# The Pleasures of Solitude?

A qualitative analysis of young Chinese women's
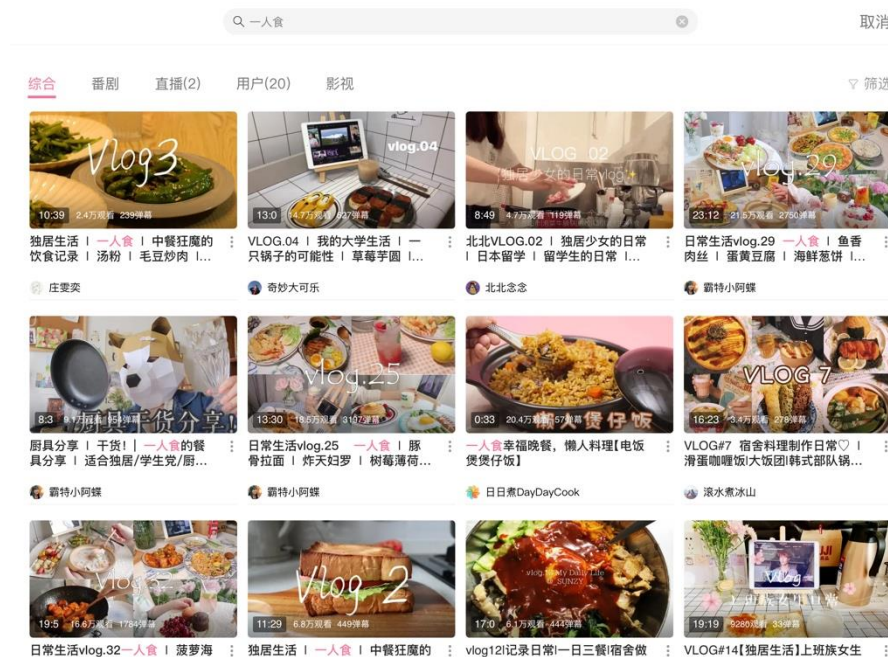daily-life vlog viewing practices

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# ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the phenomenon of young Chinese women watching a particular genre of daily-life vlogs, which present vloggers' solitary life states with hashtags such as 'living alone' and 'eating alone' on Bilibili, a Chinese video-sharing platform mainly welcomed by youngsters. Since the vlog is a new media format and currently in vogue in China, it leaves much research space for media scholars to explore. This project is guided by the main research question: what are young female audiences' motivations and interpretations in terms of their viewing practices? Sub-questions for discussion also include: what kinds of relationship do they perceive to have with those vloggers? Also, do young women identify with these daily-life vlogs or aspire to live the kind of lifestyle vloggers present?

Given that this is an explorative study, it is based on the contemporary Chinese context and widely draws research repertoires from lifestyle media, the media practice approach and identification theory regarding media interaction, and also refer to previous studies on female audiences of various media genres. Reflecting on twelve in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young women aged between 18 and 25, whose transcripts were analysed through thematic analysis, it manages to address these questions. Results show that young women's motivations and interpretations of their viewing practices can be divided into three dimensions, namely 'visual appeal', 'seeking resonance' and 'the pursuit of 'exquisiteness' (*Jingzhi*)'. Finally, this study moves onto those young Chinese women's attention to self and their pursuit of an exquisite life in the context of modernity.

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# 1    INTRODUCTION

[1]Waking up early in the morning, making an exquisite breakfast for herself and getting ready for a vigorous day - this is a typical opening scene for Susie's vlog, a young woman who is a graduate student and a freelance designer living alone in Hong Kong. Using keywords such as 'eating alone' (*yirenshi*) or 'living alone' (*duju shenghuo*) on the Chinese video-sharing platform Bilibili, which is regarded as a 'prosumption' platform mainly for Generation Z (Chen2, 2018), one can access a massive number of vlogs seemingly similar to Susie's (Figure 1).

Apart from cooking and eating alone, some other core content of these vlogs includes shopping in the supermarket, choosing an outfit for the day, doing chores and other trivial details in vloggers' daily life, presenting a solitary state and usually with a style of slow-pace. Unlike the monologue mode those traditional vlogs use (Snelson, 2015), some of them retain nature sounds without speech and background music. Based on my preliminary observations online, I discovered these vlogs were primarily filmed and watched by women and the main filming sites were vloggers' homes. I define these vlogs as 'solitary daily-life vlogs'.



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[1] a

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Figure 1 This is a screen-shot of Bilibili via personal tablet, searching with the keyword 'eating alone' (*yirenshi*). These vlogs' titles usually also include 'living alone' (*duju*), 'daily life (*richang shenghuo*)' and the dishes they made.


Vlog, short for video blog, has been popular on YouTube for years, yet it is still a novel concept in China and burgeoning currently. A growing number of ordinary people utilise this new media format to present and share their quotidian routines. These vlogs, usually in a diaristic format and characterised as trivial and mundane, have become the most prevalent type of vlogs circulating on media platforms (Yin 2019). To a large extent, it is due to the sudden enthusiasm of tech corporations, content creators, celebrities and media platforms that make vlog carve out space in the already saturated market of short videos (Yin 2019; Global Times 2019). However, the particular media environment and socio-cultural context should also be taken into account, especially for these solitary daily-life vlogs. On the one hand, romanticising eating alone in media portrayals (e.g. Little Forests[1]) and the slow variety shows (e.g. Back to Field[2]) continue to attract attention, which implies a public interest in mundane but authentic daily life and the pursuit of a sense of ritual in a postmodern society (Chen3 et al., 2019; Zhu, 2017). On the other hand, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of single households has increased from 13.1% (2016) to 15.6% (2018). More and more youngsters, passively or actively pursuit solo-living lifestyle could be a significant cause (Du et al., 2019; Wang, 2017). To some extent, the popularity of the vlog and the emergence of solitary daily-life vlogs could be seen as a 'lifestyle' trend in contemporary China, which is a background framework of this research.

According to a recent insight report conducted by Kueclub (2019), a research brand affiliated with China's internet giant, Tencent, vlog users largely consists of highly educated young women, living in first and second tiered cities. Given my interest in audiences, this research aims to explore young women's motivations and interpretations of watching solitary daily-life vlogs. In addition, through analysis of these young women's narratives of their viewing practices, further insight is offered into their identification with those vlogs and their potential aspiration to live the kind of lifestyle those vloggers present.

To approach my research questions, the theoretical chapter incorporates these vlogs into the genre of lifestyle media and discusses it under the context of modernisation with key concepts, such as 'the aestheticization of everyday life' and 'reflexivity'. I then review the current research on vlogs and note a lack of audience research. Though some articles have developed an understanding of vlogs' audiences in Chinese academia, the empirical foundation is required. In light of media practice theory (Couldry, 2004; 2012) and previous studies on women's media practices (e.g. Ang 2013; Radway 1984; Ytre-Arne 2011), this study contextualises young women's viewing practices in their everyday life and thus understanding their meaning-making process. Lastly, the concept of 'lifestyle experts' (Lewis, 2008) and identification theory, compared with Para-social Interaction theory, are adopted to

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explicate audience's involvement with the kind of lifestyle those vloggers present through exploring the relationship audiences perceive with vloggers.

Based on twelve in-depth interviews, this dissertation explores three themes to explain young female audiences' motivations and interpretations in terms of their viewing practices, including 'visual appeal', 'seeking resonance' and 'the pursuit of 'exquisiteness' (*Jingzhi*)'. The discussion surrounding vlogs, young women's reflexivity and their pursuit of certain lifestyle might shed light on future research of vlog and lifestyle media in China.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The first section of this project encompasses a critical review of the related literature followed by the conceptual framework and an illustration of research objectives and research questions.

