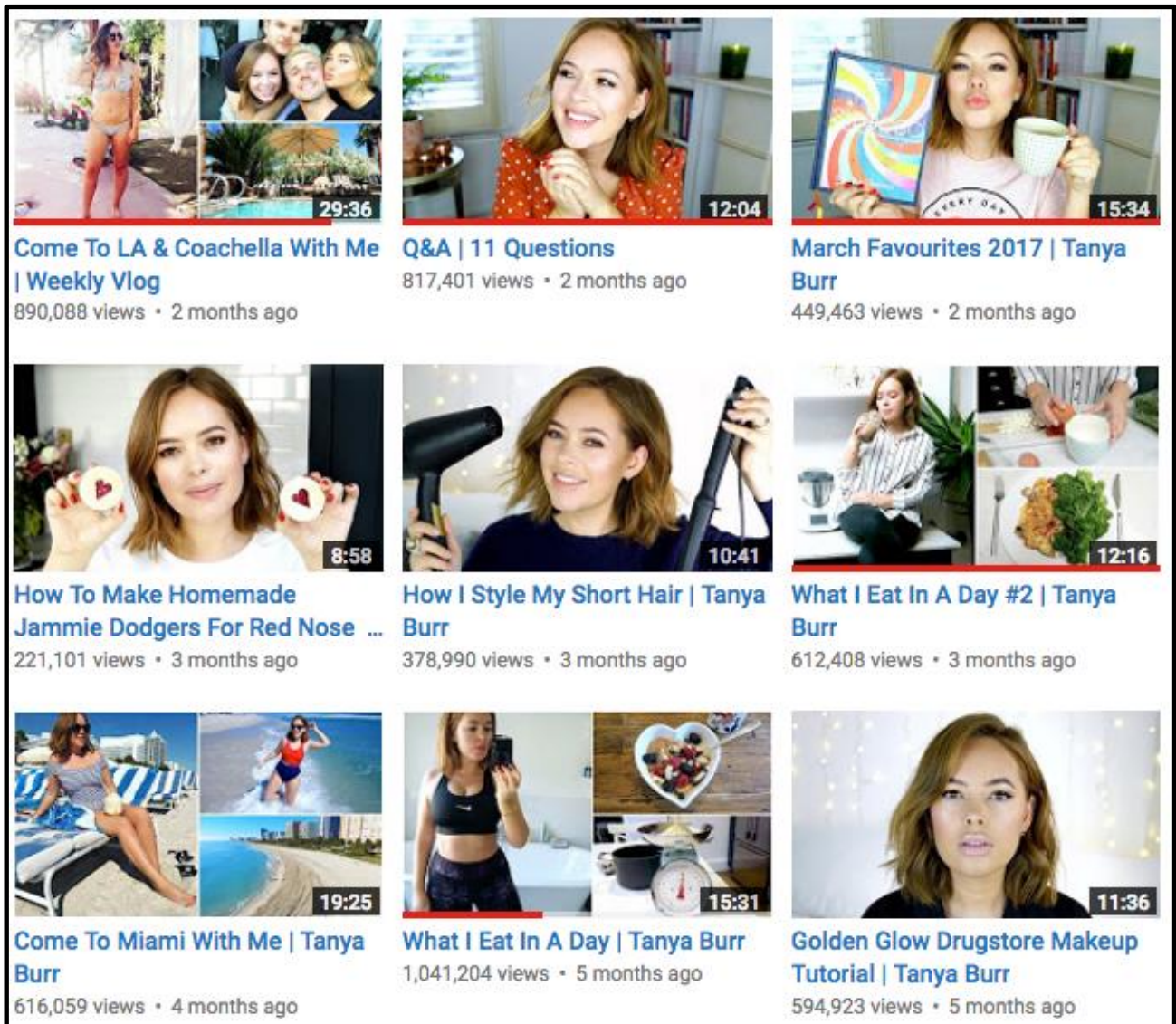


# The Commodification of YouTube Vloggers



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## **ABSTRACT**

*Through a combination of political economy and radical mediation theory, this dissertation argues that current 'YouTube Stars' can be understood as a particularly virulent strain of 'homo æconomicus', who are produced and commodified through the techno-capitalist structures of the platform. YouTube culture has transformed since its inception in 2005 to increasingly become a conduit for commercial interests, and successful vloggers are nodes in this capitalist flow: absorbing, transforming and spreading the neoliberal political rationality of the platform. I analyse how mainstream vloggers are emerging through and are entangled with the neoliberal rationality of the complex commercial interests, structures and technological affordances of the platform. I conclude by considering the ethical ramifications of, and possible solutions to, the commodification of the self on YouTube vlogs.*

# INTRODUCTION

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This dissertation argues that successful YouTube vloggers<sup>1</sup> erode any meaningful distinction between the self, technology and processes of capitalist production and consumption. They become 'nodes in the flows of capital' (Zylinska 2007: p. 29), acting as conduits for big brands that leverage their popularity in order to more effectively sell products and lifestyles to vloggers' adoring, and often young, fans. Combining political economy and mediation theory approaches, I analyse how mainstream vloggers are co-created with/through the logic of neoliberalism, corporate interests, practices of self-branding, and the technological affordances and cultural norms of YouTube as a website.

The dissertation is divided into three chapters, circling around the central issue of the commodification of YouTube and encountering it from different angles. The introduction contextualises the commercial history of YouTube as a website and the rise of 'YouTube stars', and then outlines the combination of political economy and mediation theory that is the basis for this dissertation.

Informed by Wendy Brown's (2005) concept of *homo æconomicus*, the first chapter analyses how the neoliberal political rationality informs practices of self-branding, post-feminism and the role of authenticity in the vlogging context, through a case study of the YouTube star 'Zoella'. Chapter two explores the ways in which the *technological affordances* of YouTube promote a neoliberal rationality at all levels, from content creators and audiences, to advertisers and sponsors (Postigo 2016), and tracks the move away from community and towards connectivity and commercialism on the platform (van Dijck 2013a, 2013b; van Dijck and Couldry 2015). The third and final chapter considers biopolitics, self-tracking, post-feminism and the body through the case study of 'What I Eat in a Day' videos and health and fitness YouTube channels, which I view as the

<sup>1</sup> YouTube vloggers (video bloggers) are people who document their lives, thoughts, opinions and interests on film and upload these videos to YouTube. Burgess and Green (2009b) describe the vlog as 'an emblematic form of YouTube participation' (p. 94).

ultimate co-option of life itself into the YouTube neoliberal fantasy. I conclude by considering the ethical ramifications of, and possible solutions to, the commodification of the self on YouTube vlogs and social media more widely.

Various scholars have written specifically about the political economy of YouTube (for example, Andrejevic 2009; Banet-Weiser 2011; Burgess and Green 2009a, 2009b; Cocker and Cronin 2017; Garcia-Rapp 2009; Grusin 2009; Lovink and Niederer 2008; Marwick 2015; Postigo 2016; Smith 2014; van Dijck 2009, 2013a; Wasko and Erikson 2009), and some of these have also considered how the technological affordances of the website impact upon the types of videos that get created and how people interact on the site (Banet-Weiser 2011; Garcia-Rapp 2009; Postigo 2016; van Dijck 2013a). However, none have taken a radical mediation approach, considering how the YouTube vlogger's life, identity and body is produced through the logic of neoliberalism in conjunction with the technological structure and norms of the website. By combining political economy and mediation theory approaches, this dissertation seeks to make a timely critical contribution to the current literature on YouTube vlogging culture. Whilst I am using YouTube as my case study in this dissertation, many of the observations made also apply to other pervasive social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Snapchat, and so my wider aim is to propel scholarship on the neoliberal nature of social media culture more broadly.

It is important to note that I am specifically looking at *successful* YouTube vloggers here, also known as 'YouTube stars', by which I mean those who have very large numbers of subscribers and video views, and who earn their living through YouTube and related activities. There are of course many other people with relatively small audiences who post videos to YouTube as a hobby. This is a significant distinction because those with small audiences are not embroiled in the technocapitalist structures that I am exploring in this dissertation, though arguably they are subject to some of the same pressures as YouTube stars if they wish their videos to be promoted by YouTube's algorithms. I have chosen case studies of different YouTube channels and types of content in order to give a broader view of popular YouTube culture, and also to draw out the subject

of each chapter most effectively. Throughout this dissertation I use the terms 'YouTuber', 'vlogger' and 'YouTube star' interchangeably.

## **I. 'Broadcast Yourself': Introducing YouTube**

YouTube was launched in February 2005 as a website where users could upload, store and share video content. Shortly thereafter, the site's founders coined the ubiquitous tagline 'Broadcast Yourself', an imperative that users of YouTube have accepted with gusto ever since. At its 10-year mark, 300 hours of content was being uploaded to YouTube *every minute* (YouTube Official Blog 2015), and an eye-watering 1 billion hours (or *100,000 years*) of YouTube content is currently being watched *every day* around the world (Goodrow 2017). When acquiring the site for \$1.65 billion in 2006, Google made clear in a press release that their intention was to develop new models for attracting advertising revenues in order to capitalise upon the popularity and sheer quantity of content being uploaded to YouTube, which was relatively minor at that time in comparison to now (Wasko and Erikson 2009: p. 374).

Many large companies currently have a financial stake in YouTube, from advertisers who use the platform to sell products (either through pre-roll video ads, banners or product placement within User Generated Content), to Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) that represent multiple YouTube creators (to whom they provide guidance on how to grow their channels and become more successful), making the website a particularly complex commercial ecosystem. Examples of the scale of corporate interest in YouTube from traditional media companies include the 2014 acquisition of MCN Maker Studios by Disney for \$950 million, and the 2013 acquisition of MCN AwesomenessTV by DreamWorks Animation for \$117 million (Dredge 2016). This process can be understood in terms of Graham Murdock's historically and economically grounded analysis of convergence:

'...by steadily rubbing away the established boundaries between different media sectors and bringing previously separate interests together, innovations in digital technology have led to an unprecedented wave of mergers, acquisitions and partnership agreements, as the major communications companies seek to extend their reach and position themselves to take full advantage of future moves towards systems convergence.' (2000: p. 38)

By understanding the underlying economic and political structures that shape new digital technology industries, we are able to critically assess to what extent these technologies are challenging or in fact sustaining current distributions of power (Ibid.). This is particularly important in relation to YouTube and other social media platforms, which have been heralded as great democratisers of media and shining examples of 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006a, 2006b; Leadbeater 2007; Shirky 2010; Tapscott and Williams 2006). I will return to this point shortly.

When we consider Google's motivation to generate exponential advertising revenue on YouTube, alongside the major financial investment in YouTube from companies like Disney and DreamWorks, and the fact that a large proportion of YouTube's most viewed videos are User Generated Content (UGC), we start to get an idea of the structural economic forces motivating a commodified self amongst YouTube vloggers.

