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Language, Technology and the Internet

Introduction

The past decade has seen visuals, photographs and videos becoming an increasingly preferred mode of communication. The rise of Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest, among other photo- or video-sharing applications, in the 2010s is evidence enough of this. YouTube and Hulu already existed to grant us access to videos of various lengths. Yet, it was Vine that revolutionised the manner in which we consumed videos and visuals on a more regular basis, particularly because of one unique feature: it popularised short video formats. The way communication has developed since then would turn out to enlighten us on youth culture, and to discover our crave for quick content.

Vine as a Medium of Communication

Vine was a video-sharing platform released in January 2013. Originally intended by its founder to be a platform for people to share video snippets of their everyday lives (Hoffman, qtd. in Newton, 2016), Vine notably flourished as a medium for creative expression instead.

A user of Vine (hereafter referred to as a *viner*) could create Vine videos (*vines*) through tapping and holding their screens to record a video, and letting go to stop the recording. Viners had a limited option of effects to add onto their videos, like a ghost mode that overlaid images from previous videos onto the current video. Alternatively to filming, viners could also import videos, whether it be their own videos or screencaps of other videos.

Upon filming, viners could edit their videos by trimming the clip and combining different sections of a video. One of Vine's distinguishing factors was its six-second time limit on a video, whereas most video-sharing platforms did not have time limits that were as restrictive, if they had any at all. Compared to existing video-hosting services, this feature made vines contextually richer than GIFs due to their ability to capture audio, and more temporally-restrictive than platforms like YouTube. This editing option meant that users could get creative with their videos such as by adding jump cuts or creating optical illusions, as long as the vine adhered to the six-second limit.

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(From left to right) A progression of a vine by user Harry Styles, captioned "Platform Niall and three quarters." The trimming feature allowed him to edit the video such that it appears as if the man has gone through the wall, as referenced in Harry Potter.

Once a vine is uploaded onto one's feed, it can no longer be edited. Should a viner hope to do so, they would have to re-upload an edited version. Viewers can interact with a vine by liking, reposting (or *revining*), and/or by sharing the vine to other viners or to individuals on different platforms. Viewers can also interact with the creator by commenting on the vine. The virality of a vine can be assessed by the amount of likes, revines or even loops (views) it has received.

Vine was a platform that was most frequented by youth; in 2015, 71% of Vine's United States (US) demographic was made up of millennials aged 18 to 24 (comScore).

Vine and David Crystal's Seven Features of Speech and Writing

It is noteworthy to consider that vines undergo, broadly, two stages in its communicative process: the production stage, which is a process mainly accessible to the content creators; and its publication, wherein the vine is made viewable to other viners. Vine is a cinematographic medium; that is to say, actions that are spontaneous, irreversible and unrepeatable in nature can be scripted, reenacted and edited in order to achieve a satisfactory final product in the form of a video. Because of this filmic nature, its two stages of communication appear to align with David Crystal's features of speech and writing respectively. Vine therefore constitutes an interesting

amalgamation of his seven speech and writing features, with variations in accordance with the platform's unique features.

In their spatial and temporal existence, vines can be said to be partially time- and space-bound. This awkward suspension is precisely because of the lag between the vine's production and reception, which coincides with Crystal's second feature of speech and writing. For a vine to fit into the six-second time frame, the performers would have to complete their performance in that duration or risk having snippets of their performances be edited out. The performance itself is as ephemeral as speech, and is spatially impermanent. It can be reenacted or re-attempted, but cannot be repeated exactly. However, during a vine's reception, it automatically loops like a GIF until it is paused, having been captured in footage. An interesting phenomenon occurs here wherein time is stretched — although the final video is only six seconds, the vine may be repeated such that it transcends the initial temporal boundary. The lag in production and reception suggests therefore that while vines are time-bound, the boundary can be manipulated.

Just as it exists in the liminal space between being bound and unbound by time, vines are likewise semi-permanent due to the pause between their production and reception. While a mid-production performance is space-bound due to its impermanence, the footage itself is immortalised visually and aurally, and can be re-viewed. On another level, the vine is semi-permanent in that it can be lost; it disappears when a user scrolls past or closes the application; or perhaps the creator privatises, archives or even deletes the vine. Yet, under some circumstances, it remains discoverable should the viewer wish to return to it. In these respects, vines can be said to be bound by space, but only to two extents. Firstly, although vines are not stationary, they repeat. Such leaves any section of a vine open to review and revisiting as and when the viewer wishes. Secondly, while they can be lost, they can also be rediscovered. Vines, and videos, by extension, appear to stretch the boundaries of space and time in a manner that is almost paradoxical. They are transient, but can be reviewed and repeated, and this can be attributed to the combination of features in speech and writing that exists during their production and reception. Therefore, vines are bound to time and space, although to varying degrees as compared to speech and writing respectively.

The lag between a vine's production and reception opens the option for it to be scripted, edited and revised during the production stage. This likens vines to text in their editability and revisability. It leaves room for the construction of scripts and storyboards, and should the content be unsatisfactory, the creator has the opportunity to tweak their content as they wish. With that said, the reception or even success of a vine is not necessarily hinged on its revision. Take for instance the "I could've dropped my croissant" vine, which was captured in the moment and shot to success because of the humorous nature of the unscripted response. It goes to show that vines do not necessarily need to be scripted, although the option is available to viners who perhaps intend to present more structured content.

