

“Getting personal with you”: Affect and Authenticity in Confessional Videos of YouTube Lifestyle and Beauty Influencers

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Abstract

Since the Middle Ages, confession has been one of the 'most highly valued techniques for producing truth' (Foucault 1978). While confessional monologues have been researched in reality TV discourse (Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Tolson 2006), the communicative potential of confessional talk for Social Media Influencers has been largely underexplored. This chapter aims to fill this gap by exploring confession as a distinct genre in the communicative repertoire of lifestyle and beauty YouTubers. In this regard, we first map this genre in terms of its key themes, formal features and media production choices. Drawing on Giaxoglou's (2021) notion of affective positioning, we also examine how the influencers and their audiences are affectively positioned in the discourse of confessional videos through the deployment of verbal, non-verbal, as well as other material (camera) and graphic (emojis) resources. We conclude this chapter by demonstrating how this type of positioning intersects with the production of an authentic selfhood on YouTube.

Keywords

confession; affect; authenticity; YouTube; (affective) positioning; intimacy; vulnerability; multimodality; lifestyle and beauty influencers; social media influencers; content creators

1. Introduction

Over the last decades, we have witnessed the rise of new power players whose status and influence do not originate in traditional centres of power, such as politics or entertainment industries. These power players, often called Social Media Influencers (henceforth, SMIs) are content creators who make a living from being (micro)celebrities “native” to, and on the internet (Abidin 2018). In other words, our understanding of SMIs does not include mainstream celebrities who are using their online following to earn money through endorsements; instead, the term refers to more ordinary¹ users of social media platforms who through their strategic production of content and the platforms' algorithmic ranking have amassed a considerable audience which they can monetise. The term encompasses a range of content creators,

including, among others, comedy TikTokers, travel Instagrammers, Twitch live streamers, as well as lifestyle and beauty YouTubers whose discourse will be examined in this chapter.

While the issue of authenticity, especially the need for SMIs to be perceived as ‘real’ and not ‘fake’, has been widely discussed in the literature (e.g. Abidin 2018; also see chapters by Georgakopoulou, Page, Garces-Conejos Blitvich, this volume), confessional talk as a long-standing technique for producing truth and constructing selfhood (Foucault 1978) has been under-researched in discourse studies of SMI communication. Nevertheless, the ethnographic work of the first author on the YouTube lifestyle and beauty community has revealed that confessional talk in the form of emotional disclosure of personal experiences is evident in the content produced by a range of influencers. Based on this observation and previous literature on confession, we have set out to explore how confessional talk may be used as a resource for constructing authenticity among YouTube lifestyle and beauty influencers.

For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on what we call *confessional videos*, i.e. YouTube clips that appear to have been entirely dedicated to the disclosure of intimate details of the influencers’ personal life and, especially, of their feelings and thoughts about their experiences. In this study, we first outline the generic features of these confessional videos, as they emerge from the analysis of fifty English-language videos created by thirty-four young female lifestyle and beauty YouTubers. Among the generic features, we note a distinctive orientation towards expressing emotion and truthfulness. In order to probe further into the potential relationship between affect and authenticity, we draw on the notion of *affective positioning*, i.e. how tellers modulate degrees of distance from or proximity to any events (and related characters) narrated in discourse, to their audience(s), and to the self (Giaxoglou 2021:59). In doing so, we investigate how the influencers and their audiences are affectively positioned in the discourse of the confessional videos. Our analysis reveals that certain affective positions that foreground the influencer’s vulnerability and raw emotion, as well as their intimate relationship with their audience, contribute to the construction of an authentic self in the context of confessional videos. More broadly, our study foregrounds the co-deployment of mediational, together with (para)linguistic and bodily, resources in the curation of such confessions on YouTube and offers a lens for further research on the interplay between affect and authenticity through the analysis of confessional talk in SMI communication.

2. Confessional talk, Emotion and Authenticity

As Foucault (1978:58-59) states, confession has been “one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth”. The interaction between the *confessant* (the person who makes the confession) and the *confessor* (the person who elicits, facilitates or, simply, hears the confession) involves self-disclosure and verbalisation of feelings, thoughts and experiences, resulting in a new reflective experience of the self (Friesen, 2017). From early Christianity to the modern times, the production of selfhood in confessional contexts has been thought to improve physical and mental wellbeing, as it enabled the confessants to communicate with their inner and true self and, thus, achieve moral worthiness. Confession has been one of the key resources for producing *authenticity* which, as opposed to sincerity (i.e., honesty in one’s interactions with others), is defined as the value of being true to oneself - or to an assumed internal self – irrespective of external societal norms and expectations (Trilling 1972).

In the context of media communication, confessional formats and their potential to produce authentic selfhood have been mobilised in reality TV where contestants offer emotionally-charged first person testimonials (Tolson 2006), either in dialogue with a talk show host or in a one-to-one monologue to the camera (Lorenzo-Dus 2009:88). Contestants style an authentic self by externalising and reflecting on inner feelings and thoughts in dedicated spaces, such as the Big Brother diary room. The performance of raw emotion in such confessions is cued through a combination of verbal resources (e.g. expletives, evaluative language), non-verbal means (e.g. loudness, gestures), and camera angles that enable medium-close or close-up shots and, thus, metaphorically establish a more personal and intimate connection between contestants and viewers (Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Bednarek 2013).

