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Trivial and Normative? Online Fieldwork within YouTube's Beauty Community

In this article I discuss methodological understandings around qualitative research and online ethnographic practice to bring forward a reflexive account on the particularities of doing fieldwork on YouTube. I draw from a multi-year ethnographic examination of YouTube's beauty community that sought to understand online popularity framed by local norms and practices and shed light into the local significance of knowledge, expertise and self-development (García-Rapp 2016, 2017; García-Rapp and Roca-Cuberes 2017). I argue for an epistemological perspective that acknowledges the diversity of viable, conceivable fieldwork experiences while distancing from prescriptive modes of argumentation. I propose seeing fieldwork in and through its richness and predicaments, persistently naturalistic while interpretive. I approach online popularity, fandom, and even YouTube itself from a perspective that tolerates ambivalence, contradictions, and embraces the complexity of social worlds and human interaction.

Key words: *digital ethnography; online fieldwork; YouTube; online communities; interpretive epistemologies; cultural critique, diversity*

Introduction

In this article, I discuss methodological understandings around qualitative research and online ethnographic practice to bring forward a reflexive account on the particularities of doing fieldwork on YouTube. I argue for an epistemological perspective that embraces the diversity of viable, conceivable fieldwork experiences while distancing myself from 'methodological fundamentalisms' (Denzin and Lincoln 2013) and prescriptive modes of argumentation. Moreover, I contend it is worthwhile recognizing not only the dialectical play between the emic and the etic in ethnography, but also the respect, openness and empathy needed to capture a certain analytical moment in the contingent and dynamic development of human interaction and cultural practices. This contribution proposes seeing fieldwork in and through its richness and predicaments, in the thick of the emic and the etic, persistently naturalistic and interpretive.

In the case of YouTube's beauty communityⁱ –made up of creators who upload video tutorials and vlogs, and users who watch and comment– contradictions and ambivalence are particularly evident thanks to the overlapping of differing economical and socio-cultural spheres of action and interest as consumption, commercialization, commoditization and the everyday creative practices of learning communities (Hills 2002; Tolson 2010). But rather than

quickly classifying people and digital cultures as 'normative' or 'resistant' or defining grades of 'struggle', our job here, as I see it, is to clarify *and* complicate. As there is no paradigm-free way of seeing and in the hope of presenting a continuing challenge to traditional, restrictive notions of research and the way we have access to and understand the world (Campbell 2017), it is worth questioning: what do we research, and how? What are legitimate research topics and methods and for whom?

The discursive construction of certain analytical categories or the implicit cultural prestige of communities and practices can and should not prevent us from listening closely to understand and acknowledge agency. Following the premises of anthropological research, when looking to understand a culture, it is essential to do it with an open, "emphatic mind" (Bazeley 2013: 28; Lange 2014; Boellstorf 2008). In addition, I believe it is possible to critically assess and interpret the practices and understandings of others without judging or quickly applying labels based on preconceptions. Parting from these considerations, I seek to delve into the social worlds I research without taking a higher moral ground or dividing cultural manifestations in 'worthy' or 'unworthy' (or high-brow vs. low-brow culture).

Culture is relational, partial and plural: it is always about cultures, with an s (Agar 2006b). Something similar happens with our dynamic and performative identities. There is a long list of cultural labels to what we are. "We put together who we are based on the contingencies and constraints of the moment" (Agar 2006b:7). Identities and practices are in constant flux because the norms and rules guiding behavior are also contingent and contextual. They are dynamic, subjective, and negotiated on a daily basis. When examining these online audience communities and communities of practice brought together by common interests. We only gain insight into a small part of who they are. We do not study fanatics, obsessed people who are 'only' fans. Or, in the case of YouTube's beauty community, superficial, vain or insecure women, although some of them may well be.

This publication draws from a multi-yearⁱⁱ ethnographic examination of YouTube's beauty community that sought to understand online popularity framed by local norms and practices (García-Rapp 2016, 2017; García-Rapp and Roca-Cuberes 2017). The objectives of qualitative research, particularly of ethnographic research, match my research aims, namely the understanding of experiences and the construction of meanings (Merriam 2009; Silverman 2011). The study shed light into the significance of knowledge and expertise within the community, taking into account the high percentage of videos that offer instructional content as tutorials. In opposition to the short-lived visibility of online trends, viral videos and memes, beauty gurus achieve sustained popularity and are consolidated in high-status community positions within a competitive, dynamic, cultural industry as YouTube. Considering the millions of people that, day after day, engage with these influential personalities, the goal was to describe, understand and generate a theoretical framework of the sociocultural processes at play and its impact on the audience. How is popularity achieved and sustained? What does it mean to be an online celebrity in YouTube's beauty community?

I aimed to the construction of hypothesis through theoretically informed data analysis to offer new ways of thinking and reflecting on online celebrity and the ethos of contemporary digital cultures. The interpretive case-study, thus, contributed empirically and theoretically to the fields of digital cultures, celebrity studies, as well as audience and fandom research.

We are always going to try to clarify and complicate things when seeking to portray the 'ethos' of a group from an emic perspective because we eventually need to explicate it and reach some overarching conclusions plausibly of being referred to other social formations. As Grossberg (1992) and Lewis (1992) argue, people are fans of various sorts of things, and, in a sense, we are all fans of something.

Human experiences intrinsically matter and seeing fandom as enabling (Grossberg 1992) and performative (Hills 2002) draws our attention to meaningful "micro-settings of media consumption" (Sandvoss 2005: 154). In contrast to cynical approaches to popular culture, I

highlight instead the relevance of user-centered perspectives where entertainment, connection and information are legitimate reasons to produce and engage with online beauty content and personal vlogs.

