

SOCIOLOGY SENIOR EXERCISE

Sex, Text, and Post Generation X:

Reality Construction and Gender Performance

Through Texts from Last Night

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Previous research has argued that one of the most notable features of the 1980s – 2000 born generation – loosely referred to as “post Generation X” or Generation Y - is the expansion of digital communication. Adding to the discussion on social identity online, this research examines the website Texts from Last Night, which integrates cellular texts and internet blogs into one forum that is meant to give a humorous insight into the culture of the ‘twenty-something.’ How does this website socially construct an identity of Generation Y? What are the characteristics of this portrayal? This study consisted of a two week content analysis of daily posted texts and photos in online advertisements, as well as select interviews with individuals associated with the website. Findings revealed that submitted texts go through a selection and editorial process before being posted online. The resulting data indicate that through the combination of text and image, Texts from Last Night creates and reinforces a social identity for Generation Y. This resulting cultural portrayal contains themes of sexual activity, deviant behavior brought on by drug/alcohol abuse, hegemonic gender norms and heteronormativity. Ultimately, results show that Texts from Last Night continues to play an active role in perpetuating a constructed gendered identity for Generation Y.

In the mid 1920's, the invention of television revolutionized the world of communication (Abramson 1987). In only ten years, thousands of families across the United States began to tune in to hear what they considered to be non-partisan news from this emerging media source (Gilder 1990). However, it took an additional 30 years for many to begin questioning how unbiased this media source actually was. In 1967, Marshall McLuhan wrote that the “*media is the message*,” arguing that when the average American family turns on the evening news, what they get is not unbiased truth, but rather the media itself (1967, 26). When McLuhan was writing, he described the image of television and notions of a global village. McLuhan had not yet experienced a second wave of expansion in digital media: the invention and development of the internet and online communication. Now, with the growth of digital media in the twenty-first century, we must again consider the perceived neutrality of online communication.

In the twenty-first century, advances in digital and online communication have significantly impacted the way individuals born between the years of 1980-2000, Generation Y,¹ relate to one another (Strauss, Howe, Kelly, Pugh 2006). As McLuhan predicted, “The medium, or process, of our time – electronic technology – is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life,” (McLuhan 1961, 8). From the popularization of texting, to social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*, many researchers have recognized the Gen Y group as growing up in a truly digital age (Yerbury 2010). In 2010, the International Association for Wireless Telecommunications recorded that the number of text messages occurring across the world has nearly doubled from 2005 to 2009, amounting to 152.7 billion texts per month (CTIA 2010).

¹ The generation after Generation X has been given many names including “Millenials,” “Post-Generation X,” and “Generation Y” (Strauss, Howe, Kelly, Pugh 2006).

According to many researchers, the popularity growth in technological communication has prompted many users to create a personal identity that is then portrayed through image, video, and text online (Kendall 1998, Kendall 1999, Gomez 2010, Laudone 2007). This finding stems from research indicating that not only has digital and online communication become more popular with individuals who belong to Generation Y, but that for the majority of middle-to-upper-class families, this form of communication has become a normalized and important part of daily life (Bakardjieva 2005). Given the emphasis on individual control and profile management on social networking sites (SNS's) like *Facebook* and *Myspace*, many researchers have noted that websites such as these offer a relatively neutral platform for individuals to create an online presentation of self that is entirely “personalized” (Livingstone 2008). Therefore, what the public sees can be assumed to be how the individual wants to present herself (Consalvo 2002, Livingstone 2008). However, can this neutrality in social networking sites also be said of sites that have a more active role in deciding what goes online? In the midst of *Facebook*, *Myspace*, *Twitter*, and personal blogs, all of which emphasize individual presentation management online, a relatively new form of website communication has arisen that combines individual post submissions with the editorial and selective decisions of a third party - the website staff. I call this type of website as a “universal blog:” an online forum to which everyone can submit, but only a few are actually posted at the discretion of a third party.

HISTORY OF *TEXTS FROM LAST NIGHT*

In February of 2009, two 22 year old students created the website called *Texts from Last Night*, which provides a universal blog set up and consists of humorous posted text messages submitted by visitors. The premise is that once an individual receives a “funny” text message

from a friend, they can submit the message to the website. Should the website find the text funny, it will post it, allowing other visitors to vote on the funniest texts, as well as deem posted texts representative of a “good night” or a “bad night” (Texts from Last Night 2010). A mere 19 months after it was created, the website now receives approximately 1.7 million views and 3,500 submissions per day (Interview, 2010). This means that in any given week, the website will receive approximately 11.9 million visits and will receive 24,500 text submissions. Although the website staff may receive 3,500 submissions per day, they post only 30 new messages, and reserve the right to cut and edit the texts however they see fit.

Despite being online for less than two years, many critics have touted the universal blog as being an “amazing collage [representing] this generation” that “speaks volumes” to the lived life of the “twenty-something year old” (*Overnight Sociology* 2009). This commentary and others that are like it found in popular media such as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* exemplify what Howard Rheingold identified as the assumption of identity characteristics based off of the portrayed identity online (1993).

