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Performing the self: Social identity construction by blind and visually impaired YouTube vloggers

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Abstract

This article investigates how blind and visually impaired (BVI) YouTubers construct and perform their social identities through strategic self-representation. Drawing on Social Identity Theory and Erving Goffman's performance model, it analyses 60 YouTube channels to examine how disability is negotiated within broader identity constellations, including gender, profession and interest groups. The study finds that BVI identity is thematically foregrounded in most channels, yet rarely in isolation: creators who explicitly centre blindness also display a greater number of salient identity categories and produce more diverse content. Analyses further show significant associations between BVI salience and certain genres, with central-BVI channels more likely to feature lifestyle and entertainment content, thereby 'normalising' blindness within mainstream formats. At the same time, vloggers mobilise identity enhancement strategies, such as portraying competence in highly visual domains (beauty, cooking, filmmaking and technology), to challenge ableist expectations and reduce social distance with sighted viewers. These performances are accompanied by selective omissions, with politically charged, socio-economic and intimate topics, indicating careful management of vulnerability and audience appeal. The findings demonstrate that BVI vlogging constitutes a performative, intersectional and inherently advocacy-oriented practice, even when activism is not explicit. The article contributes a nuanced understanding of online disability (self-) representation and offers an analytical framework for future research on identity performance, stigma and digital media practice.

Keywords

visually impaired, blind, vloggers, YouTube, social identity, self-representation, performance, ableism, stigma, disability

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Introduction

Research on new media and disability has largely examined platform use, accessibility and interaction patterns, while comparatively little attention has been paid to how disabled individuals construct and perform their social identities in public digital spaces (Emara, 2024; Seo and Jung, 2021). This gap limits our understanding of how identity performance, agency and social perception intersect within everyday digital participation. Blind and visually impaired (BVI) vloggers offer a particularly rich case for addressing this, as their audio-visual self-representations negotiate both the expressive possibilities and constraints of a visual platform.

BVI creators use YouTube not merely to document daily life but to actively construct multifaceted identities that respond to, bypass or reinterpret social expectations about blindness. By selectively foregrounding intersecting identities, such as gender, profession or interest groups, they challenge reductive disability labels and produce more agentic self-presentations. Such practices align with scholarship showing how disabled creators deploy digital media to resist marginalisation, assert narrative control and shape public understandings of disability (Ellcessor, 2016; Haller, 2023). Through this identity work, vloggers also cultivate community belonging and shared imaginaries of blindness that counter isolation and stigma (Malhotra and Rowe, 2014). These nuanced portrayals destabilise dominant stereotypes of blindness as either helplessness or heroism (Brylla, 2023), contributing to broader discourses of accessibility, inclusion and disability justice (Emara, 2024; Trevisan and Cogburn, 2020).

Because this study pioneers a systematic mapping of how social identity categories are constructed through BVI YouTube content, its first task is descriptive and evaluative rather than symbolic or discursive. We therefore focus exclusively on the textual construction and inferred social implications of salient screen identities, whether enacted consciously, intuitively or incidentally, without verifying actual authorial intent or audience reception. This establishes an empirical baseline for a forthcoming companion study (based on the same dataset) that will analyse higher socio-cultural dimensions of these representations.

To examine how BVI vloggers perform social identities, we conducted a content analysis of 60 YouTube channels created by BVI individuals, complemented by thematic analysis to explore recurrent narrative strategies and audio-visual framings. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we do not test hypotheses but address the following research questions:

- RQ1: Which social identities are salient in YouTube videos by BVI vloggers?
- RQ2: How are these identities constructed and expressed (i.e. performed) through narrative and audio-visual means?
- RQ3: How do these identity performances position BVI vloggers in relation to agency, community-building and the reframing of blindness?

By addressing these questions, the study advances scholarship on disability (self-) representation, digital identity performance and participatory media. It demonstrates how BVI individuals use YouTube's multimodal affordances to negotiate selfhood, foster community, challenge ableist narratives and broaden public understandings of blindness. The article proceeds by outlining the analytical foundation, describing the methodological approach, presenting key findings and finally discussing their implications for digital disability culture and inclusive media practice.

Literature review

BVI creators in digital media

Existing research on how BVI individuals utilise social media platforms for self-representation, advocacy and community-building has grown steadily in recent years, although it remains relatively limited compared to broader disability media studies. Much of this literature has concentrated on text-based content creation, such as posting and blogging, identifying how BVI users engaged in activism, built communities and resisted stereotypical portrayals of disability through personal storytelling and advocacy (e.g. De los Reyes, 2018; Emara, 2024; Stamou et al., 2016; Wu and Adamic, 2014). This research has generally shown that social media spaces enable 'descriptive presentation' and authentic lived-experience storytelling (Emara and Haller, 2024), positioning creators as epistemically legitimate voices who potentially reshape how blindness is socially understood.

Emerging literature extends these insights into audio-visual content. Ellis and Kent (2016) and Seo and Jung (2021) show that BVI individuals use YouTube to challenge stereotypes, assert autonomy and build community cohesion. YouTube's interactive affordances (comments, likes and subscriptions) support reciprocal exchange and help creators refine their performances (Dumova and Fiordo, 2009). Studies also demonstrate that BVI vloggers produce content across diverse genres, including daily routines, adaptive technologies, beauty, education and professional expertise (Li et al., 2022).

At the same time, scholars have noted that the visual-centric design of YouTube poses inherent challenges for BVI creators, requiring creative strategies such as detailed verbal descriptions, audio cues or collaborations with sighted assistants to ensure accessible and engaging content (Rong et al., 2022; Seo and Jung, 2021). Technical obstacles related to video editing software, camera work and visual framing further complicate the production process for blind creators (e.g. Li et al., 2022). Nevertheless, these studies also highlight the resilience and adaptive creativity displayed by BVI vloggers who reconfigure platform affordances to suit their needs and circumvent structural design limitations.

