

YouTube vlogging as access to possibilities: A phenomenological study of an OG Filipino vlogger

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to understand and provide contextual explanation on the meaning behind the communicative action of YouTube vlogging as located in the essence of experience of the OG Filipino vlogger voice. The bracketing used is an in-depth interview, and the participant is Lincoln Velasquez, more popularly known as Cong TV, one of the top 10 individual vloggers in the Philippines (his channel having >7 million subscribers), and also one of the earliest to start in 2008, several years before vlogging became commercially lucrative in 2016. The analysis is conducted by coding, categorizing, and interpreting the interview transcript, from which 13 sub-themes emerge. By conceptually connecting the sub-themes, the grand theme of vlogging as access to possibilities is surfaced. Through an initial linkage to Sen's capability approach, a further theoretical abstraction of the grand theme to vlogging as expansion of capabilities is tentatively proposed.

Keywords: vlogging in the Philippines, OG Filipino vlogger, Cong TV, qualitative, phenomenological, access to possibilities, capability approach, expansion of capabilities

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YouTube Vlogging in the Philippines

Vlogging has become arguably one of the most revolutionary forms of new media especially in the last decade. Its rise in popularity coincided with the widespread availability of key enabling technologies such as digital cameras, smartphones, video editing software, and high-speed internet connections, which allow the almost instantaneous recording, editing, uploading, and broadcasting of videos in internet streaming platforms. Since it was acquired by Google in 2006, YouTube has become the most popular online video streaming platform globally (Gao et al., 2010). YouTube has since enabled the proliferation of vloggers globally leading to more than 37 million YouTube channels as of November 2020, out of which only around 22,000 (or 0.06 percent) have more than 1 million subscribers each (Funk, 2020).

According to Pauline Estella and Martin Löffelholz (2019), the Philippines has the 12th greatest number of internet users among all countries in the world (around 64 million out of its 104 million population, or 63 percent), almost half of whom primarily use the internet for social media while around a fifth prioritize video streaming. They also found that as a mode for online sociality, aside from social networks, YouTube vlogging has become a preferred platform for reaching and relating with broader audiences for regular Filipino netizens; cause-oriented individuals and groups; and more especially so for celebrities, influencers, and opinion makers, and also that YouTube has also become a primary platform for independent artists to produce and distribute their music. Like traditional media, digital media in the Philippines generates most of its revenue from advertising, with potential earnings increasing with broader reach and higher audience engagement (Estella & Löffelholz, 2019).

P. Ng (personal communication, November 20, 2020), states that the beginning of the massive growth in YouTube channels in the country started around four years ago and was driven by the significant growth of social media marketing as a business. YouTube and social media monetization from advertisements already began several years prior. However, it was only around 2016 that corporate brands in the Philippines started to invest significant advertising budgets in digital media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Google, YouTube, etc.) as well as on social media influencers and vloggers, or the so-called key opinion leaders (KOLs). Since then, vloggers and social media influencers who have substantial followings have become celebrity KOLs, and pre-digital celebrities have also expanded to vlogging and social media influencing. Because of the potential significant payout from advertising monetization and brand endorsements, vlogging has become a lucrative and aspirational endeavor, and thus more and more Filipinos have been encouraged to start their own YouTube channels and upload their own

vlogs. Some Filipino vlog channels have only started within the last four years and have since achieved huge success in terms of garnering millions of followers and the corresponding payout.

P. Ng (personal communication, November 20, 2020) also asserts that arguably the main audience appeal of these channels is the portrayal of relatable “real-life” narratives in their vlogs, which brings about a potent social and relational dimension, a market need that is insufficiently provided by traditional media such as print and television. She also contends that market segmentation is an important element in driving relatability, with vloggers often defining their brand equities into different target audience categories such as lifestyle, food, humor/comedy, mommy, song covers, dance, game streaming, tutorials, unboxing, etc. Aside from driving relatability, market segmentation is also strategic for a vlogger in terms of clearly defining an audience base with a demographic profile that corresponds to the target markets of specific brands (e.g., young mothers, millennial professionals, middle-aged men, etc.). Moreover, P. Ng maintains that although vlog content is generally presented as unfiltered or “real-life,” they are nonetheless mediated, and most serious vloggers are cautious in editing out any potentially offensive, politically incorrect, or politically charged content because of significant commercial and personal risks such as getting flak from netizens, being attacked by so-called cancel culture, losing followers, being demonetized by YouTube, and getting blacklisted from corporate brand endorsements on the grounds of brand safety concerns.

The Muted Voice of the OG Filipino Vlogger

The recent phenomenon in the Philippines of marketing-oriented and commercially driven social media influencing and YouTube vlogging of supposedly “real-life” content is described by Jeremy Shtern, Stephanie Hill, & Daphne Chan (2019) in terms of audience commodification and performative authenticity, in a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with 20 vloggers, influencers, and social media strategists based in the Philippines. Because YouTube vloggers are at least in part commercially motivated, and the extent of commercial gain is directly determined by the size of their audience or following and the quantity of their engagements (reactions and comments), vloggers tend to essentially commodify their audiences. According to Shtern, Hill, & Chan, this audience commodification impact the strategic relational work of vloggers with their audiences, in the sense that vloggers are driven to produce content that would be more relatable to as wide an audience as possible, although such content are often portrayed as authentic to the creators

themselves. They also assert that this strategic relational work entails the intentional creation of parasocial relationships with audiences which cover affective and emotional dimensions of connection such as personas, places, and ways of speaking. Thus, in a sense, such a presentation of authenticity is performative, grounded on the recognition of vloggers that the incorporation of content that represent the social reality of their audiences is more important in terms of ensuring their commercial success, instead of presenting personal authenticity (Shtern, Hill, & Chan, 2019).

