

**‘Zoella hasn’t really written a book, she’s written a cheque’:  
Mainstream media representations of YouTube celebrities**

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## **'Zoella hasn't really written a book, she's written a cheque': Mainstream media representations of YouTube celebrities.**

### **Abstract**

In this paper, we present a thematic analysis of broadcast and print media representations of YouTube celebrity. Youth-oriented media have capitalised on the phenomenon, placing vloggers alongside actors and pop stars. However, in much adult-oriented mainstream media, YouTubers are presented as fraudulent, inauthentic, opportunist and talentless, making money from doing nothing. Key themes recur in coverage, including YouTubers' presumed lack of talent and expertise, the alleged dangers they present and the argument that they are not 'really famous'. YouTubers' claims to fame are thus simultaneously legitimised by giving them coverage and delegitimised within said coverage, echoing media treatment of other 'amateur' celebrities such as reality stars and citizen journalists. We argue that the response to YouTubers in more traditional media outlets demonstrates recognition of their visibility and appeal to a younger audience, whilst also signifying apprehension towards a phenomenon that potentially threatens both the existence of traditional media forms, and the influence of traditional media professionals.

**Keywords:** celebrity, youtube, vlogging, social media, microcelebrity, fame, stardom

In recent years, YouTube celebrities have achieved a level of public visibility that transcends the platform itself. Their smiling faces beam out at us from teenage magazines; high-street retailers stock products branded with their signatures; they front TV documentaries and radio shows; they advertise global brands like L'Oreal and Dr Pepper; displays in bookshops are given over to their output; and we can even visit their waxworks in Madame Tussaud's. In this paper, we explore the ways mainstream, or traditional, media have responded to famous YouTubers. These stars have been embraced by some outlets, but treated with suspicion and contempt by others. The phenomenon of YouTube celebrity offers opportunities for traditional media in terms of potential audience reach and as a source of new talent, yet it is also a direct competitor for audience attention, and a potential threat to some media professionals who may fear being usurped by this new breed of star. The examples we discuss display a form of 'boundary work' (Gieryn, 1983; Lamont and Molnár, 2002) in which journalists and media professionals attempt to assign YouTubers to an appropriate 'place' within the media and celebrity hierarchy.

Whilst 'internet celebrities' can be found across most platforms, our focus is YouTube. Although the nature of fame on YouTube shares some characteristics with fame encountered in other online platforms, YouTube has its own specific formats and cultures, particularly focused around the use of video technology and direct address to camera. Therefore, we discuss it as a distinctive platform, rather than as a proxy for all forms of online celebrity.

There are many ways of conceptualising 'mainstream' media, and a case could certainly be made for describing YouTube as mainstream. Similarly, 'traditional' media brands can be found on YouTube, the web and social media alongside offline platforms – indeed, some brands established offline now solely operate online (e.g. broadcaster BBC Three, newspaper *The Independent* and magazines *Glamour* (UK edition) and *NME*). Therefore, distinctions between old and new forms of media are, inevitably, problematic. However, for the sake of comparison, we use the terms 'mainstream' and 'traditional' in this article to refer to brands with origins in broadcast and print even if those brands now operate either partially or exclusively online. We use these terms with caution, but nevertheless find it helpful to distinguish between YouTube and older formats/brands, especially as many of the examples we discuss portray YouTube and its stars as something 'other', inferior, and often presumed alien to their audience.

### **Conceptualising YouTube celebrity**

Since its 2006 launch, YouTube has presented itself as a user-oriented platform - exemplified by former slogan, 'Broadcast Yourself' (Burgess, 2015). Even after its acquisition by Google in 2007, YouTube presented itself less as part of a media conglomerate and more as a ground-up, egalitarian community. User-generated content remains popular, but its dynamics are complex. YouTube hosts content from a range of commercial, political and media organisations and is funded by advertising revenue –like traditional media companies. The development of social talent agencies and multichannel networks (MCNs) - aggregate networks of several popular channels allowing for cross-promotion and collaborative approaches to advertising and branding (Lobato 2016) - further complicate the notion of a user-oriented community (Vonderau, 2016; Morreale, 2014). This combination of corporate and user-driven interests exemplifies well the tensions Jenkins outlines in his discussions of participatory culture, 'where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways' (2006: 259-260).

Whilst user-created videos take many forms, we are concerned here with personality-driven content, where creators appear front-and-centre. Typical video topics include: daily vlogs (video blogs) exploring routine activities; reviews; opinion pieces; challenges; 'hauls' (sharing recent purchases); tutorials; music; comedy and more. Regardless of content, the personalities of these YouTubers are core to their branding, echoing Senft's (2013) discussion of users transitioning themselves from individuals to commercial businesses.

YouTube is a direct successor of webcam sites and blogs (Senft, 2008; Rettberg, 2013), both of which became star-making vehicles for a select few, and even in its infancy, YouTube's most successful users could achieve a level of celebrity (Marwick, 2007). Today, some YouTubers attract huge global audiences, both in terms of viewers (those who watch any given video) and subscribers (those who actively follow a channel). As of summer 2018, more than 4000 YouTube accounts have over 1 million subscribers - although this data does include accounts from 'traditional' celebrities and media organisations (SocialBlade, 2018a).

