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The YouTube Selves of Mememolly

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Sections:

ABSTRACT

Section:

This article focuses on a collection of public videos posted to YouTube by a teenage girl who calls herself " mememolly." Drawing on case study observation and documentation of roughly 18 months of her posting life on YouTube, the article concentrates on how mememolly constructs her online self through the language-mediated practices of her YouTube communications. Applying notions of performance, simulation, and subjectivity, the article suggests that mememolly's case offers an instructive backdrop from which to take up the possibilities, effects, and consequences of creating oneself on YouTube. For mememolly, YouTube serves as a space to enact performances of a routinely changing and changeable self, to simulate fantasies and desires of becoming, and to explore a series of pleasures. More so, it allows her the opportunity to narrate various aspects of her life, to reflexively document these narrations for posterity, and to comment on her world in ways that coexist and compete with her ideas about her material existence. Young people who make videos in online spaces like YouTube can animate discursive notions of youth, her story suggests, by inviting us to investigate what an experience of being young might entail and how it might be expressed when made within a space where multiple simulations of self are possible.

Introduction

Section:

Early in the first of 17-year-old mememolly's 47 YouTube videos, a teenage girl, one of mememolly's friends, walks into a room and sits down next to her at the table she occupies (November 21, 2006). The setting appears to be the school, in England, that they both attend. As the friend sits down, her preoccupied demeanor (" you can't distract me, I've got so much work to do," she announces upon arrival) suddenly transforms as she realizes that an additional presence occupies the space she has entered.

" What are we doing!" she exclaims as she breaks into a disoriented smile. She then giggles excitedly before sheepishly waving her hand in recognition of the presence. " What is this!" she now yells, turning to mememolly.

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" It's a webcam," says mememolly.

" What?" her friend says, still giggling, now with her hand over her mouth.
" How did you get it.... Are we recording ourselves?"

" Yeah," says mememolly.

Still excited, her friend looks into the web camera on the table in front of her—the camera through which we, who are watching her on YouTube, see her—and says to it, " Can you hear me?"

In what follows, various adolescent bodies and voices move in and out of the camera's mostly fixed field of vision and sound. Although stationary and presumably small, the camera's presence is far from innocuous. Those who enter its gaze seem to know they are on display, even if, as in the case of mememolly's friend, they do not know for whom. And so they perform for it, sometimes subtly and sometimes not, by posing, peering, and endlessly adjusting and readjusting their bodies (their hair, their postures, the fit of their clothes). So ominous is the camera that it seems to take on an embodied presence among those in its environs. When mememolly and her friends tell one another jokes or when she gives one friend a playful lick on the cheek, the behavior seems most often done with an awareness that an anonymous audience lurks somewhere beyond the camera's lens. Likewise, when one of mememolly's friends shows the rest of the group an art project she has completed—an impressively rendered drawing of a series of naked male bodies—the first response (" Oh my God, that's quite good," says one friend) soon gives way to the prompt of, " Show the webcam!"

The webcam, as both ominous recorder and anonymous spectator, seems here to ask something of those who enter its purview. In its provocations to perform, it gently manipulates those who pass before it, so that the latter construct themselves and one another according to the prospect not just of being seen but of being preserved and then reseen. On the other hand, the webcam is hardly a silent or omniscient witness to the constructions it helps to provoke. Just as it manipulates, so, too, can it be manipulated. And so, whether through the staging of the interactions that it records (" real," simulated, or otherwise), or in the later editing of these interactions, those constructing themselves within the webcam's purview seem as well to ask something of it in return. And while the nature of this asking is far from uniform or certain—it seems from moment to moment to change among and between people in mememolly's first video (" Why have you slowly edged away from me," she says later in the same video to the very friend whose excitement about the webcam initiated the video; " Because you're distracting me with your bloody webcam shit," is the response)—the concert enacted in the relationship between person and camera, between online performer and anonymous spectator, and the kinds of subjectivities that this relationship can enable, is the focus of this article.

In particular, I focus on the collection of public videos posted to YouTube by mememolly, a white, teenage girl from England. I first came across mememolly as part of a larger inquiry into young people's video-making practices on YouTube. I was interested in the large numbers of young people who seemed to be participating on the site, as well as the kinds of stories they were sharing about themselves. I also became interested in how young people were using online spaces to articulate versions of themselves that did not always match depictions of them in the more overtly scripted world of existing popular visual media; most notably, film and television. Many of these articulations struck me as significant instances of critical commentary about young people on matters of personal and social issues of concern to them—significant not least because these commentaries *about* young people were being made *by* young people, as well as because they were being broadcast to potentially huge, dispersed audiences, factors that together seemed to mark YouTube as a very different kind of space of cultural production than other popular visual media of similar reach. In mememolly, I found a young person with a popular online presence who had left a public record of herself vast enough and highly articulated enough to offer insight into YouTube video making as an emerging practice of significance to youth.

The 46 videos that followed her initial video of November 21, 2006, spanning roughly a year-and-a-half of her life, offer a compelling backdrop against which to begin to take up some of the contingencies (the possibilities, effects, and consequences) of creating oneself on YouTube.¹ As her video contributions progressed, appearances by her friends became more sparing. What deepens and intensifies is her own relationship with the camera, as well as with the YouTube audience, me among them, who watch her videos.² In the talk, role play, dancing, poetry, visual montages, and other forms of

expression she shares, she constructs both a series of moments (often disjointed) and a broader narrative (the collection of these disjointed moments) that together offer a sense of what it can mean—subjectively, discursively—for young people to make themselves on YouTube.

