Media Mimicry - How 'Mimic Vlogs' Emulate User-Generated Content in Online Stories.

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ABSTRACT

Mimic vlogs are a form of fictional web content produced to replicate the style and feel of the video blog (vlog), a user-generated format popularised on YouTube. Mimic vlogs predominantly adapt well-known, existing stories, and many of the web series are very successful with some having millions of views across the series. As many mimic vlogs are transmedia texts, existing literature in the field tends to approach these texts with a focus on their transmedia elements, which limits our understanding of the videos and how audiences respond and interact with them. However, while formats associated with user-generated content such as mimic vlogs offer an opportunity to tell online stories in novel and interesting ways, they also have the capacity to mislead audiences who take them at face value. In this research, I take an exploratory, audience-centred approach to mimic vlogs in order to understand how audiences perceive this format.

With the aim of examining what audiences look for when identifying mimic vlogs, I surveyed and interviewed participants to gather primary data that unpacks how audiences perceive speakers and what key factors they use to determine if something is fictional. Furthermore, given mimic vlogs are one piece of a wider replica content phenomenon, I questioned participants on how they viewed these mimic vlogs in comparison to other types of content that replicates 'authentic' styles. My findings highlight how mimic vlogs, much like mockumentaries, make use of the "false signifiers of reality" that make the formats' factual counterparts (standard vlogs and documentaries, respectively) seem real. Participants frequently relied on their subjective perception of content to identify the format, rather than seemingly concrete factors. The participants often came to different, or opposing, conclusions about the videos, despite referencing the same details. This multiplicity of responses supports audience reception theory which states that all viewers bring their own understanding to a text. Additionally, some participants view this more banal form of mimicry to be of little to no consequence for them personally. This dismissiveness has ramifications for audiences' abilities to identify more 'malicious' forms of replica content, such as deepfakes and disinformation.

While mimic vlogs as a YouTube format were in their prime during the mid-2010s, they set the precedent for emerging storytelling techniques on other platforms that feature user-generated content. Similar stories are now appearing on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, and my research on mimic vlogs helps to explicate how newer formats of replica content work, and how audiences make sense of what they are seeing. In understanding what factors mislead audience members, we can better ensure that viewers are equipped to identify content which replicates user-generated formats, including those on emerging platforms.

STATEMENT

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The movement towards telling stories online has seen a wave of innovation, adaptation, and remediation for creators. From fan works to large scale productions, the ways that stories are being told is changing. In particular, there is a push towards telling stories in ways that replicate user-generated formats native to online spaces, such as video blogs (vlogs) on the video-sharing website YouTube, text message exchanges, and social media posts on platforms such as the short-form video app TikTok and micro-blogging platform Twitter[1]. This content looks like legitimate content and – for unsuspecting users – may be misinterpreted or taken at face value. Replica content, an umbrella term I utilise to refer to this style of imitation content, in many ways mirrors satire and parody in its replication of existing genres and utilisation of familiar codes and conventions. In this thesis, I explore what I term 'mimic vlogs', which are a particular type of fictional video on YouTube that actively replicates the user-generated format of a vlog. Mimic vlogs are one way that creators commandeer user-generated content as a means of storytelling, and they are indicative of a wider phenomenon in online spaces that facilitate user-generated content.

The term replica content encompasses many formats including fan-created content, mockumentaries, parody, satire, manipulated audio visual content, and information disorder in the forms of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. The impact of each of these formats varies because of their scale and whether there is an intention to cause harm. Deliberate disinformation and fake news has a clearer intent to fool and harm. In contrast, creators of fan works such as fanfiction and fan art are creating content for their

[1]The platform now known as 'X' will be referred to by its former name 'Twitter' throughout this thesis to ensure consistency, as this was its name during data collection including in participants' interview responses.

peers in a way that seeks to expand fictional characters beyond their canonical texts. The intention here is not to fool, but there is still the potential for this kind of content to cause confusion for unintended audiences. These formats highlight the capacity for mimicry and parody to exist as creative and exciting opportunities to experiment with form and expectations. Equally, discourse surrounding the current media environment, with its heavy focus on the impacts of fake news and disinformation, emphasises that audiences' ability to distinguish 'truth' is more important than ever. These two schools of thought require a nuanced approach to understanding how mimicry actually functions in its many forms and a balanced exploration of how audiences engage with these formats.

Examples of replica content in more 'everyday' settings can be seen across the media landscape. Fan content, for example, routinely mimics other formats, particularly in its non-literary forms. While fanfiction is the most recognisable form of fan content, it sits alongside a plethora of other content, more widely referred to as fan works (Hellekson & Busse 2014, p. 2; Scott & Click 2017, p. 2; Schwabach 2011, p. 14). Such examples include fan videos and edits, mood boards, aesthetic palettes, photo editing and manipulation, and social media AUs (alternative universes). Many of these fan works emulate existing formats as part of the storytelling process. The problem with these types of content is that, for unassuming consumers, this content can look very real and as such can be misidentified by those who take it at face value, unaware of the intended use as a work of fanfiction. There have been some notable examples of fan works being taken into the mainstream by unassuming internet users who did not realise the content was fan-made. An example of this is the '#ClarkeTheHusband' text message exchange shown below in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1 – Article from *The Sun* (Moorhead 2015)

Figure 2 – Article highlighting the original context (Chayka 2015)

In this example, fan fiction in the form of text messages between the fictional queer characters, Clarke and Lexa, from the CW television show *The 100* (2014-2020) made tabloid headlines after being mistaken for real text messages between a husband and wife. The messages showed Lexa asking Clarke about whether bringing home a dog named Fish was okay after going to the pet shop to buy a fish. #ClarkeTheHusband trended after fans of the show realised that a central female character of the series, Clarke, was at the centre of a debate about who was in the right between the (incorrectly reported) 'husband' and wife.

Fans creating fan works typically do so for the purpose of entertainment, but the works can quickly get out of hand when decontextualized. Taken out of context, well-meaning internet users (audiences) can perpetuate false stories and ideas without knowing they are actually engaging with fan works. Additionally, some users (as creators) deliberately masquerade as celebrities by way of 'impostor accounts' on platforms like Twitter. These impostors utilise similar handles and profile pictures as the celebrities they imitate, and can cause chaos by tweeting, liking, or responding to other users. Content created by these impostor accounts can similarly cause havoc when mistaken for genuine celebrity content.

To return to the concept of mimic vlogs, the web series *Lonelygirl15* (2006-2008) is the landmark case for mimic vlogs misleading audiences into believing the vlogs they were watching were real, but it is certainly not the only example of mimic vlogs in action. *Lonelygirl15* mimicked the format of user-generated content and appeared in many ways to be no different from non-fiction content on YouTube, which Burgess and Green state "violated the ideology of authenticity associated with DIY culture" (2018, p. 44). The creators of *Lonelygirl15* purposely played into the amateur aesthetics and participatory

nature of YouTube, and in doing so, exploited audience members through the promise of audience involvement that ultimately turned out to be further fictional characters touted as viewers by the creative team (Bakioğlu 2018). Bakioğlu (2014) also suggests that YouTube "grew up" during the *Lonelygirl15* saga as the YouTube community began to understand the more complex ways that the platform could be used. However, many things have changed in the time since *Lonelygirl15*'s production. There are many more web series that seek to replicate the vlog as a format for storytelling, and the overall quality of videos on YouTube has improved, thus making it more difficult to discern types of content based on quality alone.

There are certainly differing levels of deception at play in each of these examples of replica content. Fan content creators are making content for entertainment, imitation accounts might be doing it as a fan work or to confuse people, and production companies aim to capitalise on the audience expectations of the content they are replicating. Replica content online treads a fine line between telling stories in novel ways and misleading audiences (whether purposefully or not) about the true nature of content.

Mimic vlogs as a genre of video warrant a thoughtful interrogation of how they contribute to the wider phenomenon of replica content. In particular, they are an interesting case study because their factual counterparts are seen as synonymous with authenticity online, especially given their intimate and confessional nature. The use of this format for storytelling makes specific use of the audiences' perception of the format to imply a certain authenticity to the fictional content as well. This kind of content raises questions about audience reception of mimic vlogs, particularly given the format's similarities with other replica content such as misinformation. There is an opportunity to

investigate these videos as examples of the rich relationship between 'real' formats and their fictional counterparts. Further, the adaptation of a format that is so closely associated with its user-generated roots prompts questions about how creators co-opt participatory cultures for commercial purposes.

As such, this research investigates how audiences identify these fictional videos as distinct from user-generated vlogs. I seek to understand the impact of the audiences' preconceived notions of YouTube as a platform on their ability to differentiate between videos, and how this format fits within the audience's understanding of other replica content. Through a small group of in-depth interviews with web users, this thesis examines mimic vlogs as a case study of how audience members interact with content that emulates existing user-generated formats. The method utilises both surveys and interviews to capture multiple aspects of the participants' interactions with the videos, and in doing so, I explore how audiences differentiate between fictional and legitimate user-generated content and how audiences perceive these fictional stories in the broader context of replica content. By examining mimic vlogs as a case study, we can explore how content is also being replicated for storytelling purposes on new platforms including TikTok and Instagram.

This research is an important addition to studies examining online texts, as it highlights the role of the audience as interpreters of texts. It shows how audiences typically utilise subjective measures while judging factors such as the plausibility of a text and the authenticity of the speaker. In developing this understanding of how audiences engage with these texts, we can better ensure that viewers are equipped to identify content which replicates user-generated formats, including those on emerging platforms.

1.1 Key Terms

Throughout this thesis, I employ a number of terms that require a degree of clarification regarding their use. I will now briefly outline and clarify these terms. Firstly, 'mimic vlogs' is a term I have introduced to name and describe the online fictional videos that replicate the user-generated format of the vlog. While a number of the web series that employ mimic vlogs are transmedia stories – meaning the mimic vlogs are part of a story that is told across multiple platforms (Jenkins 2008, p. 334) – I use mimic vlogs to refer specifically to the videos themselves rather than the texts as a whole. Section 3.4, *Defining Mimic Vlogs*, provides a more thorough discussion of the concept. For simplicity's sake, I have chosen to refer to non-mimic vlogs as 'standard vlogs' throughout the thesis. In calling them standard vlogs, I seek to avoid referring to them as 'real' vlogs as this comes with an implication that what is shown in these vlogs is 'true' or 'legitimate'. While these videos are not concretely fictional in the same way mimic vlogs are, they are still mediated representations of reality, and as such incorporate a level of bias and should not be presumed entirely truthful.

Throughout the findings chapters (and in particular Section 6.5), I utilise terms such as 'perception' and 'intuition' to refer to how participants make judgements about particular videos based on what they understand to be happening. The Oxford English Dictionary states perception is related to the verb 'perceive', which the OED then defines as "To apprehend with the mind; to become aware or conscious of; to realize; to discern, observe" (Oxford English Dictionary 2023b). Perception then becomes the "process of becoming aware of physical objects, phenomena, etc., through the senses" (Oxford English Dictionary 2023a). As such, I use perception as a term to discuss when participants made judgements

based of their observations of the texts and speakers. Similarly, the Cambridge Dictionary defines intuition as "(knowledge from) an ability to understand or know something immediately based on your feelings rather than facts" (Cambridge Dictionary 2023). Eskini and Giannopulu further define intuition as "the unconscious ability to create links between information […] 'a sense of knowing without knowing how one knows'" (2021). In this thesis I use intuition to help articulate times participants were using an innate response to tell them what they were looking at.

'Kayfabe' refers to a phenomenon in professional 'sports entertainment' wrestling wherein the audience accepts the fictionality of events and proceeds to interact with the narrative as though it is true (Reinhard 2019). This concept is useful in discussing how some audience members interact with some fictional content in online spaces as though it is real as a part of the fan experience.

'Storytelling' is the final key term and is a term whose definition changes depending on the context. For example, Brown-Grant (2022) describes storytelling in journalism, cinema, literature, video games, and in organisations and the concept is applied differently in each of these settings. He argues that "At its most basic, the practice of storytelling is about the construction of the stories, the weaving of events into a tale or narrative that will transmit a message and capture the imagination of an audience" (2022, p. 11). Throughout this thesis I refer to mimic vlogs (and replica content more widely) as emerging methods of storytelling, and I do so with this definition of storytelling in mind. Mimic vlogs and other forms of replica content are new ways of constructing 'stories', which in this case are fictitious narratives shared for the purpose of entertainment.

1.2 Chapter Breakdown

Given this thesis focuses on a format that emulates existing media that represents reality, there are two chapters that account for the literature review. In Chapter 2, *Representing the Real*, I explore the existing literature regarding ways that media formats seek to represent reality. The chapter outlines key concepts in regard to authenticity, reality, and the performance of self, before moving on to discuss legacy media formats that claim to represent reality, including news broadcasts and reality television. From this, I then position vlogs as an online mediated representation of reality. Section 2.4, *Vlogging as Representing the Real*, discusses the impact of YouTube as a platform with regard to authenticity and defines vlogs, before considering the authenticity of vloggers (the speakers in vlogs) with regard to the genre and the audience.

Chapter 3, *Replicating Representations of Reality*, also reviews existing literature, but this time with a focus on how media formats replicate factual content. Firstly, I discuss imitation, remediation, and audio-visual manipulation as ways of approaching content that replicates other formats. Following this, mockumentary, parody, and satire are used as case studies through which to examine how legacy media formats replicate factual formats. I then discuss replica content more broadly, building on the example of fanfiction discussed in the introduction, as well as considering other types of replica content such as misinformation and impostor content. Following this, I explicate how transmedia online texts remediate social media spaces for storytelling and discuss the ways in which audiences interact with these texts. Mimic vlogs are typically the core text of these transmedia stories, and as such, the discussion builds to establish how mimic vlogs are defined, as well as how they function as texts. Finally, I review the existing literature on mimic vlogs and web series

that utilise this format. In doing so, a gap in the existing research is identified by highlighting the lack of research discussing how audiences identify and navigate these types of fictional texts that replicate the user-generated format of the vlog.

The methodology outlined in Chapter 4 positions this research in the broader media field by explaining the research paradigms and theoretical framework of the study. Given the gap in the literature is related to the audience response, this research fits within audience reception studies, and thus that informs the method chosen for the study. In this chapter, I articulate the research method, including an explanation of each of the four stages of the participant sessions which comprise of both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide adequate research data. In Sections 4.4 and 4.5, I introduce the corpus of videos and the participants by providing an overview of the content of each of the videos and a description of each of the participants. Section 4.6 then discusses the considerations made regarding data collection and analysis.

Chapter 5, *Categorising the Videos*, is the first of three chapters that outlines the findings of the study and discusses these findings in the context of the research and the literature explored in Chapters 2 and 3. Specifically, Chapter 5 articulates the results of Stages 2 and 3 of the research, which comprises of surveys relating to the videos participants viewed, as well as a categorisation task wherein participants attempted to identify if the videos were standard vlogs or mimic vlogs. This chapter provides an overview of the results of the categorisation task, as well as a discussion of what methods participants used to categorise the videos.

In Chapter 6, *Exploring Perceptions*, the discussion moves from discussing the results of the survey tasks, to predominantly exploring the responses participants gave in their

Stage 4 interviews. The participants' perspectives on YouTube as a platform for storytelling are discussed first, before moving on to their different approaches to defining authenticity. The interviews also highlight how participants want concrete evidence to 'prove' whether the videos are fictional or not. I then discuss some of the factors participants utilised in place of having this proof, such as relying on body language, accent, and their perception of the speaker and the videos by way of 'gut feeling' and intuition.

Chapter 7, *Positioning Mimic Vlogs*, then considers mimic vlogs in the context of replica content more broadly. This chapter discusses how trustworthy participants perceive standard vlogs and how they compare mimic vlogs to other replica content, particularly that which is more 'malicious' in intent, such as disinformation. Finally, I discuss how participants describe the role of production companies in replicating the user-generated format of the vlog.

The conclusion then considers the findings and discussion presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 in the context of the proliferation of replica content in online spaces. In particular, I argue that wherever new content exists, there will be the potential for people to replicate that content, whether for entertainment or for personal interest. This thesis therefore shows that it is essential to understand both how this emulation occurs and how audiences identify it in order to arm audiences against misinterpreting similar content going forward. In doing so, this research also explores the possible repercussions (positive or otherwise) which might arise from the publication of such content.

2 REPRESENTING THE REAL

To best understand how content replicates formats that represent the real, we must first understand how traditionally 'factual' content appears 'real'. I use inverted commas here because these formats only represent reality, they do not necessarily equate to reality. Representation, as Stuart Hall (2013) explains, relates to the ways in which a sound, symbol, or word depicts, describes, or stands in for a concept, thing, or event. Building through various approaches to representation, we can see that media represents the world around us through depicting or symbolising events and ideas. In factual media, there is a clear connection between actual events which are happening and their depiction in the media. For example, a news segment about current events specifically depicts that event, but is merely a representation because what is included and excluded, the framing of the story, and influence of the producers each shape the segment.

In this chapter, I explore the literature to date that seeks to make sense of how media has previously represented 'reality'. This includes discussion of how authenticity and the performance of the self can influence what an audience perceives to be real, as well as looking at specific formats that are typically associated with reality and factual content, such as reality television and documentary. Following this, I discuss vlogging as an example of similar content in an online realm, and explore how vlogs have been described as authentic in scholarship to date.

2.1 Authenticity and the 'Real'

An essential component of approaching formats that represent the real is understanding how authenticity as a concept is defined. Authenticity has many different applications and to fully understand the concept's role in both producing realistic content, we must define what 'authentic' means in this context. The following section works through several definitions of authenticity before clarifying the concept's relationship with both online content and other types of media.

Van Leeuwen notes that part of the difficulty in defining authenticity as a term is that it is ultimately an "evaluative concept" (2001, p. 392). Authentic can mean genuine because the creator or origin are known and therefore is an authentic artefact, for example, because we can prove where the object originated. Conversely, something could be authentic because it is an accurate replica. Here we can see how even in these two approaches alone, there are contradictory applications of the term. Van Leeuwen points to authentic also having the potential to mean authorised such as "bearing a genuine signature, or stamp, or seal of approval" (2001, p. 393), and authentic as meaning "true to the essence of something" (2001, p. 393). The contradictions and multiplicity of definitions are part of what makes authenticity as a concept confusing and difficult to measure as a qualitative feature.

Dutton (2009, p. 1) notes that authentic (and other similar words such as real and genuine) is a "dimension word" and thus its meaning is ambiguous until its usage is determined. Additionally, authenticity is subjective in nature (Warfield 2015; Nguyen & Barbour 2017), which further complicates pinning down a definition because what may be authentic to one person may not be authentic to another.

Similar to defining authenticity, defining realism can be complex because of its multiplicity of meanings across disciplines and changing definitions over time (Malafronte 2012, p. 80). The concept of realism is applied differently in film, in art, in literature, and in games. For example, in games, realism has connotations around immersion as well as the aesthetics of the game and genre. In art, however, realism refers to both the specific mid-nineteenth century movement as well as a more general term wherein visual mediums are painted to appear almost photographic (Tate 2020). Realism in photography and film benefits from the medium's ability to accurately recreate an image of the subject. Realism can therefore be used to describe the accuracy of the images. This accuracy is, however, growing more contentious as the ability to manipulate photographs and create realistic synthetic media erodes trust in photography (Westling 2019 in Kietzmann et al. 2020, p. 136). I will further discuss the implications of manipulation in the following chapter, *Representing the Real.*

In film, there are two primary schools of thought surrounding film and realism. Firstly, Andre Bazin's theory that film can be used to accurately represent events as they occur through the use of long take shots and lack of editing to compress and elongate time (van Leeuwen 2015, p. 1; Kuhn & Westwell 2020c, n.p.). Secondly, film (and photography) can be used as a medium for art (van Leeuwen 2015, p. 1), such as to describe the 19th century artistic realism movement and its concepts (Kuhn & Westwell 2020c, n.p.), but it also has its own connotations and meanings.

Two specific genres in film that allude to realism are 'mumblecore' and the 'cinema of slowness'. Mumblecore films are "low-budget independent US films with a pared-down realist aesthetic and featuring non-narratives that depict the everyday experience of, and relationships between, awkward, white middle-class twentysomethings" (Kuhn & Westwell

2020b, n.p.). Murphy states that mumblecore films represent "a moment in which a media-savvy generation turned their cameras on themselves" (2016, p. 279). The 'cinema of slowness' draws on technical characteristics that include "(often extremely) long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling, and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday" (Flanagan 2008, n.p.). Slow Cinema (and Slow TV) is another genre which relies on extremely long takes and is often seen as a form of documentary highlighting travel such as train journeys. These genres each lend themselves well to Bazin's approach to realism in film in that it can be used to accurately capture events.

Similar to the aforementioned genres of film, Tony E. Jackson highlights the term realistic fiction. He states "Whereas literary nonfiction tries to satisfy a desire for real content that reads like fiction, realistic fiction tries to satisfy a desire for fictional content that reads like a report of the real" (2010, p. 137). This is closely related to the classic realist texts in film "in which style is subordinated to narrative and the fiction produces an illusion or appearance of reality" (Kuhn & Westwell 2020a, n.p.). Classic realist films are works wherein markers of production are removed to create a semblance of reality and natural-ness (Stam 2017). Despite all these movements and understandings of representing the real, Smith (2017) states that inherent to all media is a "distortion" of reality. He contends that in attempting to represent reality "media makers must select which things to include, which to condense, and which to leave out. There is no way that any medium could compare favorably to the breadth, depth, and complexity of the real world" (Smith 2017, p. 166). As such, any attempt to represent the real will only ever be that: a representation.

In each of these examples, there is an understanding that 'realism' is in trying to replicate the world outside the text, either through aesthetic or thematic replication. Each of these terms relate to the feeling of verisimilitude that works of fiction try to create.

Importantly, none of them are related to a specific genre or type but can be applied to many different texts and experiences outside of art itself.

2.2 Performing the Self

In combination with representations of the real, is representation of the self. In mediatised content there is a layering of performance present, and differentiating between performance of the self, and performance of a character is important. This helps to establish what kinds of presentations are and should be read as fictional or legitimate. This section outlines approaches to identity and performance of the self in both offline and online formats.

Erving Goffman's work on dramaturgical identity performance states that a person constructs their identity by performing different elements at different times to different audiences (1959). Goffman's work on dramaturgical identity is based primarily in the metaphor of the theatre. Identity becomes a performance, wherein the "actor" performs a role that is informed by their audience and other cues such as the location and tasks being undertaken. Front stage, or the front region as Goffman describes it, is the place where the role is performed by the actor. It is here that the performance occurs, and occurs in a manner that reinforces the understanding and existing expectations held by the audience (Goffman 1959, p. 32-33). A person may perform the role that is expected of them to an audience who appropriately plays their role back. However, back stage is "a place, relative to a given performance, with aspects of the activity, but consciously suppressed in the front region […] performers are sheltered from their audience and so behave differently, apparently more real or natural" (Rasmussen 2014, p. 38). As such, a person's identity is

more staged in front-facing circumstances, but in more private spaces, one's performance of self is more natural, and takes on less of an overt role. Beyond the theatre metaphor, dramaturgical identity is performed anywhere an audience might be, and "is one of the main forms of action models analysed in sociology" (Rasmussen 2014, p. 37). The front stage / back stage dynamic is further complicated by the ways that back stage roles can also be performed to an audience, but they are typically more relaxed than front stage performances.

Through the lens of dramaturgical action, no version of this self is truly authentic or inauthentic, but rather each performance is developed with an audience in mind. For example, a person may present one version of themselves at work and another in front of their friends. This is not to say that the individuals are not 'themselves' when they are at work. They are simply performing different parts of their identity that are appropriate for the front stage audience. Differences in presentation might include things like language choice (expletives might be perfectly acceptable in front of friends, but is not appropriate in a workplace), the way a person dresses, their mannerisms and more (Goffman 1959, p. 34). Each of these choices is to maintain the performance and to meet the expectations of the audience, who in turn, are playing their own role.

In connecting performance of the self to authenticity and representations of the real, we must consider the role of authenticity as is relates to the self, as well as how the self is presented in mediatised forms that represent reality. Vannini and Franzese (2008) note that while there is no singular approach to authenticity, there are five key ideas upon which theorists tend to focus. One of these is the question of whether authenticity is self-referential or other-referential (Vannini and Franzese 2008, p. 1624) meaning whether authenticity is in relation to how one sees oneself or how others perceive that self. Charles

Taylor (1999 in Tshivhase 2015) is noted to support the concept of self-referential authenticity stating "I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in anyone else's. But this gives a new importance to being true to myself" (Taylor 1991 in Tshivhase 2015, p. 380). Tshivhase also cites Taylor in saying "persons are always embedded within a society and do not exist in isolation from others" (2015, p. 378) and therefore we cannot completely extricate an innate sense of self from the way that sense of self is perceived by others. Cooley's "looking-glass self" approaches self-concept as having three main elements; "the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification" (1902). Cooley's approach suggests that the self is built in response to others and how they perceive us. Vannini and Franzese ultimately reason that authenticity is both self-referential and other-referential (2008, p. 1625).

Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012), as part of a much broader work on authenticity and branding, discusses what it means to be 'authentic' in an online space particularly with regard to self-branding. She argues that authenticity in online spaces presents a shift from "historical liberal values where being true to the self is solely an internal process" (i.e., one's opinion of themselves is central) towards an externally motivated authenticity, where being *perceived* as authentic is at the fore (2012, p. 80). Banet-Weiser also discusses the ambivalence towards authenticity by arguing that "Within contemporary brand culture the separation between the authentic self and the commodity self not only is more blurred, but this blurring is more *expected and tolerated*" (2012, p. 14, emphasis in original). This blurring highlights the malleability of authenticity in online spaces, because it shows that audiences are in many ways understanding of the shifts between the 'authentic' self and the branded self.

Peterson (2005) supports the notion of authenticity in relation to identity as being polysemic and utilises the idea of "authenticity work", relating to how constructing, producing, and maintaining authenticity is a type of labour. Peterson argues "it clearly takes an effort to appear authentic" (2005, p. 1086). It is a process that must be undertaken. Peterson outlines six ways in which we might approach authenticity work, or ways in which it can be applied, including "technologically mediated authenticity", which he discusses in the context of music scenes which previously relied on identifying 'authentic' fans through characteristics such as hair and clothing. These visual cues disappear in online spaces, meaning 'authenticity' had to be established in other ways.

Automediation is also a technologically mediated approach to authenticity and the presentation of the self. Automediality is related to field of (auto)biography and incorporates the impact of media and technology over the ways the self is constructed and portrayed. Maguire says that "The aim of an automedial approach is to discover what texts can tell us about cultural understandings of selfhood and what it means to portray 'real' life and 'real' selves through media. The emphasis is on thinking critically about mediation" (2015, p. 74). We can consider the online presentation of oneself to ultimately reflect a kind of biography in the same way that we might look at a diary or published autobiography. With an automedial approach, this online presentation of self becomes enshrined in a searchable archive and presents as an ever-changing, rather than static, representation of identity because there is no concrete 'finished' version of the presentation. Maguire uses the example of Jenna Mourey (who utilised the screen name Jenna Marbles) and states:

> [Jenna's automedial] self is composed of a range of interlaced digital texts that are able to circulate independently (for example, Instagram selfies, single YouTube videos that are shared on Facebook, and tweets from Jenna Marbles's Twitter account), but that also work together to constitute the

> Jenna Marbles personal brand. Consumers of Mourey's automedial self cannot hold a single cohesive version of Mourey's story in their hands, as readers can with a memoir.
>
> (Maguire 2015, p. 75)

Equally, Maguire notes that an automedial approach requires us to consider the impacts of the affordances and constraints of the platform, and how these influence particular presentations of the self. The impact of platforms' affordances and constraints is particularly important when discussing the constructed and performed nature of authenticity online. Emily van der Nagel (2017), for example, writes about how social media platforms afford and constrain the ways that individuals can represent themselves depending on the options available for constructing online identity. Additionally, the affordances of interaction contribute to a sense of sociality between audiences and creators which reinforce the parasocial nature of the relationship. The perceived level of access to 'backstage' performances of identity also add to the sense of authenticity.

2.3 Legacy Media that Represents the Real

Many different existing formats function as representations of the real. News broadcasts, reality television, and documentaries are all examples of existing audio-visual formats that are typically understood to be showing some version of 'reality'. The following section uses these three formats as case studies to examine how existing formats function and how audiences understand these versions of truth.

2.3.1 News Broadcasts and Documentary

News formats are a foundational genre in defining how reality is represented in various media. Watson and Hill state "Whether it is in print or broadcast form, the news re-

presents to us the world – reality" (2015, p. 204), and argue that in the process of selecting stories, editing stories, and presenting them in a mediated format, news formats turn events into narrative. García-Avilés suggests the essence of traditional news broadcasts is always the same in that there is "a presenter who conducts a narrative of fragmentary pieces that make up a supra-story of current events that intent [sic] to be decisive for public conversation" (2020, p. 144). Ryan et al. note that "The emphasis on objectivity sits uneasily with the view, common in both early and current studies of television journalism, that journalism functions in the role of 'opinion-maker'" (2014, p. 271) which alludes to the wider discussion around the 'objective' nature of news formats. News broadcasts are inherently shaped by the people who make them and the power structures related to the news corporations associated with them, and as such "news reconstructs the world according to the perceptions" of these influences (Watson & Hill 2015, p. 205).

Sports broadcasting is a similar representation of events, though can be considered in two disparate ways. For example, there are broadcasts featuring live games, and separate panel shows, which Schirato describes as "studio sports formats" (2011). In comparison to the live broadcasts of games, which inherently "simulate […] the 'feel' of being at the game" (2011, p. 59), studio sports formats are afforded more scope to control the narrative of how different segments and highlights are portrayed. Schirato argues studio sports formats are very similar to news formats and the presenters must appear "like mainstream news readers, [in that] they need to look, act and speak as if they're trustworthy, and know what they're talking about" (2011, p. 65). Here we see allusions to the expectations around news anchors and journalists as being trustworthy figures who uphold journalistic standards, though these expectations are complicated by the relationship between news media and

political or commercial powers (Harrison 2019). These relationships may alter the level of impartiality in news media texts.

Documentaries, like news broadcasts and sports formats, also represent reality, and seek to "represent actual people, places, and events in a manner intended to leave viewers or listeners feeling that they have gained some insight into the subject matter" (Chandler & Munday 2011). Factors that are associated with documentaries are related to the format's portrayal of reality. Conventions of the documentary involve methods of "filmic mimesis", which include observational "on-the-fly" camerawork and talking heads as a means of recording 'real life' "as it is lived in front of the 'candid' camera or recalled by testimony" (Saunders 2010, p. 13). Saunders discusses how filmmakers have utilised methods beyond these typical conventions, but still adhere to the key concept of documentaries "to express basic truths" (2010, p. 13). Documentaries are also relatively fluid genres and are often combined with other genres (such as docu-drama) where the amount of narrative embellishment balloons beyond what is typically agreed upon as being "verifiable documentary" (Saunders 2010, p. 14). These conventions of the genre are typically the basis upon which audiences recognise the genre and resultantly interact with the text on the basis that it is a representation of reality. Similarly, the use of some of these conventions in news formatting further ties in associations with reality and the representation of actual events.

2.3.2 Reality Television

Reality television, despite the genre's name implying a particular reading of its texts as being 'real', exists in a liminal space between reality and fiction. Reality television traditionally features ordinary people who are not playing characters, but are rather playing

themselves in a non-scripted format. For simplicity's sake, in this section I will refer to the people featured in reality television as 'contestants' given that these shows can take the form of a game show or competition of some description, though I do recognise many reality formats include participants in non-competitive scenarios. The fact that contestants are 'being themselves' (as opposed to acting as fictional characters) helps distinguish the genre from other types of scripted content.

Marcia England notes that a dichotomy of labelling television formats as binary of either scripted television or reality television "is a false one […] but the dualism is necessary in order to distinguish between the two styles of television" (2018, p. 155). In addition to this, Jane Feuer writes that "One can and should deconstruct the opposition between scripted and unscripted that so often serves to define 'reality TV'. These shows are only 'unscripted' or 'real' in the sense that the contestants are not fed all of their lines and that the outcome is not exactly predetermined" (2018, p. 49). Audiences' reactions to reality television are related to this interplay between reality and fiction. Audiences enjoy reality formats because "they feature real people's stories in an entertaining manner. However, [audiences] are also distrustful of the authenticity of various reality formats *precisely because* these real people's stories are presented in an entertaining manner" (Hill 2005, p. 58, emphasis in original). Producers are in a constant battle of balancing the 'reality' and the 'entertainment' in these formats.

Despite the fact that reality television is named as such, there are clear ways in which the 'reality' portion of the show is functionally scripted. Feuer points to the predetermined "beats" of the show, including the Rose Ceremonies in *The Bachelor* series. The show has beats it must hit in the course of the season and often these beats are

characteristic of the show itself. Additional examples from *The Bachelor* franchise include 'home towns' in which contestants take the Bachelor(ette) to meet their families, and in the American version of the show the 'fantasy suites', where the Bachelor(ette) and their chosen contestant spend a night alone without cameras. Both the contestants involved in the show and the audience anticipate these plot points, and they function as narrative moments. These plot points, for lack of a better term, are decided before the contestants begin their time on the show and can be one way to consider the predetermined structure of the show.

Richard Crew, when writing about the reality television program *Survivor*, states that audiences are aware of the role of producers, and accept this manipulation of events into narrative as being necessary to make the show interesting (2006, p. 68-69). Further, Crew argues that his research suggesting audiences accept manipulation of reality television "confirms Richard Kilborn's observation about reality television, 'Viewers are … aware that what is seen on the screen is in every sense a constructed reality' (422)" (2006, pp. 68-69). As such, in addition to the pre-determined beats of reality television, we might consider the type-casting of contestants, or indeed the editing of some contestants to fulfil certain roles in the show such as the 'villain' or the 'troublemaker', as another example of scripting. We can even think about the positioning of the Bachelor(ette) themselves as fitting within a role that they must play within the show. The implementation of music and editing helps set a specific tone for each scene which tells us, as an audience, how we are to interpret this interaction. A perfectly normal conversation could be edited to look incredibly awkward by overlaying it with certain music and including (or adding) silences.

As much as 'reality' television is positioned to look as though it is a replication of a series of events, it is merely a representation. While it is technically possible to capture and show the un-edited evenings of all 22 contestants of *The Bachelor*, it would not necessarily be very interesting to watch and is not commercially viable. The decision to include and exclude certain moments and contestants influences the way that the audience understands the narrative to play out, and this is a version of scripting. As Crew illustrates, audiences are aware of this construction, and accept it as a part of the format. As a result of this acceptance from audiences of the producers' involvement in shaping the narrative of reality television we can see that despite reality television not being scripted in a formal sense, it is not to say it is devoid of story and structure. The 'reality' in reality television is only as real as we accept the representation of events to be.

Another important concept in discussing reality television is the demotic turn. Graeme Turner writes that the demotic turn is a term which "was coined to describe a broad trend that has seen ordinary people become increasingly visible (and audible) as they are turned into media content via many platforms and formats" (2014, p. 309). The incorporation of everyday people in the majority of reality television formats is an example of the demotic turn in practice. Wilson argues that the demotic turn is part of the reason that reality television can continue to claim to be 'real':

> For reality television celebrities, their on-screen television performances of identity within reality formats are constructed as their "real" and actual private lives. Indeed, this is precisely reality television's ongoing claim to reality: while its settings are fake and its formats fabricated, its stars are nonetheless "real," ordinary people.
>
> (Wilson 2013, p. 426)

The demotic turn can also be seen on YouTube and other social media sites, where user-generated content uploaded by ordinary people is the norm. The concept of micro-celebrity goes hand in hand with the demotic turn and Marwick defines micro-celebrity as "a self-presentation technique in which people view themselves as a public persona to be consumed by others" (2015, p. 333). The prevalence of everyday people on platforms like YouTube helps invoke ideas of authenticity.

