TITLE: Charlie-is-so-"English"-like: Nationality and the branded-celebrity person in the age of YouTube

ABSTRACT: The YouTube celebrity is a novel social phenomenon. While this seeming novelty has bearing on developments in the social and cultural study of celebrity more generally, this article focuses upon one case-study – Charlie McDonnell and his video 'How to be English'. It argues the YouTube celebrity is able to construct a celebrity *personage* through turning one's socio-cultural aspects of identity, such as nationality, into components to be drawn upon by using them as masks to perform with. Use of these masks of identity allows one to develop a YouTube celebrity. By situating Charlie's 'How to be English' in the context of establishing celebrity, this article argues that the processes of 'self-branding' and forging a following utilises the power of myths for resolving the contradictions of social practice, as Lévi-Strauss suggested. The premise of YouTube – 'Broadcast Yourself' but 'what self?' – allows for one to develop various aspects of their person into *personas*. One such *persona* for Charlie is 'Englishness' and as the social experience of 'Broadcasting Yourself' necessarily asks one to turn ordinary aspects of their person into extra-ordinary aspects. Vlogging celebrity allows 'being English' to lead to 'Englishness' as a mythological recourse to overcome the problem of 'self-promotion'.

KEYWORDS: YouTube * Charlie McDonnell * Branding * Mythology * Englishness

Introduction

YouTube has become a platform for the creation of a 'branded' personhood. With this it has forged a celebrity sub-culture of its own, a 'big-name' example being Charlie McDonnell. Charlie has a cult following and has had features written about him in the national press on the success of his YouTube videos. Charlie's highest viewed video to date is his 'Duet with Myself' (viewed over 7 million times) and he has over one million 'subscribers' to his channel. Charlie has become a YouTube celebrity after beginning video-blogging when revising for his GCSE exams in April 2007. After gaining something of a following, his vlogging has since become his profession. His YouTube celebrity began when he was featured on the UK homepage of YouTube for his video 'How to get featured on YouTube' (www.charliemcdonnell.com) and national celebrity from his video 'How to be English' (BBC Breakfast, 2007).

After gaining a substantial following, YouTube granted him 'partner' status and started to pay Charlie for uploading his vlogs. From viewing Charlie's videos one can follow what this investment has given him. It is a job with a salary which is able to help him share a mortgage on a house with fellow vlogger, Alex Day ('nerimon'), and a life to diarise. But as this is Charlie's job we also realise that he is also his own product. He is Charlie Inc. and sells the 'charlieissocoollike' brand.

Using Charlie as a case study, I argue that branded-celebrity is increasingly becoming a central aspect to personhood in contemporary society (cf. Lury, 2005; Adkins, 2005). Celebrities act as commodities in that they sell their personalities to the public but also as a brand in that they develop a 'name' for themselves (Lury, 2005). The celebrity-brand or 'branded person' has implications for the status of the individual and also how we view our culture more generally. By highlighting how celebrity in modern culture rests upon the cult of the individual suggested by Durkheim (in Giddens, 1972) and that this celebrity-brand is accomplished by self-commodification through the development of a persona (Mauss, 1985), I shall outline how YouTube acts as the platform for a branded-personhood.

Part of Charlie's celebrity is his 'English' persona. '*Persona*', as explored by Marcel Mauss (1985), referred to Roman legal status and a person's ability to assume the role of 'the *imagines*… of their ancestors'. It was an 'artificial character' that would 'become synonymous with the true nature of the individual' (Mauss 1985, p.17). The notion of

persona as character types handed down from the past is central to my argument on YouTube celebrity. As video-blogs supposedly capture 'everyday life' and various aspects of the vbloggers' ordinariness, their celebrity relies more and more on what their ordinariness is able to espouse – with Charlie this is his 'Englishness.' Using Charlie's 'How to be English' video, where he plays a spoof English stereotype instructing the viewer on how to make the 'perfect cup of tea', I addresses how YouTube allows for the circulation of mythic elements of national identity through the global platform which YouTube's 'broadcast yourself' ideology encourages. The stereotypical Englishness evoked by 'the perfect cup of tea' is one without an internal referent in English society yet is recognisable to a global constituency as synonymous with Englishness. Becoming a YouTube celebrity encourages the perpetuation of these cultural stereotypes in order to 'broadcast yourself' to a sea of anonymity.

Celebrity on YouTube can largely be seen as turning the ordinary into something extra-ordinary (Strangelove, 2010), a phenomenon observed in celebrity culture more generally, notably reality television (cf. Littler, 2002). National identity in this case is at once either a nominal aspect of the person who video-blogs, or online it can become a more central facet of their celebrity and thereby more akin to film actors: e.g. Hugh Grant's Englishness. Combining celebrity as *personage* – persons of note in a ritual-context (Mauss 1985, p.4) – and national *persona* are in fact complimentary aspects as vlogger's become notable persons who exemplify national character types in a very recognisable manner. Using Alexander's (2010, pp.325-329; 2008, p.6-8) notion that celebrities combine objectification of their 'self' with audience subjectification, we can see that the celebrity *relies* on aspects of persona as well as a stage-by-stage process of celebrification (Rojek 2001, p.181ff): ordinary aspects of one's 'nationality' become increasingly part-and-parcel of what this particular celebrity-*personage* exemplifies. YouTube is especially effective as celebrity becomes much more intimate in terms of the mode of reception: videos are uploaded frequently and watched by persons via more immediate devices – iPhones, laptops – not by a 'public' in the sense of mass media celebrity (cf. Marshall 2010, p.44-45). This, as YouTuber's have commented, makes the watching experience more (a) engaged and (b) viewers more involved in the content, conta. television's 'laid back' 'switched off' 'relaxed' mode of watching.[1]