For mememolly, YouTube serves as a space in which to enact performances of a routinely changing and changeable self, to play out a range of fantasies and desires, and to explore a series of pleasures. She draws on YouTube to narrate various aspects of her life, to document these narrations for posterity, and, in the process of doing so, to comment on the world as she sees it. And she accomplishes these tasks with an ever-present reflexive awareness of how she is both shaping herself and being shaped by the space within which she is operating—at times displayed in the form of a frequently reappearing editorial voice that comments on her creations of herself. That she achieves all of this in an environment where simulation and certainty easily and often conflate—in her case rendering each term tenuous but not quite obsolete—underlies what is possibly most distinguishing about making a self on an online space such as YouTube rather than elsewhere. On YouTube the play of opposition between reality and representation, and the stabilities that might be assumed of one's narrative perspective, are easily muddled, so that the temporal ordering, the continuities, and the configurations of one's experiences can there take on increasingly flexible forms.

To begin to make sense of these forms, and in the broader course of setting out to describe, analyze, and make a case for the relevance of mememolly's work on YouTube along the grounds just described, I want to draw attention to the notion of performativity. Butler describes performativity as "that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names" (Butler 1994, pp. 235–38; see also Butler 1990). In using the term, I mean to draw a distinction from the analogous notion of a performance. If a performance can be said to conjure images of a prior subject enacting a role, performativity asks us to consider the reverse: the occurrence whereby roles—here understood as reiterative enactments made in relation to preexisting social and cultural frames of reference—help instead to make the subjects who perform them. According to this configuration, what becomes pedagogical about mememolly's work on YouTube has to do with what she manages to create out of the reiterative object (herself) to which her performance is meant to refer. In performing herself on YouTube, mememolly does more than just describe an experience of youth for her viewers—she creates one.

Case Study and Online Youth

Section:

Stake writes that as a method of inquiry the case study—an "intrinsic study of a valued particular"—is "both a process of inquiry ... and the product of that inquiry" (Stake 2000, pp. 339, 436). As a process, case study is conducive to research that aims to offer insights into the complexities of a circumscribed particular rather than to research that aims for theoretical coherence across vast stretches of data (Stake 2000). The appeal of case study lies in allowing researchers to mine their subject matter for depths and ambiguities more difficult to come by in methods of study constrained by imperatives to quantify, compare, or generalize information (Stake 2000). In favoring a concentrated inquiry into one or a few cases, case study therefore seeks to bring out the questions, complications, and hidden perspectives that an individual case can add to a field of study.

In that case study is most often concerned with uncovering the epistemology of the particular, a consequence of this orientation is that it often ends up portraying something of the uncommon (Stake 2000). As a product of inquiry, case study subsequently contributes to bodies of knowledge by suggesting not just that particularity matters but by suggesting how and why it matters. Deep inquiry into one case can in this sense do the work of refining or updating theory, of extending prescribed lines of inquiry, of provoking new directions for inquiry, and of expanding the limits of a subject's generalizability. When focused on the practices of human subjects in particular, case study's reliance on strategies of ethnographic and discursive inquiry can elucidate the variability of individual experience, centering it within broader knowledge-making formulations that often eschew nuance in the exercise of constructing consistencies.

This is not meant to suggest that potential information gleaned from case study is merely arbitrary and impervious to broader abstraction. On the contrary, the relationship of particularity to generality, or of how inquiry focused on the first can inform thinking about the second, makes for a productive tension that is central to the depth of information case study can

yield. That is, contemplating how a case is like or unlike any other, and how information gleaned from a case might be located in relation to an existing body of knowledge, can deepen our understandings of the latter (Stake 2000).

The body of knowledge within which I situate mememolly's case focuses on the new possibilities, the new "technologies of self" (Foucault [1982] 2003) that online spaces offer young people for existing in the world; particularly in terms of how they might experiment with various self-expressions while there, as well as in terms of what might come of their new communicative practices, which can now span spectrums of communication once unprecedented (Jenkins 2004; Buckingham 2008).

While technologies are commonly thought of as applications of knowledge that take shape in objects, we can also think of ourselves as undergoing similar applications. Foucault suggests as much in asking us to consider selfhood as not an essence but an effect, as not a concretized "substance" but a dynamic "form" (Foucault 1988, p. 10; see also Foucault [1982] 2003). He defines technologies of the self as those processes that "permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being." They are, he continues, "specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves," techniques that imply "certain modes of training and modification of individuals" (Foucault [1982] 2003, pp. 146–47).

Whether in making and posting YouTube videos, in creating ourselves anew by inhabiting avatars in constructed online worlds, in anonymously observing these worlds, or in a variety of other modes of interaction we can, to varying degrees, disassociate from our bodies yet still "exist" while online. This notion has been a major preoccupation in studies of online youth. The idea that there exists, through participation online, the possibility for engaging in a variety of experimentations of which the subject of experimentation is a projected self—Nakamura (2006; 2008) calls this "identity tourism"—means that making a self, particularly for youth who are arguably already preoccupied with doing so, now often comes with a slew of new intensities related to the work of deciding who one might be (Giddens 1991; Thomas 2007). Partial identities can be tried on, adopted, and/or discarded online, in ways that need not be permanent but might be.

The decisions implied by this kind of identity work are not born of online practices. Postmodern theories of youth—which tend to posit a view of identity construction not as arrival but as the ongoing work of becoming—have long taken up these possibilities (Yon 2000). According to such a view, fragmentations, shifts, ambivalences, and partialities are suggested as being more characteristic of how one conceives of oneself than are notions like coherence or wholeness. What seems to distinguish this moment of online identity construction from earlier articulated postmodern theories of youth is the sense in which possibilities for living with partiality are now accompanied by new choices, more immersive possibilities (for being, for sharing), and greater immediacies than before. "Computers," Turkle writes, "are bringing post modernism down to earth" (Turkle 1995, p. 268).

