

IYKYK: Authenticity of Diasporic Media and Information From Vietnamese YouTube Influencers

SARAH NGUYỄN¹
CELESTINE LE
RACHEL E. MORAN

University Of Washington, USA
Center For an Informed Public, USA

Digital communications platforms provide a crucial understanding of how community members express authenticity, how broader audiences interpret this authenticity, and the validation or rejection of cultural authenticity. This article examines YouTube channels within the Vietnamese diaspora that cover current events, world news, and American politics, analyzing the strategies they use to build trust with audiences. Through digital ethnography and content analysis of three channels, this study reveals how consumers of Vietnamese diaspora news navigate factual accuracy and cues of authenticity within their distinct community norms to assess trustworthiness. This research highlights multifaceted dimensions of authenticity in ethnic media content and online expectations, considering cultural, social, political, economic, and technical factors that shape media consumption in one such community. It emphasizes the need for nuanced approaches to producing and communicating authentic information amidst information abundance. By bridging human-computer interaction with social and humanistic perspectives, this article advocates interdisciplinary collaborations to address digital authentication challenges, rejecting universalization approaches in favor of recognizing heterogeneity in establishing information authenticity across communities.

Keywords: problematic information, misinformation, disinformation, authenticity, Vietnamese diaspora, YouTube, immigrants, refugees

Sarah Nguyễn, snguye@uw.edu
Celestine Le, cmle@uw.edu
Rachel E. Moran, remoran@uw.edu
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"If you know, you know," or the acronym "IYKYK," is a phrase that indicates information legible to those within a niche group of people. Knowing the context of IYKYK is a marker of authenticity, trust, and belonging within said niche group, creating "a sense of exclusivity and shared knowledge" among viewers (Clausen, 2023, para. 1). For example, a viral meme on Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, "tell me you're X without saying you're X" followed by hashtags #IYKYK, #childhood, #memories exemplifies the identification and claims of experiences that build common shared knowledge within certain in-group communities. IYKYK is a subtle way to signal insider knowledge of community-specific information and ascribe authenticity to aspects of identity (Brock, 2020), such as age, generation, race, ethnicity, or class. This approach signifies that a person is only trustworthy and authentically "X" if they can decipher culturally conspicuous knowledge. However, not all trends and behaviors on social media relay authenticity through coded references to tacit knowledge.

Other viral memes have captured cultural authenticity and shared identity by visualizing or verbalizing previously unspoken shared experiences. For example, one meme on social media uses the phrase: "We're [insert identity], we [insert common cultural behavior within a specific identity of community]." These short, humorous videos demonstrate common shared experiences to define specific identities and communicate trust toward authenticity. Transnational and diasporic examples include, "Pov: you live in a Viet house, rent is free but your mental health is not" (Phở Da Culture, 2023); or "Of course I'm a viet almond mom, I'm going to complain this house is dirty even though I clean it everyday" (Tran, 2024). In contrast to IYKYK, such memes forgo subtlety and explicitly state identity authentication by naming and performing said traits. Both subtle and explicit authentication markers appear across many ethnic media channels, which serve as primary sources of culturally relevant, in-community information, whether through influencers sharing short-form memes or long-form news channels. Both of these are forms of self-produced ethnic news and are not subject to federal or journalistic fact-checking policies. This is a qualitative study on traits within long-form YouTube videos produced and published by Vietnamese and diasporic news channels.

These traits reveal and acknowledge problematic information (i.e., mis-/disinformation) or harmful trends within a particular community's intergenerational and cultural trauma. Taken together, viral trends exist as contemporary markers of performed identity, highlighting how communities find authenticity in shared, resonant behaviors depicted by content creators within that community. These videos obfuscate the facticity of information and communicate problematic information to viewers. The traits both strengthen a community's collective identity and potentially perpetuate harmful, non-factual information.

The visibility of social media and the invitation for audience engagement on these platforms raise questions about community membership, identity formation, facticity, and the potential harms of media production and consumption. If viewers cannot relate to the norms claimed in a video, can they be authentic members of that community? How are content creators validating stated norms? How can authenticity be exploited? Contestation around authenticity plays out publicly in the form of comments, engagement metrics, and resharing on social media. For example, on January 2, 2024, Instagram account @phodaculture posted a video resulting in comments that opposed stated norms in the video. Contestation emerged around

“mỹ đen”² or “đụ má” as disinformation, racist, and harmful Vietnamese terms. The video creators’ use of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam flag sparked tension in comments on the authenticity of the content creators’ *Vietnameseness*. One comment (46 likes) critiqued the use of “mỹ đen” in the video: “You gone adopt black culture items when it’s convenient but talk shit about them? We are allies in a long ass fight against racism not each other” (bamepopup, 2024). Another comment (144 likes, 21 direct replies) in the same thread reacts: “Not that flag tho! It’s a communist flag” (jttringuyen_realtor, 2024). Cultural markers of authenticity can be forms of problematic information—precisely because they are truthful statements from trusted community members.

Digital communications platforms thus provide crucial insights into how community members perform authenticity with each other, how the broader community validates or rejects cultural authenticity, and how mis-/disinformation spreads within such interactions. This article explores how YouTube channels covering current events, world news, and transnational politics reveal the uses of authenticity to gain trust among intended audiences. As a community known for YouTube playing throughout the day within Vietnamese households like background music or cable television (Johnston, 2021; Lampard, 2021), we examine Vietnamese diaspora YouTube channels as ethnic media to identify and analyze contextual factors that Vietnamese diaspora content creators leverage to share information, news, and mis-/disinformation to viewers.

Through this case study involving digital ethnography and content analysis of three YouTube channels, we learn that consumers of Vietnamese diaspora news navigate factual accuracy and cues of authenticity to assess trustworthiness. This research highlights multifaceted dimensions of authenticity in ethnic media and online expectations, considering cultural, social, political, economic, and technical factors. We suggest that given the complex nature of authenticity of online information, researchers and media producers have opportunities to incorporate cultural, social, political, economic, and technical nuances to produce and communicate authenticated information in the sea of information overload.

Extant Literature

Affect and Authenticity

Reflections on authenticity capture a historical trajectory of the term that highlights shifts in its meaning and consequences for individual self-expression and collective belonging (Taylor, 1992). Gaden & Dumitricia (2014) trace uses of the term “authenticity” from its philosophical beginnings to its current parlance in social media discourse, first exploring how “in its early form, authenticity represented an ethic for leading our lives in a way that connects us, as individuals, to the community” (para. 2). In this way, authenticity represented both a sense of self and a broader commitment to and engagement with a community.