Much of this research has focused on two aspects, typically analysed through interviews, surveys or participant observations: The *why* regarding BVI individuals' intentions and subjective experiences of vlogging, and the *technical how* in relation to accessibility, adaptability and platform affordances. However, the actual *conceptual how*, that is, how BVI creators construct and express (i.e. perform) their social identities through textual features, such as narrative framings and audio-visual techniques, has remained largely unexplored. This gap persists despite wider disability media scholarship demonstrating that digital self-representation can function as a form of activism, cultural citizenship and identity negotiation (Johanssen and Garrisi, 2020).

Moreover, the intersectionality of disability with other social identities, such as gender, race, age and socio-economic status, remains underexplored in this context (Ellcessor, 2016; Goethals et al., 2015; Shakespeare, 2014). Recent work on blind bloggers, for instance, suggests that identity performance often incorporates disability alongside parenting roles, professional identities and cultural affiliations (Emara and Haller, 2024).

Social identity

Social identity construction helps unpack the relationship between media creators' motivations, content production, media texts and audience perceptions. Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains

how individuals define themselves and others through group memberships, shaping both self-concept and intergroup relations (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). People categorise themselves into *ingroups* and others into *outgroups* to simplify social perception and comparison, and to inform attitudes and behaviours, often favouring ingroups while devaluing outgroups (Abrams and Hogg, 2010).

Central to SIT is identity enhancement, which is the protection or elevation of one's ingroup to maintain a positive self-concept and access psychological resources like self-esteem and resilience (Jetten et al., 2017; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This often involves social comparison to position one's experiences and capabilities in relation to majority groups and their dominant social norms, actively reshaping and improving perceptions of one's own minority group (Jetten et al., 2017). In disability contexts, identity enhancement though self-representation can reduce both public stigma and internalised ableism (Campbell, 2009; Corrigan and Watson, 2002).

Of course, the social identity of an individual is a dynamic and context-dependent aggregate of multiple intersecting identities (Crisp and Hewstone, 2006). Thus, depending on their motivations, BVI vloggers – consciously or unconsciously – configure the fluctuating salience of their multiple social identities through the strategic use of narrative, audio-visual and textual cues. This may involve foregrounding identities unrelated to disability in order to foster intergroup similarity and improve attitudes among non-disabled viewers.

Performing social identity

The simultaneous construction and expression of identity is effectively mapped through the concept of performance. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) Erving Goffman describes social interactions as theatrical performances, where individuals manage viewers' impressions through idealised expressions and behaviours. Central to this model is the distinction between front stage and backstage. On the front stage, individuals tailor their performance to align with audience expectations, adopting roles, such as makeup artist, partner, parent, gamer or advocate, to maintain a coherent and socially acceptable identity. The front stage also involves concealing traits that might undermine the intended impression. In contrast, the backstage represents a private space where the pressures of impression management are relaxed, allowing for the expression of less curated aspects of the self.

Applied to digital contexts, Goffman's dramaturgical model becomes even more relevant, as vloggers actively curate their idealised self-presentation with awareness of actual and imagined audiences (Khoshsabk, 2017), negotiating authenticity, self-protection, disclosure and impression management (Merunková and Šlerka, 2019). Audience segmentation plays a crucial role, with vloggers tailoring their performances to various groups that often differ in attitudes, interests and expectations (McFarland et al., 2023).

The main performative cues of manner, appearance and setting (Goffman, 1959) manifest digitally through filming style, editing, graphic design, narration and paratexts such as thumbnails and banners. Indeed, YouTube affords greater creative control than more protocol-driven platforms, such as Facebook (Masschelein and Van Goidsenhoven, 2016), enabling nuanced identity work. At the same time, social media blurs the frontstage/backstage divide: curated displays of intimacy become part of the public persona, as illustrated by Lupinetti's (2015) analysis of Instagram athletes who strategically incorporate private (backstage) routines into their performances to signal authenticity.

Extending Goffman's model, stereotypes also function as strategic tools in online impression management. As socially shared cognitive shortcuts integral to social identity perception, they

simplify complex information and determine the salience of performed identities, thus facilitating effective communication with audiences (Schneider, 2004). Building on Biernat et al. (1996), vloggers may even deploy positive self-stereotyping to signal group membership and dispel negative stereotypes in perceivers.

Disability and performative self-representation

For disabled individuals, performing social identity online involves navigating tensions between self-expression, audience expectations and cultural norms. Ellis and Kent (2016) show that social media offers disabled creators both challenges and opportunities, allowing them to counter ableist stereotypes and assert narrative control. Strategic disclosure is central to these performative affordances, and it navigates between attempts to express authenticity, reduce stigma, foster audience engagement and prevent the perceived risks of self-disclosure (Furr et al., 2016; Goldfarb and Armenta, 2017; Niu et al., 2022).

Disability self-representation also strengthens community belonging. Sweet et al. (2020) demonstrate how social media platforms aid disabled users in sharing lived experiences, adaptive strategies and mutual support specifically related to their disability identity. These community-oriented reinforce a cohesive and simultaneously heterogenous group identity with the scope of fostering a positive sense of self and feelings of connection and solidarity (Dunn and Burcaw, 2013; Smith and Mueller, 2022). They also operate as collective cultural advocacy, countering misrepresentation and normalising disability identity (Haller, 2023; Johanssen and Garrisi, 2020).

This affirmative orientation is particularly interesting given Goffman's association of idealised performance with conforming to dominant norms. Disabled creators often invert this logic through 'transgressive idealisation', foregrounding sensory difference as a source of pride, creativity and capability (Swain and French, 2010). Influencer culture amplifies this dynamic: as Södergren and Vallström (2023) note, disability can function as a communicative and marketable identity, while Longhurst et al. (2024) show how polished aspirational content, especially in lifestyle and wellness genres, builds cultural capital and counters stigma.

Methodology

Research design

Integrating Goffman's dramaturgy with disability media scholarship and SIT, this study used a combined content and thematic analysis design to examine how BVI vloggers dynamically construct social identities through performative self-representation. Content analysis provides a systematic approach for identifying the presence, frequency and patterns of representational categories across media texts (Krippendorff, 2019) and is well suited to mapping how identity cues appear in YouTube videos.

