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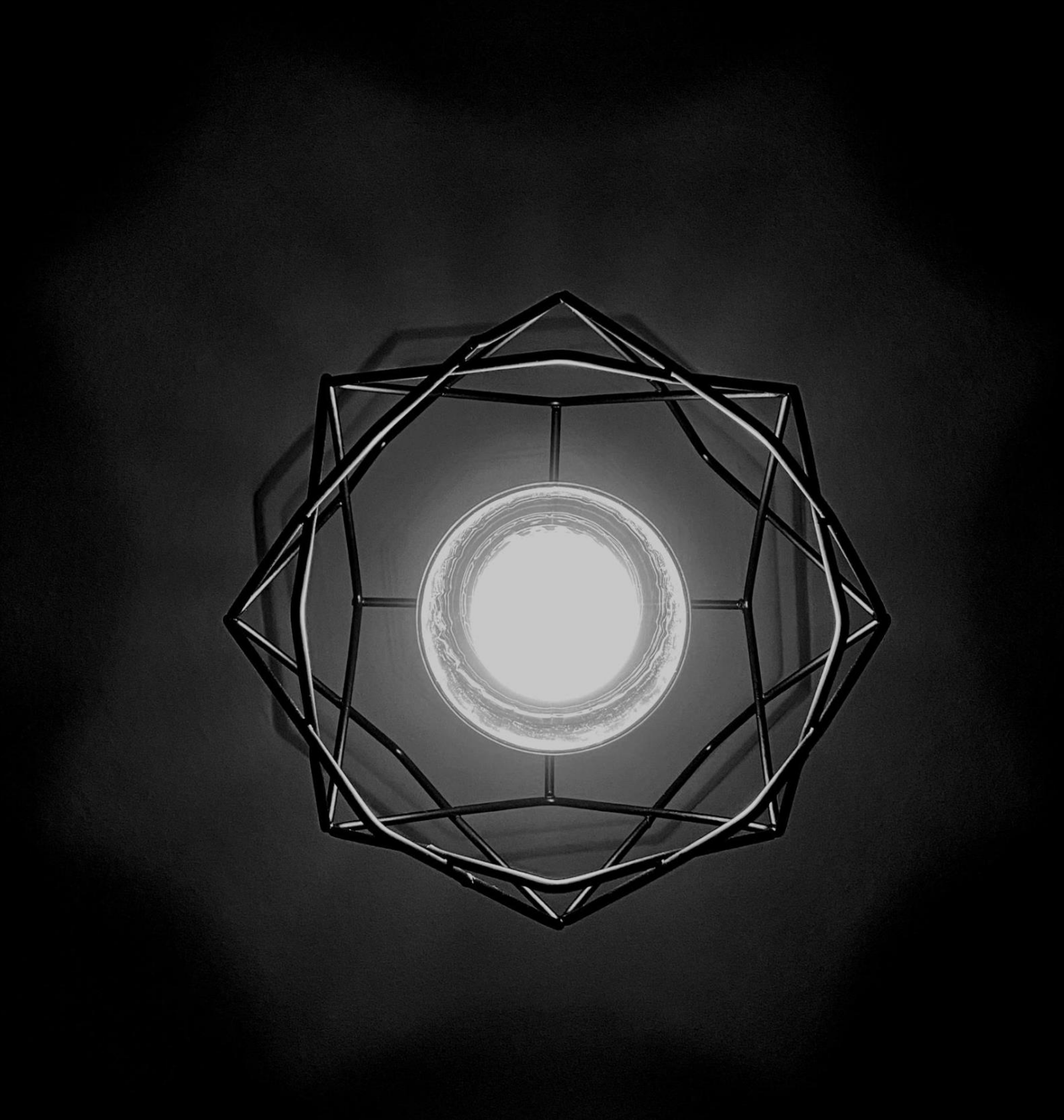

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Visuality: Truth and Politics

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The Visual, the True, and the Political

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Some medial questions consistently recur, requiring that we re-tread old territories to identify new developments in light of shifting formations. Visuality is one such medial nexus, bound to fundamental epistemic and political contestations and continually the site of technological and discursive novelty. Visuality encompasses light, interfaciality, mapping, the technics of screens and images and projections, the whole panoply of representational theorization, the dialectic of the visible and invisible, the priority of certain senses above others and their relationship to the perceptible, the knowable, the actionable. In all these forms, the visual turns upon and contributes to a regime of truth, and a horizon of political possibility. Thus, the question of the visual, as Judith Butler (2009, p. 64) puts it:

> is hardly new but bears repeating… that whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established".

The basis of the political is a field or condition of truth: what is registered as real and as requiring address—the episteme in which struggle, violence, or resistance occurs—shapes and directs those vectors of action. What is visible shapes what is valued. In turn, the political contestation of this very visible field—what is seen and what is registered—inflects any regime of truth. In this way, the visual straddles the concerns of both truth and politics, revealing their mutual imbrication.

Visuals encompass live-streams, videos, photographs, artwork, memes and cartoons that are utilised as tools for social and political commentary. They represent acts of political defiance seeking to challenge underlying power relationships. The mediatization of violence brings atrocities into the public eye, and compels authorities and social media audiences to respond to them, whether with action, denial, dissimulation, or distraction. In the digital landscape, the circulation of visuals works as a powerful force for activism, political engagement, solidarity and for speaking truth to power (Kasra, 2017) as is evidenced by numerous local and global examples. Video footage of George Floyd's death in police custody undoubtedly propelled a resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, mobilised activism and sparked global protests. Bearing witness to violent deaths involves taking responsibility for the plight of others which compels people to act in support of the victims as an expression of solidarity.

Kari Andén Papadopoulos introduced the term "citizen camera witnessing" to describe the practice of using mobile phones to take photographs that highlight injustice (2014, p. 753). In the digital age, capturing and circulating images of violence is easier than ever before. Through the mediatization of violence, the impact of violent acts extends well beyond those who are personally impacted by these incidents to include large numbers of people who encounter these forms of violence via various forms of media. Digitally networked images provide a forum for political advocacy and are instrumental in triggering action — "Indeed, image-based activism via snapshots, avatars, and selfies" can be harnessed to "construct new collective, political, and protest identities on social media" (Kasra, 2017, p. 51). Activist images are shared and re-shared across social media and can be remixed by users to achieve their own aims. In this way, digitally networked images can invoke or motivate political action, but posting and to a lesser extent viewing the images is in itself a form of political action. The mediatization of public violence has also given rise to the mediatization of mourning so that it is not just acts of violence but also related emotions that flow through the media.

Yet such political aspirations remain complicated by their mediation, which as ever is an active factor in the process of representation. Dorothy Santos draws attention to the racialised underpinnings of the representational spaces that social media proffers in her article *Mediating the Social: The Excesses of Racial Representation within (Trans)formative Digital Space* (pp 69-76). Expanding upon Herman Gray's notion of the "excesses of representation," Santos shows how social media spaces do not merely convey the political transparently, but actively work to shape social affect. Conveying the political is not merely a correspondence between an immediate social truth and its representation, but is shot through by reified categories, amplification, and silencing. Nevertheless, we continue to see attempts to communicate across and through this excess: the visual is not ceded for its representational failures, but remains ever more contested.

Users over the last decade have enacted this will to communicate visually through the mediation of platforms, whilst the possibilities for visibility are increasingly entangled in algorithmic and platform logics. We can observe visual content being beholden not only to platform rules, but also to a commercial imperative; one that is operationalised and enforced through algorithmic logics of filtering, optimisation and personalisation. This mediation of content is inherently political as precisely put by Tania Bucher, "algorithms establish the conditions through which visibility is constructed online" (Bucher, 2012). Fisher & Mehozay (2019, pp 1188) argue that the contemporary algorithmic episteme sees its audience not as individuals, but as an aggregate of human behaviour within digital media: "These epistemes are performative: they not only assume a certain human being, but also construct an individual which they presume merely to measure or identify." On one hand, the power of algorithmic visibility and logics of engagement have contributed to a rise in extremism, and fake news, or what Luke Munn describes in the final chapter of this issue, as "the post-truth condition" (pp 60). On the other hand, creators of content must also contend with the politics of platforms and algorithmic visibilities in order to be seen. In their contribution, *Chinese Video Creator Identities - a Cross-Platform Social Media Perspective*, Ziying Meng & Bjørn Nansen explore Chinese content creator identities on video sharing platforms (pp 23-39). The authors move beyond an established western centric focus of research, to include Chinese platforms Bilibili, Douyin and RED. Through their ethnographic work with nine Chinese content creators, Meng & Nansen explore the cross-platform and transnational tactics of these creators as they navigate and contend with the politics of online video sharing platforms, algorithmic constraints, as well as advertiser demands for a unified identity across platforms.

Algorithms deployed within social media allow for greater and greater optimisation, offering the ability to optimise images, video, audio, faces (through filters) as part of an overall effort to optimise the self (McKelvey & Neves, 2021). Through an analysis of YouTube videos, Lawrence May's article *On the Road: Emergent Spatiality in #Vanlife* considers Vanlife travellers' use of digital media practices, objects and networks to construct emergent spaces (pp 52-68). May argues that these videos work to construct and redefine travellers' experiences and illustrate the fluidity of spatial meanings. Though this offers "Vanlifers" opportunities for expression and creativity, May contends that these idealised visual spaces are not free from intrusions and disruptions from the external world.

Beyond and beneath these more overt sites of struggle, visuality as a conflux of sensing and representing necessitates engagement with the multi-scalar structures of media. Wendy Chun, in discussing the visual hegemony of software, argues that "interfaces seem to concretize our relation to invisible (or barely visible) 'sources' and substructures" (2011, p. 59). The visuality of computation is organised by the interfacial abstractions of GUIs and parsed at different levels by various coded forms, from higher-level programming languages on down. Medial grammatizations of different software standards, codecs, or hardware conventions organise and distribute regimes of sense, grounding the very formal conditions of any possible expression. As Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan (2021, p. 1094) argues regarding digital formats such as the JPEG, It is not that the territory of the digital image has one or another political orientation; on the contrary, it is an orientation unto itself. The spatial expanses digital formats assign on the screen are part of a seamless fabric of global technical standards shaping an order of things in lived space. The dream of a "world wide web" rests, among other things, on a uniform system of technical writing integrating users from California to the Caspian Sea via shared formats.

Formats and forms, infrastructure and codes constitute a global arrangement of technical conditions that are in turn their own politics, producing a way of speaking and communicating across older political geographies. In her paper, *Crowdsourcing Women's Experiences of Space: Empowerment, (In)Visibility, and Exclusions - A Critical Reading of Safetipin Map*, Trang Le interrogates the use of Safetipin as a form of crowdsourced mapping designed to convey spatial patterns of gender violence in urban areas (pp 40-51). Le draws attention to underlying forms of exclusion and regimes of knowledge production that are perpetuated in crowdsourced maps. In this way, the new visual modes of presentation remediate political geographies via structured modes and models, encoded into software systems and deployed in increasingly sensor-laden cities. The computing and sensing of digital infrastructures penetrate into the minutiae of social fears and bodily harms, producing a new iteration of a political visuality.

In turn, this computing and sensing megastructure that spans the Earth can produce its own visual orientation of truth: the M87 black hole could only be imaged by virtue of a network of telescopes that constitute "an aperture as wide as the Earth" (Bratton, 2019, p. 6). Crucial, but often invisible infrastructures for the internet and cloud computing therefore require close analysis: Samuel Kinninmonth draws our attention to the growing phenomenon of data centre tour videos, in *Lasers, Mantraps And Alligators: Visualising Physical Security In Data Centre Tour Videos* (pp 9-22). Through a content analysis of 66 data centre tour videos, Kininmonth focuses on the foregrounding of physical security in the videos, including human labour, which is juxtaposed against the backdrop of the data-driven, networked infrastructure of the data centre itself. He argues that these tour videos constitute a security theatre, in which they "perform a security discourse of control over territory, people and data.", (pp 9). He examines the visualisation of these infrastructure's security apparatuses, revealing the underpinning relationships to labour, risk, and brand identity. The physical infrastructure of datacentres is often obscured, hidden from sight, except for curated presentations such as the security demonstration videos Kininmonth analyses. Such representations are revealing both in what they show and in what they hide, simultaneously working to "foreground security guards as working within layers of security," (pp 13), while also working to "smooth the tension of perceived risk"(pp 17) by ensconcing these same guards within those same layers as surveilled subjects. Thus the visualisation of infrastructure itself becomes folded back into technical-financial apparatuses for determining funding, resource-allocation, and the very self-image of planetary computation.

This double movement of visuality, the advertising of the hidden, securitised site, may be emblematic of a larger shift, diagnosed by Jean Baudrillard (1988, p. 22):

> It is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication.

The long-discussed spectacle of the image appears, in this sense, to degrade the epistemic function of visuality, breaking the bonds between the visible and the true, supplanting it instead with a simulative hyper-visibility. Truth recedes in favour of the communicable image, a realpolitik that favours a duality of hyper-skepticism and religious faith. Luke Munn's article, *Have Faith and Question Everything: UnderstandingQAnon's Allure* (pp 77 -94) addresses the epistemic nexus that sustains QAnon's conspiracist media. By analysing an archive of a year's worth of Q's posts, Munn traces the interplay between religious narratives and critical thinking discourses, where the immediately visible reality remains subtended by an invisible deep-state that must be doggedly brought to light by adherents. The truth which lies beneath our immediately visible realities, then, is not itself a non-ideological substructure, but rather also a site of political contestation and uncertainty.

The papers in this issue address this challenge of the visual, asking how contemporary medial practices enact or alter the dynamic relation between the true and the political. Far from attempting to reduce one to the other, or take either pole as given, they demonstrate again the old lesson that the medial cannot be taken for granted: the territory of seeing and being seen contains its own mediations, fractally folding. Visuality, truth, and politics, taken as a nexus, demand the careful traversal of these distinctions as an epistemic concern and a demand of technological life.

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Lasers, Mantraps and Alligators: Visualising Physical Security In Data Centre Tour Videos

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Abstract

This article examines how video tours of data centres visually foreground physical security infrastructure. Despite the importance of cloud computing to many people's lives, data centres, a key piece of cloud computing infrastructure, are often hidden from public view — but not always. Many companies promote their services by making tour videos of their data centres. An emerging body of research in media and communication studies has examined how promotional material visualises data centres, but there is little research on how promotional videos represent physical security infrastructure. This paper consists of a qualitative content analysis of 66 data centre tour videos from data centres located around the world. It finds that data centre video tours often spend significant time visualising security features used to protect data centres from unauthorised physical access. The videos often feature various security measures, including 24-hour guards, boom gates, fences, radio-frequency identification (RFID) cards, guard stations, biometric scanners, man traps and underfloor lasers. I argue that the video tours are marketing materials that act as security theatre and foreground physical security features to perform a security discourse of control over territory, people and data. The videos also unexpectedly foreground human labour within the security apparatus. They demonstrate that security infrastructure governs the workers that maintain it.

Keywords

Data Centres, Security, Video Tours, Infrastructures

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Introduction

Media researchers are paying greater attention to communication infrastructure and how infrastructure is mediated. Communication infrastructure such as data centres are often remote and difficult to access. Earlier research has shown that organisations that operate data centres produce media to promote some aspects of their infrastructure, such as its environmental efficiency or security; the infrastructural elements that organisations choose to promote help build their "corporate identity" (Holt and Vonderau, 2015, p.90). Many data centre operators have produced or participated in data centre tour videos to promote their brand and stake their infrastructural corporate identity.

For example, in one video, a tour guide, dressed in a jacket and jeans, guides the viewer through a Google data centre one location at a time – from the bright foyer to the racks of servers to the cooling systems on the roof (Google Cloud Tech, 2016). He is joined in every area by enthusiastic Google employees who excitedly explain the infrastructure they maintain and support many of Googles services. In this video, every location also contains a third person. A silent, motionless security guard is standing in the back of shot. The producers shot this data centre tour video using a 360-degree camera that stitches the footage together to create a virtual reality (VR) experience. While the guide speaks, viewers can use their mouse to pan and tilt the camera in any direction. The guard is not immediately apparent; viewers need to pan away from the exuberant tour guide to find them, but they are there. Figure 1 illustrates examples of the guard in several locations: among the server racks; next to the auxiliary power supply; next to the cooling system, roaring as it works to cool the powerful computers. The production appears to have purposefully made the guard visible.

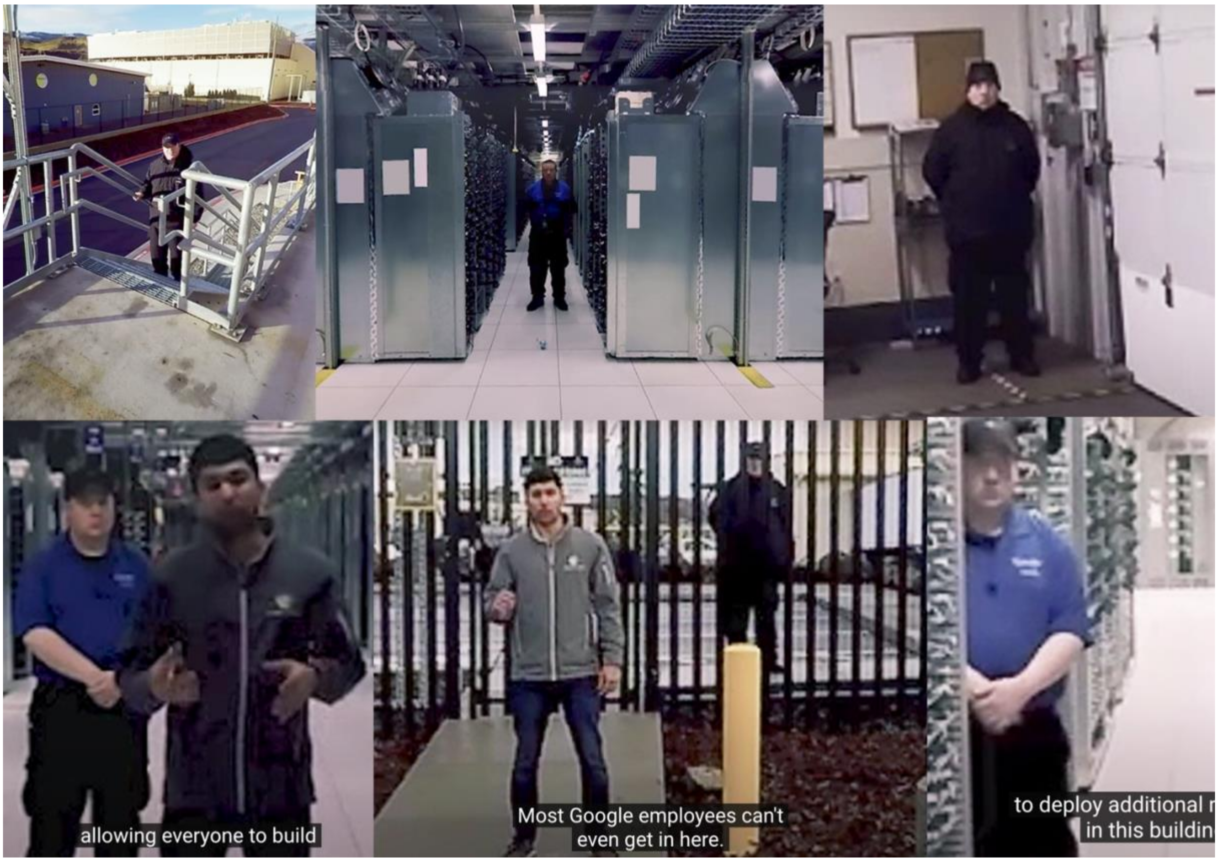
allowing everyone to build
Most Google employees can't even get in here.
to deploy additional
in this buildin

Figure 1. A glimpse from the 360 video tour of a Google data centre. A motionless security guard appears in the background of every location. Source: (Google Cloud Tech, 2016).

Like other kinds of telecommunications infrastructure, such as undersea cables (Starosielski, 2015), data centres are often located far away from the customers they serve. A host of factors can influence the location – land prices, access to fibre optic cables, access to electricity, air temperature, frequency of natural disasters, government policies – but certainly a significant reason is that operators often do not want them to be publicly accessible (Rossiter 2017; Hu 2015). Data centres are primarily designed to function invisibly in the background. But this is not always the case. Like the Google tour video described earlier, companies exhibit their business infrastructure to potential clients in data centre tour videos. The tour videos are designed to reassure potential clients that the data centres will continue to provide service in the face of external threats such as natural disasters or intruders and technical failures such as fires or power failure. Recent research has examined how data centres are put "on display" (Holt and Vonderau, 2015 p.89; see also Taylor, 2017; 2019). Because data centres are essential infrastructures that are often inaccessible to the public and researchers, the media made about them is crucial for understanding part of the infrastructure that underpins much of our digital communications.

This article reports on the representation of security from a content analysis of 66 data centre tour videos. In addition to highlighting power reliability and cooling efficiency, the video tours spend significant time presenting physical security infrastructure. I argue that data centre security videos foreground physical security to make certain features "hypervisible" (Holt and Vonderau 2015). By emphasising physical security features, the promotional videos cultivate an image of sovereign territory guarded against external threats (Hu 2015). The tour videos perform a particular kind of security theatre that channels a discourse of control of territory and people. This security discourse of control extends to the people who maintain and guard the data centres. Workers require access to data centres to maintain and defend them, and the tour videos spend a significant portion of their time visualising the features that restrict or allow access to particular areas. The videos demonstrate that data centres are sociotechnical infrastructures and that the companies that run the centres believe that control of people within data centres is important to their clients.

I first outline previous research that interrogates why data centre operators choose to visualise certain aspects of their infrastructure and what role security features play in performing discourses of security. I then briefly detail how I conducted qualitative content analysis on a corpus of data centre marketing videos. The content analysis identifies several recurring security representations in the videos, including how visualising physical security infrastructures links to corporate identity, layers of access and security staff. Finally, I discuss how the tour videos perform the construction and control of territory to sell the data centre's services and smooth over perceived threats from workers within the data centre.

Current Debates

As media and cultural studies take an "infrastructural turn", scholars have focused on data centres as critical internet infrastructures. A growing number of scholars have examined the representation of data centres (Holt and Vonderau, 2015; Taylor 2017; 2019), their labour (Velkova, 2020), territoriality (Hu, 2015; Rossiter, 2017, for cables, see Starosielski, 2015), political economy (Mosco, 2015) and environmental costs and interactions (Cubitt et al., 2011; Peters, 2015; Hogan and Vonderau, 2019).

An issue in the emerging research concerns how data centres represent certain features over others in their promotional materials. Jennifer Holt and Patrick Vonderau (2015, p.90) argue that promotional materials, including videos, serve to "stak[e] corporate territory", locating the company and service in the material world. The companies that promote their data centres make certain features "hypervisible". Holt and Vonderau argue that promotional materials foreground some features while hiding others in "plain sight" (2015, 92). Hypervisibilised infrastructure cultivates an identity for the organisation that builds, maintains and uses it. A crucial recurring narrative in data centre promotional materials is their security features.

Although modern data centres are highly automated, they require people to maintain them (Greenburg et al., 2009). There is a tension between access to data centres and their security. As computer security expert Gene Spafford noted in 1989, "The only truly secure system is one that is powered off, cast in a block of concrete and sealed in a lead-lined room with armed guards — and even then I have my doubts" (Spafford via Schneier, 2018, 19). A server that has been powered off, cast in concrete and lined with lead is useless to store accessible information. In other words, a totally secure data centre is a useless data centre. As internet security expert Bruce Schneier (2018, p.19) notes, "[s]ecurity is always a trade-off". A data centre without labour to maintain it would be useless, but labour's presence is a perceived threat.

A common way out of this dilemma is to downplay workers' presence in data centre promotional materials. ARE Taylor found that data centre management actively cultivates an aesthetic of facilities that are futuristic, full of white space (2017) and "pure machine" (2019 p.4). A photographer who works for data centre clients recounts that "most data center [sic] briefs specify that they don't want their workers in the photographs" (Taylor, 2019 pp.13-14). A Chief Operating Officer of a data centre explains that they minimise human representation because it is perceived as the weakest security link (Taylor, 2019). Taylor (2019, p.14) notes that phrases such as "'humans are the easiest thing to hack' or 'people are the weakest link in data center security', are frequently encountered in industry discourse and reflect a specific brand of 'automation bias' (the trusting of machines over humans)". The invisible labour of data centres is in tension with their security. However, this research illustrates that human workers are more foregrounded in data centre tour videos than might be expected, but primarily when functioning in a security role.

Data centres project their security through control of specific territory and the people within it. Scholars including Tung-Hui Hu (2015) and Ned Rossiter (2017) have considered the relationship between data centres' security discourses and their territoriality. Hu (2015, pp. 91-92) argues that security is a "widespread discourse" used by various, often antagonistic, actors who share the common value of "freedom". This liberal freedom functions as the reaffirmation of shared values to an external threat. For data centres, the danger stems from "external, unfree enemies" such as hackers or scammers (Hu, 2015, 92). Hu asks, "why are so many data centers [sic] housed inside militarized structures built to defend physical territory?" (Hu, 2015, 91). The answer for Hu lies in the staking of "sovereign power within the cloud, power as dependent on or coterminous with a specific territory" (Hu, 2015, 92). Territory is linked to sovereignty, creating ruled space. For Hu, data centres represent "the guarded camps of the Pony Express, in which messengers retreated for the night from the unsafe territory outside" (Hu, 2015, 81). As a worker at The Bunker data centre remarks to Hu, "Security is our way of thinking . . . We consider everything outside the client firewall as hostile" (Hu, 2015, 81). Security features are a political intervention that governs who can access infrastructure and how. Rossiter (2017) argues that studies of data centres need to account for "the apparently paradoxical" tension between data centres' differences and industry-wide security standards. He notes that data centres can prompt issues around "security, surrounding economies, labouring subjectivities and so forth" (Rossiter 2017, 6). Importantly, data centres are heavily securitised spaces that rely on on-site and offsite workers to maintain them. Data centres have a kind of sovereign territoriality but are inextricably, simultaneously linked to local labour markets, international standards, and data markets.