Building from Berger and Luckmann’s theory of the social construction of reality, in addition to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance, and Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s theory of “doing gender.” My research questions how the website *Texts from Last Night* socially constructs reality online and what the characteristics of this reality might be. I also discuss why critics interpret the website’s postings as representative of Generation Y, as well as what are the editorial choices made that reinforce hegemonic gender roles and heteronormativity. My research draws upon content analysis conducted on the website’s posted texts and advertisements as well as interviews with web designers and employees involved with *Texts from Last Night*. I conclude that through the combined use of suggestive, sexual images found

within pointed advertisement and selective text postings, the website *Texts from Last Night* performs gender in a way that socially constructs a specific and narrow, gendered reality of Generation Y.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In her discussion of the integration of the internet within everyday life, Maria Bakardjieva writes that through the “weaving of the local and the global, the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real,’ through involvement in groups of common interest both online and face to face,” the internet has become a normalized structure within the average American family (2005:13). One of the elements Bakardjieva illustrates is how, in a relatively short amount of time, mobile and internet communications have become integral parts of American society. Exemplifying Bakardjieva’s study, in recent years research examining how individuals interact, organize and express themselves through online venues has grown immensely and is now considered its own sociological area of study (The MSS 2010).

Although the pool of research conducted on identity in the digital age is relatively new and thus small, the majority of research that does exist focuses primarily on the micro-level: how the individual acts and reacts to the larger online community and his/her own personal online identity (Kendall 1998, Pascoe 2009, Sibak 2010). It is important to note how research has looked at social interactions online thus far, and then to discuss how this particular research project can add to a growing pool of knowledge.

Studies thus far have examined online communication’s growing influence on individuals’ presentation of self to a larger group, such as friends on a social networking site or in a communal group with similar expressed interests such as single parenting (Brickell 2005;

Clark 2005, Van Doorn 2010). In fact, a number of researchers have examined how individuals see online social networking as an attractive outlet for expressing and presenting oneself based on the belief that individuals have the ability to create and manage their own portrayal with limited difficulty: “Using text, images, video, audio, links, quizzes, and surveys, teens generate a profile that expresses how they see themselves,” (Boyd 2007, 2). Examples of this include Haythornthwaite and Kendall’s research that shows how personal aspects of an individual’s identity such as their professional career, personal domestic responsibilities or geographical location are carried into one’s presented online identity thereby creating a stronger communal bond online (2010).

Other studies have examined the appeal of online discussion places such as social networking sites and personal blogs and credited such sites for providing the opportunity for users to find a larger, more public community of users who participate with each other through text, video, images, links, etc. on a regular basis (Boyd 2008; Gurak & Smiljana 2008; Mesch & Talmud 2010). These studies reveal not only the appeal individuals feel towards engaging in online interaction in the hopes of belonging to a community, but also the likelihood of assimilation between a user’s online and offline realities. Should one feel connected and integrated within an online community, specifically through repetitive, active discussion within communal websites, the greater likelihood that the user will possess qualities in his/her daily life that reflect those of the online group (Mesch & Talmud 2010, Rheingold 1993). An early and classic example of this is Howard Rheingold’s study entitled *The Virtual Community* where the author recognizes his gradual attachment to the online communities he was involved in was then perpetuated in his offline reality (1993). The author reported that it did not take long for him to

find that he was feeling emotions and noticing changes in behavior that mimicked group emotions and behaviors expressed in the online communities he belonged to (1993).

In addition to these sources, my project also builds upon the research work conducted by Niels Van Doorn, who argues that users on *Myspace* contribute to a sexualized and gendered norm through their use of text, images, and video as it is posted on their *Myspace* page (2010). Van Doorn's work is particularly interesting in that he specifically looks at how users perform gender through their own contributions to the social networking site *Myspace*. Although *Texts from Last Night* functions as a universal blog in which anyone can submit posts, the elements of text and image play a significant role in how gender is performed online and ultimately become characteristics of a constructed group identity.

Although *Texts from Last Night* is not a neutral platform for self-presentation like *Facebook* or *Myspace*, the website's universal blog aspects offer qualities of an online community. These qualities include open submissions, the ability to post unlimited comments on individual texts and notification features that indicate when new texts have been posted. These aspects of the website encourage discussion and frequent visits to the site, which are both important elements of an online community (Rheingold 1993, Boyd 2006).

These studies assume that the mediator between the individual and the larger community maintains a neutral status, serving only to connect the individual with the greater public. However, how does this neutrality change when the mediator claims a voice in how an individual is portrayed online? What is the effect if the mediator does not formally claim an active role but continues to participate through administrative choices in the individual's online portrayal? Similar to Marshall McLuhan's in-depth examination of the perceived neutrality of television,

this research examines the role *Texts from Last Night* plays in representing a generational culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research draws from Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966) *Social Construction of Reality*, in which the authors theorize that through perpetuated interaction between individuals in a social environment, the individual learns customs, roles, and habits that then help form what he/she interprets as reality. The authors write that "the reality of everyday life is taken for granted as reality" (1966: 23). They go on to explain that what one perceives as true reality is merely just one version of reality that is emphasized and maintained through repetitive interaction. Thus, Berger and Luckmann conclude that all social reality is constructed, meaning that one's reality can change given a different environment, different individuals, and indifferent interactions (1966). Given that the authors wrote their theory in 1966, they did not have the opportunity to address how the digital communication age would exemplify and further complicate the meaning and definition of "reality." This paper will discuss how notions of reality are challenged and demonstrated through online venues.