The analysis' descriptive dimension enabled the measurement of key identity categories, themes and paratextual features, offering a replicable empirical overview of representational patterns (ibid). The explanatory dimension employed Thematic Analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) to organise coded material into broader thematic clusters, refining a theory-informed coding frame through repeated engagement with the data. This facilitated the examination of how identities were performatively expressed through spoken language, audio-visual cues, narrative structures and paratextual elements, moving from discrete codes to recurrent expressions of identity construction.

This approach is particularly appropriate for studying identity performance because it examines how intersecting social identities are staged in situ within the contextual and multimodal affordances of YouTube. Unlike interviews or surveys, which rely on introspective accounts, this method allows direct analysis of how identity is enacted within the texts themselves, whether consciously or incidentally. It therefore serves as a descriptive and evaluative foundation for understanding BVI self-representation, rather than as a vehicle for symbolic or discursive interpretation (which is part of a forthcoming paper). Establishing this baseline is an essential first step in a broader research programme that examines identity construction across multiple analytical layers.

Researcher positionality

The study was conducted by two researchers whose complementary positionalities informed the analytical process. One is a blind disability and media studies scholar and journalist, bringing embodied insight into visual impairment and everyday representation. The other is a sighted media and disability studies scholar and film practitioner, offering critical distance and expertise in visual culture. This combination created what Chhabra (2020) terms an 'in-betweenness', balancing insider knowledge with analytical detachment and helping to mitigate interpretive 'blind' spots.

Reflexivity played a key role in theme development. Although the coding frame provided structure, broader thematic patterns emerged through iterative discussion between the two coders, whose differing experiences sensitised them to distinct nuances in identity performance (see Emara and Haller, 2024). This aligns with reflexive approaches to thematic work that acknowledge the researcher's active role in meaning-making (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Further reflections on positionality are addressed in the Discussion, where they are considered in relation to the study's findings rather than as part of the procedural account.

Data sampling

Because no comprehensive catalogue of BVI-run YouTube channels exists, the authors conducted a systematic platform search using keywords such as 'blind', 'visually impaired', 'low vision' and 'sight loss' in all languages spoken by them (English, Arabic, Spanish, German and Romanian). This multilingual strategy broadened the search beyond the Anglophone sphere and enabled the identification of a diverse and analytically meaningful sample, even if not exhaustive.

Three inclusion criteria ensured relevance and depth of analysis: (1) the channel had to be run by an individual with a self-declared visual impairment rather than an organisation, in order to focus on personal identity performance; (2) it had to contain content uploaded within the last 2 years to ensure currency and audience engagement and (3) it needed at least 1000 total views to establish a baseline of public reach, capturing both casual creators and more active influencers (see Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). Subscriber count was deliberately excluded to avoid privileging high-reach creators and to ensure the inclusion of underrepresented linguistic, cultural or minority-group contexts.

Sixty YouTube channels met these criteria. As shown in Table 1, most creators were based in English-speaking countries (43% US; 18% UK; nearly 7% Canada), and 93% of all content was in English (Table 2). The few non-English-speaking vloggers typically used their native language, indicating that BVI creators, like most sighted users, tend to address audiences within their own cultural and linguistic communities.

The sample included a majority of fully blind vloggers (60%), with the remainder partially sighted (Table 3). Gender representation comprised 32 male (53.3%) and 26 female (43.3%) creators, along with two jointly run male–female channels (Table 4).

Subscriber numbers ranged from just over 200 to nearly 2 million (e.g. MollyBurkeOfficial), and total view counts spanned from under 1000 to over 282 million. This variability provided a robust basis for analysing identity performance across differing levels of visibility, reach and engagement, as well as across geographic, linguistic, gender and experiential dimensions.

Coding procedure

The unit of analysis was the entire YouTube channel, including the channel title, profile description, visual branding and all uploaded videos. Coding proceeded at two levels: (1) channel-level paratexts (titles, banners, introductory text) and (2) the textual content of individual videos. This enabled systematic analysis of both structural features and performative identity cues. Because all data were publicly accessible and no creators were contacted, anonymisation was unnecessary and formal ethics approval was not required, consistent with established guidelines for analysing public social media content.

A structured codebook organised identity-relevant material into five major coding areas, which also constituted the sequential coding steps (Table 5). The coding frame combined theory-informed categories with refinements derived from a pilot phase, ensuring conceptual clarity while remaining sensitive to patterns emerging from the dataset. This iterative approach enabled us to capture the salience of different social identities and representational strategies across diverse genres, production styles and channel sizes.

Coding criteria were developed through a deductive–inductive process. Descriptive YouTube features (metadata, paratexts, visual branding) formed a largely deductive category set documenting each channel's structural characteristics. Video-theme categories emerged inductively during piloting and were consolidated into a typology covering major content areas (e.g. technology, lifestyle and advocacy). Social identity categories drew partly on Social Identity Theory, highlighting dimensions such as age, gender and ethnicity, and partly on inductive refinements including hobbies and interest-group identities. Finally, BVI salience and disability-framing codes combined theoretical insights from SIT and intergroup dynamics with inductive observations of how blindness was foregrounded, normalised or contextualised through narrative and audio-visual choices. This

Table 1. Countries.

Country	Freq.	Percent
Australia	1	1.67
Canada	4	6.67
Germany	3	5.00
India	1	1.67
Ireland	1	1.67
Kenya	1	1.67
Netherlands	1	1.67
Portugal (Brazil and Germany)	1	1.67
UK	11	18.33
US	26	43.33
US/Canada	1	1.67
n/a	9	15.00
Total	60	100.00

Table 2. Languages.

Language	Freq.	Percent
English	56	93.44
German	3	4.92
Hindi	1	1.64
Total	60	100.00

structured yet flexible coding strategy ensured robust capture of both theoretical constructs and empirical variability within BVI YouTube content.

The analytic process followed a structured sequence moving from descriptive coding to thematic analysis. Codes generated through the content analysis captured the presence and salience of identity cues across the 60 channels and were then clustered into broader categories reflecting recurrent configurations and concepts from the literature. Themes thus emerged through an integrated inductive–deductive process that linked observable textual features to the study's conceptual focus on social identity performance.

