Sharing Intimate Moments on YouTube: Women Who Vlog and Their Sense of Community, Friendship and Privacy

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ABSTRACT

YouTube, a public video-sharing site, is attracting people who crave a sense of community, and is allowing individuals – specifically women – to maintain social relationships through its web-based system. Groups of these women vloggers document their efforts to conceive, their pregnancies and parenting challenges, which some critics argue are very personal experiences that should not be shared publicly with strangers. Using social penetration theory and elements of communication privacy management theory, this thesis analyzes how self-disclosure through computer-mediated communication converts superficial relationships with strangers into close, social connections by examining the extent to which breadth and depth of self-disclosure occur online between members of the community, and how privacy issues affect social penetration. Using the method of ethnographic research, including vlog viewing and interviews, the analysis reveals the reasons women share intimate moments online and how this type of self-disclosure fosters friendships through computer-mediated communication. According to participants, friendships developed through the social network site are valued as much as real-life relationships with friends and family. YouTube has become a platform for group formation and fellowship where broadcasting intimate moments online creates a platform for debate, discussion and greater understanding, especially for members of the trying to conceive community.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 5  
  Importance of the Study ........................................................................ 5  
  Statement of the Problem ...................................................................... 5  
  Definition of Terms Used ..................................................................... 7  
  Organization of Remaining Chapters .................................................. 8

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .......................................... 9  
  Philosophical Assumptions .................................................................. 9  
  Theoretical Basis .................................................................................. 10  
  The Literature ...................................................................................... 11  
    Social Network Sites and Social Penetration Theory. ......................... 14  
  Rationale ............................................................................................ 19  
  Research Questions ............................................................................ 20

## CHAPTER III: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY ....................................... 21  
  Scope .................................................................................................. 21  
  Methodology ....................................................................................... 21  
  Validity ................................................................................................ 23  
  Reliability ............................................................................................ 24  
  Ethics ................................................................................................... 24

## CHAPTER IV: THE STUDY .................................................................... 26  
  Introduction .......................................................................................... 26  
  Results .................................................................................................. 26  
  Data Analysis ....................................................................................... 27  
    Context of Vlogging: Why Women Do It ......................................... 28  
    Vlogging Encounter: What It Looks Like .................................... 30  
    Privacy Boundaries and Gender ..................................................... 35  
    Language .......................................................................................... 37  
  Discussion ............................................................................................ 39

## CHAPTER V: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS .................................. 43  
  Limitations of the Study ...................................................................... 43  
  Further Study or Recommendations ................................................... 44  
  Conclusions ......................................................................................... 44

REFERENCES ........................................................................................... 47

Appendix A ............................................................................................... 52  
  Email to YouTube Vloggers Asking for Participation .......................... 52

Appendix B ............................................................................................... 54  
  Author’s Note ...................................................................................... 54
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Importance of the Study

The substantial growth of the Internet since the 1990s allows individuals to connect to each other in a variety of ways, widening users’ social circles by creating computer-mediated communities. Social interaction has become the most popular Internet activity, allowing users to keep in touch with family, friends, coworkers and acquaintances from real life (Iriberry & Leroy, 2009). However, the extensive reach of the Internet also helps to foster associations between people who would otherwise never have met in person, but who form close relationships through a social network site (SNS) because of a shared interest. One SNS that interests researchers is YouTube, a video-sharing community where some participants post video blogs, or vlogs, for others to view. Past communication theories of Walther (1996) and Daft and Lengel (1986) researched interpersonal communication in terms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) versus face-to-face (FTF) communication. These theories conflict in their arguments regarding which form of communication is richer, judging that CMC has advantages over FTF and vice versa. But recently, Walther (2010) concluded that online interpersonal communication is a valid and compelling focus of study in itself, without having to compare it to off-line behavior. Therefore, as a new media, YouTube is emerging as an area of study for CMC.

Statement of the Problem

Social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973) suggests that the human personality is “analogous to an onion” (p. 27), with the layers of the onion representing the depth dimensions of one’s personality. Altman and Taylor (1973) propose that social penetration proceeds through the onion like a hypothetical pin, moving from layer to layer without skipping layers. In this
way, social interaction is gradual and systematic and moves from initial superficial topics to more intimate discussion (depth), while also widening the number of topics and categories shared between individuals (breadth).

Scholars are challenging Altman and Taylor’s (1973) social penetration theory by suggesting that CMC allows relationships to develop more rapidly with just as much breadth and depth (Pennington, 2008). Additionally, extensive research exists regarding the level of intimacy in vlogs and how self-disclosure shapes privacy and relationship development through CMC (Child & Petronio, 2011). Gender issues also play an important role in understanding intimacy through CMC, as Bane, Cornish, Ersparer and Kampman (2010) indicate female friendships are developed through intimate disclosure, while male friendships are developed through shared experiences and activities. This supports Lange’s (2007) research which indicates female vloggers participate in more vulnerable and personal types of engagements, promoting higher levels of intimacy.

What sets YouTube apart from other forms of CMC is that YouTube employs both CMC and FTF communication, as most vlogs utilize a diary format where an individual is speaking conversationally into a video camera. According to Tolson (2010), this form of vlogging reproduces “the feel of face-to-face communication,” even though it is accessed through technology (p. 277). This distinctive characteristic has important implications for research by proposing that social penetration theory is evolving, suggesting that developing lasting relationships does not take as much time as previously thought because of the melding of CMC and FTF communication. Issues of privacy, intimacy and self-disclosure also need to be examined, as it is these layers which compose relationship development.
Definitions of Terms Used

Because YouTube is a fairly new technological medium, it is imperative to define some terms and definitions that are used frequently throughout this study. This thesis also includes an ethnography of a YouTube community that uses specific phrases to identify itself. Basic technical definitions are followed by YouTube-specific definitions, concluding with community-specific definitions.

1. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) – this term encompasses any “human communication achieved through, or with the help of, computer technology” (Thurlow et al., 2004, p. 15).

2. Face-to-face communication (FTF) – this type of communication involves social presence, visual cues and close geographical proximity. Scholars consider FTF the richest form of communication because of its immediacy and intimacy (Thurlow et al., 2004).

3. Social network site (SNS) – boyd and Ellison (2008) define a social network site as a web-based service that allows individuals to form connections with others through a public or semi-public profile, while also articulating those connections to other users who are also able to view them.

4. Channel – A YouTube channel is the home page or profile page for a YouTube account. Users can view the channel owner’s YouTube activity and any personal information the owner has decided to share.
5. Vlog/video – The term ‘vlog’ is a shortened form of the term ‘video blog.’ In this thesis, video and vlog are used interchangeably. Vlog can also be used as a verb to show the action of making a video.

6. Vlogger – One who creates a vlog.

7. Real-life – Used to define the vlogger’s social interactions outside of YouTube with family and close personal friends, essentially another form of FTF communication.

