

# HANGING OUT AT HOME AS A LIFESTYLE

## YouTube Home Tour Vlogs in East Asia

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The locus of the home is one of the earliest and most common settings and backdrops for YouTube vlogs. In the decade since YouTube creators and Influencers have flourished in the industry, new strategies, mechanisms, and vocabularies of self-presentation have emerged across various social media, resulting in the emblem of the home emerging as a topic, genre, and setting in YouTube vlogs. Several studies have studied the proliferation of various genres of vlogs on YouTube—generally surveying how the medium is used for diary-keeping, sharing one’s identity, or constructing one’s self—but very few focus on the spatiality of the home as a locale and topic of content production.

Three studies on YouTube vlogs, in particular, have focused on the home as a topic, genre, and setting for discussion. Juliano Spyer’s thesis looked at YouTube vloggers in the beauty genre and the creation of a social order, and in one chapter focused on the spatiotemporality of their video content. Specifically, they point out that room tours are a popular *topic* among beauty gurus on YouTube and provide “an introduction to the person’s room including explanations about the meaning of certain objects of decoration and about how different kinds of products ... are organized and stored.”<sup>2</sup> Building on Spyer’s work, Gala Rebane has focused on the *genre* of home tour vlogs in their paper that defines room tours as “short, amateurish or semi-professional videos [in which] predominantly female teenagers put their bedrooms on show, painstakingly commenting on furniture and decoration”<sup>3</sup> and “flaunting material possessions” as an extension of their “narcissistic tendencies on social media.”<sup>4</sup> Drawing up a literature review-based conceptual history of visiting the parlor, Rebane argues that YouTube home tours are a similar interstitial space between privacy and public socialization within the locus of the home, where symbolic capital can be put on display for viewers as “virtual guests”<sup>5</sup> to take in. Rebane further contrasts the room tour genre with DIY videos; in that while the latter is “concerned with interior decoration” and “practical guidance”, the former “only boasts [of] the results of that process.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps most relevant is Rainer Hillrichs’ broader study on the history of the earliest vlogs on YouTube and how they managed the bedroom as a *setting* for their content. Hillrichs observes that prior to YouTube’s culture of rapid professionalization, bedrooms were not merely unthoughtful, convenient backdrops for producing content, but were already “motivated by particular video projects” and were “willingly, consciously, and performatively”<sup>7</sup> captured on film. Focusing on the teenagers whose videos comprised the earliest YouTube archives, Hillrichs argues that the arrangement of bedrooms in the absence of the camera are already manipulated for “a private local audience”<sup>8</sup> such as one’s friends and parents, thus challenging the idea that such home vlogs are

mere extensions of “home movies and home videos” that had more accurately captured life ‘as is’ pre-social media.<sup>9</sup>

Following from these three key works, this chapter presents a subset of work from an exploratory study to survey other formats, demographics, and genres of home tour vlogs and vlogs that privilege the home as a locus, specific to the East Asian context, in relation to performances of class in domestic spaces. This diversion is a reflexive decision considering that Hillrichs’ study has focused on American YouTubers by nature of the history of YouTube, that Rebane’s survey of videos that were “chosen randomly” is (still) dominated by the figure of a “girl in her mid-teens, mostly white and middle- to upper-middle class,”<sup>10</sup> and that Spyer’s study focused on British YouTube microcelebrities.

### **East Asian Context and Methodology**

Topically, research on Asian cultures on YouTube can be grouped into three categories. The first group of studies predominantly focus on the East Asian diaspora, usually from the US, who are parsed as ‘Asian American’ in relation to discourses of cultural hybridity.<sup>11-14</sup> Although sometimes claiming to focus on the ‘Asian community’, these studies are still largely Anglo-centric in their sampling, for instance, by focusing on YouTube channels where content creators primarily generate English language content. This reflects the larger Anglo- and Euro-centricity of studies on YouTube videos, where studies have claimed to draw from a “random sample” via search terms on YouTube only to exclude those that are not in the English language,<sup>15</sup> for instance. The second group of studies focus on how YouTube is used as a medium to document and disseminate knowledge about various practices in East Asia, such as the promotion and remixing of legacy media productions,<sup>16-18</sup> documenting and discussing cultural heritage,<sup>19</sup> consuming news,<sup>20</sup> and producing and discovering identity.<sup>21</sup> At times considering nation-specific issues such as media censorship or state authoritarianism, these studies have also explored the potential for YouTube to be a site of participating in politics, political campaigning and to hold politically subversive content.<sup>22-26</sup> The third group of studies has focused specifically on socio-cultural practices on YouTube content that is based on East Asian cultural phenomena, such as the experience of expatriates in these countries,<sup>27</sup> East Asian specific memes<sup>28</sup> and internet celebrities.<sup>29</sup>