## **II. YouTube Stars**

Since around 2010, we have witnessed the proliferation of YouTube vlogging stars. These are people who make videos and post them on YouTube, garnering huge audiences and making a considerable income in the process. Vloggers produce a broad array of content, ranging from sitting alone in front of a camera speaking directly to their audience about a topic<sup>2</sup>, to instructional/tutorial videos<sup>3</sup>, makeup and clothing 'hauls'<sup>4</sup> and 'favourites'<sup>5</sup> videos, 'What I Eat in a Day' videos<sup>6</sup>, to 'daily vlogs' in which a person documents themselves going about their daily life<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> For example, 'The Teenage Years | Friendships, Bodies, Hormones & Periods | Zoella' (Sugg 2017c) (1,673,871 views as of July 8<sup>th</sup> 2017)

<sup>3</sup> For example, 'My Everyday Makeup Routine | Zoella' (Sugg 2016a) (6,723,221 views as of July 8<sup>th</sup> 2017)

<sup>4</sup> In which vloggers show their audiences items (usually clothing or makeup) that they have bought recently, and sometimes try on the items. For example, 'Huge Holiday ASOS Haul & Try On | Zoella' (Sugg 2016b) (3,570,608 views as of July 8<sup>th</sup> 2017)

<sup>5</sup> In which vloggers show their audiences their favourite items (clothing, makeup, homeware etc.) that they have purchased recently, often monthly. For example, 'January Favourites 2017 | Zoella' (Sugg 2017a) (1,925,418 views as of July 8<sup>th</sup> 2017)

<sup>6</sup> In which vloggers document everything they eat within a day and explain it to their audiences. These videos are heavily influenced by the veganism/clean eating movement. For example, 'What I Eat In A Day | Tanya Burr' (Burr 2017) (1,047,342 views as of 8<sup>th</sup> July 2017)

<sup>7</sup> For example, 'THE BIG DAY!' (Deyes 2017)



YouTube stars are successful entrepreneurs, being paid a cut of the advertising revenue on their videos as part of the 'YouTube Partner Programme' (YouTube Help 2017a), as well as profiting from lucrative sponsorship deals with big-name brands, selling merchandise and performing in sell-out shows. The UK is home to some of the most profitable YouTubers in the world, such as 27-year-old Felix Kjellberg (AKA PewDiePie) who was named the highest earning YouTuber last year, receiving a reported \$15 million in 2016 from his YouTube gaming channel (56 million+ subscribers<sup>8</sup>) and spinoff projects (Berg 2016). The popularity of YouTube stars, such as PewDiePie and Zoella, has now reached beyond the borders of YouTube itself. Zoella's debut novel *Girl Online* was the fastest selling book of 2014, as well as breaking the record for highest first week sales for a debut author since records began (Collinson 2014). Popular pre-teen magazines, such as *We Love Pop* (Fig 1.) and *Shout* (Fig. 2), are now more likely to feature famous YouTubers than more traditional celebrities, such as musicians or actors.



<sup>8</sup> As of 8th July 2017, PewDiePie's YouTube channel has 56,110,597 subscribers (PewDiePie 2017)



Fig. 1 – *We Love Pop* cover, January 2017 issue<sup>9</sup>

Fig. 2 – *Shout* magazine cover, Jan 2017 issue<sup>10</sup>

On a platform that was originally seen as a hub for grassroots creativity, in opposition to mainstream broadcast media, a growing sense of commercialisation on YouTube has emerged. Videos from popular vloggers appear more polished, ‘routinized’, and packed with product placement (Cocker and Cronin 2017: p. 6). The most successful YouTube creators have signed with social media talent agencies such as Gleam Futures, which represents the majority of popular UK vloggers, such as Zoe Sugg (Zoella), Alfie Deyes (PointlessBlog), Niomi Smart (Niomi Smart), Louise Pentland (SprinkleofGlitter) and Tanya Burr (Tanya Burr). These agencies exist to negotiate deals with brands on behalf of their clients, to produce and sell YouTuber merchandise, and to systematize and guide their clients’ YouTube channels (Ibid.). They also manage collaborations between different YouTubers, which explains in part why their clients often feature on each other’s channels, thus sharing subscribers and boosting their cumulative popularity.

According to Ofcom’s latest *Children and parents: media use and attitudes report*, 73% of 8-11 year-olds and an incredible 87% of 12-15 year-olds in the UK watch videos on YouTube, and notably the report observed that young people now strongly prefer to watch YouTube content over TV programmes on a TV set (Ofcom, p. 64). With increasingly high rates of engagement amongst young people with YouTube, many of whom are avid fans of particular YouTube vloggers, the question of what messages, values and lifestyles that these YouTube stars are promoting in their videos has become a more urgent issue for critical scrutiny.

### **III. Combining political economy and mediation approaches**

The theoretical grounding for this dissertation is the combination of political economy and mediation theory approaches. This synthesis is well suited to analysing the inseparable intertwining

<sup>9</sup> Famous vloggers Zoella, Joe Sugg and Caspar Lee on the front of *We Love Pop* magazine’s January 2017 issue (*We Love Pop* 2017)

<sup>10</sup> Famous vloggers Zoella, Joe Sugg, Dan Howell and Phil Lester on the front of *Shout* magazine’s January 2017 issue. *Shout* magazine’s current tagline is ‘NO. 1 FOR YOUTUBERS!’ This issue also included a ‘YouTuber Colouring Book’, with images of young people’s favourite YouTube stars (*Shout* 2017)

of commercialism, life, the self and technology that is so apparent in YouTube vlogs. Informed by van Dijck's argument in *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013a), I aim to present a *critical history* of the insertion of commercialism into YouTube culture. Van Dijck is neither a technological determinist nor a social constructionist, managing to find a socio-technical middle ground. Her approach can be understood within the wider trend towards theories of *mediation* that have proliferated in recent years (for example, Deuze 2012; Kember and Zylynska 2012; Scholz 2010). Whilst van Dijck does adopt a mediation approach, in that she considers the ways in which humans and social media technologies are mutually co-constituted, I want to go a step further by adopting a more radical mediation theory approach. Here I am particularly informed by Kember and Zylynska's understanding of mediation in *Life After New Media* (2012) as a process of mutual becoming, and of our sociocultural and biological entanglements with media. I am also very inspired by Wendy Brown's concepts of *homo æconomicus* and the rise of a neoliberal political rationality (2005).

In order to fully appreciate the importance of scholarship on new media rooted in political economy, it is necessary to outline what it was preceded by. The arrival of 'Web 2.0' brought with it much excitement and optimism from both mainstream media and academics alike regarding the transformative power of user-generated content (for example, Jenkins 2006a, 2006b; Leadbeater 2007; Shirky 2010; Tapscott and Williams 2006). Revolutionary rhetoric abounded, exemplified by the famous 2006 *Time* magazine issue confidently declaring their Person of the Year as 'You' (Fig. 3). Lev Grossman, the author of the piece, wrote:

'For seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, Time's Person of the Year for 2006 is you.' (Grossman 2006)

The collection of technologies under the 'Web 2.0' umbrella were viewed as a challenge to 'Big Media', providing people with direct access to one another and to new tools for creativity and activism (Marwick 2014: p. 22). YouTube was no exception to this hopeful mood; as a website on which anyone could create and upload content for free, it was seen as the antidote to traditional broadcast media's stranglehold on audiovisual content. The notion of 'participatory culture',

popularised by Henry Jenkins (2006a, 2006b), emphasises the emancipatory elements of new technologies for engaged 'prosumers', with audiences now 'demanding the right to participate within culture' (Jenkins 2006a: p. 24).



*Fig. 3 – Time magazine cover, December 2006 issue (Grossman 2006)*

However, a number of academics have rightly pointed out the danger in these techno-utopian and deterministic works that hail a paradigmatic shift in communication due to Web 2.0, highlighting instead the importance of understanding these technologies within their political and economic contexts. Studies of the political economy of the media are broadly concerned with questions of power: who has the power to make decisions about the direction of the media, who benefits from these decisions, and how do these power relations operate? Crucially, political economic approaches critically analyse and challenge the positioning of media and communications technologies within the neoliberal capitalist framework (Wasko and Erikson 2009:

p. 373). Particularly prevalent topics in the political economy approach to new media have been critiques of free labour online (De Kosnik 2013; Fuchs 2014; Scholz 2010, 2013; Terranova 2000), data collection and targeted advertising (Andrejevic 2009; Morozov 2011; Postigo 2016; van Dijck and Nieborg 2009; van Dijck 2009, 2013a), and the increasing co-option of online space by the corporate neoliberal agenda (Banet-Weiser 2011; Couldry and van Dijck 2015; Hearn 2008; Marwick 2014; van Dijck 2009, 2013a, 2013b).

Mediation theories understand social processes and media as having a *dialectical* relationship, being mutually co-constituted (Silverstone 2005). For the purposes of this dissertation, I am drawing upon Kember and Zylinksa's more radical understanding of mediation in *Life After New Media* (2012), as a temporal concept concerned with flow and process, as opposed to the static spatial concept of 'media' that is concerned with fixed objects. Their core aim is to produce:

'...not just a theory of "mediation" but also a "theory of life," whereby mediation becomes a key trope for understanding and articulating our being in, and becoming with, the technological world, our emergence and ways of intra-acting with it, as well as the acts and processes of temporality stabilizing the world into media, agents, relations, and networks.' (Ibid: p. xv)

This ambitious goal results in an extremely useful framework for understanding much more than what most people would traditionally call 'media'. Nonetheless, for my purposes it is also suitable for an analysis of the commodification of YouTube vloggers, when considered in conjunction with a more traditional political economy approach.

# 1. THE BRANDED AND COMMODIFIED SELF

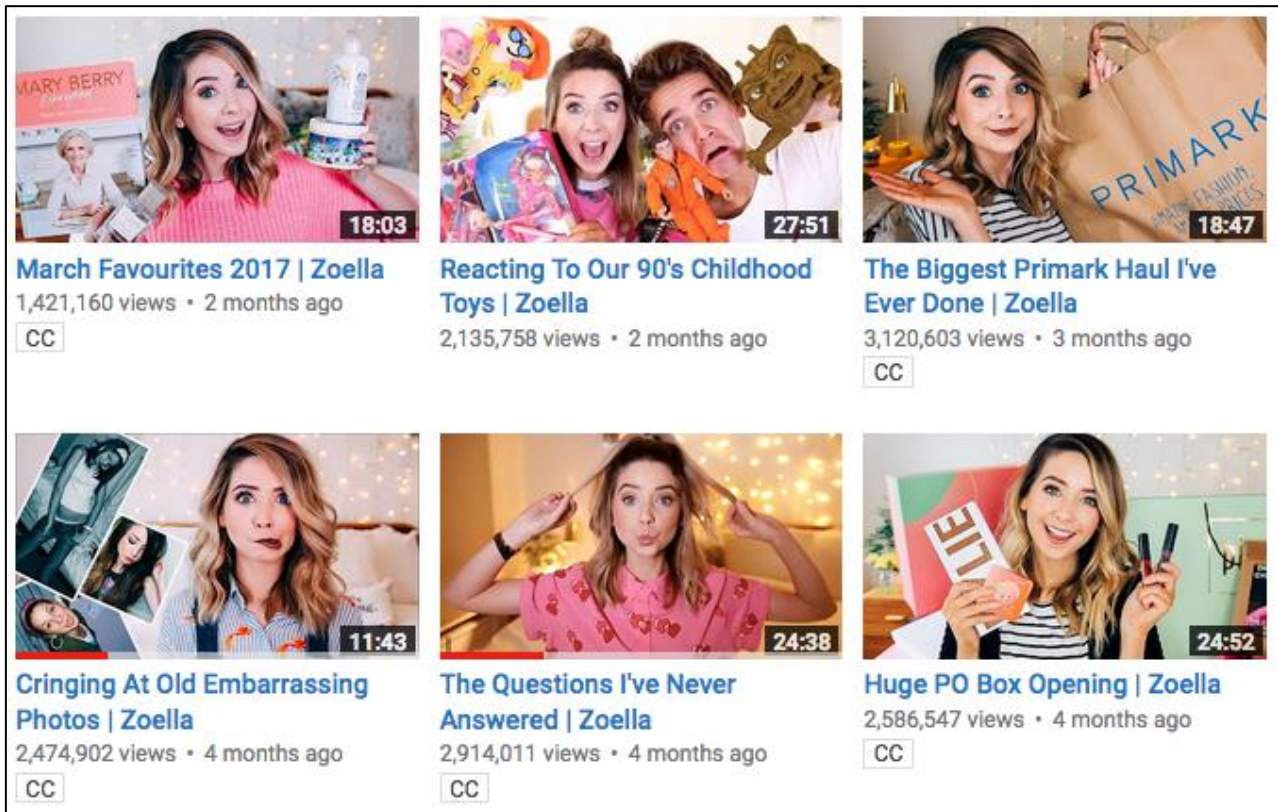


Fig. 4 – Screenshot of recent videos from Zoella's YouTube channel (Zoella 2017)

Using Zoella as its case study, this chapter analyses the ways in which a commodified self is produced amongst popular YouTube vloggers through a neoliberal political rationality and practices of self-branding, and the ways in which the perceived *authenticity* of vloggers is being undermined by commercialism. 27-year-old Brighton-based Zoe Sugg (AKA 'Zoella') is one of YouTube's most recognisable and popular lifestyle and beauty vloggers.