2.4 Vlogging as Representing the Real

Moving beyond legacy media formats such as news broadcasts, reality television, and documentaries, media formats that claim to represent reality also exist in online spaces. These are particularly interesting in social media spaces, as these 'realities' are created and disseminated through user-generated formats. Vlogging is one online format that appears 'real'. I employ a sense of apprehension about calling all vlogs completely truthful in the same way I assessed legacy media formats as merely representing reality. Vlogs are representations of events and at risk of editorialising just like any other type of 'factual' media content.

In this section, I examine YouTube as a platform and defining the format of a vlog before considering the role of the vlog as a key format on the platform. Further, I discuss how authenticity has been considered in relation to vlogging and how vloggers perform the self in these spaces. Theories around the role of audience and their parasocial relationships with vloggers rounds out this section. In order to best approach how vlogging functions as a representation of the real, it is useful to consider the role of YouTube as a platform first.

2.4.1 YouTube the Platform

Originally launched in 2005, YouTube is a video hosting website which attracts over two billion signed-in users every month, as well as boasting over 500 hours of content uploaded every minute, and users who collectively view billions of hours of content daily (Reid 2023; YouTube 2022). The platform was procured by Google in 2006 for $1.64 billion (Arthurs et al. 2018, p. 3) and currently streams in over 100 countries around the world in 80 languages (YouTube 2023b). In the early development and pitching for investment, the founders identified user-generated content as one of the major components of the platform (Burgess & Green 2018, p. 3). The co-existence of types of content was predicted by the founders who "hinted that amateur content created and contributed by ordinary, socially networked users might eventually sit alongside legitimately uploaded, professionally produced media content" (Burgess & Green 2018, p. 3) in a pitch to Sequoia Capital in 2005. User-generated content (UGC) is, naturally, generated by the individual users of the platform. This includes both amateur and professional users. Professionally-generated content (PGC), however, refers to the professionally produced content that also makes its way to YouTube. Producers of PGC may create content specifically for the site or repurpose content from other mediums, such as broadcast television segments. It is important to distinguish that there is a difference between content production companies create as professionally-generated content (PGC), and content produced by professional users of a platform (who are still creating user-generated content). Despite both of these types of content being produced by 'professionals', one is made by a production company (*The Late Late Show* YouTube channel is an example), and

one is made by an individual or small team whose success elevates them beyond an amateur creator, but is without the backing of a production company.

From a technological angle, the development of YouTube as a platform has contributed to the increasing quality of user-generated content. Firstly, Helmond notes that, in 2005, YouTube introduced a new widget that effectively allowed videos to be embedded into other websites which "made it possible to distribute and view YouTube videos outside of YouTube's website [… enabling] YouTube to circulate videos across social networks, blogs, and other parts of the web" (2015, pp. 5-6). Berryman and Kavka (2017) highlight the influence of moving YouTube content between platforms. They argue:

> It is not just the self-reflexive name of YouTube but precisely the intimate traversal of the screen, already embedded in TV's affective dynamics, that is borrowed by YouTube vloggers and extended into interactivity through the mechanics of discussion threads and spillage onto other social media platforms.
>
> (Berryman and Kavka 2017, p. 310)

This spillage encourages sharing of YouTube videos on other platforms which helps to facilitate the creation and cultivation of YouTube celebrities. Secondly, technological developments such as increased bandwidth, increased capacity for high definition video, and increased file size limits, resulted in YouTube enabling more types of content and higher technical quality user-generated content. These changes also allowed for professionally produced content to retain its original quality when repurposed online.

As a result of these improvements, user-generated content has also improved in quality over time. User-generated content is one of the hallmarks of the platform which for many years touted 'Broadcast Yourself' as its tagline. Burgess and Green state that "from launch, YouTube presented itself as a neutral web service for sharing and viewing content, rather than as a content producer itself" (2018, p. 8). Over time, however, there has been a

shift away from YouTube's role of exclusively hosting content. The introduction of YouTube Originals in 2016 indicated a move towards content creation and collaboration with existing content creators to make production projects on a larger scale (Daniels 2016). Initially these YouTube Originals were incorporated as a part of YouTube Red, the subscription model that provides an ad-free YouTube experience that has since been rebranded as YouTube Premium (Leske 2015; Daniels 2015; YouTube 2018). In 2018, YouTube announced its Originals series would no longer be pay walled and utilised an ad-supported streaming model (Alexander 2018), and in 2022, YouTube announced it would be ceasing its Originals programming (Spangler 2022). The premise of YouTube Originals was to engage prominent content creators in making new, original content which was often – though not exclusively – scripted. While some creators had their Originals hosted on their own channel, others had their videos hosted on the official YouTube Originals page. This increased the reach of some individual creators across the platform. Regarding user-generated content, this created some separation between amateurs and professionals on YouTube. American vlogger Joey Graceffa, for example, was originally an amateur content creator who was supported in creating a YouTube Originals series when YouTube Red first launched (Lange 2019, p. 230).

Regardless of other markers of professionalism that could distinguish user-generated content from professionally-generated content, this partnership with YouTube itself establishes a move away from referring to Graceffa (and other YouTubers associated with the Originals program) as merely 'users' of YouTube. Lange interrogates the relationship between YouTube, its users, and the monetization strategies employed and states that "monetization changes that reduce control and complicate interaction were perceived as threatening to socially oriented – and even some professional – participants" (2019, p. 231). Highlighting the amateur to professional shift, Burgess and Green state that YouTube

Premium has “increasingly incorporated its formerly amateur star YouTubers […] as drawcard content” (2018, p. 147). This home-grown approach to star recruitment has meant that YouTube reaps the rewards of seed sown on the platform by promoting its own content but also drawing audiences from those creators to its own original content. However, by creating its own content, YouTube moves away from its role as an unobtrusive host and towards a major player in the content of the platform itself. It moves away from being the ‘neutral platform’ it began as, though the shifts away from Originals content may once again see YouTube positioned as host, rather than creator, in an ongoing capacity.

Despite this, user-generated content has and continues to make up a large portion of the collective uploads to YouTube (Aran et al. 2014; Bärtl 2018; Burgess & Green 2018). As established earlier, the dichotomy between amateur and professional content is increasingly blurred, and this is for two main reasons. Firstly, the technical affordances of both the platform (i.e., the capacity to host higher definition videos) and the increase in production quality of amateur content (higher quality consumer grade cameras and editing software) improves the quality of amateur content and can become progressively better as amateurs gain skills and access to technology. Secondly, the ability to generate revenue from user-generated content has meant that amateur content creators can also start to earn money from YouTube. Commodification of user-generated content occurred in 2007 when YouTube launched its Partner Program which allowed content creators to monetize their content and generate revenue from their uploads (YouTube 2007). While this money is often meagre in the early stages of a YouTube career (though does increase with viewership), it naturally changes the conversation about where, when, and how an amateur vlogger becomes a ‘professional YouTuber’. The question of when exactly a YouTuber becomes ‘professional’ is complicated. It cannot be based purely on monetary factors

particularly as many creators have diverse revenue streams including paid sponsorships on YouTube and additional paid subscription services like Patreon. Equally, the quality of the content or how many followers a creator has does not necessarily indicate whether they have transitioned to creating content online full time.

The way YouTube as a platform functions invites a visual equality which flattens the difference between PGC created by production companies and UGC created by professional and amateur creators. Both types of content present very similarly. The size and capabilities of videos are the same, as is the layout and channel design. Perhaps the only noticeable difference between PGC and UGC is the 'Verified' tick assigned to some channels, though even then, professional users can also attain this tick. These verified channels must have at least 100,000 subscribers, be "authentic" (i.e., it has been confirmed that this channel is the person, brand or entity it is claiming to be), and be "complete" (YouTube 2023a). YouTube acknowledges that "Verified channels don't get extra features on YouTube" (YouTube 2023a), and there is no quantifiable shift between amateur and professional content at the 100,000-subscriber mark. Certainly, this could be seen as a type of hurdle requirement for gaining verification, but it does not actually mark a legitimate shift in quality, quantity, or commercial viability of the channel or creator. As such, UGC and PGC on YouTube present similarly online in terms of the platform itself. Shifts in the aesthetics of the platform have also further homogenised different channels. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, creators had the opportunity to customise large parts of their channel homepage such as the header, the colour of the channel page, and more. This capacity for customisation has decreased over time, with creators only now able to customise their channel banner and profile picture. Figures 3, 4 and 5 below show examples of the *Vlogbrothers'* channel page in 2009, 2010, and 2023.

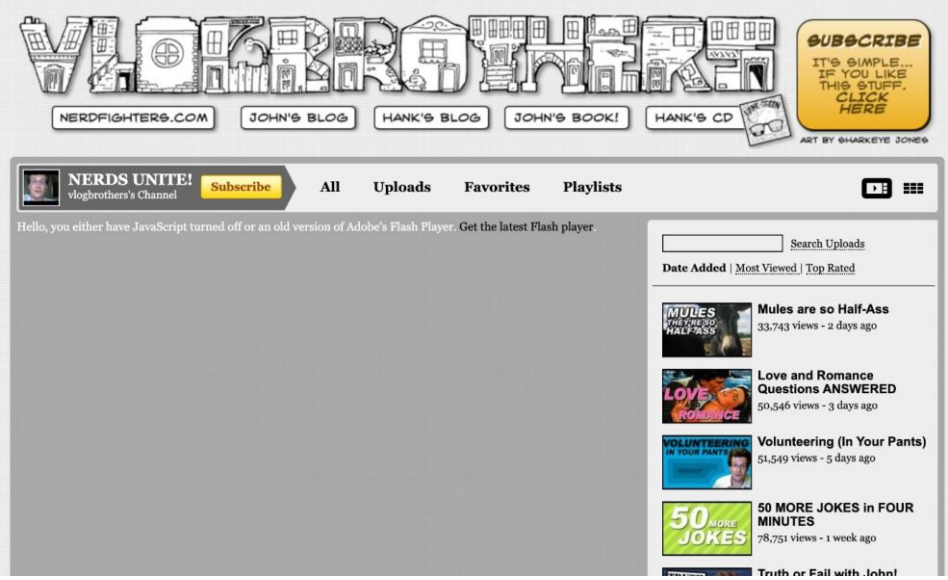


Figure 3 – Screenshot of 2009 Vlogbrothers' channel page (Green 2021)

Figure 4 – Screenshot of 2010 Vlogbrothers' channel page (Green 2021)

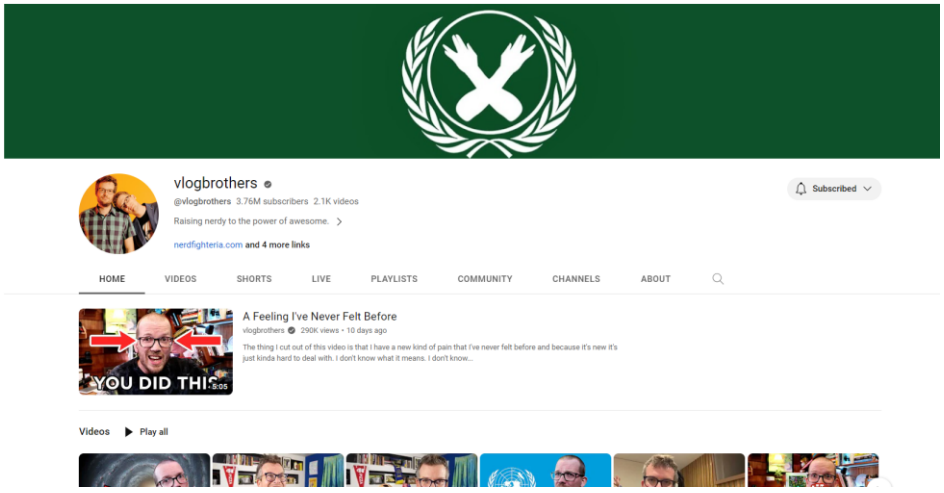


Figure 5 – Screenshot of 2023 Vlogbrothers' channel page (Vlogbrothers 2023)

In the 2009 and 2010 examples, we can see that there was the ability to visually distinguish many parts of the channel page based on the customised background, header, font choice, button placement and more. In comparison, the 2023 screenshot, the header and the profile picture are distinct, however the rest of the page is visually similar to all other channels (i.e., a white background, the same font, buttons all in the same places). While there is the potential for creators to customise written components, such as the About section and the Community tab, these sections at first glance do not appear particularly different due to the homogenous font size and typeset across different YouTube channels. Beyond the now limited customisable features on a channel's page, only the content can identify the type of person or group creating it. This content can be the video itself or the associated paratexts, including the channel name, icon, thumbnail, and video titles or descriptions for example.

2.4.2 Defining the Vlog

Video blogging as a format stands as a representation of the reality of the individual who is creating the vlog content. Burgess and Green state that in their most basic form, vlogs are typically structured around a "monologue delivered directly to camera", and while topics range from pop culture to the everyday life of the YouTuber, "good storytelling and a direct, personal address have always been essential to the genre" (2018, p. 40). The direct address to camera is one of the most important distinguishing factors of vlogs. This, however, is not a factor that is original to the vlog and can be seen in many other types of media. In broadcast media, direct address is a feature in news bulletins, television shows with hosts such as game shows or talk shows, as well as in instructional television programmes like cooking shows. Similarly, in online content, a direct mode of address can

be seen in genres other than vlogs such as DIY tutorials. The confessional style of vlogs is one of the format's defining qualities and is also a major contributor to creating a sense of authenticity and realism in these videos.

Cunningham and Craig identify native-to-online video content in their article examining modes of address on YouTube. They highlight three types of native-to-online content: do-it-yourself beauty, gameplay, and personality vlogging (2017, p. 72). These three areas are identified as differing "sharply from established film and television, and are constituted from intrinsically interactive audience-centricity" (Cunningham and Craig 2017, p. 72). The term 'vlog' derives from video blog (Gao et al. 2010, pp. 4-5), and draws upon a history of web logging (with the portmanteau: blogging) online from traditionally text-based content. Personality vlogging has become a staple of YouTube content with creators uploading more than 50,000 videos with "Day in the Life" in the title in 2019 (YouTube 2020a). User-generated content on YouTube comes in many different forms, but undoubtedly vlogging is a major component of that content.

In conjunction with Cunningham and Craig's labelling of vlogs as "native-to-online" content, Tolson notes that "In both academic and user-generated discussion […], with its 'emphasis on liveness, immediacy and conversation' (Burgess & Green 2009, p. 54), vlogging on YouTube is seen as a distinctively original form of mediated communication" (2010, p. 279). Vlogging is an umbrella term that encapsulates a number of smaller sub-categories of videos. In the same way that television shows vary by genre, the codes and conventions of online content vary, and vlogs are one genre with its own sub-genres. Genre, of course, is a term "used to characterize groups of similar texts that share certain recognizable conventions and that belong in the same literary tradition" (Türkkan 2010, p. 1).

The speaker is an important facet of a vlog, as is whom they are speaking to. A vlog usually "involves one or more presenters talking directly to a camera about a variety of topics" (Stein et al. 2022, p. 2). Wesch proposed that the perceived audience is a factor saying that vlogs "have no specific addressee. They are meant for anybody and everybody, or possibly nobody—not addressed to anyone in particular—or perhaps only vaguely addressed to 'the YouTube community'" (2009, p. 21). This statement, however, comes from 2009 and a lot has changed in the YouTube vlogging space since then. The vloggers' awareness of their own audience and reach has grown and "despite the asynchronicity of the exchange, there is a form of audience involvement present in vlogs resembling that of face-to-face conversation" (Frobenius 2014, p. 70). Marwick and boyd (2011), drawing from Ede and Lunsford's (1984) concept of the "audience addressed" and the "audience invoked", employ the term "imagined audience" to explain the abstract audience that a person thinks *might* interact with a social media post. This imagined audience does not necessarily equate to the actual end audience, but stands in for them during the production of a text. On YouTube, a YouTuber creates their content with a particular type of audience in mind, their imagined audience. Kennedy states that "the presence of the audience — the fact that vlogs are crafted with an audience in mind — significantly influences and shapes what is shown" in addition to other factors that shape the format such as the platform norms and conventions (2021, p. 568). YouTubers, unlike everyday social media users on Facebook or Instagram, have some access to data analytics of who the end user actually is, and this may help inform their imagined audience, but still is not necessarily an accurate representation.

Aran et al. (2014) note that technical aspects such as lighting, video quality, editing, framing, and resolution vary amongst vlogs and can be indicative of level of professionalism

as well as vlogging style. The variation in quality is a hallmark of user-generated content online as opposed to re-purposed television content which tends to be of the same or similar quality. Conversational vlogs tend to be shot from a static camera angle, while other sub-genres such as travel vlogs and 'day in the life' vlogs utilise handheld camera shots as well as static shots (Stefanone & Derek 2009 *in* Munnakka et al. 2019). Typically, these handheld cameras shoot in selfie-mode to capture the speaker rather than what the speaker is looking at.

There are a multitude of sub-genres when it comes to vlogs, with featured topics such as "games, politics, beauty, fashion, cooking, family or more general 'lifestyle' vlogs" (Arthurs et al. 2018, p. 9). Aran et al. also identify conversational vlogs which "present a monologue-like setting in which vloggers display themselves in front of the camera and talk. Although conversational vlogs are asynchronous and recorded as monologues, they establish conversations between the vloggers and their audience" (2014, p. 201). Conversational vlogs are less likely to focus on a particular activity (unlike travel vlogs for example) and rely more heavily on the content of the monologue itself. Frobenius suggests that one way to distinguish between a vlog and other videos, such as how-to videos and sketches, is to determine the main focus of the content, because "vloggers predominantly tell stories or discuss topical events. The focus in a sketch or how-to video is on the action" (2011, p. 816). YouTubers often upload multiple types of content, shifting between styles both within and between videos. This shifting involves uploading variety content such as skits or make-up tutorials as well as conversational, travel, or daily vlogs. It is also helpful to understand that content creators often produce both types of content, and audiences expect this to happen.

There are conventions around filming locations for different styles of vlog. Vloggers tend to show themselves in their own private environments, with a heavy focus on their own houses and, in particular, bedrooms (Berryman & Kavka 2017, p. 312; Hillrichs 2016). Over time, vloggers may 'upgrade' their filming locations, and these shifts are often markers of a movement away from amateur content towards a more professionalised approach to content creation. Upgrades may see vloggers setting up a specialised filming location within their own house, such as a staged bedroom, or moving production onto a set outside of their home. The inclusion of domestic spaces in vlogs allows the audience to step into an intimate space in the creator's life. Hillrichs (2016) notably suggests that despite the bedroom being a 'private' space, the use of the space for production of a public video changes the impact of stepping into these spaces. Vloggers can selectively frame, light, edit, and choose the tidiness of their space in a way that produces a publicised version of a private space. Berryman and Kavka argue that the bedroom facilitates a more intimate relationship between the YouTuber and the audience due to the room's personal nature (2017, p. 311-312). Berryman and Kavka go on to note how UK vlogger Zoe Sugg (who uses the online screenname Zoella) draws on the convention of the bedroom by set-dressing a spare room in her house as a bedroom to film her videos in (2017, p. 312). Through their analysis of Sugg, Berryman and Kavka show how different types of content can co-exist on one channel. Sugg's content can be divided up into vlog videos and content videos with content videos serving "to constitute a YouTuber's brand and selling power" while vlogs provide the opportunity to see the everyday life and persona of the YouTuber (Berryman and Kavka 2017, p. 310). The vlogs here provide the insight into the creator's persona that allow for perceptions of authenticity to develop.

Many of the conventions of vlogs are applicable in some sub-genres, but not in all of them. For example, the filming location for a travel vlog would, by nature, be different from a typical conversational vlog shot in a YouTuber's bedroom. The direct address to camera about the events of the past week, however, might be similar. Daily vlogs of what a YouTuber gets up to in a day might have a combination of both handheld and static camera shots, depending on what they are doing and what they are trying to capture.

The difficulty in using vlog as a genre of video is in differentiating it from other types of content that look similar, either because they are produced by the same YouTuber or because the aesthetics of the video are the same. Frobenius notes that vlogs are "significantly shaped by social context" (2011, p. 816) regardless of the fact that the technical aspects are similar (i.e., direct address to camera). Frobenius points to characteristics of the vlogger, using the fact that typically vloggers are untrained in broadcasting as an example of the social context which helps differentiate content. The untrained vloggers are in contrast to TV news presenters who are highly trained professionals who represent a broadcast network. From this, we can understand that context plays a part in identifying types of content just as much as the technical aspects of number of speakers and filming locations. Additional qualities that audiences use to differentiate similar types of monologue content include the presence of a live audience. This would be typical of a late-night talk show; however, vloggers tend to film on their own without an audience. As outlined earlier, the content of a video is equally as important as the visual aesthetics in determining what type of video a YouTube upload is.

With regard to defining 'genre', Tudor (2012, p. 7) states that "the crucial factors that distinguish a genre are not only characteristics inherent in the films themselves; they

also depend on the particular culture within which we are operating". While Tudor was writing specifically about film, this concept is applicable to all texts. As such, genres are fluid, and dependent on the socio-cultural context they are situated in. Tudor argues that genre is "what we collectively believe it to be" (2012, p. 7). As such, the codes, sub-codes, and conventions of a genre are all malleable and are influenced by each other and outside context (Chandler 2017), and the influence of viewers' interpretations is just as important as the intentions of the producers. Belas (2010, p. 1) notes that the characteristics and definitions of genres change both over time, and between cultures. As such, whenever we consult conventions to dictate what a vlog is, we do so in the knowledge that context dictates our expectations and our own definitions. Often, these are widely accepted definitions, but the definitions exist within a socio-cultural context and are therefore able to be altered.

2.4.3 Authenticity and Vlogs

In the same way that authenticity and realism are key concepts in establishing how factual content constructs reality, these concepts have equal influence in vlogging and are part of the success and appeal of the format. Theresa M. Senft's work on camgirls is one of the early precursors to studies around the vlogging format. In her work, Senft discusses the ways in which reality is constructed in camgirl streaming spaces. Senft compares the depictions of camgirls and participants in reality television. She notes that while reality television participants are non-actors, these people are often placed in contrived circumstances and highlights that the editing plays an enormous role in creating narratives. Camgirls, by contrast, are performing "live and without overt manipulation" (2008, p. 16). Senft goes on to state that while camgirl Jennifer Ringley's presentation of herself in her

videos is “real”, her “webcam’s relationship to reality remains equivocal” (Senft 2008, p. 16). Similarly, vlogs are ‘real’ in contrast to videos that are explicitly fictional, such as comedic skits. This is in the same way that reality television is ‘real’ in contrast television shows which are explicitly fictional, where scripted genres such as dramas could be an example. Through this approach to reality, we can understand that vloggers, such as Zoella for example, are representing ‘real’ versions of themselves, though the overall production of the vlog creates a piece of content where the actual semblance of reality is ambiguous. In her work, Senft employs the term “theatrical authenticity” which she defines as “verisimilitude delivered by the representational mechanisms of the era” (Senft 2008, p. 16). As such, by employing the term theatrical authenticity, Senft highlights that the ‘reality’ is only a representation, and this representation is also influenced by how it is conveyed.

Theatrical authenticity ties well into the concept of expressive authenticity wherein something is authentic based on the intention behind the expression. Denis Dutton suggests that “the concept of authenticity often connotes something else, having to do with an object's character as a true expression of an individual's or a society's values and beliefs. [This] sense of authenticity can be called expressive authenticity” (2009, p. 2). The “character” is aligned with the sense that manner in which something is created and shared influences the authenticity of it. Nguyen and Barbour write about expressive authenticity in selfies and note that “the notion of expressive authenticity links to the relationship between an individual and his or her visual representation” (2017, n.p.). Similarly, vlogging can be seen as expressively authentic because it constitutes a representation of the person at the time. Viewers can perceive the vlogger to be authentic because the vlogger appears to be true to themselves through expressive authenticity.

Vloggers experience and perform authenticity in a few ways, and authenticity is integral to the success YouTubers in building their brand and connection with their audience (Ault 2014 in Ashton & Patel 2018, p. 161). Primarily, vloggers perpetuate the idea that their representation of themselves online is genuine in keeping with Goffman's dramaturgical approach. In the context of vlogging, these dramaturgical performances can be clearly seen. Individuals play a number of roles; they play the vlogger, the micro-celebrity, the friend, the role-model, and (most importantly) themselves. Vloggers perform each of the aforementioned roles (and more) within their videos and these all help construct the vlogger persona. Front stage and back stage in this instance seemingly become on camera and off camera performances. Performing to the camera is performing to the viewers who, while not present at the time, are inevitably the audience for whom the performance is enacted. This on camera performance tends to show what has previously been seen as backstage moments, however, it is merely a shift in boundaries rather than a removal of them. For example, a vlogger may film at a hotel in the lead up to an appearance at a conference which would traditionally be considered a 'backstage' performance of identity. However, because of the asynchronous audience (i.e., the vlogger is still performing for an audience, the audience is just not physically or temporally present) we can still understand this to be a 'front-stage', mediated performance of identity. Goffman's dramaturgical action theory works well with Horton and Wohl's (1956) work on parasocial relationships and both together work to identify the ways that audiences react to personas on YouTube.

Vloggers perform several roles within their videos, which include their existing roles as individuals, and these become enveloped in their vlogger persona. With Zoe Sugg once again as an example, the roles of sister, partner, business owner, author, brand ambassador and more are performed under the umbrella of her Zoella persona. When Zoe acts as Zoella,

aspects of each of her other identities may be highlighted or omitted depending on where she draws her personal boundaries. For example, Zoe's relationship with fellow vlogger Alfie Deyes (PointlessBlog) may be different online compared with their off camera relationship because of what the pair decide to include and exclude in their vlogs. This is not to say that Zoella is less Zoe than off-line Zoe, but rather she performs the role of vlogger on camera, and this has implications for how she performs her other roles as well. The front stage performance encapsulates a particular version of a content creator's identity because of its mediated nature.

Importantly, the vloggers are also performing as themselves, not as fictional characters. This is in contrast to something like vitafiction, wherein celebrities play a fictitious version of themselves (Jacobsen 2020, p. 913) such as Matt le Blanc playing himself in the mid-2010s television show *Episodes* or Nicolas Cage in the 2022 film *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent.* In vitafiction, the celebrity's role draws on what audiences know about the celebrity, but the personality is often exaggerated, and plot events are storylines rather than real events (though may draw on real experiences associated with the celebrity). By contrast, vloggers are performing an online persona; this persona is not a character so much as a specific version of their identity being strategically enacted for a specific context (Barbour and Humphrey 2022, p. 1).

Vitafiction is not the only sense in which people can appear as themselves in fictional texts. Cameos, for instance, bear semblance to vitafiction but are not the same thing. Jacobsen argues that vitafiction differs from cameos based on the level of dependency of the viewer's ability to decode the media message. She states:

> Cameo differs from the vitafictional appearance because the cameo appearance can be purely fictional and because (if occurring in a movie or TV series) it is not crucial for either the creation of the plot or the viewer's

> decoding of the media message as a whole. In vitafiction it is the concurrent surplus of fictionality and biographical information that both structures the appearance and makes the viewer generate meaning based on what she perceives.
>
> (Jacobsen 2015, p. 255)

Resultantly, we can see that in vitafiction it is fundamental to the text that the audience understands the layering of the self-referential nature of the role, as it is key to the plot. This is in contrast to cameos which are noteworthy appearances inserted in order to be significant to audiences who catch them, but ultimately have no bearing on the overall plot if missed. Mathijs defines a cameo as "a short appearance by a publicly known person who is instantly recognizable […] A cameo stands out as a punctuated moment because of the extratextual connotations it produces but also because of its role within the narrative" (2013, p. 146). Cameos and vitafiction sit in contrast to vloggers because vloggers are simply appearing as themselves, not as a reference or fan service, but simply through the function of the format. Despite the clear difference between cameos, vitafiction, and vloggers, these are still useful concepts to discuss how audiences differentiate between performances of the 'self'.

Another dimension to authenticity in vlogs is the use of scripted versus non-scripted content, where scripting vlogs does not necessarily make them inauthentic. The dichotomy between scripted and non-scripted content causes similar problems on YouTube as it does in reality television, as some videos may be scripted but that does not necessarily make it inauthentic. Similarly, just because something is not scripted does not mean it is real. Bhatia suggests that bloopers featuring the outtakes of misspoken lines explicitly point to the lack of spontaneity and inherent mediatisation of the vlog format (2018, p. 112), however notes that this can still be taken as authentic due to the conversational tone employed by

vloggers. Simultaneously, including moments of imperfection within the video itself (rather than, or in addition to, bloopers) is also considered a form of authenticity. Jerslev points to Sugg's inclusion of linguistic errors and mistakes as markers of authenticity and spontaneity (2016, p. 5243). It would seem that both pointing to and editing out moments of imperfection are seen as examples of authenticity and genuineness on the part of the vlogger. Abidin (2017a) writes about Instagram users fostering a sense of authenticity by actively including behind-the-scenes moments and outtakes on Instagram. Abidin utilises the term "calibrated amateurism":

> Calibrated amateurism is a practice and aesthetic in which actors in an attention economy labor specifically over crafting contrived authenticity that portrays the raw aesthetic of an amateur, whether or not they really are amateurs by status or practice, by relying on the performance ecology of appropriate platforms, affordances, tools, cultural vernacular, and social capital.
>
> (Abidin 2017a, p. 1)

Goffman's theory of scheduling is related to dramaturgical theory and relates to presenting only the persona that is required for the present audience (Abidin 2017b). Abidin's theory works to explain how content creators capitalise on the amateur aesthetic to develop a heightened follower response. Additionally, creators may choose to include behind the scenes or 'amateur' moments to further foster an authentic aesthetic. This can be seen on YouTube where YouTubers include either outtakes at the end of their videos, outtakes uploaded in a separate video, or utilise second channels for long-form videos with less editing. Furthermore, second channels can act as another avenue for backstage content beyond bloopers. Second channels have many purposes including showing longer form content, gaming content, daily vlogs (for content creators who tend to make other types of content), and content with a different focus to the main channel. Second channels allow for the inclusion of more 'amateur' moments as they tend to be a less-polished overall product.

Tolson (2010) discusses what he calls the “authenticity effect” wherein audiences see a celebrity not acting as their celebrity persona, but rather as the ‘authentic’ version of themselves. This effect is open to critique. As Tolson states, the authenticity of YouTubers is still framed by their online presence and the ramifications of their online identity. For example, a beauty guru’s authenticity can be questioned when the audience assesses the influence a brand deal might have over the guru’s content. If said guru is including paid advertising for a brand they are reviewing, their reaction to that product versus other products in the review should be questioned. The cultivation of authenticity is important for online celebrities, as McRae (2017, pp. 16-17) argues performing authenticity is a form of labour which accumulates socio-cultural capital for those who invest in it. This capital can then translate to monetary gain through brand deals and ads. Furthermore “conveying an aura of ‘authenticity’ in a product increases its value, [… and] This marketing logic also extends to the commodification of authenticity in online micro-celebrity” (McRae 2017, pp. 16-17). Cunningham and Craig state that brands capitalise on established relationships between creators and their audiences and market products based on the perceived authenticity of the creator (2017, p. 74). If audiences perceive a creator to be authentic, then they are more trusting of recommendations the creator makes. Thus, the credibility of the YouTube personality is a commodity that brands are keen on exploiting because of the authority and authenticity that the audience perceives the personality to have.

Jerslev (2016) also implies that an element of authenticity lies in performing oneself as ‘doing it for the right reasons’. Similar to the way that some reality television show contestants are painted as “villains” through editing due to their search for fame (Feuer 2018, p. 59), vloggers who actively and visibly produce content in an attempt to become famous are seen as less authentic than their ‘genuine’ counterparts. At this point,

the parallels between reality television and vlogging are clear. In both formats, the people onscreen are performing a version of themselves, the presentation of reality is mediated and constructed through the editing process, and the role of a script is not necessarily a marker of truth or fiction.

Jerslev suggests that Zoella performs authenticity "by identifying herself as an honest and unpretentious person who got an idea and followed it because it felt right for her, never really caring about the size of her following" (2016, p. 5234). We can apply this same logic to other vloggers and content creators, though we can of course question just how 'little' the creators actually cared. Zoella herself has faced criticism for utilising a ghost writer when publishing her first book *Girl Online* (2014), with some critics suggesting Zoella misled fans by routinely saying she herself was writing the book (Deller & Murphy 2020, pp. 123-124). That said, micro-celebrity and influencing as a vocation has ballooned in size and the pathway to becoming a content creator is much clearer than it was in the early days of YouTube. There is certainly an argument that vloggers making videos 'just for the fun of it' are becoming less common in comparison to early YouTube.

In considering the many facets of authenticity in vlogging, it is clear that authenticity as a concept is both malleable and relational, especially in spaces such as this where both the creator and the audience are working with representations of a person. One vlogger might be seen as 'more authentic' because they show raw emotion on screen, another might be seen as 'less authentic' if their crying is seen to be a plea for attention. As such, it is important to understand that audiences and creators are constantly negotiating what it means to be 'authentic' in these spaces.

2.4.4 Audience and Parasocial Relationships

The role of the audience is crucial, and vloggers' cultivation of parasocial relationships with their viewers is an important factor that has gained prominence in scholarly research into YouTube and vlogging (Kurtin et al. 2018; Rasmussen 2018; Rihl & Wegener 2019). YouTube's affordances allow for a level of interactivity between the viewer and the content creator which in turn facilitates parasocial relationships.

The concept of parasocial relationships predates YouTube and vlogging but applies in this newer context as well. Horton and Wohl coined the term parasocial relationships to describe the type of relationship that is developed between spectators and performers in media, including television, theatre performances, and radio (1956, p. 215). Rihl and Wegener explain that "viewers feel as though the media personalities are addressing them personally and as though they were speaking with a familiar person one-on-one" (2019, p. 556). They go on to note that despite the fact that the relationship is one-sided, the interaction is perceived to be mutual by the audience member. The audience members feel as if they know the media personality, but the media personality does not know the individual members of the audience. This creates several implications for the audience and their perception of the media personality with whom they have developed a parasocial relationship. Rihl and Wegener state that "a parasocial relationship develops out of a series of parasocial interactions. While an interaction can be thought of as limited to the act of reception only, the relationship extends beyond the moment of reception through repetition of such moments, forming a closer – but still one-sided – relationship" (2019, p. 556). Primarily, Horton and Wohl highlight the "illusion of intimacy" (1956, p. 217) in that audience members perceive themselves to have an actual understanding of who the

personality is on an intimate level. This illusion presents a problem when audiences see personas outside of their performance.

> The encouragement of, not to say demand for, a sense of intimacy with the persona and an appreciation of him as a "real" person is in contradiction to the fact that the image he presents is to some extent a construct – a façade – which bears little resemblance to his private character. […] The standard technique is not to make the private life an absolute secret – for the interest of the audience cannot be ignored – but to create an acceptable façade of private life as well, a more or less contrived private image of the life behind the contrived public image.
> (Horton and Wohl 1956, p. 226)

YouTube complicates this already rather convoluted dynamic by introducing an additional sense of intimacy (in that the audience sees the personality in what is constructed as a back stage performance, and typically in domestic locations) and the sense of authenticity that goes along with this (as the personalities are performing as themselves[2]).

