

The How-to Video: An Exploratory Study on a Popular User-Generated Genre

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Abstract. *Given the increased tendency to turn to the Internet to look for advice and the simultaneous rise of the amateur culture in the online medium, this research aims to explore the characteristics of a type of tutorial associated with the phenomenon, namely the how-to video. In this regard, it examines a corpus of 250 YouTube channels that contain such videos. The study looks over the language of the content, the domain it belongs to, and the type of its creator. The results reveal several specificities of the genre depending on the criteria considered.*

Keywords: YouTube; How-to video tutorial; Amateur culture; Internet culture.

Introduction

As described on its “About Me” page, YouTube’s mission is to “give everyone a voice”, stressing out that “video is a powerful force for education”. The tutorials made and uploaded by amateurs on the platform stand as confirmation, and their popularity is proof that this philosophy works. They allow any Internet user to share their knowledge or learn something new, in a more flexible, informal manner.

Whether we look for the recipe for a dish, a method to improve our home or try to learn to style our hair, there surely is a video on YouTube that provides us the information necessary at any moment, for free. After all, the website’s trends page indicated that over a hundred million how-to videos were uploaded on it and the searches related to them are annually increasing with 70% (Mogensen, 2015).

The phenomenon around amateur-made videos on YouTube has received scholarly attention since the platform became huge. Research has been conducted on the content uploaded on some channels that host amateur-made tutorials, also known as how-to videos, but studies did not go as far as to find the specificities of this genre. The existing scholarship has either focused on the discourse of popular content creators (Riboni, 2017), on a particular subgenre of such videos (ten Kate, 2016), a single topic of the ones they generally cover (Tolson, 2010), or has not clearly made the distinction between how-to videos and other similar user-generated genres (Tolson, 2010; Gruffat, 2015). Hence, this paper aims to provide a foundation for further exploratory research on the how-to video that has become a part of many people’s daily lives. The novelty it brings is that it discusses its main distinctive characteristics while also considering more domains and subgenres.

How-to videos on YouTube

The tutorial is not an invention of YouTube, it is just that the platform’s affordances have helped it change and adapt to the new environment. According to Collin’s Dictionary, “in university a tutorial is a regular meeting between a tutor or professor and one or several students, for discussion of a subject that is being studied”. However, a tutorial can also be “part of a book or a computer program which helps you learn something step-by-step without a teacher”. While having their origins in academia, all kinds of tutorials revolve around the same principle: learning.

The tutorial that dominates YouTube is known as the how-to video. While these two terms are used interchangeably, early research on the topic sometimes even categorizes them as vlogs (Tolson, 2010). In a paper from 2015, Gruffat looked at tutorials made by non-professionals and concluded that they often are situated at the convergence of two phenomena: the DIY and vlogger culture, and called them “tutorial-vlogs” (Gruffat, 2015). Riboni acknowledged that make-up tutorials are a combination of the how-to genre and the vlog (Riboni, 2017). Although it represents a separate genre, the how-to video has not yet been discussed as such.

As its name suggests, the how-to video is a video that gives basic, step-by-step instructions on how to accomplish a certain task. The how-to format is not an invention of YouTube either, as prior to that people could turn to how-to books for help. The phenomenon is in fact what Bolter and Grusin call “remediation”, and it occurs when some media reform other media in terms of content and form (Bolter & Grusin, 2000). In this case, it is about new media borrowing characteristics of older media. Both such books and videos are texts that offer their audiences tips and tricks they can put into practice by themselves.

What distinguishes how-to videos that became very popular on YouTube is the fact that they are usually created by amateurs, and are starring amateurs that show others how to do something in particular while performing that action. While writing and eventually publishing a book implies more effort and resources, nowadays, due to the technological advances, anyone can create a video and share it on the Internet. What’s more, the audience does not have to buy the content, as it is available to anyone online. As everyone is interested in saving resources, this is an aspect that contributes to the success of the genre.

