

Ambiguous Imitations: DIY Hijacking the 'Danish Mother Seeking' Stealth Marketing Campaign on YouTube

By Carsten Stage & Sophie Esmann Andersen

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of imitation as a key dimension of online DIY and participatory cultures on YouTube. The empirical point of departure is the viral stealth marketing YouTube video entitled 'Danish Mother Seeking', produced by the official national tourist organisation (Visit Denmark), and selected extracts of the online responses to this video.¹ Framed by the notion of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006; Burgess & Green 2009) and the concept of imitation (Tarde 1895/1903), we analyse how marketing initiatives buy into and borrow energy from engaged networked producers, but also how these producers can criticise marketing initiatives by 're-imitating' them. Following this, we argue that the case represents an interesting and fascinating example of consumer resistance and bottom-up voices insisting on being heard, rather than a simple example of the breakdown of a brand strategy. Looking at the response videos they furthermore reveal that imitation can be a rather ambiguous social strategy as it is used both to transfer energy from the imitated object and to deconstruct it. As part of this argument we replace the classical concept of 'mimicry' (Bhabha 1994) with the notion of 'ambiguous imitation' to be able to describe online imitation as both an act of critical voicing and energy transmission.

Keywords: Participatory and DIY culture, stealth marketing, YouTube, social media, imitation and mimicry

Introduction

'Hi. My name is Karen and I'm from Denmark. And this here is my baby boy; his name is August. I'm doing this video because I'm trying to find August's father.' This quotation launched a 180-second-long YouTube video in which a young Danish girl, Karen, posted a viral online search for the father of her baby boy, who had been conceived following her chance meeting with a foreign tourist. After only a few days, the video had spread like a virus with more than 1 million views on YouTube, circulating in more than 150 countries. The video created headlines in several newspapers, was broadcast in prime time on Danish national television and hit the news worldwide, all helping to spread the word in order to locate August's father. The ability of the social media to facilitate human relationships was praised a good deal in this connection. But at the same time critical voices began to circulate, questioning whether the video was just a media or advertising stunt; and shortly after being posted on YouTube, the Danish online newspaper *jp.dk* revealed that Karen was in fact an actress. Subsequently, it was revealed that the video was an advert for the official national tourist organisation, Visit Denmark (referred to below as VD), aiming at branding Denmark as a democratic, open and friendly country and thus as an interesting and attractive tourist destination. The revelation transformed the video from an 'authentic' DIY media product made by an amateur in need of help into a viral stealth marketing stunt and a commercialised representation of Denmark. After this transformation the video became the centre of a massive creative struggle on YouTube over how to represent the national identity of Denmark, different individual/social identities, and the relations between place and identities.

The empirical point of departure of this paper is the YouTube video known as 'Danish Mother Seeking' (produced in 2009) and extracts of the approximately 50 online responses to the video. Based on textual analyses of these videos, we explore their meanings, interrelations and transformative character. Framed within theories of participatory and DIY culture (Jenkins 2006; Knobel & Lankshear 2010; Gauntlett 2011) and drawing on the notion of imitation (Tarde 1895/1903) as a way of participating and engaging in media culture, we argue that the video responses simultaneously borrow energy from and deconstruct the initial video. Thus, the case demonstrates a process of power conversion, in which a stealth marketing initiative is assigned to the different agendas of a social community, thus transforming the advertised message into cultural material for constructing new user-generated narratives.

The case is interesting first of all because of the number of creative video responses that the initial video motivated, which indicates that the case can reveal important insights on the basic dynamics and motivating factors that triggers DIY participation on YouTube. Secondly, because of the various types of imitative strategies used in the case, which makes it possible for us to understand the role

of imitation as a way of using socially established resources and energies online. Consequently, the case allows us to reflect on the relationship between getting a voice online and imitating other social agencies or genres, thereby providing insights into understanding the strategies used, the energies circulating and constantly revitalizing online DIY and participatory culture. Following this our overall research question is: *How is imitation used as both a commercial and a social strategy, i.e. by both the commercial producer of the viral video and the producers responding to the video with DIY productions?*

Our analytical approach is based on textual analyses of the videos and is inspired by the discourse theoretical work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau 1996; Laclau & Mouffe 2001). This implies focusing on the media space of YouTube as a platform of various and contesting articulations trying to fix the meaning and interpretation of a certain social phenomenon (e.g. a branded message such as the Visit Denmark initiative). Furthermore, we are inspired by John Law and Bruno Latour in viewing the social event created by the original video and the responses as a composite of relations between interconnected producers (the people behind the videos), media technologies (the internet/computers) and media objects (the videos) (Latour 2005). The videos both share characteristics (e.g. taking ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ as a motivating reference) and dissolve into different articulations about politics, gender, marketing, and parenthood – or simply just parodist and entertaining statements. Consequently, we aim to explore and understand the material as being characterised by both similarities and differences, and one of our important goals is to refrain from harmonising or simplifying this complexity (Law 2004). In order to do that we have simultaneously analysed the dominant narrative logics structuring the material (e.g. narratives about missing fathers, nationality, gender) and focused on the way the videos imitate other sources. Thus we have been able to trace the similarities and differences in the narrative content and in the imitative dynamics of the videos. By doing this we have attempted both to code the material via relevant categorizations, but always in a way that helped us to further grasp its ‘narrative-imitative’ complexity.

Key Concepts: Participatory Culture, Voice and Imitation

The cultural movement from a media user paradigm (where most media users simply receive media material produced by professionals) towards a media producer paradigm (where users increasingly also produce and disseminate media material like photos, videos and comments) is obvious (Rosen 2006; Bruns 2008; Penenberg 2009). Thus a reconceptualisation of the user concept is developing in a media (*producers*, e.g. Bruns 2008), consumption (*prosumers*, e.g. Xie et al. 2007) and marketing and management context (*co-creators*, e.g. Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; Vargo & Lusch 2004), acknowledging users as connected,

informed, creative and empowered (Pralhad & Ramaswamy 2004).