While not the sole reason for Charlie's success on YouTube, Charlie's persona of 'Englishness' represents the *mythic* value of speech in an on-line, 'parasocial' (Marshall, 2010 p.43-44) domain. Myths are stories where the act of telling them promotes wider socio-

cultural meanings despite being isolated to particular speakers when (re)told; the myth is seen as perpetuating itself for its central value lies preserving cultural values through retelling (Lévi-Strauss, 1963 p.210). The parasocial use of national identity myths explored here demonstrates the process of YouTube celebrification. Stemming from Charlie's mediation to act upon a global platform, his English persona spirals into other media and speaks *for* 'Englishness' as it *performs* 'Englishness' – part of what Turner (2009 p.143) calls the 'immanence of connectedness' offered by YouTube. As such, evoking Englishness functions as a myth (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, 1966): it espouses the origins of personality by providing a story made up of empirical elements whose analysis renders patterns apparent and, via repetition, aim to 'provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction…' (Lévi-Strauss 1963 p.229). This is the 'intellectual impulse' (Lévi-Strauss 1963, p.229) which provokes mythology. I shall argue the contradiction to be overcome is the mediating activity of creating a YouTube persona: the utilisation of nationality myths is part of the performance of self and the forging of a celebrity personage.

As a contribution to celebrity literature, I follow those who have argued celebrity-selves are like masks representing mythic persons (Alexander, 2010; Marshall, 2010). I argue that YouTube emphasises this masking in celebrification while also granting a heightened self-awareness and '*meta*' status to celebrity. With Charlie, this arose from his parody of Englishness which later became part of his celebrity-personality and 'brand.' With regard to YouTube literature more specifically, Charlie's parody of Englishness can be seen as part of the vaudevillian character of video-blogging (Burgess & Green, 2009; Jenkins, 2006). And as Hurtley (2009) has also argued, the use of mythic speech on YouTube draws our attention to the theatrical dimensions of everyday 'presentation of self'. As celebrities, YouTubers are part of the 'demotic turn' (Turner, 2010): their 'personality' is based upon discourses of ordinariness and authenticity, like television celebrities (Bennett & Holmes, 2010), yet may also become 'stars' in the filmic sense (Burgess & Green, 2009) when viral videos lead to Hollywood film roles, e.g. Andy Samberg.

YouTube and the vlog

Video-blogging can be said to have its socio-historical origins in what Charles Taylor (1989) called the 'expressive turn': one becomes a 'self' not through having a stable internalised 'essence' but rather through the expressive practices which articulate and fortify

self-conceptions: ‘I express my vision of things in some work of art, perhaps a novel or a play’ (Taylor 1989, p.374) or a YouTube video. This notion of expressivism allows for ideas of creativity to re-enter conceptions of celebrity and also brands, contra Lury’s (2005) notion where creativity in brand’s denies the presence of an authorial voice. For Lury, the power of the ‘brand’ as a totalising entity for self-hood negates creativity, yet the way I use ‘Englishness’ below is not meant as an all-encompassing identity. Rather the videos YouTubers upload are expressive ‘visions’ of themselves and, by implication, allow space for other facets of creativity to flourish in their video-making: other formats, other content and topics, not just ‘more of the same’.

Central to Taylor’s expressive self was the presence of an interlocutor, a reciprocal understanding between persons in a dialogue and recognised for their contributions to a community of speakers (Taylor, 1991). YouTube celebrity develops this dialogue of self-hood with the use of new media allowing for their celebrity to have a ‘parasocial’ (Marshall, 2010) interaction with audiences: Twitter, Facebook and other embedding mechanisms (wikis, tags, likes and video-responses) create a *dialogue* or *conversation* between YouTube users which moves beyond the imaginative interaction with celebrities (Marshall 2010, p.38) to a more situated interaction ‘on YouTube’ as a virtual space. The myths which become utilised act as mediums for what Henry Jenkins (2012) calls ‘spread-ability’, the circulation of the myth being central to accumulating value and resonance for the group which circulates it (Turner 2010, p.144): YouTube thrives on spread-ability and opens up questions to view *celebrity* in line with the circulation of myths as results of virtual social interaction, whereby dialogical recognition creates the impulse to share and spread (cf. Hartley, 2009).

This historical genesis demonstrates, additionally, that YouTube ‘celebrity’ and its ideology of ‘broadcast yourself’ is a generalised facet of self/personhood in modern society and relies upon common normative claims for the value and sanctity of the individual.

YouTube: celebrity and cult of the individual

Rojek (2001, p.46) has stated that while various accounts of celebrity differ, they all agree that the mass media is central to their valorisation. The importance of celebrity through mass media involves an important distinction. This is the distinction between ‘celebrity’ and ‘fame’: celebrity is largely about the importance of personality or persona; fame is circulation of the name of the person who is the concrete embodiment of these traits (Elliot 2011, p.468).