As YouTube was known in its beginnings as a platform created for fostering amateur creativity (Burges & Green, 2009), so is the how-to video to some extent. Many such videos are created by users that are not media professionals that want to share their knowledge and skills with other people like them. These content creators came to be known as “ordinary experts” (Riboni, 2017). Yet, in spite of their informal origins, such tutorials resemble traditional speech genres associated with expertise (Tolson, 2010).

However, it frequently occurs that some amateur made how-to videos become so popular that their creators eventually begin making money out of the work. Even though they start out as non-professionals, they somehow turn into professionals over time. As the whole notion becomes paradoxical, their status remains a subject of debate (Burges & Green, 2009). Riboni noted that this kind of YouTubers go through a continuous negotiation between professionalism and amateurship in their discourse (Riboni, 2017).

Although the website hosts large numbers of how-to videos, that does not mean that they are all created by amateurs; big players can also produce them. Various companies learnt how to turn the genre’s rising popularity to their advantage in marketing campaigns, so they also create such videos. For instance, French cosmetics company Make Up For Ever’s YouTube subscriber count increased by 11% in one month after launching a campaign that consists of how-to videos where it promotes its products (O’Neil-Hart, 2017). By the same token, YouTube is not the only place where how-to videos can be found online. It is just the place where they are so numerous and very popular.

While YouTube allows its users to upload content in predefined categories, it even has one called How to & Style, where materials that give instructions usually go. This category was identified as being one of the most successful in terms of popularity on the platform (Cullen, 2014). Nonetheless, it is highly likely that some users do not upload their how-to videos in this category as they can be incorporated in others as well. For instance, a video about how to use or fix an electronic device such as a smartphone could fall under the Science & Technology category predefined by YouTube.

Moreover, not only can how-to videos be made by anyone, but they can also cover any topic. These videos are addressing every need, curiosity or question that people usually type into a search bar, offering tips and tricks for anybody interested in learning something. Even searching for how to make a how-to video leads to numerous options.

Furthermore, when it comes to identifying and retrieving them, they usually have the “how-to” syntagma followed by the topic they cover in their titles (e.g., “How to Make a Unicorn Cake” on amateur channel called Rosanna Pansino), but this is not always the case.

A specific type of how-to video, the one that presents life-hacks, stands out on YouTube, as it has already caught the attention of many viewers. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, life-hacks are tips or techniques whose purpose is to make a familiar task faster and more efficiently to accomplish. Thus, while they follow a tutorial structure, life-hack videos on YouTube often present clever ways of doing things in the most atypical ways. The creators of such content often use objects or products for other purposes than their original one (ten Kate, 2016). Thus, life-hack videos do not constitute a different type of video tutorial; they are still how-to videos. Videos depicting life-hacks are usually easy to distinguish based on their titles as well, as many of them contain the “life-hack” syntagma.

What’s more, in the case of many such videos, they do not only present one life-hack, but they rather enumerate more solutions to a single problem or to similar issues revolving around the same topic. Thus, they are reminiscent of the listicle, the journalistic article where the items of concern are presented in the form of a list (Vijgen, 2014). Although the format was used in the newspapers in the eighties, the listicle became a new media phenomenon about thirty years later, gaining popularity on the Internet a little ahead of the life-hack video. It is frequently encountered on blogs and web platforms such as the one of media outlet Buzzfeed. The titles of listicles usually make them easily recognizable, having a structure that begins with a number, followed by the topic that the items listed in the article refer to (e.g., “17 Giant Foods From Around The World” posted on Buzzfeed). Similarly, the videos that present more than one life-hack received titles structured in the same way (e.g. “DIY Morning Routine – 25 Life HACKS to

Get Ready Fast for BACK TO SCHOOL” uploaded on the amateur channel called SaraBeautyCorner - DIY, Comedy, Makeup, Nail Art).

Additionally, as YouTube is a global resource, how-to videos can be in any language. Although English is considered to be the “lingua franca of the Internet” (Shifman, 2014, p. 154), this is not necessarily the only one that is used.

