Worth the effort? Comparing different YouTube vlog production styles in terms of viewers' identification, parasocial response, immersion, and enjoyment

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For citation, please refer to

Author Notes

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

In recent years, online video blogs (vlogs) have become a highly popular form of media content, especially among younger audiences. While public interest has invoked a strong commercialization of vlog culture, research suggests that the concurrent loss of performer authenticity might pose a problem for the genre's appeal. Preparing the same vlog content in unedited ("amateur") and heavily produced ("professional") versions for an online experiment, we compare the viewing experience of 154 participants in terms of identification, parasocial responses, immersion, and enjoyment. Regarding most of these variables, we observe that the evaluations for the professionally produced vlog turn out much more favorable. Interestingly, the uncovered effects remain independent of the vlog's thematic focus, which is explored as an additional factor in our experiment. Concluding our statistical analyses, we report the results of an exploratory mediation analysis connecting the measured media psychological constructs.

Keywords: vlog, YouTube, production style, parasocial interaction, enjoyment

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Following the digital revolution of the past three decades, previous cornerstones of media transmission—radio, television, and newspapers—are nowadays known as *traditional media*, a label that hardly manages to conceal its allegation of antiquity. Indeed, more and more of today's media consumers tend to navigate the media ecosystem in a strictly digital way: In their daily life, fixed television schedules have yielded to video-on-demand platforms (Rainie, 2017), while printed newspaper subscriptions fight a losing battle against ever-updating social media feeds (Kamarck & Gabriele, 2015).

Among other contemporary success stories such as Netflix, Facebook, or Instagram, a particularly popular provider of digital media has emerged in the video-sharing platform YouTube. According to a recent survey, 85% in a large-scale sample of U.S.-American teenagers described themselves as frequent YouTube users, marking the highest prevalence found for any digital media outlet (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). In turn, the platform is prepared to fulfil any given demand: With more than 400 hours of new content uploaded every minute, YouTube offers a literally inexhaustible supply of content. Clearly, this enormous collection of media is only made possible by the fact that YouTube uploads are not necessarily created by media professionals, but also include a large percentage of amateur footage (so-called *user-generated content*). In particular, it has become a very popular practice among users of the platform to upload recordings of themselves in which they discuss personal thoughts or recollect daily-life experiences—paving the way for the hugely successful genre of the video blog, or *vlog*.

In contrast to the passive modes of reception known from traditional media, viewers themselves constitute an integrative part of vlog culture, as YouTube hosts often address viewers and fans directly in their videos. From a media psychological perspective, this

"[going] beyond an era of passive entertainment into a renaissance of immersive entertainment" (Brouwer, 2015) suggests that the success of the vlog all but depends on the high levels of identification, immersion, and parasocial interaction evoked among audiences. Strangely enough, however, actual empirical research into these media psychological concepts in the vlog context remains sparse to this day. Even more so, the fascinating evolution of many vlog channels into highly professionalized media offerings has not yet attracted notable attention from the media psychological community; as a result, the connection between the stylistic aspects of a vlog and viewers' experience remains mostly unexplored. With the current study, we strive to remedy the identified shortcomings, conducting an experimental investigation of viewers' reaction towards both a prototypical amateur vlog with low production values, as well as a more professionalized version in the style of highly successful YouTube channels.

The Professionalization of Vlog Culture

In its usual form, vlogging involves one or more presenters talking directly to a camera about a variety of topics, such as fashion, societal issues, or celebrity gossip. Accordingly, one of the first analyses of the emerging genre argued that vlogs constituted a vessel for amateur and mundane self-expression (Burgess & Green, 2009). Even back then, however, the authors already noticed the emerging entrepreneurial character of YouTube's vlogging culture, anticipating a steady disruption of the "professional–amateur divide" (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 104). Several years later, this prediction has become reality: Vloggers who were able to attract large audiences—i.e., vlog *influencers*—have achieved immense financial success, turning vlogs into a legitimate media industry complete with covert advertising (Gürkaynak et al., 2018) and million-dollar sponsorships (Lynch, 2018).

Unsurprisingly, the professionalization of YouTube's vlogging culture as a whole has also invoked the professionalization of the vlog as a media form (Kim, 2012). Although the

vast majority of vloggers still has to rely on low-priced video equipment (e.g., GoPro cameras or smartphones) and self-taught editing skills, successful influencers usually proceed to filming their content with high-level equipment and the help of professional production crews. By these means, however, they also run the risk of robbing the medium of its main appeal: its seemingly unedited authenticity (Duplantier, 2016). After all, recent research suggests that the success of mass-oriented computer-mediated communication might all but depend on the believable conveyance of intimacy and interrelatedness (Lee, 2020), with some authors suggesting that certain stylistic choices might be necessary to uphold these crucial impressions among the audience (e.g., Abidin, 2015; Ferchaud et al., 2018; Strangelove, 2010). However, apart from single case studies and a few content analyses (e.g., Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Zhang, 2018), actual empirical investigations into the relationship between certain vlog characteristics and viewers' experience remain absent from literature. Even more so, it has to be noted that the few extant publications in this regard have relied mostly on vague self-report measures such as "perceived vlogger authenticity," while neglecting well-established psychological constructs that might underpin these perceptions. For instance, Cunningham and Craig (2017) argue that "traditional audiences go into a theatre [whereas vlog] audiences would rather hang out in the green room with the talent" (p. 75), but despite clearly addressing the impact of parasociality, the phenomenon is never introduced (let alone measured) as such. Similarly, Hunter (2015) proposes that vloggers benefit from the fact that viewers could "imagine being" them, yet to the best of our knowledge, a scientific exploration of viewers' identification with vloggers has not been carried out to this day.