It is particularly the anthropological stance of regarding human experiences as inherently relevant that I position against supposedly critical approaches to media studies which are in essence reductionist. It is possible, and it is meaningful to offer nuanced and thoughtful conclusions that increase the understanding of cultural phenomena, without resorting to paternalistic and condescending views of these communities and users.

“Being there” – Particularities of Studying YouTube

The notion of ‘being there’ often represents a strict and somewhat idealistic way of performing fieldwork, because, maybe there is no ‘there’ after all, as for instance, when studying online communities that interact without face-to-face communication (Boellstorff 2008; Kozinets 2010). Therefore, if one is researching a group or practices that develop geographically decentralized as on YouTube, one is not expected to relocate in order to experience the needed immersion.

Tom Boellstorff reflects on how “anthropology has always been about avatarizing the self, standing virtually in the shoes (and on the shores) of another culture” (2008:6). Nowadays it is only easier to gain access to a myriad of communities of practice, because, when online, ‘being there’ loses its geographical character. The online field is, thus, a space but not a geographically delimited place any longer and this deterritorialization should be capitalized on since it still is the real, naturalistic setting of the processes and dynamics we investigate. In essence: “No matter how close to home, ethnographers study culture” (Wolcott 2008:243).

The main difference of the study I performed is that, in contrast to traditional ethnographic (participant) observation, which takes place in the site as the activities are unfolding, I did not

analyze the posts, videos, or interactions live. Rather, I collected earlier uploaded data, which I immersed myself in (Bazeley 2013) to analyze and interpret. This particularity is due to the inherent asynchronicity of the platform itself and the technically-determined attribute of 'persistence' of online content (boyd 2011)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Considering all these points, it is worth embracing the diversity of viable and conceivable fieldwork experiences and perspectives:

there is an implied sense of adventure, even of the exotic, in the imagery that comes to mind. I think that most of us who have conducted most of our fieldwork in the most ordinary, familiar, and easily accessible of places still carry around an idealized image of someone (even ourselves) outfitted in safari suit and pith helmet stepping into the shore and into the center of a circle of huts, with camera, binoculars, and notebook at the ready (Wolcott 2008: 45)

However, these 'natives' do not 'live' there, in the field, on YouTube. They are 'there' daily or weekly for some time, perform that role and then they perform others within the same and other platforms. They are fans of Bubz and of other gurus, fans of singers, films, and book authors, they are creators themselves, they are viewers, critics, members, some share content, some comment on it, and others do not. They are anything and everything. This is, of course, in addition to their roles in their unmediated, offline contexts and lives (Boellstorff 2008). Online roles and practices are immensely diverse and dynamic (Lange 2014). This means that YouTube's beauty community, or even Bubz's popularity, is unique but not an isolated case. These formations are active in other contexts. Subsequently, the analyzed example and viewer comments are not representative but fit within some broader spectrum of contemporary production and consumption practices. In line with this, it is relevant to highlight that people participate in multiple communities (e.g. Baym 1999) and with this study we are gaining insight into a small part of who they are.

Why ethnography? When ethnography? – The ethnographic intent

I believe it is worth explaining my constructivist research rationale, particularly because not all traditions of qualitative inquiry believe with the same fervor in the researcher as key instrument of data collection or focus on the emic perspective and subjective views of participants (Prasad 2002; Philips and Burbules 2000).

As Denzin and Lincoln (2013), I understand qualitative research as a mode of inquiry that crosscuts fields and disciplines and situates the researcher in the world. The fact that the understanding gained from the study is based on the researcher's interpretation of the examined phenomenon (Charmaz 2006), draws our attention to the central role of the researcher, who has her own "theoretical sensitivities" (2006: 148) that she brings to the field. The interpretive value of "intuitive realizations" (2006: 5, also Merriam 2009) make our being there different from anyone else's.

Therefore, by framing my research from an interpretive, constructivist perspective, I sought to distance myself from a certain 'positivist anxiety' still active within qualitative studies and, more generally, from unproductive 'methodological fundamentalisms' (Prasad 2002; Denzin and Lincoln 2013). Moreover, I have a pragmatic approach to research design, and believe in combining features from several models, as well as being guided by data to modify questions and approaches (Charmaz 2006; Boellstorff, Nardi et al 2012; Bazeley 2013).

Over time, scholarly traditions produce shared conventions about ways of conducting research and presenting studies, which lead to certain styles that are associated with them. Still, methods are often appropriated in diverse ways within the same and different paradigms. As Kathy Charmaz (2006) argues regarding the case of grounded theory techniques –and Harry Wolcott (2008) for ethnographic fieldwork– researchers can draw on different strategies and methods without turning to rigid prescriptions concerning data collection and analysis. For instance, when working inductively to generate theory, most of us adhere to some form of

grounded approach to building theory (Hine 2009; Merriam 2009), independent of conducting a phenomenologically oriented grounded theory or not. In any case, we are free to draw from grounded theory techniques of data collection and analysis, such as the constant comparative method, theoretical sampling or open coding (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978; Charmaz 2006). Choices of strategies and methods are open to all, no matter the discipline or orientation since methods are guided but not prescribed by a particular philosophical or methodological perspective (Bazeley 2013; Denzin and Lincoln 2013; Guba and Lincoln 1994).

As Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue, the defining question is the one about intellectual tradition or paradigm. Questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm because it is her basic belief system or worldview the one guiding the researcher in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways. In line with this, two beliefs frame my stance as a researcher: that inquiry paradigms do not imply particular methods and that “research is actually more a craft than a slavish adherence to methodological rules” (Miles and Huberman 1994: 5). We are liberated to shape our work in terms of its own needs (Bochner 2000).

