

*Joe Sugg: authenticity, self-branding and networking from YouTube microcelebrity to mainstream star*

MURPHY, Kathryn Dorothy

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**Joe Sugg: Authenticity, Self-branding and Networking from YouTube  
Microcelebrity to Mainstream Star**

Kathryn Dorothy Murphy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

January 2021



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I hereby declare that:

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2. None of the material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.
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Name	Kathryn Dorothy Murphy
Date	January 2021
Award	PhD
Faculty	Social Sciences and Arts
Director(s) of Studies	Dr Ruth Deller

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# Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the YouTube celebrification process from internet content creation to mainstream media through analysis of the career trajectory of Joe Sugg. Joe is arguably the most successful British YouTuber to transcend internet recognition and mobilise this prominence towards mainstream fame. As such, the research draws insight from his practices and brand development strategies to interrogate how he has been able to successfully bridge the worlds of mainstream and traditional media, whilst still maintaining his online presence. Existing research has defined levels of traditional and online fame, however there is a lack of research that interrogates the relationship and interaction between different stages of fame. This research considers the internet to mainstream celebrification process through a detailed analysis of Sugg's career. Moreover, there is a gap in existing literature for research focused on individual creators' career trajectories, particularly in relation to their development from online to the traditional media and celebrity sphere, which the research thus addresses.

Within this broad research aim, the investigation focuses on three key sub-themes within Joe's career development: self-branding; authenticity labour; and networked relationships. The inquiry takes a single case study approach focused on Joe Sugg, which is situated in digital ethnography and utilises a variety of online and offline data collection methods to gather micro-, macro- and wider contextual level data from Joe's career. The data is analysed using a combination of thematic, content and textual analytical approaches to draw insight into his career trajectory in relation to the sub-research themes.

The analysis identifies ordinariness and relatability, maintaining perceived authenticity and credibility, and building strong networks online as key to developing an online brand that is commodifiable, appealing to audiences, and able to be mobilised towards mainstream media ventures. Moreover, the research offers a substantial framework for understanding the process of

celebrification from online to mainstream through five stages, defined by characteristics and experiences as opposed to follower metrics. The research also provides the first significant longitudinal study of a British YouTuber's career trajectory that interrogates their strategic brand development and networking practices, which have enabled them not only to sustain a career online, but to mobilise this online recognition towards mainstream media platforms too.

# Acknowledgements

There are many people without whom this thesis would not have been possible.

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*In loving memory of Grandma and Uncle Bill.*



# Chapter 1: Introduction

In this thesis, I will explore the YouTube celebrification process from ordinary to mainstream through analysing the career trajectory of Joe Sugg. Joe<sup>1</sup> is arguably the most successful British YouTuber to build an online following and mobilise this prominence towards mainstream fame<sup>2</sup>; thus, the research will interrogate the practices he has used to attract attention, gain prominence and (re-)negotiate his self-branding throughout his career. The inquiry will take a case study approach situated in digital ethnographic methods, utilising thematic, content and textual analytical approaches to draw insight from Joe's career trajectory.

This chapter will introduce the research, stating the overarching aims and scope of the inquiry, and asserting the rationale for the study. I will then set the context for the investigation, situating YouTube as a networked community, and outlining the commercialisation and professionalisation of YouTube as a platform. I will also provide context on Instagram, highlighting its significance as a platform for online identity construction and as the primary site of operation for the influencer industry<sup>3</sup>. Background context will be provided on Joe, discussing his route into the online world and explaining his significance as the focus for this investigation. Following this, I will situate the research in existing literature, identifying the gap this study aims to address and the original contributions to knowledge the research will make. Finally, I will outline the structure of the thesis, indicating the topics addressed in each of the forthcoming chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> I will refer to him as Joe throughout this thesis to avoid confusion with his sister Zoe (whose surname is also Sugg) who will be mentioned regularly in the discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Whilst other YouTubers have crossed over into mainstream media platforms on occasions, these ventures have typically been met with scepticism and resistance in the way they have been represented (Deller & Murphy, 2019). Thus, I consider Joe to be the first YouTuber to make this transition successfully (without his legitimacy or status being brought into question within these representations), and to utilise this crossover into mainstream media to transition towards traditional media and performance work.

<sup>3</sup> The development of the approach towards focusing on these platforms is discussed in detail in Chapter 3 - [Research Design](#)

## Aims and rationale

The research aims to explore the career trajectory of Joe Sugg, who I consider the most notable example of a British YouTuber to have built a career from his online following, and transition this popularity towards mainstream fame and traditional media work. As such, the research aims to interrogate the practices which have enabled Joe to be so successful in transitioning into traditional media, whilst maintaining his online prominence. The inquiry will draw insight from his career trajectory through three lines of inquiry:

- The (re-)negotiation of his branded identity as part of his wider career development strategies
- His maintenance of perceived authenticity and credibility
- The significance of networked relationships to his overall career and brand development

## Significance

YouTube launched in May 2005 with the slogan 'Broadcast Yourself', inviting users to upload and share video content to its online public space. Since launching 16 years ago, the video-sharing site has grown exponentially from initially attracting a niche cohort of amateur video creators to becoming the second most popular website in the world (behind Google) (Alexa, 2021).

YouTube is 'the fastest growing site in the history of the Web', now boasting 'over a billion users' (Snickars and Vonderau, 2009: 11); amounting to 'almost one-third of all people on the Internet' (YouTube, 2017). YouTube claim that 'overall, and even on YouTube mobile alone' they reach 'more 18-34 and 18-49-year-olds than any cable network in the US' (YouTube, 2017). These exponential levels of growth have seen the site shift from a space for sharing amateur video content, to a platform enabling content creators to forge lucrative careers through hosting commercial advertising on their videos.

As YouTube has surged in popularity, its content creators have also reached unprecedentedly large followings. Many of today's most popular vloggers started creating content on YouTube as a hobby without any consideration of where it might take them. For these vloggers, the idea that fame and wealth could come from picking up their cameras and making videos in their bedrooms would have probably seemed laughable when they first began uploading to the site. However, YouTube's phenomenal growth has made this a reality, allowing creators to reach audiences of millions worldwide, establish loyal followings and earn a living online. Since 2009 when the channel FRED became the first to reach 1 million subscribers<sup>4</sup> (SocialBlade, 2016), the subscriber counts of the most popular YouTube channels have continued to rise with four channels now breaching the 100 million subscribers mark<sup>5</sup>, and 19 channels with more than 50 million subscribers<sup>6</sup> (SocialBlade, 2020). As YouTube creators' followings have grown over the years, they have received increasing amounts of attention in the offline world from both their audiences and the mainstream media, resulting in debate as to where popular vloggers are situated within the wider mechanism of fame. When vloggers first came to prominence, they were not considered 'proper' celebrities (Marwick, 2013). But with many now maintaining seven-figure subscriber counts, they are increasingly living lifestyles akin to traditional celebrities; attending high-profile events and releasing their own product ranges, books and clothing lines. As such, it is interesting to explore the process Joe has taken from beginning to upload videos to YouTube, to attaining mainstream recognition, and to interrogate YouTube as a site for the production of Internet celebrity.

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<sup>4</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>5</sup> Two creators - T-Series and PewDiePie - and two YouTube-run music and movie channels

<sup>6</sup> Correct as of 8th October 2020

## Motivations

My interest in this phenomenon developed from personal experience as a viewer of YouTube and a consumer of online content. In 2010, a friend introduced me to fashion and beauty blogs which I began following avidly, staying up-to-date with new posts from my favourite bloggers through the now-defunct Google Reader<sup>7</sup>. It was through reading beauty blogs that I discovered YouTubers, with another friend telling me about a YouTube channel called Pixiwoo, run by sisters Samantha and Nicola Chapman - two professional make-up artists who uploaded tutorials for recreating celebrity beauty looks and popular trends. The beauty bloggers I followed at the time then started creating YouTube channels - namely, Zoe Sugg (Zoella - Joe's sister), Fleur Bell (FleurDeForce), Tanya Burr (Pixi2woo) and Louise Pentland (SprinkleofGlitter) - and I followed them over to YouTube to watch their video content, alongside continuing to read their blogs.

As these beauty bloggers became more established on YouTube, I became more immersed in the world of vlogging, following more channels - often as a direct result of watching my favourite YouTubers collaborate with other users. The YouTubers I was following also began to upload a different style of content to their initial 'sit-down'<sup>8</sup> beauty videos<sup>9</sup>. These were what we know today as vlogs - a more informal style of filming where the camera is taken around with the vlogger as they go about their day<sup>10</sup>. The prominence of vlog-style content increased rapidly, and a trend emerged of YouTubers creating dedicated vlogging channels in around 2012-2013<sup>11</sup> where they uploaded these more informal videos. This style of video proved popular with audiences, suggesting a desire for more unstructured content that denotes creators' everyday experiences and implies backstage, uncensored access to their lives (Berryman & Kavka, 2017;

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<sup>7</sup> A website enabling the easy collection of updates from Blogger and Wordpress sites followed.

<sup>8</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>9</sup> These often involved them sitting down and chatting to a static camera about their favourite beauty products, demonstrating ways to use them and sharing their opinions and reviews.

<sup>10</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>11</sup> Joe started his vlog channel ThatcherJoeVlogs in January 2013, just over five months after uploading his first video to his initial ThatcherJoe channel in August 2012.

Goffman, 1956; Marwick & boyd, 2011). As such, the notion of everyday life became more entwined with these YouTubers' content, conveying a sense of intimacy through this perceived access to their day-to-day lives (Berryman & Kavka, 2017).

When vlogs first became popularised amongst the YouTubers I was watching, their lives could be considered ordinary. They were yet to experience any significant changes to their lives from YouTube so this content was very relatable, existing within the context of an ordinary person's life, rather than people with any degree of celebrity status. However, as these YouTubers became more established around 2012-2013, I noticed the speed at which some of the vloggers I followed were beginning to gain subscribers to their YouTube channels, including Zoe Sugg reaching the landmark of 1 million subscribers in April 2013. I had also become aware of some male YouTubers who were beginning to collaborate with Zoe, Louise and Tanya on fun, non-beauty videos such as tags and challenges<sup>12</sup>. These male creators made comedy and prank videos, opening my eyes to a wider range of content creators outside of the beauty sphere. As the creators I followed continued to produce collaborative videos, I noticed a network beginning to emerge - this would later come to be known by fans as the Brit Crew<sup>13</sup>. This group experienced elevations in their online status simultaneously, whilst attaining a level of collective popularity too. This new-found prominence led them to be able to earn sufficient income from advertising revenue<sup>14</sup> that they could quit their day jobs to focus on YouTube full-time.

As YouTube became a career for these vloggers, I noticed shifts in their lifestyles and markers of increasing wealth and status appearing in their content, resulting in a shift in the previously equal dynamic between creators and their viewers into something more hierarchical. These YouTubers became elevated in status with

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<sup>12</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>13</sup> This network will be interrogated later as part of Chapter 6 - [The Brit Crew](#)

<sup>14</sup> See [The vlogging industry](#)

fans beginning to treat them in ways typically associated with traditional celebrities. This sparked my interest in YouTube creators and Internet celebrity as a phenomenon, and I continued to follow this closely through my own viewing until I developed this interest into a research topic for the first time. In 2015, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of newspaper representations of Zoe Sugg, which was later expanded in a 2019 journal article into newspaper representations of YouTubers more broadly<sup>15</sup>. This initial research sparked an interest in investigating YouTube celebrity culture further to explore the trends I had noticed through close observation as an audience member in academic detail; thus leading to this PhD research. I believe that my personal interest in the topic and experiences as an audience member over the last decade have enabled me to gain unique insight into the phenomenon, providing me with an advantageous understanding of the conventions and cultures of these spaces, alongside my academic knowledge<sup>16</sup>.

## Wider context

This section will set the context for the investigation, providing background on YouTube and its functions outside of being a video-sharing site, and the vlogging industry that has emerged as a result of its popularity. I will also contextualise Instagram, highlighting its primary conventions as a platform, and its role in digital identity construction and influencer practices.

## YouTube

### YouTube as a networked community

YouTube is known, primarily, as a video-sharing platform with a global user base, however, it is also widely acknowledged as a space for community (Burgess and Green, 2009b; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009). YouTube has its foundational roots

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<sup>15</sup> See Deller & Murphy (2019)

<sup>16</sup> This is discussed in more detail later in the thesis in Chapter 3 - [Researcher reflexivity](#)

in participatory culture – defined by Jenkins as something that ‘transforms the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts’, fostering new cultures and communities (2013 :46). Whilst literature commonly suggests that the development of participatory cultures has been facilitated by the emergence of Web 2.0<sup>17</sup>, Jenkins (2009) argues that the reverse is also true. The rise of participatory cultures helped lay the foundations for people getting on-board with platforms like YouTube in their early days (Jenkins, 2009). Jenkins further stipulates that it is commonplace for companies in Web 2.0 to feel they are responsible for forming a community around their products. These communities already exist elsewhere with their own sets of values and practices – the companies merely attract them to their platform, encouraging them to adopt its structures to situate their community in the space (Jenkins, 2009).

A notable quality of YouTube’s community is that it exists within a platform structure that ‘does not overtly invite community-building, collaboration, or purposeful group work’ (Burgess & Green, 2009b: 63). This is an interesting characteristic for a platform where so much of its value seems to derive from the culture of community through practices such as sharing, responding and interacting with content (Jenkins, 2009; Lange, 2007). However, this does not appear to inhibit users’ ability to participate and engage in the co-creation and social interaction practices that are so key to YouTube’s significance as a platform (Burgess & Green, 2009b).

Recurrent communication between creators and audiences is one of the key aspects of participating in the YouTube community (Lange, 2007), which occurs primarily through video uploads (Burgess & Green, 2009b), although videos can subsequently be responded to in the comments section beneath each video<sup>18</sup>. This designated space for communication within the platform’s architecture allows users to ‘respond to or give feedback on the content of YouTubers’ videos’

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<sup>17</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>18</sup> Although creators have the option to switch this off for certain videos if they wish to.

(Berryman & Kavka, 2017: 316), keep in touch with distant friends and family (Lange, 2007), and to network with new people and form social connections (Burgess & Green, 2009b). This space enables fan communities to be formed, whilst also allowing viewers of video content to directly interact with their favourite creators (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Discussions in the comments section are often facilitated and encouraged by creators who request viewers to share their thoughts on the content, allowing them to gather feedback about the kinds of content that are favoured by their audience for future videos (Hou, 2018).

Being a participant in YouTube involves forming smaller networks with fellow creators too. This is a key part of YouTube's function as a community space and thus YouTuber friendships are common. Creator friendships occur both online and offline with those who meet in the flesh commonly filming their time spent together, whether that be informally socialising, attending an event, or being silly together (Bishop, 2018). An entire video genre has even emerged from the networked potential of YouTube creator friendships: the collaboration<sup>19</sup> (or 'collab', as they are colloquially known). These are generally fostered organically through creators networking on the platform, although some are facilitated by cultural intermediaries<sup>20</sup> such as multichannel networks (MCNs)<sup>21</sup> (Cunningham, Craig & Silver, 2016). These videos are highly beneficial for creators in terms of growing their following (Bishop, 2018) because they allow for a transactional exchange of attention from each party's existing audience, and the chance to combine viewer communities (Cunningham et al., 2016).

### The commercialisation and professionalisation of YouTube

Since Google purchased YouTube in 2006, the site has developed from an initially non-commercial platform where amateur video content was uploaded and displayed without advertising, to a highly commercialised platform where content

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<sup>19</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 2 - [The star-making industry](#)

<sup>21</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)



has become increasingly professionalised (Morreale, 2014). Between the pre-Google advert-free days of YouTube and the highly lucrative vlogging industry of today, there has been a seismic shift in the way the platform operates as a business. This section will contextualise the commercial development of the platform that has paved the way for creators to forge careers on YouTube.

In its infancy, YouTube offered a unique alternative to the mainstream broadcast media platforms on offer to the public by creating a democratised space for the distribution of user-generated content (McDonald, 2009). However, its acquisition by Google resulted in the platform shifting towards a more controlled, monetisable operative model (Andrejevic, 2009). This led YouTube to leave behind its early 'Broadcast Yourself' ethos, which promoted uploading fun, amateur content, in favour of becoming a 'more structurally complex, managed ecosystem designed to monetize both amateur and professional content' (Lobato, 2016: 348). This commercialisation of the platform has resulted in YouTube becoming more akin to a mainstream media corporation, whose focus towards advertising revenue has led to the infiltration of commercial advertisements in almost every space of the YouTube interface, maximising the site's earning potential (Lobato, 2016).

YouTube's shift towards becoming a more commercialised and professional platform was welcomed by advertisers who were initially reluctant to get on-board as they did not want to advertise on user-generated content, which was often low-quality (Kim, 2012), and sometimes immature or offensive in nature (Andrejevic, 2009). There were also concerns over copyrighted content on the platform as, prior to the launch of Content ID<sup>22</sup> in 2006, amateur content frequently contained copyrighted music, images or video clips (Andrejevic, 2009). This led to tensions between global media conglomerates (who owned the rights to infringed content that appeared in videos) and YouTube who were criticised for

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<sup>22</sup>YouTube's automated system for identifying copyright-infringing content within videos, allowing the rights-holder to 'either have the video removed or collect all the advertising revenue on the video' (Cunningham et al., 2016: 380).

not sufficiently policing uploaded content for copyright infringement, and for profiting from users' infringement in the form of advertising revenue (Burgess & Green, 2009b). Advertisers were used to mainstream media advertising where they could control where their advert appeared and felt reassured it would not be shown alongside inappropriate (Andrejevic, 2009) or copyright-infringing content (McDonald, 2009) - things they could not do on YouTube. In 2007, YouTube launched its Partner Program to make the platform more advertiser-friendly by incentivising amateur video creators to produce higher-quality, inoffensive content which does not infringe copyright (Gerhards, 2019; McDonald, 2009), in exchange for earning advertising revenue from their videos.

YouTube's attempts to make its platform more advertiser-friendly were successful and the Content ID and Partner Program reassured traditional media companies and advertisers enough to get on-board with the platform (Gerhards, 2019). Advertisers were satisfied by the Partner Program's professionalisation of content, helping assert YouTube's status as an advertiser-friendly platform (McDonald, 2009). Traditional media corporations also began to recognise YouTube's potential as a platform for content distribution and earning advertising revenue (Gerhards, 2019; Kim, 2012). As a result, content creators were able to start earning modest sums from their content, and, as the earning potential began to increase, vlogging began to develop from an amateur hobby into a lucrative industry.

### The vlogging industry

As YouTube channels began to grow in popularity, the advertising revenue creators were able to earn on their videos increased too; however, it was not until 2009 when the first YouTube channel hit 1 million subscribers that the phenomenon of YouTube stardom began to emerge. It was around this time that advertisers began to acknowledge the potential of these popular vloggers (Gerhards, 2019), enabling some entrepreneurial vloggers to turn their hobby into a career (Hou, 2018).

Burgess and Green (2009a) define entrepreneurial vloggers as 'quasi-professional' video creators who generate income from their videos by participating in YouTube's Partner Program. However, their entrepreneurialism is balanced by genuine, authentic participation in the community aspects of the site, with their success stemming from highly skilled utilisation of the platform, their ability to form a significant presence and build an invested, loyal audience (Burgess & Green, 2009a). Enrolling in YouTube's Partner Program results in automated advertisements being displayed on the creator's videos, with revenue earned being split proportionately with YouTube (Hou, 2018). However, not all creators are eligible to join the Partner Program - YouTube stipulates that creators must have 'more than 4000 public watch hours in the last 12 months' and at least 1000 subscribers to their channel (YouTube, 2019b). Additionally, creators must reside in 'a country or region where the YouTube Partner Program is available', be complicit with the program's policies and YouTube's community guidelines, which include '[e]nsuring that you have commercial use rights for your content', and adhering to the 'AdSense Programme policies' (YouTube, 2019b).

According to Cunningham et al., '[o]ver the past few years, YouTube has repeatedly changed their partnership plan. Revenue splits have shifted from a high of 70/30 in favour of their premium creators to a standardized split of 55/45' (2016: 381). The percentage split is determined by the CPM<sup>23</sup> - the price advertisers pay for every 1000 views of their advertisement (Hou, 2018). Alternatively, RPM<sup>24</sup> refers to the revenue that creators *actually* earn after YouTube have taken their cut (YouTube Help, 2019). CPM can fluctuate throughout the year with certain periods carrying higher rates, (e.g. pre-Christmas), whilst other times this rate is lower (Hou, 2018). In response to the uncertainty of fluctuating CPM rates, entrepreneurial vloggers often take on product placement and endorsement deals with advertisers who value their loyal

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<sup>23</sup> Cost Per Mille.

<sup>24</sup> Revenue Per Mille.

audiences and perceived credibility (Gerhards, 2019). They also utilise techniques such as affiliate links<sup>25</sup> to generate additional revenue that is not dependent on CPM. These commercial practices are forms of influencer marketing in the context of YouTube, although many YouTubers utilise other social media platforms as additional sites for earning revenue.

#### Talent management agencies and Gleam Futures

As the commercial potential for YouTubers developed, individual creators found themselves in the position of needing to negotiate deals with brands, understand complex legal contracts and develop marketing and branding strategies. This is in addition to managing their online presence and maintaining their relationship with their audience – a lot of responsibility for one person, especially if they have no prior business or legal experience. Talent management agencies began to emerge who were able to offer vloggers and those with large social media followings support in these areas. Bishop explores the role of talent managers in her research, positioning them as full-service agencies as a result of the complete service they offer, making them a “one stop shop’ for all clients’ needs’ (2018b: 149). Their role includes acquiring commercial partnerships and sponsorship deals, collecting and analysing crucial data on behalf of clients, assisting with brand strategy and development, and aiding delivery of collaborative projects and merchandise (Bishop, 2018).

One of the most prominent talent management agencies in the UK is Gleam Futures who are responsible for managing some of the world’s most prominent online content creators. Gleam Futures formerly represented Joe before he left in November 2017 ahead of starting his own talent management firm (Margravine Management), with friend and fellow YouTuber Caspar Lee in June 2018. Gleam Futures were also responsible for managing the popular network of British YouTubers that became known as the Brit Crew - a group of nine creators including Joe and his sister Zoe<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>26</sup> This network will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6 - [The Brit Crew](#)

Gleam Futures' founder Dominic Smales formed the agency as a result of discovering sisters Samantha and Nicola Chapman (known for their beauty YouTube channel Pixiwoo, 2008--<sup>27</sup>) on the YouTube homepage. At the time, Smales was doing social media consultancy for beauty brands and decided to reach out to the Chapman sisters to discuss the commercial potential of their content (Elmhirst, 2019). This led Smales to launch Gleam Futures as a digital talent management agency in 2010, with the Chapman sisters signed as the first talent on their roster. The Chapman sisters then introduced Smales to their brother Jim Chapman and his then-girlfriend<sup>28</sup> Tanya Burr (who the Chapman sisters had helped to set up beauty YouTube channel Pixi2woo, 2009--<sup>29</sup>) (Lumsden, 2019). The recruitment of new talent through the existing roster's connections continued and Gleam Futures quickly expanded to represent Jim Chapman's twin brother John and friend Leon Bustin (who run fitness channel TheLeanMachines) in 2011 (Lumsden, 2011), with Zoe Sugg, Louise Pentland, Alfie Deyes, Marcus Butler, Joe Sugg, Caspar Lee, Patricia Bright, Ruth Crilly and Wayne Goss joining the ranks by late 2013 ([Image 1.1](#)). Gleam Futures position themselves as an agency for 'digital-first talent' – 'individuals who have built considerable audience & influence on social media channels' (Gleam Futures, 2013). They summarise their role as to 'develop, monetize & protect' their talent (Gleam Futures, 2013), illustrating the fundamental role management agencies play in fostering commercial relationships and helping creators build commodifiable brands.

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<sup>27</sup> Now renamed to Sam & Nic Chapman.

<sup>28</sup> They later married in 2015, however they announced their separation in 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Later renamed to Tanya Burr.

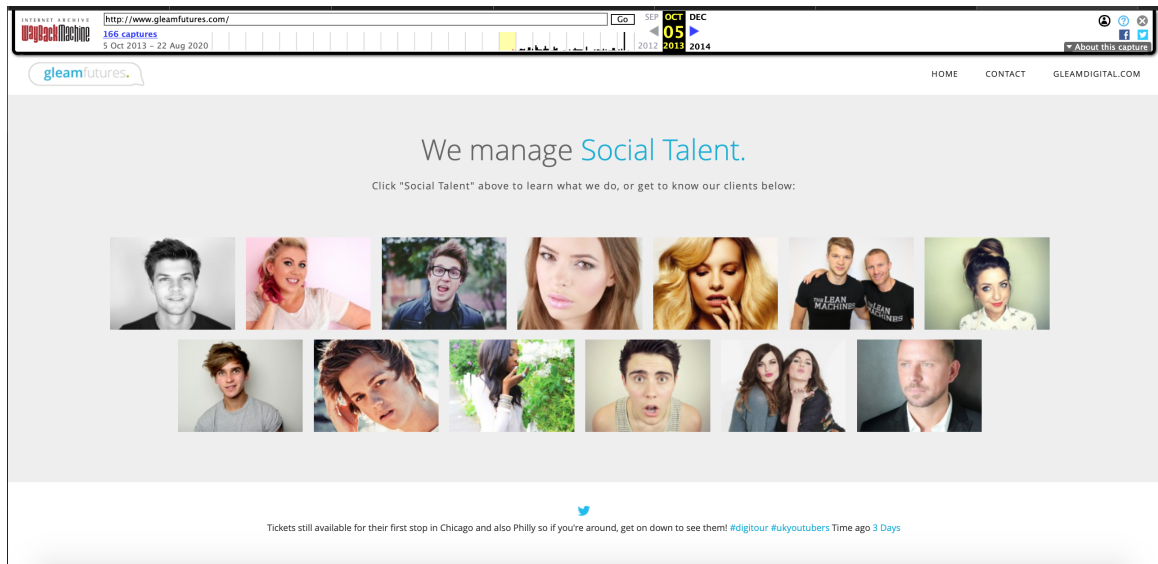


Image 1.1 - Screenshot of Glean Futures' website homepage from 5th October 2013<sup>30</sup>

## Instagram

Whilst YouTube was the platform Joe first began to build his following on, Instagram has also played a crucial role in his delivery of online content<sup>31</sup>, making it an important platform to consider in my analysis of Joe's career trajectory. This section will set the context around Instagram as a platform, considering its primary uses and its role as a site for identity construction and influencer labour.

Instagram launched in 2010 as an iPhone photography app enabling users to add aesthetic filters to their images, which adjusted the colours and textures to give it a more retro feel (Leaver et al., 2020). It was acquired by Facebook in 2012 (BBC News, 2012) and has since shifted into more than just a photo-sharing platform. Instagram now boasts more than 1 billion monthly active users, making it the second most-used social networking site after Facebook

<sup>30</sup> Captured via Wayback Machine Internet Archive.

<sup>31</sup> Twitter (and later TikTok) have also been key sites in Joe's career and brand development, however YouTube and Instagram were considered the primary platforms of interest - see discussion of this in [Case study design](#)

(HubSpot, 2020). Instagram has become so integrated in everyday life for its millions of users (boyd, 2015) that it can be considered ‘an icon and an avatar for understanding and mapping visual social media cultures’ (Leaver et al., 2020: 12). Indeed, Instagram’s popularity is deemed so great that its influence has extended offline too, shaping the material world, cultural practices and even the way physical spaces are designed around Instagram-worthy aesthetics (Leaver et al., 2020).

Instagram has played a central role in the importance of visual content in individuals’ online self-expression (Rainie, Brenner & Purcell, 2012; Sheldon & Bryant, 2015), presenting a wealth of possibilities for public self-presentation (King, 2015) and identity construction (Marshall, 2015). It is also an innovative platform for digital marketing and advertising (Abidin, 2014), and the platform where influencers primarily operate (Abidin, 2014, 2016b). Users are able to easily ‘perform’ taste on Instagram, thus it is utilised by influencers as a medium through which they can perform aspirational lifestyles (Hund & McGuigan, 2019) and strategically increase their following (Abidin, 2014)<sup>32</sup>.

## Joe Sugg

This section will introduce Joe Sugg who is the focus of the case study inquiry, giving an overview of his background and route into online content creation, and demonstrating his significance.

Joe (full name, Joseph Graham Sugg) is a 29-year-old British YouTuber from Wiltshire, England who shares vlogs, comedy and gaming videos on his YouTube channels ThatcherJoe, ThatcherJoeVlogs and ThatcherJoeGames. Joe joined YouTube in 2011 after appearing in his sister Zoe Sugg’s (widely known by her YouTube channel name, Zoella) videos, quickly gaining a large following of his

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<sup>32</sup> The influencer industry will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 - [Influencers](#)

own<sup>33</sup>. He has since built an online presence across other social media platforms, currently maintaining active profiles on Instagram, Twitter and, most recently, TikTok. Joe maintains a cross-platform online presence, and has accrued substantial followings on each platform ([Table 1.1](#)).

Table 1.1 - Joe Sugg's online profiles<sup>34</sup>

Platform	Username	Joined	Followers
Twitter	joe_sugg	2009	5 million
YouTube	ThatcherJoe	2011	7.75 million
	ThatcherJoeVlogs	2013	3.49 million
	ThatcherJoeGames	2013	1.73 million
Instagram	joe_sugg	2012	5.4 million
TikTok	joe_sugg	2018	1.2 million

As Joe started to share content online through Instagram and YouTube, he began building a branded identity within his content. At this time his sister Zoe had already built a significant online following through her blog Zoella (which she started in February 2009), and her YouTube channel Zoella280390 (which she had been posting videos on since December 2009). Joe appeared in several YouTube videos with his sister before starting his own channel, following requests from her viewers for him to do so, thus starting his channel with an existing audience from Zoe's viewers. From posting his first YouTube video in

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<sup>33</sup> Despite YouTube being the first platform where Joe began building a following, he has had a Twitter profile since 2009, making it the first of all his public social platforms. However, it was not until after his YouTube channel began gaining traction that his Twitter following expanded outside of his immediate social circle. As such, I consider YouTube to be the platform from which his online prominence began, with subscribers of his YouTube channel later following him on his other public social media platforms.

<sup>34</sup> Follower counts correct as of 9th January 2021.



August 2012, Joe's online popularity increased quickly, reaching over 600,000 subscribers on his ThatcherJoe channel in his first year of posting videos, and hitting 1 million subscribers by November 2013<sup>35</sup>.

Throughout his career, Joe has extended his brand outside of YouTube into various ventures including producing a trilogy of graphic novels in the *Username*: series<sup>36</sup> (2015-2017); and starring alongside fellow YouTuber Caspar Lee in two feature-length *Joe & Caspar Hit The Road* films<sup>37</sup>. He has also made numerous mainstream media appearances throughout his career, culminating in his appearance on BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2018. This is significant because, whilst other online content creators have been invited into the mainstream, their attempts have often been met with friction. Indeed, YouTubers have often received criticism, had their legitimacy questioned and been made to look inferior compared to traditional celebrities when represented in the mainstream media (Deller & Murphy, 2019). As such, Joe presents a unique example of a YouTuber who has successfully bridged the gap between Internet and mainstream celebrity culture, making him a particularly appropriate case study to focus the inquiry on<sup>38</sup>.

## Situating my research

Existing literature has defined levels of traditional and online fame, however there is a lack of research interrogating the relationship between different levels of traditional and Internet celebrity status. As such, my research aims to address this gap, considering levels of recognition from online to mainstream media as a celebrification process, as well as the brand development practices that enable

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<sup>35</sup> See [Appendix 1: Joe Sugg's career timeline](#) for overview of key growth milestones.

<sup>36</sup> *Username: Evie* (2015); *Username: Regenerated* (2016) and *Username: Uprising* (2017)

<sup>37</sup> *Joe & Caspar Hit The Road* (2015) and *Joe & Caspar Hit The Road USA* (2016)

<sup>38</sup> The rationale for focusing the case study inquiry on Joe will be discussed in Chapter 3 - [Case study design](#)

one to transcend through differing levels of recognition. Existing literature lacks studies focused on individual creators' career trajectories, particularly in relation to their development from online to the traditional media and celebrity sphere. Thus, my research provides the first significant longitudinal study of a British YouTuber's career trajectory, interrogating the practices which have enabled them not only to sustain an online career, but to mobilise this recognition towards mainstream media prominence and traditional fame.

## Approach

Using an in-depth single case study focused on Joe Sugg, the study will utilise digital ethnographic approaches, encompassing YouTube and Instagram-specific scraping and observational data collection methods, and gathering visual and textual data from ancillary media sources. These methods will enable the collection of macro-, micro- and wider contextual level data from Joe's career trajectory. The data will be explored using thematic, content and textual analytical approaches to address the three sub-areas of inquiry - self-branding, authenticity labour and networked relationships. This approach aims to generate an in-depth, descriptive account, interrogating Joe's success and the practices he has used to develop his career from YouTube to the mainstream.

## Thesis structure

Following this introduction to the thesis, Chapter 2 will outline existing literature around the research topic. Literature will be highlighted in relation to celebrity studies, Internet celebrity culture, self-presentation, and capital, considering how these ideas inform my research.

Chapter 3 will discuss the methodological approach, outlining the development of the research design, justifying the suitability of a case study methodology and

situating this within a digital ethnographic approach. I will also delineate the data collection methods used to gather macro, micro and wider contextual data from Joe's career, rationalising the use of these techniques and highlighting potential challenges they present. Then, I will discuss the analytical approach for the inquiry, considering the suitability of thematic, content and textual analysis to draw insight from the data. Finally, I will consider the importance of reflexivity in the research process, reflecting on how my own inherent biases may affect the inquiry.

Three analytical chapters follow the methodology with each centred on one of the sub-research questions outlined previously. Chapter 4 considers Joe's brand development across his career trajectory, within which I define five key stages. The discussion will consider Joe's self-branding practices at each of these career stages, highlighting key examples to draw insight towards his overall brand development. Chapter 5 explores the notion of authenticity labour through these career stages, interrogating how these practices aid his development and maintenance of a credible, commodifiable self-brand, and an intimate relationship with his audience. Finally Chapter 6 focuses on networked relationships as part of Joe's brand development and wider career trajectory, exploring the key relationships that have shaped his journey from ordinary boy to mainstream media star.

Following the analytical chapters, Chapter 7 will present the research conclusions, providing a summary of the inquiry. Here, I will outline the key findings, considering their wider significance in relation to existing theorisations and highlighting the research's original contributions to knowledge. The thesis concludes by considering the limitations of the investigation and resulting findings, and highlighting areas for further research.

# Chapter 2: Literature review

## Introduction

This chapter will outline existing literature relating to the research topic. I will begin by highlighting key concepts from celebrity studies which inform notions of fame and status, and relationships between audiences and stars within the research. Then, I will review literature around ordinary celebrities, microcelebrities and influencers, discussing the levels of status and practices implied within each concept. I will also discuss theorisations of self-presentation and self-branding; as well as interrogating notions of value by highlighting existing research around forms of capital and how this relates to influencers and celebrities.

## Celebrity

As this research seeks to understand the celebrification of an individual, Joe Sugg, from YouTube towards mainstream media fame, it is important to theoretically ground the study in concepts around celebrity and stardom - particularly as notions of celebrity are often contested in relation to Internet content creators. As such, the research is concerned with how Joe navigates these tensions between perceptions of fame, and the ways in which he builds and manages his celebrity status as part of his wider career development. Celebrity studies is a discipline covering a wide range of areas that are interconnected with sociology, media studies and cultural studies, and inextricably linked to consumer culture (Marshall, 2014a). In this section I will introduce celebrity studies, considering definitions of fame, stardom and celebrity; debates around celebrity status and star qualities; the power and function of celebrity within society; celebrity masculinities; and representation.

## Fame, stardom and celebrity: defining key terms

To begin, I will first define the terms fame, stardom and celebrity - three key words in the celebrity studies vernacular that are used to describe the nature and experience of being famous, but with each term describing slightly different aspects of the phenomenon.

Fame is defined by Giles as '[a] process by which individuals become recognized by a significant number of people outside of their predictable social and professional networks' (2010: 191). He distinguishes this definition of fame from the concept of celebrity, arguing that they represent different phenomena, with fame representing a social process and celebrity representing a cultural process (Giles, 2018). Redmond and Holmes (2007) also regard fame as a phenomenon, positioning it as a cultural one that is always adapting and developing. These definitions position fame as the shifting sociocultural process by which individuals increase their recognition outside of their immediate social networks - a notion particularly relevant to this research's focus on Joe's career trajectory in relation to the process of celebrification.

Alternatively, stardom is defined as 'everything that is publicly available about stars' (Dyer, 1987: 85). The term 'star' has its origins in film studies and has historically been used to 'refer to a representational interaction between the on/off-screen persona' for actors in films (Holmes and Redmond, 2010: 5). Alberoni defines stars as 'the phenomenon by which a certain individual attracts in the eyes of many others, an unconditional admiration and interest' (2007: 66-67). All societies have members who are deemed to be extraordinary or special, and who attract the attention of other members of the community (Alberoni, 2007). These privileged members usually fall into two categories: those whose prominence results from holding institutional power, and the 'powerless elite' - where stars are situated because they lack institutional power; distinguishing them from those whose elite position results from being governing figures (such as The Royal Family or parliamentary leaders) (Alberoni, 2007).

Redmond and Holmes (2007: 61) consider stars to be 'the main actors in a film, or the leading performers in a (music) video'. This implies that only those with principal positions in media texts can be considered stars, suggesting one must reach a degree of recognition and attain a level of respect in their field before they can reach star status. Giles (2018) notes that, along with film stars, those within popular music and sport are also commonly attributed the term, contrasting with forms of celebrity whose recognition originates from media representations. This suggests a distinction between stars and celebrities based on the origin of their recognition - if they are recognised for their abilities and skills in a particular field, they are a star in that area (a film star, a sports star, a popstar); whereas if they are recognised as a result of their lifestyle and representations in media texts, they are considered more generally as celebrities. Thus, the term 'star' carries a certain amount of gravitas and respect as it suggests a level of skill and achievement in their specific field (Redmond & Holmes, 2007).

Next, I will explore definitions of celebrity. Despite being perhaps the most commonly used term in the celebrity studies vernacular, there is a surprising amount of contention over exactly what celebrity *means* and what celebrity *is*. The following discussion will examine existing conceptions in order to delineate a broad definition that can inform the research. Within the varying scholarly definitions of celebrity, Giles (2018: 10) notes three general trends:

One is that celebrity is defined in terms of how it is talked about (a discursive definition); a second that is defined by its impact on the individual celebrity (a psychological or phenomenological definition); a third is that it is defined in terms of its impact on the public (a broadly sociological definition).

Giles' first category of celebrity definitions considers scholars who have described the phenomenon as discursively constructed through media texts, representations and public conversation. Marshall conceptualises celebrity as 'a metaphor for value in modern society' and as 'a very public discourse about the dimensions of what is public and what is private, and, ultimately, what is intimate' (2014a: xii). Similarly, Turner defines celebrity as '*a genre of representation and a discursive effect*' (2004: 9, emphasis in original). He further considers celebrity as a shift in culture towards valuing visual moments of short-lived drama and excitement, over stability and rationality. Turner also considers celebrity as an industry, formed at the confluence of three processes - commodification of the individual; situating the celebrity within people's identity forming processes; and constructing their image through media representations. This is highly relevant for YouTube vloggers for whom a key part of their appeal is their ability to be relatable to their audiences, and a crucial factor in their success is their self-branding and ability to transfer this brand to commodities (Jerslev, 2016). As YouTubers are able to represent themselves through their own channels and social media platforms (Hou, 2018), they are potentially less reliant upon mainstream media representations for their success - particularly as YouTube establishes itself less as an alternative to mainstream media platforms, and more as a media outlet in its own right (Morreale, 2014). However, traditional media representations may still be of value to YouTube celebrities, especially if they wish to mobilise their popularity outside of the Internet as Joe has done<sup>39</sup>.

For Boorstin (1961), celebrity is a prefabricated construct that exists to gratify society's inflated ambitions of success and achievement. This positions the construct of celebrity as a marker of exceptionalism in society - a symbol of greatness and success that the wider population can only aspire towards. Boorstin further depicts celebrity as the product of public engagement and interest in representations and discussions of these figures. Rojek (2001) also views celebrities as fabrications, considering them to be created through 'the

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<sup>39</sup> A notion I will interrogate later in the analytical chapters.

attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere' (2001: 10). He explains that whilst celebrities may appear on the surface to be 'intimate and spontaneous', they are actually very carefully constructed and negotiated with the help of cultural intermediaries<sup>40</sup> whose role is to manage the celebrity's public persona.

Redmond and Holmes (2007) discuss contemporary celebrity as a vast, multi-faceted phenomenon that enables stars to be represented across a range of media platforms, spreading their image globally. They note, '[c]elebrities are now rarely restricted to a single medium, and the commercial and cultural value of the modern star or celebrity is seen to be predicated on their inter- and cross-textual appeal' (2007: 6). Giles offers a different perspective, considering celebrity to be 'primarily a *cultural* phenomenon' - something that is moulded and influenced by the social, cultural and political climate within which it exists (2018: 6). This is certainly true of popular vloggers for whom the existence of YouTube and their resulting popularity is indicative of a wider cultural shift towards digital media, user-generated content and a culture of sharing private lives online.

Giles' (2018) second category of the psychological or phenomenological definition of celebrity encompasses those for whom celebrity is concerned with the lived experiences of fame on individuals. Boorstin simply defines celebrity as '*a person who is known for his well-knownness*' (1961: 57, emphasis in original). Turner summarises ideas from Boorstin, stating 'the celebrity develops their capacity for fame, not by achieving great things, but by differentiating their own personality from competitors in the public arena' (2004: 5). Similarly, Gamson (2011) notes that in order to function, the celebrity industry doesn't require stars to be exceptional but it does insist they live for the camera. Here, Gamson conveys that it is not individuals' extraordinariness that the star system is reliant upon - it is their willingness to forfeit their privacy and allow their lives to be examined on the public stage. This suggests that by allowing themselves to be

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<sup>40</sup> See [The star-making industry](#)



photographed, recorded and followed, stars will be rewarded in the currency of coverage and attention. Gamson's point holds much relevance to YouTubers and influencers whose success is predicated on the perceived access they give viewers to their lives (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Ots, 2016); thus 'living for the camera' is a necessary condition for those wanting to build a following online.

An alternate perspective comes from Currid-Halkett who defines celebrity as 'the special quality that some individuals possess that propels society to care more about them than about other people' (2010: 6). Similarly, Ferris defines celebrities as 'highly visible, well-known individuals who may or may not have some special quality, talent, or skill, but who are widely recognizable on a national or even international level' (2010: 393). She adds that 'at the core of being a celebrity is the experience of being recognized by far more people than one can recognize back' (Ferris, 2010: 393). This encapsulates a sense of what it means to experience fame on any level, and could be considered true of those with a substantial audience online who are widely recognised but would not recognise their followers individually.

Also in this category is Holmes and Redmond's consideration that the term celebrity is used on a general scale to categorise the 'contemporary state of being famous', with celebrity being understood in both cultural and academic spheres as signifying 'a redefinition of the public/private boundary' for the famous person, where attention is primarily given to their private life instead of their career (2010: 5). Rojek asserts that 'celebrity status always implies a split between a private self and a public self' (2001: 11), which supports this notion that celebrities must redistribute their boundaries and allow the public access to their private lives to succeed in the star system. This ongoing negotiation between public and private boundaries is also significant for digital creators for whom providing intimate access to their lives in their content is key to their appeal (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Ots, 2016; Marwick, 2013).

Giles' (2018) third category, the sociological definition of celebrity, considers those who conceptualise celebrity in terms of its impact on society. Rojek (2001) deems celebrities to provide the population with heroic idols and role models, offering a welcomed contrast to the mass conformity and mundane predictability of contemporary society. Rojek further proposes that celebrities 'are symbols of material success' whose displays of extravagant wealth and excess simultaneously evoke feelings of desire, aspiration, jealousy and disapproval (2001: 93). Alternatively, Marshall discusses celebrities as 'heightened examples of individual achievement and transformation' that challenge traditionally fixed structures of social class by representing the potential for class mobility, whereby people have the opportunity to transcend their pre-existing social status if they only work hard enough (2006: 317).

Whilst celebrity does not have a fixed, agreed upon definition, some of the commonalities in these conceptualisations can aid the understanding of celebrity as a construct, a lived experience and in terms of its influence on contemporary culture. Celebrity as a discursive construct can be described as an industry and value system, which is shaped by the sociocultural and economic context within which it exists, and that privileges drama and excitement. Celebrity, as defined by lived experience, is a state of being recognised by others outside of your immediate social and professional circles, and possessing some kind of inherent star quality that evokes public attraction and interest in you. Lastly, sociologically, celebrities can be considered to be motivational figures for the public, offering the narrative of attainable social mobility through possessing talent or positioning the self to be more like them. These definitions can help inform the analysis of the process of ordinary to mainstream celebrification experienced by Joe, and the inherent discursive, experiential and sociological ways celebrity operates within this.

## What makes a celebrity?: Celebrity status and star qualities

Key to understanding stardom is considering what actually makes a celebrity, examining some of the different routes of entry into fame, as well as the skills and characteristics that are deemed most likely to lead individuals to succeed in the spotlight. Here, I will examine ideas in existing scholarship around celebrity status and star qualities that can underpin the analyses of online fame later in the thesis.

### Celebrity status

Existing literature has considered celebrity status in relation to one's route to fame. Perhaps the most significant understanding of this is Rojek's (2001) proposition of three forms of celebrity status: ascribed - referring to celebrity status which results from an individual's family connections and means that their fame is predetermined<sup>41</sup>; achieved - those whose fame is the result of their 'perceived accomplishments ... in open competition' (Rojek, 2001: 18) and are therefore considered to possess special talents or proficiencies; and attributed - those whose fame is constructed by repeated representation as significant or extraordinary by the media and cultural industries. Rojek's categorisations of celebrity status are supported by Gamson (2011: 1063) who considers celebrity to be generally formed of two principal, but often contending, narratives around the relationship between celebrity status and talent or worth:

In one, people become famous because of achievement, merit, talent, or special internal qualities, earning admiration and attention; they are cream at the top of a meritocracy. In the other, people become famous because they have been made so, artificially produced for mass consumption by a team of investors, publicists, makeup artists, magazine publishers, and the like; they are factory products.

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<sup>41</sup> Although the magnitude of this status can be increased or reduced as a result of their behaviours and actions (Rojek, 2001)

These narratives show a clear link with Rojek's (2001) achieved and attributed forms of celebrity status. However, these notions of celebrity status in relation to YouTubers and influencers are perhaps more contentious. Someone like Joe can be considered to have achieved his prominence through his ability to successfully build an online brand, create engaging content and grow his audience; however he also has a level of ascribed fame from his sister Zoe's online prominence. As the Internet celebrity industry becomes more established and the potential for fame and wealth continue to be realised, it could be argued that there is a degree of attribution and production involved in online content creators' fame. Gamson (2011) notes that the second more produced form of celebrity status often involves ordinary people who are perceived to have attained their status through luck and chance, rather than as the result of accomplishments. This is a common narrative positioned against YouTubers and online content creators - particularly by traditional media outlets who often delegitimise their prominence (Deller and Murphy, 2019) - and fails to acknowledge the labour involved in building an audience and a career online<sup>42</sup>.

A further form of celebrity proposed by Rojek (2001: 20) is the celetoid, which he defines as 'the term for any form of compressed, concentrated, attributed celebrity'. He notes that celetoids rely on many of the same representational media practices to present themselves to the public as those used by more traditional forms of celebrity. Their fame is characterised by attracting an intense but short-lived period of media attention, which is then quickly forgotten about soon after. The celetoid's star career is fleeting and fragile as they lack the special talents or skills that would allow them to sustain a more durable career in media and entertainment (Turner, 2006). Turner also considers celetoids to lack career ambitions outside of the desire to attract media attention and visibility, resulting in them being unable to maintain public interest; thus their moment of fame is short-lived. Similarly, Giles notes that celetoids' fame is 'forever linked to the show they appear in or the brief period of news coverage that follows the

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<sup>42</sup> See [Microcelebrity as a practice](#); [Influencer labour](#)

events that brought them into the headlines' (2018: 82). This suggests that celestoids' lack of skills or talents leaves them unable to develop their star image outside of their point of origin to progress to new areas of fame; thus their prominence quickly fades as the star system moves onto the next big thing. Celestoids are certainly relevant to Internet culture where user-generated memes and viral content are constantly being produced and circulated, creating short-lived moments of fame for people around the world on a daily basis (Abidin, 2018). It is interesting to consider Joe in relation to this concept as someone whose experiences are in opposition with the short-lived Internet visibility experienced by celestoids; instead managing to sustain a long-term career trajectory from Internet prominence. Thus, this research aims to interrogate Joe's practices and strategies throughout his career to consider what it is that has enabled him to be so successful in sustaining a career online, whilst also attaining a level of mainstream fame.

#### Star qualities: Talents, skills and charisma

A common belief in discussions of what leads an individual to celebrity status is that of possessing special talents and characteristics, as highlighted in Rojek's (2001) achieved form of celebrity. Turner (2004) argues that it is usually consumers of celebrity culture that deem stardom to be an inherent quality, residing in certain exceptional people and waiting to be uncovered by talent scouts from the star industry. This quality is characterised as 'both natural and magical: journalists, feature writers and publicists speak of their 'presence', their 'star quality', and their 'charisma' (Turner, 2004: 4). Currid-Halkett also recognises charisma as a key part of celebrities' appeal, although she notes that 'sheer determination to be noticed' and 'the luck of being born beautiful or being in the right place at the right time' (2010: 6-7) are further possible star-producing factors.

Aside from charisma, previous literature on celebrity lacks consensus around the notion of stars possessing inherent characteristics or skills that lead them to

stardom. Dyer questions this notion, arguing that 'not all highly talented performers become stars, nor are all stars highly talented' (1979: 18-19) - a notion that holds particular relevance when considering contemporary celebrity culture and its increasing population of ordinary-people-turned-famous reality TV stars<sup>43</sup>. At the time of Dyer's writing, reality TV as a genre was yet to exist<sup>44</sup>, however this point suggests a longstanding presence of those who are perceived to lack skill or talent in celebrity culture. Dyer also argues that the concept of talent is specific to the sociocultural and historic context in which it is situated. He explains that rather than people having specific inherent talents or skills that produce fame, it is instead their ability to be 'a certain sort of person or image' that results in them being deemed exceptional, thus considering the production of individuals as celebrities to be a cultural and ideological matter (1979: 18-19). In other words, what might be perceived as a talent or skill in one culture or time period may not be considered so in another - it is a matter of which abilities and characteristics cultures and belief systems place value on at a given time, and the acknowledgement that these are not fixed. Instead, Dyer posits the qualities that lead to stardom as in flux and reflective of what is valued within the cultural and historic moment.

Also rejecting the notion that stars require special talents or skills is Currid-Halkett who argues '[t]oday anyone can be a celebrity', explaining that at the heart of being a celebrity is the essential notion of being someone who evokes public desire to know more about them and details of their life (2010: 7). Giles (2010) acknowledges that fame remains seen as a very attractive status to obtain in contemporary culture and there are now a greater number of opportunities for people who wish to do so. Despite this, Giles argues that this higher prevalence of those who obtain prominence without any perceived talent or skills has resulted in the trajectory of their fame becoming much shorter than

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<sup>43</sup> See [Ordinary celebrity](#)

<sup>44</sup> Despite this, there were programmes around at this time that we may consider congruent with what we now call reality TV, however at this time this had not been coined as a genre. Whilst the name reality TV has been used in scholarship since the 1990s, it was not until the early 2000s that the term became popularised and used by the mainstream press (Deller, 2020).

those entering the spotlight through more traditional talent-based routes. This is especially true for Rojek's (2001) celetoid form of celebrity which, as previously discussed, is characterised by an individual without any exceptional talent or skill, enjoying an intense but ephemeral moment of fame that lacks the durability of more traditional modes of stardom. Joe appears to challenge this notion of an individual who has attained prominence through his personality, rather than through being perceived to possess traditionally valued talents or skills<sup>45</sup>, that has been able to build and maintain a level of fame. As such, it is particularly interesting to consider the strategies and practices he has implemented throughout his career trajectory which may have enabled him to successfully sustain his prominence.

A further consideration comes from Turner (2004) who notes that once an individual has reached fame, their status is no longer reliant upon the work or accomplishments that originally prompted their rise to prominence, and their elevated status thus usurps their initial route to the spotlight. This is not true for the celetoid who, as Giles (2018) notes, is only known and remembered for the original moment that resulted in their prominence, and is quickly forgotten before they can transition this fame to other outlets. Turner continues to state, '[i]ndeed, the modern celebrity may claim no special achievements other than the attraction of public attention' (2004: 3) - a notion that is especially true for Rojek's (2001) attributed and celetoid forms of celebrity which are, by their very nature, constructed through media representations in order to attract public attention. Turner's statement holds particular relevance to YouTubers and Internet celebrities who are often criticised for lacking talents or skills (Deller & Murphy, 2019), asserting that in contemporary celebrity culture, these are not requisites to fame.

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<sup>45</sup> Such as singing, acting or dancing, as are commonly valued skills and talents which could produce fame in the traditional celebrity industry. However, Joe's ability to perform himself in a way that appeals to audiences and fosters a connection with them, as well as his later pursuits in graphic novels, comedy and presenting can certainly be considered skillful.

Currid-Halkett encapsulates that the key commonality amongst all stars, regardless of their route to fame, is 'the basic fact that we are interested in them' (2010: 7). There is consensus that attracting interest and public attention is fundamental to becoming famous, with their path to fame being less of a factor here. There is agreement that an individual's route to fame may play a role in determining the durability and trajectory of their celebrity status, particularly in the case of ordinary people and celestoids (Giles, 2010; Rojek, 2001).

### The star-making industry

In addition to considering the factors that can produce fame on an individual level, it is also important to consider the contributing factors outside of the individual in the form of the star-making industry. As Rojek explains, celebrity is often 'largely the result of the concentrated representation of an individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural intermediaries' (2001: 17-18). By cultural intermediaries, Rojek is referring to the team of professionals involved in managing, promoting, photographing, styling, maintaining the appearance of, and assisting the celebrity. These cultural intermediaries help construct, manage and distribute the celebrity's public persona with the ultimate goal of helping to produce and maintain an image for the star that is attractive to and connects with audiences (Rojek, 2001). As Dyer states, '[i]mages have to be made. Stars are produced by the media industries' (2007: 85).

As YouTube and social media have developed as a commercial space for people to form careers and make money, we have seen the emergence of various management companies, agents, and PR/publicity agencies who specialise in this new breed of online social 'talent'. These function as what Bishop (2018b) terms digital cultural intermediaries - new media stakeholders working as digital talent management agents and MCNs<sup>46</sup> who are using practices informed by traditional media industry strategies to shape the digital media economy. As such, it is useful to think about the ways in which cultural intermediaries,

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<sup>46</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)



particularly those holding management and promotional roles, function within the traditional celebrity industry in order to help understand the ways these practices have been appropriated towards the digital media ecology.

## The power and function of celebrity

To understand YouTube as a phenomenon, it is important to first consider the power and function of celebrity more generally, reviewing existing scholarship in this area to understand the ways in which stardom functions and holds power within society. The role of celebrity in society has been discussed in previous literature as having ideological, economic and social functions. Here, some of the key ideas from each perspective will be outlined, considering the implications of these ideas to the context of YouTube celebrity and online fame.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) discuss the function of celebrity as ideological, arguing that celebrity is intended to serve as a motivational image for mass society, depicting individual potential for success. Marshall (2014a) explains that inspirational images of celebrity perpetuate fame and success as universally achievable statuses; however these promises are false. The reality is that the 'reward' of celebrity status is only handed out to a select few. This exclusivity only works to uphold and further disseminate the mythical discourse of attainable stardom and success to the masses (Marshall, 2014a). Dyer (1979) likens the public's generalised vision of the ways stars live to the narrative of the American dream, asserting that celebrities' perpetuation of this myth of success rejects the notion of a social class system and makes it seem possible for anyone to rise through the ranks and become successful, regardless of their previous socioeconomic and cultural status. Despite the reality of celebrity status being unattainable to most, the ideological narrative perpetuated by celebrity culture that fame and success can be achieved by working hard is powerful enough to attract individuals towards the inspirational magic of stars (Marshall, 2014a).

In addition to their ideological function, scholars have considered the economic role of celebrities. Cashmore (2014) argues that stars are designed to keep the public spending money. Similarly, Currid-Halkett recognises the economic significance of celebrity, asserting, 'people get wealthy from stardom, products are sold through celebrities' (2010: 21). Key to celebrities' success as marketing devices is their perception as success symbols, evoking feelings of want, jealousy and criticism toward them simultaneously (Rojek, 2001). Stars' status as symbols of success stems from public perception of their lifestyles as glamorous and excessive, which, according to Dyer (1979), is perpetuated by three key aspects - the common materialities of the star lifestyle, e.g. mansions and private jets; stars' displays of wealth and status; and celebrities' roles as idols of consumption i.e., being admired for their consumption and leisure activities.

Scholars also argue the importance of celebrities' social function. Turner (2004) explains that some sociological perspectives attribute the increasing public investment in celebrities and popular culture to a decline in traditional communities, which has resulted in a lack of social relations with family members and the wider community. This gap, he explains, becomes filled instead with parasocial interactions with on-screen characters and media figures<sup>47</sup>.

Taking these ideas forward, celebrity can be recognised as having important ideological, economic and social functions in society through promoting motivational narratives of achievable success; functioning as marketing devices who promote aspirational consumption; and as figures who fulfil human needs for social interaction and community.

## Celebrity masculinities

Important to celebrity is the notion of gender and the way this is performed as part of a star's image. Previous research has explored the way gender manifests in celebrity representations, identifying discrepancies in the way stars are

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<sup>47</sup> See [Parasocial interaction](#)

treated, with females often subjected to heightened media scrutiny (Geraghty, 2000; Holmes & Negra, 2011). This is particularly true of working class female stars who are often deemed to perform femininity incorrectly (Skeggs, 2001), resulting in them being positioned as delinquent, abject 'celebrity chavs' (Tyler & Bennett, 2010). Alternatively, male stars are often applauded for their working class, 'gritty' masculinity, which is portrayed as sexy and as conveying authenticity (Skeggs, 2005). On YouTube, masculinity is performed in a 'softer, gay-friendly, feminist-oriented' way (Morris & Anderson, 2015: 1212), offering a more progressive approach to gender compared with conventions of typical hegemonic masculinity. This involves being more open emotionally and in touch with their femininity, being inclusive and supportive of queer identities, and engaging in close social interaction with other males (Morris & Anderson, 2015).

This 'softer' form of masculinity identified within YouTubers' behaviours offers parallels to the masculinities performed by boy band members which convey 'innocence, immaturity ... and inauthenticity' (Hansen, 2018: 195). Innocence is cultivated through avoidance of intoxicating substances and undesirable behaviours to ensure they are appealing to young girls, whilst obtaining the approval of fans' parents (Hansen, 2018). Immaturity is conveyed through performing themselves in a way that appears to sustain their adolescence (Hansen, 2018), despite being adults. Finally, inauthenticity stems from assumptions that pop musicians have a lack of independence, musical skill and agency in their musical and creative direction - a gendered devalorisation of music which is typically female-oriented (Hansen, 2018). Despite boy band masculinities being considered inauthentic (Hansen, 2018), the boy-next-door images they portray succeed in appealing to young girls who are often positioned as behaving obsessively and hysterically, and represented as 'hormonally out of control' and 'heterosexually desiring' in relation to band members (McCann & Southerton, 2019: 49).

Also key to celebrity masculinities is the notion of male relationships. The close, homosocial interactions with other males displayed in YouTuber masculinities (Morris & Anderson, 2015) links with the contemporary phenomenon of the 'bromance' - a term combining brother and romance to describe a 'same-sex, non-sexual male friendship' (Savin-Williams, 2019). 'Bromantic' relationships are described as 'more emotionally intimate, physically demonstrative, and based upon unrivalled trust and cohesion compared to their other friendships' (Robinson, Anderson & White, 2018: 94). As such, bromances reject conventions of hegemonic masculinity which promotes heteronormativity and a lack of emotionality, and fears behaviours being deemed homosexual (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014; Robinson et al., 2018). Bromances are regularly portrayed in film and television, often involving 'dynamic duos' of on-screen characters (DeAngelis, 2014: 2). Bennett (2011) discusses the TV presenting duo Ant and Dec whose portrayal of working class ordinariness, genuine friendship and construction of cheeky, affective personalities have enabled them to forge long-standing television careers from their homosocial dynamic. The notion of bromances is particularly relevant to Joe whose friendship with former flatmate and fellow YouTuber Caspar Lee has played an important role in his career trajectory<sup>48</sup>.

## Celebrity and representation

Existing literature in celebrity studies has commonly emphasised the importance of representation for celebrities<sup>49</sup>. Marshall (2014a) positions celebrities as a type of representation within popular culture, deeming them reliant on the media who provide them with platforms from which they gain power and have their voices heard. Similarly, Turner argues that '[m]odern celebrity ... is a product of media representation' (2004: 8), highlighting the importance of the role played by the media in creating celebrities. Turner further stipulates celebrity as being itself 'a

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<sup>48</sup> See Chapter 6 - '[Jaspar](#)'

<sup>49</sup> Whilst there is not room to interrogate previous conceptions of representation more broadly in this literature review, the way I understand and refer to it in this section is informed by Stuart Hall's definition of representation as 'the production of meaning through language' (Hall, 1997: 16).

*genre of representation and a discursive effect'* (2004: 9, emphasis in original), and a commodity that is exchanged by those who construct and distribute the representations. As this research is concerned with the career trajectory and celebrification of an individual, it is useful to understand ideas around how celebrity status is constructed through representation to support the interrogation of Joe's own self-presentational and brand development practices.

Giles (2018) considers the culture of 'mass representation' to facilitate the perfect conditions for celebrity to thrive by enabling the processes of celebritisation and celebrification to occur. Similarly, Marshall (2010) considers celebrity to play a vital role in what he terms representational culture, deeming stars to be dependent on the power of the media for building and maintaining their status. On the other hand, Polaschek (2017) critiques this view of celebrities as being produced by media representations, considering this perspective to not account sufficiently for the celebrities' own agency in creating and shaping their star image.

Some scholars have noted a shift in culture from representational media towards more presentational forms (Marshall, Moore & Barbour, 2015; Moore & Barbour, 2016). Marshall, et al. (2015) explain that whilst previously celebrities utilised the powers of representational media (e.g. mainstream media formats), there is now the need for them to also engage with more presentational forms (e.g. social networking sites). They further note:

This is a shifted form of agency where the individual, via their social media accounts, is an agent in the movement of content and also the adjudication and evaluation of that content amongst a network of connected people. (2015: 291)

This means that celebrities are now able to utilise media forms that give them more control over the production and dissemination of their star image,

compared to leaving this solely in the hands of third parties through the traditional mechanism of the mainstream media. Moore and Barbour consider the shift towards presentational media to have 'produced a new set of claims to authentic selection and framing of events relevant to the ongoing management and presentation of online identity to personally curated audiences' (2016: 4). This gives celebrities not just more control over the way their image is received, but also allows them to produce images of themselves that appear to be more authentic in new ways. Whilst these ideas are concerned with more traditional modes of fame, the notions of representational and presentational media are highly relevant when thinking about popular YouTube vloggers like Joe who are highly skilled at building and maintaining a profile across both of these types of media. In particular, this research considers the relationship and tensions between presentational and representational media as Joe builds a career trajectory and star image which spans both online and traditional media platforms, with varying levels of control over the way he is constructed.

## Audience and star relationships

Key to considering anyone with a public profile - whether that be celebrity, a YouTuber or a social media influencer - is the relationship between the individual and the audiences that follow their lives and engage with their content. In this section, I will discuss some key theories about the relationships between audiences and traditional stars, considering how these ideas can be relevant when thinking about online fame. I will begin by discussing Horton and Wohl's (1956) influential theory of parasocial interaction, before considering how this can be applied to the contemporary digital media context.

## Parasocial interaction

### Conceptualising parasociality

Horton and Wohl's (1956) conceptualisation of parasocial interaction considers the relationships formed between television and radio personae and the audiences that consume their media content. They define parasocial interaction as the phenomenon by which TV and radio stars are able to elicit feelings of intimacy in those with whom they are otherwise unfamiliar with, providing audiences with the illusion of face-to-face relationships as a result of regular, close observation. These parasocial interactions develop as audiences are offered the chance of an ongoing relationship with the personae, which is mediated through them making regular, dependable appearances in audience members' schedules; thus becoming intertwined in their daily routine and eliciting feelings of knowing the star on a personal level. In particular, Horton and Wohl note on-screen personae as being particularly effective in evoking feelings of parasociality in audience members because they are often shown looking straight into the camera, directly addressing the audience and communicating in a way that feels personal and private. Despite the intensity of the audiences' feelings of connection with the personae, it is important to note that parasocial interaction is characterised by its one-sided nature and, as such, the feelings of intimacy experienced by the viewer are only an illusion of such and are never reciprocated by the personae. Nevertheless, Horton and Wohl recognise that, despite the illusory nature of the intimacy between viewer and personae in parasocial interactions and relationships, these feelings are highly powerful to those who experience this phenomenon.

Despite being written more than 60 years ago and in the context of television and radio audiences, Horton and Wohl's (1956) ideas are still highly relevant to media audiences in general and are commonly used to underpin research into audience relationships with celebrities and media texts. One of the most significant contemporary discussions of parasociality comes from Giles (2010) who utilised

the concept to ground his work on the psychology of the media. In this work, Giles (2010) considers the difference between parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships, determining a parasocial relationship as one that develops through repeated episodes of parasocial interaction and extends outside of the interaction with the personae in the media text. In a parasocial relationship, the audience member continues their engagement with the media personae outside of their consumption of the media text in their own thoughts and through discussions with peers (Giles, 2010).

### Parasociality online

Since Horton and Wohl's conceptions were published in 1956, the Internet and social networking sites have somewhat complicated matters within parasocial theory. Giles (2010) has discussed some of the complications the influx of online social media brings to parasocial theory, explaining that many have used the concept to describe computer-mediated interactions. However he deems this incorrect, rejecting the notion that parasociality can account for the online interactions that have come to form an important part of modern life in the Web 2.0 era. This is because the concept of parasociality was developed to describe one-sided interaction experienced by audiences of traditional media forms; thus he advocates the need for a new concept that can accurately describe the relationships experienced by those interacting with one another online without visual contact.

Despite this, the Internet still affords opportunities for one-way communication and interaction that is more similar in nature to parasocial interactions between traditional media and its audiences. Giles (2010) gives the example of one-way communication on social media between audiences and bands or public figures who they are able to 'befriend' on MySpace as reflecting a parasocial interaction. The social media landscape has changed significantly since Giles' writing in 2010. Indeed, 2010 was the year that Instagram launched, and since then, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have usurped MySpace as



the most popular social networking sites. Whilst these platforms still afford opportunities for audiences' interactions to be reciprocated, the vast follower numbers experienced by celebrities online means that it is much less common for interactions to be reciprocated. Thus, the majority of user interactions with stars online are one-sided, perhaps more closely representing a digitised version of Horton and Wohl's (1956) parasocial interaction. As such, parasociality as a concept can be utilised to help understand the ways in which Joe has fostered and maintained an intimate relationship with his audience throughout his career.

### Parasociality, celebrities and social media

Previous research has considered parasociality in relation to the celebrity fan dynamic, particularly online. Baym (2013) identifies that connections between performing artists and audiences are often viewed as parasocial, however this is complicated by web-based interactions. Traditionally, celebrities have viewed audiences as an anonymous, collectivised group. However, social media has fundamentally altered this, enabling celebrities to develop affective social relationships with their audiences through reciprocal communications and interactions (Baym, 2013).

Marwick and boyd's (2011) research into celebrity practice on Twitter identified that celebrities often reveal personal information, or at least give the perception of such, in their tweets; thus fostering feelings of intimacy between them and their followers. In particular, Marwick and boyd found that celebrities 'publicly acknowledge fans, and use language and cultural references to create affiliations with followers' (2011: 139). Celebrities also publicly interact with other stars, giving audiences perceived access to private interactions (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This perceived access to intimate interactions conveys a level of what Goffman (1956) terms backstage access and suggests they are witnessing authentic, candid interactions and relationships<sup>50</sup>. Marwick and boyd (2011) conclude that while performed intimacy in celebrities' tweets coincides with

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<sup>50</sup> See [Self-presentation](#)

parasocial relationships, it does not function to replace *actual* interactions. These ideas around practices of personal disclosure and performed intimacy within celebrities' tweets function as online self-presentation practices, helping to strengthen the parasocial relationships audiences build with them by fostering a sense of closeness through the way they perform towards their followers. These ideas can offer insight into the ways in which Joe's self-branding, authenticity and networking practices on YouTube and Instagram help to build and develop his relationship with his audience.

### Parasocial interaction on YouTube

The concept of parasocial interaction is particularly relevant when thinking about popular vloggers on YouTube who share personal aspects of themselves and their lives online in a manner that fosters parasocial interactions between creator and audience (Smith, 2014). Research by Rihl and Wegener (2017) identified a high level of parasociality between audiences and the YouTube celebrities whose content they consume. This enabled them to conclude that parasocial interaction can be successfully applied to the context of digital audience and star relationships, in addition to traditional broadcast media formats (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Rihl and Wegener found correlation between the age of the viewer and the level of parasocial connection they had with YouTube celebrities with older users reporting less connection than younger users - something they suggest is related to the prevalence of young YouTube celebrities, and Schmid and Klimmt's (2011) finding that 'parasocial relationships are stronger when similarities exist between actors and viewers in terms of character traits and personal backgrounds' (cited in Rihl & Wegener, 2017: 7). As such, it can be understood that those who are closer in age, characteristics and background to the YouTuber tend to experience greater identification and levels of parasociality.

The parasocial relationship between YouTuber and audience differs from mainstream media celebrities in that they are perceived as familiar to their audience, with vloggers often using their homes as backdrops for their videos,

using language and colloquialisms understood by their audience and by covering topics that are valued by their viewing demographic (Rihl & Wegener, 2017). Viewers are also found to have a particularly strong interest where there was longer-term, regular interactions with the vlogger, resulting in the YouTuber becoming more firmly intertwined with viewers' lives (Rihl & Wegener, 2017). Despite this, viewers did not perceive their parasocial relationship with YouTubers to extend to a real-life friendship, although viewers often desire to meet YouTubers face-to-face. Instead, they were able to conclude a uniqueness in the YouTuber-audience relationship in that it is 'neither deeply emotional' or 'hierarchically constituted'; rather, 'it is a matter of virtual relationships between equals, in which YouTubers appear to act as reliable, albeit somewhat superficial, friends' (Rihl & Wegener, 2017: 10). The sense of familiarity and relatability in YouTubers' content, coupled with the opportunities online platforms afford for audiences to interact with their favourite vloggers, 'suggests a feeling of approachability and communication between equals' (Rihl & Wegener, 2017: 2). This is particularly interesting because this perception of equality differs vastly from the parasociality between audiences and traditional media celebrities where there is a clear perceived hierarchical distinction. As this research is concerned with the celebrification of Joe Sugg throughout his career trajectory, it is interesting to consider these ideas in relation to hierarchical dynamics between him and his audience as his career progresses and his celebrity status increases.

## Ordinary celebrity

Within celebrity studies there has been a contemporary trajectory that focuses on ordinary people. This began as early as the 1940s when Gamson explains 'celebrity production ... became more visible' and public suspicions 'that celebrity status was artificially produced and undeserved' (2011: 1063) became heightened. In response to this, formats such as 'camcorder cinema-vérité', early forms of reality television, daytime chat shows, and hidden camera

programmes began to emerge (Grindstaff, 2012: 23). Thus, the emergence of ordinary people (and ordinary celebrities) in the media offered audiences an attractive alternative of authenticity behind the carefully constructed exterior star image (Gamson, 2011). In this section, I will discuss ideas around shifts in media and celebrity cultures that have led to increased public attention and interest in the ordinary from the demotic turn, to reality TV, to the Internet.

## The demotic turn

In 2004, Turner coined the phrase 'demotic turn' to describe the increasing prominence of ordinary people in the media, resulting in celebrity losing its prestige. This notion is echoed by Gamson who argues that this 'decisive turn toward the ordinary' has resulted in a celebrity culture that 'is increasingly populated by unexceptional people who have become famous and by stars who have been made ordinary' (2011: 1061-1062). Abidin (2018) characterises the demotic turn as a shift in which fame and stardom become attached to aspects of the ordinary lived experience. This, she explains, occurs through media producers offering ordinary people the chance to participate in the world of fame by opening up their private lives for observation and scrutiny on the public stage (Abidin, 2018).

Turner (2004) makes the important distinction between demotic and democratic, explaining that, whilst it is true that the media has opened itself up to a more socioculturally diverse range of participants, this does not necessarily equate to a politically democratic shift in media cultures. The demotic turn offers 'an increased *appearance* of participation - which may include more spaces for people of color, queer people, and so forth - tightly circumscribed within a hierarchical media system' (Marwick, 2015: 355). The demotic turn offers the illusion of equal, democratic access to the world of celebrity through portraying everydayness. Despite this, the authenticity conveyed is actually carefully

constructed; thus the notion of celebrity in the traditional media world continues to be 'hierarchical, exclusive and gatekept' (Abidin, 2018: 6). Turner (2006) notes that it is in the interest of the celebrity industries to disguise the true restrictive nature of access to the celebrity world because perpetuating the ideal of achievable celebrity provides the industry with willing participants for their content. This supports traditional celebrity conceptions around the myth of attainable celebrity, which serves to inspire and attract the public to the magic of stardom<sup>51</sup> (Dyer, 1979; Marshall, 2014a). As such, Turner (2006) notes that it is the celebrity industry's ability to uphold this guise so convincingly that is a defining attribute of the demotic turn.