For young people engaged in doing so, making a self online is therefore not some sort of abstraction; it is as embedded in one's conception of self as might be a range of material practices—to the extent that to talk of a material/virtual divide is really to talk of redundancy (boyd 2008). In this regard, the online subject-making practices that many young people engage in are not merely some activity to try on—to the contrary, young people often relish the chance to make themselves reflexively through the medium that online practices afford them (Dennis 2007; Weber and Mitchell 2008), to solicit and work through comments that others make about them, and to revise the selves they project as they see fit (Stern 2008). In these senses, socially mediated online spheres are more than just externalized staging grounds for young people to work out what are already intact material identities, just as notions such as fracture, multiplicity, and heterogeneity are more than just externalized attributes of identity construction to think *with* for many contemporary young people. They are, as mememolly's video work shows, central precepts from which to think *from*.³

The Changeable Selves of Mememolly

Section:

Mememolly projects a changeable self with ease and frequency on YouTube. From one video to the next, and often within the same video, she is apt to speak (both to herself and to her imagined audience) in varying accents and

from varying perspectives. She communicates by speaking directly to the camera, through voiceover narration (juxtaposed against various moving images, usually of herself), and by inhabiting (via role play) assorted characters from film and elsewhere. Likewise, she is apt to dress in all manner of clothing and accessories (in wigs, makeup, costumes), as well as to lip-synch, dance, recite poetry, or perform these practices in combination. Her changeability is not of the sort that renders her unrecognizable from one video to the next; it takes shape in the range of looks, moods, ideas, and creative stances she enacts in projecting different iterations of what her audience understands is the same protagonist. Scrutinizing the ways in which she performs her changeability, not to mention what she achieves in doing so, begins to underscore what seems most interesting about the possibilities of making oneself on YouTube.

One of the things that immediately resonates about mememolly's changing projections of herself in her videos is the sense of fun—and, by extension, of play, of pleasure, and of celebration—that she exudes in them. For example, one of her early videos, called *happy feet!*, is devoted almost entirely to an assortment of edited close-ups of mememolly's dancing feet (November 27, 2006). Clad in a variety of alternating shoes, boots, and slippers (when not bare), these dancing feet parade from one backdrop to the next to the upbeat 1983 Violent Femmes song "Blister in the Sun." When her feet are not shot close-up, which occurs only in brief and scattered moments, a celebratory aesthetic continues to permeate—we see mememolly playfully doing handstands, bending herself into back bridges, sprawling on the ground, and violently shaking her body before our perspective is returned to her dancing feet.

In another video, which mememolly calls *the frug* (an homage to a popular song of the same name), she dances for the video's entirety, lip-synching the song in some moments and physically acting out its lyrics in others, all the while positioning her body, forever in motion against the backdrop of continually changing scenery, as the center point of the camera's gaze (June 6, 2007). In *sparklepop!* and *BING BANG!* mememolly adds props such as wigs and costumes to still more dancing and lip-synching (December 16, 2006; June 23, 2007). In *HEY! HO! LET'S GO!* she wears glasses, offering the rejoinder, "I don't really wear glasses, I just think they look really cool" (January 11, 2007). Later in the same video, after casually calling attention to "how stupid my fringe looks," the silent background over which she speaks is suddenly drowned out by blaring music, which accompanies the impromptu hair cut she then gives herself. And in *valentine*, a black-and-white video that strikes a more somber mood, a montage of scenes set to Elliott Smith's "Figure 8" (2000) depicts mememolly in various moments of playful solemnity: she rotates endlessly in a spinning chair, she moves in toward the camera that films her and intimately grimaces at it over and over again, she draws hearts on her face (then cycles through one facial expression after another), and she performs all of this while constantly manipulating the camera speeds through which we see her (February 6, 2007).

What is going on here? In one sense, what binds these videos, no matter their varying affectations, is an ethic of celebration: a celebration of self and of the possibilities for experimentation that this medium can provide. The frequency with which similarly themed videos appear amid mememolly's larger oeuvre makes the sense of fun she exudes in her videos—whether through guises such as lip-synching, dancing feet, and otherwise—seem like no trivial matter, no cursory side note to what making a self on YouTube might entail.⁴

Grace and Tobin argue that the act of engaging in video work provides young people an important "place for pleasure" (Grace and Tobin 1998, p. 43); that is, a place of self-expression free from the potential constraints of enacting similar expressions in the material world of daily existence. When mememolly playfully dons pink wigs, draws on her face, or accessorizes herself in glasses she does not need, because she thinks they "look cool," one can see that she understands she is performing these instances of self-expression in a space that insulates her from the immediate judgments of the material world, where such acts would have to be negotiated differently (wearing pink wigs and drawing on one's face can provoke instant reactions in others—reactions that can be kept at a distance when one is sitting alone, making a video). In expressing herself publicly on YouTube rather than elsewhere, mememolly demonstrates that she is not trying to avoid provoking a reaction. Precisely the opposite is the case: she wants to be seen. And herein lies what seems most important about understanding YouTube's significance for mememolly as a "place for pleasure," a place that helps incite the kinds of videos mememolly produces. Expressing oneself on YouTube—this paradoxical space of exposition and insulation—affords one the opportunity to work (to play) at the act of being seen.

For mememolly, the pleasure derived from projecting a changeable self on YouTube is partly the pleasure of play; it is the pleasure of fashioning oneself

through experimentation, through moments of transience that can be at once preserved and shared but also easily abandoned. YouTube might consequently be seen as a place for mememolly to enact a series of fantasies and desires as part of her ongoing (and perhaps intensely adolescent) work of relating to herself. Hers is the work of desire in the sense that it offers her the chance to perform different roles, to experiment in those roles, to set the limits of what she deems possible by way of those experimentations, and to push those limits. Underlying these desires is a sense of the fantastical. Her videos function as fantasies of the self because in them she can exercise a variety of hypercontrols over how she both projects herself and attempts to manage, in ways of her choosing (through editing, camera angles, editorial emphases), the impressions she leaves. The notion that YouTube can be a canvas for the projection of a young person's fantasies and desires seems therefore essential to understanding its appeal and central to determining how the videos young people make there can broaden the discursive range through which we might make sense of their performances and, by extension, their subject-making practices—two notions, to return to [Butler's \(1994\)](#) notion of performativity, that are intimately tied.