8. Trying to conceive (TTC) – The term used to describe the YouTube community of study. This term was adopted by the community itself and is used frequently in its language.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This thesis is a five-chapter ethnographic study of the YouTube trying to conceive community. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature regarding social penetration theory and communication privacy management theory and establishes the rationale and research questions identified for the thesis. Chapter 3 classifies the scope and methodology of the study and provides a list of interview questions. Chapter 4 presents the ethnography and examines the study’s results through data analysis and discussion. Chapter 5 describes the limitations of the study, suggests further areas of study and recommendations and provides a summation of the study’s conclusions.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Philosophical Assumptions

Every person has a story, a message, he or she feels is important and that others can most likely learn from. Individuals also have two very important innate needs: a) the need to be included and b) the need to be heard. Communicating through SNS allows that peer connection while also providing an avenue for self-disclosure, filling both the need to be included and the need to be heard. This philosophical assumption is similar to Jurgen Habermas’ discourse ethics, a procedure allowing a group of diverse individuals to engage in public discourse (Griffin, 2009). The group establishes rules and knowledge about how to make their culture or community a positive one, building an “ideal speech situation” (Griffin, 2009, p. 231) where participants feel comfortable listening and speaking without fear, exchanging information and experiences and accepting and learning from different points of view.

Patterson and Wilkins (2005) write that Habermas is a proponent of a deliberative democracy, which is made up of a “large number of public forums where people meet by chance and begin a dialogue” (p. 254). Many of these forums are created through CMC and are developing at an accelerated rate as members of online communities come together for open discussion and mutual understanding. This study aims to evaluate how members of an online community who have never met in person view their online friendships with each other. The goal is to suggest that the cultural realm of CMC and social network sites give way to acceptance because they offer a platform for non-confrontational debate, which only enhances our knowledge of interpersonal relationship development and contributes to Habermas’s vision of utopian discourse.
Theoretical Basis

Irwin Altman and Dalmas A. Taylor first introduced social penetration theory in 1973. The theory originated from both researchers’ long-standing interest in social processes and informal observation of the growth and deterioration of social relationships (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The term “social penetration” refers to the overt interpersonal exchanges within social interaction and the internal processes that accompany those exchanges (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Altman and Taylor’s (1973) theoretical framework encompasses two basic themes: (a) social penetration processes require time to move through orderly, systemic stages; and (b) relationships advance through personal assessments of the rewards and costs from interactions with others.

Altman and Taylor include in their theory the notion of group relationships, positing that individuals only glean from one another that which is necessary to interact within the foundation of the group’s objectives. However, group interactions can serve as a catalyst for more intimate interpersonal relationships among group members (Altman & Taylor, 1973). It should be noted that since the theory was published in 1973 before the explosion of the Internet and social network sites, the ideas presented by Altman and Taylor (1973) regarding social penetration and group relationships were framed by physical environment factors, such as parent-teacher associations and cocktail parties. They cite several research studies that suggest deeper intimate relationships are associated with closer geographical distances. Altman and Taylor (1973) also mention that interpersonal relationships do not work like computers; there is no “constant updating of results and immediate revisions of behavior” (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 49). Interestingly, this is the precise task of present-day social network sites.
An examination of communication privacy management (CPM) theory should accompany a study regarding the social penetration of female vloggers on YouTube since the basic rule of CPM is that individuals have a need for self-disclosure – but also a need for privacy – and they will change their boundary and privacy perceptions based on the situation (Petronio, 2002). The five principles of CPM include: a) the belief that individuals own their private information; b) since the information is owned, they have the right to control the flow of this information to others; c) individuals use their own set of privacy rules to control the flow of information; d) once the information is shared, it becomes co-owned by both the original owner and those who the information was shared with, making it the responsibility of the co-owners to see that the information is disseminated responsibly, and; e) that if privacy rules are not established to circulate the information properly, boundary turbulence will result, requiring a reassessment of privacy needs and management in the future (Child and Petronio, 2011). These principles are essentially what define self-disclosure through a social network site, and particularly a YouTube community, since a collective boundary is established through the disclosure of intimate information and is enhanced by the ability of the visitor or viewer to add contributions (Child and Petronio, 2011) in the form of comments, messages, or video responses.

The Literature

According to boyd and Ellison (2008) there are three well-defined features of social network sites. The first is that they allow participants to construct a public or semi-public profile within a web-based system. Profiles can be personalized by adding photos, multimedia content or applications to make them unique pages (Burgess & Green, 2009). The second feature is that the profile articulates connections with other online participants who are also users of the system. These connections are often known as “friends,” “contacts,” or “fans” on most social network
sites (boyd & Ellison, 2008). The third feature of a social network site is the ability of participants to see each others’ connections within the web-based system. Profiles linked through contacts and the capacity to view connections on others’ profiles reflect the process of the social network (Lange, 2008), while the critical organizing feature of these contact systems underscore their social nature (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Lange (2008) maintains that it is important to note this definition does not identify the relational closeness of the connections, just that participants are linked in some way.

Additionally, most social network sites allow participants to post messages or comments to one another through the web-based system (Pennington, 2008). These messages imitate webmail or text messaging, but are sent and received through the social network site. boyd and Ellison (2008) further explain that beyond the standard features of comments, messaging, profiles and connections, social network sites differ in their utilization of other distinct features, like instant messaging or photo- and video-sharing, and their user base varies.

One example of a social networking site is YouTube. Burgess and Green (2009) state YouTube was launched in June 2005, and its aim was to remove the technical barriers to widespread online video-sharing. With minimal technical knowledge, users could upload, publish and view videos within the limits of basic browser software. In October 2006, YouTube was acquired by Google for $1.65 billion, and by April 2008, the website had hosted 85 million videos, an unprecedented amount for an online community designed strictly from user-created content (Burgess & Green, 2009). According to YouTube’s press statistics, the site is visited by 800 million unique users every month, and 72 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute (www.youtube.com).
YouTube’s slogan, “Broadcast Yourself,” encourages vlogging, a user-created form of online video production. Vlogging brings together webcam culture and personal blogging to create vlog entries discussing the deliberations of daily life, a medium that Burgess and Green (2009) claim was born out of the rise of reality television which focuses on the observations of other individuals’ life experiences. Vlogging imitates FTF communication with emphasis on emotion, immediacy and conversation, and it invites feedback because of direct address to the viewer (Burgess & Green, 2009). Therefore, Tolson (2010) regards YouTube “as a distinctively original form of mediated communication” (p. 279).

However, YouTube’s innovative communication structure may not be easily understood by society. Research by Lange (2008) proposes people who are not regular users of YouTube cannot comprehend why others would watch poor quality or odd videos on the site. People are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with vlogging’s diary format and are often critical of it, claiming that vlogging is self-centered and obsessive, with little or no value to anyone but the videomaker (Lange, 2007). Hian, Chuan, Trevor and Detenber (2004) suggest support group systems within a computer-mediated environment only serve to indulge the interpersonal needs of individuals. Nevertheless, Burgess and Green (2009) argue that all video content circulated on YouTube is valuable and engaging, as it contributes to the culture of the YouTube social network, allowing a common space to support a diverse range of issues. Vloggers agree that it is by broadcasting the intimate moments of their lives that “a space is created to expose and discuss difficult issues and thereby achieve greater understanding of oneself and others” (Lange, 2007, para. 1).

This type of “digital bonding” has become increasingly popular since the inception of YouTube, creating a wide variety of online niche communities (McIntosh & Harwook, 2002, p. 26). Members of these communities are committed to YouTube’s success and value as a creative
collection of expressions, ideas and learning tools. Their engagement requires personal time, persistence, and self-revelation in order to build relationships with other members (Burgess & Green, 2009).

