Collaborative Digital Ethnography of Consumption: Co-Producing The Meaning

of Makeup and Identity with Young Latina Women.

ABSTRACT
This paper offers an example of collaborative digital ethnography within business anthropology. This study was conducted for an American makeup client who wanted to understand makeup practices among young Latina women. Acting as co-researchers, a panel of young women from around the county uploaded a variety of digital artifacts in response to open ended questions and activities posted by bilingual Hispanic ethnographers. These digital artifacts (text, images, pictures, videos, music, Internet links, etc.) in both English and Spanish served as the springboard for dialogue between and among the informant collaborators and ethnographers about the meaning of makeup and Latina identity.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on a digital collaborative ethnographic study I conducted with young Latina women about makeup. To be clear, this paper does not report on the findings of the research project. This information belongs to the client who commissioned this research. Instead, this paper is a reflection on the collaborative research process.

Research context

Let me begin by contextualizing this research. The project was commissioned by a makeup company to understand the everyday lives, dreams, values, and aspirations of young Latina women. The client wanted to know the feelings and associations these young women have toward makeup and their brand in particular. This research project was conducted online using a digital platform for data collection. These findings were used to develop marketing and branding strategies.

Prior to this online project I am reporting on today, I had conducted several traditional ethnographic research projects involving face-to-face observation and interactions with respondents. By definition, these ethnographies were collaborative. A typical client project would involve 12-15 ethnographic interviews. At the end of my interviews, I would invite my respondents to join me as co-researchers as I wanted to know what their lives were like when I wasn't around. I would loan them cameras, video or audio recorders and asked them to create multi-media diaries for me. I derived ethnographic authority from the collages, images, words, visuals, video and audio diaries created by the respondents. The clients wanted specific stories from consumers because stories serve as the muse for product, advertising and marketing strategy. So, the methodology of my face-to-face ethnographies was collaborative in part because my respondents created ethnographic texts. As Malinowski urged, anthropologists should get "off the verandah" and into the everyday lives of natives. Collaboration has always been embedded in the ethnographic research process.

The project I am reporting on today has different style of collaboration because all of the fieldwork was conducted via on online platform. Because of the continuous mediated interaction, the nature of the relationship between the informants and myself was even more collaborative than traditional face-to-face research.

This project was more collaborative than F2F research; yet there are limitations on the degree of collaboration. For example:
- The client established the objectives of this project
- The informant collaborators did not write or edit the final report.
- There wasn't an editorial board made of representatives from the researched community.
- Indeed, the ultimate power between ethnographer and informant collaborators remained with the researchers.
- Also, because this project was commissioned proprietary research, it couldn't be described as a type of "public anthropology" that engages in a larger stream of public issues concerned with public policy. That said, this work did influence the nature of the messaging and overall marketing strategy of the client's brand.

Lassiter writes that collaborative ethnography can use a variety of techniques. "Every project is unique," he writes. "Each calls for specific strategies appropriate to the individualized relationships and particular contexts. " What makes this project collaborative was the nature in which the ethnographic data was created. The mediated environment created the space for a special collaborative relationship between my informant collaborators and myself. And as Lassiter writes, collaborative co-interpretation is what ultimately makes ethnography collaborative.

With full disclosure on the limitations of the degree of collaboration, I now begin telling the research story. I describe how the interaction around digital artifacts (text, images, pictures, videos, Internet links, etc.) in both English and Spanish created by the young Latina women served as the springboard for dialogue about the meaning of makeup and Latina identity.

Research methodology

I interacted with 12 young Latina women ages 18-25 living across the US. These women were "English dominant" meaning they indicated on a screener question that they could speak both English and Spanish, but preferred communicating in English. The 12 women represented different levels of acculturation. Some were born in the US, while others had immigrated to the US in the last 2 years. The women were of Mexican, Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican and Colombian descent. Some were full time students, others worked full time. They were a mix of single or married women living with parents, mothers, boyfriends or husbands. All of the women expressed an interest in makeup.

Research methodology

All of the data collection was done via a "board," which means I communicated with the women via a website on the Internet. They were recruited by a recruiting company and agreed to participate in a weeklong research project in return for money. Each day, they logged on to the research website and completed a different task. They answered questions using written text, pictures, images, and videos of themselves. They also engaged in discussion with the other participants. Like traditional consumer ethnography, the women first introduced themselves and their world to the group and me. The exercises then became more specific as I led discussions about their makeup practices. The end of the study was all about their relationship with makeup brands, specifically the client's makeup brand.