This research discusses how the staff of the website reinforces hegemonic gender stereotypes and heterosexism through their selection of texts as well as selection of advertisements shown on their website. Drawing from R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity and gender roles, I define hegemonic gender stereotypes as a normative set of ideals for either gender based on the belief that males should follow a dominant masculinity and females should be subdominant to males (1991). I also draw from Suzanne Pharr when I define heterosexism as the assumption of heterosexuality and its subsequent privilege and power

(1998). My hypothesis builds from gender theories from West and Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender" as it constructs an illusion of regulated sexuality and heterosexuality through acts and gestures (1987: 126). Butler argues that the notion of gender is something that we perform daily and thus perpetuate through our actions and gestures (1999: 7). What Butler did not discuss was how gender performance continues within the realm of new media. Also, if gender performance does continue online, are the inequalities that are inherent within hegemonic gender role and heterosexism perpetuated as well?

Building from Butler's theory of gender performance, this paper also takes into consideration Sut Jhally's theory of gendered dream worlds and new media imagery. Looking specifically at the effects of music videos, Jhally recognizes that through the use of select imagery, gendered language, actions, and expectations are perpetuated. Thus, Jhally argues, gender continues to be performed through new media imagery (2007).

This research project examines how the internet plays an active role in creating what Berger and Luckmann would see as a socially constructed reality. Moreover, this research uses *Texts from Last Night* as a case study for how a website as a fabricated reality of a culture perpetuates gender norms through its use of text and images and therefore creates a gendered reality of a generation. Thus, the focus of this paper is not on how the individual presents herself to the larger public through a neutral, online platform, but rather on how the online platform becomes active in portraying a generation and perpetuating gendered norms.

METHODS

My methodology was a combination of content analysis of both advertisement images and text, and semi-structured interviews. In order to fully understand the textual content that

makes up the majority of the website on *Texts from Last Night*, I visited the site daily for a two week period. Although the website's advertisements change with every unique site visit, I took notes and observations on the types of advertisements and companies that were endorsing the site. While coding the texts that were posted daily, I also recorded the different advertisement photos through taking computerized-snapshots of the website's homepage.

The website posts 30 new text messages every day. After printing out each new set of texts for a total of 14 days, I then began to read through each message and created codes inductively from the content. The emerging codes thus came out of my general analysis of the texts. At the end of the 14 day period, I had coded a total of 375 posted texts.²

Although the posted text messages contain a number of codes that represent a fairly diverse set of themes, I focused my codes on themes and notions that either highlighted issues in gender performance or codes that seemingly spoke to the specific character of Generation Y, as interpreted by the website. My codes included mentions of alcohol, drug use, the hook-up culture (that is, non-committal sexual interaction, "walk of shame" - which refers to a student who has a sexual encounter with another student, spends the night and then walks back to his/her dorm room the next morning -, etc), sexual intercourse and language pertaining to sexual acts. and gendered language (gender expectations, gendered roles, etc).

The final code that I looked for within the 375 texts was gendered language. I coded for this theme any time I came across language that expressed expectations or pressure to fulfill a hegemonic ideal based on one's perceived gender. Texts of this nature included texts such as:

² It is important to note that although I coded for text messages for a total of 14 days and the website claims to post 30 new messages per day, there is a discrepancy between the actual number of texts I coded for and the expected amount of text messages to be posted (420). This can be explained through the process of daily visits to the site. On three separate occasions, the website only presented 15 new text messages and then posted a sign stating that the website was down with temporary maintenance issues, thus not allowing access to the additional 15 posted texts. Wanting to maintain a steady pace of coding and taking into consideration the homogenous quality of the text messages, I had to allow for the discrepancy and focus my analysis on the 375 text messages.

“(412): Her [oral sex] game is great...All I’m saying is that she needs to invest in some razors...” (Texts from Last Night 2010). This text was coded for gendered language because of its expectation for women to shave their vaginal area.

In addition to performing a two-week long content analysis on the posted texts and advertisement images presented on *Texts from Last Night*, I also conducted two semi-structured interviews with individuals who have been involved with the actual creation and the daily running of the website. These interviews were designed to explore how the website’s editorial staff makes decisions on text selection (approximately 3,500 texts are submitted per day, but only 30 are chosen), editing of texts prior to posting, and the overall nature of texts submitted (I was interested in what subjects of interest are portrayed in the texts, the variety of the text submissions, and the process the staff engages in for selecting the posted texts). Ultimately, my questions centered on the editorial process the website goes through each day when dealing with daily submissions³.

RESULTS

After concluding two-weeks of content analysis of the posted texts on *Texts from Last Night*, I found that some of the most frequent themes in the texts are that of deviant behavior, sexual interaction, and alcohol use. Other themes, which were less prevalent but still very common throughout the 14-day analysis, included allusions to sexual anatomy, college-life, drug use, the presence of digital media, and heteronormative language.⁴

In regards to the more popular themes running through the texts, I found multiple aspects of deviant behavior, which I defined as any event or action that is separate or departing from any

³ List of semi-structured questions used in the interview process can be found in Appendix A.

