

## The mediatization of self-tracking

Knowledge production and community building in YouTube videos

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## The mediatization of self-tracking Knowledge production and community building in YouTube videos

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### **Abstract**

*This article investigates a community of men who use the pharmaceuticals Minoxidil and Finasteride to enable and restore beard and hair growth, and who track and trace the effects on YouTube. It argues that the traditional positions of expert and patient are deterritorialized by the digitalization of health discourses and practices, and that the camera in these YouTube videos acts as a mediating/performative factor. The article seeks to answer the question of community formation among the male self-trackers. It offers a generic, analytical model where knowledge production is outlined as either expert or practitioner and community formation as either community member or community leader, both of which figure as intersecting axes on a continuum. Although derived from the case material, the article suggests that the generic, analytical model works across different audiovisually mediated self-tracking communities and practices.*

### **Keywords**

*mediatization, self-tracking, YouTube, knowledge production, community building, masculinity*

## Introduction

We click our way into the channel of the most popular Minoxidil vlogger on YouTube, British Adam Siddals (Adam Siddals, n.d.), and press play on one of his early videos. A catchy hip-hop song starts accompanied by images of computer codes and a floating bar with the wordings #TheBeardNecessities written in a way that mimics the YouTube logo. Then a bearded Adam appears in a homely setting, speaking straight into a low-key camera:

Hi guys, welcome to another episode of the beard necessities on the facial fuzz [the previous name of his channel]. This is the series where we try to cut through all the misinformation on Minoxidil beard out there on the Internet and try to bring you the truth of what's going to happen to you when you are on your journey. (Adam Siddals, 2016a)

Adam Siddals creates videos on YouTube about his use of Minoxidil to increase beard growth, and he documents his progress through up-close visual and oral registrations of the transformations. As the quote shows, he expresses a strong interest in connecting with others who also use or consider using Minoxidil and in exploring the potentials of the drug. When Siddal started to document his use of Minoxidil, it was not widely known or medically marketed as a drug to increase beard growth. He is not a certified expert, but he nevertheless acts as a kind of expert, whose own experimentation with Minoxidil and research vouch for the supposedly accurate knowledge production about the drug.

This article investigates the growing phenomenon on YouTube of cisgendered men creating and sharing videos of themselves while self-tracking and trying out medical treatments to avoid baldness and/or gain more substantial beard growth. The most commonly used and evaluated products are Minoxidil, to increase beard growth, and Finasteride, to increase hair growth and/or slow down balding processes (at times in combination with Minoxidil). Our study is based on a sample of seven YouTube channels produced by individual vloggers who try out, document, and discuss the use of Minoxidil (3 channels) and/or Finasteride (4 channels). We found the case study channels by searching on YouTube for "Minoxidil" and "Finasteride" (in January 2020), sorted by the date of the upload and the number of views, respectively. We hereby got a sense of new and active YouTubers as well as the most popular within the field. In our coding of the case material, we were particularly interested in decoding dominant and significant patterns within the field of Minoxidil and Finasteride vlogging. Hence, we did not conduct interviews with the vloggers, as we were primarily interested in characterizing the field as a whole with its similarities and differences, paying special attention to the sociocultural norms and negotiations governing how the individual vlogger can or should tell their story of progress. All vloggers are in their 20s, they present themselves as cisgendered and heterosexual, and none of them have any visible or expressed disabilities or health problems, but they diverge in racial-ethnic positionalities (for a further description of the case vloggers, see Appendix 1).

In this article, we ask: *How are the self-trackers' knowledge production and community building audiovisually mediatized on YouTube?* By posing this question, we seek to under-

stand self-tracking as mediatized practices on social media and emphasize the multiple roles of the camera. Hereby, we pinpoint and categorize different mediatized typologies of knowledge and community positionalities that are applicable to other kinds of empirical data.

We understand these male vloggers as an example of contemporary, digitized self-tracking that enables the self-trackers to turn their body and their self into quantifiable and measurable parts to be optimized (Lupton, 2016; Neff, & Nafus, 2016). While humans have engaged in practices of self-tracking for centuries, the practices of “monitoring, measuring and recording elements of one’s body and life as a form of self-improvement or self-reflection” (Lupton, 2016, p. 1) have intensified in recent years. We want to draw attention to how the practices of self-tracking are to be understood within an increased mediatized culture. To self-track is not solely a question of digital tracking (using tools and technologies) and interpreting this data within a framework of neoliberal biomedicalization, it is also a mediated practice that is created and formed within the specific platforms.

According to Neff and Nafus (2016, p. 18), the intensification of self-tracking is to be explained in relation to the introduction of digital technologies and tools such as the mobile phone, miniaturization of sensors, as well as improvements in connectivity infrastructure and data storage (Neff & Nafus, 2016, p. 18). However, another significant element is the increased mediatization and aestheticization of the self within contemporary culture. As argued by Christine Hine (2015), the Internet has transformed to the E3 Internet, that is, an embedded, embodied, and everyday Internet (see also Nebeling Petersen et al., 2018). Self-tracking is inextricably linked with being always already mediatized. Furthermore, self-tracking as a mediatized practice takes place within a specific media context, namely YouTube; hence, online social infrastructures are platformed (van Dijck, 2013). The vloggers’ creative self-representations are embedded in and formed by YouTube’s digital infrastructure as well as the platform’s specific social and aesthetic norms (van Dijck, 2013, p. 25).

We are inspired by Jamie Hakim’s (2020) study on digital male body-work under contemporary neoliberalism, but add an emphasis on biomedicalization as well. Biomedicalization relates to how still larger parts of human life have become subjected to biomedical interpretation and neoliberal modes of individualization (Hvidtfeldt et al., 2021), “from moods and feelings to life success itself” (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 19). The human body is transformed in this process not only for treatment but also increasingly for enhancement (Clarke et al., 2010, p. 2).

### **Late modern tales of mediatized and biomedicalized masculinity**

We see the practices of self-tracking as late modern tales of biomedicalized and mediatized masculinity, where knowledge positions and community building are informed by new notions and expectations of masculinity. In relation to medicalization, Szymczak and Conrad (2006, p. 90) remind us that medicalization should be understood as bidi-

rectional: While certain domains of life have become demedicalized (e.g., masturbation and homosexuality), other domains have become medicalized. Szymczak and Conrad elaborate on baldness and andropause, while Loe (2004) investigates the medicalization of male sexuality in relation to the rise of Viagra. However, the academic literature on medicalization has predominantly focused on female bodies vis-à-vis medicalization as a source of social control, and only recently have men's bodies become an area of investigation (Rosenfeld & Faircloth, 2006, p. 10). But there is no doubt that still more domains of human life have become biomedicalized (Conrad & Schneider, 1992; Clarke et al., 2010; Fishman, 2010; Preciado, 2013; Race, 2009).

