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Commodifying the self: a multimodal analysis of college YouTubers' first day videos

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ABSTRACT

YouTubers focusing on college-related content have gained traction in recent years. This study explores the ways College YouTubers establish their personal branding online using a social semiotic perspective. Focusing on how two YouTubers of different cultural backgrounds, from the United States and Singapore, document their first day of college amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a multimodal discourse analysis is carried out on the two videos to identify the prominent modes utilised to make meaning. We analyse the multimodal discourse of the videos of the College YouTubers and discuss the impression management strategies the online content creators adopted from the dramaturgical perspective. Our study seeks to contribute towards understanding how online content creators engage in digital labour and present themselves successfully in self-commodification through personal branding.

Introduction

The rise of YouTube as a platform for individuals to create content has sparked the proliferation and commercialisation of YouTube videos over the years (YouTube 2021). As such, the platform has also seen a myriad of video genres ranging from comedy, sports, cooking, travel, beauty, finance, and many more, with it evolving based on the ever-changing global trends. While there have been several studies done on YouTube and its content and community, for example, Cocker and Cronin (2017) and Kim (2012), less attention has been given to the emerging trend of College YouTubers, which has gained traction in recent years (Johnson et al. 2021). College YouTubers are predominantly young content creators who document their day-to-day lives centring, but not limited to, their college life. Such videos include vlogs like 'Day in my Life' type of documentaries; 'How-to' type of tutorial videos regarding topics like productivity and finance; or events related to their student life such as global exchange programmes, internships, and summer holidays. As such, the demographic of viewers largely comprises students who are seeking to know more about the lives of undergraduates from different regions. Given that 66.2% of high-school graduates in the US enrol into colleges or universities (U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics 2021), the community of tertiary students is a sizable and significant one. Given the rising trend and influence of College YouTubers, it is of interest to understand how they establish their personal branding online through their vlogs.

The aim of our study is to examine how two College YouTubers orchestrate the semiotic selections on their videos to realise specific impression management strategies to create a positive persona and establish rapport with the viewers. Our study seeks to contribute to an understanding of the nature of vlogs as an emerging form of online communication and how online content creators engage in digital labour and present themselves successfully in self-commodification through personal branding.

Vlogging

Among the vast amount of content on YouTube, vlogging has gained wide-spread attention. The beginning of vlogging traces back to the early 2000s during the proliferation of the Internet, and particularly with the emergence of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2007) which was characterised by the

prominence of user-generated content and participatory culture. This led to the evolution of blogging where individuals took the practice of documenting the everyday happenings of their lives and combined it with videography, resulting in vlogblocs (vlogs). As such, YouTube became noted for its participatory culture in online content creation, giving rise to evolving media and new virtual communities (Burgess and Green 2009; Chau 2010). Online content creators on YouTube have also been offering more sponsored content on their vlogs in recent years (Johnson et al. 2021) as vlogs are deemed to be more effective than other sponsored digital content as they elicit a perceived realism (Munnukka et al. 2019).

A key draw of vlogging is its digestible bite-sized pieces of content in the form of short entertaining texts and videos, and the purported candidness of the content produced to invoke ‘a sense of intimacy between the vlogger and their audience’ (Thompson and Weldon 2022, 92). The vlog is designed to create a sense of reliability by enabling viewers to gaze upon the lives of others through a seemingly unfiltered lens. As a stark contrast from popular media such as movies, which were predominantly scripted for actors, often unrealistic, and heavily laden with editing and special effects, vlogs provided a fresh perspective into the world of film. Vlogs often involved regular individuals documenting their day-to-day activities and sharing their thoughts on certain topics, enabling their personality to be the main draw and charismatic feature of the content.

The motivations for vlogging have been explored by several researchers. Initially, a prominent motivation for vloggers is the interaction that they obtain with other vloggers (Miles 2003), which includes the desire to look for friends within a community for support, validation, as well as connection (Luers 2007). As such, vlogging is largely seen as a personal hobby and is often done to fulfil one’s desire such as the need for attention, to make friends, or to express the self (Warmbrodt 2007). However, YouTube has evolved from a video-sharing site where amateur and ad-free videos were uploaded to one that is dominated by professional and commercialised content over the years (Holland 2016). As such, this commercialisation has enabled content creators to begin monetising this hobby and to transform it into a potential source of income (Kim 2012). This gave rise to an upward trend of online content creators looking to YouTube as a career and a means of money making from YouTube ad revenues. In more recent years, the advent of influencer marketing has caused YouTube to become a popular marketing tool for product promotion, further adding to this income stream (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki 2018). Hence, it is evident that the motivation behind content creation on YouTube has vastly shifted from being more of a hobby to become another source of income stream for content creators in the present. With the emerging trend of College YouTubers as a new type of online content creators, this study seeks to understand, through a multimodal analysis of their content, the strategies they use in impression management and personal branding to result in self-commodification.

