially when it is emotionally authentic. Respondents in this study seem to challenge this strategy, indicating that it may not only waste time and resources to create content diligently but also compromise the authenticity of the final product. Furthermore, these successful individuals displayed a more relaxed attitude toward customer engagement with SVC, exhibiting less frustration than their peers yet to experience significant viewership. These findings suggest a potential link between a laid-back approach to content creation and its perceived success and authenticity.

While this author anticipated authenticity would play a crucial role in solopreneurs' strategies for securing customer engagement, the findings revealed that 'successful' content depended on a

relaxed approach, with minimal effort being advocated by respondents. This raises the question of whether the perceived ease of content creation results from solopreneurs becoming adept at their craft or reflects a more laissez-faire attitude toward what is posted without concern for its efficacy. The contrast is stark when considering those solopreneurs who, despite employing various strategies, fail to achieve significant engagement. This discrepancy underscores the need for further research to unravel the nuances of content creation strategies and their impact on engagement in the context of solopreneurship.

5.3 Storytelling: A generational discrepancy

An analysis of respondents' views on storytelling has illuminated a generational divide on whether it is a critical component or an unnecessary element within SVC creation. Generation Y respondents underscored the importance of showcasing vulnerability, transparency, and everyday musings in their communication with potential consumers, suggesting that customers are actually 'buying the individual' behind the offering and not the offering itself. This approach aligns with Dessart & Pitardi (2019), who argue that incorporating a narrative structure in marketing materials can enhance authenticity and a connection with ideal customers. Mucundorfeanu (2018) and Phillips & Nguyen (2021) further support this, suggesting that personal narratives add emotional depth and captivate potential customers, making them feel as if they are connected to the product exclusively.

In contrast, respondents from Generation X and Boomers generally perceived storytelling as mundane and purposeless, challenging the universal efficacy of storytelling in marketing. This perspective raises the question of whether storytelling's relevance and impact may vary depending on the target audience and the nature of the product or service offered. Respondent G's statement, "They just happen to be very good on camera, or sadly, they are just good-looking," reflects not only scepticism regarding storytelling but seems to disparage storytellers as nothing more than aesthetically pleasing people talking into the camera. While research exists on how Generation X processes video content on mobile devices less effectively than their younger counterparts (Mulier et al., 2020), no direct research uncovers what types of content appeal to audiences across multiple demographics. Therefore, these findings highlight the importance of understanding the target audience's preferences when crafting SVC strategies. For solopreneurs targeting a younger demographic, embracing storytelling and incorporating personal narratives into their SVC may be crucial for establishing authenticity and

fostering engagement. However, a more straightforward, informational approach may be more effective for those catering to an older demographic.

Alternatively, this study raises the possibility that Gen X/Boomers might be overlooking the potential of narrative storytelling in today's social media landscape. The shift toward a more personal and narrative-driven approach could be seen as a fundamental aspect of modern social media marketing, potentially overlooked by the older generations. To explore whether Gen X and Boomer consumers also appreciate narrative storytelling, further research could be conducted involving surveys or interviews with this demographic alone in order to gauge their preferences and attitudes toward storytelling in SVC.

5.4 Do metrics matter?

Technical advancements, such as the increased accessibility of mobile internet, have contributed to the rising popularity and widespread adoption of short videos (Lu & Nam, 2021). This surge in popularity could force creators to place greater emphasis on metrics like likes and views as measures of success. However, the scepticism expressed by solopreneurs towards these traditional platform metrics suggests a nuanced perspective. While respondents recognise the importance of technical advancements in reaching a broader audience, they appear to question the value of traditional metrics as the sole indicators of their content's success. This stance challenges the widely held assumption that data-driven decisions enhance consumer interaction and drive lead generation and conversions (Chang et al., 2019). This is evidenced by respondent B, who stated, "I basically gauge my success through vibes."

Solopreneurs in this study care little for 'vanity metrics', realising that these ultimately do not equate to financial gain. Because participants in the study report that they sell high-ticket items, just one or two sales a week may be enough to sustain their business model. Therefore, scrutinising likes on multiple videos is likely not a productive use of their time. In this context, vanity metrics such as views, likes, or follower counts could be explained as "distracted modes of engagement" (Rogers, 2018, p.271). Because these results may not accurately reflect the depth of audience engagement, solopreneurs might benefit from focusing on more qualitative measures of success, such as the strength of the connections they forge with their audience and the impact of their content on their overall brand perception.

While all respondents agreed that they were not worried about traditional metrics, there were mixed responses regarding how to approach platform algorithms. One participant bemoaned the constant need to ‘feed the machine’ and cater to the TikTok algorithm, while another indicated a ‘growing weariness’ with the demands of maintaining visibility on LinkedIn. This sentiment aligns with the findings of Klug et al. (2021), who observed that short video creators attempt to manipulate the algorithm to promote their videos, a process that requires trial and error. Given the meticulous time management of the solopreneurs interviewed, the effort to outwit a frequently changing algorithm may be a frivolous and unproductive use of time. For those solopreneurs in this study who have greater success with SVC, algorithms are not a factor they consider when creating or posting. The idea that some content works and some does not—is accepted as part of the process.

Conversely, solopreneurs who struggled with engagement expressed frustration and sought an explanation for how the algorithm worked. Given these results, solopreneurs may be better off developing their personal brand and forming authentic connections with their audience rather than trying to decipher confusing algorithms. This strategy aligns with the recognition that the success of content can be unpredictable. Solopreneurs could foster a more sustainable and fulfilling approach to SVC by prioritising genuine engagement over algorithmic manipulation.