Research design and method

The aim of this study is to offer a deeper understanding of the how-to video as a distinctive user-generated genre. For this reason, it tries to answer the following research questions:

RQ1:How are languages in which the content of how-to videos is created distributed on YouTube?

RQ2:What are the defining characteristics of how-to videos depending on the type of content creator?

RQ3:What are the defining characteristics of amateur how-to videos depending on the domain covered?

Given the free and somewhat chaotic nature of YouTube and the large number of how-to videos it hosts, we face the difficulty, or perhaps impossibility to track all of them. While they can be uploaded in any category, they are even harder to trace. Moreover, selecting videos to build a sample by searching for the “how-to” syntagma on the platform would also imply looking for specific topics, whereas this study aims to observe what domains they cover in general. Thus, this study only looks over content in the How to & Style predefined category.

Therefore, the Social Blade ranking was used as a starting point for building the sample. It measures the influence of a channel based on a variety of metrics, including average view counts. It does not only use the number of subscribers and views, as the first can be cheated. In other words, an influential channel is both followed by numerous YouTube users, but it also reaches large audiences that are not necessarily registered on the platform. Social Blade’s list of 250 most influential YouTube channels that contain videos uploaded in the How to & Style category constituted a purposeful source for examination.

However, the channels comprised in this list also contain other kinds of videos, although the predominant content is of the how-to type. Therefore, through quantitative and qualitative content analysis, the channels were classified depending on the topics they covered in the majority of the videos uploaded on them, and categorization was mostly made based on the titles and thumbnails. Where it was not clear enough what topics videos from a certain channel covered, a number of materials was watched until conclusions could be drawn.

Findings

Overall, 110 out of the 250 most influential channels contain content in English, while the remaining 140 are in 19 other languages (Spanish, Hindi and Japanese being the most popular). While English still is the most often encountered, a significant number of channels containing how-to videos in other languages are considered influential. Hence the English language is no longer a barrier for those who do not speak it and want to produce or consume how-to videos, indicating that YouTube really is a useful resource for everyone.

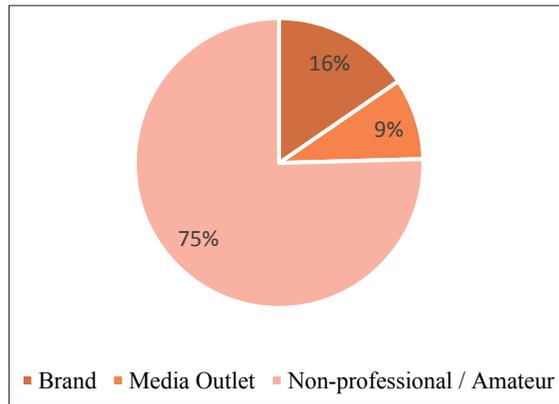


Figure 1. How-to videos in English by channel owner type

Three types of channel owners can be distinguished among those on the list of 250 most influential: brands, media outlets and non-professionals or amateurs. The first two categories both involve professionally produced content and feature someone with expertise in the field. The third rather refers to users that have most probably started out by performing the actions as a hobby, and continued to delve into specific topics.

A number of 126 channels have over one million subscribers, on the top of the list being an amateur that uploads content in Spanish and over 21 million YouTube users follow it. Concerning the views, the content on 22 channels was visualized more than a billion times. The channel that ranked first on this criterion is owned by a media outlet that created content in English, having gained over 5 billion views.

Of the total amount of channels in English, 17 are owned by brands, 10 by media outlets, while 83 belong to non-professionals or amateurs (Figure 1). Thus, while there is a considerable amount of how-to videos created by professionals, the ones made by non-professionals and amateurs are still the predominant ones.

