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Analysis: YouTube and Gender¹

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In only four years, online video sharing has become a phenomenally popular new media format. Ordinary people put their home-made short videos on the internet where they can be viewed and commented on by millions of people around the world. Every week, millions of women make and share videos online. Hundreds of millions of videos are now online that tell women's stories or portray images of women. This article discusses some of the first research conducted that explores the gender aspects of the online video site YouTube.

YouTube, introduced to the public in 2005, is currently the most popular online video website and hosts more videos than rival video sites (Trier, 2007). Video content on YouTube is diverse, but most YouTube videos are amateur videos that document everyday life (Godwin-Jones, 2007). We chose YouTube as an obvious source of online videos for our study to investigate how and why people communicate using vlogs, and how viewers react to vlogs. "Vlogs," also known as video blogs, are video web logs. A web log or blog is a website where individuals post updates about their lives and ideas – usually in the form of written comments. A vlog is created in video rather than textual form. Vlogs are a form of online publishing, allowing everyone with web access and simple video production tools – such as a computer and a webcam or a cell phone with video capabilities – to create and post content. Most vlogs are authored by individuals and focus on personal themes (Nardi, 2004; Schiano, 2004). In this study we examine how women are creating vlogs and using YouTube. Our initial findings reveal gender differences in both vlog creation and YouTube use.

Analyzing vlogs

New technologies could potentially change traditional social and political hierarchies, transform the boundaries between the private and the public (Rakow and Navarro, 1993, Milliken *et al.*, 2008) and create new spaces for interaction and participation. At the same time such technologies can also contribute to a growing digital divide. Marginalized or minority groups are especially vulnerable to this phenomenon. A potential concern is that women might be excluded from the participatory process of creating and viewing videos as a result of the digital divide.

The digital divide is not the only potential problem with online video – questions of representation are also important. A major issue with the visual representation of women is exploitative images that present women not as subjects but as objects for the male gaze. The greater visual representation of women on the internet, for example, is not necessarily a sign of progress for women, as greater representation could mean greater exclusion. Regardless of what

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images are being portrayed, women without ideal bodies are rendered invisible in the media (Nead, 1992). A clear example of this is the proliferation of the image of women in pornographic materials in magazines, on film and on the internet.

However socially constructed meanings are neither fixed nor unalterable (Rakow and Wackwitz, 2004). Websites created by women for women, for example, are positive spaces where women can be represented as subjects rather than objects. Even though women themselves grapple with the subject/object dichotomy, there is a potential for women's roles to be reconstructed (Blair and Takayoshi, 1999). In vlogs, women depicting themselves can be in control of their own representation. Female bloggers face particular challenges- they are frequently objectified, threatened, and harassed (Lange, 2007; Ratliff, 2007). Vlogging may hold similar challenges for women.

Videos on YouTube are just beginning to be examined by scholars. Little is known about who creates these videos, why they post them and who watches them (Croteau, 2007). Our research builds on various theoretical and analytical approaches. In order to examine who is vlogging, why and how, we conducted a content analysis. Visual analysis methods were then used to closely examine the content of four vlogs. We also conducted an audience analysis that analyzed the responses to vlogs by viewers.

Research methodology

We conducted our content analysis to explore who is vlogging, how audiences respond to vloggers and the influence of gender on these variables. At the time of our study there was no obvious category on YouTube for vlogs so we conducted an initial search on YouTube using the term "blog" choosing vlogs posted over a 15-day period. To enable comparison among potentially similar vlogs, vlogs longer than three minutes and non-English vlogs were excluded, leaving us with a population of 1,028 vlogs. Using a listing of 100 random numbers (RAND, 2001) we randomly selected 100 vlogs from this population. These vlogs and the profiles of their 100 vloggers were then coded for a number of variables, including gender, age, location, audience, message, motivation, technical quality (both audio and visual), and the number of views.

We then conducted a visual analysis on four of the videos in the sample. Interpretations of vlogs change according to place, time; however visual messages have dominant meanings that provide interpretive boundaries for decoding messages (Hansen, 1998; Hall, 1999). We also collected data on the views and comments from the YouTube site on the four videos analyzed.

The final aspect of the research was an audience analysis of vlogs. We recruited 60 participants from a university in Atlantic Canada that self-identified as YouTube users. The study included an equal number of males (30) and females (30). Participants viewed the four vlogs we selected for the visual analysis in a random order. They completed a paper questionnaire comprised of questions about their demographic profile and their responses to the four vlogs.