Within existing literature on online fame, Senft's notion of 'microcelebrity' is one of the most influential concepts. In 2009, Senft defined microcelebrity as a form of self-performance that utilises corporate-style visual branding alongside the capacities for distribution that are afforded by online technologies. She later added to this, describing microcelebrity as the practice of constructing and preserving an online identity, managing it like a commercial product or brand (Senft, 2013). Senft explicitly situates microcelebrity as a *practice*, not a status – as Marwick (2013) explains, microcelebrity relates to one's behaviours and mindset, rather than signifying a level of status. We

have observed several authors using 'microcelebrity' to discuss anyone whose fame originated online, however we consider this problematic. 'Microcelebrity' in Senft's work encapsulates practices *all* internet users potentially engage in, regardless of audience size (see also Marwick, 2015). We note that there is an implicit inferiority in this term when used as a catch-all for online celebrity, positioning online fame as 'micro' compared to more traditional forms. As these stars have audiences in the tens of millions and their visibility often extends beyond a single platform, or even the internet in general, it is difficult to claim their fame is 'micro' (Giles, 2018). If they are not micro in size of reach, what is micro? Their claim to fame? Using microcelebrity to mean 'online celebrity', could infer that internet fame is somehow 'less' in status or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) than other forms of celebrity.

Even using 'microcelebrity' to discuss a set of practices is problematic when it comes to the YouTubers we examine here. Whilst our examples do engage in the self-branding Senft describes, management of their brands is complicated by the role of cultural intermediaries such as personal assistants, MCNs and talent agencies. This professional representation, alongside their visibility in traditional media and on the high street makes their form of celebrity something of a hybrid between microcelebrity practices and more traditional modes of fame. And, of course, 'traditional' celebrities also engage in a combination of self-directed branding and branding performed on their behalf by others (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Giles, 2018).

One concept closely associated with microcelebrity practices is 'authenticity'. Marwick notes that a believable performance of 'authenticity' is crucial for strategic appeal to audiences (2013: 114). Of course, the notion of 'authenticity' has long been a core component of celebrity culture. As Dyer has argued: 'the whole media construction of stars encourages us to think in terms of 'really'' (2004: 2) - speculation over what stars are 'really' like forms a huge part of celebrity media. However, 'authenticity' is understood differently depending on the arena of fame a star originates from, and the degree to which celebrities share personal information varies in keeping with a star's particular brand (Turner, 2014; Marwick and boyd, 2011).

Smith notes that, as with traditional celebrities, authenticity is a complex concept for YouTubers. Some formats, especially vlogging:

supposedly capture everyday life and various aspects of the vloggers' ordinariness, their celebrity relies more and more on what their ordinariness is able to draw upon for its self-commodification... the YouTube celebrity simply highlights the tightrope walked between ordinary and extraordinary, person and celebrity (2014: 257, 260).

YouTubers are often aware of this tightrope, and its implications for their celebrity/brand persona (Smith, 2014; Abidin and Ots, 2016). This persona is not constrained to one style of presentation, however. YouTubers adapt their format and register, using different idents, locations, tones of voice or characters according to the tone and genre of the video (e.g. comedic, educational, confessional). In order to maintain an image of being authentically ordinary and 'relatable' to their audiences, even popular YouTube stars may still perform amateur-ness through situating their videos in domestic settings or leaving in 'performances of spontaneity' such as errors in speech or editing (Jerslev, 2016: 5243) alongside continual direct address to the viewer and dialogue between creator and audience (Tolson 2010).

However, the size of following many popular YouTubers attract means direct conversational responses with viewers are not always possible. In addition, factors such as the monetization of channels (where users receive payments from YouTube connected to advertising), along with promoted/sponsored content and relationships with MCNs and talent agencies all explicitly point to the professional status of creators. Popular creators invest in expensive recording equipment and professional branding materials, and many employ extra camera operators, designers and assistants.

It is difficult, then, to ascertain what 'authentic' means in relation to YouTubers. For those who earn a sizeable income, will depicting an expensive lifestyle alienate 'ordinary' viewers? Or is it 'inauthentic' to pretend their lifestyles are the same as they once were? Questions of authenticity form the heart of much of the media coverage we analyse in the rest of this paper. Are vloggers credible in the claims they make? Do they 'deserve' their income? And are they 'really' famous at all?

## **Methodology**

YouTube stars have featured in mainstream media for several years now. British newspaper the *Guardian* employed Lauren Luke (Panacea81) as a make-up columnist in 2009 (Tolson, 2010), whilst competitor the *Telegraph* hired model and beauty vlogger/blogger Ruth Crilly (amodelrecommends) in 2012. In 2013, BBC Radio 1 signed vloggers Dan Howell and Phil Lester to host a weekly show titled *Dan and Phil*. This was rebranded a year later as *The Internet Takeover*, presented by different YouTubers, before ending in April 2016. YouTubers now feature everywhere from news to reality television; documentaries to teenage magazines.

This article focuses specifically on traditional broadcast and print media brands (including online versions). Due to access and language constraints, our research predominantly covers British media,

although we also refer to examples from Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA (for relevant work on Asian internet celebrities, see Abidin, 2016, 2017; Guo and Lee, 2013).

