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## The 'WeTube' in YouTube – creating an online community through video sharing

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**Abstract:** Video sharing has become a growing social practice, with YouTube being the predominant online video sharing site. Most of the research concerning YouTube's social impact has been focused on quantitative evaluation of the social interaction facilitated by the tools embedded in the site. This study aims to explore the growth of the YouTube online community through the eyes of YouTube users who author video-blogs, and to ascertain whether a community is actually created, or does YouTube remain an online broadcasting platform. Building upon users' perspectives and thoughts, and using grounded theory approach, the foundations of an online community – people, interaction, shared purpose and culture – are analysed to understand how users view YouTube. A new important characteristic of the YouTube online community, face-to-face mediated interaction, will be presented and its role in differentiating the visually enhanced YouTube community from textual communities will be assessed.

**Keywords:** online community; social media; social network; YouTube; face-to-face interaction; visual recognition; video sharing.

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## 1 Introduction

YouTube.com is a video sharing site, which offers embedded social networking features. In much the same manner as other media sharing sites (e.g., Flickr, Picasa, Treemo), it allows users to calibrate their participation and interaction levels – alternating between viewing the site's content passively and actively communicating with other users. Most research of YouTube's social impact was focused on evaluating the number and frequency of social interactions occurring through the sites' social-networking tools (Cha et al., 2007; Geisler and Burns, 2007; Halvey and Keane, 2007; Paolillo, 2008). These were quantitative assessments of the strength and divergence of relations created among users, and the structure of the network created by them. Ethnographic studies of YouTube focused on privacy related behaviour and contentious experiences (Lange, 2007a, 2007b). Our previous work triangulated quantitative and qualitative analyses of the YouTube network to reveal the sense and structure of the YouTube community (Rotman et al., 2009). As a continuation of our previous work, this study focuses on the users' perspective: their views and actions while using YouTube for video sharing and personal communication. It seeks to understand whether YouTube users employed the social tools of the site to create and maintain a lively online community, or do they act independently of each other, posting videos with little regard to possible future interaction with their peers. We emphasise users' experiences, as they are discussed and shared through the videos they authored. Users' videos were retrieved and analysed, using a bottom-up grounded theory approach, to uncover the foundations of the YouTube community, and the place it holds in the eyes of their authors. Based on previous literature, a working definition of an online community will be presented, its different facets will be discussed, and new facets will be elaborated.

The next sections of the paper are organised as follows: Section 2 defines the concept of online communities through previous literature, and suggesting a working definition of the online community; Section 3 presents the phenomenon of YouTube and the social media tools embedded in it; Section 4 discusses the methods used in this study; Section 5 presents a grounded theory analysis of the data retrieved from YouTube videos, in light of the various attributes of an online community and Section 6 draws conclusions from the study.

## 2 Defining online communities

### 2.1 The elusive definition of online communities

There is no one exact definition to the term 'virtual community' or 'online community'. Different definitions relate to the various populations of such communities, the communities' diverse purposes and structures, as well as the meaning communities hold for different stakeholders (Preece, 2000). Defining what an online community is will allow us to ascertain whether such community exists on YouTube.

The term 'community' is borrowed from offline social interaction to reflect a known cultural and social construct that, while amorphous, is omnipresent in our lives. As with online communities, offline communities eluded exact definition: Hillery (1955) defined a community as "a collection of people engaged in social interaction, *within a geographic area*, that has one or more additional ties". Dependant on changes in the nature of the community, later definitions moved away from physical attributes and spatial proximity to communication and social exchanges as the core characteristics of a community (Wellman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). This change was best reflected in the emergence of online communities. In trying to draw the boundaries of online communities, many scholars did not attempt a single conclusive definition, but rather related to the different attributes such communities may hold. Among the characteristics of online communities that came up frequently in literature were:

- 1 commitment to a shared domain (Cothrel and Williams, 1999; Preece, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Porter, 2004)
- 2 shared repertoire and resources (Wenger, 1998)
- 3 companionship and bonding (Wellman, 2001; Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999; Preece, 2000)
- 4 social activity and interaction (Donath, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2002; Kozinets, 2002) or collective efficacy (Carroll et al., 2005).