## Reality TV

Abidin (2018) notes that as ordinary people have become more prevalent and valued in the media, reality television has been one of the genres that has most capitalised upon this. Turner (2006) notes that since exploding in popularity around the year 2000, reality TV has driven an increase in the amount of ordinary people wanting to become celebrities. He further explains that the growth in demand for ordinary celebrity, and an increase in the amount of reality TV being produced, has resulted in a relationship between the two which is both symbiotic and a catalyst for further growth. In addition, television producers have come to realise that ordinary people afford them the opportunity to create new stars for the needs of each format (Turner, 2006); rather than choosing from the pool of pre-existing celebrities who may not be suited to the programme's needs. One of the key consequences of this shift towards ordinary celebrity and the huge growth of reality TV is 'an acceleration of the industrial cycle of use and disposal for the products of these trends' (Turner, 2006: 155). In other words, the speed and trajectory of celebrity becomes intensified, meaning that celebrity status can be built in a very short space of time, and, equally, can be taken away just as quickly (Turner, 2006)<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> As discussed in [The power and function of celebrity](#)

<sup>52</sup> Rojek (2001) conceptualises this form of celebrity as the 'celetoid' (see [Celebrity status](#)).

Deller (2016: 375-376) proposes a cyclical model to describe levels of fame and motivations for participation in reality TV, which is comprised of six stages:

- 'Pre-celebrity' - ordinary people hoping to enter 'civilian' reality formats to achieve a level of recognition.
- 'Proto-celebrity' - those who have an existing level of prominence within a niche and are looking to widen their recognition.
- 'Promotional celebrity' - professionals who may not necessarily be deemed to be stars that are aiming to increase their recognition, whilst promoting their professional labour.
- 'Proper' celebrity - household names who appear on reality shows in expert or guest roles, rather than as contestants.
- '(Re)-purposed celebrity' - those looking to rebrand themselves towards a different field or in attempt to revive their reputation after controversy.
- 'Post-celebrity' - individuals who have lost their past prominence and are looking to restore their star status.

This model is helpful in that it understands celebrity as a cyclical process, which individuals can move through with strategic brand management - something particularly relevant to this research's focus on longitudinal career development.

According to Andrejevic (2004), the relationship between TV producers and willing reality TV participants is interdependent and offers a simple but mutually beneficial exchange – ordinary people are invited to participate in the production by allowing themselves to be filmed and, in return, they are offered a shot at the lottery of fame and potential fortune. Turner explains that the only requirement of participants is that they 'can perform their ordinariness with some degree of specificity or individuality'; thus talents, skills or special qualities are not barriers

to entry (2006: 160). This notion is echoed by Andrejevic (2004) who explains that, whilst participation in reality TV needs no particular skill or qualification, it does require its participants to allow access to their private lives, ready to be exposed and exploited for the public's viewing pleasure (Andrejevic, 2004).

Gamson (2011) notes that the commonly-portrayed reality TV narrative of an ordinary person transforming into an attention-worthy 'somebody' perpetuates the idea that celebrity is democratic, however he considers this to be a myth. Similarly, Andrejevic (2004) explains that reality TV uses the promise of achievable celebrity status to draw members of the public in, willing them to participate so producers can exploit their eagerness to allow access to their private lives, in return for a chance at fame. He further notes that this results in the star system appearing fair and like everyone has an equal chance of fame, thus supporting Gamson's argument of perpetuating the myth of a democratic star system. The reality is that 'celebrity still remains a systematically hierarchical and exclusive category' (Turner, 2006: 157). Despite the reality, it seems that the appeal of fame and stardom and the myth of a democratic star system remains strong enough that many 'ordinary' people will do everything they can for a moment in the spotlight. Contemporary digital cultures and the advent of Web 2.0 have created more opportunities for ordinary people to attain a level of prominence with less reliance on the mechanisms of the traditional media industries (Gamson, 2011) - something I will discuss in the next section.

## Ordinary celebrity and the Internet

The Internet has furthered celebrity culture's shift towards the ordinary, offering anyone the chance to produce content and increase their visibility, as well as allowing 'everyone to gain greater participation in and control over the mediated version of reality in which they are immersed' (Andrejevic, 2004: 5). The Internet

has opened a platform for numerous types of 'DIY celebrity', including the 'celebrification' of the self through online self-presentation practices (Turner, 2006: 156). Early instances of ordinary people gaining prominence online includes bloggers, 'camgirls'<sup>53</sup>, tech entrepreneurs (Marwick, 2013), citizen journalists, and popular users of platforms such as MySpace and Live Journal (Senft, 2008).

The Internet makes it easier for normal people to reach audiences and build followings without needing to go through the traditional mechanisms of the celebrity industry, giving increased power to audiences who are able to create stars by giving them support in the form of attention and following (Gamson, 2011). Gamson further notes, 'the Internet drastically widens the pool of potential celebrities by lowering the entry barriers' (2011: 1065). The types of celebrity produced online are generally different to traditional Hollywood images of stardom, privileging ordinariness over exceptionalism; however, it is common for people to use their Internet fame as a springboard to attempt to launch a career in traditional media (Gamson, 2011). It is also increasingly common for ordinary people creating content on YouTube to turn their hobbies into careers, resulting in the professionalisation of content creation on the platform<sup>54</sup> (Hou, 2018).

Existing literature has also considered YouTube specifically as contributing to the demotic turn. Bakioğlu explains that YouTube affords individuals potential to reach a wide audience without much financial expense, thus 'bridging the gap between the ordinary citizen and the celebrity' (2016: 9). This notion of putting power in the hands of the people positions YouTube as a democratic space where anyone can upload and share content, and reach audiences. According to Smith (2014), conveying ordinariness is key to YouTube content, and this becomes a fundamental characteristic from which vloggers build their online celebrity personas. He further notes that this celebrification of the ordinary results

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<sup>53</sup> Webcam girls - see Senft (2008)

<sup>54</sup> See [#ad: Earning an income online](#)



in increased self-awareness for the YouTuber, thus 'vlogging celebrity becomes 'meta' celebrity as the person becomes highly self-aware of the [sic] own conditions of their celebrity persona' (2014: 258). This notion of the commodification and performance of ordinariness, highlighted by Smith, is an interesting feature of YouTube vlogs, and a notion that will be interrogated in relation to Joe's online content throughout the thesis.

## Microcelebrity

In 2008, Senft coined the concept of microcelebrity which very much relates to the notion of DIY celebrity and ordinary people. She defines microcelebrity as 'a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social networking sites to 'amp up' their popularity among readers, viewers and those to whom they are linked online' (Senft, 2008: 25). Marwick builds upon Senft's definition, stating that '[r]egardless of one's actual audience, micro-celebrity is a way of thinking of oneself as a celebrity, and treating others accordingly' (2013: 115). In addition to thinking of themselves as a celebrity, Marwick (2015) further notes three key facets of being a microcelebrity - implementing self-presentation techniques to construct a star persona for public consumption; strategically managing their online persona in order to attract followers and maintain their popularity; and viewing their audience as a collective fanbase. She also makes the important distinction that microcelebrity is not 'simply a smaller, scaled-down version of celebrity', nor does it require the individual to have a large online following (2015: 358). It describes the practices implemented by ordinary people to gain attention and attract a following online, regardless of their actual audience size (Marwick, 2015).

Since Senft (2008, 2013) and Marwick's (2013) early conceptualisations of microcelebrity, a lot has changed in the online celebrity landscape, resulting in

the concept developing in response to this. Giles argues, '[t]he prefix 'micro' seems inadequate to capture the state of online celebrity in 2018' (2018: 72). He considers the distinctions between traditional celebrities and online celebrities to have become somewhat blurred and less significant than they were 10 years ago. This, he posits, is because the reach of social media has increased exponentially on a global scale, allowing online stars to attract audiences that far exceed those attainable by traditional broadcast media; thus resulting in a reduced need for online celebrities to transfer their online fame to mainstream media formats. Further, Giles notes that the explosion in online fame has led to a reduction in the economic and cultural power of traditional celebrities, with audiences - particularly younger consumers - being more heavily influenced by online celebrities instead. Despite this, Giles acknowledges the prevalent use of the term microcelebrity in scholarship when discussing prominent online personalities such as YouTubers and Instagrammers, regardless of the actual scope of their reach and power. Joe can certainly be considered to have a large audience that he holds influence over, however it is nevertheless useful to think of him in relation to the concept of microcelebrity to aid understanding of the self-branding, presentational practices he employs to build a brand and maintain his online following.

## Microcelebrity status

In *Status Update*, Marwick conceptualises microcelebrity as existing 'on a continuum, from ascribed to achieved' (2013: 116). Ascribed microcelebrity, she posits, relates to those who are well-known to a specific sub-group of the population with their status being assigned to them, often as the result of celebrity content being made about them. Within their cultural sub-group, ascribed microcelebrities are perceived as holding high status, receiving the kind of treatment typically associated with mainstream celebrities (Marwick, 2013).

Alternatively, she defines achieved microcelebrity as being the result of an individual utilising social media to implement strategic self-presentational practices such as building an online persona, sharing aspects of their personal life to forge feelings of intimacy with their audience, viewing those who follow them online as fans, and carefully cultivating this persona to maintain their audience and attract new followers.

Whilst the two ends of the microcelebrity continuum stipulated by Marwick present contrasting routes to prominence, she notes that both types have in common a reliance upon 'attention and visibility to maintain their elevated status' (Marwick, 2013: 148). In later work, Marwick shifts her focus towards the achieved form of microcelebrity, using the concept to describe the mindset and performative self-branding practices utilised by individuals to build and maintain an online following (Giles, 2018; Marwick, 2015). These ideas hold particular relevance to this research's concern with Joe's self-presentation and branding practices throughout his career, and how this relates to notions of (micro-)celebrity status.

### Microcelebrity as a practice

In considering microcelebrity as a set of practices, microcelebrities are situated as practitioners who 'strategically construct their presentation to appeal to others' (Marwick, 2013: 113). Existing literature on microcelebrity acknowledges that one of microcelebrities' key roles is creating, managing and maintaining their relationship with their audience who are viewed as a fanbase (Giles, 2018; Marwick, 2013, 2015). This involves direct interaction with their audience through responding to messages and comments on their social media channels - something they aim to consistently upkeep, making them seem more accessible than traditional celebrities, whilst helping them to maintain their following

(Marwick, 2013, 2015). This direct interaction with their audience is a key characteristic of microcelebrity that distinguishes it from more traditional modes of fame where only 'the illusion of interaction and access' is provided (Marwick, 2013: 118).

Marwick also notes the importance of microcelebrities mediating their relationship with their audience through the personal details they choose to share in their content (Marwick, 2015). She explains that microcelebrities often divulge intimate details about their personal lives, their families and their relationships, and share their thoughts and feelings in their content. Allowing fans intimate access to their lives enables the microcelebrity to foster intimate connections (Marwick, 2013) and appear authentic to audiences, therefore deciding what personal details to divulge requires careful consideration (Giles, 2018). This notion of sharing their personal lives is key to the microcelebrities' appeal and uniqueness - as Marwick notes, 'while mainstream celebrities are expected to protect their privacy, micro-celebrities cannot or they'll lose this attention' (2013: 143). Allowing access to their personal lives results in their microcelebrity persona being perceived as less managed, commodified and moderated than traditional media celebrities (Marwick, 2015). This perpetuates the microcelebrity as authentic, which is one of their most appealing characteristics over traditional media celebrities (Marwick, 2013), and something that will be interrogated analytically throughout this thesis in relation to Joe's authenticity practices<sup>55</sup>.

A further practice that is intrinsic to being a successful microcelebrity practitioner is constructing and maintaining an online identity, managing it as if it is a commercial product or brand (Senft, 2013). Jerslev deems microcelebrity to require creating a personal brand that can be commodified, resulting in a celebrification process that 'merge[s] commodification and branding smoothly

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<sup>55</sup> See [Chapter 5: Authenticity Labour](#)

with intimacy and authenticity' (2016: 5240). Mavroudis and Milne (2016) discuss these self-branding practices as requiring the microcelebrity to act as their own public relations agent in order to carefully manage and strategise their online brand. They describe this process as a form of largely immaterial labour, which requires 'promoting a sense of self in order to gain fame or status online' (Mavroudis & Milne, 2016). There is consensus in existing literature that branding the self into an appealing, commodifiable, consistent persona is a challenging, labour-intensive job (Marwick, 2015; Mavroudis & Milne, 2016), which is why traditional celebrities generally outsource this work to publicity and public relations professionals (Mavroudis & Milne, 2016). It is just as important for the microcelebrity to ensure that, despite the intensity of labour involved in self-branding behind-the-scenes, their personal brand appears effortless and authentic to audiences (Mavroudis & Milne, 2016). Marwick (2015) notes that microcelebrity self-branding focuses on consistently performing a version of themselves that is attractive to audiences and appears authentic, rather than placing value on being themselves.

As previously highlighted, attracting and sustaining attention is vital for the survival of microcelebrities who operate in what is referred to as the attention economy (Fairchild, 2007; Marwick, 2013, 2015). The attention economy is described by Marwick as a system in which brands and individuals alike compete for public attention with 'page views and clicks' deemed as measures of success (Marwick, 2015: 363). This system, which places value on the social media success metric of likes and follows, promotes the idea that users should be aware of these statistics and be actively trying to boost them through cultivating a larger following and competing for audience attention (Marwick, 2015). This value system is inherent within microcelebrity culture which functions as 'a new form of cultural capital based on followers and likes' (Mavroudis & Milne, 2016). As such,

capital is a useful lens to consider microcelebrity, online fame and the likes and views currency of the attention economy through<sup>56</sup>.

## Limitations of microcelebrity

Whilst microcelebrity is a useful concept for considering online celebrities, it has its limitations. The concept was initially developed to describe the mindset inhabited by ordinary individuals who practiced self-branding and celebrification through social media. In the years since Senft (2008, 2013) and Marwick's (2013) early conceptualisations, the online celebrity landscape has shifted hugely. It is now common for prominent Internet celebrities to reach far wider audiences and have much greater influence on fans than traditional media celebrities (Giles, 2018). In 2013, Marwick stated, 'online celebrities are not traditional celebrities, they do not have teams of agents and managers to protect them from the public, and they lack vast sums of money' (2013: 114), however this is no longer true for some. It is now commonplace for online stars with substantial followings to have audiences larger than those of mainstream television, to be professionally managed and represented by talent agents, and to earn substantial sums from their online content and associated commercial activities (Giles, 2018).

Traditional celebrities have also begun to take on the practices of micro- and influencers, using digital platforms to connect and even develop social relationships with audiences (Baym, 2013), share content, engage in brand partnerships, and even make announcements such as publicly 'coming out' (Lovelock, 2016).

Giles (2018) highlights a further limitation with the microcelebrity concept, explaining that microcelebrity implies a scope that limits the reach of their prominence and visibility to a specialist sub-group, rather than attaining

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<sup>56</sup> Discussed later in this chapter - see [Capital](#)

mainstream popularity. This is problematic because contemporary online celebrities are often not intending to use their platform as a stepping stone to reach traditional media fame, nor are the mainstream media welcoming them in with open arms. Traditional media frequently rejects the legitimacy of online celebrity (Deller & Murphy, 2016, 2019; Giles, 2018), however Giles (2018) notes that the once hierarchical dynamic between traditional and Internet celebrities has shifted to become somewhat more equal (although still distinct from one another). As a result, there is less desire from online celebrities to break into the mainstream media, and achieving Internet fame alone has become a popular goal (Giles, 2018). Likewise, with traditional celebrities using social media platforms to share content and connect with audiences, and even engage in online brand partnerships, the boundaries between microcelebrity and traditional celebrity have become much less defined. However, the concept of microcelebrity still offers value to the research, particularly to help draw insight from markers of status and changes in practices within Joe's content as his career trajectory progresses.

## Influencers

### Conceptualising influencers

In recent years, a new type of prominent online figure has emerged that blends ordinariness with self-commodification and intertwines everyday life with branded content: the social media influencer. Born out of early microcelebrity and blogging cultures, influencers are individuals who have managed to build lucrative careers from their online personas (Abidin, 2016a) and are regarded as 'the epitome of Internet celebrity' (Abidin, 2018: 98).

Abidin (2015) defines influencers as 'everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the

textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles'. Key to influencers is their ability to merge commodification with their everyday lives, monetising their followings through the integration of commercial partnerships in their content (Abidin, 2015). According to Abidin and Ots (2016), the main appeal of influencers is that their content revolves around sharing highly personal aspects of their lives that would usually be kept private in the case of other public figures. Influencers support their online content and engagement with followers through physical interactions with their audience in the offline world, making them seem accessible, credible and authentic to followers, while fostering feelings of intimacy (Abidin & Ots, 2016). The phenomenon of social media influencers is dominated by females primarily aged 15-35, although this range is constantly expanding as new influencers emerge and long-standing ones get older (Abidin, 2016b). Abidin's research also found that around 70% of influencers' followers are female with an age demographic predominantly between 13 and 40 years of age. Despite the influencer industry being female-dominated, Joe can certainly be considered an influencer due to his large online following and the commodification of his content, however it is interesting to note that he is in the minority of males within this space.

Whilst social media influencers encompass microcelebrity practices, they offer more of a multi-platformed approach to building and maintaining an online persona (Abidin, 2016b), with the additional functions of helping to form and shift public opinion (Abidin & Ots, 2016), and engaging in entrepreneurial labour to sustain a profitable business (Abidin, 2018). Whilst Marwick (2013) considers microcelebrities not to have professional management and representation in the form of cultural intermediaries, it is commonplace for influencers to be managed by an agency who are responsible for negotiating collaboration projects and brand endorsements, receiving a commission in return (Abidin, 2016a). This is certainly true of Joe who operates across multiple online platforms and was represented by a talent management agency for a significant period of his career. As such, it is interesting to consider Joe's career development in relation to



influencer practices, interrogating his self-branding, authenticity and networking in relation to this merging of the everyday with commodification in order to earn a living online.

## Trust, intimacy and access: Influencer relationships with followers

Key to the success of influencers is the relationships they build and sustain with their audiences through the persona they share online. In the relationship between influencer and audience, influencers refer to their viewers as followers, as opposed to fans 'in rejection of the status elevation and sense of distance this hierarchical naming implies' (Abidin, 2015).

This relationship is centred around creating feelings of intimacy between the influencer and their followers through engaging with followers in a way that makes it seem like they are being given exclusive access to the influencer's private life (Abidin, 2015). Influencers further foster feelings of intimacy through emphasising their ordinariness in their content, sharing everyday aspects of their lives to show their normality and lessen the perceived distance between themselves and their followers (Abidin, 2015). These perceptions of intimacy between influencers and their followers creates a trusting relationship, however they must take care not to breach this when deciding to take on commercial partnerships and sponsored content as voiding this trust would be detrimental to their careers (Abidin & Ots, 2016). As such, commercial partnerships can be considered a key part of influencers' self-brand management, therefore they are important to consider when interrogating Joe's self-branding practices throughout his career.

## #ad: Earning an income online

In order to sustain a career online, influencers must find ways to monetise their content and earn revenue through producing advertorials, endorsing products and selling commodities (Abidin, 2018). These marketing practices are also

longstanding facets of the celebrity industry within which commodifying individuals is one of the key processes in the production of fame (Turner, 2004). Turner (2007) explains that once a celebrity has reached prominence, their fame can be transferred to other related areas through marketing, advertising and endorsements, becoming their own lucrative brand. Stars' abilities to generate revenue is a key part of their role with Turner asserting, 'celebrities are developed to make money' (2014: 36); thus advertising and endorsements form essential parts of their careers.

The power and appeal of celebrities as marketing devices is consistently recognised in existing literature. Rojek explains the desirability of celebrity endorsement for advertisers as resulting from celebrities' abilities to 'change things and fill us with powerful inclinations and cravings' (2001: 91) - something companies are willing to spend lots of money to obtain. Celebrities are some of the most powerful assets available to the advertising industry because of their ability to intensely hold and represent certain meanings which can then be related to commodities (McCracken, 1989). McCormick (2016) explains that celebrity endorsement can be particularly successful for persuading millennial<sup>57</sup> consumers who are much more concerned about brand identity and brand image than previous generations. However, endorsement can also result in development and growth of the star's image. Boorstin asserts '[e]ndorsement advertising not only uses celebrities; it helps make them' (1961: 58). This notion is echoed by Hou (2018) who considers advertising and marketing as key aspects within the production of star image, noting that exposure as a result of involvement with brands helps to build and maintain the star's profile. Similarly for influencers, the ability to monetise their audience by engaging in commercial partnerships is vital for their career development, enabling them to earn money from posting content online. As Abidin notes, '[u]nlike traditional celebrities with their occasional million-dollar endorsements, Influencers depend on a constant

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<sup>57</sup> Millennials are defined as the generation of those who were born between 1981-1986 (Dimock, 2019)

stream of smaller sponsored posts, appearances, and endorsements for income' (2018: 94).

The most common form of influencer marketing content is the advertorial. Defined as 'highly personalised, opinion-laden promotions of products/services' (Abidin, 2015), advertorials are the predominant way for influencers to capitalise upon their online platforms to earn a living (Abidin, 2018). Abidin and Ots (2016) explain that influencers are attractive to advertisers as promoters of their brands because of the high levels of social capital they possess and the intimate, trusting relationships they hold with their audiences, making them valuable marketing devices. Influencers' perceived ordinariness makes them appear less commercial and more trusted than traditional marketers (Audrezet, de Kirviler & Guidry Moulard, 2020) and mainstream celebrities (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017) when advertising products. This is due to influencers' incorporation of personal narratives and perspectives, and their opinions from personally experiencing and using the products or services into their advertorials (Abidin, 2016a). According to Abidin and Ots, 'effective advertorials are those that are so natural and personal in tone that readers are unable to distinguish between them from the daily narratives which Influencers publish online' (2016: 156). Therefore, it is vital for influencers to create advertorials that seamlessly fit with their usual content and their self-brand. In addition, Abidin (2018) notes that some of the most entrepreneurial influencers end up creating brands of their own, mobilising their online persona to produce physical products (e.g. cosmetics, clothing and other merchandise). This enables the influencer to capitalise upon their online following to boost interest, attention and sales in their business, whilst enabling them to earn money from the venture (Abidin, 2018).

As previously highlighted, influencers have to be very careful when choosing which companies to work with and which products to endorse so as not to risk breaching the highly trusting relationship they have with their audience (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Anything the influencer promotes needs to be a good fit with their

online persona and personal brand, as well as fitting seamlessly with the style and narrative of their existing content (Abidin & Ots, 2016). As such, Audrezet et al. identify two key authenticity strategies utilised by influencers to ensure their commercial partnerships do not threaten their perceived authenticity: passionate authenticity - the notion that 'they are driven by their inner desires and passions more so than by commercial goals'; and transparent authenticity - 'a set of means to provide a truthful and exhaustive representation of brand partnerships as well as personal opinions' in order to uphold integrity (2020: 565). Above all, it is essential for influencers to prioritise sustaining their personal brand over taking on the narratives and values of commercial partners because it is this integration with their personal branding that makes their endorsements so valuable (Abidin, 2018). This is indicative of an industry shift towards genuine affection and authenticity in influencers' commercial endeavors, alongside just merely attracting attention (Abidin, 2018).

## Influencer labour

### Conspicuous consumption and the leisure class

The notion of constructing and sharing a desirable lifestyle online for others to emulate is rooted in Veblen's (1899) theorisation of conspicuous consumption which discusses the practice of purchasing and consuming goods for the purpose of displaying wealth and power to others. Conspicuous consumption can take the form not only of purchasing material goods but also in the consumption of food and drink, clothes worn and possession of properties (Veblen, 1899). Here, value is placed on the level of wealth displayed so the amount of celebration and reward a person receives for their consumption of goods increases in proportion to the value and opulence of the goods displayed. To avoid being considered stupid or lacking credibility, these displays of wealth should be carefully curated to portray tasteful consumption (Veblen, 1899). Here, the individual must consider conveying taste in the aesthetics of the goods they consume, ensuring these are 'the right kind of goods', however it is important to

also 'know how to consume them in a seemly manner' (Veblen, 1899: 36). Thus, Veblen's theorisation of conspicuous consumption involves constructing one's self-presentation through the consumption of commodities, carefully choosing the objects of consumption that will be on display in order to portray good taste, and ensuring that these goods are consumed in a manner appropriate for a member of the leisure class.

Veblen's theorisation of conspicuous consumption was conceptualised in relation to what he terms the leisure class – an elite group whose affluence allows them to abstain from industrial labour, to take part in leisure activities and to spend time conspicuously consuming goods in an attempt to increase their societal status and power (Veblen, 1899). The labour market and socioeconomic conditions have changed significantly in the century since Veblen's writing. Despite this, scholars have considered Veblen's ideas in relation to contemporary phenomena including celebrity, influencer and social media cultures. In particular, celebrities' self-presentational practices on social media through selfies have been considered as forms of conspicuous consumption (Hackley, Hackley & Bassiouni, 2018); Instagram has been highlighted as a key site for displays of conspicuous consumption through individuals' portrayals of idealised lives (Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017); and influencers' online content has been positioned as promoting conspicuous consumption through conveying aspirational lifestyles (Hund & McGuigan, 2019).

### Visibility labour

Being an influencer involves a type of immaterial labour termed by Abidin (2016b) as visibility labour – the work of carefully constructing their self-presentation and brand in order to make themselves appealing to others. As well as engaging in visibility labour to increase their own profile, Abidin (2016b) also notes that influencers commonly encourage these behaviours in their followers by asking them to engage with their content by liking, sharing and commenting in an attempt to increase the content's visibility and, ultimately, boost

the influencer's profile. The visibility labour undertaken by followers when engaging with influencers' content is carried out in such a way that it feels instinctive and is not viewed as a form of labour (Abidin, 2016b). It feels like a natural exchange between the influencer's content and the follower's attention, and is an intrinsic part of operating in the attention economy<sup>58</sup>.

## Self-presentation and self-branding

### Self-presentation

In order to unpick Joe's career development and self-branding, it is important to consider the ways he presents himself. Self-presentation can be defined as the way people present themselves in an attempt to influence the way they are perceived by others (Terry, Sweeny & Shepperd, 2007). As highlighted in previous sections, self-presentation is a key part of the practices of microcelebrities (Marwick, 2013, 2015), and influencers (Abidin, 2016b). It is therefore important to first consider theories of self-presentation to gain an understanding of what this means in sociological and psychological terms. Self-presentation forms a key part of building an online brand, as well as appearing authentic to audiences. Networking can also be considered a form of self-presentation, functioning as what Abidin (2014) terms markers of 'pecuniary taste', whereby individuals' social networks, and displays of these connections, are used to portray desirability, exclusivity and perceived value. As such, the people Joe chooses to publicly connect himself to, and equally, distance himself from, can provide insights into the image and identity he is trying to project. Thus, this section will review key scholarship relating to self-presentation which can help inform the inquiry.

Perhaps the most influential work relating to social and psychological understandings of self-presentation is Goffman's (1956) *The Presentation of Self*

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<sup>58</sup> see [Microcelebrity as a practice](#)

*in Everyday Life*. According to Goffman, individuals act in certain ways to try and give off a positive impression to others, with the hope other people will act favourably towards them in return. He likens this notion of self-presentation to a dramaturgical performance on a public stage, dividing the self into the front and back stage self. The front stage is where a chosen identity is projected to the audience through a carefully constructed performance (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013), intended to give a desirable impression. The performance is aided by setting, which is made up of things such as furniture, room décor and other items that function as props and help convey the performance (Goffman, 1956). In addition to setting, Goffman also notes the importance of the performer's personal front which he defines as 'the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes' – for example, age, sex, race, behavioural characteristics and body language (1956: 14). Goffman notes it is often helpful to divide the components of personal front into appearance and manner, based on the information they convey and its purpose. Stimuli that fall into the appearance category provide information to the audience about the performer's social status; whereas those in the category of manner suggest the type of interaction they can expect from the performer in the imminent situation. Alternatively, Goffman defines the back stage self as where the performer can relax and be themselves, hidden from view. This requires no performance as the individual is in private and 'may forgo speaking his lines and step out of character' (Goffman, 1956: 70).

Despite the prevalence of Goffman's theorisations, they have their limitations. Leary and Kowalski (1990) explain that his analysis fails to discuss the motives that cause people to alter their behaviours in order to influence others' impressions of them. They propose their own explanations for this, arguing that people are often concerned with the ways they are perceived by others and may alter their behaviours in order to create this perception. This process is referred to as impression management, which is defined as 'the process by which people

control the impression others form of them' (Leary & Kowalski, 1990: 34)<sup>59</sup>. Thus, Leary and Kowalski propose a two-step process of impression management, consisting of impression motivation – 'the degree to which people are motivated to control how others see them'; and impression construction – the physical actions taken by a person to control others' impressions of them (1990: 34).

### Self-presentation in the digital age

Recently, many scholars have taken Goffman's theories of self-presentation and explored their relevance to the online environments that form an instrumental part of daily life in contemporary society, thus offering a new type of public stage upon which performances of the self occur.

Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) offer a recontextualisation of Goffman's ideas to investigate notions of identity and selfhood in blogs and the game *Second Life*<sup>60</sup>. Considering the Internet as a public stage and the offline world as the backstage, they found that, rather than choosing to adopt new personae, participants tended to try and replicate their offline self in the online world. Participants did not replicate their offline self in its entirety, instead choosing to highlight selective elements of their personality through the way they expressed themselves online; thus supporting one of Goffman's key arguments: 'that, when in 'front stage' we deliberately choose to project a given identity' (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013: 110). Bullingham and Vasconcelos' findings are congruent with wider digital sociology and Internet studies literature where the Internet's ability to afford individuals opportunities to take on multiple personae and experiment with notions of identity without restrictions is acknowledged (Turkle, 1995). As Baym notes, this 'ability to construct an online identity, whether authentic, fanciful, or manipulative is limited and enabled by the communicative

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<sup>59</sup> Impression management is often used to describe the same concept as self-presentation within existing literature, however, for consistency, I will use self-presentation to denote this concept throughout this thesis.

<sup>60</sup> *Second Life* (2003—) is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) where players enter a virtual world in which they can create things and interact with other users.



tools, or affordances, a platform makes available and our skill at strategically managing them' (2010: 108).

The Internet offers new challenges to existing ideas of self-presentation and offers unique opportunities for individuals in the ways they can present themselves and have various identities online. Reichart Smith & Sanderson (2015) note that the Internet has brought with it the opportunity for individuals to have greater governance over their self-presentation. The anonymity afforded by the Internet allows people to adopt different personas and express different sides of themselves without fear of judgement from their real-life peers (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons, 2002). Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) explain that this physical distance makes it easier for the performer to hide aspects of their offline self, whilst enhancing and embellishing other aspects. In addition, multiple scholars recognise the opportunities afforded by the Internet for individuals to create new identities and explore alternative aspects of themselves (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Seidman, 2013).

Whilst Joe may claim to present an authentic version of himself online, it could be argued that he may still engage in practices of embellishment or highlighting certain aspects of his persona. Whilst selective self-presentation is a common practice implemented by most Internet users, it is interesting to interrogate this notion in relation to Joe because he is not only constructing an online persona that he claims is authentic; he is also profiting off this authentic image and using it professionally, thus separating his practices from those of everyday Internet users.

## Self-branding

Whilst self-presentation typically describes the ways in which the private self is presented on the public stage, these principles are employed in the practice of self-branding too, however self-branding tends to be more strategic in focus,

often with professional motivations. As discussed previously, self-branding is a key practice for microcelebrities and influencers. They implement strategic self-presentation practices to brand themselves in a way that is appealing to both audience and potential brand partners, therefore it is an important area of literature to consider for this study. In previous sections, self-branding has been discussed as a key practice of celebrities, microcelebrities and influencers - these areas have in common the notion of self-branding as a form of labour. Here, I will review some of the key ways in which self-branding practices have been discussed as a form of professional labour within the neoliberalist digital labour economy.

According to Khamis, Ang and Welling, self-branding is the process by which 'individuals [develop] a distinctive public image for commercial gain and/or cultural capital' (2016: 1). This notion is echoed by Marwick (2013) who positions self-branding as the process of strategically constructing the self as a professionalised commodity that can be marketed and sold and is attractive to employers. Similarly, Hearn defines the branded self as 'a form of self-presentation singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value' through capitalising upon lived experiences to promote the self as a culturally-significant brand (2008: 213). She further explains that the process of self-branding draws cultural value and monetary capital from emotion, aspiration and attention through carefully and strategically constructing a 'life-brand', developed to produce fame and earn money when sold to advertisers (Hearn, 2008).

According to Marwick (2013) self-branding has its origins in business and tech entrepreneurialism and, situated in neoliberalist ideologies, encourages individuals to reject the dominant economic labour structures and start their own businesses. As a result, individual entrepreneurs are required to brand themselves and their business in a way that has commercial appeal and is attractive to potential corporate partners, clients and customers (Marwick, 2013).

The labour of self-branding is reliant upon digital technologies and social media platforms and the opportunities they afford for creating the self-brand and promoting it to a wide audience without great barriers to access, such as financial cost (Marwick, 2013). However, despite self-branding originating from tech entrepreneurs, the premise of the self-brand and the practices of constructing and promoting the self as a commodity have been adopted by individuals outside of the business world with practices of self-branding now widely used in everyday online and offline interactions (Marwick, 2013; Scolere, Pruchniewska & Duffy, 2018). These self-branding practices rooted in entrepreneurial labour have made it increasingly common for those outside of entrepreneurship to feel it is necessary to brand themselves commercially (Banet-Weiser, 2012), particularly for workers in creative industries (Meisner & Ledbetter, 2020). The prevalence of self-branding practices shows the extent to which 'flexible corporate capital' has become ingrained in everyday life (including people's private lives) with the commodification and promotion of this celebrated under neoliberalist societal ideals (Hearn, 2008: 214).

Self-branding suggests that if one wants to succeed, they must focus on packaging and branding themselves effectively, rather than placing focus on improvement through developing their skills, increasing their ambitions and broadening their interests (Lair, Sullivan and Cheney, 2005). Khamis et al. (2016) explain that for individuals to construct a successful self-brand, it is important for them to market themselves like a commercial product, offering a unique selling point (USP) or characteristics that make them seem charming and stand out in the marketplace; as well as being appealing to the target audience. Similarly, Marwick posits 'a distinct username, ... multiple social media accounts, the distribution of content using the Internet, and the promotion of this content using social media' as key to producing a successful self-brand (2013: 185). Moreover, Lair et al. (2005) note that agility in the labour market, maximising opportunities and being self-motivated are expected as part of having a professionally appealing self-brand.

## The labour of self-branding for bloggers and influencers

Taking these ideas forward to the context of influencers and online content creators, self-branding practices are a crucial part of their labour in order for them to build their online audience and convert their following into a monetisable career. They must brand themselves in a way that is appealing to audiences, whilst conveying charisma and authenticity. They are also required to market themselves professionally through a strong self-brand that is both attractive to advertisers and can be successfully transferred to commercial brands and consumer products. Not only this but influencers must do this in a way that produces the self-brand as one coherent whole that fulfils the needs of appealing to audiences, is attractive to professional collaborators, and can be successfully mobilised to promote commercial goods of their own or endorse those of other corporations. Whilst there is limited literature that considers online content creators and influencer marketers in relation to the labour of self-branding, earlier work has considered the brand labour of bloggers, who can be considered earlier iterations of the multi-platformed influencers we know today.

Duffy and Hund's (2015) exploration of the self-branding of female fashion bloggers as entrepreneurs identified a common practice of top-tier bloggers presenting themselves in a way that makes them appear to 'have it all' through offering an idealised image of their lifestyle. Key symbols of this were the portrayal of pursuing work they are passionate about, leading a glamorous lifestyle, and carefully considered content-sharing on social media platforms (Duffy & Hund, 2015). Whilst these symbols were identified from studying fashion bloggers, they are arguably highly relevant to social media influencers more generally. The portrayal of pursuing passionate work, as described by Duffy and Hund, is produced through showcasing aspects of their labour that does not seem like work in the traditional sense, and appears closer to leisure activities such as 'meetings in shopping spaces, photoshoots in exotic locations, and the ability to work from home' (2015: 9). They note that these idealised portrayals of their labour fail to show the realities of a job that requires them to be 'always-on',

working and sharing at all hours, every day of the week (Duffy & Hund, 2015: 9). Next, Duffy and Hund identified portraying a glamorous lifestyle as a key trope used by fashion bloggers. This, they explain, is demonstrated by showcasing attending celebrity events, glamorous parties and regularly flying to various exotic locations around the world. They note that as authenticity is key to the appeal of fashion bloggers, these portrayals of glamour are often caveated by sharing images that depict normality and the notion they are '*just like us*' (Duffy & Hund, 2019: 9, emphasis in original). Despite this, they note that these images are still carefully curated and, although they attempt to depict candid, everyday life, they are still coherent with the overall aesthetic and self-brand built by the bloggers.

The authenticity practices of fashion bloggers discussed by Duffy and Hund (2016) are certainly employed by influencers today – in October 2019 the *New Yorker* published an article about the rise of what they termed the 'getting real' post on Instagram (Battan, 2019). Battan explains that these posts are often accompanied by long captions, with the content intended to depict the things people do not usually share in their idyllic portrayals of life on social media such as mental health. Essentially, these posts offer a contrast to the overly-curated, perfectionist aesthetic of influencers' social media feeds, and are deemed to be indicative of audiences growing tired of the idyllic aesthetics that have become synonymous with Instagram; 'creating a hunger for authenticity, or at least the appearance of candor' (Battan, 2019). Similarly, Tiggemann and Anderberg have explored the trend of 'Instagram vs reality' content where posts 'seek to expose the falseness of social media and thereby discourage women from comparing themselves with idealistic and unrealistic images' (2020: 2184). The trend is characterised by female users sharing a perfected Instagram photo - often depicting themselves with good lighting, angles and posing; alongside a more natural and less constructed version - the 'reality' (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). These posts perform authenticity through their claims to depicting reality and assertions that the perfected aesthetic of Instagram content is not real.

However, it is pertinent to question whether any content uploaded online can really constitute authentic reality because, regardless of whether the picture is consciously constructed or 'natural', there is a degree of self-presentation involved to ensure the images reflect certain characteristics. As such, while the images themselves may claim to be less constructed, composing posts and accompanying captions is, in itself, self-branding labour with users strategically arranging themselves to appear authentic. Both 'getting real' and 'Instagram vs reality' posts highlight the importance of authenticity (or at least the perception of such) online, and the desire from audiences to see content that depicts aspects of the real, everyday experience; alongside the carefully constructed, idealised aesthetic that has become so synonymous with Instagram.

## Conceptualising value: capital, reputation and status

### Capital

Also key to the success of the YouTube celebrity is capital, which allows them to build a following and a reputation. The idea of capital originates from Bourdieu and essentially means power; something which is accumulated over time (Bourdieu, 1997). The distribution of capital represents the inherent structure of the social world and Bourdieu (1997) considers there to be three fundamental types of capital – economic, cultural and social – each of which can be converted, under certain conditions, into the other forms of capital. This section will begin by introducing these three key forms of capital, before moving on to outline a further type - symbolic capital. Then, I will discuss how capital has been utilised in relation to celebrities and influencers in previous literature.

### Economic, cultural and social: Three key forms of capital

Economic capital refers to a person's economic value and can be directly converted into money, as well as being institutionalised into possessions and property (Bourdieu, 1997). This type of capital is discussed from a Marxist

perspective as privately accumulated economic wealth that materialises in the means of production, and is used to generate profit or produce extra value (Jary & Jary, 2000). Put simply, this means that economic capital is generally 'any 'asset', financial or otherwise, immediately usable, or potentially usable, as a source of income' (Jary & Jary, 2000: 54).

Cultural capital is defined by Jary and Jary as 'wealth in the form of knowledge or ideas, which legitimate the maintenance of status and power' (2000: 127).

Sadowski explains that 'cultural capital is a representation of class and tends to be invested by a person's family and transmitted from a person's domestic environment' (2019: 4). Taking these definitions forward, cultural capital can be understood as a person's value formed through possession of knowledge and ideas, and influenced by their social class, environment, and lived experiences. Bourdieu (1997) denotes cultural capital as existing in three forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Embodied cultural capital is acquired through possessing and understanding cultural knowledge and values, and is displayed through behaviours and personality characteristics; objectified cultural capital is accrued through possessing cultural artefacts such as art and books; and institutionalised cultural capital is attained through educational qualifications such as university degrees (Bourdieu, 1997). Cultural capital 'is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital' (Bourdieu, 1997: 47) - for example, academic qualifications can lead an individual to holding increased levels of value in the job market, resulting in access to higher paid jobs.

Social capital is defined by Bourdieu as 'the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119). He further explains that social capital is made up of a person's social connections and, like cultural

capital, can be converted into economic capital under certain conditions (Bourdieu, 1997). Bourdieu (1997) notes that social capital can also be institutionalised in the form of attaining a noble title. Sadowski (2019) proposes that social capital can be accumulated through social connections, in particular being part of 'privileged groups' – for example, through family connections or membership of clubs and societies. Similarly, Driessens notes that the amount of social capital accrued by an individual 'depends on the number of people that can be mobilized in an individual's network' (2013: 551). Sadowski summarises, '[w]hen people talk about the value of 'who you know' and 'networking,' they are talking about having and developing social capital' (2019: 4). In the Internet and social media age, social capital has become increasingly important for those trying to gain more exposure for themselves or their content online, attempting to attract attention and reach a wider audience by attempting to make their content go viral or get their topic trending – i.e. get lots of people talking about it (Ross, 2013).

### Symbolic capital

In addition to the three previously stipulated key forms of capital set out by Bourdieu, he further proposes a fourth, separate type of capital a person can accrue – symbolic capital. The concept of symbolic capital is less clearly delineated than the other forms of capital, however, I will attempt to define the key facets of the concept in a broad sense, and in the context of this research.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) posit symbolic capital as referring to the resulting form of capital that arises when the other forms – economic, social and cultural capital – are recognised and validated by others. Driessens (2013) notes that symbolic capital is usually specific to a certain field or group, thus the individual's recognition does not usually extend outside of this area. For example, a fan of a particular YouTuber may accrue cultural capital by watching all of their video



content and following their social media channels, however this cultural capital could then be converted into symbolic capital when their extensive cultural knowledge of the YouTuber is recognised by other audience members. For symbolic capital to exist and be recognised, it must occur within 'schemes of construction' – i.e. the structural systems through which symbols are organised and hierarchically ranked, which thus enable social actors to decode and understand the symbolic value of objects and individuals within that framework (Bourdieu, 1991: 238). In the case of the YouTuber's fan example, the structural system is less explicitly defined as, for example, in the case of an official ranking system. However, other members of that YouTuber's audience community will have a common, implicit understanding of the way the community operates and the perceived value of certain fan practices within the fan group. Thus, this functions as an inherent scheme of construction that enables symbolic capital to be distributed and earned within the audience community.

### Celebrity capital

In 2013, Driessens proposed a need for the redefinition of celebrity as a type of capital as a result of him considering previous definitions of celebrity to have a 'lack of explanatory power of the convertibility of celebrity into other resources, such as economic or political capital' (Driessens, 2013: 543). In response, he situates celebrity as a form of capital that is formed and accrued through repeated representation in the media, noting that without these representations, celebrity capital quickly diminishes. Driessens (2013: 557) outlines four key considerations within his conceptualisation of celebrity capital:

1. 'it is the individual agent who accumulates capital through recurrent media representations and who competes with other agents for celebrity capital and its recognition by other agents and institutions in the field of production'

2. 'these individuals aiming to gain celebrity capital have to be prepared to play the game of the celebrity industry'
3. 'media are obviously essential in understanding celebrity capital currently'
4. 'it is through the recognition of celebrity capital by others (the public) and through its conversion into symbolic capital or other forms of capital that it can be valuable within a certain social field'

Driessens (2013) also notes that celebrity capital is not merely a type of symbolic capital which operates within a particular field. Celebrity capital functions across multiple fields in the social world, and, as with Bourdieu's traditional forms of capital, can be converted into other forms of capital (Driessens, 2013). This exchange of celebrity capital for economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital is something employed by Internet celebrities and social media influencers who commonly convert the value of their online followings to sell products and merchandise (economic capital); build networks with brands and other creators (social capital); travel the world (cultural capital); and to gain recognition in the online world (symbolic capital).

### Social media influencers and celebrity capital

The notion of capital is fundamental to the existence of influencers who are reliant on attracting attention and gaining visibility in order to achieve and sustain their status and, thus, their career (Marwick, 2013). Marwick (2013) notes that in the social media attention economy, great importance is placed on metrics of popularity such as follower counts, likes and comments, which enable individuals to attain status. She further explains that, '[t]hese social values are embedded in the technology and thus encourage status-seeking behaviors that privilege audience and performance' (Marwick, 2013: 108). Thus, the focus on attracting attention means that the metrics of popularity afforded by each platform become the structures through which users can understand the hierarchical system and

place further value on others in the community. Thus, levels of celebrity capital are accumulated by popular users on social media platforms who are able to build and maintain a following 'by cultivating as much attention as possible and crafting an authentic "personal brand" via social networks' (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016: 194).

Social media influencers are reliant on producing this attention-based form of celebrity capital which can then be commodified and sold to commercial brands as a way to reach their target consumers and advertise their products (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2016). Here, we see a form of the conversion of celebrity capital described by Driessens (2013), whereby the influencer's celebrity capital is converted into economic capital through commodifying their self-brand, and using their following to sell products and obtain brand endorsement deals. This ability to convert online status into economic capital allows individuals to earn money, and potentially, forge a career online if they are successful at building a following – something Hearn and Schoenhoff (2016) situate as part of the reputation economy whereby the status and reputation produced by actively sharing and engaging on social media platforms constitutes value in the labour market. According to Gandini, 'reputation should be seen as the social capital of a digital society', explaining that it functions as a marker for trust amongst online communities (2016: 28). On social media platforms, reputation is quantifiable and measurable through metrics such as follower counts, likes and comments that are made publicly visible by platform interfaces (Gandini, 2016), as well as through verification markers (e.g. blue ticks) which denote an official account (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In this contemporary shift towards a reputation society, self-branding becomes increasingly important as 'we see a shift from a working self, to the self as work in the form of a self-brand with reputation as its currency' (Hearn, 2010: 426, emphasis in original).

## Conclusion

This chapter has situated the research topic in existing knowledge on themes relating to the research - in particular, in relation to notions of celebrity status, influencer cultures, Internet fame, value and reputation. These existing theorisations outlined do not interrogate the relationship between different levels of perceived celebrity status, particularly in relation to the transition from online prominence to wider recognition. As such, my research seeks to address this gap, exploring the spectrum of Internet to mainstream celebrification as a process through close examination of the career trajectory of Joe Sugg. The next chapter will outline the methodological approach used in order to conduct the inquiry, highlighting the data collection and analytical methods used, as well as the rationale for the approach taken.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## Introduction

Whilst the previous chapters have established the cultural and theoretical context of the research, this third chapter will move on to discuss the methodological approach to the research. The chapter is divided into three key sections which will outline the development of the research design, the data collection methods, and the analytical approach.

The first section will focus on the research design, philosophically grounding the approach and providing justification for the suitability of the case study methodology. I will discuss the development of the case study design, providing a rationale for the case selection and outlining the pilot testing process which helped refine the approach. Then, I discuss the shift from multiple to single-case design, providing justification for this change of focus, as well as identifying potential limitations. I also introduce digital ethnography as part of the broader case study methodology, identifying the strengths and potential limitations of this approach.

The second section will discuss the data collection methods used to gather the macro-, micro- and contextual data for the case study. A variety of methods including platform-specific data scraping, online observations, and manual gathering of Instagram, YouTube and ancillary media sources were used to gather the research data. As a result, this section will justify the use of these methods, highlighting some of the issues involved in working with different methods and data forms. There are also complex ethical considerations involved in working with online data which I will discuss in this section, outlining how these issues were navigated throughout the research process.

The third section of this chapter will focus on the analytic process, discussing the practices used to code and draw insight from the data using content, thematic and textual analytical approaches. I will also consider the suitability of these methods, highlighting potential limitations and acknowledging the importance of researcher reflexivity within the interpretive research process.

## Research design

### Philosophical underpinnings

Before discussing the research design, it is important to first consider the philosophical roots of the inquiry through the paradigm in which it is grounded. This consists of ontology - 'what is the nature of reality?'; epistemology - 'what is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?'; and methodology - 'how do we know the world or gain knowledge of it?' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018: 19). These paradigmatic assumptions guide the way the world is viewed and how knowledge can be understood and created (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Scotland, 2012), underpinning the way the research is designed and conducted (Bryman, 2012; Scotland, 2012).

My research is rooted in the constructivist paradigm, taking an ontologically relativist, epistemologically subjectivist and methodologically naturalistic approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Relativist ontology considers there to be multiple existing realities which are individually constructed by social actors through their lived experiences and interactions with the world and others (Dieronitou, 2014; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2018), rejecting the notion of a single 'correct' reality (Dieronitou, 2014). Subjectivist epistemology holds the belief that 'people construct their own understanding of reality' and that meaning is constructed by actors as a result of environmental interactions (Guba & Lincoln, 1985 in Lincoln et al., 2018: 116). As such, actors' lived experiences are

fundamentally intertwined with their version of reality, therefore their subjective understandings of the world are inherent in the research data (Lincoln et al., 2018). As this research does not directly work with participants, it is useful to consider these epistemological assumptions in relation to the way knowledge is produced by the researcher. Here, the researcher and the knowledge produced cannot be separated so it is important to acknowledge research as 'value-bound' (Dieronitou, 2014: 7), with findings tied up in the researcher's own lived experiences and subjective version of reality (Lincoln et al., 2018)<sup>61</sup>.

The constructivist paradigm advocates a methodologically naturalistic and hermeneutic approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2018). A naturalistic approach means studying 'things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018: 10); whereas hermeneutics values interpreting individuals' actions and constructions of reality, deriving meaning from metaphors and experiences to gain an understanding of phenomena (Guba, 1990, 1996 in Lincoln et al., 2018; Jary & Jary, 2000; Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012). This places value on researching phenomena in their natural environment, interpreting meaning from individuals' subjective experiences, as well as through the close-reading and examination of texts (Mohr, Wagner-Pacifici & Breiger, 2015) with the aim of gaining an 'authentic' understanding (Jary & Jary, 2000).

## Case study methodology

My research takes a case study methodology, which involves researching 'a contemporary phenomenon (the "case") in its real-world context' (Yin, 2014: 2) - Joe Sugg is the case in the real-world context of YouTube, the Internet and the contemporary celebrity industry. Case study methodology is not fixed to a philosophical standpoint, and, instead, offers researchers flexibility in relation to the methods used for their inquiry (Luck, Jackson & Usher, 2006). Historically, researchers have tended to approach case study research from either a

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<sup>61</sup> see [Researcher reflexivity](#)

postpositivist/realist or a constructivist/relativist position (Harrison et al., 2017). Postpositivist/realist research takes an objective, truth-seeking approach to case studies, lending itself to quantitative, statistical forms of data; whereas constructivist/relativist research aims to derive meaning and understanding about the nature of phenomena, thus, researching the phenomena in its natural setting by gathering qualitative data is most appropriate (Harrison et al., 2017; Stake, 2006). Harrison et al. (2017) also note a tradition towards a more pragmatic form of constructivist case study research (utilised by Merriam (1998)), which acknowledges the value in qualitative and quantitative methods in its aim to gain a rich, descriptive understanding of the phenomenon, but values rigour in the research procedures to ensure the credibility of the research. I consider my research to be more strongly rooted in the pure constructivist relativist tradition, rather than the pragmatic constructivist approach due to its primary focus on generating rich understandings through qualitative data.

Due to the complex nature of my methodological approach and the diversity of data collected, my research does not neatly fit into one paradigm. The data I gathered from platform-specific scrapes blurs the boundaries between qualitative and quantitative data due to their spreadsheet format, which lends itself towards statistical analysis. However, the primary purpose of gathering this data was to provide a macro-level overview of Joe's YouTube and Instagram content, helping identify examples for more in-depth qualitative analysis. As such, my research is more aligned with an ontologically relativist approach as the data is being viewed with the purpose of researcher interpretation.

## Rationale

According to Schwandt and Gates there are four distinct but 'not necessarily mutually exclusive' types of case study designs: '(1) description, (2) hypothesis generation or theory development, (3) hypothesis and theory testing, and (4) development of normative theory' (2018: 346). Descriptive case studies are the most common (Yin, 2014) and tend to utilise 'methods of document review,



participant observation, and in-depth interviews' to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). This notion of gathering multiple forms of data is common in a case study approach where different types of data are brought together and triangulated (Yin, 2014) to gain a holistic understanding of the phenomena. Prior to data collection and analysis, it is helpful for case study researchers to have established the theoretical context for the research, using this knowledge to guide the research process (Yin, 2014).

Case study research is particularly suited to research questions that ask 'how' or 'why', as well as for the exploration of contemporary phenomena where the researcher has little or no influence over behaviours and events (Schell, 1992; Yin, 2014). This makes a case study methodology particularly well-suited to my exploratory research into the contemporary phenomena of YouTube celebrity culture, which seeks to understand *how* self-branding practices, authenticity labour and networked relationships have played a fundamental role in the development of Joe Sugg's career trajectory. The cross-platform nature of Internet celebrities' careers makes this a complex phenomenon to explore, thus, to be able to draw insight around these aspects of vloggers' careers and online content, an approach suited to dealing with multiple different forms of data was required. As such, a case study approach was deemed best-suited to my research as it could help me to gain a comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon, situated in the real-world context in which it occurs (Yin, 2014). Case study research is also suited to the utilisation of multiple research methods, enabling both micro- and macro- level insights to be drawn into the phenomena, avoiding the short-sighted limitations single method research designs can incur (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). This was appropriate for my research as the phenomenon of an Internet celebrity career trajectory is complex and takes place across multiple online sites, thus eliciting multimodal visual and textual data forms that require differing methods of collection and analysis to enable a holistic understanding across these sites.

## Case study design

According to Yin (1994: 20), there are 5 components of case study research design:

1. a study's questions,
2. its propositions, if any,
3. its unit(s) of analysis,
4. the logic linking the data to the propositions, and
5. the criteria for interpreting the findings.

The first component, the study's questions, relates to what it is the researcher is wanting to find out. As previously noted, case studies are particularly suited to questions of 'how' and 'why' (Schell, 1992; Yin, 1994). The first stage of designing my approach involved devising a set of research questions to be investigated within the broader research aim - to explore how three popular YouTube vloggers have been able to build, develop and sustain a career from their online prominence. Thus, three specific research questions were developed:

- How do popular vloggers negotiate and re-negotiate their branded identity as part of their wider career development strategies?
- How do popular vloggers maintain their perceived authenticity and credibility?
- How have networked relationships been important to the development of popular vloggers' careers and brands?

Next, I defined the study's propositions, i.e., what is going to be examined within the study, therefore suggesting sites for gathering evidence (Yin, 2014). The complex cross-platform nature of vloggers' online labour and content presented an array of possible data that could be collected, therefore, it was important to use the research questions to interrogate what, specifically, would be examined. It was clear that from this focus towards authenticity practices, self-branding and networked relationships, data would need to be gathered from creators' online

content and social media profiles, as well as from other key developments in their careers outside of YouTube and social media. What became clear here was that the data I would need to gather would be diverse in form, whether image- or video-based, textual, relating to physical objects or immaterial relationships and labour; thus having a clear focus of the inquiry would be vital.

Next, I needed to determine the unit(s) of analysis. This involved first defining the cases, helping to limit the scope of the data to be collected, whilst also ensuring the feasibility of the research (Yin, 2014). Initially, I had intended to pursue a multiple case study design which is suited to studying several closely-linked cases (Stake, 2006), and is often considered more robust due to the increased breadth of data gathered (Yin, 2004). A set of criteria was defined to identify appropriate creators<sup>62</sup>, leading to the selection of three of the UK's most popular vloggers as cases - Zoe Sugg, Joe Sugg and Alfie Deyes.

Multiple case study designs can be either holistic or embedded depending on whether they have one unit of analysis (holistic) or multiple (embedded) for each case (Schell, 1992). As such, the three research questions to be explored for each case led naturally to an embedded design with three sub-units of analysis for each case - self-branding, authenticity, and networked relationships. These sub-units of analysis helped set the boundaries of what data was to be included and excluded within the dataset for each case. The longitudinal nature of focusing on the cases' career trajectories meant that it was clear that I would not be able to collect and analyse every instance of these practices across their careers. Thus, a further sub-unit of analysis was set through sampling data from specific career moments, interrogating the cases' self-branding, authenticity and networking practice at these points. As the research design developed from three cases to one<sup>63</sup>, this approach became more specific. Macro-level analysis of data scrapes from Joe's YouTube and Instagram platforms enabled me to identify five

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<sup>62</sup> See [Selecting the cases](#)

<sup>63</sup> See [From multiple to single-case design](#)

key stages in Joe's career trajectory. These functioned as further sub-units of analysis which helped to bound and contextualise the specific examples identified within these stages, whilst providing insight to his wider career development.

### Selecting the cases

A crucial part of case study design is identifying appropriate cases to be researched. In a multiple case study, cases may be selected for their typicality or representativeness, although it is important to note that the aim of a case study approach is not generalisation. Thus, the primary aim for the researcher should be eliciting understanding of the selected case(s) (Stake, 1995). Alternatively, in a single-case design, the case may be selected because they are unique and interesting in themselves (an intrinsic case), or because they are illustrative of the issue the inquiry is concerned with (an instrumental case) (Miller & Salkind, 2011). As highlighted previously, my research initially took a multiple-case approach before moving to a single-case design. This section will outline the initial criteria devised for multiple case selection, the cases selected and the potential limitations of focusing on these YouTubers.

When initially designing the multiple-case approach, I set the following criteria for the cases:

- British;
- Over 1 million subscribers on one of their YouTube channels;
- More than one YouTube channel;
- Active accounts on Twitter and Instagram.

I decided to focus on British YouTubers to minimise potential issues around accessing mainstream media content from other countries. I also have a better understanding of the context within which British vloggers operate, enabling me to draw stronger analyses from their content. I determined that cases should

have at least one million YouTube subscribers as I believed this to be the audience size at which mainstream media begin expressing interest in them. When I initially defined these criteria in 2017, one million subscribers seemed like a significant milestone in terms of the YouTuber-celebrity distinction, but it is pertinent to note that since 2009 when the first YouTube channel reached 1 million subscribers, the number of channels reaching this milestone has increased exponentially<sup>64</sup>. Despite this, the influencer industry widely regards those with a following of over 1 million on at least one of their profiles as top-tier (Influencer Intelligence, 2017, 2020); mega influencers, (Ismail, 2018), and macro or super macro talent (Dentsu Aegis Network, 2020). Thus, whilst followings of over 1 million have become more common online, this is still regarded as the barrier for entry to the upper echelons of the influencer and social talent world. Dentsu Aegis Network define super macro talent as 'household names with a large social-media following in the millions' with 'celebrity status in both digital and traditional media' (2020: 9). This level of both digital and traditional media prominence was a key requirement for selecting my cases and, whilst 1 million subscribers serves as a benchmark for this, it was also important for my cases to have a level of mainstream media recognition to enable insight to be drawn from their representation outside of the Internet.

A further requirement for my cases was to have at least one YouTube channel, including a vlogging channel. The notion of subdividing the online self across multiple YouTube channels toward different purposes and audiences had become a common phenomenon on the platform around 2012/2013, particularly where creators wanted to share both formal sit-down style videos and more informal day-in-the-life vlogs. For my research, this notion of multiple channels was key in order for me to observe self-presentation, self-branding, authenticity

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<sup>64</sup> According to social media analytics site SocialBlade, in 2016, four channels were hitting the one million subscribers milestone every day (Fratella, 2016) and, whilst it is not clear how many channels have reached this landmark in 2020, the site's most subscribed channels have now accrued followings of over 100 million. Indeed, there are now 4 channels that have breached 100 million subscribers and 19 channels with more than 50 million subscribers (SocialBlade, 2020), demonstrating the extent to which follower counts have increased on platform since 2009 (statistics correct as of 8th October 2020).

practices and networked relationships across different styles of video, interrogating the notion of masks of identity (Marshall, 2013) and facets of the front and backstage self (Goffman, 1956). Influencers commonly operate across multiple online platforms (Abidin, 2016b) - usually Instagram, YouTube and Twitter<sup>65</sup> - therefore, an active presence on these platforms was important to enable data to be collected around their cross-platform practices. Following refinement of my data collection sites during pilot testing, Twitter was found to be less valuable as a site for data collection to draw insight around self-branding, authenticity and networking practices, thus the primary platforms of interest shifted to just YouTube and Instagram<sup>66</sup>.

From establishing the selection criteria, three YouTubers were identified who satisfied all of these requirements, with the additional unique characteristic that they constituted a close, interlinked network, formed at the crux of a sibling relationship, a romantic relationship and a friendship. The three cases selected were: Zoe Sugg, Joe Sugg and Alfie Deyes - three hugely successful YouTubers who had each built and maintained a career online for the best part of a decade. They have all transitioned their initial YouTube fame toward alternate career paths, spanning entrepreneurial endeavours, mainstream media work and physical product merchandising. This made each of the three cases ripe for individual analysis, as well as presenting a unique and highly successful example of a mutually-beneficial networked relationship that could be interrogated.

There were potential limitations that could occur as a result of using such a closely linked set of cases. They are undeniably homogenous in both physical appearance and background with them all being young, white, middle-class, cisgendered, slim, conventionally attractive, heterosexual and representative of idealised middle-class cultural conventions. This is in contention with the

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<sup>65</sup> TikTok is a further platform now commonly utilised by influencers in their multi-platformed online presence, however whilst the platform has been around since 2016, it has experienced a surge in popularity in 2020 which has now cemented it as a key platform. Thus, at the time of designing the research, TikTok was not considered a key platform for the cases to be active on.

<sup>66</sup> See [Pilot testing and development](#)

narrative of YouTube being a democratised space in which anyone can ‘make it’, giving individuals access to potential audiences of millions no matter their class background or physical traits (Bakioğlu, 2016). Whilst YouTube, in theory, affords anyone the opportunity to create and upload content, the reality is perhaps more reflective of the demotic turn in celebrity culture, which offers the illusion of equal, democratic access to participation (Marwick, 2015; Turner, 2004), yet remains ‘hierarchical, exclusive and gatekept’ (Abidin, 2018: 6). Whilst many from a more diverse background do manage to attain a level of fame and recognition online, there still appears to be a lack of diversity at the upper levels of the YouTuber and influencer hierarchies where talent management agencies’ rosters favour creators who are white, middle-class and conform to Eurocentric, hegemonic and heteronormative standards of beauty (Bishop, 2018). As such, whilst I acknowledge the lack of diversity in the cases selected and the limited insights this can offer towards more diverse creator practices online, this is representative of a wider YouTube and influencer industry issue. Further, the aim of my research is not to produce findings that are representative of, or generalisable to, the whole of YouTube. The research aims to generate detailed understanding into the specific YouTubers and their career trajectories; thus, these cases were selected for their appropriateness to the inquiry and their uniqueness as a tight-knit network.

### Developing a theoretical framework

The fourth and fifth stages of case study design relate to linking the data to the previously-identified propositions, and determining the criteria for interpreting the findings and thus represent the process of outlining the steps for data analysis, i.e., what should be done with the data once it has been gathered (Yin, 1994). This process involved organising and close-reading of the collected artefacts using the previously-set propositions of authenticity, self-branding and networking to guide the handling and coding of the data, and to identify notable examples and emerging themes within the dataset<sup>67</sup>. Also key at this stage is the process of

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<sup>67</sup> See [Analytical approach](#)

theory development which should be carried out before collecting the data - a factor which distinguishes the case study approach from other methodologies (Yin, 1994). This process involves reviewing existing literature and considering the topic, the motivations for researching it, and the study's intended learnings before any data is gathered (Yin, 1994), setting the contextual framework for the inquiry (Harrison et al., 2017). For my research, this consisted of an extensive literature review process which helped to inform and situate the research topic in a wider sociocultural context, whilst guiding the refinement of the research questions. This process also enabled a solid theoretical framework for the study to be developed which centred around four key areas: self-presentation (e.g. Goffman, 1956); celebrity studies and Internet fame (e.g. Abidin, 2015; Giles, 2018; Marwick, 2013); parasocial interaction (e.g. Giles, 2010; Horton & Wohl, 1956); and wider sociological and cultural studies concepts such as capital (e.g. Bourdieu, 1997). This framework functioned as the theoretical base for the interpretation of my research data, allowing analytical insights grounded in existing scholarly ideas to be drawn.

### Pilot testing and development

Following the development of the initial research design, an extensive pilot study was conducted in order to refine the methodological approach. Pilot studies usually involve testing a scaled-down version of the research tool and can be useful in helping identify any potential logistical or practical issues with the design, allowing the researcher to make amendments to the research tool to improve its design before it is utilised for the actual study (Jary & Jary, 2000). For case studies, pilot testing can help identify any issues with the design of the case studies or the case selection, allowing modifications to be made or different cases to be selected (Yin, 1994). Yin also notes that in the instance the researcher decides it is appropriate to amend the cases, they must take care not to shift the focus or aims of the inquiry to match the new case(s) as this could impose bias in the research process. Pilot testing was a particularly important stage for my research as the study involved working with multiple forms of data



gathered from varying online and mainstream media platforms, and utilising a bricolage of different data collection methods within the broader case study methodology. Thus, a process of careful development, testing and refinement was vital to ensure the data I was collecting was relevant and could offer insight to the inquiry, whilst allowing me to renegotiate the boundaries of the data collection to maintain the manageability of the datasets.

In 2018, I carried out an initial pilot study utilising my planned data collection approach to gather data around one key point in one of my cases' careers. At this stage, my approach was to manually gather data from a range of sources relating to the case studies, ranging from newspaper and magazine articles, TV and film appearances and the cases' YouTube and social media content (primarily from Twitter and Instagram). In addition, ethnographic data was to be collected from observing online forums, social media sites and comments on YouTube videos. Three key career points were to be explored for each case by sampling data from a range of sources around the date of the key points using fixed time-frames specific to each medium. To test this approach, the pilot study focused on one case - Zoe Sugg - and the key moment of the ghostwriting scandal that surfaced following the release of her debut novel *Girl Online* in 2014.

From this pilot data collection, I was able to identify which approaches presented the most value in terms of the data produced, allowing me to disregard methods that were unnecessarily time-consuming with little insight able to be drawn from the data gathered. What became clear was the substantial amount of data elicited from one career point, and that if similar amounts of data were generated for further career points across two more cases, it would result in an unmanageably large dataset. This would run the risk of the data not being analysed in sufficient depth, thus limiting the strength of the insights able to be drawn and increasing the chance of key analytical points being missed. As such,

the pilot study enabled me to realise that I needed to focus the scope of the study to ensure the richness of the case study was not lost.

The pilot study also enabled me to test the data collection and handling procedures, allowing me to evaluate and refine the approach, whilst checking appropriate data was being gathered that offered value to the inquiry. Through this testing, I identified that gathering and organising observational data from online forums and YouTube comments was time-consuming and did not offer as much value to the inquiry as expected. It also proved difficult to gather relevant Twitter data due to limitations imposed by the site's API in relation to historic tweets. This meant I was only able to gather a small proportion of tweets from Zoe's career trajectory, therefore offering less value to the inquiry than expected. From pilot testing these approaches, I evaluated that these forms of data did not offer much value to the overall case study. Thus, I decided that online forums, YouTube comments and Twitter data would not be utilised in the primary data collection. The pilot testing identified YouTube and Instagram data to be the most valuable to the investigation, particularly the overview data obtained from manually archiving Zoe's YouTube videos. This offered a macro-level overview of her YouTube content, enabling trends and specific examples to be identified for more in-depth analysis. In addition, pilot testing identified that valuable context was gained from gathering mainstream media artefacts around the career point, enabling media representations of Zoe to be unpicked in relation to this event too. As such, it was decided that combining macro-level data collected from YouTube and Instagram, with micro-level specific examples identified within the macro data, and contextual data from wider media sources would allow me to gain valuable insights into the cases' careers, whilst ensuring sufficient richness of the analytic account.

Following the pilot study, I began collecting the data starting with just one of the cases - Joe Sugg - functioning as a further pilot test to identify any final modifications that needed to be made for the other two cases - a common procedure with multiple case study approaches (Yin, 1994). As I began collecting the research data in late 2018, significant developments occurred in Joe's career, substantially widening the potential pool of data to be collected as Joe's career developed more towards mainstream media and performance work. As a result, I decided to further refine the focus of the project to focus solely on Joe - a decision I will discuss in more detail in the [next section](#).

### From multiple to single-case design

As I began working on collecting artefacts from Joe Sugg's career, it became apparent that there was an abundance of data and potential for really interesting detailed analyses to be made from his career examples. A shift in Joe's career occurred during the early stages of data collection, catalysed by the announcement he would be appearing on the 2018 series of BBC reality show, *Strictly Come Dancing*. This made him a unique example of someone who had been able to successfully utilise their online career and following to transition into, and be accepted by, mainstream media, resulting in increased scope for insight to be drawn from him as a case. This shift led me to move to a single-case approach which enabled me to delve into greater analytical detail with Joe's career examples than would have been feasible in the multiple-case approach. This shift also ensured I did not lose the richness of the data gathered, enabling me to tell the full story without being limited by the scale of the project.

It is common to use a single-case approach where the case offers a unique example of the phenomenon (Yin, 1994), where it depicts an iteration yet to be studied, or is regarded as a representative or common example (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). As with the previously-planned multiple case approach, the shift to a single case study methodology maintained an embedded design, meaning

there was more than one unit of analysis within the case. This enabled more extensive analysis to be conducted into the case (Yin, 1994) through the three, literature-led analytical prongs into the case study inquiry - authenticity practices, self-branding and networked relationships. The key difference here was that the networked relationships subunit of analysis was re-centred around Joe's network, expanding to include other cross-promotional relationships throughout his career trajectory. Despite this, Zoe and Alfie are still relevant to the networked relationships analytical strand of the inquiry and the initial focus on three cases helped me to identify the significance of these relationships to Joe's career development.

A single-case approach comes with its own potential limitations. Yin (1994) advises that care is taken in defining the units and subunits of analysis for the research before definitively choosing the case to ensure that this is still appropriate for the research's aims and objectives. Single-case study research offers less scope for generalisability than other approaches (Schell, 1992), however this is not the aim of this research which, instead, intends to generate a detailed, longitudinal account of Joe's career trajectory. Embedded single-case designs can also incur limitations if too much focus is placed on the sub-units of analysis, resulting in the neglect of the wider, holistic inquiry and the wider aims of the research not being met (Yin, 1994), therefore it was crucial that care was taken to refer back to the holistic unit of analysis at each stage of the research process.

## Digital ethnography

Within the case study methodology, my research took a digital ethnographic approach. Digital ethnography (also referred to as online ethnography, virtual ethnography and netnography in methods literature) is an approach pioneered by Kozinets who defines it as being 'rooted to core ethnographic principles of participant-observation while also seeking to selectively and systematically incorporate digital approaches' (2015: 3). Digital ethnography is characterised by

its openness and flexibility (Pink et al., 2016), and is considered to sit 'somewhere between the vast searchlights of big data analysis and the close readings of discourse analysis' (Kozinets, 2015: 4) in the level of detail involved in its interpretive processes. The researcher is not limited in the types of data they can gather, thus the appropriate breadth, depth and formats of the data to be gathered will depend on the phenomenon being studied (Logan, 2015). This means digital ethnographic datasets may encompass data collected using online iterations of traditional offline research methods such as interviews and observations, alongside the gathering of digital cultural artefacts and digital-native approaches such as social network analysis and big data methods (Kozinets, 2015). What remains consistent is the aim of gathering online data to help elicit understanding around cultures and lived human experiences (Kozinets, 2015). As such, digital ethnography requires a unique methodological approach depending on the specific research question(s) or phenomena being studied (Pink et al., 2016).

Digital ethnography is considered to have its strengths in its ability to 'reveal interaction styles, personal narratives, communal exchanges, online rules, practices, and rituals, discursive styles, innovative forms of collaboration and organization, and manifestations of creativity' (Kozinets, 2015: 3). Researching online phenomena in their online contexts reduces potential issues around communities' interactions and activities being decontextualised and stripped of their meaning by researching them solely using offline approaches (Abidin, 2013). Digital ethnography is also deemed particularly appropriate for those studying microcelebrities and others with a level of fame due to data about them being available publicly online (Logan, 2015). By utilising this freely-available online data in a digital ethnographic approach, researchers are able to avoid some of the difficulties around obtaining prior consent from celebrities and public figures before data can be collected (Logan, 2015).

Limitations of a digital ethnographic approach are frequently cited in relation to the ephemerality of digital data which is neither fixed nor permanent (Abidin, 2013; Logan, 2015; Pink et al., 2016). Abidin (2013) notes that the transience of digital media texts means that content and communities can potentially be removed from the online sphere in an instant, and the impermanence of content means that previously published data could be covertly edited without this being made clear to the public. Logan (2015) advocates conducting digital ethnographic research in real-time to reduce the risk of data being deleted, leaving gaps in the dataset. For my research, a real-time study was not possible as the period of interest was Joe's online career trajectory spanning almost a decade. Despite this, the use of platform-specific data scrapes<sup>68</sup> helped create a permanent archive of his content<sup>69</sup>.

Using the Internet as a field site also poses difficulties to the ethnographic researcher, with Postill and Pink (2012) positioning social media as existing within a 'messy web' which thus complicates the ethnographic approach required. This is because of the nature of Web 2.0 as a fieldsite 'that crosses online and offline worlds, and is connected and constituted through the ethnographer's narrative' (Postill & Pink, 2012: 126). As such, Postill and Pink advocate taking a 'plural concept of sociality that allows us to focus on the qualities of relatedness in online and offline relationships', which they regard as allowing the researcher to elicit better understandings of online communities and social interactions (2012: 132).

The next section will outline the specific data collection methods that were utilised within the broader digital ethnographic case study approach.

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<sup>68</sup> See [DMI Tools: YouTube and Instagram data scraping](#)

<sup>69</sup> This constituted an accurate snapshot of Joe's YouTube and Instagram content over the data collection period, which was available at the time of gathering (20th December 2019 for Instagram and 3rd March 2020 for YouTube)

## Data collection

Due to the complexity of my research data, I consider the data collected to be situated within three levels: macro, micro and wider contextual. As such, I will use these levels to structure the discussion of my approach to data collection. At the macro level, data was scraped from Joe's YouTube and Instagram profiles, producing observational notes from immersion in his content. The micro level of data collection relates to the gathering of specific examples from Joe's career stages. Finally, wider contextual data collection refers to the assemblage of supplementary media sources including mainstream media texts on YouTube and influencer-related themes, as well as industry-specific publications and policy guidance relating to YouTube and influencer practices. This section will discuss the rationale for the data collection methods, potential limitations of these approaches, and key ethical considerations.