The Current Study

Going beyond the ad-hoc measures and narrow qualitative scale of previous research efforts regarding the vlog context, the current study presents an online experiment that explores viewers' identification, parasocial response, immersion, and—as a more overarching

criterion—enjoyment while watching amateur (i.e., improvised, unedited) and professional (i.e., scripted, heavily edited) versions of the same video blog content.

Identification

Identification describes short-term instances of psychological assimilation during which a viewer takes on certain aspects or complete identities presented by media personae (Cohen, 2001, p. 245). By identifying with a media character, viewers temporarily expand their personal selves and start to subjectively experience another person's feelings and motivations (Slater et al., 2014). Extant literature has often differentiated between two forms of identification, namely *similarity identification* and *wishful identification* (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). While the former is based on the perception of characteristics one might share with a media persona, the latter revolves more around efforts to emulate a character whose appearance or behavior are considered highly desirable.

Concerning the influence of different vlog production styles on these two criteria, we assumed that viewers would find it easier to experience similarity identification with the presenter of an amateur vlog (**H1a**), whose natural and intimate portrayal should decrease the psychological distance between the depicted persona and oneself. On the other hand, we expected that the refined appearance of the vlogger in a well-produced video should go along with stronger wishful identification (**H1b**).

Parasocial phenomena

Broadly speaking, parasocial phenomena can be defined as unilateral viewer responses towards media personae. As the most well-known forms in this regard, parasocial interaction (PSI) describes the imagined interaction with a media character (Horton & Wohl, 1956), while parasocial relationships (PSR) encompass nonreciprocated feelings of relatedness during and after the viewing situation (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016).

In contrast to the initial conception by Horton and Wohl, parasocial phenomena are nowadays regarded as non-pathological responses that do not necessarily rely on the illusion of reciprocal social contact (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). Furthermore, in a widely noticed elaboration on the phenomenon, Hartmann, Schramm, and Klimmt (2004) argued that PSIs may range from immediate, involuntary responses that only scratch the surface of parasociality to more reflective responses impacting viewers' thoughts, feelings, and behavior (i.e., *high-level PSI*). In the face of these theoretical advancements, another recent contribution (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011) argued that the contemporary understanding of PSI has little in common with Horton and Wohl's original conception (1956), which framed PSI as an actual illusion of reciprocity. In order to return to this initial idea without devaluating recent modifications, the authors proposed a new construct in the tradition of Horton and Wohl—the *experience of PSI* (EPSI), which focuses strictly on the impression of mutual awareness with a media persona.

Since both PSI and PSR, as well as EPSI have been shown to depend on stylistic aspects of media portrayals (e.g., Cummins & Cui, 2014; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Tsai & Men, 2016), we decided to include all of them in the current study. Yet, based on our literature review, we found it difficult to settle on a single, directional hypothesis regarding the relationship between a vlog's production style and viewers' parasocial response. On the one hand, Cohen and Tyler (2016) recently reported that participants' PSI with Twitter celebrities diminished once they found out that external assistants had helped to manage the respective profile. In our expectation, this effect could likely apply to vlogging as well, as being aware of a professional filming crew might reduce viewers' perceived closeness to a vlogger and therefore impede parasocial responses. On the other hand, studies have indicated that higher persona attractiveness and prolonged eye contact usually lead to stronger PSI and EPSI (e.g., Cummins & Cui, 2014; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). Considering that both of

these aspects are often emphasized in professional vlogs (e.g., Chen, 2014, Zhang, 2018), we also deemed it possible that a refined production style could evoke a stronger parasocial reaction. As such, we decided to pose an open-ended research question, exploring how a well-produced and an unedited vlog influence participants' PSI, EPSI, and PSR (**RQ1**).

Immersion

Immersion describes a state of focused attention during the reception of media, which is typically accompanied by a reduced awareness for one's physical surroundings (Murray, 1997). Described as the complete absorption "within the ebb and flow of a […] narrative schema" (Douglas & Hargadon, 2000, p. 154), it is strongly related to theoretically similar concepts such as transportation (*narrative immersion*). Unlike the latter, however, immersion also depends strongly on technical characteristics of a media (*sensory immersion*), including its modality, level of detail, or visual realism (Schmierbach et al., 2012).

Contemplating how different vlog production styles might compare in terms of immersivity, we again expected opposing effects. Insight gained from the field of cinematography suggests that less refined images may sometimes convey a heightened sense of immersion (Bordwell & Thompson, 2007), for instance when using a shaky, hand-held filming style (which often applies to amateur vlogs). In contrast to this, other media studies indicate that higher sensory quality—as provided by the well-lit, high-definition material found in professional vlogs—inevitably increases viewers' immersion (Ryan, 2015). Thus, from a strictly sensory perspective, no clear assumption on vlog immersion emerged from our literature review. However, by focusing on the narrative aspects of the construct, a directional hypothesis seemed more feasible. Since professional vloggers often edit their material in a fast-paced, tense manner (e.g., by using jump cuts and inserting stock footage), they usually build towards highly focused narratives. In contrast to this, the lack of post-production—or any script whatsoever—typically seen in amateur vlogs can make it difficult for viewers to

follow a coherent story. Hence, we ultimately hypothesized that viewers' immersion would turn out higher while watching a professionally produced instead of an unedited vlog (**H2**).