## 2.1 Lifestyle media and mediated ordinary life

The recording feature of vlogs resembles other media genres, such as reality TV and live-streams. Nevertheless, this research focuses on solitary daily-life vlogs and mainly pays attention to their format of mediating ordinary life. In light of previous studies on lifestyle and lifestyle media, it constructs a background framework to understand young Chinese women's viewing practices.

### 2.1.1 Vlog as a genre of lifestyle media

The notion of lifestyle plays a significant role in modern social life (Giddens, 1991:5) and the proliferation of lifestyle media serves as a response to its circulation and transnational phenomenon (Bell, 2016; Lewis et al., 2012; Lewis & Martin, 2010). Lifestyle media covers everything from fashion magazines, self-help books, variety shows with various lifestyle segments to cooking shows, home renovation and other mediated everyday life practices, with the implication of promoting individuality, self-management and self-consciousness (Featherstone, 1987; Lewis, 2008; Lewis & Martin, 2010; Ryan, 2014). Additionally, lifestyle media provides idealisations about how to manage one's own life (Raisborough 2011). In this vein, those solitary daily-life vlogs could also be counted into the genre of lifestyle media though vloggers do not necessarily provide suggestions or instructions directly, unlike hosts of traditional lifestyle media. Some research has already acknowledged the vlog as lifestyle media. For instance, Sandal (2018) focuses on the 'What I eat in a day' genre and analyses vloggers' explicit lifestyle-performance, which further uncovers a latent taste distinction among vloggers and the community of the audiences. This research also views vlog as a genre of lifestyle media and intends to further understand what roles do these vlogs play in young women's everyday life practices through analysing their motivations and interpretations.

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The existing research about lifestyle concentrates on the reasons for its growth. For example, some scholars attribute the proliferation of lifestyle to flourishing consumerism (e.g. Featherstone, 1987; Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 2002), while others view lifestyle as a historically continuing thing, rather than being radically new in the postmodern society (Bell, 2016). In addition, previous research probes into lifestyle media's pedagogical function and unveils its hidden citizenship construction discourses in the context of neoliberalism, linking lifestyle media with a self-transformation process of makeover culture (e.g. Lewis, 2008; Raisborough, 2011; Taylor, 2002). However, as Ryan (2014:14) argues, although these studies view lifestyle media as a compensation role in the 'detraditionalization' era, unveiling the way social forces urge citizens to incorporate lifestyle into their daily life, they fail to zoom in on individuals' needs and how lifestyle media resonates in their everyday life practices. In consequence, audiences' investment and their pleasure in engaging with lifestyle media are neglected. Compared with more traditional formats, solitary daily-life vlogs share similarities in that, to some extent, they also induct ordinary people into the 'art of living' (Lewis & Martin, 2010), yet it is user-generated content filmed by amateurs, and thus endowed with interactivity, enhancing the affective relationships between vloggers and viewers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017).

## 2.1.2 Mediated ordinary life and the aestheticization of everyday life

Most of the content in solitary daily-life vlogs is comprised of preparing meals. Nowadays, in this media-saturated environment, mediated ordinary life has become a new ritual of life and food images are one of the most prevalent visual spectacles (Ibrahim, 2015a). In these circumstances, the functional level of food is less significant than its aesthetic perfection and the pleasure derived from it (Viviani, 2013). As Ketchum (2005) argues, individuals' attention to aesthetic components, including food and eating practices, makes them aware of themselves and their entire ordinary lives as objects of beauty. This phenomenon further echoes the notion of the aestheticization of everyday life. According to Featherstone (1987, 1991), 'new heroes' of consumer culture promote the commoditisation of lifestyle to display their sense of style, generating an aestheticization of everyday life. Thus, aesthetic components and the emerging 'new heros' are central to understanding individuals' production and consumption of lifestyle media content. Moreover, in Lewis's (2010) account, practices of lifestylisation in the everyday routine contribute to the combination of commodity production and spectacle in the public sphere, and personal consumption and ordinary life in its private counterpart. Likewise, Ibrahim (2015b) associates the notion of objectification with the concept of 'aestheticization of everyday life' and argues that it is a process of endeavouring to transform everyday objects and practices into an economy, consuming ourselves through visual cultures; and meanwhile, inviting others' gaze into the private realm. The interaction between the two concepts reveals that the popularity of 'aestheticization of everyday life' in the consumer society implies individuals' attention to the self, to the ordinary life and to the private sphere.

When it comes to the Chinese context, the politics of lifestyle turned to play a role in social life along with the process of urbanisation and modernisation (Yan, 2010). Tao (2013) acknowledges the 'aestheticization of everyday life' as conducting a profound revolution on today's cultural life. Some scholars associate this trend with the generation of 'domestic petit bourgeois' (Xiaozi, usually refers to precarious young, newly middle-class urban dwellers) in urban China, further presenting the enactment of an aesthetic lifestyle as a popular pursuit among urban youths (e.g. Henningsen, 2012; Jiang & Leung, 2012; Liu1, 2008). It is worth noting that, as Peng's (2019) research on Chinese young urbanites' food photos sharing practices illustrates, the Xiaozi lifestyle is not necessarily a fixed symbol for stratification, but instead is fluid and invoked by individuals' desire for self-presentation. This echoes Bell's (2016) discussion on the pleasure of watching home shows, which indicates that it is a kind of imaginative consumption, rather than actual acquisition of goods, and brings satisfaction. Therefore, drawing on Xu1's (2007) account, aspiring young people are interested in watching and following lifestyle media in that it is desirable and seemingly approachable for them to follow.

Additionally, some scholars regard 'the aestheticization of everyday life' as a gendered issue. Ryan (2014) suggests that this cultural formation is mainly appealing to women. Likewise, Gill (2013:85) incorporates 'an increasingly reflexive and stylized mode of consumption', privileged by 'self', into the pursuit for the aestheticization of everyday life and claims this site is especially for women. This research does not intend to criticize 'the aestheticization of everyday life' for its collusion with consumerism but to examine young women's responses and interpretations of this trend in their vlog viewing practices.

### 2.1.3 Young women's attention to the self

After incorporating the vlog into the genre of lifestyle media and associating it with the trend of the aestheticization of everyday life, it could be further linked to individuals' growing attention to the self in China, especially young women. As Liu1 (2014) suggests that the post-Mao transformation imposes stress and expectation on women to be self-reliant. With decades of economic reform and privatisation, people in China have grown active in shaping and optimising their life chances by pursuing a variety of media activities (Sun & Lei, 2016). Meanwhile, modernity calls for individuals to undertake life projects based on greater self-reflexivity and increasing lifestyle choices (Yan, 2010).

In Beck's (2002) account, individualism refers to the detachment from the traditional social identities and relations, such as social class, family and gender. Individualism in China has its own historical and cultural specificity when compared with its Western counterpart (Liu1, 2014; Sun3 & Ryder, 2016; Yan, 2010). Although scholars point out that individualisation in China is a changing relationship between the individual and the collective party-state, which takes place in the context of 'dual modernity' (e.g. Liu1, 2011; Nelson & Chen, 2007; Yan, 2010). They also assert that the neoliberal concepts of 'self-choosing', 'self-enterprising' and 'self-

governing' have been broadly internalised, particularly by the younger Chinese generation (Liu1, 2008; Liu1, 2011; Sun2 & Lei, 2016; Sun1 & Wang, 2010). In recent years, along with the process of urbanisation and modernisation, living alone has gradually become a common phenomena among youngsters in their twenties or thirties, and they desire to lead a solitary, but not lonely life (Du et al., 2019; Wang, 2017). However, there is a contradiction between a market-oriented society's requirement for youngsters' to focus on the self and the central role conventionally served by family (Kim, 2008; Yan, 2010). Therefore, whether those solitary daily-life vlogs as lifestyle media produce a picture of the ideal life for audiences' self-actualisation remains to be exploited.