This chapter is oriented to the third group of studies and focuses on YouTube videos produced by East Asian content creators in East Asian languages. Specifically, this chapter looks at YouTube vlogs that focus on the home as a topic and locale of content production, and how these creators’ domestic practices and leisurely pursuits convey inconspicuous consumption as an indicator of class within their East Asian contexts. Responding to social theorist Raewyn Connell’s call to decolonize social thought by interrogating our practices of knowledge production and methodological application in research,<sup>30,31</sup> the data in the chapter are purposively sampled to discuss two specific genres of home vlogs or domestic space vlogs that are popular among Chinese, Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese YouTube creators but have not otherwise been covered in the literature of YouTube home vlogs thus far. The YouTube creators in this study are drawn from a larger set of East Asian YouTube channels that are being observed by the author in an ongoing pilot study on East Asian Influencers as producers and gatekeepers of knowledge, and have been studied via immersive digital ethnography from June 2018 to April 2019.

The survey of YouTube home vlogs in the larger study can be classified into three broad categories: *Recreational* home vlogs displaying YouTube creators flaunting their houses or holiday homes; *Procedural* home vlogs documenting YouTube creators cleaning, organizing, or upgrading their space; and *Milestone* home vlogs detailing YouTube creators progressing in their domestic living space, such as moving into a college dormitory or a new house. This chapter concentrates on the recreational genres of ‘slow living at home’ and ‘home cafés.’

Each channel is screened weekly for new video updates and announcements, the content of the videos and comments section, and the rhythm and shape of the discourse in the comments section,

all of which are observed and recorded with thick description in ethnographic fieldnotes. Each of the videos in this chapter was precisely selected from the YouTube creators' channels to demonstrate the core features of the genres. They contain spoken and written Chinese, Japanese, and Korean and are usually complemented by English subtitles provided by the creator, or, in a few instances, crowd-sourced and volunteered by other viewers; some of the video titles are auto-translated by YouTube while others are bilingually titled by the creators. Although it is difficult to generalize the demographic of these YouTube creators given that the variety of videos and channels is diverse across the cultural and language groups, the sample in this chapter and in the larger study do not reflect Rebane's<sup>32</sup> claim that home tour vlog creators are usually teenagers and differ from Spyer's<sup>33</sup> focus on microcelebrities, as they primarily comprise adults in their 20s–30s and include an assortment of internet celebrities<sup>34</sup> and non-celebrity, non-monetized YouTube creators.

### Slow Living at Home

'Slow living at home' generally features YouTube creators who share sentiments about preferring to stay in and spend recreational time at home rather than venturing outside. These videos tend to focus on reducing one's conspicuous consumption, being more mindful about waste, and resisting societal pressures such as overworking. Many of these channels include YouTube creators who reveal that they have resigned from high paying, fast-paced corporate jobs to pursue better wellbeing, or that they are recovering from mental health conditions such as burn out, stress, and exhaustion, which are urban conditions that proliferate in fast-paced, commercial-driven cities such as Shanghai, Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei, to name a few. Unlike traditional displays of class and wealth that are performed through "conspicuous consumption"<sup>35</sup> these YouTube creators boast the valuable asset of time and the ability to juggle both their work lives and a degree of "conspicuous leisure"<sup>36</sup> within the confines of their homes. Their capacity to opt out of the rat race in their countries by pursuing alternative mostly home-based freelance work and their dedication to the conscientious keeping up of their domestic spaces signify a "pecuniary ability to afford a life of idleness"<sup>37</sup> at least to a certain extent.

One such channel is 𠄎𠄎 sueddu. Based in South Korea, the videos feature a young woman whose face is generally obscured and whose movements are filmed from the neck down. Even then, the focus of the videos is less on her body and more on her household environment. Like many videos in this genre, dialogue and speech in these videos are minimized and diegetic sounds of various actions on screen are emphasized. Occasionally, some of these videos feature a soft and gentle narrative complementing certain scenes in post-production, layered over the diegetic sound. They almost always feature brief captions describing the YouTube creator's actions or thoughts in small, slim, simple white script placed in the middle of the screen. At times, some scenes are complemented with light background music.

