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On the Road: Emergent Spatiality in #Vanlife

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'Vanlife' is a term utilised on social media sites, including YouTube, to denote images and videos that represent a lifestyle centred around long-distance travel using converted vans. The Vanlife phenomenon demonstrates the potential for networked culture and storytelling to combine to create emergent spaces, fostered not only by individual digital media objects but also the connected digital networks they occupy. In this article I ask how digital media practices are used by Vanlife travellers in order to construct such emergent spaces, and what the characteristics of these spaces might be. This investigation has a particular focus on the capacity for the creative practices used to tell visual stories online to combine representations of 'real world' experiences and environments, with the individual and communal desires, rhetoric and, at times, fictions, of the burgeoning Vanlife alternative lifestyle. Taking a netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2002), and guided by Henri Lefebvre's trialectic model of space (1974), I conduct analysis of a set of Vanlife YouTube videos and explore the construction of different layers of spatiality as well as the productive tensions that arise between these. As Vanlifers undertake and document their freewheeling travels, their production of spaces serves to establish the unending road trip as a viable alternative lifestyle. Vanlife videos also work to formulate new cultural and aesthetic dimensions for the areas their creators explore, destabilising and redefining the meanings of the spaces, experiences and communities its travellers encounter. Equally, the idealised spaces of Vanlife are themselves disrupted by jarring intrusions from the external world and its everyday problems, a tension that further illustrates the continually negotiable nature of spatial meanings and highlights the role digital media might play in accentuating and accelerating this fluidity.

Keywords*:* Vanlife; space; tourism; Henri Lefebvre; YouTube; narrative

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Introduction

The Vanlife movement, an alternative lifestyle in which travellers undertake long-term independent travel by inhabiting modified vans, represents a nascent phenomenon within the cultures of tourism and nomadism. The Vanlife movement's participants typically dissociate themselves from traditional careers and homes in order to adopt a nomadic style of living. Enabled by mobile media technologies and global communications networks, Vanlifers are not only able to embark on such travels with relative freedom and ease, but also to capture, assemble and disseminate digital media content (including images, videos and ongoing vlogs) related to their journeys. As these media objects are shared through online social media platforms, they do far more than simply tell the story of Vanlifers' travels: such images and videos work together to produce space. I draw on Henri Lefebvre's (1974) spatial triad in order to unpack their generative nature. The spatiality that emerges across this movement's videos is one defined by liberation and freedom, vivid visual imagery of landscapes, and the allure of a 'simpler' life. It is also, however, a space marked by instability and incursion by unwelcome narrative and aesthetic influences. Vanlife's idealised form of spatiality is frequently disrupted by the everyday reality of situations that do not align neatly with the movement's ambition and rhetoric, including border crossings, the practical requirements of long-term travel, and the unavoidably central role played by mobile technologies. These inherent

tensions, which underscore the particular productions of space in Vanlife media, not only gesture toward the instability and continual reconstitution of all spaces, but also to an amplification of this fluidity in spatial meaning brought about by an era of global, connected digital and social media.

The Vanlife phenomenon has clear origins in the Beat Generation and traveller cultures of the 1950s and 1960s (Dooley, 2019, p. 68), as well as in the touristic subculture of RVing (long-term travel using recreational vehicles or camper vans) (Hardy et al., 2012). The birth of the Vanlife hashtag itself (and, by extension, the burgeoning movement) is commonly attributed to a photographic book published by Foster Huntington (Dorn, 2015, pp. 7–8). After moving into a renovated 1987 Volkswagen Syncro van, Huntington took to the road, leaving both his career and apartment behind in New York City, and through his photographs of a life lived largely parked up along the picturesque Californian coast he became an early star on the fledgling Instagram platform. The amount of Vanlife content found on social media has since grown at a remarkable pace. In 2018, Google identified 1,200 YouTube channels as having descriptions invoking 'van life', 'van living', and other similar terms (Pettie, 2018), and Google Trends data (Google Trends, 2021) shows that search interest on YouTube for the term 'vanlife' has approximately tripled between 2018 and 2021. As of April 2021, over 9.7 million posts on the Instagram platform were associated with the '#vanlife' hashtag, while other secondary hashtags including #homeiswhereyouparkit, #vanlifenation, #vangirls, #diaryofavanman also proliferate.

An article in The New Yorker magazine (Monroe, 2017) identifies Vanlifers as driven to pursue "a culture of hippie-inflected outdoorsiness, and a life free from the tyranny of a nine-to-five office job". This combination of liberation, self-fulfilment, and empowerment is fundamental to the appeal of Vanlife as a lifestyle. The emergent identity of 'digital nomads' – young professionals who "strive for a more holistic approach to life where work and leisure are not considered dichotomous through spatial and temporal separation" (Reichenberger, 2018, p. 364) – also clearly underpins this movement. Ulrike Gretzl and Anne Hardy (2019) connect Vanlifers to a wider development within the cultures of tourism and travel, that of neotribes: communities which lack "the rigidity of the forms of organisation with which we are familiar" and instead invoke "a certain ambience, a state of mind … preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form" (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 98). Vanlifers are understood as an online tribe engaged in a lifestyle defined by hyper-mobility and minimalism, supported by the practical and economic affordances of digital nomadism, and motivated to document their experiences using a common visual grammar (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019, p. 8). Vanlife emerges as a movement, mentality and aesthetic united around a motivation to disregard conventional expectations of settled life in favour of the open road.