While there can be some parallels drawn between FTF support groups and computer-mediated support groups such as YouTube communities, Hian, Chuan, Trevor and Detenber (2004) claim that the difference is the “rate at which social information exchange takes place” (p. 3). They present Walther’s (1996) hyperpersonal communication model to illustrate the contrasts, namely that CMC encourages idealization of online partners and allows self-preservation through editing. As stated previously, the development of relationships through CMC takes time and commitment; however, this can be also be said of relationship development through any medium, including FTF communication.

Social Network Sites and Social Penetration Theory

Altman and Taylor (1973) developed social penetration theory to explain how relationships progress from shallow contacts to more intimate self-disclosure, resulting in closer attachments and stronger personal bonds. They use the metaphor of an onion with its many layers to illustrate the beliefs, feelings and attitudes individuals have about themselves, others and the world. The outer layers hold more superficial information that is accessible to anyone, and the inner layers are more vulnerable, containing protected information that is central to one’s self-image (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Altman and Taylor (1973) believe it is only by discovering these more intimate, vulnerable layers through self-disclosure and time that a close relationship can develop.
With the advent of CMC, many scholars suggest that Altman and Taylor’s social penetration theory should be reevaluated. Griffin (2009) indicates that social penetration is quick at the beginning of a relationship, but slows down as the guarded inner layers of one’s personality are reached, and that there are societal norms against revealing too much personal information too quickly. But research by Pennington (2008) shows that CMC is eliminating layers once thought essential to the development of lasting relationships, suggesting that the social penetration process can take weeks – and not months – as Altman and Taylor (1987) theorized. Pennington (2008) states it is becoming socially acceptable to put personal information on display for others to see, suggesting self-disclosure through CMC is altering what is and is not considered suitable communication when establishing relationships.

Even though many recent studies maintain that social penetration theory has been applied to CMC, there is not much research analyzing the relationship between social penetration theory and CMC that constructs interpersonal relationships, such as YouTube. One such study researched computer-mediated relationship development and the effect of social penetration theory’s breadth and depth of disclosure (Wright et al., 2008). Breadth, the range of topics discussed between individuals, and depth, revealing information that individuals consider personal, are a central route to social penetration (Altman & Taylor, 1973). The research, conducted through the social network site Facebook, found that CMC minimized the interpersonal risks of relationship development, allowing expedited social penetration leading to meaningful relationships (Wright et. al., 2008). CMC also enhances friendship progression and maintenance because of its convenience, allowing for more frequent interactions with others (Bane et al., 2010).
Additionally, research conducted by Kleman (2007) applying social penetration theory to blogs, claimed that self-disclosure through blogs may be more intimate than FTF disclosure. Individuals may feel a sense of online disinhibition, allowing for increased intimate self disclosure as compared to FTF communication (Suler as cited in Kleman, 2007). Therefore, when combining the diary format of a blog with the FTF disclosure experience of YouTube, assumptions can be made that disclosure through vlogging would be particularly personal.

Kleman’s (2007) research also indicates that “when bloggers expect positive outcomes of their self-disclosure, it is predicted that they will disclose more intimate information” (p. 24). One positive outcome could be garnering support and gaining friendships and knowledge, occurrences that are sought by the subjects of this thesis – women who vlog. Earlier research reveals that women disclose more intimate information than men and tend to be more positive and aware in their disclosure (Kleman, 2007). Burgess and Green (2009) propose it are these gentle moments of communication facilitated by vlogs that lead to “hope for an enrichment of public discourse” (p. 80).

Iriberri and Leroy (2009) indicate the Internet appeals to individuals because it is an avenue for social interaction, facilitating social bonding and friendship development. Online communities are born out of a need for information, support and relationship, and participants who actively contribute to the community feel a sense of pride and accomplishment in helping others within the community (Iriberri & Leroy, 2009). McIntosh and Harwood (2002) theorize that individuals are joining online communities to share problems, seek advice or encouragement, and reassure themselves that their experiences are common or normal. People desire the feeling of community, and that is the appeal of CMC. It enables individuals to experience belonging, suggesting that “when people feel marginalized by their community, they
find community at the margins” (McIntosh & Harwood, 2002, p. 28). Kim (2011) agrees, stating that online communities – and specifically YouTube – are places “where the marginalized get heard and become active agents for movement mobilization” (p. 6). The goal of some, writes Keller (2012), is to make social network sites more responsible, acting “more as constituents, and not as passive residents” (para. 25).

It is here that some women find themselves, sharing the intimacies of their lives online. In interviews with mainly women vloggers, Lange (2007) notes YouTube fosters connections while raising awareness about topics that used to be uncomfortable, distasteful or difficult, and it does this in ways that other media and other methods have not. One example of this from YouTube is women who share intimate details regarding their pregnancies, parenting challenges and efforts to conceive a child, sometimes broadcasting the results of a pregnancy test to strangers even before telling their own partners. Some of the vlogs within this online community, labeled “WombTube” (Meltzer, 2011), have 90,000 views, illustrating that these videos reach further than one might have thought. Meltzer (2011) presents the notion that women who post these videos must be getting support within the online community that they are not getting in their real lives, adding that she doesn’t understand why anyone would post something so personal.

Understand it or not, research proves that women disclose more personal information through CMC than men, and Kleman (2007) asserts that gender does play a role in the act of intimate, online self-disclosure. This could be why Cheng, Chan and Tong (2006) maintain online same-sex relationships between women are closer than online same-sex relationships between men or online cross-sex relationships between women and men. While Derlega, Winstea, Mathews and Braitman (2008) did not specify the gender of the online same-sex
relationships they studied, they did find that online same-sex relationships are more stable, close and helpful, therefore deducing that online same-sex relationships between women hold these same qualities. Bane, Cornish Erspamer and Kampman (2010) claim that online friendships between women improve over time, but their research also concludes that real-life relationships are superior to online relationships, suggesting that this is an area of CMC that needs additional study.

While it is clear that women tend to reveal more intimate information than men in the context of CMC, Child and Petronio (2011) state women are more concerned with online privacy management than men. Managing privacy boundaries includes assessing the risks associated with disclosing personal information through social network sites. According to Kleman (2007), CMC audiences are not well-defined, making it possible for social network site participants to share information with an ambiguous audience. Petronio (2004) maintains that any negative self-disclosure could damage the image of the person revealing the information and might be unwelcome to the person receiving it. Lange (2007) indicates that exposing personal information over the Internet makes one vulnerable to embarrassment and humiliation, but argues that “it is precisely in taking this kind of risk that a space is opened for others to relate to the video blogger’s concerns” (para. 4).

The prominence of social network sites are requiring people who use them to redefine what is considered private information and what is considered public information, and they do this out of a desire to belong and connect with others (Pennington, 2008). Derlega, Winstead, Mathews and Braitman (2008) determine that individuals are motivated to disclose intimate information to gain approval, and may not disclose intimate information for fear of rejection.
These motivations influence the decisions of social network site participants trying to manage the struggle between self-disclosure and privacy (Derlega et. al., 2008).

Because of this, women may limit access to their blogs, vlogs or other forms of self-disclosure through CMC (Child & Petronio, 2011). In the case of YouTube, videos can be labeled private, requiring the videomaker to email a hyperlink to those who want to view the video. In this way, women vloggers are able use their own set of privacy rules to manage intimate self-disclosure (Child & Petronio, 2011).

