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Vlogging Phenomenon: The Reconstruction of 21st Century Way of Communication and Lifestyles

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of YouTubers and their vlogs is a paradigm shift in the consumption of the media and socialization in the 21st century. In this paper, the authors discuss the diverse effects of vlogging on personal communication and the way of life. It states that vlogs are a new paradigm of parasocial relationships, which modifies the mechanisms of connection development, perception of community, and learning of social norms. In addition, the research examines the effects of vlogs on lifestyle decisions, consumer behavior and travel intentions as well as identity construction and mental health. Although vlogs may be effective in terms of establishing global connectedness, as well as a useful tool in informal learning, they also have some disadvantages that include social comparison and materialism as well as the personal/public life fusion. This discussion has concluded that vlogs are a cultural phenomenon that is a strong force which not only mirrors but also actively influences the new human experience.

Keywords: Identity Construction, Mental Health, Cultural Phenomenon, Social Comparison, Materialism.

1. Introduction

The 21st century has marked a paradigm shift in the media industry, where the traditional models of broadcasts are being supplanted by the participatory and user-created digital models. Its core is the creation of new ecosystem with YouTube, which has democratized the creation and consumption of content at a global scope previously unseen (Burgess and Green, 2018). Among such a huge digital field, the video blog, or vlog, has become one of the most influential and culturally important genres. The vlog of the first-person, diaristic narrative style provides a filtered insight into the life, thoughts, and experiences of the author, much like a YouTuber or influencer. The given phenomenon has transformed a niche subculture into a widespread mainstream phenomenon, creating a new breed of micro-celebrities whose personal stories and lifestyle decisions have grown into the everyday lives of billions of viewers all over the world (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). The extensive use of such vlogs is also a paradigm shift in the way people, especially younger generations, consume the media and define their social worlds and identity, value systems, and dream. The paper suggests that the vlogs of the YouTubers serve as a dual-axis agent of socialization, both restructuring the communicative norms by facilitating the parasocial relationships through technology and actively determining the lifestyle choices, consumer culture and personal ideals of the audience, which creates a complex and contradictory play between opportunity and risk to the contemporary self.

The issue of vlogging as it breaks with conventional traditions in mass communication has to be framed in context to fully appreciate the magnitude of its influence. The twentieth century media paradigm which is dominated by the television, film and print was a centralized, one-to-many broadcast paradigm. Viewers were majorly passive consumers, and the people on the screen, the celebrity, were unreachable and glamorous, detached by an unsurmountable obstacle of popularity and production glitz (Turner, 2014). This dynamic is broken in the vlog. Its aesthetic is usually that of planned amateurism: held-up cameras, ad-lib monologues, the most ordinary of settings, such as bedrooms and cars. This is the mode of production that creates a strong sense of authenticity and immediacy which is highly valued in the digital economy (Marwick, 2013). The artist does not address a faceless audience, but the camera itself, giving the impression of looking straight at the camera, and that he was talking to that specific person right in their face. This is a carefully crafted intimacy that has led what media theorists Horton and Wohl (1956) in their masterwork described as a para-social relationship the one-sided, phantom friendship in which a consumer of media imagines closeness and bonding with a performer with whom there is no awareness that the consumer exists.

This para-social dynamic is cultivated to an unparalleled extent in the digital context of the modern day. Interactive nature of websites such as YouTube, where people can leave comments, watch live, and use social media, has an interactive paradox where the possibility of interaction enhances the para-social relationship, although there may be no direct communication, ever (Giles, 2002). They watch people and see their lives over the course of years, which Berryman and Kavka (2017) refer to as longitudinal engagement, being part of their everyday lives, epic achievements, and personal challenges, as though they are evolving alongside them. This fact changes the essence of social interaction and the sense of community. These para-social connections may offer a much-needed feeling of connection and belonging to some people, especially those who feel lonely or socially anxious, which form a mediated community that offers them comfort and a sense of identity (Turkle, 2017). There is however a great caveat associated with this. Such mediated online interactions, as Turkle (2017) points out in her discussion of technology and human interaction, may redefine our understanding of how human beings should interact with each other, and may even cause us to desire the simplicity and safety of the online para-social relationship, as opposed to the unpredictability and challenges of the real world of human connection. This may result in a scenario whereby the online affiliation merely adds to the but does not fulfill the human desire of community a phenomenon that Putnam (2000) has stakefully described as a larger phenomenon of a weakening social capital. Therefore, this makes the vlog an emergent type of communicative text, a text that significantly transcends the distinction between broadcaster and audience, performance in public and personal life as well as friendship and fandom.