Enjoyment

Enjoyment constitutes a media psychological construct with seemingly high face validity—due to its simple denomination, it is often interpreted as the "pleasure" felt during media use. However, recent psychological literature suggests that enjoyment encompasses much more than the satisfaction of hedonic needs: It may also result from meaningful (i.e., eudaimonic) experiences that advance people's self-realization or make them feel competent (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). While this conceptual refinement has certainly elevated the contemporary understanding of enjoyable media experiences, we argue that in the context of vlogging, a hedonic viewpoint remains quite sufficient at the current time. Not only do most vloggers make sure to create a serene atmosphere in their videos, they also tend to focus on lighthearted subject matter such as fashion trends, traveling, or video games. Arguably, this tonality cannot be assumed for every single vlog channel on YouTube; considering the majority of cheerful vlogs, however, we decided that a hedonic viewpoint was still adequate for the current study.

Researchers have managed to identify several factors that generally predict hedonic media enjoyment, including narrative coherence, evoked arousal, perceived novelty, and technical finesse (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2011; Eden, 2017). Similarly, all of the abovementioned constructs have been connected to enjoyment in previous literature (e.g., Ferchaud & Sanders, 2018; Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004). Considering all of these criteria, professionally produced vlogs seem to gain a clear advantage over amateur material, which they surpass both in terms of visual quality and narrative structure. Therefore, we hypothesize that professional vlog videos will lead to higher viewer enjoyment than comparable amateur counterparts (**H3**).

Additionally, since enjoyment is often perceived as an underlying "core" of viewers' media experience (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004), potentially feeding from the other constructs included in our study, we prepared another research question on the potential mediation of enjoyment through the other explored aspects of viewer experience. In particular, we hoped to gain further insight if identification, parasocial reactions, or immersion could serve as significant mediators of participants' enjoyment (**RQ2**).

Controlling for Vlog Topic

When trying to understand the psychological effects of a media's stylistic presentation, it is undoubtedly very important to consider the media's content as an impactful confounding variable. In order to gain at least some basic statistical control over this influence, we decided to add the vlog's *thematic focus* as a second factor to our experiment— striving to avoid the mono-message bias often detrimenting from media psychological research. Therefore, we prepared amateur and professional vlog video conditions for two vastly different topics, juxtaposing a mundane daily-life issue with a much more abstract, nature-related topic. This specific selection of topics was guided by an exploratory review of the most popular vlogs on YouTube, which indicated to us that vloggers either tend to share their own daily life experiences from a first-person perspective (e.g., social events, 'life hacks,' identity issues) or talk about a specific subject matter assuming a third-person perspective (e.g., games, celebrities, animals, etc.). In our expectation, this different level of personal engagement with the viewer might have emerged as a confounding variable and, therefore, offered a welcome choice in order to control for the influence of vlog topic. Accordingly, we chose one exemplary topic for each of these two distinct approaches, trying to juxtapose a personal daily-life vlog with a "narrator-style" nature vlog. By including this second experimental factor, we found ourselves able to investigate whether the effects of our core variable "production style" would remain consistent across thematic conditions,

regardless of the content discussed in the respective videos or the emphasis put on the shown persona).

Method

The current study was conducted in the form of an online experiment, using a 2×2 between-subjects design. At the beginning of our online survey, participants received a short briefing on the study's anonymity and voluntariness; in order to proceed, giving informed consent was required. Subsequently, every participant was assigned to one of four vlog conditions via block randomization (Fig. 1). Following the presentation of the respective video, several measures had to be filled in. Lastly, as a compensation for their time, participants could choose between partial course credits or the chance to win one of two €25 vouchers in a gift raffle.

Participants

A total of 219 [NATIONALITY REDACTED] participants (60.7% female; age $M = 22.91$ years, $SD = 3.16$) took part in our study. Since invitation messages were mostly distributed via university mailing lists and local social media groups, the majority of the sample consisted of undergraduate and graduate students (95.4%). Although our videos featured a relatively unknown vlogger, 28 individuals claimed to recognize the depicted persona and were therefore excluded from the sample. By recording the time participants spent viewing the vlog, we were able to identify 38 individuals who had watched the embedded five-minute video for less than four or more than ten minutes (attention check). These participants were excluded as well, with both cutoff values formulated a priori. As a result, our final sample consisted of 154 participants (63.0% female) aged between 18 and 35 years (age $M = 22.78$ years, $SD = 3.38$).

Materials

To keep full control over the planned experimental manipulation, we chose to produce our own vlog videos for the current study. For this purpose, we recruited an amateur-level vlogger (a 26-year old woman) and asked her to record four different versions of a vlog: two well-prepared (*professional condition*) and two seemingly improvised recordings (*amateur condition*). In each of these pairs, the vlogger presented the same two topics according to self-written scripts, namely a practical daily life issue ("Life Hacks to Save Money") and a more abstract topic from the field of zoology ("Astonishing Facts About Whales").

In order to create ecologically valid style conditions from these recordings, we consulted previous analyses (Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Marwick, 2016; Mathies, 2017), which provide some evidence as to what constitutes a "professional" versus an "amateur" vlog. During this step, the following criteria emerged for professionalized vlogs: a stylistically thought-out setting, excellent image quality (high definition in landscape format), professional lighting, numerous (jump) cuts, background music, stock footage inserts, and error-free speaking of the presenter. Conversely, we found amateur vlogs to be characterized by uncut single-take shots filmed in portrait mode, inferior image quality, unclean framing due to the camera being handheld, and numerous speaking errors.

