Contextual Factors behind Audience Engagement Behaviours of YouTube Vloggers: A Case Study

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Abstract: YouTube as a social media site for online videos has become a major platform for the distribution and consumption of video blogs (vlogs). Famous YouTube video bloggers (vloggers) can obtain large audiences and become important for product marketing. The success of vloggers can be related to the achievement of audience engagement, manifested by viewers' participation and consumption on YouTube. Existing studies have explored vloggers' audience engagement behaviours (AEBs) in their videos. This work-in-process research shifts focus from content to the vlogging "context" - situational factors involved during the production of vlogs. Context has been studied in subjects including human-computer interactions (HCI), television and language use, but rarely in vlogging. Previous research unveiled that context could affect bloggers' written content. Research in marketing suggests the effect of context on brands' engagement strategies towards consumers. However, the relationships between vlogging context and vloggers' AEBs in videos have rarely been explored. This study explores the question "How can vlogging context affect vloggers' audience engagement behaviours in videos?" This study implemented a qualitative analysis of videos from two famous UK YouTube vloggers. The analysis currently focuses on exploring how three key types of context (vlogger, audience and environmental context) may affect the two AEBs – interaction and self-disclosure. The results propose that the three contexts affect vloggers' AEBs through multiple contextual factors within each context. This highlights the importance of the vlogging context regarding its impact on vloggers' implementation of AEBs. The study contributes to establishing a further understanding of AEBs of vloggers by taking context into account in addition to content. It provides another angle to evaluate vloggers and social media producers' practices for building audiences.

Keywords: vlog, audience engagement, context, YouTube, social media, behaviour

1. Introduction

Audience engagement on YouTube refers to viewers' consumption of video content, and their participation activities (e.g., subscribing, commenting and liking) beside consumption on the site (Khan, 2017), reflecting the building of relationships between viewers and creators. As a video-based social media site, YouTube has become a major platform for user-generated video content, including video blogs (vlogs), one of the popular video types on YouTube (Burgess and Green, 2018; Kaminsky, 2010). Vlogs are a type of video in which video bloggers (vloggers) present their daily activities or other topics (Zhang, 2018). Popular YouTube vloggers can develop large audiences and can help promote products for marketers via their impact on consumers' opinions (Nouri, 2018).

It can be argued that vloggers' success in terms of audience bases can relate to their establishment of audience engagement, reflected by the gaining of, for example, subscribers, comments, views, and likes (YouTube, 2022). Research has already shown that to engage audiences, vloggers implement *audience engagement behaviours (AEBs)* in videos. Two common AEBs are interaction and self-disclosure. For example, vloggers interact with viewers by responding to comments (Tur-Viñes and Castelló-Martínez, 2019), and disclosing personal information (Marôpo, Jorge, and Tomaz, 2020) to deliver a sense of authenticity to connect viewers (Jerslev, 2016).

This work-in-process research shifts attention from the content of vlogs that contain AEBs to "*context",* which has rarely been discussed in vlogging. Context relates to situational factors in media (e.g., television, music, social media) content production, dissemination, and consumption (Bickham and Rich, 2006; Lena, 2006; Jaakonmäk, Müller and Vom Brocke, 2017). In other areas, for example, context refers to situations of environments and participants in language use in a non-online communication environment (Clark, 1996). Context has also been referred to as circumstances of entities in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) (Farahbakhsh, 2021). This paper views vlogging context as *situational factors involved during vlog production*.

Context can affect (online) media content. For example, the context of bloggers such as their motivations can shape the written content (Nardi et al, 2004). The context of uploaders such as whether young creators were monitored by their parents can affect the content types uploaded on YouTube (Yarosh et al., 2016). In traditional media, for example, Lena's (2006) research in music production found that the song lyrics in the market context

dominated by independent labels were written differently from the ones in the market dominated by major labels, indicating the effect of context on the traditional media content. As an online audio-visual media on YouTube, which is also an audio-visual format of blogs, it can be argued that vlogging context can affect vlog content. However, limited research explored the relationships between context and vloggers' AEBs in the content. Researchers already indicated context (e.g., policies, market environment) can shape brands' strategies to engage consumers (Van Doorn et al, 2010) in marketing, instead of the field of vlogging. Therefore, this research explores the question: "How can vlogging context affect vloggers' audience engagement behaviours in their videos?"

2. Methods

A qualitative case study was implemented to observe vloggers' practices in detail within YouTube (Yin, 2009). Two popular UK vloggers were selected as subjects: Zoe Sugg (beauty vlogger), and Daniel Middleton (game vlogger). Both vloggers already reached over 10 million subscribers in 2017, which can reflect their high audience engagement (Ferchaud et al, 2018). Furthermore, by using the YouTube Data Tool developed by Rieder (2015), metadata of these vloggers' channels up until 15 Jan 2022, including view count, comment count, and like count were retrieved. These metrics, according to YouTube (2022) can all indicate relative high audience engagement obtained by these two vloggers, making them a suitable case for this research (Table 1).