Similar to medieval confessions where parishioners participated in the confessants’ recounting of past actions and feelings in public (Friesen 2017), viewers reflect on the contestants’ experiences, feelings and thoughts, identify with their stories and empathise with their reactions (“emotioneering” Batty 2014). In this affective economy (Redmond 2008:156), the contestants’ emotional and authentic self also becomes commodified as those who are particularly good at verbalising emotions and appear true-to-themselves become audience favourites and win the show (Tolson 2006:169). At the same time, however, “such commodification of private lives disproportionately benefits producers and traditional media” (Abidin 2018: 7).

Unlike traditional media, like TV and radio, social media enable ordinary people to share content without being subject to the editing practices and conventions of professional media production teams. Instead, YouTubers can broadcast, control, and negotiate their own presentations of self (Goffman 1954). Early research on vlogs as mediated monologues (Frobenius 2014) has shown how vloggers assign particular roles and

positions both to themselves and their viewers through a range of resources, such as terms of address or gaze (also see Lene Pers, this volume).

With respect to the range of positions assigned to themselves, authenticity - or the construct of an authentic self - as part of SMIs' self-brand that is managed, directed and catered to their followers has been noted in the literature (e.g. Jerslev 2016; Khamis et al. 2017; van Nuenen 2016; Georgakopoulou, this volume). The performance of authenticity on YouTube and other social media entails some inherent tensions, as influencers need to produce an authentic self that appears true-to-onself and real, while it is being evidently edited at the same time. As a result, SMIs labour in an "always on" work mode which requires a state of constant vigilance and monitoring of the self in interaction with their followers (Khamis et al 2017:202; Marwick 2013). Since a self-brand needs to be cohesive and consistent to be credible (Barnes 2022; Droz-dit-Busset, forthcoming), every influencer's brand collaboration, post or interaction with followers across platforms has to orient to the values of that public facing 'persona'. Cultivating branded selves in this manner results in a situation where "work extends far beyond the temporal and spatial limits of traditional workplaces [...] and capital's productivity penetrates ever more deeply into all, including the most intimate, aspects of our lives" (Hearn 2011:316).

This always on work mode often takes the form of both *affective labour* (Hardt 1999), work that is carried out to manage others' emotions, and *emotional labour* (Hochschild 1983), effort that is invested in managing one's own emotions to meet the needs or demands of others (Grandey et al. 2012). Both forms of labour have been discussed in relation to the content produced by SMIs, such as "camgirls" (Senft 2008), or beauty and fashion YouTubers (Dekavalla 2022). Affective labour is often mobilised in various forms of content creation to build affective bonds with audiences. For instance, feelings of intimacy are incited through interactions that give the impression of exclusive and private exchanges, by sharing "what appears to be genuine, raw and usually inaccessible aspects of influencers' personal lives" (Abidin 2015:11). In turn, emotional labour is carried out by SMIs to display desirable feelings or states of being, such as being positive, passionate and humbly grateful (Duffy 2017; Jeffries 2011). The consistent management of at least a façade of desirable and aspirational qualities is a particularly challenging endeavour in a (social) media market that requires from power players to "indulge in greater disclosures of the self to maintain follower interest" (Abidin 2018:18).

Against this backdrop, this chapter aims to examine how confessional talk may be used as a resource for conveying affect² and authenticity by lifestyle and beauty influencers on YouTube. To our knowledge, this area is underexplored, with the exception of Dekavalla's (2022) study that undertakes a thematic analysis of confessional videos to

explore the construction of closeness between YouTubers and their audience. In our study, we offer a more systematic analysis of confessional videos as a potentially distinct genre in the communicative repertoire of lifestyle and beauty YouTubers. We also probe further into how the influencers and their audiences are affectively positioned in the discourse of confessional videos and how this type of positioning intersects with the production of an authentic selfhood on YouTube.

3. Collecting and Analysing Confessional Videos

This study draws on an ongoing ethnographic discourse analysis on YouTube, which integrates an ethnographic sensibility with (critical) discourse analysis and enables a close look at situated discourse(s) (Krzyżanowski, 2011). This perspective initially entailed two months of daily observation of communicative practices in the English-speaking beauty community on YouTube (mostly Americans, Canadians, and people from the United Kingdom), as well as initial data collection of influencers' videos and viewers' comments. Specific attention was directed at YouTubers' self-branding practices and the associated discursive strategies as well as the reception practices of their audiences. This rather intensive engagement with the community was followed by further discourse ethnographic work that the first author undertook over the course of several years as part of a larger research project (Droz-dit-Busset, forthcoming). This phase also included seven interviews with YouTubers, three of whom belong to the wider beauty and lifestyle community. While not homogenous, the community of YouTube lifestyle and beauty influencers can be characterised by: (i) communication that centres on peer-to-peer recommendation and reviews of cosmetic products, clothes, and brands; (ii) sharing of recipes, home renovations or décor, daily routines and other everyday activities; and (iii) general avoidance of negativity or controversial topics such as politics and religion.

During the initial phase of this research, the first author noticed that elements of confession in the form of emotional disclosure of personal life details were embedded in the YouTubers' videos, including daily vlogs and more commercial formats such as reviews or hauls (videos displaying products purchased in a shopping spree). Moreover, the author's attention was drawn to videos which were entirely dedicated to one long confession of events or (often negative) feelings that the YouTuber had been experiencing. The intensified amateur aesthetic of these videos contrasted with the often more polished and glossy videos which are typical of both commercial and daily vlogs of lifestyle and beauty YouTubers. Furthermore, we observed that these videos were generally posted at strategic times; for example, when the YouTuber was tied in a controversy or needed attention

for a new product launch. These confessional videos emerged as “rich points” for our study, i.e. as snippets of data which surprise, confuse or intrigue the ethnographer (Agar, 2006), because the intensified amateur aesthetic, the disclosure of negative feelings and the strategic position of these videos set them apart from the routine content uploaded on the YouTubers’ channels. In this chapter, we have set to investigate further:

- (a) What are the broad generic features of these confessional videos?
- (b) How are the influencers and their audience(s) positioned affectively in the videos?
- (c) To what extent do these affective positions contribute to the construction of an authentic self in the videos?

