

In Synch with Lip-Synching  
A Riff on Teen Sociality

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**Abstract:** Lip-synching is an old yet much-maligned musical practice. Critics argue that moving one's lips to pre-recorded songs is inauthentic and unoriginal. Female teens in particular are seen as being self-victimized by enabling themselves to be viewed and consumed in sexualized ways through their choice of songs, movements, and costuming in lip-synched videos. In these accounts, girls are reduced to dancing "Lolitas" (Durham 2008) who bring eyeballs to YouTube. However, these criticisms ignore the great variety of lip-synching videos, and how their characteristics may be manipulated to showcase an individual's personality. For some teenagers, the performative aspect of lip-synching is important for experimenting with their identity and sexuality. Scholarly accounts ignore the phenomenological, physical, and social aspects of lip-synching. Yet, teenagers sometimes perform lip-synching videos with their friends and family, and synchronize themselves not only to the music but to each other in terms of body movements, facial expressions, and shared experience of fun. These social synchronizations reveal powerful interpersonal connections that are more important to performers than are viewers' criticisms. Using an anthropological approach, this paper focuses on lip-synching's formal characteristics—such as song choice, visual framing, and rhythmic body movements—to explore how teen sociality may be experienced through personalized, audiovisual music production. It analyzes two ethnographic case studies in which female teens' performances exhibit a "ludic self-immersion" (Morse 1985) that is a vital part of musical experience. The paper asserts that the genre of homemade lip-synching videos is important and can facilitate individual self-expression and sociality.

**Keywords:** lip-synching, musical performance, YouTube, teen sociality, audiovisual music, phenomenology

Lip-synching is a widespread but much-maligned form of audiovisual music production. The practice is often used in professional contexts, such as when performers do not sing, but actually mouth the words to one of their pre-recorded songs during energetic dance numbers. Lip-synching is also frequently associated with amateur video makers, who record themselves mouthing along words to a popular song. According to popular and scholarly discourse, this activity is derivative and unimaginative because it relies on musical source material that the performer did not create. To these critics, the practice is at best a silly activity that creates visual pollution by filling the airwaves with narcissistic videos that receive undue attention (Brantley 2010). At worst, lip-synching videos are exploitative examples of free video labor (Andrejevic 2009; Terranova 2000; Lazzarato 1996) in an online, attention economy (Goldhaber 1997, 2006). Lip-synching videos often are seen to present inappropriate, overtly-sexualized content of young females (Banet-Weiser 2011). Little “Lolitas” (Durham 2008) dance for the camera, as advertisers and site administrators tangibly profit from their labor.

What is often lost in this discourse is the perspective of performers, who often use the genre of lip-synching in a variety of ways, including having fun, engaging in collaborative forms of teen sociality, and experiencing the music within a larger context of what Holt (2011) calls the “visual turn” in music. Further, critics of the genre also fail to take into account the embodied forms of pleasure that are felt in the performance of a song. The embodied aspects of the performance yield a kind of “ludic self-immersion” (Morse 1985) that motivates expressing one’s personality and social connections through music. Notably, not everyone’s a critic; comments left on many lip-synched, YouTube videos indicate that at least some portion of the music video audience enjoys watching people express themselves by having fun and lip-synching to a popular song.

This paper takes a phenomenological approach and does not focus on the reception of videos, as has generally been the privileged locus of attention in discourses about lip-synching. Rather, it explores and analyzes the individual and social dimensions of the practice from the point of view of the performer. In a phenomenological approach, what is privileged is an actor's experience of an activity and how they make meaning by engaging in it (Schutz 1967). Lip-synching is part of an experience that both depends upon and yet departs from a familiar rendition of a work, and thus enables a unique and perhaps uncanny new mediated experience that provides genuine enjoyment for performers and many viewers.

### Lip-Synching as an Index of the Visual Turn in Music

Despite criticisms, lip-synching is now a very widespread phenomenon, and is often embraced as a fun way for people to experience music, not just by watching slick Music Television (MTV) videos, but also, by doing it themselves. A search for terms such as “lip synch” and “lip synching” produced more than 150,000 videos on YouTube alone. Lip-synching videos arguably follow from what Holt (2011:59) calls the “visual turn” in music, in which the “distribution, presentation and communication about music have become more visual, with video playing an important role and transforming the websphere from discursive to more audiovisual communication.” According to Holt (2011:52), “Video extends the range of communication, adding another element of *sensuous* stimulation, information and entertainment” (emphasis added). People increasingly see more cinematic interpretations of music in professional videos, which are used to promote particular songs, albums, and musicians.

