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'Stayhome' as a YouTube performance: representing and reshaping domestic space under the 2020 covid lockdown in Italy

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ABSTRACT

What does 'staying at home' mean, and how is it represented online, once it suddenly becomes a legal obligation? This article explores the ways to display and resignify the domestic space through the frames of YouTube during the first nationwide lockdown in Italy in spring 2020. While being enforced at home, and possibly as a way to cope with this, YouTube creators perceive, display and (re)adapt their dwellings in contrasting ways along the continuum between safe shelter and prison; as proper domestic space but also as functional equivalent of extra-domestic ones such as gyms and offices; as the necessary backdrop for their performances or as a setting to be exhibited in its own right. Based on a content analysis of 989 videos using the hashtag *#iorestoacasa* ['I'm staying home'] between March and May 2020, this article explores how the domestic space is turned into a stage for public (YouTube-mediated) activities, thereby revealing an increasing permeability between private and public domain. This, in turn, invites to further investigate the complex entanglements of private and public, 'displayed' and 'invisibilized', as an expression of the constitutive ambivalence of the home.

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KEYWORDS Home; YouTube; lockdown; #stayhome; Covid-19; Italy

1. Introduction

Home, as everyday experience of one's domestic space, has gained unprecedented salience, meanings and functions with the Covid-19 pandemic. When people started to be strongly encouraged, if not required by law, to stay home, a number of overlapping tasks and commitments had to be reconciled within the domestic space for most of them. How did a 'domestic' social medium *par excellence* like YouTube capture such an experience? And what do people's ways to broadcast themselves suggest about the changing emotions, routines and practices associated with staying home?

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We address these concerns, in this article, through a content analysis of the videos uploaded on YouTube during the 2020 national lockdown in Italy (March 11–May 3) under the hashtag *#iorestoacasa* ('I'm staying home'). Starting from the assumption that the lockdown-related 'enforced domesticity' enhanced the functional and symbolic importance of the domestic space (Brickell 2020; Byrne 2020), as well as its visibility in social media, we explore how YouTube creators portray their everyday lives under these revolutionary circumstances. Their narratives and visual representations may be telling of their own backgrounds, but also of their changing ways to understand and represent domestic spaces and cultures. Whatever the creators' interests and aims in representing themselves, their video production is a window into the everyday life experience of the pandemic and the different ways in which people cope with it.

Our analysis draws on a sample of almost one thousand videos, highly diverse in contents and targets and yet all sharing the main slogan in use to contain the virus diffusion in Italy. In what follows, after an overview of the literature and of our research design, we aim to address four questions, at the crossroads between research on home and on social media in everyday life. First, we ask how these YouTube creators talk about their own homes. Is the domestic space a necessary backdrop, or a topic of discussion in itself? As people 'broadcast themselves' within their dwellings, moreover, they operate choices about what should be (in)visible there. What balance do they negotiate between what they try to emphasize and conceal of themselves and of their life environments? Indeed, this data archive enables us to focus also on the domestic space surrounding people's online performances. What do home interiors reveal of the underlying domestic cultures? Last, we ask how people readapt their domestic space and infrastructures, given their new life circumstances. All across these questions, we aim to analyse how the lived experience of the pandemic, as exemplified on YouTube, affects the interdependence between the home and the outside world; that is, between private, public and professional domains (Boccagni and Duyvendak 2021). How is the boundary between (what is deemed as) private and public rearticulated, and what implications does it have, under conditions of enforced domesticity?

2. Home, YouTube and the domestic representation of the self: an overview

Representing the domestic space in a more or less explicit and intentional way is nothing new for YouTube. It is actually an ordinary implication of

the use of this social medium. There is a promise, however, in exploring the displays and uses of domesticity on YouTube in a period in which the home is less a backdrop than the functional container of virtually all everyday activities. How do the ways of representing the home, and oneself in the home, change accordingly?

Relative to other social media, YouTube is home-made by definition (Buckingham *et al.* 2011). Yet, it is interestingly marginal to social research on the lived experience of home. Within the latter, it is no coincidence that proper ethnographies of everyday life *within* the domestic space are very infrequent (with exceptions like Miller 2001; Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2013; Pink *et al.* 2017). Even under the covid-driven ‘new normal’, the increasing interest in domesticity has typically resulted in research done ‘from the outside in’ (e.g. Meagher and Cheadle 2020; Devine-Wright *et al.* 2020; Byrne 2020). And none of these studies, to our knowledge, has explored the representation of domestic spaces and cultures through YouTube. For sure, the opening in the domestic space YouTube gives is far from unconditional or unfiltered. Even so, this is a unique channel to explore the domestic space, starting from the ways to order and display it to a public audience. While a ‘real’ domestic environment is normally out of the reach of external viewers, YouTube shows spaces that are ‘publicly private and privately public’ (Lange 2007): the ‘performative’ domesticity displayed on YouTube is specially devised to be visible.

Within media studies, the concept of home points more to an attitude than to a particular place. Notions such as *home-* movies, videos or cinema involve a communicative style – a ‘home mode’ (Chalfen, 1987) – rather than one domestic location. Home evokes the domestication of a particular technology, but most of all the imperceptible quality of a smooth, gentle and emotional gaze on one’s own family or inner circle. The home mode relates to the *uses* of amateur technologies of audiovisual recording, to produce *home movies*. This technology has been applied to the private sphere, which does not necessarily overlap with the domestic one. Home movies were mainly filmed outside the home to record special moments such as holidays or public ceremonies to be later ‘consumed’ at home during collective ritual screenings (Zimmerman 1995). While YouTube has certainly to do with this history, it adds new connotations to it, tied to the digital revolution and to the new video practices enabled by participatory cultures (Jenkins 2006). What constitutes the home mode, writes Lange (2019), has changed significantly over time. Social media have

undermined the distinction between private practices and their public display, producing a continuum between professional and amateurish, intimate and external.