A combination of purposive and random sampling was used to identify relevant texts. A pilot study explored newspaper coverage of British YouTuber Zoella in 2014-15. We used Nexis to search for articles (Fig. 1) and read every headline and first paragraph and analysed every 10<sup>th</sup> article in detail. We replicated this on Google, concentrating on content from major ‘traditional’ media outlets only. We used Google particularly to identify coverage in major publications not covered by Nexis – most notably magazines with an online presence, including *The Atlantic*, *Forbes*, *Radio Times* and *Cosmopolitan*, and news organisations such as the BBC and CNN.

<p><b>ZOELLA'S BESTSELLER: THE PLOT THICKENS; She has outsold JKROWLING with her debut novel, but did the vlogger described by critics as 'vain and inane', actually write it? Katie Glass reports</b></p> <p>The Sunday Times (London) NEWS; Pg. 33, Katie Glass</p> <p>Show 2 similar results</p>	<p>1879 words 6 hits</p>	<p>07 December 2014 Preview</p>
<p><b>Publishers follow in Zoella's footsteps</b></p> <p>The Times (London) BUSINESS; Pg. 40, Gideon Spanier</p> <p>Show 1 similar result</p>	<p>518 words 4 hits</p>	<p>13 April 2015 Preview</p>
<p><b>Zoella isn't the perfect role model girls think she is; The intimidatingly perfect Zoella has amassed a following of millions of girls for her YouTube make-up tutorials, but Daisy Buchanan thinks her message of staying safe and being pretty isn't what teens need</b></p> <p>telegraph.co.uk By Daisy Buchanan</p> <p>Show 1 similar result</p>	<p>1300 words 4 hits</p>	<p>28 November 2014 Preview</p>
<p><b>Zoella: Zoe Sugg's book Girl Online becomes biggest-selling debut novel ever; The book has sold 78,000 copies in its first week</b></p> <p>Independent.co.uk FRONTPAGE, Daisy Wyatt</p> <p>Show 1 similar result</p>	<p>248 words 4 hits</p>	<p>02 December 2014 Preview</p>
<p><b>The killjoys should leave Zoella alone</b></p> <p>The Evening Standard (London) LETTERS; Pg. 50,</p>	<p>173 words 2 hits</p>	<p>09 December 2014 Preview</p>
<p><b>Letters to the editor: Cuts will top the election agenda</b></p> <p>standard.co.uk LETTERS,</p>	<p>1002 words 4 hits</p>	<p>09 December 2014 Preview</p>
<p><b>Zoella quits internet after Girl Online ghostwriting row</b></p> <p>The Sydney Morning Herald (Australia) - Online Anita Singh</p> <p>Show 2 similar results</p>	<p>765 words 2 hits</p>	<p>09 December 2014 Preview</p>
<p><b>4 THE POTION DIARIES Amy [...]</b></p> <p>The Sun (England) FEATURES; Pg. 52,</p>	<p>76 words 1 hit</p>	<p>24 July 2015 Preview</p>

Figure. 1. Extract of Nexis results for ‘Zoella’ and ‘book’.

Following this, we chose several YouTuber-themed stories that received a large amount of mainstream media coverage. We searched using the approach outlined above with the number of articles returned averaging around 100 results per story. Our chosen stories included YouTuber book launches, the ‘100 layers challenge’ and the ‘demonetization scandal’, as well as coverage of TV appearances by YouTubers. We took the same approach of reading all headlines and introductory text and analysing every 10<sup>th</sup> article.

In addition to these core stories, our purposive sampling approach involved following links from articles analysed in our primary sample and analysing content in magazines purchased because they

featured YouTubers. Coverage included interviews, biographies and profiles; YouTubers as experts (or critiques of their expertise); discussion of sponsorships and advertising and YouTubers taking part in challenges and competitions. We also sought out UK-broadcast (due to access) TV appearances by YouTube stars, including documentaries; entertainment and reality shows and lifestyle programming.

Thematic analysis helped us identify core themes across all coverage to gauge the general nature of the representations. The examples were coded for emerging themes which were then grouped into parent categories to assist with the identification of recurrent representations across the data.

Themes identified from the pilot study were: delegitimisation of YouTube as a route to fame; scepticism towards YouTube as a profession; Sugg's responsibility as a role model; focus on Sugg's age and gender. The themes identified from the pilot data were used as a starting point for analysis of the wider data set, however additional themes were also established where new ideas emerged – for example, praise for authenticity and credibility was identified in a small number of cases, which we will return to. We present selected qualitative examples here as illustration from a range of texts across our sample to demonstrate how these themes are common across different outlets. We found that many examples drew upon multiple themes, such as combining concern over YouTubers as role models with delegitimising YouTube as a credible career choice and a worthwhile source of education, information and entertainment.

The personalities featured in mainstream media comprise a small, fairly homogeneous (albeit popular) subset of the YouTube community, dominated by white, cisgender, and conventionally attractive twentysomethings. Whilst some have mental health conditions (e.g. Zoe Sugg and Tanya Burr, who vlog about their anxiety), few have visibly obvious physical disabilities. Most are represented by social talent agencies such as Gleam Futures or Big Frame (Cunningham et al., 2016). Whilst not the focus of this article, the lack of media coverage of the diversity of identities on the platform downplays its status as a space that gives voice to those often marginalised (Lovelock, 2016; Abidin, 2016) and presents a limited picture of what the platform is and who its creators and audiences are<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, it is partly these limited understandings that help create the representations we analyse.