This paradigm shift is undeniable, but the question whether or not this rise of participatory or DIY culture creates a radically new and promising opportunity for ordinary people to be heard or have a voice in the processes of democratic contestation is nevertheless rather unresolved. Henry Jenkins is among the optimists, as he sees new media as a way of engaging new generations in political processes and the creation of collective intelligence (Jenkins 2006). Following Nick Couldry, it is nevertheless important to remember that it 'is the interactive dimension of voice that is crucial; technological forms enable, but cannot guarantee, this. Voices may multiply, but democracy still fail' (Couldry 2010: 143). In other words, having a voice by posting something online is not the same as having social influence or being heard (Fenton 2008; Burgess & Green 2009). Online visibility and public disappearance can paradoxically be two sides of the same coin. This implies that social actors wanting to be heard online will often have to be highly innovative, newsworthy or scandalous to be noticed.

In terms of political effect, the potential of new media for transformation is difficult to determine; but if we turn our attention towards everyday or vernacular creativity there is no doubt that new social media make it possible for more people to create and spread their own DIY materials, e.g. film and music productions. The rising DIY media culture is thus based on a de-professionalisation of media production and a democratisation of channels of distribution (Knobel & Lank-shear 2010). One of the most important and widespread participatory media platforms is YouTube, where both companies and non-professionals struggle to be heard and circulated every day. The website was launched in 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim. YouTube statistics illustrate its profound importance in everyday life. In 2011 three billion videos were watched every day, making it by far the most important site for user-generated videos in the world. Each minute a total of approximately 48 hours of videos are uploaded to YouTube. And as of October 2011, the most-viewed video of all time had been seen 633,322,671 times.² Becoming a successful video on YouTube is therefore a major achievement – not least for companies wanting to spread knowledge about their products and brands worldwide.

According to the early sociologist and author of *The Laws of Imitation* (1895) Gabriel Tarde, imitation is the primary social force or principle in the creation of any community or society: 'Society may therefore be defined as a group of beings who are apt to imitate one another (...)' (Tarde 1895/1903: 68). When children grow up they learn language and social conventions and become socialised beings by imitating significant others. When cultural contexts become inspired by other traditions they are included via imitation. When fans relate to their idols and to other fans, they often do so by imitating a style or certain values. Imitating practices thus often relate to energies that the imitator finds fascinating, interesting, prestigious or sympathetic. From the perspectives of branding and participatory

culture, *imitation* can thus be seen as one way to engage in communal practices by tapping into existing social energies and events – both as a consumer and as a corporation/brand. The notion of imitation is used as a way of understanding *both* a complex stealth brand strategy *and* an engaged consumer culture striking back. Thus, we analyse the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video as an imitation of a DIY genre by which it taps into participatory culture’s ongoing quest for new attractive videos to hype. Furthermore, the video responses imitate the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video as they imitate the narrative structures and components of an already socially contested and highly disputed phenomenon. These processes of imitation are explored in the analytical part of this paper.

However, one key question is whether imitation can both *borrow energy* and *distance itself* from the thing being imitated. In the analysis we argue that this is exactly the case in our material, in which a lot of the response videos imitate the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video, while at the same time criticising and dissociating themselves from it, e.g. by critiquing the use of the imagery of a Danish mother seeking the father of her son to demonstrate that Denmark is a free and tolerant society. The concept of *mimicry* from Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994) comes close to the phenomenon we want to describe (Bhabha 1994). According to Bhabha, mimicry is an act of imitation where the thing being imitated (e.g. a colonial authority) is also criticised or destabilised by the imitator (e.g. a colonial citizen). But the focus on energy and social force, which is prominent in Tarde’s work on imitation, is lost if we only employ Bhabha’s concept. The latter is mostly focused on the act of imitation as a way of splitting or destabilising the thing being imitated, and is therefore less interested in what is *gained* – e.g. social energy and intensity – by critically imitating something. As such we argue that mimicry is one of the many forms that imitation, as a broader concept of social exchange and relation making, can take.

But how does this link to our case? Following Couldry it can be argued that *imitating something socially significant* (like the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video) *increases the possibility of a citizen’s voice being heard* on social media platforms. Seen from this perspective, imitation is a strategy that can be used to become more visible and less likely to disappear among all the other voices. Imitation is therefore a way of entering a stage, which is already of importance in the context, and a way of creating affinities to other social actors doing the same. Collective imitation thus makes the individual into a part of a movement, a swarm (Rheingold 2002), with the power to attract attention. And this is exactly what the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video seeks to do by imitating a DIY style and genre with a large viral potential. And it is simultaneously what the response videos are doing by creating a complex swarm of imitators using the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video as an opportunity to criticise, entertain, relate to others and/or to express yourself.

A Danish Mother Enters Participatory Culture

In this section we will begin by analyzing the original VD video and categorizing the responses it received before it was revealed as a stealth marketing campaign. This is followed by an analysis and categorization of the response videos. The analysis will primarily focus on the very salient dynamics and processes of imitation.

In September 2009 the viral stealth video ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ was broadcast on YouTube as part of a sophisticated strategy for branding Denmark as a desirable tourist destination. The video was initiated by the national Danish tourist organisation, Visit Denmark, and strategically and creatively executed by a locally based division of the global advertising and marketing agency Grey Group. According to the Visit Denmark CEO, the strategic goal was to create positive awareness of and conversation about Denmark.³ However, the commercial status of the video was deliberately concealed. Instead, a young woman was staged as the sender of the video, making it one more example of the wide range of DIY videos.