Julia Velkova (2020) conducted participant observation in the Yandex data centres in Finland and created a photo essay about the lives of the workers who maintain and guard it. Velkova describes how the workers persist in the often inhospitable workplace by growing plants, making art and cooking for each other. The activities reaffirm their humanity even as the work itself addresses them as "non-people' in a "not-for-humans space" (2020, p.49). Guarding is a significant task, even if it is often long and tedious. As one guard tells Velkova (2020, p.49), "Very little happens here. There is nothing. I kind of feel that I am guarding an empty space". Velkova notes how the guards are themselves surveilled by the data centre site manager. As the site manager tells her, "The security guard [booth] looks like an aquarium. [The guards] are the fishes inside" (Velkova, 2020, p.54). The security infrastructure applies to both potential intruders and workers within the data centre.

The previous studies demonstrate that data centre operators promote certain infrastructure features to market their services. Operators foreground physical security features to project secure, ruled space in contrast to perceived external threats. Some studies have observed that data centre operators prefer to minimise human labour in their promotional materials because they perceive people as unavoidable security threats. Foucault noted that security is not always a "binary division between the permitted and the prohibited" (Foucault, 2007, pp. 20-21). Security can mean governing somewhere between an optimal and acceptable bandwidth. Put another way, the videos convey the impression that the affordances of security infrastructure permit acceptable behaviour on-site (Davis 2020). This research aims to understand why, unlike the material studied by Taylor (2019), data centre tour videos visualise workers within the security apparatus and what that means for security discourses of sovereignty and territoriality.

Method

I constructed a corpus of videos from the video streaming service YouTube in late 2019 to explore the representations of physical security features and staff in data centre tour videos. I began by collecting videos from the curated YouTube playlists Data Center Tour and Data Center Knowledge. I then expanded the collection by searching variants of “data center tour” using YouTube’s internal search engine in the Firefox browser’s “Private Browsing” mode. I collected over one hundred videos in total before removing videos of product demonstrations at trade shows and other videos not filmed at data centres. After removing those videos not filmed at data centres, the corpus contained 66 videos with a total of around thirteen million views [1]. The videos are diverse. They vary in a) views – the least with several hundred views, the highest with around five million, b) length – from a couple of minutes to half an hour, c) production site – they were produced by different companies and in different countries (although a large section are from the United States), and d) format – 11 of the videos in the corpus feature 360/VR footage.

I conducted a qualitative content analysis on the corpus of tour videos, deploying the common practice of coding information within a media sample into categories to establish patterns or trends (Mayring, 2004). I coded any security features explicitly mentioned by tour guides or in on-screen text and any security features shown on-screen. I then inductively collected the different security features together into recurring themes.

Promotional videos are useful for studying industry discourses. Previous research illustrates how news organisations (Bednarek and Caple, 2015) and Australian universities (Gottschall and Saltmarsh 2017) use promotional videos to distinguish their brand by foregrounding desirable attributes like trustworthiness or a “good life”. The data centre tour videos are marketing materials used to promote their security, reassure clients and distinguish themselves from competitors. This isn’t to say that the tour videos mislead the viewer with the security features they highlight. The texts blur the true and the political. Data centre operators produced the videos to foreground some elements over others to sell the data centre's services to potential clients. Bruce Schneier (2009) argues that much overt physical security infrastructure is “security theatre” that makes people feel more secure without actually improving their security. While many of the security elements of data centres are prescribed by international standards (Spring 2011; Rossiter 2017), numerous security features and scenarios discussed in the tour videos resemble the “movie-plot threats” that Schneier (2009) describes. However, this security theatre is productive, sustaining a particular sociotechnical imaginary of security (Hockenhull and Cohn 2021). The videos stake corporate territory and identity by performing the same security discourses described by Hu (2015), Rossiter (2017) and Taylor (2019).

Promoting Security in Data Centre Videos

The content analysis of the corpus showed that security is a significant focus in data centre tour videos. Most videos featured three key elements: security, cooling and power. While the systems that cool and power the servers are often an appreciable part of the tours, the security features such as cameras, gates, and radio-frequency identification (RFID) badges often feature heavily and feature first. Generally, tour videos devoted around one third of their total running time to security, although a few videos devoted at least half their time to security infrastructure. Three key themes emerged from the content analysis: first, that the videos tie security to data centres’ identities; second, the videos emphasised that security is layered; and third, that the videos foreground security guards as working within layers of security.

Tying Security to Organisational Identity

The video centre tours visualise the security infrastructure to emphasise aspects of companies’ identities. The caption to the OneNeck tour video, promoting one of their data centres based in the United States, reads: “Take a look inside a OneNeck state-of-the art data center and see first-hand the security and compliance measures taken to ensure your data is safe!” (OneNeck IT Solutions, 2017). LeaseWeb’s (2016) video notes that it is a “Fort Knox for your data”. Oracle’s (2017) tour boasts that the physical security is at the "Forefront of Oracle's first defence against threats and compromises" and that their "buildings are among the most secure in the world". A Visa DPS (2014) tour video states that,

> "In here, the Visa promise is rooted in metal, fibre optics, concrete and electricity … Infrastructure like this doesn't just happen. It comes from investment."

Another video notes, "Steel, granite, brick. … This place is a bunker" (Gestalt IT, 2017). The physical security infrastructure stands in for the organisations' commitment to protecting their customers' data.

While some physical security at data centres might be unsurprising, several data centres promote their ability to repel threats that could come straight from a Hollywood film. A tour guide at a data centre in Brazil notes that "[i]n the case of an invasion, all our doors are automatically locked" (TIVIT_Oficial, 2017). Another data centre claims to be safe from "biological attack" (Data Center Knowledge, 2008). Some data centres reference nothing less than the end of the world. As a tour guide notes in one video, "Yeah, this place is a fortress, great for a zombie apocalypse" (Gestalt IT, 2017). Tour videos also note the following: attacks via a vehicle, deploying gates and bollards; attacks by an intruder, deploying anti-climb technologies (such as barbed wire) and bulletproof glass; attacks by a visitor, who must be escorted at all times and navigate different layers of access; and attacks by an employee, many of whom are given the access to or the location of the data centre, or must be monitored at all times when on-site. The videos foreground physical security features to promote their resilience to a range of physical threats. By connecting the company's brand to impervious security structures, the data centre operators stake their corporate territory and render the identity corporeal (Holt and Vonderau 2015).

Security Layers

The tour video corpus promotes the idea that security features often operate as an assemblage of security *layers*. The tours frequently refer to security as "multi-layered", or "seven layers", or "six zones", or "two" or "three" "factor" authentication. According to the marketing materials, the layers act as both a redundancy measure and for structuring access. By layering independent security measures, an intruder would have to overcome each one in different ways. Even authorised workers and visitors operate within multiple layers of security. As the Chief Operating Officer of the Involta 360 Data Center explains, they use a "least privileged approach" where clients can only access certain areas in the data centre (Involta, 2018). The security functions to discipline action between the optimal and the acceptable, for an intruder, visitor, and employee alike.

The security of the data centres starts with their choice of location. Different videos boast that their data centre has no external signage to identify it, and many do not allow visitors. As one tour guide boasts, their centre is "so secure even some of our employees don't know where it is" (TradeCraft, 2016). To create these secure buildings (as well as cool and power them), some companies build data centres in existing buildings. A considerable number of data centre videos feature data centres built in repurposed buildings. Repurposed structures in the sample include an old mineshaft (Iron Mountain, 2017), retired silos (CLUMEQ, 2009), converted factories (Intel, 2009), including an old microchip factory (Intel, 2016), a cotton mill built in 1876 (Congruity360, 2017), a remodelled shopping centre (Data Center Knowledge, 2009) and an old nuclear bunker in Sweden (touted as a Bond lair) (Pionen Data Center, 2017).

A potential intruder who could identify and reach a data centre would then have to contend with entering the grounds. Many data centre operators use the tour video to promote how heavily they guard their premises. For example, numerous data centres in the tour videos featured extensive and high fencing. Operators augment the fencing with other features, including "anti-climbing devices" or charging the fence with "10,000 volts of electricity" — "the highest legal limit", one video boasts (Leaseweb, 2016). Other videos feature shots of what appears to be a moat, while another features a "beware of the alligators" sign (see Figure 2). Management may have placed the sign for the safety of employees, but the decision to feature it in a video tour of a data centre gives the impression that alligators are protecting clients' data. Visitors seeking to pass the various barriers might do so through any combination of gates, boom gates, licence plate recognition cameras, closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras and well-lit spaces. An intruder might have to pass any of these features to reach a data centre's car park.

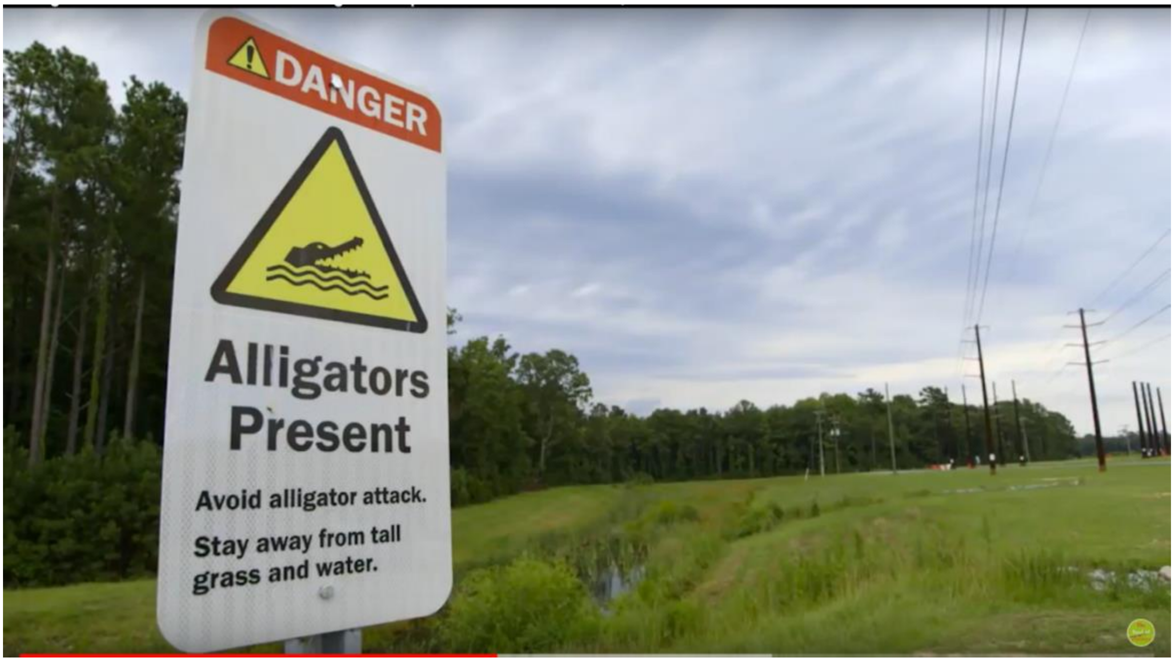

Figure 2. Beware of the Alligators sign outside a Google data centre. Source: (The Soul of Politics, 2017).

Once a visitor has reached a data centre's buildings, they might then walk past anti-ramming devices or retractable bollards to reach the door, measures to stop a vehicle from ramming into the building. Other videos boast about bulletproof windows or bulletproof film applied to the glass. The types of efforts seem to indicate that the intruders may be armed or dangerous.

Tour videos and their guides typically move into the entrance or foyer of the data centre, sometimes after announcing themselves to security guards through an intercom next to a remote access door. Once inside the threshold, data centres may have security staff checking each visitor against a pre-approved list of authorised entrants. Visitors may be identified by photo ID or biometric scanners. Once checked in, visitors may then be issued with a marked badge or lanyard, some with an RFID function to access certain areas in the centre.

In the videos, after the security check-in, visitors will generally move through the data centre using a combination of an RFID badge, passcodes or biometric scanners. The tour videos promote the use of a variety of biometric scanners, including fingerprint scanners, facial recognition cameras, iris scanners (that scan your eyeball) and vascular scanners (which use infrared light to recognise the patterns of veins in a finger). In the video tour of Congruity360 Data Center, the group jokes about which finger an intruder would need to cut off an employee to gain entry (Gestalt IT, 2017). The tour videos often mention that operators use multiple security features together. As a guide at the Involta 360 Data Center tells the camera, “there's no getting beyond these doors without clearing both” a preapproval process to receive a proximity (RFID) badge and a “thirty-two point” iris scanner (Involta, 2018). The visitor still requires an escort.

The videos demonstrate how passcodes and scans allow visitors to pass through various portals and security cages. These portals might be reinforced steel doors, while others are more elaborate. Some centres feature turnstiles within the facility, ensuring that someone without authorisation cannot follow someone with clearance between rooms. “Mantraps” also feature in tour videos. Mantraps are devices with two doors that usually require the first door to be closed before the second can open. Mantraps function to stop an unauthorised person walking behind an authorised person or ‘tailgating’, but security can also trap intruders between doors. Some tour videos show centres with individually locked “cages” around the actual server racks. Technicians may need passcodes, RFID badges or metal keys to access the servers.

The videos promote the idea that visitors often move between other kinds of surveillance technology while walking around the centre. Many data centre tours explicitly showed and mentioned the high number of CCTV cameras spread across the facilities. In one video, the tour guide boasts that a centre in Cairo has over 130 cameras (GPX 2017). In another, a guide boasts about how ubiquitous the CCTV coverage is when he says, “You can't stand anywhere in this facility without a camera being able to view you” (IPC, 2016). Another guide echoes, “Everywhere we've been, there are two or three cameras” (Gestalt IT, 2017). One video notes that some Google data centres use sophisticated thermal imaging cameras to identify the heat signatures of intruders at their perimeter or within their grounds (Google Workspace 2013).

Some centres use algorithms in addition to guards to analyse the surveillance footage for suspicious behaviour. As a Google tour video explains, it uses “video analytics” that “automatically detect anomalies in the video and alert security staff to investigate further” (Google Workspace 2013). CCTV cameras are not the only sensors, though. Other areas might be protected by motion detectors, including lasers in the underfloor vents. “Lasers?!” a visitor excitedly exclaims in one video (Gestalt IT, 2017). The security measures featured in the corpus of tour videos illustrate how the security features do not simply prevent unauthorised access but structure that access. Security staff work for and within layers of security.

Guards: Watching and Watched

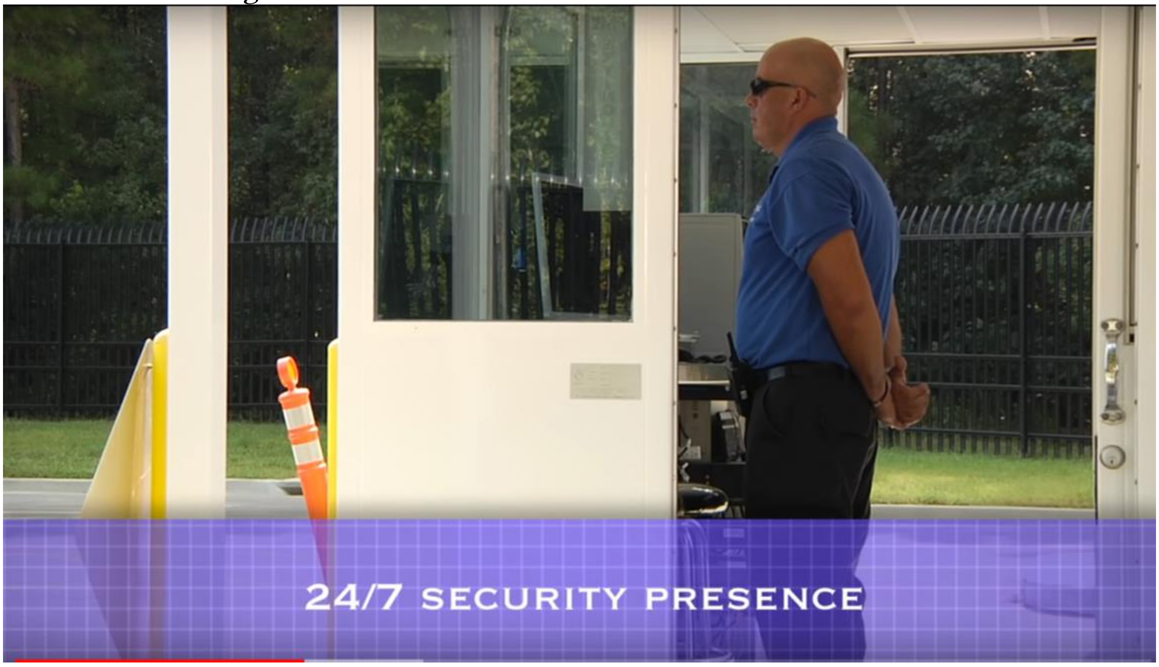

Figure 3. A guard checks cars at a checkpoint outside a Google data centre. Source: (Google Workspace, 2013).

Security staff feature heavily in data centre tour videos. The videos promote security guards as an essential security element in a data centre. Many of the videos boast of a “24/7” or “24/7/365” security presence. As the video tours work their way towards the racks of servers, they may feature a host of security guards at work. Some of these jobs might include guard posts stationed next to the gates and boom gates. In Figure 3, a security guard gazes vigilantly out from the perimeter of a Google data centre for intruders. The guard checks the identity documents of employees as they approach a boom gate to enter the grounds.

The video tours often show guards performing their work inside the data centre. In the videos guards perform their duties from behind counters and front desks, checking credentials and issuing passes. Beyond the front desks, visitors may then pass a metal detector test and x-ray machine. Guards are also featured in command centres, watching rows of monitors with CCTV footage or graphical representations of the centre. Figure 4 shows guards at a Google data centre watching and discussing video surveillance feeds in the command centre. The video explains that security guards are trained to immediately investigate anything out of the ordinary and that Google maintains “relationships with local law enforcement” alongside footage of a police cart arriving at the gate (Google Workspace, 2013). The videos also feature guards who aren’t tied to a particular location. Tours show and boast of round the clock patrols of the buildings and grounds, with some mentioning audits of restricted space “every hour” (OneNeck IT Solutions, 2017). In some data centres, guards escort visitors at all times during their visit. One Google data centre equips patrolling security guards with a garage of cars and jeeps to secure the grounds (Google Workspace, 2013).

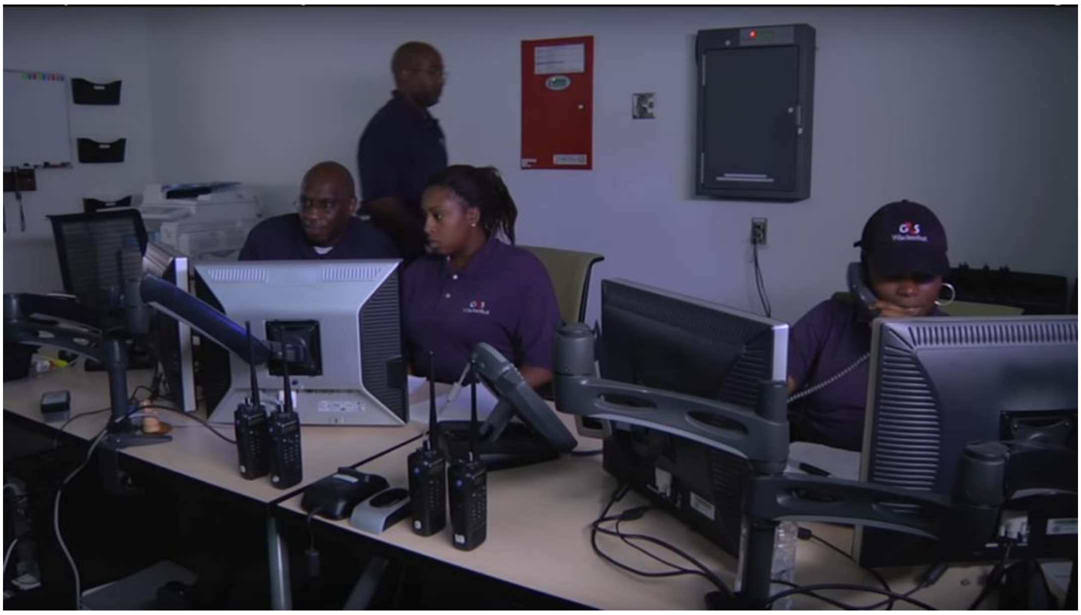

Figure 4. Guards staff a security command centre inside a Google data centre. Source: (Google Workspace, 2013).

The videos often promote features that allow technicians to work within the security layers of the data centre. Many data centre tour videos show features designed to make data centres habitable for their clients’ technicians. Standard amenities appearing in the tour videos include meeting rooms, kitchenettes and hot desk spaces. Some data centres offer more comprehensive domestic features such as gyms, showers and sleeping quarters. These spaces enable people to inhabit and effectively work in the austere data centres. In some data centres, the security extends beyond protecting the capital of the server racks to the workers. One tour video boasts that workers can enjoy an outdoor break area “within the secure area” (RagingWire Data Centers, 2017). People secure and are secured within the data centre.

The corpus of video tours demonstrates the prominent role physical security features take in data centre promotion. The videos make specific security infrastructures hypervisible to perform particular security discourses. The tour videos illustrate the tension noted by Taylor (2017) that data centre workers are perceived to be a weakness in the security, making their representation in the tour complex. As the videos demonstrate, security guards are often critical to data centre security. The security is represented in the videos in layers to account for potential weaknesses and reassure clients that those who work within the securitised space are themselves governed. As a tour from the Iron Mountain data centre tells the viewer, its officers are "vetted [and] background checked" (Iron Mountain, 2017). A guide at the IPC Data Center in the Philippines tells the viewer that "we have eyes on all visitors all the time" (IPC, 2016). The videos smooth the tension of perceived risk by layering security for the people who work within the data centres.

Discussion

The analysis of data centre tour videos highlights that physical security is vital to promoting data centres. The infrastructure needs to be secure and operational, even in the face of disaster (what is referred to as continuity-of-operations plan or COOP (see Spring, 2011)). Data is a crucial part of our lives, and many institutions and essential social processes rely on keeping personal information (Nissenbaum 2010) and health data (Lupton, 2018) secure. Data flows and storage are also crucial to structures of power (D'ignazio and Klein 2020). Infrastructure is supposed to be reliable and seamless. The physical security infrastructure is tied to the identity of the organisation that runs it and the clients who might use it. Choosing a data centre is both an operational decision but also a political one. Infrastructure is usually hidden, or *infra,* and operators choose to exhibit the infrastructure for political reasons.

Contrary to industry preferences expressed in previous research, the video tours foreground workers within the security apparatus of data centres. Unlike the material observed by Taylor (2019), where workers are hidden from the camera lens, the data centre video tours used the workers, and other security measures, to perform the discourse of guarded, ruled space described by Hu (2015). The promotional videos highlight physical security features as a security theatre, pre-empting and nullifying potential threats to underline the centre's brand or corporate identity.

Mark Andrejevic (2007) terms the increasing use of surveillance through a growing number of inputs as constructing the "digital enclosure". The dream of the digital enclosure, according to Andrejevic, is "the creation of an interactive realm wherein every action and transaction generates information about itself" (2007, p.2). Data centres and the cloud are foundational for enabling mass surveillance and calculation for the digital enclosure to function (Rossiter 2017), but it also appears that its logic has turned within. As the Google video tour at the beginning of this article illustrates, data centre tours communicate that even media crews working for Google are always accompanied by guards within the centre. Other videos echo this sentiment, and some state explicitly that visitors are escorted by guards at all times, while many display the enormous amount of surveillance equipment used within the data centres and their grounds. Andrejevic notes that the digital enclosure facilitates only two things: "commerce and policing" (2007, p.132). The staff in the data centre work towards the ends of commerce and policing, securing the data centre and ensuring it continues to provide uninterrupted service against "external, unfree enemies" (Hu 2015) even in the face of existential threats such as climate change (Cubitt et al., 2011; Peters, 2015; Jones, 2018; Hogan and Vonderau, 2019). The tour videos demonstrate the discourse used to sell the securitised future of the internet to corporate clients even in the face of potential social and environmental upheaval.

Conclusion

This article shows that the data centre tour videos foreground physical security infrastructure and security workers. The tour videos tie the physical security infrastructure to the corporate identity and communicate the durability and reliability of the service. The video tours perform a certain kind of security theatre to promote their services and stake their corporate identity, guarding their sovereign territory against perceived external threats. They foreground security features such as 24-hour guards, boom gates, ID checks and CCTV to illustrate their control over the data centre territory. To underline their security, some also claim to be ready for movie-plot threats such as an “invasion”, a “biological attack”, or a “zombie apocalypse”. Rather than considering this security theatre as a distraction, it might be more helpful to consider its role in performing security discourse, branding data centres, and putting infrastructure on display (Holt and Vonderau 2015).

The video tours also highlight ongoing tensions associated with working in data centres (Rossiter 2017). Previous research has noted a reticence to include people in promotional material for data centres because people present a possible security threat (Taylor 2019). However, tour videos often feature security guards and technicians at work. The tour videos smooth this tension by communicating that the security works in layers with comprehensive surveillance of visitors and workers. Rather than an authorised/unauthorised binary, the videos give the viewer the impression that the security structures access. Much of the security work featured in the videos occurs away from the towers of servers, communicating that workers are only allowed where necessary.

Data centres are central to many growing uses of digital technology, including cloud data storage, data processing, media streaming services and automation. The operators of data centres appear to consider it essential to communicate the physical security they use to guard their services. The tour videos foreground physical security to perform specific security discourse and establish governed corporate territory. The data centre tour videos give an insight into a vision of the future of computing and the internet that is much more closed and securitised than might have been previously imagined. Further research is required to critically examine how this promotional material is produced and how it relates to data centre workers' lives and working conditions. Cloud storage and computing seem likely to increase in importance, but workers will occupy changing roles as data centres are further automated. Following work such as Starosielski (2015) or Rossiter (2017), future research might study how the representation of data centre security changes in different political and cultural contexts across countries. So, even as you read this article you downloaded from a server somewhere, think of the alligators.

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Endnotes

1. Please contact the corresponding author for a full copy of the data centre tour video corpus.

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List of Figures

Figure 1. A glimpse from the 360 video tour of a Google data centre. A motionless security guard appears in the background of every location. Source: Google Cloud Tech (2016, 24 March). Google Data Center 360° Tour. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDAYZU4A3w0 All Rights Reserved.