Adhering to the identified principles, we recorded our videos for the professional condition with a Canon EOS 5D camera mounted on a tripod, using external microphones and high-level lighting equipment. The amateur stimuli, on the other hand, were shot with a handheld iPhone 6S smartphone. While our presenter was instructed to deliver the two scripts fluently for the professional condition, the amateur condition showed her presumably improvising the same content with many breaks, mispronunciations, and filming errors. Lastly, we made sure to acknowledge the analyzed editing differences, enhancing only the videos for the professional condition with jump cuts, stock footage inserts (Figure 2), and soft background music. Apart from these stylistic choices, however, we standardized as many

aspects of the vlogs as possible—including the clothing and make-up of the presenter, her

relaxed mood, and the videos' length. Once finished, the prepared materials were uploaded to

YouTube and embedded into our online survey using the platform's distinctive video player.

Measures

We assessed participants' viewing experience via slightly adapted versions of well-

established scales as well as ad-hoc items inspired by extant research. Unless stated

otherwise, all of the described scales were answered on 7-point Likert-scales ranging from 1

(*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). After excluding a few items due to insufficient

item-scale correlations ($r < .4$), all scales were averaged into indices for statistical analyses.

Identification. Participants' similarity identification was measured using four adapted

items (e.g., "The vlogger is like me in many ways", Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$) suggested by van

Looy and colleagues (2010). For a measure of wishful identification, on the other hand, we

adapted five items (e.g., "She is the sort of person I want to be like myself", Cronbach's $\alpha =$

.85) from Hoffner and Buchanan (2005).

Parasocial phenomena. Despite looking back at a long tradition in communication

research, measuring parasocial phenomena has remained a critical issue among researchers

(Dibble et al., 2016). To cover a significant part of the existing conceptual range, we utilized

several scales to assess participants' cognitive, affective, and conative responses to the

vlogger (high-level PSI), their illusion of mutual awareness (EPSI), and feelings of friendship

and interrelatedness (PSR[1]).

Parasocial interaction. In order to address the full theoretical range of high-level PSI,

we adapted numerous items from the well-established PSI-Process Scales (Schramm &

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[1] Recent studies indicate that even brief exposures are sufficient to initiate PSRs (e.g., Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018). Accordingly, we decided to include the measurement of PSR despite showing only a single video of the vlogger. Following the suggestions found in the literature, PSR was measured as the last parasocial construct in our questionnaire to allow for a short period of processing between the media exposure and the assessment of parasocial friendship.

Hartmann, 2008): 16 items about cognitive responses (e.g., "I carefully followed the behavior of the vlogger,"; Cronbach's α = .87), eight items about affective responses (e.g., "Sometimes I really loved the vlogger for what she did and said"; Cronbach's α = .85), and another eight items about behavioral responses (e.g., "Sometimes I felt like speaking out on the vlogger"; Cronbach's α = .90). Moreover, to gain insight into the polarity of viewers' parasocial reaction, a single-item measure of PSI valence ("As how likable did you perceive the vlogger?"; 1 = *not at all, 7 = very*) was added to our questionnaire.

Experience of parasocial interaction. In order to measure the impression of mutual awareness with the vlogger, we included the six-item Experience of Parasocial Interaction scale (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; e.g., "While watching the clip, I had the feeling that the vlogger knew I was aware of her"; Cronbach's α = .81).

Parasocial relationship. We operationalized participants' PSR with the vlogger via five adapted items from the Multiple Parasocial Relationship Scale (Tukachinsky, 2010; e.g., "If I knew the vlogger personally, I would disclose a great deal of things about myself to her"; Cronbach's α = .90).

Immersion. Participants were asked to indicate their feeling of immersion during the vlogs' reception with five items adapted from Oh, Chung, and Han (2014; e.g., "I was totally absorbed in the video when watching it"; Cronbach's α = .86).

Enjoyment. To assess the extent to which our participants enjoyed the presented vlogs, we adapted four ad-hoc items taken from previous studies (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). Due to the brevity and lighthearted nature of our stimuli, all items operationalized the concept in hedonic terms (e.g., "The video was entertaining"; Cronbach's α = .94).

Manipulation checks and covariates. We checked our experimental manipulation for its validity by using four ad-hoc items about the production quality of the video (e.g.,

"The speaker seemed well-prepared"; Cronbach's α = .74), as well as another set of four items about the videos' thematic focus (e.g., "The video addressed issues that are important in my everyday life"; Cronbach's α = .82). Originally, we also prepared two covariates for our analyses, assuming that participants' individual fascination for the presented topics (3 items; e.g., "I like thinking about the video's topic"; Cronbach's α = .89), as well as their previous engagement with vlogs (single item: "How often do you watch vlogs and streaming channels?"; 1 = *never*, 5 = *several times each day*) would systematically influence their viewing experience. However, as we found these covariates to differ between our experimental groups—thus, violating a key assumption of the intended (M)ANCOVA calculations, namely that experimental factors and covariates have to be independent from each other—we decided against including them in our analyses.

Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for all scales are displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Sensitivity analyses indicated that our achieved sample size resulted in 80% power for detecting univariate effects with an effect size of $\eta_p^2 \geq .05$.

Manipulation Check

Prior to addressing our hypotheses and research questions, we checked our experimental manipulations for their effectiveness. Concerning the first factor, we calculated a Student's t-test with the assigned vlog style condition (amateur vs. professional) as between-subjects factor and perceived production quality as dependent variable. Results revealed a very strong effect, $t(152) = 11.76$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.90$, as participants rated the professional version as much more well-produced ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.10$) than the amateur version ($M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.17$). Thus, our different production style conditions can indeed be regarded as different manifestations of the according variable.