Research findings and discussion

Our research findings are presented according to the different methodological and analytical approaches we used.

Content analysis: the vloggers

The majority of vlogs featured a single participant. Vlogs were posted more often by men (58%) than women (33%) – the gender of the vlogger could not be determined for 9% of vlogs. In vlogs with more than one participant, most other participants were also male. Most vloggers (61%) were adults ranging in age from 20 to 50 years and 36% were younger - the age of the vlogger could not be determined for 3% of vlogs. The average age of the main vlog participant (23 years) was almost the same for men (24 years) and women (21 years).

The young age of vloggers is not surprising; studies on internet use in the United States show that college students, who have greater access to technology, are frequent internet video users. A 2007 PEW internet study indicated that young adults ages 18-29 are the most avid viewers of online video in the United States (Madden, 2007).

Text information posted on the YouTube user profiles occasionally differed from that stated in the actual video blog. The most popular misreported information was age. The study found four cases of vloggers posting on their profile a different age than they state in the video blog. In all four cases the vloggers were young women, ages 12, 14, 15 and 15, who reported their age in their profile as older than their actual age - 86, 22, 20 and 46.

Content analysis: the vlogs

For our analysis we coded each vlog into one of five categories based on the message of the video: personal, public, entertainment, YouTube, and technology. Personal vlogs offer viewers introductions to the vloggers' personal lives, provide updates on their lives, or act as home movies. Public vlogs report or discuss the news or politics, or offer social commentary. Entertainment vlogs consist of comedy routines, musical numbers, acted skits or dancing or a combination of these elements. YouTube vlogs are videos where people either ask questions for other YouTube viewers to answer, respond to questions asked by other vloggers, or discuss other vlogs on YouTube. Technology vlogs either discuss technology or test out equipment.

Herring, et al, note in their study of blogs that more bloggers discussed personal matters than any other category (Herring *et al.*, 2004); similarly, almost 50% of the vlogs in our study were personal vlogs. Just over one quarter of the vlogs were entertainment vlogs, and almost 15% were YouTube vlogs. Public and technology vlogs were the least frequent type, making up 7% and 5% respectively.

Similar to findings of other research on the gender and subject matter of bloggers, (Nowson and Oberlander, 2006; Lange, 2007; Pedersen and Macafee, 2007, Herring *et al.*, 2004) our study found that female vloggers are more likely than male vloggers to vlog about personal matters. More than 60% of the female-authored vlogs and less than half (48%) of the male-authored vlogs were about personal themes. More men than women created “entertainment” themed vlogs. More men than women vlogged about public and technology related topics. More women created vlogs that interacted with the YouTube community.

Content analysis: image and audio quality

The quality of the vlog did not differ by the gender of the vlogger. When coding for quality the researchers coded for three categories (excellent, acceptable and poor) for the quality of the image and sound. Men and women vloggers scored very similar ratings across the board.

The videos created by women vloggers had slightly better image quality, and slightly poorer sound quality than those created by men.

While most vlogs had acceptable video and sound quality, more videos were of poor quality than excellent. Common problems included the image and sound being out of sync and the background noise affecting the sound quality. Background noise included but was not limited to background music which played in 21% of the videos.

Just over half of the vlogs contained no editing at all. There was an average of four scenes, or camera takes, per vlog. Vlogs with entertainment and public content had more scenes than other subjects (five and six scenes, respectively). The YouTube category of vlogs (described earlier) had the least number of scenes, on average two per vlog, while personal vlogs averaged three scenes. There was little difference by gender for the average number of edits: vlogs created by women averaged three edits, while men's vlogs had four.

More men than women created vlogs; however, our analysis of the average age of the vlogger, the average number of edits, and the quality of the vlogs found little difference between male and female vloggers.

Visual analysis: four videos

We selected four videos for our audience study. The four videos share many common characteristics. All were created by and feature young people in their teens to 20s. The vloggers did not indicate where they were from, although three of the four vloggers had North American accents, while the other sounded Australian. Their videos were all short vlogs, ranging from 2:00 to 2:53 minutes in length. The vloggers all gazed at the camera - directly at the viewer - for most of the time. In all four videos, the camera closely framed the individuals, showing only their faces and shoulders; it has been suggested that this video technique creates a personal intimate relationship between the viewer and the person on screen (Hansen, 1998).