Vanlife's Dialogue with Cultures of Tourism

Seeking withdrawal from 'everyday life' is one way in which the Vanlife community establishes its continuity with broader practices of tourism. For a number of scholars, tourism is considered a set of experiences that are distinct from the routines of work and conventional domesticity (MacCannell, 1999; Urry, 2002; Wang, 2000). Others have identified tourism as an explicitly escapist activity that relieves individuals of the monotonous, responsibility-laden experience of daily life (Cohen and Taylor, 1992; Krippendorf, 1987), or more transactionally as a kind of periodic reward for having tolerated conventional life on an ongoing basis (Graburn, 1983). Stephen Wearing et al. observe that "for many people, work is an annoying irrelevance; their dream is usually to be free of its constraints" and travel presents a means for experiencing such freedom (2010, pp. 8–9). While this contrast between the everyday experience of regular life and the extraordinary nature of tourism has significantly shaped tourism studies, there have been efforts to reconsider this dichotomy (Uriely, 2005). One reason for reassessing tourism's nature arises from its disingenuous separation of the experiences of home and travel into "different ontological worlds, the worlds of the mundane and the exotic" (Larsen, 2008, p. 22). Pau Obrador Pons (2003) notes that everyday routines and home comforts are an important part of travel

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experiences for many tourists. The hybridity between these two worlds is one that Vanlifers take to an extreme by relocating the practices and objects of home into their vehicles.

The Vanlife movement, through both its nomadism and minimalism, communicates a heady combination of wanderlust and a yearning for a time where parts of the world remained under-explored and more genuine. That tourists are commonly seeking so-called authentic spaces and experiences is another well-established concept in tourism studies. Dean MacCannell (1999) makes an influential claim by casting tourists as desiring the simpler experiences of life, more closely connected to land, traditional values and communities, and most often perceived to be accessible in non-Western countries and cultures. This theoretical position echoes the popular perception of tourism as "immersion in picturesque, distinct, [and] colourful cultures" (Duncan and Gregory, 1999, p. 8), and as a quest for 'real' experiences in reaction to the purportedly brash, atomised and alienating experience of everyday life in Western society (Mowforth and Munt, 2003, p. 55; Polson, 2018, p. 162; Wearing et al., 2010, p. 27). Popular cultural conventions surrounding travel further suggest to contemporary tourists that locating the authentic requires "searching for hardship" (Iyer, 2000, para. 3), "embracing the uncertainty and chaos of the unplanned" and otherwise accepting discomfort and struggle as part of the pursuit of adventure (Polson, 2018, p. 163). As in other fields of study and practice, the measure of such authenticity is relative and unfixed, and Ning Wang draws upon this mutability in order to distinguish between 'objective' touristic authenticity (wherein toured objects communicate a socially constructed authenticity through signs and symbols) and 'existential' authenticity (a subjective interpretation that rests on the traveller's relationships with self and others) (Wang, 2000, pp. 48–49). The balance between these modes of authenticity appears equally important to Vanlifers as it is to other tourists, as they work to construct space and meaning in their travels.

Another motivation shared between cultures of tourism and the phenomenon of Vanlife is the search for discovery (or construction) of the self. Travel, alongside its escapist possibilities, also offers individuals "a means of self-development, a way to broaden the mind … and return in some way enriched" (Wearing, 2002, p. 244). In their search for the 'real', tourists often, in fact, "seek to capture the extraordinary within themselves" (Dinhopl and Gretzel, 2016, p. 126). By gaining understandings about new cultures and places, travellers often more importantly gain understandings about themselves or gather the cultural and social capital and resources required to deliberately narrativise their travels to this end (Desforges, 2000; Wang, 1999). Whether this is read as a process of truly novel self-discovery, or the more deliberately guided activity of self-construction, the aim is common: augmentation of personal identity (Wearing et al., 2010, p. 29). As with the backpackers who came before them (Wearing et al., 2010, p. 102), Vanlifers are the latest within the cultures of travel and tourism to connect self-enhancement to time and effort spent away from everyday life in search of forms of authentic experience.

Narrating Space

The use of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook by Vanlifers to disseminate videos and images that capture their travels is part of a wider adoption of online and social media by tourists sharing travel stories (Leung et al., 2013). Travel is not only about the direct relationship tourists have with space, but also the mediated relationship tourists (and the wider public) have with such spaces (Young, 2009). Whether in the form of diaries, oral storytelling, photographs or emails, "recounting stories and narratives of travel … is central to the tourism experience" (Wearing et al., 2010, p. 47). Visuality, in particular, has taken a central role in the mediation of travel experiences and touristic spaces. Photography has, over the twentieth century, taken on the role of the key language of environment, and the "travel photographer and the tourist seem to engage in a mutually reinforcing social process of constructing and altering images of places and experiences" (Crawshaw and Urry, 1997, p. 184). Arising from these visual media and the acts of representation they afford is a "tourist gaze": a socially patterned way of interpreting and understanding travel and the tourists who undertake it (Wearing et al., 2010, p. 115). This is a gaze that

consequently guides its audiences' future travel endeavours, both through its nature as a learned mode of seeing and understanding, and through the deliberate preparation that many modern travellers make for journeys by consuming the accounts of others (Urry and Larsen, 2011, p. 2).