According to Giddens (1991:94), individuals have to make the self a 'reflexive project', which becomes an essential part of the modern city. Reflexivity is also regarded as a gendered thing, in which women are constructed as ideal subjects in the context of neoliberalism (Gill, 2007:163). Young women are also subject to the pressure of self-actualisation and high achievement (Dobson, 2016). Additionally, the growing attention to the self could also attribute to self-improvement media culture that promotes the core idea of positive energy (McGee, 2012; Yang, 2014).

This research also draws on the discussion of 'reflexivity' in audience studies. For instance, Kim (2008) analyses how does young Korean women's reflexivity operates through comparisons with protagonists in their trans-cultural experience of watching global television, and how it affects their personal aspects of lives. In addition, Sender (2012a) focuses on makeover shows' audiences and discusses the production of the 'reflexive self' from three dimensions, including audiences' self-reflexivity in using makeover shows to imagine themselves from the outside, deriving inspiration to optimise their own lifestyles, media reflexivity in distinguishing manipulated elements of the show and research reflexivity during the research process. Sender's research mainly aims to disentangle the paradox between 'dupe audience' and 'savvy audience', further unveiling the apparent liberty audiences have gained that is actually still under the discourse of neoliberalism. Nevertheless, Sender's investigation of audiences' reflexive engagement with makeover shows is inspiring for this research to inspect audiences' ideas about themselves as projects to work on in their solitary daily-life vlog viewing practices.

## 2.2   The vlog and its audiences

There is an abundant amount of research on vlogs in Western academia since this media format has been popular on YouTube for years. Existing research could be basically divided into three directions. Some research pays attention to a particular genre of vlogs, applying 'the circuit of culture' to interpret its popularity as a cultural phenomenon, such as 'hauling' vlogs (Keats, 2012). Some scholars analyse the role of vloggers and their tactics with Goffman's theory of stage performance, especially when those vlogs are characterized as self-disclosure (e.g. Frobenius, 2014; Komulainen, 2017). Other researchers examine the interaction between

vloggers and viewers through the lens of Parasocial Interaction theory and the concept of mediated intimacy. These studies are mainly based on the business field of branding and the influencer economy, evaluating the effectiveness of endorsement with quantitative methods (e.g. Berryman & Kavk, 2017; Liu2 et al., 2018). So far, little research has solely focused on audiences' viewing practices to understand their motivations and interpretations in terms of watching vlogs. Humphreys (2018) analyses why people document and share the quotidian aspects of their lives, including the vlog, from a historical perspective. She mentions the phatic communication function and argues that knowing the ordinary routines of someone could build intimacy between people (2018:46). Furthermore, she suggests that watching others' life practices is a way for viewers to reflect on their own existences (2018:42). Even though Humphreys has proposed some motivations for individuals watching others' mediated ordinary life, there is a lack of empirical research to underpin these presumptions.

In Chinese academia, the discussion on vlog is still in its infancy. Scholars usually co-opt the vlog into the short video field and regard it as a new trend to examine its popularity, especially in relation to the younger generation. Some main arguments include a manifestation of visual consumption and aesthetic distinction when compared with rustic videos (Tuwei Shipin)[3] on other short videos platforms (Wei, 2019; Zhao, 2019), voyeuristic appeal in the spectacle society (Yin, 2019; Qiao, 2019), solo-living youngsters' requirements for companionship and relaxation (Yin, 2019) and individuals' pursuit of a slower pace in modern life (Xu2 2019). These proposed explications are indeed instructive and have encompassed audiences' motivations from different perspectives; however, they are still confined to the realm of 'implied audiences' (Livingstone, 1998b) without empirical grounds. Therefore, on the one hand, these assumptions neglect the complexity in individuals' media practices and the particularity of vlogs. For instance, when acknowledging voyeuristic appeal as audiences' motivation for viewing, it might fail to explain why they choose vlog rather than live-streams with similar content. On the other hand, these explications view audiences as a singular entity and thus neglecting the difference between individuals, which depends on their personal experiences and requirements. Empirical research on audiences is utilised to elicit their personal motivations and interpretations and examine those assumptions.

## 2.3 Understanding audiences' media practices

When it comes to audiences' motivations, this research does not intend to explore the driving forces behind human behaviors relating to psychological processes, but to examine audiences' motivations that underlying their engagement with the specific media genre from a practice approach (Couldry, 2004).

In a media-saturated world, audiences are no longer assumed as passive receivers in a linear mode, consuming media contents without agency but engaging with media actively (Livingstone 2003). Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model illuminates audiences' polysemic interpretation by revealing their meaning construction process, although it still confined to

audience-related practices (Ang, 2006). Previous studies on audiences' motivations have primarily been dominated by Uses and Gratifications theory (e.g. Haridakis & Rubin 2003; Khan, 2017), which implies audiences initially seek media to gratify their own needs (Katz et al., 1973; Rubin, 2002). Even though it gives great agency to audiences, it overemphasises individual differences and fails to illustrate the interaction between audiences and producers and the specific social and cultural contexts (Bird 2003). There has been an ethnographic turn in audience research, which shifts the focus from the medium itself and textual interpretation towards audiences' meaning-making process, further contextualising their media practices into everyday life (Ang 2006; Hermes, 1993; Morley, 2003; Press & Livingstone 2006). Couldry (2004) theorises media as a set of practices and proposes a practice approach, which means situating media consumption in the social world and everyday contexts instead of adhering to media-centrality. It moves beyond the media effect model to view media activities as a more dynamic and complex process (Couldry, 2004). In this vein, audiences' meaning making process and media engagement can only be understood in context of their personal life experiences and socio-cultural backgrounds. In this study, through analysing what young women actually do and say in relation to solitary daily-life vlogs across a whole range of situations and contexts, the practice approach helps to examine how are vlogs integrated into young female audiences' everyday life and what roles do vlogs play in this context (Ang, 2006; Couldry, 2004; 2012; Livingstone, 2004; Morley, 2003).

Given my research objects are young female audiences, it is necessary to draw on previous audience research regarding gendered media products that primarily appeal to women, such as romance (Radway, 1984), soap opera (Ang, 2013) and lifestyle media content. One insightful example is Ytre-Arne's (2011) study, which unveils reasons for women's magazines appealing to particular readers, being consumed in particular ways and in particular situations. In her research, two completely different reading patterns are unveiled, namely ritual and fragmented reading. Furthermore, it turns out that rather than interpreting women's magazines as sources of pleasurable fantasies as some previous studies illustrate, readers will relate the content to the realities of their everyday lives. Similarly, Grodin (1991) conducts a reception study on women's self-help book reading practices, in which she finds their reading practices are a response to rapid social change and a way to survive dislocation in the face of uncertainties. These empirical studies provide insights for examining the patterns and interpretations of young women's solitary daily-life vlog viewing practices: to what extent will young women watching these vlogs have expectations of living alone and share the tendency towards individualism similar to 'becoming one's own person' in American culture (Grodin 1991)?

## 2.4   Lifestyle experts and identification

Lewis (2008, 2010) introduces the concept of 'lifestyle expert' into the lifestyle realm, which refers to those ordinary people with certain knowledge tied to the domestic sphere of consumption and ordinary everyday life rather than traditional modes of expertise. This

concept is drawn on Bourdieu's (1984:325) 'cultural intermediaries', who act as mediators and transmitting their knowledge about taste and lifestyle of the middlebrow to wider audiences. To some extent, those vloggers who tend to present aestheticized ways of living, for example, cooking as leisure rather than a chore, could also be viewed as lifestyle experts (Lewis & Martin, 2010). When illuminating young women's watching practices, understanding their interaction with vloggers could complement the research on their watching practices from another aspect.

Previous studies mostly use para-social interaction (PSI) theory to examine the interaction between vloggers and viewers as already reviewed. Horton and Wohl (1956) develop the concept of PSI, which refers to the illusion of a face-to-face relationship between the performer's media 'persona' and the audience in that it is one-sided and lacks reciprocity. This concept is further elaborated into viewers' interpersonal involvement with the media persona (Rubin and Perse, 1985). Identification is originally a psychological theory and later adopted by audience research to understand the perceived relationship between audiences and media persona. It is defined as vicarious experiences with someone else, seeing the world through others' eyes and internalising a viewpoint onto that person, and regarding them as role models and imitating their behaviours (Cohen 2001; Livingstone, 1998a). Some scholars argue that PSI and identification represent for different stages during audiences' interaction with the media persona and distinguish between PSI and identification. For example, as Feilitzen and Linne (1975) state, the difference between PSI and identification is that audiences have to recognise some of the figures' characteristics that they could share with. They further subdivide identification into similarity identification and wishful identification, the latter one implying role-modelling behaviors are adopted. Moreover, Brown (2015:275) argues that whereas parasocial interaction is a process of imagining developing a relationship with a media persona, identification refers to the process of 'sharing or adopting the persona's attitudes, values, beliefs or behaviour'. Therefore, parasocial interaction and identification are treated separately and PSI could be viewed as an initial phase during the interaction between audiences and the mediated persona.

In this research, these two concepts are adopted to explicate audience's involvement with the kind of lifestyle those vloggers present through the exploration of the relationship audiences perceive they have with them. Since this is qualitative research, I do not intend to examine the effect of media exposure but probing into the potential identification during the process of particular media engagements and the interrelationship between audiences' motivation and their watching practices. Empirical research would further examine the correlation between the two concepts.

## 2.5 Conceptual framework and research questions

This dissertation captures the current vogue of vlog in China and focuses on a particular genre of solitary daily-life vlogs, mainly aiming to understand young female audiences' underlying

motivations and personal interpretations in terms of their watching practices. What worth noting is that, this research has no intention of generalising findings to the larger population. It is merely a qualitative study of a particular genre of vlogs and applicable to a specific part of the population.

In order to achieve my research objectives, this study follows the practice approach and contextualises young female audiences' daily-life vlogs viewing practices in their everyday life and also takes the specific contemporary Chinese social and cultural context into account. By placing solitary daily-life vlogs, as a form of recording and presenting mundane life, into the field of lifestyle media research, the socio-cultural context analysis is developed into two parts based on the literature review. One is the trend of the 'aestheticization of everyday life' in the media spectacle, which implies individuals' fascination with others' private and banal everyday practices through an act of gazing at others' media presentation (Ibrahim, 2015b: 51). Xiaozi lifestyle is discussed with the assumption that young female audiences watching other ordinary women's daily life via vlogs also suggests the pursuit of a desirable and seemingly approachable life. The other one serves to further illustrate the growing attention to the self among the younger generation in China, introducing concepts of individualism and reflexivity. In addition, identification theory relating to media interaction is incorporated in order to examine the relationship between audiences and vloggers, and compared with para-social interaction, which might further complement the formation of their watching practices and their perception of vloggers' lifestyle.

When reflecting on previous literature, there is always a lack in lifestyle media research and uneventful media content, dismissing lifestyle media as trivial and undervaluing the role of 'ordinariness' in people's everyday practice (Bell & Hollows, 2005, Bell, 2016). In addition, little empirical research emphasises individuals' needs and their resonance with lifestyle media in their everyday life practices (Ryan, 2014), similarly in the research on vlog audiences. Chinese scholars have proposed several assumptions about audiences' motivations for watching daily vlogs, including the trend in visual consumption, voyeuristic appeal, solo-living youngsters' requirements for companionship and relaxation and individuals' pursuit of slow pace in modern life. These presuppositions have shed light on the current research, yet they are still confined to the realm of 'implied audiences'(Livingstone, 1998b). Therefore, I am open to empirical data, which is based on audiences' own life experiences and personal concerns to better understand their viewing practices. In light of the daily-life vlogs' analogy with lifestyle media and with a focus on young female audiences, this research is broadly drawn on previous audience studies of gendered media products, such as makeover TV shows and self-help books. Additionally, it also refers to research on some other food media genres.

Concequently, the main research question is that, what are young female audiences' motivations and interpretations in terms of watching daily-life vlogs filmed by common people presenting a solitude life state? The sub-questions include, what kinds of relationship do they perceive to have with the vloggers who document their daily life? Moreover, do young women identify with these daily-life vlogs or aspire to live the kind of lifestyle vloggers

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present? Through answering these questions, this research hopes to shed light on the audience research in the vlog and lifestyle media field and to provide an epitome of contemporary young Chinese women's sense of individualism and reflexivity.

# 3    METHODOLOGY

To address these research questions, the project conducts twelve in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews via voice calls and the data are processed through inductive-deductive thematic analysis.

## 3.1    In-depth interview

I am interested in young female audiences' own accounts, namely how do they make sense of their watching practices and of those vlogs they watch. Although some earlier studies apply a quantitative approach to analysing audiences' motivations for watching particular media formats (e.g. Chen1 et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2017), they might fail to understand audiences' concrete meaning-making process and personal feelings underneath their viewing practices. Compared with focus group, individual in-depth interviews are endowed with the benefit of eliciting rich details about respondents' personal experiences and uncovering the meanings that underpin people's routines and feelings (Gaskell 2000). As Warren (2002) suggests, the qualitative in-depth interview is utilised to examine respondents' experiences and life-worlds, therefore it could be an appropriate method of giving audiences a voice (Livingstone 2010). Moreover, an in-depth interview serves as a way to explore the different representations of a single issue, which could facilitate rich meanings and unexpected responses to be generated during conversations rather than confined to presumptions (Berger 1998; Gaskell 2000; Ritchie et al. 2013). Lastly, considering that media experiences might be private and unobservable and in light of previous studies on women's media practices (e.g. Radway 1984; Grodin 1991; Ytre-Arne 2011), in-depth interview could be the most suitable approach to understanding audiences' viewing practices.

## 3.2    Sampling and recruitment

Considering audiences of a particular genre of vlogs are relatively niche and dispersed, this project utilised online recruitment, building contact with potential participants on Bilibili directly, rather than conducting snowball sampling.

The first step is to define a sample universe (Robinson, 2014). According to the insight report and online observations that mentioned earlier, the target population of this study are young women who are currently active viewers of solitary daily-life vlogs. In addition, Arnett (2000) labels the period from 18 to 25 as 'emerging adulthood' and distinguishes it as a unique life

course for self-development, when young people have to confront uncertainties and choices. Liu1 (2011:65) states that for many Chinese urban youths, this stage is a major source of frustration, pressure and boredom. Therefore, inclusion criteria for my sample recruitment should be young women in Arnett's specified age group. I searched with key words such as 'living alone' and 'eating alone' on Bilibili and obtained more than fifty vloggers who mainly produced solitary dialy-life vlogs. To ensure my participants were 'information-rich cases' (Patton 1990:169), I retained six vloggers (see Appendix E), who could be viewed as 'micro-celebrities' (Senft 2008) with over 100,000 followers. I respectively selected potential respondents from the comment sections of these vloggers' latest issues and invited them to be interviewed.

Limitations exist in two dimensions. On the one hand, although I tried to diversify the vloggers those respondents followed, their favorites might still be concentrated on one or two content producers. On the other hand, the sampling strategy was on a first-come-first-served basis with characteristics of convenience sampling when put into practice (Robinson, 2014). To compensate for its weakness, I utilised filtering questions to add range to the sampling and made an assessment of participants' demonstration of enthusiasm about the topic. In this sense, diversity was gained in terms of age, occupation, living states (i.e. solo-living and living with roommates or families).