Elliot has argued that contemporary culture has made a wholesale shift from fame to celebrity, 'fame emptied of content.' (Elliot 2011, p.468). Such a historical and cultural shift is only reasonable in so far as we follow Elliot and Rojek in their treatment of the mass media element of celebritisation, i.e. celebrities have a dual role of forging possible role-models for fans and sustaining 'abstract desire' under capitalism (Elliot 2011, p.474f; Rojek 2001, p.181ff). This idea creates an unnecessary split between celebrity and fan, producer and consumer. As celebrity is the mark of a democratic age where fame becomes both achieved *and* attributed celebrity (Rojek 2001, p.28; Marshall 1997, p.6), central to YouTube celebrity is the breakdown of the distinction between celebrity and fan.

This breakdown occurs because the mask central to modern celebrities is itself so ambiguous – the YouTube celebrity is an ordinary person turned extra-ordinary as they gather fame on-line. One finds this in mainstream celebrity culture as well as in YouTube celebrity, notably humble beginnings to cultural icon, e.g. from Shaun Carter to Jay Z. And YouTube celebrity still involves adopting a persona but, in contrast to mainstream celerity, it offers this identity-transformation to be a more readily accessible process than the rags-to-riches of major celebrity. YouTube vlogging relies on capacities of self-presentation that *we all do* and offers this to us in a realm of easy access; the easy video-upload on the site. As such, the YouTube celebrity highlights the tightrope walked between person as ordinary and persona in their celebrity-personage. That this occurs and is so important is because it ties in with the notion of the celebrity as a sacred object in the secular age (Rojek 2001, p.51ff; Collins 2004, p.280f; Alexander, 2010). More than a sacred object, the celebrity also marks the celebration of what Durkheim (in Giddens, 1972) called the cult of the individual – the individual is sacred and this is a cult where the individual is 'both believer and god.' (Durkheim cited in Giddens 1972, p.149) A premise, if taken to its logical conclusion, reveals that all celebrity rests upon this. Fame rests upon being *both* fan and celebrity (believer and god). YouTube merely highlights this further.

Constructing a YouTube persona involves self-celebritisation and self-branding in the sense that one forges an online character for themselves in one video only to forge another character in the next video. The YouTube celebrity can adopt multiple narratives and personas (celebrity) which demands *knowledge of these roles to perform them adeptly* (fan): Charlie's videos include a series 'Fun Science', 'Challenge Charlie' and 'Cooking with Charlie'. These videos develop personas similar to established television presenter-role styles

and often use the same generic motifs and stylistic devices. In this way the YouTube celebrity works like the film-actor in Marshall's account of the system of celebrity. They embody the cultural capital of production as they develop superior performances and mastery of the profession (trending on YouTube) but also bring in economic capital as top names – as stars which attract audiences (advertising on their channel) (Marshall 1997, p.188-189). But, as I will argue further below, the element of auratic distance that Marshall highlights is always placed within a context of authentic personality for the YouTube community of vloggers. The YouTube celebrity walks the tightrope of 'believer and god', ordinary and extra-ordinary.

Within this community, the disjuncture suggested between celebrity and audience is largely an artificial distinction for YouTube. Rojek's (2001) account would lead an analysis of YouTube celebrity into a reductionist ideological critique (Alexander 2010 p.334n.5). As the believer and god of modern society, the individual is not divided between seeking out abstractions of personality because they lack a personality; rather it's the other way round. Consumer culture is one of choice (Davis 2008, p.73ff) and the individual 'determined to choose' forges their personality through choices, always remaining in the position to choose again. Each choice of personality depends upon abstractions which allow for their concretisation (i.e. in videos). Charlie's Englishness is not a total identity but, like celebrity, performance calls upon notions of identity in its enactment (Alexander, 2010). Charlie *performs* Englishness as much as he is English. This also goes toward understanding how celebrity on YouTube is not a *fait accompli*. Video-performances rely upon Alfred Gell's (1998) specialist term 'captivation.' Gell's speculative theory applied to YouTube vlogs would suggest that what keeps us viewing and what keeps video-bloggers with an audience is the notion that video-blogs display a performative agency we all could easily adopt or enlist ourselves. Captivation comes from the ability to ensure that the recipients are able to see some semblance of their own capacities as an agent in the video. Showing us an agency we are *all* capable of demonstrates that the audiences are both believer and god as they watch the god who is also a believer.

The 'charlieissocoollike' brand

In this discussion of the construction of 'self' and also celebrity we may turn to Bauman's (2007, p.6, original emphasis) assertion that social-networking sites reveal self-commodification: 'the commodity they are prompted to put on the market, promote and sell

are *themselves*.' The 'charlisissocoollike' brand comes from an ability to turn life into commodity but also to turn his persona into an expansive spatio-temporal field. This happens through the use of his name, a 'name' that conjures up a whole imagined persona (Munn 1986, p.105ff). A YouTuber's username and website name allow for this sense of individual uniqueness to arise. At the 2009 'Tomorrow's Web' conference, Charlie commented on his unfortunate dislike for his username. Set up in an *ad hoc* manner he chose 'charllieissocoollike' due to 'charlieiscool' being already taken. Charlie stated:

> Stephen Fry met me recently and he referred to me as 'charlie is cool is he like'… and pretty much any combination of those words mixed up is, is, is, me. …but I will show you [moves to computer], my username is 'charlieissocoollike' but if you have a look there [shows URL name] I have www.youtube.com/charlie, which is perfect. […] If you have a look at the people who do the best on YouTube, its pretty simple, it comes down to usernames. The number one [in 2009] on YouTube is Fred, www.youtube.com/fred and its obvious why, it's so easy to spread around. It's Fred. (Charlie McDonnell, 'Tomorrow's Web, 2009)

The use of easily recognisable names is central to the distribution of the videos as well as authorship via YouTube mediation. As YouTube is user-generated and user-distributed (cf. Wesch, 2008), circulation of the name is dependent upon people's ability to 'like' a video or 'tag' a video and, with these actions, circulate it beyond its original static state on one personal homepage. Central to this quick and chaotic motion of circulation is the simplicity of the name as it acts as a way to circulate but also recognise the person. The username becomes a *cognomen* of the YouTube celebrity. Charlie continues:

> if you're wanting to start making content on YouTube, its always good to think about the username. Because what this username is, 'charlieissocoollike', I didn't really think about it when making my account, but I was making a brand new name for myself. So when people meet me in the street, and they recognise me, they call me charlieissocoollike, which obviously

> isn't my name, it's Charlie McDonnell, I'd much prefer for people to call me Charlie McDonnell, so, yeah, this is essentially my name. And because I'm a video blogger, what I'm selling, well I'm not really selling, my product, is me. Because I video blog, everything I distribute is just me, my opinions on stuff, what I'm doing, what I think about things, my humour, shared with people. My whole brand, if you will, is me. (Charlie, Tomorrow's Web, 2009).

Becoming synonymous with his 'username', Charlie has been given over to YouTube and its circulation of videos across vast distances of time and space. When he says 'I was making a brand new name for myself' and then concludes, 'my whole brand … is me', one notices that 'brand new' means his name is now blurred with his *cogonomen* or *brand-name* as this name signifies more people's perception of him than his intimate, private person: his cognomen (*brand-name*) 'charlieissocoollike' is now his 'name' and his video-content is now synonymous with his own person. As Mauss (1985, p.16) pointed out, cognomens merge with the visible recognition of the person. The embarrassment Charlie feels can be linked to the mediation of turning one's person into a brand. As logos in contemporary branding are 'marks of social identities …extended through their iconic presentation or personalities, persona or *faces*' (Lury 2004, p.75,), we realise Charlie's logo is his face and the embarrassment concerns how his 'face' allows his very person not to be recognised as 'Charlie McDonnell' but rather '*Charlie-is-so-cool-like*, TM'. Despite being 'ordinary', Charlie's celebrity is still couched in the celebrity logic of 'stars' (Burgess & Green 2009, p.23). In this regard we notice the overlap between YouTube as a site for the creation of a 'branded' self and also the performativity of the vlogger: as YouTube's partnership programme demands 'branding' in the form of a 'banner' for their personal website and also a thumbnail 'icon' [Fig. 1], it also demands performing through this branded-matrix. One's name becomes evidence of their *products*, as Lury (2005) has argued. Their *brand*-name refers to 'the relation between products in time': one's YouTube channel is a chronological series of videos as well as past incarnations of their 'selves' which are inseparable from the branded strictures of the YouTube website. In this way, the aesthetic limitation of the YouTube corporate strictures limits the recognition of the YouTube person in terms of their product.

In such a process, 'creative labour is defined …not in terms of the relations of personhood but in relations external to the person.' (Adkins 2005, p.119). This externalisation of aspects of personhood, Adkins (2005) argues, is due to the importance of commercial success for the intended audience. Commercial success on YouTube is measured (like the labour-market) by abstractions: 'views' 'subscribers' and 'features.' Yet commercial success on YouTube is not commercial in a more traditional understanding of 'commodities orientated to a market'. The success of a commodity is determined solely upon 'how well it sells' and is understood through the economic knowledge of 'market forces'. In contrast, YouTube demands more reciprocal interaction between viewer and viewed, which is also part-and-parcel of how one presents and *produces* themselves on YouTube.

The emphasis upon the username as the circulation of one's influence in the minds of others is the *persona* of the commodity – the veil which, while illusory, is the living mode of thought for market participants (cf. Marx 1976, pp.167-168; Bauman 2007, p.14f). It is the mask which gave rise to notions of the individual (Mauss, 1985). Yet the performance of YouTube is mediated, like commodity exchange, by a market – it has to go through judgement from *others* in order for it to be deemed worthy of viewing. This is the problem resulting from turning oneself into a 'brand' and is based upon what Marx (1976, p.178-180) saw as the Faustian 'difficulty' of commodity-exchange: videos cannot make their own way onto YouTube so we have to have recourse to their makers. Vloggers have to turn themselves into a mask appealing to others, translating themselves from a particularity into universality (for Marx this was 'use-value' into 'exchange-value'). This 'Faustian difficulty' is, like Goethe's *Faust*, the problem of having all the worldly knowledge but no worldly experience or recognition for it. Marx evoked this analogy by stating a particular commodity (e.g. a video for YouTube) is a use-value in that people find it enjoyable, for instance, but is not recognised as a 'commodity' unless it can be measured by an external standard. For Marx this was 'money' (1976, p.181); for YouTube it's view-counts, subscriptions and audience interaction.

