User-Generated Content And The Artificial Consumption Needs Through System Of Sign: Semiotics Study on Beauty Vlogger Video on YouTube

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Abstract
This research was based on the commercialization of user generated content called beauty vlog. Beauty vlog was initially used as a medium for consumers to share information about beauty products, but is now shifting to a marketing tool for the cosmetics industry. Just like all other industry-oriented media, commercial beauty vlogs are created to generate consumption needs through the use system of sign. As requires imaging to hide the commercial aspect of cosmetics needs. Using the social semiotics analysis method, this research shows that beauty vloggers are making use system of sign that represent ‘objective’, ‘amateur’ and ‘personal and intimate’ characteristics.

Keywords: Consumer Society, Semiotics

Backgrounds
The beauty industry has existed for long time and is still going strong today. Beauty product sales activities are a normal part of the consumer society. Chung(2014) described it by taking example out of the plastic surgery trend across the world. Based on data from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, there were 14 million surgery procedures carried out in the United States in 2011.¹ The cosmetic industry owes its success to the beauty standards constructed by the mass media. Chung (2014) proceeded to state that in a capitalist society, the beauty industry built consumptive desires through manifestation of beauty standards by promising consumers the attainment of ideal beauty from using their products. There are many different products used just to achieve ‘ideal’ set of eyes alone: mascara, eyeliner, eyeshadow, eyelash curler, brow pencil, etc. In Asia, especially the Far East, the western beauty standard led to double eyelid trend (Bates, 2013). Nowadays, we can easily find products such as eyelash glue or sticker to imitate double eyelids at cosmetic stores and make our eyes look bigger. The ideal flawless porcelain skin also made the global cosmetics industry worth billions of dollars through skin-whitening products (Chung, 2014).

Aside from the beauty industry, the publications about fashion and beauty topics have existed for a long time – it was pioneered by Le Mercure in 1672. Starting in the 19th century, many fashion media became increasingly commercial. Skyes (2014) called

it the industry-driven media, since the time of content publishing are often based on the fashion industry’s calendar. Advertisements became dominant content on the media.

With the arrival of communication technology, specifically the internet, the commercial fashion media becomes more and more prominent.

The development of internet technology didn’t only create new forms of commercial and industry-driven media, but also consumer-driven media, especially since the dawn of Web 2.0 technology based on participative culture. The technology enables internet users, including consumers, to create and upload their own content. One of the most interesting consumer media is the beauty vlog. It became very popular in Indonesia since 2016. Beauty vlogger (usually young females) give make-up tutorials, cosmetics product review and share their routine skincare experiences (Fischer, 2014).

Vlogger is defined as someone who records a vlog (Georgia, 2015, p. 30), a type of web blog which features video as its main content and typically used to refer to the type of content on YouTube. YouTube is a video-sharing website built on user-generated content (UGC). In other words, all of its content are produced by its users. Since its establishment in 2005, YouTube has become an Internet giant with more than one billion users or almost one third of all Internet users. Indonesia has also become one of the largest YouTube-accessing countries in the Asia Pacific. In 2015 alone, the amount of time Indonesians spent to watch YouTube (watch time) has increased by 130 percent compared to the previous year (Tekno Kompas, 2015). Based on YouTube Indonesia’s survei, contents related to beauty and makeup tutorials are very popular in 2016, as marked by the growing number of beauty vloggers on the site.

Four out of one hundred YouTube channels with the largest number of subscribers in the entire world are made by Michelle Phan (username “MichellePhan”) and Bethany Mota (“MacBarbie07”) from United States, Zoe Sugg (“Zoella”) from UK and Mariand Castrejon (“Yuya”) from Mexico. In Indonesia, beauty content is also rapidly growing on YouTube. Some which are quite popular include those made by Suhay Salim, Elizabeth Christina (“Lizzie Parra”), Sarah Ayu Hunter, Cheryl Raissa, Abel Cantika and Rachel Goddard. Each of them has more than 100,000 subscribers in December 2016.

According to Mediakix, beauty vlogs are classified as “Haul”-type video where a vlogger presents products that they just bought. Fischer (2014) saw that haul video is deeply associated with commodity culture because the majority of its content is identical with the use of cosmetics product, prompting the vloggers to purchase more and more cosmetics to be used in their video content.