As paraphrased above, the video presents a young Danish woman in search for the father of her son.⁴ The video begins with the woman adjusting the camera and taking her position in front of the camera, holding her son in her arms. By directly addressing the camera and by framing the picture in a close-up of mother and son, the video creates an intimate space, from where the woman begins her very personal story:



‘Hi. My name is Karen and I’m from Denmark. And this here is my baby boy; his name is August. I’m doing this video because I’m trying to find August’s father’

Picture 1: Screenshot and quote from the Danish Mother Seeking video (time 0:02/2:28)⁵

The video appears to be a homemade amateur video: it imitates and draws on the notion of a DIY producer authenticity, gaining its ethos through this authenticity. The video addresses and appeals to the producers of participatory culture, which it simultaneously claims to be a part of, urging them to disseminate the story; demanding to be seen and heard. As a real-life story and a genuine product of DIY culture (i.e. before it was revealed as a marketing stunt), the video attracted a huge amount of attention and response. Based on a categorisation of the response videos, we can distinguish between three different forms of response, which all have the Danish Mother Seeking video and its authentic status as a reference:

The first group of responses consist of spontaneous comments to Karen and her story and is directly related to the young woman and to the fact that her story is authentic. This group of responses is difficult to track, since the original video was removed by Visit Denmark. However, it is possible to identify traces of the responses to the original video in the comments to the re-posted versions of the video.⁶ Even though a pay off has been added at the end of the video, saying 'www.visitdenmarknow.com (please)', thus revealing that the video is a commercial, several comments on the video clearly perceive the video as real and authentic. For instance by posting comments ('=/ hope she found the dad...', Godiazul), questions ('Did she find the father?', tubingtheworld) and statements ('This video is sooo lame... she dosent remember the dudes name, where his from or ANYTHING. Jesus.. She must have been DRUNK. BTW. silly girl, you ARE a bimboo..', Trykkermike). These responses are characterised by spontaneous emotional outbursts linked directly to the young woman and her story.

A second group of responses is characterised by active user actions initiated by the video; not only as emotional outbursts, but as physical actions and active producer participation in sustaining the cultural circulation and viral vitality of the video. In other words, these responses are characterised by the fact that they pass on the message, thus responding to the request ending the video, where the audience is urged to take action:



'I know that this is really a long shot, but if you [August's father] are out there and you see this, or anybody else who can help me sees this, please contact me. I will put my e-mail with this video; so, just write me'

Picture 2: Screenshot and quote from the Danish Mother Seeking video (time 2:26/2:28)

This type of response spins a complex on- and offline network. Producers around the world repost the video on their own YouTube channel; they link to the video on their Facebook and Twitter profiles and on personal blogs; and people talk about the video offline among friends and family, continuously passing on the message and actively responding to the request to find August's father. This category moves the responses beyond a mere interest in the story, which characterizes the first category of responses and demonstrates an interest in retelling the story in new settings and thus become a part of the storyline.

Besides the emotional outbursts and physical actions, a third group of responses assume a more reflective character. These are characterised by (meta)reflections on the potentials and opportunities of online social media in literally connecting

people and facilitating new lives and relations in real life. An example of this kind of response is delivered by the Danish social media agency Mindjumpers. On 10 September 2009, the day after the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video was initially broadcast and a few days before it was exposed as an advert, an article was published on the Mindjumpers website (www.mindjumpers.com) under the headline ‘Finding Dad Through Social Media – Danish Mother Seeking’,⁷ in which the author reflects on the potentials of using social media in bringing people closer together. This type of responses is characterised by a certain degree of distance towards Karen and her story (i.e. the content of the video), counterbalanced by an interest in the case as a social media phenomenon (i.e. the context of the video). And as in the responses hyping and passing on the video, these reflections are played out on a variety of media platforms and via offline relations.

From Genuine DIY Product to Viral Stealth Branding

The response to the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video as a genuine DIY product was of course disturbed and derailed by increasing awareness of its status as a marketing stunt. Within recent years, new strategies for reaching a rising group of sceptical consumers have gained solid ground in marketing, including covert or undercover marketing practice (Kaikati & Kaikati 2004), relying on deception for their effectiveness (Martin & Smith 2008). One subset of these strategies is classified as stealth marketing, defined as ‘the use of surreptitious marketing practices that fail to disclose or reveal the true relationship with the company that produces or sponsors the marketing message’ (Martin & Smith 2008: 45). The ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video can be defined as stealth marketing because it intentionally hides its commercial standing. It could, however, be argued, that the video sophisticatedly insinuates its own genre as an advertisement. The painting in the video (showing the letters ‘AD’) that is placed strategically at the center of the frame seems to point at the commercial position of the video, cf. picture 3.



The letters in the painting quotes “AD”, which might (retrospectively) suggest the commercial status of the video.

Picture 3: Potential sign of a commercial genre?

Conversely, none of the responses decode or even mention the letters in the picture, suggesting that the letters do not represent a valid sign enabling users to identify the video as a commercial genre. And as the above-mentioned responses illustrate, the video was initially decoded as a genuine DIY media product, telling the true story of a young woman. Drawing on Douglas Holt (2002), the video alleges its own authenticity (and simultaneously conceals its commercial status) through the voice of a young woman and her self-disclosure and by tapping into YouTube as the social hub and cultural epicentre for broadcasting real-life stories. The video thus demonstrates a sophisticated stealth marketing strategy, feeding into the growing quest for authenticity in consumption practices (Beverland & Farrelly 2010).

As a viral stealth brand strategy, the goal is to use the energy and circulating voices of participatory culture. In other words: to imitate the voices of an active, empowered and networked culture, and reoccupy the role as cultural engineers (Holt 2002). The viral stealth strategy is premised on existing relations between the users; it constitutes the commercialisation of social interactions, using a phrase by Martin and Smith (2008), as users unaware of the commercial motives and values pass on messages and ideas to their networks. As the 'Danish Mother Seeking' video is revealed as a commercial, it becomes clear that the makers of the video have performed an act of cultural control and reinstalled the active and co-creative consumer in a defenceless and manipulated position.