Walter Benjamin (2008) discusses this problem of translation in relation to the movie-star's experience of 'the camera', the medium of translating theatrical performance into a commodity: i.e. their performance into their 'celebrity'. The branded person goes through this mediation and it impacts on what this means for the circulation of their YouTube videos.

Benjamin noted that the manner of performance demanded by the camera lens brought with it existential consequences:

> the screen actor, by not presenting his performance to the audience in person, is deprived of the possibility open to stage actors of adapting their performance… the cinema audience is being asked to examine and report without any personal contact with the performer intruding. The audience empathizes with the performer only by empathizing with the camera. It thus assumes the camera's stance: it tests. (2008, p.18)

The 'test' of the camera is a disquieting experience. It deprives the performer of the cues of everyday interactions which make performances seem virtuosic (Goffman, 1959). Mike Wesch's study of vlogs saw that the 'tests' of the camera led to what he dubbed 'the context collapse of the webcam' (2009, pp.22ff): deprived of a context to perform to, the vlogger has to perform without a 'face', 'line' or even interaction setting. Deprived of these, 'it is not surprising to find many would-be first-time vloggers perplexed by the webcam, often reporting that they spent several hours transfixed in front of the lens, trying to decide what to say.' (Wesch 2009, p.23)

The solution of such performative lapses is to generalise the 'generalised others' we interact with, making (anticipated) future judgements on one's performance part of the performance itself (Wesch 2009, p.24f). This usually takes the form of introspection and imaginary retorts from imagined reprimands from imagined others. For instance, Charlie usually presents a line and then, as if receiving a scolding, makes an apology to his viewers. Internal dialogue with oneself is, like a diary entry, a way to negate the context collapse and present an acceptable face in the absence of an interlocutor.

Because the video is the basis of fame as 'an artificial inflation of 'personality' outside the studio' (Benjamin 2008, p.21), the existential question of 'who to act toward' has become subject to a special criterion of evaluation, the other side of the Faustian problem: once *the actor* has been universalised on YouTube in a sea of video-selves, so too has *the viewer*, i.e. the potential audience to video-selves. Deprived of an interlocutor, the viewer asks 'is this ordinary person for real?' Mechanical reproduction leaves the work of art to be 'underpinned' by a 'politics' of authenticity (Benjamin 2008, p.12). Being 'real' is vital to the

verdict of one's celebrity on YouTube and subsequently becomes part of the value people grant them, as documented by others (Wesch, 2008; Burgess & Green 2009, p.29).[2] Lacking authenticity is anathema to the values of YouTube celebrity: ordinariness allows these videos to resonate with people.[3] The viewer finding out the vlogger is inauthentic after the premise of the vlog to be 'reality' is an insult to those same viewers who attribute fame and circulate the name.[4] We may speculate that people may often see part of themselves in the video, gaining a sense of pathos with these ordinary people vlogging (usually because they're vloggers themselves). Devaluing this is to devalue the basis and ethos of the individual free to choose a life of their own and value themselves as their own possession.

Charlie's success (in part) comes from his authenticity being a central part of his brand and partakes in a growing dispute about 'only getting famous' on YouTube, a dispute which regards video-content to be about the *content*, not the subscription count. Charlie states:

> I have in the past become obsessed with numbers going up and down and I'm happy now just to have a nice bunch. And that way of thinking also extends to how I make my videos. I don't see it as a sea of eyeballs that I need to trick into 'liking my video', or 'subscribing to my channel' … I just try to make good stuff and I have faith that if I make good stuff all that stuff will come with it regardless. And I also like to think that I'm making these videos for you. Because you aren't a sea of eyeballs, or a community: you're a person. One normal, actual person, sitting in front of your computer, or whatever, watching this. And this I think, thinking about you as anything other than what you are, makes it less personal, and I like it when its personal… ('Hello', www.youtube.com/charlie)

This claim to authenticity through treating an audience as *one person* is part of the para-social dimensions of online fame. It demonstrates awareness of fans as *individuals* in an inter-personal manner that deviates from institutional conduits (cf. Marshall 2010, p.41). Charlie has a million followers on his channel and uploaded a video about this landmark, saying:

> I do just want to say thank you for the last four years, or so, of my life. Pretty much all of the closest friends I have met on YouTube, all the opportunities I have had to do cool things in my life have come from being on this website. Fundamentally from people watching me on this website. […] Thank you. You have given me my life, like on a plate, if it wasn't for you I, I don't know what I'd be doing without this website. ('One million subscribers', www.youtube.com/charlie)

Given this centrality of the ordinary, the everyday person elevated to celebrity and a brand has interesting consequences for investigating what the persona of 'charlieissocoollike' entails. As his celebrity is attributed, we have to understand how this affects his persona. What does Charlie have to do in order to maintain his 'me', his brand that is himself while living his life through the gazes of his anonymous viewers and highly aware of this? The centrality of maintained authenticity is also used to heighten his self-awareness and reflexively monitor his self-conscious image so as to deal with the 'generalised generalised other' (Wesch, 2009) *and* maintain celebrity.

