REPRESENTATION OF HULA AS A NETWORKED PUBLIC ON YOUTUBE

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Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature

YouTube Background

YouTube, founded in February 2005 and later bought by Google in 2006, has quickly grown to be the world’s most popular and largest video sharing website. The video content is extensive and very diverse, ranging in topics from music videos, movie clips, documentaries, personal home reels to self-generated videos of how-to tutorials, short blog vignettes, and even squirrels riding on a mini jet ski and everything else in between (Gill et. al., 2007). Users visit the site to discover, watch, upload, comment on, and share their professional and amateur quality videos with people around the world. It has been calculated that millions of YouTube users watch over 6 billion hours of content in a month. In addition, there are hundreds of hours worth of new videos being uploaded to the site every minute, which users can add to their queue of videos to watch (www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html). Because of the vast collection of videos YouTube has, YouTube has become the leading forum for people to engage with video content across the world and it acts as a distribution platform for content creators.

YouTube’s Structural Affordances

YouTube content creators find YouTube as the premier networking site because of its affordances or capabilities. According to Norman (2002), “the term affordance refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used. A chair affords ("is for") support, and, therefore, affords sitting” (p. 9). Similarly, structural affordances configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement (Ellison and boyd, 2013). Networked technologies introduce affordances that shape the networked public environment, like YouTube, and how
people participate in these publics (boyd, 2011). Public is defined as a collection of people who share a “common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest” (Livingstone, 2005, p. 9). Whereas traditional publics may be affected by physical structures (ex. Architecture), networked publics are built with digital bits. Thus, the properties of digital bits or information comprise a different understanding of public which boyd refers to as a “networked public.” boyd presents four structural affordances that emerge from social networked sites that play a significant role in configuring networked publics like YouTube: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. The following section will focus on how the four affordances are relevant to the practices and issues people contend with while participating on YouTube.

**Persistence**

The first affordance of networked publics is persistence. boyd (2011) defines it as online expressions being automatically recorded and archived. Unlike the ephemeral quality of speech in unmediated publics, networked communications are recorded for posterity. This enables asynchronous communication, but it also extends the period of existence of any speech act (boyd, 2007). For YouTube, videos uploaded and comments posted to the site are archived. Days, even years after an initial content was made public, that video or statement persists and can be viewed again by the originator and the many others who come across the content.

Moreover, original videos and comments may be copied, disbursed, or even reposted without the originator’s knowledge. In this case, if a user wants certain content deleted from public view it may still be available for others to see because someone may have duplicated it before the author deleted the original record. The capability to copy content relates to the next affordance described by boyd, replicability.
Replicability

The second structural affordance that shapes YouTube as a networked public is replicability. Replicability refers to the ability to duplicate content. This is important because in real life, hearsay can be deflected as misinterpretation; however networked public expressions can be copied from one place to another verbatim such that there is no way to distinguish the “original” from the “copy” (boyd, 2007). As mentioned in the previous section, people are able to copy comments or documents without the originator knowing, which allows the message to continue and be shared. In addition, it could be misleading if the “copier” carries off that information as his or her own.

As for duplicating videos, there are many third party programs available online that enables the end user to download YouTube content. A program frequently downloaded by many YouTube users is provided by Xenra.com. All one needs to do is copy the URL of the video and paste it into a field on the Xenra website. Within three minutes, the video is converted into a downloadable file for a person to save in his or her own archive.

Scalability

Scalability, the third structural affordance, is defined as the potential visibility of content to be scaled or a more common term is to “go viral.” However, what scales in networked publics is never guaranteed but determined by the “social structure underlying the networked public” (boyd, 2011, p. 54). Furthermore, what scales may not be representative of everyone’s wishes because what tends to scale is the funny, embarrassing, crude, mean, and bizarre. Therefore, scalability in networked publics is about the potential of tremendous visibility but not its guarantee (p. 48).
Today, YouTube can be accessed in over 60 countries and in 61 different languages. There are some videos that scale across countries and garner over million views and there are other creators’ videos that wish could break the 20 views threshold. In addition, YouTube comments may reveal how geographically dispersed YouTube users are from each other. Comments left for the video may demonstrate the scalability affordance through comparison to where the video was originally recorded and the type of language and character text that is present.

