

Lydia Myszka
Dr. Glantz
COME384
March 11, 2022

More Than Just Photos: A Tetrad Analysis of VSCO

Introduction

If you can identify someone by the hair scrunchies on their wrist, hydro flask in hand, a pair of fashionable Vans, and sole usage of metal straws as a “VSCO girl,” you are familiar with the photo-editing app called VSCO (pronounced vis-co) (Urban Dictionary, 2019). VSCO was founded in 2011 by Joel Flory and Greg Lutze. It is a social networking app that focuses on editing and sharing photos. VSCO is similar to other photo-sharing social media sites, like Instagram, in a sense that users upload, edit, and post photos to their feeds. However, what sets VSCO apart is that the app does not have any numbers that reveal how many followers a person has or how many likes a photo received. These features have helped with VSCO’s popularity of 100 million registered users because it removes all the stress and anxiety that other social media platforms deal with in terms of numbers (DMR.com). Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian philosopher who became one of the leading experts on media theory, spoke about how media becomes an “extension of ourselves.” (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, xiii). By using McLuhan’s theory and explaining his tetrad model, this paper will further explore VSCO’s ability to enhance one’s experience, retrieve old media, flip original usage, and turn obsolete old media, which in turn will showcase how VSCO is more than just photos and a full experience for users.

Theory

Marshall McLuhan originally stumbled upon media analysis when he felt disconnected with his young adult students (Gordon, 2002). He was intrigued at this phenomena of detachment between the younger generation and older generation, and he was moved to learn all that he could about media effects. McLuhan used his passion for literature, language, and

communication and related it to understanding the relation between society and media. This inventive approach allowed McLuhan to expand upon people's areas of attention (described as "figure") and areas of inattention (described as "ground") (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, 5). These two categories are further divided into four tetrads: enhance, retrieve, reverse, and obsolescence (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, 129). The elements of enhancement and retrieval are found under the "figure" category. *Enhancement* explores the question of how a medium expands human behavior. *Retrieval* looks into the remediation of different old media and how it evolves into present society. *Reversal* deals with the idea that, if pushed to its limit, what the media turns into or what unintended use does the media flip to. *Obsolescence* is looking at what new technologies are replacing old ones and how they change individuals' perceptions of these mediums. Each of these tetrads of enhancement, retrieval, reversal, and obsolescence work simultaneously together as processes (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, 127). McLuhan was incredibly interested in observing the behaviors and effects of media and technology in society. The tetrads will be a strong foundation for analyzing the impact VSCO has created on users' perception about their status, posting, and overall photo creation.

VSCO Analysis

Enhancement

VSCO's primary goal is to enhance the user's experience of photos and how they express themselves. Creativity and self-expression are the driving factors behind VSCO's mission statement. The user's expression matters most when it comes to editing photos with different filters and exposures (VSCO, 2022). The app is designed to be more aesthetic and focus more so on how photos are laid out and using different photography styles. VSCO contains two options for users to select: one being a free membership and the other a paid membership that allows them to have more liberties like advance editing presets or weekly photo challenges (VSCO,

2022). If a user chooses to have the paid membership, it opens up more opportunities to join community groups or find more resources for their photography. With the focus being on the actual product/photo/video, VSCO is less concerned about quantified numbers. This relaxed environment actually creates a more positive response. For example, a study shared, “Girls felt that they *‘did not feel pressure’* and could post *‘a picture on VSCO with no makeup on ... but would not put [the same photo] up on Instagram’* (Female 2)” (Mahon, Hevey, 2021). VSCO allows users to share the rawness and reality of their lives in a unique way that other apps cannot achieve. The ability to feel comfortable and confident in the content you create is a large factor in how VSCO markets to their users. On a user’s VSCO profile, you have a profile picture and then immediately below their posted images are all collectively located. This layout is very strategic for enhancing aesthetics and expression. There are no numbers broadcasted anywhere in order for users to focus solely on the photos. Removing quantities with followers and likes helps VSCO maintain the unpressurized atmosphere to create a certain image. Many apps create insufficient social validation because users are not satisfied with the status of their profile because of issues related to how many likes a photo got or gaining and losing followers (Lee et al., 2020). VSCO goes against this model and by focusing on self-expression; it enhances the users’ ability to create.

Additionally, VSCO enables users to attach short captions, less than 115 characters, to pair with their photo if they chose to. This feature enhances VSCO because users are able to use words to also share their experiences. The captions on these photos are hidden, and unless a user clicks on the photo to view it, you would not see it. The caption and buttons to “favorite” or repost an image are only able to be viewed once you click on the image. These elements showcase VSCO’s priority of images and creativity coming first and additional accessories

coming second. Your feed is only photos and you can choose if you want to view captions or interact with other posts. VSCO enhances the user's ability to find their own unique way of building a profile that is specific to their personal aesthetic.

Retrieval

VSCO retrieves one main element from old media for the user to take in this new media age: scrapbooking. VSCO emphasizes images, sharing memories, and brief captions which is a remediation of physical scrapbooks. Both the mediums of scrapbooks and VSCO desire for the user to take and share pictures with others, just now VSCO uses an online platform to share pictures. However, VSCO continues to focus on the importance of valuing personal memories. Scrapbooking carries a lot of personal information and pictures that might not be the first ones you want to show other people, for example, baby pictures or elementary school pictures. The users' experience with VSCO is also very personal because it is not as showy as other social media sites. This personalization is able to carry the same intimacy as VSCO is concerned with, "an immediate, rather fleeting display of one's discovery of the small and mundane (such as bottles, cupcakes, trees, debris, and architectural elements)" (Murray, 2008). Users on VSCO are searching to create their own online scrapbook of images that they believe are aesthetic and unique to them. Having VSCO be a collecting site for these images and memories retrieves the elements of old media where scrapbooks were a primary form of sharing photos.

