

Liorah Hoek, Louis van den Hengel, Inge van Nistelrooij and Alice Schippers

Performing Plurality: Meet the Alters Vlogs on YouTube as Breeding Grounds for Epistemic Justice

Abstract

Social media platforms have provided people with a psychiatric label the opportunity to build communities and share their stories without relying on the mediation of therapists, publishers, or broadcasters. Among them are people who identify not as one whole self, but as a system of plural personalities, often labeled as dissociative identity disorder (DID). People with plural identities started sharing videos on YouTube as a means to convey their experiences and fight stigma. In 2009, this gave rise to a distinct sub-genre of vlogs created by people with plural identities and DID: the ‘Meet the Alters’ video, where various personalities introduce themselves to the audience. This paper traces the fifteen-year evolution of these videos in order to show how the makers of the Meet the Alters videos use YouTube’s affordances and the conventions of the vlog genre to navigate a lack of hermeneutic resources outside of psychiatric discourse and understanding, allowing them to communicate their experiences in a relatable way to a general audience. Through a close reading of the staging and performance of plurality in thirteen Meet the Alters videos, posted between 2009 and April 2024, the paper reveals key developments and particularities of this genre. The analysis highlights how plural YouTubers create their own hermeneutic resources to present their potentially unfamiliar or unruly experiences in an understandable manner to their viewers. In conversation with emerging and growing plural communities, these hermeneutic resources have been continually supplemented and refined. After fifteen years, this has resulted in a rich identity-centered discourse that enables the performance and communication of plural experiences. We argue that YouTube’s specific affordances and the generic conventions of the vlog have been crucial in the emergence and development of non-stigmatising, non-psychiatric hermeneutic resources for expressing plural experiences.

Keywords

Plural Identity | YouTube | Epistemic Justice | Mad Studies | Dissociative Identity Disorder | Disability Studies

Introduction

YouTube, like other social media, offers an opportunity for people with a psychiatric label to express their own experiences without the mediation of psychiatric, medical, or media professionals.

Among them are people who consider themselves not as one whole integrated personality, but as a system of multiple personalities. Often labeled with DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder) or OSDD (Otherwise Specified Dissociative Disorder), these new social media creators contribute their own voices to an extensive network of YouTube channels, which is itself part of a network of online groups that have contributed to the emergence of a *plural* community and a plural culture.¹ In 2018, more than 23,000 users of various global online platforms voted for the umbrella term *plurals* as a more inclusive term for all kinds of experiences of plural identities.² Furthermore, the community has become increasingly politically aware.³ The majority of the YouTubers who are part of this community and culture express that they want to fight stigma, misconceptions, and misrepresentations. They aim to present their own experiences of living with DID or plurality. Instead of interpreting experiences of plural identity as a medical condition, there is a growing effort to understand them as cultural diversity. In *The Online Community: DID and Plurality* Christensen shows that digital media and participatory culture⁴, including YouTube, have been crucial in amplifying the marginalised voices of plurals, enabling them to take agency over the portrayal of their experiences and to build communities.

However, when attempting to express their identity and make their experiences understandable to a wider audience, plurals encounter a lack of epistemic resources. The psychiatric medical-oriented paradigm is the dominant, maybe even only, hermeneutic resource in Western culture for understanding plural identities. Testimonial injustice⁵, which dismisses people labelled with DID as credible sources of knowledge about their own experiences, combined with the (self)stigma and shame caused by a psychiatric label, prevents plurals from even expressing their experiences. Their exclusion as legitimate knowers has led to the exclusion of their own understanding of plural identity from collective epistemic resources. Consequently, there is a lack of hermeneutic resources outside of medical discourse, creating an intelligibility deficit, which hinders plurals' ability to understand and express their experiences intelligibly.⁶ However, as we will see, scholarly work within psychiatry and related fields does not attribute the unintelligibility of the experiences expressed through the YouTube videos to a lack of collective epistemic resources, but instead dismisses it as a psychiatric disorder. This constitutes a 'third order' epistemic oppression⁷, which is the resilience of a dominant – in this case, psychiatric – epistemic system that resists disruptions to the prevailing medical paradigm. The *meta blindness*⁸, which prevents the professionals in the field from acknowledging the limitations of psychiatric understanding of plurality, thus does not prompt a reevaluation of the

sanist and *singlet-normative*⁹ perspective. The assumption that everybody should be a single whole self, which can be seen as a form of *compulsory able-bodiedness* or *compulsory able-mindedness*¹⁰, remains unchallenged. Rather, any challenge the YouTube videos pose to the singlet framework is labelled as another sign of mental illness. Together with the other authors, the first author, who identifies as part of the plural community, aims to contribute to collective hermeneutic resources. Adopting a cultural understanding of plurality, this article re-reads YouTube videos posted by people with plural identities and takes both their content and creators seriously.

Plurality on YouTube from a culture based theoretical framework

The term ‘plural’ includes those fitting the diagnosis DID or OSDD, which is caused by early childhood trauma, but also includes other forms of plural identity. The majority of plurals do not strive to become one personality, a *singlet* or *singleton*, but aim for a state of ‘functional’ multiplicity.¹¹ Although there is general consensus about plurality as an overarching term, according to a survey done in 2020, only 27% of the community identifies themselves as plural, while 35% still identify as having DID, and 22% prefer *multiple* as a term when referring to themselves.¹² All of the YouTubers studied here identify as having DID. In this article, plurality will be the preferred term, while DID is used when referring to the self-chosen identity of the creators and how they name their channels and videos.

In psychiatry, DID is a contested diagnosis, prompting extensive research either validating or refuting its existence and legitimacy and arguing about its aetiology. While DID is underrepresented and under-researched in general¹³, the knowledge about how people experience living with DID or plurality is scant at best. A recent review¹⁴ found only 13 qualitative studies between 1993 and the end of 2022 that incorporate the experiences of people with DID themselves. Since around 2020, there has been some research, primarily led by scientists with lived experience, which centres around a less medical and more experiential understanding of plurality or DID.¹⁵ However, all of this research is aimed at therapists and the improvement of treatments.