Additionally, the audience sees the personality in the 'behind the scenes' moments that would constitute the private life of a traditional media personality. The interactivity of social media platforms also offers the illusion of access to a celebrity which further complicates parasocial relationships because there is the potential for a fleeting interaction that elevates the parasocial to social. Here, however, there is still a very clear power imbalance and ultimately for the content creator, this interaction does not constitute an actual awareness of the person on the other side which serves to further reinforce the relationship as being parasocial in nature. We must account for the heavily weighted nature of both sides of the YouTube interaction. The audience knows far more about the personality than the personality will ever know about the audience given the weighting of

[2] This distinction is important to clarify as some scholars discuss parasocial relationships with fictional characters, who obviously have no capacity to make the relationship two-way. Equally, it is important to clarify that vloggers seem more authentic because they are performing as themselves without the added layer of performing a role such as 'guest' on a talk show, which is layered with a degree of promotion for the star.

content versus comments. There are far more people commenting on a video than were involved in the production on it, at least for successful and popular videos. The imbalance is exacerbated by the asynchronous experience of creating and consuming content. Audience members can interact with the video for the life of its upload and even beyond, whereas content creators are more likely to focus their attention on their most recent video. In the act of viewing a video, the audience must interact with the personality, but there is no guarantee the personality will ever engage with the comment they might leave when engaging. Thus, YouTube presents a shift in what audiences experience as a parasocial relationship.

We can see that vlogging as a format is a culmination of factors that results in a perception of the genre as being particularly authentic. The format benefits from the associations between certain factors – such as the use of direct address – and authenticity. Vlogs function as a representation of reality in the same way that other legacy media formats do, meaning that we can draw connections between how audiences make sense of these formats that seek to represent the real.

3 Replicating Representations of Reality

Transitioning now to understanding how content that appears real has been replicated in the past, in this chapter, I will explore the ways in which media formats already replicate existing genres that represent reality to tell stories in new and interesting ways. Firstly, I outline imitation, remediation, and audio-visual manipulation, before moving on to specific genres such as mockumentary, satire, and parody. Following this, I explore the broad concept of replica content, then transition to more specific ways that newer genres of online content make use of the 'authentic' vlog format to tell stories. As transmedia stories are the most common format for mimic vlogs, I discuss these transmedia texts, the role of the wrestling concept 'kayfabe' which helps explain how audiences embrace fictionality, and then examine existing research on mimic vlogs and identify the gaps in knowledge.

3.1 Existing Ways to Replicate

Imitating formats that claim to represent the real is not a new phenomenon, stretching back to storytelling techniques thousands of years old. In the past century alone, there are many existing film, digital, and video formats such as parody videos, mockumentaries, and imitations of other genres. These formats may seem interchangeable; however, each is its own field of study with regard to art and media to this point. The following section will outline some of the most notable discussions in the fields to date, beginning with imitation and its role in knowing, seeing, and understanding.

3.1.1 Imitation

The allegory of Plato's cave has long been an example of the relationship between perception and reality. In Book VII of *The Republic*, Plato presents an "underground den", where prisoners are kept in such way so they can only look at a shadowy version of the world outside the cave. All the prisoners can see is the shadows, and to them, "the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images" (Plato 2009, p. 471). This is to say that to the prisoners, the shadows are the only form of existence, and they have no understanding of the world that casts the shadows or themselves. Plato's allegory is indicative of ways to think about philosophy as it goes on to talk about the seeking of light (an extended metaphor for knowledge), but also inherently speaks to the relationship between perception and reality (Biffle 1995, p. 88). Huard argues that the "ability to draw a distinction between how something appears versus the reality that in some way causes that appearance is quite possibly an aspect of the human condition that is unique to it" (2006, p. 4). This ability to distinguish is of particular interest because scholarly discussions around visual media interrogate the premise of reality versus perception.

Susan Sontag's work *In Plato's Cave* deals with the implications of both reality and perception in relation to photography. She argues there has been a perception that photographs are "incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture" (Sontag 2010, n.p.). Over time, this understanding has been complicated by the ways in which images can be altered or manipulated and that the very action of taking the photograph inherently distorts the reality of the image. Sontag states that photographers impose their own standards on their subjects and that while cameras do

capture the reality, they are interpretations of the world in exactly the same way as paintings and drawings are (2010). The implications of Sontag's work being called *In Plato's Cave* is that photographs eventually end up being a makeshift replica of the actual real world and that we, as people who look at photographs, take them to be the real thing without thinking about the ways that those things came to be.

The theory behind Sontag's *In Plato's Cave* is as true of vlogging as it is of photography. The captured reality of vlogs is as much a 'true' replication of events as a photograph would be. Vloggers choose what to film, when to film, how they position themselves and the camera, and each of these choices represents reality in a certain way. To use Sontag's terms, vloggers impose their own standards on their subject, even if that subject is themselves. As such, the viewer ought to question how a representation of an event came to be, in the same way that viewers negotiate the 'reality' of reality television.

3.1.2 Remediation

Remediation is widely understood to be the way in which novel media is composed of elements of existing media. Bolter and Grusin note that "What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media" (1999, p. 15). It is not unusual to have formats that build from one another and inspire new formats. Equally, platforms and formats are frequently used in emergent ways to create content beyond what they were originally intended.

Remediation allows for platforms to be used in ways they were not initially intended for. Highfield discusses the ways in which "Platforms are employed for purposes for which they were not originally intended; media content is appropriated for critical, sarcastic and

ironic commentary" (2016, p. 2030). We can therefore see platforms such as YouTube used as conduits for episodic storytelling. The content itself can of course be remediated, but the use of social media platforms for storytelling is remediation in its own right.

3.1.3 Audio-Visual Manipulation

Audio-visual manipulation is a field in which images, videos, or audio channels are edited so as to create a seemingly realistic portrayal of someone or something. Paris and Donovan state "AV manipulation includes any sociotechnical means for influencing the interpretation of media. AV manipulation includes both the cutting edge, AI-reliant techniques of deepfakes, as well as 'cheap fakes' that use conventional techniques like speeding, slowing, cutting, re-staging, or re-contextualizing footage" (2019, pp. 5-6). Deepfakes and cheap fakes present two different avenues for audio-visual manipulation to occur and are sometimes referred to as a form of synthetic media (van der Sloot & Wagensveld 2022). Kietzmann et al. (2020, p. 142) utilise a rubric to outline different types of deepfakes, including face-swapping, text-to-speech, and lip-syncing. They suggest that there are both "light" and "dark" applications of different deepfake technologies, whereby "light" examples include businesses utilising the technology to make better products, and "dark" examples result in harm to individuals or businesses (Kietzmann et al. 2020; Kirchengast 2020, p. 309). There are many examples of deepfakes manipulating content including footage of Mark Zuckerberg being edited to talk about gaining power and control (Paris & Donovan 2019, p. 5) as well as examples of celebrities being superimposed into pornographic content (van der Nagel 2020). Deepfake and cheap fake material alike presents a problem with regard to the perception of reality that is presented within them. Certainly, not all deep/cheap fakes are entirely convincing and may indeed be labelled

explicitly as fake or produced in an obviously comedic or low-quality way, but audiences are still capable of taking this unconvincingly manipulated content at face value.

3.1.4 Mockumentary, Parody, and Satire

There are many legacy media formats that seek to emulate existing factual formats, and these include mockumentaries, parody, and satire. These formats act as case studies for how newer formats replicate their more factual counterparts. These are each genres in their own right; however they are heavily dependent on how audiences perceive, and make sense of, other genres.

Mockumentaries, for example, draw on the specific codes and conventions of the documentary genre to create a new type of content. While this is still considered remediation, it is to a lesser extent than other types of remediation wherein media is repurposed, redesigned, or reimagined for a new platform. Richard Wallace writes that mockumentary includes texts "where the immediate subject matter is fictional, but where the visual style is one that resembles a pre-existing mode of non-fiction media, or, significantly, where this style resembles other mockumentaries" (2018, p. 8). Mockumentaries co-exist with parody and satire, and often there are connotations of the two when talking about mockumentary as a genre. Television mockumentaries are common formats for workplace comedy with shows such as Australia's *Utopia* (2014 –), *The Office* (UK 2001 – 2003; US 2005 – 2013), and *Parks and Recreation* (2009 – 2015) featuring a documentary style with regular breaks in the fourth wall.

Mockumentaries can and have also been defined as parodies of genre as well as pieces of satire in conventional dictionaries (Merriam-Webster 2023; Collins English Dictionary 2023) and academic research (Wallace 2018; Campbell 2007; Chandler

& Munday 2011; Juhasz & Lerner 2006). Culturally, the notion of parody exists with connotations of comedy as is particularly evident in the dictionary definitions, however this connotation is not broadly applicable to the term (as explored in the scholarly research). Hutcheon notes that parody is a form of imitation that is characterized "by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text […] parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (1985, p. 6). She argues that parody does not require comedy or satire, but instead exists within the realms of intertextuality wherein elements of texts can be referenced and, with ironic inversion and critical distance, can create new meanings and reading for audience members. We can, therefore, have parody without comedy, and – with the use of Wallace's definition – have mockumentaries without the basis of humour as well.

The elements that make documentaries appear 'real', such as the hand-held camera shots and the (occasional) diegetic camera crew are examples of the way that media aesthetics can be seen as more or less truthful than others. Wallace notes that these aesthetics that are seen as more authentic, are actually easily replicable in fictional texts:

> […] the aesthetics of factuality are imitable, malleable and unstable […] John Parris Springer and Gary D. Rhodes call these components '"false" signifiers of reality' (2006: 8) because they do not guarantee truthfulness. They 'signify' reality because they have become associated with documentary and factual forms where they are most frequently found. However, they are 'false' signifiers because they can be easily imitated, fabricated or falsified.
>
> (Wallace 2018, p. 4)

The implication here is that producers can create content that draws on codes and conventions that are aligned with degrees of authenticity. Audiences read the text and absorb the content as being authentic because of their ability to read coded messages in texts. When these same elements are used in a different way to what the audience

expects, audiences may misinterpret what they are seeing. As such, mockumentaries can appear to be 'real' by imitating the aspects of documentaries that make them appear truthful too.

Both Chandler and Munday (2011) and Wallace (2018, p. 8) identify the Orson Welle's radio play adaptation of *War of the Worlds* as an example of mockumentary. In addition, John F. Barber also writes about the *War of the Worlds* radio play and poses the question of whether the play is either a radio hoax or an experiment in radio storytelling. Barber argues that *War of the Worlds* – and other radio plays like it – were not intentionally creating panic, but rather were innovative story techniques that incidentally caused a reaction (2020, pp. 97-98). The reaction was the result of audience members misconstruing the content that they were consuming. The radio dramas drew on elements of the real radio content as a means of eliciting a response from the audience. Barber notes that "these radio dramas seemed real because the reporting narrative styles and break-in news reports they employed sounded real, official, and, more importantly, believable" (Barber 2020, p. 114). A key phrase that recurs in Barber's chapter, is the concept of "authentic sounding" content. The integrations of false signifiers into *War of the Worlds* played on the audiences' expectations and produced authentic sounding content. Using these elements as a method of storytelling is an effective means of drawing the audience in because their perception of these elements is that of authenticity.

While there is debate about the true extent of the panic caused by the *War of the Worlds* radio play (Socolow 2008), it remains a well-known example of the possible impacts of media and utilising platforms in interesting ways to make more engaging content. Tying this back to Sontag's work, there is a level of trust placed in different kinds of media. With the *War of the Worlds* radio play, this trust was placed in an audio 'truth'. The appearance

of truth cultivated by actively replicating "false signifiers of reality" associated with the 'factual' format resulted in a misled audience.

Parody news and satire news are further examples of how existing media adapt the 'trusted' format of the news. Satire outlets such as *The Betoota Advocate* in Australia and *The Onion* in the United States of America replicate traditional news media articles but feature headlines laden with irony, critique of social norms, and humour. Part of the success of satire news is in its use of the familiar news format, and in *The Onion*, Holland and Levvy argue "the mimicking of authoritative news language and style is communicated most effectively via the article headline[s]" (2018, p. 183). News media feature similar false signifiers of reality in the same way that documentaries do, and the authoritative news language and style that Holland and Levvy identify are one example of this. Berkowitz and Schwartz argue that satire news organisations perform an important role as a "Fifth Estate" in that they hold mainstream journalism to account, and this is a result of its ability to criticise and parody 'real' news and its systems (2016). As such, satire news is another important example of how fictional content replicates existing modes and that, in doing so, satire news is more effective because of its use of form.

3.2 Replica Content

Replica content is the umbrella term that I am utilising as a catch all for the different forms of media that actively seek to replicate and mimic existing media formats. The formats I have discussed to this point are encompassed within this umbrella term, including mockumentary, parodies, and satire, but the breadth of the term is wide reaching. The term also incorporates content such as disinformation, deep and cheap fakes, as well as user-generated content that replicates media formats as a means of fanfiction and storytelling.

Fanfiction is a particularly useful form of transformative work that lends itself well to comparison with mimic vlogs. Fan content is a fertile space for replica content as existing formats are frequently adapted in order to create fanfiction of various formats for fictional characters as well as fan content about real people such as celebrities (referred to as real person fiction or RPF). An example of replica content in fanfiction includes Text Fic Alternative Universes (stylised as AUs in online communities) wherein the story is told either wholly or in part through text messages or direct messages. There are a number of ways of presenting this kind of fanfiction. Some authors simply post their fanfiction formatted as an exchange between two characters (i.e., with each character's text aligned to either margin). Others post the texts as screenshots of digitally created messages. Others screen-record the texts as they come in to add a particularly 'authentic' flavour to the direct messages. I have de-identified the following examples taken from Tumblr.

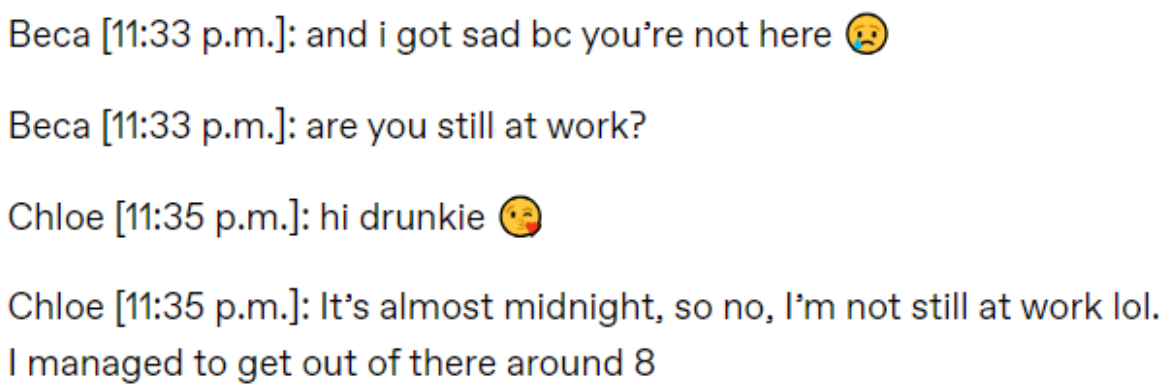


Figure 6 – An example of a fanfiction written in message format

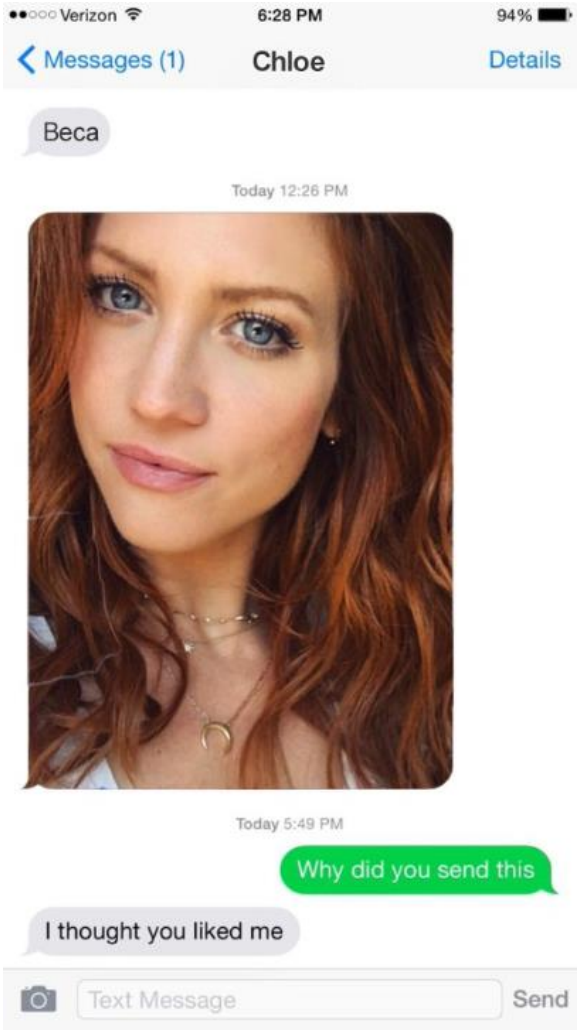


Figure 7 – An example of a mock text message exchange as a fanfiction format

Social Media AUs are also a particularly popular form of fanfiction and occur in several formats. Social Media AUs encapsulate fictional social media accounts and interactions for the characters within the story. They can utilise fictional versions of different platforms like Instagram and Twitter accounts. These stories include either created images that replicate the social media posts and interactions or can include actual accounts used to tell the fictional story. These are slightly different from things like parody accounts

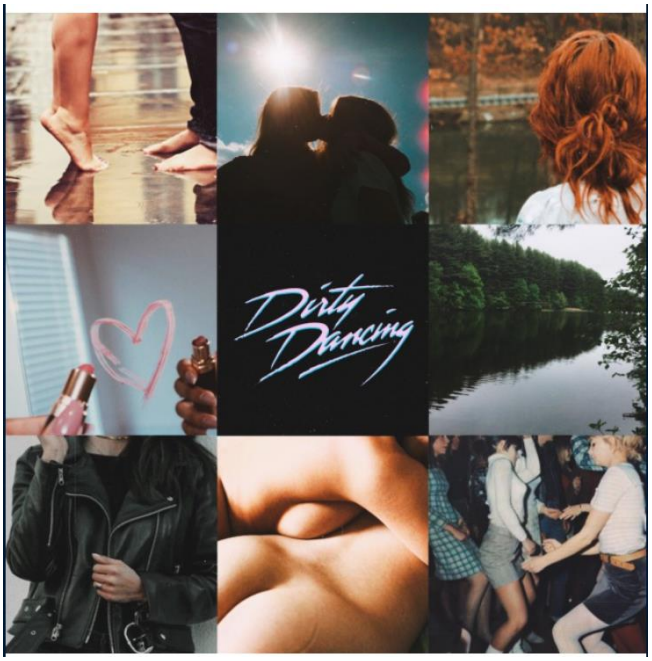
and impostor accounts[3] though they do present in very similar ways. Social Media AUs for fictional characters often use images of the actors who play the character in the original text, taken from the actors' own social media pages or the original text itself. For example, Social Media AUs for the 'ship' (a term short for relationship used in fan communities to refer to a preferred couple) 'Bechloe' from the Pitch Perfect franchise will utilise images of Anna Kendrick (who plays Beca in the movies) and Brittany Snow (who plays Chloe) as part of the fan content. Bechloe, like most ship names, is a portmanteau of the romantically linked characters' names. Lam notes that in slash fiction[4], "the actor's appearance becomes aligned with the character and is appropriated to give the fan work universal recognition" and that this is particularly true of fandoms that have a basis in visual mediums such as film and television (2019, p. 81). The appropriation of actors' appearances is also applicable in fanfiction beyond just slash fiction.

Similar to social media AUs are mood boards and 'palettes'. These might also use images of the actors who play characters in audiovisual texts or might use images of other actors or people who look similar to the character – either stock images or specifically chosen photos of alternative people. These mood boards can be examples of something that the character might post on a social media page if they were to have one, but often are not as fully formed as a whole AU. They might take a simple idea as inspiration and then collate some images that make up the 'mood' or aesthetic of the idea in relation to the characters. For example, to use the Bechloe example again, the inspiration might be 'road

[3] Impostor accounts look eerily similar to a celebrity's account, i.e., it uses the same profile picture, and a variation of a 'handle' that looks like it could be the real celebrity (Buxton 2018; Zarei, Farahbakhsh & Crespi 2019). For example, a Harry Styles impostor account might use the same profile picture and change the L in the handle to a 1 or an uppercase i so that it looks the same at first glance (e.g. @HarrySty1es or @Harry StyIes).
[4] Slash fiction is fanfiction featuring typically sexual relationships between characters of the same sex.

trip' and a series of nine photos might include photos of a brunette (Beca), of a redhead (Chloe), of a car, a diner, hands lightly clasped and so on. Figure 8 below is an example of a fan created moodboard.

Social media AUs also exist for real person fanfiction (RPF) which involves fictional stories about real people and celebrities. These AUs start to become slightly more problematic because it may be less obvious that these fictional posts are not legitimate tweets or posts made by the celebrity. With the fanfiction about existing fictional characters, there is a dissonance between the images used and the names of the characters doing the posting because the names and images will not align with the celebrity's actual identity. For example, people familiar with Anna Kendrick would understand that these Bechloe images are not real because they utilise a different name and handle, and therefore are potentially able to identify that this is a work of fanfiction. Conversely, real person fanfiction does not facilitate this dissonance and it is less clear what is legitimately posted by the celebrity and what is crafted as part of the fanfiction. Social media AUs featuring Harry Styles, for instance, will craft screenshots/mock tweets which utilise his actual handle and profile picture. This makes it less obvious that it is fictional. Some fans will use different handles to help avoid the potential confusion, but this is not necessarily always the case. Impostor accounts also do not facilitate a clear disparity between the impostor account and the celebrity's legitimate account, because the users behind impostor accounts are purposefully trying to imitate the legitimate account. As such, users must carefully check accounts to ensure it is actually the celebrity posting.



be my baby

Bechloe AU: It's the 60s, and Chloe goes to a family resort with her father, mother, and sister, Aubrey. While there, she meets Beca – a jaded, and snarky dancer – who just so happens to need a dance partner. Chloe doesn't know the first thing about dancing.

#bechloe #chloe beale #beca mitchell #bechloe au #pitch perfect #moodboard #not a published story #just a concept #dirty dancing au no one asked for

Figure 8 – An example of a #Bechloe moodboard on Tumblr

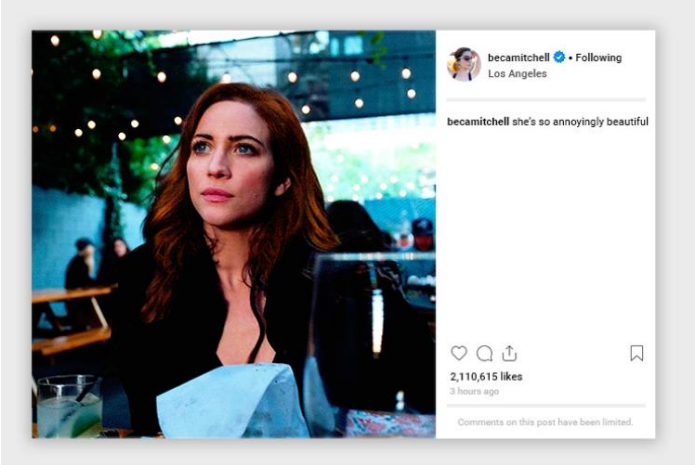


Figure 9 – A social media AU featuring Brittany Snow cast as Chloe in the *Pitch Perfect* franchise

Similar to Social Media AUs are character parody accounts. These parody accounts post in the voice of a fictional character but are not doing so as a form of storytelling or fanfiction, which is in contrast to character accounts in online transmedia stories or Social Media AUs respectively. Notable examples of these parody accounts include a Severus Snape parody account (@_Snape_ on Twitter, since deactivated), Darth Vader (@The_Darth_Vader), and an account that parodies King Charles III (@Charles_HRH). These accounts are a form of replica content. Parody accounts of real people pose a slightly more potent opportunity for audiences to misconstrue the content as real. Some parody accounts, such as @Charles_HRH, utilise labelling such as the word parody in brackets in the account's Twitter name to help distinguish this account from a legitimate account.

Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in 2022 and the subsequent introduction of a subscription model for 'Verified' status encouraged a slew of impostor Twitter accounts. This presents as an interesting case study of the impact of symbols like verification ticks as signifiers of reality or authenticity, and equally of the impact of replica content. For a relatively minor cost, users can now become a premium member, which includes a blue check mark, previously used to indicate that an account was verified and indicated the account was who (or what) it claimed to be. As such, users were able to set up accounts that mimicked existing high-profile individuals or companies and post tweets that looked authentic. Here, the blue check mark acts as a signifier of reality, and by making the tick something that could be misappropriated via purchase, individuals were able to more effectively (for better or for worse) masquerade as people or companies. A significant example of this was the account which mimicked Eli Lilly & Co., which produces and sells insulin. The impersonator tweeted "Insulin is now free" which caused the stock price of the company to fall dramatically (Morris-Grant 2022). This example highlights the impact that

imitation can have in extreme circumstances. Musk has since attempted to enforce rules regarding impostor accounts to counter the imitation practices (Ray 2022).

Impostor content, such as imitation and impostor Twitter accounts, are a form of information disorder under Claire Wardle's seven categories of information disorder (2018). Wardle places each of the seven categories on a spectrum to indicate the least problematic (or severe in terms of impact) to most. The categories are satire or parody, false connection, misleading content, false context, impostor content, manipulated content, and fabricated content. This spectrum is particularly useful for approaching replica content, because it helps place this kind of content in an existing framework. Replica content can, on a case-by-case basis, fit into any of these categories.

There are some complicating factors that mean that it can be difficult to neatly place all replica content on this spectrum (included below in Figure 10). For example, fanfiction such as that discussed earlier in this section does not necessarily fit cleanly on the spectrum. Content like Text Fics which utilise fabricated screen shots of texts messages fall into the category of fabricated content but are not necessarily designed to deceive or do harm. In fact, they are more akin to satire or parody in their lack of intent to harm but capacity to fool. Fanfiction is typically created with a particular imagined audience in mind; an audience that is familiar with the original text being extended or reimagined. The capacity to fool is often a result of the content reaching outside of this audience that is 'in the know'.

Ultimately, fan work creators aim is to entertain and, when their content is kept within their original circles, they do that well. Social Media AUs featuring real people can also fall into this fabricated content category (and also impostor content if they mimic the actual names, handles, and profile pictures of the celebrities involved) but their ability to

harm is greater than other fanfiction because of the higher stakes given the potential impact to real people. Fanfiction taken out of the context of the fan community it is made for and the platform upon which it was originally posted can also fall into the category of false context.

Figure 10 – Wardle's seven types of information disorder (2018)

Where fictional content lands on this spectrum is difficult to pinpoint because the perceived level of harm is dependent on the particular type of content, the format, and the platform. A completely text-based prose fanfiction has less potential to be intercepted (causing harm) than images of fabricated tweets of real people that are made as a part of fan content. The harm here is dependent on each particular style of fan-created content and the types of formats that are being replicated. Each format has a different ability to affect its audience.

One of the things I want to highlight in this section is that I am predominantly talking about the replication of user-generated formats. Particularly in fanfiction spaces, there has

been a lot of content that replicates things like social media platforms because it is a way of imagining what it would be like if these characters were real and so replicating existing forms makes sense. By replicating social media platforms, there is an added sense the content *could* be real.

3.3 Transmedia Online Texts

Online transmedia stories, such as those developed for YouTube, are a prime case of replica content in an online environment. Transmedia texts, as Jenkins defines them, are "stories that unfold across multiple platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world" (2008, p. 334). Online transmedia stories remediate online platforms for storytelling, and replicate the user-generated formats native to the platforms that are associated with authenticity. These transmedia stories are typically much broader than YouTube videos alone and often incorporate social media accounts for the fictional characters to tell the story over multiple platforms and in such a way that makes the characters feel 'real' (Adams & Barbour 2022). Part of understanding the ways in which audience members interact with the stories is to realise that often the audience responds to the fictional characters as though they are indeed real. This means interacting with the videos much in the same way an audience member would interact with a standard vlog and vlogger. Such interactions include commenting on the video in such a way that it works in dialogue with the video and the vlogger or to discuss the video and its content with other viewers. These same interactions can be seen in response to fictional mimic vlogs, as audience members who are in the know suspend their disbelief to interact with the content as though it is real.

To describe this particular phenomenon, we can borrow a term used extensively in the world of professional 'sports entertainment' wrestling; 'kayfabe'. Reinhard defines kayfabe as "the artificial reality surrounding professional wrestling, whereby wrestlers appear larger than life and different from their real personas, and the matches can be predetermined and fictional yet feel completely real to wrestling fans" (2019, p. 31). Additionally, kayfabe can be seen as "a convergence of reality and fiction that produces a simulation of reality, or a hyperreality, in which reality becomes indistinguishable from the simulation" (Mazer 1998 *in* Reinhard 2019, p. 31). Kayfabe actively encourages audiences to lean in to the fictionality of the narrative built in professional wrestling. The text then benefits from the interactivity afforded to fans who become co-creators in the fictional world.

Fans of professional wrestling are sometimes painted as though they do not understand that what they are watching is scripted but, by contrast, the very nature of wrestling asks fans to see that something is fictional and look beyond that to enjoy it. Fans typically know what they are watching is constructed and part of the fun is in engaging with the storylines and characters despite (and because of) this.

Kayfabe extends beyond the traditional walls of a text in that wrestlers are expected to maintain their fictional persona outside the ring as well. Litherland (2014) notes that the extension of kayfabe into online spaces poses complications to the performance of identity as the athletes navigate performing as themselves and their wrestling identities. He states that online spaces can collapse the spaces between kayfabe and non-kayfabe (outside the fictional world) with audiences required to unpick which moments are in world and which moments are not. This is particularly evident when wrestlers do not have distinct 'real'

private personas such as John Cena who lends his name to his character (Litherland 2014). As such, kayfabe is full of complexities that require deconstruction from audiences as well.

The links between kayfabe in professional wrestling and in online transmedia stories (especially those that build the story across in-character social media accounts) are clear. Audiences in both scenarios are encouraged to look beyond the fictional, constructed nature of the text, and lean into the story world. Not all viewers of mimic vlogs will engage in the level of play that kayfabe entails. Many will simply engage with the text as a normal video. However, for those that do engage with kayfabe, the storyworld becomes much more alive, and where the transmedia story is well-developed, the text becomes an interactive play space for audience members and story tellers alike.

3.4 Defining Mimic Vlogs

The videos that sit at the core of these transmedia stories are vastly understudied. Typically, when these texts have been studied, it has been through the lens of their holistic transmedia status, the interaction that transmedia nature affords, the roles of the producers and fans, or the practice of adaptation. There has been little research on the format of the videos or a neutral audience's response, which is surprising given the socio-cultural impact of the *Lonelygirl15* series. *Lonelygirl15* was the first major mimic vlog series, and notably is one of few that feature an original storyline. It is also widely reported to have misled many members of the audience into believing the videos were real.

The videos at the core of these texts remain unnamed as a style, which is why I coined the term 'mimic vlog'. I utilise this term specifically because the fictional format mimics a number of key factors from the original format. Alternative adjectives include fake, replica,

mock, parody, and imitation, but each of these choices has a number of connotations that makes them less suitable choices. These connotations include allusions to 'fake news' in the case of fake, as well as the general associations between parody or mock and comedy. Mimicry, by contrast, is advantaged by the connotations associated with the adjective. Mimicry in biology refers to:

> [A] phenomenon characterized by the superficial resemblance of two or more organisms that are not closely related taxonomically. This resemblance confers an advantage—such as protection from predation—upon one or both organisms by which the organisms deceive the animate agent of natural selection"
>
> (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2023)

In essence, one species receives the benefits of mimicking another species such as a non-poisonous butterfly species taking on a similar hue or pattern to a poisonous species to avoid predation. To this effect, 'mimic' makes for an additionally interesting adjective because mimic vlogs receive the benefits of the form they are imitating; i.e., audiences are more likely to trust the form because it so closely resembles a previously acknowledged 'authentic' form. Resultantly, the term 'mimic vlogs' is the most effective term for this type of content.

Moving beyond the semantic labelling of mimic vlogs, these fictional videos replicate the format by typically focusing on a singular speaker who is directly addressing the camera (and, in turn, the audience). Bakioğlu highlights that "The seemingly overnight popularity of *LG15* was the direct result of the creative team's ability to effectively activate the participatory culture that has become the defining characteristic of YouTube" (2018, p. 185). While this popularity was in part due to the encouragement of fan interaction and

participation with the series, the success also speaks to the effective imitation of the practices common on the platform at the time.

Mimic vlogs are inherently different to standard vlogs because of the use of actors and fictional storylines. The focus of the videos is still very much on what is being said (rather than what is being done) which helps to classify mimic vlogs as a separate format from other types of fictional content on the platform such as skits and repurposed professionally-produced content. The use of actors who are playing fictitious characters, rather than presenting a mediated version of themselves, also helps differentiate between mimic vlogs and other versions of fictionalised representations of the self, such as vitafiction and cameos.

In Section 2.4, I outlined the role of YouTube in establishing itself as a platform for user-generated content that facilitates portrayal of the 'real'. The associations between vlogging and authenticity mean that YouTube becomes a suitable platform for creating imitation content that benefits from the audience's perception (and in many cases expectations) of authenticity. Additionally, YouTube has become a platform that enables mimic vlogs as a format because the affordances of the platform to allow fictionalised versions of user-generated content to be effective. The visual homogeneity of the platform allows for mimic content to present identically to all other content on the site.

The defining qualities of mimic vlogs are intrinsically linked to the qualities of standard vlogs outlined in Section 2.4.2. Importantly, mimic vlogs as a genre differ from other native-to-online content such as DIY tutorials and skits. Conversational vlogs are the most readily mimicked subgenre of vlog, though there are some examples where mimic vlogs utilise different camera styles. Conversational vlogs, in

particular, stand as a compelling format for creating engaging web series because they establish a connection between the audience and the content creator that is based on the notion of being let in on personal aspects of the speaker's life. Tolson states the authenticity of vlogging "is located in its excessive direct address, in its transparent amateurishness and in the sheer volume and immediacy of 'conversational' responses" (2010, p. 286). This illusion of connection, confession, and intimacy between a vlogger and their audience establishes a sense of authenticity on the vlogger's behalf. The "excessive direct address" that Tolson highlights in standard vlogs then becomes a defining quality of mimic vlogs, and stands to why these fictional videos can also be read as authentic. Key to the success of mimic vlogs is that the appearance of authenticity is an essential component and by-product of conversational vlogs.

While mimic vlogs predominantly replicate the conventions of the genre, occasionally creative liberties are required to further the plot. For example, some series contrive reasons for the characters to begin uploading videos in the first place. For example, *Carmilla* (2014-2016) begins under the guise of a journalism project and *All For One* (2016-2018) takes place under the guise of a livestream for the main character's group of friends. Additionally, while videos are predominantly delivered in a direct-to-camera mode, these series often use 'happenstance' interruptions as a means to introduce other characters and further the plot or incorporate additional speakers also talking to camera.

Mimic vlogs as a novel medium for storytelling draw on existing media including film, television, novels, user-generated YouTube content, and more. Mimic vlogs also have similarities with the other types of remediated works including mockumentary, parody, and satire. In fact, mimic vlogs are, based on the definition provided by Wallace (2018), a form

of mockumentary as they are fictional in subject matter but resemble non-fiction media. Additionally, in keeping with Hutcheon's work on parody which states we can have parody without humour, we can also recognise that mimic vlogs do not need to be comedic to be seen as and characterised as parodies of the genre they remediate.