Vanlifers continue a touristic tradition of using representational media to capture distant travels and to construct narrative and interpretation of space for consumption by others. Space and narrative are, of course, familiar bedfellows. Michel de Certeau remarks that "every story is a travel story" and describes storytelling as being fundamentally "a spatial practice" (1984, p. 115). In de Certeau's approach, narrative movement transforms place into space: places begin as abstract and stable and have the potential to host narrative; storytelling destabilises this default state and instead activates space (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117). Our production of narrative, according to Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins, can be linked again to the quest for authenticity that underlies the traveller's "search for believable, memorable, and primitive spaces" (1994, para. 21). Jurij Lotman (1977) also embeds spatiality and movement in his account of narratology. Lotman suggests that the topographical concept of the boundary underlies narrative texts, structuring storyworlds into differentiated, plotless zones with their own respective rules. Narrative movement occurs when narrators and protagonists undertake "the crossing of that forbidden border which the plotless structure establishes" (1977, p. 238).

Henri Lefebvre (1974) further theorises the interrelationship of body, environment and narrative, following the well-known argument that embodiment and space are mutually constituted. Bodies, in this account, do not merely cross borders to enter and encounter passive containers of subjects, objects and meaning. They also undertake the very work that produces space and its meaning, and in doing so draw on an individual's relationships, culture, society and connections to power. Lefebvre addresses the dynamic, social production of space through a three-part dialectic. Representations of space (or 'conceived space') are society's dominant spaces, "tied to the relations of production and to the 'order' which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes" (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 33). Spatial practices (or 'perceived space') produce and guide people through everyday life, and provide the elements of its cohesive organisation by embracing "production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 33). Representational space (or 'lived space') is a mode of space "directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 39).

Addressing Vanlife's Space

In this article I seek to further understand the fluid and malleable nature of the meanings of touristic spaces by focusing on the context of Vanlife, and by illuminating the distinct role that digital and social media play in destabilising and restabilising spatial meaning. To that end, this study is guided by two research questions:

- How are the environments and communities of toured spaces, and the desires and rhetoric of the Vanlife lifestyle, represented in the movement's digital media objects?
- What are the characteristics of the emergent spaces that are constructed by Vanlife media creators?

I follow the example of Gretzel and Hardy (2019) in their study of the materiality of Vanlife artefacts on Instagram through the adoption of a netnography approach to this research (Kozinets, 2002). Such an approach takes advantage of the affordances of social media platforms to provide access to archival data (Gretzel, 2017, p. 119), enables a "rich cultural understanding of online phenomena" (Gretzel and Hardy, 2019, p. 3) and contains an "innate flexibility" that empowers the researcher to focus on data points that particularly advance or challenge assumptions (Kozinets, 2002, p. 63). The mediated Vanlife phenomenon inhabits social media sites including Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Early in Vanlife's digital growth, Instagram's tendency toward facilitating a kind of lifestyle envy in its audience

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(Berryman and Kavka, 2018, p. 85) and to reward users who "tend to be conventionally good-looking, [and] to work in 'cool' industries" (Marwick, 2015, p. 139) suited the Vanlife movement's stereotypically attractive stars as they worked as digital nomads.

Over time, however, YouTube has instead become the locus of this phenomenon, with hundreds of channels, if not thousands, dedicated to capturing the adventures of Vanlifers. This shift is driven by a number of factors: YouTube's emergence as a key repository for mediated travel experiences, the centrality of YouTube to the confessional cultures of new media (Beer, 2013, pp. 52–53), and the way in which YouTube has normalised entrepreneurialisation of the self through vlogging (Arthurs et al., 2018, p. 8). YouTube supports the economic viability of the digital nomad lifestyle for those able to achieve "micro-celebrity" (Senft, 2013) status within the Vanlife community, as well as sustaining the intimate and confessional aesthetic and narrative conventions of the movement's mediation. For these reasons, I have focused my analysis on Vanlife media only as it appears on the YouTube platform, although the conclusions I draw about the nature of this phenomenon are also likely applicable to the Vanlife community's dissemination of content on other social media platforms that privilege visuality.