In order to examine the generic features of the videos, we have collected a sample of fifty clips; the key criterion for selecting these videos was the inclusion of explicit references to confession or emotional disclosure of intimate details of the influencers’ personal life in the video title (e.g. “Guys... I’m scared of *having another baby* / Raw and honest confession”, Alma Ngur, 26/01/2021). The collected videos were uploaded between 2015 and 2022 by thirty-four lifestyle and beauty YouTubers whose follower count ranges from 8.01M to 61K with total channel views between 258M and 5M, at the time of writing. In terms of demographics, the majority identify as younger female YouTubers (94% in their twenties or mostly early thirties and 6% in their forties; this loosely coincides with the average Beauty and Lifestyle YouTuber and the biggest YouTube viewer demographic, Ceci, 2024). Although this sample is by no means exhaustive, it is representative of the type of confessional videos noticed during the study’s ethnographic phase and of the range of big and small(er) influencers that are active in the specific community. In this chapter, we share screenshots of two videos in which an influencer is visible – since the data is public (not semi-public such as Facebook contributions), and the influencer is producing her content for a large public audience (as opposed to e.g. home videos posted on YouTube to share with family and friends) we find this use of a small portion of her production to fall under ethical social media research.

In terms of investigating how the influencers and their audience are positioned affectively in the discourse of these videos, we have focused on Amy Lee who, at the time of writing, represents a medium-size influencer, with 500K subscribers, 40M channel views and on average 50K views per video. Amy Lee is a Korean American YouTuber who started uploading fashion and makeup content in 2011 but has more recently shifted to self-help content, such as mental health and spirituality. For the qualitative analysis of affective positioning in this chapter, we focus on two of her confessional videos: (i) ‘getting personal with you’ (23/09/2016, dur. 28:44min, 132K views³) and (ii) ‘I am Burnt Out. / Healing the Divine Feminine’ (15/03/2021, dur. 21:28min; 55K views⁴). Drawing on the three levels of identity positioning, i.e. the taleworld (reported events), the

storyrealm (storytelling event) and the self (Bamberg 1997: 337; De Fina 2016: 479), as well as the heuristics suggested by Giaxoglou (2021; see also Giaxoglou & Spilioti 2020), our multimodal analysis of affective positioning examines: (i) how the influencer and her audience are affectively positioned as characters in the event(s) recounted in the confession; (ii) what types of relationships are affectively projected by the confessant/influencer to her confessor/audience and what affective reactions by the audience are invited in the influencer's discourse; (iii) what types of affective self, vis-à-vis broader sociocultural norms of emotional displays, are projected in the videos.

4. Confessional videos as a genre

Confessional videos are defined as videos where the YouTubers 'open up about' (to use the influencers' own words) a range of personal and intimate experiences that can relate to, but are not limited to, their private life. During such disclosures, they topicalise their reflections on and feelings towards past and/or ongoing events and may (in)directly "offer advice to those in a similar position" (Dekavalla 2022:858). Based on our observation, we suggest that these confessional videos emerge as a distinct genre in the feeds of lifestyle and beauty influencers. Following Bauman (2001) and Georgakopoulou (2006:552) we understand genre as "orienting frameworks of conventionalised expectations and routine ways of speaking and (inter)acting in specific sites and for specific purposes". That is, we follow the line of research that approaches genres not as fixed categories but as emergent, constantly changing groupings with fluid boundaries, as new texts are produced and taken up into their canon. Yet, we acknowledge that some conventionalised aspects can be detected, and, in this section, we outline the key generic features of the fifty collected videos (see Table 1 for a summary).

Table 1. Generic Features of Confessional Videos

Function (primary)	To disclose and open up about (challenging) experiences, thoughts and feelings	
Content/Themes	Personal life challenges (motherhood, break ups, health/illness, mental health/addiction, abuse/harassment, sexuality, loss)	
	Professional life challenges (hate comments, interactions with followers, taking time off from work/social media)	
Form	Emotion markers	Linguistic (references to emotions, expletives, evaluative language)

		Paralinguistic (long pauses, loud/quiet speech, fast/slow speech delivery)
		Bodily (crying, cracking voice, body posture and movement)
	Truthfulness markers	Lexis associated with truthfulness (truth, real, raw, honest, really)
	Moral stance markers	Evaluative language (how can you <i>judge</i> me when...)
	Temporal markers	Verb tenses (past, present)
		Temporal adverbs (now, then)
	Unconventional spelling and/or punctuation in titles	All upper/lower-case letters, ellipsis points, full stop at the end
Production	Non-professional shooting background, location and appearance	
	Sit-down video (shot from static camera angle)	

In terms of *content*, having undertaken a thematic analysis of the key topics discussed in the videos, we have found an orientation towards opening up about aspects of *personal life* and related challenges (n:36), such as motherhood and pregnancy, relationships and break ups, mental health, and abuse. While the disclosure of personal life matters is perhaps expected in a confessional context and results in enhancing the influencers' relatability (Abidin 2017; Baker and Rojek 2020), a number of confessional videos (n:14) were found to focus on the YouTuber's *professional life*, which is arguably less relatable to their followers' everyday life. In these cases, the YouTubers topicalise experiences and challenges relating to them 'being' on the platform, such as audience interactions, hate comments, or their need to take time off from work and/or social media.