6 Conclusion

To adequately summarise this study, it is crucial to revisit the primary objectives and synthesise each insight gained from respondents regarding their experiences with SVC. The research considers participant sentiment toward SVC platforms, the significance of authenticity in the creation process, content promotion techniques, and the overall effectiveness of SVC in fostering consumer engagement. By systematically addressing these objectives, this conclusion draws on the findings, offers actionable recommendations and identifies areas for future research.

Prevailing sentiment toward SVC

With the exception of one respondent, solopreneurs overwhelmingly disliked SVC and its hosting platforms. They exhibited disdain for the creation process and felt challenged trying to distil their value proposition into bite-sized clips. There is a general consensus that SVC does

not provide an adequate medium to convey the depth of information required by solopreneurs, leading to concerns about the trivialisation of their work. Contrary to existing research that highlights the favourable impact of SVC relative to the time invested by creators, many respondents in this study found the process of scripting, filming, editing, and posting to be laborious and challenging. This experience has led to feelings of burnout and raised doubts about the value of investing time and effort in SVC. For solopreneurs, who are typically the sole representatives of their business, dedicating substantial time to activities that do not generate leads is deemed unproductive. Perhaps more profoundly, it poses a risk to the sustainability of their enterprise.

Authenticity in content creation and posting

Authenticity emerged as a crucial element for solopreneurs. For the most part, there is a recognition that they are selling themselves rather than their product. Therefore, the emphasis on creating authentic videos highlighted the importance of genuineness in building brand awareness and connecting with ideal customers. This finding aligns with existing literature, underscoring the pivotal role of authentic content not only for SVC but all other types of outward-facing marketing materials.

,

Content promotion techniques

The study revealed mixed approaches to content promotion, particularly regarding platform algorithms and the use of storytelling. A generational divide was observed in attitudes toward storytelling. Generation Y respondents favoured weaving narrative structures into their SVC, emphasising the need to show vulnerability and transparency to audiences. Conversely, Generation X and Boomer respondents were sceptical, viewing storytelling as unnecessary, vain, and an opportunity to look good in front of a camera. This divide suggests that storytelling's effectiveness as a content promotion technique may vary depending on the target demographic. Another plausible reason for the divergence in beliefs is that one group is misinterpreting the true value proposition of SVC platforms for their business. In addition to the generational divide, older solopreneurs expressed frustration with the demands of algorithmic visibility, while others adopted a more relaxed attitude—recognising that they did not have the power to make an impact or change this phenomenon. A notable observation from half of the respondents was that content which required minimal effort often resulted in higher

engagement. This challenges the conventional strategy of meticulously crafting content based on defined metrics and suggests that a less structured approach may be more effective for solopreneurs.

Is SVC the answer to enhanced consumer engagement?

The findings from this study indicate that while SVC presents significant opportunities for enhanced consumer engagement, its effectiveness is not unequivocal. Solopreneurs have expressed concerns about the medium's ability to convey complex information and its demands on time and creativity. While SVC appears to be an excellent vehicle to exhibit authenticity, this study questions what form that should take.

Furthermore, research suggests that solopreneurs seek alternative ways to gauge engagement and measure the impact of their content beyond likes and views, which is challenging to elucidate. SVC has the potential to boost lead generation and brand visibility, but given the divergence in responses and the challenges identified, its role is complex and multifaceted. Whether it is the answer to consumer engagement remains unclear, and solopreneurs would be unwise to abandon other marketing efforts in favour of an SVC-only strategy. There is still much to learn about the medium, especially considering its relative infancy in the content marketing paradigm.

6.1 Areas for future research

Methods for conveying complex information using SVC

For some solopreneurs, articulating a value proposition within the confines of 60-second clips presents a significant challenge. Investigative research offering strategies for succinctly conveying complex services in such brief timeframes would be invaluable. This could encompass exploring diverse content formats and narrative techniques that facilitate a more detailed presentation of information.

Generational storytelling

The observed generational divide in attitudes toward storytelling and content promotion techniques warrants further investigation. Research could focus on understanding the

preferences and expectations of different demographic groups regarding SVC and how solopreneurs can tailor their content to appeal to diverse audiences.

Platform algorithms

The frustration expressed by solopreneurs with algorithmic visibility suggests a need for more research on how SVC platform algorithms influence content strategy and engagement. This could include studies on the effectiveness of different approaches to navigating algorithms and exploring alternative metrics for measuring success.

Long-term impact of SVC on consumer engagement

Given the infancy of SVC, its effect on consumer engagement is hard to predict. Longitudinal mix method studies may uncover richer insights that will help solopreneurs strategise their marketing campaigns more efficiently. With a more extensive data set, creators can decide how much (if any) SVC would be useful in reaching their business goals. This study could include examining the retention rates of audiences engaged through SVC and the evolution of content strategies over time.

6.2 Research Limitations

Working with a limited data set

While the current data set provided valuable insights, a larger sample size would enhance the robustness of the findings. Future research could include a more extensive array of solopreneurs to capture a broader range of experiences and perspectives. The nine interviews presented here probably uncovered more questions than definitive answers. Should another researcher choose to expand the number of respondents, a clearer picture may become evident regarding whether SVC is having a significant impact on the marketing strategy of solopreneurs.

Mixed methods approach

During the course of researching this study, it became apparent that implementing a mixed-methods approach could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship

between creator sentiments and marketing metrics. By analysing raw data and comparing it to the qualitative creation ethos, future researchers could ascertain if there is a correlation between content creation strategies and algorithmic success or if engagement is indeed random.