Methodology

I first conducted content analysis, which allows for "making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying the characteristics of the messages" (Holsti, 1969, p. 14) of a dataset comprising 30 Vanlife videos collected and viewed in June 2020. In order to identify channels and creators central to the YouTube Vanlife community, I undertook a search for the term 'vanlife', applied the view count filter and analysed the first fifty results in order to identify six popular channels. In this initial step, two types of YouTube channels were excluded from further data gathering. First were those that act as aggregators, either sharing highlights from various other Vanlife YouTube channels producing meta-cultural content and commentary. Second were commercial media outlets whose videos were news reports addressing the Vanlife movement. The following six channels were selected: *Eamon & Bec, Kombi Life, Max & Lee, Jim and Sab5, The Matneys and Where's My Office Now?* From each of these channels, five videos among those with the highest view counts were selected for analysis. Again, exclusions were made for non relevant material that did not represent the core Vanlife experience, including administrative updates, compilations of out-takes, and videos created to address audience comments or questions.

Prior to data collection , I immersed myself in the YouTube Vanlife community over a period of three months as an observer. During this time, I engaged with a wide range of channels and videos located through search terms (such as 'vanlife', 'vanlifers' and 'digital nomad + van'), as well as by following the algorithmic cues presented in the platform's recommendations for further viewing. I drew on this digital ethnographic experience in order to establish six categories which were used to code the selected videos. The categories were organised around the characteristics of Vanlife videos as they related to contemporary tourism and the narrative construction of space: 'toured spaces' (environments visited by users are a central focus), 'toured people' (communities encountered by the channels' protagonists are a central focus), 'self-discovery' (explicit connections are made by users between their travels and the construction of self), 'digital nomad lifestyle' (videos highlight the practicalities of nomadic, working life), 'the van' (centering on the renovation, and experience of living within the vans), and 'disruption' (where users' travels or creative productions are hindered by external interruptions). I followed this content analysis with close textual analysis of a number of exemplary videos in each coding category, across the channels, and these form the focus of this article's analysis. This qualitative analysis allowed for a detailed understanding of how the narrative and aesthetic elements of Vanlife's YouTube videos combine in the production of a particular spatiality. The content analysis indicates the widespread nature of the Vanlife

5 During the initial data collection period, this YouTube channel was titled 'Jim and Sab' but has since renamed to 'Jim H'. I continue to refer to the channel, in the body of this article, as 'Jim and Sab' to reflect the channel's identity at the time of the creation of its Vanlife-focused content.

genre's vernacular conventions, practices, and spatial constructions, and the qualitative case studies included in this article are necessarily representative of these wider trends. It is important to note that this methodology only provides one perspective of the Vanlife lifestyle, and one that focuses upon it as mediated through YouTube. Vanlife is also a lived experience for a great number of people, and to provider a fuller account of the phenomenon, future research should address these lived perspectives through additional ethnographic research.

Producing Vanlife's Space

In the following section I work through each of the three elements of Lefebvre's spatial triad with reference to close textual analysis of a number of Vanlife YouTube videos. By analysing only one key expression of each aspect of this spatial triad, my intention is not to limit possible interpretations of the spatiality produced by Vanlifers, but to identify dominant tendencies that have emerged in my content analysis. Space must be understood as a "bounded but open and contested site", and "a complex product of competing discourses" (Wilken and Goggin, 2016, p. 56) subject to continual reconstitution as a result of its relational characteristics (Wilken and Goggin, 2016, p. 57). In the context of the Vanlife phenomenon's mediation through networked visual and social media, this means acknowledging that the emergent spatiality is unstable and mutable. As the genre continues to grow and evolve, so too will the textual and spatial meanings of Vanlife YouTube videos.

Exotic Lived Spaces

As Vanlifers cross borders between nations, as well as those figurative borders between a more conventional life and that of long-term travel, they construct for their audiences a type of representational space. Lefebvre termed this category of his spatial triad 'lived space' because it "embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations" (1974, p. 42) and, charged with feeling and experience, is "hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'" (1974, p. 39). This triadic layer is defined by its partiality, deliberately constructed and "directly lived through its associated images and symbols" (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 39). Evident across the Vanlife video dataset is the construction, as a lived space, of the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of several geographical points throughout North and Central America. A route running down the United States' west coast into Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and as far as Costa Rica is commonly plied by Vanlife's YouTubers. The representational space that emerges through this circuit is dominated by vibrant and attractive landscapes, plentiful evidence of a so-called simple life lived in close alliance with nature, and an attenuation of the visibility of local people, lives and concerns.

Figure 1. Emily and Corey's vehicle speeds across the scenic Arizonan desert (Where's My Office Now? 2017). All Rights Reserved: Where's My Office Now?

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Natural environments take on an intoxicating, dreamlike and exotic quality across Vanlife YouTube videos. In a video filmed in the desert area of Sedona, Arizona, Vanlifers Emily and Corey exemplify a number of the visual tropes that repeat across the genre's videos (Where's My Office Now?, 2017). Shots of their Volkswagen van sitting alone in the centre of vast desert landscapes filled with scrub and cacti are mixed with images of leisure and self-care, including yoga practised in the middle of a scenic canyon as the sun rises, swimming under the high sun in idyllic waterholes, and stargazing under a crystal-clear night sky. Multiple aerial drone shots taken in different parts of Sedona capture the Volkswagen tearing across dusty roads with no evidence of residents, other vehicles or manmade structures. In another video (Jim H, 2018), the pattern continues during the Mexican leg of a Vanlife adventure undertaken by travellers Jim and Sabrina. Azure seas, crisp white-sand beaches, stunning sunrises and sunsets, and ramshackle and seemingly uninhabited settlements punctuate these Vanlifers' conversations to camera throughout the video. The typical Vanlife video colour palette is also typified in this video. Heavily saturated blues, oranges and yellows, and the deep ochre of the 'golden hour' of frequent dusk-time videography, ensure a rich and inviting lustre which defines the visual imagery of these texts.