But, who can perform ethnography and when? It is clear that anyone can perform fieldwork and observation since they are not exclusive to ethnography (Knoblauch 2005; Wall 2015; Agar 2006a). As Harry Wolcott explains:

It is hard to imagine how anyone could pursue a field-oriented approach *without* borrowing ethnographic techniques, except that the very idea of borrowing suggests that fieldwork techniques somehow ‘belong’ to ethnographers or to cultural anthropologists [...] it is difficult to identify any field technique that is *exclusive* to ethnography (2008:216f)

Moreover, while interviews and participant observation are main techniques of ethnographic fieldwork, ethnographers also draw from surveys and perform analysis of content and data. What is more, not *every* ethnography meets *all* the customary criteria and no feature is

absolutely essential, since it is rather about experiencing situated practice and local knowledge (Knoblauch 2005).

For me, it is not about 'borrowing' ethnographic techniques, but it runs actually deeper. It is about a certain vision, an underlying gestalt; the "following in the footsteps" (Wolcott 2008: 224) of a particular tradition of seeing. I chose to frame this research design from a focal point on ethnographic fieldwork not only because of its underlying goals of naturalistic and holistic understandings, but also due to an inherent epistemology and axiology implied by a certain ethnographic 'way of seeing' (2008). As Annette Markham writes, it is the particular "mindset or epistemological approach" (2009: 149) rather than a set of particular interpretive procedures what best describes ethnography. Its cornerstone, essential character and purpose, has always been to understand a culture from an emic perspective (Nadai and Maeder 2005). In essence, it is the *intent* of revealing common elements of a culture that legitimates the uses of the label, not the data collection (Wall 2015).

I found in ethnography a systematization of ways of operating and interpreting reality that I had devised for myself long before starting this project. I chose this approach because of a particular *ethnographic way of seeing* the world and its understanding of research as a whole. Even though ethnography has many faces and there is no single model for it^{iv}, in general terms, ethnography is a craft that always implies a concern for cultural description and interpretation (Fetterman 2010) since it follows the commitment to the value of understanding human social life. Whatever the collected data and impressions are, they will be interpreted in terms of a sociocultural perspective. Ethnography "is about something that you have personally tried to know and to understand rather well and something that you believe others will want to know about, at least as seen through your eyes" (Wolcott 2010:136).

I mentioned what ethnography means in its essence, but now turning to its content and structure, ethnography is a synthesis of empirical and theoretical interpretation of society and

culture (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). From a more pragmatic understanding and based on my research questions, I chose to follow ethnographic strategies and aims because of the classical anthropological premise I also share: culture is discovered by grasping patterns of social behavior (Wolcott 2008). In the guru's self-presentation as beauty expert –as an example of a member of a group– in the value of the content she shares, and in user comments implying expectations and underlying understandings about the community and the platform, I saw the need to look for patterns.

Usually, ethnographers do not make a grand theory explicit because they do not necessarily subscribe to one (Fetterman 2010). The ultimate goal is telling a rigorous, authentic story. They can be midlevel theories about how the world or some small part of it works. I aimed with my ethnographic contribution to offer an interpretive account that presents a grounded, complex picture of being famous on YouTube, of the community and inherent values framing this as well as the meaning of teaching and learning makeup techniques and disclosing one's life online.

Data Collection, Analysis and Interpretation: How I Proceeded

After explaining the study's vantage points regarding research paradigms and methodologies, I outline here a more detailed structure of the specific techniques that were adopted and adapted for this study.

I followed fundamental ethnographic concepts and research values to offer a contextualized, holistic understanding of people, roles, and practices and the connections among them. Analytically, I aimed to propose an integrative model including different empirical aspects of the phenomenon: the processes within the community, the characteristics of four types of videos, two overarching spheres of interest and a dual viewer typology. Moreover, I followed the ethnographic premise of presenting conclusions of what people in a particular place of status do by drawing attention to patterns that imply cultural process.

Entering the field

When I first discovered beauty-related tutorials on YouTube back in 2010, it was through my interest in nail art and hairstyling. I found one tutorial on braids and started reading comments of viewers not only praising the creator and expressing affection but making clear that they had watched most of her other videos too. For me, what first started as a content-related interest such as in a particular hairstyle, developed into a broader academic interest in understanding these new subject positions of amateur experts who develop into well-esteemed, popular members of a community and eventually become online celebrities. I was curious to know why the phenomenon of beauty gurus got to be so popular and relevant on YouTube. I wondered what was motivating many millions of people to watch, engage with and regularly follow not only specific online content but the actual people offering the tutorials.

As I watched each video, I decided to examine the specific gurus who created and uploaded content in order to learn more about the community. I went back and looked for their earlier videos and read user comments. One of the gurus was known as Bubz and her channel was Bubzbeauty. Most of her tutorials included instrumental background music and on-screen step-by-step indications. Her voice-over explaining the steps made the tutorials easy to follow. I noticed how Bubz's tempo and cadence of speech was slower and calmer when compared to other gurus. It had a soothing effect. Even her pitch of voice seemed to be lower and she spoke clearer than other content creators. I realized that many audience members were commenting positively on her "cute" Irish accent, which at that time, was not common among beauty gurus, since most of them seemed to be American. The trend of starting beauty-related channels started in 2008 and Bubz eventually (and quickly) rose to the top of the British YouTube beauty community as the most subscribed guru not long after starting uploading videos.

Without knowing much about the beauty scene on YouTube, and before entering the online field to research it, I had already framed in my mind two underlying research questions that needed to be explored and which eventually built the structure of the thesis. 1) *What do gurus*

offer? From the viewers' point of view: what do they give the audience? As a repository of step-by-step, information-rich tutorials YouTube is a learning platform. What are the uses, effects and implications of gurus' content for the everyday lives of audiences? 2) *What are gurus after all?* What do they represent as cultural and symbolic texts? How can we delineate the contours of their subject position as popular and influential online personalities?

