

Private Birth, Public Spectatorship:

Reimagining Digital Activism Through Embodied Practices of Natural Birth Vlogging in South Korea

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Extended Abstract

This study investigates how natural birth vlogging becomes a site of gendered reproductive politics in contemporary South Korea by producing embodied knowledge and circulating affect across digital platforms. In a context where childbirth has been historically medicalized and institutionally governed, women's reproductive bodies remain subject to professional authority, biomedical standardization, and gendered expectations of endurance and care. Rather than treating social media merely as a space for explicit protest or organized activism, this project examines how the publicization of childbirth reconfigures the politics of reproduction. It asks: *How do women's embodied childbirth experiences, when made publicly visible through natural birth vlogs, challenge institutional authority and renegotiate gendered divisions of reproductive labor?* Specifically, the analysis examines how vloggers claim reproductive autonomy through narrative and practice, how visual and sonic techniques intensify embodied meaning, and how audience reception extends politicization through mediated witnessing.

South Korea offers a particularly revealing field for such inquiry. In a context marked by high medicalization of childbirth, elevated Caesarean rates, and strong institutional authority over women's reproductive bodies, with over 99 percent of childbirths taking place in hospitals, birth is conventionally framed as a clinical event managed through professional expertise and pharmacological intervention (Kim 2021; Park and Park 2019). Within such a framework, authority is centralized and autonomy is often constrained. Against this backdrop, women who document and upload natural birth experiences do more than record personal milestones. By making childbirth publicly accessible, they reposition birth from a private medical procedure to a shared social event, inviting collective witnessing and affective engagement. In this context, the significance of these vlogs should not be reduced to mere niche individual preference but rather recognized as an arena of contested authority, reconfiguring reproductive labor and converting embodied experience into public testimony as well as practical pedagogy.

This project draws on theories of affective knowledge production, synthesizing affect theory, situated knowledge, and mediated witnessing (Ahmed 2014; Haraway 1988; Peters 2001). From an affective perspective, emotions are not merely internal states but relational forces that circulate between bodies and construct social boundaries. That is, emotions, such as pain, fear, relief, and ecstasy, become communicative intensities rather than private sensations. Situated knowledge further grounds this framework by emphasizing that knowledge is produced through embodied experience rather than detached objectivity. Within the format of vlogs, childbirth becomes a site of epistemic production, as bodily sensations are translated into audiovisual testimony that generates a shared epistemic space among viewers. The concept of mediated witnessing deepens this analysis. Media do not simply transmit information, but they create a condition of presence-at-a-distance, enabling viewers to experience events they do not physically inhabit (Frosh and Pinchevski 2011; Nash 2018). Viewers are not passive spectators but co-witnesses who encounter the scene as if alongside the birthing subject. This mediated intimacy destabilizes conventional separations between private and public, personal and political.

Methodologically, the study employs a multimodal approach combining thematic discourse analysis and visual/sonic analysis of 60 YouTube natural birth vlogs produced in South Korea. Selection criteria include explicit self-identification as a natural birth, documentation of labor and delivery footage, and availability of public comment sections. Thematic analysis examines spoken dialogue with partners and midwives, monologues, open captions, retrospective interviews, and viewer comments. Visual analysis focuses on framing, camera movement, and shot duration, whereas sonic analysis attends to the layering of diegetic and non-diegetic sound, as well as strategic silence. Together, these methods capture both discursive articulation and affective intensification.

The findings are threefold: (1) politicization through claiming reproductive autonomy, (2) displaying embodied experience through visual and sonic techniques, and (3) publicizing motivations and shaping audience experience. The first finding is that natural birth vlogs politicize reproduction by claiming reproductive autonomy across interconnected domains of medicine, family, and care. Vlogs do not simply document birth, but they articulate rationales for choosing natural childbirth in opposition to the dominant medicalized model characterized by routine intervention, including epidurals and C-sections. Autonomy is not presented as a singular preference but as a multidimensional intervention enacted through medical decision-making, fathers' participation, and post-birth care practices.

Specifically, vloggers claim corporeal and epistemic autonomy by resisting over-intervention and inadequate provision of biomedical information. They also recast childbirth as shared political and affective labor rather than an individualized maternal burden, thereby challenging the gendered distribution of responsibility embedded in dominant childbirth practices. In addition, they claim temporal autonomy through post-birth care practices that resist institutional separation and biomedical timetables. Taken together, these dimensions demonstrate how natural birth is framed as a political act, given that it proposes alternative models of knowledge, accountability, and care within a reproductive landscape that vloggers

portray as systematically restricting agency.

Furthermore, politicization is accomplished sensorially through deliberate visual and sonic techniques that make embodied experience transmissible. These affective textures create collective, situated knowledge by constructing an epistemic space in which viewers learn not only through explanation but through sensory encounter. For instance, whereas pre-birth sequences are edited to be fast-paced and fragmented, near delivery, extended long takes and unedited screams intensify affective immersion, producing a sense of real-time continuity and embodied co-presence. Sonic techniques amplify these effects, as vlogs layer diegetic and non-diegetic sound and deploy strategic silence in synchronization with visual intensity. For example, as labor reaches climax, non-diegetic music often stops abruptly, shifting attention to panting and urgent instructions, creating acoustic amplification and intensifying bodily immediacy. These audiovisual strategies do not simply enhance storytelling but generate affective knowledge by enabling viewers to sense the experience rather than merely see it.

The third and final analysis addresses why vloggers publicize childbirth and how audience reception extends politicization. Vloggers frequently frame their uploads as testimony, education, or moral enlightenment, implying that the act of making private reproductive experience publicly accessible reframes childbirth as a matter of collective concern. At the same time, comments demonstrate the persuasive force of affective and embodied knowledge. Viewers use comment sections to seek information on natural birth, to articulate emotional resonance, to praise spousal support, and to reflect on their own prior birth experiences, sometimes with regret shaped by lack of information or viable options. Importantly, some viewers describe changes in their future birth plans, articulating that the vlogs become an encounter with alternatives that cast doubt on medical hierarchies and expand perceived reproductive possibilities. In this way, mediated witnessing becomes politicized not only through mobilization rhetoric but also through affective reorientation, knowledge diffusion, and the circulation of embodied testimony across networked publics.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that natural birth vlogs constitute an emergent mode of embodied digital activism. Politicization occurs through a chain: (1) reproductive autonomy is claimed through the exercise of informed choice and bodily authority; (2) embodied experience is made sensorially transmissible through visual/sonic orchestration; and (3) publicization invites mediated witnessing that expands perceived reproductive options and prompts viewers to reconsider the institutional control embedded in dominant childbirth practices. These vlogs challenge medicalized birthing norms and gendered divisions of reproductive labor without explicit activist framing. By producing affective knowledge grounded in bodily experience, they expand what counts as political communication in digital environments.

Conceptually, the findings reposition digital activism as a process through which embodied knowledge destabilizes institutional control, revealing that the politics of reproduction can be enacted through the mediated sharing of private life. The politicization of private life on social media need not depend on overt protest discourse. Instead, it can emerge through the public circulation of embodied knowledge, where affect becomes both medium and message

and where viewers are invited into co-presence that transforms perception into potential agency. In natural birth vlogs, the boundary between private experience and political action is neither fixed nor stable but continuously negotiated through digital media. In this sense, birth vlogging becomes not merely self-representation but a reproductive politics of witnessing, one in which the body is not only shown but mobilized as a site of critique, pedagogy, and collective reorientation.

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