Next, we conducted another Student's t-test with the assigned topic condition (daily life vs. zoology) as between-subjects factor and perceived thematic focus as dependent variable. Again, results showed a very strong effect, $t(152) = 10.03$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.62$. Observing the group means, we found that the videos about saving money were rated as much more mundane and focused on everyday life ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 1.28$) than the vlogs about whales ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.20$), confirming another successful manipulation.

Hypotheses Testing

To reduce the risk of false-positive errors, our statistical analysis was designed to contain the smallest number of significance tests necessary to test our research propositions. Due to this principle as well as the notable intercorrelations between our dependent variables (see Table 2), we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) including all measured outcome variables, as well as production style (amateur vs. professional) and topic (daily life vs. zoology) as between-subjects factors. Checking our data for their suitability, an inspection of histograms and scatterplots, Mahalanobis' distance, and a Box's M test showed that all necessary assumptions for the statistical procedure were met. The procedure resulted in a very strong multivariate effect of production style, Wilks' $\Lambda = .81$, $F(10,141) = 3.37$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$, but neither in a multivariate main effect of vlog topic, $\Lambda = .92$, $F(10,141) = 0.31$, $p = .311$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, nor an interaction effect between both experimental factors, $\Lambda = .91$, $F(10,141) = 1.38$, $p = .195$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$. Thus, as a first important result, we report that our findings regarding vlog production quality can be considered as mostly independent of the vlog's thematic focus.

In light of our significant multivariate main effect for vlog style, we next proceeded to univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to find out which psychological variables had actually been affected by our different production styles.

Identification. Whereas participants' similarity identification was not found to be influenced in a statistically noteworthy way by the different vlog styles, $F(1,150) = 3.23$, $p = .074$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, we did observe that their wishful identification had turned out significantly different depending on the viewed production style, $F(1,150) = 4.51$, $p = .035$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, albeit with a very small effect size. Specifically, it can be noted that viewing a well-produced vlog video led to slightly stronger wishful identification ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.38$) than the unedited amateur vlog ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.27$). As such, although we have to reject H1a, our data provide minor evidence in favor of H1b. Due to the small effect size, however, we ask that this result is interpreted with caution.

Parasocial phenomena. Regarding our multi-faceted operationalization of parasociality, we found several conceptual aspects to be unrelated to our manipulation of production style. No significant effects were found for cognitive PSI, $F(1,150) = 3.54$, $p = .062$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, behavioral PSI, $F(1,150) = 1.45$, $p = .230$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, EPSI, $F(1,150) < 0.01$, $p = .994$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, and PSR, $F(1,150) = 0.02$, $p = .917$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$. In contrast to this, we observed significant univariate effects on affective PSI, $F(1,150) = 7.76$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, and PSI valence, $F(1,150) = 5.17$, $p = .024$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. Examining our results closer, we found that participants who had watched the amateur vlog reported a weaker affective parasocial response ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.12$) than participants in the professional condition ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.36$). Furthermore, participants described their reaction to the vlogger in the amateur video condition as less positive ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.61$) than in the professional video condition ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.44$). In summary, we come to a mixed conclusion regarding our research question on parasocial phenomena (RQ1): Different levels of production quality actually influenced parasocial responses, but only in the form of emotional PSI and general PSI valence.

Immersion. In our ANOVA focusing on participants' immersion, we found another significant main effect of production style, $F(1,150) = 18.92$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$. As assumed in our respective hypothesis, viewers had indeed felt more immersed in the professionally produced video ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.60$) than in the amateur version ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.17$). Hence, our data offer evidence in favor of H2, showing that vlogs with higher production quality may actually make it easier for viewers to become immersed in.

Enjoyment. Lastly, an univariate analysis focusing on our measure of viewer enjoyment uncovered a significant and rather large effect of production quality, $F(1,150) = 17.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$. Our data showed that participants considered the professional vlog as much more enjoyable ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.82$) than the amateur vlog ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.25$). Thus, we present a positive answer to H3: Viewers' enjoyment of vlog videos *did* benefit from a professional production style.

Exploratory Mediation Analysis

Based on the significant effects that were uncovered during our hypotheses testing, we created an exploratory mediation model, in which variables (i.e., mediators and criterion) were modelled according to the theoretical understanding of their causality. Accordingly, we assumed enjoyment as the criterion variable (due to its meta-emotional/-evaluative nature; Bartsch et al., 2008), while wishful identification, affective PSI, PSI valence, and immersion were modelled as potential mediators (due to their respective experiential nature). Production style (amateur vs. professional) was included as the causal variable. Since both wishful identification and PSI valence showed insignificant or only marginally significant correlations with enjoyment, we excluded both from our final mediation model as shown in Figure 3. Indirect effects were calculated via 5000 bootstrapped samples and 95% confidence intervals.

The final mediation analysis revealed both a significant total effect, $B = 1.03$, $t(152) = 4.10$, $p < .001$, and direct effect, $B = 0.34$, $t(150) = 2.10$, $p = .037$, of production style predicting enjoyment. Furthermore, we found significant indirect effects through affective PSI, $B = 0.24$ (95% CI: 0.069; 0.457), and immersion, $B = 0.44$ (95% CI: 0.143; 0.770). Concerning our RQ2, these results indicate that even though the vlog's production quality exerted a direct influence on viewers' enjoyment, this connection could partially be explained by stronger affective parasocial responses towards the vlogger, as well as higher immersion during reception of the professionally produced vlog.