Impression management and personal branding

Personal branding has its theoretical roots in Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective where the focus on the presentation of self is now magnified by the affordances of digital tools, such as social media, at an individual’s disposal (Chen 2013). The dramaturgical perspective can be productive in reflecting on how online content creators present themselves through their vlogs based on how they would like to be perceived by others. In recent years, the dramaturgical perspective has been applied to the study of online content creators on Instagram (Bardhan 2022), Facebook (Rui and Stefanone 2018), and YouTube (Atef, Fleerackers, and Alperin 2023). Part of performing on a stage for an audience is the need for impression management. Goffman (1978, 366) argues that impression management involves creating and sustaining impressions to others formed through ‘appearances and actions’. These impressions can be formed through strategies such as self-promotion in highlighting one’s merits (Leary 2001), ingratiation by showing care for others (Swencionis and Fiske 2016), and exemplification through expressing one’s morals (Jones 1990).

Personal branding was first popularised in the field of marketing in the 1990s (Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney 2005; Peters 1997) and has since been explored across disciplinary fields. Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova (2018) conducted a systematic review of academic research on personal branding and defined personal branding as ‘a strategic process of creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself, based in a unique combination of individual characteristics, which signal a certain promise to the target audience through a differentiated narrative and imagery’ (Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova 2018).

While terms such as ‘self-branding’ (Gandini 2016) and self-promotion (Schmitt and Buss 1996) are used almost synonymously with personal branding, Shepherd (2005) has acknowledged the acceptance of the term ‘personal branding’ as a concept used amongst scholars. In relation to personal branding and social media, online personal branding has allowed an individual to reach a wider audience beyond the confines of time and space (Gehl 2011). Scheidt, Gelhard, and Henseler (2020) observe that personal branding in social media has allowed ‘individuals to create their own unique virtual space’, which in the present neoliberalism era, allow them to own and treat themselves as ‘a corporate business aiming to maintain [their] human capital’ through ‘skills, assets, and alliances’. Neoliberalism values the market economy as ‘an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs’ (Harvey 2005, 3). The presentation of self through their personal branding on social media has been recognised as ‘digital work’ (Gandini 2016) and contributes to ‘socialised value production’. For the College YouTubers, this is expressed through the attention they attract through views and likes and especially through the number of followers for their channel.

Recent studies have examined the rise of online content creators, also described as influencers and internet microcelebrities, and how they applied discursive and multimodal strategies to project the impression of authenticity through the positive projection of one’s persona, and to establish a sense of relatability with the audience (Berryman and Kavka 2017; Cunningham and Craig 2017; Hurley 2019; Sandel and Wang 2022). This includes the use of settings, such as the bedroom, and the donning of casual apparel to express the sense of connection and intimacy with the viewers (Berryman and Kavka 2017). Online content creators also strive to perform a multimodal discourse of ‘realness’ through their semiotic choices in their bid for success with their audience (Sandel and Wang 2022). Such multimodal discursive strategies contribute towards the personal branding efforts of the online content creators and can result in the marketing of the online content creators themselves as a commodity (Chen and Whyke 2022; Wang and Picone 2021). For example, Wang and Picone (2021) discussed the commodification of online content creators in their attempt to create a sense of authenticity and intimacy with the viewers. Chen and Whyke (2022) also analysed the digital persona of a popular online content creator, Li Ziqi, and showed how she manufactured intimacy and authenticity through both ‘self-branding and self-commodifying’ in her videos.

In our study, we examine how two College YouTubers (1) create, position, and maintain a positive impression of oneself and (2) highlight their use of differentiated narrative and imagery through their vlogs. We analyse the multimodal discourse of the videos of the College YouTubers and discuss the impression management strategies the online content creators adopted from Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective. Our study seeks to contribute towards understanding how online content creators engage in digital labour (Thompson and Weldon 2022) and present themselves successfully in self-commodification through personal branding.

Methods

We adopt a qualitative multiple case study approach (Baxter and Jack 2015), with convenience sampling and multimodal discourse analysis (O’Halloran and Lim 2014; Jewitt, Bezemer, and O’Halloran 2016) of two YouTube videos. The nature of multimodal discourse analysis, given its detailed analysis of the semiotic choices in the video artefacts, privileges the depth of analysis over the scope of data analysed. As such, two representative videos from each of the College YouTubers

have been chosen for close analysis in this study. The findings of the analysis, while not intended to be generalisable, serve to offer a nuanced understanding of how the semiotic choices in the videos can be artfully orchestrated to realise specific impression management strategies as part of their personal branding.