Whereas women and minoritized masculinities (e.g., racialized and Indigenous men, homosexual and transgendered men) have been objects of medical interventions and pathologization for centuries, cisgendered heterosexual men are now also objects of surgical and medical technologies and interventions to gain an appearance aligned with gendered, aged, bodily, and sexual norms (Haiken, 2000, p. 399; Szymczak & Conrad, 2006). As noted by Kristin Barber (2016, p. 39): "The 1990s solidified men's aesthetic-enhancing consumerism, with a growing array of products and professional services available to men. Hair transplants, steroids, plastic surgery, gym memberships, and libido-enhancing drugs". Being a man is no longer solely a given and self-reliant power position; thus, men too are increasingly told they are in need of repair and improvement in order to become valuable in society. It is not just the female body that is considered "always, already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending)" in order to conform to female attractiveness (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 62); this also increasingly pertains to the male body. In relation to the male vloggers, balding and lack of a substantial beard are considered undesired deficits that can and must be cured in order to gain masculine desirability and confidence. Hair and beard signify virility and adulthood. Balding connotes aging and decline of youthful strength, while a lack of a substantial beard connotes boyhood and immaturity. Thus, the combination of significant hair and beard constitutes an idealized and virile masculinity at its peak.

Male appearance and male bodies are today expected to be under self-surveillance and self-optimization, highlighting a new kind of masculinity that Mark Simpson (1994) initially labelled "metrosexual", signaling a growing awareness among especially class-privileged heterosexual men of the pleasures of cosmetics and shopping and in showing off their well-groomed bodies (Barber, 2016, p. 22). The rise of the metrosexual man in the late 1990s is, according to Eric Anderson, an indication of a softer, more aesthetically self-aware, and sexualized form of masculinity, and thus a conscious rejection of more traditional male norms (Anderson & Magrath, 2019, p. 88). According to Anderson and McCormack (2018, p. 549), we are witnessing "a fundamental shift in the practices of masculinities", moving towards what they coin "inclusive masculinity", which refers to the inclusivity of gay men and same-sex sexual desire more broadly (see also Nebeling Petersen & Hvidtfeldt, 2020).

A more aesthetically self-aware and sexualized form of masculinity is also what is at the forefront of Mark Simpson's (2014) more recent coining of the term "spornosexual". The spornosexual denominates a new practice and body ideal among heterosexual men, where time and energy are invested in having a lean muscular body that can be circulated on social media platforms through digital images that draw on cues from the metrosexual as well as the aesthetics from sports and porn culture (Hakim, 2020, p. 57). The phenomenon of the spornosexual shows that the male body is increasingly on display in digital media and that middle-class heterosexual cisgendered men, too, are expected to engage in various kinds of body-work and self-branding online for value creation within neoliberal austerity, where the protestant work ethic is applied to *all* areas of a person's life (Hakim, 2020, pp. 58–61). As noted by Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff: "Neoliberalism makes us *all* 'aesthetic entrepreneurs'—not simply those who are models or working in fashion or design" (Elias et al., 2017, p. 5). Masculinity today involves various kinds of labor (emotional, aesthetic, etc.) that historically have been associated with femininity and women (Hakim, 2020, p. 23), and which almost exclusively have been specified in relation to *female* influencers/online celebrities and how they earn a prominent position and maintain audience attention (Abidin, 2015; Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy, 2016; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy, & Pruchniewska, 2017; Raun, 2018; Raun & Christensen-Strynø, 2021). Although it is not within the scope and purpose of this article to outline what kind of labor these male YouTubers engage in, it is clear that they, too, undertake affective labor like showcasing accessibility, availability, presence, authenticity, and connectedness, and that the practice of taking Minoxidil and/or Finasteride is a pivotal part of undertaking aesthetic labor – working on the self and one's appearance in order to become more attractive to self and others. In today's world of all-encompassing mediatization, we see an unprecedented degree of forensic surveillance (Elias et al., 2017, p. 26), of which self-tracking is a prime example.

In the following, we unfold how the YouTubers, on the one hand, establish belonging to a community and how they, on the other hand, establish themselves as valid sources of knowledge. We illustrate their performed relationality to a community and knowledge production as two intersecting axes that figure as a continuum. Thus, the key contribution of this article is a generic description of the mediated strategies of establishing relationality to a community and knowledge production. Although derived from our case material, we suggest that the generic model works across different audiovisually mediated self-tracking communities and practices.

Before presenting the model, we first argue that the digitalization of health destabilizes traditional positions of authority and of expert/patient – destabilizations that have egalitarian and democratic possibilities. Second, we argue that the camera is not merely a tool of self-tracking but also an important mediating or performative factor.

## Health *online*

A growing field of research puts focus on the use of the Internet to acquire health-related information and on the effect of this on the balance of power between healthcare professionals and patients (see, e.g., Anderson et al., 2003; Broom, 2005a, 2005b; Broom, & Tovey, 2008; Burrows et al., 2000). A key argument is that the Internet has a potentially liberating or egalitarian influence on patients because of the ease of access to a range of different kinds of knowledge and the ability for users to share experiences online (Broom & Tovey, 2008, p. 143–144). As noted by Anderson, Rainey, and Eysenbach (2003, p. 74): “The Internet opens up enormous possibilities for obtaining information about the most rare health conditions and experimental or alternative treatments”.

Sharing, evaluating, and discussing medical knowledge online with peers can be a questioning of certified knowledge, challenging traditional monopolies, hierarchies, and channels of knowledge (Raun, 2016; Stage, 2017). Community-based knowledge production has been part of social movements’ fights for equality, anti-discrimination, and social justice. Challenging and questioning the medical establishment through the Internet can thus be seen as part of what Coulter and Willis (2004, p. 588) term a newer history of the “politicisation of health”. The Internet has hereby enabled cultures of anti-establishment that have both egalitarian and empowering affinities or can be more conspiracy driven, supporting populist tendencies.

The egalitarian and democratic aspects, as well as the community-based knowledge production and disruption of traditional authority positions (Broom & Tovey, 2008, p. 143), are also significant when looking specifically at self-tracking practices online. As Neff and Nafus (2016: p. 140) show, self-tracking technologies and community formations have empowering and transformative potentials, which “may also change the power relationships within medicine”. Importantly, the access to and community-based interpretation of health-related data and evaluation “potentially create(s) new ways for them to solve their own problems without clinical interventions” (ibid., p. 141). Following these lines, in this article, we are interested in the ways in which agents of a particular community perform and create knowledge that gains validity, and how they challenge and bypass certified medical knowledge systems and channels.

## Self-tracking as an always already mediated practice

When people self-track, it relates to specific motivations and goals for tracking and to specific practices of data tracking and interpretation (Neff & Nafus, 2016, p. 70). Within the YouTube communities of Minoxidil and Finasteride self-trackers, the motivation is clearly articulated as a wish to improve, cure, or manage a condition, that is, to avoid baldness and/or gain more substantial beard growth. But this motivation is not solitary, as the motivation to gain more hair or beard is closely connected to a motivation of becoming more successful in life in general, e.g., in relation to dating, work, health, and appearance.

The self-tracking activities of the YouTubers explicitly concern 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.

The motivations for self-tracking are multiple, and this is also the case for the purpose and style of self-tracking; hence, it does not exclusively concern the intense monitoring of their bodies and evaluation of the products and treatments or debugging the system (lack of substantial hair). Rather, self-tracking to monitor progress also seems to cultivate new habits as the self-trackers become aware of other aspects of their lives that need to be changed: An increased focus is on getting in shape, improving their diets, or gaining more confidence. When the monitoring shows increased hair or beard growth, it is noticeable in the videos how the tracking also elicits new sensations, such as happiness and pride. The increased hair or beard is formulated and understood as a cause of and an explanation for improved success or self-worth. As far as we interpret these videos, different forms of hair/beard self-tracking purposes intersect and co-constitute each other, and the vloggers explicitly interlink physical and psychological traits.