Discussion

Every day, millions of people access YouTube to watch the private thoughts, critical commentary, or daily life experiences of vloggers from around the world. However, the global rise of vlogging as a popular media form has changed the way many vlogs *look*— which inspired us to investigate if this transformation also encompasses the way they *feel*. Assuming a media psychological viewpoint, we inquired participants about the experiential variables underpinning their watching of vlog videos in a self-created experiment. Instead of the theoretically ambiguous concepts employed by previous case studies and qualitative analyses (e.g., Cunningham & Craig, 2017; Hunter, 2015), we focused on four prominent psychological constructs (identification, parasocial phenomena, immersion, and enjoyment) in order to gain deeper insight into the relationship between the genre's on-going professionalization and viewers' response.

In summary, our results paint a picture in favor of the professional preparation and post-production of user-generated content in the vlog context. Among our self-created videos, viewers considered the refined filming and editing style of a "professional" vlog as more immersive, parasocially affecting, and enjoyable than allegedly improvised one-take recordings lacking any visible editing. Moreover, our participants found it slightly easier to

experience wishful identification with the vlogger in a professionally filmed and edited video. For content creators, this implies that striving for a certain level of visual quality and narrative coherence might well be "worth the effort," promising a more engaging and pleasing media product. Unlike previous commentary, which has framed the relatability of vlogs (or more specifically, their hosts) as a main advantage over the "presumed inauthenticity of established fictional screen formats" (Cunningham & Craig, 2017, p. 10), we found that the merits achieved with good filming equipment, the preparation of a script, and coherent editing did not detriment from our participants' impression of an enjoyable vlog, or reduce their identification with the depicted persona. Instead, by removing the vlogger's occasional stuttering, making her appear more attractive, and adding stock footage about the discussed topics, viewers not only found it easier to become immersed in our materials, but also expressed stronger liking and admiration towards the vlogger. Concerning the on-going discussion about authenticity as an underlying core quality for successful mass-oriented online communication (Lee, 2020), this may suggest that beneficial perceptions of being "real" or relatable do not necessarily depend on an unrefined or amateurish visual presentation—otherwise, participants might not have been able to identify with or generally enjoy the vlogger in the professionalized vlog as much as they did in our experiment.

Providing additional insight into the relationship between our statistically relevant outcome measures, an exploratory mediation analysis showed that both immersion and affective PSI mediated the positive influence of production style on enjoyment. In our opinion, this not only makes sense theoretically, but also when adopting a market perspective. In a community filled with several thousands of amateur vlogs competing for strangers' attention, a certain level of professionalization might convey that the vlogger in question puts in extra work to create valuable content for her or his audience. In turn, this perception of creative effort may prompt viewers to become emotionally invested as well, contributing to an enjoyable viewing experience. Similarly, augmenting a vlog video with

visual footage and coherent editing seems to make it much easier for the viewers to become immersed in the presented materials, further heightening the enjoyment derived from the respective vlog. However, we want to point out that our exploratory mediation approach that was based on a common theoretical understanding of experiential and meta-evaluative concepts needs to be confirmed with an experimental methodology in order to determine the definitive causal direction of the included concepts.

Lastly, comparing two quite different vlog topics helped us to find out whether the impact of our core variable—technical professionalism—would somehow depend on the presented subject matter. Juxtaposing an approachable, daily life vlog with a much more abstract vlog on whales, we observed that the depicted content did not modulate the effects of the vlogs' production style in a notable way. While two topics are clearly not enough to represent the full spectrum of different vlogs available on YouTube, this finding lends at least some support to the notion that our results might apply to more than one specific kind of video diary.

Limitations and Future Work

While we expended our best efforts to create externally valid stimuli, it still needs to be acknowledged that we presented participants with imitations of existing vlogs instead of completely authentic material. As such, it cannot be ruled out that participants noticed some form of artificiality in our videos. Similarly, the ecological validity of our work is clearly limited by the exclusion of all *social* aspects of vlogging culture—such as YouTube's commenting features or the way vloggers often address their fans with affectionate nicknames. Undoubtedly, the possibility to turn a parasocial relationship into a social one constitutes an important incentive for many viewers of vlogs; however, standardization issues make it rather difficult and impractical to include this aspect in a controlled experimental

study. Nevertheless, any efforts in this regard will definitely benefit future investigations of vlogging and its specific gratifications.

The fact that our study only focused on the "first contact" between a vlogger and the audience needs to be listed as another shortcoming. After all, research suggests that the initial exposure to a media persona is subject to very different expectations and criteria than later involvement (Tukachinsky & Stever, 2018). In consequence, YouTube users might find a well-produced vlog more interesting while looking for a new vlogger to follow, but develop quite different expectations and preferences over multiple viewing experiences. Will users expect their favorite vlogs to stay consistent regarding their production style (and penalize them if they do not)—or is there an implicit expectation of increasing professionalism the longer a vlog is on the market? Conversely, it could also be possible that the impact of a vlog's style gets less important over time, as viewers form intricate parasocial relationships with the depicted personas that 'overwrite' any other (e.g., stylistic) criteria. Pondering these questions, we strongly encourage other scholars to elucidate on the role of vlog production styles in long-term vlogger–audience relationships. For the time being, our presented findings are only suited to understand the reception of newly discovered vlogs.

On a methodological note, we think that a crucial next step in this line of research would be to disentangle the investigation of all the different vlog production qualities that were summarized in our manipulation. In all probability, the fact that we collapsed numerous stylistic aspects into a single macro-level variable may have concealed interesting effects on a smaller level of abstraction. However, due to the relative novelty of our research propositions, we deemed it more important to create ecologically valid conditions with large intergroup variance than to focus on singular technical aspects such as lighting or picture format. Nevertheless, future work should undoubtedly pursue this approach for a more refined understanding of the uncovered results.