**Searchability**

The final structural affordance is searchability. According to boyd (2011), searchability essentially means that within a networked public, content can be located via search. Because expressions are recorded and identity is established through text, search and discovery tools help people find like minds (boyd, 2007). Google enabled its search engine to return results from general searches that included YouTube videos after the purchase of YouTube by Google in 2006. This feature widens video makers’ exposure being viewed, if they use the same tags that people searching Google also use to find material (Lange, 2007).

For those who frequent YouTube, they often utilize the search function, which is located on the top left corner of the YouTube screen. The filter options are right below, presenting five filters: Upload date, result type, duration, features, and sort by. In addition, people can use the suggested categories, like news, movies, and music, under the title “Best of YouTube”, for searching videos.

Over time, YouTube upgrades their system and the number of categories, the category titles change, or access to videos are removed or changed. Due to the rapid pace at which innovations and technical changes are implemented, researchers have a difficult time studying
social network sites and they have to be mindful of the ways that these sites evolve (Ellison and boyd, 2013). Even with all the potential for social and technical changes, the top three popular categories usually include both music and entertainment (Ferguson and Perse, 2000; Gill et al., 2007; Pauwels and Hellriegel, 2009; Sysomos Inc., 2010). Video content that has been categorized in music and entertainment is the Hawaiian cultural dance, hula. The next section will provide a brief background on hula and the different types of hula.

Hula, the Hawaiian Cultural Dance

Hula is unique to the Hawaiian culture. Accompanied by rhythmic drumming, chanting, and instruments, hula chronicles ancient stories of Hawaiian royalty, places, events, and traditions, which have been passed down orally from generation to generation (Stillman, 1998). Before European contact, hula was closely related to religious practices. It was typically men who danced at the heiau (temple) as an offering and prayer to their gods. When missionaries arrived in the Hawaiian Islands in the early 1800s, they found hula dancing to be vulgar and disagreed with the natives dancing and worshipping other gods. With the support of converted high-ranking chiefs, hula was abolished all together.

The revival of hula came with the reign of King Kalākaua in the late 1880’s when he commissioned hula performances at his jubilee celebration. During this era, learning and dancing hula was encouraged. The hula practitioners merged their Hawaiian elements of poetry, chanted vocal performance, dance movements, and costume to evolve from their ancient style of dancing to a more modern, western influenced type of hula. Today, people commonly distinguish these two prevalent styles of dancing as hula kahiko, the ancient traditional cultural dance and hula ‘auana, the modern style of hula dancing.
Ancient Hula

Hula kahiko is the most ancient form of hula with sacred ties and strong purpose. It is danced to the chanting of the kumu hula or hula master teacher. A kumu hula’s responsibilities used to be the sacred tasks of a priest in ancient Hawai‘i. Since there was no written language at that time, the priests were given the responsibility of preserving the genealogy of the royal family, recording significant battles, acknowledging valiant efforts by the people and, very often, presenting a hula dance as offerings to the goddesses and gods.

The depiction of hula that people recognize as hula kahiko stemmed from a written description of a hula performance in 1778, when Captain James Cook and his crew arrived on the island of Kaua‘i. It described a man dancing with a papa heihi (wood like platter) and kala‘au (two sticks) with a woman singing while playing an ipu heke (small gourd). Explorers wrote and shared drawn pictures of topless dancers wearing a pā‘ū (skirt) made of kapa (beaten bark cloth) from wauke (paper mulberry), that was rolled around their torso with part of it hanging below the knees. Men were pictured wearing a malo (loin cloth) with a flounce covering private parts. Both men and women wore head, neck, hand, and ankle adornments made of bone, shell, or plaited foliage (Klarr, 1997). The few books, photographs, and even fewer, moving images of hula dancing of the 18th and 19th centuries continue to inspire the kumu hulas today to preserve their culture and recreate the image and meaning of hula for their dancers in today’s society.