Another consequence of the pause between production and reception is that responses from viewers were also delayed — which heightens the possibility of a more contrived reception. Resultantly, content creators would have to anticipate reactions to their vines. Upon watching (and possibly rewatching) a vine, a viewer could respond favourably to a vine by liking or revining it, but was also free to present a more complex response through commenting or sharing it. Yet, all these responses could only occur after the vine has been uploaded, and additionally did not have to be communicated immediately. This also meant that the interaction between the creator and viewer is visually decontextualised, although the viewer is still able to derive meaning and context from visual cues within the vine.

Since vines were essentially recordings of speech and action, they were both prosodically and graphically rich, as were speech and writing respectively. The main, if not only, difference was that while writing presented graphics in the form of text, vines could graphically display other objects too. This opened up vines as an avenue for social interaction, but also of factual communication. However, its six-second time frame meant that it could not be the most effective medium for information communication — unless the content was captured creatively enough within that time restriction. As such, the content of vines were mostly loosely structured although compact enough to maximise information retainment.

Vine's Demise: Summary of Relevant Literature

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Most of the relevant literature surrounding Vine entails its demise as a social media platform. It was discontinued in January 2017, merely four years after its initial release. Earning revenue mainly through providing advertising spaces, Vine's sustainability relied heavily on its audience. Across multiple analyses on the topic, the consensus appears to be that despite its initial astounding success, Vine's eventual death was namely a result of fierce competition and a lack of enticing developments on the platform, which drove that very audience away.

Vine's popularity was arguably imperative to some of Snapchat's and Instagram's key developments. However, they would be the very platforms to rival and outlive their prototype, because while they developed, Vine appeared to stagnate. Snapchat, with its self-destructive picture format, was introducing features like stories and filters, as was Instagram. Both later developed a multi-story feature, which permitted users to record videos that extended their original ten-second limits. These growths retained an audience that craved a buzz and novelty in the platforms they were frequenting. On the contrary, Vine did not introduce any new features for a year and by January 2017, 52% of its top users had migrated onto other more captivating platforms (Chen, 2017).

Effects of Vine on Communication

Although Vine no longer exists, its effects on communication are undeniably manifold. It appeared apparent enough that it was the perfect breeding ground for youth identity and culture, but the potent effect of vines on content consumers and creators was arguably much more subtle. It revolutionised the way information was packaged and enlightened society on how they responded to information best.

Given that Vine's predominant demographic was of youths aged 18 to 24 (comScore), it comes as no surprise that it witnessed a deluge of cultural references unique to youths of the time. Vine appeared to hit the trifecta; it was not ridden with older users, it delivered punchlines quickly, and it was trendy. It was the perfect space for youths in their experimentation and discovery of their identities and culture — and it showed. Vine brought countless neologisms into the world, and countless more words into popular use. Perhaps the most popular instance of

a neologism coined on Vine would be *on fleek*, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary to mean "very attractive; as good as it could be". It was vined when user Peaches Monroee uttered it in the phrase "eyebrows on fleek". For a while after the vine was heavily circulated, the phrase only pertained to eyebrows before semantically broadening to refer to virtually anything. It is fascinating that *on fleek* should fill a semantic vacuum the world did not even realise it had: it was similar to *on point*, but younger. It possessed the cultural capital that was beginning to mold up the terms that older generations preferred using. On top of introducing new words into the global lexicon, it also highlighted lesser known ones like *yas*. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, *yas* has its roots in queer African-American subculture, but proliferated in use especially among youths. While its use first returned to the spotlight after the word had already been around in cyberspace, vines like 'Kid on Crack' and 'Yas Bitch Yas' sent the word in greater circulation. While Vine has become a youth relic of the 2010s, both *fleek* and *yas* remain in popular use by the youths of yesteryears. It is folly to disregard its role in introducing words into society's collective thought cloud as well as in contributing to the formation of a global youth identity.

Inevitably, such an informatively rich platform would not go unexploited by brands seeking publicity. Content marketers struck jackpot with the brevity of vines, which forced a quick, focused and concise delivery of their content. Furthermore — perhaps most importantly — Vine was trendy. It was no wonder that big companies were shifting over to Vine to market their content to millennials, who were largely disillusioned by old-fashioned marketing techniques (Rouse, 2019). Vine presented the perfect opportunity to promote their image with a veneer of relatability, seeing brands like Nike and even Taco Bell jumping onto the platform to promote their products. Interestingly, users were less forgiving about other viners making vines sponsored by corporations, describing it as "annoying" (Kircher, 2016).

A natural progression to the need to be heard was the popularity of information communication through bite-sized content. Research conducted by Microsoft Canada revealed that the average human attention span has fallen from 12 seconds in 2000 to just 8 seconds in 2013. The attention that vines received incentivised creators to package their information quickly and concisely within or without the platform. Vine's release and success was very quickly

followed by its rival's introduction of 'stories' — snackable video content —, and also saw the establishment of companies like NowThis, a social journalism medium that disseminates news through short videos. Video advertisements on YouTube were shortened to five, unskippable seconds. Even Vine's closest modern-day equivalent, TikTok, has resorted to limiting their videos to a minimum of 3 seconds and a maximum of 60 seconds, though its interface typically cuts videos off at 15 seconds unless a user requests for more time. Vine began with an idea to share content quick and easy — it left inspiring nearly every other major social platform to adopt a new mode of communication that was anchored in brevity and creativity, because its effects were clear. With its six-second rule, Vine revolutionised a way for content creators to get their content across with a greater guarantee of effectiveness and illustrated more vividly to the world their crave for snackable content.

Conclusion

Vine and its impacts were both as ephemeral and as everlasting as the vines it contained. At the core of the platform with a six-second video format lay a monumental cultural, and even scientific, revelation. They manifested in the *fleeked* manner millennials now communicate, and in our need for speedy access to information that we now see in platforms we frequent regularly.

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