As of the 21<sup>st</sup> July 2017, Zoella has 11.9 million subscribers on her main channel (Zoella 2017), which is devoted to typical YouTube lifestyle and beauty vlogger content such as makeup and hair tutorials, monthly favourites, clothing/product hauls, Q&A's, PO box openings, and funny/entertaining collaborations with other YouTubers stars, such as her boyfriend Alfie Deyes (PointlessBlogVlogs 2017) and brother Joe Sugg (ThatcherJoe 2017). On average the videos on her main channel receive between 1.5 and 3 million views each. She also has a further 4.6 million subscribers on her second YouTube channel (MoreZoella 2017), which contains daily vlog style

videos, and these receive 1 or 2 million views each on average. It is common for popular YouTubers to have a main channel and then one or multiple additional channels, each dedicated to a different genre of content. Usually the second channel will be reserved for more relaxed chatty/daily vlog style content, less 'polished' and unscripted content, or else a hobby such as gaming<sup>11</sup>. Zoella also has a prolific presence across other social media platforms, for example 9.4 million Twitter followers (@Zoella 2017a), 11.1 million Instagram followers (@Zoella 2017b), and 2.6 million fans on Facebook (zoe.zoella 2017).

Between her two YouTube channels and other social media accounts, a large proportion of Zoella's life is available for public consumption, and much of what she does in her life (what she wears, where she goes, what she eats, what she buys etc.) is informed by what will make interesting/watchable/entertaining content for her followers. Zoella's life is intimately intertwined with technologies (filming equipment, social media accounts etc.), her audience's attention and desires, and YouTube's affordances and algorithms, that promote certain types of content over others. Earning one's living through 'broadcasting yourself' on YouTube produces a particular type of subjectivity informed by all of these factors, as well as the overriding logic of neoliberalism that permeates the platform. From the economic imperative to make popular content in order to receive a lot of advertising revenue, to the multitude of sponsorship, TV and book deals that are offered to the likes of Zoella and her peers, to the vested financial interests of talent agents and MCNs, YouTube stars are pushed from many sides to become ever more valuable commodities. Corporate interests view YouTube stars as empty vessels waiting to be filled with products, messages and lifestyles to sell to their audiences (for a fee, of course).

### **I. *Homo æconomicus* and monthly favourites videos**

Wendy Brown's concept of *homo æconomicus* (2005) is fitting for an analysis of the

<sup>11</sup> Gaming channels are a popular genre in which YouTubers play video games and commentate over the top.

vlogger's participation in and inseparability from the exchange of capital. Brown describes the spread of a neoliberal political rationality that produces subjects, behaviours, and a new organisation of the social. This rationality has dominated every dimension of contemporary existence, resulting in all institutional and human action being measured 'according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality' (p. 40). Crucially, Brown does not see this neoliberal rationality as an ontological truth, but rather as an ongoing constructivist project, aggressively enacted through the development of institutional practices and systems of reward. In other words, neoliberalism 'takes as its task the development, dissemination, and institutionalization of such a rationality' (Ibid.).

Particularly relevant to the vlogging context is Brown's assertion that this configuration of the human as *homo æconomicus* has permeated every sphere of life, so that the distinction between work and play is dissolved and individuals become entirely entrepreneurial actors (p. 42). For YouTube vloggers this distinction is nonexistent, where the commodity being sold in their videos is the vlogger themselves – their lifestyle, activities, tastes and relationships.

A particularly conspicuous example of Brown's neoliberal rationality can be seen in the pervasive 'monthly favourites' video genre, in which a vlogger shows their audience their favourite products that they have bought or (claim to) have been using a lot in the past month. These are usually makeup, clothing, homeware, and beauty products (and sometimes food/drink, books, music and films). To return to our Zoella case study, her recent video entitled 'April Favourites 2017 | Zoella' (Fig. 5) is a typical example of this genre. Since it was published on the 16<sup>th</sup> May 2017, it has garnered 1,839,087 views (as of 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2017), 72,291 'thumbs ups' and 166 comments (every single one positive). The 16-minute vlog involves Zoella reviewing a list of nine items in a chatty and personable manner, explaining to her audience why she likes them. The video is informal, as if a friend is talking to you, and Zoella brings her bubbly personality to the fore with entertaining asides and jokes: "I'm very tropical today! I feel like I should have a coconut in my hand and a pineapple on my head!" (Sugg 2017b).





*Fig. 5 – Screenshot from Zoella’s ‘April Favourites 2017’ vlog (Zoella 2017b)*

Favourites videos like this, and similar ‘haul’ and ‘try on’ videos, openly promote a culture of consumerism in that they directly encourage the buying of products. In order to maintain credibility, YouTubers cultivate a reputation of honesty premised on the idea that they have actually personally used and liked the products (Garcia-Rapp 2017: p. 239). However, there is a covert agenda at work here. In the description box below the video (Appendix 1.) is the following sentence:

‘Links below marked with a “\*” are affiliate links – which means I receive a percentage of the revenue made from purchasing products through this link.’ (Ibid.)

Below this is a list of all the products reviewed in the video, with URLs linking directly to the pages where you can buy each item. Of the nine items reviewed in the video, six are products that Zoella is being sponsored to promote by other brands. It is not made clear in the content of the video itself that Zoella is receiving remuneration for the sales of the items that she is reviewing, though she does occasionally mention in various videos that she is ‘sent’ items by the brands (presumably for free in the hopes that she will endorse their products on camera). Although arguably Zoella is being

transparent, in that she has written this information in the description box that she has financial stake in the selling of these products, I would posit that most viewers do not read the small print below videos. Most YouTubers do not include this information beneath videos of this nature, in which case it is completely obscured whether or not they have been sponsored to promote certain products.

Even more remarkable than Zoella gaining financial reward for the items that she is reviewing, which although somewhat unspoken is at least relevant to the topic of the video, she also lists in the description box four further items under the heading: 'I'm Wearing & In The Background' (Appendix 1.). These items are fairy lights, her bed and bedside tables, and the top she's wearing in the video. With the exception of her top, these items are also marked as affiliate links. This means that although these items are not being reviewed in the video, Zoella is still selling them to her audience. This underhanded marketing is an excellent example of Brown's neoliberal political rationality. Everything about this video has been designed to yield the highest financial profit possible for Zoella, her management team, and her sponsors. Underneath the guise of friendly offhand recommendations lies a deeply calculated economic logic.

The majority of Zoella's fans are young girls, who see her as a combination of icon, role model and friend. If Zoella recommends a product to her followers, they are more likely to buy it than if they had seen the product in a traditional commercial. Neoliberalism is far more effective when 'dispersed through micro-interactions than when imposed from the top-down' (Marwick 2014: p. 3). In her recent article on the attention economy of the YouTube beauty community, Florencia García-Rapp makes an interesting distinction between the role of 'motivational' and 'relational' vlogs versus 'content-oriented' and 'market-oriented' beauty tutorial videos (2017: p. 228). She argues that these categories serve different but mutually beneficial purposes for a YouTube channel. Vlogs help to foster a sense of community and generate personal investment in and subscribers for the YouTuber, whilst beauty tutorials are informational and 'searchable' (boyd 2011) and therefore attract bigger audiences of more casual viewers (García-Rapp 2017: p. 234). The idea is that the larger casual *viewers* drawn in for tutorial videos might then be converted to loyal

*subscribers* once they watch personal vlog content, thus building a devoted and invested fan base for that YouTuber. I find this argument to be compelling, and certainly corresponds with my own observations about how people interact with YouTube channels. If you exchange this example of beauty for a different channel genre such as comedy, gaming or cooking, then the addition of personal vlogs still helps to give the audience a sense of personal connection with that YouTuber, thus boosting their subscriber base. This is important to the topic of commodification on YouTube, because the intimate nature of the relationships that YouTubers have with their fans means that they are better positioned to sell products to them. Big brands recognise this commercial influence and exploit it; YouTubers are better at selling products than traditional advertising because their fans trust them and want to emulate them. This as an utterly cynical process, in which audiences (often unwittingly) become party to elaborate marketing campaigns disguised as honest “unmediated” connections with YouTubers.

## **II. The undermining of authenticity by commercialisation on YouTube**

One of the few products that Zoella reviews in this video that is not an affiliate sponsorship is from her own range *Zoella Beauty* (‘Scooper Dooper Bubble Bath’), which she coyly recommends at the end of the video:

“And last but by no means least is one of my own products, which I try not to rave about too much just because I don’t want you guys to be like ‘OK we get it’, but I genuinely do use and love my products, which shouldn’t really come as much of a surprise to any of you.” (Zoella 2017b)

Her tentativeness to self-promote can be attributed to an ongoing struggle for *authenticity* amongst YouTubers. A number of media scholars have written about the subject of authenticity on social media (De Kosnik 2013; Marwick and boyd 2011; Marwick 2014, 2015), and some specifically about authenticity on YouTube (Beuge 2007; Cocker and Cronin 2017). Often noted in this literature is the friction between authenticity and commercialism; a person is seen to be less authentic if they openly seek economic gain for their contributions to social media platforms. As pioneering YouTube scholar Michael Wesch observed in an interview back in 2007:

'Many commented that they would rather watch real people on YouTube than the commercial productions of television. They saved their harshest complaints for reality TV, which they found to be the least real because it is posing as something it is not. Ultimately, it is the ulterior motives that bother them. (Buege 2007: p. 14)'

Ironically, at the time Wesch was citing YouTube vlogs as a source of authenticity in opposition to broadcast television, but his comment about reality TV is a perfect description of what is currently happening on YouTube vlogs. Vloggers appear to be making videos for fun and because they are genuinely interested in constructing online communities, but many have ulterior motives of making money and seeking fame. Much like in the Zoella example above, many YouTubers have become adept at masking or softening the appearance of their commercial activities. Whilst Zoella's fans accept (and often enjoy) that she has many products on sale, such as *Zoella Beauty*, other merchandise, and her books, if she were to adopt a more aggressive marketing style then some of her fans would feel resentful or taken advantage of. Much like when she is endorsing the products of other brands, when she talks about her own merchandise Zoella is careful to maintain her image as friend and confidante, rather than salesperson and entrepreneur.