### **Famous for what? Situating YouTube celebrity within the hierarchy of fame**

As many authors have noted, media and audiences alike are fascinated by the idea of hierarchies of fame. Gossip columns rely on notions of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' media personalities (Palmer,



2005; Holmes, 2006). Such scrutiny over celebrities is often intrinsically linked to factors such as platform and genre. For example, even reality television has its own hierarchies, with certain formats seen as more prestigious than others (Bonner, 2013; Deller, 2016; Holmes, 2006).

Chris Rojek's (2001) typology of celebrity as ascribed (through lineage), attributed ('famous for being famous') or achieved (through talents and accomplishments) attempts to articulate these hierarchies. 'Attributed' celebrities are often most heavily scrutinised in the media, with speculation on why that person is famous, whether they deserve it, and how long they can sustain it. This is particularly true of 'ordinary' people turned famous – the closest comparisons to YouTube celebrities perhaps being reality television stars (Turner, 2009), bloggers and citizen journalists (Rettberg, 2013; Örnebring, 2013).

Whilst many YouTube stars could make a claim to being 'achieved' celebrities with skills in presenting, editing, camerawork and specialisms such as make-up artistry or singing, most coverage we analysed positions them firmly in the area of attributed fame. In our sample, one of the most common mainstream media imaginings of YouTube stars was that they were not 'really famous':

Who is Marcus Butler? Vlogger leaves *Celebrity Masterchef* fans confused... even Gregg Wallace was baffled' (Agius, *Daily Mirror*, 2016)

Who is Zoella and why is she baking off for Comic Relief? (Doran, *Radio Times*, 2015)

Jim Chapman: the most influential man you've never heard of (Garratt, *Telegraph*, 2015)

This continued assumption that readers won't have heard of these stars, despite various high-profile endeavours (including book launches and TV appearances), reinforces the idea that online fame is, somehow, not 'real' fame; YouTube stars are not significant enough to be featured without qualifiers. Often, this is made explicit through comparison to 'real' celebrities, such as the *Daily Mail's* distinguishing Zoe Sugg from genuine 'celebrity contestants':

Miss Sugg has also starred on the BBC's *Comic Relief Bake Off* special alongside celebrity contestants Gok Wan, Jonathan Ross and Abbey Clancy. (Tingle, *Daily Mail*, 2017).

In 2016, ITV entertainment show *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* invited vloggers Marcus Butler and Alfie Deyes to appear as regular guests. Their image as ordinary, clean-cut, 'boys next door' who are close friends made them a good fit for this show, as if they were younger versions of presenters Ant and Dec, who successfully maintained that same image for twenty years<sup>2</sup> (Bennett, 2011). Butler and Deyes were also presumably brought in to appeal to younger audience members,

giving the programme a sense of continued relevance in a media climate where young people frequently choose YouTube over television.

On the show, Butler and Deyes were often shown in the audience or backstage rather than front-and-centre: operating as members of the supporting cast, rather than as presenters or high-profile celebrity guests. Furthermore, they were regularly treated as figures of fun, wearing silly outfits or being the butt of jokes. This was particularly exemplified in an episode broadcast on 19/3/2016, whereby the legitimacy of vlogging as a profession came into question during the 'Fame-ily Fortunes' segment of the show. Presenter Stephen Mulhern introduced the 'traditional' celebrities taking part (actor Hugh Jackman and model Abbey Clancy) simply by first name, under an inherent assumption that they were recognisable enough not to warrant further explanations as to their identity or profession. However, when Mulhern reached Butler, he followed the introduction with a description of Butler's vocation, describing him as 'an Internet sensation; one of the biggest vloggers and YouTubers around', then asking, 'What the hell does that mean?'. This suggests a hierarchical distinction between the traditional celebrity guests whose presence on the show is not considered to need justification, and online celebrities, who, despite being regular guests on the show, are still perceived as lesser stars, resulting in them being mocked and their status questioned. This is especially interesting when we consider that Abbey Clancy's claim to fame is primarily her marriage to footballer Peter Crouch, followed by her winning reality show *Strictly Come Dancing*. Despite her fame being in areas that might otherwise situate her as lower in the fame hierarchy than major Hollywood star Jackman, she is presented here as a household name in comparison to the vloggers.

Giles argues that 'new forms of media challenge the celebrity structure of broadcast media just as television broke down some of the barriers separating film stars from their audiences' (2018: 37). We see this here through the uneasy tension between ...*Takeaway* wanting to be seen as being contemporary and engaging with a younger audience, yet seeking to put these new stars 'in their place' within an imagined hierarchy of fame and credibility.

However, discussion of YouTube fame is not restricted to 'others' commenting on their stardom – YouTube stars exercise a degree of self-reflexivity. Smith notes that:

part of their celebrity performance is bearing witness to the constructed, self-conscious nature of their own celebrity. That being a celebrity is self-awareness of it and commenting upon it is part of what fame is, not merely its consequence (Smith, 2016: 348)

Youtuber critiques of their own star status occur within mainstream media as on their YouTube channels. In documentary *Rise of The Superstar Vloggers* (BBC Three, 2016), Youtuber and presenter

Jim Chapman declares it 'ridiculous' that there are waxworks of vloggers, and Joe Sugg (brother of Zoe and popular YouTuber in his own right) says:

We're kind of experiencing like a new kind of fame. On the internet we're very, very well known, but in terms of traditional media and stuff, we're not known at all and it's interesting to see how people react to that because there's a lot of people who are scared of what we do, a lot of people who are terrified, and a lot of people who are excited about us, 'cos we're just these new people who've come out of nowhere with these massively engaged audiences.