Further, in the same way that mockumentaries draw from the "false signifiers of reality" in documentaries, mimic vlogs emulate the factors that make things seem authentic in standard vlogs. This includes the earlier mentioned "excessive direct address" but also typically includes factors such as the setting (mimic vlogs emulate the domestic domain by featuring sets such as bedrooms), the filming style, displays of amateurism, and a sense of relationship between the speaker and the audience.

There are also connections between mimic vlogs and the discussion of specific mockumentaries such as the *War of the Worlds* radio play discussed earlier. In the *War of the Worlds* radio play, audiences placed trust in an audio 'truth' that replicated existing, trusted forms of communication (such as news break ins). In *Lonelygirl15*, the audiences' trust is placed in the visual media and the associated codes as being a 'true' and 'authentic' representation of what is shown to be happening. The parallels between mimic vlogs and radio plays become evident. Both storytelling modes draw on expectations the audience has of the type of content they are consuming. Using these elements as a method of storytelling is an effective means of drawing the audience in because their perception of these elements is that of authenticity. There are also similarities in the backlash from the audience in both *War of the Worlds* and *Lonelygirl15*. After *Lonelygirl15* was confirmed to be a scripted, fictional show, audiences announced their displeasure at being duped into caring about a

character they genuinely considered to be in danger (Bakioğlu 2018, p. 189), mirroring the alleged panic from some *War of the Worlds* listeners.

3.4.1 Mimic Vlogs so Far

Lonelygirl15 (2006-2008), as the first major mimic vlog series, represents the starting point for research in the field. Bakioğlu's 2018 work, as included in the earlier sections, focuses on the tensions between producers of the series and the fans who were drawn in by the participatory nature of the platform and text. Bakioğlu argues that the producers of *Lonelygirl15* exploited their fans by promising "a community-based narrative that embodied the general spirit of co-authorship [and] sold their show to fans as an unprecedented initiative that would blur the actor/producer and fan divide, a promise that did not actualize for many fans" (2018, p. 186). Bakioğlu also wrote on *Lonelygirl15* in 2014, focusing on the role of fan alternate reality games in the franchise, and the impact of the fan ARGs and interactivity on the text as a whole. She argues the first of the puzzles the fans worked together to solve was that of whether the show was real or not, and while the first suggestions about the nature of the series came as early as the third video, it was months before the fictional status was confirmed. Bakioğlu also notes that the fan backlash to the revelation was "substantial, but it only added to the hype around the show" (2014, n.p.). The fan ARGs assisted in furthering the interactivity and "drill-ability"[5] of the text but was also an interruption that "temporarily destabilised" the series, highlighting the complexities of producing content in online spaces (Bakioğlu 2014).

[5] Drillable media "typically engage far fewer people, but they occupy more of their time and energies in a vertical descent into a text's complexities" (Mittell in Bakioğlu 2014). These texts provide opportunities for audiences to engage with texts at a deeper level through investigation and analysis.

Kimberly Ann Hall (2015) discussed *Lonelygirl15* in the context of authenticity, gender, and performance. In particular, she positions the main character in the series, Bree, as a micro-celebrity brand on the platform developed through her perceived authenticity. This authenticity was a result of Bree's amateurism, intimacy with the audience, and qualities such as her looks and gender (Hall 2015, p. 132). Hall also outlines how the development of Bree's brand builds on Senft's work on camgirls. Further, Hall analyses the uncovering of the true nature of the series and the coverage the series received, in particular with regard to the media framing of the fans who 'revealed' the actress' identity and the fallout of the series.

Burgess and Green argue that *Lonelygirl15* "both supported and subverted the mythologies around the significance of YouTube's amateur content" (2018, p. 43) and successfully adopted the conventions of the vlog format as a mode for storytelling while drawing on the 'authentic' associations with the style and platform. They further claim:

> *Lonelygirl15* violated the ideology of authenticity associated with DIY culture, while at the same time being wholly consistent with the way early YouTube actually worked. […] *Lonelygirl15* introduced new possibilities for experimenting with and expanding the uses of the vlog form within YouTube.
>
> (Burgess & Green 2018, p. 44)

Burgess and Green go on to argue that *Lonelygirl15* stands as a turning point with regard to authenticity, suggesting it "marked a new phase of ambivalence" (2018, p. 44) towards the concept, before also stating authenticity is still a fundamental factor associated with YouTube, and that this authenticity (alongside intimacy and community) are part of what sets YouTube apart from other mainstream media. Both Bakioğlu's and Burgess and Green's work suggests that *Lonelygirl15* series set the precedent for storytelling of this nature on YouTube.

Following the success of *Lonelygirl15* came *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012-2013), developed by Bernie Su and Hank Green, the latter of whom is a well-known YouTuber in his own right as part of the *Vlogbrothers* channel*. The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is one of the more popular mimic vlog series and has gained critical acclaim by way of an Emmy Award for Outstanding Creative Achievement in Interactive Media – Original Interactive Program in 2013. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is a modern-day adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and was released across several different social media platforms as a transmedia story told in real time. The series also prompted a series of other adaptations by the same production team – Pemberley Digital – including *Welcome to Sanditon* (2013) and *Emma Approved* (2013-2014, revived in 2018) which adapt Austen's *Sanditon* and *Emma*, as well as *Frankenstein M.D.* (2014) and *The March Family Letters* (2014-2015) which adapt Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Louise May Alcott's *Little Women* respectively. Beyond Pemberley Digital, similar series were produced by other teams in the wake of the success of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries.* The series has also attracted the most scholarly research of mimic vlogs to date.

The research on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* typically focuses on the transmedia elements of the web series or the process of adapting the material rather than the videos themselves as a format. Seymour et al.'s (2015) work on *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* focuses on the relationship between producers and fans in new media ventures. In particular, it highlights the role of the fan in producing an immersive transmedia text. Seymour et al. state "The LBD created spaces where fans participated in the production of the work, while at the same time the producers steered fan interactions and involvement to retain a level of control over the developing text" (2015, p. 100). Managing fan interaction with a live transmedia text required balance on the part of producers to maintain control of the text. The authors also

discuss the role of the audience as contributors to the story, and the authors suggest that in some ways, the audience becomes a character of its own.

Zerne (2013) and Jandl's (2015) articles primarily focus on the work of adapting *Pride and Prejudice* for an online, transmedia setting. Zerne's work is specific in its breakdown of modernising the story beats, while Jandl's article moves beyond this to also discuss some of the affordances and characteristics of the newer format. Jandl notes that while *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* never denied its fictionality, there were still occasions where the true nature of the video was obscured to a degree (such as below the cut in the description box), and immersion was encouraged. The use of metareference permeates throughout the series and there are nods to the constructed nature of the text at times, but these often aid in the 'home-made' aesthetic rather than alluding to fictionality (Jandl 2015, p. 180). This is achieved by Lizzie and Charlotte diegetically utilising and referencing conventions of the vlog to draw attention to the fact that the videos are a mediated representation of events, which serve to perpetuate verisimilitude of the 'vlogs'. Camden and Oestreich also comment on this construction:

> The paradox remains, though, that these fictional characters played by professional actors appear real because they constantly discuss their fictional process of writing, recording, editing, and uploading their videos, a slew of activities that, of course, were actually achieved by the team members listed in the credits below every YouTube video.
>
> (Camden & Oestreich 2018, p. 43)

The producers of the text are clearly aware of the conventions of the format and utilise those conventions to make the series a compelling narrative by simultaneously drawing attention to the construction, but in a way that serves the text.

As a transmedia story, many scholars use *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* as a text through which to view transmedia stories developed for online spaces. In previous work, I have explored the narrative structure of the series and the influence of the 'real time' nature of the text on its ongoing transmedia status. I proposed that after their initial run these texts should be considered 'transmedia artefacts', as they no longer function as the transmedia texts they were upon release (Adams and Barbour 2022). Anne Zeiser (2015) also writes about *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* through a transmedia lens but utilises the web series as a case study for transmedia storytelling in an online capacity, primarily focusing on the way the story unfolded in the online space. Camden and Oestreich's (2018) book *Transmedia Storytelling: Pemberley Digital's Adaptations of Jane Austen and Mary Shelley* features a chapter specifically regarding *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* but also considers the other series produced by Pemberley Digital. The chapter regarding *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* approaches the text through an advertising and monetary lens as it works to explore how capital was raised for the project in addition to its transmedia elements.

In a similar vein, Røstvik's (2022) chapter about the queer vampire series *Carmilla* (2014-2016) produced by KindaTV focuses on the sponsorship of the series. *Carmilla* is another modern adaptation of an existing text, this time the 1872 novella of the same name by Joseph Sheridan La Fenu. The series had three main seasons, as well as a prequel miniseries and a movie. Røstvik examines *Carmilla* through its links with Kimberly-Clark and its Kotex brand of period products. While the chapter primarily focuses on the broader history of Kimberly-Clark's advertising, Røstvik analyses the success of integrating the product into the series which garnered a strong fan community. The author notes that the series "was one of the first corporately sponsored – rather than DIY community created – serialised narrative stories to become a sensation within queer communities" (2022, p. 131),

but Kimberly-Clark faced a paradoxical problem in that "*Carmilla* was a success in part due to the lack of traditional branding strategies, [so] how would viewers know to buy Kotex?" (2022, p. 147). The paradox highlights some of the hurdles faced in marketing and funding novel storytelling forms on emerging platforms. The success was the result of a new model, so producers and brands were faced with the question of how best to incorporate revenue streams.

Crape discusses the narrative framing of the *Carmilla* series, focusing on seasons one, two, and three of the YouTube series. Crape suggests that the release of the show coincided with what Ferles (2019 in Crape 2023) defines as a "convergence environment" particularly in regard to the convergence of various roles such as author, writer, producer, editor, performer etc. Convergence, as Henry Jenkins (2008, p. 322) defines it, is "a word that describes technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes in the ways media circulates within our culture". Crape argues that the format of the show encourages this convergent environment by inciting audience participation and engagement. The article discusses authority and representations of queerness in both the novella and in the web series which then acts as an exploration of the adaptation process and results.

Other research on *Carmilla* further discusses the queer romance elements of the story and its impact on its fans and the queer community. Kumar's (2021) article largely discusses the fan community associated with the show and argues "for *Carmilla* fans, YouTube, Tumblr, and AO3 enable the creation of affinity spaces and archives of lesbian feeling". Importantly, Kumar suggests that "By uploading vlog-like episodes on YouTube, *Carmilla* situates its characters and viewers within the affective economy of YouTube" (2021, n.p.) which champions participation, interaction, and 'authentic' emotion.

This article also acts as an example of the lack of naming conventions for this particular type of video format. The videos are simply "vlog-like". The author does, however, examine the relationship between the general understandings of vlogs as being effective for creating "impressions of authenticity and intimacy" (Horak 2014 in Kumar 2021) and of how the *Carmilla* series, by emulating this style, also creates these impressions. Further, the article goes on to explore how the format and the platform promotes fan interaction with the characters as though they are real people (much like through the practice of kayfabe discussed earlier), and that the fan community thrives on other platforms such as Tumblr and AO3 (a fanfiction website) in part because of their participatory cultures.

Røstvik states that YouTube as a platform provided an opportunity for stories to be told by groups that had previously been under-represented by traditional media creators, and queer content was particularly prevalent as an example of this (2022, p. 143). However, in both Røstvik's and Kumar's work there is discussion of the predominantly white cast in *Carmilla,* which Røstvik cites as being "striking because the writers had recontextualised much of the original novel, including inventing new characters" and notes "the original novel describes an intriguing, if brief, glimpse of a Black female character" who was not expanded upon in the web series despite other plot points being expanded upon (2022, p. 146). Kumar also remarks that with the fan community "The racism of the *Carmilla* fandom does not manifest as open hostility toward marginalized people but as a refusal to examine or even acknowledge whiteness and racial inequality" (2021, n.p.). While these web series present as an opportunity to produce content by, for, and about under-represented communities (and are often celebrated in queer communities) the lack of racial diversity is apparent in several of the series.

Amongst this research, there is a gap in looking at these texts from an audience reception perspective regarding the similarities of the format to the standard vlog, in particular, from the perspective of audiences who are not already familiar with the text. In the time since beginning my own research, de Lueena Lucas and Moreira (2021) published a study that sought to determine whether participants could identify Lizzie in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* as a fictional character based on the first video in the series and whether the participants would follow her on her transmedia social media accounts[6]. The study utilised an online survey which limited the amount of information the researchers were able to gather about why participants responded in particular ways.

Fourteen of the 40 participants in the survey overtly identified the videos as fictional either by recognising the source text, through the paratexts, or through the content itself. While the study was interested in the role of paratexts, the authors note there were no questions that specifically asked participants about the paratexts associated with the video so as not to draw more attention to these paratexts than participants normally would. In the results, de Lueena Lucas and Moreira comment that some participants missed obvious paratextual markers of fictionality, such as the inclusion of the episode number in the title of the video ("My Name is Lizzie Bennet - Ep. 1"). Equally, they highlighted that participants who were familiar with the source material were able to easily identify the content as fictional.

While this study does begin to fill some of the gap in existing literature on mimic vlogs, it is rather narrow in scope (i.e., it only focuses on the one text) and the method limits the

[6] This article was originally written in Portuguese, and as such, I have relied on translation software to read this article. Resultantly, there may be some limitations to my understanding of the research.

amount of clarifying data the researchers were able to collect. The research touches on some of the factors audiences use to identify texts, but this is a minor aspect of the article overall. Equally, the study utilises one of the more popular mimic vlog web series, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, and the video included in the survey is the first video in the series which opens with the infamous opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*; "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." These factors make it more likely that participants were able to identify the video as being fictional in nature.

As such, it is clear that there is a gap in existing research with regard to the implications of emulating a vlog format for audiences. The research to date primarily focuses on the transmedia aspects of the text, the adaptation, or the interactivity afforded to audiences. Given Burgess and Green's assertion that *Lonelygirl15* "violated" the expectation of authenticity on YouTube, I believe there is a clear opportunity to investigate how audiences perceive these texts. In particular, there is an opportunity to explore the ways in which audiences consider these texts in the broader context of both YouTube and other content that seeks to replicate user-generated content.

4 METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter outlined some of the key concepts relating to mimic vlogs, YouTube, authenticity, and other types of replica content such as mockumentaries. Importantly, it highlighted the gap regarding audience perception in the existing research looking at how mimic vlogs replicate existing 'factual' formats. My project therefore takes an audience-based approach to mimic vlogs by focusing on audience responses rather than creator intentions and investigates three key areas. I aim to determine the perception audiences have of storytelling on YouTube through the medium of mimic vlogs. Additionally, the project works to identify how audiences discern mimic vlogs from standard vlogs as well as understand the methods audience members use to categorise the videos. Finally, as I argue that mimic vlogs fit within a broader category of replica content wherein content is specifically made to mimic another format, this study considers the viewers' perceptions of mimic vlogs in relation to other types of replica content such as disinformation, mockumentaries, deepfakes, and cheap fakes. In undertaking an audience reception study, I centralise the perspectives of the audience as end-users rather than the 'authoritative' view of creators or my own singular, subjective perspective. Audiences offer diverse insights into the ways texts function in practice rather than in theory, and their readings of texts can "sharply diverge from the perspectives of those who produce and transmit messages" (Gunter 2000, p. 19).

In exploring these ideas, I address four key research questions:

RQ1. What preconceptions do audiences have about storytelling on YouTube?
RQ2. How do audience members identify and categorise types of storytelling content on YouTube?

RQ3. What influences success in identifying and categorising different types of YouTube content?

RQ4. How do the audiences' perceptions of mimic vlogs fit into their wider opinions about other online replica content?

In order to answer these questions, I have utilised a mixed method approach that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data developed through audience analysis. The following sections outline the process of selecting this method.

4.1 Research Paradigms and Theoretical Framework

It is clear that there is more than one epistemological approach to media studies. Some research draws from the positivist paradigm (Bertrand & Hughes 2005, p. 11) and investigates whether there is a concrete truth to something. Examples of this include research into metrics such as audience size and composition (Bertrand & Hughes 2005, p. 11). Interestingly, the *War of the Worlds* radio play is an example of how positivist theory can be applied to media studies; some listeners to the broadcast thought it was true and panicked, thus 'showing' an inherent link between the power of media consumption and people's behaviour. This story, as shown earlier, has been complicated over time and the impact of the media is thought to be less significant than initially believed. Other media studies work, however, draws on the interpretivist paradigm which states each individuals' interpretation and perception of something is equally true (Anderson 2012, p. 17). An interpretivist paradigm allows for viewers of media to draw different meanings from texts depending on their own understanding of the text.

Media reception studies, or reception theory, is an approach to media studies that takes an audience centred perspective. Media reception studies "is not a hermeneutics or truth-finding of the meanings of the text. […] It asks, How does a text mean? To whom? In

what circumstances?" (Staiger 2005, p. 2). Livingstone states "reception studies argues that media texts must also be interpreted, made sense of, worked on by their audiences" (2007, p. 1), and also highlights the shift away from understanding texts as having an implicit meaning 'in' the text, rather, that reception studies promotes analysis of how meaning is constructed through audience interaction with the text. As such, reception studies sits within the interpretivist paradigm, as it focuses on how audiences make meaning from texts.

Fundamental to understanding how meaning is made in media is semiotics. Matusitz states that semiotics is "the study of signs and symbols, including their processes and systems. It is an important approach to communication research because it examines the association between signs and their roles in how people create meanings on a daily basis" (2017, n.p.). Further, Roland Barthes' (1987) denotation and connotation approach contends that images contain more than one message; the denoted (i.e., what is in the image) and the connoted (what that image signifies). Barthes' approach draws on semiotics through the use of signifiers and signifieds, and utilises the 'language' of signs in order articulate how meaning is made. He further states "the number of readings of the same lexical unit or lexia (of the same image) varies according to individuals" (Barthes 1987, p. 47), meaning the same image may have many connotations depending on the context and the viewer.

Similarly, Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding approach to meaning making and audience reception is a useful tool in understanding how audiences make sense of texts, and is "perhaps the most significant, early conceptual paradigm within Reception theory" (Ott & Mack 2014, p. 249). Encoding and decoding as a model builds from semiotic theory, and relies on the use of signs, linguistic and iconic messages to imbue meaning in texts. Hall

outlines that meaning is both put into texts by the producers of the text, as well as taken out of the text by audiences, and that "the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical" (2006, p. 166). Additionally, Hall argues the reader of a text has the capacity to take a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading of the text depending on their level of agreement with the encoded messages.

Ott and Mack (2014) suggest that there are limitations to Hall's encoding/decoding model, and state that other models of "textual negotiation" promote a less structured approach to meaning making. Ott and Mack cite John Fiske as proposing the concept of polysemy which suggests that there are multiple readings of any one text. They state that polysemy "refers to the relative openness of media texts to multiple interpretations. A polysemic text is one that can signify a number of different meanings to many different members of the audience" (Ott & Mack 2014, p. 252). The polysemic nature of signs in semiotics means that there is further room for asymmetrical meaning making, as signifiers have the capacity to have different meanings in different contexts (Hobbs 2011, p. 93). David Morley's (1980) work on the television show *Nationwide* is routinely pointed to as a key text in audience studies (Ang 2006; Bertrand & Hughes 2005; Berger 2016; Gunter 2000). Morley applies Hall's encoding/decoding framework and explores whether the dominant/negotiated/oppositional reading works in practice for audiences of *Nationwide.* Morley's work is an important text in prioritising qualitative and ethnographic methods in audience studies, which Gunter (2000) states are important characteristics in reception analysis. Ang suggests that qualitative empirical research, such as Morley's, which incorporates "in-depth interviews with a small number of people (and at times supplemented with some form of participant observation) is now recognised by many as

one of the best ways to learn about the differentiated subtleties of people's engagements with television and other media" (2006, p. 174).

Media reception theory and semiotics both underscore the capacity for the viewer to make their own meaning from a text because of their own understanding and experiences. In order to make sense of how viewers reach these conclusions, media reception studies typically utilises methods aimed at exploring how audiences interact with texts. Hermes states "Generally, reception studies as an area of academic research has set itself the goal to understand and explain (by theorizing empirical audience material) how media texts become meaningful and are relevant to audiences, rather than to predict audience preference or media effects or generalize findings to large populations" (2003, p. 383). Given the aims of this research, this study takes an exploratory approach to the research, looking to understand and explain how some viewers respond to mimic vlogs, rather than create a generalisable set of findings to discuss audience practices at large. By taking a reception studies approach I hope to encapsulate the responses of different participants to identify if there are similar approaches, factors, or themes present in how audiences decode 'truth' and genre. This audience-focused approach allows me to investigate how specific viewers make meaning from mimic vlogs, and how they make sense of the encoded meaning in the videos. By working with viewers who are not fans of the specific web series in the corpus, I anticipate that some of the encoded messages will be lost or misinterpreted.

In order to address the research questions outlined above, I explore how audiences perceive and react to a corpus of eight videos comprising of both standard vlogs and mimic vlogs. These videos act as both a quasi-experiment regarding audiences' abilities to identify the texts, and as a launch point for discussion which addresses the research questions of how audiences perceive these videos in a wider context.

4.2 Method

Given the established theoretical framework of this research, it is essential to ensure that my data allows me to understand the individual approaches of each of my participants. As such, I have employed a mixed-method approach which encompasses an in-depth interpretative exercise with audience members, with a focus on capturing individual responses to a set collection of videos. Audience reception studies as a field engages with several methods, and, as Tuominen states, "Often, these studies combine several methods to provide a fuller perspective on reception" (2018, p. 70). Bertrand and Hughes describe reception analysts as "eclectic in their methodology – using both quantitative and qualitative methods, and often combining the insights of both the social sciences and the humanities" (2005, p. 39). A mixed method approach allows for complementary datasets to be used together to describe and define how the audiences make meaning, such as using surveys to position qualitative results in context and vice versa (Kitzinger 2004, p. 173). Additionally, mixed method approaches can be useful for providing additional complementary data that ensures there is sufficient data for the project, as one data set alone may be inadequate (Caracelli and Greene 1993 in Anderson 2012, p. 76; Sloan & Quan-Haase 2017).

With regard to my specific project, I have chosen to utilise both surveys and qualitative interviews in this research, as well as a viewing task which informs both the surveys and interview. Kitzinger states viewing exercises and discussion are key approaches in reception studies exploring audience interpretation but have their limitations (2004, p. 176). While limited in some aspects, the combination of methods in this project develops a detailed dataset to draw from. By employing such methods, I am actively leaning into the

principles of audience reception studies as the results then highlight the capacity for various readings of a singular text.

Each participant undertook a multi-stage session which comprised of four stages:

1) A short survey providing demographic information
2) A viewing task with a survey response
3) A categorisation task with a reflective activity
4) A semi-structured interview

The sessions were each approximately two hours in length and took place between May and August 2021. In Stage 1 of the session, participants provided general information about themselves and their YouTube viewing habits. Stage 2 comprised of a viewing task in which participants watched a corpus of eight videos made up of both standard vlogs and mimic vlogs. After each of these videos, the participant filled out a standardised survey responding to the video, before moving on to the next. Importantly, at this stage, participants did not know that some of the videos were fictional. Stage 3 is the point at which I informed participants about the fictional nature of some of the videos. I then asked participants to categorise the videos as either a standard vlog or a mimic vlog and provide a short reason as to why. Following the completion of the categorisation task, there was a reflective task asking participants to explain their general approach to the categorisation task. The two-pronged explanation for how participants categorised the videos in this stage allows for both a nuanced answer for the specific videos as well as discussion of the broader approach to the videos overall. Stage 4 involved a semi-structured interview to discuss each participants' perceptions about vlogging, storytelling online, and replica content, as well as further discussion of the videos and categorisation tasks.

I informed participants prior to their participation in the study about the general area of the research (i.e., that the research is looking at vlogs and YouTube) but they were

not told that the key area of interest is mimic vlogs and fictional replica content. It was only at Stage 3, after participants watched and responded to the videos, that they were informed that some of the videos were mimic vlogs. This omission was to ensure that participants could answer questions about their perceptions regarding the authenticity of the videos in Stage 2 without the influence of knowing that some of the videos were fictional.

This mixed method approach allows for data that helps respond to the research aims, in that it provides quantitative data that speaks to the ability of participants to identify content, but also to understand their perspectives on storytelling and replica content. By preceding the interview with the viewing exercise rather than having solely an interview, participants are able to reflect on their own experience of watching two similar types of content. As a result, the interviews included specific examples that the participants identified within the corpus. If the method included only a semi-structured interview without Stages 2 and 3 of the study, the participants may not have had a reference point upon which to base their answers about mimic vlogs on and may have been working in a hypothetical space.

4.3 Ethical Considerations

A significant ethical consideration that comes from this project is related to the withholding of the true intent of the study regarding fictional content. Initially, there is limited disclosure of the scope of this project and this has the potential to result in participants feeling misled about the aims of the research. This limited disclosure is important to ensure that participants are not led to the answers nor divert their attention when viewing from where it would normally go. The corpus of videos was selected in a

manner that reduces any distress the participants may feel. For example, particularly drama-heavy mimic vlog episodes, such as those featuring discussions of relationship breakdowns, have not been chosen as part of the corpus. This is to minimise emotional distress from the participants both before and after finding out that some of the videos were fictional.

Other ethical considerations include how the participants are identified within the research itself (Saunders et al. 2015, p. 617). Participants had pseudonyms given to them in the reporting of results to provide anonymity in the reporting of specific comments and/or data. Some identifying data, such as age or gender, has been included alongside data given by the participants to provide additional clarifying context. This data has only been included where it is considered to be a necessary addition that has some influence over the participants' response. For example, where specific participants have pointed to a factor about themselves that they feel influences the response they gave, this factor has been included as a clarifying detail. Given a) the detailed nature of interviews and b) the relatively small sample size of participants, I informed all participants before participating, as well as on their consent forms, that while every action will be taken to de-identify participants, it was not possible to guarantee anonymity. Another ethical consideration is to do with the anxiety around 'correctness'. Bertrand and Hughes note that respondents may give the answer they assume is correct or what the researcher wants to hear, and this can cause problems with the data (2005, p. 74). Participants may feel some anxiety about getting the answers correct, either in their surveys or in the interview itself. As correctness is not the key focus of this research, I reminded participants regularly and kindly that getting the answer right was not of primary concern, and that the participants' approaches to categorisations were more important than the categorisation itself.

4.4 Corpus

Given the videos act as the impetus for this research, choosing the videos was an integral aspect in designing the project. Bauer and Aarts suggest three key factors when establishing a corpus. Firstly, materials should be relevant and have a singular focus. Secondly, they should be as "homogenous as possible", and thirdly, they should be synchronous, from one natural cycle (2000, pp. 31-32). As such, in selecting this corpus, I have taken great care to select videos that look and feel similar and come from a relatively similar time period of YouTube. The videos were specifically chosen for the task to ensure they would be suitable, as random sampling would result in the selection of videos that were not suitable for the task.

All videos have a rating that is the equivalent of an Australian PG or less (i.e., Parental Guidance, meaning content and themes are mild), and were selected in such a way as to minimise the likelihood that participants have watched the videos prior to the study. I purposefully chose to avoid including videos from popular YouTubers in order to allow participants to observe the videos and the speakers ideally for the first time. While choosing less popular vlogs did not eliminate the possibility that participants had seen the videos or the speakers before, it did reduce the likelihood. In order to determine if participants had or had not engaged with the vloggers outside the research, the Stage 2 surveys included a question asking participants if they have seen each specific video before. Participants who ticked 'yes' to these questions had their responses addressed in the context of this prior knowledge, as distinct from the data produced by those watching for the first time.

The mimic vlogs chosen for this study have been selected from less well-known web series for precisely the same reason. As such, I chose not to include particularly popular

mimic vlogs such as *Carmilla* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* to reduce the likelihood that participants will have seen these videos. Additionally, choosing the specific videos from these series poses another challenge because the vast majority of mimic vlogs are adaptations of existing literature. This means some videos contain identifiable names or locations such as the lead romantic character being called William Darcy in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and the references to Hogwarts in *Always Lily* (2017). I have omitted the majority of videos that contain these fairly obvious clues from the possible pool of selection. Videos in the corpus of mimic vlogs are from the web series *Nothing Much to Do* (2014), *Merry Maidens* (2017), *Mina Murray's Journal* (2016), and *The Better Strangers* (2016-2017). These videos were selected on the basis that they are concretely fictional as they are adaptations of existing literary fiction and include indicators in their paratexts that they are adaptations. For example, *Jack's Vlog 2* from *Mina Murray's Journal* includes production credits in the description box.

Given the pool of mimic vlogs is significantly smaller than the number of standard vlogs available on YouTube, I selected the mimic vlogs first and elected to match the standard vlogs to the mimic vlogs to ensure "homogeneity", as per Bauer and Aarts' (2000) selection criteria. The standard vlogs selected for the corpus are from a similar era of YouTube to the mimic vlogs and were released across 2015 to 2018. As such, the standard vlogs have similar aesthetics and themes to the videos that make up the mimic vlogs in the study. This approach helped alleviate any noticeable, unintentional discrepancies in regard to the quality of the videos uploaded due to early file size limitations and other technical constraints. It also meant that a number of the mimic vlogs have a 'matching' standard vlog, in that they share a similar tone and concept for the video. Eight videos in total were selected to form the corpus, comprising of four standard vlogs, and four mimic vlogs. In

order to count as a 'standard vlog' the videos had to feature vloggers who were performing as themselves. I researched the creators to determine if they were consistent in their presentation across other videos and other online presences. While there is some possibility that these standard vloggers could be acting out a very detailed mimic vlog series, I am confident that these vloggers are standard creators. In the event that these videos are indeed fiction, then the interrogation of the videos in this research still stands, however it will have a slightly different context. The research is intended to investigate how audiences make sense of these videos rather than concretely 'prove' if participants can identify them. In the event that I, as the researcher, incorrectly identified a video, then it only goes to add another facet to the interesting relationship between mimicry and 'reality' at play in the videos.

The order of the videos was randomly chosen during the corpus selection, and the same order was used for all participants. The order was randomised by pulling the names of each of the videos out of a hat. This randomisation minimised any impact my own awareness of the videos may have had on the order of the videos such as purposefully placing similar videos close together or far apart from each other in the viewing order. A random order meant that any similarities or differences in either the video style or format (mimic vlog versus standard vlog) was purely incidental. The final order was one standard vlog, followed by the four mimic vlogs, then the three remaining standard vlogs, meaning the participants watched eight videos in total, each of which was four minutes or less in length.

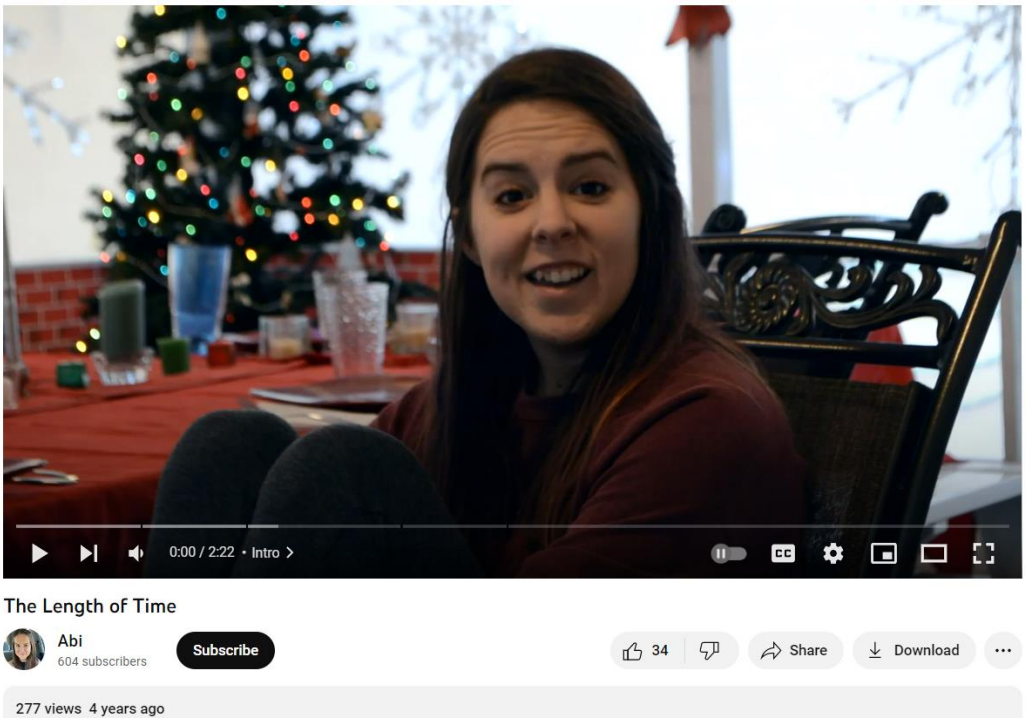
It is of note that the speakers in each of the selected videos are white. As outlined in Section 3.4.1, while mimic vlogs are typically seen as representing marginalised groups,

racial diversity is still relatively limited in these videos (particularly amongst protagonists). In selecting videos with white speakers, I have selected videos which reflect this shortcoming of the genre. Further, in some ways, this is also reducing the number of variables which could influence participant responses to concepts such as authenticity.

4.4.1 Videos

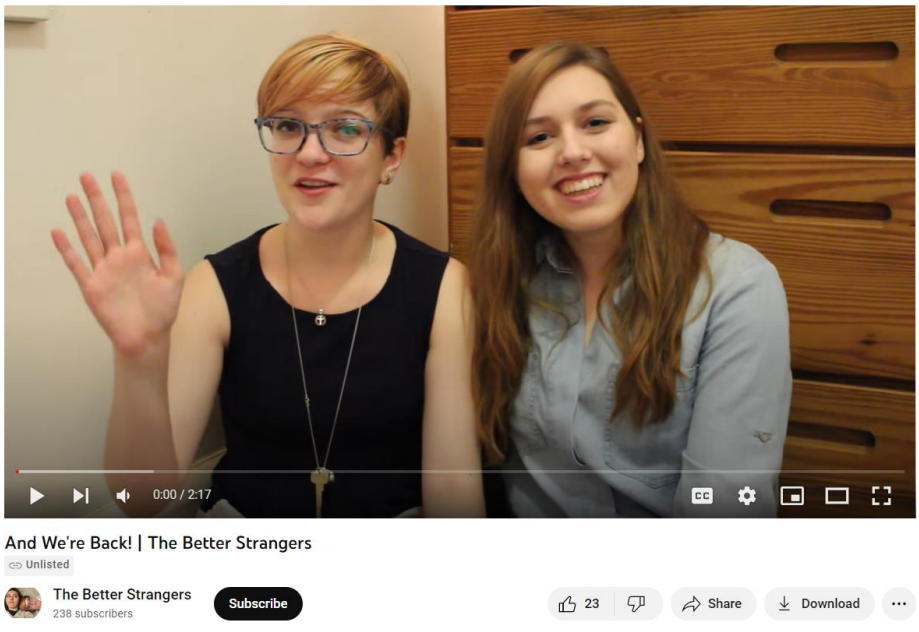
I will now briefly outline each of the eight videos included in the corpus of videos selected for the research. Each video is listed with its title as well as a link to the video and a screenshot of the video to help provide an overview of the videos and the speakers. Inevitably, these descriptions will include some of my interpretation and analysis; by including the explanations, key aspects of the videos are unpacked to help contextualise each of the participants' responses, findings, and analysis. The short titles of the video will be used to refer to the videos in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 for clarity throughout.