This article draws from several theoretical fields to understand plural creators and their videos from an epistemic justice perspective grounded in a cultural conception of plurality. Starting from the adage ‘Nothing About Us, Without Us’, we draw on a Disability Studies and Mad Studies ethos to prioritise the experiences of people marked as epistemically illegitimate and

their subjugated knowledges.¹⁶ We use the concept of models of disability¹⁷ to show how a medical model or medical conception of plurality is abandoned by the creators in favour of a cultural or identity model and cultural understanding of plurality.¹⁸ Borrowing from the fields of Critical Disability Studies and Crip Theory, we include the notion of cripistemology as proposed by Johnson and McRuer who consider '[t]he work to call forth a legible, politicized disability identity' as 'a key type of cripistemology.' Following this logic, we test if the work of the plural YouTubers can be seen as a form of *cripistemology* and *crip creativity*.¹⁹ In this article, we try to answer to the call of Mad Studies that true liberation and justice can only be achieved by changing master narratives²⁰ and imagining the alternative narratives that could emerge to create *crip futurities* that are currently still on *crip horizons*.²¹ In such *crip futurities*, having plural identities would not only be accepted as a form of human diversity but could even be desirable. Media Studies, in turn, provides a framework for understanding the videos not only as self-expressions of people with plural identities but also as a mode of cultural production within contemporary participatory cultures. Combining (Critical) Disability Studies, Crip Theory and Mad Studies, with their focus on the experience of marginalised people, with the Media Studies focus on everyday life, this study engages the project of Disability Media Studies to radically rethink forms of knowledge about identity through a study of how plural YouTube creators use their medium to create alternative epistemologies.²²

The scholarship on plurality within the fields mentioned above is scant at best. Work on plurality in digital media, specifically YouTube, is even rarer. Within Mad Studies, only a few studies focus on plurality or DID. Examples include a study of comics by plurals²³ or research into representations of plurals in TV series and film.²⁴ More common is Mad Studies scholarship that includes plurals or DID as part of a larger mad community, like work on hearing voices²⁵, visual artists with a psychiatric label²⁶, spirituality and religious experiences²⁷, or neuroqueer perspectives on gender.²⁸ Nevertheless, recently there has been a growing body of work on the representation of disabled and mad people in digital media or on video-based platforms. All these sources show how disability and mad self-representation offer opportunities to reclaim agency, create counter-stories, and advocate for justice.²⁹ This is also confirmed by the only study the authors found that includes a person with plural identities: a netnography of Tumblr posts by trans disabled people conducted by Cavar & Barill.³⁰ The article conceptualises Tumblr posts as forms of micro-resistance against epistemic injustice. However, in the case of the Tumblr poster with multiple identities, the discussion

primarily focuses on issues such as pronouns and gender, never mentioning gender or pronoun issues specific to plurals.

For research on plurality or DID on online video platforms, one must turn to publications in psychiatry and related fields. We found only one study that explicitly addresses the content of YouTube videos about DID. This study by Munoz et al. focuses on the medical accuracy of statements about DID in YouTube videos. The authors note that medical information is absent in most of the personal stories posted on YouTube, and they labelled none of these videos as misleading. By contrast, misleading information was found to be present in all mainstream media videos.³¹ The remaining research focuses on TikTok.³² Much of this research examines suspected cases of factitious or malingering cases of DID presented in the videos and their audiences, often labelled as Mass Social Media Induced Illness³³, Munchhausen by Internet³⁴ or Social Media Associated Abnormal Illness Behaviour.³⁵ In such cases, people present other symptoms than those noted in the medical literature, often more extreme ones, such as highly dramatised forms of DID, with many dramatically different alters, often more than 25.³⁶ According to the authors, TikTok creators presenting these symptoms typically don't perceive themselves as distressed or diseased.³⁷ Launay et al. map the disparities between self-presentations of people with DID on TikTok and the medical idea of DID while also dismissing the videos as they 'mimic textbook portrayals'.³⁸ This line of argumentation, however, is itself a textbook example of the aforementioned meta-blindness and third-order epistemic oppression, as it leaves no space for any validation of experiences beyond the psychiatric understanding of DID. Meanwhile, Christensen proposes another explanation for people presenting with complex inner worlds, and numerous alters, including *fictive* ones with detailed backstories from movies or video games, suggesting a distinct political identity among plurals that differentiates them from people with DID or OSDD. She refers to *maladaptive daydreaming* as a mechanism for developing these rich inner worlds. While Christensen argues that the distinction between plurals and DID does not devalue either, her approach shows that the medical perspective still overrules a cultural perspective on plurality, even within the work of a clinician with experiential knowledge working from a cultural perspective.

Yet, research in psychiatry and related fields also reveals the emergence of a community language within plural cultures³⁹ with terms like host, switching, protector, little, fictive, fronting, polyfragmented, traumagenic, endogenic, and exogenic.⁴⁰ In a descriptive analysis of TikTok user signatures, Greene et al. identified two developments. The first is to opt out of invalidating normative

structures that constrain flexible conceptions of identity. This is indicated by the use of non-human pronouns and indicators of sexuality, such as fae/bun pronouns, identifying as *vulpisgender*, expressing age as age-sliding or regressive, or identifying as a mythical or magical being. Additionally, the adoption of celestial names by plurals as a system points to a more expansive idea of identity. The second development is the affirmation and collective naming of DID provided by the plural community. System architecture information is essential in this understanding of plurality, including the number of alters (in Green's study these numbers vary from under 10 to 100+ and most frequently between 20 and 50). Rich metaphoric language is employed when naming the system as a whole, often using galaxy language or terms like swarm, hive, coral reef, kintsugi, or even more imaginative descriptions.⁴¹ They conceptualise this community-based language as a means of doing creative identity work and rendering their plural selves legible to others.

Meet the Alters as YouTube videos

In the aforementioned studies, two specific types of video are identified. Firstly, there is the 'catch my switch on camera'⁴² or 'switching on camera'⁴³ type of video, sometimes referred to as *switch log*. The second is a category called 'Meet the Alters'⁴⁴ or 'Meet the System'⁴⁵ The 'Switching on Camera' type of video typically shows the transition from one personality to another, while in the 'Meet the Alters' video, different personalities of a person with plural identities introduce themselves to the viewers. As Launay et al. notes: 'videos featuring "meet the system" or "catching my switch on camera" content, where each personality is clearly distinguished by outfit and demeanor, tend to garner the most views and likes.'⁴⁶

Despite these videos' popularity, they have not been studied. This article traces the emergence and development of the Meet the Alters videos over more than a decade as they have proliferated on YouTube. While these videos may have slightly different names, Meet the Alters will be used here as a general overarching term. Drawing on research into the vlog genre,⁴⁷ we conceptualise the Meet the Alters as a sub-genre of the vlog genre, which originated on the YouTube platform.

The first aim of this article is to conceptually unlock this genre through an explorative descriptive analysis of the videos themselves. This brings to light the understudied experiences and performances of plural identity while also showing how this genre has emerged and developed in the decade of its existence. A close reading approach is most appropriate to gain an in-depth knowledge

of the Meet the Alters videos. This close reading includes tracing the following elements: character and performance (e.g. introduction of the alters, characterisation, speech, body language), setting, presence of other people, plot and time, editing, language, formats/conventions, use of visual and auditory elements (e.g. voiceover, music, titles) and context (e.g. intertextual and paratextual elements). The analysis zooms in on how the YouTubers convey their experiences to an audience by using the discursive means of vlogging and the affordances of the YouTube platform. Therefore, performance, setting, editing, and language are more prominent in the following analysis.