The practice of self-tracking itself is not new, but the tools used to self-track have changed and vary depending on the person and the purpose (Crawford et al., 2015; Lupton, 2016; Lupton, & Smith, 2018). The hair- and beard-growth self-trackers use a specific tracking technology as they use the camera to closely monitor and document the growth and progress (Raun & Nebeling Petersen, in review). But the camera has multiple functions that go beyond being a mere tool: It is also through 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. The camera also facilitates access to a self-tracking community and becomes an important mediating or performative factor in shaping and re-negotiating the self-tracker's male identity. The videos are *performative* in the sense that 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. Thus, the data or material does not preexist or exist separately from its mediatization. On the contrary, self-tracking the effects of the drug is done with a special view to – or in preparation for – broadcasting on YouTube; thus, self-tracking is always already a mediated practice for these vloggers. And maybe even the practice of taking the drug is intertwined with the urge to document the effects of it on YouTube and inscribe oneself in this particular community.



## The community and knowledge positionalities of the self-trackers

We will now turn to a concretization of how the Minoxidil and Finasteride self-trackers position themselves with their respective communities and what knowledge positions they claim. To illustrate the different positionalities and the mediatized strategies they make use of to constitute these positionalities, we have developed a figure containing an axis of belonging to a community and an axis of knowledge positions (see Figure 1).

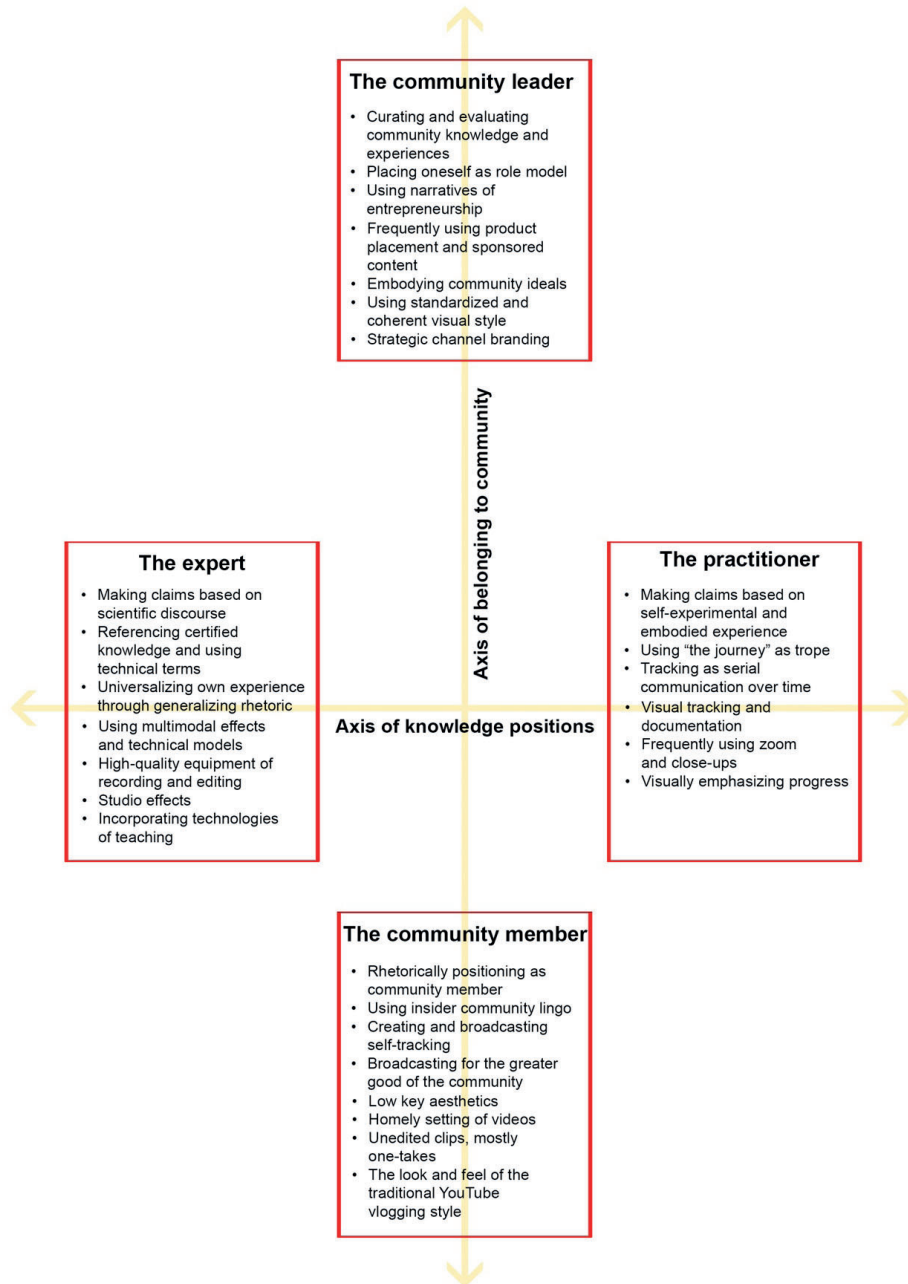


Figure 1: Axes of belonging and knowledge positions.

The YouTube self-trackers direct attention towards and label the audience as a community. They address the audience as a delineated group of people – namely men struggling with the lack of hair. The community is based on loose ties, formed and sustained online through watching and creating videos. The creation and circulation of videos on YouTube enact a social relationship between those who make the videos and those who view them (Lange, 2007, p. 368). The YouTubers are not addressing a general public whom they wish to enlighten or educate, but rather a pool of like-minded others with similar issues. Hence, the community is based on a shared purpose or common interest and therefore centers around unique communal content (Rotman & Preece, 2010, p. 320), and yet it is also a *community of practice* (Eckert, 2006, p. 683; Neff & Nafus, 2016, p. 29; Wenger, 2011, pp. 1–2).

We define the Minoxidil and Finasteride vloggers as two separate *self-tracking communities*, although there are overlaps in terms of supplementing the use of Finasteride with Minoxidil. The beard growth community is very closely interlinked with and based on the use of a singular drug, Minoxidil, which makes this community clearly demarcated and easily traceable. The balding prevention community is more loosely organized around Finasteride and often includes the use of other procedures as well, such as surgery. However, what defines both of these YouTube communities are self-tracking as a *modus operandi*.

We suggest that the vloggers position themselves on a continuum of being a community member – as “one of us/you” – and being a community leader and hence a leading voice. The two forms of community belonging are not mutually exclusive; thus, all the self-trackers claim community membership to some extent but in various ways, and some of them also position themselves as community leaders.

The *community member* expresses a strong affiliation with the community and labels himself as one of “us”/“you”, or as “one of the lads”. He discusses other community members’ experiences or claims but rarely evaluates or validates them. Rather, the community member levels himself with other members in a non-hierarchical relationship. He frequently uses community lingo, which is rarely explained, as a way to signal insider status, while also presupposing and positioning the viewer as part of the (same) community. Community membership is also established through the use of hashtags such as #Minoxidil, #Minoxidilbeard, #Minox, and #Growfacialhair. The use of specific hashtags is “an explicit attempt to address an imagined community of users following and discussing a specific topic” (Bruns & Burgess, 2011, p. 4). The community member’s videos are low-key, the camera is often handheld, and the style and feel of the videos are homely and unedited. Hence, their videos draw on a well-known amateur aesthetic, which is associated with the early days of YouTube, evoking discourses around authenticity and social connection, giving “viewers a feeling of being connected not to a video but to a person who shares mutual beliefs or interests” (Lange, 2009, p. 83).