### Macro data

First, I will discuss the macro-level data collection which took place in two key stages - collection of data and metadata through platform-specific, API-based tools for YouTube and Instagram, and ethnographic observations through immersion in content.

#### DMI Tools: YouTube and Instagram data scraping

To gather the macro-level YouTube and Instagram data I utilised the YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015<sup>70</sup>) and Instagram Scraper<sup>71</sup> (DMI, 2015) from the Digital Methods Initiative (DMI). When conducting my pilot study, I initially tested gathering YouTube channel data manually - a highly time-consuming process. However, in early 2019, I attended a workshop run by Óscar Coromina<sup>72</sup> where I was introduced to the YouTube Data Tools and DMI tools more broadly, including

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<sup>70</sup> Available at <https://tools.digitalmethods.net/netvizz/youtube/>

<sup>71</sup> This tool has unfortunately since been retired. It has been replaced with the 4CAT: Capture and Analysis Toolkit, however this tool can no longer be used for scraping Instagram due to new anti-scraping rules imposed by the platform (Peeters & Hagen, 2018).

<sup>72</sup> *Analysing Controversies on YouTube with Digital Methods* - Dr. Óscar Coromina (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona), Sheffield Hallam University, 19th February 2019.

the Instagram Scraper. These data scraping tools enabled me to gather overview data that could provide valuable context to the more in-depth digital ethnographic analysis as part of the broader methodological strategy (Postill & Pink, 2012). The YouTube Data Tools platform offers simple web-based mechanisms for gathering data by accessing YouTube's API<sup>73</sup> and scraping the site (Rieder, 2015). The YouTube Data Tools have been utilised by other researchers on a diverse range of projects from the ranking algorithms of YouTube search results (Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández & Coromina, 2018), to product promotion on YouTube (Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018), to investigating the phenomenon of BookTubers<sup>74</sup> (Tomasena, 2019). These automated tools have thus made studying YouTube, which has historically been under-researched in comparison to other social media platforms (Arthurs, Drakopoulou & Gandini, 2018), far more accessible to researchers without the need to master complex computer programming languages or engage in ethically questionable scraping practices that bypass platform APIs.

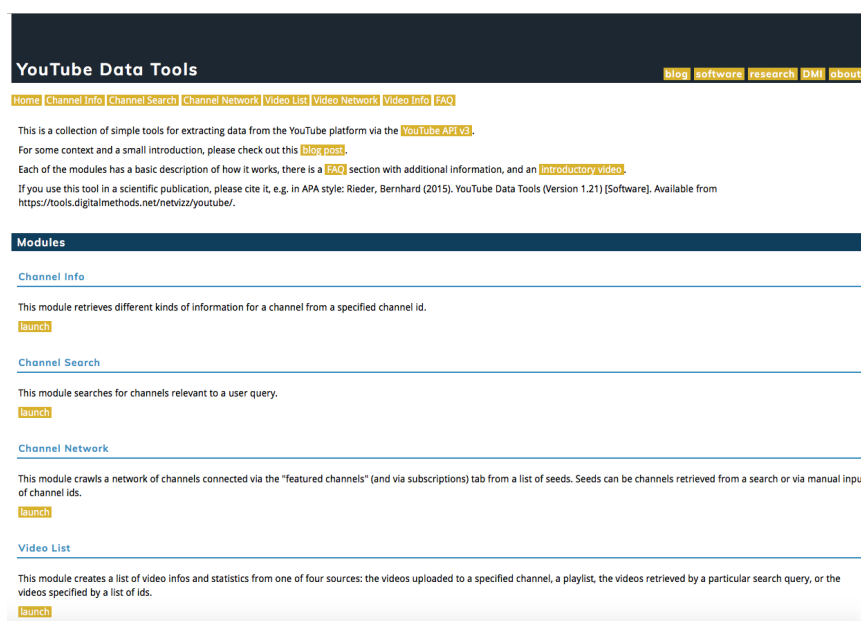


Figure 3.1 - Screenshot of YouTube Data Tools

<sup>73</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>74</sup> Literary YouTubers who create videos on book-related content (see Doggett, 2019)



YouTube Data Tools enabled me to gather the channel data I had recorded manually in my pilot test in a much quicker and more efficient manner, with the advantage of collecting metadata about the channel and content too. Following initial testing of the tool to determine its appropriateness for my inquiry, I used the tool to scrape data from Joe's YouTube channels ThatcherJoe, ThatcherJoeVlogs and ThatcherJoeGames. To do this, I utilised the YouTube Data Tools' 'Video List' function ([Figure 3.2](#)) to input the channel ID for each channel I wished to scrape the data from, which, when run, gathered data and metadata for every publicly available video posted on the channel into a .tab file which could be imported into Google Sheets as a spreadsheet ([Figure 3.3](#)) with key columns<sup>75</sup> such as:

- Channel ID<sup>76</sup>
- Channel title
- Video ID<sup>77</sup>
- Published at
- Video title
- Video description<sup>78</sup>
- Video category<sup>79</sup>
- View count
- Like count
- Dislike count
- Comment count

The structure of the dataset made it easily sortable and searchable, enabling me to run exploratory queries with the data such as finding the most viewed and most liked videos, and exploring factors such as posting frequency. The

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<sup>75</sup> The scrape does produce some other headings of data too, however these are the ones considered most relevant to the inquiry.

<sup>76</sup> The YouTube channel's unique identifier.

<sup>77</sup> The unique identifier for each video.

<sup>78</sup> The information in the video's description box.

<sup>79</sup> The category the video has been listed as by the uploading user.

convenience and efficiency of the tool also made it possible for me to gather supplementary data for Zoe Sugg, Alfie Deyes, Caspar Lee, Dianne Buswell<sup>80</sup>, and additional related channels such as In The Pan. Collecting data from these additional sites allowed further insights to be drawn, particularly in relation to networked relationships, thus further strengthening this approach.

Video List Module

This module creates a list of video infos and statistics from one of four sources: the videos uploaded to a specified channel, a playlist, the videos retrieved by a particular search query, or the videos specified by a list of ids.

The script then creates a tabular file where each row is a video. A number of infos and variables are added for each video.

Check the documentation for the [video/list](#) (used to get the info for each video) and the [search/list](#) (used for the search function) API endpoint for additional information.

Parameters

Choose a way of making a list:

☒ Channel id:
 

(channel ids can be found in URLs, e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtGgQpJPi8ptAzB029jpYA>)

☐ Playlist id:
 

(playlist ids can be found in URLs, e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJtitKU0CAehMmISi9oCiv3WCjrZqMWZ0>)

☐ Search query:
 

(this is passed to the search endpoint)

optional [ISO 639-1](#) relevance language:

optional [ISO 3166-1 alpha-2](#) region code:  (default = US)

Iterations:  (max. 10, one iteration gets 50 items)

Published:

☐ limit search to videos published in a specific timeframe (format: yyyy-mm-ddThh:mm:ssZ - timezone: UTC):
 

after: 
before:

☐ make a search for each day of the timeframe (can yield many more videos, use wisely)

Rank by:

Figure 3.2 - Video List query, YouTube Data Tools

videoid	publishe	publishedAt	videoTitle	videoDescription
jcw3ax_n0	2019-06	2019-06-28	We Have An Announcement	► IT'S TIME! ► TICKETS GO ON SALE AT 9AM ON TUESDAY 2nd JULY ► FIND OUT MORE AND GET TICKETS: <a href="https://www.thejoeanddiannewshow.co.uk/">https://www.thejoeanddiannewshow.co.uk/</a> ► Become a ThatcherJoe member: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join</a> ► My Links: Twitter: <a href="https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg">https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg</a> Insta: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/">https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/</a> Facebook: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/">https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/</a> #ProjectJoanne #TheJoeAndDianneShow
_7Qm2KRwFoA	2019-05	2019-05-19	GIRLFRIEND VS BESTFRIEND SPELLING BEE *Winner gets a free trip to DISNEY*	► Become a ThatcherJoe member: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join</a> ► My Links: Twitter: <a href="https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg">https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg</a> Insta: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/">https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/</a> Facebook: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/">https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/</a>
i065q6dKrGk	2019-05	2019-05-05	88 SIMPSONS IMPRESSIONS IN ONE SITTING!	► Let me know in the comments which Impressions were the BEST! ► Become a ThatcherJoe member: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join</a> ► My Links: Twitter: <a href="https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg">https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg</a> Insta: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/">https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/</a> Facebook: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/">https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/</a>
HtrJftk6u_I	2019-05	2019-05-01	Drawing DISNEY Characters From Memory	► Can I draw Woody from Toy Story, Mickey Mouse and Winnie the Pooh without looking at a pic? LET'S FIND OUT! ► Shout out to PJ for the idea, check out his video: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1ypB2gBA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u1ypB2gBA</a> ► Become a ThatcherJoe member: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join</a> ► My Links: Twitter: <a href="https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg">https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg</a> Insta: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/">https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/</a> Facebook: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/">https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/</a>
ITf0yjk1to	2019-04	2019-04-28	The EASIEST PRANK to Try at Home!	► EASY TUBE PRANK ► Become a ThatcherJoe member: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join</a> ► Check out... Dianne: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHEPUMv8l5qYfiqTW5n8RQ">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHEPUMv8l5qYfiqTW5n8RQ</a> Oli: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/TheOilWhiteTV">https://www.youtube.com/user/TheOilWhiteTV</a> Mikey: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH6m_AEgV7JgN9JK_kfUWfA">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH6m_AEgV7JgN9JK_kfUWfA</a> Jack: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH6m_AEgV7JgN9JK_kfUWfA">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH6m_AEgV7JgN9JK_kfUWfA</a> ► My Links: Twitter: <a href="https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg">https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg</a> Insta: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/">https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/</a> Facebook: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/">https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/</a>
30Ze4_INCWw	2019-04	2019-04-24	BLINDFOLD MUSICAL CHAIRS	► Like a 6 year old's birthday party... BUT MORE EXTREME! ► Anna: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6slv36irVoG8P06fsl9lnw">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6slv36irVoG8P06fsl9lnw</a> ► Oli: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/TheOilWhiteTV">https://www.youtube.com/user/TheOilWhiteTV</a> ► Josh: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpESVksCvp6lk35MJYIRs5Q">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpESVksCvp6lk35MJYIRs5Q</a> ► Mikey: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH6m_AEgV7JgN9JK_kfUWfA">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH6m_AEgV7JgN9JK_kfUWfA</a> ► Byron: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzqyzl-Cr3k-Ec98zyDu-Mw">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzqyzl-Cr3k-Ec98zyDu-Mw</a> ► Conor: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/skizaisherebooya">https://www.youtube.com/user/skizaisherebooya</a> ► Jack: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPvi4_6AZfND4lV82s3wA">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPvi4_6AZfND4lV82s3wA</a> ► Become a ThatcherJoe member: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join">https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCuouUWCLmpG4Dje3Ay0p1oQ/join</a> ► My Links: Twitter: <a href="https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg">https://twitter.com/Joe_Sugg</a> Insta: <a href="https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/">https://www.instagram.com/joe_sugg/</a> Facebook: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/">https://www.facebook.com/ThatcherJoe/</a>

<sup>80</sup> Individuals closely associated with Joe - see Chapter 6: [Networked Relationships](#)

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Figure 3.3 - Screenshot of ThatcherJoe YouTube dataset<sup>81</sup>

I also used the DMI Tools Instagram Scraper to gather data from Joe's Instagram profile ([Figure 3.4](#)). The tool utilises Instagram's API to gather a list of posts and corresponding metadata from Instagram usernames or hashtags (DMI Tools, 2015). As such, I was able to input Joe's Instagram username (@joe\_sugg) to the tool which gathered a total of 1292 posts and accompanying metadata which could be downloaded as a .csv file. As with the YouTube data, this could be imported into Google Sheets ([Figure 3.5](#)), creating an easily sortable and searchable dataset containing information data and metadata such as:

- Username
- Hashtags used
- Type (photo or video)
- Post URL
- Date and time posted
- Comments
- Likes
- Caption
- Geotag (if used)

As with the YouTube Data Tools dataset, the data obtained from the Instagram Scraper made it simple to run queries, count frequency and sort the sheet to identify the most liked and commented posts. I also obtained supplementary data from related Instagram accounts including Zoe Sugg, Alfie Deyes, Gleam Futures, In The Pan and Sugg Life merchandise<sup>82</sup>. The datasets produced by the Instagram Scraper query made the process of identifying interesting examples

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<sup>81</sup> Some columns are not visible due to the width of the spreadsheet. Full dataset can be found in [Appendix 3](#)

<sup>82</sup> These are accounts that either Joe is involved with or belonging to those connected to him through his close networks - see Chapter 6 - [Networked Relationships](#)

## Instagram Scraper

## Input

You can scrape Instagram by username, hashtag or location. If you scrape by hashtag or location, note that results are limited to approximately 10000 photos per query. As each scrape takes a considerable amount of time, you are furthermore limited to either 25 usernames or 25 hashtags/locations - further input will be ignored.

Note that your scrapes are publicly available via the menu at the top of the page.

**Query mode:**

User names

**User names (one per line):**

**Result file name (leave empty for default):**

## Instagram Scraper, an Introduction

Retrieves Instagram images for hashtags, locations, or user names.

Figure 3.4 - Screenshot of Instagram Scraper Tool

hashtags	type	post_url	media_url	timestamp	date	comments	likes	caption
followmetoe	photo	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/</a>	<a href="https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be">https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be</a>	1576791285	19-12-2019 22:34	918	210420	Followed her toe The desert.. #followmetoe
	photo	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/</a>	<a href="https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be">https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be</a>	1576738599	19-12-2019 07:58	367	168577	Beating the jet lag with a bit of sand boarding. MUST STAY AWAAAAAKE 🌞
								Nice little couple days back in the countryside visiting the family before heading off to The complete opposite side of the world for Christmas. It's going to be strange for me but I'm so up for a change up this year and going on an adventure/pure relaxation time. Also massive shout out to @mercedesbenzulk for #loaning this absolute beaut of a car for the weekend. It had a button to massage your back whilst driving.. not even kidding.. technology these days goodness grief.
loaning	photo	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/</a>	<a href="https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be">https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be</a>	1576524614	16-12-2019 20:36	382	164678	What a final! Congrats to @kelvin_fletcher & @otimabuse you were absolutely incredible all series 🙏 thanks so much to @kimwinston. It's been so lovely to work on the podcast with you. It's been an absolute joy to still be a part of this show this year. Thank you @bbcstrictly 🎊
	photo	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/</a>	<a href="https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be">https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be</a>	1576365898	15-12-2019 00:24	465	256894	I know what you're all thinking and the answer is YES!! I did pull every single book to see if it was a secret lever to a hidden room.
	photo	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/</a>	<a href="https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be">https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be</a>	1576096474	11-12-2019 21:34	620	243251	Don't panic, I'm slowly winding down for the year I promise 🧘
	photo	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/</a>	<a href="https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be">https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be</a>	1575580367	05-12-2019 22:11	374	116836	
	photo	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/">https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t0vXUgk9I/</a>	<a href="https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be">https://content.googleapis.com/media/videoplayback?id=62f7d3e3c38383838383&amp;source=youtu.be</a>	1575477020	04-12-2019 17:36	204	101651	Reunited with my favourite twitch streamer 👍
								If you asked me a couple of years ago that I'd be singing and acting on stage in the west end I wouldn't have believed it. Something like this would usually terrify me, and it definitely did. Many times I thought "what am I doing? I'm so out my depth here" and got the classic 'imposter syndrome' which a lot of youtubers get whenever they branch out into anything outside of the internet. But this show and this experience really has been a game changer for me on so many different levels. Ive always said from day one that I've just been riding a wave of luck for the last 8 or so years and I'm so excited to see where this wave will take me next. Best bit about it all is the continued support from friends, family and the people that have stumbled upon my channels etc and decided to follow me.

Figure 3.5 - Screenshot of Instagram data scrape for @joe\_sugg<sup>83</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Some columns are not visible due to the width of the spreadsheet. Full dataset can be found in [Appendix 3](#)

for in-depth analysis more efficient as I was able to identify potentially relevant or insightful posts through the dates of the posts, their captions and hashtags used, then click the post URL to see the image and caption as a post on Instagram. This helped reduce the likelihood of important posts or events being missed in the dataset.

The Instagram Scraper was limited in that it could only gather main feed images from Instagram profiles, excluding Instagram Stories<sup>84</sup>, IGTV<sup>85</sup> and Reels<sup>86</sup> posts from the dataset. Instagram Stories present a methodological challenge to researchers as an ephemeral form of media, meaning, despite their popularity as a media form, they are largely under-researched at present (Bainotti, Caliandro & Gandini, 2020). Instagram's API also does not allow for the gathering of Stories and, whilst there are free online tools such as StorySaver which enable Stories from public Instagram accounts to be downloaded as image or video files, this is still restricted by the 24-hour time period for which an Instagram Story is visible (Bainotti et al., 2020). As a result, this renders tools such as Story Saver redundant for gathering data from Stories shared longer than 24-hours ago. Bainotti et al. (2020) found that Instagram Stories are often archived by users on YouTube, however this approach is very reliant upon the user's Stories being deemed of enough public interest to have been archived and uploaded to the site, thus leaving room for potential gaps and limits to the data able to be obtained. As such, it was decided that Instagram Stories would not be included in the research data as I felt that sufficiently rich insights could be drawn using the macro-level Instagram data obtained from the Scraper tool. IGTV was also excluded from the data as Joe had only posted one video within the data collection period - a reformatted version of a YouTube video<sup>87</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>85</sup> Instagram TV - see [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>86</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>87</sup> *88 SIMPSONS IMPRESSIONS IN ONE SITTING!*, ThatcherJoe, YouTube, 5th May 2019

Using the YouTube and Instagram tools carried the risk of changes being made to the tool by the developers, or to the platforms in the event of access to their API being withdrawn (Rogers, 2019). As such, it was important for me to download the data gathered using these tools to create a stable copy of the data that is not subject to API changes. The Instagram tool was decommissioned around June 2020, affecting my ability to gather Instagram data from any additional profiles after this time. This did not present any challenges to my research as I had already gathered all of the data needed before the tool was decommissioned, however this demonstrated the transience of Internet data and highlighted the value of creating a stable archive of research data once it has been gathered to reduce the risk of already-scraped data being made unavailable.

### Content observations

One of the key data collection methods within digital ethnographic approaches is the notion of observation - whether that be of participants or of phenomena more broadly (Logan, 2015). The second stage of the macro-level data collection involved immersion in Joe's YouTube and Instagram content, conducting close observations and making notes to help identify trends and developmental stages within his career trajectory, and to recognise significant examples for further analysis. This process was a 'hermeneutical exercise', rooted in interpretation with the broad aim of eliciting understanding around what is happening, and interpreting this within its physical, sociopolitical and cultural context (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012). As such, this approach enabled immersion in Joe's content, observing it in its natural context and taking note of commonalities and unique practices in the form of field notes (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Joe's YouTube and Instagram profiles were particularly valuable as natural research sites as his online identity had already been constructed on the platforms, therefore there was no aspect of artifice in creating an environment for the purpose of the research (Burns, 2000; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). As such, researching his online practices in the natural setting can be considered to enable richer

research data to be gathered, thus eliciting a deeper level of understanding into the phenomena being observed (Reeves, Kuper & Hodges, 2008). This observational process is particularly advantageous over direct face-to-face qualitative approaches such as interviews for dealing with identity, which is a notably complex phenomenon; thus, conducting observations alleviates issues around the potentials for discrepancies between individuals' descriptions and interpretations of behaviours and their actual identity-construction practices (Friedrichs & Lüdtke, 1975).

For Instagram, conducting observations involved immersing myself in Joe's content by looking through thumbnails of posts on his profile across the entirety of his career trajectory, keeping observational field notes of trends noticed and key moments throughout his career. This helped me to identify shifts in Joe's career and celebrity status using factors such as settings and props as indicators of his self-presentation within the posts (Goffman, 1956). Instagram is a highly visual platform and content often portrays an idealised version of reality. It is also a platform where displays of status and aspirational lifestyle are synonymous with the platform aesthetic; thus, this mode of data collection was fundamental in the identification and development of the five stages of self-branding and status identified in Joe's career trajectory.

For YouTube, the process of close-reading and conducting observations involved looking through both the channel data scrapes and the more visual element of video thumbnails by looking at the Uploads pages of his YouTube channels. Insights were drawn here by running exploratory queries into the data scrapes and using YouTube's sort function on each channels' Uploads pages to identify the most viewed and most liked videos. This process also allowed for the identification of trends in the prevalence of video genres such as collaborations, challenges and commercial partnerships. Conducting observations of Joe's Instagram and YouTube accounts was essential in identifying which specific

examples should be analysed in more detail and why - an essential first step for any methodological approach to researching visual data online (Rose, 2016).

These observational processes are subject to the same limitations around the transience of online data as digital ethnography more broadly<sup>88</sup>. To reduce the likelihood of data collection being impacted by changes in platform APIs or content being removed by Joe or the platforms, archiving practices were implemented. For YouTube, this involved using the database scraped using the DMI tool, and gathering screenshots of key examples to support my observational notes. These also functioned as backup evidence in the event of a video being deleted between the observations and the micro-level data collection. For Instagram, this archiving process involved collecting screenshots of the thumbnails on his profile, resulting in a visual archive of the images which could not be seen at a glance in the Instagram Scraper data ([Image 3.1](#)). These content archives could then be used to identify specific examples to be studied in more detail, thus it would be apparent if a piece of data had since been removed from when the data scrapes were conducted. However, this is not a completely transience-proof approach as data could have still been removed if Joe or the platforms themselves had deleted posts. Despite this, at the time of archiving Joe's content and scraping data through the APIs, this offered a complete dataset of the publicly-available content on his YouTube and Instagram profiles. As my focus was exploring his career trajectory as a whole, the research was concerned more with emergent themes and stages in his career, rather than the minutiae of individual posts. Whilst individual pieces of content were gathered to illustrate the themes identified, the risk of a handful of pieces of content being missing over such a long period was less likely to impact the accuracy of the insights drawn, therefore it was not considered to impact the quality of data gathered.

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<sup>88</sup> As discussed earlier in this chapter - see [Digital ethnography](#)



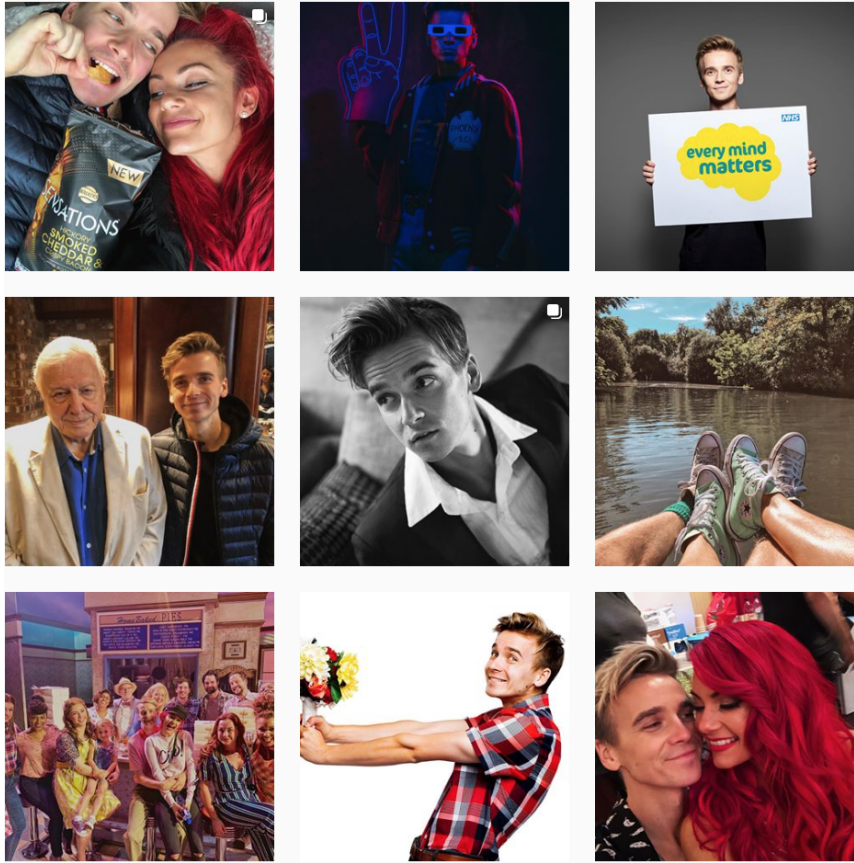


Image 3.1 - Example visual archive of Instagram posts from late 2019

## Micro data

The micro-level data collection involved collecting specific examples from Joe's career stages through gathering data from individual Instagram posts and YouTube videos, as well as from mainstream media appearances, product releases and other extensions of Joe's brand. This process was guided by the macro-level data collection, which enabled me to identify specific examples throughout Joe's career for in-depth analysis.

Visual forms of data like videos and images are more difficult to research using big data scraping approaches and, as such, are often excluded from digital methods researchers' analyses (Vis, 2013). As my research aimed to focus on eliciting a detailed understanding of Joe's self-branding, authenticity and

networking practices within his career trajectory, it was crucial not to discard these valuable artefacts. Thus, a manual approach to collection was required, led by insights from the macro data scrapes. For collecting specific data examples from Joe's Instagram and YouTube content, this meant using a combination of transcription (for audiovisual data) and screenshotting (to capture visual and contextual data around each example). Relevant sections of videos were transcribed verbatim as accurately as possible, which involved a careful watching and re-watching process with the video played at 0.75x speed<sup>89</sup>. In addition to transcripts, the use of screenshots helped to capture not only the visual aspects of examples, but also important information such as date of posting, video titles and viewing metrics for YouTube videos; and post captions and number of likes from Instagram posts, thus helping to contextualise each example. For YouTube videos, care was taken to ensure the video timestamp was in-frame and included in the saved file name for each screenshot for referencing in the analysis.

Mainstream media appearances were also identified at the macro-level data collection stage, enabling me to keep a timeline which I could refer back to, tracking key appearances alongside Joe's career developments and life events<sup>90</sup>. Examples from these appearances were collected using a combination of screenshotting and transcription to identify relevant quotes and emerging themes. In addition, press releases and promotional materials relating to these appearances were also gathered using screenshots and downloading relevant web pages as pdfs. Similarly, examples from extensions of Joe's brand such as product releases, launches of artefacts such as his graphic novels and DVD movies were collected using screenshots and downloading of relevant webpages, press releases and promotional materials. This allowed the materials

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<sup>89</sup> There were sometimes difficulties hearing individuals' words if there were others present as actors often spoke over one another, leaving room for minor inaccuracies in the transcription. However, usually the process of re-listening helped to identify errors in transcription. In the event of the words spoken being undeterminable in an accurate manner, [inaudible] was used to denote this on the transcripts.

<sup>90</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

collected to be easily imported into NVivo ready for coding and analysis at the next stage of the research process<sup>91</sup>.

## Wider contextual data

Wider contextual data was gathered from ancillary media including mainstream press coverage of key career moments; media coverage of YouTube trends, scandals and cultural moments; industry publications and policy guidance relating to YouTube and influencer cultures; and key developments from other YouTubers' careers that relate to themes identified in Joe's trajectory. These supplementary media were utilised in order to contextualise the more in-depth examples from Joe's career in the wider cultures they operate within. Wider contextual data was gathered throughout the course of the research as I maintained focus on developments in the vlogging and influencer industries, archiving materials as they came to my attention. Further contextual data was gathered purposefully during the coding and analysis stages of the research where emerging themes and codes linked to related developments from other online content creators' careers, or required contextualisation through gathering supplementary data to be analysed alongside the micro-level data.

## Ethical considerations

Vital to the research design was considering the ethical implications of the approach, particularly as I was working with online data which raises its own specific ethical considerations. My research received full ethical approval from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee in September 2017<sup>92</sup>. This section will outline some of the key ethical considerations for this project, which mainly centred around notions of consent and negotiating distinctions between public and private data.

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<sup>91</sup> See [Analytical approach](#)

<sup>92</sup> See [Appendix 5](#) for relevant ethics paperwork

Alongside the traditional ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, integrity, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and impartiality (Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), 2017), Internet research poses additional ethical considerations for researchers. AoIR's<sup>93</sup> 2012 guidance on online research ethics outlined three major tensions and considerations for online research: the suitability of the term 'human subjects'; the distinction between public and private data; and the connection between data and persons (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Their advice has recently been updated to account for technological developments and the increasing prevalence of Big Data approaches (Franzke et al., 2020), which present new challenges to existing Internet research principles, especially in relation to consent. Generally, AoIR advocate a case-by-case process to Internet research ethics, rather than a 'one size fits all' approach (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). This process should be ongoing, requiring the researcher to address and resolve ethical issues as they arise throughout the project (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). As such, the ethical implications of the research were considered for each mode of data collection, at each stage of the research's development.

In offline social research, the notions of informed consent and participant confidentiality and anonymity relate in a simple manner to the research's interaction with human subjects and the way the researchers gather permission from and protect the people involved in the research. For online research, it is much less clear what constitutes human subjects and when and how informed consent should be obtained. The ethical principle of informed consent states that 'all research subjects should give their knowledgeable consent to being studied' (Sveningsson Elm, 2009: 70). Obtaining informed consent 'means that participants are voluntarily participating in the research with adequate knowledge of relevant risks and benefits' and typically involves the researcher providing the participants with information about 'the purpose of the research, the methods being used, the possible outcomes of the research, as well as associated risks or

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<sup>93</sup> Association of Internet Researchers

harms that the participants might face' (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2016). However, researching online complicates the fundamental question of whether informed consent must be obtained in the first place.

Across Internet ethics literature the decision of whether obtaining informed consent is necessary is commonly based on the distinction between public and private data, which AoIR identify as one of the key tensions for Internet researchers (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). According to Gavin & Rodham, the simple, surface-level 'argument is that if a website or chat room is public, consent is not required;' whereas, 'if a website or chat room is private, consent should be sought from the site administrator or users themselves' (2015: 109). It is very rare that online environments fall neatly into a distinct category of either public or private, and instead it is more useful to view public and private as a continuum (Sveningsson Elm, 2009). Sveningsson Elm (2009) suggests breaking this spectrum into public, semi-public, semi-private and private whereby a public environment is open and accessible to anyone; a semi-public environment is open to most people, but they must first register or become a member of the site; a semi-private environment is only accessible to some, with membership being restricted by certain criteria; and lastly, a private environment is one that is hidden or with very restricted access such as by invitation only. Researchers should also consider users' expectations of how public or private the online environment within which they are posting is as 'it can sometimes be that even if a certain Internet medium admittedly is public, it doesn't feel public to its users' (Sveningsson, 2004: 57).

In line with AoIR's guidance to consider ethics on a case-by-case basis, the notion of privacy and informed consent was considered on an individual basis for each data collection method and related public of interest. The data collected for my research was gathered from YouTube and Instagram, mainstream media content, and other online data situated in the public domain. However, it was still important to consider expectations of privacy in these spaces, particularly when

gathering content from individuals' Instagram and YouTube accounts. This was particularly important as the research was focused on analysis of one public figure's career trajectory, thus attempting to anonymise the data would inhibit the research's value as Joe's identity is fundamental to the inquiry. As such, it was vital for me to consider the expectations of privacy within the spaces of Instagram and YouTube specifically as these were the sites for data collection where content was most closely linked to individuals. Both YouTube and Instagram are widely understood as public spaces that are open and accessible to anyone (Sveningsson Elm, 2009), however within these bigger spaces exist a multitude of users, profiles and channels that may incur varying levels of perceived privacy.

For Joe, his online following is significant enough that he can be considered a public figure and by virtue of making a career out of sharing his life publicly online, it is reasonable to consider his expectations of privacy within his Instagram and YouTube accounts as being very public. As such, this information can be determined within the public domain, therefore informed consent is not required for this data to be used. Likewise, other related YouTubers and Instagram accounts included in the research data - for example, Joe's relatives' Instagram accounts as part of the networking analysis - were all considered to have public profiles on the platforms. According to a 2019 ruling by the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA), having 30,000 or more followers is deemed to indicate the individual attracts a significant amount of attention to be considered a celebrity. By influencer industry standards, those with under 50,000 followers are considered micro talent, and users with between 100,000 and 800,000 followers deemed mid-tier talent (Dentsu Aegis Network, 2020). These numbers and level of perceived influence vary from source to source, and, arguably, cannot resolutely say what someone's expectations of privacy on a given platform are. However, it is relevant to note the level at which someone's following size is deemed significant by industry professionals. As such, I took care to ensure any content collected from other YouTube or social media

accounts as part of the platform was from either professional accounts or those with substantial followings who I therefore deem aware of the public nature of their content.

Within Joe's content on YouTube and Instagram there were also other users of the online communities to consider who may like or comment on his content, or even appear in videos or pictures from meeting him in public or at events. These people are not public figures and many are under the age of 18 which also raises ethical considerations as they are deemed minors who would usually require parental consent before participating in social research (SHU, 2017). As such, care was taken to ensure usernames, faces and comments from other users were removed from the research data. This involved ensuring comments were not included in the screenshots from videos and Instagram posts and that any faces of non-public figures were pixelated to protect their identities within the research data. Of course, this does not alleviate the potential for the original data to be located on Joe's YouTube or Instagram profiles where the faces or usernames of members of Joe's audience community would be visible. This data is in the public domain and is out of my control as a researcher, but every effort has been made within my research process to ensure that personally-identifying data involving members of the audience community is excluded from the research.

## Analytical approach

### Content analysis

The first step of the analytical process involved implementing content analysis to draw insight from the macro-level data obtained from YouTube and Instagram scrapes. Content analysis is defined as 'a research technique for the objective, quantitative and systematic study of communication content', involving 'charting or counting the incidence, or co-incidence, of particular items belonging to a set



of (usually) predetermined categories (Jary & Jary, 2000: 111). Content analysis essentially aims to produce numbers from words by counting occurrences of specific words, phrases, themes or actions within a dataset (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Futing Liao, 2004), therefore making it a valuable approach to derive statistical overview information from the platform data scrapes. However, it can only identify the frequency with which a term, phrase or theme occurs and is therefore unable to offer understanding or additional insight beyond this (Reichert Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Content analysis is rooted in the epistemological assumption that meaning can be quantified, but critics assert that too much focus can be placed on counting occurrences; thus neglecting to consider the importance of absence and context as conveyors of meaning (Jary & Jary, 2000). In my research, content analysis was used as a supplementary approach to support the more in-depth qualitative analysis of the data, therefore minimising these limitations as the other forms of analysis allow for wider understandings to be drawn, and notions of absence to be interrogated within the data.

Content analysis was utilised to derive macro-level understandings from the platform data scrapes around the frequency of content being uploaded ([Table 3.1](#), [Table 3.2](#)), the most popular posts and videos, and the categories of content being uploaded to Joe's YouTube channel too. I used Google Sheets' in-built data sorting functions to sort the dataset by columns such as 'likes', 'comments' and 'views' (for YouTube) to identify popular forms of content, enabling me to calculate averages to provide further insight. I also utilised the search function on the spreadsheet to identify specific types of content - for example, commercial content such as ads, gifts and loans - using keyword searches for terms such as '#ad', 'AD', 'advert', 'working', 'gifted' and 'loaned', 'working' to identify occurrences and produce a table of examples ([Figure 3.6](#)).



Table 3.1 - YouTube video posting frequency table

Year	ThatcherJoe	ThatcherJoeVlogs	ThatcherJoeGames
2012	15	0	0
2013	34	44	0
2014	51	72	50
2015	54	135	113
2016	48	141	46
2017	52	155	100
2018	31	90	37
2019	16	114	25

Table 3.2 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram posting frequency table

Year	Frequency
2012	128
2013	307
2014	270
2015	156
2016	141
2017	82
2018	121
2019	86

Year	Date	Type of post	Account	Company	Type	With others?	Other info
2013	25/10/13	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	City & Guilds	Ad		
2014	11/5/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Frankly app	Ad	Caspar Lee	Caspar made video on his channel too
	20/7/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	4Music Vlogstar competition	Ad		
	13/7/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Chupa Chups	Ad	Jim Chapman	Made video on their channel too
	21/9/14	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	NCS	Ad		
	5/10/14	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	VidBee app	Ad		Says it's his own app but think it is a third-party platform where fans can enter competitions and compete in challenges set by Joe
	4/12/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Sodastream	Ad	Will Darbyshire & Caspar Lee	
	18/12/2014	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Google/Android	Ad		
	21/12/2014	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Game of War	Ad		
	31/12/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Skype Qik	Ad		
2015	20/2/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Paramount UK & Spongebob Movie	Ad	Caspar Lee	Promoting movie they have small voice acting part in
	24/3/2015	Instagram promoting YouTube	@joe_sugg	McDonalds	Ad		Promoting video he made on McDonalds' channel
	25/3/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	McDonalds	Ad		YouTube video promoted in above Instagram post
	27/3/2015	Instagram promoting YouTube	@joe_sugg	Rise Above	Ad		Promoting video he made on their channel
	24/4/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Minions & Universal	Ad		
	7/5/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Minions & Universal	Ad		
	24/5/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	NCS	Ad	Caspar, Oli, Will, Jim, Josh	
	12/6/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Mini Babvbel	Ad		

Figure 3.6 - Screenshot of YouTube and Instagram promotional content table<sup>94</sup>

In addition, content analysis was used to determine the types of content posted by Joe on his ThatcherJoe channel as the style of videos shared here seemed diverse, in contrast with his ThatcherJoeVlogs and ThatcherJoeGames channels which focus on one style of content. As such, I categorised the videos gathered in the data scrape from ThatcherJoe by genre, resulting in the identification of 15 categories ([Figure 3.7](#)):

- Announcement
- Challenge
- Charity
- Collaboration
- Comedy
- Game
- Mainstream appearance
- Milestone
- Music
- Prank
- Question and answer (Q&A)
- Reaction

<sup>94</sup> See [Appendix 4](#) for full promotional content table

- Sit down chat
- Tag
- Vlog

Year	Posted	Title	Category	Ad?	Views	Likes
2019	28/06/2019 08:00:	We Have An Announcement	Announcement		422535	16081
		GIRLFRIEND VS BESTFRIEND SPELLING BEE *Winner gets a free trip to DISNEY*	Collaboration		458096	25636
2019	19/05/2019 16:58:	88 SIMPSONS IMPRESSIONS IN ONE SITTING!	Comedy		835118	51087
2019	05/05/2019 17:00:	Drawing DISNEY Characters From Memory	Challenge		356237	22242
2019	28/04/2019 16:57:	The EASIEST PRANK to Try at Home!	Prank		1475388	56836
2019	24/04/2019 16:57:	BLINDFOLD MUSICAL CHAIRS	Collaboration		337085	28560
2019	21/04/2019 16:58:	RE-CREATING CELEBRITY COACHELLA OUTFITS	Comedy		1817949	83709
2019	07/04/2019 16:57:	TURNING MY HAIR INTO THE LITTLE MERMAID	Collaboration		294932	21046
2019	31/03/2019 17:00:	MEET CHIPPY	Vlog		568743	31714
2019	24/03/2019 20:15:	GIRLFRIEND DOES MY ASOS SHOP	Collaboration		1012165	61191
2019	17/03/2019 18:06:	THIS CHALLENGE IS IMPOSSIBLE **10,000 PRIZE**	Collaboration		587669	31987
2019	14/03/2019 17:57:	REACTING TO YOUR CONFESSIONS #8	Reaction		478994	30577
2019	03/03/2019 17:57:	AM I DANCING WITH MY GIRLFRIEND? CHALLENGE	Comedy		838185	37082
		GIVING MYSELF A MAKE OVER USING MY SISTERS NEW MAKE UP				

Figure 3.7 - Screenshot of ThatcherJoe video categories table<sup>95</sup>

These categories could then be used to run content analysis queries into the data. To do this, I used the 'COUNTIF' function on Google Sheets to automate the counting process, running queries to identify the frequency of each category, which could also be cross-referenced with factors such as year of posting and number of views using a Pivot Table. This offered valuable macro-level insights into the trends of different content styles within Joe's online career trajectory, providing useful context for the more in-depth analysis of the micro-level data.

## Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was used initially to devise the career stages within which Joe's self-branding, authenticity labour and networking practices could be interrogated; then to identify emerging themes within the micro-level data

<sup>95</sup> Some columns are not visible due to width. See ThatcherJoe video categories sheet in Appendix 3 - [YouTube dataset](#).

examples gathered. I will begin by outlining thematic analysis as an approach, before moving on to explain how this method of analysis was utilised to identify the career stages and emerging themes within the data. Finally, I will outline how textual analysis was used as a supporting analytical approach to explore key examples in more detail.

Thematic analysis is an approach focused on 'identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes' (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012: 9). Themes are identified in the form of patterns which help to not only organise the data, but begin the interpretive process too (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis has its strengths in its accessibility and flexibility, which offers the researcher potential to elicit rich understandings from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This made it a particularly well-suited approach for dealing with the vast and varied forms of data gathered within my corpus of materials.

Themes were identified using an inductive approach, meaning they are driven by the data, rather than pre-formed and derived from theory prior to analysis. Whilst data-led, it is impossible for these themes to be developed without some influence from the researcher's existing knowledge and theoretical grounding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were identified at a latent level, taking an interpretive approach which is rooted in the constructivist paradigm, and extends beyond description to consider the inherent assumptions and meanings that have informed the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). On their most basic level, a theme 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 82).

The process of developing themes followed the six stages set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), starting by importing and organising the micro and wider contextual data collected into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software<sup>96</sup> and

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<sup>96</sup> I did not consider there to be much value in importing the macro-level YouTube and Instagram data scrapes into NVivo as they were most easily utilised in Google Sheets where data could be easily sorted, searched and queried.

familiarising myself with the data collected. This stage also involved transcribing video and audio data for relevant quotes, helping to further immerse myself into the corpus. Additionally, close readings were conducted of the macro data scrapes from YouTube and Instagram alongside my observational fieldnotes to identify shifts in Joe's content that reflected changes in his level of online prominence and perceived celebrity status. This process led me to develop five key stages within Joe's career that could be used to situate the analysis within his career trajectory. The second stage of thematic analysis involved developing initial codes by carefully reading through the data and adding coding nodes<sup>97</sup> on NVivo based on observations and interpretations of things noticed. These initial codes were then organised into themes at the third stage, whereby initially-coded nodes were grouped together into related themes under the three subunits of analysis: self-branding, authenticity and networking. Stages four and five of the thematic analysis involved reviewing the identified themes, defining and setting the boundaries for each theme and naming them appropriately (Figures [3.8](#) & [3.9](#)). Then, the final step was writing up the analysis using the defined themes for each of the three sub-areas of inquiry to structure the discussion. Pertinent examples were identified within each theme by viewing the coded data on NVivo, with further analyses drawn using textual analysis<sup>98</sup>. These examples were discussed in relation to the identified themes with reference to the overarching research question and related literature, and the subunit of analysis the chapter was concerned with, thus producing a cohesive report of the thematic analysis.

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<sup>97</sup> Defined as 'a collection of references about a specific theme, place, person or other area of interest' (NVivo, 2011).

<sup>98</sup> See next section - [Textual analysis of examples](#)

Name	Files	Refer...
▼ (Re)-branding	289	939
▼ 1 Ordinary stage	37	73
Beginning to grow	6	9
Family man	4	5
Non YT friendships	8	9
Ordinary boy	10	33
Thatching	15	16
▼ 2 Microcelebrity	32	59
First promotional	7	7
Hierarchy begins	13	13
Life begins to change	10	22
Ordinariness	1	2
Still a thatcher	3	3
▼ 3 Internet celebrity	68	84
Branded content	0	0

Figure 3.8 - Screenshot from NVivo of coding nodes around branding



Reference 1: 99.22% coverage

[Files\Joe Sugg\Instagram\Individual posts\2019\JS IG 28.6.19](#)  
1 reference coded, 96.83% coverage



Reference 1: 96.83% coverage

[Files\Joe Sugg\Instagram\Individual posts\2019\JS IG 3.7.19](#)  
1 reference coded, 97.52% coverage



Reference 1: 97.52% coverage

DES > Nodes > (Re)-branding > 5 Mainstream > Performing

Figure 3.9 - Screenshot from NVivo showing data coded under Mainstream > Performing

Thematic analysis has its limitations as an analytic approach. One of the frequently cited criticisms of thematic analysis relates to rigour, particularly as a result of the approach's flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Whilst this flexibility is advantageous in many ways, it can result in inconsistencies when identifying themes from the data (Nowell et al., 2017), making it harder for the researcher to choose which parts of the data to focus analytical attention on (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, it is important for the researcher to ensure the themes work cohesively together and do not overlap or fail to show something valuable about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Nowell et al. (2017) note the importance in making clear and implementing an epistemological standpoint which can ground the research's claims. This can also help minimise the critique that thematic analysis can offer limited insights beyond generating descriptive accounts by rooting the inquiry in an established theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As such, it was important to situate the research within a paradigmatic tradition to ensure analysis was rooted in the ontological and epistemological positions of the inquiry. It was also important to clearly show the research data and analytical process, using plenty of quotes (and in the case of my visual data, images and screenshots) in the research's narrative (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2014). As such, it was vital to ensure my account of the analysis was strongly rooted in the use of multiple examples to illustrate the analytic points and themes from the data.

### Textual analysis of examples

Within the broader thematic analytical strategy, textual analysis was used to explore specific examples from the data in more detail. Textual analysis offers 'a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world' and can help researchers elicit understanding into cultural practices and experiences of identity (McKee, 2003: 1). This made it a valuable approach for drawing meaning from specific examples in relation to Joe's self-branding, authenticity and networking practices, which require consideration towards the ideologies and cultures they are situated in. Textual analysis is much

less clearly defined than other analytical approaches, but it often combines methods of discourse analysis with notions of representation, genre and style (Fairclough, 2003). Its central aim is toward interpreting texts through identifying inherent assumptions, and situating this within the social and ideological context (Fairclough, 2003).

My research utilised a blend of semiotic, visual and discursive analytical techniques to draw more in-depth insight into specific images, videos and text-based transcripts gathered in the dataset and identified as key examples within the thematic analysis. Once the gathered data had been coded in NVivo using a thematic analytical approach, specific examples were identified within each theme to be explored in more detail. These examples were selected based on their relevance to the key analytic themes with each analysed individually using this blend of textual approaches, exploring the way meaning was constructed and communicated in the texts in relation to the sub-units of analysis: self-branding, authenticity labour, and networked relationships. Factors such as visual composition, language, tone, sentiment, setting and props were interrogated within the examples, enabling insight to be drawn towards what was being signified by each example, its inherent assumptions, and the representational and self-presentational practices present within the examples. This in-depth analysis of specific videos, posts and mainstream media artefacts offered great value to the overall analytic approach, enabling deeper understandings of the broader analytic themes to be drawn through exploring specific examples from his career, whilst allowing me to identify the individual self-branding, authenticity and networking practices utilised at different moments.

Textual analysis has its limitations - whilst it can provide valuable insights into data, it is somewhat limited as an approach when used on its own and is, therefore, best utilised in conjunction with other approaches (Fairclough, 2003). This is because textual analysis is only able to offer limited insights towards 'meaning-making, the causal effects of texts, and the specifically ideological



effects of texts', and as such, is best suited for use within an ethnographic approach (Fairclough, 2003: 15). Textual analysis is very dependent upon the researcher's selection in terms of where the focus of the research is placed and which questions are asked. It is impossible to be completely objective and unbiased in analysing a text and this is not the aim of a textual analytical approach (Fairclough, 2003). Despite this, I recognise the importance of reflexivity in the research process, which I discuss in detail in the next section.

## Researcher reflexivity

It is impossible to separate myself from the research as so much of the data and its analysis is derived from my interpretations - whether that be in relation to where interest and focus has been placed within the inquiry, or in the analytical process, which relies on my interpretations to produce themes and identify key examples to be discussed in more depth. As such, researcher reflexivity around how these inherent biases and assumptions affect the inquiry is a crucial part of the research process. Reflexivity is defined as 'the process of reflecting critically on the self as the researcher' and 'forces us to come to know the self within the process of research itself' (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2018: 143). Reflexivity requires the researcher to interrogate how their own identity shapes the research from its design and the way the inquiry is carried out, to the analytical process and the way the research is framed in the written account (Lincoln et al., 2018). For digital ethnographers, reflexivity follows the same basic principles as more traditional reflexive practice, however it also requires researchers to question their own process of knowledge acquisition and their own relationship with the digital world (Pink et al., 2016). In this section, I will reflect on how my own identity and resulting inherent assumptions and biases have shaped the research process.

Prior to researching YouTube, I was an audience member. In fact, it was my personal interest in YouTube as a viewer which led me to research the topic

academically. Thus, there is an inherent bias in that I have a personal interest and connection to the phenomenon being studied. My experiences as a viewer of YouTubers over the last decade have undoubtedly shaped the research process, however they have also helped inform my research, giving me a unique and in-depth understanding as both an audience member and a researcher.

Henry Jenkins (2012, 2013) has reflected on some of the tensions between being an academic and a fan and, whilst I would perhaps situate myself more as a close observer than a fan of the YouTubers studied, the closeness with which I have observed YouTube as a platform through my own viewing practices firmly situates me as a fan of YouTube cultures more broadly. Jenkins (2012) terms this positionality as that of the 'aca-fan' - a hybrid between academic and fan - which he considers to acknowledge three key things: the researcher's personal investment in the media cultures they study; their sense of responsibility to the communities they research; and their feelings of identification with these groups (Jenkins, 2013). As such, it is important to interrogate how my own relationship with both the phenomenon of YouTube, the objects of study and the wider online communities may impact my interpretations of data. This personal connection with the research phenomenon is not necessarily a limitation. This closeness and personal interest has arguably helped inform my research, giving it a unique context as an authentic audience member researching the phenomenon, rather than an outsider lacking contextual knowledge about the cultural practices and conventions within these digital communities. Thus, whilst it was important for me to be aware of the potential biases my personal interest in the phenomenon may impart on the research process, I consider it to be an advantageous position that has overall enabled me to gain a much deeper understanding of the phenomenon of study.

## Methodology: Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach to my research, grounding the study in the constructivist paradigm and showing the development of the research design from a multiple to single-case approach, asserting the value of Joe Sugg as a unique example to focus the inquiry on. I have provided a rationale for the data collection and analytical approaches, outlining the combination of techniques used within this approach which were necessary to suitably address the nuances and complexities of varied field sites and data forms which exist within a 'messy web' (Postill & Pink, 2012). I also outlined the practical implications of these approaches, discussing the ways in which these techniques were implemented to gather data and draw insight from Joe's career. This chapter has also considered the role of my personal assumptions and biases in the interpretive research process, providing a reflexive account which evaluated the strengths and limitations of 'aca-fandom' to the inquiry.

The three chapters which follow will present the analysis and are structured by the sub-research questions, which focus on Joe's self-branding practices, authenticity labour, and finally, networked relationships.

# Chapter 4: “From ThatcherJoe to *Strictly* superstar”: (Re-)branding the self

## Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the brand development of Joe Sugg as his career progresses from an ‘ordinary’ boy making content online, to reaching widespread recognition, appearing in the mainstream media, and developing his own businesses away from YouTube. As such, I will consider the practices Joe has utilised to negotiate his self-brand across an online career trajectory spanning more than eight years through discussion of specific career examples.

Through analysis of the macro-level data collected from Joe’s online content, five key stages were identified within his career trajectory: ordinary, microcelebrity, Internet celebrity, quasi-mainstream and mainstream<sup>99</sup>. These categories draw upon existing conceptions of microcelebrities (e.g. Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008, 2013), ordinary celebrities (e.g. Gamson, 2011; Turner, 2004, 2006), Internet celebrities and influencers (e.g. Abidin, 2016b, 2018), and traditional celebrities (e.g. Giles, 2018; Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004), which were applied to the data gathered to form new understandings around the stages of Internet celebrification throughout Joe’s career. These five stages will be used to structure the analysis of his self-branding practices throughout his career, drawing upon specific examples at each phase to draw insight into his brand development at each stage. Then, findings from each stage will be brought together to draw conclusions about Joe’s brand development more holistically, interrogating how he has been able to so successfully transition from an ordinary boy, filming videos in his bedroom, into the most successful example of a British YouTuber breaking into the mainstream. The significance of these findings in relation to existing theoretical perspectives, as highlighted in [Chapter 2](#), will also be discussed.

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<sup>99</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg’s career timeline](#)

## Stage one: Ordinary

The first phase of Joe's branding identified is the ordinary stage, which occurs at the start of his online content creation when he shares his first Instagram post in May 2009 up until January 2013 when he creates his second YouTube channel, ThatcherJoeVlogs<sup>100</sup>. However, it is important to note that ordinariness continues to be a recurring theme in the later stages of Joe's self-branding too, even as his celebrity status grows. The key characteristics of Joe's self-branding identified at the ordinary stage of his career are: relatability; roof thatching; and the significance of his relationships with family and friends.

### #Relatable: Sharing the ordinary and everyday

The first theme identified in Joe's ordinary self-branding was sharing content that depicts typical, everyday experiences that his audience are likely to relate to. As noted in Chapter 2<sup>101</sup>, emphasising the ordinary and sharing everyday life are key practices of influencers, which function to situate them as 'normal' to audiences, and help to foster feelings of intimacy and closeness between them and their followers (Abidin, 2015). Analysis of Joe's content identified ordinariness and the everyday as prominent facets of his self-branding, particularly in this initial stage where his self-brand was being established online.

On his ThatcherJoe YouTube channel, Joe's early content featured a series of observational videos in which he comically reflects on everyday experiences and British culture with topics including primary school, the cinema, reality TV show *The X Factor*, and going shopping. The videos are framed in a way that suggests their intention is to be relatable to audiences - for example, in the description box of his video *Primary School Observations* video, he writes, 'I thought I'd make a video that everyone can relate to.. [sic] Unless you've never been to Primary

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<sup>100</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

<sup>101</sup> See Chapter 2 - [Influencers](#)

school' (ThatcherJoe, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012). Here, he makes the assumption that his audience are British and will be able to relate to the experiences shared in the video. This continues throughout the video where Joe recalls experiences from attending a British primary school, framing the experiences through humour:

There was always that one kid who would remind the teacher that homework was due in. Why?! What are you? What sort of person are you? None of us have done our homework and then you decide that like, "Miss, I think we had homework due in today."

"Thanks for reminding me. I'd have forgot otherwise!"

You bitch.

*(Primary School Observations, ThatcherJoe, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012)*

The experiences he recounts are likely to be relatable to audience members of a similar age and background to Joe, thus strengthening the connection between him and his audience based on their shared experiences and creating a sense of communication between equals (Rihl and Wegener, 2017). These experiences may not be shared by all viewers, particularly those living outside of the UK. Despite this, many of the experiences relayed in these observation videos play into stereotypes of British culture which may be appealing to a wider international audience, whilst also serving to integrate Britishness as a key part of Joe's ordinary self-branding - a tactic also employed by early British YouTubers such as charlieissocoollike<sup>102</sup>. Sharing his personal childhood experiences is an intimate practice, furthered by his use of casual language and swearing which implies ordinary conversation and closeness. Allowing viewers access to these memories through sharing his experiences strengthens the intimate connection with his audience, even if audience members cannot directly relate to his experiences. Later in the video Joe invites viewers to share their own experiences too:

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<sup>102</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/charlieissocoollike> - See Smith (2014)

If you have any more memories of school, like things that used to irritate you in primary school or you'd noticed that was quite funny or plain weird that kids used to do in primary school then I'd love to see it in a comment below ...

*(Primary School Observations, ThatcherJoe, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2012)*

This further helps to situate Joe as equal to his audience, supporting Rihl and Wegener's assertion that YouTubers function as 'reliable, albeit somewhat superficial, friends' (2017: 10) to their audience. This rejects the notion of hierarchy and helps strengthen the parasocial relationship between him and his audience (Rihl & Wegener, 2017), whilst simultaneously authenticating his ordinary self-branding.

### ThatcherJoe: Material labour as self-branding

Joe's early self-branding often refers to his job as a roof thatcher - something deeply rooted in his online identity. One of the first online branding decisions he made was to name his YouTube channel ThatcherJoe when he joined in November 2011. Here, he chose to brand himself not simply with his name as on other social media platforms (he is @joe\_sugg on both Instagram and Twitter); instead, opting to create a more distinctive branded identity under ThatcherJoe. This could have been informed by his awareness of the potential for growth on YouTube from his sister Zoe's experiences, thus recognising the importance of creating an easily memorable username. Smith positions online usernames as 'the circulation of one's influence in the minds of others' and the thing that 'gives one their individuality' (2014: 263). Thus, by foregrounding his job as a roof thatcher in his username, Joe adds a level of distinctiveness to his otherwise ordinary self-brand. This ability to 'perform ... ordinariness with some degree of specificity or individuality' is crucial for reality TV participants (Turner, 2006: 160) and Joe appears to have, intentionally or unintentionally, used this same tactic to make his brand stand out online.



In addition to branding himself as ThatcherJoe, Joe's early content regularly highlights aspects of his career as a roof thatcher, sharing images and videos of him at work which suggest to his followers that they are being given access to his offline, working life (Images [4.1](#) & [4.2](#)). In these images, Joe furthers his brand as an ordinary working man, reminding his audience that, at this stage, online content creation is just a hobby. Allowing his audience access to his working life helps to strengthen the parasocial relationship between Joe and his viewers, giving them an insight into his day-to-day life outside of YouTube (Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, it is interesting to note that, whilst roof thatching conveys Joe's ordinary working life, it is an atypical, specialist trade, and something generally associated with quintessential old English culture. This presents an interesting tension between this manual labour which is ordinary to Joe, but perhaps extraordinary to others with thatched roofs being regarded as desirable symbols of wealth (McLachlan, 2020). Moreover, Joe's incorporation of thatching into his self-brand plays on quaint English cultural stereotypes to further situate Britishness as a key part of his online identity.



Image 4.1 – @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 11th August 2012





Image 4.2 – @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 6th September 2013

Although Joe's work as an apprentice roof thatcher may reflect quintessential wealthy English culture, he portrays his work in his content as hard manual labour. For example, in Images [4.3](#), [4.4](#) and [4.5](#), he highlights the realities of working outside in the cold and rain. In these posts, Joe evidences his claims to ordinariness in his self-branding by showing the unglamorous realities of his job. In [Image 4.3](#), Joe is pictured wearing a dirty-looking high-visibility jacket, contradicting the stereotypes of thatching as a traditional, almost fairytale-like trade by sharing the realities of outdoor manual labour. This functions as authenticity labour, showing the ordinary, unglamorous reality of this labour, despite its quaint associations, which thus strengthens Joe's ordinary self-branding. By conveying this ordinariness as a key part of his self-brand, it becomes an extraordinary quality, used to distinguish him from other creators online (Smith, 2014).



Image 4.3 – @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 14th December 2012



Image 4.4 – @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 22nd February 2013



Image 4.5 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 8th January 2014

## Relative values and 'lad culture lite': Relationships as self-branding

The final key theme identified in Joe's ordinary self-branding stage relates to situating the importance of his family relationships and friendships in his content<sup>103</sup>. Joe positions himself as someone who strongly values his family through sharing content displaying his relationships with them. For example, in his YouTube video *The Sibling Test* posted on his ThatcherJoe channel in September 2012, Joe and his sister Zoe test each other on knowledge about their sibling's life. In the introduction to the video, they explain:

- Joe:       What we're gonna do is answer questions about each other—
- Zoe:       Which we should both know the answer to—
- Joe:       Because we are siblings.

<sup>103</sup> The importance of Joe's relationships in terms of building networks and amplifying his online following will be discussed in Chapter 6, however this section will consider the significance of Joe's relationships from the perspective of his early self-branding.

Zoe: I've known you my whole life.

(*The Sibling Test*, ThatcherJoe, 7<sup>th</sup> September 2012)

Here, they highlight the amount of time they have known each other, conveying to the audience that they should know each other well. Their delivery of dialogue involves them finishing each other's sentences off – a common TV and film trope used to denote closeness and familiarity. Joe's close bond with his sister is a recurrent theme across his content and self-branding, both at this ordinary stage and throughout later stages of his brand development<sup>104</sup>. However, this focus on his relationship with Zoe is particularly significant because Joe became known online through appearing in his sister's videos prior to starting his own YouTube channel. As such, displays of their relationship could function as a marker of pecuniary taste, reinforcing her accrued online following as a marker of his value (Abidin, 2014).

Joe also frequently shares his relationships with other family members in his content, including his mother, father and grandfather. At the ordinary stage of Joe's self-branding, Joe was living in Wiltshire with his father and sister and, as such, they made regular appearances in his content. This allows his audience glimpses into his home life and relationships with his father and sister through their interjections in his videos or Joe sharing Instagram posts featuring or referring to them, offering relatability to his audience. For example, in [Image 4.6](#) Joe shares the comic birthday cards he received from his father and sister on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Birthday cards are incredibly personal artefacts and sharing these publicly on his Instagram creates a sense that followers are being let into Joe's private family relationships, thus fostering feelings of intimacy and closeness (Marwick, 2013), and strengthening his perceived authenticity (Giles, 2018). There is also an element of humour as they have both opted to buy cards featuring the children's TV character Mr Tumble, however the 'HAR HAR' in his

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<sup>104</sup> See Chapter 6: [Networked Relationships](#)



caption suggests these have been given to him as a joke. This shows that his sense of humour, which is a key strand of his online persona, extends into his offline life too. Despite the silly nature of the cards, sharing pictures of them on Instagram highlights the value Joe places on his family relationships, whilst portraying a playful, 'perfect' family dynamic - a notion congruent with Instagram's trends towards portraying aspirational, idealised lifestyles (Hund & McGuigan, 2019; Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017). This helps to position Joe as a good, family-oriented young man, drawing parallels with the 'boy-next-door' branding of boy band members (Hansen, 2018). Moreover, the everydayness of sharing family interactions online also conveys a sense of relatability, thus strengthening Joe's ordinary self-branding.



Image 4.6 – @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 8th September 2012

Also key to Joe's self-branding at the ordinary stage is his portrayal of friendships in his content. At this ordinary stage, Joe shares posts on Instagram of him at parties and on nights out with friends, however his self-presentation appears to be carefully considered in these posts to ensure he projects a desirable image to

followers. For example, [Image 4.7](#) is captioned, ‘Me @zozeebo<sup>105</sup> and a drunken friend’. Here, emphasis is placed on their friend being drunk, both through the caption and choice of photo, which shows Joe and Zoe appearing sober next to their friend who looks visibly intoxicated. This juxtaposition positions Joe and Zoe as sensible and well-behaved in contrast to their friend, with the caption implying sobriety on their part; helping to reaffirm Joe’s ‘good boy’ image as a result. However, this is not to say that Joe abstains from these less desirable behaviours. Rather, his online self-presentation indicates that, regardless of whether he engages in these behaviours offline, they have no place in his online content where he chooses to project a more clean-cut image.



Image 4.7 – @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 15th September 2012

This focus on clean-cut branding was evident in 2013 Joe went on a ‘lads’ holiday’ to the popular party destination Zante, Greece. After returning, he uploaded a vlog titled *ULTIMATE BOAT TRIP IN GREECE!*. In the video’s description box, he notes:

<sup>105</sup> Zoe’s former Instagram username

Earlier on this summer me and some of my friends went on holiday to Greece! a LOT of the footage wasn't suitable for your eyes .. or mine for that matter! so this is a collection of footage that i thought was appropriate  
ENJOY :D (ThatcherJoeVlogs, 10th October 2013)

Here, Joe makes clear that self-presentation is a concern when choosing what footage to include in the video, showing that he has considered the potential impact on his self-brand and has made decisions around appropriateness. He notes that much of his footage is unsuitable for his audiences' eyes, implying a distinction between himself and his perceptions of his audience demographic, particularly in relation to age. This suggests that he perceives his audience to be younger than him and functions similarly to the clean-cut, boy band-style branding discussed by Hansen (2018), which strives to appeal to younger females and their parents. Joe even states that the footage is not even appropriate for his eyes, positioning him as too pure and clean-cut for the antics filmed, thus reinforcing his 'good boy' image to his followers, despite the fact he was likely involved in the clips.

Instead, the vlog presents his audience with a sanitised version of the trip which shows Joe and his friends joking and messing around, but never shows them in a state of intoxication or engaging in inappropriate behaviours. This conveys a 'lad culture lite' of sorts, which portrays male friendship as based on banter, messing around and having fun without the boorish over-sexualisation, sexism and offensive humour that characterises typical lad culture (Phipps & Young, 2013). This avoidance of anything that could be deemed inappropriate is much like the cheeky but family-friendly branding of Ant and Dec as discussed by Bennett (2011), and ensures Joe is able to maintain both his appeal to younger female viewers, and the approval of their parents (Hansen, 2018). However, this sanitisation of his lived experiences through selectively limiting the vlog footage raises tensions with his claims to ordinariness and authenticity. Joe's

self-branding claims that he is authentic, yet he is admitting to not showing aspects of his holiday which negate his clean-cut image. Drinking alcohol and being silly with friends is considered ordinary behaviour for a person of Joe's age, however Joe's desire to maintain his 'good boy' image appears to take precedence with him instead navigating this tension by alluding to these behaviours in the video's description box. However, it is interesting to note that Joe posted his first brand partnership several weeks after his Zante vlog on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2013 - a YouTube video about being an apprentice roof thatcher in partnership with City & Guilds<sup>106</sup> (*THATCHING ROOFS!*, ThatcherJoeVlogs). As such, Joe may have censored his content to ensure he did not tarnish the squeaky clean self-brand that City & Guilds were paying to acquire with any inappropriate or unfavourable footage.

Joe's offline friendships were also a prevalent feature in his content at the ordinary stage, functioning to convey ordinariness and normality to his followers. For example, in a YouTube video titled *25 Facts About Me*, Joe tells his audience about a game where he and his friends send each other pictures of themselves pulling silly faces:

I started a game with my friends where we take the most vile photographs of our faces and send them to each other for no apparent reason [pretends to take selfies<sup>107</sup>] so he just opens it up like, "Woooah... weirdo." (ThatcherJoe, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2013)

The game described appears to have been shared in the form of a screenshot on Joe's Instagram ([Image 4.8](#)), captioned 'This is how me and my friends communicate. #fit'. He frames this everyday interaction using his humorous style, conveying a sense of backstage access to his offline interactions (Goffman, 1956). The fact these interactions are with his offline friends evidences the

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<sup>106</sup> Discussed in more detail later in this chapter at Stage two - [From hobby to paid labour](#)

<sup>107</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#) for definition of selfie



authenticity of his online comedic persona, whilst suggesting to audiences that his online self-brand is an authentic reflection of his offline personality. Sharing these informal interactions between him and his friends can be considered a highly intimate disclosure (Rogers, 2014), giving a perception of access to Joe's relationships that enables followers to feel an increased sense of familiarity with him and his social connections (Marwick, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011).



Image 4.8 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 12th October 2012

Alongside sharing everyday interactions with his friends, Joe emphasises the value these relationships have to him in his content. At the ordinary stage of his self-branding, he regularly acknowledges how much he misses his friends in his content. [Image 4.9](#) states, 'I love it when all my friends who are at uni come home for the summer!'. Similarly [Image 4.10](#), is captioned, 'One of the best things about Xmas is that all the uni friends are back!'. These posts suggest that Joe is missing his friends who have moved away to study, whilst he remains in Wiltshire working as an apprentice roof thatcher. Here, it becomes clear that Joe has followed a different path from his peers, opting to stay in Wiltshire and learn

a trade, rather than pursuing further academic qualifications at university. Despite the excitement of his growing YouTube and social media followings, these captions suggest that he feels left behind. Joe lets his followers in on his intimate feelings, sharing his excitement about his friends returning home, implying a level of sadness when they are away. This vulnerability allows his audience to feel an increased sense of connection towards him, functioning as what Marwick and boyd (2011) term performed intimacy, which can thus increase parasociality (Horton & Wohl, 1956).



Image 4.9 – @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 15th July 2013



Image 4.10 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 15th December 2013

## Stage one: Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that stage one of Joe's self-branding comprises of three key facets – emphasising relatability in his content by sharing the ordinary, thus provoking feelings of identification through common experiences; sharing aspects of his material labour as a roof thatcher, thus highlighting Britishness as a key part of his self-brand whilst allowing followers access to his everyday working life; and finally, through situating the importance of relationships in his life, positioning himself as a family and friendship-centred boy-next-door figure, and providing his audience access to his intimate interactions.

## Stage two: Microcelebrity

I identify the second phase of Joe's self-branding as the microcelebrity stage which I define as starting in January 2013 when Joe started his ThatcherJoeVlogs YouTube channel and ending in November 2013 when he reached 1 million subscribers on his first channel ThatcherJoe<sup>108</sup>. In this section, I will draw on the key concept of microcelebrity as established in existing scholarship (e.g. Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008, 2013) to help understand the self-branding practices employed that characterise a shift from Joe situating himself as ordinary and unexceptional, into a commodifiable self-brand that is both authentic and intimate, and attracts attention. Balancing these aspects is a complex task, therefore interrogating his brand management and development practices can offer useful insights towards his initial celebrification from ordinary to microcelebrity, and his career development more broadly. The primary characteristics identified at the microcelebrity stage are: commodification of his self-brand as he begins to monetise his online platforms; and hierarchical shifts in the dynamic between Joe and his audience.

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<sup>108</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

## From hobby to paid labour: Commodifying the self-brand

The first key theme identified at the microcelebrity stage relates to the development of Joe's online content creation from a hobby into something he can monetise. Here, the process of self-commodification, and therefore monetisation, is founded on successful self-branding and maintaining an advertiser-friendly branded identity. As discussed in stage one, Joe's initial self-branding focused on creating a relatable, clean-cut image that helped foster intimate connections with his audience. At stage two, his brand becomes commodified as he begins to engage in his first commercial partnerships, coinciding with the approximate time he became signed to Gleam Futures<sup>109</sup>. This challenges Marwick's (2013) assertion that microcelebrities do not tend to have professional management and representation, however at this stage of his career, Joe engaged in very few brand partnerships. As such, his professional representation does not appear to have significantly altered his practices, therefore I still consider it accurate to view Joe through the lens of microcelebrity at this stage.

As noted previously, Joe's shared his first piece of sponsored content in late 2013 - a YouTube video titled *THATCHING ROOFS!* (ThatcherJoeVlogs, 25th October 2013) in partnership with the vocational training and education provider City & Guilds. This partnership drew upon Joe's existing brand as a roof thatcher and commodified this to promote City & Guilds' apprenticeships. The video offers an interesting juxtaposition between Joe's portrayal of his 'ordinary' working life as an apprentice, but shared in the context of a sponsored video on YouTube where he had, at this stage, accrued nearly 1 million subscribers on his ThatcherJoe channel (and over 300,000 subscribers on ThatcherJoeVlogs).

In the video, Joe talks about his educational journey to doing an apprenticeship, as well as demonstrating thatching a roof. He is able to successfully merge this

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<sup>109</sup> Whilst it is not clear exactly when Joe signed with Gleam Futures, my analysis suggests this was around December 2012, with him remaining on their roster until November 2017 when he announced publicly that he had parted ways with them.

promotional content with his characteristic comic wit which he established as a key part of his branded identity at stage one, making the brand partnership seem more authentic. This ability to merge the intimacy and authenticity of his self-brand with commodification is a key microcelebrity practice (Jerslev, 2016), and is particularly important here in Joe's first piece of sponsored content to avoid breaching the intimate, trusting relationship he has built with his audience (Abidin & Ots, 2016). This sponsored video was part of a longer term partnership with City & Guilds which saw Joe presenting a series of videos on their YouTube channel, exploring careers in construction<sup>110</sup>, agriculture<sup>111</sup> and catering<sup>112</sup>, as well as appearing in two videos promoting their #OpenDoors Skills Show<sup>113</sup>. The videos produced in his partnership with City & Guilds saw Joe take on a more traditional mainstream media presenter role, giving him a taste of more performance and presenting-based roles - something he explores further at later stages of his self-branding, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

With the exception of City & Guilds, Joe's early brand partnerships were primarily short-term or one-off sponsors<sup>114</sup>. These initial brand partnerships took place on YouTube to begin with, with other early commercial partners including ephemeral messaging app Frankly, 4Music's Vlogstar competition, Chupa Chups confectionery, and at-home carbonated drinks brand Sodastream. It is also pertinent to note that, following the sponsored video produced for City & Guilds on his ThatcherJoe channel in October 2013, Joe did not share any further pieces of sponsored content until May 2014 - around the time he hit 2 million subscribers on ThatcherJoe. As such, I situate the promotional content that followed Joe's video for City & Guilds within stage three of his self-branding, rather than stage two; thus it is interesting to consider whether this gap in

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<sup>110</sup> *Construction at the Olympic Park with Joe Sugg*, City & Guilds, 25th October 2013

<sup>111</sup> *Exploring careers in agriculture with Joe Sugg*, City & Guilds, 1st November 2014

<sup>112</sup> *Catering Careers at River Cottage with Joe Sugg*, City & Guilds, 24th July 2014

<sup>113</sup> *#OpenDoors with City & Guilds*, City & Guilds, 18th Oct 2013; *Have a Go: Joe Sugg tries 7 new skills at The Skills Show*, City & Guilds, 6th Dec 2013

<sup>114</sup> See [Appendix 4 - Promotional content](#)

sponsorship is reflective of hesitant advertisers in the market at the time, or a result of Joe's brand not being established enough to attract advertisers.

Alternatively, this gap could be the result of Joe not having forged a particular niche within his YouTube content like beauty vloggers or gamers who have a direct relation to commodities in their area, as well as a level of source credibility in testing, reviewing and recommending relevant products (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Joe, who creates more comedy and lifestyle content, has a less obvious link to products or commodities. This is evidenced in the nature of his early brand partners who did not particularly link with the style of content Joe produces. It could be said that these early commercial partners were instead using Joe's fun online persona and close connection with his followers to target his audience demographic - Frankly, Chupa Chups and Sodastream appear to be well-suited to Joe's young audience who are likely within these brands' target demographics. Celebrity endorsement has been found to be particularly persuasive for Millennial consumers who are more concerned about brand image and identity than their predecessors (McCormick, 2016). It is likely that the same can be said for Generation Z<sup>115</sup> (Millennials' successors) who have grown up in the Internet age. As such, these brands are not only able to target younger consumers through Joe, they are also able to use his influence to enhance the persuasiveness of the advertorial, and capitalise on the trusting relationship between him and his followers (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Moreover, brands are able to transfer inherent meanings from Joe's already-established self-brand towards their product and brand through a meaning transfer process (McCracken, 1989). As such, Joe's perceived ordinariness and relatability are transferred onto the commodities, making his endorsements more trusted by his audience than traditional marketers (Audrezet et al., 2020) and mainstream celebrities (De Veirman et al., 2017).