Table 1: Vlogger Channel Metadata (up until 15 Jan 2022)

Vlogger	Channel Names	Subscribers	View Count	Average Likes	Average Comments
Zoe Sugg	Zoella	10.9 million	1.1 billion	121,483	3,410
	Zoe Sugg	4.93 million	946 million	58,734	1,205
Daniel Middleton	DanTDM	25.9 million	18.5 billion	66,622	12,303
	DanTDM Shorts	78, 800	65.9 million	31,937	2,425
	MoreTDM	3.26 million	580 million	36,867	9,197
	DanTDM Live	1.42 million	156 million	22,169	2,678

The current stage of the study collected 2881 videos uploaded by the vloggers on their two channels (*Zoella* and *DanTDM*) before August 2017 and categorised them based on their topics. In each category, one video close to the beginning of each upload year was selected for final samples (N=126). Analysing the current data can explore how context affects vloggers' AEBs during that period in which vloggers' audience engagement has already been built, opening future opportunities for comparing the results to those from later video data that will be collected when the research progresses.

Based on the feature of vlogs and the exiting literature, the research currently focuses on three key contexts:

- Vlogger context: the situation of vloggers who may affect the content (Yarosh et al, 2016).
- Audience context: the situation of audiences, towards which vloggers may tailor their production since audiences' consumption is key for content popularity (Pires, Masanet, and Scolari, 2019).
- Environmental context: the situation of the environment that may affect (vlog) content produced (Lena, 2006; Snelson, 2015)

The study focuses on these contexts' effects on two ABEs mentioned: interaction and self-disclosure.

A thematic analysis was used first to identify interaction and self-disclosure in the content. Second, the content was re-evaluated with the identified AEBs to observe how those three contexts may affect the AEBs.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Vlogger and audience context

For vlogger context, the results show that vloggers' AEBs can be conditioned by vloggers' *personal experience* and *social characteristics. Personal experience* refers to what the vloggers were experiencing behind the production. For example, both vloggers show their life activities in videos as self-disclosure. It can be argued that their experience during those activities decided whether or which parts of the activities were disclosed. *Social characteristics* includes vloggers' interests and hobbies. For example, the results show that it drove both vloggers to disclose their interests such as Sugg talking about her most/least favourite food, and Middleton talking about his favourite games.

For audience context, the results show that *audience experience* and *interests* can also condition vloggers' AEBs. *Audience experience* relates to vloggers' awareness of their viewers' experience. For example, by knowing some viewers have similar skin issues as hers (through Twitter), Sugg made a video disclosing her skin problems, as self-disclosure. Similarly, by knowing some viewers are more experienced players than him, Middleton asks for advice in some gameplay videos, as interaction. *Audience interests* links to viewers' interests in specific content. For instance, both vloggers have made specific videos due to viewers' requests that could be driven by viewers' interests. This implies the effect of audience interests on interaction.

Overall, the results propose that vlogger context affects AEBs by conditioning vloggers' decisions of making content according to their personal experience and social characteristics. Audience context conditions AEBs by driving vloggers to make content based on their audience experience and interests. The results regarding vlogger and audience context not only link to exiting research in which context of human entities can alter online media content (Nardi et al, 2004; Yarosh et al, 2016), but also propose the effect of vlogger and audience context on AEBs.

3.2 Environmental context

The results found that both social and physical environments can affect vloggers' AEBs. *Social environment* refers to social activities such as public and popular events (e.g., festivals), leading vloggers to make specific content and resulting in AEBs. For example, because of Easter, Sugg uploaded an Easter DIY video, in which she also encourages viewers to share with her their DIYs, as a form of interaction. Similarly, because of a gaming event, Middleton shared a video showing him visiting the event as self-disclosure.

Physical environment mainly refers to locations of the vlog production that affect AEBs. Location was found to affect self-disclosure. For instance, both vloggers made videos disclosing their vlog production rooms to the viewers or their activities in some places. Without the locations, vloggers would not have obtained specific experience and shown them as self-disclosure.

So, overall, environmental context affects vloggers' AEBs through altering vloggers' consideration of making videos based on their physical and social environment during the production process. The effects of the social environment on human communication and media production have been indicated in previous research (e.g., Clark, 1996; Lena, 2006). However, the results in this paper further propose its effects on vloggers' AEBs in the content. Location is also considered critical in vlog production (Snelson, 2015). However, the current results further propose the effects of physical environment on vloggers' AEBs in their content in addition to its effect on the content itself.

4. Conclusion

The initial results argue that vlogger, audience, and environmental context affect vloggers' AEBs via contextual factors within each context. The research highlights the importance of vlogging context for AEBs. It contributes to further understanding of vloggers' AEBs by considering the role of context in addition to content. It provides a new angle to evaluate vloggers' and social media producers' practices for building audiences.

There are also limitations. First, currently, the study analysed videos uploaded up until 2017. The current results already propose the important effects of context on vloggers' AEBs. However, more video samples will be involved when the research progresses for results comparison. Second, other vloggers and AEBs will be analysed. Third, although the results demonstrate the effect of context on vloggers' AEBs, due to the qualitative nature, the results may not be able to indicate the levels or frequencies regarding the effect of contextual factors on vloggers' AEBs. For example, how many times did social environmental context affect vloggers' AEBs, or how effective the vlogger context is in comparison to audience context. Future research could consider comparing these factors.

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