Authenticity, in its earliest conceptualizations, is thus an affective experience rooted in emotion and feeling as both an individual lived experience and a connector between self and other. Sara Ahmed’s work on affect and how emotions impact politics and the collective retains further insight into the role and

² “Mỹ đen” is a derogatory term for “black person” in Vietnamese and “đụ má” is the English profanity “fuck.”

shifting understanding of authenticity. Affect circulates, retaining a “stickiness” that compels some, but not all, thus aligning individuals with their collectives (Ahmed, 2004). The affective dimensions of authenticity thus offer routes to understanding oneself and one’s connection with others. Marika Cifor (2016) argues that affect theory can be understood as a tool for analyzing relations between bodies and the world—“how we form, sustain and break social relations, differences and individual and collective identities” (Cifor, 2016, p. 8). Building on this, Jason Young (2021) uses Berlant’s (2011) affective framework of “cruel optimism” to discuss how “broad sociotechnical shifts have uniquely undermined affective communities in ways that lead individuals to accept and even seek out misinformation” (Young, 2021, p. 2). Young (2021) calls us to understand both the sociotechnical shifts that alter authenticity and authentic community as well as the affective dimensions of information that bind us to “fantasies of the good life that are ultimately unattainable and threatening to our wellbeing” (p. 3).

Accordingly, advancements in technologies of self-presentation and self-knowledge have shifted core understandings of authenticity. Authenticity has always been performed—something that helps explain the spread of affect. However, social media researchers exploring the rise of social media and other late-stage capitalistic communication platforms highlight changes in transparency, away from a pursuit of truthful alignment and connection towards authenticity as an object of consumption (Gaden & Dumitricia, 2014).

The shift in a digital era to *consumptive* authenticity represents an unbalancing between the Self and Other wherein performance of an “authentic” Self is geared more towards the needs of the validator rather than a reflection of inner truth as a connector to the broader community. Sarah Banet-Weiser (2021) exemplifies this tension through the intersections of authenticity, social media, and gender. Banet-Weiser (2021) argues that female Instagram influencers “are more commercially successful the more relatable, intimate, and vulnerable their self-presentation. Yet at the same time, to be ‘authentic’ for influencers also means to strictly conform to dominant white, cis-gender norms” (p. 141). In this way, authenticity—far from its radical potential to build community and equality, as envisioned by early philosophers—now serves to cement social structures of homogeneity and inequality.

Understanding such uncoupling requires navigating the affective dimensions of authenticity and their relationship to truth. If authenticity is underpinned by a sense of belonging to a community, but that feeling of membership is validated by the consumption and approval of one’s performed self by an Other, then authenticity need not require an absolute commitment to truth. Instead, it may be better understood as alignment with a truth, as defined by a consumptive Other. In late 2023, *The New Yorker* ran an article allegedly exposing Indian American Muslim comedian Hasan Minaj for fabricating stories in his stand-up specials (Malone, 2023). The journalist focused on comedic routines Minaj performed that had, at their heart, experiences of racism and/or racial microaggressions, pointing to alleged evidence of inconsistencies. In the lede to the story, the author posits—“[Minaj] often recounts harrowing experiences he’s faced as an Asian American and Muslim American. Does it matter that much of it never happened to him?” (Malone, 2023, para. 1). Minaj has since rebutted much of the article’s argument, but in his initial response to the reporter focused on what he believed was the “emotional truth” of his art. Minaj highlighted how much, if not all, comedy is built on exaggeration or creative retellings of truth and that, for him, “the emotional truth is first. The factual truth is secondary” (Malone, 2023, para. 29). Minaj’s routines spoke to lived experiences and emotions surrounding racial harm: “emotional truths” that were authentic to Minaj and to others within

his community who consumed his art. Whether or not the precise stories Minaj told were factually accurate—in that they happened exactly as told to him personally—does not diminish the felt experiences of Asian American and Muslim American communities, and his stories act as a conduit for an authentic emotional truth for members of said communities.

Migrants, Diaspora, and Assimilative Authenticity

For Vietnamese diaspora migrants, authenticity has been explored in the fields of art history (Vuong et al., 2018), identity (Barber, 2017), place making (Mazumdar, Mazumdar, Docuyan, & McLaughlin, 2000), cuisine (Avieli, 2013), travel and tourism (Gillen, 2016), and language education (Nguyen, 2022). Scholars across disciplines have identified tensions around (in)assimilation, traditions, stereotypes, and originality that influence intergenerational dynamics among Vietnamese refugees and immigrants, posing the following questions: *What does it mean to be Vietnamese? What version of Việt Nam is authentically Vietnamese?*

Place making and identity formation are key to authenticating Vietnamese-ness. Le Espiritu and Tran's (2002) seminal work on transnational identity formation posits intergenerational power relations as keys to "authentic cultural memory" (p. 391) and to authenticating membership in the Vietnamese diaspora community. Aguilar-San Juan (2009) expands upon this in Fields Corner, Boston, Massachusetts and Westminster, Orange County, California as Vietnamese American communities accredit place to be "authentically Vietnamese" differentiating from Chinese Americans. Chung, Bloemraad, and Tejada-Peña (2013) continue investigating Fields Corner in comparison to Koreatown in Los Angeles, California, positing that intergenerational definitions shape who and "what constitutes a community's 'authentic' political project" (Chung et al., 2013, p. 839). In support of critical refugee studies, Nguyen commits to Le Espiritu's postulation that Vietnamese refugees "possess and enact their *own* politics as they emerge out of the ruins of war and its aftermath" (Le Espiritu in Nguyen, 2019, pp. 232–233), which becomes apparent when globalized technology affords platforms to share information between adopted and homelands.

Cuisine and entrepreneurship are commercialized markers of Vietnamese diaspora authentication. Phillips (2009) discusses impractical expectations of consistent, authentic Vietnamese cuisine given that there are 54 different sub-ethnicities within Việt Nam itself, each with distinct regional cuisines. Thus, Western appeal to cuisine relies on domestication, exoticized stereotypes, and controlled temporalities—inauthentic Vietnamese cuisine experiences. Chan and Tran (2011) approach tradition in Vietnamese food businesses through linguistics and lexicon employed in menus and signage. Huynh (2012) argues that consumers and producers "invent Vietnamese-ness and authenticity through racialized practices [... to] feed consumers racialized expectations because their restaurants are connected to their livelihood" (p. 98).