Intercoder alignment was ensured through a joint piloting phase. Both authors independently applied the initial codebook to four channels, compared outputs and refined category definitions, operational boundaries and overlapping codes. The revised codebook achieved strong internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.812). Following piloting, each researcher coded 30 channels independently, with one channel double-coded to maintain ongoing calibration.

Stata was used to generate descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages and correlations) and to conduct Chi-square tests examining associations between categorical variables, such as identity markers, content themes and disability-framing strategies. These numerical results supported the thematic analysis by identifying representational patterns that occurred more frequently than expected by chance.

Data analysis

The following sections address RQ1 and RQ2 by outlining five key thematic patterns of identity performance, before we return to RQ3 in the Discussion.

Centralising BVI

The content analysis of 60 YouTube channels by BVI creators reveals a diversity of performed social identities, foregrounded or downplayed through dramaturgical choices in setting, manner, appearance and narrative focus. Our first analysis focused on BVI identity performance. BVI was coded as a thematic focus in 49 of the 60 channels (81.7%). These channels explicitly foreground

Table 3. Degree of blindness.

Fully blind	Freq.	Percent
No	24	40
Yes	36	60
Total	60	100.00

Table 4. Gender.

Gender	Freq.	Percent
Female	26	43.33
Male	32	53.33
Male and female	2	3.33
Total	60	100.00

BVI as a central social identity that dominates textual and paratextual framings, indicating that for most creators BVI is not an incidental background characteristic but a central organising theme of the channel.

This is observable in channel names (e.g. 'Blind on the Move' and 'Life After Sight Loss'), profile descriptions, recurring video topics (e.g. assistive technology reviews and life hacks for BVI people) and visual paratexts such as banners depicting guide dogs or white canes. For instance, in *The Blind Mom Next Door* Nicole repeatedly references her blindness in both titles and intros (e.g. 'Blind Mom Cook & Clean with Me'), combining performative cues like her guide dog, direct-to-camera storytelling and a banner featuring Braille text and the text 'Crafty Blind Chick'. Another example is *Seeing Blind*, which prominently features the vlogger's guide dog in banner and intro videos, while *Life After Sight Loss* uses clear visual branding to centre BVI identity. These paratexts serve as identity cues that reinforce the vlogger's positioning, whether through overt messaging or aesthetic symbolism.

Channels where BVI identity is central are significantly more likely to include lifestyle content (fashion, cooking, travel; χ^2 (1) = 6.28, p = .012) and entertainment content (gaming, general leisure; χ^2 (1) = 6.28, p = .012) than channels where BVI identity is incidental. Rather than downplaying blindness in order to appear mainstream, vloggers who foreground blindness actively integrate disability into lifestyle and entertainment genres, normalising blindness within the aesthetics and rhythms of everyday life.

Within this group, 17 channels (28.3%) portray only BVI people (usually including the vlogger), whereas two-thirds (40 channels, 66.7%) regularly show BVI people interacting with sighted peers; a smaller subset also include other disability groups (11 channels, 18.3%) or foreground BVI people other than the vlogger (16 channels, 26.7%). These categories are not mutually exclusive, but together they underscore the variety of ways in which BVI identity is socially situated across the sample. Chi-square tests show no statistically significant association between BVI being a thematic focus and being explicitly signalled in channel titles or visual branding, suggesting that some creators foreground blindness primarily through video content (text), others through paratextual cues and many through a combination of both rather than following a single standard pattern.

In contrast, 11 channels feature BVI only incidentally, that is, it is evident through non-verbal cues and occasional mentions, but it is not thematically central. For example, the channel *Bird-NerdSophie* focuses primarily on wildlife education and animal care, with the creator presenting herself as a knowledgeable and passionate animal handler. Although Sophie is blind, this aspect of her identity is rarely foregrounded in her video narratives. Instead, her blindness is only subtly perceptible through cues such as mobility techniques or brief acknowledgements in conversation. These incidental references still contribute to the performance of self, but they operate in the background, allowing other social identities, such as wildlife expert, educator or animal advocate, to take narrative precedence.

Table 5. Coding criteria.

1. General channel characteristics
   - Metadata such as channel title, year of creation, total number of videos, subscriber count, total views and whether the channel name referenced visual impairment (e.g. terms like 'blind', 'sightless' and 'braille')
   - Demographic and identity indicators where available – such as the vlogger's name, stated or inferred age and gender, occupational information, country of residence and language of video content
   - Visual branding cues, such as whether the profile image, logo or banner indicated blindness or visual impairment
2. Introductory video content
   - Title, duration, topic and BVI references in introductory or earliest video
   - Presence and function of additional individuals in introductory video
3. Video themes
   - Social life (e.g. dating and parenting)
   - Personal narratives
   - Disability activism or advocacy
   - Political commentary
   - Economic issues (e.g. employment)
   - Culture and history
   - Technology
   - Science
   - Entertainment (e.g. gaming)
   - Lifestyle (e.g. makeup, cooking and travel)
4. Social identity salience
   - Gender
   - Race/ethnicity
   - Age
   - Class
   - Professional identity
   - Sexual orientation
   - Religion or spirituality
   - Hobbies and interest groups
5. BVI salience and disability framing
   - How blindness or visual impairment features within the content (narratively and visually)
   - Exclusively portrayed BVI individuals (including the vlogger)
   - Included sighted or non-BVI individuals
   - Referenced other disability groups
   - BVI-related themes: Educational content about blindness (e.g. guide dogs and cane use), advocacy or awareness-raising efforts, use of either person-first or disability-first language

While no significant relationships appear to exist between BVI centrality and age or other foregrounded social identity cues (all $p > .12$), gender shows a significant association (χ^2 (1) = 4.58, $p = .032$). Channels in which blindness is incidental are overwhelmingly male-run (90%), whereas channels that narratively foreground BVI identity display a much more balanced gender distribution. This indicates that female creators are markedly more likely to position blindness as a salient and explicitly performed identity, while male creators more often let BVI identity remain implicit or backgrounded.

