YouTube lies at the intersection of media creation and social networking, providing young people a participatory culture in which to create and share original content while making new social connections.

YouTube as a participatory culture

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Recent discussions around youth’s online activities focus on Web sites as virtual spaces where they can “hang out” and “mess about.”1 Nationally representative statistics have shown that online technologies have made creating and sharing media content easier and more accessible for young people.2 Researchers see these virtual spaces as becoming portals to communities where youth bond with peers, engage in public discourse, explore identity, and acquire new skills.3

The explosion of youth subscription to original content-media-sharing Web sites such as YouTube has confirmed their relevance and importance in the lives of today’s youth. These Web sites combine media production and distribution with social networking features, making them an ideal place to create, connect, collaborate, and circulate novel and personally meaningful media. By merging the technical aspects of youth as media creators with the social aspects of youth as social networkers, new media platforms such as YouTube offer a participatory culture in which to develop, interact, and learn.
As youth development researchers, we must be cognizant of this important and relevant context and critically examine what this new platform offers that might be unique to (or redundant) typical adolescent experiences in other developmental contexts. To this end, this article examines YouTube using Henry Jenkins and colleagues’ participatory culture framework in order to understand how this type of Web technology offers a space for youth development.4

The YouTube craze

YouTube is a video-sharing Web site. Users share and view videos made by other users free of charge. Boasting that it is one of the most frequented Web sites on the Internet, YouTube received 100.9 million unique viewers who watched over 6.3 billion videos (62.6 videos per viewer) in January 2009 alone.5 Most of these are short video clips averaging three and a half minutes each. Although the majority of viewers are adults, teens between fifteen and nineteen years old account for 17 percent of YouTube’s market, with about even male (8 percent) and female (9 percent) representation.6 Thus, young people account for a significant portion of the YouTube audience.

Research shows that teens engage in a variety of activities on YouTube. Entertainment Media Research found that 44 percent of teens find YouTube to be a better source of video entertainment than other sources. Over half of this population reported that they registered to become a member to post comments. In addition, 17 percent of teens who registered to create their own YouTube channel, a Web page that users can customize and personalize, did so to broadcast their original content. Teenagers visit YouTube to be entertained (79 percent), pass time (71 percent), watch videos (61 percent), see what others are talking about (56 percent), and follow up recommendations from friends (53 percent).7 These numbers are not much different from data from other age groups.
However, YouTube is much more than an online platform for sharing and broadcasting content. Its unique technical and social features support the formation of a participatory culture among the members of its community. Rooted in media studies, the participatory culture framework is relevant to youth development researchers because it provides a lens to understand specific mechanisms that attract youth to collaborate and produce creative, self-expressive, and self-initiated media products.8

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**Participatory culture**

The participatory culture framework is defined by five characteristics.

**Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement**

One key element that sets YouTube as a pertinent space for youth activity is that it has low entry requirements and its participatory trajectory is gradual. Most visitors to the Web site are unregistered users who come to the site to view videos, and teens account for 35 percent of the avid viewership who watch a video at least once a day.9 Some viewers stay at the periphery of the community; they may watch a video and read comments but not contribute to any discussions.10 Their participation is accounted for in terms of view counts, which increases the popularity of each user video. When members feel comfortable about contributing to a comment thread, they register for a free account to comment, respond, and rate video clips. These activities account for the majority of users’ engagement and are crucial to the way the community operates. These feedback interactions motivate content creators to create more videos and are critical to the ways video content is circulated within the community.

Full-fledged YouTubers are those who regularly broadcast videos to the YouTube audience. Approximately thirteen hours of videos are uploaded every minute, and YouTube continues to develop
new features to make the process as simple as possible. Although teens constitute the dominant demographic on YouTube in terms of viewership, comments, rating, and other feedback mechanisms, they are not the leading age group for video uploads: only 22 percent of teens who have visited the site have uploaded videos as opposed to 30 percent of adults ages twenty-five to thirty-four.

Although scholars in the field of media studies have begun to suggest that youth are increasingly becoming producers of media content rather than mere consumers, the statistics show that teens still prefer to participate at the periphery.

Finally, as with other social media properties, a few individuals tend to rise to leadership roles because of their contribution to the community. YouTube’s Partnership Program raises the status of selected well-known contributors of the community by giving privileges such as allocation for longer videos and advertisement revenue. Although teens do not make up the majority of uploaders, seven of the ten most subscribed partners are teens and young adults ranging between ages fifteen and twenty-four, and the other three are large media studios. The top partners are Nigahiga, a nineteen-year-old student who creates video blogs about his life with a funny twist; Fred, a character with a high-pitched voice portrayed by a fifteen-year-old student; and Smosh, a dynamic duo of college students who create comedic sketches.

These youth user experiences demonstrate an expansive trajectory with relatively low barriers. Such low barriers afford easy entry into the community and legitimate engagement even at the periphery. Youth gain new skills and explore their identity as they navigate the community and participate in its activities. Further research is needed to understand what motivates young members to move along the participation trajectory.

