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YouTube nation

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For years at family gatherings, Christine Gambito sent her relatives into laughing fits by doing skits on their quirky ethnic habits.

So when Gambito, a 31-year-old nurse-turned-actress, posted a few self-made videos on YouTube.com last year, she included her comedic impressions of her Filipino-American upbringing.

"I was like, maybe a few Filipinos will get my jokes, and the other half will hate me," said Gambito, a first-generation Filipina-American. "I wasn't sure what people would think."

People not only got her jokes, they made her into an Internet video celebrity.

Within 48 hours, a video in which Gambito pokes fun at her mom for cooking Spam and eggs for breakfast had been viewed nearly 80,000 times. Fans - Filipino and non-Filipino - forwarded links to friends around the world, from Belgium to Milwaukee.

A few months later, another one of Gambito's cultural comedies was nominated for a 2006 video award by YouTube. Gambito's Web site, www.happyslip.com - named for the way her mom pronounces the words *half slip* - now sells logo T-shirts and hoodie sweat shirts.

Like Gambito, a growing number of amateur video-makers have discovered how quickly average people can turn themselves into international stars by posting videos on YouTube and other video-sharing Web sites. And they're using the opportunity to share ethnic and cultural experiences, a practice that people who study changing technology consider a notable turning point in the way people learn about each other and the world.

"People are using the technology in ways that even people who made the tools wouldn't have guessed," said Joshua Cohen, co-founder of Tilzy.TV, a guide to entertainment on the Web.

Relating experiences

Since YouTube was founded two years ago, it and other video-sharing sites have seeped quickly into everyday life.

Bernadette Mahnke, a 42-year-old Brookfield resident, was juggling her part-time nursing job and the duties of raising three kids when she stumbled onto YouTube. A cousin had e-mailed Mahnke a link to Gambito's Happy Slip skits with a note: "You have to open this."

In the videos, Gambito plays each of her eccentric family members: her computer-illiterate mother, her pork-rind-eating father, her piano-playing cousin. But the characters are shown doing things almost anyone can relate to from their own families and cultures: struggling to use the Internet, scolding one another, talking with their mouths full.

"When I saw that, literally, I fell on the ground," said Mahnke, a first-generation Filipina-American. "I thought it was hysterical because, just listening to the accent and what they were talking about, it just reminded me of my parents."

Audiences have always had an appetite for ethnic and cultural stories, as evidenced by the success of films such as "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" and "Bend It Like Beckham," said David B. Wertheimer, executive director of the Entertainment Technology Center at the University of Southern California. The center is a consortium funded by Hollywood studios and leading technology companies that looks at how technology is changing the entertainment landscape.

What's different about video-sharing technology is that it allows culture and ethnicity to be shared in smaller, more flexible, more immediate ways than traditional films can. And while the power can be abused because of a lack of censorship, when used earnestly, it offers viewers a totally new type of entertainment, Wertheimer said.

"When I watch (Gambito's) stuff, I don't just see her Filipino family, I see my family. And yet, by seeing the sameness, we are able to appreciate the differences," he said.

A bubbe for everyone

Other amateur filmmakers also have discovered the way family stories on the Internet appeal to broad audiences.

After graduating from college, Avrom wanted to make a demo reel that he could use when applying for jobs. Like many amateur filmmakers who post videos on the Web, Avrom, who chooses not to give his last name for security reasons, first tried hooking up a microphone to his computer and speaking to the camera himself. But after a few tries, he decided his camera presence wasn't engaging enough.

Over strudel-like dessert at a family dinner, Avrom's father suggested that he film his grandmother - or *bubbe* - instead. She could cook traditional Jewish foods, like the ones they were eating at that moment.

Today, the "Feed Me Bubbe" videos, which feature Avrom's 70-something grandmother making latkes, mandel bread and other traditional Jewish foods, have been viewed by millions of people around the world. The videos, which offer "Yiddish Words of the Day," were mentioned on the NBC late-night TV show "Last Call With Carson Daly" and have inspired hundreds of e-mails daily. Some fans beg, "Bubbe, please adopt me!"

"I didn't know anything about podcasting then, or any of this computer business. And e-mails started coming up from all over the world," said Bubbe, who, like her 23-year-old grandson, doesn't disclose her name. "A lot of people were hungry for the memories, and the memories they had of their grandparents. . . . It gives me such a good feeling."

On the West Coast, Baba Ali took up film editing as a hobby. When friends weren't available to be the subjects of his videos, Ali, a 32-year-old Web designer, set up a camera in his living room and began talking about what he knew best: his Muslim-American experience.

In one video, he jokes about excessive Muslim weddings in America. Another skit makes light of the difficulty Muslim-American men have when traveling by plane. Yet another video offers Muslim-Americans tips on how to talk to their parents about dating.

For Ali's third video posting on the Internet, he had 3,000 viewers. By the 10th, 100,000 people had tuned in. By the 14th, he had more than 1 million. The videos also caught the attention of hiring directors at DirecTV, who offered Ali a job presenting the news on Channel 101.

"I can't explain how much everything has changed overnight because of the videos," Ali said.

Understanding via video

Those who are following those changes are optimistic about the impact cultural Internet videos will have on society.

Wertheimer said he believes that, in five years, sharing culture and ethnicity in Web videos will be the norm, and he expects traditional Hollywood to integrate what it is learning from the success of short Web videos.

Also convinced that Web videos are here to stay, the founders of Tilzy.TV, which began offering an informed guide to programs on the Internet last month, say they are eager to see if the cultural and ethnic videos will make people more tolerant of each other.

"I'm hopeful that it will make the world a smaller place," said Jamison Tilsner, co-founder of Tilzy.TV. "It makes it more difficult to misunderstand each other."

In the meantime, Web videos highlighting ethnic and cultural experiences continue to pop up every day. "Barrio 305" on YouTube offers a bilingual perspective on Latino neighborhoods in Miami's South Beach. "What Black Men Think PSA" sets out to debunk misleading myths about black men and women in the United States.

And Avrom and his bubbe plan to continue filming their cooking lessons for as long as they can.

"This is an unbelievable way to archive traditions that are disappearing in society today," Avrom said. "It feels absolutely wonderful."

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