The visual turn in music and the rise of MTV has encouraged acceptance of lip-synching as a common form of musical presentation and performance. According to Nelson (2004) “the

enormous popularity of MTV, with its almost exclusively lip-synched videos, ushered in an era in which average music fans might happily spend hours a day, every day, watching singers just mouth the words.” In the case of MTV, viewers watch singers lip-synch to their own pre-recorded vocal interpretations of songs, a practice that drives the staging, bodily interpretation, and charisma of performers to the forefront of the musical experience.

Certain amateurs, such as Gary Brolsma and Keegan Cahill, have seen wild success on YouTube when their own style of lip-synching to other people’s songs received many views (Feuer and George 2005; Wei 2010, 2011; Bhansali 2011). In certain social groups, lip-synching may even help members of a certain cohort to bond, as has been the case of drag performers who lip-synch to songs as a way of expressing their sexuality to people who have similar feelings and educating others who do not (Kaminski and Taylor 2008). In these ways lip-synching videos become “videos of affinity” (Lange 2009) that draw people with similar interests together, not only in terms of the source material chosen for the performance, but in terms of the act of doing lip-synching itself. Although prior discourse and the case studies here focus on girls, it is important to note that boys have also been observed lip-synching with friends in ways that reveal, as Dorwick (2011:235) suggests, the “stories of their lives” through audio-visual, musical instantiations of boys’ friendships. Although the present work focuses on understanding the personal and social meanings of lip-synched videos that female teens exhibit on YouTube, it is certainly not surprising to see males engaging in the practice, as discussed below. For many performers, what seems to be important is being in synch, not only with a song but, with each other.

## Lip-Synching Case Studies

The present study draws from a two-year ethnographic study of YouTube. The study was funded by The MacArthur Foundation, and was part of a larger effort to understand children's use of new media in the United States (Ito et al. 2010). My YouTube portion of the study involved 150 interviews, analyses of more than 200 videos, and participation by posting videos on the site.

In the corpus collected for the study, lip-synching videos were but a small portion of the myriad activity that kids accomplished when participating and learning in informal ways online and through YouTube. Further, not everyone engaged in the practice. Yet, the children and teens who did put up lip-synching videos seemed to thoroughly enjoy them, as a way to bond with their friends and family as they made media together. The stories of two teen-aged girls are particularly interesting for understanding the role of lip-synched, musical performances in the lives of teens on YouTube.

The two teens will be referred to by the pseudonyms of Wendy (16) and Crystal (18), each of whom embraced the lip-synching genre, even when they faced criticism from other YouTubers. In some cases, the girls also received positive feedback and encouragement for their efforts. The enjoyment that the girls seemed to display in the videos and the way they characterized the experience in text descriptions of their videos draws attention to the musical experience as "ludic self-immersion" (Morse 1985). This form of enjoyment privileges the personal and immediate social experience of the performers, even though they are posted for consumption on the public site of YouTube. The way in which the girls handle certain forms of feedback and criticism also indexes the importance of self-enjoyment over the crafting of the product for widespread consumption.

### *Bonding with Friends*

Wendy was a 16-year old Asian teen who primarily enjoyed making parodies of situation comedies (sitcoms) with her friends. Before her sitcom project, she enjoyed making lip-synching videos in which she and her friends danced and made faces to popular songs from artists such as Britney Spears, Jet, 'N Sync, and The Backstreet Boys. Like many kids on YouTube, Wendy taught herself to make videos and considered herself to be very technical. She was also the president of her school's film club and had completed a documentary on dilapidated parks in an underserved neighborhood in her city.