Figure 2. Beware of the Alligators sign outside a Google data centre. Source: The Soul of Politics (2017, 8 May) Google Data Center Inside Tour in Google headquarters in Mountain View, CA. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evHVnkZBpW4 All Rights Reserved.

Figure 3. A guard looks out from a guard post outside a Google data centre. Source: Google Workspace (2013, 19 September) Security and Data Protection in a Google Data Center. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLory3qLoY8 All Rights Reserved.

Figure 4. Guards working at a security command centre inside a Google data centre. Source: Google Workspace (2013, 19 September) Security and Data Protection in a Google Data Center. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLory3qLoY8 All Rights Reserved.

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Chinese Video Creator Identities - a Cross-Platform Social Media Perspective

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Abstract

Within a globalised digital environment characterised by increasingly diverse and dynamic social media platforms, video creators and their content production and circulation now typically operate across multiple social media platforms. Focusing on Chinese content creators and their cross-platform and cross-cultural social media practices, this paper draws on digital ethnographic research to analyse how user-generated content and creator identities are constructed across Chinese and Western social media services including YouTube, Bilibili, Douyin and RED. This article asks: how do Chinese content creators produce and circulate videos across multiple social media platforms and diverse cultures? How do these creators navigate platform architectures to present, manage and commercialise their identity given the cross-platform and transnational context?

The findings suggest that Chinese creators' cross-platform practices can be seen as a form of *platform migration*, in which they learn to move within and across platforms to ensure they create the optimal conditions for their content to spread and be viewed. These migratory platform practices are, however, constrained by audiences, algorithms, and advertiser expectations for creators to construct and maintain a single and consistent creator identity. These transnational creator identities include elements of both novelty and normativity in video content, such as niche or exotic performances, which serve up content for negotiating algorithmic visibility, or negotiating audiences for achieving a "cosmopolitan Chinese-ness". As such, we can see that creator identities are both afforded and shaped through the globalised cultures, economies and politics of online video-sharing platforms.

Keywords

Video-sharing platforms, social media, online identity, Chinese creators.

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Introduction

This article focuses on the social media practices of a group of young Chinese content creators in Australia who make and share online video blogs, or vlogs, across multiple platforms. These Chinese creators initially created vlogs for personal reasons, to archive their transnational experiences, and to share videos of their lives with friends and family in their home country. However, as they gained exposure and attracted subscribers on various platforms, they began thinking about the possibility of commercialising their video content. Creators' daily vlogs were initially grounded in their ordinary practices, before becoming content they curated in their entrepreneurial use of platforms (Burgess and Green, 2009).

Although YouTube remains the dominant platform for user-generated videos with more than 2 billion monthly users worldwide (YouTube, 2020), it is being challenged by other fast-growing video-sharing services, such as the Chinese mobile short video app TikTok, and video-enabled social media platforms like Instagram. As TikTok has expanded globally, it has prompted both popular and academic attention on the growing significance of Chinese-owned social media platforms as part of a dynamic and changing global media environment. Subsequently, a video creator's content is no longer located within one particular platform, but operates across multiple platforms. Despite emerging research on platforms, creators, and content within the global social media entertainment industries (Craig and Cunningham, 2019), there is a lack of attention on how content creators post and share videos across multiple commercial platforms, participate in transnational spaces, and engage with culturally diverse communities (Abidin, 2018).

This paper draws on data collected from digital ethnographic research of young Chinese content creators in Australia, and in particular explores their self-presentation practices (Marwick, 2013a), as they navigate international and cross-cultural creator economies. The research adopted a cross-platform perspective to explore how user-generated content flowed, and creator identities were constructed across Chinese and Western social media services including YouTube, Bilibili[1], Douyin[2] and RED[3]. This article asks: how do Chinese content creators produce and circulate videos across multiple social media platforms and diverse cultures? How do these creators navigate platform architecture to present, manage and commercialise their identity given the cross-platform and transnational context?

Building on the literature on creator culture, social media entertainment, self-presentation, and online and cultural identity, this paper aims to bring together different threads of research to address the questions of video creators' cross-platform practice and online identity management. In this way, this article contributes to an understanding of the cross-platform use of social media and its impacts on identity management and performance in a cross-cultural, transnational context.

Our analysis is structured around two key themes. In the section on "platform migration", we discuss how Chinese video creators conduct platform-specific practices and cross-platform sharing to increase their online visibility and popularity. This article does not consider migrant experience in general, or migrant's general use of social media; instead, it focuses on Chinese creators' use of multiple platforms to build audiences and brand themselves across the global context of transnational social media. In the section on "cross-platform identities", we analyse how Chinese content creators manage their self-presentation on social media services through identity curation. We also consider how creators maintain a single, consistent online identity, and how they manage identity through algorithms across platforms. We argue that Chinese creators' cross-platform practices can be seen as a form of *platform migration*, in which they learn to move within and across platforms to ensure they create the optimal conditions for their content to be viewed and spread (Jenkins et al, 2013). As a result of migratory platform practices, creator identities are both afforded and constrained through the globalised cultures, economies and politics of online video-sharing platforms.

Background

Video Creators and the Social Media Entertainment Industry

YouTube has been the dominant platform for video sharing since the early period of social media development. The rise of "entrepreneurial vloggers" on YouTube (Burgess and Green, 2009) and multichannel networks (MCNs) have contributed to the professionalisation and monetisation of

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[1] Launched in 2009, Bilibili is a Chinese video-sharing site popular among the young generation and it is famous for the bullet-screen feature (Danmu) that allows comments scrolling across the screen in real-time.

[2] Launched in 2016, Douyin is the domestic version of TikTok in China

[3] Launched in 2013, RED (Little Red Book or Xiaogongshu) is a Chinese social media and e-commerce platform that is popular among female users.

YouTube amateur content, leading to a new social media entertainment industry where formal entrepreneurialism and non-entrepreneurial activities co-exist within the same space of video-sharing platforms (Craig and Cunningham, 2019; Cunningham et al, 2016; Lobato, 2016; Nicoll and Nansen, 2018; Vonderau, 2016). When vlogging (video-blogging) became a common cultural practice in everyday life (Burgess and Green, 2009), popular YouTuber accounts began to achieve a certain status through metrics such as video views or subscriber numbers. New terminology emerged and developed to account for new types of entertainers, with terms such as "micro-celebrity" (Senft, 2008), "internet celebrity" or "influencer" (Abidin, 2018), or the Chinese term "wanghong" that refers to online celebrities (Xu and Zhao, 2019; Zhang and de Seta, 2018). These social media entertainers are what Craig and Cunningham (2019, p.70) amongst others in media marketing describe as "creators", who produce and share original content on social media platforms, while professionalising their practices and monetising their content and their own media brand online and offline.

Research on participatory cultures on YouTube, and subsequently on entertainment industries on social media platforms provide a valuable lens to understand how contemporary platforms operate as hybrid cultural-commercial spaces that embody inherent tensions among users, advertisers and policymakers (Gillespie, 2010). This foundational research has established a field of study focused on U.S.-based platforms like YouTube and the cultural phenomenon of entrepreneurial content creators in the West, while more recently attention is broadening to platforms outside of the Western world.

Chinese social media platforms, too, present a more complicated case that offers additional perspectives to rethink Western-centric foci. In terms of studies on China's online video space, there is a growing body of research examining the shifting amateurism and professionalism on Chinese video-sharing platforms and the development of Chinese video streaming services (e.g. Wang and Lobato, 2019; Zhao, 2016). There are also case studies on Chinese video-sharing platforms' Danmu feature (e.g. Chen et al, 2015; Liu et al, 2016). More recently, there are emerging studies on the Chinese livestreaming industry (e.g. Cunningham et al, 2019; Zhang et al, 2019), and popular short video apps such as Kuaishou (Lin and de Kloet, 2019), Douyin and TikTok (Chen et al, 2020; Kaye et al, 2020), which analyses their affordances, business models, governance and platform cultures.

Despite some emerging areas of research on Chinese social media platforms as part of global entertainment industries, or as spaces in which Chinese users can participate in transnational communities (e.g. Sun, 2019; Sun and Yu, 2016), there is a lack of attention on how content creators post and share videos across culturally diverse platforms. The recent surge in popularity of the Chinese-owned short video app TikTok has prompted both popular and academic attention on this globalising cultural economy, yet this obscures a much more diverse ecology of Chinese video-sharing platforms and their cross-cultural uses and implications.

Bringing together research on creator culture, social media entertainment and Chinese video-sharing platforms, we can learn that social media platforms across China and the West have been transforming into a hybrid cultural-commercial space. Current understanding of the professionalisation of amateur content creators shows that video creation and circulation on various social media platforms are becoming every day and vernacular practices (Burgess, 2006; Burgess and Green, 2009; Gibbs et al, 2015), although there has been a lack of research on cross-platform usage. As social media entertainment platforms diversify and globalise, there is a need for further research on the transnational use of social media platforms for content production and circulation, and how creators on culturally different platforms contribute to the emerging global social media entertainment.

Through an analysis of cross-platform Chinese content creators, their online identities, and their entrepreneurial and cultural social media practices, this paper aims to contribute to knowledge about the increasing globalisation of video-sharing platforms and culturally diverse forms of participation.

Self-presentation, Online Identity and Chinese Cultural Identity

Scholars have examined the self-presentation practices of content creators, such as studies of "micro-celebrity" (Senft, 2008; Marwick, 2013b) and "internet celebrity" (Abidin, 2018), exploring topics of self-branding, authenticity and publicity, as they spread out across multiple platforms. These terms attempt to capture how ordinary people use videos, blogs and social networks to boost their popularity on the internet through performances that reflect commercial forms of branding and marketing (Senft, 2008 p.25), whilst also acknowledging the significant role social media audiences play as arbiters of authenticity in the identity performance of these celebrity-like entertainers (Marwick, 2013b). Despite this body of research on self-presentation amongst entrepreneurial content creators, there remains a lack of scholarly research on users' cross-platform behaviours on video-sharing sites, how people present identity differently across platforms, and the implications of different platforms on identity construction and reception.

Conceptually, analyses of social media self-presentation have been framed by applications of Erving Goffman's (1956) concepts of dramaturgy and "impression management" (Barbour and Marshall, 2012; Baym, 2010; Hogan, 2010; Marwick, 2013a; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2002). Goffman's concepts of self-presentation are valuable to understand key aspects of identity, performance, and evaluations of authenticity in the digital age. Hogan (2010), for example, developed Goffman's dramaturgical approach in social media research, arguing that self-presentation on social media should be spilt into "performance" that happens in synchronous "situations", and artifacts that take place in asynchronous "exhibitions" (Hogan, 2010, p.377). His exhibitional approach considers the temporal structure of online content, as well as the significant role of platforms and algorithms as "curators" in digital spaces. This paper builds on theories of self-presentation and online identity by exploring how Chinese video creators express their creative identity across multiple platforms. It uses empirical evidence to analyse to what extent online identity is shaped by the affordances of platforms, the commercial logic of their operation, and the expectations of audiences.

In particular, this article considers the perspective of Chinese cultural identity, and how it is managed and presented differently across cross-platform and cross-cultural contexts. When discussing these Chinese creators' cultural identity, there is a need to situate it in the cultural, economic and political contexts in which these videos are produced, distributed and consumed. The transnational contexts of China and Australia that form the focus of this paper necessitate that the analysis explores how user-generated videos posted across both Western and Chinese social media are shaped by and in turn shape their cultural identity. The literature on Chinese identity in the transnational context is complex and must be understood in the context of the political history of China (Wu, 1991, p.159). Migrant media studies also recognise the centrality of digital technology in shaping the cultural and social lives of Chinese diaspora (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Sun and Yu, 2016; Yu and Sun, 2019). Being part of a diaspora, one may feel a sense of in-betweenness, hybridity or "cosmopolitan Chineseness" (Yu and Sun 2019, p.18; Yue 2012, p.104), negotiating inherited Chinese identity with acquired local experience in the host country (Sun and Yu, 2016, p.167). This situated experience and identity are in turn mediated through the lens of contemporary global creator economies and cultures.

Current research has developed useful theories to understand how self-presentation and online identity has evolved since the rise of digital technologies. But changing digital platform technologies and globalisation requires further investigation of the complexity of platform affordances, and how users' cross-platform and cross-cultural practices of self-presentation and online identity are shaped by transnational contexts. Thus, by looking at the performance of online identity and more specifically at the expression of Chinese transnational cultural identity, this paper can help to broaden current knowledge of self-presentation and online identity by situating it within both cross-platform and cross-cultural contexts.

Research Methods

This article draws from digital ethnographic research involving semi-structured interviews, online observation and qualitative content analysis with young Chinese content creators living in Australia. Specifically, we conducted interviews with nine Chinese creators, observed their activities on social media platforms, and analysed their videos and comments.

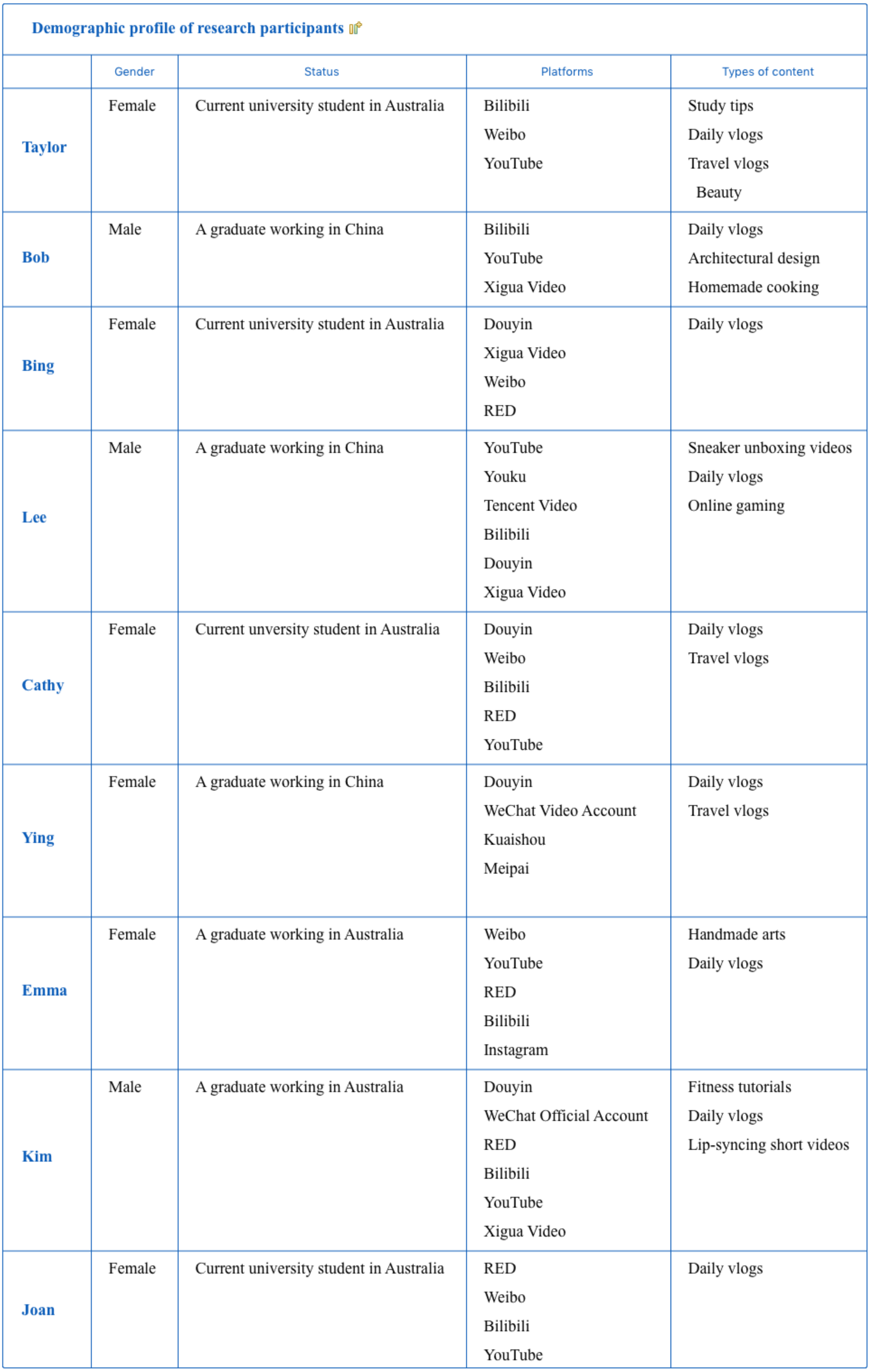
The digital ethnography approach in this paper allows us to immerse in the digital space, developing a firsthand understanding of these creators by spending time on their online platforms and interacting with them. Because this article explores Chinese video creators' cross-platform practices and online identity management, it is necessary to use ethnographic methods to pursue "thick descriptions" (Hine, 2015, p.1) to understand the complexity and the diverse elements impacted on online identity formation. On the "embedded, embodied and everyday internet" (Hine, 2015), using an ethnographic approach develops an all-round and in-depth understanding of how making videos and posting online are embedded in creators' lives, how their online identities have become a part of them, and how their social media practices have become everyday activities. Applying digital ethnography can help to gather a set of data that can capture the flow of video creators' online behaviours and understand their identities in depth and detail. Thus, digital ethnography (Hine, 2015; Hjorth et al, 2017; Pink et al, 2016) underpins much of this paper, as it is a methodology that combines in-depth research with users and their experiences as content creators, and a close analysis of the materiality of digital technologies that mediate their practices, as well as a critical and conceptual analysis of these data.

The selection of young Chinese video creators for this research recruited participants who identified as Chinese, having been born and grown up in China whilst also having experience of studying and living in Australia. Participants were aged from 18 to 35 years old, and were users who regularly uploaded videos online, posting on more than one social media platform, with their content covering various aspects of their lives in Australia. We recruited nine creators as research participants for interviews and online observation. Of these, six were female and three were male. In all, four were university students in Australia, three were graduates working in China and two were working in Australia. All the participants were on more than three social media platforms. The most common platforms they used were Bilibili and YouTube, and each site had seven of the interviewed creators on it. The second-most popular services or apps were Douyin, Weibo and RED with five creators on each platform. The third-most popular platform was Xigua Video with four creators on the site. Table 1 (pp 29) shows the demographic profile of the nine research participants (their names have been anonymised), and Table 2 (pp 30) shows the details of the most used platforms for sharing videos emerging from this research.

Research participants engaged in semi-structured interviews between June and July 2020. Due to the global outbreak of COVID-19 and social distancing rules, as well as the fact that participants were located in different parts of Australia and China, eight of the interviews were conducted via video chat through digital tools such as Zoom, and there was one offline face-to-face interview conducted in Melbourne. In addition to interviews, online observation of key platforms and research participant videos, profiles, and channels was conducted. Through immersion and participation on various platforms, including YouTube, Bilibili, Douyin and RED, we observed participants' self-presentation and audience interaction. We also conducted qualitative content analysis on publicly available data, including Chinese creators' user profiles, video content, posts and commentary. The collected data on social media was combined with observational notes.

Through interviews, online observations and qualitative content analysis, we collected and analysed data under the topics of cross-platform practices and online identity management to address the two research questions. The analysis was structured around two key themes that emerged from the research, including platform migration and cross-platform identities. These themes are presented in the discussion below. The last part of this article brings together the two themes and draws the connections among cross-platform video-sharing practices and the formation of online identity.

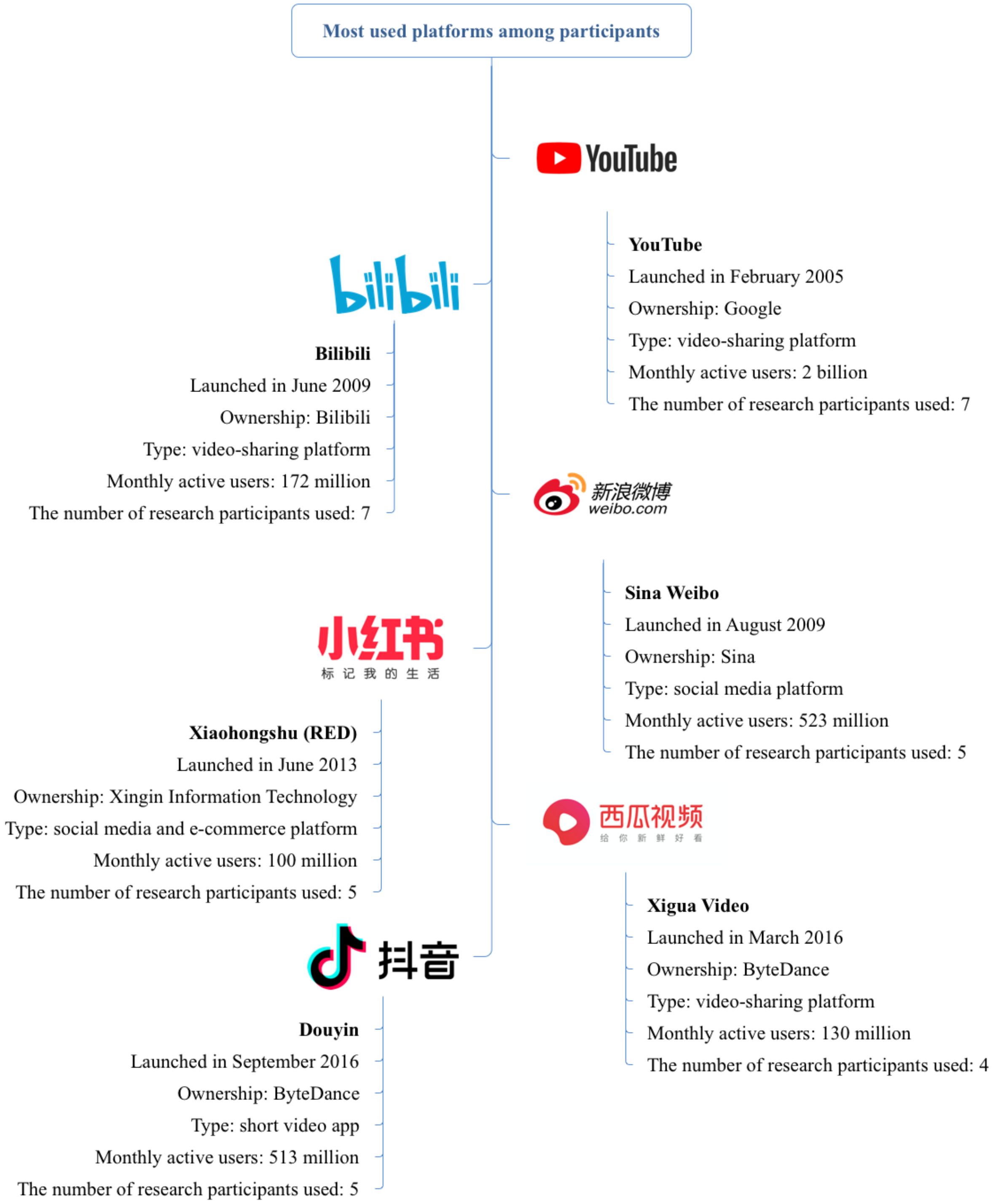
Table 1. Demographic profile of research participants (Pseudonyms have been used).



Demographic profile of research participants

	Gender	Status	Platforms	Types of content
Taylor	Female	Current university student in Australia	Bilibili Weibo YouTube	Study tips Daily vlogs Travel vlogs Beauty
Bob	Male	A graduate working in China	Bilibili YouTube Xigua Video	Daily vlogs Architectural design Homemade cooking
Bing	Female	Current university student in Australia	Douyin Xigua Video Weibo RED	Daily vlogs
Lee	Male	A graduate working in China	YouTube Youku Tencent Video Bilibili Douyin Xigua Video	Sneaker unboxing videos Daily vlogs Online gaming
Cathy	Female	Current unversity student in Australia	Douyin Weibo Bilibili RED YouTube	Daily vlogs Travel vlogs
Ying	Female	A graduate working in China	Douyin WeChat Video Account Kuaishou Meipai	Daily vlogs Travel vlogs
Emma	Female	A graduate working in Australia	Weibo YouTube RED Bilibili Instagram	Handmade arts Daily vlogs
Kim	Male	A graduate working in Australia	Douyin WeChat Official Account RED Bilibili YouTube Xigua Video	Fitness tutorials Daily vlogs Lip-syncing short videos
Joan	Female	Current university student in Australia	RED Weibo Bilibili YouTube	Daily vlogs

Table 2. Most used platforms among participants.



Most used platforms among participants

YouTube
Launched in February 2005
Ownership: Google
Type: video-sharing platform
Monthly active users: 2 billion
The number of research participants used: 7

Bilibili
Launched in June 2009
Ownership: Bilibili
Type: video-sharing platform
Monthly active users: 172 million
The number of research participants used: 7

Sina Weibo
Launched in August 2009
Ownership: Sina
Type: social media platform
Monthly active users: 523 million
The number of research participants used: 5

Xiaohongshu (RED)
Launched in June 2013
Ownership: Xingin Information Technology
Type: social media and e-commerce platform
Monthly active users: 100 million
The number of research participants used: 5

Xigua Video
Launched in March 2016
Ownership: ByteDance
Type: video-sharing platform
Monthly active users: 130 million
The number of research participants used: 4

Douyin
Launched in September 2016
Ownership: ByteDance
Type: short video app
Monthly active users: 513 million
The number of research participants used: 5

Table 2 note: The chart is created by the authors based on sources from Bilibili (2020), Xiaohongshu (2020), YouTube (2020), RTTnews (2020), QuestMobile (2019; 2020).

Discussion

Platform Migration

This study found that Chinese video creators had two main strategies for cross-platform content production and circulation. One is *platform-specific practices,* in which creators adopt multiple platforms and make tailored content for each platform with considerations of targeted audience, platform features, and cultures. The other strategy is *cross-platform sharing*, in which creators intentionally circulate the same content across multiple social media platforms to increase their online visibility amidst the unstable and unpredictable social media platform ecology. As Chinese creators in this research had access to both Chinese and Western platforms, many of them wanted to expand their audience base to the Chinese market within mainland China, as well as a global market that is not restricted to national boundaries.