Today, hula kahiko is still being performed and it is the pride and favorite of the Hawaiian people. The dance is still done in its traditional way with chanting and use of traditional implements like the ipu heke or pahu (drum); however, innovative movements and modern material have been used to replicate those of their Hawaiian ancestors. The early hula
costumes were abandoned, at least by women, except for the foliage lei. Dancers no longer wore kūpe‘e of bone, women covered up and wore chemise, men could wear pants, and a western skirt made from material other than kapa replaced the pāʻū hula skirt.

**Modern Hula**

Western influence had a great impact on the Hawaiian cultural art form and has shaped hula into the modern style of dance that people now know as hula ‘auana. As an adaptation of hula kahiko, hula ‘auana continues to have the same body posture, hand and feet movements, but is done so in a more graceful and fluid motion. Additionally, hula ‘auana still conveys stories like hula kahiko, but more often of contemporary affairs.

The main difference between hula ‘auana and hula kahiko are that the modern dance is accompanied by song and musical instruments such as ‘ukulele, guitar, upright base, and piano (Stagner, 2011). Instead of Hawaiian chanting, musicians sing contemporary songs both in Hawaiian and English language. The melodic island music of hula ‘auana shares stories, not only of Hawaiian history and culture, but also of topics like ranch life of paniolos (Hawaiian cowboys) and even of award winning Hawaiian musician, Kuana Torres’ trips to Osaka, Japan in the song *Ka Leimomi* and another song entitled *Palisa (Paris).*

When dancing hula ‘auana, dancers are often decked out in elaborate, elegant costumes. Women commonly wear *holokū* or modern fashioned dresses, apply “stage” makeup, and decorate their hair with flowers or floral adornments reminiscent of the hula kahiko attire. Men typically wear colorful aloha shirts, a ti-leaf or raffia skirt over dress pants with a cumber bun at the waist.

The fashion and style of hula ‘auana grabbed the attention of tourists and Hollywood film audiences, which contributed to a growing entertainment industry in Hawai‘i. Hawaiian lū‘aus
that showcased both hula styles, and performances, like the Hula Kodak Show, became popular and solidified the iconic hula girl image of a tan Polynesian-looking girl wearing a brazier, grass skirt and leis (Desmond, 2001). Graceful and statuesque gestures and sex appeal were added to emphasize hip movements, removing hula from its former religious context. Gone was dancing to worship gods and in came the hula skirts and seductive satin sarongs being flaunted in lūʻau shows and Hollywood movies.

**Hula on YouTube**

Until the World Wide Web and the advent of YouTube, television and movies were the main media source of watching hula if you were not attending a Hawaiian lūʻau. People no longer have to wait to attend a hula event or wait for the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival, also known as the “Olympics of hula” to be broadcasted on television, nor head to Waikiki on mere chance they will see a hula show. If a person needs a hula fix, all they have to do is log on to YouTube and search hula. People use media they believe will help them achieve their goals (Ferguson and Perse, 2000) and the Internet is the only place where one could watch hula on demand.

When one enters the word “hula” into the YouTube search engine, over a million results are found. A preliminary search on YouTube resulted in finding a video of a person playing with a hula-hoop and another video of the United States First Lady, Michelle Obama, dancing hula. Both of these videos are not necessarily of the Hawaiian cultural dance. The first video with the popular circular toy was named after the Hawaiian dance, but not reminiscent of the hula dancing at all. The second video was of Mrs. Obama mimicking hula dancing with flailing arms and rocking her hips side to side. Hula mimicking is a term referred to as one carelessly moving
their body like a hula dancer. Unlike authentic hula, mimic hula is danced with no meaning, no purpose, or cultural sensitivity. Hula mimicking is usually done for fun, generally while wearing plastic leis and synthetic grass skirt bought from the tourist or party section of a general store. It is assumed that there is a lot more YouTube videos than just this one of people imitating what they have seen or what they perceive to hula to be. Although it may be amusing to watch people mimic hula dancing or just having fun with friends at a Hawaiian themed party, there are some YouTube users who are sincere about finding traditional hula kahiko and hula ‘auana videos to learn and be inspired by the dance.