Fischer (2014) said that the majority of beauty vlog contents are product reviews and recommendations, both purchased personally or endorsed by the cosmetics industry. The industry also makes profit out of these videos. A study by Google shows that four out of ten people who watch beauty vlogs ended up visiting the physical or online store. It shows that the fashion industry increasingly leans towards vloggers for marketing.

With the increasing popularity of beauty vloggers, the brand now regards them as brand influencers who can intervene a consumer group’s views of a particular brand. They are seen as influential, especially those with large subscribers base on YouTube.

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Based on a research conducted by Pixability⁴, when a cosmetic brand collaborates with a beauty vlogger through her amateur content, the brand already saves a large amount of marketing costs. Renowned brands such as NYX has implemented this strategy and enjoyed better and more efficient marketing results compared to other brands which are still struggling with creating their own promotional content.

This was affirmed by the result of polling by Kompas daily newspaper in May 2016 ⁵, which concluded that beauty bloggers/vloggers affected the way consumers use cosmetics. Buyers become more assured of which product they want. The phenomenon was largely followed by the development of new cosmetic brands.

With the growing amount of beauty information on the internet, the female age groups who consume cosmetics are also expanding. In the same polling, almost all respondents (92.7 percent) agreed that women are now wearing cosmetics at a much younger age than those who were born before 1990. There are even beauty vlogs targeted specifically at schoolgirls. If one enters ‘make up for school’ keywords on the search bar, the result will come up with numerous videos on how to do makeup for school day.

What can be concluded from the above issue is that the beauty vlogger phenomenon is an example of commercialized consumer driven media that. Previous data has also shown that the beauty industry has been exploiting this phenomenon into their marketing strategy. Such practices led to beauty vlogs being commercial and containing messages from the company (Jeffries, 2011). As a media with marketing purpose, commercial beauty vlogs are created to induce an artificial consumption needs through system of sign. This article will explain how the system of sign is implemented by beauty vloggers to induce the artificial consumption needs of cosmetics products.

**Literature Study**

This chapter starts with an introduction of the Baudrillard’s concept, Simulation. Baudrillard (1983) introduced the distinct characteristics of the western society. He thinks that the culture is a representation of a simulation world – a world created by the arbitrary relationships between various signs and codes without clear relational references. These relationships include signs which were actually created through a production process and unreal (image) signs created through reproduction.

Baudrillard’s concept of a simulation is the creation of reality using a conceptual model or an idea related with ‘myth’ which cannot be observed in reality. This model became the factor for determining our views of reality. Baudrillard (1981) stated that simulacrum has never been about concealing the truth, rather a truth which conceals the existence of nothing. He believes that simulacrum is never meant for exchange with reality, instead exchanging between themselves in a never-ending loop without the need for reference. In other words, simulation is a process where representation (image) of

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an object replaces and becomes more important than the object itself. According to Baudrillard (1983), representation can be observed in four stages of imaging:

1. An image is made as reflection of reality.
2. An image has already concealed and misled the reality
3. An image conceals the nothingness of a reality.
4. An image becomes an idea which is completely detached from reality. This is the state of pure simulacra as proposed by Baudrillard.

Simulacra is a world built on values, facts, signs, images and codes, all of which resulting in the reality to no longer have reference aside from the simulacra itself. Simulacra enables people to inhabit a space full of duplicates and recycled fragments of different worlds at a given time. Simulacra was defined by Baudrillard as a reference to “imaging” or the manifestation of an intangible element into a twisted pseudo-reality which no longer bears any similarity with what it refers to. However, this reality is imperfect and not entirely real because of the lack of mutual/interactive relationships. It can also be called “semi-reality”.

Baudrillard in his book stated that in the context of simulation, the reality is not mixed with virtual reality, rather suppressed by it. He had previously explained that an image is far more believable than actual facts. This is also what we refer to as “hyper-reality” era, when true reality is defeated by artificial reality manifested as image. This is where the boundaries between simulation and reality become blurred, creating what we call hyper-reality, where the real and virtual become indistinguishable, creating a new reality outside of the boundaries of reality itself; past united with present; facts entangled with fiction; signs are one with reality; lies mixed together with truth. The categories of truth, falseness, originality, issues and reality appear to be ineffective in such world.

This concept can be associated with the industrial culture which bridges the gap between facts and information, between information and entertainment and between entertainment and political excess. The truth is, the people are often unaware of the effects of simulation and signs. They always want to be bold and try new things that are offered by the simulation, such as the desire to purchase goods.