### *Narrativizing Visual Rhythms of Everyday Routines*

In an early video, 𠄎𠄎 sueddu explains at the beginning of one of her standard house tours that she has recently moved house: "I move to a new house. It's a new house but feels familiar. It's because I used to live here till a year ago."<sup>38</sup> She explains in another video that her "Home is a precious place with many meanings to me. Where I can be MY SELF."<sup>39</sup> With the house as her primary locus of inhabitation and where she develops her personhood the most, 𠄎𠄎 sueddu explains how she went to great lengths to return to this previous apartment. Her videos generally follow the rhythm of her daily life, starting from when she wakes up, makes her bed, and makes herself some breakfast. The rest of the video usually spotlights routine activities such as doing the laundry and cleaning, or other home-based lounging practices such as reading or enjoying a coffee.

The scenes pan across different areas of her house in each video, and zoom in on different corners or artifacts to complement the slow living practice captured on film. ㄸㅍ sueddu's videos of the daily mundane usually emphasize diegetic sounds completed with superimposed white Korean script on screen as descriptors: the pouring water into a flask from making a cup of coffee ("This moka pot that I bought in Spain is really useful"), the crinkling of plastic from unwrapping packages that arrive by post ("The items I ordered last night arrived this afternoon"), or the pitter-patter footsteps of her dog around the living room ("Bebe [name of her dog] eats a snack while I work").<sup>40</sup> Set against the culture of "conspicuous consumption"<sup>41</sup> that is prevalent throughout East Asia, the wares ㄸㅍ sueddu displays around her home may not always connote "pecuniary beauty"<sup>42</sup> *per se*—a status elevation and distinction accorded to goods desired by people by virtue of its prohibitive financial cost—as they are often mere household products. However, the short captions she shares often subtly point to their distinction as 'exotic' or 'exclusive' wares by referencing the holiday destinations from which she acquired her goods, and indirectly highlight her relative wealth as such.

### *Aestheticizing the Principles of Housekeeping*

In other videos, ㄸㅍ sueddu is focused on specific house-bound recreation activities such as painting,<sup>43</sup> and explains how these activities allow her to appreciate the locus of her home—in one scene where her camera fixates on a sunray on her carpet, her caption reads "I like today's sunlight."<sup>44</sup> Other videos turn to very specific steps of routine household chores such as loading up a washing machine with clothes, starting it up, listening to water gush through the pipes, and watching the machine spin rounds.<sup>45</sup> Like other channels in her genre, ㄸㅍ sueddu also espouses some principles of housekeeping, which in her instance include minimalism and recycling<sup>46</sup> through demonstrations of her practices in these home tour vlogs. In a handful of videos where she has to go for a grocery run or go to work, the scenes cut from her morning routine to short snippets of her commute on public transport, where the camera continues to focus on the scenery to reflect her daily rhythms, until it culminates in her return home. Here, she regularly refers to her home as a refuge, as encapsulated in one video where she is seen preparing an elaborate meal in the kitchen upon coming home at nightfall; the captions accompanying her cooking and winding down at home read "It is late ... but I bake meat for me who suffered all day."<sup>47</sup> In these examples, YouTube creators such as ㄸㅍ sueddu demonstrate their "habitus"<sup>48</sup>—a conditioned set of dispositions, preferences, practices, and habits that are ingrained and embodied in persons as a sum of their upbringing, social exposure, and personal experiences—through the decisions they make about mundane routines such as housekeeping and preparing a home-cooked meal. Building on Veblen's notion of "pecuniary beauty",<sup>49</sup> she displays a "pecuniary taste"<sup>50</sup> in that her lifestyle patterns refute the mainstream 'big city' culture of outsourcing household chores to casual cleaners and substituting the labor of home-cooked meals for convenient take-out. Instead, ㄸㅍ sueddu is able to afford spare time during regular working hours to focus on her chores, and some leisurely time after her freelance work to invest in an extent of culinary extravagance.