Our approach follows Hattingh's (2017) netnography and Patterson's (2018) method in analysing content on YouTube videos. Netnography is an appropriation of the principles of ethnography applied in research to analyse online data (Kozinets 1998). The approach involves close viewing of the video, transcription of selected portions of the video, and several reviews of the video before interpretations are made (Lim and Toh 2020; Patterson 2018). We apply a multimodal discourse analysis on the two videos and identify the semiotic choices made to express specific meanings as evidence for our interpretation. While a social intersubjective positioning (White 2003) is taken, we acknowledge that there may be different possible interpretations that can be made based on the textual evidence (Iedema 2001).

We adopt a social semiotic perspective (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress 2010) in the multimodal analysis of the YouTube videos. Based on Systemic Functional Theory, social semiotics focuses on how meanings are made and interpreted, as well as the implications they have on society (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran 2016). Social semiotics offers a perspective on how multimodal texts express 'particular representations of experience and forms of social interaction' (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 2). The theoretical lens builds on the recognition of the agency of sign makers, and how modes and their affordances serve the communicative purposes of the texts. Social semiotics is a theory of communication which recognises that meaning-making is not arbitrary but always motivated. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 8) explain that the motivation reflects the interest of the sign-maker and is 'formulated in relation to the sign-maker and the context in which the sign is produced'. The notion of 'design' is central in social semiotics (Kress 2010). Design bridges the connection between 'determinative power of cultural forms and social structures' and 'individual agency' in meaning-making (Kress 2000, 153). Design involves sign-makers, described as rhetor, making motivated selections in their 'signs and sign complexes that they believe are apt for their rhetorical purposes, given the affordances of the modes chosen' (Bezemer and Kress 2016). A mode is a socially shaped and culturally given resource for meaning making. Examples of modes are words, images, and gestures. Modes have affordances, that is their meaning potential. Each mode allows the rhetor to represent their meanings in specific ways and also insist on specific types of meanings to be made in its use due to its epistemological commitment. For example, images are better at representing topological meanings, such as size and space, whereas words are better at representing typological meanings, such as categories and classifications. Over time, these modes develop unique functional specialisations (Kress 2010). In this paper, we identify and examine the semiotic modes used by the YouTubers to create meanings in their videos.

While there are many semiotic modes used in the vlogs, for the purposes of this study, we focus on the semiotic modes of editing, filming, and actions in the videos. Reflecting on the practice of content creation on YouTube within the niche of college videos, our study seeks to answer the question of how YouTubers in their videos design their persona. A social semiotic analysis is carried out on the two seemingly similar 'First Day of College' vlogs, from two prominent College YouTubers in their respective communities, enabling us to observe the different modes utilised within the videos to express their interests and rhetorical purposes.

Data

In this study, we analyse two vlogs, First Day of College ft. covid by Elliot Choy (<https://tinyurl.com/bmpufcpp>) viewed more than 374,000 times (the video has since ceased to be publicly available as it has been blocked on copyright grounds), and My First Day of University AFTER the Pandemic by Daniel Tamago (<https://tinyurl.com/c7szwt5e>) viewed more than 144,000

times (May 2023). These two videos feature Elliot and Daniel on their first day of College amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in their respective communities.

Elliot Choy is a final-year Business student from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee and is of Korean-American descent. He makes weekly videos on YouTube related to college life, entrepreneurship, productivity, and vlogs. With years of experimentation in the YouTube industry and multiple failures in amassing an audience, his videos gained popularity after he found his footing within the College YouTuber arena (Choy 2019). With most of this audience being college students, or potential college students, he not only shares about his personal life in Vanderbilt, but also visits multiple campuses to feature the lives of other college students, particularly in universities with popular brand names such as the Ivy Leagues and University of California (UC) schools. With his relatable content featuring both the highlights and struggles of his life as a student, as well as the high-quality videos he consistently pushes out, Elliot has successfully gained a huge following of 1.24 million subscribers (May 2023). According to Inns (2021), Elliot made more than USD 90,000 from AdSense revenue based on one of his YouTube videos, called 'I give a iPhone 11 to Harvard students if they can answer THIS question' in 2019, which now has more than 25 million views. Social Blade, an American website that tracks social media statistics and analytics reports that Elliot earns an estimated USD 57,000 annually based on the advertisement revenue from his videos (<https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/elliotchoy>).