Performing multiple identities

Across the dataset, BVI vloggers reveal sophisticated strategies of selective self-presentation through multiple identities, often using paratextual elements, such as introductory videos, channel descriptions or pinned messages, as front stage performances that guide audience expectations (Goffman, 1959). These elements prime viewers to recognise the vlogger's disability within broader identity narratives. Every channel foregrounds at least one additional social identity category beyond BVI (e.g. gender, profession and interest group), and channels where BVI is thematically central

actually display a higher average number of distinct salient identity categories (M = 3.94) than those where BVI was incidental (M = 2.91; t (14.56) = 2.39 (Welch's t-test used here due to unequal variances between groups), p = .031). A similar pattern exists in relation to video subject diversity: channels with a central-BVI focus feature a higher mean number of thematic content categories (M = 4.82) than channels where BVI is incidental (M = 3.09), indicating that greater disability salience often coexists with broader thematic output rather than a narrowing of representational scope.

This suggests that foregrounding BVI does not narrow identity performance but tends to co-occur with more multi-layered and intersectional presentations of self through personal or professional narratives. For example, Lucy Edwards' 'blind IVF journey' clearly emphasises womanhood and motherhood, whilst Steve Saylor's introduction of 'I'm blind and I play video games!' immediately highlights his BVI and gamer identity.

Thus, rather than a simple division between 'disability-focused' and 'non-disability-focused' channels, the dataset indicates extensive overlap between BVI and other salient identities. Other examples include *The Blind Girl*, whose makeup tutorials centre on gendered self-styling; *Blind to Billionaire*, who performs as an economically competent financial consultant; and various vloggers who complement BVI with sports-related identities through blind skiing or hiking. These cases illustrate not only a dramaturgical balancing act between personal authenticity and targeted audience engagement but also a form of social navigation. Drawing on Jetten et al. (2017), this can be understood as the strategic overlapping of ingroup (blind community) and outgroup (sighted audiences) identities. By foregrounding shared interests and competencies, BVI vloggers reduce perceived social distance, combat stigma and create points of commonality that enable intergroup perspective-taking. This is reflected in the high prevalence of non-disability identities across the sample: interest-group or hobby identities are salient in 95% of channels, gender identities in 90% and occupational identities in 58%, while other categories such as class and sexual orientation appear far less and more selectively.

Interestingly, several high-profile channels reveal a tension between textual and paratextual identity signalling, particularly among influencers with ≥1000 subscribers (see Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). On the one hand, paratexts may signal the incidental nature of blindness, while on the other hand, video content often centres strongly on themes of disability. For instance, one of the most prominent BVI influencers, Molly Burke, starts her channel's description with, 'I'm Molly, a typical sushi and makeup loving millennial girl who just so happens to be blind!' This rhetorical move initially downplays her blindness, positioning her instead within a broad, relatable identity category ('millennial girl'), only to re-centre disability in the video content through topics such as daily life with a guide dog, accessibility in fashion or navigating the world as a blind woman. Consistent with this ambivalence, chi-square tests show no significant association between having BVI-related terms in the channel title or visual branding and BVI being a thematic focus in the videos (χ^2 (1) < 0.01, p > .95). This indicates that paratextual signalling and content-level salience often diverge, allowing creators considerable flexibility in how explicitly they represent their BVI identity.

Such discursive ambivalence operates as a strategic impression management technique, allowing the creator to reduce social distance by framing blindness as incidental and non-threatening in frontstage self-presentation, while still affirming and performing disability identity in backstage (or more intimate) narrative contexts. For influencers in particular, blindness and associated positive stereotypes, such as the *super cripple* trope that mediates the extraordinary overcoming of disability (Barnes, 1992) can function as a unique selling point, setting them apart in the saturated influencer marketplace while reinforcing ingroup solidarity with the BVI community (Södergren and Vallström, 2023). This strategic toggling aligns with attempts of identity enhancement (see next

section) and selective positive self-stereotyping (Biernat et al., 1996), enabling creators to modulate disability salience depending on the intended audience and communicative purpose.

Conversely, there are examples in which blindness is heavily foregrounded in paratexts, especially in usernames, channel banners or 'About' sections, but only marginally addressed within the actual video content. Five channels (8.3% of the sample) explicitly reference blindness in their channel titles or branding while treating it only incidentally within their videos. These cases exemplify a deliberate frontstage framing of blindness as an attention-directing or authenticity-signalling device, while backstage narrative content foregrounds other identities such as professional expertise, hobbies or lifestyle.

A prime case is *Blind to Billionaire*, whose name explicitly references visual impairment, positioning it as a core identity marker. However, the vast majority of his videos focus on financial news, governmental benefits and political commentary, with only occasional references to his blindness. In this instance, blindness functions more as an attention-directing label than as a consistent thematic focus. The performative aim (whether conscious or unconscious) may be to establish relatability for other BVI people or a narrative of overcoming adversity for sighted people. The creator's decision to use 'blindness' as a frontstage branding device, but not as a sustained discursive theme, reflects another mode of identity performance. It simultaneously capitalises on the perceived novelty or authenticity of a blind person giving financial advice while minimising potential (sighted) audience prejudice by avoiding sustained disability discourse.

This approach exemplifies what Goffman (1959) alludes to as controlled information leakage between frontstage and backstage identities, signalling disability where it attracts engagement but keeping it backgrounded where it may fuel ableist audience attitudes. The latter may be the case with the seven channels (11.7%) that foregrounded BVI thematically only in their video content while making no reference to blindness in their titles, banners or profile descriptions. These vloggers may not want to emphasise disability in paratextual frames, thus preventing the activation of BVI-related stereotypes in viewers. This further demonstrates that paratextual cues and content-level salience frequently diverge in both directions, underscoring the flexibility with which creators modulate disability visibility throughout different layers of their self-presentation.

It is important to note that these patterns represent statistical associations rather than causal relationships; the data indicate how identity elements co-occur across the sample, not why particular creators adopt specific representational strategies.