All of Wendy's lip-synching videos, which garnered thousands of views, included other people. They were mostly female friends, but occasionally a male friend is also present as they sing and move to the songs. The songs she interprets are about sexual attraction and relationships—typical subject matter for popular singers and bands, and for U.S. teenaged musical tastes. What is consistent across all the videos is the sense of fun the teens experience as indexed by their smiles, giggles, and laughter, and their constant movement and occasional touching of each other in affectionate ways. Their fun is palpable and free. In one video by a band called Jet, one of Wendy's male friends waves his index finger in circular motion around his ear, playfully indicating that his friends are crazy. Similarly, Wendy describes a different lip-synch video as “just going crazy,” an assessment that arguably acknowledges the marginality of the genre while simultaneously engaging in it.

The sexuality that is expressed in Wendy and her friends' videos varies, with the most overtly sexual moves appearing in their lip-synched interpretation of a Britney Spears song called “Toxic.” The two girls in the video occasionally touch their fingers to their lips, whip their

hair around, undulate their chest (in a move familiar in hip hop dance styles), and blow air kisses. Their clothes are not particularly sexualized. In any event most of the focus is on their faces as they sing into a web cam.

The performance appears to be more for each other than an intended audience. In interviews and text descriptions of videos, kids say it is a fun thing to do with friends when they are bored. Wendy and her friends have animated expressions and interact with each other, sometimes by swaying together to the music, pinching cheeks, or pressing their faces very closely together (more than is needed to broadcast their image on their web cam). Such closeness presents a visual framing that one might see in a photograph of close friends. Their swaying together is a physical index of their synchronization not just to a musical beat, but to their closeness and friendship.

In one video, Wendy and her female friend are chided by viewers because they are clearly not looking directly at the web cam when they record their performance. Experienced web cam users know that looking into the camera produces the effect of looking at the viewer. Yet, in one video, the girls' eye lines are clearly directed downward toward their own monitor rather than gazing out straight into the eyes of the imagined viewer. Wendy explains that they were looking at themselves through the monitor as they performed, rather than looking at the web cam. As an experienced media producer, it is not inconceivable that Wendy could have taken steps to correct this issue in subsequent videos, yet she never did.

Although discourses of girls' lip-synched performances on YouTube are often about the projection of sexuality (Banet-Weiser 2011), another interpretation is that the girls' sensuality derives from enjoyment of their own bodies moving to the music. They are teenagers who are no doubt experiencing hormonal changes which become visible as they experiment with public

expressions of their developing sexuality in pleasurable ways. Such a phenomenon resembles the way scholars have written about certain musical performances in films. For example, Rita Hayworth's dance number, *Put the Blame on Mame*, in the film *Gilda*, does not easily fit within a traditional Mulvey-esque (1975) reading of a woman's body suspended in a sexual stasis while being aggressively and visually consumed by male viewers. Indeed, McLean (1993:7) argues that Hayworth's performance does not play only to male desire. Hayworth's dynamism prompts Dyer (1998) to argue that the performance projects an eroticism that is enjoyed as much by the performer as by the spectator. According to Rosen, (1974:226), the image indexes the feeling that, "This is my body. It's lovely and it gives me pleasure. I rejoice in it, just as you do." One can certainly read a similar interpretation into Wendy's videos. Sensual dancing may have auto-erotic pleasures that are not necessarily crafted solely for projection to anonymous others. As their production choices indicate, the girls were apparently less interested in performing for the camera than watching themselves on the monitor and enjoying their own and each other's performances and mediated experiences of friendship.

### *Lip-Synching with Dad*

Similar to Wendy, Crystal also enjoyed performing for herself and interpreting songs by lip-synching. Crystal, whose lip-synching videos garnered hundreds and sometimes even tens of thousands of views, was a white, 18-year old college student who was considering becoming an animation director. She also enjoyed video blogging and talking about time crunches and financial issues at college, games she enjoyed playing, fandom and animé, her artwork, and movies she watched.



In two of her videos, Crystal trains a fixed camera on her body, showing herself from the waist up as she lip-synchs, dances, and makes funny gestures and facial expressions to the music. Her gestures are often frenetic and comical and she reinterprets the music with her own creative choices of movement. Whereas Wendy and her friends casually move their mouths to the songs, sometimes getting the lyrics wrong or being late on the lip matching, Crystal's performances tended to be more precise and attentive to the exact timing, which is an element of lip-synching that is often recognized as a key part of the performance. Crystal's performances in general were less sexual and more comedic. For example, she used silly gestures while performing to a fast-paced, polka-inspired, Weird Al parody of the Spice Girls' song, *Wannabe*. Crystal gyrates using cutesy moves with her hands on her hips as she lip-synchs to the lyrics, "If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends," and "friendship never ends." Crystal is engaging in a parody of a parody, which desexualizes the original performances of the attractive women in the Spice Girls who were often criticized for exhibiting sexualized moves and clothing while ostensibly promoting "girl power."