Daniel Tamago, a Singaporean Chinese, is a final-year Business student and video producer studying at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Apart from being a full-time student, he creates content on YouTube, with more than 74,500 subscribers, and simultaneously runs a video production company, Parallax Collective. His YouTube channel rose to fame after posting his first video titled 'Day in The Life of a Singaporean University Student – NUS/Kent Ridge Hall (THE MOVIE)', amassing 115,000 views to date (May 2023). This video garnered the attention of many students, especially Singaporeans. With his strong video editing skills as a video producer, Daniel consistently pushes out high-quality and cinematic videos which caused him to gain a steady following on the platform. Over the past year, he has continued to share his personal journey including his student exchange programme in Sweden, personal growth challenges, and 'How to' style videos. Social Blade reports that Daniel earns an estimated USD 5800 annually based on the advertisement revenue from his videos (<https://socialblade.com/youtube/c/danieltamago>).

For the purpose of our analysis, the two College YouTubers identified are comparable because they share a similar focus in their role as a content creator, that is in documenting their first day at college, and that they have similar profiles as both are similar in age and ethnicity, despite being based in different countries. Both College YouTubers have also been growing in their popularity and have been gaining an increasing number of followers. As such, understanding how these two College YouTubers orchestrate the semiotic choices in their vlogs for impression management and to achieve personal branding are of interest.

Findings

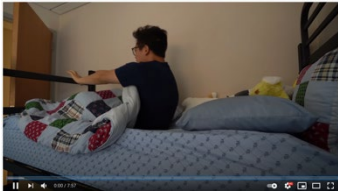
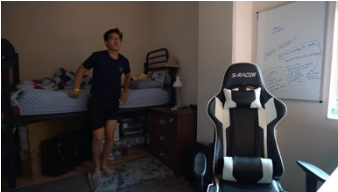
This section presents the analysis of the two vlogs, where we examine how Elliot and Daniel establish their personal branding through creating, positioning, and maintaining a positive impression of oneself as well as highlight their use of differentiated narrative and imagery through their videos. In particular, we focus on their motivated use of the three semiotic modes – editing, filming style, and actions in the design of their videos.

Editing

One way a relaxing morning was portrayed in Elliot's vlog was in the video's introduction where he films himself waking up and getting ready for a Zoom class. This was done through a series of short clips in chronological order, where he slowly gets out of bed (E1 in Figure 1), walks to his desk (E2),

sits down on his chair (E3), and types on his keyboard (E4). Each clip ranged around 3 seconds, in sync with the beat of the background music. The audio selected was a slow and high pitch ringing tune with ascending notes, which aided in conveying a relaxing and slow morning, and which was also uplifting. This could perhaps be due to Elliot having classes via Zoom and the general slowdown in pace due to the pandemic, which was very much more relatable to college students (his viewers) who likely attended their online classes upon leaving their bed as well. In Scene 4, a short clip of him typing on the keyboard with the audio (keyboard typing noise) being in sync with his fingers is presented. In relation to the ASMR trend which often features keyboard typing sounds to induce relaxation, the inclusion of a keyboard typing scene along with the audio conveyed his intention and understanding of using editing as a mode to communicate a particular message. The combination of these clips along with the audio selected sought to bring across a ‘relaxing’ and ‘uplifting’ atmosphere.

Figure 1 – Elliot Choy’s Opening Scene

Scene	Screenshot of Scene	Description
E1		Elliot stretching while getting out of bed with a slow and uplifting background music.
E2		Elliot walking towards his desk from the bed, which was a


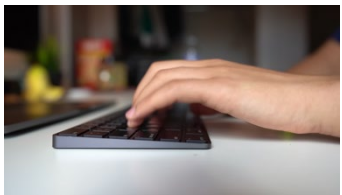
		few feet away.
E3		Elliot sitting on this desk to turn on his computer.
E4		Typing of the keyboard with the keyboard sounds in sync with his fingers.


Figure 1





Daniel's morning started at 6 am as shown on his phone alarm screen (D1 in [Figure 2](#)), where the scene immediately shows him violently flipping his blanket off at 0:03 seconds (D2). Proceeding that, a mere 2 seconds were used to include three different shots which included a shot of him placing 2 mugs loudly on a table (D3), turning on a water kettle (D4), and making two cups of beverages (D5). The motion of these clips was fast, with each having less than a second on screen. Next, the video immediately transitions into a 2-second time-lapse video with Daniel's back view shown as he works at his desk (D5), where the words '2 hours deep work' was inserted at the bottom of the screen. This time-lapse also captured the sky turning from pitch dark to brightly lit, signifying the time that has lapsed. The series of short and fast clips continued from D7 to D10 where he washes up, packs his bag, and wears his shoes before leaving the house. To end off the scene, Daniel loudly stamps on his feet with his shoes on (D11).