Video One: The Length of Time – Vlog
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yCf24IrfObQ



The first video in the corpus is a standard vlog. This video features a singular speaker, Abi, talking about what she perceives to be the transient nature of time, wherein it can feel like time moves slowly sometimes, and quickly at other times. The video was released around Christmas in 2018 and features a tree lit with string lights in the background as well as overt mentions of Christmas in the video. It feels quite philosophical in its approach to the subject, and has a nostalgic feeling because of these references to a specific time of year. Abi is relatively softly spoken and the video sticks to the one topic quite strongly. The through line is the metaphor about time feeling like a slinky, where sometimes the gaps between rings are compressed and other times the gaps feel far apart. Abi is very reflective within this vlog and discusses a few specific memories. A notable line is “and anyway… this is my submission for I’m fourteen and this is deep? I guess?” which is quite tongue in cheek given Abi is not 14 and nods to the quasi-depth achieved in the philosophy of the video. The video is nearly two and a half minutes in length and had under 300 views at the time of data collection.

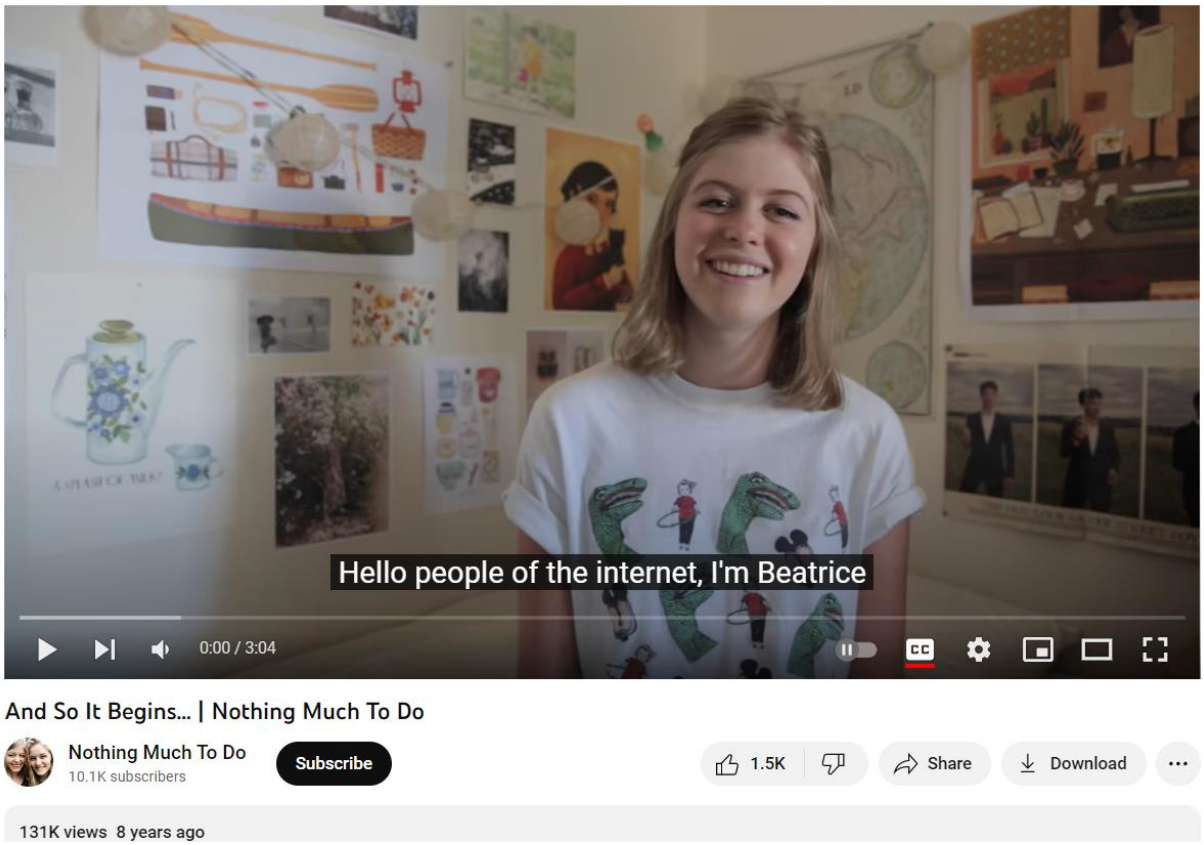
Video Two: And We’re Back! | The Better Strangers – Mimic Vlog
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q88tyNFijlw



Video 2 is a mimic vlog from 2016 and is the only video that features two speakers, and this is potentially to its detriment as it highlights the scripting at play. Where mimic vlogs with a singular speaker can edit around some awkward phrasing, the back and forth of the dialogue combined with the acting make it quite obvious that this video is scripted. There are moments that feel more natural, particularly in some of the areas where the actors loosen up or improvise, but equally a number of lines are delivered awkwardly. The video does, however, do a good job of making it seem very established on the channel by talking about 'being back' and alluding to what has happened prior to this video. The video is part of a series that eventually goes on to be an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, though this is not immediately obvious in this particular video. In fact, when originally deciding on the videos to include in the corpus I selected this video because I thought it was an original mimic vlog rather than an adaptation.

In terms of content, the video focuses on two main points. Firstly, that Jill and Rose have 'returned' to making videos and apologised for their absence. And secondly, that they have been successful in securing off-campus housing at university. Rose's girlfriend, Phoebe, lives in one of the dorms, Misfit Hall. The inclusion of queer relationships is in keeping with the format's representation of the queer community as discussed in Section 3.4.1 in relation to *Carmilla.*

Video Three: And So It Begins… | Nothing Much To Do – Mimic Vlog
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rn57zw4--D0



Video Three is the first in a series that adapts Shakespeare's play *Much Ado About Nothing* and as such is a mimic vlog. This first episode, released in 2014, establishes a number of the characters within the series, in particular, Beatrice. This series was developed in New Zealand, and as such features some specific references to New Zealand and the particular location Beatrice is from. The video had over 100 thousand views at the time of data collection, which was the highest view count of all the videos in the corpus.

The acting in this video is quite strong as the actress accurately replicates the style and mannerisms of a number of popular vloggers and the video feels very 'at home' on YouTube. That said, given it is supposed to be the first vlog Beatrice has ever made, this well-executed editing is almost *too* good for her supposed skills. She utilises the style of cutting whereby the video of the most recent clip continues while the audio for the next clip

has started known as a J cut (Glazebrook 2010, p. 120), to reduce the amount of dead air, and this is certainly a convention of vlogs alongside jump cuts (McMullan 2021).

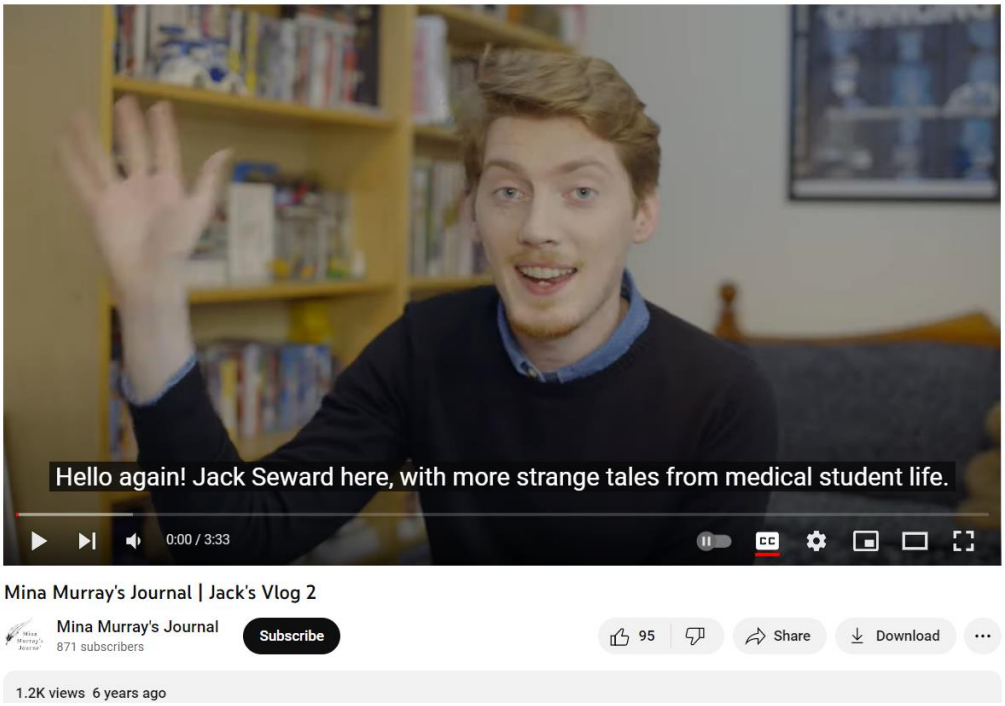
In terms of the content, this video is very much establishing who Beatrice is, as well as what is happening in the diegetic world that acts as the catalyst for the vlogs. Beatrice's parents are going to Italy so she is on her own with her cousin, Hero, in New Zealand. While this appears as a questionable choice given she is supposed to be a teenager, for the purposes of the plot, it works.

Video Four: Steady State | MERRY MAIDENS EP. 3 – Mimic Vlog
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B0sRUjDtNzk&list=PLEqPkbevFLeofgnFkHscqToet6Gu4GCdP

This adaptation of *Robin Hood* features a singular young woman, Marian, discussing how she is going to a party. The video is a mimic vlog from 2017 and utilises a monologue format. The video comes across more rehearsed than some of the other mimic vlogs in this corpus. Some of the other videos allow for a bit more improvisation, but this video does not have as much of that. The tone of the video is self-reflective and in doing so Marian paints a

particular version of herself that comes across self-critical; for example, she makes reference to how she keeps getting 'dumped'. Outside of its place as part of a web series, this kind of video might seem a bit self-indulgent in terms of its topic. Like Video 1 'The Length of Time', there is an extended metaphor being explored in the video. Marian talks through the mathematical theory of dynamics and theories of change. She then tries to apply this to herself which acts as a story-progression idea; she wants to change, so going to the party is part of making that change happen. The *Merry Maidens* series features vlogs from more than one character's point of view, and not all of the videos are shot in the same monologue to camera style. The start of the next video in the series played at the end of 'Steady State' because it was playing from a link to the video within the playlist for the web series rather than the individual video, so participants got an extra piece of information from this particular video as episode four of the series played very briefly. This was consistent for all eight of the participants.

Video Five: Mina Murray's Journal | Jack's Vlog 2 – Mimic Vlog
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zOm8gIVJtTY



Video 5 is one of the longest of the videos of the eight in the corpus at three minutes and 33 seconds and it is the final of the four mimic vlogs included. There are a few moments where the video feels like it is about to end but does not and the speaker, Jack, adds on an addendum elongating the video further. The combination of Jack's subdued personality and the kind of awkward ending to the video makes this video feel particularly long when compared to the rest of the corpus.

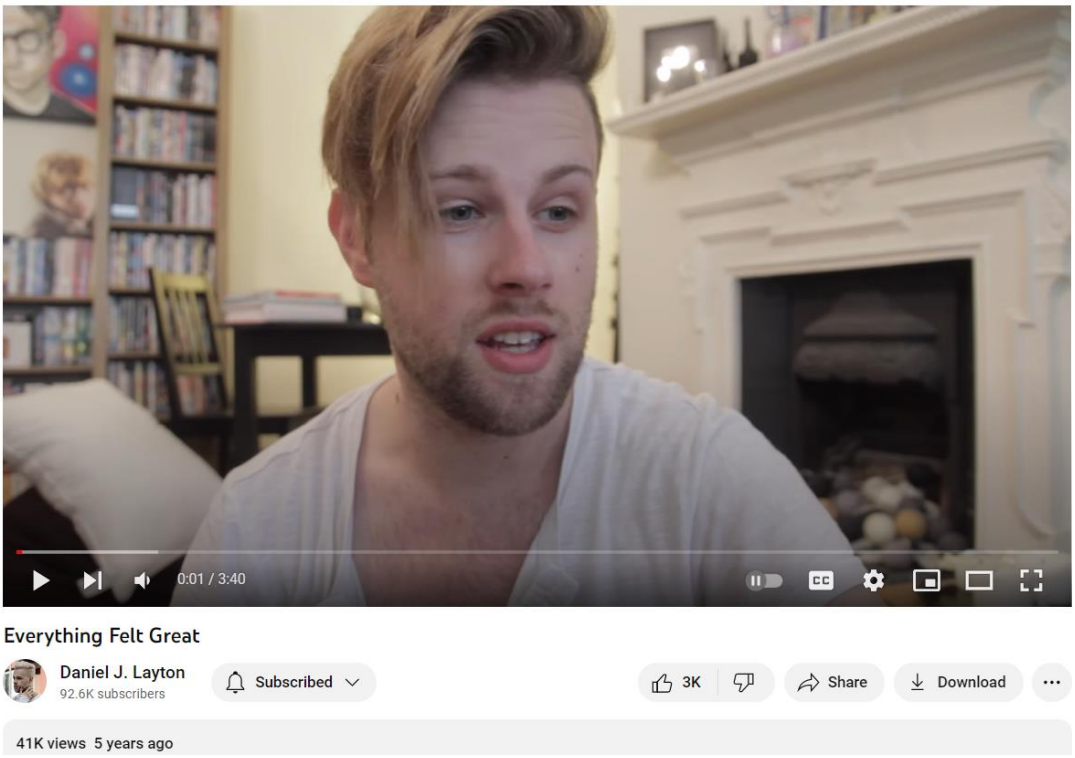
'Jack's Vlog' is part of a series called *Mina Murray's Journal* which is an adaption of Bram Stoker's *Dracula.* This video was released in 2016. Jack is a medical student and in this video, he begins by outlining some of the things he has been doing at school. Jack has a very dry delivery to camera and comes across quite awkwardly. An example of this is when, after the title card is shown, the video restarts with "so… we dissected some corpses" and the ensuing discussion. His speech is quite slow and stilted, and he frequently questions or rephrases what he has said.

The main premise of this video provides an update of some of the other characters in the series, Mina and John, in particular the latter who has apparently been sleepwalking. Jack then goes on to talk about one of his medical cases, one he has spoken about in a previous video. Jack mentions that this case has been eating bugs, is at the hospital voluntarily, and reveals the patient's name is Renfield. There is also a link to Renfield's website mentioned and linked in the description box; this site is part of the transmedia element of this particular series. The insects (and Renfield's consumption of them) is mentioned quite a few times throughout.

Video Six: how does interior design work?? – Vlog
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5Loa7zXm9g

Following on from 'Jack's Vlog', the 2018 'how does interior design work??' is significantly more upbeat. Janice speaks quickly and loudly which directly contrasts Jack's style. It is also over a minute shorter in length. The video begins without much of a premise; it appears to come about just through Janice talking. She begins by confessing that she does not particularly like the style of her apartment because she tried to copy an aesthetic and has cobbled it together in such a way that does not really work. Janice then explains a trick she uses to find interior design ideas for smaller spaces, specifically going to AirBnB and searching for single bedroom spaces in Asia. Notably, she does not show any pictures of the inspiration, or of her own space (other than what is visible in the frame), she is just talking to the camera about how she is trying to design her space. Janice does not mention any other people in this video and the video keeps quite a tight focus on the premise of interior design throughout. The video finishes quickly but is then followed by approximately 20 seconds of 'end screen' with links to two other videos and her channel.

Video Seven: Everything Felt Great – Vlog
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kb0lqqLK-aE

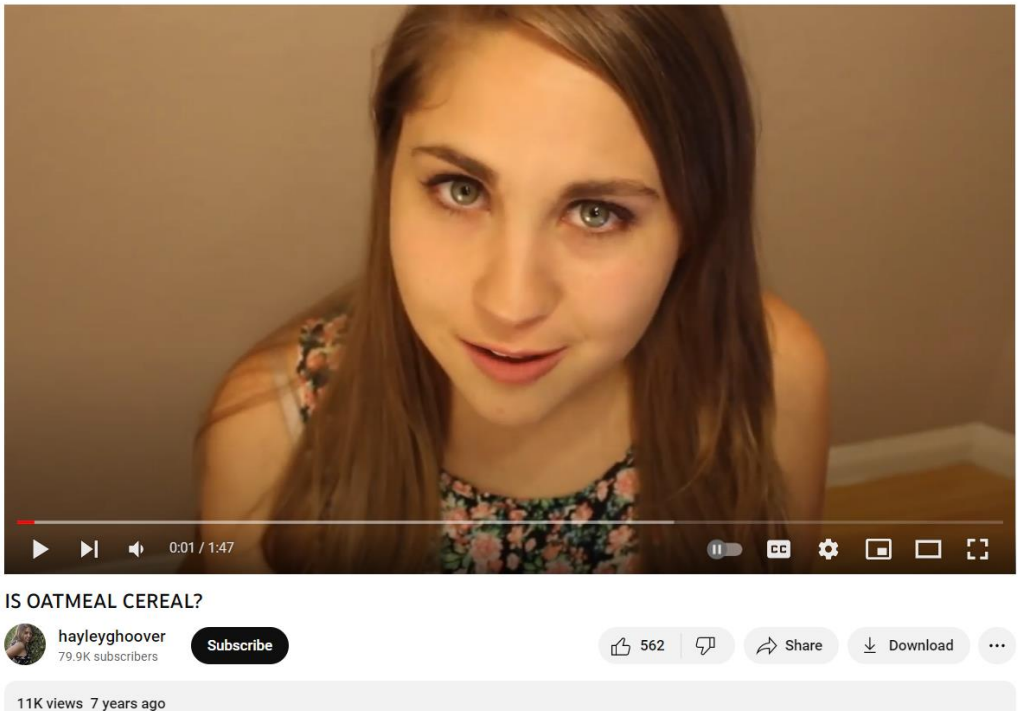


In this 2017 standard vlog, a British vlogger, Daniel, bounces through a number of topics including the British weather, his health, and attending the MCM conference (London Comic Con). This last topic is something of note because the specificity of naming the conference helps ground the other details of the video. The way Daniel moves through topics comes across very naturally. He shifts through them quite quickly, but also spends much of the vlog discussing the impact of exercise on improving his general health.

Similar to Video 2 'And We're Back!', Daniel begins by starting with a reference to how long it has been since he last filmed a video. In comparison to a number of the other videos (in particular, compared to Video 8 'IS OATMEAL CEREAL?') Daniel looks around off-camera a lot. Certainly, he focuses his attention back on it often, but he frequently looks to the side and gesticulates broadly. As with Video 3 'And So It Begins…' (which is, in contrast, a mimic vlog), Daniel's editing also includes a lot of audio that overlaps across cuts (J-Cuts).

This video has the largest view count of the standard vlogs in the corpus at 41 thousand at the time of viewing, and second largest overall. It is also the longest of all of the videos with a run time of three minutes and 40 seconds.

Video Eight: IS OATMEAL CEREAL? – Vlog
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_rwKIOQFy3Y



This final standard vlog moves extremely quickly. Released in 2015, it features a very classic 'MySpace' style shooting angle[7], shot from above with quite tight framing. Hayley also makes fairly intense eye contact with the camera at points throughout this video which, combined with the framing, makes this video seem quite intimate. This video is short at a total of one minute and 40 seconds and is the final video of the corpus.

[7] Colloquially referred to as the 'MySpace Angle', this particularly framing was popular on the MySpace and other social network sites. MySpace Angles are generally described as "self–portraits taken with the photographer/subject's arm outstretched above eye level, this style of portraiture, allegedly, makes the user appear especially attractive due to perspective and scope obtained from holding the camera above one's head. MySpace Angles are further characterized by the poses struck, the facial expressions formed and the hand gestures made" (Sessions 2009, n.p.).

The premise of this video is to pose the question of "IS OATMEAL CEREAL?", a question which is prompted by Hayley reflecting on an episode of *The Office* where the characters debate whether "Hillary Swank is just attractive or if she counts as just hot", as Hayley puts it. She then posits to the audience a similar question that came up in her own workplace. Hayley then goes on to present the results of a Twitter poll she created asking her followers the same question and shows a tally of responses for "cereal" and "not cereal" (the results are 31 – Cereal and 35 – Not Cereal). The video features a call to action whereby Hayley encourages viewers to comment below whether oatmeal is a cereal or not, before the video ends with a short clip of her previous video about a bag she recently purchased.

4.5 Participants

The limited number of participants in this research is by design. Hennink and Leavy state "Qualitative research typically includes a small number of study participants to achieve depth of information and variation of perspectives" (2014, p. 43), and as this research incorporates sessions with eight participants, this research does not seek to create representative data that can be applied more broadly (Bertrand & Hughes 2005, p. 65). Instead, it hopes to understand the perceptions and feelings of these regular viewers who fit the demographic of YouTube's most frequent users. In addition to qualitative research typically employing smaller numbers of participants, the prevalence of COVID-19 in South Australia at the time of participant recruitment also had an impact on the number of participants. The eight participants provided a range of perspectives, and the methodology ensured that a sufficient depth of data was provided to address the research questions. Including fewer participants would likely be not enough to identify key issues,

while a larger group could have made the datasets difficult to manage or could be superfluous upon reaching saturation.

While recruiting participants, I actively sought audience members who fell in the age bracket of 18-34 years old, as this is the most common age range for YouTube users according to their press website (YouTube 2020b). Participants had to self-identify as frequent YouTube viewers who watched at least once per week and were all required to fluently speak English given the videos in the exercise were all purposively sampled and in English. Each of the participants was located in Adelaide, South Australia, and were recruited by expressions of interest in response to posters and advertising both locally and online. The recruitment material was shared via physical flyers on campus at the University of Adelaide, as well as online through my own social media accounts (including Twitter and Facebook), the University of Adelaide mailing lists, and student groups such as the Mature Students Association and undergraduate media programs (as I was targeting frequent YouTube viewers).

Notably, the recruitment material did not ask for participants who were experts in vlogs. Instead, the participants only needed to be frequent users of YouTube. I chose to interview participants who represented a frequent user rather than ones who were distinctly aware of vlogs and mimic vlogs, as I feel this gives a more rounded understanding of how these videos are perceived by 'typical' audiences. These are users who are familiar with and understand how YouTube as a platform functions, but might not routinely interact with vlogs. As such, they represent a core group of users who may stumble across mimic vlogs on the site.

Included below is a short bio for each of the participants outlining some demographic factors as well as an overview of their viewing habits. These factors were captured in the survey in Stage 1 of the study, which asked for demographic information and viewing habits before the participants watched the videos. Each participant has been given a pseudonym that is used throughout the entirety of the thesis. The use of pseudonyms is in keeping with the ethics approval provided for the project, and also ensures that participants felt comfortable to provide their opinion on specific videos and viewing practices more broadly. The participants are as follows:

Michael is 28 years old and watches YouTube at least once per day in approximately 20 minute chunks. He tends to watch long form videos that are educational and informative in nature. As such, Michael typically watches YouTube at home and gives the videos his direct attention. In his response to how he feels about YouTube generally, Michael stated he believes the platform started out well but, as it is maturing, it has become more problematic.

Lauren is 26 years old and watches YouTube more than twice a week but watches for approximately two to three hours when she does. She says that YouTube is good for relaxing because it is generally a low mental effort. She watches on her laptop at home, and occasionally multitasks while she watches. She typically consumes vlogs and non-scripted content, as well as travel videos, video essays, reaction videos, and interviews. Lauren listed a few creators she watches, including Dylan is in Trouble, Watcher, and Michelle Choi. Lauren is one of two participants who listed vlogs as content she typically consumes.

Connor is 21 years old and watches YouTube daily. He multitasks while he watches, stating that he is usually watching YouTube on his phone while eating or while playing

games. Connor watches political content, as well as music videos, memes, reaction videos, and tutorials. He says that YouTube is a pretty good platform, but thinks its algorithm pushes people to extremes on the political spectrum. He also thinks it is a great place for learning.

Allie watches YouTube in multiple sittings over the day, totalling around two hours comprised of approximately 20 minute chunks. Allie is 24 and watches on her phone, at home, and on her breaks at work and does not normally multitask. Allie enjoys YouTube generally and thinks it is a great way to de-stress and she sometimes watches it in place of TV. She watches comedy and skit content (featuring creators such as Smosh and Gus Johnson) as well as animal videos that come up on YouTube's trending page.

Jason is 21 and has YouTube on in the background throughout the day. He watches in more than one sitting and says each viewing session is over two hours long. He highly enjoys the platform and the variety of content that YouTube offers. Jason consumes Australian comedy, martial arts and competitive fights, animation, news, podcasts, and television content. He does this while watching on a laptop or phone, normally while doing something else such as reading, playing video games, or working out.

Michelle is also 21 and watches YouTube more than twice a week, in approximately 40 minute long sittings. Michelle is the second of two participants who actively listed vlog content as something she typically watches, and she listed it alongside other videos such as content about thrift shopping, art, cooking, gardening, and interior design. Michelle says she enjoys the length of YouTube videos and likes how they can be like a short film and can also be very artistic. She typically watches on her laptop while eating or while scrolling on her phone.

William is 24 years old and typically watches YouTube through his PC, in multiple sittings throughout the day which he lists as totalling approximately nine hours per day. His general feelings about YouTube are "mixed to good" and he listed FriendlyJordies, Internet Comment Etiquette, and Geno Samuel as creators he usually watches. William started answering some of the questions in the surveys while the videos were still playing.

Jenny is the final participant and is 22 years old. She watches YouTube multiple times a day, averaging about two to four hours. Jenny mostly watches on her laptop with it playing in the background while she is working, getting ready in the morning, or going to bed. She also consumes YouTube content on her phone while eating breakfast. Jenny typically watching gamers such as JackSepticEye, Markiplier, OfflineTV, and GameGrumps. She has recently started watching Critical Role (a role-playing game series), and Unus Annus for the entirety of the channel's one year existence. We later added singer/songwriter YouTuber dodie to the list of creators once Jenny and I realised she recognised one of the featured vloggers, Daniel, from some of dodie's content. Jenny considers YouTube to be entertaining and eye-opening to the world, especially current events, and she says it is a good place to find alternative opinions she had not considered on topics. Jenny also filled out the answers to some of the survey questions while the videos were playing.

I have included a summary of the key demographic and psychographic features of each of the participants in the table below. Each of the participants volunteered to take part in the research after responding to a call for participants. Each participant fit within the requirements for selection (i.e., aged 18-34, fluent in English, and a frequent user of YouTube). There was an even gender split amongst participants and participants were aged between 20 and 28, which represented the target demographic for the study.

	Age	Gender	Viewing Frequency	Viewing Style
Michael	28	Male	Daily	At home, direct attention
Lauren	26	Female	Twice per week	Laptop at home, multitasks
Connor	21	Male	Daily	On his phone, multitasks
Allie	24	Female	Multiple Sittings	At home, at work, direct attention
Jason	21	Male	Multiple sittings	At home, in the background
Michelle	21	Female	Twice per week	On her laptop, multitasking
William	24	Male	Multiple sittings	At home, on his PC
Jenny	22	Female	Multiple sittings	On her laptop, in the background

Table 1 – Key demographics and psychographics of the participants

4.6 Data Collection

Given the results of Stage 1 of the study were included in the information describing the participants above, this section will begin with Stage 2 of the study. Stage 2 comprised of a viewing task with a survey response. Participants watched and responded to each of the eight videos in the corpus, one at a time, while answering questions aimed at exploring how participants viewed the speakers in the videos. A copy of the survey questions is included in the appendix (Appendix 10.2).

There are a number of factors to consider in designing this stage of the study. One of the key factors was how the videos were to be shown to participants. The viewing experience is important because the videos are native to YouTube which has particular types of paratextual information available that other platforms do not have. I decided to

show the videos in a browser on a computer screen in a way as similar to a regular viewing experience as possible. This choice ensures that participants had the capacity to engage with some of the paratextual elements of the videos (such as the video title or view count), which participants could use as markers of authenticity or fictionality. Alternative viewing experiences include showing the video as an MP4 file in a media player (rather than on YouTube) or viewing on a different screen (such as a television screen, mobile phone, or projector). These alternatives were not preferred because they alter the amount of paratextual content participants could engage with.

Paratexts influence perceptions about a text but are not a part of the text itself, rather they exist in an "undefined zone" between the text and the world outside the text (Birke & Christ 2013, p. 68; Genette 1997, p. 2). On YouTube, paratexts include the channel name, the channel's display picture, the description, comments from other users, and the suggested videos. To best recreate a typical viewing, I originally ensured these paratexts were included by loading the video on YouTube in a browser, and then played the video in full screen which diminishes the number of paratextual elements participants could see throughout the whole video. This choice to include the paratextual elements can influence the success of categorising the videos as participants can use them to help decide what format each video was, however, these paratextual elements are typically considered a part of the viewing experience and so including them before showing the video was important.

The video was left in full screen at the conclusion of the video while participants filled out their survey responses. The end screen on YouTube videos is a black screen with the name of the video in the top left of the screen and a number of recommended videos taking up the rest of the space. Leaving this open gave participants the opportunity to garner some

more information if they engaged with it. This overall viewing experience allowed the participants to take in some of the paratextual information if they were paying attention to it, but also were not directed to dwell on these details either. I decided this was the best compromise to navigate this viewing experience without adversely impacting on the experience by making it too obvious, or not obvious enough, what format each of the videos were. The exercise was undertaken on a communal computer that had its browsing history wiped before each participant's session so that the suggested videos that came up for the participants were not geared towards any particular viewer or style of video. In each session, these videos tended to update as the session went on to include links to other vlogs from either within some of the web series included in the corpus of videos, or from the standard vlog creators we watched. For example, a number of the videos from the web series that 'And So It Begins…' is from appeared in the suggested videos after participants had watched that video.

After viewing all eight of the videos and completing the relevant surveys, the participants began Stage 3, where I informed the participant that some of the videos were fictional videos called mimic vlogs. I briefly explained what this meant (including providing a short, written definition of the term and some other relevant terms) and then asked the participant to undertake a categorisation task. Participants received a sheet of paper showing a screenshot from each of the eight videos and below each screen grab participants needed to indicate if the video was a standard vlog or a mimic vlog and provide a short, written explanation as to why they categorised the video as such. Correctly identifying the videos meant that the participants' response to whether the video was a standard vlog or a mimic vlog matched the categorisations I have given the videos in Section 4.4.1. Participants also filled out a short survey asking them about how they found the overall categorisation

task and the broad methods they used. Questions here included: How difficult was the task?; What did you look for *inside* the video that signified fictional or 'real' content?; What did you look for *outside* the video that signified fictional or 'real' content?; and How accurate do you believe your categorisations are? The research instruments for Stage 3 are also included in the appendix (Appendix 10.3).

Following the categorisation task, participants had a short break for refreshments, and we then undertook Stage 4: a semi-structured interview. In the interview, the participant and I discussed their perceptions around YouTube, storytelling, mimic vlogs, and replica content more broadly. The interviews generally utilised the funnel structure (Hennink et al. 2020, p. 143), meaning it began with questions to situate the participant's perceptions, moved to specific questions regarding the task itself and replica content more specifically, and concluded with broader questions such as closing remarks and post-discussion questions. The topics of interest in the interview are largely related to the research aims and questions, which is to say interested in perceptions around replica content, YouTube and storytelling, as well as a response to the categorisation task.

The majority of the interviews followed a similar structure, although the order in which the questions could be asked was fluid by design given the semi-structured nature of the interview. By structuring the interviews in this way – with key questions to ask all participants, but with capacity to move between them at will and ask further questions if required – each of the interviews flowed in the way that best suited the participants. The interview schedule is also included in the appendix (Appendix 10.5). In each interview, I did not immediately clarify which of the eight videos were mimic vlogs and which videos were standard vlogs. In doing so, I was able to discuss with participants some of their reasoning

for categorising videos in particular ways prior to them knowing if they were correct or incorrect. I made this decision for two reasons. Firstly, it provided more data as we could discuss the participants' thoughts prior to and after finding out about which type of format each video was. Secondly, given a participant may react poorly upon discovering that they had incorrectly identified a number of videos, discussing before revealing the answers mitigates the impact of that response to failure. In addition to this, I also attempted to mitigate this response by emphasising throughout the sessions with participants that the individual responses were of far less importance than the reasoning that participants provided. The degree to which individual success has been discussed in the findings sections of this research is relatively minor in the overall context of the study. Participants appear to have responded relatively well despite not doing as well as they would have hoped at categorising the videos.

Upon completing each of the sessions, I collated the data from Stage 1, 2, and 3 into spreadsheets in order to compare both the qualitative and quantitative data provided in these stages. I entered each participant's responses into a spreadsheet that I then organised by question. This approach allowed me to compare responses between participants in the one data set. Quantitative data, such as the ratings participants gave to each of the speakers based on factors like 'authenticity' were collated and compared. The qualitative data provided in the first three stages, such as reasons why a video was categorised as a mimic vlog rather than a vlog, were also collated and coded based on factors such as what method the participant used to identify the videos, as well as key concepts mentioned by participants. Given the number of participants was relatively small, each of the responses was been dealt with on an individual basis rather than collating in such a way that would appear to be representative of all viewers.

Following the collation and coding of Stage 1, 2, and 3, I transcribed the interviews from Stage 4, then coded and annotated each of the individual responses. The coding of the transcriptions was to understand the overall responses of each participant and identify main areas of interest throughout all of the participants' responses. The early read throughs, coding, and annotations of the responses allowed me to develop a deep familiarity and understanding of each of the respondents' answers, particularly in combination with their responses provided in the survey and categorisation tasks.

After completing my initial read throughs and coding of the responses, I undertook qualitative thematic analysis of the responses on a question-by-question basis. This was achievable considering all of the participants answered the same core schedule of questions and the number of participants was manageable enough to take this approach. In approaching the coding of the interviews, I employed a method outlined by Smith et al. (2009), which suggests reading and rereading, initial noting, developing emergent themes, and searching for connections across these themes. As such, I collated the responses to each of the questions to find commonalities and comparisons between the approaches the participants had. By close-reading each of the individual responses to get a feeling of the individual and also collating responses on a question by question level, I was able to compile themes from each question with an understanding of how each answer in that collation came to be.

In presenting the data in this thesis, I have opted to polish spoken sentences from the interviews and some written responses provided in the survey responses for legibility in the overall piece. I have maintained the overall flow of the responses but have removed some linguistic faults such as filler words (e.g. 'like' or 'uh'). Where these fillers words have been

used as a marker of a participant thinking through an answer before giving it, I have left these in as I believe they help to express the participants' thinking patterns. In survey responses, often participants were writing a lot in a small amount of space on a piece of paper, so I have occasionally added linking words in to make the response make sense and read well. While polishing participant responses is a stylistic choice, I feel it is worth highlighting for clarity.

Other methods I considered for the study included textual or content analysis of mimic vlogs themselves as well as of the audience responses across platforms. This approach would have allowed for specific analysis of what is included in the texts (Berger 2016), however textual analysis of the audience responses such as comments does not allow for exploration of perceptions as identified by the audience themselves. Instead, it would have required me to impose my own reading of these responses which may not have reflected the intention of the audience member. Textual analysis of the mimic vlogs alone also fails to incorporate audience response beyond my own, which alters one of the unique factors of this research in comparison to existing research: discussion with audience members unfamiliar with the texts. Despite textual analysis not being a formal method in this research, there has been a level of textual analysis of the videos included in order to discuss them in depth with the participants and throughout the thesis. However, this analysis makes up only a portion of the overall work and using this method in conjunction with the other chosen methods makes for a more well-rounded study than textual analysis alone.

Another alternative method I chose not to employ was focus groups. Despite focus groups being a relatively popular approach to audiences studies (Kitzinger 2004), I chose to

interview participants individually rather than collectively. This was to ensure participants had the capacity to work through their own understandings of the videos in adequate depth, and with enough opportunity to explain their reasoning. By undertaking individual interviews rather than a focus group discussion with all of the participants, I was able to more fully engage with each participants' individual thoughts regarding each of the videos. Equally, no individual participant was able to dominate the discussion, or lead the answers of the group as a whole. It was essential to spend time investigating the individual approaches of each participant in order to meet the research aims regarding the methods participants used to categorise the videos, and the investigation into perceptions around other kinds of replica content like deepfakes. Exploring these topics in a simple survey would not allow for the same level of depth and nuance as can be achieved in the short survey responses alone. Additionally, undertaking this exploration in a group setting may have prevented some participants from giving answers that differed to the others in the group.