However, there are also prominent Filipino vloggers who have started vlogging substantially in YouTube several years before the rise of commercial vlogging around four years ago (P. Ng, personal communication, November 20, 2020). Such vloggers can be said to represent the voice of the original (or more colloquially “OG,” literally meaning “original gangster”) Filipino vloggers. Although many OG Filipino vloggers have also achieved commercial success coinciding with the rise of social media marketing, and thus can be suggested to also (at least recently) ascribe subjective meanings to the communicative action of vlogging related to audience commodification and performative authenticity, their rich experience in and engagement with vlogging for several years prior can also potentially provide deeper insights on the meaning behind vlogging.

As of this writing, there are no significant past studies that are directly concerned with the OG Filipino vlogger voice, and the current study is likely the first one to present an analysis on this topic. Some past studies on vlogging in or related to the Philippines have focused for example on the content and narrative analysis of travel vlogs to analyze how they create a destination image (Peralta, 2019), on the analysis of a series of vlogs on HIV and AIDS awareness especially for deaf LGBT Filipinos toward an exploration of deaf queer advocacy and cultures (David & Cruz, 2018), and in the comparative textual analysis of vlogs to inquire on the sort of Filipino identity constructed (Fuerte, 2017). This suggests that the OG Filipino vlogger voice is muted in current communication scholarship on vlogging both in the Philippines and elsewhere.

Thus, this study aims for the OG Filipino vlogger voice to get heard. The notion of voice referred to here is in line with Linda Putnam’s (2001) conception of voice as a “stance or a position from which to speak” (p. 41), consistent with ideas from feminist literature and critical theory. Following this construction, focusing on a muted voice in a communication study thus calls attention “to unique perspectives that are often ignored, silenced, or misunderstood” (p. 41). The OG Filipino vlogger voice brings a viewpoint on the contextual meaning behind the communicative act of vlogging that is situated before (both in the senses of temporally prior and conceptually

deeper) its current prevalent associations as a lucrative opportunity to become a wealthy celebrity through commercialization via advertising monetization and brand endorsements. This voice will contribute in creating knowledge on the contextual explanation of how vlogging is meaningfully constituted in ways apart from being yet another shortcut to become rich(er) and (more) famous.

The subject or participant of this study is Lincoln Velasquez, more popularly known as Cong TV (with his YouTube channel having the same name) or simply Cong. He started YouTube vlogging in 2008 (almost 12 years ago), went full-time in 2015, and started earning from monetization only in 2017 (L. Velasquez, personal communication, November 14, 2020). His vlogs are mainly in the humor/comedy category, starting out with parodies and sketches, then later gaining a substantial following with his *USAPANG...and 10 UTOS* series. Currently, most of his vlogs are created with Team Payaman, a team of vloggers and content creators which he leads, and which includes his partner, family members, and friends. Cong has also ventured into music (through his band COLN, for which he has produced a number of music videos) and business (through his clothing and merchandise line) (P. Ng, personal communication, November 20, 2020; "Cong TV," 2020). The Cong TV channel on YouTube to date has more than 7.2 million subscribers and has received more than 650 million views and is ranked 14th in terms of number of subscribers in a list that already includes the channels of institutional or organizational entities such as ABS-CBN, GMA, and Wish 107.5 ("Top 250 YouTubers," 2020). From the same source, considering only the channels attributed to individuals or couples (a list which already includes pre-digital celebrities), Cong TV is ranked 8th in the Philippines. In this study, Cong TV represents the OG Filipino vlogger voice.

A Phenomenological Study of the OG Filipino Vlogger Experience

As already alluded to earlier, this study is a qualitative research on the communicative action of vlogging and focuses on the OG Filipino vlogger voice. The purpose of qualitative communication research is to understand the meaning behind the communicative action, and the sort of knowledge it provides is the contextual explanation of this meaning (Saludadez, 2020). There are different traditions of qualitative research, which have the same purpose of understanding meaning but which differ in how or where they locate meaning. This study is in line with the phenomenological tradition, which is concerned with understanding the meaning in terms of the essence of experience. Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor (2011) describe that the primary scientific problem of the phenomenological tradition (particularly

based on Edmund Husserl's phenomenology) is "how things get to be that way: how the life world acquires its natural quality" (p. 37). "Life world" in this sense refers to the "unique world of being for all humans" (p. 37). This life world consists of objects of perception that may appear as transient and arbitrary and are thus usually taken for granted. However, this life world is also experienced by social actors as in a sense objective, timeless, and inevitable (i.e., with "the natural attitude") and in doing so "create meaningful order by standardizing, and abstracting from, the unique specifics of their recurring situations" (p. 37). In line with this, the research question that this study aims to answer is: what or how is it like to be an OG Filipino YouTube vlogger?