Focus on Age Demographics

Narrowing the study to make it representative of a specific age demographic could yield more targeted insights. While doing so would exclude the views of specific subsections, the results here showed such a significant divergence that the study revealed stark perspectives towards storytelling and personal expression. Future research could benefit from focusing on a particular generational group to explore the effectiveness of storytelling in SVC within that demographic.

References

- Anderson, K. (2020). Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: it is time to talk about TikTok. *Library Hi Tech News*, 37(4), 7-12. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-01-2020-0001>
- Belt, P., Paloniemi, K., & Sinisammal, J. (2015). One-Person Enterprises and Business Growth. *Journal of Enterprising Culture*, 23(3), 381-404.
<https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/abs/10.1142/S0218495815500132>
- Biggam, J. (2021). *Succeeding with Your Master's Dissertation: A Step-by-step Handbook*. Open University Press, McGraw Hill.
- Bridge, K. (2023). *64 user-generated content statistics to know in 2023*. Bazaarvoice. Retrieved January 7, 2024, from <https://www.bazaarvoice.com/blog/user-generated-content-statistics-to-know/>
- Bump, P. (2022, November 21). *The Top Marketing Trends of 2023 & How They've Changed Since 2022 [Data from 1000+ Global Marketers]*. HubSpot Blog. Retrieved January 7, 2024, from <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/marketing-trends>
- Busetto, L., Wick, W., & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and Practice*, 2(14), 1-10.
<https://neurolrespract.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z>
- Chang, Y.-C., Ku, C.-H., & Chen, C.-H. (2019). Social media analytics: Extracting and visualizing Hilton hotel ratings and reviews from TripAdvisor. *International Journal of Information Management*, 48(1), 263-279. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2017.11.001>
- Chen, H., Ma, D., & Sharma, B. (2023). Short video marketing strategy: evidence from successful entrepreneurs on TikTok. *Journal of Research in Marketing and Entrepreneurship*, 26(2), 257-278. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JRME-11-2022-0134>

- Chen, L., Yan, Y., & Smith, A. (2023). What drives digital engagement with sponsored videos? An investigation of video influencers' authenticity management strategies. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 51(2), 198–221.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-022-00887-2>
- Collis, J., & Hussey, R. (2021). *Business research: A practical guide for students*. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. 10.1007/978-3-658-34357-6
- Cronin-Gilmore, J. (2012). Exploring Marketing Strategies in Small Businesses. *Journal of Marketing Development and Competitiveness*, 6(1), 96-107.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/347943152_Exploring_Marketing_Strategies_in_Small_Businesses
- Cuesta-Valiño, P., Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, P., & García-Henche, B. (2022). Word of mouth and digitalization in small retailers: Tradition, authenticity, and change. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 175(121382), 1-15.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0040162521008131>
- Davis, J. (2020). Successful Marketing Strategies for Small Business Sustainability [Doctoral Dissertation, Walden University]. In *College of Management and Technology*.
<https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=10370&context=dissertations>
- Delafróoz, N., Ahmadi, Y. R., & Abdi, M. (2019). The influence of electronic word of mouth on Instagram users: An emphasis on consumer socialization framework. *Cogent Business & Management*, 6, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2019.1606973>
- Dessart, L., & Pitardi, V. (2019). How stories generate consumer engagement: An exploratory study. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 183-195.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.06.045>

- Dhote, T., & Kumar, V. (2019). Long-duration Storytelling: Study of Factors Influencing Retention Ability of Brands. *Journal of Creative Communications*, 14(1), 31-53.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0973258618718228>
- Dolezal, J. (2019). A flight to quality? Why content marketing strategy must evolve. *Journal of Brand Strategy*, 7(4), 343-354.
<https://hstalks.com/article/3916/a-flight-to-quality-why-content-marketing-strategy/>
- Dong, X., Ni, X., & Liao, J. (2023). Short video marketing: what, when and how short-branded videos facilitate consumer engagement. *Internet Research, Advance online publication*.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-02-2022-0121>
- Dwivedi, Y. K., Ismagilova, E., Hughes, D. L., Carlson, J., Filieri, R., Jacobson, J., Jain, V., Karjaluoto, H., Kefi, H., Krishen, A. S., Kumar, V., Rahman, M. M., Raman, R., Rauschnabel, P. A., Rowley, J., Salo, J., Tran, G. A., & Wang, Y. (2021). Setting the future of digital and social media marketing research: Perspectives and research propositions. *International Journal of Information Management*, 59(1), 1-37.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102168>
- Frechette, J., Bitzas, V., Aubry, M., Kilpatrick, K., & Lavoie-Tremblay, M. (2020). Capturing Lived Experience: Methodological Considerations for Interpretive Phenomenological Inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920907254>
- Gao, P., Jiang, H., Xie, Y., & Cheng, Y. (2021). The Triggering Mechanism of Short Video Customer Inspiration – Qualitative Analysis Based on the Repertory Grid Technique. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21252>
- Gkypali, A., & Roper, S. (2024). Innovation and sales growth intentions among the solopreneurs: The role of experience and entrepreneurial self-efficacy. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 200, 1-4.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0040162523008867>

