

# This Proposal Was Brought to You by Content Creators’ Mental Models of Security & Privacy Products

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**Abstract**—In this proposal, we discuss the design and preliminary results of a pilot interview study (N=4) with digital content creators to better understand what factors affect the claims they make in their sponsored advertisements, and to identify possible points of intervention.

## 1. Introduction

Online content creators frequently produce sponsored advertisements for digital security and privacy tools such as VPNs and password managers. Unfortunately, those ads often include vague, hyperbolic, nonsensical, or technically inaccurate claims [1]. Creators are not necessarily domain experts for their sponsors’ products, and even advertisements created in good faith risk propagating inaccurate mental models from creator to viewer. In this proposal, we discuss the design and preliminary results of a pilot interview study with content creators, to better understand: (1) how creators learn about sponsors and their products, (2) how creators craft the messaging and content in their advertisements, and (3) what points of intervention could be leveraged to improve the quality of messaging in sponsored advertisements.

## 2. Methods

In this section we describe the design of our IRB-approved study, which we have piloted with 4 participants.

**Recruitment** Our primary population is “content creators with experience crafting sponsored video ads for S&P products.” We are open to contrasting video S&P ads to creators’ ads for other products (finance, health, low-risk goods) or other media (static images, audio, live streams). We are also interested in interviewing other entities in the sponsored ad ecosystem, including sponsoring brands’ representatives, creators’ personal business managers, and third-party companies that match creators with brands looking to advertise. We plan to recruit participants via a combination of direct recruitment messages (email, social media) and snowball sampling.

**Interview Protocol** We designed a semi-structured interview protocol which can be adapted to each participant’s experiences. Topics discussed include: obtaining and managing sponsorships, learning about sponsors and products, crafting sponsored content, evaluating the success/failure of ads,

differentiating between sponsors that sell similar products, comparing S&P products to non-S&P products, and asking participants for their thoughts on possible interventions.

**Data Analysis** Our pilot interviews were conducted and audio recorded via video call; transcripts were recorded automatically and corrected manually. First-cycle coding was conducted using an iterative initial coding procedure [2]. Two researchers independently coded the pilot transcripts, meeting after each to resolve conflicts and reach consensus on a (preliminary) codebook. The next section outlines potential topics to explore in depth via second-cycle coding [3] as our study expands outward from its pilot implementation.

## 3. Preliminary Results

We report on preliminary themes from our pilot; in future interviews, we will iterate on these themes while continuing to explore new ones.

**Content Creators’ Mental Models** Creators seek information when evaluating sponsorship opportunities, while crafting ads, and when assessing an ad’s success. We identify three pillars that creators rely on to understand sponsoring brands and products: their own *existing mental models*, *information shared with them* (via brands or social ties), and *information they seek out themselves* (via online research or new personal experiences with products). Contextual factors like resource constraints, personal/social familiarity, and brand reputation are critical to understand when and why a creator will lean more heavily on which pillars.

**Crafting Ads** Content creators must balance satisfying their sponsors’ requirements without disengaging their own community of viewers. Our preliminary analysis points to hardships in the ad-crafting process stemming from strained resources, conflicting identities, and negligent/fraudulent/abrasive sponsors. It is unclear why some ads must be explicitly approved while others may be published without vetting; the vetting process represents an extant point of intervention that we will explore further.

Creators have a platform to amplify mental models, constructive or harmful, within their community of viewers. Multiple creators cited *other creators’ sponsored ads* as a source of inspiration for what to say in their own ads. Future interviews will investigate the extent to which harmful mental models spread *between* communities, and whether constructive messaging could proliferate via similar means.

## References

- [1] O. Akgul, R. Roberts, M. Namara, D. Levin, and M. L. Mazurek, "Investigating influencer vpn ads on youtube," in *IEEE S&P*, 2022.
- [2] J. Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4th ed. SAGE Publications, 2021, ch. Initial Coding, pp. 148–152.
- [3] —, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4th ed. SAGE Publications, 2021, ch. Transitioning from First to Second Cycle Coding Methods, pp. 279–296.