Mememolly elucidates the significances of these ties—especially in the context of the particular forms they can take on YouTube—in a number of ways. If, as [Butler \(1994\)](#) advises, performance can be thought of not from the liberal humanist perspective of a prior subject deliberately enacting a role, whereby the source of meaning inheres in said subjects, but can instead refer to how the habitualness of texts can be performed unknowingly, through the repetition of norms that both prevent identity from running rampant and allow hybridity to be domesticated, then the pleasure mememolly derives from YouTube—the pleasure of play—is perhaps also the pleasure of critical intervention; it is perhaps the pleasure that can come from experimenting with oneself through deliberate acts of performative rule bending ([Frith 1996](#); [Warner 2007](#)). In this way, YouTube becomes a place where mememolly can exercise important modes of agency through her performances. Whether enacted as desire, fantasy, or otherwise, she experiments with whom—and how—she can be when on YouTube.

And yet the expressions of desire and fantasy that both precede and follow from these kinds of performative interventions are not merely innocent. They might also be seen as being born of uncertainty and tension. The case can be made that mememolly's fantasies of hypercontrol over the images she projects of herself on YouTube, not to mention her strategies for managing these images, emerge from a place of ambivalence—an ambivalence born of the inevitable gap between projection and reception, or between how she works to make herself and how these instances of making are received by others. Performativity theory tells us that the will to perform stems from this very ambivalence, from the anxiety that we can never recover the gap between intent and recognition, that meaning is always and inevitably out of our control ([Frith 1996](#); [Warner 2007](#)). The performative dialectic enacted in the space between “creativity and constraint” ([Warner 2007](#), p. 9), or between agency and normativity, therefore marks fantasy and desire as concepts intertwined with ambivalence and anxiety. And yet for mememolly—and, undoubtedly, others who make videos on YouTube—the pursuit of meaning amid these performative entanglements can remain acts of pleasure nonetheless.

An example from mememolly's work gives this suggestion—that the pleasure of experimentation on YouTube is, for mememolly, tied to the pleasure of becoming the subject she performs and is tied to the pleasure of working to recover the irrecoverable gap endemic to this becoming—still more clarity and depth and adds to the meaning we might make of the changing and changeable roles she plays in her videos.

The video *me & you & natalie portman* begins when mememolly—shot from the chest up, wearing a pink wig, and holding an oversize black-and-silver microphone—looks blankly into the camera and says, “Hello stranger” (December 19, 2006). Her choice of words is significant. What marks her audience as “strangers,” and in turn marks her as the same, is that the accent she uses here is not one her regular viewers would recognize (it sounds much more North American than her usual British voice). Following her initial address, our perspective is interrupted. The camera jump-cuts to mememolly, in the same pose and attire as a second earlier, but now no longer holding the microphone. Reverting to her regular British voice, she says, “Hi, it's about 20 to 1:00 on a Monday night ... I'm just ... in my bedroom.”

What follows is disorienting until one realizes what is going on. Holding the oversize microphone away from her mouth, and in her new American voice, mememolly looks piercingly into the camera and says, “If you really love me, then let's make a vow. Right here, together, right now. Okay?” She then raises the microphone to her lips and responds to her own prompt.

" Okay," she answers.

This initiates a peculiar dialogue between what we come to understand are two iterations of mememolly, neither of whom is the regular mememolly of past videos, and both of whom are distinguished only by the fact that one holds a raised microphone and one does not.

" Alright ... repeat after me. I'm gonna be free," she says, microphone lowered.

" I'm gonna be free," she responds to herself, microphone raised, voice projecting as if to recreate a booming sound.

" I'm gonna be brave," is the next directive, microphone again lowered.

" I'm gonna be brave," she responds, microphone raised, voice again booming, vowels now elongated.

" Good, and the next one is: I'm gonna live each day as if it were my last ...," she says, microphone lowered.

" Oh, that's good," she interrupts, microphone raised.

" You like that?" she asks, microphone lowered.

" Yeah," she answers, microphone raised.

" Say it," she urges, microphone lowered.

" I'm gonna live each day as if it were my last ..."

Some will recognize this dialogue from the 2005 film *Me and You and Everyone We Know*. Some might also recognize that mememolly seems to be dressed and speaking like the actress Natalie Portman in a memorable scene from the 2004 film *Closer* (in which Portman's character delights in performing an identity ruse), just as they might recognize other popular film lines in the ensuing conversation mememolly has with herself (lines like " Let's go everywhere even though you're scared" and " Lying's the most fun a girl can have without taking her clothes off"). Periodically, mememolly breaks from both characters and, returning to her British speaking voice, meanders through commentary where she lists celebrities she likes and dislikes, editorializes about how she made her video, and performs other impressions. Her video ends abruptly with the recitation of another movie line: " I don't love you anymore. Goodbye."

What is perhaps most revealing about this video is that it fulfills an important pedagogical function: its form instructs its viewers on how its content might best be understood. That is, it teaches its viewers about the presumptions that its protagonist, mememolly, requires of them in order to make sense of her role in this video and in the larger video-making enterprise in which she engages. If mememolly's work here is to make any sense to us, then we must adopt a certain practice of viewing her. In *me & you & natalie portman*, mememolly projects multiple voices from the same body, she appropriates into her own speech lines and scenes from popular film, she dresses like a movie character, and she mixes together all of these forms of expression with personal ones. In effect, the " who" that she performs in this video—this chaotic, changeable, and fragmented constellation of subjective expressions both borrowed and claimed, yet still recognizable as encompassing " mememolly" —can be seen as an allegory for the broader self she can and does become on YouTube.