This situation has made the modern society excessively consumptive with no clear essence. The majority consumers purchase products not because of their economic needs, rather because of the influence of simulation created by media advertisements. The advertising industry holds the power over their needs. Advertisements are packaged with simulation to become a hyper-reality with the addition of semiotics, audio-visual and information technology illustration which help identify what types of product innovations are needed by the people. All of these are carried out by the manufacturers in order to attract consumers by persuading them to act and to become loyal customers to the benefit of their brand.

This research focuses on the simulation of consumer’s medium on the YouTube platform. YouTube is a highly relevant example of a digital platform which enables the production of content by users, often referred to as User-Generated Content. The term “User-Generated Content (UGC)” is used to show that on that particular media, the content is fully owned by the user and is contributed by the user or account holder. UGC
is a symbiotic relationship on a new media which provides the opportunity and flexibility of users’ participation (Lister, 2003 p. 221).

This is the consequence of Web 2.0 technology. The term was first introduced by O’Reilly Media in 2003 to refer to the second generation of web-based service which emphasizes on online collaboration and sharing between users. Web 2.0 refers to the internet media which is no longer constrained to a means to connect individuals using computer device (technology and network) which has been the characteristic of Web 1.0 platform. Platform 2.0 involves individuals to publish, process and complete data, web or platform or program which can be developed down at the network user level on a very long workflow (Nasrullah, 2014).

The emergence of Web 2.0 has changed the mediascape by providing alternatives for the production and distribution of content which were initially dominated by the mainstream media (Welbourne & Grant, 2016). According to Burgess and Green (Welbourne & Grant, 2016), web 2.0 sites such as blogs, wiki, social media and video-sharing websites are built upon participative culture, a function which has been mostly absent from the mainstream media.

Furthermore, Fuchs (2014) revealed that based on the social theories developed by Durkheim, Weber, Tonnies and Marx, it can be concluded that social media presence is a development on how individuals and media devices are connected. The characteristics of Web 1.0 computer works are based on recognition between individuals (human cognition) on a network system, whereas Web 2.0 is based on how individuals communicate with one another (human communication) within a network. Web 3.0 platform is starting to appear with the characteristics of cooperation between users (human cooperation) (Fuchs, 2008).

Based on the above, Web 2.0, especially the new media based on User-Generated Content (UGC), it basically enables an interactive world where everyone is able to define, create, change and modify content. In the Web 2.0 era, the audience has shifted from passive to active participants.

Weblog was the earliest participatory media, which emerged since the mid-1990s. They are the next generation of collaboration and web 2.0 connectivity (Monaghan & Tunney, 2010). Weblogs have individualistic and subjective characteristics. They are also perceived as opposed to institutional, top-down, and “objective” sources of information.

YouTube is a form of web 2.0 that seizes the attention of Internet users. The slogan of the Platform is “Broadcast Yourself!”. YouTube user can upload and share a video of a personal work up to a montage of audio-visual material available on another platform. Thus, many parties are concerned about copyright infringement by YouTube and YouTube users themselves. The future of YouTube is closely related to this issue and how it is solved.

**Methodology**
This research makes use of semiotics analysis method for being focused on signs as its object of study. Semiotics are used to identify how signs, both letters and symbols, bring meaning to a certain context (Patton, 2002, p. 133). Semiotics are important to
understand the consumption culture because the consumer consumes product to express their social identity (Solomon, 1999 p. 17).

This research specifically uses social semiotics approach. Social semiotics recognize the shifts of signs as being necessary to further understand the roots of communication, especially those performed without the use of language. Social semiotics also reiterate that the selection of media will contribute to a meaning. This, in turn, supports the needs for social semiotics approach to analyze meaning on various new media types and how to communicate outside the language which formed the said message (Mehmet, 2014).

Social semiotics are influenced by Hodge and Kress (1988) which expands the Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) based on linguistics (language) towards all other modes of communication, including images, sounds, kinetics and even designs. In alignment with such idea, the social semiotics community also stated that the different means of communication will reveal the meaning in a different and unique way. Social semiotics encourage the understanding that all text elements are basically separate but they all retain the emerging context. Social semiotics also assume that non-linguistic text structure will reiterate the meaning (Mehmet, 2014).

