**Digital Impression Management: The Case of the Fashion Vlogger**

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In this age of social media, consumers are mindful of the imperative to create a large digital footprint (Patterson, 2012). The number of views, likes, and comments one garners for social media posts seems to be a critical component of self-validation. Some social media users strive for social acceptance to the point of narcissism, as they studiously photoshop the minutiae of their lives and carefully cultivate themselves as personal brands (Deckers and Lacy, 2013; Peters, 1999). Many have figured out that reaching high echelons of online social success can also be potentially profitable. Gaining high social influence enables content creators to monetize their social capital through advertising revenue and brand sponsorship attached to their posts.

One route to creating influential social content is through *vlogging* (or video blogging) on sites such as *You Tube*. Vlogging is starting to become noticed by commercial media as “setting the future shape of marketing and advertising” (Chawla, 2014). Vlogging for the most part it is a fairly straightforward process; the subject films his or her thoughts and feelings and then broadcasts these insights on the internet to followers. Vloggers gain influence when viewers identify with their recommendations (Simmel, 1957). In turn companies recognize this influence as they offer Vloggers exclusive opportunities to encourage their help in promoting word of mouth; these perks include sponsorship by brands, access to free products and insider access to parties and events.

The distinction between Vloggers and professional marketers is becoming hazy. Of course, not all Vloggers become reliable information sources and only a minority gain “micro-celebrity” status. However, those that do reach the heady heights of popularity do so by carefully curating details of their lives in order to accrue social capital. This process of *digital impression management* amplifies by orders of magnitude; the scripted activities, consumption choices and self-presentational strategies social psychologists have long documented in the physical world[[1]](#endnote-1). However, Vloggers also tread a slippery slope; their impact as an arbiter of taste diminishes significantly if followers detect bias, i.e. if they see evidence that the Vlogger has been “bought” by a sponsor. Source credibility is the bedrock of traditional perspectives on attitude change and an asset not to be taken lightly.[[2]](#endnote-2) Vloggers need to establish themselves as objective judges while at the same time acknowledging that they may be reviewing products the manufacturers supplied to them.

In recent years a specific vlog subgenre has emerged; the *haul video*. The process is straightforward; a consumer (most typically a female) embarks on a shipping trip, comes home with her purchases (the “haul”), and then engages in a running commentary as she pulls each item out of the bag. The haul video typically includes an enthusiastic recitation of a product’s most compelling features, the price, and perhaps a shot of the Vlogger modeling the item. Many haul videos are created with products from the fashion and beauty industries, which are the focus of this study. Haul videos are not a small, isolated phenomenon. Successful Vloggers command tens of millions of viewers and can gain around 20,000 comments per video. The implicit promise of instant celebrity and sponsorship deals means that hundreds of fledgling Vloggers are starting to post their own material on *You Tube* every day. These budding online entrepreneurs are today’s ultimate social climbers. It therefore makes sense to look at vlogging through the lens of social capital.

Bourdieu’s theory of Capital states that capital can appear in three forms: economic capitals, which are resources that can be converted into money; cultural capital, which includes skills, education and personal enlightenment; and social capital, made up of social obligations and relationships that can be utilised for personal gain (Bourdieu, 1983). Hanquinet (2014) found that the ability to become a cultural intermediary and have greater influence to dictate what is and what is not fashionable is mediated by the follower’s belief that the individual has a greater experience and knowledge of products. Schwarz (2011) suggests that those who display greater vanity will gain social capital, which is supported by Bourdieu’s (1986; 1993) assertion that beauty and fashion act as a form of cultural capital. Vloggers may thus capitalize upon advances in technology to accumulate social capital as they demonstrate their unique knowledge of and access to coveted items.

**Method**

A 3 month Netnography (March-May 2014) involved an immersion into the world of fashion Vloggers. Netnography was chosen because it helps us understand revolutionary transitions in social behavior (Griffith & Papacharissi, 2009). In a preliminary stage, fashion Vloggers were explored in order to gain a holistic and cultural understanding of their styles, motivations and characteristics. Following this, to gain a deeper understanding of the content and structure of haul videos, the haul videos of the three Vloggers (MelonLady, InTheFrow and Zoella, see Table 1for further information ) were viewed extensively to find emerging themes throughout the videos. To gain an understanding of how vlogging can effect social capital, the comments and feedback on the videos were also analyzed. Hermeneutic data analysis techniques were used during this project (Miles and Huberman, 1999).