Understanding who mememolly is as she exists on YouTube therefore necessitates understanding that her work, and that of countless others who make videos in this space, is partly carried out in order to " explore ... pleasures and emotional investments in ways that are ... subjective and playful" (Buckingham 2003, pp. 317– 18, emphasis added; see also Silverstone 1999). What playfulness here enables is an " opportunity to claim our individuality, to construct our identities through the roles we take and the rules we follow" (Buckingham 2003, p. 317). Mememolly's expressions of self are in this light an actualization of Butler's (1994) notion of performativity. In experimenting within this medium, mememolly is experimenting with herself and with the possibilities of who she can be. She says as much when, for

example, she goads her audience with recycled movie lines such as “ Lying is the most fun a girl can have” or when she chooses to perform a movie character who is defined by her ambiguous identity (or identities). In so doing, she pushes the discursive parameters of “ youth” by inviting us, through her videos, to investigate a much broader commentary about what an experience of youth might entail and how it might be expressed when made within a space of uncertain coexistence between different simulations of self.

The Simulated Selves of Mememolly

Section:

Mememolly's work invites us to consider a curious narrative of self—and by extension a curious narrative of youth—in part because her videos blur familiar boundaries between fact and fiction. Into which of these categories her videos fall is not always easy to discern. In some of them, she appears before her webcam absent of any obvious artifice. She simply sits and speaks about her life and her interests. In others, including *me & you & natalie portman*, a more overt sense of staging pervades. And in still others, these modes of expression are combined. Through the coexistence of all of these forms, however, her work offers a different kind of story of self than might be possible if she were expressing herself through other means.

Not only does mememolly not discriminate between fact and fiction in her presentations of self on YouTube; she is not particularly preoccupied with explaining to her audience how to distinguish between the two. As a result, her work takes a definite, albeit undeclared, position on such matters; namely, that grappling with distinctions of fact and fiction are at best of minor importance when making sense of the expressions of self she performs. Making sense of her videos, she seems to say, can best be achieved not by trying to extricate fact from fiction but by beginning from the place of confusion that her confections produce. What they produce is a compelling commentary about how reality and simulation can work together—indeed, inform each other—and in combination deepen the scope through which a conception of self can be created when expressed in an online space such as YouTube.

Baudrillard's notion of the “ hyperreal” helps give this suggestion some conceptual grounding. He defines hyperreality as a form of simulation that is “ real without origin” ([Baudrillard 1983](#), p. 2), or a form of simulation that produces its own reality even though it has no basis in reality ([Lane 2000](#)). He writes that a consequence of hyperreal simulation is that it creates conditions whereby “ the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it” ([Baudrillard 1983](#), p. 1). These metaphors of territory and map, and Baudrillard's suggestion about the implications of their inversions, are useful for making sense of mememolly's performances of self on YouTube.

What Baudrillard's metaphor suggests is that hyperreal simulations function to reverse the commonplace notion that first come territories and then come maps purporting to sketch these territories. The metaphor instead posits that when hyperreal simulations occur, maps can be drawn absent of territories (“ the territory no longer precedes the map”) and can, once drawn, remake existing ones (“ nor does it survive it”). If we think of lived experiences of youth as a territory and all of the ways we have of representing these experiences as a map, then YouTube videos like mememolly's contribute to a redrawing of this map (or to new kinds of representations), and they create new territories (or new experiences of “ youth”). These videos do so because their hyperreality allows for real experiences of “ youth” to be lived, if only partially, in a domain where simulations of self disrupt familiar orderings of fact and fiction, of reality and simulation.

Baudrillard writes that while “ it is always the goal of the ideological analysis to restore the ‘ objective’ process, it is always a false problem to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum” ([Baudrillard 1981](#), pp. 26– 27). The problem is false because, in a space where fact and fiction so easily conflate, the act of trying to extricate the one from the other reveals less than what the confusion of these categories can initiate. For mememolly, these confusions initiate a mapping of self that departs from the constraints of existence in “ reality.” This should not be taken to mean that what mememolly performs in her videos is merely a deception. On the contrary, as Baudrillard instructively suggests, “ The simulation is true.” For mememolly, the simulation is true without being “ real” because the simulation reveals something true in the absence of the real.

Mememolly's simulations are instances of confusion but not of deception,

because in them she reveals a different kind of insight about herself than might come through the simple transmission of facts. Much like with any work of art, what matters most about interpreting hers is perhaps not so much what the “real” person (the artist) who plays the character “mememolly” says about it—or whether her YouTube persona accurately accounts for the conditions of her real life. What matters most is how she comments on her world by sharing what she thinks and feels through the work that she produces. In this way, her videos about herself—these combinations of simulation and reality—are as “true” as any autobiographical admission. And, in the vision of herself that she expresses in these videos, she offers significant opportunities for learning about her world and those of others partaking in similar practices on YouTube.

On the side of “reality,” part of mememolly’s vision finds form in straightforward autobiographical commentary through which we learn all sort of things about the life of the teenage girl behind the character mememolly. We learn early on that she is seventeen (November 24, 2006), that she began making YouTube videos as a high school student in England who was about to move to Canada with her parents (November 21, 2006), and that her video-making endeavors on YouTube are partly born out of a desire to document her experiences of moving to a new place. To this end, some of her early videos are montages of the friends (November 23, 2006) and places (January 1, 2007) she is leaving behind, while others center on her frustrations with various aspects of her impending move (December 26, 2006). Once she does move, her feelings about her displacement often remain a subtext in her videos, and in them she shares with her audience her impressions of adjusting to a new life (April 12, 2007; June 17, 2007; April 29, 2008).

Autobiographical commentary often takes on a broader scope in mememolly’s videos as well. She speaks about various books, movies, music, or television shows she likes (April 17, 2007; August 5, 2007; April 29, 2008), she models new clothes (August 31, 2007), she tackles existential questions (September 16, 2007), she comments on other YouTube videos and video makers (May 5, 2007; December 13, 2007), and she replies to rumors, commentaries, and questions that her videos elicit on YouTube message boards. (The questions she responds to include inquiries about such banal matters as the brand of webcam she uses, as well as prompts for information about the “real” her—her relationship status, her likes and dislikes, and so on; see September 1, 2007; December 23, 2007; January 6, 2008.) At times, she even takes her camera with her to film and then post clips of her outings with friends, some of whom she has met through YouTube correspondence (July 31, 2007).