Charlie's Englishness: between persona and person

Charlie's sense of self-awareness is where the emphasis on Englishness becomes important. Firstly he talks in an English accent and is simply an 'Englishman' in the global community of YouTube users. Secondly, interacting in this global community, he is further attributed Englishness from this presence of 'the other', other nationalities, ethnicities and classes heightening his own national/ethnic identity. Yet the main source of his Englishness is his use of his turning himself into a stereotype (auto-stereotyping) as much as it is based upon foreign perceptions of stereotyping. Peter Mandler (2006, p.53) claims that the use of auto-stereotyping refers to self-conceptions as much as foreign stereotypes as they become part of an external vision of 'how others see us' and are internalised as part of national identity. Using foreign perceptions to create a self-conception is demonstrated by Charlie in his 'How to be English' video as he instructs his audience on 'how to make a cup of tea'. Exploring this video and Charlie's subsequent Englishness, I will seek to emphasise and elaborate what I have argued above, highlighting the mythic dimensions of speech in the forging of celebrity as well as one's individual 'self'.

Nationalities are often viewed through the lens of their 'mythic' dimensions, e.g. famous ancestors, legends, folklore (Rojek, 2007 pp.76ff). By drawing upon these we notice Charlie's use of his nationality is also a dimension that helps forge his celebrity personage. As Lévi-Strauss argued, myths only have a value in so far as they refer to practical, technical activities which endure in a society (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p.35) – they're historically inherited assumptions from an archival past. Archives gives us mythic 'stereotypes' and 'auto-types'. These are made up of

> elements which can be defined by two criteria: they *had a use*, as words in a piece of discourse which mythical thought 'detaches'… and *they can be used again* either for the same purposes or for a different one if they are at all diverted from their previous function. (Lévi-Strauss 1966, p.35, original emphasis)

Charlie's YouTube celebrity is located in this gap between previous and present use of mythic materials. His use of them rests upon historically inherited assumptions of what an 'Englishman' is and his YouTube persona partly rests upon his use of mythic stereotypes as an elevated yet partly incidental aspect of his 'brand'. In his 'How to be English' video, Charlie's mythic use of Englishness is associated with the elite sections of British society which have become part of a globally recognisable notion of an 'Englishman' due to imperial projects (Colley, 1993) and post-imperial resonances in British society (cf. Tyler, 2012).

While historians explore the varieties of Englishness (Colls, 2003; Mandler, 2006) and take issue with 'elite' Englishness as synonymous with 'England', the English life lived by elite sections of British society is a pervasive feature of what one would associate or describe as a quintessentially English person. This inheritance of 'upper-class' Englishness as the predominant form of the Englishman has become hegemonic in media representation of them as indicative of 'the nation' writ large while other classes are conceded belonging localities (West Country, Geordie, Essex) (Nadel-Klein, 1995). Charlie's location in this myth of England can be said to arisen due to a playful mocking of this stereotype in his 'How to be English' video, a parody that draws upon the myth and perpetuates it regardless of such mockery for it recognise its *cultural value for English identity*.[5]

In what follows I shall develop the English mythology that Charlie espouses in his videos, utilising the method outlined by Lévi-Strauss (1963) for mythological analysis, i.e. by isolating its constituted elements (mythemes) and showing how when these are related and combined they forge meaning (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p.211). Mythemes are components of a story which when isolated can 'show that a certain function is, at a given time, linked to a given subject.' (Lévi-Strauss 1963, p.211). The function is to emphasise Englishness as a heightened part of one's identity and the subject is the pressures of YouTube celebrification detailed above.

'*How to be English' ... and its 'imponderable joy'*

In Figure 2. we see Charlie in a suit, waving with a toothy grin. We have our first mytheme, the initial appearance of a character and his opening speech:

> Hullo. And welcome to another episode of 'How to be English'. … My name is Charles, and I will be showing you the ancient English art that is making a cup of tea [snorty laugh].

In this mytheme the relation between person and the speech is to link up to the personality of Englishness – adopting an 'upper class' accent and changing his name to 'Charles', Charlie's suit and his speech relate to what 'Englishness' is, i.e. the upper-class gentleman. Yet in the opening section we also see a series of jump-cuts and lapses of his accent and with it the undermining of this speech. These mythemes – the content, the performance and its undermining – take on the quality of a spoof and a heightened sense of self-awareness in order to create a parody. Yet given the use of these mythic entities, (speech and personality, suit and ties, snorty laughs, upper class accents), they forge a self-conception of Englishness which acknowledges the use of these entities by using them for purposes of comedy and parody over lived personality (cf. Jenkins, 2006 on parody).

When we consider the content of 'making a cup of tea' as the next mytheme, we see it also relates to the disjuncture between parody and actuality. Charlie's use of kettle, semi-skinned milk, Yorkshire tea bags, sugar and a mug and tea-spoon [Fig. 3], are all existing features of English life and practice, as is the suit and an upper-class accent. Yet for heightened self-consciousness these elements relate back to an ethnic identity of 'being English' and give these everyday facets of English life iconic status. Additionally these class

signifiers – of Yorkshire tea-bags, mugs and upper-class accents – actually contradict each other and give rise to a heightened quality of parody.

These two mythemes make up the 'How to be English' myth. With this we have to understand what the myth's use is, its value. Myths take on value through resolving real, *social* contradictions in the *cultural* imagination (Lévi-Strauss 1963, p.229): the social contradiction of camera mediated performance relies upon imaginative solutions. This is the intellectual impulse of the Englishness parody. Yet 'the myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has produced it is exhausted.' (Lévi-Strauss 1963, p.227) Aware that people on the earth originate from disparate parts of the global, the use of mythic entities is itself a form of politics – for the video contains within it a synchronic facet by its very nature. It is this feature of being 'timeless' that give myths 'operational value' (Lévi-Strauss 1963, p.209): the video is clicked, played, replayed and circulated uncompromised at each instance. Such synchronicity gives it the quality of explaining 'the past and the present as well as the future' (Lévi-Struass 1963, p.209).