Figure 2. An aerial drone shot captures Jim and Sabrina sitting atop their van on a Mexican beachfront (Jim H, 2018). All Rights Reserved: Jim H.

The toured places of a typical Vanlife journey are reduced to simplistic, vivid imagery that is mimetically repeated across videos and channels. What disappears in these visual accounts are the political, social and economic realities and complexities of each of the countries visited. As one would expect, Vanlifers and their
ambitions and experiences feature centrally in the videos uploaded to these channels, a narrative focus further entrenched by the common generic convention of confessional conversations to camera. In the video *WANDXR BAJA* (Jim H, 2018) for example, individuals other than Jim and Sabrina appear only twice in the footage, and only in service of the protagonists' leisure aims. The first is the skipper of a boat that spirits the travellers across an unspoiled lagoon, and the second is a child who playfully joins the couple to kick a football around on the beach as the sun sets. Sealed roads, established settlements and further indications of the presence of others often pass by in the camera's peripheral vision. As such, the apparent seclusion travellers experience across Vanlife media appears to owe as much to the creative process of filming and editing videos as it does to the possibility of these creators being far 'off the beaten track'. This tendency in the genre means the erasure of visions of authentic, everyday ways of living in the communities these Vanlife travellers pass through. A wide-scale smoothing down and filtering – both aesthetically and narratively – occurs in these creative decisions.

The aesthetic tendencies of Vanlife videos closely reflect the movement's overarching ambition to eschew routinised urban life and embrace adventure and distant natural beauty. By returning to Wang's theories of different modes of authenticity within cultures of tourism, we can understand the production of this exoticised lived space as part of a tradition of travellers' construction of expectations, symbols and images that signify and affirm the characteristics of authenticity sought in toured places and objects (Wang, 2000, p. 49). As with earlier practices of travel photography, social media images and videos are a "technology of world making" (Urry and Larsen, 2011, p. 167) that produce contemporary versions of Edward Said's "imaginative geographies" (1995, pp. 49–73) by creating (rather than simply representing) the visual, cultural, and social characteristics of places. As scholars such as Tom Selwyn have observed, the quest for experiencing or constructing the exotic that features centrally in the tourist imagination rests largely on "ideas, images, myths and fantasies about the Other" (Selwyn, 1996, p. 10). The minimisation of local residents and their ways of living in the Vanlife videos recalls a tendency in pre-internet travel media to reflect and reinforce contemporaneous currents of power and privilege (Duncan and Gregory, 1999, p. 2), as well as growing evidence that platforms such as YouTube structurally work to privilege Western, White perspectives (Oh and Oh, 2017, p. 699).

Domestic and Routinised Perceived Spaces

Spatial practices (or perceived spaces), meanwhile, reproduce contemporary social relations and relate to the ways we think about how our everyday lives are structured. They provide, in Lefebvre's words, "continuity and some degree of cohesion" (1974, p. 33) between the order of the organisation of life around us and our own less predictable behaviours. Perceived space provides us with a point of overlay with "society's space [and] it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction" (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 38). The carefully renovated interiors of Vanlifers' vehicles are a key example of perceived space as captured in these videos. Viewers are inducted, through repeated views of this particular space across videos and channels, into an aesthetic and functional understanding of the internal space of the vans as hosts and catalysts for aspects of everyday life. Sleeping, cooking, personal hygiene, freelance work, intimacy, entertainment, and more are all sustained in these refitted vehicles. In this way a handover occurs between society's cohesion and the radical departure of Vanlifers' ambitions: everyday domesticity is enabled, and celebrated, but in its relocation away from bricks-and-mortar to four-wheeled homes a crucial boundary is also established between the digital nomadic lifestyle and society's conventions.

Figure 3. A view of the interior of Max and Lee's van, showing the compressed layout of their kitchen, laundry and living spaces (Max & Lee, 2018). All Rights Reserved: Max & Lee.