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<sup>115</sup> Defined as those born between 1996-2010 (Business Insider, 2020).



## ‘Become a Sugglet NOW!’: Hierarchical shifts in the audience dynamic

The second key theme identified from Joe’s branding at the microcelebrity stage relates to shifts in the dynamic between himself and his audience, with a hierarchical distinction forming between the two. The analysis highlighted the emergence of opportunities for Joe to engage in out-of-the-ordinary experiences at this stage, however these were not typical celebrity or mainstream media experiences. These extraordinary experiences related more to elevations in status and privilege, resulting in separations in status between Joe and his audience. Examples include attending the glamorous London launch party for new YouTube channel DailyMix in December 2012; visiting Google HQ with fellow YouTuber Jim Chapman in April 2013; and getting taken on a complimentary visit to the Warner Bros. Studio Tour in May 2013.

In May 2013, Joe (along with his then-management company Gleam Futures and their cohort of signed talent) was invited for a complimentary experience at the Warner Bros. Studio Tour near London and gifted<sup>116</sup> an overnight stay at The Grove Hotel - a luxury 5-star private resort. Joe documented this experience in a vlog titled *A Magical Day At The Harry Potter Studio Tour!* (ThatcherJoeVlogs, 29th May 2013), and shared four Instagram posts from the trip (Images [4.11](#) - [4.14](#)), as well as a fifth promoting the vlog. In the video, Joe shows the group being given complimentary goodie bags containing Harry Potter merchandise, being taught how to duel with wands, and receiving a buffet lunch; in addition to experiencing the standard Warner Bros. Studio Tour. While they did not receive explicitly VIP treatment, there was certainly a degree of superior treatment compared to the standard entry offered to members of the public. Thus, documenting this experience in his video situates Joe in a position of exclusivity and superiority to his audience who witness the group’s status being elevated during their visit. Joe’s vlog also features footage from their stay at the Grove

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<sup>116</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

Hotel, depicting Joe and the rest of the group reacting to the lavishness of their hotel rooms:

Zoe: “Oh Joe, look, you’ve got a view of the golf course!”

Louise: “Joe, can I dive onto your bed?”

Joe: “Wait, wait--”

Alfie: “Oi, look at your TV!”

Zoe: “Look at your TV!!”

This is the coolest hotel room I have ever been in in my life. I’ve got two sinks! What do I need two sinks for?! If that one breaks [points], don’t worry, I’ve got that one [points].

(A Magical Day At The Harry Potter Studio Tour!, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 29th May 2013)



Image 4.11 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 25th May 2013





Image 4.12 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 25th May 2013



Image 4.13 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 25th May 2013



Image 4.14 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 26th May 2013

Here, viewers see the amazement the YouTubers display in response to experiencing this level of luxury. However, the hysteria and excitement they display in the vlog when exploring his room and the hotel is almost child-like and, at times, inappropriate, indicating that this experience is certainly novel to them. Despite the extravagance of the hotel experience, their over-excitement at the hotel's lavishness offers a very 'normal' person's reaction to the experience, reminding the viewer that, although they are experiencing something very luxurious, it is as much of a novelty for them as it would likely be for the audience. This interaction has some of the appeal of ordinary celebrity and the demotic turn in mainstream media (Turner, 2004) in that the YouTubers provide entertainment through their performances of ordinariness in response to these elevations in status. Documenting this luxurious experience situates Joe in a position of exclusivity and superiority, which could lead his authenticity to be questioned, but he carefully navigates the tension between the excitement of this new experience and ensuring he does not appear to have 'sold out' by

performing authenticity, expressing awe to assure viewers this is not 'normal' to him.

In addition to the emergence of a hierarchy between Joe and his audience through him beginning to receive exclusive treatment and out-of-the-ordinary experiences, my analysis also revealed the introduction of collective terms used by Joe to refer to his audience online at this stage. This involves the use of words such as 'everyone', 'you', 'all' and 'guys' to refer collectively to his viewers, however on his YouTube channels, Joe began to introduce the name Sugglets to refer to his audience, grouping them together collectively. This practice is nothing new - fan groups, particularly of bands and music artists, have been adopting collective names for years, whether defined by the fan community or the object of fandom (e.g. One Direction fans as Directioners, Lady Gaga's fans as Little Monsters). In the case of Joe, it appears that the term Sugglets originated from a tweet posted in May 2013 where he was promoting a new video upload. I identified that the term appeared most frequently in his YouTube video description boxes where 'Sugglet' appeared 123 times on his ThatcherJoe channel between 24/11/2013 - 13/6/2016, and 199 times on ThatcherJoeVlogs from 24/10/2013 - 16/11/2016<sup>117</sup>.

Interestingly, the term Sugglet did not appear at all in the description boxes of videos on his ThatcherJoeGames channel, despite it launching in June 2014. As such, there could be an assumption made by Joe that viewership of his gaming channel extends outside of his ThatcherJoe and ThatcherJoeVlogs audience. The term Sugglets sounds cute and almost infantilising, connoting a sweet, young and probably female group, whereas perhaps Joe perceives his ThatcherJoeGames audience to consist of an older, more male demographic. This assumption is congruent with Bishop's (2017) finding that gender stereotypes are reinforced on YouTube with pranks, comedy and gaming content

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<sup>117</sup> These dates represent the first to the last occurrence of the term, rather than the date parameters of data analysed. This demonstrates that the use of the term 'Sugglets' in Joe's video description boxes diminished after November 2016.

being male-dominated on the platform. Whilst Joe's main and vlogging channels do feature pranks and comedy content, the videos here are more rooted in his lifestyle which may appeal to a wider demographic, as evidenced by the highly visible female fanbase who appear in Joe's content at events and meetups. Conversely, Joe's gaming channel content does not extend outside of games, therefore, using Bishop's findings, we can assume this audience may be male-dominated and distinct from the core viewership of his other content.

Coining the collective name Sugglets puts Joe in a position of increased social status in a one-to-many dynamic with his audience, echoing traditional celebrity-fan practices. As such, he positions himself as a celebrity, and treats his audience as a collective fanbase - key practices of the microcelebrity as defined by Marwick (2013, 2015) and Senft (2008)<sup>118</sup>. Further analysis identified that the collective term Sugglets most commonly appeared in the context of the phrase 'Become a Sugglet NOW!' in Joe's video description boxes. This was most prominent on his vlog channel ThatcherJoeVlogs with 198 occurrences, but also featured heavily on ThatcherJoe where it appeared 122 times. Here, he strengthens the fandom connotations of the term Sugglets, affirming to viewers that this is a collective gang they can be a part of by subscribing to his YouTube channel. Thus, not only does Joe promote a celebrity-fan distinction between himself and his audience, he also uses this to encourage viewers to become subscribers to his channel; extending beyond mere viewership (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2006). This functions as a prompt for audiences to engage with his content in an attempt to increase his popularity and visibility online (Senft, 2008).

## Stage two: Conclusion

To conclude, I have identified the second phase of Joe's self-branding as the microcelebrity stage. Overall, this section has argued a shift in Joe's self-branding from ordinary to microcelebrity that is characterised by the juxtaposition between his ordinary life and the new experiences he is being

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<sup>118</sup> See Chapter 2 - [Microcelebrity](#)

afforded and the signifiers of his new-found online success. His self-branding became commodified with the introduction of promotional content, and a hierarchical shift emerged in the dynamic with his audience, leading Joe to take on the key mindset and practices of the microcelebrity, attempting to seamlessly merge the authenticity and intimacy of his already-established ordinary self-brand with commodification (Jerslev, 2015; Marwick, 2013, 2015; Senft, 2008).

## Stage three: Internet celebrity

The third stage identified in Joe's branding is Internet celebrity, which I define as beginning after Joe hit 1 million subscribers on his ThatcherJoe YouTube channel in November 2013, and ending just before February 2015 when he announces his debut graphic novel *Username: Evie*<sup>119</sup>. This stage is primarily characterised by a shift in Joe's perceived social and symbolic capital, particularly in relation to his audience. In this section, I will build upon the microcelebrity branding practices discussed in the previous section, drawing upon theoretical perspectives on Internet celebrity (e.g. Abidin, 2018; Giles, 2018) to inform the discussion. The key themes identified at the Internet celebrity stage which will be discussed in this section are: branding towards a younger audience demographic, and transitioning his online brand into the offline world of traditional media.

### 'If you're not old enough then ask your parents': Branding towards a young audience demographic

At the Internet celebrity stage, Joe continues to strengthen his clean-cut branding which was established at stage one, however it becomes particularly key here as he appears to construct his self-brand with a young audience in mind, maintaining a 'good boy' image in order to appeal to this audience (and,

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<sup>119</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

importantly, their parents) (Hansen, 2018). As identified previously, stage three is characterised by a notable shift in Joe's status, as well as in the dynamic with his audience which becomes more reflective of a traditional celebrity-fan distinction; in particular, reminiscent of a typical boy band member-fan dynamic, denoted through the primarily young, female demographic of these fans who are highly visible at the YouTube events Joe attends at this stage<sup>120</sup>. As a result, Joe appears to construct and deliver his self-branding with this highly-engaged, young audience in mind at this stage of his career. For example, [Image 4.15](#) is captioned, 'Have you donated yet? If you're not old enough then ask your parents', encouraging viewers to donate money to the charity Sport Relief. This suggests that Joe considers there to be a notable proportion of his audience who are under the age of 18 and would therefore need to obtain parental permission before they could donate. This could also be considered an attempt to get his followers' families involved, widening awareness of both him and the cause. Through asking their parents to donate money to Sport Relief, Joe's audience are reinforcing his 'good boy' image, reassuring parents that he is a positive influence whilst further engaging his followers in his self-brand (Hansen, 2018).

Analysis of Joe's content highlighted that at this third stage of his self-branding, this consideration towards this young, highly-engaged audience demographic extended into the promotional roles he undertook during this time<sup>121</sup>. For example, in March 2015, Joe created some sponsored YouTube and Instagram content in collaboration with Rise Above - an organisation developed by Public Health England who aim to 'engage young people on a variety of key health issues, including: smoking, body image in the digital world, online stress and fear of missing out (FOMO) and exam stress' (Public Health England, 2017). Rise Above's content includes a series of YouTube videos aimed at young people

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<sup>120</sup> See Chapter 5 - [Shift from micro- to Internet celebrity](#)

<sup>121</sup> See Appendix 4 - [Promotional content](#)





Image 4.15 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 15th March 2014

which feature ‘aspirational vloggers’ including Joe Sugg and his then-flatmate Caspar Lee. Joe appears in two videos on the Rise Above YouTube channel alongside Caspar, promoting these in a post on his Instagram profile. In the videos, Joe and Caspar are positioned as good role models, offering advice to younger viewers:

- Joe: “Now everyone that I know, and I mean *everyone* that I know, has either been offered drugs, cigarettes or alcohol. So, Caspar, you’ve been offered stuff in the past. What happened? Tell me what happened, I wanna know.”
- Caspar: “Well, erm, you know, growing up you get offered, you’d usually get offered drink first—”
- Joe: “Yes, I found that too.”
- Caspar: “—or cigarettes and then as you get older, you’d maybe get offered drugs. ... I was lucky enough to feel confident to say like, ‘no, I don’t need that,’ and I was obviously really scared

of cigarettes, as you probably should be, as cigarettes aren't very good for you. It was quite scary to say no.

Joe: "Why was it scary to say no?"

Caspar: "I think because I wanted to be part of the group and when you're that age, that's really important, even if that group is doing something you wouldn't want to do."

(*Thatcher Joe | Smoking, Alcohol & Drugs*, Rise Above, 25th March 2015)

Here, Rise Above are able to draw upon Joe and Caspar's clean-cut images and popularity with a young demographic to target secondary school-aged teenagers. Joe's already-established 'good boy' branding helps this partnership seem like a natural fit for him, thus permitting Rise Above access to the intimate, trusting parasocial relationships Joe has with his audience with minimal risk of breaching this bond (Abidin & Ots, 2016). In the videos, Joe and Caspar take on the role of big brothers, using this existing trust built with their audiences to offer viewers advice on social issues they may be concerned about in a relaxed, conversational format. Joe and Caspar's position as slightly older than Rise Above's target audience of secondary school pupils (at the time, Joe was 23 and Caspar was 20) helps to position them as caring older brother figures who have encountered these experiences already; but not so much older than the demographic that they seem patronising or condescending in giving advice. As such, their participation in the campaign reflects the 'strategically performed, innocent masculinities' that are central to boy band stars, whereby a clean image is vital for appealing to young female fans, whilst gaining parental approval (Hansen, 2018: 195). The big brother roles they take on offers a similar dynamic to that discussed by Berryman and Kavka (2017) in their exploration of the big sister dynamic between Joe's sister Zoe and her audience. They consider this YouTuber-as-older-sibling role a gendered form of intimacy, fostered by sharing experiences and advice with Zoe's appeal in this role centred around her perceived ordinariness and authenticity (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Whilst Joe



and Caspar are male, they seem to forge the same sense of intimacy through sharing their experiences in a way that is congruent with their existing ordinary, authentic brands; thus enabling them to be successful in creating a big brother dynamic with viewers which makes them suitable figures to discuss these teenage issues.

During the Internet celebrity stage, Joe also partnered with National Citizen Service (NCS)<sup>122</sup> which, like Rise Above, is an organisation which aims to help teenagers with their confidence and encourage responsible decision-making. As such, this partnership further draws upon Joe's clean-cut self-branding and big brother dynamic with his audience to transfer some of his existing brand identity to the NCS programme (McCracken, 1989); increasing awareness and likely heightening its appeal to Joe's teenage viewers. This meaning transfer is a two-way process, thus Joe's work with NCS also helps to strengthen his clean image and position as a positive role model through promoting this organisation (McCracken, 1989). As part of the partnership, Joe hosted the event NCS YES LIVE alongside fellow vlogger Marcus Butler in 2014. Joe posted a YouTube video posted ahead of the event titled *COME SEE ME & MARCUS LIVE!?* (ThatcherJoeVlogs, 27th February 2014) which, as denoted by the title, focuses on himself and Marcus as the primary appeal for viewers to attend the event:

I want you guys to be there as well because, 1, I'm going to be on-stage. I've never been on-stage—. Hang on, I'm getting a bit hot, heating must have got turned on. Now I've never been on-stage before so I'm kinda scared so I'd love to see as many of you guys there as possible just to sort of be like, 'don't worry, Joe. We're here for you,' otherwise I'm scared I might cry on-stage if you're not there. (*COME SEE ME & MARCUS LIVE!?*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 27th February 2014)

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<sup>122</sup> NCS is a youth programme providing experiences for 16-17-year-olds which 'brings together young people from different backgrounds and helps them develop greater self-confidence, self-awareness and responsibility' through participating in 'social action projects' and 'working on skills like leadership, teamwork and communication' (GOV.UK, 2013).

Here, Joe draws upon his light-hearted, comic online persona to encourage viewers to come along to the event, using emotive phrases such as 'I'd love to see as many of you guys there as possible' and 'I'm scared I might cry on-stage if you're not there' to be persuasive in his pitch. Whilst this emotive language aims to encourage the audience to get tickets, the light-hearted nature of his promotion of the event draws upon his existing comic brand and ensures he is able to appear authentic whilst commodifying his branding to promote the NCS event. His aside about the heating further conveys authenticity, making it appear less of a formal sales pitch and more an informal chat.

In both his work with Rise Above and NCS, Joe is able to strengthen his clean-cut self-branding, and position himself as a good role model to his audience through fostering a sense of ordinariness, authenticity and intimacy with his followers (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). By promoting these organisations whose role is to encourage responsible behaviours in young people, Joe is also able to strengthen his appeal to his young viewers' parents by authenticating his 'good boy' image through these actions (Hansen, 2018). Branding towards a younger demographic creates a greater power dynamic between Joe and his audience, and often sees him positioned as hierarchically superior and like a celebrity in relation to them. This elevation occurs both ideologically in terms of being deified as a role model, and physically through being separated by barriers and stages at events such as NCS. This is further evidenced in Joe's documentation of interactions with his audience when he meets them at events<sup>123</sup>. In particular, these younger, primarily female fans often appear overly excited and hysterical. For example, when Joe attended the Playlist Live<sup>124</sup> YouTube fan event in 2014, fans at the event were depicted in his vlog as potentially dangerous to Joe by event staff:

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<sup>123</sup> Discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 - [Shift from micro- to Internet celebrity](#)

<sup>124</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

[in backstage area of venue]

Staff member: “Hiiii. Do you need help?”

Joe: “Can we come through this way?”

Staff member: “Are you sure you guys wanna do that? It might be a little bit dangerous for you.”

I’ve finished my meetup now erm and yeah, it was crazy. There was so many of you that came out to see me which was amazing.

*(Mainstage, Meetups & Youtuber Pizza Parties - Playlist day 5, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 29th March 2014)*

These examples demonstrate the clear divide that is reflected in Joe’s self-branding between himself and his audience. In particular, the representations not only present a fan-celebrity distinction, but the boy band-style hysteria that is experienced in these interactions which evidence this shift in status from micro- to Internet celebrity. Here, the attendees reflect stereotypical representations of fangirls who are generally portrayed by the media as obsessive and even neurotic, and their behaviours presented as resulting from a desire for intimacy with their object of fandom (McCann & Southerton, 2019). Joe’s description of interactions with fans at the event as ‘crazy’, as well as showing footage of him being mobbed for selfies help to situate Joe not only as elevated in status, but as an object of fan hysteria, furthering the similarities between these representations with boy band mania and fangirl culture. The fans’ excitement and hysteria is presented as something that could be potentially dangerous, and that they may need protection from with security staff visible in his vlog ([Image 4.16](#)), positioned around the event to control the crowds and enforce the separation between those with elevated social status (the creators), and the general public.

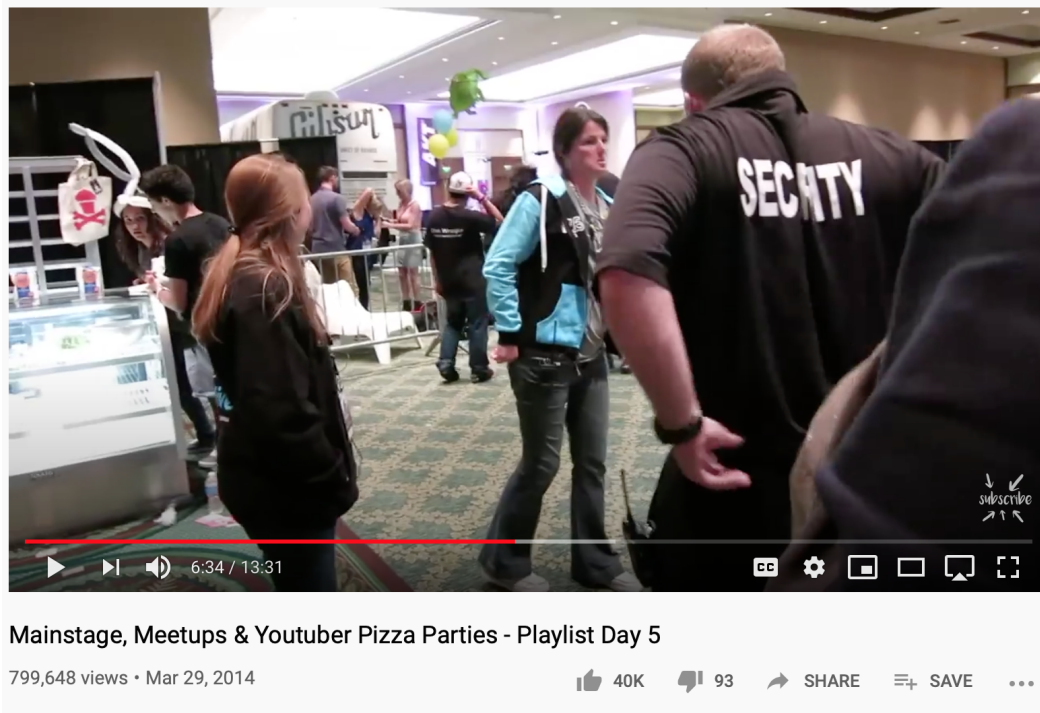


Image 4.16 - ThatcherJoeVlogs, YouTube, 29th March 2014

## Legitimising Internet fame: Participation on the fringes of the mainstream

The second theme identified at the Internet celebrity stage of Joe's self-branding relates to him developing his online brand towards offline outlets such as through YouTube fan events and conventions, and through being invited to participate in the worlds of mainstream media and traditional celebrity culture. This section will analyse key examples from this stage where Joe has extended his brand offline into mainstream media contexts, interrogating the impact of these extensions on his brand identity.

At this stage, Joe's content featured a plethora of examples of extensions offline including radio appearances (e.g. on BBC Radio 1 as a guest on Scott Mills'

*Innuendo Bingo*<sup>125</sup> and guest presenting the *Internet Takeover*<sup>126</sup> show); TV presenting (e.g. on Sky1's 2014 series of *Got To Dance*); involvement in charity media campaigns (e.g. the Sport Relief 'YouTube boy band' in 2014, and appearing on the 2014 Band Aid 30 charity single); and crossovers into the world of cinema (including a minor, uncredited voice-acting role in *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water* (2015), and beginning to attend film premieres (e.g. *World War Z* - June 2013, *Noah* - March 2014, *Godzilla* - May 2014). It is interesting to note that whilst many of these extensions of Joe's online brand into the offline world involve crossing over into the mainstream media, his positioning in these appearances was limited to an online context.

In September 2013, Joe was invited onto the Scott Mills show on BBC Radio 1 to play *Innuendo Bingo*. Whilst *Innuendo Bingo* is broadcast as part of the live radio show, it is also video-recorded and uploaded to the BBC Radio 1 YouTube channel, receiving on average more than 170,000<sup>127</sup> views per video. Prior to appearing on the radio show, Joe had been making an *Innuendo Bingo*-inspired video series on his YouTube channel since April 2013, featuring YouTubers as contestants and using clips of innuendos from YouTube videos. These videos were hugely popular with his audience; thus, appearing as a contestant on the radio show was a natural extension of his online brand. Joe has appeared on *Innuendo Bingo* twice - in September 2013<sup>128</sup>, and later in October 2016 alongside Caspar Lee<sup>129</sup>. The YouTube videos of these appearances have

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<sup>125</sup> *Innuendo Bingo* is a game played on the Scott Mills' show on BBC Radio 1 in which the show's co-presenter Chris Stark takes on a celebrity opponent, sitting opposite them in close proximity whilst presenter Scott Mills plays a series of voice clips from TV and radio that have been sent in by listeners. Stark and his celebrity opponent take a mouthful of water before each clip is played with the aim being to try to keep their mouths as full of water as possible, trying not to spray it out over their opponent by laughing at the innuendos.

<sup>126</sup> BBC Radio 1's *Internet Takeover* was a regular radio show which was aired from September 2014 until April 2016. It featured regular presenters Dan Howell and Phil Lester who hosted one show each month, with guest presenting slots rotated between 11 other vloggers from the UK and beyond. The show was part of BBC's attempt to adapt and innovate to maintain youth interest in radio as their media consumption habits shifted towards online media such as YouTube, with the show recorded visually and streamed from the Radio 1 website (BBC, 2014).

<sup>127</sup> Correct as of 7th May 2020 (rounded to 2 s.f.)

<sup>128</sup> *Joe Sugg Innuendo Bingo* - BBC Radio 1, YouTube 5th September 2013

<sup>129</sup> *Caspar Lee and Joe Sugg get cheeky during Innuendo Bingo* - BBC Radio 1, YouTube, 18th October 2016)

attracted >600,000 views and >670,000 views respectively, making them the 22nd and 17th most viewed Innuendo Bingo videos on the channel<sup>130</sup>. This demonstrates Joe's popularity when appearing in mainstream media content, particularly when these appearances are uploaded and distributed online. This popularity highlights the significance of YouTubers like Joe to mainstream media producers who can utilise his prominence to attract audiences to their content and keep young people engaged with Radio 1. These appearances in mainstream media can help Joe convert the social and Internet celebrity capital he has accrued online into more legitimised mainstream celebrity capital (Driessens, 2013).

Another interesting facet of these examples is the notion of innuendo. Innuendos are defined as 'remarks that suggest something sexual or something unpleasant but do not refer to it directly' (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020b). This is particularly relevant to Joe's clean-cut branding insofar as that innuendos hint towards potentially sexual or lewd meanings, rather than explicitly saying anything risqué. This quality to his branding offers parallels to the cheekiness exhibited by popular mainstream figures such as TV presenting duo Ant and Dec, among others, who are able to balance aspects of innuendo and suggestive humour with the 'safeness' of family programming (Bennett, 2011). Joe strikes a similar balance in his content, whilst maintaining his clean-cut brand and suitability to his young audience demographic. Innuendos have long been a stalwart of British culture, harking back to Chaucerian and Shakespearean times, however, they remain a characteristic feature of contemporary British family entertainment within TV shows such as *The Great British Bake Off* and *Springwatch* (Verdier, 2015), pantomimes, and sitcoms. As such, engaging with this form of humour further reaffirms his British branding too. The fact that Innuendo Bingo appears on a prime-time BBC Radio 1 show carries a level of virtuousness in that the BBC are considered to be the hallmark of family-friendly, quality programming. Therefore, association with the BBC enables some of their

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<sup>130</sup> Figures correct as of 7th May 2020 (rounded to 2 s.f.)

inherent brand meanings to transfer to Joe (McCracken, 1989), and by extension, legitimising his YouTuber version of Innuendo Bingo.

Another key example of extending from online to offline relates to Joe's participation in a charity cover of McFly's song *It's All About You* as part of the 'YouTube boyband' for Sport Relief in 2014. As previously noted, Joe's self-branding frequently draws upon tropes of the clean-cut image displayed by boy band members which is aimed, primarily, towards teen girls (Hansen, 2018). The YouTube Boyband sees this actualised as Joe and fellow vloggers Alfie Deyes, Jim Chapman, Caspar Lee and Marcus Butler form this group. The YouTube Boyband originated from a now-private<sup>131</sup> spoof video posted in December 2013 on Marcus Butler's YouTube channel (titled *The YouTube Boyband*), in which the boys pretended to be in a band (Dredge, 2014). The video proved incredibly popular with viewers, prompting Comic Relief<sup>132</sup> to get in touch. As a result, the group recorded a spoof cover of McFly's aforementioned song, titled *It's all about you(tube)*, which was uploaded on the Comic Relief YouTube channel on 20th March 2014, followed by three behind-the-scenes videos documenting the group getting vocal coaching, recording the song, and creating the music video.

The Sport Relief single offers another example of Joe being invited into the world of mainstream media - one of the UK's most prominent charity events - however, this, again, is limited to the online context. The boys' song and music video was uploaded to Comic Relief's YouTube channel but they did not participate in the live telethon itself. The YouTubers' involvement with the charity serves as a form of celanthropy (Rojek, 2012), helping to promote the cause and encourage their

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<sup>131</sup> When a YouTube video is made private, it is removed from the site and is no longer visible to users, except the user who uploaded the video. This means the footage is still preserved, but it is no longer accessible to anyone other than its creator unless they choose to re-publish it..

<sup>132</sup> Who are also responsible for Sport Relief



primarily young audience to donate money. Connection with Sport Relief functions to legitimise the boys' online fame through their significance being acknowledged by such a mainstream charitable organisation - something *The Guardian* deem to signify YouTube's growing influence, particularly on younger viewers (Dredge, 2014). As such, this legitimises the social and symbolic capital the YouTubers have accrued online (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), whilst generating philanthropic capital. This helps to build their celebrity brands and reputations through positioning them as caring, kind-hearted and socially-conscious (Rojek, 2012). This also strengthens the 'good boy' image Joe has established through his clean-cut self-branding, whilst helping to raise his celebrity profile, although this is perhaps limited by his participation in Sport Relief only being distributed online and not shown in the main telethon.

### Stage three: Conclusion

To conclude, in this section I have argued that the Internet celebrity stage of Joe's brand development has been characterised by two primary facets: branding towards a young audience; and starting to extend his online brand towards traditional media and offline work. Joe began to focus his self-branding towards the highly-engaged, young audience demographic, resulting in his clean-cut, 'good boy' image becoming an increasingly prominent strand of his brand identity. This clean branding was further strengthened through Joe's partnerships with organisations that encourage responsible behaviours from young people, thus positioning Joe as a positive influence and role model for his viewers. However, the young demographic Joe's branding appeared focused towards were often positioned as over-excited and hysterical when featured in his content, situating him as an object of fandom and as elevated in status in relation to them. Joe's self-branding also began to extend offline during the internet celebrity stage through engagement with mainstream media organisations, however many of these invitations to participate were limited to, or framed within, their online channels. Despite this, involvement with these



well-established platforms and organisations helped Joe to legitimise his celebrity status in the offline world, converting his online popularity into celebrity capital (Driessens, 2013) and boosting his image and reputation through philanthropy (Rojek, 2012).

## Stage four: Quasi-mainstream

I identify the fourth stage of Joe's self-branding as the quasi-mainstream celebrity stage in which he begins to expand and develop his online brand into offline and mainstream media territories, alongside maintaining his already-established Internet celebrity brand. I define this stage as beginning in February 2015 around the time Joe announced his debut graphic novel *Username: Evie* and ending in summer 2018, before Joe was announced as a participant on BBC's 2018 series of celebrity reality TV show *Strictly Come Dancing*.

It is interesting to note that this quasi-mainstream celebrity stage is the phase which covers the longest time-frame, following a fast ascent to this point in his career trajectory. As such, I have divided this stage into two, breaking this extended period into Stage 4 and Stage 4.5 to denote early and later practices within this career phase. Stage 4 centres around Joe extending his existing brand into offline territories through physical products and merchandise; conveying an aspirational lifestyle online; and breaking into the mainstream media and traditional celebrity world. Stage 4.5 is characterised by Joe professionalising his experience as an Internet celebrity through the launch of his talent agency Margravine Management.

## Participatory culture in the offline world

The first key theme identified related to Joe inviting audience involvement and participation in these offline brand extensions. This was particularly notable in two of Joe's key brand extensions at this stage - his *Username*: graphic novel

trilogy<sup>133</sup> and the *Joe & Caspar Hit The Road (HTR)* DVD movies<sup>134</sup>. For example, when Joe announced to his viewers in a YouTube video that he was releasing his debut graphic novel, *Username: Evie*, he offered them the chance to vote for the name of the main character in the book:

I want to get you guys involved straight away. I want this to be as much as it is your graphic novel as it is mine. The reason why I'm announcing it so early is because I want you at home to choose the name of the main character. (*MY BIG ANNOUNCEMENT!*, ThatcherJoe, 1st February 2015)

Similarly, when Joe and Caspar revealed the secret project they had been working on in the form of the first *HTR* film (2015), they offered audiences a chance to get their name in the film's credits if they pre-ordered the DVD:

The first 8,000 get their names in the credits and they also get a jelly band. Is that right? [turns camera to show crew] A jelly band guys! A jelly band!... [to crew] You're too old for that. (*MY ROOMMATE IS EVIL PROJECT JASPAR REVEAL*, ThatcherJoe, 1st September 2015)

In both the *Username: Evie* and *HTR* announcement videos, audience involvement is used as an opportunity for Joe's audience to feel part of his offline brand extensions, thus encouraging their support of these endeavours. In particular, when announcing *Username: Evie*, Joe emphasises, 'I want to get you guys involved straight away. I want this to be as much as it is your graphic novel as it mine.' (*MY BIG ANNOUNCEMENT!*, ThatcherJoe, 1st February 2015). Here, he encourages viewers to take a degree of ownership and emotional investment in the book, positioning it as a shared endeavour with their input equal to his own, perhaps suggesting the extent to which he feels his audience

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<sup>133</sup> Published in September 2015, 2016 and 2017, respectively. See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

<sup>134</sup> Released in November 2015 and November 2016, respectively. See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)



Image 4.17 - *Username: Evie* cover (2015); Image 4.18 - *Joe & Caspar Hit The Road* DVD cover (2015)

have contributed to this opportunity. However, voting for the protagonist's name is hardly akin to the labour of writing and illustrating the graphic novel, nor will Joe's audience reap the financial and personal brand-building rewards from sales of the book in exchange for their input.

For both *Username: Evie* and *HTR* audiences were incentivised to place pre-orders with the promise of exclusive rewards - a limited signed copy of the book, and their name in the credits for *HTR*. This adds a level of time-limited urgency, rewarding only the most dedicated fans who are within the initial quota of pre-orders. This provides fans the chance to increase their symbolic capital when this commitment is acknowledged within the fan community (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). For *HTR*, the further incentive of a 'jelly band' is offered, demonstrating a continued focus in Joe's branding towards a young audience demographic, with Joe even acknowledging the child-like nature of this reward,

telling the production crew that they are ‘too old for that’. This suggests the *HTR* DVD is being targeted towards the young and highly-engaged demographic discussed at the Internet Celebrity stage<sup>135</sup>, rather than adults, however it also functions to ensure these younger viewers do not feel like they are being patronised.

By offering audience members opportunities to get involved in these projects, we see a mirroring of the participatory cultures viewers are likely accustomed to in the online world. YouTube is fundamentally built on participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009, 2010) and co-creation between users is part of YouTube’s social, cultural and creative network (Burgess & Green, 2009b). Likewise, much of the appeal of social networking sites is their affordance of active participation in content through sharing, commenting and engaging with other users, and their revolutionisation of the celebrity-fan dynamic (Baym, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Audience participation is not something typically associated with the traditional media forms of publishing and filmmaking<sup>136</sup>, therefore, utilising audience participation in these offline extensions of Joe’s brand offers a sense of continuity from the existing relationships and interactivity audiences have with Joe online. These opportunities offer his audience chances to further their fandom and increase their social capital within the fan community by investing their opinions and economic capital, and being rewarded with increased fan capital in return (Hills, 2002).

In addition to opportunities to be directly involved in Joe’s offline extensions, the analysis also identified a common theme of offering participation through signing and tour events. To promote his *Username* books, Joe hosted a series of tour events in cities across the UK, and an event in New York City for his debut book *Username: Evie*. Whilst the notion of book signing events is a common

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<sup>135</sup> See Stage three - [Branding towards a young audience demographic](#)

<sup>136</sup> Despite audience involvement not traditionally being used in these industries, the advent of online crowdfunding campaigns has seen an emergence of these practices in areas like publishing and filmmaking as individuals or organisations offer rewards in exchange for users providing funding to support their ventures.

promotional strategy in the publishing industry, what is significant here is the way the event was posited. The webpage from the Cardiff *Username: Evie* tour event states that tickets (priced at £14.99 per person) entitled attendees to 'a pre-signed copy of *Username: Evie* and a place in line to have a selfie with Joe'. However, the website also emphasises, '**Strictly ONE SELFIE photo with Joe will be permitted per ticket holder**' (Waterstones, 2015). The ticket terms and conditions state that '[n]o other merchandise will be signed' and 'dedications within the book will not be possible' (Waterstones, 2015). As pre-signed copies of the book could be pre-ordered online, the events' appeal is centred on the opportunity to briefly meet Joe and take a selfie, which is more akin to traditional celebrity-fan meet-and-greets than a book signing. However, it is a common characteristic of YouTube parasocial relationships for viewers to want to meet the vlogger in person (Rihl & Wegener, 2017). This allows them to validate the authenticity of Joe's online persona and gather evidence about his offline self (Ferris, 2001), thus meet-and-greets with fans are important for Joe in helping maintain and strengthen the parasocial relationships with his audience, even extending them momentarily into a social relationship through direct interaction (Giles, 2010).

For both *HTR* movies, Joe and Caspar hosted a tour of live shows across the UK, as well as in Australia and New Zealand (*HTR USA* only). A press release for their *HTR USA* tour describes the show as featuring 'the boys on stage talking about what they really got up to, what couldn't be including in their upcoming film with exclusive footage from filming, and ... behind-the-scenes funny business', as well as offering 'an opportunity for you to get up close and personal with Joe and Caspar for a VIP Meet & Greet prior to the shows' (Ainsworth, 2016). The events also offer attendees a chance to meet Joe and Caspar, although here this is limited to VIP ticketholders who are paying extra for the privilege. This commodification of the creator-audience relationship signals a shift in Joe and Caspar's status away from the early YouTube dynamics of intimacy, egalitarianism and equal status between creator and audience (Morreale, 2014;

Rihl & Wegener, 2017; Stokel-Walker, 2019), towards a traditional celebrity-fan dynamic where access to the star must be paid for<sup>137</sup>. As Turner notes, 'celebrities are developed to make money' (2014: 36); thus, Joe and Caspar become commodities for consumption, adding a layer of complexity to the ordinariness and intimacy of Joe's self-branding.

The tour is also positioned as an opportunity to get exclusive access to behind-the-scenes footage and anecdotes from their experience, implying performances of front stage and backstage self (Goffman, 1956)<sup>138</sup>. In particular, the notion that attendees can find out 'what they really got up to' and 'what couldn't be included' suggests a separation between the film and reality, and situates Joe and Caspar's roles in the film as mediated front stage performances. It is implied that behind-the-scenes footage and anecdotes about what 'really' happened convey an authentic reality, highlighting the performed nature of the film and commodifying the notion of access to this 'authentic' reality and Joe and Caspar's backstage selves (Goffman, 1956). Whilst this exclusive footage promises behind-the-scenes access to Joe and Caspar's authentic selves, they are still being filmed, therefore only an illusion of true backstage access is given (Goffman, 1956). Despite this, this raises interesting tensions between Joe's portrayal of an authentic, ordinary self-brand online, and commodifying access to what is denoted as his *real*, backstage self here which, by nature, implies a level of performativity elsewhere.

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<sup>137</sup> Whilst practices of monetising access to stars are established in the celebrity industry through ticketed events, meet-and-greets and signings, these practices have developed in recent years through the advent of subscription platforms such as Patreon and Only Fans. These sites have made paying for access to celebrities, Internet stars and content creators more commonplace, enabling fans to receive exclusive content in exchange for providing regular financial support to the creator, and allowing the creator an additional revenue stream (see Glatt & Banet-Weiser, 2021)

<sup>138</sup> This offers similar incentives to subscription platforms like Patreon and OnlyFans as discussed in the previous footnote.



## Fake it ‘til you make it: Aspirational lifestyle content on Instagram

The next theme identified at this stage of Joe’s self-branding relates to aspirational lifestyle content depicting Joe in luxurious settings, travelling to exotic locations and driving expensive cars (Images [4.19](#) - [4.22](#)). This self-presentational theme occurred primarily on Joe’s Instagram, but, interestingly, did not tend to extend into his YouTube content. The portrayal of a glamorous, aspirational lifestyle is a common aesthetic on Instagram more generally, with users often sharing highly filtered, idealised and inspirational imagery on their profiles which promote conspicuous consumption (Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017). This aesthetic, popularised by the ‘rich kids of Instagram’ (RKOI) phenomenon on the platform<sup>139</sup> is centred around displays of extravagance, opulence and glamour by young, rich and conventionally attractive people (Abidin, 2018). In Joe’s content, this aspirational Instagram imagery falls primarily into three categories: idyllic travel imagery, driving expensive cars, and sharing professionalised model-style pictures of himself.

Joe’s aspirational Instagram images are high-quality, carefully composed and appear to have been taken by a third-party, conveying a sense of professionalism. This, coupled with Joe’s candid posing and looking away from the camera makes these images look like editorial photoshoots with Joe as the model (e.g. Images [4.21](#) & [4.22](#)). Joe looks away from the camera in many of the images, feigning candidness and conveying a sense that he has been caught off-guard, despite the photos having clearly been set-up in this way. Joe is the focal point of these pictures with impressive destinations, cars and backgrounds acting as props which aid his self-presentation (Goffman, 1956). For example, in [Image 4.20](#) Joe is pictured on a jet ski with the Dubai skyline providing an impressive backdrop. Dubai as a setting offers specific connotations of wealth and glamour, owing to the city’s reputation as a playground for the rich with its super luxury hotels, huge shopping malls with high-end designer boutiques (Jacobs & Zheng, 2018). These more implicit connotations, coupled with Joe

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<sup>139</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

candidly posing on a jet ski against the city skyline suggests glamour and luxury, aiding Joe's self-presentation as an aspirational figure to his followers. Being perceived to live a glamorous, excessive lifestyle is a key aspect of stars' status as symbols of success (Dyer, 1979); thus, these aspirational posts position Joe to his followers as living a celebrity lifestyle, whilst promoting conspicuous consumption to his followers (Hund & McGuigan, 2019).



Image 4.19 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 8th February 2018

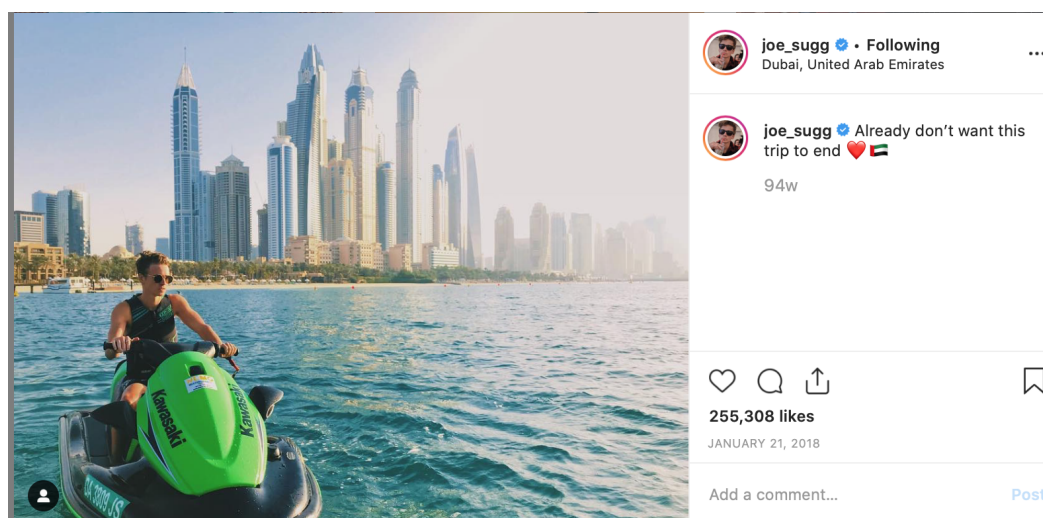




Image 4.20 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 21st January 2018



Image 4.21 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 20th March 2018



Image 4.22 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 31st March 2018

Whilst Joe's aspirational lifestyle posts conveyed a sense of glamour and elevated status, they were usually accompanied by light-hearted, comic captions. For example:

"alright mate can you take a picture of me trying to look cool in this bath.. nah I don't want to smile it's for Instagram. No take another one.. one more... wait try and take it when one of those weird smiley fish goes past.. you can't see my bollocks in that one can you?.. sweet yeah that'll look sick on insta" 🤪 ([Image 4.19](#), @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 8th February 2018)

Are you getting TYRED of all these desert photos yet? Are they DRIVING you crazy? Also.. lol at the kid falling over in the background ([Image 4.23](#), @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 28th January 2018)



Image 4.23 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 28th January 2018

In both captions, Joe uses humour as an authenticity device to make this aspirational content seem less pretentious and contradictory of his usual ordinary self-branding<sup>140</sup>. The witty captions reframe the aspirational imagery in Joe's established online brand, reassuring his followers that he has not sold out. Moreover, the caption of [Image 4.19](#) mocks the Instagram aesthetic of candid posing in locations in order to portray a cool, aspirational image. This conveys self-awareness about the reality of the aspirational content he is sharing by highlighting the constructedness of these 'candid' images. This reflects the notion of vloggers as 'meta celebrity' described by Smith, whereby one is 'highly self-aware of the own conditions of their celebrity persona' (2014: 258). This is also endemic of the wider trend of Instagram vs. reality content which acknowledges the constructed, idealised nature of social media content (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020), performing authenticity in response to this through claims to 'reality'. Thus, Joe frames these aspirational posts with humour and by mocking himself and the aspirational Instagram aesthetic, ensuring his authenticity is not challenged and he does not appear to have 'sold out'.

### Breaking into the mainstream: Crossovers into traditional media

As Joe became more established in the quasi-mainstream career stage, there was a notable trend for crossing over into the mainstream media and celebrity world. This included appearances on mainstream television and radio to promote his *Username* books and *HTR* films, such as Channel 4's *Sunday Brunch* (November 2015), BBC's *Breakfast* (October 2015) and returning to BBC Radio 1's *Scott Mills Show* to play *Innuendo Bingo* (October 2016)<sup>141</sup>. These offline brand extensions also received press coverage including reviews and interviews with Joe. These mainstream crossovers also occurred outside of his book and film promotion, with Joe featuring on a BBC3 documentary about YouTubers called *Rise of the Superstar Vloggers* (February 2016), and appearing on TV shows including Channel 4's *Alan Carr: Chatty Man*<sup>142</sup> (December 2015) and

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<sup>140</sup> Authenticity devices will be explored in detail in [Chapter 5: Authenticity Labour](#)

<sup>141</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

<sup>142</sup> British chat show hosted by comedian Alan Carr featuring celebrity guests

ITV2's *Release The Hounds: Famous & Freaked*<sup>143</sup> (March 2017) during this stage of his career trajectory. In this section, I will discuss the key themes identified in these crossovers into mainstream media territories, beginning with analysing coverage of his offline brand extensions *HTR* and the *Username* graphic novel trilogy, then focusing on the TV appearances which were independent of these projects, seeking to interrogate how crossing over into the mainstream media has influenced his brand identity and wider brand development.

As previously highlighted, extending offline is a key characteristic of Joe's self-branding at the quasi-mainstream stage, particularly in the form of releasing his *Username* graphic novel series and *HTR* DVD movies, which resulted in Joe gaining wider media coverage for these endeavours. This is particularly significant because this is the point at which Joe's brand and career trajectory make notable shifts into the mainstream. Here, his online brand and digitally-acquired social (Bourdieu, 1997), symbolic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and Internet celebrity capital transition into the offline world of traditional media where this status can be converted into more traditional forms of celebrity capital through repeated mainstream media representations (Driessens, 2013).

The first career moment that sparked notable mainstream coverage of Joe was the release of *Username: Evie* (published in September 2015), starting at the point of his signing to publisher Hodder & Stoughton who acquired the rights to publish his book (announced in February 2015), with increased coverage around the publication date. Analysis of this media coverage identified recurrent representational themes, with the most prominent being Joe's connection to his sister Zoe which was frequently highlighted in articles' headlines and subheadings:

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<sup>143</sup> Celebrity edition of the reality TV game show *Release The Hounds* which describes itself as a '[h]orror gameshow where brave people step inside the gates of an eerie estate in their quest to win a large cash prize' (ITV Hub, 2020). Joe featured alongside fellow YouTubers Alfie Deyes and Marcus Butler.

Zoella's brother signs with H&S (Shaffi, *The Bookseller*, 2 Feb 2015)

Zoella's brother Joe Sugg nets deal to write graphic novel (Flood, *The Guardian*, 2 Feb 2015)

His book was also frequently positioned in relation to his young fanbase, both structurally by being covered by periodicals' children's books correspondents (e.g. Sproull, 2015), and through articles directly highlighting Joe's fanbase and likely readership.

Blogger and YouTube star Joe Sugg is expected to be highly popular at the Bath Children's Literature Festival - especially with teenage girls. (*The Bath Chronicle*, 2015a)

Hundreds of screaming fans welcomed YouTube star Joe Sugg to the Bath Children's Literature Festival at the weekend. Teenagers held up hand-made signs saying 'we love you Joe' as they queued to get in and took plenty of selfies in the auditorium. (*The Bath Chronicle*, 2015b)

Here, Joe's representation draws parallels to stereotypical boy band-fan dynamics, which are characterised by fans' over-excitement, obsession and affection towards the objects of fandom (McCann & Southerton, 2019). The coverage here focuses on Joe's popularity with female fans - a notion often used to discredit the legitimacy and credibility of boy bands' music and thus their value (Hansen, 2018). As such, this focus on Joe's popularity with teenage girls could be seen as an attempt to discredit and devalue his book and celebrity status, following a trend that has previously been identified in representations of YouTubers in mainstream media coverage (Deller and Murphy, 2019). It is interesting to note that the coverage analysed often referred to other YouTubers'



books in relation to Joe's release, with discourse centering around the notion of *Username: Evie* not being a 'typical' YouTuber book:

Unlike most YouTubers who have published a book (and it is becoming a very crowded market), this is not another anodyne autobiography. It is a graphic novel and quite an inventive one (Wallop, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2015)

Sugg is the latest in a line of YouTubers to have secured his book deals. His sister Zoe Sugg, commonly known as Zoella, released a YA fiction novel *Girl Online* (Penguin), and her boyfriend Alfie Deyes released *The Pointless Book* (Blink Publishing), both last year. (Shaffi, *The Bookseller*, 2015)

Here, the notion that *Username: Evie* is unlike other YouTuber publications seems to applaud Joe for offering something different in producing a graphic novel. This comparison to other YouTuber books carries with it a reductive critique too, particularly in Shaffi's (2015) highlighting his connection to Zoe and Alfie whose books received widespread critique for lacking substance and originality, and for Zoe's, being ghostwritten (Deller & Murphy, 2019). As such, there is a layer of implicit critique being levelled here through association with these books, despite it being less overt than Wallop's (2015) assertion of blandness. Reducing YouTubers to a collective, comparable group diminishes the individuality of their online content creation and literary endeavours, and lazily dismisses them under the common representation of vloggers as vapid and talentless (Deller & Murphy, 2019).

At the mainstream celebrity stage, Joe also crossed over into traditional media through several notable television appearances, however, analysis of these appearances identified limitations to Joe's invitations into the mainstream. For example, in December 2015 Joe appeared as a guest on the Channel 4 talk

show *Alan Carr: Chatty Man* alongside Caspar Lee. On the show, Joe and Caspar were firmly positioned as vloggers, rather than celebrities, with Carr asking them questions such as:

For the people at home, you are two of the biggest vloggers on the Internet. Listen to this, you've got 10 million followers, you've been viewed a billion times, but for my elderly viewers who only go online to hand over all their life's savings to a Nigerian business person, do you want to explain what a vlogger is?

Now listen boys, I wanna become an Internet sensation like you, yeah, I wanna go viral, I wanna go proper viral. I wanna walk into that Internet cafe and go cowabunga. How do I do it?

(*Alan Carr: Chatty Man*, S15E13, 4th December 2015)

Here, Carr represents YouTube as a novel phenomenon that needs explaining to older viewers, suggesting it is a young person's platform that the show's audience will not understand. Highlighting Joe and Caspar's online popularity metrics in terms of their combined follower and view counts functions to justify their position on the show to viewers, suggesting an assumption that the audience will not know who Joe and Caspar are or why they are appearing on the programme. Their careers as Internet content creators are marvelled at by Carr who wants to know how to produce viral content, portraying a narrative to the audience that Joe and Caspar's careers have been built upon creating one-off pieces of viral content, rather than the reality of slow, sustained growth and fostering intimate relationships with their audiences over time. In these examples, Joe and Caspar's invitation into the mainstream is limited within the context of being YouTubers, with their jobs being marvelled at and positioned as novel, suggesting inferiority to traditional celebrities. This represents a wider tension between traditional media forms who want to keep up with the

contemporary media landscape to attract and maintain younger audiences' attention, but are also somewhat threatened by new forms of media and celebrity which challenge their existing structures (Deller & Murphy, 2019; Giles, 2018). As a result, Internet celebrities like Joe are often invited to participate in mainstream media programming but are not accepted as equals, often being questioned about the legitimacy of their vocation and their fame, and made to look inferior in relation to traditional celebrities 'within an imagined hierarchy of fame and credibility' (Deller & Murphy, 2019: 8).

A further notable is Joe's appearance on ITV2's *Release the Hounds: Famous & Freaked (RTH)* alongside Alfie Deyes and Marcus Butler in March 2017. Interestingly, *RTH* offers an example of Joe being invited into the mainstream as an equal to traditional media celebrities, however the perceived level of fame and credibility of other celebrity contestants within this imagined hierarchy is quite low. Applying Deller's (2016) conceptualisations of the fame cycle relating to reality TV participants, contestants on *RTH* can be situated within the 'proto-celebrity' stages of the cycle<sup>144</sup>. *RTH* even acknowledges the proto-celebrity status of its participants, naming its episodes after the group of contestants' origins - for example, in Joe's series, contestants included stars of *Love Island* and *Geordie Shore*. As such, Joe, Alfie and Marcus are positioned on a similar hierarchical level to these proto-celebrity contestants, despite their significant audience sizes and global followings. However, in the eyes of the general public and mainstream media, they are famous within the niche of the Internet and are yet to reach mainstream celebrity status. Thus, they can fit comfortably into this proto-celebrity category from which reality shows like *RTH* primarily select participants. Here, Joe is invited to participate in the mainstream without having the legitimacy of his vocation questioned. It seems that at this stage, he is able to participate as a low-level celebrity, alongside

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<sup>144</sup> Defined as those in the preliminary stages of fame who have often attained recognition through being relatives of celebrities, are famous in a specific field, or celestoids hoping to extend a brief moment of fame (such as those who have participated in 'ordinary' reality TV shows). See Chapter 2 - [Reality TV](#)



proto-celebrities. These low-level celebrities are still often subjected to a degree of snobbery by the mainstream media - particularly the ordinary-people-turned-reality-stars from working-class backgrounds who have suddenly been thrust into a world of wealth and public visibility (Tyler & Bennett, 2010). Yet, despite lower-level stars being embraced by many celebrity reality TV shows, they are unlikely to be invited onto more prestigious shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* whose participants tend to be situated more in the 'promotional' and 'proper', and sometimes '(re-)purposed', celebrity stages of the fame cycle (see Deller, 2016). As such, participating in *RTH* still offers potential for Joe to increase his recognition outside of the Internet, however he is not yet able to completely transition his brand into the 'proper' celebrity world.

#### 4.5: Professional Internet celebrity

The final development in Joe's self-branding at the quasi-mainstream stage related to a more professional aspect of his career which emerged towards the end of this phase. In November 2017, Joe posted an announcement on Twitter that he had left his management company Gleam Futures, stating 'Caspar & I have decided to part ways with Gleam. It's been a fun 3 years and I wish them all the best for the future' (@joe\_sugg, Twitter, 3rd November 2017). Following this split from his management, he later announced in an Instagram post from June 2018 ([Image 4.24](#)) that he and best friend Caspar Lee would be launching their own talent management agency, Margravine Management ([Image 4.25](#)) (named after the street on which their shared apartment was located). In the post's caption, Joe describes the agency as:

Our own management company to help find/grow other people in the same position we were in in that first photo. I'm feeling very thankful to be given the amazing opportunities I've had over the years and I'm super excited to hopefully pass that on to others. (@joe\_sugg, Instagram, 14th June 2018)

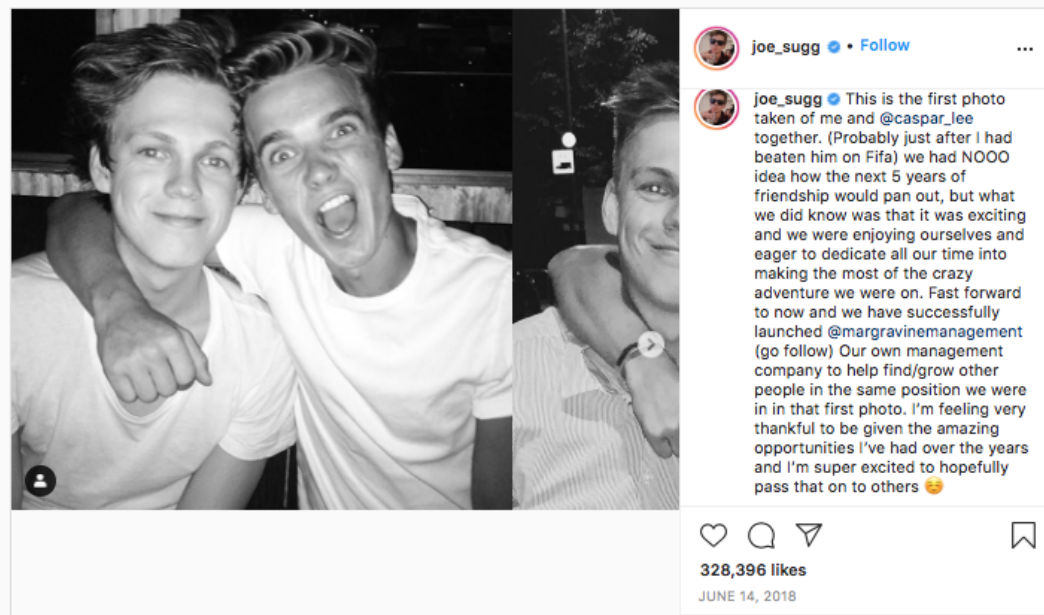


Image 4.24 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 14th June 2018

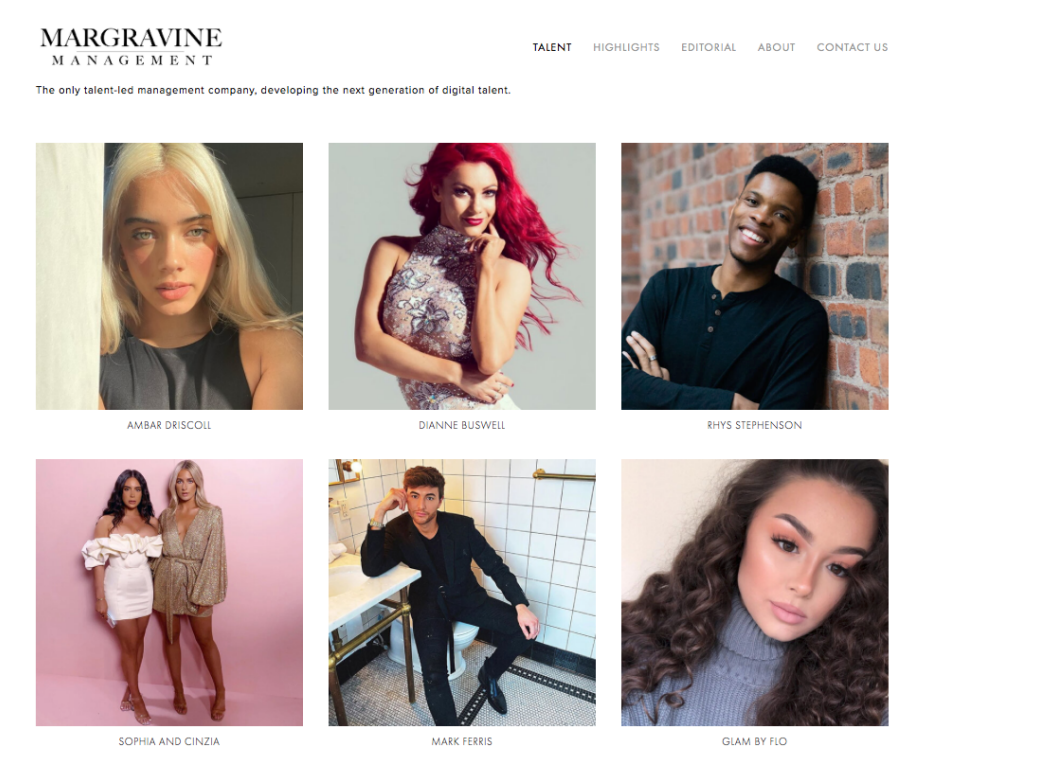


Image 4.25 - Margravine Management website homepage - November 2020

This demonstrates a marked shift in Joe's self-branding from his earlier performances of amateurism and ordinariness (discussed previously in this chapter), in which he distanced him from the professional aspects of his content creation. Instead, Joe presents himself here as having reached a level of experience in terms of self-branding and building a successful career online that he wants to use this expertise to help others who are in the position he was in several years ago. He frames this an opportunity to give something back to YouTubers and online content creators wanting to follow in his (and Caspar's) footsteps. It is important to note that whilst this may be his motivation for launching Margravine Management, it can also be viewed as an opportunity to capitalise upon his success as an Internet celebrity and status as an aspirational figure to others. As such, Margravine Management enables Joe to convert his online celebrity capital into social, economic and symbolic forms through building and utilising his social connections, earning revenue and gaining recognition for his expertise as he helps others build their Internet celebrity careers (Driessens, 2013). This suggests a desire to be viewed as credible and taken seriously as a professional, challenging common media criticisms that YouTubers lack skills or talent, and earn money from doing nothing (Deller and Murphy, 2019).

In his announcement post, Joe's frames Margravine Management as an almost philanthropic endeavour. However, the reality is that talent management agencies, like other social media entertainment (SME) intermediaries (Cunningham & Craig, 2019), function to harness the commercial potential of creators in exchange for a percentage of revenue, thus capitalising upon other creators' success. As such, framing this as an opportunity to help emerging creators and give something back functions as authenticity labour to protect his ordinary self-branding and the close relationship with his followers. This indicates an awareness that he needs to maintain his perceived ordinariness and humbleness to avoid breaching the trusting relationship with his audience (Abidin & Ots, 2016), and appearing to have 'sold out'.

## Stage four: Conclusion

To conclude, at this fourth quasi-mainstream stage, key developments in Joe's self-branding included offline brand extensions, conveying an aspirational lifestyle, mainstream media appearances, and branching out into professional talent management. What has become apparent at this stage is the need for Joe to negotiate the tensions between these career developments and brand extensions alongside his intimate, trusting relationship with his audience in his self-branding. This section has argued that at the quasi-mainstream stage, Joe's self-branding practices centred around ensuring his ordinary, relatable self-brand was not jeopardised or deemed inauthentic as his status became elevated and he crossed over into the offline and traditional media worlds.

## Stage five: Mainstream

I identify the fifth and final stage of Joe's self-branding as the mainstream celebrity stage, which I define as being catalysed by his appearance on the 2018 series of BBC's celebrity reality television show *Strictly Come Dancing* (September-December 2018). As such, I define this fifth stage as beginning in August 2018 when Joe was announced as a contestant, continuing until the end of 2019 when data collection ended. Key developments within this stage include his appearance on *Strictly* in 2018, followed by further performance work including small voice acting roles for film and TV, performing in dance and theatre stage shows, live TV presenting and podcast hosting. The mainstream celebrity stage is characterised by Joe's brand developing towards more traditional media and performance work, using his *Strictly* success as a springboard to try and cement his position in the mainstream media landscape, resulting in a reduction in focus towards his online content. The key areas of Joe's self-branding I will discuss within this stage are: Joe's branding on *Strictly Come Dancing*, his post-*Strictly* brand development towards mainstream media and performance work, and his online celebrity self-branding.

## “From ThatcherJoe to Strictly superstar”: Branding for television

The first key theme identified within Joe’s self-branding at this stage relates to his negotiation between his existing online brand and his first high-profile mainstream television appearance as a contestant on the 2018 series of *Strictly Come Dancing*. I will begin by exploring *Strictly* as a wider brand development strategy, before discussing how he was represented on the show, then interrogating shifts in his brand after the series.

### *Strictly* as a brand development strategy

Before looking at Joe’s self-branding on *Strictly* itself, it is important to interrogate the significance of the programme as part of Joe’s strategic brand development. As noted previously, the latter stages of Joe’s self-branding have marked a shift towards traditional media and performance-oriented work, as evidenced by examples such as the *HTR* films, various television appearances and even a minor voice-acting role in *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water* (2015). This suggests a level of motivation by Joe to steer his career more towards traditional media and to reach mainstream recognition and, as such, *Strictly* offered Joe a chance to not only participate in one of the most popular British celebrity reality TV shows, but to propel himself further towards reaching mainstream prominence and gain a platform from which to launch into other traditional media roles.

As a skills-based reality TV show, *Strictly* offers a level of prestige compared to other potentially more humiliating celebrity reality shows. As a result, *Strictly* tends to attract a higher calibre of star (Bonner, 2013; Deller, 2020), compared to non-skills-based formats who recruit stars from the proto-celebrity, post-celebrity and pro-reality<sup>145</sup> stages of the fame cycle (Deller, 2016, 2020). Conversely, *Strictly* tends to feature celebrities who are in the promotional stages of the fame cycle who may participate in order to raise their profile and promote their work,

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<sup>145</sup> Pro-reality celebrity is defined by Deller (2020) as those who are perpetual stars of reality TV whose careers become centred around appearing on different reality shows

company or other projects they are involved in (Deller, 2016, 2020). The show's 2018 cohort can be considered primarily promotional celebrities with a few contestants situated more in the (re-)purposed and post-celebrity stages of Deller's (2016) fame cycle. Joe can be considered a promotional celebrity because he is active in his profession as a content creator and appears to be seeking to raise his profile and widen his recognition outside of his online audience. Appearing on a prestigious celebrity reality show like *Strictly* offers potential for Joe to convert his online prominence into traditional celebrity capital (Driessens, 2013), and take advantage of the show's wide-ranging broadcast audience to extend his recognition amongst traditional media consumers. This was a successful endeavour, as highlighted in an interview with Joe in *The Times* following his stint on the show: 'Sugg tells me delightedly that *Strictly* transformed his demographic. "It's completely changed. I get stopped more in supermarkets by the older generation."' (Sugg in Llewellyn Smith, 2019). Conversely, *Strictly* benefit from this value exchange in that Joe's existing young, fun self-brand, his online popularity and younger audience demographic become associated with the show, thus attracting younger audiences and raising the show's international profile to Joe's global following; although he admits in his announcement YouTube video that they 'may not know what [*Strictly*] is' (*I'm Going On Strictly Come Dancing*, ThatcherJoe, 14th August 2018).

Despite the potential benefits for Joe's long-term brand development from appearing on *Strictly*, appearing on a prime-time mainstream media show carries a degree of potential risk to his brand identity. Increased press attention from appearing on the show could result in negative or critical coverage, particularly given the previous trend of Internet celebrities being criticised, patronised or their legitimacy questioned by traditional media (Deller and Murphy, 2019; Giles, 2018). However, the majority of press coverage around the 2018 contestants analysed did not question Joe's casting for the show, although his significant online following and relation to his sister Zoe were commonly highlighted. This explanation of a contestant's origins and past work was not unique to Joe,

though - context was given for all of the celebrities, no matter widely-recognised they are and, whilst the majority of coverage did not question Joe's casting, there was some critique in the coverage analysed:

Many took aim at YouTube sensation Joe Sugg, saying he wasn't a big enough name and was only famous because of his vlogger sister Zoella.' (Needham, *Mirror*, 2018)

Joe Sugg might be a cynical ratings play but he could change *Strictly* forever (Hogan, *The Telegraph*, 2018)

Despite these critiques, Joe was not the only celebrity to attract press questioning over their status and worthiness of a place on the prestigious reality show. Dyke critiqued the line-up of celebrities as a whole, terming them 'Z-listers' (*Daily Star*, 2018), whereas Needham asserted it was 'the worst [line-up] in the show's fourteen year history' (*Mirror*, 2018). Casting critique is common practice for press coverage of celebrity reality shows and tends to occur regardless of the line-up. However, it was interesting to see Joe positioned by Hogan (2018) as 'a cynical ratings play', but with the potential to 'change *Strictly* forever' by opening 'up a whole new world of online personalities to the programme'. In this sense, *Strictly* has lagged behind other reality TV shows which have been quicker to cast Internet celebrities - Joe's sister Zoe appeared on *The Great Sport Relief Bake Off* in 2015, and from around 2015/2016 onwards, online stars have appeared regularly on celebrity reality TV shows ranging from the less well-known (such as *RTH*) to more established formats (e.g. *Celebrity Masterchef* and *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here*). Since Joe's appearance on the 2018 series, *Strictly* have continued to recruit Internet celebrities, casting YouTuber Saffron Barker in 2019 and social media star and singer HRVY in 2020. Thus, it is clear to see the potential being realised for both *Strictly* and social media stars to mutually benefit from each other's platforms, much like the



exchange between ordinary people and TV producers in civilian reality formats (Andrejevic, 2004).

### Self-branding and representation on-screen

Appearing on *Strictly* was a significant step in Joe's longer term shift towards mainstream media work, however participation in a high-profile TV show like *Strictly* is not a guarantee of successfully transitioning into the mainstream media world. Many proto-celebrities participate in reality shows hoping to be well-received by audiences and gain enough credibility to be accepted into the mainstream media world and attain 'proper' celebrity status (see Deller, 2016), however very few succeed. Driessens (2013) notes that possessing high levels of one form of capital does not guarantee its conversion into other forms at an equal ratio, thus, for Joe, his accrued online celebrity capital is not guaranteed to convert into high levels of traditional celebrity capital. In *Strictly*'s 2019 series, YouTuber Saffron Barker became the show's second vlogger contestant. She was eliminated in week 10 of the show, however she did not receive the same level of audience support as Joe, nor has she gone on to do any further mainstream media work since the show. Conversely, Joe received a warm reception from *Strictly* viewers and the BBC who recruited him for several live TV presenting roles after the show finished. This reflects the disproportionate capital conversion ratio discussed by Driessens (2013) as Joe and Saffron's online followings have been converted into traditional celebrity capital at differing rates. As such, it is interesting to interrogate Joe's branding on the show, considering his self-presentation and representation on the show as determining factors influencing the success of this capital exchange.

The analysis identified that Joe was recurrently represented on the show as a social media star. In the launch episode, each celebrity was introduced with a short VT<sup>146</sup>, in which Joe defined himself in relation to his online following:

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<sup>146</sup> Stands for Video Tape and, in the context of *Strictly*, refers to the pre-recorded video clips that are played within the live shows.



My name's Joe Sugg and I'm a YouTube vlogger. I make videos. I'll think of an idea, be it a prank, or an impression video, or a video with my mates and then it's somehow watched by quite a lot of people. I think the last time I checked I think 13 million subscribers, which is mindblowing.  
(*Strictly Come Dancing*, S17E1, 8th September 2018)

Here, Joe positions the popularity of his YouTube videos as almost accidental, modestly noting that they are 'somehow watched by quite a lot of people'. Joe's initial introduction draws upon his established ordinary self-brand, performing authenticity and humility in relation to his Internet success<sup>147</sup>. Despite Joe's modesty regarding his audience, *Strictly* directly assert his significant online following with the announcer introducing him in the launch episode by saying, 'He's an Internet sensation with millions of followers, but will he be a hit on the dancefloor?' (S17E1, 8th September 2018). Here, *Strictly* highlight the importance of Joe's large viewership, evidencing his significance as a contestant through his sizable following. Joe, too, notes the size of his YouTube audience when introducing himself in the VT, combining the subscriber totals of all three of his YouTube channels to easily quantify the scale of his audience. Whilst this produces an impressive number, the combining of metrics is somewhat problematic in that it assumes these are all unique subscribers. Rather, it is highly likely that many of Joe's fans will follow his content across more than one of his YouTube channels, thus stating metrics based on this assumption is misleading. Despite this, combining audience metrics is common practice for YouTubers when crossing over into mainstream media - either by themselves or by TV producers - because it demonstrates their popularity and helps give them credibility by conveying reputation (Gandini, 2016). This is particularly important as YouTubers are often met with questions around their legitimacy when entering the mainstream media (Deller & Murphy, 2019); thus, the use of follower metrics to convey their reputation could be considered to preempt these critiques,

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<sup>147</sup> This notion of performing authenticity on *Strictly* will be discussed in Chapter 5 - [‘I can’t even dance’: Authenticity labour on Strictly](#)

providing justification for their significance before it is challenged. In this case, Joe was the first Internet celebrity to appear on *Strictly*, therefore the show may have been expecting scepticism from their older audience demographic around his legitimacy as a celebrity, leading them to reinforce the magnitude of his online following from the outset.

Joe's initial branding on *Strictly* as a social media star was reinforced further in the first dance routine Joe performed on the show - a gaudy emoji<sup>148</sup>-themed jive to Aha's *Take On Me*. Presenter Tess Daly explained, "As Joe is our social media star, we thought we'd make him feel at home by throwing a few emojis into the routine." (S17E2, 22nd September 2018). What ensued was a dance beginning with a digitally-overlaid YouTube-style streaming page, complete with reaction emojis at the side ([Image 4.26](#)) with juvenile yellow smiley faces superimposed on-screen ([Image 4.27](#)). This reduction of his YouTube and social media roots to cringeworthy emojis plays into oversimplified notions of what being a vlogger or influencer actually entails, with the juvenile emoji theme positioning his work as immature and for children<sup>149</sup>.

Despite these oversimplified initial representations of Joe's social media roots on *Strictly*, Joe was able to highlight more specific aspects of his identity as the series progressed - in particular, his previous vocation as a roof thatcher and his comic, prankster antics that are central to his online content. In week 1 of the show, Joe tells the pre-dance VT interview that he's known as 'a bit of a prankster', before proceeding to hide in some cardboard boxes to make dance partner Dianne jump (S17E2). This is likely to have been orchestrated by the producers, rather than an organic representation of Joe's prankster nature, however it serves as a simplified device to communicate this aspect of his self-brand to the show's audience. Similarly, in week 2 (S17E3), Joe's past

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<sup>148</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>149</sup> This notion of infantilisation was a common representation identified in Joe's career at this stage and will be interrogated later in this section.