The *community leader* is not merely a member but rather a role model, if not a member par excellence. He embodies the ideals of the community (gaining substantial hair growth) and figures as a kind of “emotional icon-leader”, who “incarnate[s] larger personal character-

istics, such as positivity, being inspirational, not giving up” (Stage, 2017, p. 63). The community leader curates, discusses, and evaluates the knowledge from the community and often positions himself as a teacher or guru of the community. A trope of entrepreneurship runs through the narratives of the leader, using the channel as a way to create value or personal profit through the use of product placement, sponsored content, and ads – thus, to be an influencer in one way or the other, which does not negate the validity of the leader’s knowledge but rather underscores it. For the YouTube entrepreneurial vlogger, personal documentation intersects with social and economic activities, thus commercial and non-commercial enterprise merge (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 90). As also noted by Carsten Stage, entrepreneurial activities or vibes are not incompatible with personal problem solving and social support (Stage, 2017, p. 47). On the contrary, a precondition for these processes of valuation is self-tracking as a practice and collective engagement. Among the community leaders in our study, to gain a substantial beard or more hair is equated with romantic, social, emotional, and/or economic success. The leader has a standardized and coherent visual style, both in terms of the aesthetics of the videos as well as the vlogger’s personal appearance. The leader’s videos signify professionalism with their often high-quality camera, recording equipment, and lighting, incorporating multimodal effects, adhering to “the competitive market logics of professionalising YouTube” (Burgess & Green, 2018, p. 93).

With the advent of the Internet and participatory media culture, the boundaries of expertise and legitimacy are expanding and shifting, as noted earlier. In relation to both online and offline groups and forums, knowledge sharing and community building often go hand in hand, and they often posit each other. What is characteristic of the Minoxidil and Finasteride vloggers is that the knowledge production is tied to and presupposes an embodied and experience-based gathering of information, which the vlogger tracks and traces through continuous and ongoing documentation. Self-tracking can be perceived as a form of *self-expertise* or *practical self-knowledge* because it relates to the self, one’s own body, and/or lifeworld (Heyen, 2020, pp. 130–131).

We suggest that the vloggers place themselves within an axis of knowledge positions as either a *practitioner* or an *expert*. Like the axis of community belonging (outlined as the community member and the community leader), the axis of knowledge positions are not mutually exclusive positions but form a continuum of different strategies that are applied to a more or less explicit extent. We stress that being both subject and object of medical intervention is a prerequisite for expertise and community membership. Legitimacy and expertise are something they take upon themselves and are ascribed through (among other things) the phenomenological experience of trying Minoxidil and/or Finasteride. As argued by Raun in relation to trans vloggers: “The expert here is indeed situated and physically and emotionally involved, not assuming a perspectival objectivity, and this is exactly what seems to grant them expertise” (2016, p. 190). Hence, the Minoxidil and Finasteride vloggers speak from a subject position where they witness from inside and document their own process aka “the practitioner”, and at times this is supplemented

with a witnessing from outside, drawing on and relating one's personal experiences with scientific knowledge and discourses aka "the expert". In some respects, they are all practitioners, and yet, as we argue, this is a mediatized strategy with specific characteristics that are more pronounced in some vloggers' videos than others.

The practitioner claims expertise primarily through embodied experiences and experiments. Hence, the practitioner is the epitome of the *self-tracker*. The practitioner articulates their experiences from an insider position and often refers to these as a "journey". This is also emphasized in the continuous focus on tracking and tracing progress, changes, or lack thereof over time. The repeated documentation of progress also relates to a characteristic visual style: The frequent use of the *momental* and *longitudinal* self-tracking video format that we have coined and analyzed elsewhere (Raun & Nebeling Petersen, in review). The practitioner frequently uses zooming effects and close-ups of their own body which lacks or sprouts hair to focus on and emphasize progress over time in the form of before-and-after compositions, time lapses, and the like. The frequent use of zoom also makes the practitioner's own body an object of the camera gaze. Dwelling on specific parts of one's body evokes a sense of these parts as either problem areas in need of optimization or as fetishized areas of growth. And yet, the YouTubers act as both objects and subjects of the gaze: Putting themselves on display for others to praise or critique while also becoming objects of their own continuously evaluating gaze. Hence, digital self-portraits – both visual and audiovisual – involve a "distinctive complex gaze" (Lasén & García, 2015, p. 718). As also argued by Hakim, the rise of men working out and sharing images of their muscular bodies on social media platforms points to a shift in the configuration of contemporary power relations, as men are increasingly encouraged to sexualize and surveil their bodies as part of value creation due to the neoliberal precarity that we are all subjected to (Hakim, 2020, pp. 75–76).

As expertise within these self-tracking communities relies on and is conditioned by embodied experience, all of the vloggers enact and visualize a kind of practical self-expertise/knowledge, but, as we argue, not all perform the role of the expert. In overall terms, to become an expert within a domain is defined as "a matter of becoming embedded in the social life of the domain, acquiring what is to a large extent, tacit knowledge, so as to internalise the associated concepts and skilful actions to the point of fluency" (Collins, 2018, p. 68). However, we coin the expert more specifically as a lay person whose vlogging practice draws on or is directed towards *scientific* approaches, applying procedures and methods that are well-known from science, from setting up experiments and making use of descriptive statistics and correlation analyses to drawing on and including scientific knowledge relevant for the respective subject, either in the form of popular science or original journal articles, which are then used (in relation to situated and embodied knowledge) to generate hypotheses or to test their own conclusions (cf. Heyen, 2020, pp. 130–131). The expert thus applies or mimics scientific methods and approaches in combination with being well-researched on the topic and willing to share with peers.

The expert claims expertise by referring and relating their own practice and experiences to scientific and certified knowledge, and if non-certified knowledge is included beyond their own experiences, they claim validity by mentioning the number and names of other YouTubers experiencing the same thing. The expert also uses technical terms, many of which they explain to the viewer, and they communicate with certainty, often using generalizing rhetoric. The position of the expert is also visually coded; the expert uses several multimodal effects, e.g., graphical inputs like quotes, models, or figures from scientific literature, which are integrated into their own talking to the camera. The videos are often of high quality, and the expert might create a studio effect, thus the videos seem (semi-)professionally made with lighting and depth and accessories, creating a carefully composed and professional *mise-en-scène*. Likewise, the expert visually performs the role of the teacher/lecturer and places themselves in front of a white or black board, thus positioning the viewer as a student/audience.

In the following section, we illustrate how these generic characteristics of community belonging and knowledge production are played out in our study. Rather than presenting an elaborated empirical analysis, the aim is to present the contours of how the typologies can be helpful analytical tools.

### **Situating the Minoxidil and Finasteride self-trackers on the analytical axes**

In Figure 2, we have placed our case study vloggers in a diagram of community belonging and knowledge production, which we will elaborate on in the following sections. As it will become clear, the vloggers often draw on mediated strategies from several positions.