The mediated self

All of my impressions of the women came from their digital artifacts (text, pictures, images, videos) that they created for the study. Everyday the assignment was posted at the same time, but the women had all day to complete the activity. So, in addition to the actual artifacts, I also gleaned information from their style of engagement with the study: the frequency of their posts, the length of their answers, the time of day of their responses, the promptness in completing the exercise and responding to my quires. From the very first day of the study, I received a very clear understanding of the women. Their unique voices came to me via my computer screen through their words, pictures, images and video.

Representing self via text

It was particularly interesting that text written by the participants was the primary unit of analysis because of the bicultural aspect of the study. All the women reported that they could communicate in either English or Spanish, but preferred English. So language was an important element in this study.

As meaning is embedded in language, I gathered much of my information about the women by how they wrote. Clues included their vocabulary, sentence length, mechanics, and style. The women who told me they had not finished high school wrote in incomplete sentences with many spelling errors. The college students had a more polished style. Reflecting their age, their writing style included lots of social media style language abbreviations and emoticons.

Particularly interesting was how acculturation was refracted through writing. At the onset, I told the women they could respond in English or Spanish, but the dominant language in the group was English. As in many aspects of acculturation, the line between cultures is never exact. In this study, English and Spanish were blurred. The Dominican woman who recently immigrated to the US complimented others on their English writing and wished she could write as well.

She was still taking English classes. At one point in the study, she stopped posting. As soon as I wrote her that responses could be in Spanish, she quickly jumped back in. Some women responded to the assignments and to my questions in English, but they interacted with each other in Spanish. The posts might have been written in English, but they were accented with social media terms in Spanish. For example, instead of writing LOL (laughing out loud), they wrote the Spanish equivalent (ajaja or jejeje).

Representing self via pictures
The women also told their stories through the pictures that had a distinctive "Facebook" style quality to them. I saw many pictures of smiling friends and family huddled together in front of the camera. They were often pictures from vacations, restaurants, clubs or parties. The pictures showed family and friends in both the US and in their country of origin. Beyond family and friends, I also received lots of pictures of pets and plates of food. Like in Facebook, the quality of the pictures varied.

Representing self via video
Some of the daily assignments required the women to answer the questions in the form of a video. This provided quite an intimate portrait as they would sit in front of their computer or phone and shoot the video. I would then see only their faces within the frame of my computer screen as they answered questions about their family, friends, school, work and makeup practices. I also asked them to give me a video tour of their home. They would narrate while moving about the house. ("This is my room. It is really messy.") One woman shot a video of her chilly, morning walk to the bus stop in her neighborhood in Queens. I could hear her breathing as I saw images of a snow on the street. It felt like I was inside her coat looking out through her hood. Some of the videos felt like rough-cut footage from a documentary. They spoke into the camera like people on TV reality shows. The presentation was casual, funny and seemly frank.

Representing self via images

Another exercise required them to upload images from the web that captured their feelings or attitudes about a topic. I not only saw common themes but I also saw the same exact image. I believe they all uploaded the same images because of the searchable nature of the web. All the women typed in the same collection of words into Google and the search engine offered the same collection of images. They not only had similar opinions, but their images were pulled from the same digital universe.

Representing self via posting frequency

Finally I gathered information about the women through their patterns of communication. There was meaning not only in what they posted, but also in *how* they posted. Often their pattern of communication reflected the lives the lived in front of their screens.

- Rosie from Miami was always the first to post. She responded to my questions almost immediately. Her answers were thorough and insightful. She told me she needed to be very disciplined because she was a full-time nursing student.
- Velerye from Houston was also a frequent poster. She happily engaged with the other women. Being a young mom, she seemed eager to make connections with the other moms in the study. Valerye admitted in one of her posts that she was bored and lonely.
- Jossie from Queens barely finished the study. Her entries were often posted in the middle of the night. She worked two jobs and went to school. She also enjoyed going out with her friends. After a full day of work, school and friends, Jossie would share reflections with others and me as she typed from her bed.