In terms of *media production*, confessional videos are often shot against a *non-professional* background, such as the influencers' private bedrooms or bathrooms, with the YouTubers looking particularly ungroomed. Most clips take the form of a 'sit-down' video (a term used by the community itself), in which the YouTuber is sitting down and facing the camera which is relatively static, as opposed to a vlog where the camera is handheld and mobile, with the YouTuber not being visible in every shot. This *amateur* aesthetic is also evident in the video titles where we notice the use of unconventional spelling and punctuation, such as the all upper- or all lower-case letters ('WHO AM I...?' RawBeautyKristi) or ellipsis points ('It's Not Goodbye...' Fleur Deforce).

In terms of *form*, the confessional videos and their corresponding titles include overt expressions of *emotion*, which, following Bednarek (2013:92-93), can be couched in the form of linguistic (e.g. expletives, evaluative language), paralinguistic (e.g. long pauses, loud/quiet speech), and bodily features (e.g. crying, cracking voice). Moreover, we found repeated use of expressions that mark the YouTuber's stance towards the *truthfulness* of what is shared, like 'postpartum *truth*' (RawBeautyKristi), or 'what *really* happened' (Cari Cakes). In terms of *temporality*, verb tenses and other temporal markers (e.g. then, now) indicate a "double orientation" (see Goffman 1971, on apologies) towards the past and the present, i.e. towards an old self that acted out and felt in certain ways in the past and a new self that acts and feels differently now. Furthermore, confessional videos appear to exhibit a moral tone, as YouTubers engage in evaluations of both themselves and others. The recounting of past and/or present events and feelings, their anchoring in time and place, and the associated moral stance-taking, imbue these confessions with a narrative feel, as temporality, structure, and moral stance have been key tenets of narrative discourse (Labov and Waletzky 1997[1967]; Ochs and Capps 2001). Confessions represent ways of (story)telling that afford the confessants/YouTubers to position themselves and others in different ways, as we will point out in the following sections.

With this in mind, we now turn to two examples of confessional videos which are analysed in terms of the heuristics proposed in Giaxoglou's (2021) framework of affective positioning. To gain insight into how affect is woven into confessions as a potential resource to project authenticity, we first analyse the influencer's affective positioning in each video separately, with a focus on the taleworld and, particularly, on the storyrealm as the latter represents the key frame where both the confessant and the confessor are positioned in the confessional telling. In our analysis, we examine particularly how the aforementioned linguistic, paralinguistic and bodily affective cues (Bednarek 2013) are deployed in the influencer's positioning at these two inter-related levels (sections 5 and 6). Then, we draw on these analyses and discuss the types of affective self that the YouTuber projects vis-à-vis broader sociocultural norms of emotional displays in both videos (section 7).

5. Getting personal with you

In 2016, Amy Lee posted the video 'getting personal with you', where she discloses how uninspired and disconnected from her audience she felt when striving to make content that gets views and attracts sponsorships (l.4, Ex.1). These past actions are juxtaposed with what she is currently doing, which involves learning how to be herself and harnessing her "self authenticity" (l.2). In Extract 1, this type of authenticity is associated with qualities, such

as genuineness, rawness and vulnerability, and is framed in relational terms as it involves being open with – and opening up to – the audience.

(1)⁵

1 and so I think now I'm just learning about how to harness myself-
2 my self authenticity again and how to be myself
3 and be more open and raw and genuine with you guys?
[...]
4 so I guess (.) I think I los- I lost a connection with a lot of you guys a
5 long time ago?
6 and I guess I'm just saying I wanna (.) be more personal I wanna open
7 up to you guys
8 and I'm ready to be more vulnerable

It is within this frame of openness and authenticity that Amy discloses her feelings in relation to a recent incident that has affected her deeply. The incident happened a month before the upload of the video and concerns the reaction she received after asking for an intern on Instagram (Ex.2).

(2)

1 so I ended up asking for an intern
2 and uhm I did get quite a fe:w (.) negative comments and very
3 aggressive backlash uhm
4 and you know I broke down.
5 and you guys saw that on Snapchat I was just (.) crying uhm
6 because people made specific accounts just to-
7 like they started off their comment by saying
8 >I'm gonna be savage here< and [...]
9 how I'm not a big YouTuber,
10 how I'm ((furrows brow)) exploiting people
11 uhm and I totally totally see the val- vali- oh my gosh
12 I totally see the validity in that
13 because I am not a big YouTuber [...]
14 and that's exactly what I was so scared about. [...]
15 and so that's when I broke down (.) [...]
16 and I know I'm- like I'm not exploiting people I don't want to exploit
17 people [...]
18 and I am just currently looking for help (.) a helping hand
19 because I just didn't have the resources to: (.)
20 you know pursue my job? and pursue my passions? and ahh hhhh (5.0)
21 it just really hurt ((voice breaks)) to be knocked down?
22 when I already felt so low? (2.0) ((holding back tears)) ahh hhhh (1.0)
23 but (.) the upside to that (.) is that so many of you [...]
24 as soon as I put that intern post out

25 I got over like hundreds of emails and so many applications
 26 and I'm so so sorry that I could not reply to each and everyone of you
 [...]
 27 but I'm so so grateful that all of you want to help me.