Lastly, we note that the use of a convenient student sample clearly limits the generalizability of our findings. While the age range of our participants matches the demographics of YouTube's core user group (Smith & Anderson, 2018), recent market examinations show that older audiences have been catching up at a fast pace (Think With Google, 2016). As such, additional studies exploring different age groups, education level, and sociocultural backgrounds are much-needed to deepen our understanding of the YouTube viewing experience. In this regard, it might be a particularly valuable extension of our work to better control for the audiences' specific preferences and attitudes, which might even help to find out whether there are certain sub-cultures in the vlog context that experience the genre differently from the mainstream.

Conclusion

Even though the current study shone a light on several core aspects of media reception in the context of user-generated video diaries, we cannot present a universal formula for the creation of successful vlogs; after all, the included styles and topics represent only a fraction of YouTube's vast vlog macrocosm. Nevertheless, we believe that our considerate approach to creating realistic stimuli, paired with the study's experimental methodology, offers interesting evidence regarding the impact of YouTube's on-going professionalization. Despite their inherent restrictions, our results speak to the "value of production value" in a media environment that is prone to amateurism. In order to stand out, vlog creators should not be afraid of technical excellence—if anything, our findings indicate that audiences will likely prefer it if a professional camera, additional preparation, and editing efforts come into play. Of course, it also needs to be considered that the uncovered advantage of professional vlogs ultimately depends on their relative scarcity and the contrast they form to the countless amateur offerings. Once the "professionalized" aesthetic detailed in our experiment turns into the norm among most vlogs, consumers might suddenly find it much

more endearing again to see an amateur video diary with suboptimal lighting or a mumbling

host.

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Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for all scales.*

Variables	Full sample (N = 154) M (SD)	Amateur vlogs (n = 80) M (SD)	Professional vlogs (n = 74) M (SD)	Abstract topic (n = 80) M (SD)	Daily life topic (n = 74) M (SD)
Perceived production quality	4.07 (1.56)	3.03 (1.17)	5.19 (1.10)	4.31 (1.57)	3.81 (1.53)
Perceived relevance for daily life	3.91 (1.59)	3.71 (1.49)	4.12 (1.68)	2.94 (1.20)	4.95 (1.28)
Similarity identification	2.13 (1.24)	1.97 (1.13)	2.31 (1.33)	2.24 (1.16)	2.02 (1.32)
Wishful identification	2.14 (1.34)	1.93 (1.27)	2.37 (1.38)	2.35 (1.51)	1.92 (1.09)
EPSI	3.05 (1.38)	3.05 (1.40)	3.06 (1.36)	3.00 (1.34)	3.11 (1.42)
Cognitive PSI	4.59 (1.06)	4.74 (0.97)	4.42 (1.14)	4.61 (0.99)	4.56 (1.14)
Affective PSI	3.24 (1.27)	2.97 (1.12)	3.53 (1.35)	3.30 (1.30)	3.17 (1.24)
Behavioral PSI	3.53 (1.55)	3.68 (1.50)	3.38 (1.59)	3.40 (1.47)	3.68 (1.62)
PSI valence	4.81 (1.55)	4.54 (1.61)	5.09 (1.44)	4.95 (1.50)	4.65 (1.59)
PSR	3.10 (1.36)	3.10 (1.43)	3.10 (1.28)	3.19 (1.40)	3.00 (1.32)
Immersion	3.04 (1.43)	2.71 (1.17)	3.41 (1.60)	3.19 (1.51)	2.88 (1.33)
Enjoyment	3.05 (1.63)	2.56 (1.25)	3.58 (1.82)	3.32 (1.72)	2.77 (1.49)

Note. All items were measured with 7-Point Likert scales.

Table 2. *Zero-order correlations for all scales.*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Similarity identification	–								
2. Wishful identification	.62***	–							
3. EPSI	.25**	.27**	–						
4. Cognitive PSI	.20*	.18*	.29***	–					
5. Affective PSI	.57***	.58***	.30***	.26**	–				
6. Behavioral PSI	−.04	−.13	.18*	.29***	−.01	–			
7. PSI valence	.46***	.51***	.27**	.04	.73***	−.24**	–		
8. PSR	.51**	.54***	.29***	.17*	.54***	−.14	.55***	–	
9. Immersion	.47***	.41***	.19*	.23**	.46***	−.06	.40***	.39***	–
10. Enjoyment	.61***	.53***	.28***	.16	.62***	−.12	.54***	.43***	.74***