- Gorbatov, S., Khapova, S. N., & Lysova, E. I. (<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02662>). Get Noticed to Get Ahead: The Impact of Personal Branding on Career Success. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10(2662).
- Hamby, A., Rinberg, D., & Daniloski, K. (2019). It's about our values: How founder's stories influence brand authenticity. *Psychology & Marketing*, 36(11), 1014-1026. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21252>
- Hampton, D. C., & Keys, Y. (2017). Generation Z students: Will they change our nursing classrooms? *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 7(4), 111-115. 10.5430/jnep.v7n4p111
- Holloway, S. L., & Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2021). Solo self-employment, entrepreneurial subjectivity and the security–precarity continuum: Evidence from private tutors in the supplementary education industry. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 53(6), 1547-1564. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0308518X211009237>
- Hsieh, J. K., Hsieh, Y. C., & Tang, Y. C. (2012). Exploring the disseminating behaviors of eWOM marketing: persuasion in online video. *Electronic Commerce Research*, 12(1), 201–224. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10660-012-9091-y>
- Huang, F. (2021). Personalized Marketing Recommendation System of New Media Short Video Based on Deep Neural Network Data Fusion. *Journal of Sensors*, 2021(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2021/3638071>
- Johnson, K. M. (2017). The Importance of Personal Branding in Social Media: Educating Students to Create and Manage their Personal Brand. *International Journal of Education and Social Science*, 4(1), 21-27. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313256001>
- Kemp, E., Porter III, M., Anaza, N. A., & Min, D.-J. (2020). The impact of storytelling in creating firm and customer connections in online environments. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing*, 15(1), 103-124. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/JRIM-06-2020-0136/full/html>

- Klug, D., Qin, Y., Evans, M., & Kaufman, G. (2021). Trick and Please. A Mixed-Method Study On User Assumptions About the TikTok Algorithm. *WebSci '21: Proceedings of the 13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021*, 84–92. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3447535.3462512>
- Kraus, S., Gast, J., & Ritter, M. (2019). Content is King: How SMEs create content for social media marketing under limited resources. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 39(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276146719882746>
- Latif, W., Islam, A., & Noor, I. M. (2014). Building Brand Awareness in the Modern Marketing Environment: A Conceptual Model. *International Journal of Business and Technopreneurship*, 4(1), 69-82. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272161898>
- Levers, M.-J. D. (2013). Philosophical Paradigms, Grounded Theory, and Perspectives on Emergence. *SAGE Open*, 3(4), 1-6. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2158244013517243>
- Liu, G., Gao, P., Li, Y., & Zhang, Z. (2019). Research on the Influence of Social Media Short Video Marketing on Consumer Brand Attitude. *Proceedings of the 2019 5th International Conference on Social Science and Higher Education*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.2991/icsshe-19.2019.192>
- Lu, Z., & Nam, I. (2021). Research on the Influence of New Media Technology on Internet Short Video Content Production under Artificial Intelligence Background. *Cognitive Computing Solutions for Complexity Problems in Computational Social Systems*, 1(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2021/8875700>
- Lundqvist, A., Liljander, V., Gummerus, J., & van Riel, A. (2013). The impact of storytelling on the consumer brand experience: The case of a firm-originated story. *Journal of Brand Management*, 20(4), 283-297. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/bm.2012.15>
- Mucundorfeanu, M. (2018). The Key Role of Storytelling in the Branding Process. *Journal of Media Research*, 11(1), 42-54. 10.24193/jmr.30.3

- Mulier, L., Slabbinck, H., & Vermeir, I. (2020). This Way Up: The Effectiveness of Mobile Vertical Video Marketing. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 55(1).
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1016/j.intmar.2020.12.002>
- Mulier, L., Slabbinck, H., & Vermeir, I. (2021). This Way Up: The Effectiveness of Mobile Vertical Video Marketing. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 55(1), 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2020.12.002>
- Nam, J., & Jung, Y. (2021). Digital natives' snack content consumption and their goals: A means-end chain approach. *Telematics and Informatics*, 63(101664), 1-16.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2021.101664>
- Navarro-Guere, H. (2023). Vertical video. A review of the literature on communication. *Mediterranean Journal of Communication*, 14(1), 69-81.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2762-2443>
- Newman, N. (2023). Journalism, media, and technology trends and predictions 2023 [Report]. In *Oxford University Research Archive*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.
<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2023>
- Nicoli, N., Henriksen, K., Komodromos, M., & Tsagalas, D. (2022). Investigating digital storytelling for the creation of positively engaging digital content. *EuroMed Journal of Business*, 17(2), 157-173. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EMJB-03-2021-00>
- Oxborrow, N. J. (2012). Social Media Helps Small Businesses [UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones]. In *Masters Thesis*. UNLV.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/3553773>
- Phillips, L. G., & Nguyen, T. T.P. (2021). Introduction. In L. G. Phillips & T. T.P. Nguyen (Eds.), *Storytelling Pedagogy in Australia & Asia* (pp. 1-19). Springer Nature Singapore.
 10.1007/978-981-16-4009-4_1

- Qin, Y., Omar, B., & Musetti, A. (2022). The addiction behavior of short-form video app TikTok: The information quality and system quality perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.932805>
- Razmus, W. (2021). Consumer Brand Engagement Beyond the “Likes”. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.692000>
- Reimer, T. (2023). Environmental factors to maximize social media engagement: A comprehensive framework. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 75(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2023.103458>
- Ren, J., Yang, J., Zhu, M., & Majeed, S. (2021). Relationship between consumer participation behaviors and consumer stickiness on mobile short video social platform under the development of ICT: based on value co-creation theory perspective. 27, 4(1), 697-717. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02681102.2021.1933882>
- Rogers, R. (2018). Otherwise Engaged: Social Media from Vanity Metrics to Critical Analytics. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 450–472. 1932–8036/20180005
- Saxena, S. (2010). Get Content Get Customers. Turn Prospects into Buyers with Content Marketing. *NSB Management Review*, 2(2), 98-101. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Abdul-Qadir-4/publication/301224579_
- Shahbaznezhad, H., Dolan, R., & Rashidirad, M. (2021). The Role of Social Media Content Format and Platform in Users' Engagement Behavior. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 53(1), 47-65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2020.05.001>
- Smith, J., & Osborn, M. (2015). Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for research on the lived experience of pain. *British Journal of Pain*, 9(1), 41-42. 10.1177/2049463714541642
- Statista. (2024). *Influencer Advertising - Global*. Statista. Retrieved March 23, 2024, from <https://www.statista.com/outlook/amo/advertising/influencer-advertising/worldwide>