**Rationale**

Perhaps Altman and Taylor (1973) had a premonition about how social penetration would develop as a result of swift technological advances, since they speculate in their book that technology may create a new type of social bond. In 1973, a “hippie culture” mentality among youth called the “new morality” encouraged individuals to make themselves available and accessible to others. New morality meant not conforming to the framework of social penetration theory where the development of social bonds was gradual and took time. Young people were insistent that they could create strong personal bonds more rapidly and get to the core of another person by avoiding superficial conversation (Altman & Taylor, 1973). However, Altman and Taylor (1973) cautioned against proceeding too quickly to develop social bonds, suggesting that relationships formed in this way were more likely to be disrupted.

Researchers are now suggesting that the “new morality” concept be reevaluated within the framework of social penetration theory, but in the context of CMC instead of FTF. And since CMC is now redefining what is and is not considered appropriate information to share over the Internet, it is possible that deep social bonds are developing more aggressively through CMC.
An important note is that these relationships are forming between strangers who have contact only because of a shared interest and an Internet connection, and not because of their geographical proximity. With the dynamic growth of the Internet and social network sites, CMC could hypothetically become the only avenue for the evolution of social relationships.

The implications of this thesis to communication theory could modify how scholars approach relationship development through intimacy and privacy. What has been considered too private to share in the past is now becoming regular everyday conversation, transforming the way in which close personal connections are formed – through intimate self-disclosure. The element of visual CMC adds an additional layer to the process, since until the close social relationships are formed, private information is shared with strangers, demonstrating that the social penetration process is taking place in the reverse order. The definition of intimate self-disclosure, and more importantly the theory of social penetration, is changing because of CMC.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the correlation between online intimate self-disclosure and relationship development between female YouTube vloggers who share videos about pregnancy, parenting or trying to conceive a child. Using elements of social penetration theory, three research questions were identified for this study:

RQ 1: Are breadth and depth of self-disclosure just as detailed through CMC as FTF communication?

RQ 2: How does intimate self-disclosure shape privacy and relationship development through CMC?

RQ 3: How does gender relate to intimate self-disclosure in CMC?
CHAPTER III: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Scope

Research participants are female vloggers on YouTube of varied ages. All subjects began their YouTube channels because they were trying to conceive a baby and began documenting their efforts on video. All of the participants in this study are Caucasian, although it should not be assumed that all female vloggers within the “trying to conceive” community are Caucasian. Subjects are either from the United States or Canada and agreed to participate as “informants” in the research study through YouTube’s web-based private messaging system. The goal is to determine if the development of interpersonal relationships is expedited through CMC, and how social penetration processes are modified because of the online environment. This thesis also investigates the hypothesis that interpersonal relationships developed through CMC are just as meaningful as FTF encounters.

Methodology

In order to develop a full understanding of the online culture created by female vloggers on YouTube who share videos about pregnancy, parenting or trying to conceive a child, this research design is an in-depth ethnography of the computer-mediated community. Ethnography is defined by McCurdy, Spradley and Shandy (2004) as “the task of describing a particular culture” (p. 3). The authors further explain that the concept of culture is “the knowledge people use to generate and interpret social behavior” (McCurdy, et. al., 2004, p. 8). Knowledge is gained by way of inclusion in a group of people or community, fostering social learning and understanding. In this way, an ethnography is best suited for this research study because it gives the participants – the female vloggers – the opportunity to describe their community from an
insider’s point of view. Since sharing intimate moments through YouTube is not fully understood, an ethnography allows outsiders to try to discover what knowledge the community holds and is using to structure their behavior.

The approach of this ethnography was to watch and examine user-generated videos shared by women who self-disclose intimate moments regarding conception, pregnancy or motherhood. This observation provided material for the development of interview questions, and subjects were interviewed over email over a six-week period. An initial review of a limited number of vlogs yielded the following questions that were used during the interview process:

1. How long have you been a member of the YouTube community?
2. What reasons were behind your interest in creating a YouTube channel?
3. Would you consider yourself an active participant? Why or why not?
4. Do you communicate with other YouTube members outside of YouTube? If so, how often?
5. How many close friendships have you developed with other YouTube vloggers as a result of YouTube?
6. Do you share the same information you disclose on YouTube with family members and “real-life” friends?
7. Do your family members and “real-life” friends know you have a YouTube channel? If so, do they watch your vlogs?
8. How quickly do you respond to comments posted on your vlogs?
9. How do you manage your privacy on YouTube?
Questions 1-3 established the credibility of the informants. Questions 4-7 assisted in discovering if social penetration processes occur at the same rate or faster through CMC than FTF communication. Specifically, these questions sought to determine if the depth of self-disclosure was greater in an online environment. Question 8 measured how CMC conversation helps online friendships develop since comments through the social network site act as conversational exchanges and are integral to social penetration. Question 9 was designed to examine how female vloggers assess the risks associated with disclosing personal information through social network sites.

Information gathered from the informants is the basis of the ethnography. The methodology involves analyzing the participants’ experiences and relationships with other community members to determine if social penetration is expedited through CMC and how issues of privacy influence relationship development. Because the format of most vlogs within the community mirror every day conversation between individuals, general observations will be made about the manner in which CMC through YouTube mimics FTF communication by assessing the structural features of the videos.

Validity

In the simplest terms, validity is defined by Golasfshani (2003) as a qualifying measure or check of research. Rubin, Rubin, Haradakis and Piele (2010) claim that validity “requires the researcher to choose and use a method, procedure, or instrument that provides valid data” (p. 203). This thesis employed the ethnography method of research, which sought to observe and describe the social norms and patterns of behavior within the YouTube trying to conceive community. Information gathering procedures included interviews, outside observation and
participant observation designed to illustrate that social interaction through the YouTube community allows expedited social penetration, providing external validity to other computer-mediated environments. As Golafshani (2003) states, “engaging multiple methods, such as observation, interviews and recordings, leads to more valid, reliable and diverse construction of realities” (p. 604).

Reliability

Dependability, stability, consistency and repeatability of the measures used in a study define its reliability (Rubin et. al., 2010). One strong feature of the YouTube trying to conceive community is that it is well-established, and some participants have had their channels for years. However, new members join frequently and because participation is continuously evolving there is not way to know the true size of the community. But the appeal of the community is friendship and belonging, and it is in these areas that the research should provide repeatable and trustworthy data regardless of the method used.

Ethics

The informants used for this thesis were objectively chosen because of their experience within the YouTube community and observations of their ability to communicate effectively. Informants were also required to provide their informed consent to participate, and were assured that their confidentiality would be maintained. A standard feature of YouTube is the ability to remain anonymous through lack of self-identification. Participants assign names to their channels, but channel names do not have to include real names, or any name at all for the matter. Therefore, unless the participant introduces themselves using their real name, their confidentiality is automatic. However, most female vloggers within the community of study do
disclose their first names. Since YouTube is a public venue, ensuring confidentiality or anonymity presents a challenge. As a result, only YouTube channel names are used within the thesis and other identifiable information, such as geographical location and age, were excluded.
CHAPTER IV: THE STUDY

Introduction

Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis and Piele (2010) claim an ethnography helps specify what social norms and events occur within a community to help outsiders understand the community’s structure. In other words, what communication channels and patterns of behavior are used that would help a stranger integrate seamlessly into that society? This study presents an ethnography of female vloggers on YouTube who are trying to conceive, are pregnant or who have recently become mothers. The findings present an objective description of the YouTube community using social penetration theory and aspects of communication privacy management theory to determine how friendships grow and develop between individuals who make personal connections over the internet, but are geographically separated.

