MED 5041- Assignment Research Report

What is the cultural significance of Bethanyslife vlogs?

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Introduction

In this research report, I shall consider the cultural significance of *BethanysLife* vlogs by using post modernist approaches of Jean Baudrillard on hyper realism. Vlogs are short video clips that are shared via the internet. *YouTube* one of the major online video sharing websites that hosts a lot of these videos called vlogs. By combining the grassroots of blogging with richness of expression, these video blogs are known as vlogs. Development in recent years has led to this widespread popularity of 'clip culture'. Vlogs create dominant messages since it consists of distinct visual elements attached to it and is more of an interpersonal communication.

BethanysLife is a YouTube channel started on 2010 which now has about 693,278 subscribers and 23,670,162 video views (see appendix B) owned by a seventeen year old teen Bethany Mota. Over the years her vlogs has grown a strong cult following among the other vloggers. There are several *Facebook* fan pages and dedicated *Twitter* accounts titled as '*Motavator', 'Bethanators_07', 'Macbarbie07fans'* (twitter handles- see appendix C) which describes the level of intimacy that holds the audience back. This is a contemporary media text as these vlogs have a global viewership and there is an existing culture shared within this virtual community.

As this is a short report, my aim within this is to present an array of discussion on the cultural significance of BethanysLife vlogs; I shall be discussing the ideas of key theorists to reinforce my arguments and findings. In this research, I will be stressing on the post-modernist approaches especially focusing on *'Hyperrealism'* by Jean Baudrillard. These vlogs are often edited version of a person's life which makes it a 'hyper-real' concept. When we look at the audience perception of these vlogs, they also seem to be more attracted to this 'Hyper reality' than the

reality itself. Baudrillard terms this blurring of mediated experience and reality as "hyper-reality". This report consists of a literature review, methodology used, approach, findings and conclusions derived through this research.

Literature Review

Before starting to explore on how vlogging is considered as a postmodern text, I will discuss the context of vlogging community on a social media platform like *YouTube,* as this is relevant to the theories and findings referenced later in this report. With the significant increase in using online interaction tools, there have been speculations in understanding the bridge between what 'reality' is and 'what is offered to us under the name of reality'.

Howard Rhiengold (1993) has referred to 'Virtual Communities' as social aggregations that emerge from the *Net* and they emerged from a surprising intersection of humanity and technology (p.413). He argued that 'People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind' (ibid). After the publication in 1993, *'The Virtual Community'* is reviewed from a variety of perspectives (eg. Adams 1994, Wellman 1997 a). There were two main perspectives to look at a virtual community. The utopian —"the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire" (Barlow 1995, p.40)—or dystopias—"this razzle-dazzle…disconnects us from each other" (Hightower, quoted in Fox 1995, p.12). However, the book 'The virtual communities' was dominantly labeled as technological 'utopian' and is often criticised for taking an uncritical and celebratory stance on Virtual community. Whilst all these criticisms on utopian position (Robin, 1996, 1999) 'Virtual community' undoubtedly presents a degree of truth. But at the same time theorists argue that they are

misleading and misplaced (Jankowski, 2002, pg.39). Supporting this popular understanding on virtual communities, Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) and many social scientists add that 'Online sociability [virtual communities] is a fact of everyday life' (pg.37). Now we are living in the age of online content sharing websites like *YouTube*, currently the most popular online video sharing site and hosts more videos than rival video sites (Trier, 2007) and offers a wide range of videos for the viewers to chose from and watch. Similar to this, Wellman (1999) argues that internet allows the development of communities of interest which are uniquely built on specialized relationships. New and alternative media of today, not only present a *'convergence culture'* (Jenkins, 2006), meeting of new and old media, but the formation of new social organization and social life (Castells, 2000: p.693).

Real or unreal?