In their recent article, Cocker and Cronin (2017) make a compelling argument about the co-construction of 'cults of personality' between YouTubers and their fans, drawing heavily upon Weber's concept of charismatic authority. Most usefully for this dissertation, through an exploration of seven of the most popular British YouTubers (including Zoella), they chart the rise and fall of 'charismatic personalities' on YouTube (Ibid: p. 7). They argue that early YouTube content creators instilled a sense amongst their followers that what they as a community were doing was 'revolutionary, novel and radical in contrast to the passive audiences of TV before them' (Ibid: p. 10). This was due to the 'collaborative, co-constructive and communal interdependence' between creators and followers; the feeling amongst followers that they were the *custodians* of their favourite YouTube channel and personality (Ibid: p. 7). Similarly to García-Rapp's evaluation of motivational and relational vlogs, Cocker and Cronin observe that it is the personality of the YouTuber that maintains their audience, rather than their talent or skill (Ibid.). Audiences feel that they *intimately*

*know* their favourite YouTuber, and have a role to play in building and sustaining the community around them.

However, Cocker and Cronin go on to describe the demise of the relationship between YouTubers and their audiences due to the 'routinization of charisma' (Ibid: p. 1). Charisma in the Weberian sense is *necessarily* innovative and avant-garde, and for this reason Weber argues that it cannot remain stable, it must become 'either traditionalized or rationalized' (Ibid: p. 11). Cocker and Cronin cite as examples of this process of traditionalisation and rationalization many of the elements of commercialisation on YouTube that I have already mentioned, from the insertion of talent agencies and MCNs, to sponsorship deals, the 'YouTube Partner Programme', and merchandise sales (Ibid.). YouTube channels of successful vloggers appear more polished, maintaining regular uploading schedules and utilising high quality filming equipment. A hobby that was once new, unscripted and full of creative potential has now become a form of labour that is managed, bureaucratized and commodified (Ibid: p. 12). As they aptly put it:

'...it is the co-constructed and socially activated nature of 'consumer charisma' that has allowed YouTubers to enhance their level of authority, disrupt orthodoxies and spark interest in a new order. However, once these new orders have been established, various rules and institutions emerge to guide their influence, ultimately leading to the routinization and fading of charisma.' (Ibid: p. 13)

They allude to an irony here, that without the initial co-construction of the charismatic personality between the YouTuber and their fans, these YouTubers would never have become as popular as they are now and thus would never have been able to attract the attentions of large brands etc., which has subsequently lead to them disappointing many of their original followers with their commercialisation. Notably, Cocker and Cronin add that this process of the routinization of charisma hasn't resulted in a *fall* of audience numbers for popular YouTubers, but rather a shift in the nature of their relationships with their audiences. They argue that charismatic communities are

dissipating as the level of interaction and proximity between YouTubers and their fans diminishes, and YouTubers are migrating further along the spectrum towards traditional celebrity status.

Whilst I find Cocker and Cronin's observations about the routinization and bureaucratisation of YouTube culture to be fruitful, I would argue that there are a number of original fans of YouTubers who are not disappointed or upset by the increasing commercialism of their favourite vloggers. Indeed, many fans welcome the ability to participate in the cultural identity of 'YouTube fan' through the consumption of YouTuber's branded products and merchandise, as is evidenced by the successful sales rates of these items (Ellis-Petersen 2016). I would also posit that younger audiences who have come to YouTube in the last three or four years take this commercialism at face value and accept it as part of YouTube culture, unlike older audiences who have been following some YouTubers for ten years by now. This mirrors van Dijck's argument in *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013), and I agree with her call for critical media education for young people:

'Particularly now that a generation is coming of age for whom social media simply seem to be a given – an infrastructure they do not question – it is important to make explicit that ideological structures that undergird microsystems and their ecology... There is an urgent need for sustained media education, not just in terms of teaching youngsters how to code, but also how to think critically.' (Ibid: p. 175)

It is important that YouTube audiences understand the neoliberal incentives that are informing the content of their favourite YouTube channels. I would argue that, at the very least, audiences should know and be able to make informed decisions about participating in this economically driven system.

### **III. Self-branding on YouTube**

In September 2016 Zoella invited selected online influencers, the press, and a few lucky fans to 'The Zoella Apartment' in London, for the launch of her new *Zoella Lifestyle* and *Zoella*

*Beauty* ranges and Christmas products. In her vlog entitled 'THE ZOELLA APARTMENT' (Sugg 2016c), Zoella guides her YouTube viewers around the apartment. It consists of a bedroom, living room, kitchen, bathroom and home office, all entirely decked out in her branded merchandise, which includes but is not limited to: scented candles, diffusers, pillows, socks, makeup, cosmetics bags, bath products, Christmas crackers and baubles, gift hampers and box sets, perfumes, key rings, photo frames, pencils, notebooks, planners, plant pots, coffee cups... the list goes on. Every inch of the apartment is branded Zoella, from the products on display, to the strategically placed '#ZoellaApartment' and '@ZoellaLifestyle' text printed on the walls, to the garish 'selfie spot' awash with the Zoella logo (Fig. 6): "This is a selfie spot" says Zoella buoyantly in the video, "You can stand here, take a little selfie, perfect backdrop. Love it!" (Sugg 2016c). It is apt that the marketing of the Zoella brand should take the form of an entire living space, in that it mirrors the smooth entanglement of commercialisation with Zoella's everyday home life on her YouTube channels.



Fig. 6 – Screenshot from 'THE ZOELLA APARTMENT' vlog (Sugg 2016c)

The Zoella Apartment as a particularly extreme example of aspirational self-branding, which is ubiquitous amongst YouTube stars. I understand self-branding as an explicit form of labour



whereby outward presentations of the self are purposeful, 'marked by the visual codes of the mainstream culture industry, and subject to the extraction of value' (Hearn 2008: p. 197). As social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram and Twitter have matured they have moved away from being sites of spontaneous self-expression, to increasingly become locations of conscious self-branding. As van Dijck puts it: 'Roughly after 2009, the self turned into an object of marketing and promotion now that connectivity could transform online social value to real rewards in the offline world' (2013b: p. 203). The self here is not seen as a stable entity rooted in some kind of essentialist human nature or psychoanalytic conception of unconscious identity formation, but rather as something produced by dominant cultural narratives 'intent on constant innovation and flexibility' (Hearn 2008: p. 197). Hearn argues that in recent years practices of branding have moved away from the direct marketing of particular products, to a more ambient and abstract attachment of feelings and associations to objects that may then condition consumer behaviours. A brand is no longer just a simple commodity, but rather an 'entire virtual context for consumption' (Ibid: p. 199). Branding is a broad system that validates the neoliberal project:

'In a world marked by increasing flexibility and flux, branding works to fix, albeit temporarily and tentatively, cultural meaning around consumption, producing aestheticized modes of justification for life under capital.' (Ibid.)

Hearn's framework is highly relevant to YouTube vloggers' intangible, all-encompassing and ambiguous practices of self-branding and marketing. It is not always clear if they have a vested interest in trying to persuade their audiences to buy a particular product, but they 'work to colonize the lived experience of consumers in the interests of capital accumulation' (Ibid: p. 200).

To borrow a phrase from Andrew Wernick, YouTubers become commodity signs that 'function in circulation both as... object(s)-to-be-sold and as the bearer(s) of a promotional message' (1991: p. 16). YouTubers' incomes are diverse, based on advertising revenue calculated by viewer figures, sponsorship deals, and broader projects such as merchandise and book sales. But in order to receive any of these revenue streams, YouTubers must first sell themselves by cultivating an appealing personal brand. The YouTube star creates a self that is designed for public

consumption and 'continually produces itself for competitive circulation' (Ibid: p. 192). In a world of self-branding, success becomes less dependent on particular skills and more 'on the glossy packaging of the self and the unrelenting pursuit of attention' (Hearn 2008: p. 205). YouTube stars practise a form of self-branding that 'sits at the nexus of discourses of neoliberalism, flexible accumulation, radical individualism, and spectacular self promotionalism' (Ibid: p. 201). As Burgess argues, YouTube as a platform is based on an 'aspirational strategy' in which YouTubers are selling themselves and their lifestyles (2012: p. 55).

#### **IV. Post-feminism as a brand on YouTube**

To end this chapter, I want to turn my attention to practices of self-branding on YouTube that relate specifically to *post-feminist female* identities, as explored by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2011). This is an extremely useful framework for looking at female beauty gurus such as Zoella, and whilst the gendered post-feminist aspect of this section does not apply to male YouTube stars, the observations about self-branding and commercialisation on YouTube certainly do. Although she is writing specifically about adolescent girls' amateur performances of pop songs, Banet-Weiser's argument that YouTube has become an ideal space to craft a self-brand in the post-feminist landscape, where gender empowerment is connected with consumer activity, is highly relevant in the beauty guru vlogging star context (2011: p. 278). This is due to YouTube's dynamic capacity for public performance via User Generated Content, the affordances of viewers comments and interactions (Ibid.), and its 'double function as both a 'top down' platform for the distribution of popular culture and a 'bottom-up' platform for vernacular creativity" (Burgess and Green 2009a: p. 6). The construction of the female branded self on YouTube is a dynamic process between the vlogger, their audience, and the norms and values of hegemonic gendered consumer culture (Ibid: p. 283). This kind of self-branding is not the same as the more traditional 'objectification of female bodies', but rather a blending of the ideals of femininity with more progressive neoliberal concepts like 'empowerment' and 'capability'. As Banet-Weiser puts it:

'...the self-branded girl is encouraged to be self-reliant and empowered, especially within a consumer context. Indeed, she is encouraged to *be* a product within a neoliberal context; she authorizes herself to be consumed through her own self-production' (Ibid.)

Although Banet-Weiser is writing about adolescent female amateur performances on YouTube, what she is saying is even *more* relevant to the YouTube beauty guru context, due to the insertion of financial incentives through sponsorship deals and product endorsements. Beauty gurus are paid to make the products of brands more attractive to their audiences, through their performances of femininity and entrepreneurialism. Banet-Weiser argues that the self that is created and presented on YouTube is not free to be positioned within an endlessly open cultural script, but rather is shaped by the structuring narratives of commercial brands, that have recognisable 'predetermined images, texts, beliefs, and values' (Ibid: p. 284). Mirroring Hearn's (2008) argument that branding has become more abstract and pervasive, Banet-Weiser comments that on YouTubers reference brands 'not simply as commodities, but as the context for everyday life' (2011: p. 285). This ties in with my observations about favourites and haul videos, as well as The Zoella Apartment. Brand affiliation is seen as a form of self-expression and identity formation. I return to the topic of post-feminist identity in my final chapter, in reference to health and fitness YouTube channels and the pervasive 'What I Eat in a Day' video genre.

