



Like, comment, subscribe! An interpretive phenomenological analysis of identity construction and the individual experiences of content creators on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

YouTube encourages their users to 'Broadcast Yourself', and many do just that. YouTube is the most popular video sharing website at the moment (Wen et al., 2010) and is a platform for the ever popular vlog. Vlogs (video blogs) evolved from the text based blog, and facilitate another form of online communication, self-expression and creation of community. This study aimed to explore the individual experiences of content creators on YouTube to gain an understanding of how they make sense of their identity and reconcile their online and offline worlds. A purposive sample of 5 vloggers on YouTube were chosen for individual semi-structured interviews. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to analyse the data and 3 master themes were identified: 'constructing identity', 'the journey of creating content on YouTube' and 'positioning of others'. Participants were found to use vlogs as a way to express important aspects of their inner selves, reminisce and as a creative outlet. Vlogging is a relatively modern phenomenon therefore the research around it not yet extensive. This study presents potential areas of interest for future research.

KEY WORDS:	IPA	VLOG	YOUTUBE	IDENTITY
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Contents

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>	<u>4</u>
THE ORIGIN OF THE VLOG	4
BLOGGING	5
THE INDIVIDUAL ONLINE	6
THE PRESENT STUDY	8
<u>METHOD</u>	<u>9</u>
PARTICIPANTS	9
DESIGN	9
MATERIALS	9
PROCEDURE	10
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	11
ANALYTICAL STRATEGY	11
<u>ANALYSIS</u>	<u>13</u>
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>23</u>
<u>REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS</u>	<u>25</u>
<u>REFERENCES</u>	<u>27</u>

Introduction

The aim of the current study was to explore the individual experiences of content creators on YouTube, to gain an understanding of how they make sense of their identity, and begin an exploration of the relationship between their online and offline selves. Vlogging is a relatively modern phenomenon and as a consequence, the research around it not yet extensive. Therefore, this literature review will consider the research that has followed the evolution of our understandings of interactions and self-presentation on the Internet up to this point.

The origin of the vlog

Web 2.0 is a term coined by O'Reilly in 2004 (O'Reilly, 2005 as cited in Paroutis & Al Saleh, 2009). It refers to the second generation of the Internet that is community driven and allows the user to be an active participant in the creation and sharing of content (Levy, 2009). The rise of these technologies, such as user generated content, blogs, video sharing sites and social media has transformed the Internet, bringing together millions of people from all over the world and facilitating a global collaboration of ideas (Han, 2010). These practices are available to anyone with access to the necessary technology, and have refocused Internet practices from information-reception to information-production (Han, 2010). Web 2.0 has been referred to as a social phenomenon that, through the use of collaborative actions, creates and distributes web content as a result of open communication and freedom to share and reuse information (Hung, 2011). Although definitions vary as to what Web 2.0 means, the central idea revolves around increased user involvement with the web and the formation of global, virtual, social networks and communities (Wen, Younghong, Tiejun & Qiang, 2010).

Web 2.0 technologies are a new form of mainstream communication, joining the likes of email, instant messaging and mobile phones, that allow for millions of people to personally communicate to share knowledge and information and express opinions instantly (Rosenbloom, 2004 as cited in Wen et al., 2010). Weblogs (blogs for short) are becoming increasingly important as a means to achieve this (Wen et al., 2010). Blogs began as a texted-based form of personal publishing, but from this genre other forms of blogging have emerged that include forms of visual expression, such as photoblogs and the incorporation of video and sound (Hoem, 2005 as cited in Wen et al., 2010). Videoblogs (vlogs for short) are a form of blogging that uses the rich medium of video (Wikipedia, 2008 as cited in Wen et al., 2010). Just as the act of making blogs is called blogging and is done by bloggers, so too is the act of making vlogs called vlogging and is done by vloggers (Wen et al., 2010). With the prevalence of digital cameras, camera mobile phones and the wide availability of broadband network connections, vlogging has become increasingly popular and gained attention worldwide (Wen et al., 2010).

YouTube.com, launched in 2005 and acquired by Google in 2006, is the most popular video-sharing website at the moment (Wen et al., 2010). YouTube promotes itself as a kind of one-way television experience using the tag line 'Broadcast yourself' and giving users 'channels' (Harley & Fitzpatrick, 2009). In 2012, one hour of video was uploaded to YouTube every second and video views exceeded four billion a day (<http://youtube-global.blogspot.co.uk/2012/01/holy-nyans-60-hours-per-minute-and-4.html>). The purposes of YouTube are inherently social and defined by

the users, and it is this freedom in choosing one's level of interaction that underlies its success (Harley & Fitzpatrick, 2009). Involvement in the YouTube community can come in many forms: from simply watching videos and perhaps sharing them, to creating an account which allows you to communicate and interact with other members of the community through subscribing, commenting and creating your own videos (Harley & Fitzpatrick, 2009). This frequent communication between content creators and viewers is one of the core aspects of the YouTube community (Lange, 2007). In 2007, YouTube created a partner program whereby content creators could be paid by the site to make videos (<http://youtube-global.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/yt-pc-2013.html>). YouTube's popularity and ease of access opens the site to the masses, arguably encouraging a destruction of the barrier between our private and public selves (Barkham, 2010).

Blogging

As mentioned above, vlogs are an evolution of the blog format; therefore, research on blogging, although not generalisable to vlogging, may highlight potential areas of interest and relevance for future investigations of vlogging. Although this is not ideal, until the literature surrounding vlogs becomes more substantial, research will have to be drawn upon from other areas that hold relevance.

Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht (2004) investigated social activity facilitated through blogging, analysing bloggers' relationships with and understandings of their audience. They conducted ethnographic interviews with bloggers and text analysis of blogs. Nardi et al (2004) found blogs to be inherently social, whereby they not only served as open communication to their readers but also extended interaction into other mediums of communication such as email, instant messaging and face-to-face contact. They found that blogs served many purposes by allowing their creators to express themselves in an environment that was free from the pressures of real life's immediate interaction. Blogging purposes included expressing emotions or opinions, facilitating deeper thought upon recent experiences and keeping other people up to date on the bloggers activities. Despite blogs' social nature, bloggers were often reserved in their interaction with readers in their blog posts, preferring to continue communication through other means. Nardi et al. (2004) argue that although many blogs take on a diary format, blogs are less like a diary and more akin to the radio, as blogs allowed the blogger to openly broadcast messages to others, much like a radio show. Nardi et al.'s (2004) small sample size of bloggers means that these findings are not representative of all blogs on the web. Indeed, all their participants lived in either New York or California, and were well educated, middle-class people. This demographic may not be representative of the range of people who blog on the Internet, and the participants may have different uses for their blogs than other bloggers. Therefore, this study's findings do not show a clear or diverse picture of bloggers' individual experiences of blogging. Before and during their research, Nardi et al., maintained their own blogs in order to familiarise themselves with blogging. Therefore, their insider status may have affected their interpretation of the data, for example, matters that bloggers mentioned that resonated with the researchers' own experiences of blogging may have been over emphasised in the analysis, leading to a neglect of others areas of importance. Because the researchers have not been explicitly reflexive, it is unclear what other biases they may have brought to the research.