#### ***The community member***

The performance of community membership is informed by the different meanings and characteristics of the drugs. Minoxidil was released in 1990 as a topical solution for regrowing hair (Haiken, 2000, p. 403), and it can be obtained without a prescription and is commonly bought online (e.g., on Amazon) or in a drugstore (e.g., Walgreens). Minoxidil is applied directly to the areas of the skin where one wants hair growth. Today, it is marketed under many different brand names, and it comes as a 5 or 10 percent topical solution, as liquid or foam. However, in the marketing of Minoxidil, it is at times specifically labeled as a “Scalp Foam” (Rogaine), which, together with the labeling of the product as directed towards hair regrowth, highlights the common perception and knowledge of the drug’s efficiency in relation to balding, which also explains why Minoxidil is often used in combination with Finasteride. Minoxidil is not widely known as a source of beard growth, or at least not in 2016 when vloggers like Adam Siddals started documenting his use of the drug.

Finasteride is most commonly taken orally as pills, and a prescription from a doctor is necessary. In a few countries, you can buy topical finasteride to apply directly on the skin, but in most countries, including the US, topical finasteride is (yet) to be approved by the

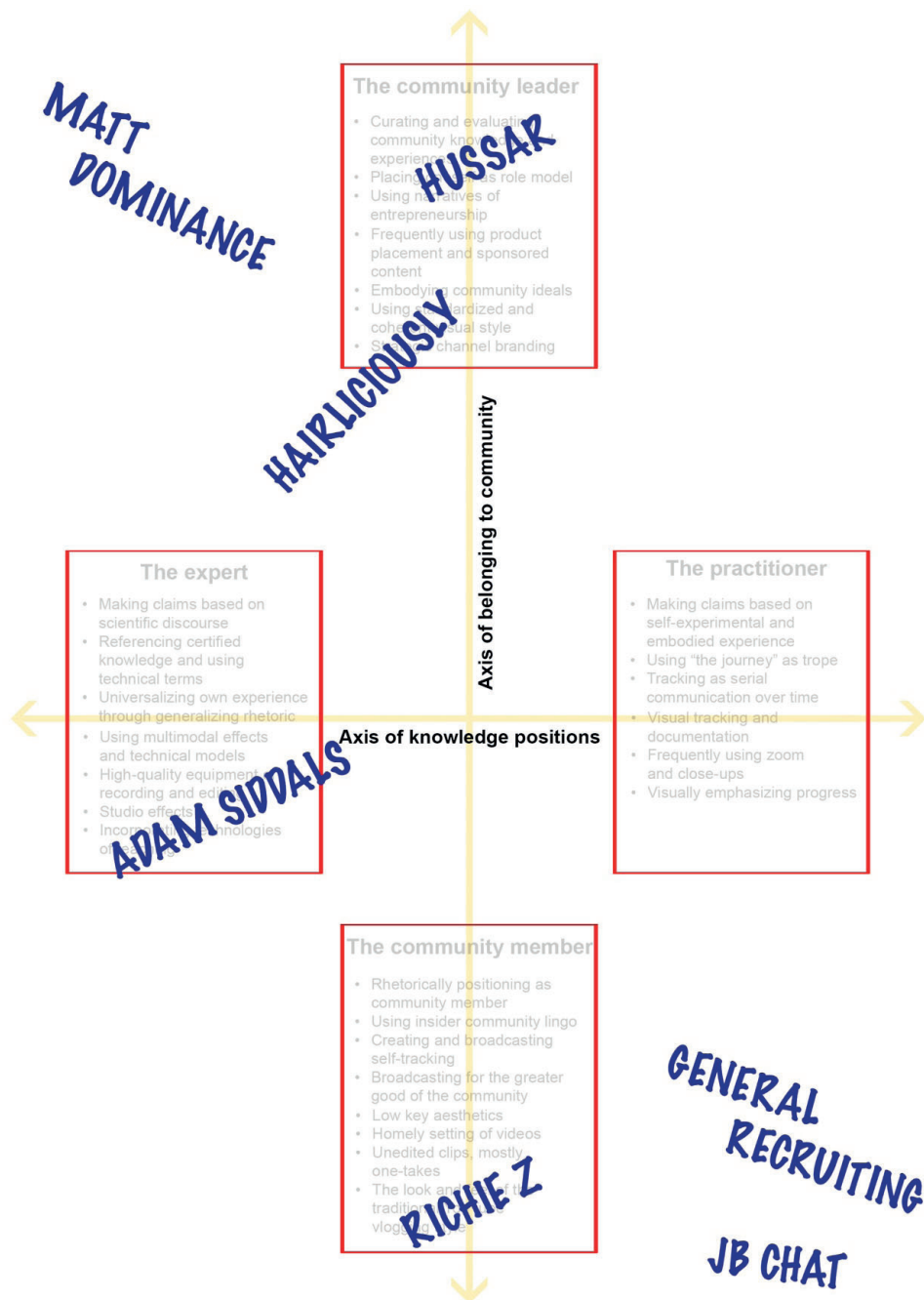


Figure 2: Situating the self-trackers within the axes of belonging and knowledge positions.

authorities. American Richie Z therefore develops his own home-made treatment, which he tries, documents, evaluates, and discusses in his channel (Richie Z, n.d.). In his opening video, he explains that he is “currently suffering from androgenetic alopecia, which is basically male pattern baldness” (Richie Z., 2019a). Hereby, he both claims knowledge

through using technical terms (the medical diagnosis “androgenetic alopecia”) as well as his embodied experiences of balding and using Finasteride to prevent it; thereby, he draws on claims made by both the expert and the practitioner.

Richie Z belongs to the community as a community member, which is visually underscored by the handheld amateuristic videos and by the homely, if not private, settings, e.g., the bathroom or the bedroom. Richie Z uses community lingo extensively and creates community knowledge through a show-and-tell of how he makes the topical therapy himself: Using a hammer, hand sanitizer, and other non-medical everyday equipment, Richie Z mixes his own treatment of prescriptive finasteride pills, which he pulverizes and mixes with a minoxidil solution product (see Figure 3). In one of his videos (Richie Z., 2019b), he carefully shows every step of the procedure, while also explaining the steps in great detail: how to calculate the measurement of Finasteride from pills into powder, how to pulverize safely, and how to mix and absorb the Finasteride into the Minoxidil to produce the self-made product. This video shows a homemade laboratory, where he invents and produces new pharmaceutical treatments, which he tests and applies on himself, allowing the viewers to learn from and copy his procedure and mixture. We understand Richie Z’s practices first and foremost as a community member’s, as he, in DIY style, creates his own drug, tries it out, and broadcasts both the recipe and the self-tracking for the greater good of the community in a low-key aesthetics.



Figure 3: Screenshot from Richie Z, October 4, 2019.

### *The community leader*

In similar ways, American-Korean Hairliciously has used his body as a laboratory for several years to examine and evaluate different ways of undergoing Finasteride treatments,

which are all based on his own experiences (Hairliciously, n.d.). While experimenting with different drugs and procedures, he has also created his own website, Hairliciously.com, which contains a blog and a web shop, where he sells more and more products and services with his special logo. He also increasingly uses a more standardized style, in which he stages himself in front of a neutral white background, signaling a certain decontextualized professionalism. In this way, Hairliciously positions himself as belonging to the community as a community leader, who brands himself and his web shop in a coherent visual style and with frequent use of product placement (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Screenshot from Hairliciously, July 1, 2021.