YouTube finds its specificity precisely as a domestic medium (Wesch, 2009; Hillrichs 2016). It was born as an archive for User Generated Content (UGC) under the motto 'Broadcast Yourself' (Snickars and Vonderau, 2009). In its medium-specific content, it is a 'home native' platform, sparked in teens' bedrooms or in small domestic studios. Young vloggers were the first to sense its potential, which surely has a generational nuance, tied to so-called Y and Z generations (Brodesco 2019b). The domestic setting, in turn, has always been a feature of the 'intimate' and 'authentic' communication that people are expected to perform on YouTube (Raun, 2018). By talking about 'performance' (Carlson 2004) we refer here to the switch in self-representation, identity construction and self-expression that followed the spreading of SNS. The new 'spectacular' role of 'audiences' (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) in the post-media condition (Eugeni 2015) has made living on a (digital) stage a common social practice. This led scholars to talk of 'performative intimacy' (Marwick and Boyd 2011) or 'performance of connection' (Marshall 2010). Sociologically speaking, this follows Goffman's (1959) definition of social interaction as a performance where 'the individual must be able rapidly to convey impressions of him/herself to others, highlighting favourable aspects, and concealing others' (Watson and Hill 2012: 133).

In certain respects, YouTube shares the same space with the audiovisual self-representations of family life in home movies. However, YouTube-based domesticity is appropriated and articulated by single individuals more than groups or families. The 'YouTubers' who use the medium at its best, possibly earning money from it, tend to represent themselves in their bedrooms or studios in front of a webcam, talking about topics like gaming, make-up or comics (Allocca 2018; Brodesco 2019a). During the 2020 lockdown in Italy, many of them went on with their usual activities, sometimes just symbolically adhering to the institutional slogan *#iorestoacasa*. Parallel to that, the lockdown opened YouTube to new creators who discovered its potential. For some beginners, communicating through YouTube was a novelty game. They just found out that they were still in a position to express themselves, communicate their hobbies, support their professions. Others, as we discuss below, joined the platform precisely for the need of a public space to retain and broadcast their work activities. These users effectively adapted themselves to 're-mediate' (Bolter and

Grusin 2000; Hjarvard 2013) their jobs via YouTube. In all these respects, YouTube as a technology has been further ‘domesticated’, that is, integrated into daily routines, work structures and environments (Berker *et al.* 2005). However, much of this domestication involves some exposure of home interiors and of one’s relation with the home. What can we infer, by zooming down to the videos that articulate an explicit engagement with the pandemic, on the representation of the domestic space (and of oneself as a part of it), and on the functional and symbolic readaptations of the home?

3. Case study and methodology

3.1. What’s in a hashtag? Exploring ‘stayhome’ and the domestic space in YouTube

The background for this study is the unprecedented national lockdown enforced in Italy from March 11 to May 3 2020, after the burst of the covid-19 pandemic. *#iorestoacasa* (‘I’m staying home’) was a hashtag to express one’s commitment to comply with the rules, on a supposedly short-term emergency. The slogan reproduced the title of the first dedicated law provision (DPCM, 9 March 2020), as formally stated by the Italian prime minister upon a dedicated press conference: ‘I am about to sign a measure that we can summarize with the expression “I’m staying home”’.¹ On the government website, interestingly, this decree went along with the image of a locked door, thereby asserting a straightforward division between a safe inside and a dangerous, covid-ridden outside world (Figure 1). While such a neat division has a remarkable symbolic power, it has long been questioned in critical home studies (Blunt and Dowling 2006). It has also revealed further its constitutive limitations, as the pandemic has kept expanding over the subsequent years.

#iorestoacasa became the institutional hashtag of the 2020 lockdown, boosted by a social media governmental campaign.² After the end of the lockdown, the hashtag rapidly lost salience (Figure 2).³ It was as if its former users thought they had ‘done their duty’ by supporting the

¹Sto per firmare un provvedimento che possiamo sintetizzare con l’espressione “io resto a casa”. Available on the Italian government’s official YouTube channel: *Dichiarazioni del Presidente Conte | 11/3/2020* (uploaded: March 12, 2020).

²*#iorestoacasa*: parte la campagna social degli artisti contro il virus (I’m staying home: the artists’ social media campaign against the virus: www.salute.gov.it/portale/news/p3_2_1_1_1.jsp?lingua=italiano&menu=notizie&p=dalministero&id=4177, published on March 9, 2020).

³We counted, overall, 48 videos with *#iorestoacasa* in the title from May 4 to May 31, and just 5 from June 1 to December 31 2020.



Figure 1. The image on the governmental webpage on DPCM 9 March 2020 (Source: www.salute.gov.it/imgs/C_17_materialiSocialNuovo_14_9_0_immagine.png).

new public health measures, and could now get back to their ‘normal’ lives. Other hashtags went also popular, albeit not to the same extent.⁴ However, in this article we stick to *#iorestoacasa* due to its prominence, institutional character and inherent connection with home as a research topic. Under circumstances that have increased the intensity and frequency of online platforms use worldwide (Mejova and Kourtellis 2021), it is worth reporting the daily occurrences of this tag and of its main ‘competitors’ in our selected time window (Figure 3).

With a view to building a complete, valid and reliable dataset, we collected all the YouTube videos with *#iorestoacasa* in the title during the formal lockdown period. For sure, YouTube hosted also contentious and anti-scientific stances on covid-19 and the measures to contrast it (Jennings *et al.* 2021). However, we found no video promoting protest, dissent or conspiracy theories under *#iorestoacasa*. Adopting this prescriptive, deontic hashtag meant using YouTube to endorse the official measures to face the pandemic, rather than to challenge them.