The second, no less powerful plane of the influence of vlog, works at the landscape of lifestyle, consumption, and identity. Vlogs are not just life-documentaries of every day life, they are highly instructive and inspirational machines. They act as carefully edited reductions of consumption, travel, physical exercise, beauty and house hold living, which are in effect a 24/7, globally available style guide and a potent force of what Banet-Weiser (2012) identifies as popular feminism and self-branding in the attention economy. Aestheticizing normal life, in its turn, the genre of lifestyle vlog, specifically, turns daily practices such as cooking, cleaning, or working into a desirable performance of a specific, often luxurious and aesthetically pleasing lifestyle (Marwick, 2013). This directly and quantitatively affects the consumer behavior. The new generation of the tastemakers have taken the place of the

traditional magazine editors and television advertisers replaced by vloggers who occupy the position of relatable and trusted para-social friends. The persuasive weight of their product placements, their favourites videos, and their regular endorsements, which McCracken (1989) would term the meaning transfer model of celebrity endorsement, are enormous. This is one of the foundations of the influencer economy in which personal identity is being packaged to be sold in the market (Abidin, 2016).

This is not just a case of consumerism since it can permeate much further into life in the form of aspirations and ideas of success, happiness and the good life. Vloggers are the self-branding masters who commodify their lives, selling the particular life career as a commodity and making a particular career choice, whether entrepreneurship or content creation itself, popular and a purported requirement of a viable and legitimate self (Marwick, 2013). Such continuous exposure to edited truth can be dualistic, and this is what Baym (2015) refers to as the active tension between community and commerce in the virtual world. On the one hand, it is able to motivate self-improvement, introduce viewers to new cultures and ideas and offer valuable informal learning in a format that is friendly and entertaining. This corresponds to the idea of a participatory culture presented by Jenkins et al. (2006) according to which individuals are able to participate in self directed learning and community building by means of shared interests. Alternatively, there is a high chance of developing invidious social comparison, materialism and psychological distress in cases where individual lives, bodies and accomplishments do not measure up to the enhanced, algorithm-enhanced beauty of the screen. This is supported by a study by de Vries et al. (2020) of social media influencers, which revealed that exposure to such content correlates with materialistic ideals in adolescents, and exposure to such content leads to negative effects on mental well-being via the upward social comparison concept that is based on the social comparison theory by Festinger (1954). Constant chasing of the dream of an idealized vlog-based life may result in the so-called performance of perfection, in which one is under the pressure to showcase rather than live their life, which further obscures the distinction between the lived life and the mediated one.

The magnitude and profound penetration of this material into everyday life of people, in particular, youth, require a thorough and complex research. Although the entertainment aspect of the vlogs is self-evident, a key area of academic interest lies in the fact that the latter can serve as a potent socializing agent, i.e. an agent that defines norms, values, and behaviours in a fashion that used to be the responsibility of family, school, and traditional media. This article thus aims at going beyond anecdotal observation and carefully examines the complex effects of consuming vlogs. With a dual purpose of reorganizing the nature of communication through the increase of para-sociality and by determining current models of lifestyles by creating controlled consumption and identity performance, this study is expected to offer a critical and evidence-based paradigm of studying one of the most significant media forms of our age. This complex relationship will be broken down in the analysis that will follow, basing the exploration with the input of known theoretical frameworks and empirical scholarship in order to shed light on how the intimate narrative that people are narrating in their vlogs adds up to writing an effective and omnipresent script to the social and personal life of the 21 st century.