Utilising the surveys and categorisations in Stages 2 and 3 or solely the interview Stage 4 would diminish the context in which participants make their claims. The survey questions and categorisation tasks inform the answers that the participants give when reflecting on the types of videos they engaged with, and the interview allows the participants to expand on and contextualise their answers. Employing either of these methods on their own would limit the scope of the resulting discussions.

At this point, I have outlined my approach to the research, as well as explained the methods through which I have procured my data. The following chapters will work through

the results of this research while also contextualising the findings and discussing the links between the existing research in the field and the findings in this research.

5 CATEGORISING THE VIDEOS

This chapter unpacks the results of Stages 2 and 3 of the study. Specifically, it incorporates the information procured from the video questionnaires in Stage 2, where participants responded to each video after they watched it, one at a time. This chapter also includes the results of the categorisation task in Stage 3, where participants categorised the videos as either standard vlogs or mimic vlogs, and explained their choices. Additionally, it incorporates the participants' reflective thoughts about the videos and tasks as a whole to understand how difficult the participants found the task as well as some of the more holistic thoughts they had. The results include discussion of a number of factors that influenced the ways that participants responded to the videos. This is a key part in answering Research Questions 2 and 3; "How do audience members identify and categorise types of storytelling content on YouTube?" and "What influences success in identifying and categorising different types of YouTube content?" These questions were designed to help identify the key markers of fictionality as determined by the participants themselves in their answers, and to understand what factors influence how participants feel they performed.

5.1 Results

The results of Stages 2 and 3 comprise of the participant responses to both the individual videos and of the categorisation task the participants undertook. Given the formats of the videos inform all other aspects of the research, this section begins with the results of the categorisation task.

The ability to successfully categorise each of the videos correctly differed between the participants. One participant, Lauren, correctly identified all eight of the videos. Allie correctly identified seven, William identified six, and Michael, Connor, and Michelle each identified half of the videos. Jason and Jenny each correctly identified three of the eight videos. Participants additionally rated the difficulty of the categorisation task and how accurate they thought their choices were, with 1 being extremely easy/accurate and 7 being extremely difficult/inaccurate. Table 2 below outlines the number of videos each participant correctly identified, as well as the difficulty and perceived accuracy ratings each participant gave.

	Michael	**Lauren**	**Connor**	**Allie**	**Jason**	**Michelle**	**William**	**Jenny**
Number Correctly Identified	4	8	4	7	3	4	6	3
Difficulty of Categorising	3	4	3	6	7	6	5	5
Confidence in Choices	5	3	4	4	3	3	2	3

Table 2 – Participant ratings of difficulty and confidence

It is, of course, important to note at this point that the small number of participants means that this data does not speak to a wider phenomenon, but does help us to understand the ways in which these specific participants responded to the videos within the corpus. There does not appear to be a correlation between the perceived difficulty of the task and success rates in identifying content – participants who found it very difficult did not tend to do significantly worse – although the exception here is Jason who rated the task extremely difficult and was one of the least successful participants.

In response to how difficult the participants found the task, half of the participants specifically noted that it was difficult to tell the difference between the two formats, in part

because it was difficult to determine if a video was a well-crafted mimic vlog or a poorly crafted standard vlog. Connor also drew attention to the difficulty of categorising videos after only one watch through, stating that "People are complicated and talking about someone you just met is hard". Some participants also noted that some of the videos felt 'obvious', and they were confident in their categorisations of those videos as mimic vlogs, but others were more difficult to identify.

Participants rated each video on a Likert scale of 1 to 7 both on how authentic they thought the speaker was (with 1 being very authentic and 7 being very inauthentic) and how likely they were to watch more of each vlogger's videos (with 1 being very likely and 7 being very unlikely). The table below shows the authenticity rating each participant gave each video. I have grouped the videos based on types (i.e., standard vlogs and mimic vlogs) rather than viewing order for ease of comparison.

		Michael	**Lauren**	**Connor**	**Allie**	**Jason**	**Michelle**	**William**	**Jenny**
Standard Vlogs	**Video 1** 'The Length of Time'	3	3	2	1	6	2	2	2
	Video 6 'how does interior design work??'	2	2	3	1	3	3	5	1
	Video 7 'Everything Felt Great'	3	3	5	1	4	2	2	1
	Video 8 'IS OATMEAL CEREAL?'	6	4	1	3	2	3	5	3

Mimic Vlogs	**Video 2** 'And we're back!'	7	7	3	4	7	6	2	5
	Video 3 'And So It Begins…'	2	5	3	3	3	3	4	1
	Video 4 'Steady State'	6	7	2	6	5	4	4	2
	Video 5 'Jack's Vlog 2'	4	4	4	5	2	4	6	1

Table 3 – Participants' rating of speaker authenticity

Table 3 shows that participants tended to give lower scores (i.e., thought the speaker was more authentic) to the standard vlogs. Mimic vlogs, on the other hand, tended to get a more inauthentic score. It is interesting that these eight participants typically rated the user-generated vlogs as more authentic than the mimic vlogs. Importantly, these ratings were given *before* the participants knew that there were both standard vlogs and fictional vlogs in the corpus.

The following table (Table 4) is the same authenticity data, but colour coded based on whether the participant correctly or incorrectly categorised the video. Videos that participants correctly identified are in green squares and the videos incorrectly identified are in white squares. The videos are once again grouped based on video type rather than viewing order.

		Michael	Lauren	Connor	Allie	Jason	Michelle	William	Jenny
Standard Vlogs	**Video 1** 'The Length of Time'	3	3	2	1	6	2	2	2
	Video 6 'how does interior design work??'	2	2	3	1	3	3	5	1
	Video 7 'Everything Felt Great'	3	3	5	1	4	2	2	1
	Video 8 'IS OATMEAL CEREAL?"'	6	4	1	3	2	3	5	3
Mimic Vlogs	**Video 2** 'And we're back!'	7	7	3	4	7	6	2	5
	Video 3 'And So It Begins…'	2	5	3	3	3	3	4	1
	Video 4 'Steady State'	6	7	2	6	5	4	4	2
	Video 5 'Jack's Vlog 2'	4	4	4	5	2	4	6	1

Table 4 – Participants' rating of speaker authenticity, colour coded based on correct categorisation of the video

The formats were fairly even in how often they were correctly identified. For each of the two formats there were 32 opportunities for the videos to be correctly identified as each of the eight participants watched four of each type of video. Participants correctly identified 20 of 32 standard vlogs and 19 of the 32 mimic vlogs. As a result, we can see that while the

participants were more likely to rate the user-generated vlogs as more authentic than their mimic vlog counterparts, this has not resulted in a significant difference in the identification task. This result is of particular interest as it shows that participants are noticing something while watching the videos that lowered their subjective authenticity rating, but that this is not necessarily translating to an ability to correctly identify the videos.

There is not always a correlation between individuals rating a speaker as particularly inauthentic and rating it a mimic vlog or vice versa. For example, Jason and Michelle rated 'And We're Back!', as a 7 and a 6 respectively in regard to authenticity (i.e., particularly inauthentic) but categorised the video as a standard vlog. Connor and Jenny each rated 'And We're Back!' as a 2 (quite authentic) and correctly categorised the video as a mimic vlog. That said, participants typically rated the mimic vlogs as less authentic than the standard vlogs. Generally, participants who correctly identified the videos rated the standard vlogs as more authentic and the mimic vlogs more inauthentic. This was the case with the exception of 'And So It Begins' which was generally rated as more authentic even though it was a mimic vlog. When divided further, we can see the inverse typically occurs with the participants who incorrectly identified the videos, meaning that participants who thought mimic vlogs were standard vlogs regularly rated them as more authentic than participants who correctly thought they were mimic vlogs. Participants who incorrectly identified standard vlogs as mimic vlogs rated those as more inauthentic than their correct counterparts.

5.2 Key Factors Utilised in Categorising Videos

With regards to what factors the participants focused on as they watched and categorised the videos, the survey responses highlight key results including a focus on scripting, story content and plausibility, and editing. Firstly, individuals come to different conclusions about the level of scripting in the videos. In some cases, the participants agreed on the level of scripting in a particular video. For example, multiple participants noted the scripting in 'And We're Back!' (a mimic vlog) in their survey responses. All of these responses included some variation of saying the video was very scripted. Conversely, however, 'And So It Begins…' (a mimic vlog) had five participants mention the scripting, but some said it did not seem scripted, and others said that it did. The three participants who mentioned scripting in 'IS OATMEAL CEREAL?' (a standard vlog) gave three different evaluations, one suggesting the vlogger "was confident to talk without a script", one suggesting the video was "A little scripted, but still very comfortable to watch", and one saying the video "seemed fully scripted, but Hayley's personality came across as genuine". Scripting was also mentioned as part of the reflective task in Stage 3 where participants were asked what methods they used to categorise the videos, as well as what they looked for inside and outside the video that gave them key information. Four different participants mentioned scripting in the reflective task a total of five times.

The next key theme in these results is storytelling. Different participants mention recognition of 'storytelling' or 'stories' five times. Words associated with the premise of authenticity or lack thereof (such as genuine, natural, real, and authentic) feature heavily in the survey results. There appears to be a divide between the participants who used 'authentic' and its synonyms to qualify their survey answers and those who did not. Connor

and Jenny did not mention these words at all in the initial survey, Jason and William mentioned them only once each, and Jason only doing so to outline that he would need to see more of the vloggers' videos to be certain of how authentic the speaker was. This is of particular note because Jason and Jenny identified the fewest number of videos correctly, so there may be a connection between perceptions of authenticity and the ability to categorise the videos correctly, at least for these two participants.

Some participants remarked on the lack of believability of some aspects of the stories. For example, three of the participants specifically pointed to 'And So It Begins…' and Beatrice's discussion of her family as a factor that contributed to how they categorised the video. Michael in particular said "Crazy her parents left her alone… but why not! Guess she needs something to fill the time" before designating the video as a standard vlog. This example is an interesting case of participants considering stories and story beats as plausible. The plausibility factors of different videos are particularly interesting because there is no way to measure or determine this. Participants either think something is plausible or they do not. Here, even when Michael considered the story element "crazy", he still ultimately considered that is was plausible. Conversely, Allie stated the video "Felt genuine at the time, but looking back, there was too much detail given at points. The discussion of her family felt off" and categorised the video as a mimic vlog.

Participants were also required to navigate facts in 'Jack's Vlog 2', a mimic vlog which comes from the series *Mina Murray's Journal* (an adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*). The video obviously includes some references to the narrative of the original story, including character names, and a participant identified one of these during the survey stage. William

wrote: “Is he actually a doctor? He's lying with his lame[8] Dracula reference 100 years after he was relevant.” This remark is interesting for a few reasons. Firstly, it appears that William has noticed that there is some fiction at play here by suggesting that the speaker is lying, and William also identifies not only the literary reference but exactly the piece that this series is an adaptation of. William did indeed correctly identify this video in the categorisation task, but the reference is not listed as one of the reasons why he listed the video as a mimic vlog. Instead, William simply cited the character’s story as “lame” and hoped “this guy stops doing this”. While this recognition may have played a part in correctly identifying this work as a piece of fiction, William did not actively point to this as the reason.

Throughout the categorisation task, participants regularly used plausibility as a reason why a video was either a standard vlog or a mimic vlog. For example, regarding ‘Jack’s Vlog 2’, Lauren stated that the video was a mimic vlog because the “Stories seemed completely fake”. Conversely, she said that ‘how does interior design work??’ (a standard vlog) was a standard vlog because it “Seemed genuine, nothing too out there in what she talked about”. Here there is a strong reliance on the actual narrative of the video being a factor in determining its believability. Participants sometimes suggested that a video “cannot have been real” or “must have been real” because of a story beat. For example, Jason said ‘IS OATMEAL CEREAL?’ “seemed too bad to parody” and William said ‘The Length of Time’ was “Too mundane to be acting. Too drawn out to be unreal.” Participants utilised their understanding of what typically makes up a story or indeed a standard vlog to identify what types of content would actually be made by standard vloggers or production companies. Some participants felt a boring story must be a standard vlog because

[8] In order to maintain the original meaning of the participants’ responses, I have not edited out the use of ‘lame’ which I acknowledge is a term laden with complex connotations for people with disabilities.

something fictional would be more interesting. Conversely, some participants felt that something too far-fetched must be fictional, because they questioned the point of a 'regular' person making that up. However, this approach is flawed. A number of participants used this same approach while miscategorising videos. In comparison to William's response to 'The Length of Time', Connor said in his interview, "No one talks this way, seems like a curious topic" and incorrectly categorised the video as a mimic vlog. Here we can see two distinctly opposing views on the same video and its content leading to two different categorisations from participants.

Moving beyond story-based factors that influenced how participants categorised videos, the methods that participants self-reported in the reflective task were numerous, though notably one in particular recurred. Half of the participants identified that they used some variation of intuition to tell them which video was which. A few different terms were utilised to describe this intuition including "gut feeling", "overall 'feeling' of the video", "intuition", and "28 years of human interaction". Additionally, when they answered the questions regarding specific things inside and outside the video, all participants were able to list at least a few factors. That said, in highlighting intuition over these more specific factors, participants may be highlighting how viewers consume content. Intuition suggests that viewers respond to videos innately rather than purposefully. The concept of intuition and gut feeling is discussed further in Section 6.5.

Following the broader question around methods of categorisation, participants were asked specifically what they looked for 'inside' and 'outside' the videos that helped them decide how to categorise the videos. Inside the videos referred specifically to things within the frame of the video and could have been anything from the acting to the mise-en-scéne,

to the actors themselves (i.e., intratextual rather than extratextual or paratextual). Outside the video referred to things outside the frame, such as the channel name or the number of views the video had, or the recommended videos. Something of note is that the participants had two opportunities to provide explanations as to how they categorised the videos. The Stage 3 handouts (included in Appendix 10.3) included the opportunity for participants to explain choices for individual videos, and more holistically in response to the 'inside' and 'outside' questions. Most of the time, when participants gave a reason for their categorisation of a specific video, they did not point to aspects that they highlighted within their answers to more holistic questions. More often than not participants tended to comment about whether the video felt right, seemed scripted, or what the video was about rather than point to specific factors they noted they observed. Occasionally participants pointed to technical aspects like the editing or the camera angle, though this was in the minority of the answers.

Multiple participants pointed to the background and the staging of the video as an indicator of the type of video they were looking at. Michelle in particular stated "I think if the background looks disorganised I thought it was real". Editing was also pointed to, however participants in these responses did not provide much detail about what exactly it was about the editing that pointed them any particular direction. Scripting was also mentioned in response to this question, and aspects of the acting came up frequently as participants highlighted the communication style of the speakers as well as their mannerisms. Jenny also mentioned some more specific YouTube video conventions such as whether the video had an introduction, an end card, and a particular greeting as a factor utilised to classify types of content.

With regard to things outside the video itself (i.e., paratexts), participants' recognition of these factors varied. Two participants stated they did not notice much outside the video itself, with Michael stating that it "could have been easier to spot if I was in control of the video". This comment is the direct result of the choices made in the research design. By limiting the control of the mouse, participants could only direct their attention to a few places. However, with that said, some participants still listed other things outside of the video that contributed to how they made their categorisations. These included the number of likes and views the video had, the titles of the video, and the YouTube recommended videos, though the amount of time they had to absorb this information was limited to a few seconds before I clicked the video into full screen.

From the factors outlined above, we can see that perception is at the heart of most of the factors that participants used to identify content. While at first some of the factors seem like objective measures by which to judge truth, such as whether or not a video is scripted, in actuality these factors still require a level of discernment from the audience. The viewer must judge whether the video appears to be scripted or unscripted. This perception is not always accurate, and equally, it puts audience members in a similar position to that of a reality television viewer who knows that what they are watching is both reality and fiction at the same time. Cloud refers to this duality as reality television being simultaneously "real" and "not-real" (2010). As I outlined in Section 2.3.2, audiences typically understand a reality television program is not scripted in comparison to overtly scripted content like a traditional television drama. Equally, the audience also understands the programs feature storylines crafted by producers who make editing choices that help establish the beats of a show and drive the narrative forward (Feuer 2018). Crew (2006) also notes that viewers accept this level of interference from producers as it helps to keep the show entertaining. Vlogs are

similar to reality television because they are not scripted in the same sense as fictional content but both vlogs and reality television as formats are mediated versions of events. Some vlogs may be scripted to a degree, or nevertheless edited to portray the speaker and events in particular ways. Viewers of vlogs are not always as acutely aware of what is and is not scripted, and the discrepancy in the answers provided by different participants in response to the same videos is one illustration of this. The fact that some standard vlogs are scripted makes it difficult for viewers to discern whether a video is scripted because the creator of a standard vlog wanted to polish their product or if it is scripted because it is a fictional mimic vlog.

The inclusion of seemingly more objective measures of truth in the videos did not necessarily equate to participants identifying the videos correctly. Factors such as the titles of the videos and, in particular, the YouTube recommended videos were misleading for some participants. The fourth video shown to participants, a mimic vlog called 'Steady State' from *Merry Maidens,* featured "Ep. 3" in the title. No participants actively mentioned this in their responses to any of the questions, including those who highlighted the titles of the videos as something they noticed outside of the videos themselves. This finding echoes the results of de Lueena Lucas and Moreira's (2021) study wherein participants missed these objective markers of fictionality in the first episode of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries.* All four of the mimic vlogs in this study included the name of the series they were from in the title of the video, which again, no participants commented on. By contrast, all four of the user-generated vlogs had fairly innocuous titles that did not include the name of the vlogger or channel, but this discrepancy across the corpus could have been a point of comparison for participants had they noticed.

Four of the participants commented on the related videos that YouTube recommended included in either the suggested videos on the right-hand side of the screen or in the recommended videos end screen after the video finished. Michelle said that "Seeing recommended videos at the end suggested the videos were real". Connor also said, in response to 'how does interior design work??', that he "Saw her other videos and she was on a real project." With this in mind though, frequently other videos from the *Nothing Much to Do* series came up in the end screen, and each of these featured a number in the thumbnail which related to the episode number. Figures 11 and 12 below include examples of these recommendations. Participants mentioned the appearance of these videos in the recommendations as a factor that they noticed.

Jason, for example, saw that YouTube had recommended a number of the other videos from *Nothing Much to Do* which is the web series 'And So It Begins…' is a part of. However, he thought that "if she's faked that many times, she's doing it for real – you can't fake it that many times". Except 'Beatrice' (and her production team) did 'fake it' that many times. In fact, most of the mimic vlogs included in this corpus of videos were from web series that had a large number of videos produced in order to tell the story in its entirety. There is potentially some confusion on the part of the participants who may have thought mimic vlogs were specifically singular videos rather than part of a larger series. Jason also used the indicator of the view count as something that helped him decide what type of content he was looking at. He said the number of views that 'Jack's Vlog 2' had received struck him as odd, because he could not understand why that many people would watch a video he found so boring. The video has a little over 1200 views, which is not a significant amount for the platform, but still struck Jason as odd and he did correctly identify the video as a mimic vlog.

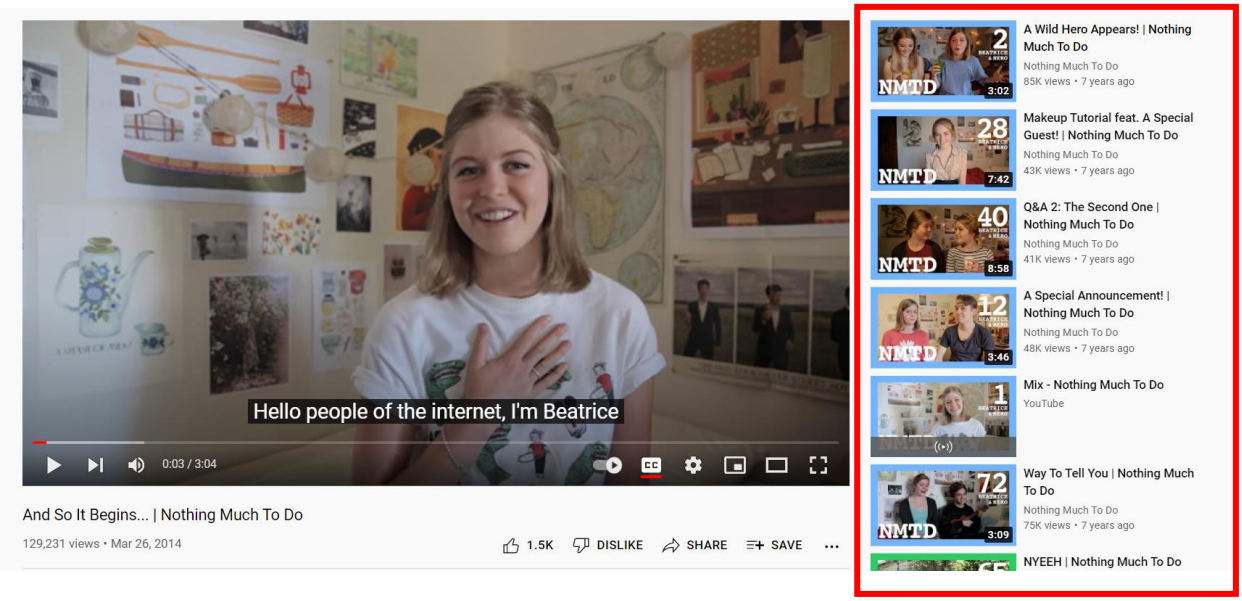


Figure 11 – *Nothing Much To Do* screenshot showing recommended videos on the right. Thumbnails all include 'NMTD' and the episode number

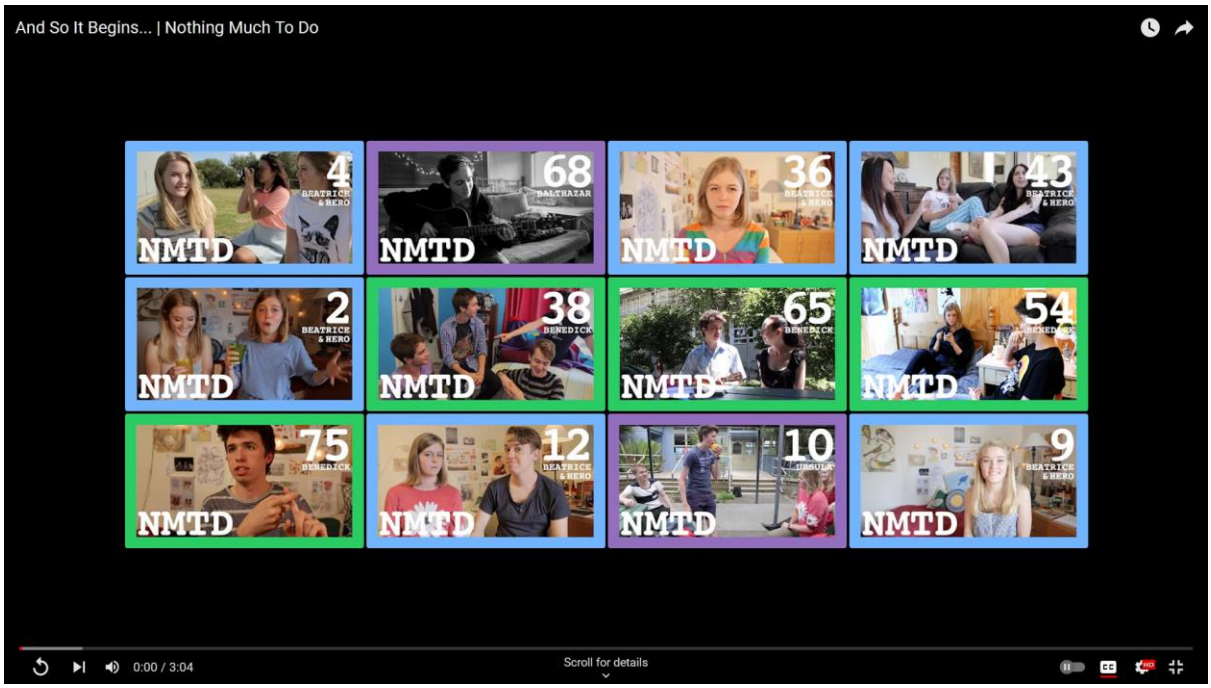


Figure 12 – An example end screen with recommended videos and the name of the video in the top left

While the amount of time participants had to process this information was limited when the video began playing before it went full screen, the recommended videos shown at the end of the video stayed onscreen while participants filled out their survey responses. This is where the method influences some of the results, as participants may have noticed more details of these recommendations or video titles if they had more time to absorb these details. The fact that things like the title were being noticed, but not enough to influence their response is very interesting.

In addition to the titles of the videos, the usernames were also external paratexts that included some clues to the formats of the videos. During the interview section, for example, Allie spoke about the usernames, stating that while she caught glimpses of them, she was just checking to see if she knew them:

> [The usernames were] one thing I didn't actually think about at the time. When I caught glimpses of the creator names I was really just checking to see if I knew them, but they did have unusual names which threw me because, I guess in my head, the older YouTube channels they'd tend to have sort of the unusual channel names because they'd tend to be groups of people while the new ones tend to be more people's names. So when a few of them weren't people's names it threw me off a little bit – I didn't actually write that one down – but yeah it was the third video when she had the – what was it? – something, it had Nothing in the title, I can't remember what it was.
>
> ***CA:*** *Nothing Much to Do?*
>
> That's it yeah! That one makes perfect sense. […] I just thought it was unusual, I didn't think any more of it.

Allie's recognition of the video titles and the usernames shows that she was looking at those factors but was not aware of exactly what they meant. Despite noticing the title of *Nothing Much to Do*, she did not initially piece together the link between this title and reference it

made to the source material. This is a prime example of how participants not understanding the context for the titles or the usernames results in viewers being unable to piece together what that means for the content as a whole. As soon as Allie knew that 'And So It Begins…' was a recreation of *Much Ado About Nothing,* she recognised the link between the title of the video and the original text.

Expressions of discomfort were also common in response to the mimic vlogs. Allie, for example, used the word "uncomfortable" to describe how she felt while watching the mimic vlogs on three occasions in the survey section. 'And We're Back!' in particular drew descriptions of discomfort from multiple participants, with Lauren saying she felt "dubious", Michelle also saying she felt "uncomfortable", and Jason saying he felt "odd" while watching the videos. Similar emotions were also used in reaction to 'Steady State'. Certainly, not all participants expressed this kind of discomfort, with one describing the 'Steady State' as "humourous", but by and large, the response was either discomfort or disinterest.

Each of the mimic vlogs had at least one participant describing it as uncomfortable, with several having multiple participants listing this response. Interestingly, 'Jack's Vlog 2' elicited the response of "uncomfortable" from two participants, and "comfortable" from another. Jenny, who later points to Jack as a speaker she relates to, was the participant who listed comfortable as how she felt while watching the video. Jenny also gave this video an authenticity rating of one (on the scale of 1-7 with one meaning very authentic,) which was the lowest of all participants and she was one of three participants to incorrectly identify the video as a standard vlog. Connor, who listed the video as "uncomfortable" was one of the other two participants to incorrectly identify the video as a standard vlog. There is potential that in this particular instance, in comparison to the others, that a level of

discomfort is in response to the fact that Jack is claiming to be a medical student and is discussing actions associated with that, such as dissecting bodies. This theory seems to be particularly pertinent given Connor also lists “grossed out” as another emotion he felt while watching the video. He gave the video an authenticity rating of 4, and stated Jack was “Emotionless, it doesn't feel like he could lie even if he tried, but despite that logic, the lack of emotion was uncomfortable.” Connor originally categorised the video as a mimic vlog, but changed his mind to a standard vlog.

The factors utilised varied amongst participants, and while there was some overlap in the methods used, it was particularly interesting that participants would frequently point to the same factor and reach a different conclusion. This is in keeping with what we would expect given the theoretical framework of audience reception theory highlights the agency of the viewer to make their own meaning from the text.

5.3 Responses to specific videos

In the following section, I work through the participants’ responses to each of the specific videos. This is in order to provide an overview of the participants’ sentiments more broadly, and gives the opportunity to discuss pertinent point raised by the participants. This section includes responses to questions included in Stage 2 such as “Describe the person featured in this video in 3 words” and “Describe how you felt watching this video in 3 words” and builds upon the excerpts included in the previous section.

Participants generally responded quite positively to ‘The Length of Time’, using words to describe the speaker, Abi, such as friendly, approachable, and cosy. William, in contrast to the others, was less receptive to Abi and considered the video boring and dull. William

also had the specific response of stating that the video was “manufactured” but gave an authenticity rating of 2 (being quite authentic) because “as boring as she is, it’s real”. This response was given immediately after watching the video, before discovering the corpus included fictional videos.

The participants touted the second video, ‘And We’re Back!’, as cringe, fake, and featuring “bad actors” amongst other descriptors in their responses to the video. Two of the participants were not as scathing calling the speakers energetic or nervous. That said, this was a video where many of the participants used words like uncomfortable in their responses, as highlighted in Section 5.2. In explaining why the participants gave the authenticity rating to the video that they did (across the eight participants, an average of 5.1 meaning inauthentic), the participants often used words highlighting the performed or constructed nature of the video such as “fake moments of conversation”, “Phrasing was awkward, and they kept looking to the side at a script” and “They were definitely playing their energy up for the camera”. There was an even split amongst the participants with four correctly identifying the video as a mimic vlog, and four categorising the video as a standard vlog. William, who said the video was like a stage play and “meta” at one point in the survey, called the video a standard vlog because it “Seemed to be spur of the moment with their dork friend, not pretending? I refuse to believe [sic]”. Presumably, William meant he was questioning whether the speakers were pretending, but refused to believe the video was fiction. Lauren on the other hand stated that the video’s dialogue “sounded like fanfiction”, which reflects her familiarity of other ways that content is remediated and adapted which helped her correctly identify the videos.

'And So It Begins…' led five of the eight participants into thinking it was a standard vlog rather than a mimic vlog, and this was the highest number of incorrect categorisations across the videos. Michelle said Beatrice reminded her of herself and incorrectly identified the video as a standard vlog. She also rated Beatrice as a 3 out of 7 on the authenticity scale. William stated that the video felt like "storytelling" and correctly identified the video as a mimic vlog. This video in particular had participants responding to the content of the video's story as a way to indicate if the video was a standard or mimic vlog. 'And So It Begins…' does a particularly good job of marrying an awkward character performance with a well delivered script. It is not overt in its scripting and mimics the awkward in-between moments captured in some amateur vlogs such as standing up to turn off the camera. The mimicking of low production values is inherent in a number of mimic vlogs. For example, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* also incorporates several of these "behind-the-scenes" moments into some of its early episodes such as a camera being framed. Including these kinds of moments is done to add to the verisimilitude of the scenes. *Nothing Much To Do* executes these moments by including long pauses, trail-off sentences, and a stilted walk towards the camera to end the recording and reaching in to turn the camera off. Incorporating these moments, combined with the fact this video in the first of the web series and is therefore full of seemingly innocent 'this is my first vlog' comments, adds to the realism of the piece. All in all, it is a particularly convincing mimic vlog as the actress does a good job at playing a newbie vlogger. Despite the 'first time' notions captured in the first *Nothing Much To Do* vlog, some participants noticed a discrepancy between what was being touted as a debut online, and the actual quality of the video's editing. After correctly categorising the video as a mimic vlog, for example, William stated that the video was "Too well put together for a bored video exercise if it's her first time".

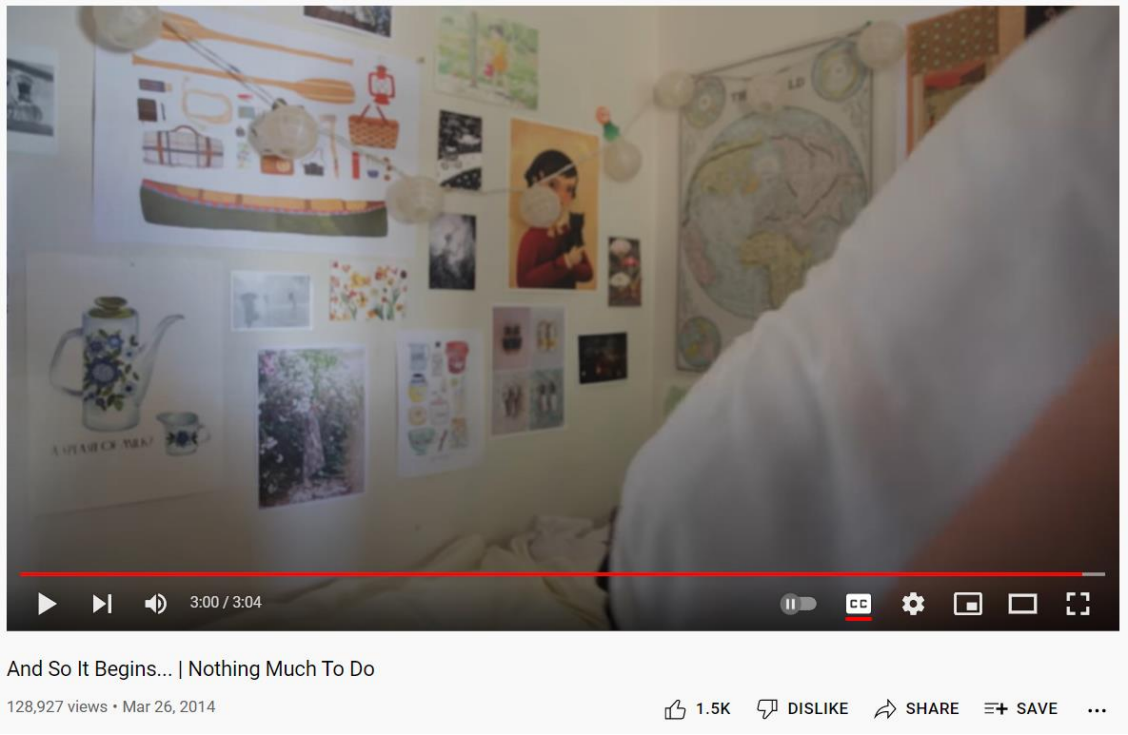


Figure 13 – Beatrice tries to turn the camera off in episode one of *Nothing Much To Do*

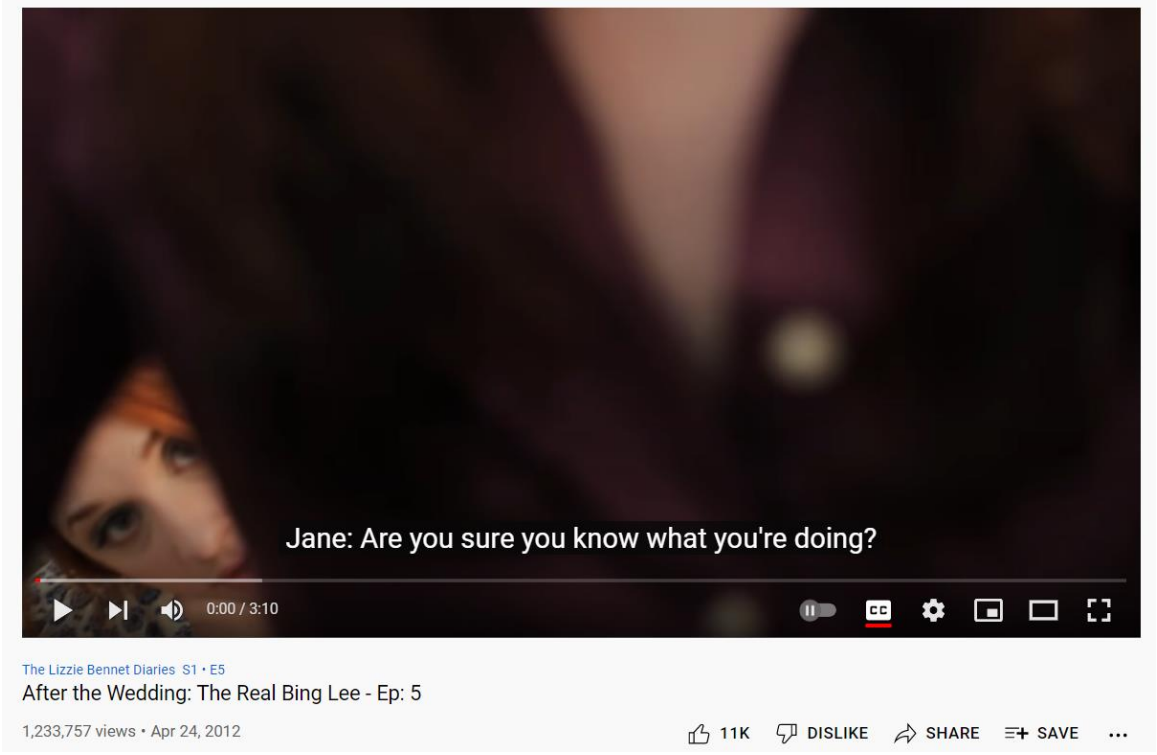


Figure 14 – Lizzie attempts to frame the camera in episode five of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*

Beyond this, 'And So It Begins…' is one of the mimic vlogs that is susceptible to being discovered as a fictional video based on its inclusion of notable elements from the original text. *Nothing Much to Do* is an adaption of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing,* and while the mimic vlogs selected for the study had relatively few overt references to the original text, this video features a number of verbal introductions to the characters, including Hero and Beatrice, as well as mentions of family members who are abroad. There was the possibility that those familiar with the original text may have picked up on these threads. None of the participants in this study mentioned noticing these references explicitly, other than a brief mention of the names being odd.