In line with the work by Christensen and Cavar and Barill, the second aim of this article is to show how the emergence and affordances of digital media have been crucial in the development and circulation of non-stigmatising, non-psychiatric hermeneutic resources for understanding and articulating plural experiences. In that sense, digital media have been pivotal in advancing the goal of epistemic justice for people with plural identities. The development of these hermeneutic resources is not effortless, but requires the crip creativity of the vloggers to ‘translate’ a potentially fragmented, unintelligible, unruly story and performance into a relatable account for a wider audience to attain a status as credible knowers. We, therefore, also dive into the question: How do creators with plural identities use the specific affordances of the YouTube channel in the process of negotiating between their experiences and making these experiences legible for an audience?

The trials and tribulations of doing historical research on YouTube

This article exclusively examines user-generated first-person accounts in YouTube videos by people identifying as plurals or as having DID or OSDD. Because our study tries to trace the evolution of a specific video genre, the veracity of the claims made by the selected YouTubers is not its primary concern. Suspicions of confabulation and controversies will be discussed when relevant, but they were no ground for exclusion, as it is impossible to be sure if someone is a plural. Due to language limitations, only English-language videos were included.⁴⁸ A refined definition of the Meet the Alters videos was adopted to focus the analysis on the representation, portrayal, and performance of plurality: only those where alters directly express themselves are included. Thus, videos featuring one alter speaking on behalf of others are not part of this study.

Conducting historical research on YouTube presents notable challenges and limitations. For instance, metadata are not collected for retrieval or archival purposes, hindering efforts to preserve

human culture for media historical research endeavours. The platform is dynamic: functionalities and content change or are deleted over time.⁴⁹ The main resource of data and metadata on YouTube is the YouTube API (Application Programming Interface), which provides YouTube data to third parties; however, this application lacks comprehensive time-related data crucial for historical research. Furthermore, this API possesses undocumented idiosyncrasies.⁵⁰ The main challenge faced in the current research is that there is no method to determine the most popular Meet the Alters videos at specific points in the past. Metrics such as views, subscribers, and likes are cumulative, reflecting only current numbers. Consequently, systematic historical research is a process of trial and error with no certainty about the completeness of the attained data sets.

To trace the emergence and development of the Meet the Alters videos, we had to devise a workaround that is less systematic, but which can at least give some insight. Luckily, we had one data point in the past: as a master's student, the first author had done a small explorative study. Although not much data were collected at the time, the top three YouTube channels with the most viewed Meet the Alter videos in August 2018 were: a video by Autumn Asphodel with over seven million views at the time, MultiplicityAndMe's video with over one million views at the time and a video by The Entropy System with over 200K views at the time. Subsequently, a master dataset of all traceable Meet the Alters videos was created using YouTube Data Tools, an online application developed to facilitate research with the YouTube API.⁵¹ Ordering the master dataset by date revealed the earliest Meet the Alters videos. In July 2009, the user ThiadTobias posted the first Meet the Alters video, and in August 2010 Tomi Fields posted a triptych of videos. In August 2013, Autumn Asphodel published her first video featuring her alters, followed by her second Meet the Alters video on January 15, 2014, the first Meet the Alters video to go viral. Since then, there has been a yearly increase in such YouTube videos.

To assess the current landscape, the master data set was sorted by views, revealing that one big new channel has emerged since 2018: DissociaDID. With over seven million views their video is the second best viewed Meet the Alters video on YouTube. However, this video is five years old. For more recent developments, we looked at the Meet the Alters videos uploaded in April 2024. We chose the latest video that fits the descriptions of videos about DID in current scientific research, a video by the Cosmic Collective. As a double check to ensure that no influential channels on DID were missed, an extra query was inputted in YouTube Data Tools, identifying DissociaDID, MultiplicityAndMe, and The Entropy System as the three largest user generated DID

channels, ranked according to views and subscribers. All of these were already included in the research. The included videos can be found in table 1.

Capturing unfamiliar experiences and unruly stories on camera

In pursuit of representing their experiences, the creators of the Meet the Alters videos face several challenges in addition to the lack of hermeneutic resources. In this part of the analysis, we will first identify these challenges. Then, we will concentrate on how the creators cope with these challenges to create the necessary hermeneutic means.

As MultiplicityAndMe states in their video, most of the YouTubers with plural identities want to fight the “axe-murderer” Hollywood stigma that has been attached to the condition for so long.⁵² Referring to mainstream movies like *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Psycho*, and *Split*, many of the creators use the similar medium of video to show how living with DID feels and what it looks like. However, in ‘real’ or everyday life, it would be impossible for personalities to switch in a controlled way that is quick enough to tell a cohesive story. To counter stigma, the YouTubers with plural identities have to come up with a performance of the alters that does justice to their own experiences and, at the same time, presents a relatable account to the audience.

None of the vloggers explicitly state that they want to fight psychiatric conceptions of DID or plurality. All of them identify with the diagnostic label DID, and most of them are in therapy for trauma, even when they do not strive for the standard therapeutic goal of becoming one whole person. As we have seen in the scientific literature from the psychiatric field, their representations challenge psychiatric conceptions of DID. The psychiatric literature marks the following elements as extreme: a high number of alters with very different or dramatic identities (who all know each other), subsystems within the system, fictional personalities and plurals who do not consider themselves disordered or do not wish to integrate into one personality. We find these so-called extreme elements in the thirteen studied Meet the Alter videos from the genre’s emergence period before there were example videos. For instance, in the first Meet the Alters video by Thiad Tobias, ten child alters are introduced, but it is unclear how many more there are. In the Meet the Alters triptych by Tomi Fields, four alters speak, but they casually mention quite a number of other alters and even an unknown number of ‘ghost alters’ trapped in ‘The Nothing’, a place where alters can appear from or disappear into. So, a high number of alters is at least

Date	Title	Maker	Length	Views*	url
2009, July 23	<i>DID Alters Introduction</i>	ThiadTobias	02:39	9,5 K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygEvTVur3j4
2010, August 7	<i>PD/DID Meet the Alters, Richi, Beth, Mimi and Hari Part One</i>	Tomi Fields	9:42	50K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulxTtRRTLUI
2010, August 7	<i>MPD/DID Meet the Alters, Richi, Beth, Mimi and Hari Part Two</i>	Tomi Fields	10:52	8K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2buO2AVekRo
2010, August 7	<i>MPD/DID Meet the Alters, Richi, Beth, Mimi and Hari Part Three</i>	Tomi Fields	12:05	23K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hxmctjywJc
2013, August 20	<i>You Can Do It! - Encouragement from Multiple Personalities</i>	Autumn Asphodel	2:00	436K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6B7P0S1K4ZA
2014, January 15	<i>Meet My Alters / Personalities Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)</i>	Autumn Asphodel	29:20	8,7 mln,	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjemK803l2M
2016, September 1	<i>Meet The Alters! MultiplicityAndMe</i>	MultiplicityAndMe	20:05	2,7 mln.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dRDqs2t2Y8
2017, November 22	<i>Living Life With Dissociative Identity Disorder</i>	The Entropy System	8:13	431K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_0orjFyx70
2018, January 1	<i>Ask An Alter Part One</i>	The Entropy System	11: 12	68K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAQfoGV711k

(Continued)

Date	Title	Maker	Length	Views *	url
2018, January 1	Ask An Alter Part Two	The Entropy System	14:01	39K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxpSpIKr_30
2018, January 1	Ask An Alter Part Three	The Entropy System	18:18	53K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBkMSg52ik0
2019, March 31	Meet SIX Alters! THE GIRLS OF DISSOCIADID Meet The Alters Dissociative Identity Disorder	DissociaDUD	35:10	7,9 mln.	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3lm2HXD1T8
2024, April 10	MEET MY ALTERS PART 1 DISSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER COSMIC COLLECTIVE	Cosmic Collective	7:55	1,4K	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvBxRfWA7T8
	*number of views checked on September 27, 2024.				