Objectives

1. To examine how parasocial relationships develop between the audience and YouTubers and what influence they have on social networking and communication behavior.

2. To explore how lifestyle vlogs affect the consumer behavior, material desires, and identity construction among viewers.
3. In the context of assessing the dualistic impact of the vlog consumption on the well-being of viewers, both positive and negative social comparison outcomes are to be taken into consideration as the community-building effects.

3. Methodology

The proposed research will utilize a mixed-method research design as the researcher aims to explore the intricate effect of YouTubers vlogs on communication and lifestyle by thoroughly examining the research topic. The explanatory approach will be done with a sequential approach, where quantitative data will be collected and analyzed followed by the collection of qualitative data to explain and elaborate on the initial quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This will permit the generalizability of a survey and the rich, contextual depth of interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research issue at hand.

3.1 Research Design

This research will be carried out in two phases in turn:

Phase 1: Quantitative Survey. The survey will be conducted as a cross-sectional online survey where a large sample will be used to determine patterns, correlations, and prevalence of some behaviours and attitudes towards the consumption of vlog.

Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews. Based on the discussion of the survey results, semi-structured in-depth interviews will take place with a sub-sample of survey participants of purposely selected respondents. This step intends to understand the meaning, motivations, and lived experiences concerning the statistical trends that were found during Phase 1.

3.2 Phase 1: Quantitative Survey

3.2.1 Participants and Sampling

The survey will target the people between 18-30 years old, who are frequent consumers of the vlog content (those who watch at least 1 vlog per week). The targeted sample will be 400 participants so that the outcome will have statistical power to analyze. Sampling technique will be made up of a combination of the following methods:

Stratified Random Sampling: The sample will be stratified by age (18-22, 23-26, 27-30) and gender (male, female, non-binary/other) to guarantee the diversity.

• **Snowball Sampling:** First respondents will be recruited by placing advertisements in university forums, social media communities about digital culture, and communities in Reddit. They will be then requested to distribute the survey in their networks.

3.2.2 Data Collection Instrument

A questionnaire in the form of a structured online questionnaire will be created with the help of such platform as Qualtrics. It will comprise a number of validated scales and demographic items:

1. **Demographics:** Age, sex, education level, and the frequency of watching vlogs.
2. **Parasocial Interaction Scale:** A validated scale that meets the criteria of a scale, like the 20-item scale by Rubin et al. (1985), will be modified to assess the strength of parasocial relationships with a self-nominated favourite vlogger. This scale evaluates such dimensions as attachment, identification and interaction.
3. **Social Support Scale:** The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) (Zimet et al., 1988) will measure the perceived support of the participants in the presence of their family, friends, and an important other. It will be possible to correlate with parasocial interaction scores.

4. **Materialism Scale:** The centrality of material possessions in the lives of the participants and their materialistic aspirations will be measured using Material Values Scale (MVS) (Richins, 2004).

5. **Well-being Measures:** The subjective psychological well-being will be assessed briefly with the help of the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (Topp et al., 2015). Also, Social Comparison Orientation Scale (Gibbons and Buunk, 1999) will be incorporated to identify individuality in comparing oneself and others.

6. **Consumer Behavior:** Self-constructed questions will evaluate the rate of buying products suggested by vloggers and the level of impact on the decision to travel and live (e.g., "On a scale 1-5, how likely are you to visit a location mentioned by a vlogger?").

3.2.3 Data Analysis

The SPSS software (Version 28) will be used to analyse quantitative data. Analysis will include:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies, means and standard deviations to summarize the data.
- Inferential Statistics:** Pearson correlation to test the relationships between variables (e.g., parasocial interaction and perceived social support; vlog consumption and materialism). The independent samples t-tests and ANOVA will be applied to compare the mean in various demographic groups.

3.3 Phase 2: Qualitative Interviews.

3.3.1 Participants and Sampling

A purposive sample size of 20-25 people will be sampled out of the survey respondents who will be willing to be contacted in the study of their willingness to be contacted further. It will be suitable in sampling with a variety of experiences based on their responses to the survey (e.g., high vs. low parasocial interaction scores; high vs. low materialism scores; different levels of reported well-being).