When it comes to already established brands, these are present on YouTube to promote their products, incorporating how-to videos in their strategies. Hence, al-

though professionally produced, some of their videos are either inspired by amateur created content and follow the same format, featuring characters performing activities at home, or are the result of partnerships with amateur YouTubers that became popular due to the success of their content. A case in point is the channel of American shopping platform Wish, ranked by Social Blade as the 15th most influential. While it contains other types of videos as well, the company created videos offering tips and tricks for DIY home decoration, beauty and some life-hacks, using products it sells. Moreover, Wish also teamed up with popular amateur channel owners, like BreannaSparkles4Ever or Camiicamiii (formerly known as Blablacamila), who produce fashion and beauty tutorials respectively. The two YouTubers created videos of them at home, trying on jewelry and make-up brushes sold by Wish, which they would use in their tutorials.

Regarding media outlets, many of them also chose to have respective YouTube channels where they upload content which was or was not previously distributed on their own websites. These can either belong to TV stations that upload materials resembling the how-to video format, like cooking shows, or can be owned by online media outlets that are generally dedicated to boost creativity. For instance, online media outlet Bright Side, a website that offers tips and tricks in many domains mostly in the form of listicles, has a YouTube channel that contains how-to videos in many domains. The channel ranked second on Social Blade's list of 250 most influential videos. In this case, remediation occurs on a different level, as the company often creates how-to videos using content previously included in listicles posted on its own website. Hence, since this content is reused with the purpose of creating a different type of media text, Bright Side's YouTube channel is dominated by life-hack videos.

As to the 83 videos in English made by amateurs and non-professionals, their content creators share their knowledge with others by offering tips and tricks in certain domains as follows: Beauty & Fashion (24), Cooking (11), Health (6), Home Improvement (11), Kids (22), Sex & Relationships (3), Skills (5) and Technology (1) (Figure 2). Although the topics featured are very diverse, some domains are more popular and more searched for than others.

Depending on the domain covered, these how-to videos have the following characteristics:

- Beauty & Fashion: videos presenting beauty and fashion tips
By watching such how-tos, users can learn how to obtain a specific look or how to obtain a product that would eventually help them reach that result. "Get Ready with Me" videos also pertain to this vast domain, as the channel owner is depicted while showing the audience how he or she prepares for an event or is sharing a routine.
- Cooking: videos describing recipes for food and beverages

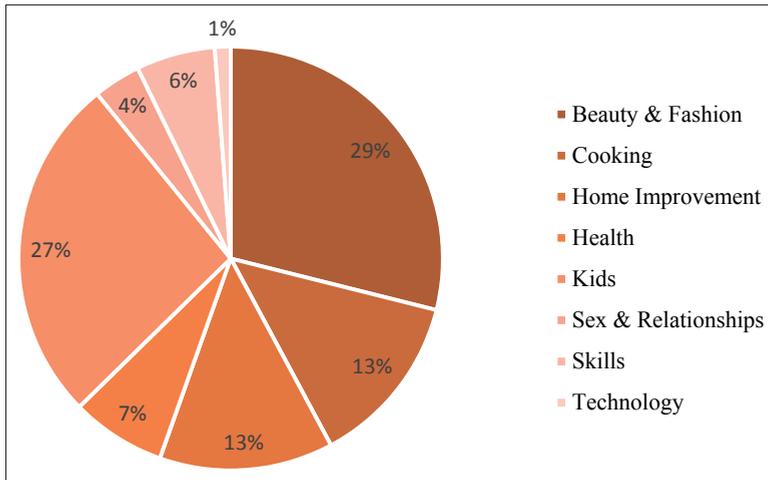


Figure 2. Amateur how-to videos in English by domain covered

- Health: videos presenting illness cures or personal hygiene tips
- Home Improvement: videos referring to tips and tricks that could be useful in any household
The viewers of such how-tos can find out how to use specific products or tools to obtain a specific décor, or can discover how to repair or clean household items through less common methods.
- Kids: videos offering tips on how to make toys (including slime) or other objects, games to play with children, or activities for them
This kind of videos is generally aimed at parents who can find inspiration and new ideas, and discover uncommon uses for many products that are not usually related with children activities in any way.
- Sex & Relationships: videos implying pieces of advice about how one should behave in relation with others, be them family or friends
Prank videos are often encountered, and their viewers can learn how to play jokes on someone, depending on the relationship they have with that person.
- Skills: videos referring to a variety of practical or artistic skills that one could gain by watching them
After watching such videos, users can learn how to draw, dance or speak a new language, (or get better at it) among others.
- Technology: videos containing instructions for the efficient usage of devices and applications that are very popular nowadays, or methods for fixing them