5.1 Conflicting Characters: Vulnerable Amy vs. Exploitative Amy

At the level of the *taleworld*, Amy describes her old self as a character in the story in primarily affective terms, i.e. as brittle (broke down, l.4), pre-emptively scared of backlash (l.14), sad (l.5), and misunderstood (not exploiting people, l.16). This emotional and vulnerable Amy, also evident in portraying her call for an intern as coming from a position of neediness (looking for help, l.18), is juxtaposed with the arrogant or calculating character the Instagram commenters made her out to be (thinking she is a “big” YouTuber l.13; wanting to exploit people l.16). Through the construal and juxtaposition of these conflicting characters, the YouTuber’s actions are reframed from exploitative to a desperate call for help and the YouTuber is (re)presented as a vulnerable and highly emotional character. Considering that confessions presuppose the revelation of something hidden which may be at odds with what appears at the surface, they arguably offer a recognisable format for organising and talking about experiences of conflicting actions, feelings, positions and selves, as evident in this example.

5.2 Affective Tellers and Supportive Listeners

Moving into the *storyrealm* and the type of *relationship* construed between the confessor/audience and the confessant/YouTuber, an intimate and supportive relationship is projected through an array of linguistic, paralinguistic, bodily, mediational and spatial resources. In terms of linguistic resources, there are direct references to the audience viewing the confessional video through the use of second person pronoun; the audience is not only positioned as a *witness* to the YouTuber’s emotional breakdown on social media (you guys saw that, l.5) but also as a source of *support* (all of you want to help me, l.27). Furthermore, the YouTuber appears as an affective teller through a range of paralinguistic cues, such as cracking voice (l.21), long pauses (l.20) and audible exhales (l.22), that delay the pace of the confession and underline the tension arising more from the unsayable, rather than the said. Amy also embodies overflowing emotion as she holds back tears during one of the long pauses (l.22). Together with talking about inner feelings, the YouTuber’s embodiment of raw emotion in the confession contributes to the authentication of the experience and projects an intimate and trusting relationship to her audience, as they are people who she feels comfortable enough with to be vulnerable.

While the confessant's body has been noted as a key resource for enacting affect and authenticity in pre social media confessions (Redmond 2008), SMIs have also at their disposal a range of mediational means that can be mobilised in confessional videos. For example, rather than drawing on professional video production techniques that involve the use of good quality cameras, Amy appears to be using the front camera of her computer. This choice does not appear to stem from lack of access to professional equipment, as other videos produced at the time were filmed with high-resolution gear. Furthermore, the video itself is minimally edited: there are only seven cuts in the 28min and 43sec video and an abundance of repetition, repairs and long pauses which have not been edited out. This aura of unmediated access to the YouTuber's original words brings the audience closer, since they are given access to her mostly unedited and "raw" (1.3, Ex.1) self and, thus, contributes to the staging of such confessions as authentic.

Beyond such mediational resources, the (physical) setting that is projected to the viewer through the medium of the camera also contributes to the construction of intimacy with the audience. Content creators carefully curate and edit the videos' backgrounds and sets (Snickars & Vonderau, 2009) which can be instrumental in construing the interactional space and, thus, set the tone of the interaction. Comparing the background and setting of this confessional video (Fig.1) with the curated settings in her make up tutorials at the same period (Fig.2), we note that the confessional video displays a distinctly untidy and intimate spatial arrangement. The video is shot in Amy's bedroom and on her unmade bed, both of which give viewers visual access to personal/intimate objects and create a casual, unedited, atmosphere, as she did not alter her room to make it presentable for guests. In fact, in the mirror viewers can still see what might have been the imprint of her head on one of the pillows. The space is thus intentionally left in a lived-in state. In contrast, in her make up tutorial the background is blank and features flattering warm tones which match her eyeshadow. The space is also generic and professional. This stark contrast between the different settings suggests the curation of intimate and personal spaces for the construal of the confession on YouTube.

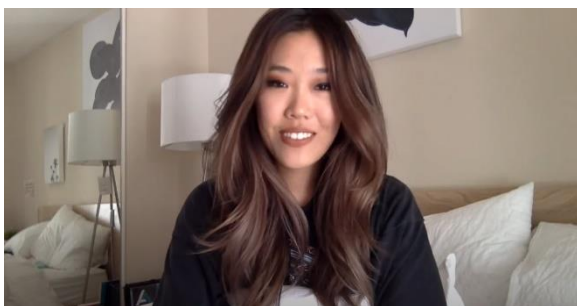


Figure 1. Confessional Video



Figure 2. Make Up Tutorial

5.3 Affective Reactions from Benevolent Confessors

At the level of the *storyrealm*, affective positioning is also evident in the type of *reactions* that the confessant/YouTuber may project to the confessor/audience in the video. In this video, we note that two different audiences are construed. The first one is only part of the taleworld, as they appear as the chastising character in her recounting of the internship incident. The second one is part of both the taleworld and the storyworld and constructed as helping hands (“all of you want to help me” l.27). This latter audience is positioned as the present viewers of the video, as indicated by the second person pronouns (“could not reply to each and every one of you” l.26, Ex.2). Consequently, this is the audience which acts as the confessor, the one accepting and presently evaluating her confession. By constructing the confessors as being the benevolent, understanding audience, Amy achieves to avoid directly accusing them of being the viewers who went above and beyond (l.6, Ex.2) to anonymously attack her online. This is partly a face-saving strategy which ensures a positive ‘connection’ to her audience (Dekavalla 2022), but also a strategic way to encourage a particular kind of audience to actively participate in this confession.

