

# NewStatesman



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## How YouTubers really make their millions

The teenage girls who make up Zoella's fiercely loyal fanbase are customers, even if they aren't aware of it.

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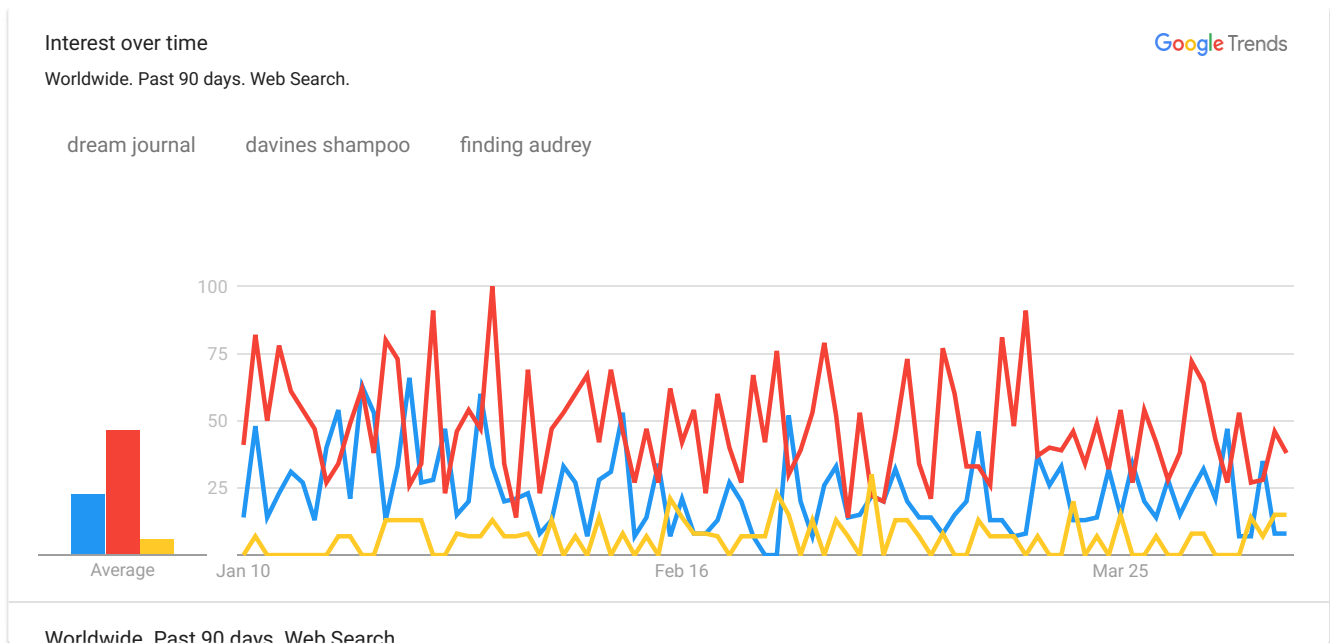
By Amelia Tait

It's no longer a secret that Zoella earns more in a month than you do in a year. Accounts obtained by the *Sunday Times* show that the beauty vlogger, who recently turned 26, profited nearly £400,000 in the eight months from March to November 2014. But far more shocking than the amount of money YouTubers make, is the truth about exactly how they make it.

On 6 March, Zoella uploaded her "February Favourites" video, a round-up of items she'd loved using in the last month. Within moments, [Google searches](#) for the products skyrocketed, with two – the Knock Knock Dream Journal and Happiness Planner – quickly selling out.

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Zoella's fans – who she claims are aged 13-17, but are actually much younger due to YouTube's minimum sign-up age being 13 – take her word as gospel. When she waxes lyrical about how she is “like just obsessed with” a product, they believe her. But they shouldn't.

In November 2014, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) implemented a new ruling whereby vloggers had to be “up front and clear” when a video was an advert for a brand. In practical terms, this means YouTubers now place the word “ad” in a paid-for video's title or thumbnail.

But scan Zoella's latest uploads and you won't see the word “ad” in the last six months. She's not breaking the ASA's rules, nor has she stopped accepting the rumoured £20,000 it costs to feature a product in her videos. She also isn't – like her boyfriend and fellow vlogger Alfie Deyes – hiding the word “ad” under YouTube's time-stamp. In reality, the definition of an “advert” is just very narrow.

“A video doesn't become an ad just because it's paid for,” says Matt Wilson, a spokesman for the ASA. “The content has to be paid for and controlled by the brand. We don't actually regulate sponsorship.” The authority who does regulate sponsorship – the Competition and Markets authority – are currently only beginning to investigate vloggers.

Simply put, under ASA rules, if Zoella is given money but not a script, she doesn't have to disclose anything. On platforms such as Snapchat, she can stealthily market a product (say, for example, some Calvin Klein underpants) without having to say a word. Marketers themselves don't mind this, as they proudly boast that consumers trust reviews nearly 12 times more than brand-written content.

But hey, who cares? She's no different from Brad Pitt drinking a Pepsi, or Nicki Minaj donning some Beats, right? Except she is. The third word in Zoella's Twitter bio (after “YouTuber” and

“blogger”) is “friend”. She has been variously described as a “big sister” and “average girl-next-door” by mainstream media. Her entire brand is founded on honesty, authenticity, and friendship.