This entire morning routine was condensed into a short 12-second introductory scene. In 12 seconds, Daniel documented and combined more than 2 hours' worth of work done, conveying a sense of productivity and efficiency. From the actions of violently flipping his blanket off at D2, to loudly placing his mugs down at D3, and stomping on the ground at D11, these brash actions gave off an atmosphere that was rushed, quick, and almost aggressive. Furthermore, the choice of audio in the editing also aided in meaning-making. Throughout the scene, the sounds produced by the actions he made were amplified, which lends a sense of realness and relatability, enabling the audience to fully immerse in the experience with these familiar sounds of a morning routine. One notable sound effect included in D6 during the time lapse video was the crowing of a rooster, indicating sunrise and the start of a new day. By relating to how a rooster crows in anticipation of sunrise to start their food hunt and defend their territory, the use of such audio significantly aids the portrayal of a morning routine that was productive, fast-paced, and a notion that Daniel was ready to seize the day. Evidently, Elliot's and Daniel's morning routines were distinctly different, and the way editing was used to enhance this contrast gave rise to different emotions and meanings.

While some actions in the opening scene of Elliot and Daniel were similar such as the act of getting out of bed or working at the desk, the two scenes depicted different atmospheres. The duration and combination of each clip, as well as the accompaniment of audio aided extensively in setting the tone for the respective scenes. As such, Elliot's opening scene had a much more peaceful and laid-back mood whereas Daniel's evoked a sense of rush and productivity. Thus, editing could significantly affect the image they intend to craft and portray to the audience, establishing their persona and branding.

Figure 2 – Daniel Tamago's Opening Scene

Scene	Screenshot of Scene	Description
D1		Alarm ringing from Daniel's mobile phone, indicating 6am.

D2		Daniel violently flipping the blanket away from his body while sitting up.
D3		Placing two cups loudly on the countertop.
D4		Turning on the kettle to make hot water.
D5		Preparing two cups of beverages with the hot water.

D6		<p>Back view time-lapse of Daniel working while the sky turns bright.</p>
D7		<p>Daniel brushing his teeth in front of a mirror.</p>
D8		<p>Placing of laptop into a backpack and zipping it up.</p>
D9		<p>Putting on shoes.</p>

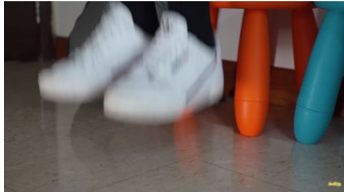
D10		<p>Stomping feet on the ground after shoes have been put on.</p>
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Figure 2

Filming

The next semiotic mode examined was the filming style, expressed through the use of different camera angles, to convey specific meanings (Kraft 1987). Serving as a tool to scope what the audience views, the camera establishes the relationship between the viewer and the image (Lotman 2016). Apart from creating variations and complexity, different camera angles can affect the way viewers feel towards the scene or character, thereby evoking different emotions and levels of empathy within viewers (Jungbauer 2018). As such, the use of camera angles as a mode can aid in creating meaningful content to affect audiences' interpretation. From the data, we were able to identify four distinct styles in the filming mode for discussion.

The vlogging style of filming is done by pointing the camera lens towards the presenter (Daniel/Elliot) for them to directly speak to and make eye contact with the audience. The vlogging style is typically done at the eye level, either with the presenter holding the camera set up directly or propping the camera on a surface such as a table to film. Filming at the eye level lends neutrality (Peracchio and Meyers-Levy 2005) and elicits a higher level of trust due to an even power distribution (Baranowski and Hecht 2018). As such, this elimination of hierarchy presents an equal status between the two parties, lending a greater sense of relatability.

This style of filming takes up the largest proportion in both the videos. As such, it can be shown that the main purpose of creating content on YouTube as a College YouTuber is to relate with the audience. By speaking to the camera directly where the camera lens is treated as the audience, these YouTubers reveal a predominant goal of entertaining the audience through direct speech. Such an approach may have contributed to the perception that vlogs can elicit a sense of purported realism (Munnukka et al. 2019). The other styles of filming, which will be covered in later parts of this paper, seem to be secondary methods to keep the audience engaged by providing variation. The creator of each video speaks to the audience directly about the happenings of his day and provides context on what is happening at various timestamps. For example, at 1:00, Elliot speaks to the audience about the COVID-19 measures his university has put in place to protect the safety of students and explains how he will be having a Zoom call with a testing personnel to conduct a COVID-19 spit test. After providing context, he then proceeds to film his interaction with the personnel for around a minute. Without the explanation, which was done through speaking to the audience directly, it could have been difficult for the audience to understand what was going on, and this might lead to them losing interest and perhaps clicking away from the video.