Public - Private Faces

The women were recruited into this study because of their high involvement with makeup, but makeup was only one of the many tools that they used to craft their

physical selves. It was fascinating to see their transform through makeup, hair, clothing and jewelry. As an example, Celia first presented herself to us with bright red lipstick and hair pulled back like a model in a magazine. Over time, she relaxed her look so much that she hardly looked like the same person. Other women used pictures and video to walk me through the steps they took to get ready for the day. They showed me through video how they transformed themselves from getting out of bed to walking out the door. Because the project lasted 7 days, I could follow the women as they presented both their public and private selves to the group

Engagement with content created by collaborators
As mentioned, I have conducted several ethnographic projects involving multi-media artifacts created by respondents. The key difference with this online study was that the online platform allowed for continuous interaction. The engagement happened in two ways.

In one case, the interaction was like a private one-on-one interview. A collaborator would post a video, image, link, or picture and I would ask a follow up question. We would create a dialogue just between us. In contrast to face-to-face research, I don't have the opportunity to go back and ask respondents about video diaries after an interview is over.

Another type of engagement was like a focus group where all the content is public. Everyone could comment on each other's posts, video, image, link or picture. This group discussion became the ethnographic text.

This engagement is the heart of what made this project collaborative. For example, a key theme that emerged from the research was the idea that "Everything is possible with hard work, like a Luchadora," in their words. Over a series of days and many comments on each other's postings, this idea took on depth as each woman contribute their nuanced perspective on the meaning of

"luchadora." Like Lassiter writes, the collaboration occurs when texts move into co-interpretation.

Time and Space

Another aspect of the online study that contributed to the collaborative nature was our co-existence as a research community over time and across space. In typical face-to-face research, a focus group might last a maximum of 2 hours; an in-home interview might be max of 4 hours. In this case, our study lasted for a week. Respondents uploaded and commented on digital artifacts continuously over a 7-day period.

During this week, we would comment on our shared asynchronous patterns of living: sleeping, working, eating, being with family, commuting, balancing life. Each living our lives separately, but co-existing together as we connected via the digital platform several times a day. It was the awareness of our shared circumstances of women balancing life that facilitated an atmosphere of collaboration. While we logged on from different parts of the country (New York City, Miami, Chicago, Austin, Houston, and LA) we formed a virtual community reflecting on what it means to be a woman….what it means to be given or take on the label of Hispanic, Latina, Mexican, Mexican-American, Cuban, Cuban-American, etc.

As Lassiter writes, "With the gap between ethnographer and consultant ever narrowing, both of whom exist within and partake of a larger economy of representation in varied and complicated ways-takes on a whole new meaning."

Smoothing out the differences within the similar

Because I speak Spanish, I have conducted many F2F studies with Spanish-speaking communities. Sitting across from my respondent, in her home, surrounded by her personal objects, I am clearly different. I speak slightly accented Spanish. I am usually the older one. While not in a suit, I am usually

wearing something casually professional that says, "I working now." I've got a clipboard, a tote bag full of consent forms and a camera at the ready. A video camera is recording our conversation and unlike natural human interaction, I hang on their every word and take notes as my respondent talks. While she might see me as a Hispanic woman, I am clearly different. As Abu-Lughod writes, "there are differences in the sameness."

In contrast, the differences are smoothed out in the mediated world of an online research platform. Yes, I am still the person guiding the conversations, but the mediated environment relaxed the division between researcher and those being researched. Text on a screen is a great equalizer.

More intimacy in mediated environment
In the online panel, it seemed like the collaborator respondents shared more intimate reflections of what it means to be woman…an Hispanic woman…an Hispanic woman who wears makeup. In an face-to-face interview, the respondent might have looked directly at my older, makeup free face, trying to pick up hints of approval or disapproval from me, the outsider guest in her home. Instead, the digital collaborators were typing on a keyboard and hitting send. These women were active social media users. They were comfortable sharing personal reflections to others and me via mediated platforms.

As the research moderator, I was also affected by the mediated platform. Like the women in my study, I also felt more comfortable sharing personal reflections and commenting on shared experiences.

There is odd, counter-intuitive sense of deep connection that is made when a screen separates senders and receivers of mediated messages. Like counseling or group therapy, it is easier to share personal secrets with strangers, especially if separated by time and space.

At the end of the 7 days, I thanked everyone for their great contributions. The collaborators had only agreed to participate for a week, yet many kept on commenting and posting digital artifacts with each other. Several commented that they hated to see the project end. In the end, I was the one who crafted the report and made sure that the client's expectations were met, but the ethnographic text generated from the study was a result of collaborative interactions between women in a weeklong virtual community.