In the first vlog, "indoor female," a young woman in a grey t-shirt with her blond hair tied back into a bun sits at her computer desk. She addresses her audience by announcing how busy she is with rehearsals and gives an update of the events in her life. Similarly, in the second video, "indoor male," the vlogger presents his viewers with a brief update on his daily life. Like the woman, he too is vlogging from his bedroom – what appears to be a university dorm room. These two videos are fairly accurate representations of vlogs which, for the most part, are filmed indoors in a room in the vlogger's home. The framing of the shot, the subject matter as well as the location add to the intimate and personal nature of the vlog.

The other two vlogs were filmed outside, in cars. The woman, "outdoor female," is vlogging from a stationary car. This is her first vlog and she introduces herself as a high-school student. In the final vlog, "outdoor male" is vlogging as he drives. The camera is placed inside the steering wheel and moves occasionally while he drives. In his vlog he discusses an incident that happened to him while driving and comments on the lack of trust people have in one another.

Our earlier content analysis of these four videos on the YouTube site allowed us to measure their popularity of by counting the number of "hits" or times that the video is viewed online. This analysis found that more people viewed the two vlogs filmed in cars, with "outdoor male" receiving the most hits. Of the two vlogs filmed inside, "indoor female" was viewed more times and commented on more often than "indoor male." However, the analysis of the viewer responses and hits from the YouTube site is problematic. Traffic to the videos depends upon the

number of the vlogger's regular viewers as well as viewers finding the video through searches. It is highly unlikely that these four videos were viewed by the same people; therefore the number of views and responses cannot give any clear indication of overall viewer preference according to either gender or location. To gain insight into viewer preference we conducted a YouTube viewer study.

Audience research: rating the four vlogs

We asked our 60 study participants to rate the four vlogs according to the YouTube star system - ratings from one to five, with five meaning "awesome!" There was little difference in the star ratings according to participants' own age or gender. However, the star rating the study participants gave to the vlogs made by the two men was higher than the rating they gave to the vlogs made by the two women, with a mean of 2.27 and 1.92 respectively. Overall "indoor female" was rated higher than "outdoor female." "Outdoor male," however, was rated higher than "indoor male." When asked to rank their favourite videos from one to four the majority of the participants ranked "outdoor male" as number one.

Audience research: commenting on the four vlogs

The written comments by the study participants on the four vlogs were overwhelmingly negative (Table 1). A minority of participants (18%) were openly negative about video blogs in general, stating that "I do not care for video blogs," "I do not enjoy blogs and never watch them," and, "I find video blogs very boring and superficial." More than half (55%) said vlogs were not entertaining, writing "it was boring" and "I do not find blogs entertaining unless (sic) there's a good story involved or something to make me laugh." More than half (52%) of participants rated the vlogs poorly because they did not know the person. Participants stated that the vlog "Doesn't really have a point without any background as to the individual or their video blog" and "Doesn't have much context not knowing what 'her story' is." One participant noted that the vlogger cannot improve their ratings because of the subject matter – "Personal blogs don't seem to have much point outside of personal expression."

While the researchers did not find a link between the gender of the study participants and the vlog ratings, there were a few differences among participants between women and men's written comments. Men were more likely than women to mention physical characteristics of the vlogger in their comments. Some male participants (10%) noted that they gave "indoor female" higher ratings, and would watch her again because "she's cute." Only one participant, a female, commented on the physical attractiveness of a male vloggers, noting that "indoor male" received a high rating from her because the "guy was kind of 'cute' in a young Jon Cusack way".

The written comments by our study participants also reveal a difference between men and women's responses to the vlogs. The women participants were slightly less likely to write negative comments than the men; however men wrote more positive comments overall. Women were three times more likely than men to leave the comment space blank on the study questionnaire.

Participants who self-identified on the questionnaire as YouTube community members were overall less likely to state that they hated vlogs, that they did not enjoy the videos because they were not entertaining, that they did not enjoy the subject matter or did not enjoy the vlog because they did not know the vlogger. In general, participants who noted that they felt like

YouTube community members reacted more positively to the vlogs than those who did not consider themselves as YouTube community members.

Audience research: gendered use of YouTube

The demographic portion of the YouTube audience study revealed several differences between the YouTube experiences of the men and women in our study: men were more likely to be frequent users of YouTube than women. More men (26.7%) than women (3.3%) visited the YouTube site on a daily basis. More women (30%) than men (6.7%) were infrequent visitors - visiting YouTube once a month or less (Table 2).