Reversal

The main goal of VSCO is to create a platform where editing and sharing photos are paramount; however, VSCO users have also been able to flip the original media and create unintended ways to interact on the app. VSCO's 100 million user audience is smaller than other social media platforms which allows for a perfect environment where users can be more bold in

terms of posting. This opens up the opportunity for users to post riskier photos that often would not make it on their Instagram pages. VSCO does not have any privacy settings on a user's account so anyone is able to view profiles at their leisure. VSCO pages are now morphed into a “private story” where you can post your drinking parties, relationship drama, and swimsuit pictures without fear because you are under the impression that it is a “safe space.” Parents are usually not aware of what their children are posting on VSCO because it’s not as popular, but that does not mean privacy should not be considered (Family Online Safety Institute, 2017). In contrast to the “perfect picture” that posts on Instagram hold, VSCO is a place where users post their sexy, imperfect, or crazy photos that usually would be lost or inappropriate for user’s accounts on other platforms. There is a thrill that comes from creating these photos because in a sense, it is a private insight into someone’s life. The original intention for VSCO was not to have users post their most seductive photos, but it has turned into a place where people feel comfortable to share these hidden and risky photos.

Obsolescence

As a photo-sharing app, VSCO has taken away some of the draw people have towards printing out photos or creating a physical scrapbook. Physical scrapbooks were a way for people to “curate content for themselves” (Zhao and Zappavigna, 2018, 15). By collecting photos and attaching them with text, it allowed individuals to keep information together when society was changing rapidly. VSCO’s ability to have these images on an online platform eliminates the need to have a physical copy of the photos or even create a scrapbook to hold all the images.

However, VSCO, and other photo-sharing apps, do not completely obsolete print photos as it is still a fairly popular practice.

Evaluation

Personally, VSCO's aesthetic was what initially pulled me into being a user of the app. In my experience and observations, the app is largely geared towards making your profile solely about your creativity. You do not have to worry about likes, shares, comments, or followers. It is just about your content and if you are confident and proud of the images you are sharing. It is truly a place for you to be you (VSCO, 2022). I post more frequently on my VSCO account than all my other social media profiles combined. For example, I posted twelve posts on VSCO in the last two months in comparison to the one single post I posted on Instagram in the last year. The low pressure and stress environment gives it such a positive light and attachment for more users to join and begin sharing their own content. However, I don't think VSCO will overtake other social media sites like Instagram or Snapchat. Since it is primarily just a photo app, it loses some of the personal aspect because people are not able to have more interactive capabilities. Overall, it has provided a way for users to have a platform where expression is encouraged.

Conclusion

The introduction of VSCO changed the way users present their photos and how they understand sharing content. Instead of being focused on reach and frequency of your post, there is greater emphasis on the lighting, aesthetic, and filters. This paper looked into an analysis of VSCO's media effects utilizing McLuhan's tetrad model of enhancement, retrieval, reversal, and obsolescence. We have seen how VSCO enhances the user's experience to focus on creativity without the pressure of numbers. VSCO also brings back aspects of physical scrapbooking and allows people to create their own "scrapbook" of images in an online setting. Furthermore, VSCO has had the unintended effect of being a platform where people post their more scandalous photos that are not incredibly appropriate for other social media apps, like Instagram. Lastly, we looked at the implications that VSCO's platform eliminates some of the need for

printed photos. VSCO is largely still a lesser known app in comparison to others, but because of the smaller community it is able to continue the value of personal connection. It will be interesting to see if VSCO continues to gain more popularity and starts trying to introduce new elements to their app or if they will stay focused on their values which encourages the environment where people feel comfortable posting their swimsuit photos, hair scrunchies, and aesthetic coffee purchases without fear of judgment.

References

- Cuccinello, Hayley C. (2019). "VSCO Makes A Sophisticated Photo App. The \$500 Million Startup Wants To Be More Than That." *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/hayleycuccinello/2019/07/24/vsco-makes-a-sophisticated-photo-app-the-500-million-startup-wants-to-be-more-than-that/?sh=2d59852958e1>
- Lee, Hae Leon, et al. (2020). Getting fewer "likes" than others on social media elicits emotional distress among victimized adolescents. *Child Development*, 91(6).
 DOI:[10.1111/cdev.13422](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13422)
- Mahon C., Hevey D. (2021). Processing Body Image on Social Media: Gender Differences in Adolescent Boys' and Girls' Agency and Active Coping. *Front. Psychol.* 12:626763. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.626763
- Murray, S. (2008) Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics, *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol. 7, no. 2, p. 147
- Petrik, Louis (2020). "VSCO's 40 Million Users Aren't There by Coincidence" *Medium*.
<https://bettermarketing.pub/vscos-40-million-users-aren-t-there-by-coincidence-50c6a5eb2292>
- Phillips, Jessica. (2017). "What is VSCO?" *Family Online Safety Institute*.
<https://www.fosi.org/good-digital-parenting/what-vsco>
- Urban Dictionary (2019). "VSCO girls"
<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=VSCO%20girls>
- VSCO Statistics and Facts (2022) <https://expandedramblings.com/index.php/vsco-statistics-and-facts/>
- VSCO (2022) <https://vsco.co/>

Zhao, S., Zappavigna, M. (2018). Digital Scrapbooks, everyday aesthetics & the curatorial self:

Social photography in female visual blogging. In F. Forsgren & E.S. Tonnessen (Eds.),

Multimodality and Aesthetics.

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323604343> Digital Scrapbooks everyday aesthetics the curatorial self Social photography in female visual blogging in press