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Goodwill hunting: YouTube user-generated content as a promotional tool for thrifted apparel

Abstract:

YouTube User-Generated Content (UGC) showcasing thrifted apparel has gained significant traction. As peer-to-peer screen texts, these videos can be considered an extension of personal style blogs. Adopting an audio-visual form of performative writing, they engage vlogging conventions while drawing on and subverting branded fashion film aesthetics. This article explores how thrift UGC mobilises textual strategies to elevate second-hand garments to desirable possessions, which serve practical, social, and emotional functions. UGC produced by Ashley (surname undisclosed) and disseminated on her YouTube channel, bestdressed, demonstrates how to select, style, and alter second-hand clothing. Analysis of Ashley's content reveals that her role as an influential trendsetter is enabled by textual strategies which cultivate the perception that she is authentic and aspirational. Her writing develops tropes to contest fast fashion and challenge the definition of new clothing in the youth market.

Biographical note:

Nicole Pavich is a PhD candidate and sessional academic in the Department of Creative Arts and English at La Trobe University. Her practice-based research explores intersections of fashion, film, and sustainability. Through the production of short films, her work aims to reveal how the moving image could be used to address the ethical and environmental issues associated with clothing production, consumption, and disposal.

Keywords:

Fashion film, user-generated content, thrift apparel, sustainable fashion, vlogging

Introduction: The rise of thrift YouTube user-generated content

Fashion and the moving-image have shared a prosperous relationship since the birth of cinema. Extended by digital culture and technology, fashion film has manifested diverse iterations that transgress media borders. Existing research tends to focus on the origin and content of branded fashion films that evoke a tension between art, entertainment, and advertising (see Berra, 2012; Mijovic, 2013; Uhlirova, 2013a, 2013b; Uhlirova, 2020; Diaz Soloagna & Garcia Guerrero, 2016; Caoduro, 2017; Rees-Roberts, 2018). However, it has been acknowledged that User-Generated Content (UGC) circulated on social media also constitutes an important part of fashion's visual culture, which 'cannot be ignored' (Uhlirova, 2020, p. 357).

UGC refers to information that is publicly available on the internet and has been created by end-users as opposed to media professionals (Knoll, 2016, p. 284). This includes YouTube videos produced by vloggers revolving around fashion production, consumption, styling, and analysis. Citing the successful partnership between Louis Vuitton and prolific YouTuber Emma Chamberlain, fashion film scholar Nick Rees-Roberts suggests that promotional fashion moving-image content disseminated on social media is triangulated through digital interactivity, fashion branding, and celebrity influence (2020). While it is commonplace for creators with large and growing followings to feature brand collaborations or sponsorships in monetised output, this is not a pre-requisite for all fashion YouTube UGC.

As a participatory form of online media, these screen texts can be considered an extension of personal style blogs, which fashion theorist Rosie Findlay notes surfaced in the early 2000s before gaining traction in 2009 (2015). Like branded fashion films, fashion YouTube UGC entered the mainstream between 2008 and 2010 (Uhlirova, 2013a). However, the context in which these videos are produced, disseminated, and consumed differs vastly from intermedial branded fashion films controlled by funding, production, distribution, and marketing hierarchies. Although sponsored content may require brand approval, vloggers typically conceive, record, edit, and promote their videos singlehandedly. This encourages a 'devolution of fashion authority from traditional power brokers such as magazine editors and designers to a more diverse assemblage of participants' (Crewe, 2017, p. 17) and counters fashion's 'top-down, hierarchical, and highly guarded organisation of taste and value' (Pham, 2015, p. 55).

Fashion vlogging, like blogging, also suggests a 'liberation from a system of rule that dictates the ways in which consumers engage with fashion media and product' (de Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 220). However, despite UGC democratising fashion by creating scope for its producers – who present as everyday consumers – to initiate and dictate trends, tropes of this content (including haul, look-book, and outfit idea videos) frequently reinforce industry fashion film conventions. For instance, fashion UGC often depicts 'young, slender, conventionally beautiful, able bodied ... cisgender' women deemed to be 'ideal' by the fashion industry, framing garments as aspirational and materialistic possessions (de Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 221).

This article is interested in analysing thrift-themed YouTube videos as a specific strain of fashion UGC that engages with fashion film culture and draws on vlogging conventions. These works grapple with ideas surrounding second-hand clothing purchased from charity stores, bazaars, and vintage shops, along with online resale companies and peer-to-peer marketplaces.

