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## **USER-GENERATED PARODY AS NEGOTIATION OVER MEANING: A TYPOLOGY OF FRAME ALIGNMENT IN MUSICAL RENDITIONS**

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The practice of parodying music videos is becoming increasingly widespread, to the extent that parodies now generate, on aggregate, more revenue than “official” material (IFBI Digital music report, 2014). The wealth of the YouTube parody scene extends beyond such tangible rewards: for researchers interested in audience engagement, this sphere presents unique opportunities for gauging mechanisms of interpretation.

Whereas past observations about the activity of audiences in the process of meaning-making (e.g., Fiske, 2010; Liebes & Katz, 1994) were based mainly on ethnographic explorations, the migration of audiences to web-based platforms generates digital “interpretive traces” (Shifman, 2013) left by active cultural consumer-producers. The goal of this paper is to delineate practices of meaning-making in creative spheres by applying the notion of “frame alignment” (Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986) to user-generated parodies. Frames are bits of information that are made noticeable, memorable and meaningful to audiences (Entman, 1993). This concept has been used to describe how information is shaped in the news and in other institutional settings (e.g. Kinder & Iyenger, 1989). However, framing is also something that occurs outside the realm of traditional gatekeepers. Specifically, reception studies in participatory culture contexts (Jenkins, 2006) can evaluate how user-generated-content *reframes* mainstream media frames.

Addressing a common critique about the hyper-sexualization of female musicians in the music industry (Lieb, 2013), in this paper I focus on how parodists align with frames pertaining to sexuality and gender roles in popular music videos. Traditionally defined as a genre that criticizes the text it imitates (Hutcheon, 2000), “parody” is often used nowadays to describe what Jameson (1990) labeled as “pastiche”, namely, the use of familiar references for the inducement of uncritical pleasure. YouTube consumer-producers may be using parody critically to exemplify resistance; they might be also engaging in uncritical pastiche or remixing that reproduces the ideological structure manifest in the source material. Two research questions thus guide this paper: *How do parodists reframe the texts they render? Do they demonstrate resistance to dominant gender ideologies in the process?*

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## Method

The corpus of this study consists of 100 videos imitating 20 pop-music singles that ranked on the top of *Billboard's hot 100* for 2009-2013. For each year in this period, I selected the four highest-ranking singles (two by male musicians and two by female musicians). Then, I sampled five renditions for each single from the results YouTube's search engine yielded for a string that combined the single's title with the keyword "parody".<sup>1</sup>

A modified version of Shifman's (2013) framework for meme analysis was used as a basis for a qualitative content analysis. Shifman's model consists of three axes of textual probing: content, form and stance. The *content* dimension relates to the ideas and ideologies conveyed in a text. The *form* dimension relates to the physical incarnation of the message. *Stance* was operationalized as the existence of a critical approach to the original's ideas and ideologies.

Building on this initial breakdown, I clustered the parodies in light of Snow et al's (1986) theory of frame alignment. The theory relates to the *alignment of individual and institutional interpretive frameworks* in the mobilization of social movements. However, I argue that its description of how interpretive schemes travel from one source to another can be useful for an analysis of popular culture in a production-as-interpretation context. Frame alignment is thus defined as the degree of linkage between mainstream music videos and individual, parodic interpretations.

## Findings

Elements of content, form and stance in the parodies investigated converged along five types of interpretative configurations: frame bridging, frame extension, referential frame transformation, rhetorical frame transformation, and frame abandonment (see table in appendix).

*Frame bridging* refers to the reproduction of an existing frame, yielding a parody congruent with the original's content and stance. Such parodies present little critical distance from the original, and demonstrate, instead, creativity in form. For example, a parody of Justin Timberlake's *Mirrors* introduced a mash-up of the original music video with a scene from the Pixar animation *Up* in which the main protagonist reflects on the life he shared with his deceased wife. This juxtaposition echoes the sentimental-romantic tone of the single's lyrics and the music video's narrative construction.