Sugg's comments here, whilst highlighting the size of his audience, also offer a performance of 'ordinariness' and humility - possibly a deliberate strategy to reinforce his 'authenticity.' He is clearly aware of how YouTube stars have been received – astutely noting that this is with a combination of excitement and terror.

### **Money for nothing? Critiques of YouTube as a career**

The idea of YouTube as a career is repeatedly presented as a monetized hobby and a waste of time, with stars earning money for very little work. These criticisms have surrounded internet celebrities for years, but rarely considered is the fact that creating a successful YouTube channel involves skills in presenting, camera operation, editing, marketing and more:

[Zoella has] been able to turn her hobby - which sees her talk to camera about everything from lipstick to anxiety - into a lucrative career... (Barnes, *Daily Express*, 2015)

If Zoella makes £50k a month, I'm launching Debella... I have just been to practise sitting on the end of my bed, and it turns out I'm bloody good at it; a natural. (Ross, *The Times*, 2014)

PewDiePie doesn't sing or dance, no. PewDiePie has made his name—and a fortune—posting videos of himself playing video games. (Zoia, *The Atlantic*, 2014)

Speculation over income forms a key part of media discourse, particularly when there is a perception that all YouTubers do is play video games or talk about themselves. This fascination is part of a long tradition of speculation over the incomes of celebrities and public figures, often with the implication that high salaries have to be 'deserved' through hard work and talent. When Louise Pentland (Sprinkle of Glitter) appeared on BBC One's *Celebrity Mastermind* in 2016, unlike her fellow celebrity contestants, she was repeatedly asked by presenter John Humphrys to explain what she does for a

living and how much she earns. Pentland deflected this criticism by asking Humphrys to disclose his own earnings. He declined the offer.

In 2016, YouTube nail artist Cristine Rotenberg (Simply Nailogical) recorded her 'Polish Mountain' video, in which she painted over 100 layers of nail polish on her fingers. The video sparked a viral '100 layers' trend on the platform, resulting in mainstream media depicting the videos as ludicrous time-wasting:

Too much time on her hands! Beauty vlogger spends 12 hours painting 116 LAYERS of polish on her nails (Buaya, *Daily Mail*, 2016)

The 100 layers challenge is the worst internet craze since neknominate. If you haven't heard of [it], you were probably making the most of your summer – outside. (Robb, *Metro*, 2016)

The knowingly comedic and curious tones of 100 layers videos are rarely commented on in such coverage, although most of these videos incorporate self-mockery. There is no recognition of the ingenuity or technical skill involved in creating them, despite some examples being both creative and hilarious. Presenting such activities as time-wasting also overlooks the potential benefits for creators in terms of audience share and advertising revenue. Rotenberg went from just over 100,000 subscribers to 4.6 million subscribers in the space of a year; 2 million of those subscribing in the two months following 'Polish Mountain' (SocialBlade, 2018b) - that video alone attracted over 23 million views (YouTube, 2018). That Rotenberg also has a full-time job in crime statistics analysis was absent from media narratives, presumably as it does not easily fit their critiques.

Also in 2016, many outlets covered what *Forbes* termed 'YouTube's Great Demonetization Controversy' (Eordogh, 2016). This story related to high-profile vloggers expressing concern at what YouTube would, and would not, 'monetize'. Non-monetized content included 'inappropriate language' and 'controversial themes' (Advertiser Friendly Content Guidelines, YouTube: <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6162278?hl=en-GB>), potentially rendering many videos ineligible for advertising revenue. Alongside this issue, stars were concerned about YouTube's algorithms, with Felix Kjellberg (PewDiePie) threatening to delete his channel because he felt he was losing viewers. Some mainstream outlets sided with the YouTubers who felt exploited:

The anger is building on years of feeling ignored, undervalued, and taken for granted... YouTube has a history of making site-wide changes that financially impact content creators, even when content creators vehemently oppose and protest such changes. (Eordogh, *Forbes*, 2016)

However, others were critical of vlogger responses, positioning them as whining and deserving of their fate for being affiliated with Google in the first place:

What would be truly delicious to observe is YouTube calling his bluff and deleting [his channel] for him. Because surely if PewDiePie is such a visionary about video-sharing, he should build his own wondrous platform in his own image then lure all of the other unhappy vloggers to his glorious haven. Build it and they will come. Or, alternatively, he could sit whining about YouTube on YouTube. (Dent, *Independent*, 2016)

This lack of sympathy for YouTubers presents them as not having legitimate concerns, and often as spoiled and whingeing. This can be found in coverage of various complaints by YouTubers, such as Zoe Sugg and Alfie Deyes tweeting to ask fans to give them privacy:

YouTube stars Zoella and boyfriend Alfie Deyes beg for PRIVACY as fans 'peer through their windows'. The stars shot to fame with their video blogs on the social media site - but now insist they never set out to be "famous" (Read and Pocklington, *Mirror*, 2015)

