

CHATing with *Humans of New York*

Brigid Ackerman

In this article, Brigid Ackerman uses CHAT to discuss and analyze the unique qualities of social media sensation *Humans of New York* that make it its own genre. She reviews the history of the project and looks into its recent changes to see what makes it stand out.

I am one of the few young people left who don't really get Facebook. For years, I have stood my ground ignoring the hype of social media. Right before my high school graduation, I decided to give in and make an account; I realized that I would rather stay in touch with friends during college than boycott the downfall of humanity. Scrolling through the new endless abyss of Facebook, I kept noticing my "friends" sharing or liking these cool pictures of people on the street. Some of them had short quotes above them while others were accompanied by long paragraphs of Q and A. As I looked into it, I soon found out they all stemmed from the same page: *Humans of New York* (HONY).

The Genre of a HONY: The Social Media Sensation

Even in my short time in the world of social media (I've recently added Instagram and Twitter to my repertoire), I can recognize how formulaic posts are. There are ones that include things that show off how fabulous your life is, the sappy shout outs to display your affection publicly, angry rants that

show you care for something, ones that share links/pictures from other sites that make you look well read, and the vague sad ones that reveal your life isn't perfect. While HONY has a series of different tones—sad, happy, thoughtful, funny, and microfashion to name a few—it is quite different. Since it goes through a third party—HONY itself—its emotions are slightly neutralized: Readers can only pick up on what creator Brandon Stanton (and his camera) have captured, which may be very different from what we would have seen in the moment. I'm drawn to HONY in ways different than the Facebook pages of my favorite artist or TV show: Its subjects are always outside of the realm of my everyday life which makes it more exciting than posts about Starbucks or music festivals; HONY always leaves me curious and hungry for more. There is nothing quite like *Humans of New York*. To help myself define exactly what it is, I decided to use CHAT—cultural-historical activity theory—to analyze what makes HONY its own unique genre.

It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's *Humans of New York*!

It turns out that the simple Facebook page I first stumbled upon is a small part of the bigger existence of *Humans of New York*. According to the *Humans of New York* official website, HONY is the masterpiece of Brandon Stanton, an ex-stock broker from Chicago who set out to create “a catalogue of New York City's inhabitants.” His idea quickly turned into a Facebook page, then a Tumblr blog followed by the Instagram account, Twitter feed, and three bestselling books. According to his introduction in his first book, the growth of HONY is largely fueled by its audience: “I began to notice unfamiliar names interacting with my photography. With each new post, a few more strangers began to follow my work. I could now see a direct correlation between my work and my growth” (3). The early stages of HONY were greatly influenced by the people it was created for, also called socialization (which I'll talk more about later).

Between all its sites, the **distribution**—or how a text reaches various people and groups and how it is shared—is quite wide. HONY isn't entirely digital: Stanton has created three books, *Humans of New York*, *Little Humans*, and *Humans of New York: Stories*. I was back home in the Chicago suburbs when I sought out the original HONY book. I was keeping my options open, so I looked at multiple places, first being a local Barnes and Noble, where I found it in the Art section. This idea correlated with Stanton's idea of his work being considered portraits. At my public library, I found the book in the Nonfiction section with the call number of 974.7. For those of you not familiar with the Dewey Decimal System, the 900s are the books of history and geography, quite a stretch from the bookstore's thinking. I'm sure that other librarians and booksellers have found even more places to put HONY—it would be so

much easier for all of us if Melvil Dewey had had the foresight to designate a section just for social media way back in the 19th century. Looking among these platforms, I was still uncertain of what HONY was.

According to the HONY Tumblr Storyboard, it is a “photo blog” of “street portraits.” The first book is referred to as “a photographic census of New York City” and simply “a stunning collection of images” on the same site. Because distribution “involves the consideration of who a text is given to, for what purposes,” it’s clear Stanton caters his product on each platform: He’s picked the best of the best for the finite collection in each book and contributes any one for the growing pool on social media (Walker 75). He was able to gauge the public’s response from the number of likes, comments, retweets, and shares. With such a strong socialization, it’s easy to grasp which posts are “the best” and can garner the book the greatest responses. Yet its unifying elements are strong and undeniable, which proves HONY is a genre in and of itself.

The popularity of a post depends largely on its **reception**, which “deals with how a text is taken up and used by others...[and] takes into account the ways people might use or re-purpose a text (sometimes in ways the author may not have anticipated or intended)” (Walker 75). Even Stanton couldn’t have predicted that his casual pet project would turn into a full time job and draw him and his work into the spotlight. While its original concept may have been passive, social media allows the audience to become involved. Depending on the site, followers can leave notes, like, comment, or share a particular post. While the bulk of this occurs when a picture is first uploaded, it isn’t unusual for followers to scroll through the HONY archives and revive a forgotten post from years ago. One post may end up on my newsfeed two or three times, while I may skim and forget others. I’ve noticed that my “friends” tend to like or share posts that they can connect to. For example, my special ed major roommate has shared a Q and A about the struggles of teaching while a wanderlust friend has liked many posts discussing travel.