3.2. A methodological background

Our data collection started from an in-site search on YouTube and a broader all-in-title search on Google. This allowed us to collect all the videos uploaded during the lockdown with *#iorestoacasa* in the title, and hence a collection of 2,250 videos that we watched, categorized

⁴These include ‘#andràtuttobene’ (‘it will all end up well’), #quarantena (‘quarantine’) and ‘#distantimuniti’ (‘distant but united’).

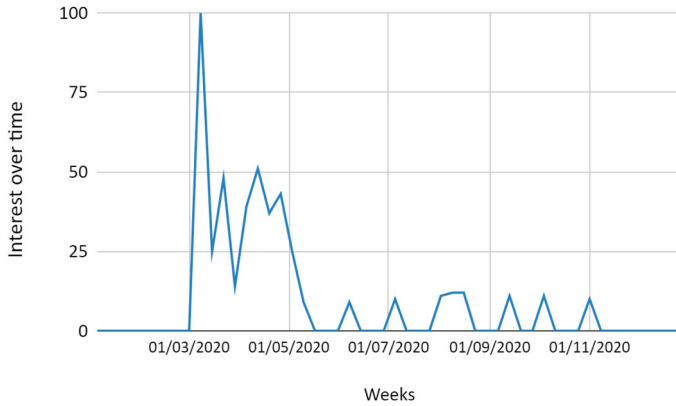


Figure 2. Number of searches for '#iorestoacasa' videos on the YouTube search engine (year: 2020; data: Google Trends).

Note: 'Interest over time' is defined by Google Trends as follows: 'numbers represent search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the given time. A value of 100 is the peak popularity for the term' (<https://trends.google.com/trends>).

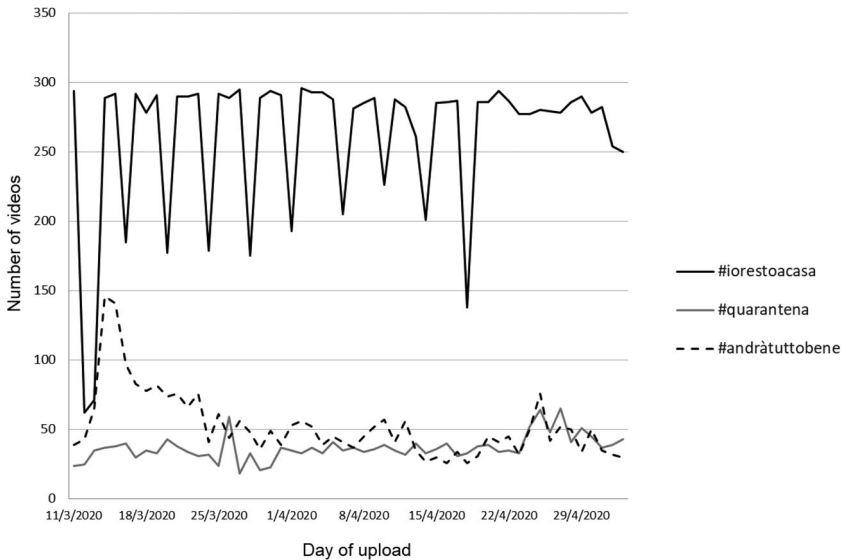


Figure 3. Number of occurrences of three hashtags on titles or descriptions of YouTube videos from 11 March 2020 to 3 May 2020 (Source: in-site research on Google).

and pre-analysed. We first collected the metadata provided by YouTube itself: date, title, channel, description, number of views, subscriptions and comments. We then added two dichotomous variables: relevance (whether or not the home is actually represented in the video) and

contents (culture and information, music, fitness, appeals, daily life, children activities, etc.). Last, we did a categorization in terms of gender, number of hosts, apparent age, rooms on display and professionalization of the domestic space. Within the general framing of netnography (Kozinets and Gambetti 2021), we combined a qualitative exploration of the meanings and functions of the home, and some key figures to understand the general characteristics of our sample. For the purpose of this study we also dedicated some space to a close-reading of particularly significant videos.

This preliminary analysis led us to select the videos that represent a domestic space distinguishable as such, rather than any public, natural or undifferentiated environment. This made for a subsample of 989 videos, posted by 476 creators, as the specific database for this article (Table 1). Interestingly, less than 17% of these videos include an explicit mention to home. Even fewer (10.5%) consist only of appeals to social distancing. In fact, the hashtag *#iorestoacasa* operates primarily as a way for youtubers to stay connected to a contingent trend. Its use is mostly associated with displaying ordinary domestic life, but also external activities, like fitness or virtual cycling, that have been specially ‘domesticated’. Particularly at the

Table 1. Socio-demographics and analytical variables in sampled videos: an overview ($n = 989$).

Creators	Individuals	54%
	Commercial enterprises	18%
	Public authorities	15%
	Civil society organizations	13%
Host gender	Male	43%
	Female	27%
	Mixed	30%
Main contents	Culture and information	20.5%
	Music	18.4%
	Fitness, wellness, health	11.3%
	Appeals	10.5%
	Vlog, daily life	9.4%
	Activities for children	7.0%
	Entertainment	6.6%
	Cooking	6.0%
	Other	10.3%
	Verbalization of ‘stayhome’ (3.1)	Talks about home
Does not talk about home		83%
Individual vs. collective video (3.2)	Single host	70%
	More than one host (or ‘mosaic videos’)	30%
Interior background (rooms) (3.3)	Multiple rooms	35%
	Living room	28%
	Kitchen	9%
	Bedroom	8%
	Domestic studio	6%
	Undistinguishable	14%
Interplay between domestic and outer space (3.4)	Modified for professional reasons	10%
	Not modified	90%

outset of the lockdown, some videos start with a short digression about Covid-19. However, even among those who endorse the *#iorestoa casa* campaign, displaying the domestic space seems to be a bare necessity, rather than a representational choice. At the same time, and unsurprisingly for a highly self-selected population, our sample includes very few examples of scepticism about the pandemic and no example of protests against the lockdown. As long as the topic is touched, this is with tones swinging between benevolent and fatalistic acceptance.