**Results**

The ‘hauls’ showed trends around the creation of videos and the behavior of the bloggers. We define three themes as professional home creations, soliciting interaction and behavior for commercial gain.

*Professional home creations*

Cultural capital can result in greater social capital as a result of displaying high levels of skills, knowledge and understanding (Bourdieu, 1986; Schwarz, 2011). In our data we see that fashion Vloggers negotiate a tightrope between creating professional-looking videos, whilst retaining amateur and homemade elements. This is becoming increasingly hard as commercially created content begins to adopt these amateur techniques such as camera wobbles and messy cuts to connect more with the audience and create a greater emotional effect. In a personal insight into the process of vlogging, MelonLady reveals that there is a pressure on fashion bloggers to produce professional videos:

“You have to make sure you have good equipment, people can be so bitchy these days. It is all about looking good, and having catchy thumbnails and catchy images, because there is so much snobbery now. If your videos don’t look good, no one is going to watch them.”

Editing techniques are also used to make Vloggers appear more authentic. This is seen in haul videos when the subjects leave in awkward moments and outtakes from their videos to distinguish them from professional pieces.

*Soliciting Interaction*

A narcissist holds the belief that he or she is special and unique and the person obsessively displays this solipsistic perspective (Rosen, 2007). Video blogging provides the perfect opportunity for users to control their self- expression and present themselves in their most favorable light (Rosen, 2007). This tendency for narcissism seems to greatly increase the level of social capital that can be gained from social media sites through increased use and self-awareness (Leung, 2011). In the haul videos it is a recurring theme for the bloggers to ensure they are not perceived as being too perfect, as they highlight certain (minor) weaknesses in themselves. For most though, this never manifests in their physical appearance but through a certain level of fashion ignorance. Zoella often asks for guidance within her Haul videos concerning fashion styling. The comment below is in response to Zoella being unsure as to whether she can ‘pull off’ a certain pair of trousers:

*“I have got those pants! I wore this black bandeau that looks like a bra under a black sheer tank top then a purple-maroon velvet blazer on top, those pants rolled up and black leather booties”*

When discussing another item, Zoella declares she is unsure what a certain shade of blue is called, which fueled an onslaught of comments attempting to help her. This need for viewers to help Zoella is grounded in the desire to create a reciprocated, equal relationship. By displaying an appearance of perfect imperfection, Zoella is able to give her viewers the opportunity to have a more equal relationship and solicit interaction, a crucial factor for social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

*Behaviour for Commercial Gain*

For fashion Vloggers to enhance their social capital, they may indulge in behaviours for commercial gain that are delicately veiled. To gain respect as a trendsetter, they must present themselves as having greater embodied social capital in the form of life experiences (Simmel, 1957; Schwarz, 2011). This is done by discussing and commenting on their lives within their hauls. Fashion Vloggers tend to present a desirable lifestyle traits to increase the desirability of the products in haul videos. In Figure 1 MelonLady is showing a dress that she acquired, and a picture of her wearing it while she performs in her band. By associating the dress with this desirable activity, Melonlady gains social capital for being a successful musician and fashionista and the garment stands to gain social capital as it takes on the characteristics of the owner’s lifestyle.

