

Vlogging conventions discussion – the construction of everyday celebrity superstars

Read the following discussion:

The traditional appeal of conventional advertising is often produced through the construction of aspirational narratives that invite audiences to desire lifestyle ideals. Alfie Deyes and Zoella's on-screen romance offers their respective audiences **a romantic ideal**, whilst their high energy vlogging lifestyle yields material wealth that audiences might similarly aspire to.

Yet the appeal of YouTubers is far more complex than the simple construction of aspirational story structure. Vloggers talk openly about their intention to create media that feels authentic to their audiences. YouTubers invite audiences into their lives – their **homes become studios**, whilst **single camera perspectives** create an **intimate confessional tone**. For relief, the **camera might become hand-held** for a moment, eliciting the **host's point of view** – placing spectators in the shoes of their YouTube icons in a bid to create **identification** and **relatability**.

The success of YouTube stars such as Alfie Deyes and Zoella is driven in part by the **authenticity** of their on-screen personas. In a world of polished media, a world in which the mainstream media saturate us with ideal imagery, YouTubers construct products that appear **unmediated** to their post-millennial target market. **Jump cut editing** provides **narrative energy** and is coupled with a **direct address presentation style** to construct a **deliberately amateur aesthetic**. Relatability is constructed through the use of **everyday mise-en-scène**, through costume and make-up that appears deliberately **natural** to affect an **effortless and understated aesthetic**. Similarly, the clichéd bedroom setting reinforces **codes of realism** and takes audiences into the **private space** of the YouTuber, where their seemingly **unscripted narratives** generate a sense of **spontaneity**. The inclusion of **presenter mistakes** and retakes in final edits further augments the idea that we are being given an authentic insight into the personal worlds of Alfie and Zoella. The effect, deliberate or otherwise, is the construction of stars, who despite their ideal lifestyles, are the exact opposite of what we expect of stars. Zoella's simple charm is to present herself as a **best friend character** – to enable what Katz and Lazarsfeld would call **personal identity**.

YouTubers make human connections with their youth audiences; they offer **narratives that deal in honesty**. Zoella's struggle with anxiety, her **self-confessed character fallibility**, makes her more human. It also suggests an understanding of issues faced by her audience within their own lives. Zoella and Alfie have also crafted a deliberately **innocent presenter style** with **cheery high-key lighting** used to underscore the jaunty tone of their output. One might argue this is a strategy that also allows **secondary audiences to sanction spectatorship**. The **wholesome values** of Zoella and Alfie mean those mums and dads casting a careful eye over their children's internet viewing habits will leave the WIFI switched on.

Vloggers, moreover, have to be increasingly careful to **avoid any potentially offensive story content** that might be picked up by YouTube algorithms designed to police vlogging content. Some content, even

that made by YouTube power vloggers, has been **demonetised** when flagged as offensive. The squeaky clean brand identities of Zoella and Alfie, and their complete lack of offensiveness, have enabled them to maintain and nurture their commercial success where others have failed.

YouTubers also take advantage of technology to create content that conveys a sense of **immediacy** – posting material on a weekly, sometimes daily basis, to satisfy the voyeuristic needs of their target audiences. Because YouTube content is assembled quickly, it can **react instantaneously** to fan dislikes and likes, producing **content that is always up to date**, and the use of **satellite social media** provides opportunities to connect audiences with their on-screen icons in real time too. YouTube **commentary provides audience feedback** whilst also satisfying user interactivity needs. Zoella and Alfie's post-millennial target audience demands to be **active rather than passive media consumers** – Instagram, Twitter and Facebook facilitate that need to engage, to be a **participatory culture** player.

Vloggers also use technology to create consumption uplift. **YouTube annotations** are an endemic feature in vlogs and point users to archived content. More views leads directly to larger advertising revenue streams in YouTube's pay-per-view advertising deals. **Personalised content and star connectivity** meanwhile are reinforced by Twitter feeds and Instagram uploads – both of which give widespread access to **intimate candid snapshots** and the thoughts and reflections of Alfie and Zoella. Where sites like Amazon and Spotify have constructed **personalisation** through landing pages that flag up products or artists based on search history, YouTubers affect personalisation through content that gives audiences an **'access all areas' perspective** on their lives.

Cynically speaking, YouTubers translate all this viewer interaction into advertising opportunities. They are **market influencers** – using their fan bases and **trusted content** to create advertising opportunities through **product placement**. They need their audiences to share their stories, to **virally distribute** their vlogs through audience led networks. Without traditional media distribution, they have to rely upon these **mediated distribution systems** to engage new fans, and their page set ups are designed to assist content sharing.

To develop their audience reach further, YouTubers also produce **collaborative content** to create subscription uplifts via content made available on fellow YouTube channels. Zoella creates at least one collaborative vlog every month – indeed, some commentators view Alfie's relationship with Zoella as a commercially expedient marketing opportunity. However, these collaborations provide more than **commercial synergies**. They suggest a sense of community; an integrated vlogging community to which the audience are invited to become a part.

Yet a tension exists. With every new subscriber who signs up, the task of persuading their audience of their vlogging authenticity becomes increasingly difficult. Alfie and Zoella have, undoubtedly, been elevated to the status of celebrity superstar by their fans. As a result, it becomes much harder for them to persuade us of their connection to the everyday. Perhaps Alfie and Zoella have already abandoned their pretense to be authentic. Perhaps they were always nothing more than ideal versions of their target audience. Perhaps they were just good looking people who skillfully seized the opportunities that YouTube presented in 2007.

Extension reading:

<http://www.thedrum.com/opinion/2016/11/18/girl-online-what-zoella-has-taught-us-about-successful-influencer-marketing>

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/feb/03/why-youtube-stars-popular-zoella>

Extension reading notes