Typically, they take the form of thrift haul, come thrifting with me, thrift shopping tips, how to thrift, thrift flip, and thrift lookbook videos. The aim of this study is to understand how these screen texts relate to both the fashion film category and participatory internet culture where they function as an audio-visual form of performative writing that advocates for second-hand apparel as a desirable wardrobe option within the youth market. Ashley (surname undisclosed) owns bestdressed, a fashion and lifestyle YouTube channel which boasts over 3.5 million subscribers. Her thrift output will form a case study of how YouTube UGC can be mobilised to promote second-hand clothing. Ashley's videos titled *Thrift flip ft. my quarantine insanity* (2020) and *Summer try-on thrift haul* (2019) will be examined to determine how her content adopts textual strategies to brand her as an authentic and aspirational figure. Ultimately, it will be argued that by advocating for thrifted apparel, Ashley's work supports elements of the sustainable fashion agenda.

Although thrift YouTube UGC emerged around 2012, it did not gain traction until between approximately 2013 and 2016. This can be attributed to the popularisation of second-hand clothing that occurred during this time (Fitzgerald, 2015). Musical artists who framed used apparel as trendy possessions should be partially credited for this. 'Thrift Shop' – a double Grammy award winning rap song by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis featuring Wanz – spent 99 weeks in the US Billboard Hot 100 in 2013 (Billboard, n.d.). While championing thrift stores like Goodwill, this track asserts that luxury fashion brands lead consumers to be 'tricked by a business' (Macklemore, Ryan Lewis, and Wanz, 2012). In the early 2010s, prominent American singer Lana Del Rey made her interest in 'obsolescence and nostalgia' explicit by romanticising 1950s and 1960s popular culture (McKinney, 2014) and showcasing 'the same disaffected and whimsical sensationalism that created the hipster' (Crutcher, 2019, p. 244). Hipster and indie subcultural movements that embraced thrifted clothing in an attempt to articulate unique identities and reject mainstream trends may have also persuaded young people to seek second-hand clothing out of desire rather than necessity. Additionally, by exposing the ugly side of fashion to global audiences, the infamous 2013 Bangladesh Rana Plaza Garment factory collapse that killed 1,129 people and injured 2,500 others may have prompted consumers to opt for thrifting as a more socially conscious means of acquiring clothes (Collins & Blige, 2016).

This is not to say that in the early 2010s, consumers were not inclined to thrift because it allowed them to obtain inexpensive, well-made, and durable apparel. By definition thrift refers to 'careful management especially of money' (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, it is probable that the gentrification of thrifted clothing during this time was equally driven by social and cultural factors as it were practical and economic considerations. Ashley's reasons for shopping second-hand seem aligned to this philosophy; it enables her to discover sustainable, high-quality, inexpensive clothes that are unavailable in fast fashion stores and allow her to experiment with different aesthetics. Between 2017 and 2019, viewership of YouTube videos containing 'thrift with', 'thrifting in', and 'how to thrift' in their title increased ten-fold, elevating these texts to a dominant form of online fashion media that demands deeper inquiry for its viral capacity and contribution to the sustainable fashion movement (YouTube Culture and Trends, 2019).

Sustainable fashion and the youth market

Before examining Ashley's thrift UGC, it is useful to pinpoint how the term 'sustainable fashion' will be interpreted in this article and consider the way in which Ashley's followers engage with this discourse. This paper draws on Sarah Portway's 'climate justice' view on sustainable fashion that accounts for its 'social and environmental impacts' (2019, p. 49). According to Portway, this perspective constitutes the idea that 'people ... [and] the natural environment should not be harmed in the manufacturing, movement or sale of clothing' (2019, p. 51). This article does not claim that thrift YouTube UGC, or purchasing second-hand clothing, addresses the entirety of fashion's complex and systemic sustainability issues. Nor does it seek to imply that creating a sustainable fashion future is solely up to Ashley's audience of young women who are 'routinely singled out as key targets/protagonists/victims in the era of fast fashion' (Horton, 2019, p. 519). Often sponsored by second-hand clothing companies such as ThreadUp, Ashley's monetised thrift videos occupy a commercialised domain and promote consumption. Her channel also features fast fashion – a system that enables megabrands to capitalise on rapidly mass-manufacturing trendy, low quality, readily disposable garments that are competitively sold in chain stores. Nevertheless, by communicating that shopping second-hand is generally more sustainable than solely consuming fast fashion, Ashley's thrift UGC remains incredibly productive.