There are various forms of semiotic sources, both physiological and technological, culture-specific or abstract, and the manner in which these resources are compiled can vary greatly. Simple semiotics sources can become a communication method such as written text in the case of published textbook, or represented by combining various communication modes such as illustrated books for children which combine images with text. The socio-cultural selection and usage are established from time to time. In its turn, this construction results in polysemy. Most importantly, social semiotics explore different variables of semiotic resources (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Social semiotics can also be used to understand how semiotic resources change over time and how it’s reformed by the people who adopt it in compiling a text (Marshment, 1997). This makes social semiotics a very useful tool in understanding how semiotic resources are reforged into a new media context (Marshment, 1997). It also enables researchers to generate many possible meaning related to a text.

This becomes important in understanding the practice of creating meaning in a whole new media landscape, since new media technology uses more than written and verbal languages to build a message (Kress, 2010). Considering that this new technology combines language with other communication methods such as visual, audio and kinetics, this approach is required to cohesively understand all these elements simultaneously.

Communication on the new media consists of some elements of text/affinities, whereas semiotic analysis in a single affinity only carries some of the meaning (Mehmet, 2014). Therefore, an intersemiotic relationship analysis is required to obtain the overall meaning. Intersemiotic relationship in this research was analyzed notably using the approach developed by Mehmet (2014) on speech text and kinetics. This intersemiotic relationship was chosen because both are the most dominant text in the analyzed video content.

Mehmet (2014) offers a tool to analyze relationship between verbal and visual sign. This tool focuses analysis on clarifications, where signs are used to clarify
speech and vice versa or complement each other. Especially when the sign expands the meaning of speech, such as in the augmentation and divergence categories. It will assist the researcher in identifying the contradictions between speech and sign. Furthermore, there are manner category which is used to reveal when a verbal process is represented by a sign, in other words when language is used to give knowledge regarding a process represented by action. Meanwhile, in the casual category, speech and actions are the result of cause and consequences, when both modes are related with each other and would never occur without one another.

The researcher conducts an analysis of the hidden meaning analysis within each affinity. Then the researchers conducted an intersemiotic relationship analysis to get a more comprehensive meaning. The intersemiotic relationship in this study was analyzed primarily by using the approach developed by Mehmet (2014), namely on speech and kinetic texts. This intersemiotic relationship is chosen because they are the most dominant text on the video content to be analyzed.

Speech will be analyzed along with kinetic to verify the meaning of both. The process of verifying the meaning of one media affinity with another has the added benefit of a contradiction that potentially expresses the vlogger’s meaning, especially when conveying the satisfaction and disappointment of the product. This of course will have an impact on the perception of the audience about the quality of products marketed.

In this study, the writer analyzed the video of Suhay Salim, one of the most popular Indonesian female vloggers according to a survey by Female Daily 6. Out of the many videos she had created, one that particularly interesting was the ‘One Brand Tutorial’. This video contains tutorial & review of cosmetic products of single brand. This video is quite different from others that normally use different cosmetic brands in a single video. Due to its single-brand unique approach, this video is often used for marketing by the cosmetics company, including Wardah which launched a video titled ‘Wardah One Brand Tutorial’ on the Instagram social media.

Result and Discussion
This part describes how beauty vloggers form an image on their commercial video and how it has helped industry in creating the image of needs among consumers.

Objectives
In the previous analysis, it is obvious how the subject presented products as its centerpiece. The subject also used gesture to attract the audience’s attention to the highest quality part of the product. For example, when presenting the Wardah eyeshadow product, the visual text clarifies the verbal speech which emphasizes on the best specific part of the product.

Analysis in the previous section shows that the subject tends to deliver product weakness verbally. At a glance, Someone who delivers product weakness appears to be more objective and honest to the consumers. Consumers have always believed in influencers who are deemed more honest in providing information in the virtual world. Throughout the years, marketers normally only provide positive

information regarding its marketed products. This is of course performed to build and maintain its product image. Meanwhile, in this case, vlogger attempts to provide positive and negative information regarding the product to maintain objective and non-commercial feeling.

How the meaning was formed by the subject will benefit company because its products’ weaknesses are delivered positively, even followed by a statement that such weaknesses are not an issue to the subject. Audio can be used to represent subjects in a temporal text. How a word is delivered through audio will expose different meanings. Pitch and rhythm used by the subjects tend to be consistent, implying that the subject is always in control of her speech.

The product quality is also presented visually through acts. Such as explained in the previous analysis in a vlog, there are actions which reflect the vlogger’s attempts to create good visualization on the final makeup. The action is usually carried out using a different brand, on only a part of the face, minimally or mixing two products with different colors.