In total, twelve young women participate in the study and all of them are urban young women with higher education. Their profiles are listed:

| Name | Age | Occupation | Living state |
|------|-----|-----------|--------------|
| Tina | 25 | Foreign trade staff | Living alone |
| Kun | 20 | Undergraduate student | Living in dormitory |
| Qin | 19 | Undergraduate student | Living in dormitory |
| Zi | 21 | Office clerk | Living with parents |
| Wei | 22 | Prospect Graduate student in UK | Living alone next month |
| Bao | 23 | Working | Living alone |
| Li | 23 | Graduate student in UK | Living in a single en-suite |
| Tu | 21 | Undergraduate student | Living in dormitory |
| Teng | 20 | Undergraduate student | Living alone next month |
| Ai | 21 | Undergraduate student | Living in dormitory |
| Mao | 22 | Trainee doctor | Living with a roommate |
| Yu | 18 | Undergraduate student | Living in dormitory |

Figure 2 The interviewees' profiles

## 3.3   Interview topic guide

The in-depth interviews were based on a semi-structured interview topic guide, which started with a brief collection of demographic information, talking candidly about respondents'

current living and life states and media activities during their leisure time. It followed by questions based on my research questions and objectives, which could be divided into four categories: audiences' watching experiences, their expectations and preferences, their assumptions and perception of vloggers and their lifestyle, and their personal understanding of mediating solitary life and an ideal life state. Drawing on the literature review, there were assumptions about audiences' motivations, however, the interviews were not guided by closed questions to verify presumptions but instead open questions were asked that pursue answers in respondents' descriptions. For instance, rather than asking respondents directly about the relationship they perceive to have with vloggers, I invited them to introduce their favorite vlogger in their own words.

The flexibility of semi-structured interview facilitated me to elicit respondents' free narratives of their own experiences and preferences (Wengraf, 2001), which is important for this research to understand audiences' motivatiosns and interpretations. Accordingly, the interview guide served as a reminder rather than a script. The order and content of questions varied slightly depending on concrete circumstances and additional questions might be posed to encourage my participants to expand their responses. Based on my pilot research, I showed my respondents their 'following list' of solitary daily-life vloggers directly, which could address the potential understanding asymmetry on 'solitary daily-life vlogs' between respondents and me. In addition, compared with my pilot research, the section of collecting personal information was boosted, and some leading questions were added, guiding interviewees' retrospection and thinking and thus paving the way for probing in depth (See Appendix A).

## 3.4   Ethical consideration and self-reflexivity

In this research, each interview lasted from forty-five minutes to one hour in Chinese and all the interviews were conducted via voice calls on WeChat. To compensate for voice calls' lack of physical presence compared with face-to-face interviews (Ritchie et al., 2013), I retained non-verbal cues such as laughter and pauses in the transcripts. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed personally once after finishing. In order to keep confidentiality, the participants were all given pseudonyms and ensured to sign the consent forms before the interviews. Moreover, I reiterated my research objectives and the issues of consent at the beginning of each interview.

My reflexivity could be manifested both in the preparations of interviews and my position during interviews. Although these vlogs are seemingly alike, I seized a general understanding of vloggers' characteristics before interviewing, especially in relation to those 'micro-celebrities' with a large following, thus facilitating smooth interaction with interviewees. Additionally, as a 23-year-old young Chinese woman with higher education, I share the same socio-cultural background with my interviewees. I watched a large number of solitary daily-life vlogs before I came to London last year with the expectation of living alone. My personal experiences and position in this field enabled me to invoke resonance and construct rapport

with my respondents (Gaskell 2000), further delving into their personal concerns. Besides that, since WeChat is a relatively private message application, I had already gained trust from my respondents once they added me and the interviews via voice calls were similar to everyday lengthy conversations, fitting into women's oral culture (Bird, 2013:13). Some of my respondents even thanked me for providing them chances to comb through past experiences. However, there still might exist the asymmetrical power relationship between respondents and myself, as an interviewer (Kvale & Brinkmann 2009). Therefore, I emphasised that whatever they provided would be valuable for my research, empowering them to speak in their own voice (Gaskell 2000). I also shared the transcripts with my respondents to check and verify afterward. In order to address respondents' emitting desired information to cater to me, I posed problems in a flexible sense. For instance, although I focused on solitary daily-life vlogs, I avoided stressing 'alone' during the interviews, thus checking if respondents recognised vloggers' solitary life states originally and what are their perceptions of that.

## 3.5   Analytical strategy

The data analysis in this research is guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which is characterised as accessible and flexible for capturing both manifest and latent meaning (Clarke & Braun, 2017). According to Attride-Stirling (2001), thematic analysis is utilised in unearthing themes salient in the transcripts and conducting network mapping, thus illuminating the hidden meaning underneath respondents' accounts of their experiences and perceptions. Therefore, this analytical strategy is in accordance with my research objectives to explore young female audiences' motivations and interpretations of their viewing practices, and further probing into the potential identification.

The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, which includes: familiarizing with original data, generating codes initially, seeking and identifying themes, reorganising and refining themes, producing clear definitions for themes and writing up the report. In this vein, themes embedded in the interviews are both generated by data in an inductive way and in a deductive way, drawing on pre-existing theories, concepts, previous assumptions and the pilot research (Clarke & Braun 2006, 2017). In this research, the coding process was conducted on MAXQDA and the coding pattern followed Saldaña's (2006:6) criteria of similarity, difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation. The data is categorized and reorganized into three themes, namely visual appeal, seeking resonance and young women's pursuit of exquisiteness (*Jingzhi*), followed by subordinate phrases or words. The coding frame is accordingly a combination of theory-driven and data-driven codes. For instance, 'reflexivity' is used as initial codes drawn from prior research to examine audiences' engagement with those vlogs. Meanwhile, several codes within women's watching practices and personal situations are derived from participants' responses.

# 4    ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the main findings of my research are divided into three themes, including visual appeal, young female audiences' seeking for resonance and their pursuit of 'exquisiteness' (*Jingzhi*). Before analysing audiences' motivations and interpretations, an overview of young women's daily-life viewing practices is to be introduced. According to interviews, there primarily exist three significant watching patterns, which is similar to findings in Ytre-Arne's (2011) research on women's magazines. Firstly, the majority of participants reported that they watched those vlogs as a fixed ritual in their everyday life, mostly watching during meals or before sleep. In Shu's account, watching vlogs before sleep could facilitate her to release herself from the strains of daily life and thus having a good night. Some participants describe the ritual scenes when watching those vlogs: " I am used to watching those daily-life vlogs when I have nothing urgent to do, usually with a cup of tea or some desserts and lying on the cosy sofa at home" (Mao). Furthermore, some interviewees stressed specific emotional states when watching vlogs: "there are no time or circumstance restrictions if watching a beauty blogger's vlog but I need to be in a peaceful state to watch those daily-life vlogs, leaving me alone."(Qin). Additionally, Li suggested that she would watch those vlogs when feeling depressed: "it soothed my unstable emotion to a certain extent". 'Relaxation', 'a sense of healing' and 'time for myself' are recurring themes, which echo Humphrey's (2018) proposition of watching vlogs to seize a 'comforting' function. Secondly, some other participants watch those vlogs for a short break during their journey to work or to take time off from studying, which could be labelled as fragmented watching. Those vlogs serve as the role of filling in their spare time. Thirdly, since these vlogs lack narration and are slow-paced, it means that they require little concentration and viewers can do their own thing while watching, such as 'making up' (Kun), 'writing journals' (Tina). 'Companionship' has become one of the particular attraction of solitary daily-life vlogs. These three patterns are not parallel but intertwining, which illuminates the complexity of young women's viewing practices and will be further discussed below.