*Frame extension* involves broadening the boundaries of the frame presented in the music video to encompass new, albeit thematically related, meanings. For instance, a Minecraft parody for Bruno Mars' *When I was your Man* depicts a protagonist's regret for failing to secure a weapon for the protection of a fellow gamer, resulting in his

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, the criterion for including a rendition in the sample was its identification as "parody" by the video's creator.

unfortunate death. Mars's frame of devotion and love is extended, uncritically, to articulate a feeling of platonic camaraderie.

*Frame transformation* describes the process of frame-reversal. Two distinct types of re-framing were identified in the corpus. In the first, labeled as *referential re-framing*, the referent presented in the original video is rearticulated to suggest a meaning that contrasts the original's content. In the context of the videos sampled, this practice was often evident in submissive depictions of femininity and gender relations. For instance, a parody of *Roar* presented a Katy Perry imitation as an obsessive stalker, thus reversing the original video's message of female empowerment. *Rhetorical re-framing* involved a critical exposure of the original's composition and aesthetics. This form of reframing corresponds with the definition of parody as a genre aimed at commenting critically on other texts, and is typically executed by utilizing a close-rendition of the original. For example, several parodies of Lorde's *Royals* reconstructed the style and sequence of the music video while inserting new scenes and lyrics to comment about its shortcomings, such as Lorde's zombie like appearance, the video's dullness and the racist approach implied in the song's lyrics.

Finally, *Frame abandonment* denotes a practice of non-alignment. Parodies in this category used musical and stylistic elements of the original as a "shell" to which unrelated meanings were cast. For instance, several parodies abandoned the theme of love/relationships in the singles they imitated and used the musical soundtrack to construct narratives about aluminum foil, zombie attacks and S'mores.

## **Conclusion**

The use of frame-alignment as a means to conceptualize practices of meaning-making has proven useful in providing a nuanced understanding of the relationships between interpretation and production in interactive web-platforms. The taxonomy suggested in this paper sheds light on the wide range of meaning-making strategies YouTube parodists utilize in their creative responses to mainstream media.

Furthermore, this taxonomy addresses two conceptual problems that underline the active audience tradition (Morley, 1992). First, although "activity" and "resistance" are often used interchangeably in the evaluation of audience responses, Morley questions whether the activity of interpreters necessarily denotes ideological resistance. In this study, activity was held constant: YouTube parodists are essentially active in their reworking of texts, which often requires considerable amounts of time and resources. However, the results of this study indicate that activity is not equivalent to ideological resistance. Most of the renditions analyzed – those categorized as bridging, extending and abandoning the original frame – did not incorporate a critical stance towards the music video they rendered. Second, the concept of resistance is in itself problematical when appreciating response: If resistance is conceptualized as the opposition to a text's encoded ideology, what can we make of cases where people resist counter-hegemonic/subversive texts? This study has found that singles that challenged traditional gender roles often prompted parodies that reaffirmed patriarchal stances in

their critique of the original. Thus, critical resistance to a particular text may just as well enforce dominant social ideologies as undermine them.

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**Appendix: Table 1. Taxonomy of frame alignment in music video parodies**

	<b>Frame Bridging</b>	<b>Frame Extension</b>	<b>Referential frame transformation</b>	<b>Rhetorical frame transformation</b>	<b>Frame abandonment</b>
Definition	The reproduction of a frame into a new text	Extension of frame's original boundaries to encompass new meanings	Referential components in original frame reversed to convey opposite meaning	Rhetorical components in the original frame exposed and ridiculed	Original material used as a "shell" to which unrelated meanings and frames are cast
Content	similar	broadened	twisted/reversed	meta-communicative	un-related
Stance	uncritical	uncritical	thematic critique	textual critique, critique of artist	uncritical
Salient form	close-rendition	spin-off	spin-off	close-rendition	spin-off