⁴ A full table of codes, frequencies, and percentages can be found in Appendix B

socially accepted norm and constituted approximately 35 percent of the posted texts. Many of these texts were similar in their seemingly nonchalant attitude towards acts of deviance presumably performed the previous night. One such text reads: “I woke up covered in blue paint and my knee was bleeding. When I went to return the shopping cart, the guy in the elevator laughed hysterically. I’m having a good morning” (TFLN, 2010). Given that coding for deviant behavior can be very discretionary, one of my limitations in this part of my content analysis was accounting for this subjectivity and working to find other codes that were more concrete and easily recognizable.

I was able to find more easily recognizable codes in the second most frequent code which was sexual interactions. I identified texts that contained sexual interactions to include any specific mention of intercourse, oral sex, petting, lap dances, and other commonly-used terms that refer to any of the aforementioned behaviors. My data shows that 25.87 percent of the posted texts contain some aspect of sexual interactions. Similar to this frequency, I also found that 24.87 percent of the posted texts contained references to alcohol consumption. Content analysis indicated that 10.13 percent of posted texts contained notions of sexual anatomy, which I defined as any mention of reproductive organs, the functions of sexual anatomy, and hygienic or cosmetic alterations to anatomy. Approximately 5.3 percent of texts also contained reference to drug use.

Although many codes did not show up as frequently, it is important to note that there was some reference to gendered derogatory language, specifically the use of the word “slut,” in 2.4 percent of the texts. This language was always directed towards a female figure. There were no such instances for men in which derogatory or demeaning language was used. Another important finding within the content analysis is the coding for “college-life” and “digital media.”

Codes indicating language that specifically mentions college classes, faculty, or social networking sites, digital communication (i.e. texting) and photo sharing blogs, constitute 5.87 percent and 3.73 percent respectively.

Interview Results

In addition to coding results of the content analysis, data gathered from my semi-structured interviews also gave important insight to the inner workings and numerical statistics of *Texts from Last Night*. According to the information received from workers associated with the website, *Texts from Last Night* receives an approximate 3,500 submissions per day. The website also gets approximately 11.9 million visitors per week. Once an individual submits a text, the submission then goes to a data base where two individuals – one of the owners of the website and a younger sibling – will read through all of the submitted texts that day. The interviewee did not indicate that the time of day was either consistent or important to the selection process. Should texts be submitted after the selection process has already begun, the text is then considered for the next day's posting (Interview 2010).

According to my interview data with an employee for the website and one of the two website owners, texts are selected based on the discretion of the two individuals reading all 3,500 texts per day – the owner of *Texts from Last Night* and his younger brother. Texts are selected based on whether these two individuals believe the texts will be both funny and relatable to a large audience. Although the wording is never changed in the texts, one interviewee did indicate that texts will be “cut” or only posted in parts at the discretion of the owner and his brother.

In addition to the selection process, the interviewee also gave valuable insight as to the types of advertising and sources of income the website continues to make on a daily basis. As of

2010, *Texts from Last Night* receives funding from two major companies: Indieclick.com and American Apparel. Although Indieclick.com goes through a rotation of advertisements for movie debuts, clothing lines, online search engines, and upcoming television shows, the majority of the ad space is paid for by American Apparel which consistently had rotating advertisements on almost every page of the website. The interviewee noted that the popularity from *Texts from Last Night* has come entirely from “word of mouth,” (Interview, 2010). He states: “We've never spent money on advertising; most people have found out about the site because one of their friends posted a text as their Facebook status or wrote a text on their friends’ wall...” (Interview, 2010).

Content Analysis of Advertisements and Website Photos

The advertisements that my analysis focused on were ad images collected within the 14 day period of text analysis. During the image analysis, notable company advertisements that were examined included “Thrill.com” – that is, a search engine geared towards young adults seeking ‘cool bars’ in their area, Delta Airlines, and Mod Cloth which is a clothing store geared towards young adult, retro-styled fashion.

Results from the image analysis indicate that the advertisements were chosen selectively and seemed to merge with the texts and the iconic photo of a young woman with her phone in her mouth that *Texts from Last Night* uses as their signature photo. First, all of the advertisement images featured models that looked as though they were a part of the Generation Y population. Secondly, many ads from Indieclick.com featured images from seemingly popular bars that echoed the many posted texts that referred to alcohol consumption. Finally, I noted on multiple occasions that there was sexual nature of the advertisements in American Apparel ads,

specifically when the photos would show only portions of the female body in provocative poses, such as legs spread or only the torso of women wearing only tights.⁵

DISCUSSION

Although previous research has looked at how individuals construct their own identity through the use of the internet, very little research has considered the active role that the website also plays in constructing a reality of a group identity. In this discussion, I will touch on how the selection and editorial process that *Text from Last Night* employs has become a key factor behind the creation of what Berger and Luckmann refer to as the “social construction of reality” (1966). Demonstrating how the website employs repetitive social interactions necessary for Berger and Luckmann’s theory with repetitively emphasized themes within the texts and imagery of the ads, I contend that it is the combination of both image and text that is able to construct a portrayal of a generation. Further, the specific characteristics that are ascribed to Gen Y’s reality in this case study exemplify aspects of Judith Butler’s theory on gender performance. Finally not only does this case study of *Texts from Last Night* demonstrate aspects of Butler’s, Berger’s and Luckmann’s theories, but this study also extends these theories and raises questions about how these theories change when a fabricated gendered reality is perpetuated through an online media source.