Giddens (1990) argues that with expanding virtual communities, the boundaries of space are crossed due to this new means of communication. This expansion becomes quite the opposite as it creates a time and space collapse (Brunn & Leinbach, 1991). The time and space collapse has led to many speculations rising around the 'reality' of vlogs. However, Michele White (2006) argues that vlogs are far more personal and intimate level of communication where the spectator becomes wrapped up in the image rather than being able to grasp the whole representation. Thus the viewer doesn't seem to know the existing differences between the virtual world and the real world. Vlogs allow them to communicate in a more natural way resembling face to face communication (Bruce, 1996). This video also facilitates the process of personal identification,

allowing for the reading of emotional expressions, aids with speech perception, and enables viewers to read gazes – signals that express intimacy and power (ibid.).

Hyperreality

Renowned French film critic Bazin (1967) argues that editing just paints the reality and offers an 'illusion of outside world in sound, colour and relief' (p.20). Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist 'who has emerged as one of the high profile post modernist theorists' (Best and Kellner ,1991: p.111) identifies this very distinction between the original and copy as 'hyper realism'. In Simulacra and Simulation, Baudrillard (1983) calls Simulation as 'the generation by models of a real without its origins or reality: a hyper real' (p.166). By saying 'hyper real' Baudrillard means that the media texts that we are offered with nowadays are 'an identical copy without original' (Storey, 2007: p.192).This explains why Bethany Mota's vlogs are considered as a post modern text. These vlogs undergo a high level of processing and editing it makes these a simulation from the original footage. Baudrillard explains this concept with classic examples of *Disney land* and imprisonment of *Coronation street* character Deirdre Rachid, which he describes as a perfect model of simulation (p. 23). John Fiske (1994) trying to find an answer for this, explains, 'postmodern media' no longer provides 'secondary representations of reality; they affect and produce the reality that they mediate'. *Disney land* also presents before us an imaginary world as it tries to conceal the reality. Storey John (2007) advocates this process of simulation by presenting examples like the evolution of CDs and films, which undergoes a lot of pre-processing and editing before they are broadcasted. This is the same case with vlogs. They are also edited before they are uploaded in Bethany's channel. Jameson, an American literary critic supports this argument of hyper reality by introducing the new idea of 'Pastiche' (1984,

p.65) defined as 'blank parody' or 'empty copy' which is a mere imitation of the old media texts and artifacts with no sense for creativity. This theory is relevant because most of Bethany Mota's vlogs always follow a sequence that is followed by any 'teen television programme' having a structured construction. There is no room for creativity in these vlogs and all other daily life vlogs that are shared in *YouTube* fills up the same order which makes it an empty copy. Some of these vlogs are also broadcasted in *'Awesomeness TV'*. He calls these re-representations as 'false-realism' and argues that these create a culture which is flat and depthless (ibid, p. 60). Collins (2009) argues that the vast expansion in the use of technologies and creation of media texts have ended up in recirculation of the signs which forms today's postmodern texts (ibid, p. 457). Jameson also makes a similar point by saying that the postmodern culture that exists now is marked by triviality (1984, p. 85). This can be completely associated with my chosen topic since most of her vlogs are framed around a common theme similar to what other vloggers in YouTube.

Methodology

With this new age of technology and extended use of social networking sites for online interactions, some academics have moved from using traditional workplace ethnography and have explored several new ways in implementing multimedia tools to venture into virtual ethnographic outlets. Christine Hine (2000) is a pioneer in doing academic research using virtual ethnography. In her book 'Virtual Ethnography' she has documented the significance of the online interactions, the way it operates and the possible challenges that may be faced in analyzing data from virtual communities. Virtual Ethnography studies communities that use

electronic communication. Even though the idea of ethnographic interaction had its roots from traditional text based settings in online communities it has later extended to different forms of virtual interactions.

Christine Hine (2000, p.8) states, "Virtual Ethnography can be used to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it". She argues, internet as a culture and a cultural artefact, which has given way to explore a new form of ethnography. With the rise in the technological advancements the status of internet as a communication medium seemed much powerful. She has been successful in using this as a methodology for her research on Louise Woodward Case which allowed her to carry out an ethnographic process very similar to the traditional ethnography. In this the first step that she recommends is to examine the status of internet as a communication technology. Her virtual ethnography helped her to engage in communication with the other members of the group and to make use of the online interaction. She followed this methodology by identifying websites that show explicit support to the case and also studied the audience by conducting several interviews.