The next filming style involves the presenter holding the camera and pointing it towards his surroundings. This style of filming enables the presenter to provide greater context by showing his environment to the audience and gives the audience a first person (creator's) point of view. This was seen when Elliot was dropping off his COVID-19 testing kit at 3:20 and made a conversation with a school personnel, as well as when he was collecting his student Vandi card at the Commodore Card Office at 3:45. Given his role as a College YouTuber and his location being predominantly in school, he leverages this first-person filming style to show his audience his environment. Rather than merely speaking about his experiences, this utilises the 'show, not tell' intention to bring about a more immersive experience for the audience. By holding the camera at the eye level and taking the audience along his route from his perspective, he shows a glimpse of exactly what he sees to the audience, as if allowing them to experience his life as well. By immersing in the presenter's subjectivity, the first-person character's thoughts and expression takes over ours as the audience (Sorfa 2019). This allows for the viewer to experience an 'immersive sensation of seeing another's point of view' (Schmidt and Thompson 2015, 48).

Apart from the direct engagement which can be expressed through the vlogging style and letting the audience see through the eyes of the presenter, the next angle of filming places the camera, which represents the audience, a distance away to view the subject 'from an entirely new perspective' as a spectator (Bédard 2015). This way of filming will be referred to as the 'third-person' point of view (POV) in this paper. The third-person lens is done by placing the camera a distance away from the subject to film them carrying out their activities. In this set up, the presenter does not directly engage with the audience but instead deliberately disregards the presence of the camera and he does his tasks as if no one is watching him. To film this, the creator has to prop the camera at an angle (usually on the ground level), step out of the screen, then put on an act of walking past the camera without acknowledging it, walk out of the lens, and proceed to walk back and pick up the camera. This is done in every scene which requires this third-person POV. This way of filming enables the audience to feel like a spectator gazing upon the life of the subject from afar. It gives the audience the illusion as if the subject is organically carrying out his task without considering their presence, where ironically it requires the most amount of staged work given the steps to create such a shot as mentioned above. This suggests the deliberate intention of putting up an act to convey such a level of naturalness.

The last style of filming does not necessarily involve any subjects in the shots but is rather encompassed by cinematic shots of the surroundings or actions, paired with cinematic background music and editing. An example of this can be found at 6:13 of Elliot's video where he obtrusively inserts a clip titled 'Campus Life with Covid' right after his vlogging speech. This 33-second clip highlights the scenery of his campus, student interactions which involve them social distancing and wearing masks, and some iconic school buildings and installations from different angles. Similarly, such a clip was included in Daniel's video at 1:23, featuring the subject's breakfast, his playing at a park, as well as some drone shots of his campus. Similar to the aforementioned filming style, cinematic shots also seek to provide context by showing the audience the subject's surroundings. Given that both Elliot and Daniel are college students and the videos analysed revolved around their first day of school during the pandemic, these cinematic shots often showcased scenes surrounding this theme such as the campus architecture and the everyday happenings in school.

By filming short clips in unconventional angles and editing them in a movie-like manner, these shots could serve to romanticise a regular college life. While the events featured may merely be mundane events which the audience themselves go through on a daily basis, the way they are portrayed in the video through modes such as editing makes these events seem more interesting and attractive than they actually are. In Daniel's video, he romanticises an occasion of eating breakfast at McDonald's using actions such as exaggerated sniffing of the food, dancing at a playground nearby, and slow aerial drone shots of the NUS campus, all with an extremely upbeat background music. This short cinematic clip exudes child-like joy and amplifies the fun he is having during his first day of school, where he seeks to sell the college experience given his role as a College YouTuber. While the first three angles often involve only basic camera works, editing, and equipment, cinematic shots require

more advanced tools such as drones. A higher level of editing skill and a pair of eyes to see regular occurrences in different angles enable the creators to differentiate themselves with skills and quality.

Across both videos, all four camera angles were used throughout the video to provide a holistic and well-rounded view of their surroundings. The vlogging angle allows the subject to directly engage with the audience through making eye contact and provides context through speech; the first-person angle allows the audience to experience the subject's point of view; the third-person angle enables the viewing of a spectator; while the cinematic shot showcases quality as well as romanticises the subject's surroundings. These alternative angles allow the audience to view their lives from multiple perspectives and provide an immersive experience for them.