Still, one gets the overwhelming sense that for mememolly, capturing all of these moments of the “real” on YouTube is of secondary importance to what else might be achieved there. She states as much when she shares her distaste for video blogs and for other online genre conventions often transposed to YouTube: “There are videos, I think, they seem like a copout ... they are essentially listing YouTubers that you know, or that you like, and talking about how you found YouTube and why you’re on it and why you make videos.... It seem[s] a bit boring” (October 10, 2007; see also June 13, 2007). Instead, her videos profess a greater allegiance to the kinds of simulations described earlier. Through simulation, she is able to expand on and make more complex her unambiguous autobiographical commentary, which in turn allows for a deeper, more nuanced, and more expansive vision of how she sees herself and her particular experience of growing up.

Consider the video *grey t-shirt day* (December 26, 2006), which consists of moving images of mememolly set to a corresponding voiceover narration. The video is meant to give voice to mememolly’s thoughts. We see her move around silently, but we hear the projection of her voice from an elsewhere that we are made to understand is an internal monologue. In step with the changeable accents she often experiments with, this monologue is performed in a generic American accent, because as she states in the short textual blurb accompanying her video, “whenever I narrate my thoughts to myself, I do it in an American accent.”

The video begins with her sitting in her bedroom, facing us, wearing a gray T-shirt, at which point a voiceover states,

This is my gray shirt. It's comfortable and relaxing....
The gray shirt works as a clichéd metaphor to explain exactly how I'm feeling at the moment. I like it—because it's not quite white [an image of mememolly wearing a white T-shirt flashes onto the screen] and not quite black [mememolly now appears in black]. [Now in gray again:] It's the vague indecisiveness of the gray shirt that comforts and torments me. Let's look at it this way—the black shirt [mememolly again in black] is my life as it is now. It's very playing it safe.... The white shirt

[mememolly now in white] is what I am looking forward to.

This talk of “ indecisiveness” and of “ looking forward,” and the way it is evoked under the guise of what T-shirt she might wear, foreshadows what viewers soon learn is an increasingly layered commentary about her impending move from England to Canada. Now cycling through various images of herself in gray, black, and white, she continues:

So basically I'm not sure what to expect. I never wear white, I hope I look okay. I'm nervous about the white shirt. It's a big change and one I know I can't reverse. It's starting over completely. And I'll have to make a new mess. That can take a while.... For now I'm sticking with gray. It's the confusing pull of wanting to move sooner and not wanting to move at all. I'm excited about the opportunity—it's a new country, continent, house, school, new friends. And the black shirt—well I'll pack in my suitcase of course and I'll wear it whenever I miss you. Which could be all the time.

Following from this, she eventually leaves the symbolism of T-shirts behind and speaks more directly, still in the voiceover narration of her thoughts, about the frustrations of her impending move: “ These circumstances have tested my patience and probably improved it some.... I've been waiting since August, frustrated at school knowing that I'm working for exams I'll never do.... It is hard sometimes.”

Near the end of the video, mememolly effects a peculiar transformation. After fading to black and to silence, the video, which at this point appears to be over, suddenly begins again, and she begins to repeat a line from earlier in her monologue before interrupting herself. In the voice she had been using during her monologue, she begins again to say, “ These circumstances have tested ...,” but then stops and restarts the line in an exaggerated Southern American drawl that begins slowly but picks up speed as she continues the monologue. Having initiated this interruption while pictured in her white T-shirt, the T-shirt of change and uncertainty, she eventually reverts to her black shirt and lets out a loud sigh as her monologue finally closes.

Mememolly's internal monologue allows her, by way of metaphor and analogy, to express her uncertainties about an important moment in her life. Through her monologue we are made to understand that her current partiality to gray T-shirts is evocative of something deeper; it represents “ the confusing pull of wanting to move sooner and not wanting to move at all.” In constructing a montage in which she vacillates among images of herself in black, white, and gray—in effect memorializing her past as she looks ahead to an uncertain future—she uses simulation to negotiate some of the uncertainties of her tenuous, liminal present.

Likewise, when as a white-shirted mememolly she interrupts herself midsentence and begins to change the way she speaks, she again engages with simulation as a means of commentary about herself, here perhaps fantasizing about the imagined person she might become upon moving to a new place. By enacting various accents and subject positions, she therefore draws on YouTube and its possibilities for simulations to negotiate issues of importance to her. In so doing, she is able to experiment with and share perspectives about her uncertainties in creative ways that, for her in particular, deepen her commentary.⁵

Further examples of how mememolly pushes these depths through simulation abound on YouTube, and many of her videos, if inadvertently, function as commentaries on being adolescent and negotiating the inevitabilities of change. In *dear body*.. (March 6, 2007), mememolly stands in a bathroom and, again in voiceover narration, recites a poem, much of it an apology to her changing body. Different body parts are highlighted on screen as she speaks directly to them. Verses from her poem include lines such as,

Dear body ... [camera focuses on a close-up of her dangling hands] I'm sorry for continuing to draw on you and that due to not doing my physical therapy when I was twelve my left hand is skinnier.... [Camera focus now moves to her hair.] I'm sorry for straightening, bleaching, and dyeing the hell out of you.... [Now with hand on heart:] Sorry for being so careful with you.... [Focus moves to her legs.] Legs—thanks for being so abnormally hairless. [Focus moves to her feet.] Feet—I'd say we're pretty cool with one another, except that I don't let [other people] look at you.