Note. $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.
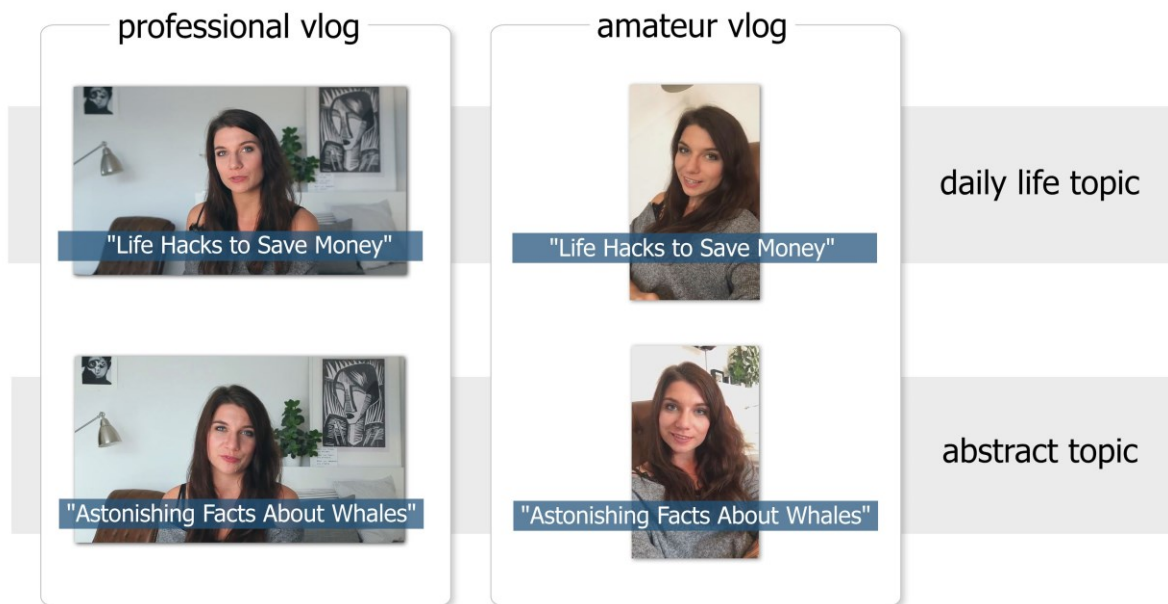
Figures

Figure 1. The four vlog conditions resulting from our two-factorial design.
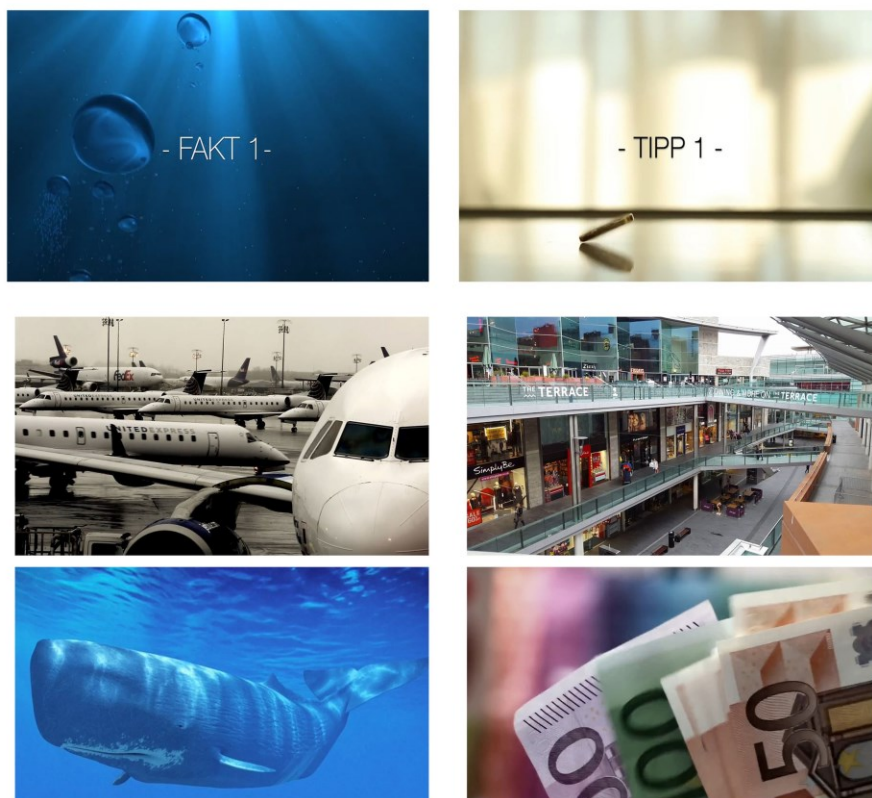

Figure 2. Examples for the stock footage added to the videos in our professional vlog condition (left: zoology topic, right: daily life topic).
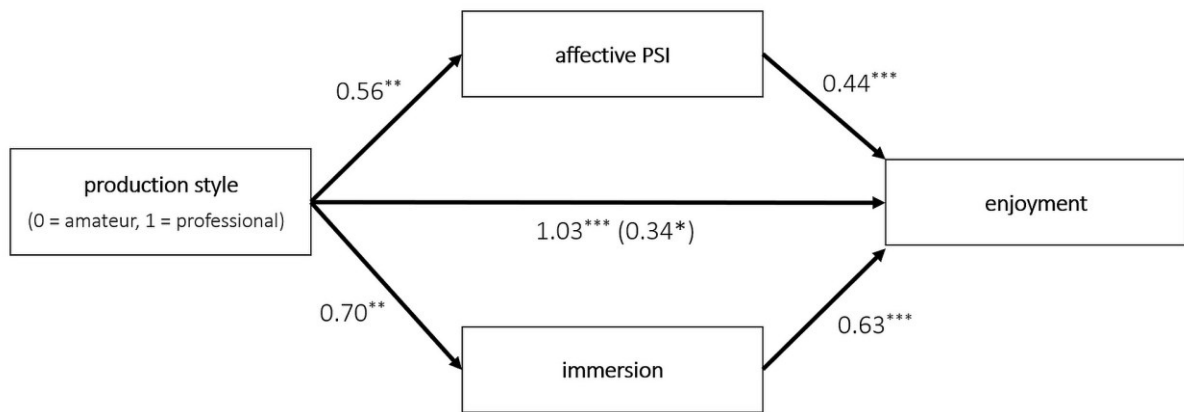
Figure 3. Mediation model including the prediction of viewers' enjoyment by the vlog's production style via affective PSI and immersion. Values are unstandardized regression estimates; the value inside the parentheses shows the direct effect of production style. $^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.