Interdiscursive performance in digital professions: The case of YouTube tutorials

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Abstract

With over a billion users, YouTube constitutes almost a third of the online population, and is one of the most used video-sharing sites in the world, becoming a major part of popular culture. A primarily user-generated platform that relies on the creation of video-blogs (vlogs) by content creators (also known as YouTubers or vloggers), YouTube has been responsible for the development of a new strand of digital professions. Within these professions, vloggers create and market profitable channels, offering an informal learning environment which has given rise to an emerging professional genre of 'how-to-tutorials'. Of this user-generated content, beauty has become YouTube's most competitive industry, with the publication of over 1.5 million beauty videos in 2015 alone (Pixability, 2015). It is for this reason, that this paper will focus on the digital beauty industry, to investigate the interdiscursive construction of expertise on YouTube, specifically the sub-category of beauty how-to-tutorials, drawing on Bhatia's (2008, 2010, 2017) framework of Critical Genre Analysis (CGA). Analysis of the data reveals that in the pursuit of establishing themselves as both engaged and interactive participants of the YouTube community but also expert and savvy users of YouTube keen on building their subscriber base, vloggers discursively exploit the boundaries between the expert and layperson by drawing on their discursive competence, disciplinary knowledge and professional practice (Bhatia, 2017).
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1. Introduction

Among the most used video-sharing sites, YouTube has been shown to reach more 18–49 year-olds than any other network,[1] with users of this space generating thousands of videos and millions of views.[2] Of this user-generated content, "Beauty is one of YouTube's most competitive industry verticals because of the sheer number of creators and beauty brands publishing content within the space" (Pixability, 2015:12) with the publication of over "1.8 million beauty videos" (Pixability, 2015:8). This paper will focus on the digital beauty industry within YouTube, which with "45.3 billion total beauty views and over 123 million beauty subscriberships" has turned YouTube into "the world's leading online beauty consumption platform" (Pixability, 2015:6). More specifically, this paper will focus on the interdiscursive performance of independent and successful content creators who eventually become experts, gaining brand endorsements, launching either independent or affiliated lines of beauty-related products, since "YouTube audience engagement is an increasingly

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important metric for brand advertisers'' (Pixability, 2015:17). YouTube has become a resource for young people both as a platform for expression, but also as a platform for informal learning, necessitating further research into identity-construction online.

Of course, there has been an increasing amount of interest in the opportunities that new media technology has afforded us, including areas of education, self-broadcasting, promotion, and information dissemination. This includes, particularly, a phenomenon like YouTube, a key platform which gives power to the consumer in a participatory space that emphasizes user-created content, and in which creativity is depicted as a practice rather than an attribute (Burgess and Green, 2009). Burgess and Green (2009:103) argue that it is best to view YouTube as a platform negotiated by ''amateur participants'', social interaction between a wide community of users, and ''the site of possibility or conflict for the promotional desires of large media companies''. This requires a deeper investigation of YouTube, past the basic understanding of its non-market culture (Burgess and Green, 2009:103) (cf. Jenkins, 2006; Lange, 2008), as a space for the interdiscursive construction of identity.

The popularity of video-sharing sites like YouTube, amongst other platforms for social networking, have garnered much academic interest and stimulating scholarship (Matthews, 2007; Griffith and Papcharissi, 2010; Miller, 2010; Raun, 2012). To begin with, there has been much discussion on the value of tools like YouTube in both online and in-class learning (Burke and Snyder, 2008; Duffy, 2008; Agazio and Buckley, 2009; Snelson, 2009). For example, Tan and Pearce (2011) investigate the use of open education videos in classroom teaching as a way of helping students grasp new, challenging or diverse topics. They claim that use of YouTube videos encourages valuable discussion, allowing students to feel confident enough to offer opinions, aid teacher commentary, and also become a creative means of presenting a diversity of perspectives. They also note, that YouTube videos became a kind of 'social currency' in developing peer relations. Roodt and Peier (2013) also argue for the value of YouTube in classroom learning, especially considering the changing learning style of the new 'Net Generation' that is more at ease with digital technologies. The use of such technology in classrooms, they conclude, works to improve cognitive and emotional engagement with subject content. Bloom and Johnston (2010) arrive at similar conclusions, stating that YouTube can serve as a tool for fostering cross-cultural understanding both between students and teachers, and their respective colleagues locally and globally. In a slightly different vein, Morain and Swarts (2012:6), assessing tutorials in a more holistic manner, argue that user-generated tutorial videos can be regarded as a ''new form of technical communication'', which rely on multimodality to create meaning, and thus propose a set of rubrics to assess the content and creation quality of such videos and the performance within.

Curiosity about the online behaviour of young people specifically, and participants of such sites generally, has also generated much work from a more pragmatic-based view of analysis (Wöllmer et al., 2013; Bou-Franch and Blitvich, 2014a,b; Boyd, 2014; Sholichah and Solichah, 2017). Notably, Bou-Franch and Blitvich's (2014) study employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis to explore how conflict develops or ends in on-line polylogues to compare whether methodologies employed in analysis of face-to face conflict can be applied to digital forms of interactions, concluding that this is not easily the case (cf. Dynel, 2014). Lange (2014), similarly, focuses on on-line rants in the investigation of im/politeness in digital forms of communication, arguing that ranting in the case of YouTube comments allows for the creation of emotional engagement amongst like-minded participants (cf. Dynel, 2012). In addition, Adami (2009:379), employing a social semiotic multimodal analysis in her study, explores the interactional practice that emerges from the 'video response' function by posted videos, to better understand ''the notion of 'interest', which shapes sign-making in a chain of semiosis in video-interaction''.

Perhaps the aspect of YouTube that has produced the most scholarship is the process of self-representation and identity-construction online. There has been considerable work, employing various analytical approaches including content and visual analysis, traditional and cyberethnography, on mediated identity and self-performance, particularly in terms of gender and race (Taylor, 2006; Strangelove, 2010; Gao, 2012). Anarbaeva (2016), for instance, examines identity performance, namely in terms of race, gender and ethnicity, in the 'How-to and DIY' subcategory of videos in order to discover how these content creators, in this case ordinary women who are members of YouTube, perform difference, concluding that often underrepresented women find a sense of community and belonging on this platform. Chang (2014) too, in her study, finds that YouTube serves as a space within which vloggers can perform racial and gender identity, more specifically emerging Asian American beauty discourse can be seen as a means of challenging more mainstream narratives of beauty. Jerslev (2016), shifting focus to a different dimension of identity performance, investigates the creation of micro-celebrity on various (social) media platforms, particularly through strategies of accessibility, intimacy and authenticity.

In fact, the growing confidence of content creators and this evolving notion of online celebrity has further encouraged research in the progressively capitalistic direction that YouTube has driven prosumerism (Marshall, 2002; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Fuchs, 2014). Morreale (2014:113) in her study examines the ''dissolution of the boundaries between media platforms as YouTube evolves into a commercially driven medium'' through the actions of prosumers (producers and consumers of content), gradually transforming into an influencer, engaging particular demographics for the cause of