Identity enhancement

Seventeen of the 60 channels (28.3%) feature only BVI individuals on screen, and although the majority of channels (71.7%) include sighted people, these individuals never appear in assisting or support roles. Sighted collaborators are shown solely as friends, partners or bystanders, rather than as helpers or facilitators. Moreover, the likelihood of VI-only representation does not differ significantly between channels where blindness is thematically central and those where it is incidental ($\chi^2(1) = 1.52$, $p = .217$), indicating that the absence of visible sighted assistance constitutes a consistent pattern across the sample rather than a function of BVI salience. This points to a shared dramaturgical strategy that foregrounds autonomy and competence: by omitting visual markers of reliance on sighted others, creators present themselves as self-sufficient media producers capable of independently handling video filming, editing and uploading. Through this, BVI vloggers counter dominant cultural stereotypes of blind people as dependent or technologically inept, and instead perform intersectional identities grounded in agency and creative control.

This performative choice also reflects strategies of stigma management through identity enhancement and selective self-disclosure. As Corrigan and Watson (2002) argue, resisting internalised stigma requires self-affirming portrayals that reclaim competence and counter negative societal narratives about disability. One illustrative example is the channel *The Blind Life*, where Sam Seavey regularly offers in-depth reviews of mainstream and assistive technologies, demonstrating expertise in areas often assumed to be inaccessible to blind individuals. His videos are grounded in personal experience but presented with technical authority, humour and pedagogical clarity, positioning him as both a peer educator within the BVI community and a credible source for sighted audiences unfamiliar with access technologies.

Seavey's blindness is not hidden. He discusses the latest accessible technologies (e.g. smart cane), as well as media creation technologies (e.g. camera gimbals). Although it is always from the perspective of a blind user, his performance always exudes technological mastery and agency. Such performances offer nuanced portrayals of what it means to be blind by resisting stereotypes of incompetence and pity (see Barnes, 1992), instead framing disability through competent social participation. This aligns with the broader literature on social identity enhancement (e.g. Jetten et al., 2017) and disability advocacy (e.g. Haller, 2023).

Indeed, many BVI creators explicitly engage in identity enhancement through advocacy-driven storytelling. For instance, *Planes Trains and Canes* offers travel vlogs that demonstrate how Mona Minkara, a visually impaired woman who also identifies as a professor of bioengineering, navigates airports, cities and public transport systems independently, effectively challenging assumptions about immobility or risk aversion. *Molly Burke* seamlessly blends lifestyle content with targeted advocacy. She uses beauty tutorials, 'day in the life' vlogs and humour-inflected storytelling to present a multidimensional BVI identity. At the same time, she regularly addresses access barriers, stigma and social misconceptions. In both cases, the visual impairment is not only foregrounded but also implicitly celebrated, aligning with transgressive idealisation as a strategic performative means of personal branding, advocacy and audience engagement (Södergren and Vallström, 2023).

Advocacy content appears exclusively in channels where BVI identity was thematically central: 25 of the 49 central-BVI channels (51%) include explicit disability activism or advocacy, whereas none of the 11 incidental-BVI channels do so (χ^2 (1) = 7.64, p = .006, Cramer's V = .36). This indicates that advocacy-driven storytelling is tightly linked to the explicit performance of BVI identity and functions as a key form of identity enhancement, collective pride-building and public education.

Stereotypical identities

While many BVI vloggers frame their disability identity with nuance, often weaving it into broader, intersectional self-representational narratives, they tend to present other social identities, such as gender or profession, in more schematic, stereotypical terms. This asymmetry reflects a complex negotiation between resisting ableist stigma and performing recognisable social roles that align with mainstream audience expectations not related to ableism.

A case in point is stereotypical gender performance, which is evident across the dataset. Lifestyle content shows a significant association with female vloggers (female: 21/26; male: 9/31; χ^2 (1) ≈ 8.57, $p \approx .0034$). Especially beauty content appears in 16 of the 26 female-run channels but only two of the 31 male-run channels (χ^2 (1) = 21.91, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .62). In contrast, tech, gaming or DIY content is significantly more common among male creators (male: 18/31; female: 7/26; χ^2 (1) = 4.76, p = .029). Algorithmic content promotion on YouTube, which tends to favour normative gendered genres (Bishop, 2018), may further incentivise and display these performances.

Nevertheless, performances that simultaneously highlight BVI and gender identities have also strong activist dimensions. For example, Lucy Edward's makeup tutorials function not only as acts of self-care or aesthetic engagement, but also as postfeminist expressions of visual agency - the beauty tutorial genre often functions as a space where femininity is constructed through consumer-oriented performance (Chae, 2019). For BVI vloggers, however, these tutorials also become dramaturgical sites of resistance: the camera substitutes for the mirror, allowing creators to visually perform their idealised routines for an imagined sighted audience. This performative gaze affirms competence in traditionally visual domains and subverts the stereotype that blind people cannot care for their appearance. At the same time, it reinforces a range of female stereotypes, such as weight loss and aesthetic ideals that, from a rhetorical and communicative perspective, enhance the performance of the beauty expert identity.

Similar patterns are observable with male identities. In *The Blind Handyman*, we see identity performance aligned with traditional masculinity, in which the creator presents himself as a skilled DIY enthusiast, using practical demonstrations and technical language to reinforce an image of mastery and problem-solving. Here, blindness is neither hidden nor foregrounded; rather, it coexists with an identity grounded in expertise, productivity and agency. Similarly, Justin Holland, a blind bodybuilder, centres his eponymous channel around fitness, discipline and transformation, visually reinforcing his muscular physique and strength to counteract any perception of bodily deficiency.

Yet these gendered alignments are not completely rigid: several female BVI creators engage in activities like sports or technology, subverting traditional gender roles in ways that may also resist ableist assumptions about fragility or incompetence. This subversion is detectable in the number of channels whose thematic patterns contradict gendered expectations (see above), though the overall structure remains significantly gender-skewed.