Results

Research results were framed by several months of observation of vlogs and video comments and several weeks of semi-structured interviews with two community informants. These informants were chosen to provide ethnographic data due to their established relationship with the YouTube trying to conceive community and their ability to coherently provide descriptive information about this particular online culture. These informants had several hundred channel subscribers and several thousand to several hundred-thousand video views. Soliciting interviews from veteran vloggers was helpful because of their history with the community, a strategy that provided more in-depth knowledge than would have been possible by interviewing a vlogger who was new to the community. Informants were recruited by email and were enthusiastic and willing participants. Interviews took place through email and included an
initial series of questions regarding their YouTube channel. Their answers yielded several follow-up questions asked over a period of six weeks.

Observations included watching the majority of user-created videos posted to YouTube by both informants, identified for the purpose of this thesis by their channel names, AngelalaLynn and Katulka2. AngelalaLynn’s channel contained 157 videos and Katulka2’s channel contains 292 videos. Both informants became members of the community when they were trying to conceive, and both have since had successful pregnancies, becoming parents. Observations also included reading video comments posted by those who watched AngelalaLynn and Katulka2’s vlogs, and watching videos of other YouTube trying to conceive community participants to determine if the interview responses and community knowledge of the two informants were indicative of how other vloggers felt about the culture as well. Table 1 lists the basic demographic information of vloggers whose videos were viewed to gain knowledge about the community. It should be noted that while the number of videos uploaded to YouTube by each participant is listed, not all of those videos were viewed.

Table 1. *Demographics of YouTube Trying to Conceive Community Participants Sample*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Channel Name</th>
<th>Date Joined</th>
<th>Total Videos Uploaded</th>
<th>Total Video Views</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AngelalaLynn</td>
<td>Dec. 24, 2009</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>86,478</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katulka2</td>
<td>Jan. 9, 2008</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>629,706</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MandD627</td>
<td>Mar. 23, 2011</td>
<td>214</td>
<td>1,349,907</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plus1please</td>
<td>Oct. 27, 2010</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>1,208,816</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turtleames</td>
<td>Jan. 6, 2007</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>360,376</td>
<td>Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TweedleTee10</td>
<td>Jan. 16, 2012</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>1,095,375</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vlog analysis consisted of watching videos several times a week, briefly noting content and themes and making general observations about the structure of the community. Because the purpose of this thesis is to provide an ethnography of the YouTube trying to conceive community, many conclusions from the interview questions overlap with the conclusions made by observations. Interviews and observations together yielded the findings of this thesis.

**Data Analysis**

**Context of Vlogging: Why Women Do It**

Almost four decades ago, Altman and Taylor (1973) suggested quick attempts to form social bonds in the new morality movement were a response to the rapid pace of technological change. Describing individuals operating within the parameters of the new morality as “desperate” (p. 185), Altman and Taylor (1973) theorized that rapid movement toward interpersonal relationships might “actually produce an even greater loneliness and alienation than that which many young people are struggling against now” (p. 185). With repeated beginnings and endings of relationships, friendship development becomes shallow and untrustworthy, since individuals must rely on themselves more and on others less for long-term emotional support (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

However, long-term emotional support was the most common reason women gave for creating and developing a YouTube channel within the trying to conceive community. Women within this community will typically post a vlog very early in their channel history to substantiate their decision to begin vlogging about conception, pregnancy or parenting struggles, and may even devote an entire episode to the subject. For example, Katulka2 explained in a vlog entitled “Family Planning Tag Video” that she and her husband had recently moved to Texas.
from Alaska, and she started her channel because she felt as though she didn’t have anyone to talk to, besides her husband and doctor, about the process of trying to conceive, claiming “it can be kind of a lonely experience” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-NtFJSklHU &feature=plcp). Because of her decision to not disclose her efforts to conceive to family and friends, she turned to an established YouTube community in order to build relationships with other women who might be having the same challenges and experiences.

Another YouTube vlogger cited the same reasons for activating her channel. AngelalaLynn lives close to family and friends, but believes discussions involving trying to conceive and pregnancy are “too heavy” for real-life relationships. She states her desire to connect with and relate to others at the same life stage isn’t unique, but “finding the right people to do this with in ‘real life’ is” (AngelalaLynn, 2012), suggesting that there is a definite difference between intimate self-disclosure through CMC as compared to FTF communication.

A second reason women choose to begin vlogging within the trying to conceive community is because they hope their experiences can help someone else. Many YouTube participants begin viewing vlogs long before they start vlogging themselves, and the decision to start their own channel originated from the insight and help received by watching others’ videos. Katulka2 (2012) claimed her efforts to “give back” by sharing her personal experiences with others was the basis for the inception of her YouTube channel, and she has received feedback from those who watch her vlogs stating that her knowledge and information has been helpful. Many videos are uploaded that provide basic assistance about daily parenting issues, like a vlog by Plus1please called “My Baby is Sick,” where she stated her goal in documenting her child’s illness was to help others “going through the same thing” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fa18VfkTvWY).
Vloggers within the trying to conceive community also treat their YouTube channels as a way to document their own experience, using their channels as computer-mediated journals. Other than sharing knowledge with others and forming a support network, archiving important information was one of the main reasons identified as to why individuals share personal experiences online (Kleman, 2007). Some YouTube vloggers who have had successful pregnancies, like MandD627 and Plus1please, stated they hope to share the personal archive with their children when they grow older.

**Vlogging Encounter: What It Looks Like**

Landing on YouTube’s home page, a search for videos about trying to conceive or infertility yields more than 100,000 video posts. Results are populated in a list format with the title of the video alongside a still photo representing a frame of the video, known as a thumbnail. The thumbnail photo of the vlog contains a small number in a minute/second arrangement signifying the length of the vlog. YouTube’s policy requires all videos to be less than 20 minutes in length or shorter and special permission is required to upload videos over 20 minutes long. Next to the thumbnail and beneath the title of the video is a short description of the video’s content, written by the vlogger. Beneath that, information shows how long it has been since the video was uploaded (2 weeks ago, 4 months ago), how many views the vlog has received, and the channel name of the individual who uploaded the vlog.

Selecting one of the videos will take the viewer to a YouTube video page where the vlog can be watched. Each uploaded vlog is assigned to a page where viewers can leave comments, like or dislike the vlog, or share or embed the video on another website, all features that can facilitate direct access between vlogger and viewer. Another element of the video page is a link
to the community member’s channel page, where viewers can collectively see all uploaded vlogs by the YouTube community member. Included on the channel page is a profile where a channel owner can write a short introduction to her channel. The page also lists all activity by the YouTube member, including comments posted to others’ vlogs, showing that vloggers are also viewers.

Interpersonal communication between community members occurs in a variety of different ways. The YouTube social network site allows others to post and view comments to vlogs, send and receive private messages and upload video responses. Several popular vloggers, such as TweedleTee10, MandD627 and Plus1please, also have a Facebook account using their YouTube channel name. A YouTube member’s Facebook page allows for quick and concise status updates, and provides an avenue for the promotion of a community member’s vlogs since links to YouTube videos can be posted to Facebook.

