Physical Transformations and Visual Practices in the Fitblr Community

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This study examines consumers’ visual practices as they pursue physical transformation projects in a virtual community. A qualitative investigation of Fitblr community reveals how visual and community practices create a system of inspiration wherein bloggers consume inspiration, share inspiration, and become a source of inspiration in the community.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The appearance of one’s body is a central aspect of self-identity and transforming the body to enact identity projects constitutes a common theme in contemporary consumer culture (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). In Western societies, achieving the cultural ideal of a slender and fit body has become a primary concern (Heisse-Biber 2007) and consumer researchers have examined how consumers’ interpretation of sociocultural discourses shape their efforts to exert control over their body (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), how consumers cope with cultural expectations of weight control (St.James, Handelman, and Taylor 2011), and the role of support groups in pursuing weight-loss goals (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010).

As computer-mediated environments become increasingly popular sites where consumers construct identities (Belk 2013), research seeking to understand consumers’ weight-control efforts has turned to the analysis of blogs (Leipâmaa-Leskinen 2011) and online communities (Ballantine and Stephenson 2011). These studies largely focus on consumers’ discursive practices by analyzing the verbal texts consumers produce and share. We argue that investigating consumers’ visual practices is a fruitful avenue to expand our understanding of their weight-related identity projects in online communities, a proposition that is premised on two observations: First, the body is a visible cultural object (Thompson and Hirschman 1995) and visual images play an important role in producing and reproducing meanings associated with specific physical forms and identities (Schroeder and Borgenson 1998). Second, social media is intensifying the visual nature of the Internet environment (Belk 2013), so that new forms of visual objects and practices such as selfies become meaningful ways for consumers to construct and express identities (Iqani and Schroeder 2015). The purpose of this study is thus to investigate consumers’ visual practices as they pursue physical transformation projects in a virtual community.

To examine this question we conducted an 18-month qualitative investigation in the Fitblr community. Fitblr is a virtual fitness and weight-loss community on the social media platform Tumblr. It is loosely structured as an informal network of microbloggers who follow each other’s account and who identify themselves through the hashtag “#fitblr” (contraction of fitness and Tumblr) and related hashtags such as “#fitspo” and “#fitspiration” (contractions of fitness and inspiration). The Fitblr community is largely composed of young women and its multimedia content is highly visual. Data collection entailed content analysis (Gleeson 2011; Fairclough 2003) of 19 blogs over a 2-month period – for a total of 480 posts – as well as depth interviews (McC racken 1988) with 9 bloggers.

Our analysis reveals that bloggers’ visual practices and community interaction practices evolve synergistically to form a system of inspiration that shapes and sustains physical transformations projects at the individual and community levels. As bloggers undertake, pursue, and achieve physical transformation goals, these practices correspondingly move from consuming inspiration, to sharing inspiration, and finally becoming a source of inspiration in the community.

Our participants joined the Fitblr community by creating a blog on Tumblr dedicated to achieving weight-loss or related physical transformation goals. Bloggers initially consume inspiration to develop their blog as a motivational board that helps them visualize their goals and to keep these goals salient amidst the various demands of their everyday lives; reposting visual content from other blogs is the main visual practice they use to this end. Reposting leads to creating a highly uniform visual landscape in the Fitblr community, composed mainly of four types of images: (1) “bodyspo” (body inspiration), which refers to images of ideal bodies or body parts that depict bloggers’ physical goals; (2) images of lifestyle activities associated with bloggers’ physical transformation projects, namely exercise or food choice; (3) pictures of various products and brands bloggers associate with their physical transformation project; and (4) stylized images of motivational quotes. As they build their motivational board, bloggers begin to interact and create relationships with other members in the community by following other accounts, reposting material, “liking” or commenting on a post.

As bloggers adopt lifestyle activities directed towards their goals and as they grow more comfortable in the community, they often begin to share inspiration by posting original content. These posts document the efforts bloggers deploy towards reaching their goals and include post-workout selfies, workout charts and statistics, meals and food diaries. By posting original content, bloggers reveal themselves to the community, thus transforming the nature and intensity of interactions. Indeed, original content attracts a larger base of followers, more reposts, as well as comments and personal messages. This is a source of affirmation for bloggers but it also sometimes experiences as pressure to post new content frequently and to live up to the image they have created on their blog. Others hesitate to post original content in the fear that it might not be embraced if it does not conform to the community’s implicit norms.

Finally, bloggers who have transformed their bodies become inspiration for the community. These success stories are presented and shared through the visual practice of “before and after” pictures which are reposted by a large audience, conferring a unique status (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010) to the featured blogger whose “expertise” is sought by other members looking to achieve similar goals. Transformation pictures also lend solidity to the blogger’s new identity and becomes a source of motivation to maintain this lifestyle.

Our findings contribute to the literature examining how visual practices contribute to the production and reproduction of identities (Schroeder and Borgenson 1998). Indeed, practices such as reposting content and dominant visual tropes such as “before and after” pictures ultimately create a highly homogeneous taste regime (Arsel and Bean 2013). This study also contributes to our understanding of the “visual culture of the self” (Dinhopl and Gretzel 2016, p.126) and the notion of extended self in digital environments (Belk 2013). We show how participants’ transformation goals can be re-negotiated in the community, and how perception that they are successfully progressing towards and achieving their objectives is not only shaped by their own private observation of their body but also by visual practices of sharing pictures that document their progress.

REFERENCES


Iqani, Mehita, and Jonathan E. Schroeder (2015), “#selfie: Digital Self-Portraits as Commodity Form and Consumption Practice,” *Consumption Markets & Culture*, DOI:10.1080/10253866.2015.1116784