From the Passive to the Active: A Silent Portal No More

In describing the actual editing technique and process text submissions go through prior to being posted, the creators of *Texts from Last Night* claim that they reserve the right to cut and edit texts, so that only portions of text conversations are then posted (TFLN 2010). Reasoning that the best texts “are the ones we can all relate to,” the creators contend that editing the texts

⁵ For a sample of the advertisement imagery collected, please refer to Appendix C

makes the end product something that all of the readers can find some familiarity in. Reaffirming their online statement of familiarity, my interview with *Texts from Last Night* staff members also indicates that the website specifically chooses which texts to post based on their own discretion: “The guidelines for text selection mostly depend on whether the owner thinks they will be funny and relatable to a vast number of our viewers,” (Interview 2010).

Who, then, are the readers of *Texts from Last Night*? Although not much can be learned in regards to demography from simple online statistics stating that 11.9 million visitors view *Texts from Last Night* per week, the website’s content contains key indicators of whom its posted messages cater to. Of the 375 analyzed text messages, I found 22 accounts (5.87 percent of total texts) of individuals referencing experiences from attending college. Content analysis also found 14 accounts (3.73%) of individuals claiming aptitude in digital communication, from *Facebook* and *Myspace* to texting. In addition to the coding results, interview data also pointed towards having an audience that is geared towards “the college campuses,” (Interview, 2010). Building from Yerbury’s study identifying a younger generation with more aptitude for digital communication and the multiple accounts of college life, one can assume that the generation that *Texts from Last Night* caters to is the same group that the website also constructs a reality for – that is the post Gen Y population.

It is important to keep in mind that although this information displays the audience demographic that the website wants to target – not necessarily what the website’s audience really is. With photos of young women as their iconic image, texts repeatedly filled with references of college life, hook ups, and digital communication as content, and American Apparel as their primary advertiser, it is clear that the owners of *Texts From Last Night* wants their website to appeal to a “twenty-something” audience. In targeting a specific demographic, the website also

was able to find a key audience to appeal to in their upcoming television sitcom (Interview 2010).

But what role does the individual play in what he/she actually submits? What control does the individual have over the identity that is perpetuated? Ultimately, the individual has very limited control over what is eventually posted on *Texts from Last Night*. Given that the premise of the site is that one person sends a text to a friend, the friend submits the text to the website, the website selects the text, two individual edit it as they see fit, and then posts the text online, the individual who originally sent the text is far removed from what is finally put online. Therefore, this universal blog does not work as a social networking site does, which allows individuals to have full control over their presentation of self. Rather, this type of website plays an active role in the decisive choices of what is presented online. The website creates the cultural image. Moreover, given that the website is able to be extremely selective in what texts they choose to submit and even more selective in what the owner chooses to edit in each text message, the website has the ability to blend photos, advertisements, and text together however they see fit.

Although the website does have primary say in what is displayed on the site, the active role that the website plays in content selection is not easily identifiable. Seeming at first like a neutral universal blog with open submissions, many viewers of the site could easily assume that the website is only a passive portal through which Gen Y individuals can express who they are as a culture. This, however, is not the case.

This research suggests that the culture portrayed through *Texts from Last Night* contains a relatively narrow range of characteristics describing the Gen Y culture. Although the website claims to edit texts to be relatable to a larger population consisting primarily of Gen Y, findings through content analysis indicate that the content of the website contains only a small range of

themes and events for the larger population to find familiarity in. Such themes include social gatherings outside of college academia, alcohol consumption, drug use, and a hook up culture. All of these themes also work with the imagery found in advertisements on the site and result in gender performance that perpetuates gender norms and heterosexual expectations. The themes portrayed through the website's text and images under the editorial direction of *Texts from Last Night's* staff construct a fabricated and somewhat narrow reality of what life is like for the twenty-something year old Generation Y individual. In order to more fully understand this constructed reality, it is important to first examine the character traits and aspects of life that the website attributes to this generation through its selective postings of texts.

The Makings of a Generation: TFLN's Recipe for Generation Y

My content analysis of *Text from Last Night's* posted texts show a number of trends associated with aspects of Generation Y's cultural makeup, as interpreted by the website. One of the most popular themes found within the text was that of extreme alcohol consumption and drunken behavior. Although the notion of alcohol consumption related to the social activities of Gen Y is not a new concept (Harford, Wechsler, Seibring 2002), it is also a very prominent theme within the culture as portrayed by the website. The theme of alcohol consumption was referenced in 24.53 percent of in 375 texts. One text exemplifying this theme was: "Things I love twice as much when drunk: Taco Bell. Office chairs that roll. Classes," (TFLN 2010). In this text alone, the theme of alcohol is referenced, but also notes that the sender and receiver of such text also is presumably in college and would fall in the age range of Generation Y. With this prevalent theme that the website actively indicates that part of this generation's cultural make up is frequent and enthusiastic alcohol consumption.