Viégas (2005) surveyed bloggers in relation to their sense of privacy and liability. The survey consisted of Likert-scales and open-ended essay questions covering the key areas of: blog content, identity management of self and others, bloggers understandings and control over their audience and the persistent nature of blogs. The majority of bloggers described their blogs as personal and reflective, in which they discussed mainly themselves and many also discussed other people such as family and friends. The survey found that few bloggers felt that they knew their audience well, and few were concerned that their blogs could be accessed online for a long time. Viégas' findings provide a limited insight into bloggers' sense of privacy as the study's results are based on impersonal, quantitative measures. Although the inclusion of open-ended essay questions presents the potential for an understanding of individual experiences, much of the participant's unique experiences will be missed. The self-reporting nature of the study impacts on the accuracy of its findings. Furthermore, surveys present various issues as a methodological technique; misunderstandings of the questions could have resulted in a false number of personal blogs being recorded, as there were no external validity checks. The survey may be subject to response acquiescence, whereby participants simply agreed with the questions asked of them (Coolican, 2009). As a consequence of their methodological choices, this study lacks a true insight into individual experiences of blogging and cannot be taken at face value to be a true likeness of blogging or entirely applicable to vlogging.

Wen et al. (2010) identified two categories of vlogging based on their presentation style: web TV show and diary. This diary style of vlog may be comparable to, and could be seen as an evolution from, traditional online diary blogs. Online diary blogs date back to around 1995 and allow the writer to describe and reflect on their everyday lives and serve as a form of introspection (Siles, 2012). With consideration to the work of Goffman (1972) online diaries, in the form of blogs, have been described as a "form of face-work" utilising the art of self-representation, impression management and potential self-promotion (Hookway, 2008, p.96). One of the main goals of self-presentation is to create a favourable image of the self in order to achieve a certain outcome or to obtain a favourable evaluation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, as cited in Hermann, 2013). Hookway (2008) suggests that bloggers can write about episodes in their lives in such a way that allows them to present themselves in a desirable light. However, blogs also allow for a considerable amount of anonymity; this disrupts Goffman's notion of 'face-work', which is limited to face-to-face interactions (Hookway, 2008). With this in mind, vlogs may provide a better platform for 'face-work' as they allow for the creators face to be seen. Vlogger's are much more easily identifiable, therefore the creator is provided with a better opportunity to form a connection with their audience, which may further facilitate 'face-work'.

The individual online

It can be difficult to investigate the impact that new technologies have on us when these technologies and the ways that we use them are rapidly changing (Davis, 2013). Therefore, researchers need to look beyond the technologies themselves and consider their distinct characteristics, such as being text-based and portable, and identify what is attractive about them, for example, maintaining instantaneous contact with others (Davis, 2013). In doing so, Davis (2013) suggests this allows the research conducted today to be relevant when the technologies change tomorrow. In

light of this, it is important to understand how underlying features of the Internet may influence and impact individuals' experiences of vlogging, as this is an online phenomenon.

An individual's identity is an affective and cognitive understanding of who and what they are (Schouten, 1991 as cited in Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan & Brown McCabe, 2005) and is in part defined by their social roles (Burke, 1980). There are benefits to being able to adopt multiple defining identities (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). For example, a person with many defining identities may feel better prepared to face stressors and changes, have better health and greater satisfaction in life than if they claim only a few roles (Linville, 1985; Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Spreitzer, Synder & Larson, 1979 as cited in McKenna & Bargh, 2000). It can be difficult for a person to adopt new roles when they remain in a static social environment where changes to a person's self concept are hindered by others' unwillingness to accept them (Gollwitzer, 1986 as cited in McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

The Internet is largely an anonymous place where interactions with others happen without being able to see the other person (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This anonymity allows people to take greater risks in sharing personal information than in face-to-face interactions and individuals are more likely to express their true thoughts and feelings (Spears & Lea, 1994 as cited in McKenna & Bargh, 2000). It also gives people more metaphorical room to play with identity construction than is possible in offline settings (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). People have an innate need to express their true selves so that others can know them as the person they believe themselves to be (Gollwitzer, 1986 as cited in McKenna & Bargh, 2000). On the Internet, a person may find it easier to express the real and identity important aspects of themselves that they do not feel able to express to others as they are much more free to choose how they present themselves (Turkle, 1995 as cited in Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, 2002). Understandings of public and private information extend to the internet, however, increased anonymity online can move the distinctions between the two, resulting in what would normally be private offline being public online (Ben-Ze'ev, 2003). This blank slate allows one to express important aspects of an inner persona and to construct the self in many different ways (McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

Walther et al (2001 as cited in Whitty, 2008) explain that people are strategic in how they present themselves online and that this is especially true for asynchronous forms of communication such as email. Vlogs are also a form of asynchronous communication, therefore, a vlogger can actively manage what information they do and do not share with their viewers. The fragmentation hypothesis states that through being able to construct multiple identities on the Internet an individual's personality may fragment and this presents a risk to their self-concept clarity (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). On the other hand, the self-concept unity hypothesis posits that the freedom to interact with other people online from differing backgrounds can actually validate one's self-concept clarity, as the individual has a chance to express their various identities and receive feedback from a variety of sources (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Online communication may allow someone to enhance their self esteem as they are able to receive acceptance and approval from others whilst also being in control of what information they share with others (Harter, 2003 as cited in Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

The Present study

In light of the current literature, it is evident that we are limited in our current knowledge and understandings of vlogging. Much of the current literature focuses on blogging, which is understandable considering that blogs have been present on the Internet a lot longer than vlogs have. However, just as researchers investigated blogs as new forms of communication, information sharing and identity construction, so too has the time come for a similar investigation of vlogs. In the rapidly changing world of online technology it is important to keep the literature up to date (Davis, 2013). A vast amount of the current literature on vlogs investigates their pedagogical applications, (Hung, 2011) or value to marketing and business (Wen et al., 2010), and there are few investigations into YouTube as an online community. The current study aimed to expand upon the blogging literature and investigate its relevance to vlogging.