Following these first two analytic themes, I further developed more specific research questions related to the "How?" of the phenomenon: How do gurus achieve and sustain merited fame in such a competitive and dynamic environment? And the "Why?": Why do people watch, what meaning does it have for them? Economic benefits and market-centered aspects are what the phenomenon means for a select group of people, (for the people making money out of it) but what does the phenomenon mean for the rest? Aside from the corporate interests of YouTube, Google or even Buzz, to me, the most insightful elements of the process, the most meaningful and interesting side of it, must be by the users and the uses they make of it. I wanted to learn about the benefits and rewards they draw from watching, and to explore the practices of the guru as producing content that is worth watching and provides people with something.

Selecting the guru

I chose to focus on a guru known as Bubz, who is an example of "best practice" within the platform and recognized as an authentic and inspiring content creator. I believe this is a fruitful case to examine in order to reflect on the socio-cultural value of beauty gurus and their offered content, since performed and created by one of the most popular and influential personalities within YouTube's beauty community. The British-Chinese young woman has created a community of her own with loyal viewers who tune in every day to not only learn beauty techniques but also be inspired by her messages.

Immersion in data was used as the primary source of understanding (Bazeley 2013), and the guru was selected with the aim of understanding process and seeking explanation rather than

correlation or describing range (Charmaz 2006). The case sample selection was purposive, also known as judgement or subjective sample. I could have chosen a different high-status beauty guru, since there are a few of the same hierarchy level as Bubz, and by now even higher. However, I realized that she was particularly praised for being very authentic and 'real' and I saw in her a good opportunity to examine the implications of her role and implicit values of the community.

Bubz is a member of a group, the beauty community, but also an example of a more reduced collective: beauty gurus, people who produce content for the community. Among those, she is part of an even more exclusive, high-hierarchy formation, namely the most popular beauty gurus. She is –and performs her multiple roles– a member of the audience, part of the community and, in addition, a content producer. What is more, she is one of the most well-known gurus, a celebrity among them, who has been active for almost ten years now. To what extent does such a figure embody the paradigmatic uses and values of celebrity –once reserved to cinematic stars– such as being a site for emulation, idealization, criticism, entertainment and knowledge?

As stated earlier, her case is individual but not unique, since other gurus must also achieve in some way a certain legitimacy that sustains them in their position of popularity. Also, the viewers, commenters and fans are often the same people, since they watch and follow several YouTubers from the same beauty community, so the expectations and inherent local premises showed in comments can be thought of as being directed not only at Bubz.

Managing data: collecting, storing and analyzing videos and comments

The internal sample strategy for choosing videos was time based to allow for maximum variation, since I considered all videos (313) uploaded to her channel since the beginning in 2008 until the day the actual data collection started, in June 2013. The further sample selection, within the videos themselves, was linked to the ongoing analysis to allow exploration of

questions that arise from initial tagging (Bazeley 2013). It was an iterative process alternating inductive and deductive phases; the latter performed when completing emerged categories through constant comparison (Merriam 2009). I performed theoretical sampling to complete (fill up) variations within the emerging categories (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). This meant that, according to the topics and structure of the videos, I explored specific attributes to compare and contrast the video categories and was, for instance, able to expand the initial typology of two to four categories.

When reporting results (García-Rapp 2016; 2017), I transcribed and described several videos, detailing their characteristics and affordances for popularity development. The main type of video, makeup tutorials, are carefully edited following the same basic structure, include lively background music, are short and easy to follow. This type of videos begins and ends with the same shots of Bubz presenting the finished style by posing playfully for the camera while showcasing his style from different angles. Tutorials are creative, pedagogical, pragmatic, straight-forward and suggest professionalism. The beauty guru includes in her tutorials on-screen text as instructions and often voice-over (recorded afterwards and edited together) explanations (García-Rapp 2016; García-Rapp 2017).

Conversely, her vlogs are very diverse since they do not display a prescribed structure and are highly conversational. For instance, during the one titled "A day in my life", she shares what her typical day in Hong Kong looks like. In this case, she films herself by doing laundry, having a bath, training and going grocery shopping, among other activities such as cooking, going for a walk with the dogs or editing videos. She often includes her husband, friends, and dogs in the videos. Instead of using a tripod, she usually holds the camera in her hand and uses direct sound as recorded at the time of filming. These features confer vlogs with a sense of spontaneity and intimacy. For a deeper analysis of her content, I transcribed more vlogs than tutorials, after realizing that these were much more diverse and conversational than her short and highly edited step-by-step makeup explanations.

The analysis was supported by quantitative variables as likes, shares, views and amount of comments that each video generated. When the affordances and impact of the video categories were assessed, I used this information in the form of a metrics table to seek out explanations and test my idea, based on user comments, that vlogs created a stronger user engagement than tutorials, which were more viewed. A key attribute of her vlogs, which I divided into relational and motivational videos, was the high amount of channel subscriptions that they led to. The quantitative overview, thus, aided in the further description and characterization of each video category.

Videos and their attributes were listed in an excel spreadsheet, in order to be clustered by using filters –such as assigning colors and then filtering by them to allow for comparisons and make patterns explicit. Each row included, besides the title, a snippet of the video as it appeared on the channel's playlists with an embedded link to it on YouTube, metrics, shortcut access to locally saved screenshots of the video in .pdf as well as cells for description and memos, where I included brief quotes, text summaries and arising thoughts. Keeping a record of researcher memos aids not only in the building of a trail to audit data collection, but also as a meaningful way of advancing analysis. I usually stopped the video to write while watching since writing “often provides sharp, sunlit moments of clarity or insight - little conceptual epiphanies” (Miles and Huberman 1994: 74).

I considered 10,000 user comments. When collecting comments, I kept with the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR 2012) which suggests a case-based approach always considering ethical concepts as harm, vulnerability and respect for persons. Before providing verbatim examples of comments, I considered if the content was ever linked to the person, would harm likely result. As usual in practice, I did not use any user or screen names. Profile, location and other personally identifying data was not collected. The guru was treated as a public person.