In fact, people in the comments section accepted and reinforced this positioning by being overwhelmingly supportive and praising Amy for disclosing her inner state. Her confession was often evaluated as being “authentic”, “genuine”, “hard but so real”, “raw” and full of “emotion”⁶ – something one commenter pointed out was exactly what made her feel connected to Amy. The comments section of her video also contained various affective stances, where commenters disclosed their own emotions towards Amy. General expressions of love and admiration are abundant (e.g. “I love you Amy!”, “daaaaamn, you’re so inspiring!”), with one commenter explaining that she felt “touched” by Amy’s vulnerability and “as if I was in your room listening to your struggles”. It thus seems that Amy was successful at staging an intimate, emotional and thus ‘authentic’ confession using the range of multimodal resources afforded by YouTube videos.

6. I'm Burnt Out

On 15 March 2021, Amy Lee uploaded a video where she opens up about her mental health and discloses to her audience that she feels “burnt out” and “tired”. In Extract 3, the ‘burnt out’ feeling is disclosed in the context of two events: (i) the preparation phase of this video (ll.1-16) and (ii) a verbal exchange with her business coach (ll.17-21).

(3)

- 1 originally when I wanted to do this video
- 2 I: was going to do a: how to get ((smiley voice)) your life together
((shining sparkles))
- 3 [...] like a self-care routine that I always do.
- 4 but eh it just felt so:: fake ((clown emoji)) really it felt so fake
- 5 because I do not feel that I have my life together right now
- 6 I feel quite the opposite I feel hhhh burnt out I feel so: tired? [...]
- 7 I feel like influencers are put on this pedestal
- 8 like >you have your dream job your dream life
- 9 like how do you even complain about being tired<
- 10 but eh maybe that's just my own projection uh of whatever hhhh
((change of setting & filming device))
- 11 editing Amy here a:nd I think what I was trying to say was
- 12 hhhh I had a huge fear o:f acknowledging me being burnt out
- 13 because I never wanted it to: come off as though I was complaining
- 14 about my job?
- 15 and maybe those are all my projections and and internalised blah
- 16 blah blah but.
((back to the original setting & filming device))
- 17 so uhm yeah I think now I'm just getting honest with myself
- 18 because I literally started crying to my business coach hhhh [...]
- 19 a:nd she was like how much money do you want to make in the next
- 20 year [...]
- 21 a:nd uhm I think right now hhhh
- 22 I'm dealing with like a lot of impostor syndrome
- 23 a:nd hhhh dealing with like hhhh I'm not good enough?
- 24 a:nd dealing with hhhh even just like hhhh learning to: outsource or
- 25 delegate

6.1 Conflicting Characters: Professional/Fake Amy vs. Personal/True Amy

In both episodes, the confessional format allows the teller to distance herself from an old self who, as a story character, is evaluated and positioned in *affective terms*, e.g. sad (“crying” l.18) or fearful (“a huge fear” l.12) and, at the same time, in terms of *in/authentic claims*, e.g. “fake” (l.4). In the story,

the struggle for authenticity is illustrated as a clash between what the character wanted to do – and routinely does – as a professional YouTuber (i.e. self-care videos) and what she felt – feels – as a person (i.e. burnt out). As mentioned in the previous video, confession allows the juxtaposition of different actions and selves. While such conflicts and tensions might be interpreted as signs of fakeness, talking about them in the recognisable format of confession may end up legitimising and authenticating the experience.

6.2 Affective/Authentic Tellers and Intimate Listeners

Similar to the 2016 video, a relationship of intimacy between the confessant and the confessor is projected through a range of paralinguistic and bodily cues (e.g. fillers ll.4, 10, 15-16; audible breathing ll.6, 10, 12, 18, 21, 23-24) that afford the YouTuber's positioning as an *affective teller*. These cues abound at – and in – the moment of confession (ll.4-6) where the confessant reveals and evaluates her past actions (“it felt so:: fake”) and current state (“burnt out”). Furthermore, in line 17 (“so uhm yeah I think now”) which acts as a coda for the first confessional moment, what is foregrounded is the teller's ‘honest’ stance towards what she is sharing in the here-and-now, which results in positioning the influencer not only as an *affective* but also as an *authentic teller*.

In terms of mediational and spatial resources, unlike the 2016 video, this confessional video is shot primarily through a professional camera in a space that looks like the living room of a house (Fig.3).



Figure 3. Living Room Setting

The video, however, also includes snippets of footage that have been produced at a later point and in a different space. These snippets have been inserted at different points of the confessional video (ll.11-16, Ex.3). In these snippets, Amy engages in metacommentary, explaining a point she is making in the main, professionally shot, part of the video (l.11). As a result, her position is shifted from the *teller* to the *editor of the confessional telling*; this is also clearly marked to the *audience*, as all these snippets are introduced by the phrase: “editing Amy here” (l.11). This shift is further signalled through video production resources that appear only in this type of footage (Fig.4),

such as recording through the front camera of a mobile phone, using a coloured (red/yellow) frame, shooting against strong backlight which places Amy's face in the dark, as well as using extreme close-ups (see cropped top headshot) and camera angles that reveal an untidy background.