- Statista. (2023a). Average TikTok video length from March 2023 to August 2023, by number of video views [Database]. In *TikTok: video duration 2023*.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1372569/tiktok-video-duration-by-number-of-views/>
- Statista. (2023b). Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2023, ranked by number of monthly active users [Database]. In *[Internet] Social Media & User-Generated Content*.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>
- Tellis, G. J., MacInnis, D. J., & Zhang, Y. (2019). What Drives Virality (Sharing) of Online Digital Content? The Critical Role of Information, Emotion, and Brand Prominence. *Journal of Marketing*, 83(4), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242919841034>
- Waas, B. (2017). What role for Solopreneurs in the Labour Market? *European Labour Law Journal*, 8(2), 154-167.
https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/eulalaj8&id=150&men_tab=srchresults
- Wang, W., Liang, Q., Mahto, R. V., Deng, W., & Zhang, S. (2020). Entrepreneurial entry: The role of social media. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, 161, 1-11.
[10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120337](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2020.120337)
- Wang, Y. (2021). Content Characteristics and Limitations of Original Short Video Based on Depth Data [The 2nd International Conference on Computing and Data]. In *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*. IOPScience.
<https://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1742-6596/1881/4/042070>
- Wikipedia. (2024). *List of most-followed TikTok accounts*. Wikipedia. Retrieved March 2, 2024, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_most-followed_TikTok_accounts

- Wiklund, J., Nikolaev, B., Shir, N., Foo, M. D., & Bradley, S. (2019). Entrepreneurship and well-being: Past, present, and future. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 34(4), 579-588.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2019.01.002>
- Yawised, K., Apasrawirote, D., Chatrangsarn, M., & Muneesawang, P. (2022). Using Short-form Video Content (SVCs) in Digital Marketing Mobile Application Engagement Model. *Small Firm Internationalisation and International Entrepreneurship: Managing Sustainable Innovation*, 5(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2020.05.001>
- Zhao, C., Liu, Z., & Zhang, C. (2023). Real or fictional? Digital entrepreneurial narratives and the acquisition of attentional resources in social entrepreneurship. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, 8, 1-13.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2444569X23000835>

Appendices

Appendix A: Personal statement

My research-based dissertation for my Masters in Digital Marketing was quite the adventure, filled with its fair share of hurdles. However, with the steadfast support of my wife, family, and supervisor, Dr. Martin King, I tackled each challenge with determination. Juggling a full-time freelancing job, parenting two children, and pursuing a master's degree was no walk in the park. I quickly realised that a well-thought-out structure and timely execution were my best allies. The literature review, in particular, was a beast of its own, eating up nearly half of my time. It was a technical marathon, requiring me to analyse and critically examine various authors and theories. Though it was a tough nut to crack, it was crucial in shaping my understanding of SVC and crafting a straightforward research question. My deep dive into peer-reviewed articles boosted my academic assessment and enhanced my professional practice in creating and disseminating SVC for clients.

Once the literature review was completed, I felt confident about pursuing interviews with solopreneurs about their perspectives on SVC. However, getting those interviews was another story. Out of 108 personalised emails, I secured only 11 interviews, with a few last-minute cancellations. Coordinating interviews across different time zones, from my base in Thailand to interviewees in Australia, the UK, and the United States, led to quite a few sleepless mornings.

The data analysis phase turned out to be a pleasant surprise. Using Quirkos software, I could map out and organise my findings visually. My insights were eye-opening, revealing unexpected generational differences in storytelling preferences and a general disregard for marketing

metrics among creators. These discoveries highlighted the varied approaches to SVC and the value of trusting one's instincts as a solopreneur.

Looking back on my dissertation journey, I realise that my systematic approach and clear vision were crucial to my success. If I were to do it all over again, I might lean towards a quantitative approach to ease the time pressures of conducting interviews. Nevertheless, this experience has broadened my academic knowledge and ignited my passion for solopreneurship.

In wrapping up, I want to thank Dr. Martin King for his guidance, knowledge, and support. His knack for challenging me to critically analyse each aspect of my research without bias was invaluable. This dissertation has been a challenging yet rewarding ride, and I am proud of the work I have accomplished. It has provided me with priceless insights and has undoubtedly set me up for professional success in the future.

Appendix B: Participant interview questions

1. Can you briefly describe your business and your role in it?
2. How did you get started with using social media for your business?
3. What initially motivated you to use short-form video content (SVC) in your marketing efforts?
4. How do you decide what to include in your videos - walk me through the process.
5. Which metrics do you use to gauge the success of your SVC on social media platforms?
6. What are some of your biggest challenges while using SVC for your business?
7. Can you give examples of how you respond to comments or feedback?
8. What elements of your personal journey are beneficial to your output of SVC?
9. How has your approach to creating SVC evolved since you started?
10. What trends, events, or other influencers significantly impact your content creation? Can you think of any examples?
11. Do you prefer specific platforms for your SVC? If so, why?
12. How do you determine the optimal length for your videos?
13. What do you think sets your SVC apart from others in your field?
14. Can you share a learning experience from using SVC that led to a change in your approach?
15. How do you see the role of SVC evolving in your business strategy in the future?