Good visualization is one of the aspects which support the success of a marketing activity. Especially on an audio visual media, consumers cannot see, hold nor feel a product in real life. Visualization of product usage makes the audience feels immersed in using and evaluating the said product without touching or feeling it themselves. It is therefore predictable that the better the skill of a beauty vlogger in applying products in her video, the more positive the meaning attached to the said products. The combination of skills and video quality is an important factor in creating high-quality product symbolization.

Personal & Intimacy

Subject consistently uses close-up angle at the same eye-level as the audience to show that there is equal power between the subject and the audience. Vloggers also appear to have made small talks regarding the procedure for using cosmetic products. These talks tend to be informative but flows smoothly. What the vlogger does isn’t outright presenting a product – she seems to speak intimately with her audience. This is a characteristic which is prominent in daily interpersonal conservations.

At the end of the video, vlogger asks the audience to leave comments on her video and gives opportunity to request a specific video. Such statement forms an impression that she is open to suggestions and critics. She also implies that the audience knows her personally, just like what occurs between friends.

The above analysis concludes how the image of consumption needs is built by beauty vloggers using signs which reflect personal relationship/intimacy. They create a simulated relationship with their audience by displaying symbols of such intimacy, which is required to build trust between an influencer and her audience.

This practice is nothing new. Commercial ads on the television are deemed to mimic the personal, intimate communication style in an attempt to make their brands more relatable. A simulated intimacy is also often created between the advertiser
and potential consumers as well as between potential consumers and the advertised product.

Duplication of body movements, conversation styles and informal face-to-face encounters can be related to communications performed by celebrities on television to create the illusion of intimacy. It is called illusion because the relationship between the persona and audience is only one-way, and the response is not received instantaneously such as in interpersonal relationship. This strategy is often referred to ‘conversational style’ and is commonly found on television programs, where such informality is cleverly arranged during the production process to make the audience feels engaged in a face-to-face encounter rather than being a passive audience.

Amateur

Researcher identifies how signs can imply amateurish values of a vlog. Brabham (2012 p. 402) reveals that ‘amateur’ label is often used to describe ‘unpaid, untrained and unexperienced,’ which is the opposite of ‘professional’. The definition of ‘amateur’ is activity performed as leisure instead of to make money. The feeling of ‘amateur’ and ‘original’ tends to cover the commercial aspect of a beauty vlog media.

Researcher will explain several signs which represent amateurism and originality of a vlogger when delivering her review of Wardah cosmetic product. The signs identified by the researcher include the plain white background which reflects simplicity in the video production concept. There’s also lack of music and visual effects in the video, which shows that the video is self-edited in a simple manner without a large production team. Another amateur quality is reflected by how the vlogger only uses a single eye-level throughout the video. It implies that she recorded it by herself.

Subject built an amateur impression by not editing / cutting mistakes that she did when recording video. The first mistake was when she wrote a text to notify that some of the video was cut out. The second was when she wrongly mentioned the product name and description. Despite making several mistakes, she did not cut / edit it from the entire video. This is what Horton & Wohl (1956) called truthful self-expression.

Amateurish impression is also often shown by the persona, by appearing as the “typical, regular person”. There are many signs which were used to imply this characteristics, for example the subject’s face at the beginning of the video which was displayed almost without makeup. Only her eyebrow and gray-colored contacts belied the fact that she wasn’t using makeup. Despite the bright lightings, the audience can see details on her face, including acne scars, brownish skin color, eye bags and brownish pink lips. This kind of image is rarely displayed on commercial advertisements.

How the vlogger reflects amateurish quality is certainly associated with the creation of image of consumption needs. It has been explained that amateurish signs result in authenticity. This kind of impression is a far from what is normally displayed in commercial advertisements that are often fake and heavily manipulated through professional production process.

Conclusion

This research describes one of the forms of marketing practices to create artificial consumption needs by making use of user-generated content, in this case through a
beauty vlogger on YouTube. As a consumer-driven media, beauty vlogs are used by consumers to obtain honest information regarding the quality of a cosmetic product. This information becomes an important factor for the consumer in making their decision. However, when a beauty vlogger becomes commercial, the content is created to accommodate the interests of the industry. As a media which originated in the consumer community for the benefits of the consumers, image is required to conceal the commercial aspect. This research shows that beauty vloggers make use of commercial logics through system of symbol that represent “objective”, “amateur” and “personal and intimate” characteristic.

References: