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## **Showing progress**

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# Showing progress. Defining self-tracking as an aesthetic audio-visual genre

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**Abstract** This article analyses videos of men talking about and documenting their lack and growth of hair via Finasteride and Minoxidil. We explore these male self-representational videos on YouTube as a specific form of self-tracking enabled by the camera within a specific platformed environment. We argue that the camera is not solely a tool, but rather an aesthetic practice with performative effects. In other words, self-tracking must be understood as always already entangled in and inseparable from mediating and aesthetic processes. The article then outlines the main characteristics of self-tracking videos as a self-representational audio-visual genre, defining them as momental videos and longitudinal videos. It is our claim that these defining characteristics constitute the central aesthetic principles of Finasteride and Minoxidil self-tracking videos, but that they are also applicable to other forms of videos preoccupied with representing and tracking transformation.

**Keywords** YouTube, self-tracking, biomedicalization, self-representation, audio-visual genre.

## INTRODUCTION

If you are on the fence about starting Minoxidil, just do it, man. Don't listen to all these people talking about they had heart attacks and all this stuff. Don't get scared, just try it! If you get side effects then get off (General G Recruiting, 2019a).

On YouTube, you can find hours and hours of videos with men talking about their lack of hair and how to regain it using medical products such as Minoxidil and Finasteride. On camera they track and trace the use and effects of these products, like General G Recruiting in the opening quote. As we will claim, documenting these effects have become an audio-visual genre of its own and communities have formed around them. This article characterises this growing phenomenon of men creating and sharing videos of themselves trying out medical treatments to avoid baldness and/or gain more substantial beard-growth. We frame these YouTube videos within the evolving research field of *self-tracking*, and we characterise the videos as a specific genre of audio-visual self-tracking. We are interested in how the effects of the drug (Finasteride and Minoxidil) are articulated, visualized, and evaluated. In other words *what characterises the self-tracking video as a genre; how are the effects of the drugs audio-visually represented by the users on YouTube?*

Hence, we are interested in defining the YouTube videos on hair loss/hair gain as a specific form of self-tracking with significant characteristics that pertains to this particular group of YouTubers, but which potentially is applicable to other forms of transformation focused videos (e.g., weight loss, fitness training etc.).

In the following we present the methodological premises of our case study. Then we situate the study within the research field of self-tracking. We argue that self-tracking must be understood, not

only as a social phenomenon, but as an always already mediated and aestheticized practice within a platformed environment. Our central contribution to the field is twofold: 1) to understand self-tracking as mediated and aestheticized self-representation, and 2) to characterize such user created self-tracking video content as a particular audio-visual genre.

## METHODS AND MATERIAL

This article is based on an empirical sample of men creating and sharing videos of themselves on YouTube while trying out, evaluating, and discussing medical treatments to avoid baldness and/or gain more substantial beard-growth.

We started by immersing ourselves in YouTube videos discussing hair loss and beard sparsity, watching hours of videos, but soon narrowing it down to videos focusing on the two most commonly used and evaluated medical products; Minoxidil, to increase beard growth, and Finasteride, to increase hair growth and/or slow down balding processes (at times in combination with Minoxidil). Based on this initial overview of the videos, we discovered that they could not be understood in their singularities, but rather, the videos appeared in series that were organized around a personal channel which served as an important temporal, narrative, and visual structure. Therefore, we decided to focus on specific channels that were dedicated to representing and tracking the intake and effects of the two products.

We chose the case study channels by searching on YouTube for 'Minoxidil' and 'Finasteride' (in January 2020) sorted by the date of the upload and number of views respectively. We hereby got a sense of new and active YouTubers as well as the most popular within the field. Among these new, active, and popular channels, we sampled six YouTube channels, produced by individual vloggers, who use Minoxidil (three channels) and/or Finasteride (three channels). The six channels represent different yet common ways of audio-visually representing the use and evaluation of the two products in relation to hair loss and/or beard sparsity. Each channel contained 11 to 411 videos, which we systematically looked through. All vloggers are in their 20s, they present themselves as cisgendered and heterosexual, none of them have any visible or expressed disabilities or health problems, and they diverge in racial-ethnic positionalities.

In our inductive coding of the videos in each channel, we discovered common and significant patterns across the videos in the six channels. We began to pay special attention to the aesthetic norms and negotiations that enabled and governed how the individual vlogger represented their use of the drugs and told their story of progress. We then deducted certain and particular systems of representation. In this article, we define and analyze the self-representational systems that we condensed from the material, and we characterize these systems as aesthetic genres of audio-visual self-tracking.

As our study is concerned with representational patterns and aesthetic genres, we did not pursue consent or conduct interviews with the vloggers. According to Heidi McKee and James Porter questions of ethics depend on what type of research one is conducting - text-based or person-based (McKee and Porter, 2009, p. 5). We perceive YouTube as a broadcasting or publishing space comprised of media texts or published material, which the researcher has the right to bring to a broader public. The vloggers appear first and foremost as authors or cultural producers who use YouTube as a site for branding themselves and their work. Furthermore, their personal channel often connects with other online accounts and profiles which are listed at the bottom of their short biographical description; "About". This highlights the fact that the vloggers actively engage in being visibly present and circulating their online name and material.

## SELF-TRACKING

Self-tracking is not a new phenomenon, as humans for centuries have engaged in practices of self-tracking like diary writing or weight measurements (Crawford, Lingel & Karppi, 2015; Lupton, 2016a; Lupton & Smith, 2018). As Deborah Lupton and Gavin Smith highlight, self-tracking can be conducted through different methods and devices; analog and/or digital, written down and/or simply noted in one's head, more or less systematically (Lupton and Smith, 2018). However, self-tracking is sometimes specifically connected to the movement of "the Quantified Self" (Nafus and Sherman, 2014; Sharon and Zandbergen, 2017). But self-tracking is not simply about quantifiable information gathered and processed through digital devices, though the scope and form of self-tracking has dramatically changed and expanded since the advent of computing (Lupton, 2016a, p. 9 & 27). Self-tracking is today widespread but differs in purpose and format. In this article, we are interested in the form of self-tracking that one willingly and knowingly subject oneself to, and which Lupton labels as "private self-tracking" (2016b). This form of self-tracking involves the users deliberately collecting information about themselves which are "directed at regularly monitoring and recording, and often measuring, elements of an individual's behaviours or bodily functions" (Lupton, 2016a, 8pp.). This private self-tracking is often connected to "communal self-tracking", as they directly address and view themselves as "part of a community of trackers" with whom they wish "to engage with and learn from" (Lupton, 2016b, p. 108-109). Personal data is shared and compared with others' pooled data in order to get more meaning out of the data and to improve one's own practice and thus, further one's own interest and goals (Lupton, 2016b, p. 109).

The self-tracking activities of the YouTubers explicitly concerns monitoring and evaluating the process of using either Minoxidil or Finasteride or both, and the self-trackers, using camera recordings, carefully track and trace any form of progress or change in hair or beard growth as well as monitoring their body and wellbeing for any form of side effects of the treatment. In doing this, they evaluate the medical products and the practices of treatments in online videos to create knowledge for themselves and the community (Nebeling Petersen & Raun, 2021).

## MALE SELF-TRACKING

According to Gina Neff and Dawn Nafus (2016, 18pp.), the current intensification of self-tracking relates to the way in which still larger parts of human life have become biomedicalized. In this process, medical phenomena and human bodies are increasingly transformed "largely through sooner-rather-than-later technoscientific interventions not only for treatment but also increasingly for enhancement" (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 2).

Women and minoritized masculinities (e.g., racialized and indigenous men, homosexual and transgendered men) have for centuries been objects of medical interventions and pathologization, while cisgendered heterosexual men only recently have become objects of surgical and medical technologies and interventions to gain an appearance aligned with gendered, aged, bodily, and sexual norms (Szymczak & Conrad, 2006; Haiken, 2000; Hakim, 2020; Nebeling Petersen & Hvidtfeldt, 2020). It was not until the 1990s that men's aesthetic-enhancing consumerism took off with "hair transplants, steroids, plastic surgery, gym memberships, and libido-enhancing drugs" (Barber, 2016, p. 39). Thus, being a man is no longer solely a given and self-reliant power position, as men too are increasingly told that they are in need of repair and improvement in order to become valuable in culture. Men are increasingly targeted as consumers of pharmaceuticals (Fishman, 2010; Race, 2009) and have become subjected to biomedical interpretation and neoliberal modes of individualization (Hvidtfeldt et al., 2021).

The increase in beauty products as well as medical and surgical interventions for men testify to a male preoccupation with self-optimization which is also present in the videos in our study, as the use of the drugs Finasteride and Minoxidil are often combined with the use of beard grooming products and a focus on sculpturing the body through (weight)training and/or clothing. In that sense, growing a beard via Minoxidil is, as stated by the case vlogger Urban Hussar Style, a “vehicle of change”, both physically and mentally, and the driving force is a complete and continuous “self-improvement” (Urban Hussar Style, 2019a & 2019c).

## SELF-TRACKING AS A MEDIATED AND AESTHETIC PRACTICE

The YouTube videos in our study are created for, and circulate on, a particular platform which sets the boundaries for the self-representational practices and aesthetics. Social media platforms are not just neutral containers offering tools for self-expression, rather social media platforms must be considered as performative media environments enabling and forming communication. Such techno-cultural constructs of the platform constitute a set of “imagined affordances and ideologies” (Scolere, Pruchniewska & Duffy, 2018, pp. 3-4) that enable and form what kind of content and presence are (made) possible on the platforms and “undergird the construction of sociality and creativity” (van Dijk, 2013, p. 25). YouTube as a platform promises democratic access to (self-)representation and community building but through self-commodification. One is today expected to ‘sell oneself’ no matter the content or purpose of one’s videos (Raun, 2018, pp. 101-102). The site’s focus has broadly shifted “from ‘homecasting’ to broadcasting, repositioning users as consumers, rather than creators, by default” (Burgess and Green, 2018, p. 80).

While YouTube constitute the overall platformed frame of the self-tracking practices, self-tracking also relies on specific tools (Neff & Nafus, 2016, pp. 105-134; Lupton, 2016a, 16pp.). Neff and Nafus (2016) and Lupton (2016b) distinguish between the (technological) tools and the (embodied) practices and the (physical) communities of self-tracking. What characterizes these studies are a prime interest in self-tracking as a social practice (within communities) which then outline the tools through which these practices are conducted but which nevertheless tends to downplay the importance and functions of the tool itself whether that be the camera, the mobile phone, the watch, the app, and so on.

Our study and framework highlights, on the one hand, the overlap of tools, practice, and community, and on the other hand, the importance of attending to the tool itself. The hair and beard growth self-trackers in our study use a specific tracking technology, they use *the camera* as a tool to closely monitor and document the growth and progress. It is important to recognize that the camera has multiple functions that goes beyond being a mere tool. First, the camera enables tracking the progress in detail: it is through the lense of the camera and through the accumulation and juxtaposition of still - and moving images that the practice of monitoring and tracking progress is seen and understood. Secondly, the camera simultaneously mediates and aestheticizes such progress to self and others: the camera becomes an important mediating or performative factor in shaping and re-negotiating the self-tracker’s male identity and facilitates access to a self-tracking community. In this sense, the videos are performative as they interchangeably function as a site for the preservation and creation of transformation – they make the growth of hair noticeable for self and others, no matter how small and insignificant it might appear, and they hereby both instantiate and confirm a desired (male) appearance.

The videos are structured around making the biochemistry of Minoxidil and Finasteride visible and detectable, and the viewer is continuously encouraged to see the biomedical effects. As Raun also highlights in relation to the trans male YouTubers tracking their transition via the use of Testosterone, the videos “show a significant and overwhelming emphasis on, and preoccupation

with, testosterone and its visual effects on the body" (2016, p. 118). Raun develops the term *performative documentation* to describe the way in which the videos function; it "allows the vlogger and the viewer to witness the process (the documenting effects) while also staging what should be witnessed and how it should be witnessed (the performative effects)" (Raun, 2016, p. 120).

By focusing and exploring the multiple functions of the camera, we emphasise that tool, practice, and community are always already entangled in and inseparable from mediating and aesthetic processes vis-a-vis the work of Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska (2012). Importantly, our argument entails that *tool* is not merely a practical tool for tracking or gaining data/information, hence a means to an end, rather, *tool* should be re-visited as an embodied and multidimensional practice in and of itself. Maybe even the term; tool is a conceptual and analytical limitation in relation to the multifunctionality of the camera. Hence, *we want to stress that the camera as a tool is an aesthetic practice with performative effects*.

## SELF-REPRESENTATION AS AN AESTHETIC GENRE

Self-tracking does not pre-exist or exist separate from its aestheticization. On the contrary, to self-track the effects of the drugs are done with a special view to, or in preparation for, broadcasting it on YouTube, thus, self-tracking is always already a mediated aesthetic practice; a genre.

We conceptualize genre as an orienting device to nuance and refine our understanding of the self-tracking videos. Genre can be defined as "commonality or 'family resemblance' between texts both within and across media, grouped according to, for example, compositional, stylistic or thematic criteria at various levels of similarity" (Lomborg, 2011, p. 57). When media texts are related by genre, they share communicative logics and functionalities (ibid.). As Jacques Derrida notes, genre is about law - it plays "the role of order's principle: resemblance, analogy, identity and difference" (Derrida, 1980, p. 81).

We understand the self-tracking video as an audio-visual self-representational genre designed to represent transformation. Like the photographic selfie, characterized by Katrin Tiidenberg (2018, p. 21), the self-tracking video is self-representational and networked, as the video inherently points to the person who filmed and authored the video, and as the videos are shared on social media platforms - in our case YouTube. Furthermore, like the selfie photograph, the videos are more than simply representational, but rather, constitute mediated and embodied sociality (Frosh, 2019, p. 131).

As a self-representational genre, the selfie can be categorized in four distinct types: the presented, the mirrored, the inferred, and the implied (Zhao and Zappavigna, 2018, p. 1745). *The presented selfie* is when the photographer takes a picture holding the camera in front of him/her/them, making the photographer the centre of the picture and the camera itself invisible. *The mirrored selfie* is when the photographer takes a picture into a mirror, making the photographer the centre of the picture and the camera itself visible. The remaining two types do not foreground the photographer but nevertheless assume the gazing position of the photographer. Hence, in *the inferred selfie* a body part of the photographer is present e.g., a picture in front of the pool where one's legs are visible. And lastly, *the implied selfie*, where the picture equals the gazing position of the photographer while both the photographer, body parts, and the camera remain invisible. A typical example of the latter would be a picture of a beautifully arranged lunch or dinner plate where we share the viewing position of the photographer.

These distinct types of photographer positionalities are also present in the self-tracking videos, and at times all of these positions are at play in one and the same video. This is for instance the case in Riche Z's video (2020a) where he starts by filming himself in full frontal as in the presented selfie. The video then clips to a scene where Richie Z explains details about baldness using a pen on a piece of paper. Here the self-representational position turns to the inferred, as we can see his hands,

and we now share his viewing position. Richie Z then clips to his bathroom and in a presented self-representational position, we see him using the drug on his head. The audio-visual nature of the self-tracking video thus allows for a dynamic and continuous changing of self-representational positions, often within the same video. However, no matter the positions, the self-tracking video (like the selfie) is always directed towards the self as both subject and object of representation.

# THE GENRE OF SELF-TRACKING VIDEOS

The YouTubers track and trace the development of hair meticulously through photographic and video documentation, supported by extended oral elaborations on gains and effects. They constantly and consistently compare their own present ‘image’ to their own previous one, notoriously listing a specific timeframe for the look, allowing them “to detect temporal aspects of their selves” (Kristensen and Ruckenstein, 2018, p. 3627). It is an emergent self that is co-produced by the drug (Finasteride and/or Minoxidil), the audio-visual representation (the video blog), and the virtual broadcasting and circulation (the personal channel and YouTube as a platform). The overall drive guiding the self-tracking videos is an overarching desire for representing transformation and progress which encompasses both the visual aesthetics as well as the visual narratives, although in different ways.

We suggest an overall framing of the self-tracking videos as either *momental self-tracking* or *longitudinal self-tracking*. In table 1 below we have outlined the main characteristics of the two forms the genre of self-tracking videos take with illustrative examples from our case material. These two forms are deduced from carefully watching all of the videos of our six case study vloggers, and locating self-representational patterns for tracking Minoxidil and Finasteride.

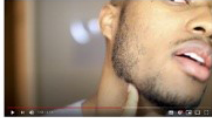



	Momental videos	Longitudinal videos
<b>Visual effects</b>	Zooming in on specific body parts, unedited, and recorded in one-clip. Close-up shots. Cut-off views. 	Visual juxtapositions, jump-cuts, collage/montage, multimodal effects, and editing. 
<b>Audio-visual narrative</b>	A here-and-now account, that presupposes seriality, often referring to former or multiple videos → calls for individual or collective serials. 	Strong plot-driven narrative: The plot relies on the movement from a ‘before’ to an ‘after’ which typically is structured as a tale of successful change. Bildungsroman as master narrative. 
<b>Temporal organisation</b>	The freezing or stopping of time. The snapshot.	Time-lapse, a longitudinal stretch of time accelerated.

Table 1: The genre characteristics of the self-tracking videos

The *momental video* is characterized by a focus on a specific problem, body part, and moment in time. Often the YouTuber literally uses the camera to zoom in or create a zoom effect by bringing the camera closer to the discussed area. In figure 1, we present a still image from a video by Richie Z as an example of a momental video: In this video, Richie Z explains how the Finasteride and Minoxidil treatment has helped regrow his topical hair. The self-representation position is *presented*, as Richie Z records himself from the front with a handheld camera. The video is recorded in one shot without any editing or graphical elements. The camera is held closely to Richie Z’s face, so we can see the

details of the new hairs emerging at his temple area. Although Richie Z does not actually use the zoom function of the camera, the composition of the video creates a zooming effect due to the way in which the camera is brought close to the appointed problem area, and due to Richie's verbal and bodily pointedness that orients us towards his hair and hairline. As a typical momental self-tracking video, this video is in essence serial: although Richie Z starts the video by introducing himself in terms of name, age and purpose, he quickly explains that "this is my eleventh month video update" (Richie Z, 2020c), and he hereby connects this video to previous videos on his channel as well as anticipated future updates. The video narratively offers a snapshot of his current appearance in a specific moment in time.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from Richie Z, 2020b

*The longitudinal video*, on the contrary, forms a plot by unfolding a time period enabling a narrative structure. The structure resembles that of the *bildungsroman* where the protagonist is faced with a problem (losing hair, not gaining hair), embarks on a journey (starts the treatments of Finasteride, Minoxidil, or a combination), and then finally is rewarded with the ultimate boon: more hair. The narrative structure is articulated as a journey.

As described by Gerard Lawson, the journey as a metaphor, figures as a heroic tale of overcoming obstacles and finding peace and pride in oneself. The protagonists "had to experience the journey in order to believe in themselves" and more importantly "than achieving the ultimate boon is the ability to return to the community from which the journey began and communicate what has been learned" (Lawson, 2005, p. 136). In a similar vein, this narrative structure and plot composition enables the self-trackers on YouTube to embark on a journey and to return to speak to the community in a manner that is both knowledgeable and retrospective which is also aesthetically underscored.

In figure 2, we present a still image from a video by Hairloss Cure as an example of a longitudinal video: Hairloss Cure makes a visual juxtaposition between a former photograph and a present moving image of himself, allowing the viewer to see, compare, and contrast the amount of hair, while Hairloss Cure, in past tense, talks about the knowledge and experiences he has gained from the treatment. The juxtaposition underlines the progressing plot structure while it also structures the temporality of the video.



Fig. 2. Screenshot from *Hairloss Cure*, 2018

The visual juxtapositions of the longitudinal videos take many forms: the most common is the *before* and *after* picture or collage in which the vlogger contrasts a photograph, still image, and/or video footage from 'before' and 'now' to scrutinize the effects of the treatments. The visual juxtaposition is often orally and/or graphically underlined by a deictic pointing, as in figure 3 from JB Chats video, where he incorporates a collage of pictures from the age of 17 to the present, where he is 23 years old.



Fig. 3. Screenshot from *JB Chats*, 2020a

The longitudinal video often relies on momental videos and sometimes functions as a summing up or conclusion on a series of momental videos. This is for instance the case in JB Chats' video "Finasteride Month 8 Results and Update" (2020b) where he, in a split screen, speaks about his

experiences and results on one side of the image frame, while clips from earlier videos are playing on the other side and together they form a documentation and scrutinization of the transformation enabled by the treatment.

After having labelled and described the self-tracking videos as a genre in overall terms with their significant characteristics, we will now turn to an exemplary reading of the self-representation of the use of Minoxidil to increase beard growth.

## SELF-TRACKING MINOXIDIL

Minoxidil was initially used to treat people with high blood pressure but as a side effect it was discovered that the drug were sprouting hair which led to the release of the drug in 1990 as a topical solution under the trade name Rogaine as a way to regrow hair (Haiken, 2000, p. 403). Minoxidil can be obtained without a prescription and is commonly bought online (ex. on Amazon) or in a drugstore (ex. Walgreens). Minoxidil is applied directly on the areas of the skin where one wants hair growth. It is today marketed under many different brand names, and it comes as a five or ten percent topical solution as liquid or foam. In the YouTube beard community it is often stressed that the liquid is the cheapest option, while the foam is considered to have less side-effects. A particular kind of lingo is also circulating; thus, the YouTubers talk extensively about the growth of “vellus hair” and the pursuit of these turning into “terminal hair”, which shows that Minoxidil has enabled lasting changes. The YouTubers also consistently talk about a “strong side” and a “weak side” of their face when showing the growth of hair or lack thereof to the camera.

Among the YouTubers using Minoxidil to improve their beard growth there have been developed a certain style of documenting the progress. A significant amount of these videos are momental self-tracking videos, focused on an audio-visual display of changes by placing one’s face close to the camera and turning one’s head from side to side, zooming in on particular areas where new hair is either appearing or still patchy (see e.g. figure 4). The videos make the growth of hair noticeable for self and others, no matter how small and insignificant it might appear. They performatively orient others towards the drug itself and its effective potentials, and the numerous amounts of these self-tracking videos also create a kind of audio-visual manuscript for how to track and trace one’s process and progress.

This is the case for all the YouTubers in the so-called, self-acclaimed ‘Minoxidil beard community’, exemplified by both the British The Beard Solution and the African American General G Recruiting, who track and trace the beard growth from the very beginning of using Minoxidil.

The Beard Solution states in his first video (he is 24 years old at the time) that he has bought three months of supply of Minoxidil – a drug he has discovered in his research online – and he will make weekly video updates on the progress (The Beard Solution, 2016a). In this video he appears almost clean shaved, turning his head from side to side, showing the camera the amount of hair that he is currently (un)able to grow while orally listing the problems he has with growing a substantial beard, and stating that he is tired of being a “hairless freak” while all his friends have a proper beard. Towards the very end he includes a short video clip of himself, showcasing how he looks with three weeks of growth.

In this video, Siddals introduces Minoxidil as a drug that potentially can be the answer to his problems, although it is not widely known at the time as a source of beard growth, but rather commonly known as a prevention of baldness. He introduces the drug and a public documentation of its effects at a point where documenting one’s ‘Minoxidil beard journey’ (a later commonly used term) is not a common practice. Later he also claims to be the first YouTuber to consistently (weekly) document his first year on Minoxidil (The Beard Solution, 2017c).

Siddals’s first video is a momental self-tracking video (although it includes another video clip at the very end), and it clearly serves as a comparison piece in advance, anticipating a change, while



Fig. 4. Screenshot from *The Beard Solution*, 2016b

also setting the style and tone for his later audio-visual self-tracking with its close-up focus on particularly cheeks, upper lip, chins, and neck. He creates a zoom effect by moving his face close to the camera. It is a here-and-now account recorded in one take and it does not make sense in and of itself, but rather relies on and presupposes seriality. This kind of momental self-tracking video seems like a diary entry as it is an unpretentious and ephemeral update with fairly unedited and associative everyday monologue, communicated through rather raw (low-key) aesthetic imagery and sound (see also Raun, 2016, pp. 120-123).

When General G Recruiting starts making videos in 2018, also using Minoxidil to improve beard growth and documenting it on YouTube, it is already a present and evolving practice with a certain amount of community knowledge. General G Recruiting directly addresses the already circulating community knowledge about expected (side-)effects and advisable uses of the drug. As he states, he has been watching a lot of videos, and he hopes to “get that Jesus beard, man, make them Jesus gains”, and he uses foam instead of liquid to reduce side effects (General G Recruiting, 2018a). He is 28 years old (at the time), and he is tired of being told that he looks like an 18-year-old. As described by both Siddals and General G Recruiting the beard signifies adult masculinity, and not having a proper beard is experienced as an infantilizing bodily marker that demarcate one from the category of manhood and community of men.

On the one hand General G Recruiting taps into the already established momental self-tracking format with a persistent focus on tracking progress through close up shots of his face turning from side to side, while on the other hand having a pronounced style of his own that is set apart from the typically amateurish and homely look and feel of other Minoxidil vloggers (see e.g. figure 5).