Not surprisingly, the revelation that the video was a fraud created a riot, escalating into an official apology from the commercial organisation behind the video. In a press release, the Visit Denmark CEO apologised for the fact that the video had offended so many people. Consequently, the CEO resigned and Visit Denmark removed the video from YouTube. But the video immediately re-emerged, e.g. by the user called *Fabriuzke*, who reloaded the video under the headline 'Karen Will never disappear... hoho!', thereby emphasising a core premise for participating in the social media game: when entering the social media scene, you continuously play with and depend upon other producers for the game to continue. So absolute power and control do not exist: messages and values get a life of their own detached from the intentional agenda and commercial strategies. Hence, something that started out as a sophisticated viral strategy for branding Denmark in order to attract foreign tourists kick-started a hectic and heated network of contesting articulations on national identity, social relations and everyday living. The attempt to strategically imitate DIY culture in order to use it in other words worked until the commercial agenda of the video was revealed, which caused a viral backlash as various 're-imitators' turned against the organisation of Visit Denmark.

DIY Culture Striking Back

When looking at the numerous response videos uploaded to YouTube after the revelation of its commercial agenda, it becomes clear that the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video stimulates a range of different imitative strategies, with a wide range of aims and agendas (e.g. critical, humorous, strategic). In other words, the original video is turned into a reservoir of socially recognisable semiotic material that is used by non-professional media producers to launch other – more or less political or personal/intimate – narratives. Some responses simply borrow the narrative framework of the original video to tell a different story about places or parodic performances, while others very directly confront the initiative itself. Most of the response videos do not focus on Denmark as a tourist destination. In other words, the original video is hijacked by DIY producers, who imitate the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video in ways that focus on other topics (e.g. gender, politics or parenthood). Following Tarde, the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video motivates an outburst of imitative energy, which is sometimes tied up with a critique of VD. Thus, YouTube as a platform enables a creative and co-creating space, in which a range of related narratives and ideas circulate on a communal stage. We argue that the entrance ticket to this stage seems to be an element of imitation of the original video.

The various types of response can be divided into five groups consisting of 1) direct responses to Karen from August’s proclaimed fathers, most of which have a witty agenda, 2) playful copycats re-enacting the original video in new and often comic ways, 3) critical retelling of the version of Denmark portrayed in the original video, 4) criticism of stealth marketing, and 5) reflections on alternative types of parenthood. Firstly we will describe these categories and thereafter focus on our primary analytical interest: the ambiguous role of imitation.

The first and very large group of videos depict various possible fathers responding directly to Karen, thereby tapping into the original story by creating new protagonists and plots. Examples are a reply from a German father who explains how he received August by mail from Karen and reports back to her about the new life of her son;⁸ a video showing that Darth Vader was really the father of August;⁹ a Danish man – called Palle Hansen – who admits having played the role of a foreign exotic man in order to get into bed with Karen;¹⁰ a Nigerian man (or rather clearly a white man with black paint on his face) who argues that he is the father of August, but needs money in order to be able to visit him. He displays the number of a bank account in Lagos to which Karen should transfer money (cf. picture 4);¹¹ a German police officer – called August from Dusseldorf – wearing a large mask, who claims to be the father of August Jr. and explains that he will be visiting him soon.¹²



Picture 4. One of August's many fathers

Hitler himself also accepts that he is the father of August in a video sequence from *Der Untergang* with alternative subtitles, thereby creating a sort of double imitation by referring to both a movie and a viral video.¹³ Another response is made in a video trying to promote the Danish town of Lyngby. According to this video, Karen is actually looking not for August's father but for a place to live. In this way the original video is used to present and brand a specific place.¹⁴ With the exception of the last video, these direct responses are primarily characterised by the fact that they seek to make a parodic and humorous comment by delivering an answer to the question posed by Karen: Who is August's father? Here imitation of the 'Danish Mother Seeking' video is not about looking like the original, but rather about embracing a narrative universe (about a son missing a father), and this becomes the starting point of new narratives. Consequently, the focus of attention is redirected away from the original content and organisational intentions and towards the DIY producer and his/her individual agenda.

The second very large group of videos do not respond directly to Karen, but simply reenact the original video by taking a new point of view (e.g. a father looking for a mother) or adding new props to the story (e.g. August not being a child, but a fish).¹⁵ One example involves a Swedish father seeking August's mother

after having a one-night stand with her in Sweden. The video repeats the dialogue of Karen, but now speaking from the point of view of a man carrying not a child but a teddy bear on his arm.¹⁶ In another very widely disseminated video (almost 100,000 views), a father in Brooklyn tries to find Albert's mother, whom he meet in a pizzeria. Yet again the dialogue is very similar to the original, but it is articulated by an American who loves pizza and smokes while holding Albert (cf. picture 5).¹⁷



Picture 5. A Brooklyn father looking for Albert's mother

Another video shows the actress playing Karen in the original, but now doing a remake in which a fish has replaced the baby boy August.¹⁸ Last but not least, it is worth mentioning a video in which the now grown-up August sends a message from the year 2034 in order to get in touch with any girls interested in having the kind of fling that his (now deceased) mother Karen had 25 years previously.¹⁹