## 4.1    Visual appeal: Rediscovering the poetic rhythm of ordinary life

In a broader sense, the vlog, as a format of documenting and sharing everyday life, could be viewed as media practices of 'showing and being showed', which transforms everyday activities and routines into 'spectacle and audiencing' (Couldry, 2012:49). Therefore, at first sight, it is not surprising that audiences tend to be attracted by these daily-life vlogs' visual appeal, which invites them to gaze at vloggers' mediated life experiences, particularly their aesthetic quotidian routines (Ibrahim 2015b). When asking my respondents their first impression on those vlogs, this theme was recurring extensively in their narratives.

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*I wondered whether those vloggers majored in media design when I watched their daily-life vlogs, because both the editing and the tone of their vlogs were fascinating. I think watching their vlogs might also improve my own aesthetic sense (Kun).*

*Although we might do something similar to those vloggers, such as cooking, tidying up rooms and reading books, there still exist some differences. They documented their life with a camera and filmed it very well, along with editing and background music, which makes those ordinary and simple routines seem to be intriguing and pleasant (Wei).*

When ordinary life becomes a spectacle with the media format of vlog, the first layer of distinction between vloggers and audiences is 'experts' versus 'amateurs'. Audiences admired vloggers' courage, skills and perseverance in recording and sharing their everyday life. For example, Tu made a comparison and said, "I am poor at taking photos or filming so I think they are awesome". Li suggested, 'They capture and retain trivial things in ordinary life that we have taken for granted, which I think are authentic and absorbing'. However, although some informants regarded the daily routines of vloggers as similar to their own lives, they also acknowledged that their life is 'plain and not worth being recorded' (Mao). Therefore, the lifestyles presented by those vlogs were caught in the tide of the aestheticization of everyday life and thus contributing to the alienation of the mundane and quotidian, which initially illuminates the complexity of audiences' perceptions of these vloggers and their vlogs; they are both close to their lives as counterparts and distanced from their lives as lifestyle experts or role models. In this case, viewing pleasures comes, as Ryan (2014) suggests, by both engaging and transcending the supposed banality of everyday life.

Meanwhile, since meal preparation accounts for the most content in the vlogs specified in this study, it gains most attention in general, according to the interviews. On the one hand, my informants' answers reveal that although they sometimes appreciate a vlog's style more than its content per se, they also watch vlogs for reference in their everyday life. They responded that they took inspiration from those vlogs and even 'take notes' during their viewing (Teng). When comparing with traditional cooking shows or short videos, Kun stated that 'the dishes in those vlogs seemingly easy to cook, especially for sole-eating'. On the other hand, interestingly, the majority of my participants acknowledged that they paid great attention to the cutlery vloggers used, their household decoration and some other delicate gadgets they owned and they might even "buy the similar product for its delicate appearance" (Wei). Besides that, the visual appeal of solitary daily-life vlogs also manifests in participants' comparisons with Mukbang, a format of solo-eating live-streams (Choe 2019). Almost half of my interviewees mentioned their previous experiences of watching Mukbang and voiced their waning interest towards Mukbang after watching those daily-life vlogs. According to Ai,

*It was long ago when I tried to lose weight and I watched Mukbang. Those streamers ate varieties of junk food that I had to get rid of. However, after watching a lot of Mukbang, I felt quite sick because they consumed too much. Some of these vloggers also eat a lot and have unhealthy food like instant noodle. Nevertheless, the process of cooking and the presentation of dishes make those vlogs distinct from*

*Mukbang. I can feel vloggers' treating food with heart and thus I can gain a sense of satisfaction and being healed but I think those Mukbang streamers just grab attention.*

By distinguishing live streaming as a product of 'the attention economy', which refers to the phenomenon of wealth flowing with attention in an information-rich world (Goldhaber, 1997), from vlogs that 'document daily life', my respondents showed their passion for the rhythms and texture of 'real-life'. Moreover, unlike previous studies' assumptions that watching vlogs represents for youngsters' requirements for making aesthetics distinction with those rustic videos on short video platforms (Zhao 2019), a couple of my respondents indicated that they still watched some Mukbang 'for the sake of novelty' (Li) and they also watch some rustic videos 'because they make me laugh' (Tu). Hence, there exists a paradox for young female audiences who pay close attention to everyday life. On the one hand, they intend to view mundane things in common people's everyday lives and avoid being trapped in the attention economy. On the other hand, those daily-life vlogs are also located in the media spectacle and audiences would be attracted by the visual appeal. In this case, although those daily-life vlogs serve as a way for audiences to rediscover the poetic rhythm of ordinary life, what do young women audiences actually pay attention to? The whole life state vloggers present in vlogs or the external packaging of vlogs? This will be further disentangled in the following sections.

## 4.2   Seeking resonance: Companionship, support and identification

Along with the curiosity of having a glance into others' daily-life routines, rediscovering mundane life through the lens of vloggers, these young women intend to seeking resonance with vloggers and the lifestyles they present. For instance, Wei preferred ordinary people's vlogs to those of celebrities' or beauty bloggers because 'ordinary people's vlogs are more authentic and similar to our life'. Qin added that 'I am hooked by those solitary daily-life vlogs in that they mostly filmed at home. Their life state is closer to mine than those travel vloggers since I am a student currently'. Moreover, in comparison with couples' vlogs, Bao preferred watching solitary daily-life vlogs because 'I am single and living alone so I would like to view those share similar experiences with me.' These kinds of narratives, regarding 'similarity', occurred in the majority of the interviews. Nevertheless, their ways of consuming these vlogs were still nuanced. During the discussion with these young female audiences, I found that the life states presented by vloggers are often juxtaposed with their own experiences of living alone or their daily lives. In order to further understand audiences' engagement with solitary daily-life vlogs, it is necessary to contextualise young female audiences' watching practices. The two following respondents could illustrate different viewing modes typically, depending on their own life experiences and concerns.

Tina, who is 25 years old, moved to Shanghai for work recently and lives alone in a single apartment assigned by her company. She is the only child in her family, she told me that,

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*Living with parents indeed let me avoid spending time worring about trivial matters in daily life, however, it could also be depressing. Conflicts are inevitable due to concepts differences between two generations and I cannot take full control of my own life. It is a normal phenomenon. Besides, conflicts would exist even if living with friends or strangers. Therefore, I planned to move out and live alone from an early time.*

Although she had studied abroad in Spain for several years, it is her first time living alone in a real sense. She followed some vloggers due to their video styles at the very beginning; however, it was not until she moved away from home that she started to re-watch those daily-life vlogs.

*I think I used to regard those household chores as a burden but now, when I have to buy and prepare food totally by myself after a nine-to-five working day; I generally take these routines as joy of life instead. Before living alone, I watched those vlogs and I believed they contained too many trivial details of daily life but those life scenes provide some references for me right now.*

Tina previously regarded these vloggers as 'loving life' and 'independent', but when she also began to live alone, she thinks that she is also generally close to their life attitudes and lifestyles, which was a state of being 'alone but not lonely'. She usually watches vlogs during her journey to work and thinks about what to cook for dinner. Sometimes she watches a vlog when making plans for the next day or writing her journal at night because 'it would be a relief to watch those vlogs and follow vloggers to do something when living alone and vlogs' slow-pace leaves me some pauses to think about my life'.