Hairliciously also, in line with Richie Z, explains and shows how one can make one's own product. But Hairliciously does not test the product on his own body on camera; instead, he relates the homemade product to scientific literature vis-à-vis the expert. Hairliciously uses the mediatized strategies of a community leader as he curates, evaluates, and discusses community knowledge, which is contextualized in relation to medical literature. Thus, he educates his peers as he combines and compares community knowledge and certified knowledge. In line with the positionality of the community leader, Hairliciously's channel has an educational vibe and purpose combined with a pronounced self-branding.

Both Richie Z and Hairliciously are examples of bottom-up medical knowledge production with their own creation of pharmaceutical products that bypass national restrictions, but they practice different belongings to the community as leader and member, respectively.



Canadian Urban Hussar (Urban Hussar Style, n.d.) acts in various kinds of roles as a community leader: 1) as a lifestyle expert through numerous how-to-groom or style your beard yourself, while also labeling himself an image and style consultant; 2) as a self-help guru by offering extended self-reflexive talk to the camera (also tagged as #HussarTalk) with an ever-persistent focus on “self-development”, addressing a “you” who is invited to engage in self-development; and 3) as a curator/facilitator, who communicates community knowledge and engages with particularly interesting community members – aka, the ones with the most pronounced and/or fastest beard growth via Minoxidil. His videos are imbued with an entrepreneurial self-narrative, encouraging self-optimization, starting with the beard.

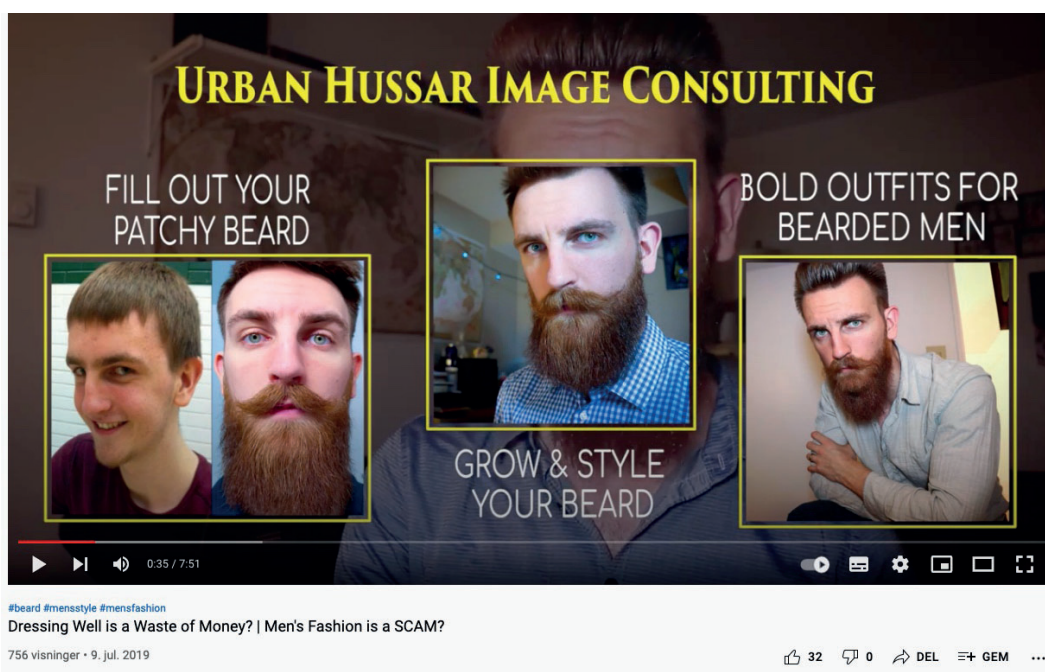


Figure 5: Screenshot from Urban Hussar Style, July 9, 2019.

### *The expert*

American MattDominance started his channel (MattDominance, n.d.) evaluating and documenting a hair transplant he got in Turkey, but his videos also include discussions of Minoxidil, Finasteride, and other hair- and beard-related products. MattDominance performs the knowledge position of an expert with a heavy use of technological terms, and he refers extensively to scientific knowledge from medical journal articles (e.g., MattDominance, 2019a) as well as to information and experiences from other YouTubers. His rhetoric relies on an authoritarian style as he generalizes and universalizes the validity of the knowledge about hair growth and treatments that he communicates. Only rarely does he share information from his own private life and his own bodily experiences. He functions as a knowledge curator and expert, and he positions himself in a hierarchical

relation to his peers. His videos appear highly edited, mimicking the style and feel of the traditional television studio with front and back light settings, careful composition of the screen and field of depth, while also connoting a homely living room vis-à-vis the classical daytime talk show.

MattDominance also positions himself as an expert through the use of screen graphics, shared screens, and other multimodal settings, acting as a lecturer or teacher: Positioning himself in front of a whiteboard (MattDominance, 2018a), using split screen that includes an educational PowerPoint slideshow (see Figure 6), using clips with video clips visualizing his words (e.g., MattDominance, 2020) or using hand-drawn visuals that he shows to the camera in a pedagogical and explanatory way (e.g., MattDominance, 2019b).

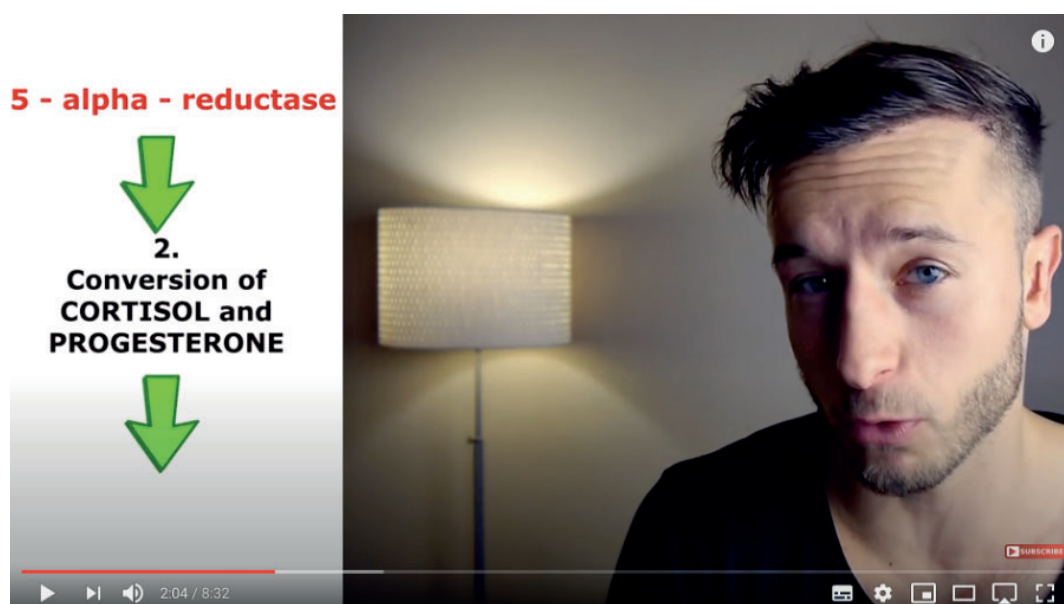


Figure 6: Screenshot from MattDominance, November 11, 2018.