While sub-genres like “Get Ready With Me” or prank videos were identified in regard to some domains, all of them contain videos that present life-hacks. These are easily noticeable due to their titles that explicitly mention it through the presence of the “life-hack” syntagma. However, it is possible that many of them still

hide under the “how-to” or “tutorial” names. There are YouTube channels in the sample that even have different variations of the word “hack” in their name (e.g. LHackTV, DaveHax or HawkGuruHacker), suggesting that all they offer is life-hack videos, whereas not all they upload expresses it through the title.

For some videos, like those featuring things for Kids, it is easy to say that they are targeted at a specific audience segment. The tips and tricks are not meant to be implemented by children alone, as they are rather supposed to be done by parents beforehand, or by parents and children together. As to other types of how-to videos, it is more difficult to assign an audience segment that would be more suitable at first glance. For instance, it would be unjust to assume that those in the Technology category are only made for technology enthusiasts. They could be searched for by anyone who is interested in using a device or software and can be useful to anyone who needs a little help with repairing and maintaining them. Perhaps smaller subcategories could be associated with more specific audience segments. The same applies to how-to videos on Beauty & Fashion, Cooking, Health, Home Improvement, Sex & Relationships or Skills.

Discussions and conclusion

This research provides an insight into the specificities of the how-to video in an attempt of helping to differentiate it from other similar user-generated genres and provide a foundation for further studies. When it comes to how-to videos that have conquered YouTube and the Internet at large, the content created by non-professionals and amateurs remains the most frequently encountered, most viewed and followed, thus the most influential among the audiences. Nonetheless, by taking a closer look at the situation, it becomes clearer how related these videos are and how remediation occurs on many levels. While amateur made how-to videos have as predecessor old media that have a more professional or formal nature, they, in turn, became so popular that they started being professionally produced and used by companies with the ultimate purpose of gaining profit. Given that they started being used as a marketing tool, understanding their characteristics could be beneficial.

Even though the English language remains the preferred one for knowledge exchange on the Internet, both parties, professional or not, are using other languages as well, giving non-speakers higher chances to understand the content and further put it into practice by themselves.

While how-to videos made by amateurs and non-professionals cover many domains, they have different characteristics depending on that. Some of the domains even have their own subgenres. However, the life-hack video, a subgenre that is as important as the how-to video itself, is found among all domains, offering people atypical solutions to their problems.

The current study finds its limitations in the relatively reduced sample used for examination as it may not be fully representative of the how-to video landscape on all YouTube. Further research is also needed to increase the generalizability of these findings. A larger, or a differently chosen sample might reveal other aspects. Moreover, rather looking at the channels and descriptive features such as title or thumbnails than at the actual content of the videos, might not be revealing enough. More in-depth qualitative content analysis of the media texts might provide more details.

Future research could also use the characteristics identified in this paper to delve deeper into the topic, and identify other specificities of the how-to video, such as a more explicit target audience or duration patterns, as it is possible these too are related to the domain covered or subgenre, and might vary depending on them. Furthermore, knowledge of these characteristics is necessary for studies on the construction of authenticity of this type of media texts, a topic that is frequently considered in regard to user-generated content. The classification on domains might also be a contributing factor when deciding on the methodology used for other studies on how-to videos. Last but not least, this research could also serve as a starting point for comprehensive studies on subgenres of the how-to video, as some have already gained popularity in the online medium.

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