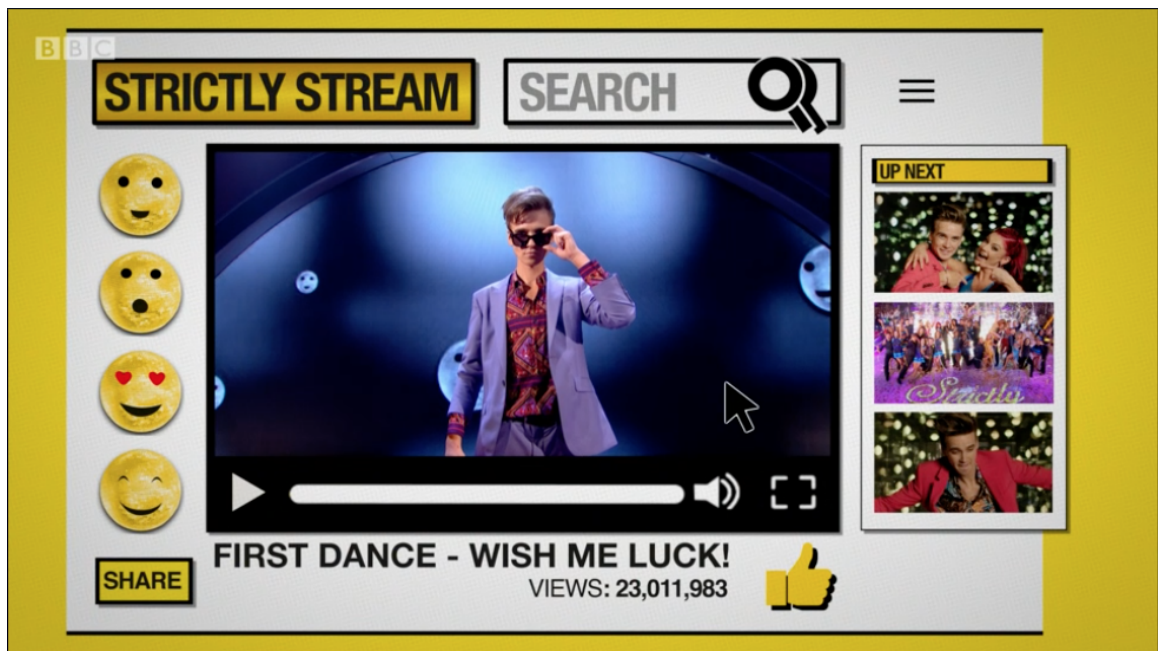


Image 4.26 - Still from *Strictly* week 1 emoji dance (S17E2, 22nd September 2018)

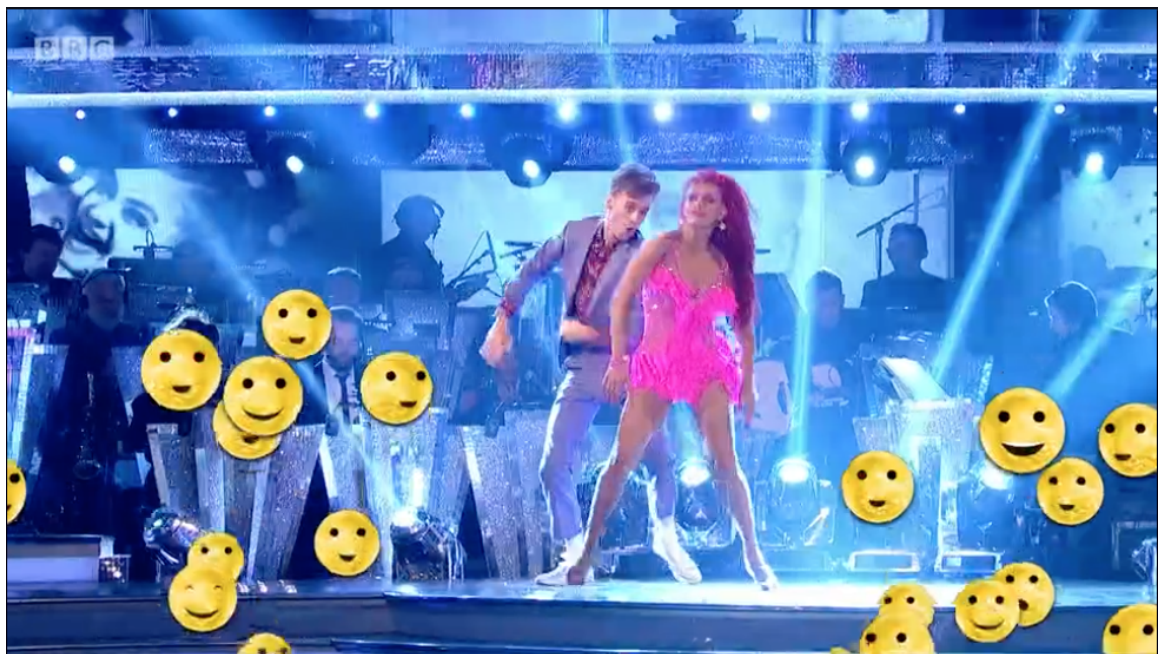


Image 4.27 - Still from *Strictly* week 1 emoji dance (S17E2, 22nd September 2018)

vocation as a roof thatcher was drawn upon with him and Dianne dancing a thatching-themed Charleston. Prior to their performance, the VT showed Joe taking Dianne back to Wiltshire to teach her how to thatch a roof (see [Image 4.28](#)), offering a simple, light-hearted representation of the thatching aspect of his self-brand. Thatching has been a key part of Joe's online brand since stage one of his career trajectory<sup>150</sup> and represents an interesting distinction between the ordinariness of his pre-celebrity career and the nature of manual labour and the extraordinariness of this quintessential, old English trade. As such, thatching, which is ordinary to Joe becomes an extraordinary quality that adds distinctiveness to his on-screen brand (Smith, 2014; Turner, 2006). As a reality format that promotes narratives of hard work (Bonner, 2013), *Strictly's* representation of Joe in relation to his past vocation suggests to audiences that he is not *just* a celebrity; he has a strong work ethic too.



Image 4.28 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 29th September 2018

<sup>150</sup> See Stage one - [ThatcherJoe: Material labour as self-branding](#)



Also key to Joe's brand on *Strictly* was the continuation of his ordinary self-branding which he has established online throughout his career trajectory. In particular, his ordinariness was conveyed throughout the series through expressing amateurism - something Joe portrayed before the series had even started in his announcement video<sup>151</sup>. This was adopted by the show who represented him as a novice, with the judges and presenters continually expressing surprise when he did well:

Tess Daly: "Not bad for an absolute novice!" (S17E1)

Darcey Bussell: "Well Joe, you are the biggest surprise of the series."  
(S17E25)

This portrayal of Joe's amateurism also extended to him being infantilised at times by the judges and presenters who referred to him as 'sweet', 'adorable' and like a 'playful puppy' throughout the series, as well as commenting on his physique as a 'smaller male' with a 'tiny bottom' and a 'little face'. Despite this, Joe, too, presented himself as small and childlike, even commenting in a pre-*Strictly* press interview, 'I just hope they have child sizes as I'm tiny!' (Saunders, *Mirror*, 2018). This infantilisation of his persona and his body, coupled with the representation of social media labour as juvenile through its reductive representation via emojis and remarks by the presenters, such as "my kids are so excited that you [Joe] are here" (S17E1), suggests a belittling of Internet labour and diminishing of Joe's status. This functions similarly to the way boy bands' popularity with young, female fans is used to delegitimise and discredit their music (Hansen, 2018). Boy band members are typically represented as 'on the brink of adulthood' and having 'sustained adolescence' in order to maximise their appeal to young girls (Hansen, 2018: 195-196), thus this comparable infantilisation of Joe on *Strictly* could be considered an effort to garner young viewers' investment in the show. Despite this implicit belittling, Joe is never

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<sup>151</sup> See Chapter 5 - [Negotiating the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary](#)

explicitly distinguished from his fellow competitors or made to look inferior as a result of his Internet roots. These representations are likely more indicative of online content being considered young persons' entertainment which traditional media lack understanding of.

These adolescent representations of Joe were further reinforced by repeated reference to his family values - in particular his relationship with his grandparents who are big fans of *Strictly*, especially his Nan who used to dance when she was younger:

But my grandparents especially, I think they're one of the main reasons why I really wanted to do this. My Nan, when she was younger, she used to dance in Blackpool Tower so I'd love to get to that stage but that's quite far in, isn't it? (S17E1)

To be in Blackpool and especially to bring my Nan and the rest of the family here, I feel like it's an early Christmas present. It's made my year anyway, it's amazing. (S17E17)

This focus on Joe's relationship with his grandparents, particularly his Nan, positions him as a sweet grandson, strengthening this sense of prolonged adolescence and drawing upon Joe's previously established clean-cut online branding to position Joe as a 'boy next door' figure (Hansen, 2018). This relationship with his grandparents is positioned as endearing on the show, highlighting Joe's 'good boy' branding to *Strictly* audiences and strengthening his appeal to young girls and their parents through this boy band-style masculinity (Hansen, 2018).

### 'Riding the wave': Post-*Strictly* media and performance work

The second key theme identified at this fifth stage relates to mainstream media and performance work, continuing along the trajectory of Joe's shift towards

performing as identified at the quasi-mainstream stage, which becomes further cemented here. As previously noted, I identify Joe's appearance on *Strictly* as the catalyst that sparked his transition from the quasi-mainstream to mainstream celebrity stage, however Joe utilised the platform the show afforded him to pursue further performance and presenting endeavours following the series<sup>152</sup>. These include voice acting roles in the film *Wonder Park* (April 2019) alongside Caspar Lee, animated TV show *The Amazing World of Gumball* (May 2019), and animated film *A Shaun The Sheep Movie: Farmageddon* (October 2019); stage performances on the *Strictly Come Dancing Live! Tour* (January-February 2019), in the West End musical *Waitress* (September-December 2019), as well as announcing *The Joe and Dianne Show* - a live show due to tour the UK in 2020<sup>153</sup>; TV presenting work including hosting BBC's New Year's Eve concert (December 2018) alongside fellow *Strictly* star Stacey Dooley, guest co-hosting BBC programme *The One Show* (February 2019) alongside Alex Jones, and as one of the hosts for Comic Relief's *Red Nose Day* telethon (March 2019); as well as co-hosting *Strictly Come Dancing: The Official Podcast* for the 2019 and 2020 series and doing some presenting work on spin off *Strictly: It Takes Two* (2019 and 2020).

Analysis of Joe's career at this stage highlighted an overall shift in his branding towards a mainstream media career as he utilised his widened prominence gained on *Strictly* to pursue more traditional media work. In a post-*Strictly* interview with *The Times*, Joe justifies his intentions towards mainstream media work, explaining, "A lot of people will tell you TV's dying, but it's not true ... Even the biggest YouTubers in the world would like the legitimacy of being a TV star." (Llewellyn Smith, 2019). This suggests he feels that Internet celebrities lack the credibility of mainstream stars, as well as affirming his ambitions to gain this perceived credibility from being on TV and pursue further mainstream media work. Joe outlines his intention to maximise the opportunities afforded to him through the platform into the traditional media world given to him by *Strictly*,

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<sup>152</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

<sup>153</sup> This was cancelled due to COVID-19.

explaining, “Since day one I’ve seen what I’m doing as like riding a big wave and I’ll ride it wherever it takes me, ... But if it all fizzles out, I tell my uncle at least I have a skill I can fall back on.” (Llewelyn Smith, *The Times*, 2019). Here, Joe conveys a narrative of following whatever direction the trajectory of his life takes him on, making his achievements and future ambitions seem almost accidental. This narrative of ‘riding the wave’ negates the necessary labour involved in not only building a self-brand and forging a career online (Abidin, 2016b; Hearn, 2008; Marwick, 2013), but also the behind-the-scenes work of SME intermediaries that is necessary for these seemingly spontaneous opportunities to materialise. Thus, over the seven years between Joe uploading his first YouTube video and appearing on *Strictly*, extensive labour has been involved in building the authentic, clean-cut and affable brand of ThatcherJoe (as this chapter has interrogated) into something appealing to both audiences and, eventually, television producers. This is not accidental - one of the key roles of talent management agencies is to develop talent’s long-term career strategies, as Gleam Future’s founder and CEO, Dominic Smales, explains:

This is about establishing them in this new medium and giving them the tools and opportunities to achieve a long, illustrious, respected career. ... We try to make the most of what they have on YouTube while planting seeds for the future. (Marr, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2014)

It is this notion of ‘planting seeds for the future’ which is crucial to developing a successful long-term career trajectory online and beyond. Therefore, whilst Joe conveys this narrative of riding the wave to almost accidental mainstream media success, analysis of his career trajectory up to this point strongly suggests that shifting towards mainstream platforms has been a longstanding aim of Joe’s long-term career and brand development strategy. Whilst the seeds for moving into more traditional media forms may have been planted long before these opportunities came to fruition (both while Joe was managed by Gleam and since parting ways), projecting the notion that he is strategising his career towards



transitioning into mainstream media work could make him appear fame-hungry, making his online endeavours appeal less authentic, thus jeopardising the trusting relationship he has built with his audience (Abidin & Ots, 2016). As such, this spontaneous narrative of 'riding the wave' fits more succinctly with his ordinary self-branding and helps maintain his perceived authenticity. Mavroudis and Milne (2016) note that despite the reality of the labour involved in developing a successful self-brand behind-the-scenes, it is crucial that this appears effortless, and therefore authentic, to audiences.

As Joe pursued further performance and presenting work at this mainstream stage, there was a notable decrease in his YouTube content, particularly on his ThatcherJoe channel, however he continued to post regular vlogs on ThatcherJoeVlogs ([Figure 4.1](#)), as well as sharing updates on Instagram ([Figure 4.2](#)). Analysis of the content produced by Joe at this fifth stage identified that his online content was primarily centred around his mainstream media and celebrity endeavours. In particular, Joe's videos on ThatcherJoeVlogs were particularly key at this stage as he documented his experiences venturing into these new performance roles such as the *Strictly* tour and his stint in the musical *Waitress*. For example, between 18th January-10th February 2019 when he was on the *Strictly Come Dancing Live!* tour Joe recorded behind-the-scenes footage and documented his experiences whilst doing the show, resulting in six vlogs from Joe's time on the tour being uploaded to ThatcherJoeVlogs. Similarly, when Joe starred in *Waitress*, he documented the audition process and shared this as part of his announcement video<sup>154</sup> (*I Auditioned For A West End Musical*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 20th August 2019), as well as uploading seven further vlogs sharing footage of the behind-the-scenes antics of him and his fellow cast members during his stint in the show. Vlogs are important for sustaining audience interest and promoting loyalty through increased emotional investment

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<sup>154</sup> Discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 - [Waitress: Authenticity labour and post-Strictly performance work](#)

(García-Rapp, 2016), thus by documenting these new experiences, Joe's viewers are more likely to support these mainstream ventures.

#### Joe YouTube video posting frequency

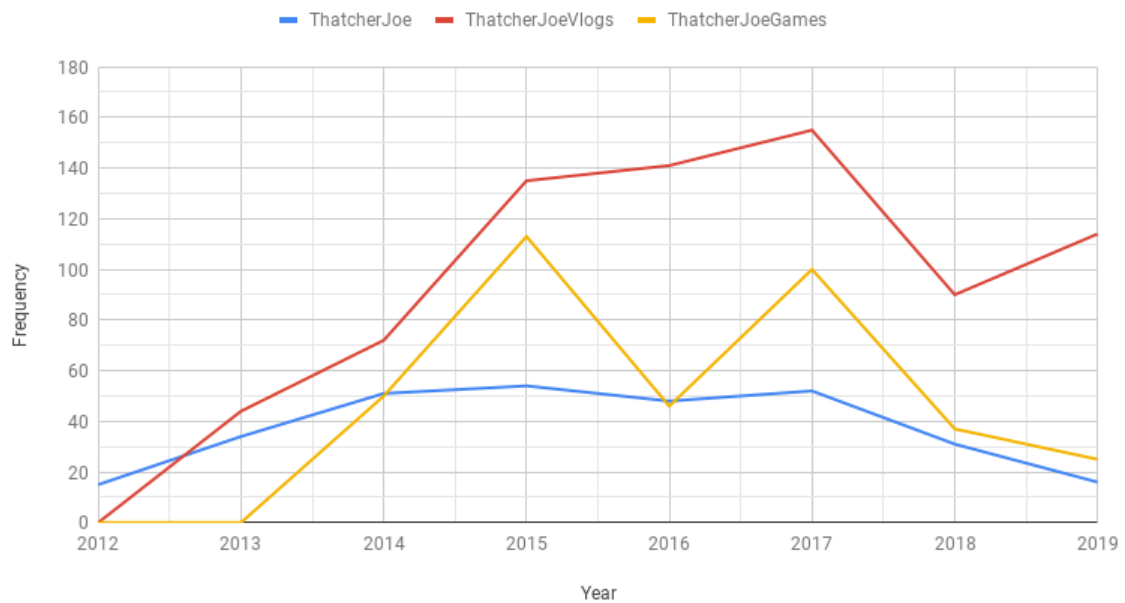
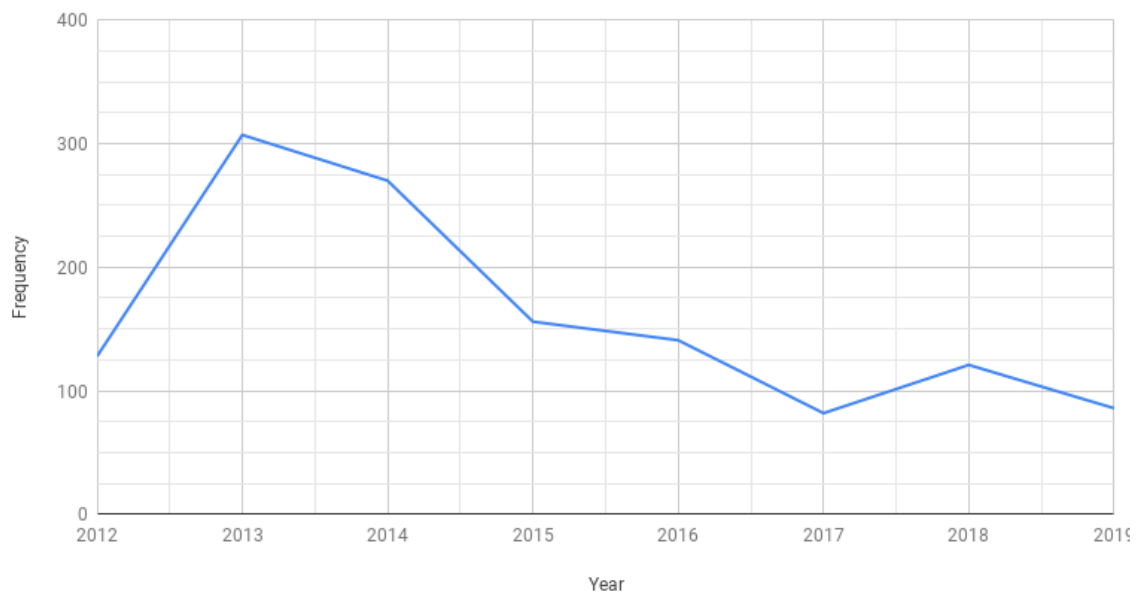


Figure 4.1 - YouTube channel posting frequency by year<sup>155</sup>

#### Joe Sugg Instagram posts - frequency by year



<sup>155</sup> See Joe Sugg video frequency sheet in Appendix 3 - [YouTube data](#)

Figure 4.2 - Instagram posting frequency by year<sup>156</sup>

Joe's vlogs of the *Strictly* tour not only offer viewers behind-the-scenes glimpses of the live shows, but a rare insight into the backstage selves of the other celebrity contestants (Goffman, 1956). This suggests to viewers they are being given a more authentic insight into these celebrities' true selves, away from the performed, front stage version projected on-screen. Instead, Joe gives his viewers access to their more relaxed, backstage personas (Goffman, 1956) - something which would usually be inaccessible for the audience whose only opportunities for interaction with these celebrities is through more mediated platforms. As such, Joe's vlogs offer viewers a rare chance to not only increase their fan capital of Joe and *Strictly* by seeing what goes on behind-the-scenes of the tour, but to also gain a unique opportunity to interrogate the notion of who these stars 'really' are off-screen - a much-held desire of consumers of celebrity culture which keeps them engaged (Dyer, 2004).

## Celebrity lifestyle

The final theme identified at the mainstream stage of Joe's career builds upon the aspirational lifestyle content identified at stage four<sup>157</sup>, however, at this fifth stage, this portrayal of an aspirational lifestyle appears less performative. Instead, Joe's content reflects his elevated status as a result of him attaining mainstream media prominence and being accepted into the traditional celebrity world. The key areas of aspirational content identified at stage four of travel, cars and professionalised model-style photos continued to be present at the mainstream celebrity stage. This is particularly prevalent as Joe's romantic relationship with Dianne Buswell becomes a key part of his branding after *Strictly*, sharing images from their holidays and trips away together<sup>158</sup>. New developments in Joe's aspirational content at this stage related to him attending celebrity events, engaging in glamorous magazine photoshoots, and being

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<sup>156</sup> See Joe Sugg Instagram frequency sheet in Appendix 3 - [Instagram data](#)

<sup>157</sup> See [Fake it 'til you make it: Aspirational lifestyle content on Instagram](#)

<sup>158</sup> Discussed in detail in Chapter 6 - ['Joanne'](#)

invited to participate in celebrity charity campaigns. Key to the progression from the aspirational lifestyle content at stage four to the celebrity lifestyle content at stage five is that Joe's portrayal of elevated status is no longer aspirational and performative, but actually reflective of his lived experience. Key examples include pictures of Joe attending the BAFTA<sup>159</sup> Awards ([Image 4.29](#)), meeting Sir David Attenborough at the premiere of the *Seven Worlds, One Planet* documentary series ([Image 4.30](#)), being photographed for a feature in *Boys By Girls* magazine ([Image 4.31](#)), and featuring as a celebrity participant in the NHS Every Mind Matters campaign ([Image 4.32](#)).



Image 4.29 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 17th May 2019

<sup>159</sup> British Academy of Film and Television Arts



Image 4.30 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 7th October 2019



Image 4.31 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 27th September 2019



Image 4.32 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 10th October 2019

These displays in Joe's Instagram content confirm that he has been accepted into the world of traditional celebrity, suggesting there is less of a need for him to perform the aspirational lifestyle seen in his content at stage four. Rather, Joe is able to share evidence of his lived experience as a mainstream star with the 'displays of extravagant wealth and excess' that represent 'material success' and 'evoke feelings of desire, aspiration, jealousy and disapproval' (Rojek, 2001: 93) - key attributes that define one as a celebrity. Despite this, it is pertinent to note that, unlike the aspirational content at the quasi-mainstream stage, the celebrity lifestyle content at this mainstream stage appears less prevalent - perhaps because he is no longer doing the work of performing an aspirational lifestyle, but actually living it.

## Stage five: Conclusion

To conclude, the fifth mainstream stage has seen Joe shift towards performance work and, as a result, move his focus away from solely producing online content.

Joe's appearance on *Strictly Come Dancing* from August-December 2018 was the catalyst for this shift as he uses the platform afforded to him from appearing on the show to raise his profile and widen his recognition outside of the Internet. As Joe's brand extended further towards mainstream media and performance work, his brand management practices centred around negotiating these ventures alongside his online content creation. Here, it was essential for Joe to manage these crossovers alongside careful maintenance of the relationship with his audience, ensuring his brand extensions felt authentic, whilst ensuring he did not appear to have 'sold out' and left his online audience behind.

## (Re-)branding the self: Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered Joe's self-branding practices throughout his career trajectory, which I break down into five key stages: ordinary, microcelebrity, Internet celebrity, quasi-mainstream and mainstream. I have highlighted the significance of building connections and establishing an identity that audiences can relate to at the ordinary stage. The ordinary branding established at stage one was commodified at the microcelebrity stage, whilst also ensuring that Joe's ordinariness and relatability was maintained so he did not appear to have 'sold out'. At the Internet celebrity stage, I outlined how Joe presented himself as a clean-cut, boy-next-door figure which was particularly important as his content appeared more targeted towards a younger audience demographic at this stage. Joe's self-branding at this third stage also began to extend offline as he attended YouTube events and saw the social, symbolic and celebrity capital he had accrued online materialise into the offline world where he was positioned as an object of fandom when showing interactions with viewers in his content. I also highlighted how Joe's self-branding served to maintain his ordinariness and perceived authenticity at the quasi-mainstream stage where his online brand continued to extend offline and he began to venture into mainstream media and professional talent management. Finally, at the mainstream media stage of Joe's career, I noted a shift in Joe's self-branding to become more



oriented towards the performance and traditional celebrity worlds. As such, it was necessary for Joe to negotiate the tensions between his new offline performance work and maintaining his online platforms and intimate relationship with his audience which he navigated by documenting these experiences and behind-the-scenes action in his YouTube videos.

Overall, Joe's self-branding practices throughout his career trajectory, while varied, have all had the broad aim of connection - whether through initially building a connection with audiences at stage one, or later in his career at stage five where he carefully negotiates his new mainstream media and performance work alongside maintaining his relationship with his online audience. In the early stages of Joe's career, his construction of an ordinary, relatable self-brand helped to lay the foundations for audiences to form parasocial relationships with him, which continue to be built and strengthened through repeated interactions over time (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Then, as his career developed, factors such as beginning to commodify his brand at the microcelebrity stage, and gradually extending into offline, mainstream media and traditional celebrity work at the latter three stages of his career presented points at which the intimate, trusting relationship he had built with his audience could be breached. Influencers have to be extremely careful when taking on commercial partnerships to ensure the company and/or the product are a good fit with their existing brand in order to avoid jeopardising the highly trusting relationship they have with their audience (Abidin & Ots, 2016). This highlights the caution required for influencers in negotiating any extensions of their brand and the analysis within this chapter demonstrates that for Joe, this tension has been carefully considered at each stage of his career and in every extension of his brand.

From this analysis, I consider the single most important factor in Joe's strategic self-branding throughout his career trajectory to be his ability to adapt and shift his brand towards new commercial and professional endeavours, while carefully negotiating this alongside maintaining the intimate relationship he has built with



his audience. As I have outlined in this chapter, Joe's career has developed significantly throughout these five stages, however at each point that his brand has shifted, he has negotiated this alongside the maintenance of the intimate creator-audience relationship. Key to Joe's ability to maintain this relationship with his audience is his ability to convey a sense of closeness through performing ordinariness and relatability; offering his audience opportunities to participate in his commercial ventures; and providing access to his experiences as his brand grows towards new endeavours. These intimacy practices help build and strengthen the unique relationship between influencer and audience whereby followers feel they are being given exclusive access to the influencer's private life (Abidin, 2015), forming a trusting bond (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Also significant here is the notion of authenticity within his self-branding which has enabled him to simultaneously grow and redevelop his brand identity without neglecting his loyal online following, or being deemed to have sold out - something I will interrogate in detail in the [next analytical chapter](#).

# Chapter 5: Ordinariness, amateurism and not 'selling out': Authenticity labour

## Introduction

As identified in [Chapter 2](#), the notion of authenticity is key for microcelebrities (Marwick, 2013), ordinary celebrities (Gamson, 2011), influencers (Abidin, 2018), and traditional celebrities presenting themselves online (Marwick and boyd, 2011). For microcelebrities, authenticity can be performed through their relationship and interaction with their fanbase, through sharing personal details about their lives, or through successfully balancing authenticity and intimacy with commodification in their branding (Marwick, 2015). The ability to not only be able to brand the self as authentic, but to actually *be* authentic is key for building a successful self-brand (Banet-Weiser, 2012); thus, this perceived authenticity is, arguably, more central to Internet celebrities than traditional celebrities (Marwick, 2013). This is because they provide greater access to their personal lives, making them appear less managed, commodified and moderated than traditional celebrities (Marwick, 2013; 2015), which conveys authenticity as a result. However, traditional celebrities, too, have started implementing authenticity practices when presenting themselves online in order to foster feelings of intimacy between them and their followers (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Contemporary society places great value on authenticity (or at least the perception of such), particularly in the context of the Internet where genuineness, affect and candour are desirable characteristics (Abidin, 2018; Battan, 2019). This has led to an increased prevalence of claims to reality and performances of authenticity in online content, even sparking trends like 'Instagram vs reality' (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020) and 'getting real' posts (Battan, 2019), which illustrate public awareness of the constructedness of online content and a desire for reality in response. Central to traditional celebrity culture is the notion of stars as exceptional, aspirational figures who are more charismatic, beautiful and

glamorous than the general public (Currid-Halkett, 2010; Redmond & Holmes, 2007; Turner, 2004), which is in direct contention with the authentic, everydayness valued online. Thus, it is interesting to interrogate the notion of authenticity in relation to Joe who, throughout his career trajectory, has transitioned from ordinary to Internet celebrity, then to mainstream fame. As such, Joe's path to mainstream fame will have required regular negotiation of the tensions between the authenticity and ordinariness which are crucial for building a successful brand and following online (Marwick, 2013) and the more aspirational, 'perfectness' of traditional stars.

Authenticity has played a central role in Joe's self-branding throughout his career, particularly as someone who has built his brand on being 'ordinary' and 'genuine'<sup>160</sup>. Joe's career trajectory has seen him go from an ordinary boy making videos in his bedroom, to a mainstream celebrity participating in one of the UK's most popular prime-time TV shows. Thus, ensuring he is still perceived as authentic and is not deemed to have 'sold out' is vital to maintain the support of his following as he has grown and risen through the ranks in the imagined hierarchy of fame. As such, this chapter will explore the authenticity labour Joe has engaged in that has enabled him to successfully maintain a genuine self-brand, his audience's support, and to extend his online brand into offline and mainstream media ventures throughout his career trajectory. Analysis of this authenticity labour will be structured by the five stages of his career trajectory: ordinary, microcelebrity, Internet celebrity, quasi-mainstream, and mainstream. This is followed by a conclusive discussion which brings these authenticity practices together to interrogate Joe's key authenticity labour practices, and how this relates to his wider brand development strategy across his career.

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<sup>160</sup> As identified in the [previous chapter](#)

## ‘I wouldn’t say I’m a man of many talents’: Authentic ordinariness

This section will explore Joe’s authenticity practices at the ordinary stage of his career trajectory, focusing on performing amateurism as a means to convey authenticity, and positioning the self as unexceptional and unremarkable in order to strengthen his ordinary branding.

### Performed amateurism as authenticity labour

At the ordinary stage of Joe’s career trajectory, he performs authenticity by branding himself as an unremarkable person with no special talents or skills, and as an amateur at creating online content. At this stage it is fair to say Joe likely *can* be considered amateur in terms of creating content as YouTube and Instagram are both very new to him - something evidenced by his early Instagram content in particular ([Image 5.1](#)) which tends to be low resolution, suggesting the images have been taken using a phone camera. His initial Instagram posts do not appear to be taken with precise consideration over technical aspects such as composition and lighting, suggesting spontaneity in the moment of taking the pictures, rather than looking carefully set up and planned. This is in contrast with the more contemporary Instagram aesthetic of highly curated images that portray a very perfected, aspirational version of reality (Leaver, Highfield & Abidin, 2020), which Joe’s posts are more congruent with at the quasi- and mainstream celebrity stages of his career ([Image 5.2](#)). This suggests that at the time of these initial posts, Joe was perhaps creating content with less consideration to self-presentation and branding, instead sharing snapshots from particular times and places as they occur. This sharing of more spontaneous, in-the-moment imagery of his everyday experiences situates Joe’s life as very normal and unnoteworthy, thus authenticating his self-branding as an ordinary boy at this stage<sup>161</sup>.

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<sup>161</sup> Joe uploaded his first post to Instagram on 30th July 2012 (the bottom right image in Image 5.1), shortly followed by uploading his first YouTube video to ThatcherJoe on 7th August 2012 so at this point, he was very new to uploading his own content online, but had already appeared in one of his sister Zoe’s YouTube videos.



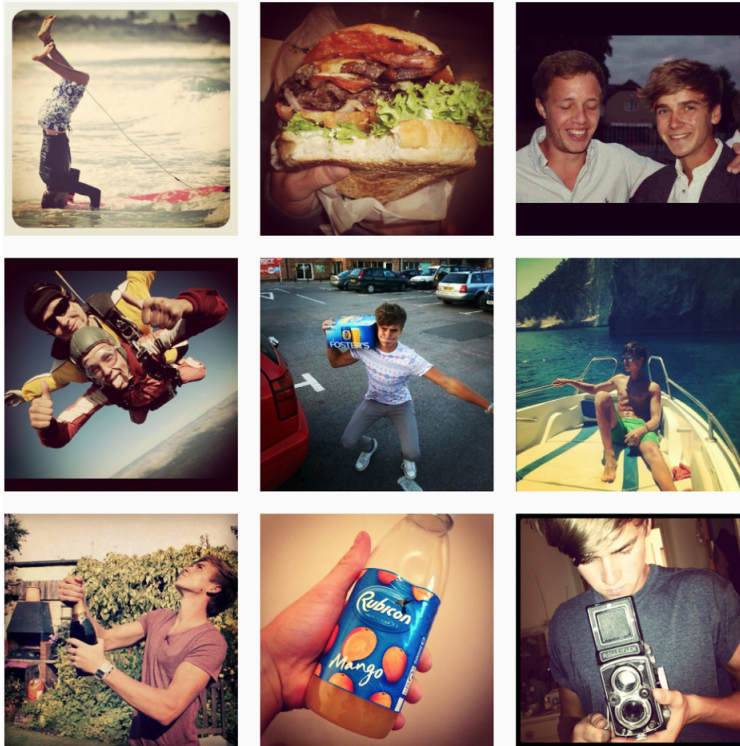
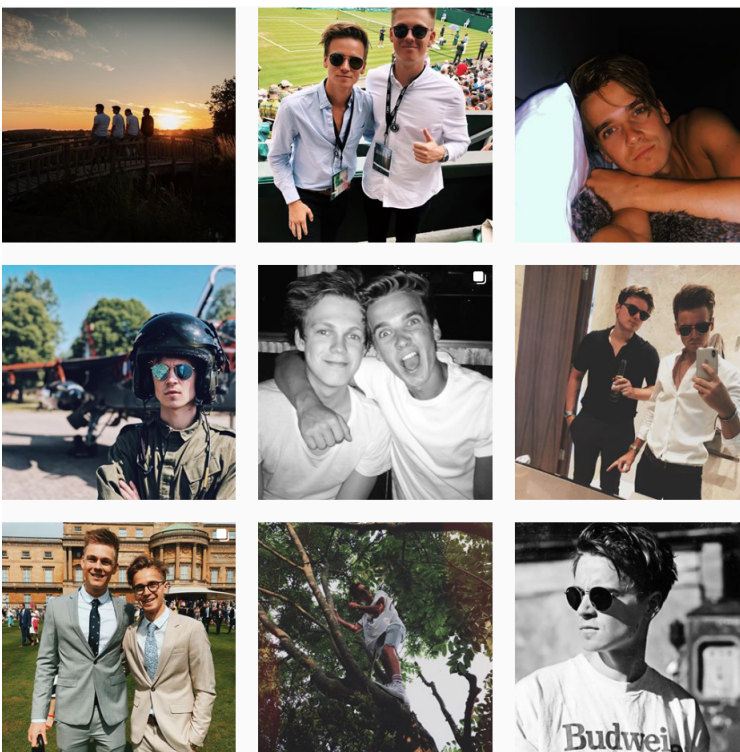


Image 5.1 (above)- @joe\_sugg - first 9 Instagram posts (starting bottom right);

Image 5.2 (below) - @joe\_sugg, Instagram - posts from late 2018



The images in Joe's initial posts do not appear to be heavily manipulated using professional photo editing software, and instead rely on Instagram's in-built filters and frames to alter the colours and tones of the images to make them appear more aesthetically pleasing. This is consistent with the popular aesthetics of Instagram content more generally in the early 2010s, whereby people tended to share more spontaneous images which were made more 'Instagram-ready' through adding one of Instagram's aesthetic filters to adjust the colours and textures of the image to give it a more retro feel (Leaver et al., 2020). The ability to add filters to images was afforded at the point of uploading the post, rather than through careful planning, composing and editing of images for the specific purpose of Instagram content as is common for social media influencers today. Many of the filters provided by Instagram attempt to create a retro aesthetic which draws upon the characteristics of analogue photography, making everyday subject matter appear seemingly more significant and interesting (Leaver et al., 2020). This notion of the filtered Instagram aesthetic is very apparent in Joe's early posts ([Image 5.1](#)) with mundane subject matter (such as a bottle of Rubicon, Joe carrying a crate of beer, and a burger) made to appear more visually interesting by these tweaks in colours and additions of heavy vignettes.

Joe's early YouTube content also claims to be amateur, however he has the benefit of his sister's prior YouTube video creation experience (she had been uploading content onto the platform since December 2009; Joe uploaded his first YouTube video in August 2012<sup>162</sup>). In a video titled *My YouTube Story* made to mark the one year anniversary of his channel ThatcherJoe, he explains that when he started making videos, 'I had no equipment, I didn't have a camera, I didn't have a laptop to edit it on so to start with my sister actually made my first video for me' (ThatcherJoe, 11th August 2013). Here, he lays claim to his amateurism, letting viewers know that he did not even own any of the equipment to create and upload videos when he started out. Performances of amateurism are common for YouTubers who tend to reject the notion of being experts or

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<sup>162</sup> See Appendix 1 - [Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)



professionals and focus more on sharing personal narratives and experiences with their viewers (Hou, 2018). This also functions as what Abidin terms 'calibrated amateurism', which she defines as a 'practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice' (2017: 1). This narrative of amateurism could be considered authenticity labour in helping to strengthen Joe's ordinary self-branding by maintaining a sense of equal status between him and his audience by rejecting any notions of professionalism or expertise (Abidin, 2018), whilst also making him seem less constructed, more relatable and more appealing (Abidin, 2018; Marwick, 2013).

Despite this, Joe had the assistance of his sister and her camera equipment, so whilst he himself may have been an amateur at creating YouTube videos, he was able to get a head-start with support from his sister. Although Joe admits that his sister helped him to make his first video, the video is quite simple in appearance and basic in terms of quality ([Image 5.3](#)), however it is clear that some consideration has been given towards lighting and composition. There are no props in the background of the frame to indicate where the video has been filmed, or to give clues to aid Joe's self-presentation (Goffman, 1956), other than the fabric used as a backdrop. The satin finish of the fabric and the soft waves in it suggests he may be sat in front of curtains, however this is a poor choice of backdrop due to the way the satin finish of the fabric reflects the light, highlighting the creases in the material and drawing some attention away from Joe who is positioned in the centre of the frame. Using this as a background shows a level of consideration to the composition of the frame, and, by extension, Joe's self-presentation in this first video, however the poor choice of backdrop also conveys amateurism and a lack of experience.





Image 5.3 - Screenshot from *An Introduction to 'ThatcherJoe'*, YouTube, 7th August 2012

### Unexceptional and unremarkable: Ordinarily authentic

In addition to the amateurism conveyed in the technicalities and appearance of Joe's early content, there was a common theme in his YouTube videos of Joe branding himself as unexceptional, frequently highlighting his lack of skill or special qualities, and the unremarkable nature of his life:

I wouldn't say I'm a man of many talents, but there's a few things that I can do – one of them being, I can, weirdly, I'm quite good at whistling. (*An Introduction to ThatcherJoe*, ThatcherJoe, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2012)

If I'm honest, I don't really get up to a lot but I think what a waste of a day, so I thought if I do a vlog channel it will give me motivation to do something big with my day because then I'll think right I can film this and show you guys. (*An Introduction to ThatcherJoeVlogs*, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2013)

Here, he situates himself as an ordinary person, setting low audience expectations for his content. He is not claiming to be special, exceptional, or

even worthy of their attention or admiration, therefore the audience are more likely to relate to him and find similarities between this online persona and themselves, potentially forming a stronger connection (Rihl & Wegener, 2017). Joe not only claims his life is unnoteworthy, but strengthens these claims with the suggestion that his days are so mundane that he needs the external motivation of vlogging in order to do something interesting with his time. What is particularly interesting here is that it is exactly this ordinariness that makes Joe so appealing to audiences as it conveys a sense of unmediated reality which rejects the highly constructed and hierarchical nature of traditional media (Abidin, 2018), offering audiences a refreshing change from this. This is reflective of a wider shift in mainstream media cultures towards an increased desire from audiences to consume content featuring ordinary, unexceptional people and their lived experiences (Abidin, 2018; Gamson, 2011; Turner, 2004). As such, Joe's claims to unexceptionalism can be seen to help strengthen his appeal to audiences by fulfilling this desire for the ordinary (Marwick, 2013).

### Authentic ordinariness: conclusion

The ordinary stage of Joe's self-branding is characterised by Joe presenting himself as ordinary and unexceptional through performing calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017) in his content, thus serving to reinforce the notion of equal status between Joe and his audience by rejecting any perceptions of professionalism or him possessing a level of expertise in relation to his content creation (Abidin, 2018). This is common practice amongst YouTubers who tend to focus their attention more on sharing their personal experiences with viewers, rather than making claims to being experts or professionals (Hou, 2018); thus helping to maintain their perception as relatable, ordinary individuals merely sharing snippets of their lives online. Joe also regularly rejects the notion of him possessing exceptional qualities or talents that make him noteworthy, which helps strengthen his appeal to audiences by making him appear authentic (Marwick, 2013).

## ‘You are quite literally changing my life’: Authentic microcelebrity

This section will explore Joe’s authenticity labour at the microcelebrity stage of his career, considering the ways in which he navigates the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary as his online popularity begins to manifest in his everyday life.

### Negotiating the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary

At the microcelebrity stage of Joe’s self-branding, an apparent tension began to emerge as signifiers of his new-found online popularity surfaced, in contrast with the ordinariness and normality – both of his persona and his everyday life – that were strongly foregrounded at the ordinary stage. Here, Joe is in a transitory stage in which the new experiences and opportunities offered by his fast-growing YouTube subscriber count start to creep into his ordinary life, but do not completely usurp it. Instead, his ordinary life as an apprentice roof thatcher in Wiltshire is punctuated by moments of excitement and out-of-the-ordinary opportunities<sup>163</sup>. I will analyse these in relation to how Joe negotiates the tensions between maintaining the ordinary self-brand he has built online and the extraordinary experiences he has been afforded as a result of his growing online prominence.

This notion of authenticity labour was present even at the early microcelebrity stage where Joe was yet to be afforded any extraordinary experiences as a result of his YouTube success. He was, however, experiencing a significant rate of growth on his ThatcherJoe channel having accrued more than 600,000 followers in his first year of posting videos, with him launching his ThatcherJoeVlogs channel at the beginning of this second stage. In [Image 5.4](#), Joe confesses to his followers, ‘This whole thing scares me..’. Despite the

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<sup>163</sup> Such as beginning to attend YouTube conventions and being invited onto mainstream radio - see [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg’s career timeline](#)

professional recording equipment pictured, the caption performs calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017), reminding the audience that he is still an amateur by expressing his fear, although this is in contrast with the camera equipment setup pictured which suggests a level of professionalism. This confession performs intimacy through disclosing his fears, creating a sense of closeness with his audience and thus helping to strengthen their parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Marwick & boyd, 2011).



Image 5.4 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 3rd February 2013

As Joe's following continued to increase, the signifiers of this growth became more apparent as he was afforded extraordinary opportunities as a result of his online success. In December 2013, Joe was taken on a trip to Dubai to film for the DailyMix<sup>164</sup> YouTube channel alongside a group of fellow Glean Futures-managed creators. Outside of this experience, Joe was still living a very 'ordinary' life, working as a roof Thatcher; thus, this is reflective of the two

<sup>164</sup> DailyMix was a YouTube channel launched by talent management agency Glean Futures in 2012 in partnership with independent TV production studio all3media. See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

contrasting sides of Joe's life that characterise the microcelebrity stage as evidenced in [Image 5.5](#). Here, Joe is pictured sitting on a sun lounger on the beach, enjoying a drink with the caption, '[t]his is what I was doing last Monday.. [sic] But today I was on a roof in the cold rain. I honestly have the most peculiar life...'. This post is representative of these contrasting sides of his life at this stage, and thus the 'peculiar' nature of his life which he refers to in his caption suggests that he is very aware of this juxtaposition.



Image 5.5 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 16th December 2013

In addition to Joe's overt reflections on the changing nature of his life, his content at this stage contained signifiers of his growing social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1997). For example, in [Image 5.6](#), Joe declared he was experiencing '[o]ne of the most emotional days of [his] life' as a result of passing his car, which he lovingly refers to as 'Polly the Peugeot', on to his best friend Lewis. It is not clear whether this transfer was the result of a sale or if he gifted the car to his friend; however, the exchange is a key signifier of Joe's increasing online popularity, symbolising the process of leaving some of his old, 'normal' life behind - in this case, his beloved old car. Additionally, passing his old car onto his friend



and leaving this relic of his pre-YouTube life behind implies that he will be moving onwards to buy a new car, and perhaps transitioning to a new phase of his life too.



Image 5.6 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 23rd September 2013

Whilst Joe does not explicitly share that he has purchased a new car with his following, a video posted to ThatcherJoeVlogs just over a month later begins with him sitting in his car before work where a luxurious leather-seated interior is visible in the background ([Image 5.7](#)). The roof and window curvature at the side of the vehicle and the condensed space behind the front seats suggests that this is a sports car, thus these signifiers suggest he has upgraded his Peugeot to a luxury sports car. Despite these symbols of increased social and economic capital in this frame of the video, this is in contrast with the context - Joe has driven the vehicle to work and is filming a video about being an apprentice roof thatcher. Here, the two contrasting aspects of his life appear in direct juxtaposition with one another - his 'normal' life and the manual labour of roof thatching; and his increasing online following and the materialisation of this

online success into his everyday life. Joe does not draw attention to his new car, but instead shares his emotional response as he mourns the loss of his old, well-loved car, therefore ensuring he does not appear to be bragging or showing off. The luxurious interior of his new car in the background of his video instead functions as a prop to Joe's self-presentation (Goffman, 1956); implying to viewers that his life is beginning to change, whilst ensuring his ordinary, relatable self-branding (and thus perceived authenticity) is not compromised by foregrounding his thatching work.



Image 5.7 - Still from *THATCHING ROOFS!*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, YouTube, 25th October 2013

In addition to the signifiers present in Joe's content that are indicative of this transition stage in his self-branding, the analysis revealed a recurrence of reflections in his online content about the new life changes he was experiencing:

Hooly cow! 50,000 of you like me enough to find out what I have for my dinner! ;) laaaaav you! X (@joe\_sugg Instagram post, 15th January 2013)

It still blows my mind when you all stop me in the street and say hello. It's crazy to think how much things have changed in a year! I feel so loved! I have the bestestestest subscribers <3 (@joe\_sugg Instagram post, 17th October 2013)

My subscribers grew and grew and I was thinking what, is this even real? I was so shocked and I sit there and just read through every single comment like, 'ah people like me'. (*My Youtube Story*, ThatcherJoe, 11th August 2013)

These reflections are performed in response to signifiers of increases in his social, economic and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) such as reaching 50,000 Instagram followers, gaining YouTube subscribers and being recognised by followers in the street. Here, Joe negotiates the tensions between these elevations in his status and his ordinary self-branding by performing authenticity in his reflections, expressing shock - 'Hooooly cow!', questioning 'is this even real?', and even confessing his self-deprecating relief that 'people like me'. This self-deprecation and modesty offers relatability to his audience - characteristics that are valued in ordinary participants of reality TV because they convey desirable moral virtues (Giles, 2018). For Joe, this also functions as authenticity labour, positioning him as without agency in these achievements; instead placing power with his audience who have liked him enough to give him an online following - something he strengthens further with his expressions of gratitude such as 'laaaaaav you!' and 'I feel so loved!'. This absolving of his agency makes his successes appear almost accidental, helping strengthen the ordinariness which is central to his self-branding and making him appear more authentic to audiences - a characteristic central to the appeal of microcelebrities (Marwick, 2013).



Additionally, there was a noticeable trend at this microcelebrity stage within Joe's content of him performing 'attention labour' - in essence, the forms of digital labour which function to attract attention and maintain visibility which are defined as key practices of the microcelebrity (Marwick, 2013, 2015):

"It has been an incredible year, like this year has flown by so quickly because of the amount of cool things I'm doing right now. There's so much stuff in the future to look forward to on this channel. I'm just trying to hype it up so you stay subscribed. Please don't leave me, please don't leave me. You are the reason why I do this." (*My Youtube Story*, ThatcherJoe, 11th August 2013)

"I just want you all to know that I love you and you are quite literally changing my life so please don't unsubscribe." (*1 Million Subscribers*, ThatcherJoe, 24th November 2013)

Joe's attention labour appears in response to the following he has already accrued and the rewards he is beginning to reap as a result of this new-found digital success, thus these practices can be seen as efforts to try to maintain his following. He shows gratitude to his followers for the 'incredible year' and the 'cool things [he is] doing right now', noting that they 'are quite literally changing [his] life'. In both examples, his expressions of gratitude towards his audience and reflections on his online growth are followed by explicit efforts to ensure followers remain subscribed to his YouTube channel, using emotive phrases such as 'please don't leave me,' and 'please don't unsubscribe' to emphasise this. These displays of attention labour, alongside reflections on the 'incredible' experiences he has been afforded as a result of his initial growth online, suggest a fervent attempt to ensure these new experiences and material rewards are not taken away from him<sup>165</sup>. These disclosures of his fears create a sense of

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<sup>165</sup> Despite these practices to draw and maintain his existing audience's attention on his content, Joe rarely appears to use hashtags on his Instagram posts to increase the visibility of his content

intimacy, thus helping to strengthen the parasocial relationship between him and his audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Moreover, these personal reflections function as performances of authenticity, helping to negotiate the tensions between his ordinary self-branding and the extraordinary online growth he is experiencing.

### Authentic microcelebrity: conclusion

In this section, I have argued that Joe's authenticity labour practices at the microcelebrity stage of his career were performed in response to emerging tensions between his already-established ordinary self-branding, and the exciting extraordinary experiences he is beginning to be afforded as a result of his new-found online popularity. Joe's work as a roof thatcher was used as an authenticity device to contrast the extraordinariness of these experiences with the manual labour of his day job, helping to ensure his ordinary self-branding is not compromised. Joe also negotiated these tensions by expressing amazement and conveying gratitude towards his audience, as well as creating a sense of closeness through intimate disclosures of his fears and reflections on his experiences. This helped to maintain and strengthen the parasocial relationships he had already built with his audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Marwick & boyd, 2011), enabling them to feel more closely connected to him and his experiences as his career progressed.

### From micro- to Internet, from online to 'irl': Authentic Internet celebrity

This section will discuss Joe's authenticity labour at the Internet celebrity stage of his career trajectory, exploring how he maintained authenticity in response to his

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to wider audiences. Where he does use hashtags, these tend to be more comic or sarcastic asides - e.g. #fit, followmetoe. See Abidin (2016b) for further reading on visibility labour.

new-found elevated social status and his online brand beginning to extend offline, affording him mainstream media and traditional celebrity opportunities.

### Shift from micro- to Internet celebrity

At the Internet celebrity stage of Joe's career, there is an apparent shift in his social status, which sees him elevated to a level of significant public recognition, though at this stage it is still largely confined within the online world. Although I define Joe's career at this stage as extending outside of and above the parameters of microcelebrity, as defined by Marwick (2013, 2015) and Senft (2008), many of the key microcelebrity practices around maintaining an authentic self-brand that is intimate and attracts attention are still very much present. These microcelebrity practices become built upon in stage three as Joe becomes more adept in presenting his online self-brand and merging it seamlessly with commodification and intimacy (Jerslev, 2016).

One of the key themes identified within the data at this stage related to signifiers of Joe's growing celebrity status, indicating the extent to which his online popularity was increasing. Whilst stage two was characterised by bursts of excitement and occasional extraordinary experiences in contrast with his otherwise ordinary everyday life, the Internet celebrity stage sees these out-of-the-ordinary occurrences become more ingrained in his lived experience. As his online status becomes increasingly elevated, Joe sees this prominence materialise in the offline world through interactions with fans 'irl'<sup>166</sup>, leading to further shifts in the hierarchy between him and his audience.

The translation of Joe's online following into the offline world was a key theme identified in the analysis at this stage. For example, in a vlog from October 2013, Joe arrives into Amsterdam Schiphol airport with fellow YouTuber Chai Cameron (MyNamesChai) to be greeted by a large group of viewers ([Images 5.8 & 5.9](#)). In

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<sup>166</sup> Internet slang for 'in real life', meaning in the offline world.

the video<sup>167</sup>, the viewers surround them, waving and screaming with excitement, offering a clear depiction of a typical celebrity-fan interaction, thus situating Joe in a position of elevated social status to the group of viewers. Showing this content on his YouTube channel suggests a desire to share this experience with his audience, and functions to reinforce this elevated status to his online viewers. Joe also reflected on the experience in an Instagram post ([Image 5.10](#)), stating 'One of the nicest feelings is arriving at an airport and being greeted by all you lovely viewers'. This conveys a sense of gratitude and genuine connection with his audience, despite the newness of experiencing this celebrity-fan dynamic. Fans desire the 'mutuality and reciprocity' of meeting their objects of fandom in-person (Ferris, 2001: 44), as well as the opportunity to validate and enhance their emotional connections and parasocial relationships with them (Reijnders et al., 2014). As such, Joe's reflections on this encounter with fans reinforces the emotional, parasocial connections by presenting the interaction with a degree of reciprocity. This reassures them that the experience was meaningful for him too; thus validating the intimacy of fans' connection with him, and evidencing the authenticity of his online persona (Ferris, 2001).

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<sup>167</sup> The video is interestingly titled *AMSTERDAM OLD MAN & BIRD POOP ON MY HEAD!* (ThatcherJoeVlogs, 18th October 2013) which, whilst I do not have space to interrogate this in detail, is worth briefly drawing attention to. 'BIRD POOP ON MY HEAD' is doing interesting work in drawing attention to what is usually considered an unfortunate, embarrassing incidence, so foregrounding this in the video's title suggests a sense that he is so authentic, he does not mind highlighting this for all to see online. This also creates a sense of intimacy in that he is letting his viewers in on an embarrassing moment within the video.



AMSTERDAM OLD MAN & BIRD POOP ON MY HEAD! | ThatcherJoe

Images 5.8 & 5.9 - Stills from *AMSTERDAM OLD MAN & BIRD POOP ON MY HEAD!*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, YouTube, 18th Oct 2013



AMSTERDAM OLD MAN & BIRD POOP ON MY HEAD! | ThatcherJoe

384,246 views • Oct 18, 2013

18K 70 SHARE SAVE ...



Image 5.10 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 7th October 2013

In addition to fans greeting him at the airport, Joe's content at this stage often depicts him getting recognised by viewers whilst out in public ([Image 5.11](#)). A particularly notable example of this is in a vlog where Joe goes to watch the band The Vamps perform in London with fellow YouTubers Caspar Lee and Marcus Butler<sup>168</sup>. The video depicts the three vloggers arriving at the venue and being shown to their seats on a first floor balcony which appears to be largely empty, despite the other standing and seating areas in the venue being full. This suggests they are seated in an area that is not available for general ticket sales, providing a physical separation from them and the other attendees, thus implicitly positioning them as hierarchically superior to the wider audience. As they are walking towards their seats, Joe says to his camera, "So we've arrived..." and pans down to show the crowd in the standing area below who are turned towards him and are screaming and waving excitedly ([Image 5.12](#)).

<sup>168</sup> *Watching The Vamps live & Ghosts in our apartment*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 9th April 2014





Image 5.11 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 22nd December 2014

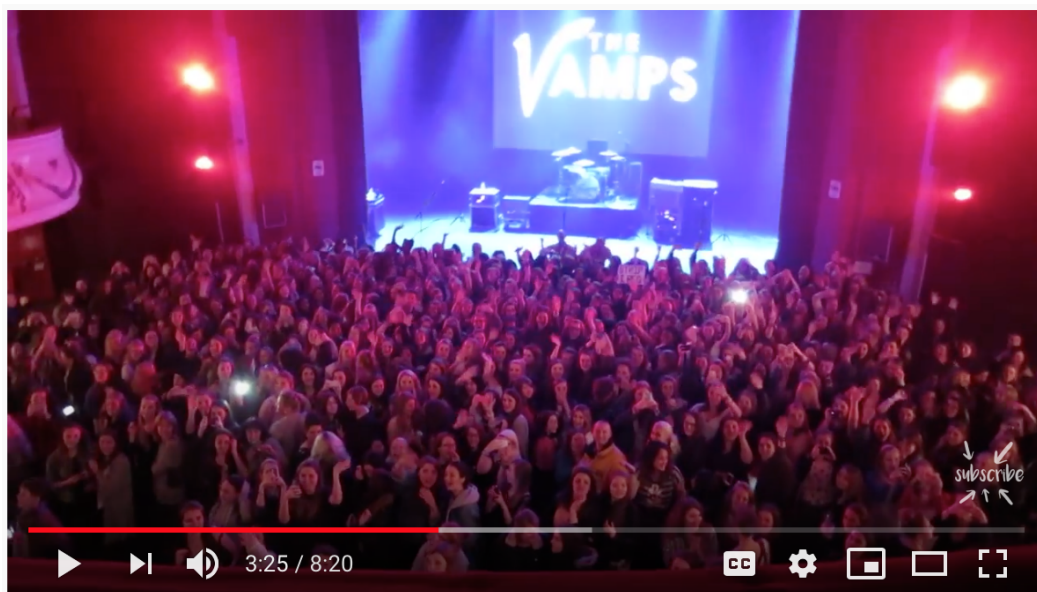


Image 5.12 - *Watching The Vamps live & Ghosts in our apartment*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 9th April 2014

Once they have been seated, Joe turns his camera around to film the audience which is met with loud screams as he pans the camera to the crowd standing below, then up to the balconies above, showing a large crowd who are screaming and waving at them. Here, attendees are waiting to see The Vamps, yet the type of hysteria that is typically associated with boy bands is being displayed towards these three YouTubers who, despite not being on the lineup of acts attendees have paid to see, are receiving the same amount of excitement one would expect to be given only to the headliners. This suggests that The Vamps fanbase, who are primarily young and female, overlap significantly with the audience demographics of Joe, Caspar and Marcus. This also conveys a sense that the YouTubers share the same level of celebrity status as The Vamps. Sharing shots of empty venues and crowds is a recognisable practice of traditional bands and performers more generally who often post these on social media before or following a show. Thus, here, the lines between traditional celebrity and Internet celebrity become blurred through Joe's practices and the audiences' response to the YouTubers.

In response to receiving such hysteria from the crowd, Joe vlogs himself and Marcus looking almost embarrassed at the attention, before turning to him to say, 'this is my first proper gig, other than obviously NCSYES<sup>169</sup>, this is my first like proper gig. I feel like a teenage girl all over again... kind of' (*Watching The Vamps live & Ghosts in our apartment*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 9th April 2014). Here, Joe conveys authenticity by shifting the focus back to The Vamps, likening himself to 'a teenage girl' - a demographic who are frequently deemed 'obsessive and hysterical' as fans (McCann & Southerton, 2019: 49), thus Joe implies here that he is feeling like an over-excited fan. This hierarchically distinguishes the YouTubers from The Vamps who Joe implies are superior, perhaps by virtue of being 'proper' celebrities through an achieved route into fame (Rojek, 2001). This rejection of the notion that the YouTubers could be considered celebrities and objects of fandom to the same degree as The Vamps reinforces Joe's

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<sup>169</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)



ordinariness and functions as authenticity labour, positioning Joe as a fan rather than a star.

The increased hierarchy between Joe and his audience, as was depicted in the previous example at The Vamps' gig, is also particularly prevalent in his content documenting his experiences of attending YouTube events and conventions - something he did throughout the Internet celebrity stage. Joe attended these national and international events as part of a wider group of British YouTubers who became dubbed The Brit Crew by international audiences<sup>170</sup>. In 2014 alone, the analysis identified seven different YouTube events that Joe attended: AmityFest, Digifest, ITATube, NCSYES Live, Playlist Live, Summer in the City, and VidCon<sup>171</sup>, which, compared to other years where he only appears to have attended a maximum of one YouTube event<sup>172</sup>, is certainly the peak of his YouTube event attendance. The structure of these fan events perpetuates this hierarchy between creator and audience with performers tending to be physically separated from the general ticket holders who are able to queue up to meet them at organised meet-ups and watch them on-stage. Joe's content from these events depicts him in a position of elevated status to the audience, whether that be through being pictured on-stage ([Image 5.13](#)), at an organised fan meet-and-greet ([Image 5.14](#)), or hanging out in exclusive backstage areas at the events ([Image 5.15](#)). As such, Joe's status as a YouTube celebrity was reflected in his positioning as a 'performer' as part of the events' line-up, which are used for promotion and to sell tickets. This raises an interesting tension to his perceived authenticity and the intimate relationship with his audience when access to him becomes monetised. According to Reijnders et al. (2014), for fans attending meet-and-greets, the fact that their object of fandom is often benefiting commercially from these encounters is not important because they place such great value on meeting them. As such, appearing at YouTube events is unlikely to pose too much challenge to Joe's perceived authenticity, as a chance for

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<sup>170</sup> Discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 - [The Brit Crew](#)

<sup>171</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#) for descriptions of these events

<sup>172</sup> see [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

momentary proximity to him is, to them, the most valuable commodity (Reijnders et al., 2014).



Image 5.13 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 8th June 2014 (Digifest)



Image 5.14 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 2nd July 2014 (VidCon)



Image 5.15 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 28th June 2014 (VidCon)

## From online to 'irl': Authentic extensions of the online self-brand

Performances of authenticity in response to traditional celebrity experiences were common at this stage as Joe displays increased levels of social and celebrity capital and serves to maintain his ordinary, authentic self-brand, whilst engaging in exciting new opportunities and experiences including extending his online brand into the offline world.

In November 2014, Joe was invited to be part of the celebrity line-up for the Band Aid 30 charity single, alongside his sister and her partner Alfie Deyes. They appeared on the line-up alongside traditional celebrities such as Ed Sheeran, One Direction and Ellie Goulding (Press Association, 2014), making them the first non-musician participants of Band Aid (Brouwer, 2014). Joe announced this to his followers via an Instagram post ([Image 5.16](#)) where he explains that he 'had the honour of being asked by Sir Bob [Geldof] to join in with the chorus for #bandaid30', positioning the chance to participate as 'a once in a lifetime opportunity which I'll never forget' (@joe\_sugg, 16th November 2014). Here, Joe

positions Band Aid as a 'once in a lifetime opportunity', assuring fans he is aware of what a privilege it is to have been asked to participate, and that he deems this an extraordinary opportunity. This serves to strengthen Joe's ordinary self-branding by positioning it as an 'honour' to have been asked to participate. Similarly, when Joe was invited onto the Scott Mills show on BBC Radio 1 to participate in the on-air game, Innuendo Bingo<sup>173</sup> in September 2013, he presented this as a big moment for his career, stating in an Instagram post shared afterwards, 'That's one more ticked off the bucket list' ([Image 5.17](#)) and, in a YouTube video: 'this week I was given the opportunity to do something that I've wanted to do for ages which was to go onto Radio 1 on the Scott Mills show to go and play *Innuendo Bingo*' (*Innuendo Bingo on BBC Radio 1*, ThatcherJoe, 9th September 2013).



Image 5.16 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 16th November 2014

<sup>173</sup> Also discussed in Chapter 4 - [Legitimising Internet fame: Participation on the fringes of the mainstream](#)



Image 5.17 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 5th September 2013

These examples function as what Audrezet et al. term 'passionate authenticity' whereby influencers convey a sense of being driven by their inner desires and passions more so than by commercial goals', thus ensuring extensions of their brand feel genuine (2020: 565). Joe's presentation of these opportunities as 'bucket list' dreams suggests to his followers that he recognises the exclusivity and significance of being afforded them, therefore reminding his audience of his ordinariness which is such a key part of his self-brand, and the appeal of YouTubers more broadly (Smith, 2014). The significance Joe places on these traditional media opportunities reinforces the narrative of mainstream media being hierarchically superior or more legitimate than online media forms (Deller & Murphy, 2019; Giles, 2018). This could suggest that Joe wants the perceived legitimacy of being recognised as significant by traditional media forms, and may reflect what Gamson (2011) considers a common desire for individuals to want to use their online fame as a springboard for launching a mainstream media career.



## Authentic Internet celebrity: conclusion

The Internet celebrity stage of Joe's career trajectory was characterised by the dynamic between Joe and his viewers shifting into something hierarchical which sees him beginning to experience more of a celebrity-fan interaction with his followers when he meets them. In response to these instances of elevated status, Joe performs authenticity in his reflections to the experiences, conveying gratitude and genuine connection with his viewers to reinforce his boy-next-door online persona. This helps to provide the reciprocity fans desire when meeting the objects of their fandom (Ferris, 2001), thus validating his audience's parasocial relationships and emotional connections with him through positioning the experience as meaningful for him too (Reijnders et al., 2014). The Internet celebrity stage was also characterised by Joe being afforded extraordinary opportunities such as appearing on mainstream radio and participating in the Band Aid 30 charity single. These opportunities evidenced his accrued social and symbolic capital from his online following (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), however Joe engaged in authenticity labour in response to these traditional media experiences by presenting these projects as dream-come-true opportunities driven by passion (Audrezet et al., 2020). This helped to position his initial forays into the world of traditional media as authentic extensions of his online brand (Audrezet et al., 2020), reassuring followers that he has not 'sold out' and ensuring his ordinary self-branding does not feel disingenuous to his audience.

## 'We owe all this to you': Authentic quasi-mainstream celebrity

This section will explore Joe's authenticity practices at the quasi-mainstream stage of his career which was characterised by further growth and extensions of his brand, thus heightening the need to perform authenticity labour to maintain his ordinary self-brand and preserve the trusting relationship with his audience. This section will interrogate Joe's authenticity labour in response to this, focusing

on his performances of gratitude for the extraordinary experiences he was afforded and maintenance of his ordinary self-brand and the relationship with his audience, as well as how Joe performed authenticity in response to it being challenged.

‘Thank you, you’re making all my dreams come true’:

### Performances of gratitude

At the quasi-mainstream stage, Joe engaged in authenticity labour in response to the growth and extensions of his brand he was experiencing by recurrently expressing gratitude to his audience, thus recognising the importance of their support in enabling him to be afforded these opportunities. This was particularly prevalent in his YouTube videos where new projects and offline extensions of his brand, such as the *HTR* movies and his *Username* graphic novel series, were announced, although expressions of thanks and gratitude to his audience were also made on his Instagram too. Examples include:

This would not be possible without you guys obviously supporting what we do and watching our videos and we owe all this to you so thank you so much. (*BEST NIGHT OF MY LIFE*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 24th November 2015)

All I know, I feel like you know by now how much all this means to me, ... thank you, you’re making all my dreams come true, you know. (*BEST NIGHT OF MY LIFE*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 24th November 2015)

Thank you so much for giving us the opportunity to do amazing things like this! we’ll never take any of this for granted (*MY ROOMMATE IS EVIL PROJECT JASPAR REVEAL*, ThatcherJoe, 1st September 2015)

In these examples, phrases such as ‘you know by now how much all this means to me’ and ‘we owe all this to you’ convey a sense of gratitude for the



opportunities, recognising that without his audience's support, he would not be afforded these experiences. This reflects an interesting facet of Internet celebrity in that increased power is given to audiences who are able to create stars by giving them support in the form of attention and following (Gamson, 2011), and, as such, Joe acknowledges this power, thanking his audience for supporting him and affording him a degree of fame. Highlighting that he will 'never take any of this for granted' and referring to the opportunities as 'amazing' indicates to his audience that these experiences are still novel and out-of-the-ordinary to him. This reassures his audience that despite his success, he is still an ordinary person and that he has not 'sold out' by appearing to have overly commercialised or commodified his brand. Instead, Joe reassures viewers by maintaining the intimacy of his content and the personal connection with his audience (Abidin, 2014). This careful management of his self-branding alongside commodification, intimacy and authenticity is crucial for microcelebrities (Jerslev, 2016; Senft, 2013), however Joe demonstrates that these practices are just as relevant as his mainstream celebrity status grows.



Image 5.18 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 1st September 2015

In these expressions of gratitude to his audience, Joe's offline brand extensions are positioned as dream-come-true work opportunities, echoing similar sentiment to the passionate authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020) identified at the Internet celebrity stage when Joe was invited to participate in mainstream media projects. This portrayal of labour as dream work is a common mythology of creative work on social media, particularly amongst influencers who present the notion of having built their careers from engaging in work they are passionate about (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). This practice was particularly prevalent in Joe's discourse around the release of his debut book *Username: Evie* (2015) where he maintained that graphic novels have been a long-standing passion of his, telling viewers 'from a very, very early age, a lot of you will have seen from my vlogs that I used to collect tons and tons of comics, and I even used to design my own comics' (*MY BIG ANNOUNCEMENT!*, ThatcherJoe, 1st February 2015). Here, Joe implements passionate authenticity to ensure his audience perceive the book to be an authentic extension of his brand (Abidin, 2014; Audrezet et al., 2020), rather than just a mere money-making exercise. This authenticity functions to minimise the risk of Joe breaching his audience's trust and damaging his reputation (Abidin & Ots, 2016), whilst ensuring his intimate relationship with his followers is preserved (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017).

In the examples discussed, Joe attributes these dream opportunities to luck and the support of his audience. This attribution of his successes diminishes the challenging, labour-intensive work of building and maintaining an appealing, commodifiable and consistent self-brand (Marwick, 2015; Mavroudis & Milne, 2016). This diminishing of the physical and emotional labour required as part of his job suggests a desire not to highlight these achievements as work - perhaps in part because this implies making money from his followers. It is no secret that Joe makes money from his following, however influencers carefully perform their labour to make it look more like a hobby or a passion project that is not really like work at all, conveying a sense that they would still be doing this work if they were not being paid for it (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Thus, by

attributing these opportunities to luck and the support of his audience, rather than positioning them as forms of financially-compensatable labour, Joe is able to maintain the intimate, authentic connection with his audience (Audrezet et al., 2020; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). This is particularly interesting because mainstream media representations of YouTubers frequently position their work as a hobby, rather than a legitimate form of labour (Deller & Murphy, 2019). This, then, reveals a tension for Joe who seemingly wishes to portray his labour as fun and driven by passion to ensure he retains his perceived authenticity, yet wants to be taken seriously and convince those outside of his audience and in the mainstream media that YouTube is a 'proper' job.

### Not 'selling out': Performing authenticity and maintaining ordinariness

Whilst the previous section highlighted Joe's amazement and gratitude towards the experiences he has been afforded, this section focuses on further authenticity labour devices used by Joe to help manage the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary emerging within his content. These devices include: humour and childishness and performing amateurism.

Authenticity labour in the form of humour and childishness was prominently identified in Joe's vlog from the day of the *HTR* Leicester Square red carpet premiere (*BEST NIGHT OF MY LIFE*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 24th November 2015). In the video, Joe and Caspar are taken to a luxurious suite at a 5-star hotel where they were getting ready for the premiere. Joe is giving his viewers a tour of the suite when he interrupts himself, saying, 'Would you look at this! Oh— Caspar, have you farted?! That absolutely stinks. It's stunk the whole room out'. Similarly, when Joe and Caspar are waiting in a campervan before Joe drives it to the premiere, Caspar gets out of the vehicle and Joe declares, 'Ooh, Caspar's going for a nervous poo'. Joe uses childish toilet humour as an authenticity device to counteract the extraordinariness and elevations in status that are being displayed in the video, conveying to viewers that, despite the grandeur of being

in a 5-star hotel suite or attending a red carpet premiere for his film, he has retained his silly and comedic online brand. This childishness reflects a sense of the immaturity and prolonged adolescence which is often conveyed in the branding of boy band members, conveying a sense of playfulness that '[blurs] the lines between childhood and adulthood' (Hansen, 2018: 196). This immaturity appears to be a crucial facet of the *HTR* films' branding - the trailer is amock with slapstick goofiness (e.g. [Image 5.19](#)). Despite Joe and Caspar both being in their twenties at this point, their childish behaviour in promotional material such as the premiere vlog helps strengthen their engagement with *HTR*'s target audience, whilst ensuring they appear innocent and harmless enough to gain approval from young fans' parents (Hansen, 2018).



Image 5.19 - *JOE & CASPAR HIT THE ROAD - Official Trailer*, Caspar, YouTube, 2nd November 2015

Amateurism as a form of authenticity labour was utilised in Joe's *HTR* announcement video (*MY ROOMMATE IS EVIL PROJECT JASPAR REVEAL*, ThatcherJoe, 1st September 2015) where he includes footage filmed whilst on location at the end of filming the movie. Here, Joe and Caspar talk directly to the

camera in a vlog-style clip telling viewers about the project, however the film crew are also present behind the camera. Examples of performed amateuriness include:

We went to— [turns to Caspar] where did we go? Venice--

We didn't announce what it's [the film] called either, I've just realised.

(*MY ROOMMATE IS EVIL PROJECT JASPAR REVEAL*, ThatcherJoe, 1st September 2015)

Similarly, in the second *HTR* announcement video (*HUGE JASPAR ANNOUNCEMENTS!*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 12th October 2015), Joe and Caspar revealed that they would be going on a UK tour, visiting Australia for two shows, and providing viewers information about the tour, however when delivering this information, they struggled to remember the details of where they were visiting on the tour:

Caspar: I'm already forgetting the cities.

Joe: It's funny though.

Caspar: But we are still coming to Manchester.

Joe: Yep, we're still coming to Manchester, don't worry about that.

Caspar: This is so confusing.

(*HUGE JASPAR ANNOUNCEMENTS!*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 12th October 2015)

Here, amateurism is conveyed through their inability to correctly remember the locations for the tour, suggesting their lack of involvement in the organisation of

the tour. In both instances, those in charge of producing and promoting the film are positioned as having responsibility over the project, and in keeping Joe and Caspar in check. Joe and Caspar, on the other hand, take on this amateur, child-like role where they are unable to deliver the information they have been tasked with providing to viewers. As a result, this rejection of responsibility and performance of amateurism prevents Joe and Caspar from being perceived as part of the media process or the professionalisation and commodification of their online brands. This performed amateurism conveys ordinariness, positioning them as participants rather than professionals with any editorial control in the filmmaking process. As such, this draws similarities to reality TV participants who Gamson explains are not required to possess specific skills or talents, and instead must simply 'perform their ordinariness with some degree of specificity or individuality' (2011: 160). This performed amateurism as an authenticity labour device is in tension with Joe's wider brand development at the latter quasi-mainstream stage towards more professional endeavours<sup>174</sup> where he and Caspar seek to capitalise upon their professional experiences by launching a digital talent management agency.

### 'We don't sing or dance': HelloWorld and challenged authenticity

Prior to the quasi-mainstream stage of Joe's career, mainstream media coverage was limited, with him only beginning to attract press attention around the end of the Internet celebrity stage (when he participated in the Band Aid 30 charity single), and the beginning of the quasi-mainstream stage (when he launched his debut graphic novel *Username: Evie*<sup>175</sup>). As discussed previously<sup>176</sup>, this press coverage around *Username: Evie* frequently cited him in relation to his sister Zoe, as well as mentioning his young, female-dominated fanbase. Whilst I argued previously that these representations could be seen to attempt to question Joe's legitimacy, he had, up until the latter end of the quasi-mainstream

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<sup>174</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4 - [4.5: Professional Internet celebrity](#)

<sup>175</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

<sup>176</sup> See Chapter 4 - [Breaking into the mainstream: Crossovers into traditional media](#)



stage, managed to successfully avoid any scandals that may challenge his perceived authenticity.