Contrary to many other Minoxidil-vloggers he uses a high-quality camera with a specific lens and a ring light, something he in a later video specifies as a Canon EOS 70D and a Sigma Lens 30mm F1.4 (General G Recruiting, 2019d). He consistently records himself from the shoulders and up in illuminated focus while the background is blurred and neutral, typically in the form of a blank wall. He uses an actual zoom lens to focus on particular areas of his face which appears decontextualized with no clearly recognisable personal belongings or furniture to disturb and/or support a situating reading of him as an individual. The videos are short (3-6 minutes) with a clean, stylish, and consistent



Fig. 5: Screenshot from *General G Recruiting*, 2018b

look from the very beginning, focusing solely on tracking the growth of hair, leaving almost no room for autobiographical storytelling. It is a show with a minimum of tell. If he does engage in more elaborate tell, he often cuts himself off by saying “Let’s get to what ya all have been waiting for – the gains”, meaning the visual documentation (eg. *General G Recruiting*, 2019c). What he implies with this statement is that tracking the growth of hair is the prime focus and interest of the viewer who desires to see transformation or progress. One of the main purposes of his channel is, as stated again and again, to “motivate” others to “start ya own Minoxidil beard journey or continue on with the journey that y’all are already doing” (*General G Recruiting*, 2019f). Hence, encouragement is important and visually demonstrating that Minoxidil works, is an essential part of it.

Aesthetically, *General G Recruiting*’s videos are in sharp contrast to the videos of *The Beard Solution* which have a much more pronounced amateur look with an always present homely mess in the background, despite becoming *the* most viewed Minoxidil-vlogger and introducing his own (semi-professionally looking) channel logo and theme music. However, they both label their videos according to the number of weeks, months, and years that they have been on Minoxidil, and in Siddals’s case also off Minoxidil which emphasises the drug and its effects as a trackable process that is worth visualizing and sharing online.

They both use their momental self-tracking videos as footage in their longitudinal self-tracking videos which typically are much more edited and include multimodal effects such as text and music. The composition and visual aesthetics of earlier footage can take many forms: in a longitudinal self-tracking video by *General G Recruiting* he jump-cuts between earlier video footage and supplies the cuts with a time frame written across the screen (week #1, week #2, week #3 etc.) along with a discreet ambient soundtrack (*General G Recruiting*, 2019e). In a longitudinal self-tracking video by *The Beard Solution*, composed as a slideshow with still images, he visually juxtaposes the growth of his beard week by week seen from four different angles, accompanied by the special rap/hip hop theme music of his channel (see figure 6).

Unlike Siddals and Recruiting, the Canadian Urban Hussar Style is not documenting his Minoxidil progress as it unfolds but offers retrospective knowledge and reflections about the use of the drug, beard grooming, and style. His videos are recorded at home, they are typically playful



Fig. 6. Screenshot from *The Beard Solution*, 2016c

as he is acting out small sketches, and he includes music (often himself singing). When starting his channel in 2018, at the age of 21, he had been on Minoxidil for one and a half year, obtained the growth that he wanted, and had been off the drug for three months (Urban Hussar Style, 2018b) but later started using it again. He wishes that he too had shared his Minoxidil process on YouTube but as he states: "I didn't know it was a normal thing to do" (Urban Hussar Style, 2019b). In fact, he hardly has any documentation from the first four month of taking the drug, as he was reluctant to anticipate any significant changes. It was only after he started seeing substantial results that he started documenting the progress - primarily photographically (Urban Hussar Style, 2020). Hence, he does not make momental self-tracking videos, but he does make longitudinal self-tracking videos. However, not having any momental self-tracking videos, tracking the effects of Minoxidil as they progress, is what puts him at risk of being accused of faking it – not having a beard that is grown through the use of Minoxidil (e.g. Urban Hussar Style, 2018c & 2018d).

His first video is a longitudinal self-tracking video with juxtaposed photographs, visually telling the story of his process/progress with sporadically added text and dramatic music (Urban Hussar Style, 2018a). Later he expands the format with a 25 minutes long longitudinal self-tracking video where he in occasional split screen acts as a narrator and tells the story of his (bearded) life accompanied by photographs from various stages and events in his life (see figure 7).

Besides extensive and elaborate retrospective reflections on his Minoxidil journey, a large amount of his videos are hands on advice and tutorials on how to groom your beard with different remedies such as beard oil, a blow dryer, and a ceramic heat brush.

Overall, the longitudinal self-tracking videos, which both Siddals, Recruiting, and Hussar have created, represent physical changes over time vis-a-vis an autobiography, and they are typically much more narratively and aesthetically coherent and structured (see also Raun, 2016, pp. 126-132).