Though all attributes are important components of the online community infrastructure, the last two, which focus on the people in the community, are paramount. Users have a critical role in the creation and sustainability of the online community – a mass of people who are meeting at a certain place online, interacting and communicating is imperative for a thriving online community (Rheingold, 1993; Hagel and Armstrong, 1997; Lee et al., 2003); yet, a mass too large may bring fracture and accelerate the demise of the community (Preece, 2000). It is through the balanced participation of users that the resources and repertoire of the community are created. Without it, online social media applications will remain mere infrastructural tools with little added value.

Participation creates, in time, culture, customs and norms. Creation of a unique community culture serves to strengthen the community's boundaries and sense of belonging that users feel, as well as to create a definitive inimitable cultural content that separates the specific community from other online interactions. In this sense, the online community culture is more likely to resemble a system of meanings, symbols and

practices (Hofstede, 2001), or ‘cultural markers’ (Barber and Badre, 1998) that signify group affiliation, than the common view of culture as a shared way of thinking and beliefs that shape behaviour and is passed from one generation to another (Kluckhohn, 1951). The intercommunity culture provides a framework for understanding each other, directing users’ conduct, interacting and communicating, providing the community its uniqueness, and inspiring a sense of belonging.

## 2.2 *A working definition of online communities*

The diverse purposes and particular needs online communities cater to, entail different community characteristics. However, it can be assumed that all forms of online communities are based on several elementary attributes:

- 1 a shared purpose or common interests
- 2 participants’ interaction
- 3 user-generated content
- 4 the existence of clear boundaries that define the purpose and practices of the community
- 5 a unique communal culture.

Thus, our proposed working definition would be that *an online community is a group (or various subgroups) of people, brought together by a shared interest, using a virtual platform, to interact and create user-generated content that is accessible to all community members, while cultivating communal culture and adhering to specific norms.*

In later parts of this paper, the interaction happening on YouTube will be analysed against this definition, to assess whether a community is actually created, or does YouTube remain an online broadcasting platform.

## 3 **The phenomenon of YouTube**

The YouTube video sharing site needs little introduction, as it is an omnipresent phenomenon, which effects the entertainment and broadcasting fields, personal communications, and even the political arena.

First launched in February 2005, YouTube has quickly become the largest video sharing service on the internet, holding about 10% of all internet traffic (Cheng et al., 2007), and accounting for more than 72% of all videos watched online (June, 2009). In 2009, YouTube reached more than 100 million US viewers; at that time it was estimated that more than 20 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute (Arrington, 2009).

YouTube allows registered users to upload their videos and share them with the public: to view a video, one does not need to register or identify in any way, however, in order to broadcast a video, a user needs to create an account. Registered users can choose between publishing their videos publicly, or privately, so that only invited viewers can watch them. Uploading videos and sharing them with friends or through other social

media (e.g., e-mail, blogs) is extremely easy even for non-technological savvy users, and may contribute to the immense popularity of the site. Video sharing is augmented by various social tools: users create personal profiles ('channels'); the data displayed on each user's channel may include an explicit outline of social relations (e.g., friends, comments and bulletin boards), interests (channels the user is subscribed to), content related data (number and dates of the videos posted), and a brief personal introduction by the user (Rotman et al., 2009). Users are able to adjust all these settings to reflect their preferences. Thus, the differences in users' pages are striking: some users prefer not to disclose any personal information, while others exhibit their social relations and personal information publicly. YouTube also enables users to communicate through various ways, such as response videos, written comments and ratings. Personal communication can go beyond the formal applications that are available on YouTube, to include various backchannels such as e-mail, IM-ing, phone calls and face-to-face meetings.

## **4 Methodology and properties of the study**

### *4.1 Choosing relevant methodology*

Prior studies of social interaction on YouTube have focused on quantitative assessments of connections, and empirical measurements of the YouTube structure (Cha et al., 2007; Geisler and Burns, 2007; Halvey and Keane, 2007; Paolillo, 2008), design initiatives (Marcus and Perez, 2007), or ethnographic studies of privacy and self-expression through YouTube engagement (Lange, 2007a, 2007b). Less attention has been given to the question whether users view YouTube as more than a mere 'personal video sharing service' (YouTube mission statement, at [www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com)), and as an online community.

Following the principals of qualitative research methods, and most pointedly, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Becker, 1993; Corbin and Strauss, 2007), the purpose of this study is not to present a representative sample of the population of users, but rather to focus closely, through a selected purposeful sample (Patton, 2002), on users' views and feelings of attachment to YouTube, and gauge YouTube's users' notions about the existence of the fundamentals of the online community – as defined in the previous section – within the larger scope of YouTube's social network.