Despite this, controversies and press critique of YouTubers are common - for example, Joe's sister Zoe was criticised for her book being ghostwritten (see Deller & Murphy, 2019), and her partner (and Joe's close friend) Alfie Deyes was slammed for creating a 'tone-deaf' video where he challenged himself to live off £1 for the day which was likened to 'poverty tourism' by *Prospect* (Crampton, 2018). Perhaps most prominently, gaming YouTuber PewDiePie has been embroiled in several scandals relating to the use of anti-semitic and racist remarks in his videos, leading to him being dropped by Disney-owned MCN<sup>177</sup> Maker Studios (Lavender & Randell, 2019). It is not clear whether Joe's avoidance of criticism is due to him being less visible and therefore attracting less press coverage, or because he has protected himself from it through the clean-cut image he has maintained throughout his career. However, towards the end of the quasi-mainstream stage, Joe's authenticity came into question for the first time following the>HelloWorld live event in October 2017. This section will discuss the>HelloWorld event, interrogating Joe's authenticity practices in response to being involved in this controversy and press criticism following the event.

Described as 'an epic four hour, immersive live show like nothing on Earth - bringing the world's biggest YouTube talent and YOU together under one roof for an unforgettable, shared experience' (HelloWorld, 2017),>HelloWorld featured Joe alongside a line-up of other popular YouTubers including his sister Zoe Sugg, Alfie Deyes, Caspar Lee, Jim Chapman, Marcus Butler, Louise Pentland, KSI and Tyler Oakley ([Image 5.20](#)). The event attracted controversy when it did not deliver what was advertised, leading to widespread criticism from both attendees and the mainstream press for being poorly organised and not living up to its promises:

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<sup>177</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)



YOUTUBE.'CON': Furious parents slam Hello World Live as rip-off after spending more than £200 just to queue for hours (Roberts, *The Sun*, 2017)

Hello World Live: organisers of YouTubers' convention apologise to disappointed fans after flood of complaints (Singh, *The Telegraph*, 2017)

With tickets to the event priced at £27.50 for a seated ticket granting entry to the live show only, £49.50 for a standard ticket for the full day and evening show (Sayce, 2017), and £99 for a VIP ticket (Singh, 2017), allowing attendees to 'be among the first people to enter HelloWorld, and be greeted by the stars of the show who will give you a guided tour of Main Street and all its secrets' (The Ticket Factory, 2017), the disappointment felt by fans left many to deem it a mere money-making exercise for the creators involved (Singh, 2017). This led to the credibility and authenticity of the YouTubers involved coming into question. This compromised the trusting bond between creator and audience that has to be carefully negotiated in commercial endeavours to ensure any ventures are a good fit with their existing brand as any breach of trust could be detrimental to their career (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Cunningham et al., 2016). As I have argued previously, Joe's brand is built upon ordinariness, authenticity and intimacy with his audience, thus it is significant to interrogate his response to this controversy, and the authenticity labour he performed to ensure this was not jeopardised.

Interestingly, Joe did not personally address the HelloWorld scandal until appearing as a guest on the True Geordie podcast in 2018 - a video podcast notorious for hosts Brian Davis and Laurence McKenna's no-holds-barred approach to interviewing guests, and who have been highly critical of and known to mock some of Joe's close YouTuber friends and family, particularly his sister



Image 5.20 - HelloWorld promotional line-up poster (Citizen Studios, 2019)

Zoe and her partner Alfie Deyes<sup>178</sup> in past episodes. In Joe's episode, titled *JOE SUGG: HELLO WORLD, GIRLS & £50 CALENDARS*<sup>179</sup>, Davis noted that his audience had been keen for them to ask Joe about HelloWorld. Earlier in the episode, Joe had noted, 'I've been media trained. Can you tell?' when asked about an upcoming project. When Davis then mentioned HelloWorld, his co-host McKenna joked, 'Here comes the media training,' implying this is a topic Joe may not talk about openly, and may have been briefed by cultural intermediaries about how best to respond to this line of inquiry. Joe's openness about being media trained functions as a performance of authenticity in itself as he shares this aspect of the more professional side of celebrity labour. This helps to strengthen his position as an 'ordinary' celebrity by revealing information that would generally not be disclosed by traditional celebrities, making it clear to viewers that while he has been media trained, his openness in admitting so and joking about it conveys a sense of being genuine. This implies to viewers that, whilst he has received professional media training, he is speaking honestly in the interview, thus strengthening his perceived authenticity.

In the episode, Davis says to Joe, 'you're the first person to even be in a position to talk about it because everyone else has bottled it, to be quite honest with you', referring to the lack of addressing HelloWorld from Joe's fellow YouTuber participants (True Geordie podcast, E82, 2018). This makes Joe appear more authentic in comparison as he is about to discuss the event on the podcast, despite the fact that he, too, has previously shied away from addressing the issues with the event. Davis asks Joe how he views the event now, looking back on it, with him responding:

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<sup>178</sup> Interestingly Alfie has also appeared as a guest on the True Geordie *podcast* in July 2017 (*ALFIE DEYES: PointlessBlogVlogs*, True Geordie, 20th July 2017), following the hosts being very critical of him and Zoe in past episodes with a whole episode dedicated to their collective dislike of him called *POINTLESSBLOG FAN CLUB* earlier that year. Alfie's appearance on the podcast was touted as an opportunity to respond to Davis' criticisms of him. It is interesting, then, that Joe elected to appear on the podcast, given the hosts' previous public critique of his closest network, however there is not space to explore this in detail here.

<sup>179</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIKpdkzjXvE>

So, the way I view it was, we had this opportunity where we could get involved in something completely different, it was not your standard queue up for ages and meet ... realistically when you've got an audience of a certain size, it's borderline impossible to meet every single person and have a ten minute chat ... because then there's a lot people that can't get your time and they miss out so it's kind of like a catch 22 kind of thing, you can't please everyone ... we had this opportunity to do something completely different. (True Geordie podcast, E82, 2018)

Here, Joe discusses the event with regards to how it was pitched to him and the other YouTubers, highlighting difficulties with the typical meet-and-greet format of YouTube fan events where there is not sufficient time for YouTubers to meet every single fan and positioning HelloWorld as offering an alternative to this format. He reflected that when they arrived at the venue, the event did not appear as it had been pitched to them. The first day of the event attracted widespread criticism online from attendees with Joe tentatively citing poor organisation of the event as the main issue and, whilst amends were made for the next day's event, the negative attention the event received from both attendees and the wider Internet population prevailed. Joe reflected on the issues and criticisms of the event, explaining:

We tried something very different, and obviously if you try something new, you're gonna have teething problems ... if it went perfectly it would be a shock ... I feel like, when I was looking back at the stuff, obviously there were things that weren't, you know, as it could be, but I feel like the second day, the team that were around it were amazing. ... the second day was actually a lot, lot better. (True Geordie podcast, E82, 2018)

Here, Joe positions the issues encountered as 'teething problems' as a result of them trying to do something new, however he does not make any claims for responsibility in the issues, nor dwells on the criticisms themselves too much.



Joe shifts the focus more towards the positive changes that were made by the team to ensure the second day was more successful, emphasising the narrative of 'teething issues' that were ironed out after learning from the first day. Despite this, Joe recognises the need to appear authentic and candid in the interview so, whilst he does ultimately put a positive spin on events, he does also cautiously admit that upon 'looking back' he recognises 'there were things that 'weren't ... as it could be', however this is a very guarded admission.

Joe further portrays this narrative of issues arising as a result of them trying something new with the event, explaining the difficulties involved in putting on YouTube fan events:

it's such a grey area with like live stuff with YouTubers because we don't sing or dance, and it's kind of like, how do you put on that perfect show? Cos at the end of the day, I feel like at the end of the day, people just want to meet you, I think, and we can do Q&As on stage, we can do silly challenges on stage and stuff but at the end of the day, they just want a selfie. (True Geordie podcast, E82, 2018)

This response feels more candid and is telling of the dilemma YouTubers and their management teams are faced with in wanting to provide opportunities for fans to meet their favourite vloggers and, of course, to capitalise upon this. Meet-and-greets are highly meaningful for fans, enabling them to authenticate their emotional connection with their object of fandom (Reijnders et al., 2014) and gain symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). YouTube fans build such intense parasocial relationships with their favourite vloggers online, resulting in an increased desire to meet them in-person (Rihl & Wegener, 2017), thus fulfilling these desires can help to maintain the strength of this creator-audience relationship. However, as Joe notes, it is hard to please everyone with a meet-and-greet event and some fans are likely to be left disappointed if they cannot meet their favourite creator which could compromise

their trusting relationship (Abidin & Ots, 2016). As such, HelloWorld's attempts to 'do something completely different' makes visible an inherent issue with YouTuber events in that creators like Joe have built their followings from sharing their personal lives online, and thus, tend not to have specific talent or performance-related skills (Turner, 2006), making it difficult to authentically translate their online popularity and brands into an offline event. In the case of HelloWorld, the widespread critique the event received put the trusting relationships between the individual creators and their audiences at risk, however, Joe's perceived authenticity does not appear to have been significantly damaged. Perhaps this is because he is just one of a collective of YouTubers, thus responsibility is placed with the group, rather than at individual level. Joe's discussion of the event on the True Geordie podcast also places blame with the event's organisers, absolving Joe of responsibility for the event's issues by presenting a narrative that the creators were let down by the production team's promises too.

### Authentic quasi-mainstream celebrity: conclusion

At the quasi-mainstream stage, tensions emerge between Joe's established ordinary self-brand, the extraordinariness of his celebrity status increasing and the commercial nature of his content creation as a career. As such, Joe navigated these tensions through authenticity labour, using these practices to protect and maintain his self-brand and the intimate, trusting relationship with his audience. Authenticity labour was also key where Joe extended his online self-brand into more traditional media formats such as books and films<sup>180</sup>. The authenticity devices identified in Joe's content as these points of growth in his career functioned as essential work in maintaining the authentic, ordinary self-brand he has established online, ensuring he did not appear to have 'sold out'. However, at this stage, Joe's authenticity was also called into question for the first time, thus, in response, Joe performed authenticity by presenting himself

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<sup>180</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

as having good intentions within this collective scandal, attempting to shift focus away from the negatives of the event and preserve his perceived authenticity.

## Negotiating the tensions between online and the offline: Authentic mainstream celebrity

As identified at the quasi-mainstream stage, authenticity labour has been particularly important throughout Joe's career in helping him navigate the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary as his status becomes further elevated. This section, then, will explore Joe's authenticity labour in relation to the mainstream stage of his career, focusing on how he maintained his perceived authenticity whilst appearing on BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*, negotiating these tensions as he enters the world of mainstream celebrity culture.

### 'I can't even dance': Authenticity labour on *Strictly*

Key to the mainstream media stage of Joe's career was his development into a mainstream media celebrity through his appearance on *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2018; thus authenticity labour was vital in negotiating the tensions between his online platforms and following, and his new-found mainstream media career. As such, it was important for Joe to maintain his relationship with his online audience alongside his ventures into the mainstream, ensuring they did not feel left behind and deem him to have 'sold out'. This began when Joe announced in a YouTube video to his followers that he would be taking part in *Strictly*<sup>181</sup> and an Instagram post ([Image 5.21](#)). His *Strictly* announcement content conveyed a sense of caution and fear to viewers, with the caption of his Instagram post stating, 'So uhh yeah... this is happening' (@joe\_sugg, 14th August 2018), in reference to the official *Strictly* celebrity reveal video clip posted. This sense of fear was further conveyed in his video announcement where he tells viewers:

Back at the start of the year I got approached and asked if I wanted to be on the show and I'm not gonna lie, I walked in to sort of be like, I mean in

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<sup>181</sup> *I'm Going On Strictly Come Dancing*, ThatcherJoe, 14th August 2018



my mind I can't ever imagine myself doing something like this, I'd be way too scared. I'd be terrified and I can't even dance, I can't dance, I've never danced sober in my life, and I was terrified so I was gonna go in and ... politely decline because I can't dance, I'm terrified and like big crowds, live, anything that's live and dancing and I left the meeting thinking I might actually do it. (*I'm Going On Strictly Come Dancing*, ThatcherJoe, 14th August 2018)



Image 5.21 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 14th August 2018

His candour around being terrified by the opportunity to such an extent that he was going to turn it down conveys the ordinariness that is such a key part of his established online brand, whilst also reflecting a very human response to being pushed outside of his comfort zone that many of his viewers will likely relate to. This disclosure of his fears creates a sense of intimacy, helping to strengthen the parasocial relationship with his audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Thus, despite the extraordinariness of the opportunity, Joe is able to situate this announcement in his ordinary self-branding, performing authenticity

to his viewers while managing their expectations for how he may perform on the show - something he continued throughout the series:

So the paso<sup>182</sup> requires a lot of strength and as you can see... [flexes bicep] I've got a long way to go.

Rehearsals went ok. I've just got to go out there ... and pretend that I'm not an awkward 27-year-old from the West Country.

(*Strictly Come Dancing*, S17E13, 3rd November 2018)

Here, Joe uses his self-deprecating sense of humour to make fun of his lack of physical strength and ordinariness, performing authenticity to the *Strictly* audience.

In the announcement video, Joe draws upon his existing family-centred branding by stating the significance of *Strictly* for his grandparents:

... this is huge for my grandparents, I think. My grandparents both love the show and, although they know what I do on YouTube and stuff, I think it'd be great for them to see me on a platform that they're more familiar with and a TV show that they're very familiar with and a TV show that they're very familiar with. (*I'm Going On Strictly Come Dancing*, ThatcherJoe, 14th August 2018)

This is further built upon on Joe's YouTube channel where he later uploaded a video showing his grandparents' reaction to finding out he is going to be on *Strictly* (*GRANDPARENTS' REACTION TO ME ON STRICTLY*, ThatcherJoe, 9th Sept 2018). Here, Joe gives viewers access to a highly intimate interaction

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<sup>182</sup> Paso doble - a strong, dramatic style of dance based around bullfighting (*Strictly Come Dancing*, 2008)

between him and his grandparents, providing heartwarming and entertaining content for his viewers, whilst creating a sense of closeness and increased familiarity with him through perceived access to his relationships (Marwick, 2013). This also helps to authenticate his humble reasoning for appearing on the show, reducing potential claims of him 'selling out'. Joe's family values have been a consistent part of his online self-branding throughout his career trajectory<sup>183</sup>; thus these accounts in his pre-*Strictly* online content situate this as an important part of his identity ready to be drawn upon on the show<sup>184</sup>.

A further central factor in Joe maintaining his perceived authenticity whilst appearing on *Strictly* was negotiating his online content alongside the show. The nature of *Strictly* as a skills-based reality format means it requires a lot of time investment from contestants who rehearse for long hours in order to learn a new dance routine each week and, as such, balancing online content creation alongside this presented a challenge to Joe. During the TV series, which was broadcast between 29th August-15th December 2018, Joe posted 5 YouTube videos on ThatcherJoe, 24 videos on ThatcherJoeVlogs and 5 videos on ThatcherJoeGames. He also posted regularly on Instagram throughout the series, sharing official *Strictly* video clips and stills from his performances, as well as behind-the-scenes selfies, with his captions continually thanking his followers for their support whilst cross-promoting the series. In a post-*Strictly* 'life update' video uploaded to ThatcherJoe after a hiatus between December 2018 and February 2019, Joe thanked viewers for their patience whilst he was on the show:

The fact that you've been so patient and understanding about how difficult it's been for me to be on that show but also try and get content out, to try and make vlogs. Admittedly didn't do a great job on this channel

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<sup>183</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4 - [Relative values and 'lad culture lite': Relationships as self-branding](#)

<sup>184</sup> Discussed in detail in Chapter 4 - ["From ThatcherJoe to Strictly superstar": Branding for television](#)

[ThatcherJoe] but on my other channel ThatcherJoeVlogs I still managed to grind out a video at least once a week, I think, whilst we were doing the show. (*Life Update*, ThatcherJoe, 17th February 2019)

This suggests Joe felt pressure to maintain his online content alongside the programme and perhaps was not able to produce as many videos he would have liked. This acknowledgement could also suggest he is keen to reassure viewers that he has not forgotten where his fame originated from and his loyal online following. Despite his other channels not being maintained to the same level as ThatcherJoeVlogs whilst he was on *Strictly*, the strong parasocial relationships viewers form with YouTubers from regular consumption of their content leads audiences to become highly invested in vloggers' lives (Rihl & Wegener, 2017). This level of investment in the YouTuber suggests that regular viewers of Joe's content are likely to follow him across more than one of his YouTube channels, as well as on other social media platforms. Therefore, only less engaged, casual viewers are likely to have been left behind by the reduction of content on ThatcherJoe and ThatcherJoeGames.

Analysis of the videos Joe uploaded to YouTube whilst appearing on *Strictly* revealed a recurrent theme of videos centred around behind-the-scenes footage, commentary and reflections on the series as it progressed. On his ThatcherJoeVlogs channel, Joe shared regular behind-the-scenes vlogs, sharing footage from rehearsals including sneak peeks of him learning the dances, as well as him and dance partner Dianne messing around and pranking one another, merging together the fun, prankster branding that is central to his online identity with his mainstream media branding as a contestant on *Strictly*. This also suggests to viewers that they are being given unmediated access to the backstage, where actors' behaviours and presentations of self are perceived to be 'authentic'; in contrast to appearing on a mainstream TV programme, where actors are in front stage mode in the presence of both a live studio and at-home TV audience and are therefore performing themselves to give a desired

impression (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Goffman, 1956). This is of increased significance on *Strictly* where contestants need to attract audience support and gain votes to remain in the competition. This perception of authentic insight into this mainstream media experience is particularly important for Joe's online audience with whom he has formed a longstanding parasocial relationship, built on him sharing aspects of his personal life and appearing authentic in his interactions with viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Rihl & Wegener, 2017). As such, maintaining this perceived level of access and intimacy through sharing backstage content and documenting his experiences on the show online is key to ensuring viewers are supportive of this endeavour and do not deem him to have 'sold out' by neglecting his online community whilst on the show. Additionally, offering his viewers exclusive access to behind-the-scenes of his *Strictly* experience through these vlogs rewards his fans for their support and engagement with his YouTube content by enabling them to gain an increased sense of cultural and symbolic fan capital over those who have just watched him on *Strictly* (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). These behind-the-scenes videos incentivise *Strictly* viewers to watch Joe's YouTube content, thus functioning as cross-promotional devices for his channels and offering potential for conversion of some TV viewers to members of Joe's online audience.

The intimacy of Joe sharing these interactions between him and his dance partner, coupled with the breakup of Dianne's previous relationship in the early stages of the series, led to speculation around romantic involvement between the pair. Whilst Joe and Dianne denied rumours of romance between them throughout the series, press coverage continued to report on their relationship, gathering paparazzi shots of them that furthered this narrative. The day after the series ended, Joe confirmed their romantic involvement to his audience. This could have resulted in Joe's authenticity being challenged by his online audience who may have felt excluded from this aspect of his life, compared to the perceived closeness and intimacy of their relationship with him (Marwick, 2013,

2015). Despite this, since announcing their relationship, Joe has regularly featured Dianne in his content<sup>185</sup>, providing his followers the perception of access to their relationship, thus helping to maintain this closeness with his audience and thus his perceived authenticity<sup>186</sup>.

In addition to the behind-the-scenes vlogs, Joe started a weekly *REACTING TO* series on ThatcherJoeVlogs in which Joe and Dianne sit down in front of the camera (usually in Joe's home) and watch back footage from rehearsals and their performance on the show. This is particularly interesting because, as well as providing further behind-the-scenes content and perceived access to Joe and Dianne's backstage, authentic selves, the format combines an archetypal YouTube video format with the mainstream media world of *Strictly Come Dancing*. Reaction videos are highly popular on YouTube, as evidenced by the hugely successful REACT channel which has amassed over 12.7 million subscribers and more than 4.2 billion views<sup>187</sup> since its launch in July 2014<sup>188</sup>. Joe and Dianne's reaction videos involved them responding to footage from their rehearsals and performance of their dance from the live show. This merging of Joe's two worlds - YouTube and *Strictly* - is particularly interesting in terms of how Joe negotiated creating content whilst on the show because he is taking the unfamiliar world of dancing and mainstream TV and presenting this back to his online audience in a format that is familiar and recognisable to them. This works to reassure his audience that he has not forgotten his YouTube roots and that they are very much on this journey with him, thus ensuring his intimate relationship with them is maintained through this perceived closeness (Marwick, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011).

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<sup>185</sup> See Chapter 6 - '[Joanne](#)'

<sup>186</sup> See Dare-Edwards (2014) and McAlister (2019) for further reading on celebrity relationships and rumour.

<sup>187</sup> Figures correct as of 21/7/2020.

<sup>188</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#) for definition of reaction videos

## *Waitress*: Authenticity labour and post-*Strictly* performance work

As discussed in the [previous chapter](#), Joe continued to develop his self-brand towards mainstream media and performance-related work following his appearance on *Strictly*<sup>189</sup>. As such, he performed authenticity labour in response to these new ventures away from YouTube and the Internet to ensure his perceived genuineness and intimate relationship with his online following was not jeopardised. This section will explore Joe's authenticity practices in relation to starring in *Waitress: The Musical* between September - December 2019.

Joe announced to his followers he would be starring in *Waitress* by uploading a video to his YouTube channel documententing his experience auditioning for the show<sup>190</sup>. In the video, Joe gives his viewers access to his intimate fears as he expresses his nerves and anxieties ahead of the audition, telling his audience, 'this whole vlog is about trying not to cripple under the pressure and just giving it everything' (*I Auditioned for a West End Musical*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 20th August 2019). In the vlog, Joe also shared his reaction to getting the role:

I was shocked, I was really shocked. I was obviously pleasantly shocked, I just thought it was a surreal moment, a real surreal moment. ... I really know and appreciate how lucky I am to be in a position like this where, you know, I can even audition for things like this, let alone, you know, get them. Feeling a lot of emotions. (*I Auditioned for a West End Musical*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 20th August 2019)

This sentiment was echoed in his Instagram announcement post where he told his followers he was 'excited to perform for you all' and thanked them for their support, noting, 'It means the world and I appreciate every single one of ya' ([Image 5.22](#)). Sharing these intimate reflections helps strengthen parasocial relationships with his audience, positioning Joe as a familiar friend through

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<sup>189</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

<sup>190</sup> *I Auditioned for a West End Musical*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 20th August 2019



fostering a sense of closeness and allowing them to feel like they are part of this new experience, despite it being a shift away from his online content creation roots (Rihl & Wegener, 2017). This reflects earlier authenticity labour practices identified particularly at the quasi-mainstream stage of his career where expressions of gratitude positioned his audience as responsible for affording him opportunities through their support. As noted previously<sup>191</sup>, this reflects an interesting characteristic of Internet fame in that audiences are given increased power to create stars through their attention and support (Gamson, 2011); however, here we see his online audience's power extend to offline opportunities too. This careful negotiation of his online following alongside *Waitress* continued whilst he was starring in the show with Joe uploading videos to YouTube by sharing behind-the-scenes vlogs of him with other cast members messing around backstage and pranking each other. Here, Joe draws upon aspects of his existing comic, prankster self-brand, integrating this aspect of his online persona into both the offline world and vlogs documenting his experiences; thus further reassuring his audience that he has not changed or 'sold out' as he ventures into this new world of performance.

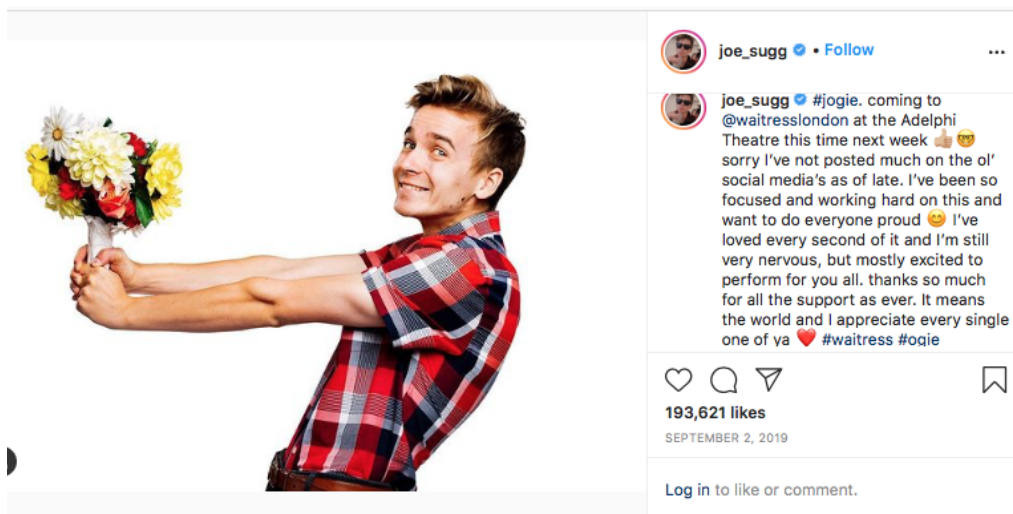


Image 5.22 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 2nd September 2019

<sup>191</sup> See '[Thank you, you're making all my dreams come true': Performances of gratitude](#)

## Authentic mainstream celebrity: conclusion

At the mainstream celebrity stage, Joe performed authenticity labour to navigate the tensions between his new-found mainstream media and performance work and maintain the intimate relationship with his online audience. This enabled him to successfully navigate the tensions between online and offline media, expressing gratitude for his online audience's support and therefore ensuring they did not feel left behind as he pursued offline media work. Whilst engaging in mainstream media and performance work, Joe also took his online viewers along with him on his journey to mainstream and performance work by documenting his experiences in his YouTube and Instagram content. This helped convey a sense of authentic, backstage access to these experiences (Goffman, 1956), thus helping maintain the perceived access and intimacy of his relationship with viewers (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Rihl & Wegener, 2017).

## Authenticity labour: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted how authenticity has been vital throughout Joe's career trajectory. At the ordinary stage, authenticity labour was utilised to help strengthen and authenticate Joe's ordinary self-branding by positioning himself as unexceptional and as an amateur, making him appear more relatable to audiences. This level of relatability aids the development of parasocial relationships through perceived similarity between the audience and Joe (Rihl & Wegener, 2017), making him appear hierarchically equal to them as a result. As Joe's career progressed to the microcelebrity and Internet celebrity stages, his authenticity labour was performed in response to his shift in status as his online prominence increased. Thus, he needed to negotiate the tensions between the contradictory aspects of his life - his ordinary lived experiences day-to-day, and the extraordinary opportunities he was afforded as a result of his Internet fame. As such, Joe's authenticity labour was important here to ensure his ordinary self-brand did not appear disingenuous as his life began to change and signifiers

of this became more visible in his content. In particular, Joe continually expressed gratitude for the support of his audience and positioned any extensions of his online brand into mainstream media avenues as authentic through reflecting on their significance to him.

At the quasi-mainstream stage of Joe's career trajectory, authenticity labour was important as Joe continued to further develop his brand offline and into traditional media. Any commodification of an influencer's brand or commercial partnership has the potential to breach the trusting relationship they have built with their audience if it is a poor fit with their existing brand or values, or is deemed disingenuous or money-grabbing (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Cunningham et al., 2016). As such, authenticity labour played a vital role in ensuring the success of Joe's commercial ventures at this stage. However, in the case of HelloWorld, they did not get it right, thus authenticity labour was performed to minimise the damage to Joe's relationship with his audience and his reputation, as well as regaining his followers' trust from this collective controversy.

Finally, as Joe reached the mainstream stage of his career, it was important for him to maintain his relationship with his online audience whilst participating in mainstream media work, therefore negotiating the tensions between online and offline was key to minimise claims of him 'selling out'. To do this, Joe successfully merged the worlds of online and offline, mainstream and Internet, bringing YouTube and *Strictly* together by sharing behind-the-scenes exclusive footage and creating reaction videos with his dance partner Dianne. Thus, Joe performed authenticity labour by presenting content relating to *Strictly* back to his online audience in a format that is authentic to both Joe and YouTube as a platform, therefore reassuring his audience he has not 'sold out' or left them behind for the bright lights of mainstream media stardom.

It is clear that authenticity has not only been a key part of Joe's self-branding throughout his career trajectory, but it has also played a vital role in his brand

development into commercial and mainstream media ventures where he has been able to successfully merge this commodification of his brand with authenticity and intimacy - something which Marwick (2015) defines as a key microcelebrity practice, but which I argue here in the case of Joe is vital for all stages of an Internet and mainstream media celebrity's career to ensure longevity and stability in their brand and entrepreneurial endeavours. Also key to the success of Joe's career has been the perceived authentic, intimate connection he has built with his audience, carefully navigating any tensions between his online following and any offline extensions of his brand to ensure this relationship is maintained, even as he gradually transitions his brand more towards traditional media and performance work. As Banet-Weiser (2012) posits as the key to building a successful self-brand, Joe has arguably been able to strike the perfect balance between not only branding himself as authentic, but appearing to *be* authentic too and I consider this to be a central part to his appeal. Joe's ability to successfully maintain this perceived authenticity despite becoming a mainstream media celebrity is perhaps why he has been able to become arguably the most successful Internet celebrity to break into the mainstream. However, I consider this combination of the intimate access to his personal life from being an online content creator, coupled with the fascination audiences have with the workings of traditional media and the star system to offer Joe a very unique selling point.

The close relationships he has fostered with his audience over the course of his career trajectory means that for them, watching his videos as he progresses into mainstream fame offers almost a sense that they are watching a friend's authentic experiences with the celebrification process. Yet for mainstream audiences, Joe still appears very ordinary, despite signifiers of his online prominence, thus he offers a similar appeal to reality television participants who present the narrative of normal people sharing their ordinariness on-screen and becoming celebrities as a result (Gamson, 2011). Thus Joe is able to successfully straddle both the online and offline worlds, maintaining the intimate

relationship with his online audience through sharing his authentic experiences and aspects of his personal life as he enters mainstream fame. This ensures they feel they are a part of his journey as his career progresses, whilst simultaneously appealing to mainstream audiences through his perceived ordinariness and authenticity on-screen.

# Chapter 6: Parasociality, cross-promotion and capital sharing: Networked relationships

## Introduction

Key to Joe's success and indeed that of many of the world's most popular YouTubers is the ability to network with other creators. The old adage, 'it's not what you know, it's who you know' can certainly be considered to have a degree of truth on YouTube and social media where forming strong networks with other creators and members of the industry can really help to kickstart your career, boost your online following and promote your content to a wider audience. YouTube is a space for community (Burgess & Green, 2009b; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009), however as a platform, it does not particularly invite the building of communities. This limitation of the platform does not stop users participating and engaging in co-creation and social interaction on the platform (Burgess & Green, 2009b). Central to the notion of networked relationships is collaboration, particularly through producing YouTube videos with other creators - a genre of video commonly referred to on the platform as collaborations or 'collabs', colloquially<sup>192</sup>. These often take the form of a game, challenge or tag<sup>193</sup> and usually involve a mutual exchange of labour, creating a video for each collaborator's YouTube channel to be uploaded to the platform at an agreed-upon date and time. Collaborations have formed a key part of Joe's content throughout his YouTube career with 44.9% of his total videos on ThatcherJoe falling into this category. Joe uploaded the highest quantity of collaboration videos on ThatcherJoe between the years of 2014-2017 ([Figure 6.1](#)), however collaboration videos made up the highest proportion of total videos on this channel between 2016-2018<sup>194</sup>. Collaborations are a popular format with Joe's audience too with

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<sup>192</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#) for more detailed definition

<sup>193</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#) for definition

<sup>194</sup> This does not include collaborative videos uploaded onto other YouTubers channels, however the process usually involves a like-for-like exchange of labour with each creator uploading a video. Whilst other creators' videos are outside of the scope of this research data collection, we can use this understanding of reciprocal labour exchange to reasonably estimate that for every

videos in this category making up 52% of his top 100 most viewed videos on ThatcherJoe.

#### ThatcherJoe video categories

Category frequency by year

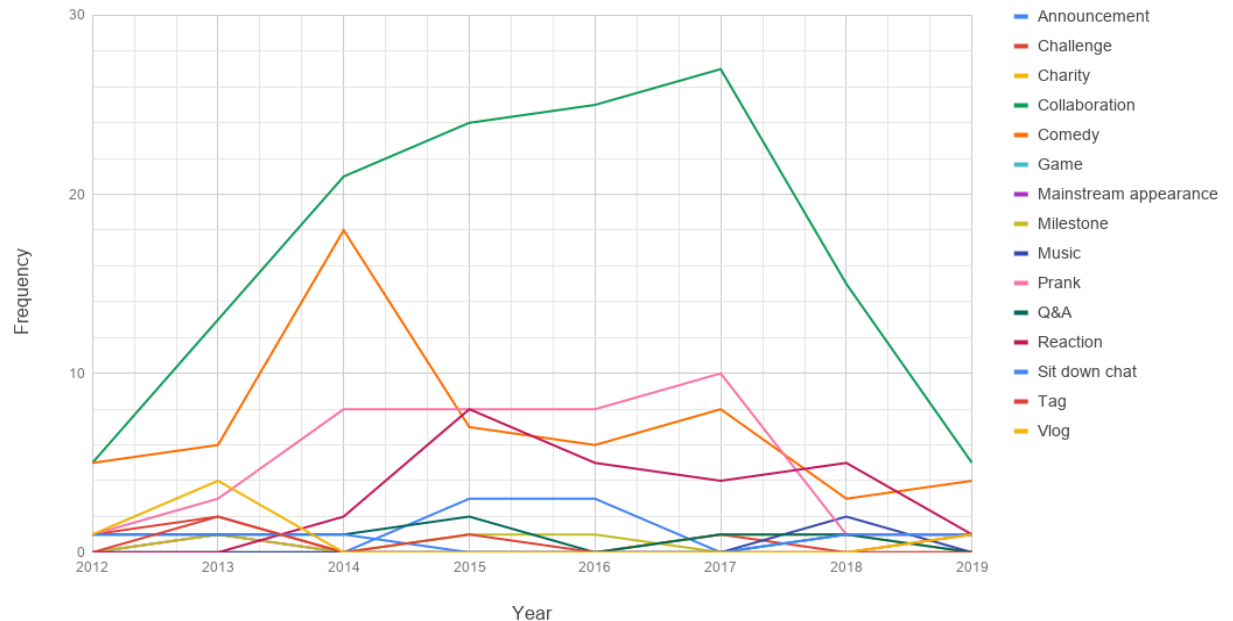


Figure 6.1 - Graph showing the frequency of ThatcherJoe video categories by year<sup>195</sup>

The power and importance of collaborations is even recognised by YouTube who have dedicated a whole lesson to it, available to users through their creator academy, where they posit collaborations as ‘a powerful way to reach new viewers’ (YouTube Creator Academy, 2015). Similarly, Joe’s sister Zoe cites the importance of collaborations for aspiring YouTubers, telling *Glamour* magazine, ‘Collaboration is key - speaking with other bloggers and finding the people you can grow with’ (Sugg in Potter, 2018: 138). This importance is placed on collaborations by vlogging industry stakeholders because they allow for a transactional exchange of attention between each party’s existing audience, as well as the chance for collaborators to combine their audience communities

collaborative video made for one of Joe’s channels, there is likely a further video from the same collaboration between creators on another YouTuber’s channel.

<sup>195</sup> See ThatcherJoe video category frequency sheet in Appendix 3 - [YouTube data](#)



(Cunningham et al., 2016). This makes collaborations particularly beneficial for creators in terms of growing their audience (Bishop, 2018), particularly when combined with ‘a smart cross-promotion strategy’ (YouTube Creator Academy, 2015) - something YouTube offers guidance on, giving the following tips to users looking to maximise the success of their collaborations:

- Upload two different videos to both collaborators’ channels ...
- Use cards and description links to provide viewers a way to navigate from one channel to the next.
- Use a verbal call-to-action that directs to the other channel like “go check out our other video on X channel by clicking the link below” to guide viewers across channels.
- Include collaborator’s channel info in your video’s title and description to help increase discovery when viewers search to find your collab.

(YouTube Creator Academy, 2015)

This notion of using collaboration and cross-promotion as a tool to widen one’s reach and to share and expand audience communities is central to the development of Joe’s career across the five stages of his career trajectory. This chapter will explore how networked relationships have been key to Joe’s brand development and ability to forge a successful career from creating content online. In particular, the chapter will focus on some of the key relationships that have shaped his trajectory from ordinary boy to mainstream media star: his relationship with sister Zoe; the Brit Crew - a network of British YouTubers who became prominent online around 2013; his friendship with YouTuber and ex-flatmate Caspar Lee and their extended friendship group of boys living in London; and lastly, his romantic relationship with former *Strictly* dance partner and girlfriend Dianne Buswell.

## Sugg Siblings

The first networked relationship that is key to Joe's career development is his online relationship with his sister Zoe Sugg, also known online as Zoella, who had already attained a level of online success prior to Joe uploading his first YouTube video to ThatcherJoe in August 2012. Sibling content creator relationships are common and many have followed a similar trajectory to Zoe and Joe whereby one sibling grows an online following and another then launches their own online profile off the back of this - for example, Zoe's partner Alfie Deyes established a substantial online following from initially launching his YouTube channel PointlessBlog<sup>196</sup> in 2010, reaching 4 million subscribers on this channel, and accruing over 2 million subscribers on his vlog channel PointlessBlogVlogs<sup>197</sup> by 2015. In August 2015, Alfie's sister Poppy (who had appeared regularly in both Alfie and Zoe's online content and had already begun accruing followers on her Instagram account @poppydeyes) launched a blog<sup>198</sup> and within a year, had quickly reached 1 million followers on Instagram and was able to pursue content creation as a full-time career. Other notable YouTuber sibling relationships include the Paul brothers (Logan and Jake<sup>199</sup>) who have achieved prominence and notoriety for their online content, initially on Vine then on YouTube with older brother Logan initially building an online following before his brother Jake followed suit; twins Lucy and Lydia Connell<sup>200</sup>; and former pop star Tom Fletcher<sup>201</sup> and his sister Carrie Hope Fletcher<sup>202</sup>.

This section will discuss the networked relationship between Joe and Zoe which was particularly important to Joe's development at the ordinary stage of his

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<sup>196</sup> Re-named to Alfie Deyes in February 2019 as part of a wider rebrand of his online usernames to his name, instead of his previous PointlessBlog moniker.

<sup>197</sup> Also renamed in February 2019 to Alfie Deyes Vlogs.

<sup>198</sup> <http://www.poppydeyes.com>

<sup>199</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/LoganPaulVlogs> and <https://www.youtube.com/user/JakePaulProductions> respectively on YouTube

<sup>200</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/LucyAndLydia>

<sup>201</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/tommcflytwitter>

<sup>202</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/carrie/videos>

career trajectory, although it continued to be prevalent after this stage too as they established a fun, supportive sibling brand online through creating collaborative content, and later, commodifying this brand through the production of a joint merchandise range.

### ‘Joe needs his own YouTube channel!’: Building an initial audience online

As noted above, Joe’s relationship with his sister Zoe was foundational to the launch of his own online career at the initial, ordinary stage of his career trajectory, helping to give him a head start in the world of YouTube when he decided to upload his first video to the platform in August 2012. As highlighted in [Chapter 1](#), Zoe had been sharing content online for over two and a half years by the time Joe posted his first YouTube video. As a result, she had an already-established audience and had accrued a substantial following online through her blog and YouTube channel. She had been writing her blog, called Zoella ([schooe.blogspot.com](http://schooe.blogspot.com)<sup>203</sup>), since December 2009 for which she was awarded Best Established Beauty Blog at the *Cosmopolitan* Blog Awards in November 2011. In December 2009, Zoe uploaded her first video to YouTube to her channel Zoella280390 (since renamed Zoella), gaining 160,000 subscribers by July 2012.

Prior to Joe launching his own YouTube channel, he appeared in six videos on his sister’s channel - three more casual appearances in vlogs<sup>204</sup>, and three appearances in sit-down style videos in the form of tags and challenges<sup>205</sup>. Joe’s initial appearance on Zoe’s YouTube channel in *The Sibling Tag* (Zoella, 26th June 2011) video was well-received by her audience, as evidenced by the

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<sup>203</sup> No longer available online at this address, however her old blog posts can still be found online at <http://archive.zoella.co.uk>

<sup>204</sup> *Vlog: Joe & Alpacas* (Zoella, 1st August 2011); *VLOG: Weekend of Funzies* (Zoella, 25th July 2012); *Video Fail : “Holidays” with Joe* (Zoella, 28th July 2012)

<sup>205</sup> *The Sibling Tag* (Zoella, 26th June 2011); *Christmas Tag* (Zoella, 17th December 2011); *My Brother Does My Make-up* (Zoella, 8th February 2012). See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#) for definition of tags and challenges.

description box for her next video that featured Joe where she says: 'I did this video with my brother since you all took a shine to him in my Sibling Tag and requested more videos and appearances from him' (*Vlog: Joe & Alpacas*, Zoella, 1st August 2011). Joe's appearances in Zoe's content, both in the more formal setting of sit-down tag and challenge videos and in the informal setting of vlogs, offer viewers opportunities for repeated parasocial interactions with Joe, enabling them to begin feeling a sense of familiarity towards him as a result (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rihl & Wegener, 2017). Tag and challenge videos are light-hearted, fun formats, enabling viewers to not only be introduced to Joe in Zoe's content, but to also see some of his natural wit shine through in his interactions with his sister in these fun videos. On the other hand, Joe appearing in Zoe's vlogs offers a sense of backstage access to their relationship, letting viewers in on the intimacy of their sibling interactions and offering a sense that they are being given exclusive access to Zoe's private life and family relationships (Abidin, 2015), thus enabling them to feel closer to her.

Through these appearances in Zoe's videos, her viewers were able to have parasocial interactions with Joe (Horton & Wohl, 1956), laying the foundations for a parasocial relationship to be formed when he started his own channel and these interactions become more regular - a factor that is key for the development of parasocial interactions into a parasocial relationship (Giles, 2010). This was further encouraged by Zoe promoting Joe's Twitter profile and, later, YouTube channel in the description boxes of videos he featured in:

Joe's Twitter: @Joe\_Sugg (Go follow him if you like) (*The Sibling Tag*, Zoella, 26th June 2011)

Where to find Joe: YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/ThatcherJoe>  
Twitter: @Joe\_Sugg (*My Brother Does My Make-up*, Zoella, 8th February 2012)

Promoting other creators' YouTube channels and social media accounts is a key feature of collaborative content on YouTube as it functions as a form of cross-promotion to help viewers find the other person's accounts (YouTube Creator Academy, 2015), and encourages the combining of audience communities (Cunningham et al., 2016). However, Joe did not yet have his own audience community to reciprocally share, thus this functions more to cross-promote Joe's social media accounts and YouTube channel (although at this stage his channel did not have any content); giving Zoe's viewers an opportunity to increase their familiarity with Joe through further parasocial interactions outside of her videos. Of course, this is not to say that Joe appearing in Zoe's videos was intended towards the aim of creating parasociality, nor a concerted attempt to build him an existing audience for launching his own channel.

It is worth noting that whilst Zoe had accrued a significant online following at this stage, people were not yet able to make a living through YouTube and social media content creation, with Zoe telling *Cosmopolitan* that '[i]t was only three years into YouTube [that I started making money] and then it was only \$60 [around £45] every now and then' (Sugg in Lumsden, 2016: 39). She further admitted that it was only when she hit 1 million subscribers in April 2013 that she thought YouTube could be a career (Lumsden, 2016). This suggests that Joe appearing in Zoe's videos was not necessarily a contrived attempt for him to build his own following from his sister's audience in order to launch an online career of his own. However, the positive reception Joe received from Zoe's audience from these appearances was undoubtedly a key motivation in Joe deciding to create his own YouTube channel, as he recalls in his *My YouTube Story* video:

One of the main comments that kept cropping up was, "Please get your brother to make his own YouTube channel," so then I starred in a video called *My Brother Does My Makeup Tag* which also went down a storm.

Once again most of the comments were like, “Joe needs his own YouTube channel! La la la la la,” and I thought, you know what, I am really tempted to give this a go. (11th August 2013, ThatcherJoe)

Here, it is clear that a level of parasociality had already been established towards Joe from Zoe’s viewers who felt familiarity towards him and wanted to develop these into more regular interactions, perhaps with the aim of forming a more intimate parasocial relationship over time (Giles, 2010). The positive reception from his appearances in Zoe’s videos, coupled with the repeated requests to start his own channel conveys the power of networking in giving him an initial audience before he even had a YouTube channel of his own. The power of the cross-promotion and foundations of parasocial relationships Joe received as a result of appearing in his sister’s videos helped to give him a head start on YouTube, providing an existing audience for his content and helping him to quickly build a following on the platform, hitting 1 million subscribers on his channel ThatcherJoe within 10 months of uploading his first video<sup>206</sup>.

## Makeovers, tags, pranks and support: Building an online sibling brand

Key to the powerful networked relationship between Joe and his sister Zoe is their strong sibling brand, which they established through frequently collaborating on YouTube videos and appearing in each other’s content throughout Joe’s online career trajectory. Videos such as *Zoella Helps Me Get Ready For A Date!* (ThatcherJoe, 15th September 2013), *THE GRINCH MAKEOVER WITH ZOELLA* (ThatcherJoe, 22nd December 2013) and *PRANK CALLS WITH MY SISTER* (ThatcherJoe, 5th April 2015) help to situate their sibling relationship as fun, whilst cross-promoting each other’s YouTube channels. This encourages the sharing of audience demographics (Cunningham et al., 2016), although it is quite likely that they will already have a high proportion of shared audiences due to them making regular appearances in each other’s content. These sibling

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<sup>206</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg’s career timeline](#)

collaborations have been consistently popular with both Joe and Zoe's audiences with 5 of the top 10 most popular videos on ThatcherJoe featuring Zoe, and 3 of the top 10 on ThatcherJoeVlogs. Likewise, on Zoe's channel, 3 of the top 10 videos on Zoella feature Joe<sup>207</sup>. This suggests their joint brand is enjoyed by their audiences who are able to observe these light-hearted, entertaining interactions between siblings - perhaps something they may be able to relate to from their own family relationships, which could help strengthen the parasocial relationships formed through shared experiences and characteristics (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011; Rihl & Wegener, 2017). The normality of sharing these sibling and wider family interactions helps strengthen Joe's ordinary self-branding, whilst offering the perception that audiences are being given exclusive access to their sibling relationship and candid interactions (Marwick & boyd, 2011); thus increasing the perceived intimacy of the parasocial relationship (Abidin, 2015).

There is also a level of intimacy in not only sharing this close relationship between siblings with their audience, but also in giving viewers access to the highly private space of their family home (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). This provides opportunities for parasocial interaction with other members of their family who also appear in their content. For example, Joe has made videos with both his father and grandfather such as:

*WHO'S THE FAVOURITE CHILD?* (ThatcherJoe, 15th March 2015)

*I GOT MY GRANDAD A FERRARI* (ThatcherJoe, 21st August 2017)

*HAPPY BIRTHDAY GRANDAD!* (ThatcherJoeVlogs, 25th May 2018)

These videos give viewers access not only to Joe's family relationships, but often take viewers into his relatives' homes, allowing them to share intimate moments. For example, in Joe's video *HAPPY BIRTHDAY GRANDAD!* (ThatcherJoeVlogs,

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<sup>207</sup> Correct as of 20th August 2020.

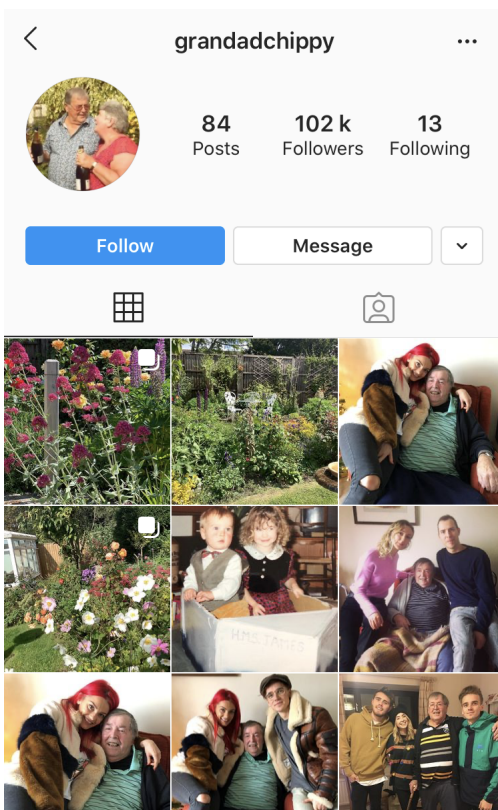
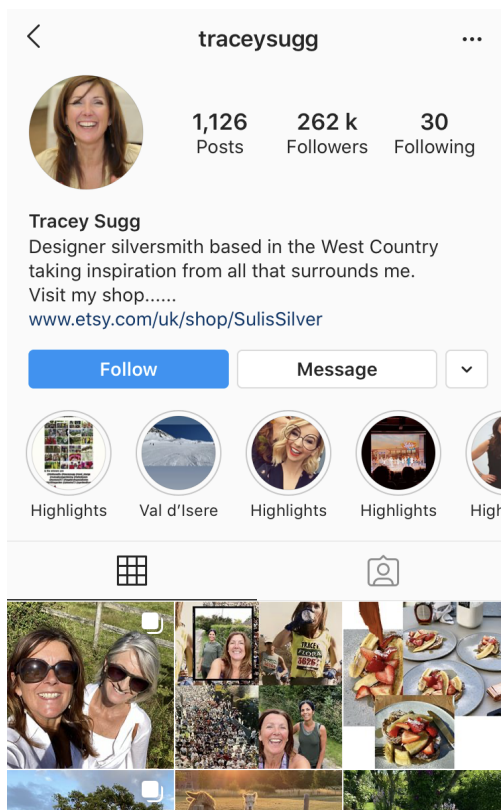


4th December 2017) he takes viewers to his mother's home where their family are celebrating his grandfather's 80th birthday. In the vlog, Joe shares old photographs of his grandfather that have been put up in a display for the occasion, as well as showing highly intimate moments such as Joe's mother, Tracey, reading his grandfather's birthday cards from friends and family to him. Here, viewers are given exclusive access to an otherwise highly private family celebration, enabling them to feel closer to Joe and Zoe (Abidin, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2011), and almost as if they are a part of the Sugg family too.

This notion of audiences being given access to Joe and Zoe's wider family is further strengthened through their family members creating their own public social media profiles which offer Joe and Zoe's fans opportunities for further parasocial interactions with them online, as well as functioning as extensions of the Suggs' sibling brand. For example, Joe and Zoe's father Graham Sugg has public profiles on both Instagram and Twitter ([Images 6.1 - 6.2](#)) with the handle @daddysugg where he has accrued over 48,000 and 154,000 followers respectively. Similarly, their mother Tracey Sugg and maternal grandfather both have public Instagram profiles where they, too, have amassed significant followings with their mother (@traceysugg, [Image 6.3](#)) having over 262,000 followers, and their grandad (@grandadchippy, [Image 6.4](#)) reaching more than 102,000 followers<sup>208</sup>. Here, their relatives experience a level of ascribed celebrity status (Rojek, 2001), although they should not be considered microcelebrities as they do not appear to consciously arrange themselves online towards the intention of gaining followers (Marwick, 2013, 2015), nor do they follow many other accounts. They do not post with much regularity and tend to favour sharing seemingly random images from their day-to-day lives and occasional family pictures with Joe, Zoe and other family members. Thus, their content does not tend to reveal much about their personal lives or offer the same level of intimacy as Joe and Zoe's accounts. As such, their relatives' online profiles can be considered to have gained traction more as a result of their association with Joe

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<sup>208</sup> Figures correct as of 23rd August 2020



Images 6.1 - 6.4 (L-R) - Screenshots from @daddysugg on Instagram and Twitter, and @traceysugg and @grandadchippy on Instagram

and Zoe than as a result of sharing particularly compelling or highly personal content online. For fans, the opportunity to increase their familiarity with their object of fandom's close network could be seen as a chance to increase their social and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997), and symbolic capital amongst the fan community when this is recognised and acknowledged by others (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Joe and Zoe both utilise their online prominence to support each other's endeavours and successes publicly. For example, when Zoe was nominated for a Radio 1 Teen Award in 2013, Joe shared a post on Instagram asking his followers to vote for her, offering 'Sugg hugs for everyone that does vote for zoella!' ([Image 6.5](#)). Then, when she won the award he posted a picture of her accepting the award on-stage, captioned 'I'm one proud brother right now! What a day for the Sugg family and the YouTube community in general!' ([Image 6.6](#)). In both posts, Joe highlights their sibling relationship, referring to her as 'my sister' and situating himself as a 'proud brother' in relation to her; therefore helping to strengthen their online networked relationship by reminding followers they are siblings. Joe draws upon the close sibling brand they had already established online, even at this early stage of Joe's online career trajectory, to urge his followers to vote for Zoe, whilst cross-promoting Zoe's Instagram account through directly tagging her handle in the caption. Following this, Joe's post when Zoe won the award helps to further strengthen the audience's perception of their sibling brand by showing his support, love and pride for his sister.



Image 6.5 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 16th October 2013



Image 6.6 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 3rd November 2013

Public displays of support between the siblings are common throughout their online content, particularly when one of them is pursuing a new endeavour or has had a significant achievement. Other examples include Joe sharing an Instagram post expressing his pride when Zoe released her *Girl Online: On Tour* book in October 2015; Joe participating in the photography for Zoe's seasonal events planning and lifestyle guide *Cordially Invited*, as well as sharing several Instagram posts that cross-promote the book; and when Joe was on *Strictly* in 2018, Zoe featured in several episodes, with producers drawing on their strong online sibling relationship to feature her in 4 of the 12 live shows, interviewing her for the VT clips where she expressed her pride and support for her brother. These recurrent displays of love and support towards each other and their endeavours function to cross-promote their respective social media platforms and projects, whilst also encouraging audiences to connect and engage with their sibling brand too.

## Sugg Life: Commodifying the sibling brand

As previously highlighted, Joe and Zoe's online networked relationship has enabled them to build a strong sibling brand that is centred around fun, silliness, love and support, that promotes audiences' connection and engagement with both parties and the Sugg sibling brand as a whole. This section will explore the commodification of this sibling brand through their collaborative range of merchandise Sugg Life which launched in December 2016 and included Sugg-themed memorabilia such as t-shirts, hoodies, phone cases, pop sockets<sup>209</sup> and stickers ([Images 6.7 - 6.8](#)). Here, Joe and Zoe attempted to capitalise upon the popularity of their sibling brand by turning it into a marketable range of products under the name Sugg Life, which condenses their online sibling (and by extension wider family) branding into a logo and set of products for fans to purchase online. Interestingly, they decided to name the brand Sugg Life - a play

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<sup>209</sup> A circular stick-on mobile phone accessory intended to make holding your phone easier and more secure, as well as functioning as a stand to prop your phone up with when watching videos, and can even be used to wrap your headphone cable around to prevent it getting tangled (see Chowdhry, 2018)



on the phrase ‘Thug Life’ which has its roots in hip-hop music culture<sup>210</sup> - a stark contrast from the squeaky-clean brands of the Sugg siblings, although it is not clear if this play on words is intended to be ironic or merely a pun. They appear to play upon this ‘Thug Life’ notion in some of the initial product images ([Images 6.9 - 6.10](#)) where both Joe and Zoe are pictured with their hoods up and with Joe even exhibiting a straight-faced, serious expression as if he is trying to convey a sense of thuggery. This suggestion towards urban street style, however, is in contrast with the lush greenery in the background which depicts rural countryside, rather than inner city grit.

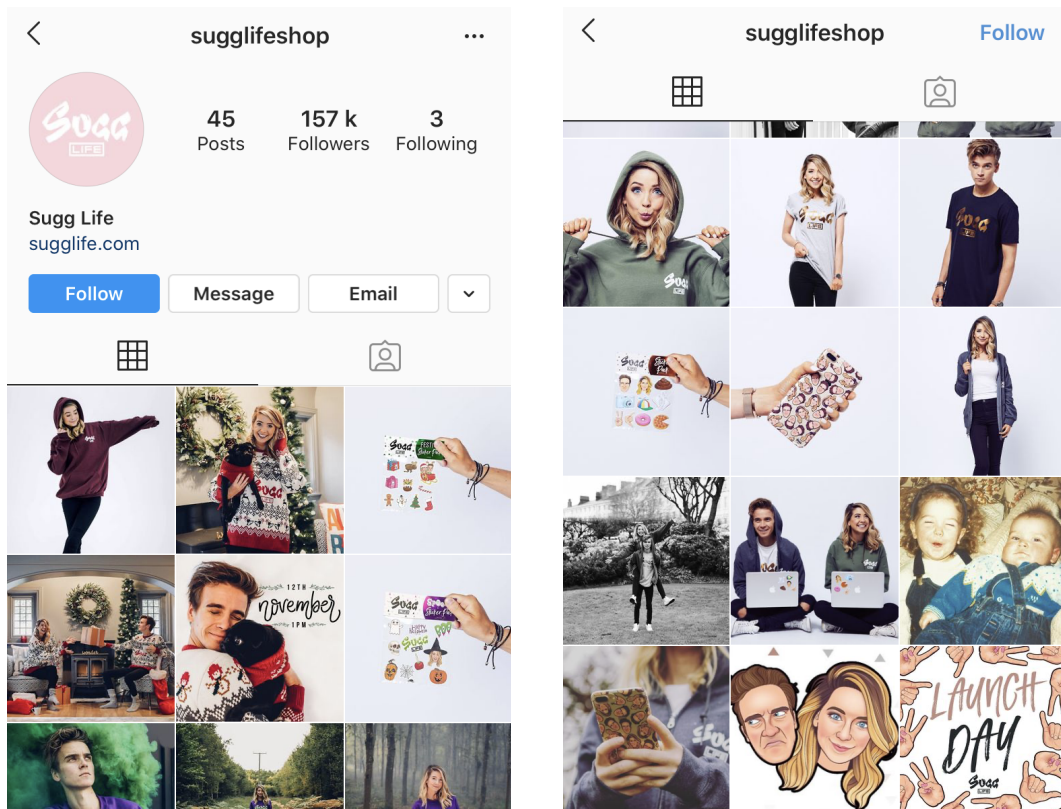


Image 6.7 - Sugg Life Instagram; Image 6.8 - Sugg Life first Instagram posts

<sup>210</sup> More recently, Thug Life has been appropriated into a popular Internet meme where users create YouTube remixes which ‘typically begin with home movies of preadolescents using overly confrontational or expletive language, followed by a freeze-frame at a close-up image of the subject and an instrumental fade out to Dr. Dre’s 1992 gangsta rap song “Nuthin’ But a G Thang.”’ (KnowYourMeme, 2017).

The Sugg Life products were generally very simple block colour t-shirts and hoodies with their logo printed on them ([Images 6.9 - 6.10](#)), or featured fun emoji-style graphics for stickers and phone cases ([Images 6.11 - 6.12](#)). Despite the simplicity of the products, the strength and likeability of their sibling brand and its popularity with their audiences functions to make their merchandise attractive to fans through their endorsement as meaning is transferred from their existing Sugg sibling brand to the products (Kelman, 1961; McCracken, 1989). There is the suggestion that by buying their merchandise, fans can buy into being a member of the extended Sugg family, enabling them to gain objectified cultural capital through possessing these cultural artefacts from the Sugg Life store (Bourdieu, 1997). This objectified cultural capital also has the potential to be converted into symbolic capital when this becomes acknowledged by others (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) - something particularly important within the fan community where individuals may be looking to increase their perceived status and value in relation to other fans.



Image 6.9 - @SuggLifeShop, Twitter, 12th December 2016; Image 6.10 - @SuggLifeShop, Twitter, 16th December 2016





Image 6.11 - @sugglifeshop, Instagram, 18th May 2017; Image 6.12 - @sugglifeshop, Instagram, 14th May 17

The Sugg siblings draw upon their extended online family network to promote the range of merchandise, with their father tweeting to promote the range ([Image 6.13](#)), and their Sugg Life Twitter account retweeting him with the comment 'Your Christmas presents are sorted this year Dad' (@sugglifeshop, Twitter, 9th December 2016). This joking response to their Dad's tweet helps strengthen the fun image of their sibling brand and, by extension, their merchandise range.



Image 6.13 - Retweet of @daddysugg from @sugglifeshop, Twitter, 9th December 2016

## Sugg Siblings: Conclusion

In conclusion, the online networked relationship between Joe and his sister Zoe has been fundamental to Joe's success online. From gaining initial audience interest and beginning to grow a social media following through appearing in his sister's videos, Joe was able to draw upon his sister's online success, using the positive reception he received from Zoe's audience as a springboard to start his own YouTube channel in 2012. From this point, the networked relationship between Joe and Zoe became advantageous in terms of cross-promoting each other's channels, creating light-hearted collaborative videos together that helped them establish a fun sibling brand online. They have also sought to capitalise upon their strong sibling brand, commodifying it into a range of merchandise, enabling fans to buy into the idealised, aspirational Sugg sibling relationship to become a member of the extended Sugg family; thus increasing their cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

## The Brit Crew

The second networked relationship key to Joe's career development relates to the group of UK-based YouTubers he was part of who became prominent online around 2012 and were referred to by audiences as the Brit Crew, consisting of: Joe Sugg, Zoe Sugg, Alfie Deyes, Jim Chapman, Tanya Burr, Marcus Butler, Niomi Smart, Caspar Lee and Louise Pentland ([Image 6.14](#)). What was particularly unique about this group was that they were formed at the crux of three romantic relationships (Zoe Sugg and Alfie Deyes, Tanya Burr and Jim Chapman, and Marcus Butler and Niomi Smart), one sibling relationship (Joe and Zoe Sugg), one flatshare (Joe Sugg and Caspar Lee) and many close friendships, who, collectively, formed the most influential group of YouTubers in the UK (James, 2014) at the time. Joe's connection to members of the Brit Crew grew from his relationship with sister Zoe who was more established as an Internet content creator and had begun to build connections with other YouTubers, starting with Louise Pentland in 2011 who was also a member of the

British beauty blogging community. Zoe and Louise then met Alfie and Marcus at an early iteration of London-based YouTube event Summer in the City (SitC)<sup>211</sup> (Lower Your Expectations podcast, E77, 2018). It was through these initial connections built by his sister that Joe came to be introduced to other members of the Brit Crew, then, as the individual creators signed with Gleam Futures and began to attend more YouTube events, they became more firmly established as a group.



Image 6.14 - The Brit Crew, photo from Amity Fest Facebook page, 13th November 2014. L-R: Marcus Butler, Zoe Sugg, Louise Pentland, Joe Sugg, Niomi Smart, Tanya Burr, Jim Chapman, Alfie Deyes and Caspar Lee.

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<sup>211</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#) for outline of the event

At the time the group was most active, they were all signed to the same talent management agency, Gleam Futures<sup>212</sup>. Race, class and gender are also significant to the group and, whilst there is not scope within this study to conduct an in-depth analysis of this, it is pertinent to note that the Brit Crew are all white, middle-class, cis-gendered, heterosexual, and conventionally attractive. Their friendships were formed organically through members forming individual connections and the group being gradually introduced to one another as time progressed, with their friendships becoming cemented online through regularly collaborating on YouTube videos and documenting their time together in vlogs, which proved popular with viewers (True Geordie podcast, E82, 2018). This is common practice for YouTuber friendships which can occur both online and offline, however it is commonplace for those who meet offline to film their time spent together and upload this to their YouTube channels (Bishop, 2018), thus solidifying their friendship in the online world and cross-promoting each other's channels.

Part of the appeal of this group was that they were all experiencing a new kind of online prominence at the same time which meant they began to give up their day jobs to pursue YouTube full-time and, as a result, had more time to hang out and film together. As their online careers took off they were afforded opportunities outside of YouTube to diversify into other creative and entrepreneurial endeavours, thus leaving them with less time to hang out and create content, which led to the group gradually dispersing as a close-knit network as things naturally fizzled out. As such, Joe's networked relationships with the Brit Crew were most important to his career development when the group were focused on growing their online followings and beginning to build a career online, centred around YouTube. As a result, the discussion in this section will be centred mainly around the importance of these networked relationships within the Brit Crew to Joe's development at the micro- and Internet celebrity stages of his career.

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<sup>212</sup> See Chapter 1 - [Talent management agencies and Gleam Futures](#)

## Collaborations, conventions and cross-promotion

Key to the Brit Crew's success as a network was their culture of regular collaboration within the group, producing videos collaboratively to upload onto each person's channel and regularly appearing in each other's content. As noted earlier in this chapter, collaborations are a powerful way to exchange attention across audiences and help to combine audience communities (Cunningham et al., 2016), whilst also offering potential for each party involved in the collaboration to grow their following (Bishop, 2018) if new viewers from the collaborative content convert into subscribers. Collaborations between Joe and other members of the Brit Crew were most prevalent between 2013 and 2014, although from 2015 onwards he continued to frequently collaborate with his sister Zoe and flatmate Caspar Lee but not with the wider group. Examples of collaborative videos with the Brit Crew include:

*YouTuber Innuendo Bingo With PointlessBlog* (ThatcherJoe, 5th April 2013)

*Electric Shock Challenge with MARCUS BUTLER!* (ThatcherJoe, 18th January 2014)

*Youtuber Whispers Game* (ThatcherJoe, 6th April 2014)

During 2013-2014, members of the Brit Crew attended lots of YouTube events together such as Playlist Live, VidCon, ITAtube and Digifest. These events (with the exception of Digifest which was in London) were all held in other countries, often spread over the course of several days leading the group to have to stay overnight in hotels, meaning they spent a lot of time together over the course of the trips. Whilst the collective name, The Brit Crew, appears to have been coined by audiences, this name is important in the way that they were marketed, especially to international audiences, positioning Britishness as central to their brand identity.

Going on international trips and attending YouTube events and experiencing this new world of YouTube fame made for interesting vlog content and, as such, it was commonplace for the Brit Crew to each vlog their time at these events. This meant that the wider group made regular appearances in each person's vlog, allowing audiences to build up a sense of familiarity with group members, and the group dynamic as a whole as they experienced these events and trips together. Audience members were able to enhance parasocial relationships with their original object of fandom by watching them in other YouTubers' videos, seeing them from different angles and extending their knowledge of the YouTuber through witnessing their interactions with the wider group, conveying intimacy (Marwick & boyd, 2011) and suggesting a level of backstage, authentic access (Goffman, 1956). These trips draw similarities to bands going on tour where backstage footage is often filmed to be released as part of a tour DVD or documentary (for example, One Direction's *Up All Night* (2012) and *This Is Us* (2013) DVDs which documented their experiences on tour). In this sense, the Brit Crew's vlogs function as multiple iterations of backstage DVDs, offering viewers the perception of intimate, authentic access to their experiences on these trips (Goffman, 1956) through different perspectives. This allows fans to deepen their social knowledge of their object of fandom and the Brit Crew more broadly, enabling them to increase their social and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997) and offering potential to gain symbolic capital too when this is acknowledged by others (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Attending events such as Playlist and Vidcon enabled the Brit Crew to spend intense periods of time together, giving them ample opportunities to film collaborations both within the group and with other international YouTubers attending the events. The power of these intensified periods of collaboration and cross-promotion is something that has been especially realised over the last five years where new waves of YouTube and TikTok content creators have come together to form content houses (Lorenz, 2020). These content houses or collab

houses have been most notably pioneered in recent years by YouTuber group Team 10 and TikTok content collectives The Hype House and The Wave House. Content houses involve a group of creators living together in a house where they can immerse themselves in the culture of content creation and regularly collaborate with one another, thus attracting more attention and helping them to grow their followings at a faster pace, whilst also providing a support network of those who understand the emotional intensity of such a demanding career (Lorenz, 2020). Unlike newer content collectives, the Brit Crew was less formally defined as a mutually beneficial network for content collaboration and conveyed the narrative of being founded in genuine, organic friendships, rather than being bound by contractual agreements<sup>213</sup>. As noted previously, the Brit Crew lack diversity as a group of white, middle-class, conventionally attractive individuals - a criticism that has also been levelled against Team 10 and the Hype House, suggesting a continuing issue with a lack of diversity amongst prominent content creators who are invited to participate in these privileged groups. The Brit Crew also featured three romantic couples within the group, however in more recent content houses, there has been more of an emphasis on rumours of romantic involvement between members, creating buzz around the groups through audience speculation (Lee, 2020). Furthermore, the Brit Crew were notably squeaky clean in image, avoiding controversy, drama and inappropriate behaviour, whereas content houses have attracted media criticism and have become notorious for their antics<sup>214</sup>.

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<sup>213</sup> Newer content houses tend to be heavily managed by cultural intermediaries and involve contractual agreements which bind residents to strict rules around daily content creation and not becoming 'party houses' (Lorenz, 2020). Furthermore, in the case of Team 10, members are required to give a percentage of their earnings to the creator Jake Paul 'in exchange for amenities like managers, video editors, and cameramen' (Lee, 2020).

<sup>214</sup> For example, when UK TikTok collective The Wave House launched in September 2020, press reported on the confused, unimpressed response from audiences after they posted a series of 'bizarre' reveal videos unveiling each of the six members and showcasing the lavish £5million countryside property they would be staying in (Greep, 2020). Moreover, YouTube collective Team 10 were described as 'nightmare neighbours who pulled dangerous pranks and had crazed fans mobbing the neighborhood at all hours' (Lee, 2020).



Whilst the Brit Crew were not permanently under one roof, they certainly operated as a (conscious or unconscious) content collective, utilising their network as a group to produce YouTube videos with other group members. This helped to cross-promote each member of the collective, as well as strengthening their perceived status as a privileged group, which can lead to increased accumulation of social capital for participants (Sadowski, 2019). This is particularly key for YouTubers in order to attract attention, reach a wider audience, and for content to go viral or trending<sup>215</sup> (Ross, 2013). Regular collaboration and cross-promotion within the Brit Crew helped them ascend to Internet stardom at an accelerated speed. For Joe, YouTube collaborations with members of the Brit Crew were most prominent in 2013 and 2014 where 10 of the 13, and 15 out of 21 collaboration videos respectively were with group members<sup>216</sup>. During this period, Joe hit the milestones of 1 million (November 2013), 2 million (May 2014) and 3 million (October 2014) subscribers on ThatcherJoe, and after launching ThatcherJoeVlogs in January 2013, had reached 1 million subscribers on the channel by September 2014<sup>217</sup>. This indicates the speed at which his YouTube subscriber numbers were growing during this period of increased collaborations with the Brit Crew, and, whilst it is not possible to declare causation between this growth and these collaborations, there is evidently a positive correlation between these factors.

As members of the Brit Crew's online prominence grew at this accelerated speed, they were able to document these experiences for viewers in their vlogs. For example, Joe shared videos of him attending media events and YouTube conventions where his status was elevated and he and the Brit Crew were treated like celebrities from adoring fans<sup>218</sup>. In a podcast interview, Joe explained:

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<sup>215</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

<sup>216</sup> It is worth noting that in 2015, Joe uploaded 25 collaboration videos, of which 18 featured members of the Brit Crew, however these were limited to with Caspar Lee (his best friend and flatmate between 2014-2016) and his sister Zoe, thus I consider this less significant to his networked relationships with the Brit Crew as these two individual relationships occur most prominently independently of the group.

<sup>217</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

<sup>218</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5 - [Shift from micro- to Internet celebrity](#)

I remember going to like early VidCons and stuff, and going there and going on stage and there's like thousands of people screaming at you. It's something that, you know, you're not prepared for it. (True Georgie podcast, E82, 2018)

As such, parallels can be drawn between the Brit Crew and reality TV participants who enter a series as nobodies and, under the watchful eye of the public, go on a collective journey to attention-worthy 'somebodies', giving viewers access to the celebrification process of this group as they went from ordinary individuals to some of the Internet's most prominent stars (Gamson, 2011) and began to reap the rewards of their new-found fame. This celebrification process also makes apparent to audiences the power they have in making these people stars through their support and adoration (Gamson, 2011), which could lead to them becoming more invested in the Brit Crew and their success as they recognise their fundamental role in the group's elevated status and prominence.

Despite the essential role collaboration and cross-promotion played within this group during 2013-2014 when their followings were all growing at an accelerated rate and they were beginning to reach a level of online fame, this began to reduce as they established their own separate career paths and no longer needed the cross-promotion of regular collaborations. In 2015, Joe continued to collaborate with Caspar and Zoe, however collaborations with the rest of the Brit Crew dissipated and his networked relationships with Caspar and the Buttercream Gang<sup>219</sup> became more prominent in his collaborative videos. This fizzling out of collaborations with the Brit Crew was likely caused by the members finding success on an individual level, enabling them to pursue their own entrepreneurial and creative endeavours such as writing books and starting businesses, leaving less time for meeting up, collaborating and attending YouTube fan events. Despite this, the networked relationships between the group

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<sup>219</sup> Discussed later in this chapter - see [‘Jaspar’](#)

were still active in that they publicly supported each other's endeavours, however the vast reduction in collaborative content and appearing in each other's vlogs led fans to question if the group had fallen out with one another. Here, there are clear parallels between the Brit Crew and popular music groups who often follow the narrative of ascending into prominence together, before eventually going their separate ways and pursuing solo careers.

## Capitalising on the Brit Crew: Gleam Futures, Amity Fest & HelloWorld

Despite being formed from organic friendships, rather than commercially beneficial agreements, the Brit Crew were all signed to the same management company, Gleam Futures<sup>220</sup>, thus it is important to interrogate their role in the commodification of this seemingly genuine group of friends. For talent management agencies, extracting and actualising social capital from existing networks of YouTubers presents great value (Bishop, 2018). As previously noted, whilst the Brit Crew were all signed to the same talent management agency, the group are believed to have been formed organically through friendships, however, it is pertinent to note Gleam Futures' role in the commercial interests of the group. Cultural intermediaries of the vlogging industry like talent managers and MCNs<sup>221</sup> have a vested interest in the commercial success of their signed creators. The power of a collaboration with the 'right' YouTuber is recognised within the industry as having potential to substantially increase the fees vloggers can charge to commercial partners (Bishop, 2018). Thus, finding authentic connections between their roster of talent and encouraging collaborations offers the potential for the YouTubers to attract attention and grow their audiences (Cunningham et al., 2016), whilst likely being financially beneficial for the intermediaries too who usually work on a commission basis, taking a cut of money made through talent's commercial partnerships and net advertising revenue (Abidin, 2016a; Lobato, 2016). This means that capitalising upon the

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<sup>220</sup> See [Chapter 1 - Talent management agencies and Gleam Futures](#)

<sup>221</sup> See [Appendix 2 - Glossary](#)

organic friendships of the Brit Crew was certainly in the business interests of Gleam Futures.

