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Roger Smith Award: Project Summary, 2019

Judging the Haul: The presentation and critique of online consumption

Haul videos, a YouTube phenomenon wherein a person displays and talks about items they have purchased, are increasingly popular, with many presenters gaining considerable fame both online and in wider communities of fashion and consumption. While the presenters themselves are rarely negative in their discussions of the products they show, the below-the-line comments by those who watch the videos are often more critical - both about the purchases displayed and the presenter herself (most haul videos feature women talking to a mainly-female audience).

This research project explores both the presentation of the material items on the videos (both visually and through the presenter's accompanying talk), and the audience's commentary on what has been shown and spoken about. In effect, this research considers the videos, and the responses, as a kind of dialogue between presenter and audience, with objects of material culture central to both the presentation and the audience's interpretations. In particular this research considers how issues of sustainability are negotiated in discourse, given that, increasingly, ideals of 'slow fashion' and ethical consumption are becoming an issue in contemporary capitalism.

This attention to ethical consumption is a recent development in the online Haul community, as YouTube has traditionally been a space in which excessive consumption was uncomplicatedly presented. Now, as many YouTubers approach consumption more consciously, there is a tendency for comments to feature a public 'calling out', wherein commentators challenge presenters (and other commentators) to reconsider their approach to consumption. Accordingly, the videos and their comments have become a contested site of contemporary material consumption.

This shift from excessive to ethical (or at least questioned) consumption in online Haul communities is worth exploration, as it indicates a shift in consumption-related rhetoric from unashamed celebration to an emphasis on moral correctness and community engagement. How might the micro-interactions of presentation and response in social media's Haul communities shed light on wider conversations concerning consumption that are (or are not) taking place in contemporary society?

This project consists of three (or possibly four) parts:

first, a literature review of scholarship concerning the presentation of material objects in online settings, with particular attention to Haul videos;

second, a literature review of scholarship that outlines the strengths and/or weaknesses of online forums as qualitative data, and that explores modes of analysis for such data;

third, the selection of specific Haul videos, and their commentary, for transcription and coding; and (if time allows),

fourth, an outline of a research paper that would either analyze selected haul videos in relation to theorized approaches to material culture (e.g. Miller's work on consumption); or that presents the Haul videos (including commentary about them) as a new mode of data that facilitates the exploration of relationships between material culture, consumption, and verbal/textual discourse.

Student qualifications: Student in Human Ecology, possibly who also has had courses in sociology and/or anthropology, and who is interested in consumption in relation to wider cultural phenomena (e.g. online communities) and/or to wider scholarly contexts (e.g. material culture scholarship, modes of qualitative analysis). A particular interest in issues concerning gender and discourse, and/or contemporary capitalism, would also be an asset, as would experience in transcription, and the preparation of literature reviews.