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A video in which one Vanlife couple reflects upon a first year of life on the road (Max and Lee, 2018) illustrates the domestic nature of the renovations undertaken for their van. Seated on a small couch, the couple – Max and Lee – talk their viewers through their routines on the road. The video footage compiled shows a kitchenette in regular use (with sink, gas-powered stove, and various inventive storage solutions), the washing and hanging of laundry throughout the van, both leisure and work activities taking place, socialisation with other travellers (who sit around the small van by using various surfaces and pieces of furniture), and the van's couch being converted into a bed. In a video from another Vanlife couple (The Matneys, 2019), audiences are introduced to the multiple domestic functions of the van's constrained environs. A small area between the driving cabin and a bed mounted in the back of the van is the only space in which the couple can stand up unimpeded. Here they chop fruit for breakfast smoothies, grind coffee, make their day's plans, engage in displays of physical affection, change their clothing, host friends, and search through hidden drawers for various belongings. Also evident is the centrality of this home environment and its domestic rituals to these users' ongoing travels, exhibited in a recurring formal structure seen across my dataset. Both the case study videos I have discussed display this structure: the first section typically captures the morning rituals and routines, which are transplanted from bricks-and-mortar life (showering, dressing, consuming breakfast, and so on). The middle section of these videos typically involves taking advantage of the van's mobility to visit one of the picturesque scenes that have drawn the travellers to a particular locale. The final act of these videos revolves again around conventional domestic rituality (cleaning, preparing dinner, eating, intimacy, sleep, and so on). While these travellers are driven by the pursuit of extraordinary natural scenes, the reproduction of home life anchors everyday experience within these Vanlife videos.

Figure 4. Cooking, sleeping, storage and leisure arrangements are visible in the van driven by travellers Aubry and Nick (The Matneys, 2019). All Rights Reserved: The Matneys.

The cramped and carefully laid out four walls of these renovated vans ensure that a form of perceived space lives on in their road-going lifestyle: continuity with society's various expectations of the functions of a home. Mobile social media conventions encourage producers to readily expose the 'backstage' of their otherwise polished productions of identity and textuality (Abidin, 2015) and to draw entertainment and interconnectedness out of the banal (Crawford, 2016, pp. 129–132). This compulsion is underscored by Vanlifers' representations of their mobile homes with the prosaic (but inescapable) perceived space of domesticity a central focus. There is also a particular architectural density to these van spaces as a result of their necessarily compact, efficient and functional design. Vanlifers' living quarters are deeply

layered with objects, tools, images, people, nooks and crannies. Using Roz Kaveney's (2005) concept of the 'thick text', the van interiors can be better understood as heavily layered with allusion and experience. The "precondition of reading" a thick text is that the reader accepts "that all texts are not only a product of the creative process but contain all the stages of that process within them like scars or vestigial organs" (Kaveney, 2005, p. 5). The scars visible to viewers of Vanlife videos are the interplay between convention and wanderlust, spatial incisions and sutures made to detach and reattach the everyday routines of domestic life from one mode of living to another. To return to Lotman's approach, we might read the inhabitation of such spaces as a constant process of crossing the figurative topological boundary between one lifestyle and another. The spatial practices underpinning this tension between home and away are also rendered more visible by the multiplicity demanded by compactness. So many experiences that might normally occur across different discrete parts of a house transpiring within one confined structure means the thick text's narrative scars pile up quickly.

Disruptive Conceived Spaces

Finally, representations of space (which Lefebvre also termed 'conceived space') describe the space that is "informed by effective knowledge and ideology" (1974, p. 42). In other words, it is space conceived for us by planners and technocrats, and it reflects how capital and its associated power prescribes our engagement with environments. Conceived space takes advantage of the fact that "space is not merely a static background for narrative events, it is also actively involved in those events" (Ryan et al., 2016, p. 9). Spaces external to those constructed by Vanlifers frequently impose themselves upon and conflict with the planned, edited and highly mediated accounts provided by the travellers. Jarring elements of the real-world communities and concerns that exist outside the vans' four walls are frequently encountered by our nomadic travellers, or otherwise inadvertently glimpsed by their audience. For example, in one section of a video (Eamon & Bec, 2018a), travellers Eamon and Bec, wrapped up in polar fleece and puffer jackets as the temperature drops into negative figures, are slowly driving down a street in Omaha, Nebraska. The couple are attempting to locate a Walmart store, where they hope to make use of its bathroom facilities before spending the night parked up in the store's parking lot. The appearance of big box chain stores such as Walmart are recurrent images in the genre. These encounters herald the intrusion of capital and the daily grind it represents into the Vanlife space, acting as a counterpoint to the principles of nomadism key to stories and spaces of the phenomenon. Such urban streets, stores and parking lots also effectively undermine the imagery of exoticised natural beauty privileged within the genre's videos.

Figure 5. A Walmart store in Omaha, Nebraska, sought out by Eamon and Bec for bathroom facilities and possibly safe overnight parking (Eamon & Bec, 2018a). All Rights Reserved: Eamon & Bec.

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Ongoing tensions between Vanlifers' narrative intentions and the external world reflect a Lotmanian boundary-crossing by the outside world into the nascent spatialities constructed around the Vanlife vehicles. Vanlifers, as Eamon and Bec detail in another video which directly addresses the challenges posed by nomadic travel (2018b), at times feel as if they are constantly seeking outposts of globalised retail empires during their travels, needing to ensure adequate provisions of potable water, fuel, food and other items. Put simply, the appearance of a life lived 'off the grid' cultivated elsewhere in the movement's videos is contradicted by practical necessities. Engagements with the infrastructures of big capital do not escape the camera's gaze, nor the confessional, highly intimate conventions of vlogging that dictate that moments of vulnerability be rendered accessible for audiences (Beer, 2013, p. 52; Raun, 2012, p. 168). Inasmuch as the Vanlife movement is predicated on a rejection of particular modes of material consumption, the realities of extended, independent travel mean its participants cannot escape the power and logic of capital.