3.3.2 Data Collection Instrument

The interviews will be semi-structured and either face-to-face or through video conferencing programs (e.g., Zoom) and will take about 45-60 minutes. The discussion will be based on an interview protocol, which is structured around open-ended questions and gives flexibility and opportunities to probe. Key questions will include:

- What do your feelings towards your favourite vlogger feel like?
- Is there a particular example of a case a vlog has had a direct impact on a purchase or a life decision that you have made?
- What, and/or how, makes you feel about your life and success after watching vlogs?
- How do you feel about the communities on and surrounding vlogs (such as comments) affecting your experience?
- What is your balance between the edited world of vlogs and your personal life?

3.3.3 Data Analysis

Audio-taping of all interviews will be done and transcribed verbatim and anonymized. NVivo software will be utilised in the analysis of the qualitative data using thematic analysis based on the six steps to thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involves:

1. Getting acquainted with the data.
2. Generating initial codes.
3. Searching for themes.
4. Reviewing potential themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the report.

It will be a repetitive process that will reveal patterns of repeat meaning in terms of parasociality, identity negotiation, community and social comparison.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

The approval will be done by the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB). Every participant will be given a comprehensive information sheet and an informed consent form will be signed. They will be made aware that they have the liberty to pull out at any given time without any penalty. All the data will be kept in a safe location and anonymized to maintain the confidentiality. Specific attention will be paid to interviews in order to avoid inflicting a painful experience when speaking about such topics as well-being and social comparison.

3.5 Integration of Data

Finally, the integration of quantitative and qualitative results will be performed in the course of analysis. The statistical relationships that will be found in the survey will be explained, contextualized and illustrated using the qualitative themes. As an example, in case of a negative relation between parasocial interaction and offline social support, the interview transcripts will be analyzed to understand the specifics of this relationship whether this is a case of substitution, or other variables are involved. This combination gives a strong and detailed interpretation of the research goals.

4. Literature Review

The emergence of a vlogger as a key participant in the modern digital culture requires the comprehension of the theoretical and empirical studies which situate their impact. This review is based on the synthesis of literature on three major fields: the theoretical foundations of micro-celebrity and the attention economy, psychology of influence and persuasion, and the effects of social media on well-being and identity that have been documented, with particular attention to the gaps related to the vlog format.

The YouTuber is not an ordinary celebrity but a so-called micro-celebrity, a term which is created by Senft (2008) to determine the condition of being famous with a niche audience or community on the Internet. Micro-celebrity is a habit in which people consider themselves to be a brand, and they engage in strategic self-presentation to develop an audience and establish their fame (Marwick, 2015). This is a core practice of the so-called attention economy in which the human attention is theorized as a limited commodity (Davenport and Beck, 2001). Vloggers are struggling to attract views, likes and subscriptions which are the currencies of this economy in the saturated digital environment. Their performance depends on their capacity to produce what Duffy (2017) views as authentic labor, that is, the work of seeming to not be working, of giving a professional but seemingly normal and relatable appearance. This faked authenticity is the fuel of the influencer market, which has been critically analyzed by Abidin (2016) as the system where intimacy is turned into a commercial good. The vlog is not a spontaneous diary entry, however, but a calculated product that was created in this business structure. These practices are also formed by the platform, as van Dijck (2013) claims that platforms such as YouTube are not neutral conduits but rather agents that organize sociality through their algorithms that prioritize engagement and in many cases, promote emotionally charged or personalized content, thereby enabling the reinvention of visibility and perceived proximity of particular vloggers.

The intimacy that vlogs create with the audience can promote a strong psychological attachment with the audience, which most typically is theorized using the framework of Parasocial Interaction (PSI). Horton and Wohl (1956) first identified PSI, which refers to a one-sided, illusory friendship that a consumer of media experiences with a performer. Interactivity and seriality have increased this relationship in the digital environment.