Authenticity within travel and tourism highlights signifiers of colonial, gendered, and economic choices. Kay Hoang (2011) situates tourists' "experiences of bounded authenticity" (p. 370) among sex workers who "serve as tour guides and cultural brokers, providing men with an 'authentic' Third-World experience" (pp. 380–381). Barber (2017) and Nguyen-Akbar (2017) provide insights into the Vietnamese diaspora's return to the homeland, highlighting social class, gender, education, and language as boundaries

shaping identity formation. This body of work is instructive across interdisciplinary discourses, and there is still a scholarly gap about migrants and diaspora contending with intersections of authenticity and information communication technologies (ICT), such as social media.

Authenticity in Information-Seeking

Much extant research exploring mis-, dis-, and problematic information has assessed “authenticity” through a traditional lens of cybersecurity verification of information provenance, and verification of online actors’ identities (Shahid et al., 2022). This was driven by a desire to authenticate user accounts as representing a “real” human, as opposed to bot accounts or a person posing as someone else (Paul, Khattar, Chopra, Kumaraguru, & Gupta, 2019; Varol, Ferrara, Davis, Menczer, & Flammini, 2017).

Further research looks beyond authenticating accounts to the authentication of content itself—seeking to provide provenance of social media posts such as videos, images, and attributed quotes. Authentication, in this case, is defined as the active pursuit of informational provenance, asking where information originated, who it originated from, and how it may have been altered or remixed. Information provenance literature provides avenues for researchers and everyday users to employ social media and online resources to find the origin of information towards assessments of trustworthiness (Barbier & Liu, 2011). In archival studies of primary sources, authenticity refers to the “quality of being genuine, not a counterfeit, and free from tampering, and is typically inferred from internal and external evidence” (Society of American Archivists, n.d., para. 1). However, journalism and media studies have highlighted that assessments of authenticity are not solely cognitive processes undertaken by evaluating provenance. Waruwu, Tandoc, Duffy, Kim, & Ling (2021) argue that news authentication processes are “not as a one-off activity under the uncontested control of the individual, but as a cycle of collective authentication strategies” that rely on a combination of individual and social validation methods (2021, p. 2516). This builds upon Tandoc et al.’s (2018) conceptual framework of exploring audience acts of authentication and drawing on social cues in evaluations. Such social verification cues consist of visual popularity heuristics—like “likes” and comments on posts and news articles—in addition to interpersonal and community-level assessments. The authors argue that the “social dynamics of confirming news also become conflated with the social maintenance of the social group” (Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 2756). Information authentication, undertaken through social and interpersonal processes, requires validation from a social group determined not necessarily by informational credibility, provenance, or any other “truth” measures, but instead is granted if the information serves community benefits.

The role of community and identity in the spread of problematic information has been taken up in critical disinformation research. Kuo and Marwick (2021) advocate for critical approaches to mis-/disinformation studies that attend to issues of power, inequality, and history. In doing so, they highlight how identity, race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, and other identity cues influence “messages and strategies of disinformation producers and who mis-/disinformation resonates with” (Kuo & Marwick, 2021, p. 1). Critical disinformation studies provide a lens on affect and authenticity in relation to community membership. Information is salient to, or weaponized against, specific communities and individuals because of community membership. Linkages between personal authenticity and validation from an Other thus become routes by which misinformation can be made salient and/or disinformation is effectively targeted.

Nguyễn, Kuo, Reddi, Li, and Moran (2022) distinguish Asian American diasporic communities to document specific instances that utilize community narratives, historic trauma, and ideas of community belonging to leverage cultural and community authenticity as a means to spread misleading information.

Extant literature highlights shifts in conceptualizations of authenticity in its philosophical understandings and in practical manifestations of the value and means to “authenticate” information. Interdisciplinary insights from critical disinformation studies, refugee studies, and critical race studies foreground the need to understand cultural and community authenticity as complex objects of study. This research builds upon knowledge of what it means for an individual, or for information, to be “authentic” and *to whom*. We disentangle how such authenticity, in its intersection with community belonging and its performance within platform capitalism, relates to truthfulness.

Methodology and Analytical Approach

Data Selection

Using a digital ethnographic approach, we conducted qualitative content analysis of YouTube channels as case studies in the performance and expectations of authenticity among Vietnamese diasporic audiences. We identified influential YouTube accounts through immersion within a Facebook dataset of community posts flagged as misinformation between 2020 and 2022 (Moran, Nguyễn, & Bui, 2023), community participatory engagement, and snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, & Gedes, 2019). Some channels were crowdsourced and vetted by Viet Fact Check community members, who provided anecdotal context to YouTube accounts known as repeat spreaders of misinformation (Kennedy et al., 2022). YouTube is the site of study because of growing and continuous concerns about misinformation on Vietnamese YouTube channels (Mai & Vo, 2023; Nguyen, 2020; Nguyen & Scurato, 2021).

We tracked YouTube accounts on Junkipedia for behavioral statistics between May and September 2023 (data available on osf.io/avr92), including subscriber count, total posts, total views, and total comments. From this list of Vietnamese YouTube influencers, we identified channels with the most subscribers in comparison to total views as a signifier of being notably influential. This sample was narrowed to six accounts. *Người Việt TV* features daily news media primarily hosted by older Vietnamese individuals, with a total views-to-subscriber ratio of 8960:173. In contrast, *ĐTN - Thời Sự Biển Đông* represents an individual younger Vietnamese host, with a total views-to-subscriber ratio of 1955:267. *Tran Nhat Phong* (TNP) represents an individual elder Vietnamese host, with a total views-to-subscriber count ratio of 599:100. *Sonia Ohlala* represents an individual female Vietnamese host, with a high views-to-subscriber ratio of 4600:201. *VietCatholicNews* (VCN) represents a large faith-based institution, with a total views-to-subscriber count ratio of 4900:687. *Saigon News* represents a media outlet perspective with a total views-to-subscriber ratio of 4900:687. The first author gathered all related cross-platform online presence of each YouTube channel, such as Facebook accounts, official websites, Twitter accounts, and other related web pages. Each researcher was assigned to investigate two YouTube accounts, published videos, and a cross-platform online presence, as publicly available.