Appendix C: Participant information sheet

You are invited to participate in this research study. Before you decide, read this leaflet to understand what is being carried out and what it will involve.

Reading this leaflet, discussing it with others or asking any questions you might have will help you decide whether or not you would like to take part.

What is the Purpose of the Study?

The study is an exploratory project examining short-form video content solopreneurs' use on different social media platforms. The purpose of the project is to gain a better understanding of the experiences and strategies of these individual entrepreneurs concerning the following key themes:

1. Strategies and Motivations of Solopreneurs in Using SVC

In exploring the strategies and motivations of solopreneurs in using SVC, the study will consider the current trends in digital marketing, the reasons that drive these entrepreneurs to invest in SVC (such as reaching a wider audience and leveraging the power of social media), and the challenges they face in creating and disseminating content.

2. Connections between Solopreneurs and Their Audience through SVC

The study will explore the connections solopreneurs build with their audience through SVC. This includes examining how they engage with viewers, the role of social media platforms in facilitating these connections, and the impact of SVC on audience perception and interaction, especially regarding accessible and engaging content.

3. External Factors Impacting the Use of SVC by Solopreneurs

The study explores the impact of various external factors on solopreneurs' use of SVC, such as changes in social media algorithms, digital marketing trends, and the evolving preferences of online audiences. This theme will also consider the role of technological advancements in enhancing SVC's capabilities.

4. Contributions of SVC to the Marketing and Branding Strategies of Solopreneurs

Finally, the study aims to understand how the use of SVC contributes to solopreneurs' overall marketing and branding strategies. This includes examining how SVC helps achieve specific business goals, its role in personal branding, and its impact on solopreneur ventures' digital presence and success.

Why have I been invited?

The study requires the insights and experiences of solopreneurs and small business owners who actively use SVC on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram for their marketing and business engagement. Essentially, you represent a unique and growing segment of the digital entrepreneurial landscape, increasingly leveraging SVC for marketing and audience engagement.

Your participation is crucial in helping understand how SVC is being used effectively by individual entrepreneurs and how it shapes the interaction between solopreneurs and their online audiences. By sharing your experiences, you contribute to a broader understanding of digital marketing dynamics in the context of SVC, particularly from the viewpoint of solopreneurs operating in today's competitive digital environment.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation is voluntary; you do not have to participate in this study. It is up to you whether you would like to participate. I am giving you this information sheet to help you make that decision. If you decide to participate, remember that you can stop being involved in the study without telling me why. You are entirely free to decide whether or not to take part or to take part and then leave the study before completion.

What will happen if I take part?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be invited to attend an online semi-structured interview at a time and date that is convenient for you. The interview is expected to last between 30-45 mins. During this interview, I will ask you questions exploring how the themes outlined earlier relate to your experiences and perspectives as a solopreneur using SVC in your marketing strategies. This includes discussing your strategy and motivations for using SVC, the nature of your connections with your online audience, the impact of external factors on your use of SVC, and how SVC contributes to your overall marketing and branding efforts.

With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded to ensure accurate recollection and understanding of the discussion. Please be assured that all data collected will be anonymised and treated as confidential (see the section below for more details).

After you have completed the study, I will provide you with a debrief sheet. This sheet will explain the nature of the research, how to find out about the study's results, and how to withdraw your data if you wish.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Participating in this study allows you to share your knowledge and insights about using short-form video content (SVC) in social media marketing as a solopreneur. However, this will involve dedicating time to arranging and participating in the interview, which might be inconvenient considering your busy schedule as an entrepreneur.

While I have made efforts to ensure that the interview will not cause emotional discomfort or stress, some topics discussed may relate to experiences or challenges in your entrepreneurial journey that are sensitive or difficult to discuss. I want to reassure you that any information you provide during the interview or any other research stage will be confidential and anonymised. You have the full right to withdraw from the study at any point or decide to withdraw the data you have shared, should you choose to do so.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Your participation in this research offers a unique opportunity to gain insights into how other solopreneurs successfully use SVC on social media platforms to engage with their audiences. Participating in this study will expose you to various strategies, techniques, and creative approaches your peers employ in their digital marketing efforts. This exposure could be invaluable in helping you understand critical variables and effective practices that you might adapt or incorporate into your own SVC strategies.

In addition to potentially enhancing your marketing approach, your contribution to this research will be instrumental in building a comprehensive understanding of how solopreneurs utilise SVC. The data collected from this study will contribute to the growing body of research on SVC in digital marketing, specifically focusing on solopreneurs' unique challenges and opportunities.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential and anonymous?

Yes. Your name will not be written on any of the data I collect; the written information you provide will have an ID number, not your name. Your name will not be written on the recorded interviews or the typed-up versions of your discussions from the interview, and your name will not appear in any reports or documents resulting from this study. Your signed consent form will be stored separately from your other data. The data collected from you in this study will be confidential. The only exception to this confidentiality is if the researcher feels that you or others may be harmed if information is not shared.

How will my data be stored, and how long will it be stored?

All electronic data, including the recordings from your interview, will be stored on the University U-drive, which is password-protected. All data will be held in accordance with University guidelines and the Data Protection Act (2018).

All data collected will be anonymised and destroyed by deleting electronic records after the study's end date in June 2024, in compliance with the University Records Retention Schedule.