The point is that Crystal's videos are more about being creating comedy, and enjoying a bodily experience of vigorously moving to the music rather than publicly exploring her sexuality. Such a choice is consistent with scholars' claims that physicality and moving to the music is a crucial part of children's musical experience (Campbell 2002). According to Campbell (2002:63), in young people's experience, "music and movement are inseparable." Crystal's moves are not at all particularly sexualized. Indeed, during an interview, she told me that she removed a video in which she performed in a red outfit that she felt was too "low cut" and revealing. She was concerned lest the video and her performance attract unwanted sexual attention.

Crystal said that her performances were improvised, and several viewers posted favorable reviews of her lip-synching videos in text comments. According to some scholars, improvisation has been a reluctant research focus for ethnomusicology in general (Nettl and Russell 1998), and it would seem that improvisation is an important part of a lip-synching performance. Nettl (1998:1) defines improvisation as “the creation of music in the course of performance.” One can make the analogy that in lip-synching, the relevant aspect of improvisation is exactly how the performer will interpret the song using particular character interpretations, facial expressions, and bodily movements. Typically, improvisation, whether sonic or physical, requires a point of departure with a known structure. Similarly, Crystal says in her exchange with a commenter that “I just made it up as I went along. I’d have to know the lyrics by heart before I lipsynched it though, otherwise I’d be off.” The original source material influences but never determines the performer’s physical interpretation. That Crystal improvised her moves privileges the moment of the performance as a crucial part of her musical experience. Traditional forms of musical improvisation are said to at root exhibit a kind of joy. As Titon (1992:11) has observed, “perhaps at some deep level we prize improvisation not just because of the skills involved but because we think it exemplifies human freedom.” Improvisation reflects and yields a kind of basic enthusiasm (Bailey 1992) which is quite clearly displayed in the videos by the teens profiled here.

While Wendy opted to lip-synch with friends, Crystal chose to lip-synch a performance with her father. Together they lip-synched to *The Chipmunk Song (Christmas Don’t be Late)* which was written and performed by Ross Bagdasarian, Sr. (under the stage name of David Seville) 1958. Bagdasarian engineered recordings of himself singing by speeding them up. The recording caused a stir at the 1959 Grammy Awards in when it received the award for Best Recording for

Children (O'Neil 2009). The music was created to sound like a trio of high-pitched vocalists that were marketed as the fictional singing group, Alvin and the Chipmunks (O'Neil 2009).

Alvin and the Chipmunks was composed of three characters, Alvin, Theodore, and Simon, but it was Alvin who was the troublemaker and breakout star of the group. Alvin is often coded as a compulsive and illogical character. This characterization opens a space for a musical performance in which Crystal can go a little “crazy” as she states in the video, and enact feelings of being spontaneous and challenging an authority figure, as depicted by her real-life dad who lip-synchs along to the recorded speech of the group’s fictional manager, David Seville. Their beleaguered manager must work hard to corral the trio into executing their performance of the Christmas music.

At the beginning of the video, Crystal introduces the song (and her dad) by putting her arm around him and saying:

Hey everybody on YouTube. Uh, this is just us goofing off today. It’s me and my dad [puts arm around her dad]. I love him. He’s crazy, just like me. I inherited it from him. Anyway, wishing you all a very merry Christmas! [Crystal and Dad together] Merry Christmas!

As the song begins, Crystal’s dad mouths along the words to David Seville saying, “Alright you chipmunks, ready to sing this song?” The chipmunks say that they are, and he checks in with each chipmunk until they say okay. But when David says, “Okay Alvin?” he doesn’t seem to respond. At this point in the video, Crystal’s dad looks demandingly at Crystal, who is lost in examining her fingernails. The voice on the recording rises several times until David/the dad finally screams, “Alvin!” to which Alvin/Crystal shouts “Okay!” Crystal smiles sweetly and mouths the words to the innocent Christmas song (as sung by a supposed chipmunk). As her

body sways to the music she smiles, delighted, as she mouths the words to lyrics about wishing Christmas would finally arrive.