### *Slow Home Living as Recuperation*

Slow living at home is not just a lifestyle choice but also a recuperation device. The home has long been designated as a space where people calibrate their "moral standards, happiness, and success in the outside world."<sup>51</sup> Studies in the medical and health fields have promoted home-based care for people with serious mental illness,<sup>52</sup> found that the elderly who stay at home are able to receive better social support and increase morale alongside good material and emotional needs,<sup>53</sup> and that the elderly who have deteriorating mobility can still lead meaningful lives at home when they experience: independence from the privacy and control over their environment, familiarity with

their surroundings, the presence of a stable social network, home maintenance as productive exercise, a conducive space to provide hospitality, and the home as a locus of meaning-making during crucial milestones.<sup>54</sup> Although she is a young person, some of these principles similarly apply to *썬뽀* *sueddu*: the desire to have control over one's environment is exactly why she painstakingly moved back to her former apartment; her stable social network is not focused on other human actors, but more on routine places of familiarity such as the grocery store or the regular coffee shop she frequents in her videos; home maintenance is portrayed as a mindful and even enjoyable activity rather than a chore; and although more rare, hospitality is practiced through the deliberate sprucing up of the home and preparing of a meal for visitors, and the house becomes a locus for meaningful seasonal celebrations through a change in décor such as table settings. Further, juxtaposed against the networks of South Korean home improvement vlogs that often focus on inevitable clutter from a lack of time to clean, space constraints in a crowded city like Seoul, and the struggle to personalize one's domestic space given the prevalence of transient renting practices over the more secure home ownership, *썬뽀* *sueddu*'s class is further accentuated through the meta message in her vlogs: she has the financial capacity and temporal ability to cultivate her home into a leisurely space wherein she is able to pursue pecuniary hobbies such as calligraphy and painting, and slow living at home can be a way of life.

### *Subtle Integration of Monetization*

In early 2019, *썬뽀* *sueddu*'s channel began to make sponsored videos for collaborations with clients, although still keeping in theme with her ethos of slow living: in the first of these videos, she records her house cleaning routine and focuses on clearing her closet, using this opportunity to showcase a new machine for sterilizing fabrics. Her integration of the sponsored message feels seamless and unforced, as her videos maintain their usual aesthetic and only lightly reference the product. For instance, in one scene the camera pans on her dog sniffing the foot of the machine, with a caption that reads "Samsung Air Dresser I just brought home last weekend. Bebe is sniffing at the new stuff." She then shows herself hanging up a few heavy clothes in the machine, and explains in the captions that "It removes dust and chemicals that are left on the lining of the clothes", and continues the video with other household chores. There is minimal overt promotion or mentioning of the brand or product, apart from the video information that reads: "Hello everyone! I've got so many request about making Home cleaning video. And finally, here it is! \* This video was made with support from Samsung Electronics, and contains AD." Comments on this first sponsored video are still focused on how peaceful and calming her videos her, and how viewers feel relaxed and soothed once again.<sup>55</sup> This marked the beginning of some conspicuous consumption practices in her videos as these products come with a hefty price-tag, and provide non-essential middle-class housekeeping. Other channels of 'slow living at home' include South Korean *카드슈*<sup>56</sup> who tends to focus on plant care and culinary skills, and South Korean *해그린달* *haegreendal*<sup>57</sup> who focuses on cooking for her children and decorating her home.

### **Home Cafés**

Home cafés are a subgenre of 'slow living at home', wherein the logic is to be able to simulate café-style ambience and foods in the comfort of one's own home. Through detailed home tour vlogs focused on the kitchen where food is prepared and the dining and living areas where meals are consumed, such YouTube creators as *Cafe709* showcase their homewares through immaculate kitchen and dishware, flaunt their home décor through beautiful backdrops and props on the dining table, and feature long montages of themselves slowly enjoying a proper home-cooked meal in their homes. Although it has been offered that women tend to be "more attached to memorabilia and men to items of instrumental value, such as furniture and appliances,"<sup>58</sup> home café

YouTube creators tend to blur these demarcations by concentrating care towards and highlighting the sentimental value of functional objects such as coffee machines or wooden tea spoons. In various videos, they explain how a specific item of dishware is meaningful for its visual aesthetic or the associated memories of previous pleasant experiences. In other words, despite the temptation to maximize convenience and ease, eating alone at home can still be designed to be mindful and enjoyable. These behaviors constitute a form of “aspirational class” where the elite class in society are defined less by their “economic position” than their “acquisition of knowledge and culture.”<sup>59</sup> Such YouTube creators “reveal their social position through much more subtle behaviors and goods that are not necessarily expensive but imply a rich cultural and social capital relegated to aspirational class membership.”<sup>60</sup>

