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AFFECTIVE LABOUR AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN THE COMMODIFICATION OF 'SELF' IN INDIAN WOMEN'S FAMILY VLOGGING

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Introduction

The participatory nature of YouTube has enabled hundreds of Indian women to create identities and achieve financial autonomy through family vlogging. With growing popularity, these amateur family vlogs on YouTube are providing alternative representations of ordinary families. This niche vlogging is situated in microcelebrity culture. Here the celebrification of ordinary lives is curated through the narrative of self-disclosure, interactive communication with the audience, and by creating a persona that consistently feels authentic, engaging, and celebrity-like, regardless of the scale or condition of their audience (Senft, 2008; Marwick, 2013; Abidin, 2018). The celebrification of 'self' and 'family' requires the enactment of various kinds of affective and emotional labour. The immaterial labour and the overall 'work' done in social media are extensively discussed in academia (Hardt, 1999; Abidin, 2016; Duffy 2017). This paper goes beyond that to observe the negotiations of affective labour and emotional labour in the lives and content of Indian women family vloggers as they engage in microcelebrity practices on YouTube. It further enquires about their motivation for vlogging and its implication in giving visibility to their unpaid domestic work.

Method

This paper builds upon the fieldwork conducted for the first author's PhD thesis. Our goal was not merely to gather data (de Waal Malefyt & Morais, 2012) but to explore how these vloggers make sense of their lives and work within the context of family vlogging. In other words, we sought to understand the work of vlogging through subjective experience. We specifically looked for family vloggers without a professional team to

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handle content creation, as it would allow us to observe the different arrays of labour involved.

The fieldwork in physical space included in-person semi-structured interviews with the vloggers and participant observation during content creation (both in front of and behind the camera). We also incorporated digital ethnography as a method to situate vlogging as a contemporary cultural practice. The six vloggers represent different parts of India, and diverse socio-economic-linguistic-cultural backgrounds, including two diaspora vloggers. This paper adopts a case-based approach to ethical challenges as per the recommendation of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (Franzke et al., 2020). Focusing on assessing the public availability of content, its sensitivity, and the influential reach of the channel, the current study recognises that vloggers share their personal lives as informed individuals who purposefully publish these materials to garner public attention, often incorporating advertisement and brand promotions. This justification calls for a critical examination of their content. However, considering that the YouTubers in this study extensively share their personal life, the channel names and the vloggers' names have been kept confidential throughout the paper.

Discussion:

We posit these Indian family vlogs in a post-feminist notion of domesticity where a new mode of gender subjectivity is formed. The vloggers' negotiation of domesticity through vlogging is situated in a contested space of tradition and modernity giving it a polysemic attribute. Motherhood, domestic work & self-disclosure are three prevalent themes of the vlogs. The narrative of the vlogs, which regularly reinforces and internalises the socially legitimised sacrificial domestic ideology of the vloggers, serves as a site for interaction for the audience. Despite the vloggers' conformity towards the ideal Indian woman who shoulders the burden of housework, adheres to the societal gender roles and remains responsible for the family's happiness; making a vlog on that performed identity empowers them. The vlogs further the vloggers' agency in transforming their invisible work and life into visible digital artefacts that bring recognition and financial autonomy. But in this process, the vloggers' housework responsibilities are complemented by the additional work of recording it skilfully, editing it, posting it strategically, managing their visibility on the platform and engaging with the audience. The vloggers we interviewed considered it challenging to balance the work of vlogging with their household responsibilities, whereby their housework and recording happen simultaneously, with the vlogs presenting a continuous flow of everyday life. On the surface, it offers the vloggers the flexibility to work from home without disrupting their domestic roles and ideologies, but it increases their burden in reality.

We argue that affective labour is involved in these family vlogging in two ways. Firstly, labour is involved in maintaining the family ties that are highly dependent on women's unpaid work within the domestic space. Secondly, the affective labour needed to tactfully represent an emotional, authentic, intimate, and relatable self. This is achieved through self-disclosure, and portrayal of the satisfaction of having and managing a happy, ideal family. The affective labour that these women undertake while maintaining their home and family responsibilities creates the desired effect of gendered relatability and adoration among the audience. The family vloggers enact affective labour more

prominently than other vlogging genres. This occurs because the celebrification of family vloggers heavily relies on their availability, accessibility, intimacy, creation of feel-good moments on vlogs, a portrayal of aspirational lives and conformity to normative socio-cultural practices and morals. We further note that here affective labour overpowers entrepreneurial labour since the promotional work by these vloggers is enmeshed with their gender roles in the domestic context, their housework responsibilities, and the life they lead on camera.

Our fieldwork reveals that the preparation vloggers take before recording is centred more on their facial expressions, voice modulation, and body language than on their make-up and attire. Even though they repeatedly claim not to make any special efforts for recording, we observed extensive work on emotional expressions that can be best explained by Alice Hochschild's (1979) concept of emotion work. Their spontaneity, and effortlessness in recording vlogs add to their authenticity and intimacy. In constructing Indian womanhood on screen, they present a normatively accepted bodily representation while displaying desexualized pleasures (such as self-care routines) and avoiding sexualised topics. This demands an intensive interplay of affective and emotional labour.

The interviews and the comment section of the vlogs reveal the vloggers continuously receiving remarks on their attire, requesting them to conform to traditional gendered apparel and symbols. The regulatory behaviour of the audience goes beyond bodily appearances and social, cultural or religious practices. With the vloggers' everyday lives commodified, their family relationships become a focal point for audience interaction. The vloggers describe their experience of receiving comments that can feel intrusive or offensive. Managing all of these, along with continuing self-disclosure and adhering to microcelebrity practices, requires them to undertake extensive emotional labour and gives rise to new forms of vulnerability.

We further find that there is no significant difference in the enactment of affective or emotional labour based on subscriber count. Our interaction with the vloggers shows that the primary motivation to perform these labours comes in the form of fame, acknowledgement of their invisible housework, and creating a gendered identity which facilitates a sense of empowerment. Finally, we argue that these vlogs have become a living testament to the lives and work of Indian women, their invisible unpaid work and their ongoing battles against inequalities. However, notwithstanding their attempts to negotiate gender expectations, we conclude that these vlogs sometimes contribute to perpetuating typical gender roles prevalent in Indian society.

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