Supply outweighs the demand for thrifted clothing. For example, although the UK Charity Retail Association note that 90 percent of donated garments 'end up on the rack in store', according to scholar Andrew Brooks, only between 10 and 30 percent of what is given to UK charities sells over the counter (Rodgers, 2015). Non-recyclable apparel is often sold to Global South countries where it becomes part of the second-hand clothing trade and damages local economies (Brooks, 2019). Unwanted clothing is also routinely incinerated or left to occupy expensive and limited landfill space where materials remain undegraded and generate toxic greenhouse gas methane (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). Purchasing a pre-owned clothing item saves an average of 1 kilogram of waste, 3040 litres of water and 22 kilograms of CO₂ when compared to buying a new garment (Farfetch, QSA, ICARO & LWARB, 2020). Thrift revenue often funds charities that are invested in aiding people and the planet, as opposed to fast fashion companies who use manipulative practices to fuel their profits. Therefore, Ashley's capacity to stimulate a demand for second-hand apparel and inform her millions of followers that thrifting is a small, yet progressive step that can be taken towards supporting the sustainable fashion movement, can make a significant impact. Many consumers taking minor steps towards reducing the ethical and environmental damage associated with clothing and textiles has the potential to make a greater difference than only a few people adopting entirely sustainable wardrobe practices.

Promoting the benefits of seeking second-hand clothing to young people is particularly important given the fast fashion industry's monopolisation of this demographic. A *Vogue Business* survey revealed that over half of its Generation Z participants admitted to purchasing 'most of their clothes' from fast fashion e-tailors (Maguire & Arnett, 2020). Half of the respondents also disclosed that they would continue to buy from Boohoo, PrettyLittleThing, and Nasty Gal despite their awareness of the health and safety breaches allegedly occurring in garment factories manufacturing apparel for these brands (Maguire & Arnett, 2020). An Australian YouGov survey found that 38 percent of Millennial respondents aged between 16

and 34 years old had purchased at least half the clothes in their wardrobe in the previous year (YouGov, 2017). Further results revealed that a quarter of Millennials had thrown away at least three fast fashion items, worn once in the past year, while another quarter of participants from this demographic claimed to have discarded clothes because they were ‘bored of wearing them’ (YouGov, 2017). Despite this, Millennials have been deemed socially responsible and environmentally mindful consumers who are often aware of the ethical and environmental implications of their wardrobe choices (Schultz et al., 2005). This indicates that a lack of education or care about sustainable fashion cannot necessarily be attributed to their significant fast fashion uptake. Rather, their ability to seek sustainable wardrobe alternatives appears hindered by other factors; the convenience of seeking the latest trends online, the importance of regularly changing their look and a lack of disposable income to seek higher priced ethically made apparel. The perception that such garments are less stylish, ill-fitting, and uncomfortable, further reduces their appeal to young people (Hiller Connell, 2010). Ashley’s thrift videos address these barriers to sustainable fashion by contending that pre-owned clothing is trendy and accessible.

Performances of authenticity in Ashley’s thrift YouTube UGC

Ashley’s UGC counterbalances performances of authenticity with aspirational representations of her thrifted apparel. This is not to say that *all* of Ashley’s content is scripted and pre-meditated. Rather, her videos contain a series of performances, given her actions and words would not otherwise naturally occur off-camera. Ashley draws on vlogging conventions to appear authentic in her thrift videos. Vlogs are an informal mode of communication that involve an exchange of gazes whereby creators look into the lens as though they are speaking to viewers in person. Maintaining eye-contact with the camera while directly addressing her audience as though she is conversing with them face-to-face suggests that Ashley is sincere. Slang phrases, inclusive language, and rhetorical questions are commonly utilised in vlogs to further diminish the barriers between vloggers and subscribers. Functioning as ‘linguistic strategies of authenticity and realness’ colloquialisms such as ‘jk’ (joking) and ‘amirite?’ (am I right?) enable Ashley to establish a casual tone and reframe spectators, who also adopt this vernacular, as active participants (Rocamora, 2018, p. 70). Expressed through speech and text-on-screen, these word choices assist Ashley to position her audience as friends rather than subscribers.