Case Study and Content Analysis

We began with a digital ethnography approach through individual deep content analysis (Tripodi, 2022) and digital behavioral data (Soldner, 2024). Each researcher considered personal individual positionalities and relationships to Vietnamese diaspora media—two of the authors identify as second-generation Vietnamese American, and the third author has familial ties in Việt Nam. Each researcher recorded memos to recall major themes and notable characteristics of the videos, descriptive text, YouTube features used, engagement statistics, comments, and other cross-platform behaviors (Lempert, 2007). We convened to discuss initial takeaways and shared our personal exposures to the channels, including input from family, friends, and community members related to each account we had individually analyzed (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, & Marcus, 2012). Drawing on data points from this first round of findings, we each revisited our assigned accounts, incorporating insights gathered from the discussion. We discussed preliminary findings with Viet Fact Check and other in-community media creators to gather their perspectives on intent, facticity, cultural authenticity, and the impact of each channel and its media. At the second discussion meeting, researchers discussed memos and findings. We allotted a final two-week period for content analysis across all accounts, incorporating shared findings before the final memo and last discussion session. These sessions occurred between August 2023 and January 2024. Borrowing from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), we met for two sessions to identify three major themes that are prevalent across all six case studies. Themes are identified as evidence of behaviors of authenticity and authentication within the spread of problematic information in the Findings section.

Findings

Findings from content analysis demonstrate that Vietnamese diaspora influencers (un)intentionally abide by a distinct set of authenticity performances, a reflection of lasting historical and political traumas and language barriers that signal community-wide authentication. Through digital ethnography and iterative discussions, we found that authenticity was performed through visual, textual, verbal, and cultural markers. We discuss recurring evidence that appeared throughout YouTube channels and auxiliary online public presence, which serve as cues to what resonates as authentically *Vietnamese-ish*. These markers of trust reflect the affinities held by members of the diaspora, regardless of the information's facticity or intent. Authenticity complicates and recontextualizes the media environment in which viewers covertly consume mis-/disinformation. We offer three major themes identifying (1) material and visual impacts of authenticity, (2) cultural and emotional resonance toward authenticity, and (3) use of language, belief or faith, and presentation of information to mark authentication for trust.

Artifices: Natural and Artifactual Symbols

YouTube's audio-visual medium offers sociotechnical affordances (i.e., technical features, cultural uses, and audience norms) for nuanced interpretations of visual imagery, audio, video effects, set/background, and material objects included in video frames. For all stakeholders—each viewing a video or a YouTube channel with diverse purposes, lived experiences, and biases—objects, styles, and content within the videos influence their likelihood of watching the footage and assessing likeness (see Malhotra,

2024; Pires, Masanet, Tomasena, & Scolari, 2022). The (un)intentional inclusion of imagery, audio, colors, objects, etc. may be used to exploit a sense of belonging to the Vietnamese diaspora.

We explore examples of potential artifices—devices or objects used to manipulate, convince, trick, or deceive—appearing throughout Vietnamese YouTube videos. Rather than attempt to identify whether these channels intentionally include specific culturally resonant characteristics, we are interested in what artifacts may do to the viewer, the platform, and the media producer themselves.

When VCN is not live streaming sermons, pre-recorded daily news and current events reveal a mixture of cross-cultural characteristics to express authenticity between Vietnamese diaspora traditions and television news channel production tropes. In Figure 1, a female VCN anchor host—with long, slightly wavy black hair, light skin, makeup—is wearing a flower-patterned áo dài (Vietnamese dress) inspired by the designs of artist Lê Phổ, which symbolizes the rejection of Western influences and the reclamation of Vietnam post-French colonial rule. This high collar and long bell sleeve style is widely accepted and popularized by the current Vietnamese government as a symbol of traditional Vietnamese culture (Duc & Bao, 2012). In contrast, the news anchor sits behind a wooden desk with a computer, notepad, and pen within reach. She foregrounds a greenscreen CGI office setting with a video screen visualizing her reporting.



Figure 1. Screenshot of a Viet Catholic News anchor facing the camera straight on, within a computer-generated imagery (CGI) office setting (VietCatholicNews, 2024).

In half-hour to hour-long videos, the news anchor speaks in a low, steady, “matter-of-factual” tone, presenting a series of events in Vietnamese only with little to no additional commentary. VCN provides consistent visual and verbal styles, mirroring Western news media channels to convey authenticity for the Vietnamese diaspora and foster propinquity.

ĐTN - Thời Sự Biển Đông, translated to “Đặng Thế Nguyên - East Sea News”, uses different characteristics to apply convincing markers toward authenticity of, a person of the global Vietnamese community and a source for “delivering reliable news[...] a trusted source of information for those interested in the maritime disputes and their geopolitical implications” (ĐTN - Thời Sự Biển Đông Youtuber overview, n.d., para. 1). ĐTN leans less on cultural signaling through visual imagery. The distinct artifacts include Vietnamese verbal communication and displays of the South Vietnam flag. In all videos, ĐTN wears pedestrian casual clothes: t-shirt, sweater, or jacket matching Western styles. His background varies—from standing outdoors with buildings and foliage resembling a small town or suburbia, to a green screen or a printed photographic backdrop of natural landscapes (i.e., forest, lake, etc.). By including outdoor environments, ĐTN signals to his audience that he is a real person, traveling around the world—from outdoor nature to residential community places, to a newsroom. ĐTN’s use of low technology background, provides intimacy, vulnerability, and relatability to community and viewers.

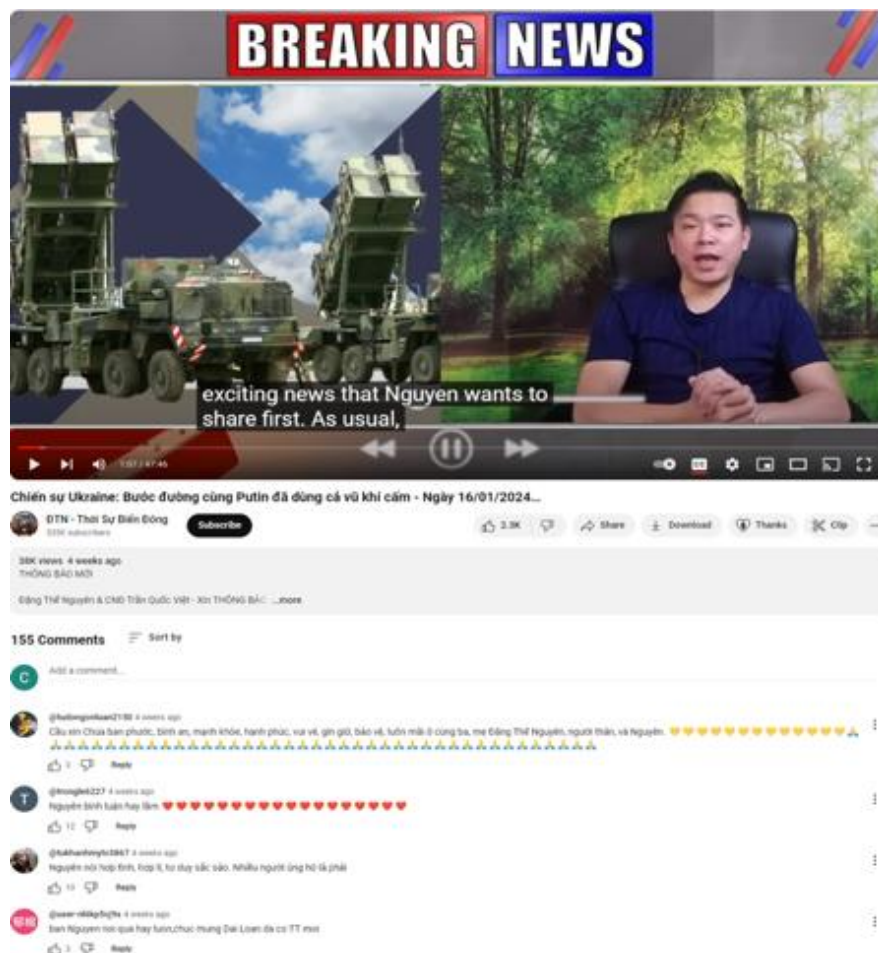


Figure 2. Screenshot of ĐTN sitting in an office chair with a greenscreen backdrop depicting a lush green forest (ĐTN, 2024a).

In Figure 2, ĐTN introduces himself and his main topics of interest, including the Ukraine-Russia conflict, Taiwan's election and its implications for China's Communist Party, and Trump's election prospects. He refers to himself in third person, communicating that "Nguyễn" intends to share "exciting news" with viewers. Proceeding comments compliment ĐTN for sharing "sharp analyses" and offer well wishes. ĐTN's self-representation in each video demonstrates notable artifices in itself. To be seen serves as a counternarrative to the silencing of Vietnamese refugees and the erasure of Southern Vietnam from mainstream histories (Le Espiritu & Tran, 2002). These gaps have historically constructed the Vietnamese diasporic identity as passive and absent from history. ĐTN's self-representation directly acknowledges the audience and self-actualizes their participation in countering invisibilizing false narratives.

ĐTN reiterates textual and verbal cues that signal filial piety to the community and viewers. In his YouTube channel and Facebook About description, he refers to phrases such as "Trọng kính, lưu ý đến Cô Chú Bác Anh Chị em và các bạn mến thương" which translates to "Respect and pay attention to our beloved Aunts, Uncles, Brothers, Sisters and friends" (ĐTN, 2024b, 0:08). ĐTN acknowledges traditional Vietnamese hierarchical relational identity to his community—using honorifics toward elders and peers is a marker of true respect in Vietnamese culture—is a simple but powerful marker of authenticity in knowing Vietnamese language and relational culture. We examine his word choice, use of honorifics throughout the videos, and descriptive texts. In Vietnamese language and intergenerational relations, honorifics are "particles[...] and verbs that express respect" signifying politeness, cultural familiarity, common ground, disarming, commitment, hesitation, sympathy, and appreciation (Nguyễn & Le Ho, 2013, p. 702). Most importantly, the use of honorifics projects a multitude of generational identities among usually faceless audience viewers. These practices are notable parasocial behavioral practices that reflect widely accepted authenticity and trust within the Vietnamese diaspora.

The last example we discuss concerning artifices of authenticity is the perspective of an elder refugee Vietnamese American media producer. TNP, unlike the previously discussed channels, communicates information in both English and Vietnamese, reflecting his hybrid identity, as symbolized by the South Vietnam and American flags hanging on a small houseplant in his background (see Figure 3). The dual representation of these flags reflects the same flags that were proudly flown by many Vietnamese Americans during the January 6, 2021 event in the U.S. Capitol—or as Viet Thanh Nguyen refers to it as "nostalgia for a lost cause" (Nguyễn, 2021, para. 1). Sometimes, TNP's background includes bamboo plants and a visible radio/podcast microphone, signaling a professional home setup. His do-it-yourself (DIY), transparent production style serves as a marker of trustworthiness, intimacy, and personal relationships.



Figure 3. Screenshot from Tran Nhat Phong's video published on December 12, 2023. He is facing the camera, sitting in a chair in what looks like a room in a home (TNP, 2023a).

TNP's representation of Self perpetuates common tropes of familial Asian or Vietnamese elder male figures. He wears casual button-up shirts in neutral tone colors. His graying short hair and singular beard chin hair follow the imagery of aging wise men. While we cannot determine his intentions or lack thereof in his personal choice of physical appearance, each element contributes to portraying an authentic Vietnamese man that immigrants may trust and relate to, regardless of information facticity.

Stories and Sentiments

Findings from Vietnamese diaspora YouTubers point toward significant tensions between affective and objective dimensions of how truth is constructed in online videos, articles, and imagery. This section discusses emergent themes across the YouTube channels and their broader online presence, offering insights into how affective knowledge of self and other is communicated between content producers and their audiences. First, we discuss affect and authenticity of VCN and how it builds images of important and truthful information reported through religious authority and culturally bound notions of Catholic identity within immigrant communities. Next, we explore the impacts of affect and authenticity expressed by TNP, a Vietnamese American refugee and individual YouTube channel producer, who shares

personal stories, stories of his direct community members, and his transformation from “American Dream” to self-described “American survival.” Finally, we offer insight into ĐTN, a Vietnamese American immigrant who self-produces content on American and global politics, in which affect intersects authenticity through diction, relationships with audience, and analyses of contemporary wars in relation to sentiments toward the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Demonstrating Emotional Truth Tied to Community Membership

Grounded in faith and morals, VCN leverages intimate, emotional ideologies by blending topics often unwelcome at the dinner table: religion and politics.



***Có ai thắc mắc Vì sao từ ngày làm
Tổng thống Hoa Kỳ anh Trump làm rất
nhiều việc cho Israel không?***

Figure 4. Text translates to “Does anyone wonder why Trump has done so much for Israel since becoming President of the United States?” (Vietcatholicnews, 2020).