The study also found that men (40%) were more likely than women (13.3%) to post comments on YouTube. Men were also more likely to post videos (Table 3). The men participating in our study not only used the YouTube site and posted on the site more often than the women, they also knew more people who visited the site. Half the study respondents stated knowing more than 10 friends and family members who used YouTube; men comprised 70% of this group.

While the women in our study were less likely to post comments, videos and even visit YouTube on a regular basis compared to the men, they were just as likely as the men to feel like a member of a YouTube community. O'Donnell *et al.* (2008) note that YouTube community members are more frequent visitors and posters on the site, and are more likely to respond favourably to user-generated online video.

Summary and limitations of research findings

Our content analysis of YouTube vlogs revealed that while the majority were created by men, 39% of the primary characters in the vlogs were women. The biggest difference in women's vlogs was the subject matter, as women vloggers focused on personal subjects rather than public, technological or entertainment subjects. The quality of women's vlogs was similar to that of the men's, with slightly better images and slightly inferior sound quality. There were also few gender differences in the average age, number of edits or location of vlogs. While women were less likely to be the primary participant in vlogs they were more likely to post vlogs that interacted with the YouTube community and were likely to receive more "views" than male vloggers.

Likewise, we found in our YouTube user study that men are more likely to post comments and videos on YouTube. Only 13.3% of the women in our study had posted comments on the site, and none of the women in our study had ever posted a video. However, when asked if they felt like a part of the YouTube community 30% of the women in the study said they were part of the YouTube community, the same percentage as the men.

Our study has its limitations. The vlogs analyzed in the content analysis were representative of English-language short vlogs on YouTube in October 2006. The four videos selected for the detailed study are not typical of all vlogs on YouTube. Results from the exploratory study of YouTube users cannot be generalized to the larger population of current or potential users of YouTube. We studied a small sample of YouTube users in a specific geographical region and all our users were university students – they do not represent the larger population.

Conclusions

Our analysis suggests there is a gendered imbalance in both the creation and reception of vlogs. Women vloggers are not posting videos at the same rate as men but they are displaying similar levels of technical skill when they do post videos. Although fewer female vloggers post videos, they are more likely to interact with other vloggers. Women vloggers are more likely to ask questions and respond to the questions and posts of other vloggers in their own videos. Women are less likely than men to post their own videos online, comment on videos, or watch YouTube videos. However, women still feel as much of a part of the YouTube community as their male peers.

Recent studies identify online videos as potentially contributing to the virtual public sphere. Online videos can generate discussion by both textual and video comments, thereby expanding textual internet exchanges (Milliken, *et al.*, 2008). Vlogs, as a result of comments that viewers make, can become links in a social network. Such connections can form a social hypertext, a network of connected videos. In this manner communities are formed (Chin, 2006). Vlogging is also a social activity and social communication, allowing people to view others vlogs and create their own.

This study contributes to the growing literature about the representation of women online while adding to research on user-generated online video. YouTube vlogs have proven to be an important and rich source of information about the new visual media and will be valuable for future research. While this study examines both online videos and the reception of these videos, it does not investigate issues surrounding the creation of online videos. The subject matter of the videos offers some insight into the author's intent; however, we can not state the reasons why people create vlogs. By creating vlogs can women empower themselves? How can women use vlogs to make their struggles public and political? What do female vloggers see as obstacles to vlogging? These are all questions waiting to be explored by researchers in future. It would also be interesting to investigate the gender of vlog viewers on YouTube who leave comments. Future studies on vlogging could further investigate these questions by administering a study directly to vloggers. This early study of YouTube and gender has made an initial contribution to what will no doubt be a substantial sub-field of gender and media research in the coming years.

Table 1: Coded Written Comments - General

	Neg.	Pos.	Neutral	Not Sure	No Comment	A	B	C	D
Total	337	189	76	49	30	18%	55%	52%	38%

Numerals refer to the number of written comments; percentages (%) are also included for the following:

A. I do not like vlogs; B. Boring/not interesting/ not entertaining; C. I do not care because I do not know this person; D. I do not care about the subject matter

Table 2: Visiting and Gender

	Once/month or less	Everyday
Men	6.7%	26.7%
Women	30%	3.3%

Table 3: Participation and Gender

	Posted comments	Posted comments and/or videos
Men	40%	50%
Women	13.3%	13.3%

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