Platform-Specific Practices

Chinese creators in this research tended to start with one platform, such as Bilibili or Douyin, establishing a practice of posting and sharing videos before developing multi-platform video-sharing practices. Initially, research participants only occasionally posted videos about their hobbies on social media platforms, identifying an interest or passion in a particular area including fitness, cooking, makeup, fashion, design and so on. In addition to sharing the "everydayness" of life in vlogs, these creators also showed their "exceptionalism" (Abidin, 2018) by presenting their expert skills in videos. As Chinese creators gained more experience and grew their subscriber numbers, they not only used platforms and videos as digital archives for overseas memories, but also treated them as tools for making money.

Over time, many of the participants started using various platforms in an entrepreneurial way (Burgess and Green, 2009). For instance, some began creating tailored content based on platform affordances, or strategically conducting "platform-specific practices", which refers to the ways Chinese creators post particular kinds of videos on a platform but not on others. Research participants engaged in platform-specific practices based on the "imagined affordances" of these platforms: that is, their practices were shaped by their expectations about the functionality of different technologies, and how these expectations shaped the way they perceived, approached and used these platforms to share videos (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p.5). Chinese creators perceived platforms differently, and they strategically used the perceived affordances of platforms in various ways towards different ends.

Cathy[4], for example, first adopted Douyin in 2018 when Douyin was getting increasingly popular in China. Douyin is a short-form video app launched by ByteDance in 2016, and the company later released its international version TikTok in 2017, targeting users outside of mainland China. Cathy described Douyin as an app for short and quick videos, and she had to do a lot of fast-cut editing in her vlogs to stimulate viewers' senses and attention. "Most of the Douyin vlogs followed the three-part structure, a question, a story and a golden sentence as a conclusion. The content is very templatised," Cathy said. What Cathy described on Douyin was "circumscribed creativity", referring to "creative potential being shaped or guided by platformization" (Kaye et al, 2020, p.18). Douyin and TikTok are representative platforms of circumscribed creativity, offering templates for users to easily replicate and participate in popular trends on the app.

Originally, Cathy posted short-form vertical videos on Douyin – portrait-mode videos that are taller than wider, with a length usually limited to under 60 seconds. In contrast, she used Bilibili and Weibo to share longer horizontal vlogs that were in a 16:9 aspect ratio and up to 10 minutes duration. As she achieved popularity on Douyin and gradually became an "entrepreneurial vlogger" (Burgess and Green, 2009), Cathy also adopted YouTube and RED for increasing her visibility and monetisation options across digital spaces.

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[4] Pseudonyms of the Chinese content creators in this research have been used.

Besides the consideration of imagined affordances, Chinese creators also noted that their "imagined audience" (Marwick and boyd, 2011) on each platform was different, which suggests that content producers on social media have imaginations and expectations about the audiences they think they are speaking to, and they use strategies to navigate these audiences in mediated conversations. Creators' understanding of their social media audience is limited, but they can take cues to imagine a potential audience, such as checking the locations and the range of ages among their viewers through channel management tools on platforms. For instance, participants suggested that their viewers on YouTube were more diverse and located around the world, whilst on Chinese platforms, the audience tended to be located in mainland China. Based on the knowledge of the imagined audience on each platform, Chinese creators adjusted their platform-specific content to cater to the taste of the targeted audience, as Cathy noted that Douyin users preferred to watch short-form videos whilst Bilibili users expected to consume longer videos.

The competitive and fast-changing digital landscape of social media platforms has posed challenges for Chinese video creators. They are not only required to adapt to the new functionality within platforms, but also to constantly adopt new social media services that they have not used before, to keep up with the shifting trends and preferences of audiences. In addition to platform-specific practices, another common strategy among Chinese creators was to share the same video content across several platforms to increase visibility.

Cross-Platform Sharing

As Chinese video creators gained more experience in making and sharing videos online, they discovered that relying on a single platform was not a wise decision. The ecology of platforms and their preferences means that there is always a new platform emerging and an old service declining. To maintain their popularity on the internet, it was common that Chinese creators had one or two primary platforms, and they also migrated across platforms and shared the same content on multiple services.

Lee, for example, initially established his channels on YouTube and Youku, a Chinese video streaming service owned by the internet giant Alibaba. After posting videos on the two platforms for two years, he paused his use of Youku, and then reposted his previous content on Bilibili and other Chinese platforms. Lee said he had to "escape the sinking ship" because Youku did not support user-generated content (UGC) as it used to. Modelled after YouTube, Youku is one of the pioneers of online video-sharing platforms that emerged around 2005 in China, aiming to build up online communities of amateur video creators (Zhao, 2016). Although it still has a section of UGC, Youku is now known as a video streaming service, similar to its competitors iQiyi and Tencent Video, owned by technology giants Baidu and Tencent respectively (Keane and Wu, 2018; Zhao, 2016).

Similar to Lee, most of the participant creators actively adopted new services and shared content across Chinese and Western social media platforms. They developed patterns of cross-platform content production and circulation for maximising their online exposure, which could potentially bring them more online influence, fame and monetisation opportunities. When creators rose to popularity on a platform, the officials from other platforms also invited these creators to join, promising to offer financial incentives and online traffic supports to newly joined users. Thus, the decision of using multiple platforms was not only because of creators' entrepreneurial insights of branding the self, but it was also because of the dynamic, volatile and competitive online video space in China (Wang and Lobato, 2019) that pushed creators to adapt to the changing digital environment. Creators tried to avoid the risk that a platform, or the account on a platform, might be shut down or unseen because of the instability and precarity of creative labour in the social media entertainment industry (Cunningham et al, 2019; Duffy et al, 2021).

Lee's "migratory behaviour" from Youku to other Chinese platforms shows a process of "media convergence" and "spreadability" that social media content creators are the driving force for circulating videos across multiple platforms and cultural landscape, and they are learning to use different platforms to bring the flow of the content more under their control and to engage with diverse audiences and platform cultures (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al, 2013). Cross-platform usage is not only because creators wanted to increase online visibility and commercial opportunities, but it is also because of the changing technical affordances and business models within platforms and the precarious nature of online video industries that force creators to migrate in-between old and new platforms. It extends our understanding of convergence and spreadability by showing that "platform ecosystems" (van Dijck, 2013) and the dynamic of social media entertainment also play a role in creators' migratory behaviour.

Bringing together the above-mentioned two strategies of platform-specific practices and cross-platform sharing, we argue that these strategic practices across multiple platforms can be viewed as a form of *platform migration*, in which creators learn to move within and across platforms to ensure they create the optimal conditions for their content to be viewed and shared. Creators' platform migration is based on the imagined audiences and affordances that populate and define the platforms, as well as the consideration of the changing platform ecosystems and social media entertainment. Here the term *migration* is useful to understand the behaviour of using several culturally different platforms at the same time. It describes the movement of content creators from one to another platform, as well as the mobility between multiple platforms and cultural landscape. The idea of platform migration not only refers to the movement across multiple platforms in a technical sense, it also refers to transnational mobility because these creators are part of "Chinese digital diasporas" (Brinkerhoff 2009; Sun & Yu 2016; Yu & Sun 2019), which we explore in the following section to discuss how cross-platform practices have an impact on the ways that creators interacted with their audiences and constructed their cross-cultural social media identities.

Cross-platform identities

The diversity of multiple social media platforms and the complexity of cross-cultural contexts posed challenges to participant creators. Although they had cross-platform strategies for creating and sharing videos, they also needed to be mindful of their online self-presentation to various audience groups on different platforms. Creators had to come up with tactics for managing their self-presentation, authenticity and online identity with considerations of audiences, platform features and affordances, and the transnational context of cross-platform usage.

Identity Curation

Identity curation refers to the process of crafting the self. For Chinese creators, curating online identity involves experimenting with a variety of video content, adjusting the positions of channels and the self, and engaging with audiences across platforms through multiple forms of "performances" (Goffman, 1956). When participant creators received feedback from their audiences, they gained a general idea about the kind of videos that could attract more attention, so they adjusted their self-presentation and personal content to be more likeable among viewers. Taylor, for example, started with travel and beauty content but gradually found her way to educational videos. It was because she realised that studying was something she could do the best at the moment based on her experience and expertise. As her educational videos rose to popularity, Taylor was motivated by the feedback of the audiences and made more study-related videos.

Similar to Taylor, other participants gave attention to cultivating internet celebrities' personalities of everydayness, exceptionalism and exoticism (Abidin, 2018). Creators were everyday because of the mundane and ordinary aspect of life present in vlogs, and they were exceptional because they presented expert skills. As for the quality of being exotic, because participants have the unique experience of living overseas, when presenting their Australian life on Chinese social media, their performances were exotic to the local people in China. Showing the cross-cultural part of life was an exotic factor to attract attention from online viewers, and it also led to the formation of a hybrid Chinese identity.

For some participants, recording everyday vlogs of their cross-cultural experience was a chance to explore local places and learn about multiculturalism in Australia. Over time, they gradually formed a hybrid Chinese identity, or a "cosmopolitan Chineseness" (Yue, 2012; Sun and Yu, 2016), showing cross-cultural characters in their videos. For instance, Lee's use of different languages in his cross-platform practices revealed his cross-cultural experience in everyday life. He mainly spoke Cantonese in his vlogs, because he wanted to use the language as a way of preserving the Cantonese culture from his hometown in southern China. Occasionally, he also spoke Mandarin and English according to the themes of a video and the imagined audience whom he wanted to speak to on a platform. Lee posted most of his English content on YouTube but not on Chinese platforms because he believed that the imagined audience on each platform had different language preferences.

The decisions on different ways of self-presentation across platforms indicated that creators had considerations of the content, audiences, platforms and cultures. Because of the unique cross-cultural context, participant Chinese creators utilised their experience in Australia as an exotic factor and performed a hybrid cultural identity on their videos through internet influencer practices (Abidin, 2018). The factor of hybridity was highlighted in participant creators' practices of platform migration for increasing online popularity and potentially leading to more opportunities for monetization. While enjoying the benefits from performing hybrid characteristics, creators had to negotiate and carefully curate their online identities across multiple video-sharing platforms to not confuse the audience.

Although research participants made use of influencer practices to present the self online, they did not deliberately create a persona at the beginning. Instead, their online personae were gradually formed and reinforced through the practices of the video-making process and the interaction with the audience. The gradual construction of online personae found in this paper is different from the current understanding that "wanghong" (online celebrities) creators in China have a preset of special "renshe" (character design) in the Chinese social media entertainment industry (Craig et al, 2021, p.153). Instead, creators in this research carefully curated and performed their online identities, and their personae were gradually constructed and changed as their content genres, or "verticals", changed after testing on different platforms.

It is noted that participant Chinese creators' self-presentation both employed "performances" in synchronous situations and "artifacts" in asynchronous exhibitions (Hogan, 2010, p.377). Their channels were the exhibitions where they archived online videos, in other words, the artifacts that they made in the past. Creators also had real-time interactions with their audience, such as live streaming. But in some cases, the situation became complex when live and recorded performances on various platforms were mixed at the same time, adding multiple layers to the "front" and "backstage" of performances (Goffman, 1956).

In one instance Taylor live streamed via a webcam on the laptop, whilst she also recorded how she filmed a video to her audience using a digital camera. She told her audience that their real-time comments may appear in the final video, and some of the viewers commented that they felt nervous about shifting from an audience member to a visible part of the performance. In this situation, the line between the audience and performers blurred, as did the boundary between performances and artifacts. Using multiple video formats to engage with the audience becomes common practices among creators. It complicates and challenges the established dramaturgical concepts of self-presentation (Hogan, 2010; Goffman, 1956), and creates a messiness to online performance. By adding the layer of live streaming, maintaining authenticity became challenging because video creators were required to control multiple roles in the same space and time. Although Chinese creators enjoyed the flexibility of platform migration and they curated different ways of self-presentation to cater to the audience on each platform, they still needed to be consistent with the performance in their previous videos posted on a platform.

Performance Consistency

Live streaming was a common tool for participants to interact with their audience in real-time. Creators used live streaming as a way to increase audience engagement, and perform authenticity and relatability to their viewers. When live-stream broadcasting to the public, participant creators were also under pressure to perform and manage their online presence because live streaming was equal to a non-stop performance that lasted for a long time. They were required to behave the same as the self in the recorded performances, carefully controlling themselves to not reveal a contradictory backstage reality to the audience. As Chinese creators in this research started making videos as amateurs, they more or less carried through the amateurism characteristics as a way of performing authenticity while professionalising their video practices (Abidin, 2017; Nayar, 2017). Authenticity is not only about being real, but it is also constructed through video creators' different uses of platforms and affordances for being consistent with their online performance over time.

Kim, for example, was a full-time content creator in the fitness genre, who was known for his funny facial expressions. When he started using Douyin, without any particular intention he uploaded a few humorous lip-syncing clips on the app, which attracted hundreds of followers and thousands of likes on the first day. This motivated him to make more funny short sketches to attract more viewership, and by doing this, his online identity was gradually constructed as a comedic creator. Occasionally he also shared gym workout clips on his platform. As he gradually rose to popularity, he signed with an MCN and the company suggested him to focus on the fitness vertical. MCNs are intermediary firms that operate in and around the advertising infrastructure of social media platforms, linking video creators with the advertising, marketing and screen production industries (Lobato 2016). For some participants in this research, signing up for an MCN was an important step to move towards the professionalisation and monetisation of amateur content creation in the social media entertainment industry (Craig & Cunningham 2019). Kim took the advice from his MCN and became a full-time fitness creator who mainly posted workout tutorials, as he reasoned that knowledge content could survive longer than funny sketches in the Chinese short-video industry.

Kim indicated that it took a while for him to work out the style of combining entertainment with useful fitness information. This kind of knowledgeable-funny persona was Kim's form of originality and uniqueness, making him stand out from other fitness creators on Douyin. His online identity is tied to his reliability as a fitness expert, and the consistency and authenticity of his comedic characteristics. Interestingly, as Kim recently adopted RED, Bilibili and YouTube, he did not carry over the comedic persona in his longer-form videos posted on the three newly joined platforms. He did this because he wanted to experiment with something different – to make fitness instructional videos in a more serious style.

Being consistent with the performance on the short video posted on Douyin and trying different forms of content and online persona on other platforms, Kim's experience suggested that platform migration had brought him opportunities for presenting his multiple online identities. As many scholars suggest that people's identity is multiple, fluid, flexible and changeable (Baym, 2010; Goffman, 1956; Marwick, 2013a; Turkle, 1995), Chinese video creators had multiple identities and they could flexibly adjust their self-presentation through different videos posted on several platforms. Just as Taylor turned herself into a study video creator, and as with Kim's story of becoming a fitness content creator, they presented the self strategically based on the niche of content they wanted to focus on, the responses from viewers across platforms and for some, the requirements from MCNs. Over time, as creators developed their video channels, they showed more of their expertise or skills in their hobbies, presenting themselves as specialists in a field and gradually leaning on such skills to create niche content.

The tendency towards niche production is related to the scarcity of attention in the digital economy. The economy of the internet follows the logic of an attention economy, in which one's primary motive is to increase one's share of the attention of other human beings (Goldhaber, 2006). This is supplemented by an infrastructural Like economy, which refers to an infrastructure that allows the exchange of data, traffic, affects, connections and money, mediated through the Like button on the social web (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013, p.1353). Thus, on video-sharing platforms such as Douyin, creators attempted to hook the audience within ten seconds, attracting viewers to continue watching the clips, and potentially letting the audience do activities such as liking, commenting and sharing the video. To leave a lasting impression among viewers, creators not only needed to perform consistently because of audience expectations and the platform economy, but they also learned and negotiated with platform algorithms to make their niche content fit into algorithmic categories and to increase popularity.

Algorithmic Management of Identity

Although participant creators could flexibly manage their multiple online identities through platform migration, there was an impetus to adhere to a single, fixed identity on a platform because most of the commercial software collected user data and targeted the audience with advertising (Marwick, 2013a, p.357). It is easier for a single identity to be recognised by the recommendation system in terms of "public relevance algorithms" (Gillespie, 2014) and algorithmic "visibility" (Bishop, 2018; Cotter, 2018). The more focus on a niche, the more possibilities that platforms would promote creators' videos to the right audience through the recommendation systems. Research participants chose their niche of content subjectively, while the decision was also influenced by the algorithms. If a kind of video fitted into a trend on a platform, that video might be supported by the algorithms and recommended to a broad range of audiences. As the viewership rose and creators reviewed the figures, they got the sense that a type of content could help to increase popularity, and so creators would put efforts into making a similar type of videos within a niche area.

This research found that creators had developed personal senses about the operations of this "algorithmic power", and based on their perceptions, they engaged in a range of strategies to intervene in and negotiate the unpredictable algorithms in efforts to enhance their visibility (Bucher, 2012; Bucher, 2017; Cotter, 2018; van der Nagel, 2018). Whilst research participants did not know exactly how a platform's proprietary recommendation algorithms worked, they learnt about the "folk theories" and "rules" encoded in algorithms from their experience, and adopted their own tactics to play the "visibility game" and intervene in algorithmic governance (Cotter 2018; Myers West, 2018; van der Nagel 2018).

Because participant creators had one or two primary platforms with other subsidiary accounts on other services, they usually put more focus on learning the rules of the algorithms on their main platforms. Participants deployed tactics in attempts to enhance their visibility, including trying different trendy keywords in titles, attaching multiple tags that were popular on a platform, frequently uploading new videos and actively interacting with their audiences. They also actively engaged with the assigned topics and events provided by some Chinese platforms. For instance, platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili and RED have various themed topics and templates to guide, inspire and encourage their users to create content. By making themed videos and adding the assigned hashtags in their posts, Chinese creator participants suggested that they could potentially gain online traffic support and even financial incentives provided by platforms. Participants also used analytics of video-sharing platforms to improve their online performance. Sometimes they spent money on running advertising campaigns through the marketing tools on platforms to more precisely target an audience, increase exposure rate and monitor the performance of a video.

The tactics that participant creators used for playing the visibility game were specifically tailored to each platform, although creators might share the same content across multiple platforms. Participants were required to become actively engaged in managing their accounts beyond simply uploading videos, because platforms contain algorithmic ranking that holds the power of determining who and what shows on the top of the users' feeds, the trending list, and the interface where users explore new content (Bucher 2012; Gillespie 2014; Cotter 2018). These algorithmic systems implied a need to spend time and effort optimizing themselves and their account settings, following the algorithmic logic and cultures on a platform. Through such algorithmically-directed and platform-specific efforts, participants found they could gain the "rewards" of visibility on a platform, and avoid the "punishment" of online traffic restriction or being shadowbanned (Bucher, 2012; Myers West 2018). The scale of their channels was different, but what they had in common was the micro-celebrity-like practices and the move towards a niche and a single identity as the result of algorithmic management.

However, negotiating among the two poles of performing the fluid hybridity across multiple platforms and being consistent on a platform amplified the sense of in-betweenness. This is in part because research participants are members of "Chinese digital diasporas" in Australia, who disperse across the geographical, political and cultural borders between the two countries, In addition to this experience in Australia, they have a shared memory of being a Chinese person in China, and they use Chinese social media platforms for "returning" to the "homeland" of China (Brinkerhoff, 2009; Sun and Yu, 2016; Yu and Sun, 2019). These observations confirm existing knowledge of the sense of in-betweenness among Chinese diasporas (Yu and Sun, 2019, p.18), but they have also led us to see a new perspective that Chinese creators' hybridized practices of the cultural self have been taken place across Western and Chinese video-sharing platforms. There is also a sense of spatial and cultural vacillation with negotiations of cross-platform video-sharing practices and diasporic identities (Zhang and Wang, 2019).

For bilingual and trilingual creators like Lee, sometimes they needed to deal with questions from Chinese viewers in mainland China in terms of the hybridity performed on Chinese platforms, leaving participant creators to consider whether they should continue the performance of cosmopolitan Chineseness that absorbs Western characteristics, or to present themselves more as "pure Chinese". By conducting platform migration practices, Chinese creators in this research enjoyed the flexibility of presenting the self in various ways. However, the performance of cross-platform online identities also reinforced the feeling of being stuck in-between cultures, posing challenges to creators for following the algorithmic logic of platforms by adhering to a single identity while performing the authentic hybrid self at the same time.

Conclusion

This article examined Chinese video creators' cross-platform content production and circulation on Chinese and Western social media services, and their strategies of managing online identities in the transnational context of China and Australia. It used digital ethnography methods and a creator-centric perspective to provide critical and conceptual analysis of the intersection of platforms and cultures in the emerging global social media entertainment industry. It found that Chinese creators posted and shared videos across multiple platforms according to the imagined audiences and affordances that populated and defined them. Due to the dynamic and the increasingly globalised ecology of the digital environment, these creators developed a series of strategic cross-platform practices, which we argue is a form of *platform migration*, in order to create optimal conditions for their videos to spread and be viewed. Based on these migratory platform behaviours, creators were able to present themselves through diverse video formats, including short, longer-forms of videos and live streaming, and to commercialise their video production.

Platform migration allowed Chinese creators to flexibly adjust their performances by engaging with different audiences across platforms, to craft their online personae and to find their content verticles that had the potentials to thrive on a platform. But it also brought challenges to creators' online identity management because of the messiness of multiplatform use. Although creators had multiple, fluid identities, they were encouraged to adhere to a single, fixed online identity because of audiences' expectations and commercial realities, including algorithmic operations and intermediaries like MCNs pushing them to find niche content. As creators applied micro-celebrity strategies and shared their transnational experience across platforms, they tended to form a hybrid Chinese identity, or cosmopolitan Chineseness, as a unique cross-cultural character to attract online viewers. Whilst Chinese creators faced challenges of maintaining the consistency of a single identity, they also felt a sense of in-betweenness because of their cosmopolitan Chinese identity. Ultimately, platform migration produced an unstable or precarious online identity, one that needed to be managed continuously, flexible to be ready to shift platforms and their conditions as demanded in this dynamic space.

The findings of this research help to build up the existing knowledge of creator culture and social media entertainment through the investigation of Chinese content creators' cross-platform practices and online identity management. The originality of this research is situated in a cross-platform and cross-cultural context to understand social media use and its impacts on the performance of identity. By developing the concept of platform migration, this research contributes to the gap in researching cross-platform social media use, and helps to understand the intersection among video creators, platform affordances, platform ecosystems and social media entertainment industries. This paper builds on the literature of online identity and self-presentation on social media by showing video creators' practices of identity curation, and their attempts of creating a single identity to meet the expectations of an audience and to follow the logic of platforms. It develops our conceptual understanding of the emergence of a cross-platform cosmopolitan identity, that is a single online identity with hybrid cultural characteristics, as one of the consequences of platform migration. The limitation of this paper lies in data gathered from a small sample of young video creators in a specific transnational context between China and Australia. Future research could explore a greater variety of creators, and survey other perspectives through interviews with MCN executives, platform executives, viewers and other professionals, and consider different transnational contexts and social media platforms.

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Crowdsourcing Women's Experiences of Space: Empowerment, (In)Visibility, and Exclusions – A Critical Reading of Safetipin Map

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As a crowdsourced visual-based technique, participatory mapping has generally been lauded as an innovative method to identify place-based inequities and shape a more inclusive urban world. In the context of sexual violence in public spaces, there is a growing number of mapping initiatives that aim to advocate for spatial justice by involving women in collaborative map production. These initiatives train women to use geographic information system (GIS) to visualise women's spatial knowledge grounded in their experience of navigating public spaces. Using Safetipin, an Indian-based mapping initiative, as a case study, I seek to challenge the simplistic reading that the crowdsourced map provides a transparent pathway to understanding spatial patterns of gender violence in urban space. I argue that this street-level mapping is a performative technique insofar as it materialises our experiences in different ways. Most importantly, it renders an imagination of space as operational—that is, calculable and malleable space that can be operated upon to prevent sexual violence. Significantly, as its visualisation of spatial distribution of safety reterritorialises public spaces, it reproduces other forms of socio-economic exclusion. This article thus argues for a reading of the crowdsourced map not as an inherently politically transformative project. Instead, it calls for an acknowledgment of hegemonic regimes of knowledge production that feminist activism like the Safetipin map is intimately bound up with and may help reproduce. Consequently, this involves attending to diverse regimes of (in)visibilities and marginalisation that such projects may stage.

Keywords: sexual violence; crowdsourced mapping; (in)visibility; spatial justice; performativity

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Introduction

In November 2013, amid public outrage in the wake of the gang rape of a 23-year-old woman in New Delhi, women's rights activist Kalpana Viswanath founded a map-based mobile application called SafetiPin (Viswanath, 2016). It was designed to crowdsource safety-related data in cities by allowing users to conduct a safety audit of public spaces using a set of parameters (Viswanath and Basu, 2015). The aim of it, according to its founder, is "to build a world where everyone can move around without fear, especially women" (Safetpin, n.d.). The user-generated data are then aggregated and visualised in the form of a heat map showing spatial patterns of safety; upon query, it advises users on the safest route from one place to another. What is distinctive in Safetipin's approach, compared to other mapping initiatives of sexual harassment, is its aspiration to inform not only women but also policymakers by providing evidence for effective interventions in city redesign[1]. Since its launch in 2013, SafetiPin is now available in 16 countries and 65 cities worldwide (The Better India, 2021). It has also engaged in partnership with a number of high-profile international organisations, such as UN Women, UNICEF, UN Habitat and Cities Alliance, and has been positively featured in numerous media reviews.

Recent years have witnessed a burgeoning of applications of Geographical Information Systems

(GIS)[2] which incorporate forms of community participation in collecting and visualising spatial data for politically progressive purposes. Applications of GIS are varied, ranging from neighbourhood development, environmental resource management, conflict management over land access, and as in the case study being examined, feminist activism for a safe and inclusive urban space. Safetipin is established on the premise that women and girls are often neglected in urban design and planning decisions, and that women have the best understanding of why spaces are unsafe for them (Viswanath and Basu, 2015). Indeed, it is often lauded as an example of a bottom-up, counter-mapping effort (Kalms, 2018; Mewa, 2020) that challenges hegemonic form of representing space and spatial patterns—what Doreen Massey bemoans as the "dominant form of mapping that positions the observer, themselves unobserved, outside and above the object of the gaze" (Massey, 2005, p. 107), or what Donna Haraway defines as the totalising, all-seeing "God trick" (Haraway, 1998, p. 581). From this vantage point, SafetiPin does appear to present a critical, feminist cartography via crowdsourced mapping that seeks to grant legitimacy and visibility to situated knowledge of women, challenging conventional forms of knowing and seeing beyond controlling and panoptic epistemologies.