Utilising these English mythemes, Charlie's imaginative solution to the real contradiction of YouTube's ideology of 'broadcast yourself' also becomes part of his celebrity personage due to the spreadable nature of YouTube content. Contemporary media gives the myth its spiral quality, emphasising and expanding the intellectual impulses which the myth seeks to resolve. Charlie's mythic vision of England and Englishness spirals in other media. On his 2007 BBC interview about the video becoming a 'sensation' in America, the interviewers state:

> BBC 1: You needed a bowler hat and an umbrella, to make it really, really English…
>
> Charlie: I would have if I had one.
>
> […]
>
> BBC 2: You're playing up, were you deliberately making this video for the Americans because you're playing up that being English, it's all about the correct cup of tea, although you really should have had some bone china instead of a clunking great mug?

> Charlie: ... Yeah, I kind of made fun of the Americans as much as I could, I tried to slip into a German accent at points, because they can't tell the difference, between, European people…
>
> (BBC Breakfast, 2 Oct 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5bEny17MVo (accessed: 23/06/2011)

The spiral quality spawns more mythemes. Here the use of the mythic stereotype – the Victorian gentlemen with umbrella and bowler hat, or the eighteenth century tea-party on bone china – are utilised in order to create a heightened vision of Englishness established in Charlie's parody; yet it is also revealed that the American orientated aspect of the video plays up the perceptions. The auto-stereotype is shared among English people as they utilise a common set of mythemes (bowler hats, umbrella, bone china, etc.) and is revealed as a feature of their being based upon awareness of foreign perceptions. Yet it is also an ability to utilise these attributed characteristics to create and circulate the video. Taking on the perception of others is itself part of the 'context collapse' Wesch (2009) outlined and the ability to resolve the problem of 'selling' and 'broadcasting yourself'.

These mythemes give Charlie a component part of his persona. This is heightened when we consider his utilisation of this Englishness in his video productions, notably his signature sign-off/outro to his videos. This sign off [Fig. 4] is spoken by Stephen Fry:

> 'Uh, you've just had the almost imponderable joy of watching charlieissocoollike which makes you, like, cool.'

The mythic value of the Stephen Fry outro is that it gives transformational quality to the mythemes of Englishness already established by Charlie. It turns his Englishness from parody to a lived identity with the use of England's 'most English Englishman'. Stephen Fry's celebrity in many ways relies upon his Englishenss as he has become increasingly a 'global celebrity'. The stereotype of Englishness exists in the celebrity persona of Stephen Fry as the archetype for our imaginative vision of Englishness, a view that Stephen Fry is highly self-conscious of:

> The longer I live the more clearly one truth stands out. People will rarely modify their preferred view of a person, no matter

> what the evidence might suggest. I am English. Tweedy. Pukka. Confident. Establishment. Self-assured. In charge. This is how people like to see me… (Fry 2010, p.276)

The imaginative quality of persons is of operative importance to the value of the Englishness myth: utilising Stephen Fry's celebrity persona expands the spiral quality of myths, giving Charlie's persona a transformational quality. The Englishness of the 'How to be English' video spreads through the media coverage, linking Charlie into a common inheritance of Englishness and expands into new dimensions. For instance, Charlie played host to his YouTube friend and vlogger, the American Michael Aranda ('arandavision') at his London flat and created the video 'How to speak English', wherein they see if Michael is able to decipher the meaning of English vernacularisms, consisting of aubergines, bogey, chav, chuffed, flap-jack, faff, numpty, spiffing, slash, nosh, fit and winkle [Fig. 5a & b].

Utilising this English stereotype of quaint nouns, Michael and Charlie play off each other as they establish ethnic differences through each being an Other to each other. They illuminate the qualities of Englishness and Amercianness through the minutiae of a common language. To end the video Charlie asks Michael to 'do his best Stephen Fry' for the outro of the video, thereby heightening the persona of Englishness through the imaginative qualities of Stephen Fry's celebrity – the words and the impersonation being two mythemes which grant Englishness a sense of reality. This bricolage of stereotyping is, stemming from the spiral of media circulation, also down to the creativity which YouTube video's demand. Dealing with the context collapse, they have to utilise a series of culturally prominent facets of 'Englishness' if they are to be received *as* English but also to account for the person making the video as they circulate on YouTube as a global platform.

This brings us back to Bauman's statement that the 'self' today stems from people being 'simultaneously, *promoters of commodities* and the *commodities they promote*' (Bauman 2007, p.6).