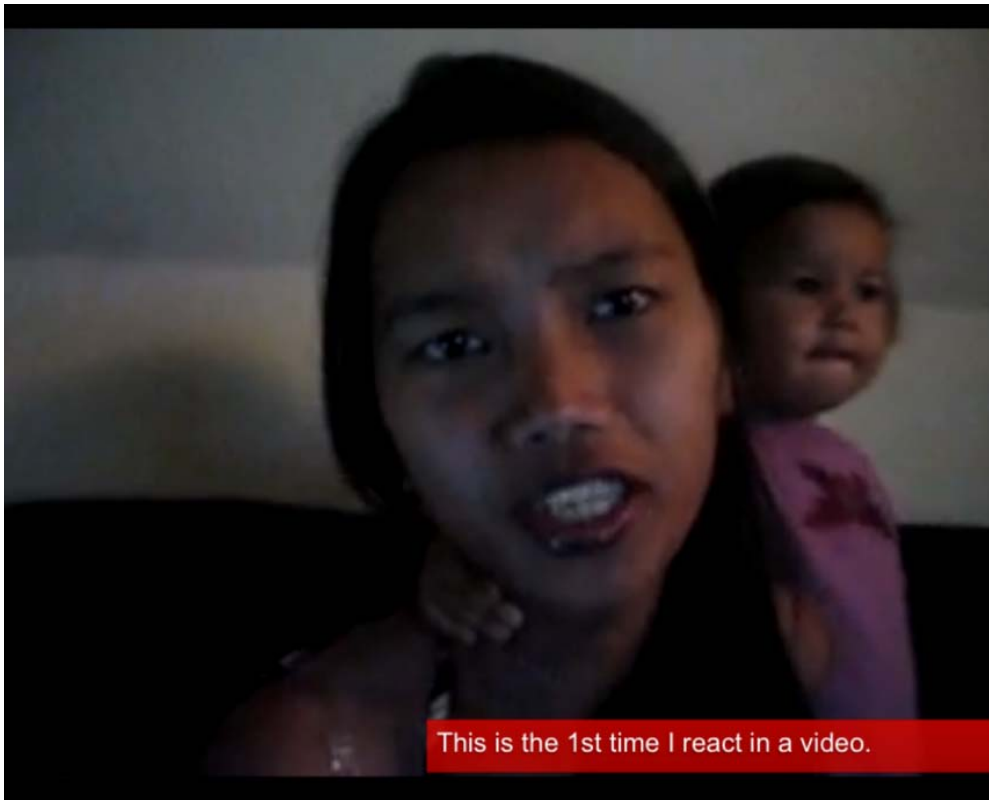
This group of videos simply reenact the original in a new way – they create ‘the same but different’, and as such perform a more direct act of imitation than the first group of videos. One similarity with the previous group of responses is that the agenda of these copycats is primarily to have fun by twisting the original material provided by Visit Denmark. The video featuring the ‘Danish Mother Seek-

ing' actress could perhaps be said to have another agenda, as it tries to take the heat out of the discussion about and critique of Visit Denmark by making a funnier and clearly not serious statement.

The third and smaller group of videos combine fun and political critique by re-articulating national identity while criticising right-wing nationalism. In this way the original video becomes a point of departure for a political agenda, with Denmark as a brand unintentionally being levered into a political arena and spun into a fight over values and opinions. One of these videos, entitled 'Danish mother seeking father – Visit Denmark the most open and free country in Scandinavia' criticises Danish immigration policies and the leader of the Danish People's Party, Pia Kjaersgaard. The producer of this video stages herself as Karen and explains that she had sex with a political refugee from Iraq, who was picked up by the police and sent to Iraq. Here the point clearly is that people are wrong to regard Denmark as a very open and tolerant society because minorities are treated badly there. The video uses a kind of detournement or culture-jamming strategy by re-using a well-known and existing framework (i.e. the Karen monologue) to spread a more critical and subversive message.²⁰ By imitating the form and content of the original video, the response video recontextualises the message and frames it politically.

In another video of this type 'Bjørn' points at and mocks the tendency that Danes have to release visual material that provokes people all over the world, implying a link to the so-called 'Cartoon Crisis', which is further explicated when he explains that he is really the guy inside the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, who drew the most infamous and widely debated of the 12 caricatures of the prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper in 2005, and that the cartoons were really also a Visit Denmark initiative trying to show that Denmark was a happy, free country.²¹ Correspondingly, the Danish male actor Gordon Kennedy, playing the role of a woman called Lisbeth in his political response video, also articulates this link between the 'Danish Mother Seeking' video and the Cartoon Crisis. (S)he claims that hunger for attention is a distinctive feature of Danes, who are supposedly willing to manipulate and insult others in order to get it.²² In this group of responses the original 'Danish Mother Seeking' video thus clearly serves as a provocation calling for an alternative story about the nation by pointing at the problems and dilemmas of contemporary political life in Denmark.

A fourth smaller group of videos confront the stealth marketing strategy of VD by accusing it of playing with people's emotions at the taxpayer's expense,²³ motivating a critical debate about the opportunities and pitfalls of the social media.²⁴ In a third very personal video, a woman with an Asian background opposes the original video and suggests that other more traditional sites (like Tivoli) should be the focus of tourism ads about Denmark instead. The latter video is a good example of how a citizen can use social media to get a voice and publish a suggestion in relation to a public event (cf. picture 6).²⁵



Picture 6. A woman suggesting a different marketing strategy

As an independent theme, this group of response videos is rather small. However, the critique of the stealth marketing strategy is indirectly present in most of these videos. This means that the critique of stealth marketing is not necessarily in focus with regard to content, but rather functions as a motivating factor for reacting in general.

In the fifth and last group of videos parenthood and different kinds of family organisation seem to be at stake. In one video a lesbian Danish woman responds to Karen because she is convinced that her best friend Robert, who is the father of her own child, is also August's father. The reason for this is that they look alike.²⁶ Another video allows Karen's proclaimed female girlfriend to tell her version of the story. According to her, August is really her child.²⁷ These videos seem to try to underline the existence of non-heterosexual intimate relations and family forms via a comic contribution to the media event. It should be noted that the videos in this category do not necessarily ideologically support alternative ways of living with regard to gender and family values. It could be suggested that questions of gender and sexuality are simply derived issues, which automatically generate a high success rate on the scale of entertainment. No matter the reason, the original video is deconstructed and turned into something else.

Processes of Imitation

Summing up the video responses deploy a kind of bricolage technique by using and combining existing semiotic material (e.g. a narrative structure about a parent looking for a forgotten partner) to create new articulations. Some of them intervene to object to the content of the Danish Mother Seeking video (cf. the three categories focused on nationality, stealth marketing and parenthood). These turn the different themes from the initial video into floating signifiers (e.g. parenthood, nationality) (Laclau & Mouffe 2001) via imitation and thereby establish a space of political contestation and satire where social categories are denaturalised and become contested. Others primarily intervene to play because they imitate the initial video as a resource for everyday cultural creativity by prolonging or twisting the narrative (cf. the categories of answering fathers and copycats). These responses rather establish a space of individual expressivity and playfulness.