 Vloggers also may offer a narrative of redemption, whereby they share negative feelings about a brand and then show how their view is now transformed on the basis of their shopping experiences. This comment on the Primark brand by InTheFrow is typical: *“My Best friend came to stay and she is a huge Primark fan … I don’t usually go into Primark, but once I got in there I found loads of cool things that I loved”* By referring to her reference group, InTheFrow is presenting her shopping trip as legitimate which encourages her viewers to trust her: *“I’m feeling motivated to spend more than 5 minutes in Primark now! Thank you xx” Saarah BK*

InTheFrow has convinced SaarahBK to give the Primark brand a chance through her authentic presentation and friendly style. Our netnography revealed an interesting contrast; InTheFrow and Zoella both conducted a Primark haul in the same week, and posted about the same products with a focus on the same attributes. However, Zoella posted her haul through the official Primark You Tube channel, but InTheFrow posted her haul on her own You Tube channel. The individuals were most likely compensated by Primark to post their reviews but they used different outlets. To date, InTheFrow has gained 73,350 views (posted on her channel, May 17) whilst Zoella earned 219 views (posted on Primark Channel, May 15). For her last Primark Haul posted to her channel, Zoella has to date gained 1,227,730 views. This shows the powerful effect of messages coming from sources followers perceive to be non-commercial.

**Discussion**

Fashion Vloggers are a new sub-culture of social climbers who painstakingly manage their digital impressions to relate to their online peers. They walk a tightrope of wanting to increase their cultural, economic and social capital whilst simultaneously creating content that makes them relatable yet still aspirational. They do this by maintaining an amateur air in the content they create, creating shopping stories and above all, striving to appear authentic at all times. However, it seems that trading only on beauty and lifestyle must now sit alongside traits such as eccentricity, authenticity and individuality when creating and maintaining social capital. This ensures that Vloggers do not become lost in a pool of other online hopefuls, but that they sit above in an elite group.

This insight in to the changing dynamic of the online marketing environment creates as many questions as it answers, particularly concerning how far toward either end of the concealed/revealed commerciality spectrum fashion Vloggers can travel before Haul Videos lose their credibility and with it their ability to generate social capital for their creators. Will the explosion of Haul Videos “poison the well” for this genre? Future work should monitor this growing phenomenon as the next generation of vehicles for digital impression management debuts.

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**Figure 1: A screenshot of Melonlady presenting a product**



Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WR50Yi9gq0w>

**Table 1: Stats and information on Fashion Vloggers**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Overall Statistics** | **Zoella** | **Melonlady** | **InTheFrow** |
| Average length | 10:43 | 05:42 | 11:20 |
| Average views | 1,700,000 | 57,600 | 26,500 |
| Average Likes | 115,500 | 3000 | 800 |
| Average Dislikes | 900 | 44 | 15 |
| Average Comments | 8000 | 230 | 110 |
| Views: comment ratio | 213:1 | 250:1 | 241:1 |
| Props | Youtube personalities/ friends and family and guineapigs. Props used in most videos | Dog or boyfriend: props not often used | Hair |
| Setting | Various: Always light and cosy background | 90% the exactly the same: bedroom | Bedroom: Plain light background |
| Video Technique | Blurred Background in most | Blurred Background; background music | Blurred background; background music |
|  |   |   |   |
| **Fashion Haul Video Statistics** |   |   |   |
| Percentage of total vlogging activity | 15% | 30% | 35% |
| Average Length | 12:35 | 07:13 | 12:02 |
| Average Views | 1,400,000 | 53500 | 33,300 |
| Average Likes | 103000 | 2,650 | 910 |
| Average Dislikes | 743 | 25 | 16 |
| Average Comments | 11,700 | 212 | 114 |
| Views:Comment ratio | 133:1 | 252:1 | 292:1 |
| Props | None | Mostly none | Hair |
| Setting | Intimate and cosy | Always the same | Always the Same |
| Video Technique | None | Blurred Background; music | Blurred Background; music |
|   |   |   |   |
| **Fashion Haul Video with modelling** |  |   |   |
| Average Views |  1,528,965 | 56,333 | 40,000 |
| Average Comments |  11,000 | 243 | 217 |
| Views:Comment ratio |  138:1 | 231:1 | 184:1 |
|   |   |   |   |
| **Fashion Haul Video without modelling** |   |   |   |
| Average Views | 1,191,971  | 48,750 | 40,000 |
| Average Comments |  9,500 | 186 | 68 |
| Views:Comment ratio |  126:1 | 262:1 | 588:1 |

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2. Solomon CB [↑](#endnote-ref-2)