Much of the current research has taken the form of quantitative surveys or other quantitative methodologies. Therefore, in order to provide an alternative viewpoint to this subject area a qualitative approach was adopted. The current study has adopted a phenomenological epistemological position, which is concerned with experience and how this is made sense of as individuals who have direct involvement with the world (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Five individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with a homogenous sample of participants in order to attain rich data (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Semi-structured interviews are flexible and give the participant the opportunity to guide the interview into unforeseen areas that are important to them that the researcher may not have thought to ask about (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As suggested by McKenna and Bargh (2000), in-depth interviews can provide valuable understandings of people's experiences on the Internet that other methods such as surveys may miss.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was chosen as an appropriate approach to analysis because it focuses on the individual's lived experience and how they make meaning from these experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). IPA is idiographic as it approaches exploration of participants as individuals and focuses on particular experiences that are important to them and recognises that the researcher must interpret the participant's account in order to make sense of their experience (Smith et al., 2009). In light of this, IPA research often explores identity and the experiences that impact it (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Other methods of analysis could have been chosen, however, IPA was considered the most appropriate approach for the current study because the lack of current research means there is room for great insight into the individual's experience of vlogging and therefore, IPA's idiographic focus would allow the researcher to achieve their research aims.

In conclusion, the present study aimed to explore content creators' individual experiences of YouTube. To gain a greater understanding of how they make sense of their identity, and begin an exploration of the relationship between their online and offline selves. This study also aimed to explore the 'vlogger' identity and explore the growing popularity of vlogging by understanding why vlogging is important to vloggers and what it means to them.

Method

Participants

In order to recruit a purposive homogenous sample of participants, (Smith & Osborn, 2008), all participants were required to have a YouTube channel which they updated regularly and where they posted vlogs. Five participants were recruited in total. Difficulty finding suitable participants resulted in a range of sampling techniques being used. Mary and Lyn were recruited through opportunity sampling (Smith et al., 2009) as the researcher knew them from university. Amy was recruited after contact through her YouTube channel. Ben and Jan were recruited through snowball sampling (Smith et al., 2009). Snowball sampling proved to be a particularly useful and appropriate technique to gain a homogenous sample because it widened the range of possible participants from just the ones that the researcher was aware of and was therefore more successful than the researcher's attempts to recruit just through messages on YouTube.

Participants (and interview times) consisted of; Mary (24 minutes), Lyn (1 hour 16 minutes), Jan (34 minutes), Ben (35 minutes) and Amy (1 hour 3 minutes). A follow up interview was conducted with Mary (2 minutes) in order to ask her about some areas that had been discussed in other interviews.

Each participant makes vlogs amongst other types of online video. Lyn, Jan, Ben and Amy all create comedy videos. Mary makes tag videos. Amy also does sex education and travel videos. All participants are from the UK, apart from Ben, who moved from the UK to New Zealand around 10 years ago. Mary has been an acquaintance for just over two years, and Lyn for a few months. There had been no previous contact with Jan, Ben or Amy, but the researcher has been subscribed to Amy's YouTube channel for a few years.

Design

The present study was designed from a phenomenological epistemological position and therefore, in order to explore the individual participant's experiences, a qualitative approach was adopted. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. This is the recommended form of data collection for IPA research because they are flexible, produce rich data and allow for interesting areas to be explored that the researcher may not have thought of (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Originally, the researcher planned to conduct four interviews, which is in the range of three to six as suggested by Smith et al. (2009), aiming for around one hour for each interview as this would allow sufficient time to explore topics in depth (Smith et al., 2009). However, because the researcher is not an experienced interviewer, three of the interviews fell short of this time and so a fifth participant was recruited. A total of 3.9 hours of data was collected, which is in line with the University of Gloucestershire guidelines for IPA research.

Materials

A research information sheet (appendix 2) explained the background and aims of the study. This included example questions that would be asked in the interview in order for the participants to decide whether they were happy for all the questions to be

asked and to allow them to give informed consent. A consent form (appendix 3) outlined ethical issues including confidentiality, their right to withdraw, and anonymity. These are discussed further in the ethical considerations section.

The interviews were recorded using either a digital voice recorder, or a voice-recording app on an iPhone (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The creation of the interview schedule (appendix 4) was informed by Smith and Osborn's (2008) and Smith et al.'s (2009) guidelines. The questions were derived from the researcher's own knowledge and understanding of YouTube and vlogging. Therefore, there may be bias in the areas addressed; this is discussed further in the reflexive analysis. The interview schedule included questions and prompts, which covered the topics of making YouTube videos, identity and their relationship with their viewers. Questions included: 'What first attracted you to making YouTube videos?'; 'What factors impact what you decide to share in terms of content?'; 'How would you describe your online self?' and 'Do you interact with your audience on YouTube?'. This schedule was used in a flexible manner and questions were deviated from or added to in the interviews depending on the participant that was being interviewed. As Smith et al. (2009) state, a rigid course and content for the interview cannot be laid out in advance and this is in line with a phenomenological position and one of the things that allows for a deeper exploration of each interviewee as an individual. Appendix 5 shows the first revised interview schedule. Appendix 6 shows the interview schedule used for Amy's interview, two questions have been added that allowed for a deeper insight into her experience as a very successful YouTuber that the other participant's could not answer.

The debrief (appendix 7) reiterated the research aims, thanked them for their participation, provided details of how they could withdraw and how to contact the researcher with further questions.

Procedure

The researcher arranged interviews with participants over Facebook, email or in person. One week before the interview participant's were sent the research information sheet and asked to make the researcher aware of any questions they did not wish to answer in the interview.

Before beginning the interview, participants were asked to read and sign the consent form. Jan, Ben and Amy were sent the consent form with the research information sheet and asked to sign it and send it back to the researcher. In order to try and build rapport with the participant we chatted for a few minutes before starting the interview and any questions they had were answered. Mary and Lyn were both interviewed at my house. For Mary's interview we sat on the sofa and for Lyn's interview we sat at the dining table.

Jan, Ben and Amy were all interviewed over Skype. This was convenient because it meant there was no need to travel to an agreed meeting place. However, it also opened up the possibility of technical difficulties. Jan's interview was affected by a poor Internet connection that distorted the audio, meaning that parts of the interview were unable to be transcribed. Amy's interview was interrupted several times by technical difficulties. The Skype call dropped twice, the audio was distorted in places,

for the second half of the interview there was no video and the recording device ran out of battery part way through. Attempts were made to overcome these issues by asking her to repeat herself when necessary. The transcripts will reflect these issues, though every effort has been made to keep them as clear and accurate as possible.

After the interview, all participants were sent or given a copy of the debrief, asked if they had any other questions and thanked for their participation.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were sent a research information sheet to be made fully aware of the research procedure and study aims before agreeing to take part in the interviews. Before each interview the following ethical issues were addressed and the participant signed the consent form.

For the purpose of anonymity the participant's identity was protected as far as possible: pseudonyms were used for the names of participants, YouTube channels, friends and places. Other identifying information such as video titles and specific descriptions of videos were also changed.

Participants were made aware that complete confidentiality could not be ensured and were told that the interview transcripts were going to be read by the dissertation markers and quotes from the transcripts would be used in the main body of the dissertation, which would be made available to the students and staff at the university.