Interestingly, the video archive is very diverse in terms of views (from a few only to almost one million each), youtuber profile and gender composition. The creators' distribution by age shows, with a rough estimate, a relatively minor share of youth (less than 30 years: 29%), a higher share of adults (30 to 60: 39%) and a limited weight of older people (over 60: 8%), along with several cases of people of different ages (24%). Relative to other creators, over 60s are systematically less inclined to show themselves in the most private domestic spaces, such as bedrooms and bathrooms. And within the videos that make home an explicit discursive subject, women are significantly over-represented relative to men (18% vs 9% of the corresponding group). When both genders are involved, the weight of videos with explicit mentions to home rises to 27%. As these differences suggest, women tend to engage in YouTube appeals on the pandemic more than men, and collective videos are more likely to be appeals about *#stayhome*. In terms of selected location, relatively more frequent are the videos in which creators move from one room to the next, or several creators are engaged in different rooms. If we revisit the domestic location by gender, we notice clear differences only for the videos shot in domestic studios. Eleven per cent of videos made only by males are set in a studio, against 3% for their female counterparts. As the gap suggests, this room is often presented as a man's domestic enclave.

In what follows we analyse the video archive at four analytical levels, as summed up in [Table 1](#). These concern, respectively, the usages of the notion of home, the balance between individual and collective video production, the role and distribution of interior backgrounds and the interplay between home and outer environment.

4. Narrating, representing, modifying the home – and the self in it

While the selected videos are not necessarily informed by explicit reflections on home, they all have the domestic space as a backdrop. Following

the above map of creators' backgrounds and activities, we can explore the lived experience of the home in several respects, along a continuum between accounts and practices. First, how do these creators make sense of enforced domesticity, judging from the ways in which they talk about it? Second, what balance do they negotiate between what they show and hide of themselves and of their dwelling places? Regarding the latter, what infrastructural and aesthetic features do creators display and emphasize, depending also on their demographics and the activities they perform? Last, how far do they reshape their domestic spaces and objects in order to reproduce extra-domestic ones, and what does this reveal of the 'colonization' by public or professional spaces? Across these questions we aim to understand how the representation of the self and the representation of the home interplay with each other, and how far the domestic background matters, is revealing of the outer social environment and is (in)dependent on it.

4.1. Talking about the home

YouTubers' narratives combine different audio- and video-scapes: words and images, verbal and non-verbal, voices and bodies of the creator(s) and visual and sound 'traces' in the background. Even with this premise, it is remarkable that less than 17% of these videos include an explicit discursive reference to the underlying domestic environments. While all videos include textual descriptions inviting people to stay at home, most are focused on particular domestic activities or objects. The home as such is a natural background that does not need to be explicitly discussed. Likewise, staying at home is taken as an obvious constraint, rather than as a subject for discussion. Even so, we can wonder what understanding of home people articulate through their online performances.

Interestingly, within the few videos that include explicit appeals to stay home (10%), only a few articulate a positive idiom about the home – the supposedly nice side of the ordinary, comfortable domestic environment (Chapman and Hockey 1999). A case in point is a live video streaming (*SI ENTRA IN FASE 2*) in which a married couple repeatedly emphasize the benefits of being home, including the rediscovery of one's family space. The two manage a channel devoted to religious edutainment. Another invitation to make the most of the time spent at home comes from a well-known Italian cook and TV guest, who uploaded a series of cooking videos recorded in his place. In *BRUNO BARBIERI*

#IORESTOACASA *e faccio un sacco di cose!* the cook shows how he uses the lockdown idle time to take care of his domestic environment, e.g. to straighten the paintings on the house walls, clean his grandmother's silverware and prepare new recipes. While similar activities oscillate between serious invitation and self-parody, they can hardly avoid some mention to domestic work. Trivial domestic chores like cleaning or cooking are presented either as a mere necessity or, indeed, as a performance to be filmed. Some creators combine them with remarks on their psychological conditions. The opening monologue of *MOMENTI DI SCONFORTO & RICETTE VELOCI* | *Vitti871* is a case in point: 'There's not much to do when you stay home, except from cooking, cooking, eating... and cleaning'. Later on, however, the youtuber recounts how she said a 'distant hello' to her mother after receiving a gift from her, ending up in the two of them crying together. The latter scene, with her real tears, supports the implicit claim that the story is authentic and not a performance of authenticity.

Overall, these youtubers' discourse about home boils down to a personal endorsement of, or at least a pragmatic adaptation to, the new policy measures. However, delving into this discursive surface is no easy endeavour. The 'surface' actually amounts to the bulk of what is said on YouTube, a platform that works on Girard's (2008) 'mimetic desire' (cf. Lawtoo 2013). The unwritten rules of the platform build on mimicry, slogans, imitations, copying the style of successful youtubers (Bishop 2018; Manilève 2018; Nicoll and Nansen 2018; Denicolai 2021). However, they also encourage a sense of commonality and shared lived experience, all the more so under enforced domesticity. Showing one's domestic space may have to do with (re)creating a virtual sociability as, or more than, exhibiting the home as such.