In *the death of mememolly*, she creates, with skillful camera work, a scene in which two physical manifestations of herself appear in conversation with each other (September 25, 2007). The first of these sits clothed at one end of an empty bathtub and at one point says to the other—who sits at the opposite end of the bathtub and looks, speaks, and sounds different from the first—“ you’re not the mememolly I knew and loved anymore.” Recalling prevalent sociobiological discourses of youth that tend to overdefine perceptions of young people through limiting narratives of biological progression—where the onset of puberty is seen as initiating a series of behavioral contagions that interrupt the peaceful growth of childhood (Bessant 2008; Lesko 2001)—*dear body*.. can be read as an attempted negotiation of these discourses. In communicating in this peculiar way with her changing body, mememolly offers a creative perspective on how she, a teenager, works through the effects of this discourse, whereby body parts are, with acute self-consciousness, picked apart and put into hyperfocus while culturally constructed successes and shortcomings are celebrated (“ Legs—thanks for being so abnormally hairless”) or lamented (“ Feet ... I don't let other people look at you”). In the same vein, *the death of mememolly* can also be read as an earnest personal commentary on negotiating the temporal discourses of youth, whereby the “ death” of old subject positions is mourned while new ones are anticipated.

In videos such as these, this kind of practiced simulation—recast as instructive rather than merely deceptive, and as authentic even if illusory—seems an especially salient practice in pushing the discursive forms through which young people might seek to make themselves understood. The narrative that mememolly—one young person negotiating changing circumstances—constructs on YouTube, not to mention the simulated selves she performs in service of this narrative, might even be said to be remarkably faithful to her own and other young people’s ever-changing subject positions; much more so, perhaps, than is the case in the seamless or coherent narratives of teenage life, often depicted in other media, that cling to distinctions of reality and unreality (Saul 2010). No “ real,” stable, teenage mememolly exists on YouTube or elsewhere. Instead mememolly is continually changing, made through the imaginary devices of fantasy, desire, simulation, and the pleasures of experimentation. In authoring her experiences through such devices, mememolly captures the chaos and uncertainty, the messiness and ambivalence, the instability of her teenage life, and in doing so she negotiates with and for us fresh and imaginative discursive forms through which to conceptualize youth.

The Negotiated Selves of Mememolly

Section:

Given mememolly’s role as a theorist of youth in her public constructions of herself, what does she teach us about why she would be drawn to a shared, online space like YouTube to undertake these constructions in the first place? What kind of appeal does participating on YouTube hold for her and, by extension, might it hold for the countless other young people engaging in similar practices in such large numbers on the website? Paying attention to how mememolly understands her relationship to YouTube adds significantly to questions of how and why she makes herself there.

For Molly, the teenage girl who creates the character mememolly, one of the central enticements of participating on YouTube seems to be that doing so allows her to exist and evolve in a realm other than that of her immediate physical surroundings. Her videos show that part of the thrill she experiences in making herself on YouTube comes from monitoring and working with how she exists as a changing subject within this space. And how she exists in this space is in many ways determined through collaboration and in accordance with others who are engaged in similar projects of public self-expression. She therefore relies on the comments of others, as well as responds to others—often anonymous others—in fashioning herself on YouTube. Not to be lost in the story that mememolly leaves us with, then, is the question of why joining a community of peers whose mode of discourse consists largely of exchanging and receiving feedback on their impressions of one another, and on their changing impressions of themselves, would be important to her.

She begins to answer this question in *a video for people with commitment*, in which she recites an essay she calls “ Finding YouTube: How YouTube Found Me” (October 10, 2007).⁶ In the video, she states,

It was early 2006 and I was killing time online looking at funny viral videos for some gentle laughs in between

school, socializing, and *Sims2* marathons. When one day I stumbled upon a humble video by a girl who called herself Brookers Park.... This became my first taste of youtube.com. From there on I stumbled upon other popular users I would grow to know and love and hate.... Nearly a year after initially wanting to, because I lost my fire wire and couldn't get videos off my camera, I finally posted my first video.... The rush of being watched flowed through my veins as my first [few] videos struggled to gain 300 views! I must admit they were terrible attempts, and they exist only as private memories and hidden files.... There were flitters of excitement upon infatuation with various users.... [Then] my first video response! ... This response was welcomed with affection.

What comes across here, and appears to be a central motivating factor underlying mememolly's participation on YouTube, is mememolly's excitement about the notion of joining with a group of anonymous others in a broad project of seeing and being seen (" the rush of being watched," the " flitters of excitement upon infatuation with various users"). These " rushes" and " flitters" propel mememolly to engage more and more deeply with YouTube and to construct herself in conjunction with the reactions and commentaries she receives there. Part of this process of construction involves discarding those projections that do not conform to her desired image of herself (her first " terrible" video attempts " exist only as private memories and hidden files"), just as it involves monitoring and adjusting the profile she creates for signs of its possible resonance with others (" 300 views!").

Why do these new forms of community and connection seem to hold so much significance for mememolly? Why does YouTube seem to satisfy a longing for expression on her behalf? A convincing body of literature suggests that participation on online sites like YouTube offers mememolly, given her social position as an adolescent, a set of prospective experiences from which she might otherwise be blocked (see boyd 2008; Palfrey and Gasser 2008). For example, being young often comes with a lack of agency over decisions about those with whom you are permitted to communicate. The spatial distances endemic to communication on sites like YouTube, however, can offer young people an attractive means of privately circumventing some of the communicative restrictions they face.⁷ Likewise, participation on YouTube addresses some of the restrictions on physical mobility that young people frequently report upon with frustration. Given the increasing erosion of public spaces aimed at accommodating young people (James and Saul 2007), and because they often lack private spaces to call their own (boyd 2008), congregating on sites like YouTube allows young people to move (metaphorically) through both public and private spaces of their own creation.