The standard format of a vlog within the trying to conceive community usually presents the vlogger sitting in front of a camera, with only head or head and shoulders visible. Vlogs are recorded almost anywhere, such as inside a car, at work, or at the doctor’s office, but most vlogs are recorded inside the vloggers’ homes. Vlogs usually begin with a greeting (“Hi, girls,” or “Hey, everybody”), just as individuals would do meeting FTF.

There is a general sequence of vlogs for every YouTube trying to conceive participant. An introduction vlog is usually the first video posted, which includes general information about the individual, including age, occupation and geographical location. The vlogger will most likely disclose health history and discuss how long she and her partner have been trying to conceive. In OurGrandAdventure’s introduction vlog, “Hello YouTube! Our TTC Beginnings,”
she discusses how long she and her husband have been married and how long they have been talking about starting a family, describing the YouTube trying to conceive community as “an amazing community with such amazing women” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-XuEbeCQF4&feature=plcp). From there, vlogging discussions turn to very intimate topics, such as ovulation, menstruation and intercourse. Even when discussing these very personal subjects, vlogging discourse is conversational and light. Disclosure in early trying to conceive vlogs may differ slightly from woman to woman, but the goal remains the same – to seek support and information while trying to get pregnant. The “Holy Grail” of trying to conceive vlogs is videos showing positive pregnancy test results. These types of videos have significantly more views than other trying to conceive vlogs. Katulka2’s positive pregnancy test video had 12,013 views, while the videos posted immediately before and after that had 998 views combined.

Those vloggers who succeed in becoming pregnant quickly will continue vlogging throughout their pregnancies, sharing the intimate details of their experience in weekly pregnancy updates. These vlogs have a standard sequence as well. It is popular among the YouTube trying to conceive community for women to compare the size of their growing babies to fruit (an 11-week-old fetus is the size of a lime; a 20-week-old fetus is the size of a pomegranate, etc.). One example of this is RenaeLaunderlife’s channel, whose weekly pregnancy vlogs included the name of the fruit in the title of the video (http://www.youtube.com/user/RenaeLaunderlife). The vlog will continue with a report on pregnancy symptoms, weight gain (or loss, since women may lose weight in early pregnancy due to morning sickness), and chest and stomach measurements. The highlight of a pregnancy vlog seems to be the “belly shot,” where the participant will bare her torso to show her growing belly. While some women embrace this and begin showing their bellies almost immediately after a positive pregnancy test,
there are a few who draw the self-disclosure line at the belly shot, waiting to reveal their bellies until their bodies show outward signs of pregnancy, if at all.

Intimate subjects are not the only discourse that takes place, however. Those women who do not succeed in becoming pregnant right away must preserve subscriber interest in their channels in order to cultivate emotional support mechanisms. Therefore, other areas of discussion are welcome. In order to balance the serious and intimate nature of videos about trying to conceive, vloggers may post recipe videos or product reviews. Video tutorials are popular, which allow vloggers to give lessons about various subjects to viewers, such as crafting or hairstyling. Recipe videos also provide vloggers who are trying to conceive with material to post to their YouTube channels, and community members embrace these types of vlogs. Additionally, vloggers will post “life update” videos, which usually have nothing to do with trying to conceive and include details about other aspects of the vlogger’s personal life. This may include information about a career change, a family move, volunteer work or home renovations. MandD627 (http://www.youtube.com/user/MandD627) posted vlogs early in her trying to conceive journey about her favorite cosmetics and her scrapbooking hobby, with the cosmetics vlog receiving 1,329 views and the scrapbooking vlog receiving 709 views. While the majority of her trying to conceive videos consistently received over 1,000 views each, the interest in vlogs devoted to other subjects is evident.

Those who have given birth may decide to continue their channels even though they are no longer trying to conceive, posting videos about their parenting challenges, known as “mom vlogs.” These vlogs may not be posted as regularly, since a new baby contributes to less time and less sleep. However, there is also a standard sequence of vlogs following the birth, and vloggers may post short videos even while in labor since the video and internet capability of
most smartphones allows direct upload to YouTube. Tweedletee10 took full advantage of this technological efficiency, posting seven short videos to YouTube during labor, each lasting under three minutes (http://www.youtube.com/user/TweedleTee10).

Viewers wait patiently for the first video update revealing the new baby, usually followed by a “labor and delivery story” vlog or series of vlogs and a new mom post-partum update. If vlogging continues, baby updates will generally occur monthly and discussions of parenting challenges occur regularly. New mothers will often admit very personal things in these vlogs, expressing frustration about sleep deprivation, the lack of help from their partners, and the physical toll that pregnancy and labor took on their bodies which leads to a deficiency in partner intimacy. These honest and vulnerable confessions represent the depth of self-disclosure that promotes the emotional support and friendship women vloggers seek. One video posted by Katulka2 entitled “New Mom Adjustment” revealed her struggles with adjustment to motherhood at three months post-partum. The vlog had 1,020 views, 52 likes, 0 dislikes and 55 comments – all positive. Viewers commented repeatedly that the video helped them to not feel alone and commended the vlogger’s candid perspective (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POkbnCA2nGM).

Privacy Boundaries and Gender

It is assumed that most viewers of these types of vlogs are women. When individuals subscribe to the channel, the benefit of the social network site is that subscribers can usually be validated by viewing the profile on their channel page. However, there are subscribers that do not have a YouTube channel, making it harder to validate these individuals. Those unknown
subscribers are categorized as “creepers” within the community, and it is because of these individuals that vloggers learn to protect their privacy.

YouTube employs a tagging system for videos, allowing participants to increase or decrease access to their vlogs by assigning certain keywords to the video. The video would then be easier or more difficult to find based on these tags. However, since the aim of most women is to expand their social network in the trying to conceive community in order to gain emotional support and provide information through their channels, participants assign their videos many different tags allowing for an uncomplicated search for vlogs. Because of this, women within the YouTube community manage their privacy in other ways.

The predominant method of privacy management relies on not disclosing too much personal information in videos. Full names are rarely used in the context of vlogging, and addresses are never announced publicly. Katulka2 takes precautions when filming to ensure that revealing information, like landmarks, street signs or license plate numbers, is not included in the background of her videos so as not to divulge her exact location (Katulka2, 2012).

Vlogs posted in the YouTube trying to conceive community by nature contain private information, but not about names or geographical locales. Information shared about trying to conceive or pregnancy is considered by some to be extremely personal and not suitable for a public venue. Vloggers disagree, because they know they are speaking mainly to an audience with a heightened level of understanding about trying to conceive and pregnancy (Katulka2, 2012). Even with that increased level of understanding, there are topics some participants feel are exceedingly personal. Interestingly, they will still share the information, but with a warning that what they viewer is about to hear may be “too much information,” commonly known as
SHARING INTIMATE MOMENTS ON YOUTUBE

TMI. It is through these risky disclosures, however, that unguarded exchanges take place, developing commonalities and discourse leading to friendship.