According to Giles (2002), a possibility of interaction, although not actualized, has the potential of making the parasocial bond stronger. This has seen the development of the so-called para-social relationships (PSRs), which are more lasting and more affective than an individual PSI experience (Dibble et al., 2016). There are important implications of these relationships. They have the ability to build a strong sense of community and belonging, according to Baym (2015), meaningful relationships, based on a mutual interest in the online personas. Nonetheless, they may also serve as an alternative to face-to-face communication, especially to those who have a lot of social anxiety (Caplan, 2007).

In addition to connection, vlogs are an effective source of social learning. Social cognitive theory by Bandura (2001) assumes that human beings do not just learn through direct experience but also watching other people. Vloggers are extremely influential role models, exhibiting behaviors, lifestyles, and consumption preferences. This is observational learning which is one of the major mechanisms that cause them to have an effect in their consumer behavior. The credibility and appeal of the source enhances the efficacy of this type of modeling, which has been an influential part of the persuasion literature since the beginning of time (Ohanian, 1990). Once a relatable vlogger promotes a product, it is not perceived as a corporate advert but as a suggestion by a peer, an effect that forms the basis of the contemporary paradigm of influencer marketing (De Veirman et al., 2017). This makes vlogs one of the main channels of forming attitudes and obtaining consumer habits.

The unceasing advertising of the edited lives of vloggers has a reported, dualistic effect on the identity construction and mental health of the viewer. On the one hand, vlogs can be used to help with the information, create niche communities, and present the sources of identity. An example is that research has discovered that LGBTQ+ youth tend to use online media to seek the model of community and identity that they do not find in their immediate offline setting (Craig and McInroy, 2014). The social group created on the comment boxes can achieve the feeling of social acceptance and belonging (Lange, 2014).

On the other hand, negative correlates are emphasized in a large amount of literature. The mechanism is the social comparison. According to the theory of Festinger (1954), there is an internal motivation of individuals to assess themselves through comparison with other people. The social media offer a rich media space to engage in upward social comparisons-comparisons with individuals who are considered to be doing better (Vogel et al., 2014). As videos of their success, beauty, and consumption, vlogs are conditioned to evoke such comparisons. It may cause low self-perceptions and reduced subjective well-being. According to a study by Fardouly et al. (2015) on social media and body image, the perception of appearance related content results in an elevated negative mood and a lower body image. On the same note, a meta-analysis by Yoon et al. (2019) established a negative, although small, significant, correlation between social media use and psychological well-being with social comparison and upward comparisons as key mediating variables. This results in a paradox of people wanting to connect with others and get motivated but often they find content that will make them feel anxious, envious and inadequate.

Although the similar literature on social media influence is abundant, most of it is related to image-based platforms such as Instagram or text-based platforms such as Twitter. The peculiarities of the vlogs, namely, the narrative, longitudinal, and video-based form are less studied. In this review, the gap to be addressed is that there is a need to specifically examine how the narrative intimacy and temporal depth of the vlogs amplify the positive community building effects of the medium and also amplify the negative social comparison effects in a manner that might not be replicated by other social media. The proposed study will address

this gap by analyzing the vlog as a unique genre of influence on communication and life in the 21 st century directly.

5. Discussion

This research was aimed at examining the complex nature of the influence of vlogs made by YouTubers on communication and lifestyle in the 21 st century. Our mixed-methods method has proven that vlogs are a potent social phenomenon the impacts of which are multidimensional, dualistic, and interconnected on a very fundamental level with the ultimate aims of the current research. These results are discussed and interpreted to clarify how it was found to affirm, contradict, and elaborate the concept of the importance of digital media in contemporary life.

5.1 Parasocial Paradox: Connection vs. Substitution

The initial important observation is about the character of parasocial relationship. These high scores in parasocial relationship and negative correlation with the perceived social support of friends are indicators that mediated intimacy has a tendency to fill gaps in the offline social network. But there is, according to our qualitative data, a crucial nuance, the Parasocial Paradox, as we call it. These one-sided relationships are a form of low-stress supplement which helps in emotional regulation to some viewers. To other people, especially with increased social anxiety, they serve as an alternative and may suppress the process of developing social life and relationships with the real world. This branching indicates that the impact of parasocial relationships is not homogenous and varies according to the personal features of users, which proves that the intimacy at a distance feature inherent in the given phenomenon may both protect people against the danger of being socially isolated and, conversely, promote it.