Adam Siddals is one of the first and most persistent vloggers to document his use of Minoxidil to enhance beard growth. His videos are not just focused on the visual, trackable effects of Minoxidil in relation to beard growth (vis-à-vis the practitioner) but also on *how* and *why* it works (vis-à-vis the expert). His videos are often very informative, and they regularly contain extensive biomedical explanations and technical terms, at times supplemented by scientifically looking illustrations/visualizations (see Figure 7).

He relies on knowledge gathered via the private peer-to-peer Facebook group “Minoxidil Beard Spot”, but he also continuously references scientific studies published in well-renowned academic journals. In line with scientific conduct, he always credits the source of his information and links to the described studies, thus the reliability of the knowledge communicated can be validated and cross-checked. He evokes again and again a scien-

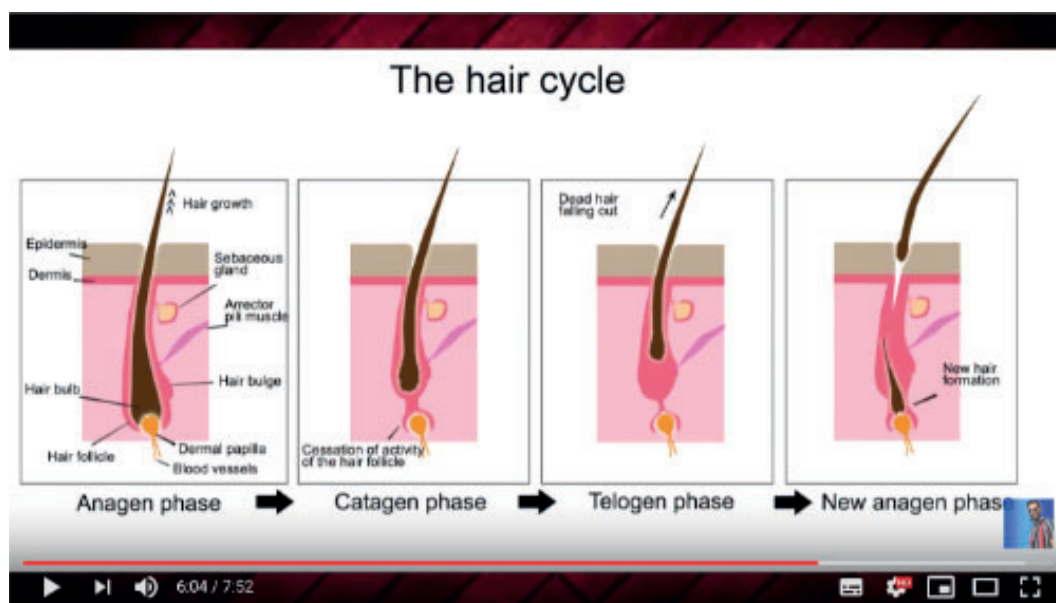


Figure 7: Screenshot from Adam Siddals, April 18, 2017.

tific discourse; thus, he talks about making videos “to have further evidence out there” (Adam Siddals, 2016b), and when others claim the effects of a certain product or supplement, he always requests “documentation” and stresses the need for “evidence” (Adam Siddals, 2016c). He continually tries different kinds of vitamins/supplements (vitamin D + B12, boron, creatine, L-Carnitine and L-Tartrate), primarily to boost his dihydrotestosterone (DHT) level, and hence to support and enhance the beard growth, while also paying attention to training and nutrition and what effect that might have. He tries to create the most optimal conditions for growth and is always on the lookout for any products or routines that might enhance that further.

Several of Siddals’s videos are categorized as “Science and Technology”, flagging a particular interest, while also laying claims to expertise. This is especially the case with his line of videos tagged #TheBeardnecessities, for which he later created a special logo that draws on a scientific discourse by referencing the periodic table (see Figure 8).

As quoted in the beginning, this line of videos are introduced as truth-tellers of Minoxidil for beard growth, where Siddals explicitly takes on an authoritative and evaluating role as a lay expert or non-certified expert (Heyen, 2020, p. 126), referencing certified expertise of professional scientists to establish himself as knowledgeable and reliable.

Siddals also conducts what he calls “experiments” on himself, which are kept a secret to the audience until he has a sense of the efficiency of the drug. During the time of the experiment, he records weekly or monthly updates on effects and side effects, which he edits into one all-encompassing video. In one of these videos, he tests and evaluates the effects of using DHT gel as a quicker way to “mature beard follicles” (Adam Siddals, 2017a), and in another, he uses Minoxidil 10 percent instead of 5 percent (Adam Siddals,



Figure 8: Screenshot from Adam Siddals, February 13, 2017.

2017b). Self-experimentation has a long and well-known history within medicine (Altman, 1998), but it is also a term and practice associated with self-trackers (Lupton, 2016, p. 106), discussed as a kind of “laboratory of self” (Kristensen & Ruckenstein, 2018, p. 3635). The knowledge gained from Siddals’s experiments is self-related, but he nevertheless claims collective value, highlighting how it might save other people within the community time and money (Adam Siddals, 2017b).

Siddals positions himself as an expert while he continues to communicate in the visual style of the community member, being placed in a homely mess and wearing an informal T-shirt or hoodie, signaling that he is a regular guy, a knowledgeable community member who has educated himself, but not claiming to be a professional or leader in any sense of the word.

### The practitioner

On the other side of the knowledge position axis we find JB Chat (now Jordan Cannon; Jordon Cannon, n.d.) from the UK, who seldomly refers to scientific or certified knowledge. JB Chat positions himself as a community member, and he often reaches out to a presumed community of practice for questions and advice. As he uses and discusses the effects and side effects of Finasteride, his claims of knowledge are solely based on his own embodied experiences of taking the drug. Through the repeated and serial videos of his “journey”, viewers witness the effects of Finasteride as JB Chat’s hair becomes thicker and his hairline improves. Notably, the progress is primarily visually documented, at times juxtaposing JB Chat’s talking head with still images for comparison, zooming in on the

top or temple area of his head. The visual juxtaposition emanates progress and temporality, which are also echoed in the titles (e.g., “Finasteride 4 month results”; Jordon Cannon, 2020), indicating the temporal organization of progress as well as the seriality of the videos.