Another example of non-BVI identity performance that, nonetheless, advocates for reducing ableist expectations is seen in *The Blind Kitchen*, a channel where the creator adopts the stereotypical persona of a professional chef. The content emphasises culinary skill, independence and sensory adaptation. It uses familiar visual tropes of kitchen mastery to frame blindness not as a barrier, but as a narrative of competence and resilience.

One particularly striking case is *Juan Alcazar*, a partially sighted filmmaker who embodies one of the most compelling disruptions of ableist expectations in the dataset. As a director, editor and self-professed cinephile, Alcazar performs an identity deeply embedded in visual and technical expertise - precisely the kind of domain assumed to be inaccessible to BVI individuals. His videos, which include short films, behind-the-scenes footage and editing tutorials, foreground his mastery of cinematic tools and aesthetics. In doing so, he subverts BVI-related stereotypes and simultaneously (and strategically) plays into stereotypes of the visionary filmmaker and obsessive film buff.

All these examples suggest that BVI creators perform stereotypical social identities other than BVI not to conform, but to strategically normalise blindness within the audience's existing cultural schema. By aligning their disability identity with high-competence, high-agency identity scripts, such as the makeup expert, chef, athlete, handyman or filmmaker, they aim to reduce intergroup distance and challenge ableist affective responses, such as pity towards and fear of blindness.

This form of identity work also illustrates the dramaturgical tension between Goffman's frontstage and backstage. While occasional moments of vulnerability or candid self-disclosure appear in these channels, the dominant public image is shaped around capability, specialisation and self-sufficiency. Ultimately, these creators strategically mobilise dominant cultural stereotypes as communicative shortcuts to frame themselves as competent and relatable to both BVI and sighted audiences.

Omissions

While many BVI vloggers foreground certain identities to challenge stigma and enhance social recognition, their performances are equally defined by what they choose to withhold. Certain omissions (e.g. politics, religion and sexuality) can be verified through coded categories, others such as trauma or intimacy emerge from textual observation rather than formal coding.

Selective omission is an essential dimension of identity curation, revealing how creators navigate the complex demands of visibility, relatability and self-protection in a platform economy shaped by audience expectations. Indeed, several identity domains appear overwhelmingly underrepresented: political topics occur in only 3 of the 60 channels (5%), economic discussions in similarly few (5%) and sexuality and religion appear as salient identity markers in just 8% and 7% of channels, respectively. These extremely low frequencies demonstrate that vloggers routinely avoid topics that may expose vulnerability, provoke controversy or invite intrusive audience scrutiny.

For instance, on the channel *Your Canadian Blind Girl* Ashley Stewart offers a telling example of how intimate boundaries are drawn. In her video titled '*How do Blind People Wipe Their Bums?*', she directly addresses a frequently asked viewer question but playfully deflects it with humour and sarcasm, refusing to answer. Her refusal is not just comedic; it reveals how intrusive curiosities about disabled bodies are often projected onto BVI creators, demanding a degree of corporeal transparency not expected of sighted influencers. In resisting such disclosure, she reasserts agency over her self-presentation, pushing back against the voyeuristic gaze that often accompanies digital disability visibility.

Such decisions illustrate how backstage elements of the self are carefully managed even in seemingly unfiltered environments like vlogs. While creators may share aspects of their lives that feel candid or intimate, such as routines, challenges, aspirations or even birth control and fertility treatments (e.g. *Lucy Edwards*), certain areas remain deliberately obscured. Across the sample, topics such as bodily functions, romantic intimacy and trauma are rarely explored in depth, especially among female vloggers who seem to use this omission as a protective dramaturgical strategy to contend with gendered forms of scrutiny and online harassment (Duffy and Hund, 2019).

Sexuality in general is a rarely foregrounded identity category for both male and female creators (χ^2 (1) = 0.52, p = .47). This reluctance to explicitly disclose sexual and romantic experiences may also stem from the cultural stereotype of disabled people as asexual or desiring-less - a pervasive trope that continues to shape public perceptions and self-presentation (Shildrick, 2009; Siebers, 2012). For BVI creators, withholding sexual or romantic identity details can thus be read as both a protective dramaturgical strategy and a response to a normative gaze predisposed to desexualise disabled bodies.

When it comes to thematic omissions of political affiliations, socio-economic conditions and factual (non-personalised) commentary possibly reflect the BVI vloggers' awareness of their audience's diversity and a desire to maintain broad appeal across social and political boundaries. This indicates that BVI vloggers aim to limit potentially divisive content that may contribute to their marginalisation or stigmatisation. Given that 95% of channels avoid political content and 95% avoid socio-economic commentary, these omissions appear to be structurally patterned rather than idiosyncratic.

This performative withholding should not be interpreted as evasion but rather as a sophisticated strategy for sustaining agency within digital visibility. By choosing what not to share, BVI vloggers assert their autonomy in shaping how blindness, and the *self* more broadly, is mediated, consumed and understood. In this sense, selective omission is just as meaningful as disclosure: it is part of the

dramaturgical toolkit through which creators navigate intersecting pressures of authenticity, advocacy and audience expectation.

Discussion

Bringing together the findings on which social identities are made salient by BVI vloggers (RQ1) and how these identities are narratively and audio-visually performed (RQ2), the Discussion examines how such performances position BVI creators in relation to agency, community-building and the reframing of blindness within digital spaces (RQ3).

Our findings show that BVI creators do not simply document their lives; they strategically curate how blindness appears within a broader constellation of identities, including gender, profession, hobbies, age and technology use. These performances simultaneously manage stigma, foster in-group belonging and create points of connection with non-disabled viewers, positioning vloggers as active cultural producers whose visibility contributes to reshaping social perceptions of blindness.

Particularly striking is the prevalence of fully blind creators within a medium commonly assumed to privilege sight: 37 of the 60 vloggers in our sample are fully blind. This highlights a direct resistance to ocularcentrism. By inserting blind subjectivities into visual culture, these creators challenge assumptions about who is expected to participate in video-based self-representation. This aligns with Garland-Thomson's (2009) notion of 'visual activism', wherein the mere act of appearing on one's own terms transforms the conditions under which disability is seen and recognised. Even when explicit advocacy is not central, the presence of BVI creators in this space functions as implicit activism, countering epistemic and representational erasure.