'Steady State' had all bar one participant correctly identify the video as a mimic vlog. Only Jason considered it to be a vlog. In listing the reason why he categorised the video as a vlog, he suggested Marian, the speaker, "comes off as too much of an ass to be fake." Michelle described Marian as "like a John Green character", with John Green being the author of several best-selling young adult fiction novels including *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012) and *Looking for Alaska* (2005). These novels feature many characters who speak in a similar way to Marian. For example, we could draw a comparison between Marian using the metaphor of dynamics with Augustus Waters (from *The Fault in Our Stars*) putting cigarettes in his mouth, but never lighting them because "It's a metaphor, see: you put the thing that does the killing right between your teeth, but you never give it the power to kill you" (Green 2012, p. 20). Michelle also said that "It seemed to be who Marian thought she was that she was betraying, but I didn't like that person and thought they weren't genuine", which suggests that Michelle did not find Marian's 'true self' to be particularly genuine even if she was acting as someone. She correctly identified the video as a mimic vlog and stated that she "hopes it's poking fun at these types of people because otherwise it's super annoying."

Additionally, several participants said they felt confused in response to ‘Steady State’, either by the language used or by the video in general. Jenny, for example, wrote she felt “Confused. Lost. Huh???” Equally, many participants said they were disengaged or disinterested in the video. The participants also describe Marian herself as anxious, annoying, desperate, and well-spoken, amongst other descriptors.

‘Jack's Vlog 2’ has some of the least believable story elements of the videos selected for this study. Predominantly, this is as a result of the source text that *Mina Murray’s Journal* is adapting. One of the key pieces of information that seems unusual is the references to one of Jack’s patients eating bugs. These relatively throwaway lines might not be noticed all the participants as they are watching this video for the first time. However, for those who did, this was a notable sign that the video was fictional. Michelle stated that “He’s talking about a man eating bugs like a hospital would allow that”. Additionally, the fact that Jack proclaims to be a medical student and then goes on to provide details about a case that he’s working on in a public online forum is at odds with how the participants expected a doctor to act, thus reducing the verisimilitude of the scene. The video inspired some interesting responses with some participants pointing to implausible factors such as someone eating bugs and another participant calling the video “#relatable”. Jenny responded well to this video stating she was intrigued and comfortable, while others found Jack rather unsettling. I expand on Jenny’s response later in Section 6.2.3 which explores viewers’ connections with the speakers. In contrast to Jenny, Michelle said that Jack “put her on edge” and Connor said he was “was interested at first about medical student life, but then Jack got creepy”. William thought the video had good potential but needed to get to the point. One other participant was amused, and others stated they were bored, neutral, or confused. Allie was one of the participants who said she felt uncomfortable while she was

watching the video, and also said it “felt like she was eavesdropping”. Five of the participants correctly identified the video as a mimic vlog.

Janice, the speaker in ‘how does interior design work??’, was summed up by most participants with words like loud, bubbly, intense, and energetic. Two participants found this energy annoying or as though they were “flexed on”, but overall the participants were interested and engaged in the video. One of the interesting points within the video corpus and corresponding survey responses is the transition from ‘Jack's Vlog 2’ to ‘how does interior design work??’, as ‘Jack's Vlog 2’ marks the end of four mimic vlogs in a row (as a result of the random selection of the viewing order). As I highlighted in Section 4.4, ‘how does interior design work??’ has a very different feeling to the video that precedes it. The participants noticed this as well, and a few commented on the change in tone in their responses. Michael, for example, noted that the video “Seems like she actually had one topic to talk about, and made one video. This is different from the rest so far…” He also wrote Janice “Wasn’t trying to be a character or someone other than herself” and, in response to why he categorised it as a mimic vlog, stated the video “Seemed to the point and like a somewhat real issue.” Michael’s response touches on a few interesting points. Firstly, he suggested that the video felt different to the others, and also that Janice did not seem “like a character”. Part of the implication here is that the other speakers *did* seem like characters. By contrast, Michael’s response to ‘Jack's Vlog 2’ was that he could “see this being a ramble someone would go on” so while he considered them to be different in tone, he did think that both of the videos were about topics people could feasibly vlog about.

Overall, participants responded well to Video 7 ‘Everything Felt Great’, with many using words like entertained, amused, and engaged in their responses to Daniel’s video.

Connor suggested that Daniel was narcissistic throughout his responses, but ultimately labelled the video as a vlog because “He seems so fake that it’s real. But he was very descriptive which makes his stories feel more real.” Jason was the only participant to classify the video as a mimic vlog, and his reasoning was that the video was over-exaggerated, and had too many edits in it.

‘IS OATMEAL CEREAL?’ is the final video in the corpus and received a mixed response from participants in many ways. Firstly, the video had a split down the middle in terms of being categorised as a mimic vlog by four participants, and as a standard vlog by the other four participants. Additionally, the words participants used to describe their reaction to the video varied. Michael, for example, said he felt “off put and awkward” and classified the video as a mimic vlog, while Connor said he felt “argumentative, attacked, and happy” and classified it as a standard vlog. Other participants said they felt mildly interested, neutral, bored, curious, or engaged. Michael had a remarkably relevant comment in that he questioned if the results to the oatmeal versus cereal debate were “anything more than fiction” during the Stage 2 surveys. While the video was a standard vlog and Michael was not informed that there were some fictional videos in the corpus at that point, this comment shows an awareness of the fabricated nature of some content in YouTube videos.

The responses to each of the videos provides an insight into what each of the participants felt in response to the speaker, but also in how they would describe them. This summation of the responses provides an over-arching look at how the participants reacted to the videos. It is clear that there was never only one response to the videos, but occasionally there was a consensus, even if it was not unanimous. It is quite noteworthy that there was repetition of particular words from multiple participants about either one

video specifically (such as calling 'how does interior design work??' some version of energetic) or about one type of video (such as all mimic vlogs being described as uncomfortable at least once). Equally, because of the different responses to the videos, we can see in practice how audiences have unique readings of texts based on their own interpretations.

This research builds on existing scholarship confirming that audiences read texts in different ways depending on context and individual understandings of texts. We know from semiotic theory and Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding theory that signs and codes are open to interpretation and that the polysemy of different signs means audiences can read the same thing in different ways (Hobbs 2011; Hall 2013). So, while it is perhaps not overly surprising, it is still striking that individual audience members can come to vastly different conclusions based on the same piece of information, either because the piece of information was used in a different way or because that information meant something else to a different participant. In this scenario, participants came to different conclusions about what type of video they watched because of their decoding of elements as possible markers of authenticity or fictionality. Here we can see clearly how audiences read multiple qualities of the text: not only the narrative or the speaker, but equally how they read production qualities, design, and format as well.

The amateur qualities that audience members identify as being emblematic of user-generated content are easily imitable "'false' signifiers of reality" (Springer & Rhodes 2006 in Wallace 2018). Using quality as a determining factor for identifying content is challenging as high-quality user-generated content does exist as does low quality fictional content. The logic of judging low quality content as user-generated makes sense given the history of

UGC's equivalence with 'amateur' content, but this logic is easily manipulated to make a mimic vlog seem more realistic. Distinguishing between a well-executed amateur *aesthetic* and legitimate amateur content is difficult, and on a platform such as YouTube which hosts a combination of many types of content, mimicking an amateur aesthetic facilitates producers creating media with the potential to mislead.

6 EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS

In this chapter, I explore the responses participants gave in Stage 4 during their long-form interviews following the completion of the first three stages. At this point, the participants had watched the videos and filled out a questionnaire gathering their initial responses to each clip. They had been told that there were some fictional videos included in the eight videos, and then categorised each of the videos as either a user-generated vlog or a mimic vlog. At the beginning of the interview, participants did not know which videos were which type of content, as I revealed this during the interview. The semi-structured interviews followed a similar structure for all participants, with some exceptions where particular concepts prompted further discussion or if the participant had said something between tasks that warranted an adjustment to the question order.

In particular, this chapter discusses the ways participants felt about YouTube, how they defined key terms such as authenticity, and some of the themes in how they approached the categorisation tasks. These themes include the desire for proof that a story in a vlog was true, as well as some methods utilised by participants to help categorise the videos such as gut feeling and body language.

6.1 Conceptualising YouTube

The interviews began with questions relating broadly to YouTube as establishing how participants view the platform is foundational to approaching its role as a host for fictional content, which contributes to investigating RQ1. Firstly, I asked participants what words, ideas, and feelings come to mind when they think of YouTube. The associations were

numerous, and the concepts included ranged from “fun” and “enjoyable” to “chaotic” and also included reflections about moderation on the site. Participants occasionally named specific channels or individuals, such as Buzzfeed or Pewdiepie, as being synonymous with the platform. Others highlighted the platform’s ‘home-grown’ and user-generated content, as well as particular styles of videos such as vlogs, skits, reaction videos, and tutorials. The responses were wide-ranging, but provide a starting point to understand the kinds of ways that these participants thought about the platform.

Moving beyond associations with YouTube, I asked participants where storytelling fits into their perceptions of YouTube, and how suitable they feel the platform is for storytelling. While none of the participants initially stated storytelling as a word that came to mind when they thought of YouTube, there was overwhelming support of the concept of storytelling on the platform. However, many of the participants also stated that there was a need for transparency when videos featured fictional content. While ‘storytelling’ and ‘stories’ as terms can apply to both fiction and non-fiction content (including news stories and anecdotes), the participants tended to preference storytelling as fiction in their responses.

Some participants felt that storytelling was crucial to YouTube or the types of content that they as a viewer enjoyed. For example, Allie’s response stated how a lot of content on YouTube is storytelling in one way or another:

> I guess [storytelling is] probably the main thing isn’t it? I guess a lot of YouTube videos is pretty well all storytelling – if it’s something that’s just incredibly mundane like Daniel who was saying he was more tired because he doesn’t do yoga very much, it’s still got storytelling in it because he’s talking about past experiences – um – but yeah, even the most dramatic ones where hundreds even thousands of dollars go into the production of it, it’s still storytelling.

> ***CA:*** *So you don't consider a user-generated story to be too different from a production?*
>
> Yeah, I guess they're sort of very different scales, but I'd say there's an element of storytelling in it for sure.
>
> ***CA:*** *Do you think that YouTube is a suitable place for these stories to be?*
>
> I think so. I quite enjoy them. I think with a lot of social media you see the really perfect lives, especially with like photos and things, but a lot of the more completely ordinary discussion on YouTube I'd say are just as important because they sort of reflect more human life rather than a really produced form of life.

Allie is focusing quite heavily on content like vlogs in this response, where the focus of the video is on what is being said rather than what is being done. This is in contrast to something like a how-to video, where there is slightly less focus on a 'narrative' and much more on the action. Therefore, while storytelling in her response is "the main thing", it is more central in certain types of videos.

Michelle states that storytelling plays "a big role in the kinds of videos" she watches, but also said that this was not true for her friends, or other people her age. These people, she felt, "tend to watch different things that don't have a coherent narrative through the video". Connor and Jason's answers built mostly from the affordances of the platform by considering YouTube as a platform for storytelling because of its ability to combine both audio and visual components. Connor in particular cited these affordances as being a key feature to YouTube's authenticity in storytelling, because there is greater scope for contextual clues. Connor also mentioned the wider community and impact of the capacity for the audience to comment on videos. Jenny stated she thinks YouTube is "definitely" a suitable platform for storytelling because it is a "decent platform for getting the content out

there", but also stated there needed to be a lot of transparency if something is fictional, otherwise audiences are not going to "believe you, or trust you, or respect you."

In contrast to the participants who said that YouTube was suitable, Lauren highlights some of the shortfalls or problematic factors of the platform. She states:

> I can't see any reason why it's not a suitable one other than maybe it's not traditionally where people would look for storytelling. […] I think when you go to a particular platform you're looking for a particular thing, and so maybe you're not really going to pay attention to the stuff that doesn't fit into those expectations.

The role of the platform here is important for Lauren, who suggests that YouTube is not necessarily a platform that people associate with storytelling. This is supported by the fact that few of the participants listed storytelling as a word they associated with YouTube in this study. The capacity to catch people off-guard is the underlying premise in this answer; if people are not aware of the types of content that might be on the platform, they might not be paying enough attention to catch it. That said, this lays the groundwork for one of Lauren's other points, as she questioned how 'real' standard vloggers are, and indeed if there is actually any difference between a standard vlogger and a fictional person being played by an actor. She notes that while she does not necessarily watch anything she knows is fictional, she says she is not naïve enough to think that everything she watches is completely genuine. Lauren stated:

> I suppose it's a good question. Is there any reason why a mimic vlog is... Does it matter that it's different than a "genuine" in quotation marks vlog? Because, realistically, you're never going to meet the people you're watching on YouTube anyway, so if they're playing a character, if the real person doesn't... You know, for the viewer, it doesn't really actually matter. If they're good

> enough that you can't tell then you could just go around believing that this person was real and it doesn't really matter.

While Lauren is clearly thinking her way through the concept in this quotation, her argument is ultimately that it does no matter if someone is not 'real' on YouTube because it has no impact on the viewer either way. A few participants raised this idea throughout their discussion of user-generated vlogs and mimic vlogs. Michael, for example, echoed the sentiment of distrust towards standard vloggers. Broadly, Michael stated that storytelling "definitely" fits on YouTube, and but also flagged that it is not "less genuine than anything else" on the platform. Importantly, he also noted that "if it's advertised that this is a character in a vlog then it's like a miniature TV show". Michael's assertion that stories are no less genuine than anything else is of particular note given his questioning of just how 'genuine' standard vloggers are anyway, which implies he thinks most content is not legitimate. Additionally, when asked why it was important that it is highlighted that the content is fictional, Michael said:

> What makes it authentic to me is that I'm able to understand how it's being portrayed, how it's being marketed. I can understand it at a conceptual level rather than just like being tricked into something. Yeah, I feel that that's what needs to be there to make it genuine.

Both Michael and Lauren thought it was important that viewers knew what they were looking at. Jenny echoed this sentiment, calling for signalling of fictional content in description boxes of videos. The concept of labelling content online is discussed further in Section 6.3 and Chapter 8.

In contrast, Allie stated that if she knew something was fiction, she might have more difficulty connecting with the speaker, as it's "sort of like watching a TV show". Allie

expressed a desire for banal and relatable content, and this means that her preference is to feel a connection with the speaker first. For her, the appeal of vlogs is that she can "follow along with someone's real story rather than a made up one". Alternatively, William stated that YouTube is a platform for all content, and suggested that disguising fictional content makes it more amusing. He said:

> Oh, put whatever you want on YouTube, it's free content. You can do whatever you want. You make a video, you put it up. I love fictional stories myself and I think if you're trying to pass it off as the truth, then it becomes a bit of an issue in a way that's funnier to me.

Evidently, there are some disparate views amongst the participants regarding YouTube as a platform for storytelling, though the majority of participants supported it as a host for fictional content. The contention tends to come around the need for signposting the content itself, so some participants' wish for clear signalling of fictional content speaks to a desire to be 'in the know' about what they are watching.

6.2 Defining Authenticity

In Chapter 2, the notion of authenticity was discussed as being an "evaluative concept", meaning that depending on its context and use, authenticity can mean different things. As such, one key part of the interview was to identify how participants defined authenticity themselves. This was essential as the participants responded to questions utilising the term in both the surveys and the interview, but the term was not specifically defined in the material, as I wanted the participants to interact with authenticity as a concept in a way that was familiar and natural to them. Thus, I asked participants to explain how they defined and applied the concept in the other tasks. As is to be expected, there

were a number of different responses to how participants defined authenticity and some of these responses provided insights into how participants approached the overall task. These can be split into three main categories: authenticity as vloggers 'being themselves', as spontaneity, and as connection. This section will discuss how the participants used authenticity in regard to these three categories.

6.2.1 'Being Themselves'

The idea of YouTubers 'being themselves' aligns closely with the concept of authenticity meaning "true to the essence of something" (van Leeuwen 2001, p. 393) and also the concepts of self-referential and other-referential authenticity (Vannini & Franzese 2008). In this case, authenticity meant that the YouTuber was presenting a version of their identity online that was congruent with how someone might expect that same person to act offline. Multiple participants pointed to the concept of vloggers 'being themselves', including Michelle who said:

> I think in my mind there's two types of authenticity […] There's people being who they think is their authentic selves, like presenting themselves in a video as they would in real life. And then I think there's the authenticity of does it feel real to the viewer and can the viewer relate to the person who's projecting themselves?

This presents a very clear link to theories around identity and persona, and the concepts of authenticity as it relates to those theories. Michelle's comments (which were echoed by Lauren in an example in the following section) speaks to Goffman's dramaturgical theory. The language nods to an understanding that the vlogger we see online is a presentation of the person, and that authenticity is when the online presentation matches the offline presentation of the vlogger. Participants who used 'being themselves' as a marker of

authenticity made judgements about whether or not the speaker was putting on a persona for the video and also how 'real' the impression the speaker made was. This kind of judgement is open to erroneous perceptions as a result of the interpretations of the viewers. The results presented in Chapter 5 provide examples of the ways the participants interpreted factors in different ways, thus influencing their perception of the speakers.

6.2.2 Spontaneous

In addition to 'being themselves', participants also suggested that spontaneity was a defining feature of authenticity and they occasionally made this connection in conjunction with the view of vloggers 'being themselves'. In this instance, spontaneity relates to the scripting or preparedness of the spoken content in the videos. Participants identified that speakers who stumbled or appeared to speak off-the-cuff appeared authentic and went on to use this as a factor to determine a video to be user-generated rather than fictional. That said, if a speaker appeared as though they were 'being themselves' enough, this could counteract the scripting, or at least lessen its impact. For example, Lauren said:

> For me authenticity is mostly about how their personality comes across. [It's] if they come across as being authentically themselves, even if it sounds like they may be practiced a bit or something like that. I think you can tell the difference between something that's maybe a little bit scripted, or at least planned, where their personality still seems genuine as opposed to someone that is trying to put on a persona for the video.

In this quotation, Lauren states that even if a speaker seemed to have pre-prepared what they wanted to say, they could still come across as genuine. This highlights a preference for the person-first approach of 'being themselves' over being spontaneous. Lauren also suggests that the inclusion of linguistic errors can help something seem authentic, but the

absence of them does not mean that a video is inauthentic because the creator might have edited around them, so the speaker could still seem genuine. Here, we can see that there are some links back some ideas around authenticity presented in Section 2.4.3 in relation to linguistic errors (Bhatia 2018) as well as both reality television (Feuer 2018) and the complexity of considering non-scripted content as 'real'. Additionally, there are questions about the role of 'preparedness' and to what degree viewers are happy to accept a vlogger preparing what they say and perfecting how it is presented. Michael, for example, considered 'And We're Back!' to feel rehearsed and "too concise", preferring the videos that seemed to ramble as they felt more authentic to him. As such, there is clearly ambiguity about exactly how scripted something can be before it is seen as 'too scripted'. For some audience members, like Lauren, some level of preparation is acceptable without the vlogger becoming negatively perceived due to using a script.

Allie, conversely, states that authenticity is *in* the spontaneity. Preparedness to a degree is acceptable but scripting, on the other hand, begins to make it seem inauthentic. Allie and Jenny both made statements about the spontaneity saying:

> **Allie:** [Authenticity is] having a bit of an idea about what you want to say but not how you want to say it. So having a genuine conversation with the audience.

> **Jenny**: I'd say being comfortable to present yourself while stumbling up occasionally.

The inclusion of errors or "stumbles" speaks to authenticity as having a lack of polish. For instance, Jerslev (2016) states that the inclusion of linguistic errors in Zoe Sugg's vlogs is a signifier of authenticity and spontaneity in her videos. Jenny's response supports the

inclusion of these mistakes as a marker of spontaneity from vloggers. The lack of clarity about which videos are actually scripted makes using spontaneity as an indicator of authenticity an inherently flawed approach. Nonetheless, having the *appearance* of spontaneity is very closely aligned with a perception of authenticity for at least some of the participants.

Additionally, Allie's concept of a "genuine conversation with the audience" underscores the role of *dialogue* (in contrast to monologue) in these vlogs. In highlighting this, we are reminded that while we consider vlogs to be a monologue delivered to a camera, there is still something to be said about the role of the audience as well. Vloggers are speaking to someone, even if that audience is not physically present while the vlogger films. Given there is no physical audience present with the speaker while recording, the imagined audience is therefore important to consider here. Litt defines the imagined audience as "the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating" (2012, p. 331). A few participants raised this idea of how the vloggers incorporated the viewer or the audience. For example, some participants discussed whether the vlogger was making it feel like a conversation. This relates closely to Frobenius' (2014) discussion of the audiences' non-corporeal presence when vlogs are crafted. Further, it relates to the idea of relatability or likeability which is another type of authenticity cited by participants that I will further elaborate on in a moment in the following section.

William's definition of authenticity combined a number of the concepts highlighted in this section, but he also cites the idea of connection. William stated that he defined authenticity as being: "Spontaneous, I'd say true to yourself. I believe the stories that you're telling you want to tell; I think it's very important to authentically *connect* to someone"

[emphasis added]. Again, here the participant has highlighted both spontaneity, a sense of being true to ones' 'real' self, and also the idea of connection. Authenticity as spontaneity presents a clear link with the content of the video in terms of scripting or acting. William also connects the idea of authenticity to the story the vlogger is telling as well, by stating that he thinks a video is more authentic if the story is one that the vlogger wants to tell.

Part of the aesthetic of vlogs is the way the content is delivered and this aesthetic can contribute to the perceived level of scriptedness. One specific factor that contributes to this is "YouTuber Voice", as suggested by Naomi Baron (in Lee 2017), which is a combination of linguistic features such as overstressed vowels and consonants, epenthesis and aspiration found in a number of vloggers. However, this "voice" is just as replicable as some of the other aesthetic choices associated with vlogs, and can be successfully achieved through quality acting. This ease of replication, in part, contributes to the viewers' struggle with identifying scripted content. Given both standard vlogs and mimic vlogs can incorporate scripts, the ability for the audience to notice scripting is very heavily dependent on the speakers themselves, rather than on the audience. Equally, the editing can do a lot to make something appear more one way or the other. The construction of the videos leans into the amateur aesthetic that is associated with 'more authentic' user-generated, spontaneous vlogs. An example of this comes from Jason who stated three factors he used to judge the videos and the speakers, an explanation he gave before he learnt which video was what format. Firstly, he judged them based on whether he believed what they are saying. Secondly, he looked for suggestions of a script. And thirdly, Jason highlighted the editing:

> I think it also comes down to editing style. So in the case of 'And So It Begins,' her editing style, the way she designed the vlog was for it to look more authentic, right? She left stuff in that she could have edited throughout it. Then she left in her getting up and

> walking away from the camera, right? You don't have to do that if you have the skills to be able to snip halfway through and edit.

Jason notes in this answer several ways that Beatrice signals 'authenticity' in the videos. Intriguingly, Jason incorrectly identified 'And So It Begins…' as a standard vlog, and in highlighting all these ways that Beatrice signals authenticity, he is actually drawing attention to the ways that the creators of *Nothing Much to Do* mimicked possible signifiers of reality in vlogs.

Jason had some difficulties with correctly identifying the fictional videos from the user-generated videos, correctly identifying only three of the videos, which was equal fewest for the group of participants. That said, the ways in which he categorised the videos was particularly interesting, as is highlighted in the previous example. Similarly, he categorised 'And We're Back!' as a standard vlog, stating that it "had to be real":

> Video 2 was so bad it had to be real. It was clearly very scripted. Like extraordinarily scripted right? Also, the pair had zero chemistry whatsoever, and I feel like if you were trying to fake something, you could at least get a laugh out of faking the thing together, and there was clearly nothing going on there whatsoever. It was all just fake laughter and poorly scripted.

Here Jason perceived the scripting and acting of the second video to be *so* poor that it could not possibly be something that was created by a team of people producing content. Poor acting did not seem to be something that many participants considered, rather, poor scripting was understood to be a sign of amateur content, which was then used as an indicator of standard vlog content. This equivalence of amateur content with user-generated content supports the discussion of quality as an indicator of fictionality, as amateur-looking content tended to be perceived as real in the survey response.

Interestingly, Jason actually highlights this equivalence of amateur aesthetics as indicators of authenticity in YouTube content by saying:

> The second you make something and you make it unbelievably good, on YouTube, it comes out as inauthentic. That being a little bit bad is what makes something seem a lot more authentic. 'The Length of Time' came off as being very professionally filmed, and that makes it seem less authentic because it is so professional for YouTube. It's supposed to be so much more personal I guess is a way to put it.

The contradiction of something seeming so bad it could not possibly be real (as he said in the first of the last two quotations) and something looking so good it *also* cannot possibly be real is such an interesting dichotomy to have come from the same participant. Evidently, for Jason, there is a sweet spot, but where exactly that sweet spot exists is not particularly clear from his answers and potentially it would be very difficult to articulate either way. It is also worth noting here that 'The Length of Time' was a standard vlog, rather than a mimic vlog. A large part of the reason it appears professional is the mise-en-scéne (as the vlog was filmed around Christmas time, and there is a large tree in the background) as well as the framing.

The aesthetic of authenticity is, in and of itself, a false signifier of reality. It is replicable as it is made up of each of the factors that indicate authenticity. As such, we must return to how audiences perceive authenticity in order to understand how we might mitigate production companies benefitting from the replication of that authenticity. Authenticity is both an act of performance and an act of reception, and to return to van Leeuwen's definition, it is an evaluative concept with many meanings (2001). Abidin's findings regarding calibrated amateurism are useful here. Calibrated amateurism is a practice wherein creators construct an appearance of authenticity by emulating an amateur style (Abidin 2017a, p. 1). Calibrated amateurism highlights that the aesthetic of the

amateur is imitable, desirable, and crafted by amateur users themselves as well as by others who are seeking to emulate its effects. The combination of calibrated amateurism, the aesthetic of authenticity, and the pervasiveness of user-generated content makes for an environment wherein audiences should be cautious around most content that positions itself as authentic. The impression of authenticity is what makes viewers susceptible to things like influencer advertising as well as replica content on platforms that host user-generated content as McRae (2017) argued.

The amateur aesthetic associated with user-generated content on YouTube still seems to be a marker that a number of participants drew from, even now when content has improved significantly from the early days of the platform, particularly in terms of technical specifications. Despite this association, an amateur aesthetic is one of the more complex markers of fictionality because of the diversity amongst users and producers of fictional content who try to replicate the aesthetic. The aesthetic is easily imitable, though attempting to imitate it presents as a pitfall for some mimic vlogs that look too smooth or too polished, such as *Lonelygirl15* when rumours first started about the reality of the web series or the participants in this study who thought 'And So It Begins…' looked too well executed to be a genuine first vlog. It is not useful to say that the aesthetic of the video is not worth considering, it is just that it is extremely difficult to actually determine fictionality based on aesthetic alone.

6.2.3 Connection

As I alluded to earlier, connection is the third factor participants used to explain how they defined authenticity in this exercise. There were two major contributing aspects to having a sense of connection with the speaker, and this included whether the speaker was

likeable and whether they (and what they spoke about) were relatable. Connor succinctly outlined that he thought liking the vlogger was a clear indicator of whether he thought they were authentic:

> I guess you have to ask why you like someone. I guess their presentation, their communication, their stories. If I felt like I could relate to them which is usually done through humbleness and I feel like I'm a very humble person. I think they're the same – authenticity and likeability.
>
> **CA:** *There was one point when you were answering one of the questions where you said aloud "I don't know if I like them because they're authentic or if they're authentic because I like them". Is that something that you feel or was that just a passing thought?*
>
> I think that's what I noticed right at the beginning: that if I liked them, I thought they were authentic. But I wasn't sure which direction that relationship was, whether I like them because they're authentic or whether they were authentic because I like them.

The question of which direction the trust and affinity moves is an interesting one, and regardless of the answer, the relationship between the viewer and the speaker plays a role in maintaining trust. Michelle also outlined in her earlier description of authenticity (included in Section 6.2.1) that relating to the speaker was part of establishing authenticity. Equally, several participants highlighted that the content delivered by the vlogger also needed to be relatable. For example, Allie thought that more banal stories seemed authentic by stating she thought the most authentic videos were:

> The ones where it feels like they're not trying to put up a front on camera, they're just like "Oh this really boring thing happened to me today but I'm gonna share it because it probably happens to everyone" that kind of thing. And in the case of YouTube authenticity, I feel like the main reason why I feel like something's authentic is if they're sharing something really mundane, they still make it a conversation.

When asked to list which of the videos Allie felt were more impromptu than others, she discussed ‘The Length of Time’, ‘how does interior design work??’, and ‘Everything Felt Great’:

> I guess they were the three that I ticked as vlogs because they felt more like they had a bit of an idea of what they wanted to talk about but not specifically. They didn’t have any phrases ready to go and they all felt very relatable I guess. They were all things that I feel like anyone could go through at any point.

All three videos that Allie identified as vlogs were correct. The only video that Allie incorrectly identified was ‘IS OATMEAL CEREAL?’, which she classified as a mimic vlog rather than a vlog. In the Stage 3 categorisation task, she reasoned this in saying the speaker “seemed genuine, but the story didn’t seem real”. This reasoning again highlights the impact that the story itself has over whether or not something might be perceived as ‘real’. If the story seemed like it was not true, then the speaker seemed less authentic.

Both Michael and Michelle echoed the reliance on the banal or the mundane in relation to the stories that the vloggers told and how that influenced whether they thought the speaker was being authentic. Michael expanded on his original response to defining authenticity as:

> People telling me their feelings and how they've responded to a certain event. Daniel in ‘Everything Felt Great’ for example, he says “oh, this is how I was feeling. I was feeling pretty crap”. Sure. The girls in ‘And We’re Back!’ didn’t really tell me much about how they were feeling, and where do you script that in? You can’t really say “Oh I feel crap”, you know? It's more in the moment. ‘Jack's Vlog 2’ [a mimic vlog] – he just kept rambling and there was no like definite cut-off point. You think the video is going to end about three times, and that feels more genuine to me. Maybe a bit more amateur in the editing or in the composition of what's being said.

Michael's response details the importance of the speaker discussing their feelings, which is a way for them to appear relatable to Michael. Michael's response implies that feelings cannot be scripted into fictional videos, which is discredited rather easily by thinking about most other scripted content which incorporates portrayals of emotion. Michael also points to some of the more technical elements that make a video seem authentic. Here, there is discussion of the editing and the composition of the video as a whole.

Speaking more broadly about the role of authenticity on YouTube as a platform for storytelling, Michelle suggested that authenticity "equals vulnerability" on YouTube, saying that she sees a trend where YouTubers are revealing lots of things about their personal lives and their weaknesses to get views. Michelle's comments suggesting that authenticity equals vulnerability fits with existing ideas around the consumption of YouTube texts that suggest "through these productions of discomfort, unease and distress, YouTube vloggers are able to cement ties of intimacy with and among their followers, evidence their claims to authenticity, [… and] achieve emotional catharsis through their generation of communities" (Berryman and Kavka 2018, p. 96). Inviting the audience into more vulnerable moments facilitates a sense of intimacy with the speaker, which in turn helps foster a perception of authenticity as a result of establishing and reinforcing a connection between the audience and the speaker.

Jenny used how much she related to one of the speakers as a reason why she felt confident about her categorisation of that video. Jenny was confident about two videos in particular, the first being 'Everything Felt Great' as it was a video that featured a vlogger she had previously encountered online, and the second being the speaker from 'Jack's Vlog 2'. Speaking about 'Jack's Vlog 2', Jenny said she felt like she could relate personality-wise, and that Jack seemed very genuine based on her own personality, and he therefore seemed

"pretty real". In the interview, Jenny expressed disappointment upon discovering that 'Jack's Vlog 2' was a mimic vlog stating she "thought he was cool". Later in her interview, Jenny also drew attention to the potential risks associated with creating trust between creators and their audience, stating:

> The more people trust you, the more of a following you'll be able to get. I guess that also comes at a risk. Say, if you're spreading false news, the more people trust you, the more of a following you have, the more that false news spreads.

Jenny's response to Jack shows that audiences can be drawn to people like themselves. Interestingly, Michelle also incorrectly categorised a video that she felt similar to personality-wise. As I mentioned in Section 5.3, Michelle said she felt Beatrice from 'And So It Begins…' reminded her of herself and incorrectly identified the video as a standard vlog. As such, we can see that where viewers find themselves relating to the speaker, they are likely to feel a sense of trust. There is also the potential for harm if people misuse the trust developed by parasocial relationships given they are in part built on trust with online celebrities. It also helps show why audiences might feel a sense of betrayal if a vlogger turns out to be a fictional character in a mimic vlog and the viewer did not realise.

Jenny is a notable participant for two reasons that make her answers of additional interest. Firstly, she frequently started filling out the questionnaire while the videos were still playing (which only one other participant did), and this had an impact on the types of information that she was absorbing. Jenny herself highlights this tendency when filling out the viewing habits questions in Stage 1 of her session, noting that she was often multitasking while consuming YouTube content. We discussed this during the interview as I

asked if it was weird watching the videos and only really being able to watch it. Jenny responded:

> Kind of. I was just like "OK, I'm going to write the questions while I'm watching it". Then Daniel came on, I was like "I must watch".
>
> ***CA:*** *Do you think that that changes the types of information that you were taking in?*
>
> Probably. I guess for me I kind of have it filtering through in the background and maybe if I get bored of one thing I'll jump back and pay attention to a little bit or if I'm doing my one thing and then suddenly they say something obscure, then I'll be like "OK, rewind. What did you just say?"