In 2014, the Brit Crew embarked on a multi-city tour event called Amity Fest which saw them visit Birmingham, Liverpool and Brighton for a two hour on-stage performance (Amity Fest, 2014). This show attempted to capitalise upon both the individual and collective success of members of the Brit Crew, using their online popularity to sell tickets to eager fans. The word 'amity' is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary (2018) as meaning 'a good relationship', evidencing a clear focus on the close-knit friendships of the group in their branding. This event featured exclusively members of the Brit Crew, meaning that the creators and their shared management agency could maximise the potential revenue that could be earned from the event. This 'cuts out the middleman' involved when the group appear at third-party organised events, taking the means of the event organisation and production into their own hands in order to vertically integrate the process. Here, the Brit Crew were packaged up like a pop band promoting a tour with their playfully-posed, but innocent and child (and parent-friendly) group promotional photos (see [Image 6.14](#)) as are characteristic of the clean-cut branding of boy bands (Hansen, 2018). However, unlike a pop band, the group are not singers, actors or dancers. Their appeal with viewers is the intimate parasocial relationships they have fostered through giving access to their private lives and homes in their YouTube content (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Ots, 2016) - something that does not naturally translate into a stage performance.

The Amity Fest ticket page for the Brighton Dome venue states: 'Come and spend an evening with your favourite self-made stars of YouTube' (Brighton Dome, 2014), which does not give much indication towards the content of the show. Similarly, the description for standard tickets merely states, '[w]e'll be on stage for 2 hours, giving you a special 'Hello!'", with the VIP ticket promising 75 individuals the chance to 'spend a whole hour with us and just a few others', as

well as ‘a special goodie bag’ (Brighton Dome, 2014). Despite these somewhat lacking descriptions of the event on the ticket page, *TenEighty* magazine’s coverage of the Brighton event includes the Brit Crew playing ‘panto’-esque games and challenges ([Image 6.15](#)), being interviewed on-stage, engaging in prompted audience interaction ([Image 6.16](#)), and vlogging (Brinnand, 2014). With tickets priced at £22.50 for standard entry and £75 for a VIP ticket (Morgan, 2014) and three dates on the tour, it is clear to see the potential for financial gain from events like this for both the Brit Crew members and Gleam Futures.

Despite the lucrative potential of Amity Fest-style events, there was not another attempt made to package the Brit Crew up into a purchasable commodity until October 2017 when the infamous HelloWorld event took place across two days at the Genting Arena in Birmingham. This appears to have been a final attempt to capitalise upon the group’s collective popularity, however, from 2014 onwards the Brit Crew slowly diminished in terms of their regular collaborations and portrayals of best friendship. As such, HelloWorld functioned as a sort of band reunion tour, getting the group back together for one last event. The event encountered difficulties, attracting criticism from attendees who believed it did not deliver what was promised<sup>222</sup>. Thus, HelloWorld appears to have signalled the end of the Brit Crew as a commodifiable group. The creators seemingly have remained friends but have dispersed from pursuing group projects, instead taking different directions in their own brand development with many shifting their energy away from YouTube towards avenues such as fashion, TV presenting, acting and entrepreneurship. Of the three romantic couples within the Brit Crew, two have now split with Niomi and Marcus announcing their separation in December 2015, and Tanya and Jim (who married in September 2015) publicly confirming their divorce in March 2019. In addition, three of the Brit Crew have since parted ways with talent management agency Gleam Futures - Joe and Caspar in November

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<sup>222</sup> As discussed at length in Chapter 5 - [‘We don’t sing or dance’: HelloWorld and challenged authenticity](#)



Images 6.15 (above) & 6.16 (below) - Amity Fest 2014 (Brinnand, *TenEighty*, 2014)





2017 (Weiss, 2017), (shortly after HelloWorld took place), going on to launch their own talent management agency Margravine Management in June 2018, and Alfie in January 2018, taking 'his representation in-house' (Collingridge, 2018). Thus the commercially-beneficial nature of collectively commodifying the Brit Crew for Gleam Futures ceased.

## The Brit Crew: Conclusion

The Brit Crew was formed at the crux of friendships, families and romantic relationships, however they became cemented as a group through forming strong networked relationships online through regular collaborations and appearances in each other's YouTube videos. This cross-promotion helped to strengthen their collective status as a privileged group (Sadowski, 2019), increasing members' social capital as a result (Ross, 2013). Regular appearances in each other's content enabled audiences to develop parasocial relationships with the group, offering the perception of intimate access to their private interactions (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Whilst the Brit Crew have since gone their separate ways, this section has argued the significance these networked relationships have had on the development of Joe's career, enabling him to widen his profile and grow his following at an accelerated rate.

## 'Jaspar'

The next networked relationship I will discuss is Joe's close friendship with fellow YouTuber and, for a period, flatmate, Caspar Lee. Caspar is a South African YouTuber who started his channel dicasp (now called Caspar) in November 2011, and vlog channel, morecaspar in October 2012. Caspar's YouTube content centres around comedy, pranks, challenges and vlogs, with his self-branding conveying a clean-cut but cheeky image similar to Joe's. Though Joe and Caspar initially became friends through the Brit Crew, it was not until Joe moved to



London in April 2014 to share a flat with Caspar that the ‘Jaspar’ (a shipping name<sup>223</sup> coined for their friendship) brand was born.

I consider their friendship to have been most beneficial for his career development at the Internet and quasi-mainstream celebrity stages as it was at these stages that they forged their key brand identity as a prankster duo, as well as working on lots of joint projects. Examples, as discussed in previous sections, include the *Joe & Caspar Hit The Road* films (2015, 2016), voice acting roles in *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water* (2015) and notable mainstream media appearances on Channel 4’s *Alan Carr: Chatty Man* (2015) and BBC Radio 1’s *Innuendo Bingo* (2016). These collaborative projects are successful because they have existing parasocial relationships with each other’s audiences, (and likely a high proportion of shared viewers) through regular appearances in each others’ content, particularly in the context of viewers being given access to their intimate friendship through their content. As a result, their audiences are likely invested in their friendship and will want to engage with their offline projects to get closer to them and further strengthen their parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In addition to these collaborative projects, in 2018, Joe and Caspar launched a talent management agency together called Margravine Management, named after the street they lived on in their shared apartment (Spangler, 2018); marking a shift in their relationship from a fun, collaborative dynamic into a more professional realm.

## Roommate prank wars: Building the Jaspar brand

As previously noted, Joe moved to London in April 2014 to share a flat with Caspar after them initially becoming good friends through the Brit Crew. Whilst living in their London flat between April 2014 and February 2016, they produced

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<sup>223</sup> The term ‘shipping’ typically describes the practice of fans publicly expressing support for a romantic relationship (Dare-Edwards, 2014), even if the two people are not actually romantically involved. This usually involves the creation of a ‘shipping name’ which combines the individuals names - in this case Joe + Caspar = Jaspar. Despite their often romantic connotations, shipping names are often used to describe and express support of friendships amongst Internet fan communities.

lots of YouTube content together including many prank videos (which proved incredibly popular with audiences), as well as regularly appearing in each other's vlogs and other social media content. In this sense, their London flat can be viewed as a small-scale content house (as discussed previously<sup>224</sup>) where they were able to immerse themselves in the culture of content-creation, using their flat as a permanent film set with no non-YouTuber residents' privacy to consider. Living together enabled Joe and Caspar to collaborate regularly, with Joe uploading a total of 33 collaboration videos and 9 prank videos with Caspar during this period. This helped attract attention and cross-promote each other's channels, aiding the growth of their individual followings. During the time they lived together, Joe's YouTube channel ThatcherJoe rose from 2 million subscribers in May 2014 to 6 million by February 2016; from 1 million in September 2014 to 2 million in June 2015 on ThatcherJoeVlogs; and from starting ThatcherJoeGames in June 2014, he gained 1 million subscribers by September 2015<sup>225</sup>. Caspar's YouTube channels also experienced growth with him hitting 3 million (August 2014), 4 million (April 2015), then 5 million (August 2015) subscriber milestones on his channel Caspar during this period. In addition to collaboration and cross-promotion, living together also enabled Joe and Caspar to support each other with the emotional intensity and unique tolls of their online careers (Lorenz, 2020). The combination of two males in their early 20s with large online followings and new-found levels of wealth living together in a big city away from their families naturally led to lots of outrageous antics and silliness, which, of course, was filmed for their YouTube channels, making entertaining content for their audiences and helping to establish the fun Jaspas brand. In particular, they became known for their roommate prank videos which documented the ongoing prank wars between the two flatmates, and proved particularly popular with their audiences.

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<sup>224</sup> See The Brit Crew - [Collaborations, conventions and cross-promotion](#)

<sup>225</sup> See [Appendix 1 - Joe Sugg's career timeline](#)

Pranks are a popular format of video on YouTube, however they did not originate online and have long been a prevalent feature of mainstream media entertainment with TV prank shows and schadenfreude home video shows being popular formats worldwide (Hobbs & Grafe, 2015). In particular, prank videos on YouTube tend to be a primarily male domain (Bishop, 2017). Part of the appeal of prank videos lies in the schadenfreude<sup>226</sup> experienced by both the prankster and the audience when watching the prank, as well as their transgressive nature, similar to other forms of humiliation viewers enjoy watching through reality TV formats (Hobbs & Grafe, 2015). Many users on YouTube have recognised the potential for prank videos to attract attention, which is perhaps the most valuable commodity in the Internet attention economy (Fairchild, 2007; Hobbs & Grafe, 2015; Marwick, 2015). Pranks are also an infamous format on YouTube with many deemed offensive, cruel or distressing, attracting negative press attention and resulting in backlash for creators (Tait, 2017).

Pranks are a consistently popular format on Joe's ThatcherJoe channel with 35% of his top 20 most viewed videos, and 24% of his top 100 most viewed videos fitting into this category, making pranks consistently the second most popular category of his videos, after collaborations. Specifically in relation to Jaspar, of Joe's top 10 most viewed videos on ThatcherJoe, 4 feature Caspar, of which 3 are roommate prank videos; and, on ThatcherJoeVlogs, 4 of his most 10 viewed videos are pranks on Caspar, including the 2 most viewed videos on the channel<sup>227</sup>. Similarly, of Caspar's most viewed videos on his main channel, 4 feature Joe, of which 3 are pranks with his top 2 most viewed videos of all time being pranks on Joe<sup>228</sup>. The prank videos between Joe and Caspar veer away from the controversy attracted by other users on the platform, sticking to cheeky

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<sup>226</sup> German word meaning 'a feeling of pleasure or satisfaction when something bad happens to someone else' (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2020c)

<sup>227</sup> *TIN FOILING MY ROOMMATES ROOM*, 12th January 2015 - >8.5 million views; *SHOWER PRANK ON MY ROOMMATE*, 20th October 2014 - >7 million views (figures correct as of 3rd September 2020)

<sup>228</sup> *GIRLFRIEND PRANKS MY ROOMMATE*, 29th September 2014 - > 23 million views; *ROOMMATE SHOWER PRANK*, 6th April 2015 - > 19 million views (figures correct as of 3rd September 2020)

but harmless pranks rather than crude, mean or potentially contentious ones. This is in keeping with their existing clean-cut self-brands and helps to strengthen their boy-next-door images, following the typical 'cheeky, but never risqué' branding of TV personalities like Ant and Dec (Bennett, 2011: 103). Despite this, their 'Jaspar' prank videos still attracted attention, evidenced by the significant number of views the videos received; thus helping to amplify each of their YouTube channels as a result. As such, the networked relationship between Joe and Caspar is advantageous in that they have been able to establish a fun 'Jaspar' brand, whilst also cross-promoting each other's content and helping to grow their individual online audiences.

The boys' prank videos subsided slightly after Joe and Caspar moved out of their shared flat and into their own separate homes in February 2016, although the 'Jaspar' brand still very much lives on and the prank videos, whilst less regular, are still a key part of the online presentation of their relationship. However, their networked relationship expanded to include a wider group with whom they also regularly collaborate, which will be discussed in the [next section](#). Interestingly, the duo's cheeky, prankster brand has shifted somewhat in recent years into something more professional, launching a talent management agency together in June 2018<sup>229</sup>, suggesting a desire to be taken more seriously as they have grown up.

### Buttercream Gang: Jaspar's extended network

Also key to 'Jaspar' is their extended network and friendship group of boys living in London. This group became most prominent as part of Joe and Caspar's extended network after they moved out of their shared flat and into their own separate apartments which, they reveal in their moving out announcement video, are 'within a stone's throw of each other's houses' (*ROOMMATE PRANKS WAR WENT TOO FAR* :(), Caspar, 29th February 2016).

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<sup>229</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4 - [4.5: Professional Internet celebrity](#)

Their extended London boys network consists of Oli White, Josh Pieters, Conor Maynard, Jack Maynard and Mikey Pearce. Oli White had been a long-standing YouTube friend of Joe and Caspar and was a regular on the peripheries of the Brit Crew, however he made regular appearances in Joe and Caspar's videos and vlogs when they lived in their shared flat, often assisting with Joe's pranks on Caspar. When Joe and Caspar moved out of their shared flat, Oli remained a key part of their friendship group with their circle expanding to include Josh Pieters - Caspar's friend from South Africa who moved over to the UK to play cricket and has since grown his own successful YouTube channel; brothers Conor and Jack Maynard; Mikey Pearce - who was not initially a YouTuber but started his own channel in July 2016 after frequently appearing in his friends videos; and Byron Langley - a South African-born singer-songwriter and actor who lived with Joe from around July 2017 onwards. The group have been collectively referred to as the 'Buttercream Gang' by fans, which appears to be a reference to the 1992 film *The Buttercream Gang*, however the origin of this name is unclear. The earliest use identified by my analysis was in May 2016 where Joe captioned a picture of him with the group using the hashtag #buttercream ([Image 6.17](#)), but it is not certain whether this was first coined by the boys themselves or their fans. The word buttercream conveys a sense of sweet, sickliness, but could also suggest something about paleness regarding the lack of racial diversity in this group and the uniformity of their appearance, with similar haircuts and clothing styles.

This extended network regularly featured in Joe and Caspar's videos, mostly filming collaborations centred around pranks and challenges, conveying fun and silliness in these videos. Examples include:

*THE RUBBER HEAD CHALLENGE* (ThatcherJoe, 13th March 2016)

*BIGGEST FAN PRANK* (ThatcherJoe, 6th November 2016)

*YOUTUBERS READ MEAN TWEETS* (ThatcherJoe, 4th March 2018)



Image 6.17 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 22nd May 2016

When members of this extended network first started appearing in Joe and Caspar's videos, not all of them were YouTubers - Josh Pieters started his YouTube channel in November 2015 after moving to the UK earlier that year and initially assisting Caspar with the launch of his clothing line, as well as appearing in his friends' videos (*JOSH PIETERS DRAWS HIS LIFE!*, Josh Pieters, 30th November 2015); similarly, Mikey Pearce was initially a self-confessed 'YouTube extra' in his friends' videos (*MY FIRST VIDEO!!!*, Mikey Pearce, 19th July 2016), appearing frequently in content alongside other members of the group, however in July 2016, he decided to launch his own YouTube channel; and lastly, Byron Langley started his YouTube channel in January 2018 after regularly appearing in and assisting with Joe and Caspar's YouTube and social media content from around July 2017 onwards, whilst trying to launch a career in music.

Table 6.1 - Buttercream Gang YouTube & Instagram Metrics<sup>230</sup>

Name	YouTube channel	Date started	Subscribers	Views	Instagram followers
Joe Sugg	ThatcherJoe	7/8/12	> 7.84m	> 1.3bn	> 5.4m
	ThatcherJoeVlogs	19/1/13	> 3.53m	> 695m	
	ThatcherJoeGames	2/6/14	> 1.75m	> 267m	
Caspar Lee	Caspar	2/1/12	> 7.03m	> 841m	> 2.6m
	morecaspar	29/10/12	> 1.74m	> 119m	
Oli White	Oli White	24/8/12	> 2.75m	> 465m	> 1.4m
	OliWhiteVlogs	28/10/12	> 1.11m	> 171m	
	OliWhiteGames	17/6/14	> 485k	> 61m	
Josh Pieters	Josh Pieters & Archie Manners (formerly Josh Pieters)	9/11/15	> 143m	> 144m	> 398k
	More Josh & Archie	20/6/16	> 68.7k	> 3.8m	
Conor Maynard	Conor Maynard	1/12/08	> 11m	> 2bn	> 2m
Jack Maynard	Jack Maynard	19/9/15	> 1.52m	> 180m	> 706k
	JackMaynardVlogs	28/8/16	> 271k	> 15m	
Mikey Pearce	Mikey Pearce	19/7/16	> 393k	> 32m	> 160k
	Mikey Pearce Vlogs	10/5/17	> 9.12k	> 26k	
Byron Langley	Byron Langley	23/1/18	> 115k	> 2.7m	> 229k

Within the group, the boys have forged mutually-beneficial networked relationships that cross-promote and amplify each other's YouTube and social media channels through regularly appearing in one another's content, thus encouraging viewers to build connections and parasocial relationships with the group as a whole. This has led them to be positioned in a collective boy band fashion as the 'Buttercream gang' with their own fanbase who create YouTube playlists, fan-fiction and even quizzes about the group such as *Your Buttercream*

<sup>230</sup> Figures correct as of 4th September 2020



*Gang Boyfriend!*<sup>231</sup> which has been taken more than 10,000 times since October 2017<sup>232</sup> (Image 6.18). In recent years, the Buttercream Gang have appeared less in each other's online content and their fans appear to be less engaged, thus these cultural activities seem to have also fizzled out.

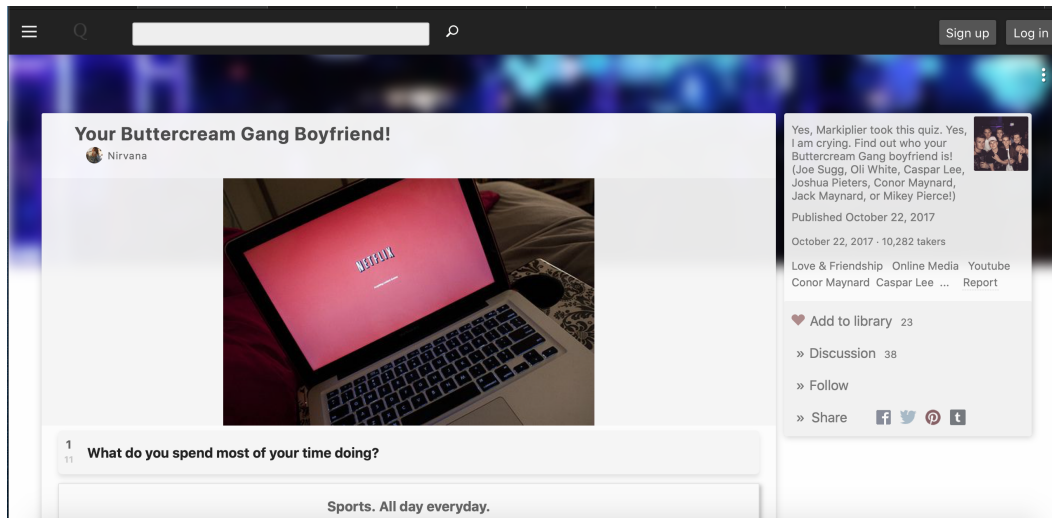


Image 6.18 - *Your Buttercream Gang Boyfriend!* quiz - screenshot from Quotev (2017)

This positioning of the group as a boy band-esque object of fandom has enabled members to become recognised by a wider audience - particularly those who did not have their own substantial YouTube and social media followings when they first started appearing in videos. In particular, Josh, Mikey and Byron who did not have their own YouTube channels but were offline friends with the group, were able to build their confidence in front of the camera through appearing in other group members' videos. This enabled them to become familiar to their friends' existing online audiences, laying the foundations for parasocial relationships to be formed (Horton & Wohl, 1956). These appearances helped to position the group as akin to a boy band, sharing their cheeky, comic interactions with one another in a way that is appealing to young female fans (Hansen, 2018). Sharing

<sup>231</sup> Found at <https://www.quotev.com/quiz/10197727/Your-Buttercream-Gang-Boyfriend>

<sup>232</sup> Correct as of 4th September 2020

their interactions as a group suggests to fans that they are being let in on the intimacy of a close-knit friendship group (Marwick & boyd, 2011), conveying a sense of backstage, authentic access to them (Goffman, 1956) which helps build familiarity.

Within the group, more experienced YouTubers Joe and Caspar gave Josh and Byron the opportunity to hone their video production, editing and photography skills through assisting them with their YouTube and social media content. This mentoring helped provide Josh and Byron with essential experience in creating high quality online content, enabling them to produce better content when launching their own platforms. This valuable experience, coupled with the cross-promotion and initial audience familiarity gained through appearing in their friends' videos undoubtedly gave Josh, Mikey and Byron a head-start when launching their own YouTube platforms. Clear comparisons can be drawn here to Joe's route into YouTube through appearing in his sister's videos where he, too, was able to successfully build parasocial relationships and start his channel with existing audience interest, thus getting a boost in initial followers from this successful cross-promotion. It could be argued that the success of this route into YouTube was recognised by Joe who wanted to utilise the following and audience relationship he has built himself to help launch the YouTube careers of his friends in the same way his sister did for him.

## Jaspar: Conclusion

The networked relationship between Joe and Caspar became most significant at the Internet and quasi-mainstream celebrity stages of Joe's career as a result of their existing friendship as part of the Brit Crew becoming strengthened when they moved into their London flat together in April 2014. Their flat became a miniature content house (Lorenz, 2020) in which they were able to regularly create content together with their prank videos, in particular, attracting a lot of attention online, thus helping amplify each other's channels. 'Jaspar's' network later expanded to a group that became known as the Buttercream gang which

functioned as a further cross-promotional network with members regularly filming YouTube videos together. Here, Joe and Caspar shared their accrued social capital (Bourdieu, 1997) with the rest of the group, helping to boost members' followings through association with this privileged group (Sadowski, 2019).

## ‘Joanne’

The final networked relationship key to Joe's career development is his public relationship with his former *Strictly Come Dancing* dance partner and now-girlfriend Dianne Buswell. This relationship occurs at the mainstream celebrity stage of Joe's career trajectory, beginning as he started his stint on *Strictly* but continuing to the present day. Joe and Dianne initially started as dance partners on the show, although it was not until after the show ended in December 2018 that their romantic relationship was confirmed. Since the show has ended, Joe's relationship with Dianne has become a key part of his online content, sharing snippets of their time together, as well as embarking on multiple joint ventures that capitalise upon their fun, light-hearted online couple brand. In this section, I will discuss how Joe's networked relationship with Dianne has been crucial to his career development at the mainstream celebrity stage of his career.

## ‘I've won something a million times more special’: Establishing the ‘Joanne’ brand

As noted previously, Joe's relationship with Dianne was initiated through his appearance on *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2018 where they were paired up as dance partners for the duration of the series. Throughout the show, they were regularly rumoured to be romantically involved<sup>233</sup> - a narrative that commonly follows contestants on the show as the mainstream press watch eagerly to see if

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<sup>233</sup> See Chapter 5 - [Authentic mainstream celebrity](#) for discussion of this in relation to authenticity.

any of the couples will fall victim to the infamous ‘*Strictly* curse’<sup>234</sup>. This refers to the string of romantic relationship break-ups that have occurred seemingly as a result of the programme, owing to the intense rehearsal and show schedule and the intimate nature of the dance routines which have, in the past, led contestants’ off-screen relationships to deteriorate (Kavanagh, 2019). When the 2018 series began, Dianne was in a relationship with *Emmerdale* star Anthony Quinlan, however in October 2018, they split after 10 months together (Joseph, 2018), leading to newspaper headlines such as:

Strictly CURSE: Joe Sugg's dance partner BREAKS UP with boyfriend as pair 'grow close' (Joseph, *Express Online*, 2018)

Strictly Come Dancing: Joe Sugg 'enjoying secret romance with partner Dianne Buswell'... after her split from beau Anthony Quinlan (Fox, *MailOnline*, 2018)

Dianne’s split with Quinlan led the press to convey the narrative that they had fallen victim to the *Strictly* curse and thus much of the media coverage of Joe and Dianne that followed focused on alleged rumours of a secret romance between the pair with paparazzi following them around in attempts to catch them off-guard, and sell evidence of the reported secret relationship to the press. Despite this, Joe and Dianne vehemently denied any romantic involvement between themselves until the series ended when Joe confirmed their romance with an Instagram post, captioned ‘I may not have won the glitter ball, but I’ve won something a million times more special’ ([Image 6.19](#)) which received over

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<sup>234</sup> Speculation around celebrity relationships is a regular feature of mainstream press, however this public interest in potential romances occurs in the YouTube world too. When Joe’s sister Zoe and her partner Alfie Deyes first appeared in a YouTube video together in September 2012, fans started ‘shipping’ (see [Glossary](#)) them as a romantic couple with speculation mounting until August 2013 when they confirmed their romance. During this period before their relationship was confirmed, fans looked for evidence of a blossoming romance between the pair in their online content. However, they were finally ‘outed’ after their YouTuber friend (and Brit Crew member) Jim Chapman uploaded a vlog where a picture of them kissing could be seen as a screensaver on one of their laptops in the background.

1.1 million likes, making it his most liked Instagram post of all time<sup>235</sup>, evidencing the popularity of romance and couple content with his audience.



Image 6.19 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 16th December 2018

Since Joe's announcement that he would be appearing on *Strictly* 2018, Dianne became a regular feature in his online content with 45% of his Instagram posts shared during the series featuring her. She also featured in his YouTube videos, appearing in 14% of his ThatcherJoe videos and 71% of his ThatcherJoeVlogs videos during the series. In particular, her regular appearances in Joe's vlogs allowed his audience to become familiar with her in the context of Joe's YouTube video, offering the impression of more authentic insights into their training and interactions than given in the highly mediated TV broadcasts, whilst encouraging his viewers to build parasocial relationships with Dianne. This building of parasocial relationships between Joe's audience and Dianne was essential for Joe to garner his audience's support for them on the programme, with him often

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<sup>235</sup> Correct as of 1st July 2020.

referring to their partnership as 'Team Joanne' in his posts. Following Joe confirming his romance with Dianne via Instagram, she has continued to feature heavily in his YouTube and social media content. On Instagram, 48% of the 102 posts he shared between them announcing their relationship on 16th December 2018 and the end of data collection (31st December 2019) featured Dianne. Similarly, during this same period, 44% of the 16 videos he posted on ThatcherJoe, 62% of the 117 ThatcherJoeVlogs videos, and 8% of the 25 ThatcherJoeGames videos feature Dianne. This prevalence of Dianne in Joe's content enables viewers to strengthen their parasocial relationships with her through repeated interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956), enabling his audience to form a bond with her through his content.

This prevalence of Dianne in Joe's content offers a sense of closeness to Joe's viewers in that he is giving them exclusive access to his intimate relationship with his girlfriend (Marwick & boyd, 2011), showing them in their private home and even sometimes vlogging from the hugely intimate space of their bed, thus giving viewers intimate access not just to their relationship, but to their most private spaces too (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). The appeal of influencers lies in that their content revolves around sharing highly personal aspects of their lives which would normally be kept private in the case of traditional celebrities and public figures (Abidin & Ots, 2016). Thus, this ability to create feelings of intimacy and engaging in a way that feels like followers are being given exclusive access to their private life is fundamental in the relationship between influencer and audience (Abidin, 2015). This perception of being given exclusive access to the most intimate aspect of his life - his romantic relationship - enables the parasocial relationship between Joe and his audience to be strengthened, whilst also helping get them on-side with his new endeavors as they feel like they are being taken along for the journey, rather than left behind or considering him to have 'sold out'.

## Cross-promotion and joint ventures

From the initial pairing up episode of *Strictly* being aired where Dianne was announced as Joe's dance partner, he has tagged her in his Instagram posts when she is pictured or mentioned in the caption - for example, [Image 6.20](#) is the first post Joe shared with his new dance partner after the pairings had been announced. This tagging helps to cross-promote Dianne's Instagram account, encouraging Joe's followers to click on her tag to view her profile and follow her through his endorsement. Dianne now has strong social media following in her own right, accruing over 821,000 followers on Instagram, as well as starting her own YouTube channel in March 2019 which currently has more than 250,000 subscribers and over 20.7 million video views<sup>236</sup>. In particular, follower data from SocialBlade highlights a spike in her Instagram followers between December 2018 and January 2019 ([Image 6.21](#)). When looking at the number of followers gained by week ([Image 6.22](#)), there is a clear increase between December 2018 and January 2019, peaking on week commencing 17 December 2018 ([Image 6.23](#)). This directly correlates with Joe announcing their relationship via an Instagram post on 16th December 2018 ([Image 6.19](#)) (his most liked post) in which he tags Dianne's account. This implies a link between the Instagram followers Dianne gained that week and their relationship being announced, suggesting Dianne was able to gain social capital through her romantic relationship with Joe being confirmed (Sadowski, 2019) - something particularly important for attracting attention and reaching wider audiences (Ross, 2013) as Dianne has been able to do here through her following increasing. For Joe's audience, following Dianne's Instagram account enables them to strengthen their parasocial relationships with her, which have already been built through her making regular appearances in Joe's content and being his dance partner on *Strictly* (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Moreover, fans can also, by extension, further develop their parasocial relationship with Joe by following Dianne's account, gaining increased insight into his intimate private life and relationship with his girlfriend. This increased knowledge thus offers fans potential to increase their

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<sup>236</sup> Figures correct as of 13th August 2020



social and embodied cultural capital, which can be converted into symbolic capital within the fan community (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

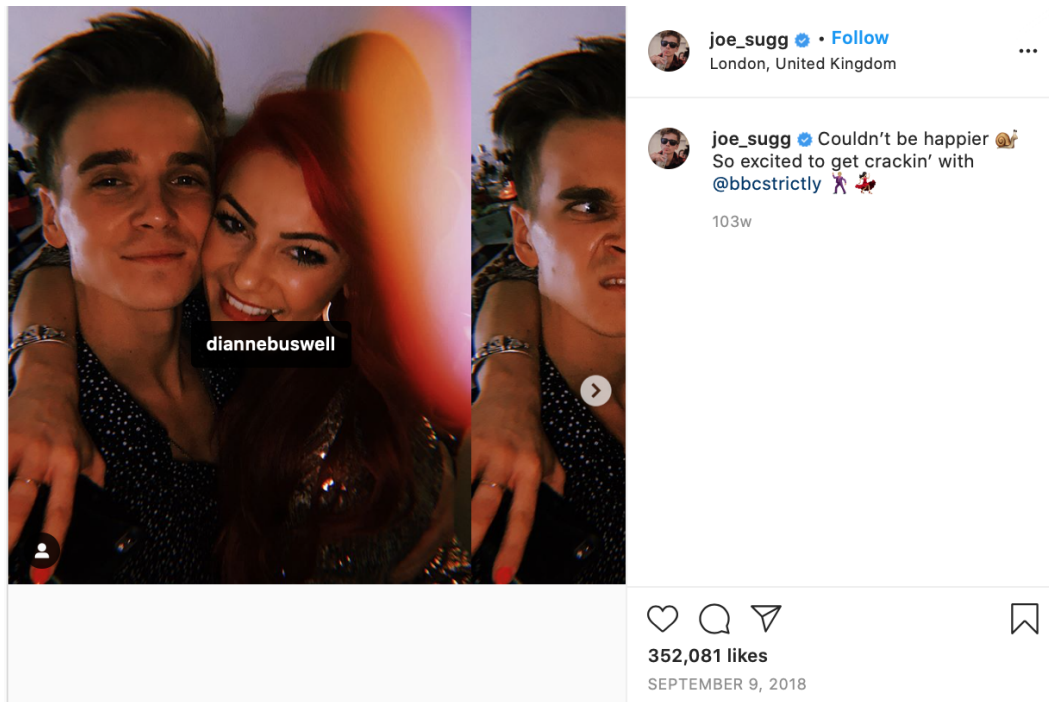


Image 6.20 - first tagged post with Dianne, @joe\_sugg, Instagram 9th September 2018

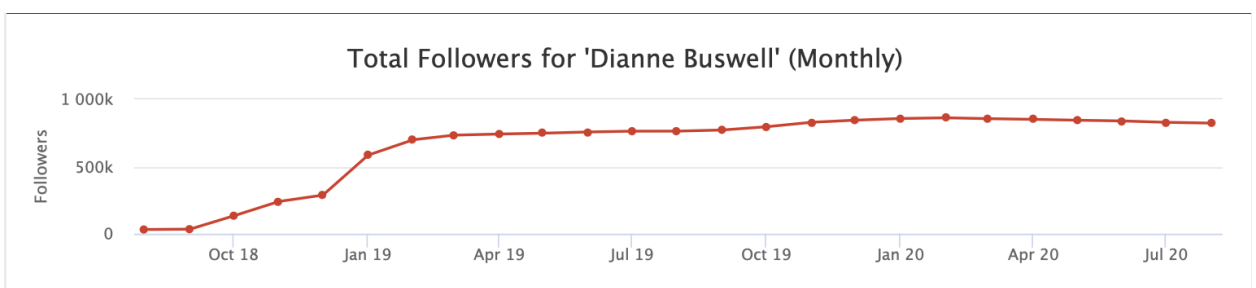


Image 6.21 - Total no. of followers for @diannebuswell Instagram by month from August 2018 - August 2020, (Socialblade, 2020a)

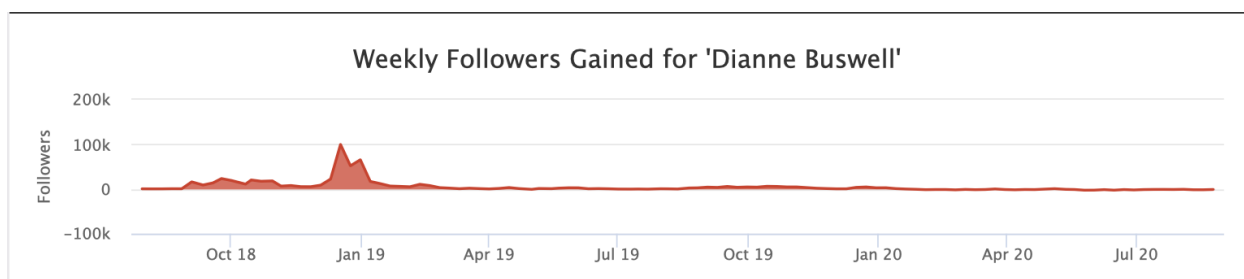


Image 6.22 - Weekly Instagram followers gained @diannebuswell from 30th July 2018 to 31st August 2020 (Socialblade, 2020a)



Image 6.23 - Spike in Dianne's Instagram followers gained in a week (SocialBlade, 2020a)

In March 2019, Dianne started her own YouTube channel where she shares vlogs, pranks, hair and beauty-related content, and has since accrued over 250,000 subscribers<sup>237</sup>. Since launching her YouTube channel, she has seen a steady increase in the numbers of subscribers each month ([Image 6.24](#)), however when we look at the weekly subscribers gained ([Image 6.25](#)), we can see that when she launched her channel, she gained more than 45,000 subscribers in her first week of the channel - the biggest gain across her channel's trajectory. This suggests the importance of the social capital Dianne had already gained from appearing in Joe's content and from her own significant Instagram following in giving her a head start when she launched her YouTube channel. This was also helped by Joe tagging her YouTube channel url in his video description boxes whenever she makes an appearance, thus

<sup>237</sup> Correct as of 6th September 2020

cross-promoting her channel and encouraging his viewers to subscribe to Dianne too. Her channel also saw a small spike of 9,000 followers gained in the week commencing 23rd September 2019. This coincided with when she posted her most viewed video *I lined up to prank my boyfriend and he had no idea!* (Dianne Buswell, 22nd September 2019) in which she pranks Joe by dressing up as a fake fan and queuing up to meet him at the stage door after a *Waitress* show, which has accrued more than 1.3 million views<sup>238</sup>.

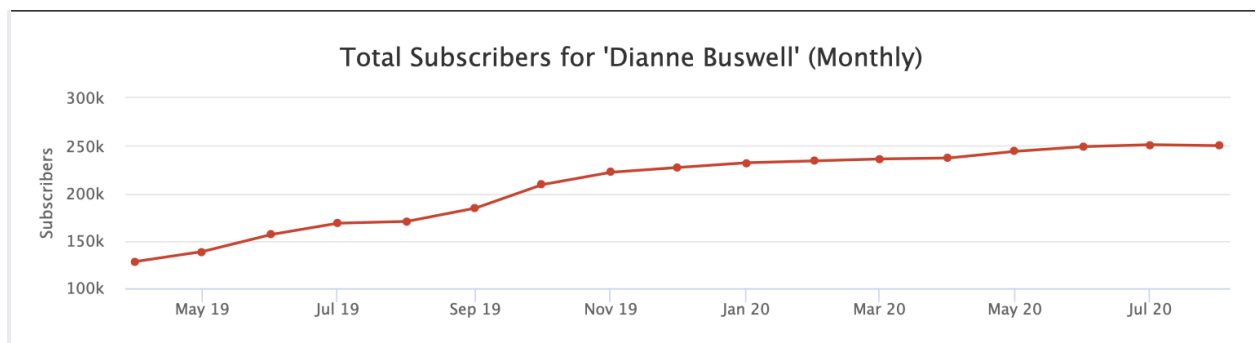


Image 6.24 - Dianne Buswell YouTube channel - total subscribers by month from March 2019 - August 2020 (SocialBlade, 2020b)

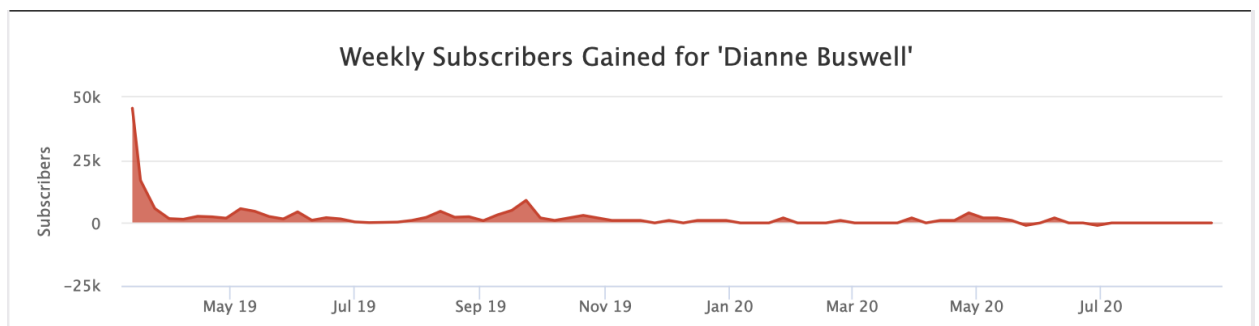


Image 6.25 - Dianne Buswell YouTube subscribers gained weekly from 14th March 2019 - 31st August 2020 (SocialBlade, 2020b)

The high prevalence of Dianne in Joe's YouTube content, as well as regular cross-promotion from tagging each other in their posts and video description

<sup>238</sup> Correct as of 6th September 2020

boxes, has allowed Joe and Dianne to build a strong online network. This strong network has enabled them to launch joint ventures that harness this strong network to create cumulative interest, and provide an existing audience-base for their joint endeavours. As part of this, Joe and Dianne have established a fun, light-hearted couple brand online through creating silly content together on each of their YouTube channels with videos such as:

*JOANNE TEACH ZALFIE<sup>239</sup> TO DANCE!* (ThatcherJoeVlogs, 19th December 2018)

*MY GIRLFRIEND DOES MY MAKEUP* (ThatcherJoeVlogs, 9th June 2019)

These videos are funny and light-hearted and help to strengthen their perceived online brand as 'Joanne' - a couple that do not take themselves too seriously<sup>240</sup>. This fun brand is comparable to the online couple brand of Joe's sister Zoe and her partner Alfie Deyes who established their relationship online through filming light-hearted collaborative videos together, and appearing in each other's vlogs. In particular, it is interesting to see Joe and Dianne film a prank video together (*OUR FIRST PRANK TOGETHER*, ThatcherJoeVlogs, 17th May 2019) as this is a key style of content Joe has become known for. This serves almost as an initiation for Dianne into the style of content Joe likes to create, whilst also endorsing her to his audience as a fun person to follow. They also started a joint YouTube channel and accompanying Instagram page called In The Pan<sup>241</sup> (Images [6.26](#) & [6.27](#)) in March 2019, which is centred around food and cooking challenges, and further builds upon their fun couple brand.

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<sup>239</sup> The shipping name (see [Glossary](#)) given to Zoe and Alfie's romantic relationship by fans

<sup>240</sup> This fun brand is comparable to the online couple brand of Joe's sister Zoe and her partner Alfie Deyes who established their relationship online through filming light-hearted collaborative videos together, and regularly appearing in each other's vlogs.

<sup>241</sup> In The Pan has accrued over 243,000 YouTube subscribers and more than 11.3 million video views, as well as nearly 50,000 Instagram followers since launching (figures correct as of 13th August 2020).

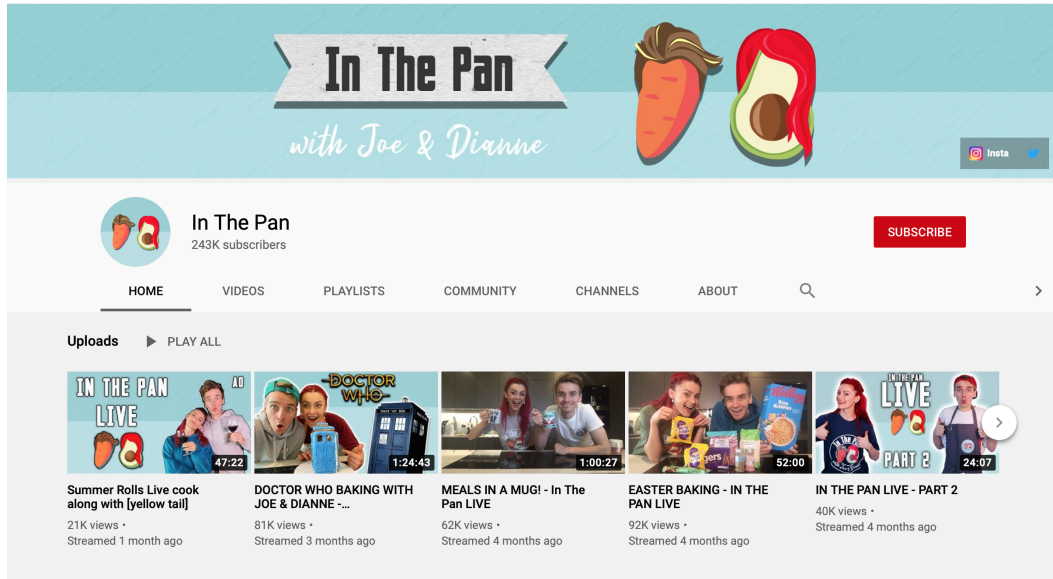


Image 6.26 - In The Pan YouTube homepage<sup>242</sup>

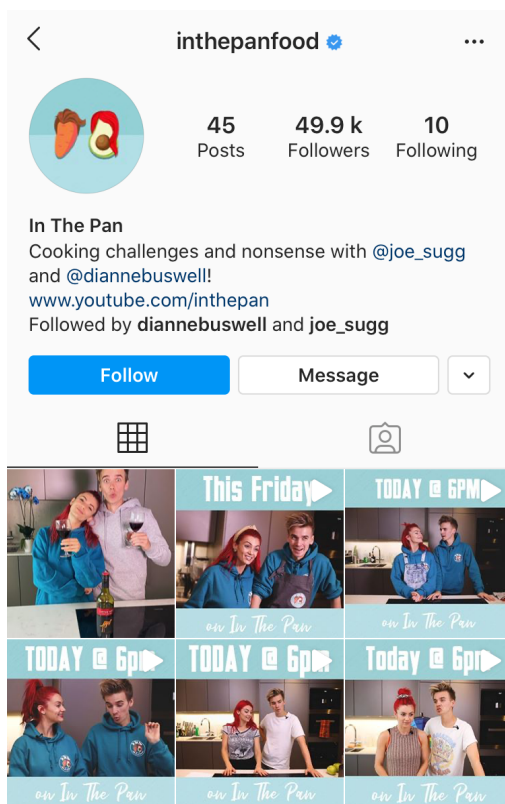


Image 6.27 - @inthepanfood Instagram profile<sup>243</sup>

<sup>242</sup> Screenshot taken 13th August 2020

<sup>243</sup> Screenshot taken 13th August 2020

## Commodification of the 'Joanne' brand

Through building a strong couple brand online, Joe and Dianne have been able to draw upon their couple branding to engage in joint commercial partnerships; take advantage of gifted items and experiences; and to capitalise upon the popularity of their brand by creating their own live touring show. In this section I will explore some of the ways their 'Joanne' couple brand has been utilised commercially.

As previously highlighted, Joe and Dianne have established themselves as a fun, light-hearted couple online through their YouTube and social media content which positions them as a couple with a good sense of humour who do not take themselves too seriously. This reflects Joe's existing individual brand identity, however their content together on Instagram presents a facet of their brand which portrays a more idealised, perfect version of their relationship, differing from the performances of authenticity and ordinariness that are central to Joe's individual brand. This style of content is more typical of Instagram feed posts where it is common for people to present a very perfected version of reality, in a consciously-arranged front-of-stage sense where self-presentation is very much being performed with an audience in mind (Goffman, 1956).

When it comes to capitalising upon their couple branding, Joe and Dianne have been able to successfully merge this idealised Instagram aesthetic with their characteristically light-hearted couple brand. This helps ensure commercial partnerships are more seamlessly integrated with their usual content and appear more authentic as a result. For example, Joe posted a series of images from luxurious gifted trips and holidays using the hashtag #followmetoe - a play on the popular #followmeto Instagram travel photo trend ([Image 6.28](#))<sup>244</sup>. Joe's images

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<sup>244</sup> #followmeto is an Instagram trend started by Murad Osmann (@muradosmann) in 2011 when he shared images of his wife stood in front of him with her arm extending back towards the camera, holding his hand, appearing to lead him and, ostensibly, the viewer towards an



take this recognisable trend and replace the photographer's hand with his foot (Images [6.29](#) & [30](#)). This swap is not instantly obvious to the viewer with Joe captioning the first image he shared in this style, 'When you see it...' (Image [6.29](#)), denoting this comic surprise to his followers. In Joe's images, Dianne appears in front of impressive scenery, portraying a sense of idyllic romance, however this is merged with their characteristically fun, silly couple branding by including Joe's foot, instead of the romantic hand-holding portrayed in Osmann's images. This humour functions to make these idyllic holiday images appear more authentically situated within Joe and Dianne's existing brands; following a similar practice to the witty captions accompanying aspirational lifestyle imagery discussed in Chapter 4<sup>245</sup>. Thus, this humour performs authenticity labour, ensuring Joe's trusting relationship with his audience is not compromised by this display of luxury (Abidin & Ots, 2016).



Image 6.28 - Murad Osmann's first followmeto image, @muradosmann, Instagram, 18th October 2011

impressive landscape beyond (Krieger, 2018). The trend has become so popular on Instagram that Osmann and his wife Nataly have created a dedicated account (@followmeto) where users can submit their own #followmeto images, which has accrued over 459,000 followers (correct as of 7th September 2020)

<sup>245</sup> See Chapter 4 - [Fake it 'til you make it: Aspirational lifestyle content on Instagram](#)





Image 6.29 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 17th July 2019



Image 6.30 - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 28th July 2019

Joe and Dianne also capitalised upon their strong couple brand through engaging in joint promotional campaigns for brands. Examples include campaigns on Joe's Instagram with Walkers Sensations Crisps and LG's Nano Cell TV and a sponsored video on Dianne's YouTube channel for watch company MVMT. In October 2019, Joe was involved in a campaign for Walkers Crisps for the launch of a new flavour ([Images 6.31 - 6.33](#)). The carousel of images show Joe and Dianne in intimate, romantic settings such as cuddling on the sofa, on holiday in New York, and eating brunch in a restaurant. Here, an idealised romantic relationship is portrayed, showing them cuddling, Joe kissing Dianne's head, and Dianne sat across the table eating brunch, with the caption explaining to Joe's followers that the crisps 'takes [him] back to lovely memories of us [Joe & Dianne] being in New York' (@joe\_sugg, 22nd October 2019). Sharing these memories in the images conveys intimacy to his followers, providing a sense that they are being given access to Joe's 'backstage' private life and relationship (Goffman, 1956; Marwick & boyd, 2011); thus aiding the effectiveness of the endorsement through merging personal narratives with the advertisement. This ensures the endorsement feels more natural and seamless with their existing couple branding, as well as Joe's individually-established ordinary self-brand and usual light-hearted content (Abidin, 2016a; Abidin & Ots, 2016).





Images 6.31 - 6.33 - Walkers Sensations ad, @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 22nd October 2019

Finally, Joe and Dianne sought to capitalise upon their couple brand through devising their own live show ([Image 6.34](#)), which was due to tour the UK across 21 dates in 2020 (however this has since been cancelled due to COVID-19). The show promised a continuation of the dancing and performance-oriented aspect of their couple brand as established on *Strictly*, offering both their online followings



and fans of *Strictly* the chance to see them perform, thus capitalising on their popularity as a romantic couple and dance duo.



Image 6.34 - *The Joe & Dianne Show* announcement - @joe\_sugg, Instagram, 28th June 2019

It is interesting to compare the 'Joanne' couple brand to that of 'Zalfie' (Joe's sister Zoe and her partner Alfie) as a similarly high-profile online relationship. Zoe and Alfie have shared images and appeared together regularly in YouTube videos since publicly confirming their relationship in August 2013, allowing viewers into the intimate spaces of their home and even vlogging from their bed, conveying a sense of access to their most private spaces (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). However, they do not appear to have commodified their couple brand to engage in joint ads and commercial ventures as Joe and Dianne have. Zoe and Alfie have professionalised their relationship to a degree though, launching a joint business A to Z Creatives in 2018; however, this is more behind-the-scenes work than the highly public commodifications of the 'Joanne' brand through advertisements and collaborative projects. However, for Joe and Dianne, their

recent prominence as a couple on *Strictly* could have heightened commercial partners' interest in creating promotional content involving them as a couple, thus drawing upon the increased public interest in their relationship to attract attention to these brand partnerships.

## ‘Joanne’: Conclusion

In conclusion, the networked relationship between Joe and Dianne online has given Joe's audience the opportunity to get to know Dianne through her featuring regularly in Joe's YouTube and social media content, allowing his audience to build a parasocial relationship with Dianne through these repeated interactions (Giles, 2010; Horton & Wohl, 1956). Viewers are given the perception of intimate access to their relationship through vlogs which document them spending time together (Marwick & boyd, 2011), conveying a sense of backstage authenticity (Goffman, 1956) and exclusive access, which is key to the appeal of influencers (Abidin, 2015). Regular cross-promotion of Dianne's YouTube and Instagram account by Joe helped her to get a head start on YouTube and gave her Instagram following a boost, increasing Dianne's perceived social capital as a result of this association as Joe's girlfriend (Sadowski, 2017) and helping her reach a wider audience (Ross, 2013).

Joe and Dianne utilised their fun couple brand to work on commercial partnerships and collaborative projects together. Key to these commodifications of their relationship was conveying authenticity, intimacy and genuine affection, which helped to situate these endeavours as natural extensions of their interactions, and merge them seamlessly with their existing content (Abidin, 2018). This ensured that the intimate, trusting relationship built with their audience is not jeopardised by these commercial endeavours (Abidin & Ots, 2016), thus maintaining their appeal to audiences as a couple brand.

## Networked relationships: Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted how networked relationships have been key to Joe's development at each stage of his career trajectory, arguing the significance of these networked relationships in building social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which can thus help him reach a wider audience (Ross, 2013). As such, these strong networked relationships have played a fundamental role in the growth and amplification of Joe's YouTube and social media profiles from gaining an initial audience and laying the foundations for parasociality by appearing in his sister's content, thus giving Joe an initial head-start when he launched his own YouTube channel; to amplifying his prominence online within the Brit Crew; and through repeated collaboration and creating attention-grabbing prank videos whilst living with Caspar Lee. The potential of these strong networked relationships and collective brands to be commodified into marketable merchandise and to sell tickets to live events has also been recognised by both Joe and the talent management agency Gleam Futures (with whom he was formerly signed). These commodities have sought to capitalise upon the strong brands built through these networked relationships and their collective popularity with audiences. However, these ventures have had mixed success and it is clear that, as with any commercialisation of influencers' brands, they require careful thought to avoid compromising the trusting relationship between creators and their audiences if they appear too money-grabbing or offer poor value for money for fans (Abidin & Ots, 2016).

I have also argued that, throughout Joe's career, his strong networked relationships with other creators have enabled him to build and strengthen parasocial relationships with audiences, and amplify attention through these networks by collaboration and cross-promotion. I consider these strategies to have been vital to the success of Joe's networked relationships as mutually beneficial exchanges of attention and amplification (Cunningham et al., 2016); which have thus enabled him to gain increased social and symbolic capital

through elevations in status within these privileged groups (Sadowski, 2019). The importance of building and utilising these online networks for Joe's own career development have been clearly recognised with Joe then utilising his own prominence to help boost his friends' (within the Buttercream Gang) and girlfriend Dianne's online profiles through regular collaboration and cross-promotion. This has led to them gaining increased levels of social and symbolic capital as a result of association with Joe and these privileged networks of YouTube and social media celebrities (Sadowski, 2019); thus enabling them to attract attention to their content, boost their followings and reach wider audiences (Ross, 2013).



# Chapter 7: Discussion

## Introduction

In the previous three chapters I explored the themes of self-branding, authenticity labour and networked relationships within the case study of Joe Sugg. In this chapter I will conclude the thesis, providing a summary of the research, the key findings and implications, as well as potential avenues for future development. Through conducting an in-depth case study focused on the career trajectory of Joe Sugg, the analysis has interrogated three key sub-research questions:

1. How does Joe negotiate and renegotiate his branded identity as part of his wider career development strategies?
2. How does Joe maintain his perceived authenticity and credibility?
3. How have networked relationships been important to the development of Joe's career and brand?

I will begin by outlining the main findings of the analysis, before considering the wider significance of these in relation to existing knowledge and ideas. Following this, I will highlight the original contributions to knowledge made by the research findings, before moving on to discuss limitations of the investigation and areas for further research.

## Key findings

### (Re-)branding the self

In response to research question 1, 'how does Joe negotiate and renegotiate his branded identity as part of his wider career development strategies?', the research highlighted two key strands - the development of Joe's brand from online to offline, and from YouTube and Instagram to mainstream media and

performance work through the identification of five key career stages; and the characteristics of his branded identity through which he conveys ordinariness, relatability and unexceptionalism alongside careful negotiation of his relationship with his audience.

The first key finding relates to the development of Joe's brand which I conceptualise into five key stages: ordinary, microcelebrity, Internet celebrity, quasi-mainstream and mainstream. The stages represent the successful growth and development of Joe's brand as he negotiates his branded identity towards more performance-oriented work. The second key finding related to Joe's construction of an ordinary, relatable self-brand which helps to situate him as authentic (Abidin, 2018; Marwick, 2013), whilst negotiating the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary as he gains social (Bourdieu, 1997), symbolic (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and celebrity capital (Driessens, 2013) as his career progresses. In addition, I identified Joe portraying himself as an archetypal clean-cut 'boy-next-door' character who appeals to both audiences (who are primarily young) and their parents (Hansen, 2018); and commercial brands and mainstream media producers keen to capitalise on his online popularity to sell products and draw younger audiences to traditional media. My analysis also revealed the common theme of connection running through Joe's self-branding, highlighting his careful negotiation of the intimate relationship with his audience alongside each career development and brand extension, offering audiences the perception of backstage access to his life in his vlogs (Goffman, 1956).

This backstage access Joe affords his audience could be likened to established celebrity industry practices - for example, for example, bands' tour DVDs<sup>246</sup> which provide *literal* backstage access to the behind-the-scenes. Indeed, the celebrity industry commonly commodifies the notion of backstage access, whether through selling DVDs of behind-the-scenes access, publishing stars'

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<sup>246</sup> As discussed in Chapter 6 - [The Brit Crew](#)

autobiographies and memoirs, or broadcasting 'uncensored' bonus content. However, there is still a degree of 'front stage' involved in all of these media products by the very nature of them being media products. Whilst the analysis identified some commodification of the backstage throughout Joe's career, this content mainly functioned to build and strengthen the intimate parasocial relationships with his audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956) through this perceived access to his life (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Ots, 2016).

Overall, I argued that it is this balance of creating a relatable, authentic brand (Abidin, 2018; Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2013), and Joe's ability to renegotiate this brand strategically over the course of his extended career trajectory, whilst still maintaining an intimate bond with his audience that has allowed him to be so successful. Strategic brand management requires the individual to construct the self as a professionalised, marketable commodity that is attractive to employers (Marwick, 2013), attracts attention and increases the individual's cultural and economic worth (Hearn, 2008). Thus, Joe's brand management practices have been crucial to his career development at every stage, allowing him to venture into areas of the labour market outside of YouTube such as publishing, mainstream media and performance work. Furthermore, Joe has continually constructed his self-brand with a degree of distinctiveness. Somewhat paradoxically, this distinctiveness comes through positioning himself as 'ordinary', 'unexceptional' and as a boy-next-door figure, which presents an interesting tension with the fact that the success of his modest self-branding has, ultimately, led him to fame. These characteristics function as USPs and have been crucial for the success of his self-brand, enabling him to stand out and appeal to audiences (Khamis et al., 2016; Smith, 2014; Turner, 2006). Thus, Joe has constructed an authentic, intimate self-brand, commodified this brand to build a career online, and strategically shifted his self-brand towards mainstream media and performance work, whilst maintaining his close relationship with audiences through providing backstage access (Goffman, 1956), and avoiding claims of 'selling out'.

The self-branding practices identified throughout Joe's career support existing conceptions of microcelebrity (Marwick, 2013, 2015; Giles, 2018) and Internet celebrity (Abidin, 2018) practices. However, Joe has implemented these practices not only to build a following and sustain his prominence online, but also to mobilise himself towards mainstream fame - something yet to be considered by these concepts. Thus, the case study builds upon existing ideas, identifying a level of wider brand management that combines these typical microcelebrity and Internet celebrity practices with more neoliberal, professionalised branding strategies that present the self as a marketable commodity to appeal to employers (Marwick, 2013). It could therefore be argued that successfully combining these strategies over the course of his trajectory has enabled Joe to appeal to both audiences and employers, whilst increasing his social, cultural and economic value (Hearn, 2008). This has, ultimately, allowed him to steadily grow in celebrity status and develop his career towards mainstream media and performance work without jeopardising the trusting relationship with his audience (Abidin & Ots, 2016). However, more work could be done to build upon these findings, eliciting further understanding around how typical online creator practices have been mobilised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) transferred towards mainstream fame.

### Authenticity labour

In response to the second research question, 'how does Joe maintain his perceived authenticity and credibility?', the analysis found that authenticity labour practices were implemented in three key areas by Joe: to authenticate his ordinary self-brand; in response to growth and shifts in status; and alongside extensions of his brand.

Firstly, I found that authenticity labour was used to strengthen and authenticate Joe's ordinary self-branding by positioning him as more relatable to audiences. This aids the development of parasocial relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956)

through perceived similarities (Rihl & Wegener, 2017), and situates him as more of an equal to audiences. This presents a key difference compared to traditional celebrities, thus strengthening his appeal to audiences who desire more ordinary, reality content perhaps as a result of the demotic turn in mainstream media (Abidin, 2018; Gamson, 2011; Marwick, 2013).

Authenticity labour was also performed in response to shifts in Joe's status in order to negotiate the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary whereby his ordinary, relatable self-branding could be called into question or deemed disingenuous. Key practices included expressions of gratitude, performing humility, and affirming personal connection to projects and extensions of his online brand. Authenticity labour enabled Joe to carefully navigate the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary, and intimacy and commodification. This ensured he did not jeopardise the trusting relationship with his audience by reassuring them his brand and any resulting extensions were genuine, and offering backstage access to these experiences in his vlogs (Goffman, 1956). These practices intersect with my findings from research question 1, and have been fundamental in Joe's ability to successfully develop his online self-brand to earn money and to shift towards mainstream media and performance work; whilst maintaining audience support and avoiding claims of 'selling out'.

Finally, authenticity labour was identified as important around extensions of Joe's brand in the form of commercial partnerships and commodifications of his brand such as YouTube events and the release of products such as books and merchandise. Authenticity even became a commodity to purchase with ticketed events offering the perception of authentic, backstage access (Goffman, 1956) through behind-the-scenes footage. I also explored what happened in the event of his authenticity being questioned for the first time as a result of the Hello World event which attracted criticism from attendees and negative press coverage. Joe engaged in authenticity practices which drew upon his ordinary, 'boy-next-door' branding by reinforcing a narrative of good intentions amongst the YouTubers

who were faced with challenges in wanting to provide attendees with a different experience to typical meet-and-greets. While this response did not acknowledge any wrongdoing or offer apologies, his authenticity labour practices (which essentially absolved responsibility) were successful in minimising damage to his relatability and reputation, ensuring the trusting relationship with his audience was not breached.

Overall, the analysis highlighted the significance of authenticity labour as part of microcelebrity and influencer brand management practices, supporting ideas from existing literature which position authenticity as important for building a successful, commodifiable microcelebrity or influencer brand (Abidin, 2018; Abidin & Ots, 2016; Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2015; Mavroudis & Milne, 2016). I have argued that Joe's ability to not only brand himself as authentic through his claims to ordinariness and relatability, but to actually *be* authentic (Banet-Weiser, 2012) throughout his career trajectory has been a primary factor in the success of his self-brand and ability to sustain a career that spans online and offline, and mainstream and traditional media. The boy-next-door version of authenticity he presents is distant from the 'gritty' authenticity often shown in traditional media forms and is very specific to his white, middle-class, aspirational persona, rather than revelatory or showing any side of him that could contradict his clean-cut image. As such, it could be argued that Joe's version of authenticity is not actually authentic at all and only performs authenticity towards the middle-class, idealised version of his life portrayed online.

## Networked relationships

In response to the final research question: 'How have networked relationships been important to the development of Joe's career and brand?', the research found networked relationships to have been essential for Joe to build social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and to reach a wider audience online (Ross, 2013). The analysis identified four networked relationships which were significant in the development of Joe's career trajectory:

- Stage 1: Ordinary - Sibling relationship with sister Zoe
- Stage 2: Microcelebrity - Friendships with The Brit Crew
- Stages 3 - 4: Internet Celebrity and Quasi-mainstream - Friendship with Caspar Lee (and, by extension, the Buttercream Gang)
- Stage 5: Mainstream - Relationship with former *Strictly* dance partner and girlfriend Dianne Buswell

Analysis of these networked relationships found that Joe primarily utilised his networks for collaboration and cross-promotion, which helped to mutually amplify parties within the network. I argued the fundamental role these networked relationships played in the growth of Joe's YouTube and Instagram profiles from gaining an initial audience and laying the foundations for parasociality, to amplifying his prominence online and helping to strengthen his ordinary self-brand. In particular, I argued that these relationships helped him to build social and symbolic capital which, in turn, enabled him to reach a wider audience (Ross, 2013). Networked relationships were found to be fundamental to Joe's growth and amplification of his online presence from the initial boost in followers he received by appearing in his sister Zoe's online content, to widening his reach by engaging in mutually-beneficial collaborations which helped cross-promote and amplify Joe and his network. These networked relationships became popular with audiences through regular collaborations and appearances in each other's content, offering the perception of backstage access to their interactions (Goffman, 1956; Marwick & boyd, 2011), thus enabling Joe's audience to form parasocial relationships with the other creators through regular interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Attempts were made to commodify these networked relationships, with groups branded together as a collective by intermediaries in a similar fashion to bands. Collaborative events, merchandise ranges and feature films were released in an attempt to capitalise upon the collective popularity of these groups and friendships, however these ventures had mixed success. As a result, I argued that commodification of networked relationships requires careful



thought, just as with other forms of commercialisation for influencers, in order to avoid compromising the crucial trusting relationship between creator and audience (Abidin & Ots, 2016).

I also argued that networked relationships helped Joe to strengthen parasocial relationships with audiences and gain social and symbolic capital as a result of being associated with privileged groups of YouTubers and Internet celebrities (Sadowski, 2019). This also had a reciprocal effect in that Joe was able to utilise his own social (Bourdieu, 1997) and symbolic capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) to amplify others by appearing in his content, resulting in a 'full circle' process. Analysis revealed the extent of this amplification process, particularly for Joe's former *Strictly* dance partner and now-girlfriend Dianne Buswell whose Instagram and YouTube followings benefited significantly from her association with Joe. Regular collaboration and cross-promotion, as well as building a strong brand as a couple helped strengthen the effectiveness of their online networked relationship as a tool for amplification and sharing capital, which was reflected in Dianne's boost in followers and their popularity as a couple, launching joint ventures including a YouTube channel and a live show.

## Wider significance of findings

Through interrogating Joe's self-branding, authenticity labour and networked relationships, the research offers unique insights into the career trajectory of arguably the most successful British YouTuber to transition into the world of mainstream fame, offering insight to his brand development strategies that have enabled him to do this so successfully. In this section, I will consider the significance of the key themes which emerged from the research in relation to wider theoretical ideas around celebrity status, ordinary celebrity, authenticity and online creator networks.

## Stages of Internet celebrification

In [Chapter 2](#), I highlighted key concepts relating to levels of celebrity status including traditional celebrity, microcelebrity, ordinary celebrities and influencers. My analysis identified five stages within Joe's career trajectory: ordinary, microcelebrity, Internet celebrity, quasi-mainstream and mainstream. Throughout these career stages, Joe broadly enters all of these levels of celebrity defined in existing literature, however past scholarship does not sufficiently explore the interactions between these types of status and the notion of transition between them. As such, my analysis challenges the notion that Internet celebrity is a fixed status and, instead, presents it as a set of stages that are in process. These stages draw upon existing concepts of celebrity, microcelebrity and influencer status, however they argue the importance of situating perceived status within creators' wider career trajectories and practices. Thus, I propose five stages of Internet celebrification, derived from my analysis of Joe's career trajectory, which can be used as a framework to understand the trajectory between online content creation and mainstream celebrity recognition as a process; rather than a fixed status.

These stages are significant in that they can be utilised to help understand the development of Internet celebrities and influencers as their prominence increases and they make the transition towards attaining mainstream recognition, thus building upon previous concepts of celebrity and Internet celebrity status which do not consider this development and interaction between levels of fame. These stages are defined by experiences and characteristics, rather than specific metrics such as followers/subscribers, because these goalposts are not fixed and shift as the industry becomes more established and the market more saturated with content creators. For example, as noted previously, 1 million subscribers on YouTube is not as significant a milestone now (when the most subscribed YouTube channel has >100m subscribers) as it was back in 2009 when the first channel reached 1 million. Therefore, I consider it important to focus on practices

and mindset, rather than using metrics as goalposts. The five stages of Internet celebrification derived from my analysis can be defined as follows:

Table 7.1 - The five stages of Internet celebrification

Stage	Qualities	Constants at all levels
Ordinary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A normal person sharing content online, usually centred around everyday aspects of their lives. They are positioned as an ordinary person within this.</li> <li>• They may have attracted a small audience outside of their immediate offline social network, but they have not attracted a significant audience beyond this.</li> <li>• They have not commercialised or commodified their platforms.</li> <li>• Their offline lives have not been impacted by their online content creation and they are not earning money or making a career from it.</li> </ul>	<p>Careful consideration and maintenance of a self-brand that is appealing to audiences, authentic and commodifiable.</p> <p>Appearing relatable to their audience.</p>
Microcelebrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They have attracted a level of prominence but this is likely limited within a local scope, either within a specific area of interest e.g, fashion, gaming, comedy, or a localised area, rather than on an international scale.</li> <li>• They consider their content and self-presentation in relation to their audience and are beginning to strategically brand themselves towards this with the intention of further growing their following and prominence.</li> <li>• They are beginning to commodify their online following/audience but are not earning significant amounts from it and so are unlikely to be able to turn this into a full-time career at this stage.</li> </ul>	<p>Building and maintaining an intimate audience relationship.</p> <p>Being authentic and performing authenticity labour.</p> <p>Building a strong network with other creators and using this to</p>

Internet celebrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They have attracted widespread prominence and a loyal online following, however this fame is limited to online audiences and they have not received mainstream media recognition.</li> <li>• They are able to earn good money from commodifying their online platforms and are able to pursue content creation full-time if they wish.</li> <li>• They may begin to release offline products such as books and other merchandise which are popular with their online audience but their customer-base for these commodities does not extend outside of this.</li> <li>• Signifiers of their online prominence emerge in their content and their life is changed as a result of their online following.</li> <li>• They may attend YouTube events and are positioned as objects of fandom in a more traditional celebrity-fan dynamic.</li> </ul>	amplify their profile.
Quasi-mainstream	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Their prominence is beginning to be recognised by the mainstream media who may invite them for low-level appearances on chat shows or radio shows. They may also be invited to participate in low-level reality TV shows and be featured in newspaper and magazine articles. Where they do participate in mainstream media, they are often not fully accepted and may have their career, success and fame questioned or criticised in comparison to non-Internet celebrities.</li> <li>• They may engage in low-level celebrity industry participation such as attending film premieres and glamorous events, however they are not deemed equal to traditional celebrities.</li> </ul>	
Mainstream	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are accepted into the mainstream media without criticism or their status and presence</li> </ul>	

	<p>being questioned, and are generally accepted as equal to other levels of celebrity participants. They may be invited onto more prestigious TV shows and celebrity reality formats.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Their recognition is widespread outside of their Internet following.</li> <li>• They are invited to participate in the traditional celebrity world as equals.</li> </ul>	
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Whilst this model of the Internet celebrification process can be applied to other influencers and online stars, it is pertinent to note that there are some factors that may make individuals more likely to succeed in transitioning through these stages. For example, Joe could be seen as possessing a set of skills that have enabled him to not only build an online persona, but transition this into a successful TV personality too. According to Bennett (2011), whilst being a television personality appears to involve just being yourself, suggesting this requires little skill or work, these on-screen personas are actually mediated constructs. As such, being a TV personality involves skill and labour to create, maintain and perform a persona that is both charismatic and appears coherent and authentic to audiences, without feeling performed (Bennett, 2011).

Whilst these skills are also essential for microcelebrities (Marwick, 2013) and influencers (Abidin, 2016b) when building their following online, the online environment is very different to that of mainstream media. Thus, these skills do not automatically translate from online to offline and therefore require work from the individual to develop their persona for mainstream audiences. As such, translation issues from online persona to TV personality could explain why some Internet celebrities who have made mainstream media appearances have been unable to transition into stage 5 of the model. For example, elsewhere (see Deller and Murphy, 2019) I have analysed Alfie Deyes and Marcus Butler's appearance on *Ant & Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* in 2016. Here, their young, fun, boy-next-door personas, which were established on YouTube, struggled to

translate to television, resulting in them being mocked, made to wear silly costumes, and having the legitimacy of their professions and statuses questioned (Deller and Murphy, 2019). Perhaps, then, Alfie and Marcus lack the innate skill sets to translate their online personas for television audiences, therefore preventing them from establishing themselves in the world of mainstream media, and thus progressing to stage 5 of the model.

The notion of transferability can also be considered for other areas of fame within the celebrity industry - for example, child stars and stars of children's TV who have transitioned towards more adult-focused media (e.g., Miley Cyrus, Fearne Cotton, Ant and Dec); soapstars and popstars who have transcended genre-specific snobbery to move into other areas (e.g., Kym Marsh, Kylie Minogue, Suranne Jones); and reality TV stars who have been able to transfer their initial moment of fame into longstanding careers (e.g. Rylan Clark-Neal, Alison Hammond, Katie Hopkins). For example, Clark-Neal originally appeared on *The X Factor* in 2012, then participated in further reality shows as a celebrity participant, thus transitioning to the proto-celebrity<sup>247</sup> stage of Deller's (2016) fame cycle. Through participating in reality shows, Clark-Neal was able to communicate a likeable, charismatic on-screen persona to audiences, demonstrating the necessary skills set out by Bennett (2011) for television personalities. His winning appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2013, and soon after featuring on *The X Factor*, allowed him to cement himself as a popular on-screen personality and helped position his image within the familiar trajectory of camp male star (Deller, 2020). As a result, Clark-Neal quickly became a regular fixture on TV screens, appearing on further celebrity reality shows and dipping his toes into the world of presenting - initially, with some guest roles, before getting his own regular slots as host (Deller, 2020). Whilst he initially entered the world of celebrity by appearing on a talent-based reality format, Clark-Neal is not known for his singing, but rather his eccentric, camp persona which has been consistent throughout his trajectory but has grown with him as he

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<sup>247</sup> See Chapter 2 - [Reality TV](#)

transitioned from pre-celebrity to professional. Thus, his success can be attributed to his skill in creating a distinctive, charismatic television personality (Bennett, 2011), and translating this successfully across multiple formats to sustain his initial moment of fame and cement his position as a household name.

