Digital Self and Parasocial Interaction on Youtube

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This study focused on how amateur individuals who live in Taiwanese culture explore digital self and parasocial interaction via YouTube videos. Drawing upon Netnography and in-depth interviews with 45 participants, our data highlight that YouTube is a consumer narrative where multiple digital selves and parasocial interactions are made comprehensible.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Nowadays, ordinary individuals are keen to consume social media like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, which are popular performance spaces to disclose one’s digital self (Lyons, 2012). Current studies further argue that people in digital environments may come to know more people parasocially than directly through interpersonal contact (Jin, 2010). With a spectacular growth, social media seem to usher in a quiet revolution in people’s media consumption. Consumption has been viewed as a self-construction, self-presentation, and self- expressive behavior (Schau & Gilly, 2003). YouTube is a new means of self-construction, self-presentation, and social relationship to consumers and is also gaining attention in the consumer behavior field. Previous studies have shown that consumers create a sense of who they are through symbolism that is attached to the consumption choices and activities (Elliott & Percy, 2007). With the advent of new technology, YouTube is seen as a fantasy-driven space which gives consumers the freedom to express their views, create whatever or whoever they want, and establish parasocial interaction. In October 18, 2007, YouTube launched a Taiwanese site; since then, the number of consumers has been increasing along with accompanying changes in its consumers’ behaviors (Krehbiel, 2007). We argue that there may be a new tendency for amateur individuals who live in Taiwanese culture to digitally self-construct, self-present, and parasocially interact with others corresponding to certain forms that are likely to emerge from YouTube videos. Thus, this paper aims to understand how amateur individuals who live in Taiwanese culture explore digital self and parasocial interaction via YouTube videos.

Reviewing and drawing upon the literature on digital self and parasocial interaction theory, previous studies state that the art of self-presentation is both a manipulation of symbols and an embodied representation and experience to impart identity. Goffman (1959) suggests that the presentation of self is contextual; based on a specific setting. By contrast, YouTube allows consumers to digitally construct and present the self beyond a regional setting to the virtual world (Lange, 2007). Where liberation is purported to exist, YouTube gives consumers the freedom to express their views and create whatever or whoever they want (Castells, 2000). Various strategies may be adopted to digitally self-present. Moreover, current studies have also supported that when people in digital environments actively seek and present social personal information about each other, they construct impressions of each other and their relationships develop through parasocial interaction (Jin, 2010). We further argue that the ability to share videos with others offers a social component to YouTube that may contribute to parasocial interaction.

This research utilizes Netnography to gather data (Hine, 2000, 2007). Three types of data are examined in this inquiry: amateur individual’s YouTube videos; face-to-face, semi-structure long in-depth interviews with YouTube amateur performers; and electronic exchanges with participants. Researchers’ judgment resulted in a set of 3,752 Taiwanese amateur performers’ videos from October 2007 to December 2010. Participants selection began with amateur individuals’ YouTube videos. In total, 11 female participants and 34 male participants with ages between 16 and 35 years old were involved in this study. Interviews were done between 2010 and early 2012, which lasted between one hour to three hours, and online resources were used. The methodology employed in this study was guided by the systematic approach to qualitative research by Strauss and Corbin (1998) in grounded theory. The interviews were coded, and themes were distilled. The hermeneutic endeavor represents an analytical technique emphasizing part-to-whole relationships. The text is analyzed and interpreted from the perspective of our literature review of dialectical digital self and parasocial interaction theory. By interacting with and observing participants across online and offline situations, we interpreted their digital self-presentation and parasocial interaction on YouTube videos more fully.

Our data highlight that YouTube is a consumer narrative where multiple digital selves are made comprehensible. Constructing digital selves on YouTube videos, consumption comes to play a central role. We also find that the construction of digital gender identity is an essential component of the self-completion project on YouTube. Previous studies claim that consumers in digital environments seen as fantasy-driven spaces (e.g., YouTube) where everything goes. However, our findings release that YouTube is in someway liberating, enabling men and women to freely construct or reconstruct multiple digital selves by lived and mediated experiences which involved symbolic meanings either from their cultural values or jumping out from traditional gender values to freely express emotions and parasocially interact with desired impressions (Elliott & Percy, 2007). Furthermore, our participants thoughtfully considered what performances of their multiple digital selves to disclose. Consistent with Moon (2000), the findings show that YouTube is inherently conducive to strategic self-presentation at a distance. The data support that the participants via YouTube videos are like traditional TV characters who can arouse viewers to parasocially make more friends and socialize with them (Kanazawa, 2002). Strong feelings of viewers repeatedly and parasocially interact with the participants would gain increased attributional confidence about their digital personality (Giles, 2002). The paper further categorizes the main four digital self-presentation strategies on YouTube videos, including: basking, mystification, self-promotion, and gender-switching. Prior studies claim that cyber theory about behavior on the website has tended to overly specific fantasy on digital environments that separate online experiences from offline (real) lives (Turkle, 1996). For long-term observations and interviews, our data challenge that notions developed on YouTube do hold for adopting mystification strategy or combining mystification with gender-switching strategies. The results release that digital self-presentation success on YouTube videos is associated with important physical associations. These patterns suggest that both idealization and selective digital self-presentation are occurring when mystification strategy or strategies in combination is successfully adopted. When successfully adopted, self-images depend on the success of one’s digital self-presentation. When appearances or important parts of physical associations were shown, however, digital self-presentation was positively correlated with cultural gender values or stereotypes (Castells, 2000). These parasocial interactions are lived, challenging, and difficult on YouTube; operating through all digital social practices. The results suggest that YouTube is not a matter but a set of cultural values in terms of symbolic meanings in everyday life, which are vital for consumers to construct and present multiple digital selves and develop parasocial relationships with others everywhere.

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