This study focuses on the videos published on YouTube, as they construct the YouTube reality as manifested in this context. These videos are symbols of the meaning (Kozinets, 2002), given to them by YouTube users; they reflect their thoughts, feelings, behaviour patterns and the norms that govern them, and as such, create a basis from which we gain insight into users' understanding of YouTube's environment.

While focusing on users' narrative, existing literature on online community research will present a general background for the study, and aid in pointing out the contextual gaps and terms that need clarification (Winkelman et al., 2005; Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Cutcliffe, 2000). New concepts, derived from the data will to be woven into existing theories, to create a broader and more comprehensive theoretical framework that will enrich the existing definition of online communities.

#### 4.2 The sample

The body of videos currently published on YouTube is enormous, encompassing more than 1 billion video posts, with more than 20 hours of videos uploaded every minute (June, 2009). Using qualitative research methods on a body of information of this magnitude, is extremely complicated (Lange, 2007a; Paolillo, 2008). A general framework for analysis, which will ensure an information-rich dataset that will be analysed in-depth (Morse, 1991; Kozinets, 2002), was needed. Thus, *purposeful sampling* was used (Patton, 2002).

When posting a video, YouTube users are asked to briefly describe and tag it. Most descriptions are short and consist of a paragraph or less. Tags are used to relate information about the video's topic and contents. Tags are left to the user's discretion, and are not subject to a predefined taxonomy. YouTube's search engine retrieves videos according to the search terms found in the video's description, tags or user name. At present, the contents of the video itself are not searchable. To retrieve a preliminary sample, an advanced search was performed and continuously refined. The basic search terms included the words 'YouTube' and 'community'. A preliminary search of the terms retrieved more than 298,000 videos. After viewing several randomly selected videos, it was apparent that the most data-rich videos came from the vlogging ('videoblogging') arena. Thus, the search was delimited to the specific channels that are categorised as 'people and blogs'. The result of this search was still quite large, as it included more than 57,000 videos. Realising that most users discussed the YouTube community in terms of online versus offline worlds, the words 'online'/'virtual' were added to the search and brought its results down to a number close to 1,500 videos.

As this study is focused on the way *users* perceive the existence of a community, the videos analysed were those which visually presented users discussing the issue while facing the camera. Medley-videos or broadcasting-videos (i.e., film segments or TV shows) were not incorporated into the sample, as they are not a direct manifestation of users' thoughts. Videos that were retrieved but were not related to the research topic, as well as duplicate videos, were dismissed. More than a 100 videos were retrieved and viewed by the researcher. From these, 32 videos were transcribed and analysed, until 'conceptual saturation' (Corbin and Strauss, 2007) was reached.

The users who authored the videos were mostly male. Information about the age of the authors was available only for a third of them, placing them in the 20–40 age bracket. Most have been YouTube users for several months to a year when they became engaged in the YouTube community discussion, and all of them are still active to date (i.e., have an active personal channel, and have logged in the past month).

Due to the 'viral' nature of YouTube videos, a common structure is prevalent: response videos to a specific video-post are posted immediately after its publication or continuously over long periods of time, sometimes even years after the original publication. Responses which were posted a long time after the video originated prolong the discussion and offer new perspectives of the video. Most videos in our sample were posted in the summer and fall of 2006, and in the fall of 2007. In these two points in time, the idea of YouTube community was often discussed. In both cases, the discussion originated from a comment, reflection or question video-posted by one of the more popular vloggers who reflected upon the nature of the YouTube community. Response videos and comments continued these discussions over a prolonged period of time.

### 4.3 Methodological limitations

Sampling from the corpus of YouTube videos is not devoid of limitations: random sampling is not possible due to the limited content-related information provided by YouTube; users who are not prominent may be altogether ignored; and the magnitude of data may cause unwarranted loss of relevant videos. Since most researches of YouTube were quantitative, a selection of several entry points (Paolillo, 2008); sampling the whole site for a definite period of time (Cheng et al., 2007; Halvey and Keane, 2007; Rotman et al., 2009); or limiting the sample to a specific category (Cha et al., 2007) were used to mitigate these obstacles. However, most researchers note the drawbacks of the methods chosen, and no one unbiased method is agreed upon. Qualitative research of YouTube has centred on case studies (Harley and Fitzpatrick, 2008) and convenience sampling (Lange, 2007a). None of these methods ensure a comprehensive understanding of the happenings on YouTube, yet an attempt to highlight a specific issue or debate that occurs within the site can be best served by qualitative analysis which is based on a chosen body of works (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Kozinets, 2002; Langer and Beckman, 2005).

