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Mediated Authenticity: The Construction of Reality in Social Media Vlogs

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Abstract. With the gradual integration of social media into daily life, Vlogs have become one of the most common forms of content in contemporary online culture. In contrast to traditional media, Vlogs are often characterized by first-person perspectives, everyday narratives, and displays of private spaces, which thus leads audiences to frequently perceive them as direct recordings of real life. However, this authenticity does not reflect a natural presentation of reality; rather, it emerges from the interplay of filming techniques, editing practices, visual design, and platform mechanisms as a mediated effect. Drawing on Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation, Marshall McLuhan's media theory, and research on identity construction in social media, this article examines the mechanisms through which authenticity in Vlogs is produced, with a focus on the interactions among self-presentation practices, visual strategies, and platform logic. In particular, it analyzes identity performance, camera language, spatial composition, lighting and color, and algorithm recommendations, and points out that the authenticity in Vlogs is actually a perceptual experience shaped by media forms, rather than a direct replication of real life. Thus, the study argues that, within social media environments, authenticity should be understood as an ongoing mediated process rather than an inherent attribute of content itself.

Keywords: Media authenticity, Vlog, Self-presentation, Social media, visual strategy

1. Introduction

In recent years, TikTok, Social media platforms such as rednote (Xiaohongshu) and YouTube have changed the way people record and share their daily lives. As a new media practice that combines visual recording with personal expression, Vlog has rapidly spread due to its close connection with daily experiences, emphasis on individual perception, and highly interactive communication features. Unlike traditional film and television narratives, Vlog typically uses handheld shooting, first-person narration, and fragmented recording methods, visually creating an immersive viewing experience of "entering into others' lives." During this process, Vlog is often understood as a direct presentation of real life, but this "authenticity" is not naturally manifested; rather, it is a result of the joint production through visual forms and media mechanisms. Previous studies have discussed from perspectives such as identity construction, self-presentation, and social media culture. Goffman pointed out that identity is performed and constructed in continuous social interactions [1]. Banet-Weiser emphasized that in contemporary media culture, authenticity has gradually become an

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important cultural value and symbolic resource [2]. Marwick further noted that social media users actively shape public identities via self-branding practices [3]. In addition, McLuhan proposed the concept of "The medium is the message," emphasizing that the form of media itself participates in and reconstructs people's perception of reality [4]. Based on this, this paper, from three dimensions of visual strategies, self-presentation practices and platform logic, analyzes the generation mechanism of authenticity in Vlogs, and proposes that the authenticity in Vlogs is not a direct reproduction of real life, but a mediated reality composed of identity performance, visual forms and platform mechanisms.

2. Self-curation and the media construction of identity

2.1. Identity construction in social media

Identity is not fixed but performed through social interactions, and in social media environments this performance becomes structured by visibility and audience awareness [1, 3]. In practice, Vlog creators select content, hide certain emotions, and emphasize elements likely to gain recognition, a process shaped by both audience expectations and the platform's algorithmically mediated visibility. Through filming, editing, and publishing, everyday life is organized into curated fragments, producing a self-image that is performative and responsive rather than direct. Overall, this process reflects how social media structures identity via visibility and audience feedback, with algorithmic factors shaping the environment in which performance occurs, rather than merely representing an individual's inherent self.

2.2. Mediated self presentation and visual norms

With the development of platform culture, users increasingly manage their online presence as curated performances. Life on social media is no longer simply recorded but deliberately organized and styled, with choices of filters, music, composition, and overall visual aesthetics shaping a coherent personal image. Across platforms, the repetition of visual conventions drives the formation of aesthetic norms, which audiences interpret as markers of authenticity. Importantly, elements such as natural lighting, "minimal" editing, and casual framing function as culturally encoded indicators of realism rather than objective reflections of actual life; their perception as "authentic" arises from shared interpretive practices rather than intrinsic qualities. In this way, authenticity emerges as a culturally constructed expectation, generated through the recurrent circulation of visual conventions rather than by direct alignment with lived reality. These visual conventions are further recognized across contexts within influencer culture and systematically reproduced in platform environments, reinforcing collective perceptions of authenticity [5].

3. Visual strategies and the production of emotional intimacy

3.1. Camera distance and the construction of intimacy

Through sustained use of close-up selfie framing in daily Vlogs, camera proximity serves as a key mechanism for producing intimacy. Such framing exposes facial expressions, skin texture, and bodily proximity, simulating co-presence and thus reducing perceptual distance between creator and viewer. In contrast to traditional cinematic forms that maintain a structured separation between audience and characters, Vlogs frequently adopt a direct address mode in which creators speak toward the lens, creating an interactional structure resembling interpersonal communication.

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In addition, handheld recording techniques characterized by micro-shakes, slight focus shifts, and unbalanced composition contribute to a stylized naturalism that conveys immediacy and spontaneity. While these visual features are technically mediated, they are perceived by viewers as signaling directness and authenticity. In this context, intimacy emerges not solely from spatial proximity but from the interaction between visual style and audience interpretation. For instance, in social media contexts, such visual styles function as cues of authenticity, supporting audience affective alignment and the sense of interpersonal connection [6].