Bauman's term 'subjectivity fetishism' (2007, p.17), as with Marx's 'commodity fetishism,' (Marx 1976, pp.163-177) is bound up with an universal aspect of human behaviour – that which is of human origin is forgotten and becomes seen as being part of the very nature of our world. Commodity fetishism and subjectivity fetishism both deal with the

same thing. They are problems of dealing with the origin of things. With the Marxian commodity fetish we emphasise the pound sign over the product and people who sell it and with Charlie we overemphasise the persona always forgetting that it has its origins with a camera lens. The origin of the YouTube videos stem from the creators own volition, but lacking a means to display their own person they rely upon mythemes in forging a celebrity personage, notably for Charlie a stereotype of Englishness. This is not objectification *as* alienation but rather the tightrope the cult of the individual walks. Charlie's dialogue with 'Others' in the YouTube community gives itself over to a heightened sense of self-consciousness (such as differences in vernacular). To be a YouTube celebrity one needs to create a 'brand' of themselves, turn the 'ordinary me' into a persona that consists of easily attached imaginary ideas: Charlie being, as his webpage states, 'An English twenty-something who makes videos' (www.youtube.com/charlie), is the basis of playing up Englishness – factual Englishness leads to heightened self-consciousness. This sense of Englishness is, therefore, partly ordinary and factual but also based upon a mythology and the spread-ability its subject to in forging a person into a celebrity.

Conclusion

Having explored Charlie's 'How to be English' video I shall conclude with the implications this case-study of a YouTube celebrity has for notions of celebrity writ large. As the cult of the individual and the centrality of self-commodification is the basis for forging a celebrity character and personality, we have to pay attention to the fact that 'celebrity culture articulates a way of thinking about individuality and producing the individual self through the public world.' (Marshall 2010, p.46) What I have singled out in this regard is the centrality of nationality myths as type of speech (Lévi-Strauss 1963, pp.211-212; Barthes 1993, pp.109-111) utilised in forging individuality through celebrification. Charlie's 'How to be English' video was uploaded in September 2007, a mere five months after creating his YouTube channel. The temporal dimension of celebrification is of significance to the use of mythic speech. Prior to having forged a celebrity personage, the early user of YouTube utilises mythic speech in order to garner meaning and personality for themselves; it becomes the speech which the persona warrants and vice versa. As Barthes (1993, p.110) and Lévi-Strauss (1966, p.22) made clear, the elements which make up myths have been wrought prior to their use in the contexts we find them in. Charlie's mythic use of Englishness is such an example of this 'detaching' and rearranging for practical purposes, the purpose being forging a

character, personality and individuality in the early stages of his YouTube career. But I would suggest that this also is a facet of YouTube celebrity, a celebrity which is about self-formation as much as it about being a personification of mythic values. Indeed the 'demands and exigencies of on-line culture which operates as the expanding source of presentational culture' (Marshall 2010, p.46) allows for self-formation and mythic qualities to be co-present.

Given the emphasis placed upon personas, the mediation of the camera lens and the establishment of a mask of national identity for a YouTube celebrity, the contribution I wish to make to celebrity scholarship is in refining Alexander's (2010, p.331) answer to the question, 'if the celebrity-icon is a mask, what of the 'individual' who lies behind it?' Alexander's answer rests upon human fallibility: anything contradicting the mask is tantamount to celebrity downfall. With the YouTube celebrity, profanation of the mask is not granted such negative consequences. Having shown Charlie's mythic speech and parody, along with his self-consciousness of his own self-branding, the celebrity on YouTube could be called a *meta*-celebrity. A celebrity constantly aware and bringing to attention their own artificiality; a celebrity (and audience) making reference to every mask or mythic use of speech as dramatic props. This is a feature of the YouTube vlogging celebrity sub-culture more generally and it demonstrates that a celebrity as an extra-ordinary person and an ordinary person as a potential celebrity is situated on a very fine line distinction.

Mauss' suggestion that the artificial character mask can in fact become 'synonymous with the true nature of the individual' (Mauss 1985, p.17) has been shown with Charlie's initial use of Englishness parody to becoming part of his celebrity personage. This observation can be furthered when combined with John Hartley's (2009, pp.131-133) claim that YouTube 'updates' the 'bardic function' that television had in twentieth century. Fiske & Hartley's (2003, pp.85ff) notion of the 'bardic' function of television was to demonstrate how narrative television served to offer structured messages to reinforce existing, everyday life and meanings. YouTube offers this bardic function to everyone, emphasising an all-embracing, democratic quality of open-access and non-expert communication (Hartley 2009, p.133f). Charlie's own 'bardic' use of certain mythemes of English culture to forge a celebrity personage is part of both a bardic function in emphasising well-worn notions of English national identity but also as part of the presentation (and promotion) of self.

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Matthias Varul and Dana Wilson-Kovacs for their advice and comments and two anonymous peer-reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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[1] See: 'What YouTube isn't | Becoming YouTube | Video #9'' for interviews from vlogging celebrities about the difference between television and YouTube, esp.09:30: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FDgT-elh60 (uploaded: May 31st 2013).

[2] Amongst YouTuber's, "the F word" is Fake.

[3] As Matthias Varul (2006:115 n.1) points out: "It is an irony of the 'expressivist turn' (Taylor, 1989: 368ff.) in modern culture that the growing importance of the inner life of the self at the same time opens it up to social scrutiny."

[4] This was a scandal that occurred in 2006 when the assumed-to-be reality video-blog of 'LonelyGirl15' was discovered to be a fictionalised online-soap in a video-blog format: (see, Wesch, 2008).

[5] As Lévi-Strauss observes, the value of the myth "does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells." (1963, p.210, original emphasis): Charlie's use of the upper-class persona is a story; its parody makes it no less powerful for it still articulates Englishness in the process of retelling.