As different types of imitation in our material we can therefore distinguish between three strategies: 1) Imitation as a commercial marketing strategy. 2) Imitation as a political type of criticism. 3) Imitation as a playful way of rearticulating existing semiotic material. What unites them is the way they use the creation of similarity with a pre-existing social object or genre to optimize their ability to circulate and have a contagious effect on social media platforms, but also to establish its own singularity by creating differences between the content of the imitated and the imitating object. As an example we would argue that the power of DIY culture simply strikes back in relation to a marketing concept camouflaged as an amateur production by imitating the original to hijack it or enter a socially established scene which is used for other purposes (right-wing criticism, telling a joke, criticising VD etc.). The swarm of DIY producers thus deconstructs and decentralises the initial (fake) DIY video by turning it into various other versions, detached from, disloyal to and sometimes even opposing the initial agenda. When searching for the 'Danish Mother Seeking' video (e.g. on YouTube, Google etc.), all the alternatives are presented to you – all the voices of other Karens, fathers, Danes and parents are present, downgrading the power and strength of the original video.

The fact that there were so many different responses prompts a lot of questions: Why is the original 'Danish Mother Seeking' video so effective in terms of triggering the power and attention of participatory culture? Why do so many individuals create their own DIY media objects in order to respond to it? Why is the video so 'contagious' that it multiplies and spreads online in various rather heterogeneous forms? Our analyses suggest at least four reasons. First, the original video asks directly for a response as it shows a mother wanting someone in the world to contact her. It simply interpellates the viewer as a potential respondent, by leaving the young mother's moving story unfinished and with an appeal to producers to actively engage in completing the story by finding August's father. The wish to

hear a response is furthermore directed at a global audience, which quantitatively increases the number of possible responses.

Second, in a press release the Visit Denmark CEO at the time (the person mainly responsible for the video) explained that Karen's story images Denmark as a free country and that the film revealed Danish women as independent and dignified people who dare to make their own choices.²⁸ However, looking at the response videos (as well as the general public debates outside the YouTube network), the 'Danish Mother Seeking' video came across as provocative because many people thought it portrayed Danish women as promiscuous and always ready to have a one-night stand. People did not feel that the video showed that democratic freedom and independence were specifically Danish national values – instead, they felt it showed that blonde Danish girls were promiscuous. According to O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy (2000), the image of a nation is complex and fluid. However, they argue, 'when countries have an international presence, it is common to talk of 'stereotyping' with respect to the nation's image' (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy 2000: 57). Even though a national image cannot be fixed, these authors argue that certain images will dominate and become 'powerful enough to crowd out all the other meanings and resonance' (O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy 2000: 59). Following this, Freire (2009) argues that countries are most commonly portrayed and perceived through stereotyping of 'the local people'. The responses to the 'Danish Mother Seeking' video are dominated by a discourse of 'free sex' and 'promiscuous women' being associated with Denmark, and these ideas become the dominant image of Denmark – enhanced not least by the fact that a national public institution is the official maker of the video, drawing an (or *the*) official image of Denmark. As a result, it is no surprise that the video provoked heated responses because it articulated a rather unflattering stereotypical image of what it means to be a Danish woman.

Third, the video initially portrayed a real mother's DIY production, thus imitating the core genre characteristic of YouTube media products. In this way the transformation from DIY culture to marketing concept also implied a shift from personal authenticity to manipulation and deceitfulness. And as such a lot of negative energy towards the concept could be used to confront or ridicule it via new videos. This suggests that the style of DIY productions is very much *associated with* and *perceived as* raw, individual, authentic or simply everyday stories, and that attempts to use this aura of everyday authenticity for other purposes are often met with resistance. Consequently, using a DIY style is a hazardous marketing tool. David Gauntlett stresses that as a media platform, YouTube is based upon a kind of pre-economic gift economy, where non-professional producers offer their creations to an audience without expecting any financial reward:

(...) users give and receive homemade video 'gifts' for reasons which are to do with feelings and attachments, rather than economics. The notion of the gift economy helps us, in particular, to understand the rewards for participation – such as 'status',

‘prestige’, or ‘esteem’ – which have no (immediate) economic value (Gauntlett 2011: 95).

Gauntlett underlines that the amateur productions of YouTube are characterised by a certain ethos of free and non-economic interaction. Following this, the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video comes across as provocative because it offers itself as an intimate, non-committal gift, but subsequently is revealed as an organisational attempt to use social networks for economic purposes. This violation of the unspoken rules of DIY interaction simply turns the YouTube community against Visit Denmark because of its commercialisation of social relations.

Finally, the turmoil that the original video created indirectly facilitated an attractive online scene, with new videos being related to the original, thereby making it possible to reach a rather large number of spectators. The attention drawn by the Visit Denmark video can simply be transmitted, used and perhaps even intensified via the DIY video responses. Consequently, the act of imitating narrative or visual components of the original video is both a way of borrowing energy from the already established event (cf. the hype concerning the video) and a way of expanding and adding energy to the event as the videos multiply online. The imitations, in other words, have a self-perpetuating effect. Referring once again to Gauntlett, he points to the fact that YouTube users have always mimicked established styles and genres (e.g. the interview, the comedy sketch) in order to have an impact on broader audiences or mainstream media (Gauntlett 2011: 91). Looking at the response videos, the imitation of a known cultural phenomenon is clearly at play. This last explanation of the creative energy encircling the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video is of course closely related to the technological architecture of YouTube. By creating a response video to another video that attracts a hyped attention, the response video is more likely to borrow some of this awareness, as it will probably appear as a suggestion for further viewing next to the original on the YouTube interface. In this way imitation – or even mimicry – is a strategy for transferring energy from one cultural object (the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video) to another (the response videos).

The case overall illustrates different processes of imitation (cf. figure 1). The video initiates and is initiated by different imitation strategies. In the first type of imitation, the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video imitates the form and style of DIY productions in order to gain value by trying to adopt the aura of authenticity and individual/bottom-up creativity that clings to DIY culture, but also to spread itself through social media thereby taking advantage of the interconnectedness of YouTube producers. However, the strategy backfired: it did not generate a positive image; instead it led to accusations of being manipulative. Consequently, the idea of imitating an amateur production ended up creating negative brand attention.