Figure 4 shows the United States and Israeli flags with Trump foregrounded, accompanied by a rhetorical question about his relationship with Israel. The question implies a community-defined answer, relying—like many memes—on unspoken yet shared understandings. Subscribing to the affective politics

embedded in this meme signals community membership and belonging. Through memes, VCN repeatedly draws on collective, affective truths to reify a normative authenticity recognizable to community members.

TNP makes emotional truths salient through testimonies and critiques of the American dream. Through interviews with Vietnamese veterans and his own testimony as a first-generation refugee, TNP conjures feelings of grief and mourning that haunt Vietnamese diaspora histories, grief constituted through the loss of family, safety, health, and home in the aftermath of the American War in Việt Nam. This is perhaps the clearest instance where an influencer addresses affective investment within the diasporic community as both witness and arbiter of Vietnamese diaspora history. TNP's dual positionalities allow access to shared emotional truths of Vietnamese diaspora identity reframed under the American dream.

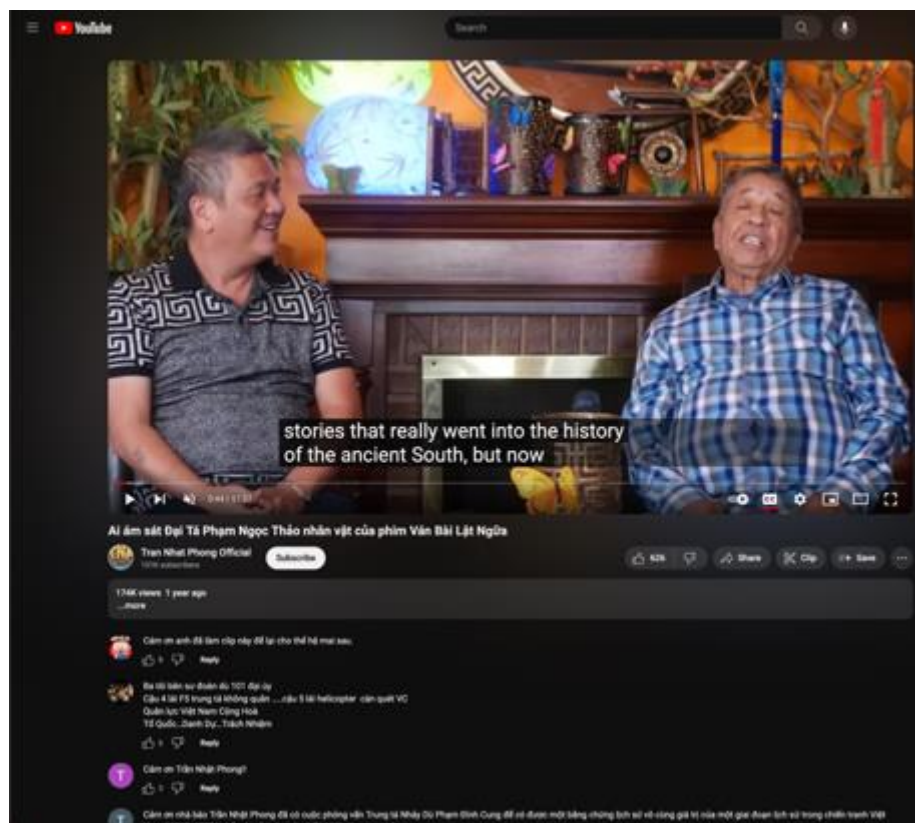


Figure 5. Screenshot of a YouTube video from Tran Nhat Phong Official as part of his series of interviews with Vietnamese refugees (TNP, 2020).

In Figure 5, TNP interviews 80-year-old veteran Lieutenant Colonel Pham Dinh Cung. Seated in front of a fireplace with bamboo plants, butterfly decors, lanterns, red tassels, a gong, and other markers of cultural artifacts. Lieutenant Colonel Pham Dinh Cung shares lived experiences with the Republic of Việt Nam military and counter-intelligence personnel. His story includes names of familiar streets, homes, and gardens. He recounts sharing coffee, rice, and fruits with government officials who promote familial

values, such as “take care of your wife, take care of your children, take care of your younger siblings” (TNP, 2020, 3:14). Viewer comments give overwhelming gratitude and praise for this documentation of “interviewing Airborne Lieutenant Colonel Pham Dinh Cung to obtain extremely valuable historical evidence of a historical period[...] to save for future Vietnamese generations” (@tonhanhanwstdc6832, 2024). Insight into primary source narratives of traumatic and traditionally unspoken events that occurred during the American war in Việt Nam offers feelings of authenticity for the Vietnamese diaspora community, paired with anti-communist sentiments or red-baiting.

ĐTN’s videos use the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia as a rhetorical theme. He typically premieres one fifty-minute video per day, naming Ukraine in the video title and including a photo of Ukrainian leader Zelenskyy or symbolic imagery of Ukraine. Despite that, ĐTN usually spends only five to ten minutes discussing Ukraine and Russia before transitioning into U.S. and global political conflicts. His framing of the conflict is distinct from American media portrayals of Ukraine as his discussion is punctuated by cultural norms of anti-communist sentiment, revealing an affective dimension that sustains emotional investment in Ukraine among the Vietnamese diaspora. By foregrounding this story as video advertisement—i.e. the thumbnail and the title despite it only being a short segment—ĐTN’s YouTube channel calls for a specific identity, grounded in anti-communism, projected as distinctly Vietnamese.