YouTube has become a great resource for people to gain knowledge of dancing, practicing, refining one’s own skill, and also inspiring one’s dance choreography (Lepczyk, 2013). Virginia Tech dance students credit the use of YouTube to draw inspiration for their creative dances from old time singing groups like The Temptations and Supremes. From watching the YouTube clips, “ideas really began forming constructively, and (the) dance began to take shape”. Other dancers mentioned that they “gained insight into the type of movements we wanted to use” from watching music videos on YouTube (ibid). Likewise, hula enthusiasts can watch YouTube videos to be inspired to choreograph their own or even learn how to dance hula without having any prior knowledge or technique.

Choreographers of the original dances may see it differently and call these “inspired” dancers “poachers” instead. Textual poaching refers to step stealing, editing, recombination, and re-performance of a dance or certain dance movement (Carroll, 2008). Countless dancers produce and disseminate clips of their choreography and of themselves dancing via YouTube. Some dancers, like the contemporary swing dancers of lindy hop, accept dance poaching and have formed an online forum for posting and commenting on each other’s choreography and
technique. However, there are others, like African American vernacular dancers, who are upset about the textual poaching for their cultural dance and pawning it off as their own. Similarly, hula dances have the possibility of being poached by people all around the world in order to learn how to dance, refine their technique, or just to steal movements, re-perform it and post it on YouTube as if it was their very own.

Swing dancers may find it acceptable for others to poach their choreography, but similar to the African American dancers, Native Hawaiian hula practitioners find it unacceptable to poach, steal their cultural practices, especially when there is lack of knowledge and respect is shown for their culture. Indigenous communities, such as Native Hawaiians, are faced with a challenge of presenting traditional knowledge or culture online because of the concern of who has the right to knowledge (Dyson, 2011). In the case of hula dancing, there are sacred hula rituals and dances that are only privileged to specific hula genealogy lines, hula hālaus, or certain people who have earned the right. To have those sacred dances and hula rituals, such as ʻūniki (sacred hula “graduation” ceremony) posted to the internet would be seen as disgraceful, not only to those who have the right to the knowledge, but also their ʻaumakua, ancestors or familial spiritual beings. However, there are those who are in the hula community that are proud of their hula accomplishments and have no problem with sharing their hula choreography on the Internet. The type of Hawaiian cultural content shared on the Internet, sacred rituals versus dance performances, makes a big difference between what videos are acceptable or not to be available online for the entire world to view. From a preliminary view of the hula videos on YouTube, there were more “performance type” of hula showcased. However, there were a few videos considered as sacred or intimate hula dances or choreography that, if the kumu hula had known,
he or she would not have approved that video being uploaded to YouTube for distribution to the networked public.

**Indigenous Representation in Media**

Native Hawaiians and their culture have been recorded since the early 1800s when British sailors first arrived in the Hawaiian Islands. Written and drawn depictions were captured of the Hawaiian people dancing hula, playing organic instruments, worshipping and sacrificing to their gods, and frolicking topless with foliage adornments. It is the twenty-first century and it is not uncommon to still find images and stereotypes that are culturally insensitive to the Native Hawaiians.

The image sold around the world of Hawai‘i is the scenery of blue oceans, Waikiki’s famed Diamond Head, palm trees, and the exotic hula girl. Traditionally and culturally, there was nothing exotic about hula. Hula served a purpose. Hula was danced as offerings to gods and was done to record events and stories of the past. Over the years hula became entertainment and has been transformed by pop culture. The cultural dance turned into kitsch as hot women frolicked with Elvis Presley in the 1960s, a grass-skirted Alice gave her best hula impression on “The Brady Bunch”, and the advent of novelty stores started selling dashboard sex-object hula dolls. These stereotypical images misrepresent Hawai‘i, the Hawaiian culture, and hula, but people around the world may not know the difference.