The following capture (Figure 1) is an example of the spreadsheet I used. Cells with blue fonts are shortcuts and hyperlinks to easily access related information, as captures of comments or pictures of the videos.

Video Title	Views	Thumbnail	Category	Code 1	Code 2	Code 3	Code 4	Code 5	Code 6	Code 7	Code 8	Code 9	Code 10	Code 11	Code 12	Code 13	Code 14	Code 15
Bra Fitting Guide (All Girls Should Watch This)	478,512		Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty
What's in My Travel Bag (Makeup, Skincare & Outfits)	412,417		Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty
Dreamy Summer	103,384		Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty	Beauty

Figure 1. Coding spreadsheet

I often printed on color papers following the same color patterns of the emerging categories, to further analyze data manually, such as the video text description that Bubz added as well as the comments included in the first page below the video. For the selected videos, coding was done manually on printed transcripts. They had wider right margins for codes and I underlined, highlighted (pre-coded), draw lines to link words, scribbled and doodled emerging ideas in the margins (see also Bazeley 2013). I used the back of the paper to record longer analytic thoughts as arising. As soon as I felt the need to integrate the emerged codes into wider categories that lead to themes (Merriam 2009), I would start diagramming and constructing visual maps. After analysis continued, most graphics were modified and expanded while others were not further considered. An example of a visual aid is the integrative model I present below (Figure 2), which displays the phenomenon in a condensed form.

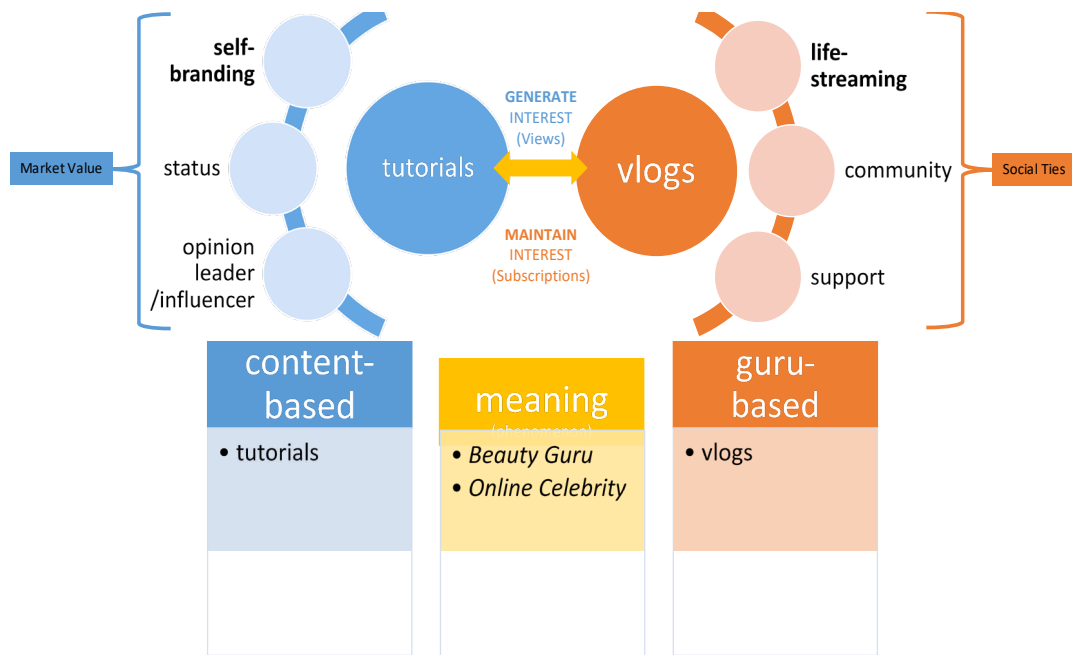


Figure 2. Integrative model of phenomenon

Quality criteria and limitations

What for studies based on different paradigms –such as postpositivistic qualitative studies– might be considered a limitation due to a loss in objectivity or validity, it is for constructivist and interpretive approaches key in building a situated, close-up view of a certain social unit (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Fetterman 2010; Guba and Lincoln 1994). As Baym and Markham argue “We are not after one true explanation. Rather, we are after a thorough, grounded, trustworthy voice that makes meaningful contributions to ongoing dialogues and on which others can build” (2009: 189).

Following this, the quality criteria to assess the study I performed are: trustworthiness and authenticity (intellectual honesty reflected in the research account), referability (plausible of being referable to other contexts to be used for comparing and contrasting) as well as the soundness and complexity of both the interpretation and the various perspectives that are considered during analysis (Baym 2009). Referability, as a means for legitimizing naturalistic inquiry, replaces the positivist criterion of external validity. Trustworthiness is related to credibility, a criterion that according to Lincoln and Guba, (2000) replaces the quantitative

research criterion of internal validity. The internal consistency of the research is achieved by prolonged engagement in the field, persistent observation, thorough descriptions grounded in examples and including raw data such as comments, as I included in the publications (videos are already searchable), researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing. In my case several instances of peer-review were applied, both institutionally and within publication review rounds. In addition, I documented the research process to provide an audit trail of data, coding stages as well as instruments and account for research decisions.

Nevertheless, part of doing fieldwork is recognizing how “there is no way we can totally capture the lifestyle of another person or group of people, any more than we could ever satisfactorily convey to another all that constitutes our own persona” (Wolcott 2008:5). One of the limitations of the study is that I only considered Bubz’s main platform, where she rose to fame, YouTube. She also updates her Instagram, and Facebook profiles often, as well as her Twitter account. It would have been interesting to compare her self-presentation and content on the different platforms, as well as the extent of users’ reactions. In addition, I have noticed that, currently, there are more negative and critical comments towards Bubz on Facebook than on YouTube. On Facebook, there seem to be longer, sometimes heated, discussions and more interactivity since more people participate replying to earlier comments. These practices are dynamic and, nowadays, the tendency appears to be to first watch on YouTube to then discuss on Bubz’s own official Facebook profile or on forums such as ‘Guru Gossip’, which contains threads dedicated to ‘Pro-Bubz’ or ‘Anti-Bubz’ posts, as well as on many other beauty gurus.