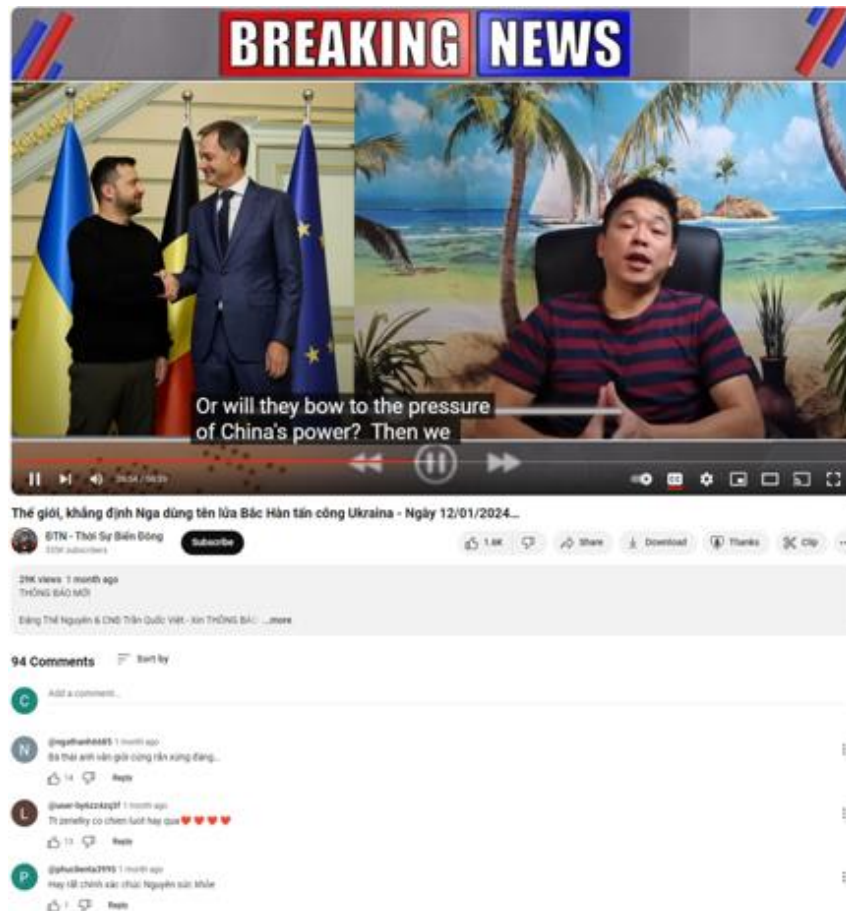


Figure 6. Screenshot of YouTube video of Đặng Thế Nguyễn in which he discusses the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia and later transitions to the topic of Taiwan-China relations (ĐTN, 2024b).

In Figure 6, ĐTN sits in front of a painted backdrop of a tropical beach split screen with a picture of Zelenskyy shaking hands with Belgium Prime Minister Alexander de Croo. He triumphantly reports Ukraine's recent victory against Russia and that they would receive U.S. aid soon, supplementing it with a sardonic description of Russia's military losses. Later in the video, he discusses ongoing political tensions between Taiwan and China, posing questions as to whether Taiwan would overcome China's "dictatorship" and pursue freedom. Between these two conflicts, he tugs at the audience's affective strings through an overarching narrative of ongoing struggles against "corrupt communist governments," conjuring memories of a Việt Nam that experienced such a struggle while resewing fear into the present.

Again, ĐTN further exploits affective strings by naming his audience as "aunts, uncles, brothers, and sisters" (ĐTN, 2024b, 00:10). This projection of identity facilitates an affective relationship between him and the audience, situating him as "family" not by blood but through shared culture and experiences.

He signals authentic membership in the diaspora, further serving emotionally compelling content to Vietnamese refugees. Emotional truths revealed in these findings reify the integral role of shared grief, loss, and disturbances in Vietnamese diaspora identity formation. Affect manifests in norms of anti-communism, American idealism, and community deference, compelling influencers to conform by expressing the emotional realities of the refugee experience—thereby shaping the truths shared within Vietnamese diaspora online communities.

Expertise and Validation

Widespread use of capitalistic communication platforms such as YouTube has been pushed by the promise of the democratization of producing and publishing video content for global access—offering unique potential for transnational and diaspora communities. Video creators publish information at will, and viewers engage with videos and comments, leading to context collapse (Costa, 2018). Markers of information originating from a certified expert have shifted from the perspectives of both the Self and the Other. YouTube video creators can produce high-quality audio-visual footage and publish information outside of non-institutional policies. Their ability to communicate long-form content across large viewer audiences brings into question the boundaries of expert and authentic reporting. We explore signals Vietnamese YouTubers embed in their videos and metadata to fulfill conscious and subconscious identifiers of authentic, expert information reporting.

Australian-based VCN offers “Catholic news, commentary, spiritual resources in Vietnamese and English” (VietCatholicNews, 2024, para. 1) and has published nearly 9,000 short- and long-form videos. With Catholicism and religion shaping ideology as a holistic way of life, VCN offers hour-long “Mass for those cannot go to church” recordings alongside four-minute chants, five-minute hymns, six-minute daily reflections, and thirty-minute reviews of “universal church news” or coverage of “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.” Produced by Vietnamese Australians, the diverse video topics and temporalities are available in Vietnamese and English languages for in-language accessibility, expertise, and trust building.

On ĐTN’s Facebook page, they identify as a “video creator” without claiming authoritative or institutional affiliations, supported by a “team” over which ĐTN retains intellectual property rights. This language signals professionalism and legalese. By referencing YouTube’s “Tube - Content ID copyright management program,” ĐTN’s videos are “scanned against a database of audio and visual content [...] submitted to YouTube by copyright owners” to “easily identify and manage their copyright-protected content on YouTube” (YouTube Help, n.d.). The technical and operational practices of ĐTN’s video policies signify that this is an “expert” channel.

ĐTN offers accessible information by sprinkling appeals to viewers, identifying them directly, and demonstrating care as important community members. There is a moral imperative incorporated into news coverage. He looks and speaks Vietnamese, so ĐTN exhibits strong morals as an authentic expert of information for the community.



Figure 7. Screenshot of ĐTN telling his audience that he will share a translation of a speech delivered by the newly elected Taiwanese President (ĐTN, 2024c).

In Figure 7, ĐTN shares news and a short clip from Taiwan’s newly elected leader Lai Ching-Te’s speech—promising his audience that he will share a translated speech in one month. He uses linguistic expertise to actualize a plan for continued engagement with viewers and sets the precedent that his language expertise will benefit the community.

TNP offers distinct characteristics to emanate an authentic news pundit for the Vietnamese diaspora. His background is simple and personable, as viewers get glimpses into his home office or living room. He claims to be a non-expert and instead offers an “authentic perspective” because he is not sponsored or affiliated with a biased organization. After the show title introduction and welcoming gratitude, TNP begins with a published article to introduce the episode’s recurring theme. Figure 8 demonstrates TNP selecting an article published in English, oftentimes on Epoch Times or Yahoo News, and sharing a full screen view to follow his reading of the article.