**Strong support for creating and sharing one’s projects**

YouTube is principally designed as a content-sharing site. Beyond a simple and intuitive interface design, YouTube also features many instructional videos to guide new users at all levels of engagement. The ease at which youth create and share content is evident in the
popularity of YouTube. Members and viewers can share automatically generated links, and popular videos are featured on the home page so that visitors are familiar with the emerging topics of the community.

The home page layout is designed to facilitate quick access to popular content. It presents a number of featured and popular videos, as well as a subscription section for registered members (see Figure 6.1). However, youth tend to opt for the search box, where they enter key terms to search for video clips based on their interests. Once a user finishes viewing a video, she or he is presented with a number of related videos based on a relevant topic.

These various ways of entering the YouTube database are particularly important because they allow both top-down and bottom-up entry points. When a user is looking for a particular video, the search function can quickly query relevant content; if a user is interested in exploring the community, the recommendation lists help the user learn the hottest and newest topics. As young people navigate across multiple developmental contexts, the extent to which they can operate within these contexts and contribute to these communities becomes crucial to their development. By making content sharing easy and part of the communal discourse, platforms such as YouTube prioritize their members’ sense of belonging and identification with the community and, in return, loyalty to the platform.

**Informal mentorship**

One of the main categories in the large corpus of user content is how-to videos on a variety of topics, from cooking to skateboarding to hairdressing. One of the most popular topics is how to contribute to the YouTube community. Highly rated how-to video clips such as those by teenaged Charlie McDonnell, or Charlieissocoollike’s “How to Get Featured on YouTube,” is an example. Created when he had only 150 subscribers, a low count within the YouTube community, this video propelled his YouTube status from an unknown member to a featured partner. Many similar videos followed, including videos on general editing (an example is
Figure 6.1. Screen shot of the YouTube home page

What is important to note is that these videos represent broadcast mentorship. They are ways in which new YouTubers learn new
skills and learn to take a larger role within the YouTube community. This type of mentorship is informal and unregulated by YouTube; however, it provides opportunities for youth to take on different responsibilities. This type of mentorship is beginning to appear in other media communities as well.

A belief that contributions matter
At any level of participation, from viewing a video to creating response clips, visitors contribute greatly to the community. The database takes into account every viewing, and videos that receive the most views are promoted at the home page. Furthermore, view counts are prominently displayed next to each video so that visitors and content creators can clearly see the number rising. Comments and responses by registered users are displayed below each video. YouTubers who consistently read and respond to their “fans” are more likely to retain subscribers and gain more views.

Rating videos and commenting are popular activities among teens, and a small portion of teens contribute by posting videos as responses to videos they have viewed, creating a self-generating process. Members build a connection with the community and the media content creator when providing feedback through comments and video responses. Teens report that reasons for posting comments include, “Because I really like a video,” “To show support for the user that uploaded the video,” and “To respond to other users’ comments.” Fans use this feedback system to encourage and support the content creators, and content creators in turn are more likely to produce additional content for viewers to enjoy.

A sense of social connection
YouTube has a limited number of social networking features to promote member connections. Registered users are equipped with a customizable profile, friends list, and subscriptions list to keep track of favorite channels and members and receive updates when a new video is posted on a subscribed channel. Other than metastatistics features and some primitive social networking features such as private messages, subscriptions and friends lists, and
comment walls, YouTube is not designed as a Web space for collaboration and synchronous interaction. However, young YouTubers have created some innovative ways to support each other and promote collaboration.

Some of these innovative practices quickly become norms shared widely across the community. One norm that grew out of youth user interaction was collaborative channels. Because YouTube did not provide features for users to share an online “play space,” young YouTubers collaborated by creating joint accounts and sharing account information. A new practice emerged in which teams of five young YouTubers would collaborate on a channel, with each member taking responsibility for posting a new video clip on the same day of each week. This helps maintain and attract subscribers, as their channel would produce new content every day while providing a space for collaboration around a specific theme. For example, the popular collaborative channel FiveAwesomeGuys consists of Alan, Charlie, Alex, Todd, and Johnny, five teens from the United Kingdom who got to know each other through their personal channels. This channel comprises daily video logs of each member’s day from Monday to Friday. Members of the team give challenges to other members in order to motivate and spark creativity and to get to know each other’s strengths and interests. In addition to the support shared among the team, viewers and subscribers use YouTube’s feedback features to provide suggestions and ideas to the team.

**Conclusion**

This article demonstrates the extent to which YouTube provides a sociotechnical platform to support a participatory culture among young YouTubers. By examining the YouTube universe through the five characteristics that describe a culture, this article illuminates the various social norms, practices, and technical features that afford opportunities to connect, collaborate, create, and circulate original media creations. The ever-growing youth subscription
to YouTube is evidence of the pertinence and relevance of this kind of medium in their lives. Youth are attracted to YouTube because the barriers for them to participate are low, their creation is easily circulated and shared, informal mentorship and instructions facilitate their developing identity, their levels of contribution matter, and they feel socially connected to peers within the community.

This analysis has design implications for other spaces that attract youth media creators. It illustrates how participatory culture invites and motivates youth producers. As broadcast and technical Web portals are beginning to merge with social networking Web sites, it is important to consider how new spaces can leverage Web 2.0 technologies to create a sociotechnical participatory culture in which members feel empowered to engage and participate.

**Notes**


13. Ito et al. (2010).


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