In this study, a *purposeful sample* (Patton, 2002; Morse, 2006) of videos was selected, and its limitations should be noted: we chose the specific subgroup of vloggers. While naturally talkative and animated, these users are also very opinionated and engaged in the idea of the YouTube community. Their videos illustrate stories and accounts which revealed repeated patterns and highlighted an oft-neglected view: that of the users of online communities.

### 4.4 The analysis process

Following the principals of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Corbin and Strauss, 2007), data derived from the sample videos were analysed and coded to reveal repeating patterns and concepts. The videos selected were transcribed from visual and vocal media to text. Following Emission and Smith (2000), who called for observational analysis of existing videos, we also looked for visual aspects of the authors' behaviour, and specifically interactional details (Pink, 2004), and noted them. However, in most cases, due to the nature of vlogging practices, authors were statically seated in front of the camera, addressing only the camera and an undefined audience, with little in the way of mutual interaction or other non-verbal cues.

Transcriptions and notes were coded using general concepts that were derived from the texts themselves. General codes included words that stood out from the texts, ideas that repeated themselves, terms that were unique to YouTube users, and patterns of engagement that were shared by users. Based on the preliminary analysis, supplemental videos were analysed in the same manner, until data saturation was achieved.

Codes that resulted from the preliminary stage were constantly compared against later data, codes and concepts modified accordingly. Codes were arranged hierarchically to reveal higher-level concepts. These, in turn, were axially evaluated, and compared against existing literature, to illuminate the phenomenon of a YouTube community.

## 5 Results

The exploration of YouTube video content commenced from the working definition of an online community. Looking for users' discussions about the various attributes of a community, we kept our eyes open to different categories that they might suggest, and to alternative interpretations of the community concept that may be articulated by them. Many users unconsciously echoed terms similar to those used by scholars describing online communities: people, interaction, shared interests and common culture were often mentioned as the foundations of an online community. A new theme that was not mentioned in earlier studies is that of 'face-to-face interaction', as an important component of community life.

### 5.1 People

Users conveyed the idea that a community is a complex structure that entails sociability: not just one-on-one, singular connections, rather a hub of interactions in which a user communicates with another or with several other users.

"I like to call this a spiderweb, because everyone interacts with each other, and everyone is a sender and a receiver. In this entire community there are smaller communities, smaller different topics and interests that they share with each other. So this is me, right here, and I interact with all these different groups... I participate in a community." (User-22<sup>1</sup>)

Most users shared Preece's (2000) view, that "people are the pulse of the community. Without them, there is no community" and mentioned their peers and their peers' participatory actions to be the most important factor in the existence of a community.

#### 5.1.1 Diversity

Some of the users referred to the diversity of users as a source of community strength. The opportunity to be acquainted with different people, from different backgrounds, living in diverse geographical places, was frequently mentioned by users as one of the most important features of YouTube:

"You can see a cross section of society... that goes from race, creeds, sexual orientation, religion and that's the definition of a community, but better, because people get past the stereotypes." (User-3)

"Although I can be in Los Angeles and another person can be in San Francisco and another one can be in South Africa, we all can do the same thing." (User-12)

Diversity is not just a 'fringe benefit' users incur from their activity on YouTube; it is essential in the creation of a community and in facilitating mutual engagement. It also provides interest and prevents the community's stagnation, which may be the result of excessive homogeneity.

### 5.1.2 *Us and them*

Users made a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them'. 'Them' referring to the commercial channels, which are owned by media corporations, to promote their artists, while 'us' were the original hard-core YouTube users who publish their thoughts or creative efforts on personal channels. To the users, the latter are the most essential part of the community:

"I don't consider the community a lot of the big YouTubers with 20,000 subscribers, who don't comment to you, who don't respond or interact with you. And understandably these people they can't talk to all of us. But I guess for me, what I mean when I'm talking about a community, it's also us with very few subscribers up to a few thousands, who really interact and chat and stick in." (User-35)

Users also differentiated between 'residents' – prolific users, who became permanent fixtures on YouTube, and treat it like their 'virtual home' (User-24), and 'tourists' – the people who incidentally visit to YouTube mainly to watch entertaining videos and almost never interact. Though both are welcome by the community, residents are regarded highly, as contributors to the community:

"[There is a difference between] a tourist that comes to YouTube only when sent a link [and a] resident. For residents YouTube has become town hall, local park; the place where you share yourself with others." (User-13)

The clear distinction between 'them' and 'us' helps users charter the lines dividing the several subcommunities that exist on YouTube, and allows them to identify themselves with the particular community, creating a feeling of mutual affinity.