Narrating the home, moreover, is based on what creators show and on the images they use, rather than on words alone. All that creators tell or omit telling is closely entangled with what they visually represent or omit. A case in point is the music video *Dietro lo schermo – KIARA FONTANA 2020*. This showcases a 'positive' attitude toward the lockdown and the reappropriation of domestic space through a sequence of activities in different dwellings. The video intertwines a woman working on her laptop from home, a girl doing her schoolwork, four people sharing a recipe, two children blowing out their birthday candles, and so on. These images are meant to convey a sense of happiness, supported by a specially composed soundtrack. The emphasis on emotional

connectedness in spite of physical distance, through shared engagement in ordinary domestic activities, is remarkable in itself. Forms of distant home-making and family living that have long been central to the lived experience of transnational migration (Madianou and Miller 2012; Boccagni 2022) are equally relevant and dilemmatic, if only for a while, for ‘ordinary’ native citizens.

Endorsing *#iorestoacasa*, overall, is primarily a matter of embodiment, as long as people show that they are indeed staying in their places. Like in an echo chamber, the visual appropriation of the hashtag is enough to make it resonate. Doing so generally means that creators tend to display their resilience, rather than admitting their vulnerability. There are exceptions, though, like in *ISOLAMENTO FORZATO! POTREI ESSERE INFETTA ... || #DAY 32*, where the creator talks with discomfort about the possibility of being infected. Still more common, and less personal or intimate, is the visual display of one’s sense of being trapped in a sort of domestic prison (Brickell 2020). An example is ‘A Diosa’ (“No Potho Reposare”) *Associazione Musica Insieme Grugliasco (TO) 2020*, another exercise in simultaneity. The video frames of some music players surround, and express a dedication to, a small child depicted on a balcony ‘behind the bars’. It seems like the child is both trapped inside the home and struggling to move beyond it.

4.2. Displaying the self in the home: negotiating degrees of visibility and intimacy

While starting from the same hashtag, creators negotiate in different ways the domestic visibility inherent in YouTube, and hence their own visibility. Generally speaking, the digital revolution (Floridi 2014) and the rise of social media (Livingstone 2008; Hodkinson 2015) have raised significant issues of privacy – the right or even only the possibility to defend one’s domestic, supposedly intimate space. In fact, social media users are not necessarily interested in hiding from public view certain private moments such as, for example, childbirths or toddlers’ baths. They rather oscillate between indifference to this shared intimacy and active promotion of it for instrumental purposes (Brodesco 2014; Lupton 2017). Against this background, the lockdown has made it more of a necessity to display one’s home interiors for communication of both public and private life. However, not all videos articulate the same level of self-disclosure and self-displaying; nor do they articulate the same

rationale and aims, in doing so. The implicit premise ‘I’m letting you in’, at the outset of any domestic YouTube video, is followed by two more questions: ‘but where, and to do what?’. The responses fall on all points of a continuum between an emphasis on the creators, or on their message; on the production of individual stories, or of collective ones.

Within the category ‘daily life/vlog’ (9.4%), youtubers aim precisely to ‘host’ viewers in their homes. Following a principle of shared intimacy (Miguel 2016), or indeed of ‘extimacy’ (Tisseron 2001), vloggers are expected to have no filters or secrets for the viewers. No space should be hidden as they move from one room to the next, along with their camcorder or smartphones, performing their daily tasks and most of all performing the task of sharing intimacy. This reverses the ordinary pre-SNS perception of the home as a space that protects from the look of intruders (Kaika 2004; Blunt and Dowling 2006); the more strangers look in, the better. Of course, creators are still in a position to control their intimacy throughout. It is up to them to show themselves more or less naked, in a metaphorical or even in a literal sense – see how female YouTuber Valerie_ Fitness (*COSA FACCIO LA MATTINA PER PASSARE IL TEMPO*) or male YouTuber Canesecco (*COME SOPRAVVIVERE ALL’ ISOLAMENTO*) represent themselves, from the back, in the shower. The use of the (digital) body is essential (Lupton 2017). Moreover, from a film language point of view, being filmed in full shot or on a traditional ‘YouTuber’s’ medium close-up changes the viewers’ perception completely. These thresholds pertain either to the space (of the house) or to the body (of the creator) (Berryman and Kavka 2018).

These videos are exemplary of a self-centred and self-promotional use of YouTube. Parallel to them, the lockdown has opened up the field for a genre that emphasizes more the message and its collaborative production than the characteristics of the authors or of their domestic spaces. This is the case of what we call mosaic videos. Unlike daily life vlogs, these are collective creations. Besides involving more people in the same domestic space, they are based on the same sequence of actions, such as singing, playing music or repeating a message from different domestic spaces. The contributions of distinct participants are edited in a sequence or composed in a split screen, with the video frame divided in many under-frames. Such videos attempt to rebuild a virtual sense of community and simultaneous engagement in a public-oriented task, to bridge the lock-down enforced isolation. Most of them are promoted by

educational institutions, cultural associations, media companies, music bands or sport teams.

A case in point is *I.P.S. F.S. Cabrini Taranto*. This vocational secondary school invited its students and teaching staff to make over 70 home-produced videos by filming themselves with their smartphones. The videos were later edited into a short collective one. In practice, the school asked both teachers and students to publicly display their homes. The normalization of the visual access to the domestic space is a good example of the collective changing perception of privacy, as discussed above. However, this domestic disclosure is instrumental to the message that is meant to be circulated – not the other way around. A particularly interesting frame (1'15'') shows a female student with an Italian flag in the background and a paper in her hands, with the slogan 'I'm studying from home. And you?' (Figure 4). On the lower side of the frame we see the back of a laptop, close to an open book. This self-representation keeps together all the motifs that are tied to the lockdown. The Italian flag operates both as a positive symbol of national renaissance and as a way to protect the privacy of that particular room and of the student herself. This apparently menial example is also revealing of a broader development: the way in which institutional actors such as schools, libraries or museums cannot but turn to a private company to develop their public educational activities. As Van Dijck (2020) remarks, this raises broader societal concerns regarding democratic control of the public sphere.