From my understanding of Christine Hine's virtual ethnography, I decided to use this as my research methodology by focusing on the online participant observation and 'participatory culture' (Burgess & Green, 2009) which is a critical element in ethnographic process. To employ this methodology successfully to my research I will use participant observation which requires the researcher to obtain firsthand experience of the online culture. This step is of vital importance for successful virtual ethnography research (Hair & Clark, 2003). As I have been experiencing this online environment of *Bethanyslife* for about 3 years, this would help me to carry out my research effectively. I selected a few of her vlogs to observe the comments to understand the

cultural significance of her vlogs and the consequent effects of these online interactions that exist between her vlogs and the audience. As academic Christine Hine suggests, this would allow me to understand the participant culture and also more about the way this online interaction affects the 'everydayness' of people.

To engage into the online environment and interactions I put myself into various online communities of Bethany Mota's fan blogs, forums, social networking site fan pages like Facebook and Twitter pages, to participate among the cult, to understand the culture of the audience those who share a common space to present their thoughts. As these vlogs communicate and exist around this virtual internet sphere, my chosen methodology will help me to observe and engage with the participants practicing their culture. However, using this methodology, I realized that it was important ethically to make the participants aware of my research process. So whenever I engaged in any conversation with a fan in the community, other than my observations from comments, I informed them at the start that I was a student carrying out my virtual/online ethnography on Bethany's vlogs.

Findings

Burgess and Green (2009) mention that YouTube creates a dynamic cultural system and is a site of participatory culture (p. 8). Bethany's vlogs don't always narrow down to a particular theme. They alternate between follow me around vlogs, tag videos, twitter talks and Q&A videos to create a new form of interaction between the vlogger and the viewer. I mainly wanted to focus on how communication takes place among the participants and how being in an online community affects people in their average 'everydayness'. Participant observation is a critical mechanism for

achieving this goal (Singh and Dickson, 2002: p.122). For it to be effective, the observations that are made have to be translated into intense reflection on reasons for the behaviours and events observed.

The content of vlogs, editing, presentation, observation

There are 56 vlogs in Bethany's life channel and each vlog has received an average of 3500 comments. The viewers have been actively participating in creating the community from the very start of this channel but there has been a lot of change in the behaviour and the attitude of those who comment and the pattern of videos back then and now. Bethany addressed her first vlog as 'more about me and my life' and accordingly the vlog was filmed in her room creating a more personal and intimate level of communication (Michele White, 2006). This amateur video content produces a sense of realism in the vlogs.

The vlogs always run with a trivial teen television format, starting with an introduction, content and the conclusion. This convergence of new and old media not only represents the 'convergence culture' (Jenkins, 2006) but the ideas of new social organization and social life (Castells, 2000: p.693). For instance, It is quite noticeable to see a television styled format in Bethany's *'Let's go Black Friday Shopping'* vlog. Most of the viewers like this format of vlogs, since they consider it as 'personal, intimate, and similar to television program'. There is no specific content that is communicated through these vlogs. Every vlog differs and the channel is updated frequently to retain the subscribers. Her vlogs seem to be a commodification of the daily life, where we can observe the commercial video content of YouTube imposing itself into the community and this also portrays the new media behaviour.

Hyperrealism

Even though YouTube 'is not primarily designed for collaborative or collective participation', the vlogger provides certain spaces to allow interaction (Burgess & Green, 2009) to make the community engage and participate in the culture. In case of Bethanyslife she hosts a separate series named 'HeyBeth' to interact with the audience. Most of the vlogs have personal elements which asserts the participant on the 'realness' of the vlogs and creates a blurring image between mediated experience and reality, which is the very concept of 'hyperrealism' as explained by French Sociologist Jean Baudrillard. He calls these simulations as 'the generation by models of a real without originality or reality' and says they can be experienced as more than the reality itself. The effect of this can be observed from comments of the participants that reinforce this in many ways. Comments like 'I actually hugged my ipad' (dndnchannel2001 – username-see appendix D) and 'I feel like she cares a lot for her subscribers, even though she is tired she takes videos, uploads and always keeps the bright smile' (Christine Rhee – username –see appendix D) shows the amount of reliability that enters within this virtual communication where the people's ability to distinguish between fiction and reality seems to decline (Storey John, 2007).