Across the sample, BVI identity is frequently foregrounded but rarely in singular or reductive terms. Creators integrate blindness into multidimensional self-presentations that emphasised competence and relatability in domains often presumed inaccessible to blind individuals, such as travel, cooking, beauty or filmmaking. These performances resist deficit-based stereotypes and reflect attempts to balance intergroup (sighted–BVI) commonality with sensory difference, consistent with optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991). In this balance, disability identity becomes neither dominant nor erased but situated as one of several intersecting identity categories. Channels in which blindness is thematically central display a higher number of salient identity categories and broader thematic output, suggesting that asserting disability identity expands rather than restricts the expressive repertoire of BVI vloggers.

A comparison with prior research reinforces this interpretation. Earlier studies show that BVI creators use YouTube to challenge stereotypes, assert agency and share practical knowledge (Ellis and Kent, 2016; Seo and Jung, 2021), but they largely emphasise motivations and experiences rather than the textual mechanics of identity performance. Likewise, Li et al. (2022) and Rong et al. (2022) foreground adaptive creativity in beauty, lifestyle or streaming contexts, typically framing these practices as accessibility responses. Our findings extend this work by demonstrating that BVI vloggers do not simply add non-disability identities to counter stigma; rather, they integrate blindness into wide-ranging identity constellations that actively enlarge their thematic and stylistic possibilities.

Similarly, scholarship on self-disclosure and vulnerability management (e.g. Niu et al., 2022) tends to focus on whether and how impairment is revealed. Our analysis shows that selective foregrounding *and* backgrounding of blindness occurs alongside the performance of other social identities, producing more complex dramaturgical configurations than previously documented. In this sense, we shift the emphasis from why BVI vloggers create content to how they construct multifaceted identity performances that reconfigure the representational space available to them.

This negotiation is especially visible in how creators modulate the relationship between disability identity and other social identities. While they often resist negative stereotypes of blindness, they frequently lean into more conventional stereotypes tied to gender, professional identity or interest groups. By aligning themselves with high-competence, high-agency identity scripts, such as athlete, beauty expert, gamer, chef or filmmaker, vloggers shift the cognitive frame through which disability is interpreted, reducing affective responses such as pity or discomfort and inviting identification through shared interests and familiar roles.

At the same time, these identity performances carry important communal dimensions. Many vloggers produce content that affirms shared experiences and diversities within the BVI community, offering BVI viewers representations that affirm self-worth, normalise challenges and celebrate alternative modalities of perception. Collaborative videos such as Juan Alcazar's 'Blindness is a Spectrum|Blind YouTubers Discuss Their Vision' explicitly foreground intragroup diversity and serve as counter-narratives to the homogenising stereotypes often imposed on blind populations. This aligns with Emara and Haller's (2024) emphasis on shared storytelling as collective identity work, and with Johanssen and Garrisi's (2020) account of digital disability activism, where communal visibility itself operates as a 'soft' form of advocacy even when overt political messaging is absent. YouTube thus functions as an affective community space, fostering solidarity while enabling creators to articulate a collective identity organised around pride, capability and mutual support.

However, identity performance in this context is as much about omission as disclosure. Vloggers rarely discuss political affiliations, socio-economic circumstances or bodily intimacy. Such selective withholding reflects a curated frontstage that manages vulnerability, avoids polarisation and preserves broad audience appeal. This pattern resonates with Goffman's (1959) backstage/frontstage model and with Marwick and boyd's (2011) work on boundary maintenance in networked publics, as well as Goldfarb and Armenta's (2017) observation that disabled creators modulate self-disclosure to resist intrusive or voyeuristic expectations. It may also intersect with broader cultural stereotypes that construct disabled people as asexual, contributing to caution around sexual or romantic self-presentation.

The polysemy of these performances warrants reflexive analysis. As ability-diverse researchers, our interpretations were inevitably shaped by our positionalities: one blind, one sighted. From a sighted perspective, strategies such as 'visual self-representation' may appear to demystify blindness and cultivate empathic perception by offering familiar visual cues that anchor understanding. From a blind perspective, the same strategies may be read as acts of reclaiming the gaze, asserting narrative authority and participating in community-specific storytelling practices. Similarly, selective disclosure of disability-related information may be interpreted by a blind listener as an articulation of control over how vulnerability is mediated, whereas a sighted viewer might perceive it primarily as individual resilience or personal branding.

This multiplicity of readings is consistent with prior research showing that disability representations circulate differently across audience groups. Haller (2023) describes how disabled audiences may read such performances as solidarity-building, while non-disabled audiences often interpret them through therapeutic or inspirational frames; likewise, Seo and Jung (2021) note that the same YouTube narratives can simultaneously serve community affirmation and public education. These interpretive differences underscore how textual prompts may result in a multiplicity of readings that digital disability performances enable.

Conclusion

This study shows that BVI vloggers engage in multifaceted identity work that challenges ableist expectations and broadens how blindness is understood within digital culture. Through varied strategies of self-presentation, ranging from explicit disability-focused storytelling to the incorporation of gendered, professional and lifestyle identities, creators use YouTube as a space for agency, visibility, relational belonging and advocacy.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample was predominantly English-speaking, reflecting linguistic search constraints and YouTube's algorithmic privileging of Anglophone content, which restricts the cultural generalisability of findings. Moreover, while this article focused on descriptive and thematic patterns of identity performance, it did not undertake a full symbolic or discursive analysis. A forthcoming companion study will address this gap by examining stereotype dynamics, narrative framings and ideological patterns across the same dataset.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes important insights into how BVI creators articulate complex identities and reshape the social meanings attached to blindness. Future research should investigate how disabled and non-disabled audiences interpret these performances and how platform governance and algorithmic visibility shape the opportunities and constraints of BVI identity work online. Such work is essential for developing a more global and inclusive understanding of digital disability culture.

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