However, deeper and more affecting enticements (beyond just a reaction to punitive restrictions) seem to draw mememolly to YouTube. A frequently reappearing subtext in many of her videos offers insight into her motivations. For example, her video *Nostalgia* (April 17, 2007) begins with the phrase " When I grow up I'm going to remember" and then proceeds, for almost five uninterrupted minutes, with her speedy recitation of a checklist consisting of a jumble of reminiscences and impressions from her-not-yet-departed youth (" When I grow up I'm going to remember ... Pokémon Cards ... South Park ... teen melodrama ... sleep overs ... water fights ... lying to get into 12 movies"). Consider also her video *You're the boss, applesauce*, in which she acts out a fictional scene between Andy Warhol and Edie Sedgwick that includes lines such as " I wonder if people are going to remember us" and " I wonder what people will say about you" (June 15, 2008). Finally, the soundtrack in many of mememolly's videos evokes a similar sensibility—*dress ups, make outs, go home, get down!*, for example, pulsates with the song line " I'm gonna stay 18 forever" (January 1, 2007).

Videos such as these indicate a seeming preoccupation with notions of preservation and legacy. They symbolize, and perhaps even concretize, a particular response to the temporal confinements that so often typify social constructions of youth in the popular imagination. Whereas " past-future" discourses often construct young people within totalizing fictions of perennial metamorphosis, in a sense entrapping them within a panoptical-time that trivializes the " now" of their lived realities (whereby, to paraphrase Lesko 2001, narratives recounted by adolescents inescapably become narratives of adolescence), mememolly shows how a young person might internalize these fictions while also strategizing to contest them.

Mememolly responds to the fictions with which she lives by articulating a " now" that matters (" I'm gonna stay 18 forever"), while nonetheless assuming a past-future subject position that locates itself in terms of legacies

(“ When I grow up I’m going to remember” and “ I wonder if people are going to remember us”). Although she endorses the notion that her own adolescence is a time of change, she also complicates this notion (more precisely, she complicates the reductive assumptions often attached to it) because she uses YouTube to render permanent and meaningful aspects of herself in response to change, uses YouTube to articulate a “ now” that matters in the midst of change. By preserving experiences and memories that she suggests would otherwise be fleeting, and by giving them lasting expression, she consequently contests the idea that their fleetingness should render them inconsequential. On the contrary, she records for posterity aspects of her changing self in what she reflexively understands is a changing time in her life, and in doing so she calls into question past-future discourses by imbuing these moments of change, rather than just their outcomes, with significance.

When considering the immersive opportunities for self-expression and negotiation that YouTube offers young people, not to mention the chance it offers them to join and share with others keen on doing the same, what becomes especially interesting in mememolly’s case is how, over time, the character mememolly starts to become more and more a part of the self-concept of the physical being, Molly, who creates her. We know that this occurs because the character mememolly often works through the effects of this union in her videos. She works through the idea that making herself on YouTube is becoming addictive to her—to the point that being pulled away from it by her “ real life” (her words) is often recounted in terms of loss.

This comes up in an early video called *my so-called life* when she states, “ So ... I started posting videos on YouTube. Just for fun. Just 'cause it seemed like if I didn't, I would die or something” (May 5, 2007).⁸ And it persists in later videos like *the last 4 seconds says it all*, when she laments that a recent holiday (taken by Molly, the “ real her”) has precluded mememolly from participating in life on YouTube (August 5, 2007). “ You know it’s really different going on holiday when you’re in a relationship, like, you really miss the person you’re with,” she reports hearing a friend say while vacationing. From this, mememolly, who has up to this point in the video been speaking directly to the camera, cuts to a holiday clip of herself solemnly sitting alone with her luggage. She says, “ Yeah, I feel like that about the Internet.”

The depth of Molly’s immersion and commitment to her life as mememolly comes to the fore later in the same video when she states,

I was offline for about five days—that is the longest I haven’t been on the Internet in, I would say years.... Now I’m all overwhelmed by everything, and I can’t keep up with my comments and my emails. If you have messaged me or emailed me I’m really sorry if I haven’t replied ... it is so daunting logging in seeing 500 or 600 messages on YouTube that you need to reply to.... I will, I will reply to them all. 'Cause I promised myself I will.... I’m gonna dedicate like a whole day just to reply to my messages. And that probably still won’t be enough.

Here, as elsewhere (see September 1, 2007; March 11, 2008), time spent on YouTube—and mememolly’s subsequent attempts at negotiating between her online life and her “ real life” —is depicted as occurring at the expense of neglecting a range of other interests (friends, hobbies, former leisure pursuits).

Although mememolly refers to her YouTube persona as separate from her “ real” life, what comes out here is that maintaining this separation is no easy task. One might say that as she becomes increasingly immersed in the world of YouTube, more and more work is needed for her to negotiate what is becoming not so much a separation but a convergence. What mememolly teaches us is that the practice of making herself on YouTube is an integrated part of her self-concept rather than a mere abstraction. Whether through pleasures sought, desires conveyed, fantasies revealed, simulations performed, or subjectivities negotiated, mememolly draws on YouTube both to explore and to communicate a multifarious conception of self that is fluid, textured, complicated, and ambivalent. In doing so, she informs us that to speak of “ The YouTube Selves of Mememolly” is to speak of the possibilities of making oneself through these processes (of simulation, of performance), to negotiate diverse ways of expressing one’s subjectivities, and to join and share with others in creating a vision of oneself—and, by extension, of youth. And, so, while mememolly may refer to her “ real” self while she works on her YouTube self, the intervention she consequently makes for us—at times seemingly unknowingly—is that these various conceptions of self need not be thought of as separate. In making herself on YouTube, she also makes herself

Appendix: List of Mememolly YouTube References

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Section:

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Notes

Section:

1. This study examines mememolly's first 46 YouTube videos; however, the overall video count on mememolly's YouTube page, ever growing, was 93 as of mid-February 2013. I chose to focus my study on mememolly's first 46 videos out of an interest in capturing a snapshot of her early encounters at