After each interview participants were given a verbal and written debrief. The written debrief included contact details for the researcher and the university Helpzone in case they felt like they had been affected by the interview in any way. Amy, Jan and Ben are not students at the university so they were verbally encouraged to contact their GP instead. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw and the debrief provided the contact details of the researcher in order for them to do so. They were also given the opportunity to read their transcripts and omit anything they were unhappy about including.

Participants were not deceived at any point during their participation, as this was unnecessary to the research aims.

The participants' and the researcher's safety was ensured by only interviewing previously known participants in person and utilising Skype interviews for the other participants.

Analytical Strategy

Transcription of IPA requires a semantic level of detail (Smith & Osborn, 2008) and therefore a simple form of transcription was used (Braun & Clarke, 2013; appendix 8). This includes all spoken words, false starts, laughter and pauses (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

IPA was used to make sense of the data and carried out according to Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Osborn (2008). Each transcript was analysed individually in

order to uphold IPA's idiographic commitment (Smith et al., 2009). After familiarising with the data through the transcription process, reading and re-reading of the transcripts, the researcher made exploratory comments on the left hand margin of the first transcript (Appendix 9). These comments noted initial thoughts on semantic content, language use, contradictions, similarities, differences, initial interpretations and questions (Smith et al., 2009). Sections of the transcript were highlighted in corresponding colours to their exploratory comments. These colours do not correspond to any of the other stages of analysis and are only to make the first stage clear.

Constructed emergent themes were then identified on a new copy of the transcript in the right hand margin. These endeavoured to maintain the complexity of the exploratory comments whilst remaining concise (Smith et al., 2009). The emergent themes were then listed chronologically in a table with examples of the exploratory comments they corresponded to. This was used for reference when the emergent themes were printed off and cut out into separate pieces of paper in order to physically move and cluster them together. These clusters were named and represented superordinate themes (Appendix 10). A detailed table of superordinate themes was then constructed (Appendix 11 - 15). Each interview was analysed in this way, with an effort made to treat them each individually; however, it was inevitable that their analysis would be influenced by what had already be found (Smith et al., 2009).

After all the data had been analysed the first interview was reanalysed in order to make sure that areas of interest that were identified in other interviews had not been missed. Reviewing and double-checking themes is important to qualitative analysis because the themes need to accurately reflect the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). After this reanalysing, the emergent themes for the first interview were altered and rearranged into new superordinate themes through the previously outlined process. Appendix 16 shows these reworked superordinate themes.

The final stage of analysis involved looking for patterns across cases. A list was made of the superordinate themes for each participant, which were then clustered into master themes (Appendix 17).

Analysis

The aim of the current study was to explore content creators' experiences of vlogging on YouTube and to create an understanding of how they make sense of their identity. Data was analysed using IPA and three master themes were identified (Smith et al., 2009). The first master theme, 'constructing identity', has the subthemes 'online and offline selves' and 'on-going self-development'. The second master theme 'the journey of creating content on YouTube' has the subthemes 'purpose' and 'success' and the final master theme 'positioning of others' has the subthemes 'community' and 'being private in public'. Overall these themes are connected by how the participants made sense of their online and offline worlds and their attempts to coalesce them. A case within theme approach will structure the analysis, each master theme will be taken in turn and extracts from the participants will be examined to support it (Smith et al., 2009). Literature will be incorporated to support and extend the argument presented. This analysis will not incorporate all the subthemes within each master theme, but will explore the ones that best address the research aims. I recognise that the analysis presented here is subjective and influenced by my own perceptions and experiences; I acknowledge that another researcher may have interpreted the data differently.

Constructing identity

The first theme to be explored will be 'constructing identity'. This theme is concerned with how the participants have made sense of their identity in relation to YouTube. Within the subtheme of 'online and offline selves' some participants discussed how they considered these two identities to be both distinct *and* merging, whilst others described them as either distinct *or* merging. Participants' accounts showed variance between being consistent and inconsistent on and offline, and others described themselves as having a core identity. This links with the subtheme of 'on-going self-development' where participants related accounts of change, both within themselves and in relation to external factors, such as increased technical ability. In this analysis only the subtheme 'online and offline identities' will be explored because this provides an interesting and rich account into how the participants construct their identity.

The subtheme online and offline selves is openly addressed in Ben's account of his online identity.

my online self he started off quite different from me (.) um (.) particularly because (.) um I was not very confident in front of a camera so I I very much put on this persona (.) um (.) but he's very extroverted he's confident he speaks his mind (.) he can get quite sort of frustrated at things (.) um which I don't really do in real life

(...)

they've become a lot closer since I've become more confident in front of the camera so I'm more myself (.) and (.) th- I'm actually I've actually started talking to people in real life an' using phrases that I would use on YouTube

(...)

that was one of my goals when I started YouTube was t' become more confident in front of the camera but also use that t' become more confident in real life as well

(Ben: pages: 6-7, lines 186-191, 211-215 and 219-222)

Here we can see how Ben separates his online and offline selves into distinct entities. His use of the pronoun 'he' forms a distinction between himself and his online self, this is accentuated by the metaphorical distance he implies is between them: 'a lot closer'. Ben highlights his lack of confidence in front of a camera as the reason for putting on a different persona online. People have a variety of reasons and motivations to use the Internet, and these goals shape how they use it and therefore how they are affected by it (Bargh, 1988 as cited in McKenna & Bargh, 2000). McKenna and Bargh (1998 as cited in McKenna & Bargh, 2000) suggest that the Internet can be used as a tool to successfully achieve desired changes in the self. Ben reveals that this was one of his intentions when he began making videos. Initially he could only sustain the persona that he had created when he was in front of the camera, but now that his confidence has increased the two identities that were once very distinct are merging. He has noticed a translation of his online identity into his real world interactions, such as using phrases he would use in videos in conversations, and similarly, online he is now more able to be himself in videos (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; McKenna, 1998 as cited in McKenna & Bargh, 2000). However, the process of merging is not complete as he continues to refer to his online self as a separate person, not only an ideal self, but also an internal one.

the easiest way to say is all the online things (.) selfs (.) things happen but inside my head so I don't let all that out (.) so I think a lot of it (.) but I don't say it unless I'm in front of a camera

(Ben: page: 6, lines 196-199)

This presents a potential contradiction in Ben's account. He simultaneously refers to himself as two separate personas and also, a single consistent persona. The Internet is a blank slate where the self can be constructed in many different ways, which also makes it easier to express important aspects of an inner persona (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). YouTube has provided Ben the opportunity to reconstruct himself as confident, but also to express his true, internal self. It is important that people express their true selves to the outside world so that other people can know them as they know themselves (Gollwitzer, 1986 as cited in McKenna & Bargh, 2000).

Amy also expresses this desire when she discusses the distinction between her online and offline selves.