Another major theme found in the coding process was that of sexual interaction, including such acts as sexual intercourse, oral sex, petting, etc. Accounting for over a quarter (25.87%) of total texts, many postings not only mentioned sexual activity as a regular part of their social outings, but also linked the sexual activity to alcohol consumption. One example of this is a text that stated, "Passing out during sex is actually quite pleasant. It's like being rocked to sleep with a penis" (TFLN 2010). Ultimately, the majority of the texts that referenced sexual activity referenced the sexual activity did so with regard deviant form of behavior. Texts exemplifying this included such postings as: "There is a clear recurring theme of my having sex in restrooms that really needs to stop," and "We're cuddling on the couch that me and his brother had sex on..." and "I just negotiated a blow job for an interview," (TFLN 2010). The repetition of this theme within the content of the website demonstrates yet another aspect of the cultural portrayal of Generation Y that the website constructs. Moreover, it is not simply the idea of sexual promiscuity that is linked to Generation Y, but also the idea of deviant sexual acts, such as public sexual intercourse, multiple partners, and unethical conduct in professional circles.

Small Frequencies, Large Impact

Although quantitative analysis does indicate larger themes within the text messages, there are a number of smaller themes that should also be noted. These themes include mentions of drug use, vomit, and discrimination against homosexuality and the obese. In these four specific themes, it was not their frequency within total number of texts but rather the actual content of the specific texts that was striking.

Of the 375 posted text messages, 20 messages made some mention of drug use. Although only consisting of 5.3% of the total texts, the messages that did contain a reference to drug use were both severe and excessive. Many of these coded messages indicated extreme use of hard

drugs to the point of memory loss, vomiting, and drug rehabilitation. Two texts that exemplify these tendencies read: “I legitimately woke up with a girl trying to snort cocaine off my dick,” and “I love watching the kids I sold drugs to score a touchdown” (TFLN 2010). Nearly all of the text messages containing a reference to drug use were also clearly attempting to relate humor to their situation. One such text reads: “I’m never telling my kids not to take ecstasy. Never. [I don’t know] what my mom was thinking” (TFLN 2010).

Another smaller but notable theme within the text was the text messages that contained a reference to vomiting. Whether due to excessive consumption of alcohol, drugs, or if it was unclear from the text, these messages permeated throughout the texts and were striking in the situations they described. One such text reads: “Thank god I puked near the cancer center. It makes me look like I’m a chemo patient,” (TFLN 2010). Similar to the mentions of drug use, the majority of the 13 coded messages for vomiting attempted to insert a sense of humor to the situation.

Although the number of messages that clearly indicate language that either discriminate against homosexuals and the obese were low – 14 messages containing homophobic language and 3 messages containing demeaning language towards the obese – the nature of the content necessitates further analysis. With regards to a discrimination against homosexuality, all of the text messages that referred to either one individual or a group of people who identified as homosexual contained language that signified the speaker as part of a heterosexual majority and the homosexual as an ‘other.’ One such text reads: “I’m really not drunk enough to watch the fat lesbian on my floor bring another fat lesbian into her room” (TFLN 2010). Similar to this text, many times the posted messages would refer not only to another individual’s homosexuality but also point out an additional demeaning quality, such as obesity. In terms of three text messages

containing discriminatory language against the obese, the resulting texts were noteworthy. Similar to the texts about homosexuals, the texts containing a comment about the obese also set them up as the ‘other.’ One posted text says: “Now we’re playing [the game] what girl doesn’t belong in the picture of girls in bikinis,” while another reads: “Day 5 without masturbation. Fat chicks are back on the table” (TFLN 2010).

It is also important to remember that these texts were individually selected by the creator of the website because of its presumed ability to be relatable to the reader. In addition to this, each of these texts were also selected under the assumption that they would, as one staff member put it, “be funny to a vast number of [the] viewers,” (Interview, 2010). Given that the overall rubric for posting messages places familiarity and humor as the two main frameworks for text selection, one must wonder how such texts like “Now go wash the fat girl off your hands” (TFLN 2010) become part of the socially constructed identity of the Gen Y population. In the end, I hypothesize that given a bigger sample of texts to analyze; these minor themes may actually play a bigger role in the overall content.

A Gendered Reality

Coding for gender norms and traces of hegemonic expectations proved to be a difficult task, given that many of the texts did not always reveal the gender of the sender. However, the instances that did show up throughout the content of the website necessitate a discussion of how *Texts from Last Night’s* posted texts, images, and chosen advertising sponsors continue to personify Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance.

Although the nature of having just the text messages on the universal blog does create a more gender-neutral (meaning that the audience is unable to determine the gender of the sender) environment, in the instances when the gender was apparent, there were a number of norms

connected with each gender. Despite the fact that there were no instances where the language of the text indicated any expectations for men, for women there were a number of accounts that presumed women were expected to shave their legs and genital area. One such text exemplifying these expectations for women reads: “Is it just my freshly shaved vagina, or is the guy at the end of the table pretty cute??” (TFLN 2010). These texts show not only an expectation put on women but also a generational norm that the website assigns to Gen Y. Building from Butler’s theory which argues that “gender is... an identity instituted by a stylized repetition of acts,” one can see how through the repetition of gendered expectations portrayed through text, gender continues to be performed.