Focusing on SafetiPin as an illustrative case study, I seek to challenge the optimistic reading that the crowdsourced map provides a transparent pathway to representing the spatial patterns of (un)safe localities by integrating women's knowledge of space. Beginning with a brief introduction to the Safetipin map and its geovisual interfaces, the article will then demonstrate that this street-level mapping is a "performative technique"[3] insofar as it materialises our experiences in different ways. Most importantly, the crowdsourced map renders an imagination of space as operational — that is, a calculable and malleable space that can be operated upon to prevent sexual violence. Significantly, as this visualisation of spatial distribution of safety reterritorialises public spaces, it reproduces other forms of socio-economic exclusion. This article thus argues that crowdsourced maps are not inherently politically transformative projects. The challenge of feminist activism using crowdsourced mapping, therefore, is to acknowledge the hegemonic regimes of knowledge production that they are intimately bound up with and may help reproduce, attending to diverse regimes of (in)visibilities and marginalisation that they may stage.

Safetipin: Mapping Method and the Geovisual Interface

Safetipin's crowdsourced mapping concept has its root in the method called Women's Safety Audit. It was first developed in Canada in 1989 by the Metropolitan Toronto Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) as a response to growing concerns about violence against women in public spaces (UN-Habitat, 2008). It is, in essence, a co-design process that enables firsthand accounts and knowledge of women and vulnerable groups to be heard in municipal decision-making. The process starts with a space being identified as insecure; then a group of local women—preferably regular users of the space—will walk through it with a checklist, pinpointing environmental factors that could make women feel unsafe, such as inadequate lighting, inaccessible footpaths, or negative graffiti messages. A report with recommendations will then be presented to local government officials so that they can prevent sexual violence (and other) crimes through environmental design strategies with a gender lens.

The concept of Women's Safety Audits has since traversed the globe, being adapted into different formats and used in different environments. In the context of Safetipin, mapping a point of interest starts when a user "pins" a location on a map and "audits" that location using a set of parameters, including both infrastructure and the way a space is used, such as "the extent of lighting, the visibility of the space to watchers, the openness of space, visible security, having both women and men present in the space, and the state of the walk path" (Viswanath and Basu, 2015, p. 50). Each parameter is rated on a scale from 0 to 3, with 0 being poor rating and 3 being good (see Table 1). Except for one parameter — feeling — others are insisted to be "completely objective" (Safetipin, 2019, p.1).

To make the crowdsourced data more representative, in some cities, Safetipin also devises a second app called Safetipin Nite. Safetipin Nite has been specifically designed to capture photographs of the city at night by volunteers and trained auditors. Mobile phones with the Safetipin Nite app are mounted on the windscreen of cars to take photographs at regular intervals as the car moves along. Safetipin then runs computer vision algorithms on these pictures to extract information on safety parameters. Additional data points are then added by trained coders to complete an audit (Safetipin, n.d).

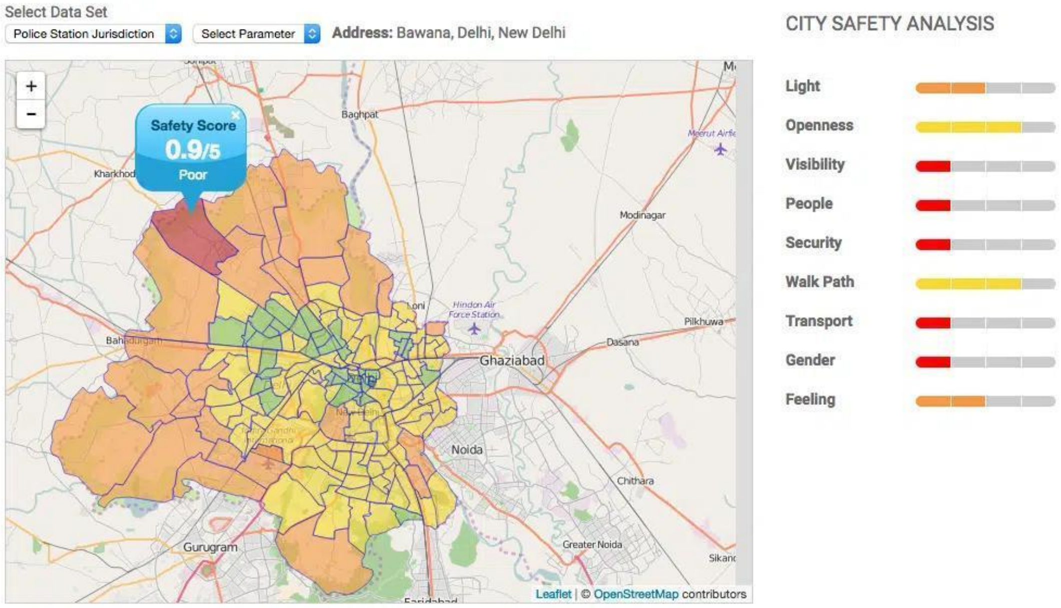
When someone finishes auditing a space, the information immediately becomes public data, visible for others to use and see (Viswanath and Basu, 2015). All the audits, both from individual users and volunteers, are then aggregated to compute a safety score of an area. For urban planners, the geographies of (perceived) safety are visualised in the form of a heat map (usually in a safety analysis report) in which the safety level of certain areas is colour coded. Women, on the other hand, are encouraged to navigate urban spaces by consulting the mobile app, where they can view safety scores of relevant neighbourhoods in real time and are recommended with the safest route to travel.

The significance of Safetipin compared to the traditional Women's Safety Audit, thus, is not in the novelty of the participatory process, but rather in its way of mobilising and visualising crowdsourced data to generate spatial narratives in an interactive way. In other words, compared to traditional audit reports, spatial patterns represented in the Safetipin map are unfolding in real time as users contribute their ratings. In this manner, cartographic techniques such as classification, abstraction, and simplification, whereby map-makers choose to emphasize certain features and de-emphasize others, are still deployed. For example, Safetipin still prioritises quantitative rather than narrative accounts, patterns rather than anecdotes, and visual forms of evidence rather than non-visual forms. However, unlike traditional cartography, Safetipin map does not merely represent spatial patterns, but also facilitates what Elwood and Leszczynski refer to as "geovisual experience" for its target users (Elwood and Leszczynski, 2013, p.545). For instance, women can use the Safetipin map to decide on the safest way to navigate or inhabit urban spaces. Urban planners, on the other hand, can use the map as evidence for their intervention and improvement of the safety of public spaces.

My reading of the Safetipin's geovisual interfaces is premised on what critical geographers have long argued — that maps never simply depict space but are an active agent in producing and shaping it (Kitchin and Dodge, 2007; Pickles, 2004). To quote John Pickles, "maps no longer are seen to simply represent territory, but are understood as producing it; in important ways maps precede the territory they represent, they inscribe boundaries and construct objects that in turn become our realities" (Pickles, 2004, p. 145). Hence, in the subsequent analysis, I do not attempt to evaluate the validity or truthfulness of the map's visualisation of spatial patterns. Rather, I am interested in the map's performative aspects: how the geovisual interface of the Safetipin map does not simply narrate a pre-given set of spatial patterns, but has the ability to generate realities, mobilise actors, and reterritorialise spaces along new socio-economic lines.

Imagining an Operational Space

Maps have become central to how we conceptualise and imagine space. Yet the maps that we are most familiar with function by imagining space as an ordered surface, a mere container, a silent backdrop against which everyday lives take place (Massey, 2005). Imagining space this way has profound social, economic, and political effects: indeed, the hegemonic conception of space as an ordered surface, as something to be crossed, together with doctrines of discovery and vocabularies of exploration, provided justifications for the project of European conquest and colonisation (Moran, 2002). Probing the kind of space imagined by the Safetipin map becomes imperative, as doing so opens up possibilities for understanding what might be at stake in its project of crowdsourcing and visualising women's experiences of space.



Select Data Set: Police Station Jurisdiction

Select Parameter

Address: Bawana, Delhi, New Delhi

Safety Score 0.9/5 Poor

CITY SAFETY ANALYSIS

Light
Openness
Visibility
People
Security
Walk Path
Transport
Gender
Feeling
Baghpat
Kharkhoda
Modinagar
Meerut Airfield
Loni
Hindon Air Force Station
Pilkhuwa
Dasana
Bahadurgarh
Ghaziabad
New Delhi
Noida
Chithara
Gurugram
Greater Noida
Sikandrabad
Faridabad
Leaflet | © OpenStreetMap contributors

Figure 1: See Note 5 below

Let us start with the language Safetipin uses to describe its process of mapping. For Safetipin, to report if a place is safe is called conducting an "audit". The word "audit", which resembles the language of the Women Safety Audit in the 1980s, seemingly conveys a sense of impartiality and objectivity, instead of acknowledging the messiness and contextual details of experiences. Auditing a space, as repeatedly mentioned by Safetipin's founder, is ostensibly completely objective as it is conducted based on a well-defined rubric (see Table 1). Safetipin's founder said they preferred the rubric over the traditional Likert scale, as the Likert scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree", was "too subjective" (Visanath and Basu, 2015, p. 50).

Table 1. The SafetiPin Safety Audit Rubric. A Safety Score is calculated from the combination of nine safety audit parameters (Viswanath and Basu, 2015, p. 51).

	0	1	2	3
Light (night)	None. No street or other lights	Little. Can see lights, but there is low visibility in the area	Enough. Lighting is enough for clear visibility	Bright. Whole area brightly lit
Openness	Not open. Many blind corners and no clear sightline	Partially open. Able to see a little ahead and around	Mostly open. Able to see in most directions	Completely open. Can see clearly in all directions
Visibility	No eyes. No windows or entrance of shops or residences overlook this point	Few eyes. Less than 5 windows or entrances overlook the point	More eyes. Less than 10 windows or entrances overlook the point	High visibility. More than 10 windows or entrances overlook this point

People	Deserted. No one in sight	Few people. Less than 10 people in sight	Some crowd. More than 10 people visible	Crowded. Many people within touching distance
Security	None. No guards or police visible in surrounding area	Minimal. Some private security visible in surrounding area but nor nearby	Moderate. Private security within hailing distance	High. Police/reliable security within hailing distance
Walk Path	None. No walking path available.	Poor. Path exists but in very bad condition	Fair. Can walk but not run	Good. Easy to walk fast or run
Public Transport	Unavailable. No metro or bus stop, auto/rickshaw within 10 minutes walk	Distant. Metro or bus stop, auto/rickshaw between 5-10 mins walk	Nearby. Metro or bus stop, auto/rickshaw between 2-5 mins walk	Very close. Metro or bus stop, auto/rickshaw available within 2 mins walk
Gender Usage	Not diverse. No one in sight, or only men	Somewhat diverse. Mostly men, very few women or children	Fairly diverse. Some women and children	Diverse. Balance of all genders or more women and children
Feeling	Frightening. Will never venture here without sufficient escort	Uncomfortable. Will avoid whenever possible	Acceptable. Will take other available and better routes when possible	Comfortable. Can take this route even at night.
	0	1	2	3

If rating a space based on the Likert scale is "too subjective", I would argue that the rubric promotes a way of seeing space and social phenomena that is profoundly disembodying. The rubric disaggregates lived experiences into modulable pieces of data that feed its calculations to categorise risky spaces. Indeed, phenomenological accounts of women's spatial experience have pointed out that there is no way for women (and perhaps for everyone else) to objectively experience spaces since experience is always lived, embodied, and connected to other forms of violence. As Vera-Gray concisely puts it, "we cannot know our world outside of ourselves in it, and similarly we cannot know ourselves outside of existing in the world" (Vera-Gray 2017, p. 25). In other words, experiences of space and spatiality are constantly shaped and reshaped through the body which has lived and relived intrusion in public spaces, or simply the body that is in a constant state of anticipating intrusion even when violence is not realised. Safetipin's parameters and rubric are strikingly similar to discourses around women's safety pervading environmental criminology scholarship and urban safety planning. These so-called environmental factors have been relentlessly lamented by feminist critics as they mechanistically locate crime, disorder, and fear within the built environment rather than considering them in relation to socio-political structures such as gender, class, race, and age which cut across space (Koskela and Pain, 2000).

In a critique of similar neighbourhood safety apps that solicit anonymous ratings of places, Leszczynski (2016, p. 1701) refers to this crowdsourced data as 'urban derivatives'— urban data that are decontextualised and re-aggregated with other data elements such as crime statistics to decide the relative safety of different areas. As Leszczynski argues, urban derivatives come into being from an amalgam of disaggregated data. The context of these data —for instance, class, race, and gender positionality of the users who contribute their ratings — are often obfuscated (Leszczynski, 2016). A neighbourhood might seem frightening and attract poor ratings if bodies deemed unsavoury such as homeless, racialised, or sexually minoritised others are present, yet we are unable to discern these webs of social relations from the disaggregated data. But this is not to argue that collecting more contextual data would solve the problem, as the spatial context in which urban encounters take place is far from being inert and static. As cultural geographers have long argued, urban social spaces are relational, dynamic, and open (i.e. Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1994). In other words, space is always in the process of becoming as a result of continuous, dialectical negotiations of power among different actors, and thus is irreducible to quantification or datafication. Having police within hailing distance does not guarantee a sense of "high security" as Safetipin's rubric defines. To those sleeping rough on the streets, people of colour, or sex workers, the presence of police can be perceived as incredibly disruptive and uncomfortable (DeVylder et al, 2017; Klambauer, 2018; Taylor and Walsh, 2006). Here, the relevance of Safetipin's map for the making of space lies exactly on the moment of operationalisation: translating embodied and relational experiences of space into quantitative, disaggregated, and disembodied data sets of physical environment and infrastructure in order to impose a logic of calculability on space.

When sexual violence is seen as a pure effect—a confluence of numerous variables located in physical and disembodied space, be it bumpy footpaths or badly lit stations—remedying spatial inequality automatically becomes a matter of intervening in space. Hence, more than a digital depiction of an existing reality on the ground, the Safetipin map signifies a certain way of relating to, imagining, and shaping space. This shaping of space is evident in two levels of intervention proposed by Safetipin, where both are undergirded by a logic of calculability: algorithmically calculated guidance that routes women away from what is deemed as risky space; and data-driven recommendations for urban planners on how they could improve safety levels for supposedly risky areas (Safetipin, n.d). The attempt by the Safetipin map to address sexual violence by intervening on and through space produces what I would term an "operational space"—space that is not only "amenable to thought" (Osborne and Rose 2004, p. 212), but calculable, malleable and governable.

My notion of "operational space" is borrowed from Mark Andrejevic's vision of an "operational city": the potential for a new mode of city governance that involves practices of automated data collection, analysis, and response in public space (Andrejevic 2020). Following this logic, mitigating sexual violence involves capturing data about the condition of the physical environment and modulating the "choice" environment in individuated ways (i.e., suggesting individually customised safest routes when queried). In other words, as causes of sexual violence are attributed to environmental factors (rather than stemming from systemic asymmetrical power relations), tackling it requires governing through the "milieu": that is to provide an immersive and flexible "choice architecture" that influences users' behaviour rather than imposing a disciplinary power on them (Andrejevic 2020, p. 95). For Andrejevic, this is rather a terrifying prospect since this operational logic of governance abandons any effort to seek causal explanation for a system merely concerned about generating actionable correlations (Andrejevic 2020, p. 32). In the context of Safetipin, who cares anymore about the social relations that motivate sexual violence in the first place? What really matters is the correlation between spatial factors (lighting, walk path, public transport) and spatial distribution of (perceived) safety. For example, problematic places, according to Safetipin are "places where the crowd parameter is high but the safety score is low" (Safetipin, n.d., no page).

Problematic places require intervention. So, if Andrejevic's notion of an "operational city" points towards the technocratic dream of transforming the city into a fully interactive space for automated control, "operationality" in the case of the Safetipin explicitly expands the mode of intervention to the physical environment. Urban planners can also use data provided by Safetipin to better illuminate certain streets, widen footpaths of certain localities, install more CCTVs, or deploy more police patrols to certain areas. In fact, this has been the reality in India where the Delhi Police is working with Safetipin's data to determine the patrol routes of their police vans (Viswanath, 2019). "Operational space" thus not only refers to an automated mode of governance of space, but also indexes an emergent ontological understanding of space configured by the Safetipin map, where space is no longer considered a passive, silent backdrop against which everyday lives take place, but open to intervention. "Operational space" is constantly becoming, both in the virtual and physical sense.

The operational space is facilitated by what can be considered operational datasets. For the SafetiPin app, individual women's ratings of places are aggregated into overall safety score for route suggestion. In this sense, data are deployed for operational purposes (Rettberg 2020, p. 8): they do not merely represent how safe an area is, but also mobilise certain actions. Similarly, street photographs captured by SafetiPin Nite can also be regarded as "operational" images where, in artist Trevor Paglen's words, "instead of simply representing things in the world, the machines and their images were starting to 'do' things in the world" (Paglen, 2014, n.p.). As Safetipin claims, it runs machine learning algorithms on these images to extract information of safety parameters which then feeds the calculation of route guidance or informs data-driven urban redesign, which exemplifies its various ways of "doing things" in the world. Following Scott McQuire (2017), I also argue that these images are operational in another sense: the meaning of each image is not merely in what each displays visually, but is dependent on its relation to the wider set of images. Instead of being understood as a discrete image—that this photograph depicts this corner of this street at this particular moment — each image becomes a data point whose meaning cannot be understood unless it is aggregated together with a bigger data set. That is, these images are not a form of aesthetics, intended for human eye, but captured for automated machine analysis.

Thinking of space as 'operational' has very grounded, unexpected, and at times undesirable consequences for lives beyond the map. In Lefebvrian terms, abstract imagination of space that is conceived in maps, drawings, and schematics constantly interacts with lived spatial practices and perceived experiences (Lefebvrian 1991), and this interaction constructs our social world in a variety of ways. As I shall argue in the next section, the Safetipin map is troubling not merely because it subordinates all lived spaces under its logic of calculability in a way that risks decontextualising embodied experience, but more significantly, for how the map has the potential to reproduce new geographies of exclusion.

Reterritorialising Space and Reproducing Socio-Economic Exclusion

Critical geographers have already provided insightful analyses of the ways space becomes imbricated in, and transformed through, maps and mapping practices (Pickles, 2004; Kitchin and Dodge, 2007). Again, to paraphrase Pickles, maps do not reveal but produce reality. In this section, I discuss what kinds of realities are materialised when space is understood to be "operational", being deterritorialised and reterritorialised by the colour-coded map and computed safety score.

Firstly, this discrete, simplistic categorisation of urban spaces as "safe" or "unsafe" continually redraws cognitive maps of consumer choice, influencing decisions of consumption, economic investment, and at the same time, setting the stage for various forms of financial harm. Cartographic design of the Safetipin heat map is strikingly straightforward, with spaces neatly demarcated into distinct zones, colour-coded in red, orange and green based on the aggregated safety score. This simplification helps to communicate a single, clear narrative to provide city planners with "actionable" insights. Here, there are notable parallels between Safetipin map and the Market Value Analysis (MVA)[4], a data-driven technology that has guided city planners in cities across the United States to prioritise their investment and housing policies since 2001 (Safransky, 2020). Safetipin and MVA are similar to each other not only in their clearly delineated and attention-grabbing colour-coded zones, but also in the epistemic power wielded through the appeal to what David Beer refers to as "calculative objectivity" (Beer, 2017, p.7). Consequently, both generate geographical distribution of wealth and poverty in a seemingly evidence-based manner. Safetipin map, like the MVA, is in essence, a sorting mechanism: it streamlines neighbourhood evaluation methods and renders places legible for evaluation and decision-making, consequently (wittingly or not) creating new frontiers for capital accumulation and displacement from within. In fact, in its review of the Women' Safety Audit (the root concept of Safetipin), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) noted that gentrification may have taken place in areas where safety audit recommendations have been implemented (UN-Habitat, 2008). It is likely that "objective" scores influence the decisions around where to buy or invest in property, which hotel seems safe to visit, and which are best to avoid.

The Safetipin map also bears a number of similarities to several neighbourhood safety apps, such as (now-defunct) SketchFactor (launched in 2014) and Ghetto Tracker/Good Part of Town (launched in 2013), which have received their fair share of criticism for racist and classist overtones. These apps solicit user-contributed personal reviews of urban neighbourhoods and combine these contributions with public data such as crime statistics, socio-economic and demographic data to inform users on how to steer clear of spaces that have a certain degree of "sketchiness" and "ghettoness". The parallels between Safetipin and these neighbourhood safety apps are conspicuous, not least in how they reterritorialise the city along the lines of a crime map, attaching a wholesale "good" or "bad" neighbourhood assessment to certain locations based on the density of red, orange and green "sketches" or "pins". Infamously dubbed as "technological redlining" (Thatcher 2013) or "digital gentrification" (Zukin 2017), these maps not only reinforce the perception of particular urban spaces, but potentially stigmatise and discriminate against neighbourhoods with "undesirable" profiles.

Finally, the stigmatisation of certain neighbourhoods as a result of algorithmic reterritorialisation may also lead to long-lasting harm to the communities who are living within them. As mentioned, law enforcement agencies in Delhi have started using Safetipin's maps and data to inform their decisions on certain routes to patrol, commonly known as "predictive policing". Although Safetipin's founder said "[its] data is used to advocate for better and safer urban public spaces so that urban neighbourhoods are not stigmatised but improved overtime" (Safetipin, n.d., n.p.), it is not clear how these unintended consequences might be mitigated. Gstrein and van Eck, in their examination of five websites and smartphone apps that similarly crowdsource users' review of places, are rightly concerned that predictive patrolling might create a self-fulfilling prophecy: there will be more arrests in areas with a higher police presence, consequently justifying the negative sentiment about them (Gstrein and van Eck, 2018, pp. 14-15). I share Gstrein and van Eck's concern that this situational, pre-emptive approach will only increase surveillance, further damaging the reputation of a certain area without resolving the root causes of sexual violence in public space.

In examining the cartographic regimes of HarassMap, a mapping project that allows users to report incidents of sexual harassment in real time, Sunday Grove argues that ethics of precision in aerial warfare is noticeable in HarassMap's rhetoric of criminalised subjects and spaces in need of intervention (Grove, 2015). This ethics of precision, once prevalent in warfare discourse, has now migrated and penetrated our everyday lives as we struggle to rationalise uncertainties. Notably, it is evident in the discourse of the contemporary smart city paradigm, which embraces data-driven spatial planning to tackle so-called 'wicked' urban problems, from poverty, to sustainability, to spatial justice. The MVA, Ghetto Tracker, and Safetipin's map are all different initiatives, but all of them seek to govern on and through space to solve complex social issues by appealing to the logics of calculability undergirded by large-scale data collection. But in rendering places commensurable across distance and difference, in distilling a range of discrete personal "audits" of space into a smoothed out colour-coded visualisation that justifies intervention, they evacuate space of social meanings and contexts. Paradoxically, in seeking to remedy spatial inequality, Safetipin map potentially legitimises other forms of social exclusion and marginalisation.

This logic of calculability, at first glance, seems to be commonsensical: more data allows for more informed decisions. As Safetipin's founder puts it, "large-scale data collection can lead to change, and that safety will ensue when more people become engaged with the issue" (Viswanath and Basu 2015, p. 46). However, the issue with seeing space as calculable, malleable, and governable is not merely that various forms of harm might eventuate, but that this also encourages the depoliticisation of data-driven urban planning decisions. After all, who could argue with the safety score?

Sun-ha Hong, in their cogent critique of data's promise of objective truth, argues that efforts to resolve historical bias — for example, efforts of mapping cases of police violence on African Americans — encounter the difficulty where alternative, messier ways of telling stories, embedded in lived experiences, become increasingly difficult to be represented (Hong, 2020, p. 183). Hong imagines the standard response to communities whose conditions cannot be datafied would be "We don't have the data. We don't know if what you're telling us is true." The road to empowerment is consequently confined within a set of technical solutions, "reflecting broader differences in what kinds of databases are funded and which are not, what kinds of populations are heavily datafied and in what ways" (Hong, 2020, p.183). We might generalise this to Safetipin map to argue that its vision of spatial justice depends on whether we can make women's experiences of space legible to be codified, calculated, and visualised, which is undesirable, if not elusive, as women's embodied and relational experiences of space are irreducible to data points.

Conclusion

Focusing on the case study of Safetipin's map, I have demonstrated that the crowdsourced map is not simply a representation of space and spatial patterns. The Safetipin map is a performative technique, constructed to mobilise a particular conception of space, with grounded consequences for lives beyond its visual interfaces. The fact that it is performative, however, does not invalidate its claim that women have been living violence and abuse in public spaces. Yet Safetipin does invite critical examination of how it functions to facilitate our conceptions of space. We must question how such conceptions might be structurally responsible for various forms of marginalisation and exclusion.

Safetipin map also illustrates the paradoxes that exist within any effort to operationalise a spatial justice agenda. On the face of it, the crowdsourced map is a form of feminist activism attempting to incorporate women's lived experiences and perspectives in the fight for equal access to public space. On the other hand, its relentless appeal to universally applicable parameters, to calculability, to transcendent objectivity in making sense of the world and operating on it, stands at odds with what it set out to achieve: that is to make visible women's situated knowledge of space. Unfortunately, enrolling more women in the project only serves to strengthen its calculative logics when women are reduced to only sensors, their lived and embodied experiences are disaggregated into environmental data which are then repackaged to feed security calculation and reveal actionable insight. The promise of the map to produce singular representation from a myriad of situated, relational, contextual experiences repositions itself as the cartographic gaze — the totalising God's eye view that it seeks to challenge in the first place.

To what extent can attempts to empower women be pursued without amplifying the dominant techniques that are being used to legitimise other forms of exclusions and marginalisation? I share with feminist geographer Mei-Po Kwan the importance of practicing reflexivity with respect to map-making and visualisation processes (Kwan, 2002, p.649). That is, while I do not think that we can totally disentangle ourselves from the world we inhabit (and the mode of knowledge production that is prevailing), I would propose that, at least, feminist activism such as Safetipin map could acknowledge the existing spheres of political-economic power it is intimately bound up with and might help replicate. This means that instead of rendering the map as amenable to universal application, we should recognise it as only a particular mode of seeing and seeking to change the world, with the various forms of exclusions, silences, and invisibilities that it might stage.