What categories of personal data will be collected and processed in this study?

The study will collect personal data (name and contact details, specifically email) to conduct the research (contact and interview participants).

What is the legal basis for processing personal data?

The legal basis for undertaking research which collects personal data relevant to this study is outlined in GDPR Article 6(1)(e): *"Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest"*.

Who are the recipients or categories of recipients of personal data, if any?

The research team at Northumbria University will process all personal data. This data will not be shared with or analysed by any third parties for further processing.

What will happen to the study's results, and could personal data collected be used in future research?

The general findings might be reported in an academic journal or presented at a research conference. However, the data will be anonymised, and you or the data you provided will not be personally identifiable unless I have asked for your specific consent beforehand. The findings may also be shared with other organisations/institutions involved in the study. I will provide you with a summary of the conclusions of the study.

Who is Organizing and Funding the Study?

Northumbria University through my university fees.

Who has reviewed this study?

Before this study could begin, permissions were obtained from Northumbria University.

What are my rights as a participant in this study?

As a participant in this study, the individual's rights under GDPR include a right of access to a copy of the information comprised in their personal data (to do so, individuals should submit a Subject Access Request); a right in certain circumstances to have inaccurate personal data rectified; and a right to object to decisions being taken by automated means. Participants should also be informed that if they are dissatisfied with the University's processing of personal data, they have the right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office. For more information, see the [ICO website](#).

Contact for further information:

If you would like to take part in the study, would like additional information, or to make a complaint, please contact the research team on the details provided below: **Alex McInnes: alex.mcinnnes@northumbria.ac.uk**

Northumbria is the data controller. You have a right to access a copy of any personal data we hold about you, a right to rectify inaccurate personal data, and a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) if you feel dissatisfied with how the university has processed your personal data.

If you want to receive a copy of your data or have any questions or concerns, please contact the Records and Information Officer at Northumbria University, **Duncan James, dp.officer@northumbria.ac.uk**.

You can find out more about how we use your information at:
[www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/leadership-governance/vice-chancellors](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/leadership-governance/vice-chancellors-office/legal-services-team/gdpr/gdpr---privacy-notices/)
[office/legal-services-team/gdpr/gdpr---privacy-notices/](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/about-us/leadership-governance/vice-chancellors-office/legal-services-team/gdpr/gdpr---privacy-notices/)
or by contacting a member of the research team.

Appendix D: Redacted example of consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project Title: *Is short-form video content the answer to enhanced consumer engagement for solopreneurs?*

Principal Investigator: Alexander McInnes

- ☒ I agree to take part in this study.
- ☒ I have carefully read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.
- ☒ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study and received satisfactory answers.
- ☒ I consent to the interview being digitally recorded for analysis and research and the possibility of using anonymised quotes in the research publication.
- ☒ I also consent to the retention of this data, provided that any subsequent use is restricted to research projects that have gained ethical approval from Northumbria University.
- ☒ I understand I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason and without prejudice.
- ☒ I agree to the University of Northumbria at Newcastle recording and processing this information about me. I understand that this information will be used only for the purpose(s) set out in the information sheet supplied to me, and my consent is conditional upon the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 2018, which incorporates General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). You can learn more about how we use your information here - [Privacy Notices](#).

Name/signature of participant.....[REDACTED].....

Date.....11/1/24.....

Appendix E: Example of participant debrief sheet

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF

Participant code:
2023SEM1_NX0480
FNN01

Name of Researcher: Alex McInnes

Name of Supervisor (if relevant): Dr Martin King

Project Title: *Is short-form video content the answer to enhanced consumer engagement for solopreneurs?*

1. What was the purpose of the project?

Thank you for participating in my study. This project explored how solopreneurs market their businesses using short-form video content (SVC) on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. I sought to understand the various strategies, techniques, and challenges solopreneurs face in leveraging SVC for audience engagement and marketing success.

My research was driven by the growing importance of digital marketing and the rapid rise of SVC as a powerful communication tool in the online world. I expected to discover diverse methods and creative approaches solopreneurs use in crafting and disseminating their SVC and identify the key factors contributing to effective audience engagement through these platforms.

2. How will I find out about the results?

I understand your interest in the outcomes of this research and am committed to keeping you informed. Once the study has been completed and the data thoroughly analysed, which I anticipate will be approximately 12 weeks after the paper's submission on March 31, I will provide you with a general summary of the results.

3. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential and anonymous?

Yes. Your name will not be written on any of the data I collect; the written information you provide will have an ID number, not your name.

Your name will not be written on the recorded interviews or the typed-up versions of your discussions from the interview, and your name will not appear in any reports or documents resulting from this study.

Your signed consent form will be stored separately from your other data. The data collected from you in this study will be confidential. The only exception to this confidentiality is if I feel that you or others may be harmed if information is not shared.

4. How will my data be stored, and how long will it be stored?

I take the security and confidentiality of your data very seriously. Here is how I ensure this:

- **Paper Data Storage:** All paper data, including your completed questionnaires, typed-up transcripts from your interview, and consent forms, will be securely stored in locked storage to prevent unauthorised access and ensure the safety of your information.
- **Electronic Data Security:** All electronic data, such as the audio recordings from your interview, will be stored on the University's secure, password-protected U-drive. This ensures that only authorised personnel involved in the study can access this information.
- **Compliance with Regulations:** All data collected and stored will strictly comply with University guidelines and the Data Protection Act (2018). This ensures that we adhere to the highest data protection and privacy standards.
- **Retention of Data:** In line with the principles of 'data minimisation' and University retention schedules, personally identifiable data will be stored only for as long as necessary. Although our funders may require data to be retained for an extended period and potentially made accessible in a data repository, this will typically involve only anonymised data. Any personally identifiable data will be kept only for the duration specified by the University guidelines.