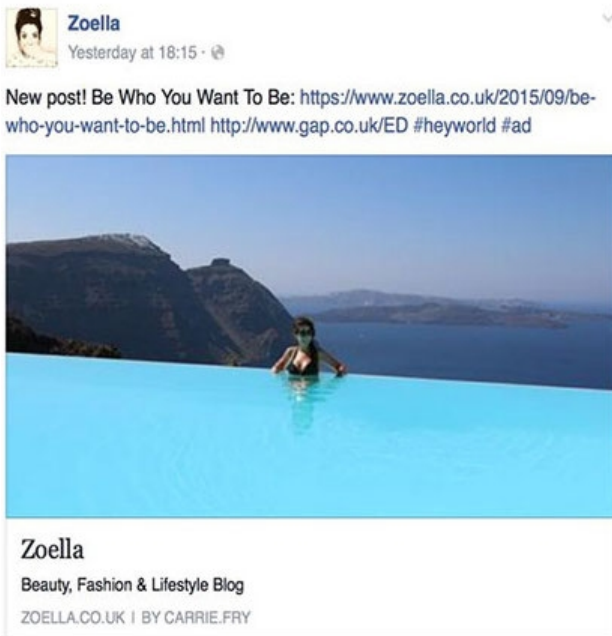
“It’s weird how YouTubers say we’re all friends,” says Lauren Hichens, a 21-year-old student from Nottingham who started watching Zoella four years ago.

“They’re making money off us. We’re kind of their job. I don’t know if they see us as consumers or friends, but a lot of the time I think it’s consumers.”

Lauren lost interest in Zoella when she began doing frequent sponsorships, as she questioned whether the beauty guru really liked the products she was featuring.

“She did a skincare regime that was sponsored by Simple but a month earlier she had talked about her skincare and only mentioned high-end products,” says Lauren. “I completely understand that’s how they make money but it’s the way they go about it. I felt it was really false of her.”

This, of course, isn’t the first time Zoella has been caught misleading fans. In October 2015, she was forced to admit ghostwriter Siobhan Curham wrote her debut novel *Girl Online*. Recently, eagle-eyed fans spotted some of her blogs were authored by another Brighton-based blogger, Carrie Fry.

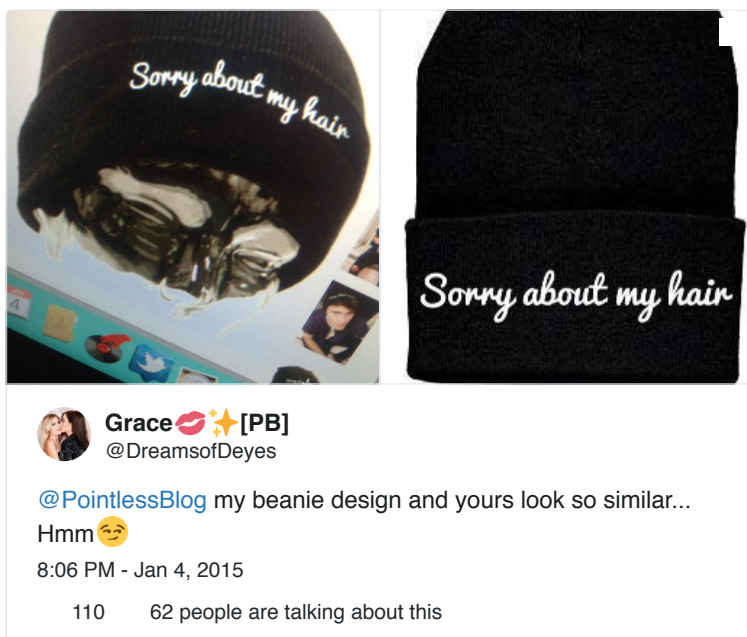


Her boyfriend Alfie was also criticised because his *Pointless Books* are similar to the best-selling *Wreck This Journal*. But it’s not just successful writers the pair rip off.

On 4 December 2014, a fan tweeted Alfie a mock-up of black beanie, featuring the words “Sorry about my hair”. Alfie then cropped the picture and asked his followers the name of the font used, deleting his tweet once he got the answer.



One month later, the hat was being sold for £12.99 on Alfie's official online store. The fan received no credit, no payment, and no free hat. Far from criticising Alfie for this, she later tweeted: “it bothers me that people are using me to hate on Alfie”.



Believe it or not, “Zalfie” (that is, Zoella and Alfie) profit from their followers even more directly than this. The pair have charged £75 to meet with viewers, and happily encourage fans to give them gifts.

“You guys are the best,” said Zoella in a February 2015 video, “America Haul”, referring to viewers who brought her gifts, including body mists, candles, and sweets. Later, she even name-checks specific fans. More recently, after a book-signing with hundreds of pre-teen girls, she proudly boasted: “There are so many presents they’re having to be sent back to my house in a taxi.” It is

this sort of behaviour that encourages fans to send gifts to her PO box (conveniently listed in the “About” section of her YouTube channel).

It’s clear that Zoella’s fans are fiercely loyal. So much so that she probably needn’t worry – as many YouTubers do – that her views would decline if she placed “ad” in a video title. But even if they did, isn’t honesty more important than a few extra views?

Mikhila McDaid, a 30-year-old beauty vlogger with nearly 87,000 subscribers, thinks so. Unlike most YouTubers, she created a specific video explaining her advertising policy, and has a disclaimer under every video on her channel MissBudgetBeauty.

“I wish more people would talk about sponsorship,” she says. “Viewers are becoming less trusting every day and the community was built on trust.”

Mikhila freely admits to her audience that links under her vlogs may be affiliate, meaning she receives money when they’re clicked. Zoella’s own affiliate links, which include not only products mentioned in videos but the clothes she is wearing and items in the background, are currently unmarked.

“I like to add disclaimers for anything where money is involved,” says Mikhila.

“It’s a very short game to lie to people who put value in your opinion and who in turn made your opinion valuable.”

From a moral standpoint, Mikhila’s attitude is commendable, but she and Zoella are obeying the law in equal degrees. Unless the rules change, Zoella doesn’t have to.



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