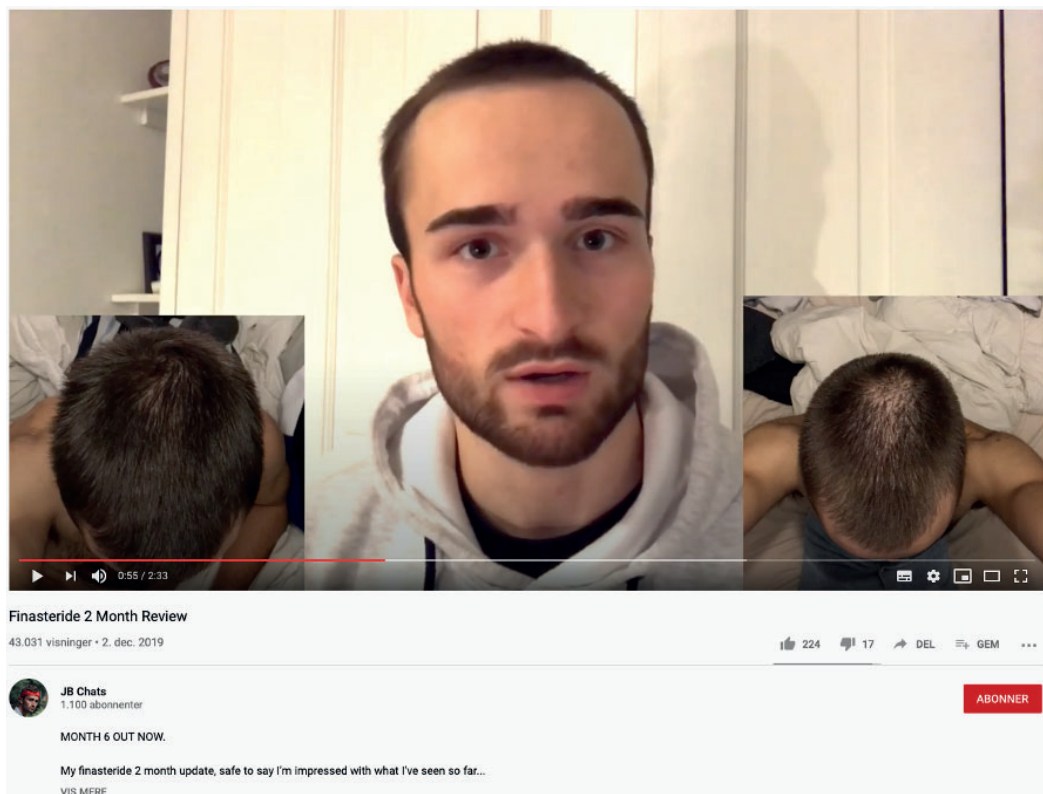


Figure 9: Screenshot from JB Chats (now Jordon Cannon; Jordon Cannon December 2, 2019).

The visual composition and juxtaposition underscore a fetishization of hair as the camera dwells on his scalp. Not only visually, but also orally, is smaller and larger progress carefully registered through his continuous scrutinizing of the hairline and the thickness of his hair.

African American vlogger General G Recruiting (General G Recruiting, n.d.) is focused on tracking and tracing his beard growth via the use of Minoxidil through close-up shots of his face turning from side to side. Contrary to many other Minoxidil vloggers, he uses a high-quality camera with a specific lens and a ring light. 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 appear decontextualized, with no clearly recognizable 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 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 minimal talking. While the aesthetics and visual style evoke a sense of professionalism vis-à-vis the community leader or the expert, the overall characteristics are more aligned with the style and claims of the practitioner.

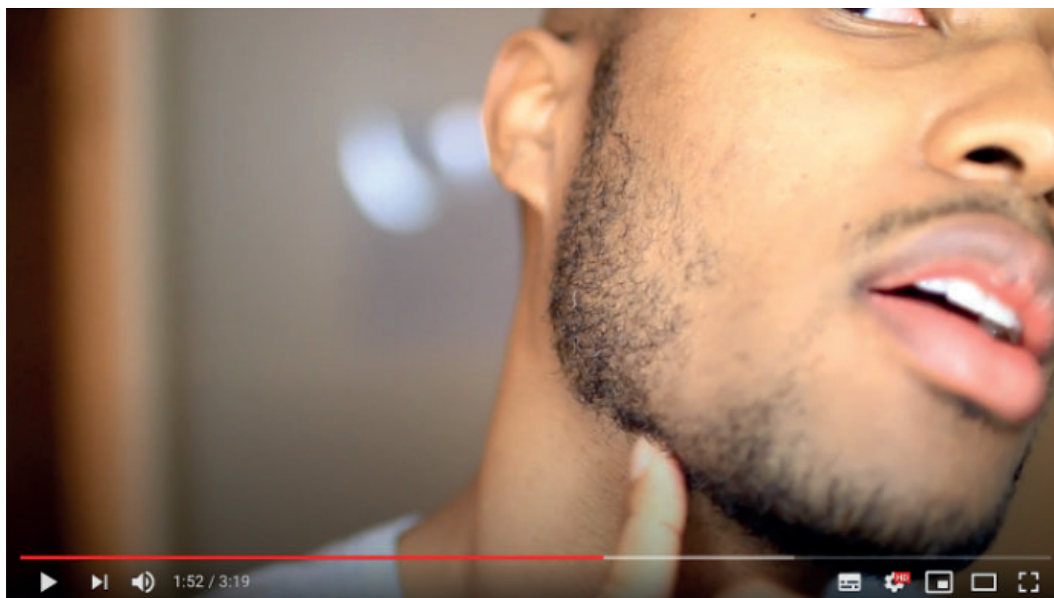


Figure 10: Screenshot from *General G Recruiting*, December 24, 2018.

At the center of his videos is his own use of Minoxidil, tracking the effects of the drug and showing how he applies it via numerous face-focused moving images that zoom in and dwell on different parts of his cheeks, chin, and upper-lip, in high-quality lighting that makes his skin look even and softly illuminated (see Figure 10). Despite the fact that his videos are shot with high-quality equipment and have a very distinct and coherent look, they do seem to continue the tradition of the YouTube vlogging style, although in an updated, aestheticized version. The clean look and limited amount of extended talk and reflections support a reading of *General G Recruiting* as a doer – a practitioner.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that self-tracking is to be understood as an audiovisually mediated practice or form, especially when documented, archived, and broadcasted on YouTube. In order to understand self-tracking as a mediated practice or form, we have developed an analytical model highlighting a continuum of community belonging (community member and community leader) and knowledge production (expert and practitioner). This model is derived from thinking with and through our case material, but we

suggest that it is applicable to other domains within self-tracking on YouTube as well, e.g., weight loss and training. We therefore hope that the generic descriptions will be analytically inspirational for other researchers who analyze self-tracking practices and communities on social media.

The entanglement of mediatization, biomedicalization, and gender in these self-tracking videos testify to how late modern masculinity is being reconfigured and renegotiated, pertaining to what we elsewhere have labelled *plastic masculinity* (Raun & Nebeling Petersen, in review). Masculinity is no longer an autonomous given; rather, masculinity is being formed as a self-reflexive process demanding constant nurture and attention. It must be understood as increasingly molded in conjunction with neoliberal imperatives and inseparable from the everyday, embodied, and all-encompassing mediatization and biomedicalization of our times.

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## Appendix

Name of channel	Channel started	Nationality	Racialization	Number of followers <sup>1</sup>	Total number of video views
MattDominance	2017	USA	White	44,900	11,996,497
Urban Hussar Style	2018	Canada	White	13,700	2,511,601
Adam Siddals	2012, started focusing on beard growth in 2016	UK	White	19,200	4,398,865
Hairliciously	2017	USA (defines himself as Korean American)	Asian	57,700	15,360,809
Richie Z	2009, started focusing on hair growth in 2020	USA	Person of color (he never articulates any ethnic, racial, or national belonging)	1,540	199,397
JB Chat	2019	UK	White	1,570	506,500
General G. Recruiting	2014, started focusing on beard growth in 2018	USA	Black	8,100	2,235,437

<sup>1</sup> All follower and view numbers were collected May 2021.

### Appendix 1

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