In the phenomenological tradition following Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (as cited in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011), the method employed to address the research problem of understanding the meaning in terms of the essence of experience is called "transcendental reduction," which entails the reduction of a communicative phenomenon (in this case, vlogging) to the transcendental elements that meaningfully constitute it. This is done through the "bracketing" of structures and appearances of the life world, so that otherwise common or normal objects of perception are revealed in their meaningful constitution and are thus understood. "Bracketing" can be characterized as the suspension of judgement regarding "things-in-themselves," and as the analysis of the intentional and conscious subjective experience. It can also be described as the act of "unpacking" a phenomenon (i.e., examining and analyzing the intentionality and consciousness in the experience of the subject until the essential meaning is exposed) (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

The "bracketing" employed in this study is an in-depth interview with Cong TV which intends "to make strange what otherwise seems normal" in order to "understand how common objects of perception are meaningfully constituted" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 37). Specifically, in this study, the intent of the interview is to understand the meaning behind the communicative action of YouTube vlogging by capturing the essence of experience from the perspective of the OG Filipino vlogger voice. Thus, the interview format allowed for Cong TV to tell the story of his rich experience and simply raised the general questions of "what is vlogging to you?" and "what is in vlogging that explains your engagement in it?" as starting points. Some examples of specific vlogs from the Cong TV YouTube channel were also mentioned during the interview to encourage further and deeper storytelling. Follow-up questions were also asked only to better understand Cong TV's responses. Due to the limitations brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the interview was conducted virtually via Zoom,

was recorded with Cong TV's consent, and was subsequently transcribed. The interview was conducted in Taglish and an observer was also included with the intent to make Cong TV more comfortable in telling his story.

What Is Vlogging to the OG Filipino Vlogger?

The data obtained from the transcription of the interview (L. Velasquez, personal communication, November 14, 2020) was analyzed in line with the method of coding, categorizing, and interpreting as described by Lindlof and Taylor (2011). Certain codes were identified in the verbatims and these were taken as chunks of meaning, which were subsequently categorized into affinity groups. The categories of empirical verbatims were then interpreted into abstract or conceptual sub-themes that provide contextual insights on what is vlogging to Cong TV and what is in vlogging that explains his engagement in it. There were 13 sub-themes that were identified.

Sub-theme 1: Home collaborative work. Vlogging is a gainful collaborative activity mostly done at home, with family, friends, and other people who are close to him. As Cong TV (2020) expressed, in describing some of the collective aspects of vlogging which he engages in:

Isang bagay lang siya na parang nae-enjoy ko gawin kasama yung mga kaibigan ko. (p. 1)

[It's just one thing that I seem to enjoy doing with my friends.]

...pagdating sa post-edit nagde-decide kami na ah, alisin natin yan, masyadong dark, like hindi siya ano, pag lumabas sa tao yan, napanood nila, kumbaga mas marami yung hindi nila magugustuhan talaga yan. (p. 5)

[...when it reaches post-edit, we decide to remove some humor that is too dark, as we think that if it gets released and people watch it, more people will not like it.]

...sinama ko yung mga kaibigan ko.... Kumbaga pag may nangyayaring maganda sa 'yo, sino ba yung gusto mong kasama, di ba? Siyempre, unang-una yung pamilya mo, mga taong nakapaligid sa 'yo, yung mga taong sumuporta sa 'yo. Eh yung mga magulang mo, siyempre, lahat sila. Hanggang pwede kang mandamay, idamay mo. (p. 3)

[I pulled in my friends... Like when something good happens to you, who would you like to take with you? Of course, first

your family, the people around you, and the people who support you. Your parents, of course, all of them. As much as you can share, share it.]

This sub-theme can be related to Karen Patel's (2017) analysis of social media interactions of cultural workers which showed strong evidences of collaboration. Specifically, in the context of YouTube vlogging, collaborations among content creators are a common practice and strategy to further engage audiences. In Cong TV's case, instead of other vloggers, his preferred collaborators are his family members, friends, and other people close to him (P. Ng, personal communication, November 20, 2020).

Sub-theme 2: Conversation with virtual friends. In a sense, vlogging is just like conversing with numerous friends in the virtual world. Such conversations, like normal face-to-face talks with friends, are humorous, relatable, comfortable, and may sometimes include profanities. However, such conversations are also sensitive to certain taboos that may be offensive or hurtful. As Cong TV (2020) said, in characterizing the content of the videos he uploads in his YouTube channel:

...tayo buong buhay natin TV, nasanay tayo sa filter, okay. So for the first time in their entire life, nakakita sila ng, pwede pala yun, pwede pala yung ganitong klaseng. Pwede pala yung nagmumura...kasi yun yung totoong buhay eh. (p. 5)

[...our whole lives we only knew TV, we were used to filtered content. So when people saw my vlogs, it was the first time they saw unfiltered content and realized what's possible, even explicit profanities...because this is real life.]

...kelangan mo lang din maging observant.... Kung anong bagay na pwede mong sabihin at hindi pwedeng sabihin. Kasi ngayon nga meron nang parang tinatawag na cancel culture.... Kaya kami dito, bago kami maglabas ng video vini-viewing naming...maging sobrang maingat kayo sa salitang babitawan niyo sa internet. (p. 5)

[...you just need to be observant.... On things you can and cannot say. Because we now have so-called cancel culture.... So here, we preview a video before releasing it...be very careful on the words you say in the internet.]

May mga bagay kasi na hindi ka pwedeng i-joke dibacancer.... But you can, pwede kang gumawa ng joke about

death, bakit? Kasi lahat yun, nangyayari satin lahat yun, tama? (pp. 5-6)

[There are things you cannot joke about, like cancer.... But you can make jokes about death, why? Because that eventually happens to everyone, right?]

...maliban sa mura, kasi lahat naman nagmumura. (p. 6)

[...except for swear words, because everyone says them.]