Figure 6. An official at the Mexico-United States border instructs a group of Vanlifers to leave their van, in order for it to be searched (Kombi Life, 2016). All Rights Reserved: Kombi Life.

Another jarring intrusion of the outside world upon Vanlife spaces is felt through the appearance of agents of state power. In one video, a group of three Vanlifers travelling together approach the border to the United States, from the Mexican side (Kombi Life, 2016). What they encounter is a sharp riposte to the carefree space of nomadic travel they have experienced and captured so far. Instead, a queue of commercial freight trucks many kilometres long signals that they are approaching a narrative, and spatial, bottleneck. As the group draw closer to the border crossing, police, customs and border officials appear in the footage and, on multiple occasions, the van is subjected to searches, or its inhabitants questioned. We are reminded in such experiences that the freewheeling logic of the Vanlife lifestyle is a fragile construction. The toured places in the Vanlife videos are often host to layers of narrative that reflect local geopolitical realities, and at times these must be integrated into these users' curated narratives, even if they are unwelcome additions. Similarly, mobile technology introduces capital's deterritorialised form of power into the contrived spaces of Vanlife videos. Such technologies are omnipresent for Vanlifers, with mobile phones and laptop computers appearing at least once in almost every video in my dataset. These tools are seen in use for navigation, for remote working, or for research and information gathering. Mobile technologies are also used to film, edit and post-process the Vanlife media objects that the Vanlife audiences engage with. This near-constant presence of the products of Apple, Google, Facebook, and various telecommunications giants works again to challenge and undermine the liberatory tone of the

lived space built up by Vanlifers.

Addressing conceived space within Vanlife videos reveals underlying political, cultural and technological infrastructures, which play a role in crafting spatial and textual meaning. These infrastructures escape or are belied by the lived and perceived spaces of these media objects, and the narrative choices of Vanlife producers. David Beer (2013, p. 28) argues that a "coded infrastructure" surrounds us and ensures that individuals are subject to surveillance, power and forms of control in their everyday life through their interaction with digital technologies. This 'sinking in' of power within the infrastructure of everyday life has typically been understood as an urban phenomenon (Graham and Marvin, 2001, p. 8); however, the dependency on computer and networking technologies that Vanlifers exhibit as part of their digital nomadism shows it to be wide-reaching. Vanlifers' vans become one more part of the "extended network architectures" that are "linked together into chains that stretch across time and space" in order to condition individuals' lives and behaviours (Kitchin and Dodge, 2014, p. 17). Both Vanlife's media and intended lifestyles are permeable, and the boundaries of these entities invite the same navigation and transgression that the users themselves undertake as travellers and storytellers. The careful construction of lived space, and the co-option of aspects of perceived space, are at times imperilled by incursions made by these infrastructures of power and capital, and at others simply modified and negotiated.

Conclusion: Vanlife's Emergent Spatiality

Lefebvre's trialectic highlights elements of Vanlife's emergent spatiality that are either defined by its users (through lived space), by the currents of contemporary power (through conceived space), or through the mixture of both those sources of agency (by way of perceived space). In the combination of the expressions of lived, perceived, and conceived space that I have described, a distinct spatiality appears. This is also an unstable and contradictory form of space, which is a trait common to other emergent geographies and spaces created using photography, written text, and even the imaginative power of memory and daydreaming (Urry and Larsen, 2011, pp. 156, 167). Michel Foucault refers to spaces that negotiate contradictory accounts of reality and unreality as heterotopias, or "the juxtaposing in a single real place, several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (1986, p. 25). Heterotopic spaces are closely linked to 'real' spaces and places, yet also offer a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (Foucault, 1986, p. 24). Tourism spaces are ripe for such contestation, being "continually evolving landscapes with space for … disruption and transgression of dominant discourses" (Aitchison et al., 2000, p. 1). Through Vanlife YouTube videos we are witness to the negotiation of discourses surrounding everyday lifestyles and their possible alternatives, as part of a broader destabilisation and redefinition of the meanings of spaces, experiences, and communities encountered by Vanlife's travellers. The tension that emerges between Vanlifers' efforts to construct idealised space and the jarring intrusion of external elements in their travels further illustrates the continually evolving nature of spatial meanings. Vanlife's videos suggest that digital media, together with social media platforms, might play a distinct role in accelerating the circulation of competing representations of spaces and their meanings, and, therefore, accentuate the fluid and contested nature of spatial meaning in ways that are distinct to our current networked era.