## 2. THE NEOLIBERAL RATIONALITY OF YOUTUBE'S TECHNOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES

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This chapter explores the ways in which the technological affordances of YouTube promote a neoliberal rationality at all levels, from content creators and audiences, to advertisers and sponsors. The technological affordances of YouTube encompass very visible elements, such as the existence of banner advertising and pre-roll ads, and the ability for audiences to comment on, 'like' or 'dislike' videos. But they also include the invisible underlying algorithms, that recommend particular videos based on users' subscriptions, viewing history and what is currently popular on the website. Addressing the technological affordances of the platform is essential to analysing of the commodification of YouTubers, within my socio-technical mediation framework. Although technological affordances aren't solely responsible for YouTube's culture, they have a profound influence upon the ways in which people are produced through and experience the platform. I follow Postigo's argument that the technological affordances of YouTube are designed to 'create a set of probable uses/meanings/practices whilst serving YouTube's business interests' (2016: p. 332). The technological features of YouTube are designed to encourage social interaction and engagement amongst viewers and creators with the platform, in order to allow YouTube to 'extract value from UGC and constitute its digital labour architecture' (Ibid.).

### **I. Outlining YouTube's affordances**

In *Fig. 7* below I have highlighted some of the significant affordances that are found on the same page as the video-viewing window on YouTube, using as an example a recent vlog by Safiya Nygaard entitled 'I Got "Perfect" Jeans From An App' (Nygaard 2017). These affordances are indicative of the broader logic of the website, designed to construct hierarchy and productivity amongst YouTube creators, as well as sustained engagement from viewers. Below I outline what each of these affordances are, and in what ways they help to produce and sustain the neoliberal rationality of the platform.

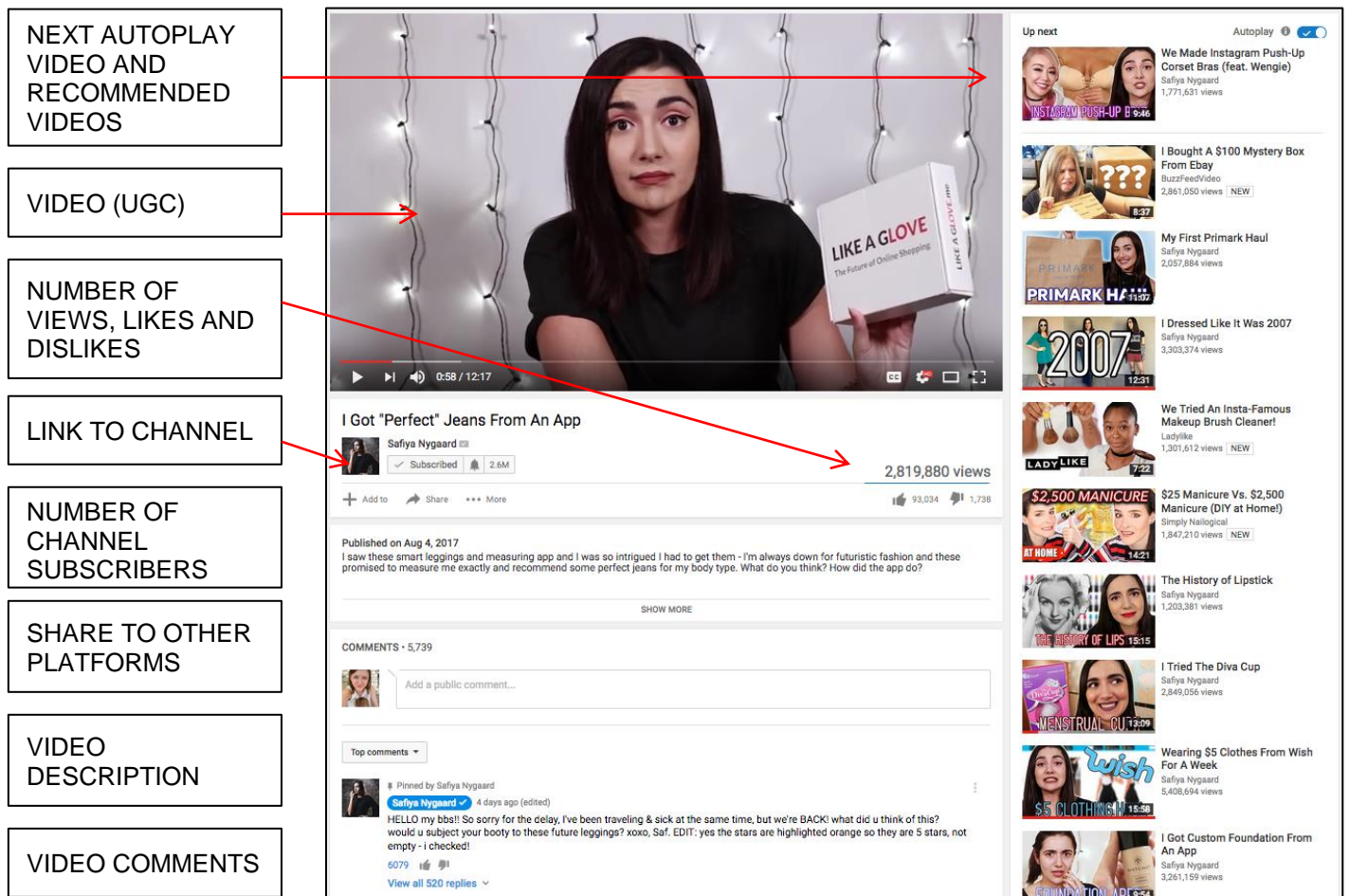


Fig. 7 – Screenshot of ‘I Got “Perfect” Jeans From An App’ vlog (Nygaard 2017), marked with affordances.

Video (UGC) – The User Generated Content in the form of videos is the central affordance and commodity of YouTube as a platform. It is ‘the “draw” that brings subscribers and others to the commentator’s channel’ (Postigo 2016: p. 337), and the product with which YouTube generates its revenue (via advertising). As discussed previously, YouTubers are encouraged to create normative and routinized content if they wish to successfully participate in YouTube’s techno-capitalist structures.

Number of views, ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’, and channel subscribers – There are a number of numerical metrics visible around the video window, which allows viewers to easily measure the popularity of the video and the creator’s YouTube channel. These figures encourage a hierarchical judgement

of video creators by viewers and other creators. All of these metrics have an impact on the video's ranking and its place in search results (Postigo 2016: p. 337). It is through interacting with videos and channels that audiences play a vital role in influencing a channel's value within YouTube's 'competitive ecology' (García-Rapp 2017: p. 231). Watching and liking a video, leaving a comment, and subscribing to a channel all act as 'performative markers', drawing the interest of advertisers (Burgess and Green 2009b: p. 41). The number of video views determines the amount of advertising revenue that video creators make who are members of the 'YouTube Partner Programme'. As Postigo points out, creators that 'rise, hold, and grow large follower bases' (YouTube stars) are crucial for the generation of revenue on UGC platforms like YouTube, and so the architecture of the platform is designed to boost the popularity of such creators (2016: p. 344), at the expense of smaller creators. Whilst a video may go viral and attract a lot of views, it is the number of *subscribers* that a channel has that is the main determinant of a video creator's success, because it suggests a sustained and dedicated audience (García-Rapp 2017: p. 234).

Link to channel – There is a link directly to the video creator's channel below the video. This encourages viewers to engage with YouTube more like they do with television, utilising it a collection of channels for different types of content, rather than as a social networking tool (van Dijck 2013a: p. 114). This feeds into the platform's design to promote YouTube stars as individual personalities, rather than highlighting interconnections between creators and viewers. To return to Cocker and Cronin's argument (2017), these YouTube stars are in turn encouraged to routinize and commercialise their channels by their management teams, further mimicking more traditional media forms.

Video description – The creator can add text to supplement the video in the box below the video-window. As well as a description of the video and a friendly message, these boxes often include a list of links to the creator's other social media profiles and YouTube channels. If it is a video endorsing products then there will also often be links to those products in the description box (as is

the case in Zoella's favourites video outlined in the last chapter).

Next autoplay video and recommended videos – Down the right-hand side of the screen there is a list of recommended videos that steer users towards certain content relating to the video currently being watched. For each recommended video the user can see a thumbnail, title, channel name and number of views. These videos are selected based on YouTube's algorithms, matching up the current video being watched with other content based on its channel, video title, and popularity. There is also a video at the top of the list that autoplays after the current video being watched, which is highly influential in steering the viewing patterns of the audience. The autoplay function and recommended videos also serve to hold the audiences' attention on YouTube as a platform for as long as possible, thus increasing the advertising revenue generated.

Video comments – Viewers can post comments underneath the video, talking to each other and the video creator. Comments encourage a level of interactivity between video creator and audience, unlike traditional broadcast television. However, the comments on YouTube stars' videos usually reflect a celebrity/fan dynamic, or else trolling on the part of the viewer, rather than peer-to-peer social networking.

Pre-roll and banner advertising – The majority of YouTube's revenue is made through advertising placed around or before User Generated Content. YouTube has a number of different advertising formats, including static banners and pre-roll ads (all of YouTube's advertising formats are illustrated in Appendix 2.). The revenue made from this advertising is shared between YouTube and the video creator, but only if the video creator is part of the 'YouTube Partner Program'. There are various rules and regulations in place to determine whether a creator is eligible to participate in this programme, including having a minimum of 10,000 views on their videos, and creating 'advertiser-friendly content' (YouTube Creator Hub 2012), meaning that YouTubers are encouraged to present squeaky clean, marketable personas that will not offend potential advertisers. YouTube



may decide to demonetise a video because it contains 'questionable or offensive material' that an advertiser would not want 'their product to be showcased with' (Ibid.). In addition to receiving advertising revenue on their videos, YouTube Partners' videos are boosted preferentially by YouTube's search algorithms (van Dijck 2013a: p. 126).

A neoliberal rationality permeates YouTubers' creative choices, being informed by what they think will attract the most viewers, and thus make the most money through advertising revenue. This results in the generification of content across different popular YouTube channels, and trickles down to less popular YouTube channels. For example, a large number of videos have been published in the last two or three years reviewing Lush bath products<sup>12</sup>. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, Lush the company is making concerted efforts to generate a lot of exposure on YouTube through sponsoring YouTubers to review their products. The second element is more subtle and diffuse: because YouTube creators have seen videos reviewing Lush products from other creators generating high viewing figures, they have in turn decided to emulate this content in the hopes that their video will also receive many viewers, exploiting the principles of 'searchability' and popularity. YouTube's algorithms promote content that is already popular, so that a snowball effect occurs. As Jakobsson puts it, 'popularity leads to visibility and the chance of spreading that popularity' (2010: p. 111). This makes it a lot easier to generate views if you are already popular, but extremely difficult to become popular if you are not already. So less popular creators emulate more popular creators, with the hope that they will be able to capitalize upon video genres that have been made successful by bigger channels.

Share to other platforms – As can be seen in *Fig. 8* below, the 'share' button encourages the easy dissemination of YouTube's video content across a wide range of different platforms. This is an example of media 'spreadability', as coined by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013).

<sup>12</sup> For example, 'Lush Haul & First Impressions | Zoella' (Sugg 2015) and 'Lush Haul Summer Time Products' (The Fancy Face 2017)

There are two main reasons why YouTube encourage the embedding of their videos on other websites. Firstly, it drives traffic to YouTube through the link in the bottom corner of videos. But secondly, and most significantly, *YouTube still collects the advertising revenue on videos embedded on other websites*. As is explained on their help page: ‘Only YouTube and the video owner will earn revenue from ads on embedded videos; the site owner where the video is embedded will not earn a share.’ (YouTube Help 2017b). This means that YouTube are making money through being promoted on other websites, without providing remuneration to those websites.