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Notes

1. The encyclopedic entry of the National Geographic website defines Geographic Information System (GIS) as a computer system designed to capture, store, and edit spatial data (data that has location attribute). One advantage of GIS is that can show many different kinds of data on one map, such as streets, buildings, and vegetation. This enables people to easily see, analyse, and understand patterns and relationships, which enables it to be a favoured tool for problem-solving. Chrisman (2002, p. 175), however, argues that GIS is more than just software. They argue for a definition of GIS that takes into account its political and social aspects, that "GIS is organized activity by which people measure and represent geographic phenomena then transform these representations into other forms while interacting with social structures." Hence, mapping, analogue or digital, is always a political project.
2. There are a number of mapping initiatives such as Hollaback! (global), HarassMap (Egypt), FreetoBe (Australia), Safe & the City (UK) which have similar approach of reporting, geolocating street harassment and visualising them in form of a map. Safetipin's uniqueness is that it does not only seek to raise awareness of the issue, but also works with local governments to advocate for environmental change. In its own words, it is "solution-focused rather than symptom-focused".
3. The proposition that maps are performative is consistent with the notion that science and technologies function to materialise experience—that science and technologies themselves are active participants in this materialisation, not neutral tools or an unmediated window on reality (see, for example Barad, 1998; Jasanoff, 2004; Wajcman, 1991).
4. Market Value Analysis (MVA) approach is a data-driven technology of spatial governance that has been used since 2001 to guide urban development in dozens of cities across the United States (Safransky, 2020). The MVA is an example of a broader phenomenon of algorithmically calculated market value assessment. Heralded as a public interest technology in the age of austerity, the MVA guides public officials and private investors on which neighborhoods they should target for investment, development and continued public service delivery, and which they might divest from or more strategically invest in (for example, via environmental amenities) based on data-driven assessment of financial risk (Safransky, 2020). This approach to urban analysis and investment rests on the assumptions that decisions should be evidence-based, and that public subsidy is scarce, and it alone cannot create a market where there is none. Hence, public subsidy must leverage or clear the path for private investment, depending on market circumstances.
5. Figure 1: Safetipin's map shows the 'safety score' of various neighbourhoods in the Indian City of New Delhi.
   Note: From The Asia Foundation. https://asiafoundation.org/2016/05/11/safetipin-tool-build-safer-cities-women/. Copyright 2016 of Kalpana Viswanath

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Figure 1. Safetipin's map shows the 'safety score' of various neighbourhoods in the Indian City of New Delhi. Note: From The Asia Foundation. https://asiafoundation.org/2016/05/11/safetipin-tool-build-safer-cities-women/ . Copyright 2016 of Kalpana Viswanath

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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 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

(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

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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.

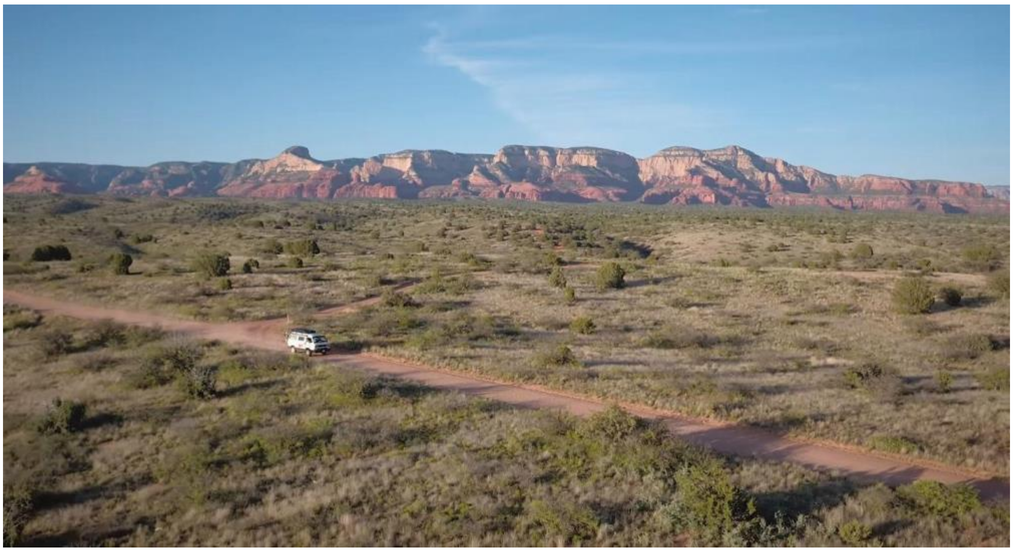

Figure 1. Emily and Corey's vehicle speeds across the scenic Arizonan desert (Where's My Office Now? 2017). All Rights Reserved: Where's My Office Now?

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.

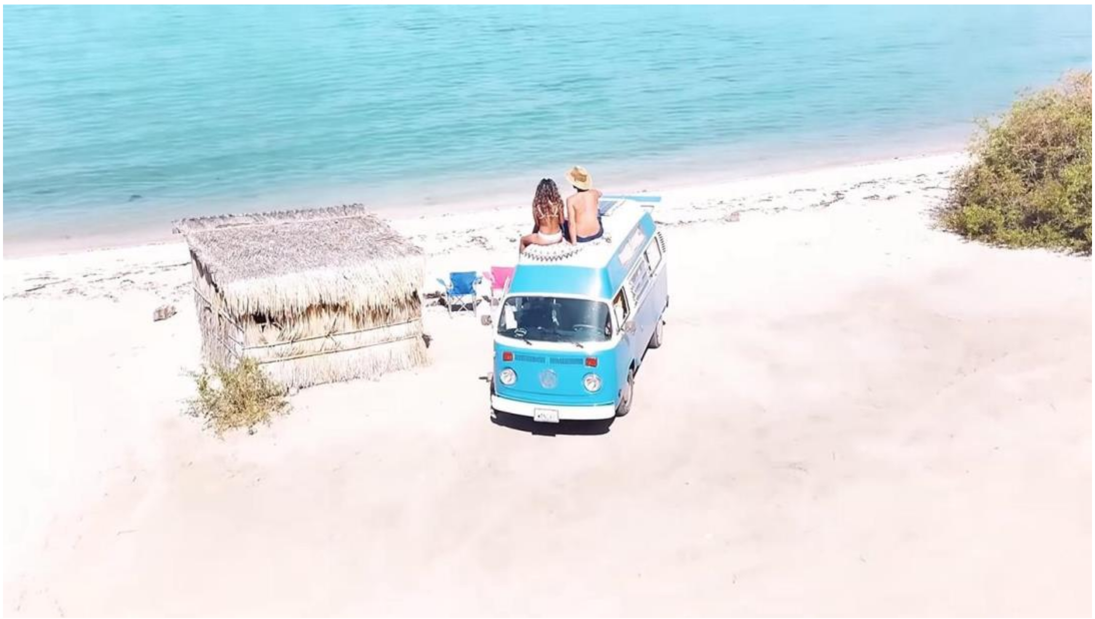

Figure 2. An aerial drone shot captures Jim and Sabrina sitting atop their van on a Mexican beachfront (Jim H, 2018). All Rights Reserved: Jim H.

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.

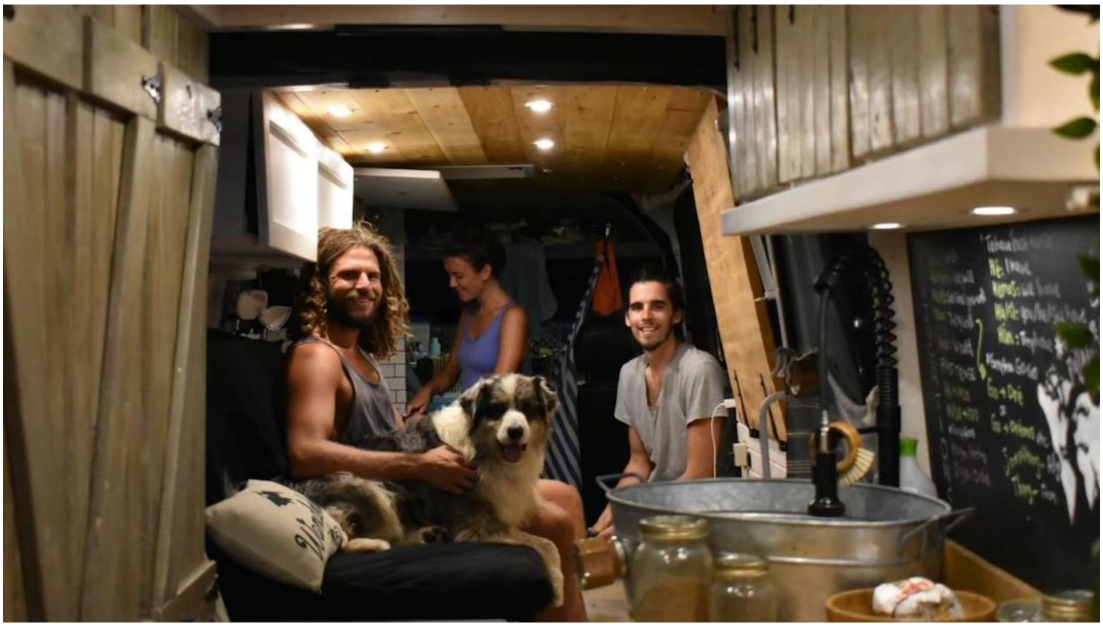

Figure 3. A view of the interior of Max and Lee's van, showing the compressed layout of their kitchen, laundry and living spaces (Max & Lee, 2018). All Rights Reserved: Max & Lee.

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.

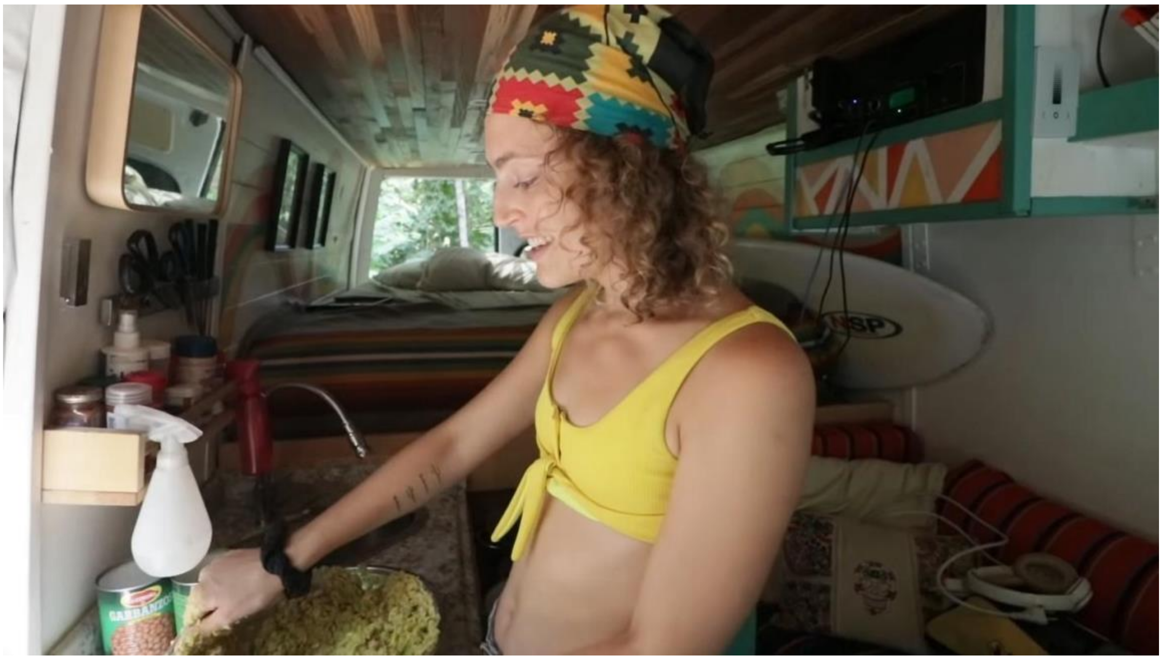

Figure 4. Cooking, sleeping, storage and leisure arrangements are visible in the van driven by travellers Aubry and Nick (The Matneys, 2019). All Rights Reserved: The Matneys.

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.

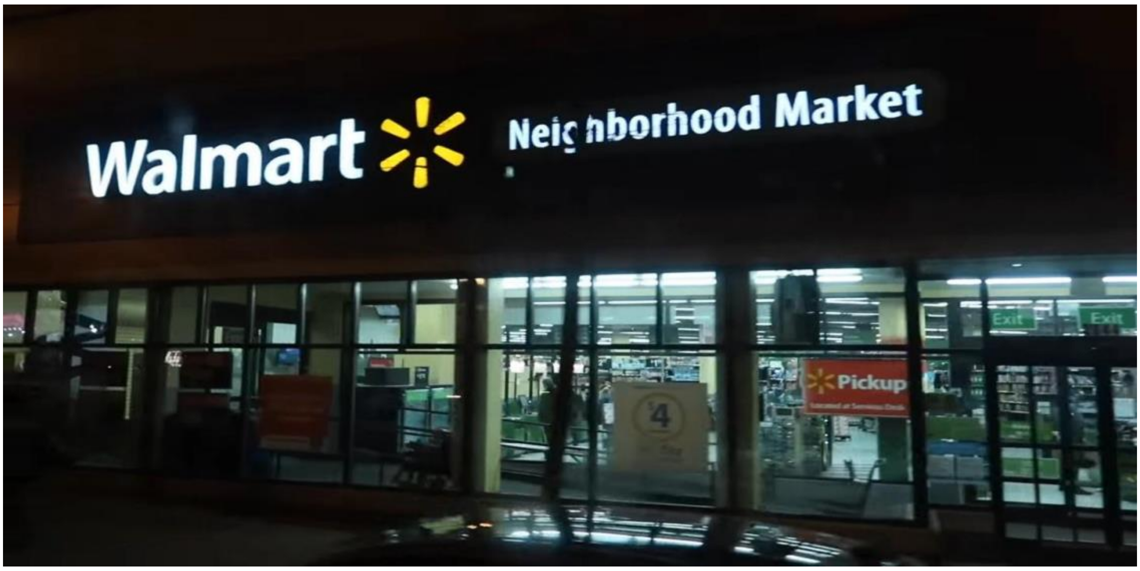

Figure 5. A Walmart store in Omaha, Nebraska, sought out by Eamon and Bec for bathroom facilities and possibly safe overnight parking (Eamon & Bec, 2018a). All Rights Reserved: Eamon & Bec.

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.

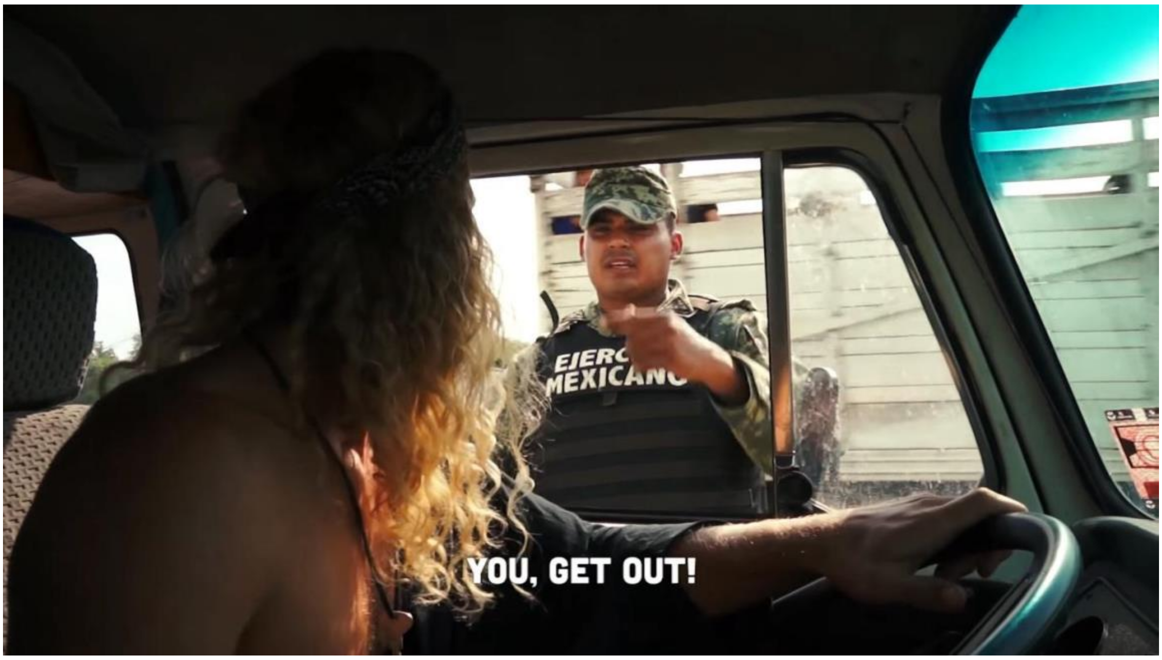

Figure 6. An official at the Mexico-United States border instructs a group of Vanlifers to leave their van, in order for it to be searched (Kombi Life, 2016). All Rights Reserved: Kombi Life.

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 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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Mediating the Social: The Excesses of Racial Representation within (Trans)formative Digital Space

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Abstract

In this essay, I explore what Gray (2015) calls "the excesses of representation" that reproduce race and gender across proliferating digital platforms. I traverse the digital in tracking and tracing viral inequality, data surveillance, and moderation. Does the term "social media," as a redundant term, accurately describe the processes of algorithmic amplification by which representational excesses get diffused and made legible? That is to say, do "social media" constitute formative spaces that produce social affect, or do they constitute transparent spaces that mediate affect? This entails addressing how digital socialization of amplified racial and gendered performances occupies a different ethical ground than the ostensibly neutral ethics that mediatization might claim. The claim of media neutrality therefore makes room for the "excessive" reproduction of "objective" racial and gendered caste categories that allow for possible objections to taking responsibility for the global restructuring of social affect. This article addresses these questions, with a particular focus on how and why large social media companies claim the social as platforms not as publishers while denying their de facto identities as Fifth Estate media institutions subsuming and eclipsing Fourth Estate Power.

I situate engagement with Herman Gray and Sarah T. Roberts's texts to interrogate ideas of transparency, moderation, and digital subjectivity, and their much-deserved denouements, to examine whether the mediated spaces of social media constitute transparent, objective sites for communicating social affect, or in fact actively produce reproduce social affect. Ultimately, I argue that the excesses of representation show the latter to be true: social media are not transparent spaces, but actively reproduce social affect. Despite premature declarations heralding their respective epochal demises, history, race, and truth remain contested sites of durable significance.

Keywords:

Media, social media, digital culture

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Social Media as Formative Space

This article attempts to answer the question of whether social media constitute formative spaces that then produce social affect, or if they constitute transparent spaces that then mediate effect. I argue that social media produces social affect as opposed to offering a transparent platform. Earlier in internet history, as previously indicated, social media was once a digital space for connection, exploration, and even online performance. Yet in the past decade, it has increasingly become a space requiring moderation and layers of technology that both filter and mediate. Transparent space is not something available unless you create it for yourself or within the confines of a specific community and outside of capitalist structures. However, these transparent spaces are not readily available: consider how the divide between offline and online becomes porous in the sense that the majority of what we experience in our daily lives somehow becomes enmeshed with our digital lives. From geolocation tools that mark our destinations to the spectrum of platforms that require you to check-in for some incentive-based purpose, the re-tooling of applications enters the domain of how a body becomes a subject.

For social media to be a transparent space, the behaviour of user generated content (UGC) needs to be predicated on the individual and collective will of users to acknowledge their intrinsic responsibility to what social media might begin to offer, not only as a formative space, but as a transformative one. The production of social affect is based on the idea of democratized space and free speech. Yet what is at stake is a shared understanding of the consequences of free speech that cause overt harm through the dissemination of media that is xenophobic, racist, ableist, and misogynistic, thus perpetuating the cycle of disinformation. Social media has enabled insidious self-deputization to occur if not altogether embedded in its contemporary use. Returning to traditional journalism for a moment, consider the issue of objectivity in relation to transparency. While the goal of journalistic practices relies on the concept of objectivity, social media becomes a container for subjectivity. Although seemingly transparent with millions of users contributing to what feels like a bottomless pool of UGC.

Individual subjective dissemination of thought and cultural observations leads to a formative space that Gray (2013, p. 781) describes as a "crucial site where different sectors of disenfranchised populations and communities continue to seek (and in some cases achieved) recognition and greater visibility as a measure of cultural justice and social equality." Social affect, then, is created by these different sectors that serve as a constitutive element of how people act and position themselves offline. A double or even triple seeing starts to happen that informs the ways in which users start to subject themselves and others towards a path of recognition (Gray, 2013).

This multi-faceted seeing, in which users are engaged when actively using social media, is tied to several techniques of regulating specific users on large scale platforms. Shadow banning, for instance, has been defined as a way of prohibiting one's profile and content from being seen publicly thereby allowing a user deemed as troublesome to sit in a digital space of disquiet in the hopes that this will squelch disruptive or offensive behaviour (Ortutay, 2018). This form of user regulation on platforms such as Twitter or Instagram raises the question of whether transparency has the potential to exist where people with dissenting views can possibly learn and form ways to be in productive, generative conflict. Wherein transparency is possible, how does it positively alter social affect towards a civil digital society and culture? While I do not examine this topic here, it's worth noting Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity and the right to be obscured or unseen. What does that mean for certain communities to have the agency to exercise this right versus Othered communities forced into obscurity? Formative space happens when content supplements knowledge and research and users are prompted to engage in co-creating and co-authoring knowledge for a great good and purpose. What ceases to have an online presence is equally, if not just as telling as what is being popularised and easily perceptible.

Section 230 of the United States Communications Decency Act of 1996 overtly states a distinction between fourth and fifth estate media related to the U.S. first amendment of free speech. This section allows for platforms, primarily social media companies to create their own standards of monitoring and surveying of UGC (Roberts, 2020, p. 61). Yet with very little to no protections mandated at the federal level, the section has become contentious amongst scholars and legal experts wanting to qualify social media platforms akin to media outlets. I gesture to Roberts' research on this legislation as related to her extrapolation of artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies that are oftentimes perceived as crafting our online experiences. Content moderation by humans as opposed to filtering algorithms feeds into how media is consumed and thus reshared and propagated. Regarding the ways bodies are mediated and disseminated, especially in relationship to police brutality and xenophobia inflicted upon QTBIPOC and disabled people, Gray (2013) explains how social media produces what he has called the "excesses of representation." He states:

> In the United States the media are the primary site for the proliferation of more difference, not less, more visibility, grievance, and resentment: they produce and circulate difference, organizing, narrating, and assigning value to bodies, threats, politicians, weather, performances, and so on, in the process. The capacity of American broadcast, cable, and digital media to reach precise demographic targets based on marketable "differences" and to tailor content based on those differences articulates well to cultural discourses of market choice, public policies of privatization, and post racial social practices of diversity and multiculturalism (p. 783).

Through a global lens, current surveillance technologies such as facial, voice, and predictive technologies interface with the visual and auditory constructs that have been normalised in popular culture and mainstream media, which continue to hinder the capacity of social media to be a space that can transcend beyond formative and become transformative. Whether there can be a merging of fourth and fifth estate media thus becomes an urgent question. How might we collectively encourage and promote platforms (either print and/or digital) that enable communities to take on more holistic approaches to using media, constructing spaces that can support nuanced views and observations and thereby begin to challenge deep-seated, damaging stereotypes?

Social Media as Redundant Term

'Social media' is a redundant term, as a name and as a function within the contemporary media landscape. Media, of any kind, are social, by nature in that they are an ecosystem of people that ensures their existence and propagation. This social ecosystem includes constitutive parts that create media that are both consumed and recycled through other platforms. Although media has not always had the word social precede it, social media was once a digital space of anonymity and performance (McNeil, 2020). The diversity of online platforms of the 1990s such as LatinoLink, CyberPowWow, Cafe Los Negroes (McNeil, 2020), and more were digital spaces for communities to convene. They were devoid of advertisements and primarily based on textual exchange. Inevitably, the process of algorithmic amplification through the collection of user data has produced the representational excesses we see in contemporary social media. If the online bulletin boards of the past and other earlier permutations of social media created a venue for performance and avatar creation, the inevitable commodification and capitalisation of these identities and online behaviours would quickly turn users into consumers and producers. The Internet could not possibly be free and accessible within capitalism. We see the nature of the marketplace interspersed between user posts on widely used platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Each has become a container for an endless barrage of advertisements presented to users based on their activity, likes, and screen time.

The use of social media platforms has enabled the development of sophisticated algorithms and analytics to create a user experience that ensures the end user continues to scroll, react, and consume an endless bank of images and video content. To a certain extent, social media is a facade for capitalism to sell content and entertain. Thus, social media has become somewhat of a misnomer in terms of convincing users of its function to stay connected with loved ones and friends. The symbiotic nature of hashtags and instantaneous communication across fibre optic cables in a matter of seconds have transformed and siloed the way media function within a specific municipality or jurisdiction. As such, recognition has now become a contentious binary of both fame and infamy within the realm of social media production.

The desire for recognition comes at a cost. Sociologist Herman Gray writes about the quandary of "cultural politics of representation" when he states the "the digital divide is no longer a matter of being seen and having a presence for marginal communities but involves the nature of participation, the separation between producers and consumers of content, and the use of these technological capacities for the intergenerational transfer of cultural and social capital" (2013, p. 772). Yet this participation in turn participates in a system of media surveillance and so participation is oftentimes dispersed without context or attribution. Gray's prescient views have taken shape and have come to fruition especially within the past year with the murders of Black Americans such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Philando Castile, Nina Pop, Tony McDade, and countless others. The narratives of Queer, Trans, Black, Brown, Indigenous, People of Colour (QTBIPOC), Asian American, Pacific Islanders, and disabled people become subjects of hypervisibility, and are thus central to the power dynamics that simultaneously threaten the livelihood and safety of these communities. Social media becomes a fertile ground for both representation and mis/disinformation. The internet has become a place where epistemologies of the body, selfhood, and self-determination unknowingly become a part of a seemingly limitless digital archive saved in perpetuity. Gray expounds on the cost at which this type of visibility becomes both diffused and legible through the shifting of racial difference to multiculturalism to colour blindness (Gray, 2013). Yet the hypervisibility of Black Americans became an overt form of racial capitalism the summer of 2020. Across the U.S., there was a significant uptick in #BlackLivesMatter messaging among large conglomerate, retail corporations amidst an already spiralling economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Among all these events, the 2020 U.S. presidential election demonstrated social media's irreversible slippage into fourth estate media, particularly apparent with the banning of former President Donald J. Trump from Twitter and Facebook.