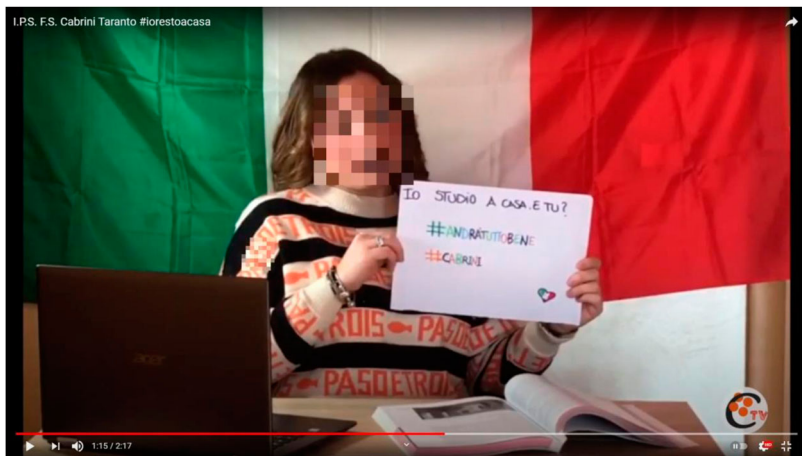


Figure 4. Still from the video *I.P.S. F.S. Cabrini Taranto*.

4.3. Displaying the home as a background

What of the domestic space people show, and how they show it, is part and parcel of their intended message. The very fact of showing that one stays home is an endorsement of *#iorestoacasa*. Having said that, which parts of the domestic space are typically displayed, depending on the demographics of the creators and on their expected audience? Do the creators display, and thereby reproduce, internal domestic thresholds between spaces with different symbolic and instrumental value for themselves or for other dwellers (Miranda-Nieto *et al.* 2020)? Similar questions are by no means specific to the lockdown period. The latter makes them all the more salient, though, as it overburdens the same domestic space with different and simultaneous tasks.

More often than not, there is a predictable correspondence between the activities people display and the functional features of their inner domestic space. Lectures or readings are typically done in studios or living rooms; video-recipes are presented in the kitchens; kids usually talk from their bedrooms, whereas make-up tutorials are held in bathrooms; songs are performed or recorded in living rooms, and so forth. Across these settings, a range of images and pictures emerges in the background – some of them rather standard, others more specific about the creators and their families (photos of weddings or travels, diplomas, etc.). However, it is hard to see them as particularly revealing of youtubers' 'self', since the exposition of their private lives already lies at the core of their performance. There is hardly any informative added value in a wedding picture, for instance, if – as is typically the case – the same couple already show themselves at the centre of the scene, in a supposedly sincere and unmediated fashion. Shared intimacy, in this perspective, is less a burden than something youtubers actively seek.

Having said this, the ways in which creators display home interiors are not just a matter of functional correspondence with their activities. They have also something to say on the underlying division between intimate and semi-public inner space, or on unequal ways to use that space between genders and generations (Lawrence 1982; Cieraad 2006). It does not come as a surprise, in this regard, that bedrooms are hardly ever present (4.2%) in the videos of adult YouTubers. While younger creators do show bedrooms as their own private, hence broadcastable places, their adult counterparts are hesitant to do the same. This would likely produce a sense of excessive intimacy, of (self)infantilization, or of uncanniness (Kaika 2004) that is at odds with the expected sense of

comfort and normality, albeit with some degree of complicity, of a YouTube video. In sum, the sampled videos articulate an implicit, but substantive generational divide in the thresholds of domestic intimacy to be shared, adult YouTubers being far more likely to navigate only semi-public spaces. The generations (Y and Z) who adopted YouTube as their own medium have always privileged the bedroom to produce their videos, 'a setting which is both distinct and similar to that used by other vloggers' (Hillrichs 2016: 123). Bedrooms, here, are not simply 'shown as they are', but 'willingly, consciously and performatively put into the scene on video blogs' (cit.: 128).

A remarkable gender divide can also be traced across these videos. This, however, is less in the use of the domestic space than in the ways to perform domesticity – the gendered distribution of the activities displayed in the home (Blunt and Dowling 2006). Perhaps counter-intuitively, there is no female concentration in the use of the kitchen, where men are actually over-represented and tend to have a more professional posture. A less visible, and yet striking inequality emerges from the performance of cleaning. The gendering of housework (Thebaud and Kornrich 2019), and even of its public display on YouTube, is captured by the gap in the weight of cleaning activities between videos with female creators (6%) and with their male counterparts (0.5%). While the weight of videos that include cleaning is interestingly low (2.4%), these correspond far more to female (64%) than male (9%) creators (with a 27% share of 'mixed' videos).

Still another way to approach the online representation of the domestic space leads us to the fundamental question of authenticity: the distinction, hence the division, between the pre-existing domestic environment and all that is specially modified. At one level, this distinction is clearly problematic, since any YouTube broadcast is a special enactment for a non-domestic audience. Some violation of the 'endogenous order' of the domestic space through a purposive performance is inherent in all YouTube production. At another level, however, this connects again with a question of expected and admitted intimacy: how far creators wish to disclose their domestic space and how they change and even 'sterilise' it in order to protect their intimacy. We can observe different degrees of openness or closedness of the domestic scenario accordingly, based on any device that affords to neutralize the background context – flags, tents, posters, or even only blank walls. For most creators, nevertheless, intimacy is not an issue. The very 'search for authenticity' can be read as a form of self-promotion that involves

artificiality and yet is rewarded by YouTube, in a sort of calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017).

4.4. Modifying the home, between domestication and professionalization

In Italy and elsewhere, a number of households had to readapt their domestic interiors under the lockdown (Goodwin *et al.* 2021) to cope with an overload of work- and school-related activities, often within the same time-space. In fact, the transition from an external working place to the home is not always easy to capture online. In a number of videos it is simply impossible to distinguish a home from an office background. This is significant in itself. It speaks to the creators' struggle to minimize their home disclosure and keep the domestic sphere separate from the work one, against the long-standing and now accelerated pressure to conflate them (Nippert-Eng 1996; Doling and Arundel 2020). In certain cases, however, domestic readaptations are as necessary as visible. This typically holds for fitness professionals and instructors who display their exercises online and rearrange their domestic spaces accordingly. Educators and library or museum employees are other cases in point.

Overall, we traced some significant modification of the domestic space, in interplay with the outside environment, in about 10% of the sampled videos. What we observe in these cases is a two-fold operation: the domestication of professional practices, as long as activities that should take place elsewhere are re-enacted inside the home; and the professionalization (or colonization) of the domestic space, as long as this process modifies the pre-existing display and use of domestic environments, cultures and objects. Many videos are focused precisely on how to 'bring home' non-domestic habits and activities. This charges certain material objects with new symbolic importance. In *AZUKITA – Sedia Gym n.8*, for instance, fitness training is domesticized through ordinary domestic objects such as a chair or a water bottle (Figure 5). This eventually becomes not only a domestic hobby, but an activity per se, which can actually be performed, following these rules, only at home. By contrast, in *Total Body con 2 manubri 24 minuti*, the rooms are 'colonized' by objects, like dumbbells and yoga mats, which are supposed to belong more to a gym than to a living room.

These domestic modifications have primarily a functional purpose. They aim to make a room fungible with an office or another hard-to-reach working place. Connected to this, however, they may have an

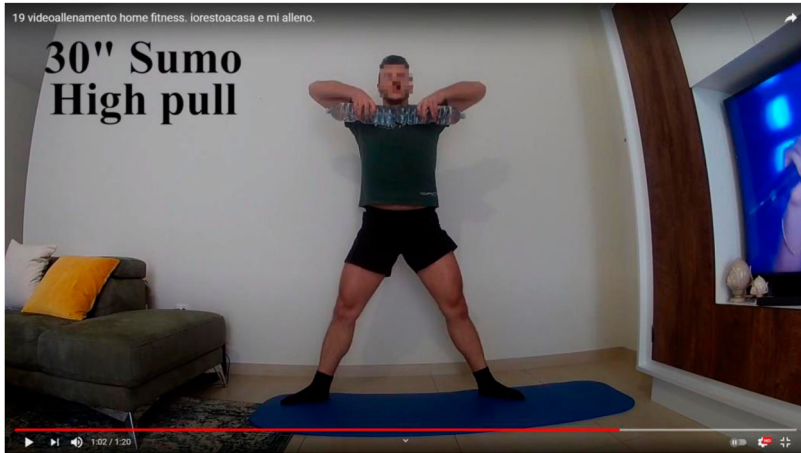


Figure 5. Still from the video 19 videoallenamento home fitness. iorestoacasa e mi alleno.

aesthetic purpose – to set a professionally neutral and tidy environment, as in the examples above, or anyway one perceived as consistent with one’s professional identity and reputation. The issue is (how) to reaffirm at home the ‘serious’ atmosphere which is typically associated with an institutional work environment. Some creators do so by displaying books, posters, plants, diplomas, professional devices, and so forth.

No matter how professionalized the home setting, some videos reveal forms of domestic backlash, or visible disruptions that interfere with their purported aim. A workout in a living room, for instance, may be disturbed by sudden raids or barkings of the family dog (e.g. *Alleniamo i glutei!* #ginnasticaincasa). Likewise, the preparation of a recipe can be interrupted by a family member jokingly stealing an ingredient (e.g. *La nostra Pizza per la Serata Cinema!*). Just like the domestic environment is colonized from the outside, it also domesticates, advertently or not, what is brought inside. Sometimes, moreover, domestic videos include details that are inconsistent with the expected message. *MA TU QUANTO VALI? Come ti ama Dio*, for example, shows a mother who exercises on a tapis roulant. Her child is doing his homework right behind. He turns his head toward his mother and the camera as the woman starts to speak (‘I just finished running a few kilometres, because today I’m really angry’). Her anger, however, is not tied to the pandemic or the lockdown but to the number of abortions in Italy. The child has no part in the video or its subject. He is just a ‘home presence’ that the woman does not omit.

It is not uncommon that creators disregard these evident traces of the home and of its inhabitants, people or pets. It seems as if there is no disturbance at all; indeed, as if the domestic space was not what it actually is but what they imagine it to be – a gym, a restaurant kitchen, an office – in a revealing denial of the (domestic) context. This ostensible lack of interest may be due to an explicit will to appear authentic, but also to improvisation, or a perception of contextual elements as irrelevant, relative to the intended content of the video. Only when the interferences become too loud or evident does the creator deal with them, possibly interrupting their activities. In the lexicon of Zerubavel (2015), these videos illuminate the situated and everyday social construction of ‘irrelevance’ – what is deemed to be relevant, and what emerges or is reconstructed as such anyhow – and of its variations between youtubers and publics, and across the latter. Furthermore, these episodes do remind the audience of the constitutive artificiality of the YouTube-based domestic order. Regardless of its pretension to be natural or, as we would say, endogenous, this accomplishment is always prone to be disrupted, either from without or from within.

5. Discussion

Having to ‘#stayhome’ during the Covid pandemic has resulted in new functions and tasks being concentrated in the domestic space, and possibly in a new and more emotionally ambiguous experience of it (Durnová and Mohammadi 2021). How has YouTube portrayed these changing imaginaries and practices, judging from the domestic #stayhome videos during the 2020 lockdown in Italy? In addressing the question, we should not forget that the ‘reality’ we encounter on YouTube is highly filtered and self-selected. YouTube as a dispositif has its own rules, which do not necessarily lead to a realistic representation of domestic life. The house that appears most authentic may be the one that was best modified for communicative purposes, thereby revealing the entanglement between construction and truthfulness that lies at the core of every social representation (Goffman 1959; Berger and Luckmann 1969; Odin 2000). While YouTube operates in a fictional and parallel world (Burgess and Green 2009), however, it does reveal meaningful reactions and adaptations to enforced domesticity. There is an underappreciated potential for research into the experience of the home within social media, with a view to capture what home means to people and how they reposition themselves accordingly.

By simply adding *#iorestoacasa* to their videos, a number of creators did endorse the new construction of the home as a safe shelter where the virus would supposedly not reach them. Their videos are invariably dotted with mundane acts of resilience, pointing to the endeavour to adapt to the lockdown while getting something good out of it. At the same time, creators have generally little interest in talking or reflecting about their homes. They rather articulate the need to leave them back in the realm of the ‘normal’ and the ‘natural’, as if to counter-balance the exceptional circumstances of covid-19 lockdowns.

Under these circumstances, letting outsiders in virtual portions of the domestic space has become almost a necessity, regardless of one’s ability to control them aesthetically (by taking care of the background), relationally (respecting the privacy of other housemates or family members) or technically (in terms of lights, noise, framing, etc.). Even in a medium based on unprecedented public intimacy like YouTube, however, we encounter significant variations in people’s disclosure of themselves and of their dwellings. In a nutshell, message-oriented videos tend to minimize domestic exposure. The videos centred on the self, instead, are more likely to exhibit the house and the body inside it as co-constitutive of the message – that is, of a sense of horizontal complicity and shared normality. In either case, YouTube videos are meant to contribute to forms of virtual sociability, while actually operating – as is typical of social media – both as means to bridge distances and as tools to produce new ones (Miller *et al.* 2021).

Importantly, the option to display different rooms and activities illuminates pre-existing gender and generation divides in the use of domestic space, but also in the perceived decency of showing it. The very domestic space in the background reflects variable degrees of ‘colonization’ and ‘domestication’, whenever extra-domestic activities are brought into the home and reshape its spatial and temporal organization. While such changes do reflect the consequences of covid-19 on domestic life, they also talk to a broader question for the social study of YouTube – the negotiation of the (in)visibility, or at least of the (ir)relevance, of other living presences or material objects in the home. This ultimately suggests the reluctance of the domestic space to be used only as a standard, impersonal public stage, regardless of people’s fictions and imaginaries about it.

6. Conclusion

More fundamentally, our case study has meaningful implications for a sociological understanding of what ‘stayhome’ orders *do*. Besides their health protection function, these measures can also be seen as an institutional way to reassert the private/public divide embodied by the home. They rearticulate – if only in the interest of collective health – a traditional view of the domestic space as a safe haven to protect people, bodily at least, from the outer world. In fact, whether such a divide suffices to protect people, unless in interaction with other health measures, is still a very open question. It is sufficiently clear, however, that the diffusion of #stayhome orders risks enhancing the naturalization and invisibilization of the domestic space, including the potential ‘dark side’ of domestic life (Kaika 2004; Blunt and Dowling 2006; Brickell 2012; Boccagni *et al.* 2020).

Against this background, social media like YouTube would seem to push in exactly the opposite direction – they hypervisibilize the domestic, or at least an artificial and polished version of it. In fact, they play a more mixed role. On one hand, as long as YouTube creators comply with #stayhome orders, albeit reluctantly and with some trace of emotional distress, they do reproduce a neat division between private and public. On the other hand, they *de facto* challenge the divide, by making (selected parts of) the home accessible, in terms of sight and hearing, to an undifferentiated extra-domestic, potentially worldwide audience. By publicly displaying their own ways of staying home, these creators implicitly undermine its supposedly constitutive separation from the outside world.

Even this, however, does not eliminate the inside/outside boundary. Since creators can afford to display certain things and conceal many more, a significant private/public boundary is still there – it is only scaled down within different regions of the home. Even at this micro level, as much as at a macro one, the boundary is no fixed entity, though. It is unlikely to ever simply overlap with the concrete and reassuring walls around a home. Instead, as our case study of the ‘YouTube home’ shows, the boundary is more of an ongoing process, or a battlefield between contrasting pressures: intimacy, and exhibition and connectedness; autonomy, and reliance on the outside (regarding both people and infrastructures); protection and, not fully separable from it, oppression. In all these respects, the control of the domestic space under display is unlikely to be total or unconditional. This holds both from the inside – unexpected events may always affect the expected domestic display –

and from the outside – people invariably need to ‘import’ non-domestic affordances and ways of being, and even to display them, whenever they rearrange the domestic space for professional purposes.

In short, even under the covid-enforced domesticity the private-public boundary in the home is irremediably porous and blurred, out of the desire and the need for both virtual and material interactions with the outside world. Nevertheless, it holds a resilience – even while the home is being displayed online, for all purposes – which should not go unnoticed. The persistence of this boundary is actually part of the ‘tyranny’ that, Douglas famously wrote (1991), is as constitutive of the home as its protective function. The lockdown experience has only made the ‘tyranny’ more salient, and YouTube domestic videos can mitigate, but not ultimately overthrow it. This is an ambivalence which most people would hardly do without, though. There seems to be little of an alternative to coping with some degree of domestic tyranny, for most of us, all the more under the persistence of covid-related biographical uncertainty. Whenever we display the home online, however, we open a valuable space to understand the micro-consequences of macro-social orders like covid-driven ones, as this article has shown.

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