This sub-theme suggests a friendship-like relational dynamic between YouTube vloggers and their audiences, similar to what Silke Jandl (2018) described from her content analysis of teenager-oriented vlogs. On one hand, YouTube vloggers create intimacy through content that feature their personal lives, and in effect invite their audiences into their “private – although consciously and heavily coded, as well as presentational – space” (Jandl, 2018, p. 16). On the other hand, YouTube vlogs are also consumed primarily in the viewers’ bedroom, which is also their most private space. This two-way virtual intimacy characterizes the interaction in vlogging, and thus fosters a friendship-like relation.

Sub-theme 3: Instant entertainment production. Vlogging is a way to instantly produce content to entertain audiences. As Cong TV (2020) articulated, in talking about what gives him the most satisfaction about vlogging:

Sana lang, alam mo yun, masaya pa rin sila pag pinapanood ako. Kasi nakakapagpasaya na sa akin pag nag-upload ako eh. Hindi na yung perang kinikita.... (p. 7)

[I just hope that, you know, watching me still brings joy. Because now what makes me happy is every time I upload. Not anymore the money I earn....]

...kapag alam kong sobrang tuwang-tuwa sila dun sa latest video na nilabas namin or dun ako pinakasobrang saya.... Kasi may real-time feedback kang makukuha eh, di ba may comments section na tinatawag...andaming likes, andaming ano, kumbaga masaya, yun yung masaya sa 'kin. Yun yung parang mission accomplished na naman ako.... (p. 8)

[...when I see that people are very happy with the latest video we released...because you get real-time feedback in

the comments section...lots of likes, that's what makes me happy. It's like I've accomplished a mission again....]

The instant production of online entertainment, as alluded to in this sub-theme, is characteristic of what Thomas Poell et al. (2017) calls the platformization of cultural production. Platformization is essentially the reorientation of the production and distribution strategies of cultural commodities (e.g., video, music, games, applications, news, and fashion) around online platforms such as YouTube (in the case of videos). Through platformization, cultural commodities such as videos are produced and distributed, and also consumed by demand, instantaneously, and such dynamics likewise render cultural objects as volatile and contingent—volatile in the sense that massive waves of content unpredictably evolve and change constantly to compete for audience attention, and contingent in the sense that their production, distribution, and consumption become dependent and conditional on the structural elements (e.g., hardware and software infrastructure, meta-algorithms, etc.) of the online platform.

Sub-theme 4: Remote public service. In a sense, vlogging is public service from a distance, in the form not only of providing concrete assistance to those in need, but also of significantly influencing, inspiring, and impacting others. As Cong TV (2020) stated, in stories on how he thinks he has helped others through vlogging:

...tina-try ko rin iboka sa mga tao yung mindset na okay din, ganito rin yung gawin niyo, maghilahan kayo pataas, try niyo abutin kung ano yung trip niyo sa buhay. (p. 3)

[...I also try to preach in my videos the mindset of pulling each other up and trying to enable each other to achieve your dreams in life.]

Madaling sumaklolo dun sa ibang nangangailangan, sa mga kaibigan mo. (p. 3)

[It becomes very easy to help out those in need, especially your friends.]

Kasi meron akong mga nareceive na message na, "salamat, Kuya Cong, dahil sa 'yo graduate na ako, salamat, Kuya Cong, dahil sa 'yo tinapos ko, dahil sinabi mo, dahil sa ganitong klaseng mindset na binigay mo sa 'min. Salamat, Kuya Cong, kasi tumuloy ako sa pag-aaral, salamat at nakapasa ako sa board kasi nagpapaalis sa stress ko ay ikaw,

dahil pinapanood kita tuwing ganito." Different kind of messages from different group of people from all walks of life, may iba-ibang pinagdadaanan...hindi ko alam na ganun na pala yung epekto ko sa kanila, di ba just by simply doing videos nang nasa bahay tapos posting it online... (p. 3)

[Because I receive messages such as, 'thank you, Kuya Cong, I have finished school because of the mindset you taught, thank you, Kuya Cong, because watching your videos relieves my stress and helped me pass the board exams.' Different kinds of messages from different groups of people from all walks of life, who are going through different struggles... you never know that you have made such an impact on them, just by simply creating videos at home and posting them online...]

This sub-theme concurs with the analyses and documentations of past studies on how vlogging is employed to remotely provide social support to others, for instance to people who experience marginalization such as transgenders (Feger, 2019), people with severe mental illnesses (SMIs) (Sangeorzan et al., 2019), and African American women wearing natural hair (Ellington, 2014), and to young people seeking a community to collectively advocate for social change (Raby et al., 2018).

Sub-theme 5: Online learning process. Vlogging is an online venue and process for learning skills such as video production, brand building, and continuous improvement. As Cong TV (2020) voiced, in reminiscing on how he started vlogging and on how he has learned from the vloggers he looks up to:

...bago ako naging YouTuber, sobrang hilig kong manood ng YouTube videos, so napakarami kong pinapanood na YouTubers way back 2007. Simulan mo na kina Moymoy Palaboy sa mga Pilipino, sina Kuya Jobert. Sa international si nigahiga kung tawagin or si Ryan Higa. Tapos yun sila yung mga una kong pinapanood, sa kanila ko nakita. And then siyempre wala naman akong gamit, bata pa 'ko, so kung ano lang yung available na meron ako noon is parang digicam na maliit. So tinry kong mag shoot ng video nung 2008. Gumawa rin ng video, siyempre na-inspire ka lang din. (p. 2)

[...before I was a YouTuber, I enjoyed watching a lot of YouTube videos, and I was a big fan of YouTubers as early as 2007. Both Filipino (Moymoy Palaboy, Kuya Jobert) and international (nigahiga or Ryan Higa) pioneers. They were the ones I watched first, and from them I saw it first. Of course, I did not have any equipment then as I was still young, so I only used whatever was available, it was just a small digicam. So I tried shooting videos in 2008. I also created my own videos, of course I was just inspired.]