I think what's interesting is that I've found that (a lot of YouTubers) are actually like very introverted in real life (.) when they seem very confident in their videos (.) but I'm not that at all I'm (.) very extroverted in real life

(...)

I didn't set out to have this (.) have a me (.) um (.) it just sort of happened (.) just when the camera turned on like (.) the way that I spoke or the way that I acted an' the things that I said just (.) came out a certain way 'n' it wasn't until (.) like (.) a year ((pause)) a year after making videos I was watching my videos an' I was like (.) 'I'm not like that I don't understand like this is really weird' (.) an' I made

this big sort of like coming out video of like (.) 'this is what I'm really like actually like (.) I don't understand why (.) this is (.) why I'm acting like this in videos' erm (.) (an' I've started being myself now) in videos (.) but beforehand you just I didn't even notice it was happening (.) like (.) the camera just turned on 'n' (.) this (.) version of me just came out (.) 'n' it was very it was a very sweet an' adorable erm (.) girl ((laughs)) an' then (.) an' then I was like actually that ((inaudible)) an' kind of like (.) crude (.) in videos (.) an' I'm like 'yes this is more me'

(Amy: pages: 13 and 15-16, lines 431-434, 500-517)

The importance of being known as one's true self shows through in Amy's account of realising that she was not being herself in her videos. She expresses her lack of control over the differences between her online and offline selves, stating that the camera influenced her in a non-conscious way. A version of her 'came out' in front of the camera, which suggests that an internal self was being expressed, however, she refutes this by revealing how she did not understand and it was 'weird', suggesting that this persona was not a true, internal self. This lack of agency over her behaviour is disturbing to her and she was so shocked by the realisation that she made a video to 'come out' to her audience about who she really is. By calling it a 'coming out video', Amy draws a parallel between her process of revealing her true self and that of a person 'coming out' to tell others that they are homosexual. This emphasises the importance of portraying an authentic online identity and being honest with her audience. 'More me' suggests that the person she expresses in videos now is still not completely reflective of her true offline self. Amy describes herself as 'very extroverted in real life', contrasting herself to other YouTubers whom she describes as 'very introverted in real life' even though they acted confident in videos. This implies that YouTube had the opposite affect on her than it did on other YouTubers. Interestingly, Amy reduces introversion and extroversion differences down to confidence; this may reflect a lay person's typical understanding of extroversion.

Amy's merging of online and offline selves shows an interesting contrast to Ben's. Ben started YouTube with the intention of having distinct identities that would then merge, whereas Amy was surprised to see a difference and is now consciously changing her online self to be more reflective of her offline self. Jan, in contrast, talks about the relationship between her online and offline selves differently.

Initially, she describes the flexibility of her offline self:

The person I am in real life is different depending on who I am with at time

(Jan: page: 6, lines 175-176)

Jan reflexively evaluates how she believes others see her and uses this to inform part of her understanding of herself and her identity (Solomon, 1983 as cited in Yurchisin et al., 2005). This flexibility of the self is echoed between her online and offline identities. Yurchisin et al. (2005) suggest that identity is not restrained by online and offline boundaries and is actually a combination of both online and offline conceptions of the self. Just as her offline self is flexible in different contexts, her online self is similarly applicable to contexts outside of YouTube.

I do have the occasional thing where I go t' t' (a party or) something an' I meet a friend of a friend they go 'I know who you are you're from Jansfunnyvids an' I go (.) 'okay this is weird now ((laughs)) I don't know how to behave around you' I tend to I do tend t' suddenly become a little bit more confident an' try and (.) try and be funny really at them (so) I have to be on show with those people so I suppose that does that identity does seep in if I do have to do that kind of thing (.) erm (.) so (.) that's something that happens (.) but I don't I don't really feel like it's such a separate entity (.) that it's so far away from who I actually am

(...)

if I were replying to a YouTube comment I can say 'well at the moment I'm in Jansfunnyvids mode an' this is what I'm doing' (.) erm (.) whereas if I'm at a party I'm not necessarily like that

(Jan: pages: 7-8 and 9, lines 225-236, 286-289)

This flexibility of the self allows her to behave differently in different contexts, however, when these contexts collide, she experiences a conflict in how to behave. Online, Jan can be in 'Jansfunnyvids mode', which guides her interactions with her viewers. However, when she is in a different context, for example, 'at a party', and unexpectedly meets a viewer who recognises her, she feels a pressure to revert back to the familiar role of entertaining a viewer in order to fulfil the perceived expectations of the person she is with. This results in her feeling 'on show', emphasised by 'at them', which reflects the expectation she feels to be funny and confident for the other person. Jan relates the strength of this feeling by noting that being on show is something she has to do, suggesting she has no choice but to change her behaviour in order to have a successful social interaction. 'Seep' conjures an image of her online identity leaking slowly through the distinctions she has drawn between her online and offline selves. She draws distinctions within herself, for example referring to 'that identity', however, her personal experience is not one of separate identities, but something more akin to an expression of different versions of the same self.

The journey of creating content on YouTube

This master theme is concerned with the subjective, creative journey that the participants experienced when making content on YouTube. The subtheme 'purpose' highlights their reasons for beginning and continuing on this journey, such as using YouTube as a creative outlet and also an external memory. The subtheme 'success' encompasses the goals and milestones reached and strived towards through change and development on this journey and what it means to be successful on YouTube. Only the subtheme 'purpose' will be explored in this analysis because I believe it shows an interesting range of variability between the participants and provides insight into their individual experiences.

Lyn discusses why she makes videos:

I think these videos are just to remember the silly things an' like the old times being at er sixth form being at [sixth form name] with my friends (.) er an' its quite nice 'cause some people you lose an' er

connection with you lose er (.) certain friendships over when you grow up (.) erm (.) so you get to (.) watch them and be like (.) 'I remember them (.) they were a really nice person I miss them' (.) so its kinda nice in that way

(Lyn: pages: 19-20, lines 639–647)

When Lyn was in sixth form she was mainly making vlogs and explains that this was so that she could reminisce on 'the old times'. Lyn conveys that reminiscing is a positive experience, 'nice', and suggests that it allows her to look back at old friendships fondly. She describes the loss of connection with school friends that she experienced when growing up. She suggests that her vlogs allow her to regain some of the connection that was lost, perhaps through remembering the 'silly things' that might have otherwise been forgotten. In this sense, vlogs serve as a sort of diary.

you can make all the videos and then look back on them instead of like (.) writing a diary and reading 'today I did this' you can watch it

(Lyn: page: 8, lines 245-247)

By drawing a direct comparison between her videos and a diary, Lyn highlights their personal significance. She suggests that making YouTube videos is better than keeping a diary, because she can watch what she has done instead of reading about it. This suggests that videos are an alternative to writing a diary because they create a deeper sense of connection with her past experiences. Lyn's extracts demonstrate how making videos provides a personal purpose, however, she chooses to share these videos on YouTube, rather than keeping them private. This suggests that her videos serve another purpose than just being a visual diary. Sharing positive experiences with others is one aspect of capitalisation; this is the process through which people attempt to maximise the advantages of their positive experiences by enhancing or marking them in a variety of ways (Langston, 1994). This could be one aspect of Lyn's motivation to upload videos that act as an external memory.