Millionaire bloggers beg for privacy... Zoella and her partner have begged their fans to stop bothering them at their mansion. (Humphries, *The Times*, 2015)

We see here an extension of some of the discourse surrounding celebrities' right to privacy, or right to complain about their circumstances, that is the staple of tabloid press and gossip magazines. The outrage levelled at these YouTube stars presents invasion of privacy as not merely an occupational hazard, but something that should be expected<sup>3</sup>. These invasions are often justified through the claim that if they do not want people invading their privacy, they should not share their lives online in the first place. Their millionaire salaries, difficult enough to justify as it is, demand their lives are always visible – otherwise, how can they claim authenticity in their self-revelatory brands?

### **Beware: fraudulent and untrustworthy YouTubers at work! Narratives of 'trust'.**

Historically, new media formats have often been treated with suspicion and presented as dangerous, lacking in value, or both. The internet, initially as a whole, and latterly through specific sites/apps, has received similar apprehension (Burgess, 2015; Senft, 2013; Rettberg, 2013). In particular, there has been fear over the impact of new media forms on young people. In such moral panics, children and youth are characterised, often simultaneously, as delinquents whose behaviour is unacceptable and as vulnerable victims needing protection (Cricher, 2003). As we shall see, these same concerns are present within media coverage of YouTube celebrity.

YouTubers' credentials are repeatedly scrutinised by a mainstream media that is perhaps afraid of the competition for audience attention, and is engaged in 'boundary work' to try and keep YouTubers in their proper place. Lamont and Molnár note that symbolic boundaries 'are an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resource' (2002: 169), and Gieryn argues that boundary work involves one group 'monopolising professional authority and resources' (1983: 787-8) by positioning themselves as credible, knowledgeable and trustworthy in comparison to others. Attempts to establish a boundary between YouTube stars and 'legitimate' professionals may be behind some of the critical coverage.

For example, Tolson (2010: 284) notes that vloggers' status as 'ordinary' consumers is coupled with roles traditionally associated with media professionals such as television presenters or 'experts'. YouTubers occupy these multiple positions whilst also circumventing traditional means of broadcasting. A recurring narrative in our sample was criticism of YouTubers and other online stars for dispensing poor-quality advice. This was particularly the case concerning lifestyle, beauty and food YouTubers and the risks they posed to people's health. In BBC Three's *Clean Eating's Dirty Secrets* (2016), YouTuber Grace Victory (UglyFaceOfBeauty) took on extreme diet challenges and interviewed YouTube 'clean eating' advocates (a diet based largely on avoiding processed food). These interviews were interspersed with a nutritionist debunking the more extreme claims of some clean-eating enthusiasts. The programme conflated several different diets, including veganism, under the 'clean eating' umbrella and focused only on the most unusual and outlandish of advocates. The use of a YouTuber as presenter and debunker is interesting here: BBC Three is aimed at a youth audience, so using one YouTuber to discredit others means the programme is simultaneously capitalising on the usefulness of YouTubers as communicators to a young audience, whilst discrediting the credibility of others on the platform.

BBC Two broadcast a similar programme, *Clean Eating: The Dirty Truth*, in 2017. That some 'clean eating' principles and recipes have been promoted in mainstream media, including the BBC, was largely ignored by both programmes. In a similar vein, *Cosmopolitan* magazine (Partington, 2017) warned readers not to trust skincare advice from vloggers and bloggers because they are not qualified dermatologists, quietly sidestepping the fact that women's magazines offer skincare tips on a regular basis that do not come from professional experts. In these examples, amateurs on YouTube and social media are seen as promoting ignorance and encouraging harmful activities without recourse to experts. The deployment of 'experts' to debunk online stars is an attempt to reposition traditional media as the ones who are trustworthy, in spite of their often similar practices<sup>4</sup>.

These concerns about credentials echo those about 'citizen journalists' from their professional counterparts. Traditional journalism, faced with the challenge of citizen media, has sought to forge a relationship in which user-created content is utilised by traditional media where it proves fortuitous to do so, yet held at arm's length in other situations. Turner notes that citizen journalism is 'clearly proving capable of influencing the asymmetry of power' (2009: 81). However, citizen journalism is challenging for audiences and professionals partly because its content comprises not only news, but personal stories, opinions, and other content outside traditional journalistic formats. Traditional journalists often express concern at the credentials of citizen journalists, perceiving their content as potentially dangerous, not being subject to rigorous ethical or legal scrutiny. Traditional journalists seeking to maintain influence (and jobs) in the new media climate position themselves as trustworthy, professional and with access to experts and training and see their role as 'gatekeeping' - filtering citizen journalism content and directing audiences to that of 'legitimate' worth (Robinson and DeShano, 2011; Örnebring, 2013; Johnson and Wiedenbeck, 2009). We clearly see this process echoed in mainstream representations of YouTube.