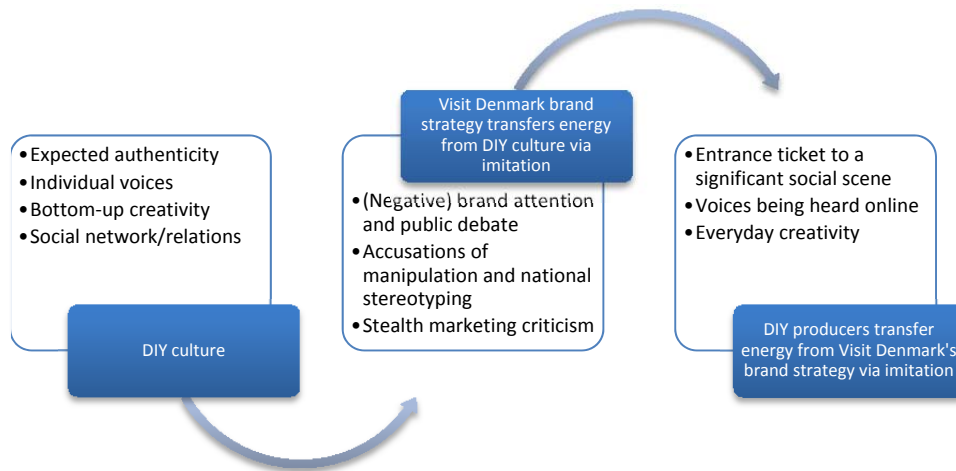


Figure 1. Processes of imitation in the Visit Denmark case

The response videos continued the process of imitation by using the original ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video as a cultural resource for making new narratives, ranging from individual self-performances to collective disseminations of political messages. This second level of imitation serves other purposes, e.g. ensuring that the DIY productions were noticed because the VD discussion was already socially widespread, but also underlining the inauthentic, fake and ‘non-DIY-status’ of the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ production. In this way the original video is turned into a source of everyday creativity and a tool for making DIY productions more likely *to be heard*, more likely *to have a voice*, and more likely *to uphold their authentic status* via imitation.

Conclusion

According to Burgess and Green, the spheres of market consumption and vernacular creativity co-exist on YouTube because the platform has a ‘double function as both a ‘top-down’ platform for the distribution of popular culture and a ‘bottom-up’ platform for vernacular creativity’ (Burgess & Green 2009: 6). The Danish Mother Seeking video illustrates a conflict between top-down and bottom-up creative forces. The commercial producers of the Danish Mother Seeking video strove to involve ordinary users in their marketing effort. But the type of participation that was triggered as a result – characterised by users challenging, rejecting and mocking the initiative – was not what the organisation intended. On the contrary, the attempt to activate the culture of participation recoiled as the organisation and video became the centre of attention in a burst of imitative deconstruction. This demonstrates how the uses of stealth or undercover marketing initiatives can create mistrust, scepticism and distance between organisations and users, converting the potentials of value co-creation into unconstructive and devalued exchange.

Consequently, the case illustrates how a non-strategic and unreflective use of viral marketing can turn the value-creating power of user-generated DIY culture into a rival. Thus, the question of whether the video is a success or failure can be addressed from two opposing perspectives: a DIY and a marketing perspective respectively. As a catalyst of creativity, individual storytelling and global discussion, the campaign can be seen as a success. It simply stimulated a sudden occurrence of humorous and critical interventions, which were seen by thousands of people all over the world. However, as a way of creating a positive brand image it was not a success.

The findings of our analysis of the ‘Danish Mother Seeking’ video and the responses to it can be summed up in the following way: The responses fall into certain groups using different imitative strategies: fathers replying to Karen, copycats, or people retelling Danish identity, criticising stealth marketing or advocating for a more diverse understanding of parenthood. They are seemingly motivated by the direct request for a response made by the VD video, its provocative image of the promiscuous Danish woman, its manipulative use of a raw aesthetic of DIY authenticity and the attractive scene for online responses that the video creates. The original video imitating the style of an amateur DIY production, and the responses imitating it in order to tap into the attention it received, all strive to use the energy of an existing genre or object in order to increase their chance of disseminating a different narrative with a different content. Our point is nevertheless not to underline the self-evident fact that social media increasingly allows for more and more people to articulate their different views on life, but rather that imitation can be one of the ways for critical DIY producers to mobilise social energy and attention. The concept of imitation thus becomes a means to understand the dialectic relation between commercial top-down forces and bottom-up DIY voices, as characterised by a flow of energies from which creative innovations emerge. Following this, imitation becomes ambiguous as both a way of energetically empowering the imitating producer – cf. the organisation and DIY producers trying to promote their videos – and energetically draining the imitated object as the organisation and DIY producers try to take advantage of each other as social resources enabling media circulation.

Carsten Stage is Assistant Professor, Department of Aesthetics and Communication, Aarhus University, Denmark. His research interests include: Political/activist online communication; cultural globalization and participatory/DIY culture; national identity; affect and discourse analysis; the relationship between discourse, affect and materiality. E-mail: norcs@hum.au.dk .

Sophie Esmann Andersen is Associate Professor, Department of Business Communication, Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research interests include: marketing communication and social media; consumption and participatory/DIY culture; brand-consumer relationships and identities. E-mail: sea@asb.dk.