Figure 4. Editing Amy – Bedroom Setting

Compared to the main, professionally shot, video, the production resources mobilised in the 'editing Amy' footage remind us of calibrated amateurism; that is, the practice of "over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice" (Abidin 2017:1). Similar to the 2016 video, this aesthetic allows the teller to distance herself from the role of a professional media producer and to project a more personal and close relationship with her audience (see Bhatia 2017 for how beauty YouTubers transition between multiple roles in order to project expertise while still performing in-groupness).

Furthermore, media graphics are mobilised in the professionally shot part of the video, such as video effects (shining sparkles, 1.2) and emojis. In Extract 3 (1.4), in particular, the clown emoji appears on the screen only for a split of a second but it is strategically placed in – and underlines – the moment of revelation: the shot freezes as Amy utters the words "it just felt so::: fake", and her face is covered by a clown emoji (Fig.5). These media graphics contribute to the staging of the confessional moment: the tension between what she wanted to do professionally and how she really felt as a person, as well as the revelation that she was a "fake". Considering the face threatening implication of admitting one's fakeness on social media, the sharing of such content and the topicalization of the fake self through numerous resources ends up enhancing the bonds between the YouTuber and the audience; after all, admitting one's fakeness can be considered the outmost expression of honesty when achieved in an intimate and safe environment.



Figure 5. Clown Emoji

6.3 Ventriloquising the confessor's affective reactions

The verbal reactions of the audience members are embedded in the confession through a type of constructed dialogue (Tannen 1989) that involves Amy ventriloquising their speech and taking their voice in hypothetical scenarios. In Extract 3 (ll.8-9, “like >you have your dream job your dream life like how do you even complain about being tired<”), ventriloquism is marked vis-à-vis the surrounding discourse through pronominal shifts; the second person pronoun “you” is no longer used to refer to the audience but it indirectly points to the teller (Amy), (“you” referring to all influencers, incl. Amy, put on a pedestal l.7). Faster speech delivery also marks these lines as distinct from the rest of the discourse.

While ventriloquism represents a linguistic manoeuvre that affords solidarity and connection between interactants (Tannen 2003), here it also achieves the *projection of particular affective stances* towards the audience. The projected reactions to the audience reveal the confessor's potential lack of empathy with the YouTuber who discloses her vulnerable burnt out self. The specific constructed dialogue illustrates a tension in the relationship between the influencer and her audience, as the audience misconstrues the influencer as an ungrateful complainer (l.9) and appears as a neither empathetic nor sympathetic listener. In a context where the number of followers translates into professional and financial success, this type of positioning is potentially face-threatening both for the audience who are portrayed in a negative light and for the influencer who is construing this portrayal. Such face threats are mitigated in what follows: Amy casts what she says as “just” her own projection (l.10) and inserts the “editing Amy” footage (ll.11-16). In the “editing Amy” snippet, the focus returns on *her*, what *she* feels, what *she* fears and how *she* potentially “comes off” to others through what *she* says. Through this shift of focus from the audience to Amy as the main agent, the audience is no longer portrayed in a negative light, as they are not the ones who make the accusations. In fact, the audience members display supportive positions and affective stances in their comments (e.g. “my heart aches for you”; “I love youuuuu”). Such emotional displays shape a ‘space of empathy’ and mutual understanding while listening to the videos,

as one of the commenters puts it. In contrast to the projected lack of empathy, the viewers present themselves as empathetic and supportive listeners (“we’ll still be here to support and nurture you”), while the confessant is portrayed as vulnerable, relatable (“that’s what truly makes me connect with you”), sincere and honest (“talk about real stuff”). The notion of authenticity is coupled in the comments with concepts like relatability, vulnerability and introspectiveness, with the latter being particularly relevant to confessional talk that presupposes the existence of an inner self (Redmond 2008:156).

7. The Affective Self and “Self Authenticity”

Through the confessional format, Amy Lee appears to reveal conflicting aspects of a hidden inner self that is portrayed as different from the professional self which is accessible in consumption-focused videos. This inner self is primarily expressed in affective terms in the two videos analysed. Both as a character in what is confessed and as a confessant, Amy is (re)presented as a sad and vulnerable individual, with emotional breakdowns that take place both away from and in front of the camera. This type of affective inner self appears at odds with the emotional displays of positive outlook, passion and humble gratefulness that are typical of the YouTube lifestyle and beauty community (Duffy 2017; Jeffries 2011). The focus on tiredness (“burnt out”) or inadequacy (“not good enough”) also foregrounds a sense of self that is distanced from the persona of the successful and aspirational YouTuber, circulated more broadly in the media (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022).

In the confessional videos, this type of emotional labour, that involves managing one’s own emotions, is linked with the affective labour of projecting a relationship of intimacy and closeness with the audience. While Dekavalla (2022:864) has pointed out how YouTubers “tread very carefully around viewers’ sensibilities” to manage closeness in such videos, we have shown that this relationship is also mediated through the projection of an affective self who appears as having lost control of the situation, while the confessant is trying to find her words and her self amid tears, hesitations, audible sighs and silence. As evident in Extract 1, these episodes that illustrate loss of emotional control are associated with rawness of feeling, better connection with the audience and, overall, a display of “self authenticity”, to use Amy’s words. This claim of authenticity is contingent upon the type of affective positioning achieved: it is through the positions of raw sadness, loss of control and intimacy with her audience that Amy can confess her weaknesses and, thus, appear true to her inner self and, ultimately, to her audience.