Most of the people who view Bethany's vlogs belong to the age group of 18-24 (See appendix E). The participants in the comments of her vlogs are geographically remote. Even though this is the case, we can argue that these vlogs lead to reduction of the world into American 'global village'. As explained in aforementioned literature review, this expansion of communication by creating virtual communities become quite the opposite, causing time and space collapse which is later explained in the theories of McLuhan (1996) in his 'global village' concept. For instance, in *'Let's go Black Friday Shopping'* in which *'Black Friday'* is a day following American

Thanksgiving. In this vlog, globalization can be seen as a successful imposition of American culture around the globe (Storey John, 2007). Most comments on the vlog tend to reinforce this economic success of American capitalism.

Context Collapse

As a Beauty Guru in YouTube and a vlogger, Bethany has grown a strong cult of her 3 year invasion in YouTube as a vlogger till now. Through strong online and social networking presence her vlogs have grown a strong fan community. The Twitter and Facebook groups called as 'Motavator', 'Bethanators_07' are interesting examples. When I questioned a fan on why does she watch Bethany's vlogs, the immediate reply was 'it is entertaining and she has one of the most famous vlogs and inspires me a lot' (see appendix F). These responses convey the way in which the fans are driven and how Bethany's vlogs have entered into the 'everydayness' of a teenager. One other fan replies, 'I am learning English to understand her' (See appendix F) shows what effect the hyper realism has on the subscribers.

'Context collapse' is a phrase coined by Michael Wesch in his video *'The Machine is Us/ing Us'* (Wesch, 2007). The new media enables us to connect with people from all parts of the world at the same time. In vlogs, there is no specific context embedded to it, unlike the everyday interaction where we moderate the speech and our actions in accordance with where we are and with whom we are with. Wesch (2007) calls it as an *'imagined community'* without normal constraints that are involved in face-to-face communication. This faceless interaction creates a loss of ability to connect in a deep and meaningful way due to the 'context collapse' that the viewer experiences. Bethany's vlogs are always filmed with heavy lighting, high quality video content and undergo pre and post editing processes. These tend to affect and produce the reality

that they mediate (John Fiske, 1994). The series of editing process it undergoes also makes it a hyper real concept (Baudrillard, 1983) manipulating the reality and they become the 'copy' of original footage.

Vlogging – 'The reality'

Bethany's videos most often have a 'bloopers section' that has gained huge popularity among the audience. When I questioned a fan about this, she says 'I watch Bethany's videos because they are funny'. This loses the depth and meaning since these are constructed meanings that are employed in creating the reality itself. Most of the participants belonging to the vlogging community tend to understand that it is not a real form of communication. YouTube network manages its user generated video content by commercializing the content and makes the user as a 'YouTube partner'. Every minute of the video earns certain cost from YouTube which are not mentioned in most vlogs as this makes it lose 'realism'. Some of the case studies of YouTube channels highlighted how vlogs have become "more accessible new media technologies and platforms can open up possibilities for the commercialization of amateur content" (Burgess and Green, 2009:23). These social interactions also enter into the *'everydayness'* through organized meet-ups, gift or commodity exchange and fan groups. As Rheingold (1993) explains this as an advantage of virtual communities, where it leaves an option for the user to be a participant in the community or not. As it is not a face to face communication, he suggests that there exist no differences in the class or race among the participants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue that Bethany's vlogs, as a post modern text, show signs of a complex mixture between both 'reality' and 'hyper reality'. From my observations and findings, I could tell that the participants in the vlogging culture already were aware of the fact that these vlogs weren't absolutely 'real'. But the participants do find these vlogs as a form of entertainment. This may be due to the televisual format that the vlogs undertake. The majority of the participants in this vlogging culture belonged to the age group of 18-24.