AngelalaLynn manages her privacy by not discussing the fact that she has a YouTube channel with her “real-life” family and friends, which only includes her mother, her best friend and her sister-in-law (her husband knows she has a channel and they discuss it freely). She feels she is an open book and would share her trying to conceive and pregnancy experiences with these individuals in real-life, but would not mention her YouTube channel in that discussion. Essentially, she shares much of the same information with the YouTube trying to conceive community that she shares with only a handful of real-life individuals, but she chooses to keep the two environments separate (AngelalaLynn, 2012). Participants can also label their videos private, in effect being able to choose who has access to their videos since the vlogs can only be viewed through an emailed hyperlink.

Communicating outside of YouTube seems to be the definition for the development of a close personal relationship between participants. AngelalaLynn claims there are a half-dozen to a dozen individuals who she interacts with through email, text messaging, YouTube private messaging, Facebook messaging and postage-paid mail (AngelalaLynn, 2012). Katulka2 has “exchanged emails with a select few individuals I really trust” (Katulka2, 2012). Swapping messages through these channels constitutes a unique level of confidence between community members.

Language

One aspect of the YouTube trying to conceive community is the language used to communicate individual experiences. This language has formed over time and is a distinct
medium of vlogging communication. These terms were gathered from observations of YouTube trying to conceive videos. Table 2 defines the most common terms used specifically within the community culture of YouTube trying to conceive vloggers. The table structure lists the term or acronym first, its interpretation and an extended definition, if needed.

Table 2. *YouTube Trying to Conceive Community Terms and Acronyms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term or Acronym</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Extended Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>AF</strong></td>
<td>Aunt Flo</td>
<td>A woman’s menstrual cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Baby Dust</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>A good will wish for pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BBT</strong></td>
<td>Basal Body Temperature</td>
<td>Early morning temperature monitored by women trying to conceive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BCP</strong></td>
<td>Birth Control Pills</td>
<td>Pills that prevent ovulation/pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BD</strong></td>
<td>Baby Dancing</td>
<td>Intercourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Beta Test</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>A blood test which detects pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BFN</strong></td>
<td>Big Fat Negative</td>
<td>A negative pregnancy test result</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BFP</strong></td>
<td>Big Fat Positive</td>
<td>A positive pregnancy test result</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CD</strong></td>
<td>Cycle Day</td>
<td>Menstrual cycle measurement (e.g., CD1, CD12, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CM</strong></td>
<td>Cervical Mucus</td>
<td>A bodily fluid found around the cervix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D&amp;C</strong></td>
<td>Dilation and Curretage</td>
<td>A surgical procedure used in the event of a miscarriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DPO</strong></td>
<td>Days Past Ovulation</td>
<td>Used to measure the number of days since ovulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FSH</strong></td>
<td>Follicle Stimulating Hormone</td>
<td>A hormone in urine that detects pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HPT</strong></td>
<td>Home Pregnancy Test</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HSG</strong></td>
<td>Hysterosalpingogram</td>
<td>A medical procedure to check for blocked</td>
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</table>
This language is vital because members of the YouTube trying to conceive community speak using these terms and acronyms, assuming individuals know their meanings. A sample sentence might sound like, “The last part of our SMEP is to meet with an RE to discuss IVF since I have PCOS.” Much like military culture, the acronyms are embedded as words themselves into the language of the trying to conceive community. Learning them takes time.
and patience, but a member’s experience is enhanced by knowing these terms since the participant will be able to more readily understand messages disseminated throughout the community.

**Discussion**

This research suggests that YouTube trying to conceive community members significantly value their friendships developed through the SNS as much as they value their relationships with real-life friends and family. Results show that community members may even have a higher number of close friends through YouTube than they do in real-life, as evidenced by Katulka2’s comment that she didn’t have anyone to talk to about trying to conceive other than her husband and her doctor. AngelalaLynn’s real-life confidants included her mother and two friends, but she has developed “a dozen close friendships with other YouTube vloggers as a result of YouTube” (AngelalaLynn, 2012). The practice of seeking emotional support and important information through the YouTube community offers an extensive network of resources and inclusion, supporting McIntosh and Harwood’s (2002) claim that individuals look to online communities to share their problems and verify their experiences are commonplace.

There is an indication that the social penetration process in the YouTube trying to conceive community moves rapidly when a vlogger initially establishes her channel. The nature of discourse throughout the community lends itself to the disclosure of very intimate and personal thoughts, feelings and information. This is in opposition to Altman and Taylor’s (1973) social penetration theory, which states that intimate self-disclosure during the stages of relationship development are orderly and systemic, and supports research by Pennington (2008) showing that CMC is phasing out steps initially thought essential to social penetration.
Additionally, the 20-minute time limitation YouTube places on uploaded videos requires vloggers to reveal intimate information in an expedited manner. This provision likewise does not support the theory of social penetration that states that relationship formation moves gradually and begins with less depth, meaning, “one does not ordinarily discuss serious personal problems immediately after meeting a stranger” (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 29). These findings would reinforce the rationale that deep social bonds are developing more aggressively through CMC since participants are discovering more intimate, vulnerable layers more quickly through YouTube, as suggested by Wright, Craig, Cunningham, Igiel and Ploeger (2008).

Even as YouTube participants discuss intimate issues, conversation is light. It could be argued that revealing deeply personal information on YouTube is accepted because vloggers are speaking into a camera. However, in her introduction vlog, Katulka2 commented on how nervous she was, suggesting that she expected interaction with other YouTube participants. Discourse is established between vlogger and viewer by way of YouTube’s comment feature, which allows participants to add contributions. The vlogger becomes aware of the “real people” posting video comments and continues vlogging, demonstrating a need to connect to other women facing the same experiences.

Intimate conversation is not the only communication that takes place in the YouTube trying to conceive community, however. Vloggers may post updates about issues related to occupation, hobbies, travel and other general topics. These areas of one’s personality “are mutually opened and available as a relationship grows” (Altman & Taylor, 1973, p. 29). Because vloggers discuss these subjects as well, it is assumed that the breadth of self-disclosure through CMC is just as extensive as it is FTF.
Additionally, because CMC minimizes the interpersonal risks of relationship development, the dynamics of communication privacy management theory are enhanced since the community establishes a collective boundary. Individuals want to belong, so they redefine what is considered private information and in the parameters of the YouTube trying to conceive community, there are not many subjects that are off limits. The depth of information shared is extremely personal and these sensitive expressions can be risky. However, the depth of self-disclosure is directly related to the expedited process of social penetration, especially in the YouTube trying to conceive community. It is also directly related to the fact that participants within the community are mostly women, and women disclose more personal information online than men do. Vloggers consider the risks to be worth the rewards, since emotional support and knowledge exchange are two of the main reasons women begin recording vlogs. The depth of self-disclosure creates very close interpersonal relationships, developing commonalities and connections leading to friendship.

These commonalities encourage group interaction, serving as an impetus for more intimate personal relationships among group members. This supports Lange’s (2009) belief that YouTube fosters connections while raising awareness in a common space about uncomfortable issues. According to Burgess and Green (2009), YouTube is not designed to overtly promote group work, collaboration or community building. Regardless of this, YouTube is a platform for group formation and collusion, especially for the trying to conceive community. This is illustrated by the established structure of the community, the prescribed sequence of vlogs and the language developed by vloggers.

The group dynamic is further developed because vloggers are also viewers. This activity illustrates the level of engagement of YouTube trying to conceive community members,
suggesting an extensive network of friendship and support. Certainly, vloggers who are not
viewers would not develop interpersonal relationships as quickly since reciprocation of
information is not taking place.

