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YouTube as a Site of Learning.
Genre, Authenticity, and Audience in the How-to Video

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Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures	v
1. Introduction	1
1.1. A Tendency towards Informal, Self-Learning on YouTube	1
1.2. Research Aim, Objectives, and Questions	4
1.3. Chapter Overviews	5
2. Participatory Culture as a Site of Learning	8
2.1. YouTube as a Site of Participatory Culture	9
2.1.1. The Pros: Advantages of Participatory Sites of Learning	11
2.1.2. The Cons: Disadvantages of Participatory Sites of Learning	12
2.1.3. The Contradictions	15
2.2. User-Generated Content	17
2.3. Social Media and Influencers	22
2.4. Authenticity	26
2.5. The How-to Video as a Genre	32
2.5.1. Origins, Remediation, Transcoding, and the Story So Far	34
2.5.2. Ordinary Experts	39
2.5.3. Retrieval	41
2.5.4. Other Variations and Categories Used	43
2.5.5. What the How-to Video Is Not	45
2.6. Audience Participation	49
2.6.1. An Overview of the Audience	49
2.6.2. Audience Participation on YouTube	51
2.6.3. Feedback on Amateur-Made Content	54
2.7. Conclusions	56

3. Methodology	58
3.1. Research Questions	58
3.2. Method	59
3.2.1. The Exploratory Study on the How-to Video	60
3.2.2. The Study on Authenticity	64
3.2.3. The Study on the Audience's Part	66
3.3. Limitations	73
4. Exploring the How-to Video	74
4.1. Content Creators	74
4.2. Video Characteristics	80
4.2.1. Language	80
4.2.2. Titling	82
4.2.3. Domains Covered	83
4.2.4. Duration	85
4.3. Content Characteristics	88
4.3.1. Step-by-Step Structure	88
4.3.2. Characters	91
4.3.3. Setting	92
4.3.4. Intended Audience	94
4.3.5. Addressing the Audience	96
4.4. Subgenres	98
4.4.1. Life-Hacks	99
4.4.2. Get Ready With Me	101
4.4.3. Prank Videos	103
4.5. Conclusions	105

5. Authenticity	107
5.1. Expertise	108
5.2. Amateur Status	111
5.3. Mimesis	118
5.4. Accessibility	122
5.5. Interactivity	124
5.6. Conclusions	128
6. The Audience's Part	130
6.1. Audience Feedback in Figures	131
6.2. User Interaction	133
6.3. Sentiment in Comments	137
6.4. Comment Typologies	139
6.5. Conclusions	148
7. Conclusions	150
References	156
Appendix	169
Appendix 1: The Social Blade list of 250 influential channels	169
Appendix 2: The list of 45 amateur-made how-to videos analyzed qualitatively	174
Appendix 3: Dataset of comments used for analysis	175
Appendix 4: Detailed view of the list of 45 videos	175
Appendix 5: Sentiment analysis on comments using SentiStrength	176
Appendix 6: Manual annotation of comments into categories	176
Appendix 7: Dataset of comments annotated by both coders	177
Appendix 8: Intercoder reliability calculation	177

Keywords: participatory culture, YouTube, authenticity, how-to video, user-generated content, tutorial

The introductory part of the thesis puts the research topic into context, by discussing the increasing global tendency towards using how-to videos on YouTube for informal, self-learning that has been observed over the past few years. While initially people were looking to solving simple household tasks with the help of how-to videos, they became interested in more complex issues over time. In the first part of 2020, due to technological affordances and forced by the circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, people turned to the online medium for most of their activities, learning how to perform them at home by following how-to videos on YouTube, among other things. However, in spite of becoming a phenomenon on the Internet for a while, the topic has not been subject to many studies. As it is reflecting a series of changes in society, that seem to be here to stay for at least a little longer, additional attention to the topic is necessary. Therefore, this research aims to delve into the particularities of this popular user-generated genre.

Chapter 2 serves as a theoretical framework, covering the concepts and notions that are further discussed in relation to the case of YouTube as an informal learning environment. It depicts the platform as a site of participatory culture based on the work of Jenkins (2007), discussing the pros and cons. In line with Fiske's (1989) observations on the nature of popular culture, the contradictions of the phenomenon are also pointed out. On YouTube, ordinary people use the same resources as the system they are often presented in opposition with to create their own materials. The essential role of both the content creators and their audience in the construction of the knowledge products known on YouTube as tutorials is also emphasized, as both parties are active participants in the process.

The chapter also explores several characteristics of user-generated content. It is pivotal to mention that media texts do not need to be completely genuine in order to be perceived as user-generated. Pieces of existing content can be reused as long as users add their own contribution to it. The intention of the creators is also brought up. Although these usually are economically disinterested, some become so popular that they start to make money out of their work on YouTube and get to be called influencers.