Ai is a 21-year-old undergraduate student, studying away from her hometown and lives in a dormitory with seven roommates. She prefers to watch vlogs in bed at night when her roommates go to sleep: "When I climb into my berth, drawing the curtain and lying quietly, I feel that I finally got my own time to be alone. Those vlogs are also quiet to appease me. I like white noise in their vlogs." She regards these vlogs as her 'emotional shelter':

*At university, I have to contact with people across the country and our living habits and values are different from each other, however, many times, it might due to my personality, even if others do something that makes me feel unpleasant, I would not point it out directly in their presence but hold it in my heart. Every night of watching vlogs is a time for me to handle my emotions. I hope I could truly live alone like those vloggers one day in the future.*

Given that my samples are young female audiences aged between 18 and 25, most of them are undergraduate students or workplace freshmen with common stressors from academic performance, jobs, personal relationships and love and marriage issues. They are at the crossroads of walking out of campus, maybe away from their hometown, and entering the job market. In addition, interestingly, most of my respondents indicated that they hardly shared or talked about those vlogs with their friends because 'my friends are idolaters and I think they prefer those 'noisy' videos rather than those quiet ones' (Kun), or 'I just wonder if there

is anyone around me watches these vlogs since we have our own taste individually' (Tu). Therefore, they regard these vlogs as a minority and private interest. In other words, these vlogs, serve as intimate publics, provide breathing space for them to escape from their ordinary life temporarily and space for independent thinking and reflection on their own lives. Moreover, based on the two samples, they demonstrate that even with a particular genre of vlogs, audiences' specific engagement with media content depends on their personal experiences to a large extent, and it might change over time.

In these circumstances, those vlogs construct a sense of presence and function as companionship and support, seeming to increase intimacy, as Humphrey (2018) has proposed. However, when it comes to the relationship they perceive to have with vloggers, it is surprising that the vast majority of my respondents offer an analogy of being 'spectators' (Kanke), namely observing vloggers' life, and being immersed in their vlogs at a distance. For instance,

*...I am just a distant spectator and I have my own life. However, watching these vlogs makes me recognise that there are others in this world, who are also living alone, doing things similar to me or distinct from me. It is hard to describe the fantastic feeling of synchronization; maybe it is the same as reading a novel or watching a film. If you live your own life, you might be confined to the life you could experience, without realising there are some other ordinary people living a life like this. (Bao)*

While such description of being a 'spectator' was a dominant tendency, some participants also reported that they viewed these vloggers as someone they were familiar with as "friends"(Wei), "sisters"(Qin), and they desired to make friends with them. The seeming contradictory between the two descriptions could be further demystified by Mao's response:

*(...) Our relationship is like neighbours yet we never drop around. I mean, she does her things at her home silently, while I follow her channel and do my own things; I cast my views upon her life intentionally or unintentionally and in the meantime, she also knew that I was looking at her. I am afraid that such behavior sounds a little bit abnormal (laugh).*

It is interesting that she defended the interaction as two-way rather than 'one-sided' (Horton and Wohl 1956). These accounts demonstrate a distinction from a purely parasocial interaction with vloggers as previous research has illustrated but in accordance with the form of 'identification'. To put it more exactly, it invokes identification beyond para-social interaction. Since young women tried to recognise their shared characteristics with vloggers (Feilitzen & Linne 1975), the initial presupposition of potential identification between audiences and vloggers could be confirmed. Therefore, some form of identification with vloggers exists among these audiences, while the generation of para-social interaction might depend on young women's individual social needs.

## 4.3 Young women's pursuit of "exquisiteness"(*Jingzhi*): the project of an ideal life and ideal self

Based on current analysis, the life state presented by these vlogs serves as a projection of ideal life and ideal self for these young women and seemingly invokes them to fall into an illusion of their future lives. However, they do not necessarily treat the aspirational life state vloggers present as a template but rather reflect on its possible modification in comparison with real life. For instance, when considering of living alone, most of my respondents also took practical threshold of living alone into account, such as "economic cost"(Zi) and "strong willpower" (Yu). Drawing on Kim's (2008) audience research and Sender's (2012) research on the production of 'reflexive self' in makeover shows, this research also probes into young female audiences' reflexivity and categorises it into three sections. The first layer is young women's self-reflexivity in comparing their own daily life with vloggers' during their viewing process. My informants expressed their feelings about a mixture of envy, admiration, and shame. For example, Teng said,

*Actually, I envy these vloggers and their life because they all have qualities I desire yet lacking, such as self-discipline, execution, confidence and having the courage to meet new challenges. Sometimes I feel confused and wonder what I actually want to be; I watch their vlogs and I think I find the answer.*

Quotes such as 'her life (refer to one vlogger) is what I want to live' recurred in the interviews. As Mao said,

*My ideal life state is just like Susie's. Even if living alone, I still cook for myself and have good meals, writing journals everyday to document my ordinary life, hanging out with friends and doing some exercises. In other words, I would like to spend time with everything I love and live in a work-life balance. Although these things appear to be trivial, through her vlogs you can feel that Susie knows what she want.*

Interestingly, although domestic scenes and cooking, which are usually viewed as gendered things account for the main content of those vlogs, my respondents never mentioned femininities in a traditional sense, such as virtuous (*Xianhui*) but instead linked it with new femininities such as 'confidence', 'independence' and 'self-discipline'. Additionally, from their perspective, living alone is no longer viewed as lonely and unfortunate but aspirational and desirable. One respondent mentioned a Korean vlogger who also produces this genre of vlogs:

*She is 35 years old. She is a freelance designer in Tokyo. She is single and living alone. She leaves me an impression that if you are independent and excellent enough, you can just rely on yourself, living alone with joy. And you know, in China, single women aged 35 will be forced to marry. Even though I am only 21, my dad always 'warns' me that ' If you cannot get married by the age of 26, it will be hard for you to get married.' (Tu)*

During the interviews, 'exquisiteness' is a term mentioned by my respondents many times to describe vloggers and their lifestyles. When I asked them what sense this term is embodied in, they often referred to 'the dish preparation, gadgets and decoration and a sense of ritual in cooking a good meal for herself' as already discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, they highlighted vloggers' self-government strategies, including 'time-management strategy', 'work-life balance' and 'healthy eating and exercise habits'. Accordingly, some participants acknowledged that they would sometimes imitate them after watching, such as 'getting up earlier' (Wei), 'going to gym more frequently7 (Li), 'picking up the habit of writing journals and making plans' (Kun). Interestingly, though these vlogs are distinct from Mukbang, it could bring audiences a similar sense of 'vicarious satisfaction' (Choe 2019), not in terms of appetite, but with regard to a fantasy of living an ideal life state. As Mao said, 'Maybe I cannot be self-disciplinary like them but I gained a sense of satisfaction when watching their documented everyday life'. This 'vicarious satisfaction' could further verify young women's identification with vloggers and their lifestyles. Hence, these vlogs not only provide young women an illusion of their future lives but a comparable and practical example or model for reference.

The second layer is audience reflexivity in distinguishing media presentation from reality. Engaging with vloggers' aspirational presentations of their positive attitudes to life and the states of their lives in general, these young women living in a media-saturated era with personal experiences of producing user-generated content are media-savvy. Most of them noticed that these vlogs in disguise the depressing situations one might encounter when living alone. As Yu told me, 'the vlogger shows her negative emotion on Weibo sometimes but never in vlogs'. However, although they acknowledged that vloggers merely highlighted the positive aspect of their life, they did not mind vloggers' performances. Young women's understanding of vloggers and their negotiation between media presentation and the authentic ordinary life further demonstrates that they not merely focus on the visual appeal, or some particular content of these vlogs, but the whole life state that present, which could encourage them to work on themselves.