Mary also demonstrates this process:

there's a weird satisfaction just knowing that you've like (.) caught something on camera an' then like shared it with people (.) can't really explain it

(Mary: page: 16, lines 521-523)

Similar to Lyn, Mary talks about only recording the positive aspects of her life. In the above extract, Mary conveys a sense of satisfaction in sharing these aspects of her life with others. The use of the word 'caught' relates how Mary feels accomplished by not only her ability to capture an event on camera, but also through the process of sharing it afterwards. Langston (1994) found that sharing positive every-day life events with others increases the effect of these positive experiences on the individual. This may account for Mary's feeling of 'weird satisfaction' when sharing her videos.

cause the reason why I started making the sex education videos was because

(...)

I (.) looked at my analytics for the first time (.) an' I was like 'oh my God they're all teenage girls (.) I must help them'

(Amy: page: 4, lines 127–128, 131–133)

Amy's motivation for creating sex education videos was so that she could share beneficial knowledge with her audience, whom she had identified as needing her help. Citizenship behaviour in a virtual community, such as YouTube, involves voluntarily helping others, such as through sharing knowledge (Yu & Chu, 2007 as cited in Xu & Shao, 2012). Amy exhibits this behaviour when she uses her position of being an entertainer to transition into an educator/mentor role. Although Amy will specifically create content for her audience, creating videos holds a variety of purposes for her, not just helping others.

my travel videos tend to like (do) the least well in terms of views (.) but I love those videos so much (.) because I love documenting my holiday (.) an' like (.) those those are the ones I tend to go back and watch myself (.) because I wanna remember those holidays (.) so those ones are mainly made for me I know they don't (.) do as well (.) but I still really love making them

(Amy: page: 24, lines 804–810)

There is a contrast between the content that she enjoys making and the content that her audience enjoy watching. Although in the previous extract Amy expressed that she endeavours to make content with her audience specifically in mind, in the case of her travel videos, it is not an issue for her that they are not as popular. The repetition of 'love' emphasises how her personal enjoyment is important and central to the content that she makes. There are multiple aspects to her enjoyment in this case: she enjoys the action of documenting the holiday, making the video and also being able to go back and watch it afterwards. This extract aptly demonstrates a salient theme throughout the majority of the participants' interviews of finding a balance between creating for their own enjoyment and also pleasing their audience.

I don't want my channel to be about that sort of thing (.) so I generally don't mention anything negative (.) that's happened (.) unless it can be made into something amusing

(...)

it's just (.) the general feel of my channel (.) I'd like it to be (.) a positive comedy (.) place (.) comedic place

(...)

I've been very clear about that (.) from the start

(Ben: page: 5, lines 145-148, 153–154, 159)

In this extract, Ben explains that he endeavours to create positive and funny content for his channel. By referring to his channel as a 'place', this creates a sense of it as a physical object in reality, even though it only exists in the place behind the screen, known as cyberspace (Barbatsis, Fegan & Hansen, 1999). By calling it a place, Ben relates how his channel has become important to him, which is supported by his determination to maintain its 'general feel' as 'positive' and 'comedic'. To achieve this he is selective about what content he will upload, only using 'negative' content if he can then create something self-deprecating from it. Ben uses extreme case

formulations: ‘very clear’, ‘from the start’, to emphasise his resolution to maintain the feel of his channel. In doing so, he suggests that creating light-hearted comedy is central to the purpose of his channel.

Like Amy, Ben also has multiple purposes for making videos on YouTube.

I can't see myself stop doing it because I just have this (.) I have all these ideas churning around in my head that are just coming out all the time (.) an' I just have to get them out on a camera it's like this new compulsion that never even knew existed (.) um (.) so yeah (.) that's that's why I try my hardest an' to make my videos as good as they could be (.) um (.) even though not many people watch them (.) because it's like a passion now (.) like a new (.) a new sort of hobby passion that I never knew could be a thing until last year

(Ben: page: 18, lines 574–583)

This extract clearly conveys Ben's personal enjoyment and enthusiasm for creating videos. The imagery of ‘ideas churning around’, ‘coming out’ constantly, uncontrollably, so that he is compelled to create them, relates a notion of excited activity. ‘Hobby passion’ exemplifies how making YouTube videos is more than just something he does to pass the time, but that he has real emotional investment in it; he tries to make his videos the best they can be because he is passionate and motivated. This relatively recent discovery, ‘last year’, is contrasted with the indistinct future, ‘I can't see myself stop doing it’, emphasising the importance of making videos to him personally because they have become a significant part of how he pictures the rest of his life. He affirms how they are personally important to him by saying he will continue making them and put a lot of effort in, ‘even though not many people watch them’. His videos hold an additional value to Ben's sense of self.

it's therapeutic as well in a way 'cause I get out my thoughts an' I get out my patriotism as well (.) um (.) an' I yeah (.) I've always had this obsession with separating myself from the New Zealanders (.) um 'cause I've been always been so patriotic so the New view Zealand was a huge way of doing that as well

(Ben: page: 18, lines 589–594)

Ben, who lives in New Zealand, is originally from the UK and points out how being British is a significant part of his identity, both on and offline. This has translated into him creating a series on YouTube dedicated to commenting on the differences between Britain and New Zealand in a funny way. Ben recognises how creating videos on YouTube has played a ‘huge’ role in the expression of his patriotism, which he regards as so important that it is an ‘obsession’. The internet provides an opportunity to choose which aspects of the self one wishes to express, Turkle (1995 as cited in Bargh et al., 2002) argues that this can allow a person to express the real and identity important aspects of the self that are not normally or easily expressed to others. This expression of salient characteristics of his identity is a central purpose as to why Ben makes videos on YouTube.

Positioning of others

This final master theme, positioning of others, encapsulates how the participants think of, respond to and manage their interactions with others. The subtheme 'community' refers to their accounts of positive and negative interactions with others from within the YouTube community, their relationships with others and what they consider to be appropriate behaviour within the community. The second subtheme 'being private in public' refers to the participants' endeavours to maintain certain levels of privacy whilst being in the public space of YouTube. The subtheme 'being private in public' shall be explored here as this is thought to give a better insight into how the participants reconcile online and offline realities.