As Burgess and Green (2018) underlined, the different kind of authenticity associated with user-generated content distinguishes it from mainstream media. For this reason, this chapter also includes an extensive discussion on the topic, going beyond the commercial vs. non-commercial logic often encountered in literature, where the former would be associated with the inauthentic, and the latter with the authentic. Existing studies on the authenticity of several user-generated genres such as memes or vlogs are reviewed. The works of Shifman (2018) and Tolson (2010) have been indispensable in this sense.

The chapter also gives an overview of the how-to video as a distinctive user-generated genre and provides a definition for this Internet phenomenon that is often depicted as a mere YouTube tutorial. An adaptation of Feuer's (1992) approach at classifying TV genres is used to establish what defines the how-to video as a genre. Thus, throughout this study, the how-to video refers to a video providing viewers with basic, step-by-step instructions on how to accomplish tasks on their own, without relying on the help of professionals. This chapter further presents a brief account of its origins, mentioning the other media it remediates and those that are transcoded, such as how-to books and articles, or tutorials and MOOCs made by universities. A discussion on the creators of how-to videos is also included. They are introduced as "ordinary experts", as they seem to be just as prepared as experts to discuss specific topics despite being regular people that have an account on YouTube.

Apart from frequently being called a tutorial in the literature, a similar confusion appears concerning life-hack videos and Get Ready With Me (GRWM) videos, which are discussed as subgenres of the how-to video throughout this research, instead of being used as alternative names for it. Moreover, the chapter also reveals the features that differentiate the how-to video from other similar user-generated genres, such as the vlog, with which it is frequently conflated.

Several statistics about the audience, its preferences and behavior on YouTube, and in regard to amateur-made content are also presented in detail. The focus is maintained on its participation and feedback. Previous efforts of analyzing such feedback are also reviewed, in particular those revolving around the comment sections, where viewers have the possibility to voice their own opinions.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed presentation of the methodological approach. This research revolves around finding an answer to how do amateur-made how-to videos generally work so that

the genre became such a popular alternative for self-learning in the online medium, and even influenced professional productions. Based on the review of existing research and findings related to the topic, the current study focuses on three main dimensions of the phenomena that have been considered relevant: genre, authenticity, and audience. The following research questions have been guiding the analysis:

RQ1: What are the content and genre characteristics of amateur-made how-to videos?

RQ2: What sets amateur-made how-to videos apart from other similar user-generated genres when it comes to the construction of authenticity?

RQ3: How does interaction among users occur in the comments section of amateur-made how-to videos?

RQ4: What types of comments does the audience add to amateur-made how-to videos?

The methodology used, comprising sampling choices and tools used for extraction and analysis, among other things, for the three studies focused on different aspects of the user-generated genre is presented.

Thus, the Social Blade list of 250 most influential YouTube channels in the How to & Style category served as a starting point for the exploratory study on the how-to video. The channels were manually checked for more details and the original list was adapted for the purpose of the current study. Additional video metadata was obtained by interrogating the YouTube Data API v3. At this stage, the data obtained was used to build categories for classifying content creators and the content, and to study video characteristics. A smaller corpus of 45 amateur-made videos in English and from each domain covered was constituted for exploring content characteristics and qualitative content analysis was performed with this aim. For a better understanding of the subgenres, life-hack videos, GRWMs, and prank videos in English were looked for in the original dataset.

For the study on authenticity, the same corpus of 45 media texts made by amateurs or non-professionals was used in order to give continuity to the research. Qualitative content analysis was conducted, while a new model comprising the authenticity of the content creator, of the actual content, and the interaction with the audience was developed based on existing scholarly work on

the authenticity of user-generated content. An analysis grid applicable to the how-to video was also constructed.

Regarding the study on the audience's role, the comments added to the same 45 videos previously analyzed were also the ones considered convenient for examination as the media texts have already been watched and some information was already known in regard to their content. A total of 164,035 comments were extracted with Webometric Analyst. Due to obstacles imposed by the free nature of the language used in the comments, a mixed method approach was used for studying them, which consisted of both manual and automated analysis. The sentiment in the comments extracted for the 45 videos was measured with SentiStrength. The existing scholarship on categories of user comments on YouTube was used for building a new classification based on content relatedness specific to the how-to genre. A subset of comments added to 16 videos was constituted to make the work more suitable for manual analysis. Hence, 7,751 short texts were coded by hand by 2 coders, and Krippendorff's Alpha (α) coefficient was used to measure the agreement between them. A pattern of frequent words and phrases was looked for in regard to all typologies with the help of online tool WriteWords.