I’ve followed HONY on all my social media, and have found it’s relatively consistent between its platforms, which suggests its form isn’t specific to any of them. Each photo is accompanied by whatever text Stanton decides to include. The audience can like or favorite it and write comments or leave notes. The structure is very hands-on, followers can control the popularity by interacting with each post. Yet there are some anomalies: A portrait with paragraphs of dialogue would never fit into Twitter’s 140-character limit. I’ve also noticed that a post on the Facebook page may take a few days to make it onto my Instagram stream. Images are cropped to fit each platform—which can change the feel of the piece—and visible comments may tend to open the conversation more quickly (especially on Facebook) while hidden ones may deter the casual reader.

The HONY Instagram and Twitter accounts have only been active since May 2014, almost two years after the first book was published. While looking to compare all the HONY platforms, I was able to casually pick up the debut book and come across a portrait in a matter of minutes, but spent a significant amount of time going into the depths of the HONY archives to find the same photo online. What separates HONY from an art gallery or, paradoxically, a volume of books is the sheer number of posts; the HONY books are set in stone, while its online presence is constantly growing. The individual portraits don't have names or titles making it difficult for them to stand alone. Dates, another identifying factor, are inconsistent among the social media sites; Facebook is clear about the specific date and time a photo is uploaded while Twitter and Instagram simply measure a more broad time since the post was uploaded. It was frustrating to me that I had to search blindly for the photos from the book online; the only guiding factor was the 2013 copyright date. Names are usually not provided, and careers are not always included, so those Stanton interviewed are still strangers on the street.

A Day in the Life in HONY

Since Stanton's feeds are focused on the final product, I had to find interviews online to learn more about his day-to-day work. I quickly realized the process of creating HONY is quite hands-on. Since it's essentially a one-man show, Stanton has complete creative control over the final product. He spends his days walking around New York City, photographing and interviewing subjects.

While the structure of the final products may be the same, the people Stanton meets are what drive the direction of every post. His pictures depend on his route and who he passes each day. He can't just stop every Suzy Q he sees or talk to the millions of New Yorkers he doesn't. He must find the subjects that would make HONY come alive—they are what is unique to every post. Stanton takes his time, he photographs about one person for every 1,000 he passes. His method is far from perfect. While he clearly hasn't reached every New York City citizen, he has interviewed individuals more than once. Stanton says he uses his intuition when seeking subjects. He looks for "a person or a face that seems kind of unique to the neighborhood I'm currently photographing in, you know something that would be representative of that area that you wouldn't see anywhere else" (humansofny).

There could be many possible factors that help him narrow his decision: if people have to sign a waiver or give verbal permission to participate in interviews, if someone is in a rush or late for something, and if people are too busy on their phones to notice a man standing with a camera looking for

people to meet. I've found that every person he profiles is intriguing and has a story to tell so I started asking myself: Does he pick and choose the most interesting candidates? Does everyone in New York have a story to tell? Does Stanton himself make each person interesting? It's important to note that he doesn't ask the same question of every participant. Stanton follows each story as he sees fit, picking out the most intriguing aspects of each person. Once he has gathered all his information, he edits the work then posts them on their respective platforms. Stanton uses the same production tools and methods to keep consistency: a professional camera, a notepad/audio recorder, photo editing tools, and his social media accounts.

While I was able to find this basic information about his work, I am still very curious about the specific details of the job. Is his intuition different from someone like me? What specific models of camera and recorders does he use? How heavily is the dialogue edited? Does Stanton use Photoshop to edit the photos? These questions drove me to further explore the genre of HONY.

The Story Doesn't End Here

Once Stanton's work is published online, the picture doesn't die it actually gains traction. Through **socialization**, the product is used to connect culture and society, and followers can form judgments about the people they see and read about. "When people engage with texts, they are also (consciously and unconsciously) engaged in the practice of representing and transforming different kinds of social and cultural practices" (Walker 76). They may discover a personal connection to themselves or loved ones. The dialogue about HONY is most open on Facebook, where any user can automatically see a handful of comments. On Tumblr, users can see the icon of those who have commented, but must click further to see more. One must go out of their way to see specific comments.

The socialization can be identical or varied among the platforms. A post may gain support from the young hipsters of Tumblr while drawing criticism from Facebook's middle-aged mainstream crowd. Reactions can also be identical, as there is much overlap in users among different social media sites. In recent years, comments have also propelled HONY into the world of philanthropy and political advocacy.