Crystal's dad assumes an appealing, and one might say adorable, persona. He gamely waves his right hand back and forth, perhaps mimicking a band director or a drummer keeping the tempo. He smiles as Crystal/Alvin sings, but it is not long before Crystal/Alvin becomes distracted, and looks off into the distance, or acts silly. At one point, Crystal puts her face right up to the camera and mouths the lyrics to Alvin asking for a "hula hoop" for Christmas. She is so close to the camera the image blurs, and she exaggerates her mouth formation of the "oo" sound in each word. With each transgression, her dad looks agitated yet calms whenever Crystal/Alvin continues singing their sweet song. The end of Crystal's video ends the way the song does, with Alvin/Crystal and David/Crystal's dad arguing about whether or not to do the song again.

The video reads like a Christmas card to YouTube viewers, and indeed, a few viewers posted text comments saying that they loved the video and Crystal's dad. One commenter wished others a Merry Christmas, and for one viewer, the video brought back nostalgic memories. Crystal and her dad lip-synched the video together in a fundamentally physical and social way. Crystal put her arm around her father, saying that she loved him. The video became another way for them to bond in an anticipatorily nostalgic video that encapsulated their relationship as well as Christmases past.

What is particularly interesting to observe is the choice of musical source material, which includes a child-like figure transgressing and misbehaving in the presence of an authority figure, which is visually portrayed by Crystal's dad. The transgressions are never serious, and perhaps index Crystal's coming of age as she has recently entered college. The exact nature of their relationship may be changing, but their affection for each other is palpable even as they mock

quarrel at the end of the video about whether or not to repeat the act of singing a warm and happy Christmas song. Clearly, lip-synching takes many forms from the highly sexual to the intensely social, and its precise yet improvisational qualities yield considerable possibilities for experiencing freedom and expressive release and enjoyment through visual forms of music.

## Conclusion

The genre of lip-synching has been dismissed by many viewers and music critics, but the visual turn in music (Holt 2011) has elevated certain visual works and practices such as the music video and lip-synching to popular status among a broad swath of music consumers. Younger generations enjoy hanging out with friends by singing and moving along to songs that are meaningful in their life worlds. Though maligned, sometimes even by those who make the videos themselves, lip-synching videos continue to appear and provide enjoyment for performers and viewers. Lip-synchers often distance themselves from the videos, even as they promote other videos of which they are proud. Kids in the study differentiated between the videos for themselves and close friends and those that were posted to garner widespread attention (Lange 2007). Such a practice resembles how other teens in prior online genres sometimes posted material that they really did not expect would be seen by others (Stern 2008). Perhaps participants in the present study only posted their lip-synching videos because from a practical perspective it was easy for friends to see them. Another interpretation is that they were posted as a way of showing at least partial public acceptance of a genre that is so widespread.

Lip-synching takes many forms and reveals a range of interpretive connotations. Much of the discourse on lip-synching, especially for females, has revolved around concerns about inappropriate and highly-sexualized content as teens begin to recognize themselves as sexual

beings and begin expressing these feelings publicly. Although these remain valid concerns, it is important to recognize that a main reason for engaging in these works has to do with experiencing feelings of personal pleasure and abandonment that becomes possible by retaining yet departing from the confines of the musical source material.

Lip-synching is also often a highly social act, but not necessarily in terms of sharing the video with viewers. Often, lip-synching is about sharing music together through a physical act of performance, as was the case with Wendy and her friends, and with Crystal and her father. These videos not only capture nostalgic feelings, but create time capsules that tangibly instantiate artifacts of teens' sociality. The video is not really for unknown audiences but resonate most powerfully for Wendy and her friends as they relieve boredom, hang out, and enjoy music together. In Crystal's case, it is especially poignant to see a teenaged girl playfully misbehaving with an authority figure, in this case her real dad, as she crosses the threshold into adulthood. Lip-synching seems to exist at the margins of many musical genres and practices, including, improvisation, popular genres, and music videos, which prompts some researchers to bracket them out of scholarly consideration. But it would be wrong to do so, as lip-synching has become a staple for many kids and teens in the United States who choose to find a sense of pleasure and freedom by going a little crazy through music.

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