I feel like I have this sort of (.) erm (.) illusion that people really think they know who I am because I talk about like intimate issues (.) but I don't actually divul- divulge a lot of personal information (.) erm (.) and (.) like I said in the identity video I was obviously going (.) 'I'm this and I'm that' an' (.) you know (.) 'this is how I identify' but then at the end of it I was saying this doesn't even like scratch the surface of (.) erm who I am 'n' that's what my vlogs are they're (.) literally just the tip of the iceberg (.) erm (.) but I like that people do feel close to me (.) an' I feel close to them as a result (.) erm an' that's really nice but then also keeping my safe distance

(Amy: page: 6, lines 184–195)

For context, the identity video that Amy refers to is one she made in which she read out a list of some of the labels that she identifies with. This extract contrasts a sense of closeness with actual distance. Amy draws a distinction between talking about 'intimate issues' and 'personal information' suggesting that one is more private than the other, though both on the surface seem to be equally potentially revealing. Ben-Ze'ev (2003) defines private as something that is intended for or confined to a particular person and if something is personal it is concerned with a certain person's affairs. What is private is not always personal and what is personal is not always private (Ben-Ze'ev, 2003). In this case, Amy refers to her 'personal information' as private, because she does not share it with others and 'intimate issues' as personal as she talks about things, like sex, that are very personal to each individual. Ben-Ze'ev (2003) argues that the distinction between personal and private continues in cyberspace, however, due to increased anonymity on the internet, what is usually private offline can be public online. Amy retains some anonymity in the sense that she does not disclose all identifying information about herself to her audience. Disclosing information about aspects of one's inner self can form bonds of empathy and understanding with others (Bargh et al., 2002). The 'illusion' that she is more open than she actually is is partly created by this surface appearance of personal disclosure (Bargh et al., 2002). The metaphor 'scratch the surface' conjures an image of the shallow representation of herself that Amy shows in her vlogs. Amy uses metaphors like this and 'tip of the iceberg' to demonstrate and emphasise that there is a deeper, more complex, true self that is not expressed in her videos, this allows her to maintain a 'safe distance' between her audience and the essence of her real self. In accordance with Lange (2007), Amy takes a 'privately public' approach to participation on YouTube. This means that although she makes widely accessible content and has a large amount of subscribers, she is still relatively private in regards to the personal and identifying information that she shares. One of the reasons she gives for this is to remain 'safe', and indeed, she talks about the

importance of restricting personal and identifying information, such as her location, on YouTube to achieve this.

Not revealing identifying information such as location is not the only way that participants maintained their privacy. Keeping information about one's love life private was a concern for many of the participants.

I don't I haven't made a conscious effort not to do it (.) but I don't talk about my love life in my vlogs 'cause I just don't want that to be a thing (.) I don't feel like I want to have that out there an' (.) people talk about it maybe or (.) not talk about it and then something goes wrong with it I don't want (.) to come back and see it all in videos again 'oh (what was the point that went wrong there) what did I do that for'

(Jan: page: 4, lines 123 – 130)

In this extract, Jan expresses that she is conscious of other people's reactions to, and subsequent actions with, the information that she puts online. She is concerned that if she talked about her love life she would become subject to gossip: 'people talk about it'. Although it is not a conscious effort on her part to withhold this information, it holds enough salience for her that she does not talk about it. Using videos as a way to record the past so that one can later reminisce was a salient theme throughout many of the interviews. Jan reveals a negative side to having records of the past. In this extract she discloses that being able to look back at a past relationship, or times when she discussed her love life, could be an unpleasant experience if the relationship went 'wrong'. When Jan describes putting her love life 'out there' she relays a sense that she will lose control over how people see that information, and she worries that it will be made into 'a thing'. By refraining from sharing her love life Jan does not have to face the consequences when things go wrong.

Lyn talks about the potential consequences of including one's love life in videos.

Lyn: you know if you have like a boyfriend (.) then you split up with them (.) an' they're on some of your videos ((pause)) yeah (.) you delete them
 (...)
 but that's the same for my friends as well like they've just (.) I I just used to film a lot around them (.) and they'd had a break up an' I'd have t'

Int: Have to get rid of that as well

Lyn: Delete them as well

(Lyn: page: 8, lines 240–243, 250–255)

In this extract Lyn reveals that there are rules that she follows when it comes to the information she shares. When she breaks up with a boyfriend she has to delete all the videos he is in. What is particularly interesting is that this rule applies not only to her, but to the friends that she features in her videos as well. This reveals that as a content creator, Lyn doesn't just have to consider her own personal information, but also that of the friends she includes in her videos. By addressing the interviewer with

'you know' and 'you delete them', Lyn implies that she considers these to be universal rules for how privacy should be handled on YouTube. This contrasts with Jan, who, by talking about watching the videos back, implies that she would not delete them.

Mary acknowledges that there will be personal preferences for the amount of information that different content creators will discuss.

I guess it's how much you feel comfortable with sharing like (.) like its like I say (.) there's (.) I'm pretty open about what I broadcast like (.) erm (.) if I'm doing a vlog it will basically be about everything that I'm doing besides (.) like personal life

(...)

I had someone ask and come up to me at a bar as well which was really random (.) and they knew all about my (.) that was back when I first started (.) and they knew all about my where I worked an' just random facts about me an' I was just like (.) 'bit weird but fair enough'

(Mary: pages: 5 and 11, lines 153-157, 338-345)

Mary describes herself as 'pretty open' on YouTube and generally seems unconcerned with her audience knowing identifying information about her: 'fair enough'. Her nonchalance contrasts with the other participants who described consciously taking control of their information. For example, Ben, like Amy, will not reveal where he lives, and has avoided meeting up with viewers when they requested to see him. Overall, participants presented a range of approaches to maintaining their privacy online.

This analysis explored the individual experiences of YouTube content creators and revealed an insight into their understandings of the interaction between their online and offline worlds.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore content creators' individual experiences of YouTube to gain a greater understanding of how they make sense of their identity, and begin an exploration of the relationship between their online and offline selves. This study endeavoured to gain insight into the 'vlogger' identity and explore the growing popularity of vlogging by understanding why vlogging is important to vloggers and what it means to them. The three master themes identified reveal that content creators' experiences of YouTube are multi-faceted and complex.

Participants' understandings of their identity have been significantly impacted by their involvement with YouTube. Ben began making videos with the explicit intention of changing aspects of himself, for example, to become 'more confident in real life'. Indeed, he found the journey of creating videos 'therapeutic', which concurs with literature that suggests that the Internet provides a space free from the expectations of real life, in which to express a true, internal self (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). This study found support for Yurchisin et al. (2005) who posited that identity is a combination of both online and offline conceptions of the self. Participants considered themselves to have a core identity from which they displayed certain aspects depending on their context.

In opposition to Viégas (2005), this study found that the participants were aware of issues surrounding privacy online. Amy warned of the dangers of stalkers and the issue of our 'digital age' complicating attempts of maintaining privacy online. Perhaps the reduced anonymity of vlogging and greater interactivity with viewers made the participant's more aware of their presence in a public space.