Table 1. The studied Meet the Alters videos, the view counts were checked on September 27, 2024.

suggested in the earliest videos, only getting more explicit in a recent video by Cosmic Collective, where in the outro we are told: ‘We have over 100 alters in our system so follow for part two for more alter intros.’⁵³ The ‘ghost alters’ could be seen as the first mention of fictional alters and “The Nothing” as the first subsystem. Explicitly fictional alters are Lito of The Entropy System, who is based on Lito Rodrigues from the Netflix series *Sense8*, and the Cosmic Collective presents several fictional alters, like vampires and even a whole subsystem with multiple alters based on DMP, a Minecraft-based web series. The framing of plurality as an identity instead of a disorder can be found in the earliest videos as well. The alters of Tomi Fields and The Entropy System clearly express not wanting to integrate into one person and liking each other like friends or family. MultiplicityAndMe portrays herself and ‘her four boys’ as ‘normal’ or even ‘high functioning’ instead of as disordered. In short, the studied Meet the Alter videos contain elements that thwart psychiatric conceptions of DID and plurality as well as mainstream media representations. Existing hermeneutic resources have not described these unfamiliar experiences, and it requires the crip creativity of the creators to familiarise the audience with these experiences.

Moreover, in these videos, the familiar concept of narrative, as the story of a protagonist involved in a single continuous and causally connected plot, is thwarted by what we can describe as plural autobiographies.⁵⁴ The narrative has fallen apart on different levels. Most obviously, the protagonist presents several alters, who often use ‘I’ and ‘we’ interchangeably, whereas the audience sees only one body. Because all the alters are different, there is no single plot. The continuity and causal connection of these plots have also disintegrated. For instance, in the introduction of the video of MultiplicityAndMe, accompanied by cheerful music, Jess explains, ‘So when a child experiences trauma, basically a part of their being, a part of their consciousness breaks apart and that is when alters begin to be created’.⁵⁵ After the word ‘trauma’ the music abruptly stops. This sudden stop puts significant emphasis on the trauma, which nonetheless remains undiscussed in the video, creating a gap in the story. Even the autobiographical experiences that are recounted have fallen apart, as demonstrated by the multiple and contradictory autobiographical narratives told by Lito of The Entropy System. In the first narrative, Lito describes being a part of Wyn, a white woman, interacting with the other alters and her/his friends. The second narrative is that of a homosexual Mexican man and his childhood memories, Mexican culture, and his longing for his lover, Hernando – storylines borrowed from

the Netflix series. In his third narrative, Lito recounts living on an island in the inner world, caring for a baby. He expresses confusion about the identity of this baby, saying: 'If the baby is real, or if the baby is made up just for me. If the baby is just an alter, I don't know, I just take care of the baby'.⁵⁶ In all the Meet the Alters videos, the fragmentation of experience, protagonist and plot exponentially increases the number of stories within the autobiographical story. Furthermore, there is often an untold trauma story, leaving unbridgeable gaps in the autobiography and resulting in a collection of disparate storylines. Thus, YouTubers with plural identities must negotiate the anti-narrative tendencies of their autobiographies to create a legible story.

In summary, the creators of the Meet the Alter videos must employ their crip creativity to capture on video experiences that cannot be readily presented before the lens. They must also translate an anti-narrative in a form that is both de-stigmatising and comprehensible to an audience. The following analysis traces the development of their efforts to overcome these obstacles and create the necessary hermeneutic means.

Emergence of a plurality of formats

In the earliest videos, various formats were used to portray plurality. The first Meet the Alter video, posted in 2009 by ThiadTobias, is a slideshow or montage of texts and images set to a dramatic song. Each of the ten child alters is introduced with a title showing a name and age, accompanied by one or more images of children (see figure 1-5). The images appear to be sourced from the internet and show the children in idealised or dramatised situations. The accompanying text tells a tale of scared children finally finding a new 'DAD'. This idealised and dramatised presentation stages the alters as characters in a fairy tale-like overarching story, providing a sense of narrative cohesion that allows an audience to connect with the characters. However, the alters only appear as a collective 'we', rather than as distinct individuals. By not showing their face and portraying the alters as one group they circumvent revealing the underlying fragmentation of their experience.

Another approach to portraying plurality comes from Tomi Fields, who posted a triptych in 2010 featuring four of their alters: Richi, Beth, Mimi, and Hari, a four-year-old boy (see figures 6-10). In these videos, the alters are seated on a couch in what looks like a spare room. Aside from a different



Figures 1-5. Some of the depictions of the alters of Thad Tobias.

shirt, they do not look distinct from one another. Only Hari seems physically smaller as he sinks further into the couch when he speaks. The use of matching shots provides a visual consistency, as if the alters were all filmed on the same day, which is highly unlikely. In a reverse shot, Tomi's wife asks interview questions. When answering, the alters look straight into the camera in one uninterrupted shot, but they do not address the audience – they are actually talking to the wife. In one video, a cat enters the frame, and we see Hari's reaction, one of the many natural interruptions in these casual



Figures 6-10. Tomi's wife asking questions, Richi, Beth, Mimi and Hari reacting to a cat.