8. Conclusion: Displaying affect in pursuit of authenticity

While confessional monologues have attracted the attention of research on reality TV discourse (Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Tolson 2006), the communicative potential of confessional talk for SMIs has been largely underexplored. This chapter has attempted to fill this gap by foregrounding the strategic mobilisation of confession as a distinct genre for producing truth and authenticity in beauty and lifestyle YouTubers' communication. In this regard, we have first mapped this genre in terms of its key themes, formal features and media production choices manifest in this type of videos. Then, drawing on Giaxoglou's (2021) framework of affective positioning, we examined how influencers modulate degrees of distance from or proximity to narrated events, to their audience(s), and to the self in confessional videos. In the different analytical stages, we studied discourse in its interplay with space, body and mediational means, undertaking a multimodal analysis that pays attention to the mobilisation of a range of verbal, non-verbal, as well as other material (camera) and graphic (emojis) resources.

The analysis has shown that beauty and lifestyle YouTubers' confessions usually take place in curated private and personal settings that contribute to the orchestration of such confessions as enactments of intimacy and vulnerability where YouTubers take the role of confessants and position the viewers as confessors who can reflect on and evaluate the confession both in terms of what is shared, and how. While previous research on confessional talk has pointed out the role of linguistic and paralinguistic resources in construing affect and/or authenticity, our multimodal analysis reveals the significance of mediational means in the authentication of such confessional moments and the strategic deployment of calibrated amateurism on YouTube. This was particularly evident in the presence – or, even, strategic absence – of particular video production and editing practices (e.g. uncut footage, lighting, content mixing).

In terms of the challenges YouTubers face in producing a self that needs to appear real, while it is being evidently edited, confessions appear in our study to act as a vehicle for navigating the tensions arising from the different personas and selves projected in interaction with their followers (see also Georgakopoulou this volume). In the case of Amy Lee, we have shown how the confessional format offered a polyvocal discursive space (Bakhtin 1981; Tannen 2004) where Amy could take on different voices: the *professional voice* framed through the professional aesthetics footage; the *personal and vulnerable voice* prevalent in the embodied performances of affect and framed in the amateur aesthetics footage; and, even, the *audience's voice* adopted at highly reflexive moments where she engaged in evaluations of her self from the perspective of her viewers. While the projection of different voices and contrasting selves (e.g. professional vs. personal, vulnerable vs. exploitative, old vs. new) may be perceived as inauthentic, we

argue that it is precisely the confessional format that enables this type of talk to be perceived not as fake but as authentic because “confessional selfhood [...] is sustained not by identity, but by difference – the inevitable difference between what you are and what you confess” (Grobe 2017:25). As a result, the fragmentation and juxtaposition of different selves does not mark confessional talk as a failure; in contrast, it is the effective deployment of multiple and contrasting selves that makes a confession seem credible and authentic, as becomes apparent in commenters’ reactions.

Central to this construction of authenticity are verbal and non-verbal displays of affect: sharing or reflecting on emotions, as well as embodying affect, becomes a key means not only for authenticating the confession, but also in producing an authentic self that does not hide or suppress who they are – or how they feel – in front of their audience. Such portrayals are a form of both emotional and affective labour, as YouTubers modulate their physical emotional reactions on camera to appear vulnerable and thus authentic, and cultivate feelings of intimacy in their audience. In the wider political economy of social media, confessional videos thus seem to act as strategic means for creating, keeping or salvaging a connection with the audience. Indeed, while our analysis focused on individual videos, we should not forget that these videos are uploaded at conspicuously opportune times. In fact, the fifty confessional videos collected reveal that such uploads are not only triggered by a personal crisis (e.g. breakup) but also by controversies over the YouTuber’s professional practice (e.g. Amy’s decision to hire an intern, or steady decline of channel views). We thus suggest that confessional videos might also act as last resorts for YouTubers to reinvigorate and capitalise on audiences’ interest in and affinity towards them through the promise of an ‘open and raw and genuine’ encounter. In this way, YouTubers become the latest in a long line of cultural workers who pull on the heartstrings of audiences through raw – yet staged – displays of emotion.

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¹ Nevertheless, race, sexual orientation, fitting into standard beauty ideals and having the resources to upload regularly for years without any promise of profit return play a role in who these 'ordinary' SMIs end up being (Droz-dit-Busset, 2022).

² Our study of affect does not only orient to the range of emotions identified in the YouTubers' discourse, as they are prefigured by cultural scripts (e.g., sadness, happiness, etc), but also to the specific performances of affect, as embodied on the video, and its effects, as evident in the viewers' comments (cf. Busch 2020).

³ Source: Amy Lee, "getting personal with you", YouTube, September 23, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwlqqMJ9COI>

⁴ Source: Amy Lee, "I am Burnt Out. / Healing the Divine Feminine" YouTube, March 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUNHpuvNDMo>

⁵ Transcription conventions include: (1) timed pause to nearest second; (.) very brief pause; word emphasis or stress; wo::rd stretching of prior sound; word. falling intonation; word, continuing intonation; word? rising intonation; >word< speeded up speech; word- cut-off or self-interruption; ((word)) non-verbal information; hhhh audible exhale; [...] text omitted.

⁶ To ensure the anonymity of commenters and avoid the risk of reidentification, we do not (re)publish verbatim comments but use words and expressions that are recurrent and illustrate broader stances and positions in our data. This decision is informed by institutional recommendations at Cardiff University and wider debates in internet qualitative research that point to the limits of positivist assumptions about data 'accuracy' and embrace creative and context-sensitive ways of data representation (Markham 2012; Spilioti 2017).