In the YouTube community, users seek to form friendship and find a sense of companionship. Affiliation and diversity come together to create the community, maintain it through shared interests and a sense of belonging. To many of the users, contact with their peer is the most important foundation of the community.

## 5.2 *Shared purpose*

The shared purpose is the central object or idea around which the community congregates. It can be based on a 'boundary object' (Wenger, 1998), an artefact, concept, another form of reification, or on a sense of a similar goal or objective (Preece, 2000), which cements relations within the community, or connects separate communities. In the case of YouTube, the shared purpose is a general and relatively obvious one: publishing creative videos. However, users did note that subgroups of more focused purposes exist:

"You look at YouTube, it really is 4–5 different communities. You've got the obvious segment of thrill seeking or entertainment seeking videos. Another community that exists here is the creative artists that come in and do really cool animations and really neat editing of videos. And you've got the musicians that come in. Those are really different kinds of communities." (User-31)

That said, users' reference to a shared purpose or domain, was far less prevalent than other concepts that were mentioned throughout the videos. This may be explained by the common notion that YouTube is a place to 'upload personal videos' (YouTube.com mission statement), and a person that chooses to participate in the happening on this site adheres to the shared purpose that is portrayed in this motto.

### 5.3 *Interaction*

The extent of interaction between users, and the means they used to communicate with each other, received a lot of attention in users' videos. The opportunity for personal interaction changed users' perception of YouTube from a broadcasting tool to a place when personal relationships can be built:

"This video that I'm broadcasting today is actually a communications video, because I'm responding directly to something 'John' put out there sort of in the form of a video letter." (User-31)

YouTube channels promote interaction and communication by providing internal communication routes (e.g., comments and personal messages to subscribers). Users can also propose alternative external communication routes or 'back-channels' on their personal channels. The most common way of communication among users is posting reciprocal written comments or videos in reply to videos, using the internal YouTube tools:

"I try to leave comments, let people know what I think of their videos. I leave positive comments most of the time, I'm with the old school that if you don't have anything good to say don't say anything about it at all." (User-33)

"I don't have a whole lot of subscribers but the ones I have are talkative, they comment and respond." (User-14)

The established rapport creates recognition and emotional attachment between users, based on the frequency and volume of personal interaction. One of the users equalled the level of intimacy and effort put into video posts to that of letter-writing and users' relationships to those of pan-pals:

"We're kind of at the stage we were back before the turn of the century when people were communicating by letter. And you had to compose your thoughts and put them down in a letter and send it out, and then the person who received the letter would read it, compose their thoughts and reply to the letter and then you could read that or reply to that letter. It's not really that interactive conversation that you have on a chat, for instance, it's more composed, more thoughtful." (User-31)

Back-channels are just as important. Users mentioned receiving Christmas cards and invitations to attend personal events from other users (User-30), as well as extensive e-mail exchanges with others:

"There is also quite a little chain of e-mails going on between a cool group of people. There could be 67 e-mails a day on that thread of e-mails." (User-2)

In some cases, personal communication went beyond the video topics and extended to more private matters:

“I made really good friends, people I started talking to everyday, who I have known for most of a year. Some of them are very close friends I can talk to about personal things and it’s really great.” (User-15)

Although in most cases the interaction happened on a one-on-one basis, its effect went further and contributed to the feeling of mutual engagement.

### 5.3.1 Support

Users emphasised their interactions as a tool for cementing relationships and an outlet for sharing feelings, needs and support. The concept of support took different shapes in users’ comments:

*Emotional support* – extended in times of need, such as illness, loss and hardship. It is also a way to share common beliefs and religious sentiments. This form of support was mentioned extensively in the videos. From general comments, such as: “A lot of people pulling together for one person. You don’t see that in the real world very often.” (User-2). To more specific examples of reaching out to support community members: a virtual candlelight vigil (User-30), posting supportive messages and videos to users in times of need (User-19), and offline fundraisers that were aided by virtual communications through YouTube (User-7). Reaching out and handing emotional support is easier in online communities than more practical forms of support (Preece and Ghazati, 2001; Pfeil and Zaphiris, 2007). However, the importance of virtual support in creating a sense of cohesiveness cannot be underestimated; empathy and support are not exclusive to formal ‘support’ communities, rather they play a significant role in other online communities, as well.