For Joe, in addition to the self-branding, authenticity and networking practices identified throughout his career in this thesis, it is clear he possesses a level of natural charisma and boy-next-door charm. However, in order to have succeeded in developing his career outside of YouTube, Joe can also be considered to possess the necessary skills of being a television personality, as outlined by Bennett (2011), thus contributing to his ability to transition his career to the mainstream celebrity stage of the model. Thus, Joe's career trajectory can be considered alongside these examples of stars who have surpassed expectations to sustain ephemeral moments of fame or transcend genre-specific snobbery in the mainstream media world. It is interesting, then, to interrogate what it is about these individuals that has allowed them to succeed in sustaining their fame and venturing into more respected formats, against expectations. However, it seems it is difficult to resolutely attribute their successes to one particular thing. Whilst there is consensus in celebrity literature that individuals must possess special talents, skills or qualities to produce fame (Rojek, 2001; Turner, 2004), these stars face an interesting contention in that their initial routes to fame (often through less prestigious forms of media such as reality TV) mean their abilities are not recognised or that they are faced with genre snobbery. Thus, they may be talented, skilled and charismatic, but if their status is met with scepticism, it is difficult for them to transfer this fame based on these qualities alone. Perhaps Currid-Halkett's consideration that the 'sheer determination to be noticed' (2010: 6-7) can be a contributing factor to the production of fame holds value here too. Indeed, for stars like Joe and Clark-Neal, their trajectories suggest intentions towards attaining traditional media work and mainstream fame so perhaps there is a level of determination required in order to sustain initial moments of fame into



something with more longevity. However, there are many celestoids<sup>248</sup> (Rojek, 2001) for whom determination may be enough to get them their initial, fleeting moment of stardom, but try as they might, are not able to turn this into a fully-fledged celebrity career. What is clear, then, is that it is difficult to pinpoint the exact alchemy needed for an individual to have this transferability that enables them to successfully develop and sustain a career in the spotlight. However, analysis of Joe's career suggests that a combination of being skilled at building a charismatic, likeable persona; branding the self in a way that appeals to audiences and mainstream media stakeholders; forging networked relationships with other stars; and the willingness to succeed are contributing factors.

### Ordinary/extraordinary

My analysis identified ordinariness and relatability as key facets of Joe's self-brand, as well as an overall aim of building and maintaining a strong relationship with his audience. Existing literature posits these things as important influencer and microcelebrity practices. In particular, emphasising ordinariness and sharing the everyday are considered key influencer practices (Abidin, 2015), which aid the formation of intimate relationships with their followers through perceived access to their private lives (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Ots, 2016). Similarly, perceived closeness and direct interaction are considered key to microcelebrities' appeal (Marwick, 2013). However, traditional celebrity scholarship posits exceptionalism and charisma as essential star qualities (Currid-Halkett, 2010; Redmond & Holmes, 2007; Turner, 2004; Weber, 2007), as well as being attractive (Redmond & Holmes, 2007) and interesting (Currid-Halkett, 2010). To an extent, my analysis supports these ideas around necessary practices and qualities for these levels of recognition, however my findings also challenge these concepts in that Joe has built his self-brand upon being ordinary and relatable by sharing the everyday in his content, as is key for influencers. This ordinary, relatableness was key to his brand identity throughout

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<sup>248</sup> See Chapter 2 - [Celebrity status](#)

all five of his career stages, thus, my analysis builds on these theorisations of influencer branding and asserts that for Internet celebrities more broadly, this ability to create a self-brand that audiences can relate to is essential at all five stages of Internet celebrification outlined previously. My analysis rejects the notion that to attain mainstream recognition one must be exceptional. For Joe, it is his unexceptionalism that makes him unique. Indeed, so much of his appeal is rooted in his ordinariness that, actually, his charm at the mainstream celebrity stage of his career is his sense of unexceptionalism and ordinariness in comparison to the perceived pretence of the traditional celebrity world. It is Joe's ability to navigate the tension between ordinary and extraordinary in his self-branding that has enabled him to so successfully seem authentic in branding himself as unexceptional and relatable, despite signifiers of wealth, success and fame becoming integrated into his everyday life.

However, Joe's negotiations of the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary, and rejections of the glossiness of mainstream stardom are not unique to him. Historically, certain types of celebrity have rejected this glossiness - for example, rockstars' strategic harnessing of rebellion towards the polish of the traditional star system (Nayar, 2009), despite very much being a part of it. This functions as a performance of authenticity that is specific to the genre of rock music, and conveys to audiences that they do not conform to the typical polished conventions of stardom; yet, concurrently, this performance shows that they *are* conforming to a particular niche within the star system, such as punk, that appeals to audiences. This notion of genre-specific performances of authenticity exists in other forms of celebrity and is generally harnessed to promote success in that market - for example, stand-up comedians' casual styles and use of everyday anecdotes in their performances; and reality stars' ability to present their ordinariness with a level of individuality (Turner, 2006). Thus, Joe's harnessing of ordinariness, the everyday and the backstage within his branding can be considered a genre-specific performance of authenticity that helps him

negotiate the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary both online and in his mainstream media work.

Whilst presentations of authenticity, ordinariness and backstage access are nothing new, these practices can be considered to have a different resonance online, particularly when the extraordinary refers to someone who still has relatively little celebrity status, and their front stage performance usually takes place in the domestic setting of their home, or even their bedroom (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). The online setting and intimate style in which Joe's performance of authenticity is enacted provides the distinctiveness (Smith, 2014) and individuality (Turner, 2006) necessary to stand out from others, particularly when this is then translated into the mainstream media sphere. Indeed, whilst the demotic turn has led to an increasing prominence of ordinary people in the media (Turner, 2004), forms of ordinary celebrity that operate within the mainstream media, such as reality stars, do not offer the same levels of intimate access to their private lives as online stars like Joe. Conversely, other online stars, such as Joe's sister Zoe, who also offer audiences this sense of ordinariness and intimate access to their lives have been unable to successfully translate their online self-brands to traditional media forms in the same way Joe has. Thus, Joe's ability to not only harness ordinariness and intimacy within his brand, but to also successfully translate and perform this for mainstream media audiences makes him distinctive, and a unique example in the arena of Internet celebrity. However, it is pertinent to note that, whilst there is a level of distinctiveness which has allowed Joe to find a niche and offer something slightly different from other mainstream stars, he is not *actually* very distinctive. He is white, middle-class, cis-gendered and conventionally attractive - privileges which would have likely made his ability to attain mainstream recognition far easier than if he was a black, working-class, queer, outspoken YouTuber who was *actually* distinct from existing stars. Thus, Joe's distinctiveness is only unique to a point and, whilst this is still an important factor in his ability to stand out from other online creators and existing mainstream stars, it only offers a very 'safe' and slight divergence from

the typical mould of mainstream celebrity, which would have likely made it easier for him to be accepted by the traditional media and celebrity world.

Also key to Joe's navigation of these tensions is his ability to manage his self-brand alongside careful consideration of the relationship with his audience. Existing literature highlights perceptions of closeness and direct access to creators and their lives as key to microcelebrities' appeal (Marwick, 2013). Similarly, for influencers, the intimate relationship built with followers through sharing aspects of their private lives online is central to their charm (Abidin, 2015; Abidin & Ots, 2016). Conversely, traditional celebrities are deemed superior in status which prompts adoration from the public (Gamson, 2011), however the dynamic is characterised by distance and traditional celebrities are generally admired from afar. My research identified that building and maintaining this intimate relationship, even when beginning to reach mainstream recognition, was crucial to Joe's ability to develop his self-brand from YouTube to mainstream media and performance work without losing audience support or being deemed to have sold out. Thus, I argue that in the Internet celebrification process, it is essential for creators to maintain this sense of closeness they forge with audiences through sharing their private lives and interacting with followers when building their following online as their prominence increases. Analysis of Joe's career has also demonstrated the value in maintaining a strong online presence and giving perceptions of access to their private lives, even when their ultimate branding strategy is to move away from online content creation towards traditional media forms. As such, I posit fostering and maintaining this audience relationship as a fundamental part of online content creators' branding practices.

## Authenticity devices

Previous research has situated the importance of authenticity for microcelebrities (Giles, 2010; Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2013) and influencers (Abidin, 2018; Abidin & Ots, 2016), however existing ideas lack clarity on *how* to actually convey authenticity in online content and the labour involved in this. As such, my

research builds upon these existing ideas to present authenticity as crucial at all stages of the Internet celebrity spectrum (as previously outlined). Practices identified in my analysis of Joe's content include:

- Conveying ordinariness through sharing everyday aspects of his life
- Humour
- Childishness
- Performed amateurism
- Declaring personal significance of brand extensions

These authenticity devices foster a sense of perceived similarity, helping strengthen the development of parasocial relationships between Joe and his audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Rihl & Wegener, 2017). They also authenticate extensions of his brand, positioning opportunities as dreams-come-true and driven by passion, rather than financial gain (Audrezet et al., 2020; Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). This ensures the trusting bond between Joe and his audience is not jeopardised by the commodification of his brand (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Cunningham et al., 2016) or elevations in social and celebrity status.

Significantly, the devices identified in relation to Joe can offer insight towards other online content creators' self-presentational practices. Whilst childishness as an authenticity device may be more specific to Joe<sup>249</sup>, performed ordinariness, humour, calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017), and passionate authenticity (Audrezet et al., 2020) can certainly be applied to online content creators' authenticity practices more broadly. As such, these authenticity devices offer new insight to celebrity and influencer cultures scholarship around *how* creators convey authenticity in order to negotiate the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary, which are so essential to building a successful career online.

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<sup>249</sup> Although, arguably, this may also be relevant to other YouTubers who employ similar boy band-style 'innocent masculinities' within their branding to target audiences of young, primarily female fans (Hansen, 2018: 195); however, on the whole, childishness as an authenticity device is less generalisable to YouTubers more broadly who are operating outside of this specific realm.

## The significance of creator networks

Existing literature on YouTube acknowledges it as a networked, community space (Burgess & Green, 2009b; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009), considering it as a space for co-creation and social interaction (Burgess & Green, 2009b), for expression for subcultural groups (Jenkins, 2010), and for audiences to interact with creators (Berryman & Kavka, 2017). Creator networks are highlighted by Bishop (2018b) as manifesting into online and offline friendships, with creators collaborating on videos together and vlogging their time spent with one another. Collaborations as a video format are also acknowledged as beneficial for YouTubers to grow their audiences (Bishop, 2018) as they allow for audiences to be shared and potentially combined (Cunningham et al., 2016). The extent of the power and prevalence of these mutually beneficial networks are not sufficiently explored in existing literature. Moreover, this notion of creator networks appears yet to be considered in relation to Instagram users. Thus, my research findings present new insight in this area, building upon the limited scholarship around the value of networked relationships for online content creators.

My research has demonstrated the significance of building networks with other creators through analysis of Joe's career trajectory, identifying networked relationships as being fundamental for him to build social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1997; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), and in growing his audience online. My analysis suggests that creators are aware of the value in building strong networks and collaborating with others online - something particularly shown in my analysis in the quasi-mainstream and mainstream stages of Joe's career where he was able to raise the profiles of others through association with him, and collaborating with them on content. As such, I argue the significance of these findings to online creators more widely, asserting that an essential part of the self-branding and career development process for online content creators who are wanting to raise their profile online is building connections and forming strong online networks through regular collaboration and cross-promotion. This is something that appears to have been particularly harnessed by YouTubers and

TikTok creators in recent years who have noted the power of cross-network amplification from the earlier waves of prominent content creators such as the Brit Crew, and have taken this to the next level through the phenomenon of content houses. As such, the insights drawn from my analysis can offer valuable knowledge on earlier iterations of promotional networks on YouTube as scholars continue to research digital cultures and online content creator phenomena.

## Contribution to knowledge

My research draws unique insight towards the Internet celebrification process, as well as the strategic brand development practices utilised to transition this Internet stardom towards mainstream media. Whilst existing literature has outlined some key practices of celebrities, microcelebrities and influencers, there is little discussion of the development between different stages of online and mainstream prominence. My research conceptualises five key stages which can be used to understand the spectrum of Internet to mainstream celebrification, contributing a substantial framework for celebrity studies and Internet research scholars to situate levels of recognition and status. My research offers a unique contribution in that it considers the interaction and development between previously-defined stages and levels of status within celebrity and influencer research, identifying the key practices and strategies within Joe's career that have helped make him so successful in both online and mainstream media spheres. As such, my research provides what I consider the first significant longitudinal study into a British YouTuber's career trajectory, exploring their experiences and the practices implemented at each stage of the Internet celebrification process.

## Limitations and areas for future development

In this section, I will reflect on limitations of my research, considering issues raised by the dynamic nature of Internet phenomena and digital cultures and



developments within Joe's career trajectory since data collection; as well as limitations of the findings as a result of the methodological approach. In addition, I will highlight areas for future research, considering how further inquiry could build upon my findings to draw insight towards the phenomenon of Internet celebrification and its interactions with the traditional celebrity world.

The research was conducted during a period of growth and development for YouTube and Instagram, as well as a time in which influencer cultures have developed (and continue to develop) hugely, increasing in prominence and prevalence. The research was also undertaken during a time of significant growth and development for Joe, therefore key changes occurred within his career and in digital cultures during the research period. The fast-changing, effervescent nature of YouTube, Instagram and influencer cultures as digital phenomena presents challenges to researchers, particularly when conducting research over an extended time period as this research did.

When I initially began researching, Joe's sister Zoe Sugg was considered the most successful and interesting of the initially-planned three case studies (from a research perspective). However, during the research period this has shifted dramatically as Joe's career trajectory has taken him from perhaps the least significant of the three cases, to the most interesting example to be studied. As such, it is interesting to consider why she has not followed the same trajectory as her brother and whether gender has perhaps been a limiting factor for Zoe. Female celebrities are typically subjected to heightened media scrutiny and critique (Geraghty, 2000; Holmes & Negra, 2011) with coverage of female content creators often presenting their beauty, fashion and lifestyle content as trivial, self-indulgent and even potentially damaging to followers (Deller & Murphy, 2019). Whilst there has not been room in this study to explore these gender differences in-depth, my pilot study into Zoe's content, self-presentation and wider representation identified scrutiny from both audiences and mainstream media platforms. This was particularly evident around her book's ghostwriting

scandal and the £50 advent calendar she released in 2017, which attracted widespread critique and prompted #zoellaisoverparty to trend on Twitter. This reflects a public fascination with female stars' success, described by Holmes and Negra (2011) as a 'waiting game' for their eventual downfall when their achievements collapse under pressure and their prominence demises. As this research has highlighted, Joe does not appear to have been subjected to this same level of scrutiny which could be a contributing factor to why he has been able to achieve a level of mainstream success his sister has not. However, it is also worth noting that, whilst Zoe did participate in several mainstream media ventures earlier in her career, she appears to have decidedly shifted away from this avenue following her book's ghostwriting scandal<sup>250</sup>; instead continuing to focus her career towards online endeavours, physical merchandise and publishing.

The huge shifts in Joe's career trajectory, as discussed in the analysis, demonstrate the dynamic nature of Internet phenomena and the fluidity of Internet celebrity status and creator prominence. Joe has been able to successfully continue to build and sustain his online prominence, whilst also transitioning some of this recognition into the mainstream media and traditional celebrity sphere, however this ability is rare. Over the course of the research, Internet 'cancel culture' has become a pervasive phenomenon whereby creators' livelihoods are at the behest of audience opinion and putting one foot wrong can lead to them being 'cancelled' in an instant. Cancel culture has become such a common concept in modern parlance that the Cambridge English Dictionary (2020a) even offers a definition for the phenomenon:

a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you

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<sup>250</sup> With the exception of an appearance on charity celebrity reality show *The Great Sport Relief Bake Off* in February 2015.

While Joe has, so far, managed to avoid any controversies or scandals which may lead him to be 'cancelled' (asides from the collective scandal of Hello World), this is an inherent risk of contemporary celebrity research, particularly that which concerns Internet celebrities like Joe. Both Joe's sister Zoe and her partner Alfie Deyes have been involved in scandals, leading to calls for them to be cancelled which may have stunted the growth of their celebrity status. Shifts in celebrity culture more broadly mean that most traditional celebrities either engage in a degree of social media self-presentation or are discussed and held to account by online audiences, regardless of their own social media usage. As such, it is important for anyone researching celebrity to account for the potential that their object(s) of study could be 'cancelled' and have their whole public perception shifted drastically overnight. As such, the longitudinal approach to this study is advantageous meaning that if Joe had been subject to 'cancellation' during the data collection period, this would not have impacted the accuracy of the research as it allows for focus on multiple 'moments' within his career, taking into account the longer-term context. Whilst this potential limitation did not directly impact on my data collection and analysis, the dynamic nature of celebrity status and public perception means that Joe could fall victim to a degree of cancellation after this research has been carried out, therefore changing the social and cultural context within which this research would be understood.

The ever-changing nature of online phenomena also presents challenges to researchers in terms of the potential for platform, cultural and industry shifts during the research period which could significantly impact the ability to conduct the research, as well as altering the cultural framework within which the phenomena is understood. For my research, there was also the additional challenge of potential shifts in Joe's career during the research period. As much of my data was collected historically in 2019 from Joe's past online content, new developments and shifts in the industry which occurred after this did not impact the sociocultural context within which this data was understood. As the data

collection period did not end until 31st December 2019, I was collecting some data as it occurred, thus keeping up to date with new developments in both Joe's career and the wider cultural context was vital. In addition, the dynamic nature of an individual's career trajectory, coupled with the fast-moving cultural context of the Internet means that the phenomena of study are constantly in a state of flux. As such, my research is limited in that the changing nature of the phenomenon means that by the time the research is finished, it is likely already outdated. To reduce the impact of this limitation on my research, it was important to set a clear boundary where the data collection ended, giving sufficient time for the research to be written up and reviewed after this. As such, I am confident I have been able to accurately represent Joe's career trajectory within the social and cultural context at the time data was collected. However, the ever-changing nature of the phenomenon means that notable changes in Joe's career and the wider digital cultural landscape have occurred since the end of 2019, thus my research is limited in accounting for developments since then. Notable developments in Joe's career development since data collection ended include:

- Appearing as a contestant on Channel 4's *The Great Celebrity Bake Off for SUTC*<sup>251</sup> in March 2020.
- Announcing he had been cast for a role in the upcoming fourth series of BBC drama *The Syndicate* (release date to be confirmed).
- Continuation of regularly uploading YouTube and Instagram content with an increased prevalence of gaming videos on his channel ThatcherJoeGames, including a series of videos of him and girlfriend Dianne playing computer game *The Sims 4* together.
- Releasing a song (and accompanying music video) titled *SAY IT NOW* with friends Conor Maynard, Joe Wantie and Will Darbyshire which was written and produced within 24-hours in his apartment, although from his YouTube video which followed the song's official music video, titled *The Truth about the new song..* (ThatcherJoe, 23rd February 2020), this

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<sup>251</sup> Stand Up To Cancer

appears to be more of a fun venture than a serious foray into music artistry.

- Sharing lots of collaborative online content with Dianne during the UK's COVID-19 lockdown between March-July 2020, including livestreamed workouts and dance tutorials on Dianne's YouTube channel, as well as livestream cooking videos on their shared In The Pan channel.
- TikTok became a prominent platform for content creation by Joe in 2020, particularly in the COVID-19 lockdown where he frequently uploaded content centred around dance routines and challenges with Dianne, as well as comedy. He has now accrued over 1.1 million followers<sup>252</sup> on the platform.

Of course, my research cannot account for things that happen outside of the data collection period, however it is valuable to reflect on the limitations regarding the research's currency, as well as highlighting key developments that have occurred outside of the data collection period to contextualise the research in more recent developments. Naturally, things will continue to change and develop within both Joe's career and the wider Internet and celebrity cultural contexts, thus there is potential for further research to explore Joe's career trajectory within the mainstream media sphere as he becomes more established in his shift towards performance work, as well as how he continues to navigate his online content alongside this.

A further potential limitation of my research is its focus on one case, making it therefore limited in its ability to offer generalisations to the phenomenon of YouTube and Internet celebrity culture more widely, however this was not the aim of the study. However, there would have certainly been benefits to using a multiple-case study approach, which would have allowed for a greater number of creators to be explored. This, then, would have enabled comparisons to be drawn across cases and even for the investigation of counter cases to explore

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<sup>252</sup> Correct as of 26th October 2020

where individuals have been less successful in transitioning through the stages of internet celebrification. However, gathering and analysing data across multiple cases would have been highly time-consuming, which would mean sacrificing some of the depth and richness of the data to maintain the feasibility of the study. Whilst there would have been benefits from drawing cross-case comparisons, the aim of this research was to produce a rich descriptive account of arguably the most successful British YouTuber to break into the mainstream media, which I believe the inquiry has done successfully.

This does, however, leave the door open for further research to be conducted using a multiple-case approach, however this would benefit from a team of researchers to ensure the large volumes of data gathered would remain manageable. Studies focused on British creators would find a limited pool of creators from which to focus on if research is concerned with successful transitions into mainstream media. Thus, it may be useful to consider less successful transitions in order to understand factors that determine the success of online creators' appearances in mainstream media. Future studies could also explore examples of YouTube and social media stars from other countries who have been able to transition their online fame towards mainstream stardom. Gender, race and class also emerged in this research as potentially significant factors in the Internet to mainstream celebrification process, however there was not scope to interrogate these in detail here. Joe (and his wider network) are representative of very particular white, middle-class, aspirational ideals which are already over-represented in the media and celebrity industries; thus a critical investigation of gender, race and class as contributing factors in the Internet to mainstream trajectory is an area ripe for further study.

Another area this research has not explored is audience data. Collecting data from audiences is common in celebrity research, particularly within fan studies because it allows researchers to gain a better understanding of fans' practices and motivations, and how these link to wider social, cultural and economic

contexts (Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington, 2007). This, then, can provide valuable insights into contemporary culture, and offer deeper understandings of the ways individuals 'form emotional bonds with ourselves and others in a modern, mediated world' (Gray et al., 2007: 10). One approach is to use Twitter data to explore interactions between celebrity and audience - for example, Giles (2021) employs a discursive conversation analysis approach to draw insight from celebrities' tweets and audience responses that also accounts for the contexts in which they occur. Other common methods of gathering audience data include anonymous online surveys (e.g., Bennett, 2014), ethnography (e.g., McCann & Southerton, 2019; Soukup, 2006) and autoethnography (e.g., Patrick, 2019) of online and offline audience communities.

Gathering data from audiences would have offered potential to gain insight from Joe's following in response to the brand and career development stages and specific ventures explored in the research. This would have opened up a further line of inquiry around audience opinion and sentiment in relation to these endeavours by gathering and analysing artefacts such as YouTube and Instagram comments, Twitter responses and discussion threads on forum sites. This approach was considered in earlier stages of the research design, however pilot testing identified these forms of audience data to be highly time-consuming to gather and manage and offered limited value to the overall research aims. As such, this line of inquiry was not pursued further, therefore the research is limited in its ability to offer insight towards audiences' perspectives and responses to Joe's career development. However, this was not the aim of the inquiry, but it does leave room for further research to explore audiences' responses to the growth and development of 'ordinary' individuals through the Internet celebrification process. Future studies could interrogate audiences' perceptions of Joe and other Internet celebrities at different stages of their careers, exploring how branding, authenticity and networking are perceived by followers, and what constitutes successful and unsuccessful negotiations of the tensions between ordinariness, authenticity and celebrity status. However, content creators'



audiences are not necessarily a homogenous community and are often diffused across many online and offline spaces (particularly for Joe whose audience now extends far beyond the Internet as a result of his mainstream media work and offline brand extensions), with varying degrees of participation and engagement. Thus, future audience studies would need to look beyond YouTube and Instagram comments to account for this, ensuring the voices of audience members who are more visible in their engagement with creators' content do not dominate and, likewise, avoiding the exclusion of voices of members who do not publicly comment from the inquiry.

As YouTube and Internet fame becomes a more established phenomenon and more online creators are enjoying a level of Internet and quasi-mainstream recognition, further research could also be conducted to explore the second and third wave of prominent online content creators to explore how their career development practices follow or reject the practices utilised by their predecessors such as Joe. These new creators have the benefit of starting their online profiles with the knowledge that their platforms offer potential for monetisation and building a career. Moreover, as the influencer industry and related cultural intermediaries become more firmly established, the scope for professionalisation is seemingly greater. As such, it would be interesting to consider the practices implemented by newer waves of creators, interrogating the strategies they have employed and avoided in order to grow their followings and build relationships with their audience, with the benefit of more knowledge and intermediary support than the first wave of professionalised Internet creators such as Joe.

## Concluding remarks

Using an in-depth single case study approach focused on Joe Sugg, the research has explored how the notions of self-branding, authenticity and networked relationships have been important to his wider career development as the most successful example of a British YouTuber who has successfully

transitioned his online fame into mainstream media prominence. The research utilised digital ethnographic approaches, encompassing YouTube and Instagram-specific scraping and observational data collection methods, as well as gathering visual and textual data from mainstream media and other ancillary sources in order to analyse key examples from Joe's career trajectory. Whilst it would have been impossible to look at every single YouTube video, Instagram post, television appearance or news article featuring Joe, I have attempted to provide analysis of examples that are representative of his wider self-branding, authenticity labour and networking practices. As such, I am confident this research has been able to add value to existing debates and theorisations around Internet phenomena and celebrity culture through the analysis conducted in this study.

The analysis has identified five stages within Joe's career which I present as having wider implications towards helping understand the process of Internet celebrification more broadly through key characteristics and indicators, rather than follower metrics. I have identified ordinariness, relatability and portraying a 'boy-next-door' image as the key self-branding strategies which have enabled Joe to successfully build an appealing, authentic and commodifiable brand, which carefully navigates the tensions between ordinary and extraordinary. My findings also contribute to scholarship on celebrity and influencer cultures around *how* creators convey authenticity and the devices employed to do so through my analysis of Joe's authenticity practices. Finally, my findings build upon limited scholarship around the value of creator networks online, demonstrating the significance of these as part of the self-branding and career development process for online content creators who wish to amplify their online profile. Overall, my research contributes to academic knowledge on the topic of Internet celebrification, providing a substantial framework within which the spectrum of recognition and status from online content creator to mainstream media prominence can be understood. The findings provide a unique perspective in considering the interaction and development between existing concepts of

celebrity status and Internet fame, whilst also highlighting the key practices and strategies necessary to transcend the Internet celebrification scale and forge a sustainable career from online popularity.

As I have established, digital phenomena and Internet stardom are dynamic and ever-changing and, as such, it is impossible for research to retain currency with the landscape constantly in a state of flux and developments in individuals' statuses and trajectories. Likewise, consumers of digital culture are fickle and creators remain at the behest of audience opinion, carrying the potential risk they could be 'cancelled' at any minute and, as such, celebrity status is never fixed or permanent. Thus, this research has attempted to interrogate a snapshot of Joe Sugg's career trajectory during the data collection period. However, whilst Joe's celebrity status has increased in a linear fashion towards increased prominence and status during the data collection period, the nature of Internet fame is far more complex than this. Thus, it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty whether Joe's career trajectory will continue to stay firmly within the fifth mainstream celebrity stage in the future, or whether it will take steps forwards, backwards, or even perhaps sideways to an as yet undefined career stage as the ever-changing digital and celebrity cultural rules continue to be rewritten.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: From ordinary to mainstream: Joe Sugg's career timeline

Year	Date	Event	Stage
2009	May	Joins Twitter - @joe_sugg	Ordinary
2011	26th June	Appears in Zoe's video <i>The Sibling Tag</i> on her YouTube channel	
	13th November	Joins YouTube - ThatcherJoe	
2012	30th July	Uploads first post to Instagram @joe_sugg - a picture of him holding a Rolleiflex film camera captioned 'So edgy...'	
	7th August	Uploads first video to YouTube on ThatcherJoe channel, titled <i>An Introduction to ThatcherJoe</i>	
	4th December	First mention in a tweet from Gleam Futures suggesting this was around the time he was signed by them.	Microcelebrity
2013	19th January	Uploads first video on ThatcherJoeVlogs YouTube channel titled <i>An introduction to ThatcherJoeVlogs</i>	
	August	Attends first VidCon followed by YouTubers' holiday in LA for a few days afterwards to spend time with rest of Brit Crew + Louis Cole, Jack and Finn Harries, Troye Sivan, Tyler Oakley, Sawyer Hartman, Grace Helbig and Mamrie Hart	
	5th September	Invited onto Scott Mills' show on Radio 1 to play Innuendo Bingo	

	November	Hits 1m subscribers on ThatcherJoe - shares <i>1 Million Subscribers</i> video on 24th November 2013	
2014	March	Attends first Playlist Live in Florida with Zoe, Alfie, Louise, Marcus, Caspar, Tanya, Jim and Louis	Internet celebrity
	20th March	Comic Relief upload <i>The YouTube Boy Band - it's all about you(tube)</i> video to YouTube	
	April	Attends ITATube with Zoe, Alfie, Caspar, Marcus, Louise, Jim and Tanya	
	5th April	Uploads video to ThatcherJoeVlogs titled <i>Premiere &amp; Moving out!</i> In which he moves to London into a shared flat with Caspar Lee	
	May	Hits 2m subscribers on ThatcherJoe	
	May	Attends Digifest London with Zoe, Alfie, Marcus, Caspar, Louise, Tanya, Jim, Louis Cole, Troye Sivan, Tyler Oakley, Connor Franta and Joey Graceffa	
	June	Attends Vidcon 2014 with Zoe, Alfie, Marcus, Niomi, Tanya, Jim and Louise	
	2nd June	Uploads first gaming video on ThatcherJoeGames titled <i>And so it begins..   Sims 3</i>	
	September	Hits 1m subscribers on ThatcherJoeVlogs	
	October	Hits 3m subscribers on ThatcherJoe	
	November	Joe announced as part of the group involved in the Band Aid charity Christmas single <i>Do They Know It's Christmas?</i> - 17th November released digitally, 8th December released as physical copy	
2015	1st February	Uploads YouTube video announcing his debut graphic novel <i>Username: Evie</i> titled <i>MY BIG ANNOUNCEMENT!</i> (ThatcherJoe)	Quasi-mainstream

	February	Attends Playlist Live 2015 with Zoe, Alfie, Marcus, Louise, Caspar, Jim, Oli White, Louis Cole, the SacconeJolys, Chai Cameron and Will Darbyshire
	March	Hits 4m subscribers on ThatcherJoe
	27th March	<i>The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water</i> released where Joe voiced Kyle the Seagull alongside Caspar Lee as Seagull 2 (both uncredited)
	June	Hit 2m subscribers on ThatcherJoeVlogs
	July	Hits 5m subscribers on ThatcherJoe
	10th September	<i>Username: Evie</i> published
	21st September	Hits 1m subscribers on ThatcherJoeGames following him tweeting 'My gaming channel youtube.com/thatcherjoegames is SOOOO close to 1 Million subscribers! :D' and a fan-made hashtag #ThatcherJoeGamesTo1Mil gaining traction on Twitter.
	23rd November	<i>Joe and Caspar Hit The Road</i> released (straight to DVD)
2016	February	Hits 6m subscribers on ThatcherJoe
	May	Hits 3m subscribers on ThatcherJoeVlogs
	June	Attends Vidcon 2016 with Caspar and Louise
	July	Hits 7m subscribers on ThatcherJoe
	22nd September	<i>Username: Regenerated</i> published
	18th October	Invited onto Scott Mills' show on Radio 1 to play Innuendo Bingo with Caspar Lee
	21st November	<i>Joe and Caspar Hit The Road USA</i> released
	9th December	SuggLife merchandise launch



2017	2nd March	<i>Release The Hounds: Famous &amp; Freaked</i> episode airs	
	June	Hits 8m subscribers on ThatcherJoe - shares video on ThatcherJoeVlogs titled <i>8 MILLION SUBSCRIBERS!</i> on 21st June	
	18th August	SuggLife x PB pop-up shop dates announced on Instagram	
	23rd August - 3rd September	SuggLife x PB pop-up shop opens in London	
	21st September	<i>Username: Uprising</i> published	
	28th - 29th October	HelloWorld Live event takes place, resulting in backlash from disappointed attendees	
	3rd November	Joe announces that he and Caspar have parted ways with Gleam Futures management	
2018	14th June	Announces launch of Margravine Management with Caspar Lee on his Instagram	
	29th August - 15th December	Starred as a contestant on <i>Strictly Come Dancing</i>	Mainstream
	16th December	Confirms relationship with <i>Strictly</i> dance partner Dianne Buswell in Instagram post	
	31st December	Presents BBC New Years Eve Live concert with Stacey Dooley	
2019	18th January - 10th February	On tour for <i>Strictly Come Dancing Live!</i>	
	22nd February	Co-hosts <i>The One Show</i> with Alex Jones	
	7th March	Wins Social Media Superstar award at The Global Awards 2019	
	15th March	Features as one of the hosts for <i>Red Nose Day</i> telethon	

	8th April	<i>Wonder Park</i> film released in which Joe has small voice acting part as Gus alongside Caspar who plays Cooper	
	27th May	<i>The Amazing World of Gumball</i> episode airs in which Joe guest stars (voice acting)	
	20th August	Announces he will be appearing in <i>Waitress: The Musical</i> in London's West End as Ogie. Announcement was made on Waitress' YouTube channel as well as a video on ThatcherJoeVlogs titled <i>I Auditioned For A West End Musical</i> .	
	25th August	Announced as co-host for <i>Strictly Come Dancing: The Official Podcast</i> for 2019 series alongside Kim Winston	
	7th September - 15th February 2020	<i>Strictly</i> podcast series runs	
	9th September	Stars in <i>Waitress: The Musical</i> until beginning of December	
	18th October	<i>A Shaun The Sheep Movie: Farmageddon</i> film released in which Joe voiced the Pizza Delivery Boy character	

## Appendix 2: The World of YouTube and Social Media: Glossary

### A AD / #ad

Labelling commonly used to denote sponsored and paid-for advertorial content on Instagram and YouTube in order to adhere to UK regulating body CAP's Code which states that it must be obvious where content includes advertisement (CAP & CMA, 2018). This also includes where influencers are using affiliate links to products which means they receive a small percentage of commission on sales (CAP & CMA, 2018).

### Affiliate links

Affiliate links are marketing devices which enable individuals (affiliates) to earn commission on products they recommend when purchases are made through a unique URL (Shopify, 2019). They are commonly used by YouTubers and influencers in video description boxes, swipe up links on Instagram stories, and embedded within blog posts.

### Algorithm

'At the most basic level, an algorithm is a sequence of programming code that instructs a piece of software to make a certain decision based on certain inputs. These snippets of code interact with other snippets of code, sometimes adjusting themselves to work more efficiently, in which case they're called self-learning algorithms. ... algorithms are the mechanisms that yield personalized results from search engines like Google or Bing, provide specific recommendations on music- or video-streaming services like Netflix or Spotify, or result in targeted advertisements.' (Markham, 2018: 654-655)

## AmityFest

AmityFest was a live tour that took place in October 2014 with shows in Brighton, Birmingham and Liverpool, which featured a line-up centred around nine of Gleam Futures' then-managed YouTubers – Zoe Sugg, Alfie Deyes, Joe Sugg, Marcus Butler, Caspar Lee, Jim Chapman, Louise Pentland, Tanya Burr and Niomi Smart. Standard tickets to the show were marketed as providing two hours of the YouTubers on-stage 'giving you a special 'Hello!', whilst those purchasing VIP tickets would get 'a **whole hour** with [the YouTubers] before the main show' where they were 'able to hang out', as well as receiving 'a special goodie bag!' (AmityFest, 2014, emphasis in original). The event was clearly marketed at a young audience demographic, with the website offering guidance that under 14s must be accompanied by an adult to be permitted entry, advising 'If you are a parent accompanying an under age person to the VIP hour and you don't want a goodie bag or to meet us YouTubers yourself, you don't need a VIP ticket' (AmityFest, 2014).

## C Challenges

Challenges are a popular type of entertainment video on YouTube which often occur as part of a COLLABORATION, although creators may create challenge videos on their own. They typically involve the YouTuber and their collaborators (if applicable) engaging in silly, light-hearted challenges or games such as the 'trying not to laugh challenge' or the 'electric shock challenge'. These challenge formats often become trends across the YouTube platform as other YouTubers decide to join in, and can sometimes become VIRAL if they gain particular traction.

## Collaboration / collab

Popular genre of YouTube involving two or more creators collaborating on content. This usually works in a reciprocal exchange with collaborators filming a separate video for each party's channel. Collaborations are popular with YouTubers because of their ability to encourage the combining of audience communities (Cunningham et al., 2016), offering potential for each party involved in the collaboration to grow their following (Bishop, 2018) through being introduced to a wider audience demographic who may, in turn, then subscribe to the collaborators' channels.

## D Daily Mix

DailyMix was a YouTube channel launched by talent management agency Gleam Futures in 2012 in partnership with independent TV production studio all3media. The channel featured beauty, fashion and lifestyle content, as well as challenges and giveaways, presented in television-style formats. Videos were presented by a core group of Gleam-managed YouTubers which included Joe and Zoe Sugg, alongside Tanya Burr, Jim Chapman and sisters Sam and Nic Chapman (a.k.a. Pixiwoo), and regularly featured other popular YouTubers as guests.

## Digifest

Digifest is a live tour which is part of DigiTour – a US-based social media events production company who have been putting on YouTube fan events since 2011, giving fans the chance to see their favourite online video creators perform on-stage. DigiTour NYC 2013 saw British YouTubers Zoe Sugg, Alfie Deyes, Caspar Lee, Tanya Burr, Jim Chapman and Marcus Butler join its line-up of international YouTube stars. DigiFest NYC 2014 saw 12,500 YouTube fans attend to see over 70 performers

across three different stages (Barnes, 2014), which included the return of the British YouTubers who performed in 2013, with the addition of Joe Sugg, Louis Cole and Louise Pentland. An article on internet video industry site *Tubefilter* explained '[m]any of the performers showed off their respective talents, though the ones known simply for their good looks focused on simple Q&A sessions as they soaked in the screams of their young fans' (Gutelle, 2014).

E     Emoji

Emojis are digital icons typically used in mobile messaging and on social networking sites. They function as a universal digital language with icons sometimes even taking on their own cultural meanings away from their literal form - for example, the aubergine emoji which has become popularly used suggestively as an innuendo for the penis. Despite this, most emojis are used in an innocent way to embellish written text and convey simple emotions such as happy and sad. Emojis have become so popular as part of the internet and social media lexicon that they now often appear outside of the internet in popular culture and beyond.

F     Follower

Users who follow another user's online social media profile, thereby receiving their posts and updates in their personal content feed.

G     Gifted / #gifted

This is used to denote an instance where a product has been given to an influencer free of charge, however, if the product has been gifted as

payment in exchange for content where the brand has a level of editorial control (CAP & CMA, 2018).

#### GRWM – Get Ready With Me

A popular style of video on YouTube where the vlogger invites the audience to watch them get ready for the day or an occasion. Usually shows them putting on their makeup and styling their hair but will sometimes include skincare routines.

#### H Handle

A common term used to refer to an individual or organisation's online username, which is often prefixed with an @ - for example, Joe's Instagram handle is @joe\_sugg.

#### Haul

Popular form of YouTube video where people show their purchases from a shopping trip or online order to the audience. This allows viewers to see things that are available either in store or online from retailers recently, allowing them to see things they may like and thus want to purchase themselves. This process is often made all the more easier for the viewer as vloggers will often leave links (URLs) to all of the items in the video's description box, making it easy for people to purchase the items themselves, and allowing the vlogger to make a small commission of their purchase if an affiliate link is used.

#### I IGTV



An Instagram feature launched in 2018 for 'long-form, vertical video' (Instagram, 2018).

#### Instagram main feed posts

A static form of content posted by users on Instagram which stays visible on the platform, unless the user deletes or archives it. Main feed posts can be interacted with by other users in the form of liking or commenting, as well as saving the post for later in a personal archive or sharing the post to their story (if permitted) or with a friend (via direct private message).

#### Instagram Reels

Reels is a newly introduced Instagram feature which launched in August 2020 and enables users to 'create and discover short and entertaining videos on Instagram' (Instagram, 2020). The feature allows users to create '15-second multi-clip videos with audio, effects, and new creative tools' (Instagram, 2020), functioning as a competitor to the popular short-form video app TikTok (Alexander, 2020).

#### Instagram Stories

Stories are an Instagram feature that encourage users to 'Share [their] everyday moments' (Instagram, 2019). They are 'characterised by a documentary, narrative and everyday style, and enable users to combine the various modes of communication of the platform (pictures, videos, texts, emoji and stickers, audio) into a single digital object. Their peculiar feature is ephemerality, as each Story lasts for only 24 hours' (Bainotti, Caliandro & Gandini, 2020: 2).

#### IRL

Internet slang for 'in real life', meaning in the offline world.

## ITATube

ITATube is the Italian Independent YouTube Convention which held its first event in April 2014 in Milan. In 2014, the British YouTubers on the event's line-up included Zoe Sugg, Joe Sugg, Alfie Deyes, Marcus Butler, Caspar Lee, Tanya Burr, Jim Chapman, Louise Pentland, Louis Cole, Oli White and Sam Pepper.

## M MCNs

Multichannel networks (MCNs) emerged in response to the need for high-quality, advertiser-friendly content for YouTube and its commercial partners, and increased stability of income for creators. MCNs are defined as 'intermediary firms that operate in and around YouTube's advertising infrastructure', offering channels that join their network advertising and promotion of their content, as well as guidance and services to assist their channel's development as a professional brand (Lobato, 2016: 345). The services provided by MCNs are varied and include 'advertising, production, audience, talent, and brand management', with the general aim of helping to increase the channel's earning potential through advertising revenue (Cunningham et al., 2016: 385), as well as expanding their audience size (Lobato, 2016). MCNs work on a commission basis, taking a percentage of the net advertising revenue earned by the YouTube channel which, according to Lobato (2016), can range between 20-50%.

## N NCSYES Live

Live event put on by NCS (National Citizen Service) - a youth programme providing experiences for 16-17-year-olds.

O     #OOTD – Outfit of the Day

Popular hashtag across Instagram and social media platforms in general, as well as being used verbally in YouTube videos (spelled out pronunciation O-O-T-D rather than OOTD). Usually refers to an image or segment in a video where someone is showing the outfit they are wearing that day, often detailing where each item is from. It is commonplace for items to be linked using shoppable affiliate URLs either in the video's description box on YouTube, or by tagging the brands in the image on Instagram.

P     Playlist Live

Popular annual US YouTube convention established in 2011.

Q     Q&A – Question and Answer

A popular style of YouTube video (although sometimes found on blogs and now commonplace on INSTAGRAM STORIES thanks to the new ask a question function) where viewers are asked to send in their questions prior to filming, then the video (or other form of content) will show the questions being answered. These are popular with audience members as they get to know the person better by asking them things they don't already know, and they're also popular with content creators too because they're a very easy form of video to film as they don't require much planning or thought and the audience do all the hard work in coming up with the questions.

R     Reaction video

Reaction videos are highly popular on YouTube, as evidenced by the hugely successful REACT channel which has amassed over 12.7 million subscribers and more than 4.2 billion views<sup>253</sup> since its launch in July 2014, following the success of the format on the Fine Bros<sup>254</sup> YouTube channel, prompting them to create a new channel dedicated to reaction videos (Allocca, 2018). The core premise of reaction videos is its focus on one or more persons who are watching, listening or looking at something, with their reaction to that entity filmed for the audience.

#### Rich Kids of Instagram (RKOI)

Rich Kids Of Instagram launched as a Tumblr blog in 2012, functioning as ‘a space for the spectacular staging of the lifestyle of the very wealthy’ (Spieler, 2014: 291) and is now a hugely popular hashtag on Instagram (#richkidsofinstagram) with over 1.3 million posts. Since launching in 2012, RKOI has renamed itself to Rich Kids of the Internet and continues to post to Tumblr (<https://rkoi.tumblr.com>), as well as on their official Instagram account (@rkoi) which has over 371,000 followers<sup>255</sup>. RKOI has become synonymous with wealthy young people flaunting their extravagant lifestyles, expensive possessions and lavish experiences to attract attention on social media sites (Abidin, 2018). The phenomenon was of such popularity that in 2016, Channel 4 released a TV series called *Rich Kids of Instagram* which focuses on ‘[t]he jet-set world of the young and super rich, who share their luxury lives online’ (Channel 4, 2016).

## S Selfie

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<sup>253</sup> Figures correct as of 21/7/2020.

<sup>254</sup> Now called Fine Brothers Entertainment or FBE

<sup>255</sup> Correct as of 29th July 2020

Genre of self-portrait photography popularised by social media and the advent of front-facing mobile phone cameras.

### Ship/shipping

The term 'shipping' typically describes the practice of fans publicly expressing support for a romantic relationship (Dare-Edwards, 2014), even if the two people are not actually romantically involved, however the notion of naming two individuals' relationship by combining their names has been used to describe friendships amongst internet fan communities.

### Summer in the City / SitC

London-based YouTube event which was founded in 2009 as a creator meet-up in Hyde Park by Tom Burns, however it has since expanded hugely into a three-day event which now features a dedicated Creator Day, alongside two more fan-oriented days where they can attend talks, meet-and-greets, participate in activities and buy merchandise (Stokel-Walker, 2019).

### 'Sit-down' videos

These are a genre of YouTube videos which were particularly prominent in the platform's infancy when content creators tended to upload videos of themselves sitting down talking to a static camera. Whilst it is not clear who originally coined this term, the use of the term 'sit-down' video, however, appears to have become more prominent when VLOGS emerged as a popular format on YouTube. As such, 'sit-down' videos were used to differentiate this earlier, more formal style of content from the more informal, day-in-the-life style of vlogs.

### Subscriber

A follower of a YouTube channel who subscribes to their updates and content, thus receiving them in their personal user feed. Subscriber numbers are regularly referred to as a success metric to determine a YouTubers popularity and audience size.

## T Tags

Tags are a sub-genre of YouTube videos which tend to involve one user creating a tag which they then nominate other YouTubers to participate in, creating their own video in this format. However, some tag formats gain a lot of traction on the platform and users decide to create their own version of this tag. For example, a popular tag video is the 'boyfriend tag' in which the YouTuber films themselves answering a pre-set list of questions with their boyfriend. This style of videos often features a question and answer style and often function to help viewers get to know the YouTuber or aspects of their lives better.

## Trending

Trending refers to content that has attained a level of popularity and gained traction online, attracting attention from platform users. Platforms often have a dedicated page or widget in which users can see trending topics or content, thus allowing this content to be further disseminated or even go VIRAL.

## V VidCon

VidCon is an online video convention which was launched in 2010 by brothers and YouTubers John and Hank Green (known for their YouTube channel VlogBrothers). It is perhaps the biggest and best known online

video convention and it has been running annually in California since its inaugural event. It has since grown to a global scale, now hosting multi-day events annually in the US, Australia and Europe which host tens of thousands of attendees every year, with its California event attended by over 20,000 people (Stokel-Walker, 2019). In 2020, the first VidCon events were planned to be hosted in Abu Dhabi and Mexico City, however these have been cancelled as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the event, speakers and featured creators are given special lanyards which allow them access to exclusive backstage areas, separating them from fans. On their website in 2014, VidCon explained:

It's always been really hard for us to draw the line between attendee and "Special Guest." But we have to draw it somewhere, and it is clearly more of an art than a science. But, basically, we think [the special guests highlighted on their website] will be of particular interest. It is entirely possible that your favorite creator is coming to VidCon but isn't on the list. That's just because it takes forever to crop pictures, so we have to stop somewhere.

The event features panel discussions and talks from YouTubers and industry professionals, as well as offering opportunities for fans to meet YouTubers in organised meet-and-greets.

## Viral

Viral is a term whose use has become so commonplace online that it is even defined in the Cambridge English Dictionary (2020d): 'used to describe something that quickly becomes very popular or well known by being published on the internet or sent from person to person by email, phone, etc.'

## Vlog



Vlogs are a popular style of YouTube video which tend to be spontaneous and unstructured, and typically follow the vlogger around in their everyday life. Here it is common for vloggers to reveal their thoughts and feelings, letting the audience into their private lives in a way that enables the viewer to identify and connect with them (García-Rapp, 2016). As such, vlogs help to maintain the vlogger's position within the community through relationships with their audience and other vloggers, thus preserving, and potentially growing, their perceived social value (García-Rapp, 2016).

#### W      Web 2.0

The term Web 2.0 was coined in 2004 'to describe a new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilize the World Wide Web' (Keplan & Haenlein, 2010: 60-61). Web 2.0 is described as the 'practices that form the participatory web where users contribute but do not control content, and increasingly, where some participants are financially rewarded while others provide content for free' (Morreale, 2014: 113).

## Appendix 3: Macro-level data scrapes

The following links lead to Google Sheets of the data collected from YouTube and Instagram platform data scrapes to illustrate the spreadsheet format and types of data gathered, as discussed throughout the thesis.

### YouTube data

[Click here to open multi-sheet spreadsheet of data from Joe's YouTube channels](#)

[Click here to open multi-sheet spreadsheet of data from supplementary YouTube channels](#)

### Instagram data

[Click here to open spreadsheet of data from Joe's Instagram profile](#)

[Click here to open a multi-sheet spreadsheet of data from supplementary Instagram accounts](#)

## Appendix 4: Promotional content

Year	Date	Type of post	Account	Company	Type	With others?	Other info
2013	25/10/13	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	City & Guilds	Ad		
2014	11/5/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Frankly app	Ad	Caspar Lee	Caspar made video on his channel too
	20/7/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	4Music Vlogstar competition	Ad		
	13/7/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Chupa Chups	Ad	Jim Chapman	Made video on their channel too
	21/9/14	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	NCS	Ad		
	5/10/14	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	VidiBee app	Ad		Says it's his own app but think it is a third-party platform where fans can enter competitions and compete in challenges set by Joe
	4/12/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Sodastream	Ad	Will Darbyshire & Caspar Lee	
	18/12/2014	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Google/Android	Ad		
	21/12/2014	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Game of War	Ad		
	31/12/2014	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Skype Qik	Ad		
2015	20/2/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Paramount UK & Spongebob Movie	Ad	Caspar Lee	Promoting movie they have small voice acting part in
	24/3/2015	Instagram promoting YouTube	@joe_sugg	McDonalds	Ad		Promoting video he made on McDonalds' channel
	25/3/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	McDonalds	Ad		YouTube video promoted in above Instagram post
	27/3/2015	Instagram promoting YouTube	@joe_sugg	Rise Above	Ad		Promoting video he made on their channel
	24/4/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Minions & Universal	Ad		
	7/5/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Minions & Universal	Ad		
	24/5/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	NCS	Ad	Caspar, Oli, Will, Jim, Josh	
	12/6/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Mini Babybel	Ad		
	24/6/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Coca Cola	Ad		
	6/7/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Cornetto	Ad	Caspar Lee	
	19/7/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Tesco Mobile	Ad	Caspar Lee	
	24/7/2015	Instagram promoting YouTube	@joe_sugg	Tesco Mobile	Ad		Promoting video he made on their channel
	12/9/2015	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	England Rugby	Ad		Promoting competition to win tickets
	12/9/2015	Instagram	@joe_sugg	England Rugby	Ad		Promoting competition to win tickets
	22/10/2015	Instagram	@joe_sugg	ASDA	Ad		For Gleam's #AsDarknessFalls party
2016	2/2/2016	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials	Ad	Mikey Pearce	Went on zombie shopping mall experience
	3/6/2016	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Sky Go	Ad		
	30/6/2016	YouTube	ThatcherJoeGames	Dungeon Hunter V	Ad		
	11/7/2016	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Sky Go	Ad		
	6/8/2016	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	NCS	Ad	Caspar Lee	
	6/9/2016	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Three UK	Ad		
	7/9/2016	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Contiki	Ad		Competition to win trip
	23/10/2016	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Best Fiends game	Ad		
2017	25/1/2017	Instagram	@joe_sugg	-	Ad		Unclear - uses hashtag #slipslopslop
	5/3/2017	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	HP Deskjet	Ad		
	9/4/2017	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	HP Deskjet	Ad	Josh, Grant, Caspar, Maddie (Caspar's then gf)	
	5/5/2017	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Original Source	Ad	Oli White	
	28/5/2017	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Williams Martini Racing	Ad		At Monaco Grand Prix
	1/6/2017	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Williams Martini Racing	Ad		At Monaco Grand Prix
	24/8/2017	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Google Home	Ad	Caspar Lee	
	17/11/2017	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Police Lifestyle/Watches	Ad		
	16/12/2017	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Coca Cola	Ad		
2018	24/12/2017	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Audi	Loaned car		
	14/3/2018	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Warner Brothers	Gifted trip		Trip promoting Ready Player One film
	20/3/2018	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Mercedes Benz	Loaned car		
	27/3/2018	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Warner Brothers	Gifted trip		Trip promoting Ready Player One film
	25/6/2018	Instagram promoting YouTube	@joe_sugg	RAF	Ad		Promoting vlog he made with them
	12/7/2018	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Wildemess Reserve	Gifted trip		
	29/9/2018	Instagram promoting YouTube	@joe_sugg	EA Sports	Ad	Byron, Caspar, Josh	He is an EA Ambassador
	9/12/2018	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Unrd app	Ad		
	10/12/2018	YouTube	ThatcherJoeGames	Unrd app	Ad		
	21/12/2018	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Dominos	Ad	Brit	
	24/12/2018	YouTube	ThatcherJoeGames	Unrd app	Ad		
2019	22/1/2019	YouTube	ThatcherJoeGames	Square Enix	Ad		For Kingdom Hearts III game
	21/2/2019	YouTube	ThatcherJoe	Unrd app	Ad		
	24/5/2019	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Moncler	Ad		
	22/6/2019	Instagram	@joe_sugg	LG TV	Ad	Dianne	
	22/6/2019	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	LG TV	Ad		
	26/7/2019	Instagram promoting YouTube	@joe_sugg	Epicurious	Ad		Video was made for Epicurious' channel
	27/7/2019	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Cavo Tagoo hotel	Gifted trip	Dianne	
	30/7/2019	Instagram promoting YouTube	@joe_sugg	Cavo Tagoo hotel	Gifted trip		Promoting holiday vlog uploading later
	30/7/2019	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Cavo Tagoo hotel	Gifted trip	Dianne	Holiday vlog part 1 from gifted trip
	31/7/2019	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Cavo Tagoo hotel	Gifted trip	Dianne	Holiday vlog part 2 from gifted trip
	31/8/2019	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	ASUS	Gifted		Gifted computer equipment
	8/9/2019	YouTube	ThatcherJoeVlogs	Flavourtown and London Platter	Gifted		Gifted food for his birthday party
	22/10/2019	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Walkers Sensations	Ad	Dianne	
	16/12/2019	Instagram	@joe_sugg	Mercedes Benz	Loaned car	Dianne	

[Click to open an enlarged version of this table in a new window](#)

## Appendix 5: Ethical approval

### APPLICATION FOR RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL (SHUREC2A)

#### SECTION A: Research Protocol

**Important Note** - If you have already written a research proposal (e.g. for a funder) that answers the methodology questions in this section please include a copy of the proposal and leave those questions blank. You **MUST** however complete **ALL** of Section B and C (risk assessment).

1. **Name of principal investigator:** Kathryn Murphy

**Faculty:** ACES

**Email address:** [kathryn.murphy@student.shu.ac.uk](mailto:kathryn.murphy@student.shu.ac.uk)

2. **Title of research:** How do popular vloggers challenge concepts of traditional celebrity?

3. **Supervisor** (if applicable): Dr. Ruth Deller (Director of Studies) and Dr. Kerry McSeveny (second supervisor)

**Email address:** [R.A.Deller@shu.ac.uk](mailto:R.A.Deller@shu.ac.uk); [K.McSeveny@shu.ac.uk](mailto:K.McSeveny@shu.ac.uk)

4. **CONVERIS number** (applicable for externally funded research):

5. **Other investigators** (within or outside SHU)

Title	Name	Post	Division	Organisation

6. **Proposed duration of project**

**Start date:** September 2016

**End Date:** September 2019

7. **Location of research if outside SHU:**

8. **Main purpose of research:**

- ☒ Educational qualification
- ☐ Publicly funded research

- ☐ Staff research project
- ☐ Other (Please supply details)

**9. Background to the study and scientific rationale (500- 750 words approx.)**

YouTube is a profoundly contemporary phenomenon, having launched little over ten years ago in May 2005. The video-sharing site has grown exponentially from initially attracting a niche cohort of amateur video creators to such an extent that, today, it is the second most popular website in the world (Alexa, 2016). According to Snickars and Vonderau (2009: 11), YouTube is 'the fastest growing site in the history of the Web', now boasting 'over a billion users'; amounting to 'almost one-third of all people on the Internet' (YouTube, 2016). YouTube's exponential growth has seen it shift from a platform for amateur video content, to allowing content creators to forge lucrative careers through hosting commercial advertising on their videos.

YouTube's success as a video-sharing platform stems from the fundamental concept of participatory culture, whereby consumers of media play active roles in creating and sharing new content (Jenkins, 2006). When Jenkins (2006) conceptualised participatory culture, YouTube had only been established for just over a year; however, subsequent levels of growth have significantly altered the once-equal relationship between members of the YouTube community, into something fundamentally hierarchical (Foulis 2014).

As YouTube has surged in popularity, its content creators have also reached unprecedentedly large followings, causing debate as to where popular vloggers (video bloggers) are situated within the wider mechanism of fame. When vloggers first came to prominence, they were not considered 'proper' celebrities (Marwick, 2013) and, instead, became recognised as microcelebrities (Marwick, 2010, 2013; Senft, 2008, 2013). Marwick (2010, 2013) and Senft (2008, 2013) conceptualise microcelebrity as a set of practices in which people use the Internet to construct a celebrity-like brand, in front of an audience they perceive to be their 'fans'. This builds upon the ideas of Goffman (1969) who describes the ways people present themselves to others as being like a performance.

Whilst much current debate surrounds YouTube and the microcelebrity, there remains limited literature concerning the extent that popular vloggers have become known. This

is due to YouTube being a contemporary phenomenon, having only surged in popularity in 2011 when the first UK channel reached one million subscribers. Since then, the YouTube and social media landscape has changed vastly with 220 YouTubers in the UK now having over a million subscribers (Spanier, 2016) and popular vloggers increasingly expanding into mainstream media and retail; challenging the boundaries of existing celebrity and microcelebrity theories. Consequently, an up-to-date exploration into the phenomenon of YouTube celebrity culture is needed. My research aims to fill this gap, focusing on the ways popular vloggers challenge concepts of traditional celebrity in their practices and representations

**10. Has the scientific / scholarly basis of this research been approved?** (For example by Research Degrees Subcommittee or an external funding body)

- ☒ Yes
- ☐ No - to be submitted
- ☐ Currently undergoing an approval process
- ☐ Irrelevant (e.g. there is no relevant committee governing this work)

**11. Main research questions**

1. How are popular vloggers presented by the mainstream media?
2. How do popular vloggers present themselves and their brand?
3. How are audiences presenting popular vloggers in their discussions of YouTube?

**12. Summary of methods including proposed data analyses**

The inquiry will take a multiple-case study approach focussing on three popular British vloggers who each have over one million subscribers on YouTube. The specific case studies will be: Zoe Sugg - a 26-year-old beauty, fashion and lifestyle vlogger with over 15 million subscribers across her YouTube channels; Alfie Deyes – Sugg's 23-year-old partner who shares comedy and gaming videos as well as daily vlogs on his three YouTube channels where he has accumulated over 11.35 million subscribers; and Joe Sugg – the 25-year-old brother of Zoella who also shares comedy videos, vlogs and gaming videos on his YouTube channels where he has accumulated over 11 million subscribers.

These case studies have been chosen to illustrate a variety of different manifestations of YouTube celebrity culture because of their varying content, ages and audiences. All three case studies have at least two YouTube channels, representing the distinction between structured main channel videos and informal diary-style vlogs; thus illustrating different elements of self-presentation and allowing for a richer analysis of their microcelebrity practices. Furthermore, each case has successfully extended their brand outside of YouTube, releasing books, films and product lines; facilitating a broader analysis of their microcelebrity personas and the extent they challenge traditional concepts of celebrity.

Data collection will begin in summer 2018, whereby a range of media and cultural sources relating to each case will be collected from notable points in their career, starting from when they reached prominence, up to the present day. These will consist of newspaper and magazine articles, television, films and radio, as well as the cases' YouTube and social media content. Additionally, ethnographic data will be collected from observing online forums, social media interactions and comments on YouTube videos to explore viewers' perceptions as the vloggers' popularity increases. There is also the possibility of attending YouTube-related events and conferences where ethnographic and auto-ethnographic data can be collected to provide valuable insights.

Established methods of textual analysis including critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), content analysis and semiotics (e.g. Chandler, 2007) will be used to analyse the mainstream media representations, social media content and online ethnographic data collected. The analysis will explore notions of representation, self-presentation and status, as well as viewers' perceptions of the vloggers, using established theories from Bourdieu (1984), Goffman (1969), Marwick (2010, 2013), Senft (2008, 2013) and Dyer (2007) to inform the discussion.

Bourdieu's (1984) theories of capital will inform discussions of hierarchy and status within both the YouTube community and the celebrity world. The research will also be informed by Goffman (1969)'s theories about self-presentation which, alongside concepts of microcelebrity (Marwick 2010, 2013; Senft 2008, 2013) and star image



(Dyer, 2007), will inform the analysis of vloggers' presentational practices across YouTube, social media and other outputs of their brands.

## **SECTION B**

- 1. Describe the arrangements for selecting/sampling and briefing potential participants.** This should include copies of any advertisements for volunteers, letters to individuals/organisations inviting participation and participant information sheets. The sample sizes with power calculations if appropriate should be included.

The research will collect data from a range of media and cultural sources relating to each case study, rather than from human participants. The ethnographic data that will be obtained from online forums, social media interactions and comments on YouTube videos does come from human subjects, however the data is situated in the public domain and is openly accessible to all Internet users. The purpose of utilising these posts and comments within my research is to ascertain public opinion and perceptions of the YouTube personalities being studied and the research does not place any focus on those posting the comments. As a result, I do not plan to brief the users on the inclusion of their data but I will ensure the use of data adheres to the terms and conditions of the websites it originates from. In addition to this, all ethical decisions will be made in accordance with the Association of Internet Researchers guidelines and informed by current literature in the field.

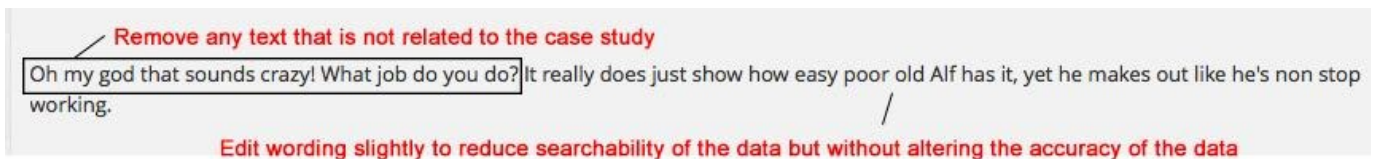
- 2. What is the potential for participants to benefit from participation in the research?**

Participation/inclusion in the research will be aiding the contribution to academic knowledge within the relatively new and understudied field of YouTube and online fame. This knowledge can help define and situate the phenomenon of YouTube celebrity culture within traditional media and celebrity theory. New insights stemming from my research have the potential to be fed back to the traditional media and PR industries to help them gain a better understanding of the perceptions and practices of popular vloggers.

**3. Describe any possible negative consequences of participation in the research along with the ways in which these consequences will be limited.**

The nature of researching online means there is a possibility that data collected from forums and social media sites could be found using a search engine, resulting in the identification of people's usernames which could result in them being personally identifiable to others. To minimise the searchability of data, posts taken from forums and social networking sites will be anonymised, removing any information that could personally identify users including their name/username, avatar, location, age etc. The names of specific forum threads where the data has originated from will also be removed to reduce the chance of the original posts being located on the forum sites. Furthermore, the wording of posts and comments will be slightly altered in a way that does not affect the original meaning of the post, but still allows thoughts and perceptions about the case studies to be obtained in the analysis.

I have included an example below (fig. 1) of how I would change the wording of this post to reduce the data's searchability whilst retaining the original meaning of the users'



**Result:**

'It just goes to show how easy poor Alfie has it yet he makes out that he's working non-stop.'

comment.

*Fig. 1*

As data will be collected from online forum sites where users are able to express their views freely, there is the potential for negative opinions and criticisms about the case studies to be highlighted. This may be received negatively from the YouTubers themselves or the management companies whose job is to help protect and maintain the vloggers' brands. To reduce the chances of any negative response from the management companies, and to protect myself and Sheffield Hallam University, it may be necessary to include a short disclaimer to state that any comments collected as part of the study are the personal opinions of online users and do not necessarily represent factual accuracy.

The nature of researching the YouTube vloggers' content and social media posts means there could be some potential issues over copyright. To minimise the risk of infringement, I will ensure that all content used is situated within the public domain and will only be used for non-profit educational purposes in accordance with YouTube's fair use guidelines. Copyrighted video and audio content will not be reproduced or distributed in full as part of the thesis – instead, transcripts and screenshots from the media texts and sources will be used to detail elements that are directly relevant to the academic discussion.

4. **Describe the arrangements for obtaining participants' consent.** This should include copies of the information that they will receive & written consent forms where appropriate. If children or young people are to be participants in the study details of the arrangements for obtaining consent from parents or those acting in *loco parentis* or as advocates should be provided.

Researching online somewhat complicates the ethical principle of informed consent. It is common for users in Internet environments to post under usernames or pseudonyms, thus making it difficult and somewhat unrealistic to obtain informed consent from every user (Sveningsson Elm, 2009; van Schie, Westra & Schafer, 2017). For my areas of data collection it is important to consider the kinds of information being disclosed as well as people's relationship to their data in each context (Markham & Buchanan, 2017). Sveningsson Elm (2009) advises that if the information is public and not sensitive, it can be acceptable to use it without informed consent; however, as Buchanan and Zimmer (2016) advise, it is important to ensure 'there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of any data collected'. As a result of this, I will not be obtaining informed consent from Internet users, however all personal data or potentially identifying information will be removed from posts. Furthermore, comments and discussions will be anonymised and wording will be slightly altered to minimise the searchability of the data. It is important to note that the nature of YouTube forum sites dictates that posts focus on YouTube creators and their content and as such, discussions of users' personal issues or lives are deemed off topic and are against forum rules (*GuruGossip*). This minimises the chance of users' sensitive information being contained within the data, however as previously explained, further precautions

will be taken to ensure the removal of any personal information relating to users that is disclosed within the data.

5. **Describe how participants will be made aware of their right to withdraw from the research.** This should also include information about participants' right to withhold information and a reasonable time span for withdrawal should be specified.

N/A

6. **If your project requires that you work with vulnerable participants describe how you will implement safeguarding procedures during data collection.**

N/A

7. **If Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks are required, please supply details**

N/A

8. **Describe the arrangements for debriefing the participants.** This should include copies of the information that participants will receive where appropriate.

N/A

9. **Describe the arrangements for ensuring participant confidentiality.** This should include details of:
- o how data will be stored to ensure compliance with data protection legislation
  - o how results will be presented
  - o exceptional circumstances where confidentiality may not be preserved
  - o how and when confidential data will be disposed of

As mentioned previously, the research does not involve traditional research participants, however steps will be taken to ensure that posts and comments collected from forums and social networking sites as part of the ethnographic data are protected. In order to achieve this, I will anonymise all posts and comments, removing users' names, usernames, avatars/display pictures, locations, ages, as well as any other user data

such as date they joined the site and number of posts. In addition to this, any parts of posts or comments that are unrelated to the case or off-topic will be removed from the data including names, locations, ages and other personal information about people other than the case studies; however, I do not foresee this to be a big issue as forum rules dictate that discussions should only relate to YouTube creators and their content.

A further step I will be taking to protect confidentiality is slightly alter the wording of posts and comments used in the research data to reduce the searchability of the data and thus the chances of linking the research data back to its original source. This will involve the removal of any information unrelated to the case studies, as well as making small changes to the wording of the quotes. These adjustments will be carried out with care to ensure the original meaning of users' comments or posts is not lost or distorted. I have provided an example in Section B, Question 3 of how I will alter the wording of comments and posts to reduce their searchability.

All data will be collected and used in compliance with the individual site's terms and conditions.

YouTube's terms and conditions stipulate that data must be accessed using the official API and that any confidential data obtained remains confidential, although it is further stated that the API must not be used to collect users' personal data such as account names. YouTube's terms also note that 'data collection, storage, use, security and deletion policies and practices' must ensure users' data is protected (YouTube, 2017) which is something I have addressed elsewhere in my ethics application and Data Management Plan.

Twitter's terms and conditions remind users that the content they post is public and as such, they should only share things they are comfortable with others seeing. They also state that by using Twitter, users are permitting Twitter to make their information public and as a result, advise users to think carefully about what they post and thus make publicly available. It is also noted that users can control whether their tweets and certain aspects of their information is made public through the privacy and visibility settings on their profile, therefore by choosing not to make their profile private, users are permitting their tweets and information to be made public and viewed by others. Twitter also stipulate that searches of the site should be only be carried out using the interface provided.

Instagram's terms and conditions advise users not to post personal or confidential information on the service, and remind users that they can change their privacy settings to control who can see their content and activities on the platform. It is also noted that information shared on Instagram is made public and may be re-shared and searched by other users and through the site's API.

The rules for YouTube forum site GuruGossip stipulate that users should be respectful to others in their postings, ensuring that they do not disclose any private information relating to vloggers that they have not already made public. Users are also not permitted to go 'off topic' on the discussion pages and as such should refrain from discussing themselves. They explain that this is to protect users' privacy as well as upholding the integrity of the forum threads, however this also means users are made aware that their posts are public and are advised not to share information relating to themselves.

- 10. Are there any conflicts of interest in you undertaking this research?** (E.g. are you undertaking research on work colleagues or in an organisation where you are a consultant?) Please supply details of how this will be addressed.

No

- 11. What are the expected outcomes, impacts and benefits of the research?**

I expect my research to offer valuable additions to existing debates around YouTube and microcelebrity, building upon the work of key theorists such as Marwick (2010, 2013), Senft (2008, 2013) and Jenkins (2006, 2009, 2010). The research aims to contribute to existing knowledge by delivering an in-depth exploration of three popular vloggers and the ways they challenge concepts of traditional celebrity culture, within the contemporary media climate.

- 12. Please give details of any plans for dissemination of the results of the research. This includes your plans for preserving and sharing your data. You may refer to your attached Data Management Plan.**

I plan to preserve the data collected for the purposes of verification and potential further analysis. Transcripts from mainstream media sources, social media and online forum discussions will be preserved in an anonymised state (where individual Internet users are named in the dataset), and documented alongside details of their origin, date of publication/broadcast/access, etc. to ensure the data are reusable to myself and other researchers in the future. Online and mainstream media sources hold the possibility of being changed or removed over time so it is important to preserve these sources at the start of the research project to ensure the sources are the same as those used by the researcher.

The data, including records of ethical practice, will be preserved for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the research project in line with the Sheffield Hallam University Records Retention Schedule. Once the research is complete, files will be deposited into the Sheffield Hallam University Research Data Archive. These will be saved in open or commonly-used proprietary formats that are deemed to be long-lasting, allowing for optimum preservation of the data.

Following the submission of my thesis, my research data will be deposited into the Sheffield Hallam University Research Data Archive where it will be shared under a Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). This license allows others to use the datasets on the condition that they acknowledge the work of the original researcher. I also hope to publish some of my research findings in peer-reviewed journals whereby it may be required that the dataset is made available to readers when the article is published (as well as to the editorial and reviewing team at the point of submission); however individual journals have differing policies and requirements for the sharing of research data and this is something that would need to be checked before submitting.

(Please see attached copy of the full Data Management Plan for further details)

## **SECTION C**

### **HEALTH AND SAFETY RISK ASSESSMENT FOR THE RESEARCHER**

#### **1. Will the proposed data collection take place on campus?**

- ☒ Yes (Please answer questions 4, 6 and 7)
- ☒ No (Please complete all questions)



**2. Where will the data collection take place?**

(Tick as many as apply if data collection will take place in multiple venues)

- |                                     | <b>Location</b>  | <b>Please specify</b>                    |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Researcher's Residence                                   |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Participant's Residence                                  |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Education Establishment                                  |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Other e.g. business/voluntary organisation, public venue | <b>Online; at YouTube-related events</b> |
| <input type="checkbox"/>            | Outside UK   |  |

**3. How will you travel to and from the data collection venue?**

On foot	By car	Public Transport
Other (Please specify) <b>N/A</b>		

Please outline how you will ensure your personal safety when travelling to and from the data collection venue

If collecting data at YouTube-related events, I will ensure my personal safety by informing a friend or family member of my whereabouts at all times and ensure I have my mobile phone with me in case of emergency.

**4. How will you ensure your own personal safety whilst at the research venue?**

I will ensure I have my mobile phone switched on and with me at all times so I can contact a friend or family member should any difficulties arise.

**5. If you are carrying out research off-campus, you must ensure that each time you go out to collect data you ensure that someone you trust knows where you are going (without breaching the confidentiality of your participants), how you are getting there (preferably including your travel route), when you expect to get back, and what to do should you not return at the specified time. (See Lone Working Guidelines). Please outline here the procedure you propose using to do this.**

If attending a YouTube event, I will keep a trusted party informed with my whereabouts at all times, including my travel arrangements and anticipated time of return. I will make my location available to them using the Find My Friends application on my phone so that they can check my whereabouts at all times. Should I not return at the time expected, the trusted party should attempt to make contact with me, or failing that, the event

venue. In the event that I am unreachable, the trusted party will need to take appropriate action and raise alarm.

**6. Are there any potential risks to your health and wellbeing associated with either (a) the venue where the research will take place and/or (b) the research topic itself?**

None that I am aware of

Yes (Please outline below including steps taken to minimise risk)

--

**7. Does this research project require a health and safety risk analysis for the procedures to be used?**

- ☐ Yes  
☒ No

(If **YES** the completed Health and Safety Project Safety Plan for Procedures should be attached)

**Adherence to SHU policy and procedures**

<b>Personal statement</b>	
I confirm that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• this research will conform to the principles outlined in the Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics policy</li><li>• this application is accurate to the best of my knowledge</li></ul>	
<b>Principal Investigator</b>	
Signature	Kathryn Murphy
Date	4/8/17
<b>Supervisor (if applicable)</b>	
Signature	Ruth Deller
Date	15/8/17
<b>Other signature</b>	
Signature	Kerry McSeveny
Date	7/8/17

**Please ensure the following are included with this form if applicable, tick box to indicate:**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>N/A</b>
Research proposal if prepared previously	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Any recruitment materials (e.g. posters, letters, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Participant information sheet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Participant consent form	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Details of measures to be used (e.g. questionnaires, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Outline interview schedule / focus group schedule	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Debriefing materials	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Health and Safety Project Safety Plan for Procedures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Data Management Plan*	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

If you have not already done so, please send a copy of your Data management Plan to [rdm@shu.ac.uk](mailto:rdm@shu.ac.uk)

It will be used to tailor support and make sure enough data storage will be available for your data.