Another normalized expectation for women is their participation in the hook up culture. While research has definitely indicated that the participation in the hook up culture has been an accepted norm in both genders, the posted text messages on *Texts from Last Night* that did indicate gender portrayed Generation Y women as hyper-sexualized beings. As one text states: “1- Guess who hooked up with that guy who finger printed her last night? 2- You mean the cop? 1- yeah” (TFLN 2010). Exemplifying what Sut Jhally identifies as female figures taking on the dream-world interpretations of the heterosexual male, this text portrays women as being excited by the idea of hooking up with a presumed stranger. Another example the female expectation to participate within the hookup culture is the text: “New handbag passed the ultimate test. The walk of shame. I had a bra, tights, skirt, shirt, and sweater in it and you couldn’t tell. Yesssss,” (TFLN 2010). Out of the 375 coded messages, there were no messages which indicated both the gender of the sender as well as any reference to sexual modesty or fear of too much promiscuity. Thus when gender was able to be perceived through the text, the texts portrayed women in a

similar light to Jhally's women in music videos: aroused, excited, and always ready for a hook up.

In addition to the portrayal of women as perpetually sexually charged beings through language that emphasizes normalized expectations, the posted messages also contain a number of instances where demeaning language towards women is used. In nine messages, accounting for 2.4% of the net texts, the term "slut" is used to describe a woman. Despite the fact that this quantity does not appear to be representative of any significant portion of the texts, there are no accounts of using derogatory or demeaning language towards men. One text reads: "be sure to add 'office slut' to your resume" (TFLN 2010). Although the word "dick" did occur throughout the text, it was always used to reference male genitals and was only coded once within the text as containing any other notion attached to it: "She can't really be mad at me. I made you two sisters... Dick sisters" (TFLN 2010). Again, coding results show that this one occurrence of demeaning language with relation to male genitalia goes back to being a derogatory term for women.

Who's Benefitting?

The content analysis of the 375 posted texts alone portrays how *Texts from Last Night* attempts to construct a gendered reality through its use of selected and edited texts. However, the language and repetition of the texts is not the only means by which the website creates a portrayal of Gen Y. Combining with the repetitive themes running throughout the posted text messages, the website's selective advertisement images also help construct what is perceived as a gendered reality.

Based on interview data, the owners and staff of *Texts from Last Night* benefit financially from the website in a number of ways. First, the website offers the opportunity for each posted

text to be screen-printed on a t-shirt for individual purpose. In addition to the income from t-shirt sales, in January 2010 the website also published its first self-titled book that showcased not only some of the most viewed and rated texts, but also new texts that had never been seen before. Finally, as of 2009, *Texts from Last Night* sold their rights to Fox and is currently in production for a television show set to come out in 2012.

The advertisements featured on *Texts from Last Night* emphasize and reinforce the suggestive posted texts. Many advertisements seem to encourage the gendered role of women within the Gen Y as sexually charged women ready for sexual pleasure at a moment's notice and men as eager to take up multiple partners. The *Texts from Last Night* staff select texts and images that work together to reinforce similar themes of sexual interactions, alcohol consumption, and gendered expectations that blend together in constructing a gendered reality.

CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, the website *Texts from Last Night* exemplifies how the internet cannot be seen as a homogenous neutral platform that individuals can use in order to present themselves to a larger public audience. Although many sites, such as social networking sites and personal blogs, allow for individual users to have more control and more management of their identity on a micro-level, universal blogs such as *Texts from Last Night* introduce a third player into the discussion of editorial choices and image management on the macro level. In addition, *Texts from Last Night* also demonstrates how Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of social constructions of reality is carried into the 21st Century. Rather than having repetitive social interaction as Berger and Luckmann's theory necessitates, the website utilizes a combination of text and image with repetitive themes of sexual interaction, deviant behavior, and alcohol

consumption to construct a fabricated online reality of a generation. Striking texts with reference to discrimination against homosexuals and the obese also continue to exist within the constructed reality that *Texts from Last Night* assigns to Generation Y.

While individual submitters may “do gender” when they submit texts, the website staff also “does gender” in their own editorial choices in the selection and editing of texts and the type of companies that they sell ad space to. As both the submitters and the website perform gender through text and image, they also continue deep rooted themes of hegemonic gendered expectations and heterosexual norms. The portrayal of the young female woman is also very skewed to portray the norm for women of Gen Y to be nothing more than constantly aroused, eager for sex, and ready to party.

Thus, the fabricated reality that the website creates characterizes the Generation Y culture as twenty-something year olds whose social experience is a constant flow of alcoholism, sexual encounters, deviant and often times illegal behavior, and not much more. Seemingly boasting additional themes of drug use, crude bodily functions, and growing discriminations against homosexuality and the obese, the website does not paint a positive image of this generation.

What does this mean that many view universal blogs such as *Texts from Last Night* as a source that “speaks volumes” to the lived life of the “twenty-something year old” (*Overnight Sociology* 2009)? Building from the literature review, if individuals carry with them the aspects of the identities that they can relate to online, what does this mean for those individuals who post daily or frequently visit the website?

The findings from the content analysis and interviews suggest that while each individual submitter to the website *Texts from Last Night* does have a say in what texts are submitted, it is ultimately the selection and editorial choices of the website staff combined with the suggestive

imagery of the advertisements that together construct the portrayed reality of the Generation Y population. Thus, the media continues to massage its public, up into the twenty first century (1966).