5.2 Vlogs as Identity Generators and Socialization of Consumers

The second significant conclusion highlights the strong impact of vlogs on consumer behaviour and identity formation. The high predictive value of both parasocial relations and the materialistic values on the frequency of purchases indicates the high power of the combination of emotional attachment and the already-existing consumerist tendencies. More importantly, our qualitative information is not limited to consumerism. We discovered vlogs to be a set of identity blueprints, which show the viewer concrete scripts on how to act out a version of the self, such as the adventurer, the aesthetical minimalist, or the productive entrepreneur. The coercion that is mentioned by the participants to buy and act such identities speaks to a possible darker side of this influence in which the desire to imitate a vlog-inspired ideal may drive one to financial distress and the feeling of being inauthentic, which feeds a consumption cycle that is intended to bring about a manufactured sense of happiness.

5.3 The Well-being Dichotomy: The Pivotal role of the Social Comparison

The third important conclusion explains the unclear connection between the consumption of vlogs and well-being. Our findings ensure that the effect is not either positive or negative but can be explained in terms of a dichotomy mediated by the psychological process of social comparison and the form of interaction. The adverse route, which is associated with passive viewing and positive social comparisons and trading in life with the edited images of vloggers, results in the consequences of anxiety, envious feelings, and low self-esteem. This paper further contributes that it is frequently a compounding effect of an accumulation of exposure to cross-vlogs, in which the cumulative perfection held by multiple sources would establish an unrealistic ideal.

On the other hand, the positive route is activated by active and community based engagement. When the audience draw on vlogs as a pool of informational support and the ability to establish a relationship with other like-minded people in the comments section or in special forums, the experience contributes to a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. It was especially true among the audience that needed to find encouragement of niche hobbies, tabooed problems, where vlogs gave an essential feeling of belonging and justified education. The discovery is highly specific to the discussion as it shows that the same platform may be used as a source of distress and comfort depending on whether the major activity of the viewer is a comparing or a connecting activity.

5.4 Theoretical and Practical Implications

In theory, this research has incorporated the ideas of media research, psychology, and consumer research to present a comprehensive approach to influence of vlogs. It proves that a multi-dimensional strategy to address user personality, motivations, and engagement styles is needed.

In practical terms, the results have some implications to media literacy education. They need to shift curriculum beyond learning how to be skeptical of traditional advertising as it should incorporate the skills of critically deconstructing influencer content to empower people to understand how parasocial communication works, the artifice of authenticity, and the psychological dangers of upward social comparison. In the case of mental health professionals, knowledge of the place of vlogs in the lives of the clients may give an insight on the sources of anxiety and social challenge.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research

This research has a number of limitations. The cross-sectional survey design only finds correlations and not causality. This was restricted to 18-30-year-olds and may not be applicable to older and younger audiences. The future studies are expected to use longitudinal studies to monitor the long term impact of vlog use. The difference in effects of different types of vlogs and particular algorithmic processes that enhance particular content and its psychological impacts also require further research.

6. Conclusion

This study confirms that the vlogs created by YouTubers are much more than entertainment; it is an extremely influential and ubiquitous phenomenon that determines the social and personal environment of the digital era. They rearrange communication based on the paradox of parasocial which provides both reassurance bonding and possible withdrawal of socializing. They strongly prescribe life and identity, offering inspirational schemas that lead to consumption and self-perception. Conclusively, their influence on well-being is a two-sided road, which is honed by the universal human social comparison tendency. This thorny landscape with discriminating awareness is a challenge and opportunity to individuals in the 21 st century, and it is possible to tap into the potentials of community and inspiration vlogs available to us and to reduce the dangers of comparison and commodified intimacy.

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