Ashley exposes her struggles and unglamorous moments in order to appear real and relatable in her videos. For instance, she begins her *Thrift flip ft. my quarantine insanity* video by stating ‘the sun is out, the bees are getting laid, and I am most definitely not. I think there was a small bit of baby carrot in my teeth, we’re gonna ignore that’ (bestdressed, 2020). Ashley proceeds to explain that summertime evokes a desire to obtain vintage-inspired dresses for dates that she will (never) go on, in fields that she will (never) frolic in—that will probably give her allergies. She later claims to sew a skirt to ‘make sure the elastic doesn’t you know, spend three years in college pulling all-nighters and then snap one day when its 22 ... ’, before making light of inheriting her father’s depression genes (bestdressed, 2020). This sarcastic humour forms an important cornerstone of Ashley’s brand. Revealing personal issues associated with her love life and mental health suggests that she is transparent. This establishes an equilibrium and

connection between Ashley and her audience, inviting them to perceive her as a vlogger who is understanding of their own struggles.

Ashley's thrift UGC generates a further sense of authenticity by challenging several tropes of branded fashion films. This is demonstrated through her inclusion of behind the scenes or blooper footage. Ashley's *Summer try-on thrift haul*, depicts her hanging a DIY backdrop (a bedsheet) over her wardrobe. In her *Thrift flip ft. my quarantine insanity* video, Ashley addresses viewers from her editing station, sneezes, consumes garlic bread, and uses a side table in place of an ironing board to flatten a thrifted garment that she later showcases in a glamorous montage. Strategic editing that heavily utilises text-on-screen and zoom effects emphasises Ashley's awkward moments for her viewers' amusement. She writes 'smooth transition' to ironically highlight that her transition is indeed jarring, before zooming in to accentuate her amateur sewing skills. Midway through her *Summer try-on thrift haul*, text stating 'i constantly embarrass myself' appears, referencing the comical dance moves that she performed moments prior (bestdressed, 2020). These creative decisions reiterate Ashley's status as a real and relatable figure because they seemingly contest the superficiality of many branded fashion film campaigns depicting heavily made-up models with flattened expressions living opulent lifestyles. This cultivates the impression that Ashley is presenting candid, unmediated reality. However, this is not the case.

Although Ashley's careful selection, omission, and manipulation of audio-visual material fosters a sense of authenticity, simultaneously, it exposes her UGC as *constructed* rather than *real*. In her *Thrift flip ft. my quarantine insanity* video, Ashley admits to pre-writing a spontaneous joke and makes her awareness of the performative nature of UGC evident, stating:

I've just realised how ... contrived the way that you're supposed to talk about fashion on the internet is ... When I start saying stuff like, 'Oh, it's so cute' and 'It would go so well with denim', I'm like ... that's not my actual voice; it's just me talking in the pre-established vernacular of fashion YouTube that I grew up watching for years (bestdressed, 2020)

The pressure Ashley places upon herself to naturally perform pre-determined dialogue is perhaps most apparent in a 2019 vlog on her secondary YouTube channel, bestmess. Titled *A terrifying and cringey look into how i sound when i vlog*, this clip sees a flustered Ashley repeatedly recite an anecdote until she is satisfied with its articulation. Such content exposes the 'labour' that is associated with selecting and delivering words to invoke 'trust and honesty' in UGC, which are 'ideas at the heart of the logic of blogging' (Rocamora, 2018, p. 70). Pham's research has similarly linked the aesthetic and affective labour of fashion blogging to neoliberal ideas of the branded and entrepreneurial self (2013; 2015). Ashley's content strategically positions her as someone who, despite living an aspirational lifestyle as a self-employed creative in New York, remains an ordinary young woman.

Findlay has coined the term 'aspirational realness' to describe brands like cosmetics giant, Glossier and clothing label, Reformation (2019). Viewing Ashley's thrift content through an 'aspirational realness' lens assists with understanding that her ability to negotiate performing as both an aspirational and a real consumer ultimately drives her success. According to Findlay, 'By employing this trope, brands diminish the distance between product and consumer by

situating their goods in locations that signify the everyday and domestic, while superficially opposing a more overtly fantastical aesthetic' (2019, p. 560). Ashley's thrift UGC – primarily filmed in her home – welcomes viewers into her domestic space, which creates a sense of the mundane. However, the synergies between Ashley's videos and branded fashion films suggest that she puts considerable effort into ensuring her content is equally as aspirational as it is authentic.

The aspirational influence of Ashley's thrift YouTube UGC

Alongside 'narratives of authenticity', Ashley's 'cultivation of affect' creates scope for her to significantly influence consumer clothing choices (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 3). Drawing on her qualification as a UCLA Film, Television and Digital Media graduate, Ashley often writes shot lists that guide her in staging appealing images of her thrifted items. Her *Thrift flip ft. my quarantine insanity* video includes dreamy montages that capture her upcycled pieces similarly to the way in which branded fashion films emphasise the design intricacies of garments and the movement of fabric. Known for editing that is defined by her affection for bygone eras, Ashley uses film filters, light leaks, and warm tones to romanticise her thrifted garments during these sequences. Hand-drawn animations and decorative fonts are also routinely included in her thrift videos. This vintage aesthetic characterises her content, while suggesting old clothes can be valued for their capacity to create new looks that pay homage to the past.