Unsurprisingly, one area that accrued a lot of coverage was the phenomenon of YouTube stars publishing books – as professional writers, many journalists attacked the literary merits of these stars:

It's a bit like the activity sheets given to children in museums and on planes to keep them quiet.... (Samadder, *The Guardian*, 2014)

ask yourself if the book would ever have existed without the lure of a huge cheque... is this book simply a festive cash-in con? (Robinson, *The Guardian*, 2015)

The books that received least criticism tended to be those that expanded the YouTube brand in a way that made sense in book format. Peter Robinson's evisceration of the YouTube book phenomenon allowed for two exceptions to his characterisation of them as 'cons'. Tyler Oakey's autobiography *Binge* (2015) gained approval for expanding the self-revelatory aspects of vlogging and staying 'authentic' to his brand: 'Uniquely, among this selection, it leaves the reader with a sense that there could actually be something more to this social star than meets the eye' (Robinson, 2015). Dan and Phil's *The Amazing Book Is Not on Fire* (2015) was praised for its successful translation of their humour into print. A successful performance of 'authenticity' is seen as giving these stars merit, whereas their counterparts are perceived as having little substance and no originality, even to the extent of plagiarism or deception:

*The Pointless Book 2*, [is] a title whose lack of originality... will come as little surprise to anyone who has read Keri Smith's spookily similar, marginally superior and significantly older interactive books. (Robinson, 2015)

*Girl Online* is different to your standard ghost-written book, and that's because of the implicit promise that Zoella makes to her followers... To them, she isn't a celebrity whose name will be used to shift a product; she's their best friend. If Zoella tells them she is "writing a book", as she did several times, they believe that she is doing just that... If this is not the full story then they have misled... Zoella hasn't really written a book, she's written a cheque (Johnston, *Independent*, 2014).

It is interesting here that, even though ghost-written celebrity books are often derided within the media (Yelin 2015), for Johnston, Zoella's use of a ghost-writer is *even worse* because her brand relies on authenticity and 'friendship'. This critique, of course, fails to consider that she makes her living 'shifting products' through including hauls, reviews, sponsored content and advertising on her channel, and her audience is likely well aware of this.

During the process of editing this article, several further high-profile stories dealing with the 'danger' or 'deception' of YouTubers have emerged. Accusations of fans being ripped-off due to poor quality merchandise and events (e.g. 2017's 'Hello World' live event) recycled the narratives explored above. Various 'prank' and 'challenge' videos were also criticised, including Logan Paul featuring the body of a suicide victim; Jay Swinger (TGFBro) cementing his head in a microwave; and panic over whether teenagers were genuinely eating laundry detergent during the 'Tide pod challenge'<sup>5</sup>.

### **Selling what YouTubers have to offer**

Whilst we have focused so far on broadly critical coverage, there are ways that YouTube stars have been embraced by mainstream media. We found several positive reactions to TV show *Joe Wicks: The Body Coach* (Channel 4, 2016). Wicks is a fitness instructor turned social media star whose recipe book, *Lean in 15* (2015), became Britain's most sold weight-loss book (Kean, 2017). The TV show embraced Wicks' popularity, using his 'eat more, train less' ethos to help participants lose weight. Within media coverage, Wicks was deemed credible due to his professional background. Articles repeated a narrative of him achieving success through hard work, determination, and professional training, rather than merely through successful implementation of social media. His 'authenticity' was a core component of the praise – even when that praise was couched in pre-conceived cynicism:



There is so much unabashed bosh and wallop you'd be forgiven for thinking he is taking the mick. But that is what ultimately saves Joe Wicks: The Body Coach as a TV format: he is totally and utterly sincere. (Raeside, *Guardian*, 2016)

This raises an interesting distinction between those, like Wicks, who have taken their profession to social media and vloggers whose profession is simply sharing their lives online – bringing us back to Rojek's (2001) concept of 'achieved celebrity' as higher status than 'attributed' fame.

The use of YouTubers as television and radio presenters seems an obvious step in many ways – they have experience of presenting to an audience, after all. However, despite occasional appearances, none have yet transitioned into regular broadcast roles. Whilst Radio One showed some sustained interest in the mid-2010s, the cancellation of *Internet Takeover* in 2016 suggests this was not the success the station had hoped for. There could be several contributing factors as to why YouTubers have not become more prominent as presenters. There are surface similarities between YouTube and traditional broadcast media but there are also many differences in the mechanics of production, editing and presenting. There may be reluctance to hire YouTubers over established professional presenters – and, of course, YouTubers themselves may not wish to take on roles that are time-consuming and relieve them of both creative control and advertising revenue.

There is one area of mainstream media that has, above all other formats, embraced YouTube stars, however. Magazines in several countries, especially those aimed at teenagers and children, feature extensive coverage of these stars (see Figure 2) - and there are several YouTube focused supplements within such magazines.



Figure. 2 YouTube stars on teen magazine covers from Europe, Australia and the USA.

The content of YouTube channels echoes that of teenage magazines: entertainment, music, beauty, fashion, humour, gossip, true-life experiences and 'problems', thus offering clear crossover potential. YouTubers share the clean-cut good looks and cheerful personae of pop stars like Little Mix and Taylor Swift, and their endorsements of products mean they are commodified in similar ways to traditional celebrities.