This study found that vlogs, like the online diary blog, could also be used as a tool of introspection (Siles, 2012). Mary found vlogs '[made her] understand [herself] a bit more', and she could track changes in herself: 'how much I've improved'. Participant's felt satisfaction not only in watching their content but also in sharing it with others, which suggests that vlogging enabled them to capitalise on their positive experiences (Langston, 1994). The personal significance of vlogs was different for each participant; for example, Lyn used YouTube as a 'creative' outlet, Amy tried to 'spur a debate' with her audience and Jan found YouTube social, often including friends in her videos.

Virtual interviews, such as the Skype interviews used in the current study, are becoming increasingly accepted as an effective data collection method (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Although they allow for contact with people who are far away, the researcher would like to point out that the occurrence of technical difficulties can severely affect the data collected.

Nardi et al. (2004) stated they could not provide a definitive understanding of blogging as it was too soon since its appearance on the web to fully understand its potential. At the point when their research was published blogging had been around for about 10 years. The current study is also working within a similar timeframe from the development of vlogs; therefore, in agreement with Nardi et al. it is not possible to conceptualise vlogs definitively at this point either.

As previously discussed, there is currently limited research into vlogs, therefore, the range of potential focal topics in this area is vast and there is plenty of room for greater insight into the actual experiences of people involved with YouTube, not just content creators but also viewers. One of the limitations of the current study was that it did not fully explore the participants' experiences of community. Expanding on the current literature around online communities, YouTube provides plenty of potential case studies, not only the global communities it has nurtured such as Nerdfighteria, but also the smaller communities where there is a close-knit relationship between a content creator and their audience

Future research could expand upon the findings of this study, by exploring the accounts of YouTube content creators whose success on YouTube has dramatically changed their lifestyle, such as starting businesses (Humphrey, 2013) or moving into other genres of entertainment (Burrell, 2013). A longitudinal study could explore the ways in which content creators experiences differ before and after they become a YouTube partner and can make a liveable wage from their content.

Overall, participants related various ways they made sense of and explored the intertwining relationships of their online and offline realities. Vlogs have progressed beyond blogs, in that they allow for greater interactivity with viewers and are a highly creative medium. This study has highlighted some areas that are important to vloggers, namely, freedom to express themselves as a person and a content creator, control of distance and interaction with their audience and using vlogs as a tool to reminisce but also share those memories with others.

Reflexive Analysis

Qualitative researchers acknowledge that it is not possible to be objective as research is always conducted from a subjective standpoint and the very act of studying a phenomenon will affect and change it (Parker, 1994). The researcher affects the research both as a theorist (epistemological reflexivity) and as a person (personal reflexivity) (Willig, 2008). Reflexive analysis allows the researcher to acknowledge how their experiences, values, beliefs and context have influenced the research process (Etherington, 2004). Therefore, reflexivity is increasingly becoming seen as essential to qualitative research (Crowley, 2010). In the current study the researcher kept a diary to record their reflexivity, extracts from this can be found in appendix 18.

Personal reflexivity is about acknowledging how my personal values and interests as an individual and a researcher have influenced the research process (Tindall, 1994). My subject position in relation to this study is that I have been an avid viewer of content on YouTube for over 7 years. I am an active member of the YouTube community: I comment on, like and favourite videos; I support content creators by subscribing, purchasing their music and merchandise and following them on other social media sites; and I identify as a Nerdfighter, a member of the global community Nerdfighteria, that started on YouTube. Therefore, this research topic was of great personal interest and significance to me.

My familiarity with the research topic and insider status as being part of the YouTube community might have impacted my investigation of it as I already had ideas about what vlogging was, what YouTubers did on YouTube and the potential reasons why they did it before I began the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This will have influenced the questions that I decided to ask. For example, my decision to include a question about Google+ arose after the first interview when Mary expressed being frustrated by its introduction to the site, something that I felt at the time as well. Therefore, by including it in the remaining interviews I may have unintentionally created demand characteristics (Parker, 1994) whereby the participants felt that they should also display similar feelings of annoyance towards Google+, although one participant did not hold that opinion.

In my experience, the YouTube community, although global, is something that not many people know about or understand. When I have talked to people about vlogging and YouTube gatherings they have often been confused and thought that it was strange. The lack of research into the YouTube community and vlogging supports my belief that it is something that has yet to become part of mainstream knowledge and understanding about the Internet. This negative or dismissive attitude to YouTube may have been something that the participants have experienced as well. In light of the reactions I have received when talking about YouTube, I was able to identify that some of the participants were sceptical of my actual understanding of what YouTube was. Lyn for example seemed surprised when I recognised the names of YouTubers that she mentioned and when I talked about other YouTubers that she did not know. She also spoke about things like vlogging and Vidcon, a large YouTube community gathering in America, in a way that suggested that she did not think I would know anything about them. In the past I have tried to start vlogging myself, but I never ended up using any of the footage I had or uploading it. I told participants about this and I think it may have reassured them that even though I

never made the videos, my attempt at vlogging demonstrated that I had an understanding of YouTube, which is obviously something that is important to them.

I originally tried to create a focus specifically on vlogging, however, I have found out from conducting this research, just how subjective the term 'vlog' is. Although all the interviewee's definitions of vlogs had similar core principles, everyone had a different definition of what vlogging was, all of which were different to mine. I believe that this may have impacted the data because during the interviews when questions were specifically aimed at vlogging participants would often incorporate their other kinds of videos into their answers. I think this may have been because for some of them they had not made what they would consider proper vlogs in a while and so were drawing on more recent experiences. Therefore this means that the analysis has a much broader focus than just vlogging.

Epistemological reflexivity encourages a reflection on the assumptions about knowledge and the world that were made during the research process and their impact on the design and findings of the study (Willig, 2008). The current study was carried out from a phenomenological epistemological position. This is a philosophical approach to the study of understanding human experience (Smith et al., 2009). This is done through first-hand accounts of individual's experience of phenomena (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2009).

The design of the study focused on the individual, lived experiences of the participants, therefore, the findings will not be generalisable beyond the participant sample (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The analysis itself is a product of my, the researcher's, sense making of the participant's sense making of their experiences of the world. Therefore, the analysis does not 'get at' a single, true reality, and can only be seen as interpretation of interpretation (Smith, et al., 2009).

The participants may have also influenced the data. Each participant had different things that they wanted to express about their personal experiences on YouTube and I think they will have all tried to present themselves in a favourable light. This might have been because each of the participants is familiar with talking about themselves to others in their videos, but this allows them full control over how they present themselves. I think some of the participants may have felt a little strange being interviewed and then not being able to control how I analysed the data. In consideration of this, I made sure that they understood the research aims, that they would be anonymous and that each received the transcript of their interview where I encouraged them to omit anything they were uncomfortable with me including. Participant's also positioned themselves in contrasting ways. Many participants positioned themselves as creating content independent of others' opinions, but also entertainers, who created content for and in response to their audience.

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