The following three chapters are dedicated to the results of the three studies. Chapter 4 begins with a delimitation between the type of content creators of how-to videos, separating non-professionals and amateurs from professional ones, such as brands and media outlets. The results show that amateur creators still gain more popularity. The chapter further provides an insight into the distinctive characteristics of the amateur-made how-to video, examining several aspects in regard to both the videos and their content. In this respect, characteristics of the video such as language, titling, domain covered, or duration are depicted. Although most of them are in English, such videos can be in any language, and some formula is generally followed when adding titles, using the "how-to" syntagma in most cases. The videos can cover a variety of topics that can be classified into 8 large domains, and are designed in such a way that they are neither long nor short, having an average duration of 8 minutes and 30 seconds. Similarly, content characteristics such as step-by-step structure, characters featured, setting, intended audience, or ways of addressing it are put under scrutiny. The characters, usually portrayed by the content creators themselves, perform an action step-by-step in a domestic setting, addressing their audience as if those people were present and actively participating. Although the titles contain descriptive information regarding the content of the videos, sometimes it is necessary to play the materials to see which the intended

audience actually is. Subgenres are discussed as well, three of them having been identified. More specifically, life-hack videos, Get Ready With Me videos, and prank videos are analyzed in more detail, and presented from the perspective of the how-to video.

Chapter 5 discusses the ways in which authenticity is constructed in regard to this popular user-generated genre known as the how-to video. Given that being perceived as authentic is often translated into having higher chances of drawing more attention on YouTube, this chapter comprises an in-depth analysis of amateur-made how-to videos uploaded on several influential channels on the platform. While considering the ingredients that make other similar user-generated genres look authentic such as testimonial rallies or vlogs, a new formula is developed for how-to videos in particular, considering the creators, the content, and the YouTubers' interaction with their audience. These amateur-made media texts create an authenticity effect through a combination of both external and internal factors. Hence, the following five main ingredients generally contribute to the construction of their authenticity: expertise, amateur status, mimesis, accessibility, and interactivity. The results of the analysis revealed that while the first two seem contradictory, they are both essential and represent the aspects that make the how-to video stand out. Mimesis, accessibility, and interactivity are also characteristic to other popular user-generated genres. However, they are not associated with the exact same features for all of them, but are rather adaptable to the particularities of each genre.

Chapter 6 further extends the discussion on the interaction between amateur or non-professional content creators of how-to videos and their audience, by looking at the part played by the latter. With an emphasis on the importance of acknowledging the viewers' perspective and their participation to the construction of knowledge products, comments added by users to amateur-made how-to videos are analyzed. In this sense, the scrutiny focuses on these individuals' interaction among themselves, or with the YouTubers in the comments section, and on the sentiment reflected in their feedback. Thus, the comments were found to be generally neutral, and occasionally slightly positive. Additionally, the comments' relatedness to the actual content of the how-to videos is also examined. 49% of the comments examined, which accounts for almost half, were found to be related to the content. The comments were further classified into related and unrelated, and seven subcategories are introduced for the first group. The seven comment typologies identified as content-related are: suggestions and recommendations, requests, criticism, positive reactions, confirmation of applicability, questions, or creator-centered. Therefore, the

feedback given by the audience works like a supplement for the videos, and it can be useful to other users or even to the content creators.

The aim of this research, to identify and explore the particularities of the how-to video as a genre, eliminate confusions surrounding this type of media text, as well as to shed light on the contribution of both the YouTubers and of the audience to this process, was achieved. The conclusions chapter emphasizes that the how-to video is a user-generated genre that reflects relevant matters of the society in the Internet-driven era in which it became popular. The contradictory nature of this type of content surfaces in several instances, underlining the combination between professional and amateur that characterize it. While a creation of common people on the Internet, these individuals did not invent something that has not been seen before, but they rather used the resources available to them to produce something different, something that is more advantageous to them than what the system provided.

While not all its characteristics are unique to it, it is the combination in which they appear that makes the how-to video a distinctive user-generated genre. Not all the characteristics appear at the same time and in the same way in such videos, and the somewhat formal origins of the how-to video are reflected in some of them. Everyone participates in the creation of such knowledge products on YouTube and the community plays a significant role. The audience can confirm or infirm the authenticity of how-to videos, regardless of how their creators choose to present themselves.

The chapter also covered the limitations and several future research directions. Given the dynamic nature of the platform, it is possible that the Social Blade list has changed soon after it was extracted for this research. Moreover, as the exploratory study is based on a limited sample of how-to videos, an analysis on a larger corpus could reveal more details about the characteristics of the genre and its subgenres. Such an in-depth analysis is necessary to make the results more generalizable. The model developed in the study on authenticity is also based on a reduced number of videos, and further investigation could help enrich it. The obstacles and challenges encountered in the study on the audience's role might be beneficial for other approaches and attempts at analyzing the feedback. What's more, the findings regarding the types of comments could be of use for future attempts at automating the process of classifying user comments. Ultimately, the

methodology developed in this thesis can be used as a starting point for analyzing other user-generated genres.

The results of the current research could also serve as guidelines for professional players looking for methods to keep their audience close and engaged. By understanding what makes how-to videos created by non-professionals or amateurs so appealing to the masses, professional creators can learn how to adapt their media texts in the future.