Notes

- 1 The initial video has been removed by Visit Denmark, but the video has been re-posted by various YouTube subscribers, see e.g. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8Seo5j_mNU (posted by *Fabriukze*).
- 2 Not surprisingly, the most viewed video is a music video: Justin Bieber *Baby*, featuring Ludacris, cf. <http://www.youtube.com/chart>
- 3 See e.g. <http://politiken.dk/newsinenglish/ECE788476/visitdenmark-removes-bogus-video/>
- 4 See appendix 1 for a full transcription of the video.
- 5 The parenthesized numbers (a/b) refer to start of quote in the video (a) and total length of the video (b).
- 6 See e.g. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiKRA-syT5M> (posted by emfufu2).
- 7 <http://www.mindjumpers.com/blog/2009/09/danish-mother-seeking/> Please note that the original article has been altered and revised after the revelation that the video was an advert.
- 8 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMWv6Kw9-cA&NR=1>
- 9 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU5XT-64Tbs&NR=1>
- 10 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAZajafcTUI&NR=1>
- 11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNw2Jw95eg4&feature=related>
- 12 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DINeB7KrvWA&feature=related>
- 13 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJreXEoJqpk&feature=related>
- 14 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UEcbiRBnFvc&feature=rec-LGOUT-real_rn-2r-3-HM
- 15 For other copycats see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1vHjzdt2v0&feature=related>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbVLd2sgXRu&NR=1>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U15NurVy5bg&feature=related>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJMallLujZq0&feature=related>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuiqlFXTTiE&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXdbNWJaif4&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJcDgz5uCwM>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWR-o8bTFri&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzCoPqvRTw&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF4-b7ZYdBw&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2w1xODiKyqI&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phzayFYNmbo&feature=related>
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Amsk2ixS_cc&NR=1
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuwW76zSHyI&feature=more_related
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aK0i1LYkVh8&feature=related>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybTw6vCLATs&feature=related>
- 28 Translated from <http://politiken.dk/indland/article787965.ece>

References

- Beverland, Michael B. & Farrelly, Francis J. (2010): "The Quest for Authenticity in Consumption: Consumers' Purposive Choice of Authentic Cues to Shape Experienced Outcomes", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 36:5, 838-856.
- Bhabha, Homi (1994): *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Bruns, Axel (2008): "The Future Is User-Led: The Path towards Widespread Producersage", *The Fibreculture Journal*, 11: <http://eleven.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-066-the-future-is-user-led-the-path-towards-widespread-producersage/> (accessed 12/03/28).
- Burgess, Jean & Joshua Green (2009): *YouTube*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Couldry, Nick (2010): *Why Voice Matters*, London: Sage.
- Fenton, Natalie (2008): "Mediating hope", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11:2, 230-248.
- Freire, Joao Ricardo (2009): "'Local People' a critical dimension for place brands", *Journal of Brand Management*, 16:7, 420-438.
- Gauntlett, David (2011): *Making is Connecting*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Holt, Douglas (2002): "Why do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29:1, 80-90.
- Jenkins, Henry (2006): *Convergence Culture*, New York: New York University Press.
- Kaikati, Andrew M. & Jack G. Kaikati (2004): "Stealth Marketing: How to Research Consumers Surreptitiously", *California Management Review*, 46:4, 6-22.
- Knobel, Michelle & Colin Lankshear (2010): "DIY Media: A contextual background and some contemporary themes", Michele Knobel & Colin Lankshear (eds): *DIY Media. Creating. Sharing and Learning with New Technologies*, New York: Peter Lang.
- Laclau, Ernesto (1996): *Emancipation(s)*, London: Verso.
- Laclau, Ernesto & Chantal Mouffe (2001): *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. London: Verso.
- Latour, Bruno (2005): *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Law, John (2004): *After Method*, New York: Routledge.
- Martin, Kelly D. & Craig Smith (2008): "Commercializing Social Interaction: The Ethics of Stealth Marketing", *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 27:1, 45-56.
- O'Shaughnessy, John & Nicholas Jackson (2000): "Treating the Nation as a Brand: Some Neglected Issues", *Journal of Macromarketing*, 20:1, 56-64.
- Penenberg, Adam (2009): *Viral Loop: The Power of Pass-It-On*, London: Spectre.
- Prahalad, C.K. & Venkat Ramaswamy (2004): *The Future of Competition*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Rheingold, Howard (2002): *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, Cambridge: Perseus Books.
- Rosen, Jay (2006): "The People Formerly Known as the Audience", *Pressthink*: http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/ppl_fmr.html, (accessed 12/03/28).
- Tarde, Gabriel (1895/1903); *The Laws of Imitation*, New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Vargo, Stephen L. & Robert F. Lusch (2004): "Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing", *Journal of Marketing*, 38:1, 19-31.
- Xie, Chunyan; Richard P. Bagozzi & Sigurd V. Troye (2008): "Trying to Prosume: Toward a Theory of Consumers as Co-creators of Value", *Journal of Academic Marketing Science*, 36, 109-122.

Appendix 1: Transcription of the “Danish Mother Seeking” video

Hi. My name is Karen and I’m from Denmark. And this here is my baby boy, his name is [laugh and smile to baby] August.

Yeah. I’m doing this video because I’m trying to find August’s father. So, if you are out there and you see this, then this is for you. We met one and a half years ago when you were on vacation here in Denmark. And we met at the Custom House Bar. [pause] I was on my way home and I think you had lost your friends, and then we decided to go down to the water to have a drink, and [pause] yeah, and this is really embarrassing but that is just more or less what I remember. I don’t remember where you’re from, or [pause] I don’t even remember your name. [pause] I do remember, though, we were talking about Denmark and the thing we have here with “hygge” [typical Danish word which more or less translates into “cosiness”] that foreign people always ask about. And that’s [pause] yeah, you were really nice, so I guess I decided to show you what *hygge* is all about, because we went back to [pause] we went back to my house [pause] and yeah [pause] we ended up having sex and [pause] the next morning when I woke up, you were gone. [pause] It’s not that I blame you for anything. And I’m not crazy. Or this is not some kind of obsession that I have with you, I just really, really want to let you know that [pause] that August is here, that he exists. [pause] I feel I owe it to both you and to him [pause] yeah [pause] and also I want to let you know that I’m not a bimbo or something like that. I know that August is yours because I haven’t been with anybody else since that night [pause] yeah, just so you know that. [pause] I know that this is really a long shot but if you are out there and you see this, or anybody else who can help me sees this, please contact me. I will put my e-mail with this video; so, just write me [smile]