5. If I change my mind and wish to withdraw the information I have provided, how do I do this?

If you wish to withdraw your data, email the investigator in the information sheet within one month of taking part and give them the code number allocated to you (this can be found on your debrief sheet). After this time, withdrawing your data might not be possible as it could already have been analysed.

The data collected in this study may also be published in scientific journals or presented at conferences. However, information gathered during this research study will only be available to the research team identified in the information sheet. Should the research be presented or

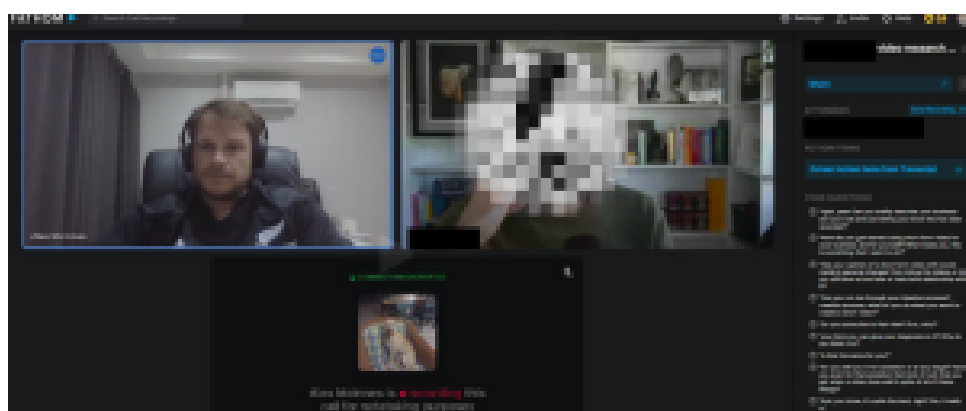
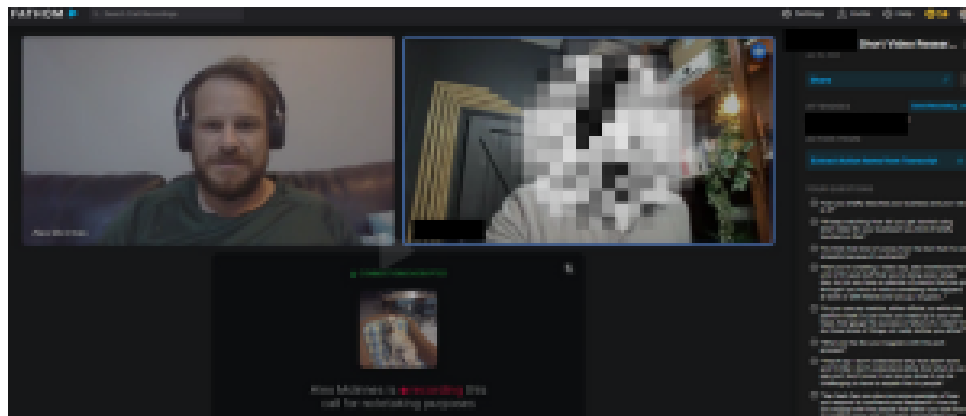
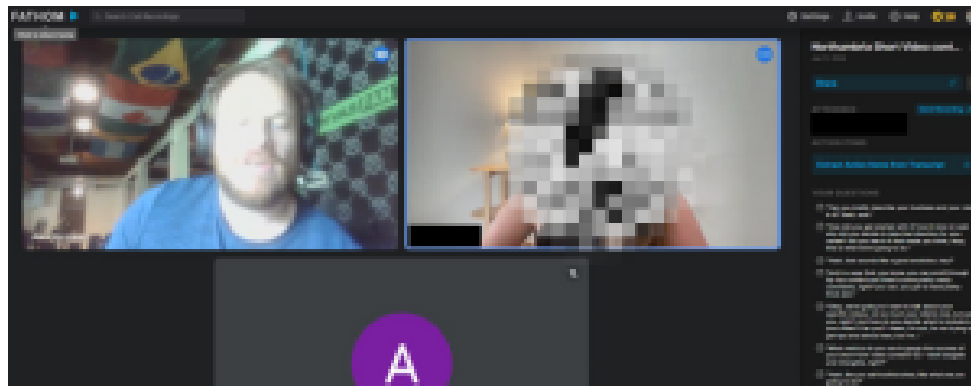
published in any form, all data will be anonymous (i.e., your personal information or data will not be identifiable).

All information and data gathered during this research will be stored in line with the Data Protection Act and destroyed following the study's conclusion. If the research is published in a scientific journal, it may be kept longer before destruction. During that time, the data may be used by members of the research team only for purposes appropriate to the research question, but at no point will your personal information or data be revealed. Insurance companies and employers will not be given any individual's personal information, nor any data provided by them, nor will we allow access to the police, security services, social services, relatives or lawyers unless forced to do so by the courts.

If you wish to receive feedback about the findings of this research study, then please contact the researcher at alex.mcinnnes@northumbria.ac.uk

This study and its protocol have received full ethical approval from Newcastle Business School At Northumbria University. If you require confirmation of this, or if you have any concerns or worries concerning this research, or if you wish to register a complaint, please contact the Chair of this Committee at Russell.warhurst@northumbria.ac.uk stating the title of the research project and the name of the researcher.

Appendix F: Redacted interview examples



Appendix G: Thematic coding analysis examples