Another limitation is that I only analyze one guru who is, or was during the time of analysis, legitimized and highly valued by the community. It would have been richer to perhaps consider in addition a second case, middle-case, of a not so popular guru to compare and contrast. Alternatively, one could have also considered an opposite case, namely a guru who is delegitimized, not well regarded, or who receives many negative comments since it would have allowed to assess the limits and consequences of not ‘following the rules’.

The third limitation is related to the amount of comments per video that I was able to analyze. It was technically determined by YouTube that only up to 500 comments were available to be visualized when selecting 'see all', which was even further reduced to 100 after 2013. This restriction is considerable since some of Bubz's videos would reach 27,000 comments. Still, I was able to consider 10,000 comments.

Lastly, Bubz was contacted twice for an interview but, unfortunately, did not respond to the requests. Nevertheless, in-depth or semi-structured interviews with her viewers could have provided an insightful account on reception and engagement.

“So, are YouTube and beauty gurus good or bad?” - Challenging binaries

As introduced before, I choose to distance myself from seeing through the lens of power and hegemony to look at media and audiences, identity and self-performances from a sociocultural perspective (Sandvoss 2005). This is because I firmly believe that, as everything in life, audience communities, online practices, makeup videos, YouTube, and beauty gurus are not inherently good or bad. They are, most often than not, both; or, in other words, neither (also Boellstorff 2008; Baym 1999, 2010). Their value and meanings are subjective and contingent on needs and preferences.

Moreover, I look at the phenomenon and people involved from an equal footing that comes from recognizing that we are all fans. The object of fandom may be anything between an author, a football team, a music band or a celebrity. As Nancy Baym aptly puts it, “We all are members of audience communities of one sort or another, although some of the materials around which we organize might be granted higher social status” (1999:4, also Sandvoss 2005).

Seeing fans and audiences as ‘others’ and performing one’s own cultural identity “through a raft overlapping and interlocking versions of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Hills 2002: 28) makes evident the

perpetuation of restrictive categories and simplified claims around cultural and expressive forms.

Instead of listening closely to the emic perspective in order to understand, it seems that the argumentative orthodoxy of many academics is framed by a combative stance of 'being against' without really reflecting on if it actually could be different than what first assumed. As Jenson eloquently puts it, often others turn into "victims of forces that somehow cannot and will not influence 'us'. We are protected by reasons of education or critical insight. Thanks to these special traits, we don't succumb to whatever it is we believe applies to 'them'" (1992: 25).

As mentioned earlier, what we study when we look at particular communities is just one small part of their members' identities as social beings. We are observing only one aspect of their identities. In the words of Baym, "just as being a member of an online group is only one elements of one's life, being a member of an audience, even for die-hard fans is only part of being a persona and usually a fairly small part at that" (1999:213).

The workings of identity: information, entertainment and self-development on YouTube

The reality is that people inhabit a diversity of social worlds and their offline and online experiences permeate each other (Baym 1999). There is a multiplicity of purposes, needs and contexts that frame viewers' roles, interpretive resources and modes of reception. Appropriating texts and re-signifying them in view of their own lives and identities is performed daily. Audience members, like all of us, move between communities, daily importing and exporting practices. They spend their time in many places and perform a variety of roles. They are mobile across texts and fandoms, unbounded, and therefore only loosely classifiable as a subculture, (Wall 2015; Nadai and Maeder 2005; Bochner 2000). To bring forward valuable

and evocative studies we need to embrace the complexities of the messy phenomena we research.

Parting from the awareness of how the self is framed inside culture (Hills 2002) we can gain meaningful insight into reception and appropriation processes. What is more, seeing engagement with media texts as cultural work, where affect is “playful” and “capable of creating culture as well as being caught up in it” (2002: 93) makes possible a more insightful examination of these practices.

The community of interest developed around Bubz and her content is focused on learning practical makeup and hairstyling techniques, as well as being entertained and motivated by the guru. The medium –Internet, YouTube– is what makes the connection possible, but the topic of interest, in this case beauty, is what unites them (Baym 1999) and makes the group unique. It is about knowledge, entertainment and self-development through content and interaction. The phenomenon is active in the intersection of digital cultures with everyday life experiences and practices, both mediated and unmediated.

Spaces of cultural production and consumption as YouTube lead to local cultural systems of value as well as broader social formations and hierarchies. For a study as this one, framed by media sociology and media anthropology perspectives, what the phenomenon of beauty gurus and their online popularity is all about must rest by its uses, rewards, and benefits. That is, close to users themselves. I see the most meaningful aspects of the phenomenon in those elements related to the reception and appropriation of Bubz as a symbolic text and of her useful and pragmatic beauty content. I frame most of the study to focus on these ‘effects’ and the cultural aspects of the active community, its norms and interactions (García-Rapp 2016, 2017).

According to the examined comments, the benefits of her tutorials and vlogs can be understood in three categories: information, transformation and entertainment. They offer useful beauty-related content and are sources of inspiration, emulation, identification, fun and entertainment.