In terms of considering this as a postmodern text, *Bethanyslife* vlogs are heavily edited and undergo a lot of pre and post processing effects that makes it a 'hyper real' concept as forwarded by Jean Baudrillard (1983). These videos also create 'Context collapse' (Wesch, 2007) as this faceless communication develops a form of *'imagined community'* without normal constraints that are involved in face-to-face communication. Thus this kind of interaction creates a loss of ability to connect in deep and meaningful ways. The vlogs created do not carry any specific context. Most of these audiences connect and participate in the culture by active social network presence. They share their culture and exhibit fandom by sharing similar culture.

My virtual ethnography helped me to engage and participate in the whole vlogging community, which led to the greater understanding the participant culture. Even though it might have had minor issues as participants were first a little reluctant to comment in few of my posts, after resolving this, my virtual ethnography opened me up to several new conclusions and theories to reinforce my arguments.

This research has a potential to develop into further areas of investigation. Having discovered that these vlogs convey a hyper real notion and discovered more about the participant culture, it would be interesting to conduct a research on why are these vlogs more popular among the teens and identifying the significance of these vlogs in 'everydayness' of teens.

(Word count - 3,546)

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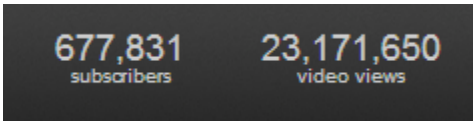
Appendices

Appendix A

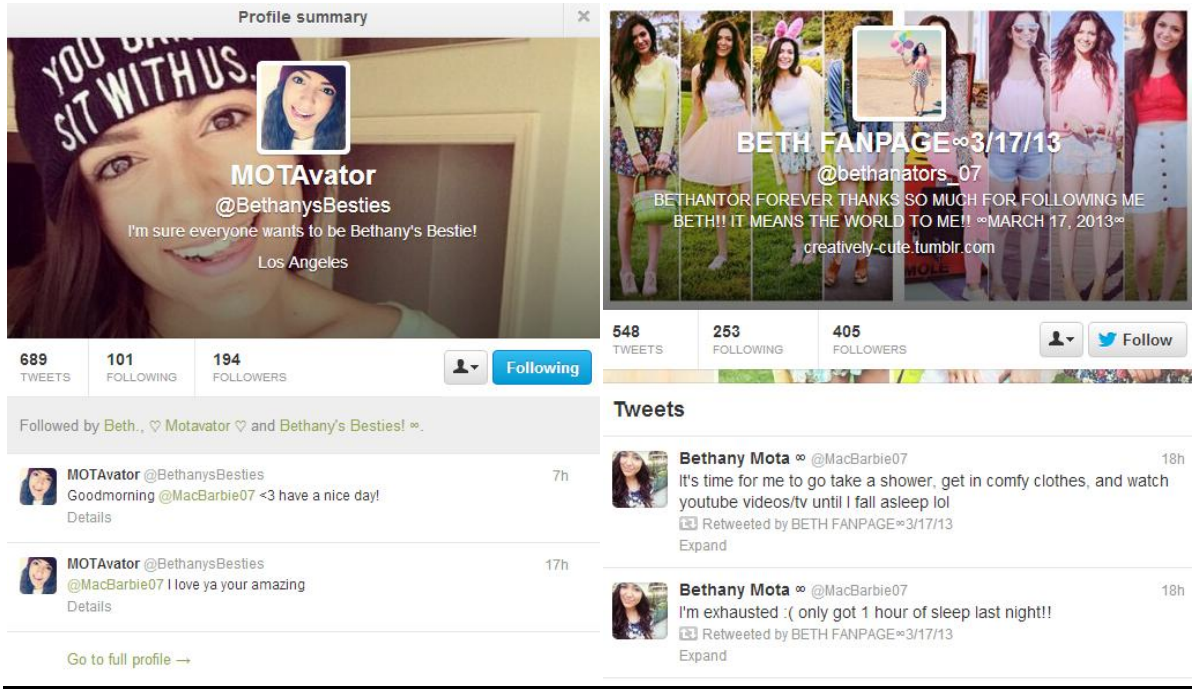
Culture diary - http://culturaldip.blogspot.co.uk/

Culture Diary (2013) *The Culture Diary*. [Online] Available at: http://culturaldip.blogspot.co.uk/ [Accessed: 20 May 2013].