### *Eating Alone but Eating Well*

Various news reports posit that the rise of people eating alone in East Asian countries is due to the growth of single-person households, a falling birthrate, an aging society, time constraints due to a hectic pace of life, and the lack of company due to anomie in city life.<sup>61–63</sup> While such phenomena has resulted in digital trends like the collaborative eating practice of *mukbang* in South Korea, where users livestream themselves eating while socializing with followers via a screen,<sup>64</sup> home café YouTube creators turn away from the notion of convenient takeaway foods and instead channel their energies into preparing “proper meals” comprising “fresh” and “natural” ingredients that are “cooked rather than cold or heated up.”<sup>65</sup> Such elaborate cooking, plating, and eating is experienced as a privilege and luxury in the climate of fast paced East Asian cities—considering their “conspicuous leisure” as the “ability to use time for something with no productive purpose”<sup>66</sup> (given that quicker and cheaper alternatives abound)—as evidenced in the comments section where viewers consistently query what these YouTube creators do for work to be able to afford this time, how much effort each home café experience takes, and the financial sink of such a lifestyle choice. Like the ‘slow living at home’ genre, these videos usually obscure one’s face and focus on diegetic sound.

### *Slow Cooking and Slow Eating*

One such channel is the South Korean Cafe709. A typical video such as “Sunday late lunch”<sup>67</sup> catalogues the process of the YouTube creator slicing, dicing, and mixing ingredients with the camera focused on the kitchen top, before moving to focus on pots boiling and pans frying as the camera fixates on the stove top. Once the food is ready, it is carefully plated onto dishware, artfully garnished, and conscientiously set on a table alongside various matching utensils. As if to accentuate “conspicuous leisure,”<sup>68,69</sup> around three minutes of footage (which is rather long in the context of YouTube vlogs that average 11–15 minutes), which is often comprised of longer scenes that have been truncated and spliced to speed things along, is then dedicated to the camera fixated on the Cafe709 creator and a family member dining, with the frame capturing their bodies from neck down, and focused on their hands and dishes. There is some light small talk in the background, but emphasis is on the diegetic sound of crunching on vegetables, slurping on soup, and chewing on meats. Each video usually ends when their plates are emptied, and they clear and clean the dining table to end the scene.

### *Care around Dishware*

Some videos may cast a spotlight on special dishware, such as teacups and tea plates,<sup>70</sup> or elaborate Japanese wooden dishware including matching trays, bowls, chopsticks, and chopstick holders.<sup>71</sup> They may focus on variations of their daily meals such as “Sunday lunch,” which appears heartier

than the usual fare,<sup>72</sup> or “Simple breakfast,” which seems to require less preparation time for lazy days.<sup>73</sup> Still other videos focus on special occasions with more extravagant meals such as “New Year’s Morning,”<sup>74</sup> or culturally specific dishes that necessitate very distinctive kitchenware such as “Sukiyaki”<sup>75</sup> which requires a continuously boiling ceramic pot on a portable stove on the dining table. Other channels in this genre include South Korean 아이비 키친 Ivy Kitchen,<sup>76</sup> or Chinese-Australian 子时当归<sup>77,78</sup> that focuses especially on the grocery shopping experience prior to meal preparation.

### Hangin Out at Home as a Lifestyle

While prior Anglo- and Euro-centric studies on YouTube home vlogs have deliberated how they are being integrated into commercialized Influencer content,<sup>79</sup> how they may convey continuums of privacy and publicness,<sup>80</sup> and whether the nature of such footage is simulated or manipulated to convey semblances of privacy,<sup>81</sup> this chapter is an exploratory study into the other genres of home vlogs that abound among East Asian creators on YouTube, and how their domestic practices and spaces can be read as displays and affirmations of social class. Unlike other studies on microcelebrity<sup>82</sup> and ordinary users<sup>83</sup> on YouTube home vlogs, these videos discard the primacy of person-based fame by obscuring the facial identity of the creator, choosing instead to focus on the feelings of spatiality and temporality within the locus of the home through camera pans over spaces, objects, routines, and practices, and in the process, reveal the “conspicuous leisure”<sup>84,85</sup> and “pecuniary taste” and lifestyles<sup>86,87</sup> of a leisurely aspirational class. Specifically, the chapter draws from a purposive sampling of video styles that are popular among YouTube creators in China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to outline the core elements of ‘slow living at home’ and ‘home café’ home vlogs as emblems of class displays against the backdrop of fast-paced living, overwork culture, and lifestyle decisions tending towards convenience and affordability in big cities in East Asia. Reflecting on the social conditions and cultural routines of the East Asian region, the chapter also shows how such YouTube home tour vlogs foreground households in situ, domesticity as a privilege, and hanging out at home as a lifestyle.

### Notes

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and Radhika Gajjala*

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