...nung nagsisimula ako, nandun yung struggle, hindi mo talaga alam kung ano yung identity mo as a YouTuber, kasi yun yung mga nags-struggle pa eh. Like ano ba talaga yung gagawin ko, ano ba yung magandang makita, ano ba yung nakakatawa. (p. 2)

[...when I was starting out, the struggle was there, you have not yet figured out your identity as a YouTuber, because those were times of struggle. Like what should I really do, what content would be good to watch, what would be funny.]

I also try to learn from the mistakes of the others. May mga tao akong tinitingala na nagkakamali din silang mga YouTuber... (p. 10-11)

[I also try to learn from the mistakes of the others. There are YouTubers I look up to who also made mistakes...]

Aside from learning reflexively and through vlogger exemplars, another more direct learning process in YouTube vlogging is in building “meta” strategies to leverage YouTube’s algorithm in order to drive and sustain channel growth and success, in terms of gaining subscribers, views, and engagements (L. Velasquez, personal communication, November 14, 2020). One example of such learning process in building “meta” strategies is how vloggers adopt “vlogger parlance,” to deliberately include in their speech keywords that can be detected by YouTube’s autogenerated textual closed captions (CC) algorithm. When more relevant keywords are captured by YouTube’s CC algorithm, it would correspondingly be more likely for the vlog to appear in searches and suggested videos lists. This consequently results in greater visibility and viewership potential (Bishop, 2018).

Sub-theme 6: Social research work. Vlogging provides new insights and knowledge on social phenomena such as humor and collective habits. As Cong TV (2020) has said, in pointing out how his personal curiosity has been integrated into his vlogs:

...feeling ko nakakatawa ako kahit hindi naman talaga. (p. 11)

[...I feel that I'm funny, even though I'm really not.]

So maraming tao rin yung makakarelate, aware sila na nangyayari yung isang bagay na yun, pero hindi nila napapansin. Kumbaga parang subconscious aware lang, hindi yung fully aware. (p. 4)

[So many people will be able to relate, because although they may be subconsciously aware, they don't usually take full notice of such things.]

This sub-theme can be related to Maria Aspinen's (2019) discussion on how vlogging is "making mundane magical" (p. 1). Aspinen advances that while it is evident that vloggers influence their followers, conversely followers can also influence and inspire vloggers. Through interactions with their followers, vloggers get inspiration for content material that feature commonplace life worlds which are integrated into their vlogs together with their own creative views and insights. Thus, in a sense, vlogging has the potential "to make strange what otherwise seems normal" (p. 37), which is one articulation of the intent of phenomenological qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Sub-theme 7: Investment for future. Like economic investments, vlogging involves the outlay of capital (in this case, of passion and effort) and begs some amount of belief, faith, and hope that the capital will grow in time. As Cong TV (2020) expressed, in reflecting on what kept him motivated during the first several years of vlogging when he was not earning from it yet:

Wala munang pera...nung panahon namin walang ganun, nung nagsisimula ako. (p. 1)

[During our time there was no money yet, when I was starting out.]

...nung panahon na yun, I was hoping na sana merong kakaiba. Kasi wala pa naman talagang kumikita ng.... Ngayon mga YouTubers kumikita ng milyon, sobra-sobra,

milyon-milyon, pero nung time na yun wala naman akong nakikitang parang konkretong parang Pinoy na ito kumikita ito ng milyon, wala, walang ganun. I mean wala talaga, wala. So iniisip kong pera na kaya nitong baguhin ang buhay ko pero hindi ko alam in what way or paano, umaasa lang ako na sana meron nung time na yun. (p. 2)

[...during that time, I was hoping for something different. Although no one was earning from YouTube yet.... Now, YouTubers earn millions, lots of money, but during that time I did not see concretely any Filipino who was earning substantially, no one really. So, in my mind I thought earning money from YouTube could change my life, but I did not know yet in what way, but I was hopeful.]

...paano ako aasenso. And yung vlogging isang nakikita kong parang tingin kong, nung time na yun, although walang pera, pero tingin ko feeling ko, ito yun. (p. 2)

[...how can I move up in life. And I somewhat saw that vlogging could be the way, although I wasn't earning yet during that time, but I felt like this could be it.]

I think law of attraction is regalo sa 'tin ni Lord. Mas malapit siya sa salitang faith, gaano ba kalakas yung pananalig mo. (p. 7)

[I think the law of attraction is a gift from God. It's related to faith, on how strong your faith is.]

...kung pera habol ko malamang sumuko na ako...naniwala lang ako dun sa ginagawa ko, dun sa bagay na gusto kong gawin.... (p. 8)

[...if money was my only motivation, likely I would have given up...but I simply believed in what I was doing, on what I wanted to do....]

This sub-theme can be related to Brooke Erin Duffy's (2015) idea of online content creation as "aspirational labor," or in other words as labor grounded on aspiration, which is work that entails a pulled forward investment of emotions, time, effort, and perhaps even economic resources with the hope of eventually gaining rewards (maybe in the form of a well-compensated career) in the future.

Sub-theme 8: New game-changing career option. Vlogging is an alternative career that brings the promise of potential accelerated progression, similar to networking or multi-level marketing. As Cong TV (2020) said, in recalling how his past experiences in networking have impacted his vlogging:

...fini-figure out mo sa sarili mo kung paano ka makakaalis ditto sa rat race kung tawagin.... Kasi I always wanted na umasenso eh...nag networking ako before, so meron akong mga catchphrase na pawer, payaman, sa networking ko nakuha, kaya naming tinatawag na Team Payaman. Kasi ako yung tao na naghahanap lagi ng shortcut sa buhay.... (p. 2)

[...figuring out how you can get out of the so-called rat race.... Because I always wanted to move upwards.... I did networking before, and from there I got the catchphrases I use in my vlogs like pawer and payaman, and that's why my team is called Team Payaman. Because I am the type of person who's always looking for a shortcut in life....]

...hindi po ako kumita sa networking, pero mas malaki pa rin yung nakuha ko. Kasi meron akong wisdom, knowledge na nakuhana hindi ko matatagpuan sa kahit anong eskwelahan nung time na yun. (p. 7)

[...I did not make any money in networking, but I got something greater out of it. Because I got wisdom, knowledge that I could not have found in any school during that time.]

This sub-theme's included notion of vlogging as a career option is in line with the characterization of Daniel Ashton and Karen Patel (2018) of vlogging as a legitimate and more and more popular, normalized, and visible form of cultural work. Part of what demonstrates the legitimacy of vlogging as a career, Ashton & Patel argue, is the often underappreciated level of expertise required to become a successful vlogger. Some of the salient skills that a serious vlogger needs to master include audience engagement, fans interaction and collaboration, and authenticity staging.

Sub-theme 9: Alternative venue to audition. In a sense, vlogging is another way of auditioning for opportunities for media stardom, in the same way that aspiring actors and celebrities audition for character roles in movies, television, and reality shows (e.g., *Pinoy Big Brother*). As Cong TV (2020) articulated, in relating the pleasure of seeing himself on video:

...iba lang yung pakiramdam na nakikita mo yung sarili mo sa video. Kasi lahat naman tayo gusto natin maging artista, di ba? Gusto natin Makita natin sarili sa screen, pero hindi lahat napagbibigyan nang ganun. (p. 1)

[...it's a unique feeling to see yourself on video. All of us want to become movie stars, right? We want to see ourselves on screen, but not everyone is given that chance.]

Siguro yungs umikat, gusto ko yun, nung time na nagsisimula...di mo na kelangang dumaan sa TV eh, like ito na yung platform eh. (p. 1)

[Perhaps to become famous, I wanted that, even when I was still starting out...you don't need to be on TV, because this is already the platform.]

In line with this sub-theme, Elliot Panek (2007) posits that aside from entertaining the audience, it seems that the other major purpose of an online video is to serve as an audition for opportunities in film and television, to be viewed by media executives or agents. This insight came from Panek's exploration of the careers of online filmmakers, during a time when online video creation was still in its early stages, only a year before Cong TV started uploading vlogs to his YouTube channel.

Sub-theme 10: Creative experimentation. YouTube vlogging creates opportunities to pursue other creative ventures. As Cong TV (2020) stated, in sharing why he has also expanded into other endeavors such as music and business:

...sikat ka na eh.... So try mo siya i-convert pa sa iba. Like ako, mahilig ako sa music, so naggitarra ako, ba't di ko i-try, subok lang.... (p. 3)

[...you're already famous.... So try to expand to other opportunities. Since I like music and I play the guitar, why not try it out....]

Maximize your, try natin ikutin lahat, suyurin natin yun, kung ano yung pwede nating gawin. Kasi, ayun minsan lang ako mabuhay eh, subukan natin lahat. (p. 10)

[Maximize the things you try, the things you can do. Because I only live once, at least I've tried everything.]

The multiple mentions in the interview extracts of the desire to try out as many creative endeavors as possible essentially express the spirit of creative experimentation. In an interpretive phenomenological analysis of YouTube content creators, Josephine Foster (2014) identified as a main theme the contextual explanation of vlogging as creative medium and outlet. This sub-theme takes this further (or perhaps deeper) beyond the immediate creative pursuit of vlogging itself, to include the possibility of experimenting with other creative endeavors.

Sub-theme 11: Free platform for expression. Cong TV's YouTube vlog allows him to express himself freely in his own terms without limitations. As Cong TV (2020) voiced, in describing the autonomy that vlogging provides:

I make my own videos, my own rules, sa sarili kong space.
And then gagawin ko lahat yun, walang limits, walang MTRCB....(p. 1)

[I make my own videos, my own rules, in my own space.
And I can do all that without limits, without MTRCB...."]

Ay pwede pala yun.... Yun nga kasi walang rules eh,
president ng Pilipinas, kahit presidente ng Amerika, walang kapangyarihan over the internet. (p. 5)

[Everything's possible...because there are no rules, even
the Philippine or US president don't have power over the
internet.]

This sub-theme is consistent with current common perceptions on the inclusiveness and accessibility of internet platforms as modes of expression, as well as on the critical analysis of Stuart Cunningham and David Craig (2018) from which they argue that online entertainment (which includes YouTube vlogging) challenges prior notions of media globalization. They assert that platforms like YouTube differ significantly from traditional forms of global media such as television broadcasting and film which are often subject to hegemony and content control (e.g., of national regulatory regimes). Instead, online entertainment platforms such as YouTube drive facilitation of content and promote significantly greater diversity of content, creator, and culture and language representation. Hence, they describe online entertainment as a "proto-media industry that represents nontraditional media ownership, disruptive platforms, and unique content innovation" (p. 5409).

Sub-theme 12: Artistic competition. Through vlogging, Cong TV is able to engage in projects that elevate the standards of Filipino artistry. As Cong TV (2020) has spoken, in talking about a music video he produced for his band COLN, wherein he invested in Hollywood-quality production tools and resources:

Nafru-frustrate ako sa quality nila.... Pera-pera na lang ba talaga ang labanan. Dun sa video na yun wala kaming kinita roon, nilabas naming lahat...kasi gusto kong mag set ng example na kung gagawin niyo, gawin niyo ang pinaka the best. (p. 9)

[I got frustrated with the quality of their work.... Do they only care about money. In that video we did not make any money, it was all expenses...because I wanted to set an example that if you do something, do it with the best quality.]

...gusto kong i-improve sa audience, na pag may gumawa ng isang ganito mag all out kayo, mag all out din kayo sa support para maulit. (p. 9)

[...it was also a call to action to the audience, that if you see quality content, give your all-out support also so more of such will come.]

Gusto ko kasi parang Hollywood. Hindi ko alam kung na-achieve naming diyan. Pero parang, nagagawa nila, pero bakit hindi natin gawin. Isang malaking question sa 'kin talaga kung ba't di nagagawa dito? (p. 9)

[I want to produce something that's Hollywood-quality. I don't know if we achieved that there. But it's like, they are able to do it, but why don't we do it also? It's really a big question to me why can't we do it here?]

In connection to the notion of competition for the purpose of elevating artistic standards, Daniel Sanchez (2020) describes how Casey Neistat elevated the standards of vlogging in terms of discipline and excellence in 2015 when he started uploading YouTube videos (for 534 consecutive days) with much higher cinematographic, storytelling, and editing quality compared to the mostly raw and point-and-shoot vlogs that were previously prevalent. In effect, Neistat raised the bar for vloggers to produce high quality content which was critical in growing viewership toward the massive

popularity that YouTube vlogs receive today. In a similar fashion, this sub-theme suggests Cong TV's aspiration to elevate filmmaking standards in the Philippines through the opportunities that vlogging has opened for him.

Sub-theme 13: Autobiographical documentation. Vlogging is like keeping a video diary that documents history and solidifies one's personal impact that can be passed on to future generations. As Cong TV (2020) expressed, in sharing what else he aspires for after all the success he has achieved:

Kung ano yung pwedeng iwan ko hangga't buhay ako.
Like si Dolphy, iniwan ni Dolphy, hari ng komedy, diba.
May legacy.... Saka ang YouTube para siyang diary eh, like
imagine mo may YouTube 200 years from now, kilala ako ng
mga apo ko, apo ng apo ng apo ko.... (p. 10)

[What can I leave behind while I'm still alive? Like how Dolphy had his legacy of being the king of comedy.... And YouTube is like a diary, like imagine if YouTube is still around in 200 years, my grandchildren and their grandchildren will still know me...]

This sub-theme is consistent with the connection that Yasmin Ibrahim (2020) makes between the diary and the vlog as two points in a temporal continuum, from the early industrial period to the current post-digital era, both of which are cultural resources or technologies that can be utilized to account for the everyday dimension of the self. The construction and governance of the self, which both the diary and the vlog records, can be a preface to the self's meaning-making in relation to the broader world, including the social and economic forces at play. Following Raymond Williams's idea of cultural materialism (as cited in Ibrahim, 2020), Ibrahim asserts that both the diary and the vlog mediate, albeit in mechanistically different ways, the construction of the life world between the self's agency and the outside world's (and its material and non-material constitutions') abstractions.

Vlogging as Access to Possibilities

After identifying the sub-themes, further analysis was done to conceptually connect the sub-themes. Ultimately, one grand theme was surfaced, which corresponds to a deeper understanding of the meaning behind the communicative action of vlogging located in the essence of experience of the OG Filipino vlogger voice. This grand theme is that of vlogging as access to possibilities.

Several constitutive concepts in the sub-themes are connected to the idea of access, or more precisely the idea of making accessible what is previously inaccessible. These constitutive concepts are the notions of home, virtual, instant, remote, online, new, alternative, and free. All of the sub-themes are also connected to the general idea of possibility, and each sub-theme to one or more among these particular possibilities—the possibilities of collective creativity, interpersonal connection, meaningful impact to others, new skill mastery, new knowledge or insight, significant financial gain, career breakthrough, fame, creative innovation, freedom, and legacy. Figure 1 shows the details of these conceptual connections that surfaces the grand theme.

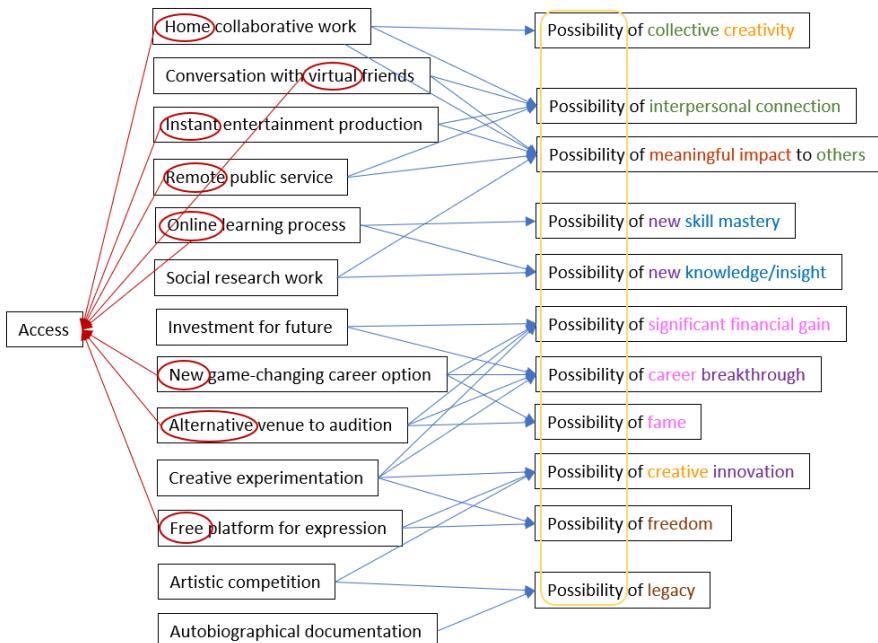


Figure 1. Conceptual Connections among the Sub-themes.

On one hand, the first key concept in the grand theme, which is the concept of access, suggests that part of the OG Filipino vlogger's essence of experience of vlogging is gaining access or, metaphorically speaking, opening doors to spaces that were inaccessible before. This concurs with how some previous studies describe the experience of YouTube vloggers. For instance, Patricia Lange (2015) describes her journey as a vlogger, which started during the early years of YouTube's popularity in 2007 to 2008, and which began primarily as a way to share aspects of her academic

anthropological research, as something that “opens new doors to digital literacies and life experiences” (p. 299). The new digital literacies she gained through YouTube enabled her to evolve raw research footage into vlogs, which eventually progressed into an ethnographic film that was screened internationally. Another example is how Ümit Kennedy (2019) characterizes the experience of Australian mummy vloggers as “opening the doors to their intimate family lives and choosing to be mothers in public” (p. 8). In a sense, this opening of doors in mummy vlogging not only gives access to the public to the private space of the mummy vloggers, but likewise the mummy vloggers gain access to intimacy with the public and to the choice of public motherhood.

On the other hand, the second key concept in the grand theme, which is the concept of possibilities, propose that in the OG Filipino vlogger’s essence of experience of vlogging, the space that is accessed is a space of possibilities. This space of possibilities is broad and expansive, and includes possibilities of connection, creativity, insight, personal progress, breakthrough or innovation, and higher aims (such as freedom and legacy). Although vlogging itself does not guarantee the obtaining of any actual utility (i.e., actual material or non-material goods) as it would depend on complex factors that involve both controllable agency as well as uncontrollable circumstances, it does open the door to the possibilities of acquiring such. Thus, to the OG Filipino vlogger, especially during the early years, vlogging can be described as some sort of act of faith and hope (L. Velasquez, personal communication, November 14, 2020).

The notion of vlogging opening doors to a space of possibilities is consistent with the insights from some previous studies, for instance in the context of possibilities for recreative texts and literary response (Jetnikoff, 2009), foreign language learning and intercultural interactions (Combe & Codreanu, 2016), and spoken language manifestations (Kurpiel, 2017). At least initially, this idea can also be linked to Amartya Sen’s capability approach to human development, which proposes an alternative account of development in terms of the actual capabilities and freedoms of people to live the lives they value and have reasons to value, instead of the conventional conceptions of development only in terms of income, which Sen deems as too narrow. In the capability approach, it is important to distinguish between functionings, which are the actual material and non-material goods (e.g., economic goods) that people get, and capabilities, which are people’s actual capacity or freedom to obtain such goods and to live the lives they value and have reasons to value. For example, suppose there are three people who are experiencing the same degree of hunger, but the first is starving due to lack of access to food, the second is on a diet,

and the third is on a hunger strike. Although, all three people have the same functionings, the second and third have greater capabilities compared to the first, who is more impoverished, because they are hungry by choice. The ideal is to expand people's capabilities, which may or may not lead to the acquisition of certain functionings. The communicational aspect is also critical to the capability approach, as the expansion of informational and communicative bases is both constitutive of and instrumental towards the broadening of capabilities (Sen, 1999). The current study is also likely the first one to significantly make the specific connection between YouTube vlogging and Sen's capability approach, although there is one study by Malik Aleem Ahmed (2011) which mentions vlogging (among other social media platforms) as a possible way to broaden the information capabilities of pre-service teachers in developing nations. From this initial conceptual linkage, perhaps it can also be tentatively proposed that the meaning behind vlogging as access to possibilities can also be expressed, in a more abstracted sense, as expansion of capabilities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This qualitative phenomenological study proposes a contextual explanation and understanding of YouTube vlogging as access to possibilities, as located in the essence of experience of the OG Filipino vlogger voice. From coding, categorizing, and interpreting the transcript of an in-depth interview with Cong TV, 13 sub-themes emerge which converge toward the overall theme that to the OG Filipino vlogger, the meaning behind the action of YouTube vlogging is that it is gaining access or opening doors to a space of possibilities. This extensive space of possibilities includes possibilities of relational connection, creativity, insight, personal progress, breakthrough or innovation, and higher aims (such as freedom and legacy). This contextual meaning can be associated to the notion of the expansion of capabilities of the OG Filipino vlogger to live the life that he or she values and have reasons to value.

In the course of undertaking this study, the researchers came to the inference that YouTube vlogging in the Philippines is a potentially rich area of inquiry for communication studies, which is yet to be substantially explored. Future research can further qualitatively study this area using other methodological traditions, or focusing on the perspective of other relevant voices, or even from a quantitative or a post-qualitative approach. Moreover, the potential of the capability approach as a theoretical framework for analyzing YouTube vlogging and other digital media can be further explored.

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