Scholar Sarah T. Roberts (2021) articulates, with precision, the contentious nature of social media platforms such as Facebook not overtly identifying as media outlets or fourth estate media when they so overtly have played an integral role in the dissemination of journalistic content in addition to or meshed within UGC. Roberts extrapolates the relationship between UGC and perceived artificial intelligence that has become a popular term amongst tech especially social media companies. UGC can no longer exist without intervention in contemporary social media. The market demands clickable content along with the ability to endlessly scroll to like and procure consumable content. Thus, an endless stream of advertisements, products, and endorsements by social media influencers have turned most digital platforms into a marketplace. Racial, gender, and class differences become content generating, and commodifiable, and subjected to a company's algorithms. In 2008, researchers at the University of Texas at Austin, Terry Daugherty, Matthew S. Eastin, and Laura Bright (Daugherty et al., 2008) examined the relationship between the creation and distribution of UGC, capturing the activity of 325 subjects via an 82-item questionnaire. This study was conducted 13 years ago, and the demographics of its participants, socio-economic and otherwise, were somewhat insular: for example, an overwhelmingly large number of respondents (82.5%) identified as Caucasian (Daugherty et al., 2008). This skews the resultant data, indicating results not representative of the vast population and people producing and participating in digital culture.

Still, this research is usefully indicative of the attitudes, media consumption, and habits of the respondents as members of this demographic, as well as how content is meditated and how it is translated (i.e., inclination to "like" and/or interact with content through commenting and/or sharing, etc.). In 2021, UGC produces something beyond a mere social network. It becomes part of a larger corpus of data informing the algorithms for specific brands, trends, and news. The propagation of content and data can therefore be fruitfully understood using Gray's idea of the "cultural politics of representation," whereby social media ceases to be a place to share and exchange but has become a mechanism of neoliberal power and control.

Digital Socialization

Digital socialization is best categorized through the concept of homophily: the tendency for people to be drawn into content, concepts, and ideas that carry a specific resonance. Homophily thereby constitutes a particular network of people within a designated framework. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton coined the term in 1954 in their research on racial attitudes in a mixed-race housing project, Addison Terrace located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Kurgan et al., 2019). Essentially, Lazarsfeld and Merton wanted to study the core shared values and beliefs amongst residents to see how friendships were formed (Kurgen et al., 2019). This concept is useful as a starting point for understanding digital socialisation due to the correspondence between this and the history and cultural context of how physical communities were developed in the U.S. Although the report and findings by Lazarsfeld and Merton were never published, the concept has been referenced and cited as a method for understanding both physical and digital socialisation (Kurgen et al., 2019).

Homophily, as a concept, lends itself to social media effectively in that networks, both on and offline, inform social relation and formation. The most significant difference is the rhythm and duration of how this happens online as opposed to physical space and embodied social interaction. Lazarsfeld and Merton conducted a survey of 51% Black residents and 49% white residents, where 88% of the Black population and 34% of the white population identified as liberal (Kurgen et al., 2019). Liberals befriended other liberals and illiberals befriended other illiberals. However, beyond this basic tendency, their study reveals something about how networks are formed. Kurgen et al. (2019) explored the "triadic closure," a concept within network science that illustrates homophily and social group formation based on "harmony and mutual connection", in that "if person A is linked to both person B and person C, then person B and person C are also likely to be linked." Now, the reason why this concept, from its beginnings in urban space, matters deeply is the fact that it shows how platforms may never reach a space of neutrality because they were never built to be a free and (trans)formative space for people who do not already share some connection. Algorithmic recommendation systems further complicate the space of digital socialisation by connecting people to objects, places, and people (or influencers), to what deeply resonates with them based on predictive analytics – a technical entrenchment of this homophilic tendency.

Contemporary social media is steeped in advertisements showing specific content targeted based on online interactions and general activity on a platform but continues to also be based on what one might enjoy or consume. The concept of "friends of friends" or "making friends" is thus heavily influenced through advertising, due to this interactive milieu. This activity not only reinforces how homophily works within a digital space, but how we are socialised to then use that space, and how we are kept within the space for longer periods of time to experience even further, the things we like. Instagram, for example, is a platform created to envelope its users by offering advertising based on our lifestyle and interactions, thereby keeping us active on the platform. Large corporate and retail companies have relied on social media to create communities of consumers that further strengthen a lifestyle or brand. Gray reminds us "with the digital technology of reproduction and circulation, this incitement to be seen and the capacity for the proliferation of identity means that we are both more inscribed and more invested in its visibility, intensity, resonance, reach, speed, and circulation" (2013, p. 790). Despite the idea that many people feel social media can level out the proverbial playing field, what it increasingly does is continuously reinscribe identity, race, class, and gender norms.

In the context of widespread mediatisation, the perceived neutral ethics of social media as a 'transparent space' relies on the presumption of objectivity and on the mass dissemination of factual information to a receptive public. However, unconscious bias makes its way into how social media functions, especially in parallel to the 24-hour news cycle. Mediatisation is foundational in understanding how a content creator might amplify racial and gendered performances. Social media, historically, have not functioned in a way that questions the user. In part, this has led social media to become, for the user and the network they are connected to, a reactionary space. However, as of June 2020, Twitter instituted prompts to any user attempting to share content that they might not have read, in an attempt to encourage a type of objectivity and awareness prior to the dissemination of information [1]. This type of mediation of content asks, broadly, for users to reflect on whether the content they are about to share engages in a practice purporting to objectivity in journalistic content. This action is a small step to minimising the indifference many users have to content and preventing merely reading headlines.

In this context, new media and digital artists whose work explores mediatic possibilities not captured within these media landscapes can be an important counterpoint. By creating work that troubles and interrogates the ways in which we understand mediatisation, the challenge of neutrality, and objectivity, they can suggest possibilities for transforming how we conduct ourselves online and engage in a type of information stewardship. with media projects that gesture towards how fifth estate media might teach us about what is possible in creating not only formative, but transformative media landscapes. These are, of course, not solutions, but indicate how we might go beyond the social media platforms currently dominating the ways we connect and communicate.

Internet artist Darius Kazemi creates bots and generators of various kinds and has been deeply concerned with the state of social media and networks for years. One project of particular note is runyourown.social, which provides robust guides, open-source code, and writing on how running this type of infrastructure might promote community building (Kazemi 2022). At first, this project might seem steeped in homophily as opposed to something more heterogeneous. Yet Kazemi's research and work entails a provocation to build something on your own as opposed to relying on the large, well-oiled machines of big tech. The building of your own social, then, requires support, a desire to learn, and to co-create with other community members. Furthermore, it involves working to create with people you do not know, thus shifting the idea of 'users' into people (again) within smaller communities founded upon, not only a code of conduct, but an orientation towards how tech can become a tool for intentional activism and education.

Another project by artist Xin Xin called TogetherNet allows for people to meet and engage in a way that simulates real world situations, such as a serendipitous meeting. While TogetherNet is a messaging platform and not meant to be a full social media platform, the exercise of communicating through a game-like interface enables participants to explore the nuances of individual and collective conversation through consent (Xin Xin 2021). Having led a workshop using TogetherNet, I can attest to its ability to reinforce thoughtfulness with each interaction. For the duration of one hour of 'conversation' using the tool, participants felt it was not as easy because they had to bring their avatar close to others to fully participate in the dialogue. In addition, the entire group had to 'consent' for the conversation to be archived and saved as a file. If one participant did not consent, there was no archived file. Despite these challenges, the participants felt much more cognizant and aware of what they were communicating and how they communicated certain ideas. This experience of beta testing the TogetherNet affirmed that artistic and creative practices within open-source communities as a response and alternative to both fourth and fifth estate media for change to truly take place.

Conclusion: On Media Neutrality and the Excesses of Representation

The concept of media neutrality akin to objectivity returns us back to the right to free speech as well as how this enables an excessive reproduction of spuriously objective racial and gendered caste categories. Because users not only produce but also share content, media participate in further perpetuating tropes in what Herman Gray calls the "excesses of representation." As previously mentioned, Gray's essay Subject(ed) to Recognition (2013) elucidates the paths by which subjection happens in media (from television to social media). But how these mediations can then be overproduced and proliferate becomes a hindrance to just representation, in that users are expected to consume, perceive, and somehow have a nuanced understanding of a wide spectrum of mediations. Since social media platforms structurally require the user to stay on the platform for a prolonged amount of time, representational priorities become less about mediatisation and objectivity and more about getting the user to consume at all costs. In addition to the proliferation and dissemination of these excesses, the intellectual and emotional exhaustion hinders nuanced reflection and observation. In this way, we can see how social media actively produces social affect, as opposed to offering a transparent platform by which affects are mediated objectively.

Endnotes

1. Although my focus is not on the features that create a sense of objectivity in relation to mediatisation, I felt it necessary to include a reference to the post Twitter Support posted June 10, 2020 as a point of reference https://twitter.com/TwitterSupport/status/1270783537667551233?s=20

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Have Faith and Question Everything: Understanding QAnon's Allure

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Abstract

QAnon is an influential conspiracy theory centering on a nefarious "deep state" network. The core of the movement is Q, an unknown individual claiming to have classified access. This article examines one year of Q's posts. These highly influential texts are read by followers, who follow the "crumbs" and "bake" them into conspiratorial narratives. Drawing on rhetorical criticism methods, the article conducts a baseline coding of these posts and develops an explanatory schema consisting of two fantasy themes. Faith is one theme, with spiritual language evoking an apocalyptic battle between the children of light and the children of darkness. Skepticism is another theme, with posts championing the enlightened individual who employs free-thought to uncover the truth. These elements blend powerful religious narratives with contemporary ideals of critical thinking and independent knowledge construction. This unique rhetorical vision contributes one explanation for QAnon's ability to mobilize an increasingly large and diverse following.

Keywords

QAnon, conspiracy theory, online movement, post-truth, religious right

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Introduction

This article investigates QAnon, a movement centering on the anonymous Q and their online posts concerning a vast covert war between the "deep state" and former-President Donald Trump. Q has become an increasingly influential figure over the last few years, particularly in the run up to the 2020 US elections. Across social media, QAnon content has millions of views and thousands of followers. QAnon posters and apparel now appear at protests and political rallies. Q-affiliated statements have been retweeted over 200 times by Trump (Kaplan, 2020). One QAnon follower has been nominated for the US Senate (Sonmez and DeBonis, 2020); another easily won her seat in the House (Darby, 2021). And a book compiled by Q followers, The Great Awakening, reached #1 in Amazon's Censorship category (Collins, 2019).

While Q's influence is increasingly acknowledged, it is often depicted in the media as a bewildering phenomenon, composed of bewildering beliefs, that has crawled out of the underbelly of the internet. As a result, QAnon is patronized as a bizarre curiosity and Q followers derided as crazy (Hoysted, 2020). Labelling believers as conspiracy theorists has long been a tactic for exclusion and dismissal (Husting and Orr, 2007). But to dismiss this movement or simply ban online groups (Frenkel, 2020) is both dangerous and ineffective, playing directly into the QAnon claim that free speech will be censored and "the truth" seen as unwelcome. Instead, I strive to understand the movement by beginning where Q followers begin: with the "crumbs" written by Q. Taking cues from Theweleit (1987) in privileging the source material, one year of Q posts are collected and examined. Drawing on rhetorical criticism, I conduct a baseline coding of this material, develop an explanatory schema by clustering tags into themes, and explore how these themes construct a compelling rhetorical vision.

Approaching QAnon

What makes QAnon important and worth attending to? QAnon's sociopolitical force has been significant and has been linked to a number of violent incidents. Early warning signs of Q's influence came in the form of a follower who blocked the Hoover Dam with an armored truck, demanding the release of a report related to the Hillary Clinton email probe (Ruelas, 2020). More recently, QAnon's "real-world" impact was witnessed in the violent storming of the U.S. Capitol (Argentino, 2021; Munn, 2021), a shocking attack designed to keep Trump in power and punish his political foes. Several participants in the attack were devoted Q followers, including casualty Ashli Babbitt and the now iconic QAnon Shaman.

Yet while these spectacular acts certainly matter, QAnon can also be linked to a less perceptible challenge to political consensus and evidence-driven claims. QAnon constitutes a parallel world with its own logic of truth. Of course, the media-driven polarization of politics (Baum and Groeling, 2008; Pariser, 2012) and the rise of fake news, pseudoscience, and alternative facts has been noted by scholars for some time (Kaufman and Kaufman, 2018; Farkas and Schou, 2019). For some, this constitutes a global "epistemic crisis" (Cosentino, 2020, p. 8), with polarizing digital technologies contributing to a profound "collapse of trust" (d'Ancona, 2017, p. 36). For others, such rhetoric is alarmist and fake news is another moral panic (Bratich 2020).

More nuanced voices have argued that networked technologies and the digital mediascape exacerbate a post-truth condition in which trust in historical gatekeepers like the church, state, and science has been systematically eroded (Harsin, 2018). In this context, we can certainly identify some affinities between post-truth modes of communication which leverage new digital media forms and forms of populist politics (Waisboard, 2018). However, contra Waisboard, I see this emerging post-truth/populism nexus not as a wholesale rejection of consensus and expertise, but as a reconfiguration that questions whose consensus counts and whose expertise matters. While such challenges are not entirely novel, QAnon seems to have amplified and exemplified these questions to a new degree, shunting them into the media spotlight. This is a movement that has seen prominent politicians openly endorse Q-beliefs, middle-class mothers attend #savethechildren rallies, and Facebook friends share narratives around Satanic cabals and the harvesting of children's blood (all events inspired by QAnon). In this sense, QAnon manifests the post-truth condition in a visible way and raises it to prominence in mainstream discussion.

The shock of QAnon, then, is not about its new effects, but the scale and intensity of these effects. If Hofstadter (1964) diagnosed the "paranoid style" in politics more than fifty years ago, that style has now been coupled to a powerful post-truth motor and accelerated by the affordances of networked media. These conditions have allowed Q-inspired theories to move from the fringes to the mainstream, where they are taken up by a diverse population of "normal people." When anti-vaxxing, climate change, and COVID-denial all find a new engine in the meta-theory of QAnon, then it is no longer an eccentric oddity but a dangerous reality with concrete repercussions for public health, environmental sustainability, and racial equality (Argentino, 2020a; Doward, 2020; Dyer, 2020).

Rather than dismissing Q as an irrational cult, then, I am interested in its internal logic, the way these posts render it rational or even incontrovertible for its followers. Here the study turns to communication theory, a discipline that has long taken seriously the ability of language to be persuasive, to shape perceptions of reality, and to legitimize certain understandings of the world. Rhetorical criticism seeks to unpack discourse and understand the persuasive force in the communicative act. For Burke (1969), it was clear that rhetoric functioned: language was a tool for achieving compliance with a common viewpoint and for inducing cooperation by tapping deeply into human nature. More recent scholarship has stressed the key role rhetoric plays in coalition-building (Chávez, 2011), knitting together diverse actors and interests into powerful social and political movements.

In aiming to understand QAnon, I see particular value in fantasy-theme analysis (Bormann 1972; 1985), a method of rhetorical criticism interested in the shared worldviews of groups. Fantasy does not mean fiction or imply derision but refers instead to an imaginative or creative use of communication. Granted, fantasy-theme analysis typically assumes that language is used to interpret events in the past, future, or somehow distanced in time and space from the present (Foss 2017, p. 106). Yet one of the innovations of Q as a political movement is precisely its ability to employ digital media as a kind of real-time interpretation machine, commenting on events as they occur and quickly reworking them into an acceptable frame.

Symbolic convergence is a theory tightly aligned with fantasy-theme analysis and seeks to understand how language forms a consensus, a shared interpretation that satisfies the rhetorical or psychological needs of a group (Bormann, 1985). QAnon needs to legitimize a view of reality in which a deep state cabal is running a sex-trafficking ring and plotting against the (former) President. How is this worldview made credible and rational? Fantasy themes are powerful fables that work to structure reality and render it understandable. "While experience itself is often chaotic and confusing, fantasy themes are organized and artistic," observes Foss (2017, p. 107), "they are designed to create a credible interpretation of experience." In this sense, fantasies align with conspiracy theories in making sense of a complex and disorienting world. Fantasies develop a unified narrative that "joins the dots," tying a messy constellation of actors, relationships, and events into a cohesive meta-narrative with persuasive force.

The next section begins with a primer on QAnon and a brief survey of existing literature. The following section explains the textual material and the methodology used to analyze it. The remaining sections unpack two fantasy themes. Faith is the first theme, with spiritual language portraying an apocalyptic battle in the present between the children of light and the children of darkness. Skepticism is the second theme, with rhetoric elevating the enlightened individual who employs critical thinking and draws her own fact-based conclusions. The final section discusses how these themes are blended into a narrative premised on thinking for oneself and critical knowledge creation, yet also rooted in powerful religious narratives and their community-forming capabilities. This unique rhetorical vision contributes one explanation for QAnon's ability to reach beyond the typical niche of conspiracists and mobilize a large and diverse following.

The Birth and Rise of Q

QAnon began on 4chan's "Politically Incorrect" board, a virulent space on a website already considered toxic. A new thread had started in response to a cryptic remark from Trump. "You guys know what this represents?" Trump had asked at a dinner for military leaders, "Maybe it's the calm before the storm" (Johnson, 2017). On October 28, 2017, a user who would later identify as Q posted in this "Calm before the Storm" thread. Q claimed to have access to classified information, with the original moniker "Q Clearance Anon" alluding to Q-level security access (Energy.gov, 2020). QAnon was not the first "anon" on the board to make these claims. Throughout 2016 and 2017, users like FBIAnon, CIAAnon, and WH Insider Anon had all claimed to possess insider information and even conducted "ask me anything" sessions where users could quiz them about classified political events (Zadrozny and Collins, 2018).

What set Q apart from these other supposed insiders? QAnon's emergence from niche community to wider social media milieu was not an organic development, but a conscious campaign carried out by three individuals. Two 4channers – Pamphlet Anon and BaruchtheScribe – reached out to Tracey Diaz, a YouTuber who had achieved some success in covering the earlier Pizzagate conspiracy theory (Zadrozny and Collins, 2018). Diaz, known online as TraceyBeanz, posted her first Q Clearance Anon video in November 2017. That video has garnered over 250,000 views and her channel now boasts over 120,000 subscribers and 10 million views (Beanz, 2020). QAnon's spread was aided by a strategic understanding of the internet ecosystem, systematically moving from the niche hate havens to alternative and then mainstream platforms. The trio set up a new group on Reddit (2018) called "Calm Before the Storm." Reddit's popularity meant that Q's posts could draw upon a far wider community to develop and distribute these ideas. Over time, posts migrated across to a growing number of QAnon Facebook groups, where the content could be consumed and recirculated by an older and more diverse audience (Zadrozny and Collins, 2018). Eventually this online growth became apparent in the offline world. In 2018, apparel and posters stating "we are Q" and the quintessential Q slogan "where we go one we go all" appeared at a Trump rally in Tampa, triggering a flurry of reactions in mainstream media (Stanley-Becker, 2018).

The core fable of QAnon has been laid out by many (Martineau, 2017; Collins, 2018; LaFrance, 2020). In essence, the narrative is that a secret network of actors, from Hillary Clinton to George Soros, the Rothschilds and others, comprise a "deep state" with a nefarious agenda. With its global tendrils in finance, governments, and corporations, this cabal orchestrates heinous acts and hides them by maintaining tight control over the mainstream media. This narrative follows the post-war trend in which conspiracy theories no longer focus on a small secret society but point to a highly dispersed "organisation, technology, or system" (Melley, 2016, p.8) that openly manipulates a population, if only they had the eyes to see it. Echoing the earlier Pizzagate narratives (Tuters et al., 2018), Q followers believe that this cabal of powerful politicians, leaders, and celebrities engage in pedophilia and child trafficking. Indeed, the movement has enjoyed a surge of exposure and support thanks to its co-option of the "save the children" slogan and hashtag (Roose, 2020). Typically associated with humanitarian campaigns, the phrase has enabled Q-inspired content to be widely and often unwittingly endorsed (North, 2020), finding sympathetic new audiences and providing another access point into the Q world.

While these theories spinoff in dozens of directions, from blood harvesting to coronavirus as bioweapon, the protagonist at the heart of QAnon is Donald Trump. Whether strategically selected or divinely appointed, Trump is the key figure striving to undo the cabal's corruption before it destroys America and the world. Trump has long been aware of the deep state's dark schemes, deploying his military, legal, and financial power to orchestrate countermoves against them. Through Q's texts and their own research, followers have become aware of this reality, beginning a "Great Awakening" that will ultimately sweep the world. While the cabal's evil currently goes unchecked, the time of judgement is soon approaching. The moment of reckoning is near, a flood of indictments and arrests that followers call "the Storm." According to Q, this act of judgement will be biblical.

First Steps to Q Research

How do we research QAnon? The Q universe has become sprawling, an entire ecosystem of theories, memes, and channels. And many Q followers are themselves prolific media creators, producing hours of podcasts, interviews, and videos to wade through. These myriad sects and multiplying media pose a formidable research challenge. Emerging research has responded by often focusing on single QAnon groups. Papasavva et al. (2020) explores one QAnon group on Voat, referring to its research as a "first step" and using computational methods to measure hate speech prevalence. Similarly, Procházka and Blommaert (2020) focus on one QAnon Facebook group, striving to understand how its members transform media narratives. That said, researchers are rapidly filling this gap. Recent articles frame QAnon as a product of the information dark age (Hannah, 2021), explore QAnon comments on YouTube (Miller, 2021), carry out a qualitative analysis of 300 hours of QAnon videos (Conner and MacMurray 2021), and unpack QAnon's distinctive relationship to signs and symbols (McIntosh 2022).

This article takes a slightly different approach, examining one year of posts direct from the source: Q. After all, one of the directives for Q followers is to concentrate not on Q's identity but on what he or she is communicating. An introductory guide (Anons, 2018, p. 3) stresses that it is the "messages, information, intel, and facts that Q posts which are important," followers "focus not on who Q is, but on what Q is saying." Q's "crumbs" or "drops" are the foundational texts of the QAnon movement, the Rosetta stones that spawn countless discussion threads and inspire hours of online investigation. What do these aphoristic and often cryptic posts actually say? What are the key themes and tropes embedded within them? And how might this thematic blend contribute to sustaining QAnon and mobilizing its broad audience?

As core material, this article draws upon Q posts between September 2019 and September 2020. This period offers a large but manageable archive for a single researcher, and includes a wide spectrum of material ranging from the presidential election to pandemic protests and corruption investigations. Q often posts several times per day, meaning that the archive covers drops #3571 – 4764 for a total of 1193 posts. Q posts on 8kun, and Q followers then meticulously record each drop on "official" archives like http://qanon.pub (the source I used) and other mirrors. Each post appears with a date-stamp, its original URL, and its number. To avoid driving traffic to these conspiracy theories, all posts are referenced by number rather than hyperlinked.

Methodologically, the analysis takes a consciously bottom-up approach, allowing the posts themselves to drive the study. Instead of beginning with a grand theory, the study focuses first and foremost on Q's words, an approach inspired by Klaus Thieleweit (1987, p. 24), whose seminal study "did not originate in theory" but rather in the source documents he investigated; central to his methodology is that "the material has taken precedence." Within communication studies, this approach would fall into generative criticism (Foss, 2017, p. 411) in that it begins with the "curious artifact" of the QAnon archive, conducts a "baseline coding" of that artifact by noting key terms and tropes, and only then develops an "explanatory schema" that aims to organize this material in a coherent and insightful way.

To begin with, the full corpus of Q posts was coded[1]. This involved reading the post itself and any hyperlinked media, such as screenshots, tweets, or linked video. After understanding the context of the post, the coder tagged each post. Coding employed a template-based approach (King, 2004), drawing on the author's domain expertise in right-wing online subcultures (Munn, 2019; Munn, 2021) to define tags but also allowing flexibility to revise these during coding. Coding aimed to stay reasonably close to the wording used in each post while also revealing key tropes that appeared frequently. For example, a short post stating "THE SILENT WAR CONTINUES" was labelled with "warfare." A videoclip with the dialogue – "I'm gonna pull the whole thing down. I'm gonna bring the whole fuckin' diseased, corrupt temple down on your head. It's gonna be biblical" – was tagged with "biblical," "temple," and "corruption." Coding avoided inferring tags, e.g. "corruption" but not Trump's catch-all term of "swamp," and also avoided creating too many variants – e.g. "corrupting," "corrupted" – which would dilute overall frequency. Posts featuring tweets from suspended accounts were not coded. The resulting list of tags can be seen in Figure 1 below.

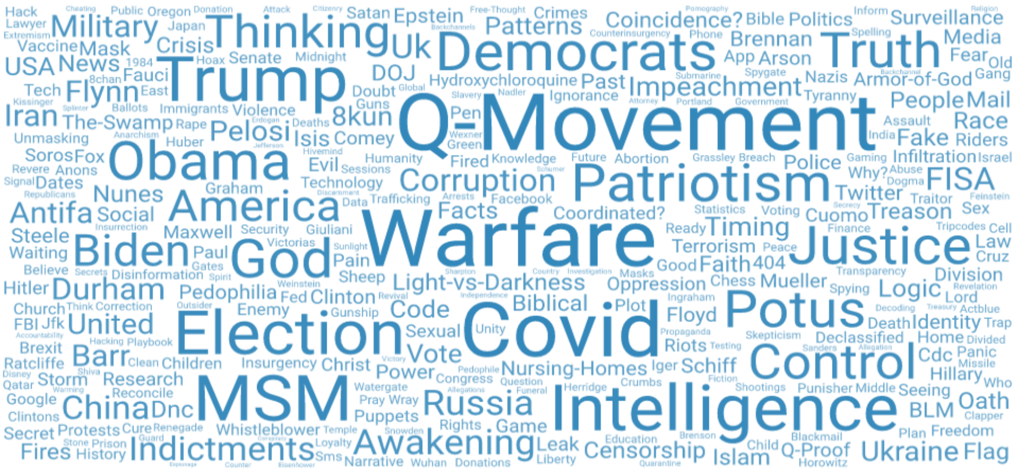

Figure 1: Cloud of tags from a year of Q posts, size indicates frequency

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[1] An Excel document (xlsx) containing the post numbers, contents, and tags is available here: https://www.dropbox.com/s/b8odj542wzbbyuj/qanon_coding.xlsx?dl=0.