Using aesthetic and narrative decisions, mobile media technologies and social media platforms, Vanlifers establish an emergent, if inconsistent, spatiality that serves to contest dominant discourses surrounding everyday life. As they cross borders and traverse new environments, Vanlifers, through their mediated travel, engage in the simultaneous construction of narrative and space. This is a type of meaning-making that exceeds the capacity of the tourist gaze to shape interpretation of toured spaces. The videos of the Vanlife movement operate to reshape places visited into an emergent spatiality, characterised by an emphasis on particular visual images, narrative tendencies and human figures, and the underexposure of others. I have utilised Lefebvre's spatial triad in order to analyse common expressions of conceived, perceived, and lived spaces across a range of videos in my dataset. We are

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witness to the careful presentation of exotic, picturesque natural beauty, the easy portability of Western travellers' trappings of domesticity, and the erasure of local socio-political contexts. Simultaneously, the long reach of the logic the conventional lifestyle that these digital nomads are fleeing is shown to intrude upon and underpin the Vanlife movement's emergent space. Patterns of consumption in networked media culture mean that these spatial constructions circulate widely and that their ongoing internal representational tensions are distributed across users, vans, videos, and channels as a wide-scale version of the Vanlife space is negotiated.

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Notes

During the initial data collection period, this YouTube channel was titled 'Jim and Sab' but has since renamed to 'Jim H'. I continue to refer to the channel, in the body of this article, as 'Jim and Sab' to reflect the channel's identity at the time of the creation of its Vanlife-focused content.

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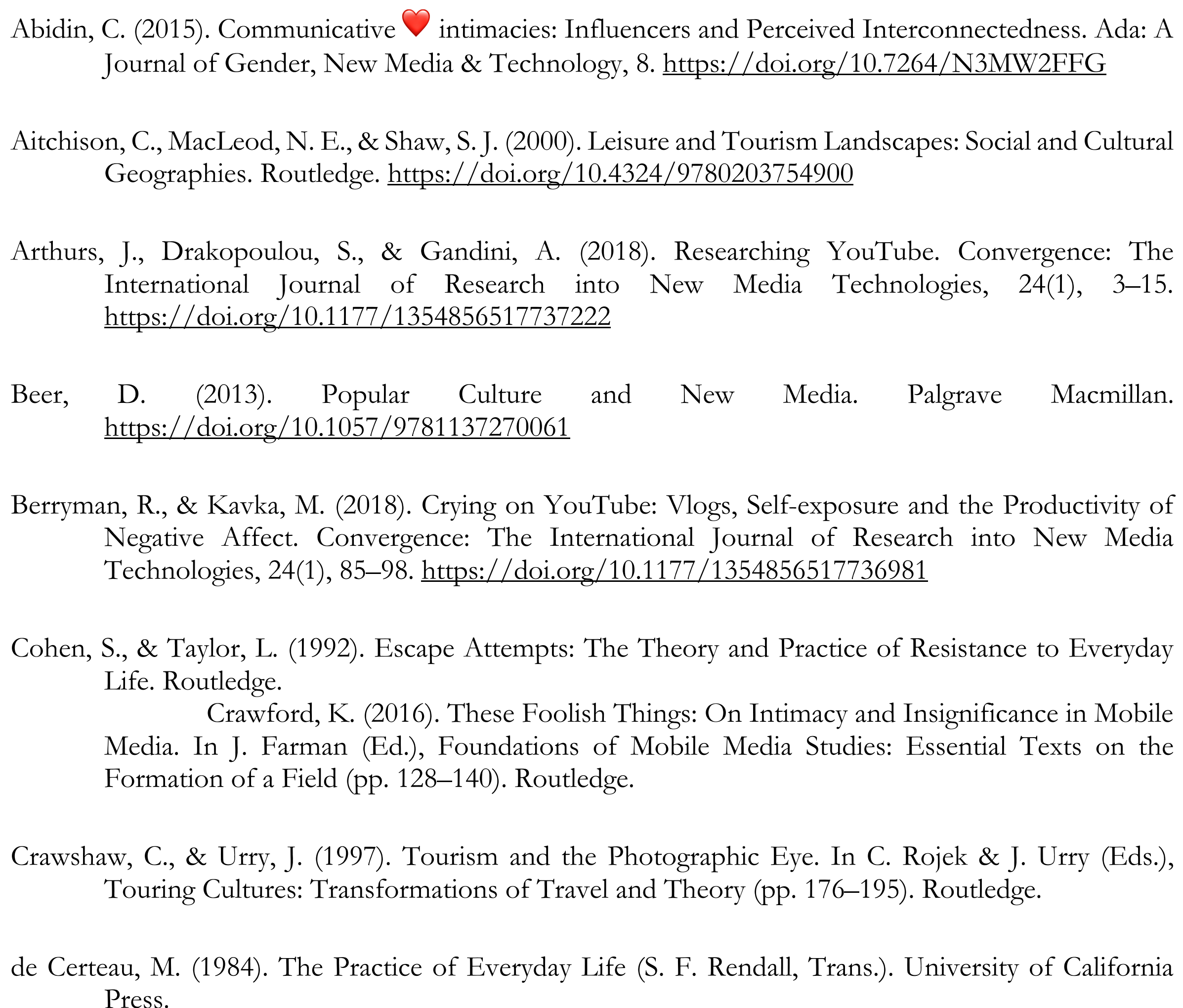
Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative  intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness. Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology, 8. https://doi.org/10.7264/N3MW2FFG

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