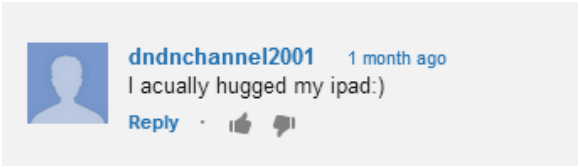
Appendix B

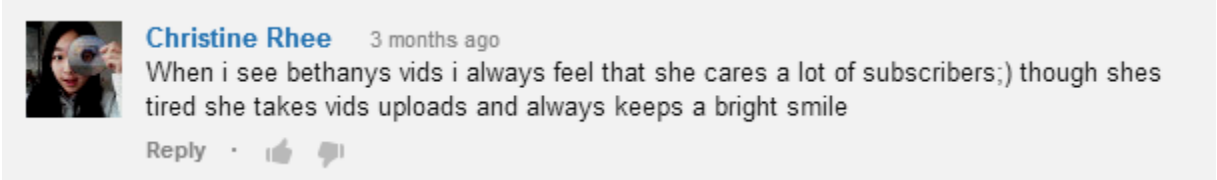


Appendix C



Appendix D





Appendix E

People Talking About This
38,274
Total Likes
405,224
Page Insights
April 14, 2013
Most Popular Week [?]
Toronto, ON, Canada
Most Popular City [?]
18-24 years old
Most Popular Age Group [?]
People Talking About This
New Likes Per Week
Apr 11, 2013
May 10, 2013

Appendix F

Ranjani Ramanathan
Hey Guys,

As a part of my college project, I am doing a research on vlogging. YAy! I have took Bethany as vlogger for my topic (can see how much I am inspired). Beth's fans are the right people to ask these questions to,

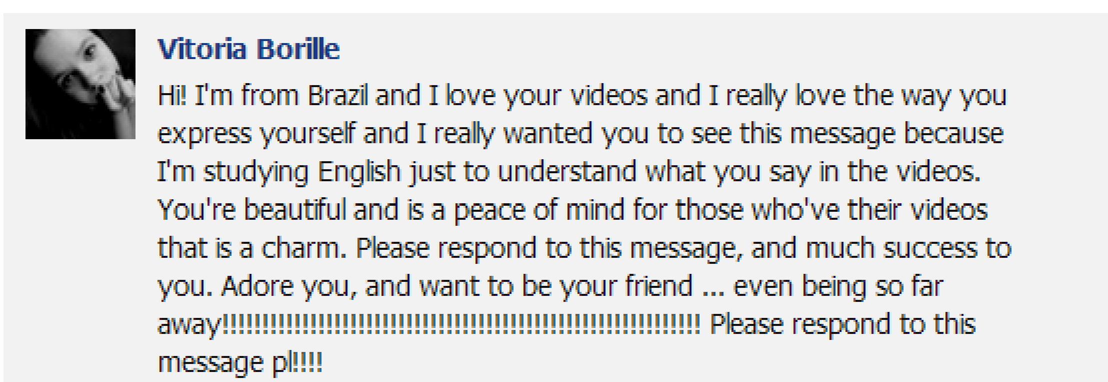
So I have 4 questions here,
...
See More
Like · Comment · Unfollow Post · April 21 at 5:18pm

3 people like this. Seen by 48

Ranjani Ramanathan Do put forward your thoughts... :)
April 21 at 8:02pm · Like · 1

Marina Ovad beth is the best cuz she is pretty and has fun in her video i watch her vlogs because she is so funny and has fun she inspires me ALOT i feel like bethany has one of the most famous blogs and her blogs are so much fun and funny and helpfull
April 22 at 5:10pm · Unlike · 2

Write a comment...


Vitoria Borille
Hi! I'm from Brazil and I love your videos and I really love the way you express yourself and I really wanted you to see this message because I'm studying English just to understand what you say in the videos. You're beautiful and is a peace of mind for those who've their videos that is a charm. Please respond to this message, and much success to you. Adore you, and want to be your friend ... even being so far away!!! Please respond to this message pl!!!!