Employing different angles in capturing these seemingly unscripted interactions also assists in showcasing a different side of the YouTuber's personality. Through the inclusion of content that is not directly engaging the audiences (non vlogging style), but rather as a spectator (first or third person), it seems as though the YouTubers are genuinely letting viewers into their real lives. However, these purposeful inclusions can arguably be a means of portraying certain personas or traits of themselves which may be difficult to express directly to the audience but can be depicted through the interactions with others.

Actions

The events and occurrences presented in both Elliot's and Daniel's videos were also strategically selected. By having control over which activities to film and include in the final video for their audience to view, these 'Day in the Life' videos are curated final products which are designed to exude a particular persona that the creator is trying to present. This is observed in the analysis of two scenes.

One significant event in Elliot's video was him conducting an at-home COVID-19 spit test under the supervision of a health worker via Zoom. At 1:58 timestamp of his video, Elliot documented the entire process of the call whereby the scene involved him propping his camera to the side while he filmed his interaction with the health worker. While he was not directly engaging with the audience throughout the process, the one-minute clip showed him performing to the audience a dimension of his personality which would be difficult to express directly. For example, when he was told to 'spit all the way up to that black line', he replied by saying 'I gotta think of, like, spicy things' followed by a series of 'mmmm' and 'yummy' to imply that he was thinking of food to induce his salivation. When the health worker reacted to the noises he made by telling him to keep spitting and stop making noises, he responded by explaining 'sorry I'm tryna just visualize the food right now'. At 2:38, Elliot was then told by the health worker to shake the spit test sample for 5 seconds. Following that instruction, Elliot then proceeded to count 'one and two and three and four and five' along with the worker while smiling cheekily towards the end. Lastly, at 2:48 when the health worker told him he did the test in 2 minutes, Elliot responded by saying 'wow is that a record' as a form of teasing and establishing rapport with her.

The actions presented in the video served in the YouTuber's personal branding efforts. The short interactions Elliot had with the health worker showcased his sense of humour through the tongue-in-cheek conversation Elliot had with her. Despite her merely stating instructions such as telling him to spit to a line, Elliot did not simply follow immediately but verbalised his thoughts in a comical way through the use of onomatopoeias such as 'mmm' and sharing with her what he was visualising. Having this conversation was clearly unnecessary for the administration of the spit test, but it aided in Elliot showing his viewers how he was like among others, which enabled him to craft his persona as someone humorous and pleasant to be around.

A similar occurrence happened in Daniel's video as well at 6:26 when he shared about his experience staying in his university's dorm as a freshman and formed a bond with the elderly janitor there. He

described her as ‘the nicest auntie in the whole world’ and that ‘she really was like an angel’ for taking care of them a lot which he did not feel deserving of. After having received a call from her saying that she had missed him, Daniel decided to surprise her with a roasted duck which he knew as ‘auntie’s favourite food’ and filmed the process of him purchasing it.

Daniel’s act of purchasing duck rice for his dormitory’s janitor portrayed him as a kind-hearted individual who was caring and humble as well. His short anecdote of his experience enabled audiences to learn that he not only makes an effort to interact with a janitor, but also keeps in touch and takes care of her even though he does not stay on campus anymore. This is in line with the Asian notion of filial piety which Daniel has extended even beyond the scope of family, which serves to make Daniel seem like a humble and respectful individual.

Hence, the design of these scenes is motivated to portray Elliot as humorous and friendly and Daniel as a respectful and caring individual. While the videos were designed to represent their first day of school for the semester, the sequence of events documented is an intention to present curated highlights for the viewers. As people tend to show mainly the positive side of themselves on social media (Gonzales and Hancock 2011), it can be postulated that these happenings were used artfully to present a certain online persona to the audience.