Beyond the Screen: HONY Does Good

From its inception up through most of 2014, HONY seemed to follow a similar pattern however a chance interview garnered national attention and changed

its horizons. Stanton featured a seemingly average teenage boy who discussed some difficulties in his life and how his high school teacher inspired him to live his best life. After many comments about wanting to support his school were posted on the Facebook page (ahem, socialization), Stanton investigated and formed what quickly became a strong relationship with the boy's school, Mott Hall Bridges Academy in Brooklyn. After showcasing various members of the MHBA community on the HONY pages—including the teacher who inspired the initial boy—public interest sparked the crowdfunding of hundreds of thousands of dollars, and HONY followers were able to establish a fund to send MHBA students on tours of Harvard on an annual basis. When the first class went, it was none other than Stanton who captured the significant moment. For many students, it was their first time stepping onto any college campus. It marked a huge jump in **trajectory**. A project that was meant to stay within city limits suddenly extended across state lines. Stanton has now even begun regularly travelling abroad, telling the stories of thousands worldwide from all walks of life.

While it may be easy to pick apart the different aspects of CHAT theoretically, they are all interconnected in the real world. The reception and socialization now affect the production of the site: In addition to the traditional street posts, Stanton regularly visited the school and shared updates about the campaign. HONY even organized the Indiegogo campaign, which took the focus away from the original portraits. Because of the power of the MHBA reception and socialization, Stanton significantly changed HONY's production for the first time to please the audience. Without such a strong reaction, it seems unlikely that this project would've taken off as much as it did.

In 2015, HONY started regularly promoting charities such as the Association to Benefit Children (ABC), an organization that supports the overall wellbeing of children in the city. After talking to ABC's founder, Gretchen Buchenholz, HONY readers again supported Stanton's exploration into the organization and ways to get involved and the socialization of the posts drove the page's subsequent content. HONY is now consistently promoting various non-profits and charitable efforts. Stanton also interviewed many Syrian refugees throughout the international crisis, garnering financial and political support from across the globe. While the purpose of portraits from these organizations and friends has become vastly different than the originals, these charity posts are very similar to each other—each focuses on the back story of the subject, then overviews basic information about the charity, with ways to get involved or donate your money. Stanton seems to understand that this angle works and has run with it.

A major difference is the **ecology**, or environment, of the charity posts: originally, HONY exclusively featured portraits on the streets, the new series has taken Stanton to parks, inside buildings, and even Harvard. Instead of

well-known backgrounds, followers are brought into unfamiliar settings to read about unfamiliar people who have unfamiliar stories. I've also noticed that the charitable posts tend to be significantly longer than the original portraits, and many interviewees appear in a series of many posts. I know these changes have shifted my interaction with HONY, as I'm sure it has with many others. When I'm quickly scrolling through my newsfeed, I've found myself moving past longer HONY posts more often than before.

These changes have also led me to question the recent methods of production: Are these people seeking Stanton out? Does he happen to run into them when he's on a route? Does he go out of his normal routine to seek out worthy causes?

While many of the posts on HONY continue to feature the everyday humans on the streets of New York, there are sporadic posts that follow this string of MHBA. It begs the question about the future of HONY, will it become philanthropy? Does everyone have a cause they want to promote? Will Stanton be able to hold onto the organic nature of his project while spreading awareness and philanthropy? Only time will tell which path HONY follows. Part of me hopes that Stanton can figure out how to separate these purposes. He could create second "sister" pages that focus solely on charity while keeping the original HONY streams closer to the original portraits. Perhaps even a fourth book, "HONY: Charities" is in order.

HONY Stands Alone

Many others have tried to copy the success of HONY. There are Facebook pages for Humans of Chicago, Souls of San Francisco, and even spoofs like Hummus of New York (in case some New Yorkers get hungry I guess). In early 2015, an ISU student created Humans of Illinois State, which highlights the unique stories of our very own peers. Yet no one can seem to come close to capturing the excitement surrounding the original. Perhaps helping establish a new genre is a full time job, or requires its curators to have the same special eye as Stanton. On the other hand, it may simply take a dedicated man, thousands of dollars' worth of film, and the one-of-a-kind people of New York City to make HONY run. In this era of tweets and Snapchats, we should get ready to observe and participate in a whole new genre: the social media sensation.

No matter how—or why—HONY is made, it'll still have a fan in me. I love learning a bit about New Yorkers, and have found a lot of them are quite awesome. I also think it's OK that people's interpretations of it aren't the exact same—each is as unique as the people HONY showcases.

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Humans of Illinois State with **Brigid Ackerman**

Why is your hair still wet in this cold weather?

I was too busy reading *Humans of New York* posts on Facebook to dry my hair. Plus it gets frizzy if I do that.

What is your biggest challenge right now?

I have to make it across the quad in 10 minutes to make it to my publishing class on time.

What's your biggest accomplishment?

Not wearing leggings yet this week.

And what kind of charity do you want me to promote?

Forever Redbirds. 'Cause giving all your money to the university through tuition still isn't enough.