3.2. Spatial composition and affective atmospheres

In Vlogs, spatial settings function not merely as background elements but as active components in the production of affect. Recurring settings such as domestic rooms, streets, cafés, and subway environments generate stabilized atmospheric continuity that persists even in the absence of narrative structure. Through specific visual cues, including warm artificial lighting, cluttered desktops, or rain-covered windows, everyday environments are encoded with situational affect, allowing spatial details to index the creator's lived condition [7].

Instead of explicitly articulating emotional states, creators externalize psychological and affective conditions through spatial arrangements and material traces, enabling viewers to infer mood and atmosphere through environmental observation. This approach parallels observational practices in documentary filmmaking, in which indirect visual cues convey context and emotion without verbal exposition. In this process, space operates as an affective mediator between creator and audience, structuring emotional interpretation and engagement. Through repeated circulation of ordinary spatial settings, these environments develop into recognizable affective templates that structure audience perception and facilitate experiential resonance. Consequently, spatial representation contributes to authenticity by transforming ordinary settings into affectively meaningful visual constructs.

3.3. Aesthetic regulation of light, color, and everyday life

Through the consistent use of soft lighting, warm tonal palettes, and low-contrast imagery, Vlogs systematically aestheticize everyday visual environments [8]. These stylistic choices collectively produce a perceptual field associated with comfort, relaxation, and affective ease, shaping audience responses at the level of sensory perception rather than through explicit narrative cues. Visual features such as grainy textures, slight underexposure, or film-like filters are not incidental; within platform culture, they are culturally coded as markers of authenticity. Rather than reflecting an objective reality, these elements function as semiotic signals that indicate "realness," signaling to viewers that the content aligns with familiar norms of aestheticized daily life. Thus, the perception of authenticity is mediated through visual style, which becomes a communicative tool embedded in platform-mediated content circulation.

Repeated reproduction of these visual templates across social media platforms further normalizes their association with authenticity. The platforms' algorithmic structures and distribution logics favor content that aligns with these aesthetic conventions, reinforcing their visibility and prominence. Over time, what begins as a stylistic choice transforms into a standardized visual language through which authenticity is collectively interpreted. Consequently, audiences encounter these visual codes not as isolated instances but as recurring markers that shape their expectations of everyday life, affective engagement, and relational connection with content creators. In this process, authenticity emerges less as a direct reflection of lived experience and more as a historically accumulated,

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culturally codified construct that structures perception and emotional response in digital media environments.

4. Platform logic and the production of authenticity

4.1. Platform architecture and the structuring of self-expression

Through algorithmic recommendation and interface design, social media platforms shape not only content dissemination but also the modalities of user self-expression. Platform studies have suggested that recommendation systems tend to favor content that generates rapid user engagement, particularly through affective and attention-oriented signals, which in turn encourages creators to calibrate their expression toward perceived intimacy and authenticity. At the level of narrative and visual practice, first-person narration, close-up selfies, and "lived experience" titles have become recurring strategies for increasing visibility within platform logics.

Meanwhile, interactive mechanisms such as likes, comments, and feedback loops reinforce self-presentation as performance. By continuously tracking audience response metrics, creators iteratively adjust content style, producing a dynamic cycle of identity construction that is both responsive to and structured by platform environments. As van Dijck argues, platform architectures actively shape user behavior rather than functioning as neutral infrastructures [9]. Consistently, recent research further demonstrates that authenticity is strategically managed in relation to both audience expectations and platform-specific visibility regimes [10].

4.2. Platformization of everyday life and mediated daily practices

Through the increasing integration of social media into daily routines, individuals begin to perceive and organize their lives primarily through the lens of digital representation. Rather than experiencing events prior to documentation, users frequently restructure and curate life activities during the recording process. For instance, in some travel Vlog practices, creators may repeat similar actions to achieve desired visual outcomes, while "productive day" videos selectively edit mundane routines to construct a sense of order and efficiency.

At the level of audience reception, such curated depictions enhance perceived intimacy and authenticity, fostering affective engagement between viewers and creators. However, these forms of self-disclosure are rarely spontaneous; they are strategically composed and selectively shared to align with platform norms and audience expectations [11]. As such, everyday life becomes both platform-mediated and performatively staged, with the processes of recording, editing, and sharing actively shaping lived experience and its social interpretation.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the production of authenticity in social media Vlogs across three interrelated dimensions: identity construction, visual culture, and platform logic. And it is found that authenticity in Vlogs is not a direct representation of lived reality, but a mediated effect produced through lens-based visual strategies, spatial composition, aesthetic regulation of light and color, practices of self-curation, and platform-level mechanisms. Within social media environments, users function as both content producers and self-curators. The construction of "natural" and "authentic" life is therefore not spontaneous, but involves systematic visual design and affective organization. In this sense, authenticity should not be treated as an intrinsic attribute of content, but as an ongoing

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and mediated process of construction. The "reality" of Vlogs is thus an experiential effect shaped by the interaction of visual form, identity performance, and platform architecture. The mediated nature of authenticity is crucial for examining identity, everyday life, and reality in digital environments. Recent research further emphasizes that authenticity extends beyond individual agency, occurring within platform cultures, algorithmic visibility regimes, and influencer self-presentation practices.

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