*Practical support and mutual recommendation patterns* – this form of support is called for when a user encounters technical difficulties or is trying to promote himself. Many users want to be noticed (User-19), get their works seen (User-15), or immortalise themselves through YouTube videos (User-14). With the enormous body of videos uploaded daily to YouTube, it is hard to get noticed by other users or the media industry. A communal action, linking, referring and discussing a specific video or author, is a way to promote awareness to creative users and raise their ratings:

“As a community we kind of watch out for one another. I think because it is hard to get found it is even more important to point people out. I know that the first time I got a big jump in subscribers was when ‘cool Sean’ did a video about me. I had mini jumps in subscribers when I had collaborations with other people, or when I’ve done video responses to someone. In my opinion you can keep it (the community) alive just by using it, talking about it, telling people who you’re watching and why you’re watching them. You don’t even have to mention channels, mention the specific video and say how good it was, or how it moved you, or how funny it was.” (User-27)

Through the many different forms support takes, it addresses users’ fundamental need to be connected and touched by other people.

## 5.4 *Culture*

Particular terms and joint repertoire are woven into users' description of the YouTube community. They are cultural symbols, aiding in the creation of a meaningful and unique culture, which shapes the community. These symbols do not carry a meaning by themselves; rather they are coherent in the eyes of community members, and gain their communal place through the use members make of them. For instance, when a user employs the term 'YouTuber' others will know instinctively that he means a permanent and dedicated user of the site (Lange, 2007a); the specific attributes of the term will be understood through its ongoing use as a communal resource. The unique culture of the YouTube community can be seen through the terms users employ and their shared experiences.

### 5.4.1 *Unique terms*

Terms coined specifically for YouTube, (e.g., 'YouTubers'), or a specific use of borrowed term, (e.g., 'residents', 'tourists'). 'Haters' is another commonly used term, referring to online bullies who harass YouTubers: "Every community has its bullies. Here we call them haters" (User-2). Yet, haters may be more than just a unique term. They are an inseparable part of the community ["Even the haters are a part of YouTube" (User-12)], and have a role in reinforcing relationships within the community, as they create a common 'enemy' against which the community rallies.

### 5.4.2 *Shared experiences*

Shared experiences are occurrences, rituals and practices (Hofstede, 2001), which foster a stronger sense of community. In YouTube, shared experiences may range from positive occurrences such as face-to-face meetings, to 'The YouTube drama' – disagreements and conflicts that arise between users, resulting in mutual 'video-fights':

"When you get a YouTube account and you get to be a part of communities and groups within, there comes the inevitable drama, which drives the group to reaction... and there are people that thrive on the drama." (User-5)

Positive or negative, the community's repertoire and cultural symbols are dynamic and dyadic. They have an extensive part in creating the community, and are dependant on members to create and recreate them as the community develops.

## 5.5 *Face-to-face interaction*

A novel concept, rarely attributed to the online community, face-to-face interaction between users was mentioned extensively throughout the videos, as one of the most important bases of the YouTube community. Personal relations within the larger environment of a community are not uncommon (Wellman et al., 1996; Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2002), even in online environments, where the main meeting place is virtual. In online communities face-to-face meetings are less prevalent, in part due to objective difficulties resulting from the geographic distance of users, and in part due to personal privacy preferences. Yet, in many cases, online interaction flows to offline environments as well. Walther (1995) and Wellman and Gulia (1999) found that the

longer people interact online, the more likely they are to engage in face-to-face meetings. The impact visual recognition has on communication and interaction is substantial (Kapoor et al., 2005; Sproull and Kiesler, 1991), as it strengthens the personal affinity between community members.