Her tutorials can be seen as topic-based instructional content and her vlogs are self-development tools. But is it 'just' knowledge and 'only' entertainment? Sometimes it is, but it often involves much more. As Grossberg argues regarding media texts, they provide audiences with "strategies, which further enable them to invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and identity in order to cope with new forms of pain, pessimism, frustration, alienation, terror and boredom" (1992: 65). Bubz's role in the lives of their fans is coupled with a sense of identification that fosters identity work. Her videos aid viewers in building and transforming their "narrative[s] of self-identity" (Thompson 1995: 210). Viewers' connection with the guru can lead to self-reflexivity and self-development regarding their own identities and lives. While the tutorials inspire them for their beauty-related aspects, her vlogs offer the chance of a broader and more personal engagement. This 'productive intimacy' involves an appropriation of resources through "semiotic productivity" (Fiske, 1992: 37; see also Hartley 1999; Thompson 1995).

Her different types of videos speak to the diverse interests and tensions that she has to balance (García-Rapp 2016). As people respond differently to her tutorials and vlogs. The comments that tutorials generate are shorter and beauty-related while her vlogs achieve longer and more personal comments, where the viewers disclose their own stories and make explicit feelings of identification and connection with Bubz and her life.

As I argued elsewhere (García-Rapp 2017) her vlogs establish a sense of 'private intimacy' (Redmond 2014) between the guru and the viewer, when they watch the personal and emotional videos. Viewers feel connected, identified and may wish to offer support to Bubz through comments. This leads to a second stage, where viewers express their engagement by sharing, liking and commenting the videos, which leaves 'material traces' in the form of metrics (Baym 2015) that are publicly visible. This second stage can be termed 'public intimacy' (Redmond 2014) because it involves making explicit their thoughts on Bubz and also self-disclosing on a public venue as YouTube as if they were talking to a friend. Similarly, Fiske

discusses these reception processes and terms them 'enunciative intimacy' (1992: 37). The third stage, 'productive intimacy', (Redmond 2006) can be seen as the most pragmatic form of intimacy because it leads to specific ideas, choices and outputs as well as inspiration and creativity.

Conclusions: A Cultural Critique (and Criticism) that Embraces Diversity

During fieldwork I often reflected on the two main tensions within anthropological research as discussed by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007): 1) the one between the particular and the universal, and 2) the emic versus etic perspectives. I incorporated these self-reflexive memos weekly as part of my field notes in order to ground and focus my research while performing numerous iterative, cyclical rounds of observation, data collection, analysis and interpretation.

When considering these tensions, it is relevant to note how, even though we remain focused on local rather than universal meanings, we still need to achieve a general, comprehensive, overarching picture plausible of being referred to and compared to. While still respecting particularity, we seek to draw conclusions to offer a framework to be used when seeking to understand new situations. We want to transform "observed *instances* of behavior into inferred *patterns* of behavior" (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:99). Taking this into account, it is useful to remind ourselves of how "as a discipline, anthropology was founded on the horns of a dilemma that committed it to the detailed study of *individual societies* while professing passionate concern for all *humankind*" (Wolcott 1995:171).

Secondly, generating theoretical ideas necessarily involve interpreting phenomena as belonging to particular categories (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). To do this, we also need to capture a certain analytical moment in the contingent and dynamic development of human interaction and cultural practices. With the clear aim of understanding the 'natives' view' or emic perspective, and still emphasizing the extent to which human social life does not take standard forms, we also interpret what is happening to make sense of it and explain it. One

cannot avoid employing analytical categories that presume general patterns and categorizing is essential to produce findings. Fieldwork, thus, is naturalistic *and* interpretive. This is why we dedicate ourselves to “make the strange familiar, so as to *understand* it, and to make the familiar strange, so as to avoid *misunderstanding* it” (2007:235).

If we see the etic perspective as the external, social scientific perspective of reality (Fetterman 2010), the dialectical play between the emic and the etic in ethnography can be compared to the more general iterative process of analyzing qualitative data through alternated inductive (data-based) and deductive (theory-guided) phases. Most ethnographers collect data from an emic perspective and then try to make sense of it in the native’s view but relating it to their own scientific analysis. According to David Fetterman, the emic and the etic perspectives can be seen as a continuum of different levels of analysis (2010). In view of this, it is important to consider that our perspectives are always situated, partial, and subject to revision (Boellstorff 2008; Bazeley 2013). Therefore, “ethnographic accounts are essentially contestable, just as cultural analysis is a necessarily incomplete business” (Morley and Silverstone 1991:157).

As Tom Boellstorff (2008), and especially when working from an ethnographic perspective, I believe in avoiding prescriptive modes of argumentation. Bearing in mind that we all make sense of things in terms of our own cultural frameworks and that people (researchers!) have diverse personal beliefs, biases, and individual tastes, it is essential to keep away from judgmental orientations (Fetterman 2010). Rather, we seek to bring forward an emphatic understanding of meanings and actions and, most importantly, respect for the social worlds and views of the people we research (Jensen 1991). In the words of Cathy Charmaz, we offer “a keen eye, and an open mind” (2006:15).

In my view, social inquiry and criticism should always go hand in hand with a respectful engagement with the practices and people we encounter along the way. Recognition and respect of audiences as cultural producers and creative respondents (Jenson 1992; Lewis

1992) reflect my stance as a researcher (and as a fan myself). “Respect and value other people as if they were us, because they always are” (Jenson 1992:26).

Qualitative researchers –as well as audience and fans studies as a discipline– have traditionally been worried more about how we are judged as ‘scientists’ by other scientists than about whether our work is useful, insightful, or meaningful. Since there is no one right way to do social science research, we should embrace and nurture contributions that extend our understanding of and commitment to the multiplicity and plurality of legitimate goals for social science inquiry (Bochner 2000). For the case of audience and fans research, even at the intersection with celebrity culture and the so-called commoditization of feelings and interactions, this could mean to continue foregrounding truly empirical grounded theories (Nadai and Maeder 2005) within the realms of ontologies of fans, audiences and users. The nuanced exploration of embedded subjectivities can allow us to continue questioning supposed truths, push the boundaries of convention while mitigating double standards of cultural value that often subsequently determine academic or political relevance.