The third layer is audience reflexivity in relation to other audiences' interpretations of those vlogs. I intended to ask my informants, 'some people in the comment section regarding these vlogs as a frivolous and boring recording of daily life, what do you think? '. A couple of them showed an appreciation of differences in individual interest, while some others justified the time they spent on those vlogs by arguing how they were healed or inspired by these vlogs to lead a similar lifestyle. Wei gave one particular answer of interest,

*I think people who commented like this must lead a completely different lifestyle to vloggers' exquisite life state. It is due to their failure to live seriously. I mean, if you put emphasis on the quality of life and hope to lead an exquisite life, you will not have those ideas. Frankly speaking, I never think of that, I believe, those viewers have never been aware of the subtlety of life.*

To some extent, her account echoes Peng's (2019) description of Chinese youngsters who adopt Xiaozi lifestyles, setting themselves apart from others by underlining their taste for a certain

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lifestyle. Hence, in some circumstances, those vlogs with the characteristics of 'exquisiteness' could be viewed as the projection of young female audiences' self-presentation.

Through analysing audiences' reflexivity, it helps to uncover the underlying motivations of their watching practices. Since lifestyle media is embedded with suggestions on how to make life better (Raisborough 2011), these vlogs also provide an ideal site of personal fulfillment for young women. As already scrutinised and discussed, young women usually watch those vlogs alone and in a peaceful mood, thus watching vlogs provides a time for themselves. In this vein, rather than assuming audiences' practices of watching other ordinary people's mediated daily life as voyeurism appeal (Yin 2019; Qiao 2019), this research argues that these young women play roles as spectators (*Kanke*) in the media spectacle. On the one hand, vlogs can offer a substitutive satisfaction for them when glimpsing into vloggers' organising their life into a seemingly perfect order. On the other hand, they take these vlogs as a reference, to reflect on their own life or looking forward to the near future as vloggers' presented mundane life, thus meeting the fantasy of an ideal self. The discourses of 'pleasing yourself' and 'love life' invoke affective resonance between vloggers and audiences. In this process, compared with those vlogs characterised with confession narratives, solitary daily-life vlogs, with their close resemblance to young women's ordinary lives, are able to invoke identification beyond para-social interaction.

These young women as 'emerging adults', living under the burdens of academics performance, work, families, social relationships and other issues, desiring to seize something they can take control of and are able to gain a sense of satisfaction and achievement instantly. In this situation, those vlogs provide a psychological refuge for anxiety-stricken individuals. Having a glance at other ordinary young women's daily life becomes a way of soothing and healing. In addition, they tend to follow vloggers who are 'down-to-earth', at a similar life stage with them or those who could be viewed as role models for the near future, which might facilitate them in taking references from their lifestyle or imaging themselves in vloggers' shoes. Since 'building up a life' demands construction of a coherent self-narrative in the modern context of identity fragmentation (Giddens 1991), these young women find a pathway inside the 'self', namely improving their personal life, to lead an exquisite life and being in pursuit of the quality of life.

In essence, it is not vloggers' state of living alone, but their positive attitude and exquisite lifestyle when they live solitarily that bring pleasures to these young women. From visual appeal to resorting to the self as the path for solving problems, although audiences' specific watching modes also depend on their individual experiences, they all desire a life with high self-discipline, freedom and fulfillment. It seems to conduct a negotiation of the work-life balance, freedom from prior constraints such as social relationships and families in their project of an ideal life. As Kim (2012) suggests that female individualisation as a transnational flow of desire contributes to the burgeoning of increased freedom, while it also brings increased insecurity and the requirements for women's self-responsibility. To a certain degree, young female audiences' solitary daily-life vlog watching practices are in line with the function

of 'finding oneself' in self-help culture when facing uncertainties of future (Grodin, 1991). In this vein, the findings provide an epitome of some young urban Chinese women with higher education paying great attention to the self and individual life as a reflexive project. Additionally, young women's pursuit of 'exquisiteness' suggests a mixture of escapism, fantasy, the self and identification.

## 4.4   Limitations and suggestions for future research

Limitations should be taken into account for the above findings and thus shedding light on future research. Firstly, my personal position and background knowledge in this unexploited research field inevitably affect my sampling strategy and also the categorization and evaluation of themes, which might need more academic evidence to underpin. For example, male audiences and female audiences of other age groups were excluded from the beginning based on my previous online observation, who might conduct distinct viewing practices. In addition, since the interviews were conducted in Chinese, some deviations in meanings might occur in the process of translating Chinese into English, especially for some key words, such as 'exquisiteness (*Jingzhi*)' and 'spectator (*Kanke*)'. Secondly, due to space constraints, an exploration and analysis of solitary daily-life vlogs were not included; it could be worthy to conduct a combination of visual analysis and audience analysis to gain a more comprehensive understanding of audiences' viewing practices. In that case, the 'healing function' of those vlogs could also be further explored in the context of self-help culture. Lastly, even though this research mentioned Xiaozi lifestyle, it fails to adopt some other social characteristics, such as social class and economic status in the sampling process. Consequently, future research could take those promising variables into account, probing into the relationship between young women's identity construction and their pursuit of 'exquisiteness' as the project of an ideal self and an ideal life.

## 5   CONCLUSION

This dissertation is prompted by an interest in young female audiences of solitary daily-life vlogs in China. As an emerging media format featured documenting ordinary life, the vlog provides a new site for viewers to have a glance into other common people's daily routines and lifestyles in the media spectacle. Based on the literature review, there is a lack in the audience research of lifestyle media and quotidian media content, including vlogs. Therefore, following the practice approach and broadly drawing on previous audience studies with a particular focus on female audiences, this research contextualises young Chinese women's viewing practices in their mundane routines and the specific socio-cultural background, examining the untested assumptions of vlog audiences in existing studies.

Based on twelve in-depth interviews, this research gives audiences a voice and concludes three major themes for young Chinese women's motivations and interpretations in terms of their

viewing practices: visual appeal, seeking resonance and their pursuit of 'exquisiteness'. In line with the notion of the aestheticization of everyday life and previous assumptions, the visually aesthetic components are central to understanding young women's consumption of solitary daily-life vlogs. Along with the curiosity into other ordinary women's daily routines, young female audiences prefer watching solitary daily-life vlogs due to the 'similarity'. Moreover, although some participants regarded these vloggers as their acquaintances and even with a desire of making friends with them, which could be categorised as para-social interaction, the majority of my participants placed themselves as 'spectator'. Through analysing young women's reflexivity regarding their viewing practices, the underlying identification beyond para-social interaction is uncovered and thus disentangling the seeming contradiction between young women's seeking similarities with vloggers and stressing the distance as being a spectator. For young female audiences, watching solitary daily-life vlogs provide a site for them to reflect on their own lives.

To summarise, although the specific mode of watching solitary daily-life vlogs varies among individuals and might change over time, young women's interest in solitary daily-life vlogs and viewing pleasures implies their attention both to the visual consumption in the media spectacle and to the self and their personal life in the context of urbanisation and modernisation. Expect for a sense of companionship and support, vloggers, serving as lifestyle experts, provide young women with the vision of, or the reference to, a seemingly accessible and achievable exquisite life, supplementing their imagination of ordinary life. Young female audiences in this case have a common desire of a life with high self-discipline, freedom and sense of fulfillment, labeling it as 'exquisitness (*Jingzhi*)'. For future studies, those young Chinese women's pursuit of 'exquisiteness' both in the media spectacle and in everyday life could be further exploited through linking it with young women's identity construction.

## NOTES

1. A Japanese film series, which portrays a young woman retreating to her hometown in the mountain area. She lives in self-sufficiency and usually eating alone, gaining energy from nature and seasonal foods, which presents her treating life seriously. See: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3474602/
2. A popular Chinese slow variety show, in which celebrities experience a slow-paced life in countryside and cooking for themselves.
3. A popular media format, which mainly circulates on short video platforms, such as Tik Tok and Kuaishou, and often criticized as both vulgar and brainwashing. The most common filming sites of those rustic videos are the rural areas and their main content including funny stories, rural lives and overacting, usually with crude editing.

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