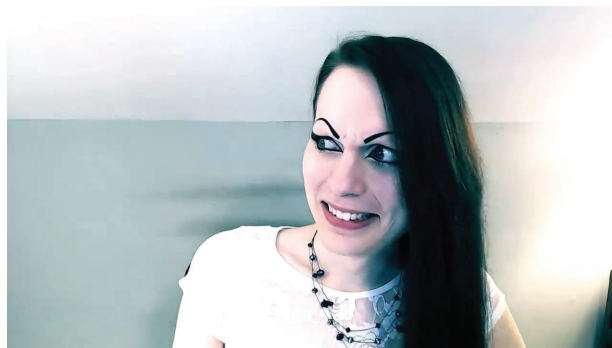
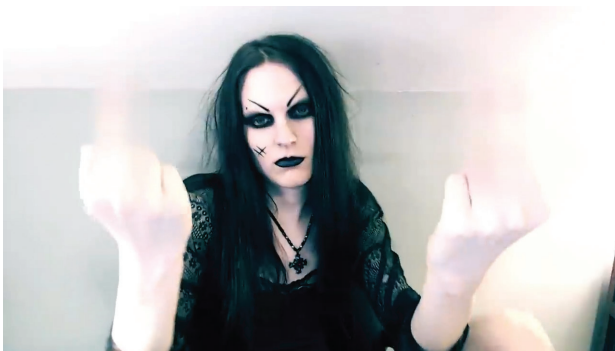
conversations. Although the interview format may be artificial, it provides room for the self-expression of the alters, highlighting their distinct feelings and opinions. The lack of direct audience engagement, the interaction with the wife, and the use of uninterrupted shots all emphasise the natural flow of the conversations. Instead of telling one overarching story, the intimate home setting creates an image of a family life with different persons living together. This suggestion of a 'normal' family life, along with the familiar interactions and interruptions, function as de-stigmatising and relatable elements in a cripistemology that also makes room for personal and even fantastical notions of self, such as ghost alters and a Nothing that can birth and capture personalities.

Some elements from the earliest videos have since become Meet the Alters genre conventions. For instance, the use of idealised pictures to portray what alters look like or how they see themselves is a common feature. MultiplicityAndMe and Cosmic Collective use drawings of the alters to introduce them. The home environment serves as the stage for almost all later videos, and the matching shots are most aptly used in the videos of The Entropy System. The casual conversation with housemates or them interrupting during filming also appear in the videos of MultiplicityAndMe and Cosmic Collective.

A main format appears when the Meet the Alters genre experiences a significant breakthrough on January 15, 2014. On that date the user Autumn Asphodel uploaded what today still is the most-watched Meet the Alters video on YouTube, with over 8,7 million views. This video adopts a typical testimonial vlog format: one at a time, an alter speaks into the camera, directly addressing the audience in long shots without editing or with editing that is deliberately seamless to maintain the feeling of a spontaneous and authentic conversational monologue. A handheld camera or music is used to emphasise certain emotional states. Furthermore, Asphodel adds some features to their video which – as we will discuss later – will also become part of the Meet the Alters genre: an educational introduction, distinct styles of clothing, hair and make-up, and the use of titles to summarise educational content or convey the thoughts and feelings of alters who are not on screen. Later creators will come up with other formats, but until today the testimonial vlog format remains the preferred and most popular format of the Meet the Alters videos, even on platforms like TikTok.

Questions of authenticity and practices of fake claiming

The popularity of Autumn Asphodel's video is likely due to the controversy it provoked. This began with a prequel titled *You Can Do It! - Encouragement from Multiple Personalities*, which was actually the first Meet the Alters video posted by Asphodel. In this video, the viewer is cheered on by Autumn, Iris, Sophie, Sexy Chick, Some Dude and ???, each characterised by very distinct, even showy, make-up styles (see figures 11-17). The alter indicated by ???, who is always accompanied by ominous music, remains silent. The video concludes in the following manner:



Figures 11-17. The staging of the conversation between Iris, Autumn, ??? and Some Dude.

Iris (looking to the left): “Why are you so quiet?”

Autumn (looking a little to the left): “Yeah, why is she so quiet?”

??? with two raised middle fingers at the camera.

Autumn (looking to the left): “Gosh, she is weird.”

Iris (looking to the right): “I know, right?!”

Autumn (looking to the left): “Not as weird as the one that was taking off her clothes.”

Iris (looking to the right): “Oh, gosh, don’t get me even started on her.”

Some Dude (to himself): “I thought she was hot.”

(Iris looks to the right with a frown).

(Autumn laughs).⁵⁷

Clearly, this ‘spontaneous’ conversation between personalities is thoroughly scripted and edited, as the alters have been recorded one after the other. With their theatrical performances, showy make-up styles, music, and editing, Asphodel’s videos feel like masquerades staged by a single hidden puppet master. This theatrical and artificial portrayal of DID plays into stigmatising stereotypes rather than contradicting them. As a result, the video received numerous comments and stirred considerable controversy both on and off the platform. Asphodel has often been labelled as a faker and accused of ridiculing DID. Ironically, this controversy has kept Asphodel’s video at the top of YouTube search results, aided by the platform’s algorithm. More importantly, it has reintroduced the psychiatric debate around the authenticity of DID into the genre. The suspicion that some people are faking plurality has led later creators to emphasise their DID diagnosis as a way to legitimise their experience as not being fake. This debate has also made the authenticity of the alters a central topic in many Meet the Alters videos. To ‘prove’ that the alters are distinct persons, they undergo personality tests or answer questions, as MultiplicityAndMe’s video where three of the four male alters respond to questions like: ‘Who is the smartest, the most creative, the deepest sleeper and who gets their way the most?’ More importantly, the controversy around faking DID has also lead to fake claiming– a practice within the community aimed at unmasking other YouTubers suspected of faking their DID or plurality status.⁵⁸ There is even a genre of fake-claiming videos on YouTube and some of the creators discussed here have been the subject of such videos.

Alters as individuals in a functional system

To present themselves in a non-stigmatising way, create narrative coherence, and develop a relatable story, both MultiplicityAndMe and The Entropy System use similar affordances of YouTube, such as cheerful soothing music and an editing style that alternates rapidly between personalities or consists of jump cuts between small snippets of monologue. While these jump-cuts go against the conventions of continuity editing, they are the predominant editing style in vlogs, creating a cohesive, dynamic flow that captivates the audience's attention and makes the videos accessible. However, the approaches of MultiplicityAnd Me and The Entropy System also differ considerably.

MultiplicityAndMe uses a portmanteau construction in their Meet the Alter video, which begins and ends with a scene of the newlywed Jess having fun with her husband (see figures 18-22). This serves to present Jess as a relatable, charming person who functions 'normally'. In an educational monologue about DID that follows the introduction of the husband, Jess is even presented as knowledgeable and 'high functioning'. At the time of the video, Jess was a clinical psychology student, and she demonstrates being up to par with both psychiatric theoretical discourse and community-based terminology. She even correctly indicates the psychiatric origin of the community term 'alter' as short for 'altered state of consciousness.' The video positions Jess as the main character – a lively, 'high functioning', relatable, and charming person who happens to have four boys inside her. Nevertheless, this portrayal can also be read as a counter-narrative that crips master narratives about DID as either psychiatric patients or axe-murderers.