Similar to the Native Hawaiians, the Native American Indians also have been dealing with society and the media marginalizing their race and culture. Media is the key source of information for most people to learn about indigenous people, and most times the media messages perpetuate distorted beliefs about these groups and contribute to real-world
discrimination (Kopacz and Lawton, 2011). These distorted, romanticized, savaged images of natives exist in print, advertisements, movies, and even more so on the Internet. New media, such as the Internet, via social networking sites like YouTube, have shown to heavily influence the public about native populations that the audience may not be familiar with. It has become a space where alternative racial images can thrive, and Kopacz and Lawton’s (2011) study, “YouTube Indian”, revealed just that. The study explored the nature of ethnic portrayals in a sample of YouTube videos related to Native Americans. Results showed that user generated video depictions of Native Americans did provide more diverse and respectful depictions of Native American culture. However, it is difficult to assess audience perception of the Native American YouTube videos in their study. Kopcacz and Lawton did note that the videos in their sample “received a median of 352 views, a low viewership” (p. 343). Therefore, the mainstream media audience consumes videos that highlight the stereotypical way that Native Americans were romanticized portraying an exotic imagery of Native American braves and chiefs of the Wild West. These stereotypes, misappropriation, and misrepresentation of indigenous populations may continue to persist on the Internet considering the fact that “many-native related videos are tagged with tribal names or derogatory terms” (p. 344).

Based on the literature reviewed and the personal experience of the researcher as a hula ‘ōlapa, hula practitioner, the research questions of interest for this study are presented.

**Research Questions**

With the popularity of YouTube and the growth of hula dancing around the world, there are more opportunities for people to view hula without being in Hawai‘i. YouTube users are able to see what the dance looks like and get an idea of how to dance hula. Due to the fact that
anyone can upload a video and label it hula, does not mean it is the Hawaiian cultural dance. The variation of hula videos accessible on YouTube leads one to question exactly what the nature of hula videos represented on YouTube is. This exploratory study examines the nature of hula content available on YouTube, whether ancient, modern, montage, mimic or other. More specifically, this study will address the following questions based on boyd’s structural affordances:

**R1: What types of Hawaii hula videos are uploaded and archived on YouTube?**

Archiving and recording information is a capability of the structural affordance known as persistence (boyd, 2010). It is interesting to explore what primary categories (kahiko, ‘auana, hula montage: Videos of both kahiko and ‘auana in a video clip, hula mimicking, and other) persist on YouTube.

**R2: What geographic locations have viewed the hula videos?**

YouTube videos are capable of being viewed all around the world because of another structural affordance, scalability (boyd, 2009). One is able to observe that a commenter is possibly from another country by examining the comments. For example, if the content is in foreign language or characters, it may indicate the YouTube user’s geographic location. Furthermore, if the commenter includes in his or her comment that he or she is in fact from another country, one is able to identify that the hula video has scaled from hula’s origin location, Hawai‘i. Another way to determine the origin of geographic location of a YouTube commenter is to view their Google profile. If a viewer enables public access to his or her information, geographic location can be identified and recorded.
R3: What type/categories of Hawaii hula videos are viewed the most according to YouTube filters (relevance, upload date, view count, rating)?

The third structural affordance of YouTube is searchability, the capability of searching for content (boyd, 2020). One of YouTube main ways of organizing videos is by using search filters, such as relevance, upload date, view count, and rating. When each filter option is executed, the types (hula kahiko, hula ‘auana, hula montage, hula mimic, and other) of hula videos that are more prevalent are revealed.

boyd’s (2011) fourth structural affordance, replicability, the capability to duplicate content, is not included in the exploratory study. It is difficult to determine which video is the original and which video has been copied and reposted without personally questioning each YouTube user. For this reason, replicability is omitted from the research study.

The next section explains the research design and method for the present study to explore the representation of hula on YouTube.
Reference List