It is unsurprising that the representations of YouTube stars in teenage, female-oriented magazines contrast starkly with adult-oriented media. As has been noted by audience scholars, female-oriented genres are repeatedly criticised within other areas of media and culture. Forms such as women's magazines, romance fiction and boy bands are seen as lacking in artistic and technical merit, intellectual depth or 'good taste' (Bourdieu, 1984; Hermes, 1995; Radway 1984; Jensen, 1992). This is especially the case when it comes to the interests of teenage girls. Female teenage fans are criticised repeatedly, both for the objects of their fandom, seemingly lacking in 'quality' or 'credibility' (Baker, 2013), and for expressing fandom through 'excess' and 'obsession'. As Jones puts it, 'Media representations of fangirls thus draw on their hyper-emotive behavior in opposition to the rational, educated cultural capital displayed by members of the press' (2016: 57). Some coverage closely mirrored typical representations of female fans of boy bands:

Deyes is perfect first-boyfriend material... Girls sob with gratitude, or are afflicted with drymouth. Many bear votive offerings: personalised M&Ms, Capri Suns, loom bands, love hearts. He places them on a table to the side... Outside the venue, I talk to Phoebe, a breathlessly excited 13-year-old [and]... her equally oxygen-challenged friend Alex (Sammader, *The Guardian*, 2014)

When it came to the vloggers themselves, we found some gendered aspects to the coverage, such as frequent criticisms of female vloggers' focus on beauty, fashion and image: perceived as frivolous, possibly harmful, pursuits:

it frightens me that millions of young women in 2014 are still being told to prioritise pretty over clever, confident and smart. (Buchanan, *Telegraph*, 2014)

Even media aimed at a young adult female audience contained scepticism, though couched in humour:

When they ask us what our generation contributed to the world, tell them #polishmountain. We are doomed. (Capon, *Cosmopolitan*, 2016)

Whilst male YouTubers engaging in gaming and prank videos were also criticised as worthless, those critiques were not explicitly gendered. There is not room to explore gendered representations in more depth here, but it is an area ripe for further study.

### **Conclusion: The role of YouTube stars in mainstream media**

In this article, we have built on existing analyses of YouTube stars by considering how they operate outside of YouTube itself. By outlining key themes in traditional media representations of YouTubers, we have identified that this coverage has much in common with coverage of other 'ordinary' celebrities. Khamis et al. have argued that 'The scale of potential audience reach for 'ordinary' people through social media is such that popularity and prominence no longer rest on the go-ahead from traditional gatekeepers' (2016: 8). Therefore, as with bloggers and citizen journalists, mainstream media faces a dilemma when it comes to YouTube stars, who present both an opportunity and a threat.

YouTubers bring with them an established audience. Their youth appeal makes them an attractive proposition for print and broadcast media hoping to retain influence and dominance in a crowded media marketplace. There is cross-promotional potential for advertisers and brands whose products can be endorsed across magazines and vlogs. YouTubers who have honed their craft over years bring with them an attractive skillset – they are able communicators, technologically adept, and savvy marketers.

On the other hand, the popularity of YouTube threatens the existence of established media. The idea of self-made celebrities, vlogging their way to millions in both audience and monetary terms, whilst circumventing traditional routes to fame, threatens the notion of the media professional. Therefore, journalists and presenters engage in forms of 'boundary work' to establish distinctions between YouTube stars and 'proper' celebrities/professionals. Media criticisms highlight YouTubers' lack of talent or knowledge; depict them as deceiving audiences through their commercial endeavours or lack of substance and thus not adequately performing the role of an 'authentic' amateur. Their hobbyist status is repeatedly emphasised and any skills (in presenting or editing, for example) are downplayed. The constant reiteration that these are stars 'you have never heard of', despite their large followings, further places YouTube celebrity as outside of the world of 'real' celebrity and influence.

Whilst some YouTubers, such as Joe Wicks, have been begrudgingly welcomed, it is still unclear which, if any, stars will 'break out' from the platform long-term. Indeed, they may not wish to – as

Giles notes, 'When you have 40 million followers on YouTube or Instagram, who needs 'mainstream media'?' (2018: 75). It also remains to be seen which have longevity – be that as creators within YouTube itself, or as celebrities in a wider context.

As with other forms of 'ordinary celebrity' (Turner, 2009), YouTube celebrities are useful to the wider media insofar as they contribute to its continued survival. Where they might draw in new audiences, as in teenage magazines, they are welcomed and utilised as commodities alongside 'traditional' celebrities. However, the repeated disavowal of these stars and critiques of their right to be famous in many other outlets seem to be an attempt to reinforce the value of traditional media and the celebrities that it creates, presenting older formats as bastions of integrity, reliability and professional practice.

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1 This is partly a consequence of where MCNs and social talent agencies focus their attention.

2 Ant McPartlin has subsequently been involved in media scandals around addiction and extramarital affairs, which may impact his star image longer term.

3 Self-revelation has also been a key part of internet celebrity culture for many years, exemplified by YouTubers' predecessors, 'camgirls', whose brands were built on the idea of seeing the 'raw' and unedited person, and who also struggled with the tensions of 'public' and 'private' (Senft 2008).

4 There has also been a trend towards qualified health professionals utilising social media platforms to dispel misinformation and pseudoscience. Prominent examples include Dr. Hazel Wallace (Thefoodmedic), Dr. Rupy Aujla (doctors\_kitchen) and Rhiannon Lambert (rhitrition).

5 A meme involving internet users joking about how edible the laundry pods appeared, and pretending to eat them.

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