In the video *Living Life With Dissociative Identity Disorder*, Wyn of The Entropy System introduces four alters (see figures 23-28). Loosely cross-referencing one another and mentioning other alters, they recount their experiences of being part of a person. Their opinions vary greatly. Mi, a child alter, regrets not being able to have friends her age, while Mistletoe, a fairy in her forties, states: 'I don't exist to be a free bird.' Daniel views himself as Wyn's helper, but sometimes wishes he could be a 19-year-old boy. Kit, on the other hand, thinks it's all fine this way and wouldn't want to be without the other alters. Even in this relatively short video, viewers get a strong sense of each alter's character, struggles, and interactions. They view themselves as friends or even family, and the video is edited to reflect this – like a documentary of a group of interrelated people. The Meet the Alters videos from The Entropy System offer a relatable glimpse into the lives of a group of people with their everyday struggles, quirks, conflicts, and friendships. The familiar jump-cut editing style, coupled

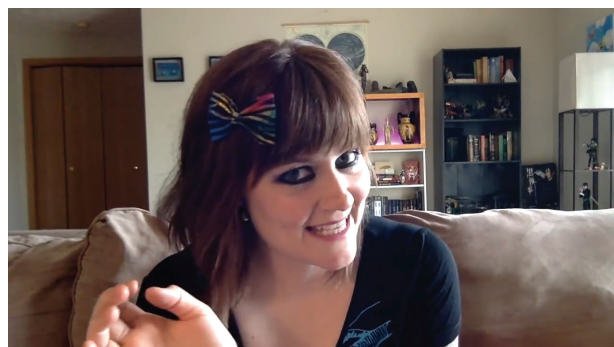


Figures 18-22. MultiplicityAndMe's Jess and her four boys, Jamie, Ed, Jake and the happily married couple.

with the soothing music and a deeper exploration of the alters' personalities and recognisable concerns, makes the experience of plurality more accessible to a general audience.

A growing community and a rich plural discourse

In the earliest Meet the Alters videos, the language is primarily grounded in psychiatric conceptions of DID, although terms like 'alters' and 'the system' were already in use as well. Terminology changes



Figures 23-28. Alters of *The Entropy System*: Wyn, Kit, Daniel, Mi, Mistletoe and Lito.

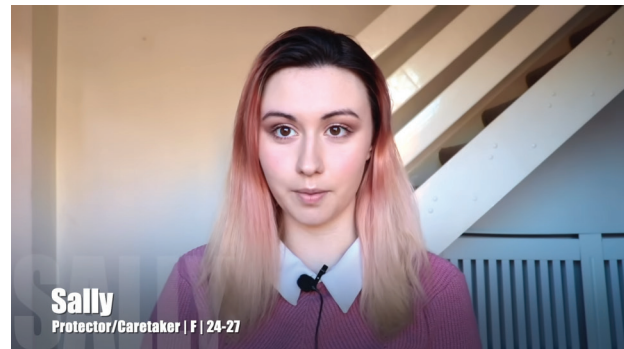
over time. For instance, Tomi Fields refers to the ‘main’ personality as ‘the core’, an idea that has since been abandoned by the community. Words like ‘original’, as used by MultiplicityAndMe, subsequently became more prevalent. However, since both ‘core’ and ‘original’ imply a hierarchy, later creators often use the term ‘host.’ An even more recent phrase is ‘the alter with the legal name’. Changes in terminology indicate the emergence of a plural culture with new concepts about plurality.

The influence of this growing community can be clearly seen in the videos of *The Entropy System*. After their introductory Meet the Alter video, they began uploading a series of Ask An Alter videos, where alters respond to questions from commenters. Many of these questions come from

people with plural identities, as indicated by their self-identification or usernames containing 'System'. This interaction led to a growing use of community-based language in the videos: 'inner world' becomes 'headspace', 'alters' become 'headmates', and 'co-consciousness' becomes 'co-fronting'. Gradually, psychiatric terminology is replaced by cultural and community-based terms, marking a shift from a medical to a cultural model of plurality. The commenters themselves also introduce new terms, contributing to the ongoing development of shared hermeneutic resources. The Entropy System's portrayal of plural experience thus functions as criptistemology recognised and expanded upon by their plural audience members. Together, they join in collective modes of cript creativity to come to a community-based understanding of DID and plurality.

It is clear a community has already formed when DissociaDID posts *Meet SIX Alters! THE GIRLS OF DISSOCIADID* it in 2019 (see figures 29-34). The alters – Chloe, Sally, Nadia, Nina, Jade, and Ruby – demonstrate an intimate knowledge of other Meet the Alter videos and community practices and understandings. For example, Nadia casually mentions a conversation with Wyn from the Entropy System and refers to the use of *positive triggers*⁵⁹ to get alters to speak on camera.

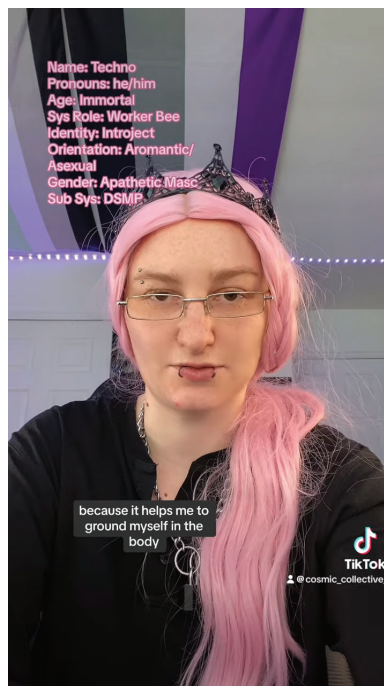
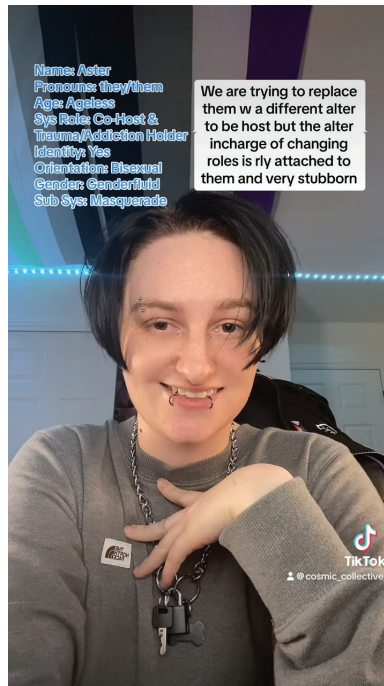
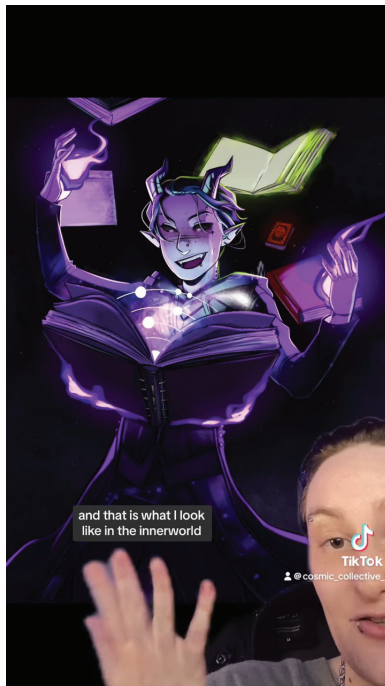
The rich plural discourse developed by the community is most prominently showcased in the eight-minute Meet the Alters video by Cosmic Collective posted in April 2024, which introduces at least twelve alters at breakneck speed. On-screen text details each alter's name, pronouns, age, system role, identity, sexual orientation, gender, and sub-system. Ages vary from young children to 35, with a variety of identities including ageless, age-sliders, and even an alter who is all ages at the same time. Gender, pronouns, and sexual preferences vary from mundane to lesser-known identities, like vi/vir/virs and dark/darks pronouns, being abrosexual or systemgender, demigirl, or apathetic masculine. The alters identify themselves as human, but also as vampire or introject. Interestingly, Cosmic Collective uses this term to refer to the more commonly recognised fictive alters, falling back on psychiatric terminology while adapting its meaning (see figures 35-40). It is probably this kind of video that the previously discussed research about TikTok alludes to, particularly when suggesting that the presentation of DID is becoming increasingly 'extreme'. However, as we have seen, almost none of these elements are new. What is new is the elaborate language and terminology, which either differs significantly from psy-discourse or reappropriates it. These hermeneutic resources indicate community-based knowledge, concepts, and practices rooted in an identity or cultural model of plurality.