This baseline coding could be analyzed in any number of ways. However, drawing on generative criticism, I searched for a schema with explanatory power, a way to organize this material that provided an understanding of QAnon's unique rhetorical vision and its persuasive mobilizing force. I chose to cluster a large number of tropes into two fantasy themes that seemed particularly interesting, not least because they appear superficially opposed. The first is *faith*, encompassing tags such as the armor of God, light vs darkness, justice, warfare, and other Christian tropes. The second is *skepticism*, including tags such as logic, thinking, questioning, coincidence, truth, and awakening. As Figure 2 demonstrates, these two themes effectively encapsulate many related concepts and phrases. Yet beyond this productive clustering, a key rationale for these particular themes is that they are imperatives. Across the corpus of posts, regardless of the particular topic, Q frequently commands followers to "have faith" and to "think" and "ask why." These are not just themes, then, but directives issued from a leader to a movement. This discourse aims to legitimize particular kinds of practices and behaviors (Reyes, 2011). From a rhetorical perspective, these commands steer followers towards a certain way of approaching Q's texts and interpreting the world around them.

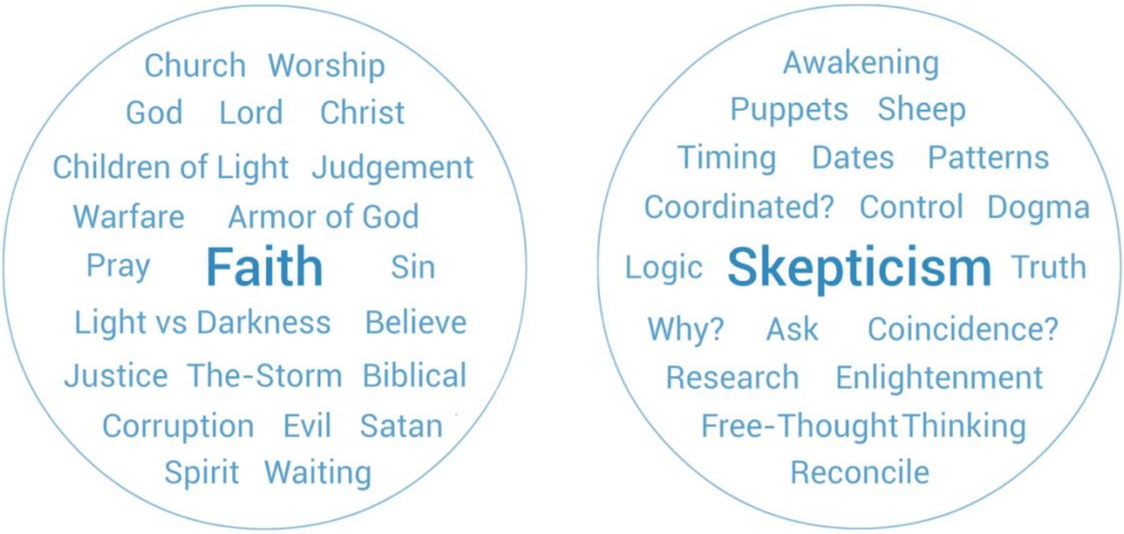
Church
Worship
God
Lord
Christ
Children of Light
Judgement
Warfare
Armor of God
Pray
Faith
Sin
Light vs Darkness
Believe
Justice
The-Storm
Biblical
Corruption
Evil
Satan
Spirit
Waiting
Awakening
Puppets
Sheep
Timing
Dates
Patterns
Coordinated?
Control
Dogma
Logic
Skepticism
Truth
Why?
Ask
Coincidence?
Research
Enlightenment
Free-Thought
Thinking
Reconcile

Figure 2: Cluster of tropes used to identify faith and skepticism themes

"Have Faith"

One powerful command across these posts is the injunction to have faith. Drop #4249 consists of a single image of a lone figure looking across a wheat field, with the words of Mark 11:22 stamped in the center: "have faith in God." Drops #4541 and #4542 reprint a letter from Carlo Viganò, former Apostolic Nuncio to the US, to Trump on Holy Trinity Sunday. In warning the President about the "deep state" and asserting that the children of light and the children of darkness are locked in a battle that can only be described as "biblical," Viganò's letter serves as a dog whistle for Q followers and a three-way bridge between their community, conservative Christians, and Trump followers. Drop #4739 is a type of public prayer, which begins by asking to "strengthen my faith, Lord." The prayer asks for forgiveness of sins, for bravery to fight the "spiritual battles in my life" and for wisdom and discernment, before making a swift segue into a cosmic battle. "While evil still roams, the power of Your name and Your blood rises up to defeat and bring us victory against every evil planned against us." The prayer states that, "While malicious actions may disturb us," its followers will use the "armor of God" in order to stand firm.

As the prayer suggests, one term within this theme is the "armor of God," a phrase Q uses repeatedly over the course of the year. The passage of scripture that this phrase is taken from, Ephesians 6:10-20, is posted in its entirety multiple times throughout this period. These Bible verses, well-known to Christians, enjoin the listener to put on a set of spiritual armor, stepping through each component, from the belt of truth, to the breastplate of righteousness, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit. Adorned in these defenses, the listener may go forth, equipped to do battle with the "powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil."

Similar imagery of battle often reappears when faith, God, or religion is mentioned, constructing a vision of spiritual warfare. Faith here is less a state of inner unity with God and more a set of outward armaments that protects the wearer and legitimizes their holy crusade. Q's mention of the armor of God recalls former President Truman, who invoked the same phrase when describing America's battle against communism (Spalding, 2007, p.103). In both cases, faith works to expand the territory of the battlefield beyond politics narrowly defined and into everyday life, where it becomes a more fundamental issue touching on one's beliefs, morality, and lifestyle. As drop #4545 stresses:

> "This is not about politics.
> This is about preserving our way of life and protecting the generations that follow.
> We are living in Biblical times.
> Children of light vs children of darkness.
> United against the Invisible Enemy of all humanity."

Yet if this battle is vast in scale, it is nevertheless simple to understand. On one side are the children of light; on the other are the children of darkness. This vast cosmic clash takes place between good and evil. Drop #4390 echoes this dichotomy, consisting of a single quotation from Proverbs 13:9: "The light of the righteous shines brightly, but the lamp of the wicked is extinguished." This clear dualism is characteristic of conspiracy theories, one way the genre simplifies the messy complexities of the world into a simpler version of reality. As Barkun (2013, p.19) notes, these theories often exhibit a "sharp division between the realms of good and evil." This is a Manichean universe, a struggle between the starkly delineated forces of light and dark.

Who is included in these forces of darkness? In the Q messages examined here, there are clear villains that are repeatedly singled out. Democrats like Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Nancy Pelosi, and Joe Biden feature alongside convicted sexual offenders and their associates such as Harvey Weinstein, Jeffrey Epstein, and Ghislaine Maxwell. Yet if this rhetorical vision offers well-known figures to scapegoat, there are also more shadowy forces. A number of drops (#3858, #3905, #4366, #4385) gestured to Antifa flags and funding, suggested fires and protests were coordinated by Antifa, and questioned what "organized group(s)" may be aiding them (#4799). These actors are undefined, their identities unknown. In Q's rhetoric, these nebulous figures gesture to the limitless dimensions of evil: there are always more individuals to be identified, more organizations to be rooted out.

Throughout the texts there is a clear link between God and America. "Do you think it's a coincidence they banned and prevent you attending Church _house of worship?" asks drop #4550, answering with two simple statements: "Anti-American. Anti-God." Drop #4397 follows in this vein, presenting a triple call to prayer: "Pray for Strength. Pray for Guidance. Pray for America." Some American evangelicals, especially of a more fundamentalist stripe, have latched onto these ideas, finding an affinity with the rhetorical mixture of patriotism and religion that QAnon upholds. Pastors have admitted that some in their congregation have been attracted to the movement, repeating claims of child exploitation and satanic worship as true (Ohlheiser, 2020).

A strong current of millenarianism, anticipating a period of enormous societal upheaval where evil will be dealt with, runs through QAnon. This often blurs into the similarly named millenialism, the more distinctly Judeo-Christian beliefs surrounding the end times. Q's frequent invocation of "it's going to be biblical," combined with the apocalyptic language of evil, punishment, and justice, resonates strongly with Revelation, the Biblical book of prophecy which describes God's return and final judgement, as well as bestsellers like the *Left Behind* series. The conceptual overlaps between conspiracy theory and eschatology are well documented. Fenster (2008, p. 227) observes that "many popular eschatological texts lean toward right-wing conspiracy theory, particularly in their militaristic patriotism, fears of a one-world government, virulent anticommunism." For the fundamentalist follower of Q, the vast cosmic battle between the forces of light and dark predicted in eschatological texts is rendered real and present: the end-times are near. "It's not a theory" stated one Christian QAnon follower (LaFrance, 2020), "it's the foretelling of things to come." Here, faith is not just a statement of beliefs but a kind of code through which contemporary events – the Mueller probe, the Oregon protests, the presidential election – are interpreted in real time.

Millenarianism and conspiracy theories both construct a strong sense of friend and enemy. As Wilson (2020, p. 1) notes, the division between "us" and "them" in conspiracy theories parallels the division between the "chosen people" and the "remnant" in millenarianism. The insiders have woken up to the truth and been redeemed; the outsiders have refused this gift and condemned themselves. These themes slot neatly into a broader narrative where the Kingdom of God will be established on earth: the good will be rewarded and evil finally punished. As one Christian political scientist stated, these QAnon themes "resonate with evangelicals, because it feels like part of a narrative we've been invested in for most of our lives" (Smith, 2020).

Across the corpus of Q texts, the injunction to "have faith" derives its meaning from this eschatological framing. Having faith in the end times is a matter of waiting. "One step at a time" reassures Q in drop #4037. "It's only a matter of time" promises Q in drop #3634. Followers are instructed to trust in the broader plan, to have patience even when nothing seems to be happening. Indictments will come, justice will be meted out. Drop #4087, for example, features a text that states "be sure of this: the wicked will not go unpunished." Drop #3724 expands on this point, stating:

> "It must be done right.
> It must be done according to the rule of law.
> It must carry weight.
> It must be proven in the court of law.
> There can be no mistakes.
> Good things sometimes take time.
> Attempts to slow/block the inevitable [Justice] will fail."

Followers must maintain their faith, holding steadfast to their belief in the face of difficulties. And yet, drawing from its eschatological roots, this is not a restful waiting, but a state of hypervigilance. "Prepare for the storm" states post #3880. "Be ready" cautions post #4006. "The enormity of what is coming will SHOCK THE WORLD. Pray." advises post #3728. Put on the armor of God so that "when the day of evil comes you may be able to stand," states the scripture discussed above, instructing disciples to "be alert and always keep praying." Q's posts thus cultivate a mode of anxiousness, of alertness, of expectancy. The world stands on a "precipice" and the next event may swiftly tilt into the "biblical" event of judgement and justice that followers eagerly await. Drop #4732 exemplifies this kind of eschatological anticipation, with one follower replying to Q: "I'm not turning a blind-eye, I'm just waiting for justice to arrive! Let it be soon please!"

The injunction to "have faith" thus contributes strategically to maintaining the QAnon conspiracy theory. On the one hand, followers must practice patience, being unwavering in their belief even when the events foretold by Q fail to occur. On the other hand, having faith means watching and waiting. Followers should be open-eyed and ready, attentive to the small clues that signal the start of the Storm. Together, these injunctions urge followers to be patient but also nervous and expectant, holding up permanent paranoia as an inner state to be cultivated.

“Ask Yourself Why”

If faith is one fantasy theme, skepticism is another. Q commands followers to question and be skeptical, to “think” and “ask yourself why.” These phrases often assert the importance of rationality. In Drop #4535, Q states that free thought is “a philosophical viewpoint which holds that positions regarding truth should be formed on the basis of logic, reason, and empiricism, rather than authority, tradition, revelation, or dogma.” Drop #4494 champions “logical thinking.” Drop #4336 speaks of “critical thinking.” And Drop #4312 quotes the definition of common sense as “the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live in a reasonable and safe way.”

Of course, whether conspiracy theorists engage in logical thinking and common sense is questionable. One recent study suggested that conspiracy believers have a less developed critical thinking ability (Lantian et al., 2020). And as See (2019, p. 67) notes, the criticality employed by QAnon followers is always highly selective: sources internal to the community are consumed uncritically, while mainstream media sources are carefully dissected “with the goal of confirming pre-existing perceptions.” Rather than engaging in dialogue and remaining open to contradictions, such thinking has been conceptualized as a monological belief system (Goertzel 1994; Miller 2020), with participants selectively pattern-seeking as a way to reinforce their beliefs and speak to themselves. However, the focus here is on taking these phrases at face value and exploring the rhetorical vision they construct.

Placed together, these phrases champion a particular mode of engagement with the world, one predicated on reason and logic. Q followers are not to accept the version of reality handed to them, but instead to question it. Dominant narratives should be interrogated and deconstructed, a strategy that Q models by identifying individuals, zooming in on license plates, locating financial links, tracking down government documents, and highlighting dubious portions of images. This work of screenshotting, searching, and document retrieval, carried out in what Q terms the “Digital Battlefield” (#4509), constitutes a contemporary version of critical thinking. For outsiders of course, this thinking is tragically misguided, a form of apophenia (Steyerl, 2016) that mistakenly finds patterns where none exist. Yet for the Q faithful, these practices make sense of the data, establishing complex connections and suggesting surprising new relationships.

QAnon practices, from posting, to researching, and “baking” crumbs into proofs, work to establish new forms of knowledge. But just as importantly, they work to erode established knowledge, rendering it suspect, unstable, even illusory. By creating “closed universes of mutually reinforcing facts and interpretations,” what is real for many becomes unreal to the QAnon community (Zuckerman, 2020). Whether claims center around climate change or the coronavirus, the aim of the Q follower is the same: to tear down the edifice of epistemological authority by producing their own digital mountain of contradictory knowledge. Based on a common antipathy towards elite institutions and established knowledge, this work knits together the otherwise scattered pockets of the #QArmy, constituting what See (2019, p. 89) calls a “community of hermeneutic practice.” As Procházka and Bloomaert (2020, p. 24) observe, the work of “knowledge activism constitutes the main organizing principle of the Qanon community,” securing its “social cohesion in the face of a great internal diversity.”

Traceybeanz (Diaz, 2018) reiterates this theme of skepticism when explaining her work on Q’s posts, exemplifying a post-truth distrust in authority:

> “I researched them ON MY OWN. I did not take anyone else’s research, and in many of my videos I stated that this was all open source information – it was freely available on the web for anyone to find. And this was the beauty of the Q phenomenon. The Socratic Method of asking questions and pointing people to research for THEMSELVES was an amazing thing to behold. It has awoken more people in a short amount of time than I ever dreamed possible.”

Throughout the corpus, the "Socratic Method" does appear repeatedly, albeit as a decidedly more steered version of the ancient technique. Q will often present a fact or figure and then immediately follow it with a question. Indeed, across this corpus, question marks ("?") occur a remarkable 1700 times. Drop #4672, for example, lists downloads of an item before and after recent protests, then prompts the reader with the query: "Coordinated?" Drop #4673 states "Antifa.com redirect to Biden's donation page" and questions whether this is "Similar to BLM > DNC?" In one twist on this method, Q will present two seemingly opposed facts and ask followers to explain them. Drop #4651, for example, concludes with: "Events then. Events today. Reconcile." Rather than serving up the answer discursively, these texts require active work from the reader.

For Q, this is a way to "_ask 'counter' questions to initiate 'thought' vs repeat [echo] of MSDNC propaganda" (#4509). In the Q imaginary, the public has been force-fed lies from the mainstream media. Questions interrupt this diet, providing a starting point for critical thinking and a route to recovery. These questions undermine the established experts and their established narrative. They contest the "epistemic authority" (Harambam and Aupers, 2015) of individuals and organizations whom others regard as trustworthy and unbiased. After this doubt is triggered, a void opens up – what then is the real explanation? Q's statements function as "informational cues" (Uscinski et al. 2016) to those predisposed to conspiratorial thinking. These statements do not hand the reader an answer, but neither do they leave a response entirely open ended. Instead, Q's prompts typically lead the reader to a "logical" if broad conclusion: that operation was a false flag, this group is secretly funded, that news was fake.

One mode of questioning hinges on probability. Drop #4639 asks the reader to look at "Average number of fires 2018, 2019, 2020" and then follows up with the question: "Outside of standard deviation?" This rhetoric invokes statistical likelihood as an objective criterion for determining the truth and guiding a follower's inquiries. Some events lie within the bell curve of normalcy; others are outliers, unusual, suspicious. One of Q's favorite catchphrases is "coincidence?" Of course, there are no coincidences within the Q universe, nor within the wider constellation of conspiracy theory that preceded it. "Conspiracy implies a world based on intentionality, from which accident and coincidence have been removed" stresses Barkun (2013, p. 41): "Anything that happens occurs because it has been willed." This is a logical world where things play out in a logical way. Everything has a reason. Effects can be traced back to causes, and if followers cannot always see the threads linking individuals, institutions, and events, it is because they are not looking hard enough or have been misled by deep state actors.

Skepticism and rationality are often championed through references to the Enlightenment. In drop #4408, Q speaks of the movement as a "new reason-based order instituting the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality"; followers should adopt these ideals by "undertaking to think for oneself, to employ and rely on one's own intellectual capacities in determining what to believe and how to act." These references to the Age of Reason suggest a new epoch, a revolution that shrugs off the dogma of religion and embraces the rigor of scientific investigation. Now, longstanding doctrines can be disputed and experts can be challenged. Everything is open to scrutiny, debate, and debunking. In "What is Enlightenment" Kant (1784, p.1) urged his readers to "have the courage to use one's own understanding." Across the corpus of posts, Q mirrors this call, urging followers to analyze and uncover for themselves. "Read and discern for yourself" Q urges in drop #3912. "Think for yourself" commands drop #3964. "Research for yourself" asserts drop #4734. "Knowledge is power. Take ownership of yourself" states #4503. "Ask yourself, why?" prods drop #3582. Fed up with the de-facto explanations handed out by others, the enlightened figure dares to take the plunge, diving into the hard truths that lie under the surface of reality.

There is a parallel here to the radical right motif of being red-pilled, a concept deriving from *The Matrix* in which the protagonist is asked to choose between swallowing one pill and forgetting everything, or swallowing the red pill and seeing how "deep the rabbit hole goes" (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1998). In the rhetoric of the radical right, this is not a pleasant experience, but it is a necessary one. Within these communities, the red pilled figure is the enlightened figure, one who has opened their eyes to the manicured reality presented by the powers-that-be and seen things as they really are (Evans, 2019; Munn, 2019). In drop #4550, Q states that "You are being presented with the gift of vision. Ability to see [clearly] what they've hid from you for so long [illumination]." From the alt-right to the newer formations of QAnon, then, the concept is remarkably similar: the "sheeple" (portmanteau of sheep and people) have their comfortable lies, while "we" know the harsh truths. In this imaginary, the Q follower escapes the darkness of ignorance and steps into the light.

Q's Blend

Q's injunctions to "have faith" and "think for yourself" bring together a unique blend of faith and skepticism. On the one hand, there is a prominent fantasy theme of rationality, empiricism, critical thinking, and logical proofs. "Knowledge is power," states drop #3662, "Think for yourself. Trust yourself. Do due diligence." These slogans distance themselves from any belief in divine sovereignty and gesture to contemporary ideals of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The neoliberal self must trust herself, managing her own life and finding her own truths (Gershon, 2011). On the other hand, there is a strong fantasy theme of faith, justice, judgement, warfare, and Christian rhetoric running through Q's posts. The faithful must trust in God, maintaining their beliefs and awaiting the coming of justice. This theme evokes a kind of quasi-religious assembly, the children of light who must band together against the forces of darkness.

For the reader scrolling through Q's posts, these themes appear directly alongside each other. Eschatology and the Enlightenment are interwoven. While QAnon's novelty and the gap in academic research make any discussion speculative, one byproduct of this blend seems to be a strong community. Neoliberal invocations of the self are augmented with the overarching purpose and unified front of the religious right. Individuals are bound together into a moral community (Graham and Haidt, 2010) founded on the tropes of justice and warfare. These cosmic mythologies establish a tight-knit "we" and bless their work as important and urgent. Q followers are faithful patriots, an assembly of good citizens struggling against evil forces. "United We Stand" proclaims one Q slogan. "Where We Go One, We Go All" declares another. Q regularly showcases video greetings from Q followers around the world, from Ghana to the UK and Iran (#3935, #3938, #4051). Each Q follower may have to investigate the truth for themselves, but these "independent researchers" are all carrying this task together, posting proofs back into the QAnon "hivemind" that are then discussed and built upon (Zuckerman, 2019). These practices collectively construct a shared reality and tie individuals into the #Qarmy.

QAnon's unique blend of narratives produces a compelling rhetorical vision, one not adequately captured by defining it as a religion (Argentino, 2020b) or dismissing it as a cult (Stanley-Becker, 2018). Of course, QAnon is certainly not unprecedented; there are some clear historical connections to note. For Lavin (2020), QAnon's obsession with blood, ritual, and sacrifice are updates of antisemitic blood libel conspiracy theories (Rose, 2015) and the more recent "satanic panic" of the 1980s. For Goodwin (2020), Q feels like an extrapolation of the New Christian Right, with its hyperpatriotism and conflation of progressive values with sexual deviancy. But these religious predecessors don't pull together all the puzzle pieces that QAnon does. QAnon borrows liberally to construct its powerful fantasy, drawing together the paranoid style with post-truth elements and combining enlightenment ideals with knowledge-construction practices enabled by networked media.

These knowledge practices of QAnoners are highly participatory. In that regard, they exemplify what cultural studies scholar Henry Jenkins (2006) termed participatory media culture. The new affordances of digital media allow individuals to come together as networked publics (boyd 2010) and generate their own media. Participatory media delighted in the fact that media was no longer dictated by a handful of gatekeepers; individuals could now create media forms that were meaningful to them. For Jenkins, this development was clearly liberating, allowing people to move from being passive consumers of media to active producers. Yet as Marwick and Partin (2022 forthcoming) note, QAnon culture brings into question this relentlessly positive, normative concept of participation. Participative media culture can be a powerful motor for coalescing publics and generating new epistemic claims — but those "truths" can also be toxic, contributing (as QAnon has done) to antisemitic sentiment and incitements to violence.

QAnon's ability to incorporate all these elements is not just due to its role as "big tent" conspiracy theory (Roose, 2020), but stems more precisely from Q's writings. Q weaves together faith and paranoia, spirituality and secular humanism into a seamless story. Habermas (2010) asked what is missing in our post-secular age and suggested it might lie in a new marriage of faith and reason; QAnon steps precisely into this gap. Granted, the "cross-fertilization of more 'secular' anti-government and apocalyptic conspiracy theories with more 'religious' ones" has been underway for at least three decades (Stroop, 2020). Yet the scale and success of this blend marks QAnon as new in degree, if not in kind. This is a story that applies powerful religious concepts like righteousness, justice, and evil to present-day political figures and events. This is a story told through the video grabs, GPS coordinates, and Twitter threads of Q. And this is a story remixed and retold through the growing community of independent QAnon researchers, who step others through their "logical thinking" with the use of screenshots, maps, and timestamps. Both the story itself, and the mechanisms of storytelling, then, stitch together a hybrid formation. This is a persuasive rhetorical vision that powerfully shapes a community's understanding of reality. Judging by the growing social and political influence of QAnon, this synthesis has proven coherent and compelling.

These insights into the persuasive power of QAnon resonate with stories by former followers. Echoing the theme of faith, one ex-QAnoner stated that a fundamentalist Christian upbringing primed him to accept conspiracy thinking. "Theories about evil evolution, science denial and the End of the world rapture return of Christ stuff is all pretty crazy too," he stated, "there's a strong link between the two" (Diceblue, 2021). The same ex-follower also echoed the theme of skepticism and rationality. "Conspiracy thinking hooks the brain because it feels like critical thinking," he stressed, people "gain a massive ego boost in thinking they have a secret that the sheeple don't know" (Diceblue, 2021). Another ex-QAnoner explained that the command to do your own research "works to reinforce conspiracy theories while making people think they're coming to conclusion on their own, thanks to the way search engines and social media algorithms work" (Reneau, 2021). Rather than being told what to believe, individuals are told to search for themselves – a far more powerful proposition that sees them inevitably finding media to support their view. These testimonies gesture to the persuasive power of QAnon's narrative-blend and its ability to mobilize individuals.

Conclusion

This article has examined the QAnon movement through the texts of its central figure: Q. One year of Q posts were analyzed, highlighting two fantasy themes in the QAnon canon. Faith is one, scripture and spiritual language gesturing to an apocalyptic battle in the present between the children of light and the children of darkness. Skepticism is another, a stress on the enlightened individual who employs critical thinking and draws her own fact-based claims. These twin themes come together to form a rhetorical vision grounded in powerful religious narratives and a tight-knit community but also premised on post-truth ideals of questioning dogma and forging your own truth through online knowledge construction practices.

This narrative blend offers one starting point for those seeking to understand QAnon and the powerful pull it exerts on followers. Of course, this study is an early and inherently limited intervention. More research is needed to investigate how Q's texts are adapted by followers, morphing as they encounter distinct subcultures. Other work might adopt a temporal lens, examining how Q's narrative has shifted over the last several years. Indeed, as a field of research, QAnon is vast, chaotic, and always changing. This rapid evolution challenges the researcher to keep pace, acknowledging her limits while still striving to conduct critical research that provides depth and insight.

"The Great Awakening is not a conspiracy theory or a cult," state the authors (Anons, 2018, p. 6) in their introduction to QAnon, "it is a sophisticated and coordinated information operation from within

President Trump's administration to enlighten the public about the true state of affairs of the nation and the world." While countering this dangerous movement is key, the first step is to understand how statements like this make sense at psychological, social, and cultural levels – how these powerful fantasies come to be internalized, endorsed, and propagated. Engaging with its texts and unpacking its themes provides one starting point for grasping the logics that drive this movement and mobilize its followers.

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