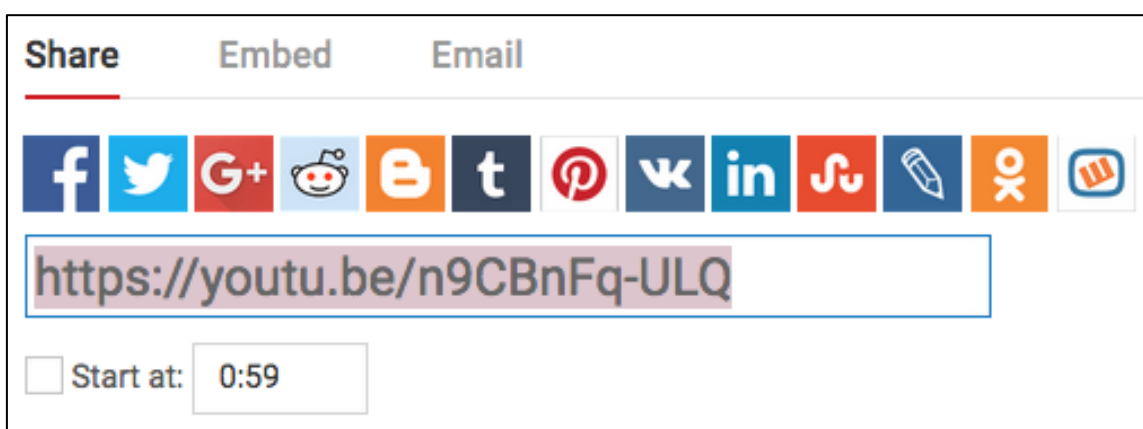


Fig. 8 – Screenshot of sharing options underneath YouTube videos (Nygaard 2017).

I have outlined above just a few of the technological affordances of YouTube, but it is clear from these examples that the platform is designed to maximise hierarchy amongst content creators, attention amongst audiences, and revenue generated through advertising models. The platform also allows for the effective collection of users' data, which is a further revenue source. Whilst it is

informative to look at the commodification of particular YouTubers on a micro level, Postigo makes an important point about the macro structures informing YouTube's business model, that '*conflict on the level of users is irrelevant so long as subscribers... move to new nodes or stars*' (2016: p. 344). What he means by this is that the financial architecture of platform allows for the ebb and flow of different channels' popularity; one channel might lose viewers, but these viewers will just move to watching a different channel. As long as users do not migrate away from YouTube to a different platform altogether, YouTube will still continue to reap the profit generated from advertising revenue. As Postigo puts it:

'YouTube... is not unlike a bettor at a roulette table who is in the happy position of betting on all the numbers, where the payout *in aggregate* outweighs what appears to be an otherwise wild investment. Some numbers don't pay, others pay a little, and some pay a lot... In aggregate, however, no matter what the scenario, YouTube the bettor always wins.' (Ibid.)

This has resulted in a situation whereby the popularity of particular creators on the platform has risen and fallen since its acquisition by Google in 2006, but YouTube's revenues have constantly been increasing (Ibid.).

## **II. From community to connectivity**

In her book *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013a) Jose van Dijck combines actor-network theory and political economy approaches to present a *critical history* of the rise of social media, charting the shift from 'networked communication to "platformed" sociality, and from a participatory culture to a culture of connectivity' (p. 4). The transition that she identifies, from subversive to mainstream, is in line with my own observations of the ways in which YouTube has become increasingly commercialised, sanitised and homogenised. Her core thesis is that social media platforms have undergone a transformation in the past decade from being relatively open and community-based, to being coopted by corporate interests in order to exploit users' interactions and activities for financial gain (through UGC, data mining, advertising revenue etc.). Through this

process, large platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have emerged as wielding a disproportionate amount of power, and have evolved into an 'ecosystem of connective media', being designed in such a way that makes sharing across these platforms easier in cases where it is mutually financially beneficial to those companies.

Van Dijck recognises the structural nature of how political, economic, technological and social factors combine to *produce* normative behaviors online. She argues that:

She 'The ecosystem of connective media does not *reflect* social norms; interconnected platforms *engineer* sociality, using real-life processes of normative behaviour (peer pressure) as a model for and an object of manipulation (popularity ranking).' (Ibid: p. 174)

asserts that the type of sociality that is engineered across different powerful social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc.) is based on the same neoliberal ideology. They all promote the principles of connectedness and connectivity, popularity and neutrality, constant data flows and a user-ranking ecosystem, and these principles are built into the technological affordances and architectures of the platforms (Ibid.).

Though van Dijck takes a sociotechnical approach, she gives technological affordances, algorithms and web design significant weight, coming closer to McLuhanite technological determinism than many other more sociocultural approaches to social media, for example media ecologies (Ito et al. 2010) and polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2013; Madianou 2014, 2015). In her chapter about YouTube specifically, she tracks the history of the platform from its rebellious, countercultural and user-driven roots, through its courtship by the traditional broadcast and advertising industries, to its eventual 'marriage with its former foe' in the form of radically redesigning its interface to mirror broadcast television (Ibid: p. 122). She argues that although users feel that they have control over what content they watch, 'their choices are heavily directed by referral systems, search functions, and ranking mechanisms' (2013a: p. 112). Citing Ding et al. (2011), van Dijck echoes the point that I made in the previous section, that YouTube's algorithms are heavily biased towards the most popular uploaders, thus perpetuating the structure of YouTube stars (2013a: p. 116). She also traces the impact of changes to YouTube's design affordances away from community functions and towards a television-like viewing experience. For example,

functions for social networking like commenting on videos were hidden from the home page, and replaced by 'most viewed' and 'top favorited' videos (Ibid: p. 114). In 2013 I observed a similar affordance change on YouTube that supports this argument, the removal of the 'video response' feature. Users used to be able to post video responses to content, which appeared below the original video-window. This promoted community and conversation amongst video creators, and gave small YouTubers a visible platform on bigger YouTubers' pages. When they removed this affordance, the most direct way for fans to interact with their favourite YouTubers became through text-based comments, and smaller creators found it increasingly difficult to get their content seen by a wider audience.

It is also important to consider that YouTube is owned by Google, who own the most powerful search engine in the world, amongst other things. Users of YouTube willingly offer valuable information to the platform owners about their desires and wants, through the social affordances of searching, liking, subscribing and commenting, and this information is used as a unique selling point to advertisers (van Dijck 2013b: p. 202). Through sophisticated user data algorithms, Google is able to connect users with content that they will likely want to watch, creating 'high-yield audience attention for advertisers' (Ibid: p. 120). Van Dijck describes the interconnected system that Google has engineered with their various platforms, combining advertising (AdWords, DoubleClick), search (Google Search), social networking (Google+), trade and pay services (Google Shopping and Google Wallet), and user-generated content (YouTube, Google Music) (van Dijck 2013a: p. 127). The result of this is an unprecedented concentration of power in Google's hands:

'Google *owns* all platforms and engineers data across platforms. Content sites, ads, search, shopping service, and payment system are all programmed to keep user traffic within the Google stream. When a user uploads a recording of a popular Eminem song, instead of taking down the recording – as it used to in the early days because of copyright violations – YouTube now runs pop-up ads to let the customer buy the ringtone or the song through its pay service, Google Wallet; YouTube may help boost the song's ranking and audience attention; and finally, Google shares the revenue with the copyright owner while also taking part of the pay system's revenue share.' (Ibid.)

This business model allows Google to effectively engineer and monetize the distribution of *personalized* content to *mass* audiences (Ibid.). It also means that YouTube actively encourages collaborations between content creators and brands, because it is beneficial for the platform to streamline corporate and user interests. Google acts like a black hole, sucking in content, viewers and brands, and crushing them into one streamlined system. One cannot help but be reminded of Dave Eggers' dystopian vision in *The Circle* (2013), in which the ultimate aim of the Google-esque corporation is to create one unified system from all systems and thus 'close the circle'.

Van Dijck prefers the term 'connective' to 'social' media, because the word social 'hides more than it reveals' (Ibid: p. 175). She argues that the use of the term *social* media is part of a larger trend in which social media enthusiasts borrow concepts from the public domain, such as *user participation, community* and *sharing*, in order to promote online platforms (Ibid.). Indeed, Google itself is very keen to praise YouTube as a site for participatory creative communities, counterculture and peer-to-peer networking, despite the fact that 'its interface no longer foregrounds taste communities' (Ibid: p. 130). Most commercial owners place many assets above sustainable communities, such as 'quick turnover, short-lived trends, celebrities attracting mass audiences, attention-grabbing experiences, influential power-users, and a large pool of aspiring professionals' (Ibid.). However, tech giants like Facebook and YouTube often invoke the community ideal in order to justify their commercial exploitation of connectivity (Ibid).

Couldry and van Dijck (2015) call for a return to 'the social' as an object of analysis in light of recent explicit claims that 'media' are social. They argue that 'social media' – the infrastructures of Web 2.0 – are at the heart of a battle to represent the 'complex interdependencies out of which human life really is made' (p. 1). This battle is important because all forms of power are invested in certain representations of the social. They believe that there is something cynical in the labeling of computational connectivity as 'social'; Facebook's 'liking' and 'friending' buttons, for example, have little basis in the social reality of friendships. They are instead 'computational systems that assign

data their value as economic currency in a global online sociality' (Ibid: p. 3). The dominant techno-economic materiality that produces this new 'social' is based on the principles of commodification, manipulation and datafication. A new system has emerged in which 'the social' is an *effect* of online sociality, in which certain flows of data are triggered to produce economic gain, and the accumulation of attention has *become* social value (Ibid: p. 4). I would argue that in the case of vloggers there is an added layer of cynicism, in that users' data is not only being collected and sold by YouTube as a platform, but also vloggers themselves are capitalizing on the concepts of *community* and *friendship* with their viewers for personal financial gain.