Although this study strove to add to developing research examining the active role of online media, there were a number of limitations to my research. Future research should also look at additional features of the website that gives much more agency to how individuals present themselves online. One such feature is that each visitor to the website is able to comment on any given texts as many times as he/she would like. These commentaries that at times can number to over 100 statements are important as they too contain language that is similar to that in the posted text messages. Another feature of the website that also deserves additional attention is the categorization of texts as a “good night” or a “bad night.” Visitors can vote on whether any given text represents a good or bad night. Again, this feature gives individual visitors to the site an immediate and unedited say in how they view each text. Given the large amount of rich data that I gathered just in the text message alone, I was unable to devote sufficient attention to this feature. However, future research should take into consideration these features of the website that allow for a more candid dialogue between visitors.

Another important recommendation for future research is that researchers consider a way to interview individual visitors who submit texts to the site. Although *Texts from Last Night* does play an active mediating role in the portrayal of Generation Y’s culture, the website necessitates outside individual involvement. What is the incentive for posting to website? Do the submitters feel any need to act a certain way or dramatize their texts in a way that would heighten their chances for being posted? Are the posted texts taken to be factual accounts? Although it is

outside the scope of my own study, I believe that future research should seek to answer these types of questions.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Can you please tell me your formal position title when working for *Texts from Last Night*?
2. Given your knowledge and experience working with the site approximately how many submissions does the website receive per day?
3. Approximately how many hits does the website receive per day?
4. Who decided on which texts “make the cut” and are actually posted on the website?
5. Do the texts get edited, and in which ways?
6. Are there any guidelines to how the texts are chosen?
7. Can you comment on the nature of the submissions (i.e. do most of the texts refer to alcohol/drug use or the hook up culture)?
8. Can you give me the names/contact information to any other individual who might know more information about the editorial practices of *Texts from Last Night*?

Appendix B

Coding Frequencies and Percentages
for Data Set from Text Analysis, *Texts From Last Night*
Accessed October 17th - October 30th, 2010

Code	Frequency	Percentage of Whole (N=375)
Deviant Behavior (Mentions of events/actions that appear to be selected because of behavior deviant from a socially accepted norm)	131	34.93%
Sexual Interaction (Specific mention of the following: intercourse, oral sex, petting/hand jobs, lap dance, “humping,” etc)	97	25.87%
Alcohol (Specific mention of alcoholic beverages, brands of liquor, bars, etc)	92	24.53%
Sexual Anatomy (Specific mentions of reproductive organs, functions of sexual anatomy, hygienic/cosmetic alterations to anatomy, etc)	38	10.13%
Food and Non-alcoholic drinks (Specific mention of any food/non-alcoholic drink item being consumed)	36	9.6%
College (Specific mentions of college classes – either at a bachelor’s or upper level degree, college faculty, or the institution in general)	22	5.87%
Drugs (Specific mentions of drug use, drug rehabilitation, influences of drugs – i.e. “blazed,” “high,” etc)	20	5.3%
Digital Media (Specific mentions of Social Networking Sites, digital communication, etc)	14	3.73%
Heterosexual Normative Language (texts that clearly indicate heterosexual encounters, as well as language that contains notions of homophobia or homophobic prejudice)	14	3.73%
Hook Up Culture (Specifically mentioning “hooking up,” “one night stand” or “walk of shame”)	13	3.47%
Vomit (Specific mentions of vomiting, puking, etc. *Code does not take into account reason behind vomiting, i.e drug or alcohol use)	13	3.47%
Gendered Derogatory Language (Use of the term “slut”/”pussy”)	9/1	2.4%
Masturbation/Pornography (Specifically mentions the act of masturbating, use of pornography, or individual use of sexual toys)	7	1.87%
Obesity (Specific mention of discrimination against the obese)	3	.8%
Gendered expectations (Shaving vaginal area, etc)	3	.8%

Appendix C

Advertising Images Recorded in 14 day Text Analysis

Image #1: Indieclick.com for ModCloth



Image #2: Indieclick for Thrill.com



Image #3: Indie click for Thrill.com

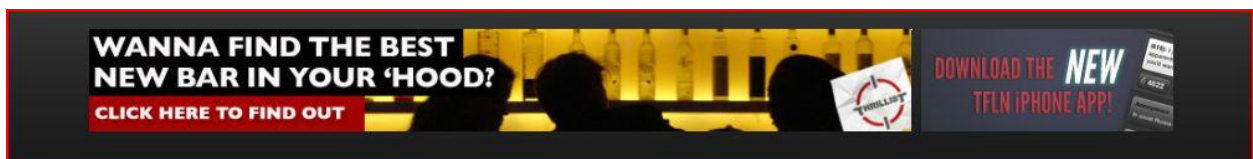


Image #4: American Apparel

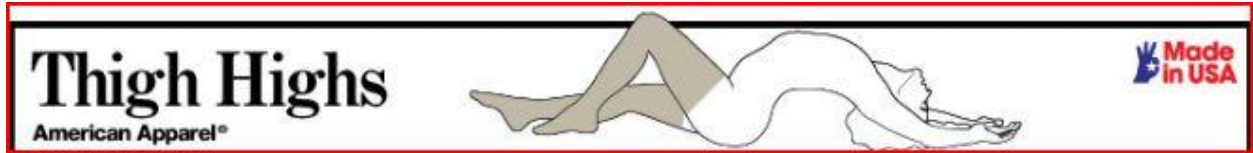


Image #5: American Apparel



Image #6: *Texts from Last Night* Icon Image