Figures 29-34. Six female alters of DissociaDID: Chloe, Sally, Nadia playing with the camera, Nina, Jade and a very displeased Ruby.

Curating the performance of plural selves

Recently, the Meet the Alters genre has begun to expand to other video-based platforms, mainly TikTok. While Cosmic Collective has only a few hundred subscribers and likes on YouTube, they boast over 90K followers and 2,7 million likes on TikTok. Like many other TikTokers, they share their TikTok content on their YouTube channel. Similar to many current DID channels, DissociaDID features a Linktree account in their channel info, linking the YouTube channel to other online platforms. YouTube is thus the main platform within a wider network of digital platforms, including a



Figures 35-40. A few of the over 100 alters of the Cosmic Collective: Astro, Aster, Levi, Jasbur, Techno and the outro by an unknown alter.

website with a webshop, an Instagram channel, and even Spotify playlists of individual alters.⁶⁰ This endeavour is sponsored by patrons on platforms like Ko-fi and Patreon. So, current channels do not

only have commenters and subscribers, but also paying patrons who can request specific content. For DissociaDID, these patrons have directly contributed to the acquisition of their house, which serves as the filming location for the video. Notably, DissociaDID even has a dedicated fan page on Wikitubia, the YouTube Wikipedia resource. Here, we can see how plurals have begun using social media to craft themselves as what has been termed ‘microcelebrity personas’, that is, ‘a state of being famous to a niche group of people’.⁶¹ Microcelebrity, as ‘a new style of online performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs, and social networking sites’⁶² involves the curation of a self that viewers experience as real, authentic, and relatable.

Genre specific performative and audiovisual possibilities have emerged to perform plurality and to convey plural experiences. Because plurality does not readily lend itself to visual representation, plural YouTubers must devise ways to stage plurality without it feeling contrived or artificial. To curate their identities – or, in the case of plural YouTubers, multiple selves – they have to bridge the gap between the same person sitting in front of the camera and that person representing different alters. In doing so, the creators employ both lively everyday methods and more staged, theatrical means. Examples of the lively, everyday methods include distinct voices, speech patterns, body language, facial expressions and, behaviours or conveying emotions. An example of this are the very different self-conscious reactions of the alters of DissociaDID to the presence of a camera: Nina tries to find an ideal pose to sit during the recording, while Ruby fulminates because she feels like an idiot talking to the camera like a person, and Nadia playfully interacts with it, making silly close-ups or trying out some deep-voiced flirtations with the audience. Intriguingly, not every system has alters who differ in these aspects. For instance, the performances of the alters of Cosmic Collective do not visually differ significantly, and their affect is almost flat. This becomes evident when Jasbur’s monologue is interrupted by his partner system – a lover who is also a plural – jumping into the frame. In his reactions to his partner Jasbur seems to ‘come alive’.

A notable example of the staged mode is to use distinct alter-related clothing, hairstyles, or make-up. In the video of MultiplicityAndMe, Jess states that the boys have ‘dressed up like themselves to make them more distinctive, but that doesn’t mean that when they go about in public, they will put on “their” clothes.’ What makes this wording notable is the contrast between ‘dressed up’, which has associations with performance and play, and ‘like themselves’, which suggests a form of self-performance where the alters play a role as themselves.

While the clothing, hairstyles and make-up of DissociaDID, combined with their editing style, may evoke the contrived plural performances of Autumn Asphodel, their video oscillates between a dramatised, staged mode and a lively, emotional mode. The popularity of this particular video likely stems from the creator's crip-creative skills to balance between familiar vlogging conventions in the staged mode with the emotional self-expressions from the alters, creating a perfect equilibrium between exciting uniqueness and relatable familiarity. Thus, the vlogging conventions and the affordances of YouTube in a wider network of platforms have developed in a direction that facilitates the performance of plurality in a way that feels real, authentic, and relatable to a wider audience. In this sense, the development of YouTube and the Meet the Alters videos have been co-constitutive.

Myriad dimensions of selves in flux

Recent videos by DissociaDID and Cosmic Collective feel much more fragmented than the earlier videos. The videos show more conflict. For instance, Techno of Cosmic Collective wears a pink wig and a crown, the attire of the character he is based on. He explains: 'I wear this when I'm fronting, because it helps me to ground myself in the body so I don't get booted back into the inner world.'⁶³ These attributes function not merely as costumes but as tools to prevent other alters from taking over the body. Conflict is further highlighted in the titles during the monologue of Aster, a co-host: 'We are trying to replace them w a different alter to be host but the alter incharge of changing roles is rly attached to them and very stubborn.'⁶⁴ Nina of DissociaDID has some beef with Chloe: 'I'm very irritated that Chloe beat me to our first lesbian sex experience. That really got on my nerves but fair play to her.'⁶⁵ Fragmentation is also emphasised by a certain overtness about the construction of the videos, such as a lapel microphone clipped to the clothing in plain sight and no attempt to conceal the fact that the scenes are shot over several days or even months. A new setting for the Meet the Alters video is inside a car (e.g. Cosmic Collective, Acrylic and Aether, Blob System), which seems to connote a transient state. The same fleeting feeling is evoked when Ares mentions belonging to the Scum and Villain Cluster, but the titles and subtitles indicate Hit List as the sub-system's name. This could be an indication that the name of the subsystem has changed between recording and editing, giving rise to a sense of rapid changes within the system.

The image that arises from more recent videos is that of a fluid sense of identity, with fictional elements loosely woven into the fabric of the self and a rich inner world comprising myriad

dimensions. The plurality of identity markers only functions as temporary beacons in an expanded self that is always in flux. A cultural understanding of plurality underpins these videos, which are overt about the aspects that do not conform to singlet-normative conceptions of identity. Instead of covering up the anti-narrative tendencies of their stories, the creators foreground them, contributing to an emerging new plural paradigm.