### 3. BIOPOLITICS, MEDIATION AND THE BODY ON YOUTUBE

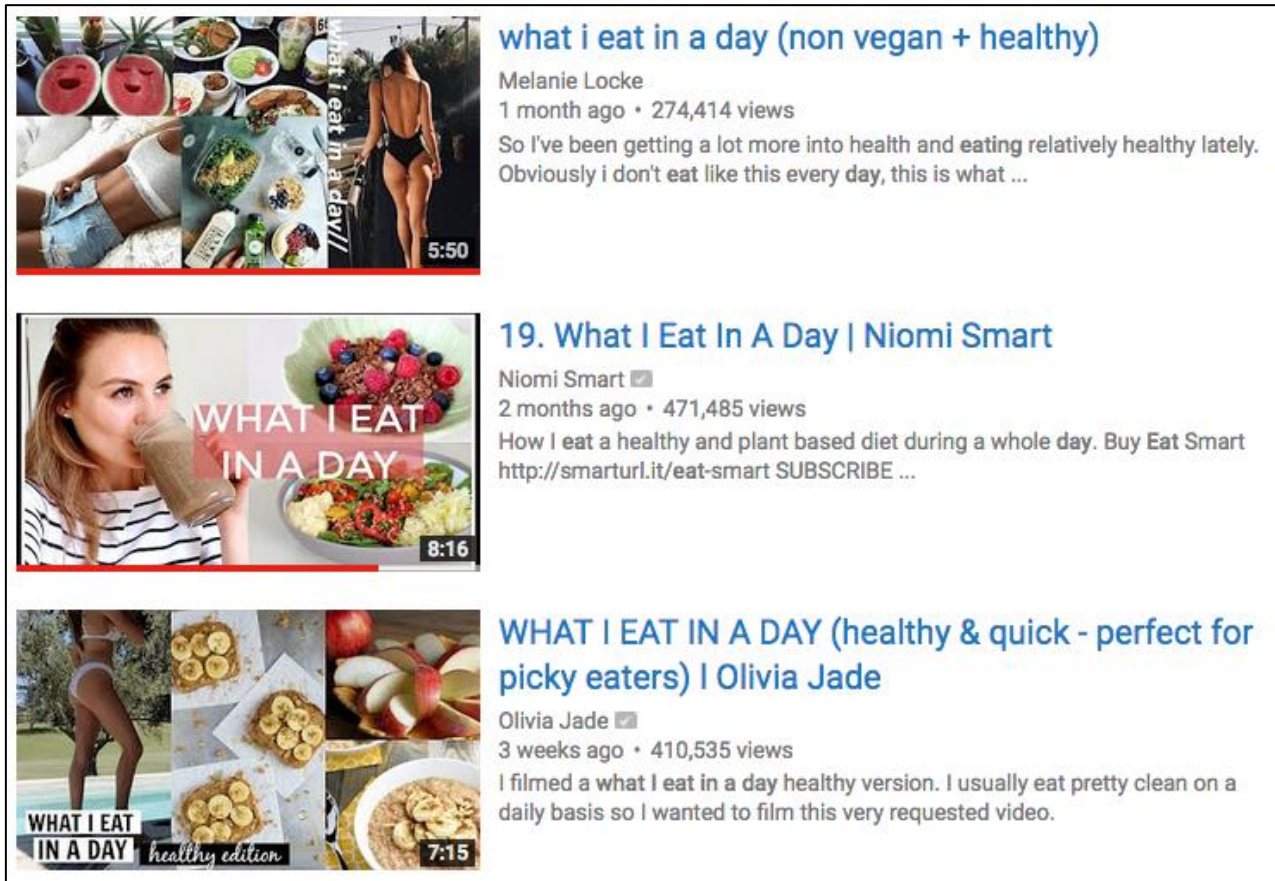


Fig. 9 – Screenshot of YouTube search results for 'what I eat in a day' (YouTube 2017)

This final chapter considers biopolitics, self-tracking, mediation and the body through a case study of the pervasive 'What I Eat in a Day' genre of videos on YouTube. They represent the ultimate co-optation of life itself into the neoliberal political rationality, thoroughly blurring the boundaries between the body, technology and processes of capitalist production and consumption. For succinctness, throughout this chapter I will abbreviate 'What I Eat in a Day' to WIEIAD.

WIEIAD videos are an extremely popular and widespread genre on YouTube, in which individuals document for their audiences all of the food and drink that they consume throughout their day. These videos often include voiceovers explaining recipes and the various health benefits of certain foods. They are part of the broader 'clean eating' vegan movement that has exploded in

the last few years, and contain beautiful people promoting their glossy lifestyles filled with yoga, smashed avocado and green juices. They are the video counterparts to the artfully saturated photographs of smoothie bowls and chia seed puddings that have become ubiquitous on Instagram. The YouTubers who make them often have other types of 'healthy lifestyle' content on their channels, including work out routines, self-help/motivational and New Age spiritualism videos. And importantly, similarly to 'monthly favourites' and 'hauls', WIEIAD videos made by prominent YouTubers often contain product placement and sponsored content from high-end food, drink and kitchenware/lifestyle brands.

For this chapter I am taking as my main case study 25-year-old London-based vlogger Niomi Smart (*Fig. 11*), a vegan health and fitness guru on YouTube with 1.7 million subscribers. Whilst much of Smart's content is similar to Zoella's (with whom she is friends), such as daily and travel vlogs and fashion/makeup tutorials, her fitness and diet videos are what she is known for. She has built up a vegan empire around her YouTube fame, having released a cookbook last year called *Eat Smart: What to Eat in a Day – Every Day* (Smart 2016) and co-founded a business called SourcedBox that delivers healthy vegan snack boxes to customers on a monthly subscription basis (SourcedBox 2017). I will also look at 'High Carb Hannah', who is a popular 'whole foods plant based' vegan YouTuber who makes numerous weight loss vlogs. WIEIAD videos are the most popular content on Smart's and High Carb Hannah's YouTube channels, gaining on average two or three times more views than their other videos (a common trend on health and fitness YouTube channels). These high viewing figures can in part be explained by the affordance of *searchability* (as outlined in the previous chapter) of the phrase 'what I eat in a day', as well as presumably by viewers' ongoing fascination about what other people eat and drink. The deeply gender normative nature of Niomi Smart and High Carb Hannah's videos, and the WIEIAD genre more broadly, which are usually made by women for women, requires a return to the topic of post-feminism for part of this chapter.

## **I. What I Eat in a Day: self-monitoring, post-feminism and neoliberalism**

Elias and Gill's article on beauty self-monitoring apps (2017) provides a useful starting point for analysing WIEIAD videos. Using a feminist-Foucauldian framework, they argue that current beauty apps are a technology that brings together 'digital self-monitoring and postfeminist modalities of subjecthood' (p. 1). These apps result in the production of a previously 'unprecedented regulatory gaze upon women, which is marked by the intensification, extensification and psychologization of surveillance' of the self and others (Ibid.). Whilst WIEIAD videos are different to beauty apps in purpose and format, they share the propagation of a post-feminist subjecthood and the intensification of surveillance, through the performance of 'health' by the vlogger and corresponding gaze of the audience. Although the vlogger chooses to present themselves in this manner and audiences enjoy watching this content, I concur with Elias and Gill's argument that 'they incite women to ever greater punitive self-surveillance, enrolling them into intense metricized self-scrutiny that is no less toxic for being 'freely' chosen', and indeed that 'their seemingly paradoxical construction as useful, pleasurable and 'fun' urgently requires explanation' (Ibid: p. 5).

WIEIAD videos form part of a wider trend towards self-monitoring and self-tracking, which has given rise to a *quantified self* (Lupton 2014). According to Lupton, the quantified self is best conceptualized as a 'reflexive monitoring' self who collects, records, monitors and shares both quantified and non-quantifiable information about themselves via digital technologies, whilst engaging in 'the process of making sense of this information as part of the ethical project of selfhood' (Ibid: p. 5). Most crucially for this dissertation, Lupton identifies the inseparability of the quantified self and neoliberalism. As she puts it, 'the very act of positioning oneself as a self-tracker, is already a performance of a certain type of subjectivity: the entrepreneurial, self-optimising subject' (Ibid.). WIEIAD videos are a particularly extreme example of the self-optimising entrepreneurial subject, in that whilst monitoring and recording their food and drink consumption practices, the video creator is also hoping to gain money, influence and fame through the sharing of this content with their audience on YouTube.



Fig. 10 – Screenshot of thumbnail for High Carb Hannah’s vegan weight loss WIEIAD (Howlett 2016)

WIEIAD videos are best understood as part of post-feminist culture, in which ‘women are interpellated as active, autonomous and self-reinventing subjects, whose lives are the outcome of individual choice and agency’ (Elias and Gill 2017: p. 6). Crucially, in post-feminism women are encouraged to undergo entrepreneurial self-work and self-capitalization concentrated on the visual register (Conor 2004). This self-work based on image is most certainly evident in the WIEIAD genre, with many video creators explicitly talking about their food and drink consumption in relation to weight loss, and commonly showing before and after physique pictures. For example, Fig. 10 shows the thumbnail for High Carb Hannah’s WIEIAD designed to maximise weight loss. Hannah outlines the purpose of this video in the introduction:

“So I figured today I would eat super clean and show you guys what I would consider to be an ideal day of eating if you wanted to lose weight as quickly, as healthy, as efficiently as you can. Like no screwing around, no junk food, no processed foods, what I would eat in a typical day... My eating has gotten off track a little bit so it definitely helps me to make these videos for you guys and eat really, really clean.” (Howlett 2016)

As is evident from this quote, and from the title and thumbnail image of the video, there is a heavy emphasis placed on a physical journey towards an ‘ideal’ self. If we understand WIEIAD videos through Rebecca Coleman’s Deleuzian framework of becoming, rather than through the traditional subject/object opposition of bodies and images, then we can start to see the potentially harmful effects of audiences knowing, experiencing and understanding bodies through this genre (2008: p.

163). As Coleman puts it, once we take seriously the conception of bodies as becoming, then we must think about ‘what becomings of bodies do images limit or extend?’ (Ibid.). This is a *processual*, *relational*, and *transformational* understanding of bodies, which I situate within the mediation paradigm of intra-activity. I see the WIEIAD genre as producing, normalizing and reifying the ‘young, white, thin, attractive, healthy, heterosexual, middle class’ body, to the exclusion of other identities (Ibid: p. 164).



Fig. 11 – Screenshot from ‘19. What I Eat In A Day | Niomi Smart’ vlog (Smart 2017a)

To return to our Niomi Smart case study, we can see in her videos that she exemplifies this assertive, empowered and *privileged* post-feminist identity. For example, Niomi’s recent WIEIAD video begins with her speaking directly to camera about her exercise:

“I’ve actually just done a yoga class. I went to Method Movement in Fulham and it is so good there... I absolutely loved it. That was really lovely, I did that at 7am and didn’t eat anything beforehand. I had a little bit of water but not much to be honest. I hate doing yoga on a full stomach of full of liquids or anything.” (Smart 2017a)

Later in the video Niomi is making a 'squash and quinoa salad with houmous and sauerkraut' for lunch (*Fig. 10*), and explains:

"I've got this sauerkraut and I always really enjoy this when I eat out in restaurants and they put it on the side. So I found it the other day in Planet Organic and it's basically fermented cabbage, which I know doesn't sound very good but it's so good for you and it actually tastes really amazing." (Smart 2017a)

These quotes perfectly illustrate the postfeminist ideal. Not only does Niomi appear independent, entrepreneurial and zealous in her approach to health and fitness, but also her lifestyle is presented as glamorous and unapologetically affluent. She lives in West London in a stylishly decorated flat filled with high-end organic foods and products, and regularly goes to lavish restaurants and events. As of August 2017 this video has 473,491 views, which demonstrates the widespread appeal of this content. I am certain that many of her viewers see Niomi as an aspirational role model, both in physical appearance and lifestyle.

Elias and Gill argue that whilst women in post-feminist culture are encouraged to reinvent their bodies towards 'perfection', they are also required to makeover their *subjectivity* to fit into the ideal modern female archetype: exuding confidence, wellbeing and a 'positive mental attitude' (2017: p. 6). This *psychic labour* is exemplified in one of Niomi's videos, 'My 5 Tips for a Balanced Lifestyle | Niomi Smart AD' (Smart 2017b). In this video Niomi gives life advice to her audience:

"For me a well balanced lifestyle is essential for happiness and peace of mind, and I feel like nowadays people are so stressed and it's really important to find that balance between things. And this can be your physical and mental wellbeing... I just try and think as positively as I can. I think about the things I'm grateful for and this is just my way of managing stress. As soon as you know how to manage stress, that's when you can achieve this balanced lifestyle." (Ibid.)

The five tips that Niomi lists in this video are: working out, having a beauty skin regime, healthy snacking, meditation and organisation, all of which are common (and it could be argued clichéd) topics for health and lifestyle videos on YouTube. This particular video is sponsored by the skincare brand 'Simple', and the whole section on Niomi's skincare regime is an extended advertisement for this brand's 'cleansing oil'. She also dedicates the 'healthy snacking' section of the video to endorsing her cookery book and SourcedBox business. There is something particularly cynical about the combination of motivational life advice and brand sponsorship deals that make these

videos *even less* ethical than sponsored 'monthly favourites' videos, as explored in the first chapter of this dissertation. Video's like Niomi's outlined above are using viewers' (physical and emotional) stresses and insecurities in order to sell products to them, with the promise that these products will make their lives happier and more fulfilled.