In the YouTube community, face-to-face interaction is common, and may take many forms: from one-on-one impromptu intimate encounters to group meetings that are usually organised well in advance and may include a more structured programme. In group meetings, people gather to chat and familiarise themselves with each other informally, share even more personal information and create rapport with others:

“This [meeting] cements the feeling that YouTube is a community. You are not only communicating on paper, you communicate both visually and auditorially, and all the senses but the sense of touch and this [meeting] is what the smell and touch are for.” (User-3)

Other meetings are more intimate, and usually include two to three users, who socialise outside the virtual media. Meetings are used to promote creative cooperation and deepen personal relationships; these meetings bridge over geographical distance, and may include hosting invitations that create closer intimacy between users:

“A lot of people it seems are meeting in real life, talk on the phone, do collaborations, there's been a few people that have hooked up and moved in together, there's been a lot of romances happening and there's some deep genuine friendships.” (User-30)

Face-to-face interaction is not often perceived as a one of the essential elements for the existence of online community. Rather, the online community is considered a substitute for face-to-face relations (Putnam, 2000). At best, face-to-face meetings are viewed as a supportive tool that enhances participation and fosters a sense of belonging (Kim, 2000; Preece, 2000). Video sharing enables users to express themselves verbally while utilising other visual cues, that contribute to the richness of the message conveyed. The higher frequency and intensity of the face-to-face interaction described by users may be due to the nature of YouTube as *visual social media*, which facilitates visual recognition and moves away from the online anonymity which prevails in textual social media. Another possible reason in the relatively exhibitionist nature of YouTube participation, and most pointedly, the self-exposure authoring a vlog entails. In solely textual environments, the author of a post can remain completely anonymous, use a pseudonym and other means of self-camouflage to maintain his privacy, or decide which facets of himself to disclose. Visual recognition of YouTube users is relatively easy, and may lead to a closer sense of acquaintance and stronger emotional affinity to other users. That said, not all users are ready or willing to expose themselves to the same degree, and the need to calibrate this exposure may be an obstacle for users who are hesitant about the level of participation and engagement 'required' of them by other users, in order to belong to the community.

## 6 Conclusions

Our exploration of the YouTube community commenced from aligning previously articulated components of the online community with YouTube vloggers' accounts. The

working definition of the community we used in our analysis encompassed *people, their shared interest, the virtual platform they use to interact and create content, and the norms and culture they cultivate*. We found that YouTube users seem to be almost unanimous in their feeling about the nature of YouTube. To them, it is a community that serves as a platform for communication and interaction rather than a broadcasting application. When looking at the aforementioned fundamental attributes of online communities, we noticed that inadvertently YouTube vloggers echoed the sentiments generated by previous research. They see themselves as a group of people brought together by their shared interest in authoring video blogs; they interact with each other through different tools, both on-site and through back-channels, and create a unique culture comprised of linguistic terms and gestures. The thread which runs through all the video posts is the feeling of companionship, the ability to create meaningful relationships and practices, and even a sense of emotional attachment to 'their' site.

Users emphasised the novel concept of face-to-face interaction, as a natural and significant part of community life. For 'YouTubers', face-to-face interaction serves to promote creative collaboration or to bolster personal ties initiated online. The prevalence and importance of face-to-face meetings may suggest that in visually enhanced online environments (i.e., where users can see each other, and be recognised physically), recognition and intimacy are created more easily, and there is a tendency for community members to go beyond the screen and cultivate their relations with other users in offline settings, as a natural continuity of their online interaction.

Our analysis reveals that many users express a sense of belonging to the YouTube community core; this deep emotional tie to the community and affiliation to other users is not diminished by the site's enormous size and daily number of visitors. The immense scale of a site such as YouTube may be seen as an obstacle to the establishment of an intimate community. However, as the vloggers exhibited, subgroups of smaller communities are created within the larger scope of the larger site, enabling users to find kinship and cultivate close relationships. It may be that the visual recognition and face-to-face intimacy, which are embedded in video sharing, aid in overcoming such scale-related obstacles. The community they envision and relate to might not encompass all YouTube channels, but a smaller subgroup, but that does not detract from the power of such community. Although the actual community may include a relatively small number of participants, and its structure may be more akin to that of a social network, it is still perceived by the users to hold all the attributes of an established online community, and fulfil their need to belong to such a community. This phenomenon may not be unique to YouTube, and could encompass other large-scale sites which incorporate social networking and media-sharing or social broadcasting (e.g., Flickr, SlideShare, and Twitter).

Integrating applications that will cultivate interaction among users in media sharing sites, even on a partial and smaller scale than that of the whole network, may shift users' patterns of interaction from broadcasting to communicating, and create a stronger sense of affiliation among them, transcending media sharing or social broadcasting to create even more socially cohesive environments, which will promote participation and users' engagement.

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## Notes

- 1 Users' names and identifying details were changed to protect their privacy.