Sociologist Georg Simmel argues that objects from the past can be ascribed value in the present because they are perceived as having a 'charm of difference' (1901/2004, p. 307). Appreciating used garments for their distinct qualities, as scholar Heike Jenß argues, is a significant part of what makes old clothes appeal to new wearers (2013, p. 117). Ashley interchangeably uses the terms 'vintage' and 'retro' to flaunt the exclusivity of her thrifted goods. Vintage clothing, along with pre-loved items that have been flipped and transformed into bespoke pieces, may appeal to young people seeking to explore their identity and stand out amidst the saturation of fashion content on social media. Importantly, it also encourages them to see value in older items, increase the longevity of their clothing and consider second-hand items when seeking new apparel.

Ashley's thrift YouTube UGC also emphasises the link between clothing and emotions that motivates consumer fashion choices. Attaching positive connotations to items from the past prompts her to intertextually reference popular culture. In her *Summer try-on thrift haul*, she admits to purchasing a pink cardigan because it resembles a *Legally Blonde* costume (Luketic, 2001). The film's protagonist, Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon), is considered an exaggerated and 'socially mediated' version of a woman who is 'ostensibly *just like us*' (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9). Using clothing to play with her identity and reinvent this character who still obscures 'hierarchies of age, race, class, sexuality, and body type' also forms part of Ashley's performance of authenticity (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 9). Although, it must be acknowledged that as a slim and youthful woman, Ashley still embodies qualities that the fashion industry deems 'ideal' (de Perthuis & Findlay, 2019, p. 221). Ashley also verbalises that a thrifted rainbow jumper is reminiscent of picture-books her mother gifted her, while a t-shirt reminds her of watching television with her father as a child. Recounting stories that have inspired her

clothing choices demonstrates that Ashley frequently selects her thrifted items based on their ability to evoke feelings of nostalgia.

Ashley's words echo Svetlana Boym's framework of 'reflective nostalgia' which fosters 'the creation of individual aesthetic identity' (2007, p. 15) and 'dwells ... in the imperfect process of remembrance ... in the dreams of another place and another time' (2001, p. 41). The rapid rate at which digital content is produced and consumed has arguably amplified people's yearning for pre-digital eras that seemed simpler and slower. However, there is more to nostalgia than a fondness or longing for the past. Boym emphasises that 'nostalgia is not always retrospective', proposing that 'it can be prospective as well' because 'the fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of our future' (2007, p. 8). As an emotional feeling, nostalgia transcends aesthetics; it compels material items to be appreciated for their longevity. Nostalgia can therefore counter the compulsion for disposable clothing that is driven by a desire for short-term emotional gratification – a factor motivating youth consumption habits (Jones & Kang, 2019).

Conclusion

YouTube UGC demonstrating how to select, style, and alter thrifted apparel, functions as an audio-visual form of performative writing. By creating opportunities for fashion and the moving-image to intersect beyond their respective industries, these videos blur the boundaries between fashion producers and consumers. Because fashion film researchers have not yet considered how YouTube UGC is shaping the discourse of sustainable fashion, this article has explored the ways in which Ashley's content promotes the restyling and upcycling possibilities of thrifted apparel to demonstrate how used-clothing can be reimagined in new contexts. Although her videos are mediated constructs, by presenting used garments as appealing items that serve practical, social, and emotional functions, Ashley's thrift UGC implicitly supports the sustainable fashion movement. By harnessing spoken word, cinematic language, and affects such as nostalgia, Ashley brands herself as an authentic and aspirational figure. As Ashley notes, this formula distinguishes her YouTube UGC and increases its ability to influence consumer fashion choices:

There is the old-school picture-perfect guru, and the relatable, "effortless" vlogger. I don't quite fall into either category. I'm honest about my flaws and awkward moments, but I'm also an absolute try-hard. Not in the sense that I spend hours caking on foundation and practicing my on-camera smile, but ... I spend days editing and perfecting every cut, color correction, and composition ... it's that combination of my uncensored personality and thoughtfully edited videos that makes me stand out. (Hale, 2019)

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