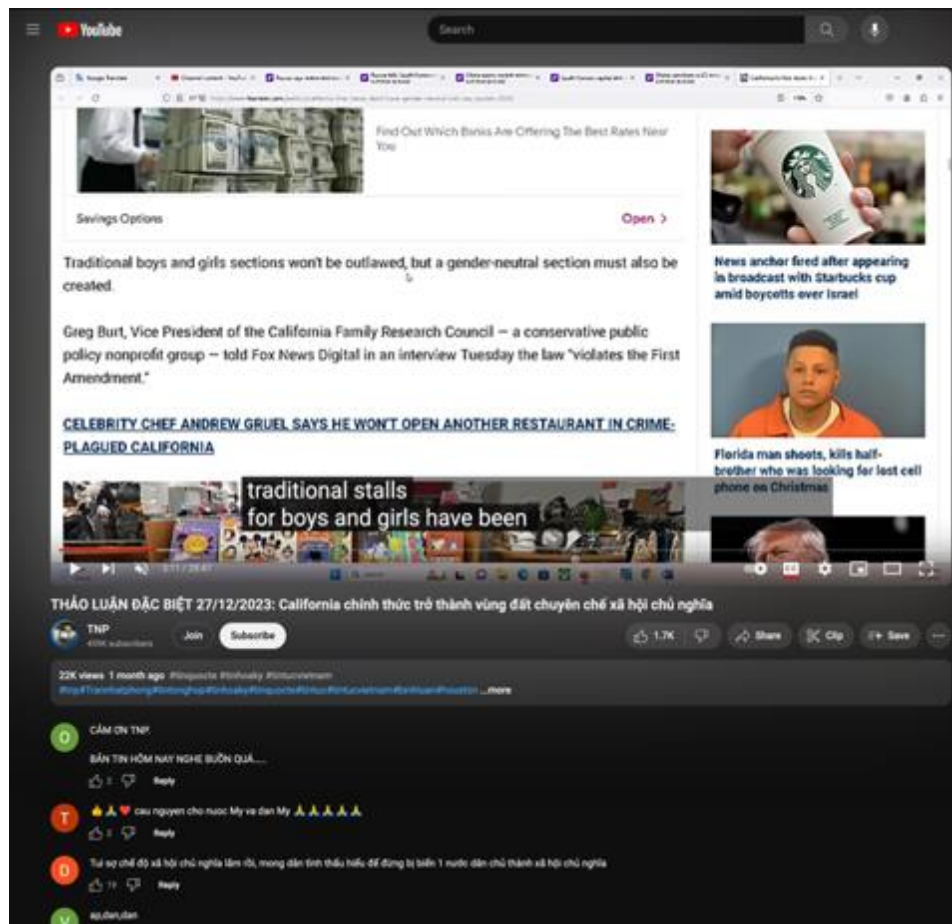


Figure 8. Screenshot of Tran Nhat Phong's video where he presents and shares his screen to read, translate, interpret, and highlight key points in articles from sources such as Epoch Times, Yahoo News, etc. (TNP, 2023b).

In these short five-minute segments within the full 30-minute video, viewers listen and watch TNP translate, interpret, and highlight key points in the article. He provides translation and interpretation services for the community for those who are illiterate in English and/or prefer to listen to summaries. He claims to perform this service without bias. After highlighting and reviewing specific quotes from the article to convey facticity, TNP stops screen sharing and speaks directly to the camera, offering personal analysis—much like a newscaster behind a desk. He relates current events to his understanding of historical contexts. This practice is akin to much of mis-/disinformation rhetoric of “do your own research” and expectations for individuals to have their own expert skills to search, judge the source of, and assess for manipulation, biases, and any gaps within information (Tripodi, 2022). Taken together, Vietnamese diaspora YouTube producers demonstrate how they uncouple the status of expert opinions and expert interpretations from the orientation of truth to fulfill the politics of identity and ideologies.

Discussion

We present unique practices of information authenticity and identity authentication on YouTube through digital ethnography and content analysis of Vietnamese diaspora YouTube influencers. We examine YouTube producers' construction of artifices, emotions, sentiments, and expertise as signals to maintain and grow viewership, while addressing the following research questions: (RQ1) What does it mean to be—or appear—authentically Vietnamese? (RQ2) How can artifices of this presentation build toward misinformed politics (or myopic politics)? (RQ3) How does this build conditions for misinformation to thrive? By problematizing authenticity as being fraught with identity construction in relation to producers and viewers who are immigrants and refugees, we confront socio-technical issues of authenticity within the Vietnamese diasporic community.

Artifices perpetuate stereotypes or provide opportunities to address complex discourses that tend to be information voids due to long histories of negating topics such as politics, the military, and social welfare. Symbols offer insight into the strong and weak ties that members of the Vietnamese diaspora resonate with. By understanding affinities (strong ties) toward artifices as markers of authenticity, researchers, media producers, and fact checkers exploit strong and weak ties toward media to offer influential and trustworthy information communication. Research on strong ties in immigrant and refugee communities is prevalent in ethnic media because of language translation access (Pham, 2021, p. 512), whereas weak ties from transnational, multilingual, and diaspora perspectives have been under-researched (Nguyễn et al., 2022). Weak ties within the Vietnamese diaspora offer insight into the lack of traditional Vietnamese cultural artifices that might be avoided in these videos. D'Ignazio, Graeff, Harrington, & Rosner (2020) note that weak ties offer influential and trustworthy platforms an approach for equitable participatory design in social media analysis contexts. We recommend exploring immigrants' relationship to weak ties toward home cultures and traditions in contrast to long histories of assimilation—some immigrants seek media in which they have weak ties to assimilate to new lands and find trust in society.

Authenticity is not always a knowledge of mis-/disinformation, cybersecurity, truthfulness, or the self. Instead, authenticity can question processes of being true to Self and Other (Gaden & Dumitricia, 2014), particularly for those within the Vietnamese diaspora who practice transnational lived experiences between the diaspora and the land of origin. With affect, authenticity, and emotional truths as orienters toward survival (Yang, 2012), the "American Dream" (akin to disinformation and cruel optimism in Young (2021)), assimilation, or in-group belonging are communal practices *against* rather than collectively *for* a cause, resulting in more palatable problematic information which rings true for viewer(s).

While this research is not inclusive of all Vietnamese diaspora YouTube channels, our digital ethnographic case study offers a generative opportunity for further research about authenticity from the personal to the technological. Practical implications—such as investing in fact-checking and auto-correction systems—remain insufficient solutions to mis-/disinformation (Bender, Gebru, McMillan-Major, & Shmitchell, 2021). The interdisciplinary fields of ICT must reconsider the role of technological interventions and address the gaps in authentication-making and emotional truth for traditionally marginalized communities, such as immigrants and multilingual groups.

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