In the same line, we as academics often seem to somehow own the “privilege and prerogative to decide upon the political worthiness of cultures and practices” (Hills 2002:13). There are many conventional conceptions of “who’s who and what’s what” that must be re-visited, re-examined and debated. We are talking here about the imposition (imposing towards other colleagues, research participants and societal groups at large) of definitions of situations and people by those sufficiently legitimated to be able to do so. Asserting critical, aesthetic, political or ideological superiority over others implies not only the exercise of control over people’s own self-determination: Judging on the inherent ‘worth’ of cultural forms and dividing practices between ‘high’ and ‘low culture’ is detrimental for the gaining of understanding and the advancement of knowledge that we seek to achieve.

To offer an example, we can look at the existence of double standards of cultural judgment (Sandvoss 2005; Jermyn and Holmes 2004) by which, for instance, studies of YouTube's beauty community would be dismissed but those examining how academics use Twitter, celebrated. How certain platforms are perceived by us researchers and subsequently portrayed in our contributions is not a given. As we can see, for instance, in the inherent devaluation of the 'narcissistic' visual culture of Instagram within academic discourses that reflect and further reinforce implicit assumptions as 'Twitter is about writing, and writing is about being intelligent, so we should care about that...' and the such.

Throughout the study, I acknowledge the influence and relevance of commercial interests and use it as a context to talk about something else. Because, at the end of the day, economic benefits and market-centered aspects are what the phenomenon means for a select group of people. The fact that popular beauty gurus exist have broader sociocultural implications for online content production and reception, and evidently, for the lives of their viewers.

Closely related to this point is Hammersley and Atkinson's framing of the ethnographic effort as seeking to advance theoretical understanding rather than practical benefits: "[ethnographers try to] understand people's actions, and the social institutions in which these are implicated, in such a way as to contribute to academic knowledge about the social worlds, rather than to further the practical enterprises in which the people they study, or others, are involved" (2007: 231). In this case, it is about contributing to comparative studies of digital cultures; which is, in essence, the study of ourselves as inhabiting diverse roles and performing a myriad of daily sociocultural practices.

The cultural value of the phenomenon rests by the uses viewers give to the content and by gurus themselves as cultural commodities; to the extent that they are able to motivate, inspire, entertain and teach others. As Hills (2002), I am proposing to approach fandom –and I extend it to online celebrity, and even YouTube itself– from a perspective that tolerates ambivalence

(Tolson 2010), contradictions, and embraces the complexity of social worlds and human interaction. In this sense, I also share the belief that “critical theory cannot claim superiority over fans’ own understanding of the industries and cultural roles in which they are implicated” (Hills 2002: 16).

Therefore, I argue for a cultural critique and scholarly involvement that fully embraces both theoretical and methodological diversity –as present within creative industries, informal learning environments, and audience communities like the YouTube case I examined– and not only certain hand-picked examples of cultural expressions, interactions, identities and practices, judged by an inherent, apparent ‘value’ determined by academics. Playing close attention and denaturalizing processes by which norms and rules develop and attain legitimacy and ‘taken-for-grantedness’ (Becker 1966) is a necessary prerequisite to advancing knowledge and practicing tolerant scholarship. Because “question[ing] inherited beliefs is an aid to enlightenment. A truth that reigns without checks and balance is a tyrant who must be overthrown...” (Feyerabend 1975:5).

The intersection between digital cultures and qualitative research practice is an area where increased methodological awareness can contribute to a useful, broader discussion within interpretive, creative qualitative research agendas. While fan studies researchers may have shied away from specifically naming ethnography as their approach, in studies otherwise interested in the lived experience of people’s engagement with media texts (Evans and Stasi 2014), we are in need of “a self-confident ethnography that is not afraid to capture the vivid and richly filled sprawl of the contemporary human landscape” (Bochner 2000:535-36). Dismissing outright the application of certain research methods, or the upholding of particular epistemologies, especially if the researcher is from a different “team” (discipline) without engaging with that individual research piece’s rationale and its conclusions would be a disappointingly one-dimensional response that neglects to see the value in meaningful grounded scholarship.

To finalize, I would like to revisit the point made earlier that ethnography represents a wider set of principles, an essence other than merely methods. In this sense, it is relevant to consider how one “can certainly live an ethnographically oriented life, drawing upon an ethnographic perspective for viewing the world around you” (Wolcott 2008:278). It is an enduring curiosity, a certain perception and this particular way of seeing life, reality, the world –which are part of me as a person and as a researcher– that I want to transmit here. As many others, I see ethnography as a calling to embrace and respect diverse cultural worlds as well as being aware, recognize, and reflect on our own subjective values and socialization. “The hope that, to whatever extent we can convey the spirit of ethnography, [...] we might someday achieve a society more truly tolerant of and committed to cultural diversity” (2008:281).

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ⁱ For a discussion on the relevance of the word community and the cohesion of the group, as well as norms governing content and members' practices, see García-Rapp 2016, 2017.

ⁱⁱ It took place during 22 months between June 2013 and April 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is without considering latest developments in social media apps such as Snapchat or features of Instagram and Facebook thanks to which videos can be live streamed and are automatically deleted after a certain amount of time. Therefore, from the persistence of online content as 'default mode', the possibility of inherently ephemeral online content is nowadays active.

^{iv} There are ethnographies situated epistemologically at the phenomenological end of the spectrum while others are located at the materialistic philosophical end and rely more on etically derived data (Fetterman 2010). Ethnographies can also attend to micro- or macro cultural and sociological levels (Jensen 1991) or be focused on action research. Besides the classical, so-called traditional (ethnological) ethnography, several other types of ethnographic practice have been defined: sociological, applied, critical, focused, realist, alternative (see Knoblauch 2005; Bochner 2000; Agar 2006; Wall 2015; Fine 1999).