The self-tracking video itself as a genre can be seen as part of a turn towards, and investment in, acceleration. As Hartmut Rosa argues, acceleration is a kind of meta-principle governing modern and especially late-modern life, thus, we live in an "acceleration society" where almost all spheres of social life are speeding up (2013, pp. 68). In other words, we want to see change and progress - and we want them as fast and extensive as possible. We crave and expect it of ourselves - and we are

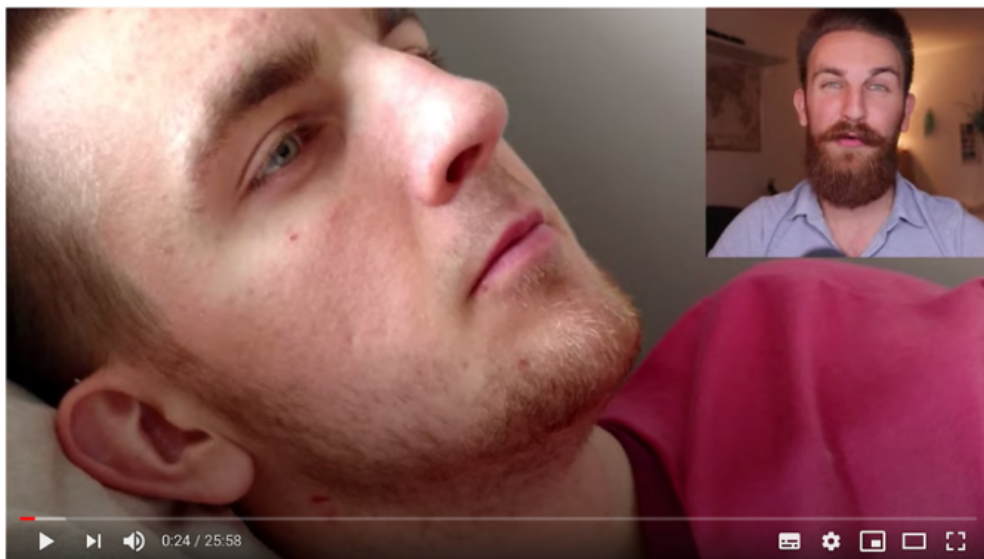


Fig. 7. Screenshot from *Urban Hussar Style*, 2020

drawn towards its manifestation in others. Hence, transformation narratives play a key role in many newer media genres from reality and makeover TV to YouTube videos. With the longitudinal video changes are highlighted and staged as *the* narrative and visual clue. These videos typically draw a much larger audience than the momental videos, thus, the three month comparison update by General G Recruiting is the most popular on his channel (General G Recruiting, 2019b), while The Beard Solution's nine month and 11 month comparison update is among the four most popular videos on his channel (The Beard Solution, 2017a & 2017b). For the audience one of the main attractions seems to be the compression of time and via Minoxidil biomedically speeding up the otherwise slowly evolving process of beard growth. Simultaneously making the changes visible and comprehensible in a few minutes which makes the videos fascinating in and of themselves while properly also serving as a motivating factor for starting one's own Minoxidil journey or sticking to the already started Minoxidil routines. Maybe that is part of the reason why General G Recruiting keeps his momental videos short, focusing on visually tracking the growth of hair and reducing or stopping his own flow of talk: "Let's get to what ya all have been waiting for – the gains" (General G Recruiting, 2019c).

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have situated the self-representational videos of men talking about and documenting their lack and growth of hair via Finasteride and Minoxidil within self-tracking as a field of study. However, we emphasize the importance of attending to the aesthetic aspects of these audio-visual forms of self-tracking. We have highlighted how the men in our study engage in private self-tracking, which is made publicly available via YouTube. However, our main contribution to the academic scholarship on self-tracking, and media studies in general, is the characterization of these self-tracking videos as a particular self-representational genre, defining them as either a *momental video* or a *longitudinal video*.

The developed model (table 1) is inductively derived from our empirical material and outlines the main characteristics of self-tracking as a self-representational audio-visual genre in terms of

visual effects, audio-visual narrative, and temporal organization. It is our claim that these defining characteristics constitute the central aesthetic principles of Finasteride and Minoxidil self-tracking videos, but that they are also applicable to other (and potentially all) forms of videos preoccupied with representing and tracking transformation whether that be weight loss, fitness training, or other kinds of traceable change.

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