Conclusion

People with plural identities started sharing videos on YouTube as a means to convey their experiences and fight stigma. In 2009, this gave rise to a distinct sub-genre of vlogs created by people with plural identities and DID: the Meet the Alters video. These videos have become a staple on the menu of many DID channels on YouTube, often ranking among their most popular content. Their popularity has since extended to other platforms, particularly TikTok. However, scholarly research on these videos remains sparse, with much of it expressing concern about the ‘extreme’ and ‘exaggerated’ presentations of DID and its ‘symptoms’ on video-based platforms. A more recent body of research, particularly the work of Christensen and Greene et al., highlights how digital media and these videos have fostered the development of a plural community and culture.

This article has conducted a close reading of a selection of Meet the Alters videos, tracing the evolution of this genre from its inception to the present. These close readings reveal unfamiliar and unexamined aspects of plural experience. Early Meet the Alters videos, produced before any example videos existed, reveal that some of these so-called extreme symptoms were already evident before a cohesive plural community emerged. Over time, we have witnessed the growth of a plural community and culture with a rich language, concepts, and practices that defy psychiatry-based understandings of plural experience and which, by thwarting singlet-normative logic, effectively crip DSM categories. By tracing the evolution of the Meet the Alter videos on YouTube, we have sought to demonstrate a shift from a medical model of looking at plurality towards a cultural or identity model of plurality. Thus, the sophisticated identity-centred language seen in recent videos does not necessarily indicate new or extreme symptoms or ‘maladaptive daydreaming’ but rather expresses a more refined discursive repertoire, a different and broader vocabulary for articulating experiences of plurality and DID compared to what was available over a decade ago.

By leveraging the affordances of YouTube and the possibilities inherent in the vlog genre, the creators of the Meet the Alter videos have developed their own hermeneutic resources to combat stigma and build community, while navigating the challenge of making their lived experiences legible to predominantly non-plural audiences, primarily consisting of singlet individuals. The development of these hermeneutic resources is not an effortless process: it requires the creators' crip creativity to 'translate' their potentially fragmented, unintelligible, or unruly experiences into a relatable performance and story, allowing plural creators to attain status as credible knowers in the broader public sphere.

Over time, plural content creators have become more explicit and overt about their experiences, including the fragmentation, disparities, and fictional elements in their sense of self. In the earliest videos, the creators and their alters are represented by pictures and never show their face. This evolved into a phase where the focus was on the 'normal' functioning of the system as a whole or the 'high' functioning 'original', often presented in a story where music and the overall rhythm of the editing masks any signs of fragmentation. By contrast, in the most recent videos the creators are overt about the fragmentation and disparities: supported by a worldwide community, they seem to have overcome self-stigma and shame, instead presenting themselves more like members of a loud and proud cultural community. While psychiatric understandings and stigma are far from overcome, this development suggests a new paradigm looming on the crip horizon, (just) out of reach.

Building on the work by Christensen and Cavar and Barill, which highlights how digital media allow epistemically marginalised groups the opportunity to take control over their own self-presentation and stories – reaching potentially large audiences – this article has shown that creators living with plurality can develop non-stigmatising hermeneutic resources, forge alliances, and build communities. In line with this previous work, we argue that digital media have been pivotal in forming a plural community. To capture plurality on video, deliberate staging is required. In 'real' or everyday life, it would be impossible for personalities to switch quickly enough to tell a cohesive and joint story. In this sense, the Meet the Alters videos are always already performative. Crucially, staging is also a generic convention of the vlog, now a staple of social media consumption. Combined with the possibilities of self-publishing and YouTube's interactive features, the platform provides fertile ground for experimenting with new performances and conceptions of DID and life as a plural, making them legible for a general audience. The performance of plurality represents a specific contribution of the creators of the Meet the Alters videos to existing community-based hermeneutic

resources, which have primarily focused on language and practices. Thus, YouTube's affordances have been co-constitutive in developing the rich plural discourse necessary for the self-presentation of plural identities through video. The unique properties of the vlog facilitate the performance of plurality and contribute to attaining greater epistemic justice for people with plural identities.

Although researching videos of plurals on YouTube is challenging and time-consuming, studying them closely as a mode of cultural production and community-building in the pursuit of epistemic justice is worthwhile. This study, though small in scope and limited to English-language videos made by white people in North America and Europe, reveals how the Meet the Alters video challenges psychiatric, stigmatising and singlet-normative conceptions of plurality and identity. Through YouTube's affordances, people with plural identities have created a criptistemology around a corpus of videos that convey plurality from within the experience itself. Although this work is far from complete – our general epistemic resources remain singlet-normative – a new paradigm is in the making by plurals who are coming out of the closet, channel by channel, moving toward plural futurities on plural horizons. By staying true to their plural experiences, they contribute to forging a new understanding of plurality. Researchers in cultural and media studies should broaden their focus to include a wider range of YouTube videos and other cultural productions of people with plural experiences. Such efforts would support the emancipatory movement toward a new paradigm that fosters a cultural understanding of both plural and singlet identities within an infinitely diverse humanity.

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Biographies

Liorah Hoek (she/they) is trained as an artist at the Willem de Kooning Academy and the Rijksacademie and as a scholar in cultural studies and literary sciences at the Catholic University of Leuven. Her PhD

research in Disability Studies at the University of Humanistic Studies focusses on unsettling the binaries of disability/ability and sane/mad. Together with artists with plurality experience she will explore the possibilities of (literary) identification in art about disabled and mad lives in order to foster a more inclusive understanding of humanity. Alongside this inquiry she works as a researcher and maker in the fields of disability advocacy and culture.

Louis van den Hengel (they/them) is Associate Professor of Care Ethics & the Arts at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht. Specialising in contemporary performance art, they have published widely in the fields of performance studies, feminist new materialism, critical posthumanism, human-animal studies, feminist ecocriticism, and queer ecology. Their current research explores the sociopolitical and ethical dimensions of twenty-first century performance and live art by bringing contemporary feminist, queer, trans*, ecological, and decolonial perspectives into conversation with the philosophical and mystical insights of Simone Weil.

Inge van Nistelrooij (she/her) is a care ethicist and associate professor Care Ethics at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht. She publishes widely on relationality and contextuality, identity and ethics. In her research she focuses on the plural identity of pregnancy, birth and parenting and its repercussions on ethics.

Alice Schippers (she/her) is professor of Disability Studies, by special appointment on behalf of Disability Studies in Nederland, at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht. From an early age she is interested in living with disabilities, as natural part of her life. She is engaged to disability in many roles: as a researcher and leader, as a volunteer and activist, as a mother and friend. From mid 1990's, her research focus is on (Family) Quality of Life, Social Inclusion and Inclusive Research. She is a strong advocate of collaborative research with and by people with disability and neurodiverse experience. Alice is Member of the Board of the International Association for the Scientific Study of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities.

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