Both Elliot and Daniel also demonstrated an apt use of differentiated narrative and imagery in their videos. For example, when we analysed their inclusion of certain interactions with other individuals in their videos, it was apparent that the persona and traits they were trying to present were different. While these inclusions both served them positively, Elliot was presenting himself as a humorous and easy-going individual, while Daniel’s interaction was geared towards the idea of respect and humility. For example, Elliot’s act of making small talk and humorous comments fits into the idea of the ‘American Niceness’ which embodies amiability and hospitality that have been ‘central to ideas of U.S. identity since the nineteenth century’ (Bramen 2017). On the other hand, Daniel’s bid to surprise and still keep in touch with his dorm’s janitor could largely be influenced by the culture of collectivism (Hofstede 1980), which is more prominent in Eastern cultures, valuing aspects such as caregiving, or the Chinese notion of filial piety. The differences in their representations suggest a level of cultural sensitivity among the two YouTubers, which could be a contributing factor to their success. By being aware of the cultures they are immersed in, which translates to the audience demographic they have, the portrayal of self or the content produced could be tailored to fit the ideas of desirability of their primary audiences.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings offer insights into how the College YouTubers establish their personal branding through specific semiotic choices made in the videos. Using Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective, we can observe the College You-Tubers adopting specific strategies as part of their impression management. For example, ingratiation (Swencionis and Fiske 2016) was demonstrated by Elliot in his interaction with the health worker to express his warmth and humorous persona. Likewise, exemplification (Jones 1990) was observed in the impression management strategies of Daniel to highlight his virtues. Daniel drew attention to his bond with an elderly janitor and featured himself buying and bringing food to her. These actions serve to portray him as a kind and respectful person. Both College YouTubers also applied the strategy of self-promotion (Leary 2001) in taking care to present themselves as authentic and relatable through offering the viewers a glimpse of their personal spaces such as their bedrooms, the interactions with their friends and the spaces around, such as playing in the park. By producing content, which is relatable to their audiences, they seek to present themselves as an everyday regular college student rather than one that is distant, perfect, or out of reach. This is consistent with the rise in influencer marketing whereby influencers tend to position themselves as a ‘friend’ rather than ‘celebrity’, lending a stronger sense of credibility due to them being more genuine (Hwang and Zhang 2018).

The online content creators are not only focused on entertaining their viewers but are also strategically presenting positive aspects of their persona to build their personal branding and establish rapport with the viewers (Gorbatov, Khapova, and Lysova 2018). Similar to findings from other studies on online content creators (Chen and Whyke 2022; Wang and Picone 2021), we found in our study that impression management and personal branding are achieved through an artful orchestration of specific semiotic choices by the College YouTubers. With the understanding of vlogging as ‘digital labour’ (Thompson and Weldon 2022, 96), College YouTubers like Elliot and Daniel have been assiduous in crafting and building up their personal branding through their vlogs to grow their popularity and influence. The analysis of both Elliot’s and Daniel’s videos showed how the semiotic choices made by the online content creators branded themselves through reputation management strategies. Viewing the online content creators’ impression management and personal branding efforts as self-commodification allows us to recognise the ultimate commercialisation goal of the College YouTubers (Hearn 2010). Rather than producing content on YouTube as a mere form of entertainment, hobby, or as a means of money making through the platform, these YouTubers are also using this as a way to monetise their persona through the publicity they have gained on their channel (Kim 2012; Schwemmer and Ziewiecki 2018).

Our study, while limited in scope to the analysis of a representative video of each of the two College YouTubers, has allowed us to offer a fine-grained examination of the semiotic modes used in their vlogs to brand themselves and create specific impressions for the viewers. We have demonstrated how a social semiotic approach (Hodge and Kress 1988; Kress 2010) to the analysis of the vlogs as multimodal discourse can be productive in eliciting a nuanced understanding of the artful semiotic orchestration performed by Elliot and Daniel in their videos. Specifically, we have identified the semiotic modes of editing, filming, and actions in the vlogs and examined how these are used by each of them to design their persona. We argue that the semiotic choices are ideologically motivated towards impression management resulting in the commodification of themselves in their bid towards monetising their persona.

Our study also contributes to the field of studies on online content creators in response to this growing social phenomenon. We add to the literature on the use of applied discursive and multimodal strategies to examine how online content creators present themselves and establish rapport with the audience (Berryman and Kavka 2017; Cunningham and Craig 2017; Hurley 2019; Sandel and Wang 2022). In particular, we apply Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective (Goffman 1959) to examine the ways in which specific impression management strategies (Goffman 1978) are realised through the College You-Tubers’ semiotic selections to brand themselves.

Implications from our study can inform further research on examining the range of impression management strategies used by online content creators in their videos and to examine the viewers’ reactions through the comments and likes offered so as to ascertain the effects of the strategies and whether there are specific strategies that are more well-received than others. Through the social semiotic analysis of the College YouTubers’ videos, our study also hopes to raise public awareness, especially amongst the youths, to adopt a more critical perspective on the online content they encounter. In recognising how the online content creators design their persona for ultimately commercial ends, youths can be more discerning towards the messages from social media ‘influencers’.

Disclosure statement

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