## **II. Biopolitics and the body**

To use Foucauldian terminology, I understand WIEIAD videos as 'technologies of domination' posing as 'technologies of the self'. YouTubers present these videos as a form of self-care and self-betterment for themselves and their audiences. This echoes Foucault's vision of ethics, as a practice of 'permanent self-examination' that:

'...permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality' (Foucault 1988: p.18)

YouTubers who create WIEIAD videos often employ the language of a journey towards purity, the suggestion being that through adopting a 'clean eating' vegan lifestyle their audiences will achieve happiness, health and moral fulfilment. However in opposition to this approach, and in agreement with Zylinska's article about the extreme USA makeover show *The Swan*, I understand WIEIAD videos within the context of Foucault's work on biopolitics. As Zylinska puts it, biopolitics is 'a form of political regime under which bodies and minds of citizens are administered and under which life is "managed."' (2007: p.1). In WIEIAD videos, YouTubers subject both their own and their audiences' bodies and lives to the 'disciplinary techniques applied by the dominant socio-political institutions' (Ibid.). Through these videos, producer and viewer alike are disciplined towards normative aesthetic beauty, disguised behind the rhetoric of 'health'. However, there is a divergence between WIEIAD YouTubers and *The Swan* contestants, in their respective relationships to their viewers. Whilst Zylinska posits a disidentification between viewers and contestants of *The Swan*, whereby the viewer feels a 'moral superiority' that they are not in need of a makeover (Ibid: p. 8),



the opposite is true of health and fitness YouTubers. There is a distinct sense of moral superiority amongst YouTubers in WIEIAD and related videos – they consider themselves to be higher up the ladder towards (mental and physical) perfection, and charitable enough to impart this wisdom to their viewers.

### **III. Mediation and YouTube**

In conjunction with the political economy approach that I have followed throughout this dissertation, I propose to understand YouTube through the radical approach to mediation theory proposed in Kember and Zylinska's *Life After New Media* (2012), as a *process* of mutual becoming, and of our sociocultural and biological entanglements with media. In this sense, human and nonhuman entities 'are not preconstituted wholes that only come together for online interaction' (Ibid: p. 159); we cannot reduce humans users and YouTube's architectures and affordances to discrete objects, but rather understand them as mutually co-constitutive.

Kember and Zylinska argue for a partial return to McLuhan's emphasis on the technological, interested in the conception of technologies as 'physical prostheses or extensions of the body (Ibid: p. 7). Their understanding of our entanglement with media not only on a sociocultural, but also on a *biological* level, makes *Life After New Media* particularly relevant to thinking about the role of the body in WIEIAD videos (Ibid: p. xviii). They challenge the nature-culture dualism by recognising the 'mutually constitutive aspects of "the brain" and "the world" of media and mediation' (Ibid: p. 164). This point leads me to think about the inseparability of the bodies constructed through WIEIAD videos and the techno-social structures that support and produce this content. If it weren't for YouTube, would these YouTubers' bodies and those of their avid fans' exist in the same form? I posit that they would not.

In 'What if Foucault had had a blog?' (2012), Zylinska argues that blogs are not merely commentaries *on* life, but rather materializations *of* it; these practices are not merely *cultural*



productions, but also *corporeal* ones (p. 71). To apply this argument to the object of study in this dissertation, filming a vlog:

‘...literally produces the body by temporarily stabilizing it as a node in the network of forces and relations: between multiple servers and computers, flows of data, users’ eyes, fingers and sensation, particles of electricity’ (Ibid: p. 69).

Through this framework, selfhood online can be understood as a project whereby human agency and technology are formed in conjunction with one another. I find this to be a fruitful approach for thinking about vlogging practices, recognising the inseparability of humans and technologies, and the ‘forces and relations’ that act upon the YouTuber as they seek to ‘broadcast themselves’. The ‘nowness’ of social media platforms becomes a flow of capital, whereby the users are incorporated into the ‘production and distribution of technovalue’ (Kember and Zylińska 2012: p. 163). And thus life itself has become a product to be sold, a sentiment that although true amongst all users of mainstream social media, is particularly literal in the case of YouTube vloggers who present their lives online for open consumption in return for payment.

Kember and Zylińska’s purpose in *Life After New Media* is to produce an ‘ethics of mediation’. Nonnormative and always singularly recast, this ethics is based on their understanding of mediation as a *process of mutual becoming* between humans and technologies. Through the process of ‘differential cutting’, bioethics here becomes a process whereby the subject makes pragmatic incisions into the flow of life. Despite still being shaped and restricted by external forces, humans can make ‘good cuts that facilitate the flow of life through the network without drowning us in the process’ (Ibid: p. 168). Using this framework for thinking about YouTube, the key question is not whether we should be ‘on it’, but rather how can we (as audiences and video producers) emerge *with* the platform to become better?

## CONCLUSIONS

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This dissertation has argued that 'YouTube stars' can be understood as a particularly virulent strain of *homo æconomicus*, who are produced and commodified through the techno-capitalist structures of the platform. YouTube culture has transformed since its inception in 2005 to increasingly become a conduit for commercial interests, and successful vloggers are nodes in this capitalist flow: absorbing, transforming and spreading the neoliberal political rationality of the platform.

A combination of political economy and radical mediation approaches is ideal for my aims, in that it allows me to analyse how humans are emerging *through* the neoliberal rationality of the complex commercial interests, structures and technological affordances of the platform. My subject matter led me to focus on case studies of lifestyle-beauty gurus and WIEIAD health and fitness content, as these genres are exceptionally forceful examples of neoliberal becoming. I have encountered the process of the commercialisation on/of YouTube from a number of different perspectives, in the hopes of providing a complex picture of its ecosystem. Chapter one addressed the production of a neoliberal political rationality in YouTube stars, through an exploration of practices of self-branding, the role of authenticity and post-feminism on the platform. Chapter two considered the role that the technological affordances of YouTube play in actively promoting the commodification of content creators and audiences, tracing the move away from community and towards connectivity and commercialism on the platform. The third and final chapter examined the role of the body, self-tracking, biopolitics and post-feminism in WIEIAD videos, understanding this type of content as the ultimate co-option of life itself into the YouTube neoliberal fantasy. I argue for a radical understanding of the entanglements between biology, technology, media and selfhood on YouTube.

The answer to the problems raised in this dissertation, of the oppressive systems of commercialism that have spread throughout social media platforms, is not an all-out refusal to participate in these platforms. Instead we must think of ways to emerge *through* these systems to

'produce counterpublics... and create networks of solidarity by diversifying/hybridizing our social media practices' (Scholz 2013: p. 8). It is my hope that in the future the intensity of the commercial stronghold on YouTube's architectures and culture will recede somewhat, and that content creators and audiences alike will be able to form identities through the platform that are less heavily influenced by the current neoliberal rationality.

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## Appendix 1. Zoella Video Description Box

Description box text from Zoella's monthly favourites video entitled 'April Favourites 2017 | Zoella' (Sugg 2017b). This is a typical description box for a Zoella monthly favourites video.

Published on May 16, 2017

Some of my favourite beauty bits at the moment!

- Previous Video: <http://bit.ly/2qogCq4>

- Vlogs: <http://bit.ly/2lyMuWK>

Items Mentioned In The Video:

— Links below marked with a "\*" are affiliate links - which means I receive a percentage of the revenue made from purchasing products through this link —

Earrings - Zara: <http://bit.ly/2rbOkQw>

\*BareMinerals Original Foundation: <http://bit.ly/2rce1jE>

\*Bobbi Brown Tinted Eye Brightener: <http://bit.ly/2pQOnNz>

Makeup Forever Aqua Brow Gel: <http://bit.ly/2pGzLV2>

\*Estee Lauder Limited Edition Bronze Goddess Illuminating Powder Gelee: <http://bit.ly/2qso6pX>

\*Charlotte Tilbury Instant Look in a Palette: <http://bit.ly/2pQYRg6>

\*Brazilian Bum Bum Cream - Sol de Janeiro: <http://bit.ly/2rcsqMP>

\*Floral Memento Body Wash - &Other Stories: <http://bit.ly/2rcoT1f>

Zoella Beauty Scooper Dooper: <http://bit.ly/2rcoT1f>

I'm Wearing & In The Background:

- \*Curtain Lights - Lights4u: <http://bit.ly/1QuXFqI>

- \*Bed & Bedside Tables - Made.com: <http://bit.ly/1QuXNX8>

- Shirt - Zara: <http://bit.ly/2rbOkQw>

My Links:

SECOND CHANNEL: <http://youtube.com/morezoella>

BLOG : <http://www.zoella.co.uk>

TWITTER : <http://twitter.com/Zoella>

INSTAGRAM : <http://instagram.com/Zoella>

SNAPCHAT: OfficialZoella

FACEBOOK : <http://facebook.com/zoe.zoella>

Check out my products:

<http://bit.ly/1G8SoCs>

<http://bit.ly/1Ctynli>

Check out my books:

<http://amzn.to/1OZo9zp>

Thanks so much for watching and for all your continued support. I am forever grateful to each and every one of you for watching, commenting and being a huge part of this channel and this crazy journey :) \*all the hug squeezes\* xxx

Caption authors Zhanna Sp, gabi dash



(Russian)

Category Howto & Style

License Standard YouTube License

## Appendix 2. YouTube Advertising Formats

Table from YouTube Help page showing the different types of advertising formats that may be shown next to their videos if they are part of the 'YouTube Partner Programme' and have enabled video monetisation on their content (YouTube Help 2017c).

Ad format	Placement	Platform	Specs
<p><b>Display ads</b></p> 	Appears to the right of the feature video and above the video suggestions list. For larger players, this ad may appear below the player.	Desktop	300 x 250 or 300 x 60
<p><b>Overlay ads</b></p> 	Semi-transparent overlay ads that appear in the lower 20% portion of your video.	Desktop	468 x 60 or 728 x 90 image ads or text
<p><b>Skippable video ads</b></p> 	Skippable video ads allow viewers to skip ads after 5 seconds if they wish. Inserted before, during or after the main video.	Desktop, mobile devices, TV and game consoles	Plays in video player.
<p><b>Non-skippable video ads and long, non-skippable video ads</b></p> 	<p>Non-skippable video ads must be watched before your video can be viewed.</p> <p>Long non-skippable video ads can be up to 30 seconds long.</p> <p>These ads can appear before, during or after the main video.</p>	Desktop and mobile devices	<p>Plays in video player.</p> <p>15 or 20 seconds in length, depending on regional standards.</p> <p>Long, non-skippable ads can be up to 30 seconds in length.</p>
<p><b>Bumper ads</b></p> 	Non-skippable video ads of up to 6 seconds that must be watched before your video can be viewed.	Desktop and mobile devices	Plays in video player, up to 6 seconds long
<p><b>Sponsored cards</b></p> 	<p>Sponsored cards display content that may be relevant to your video, such as products featured in the video.</p> <p>Viewers will see a teaser for the card for a few seconds. They can also click on the icon in the top right-hand corner of the video to browse the cards.</p>	Desktop and mobile devices	Card sizes vary