YouTube trying to conceive community members may become so comfortable with one
another that interactions occur through email, regular mail or text messaging, suggesting
participants reach the innermost layers of others’ personalities. This denotes a level of trust
usually established by close friendships. Vloggers admit that they generally have more close
personal relationships through YouTube than they do in real life.

This analysis shows that women in the YouTube trying to conceive community foster
close friendships through CMC, and while the breadth of self-disclosure may occur at the same
rate as it does FTF, the depth of self-disclosure is more detailed through CMC than FTF, at least
initially. CMC is changing the parameters for what is and what is not considered private
information and because the depth of self-disclosure is so great within the YouTube trying to
conceive community, meaningful friendships form between participants. Since women are more
comfortable sharing private information online, they seek emotional support, insight and a way
to document their experiences with others to whom they can relate.
CHAPTER V: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

The amount of scholarly articles available regarding social penetration theory and communication privacy management theory is abundant. However, finding scholarly research relating to YouTube as a form of CMC was challenging. This is understandable since YouTube is a fairly new form of CMC, only gaining popularity within the last five years. Most of the research used Facebook and blogging (textual CMC) as the subject of study. Therefore, one aim of this thesis was to contribute to scholarly research regarding relationship development and CMC that utilizes social presence, such as eye contact and body language.

Sample size presents another limitation of this thesis. Unfortunately, the size of the YouTube trying to conceive community is extensive, with no definitive way to determine the total number of vloggers who consider themselves members. Because of this, researchers studying the community might form different conclusions depending on the subjects chosen to participate in the research.

Additionally, there is no way to validate the claims of YouTube vloggers. Viewers assume that what is being revealed is truthful, but verifications of that truthfulness are practically nonexistent. As boyd and Ellison (2008) suggest, while SNSs like YouTube “encourage users to construct accurate representations of themselves, participants do this to varying degrees” (p. 219).

The methodology of this thesis has its own limitations, since there was a lack of field notes to accompany the interviews and observations of vlogs. However, large samples of vlogs were viewed for content, and themes were noted throughout the observation. Additionally,
qualitative research elements could be biased since the author of this thesis was a participant in the YouTube trying to conceive community from September 2011 to May of 2012.

Further Study or Recommendations

This research suggests that YouTube trying to conceive community members significantly value their online friendships, sometimes as much or even more than their real-life relationships. However, this study was limited to women vloggers within the United States and Canada and did not include a study of online relationships between other genders or cultures. Because YouTube is a vast and extensive SNS, it can be assumed that a male community or a community outside North America might exist that deserves the same depth of study. It would be interesting to see if the same conclusions can be made about the breadth and depth of self-disclosure by other YouTube communities. Additionally, further research could study the parallels between online support groups, such as the YouTube trying to conceive community, and FTF support groups that meet in person to determine if they are a new avenue for intimate self-disclosure or just a digital extension of an established mode of personal relationship development. Since YouTube has gained in popularity only in the last few years, it is safe to conclude that many other areas of study remain regarding interpersonal relationships and YouTube.

Conclusions

This study found that while the depth of social penetration cannot be argued since vloggers within the trying to conceive community are sharing very personal details about themselves, the breadth of self-disclosure is just as great as one might see in FTF communication. Even though the community focuses on fertility issues, pregnancy and
parenting, there are other subjects of discussion that are just as welcome. This is evident in vlogs posted about hobbies and other interests.

The need to share feelings, ideas and views often wrestles with the need for privacy. The desire of YouTube trying to conceive community members to belong and connect with others overrides the need for privacy, since privacy is in direct opposition to the act of sharing intimate experiences online. Because it is so personal, vlogging continues to be a fluid environment where one might adjust their privacy rules based on one’s feeling of belonging or ridicule.

The growth of the Internet, and particularly SNS, support intimate connections between individuals in many different ways. Communities like YouTube are built around shared interests, fostering intimate relationships between strangers who might never have met in real life. Critics argue that some information is just too personal to be shared, and confusion arises about the disclosure of this private material through vlogs. Using past theories of self-disclosure and privacy to redefine public displays of socially-acceptable personal information, it is suggested that CMC is modifying what individuals consider suitable communication when forming relationships, allowing more rapid and meaningful social penetration through technology. Even though sharing intimate information over the Internet may not be completely understood by everyone, what is clear is that female YouTube community participants have created an environment of education, trust, emotional support and friendship through intimate self-disclosure.

What is evident is that CMC and SNS are changing the way friendships are forming. Technology is making its way into almost all communicative practices, and interpersonal communication theories presented before the advent of the Internet require further study in order
to be practically applied to CMC. Social boundaries are being challenged, as private information is becoming everyday conversation. Online communities that support intimate self-disclosure are forming at a rapid rate, providing more information to a wider audience faster and with much less security and privacy.
References


Email to YouTube Vloggers Asking for Participation

Good Morning Angela-

I am a subscriber of yours who has been following your journey on YouTube for over a year now. I'm currently in graduate school and I wanted to message you because I'm in the very beginning stages of my thesis and I'd like to write an ethnography of the TTC/mommy vlog community. The title would be, "Sharing Intimate Moments on YouTube: Women Who Vlog and Their Sense of Community, Friendship and Privacy." In a way, my thesis is something I can use to help people to understand the authenticity of the friendships and connections that are formed through this community, and how they should be considered just as real as those formed through face-to-face communication.

I'm telling you this because I'd like to know if you'd be interested in being interviewed by me. I think you have a really good grasp on the community, and in order to do a good ethnography (which is basically a descriptive analysis of a culture or group of people) I need to find a few "informants," for lack of a better term. Even though I am also a participant, I obviously need to get other points of view besides my own. A majority of the ethnography would be observation by going back and rewatching videos, but I would like to use your channel as one example, since I found your vlogs so informative and educational.

When I develop the interview questions, I can send them to you so you can get a basic idea of what I'll be asking. Your privacy would be protected within my thesis, and I would use only the name of your channel, leaving out any other identifiable information. I would take any other steps necessary for you to feel comfortable with your participation. We could even do the
interview over Facebook chat or Skype and not by telephone if you feel more comfortable doing
it that way.

I can send you my abstract or my literature review to read so you know how I am
approaching my thesis if you'd like. I am also considering asking for participation from other
vloggers you may know: VegetarianWifey, plus1please, katulka2 and turtleames (these are their
channel names). I feel like any of these women could provide some great feedback.

Thanks for reading this message, and please let me know if you are interested in
participating.

Thanks again,

Julie
Appendix B

Author’s Note

This project began because of a 2011 Slate Magazine article that I read labeling the YouTube trying to conceive community as "WombTube." The author simply did not understand the structure of the community. In the article, the author claims the participant she wrote about told the world of her pregnancy through a vlog even before she told her own husband. Most likely, the woman recorded the vlog, and only uploaded it AFTER sharing the news with her husband. The average YouTube viewer who encounters these types of vlogs does not know about these processes. For that reason, I felt that writing an ethnography of the community would be a worthwhile thesis project. However, it should be noted that I was an active participant in this community in 2011 and early 2012. Even though I may carry biases about the context of the community and its shared meaning, I understand that a main feature of an ethnography is for the writer to remain objective, which as a journalist I believe I do well. My main motivation was to give credit to the friendships and close personal connections that are formed through this community.