Jenny's preference for listening to rather than exclusively watching the videos influenced the types of information that she gathered about the videos. For example, when she defined authenticity, Jenny highlighted auditory cues such as stumbling rather than something visual like the editing or the framing. This is a very clear example of how the viewing habits (and indeed, the way participants interacted with the videos in the research itself) influence how they respond to the content. While this is not overly surprising, it is important to highlight as the viewing habits therefore inform (at least in part) participants' ability to identify content. Jenny does refer to the technical aspects of the videos in some parts of her survey responses, but this is relatively minor and tends to focus on things like the framing (which is static in most of these videos) rather than editing.

The second reason why Jenny's responses are notable is that Jenny was the only participant who was familiar with one of the vloggers featured in the corpus of videos, having previously seen Daniel of 'Everything Felt Great' on YouTube with other British vloggers. Her answer in the previous quotation helps highlight this, as she noted she immediately paid more attention to Daniel's video because she "must watch" his video.

Jenny's familiarity allowed for some further investigation of the impact of this knowledge of the vlogger during the interview. In particular, I was interested in exploring whether her knowing who Daniel was had influenced her authenticity rating of him. Jenny gave Daniel a score of one, meaning she thought he was extremely authentic. Jenny also gave this rating to three other speakers in the study ('And So It Begins…', 'Jack's Vlog 2', and 'how does interior design work??'). Daniel was the last speaker to be rated "extremely authentic" by Jenny, and his video was also the penultimate video in the study (Video 7 of 8 in the corpus). Given Jenny was familiar with Daniel, knew he was a standard vlogger, and gave him such a high authenticity rating, it raises the question of how the authenticity ratings of the other speakers may have changed if Daniel's video had been earlier in the corpus. If he was earlier, there is the potential that Jenny may have used him as a point of comparison for all of the other speakers. Instead, because Daniel was at the tail end of the study, Jenny's familiarity with his content could not influence her initial responses to the first six videos but could still influence the way Jenny approached the Stage 3 categorisation task that followed the Stage 2 surveys. In regards to how important Jenny felt knowing Daniel was to the authenticity rating she gave him, Jenny responded:

> I'd say knowing who he is was very important because then I'm more aware of how he portrays himself in front of the camera and how he acts when other friends are filming him as well. So then I could understand what he'd be like in front of the camera.
>
> ***CA:*** *How does that compare to the other videos where you didn't really have a reference point?*
>
> A lot, but it made it a lot easier for me to have like a basis for each of the other videos, kind of?

Her familiarity with Daniel's content undoubtedly contributed to the correct categorisation of his video (Jenny correctly categorised three of the eight videos), but it also had some

influence over Jenny's categorisations of the other videos by giving her a reference point to compare those other videos to. This reference point contrasts with the other participants who did not have the benefit of comparison with a video they were certain about. When asked how the task might have gone if there were multiple videos from each of the speakers rather than just one, Jenny said she felt she would be able to pinpoint them a bit more because she would be able to get to know each of the speakers better. Jenny's level of connection with Daniel certainly had some impact on her response to his video and may have had some impact in regards to the others.

More broadly, throughout the discussion of authenticity, the participants raised the ideas of connection and conversation on multiple occasions, implying a dialogue of sorts with the audience. As such, the role of the viewer is also interesting consider at this point. Does authenticity mean anything without the viewer? This answer depends on if we are to lean towards theories of authenticity as being other-referential approach or self-referential (Vannini & Franzese 2008). An other-referential approach would mean authenticity is in how others react to and reaffirm our authentic selves. With this approach, authenticity is an act of perception wherein the audience member makes a series of judgements about the speaker and comes to a conclusion about them, which fits with the participants' approach of perceiving the speaker to 'be themselves'. These things can be incredibly difficult to judge, particularly in a viewing of a series of eight unrelated YouTube videos. However, by articulating the factors that participants were looking for, we can at least understand what factors they are basing this judgement on. A vlogger's likeability is invariably a subjective assessment. Whether or not something appears scripted can be misunderstood or misinterpreted. Identifying a vlogger's 'true self' can be impossible. Yet each of these factors are how participants judged the authenticity of the speakers in these videos. Intriguingly, as

shown by the results of the survey section, the mimic vlogs tended to be seen as more inauthentic than the user-generated vlogs, even before participants knew that there were multiple types of content included in the corpus.

Tying into the theories of authenticity discussed in Chapter 2, the participants' approaches to authenticity that they defined in this section tended to lie in the *perception* of authenticity. This approach makes sense because the audience is on the receiving end of a performance of authenticity. As such, the participants seem to support authenticity as being other-referential in nature, meaning that a person can be authentic if others perceived them to be so. Notably, this research does not interrogate how authentic the speakers feel themselves to be, so it cannot really make a case for self-referential authenticity. The findings also support Goffman's theory of authenticity and impression management, particularly if we look at this specifically through the lens of the audience. Goffman (1959) argues that a person performs a role with a particular audience in mind, and that the audience in turn plays a role back. In online spaces, for a viewer to think a speaker is authentic, they must agree that the speaker is performing the role that the audience expects them to play. One of the approaches to authenticity defined by the participants was the idea that a person was authentic if it seemed they were 'being themselves'. In this sense, we can see that audience members can think a speaker is authentic if they *perform* authenticity effectively.

With all of this in mind, I return to two of the key research questions under investigation in this thesis: How do audience members identify and categorise types of storytelling content on YouTube; and what influences success in identifying and categorising

different types of YouTube content? The next section will deal with one of the primary factors identified: the desire for proof.

6.3 Proof

The concept of proof provides participants with a basis to establish trust with the speaker in videos. If judging authenticity is an act of perception, then speakers giving evidence provides viewers with a seemingly more concrete reference point. Three participants specifically referenced the concept of proof in their interviews. Given the conventions of the vlogging genre, it is not unusual for videos to be extended monologues delivered to camera with no real incorporation of any other content such as cutaways or still images. Certainly, some vlogs do incorporate these (in fact, many do), but it is also common for vlogs not to include B-roll footage. None of the eight videos chosen for this research include additional cutaway content.

Participants pointing to a lack of proof are suggesting that they, as viewers, have no reason to believe anything the vlogger is saying beyond what is presented at face value and the participants' perceptions of whether this speaker seems like they are telling the truth or not. As such, 'proof' is a missing factor that would help provide context as to which of the videos were user-generated and which ones were fictional. Arguably, this logic is only applicable to a degree given mimic vlogs could also feign 'proof' that helps back up the story. Nevertheless, it is certainly an interesting insight from the participants that the *lack* of some things within the text presents a problem in identifying content. In saying this, the participants also highlight one of the limitations of this research: that by watching the videos out of context, the participants must make snap judgement over the quality of

character of the speakers. Proof, by their logic, would help to provide more of a framework upon which to judge the speakers.

Jason spoke about the idea of proof while discussing the capacity of YouTube as a platform for storytelling. He spoke specifically about how YouTube facilitated the marrying of both audio and visuals for stories, suggesting that vlogs could do more to integrate footage that made the story more interesting. In doing so, he speaks to the concept of proof as he then turns this conversation to how he identified content.

> If you're showing a visual and you're saying something that goes along with it, that's great to me, right? But if you're just sitting there telling a story, you know “this crazy thing happened”, not that any of them were particularly crazy, but like you know “this thing happened” then you're not actually having anything to engage with or make sure that it's happened. So when you ask which one do you think is real or fake, it's very hard to tell because none of them have any actual visual aids to go with it. They'll sit there telling you a story. I can sit here and tell you a story, but you know, is it real? I don't have any proof. It could or could not have happened.

In his explanation, Jason shows how he values visual content on YouTube as well as the spoken content. This was a factor he highlighted when discussing whether YouTube is a suitable platform for storytelling. As such, his preference for visuals makes sense, and it is clear that he values having ‘proof’ to solidify a story. Similarly to Jason, proof and evidence were factors that Jenny considered. When discussing which videos surprised her by being either user-generated or fictional, Jenny spoke about ‘how does interior design work??’, which Jenny originally categorised incorrectly as a mimic vlog. When asked why the vlog being standard vlog surprised her, Jenny said:

> […] because again [Janice] didn't even show off the interior design. She kept going on and on about it and didn't even bother to show it off. Plus it felt a bit too short in order for her to like

> discuss as like her interior design and she didn't, like, she titled it interior design and didn't really discuss the interior design very much.

This indicates that Jenny expected Janice to include examples of what she had been working on while discussing the interior design, and the lack of those examples made the video seem unrealistic or unbelievable. William raised a similar point about Jack, from 'Jack's Vlog 2', and stated that Jack was not giving many "specifics about a medical degree" and that he "[didn't] believe he was a medical professional. He might just be a communication student." The discussion of proof, as mentioned by Jason, William, and Jenny here, occurs in tandem with discussion from participants pertaining to the authenticity of vloggers in general. Interestingly, William also describes Marian from 'Steady State' as an "English literature student trying to be normal", and says that it feels like she is throwing English literature lingo at him. He correctly identifies 'Steady State' as a mimic vlog.

The combination of proof and the earlier discussion of what it means to be authentic online led to a recurring discussion from participants about how 'real' vloggers are in the first place. This is a particularly interesting conversation to have while thinking about fictional content online, because it asks us to continue to consider who or what we consider to be real online. For William, the idea of someone being authentic online was a misnomer. He feels that regardless of whether the speaker in a video is a genuine vlogger or an actor playing a character, they are not real:

> I think people get sort of square-eyed, you know, they sort of slap themselves into the Internet and it's not real, it's not real content. The people that you're seeing are very virtual. They're not… This sounds a bit cooked, my apologies, but these people aren't real. Yeah, someone made it. They're right there. You're looking at them, but I've never met him before. They're not a person. They're not a tangible thing.

William's discussion here about the intangibility of people on the internet builds on the discussion about what it means to be authentic online, and if there is any real difference between fictional characters and standard vloggers. Proof is therefore important to consider, but what counts as proof online? Cutaway footage can quite easily be faked, and standard vloggers can embellish and influence their content as easily as fictional content can. As such, even including visuals to co-exist with spoken content poses problems in identifying fictional content. In videos without 'proof', participants must make judgements based on the spoken content and speaker's mannerisms alone. The desire for concrete evidence is in part to help minimise the shortcomings of using perception alone to identify content.

If authenticity is an act of perception, then how do online audiences establish trust? Having a 'connection' with a speaker does not guarantee an accurate perception of their character. Jenny's response to 'Jack's Vlog 2' is an excellent example of this as she considered herself to be very similar to Jack (a fictional character) and utilised this trust and affinity to suggest that his video was legitimate. Her affinity and trust were inaccurate signifiers of legitimacy in this situation. In contrast then, proof is seemingly a much more concrete way of determining whether or not something has occurred. In this sense, proof refers specifically to video footage that provides a visual account of the story that is being told by vloggers.

Participants express this desire for proof because they see visuals as a more trustworthy and solid way of determining if something happened or, at least, participants see visuals as a way of gathering more detail to judge. However, if we are to cast a critical eye over the perception skills of some audience members, viewers are not always adept at

noticing what is real or legitimate anyway. For example, in this study alone, the framing and mise-en-scéne of some videos was enough to make participants question whether a video was fictional because they deemed it to be too well put together (see: Jason's response to the Christmas tree in 'The Length of Time'). As such, it is likely that even if there was a visual account of events routinely included in vlogs, not only would mimic vlogs be able to emulate this part of the genre, but additionally some viewers may still question whether this was real for the standard vlogs as well. It also poses the question of whether including more detailed footage of a fictional event would actually lend *more* credence to the story if it was executed well. There is nothing to say that a fictional web series could not also include additional footage if they had the budget or access to stock footage in some instances, and by including these visuals, producers could indeed make the story seem more believable even if it is ultimately fictional.

It is redundant to think that if standard vlogs incorporated footage that proved an event happened that mimic vlogs would then not also be able to do the same thing. Producers of mimic vlogs are not genuinely hampered by the constraints of the format as it is. They could very well be making short films of any other nature if they wanted. Mimic vlog producers are actively choosing to utilise a particular format to tell a story in a particular way. Vlogging as a format is enticing to producers because it is relatively low budget, but also tells stories in such a way that the focus is on what is said rather than what is done. It requires good actors to pull off convincingly because the speaker is the pivotal and primary part of a vlog-style video. The nature of the format means that having a lead actor who can connect well with audiences is enough to make the story interesting.

Perhaps the only concrete 'proof' that fictional content can give online is to say that the content is fiction. Many of the participants pointed towards this method of verification as a solution. However, such an approach is also complicated by the construction of the content and the context it is viewed in. Primarily, the success of a verification system is limited because producers cannot ensure that all viewers will engage with a piece of content in the same way and there are differing paratextual elements included depending on where a viewer consumes a text. For example, watching a video on YouTube can provide audience members with ample amounts of contextual information if they engage with it, including things like the description of the video as written by the content producer, the title of the video, the name of the channel, the comments, and the tags. By comparison, if a user shares that same video in a tweet, the amount of paratextual context dwindles. Now only a portion of the video's description can be viewed without clicking through to the YouTube page for the video; the name of the user does not automatically appear, and the comments on the video are absent. The reduction in paratextual content changes the way people view the video, but audiences can still view the video itself in its entirety on the new platform.

Additionally, there are also ways to watch content on YouTube itself – such as inline playback on the homepage – that prevents the full inclusion of all paratextual information. Audience members can watch entire videos from the home page without ever clicking on the video. The amount and types of paratextual content changes on each platform that the video might exist on, and this means there are a number of different potential viewing experiences. As such, the potential solution of ensuring that all videos include a disclaimer in the description box is also not entirely effective. That said, it is still perhaps one of the easiest options to enact for well-intentioned producers and contributes to a breadcrumb-like trail approach to labelling content in that following the content back to its source will

ultimately provide the necessary detail. While we cannot ensure that all versions of the content will have this label available, if users want to confirm the nature of a video, they could potentially source it back to the original.

The impact of markers of fictionality is limited again by the fact that some viewers do not engage with those paratextual markers and limited further again by the viewing habits of some viewers who do not give videos their full attention to begin with, let alone actively check every video they watch to confirm its fictional statue. An alternative to creating a paratextual marker would appear to be placing a marker of fictionality within the text itself. For example, a text could include a banner that includes something akin to “this is a work of fiction”. However, even in this instance, this marker could be missed. For viewers like Jenny who routinely only listen to YouTube content while multitasking, this marker of fictionality would be redundant. It is extraordinarily difficult to ensure that all potential viewers engage with all pieces of a text and its paratexts.

There are problems here with enforcing implementation as well. Well-intentioned producers are likely to include these kinds of markers, but those who are creating replica content as a means to create a fully immersive experience might be less inclined to include these kinds of markers. Additionally, people who are creating content that is more nefarious would not want to include them at all, or may do so in a way that minimises contact with a label (such as creators who include labels like “this video is for comedic purposes only” in the description box in lines which can typically only seen if the box is expanded). Equally, creating an accepted standard of labelling content is hard to enforce in online spaces that feature user-generated content and a number of the creators of replica content are amateur producers. If we think about replica content as including things like fanfiction and

fanart, then needing to label every piece of fan made content as fictional seems to be overstepping the mark as to what is necessary and also what is achievable. Not every user who posts on Tumblr is going to label their work and equally, we cannot guarantee that every amateur mimic vlogger will label theirs.

The viewing environment is also a context. By not being able to control the mouse during the controlled viewing experience, participants had less context than they might have if they had watched the videos at home. For participants who normally multi-tasked, trying to watch the videos intently is different to what they would normally do, and in turn changes the context. The lack of existing rapport with the vloggers is another context. Context changes every time audience members consume content. It is also worth reiterating that the factors participants did or did not notice in the lab environment does not necessarily reflect what they would or would not notice in a typical viewing. For example, participants who usually multitasked may have paid more attention to the videos than they normally would if they were to have these videos on in the background at home.

A compounding factor that further complicates the concept of proof is the way that other audience members interact with the text. While the viewing method constrained the amount of paratextual audience interaction the participants could take in, it is still useful to discuss what they may have encountered. When audience members do engage with stories as though they are real, this can add a level of confusion for viewers who may be unsure if what they are looking at is legitimate. Audience engagement with kayfabe lends credence to the idea that a story is in fact real. Below are three screenshots of comments from the same video (Episode 84 *Ugh.*) in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* which indicate three different types of engagement with the text. The first (Figure 15) is an example of an audience member who is

actively engaging with kayfabe by directly addressing the fictional character of Lizzie. The second (Figure 16) is not directly addressing a character but can still contribute to kayfabe as it is making an in-world remark. Finally, the third comment (Figure 17) is an example of a viewer breaking kayfabe by making an overt reference to the fictional nature of the text by referencing the source material of the web series.

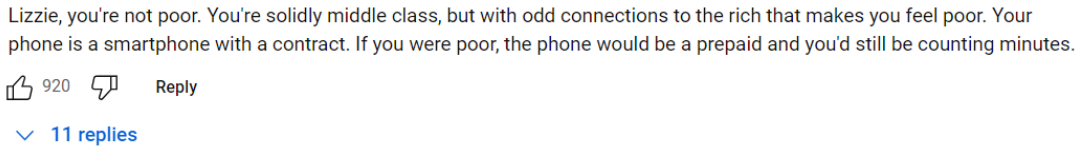


Figure 15 – An audience member conversing with Lizzie in a comment under episode 84 'Ugh' (The Lizzie Bennet Diaries 2013)

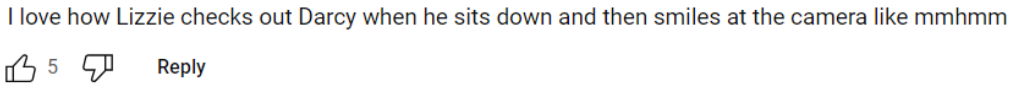


Figure 16 – An example of an audience member talking to other audience members (The Lizzie Bennet Diaries 2013)

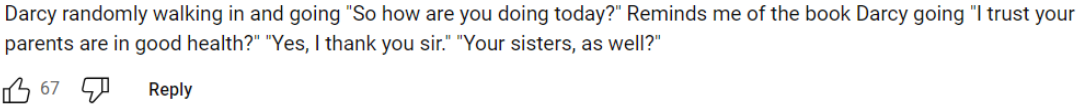


Figure 17 – Audience member breaking kayfabe by overtly referencing the source material (The Lizzie Bennet Diaries 2013)

These comments show how kayfabe can work in practice in online spaces that are not related to wrestling. Equally, the combination of different types of comments from audience members, with some leaning into kayfabe and others actively deconstructing it, highlights that audiences will engage with the texts in different ways. Understanding that mimic vlogs can be a space for play for audience members who are 'in the know' is important in

acknowledging that there are levels of decoding that must be undertaken by newer viewers who are not only engaging with the text itself to decide if it is fictional, but also other users and their paratextual elements that contribute to the reading of the text.

6.4 Body Language

Given the lack of proof provided through extra audio-visual content in the videos, participants needed to utilise other factors to help guide their perceptions of the speakers. Body language, and in particular eye contact, was a factor highlighted during Stages 2, 3 and 4 of the sessions. Given the framing of most vlogs tends to be mid-torso and up (mid shot), it is not surprising that most of the discussion around body language focused on things like eye contact and hand gestures. Eye contact in particular was noted as an indicator of perceived truthfulness, but also occasionally a point of discomfort for the viewer. It is essential to note here that eye contact (and other body language) is culturally specific, and thus various cultures and people have differing norms related to non-verbal communication. The participants' discussion relating to the body language and eye contact as indicators of truth is relevant to their own experiences, and may be different from other viewers.

With regard to perceived truthfulness, eye contact (or lack thereof) was perceived to be an indicator that a speaker was lying. William for example, said the following:

> After watching the videos and looking back at those videos, I feel like the tell-tale sign of either someone bullshitting or telling the truth would be if they just dart their eyes across the room. Like, they're not actually telling you the truth because they don't want to confirm that it's not real. […] You could tell in their eyes. And you see that in real life as well, people will not tell you the truth and they'll just look around.

William's interrogation of eye movement and eye contact is an example of utilising body language as an indicator of truthfulness to help inform readings of the speakers within the videos. Allie also mentions eye contact and movement in discussing 'truthfulness', and this interacts with the notion of scripting in an interesting way. Allie suggests that the drifting of the eyes could be related to both "thinking about what they were saying next" or "looking directly at a script". In highlighting how eye movement added to truthfulness, she said:

> It was sort of the way they looked at the camera a few times as well. I felt like if they were sort of – I guess what I'm doing now – sort of drifting their eyes off to the side but not looking at anything in particular. And then looking at the camera when they finished their sentence. That felt sort of more like a conversation.

The eye movement in this scenario reads as more natural to Allie, as it contributes to a sense of spontaneity because it seems like the speaker is thinking about what they want to say.

In a similar vein, the discomfort participants identified around eye contact was primarily related to excessive eye contact. 'IS OATMEAL CEREAL?' in particular features direct eye contact from the speaker as well as slightly unusual framing wherein the camera is positioned at a higher angle[9], so that the speaker looks up slightly. Jenny specifically mentioned the camera angle in this video as being uncomfortable and off-putting. Given some participants felt that some speakers were speaking from scripts, there is the potential that participants were more acutely aware of eye movements within these videos as a means to identify if the videos were scripted or not, in turn affecting their perception of the eye contact. This awareness further highlights just how dependent participants were on scripting as an indicator of authenticity in these videos.

[9] The "MySpace Angle" as defined in Section 4.4.1.

Participants were also conscious of other types of body language. Jason was particularly critical of (or reactive to) Daniel from the standard vlog 'Everything Felt Great'. He commented on Daniel's framing, gestures, and use of his "good side", as Jason put it. Jason not only suggested that he thought Daniel was an actor because he routinely turned one side of his face to camera, but also said that the framing gave off a particularly professional look.

> Maybe he's got a lot of acting experience but not a lot of vlog experience. That could be true, but at the same time, it came off like he knew what he was doing. The camera was framed correctly the whole time, even to include his hand gestures, which were really wide but still within frame. Which if you were just doing a casual thing there's no way you would know to do that, because for most people their frame is say 20 centimetres away from their shoulder on each side. You wouldn't know to then put the extra 40 so you could do hand signals. […] But you know, again, someone could be filming it for him.

Jason incorrectly categorised 'Everything Felt Great' as a mimic vlog, stating in Stage 3 that Daniel's story was an "Over-exaggeration with too many edits". When it was eventually revealed to Jason that 'Everything Felt Great' was a not mimic vlog, he expressed disbelief saying: "I just can't believe there's someone like him". Jason had a particular dislike for Daniel and called him "self-absorbed" in the interview, and also heavily critiqued the content of the video. This is an example of where the likeability of the vlogger has an impact on the overall understanding of the video. Jason's selection of 'Everything Felt Great' as a mimic vlog reflects his desire for Daniel to not be a 'real' person purely on the basis that he does not like him.

In contrast to Jason's perception of Daniel, Connor liked Daniel despite referring to him as "the narcissistic dude". Connor used expression and body language as a method of

identifying how he felt about specific speakers. For example, Connor did not like Jack from 'Jack's Vlog 2' for the following reasons:

> He was just creepy. His sub communications were terrible. He shouldn't have passed the interview[10] and he started talking about dead bodies and he seemed to almost enjoy cutting them up because his emotional dispositions didn't change when he talked about them. Maybe that's why. And I guess just a lack of emotion in general. I feel like we don't trust people who aren't expressive. Maybe they're trying to hide something. And I guess I kind of like the narcissistic dude [Daniel] - he was just a good communicator. His communication skills are good. And the last girl Hayley was good. She had nice skin.

The "nice skin" comment indicated that Connor responded to the physical aspects of the female speakers (including multiple comments about make-up at other points in his session), while for the male speakers, he focused mostly on their communicative styles. However, through these observations, Connor provides insight into the ways that not only body language and physical details dictate how participants responded to particular videos, but how the emotion and expressiveness of the speaker also has an influence.

6.5 'Gut Feeling' and Plausibility

To this point in the chapter, these findings have explored issues with identifying standard vlogs versus mimic vlogs, or scripted versus non-scripted content, and has highlighted some of the methods participants used to identify these formats such as mannerisms, vocal style, editing, and body language. However, intuition was another tool that the participants indicated they used in determining the truthfulness of what they watched, even if they had mixed feelings over whether their intuition was reliable. Lauren

[10] Here Connor is referring to the interview aspiring medical students undertake as part of their application for medical degrees.

addressed the use of intuition most clearly in explaining how she tells the difference between someone who seems genuine and someone who puts on a persona for their video:

> I suppose you want a more detailed answer than just... gut feeling? I think like just intuition. Basically, how genuine it feels.

A number of participants identified intuition or 'gut feeling' as a method for identifying the content. Interestingly, this ends up being applied in more than one way. For example, some participants used 'gut feelings' as a reason *why* something was classified a particular way. Conversely, another participant's use of 'gut feeling' was equivalent to guessing and was utilised once the participant had confidently categorised most of the videos and then guessing the three that remained. Jenny originally identified 'The Length of Time', 'And So It Begins…' and 'IS OATMEAL CEREAL?' as being the most difficult to categorise as either standard vlogs or mimic vlogs. When asked which of the videos she felt she may have used gut feeling to identify, Jenny identified the same three videos. In this particular case, Jenny used gut feeling as a way to *guess* the answer, rather than gut feeling being a way of *knowing*. While this contrast is subtle, there is nonetheless a nuanced difference between guessing and knowing and as much as the phrase 'gut feeling' was used for both, in the instance of guessing, gut feeling here is more a stand in for "I had to pick one of the two options, and this one felt more correct" rather than "My innate response is telling me this is genuine". This reinforces some of the earlier work in Section 5.2 that suggests a lot of the time when participants state they used gut feeling, they could still identify a factor that led to a particular categorisation, such as whether it felt scripted. In this particular instance, gut feeling is more like intuition that, when prompted, can actually be explained by perceived factors. By contrast, gut feeling as guessing is a result of the absence of additional factors to guide a perception of the video, and so the participant just picks one of the two options.

Jenny listing gut feeling as why she categorised a video a particular way makes senses given that response feels more specific than her saying "I don't know" in response to the interview questions. Jenny may have felt saying "I don't know" was not a genuine option.

Intuition as a method for identifying content relates heavily to the idea of 'fluency'. The concept of fluency arises frequently when discussing the identification of content online particularly in regard to information disorder such as mis-, dis- and malinformation. Fluency speaks to the idea that details such as familiarity, repetition, and other factors provide 'evidence' in our brains as to whether something is truthful. Lewandowsky et al. state that "fluently processed information feels more familiar and is more likely to be accepted as true; conversely, disfluency elicits the impression that something doesn't quite "feel right" and prompts closer scrutiny of the message (Schwarz et al., 2007; Song & Schwarz, 2008)" (2012, p. 112). Lewandowsky et al. cite research stating that some "superficial characteristics" also influence people's judgement of truth, including typeset, rhyme, and accent (2012, p. 112). When combined with digital literacy (and a familiarity with genre conventions in vlogs), fluency allows participants to more accurately read the videos and reach conclusions based on these factors. The concept applies to information more broadly than just in online spaces or in relation to digital literacy, however it is readily applicable in these spaces. With regard to the research undertaken in this thesis, the idea of fluency is particularly pertinent. We might think about the ways that viewers rely on what feels familiar, or what does not 'feel right' as characteristics of fluency that the participants were using. Gut feeling is a form of intuition that participants frequently mentioned throughout the study, and is an example of information processed based on what 'feels right'. These factors function as mental short cuts that audience members use to help identify what they are looking at.

Perception also quite clearly links to the ideas around gut feelings and what aspects of the videos felt plausible to the participants. In the responses participants gave in the survey section of the study, there was a focus on words like genuine and its synonyms. These ideas, perhaps more obviously than scripting, are subjective. The use of the word 'feels' is particularly interesting. The contents of the video would 'feel' like something that was not true, or the participant would 'feel' the speaker was legitimate. This 'feeling' is a key example of relying on judgement and perception. It is also worth noting that participants' may have phrased their responses this way as they hesitated to commit to an answer because they did not know whether their answer was correct or not. However, what 'feels right' is entirely subjective. Equally, what 'seems' like something a vlogger would talk about is also subjective. There is something to be said about using this as an approach to considering content. Audience members who first started questioning *Lonelygirl15* cited elements of the videos that did not match the expectations of amateur content, such as the video looking "too slick" or "a little too well edited" (Burgess & Green 2018, p. 43). Utilising factors within the video to make judgements about the type of content audiences are watching requires audience members to use their media literacy skills to work out what something is. A feeling is often an indicator that something either does or does not meet the expectation. While feelings are rife for misinterpretation, that does not mean perception and gut feeling do not have a place in the process of interpretation. This facet would benefit from more emphasis when discussing approaches to dealing with seemingly real content; does this feel right? Why? Why not? How does it fit with what we, as audience members, expect from the content we are consuming? From there, viewers can engage with more specific examinations of texts to identify why a text does or does not seem as it should. Of course, feelings cannot be the only thing audiences should rely on given the capacity for

these perceptions to be inaccurate, but to completely discredit perception as a way to identify content is overzealous. There is a role here for fluently processed perceptions to be indicators to look more closely at texts.

There are many fluently processed factors that participants use to judge whether videos 'feel right'. In Chapter 5, I outlined how participants judged whether a story beat was plausible, and used that as a reason to categorise the video as either a standard vlog or a mimic vlog. Participants applied the concept of plausibility in two ways. Firstly, participants judged the videos based on whether or not the story in the video seemed like one that could feasibly happen in real life. For example, the discussion of a man eating bugs in 'Jack's Vlog 2' is the prime example of a point at which participants discounted the video based on the speaker saying something that seemed implausible. Lauren, for example, specifically listed 'And So It Begins…' and 'Jack's Vlog 2' as videos that, while watching them, she thought included content that made them implausible. Regarding 'And So It Begins…', Lauren said that some of the story elements did not seem real, such as the "aunt lesbian thing and her name", while for 'Jack's Vlog 2' she was "100 percent sure it was not a real story", but said that Jack seemed like he was still him, a real person, but he was making up a story for his viewers while 'And So It Begins…' seemed weirder to make up.

Alternatively, participants judged plausibility on whether or not what vloggers said felt like something that people would share online. The plausibility here is less to do with the story beat, and more to do with disclosure online. 'Jack's Vlog 2' fits as an example here again, this time because Jack claims to be a medical student, and participants judged his discussion of private patient matters as something that a vlogger would not share online. Other examples of this include Michael using his judgement about whether or not the

content of the story in ‘And We’re Back!’ felt like something that people would share online. When asked why he felt ‘And We’re Back’ was a mimic vlog, he stated:

> It didn't feel like something people would do, you know, or like information you would necessarily share. Because whether it's relevant or not, telling us about her girlfriend and “we'll have to get her into the vlog” and telling us about this dorm room... I don't know, there was nothing that I could really put my finger on.

In this example, Michael suggests that some types of information do not feel like something that someone would share online. Connor pointed to ‘Steady State’ as an example of a video that was peculiar in its choice of topic, because he felt that the speaker should be getting ready for the party, rather than filming a video before she went. Michael also stated that the premise of ‘Steady State’ is a person preparing for something that *will* happen rather than something that *has* happened struck him as a bit odd for a vlog. He suggests that vlogs are, or should normally be, more retrospective than they are pre-emptive; a response to an event rather than a lead up to one. Connor also suggested that there was a shift in production quality between ‘Steady State’ and ‘Jack’s Vlog 2’ which he considered to be an indicator that something had changed. Such comparison is also an important reminder that in this exercise, and in watching videos outside of this research, viewers are never watching a video in isolation. Comparisons between videos and creators are very normal, and utilising these comparisons can be useful for identifying when something does not feel right, but equally does not guarantee that the comparison will be fruitful.

There are, of course, norms regarding what types of information people share in online spaces, and some of these are explicit boundaries set by particular individuals, and others are more opaque, widely understood norms. These differ culturally and depend on

the individual. What one vlogger might shy away from, others might feel perfectly comfortable sharing. With that in mind, this type of plausibility is once again an act of perception and evaluation, rather than a concrete measure by which to judge videos. Different viewers will have different expectations of what is taboo in online spaces depending on their own values and their previous experiences with content creators online.

There was an awareness from some participants that something was not quite right, but they did not necessarily take this for something being fictional. If the participant did think it was fictional, they thought it was fictional in the sense that the speaker was potentially trying to be funny, was embellishing their persona, or was not being very smooth in trying to appear authentic. Lauren discussed the idea of people "putting something on" in the videos quite a lot. For example, regarding authenticity, she said that she thought a number of the speakers were not being very authentic and did not seem natural, but she assumed that they were just vloggers who were embellishing their persona, rather than characters. Jason also said that many of the speakers came across as inauthentic people. As such, the participants still viewed the videos as being a step away from a fully scripted production with actors. Therefore, it appears that, for these participants, the innate assumption watching these videos was that the videos were standard, user-generated vlogs. Even when a speaker came across as inauthentic, the participants tended to rationalise them as still being a regular person as opposed to a character. It appears that the participants assume that videos on YouTube are authentic until proven otherwise. That said, it is difficult to determine whether the viewing environment (i.e., in a lab environment, with pre-determined curated videos) had an impact on this assumption.

Another type of fluently processed information that participants mentioned was accent. The participants' remarks about the speakers' accents and where they were from was an unexpected finding. In compiling the corpus, the videos were chosen to be similar in length, tone, language (English), and quality, however, the accents of the speakers was not something that I had consciously considered. The corpus included two British accents, one New Zealand accent, four American accents, and one hybrid accent (Janice from 'how does interior design work??' has even made a video about her hybrid accent).

Four participants pointed to where the speaker was from while discussing their reactions to the videos, with some participants using accent as a reason why they felt a particular speaker was more or less trustworthy. For example, Michael suggested that he found the American speakers less authentic but felt much closer to the speaker from New Zealand. Given all the participants were located in Adelaide, Australia, there is understandably a level of closeness and familiarity attached to the more culturally, linguistically, and geographically proximate New Zealand accent. Most of those who mentioned accents, or where someone was from, did so in the context of authenticity or how genuine they felt the speaker was. For example, Michelle said she felt deceived by Beatrice, the speaker from New Zealand in 'And So It Begins…':

> I definitely felt deceived by the New Zealand girl and it was purely her accent […] If she had any other accent I'd be like "this isn't genuine" but just because she had such a friendly accent, I was like "she can't be tricking me".

While this is a stereotype to assume that a person from New Zealand must be friendly or trustworthy, it does show that Michelle had an affinity for the accent and a trust in the

speaker, at least in part, because of her accent. Lauren also utilised stereotypes about where the speaker in 'Jack's Vlog 2', Jack, was from:

> So Videos 2, 3 and 4 felt like more awkward and stilted in a way, and that's what made them feel inauthentic, whereas even though 'Jack's Vlog' seemed made up, his delivery was a little bit better.
>
> ***CA:*** *Yeah that's interesting. Might just be the quality of actor and script and all that kind of stuff.*
>
> British accent maybe that's why? […] British people are always awkward so…

Lauren is pointing to both Jack's accent but also his communication style, which she preferred over the others. Michael also referenced where the speakers were from when expanded on his original response to his reaction to one of the American speakers by saying his reaction might just be a difference of culture. He then went on to compare it to Beatrice in 'And So It Begins…', who has a New Zealand accent, saying:

> I felt Beatrice was more genuine purely because, I don't know, it was more familiar and it's like a story I could relate to. Uhm. I'm not really sure – [it's kind of] ingrained […] It's just experience with people.

Conversely, however, Jason specifically mentioned that he quite liked watching Australian YouTube personalities, but when asked if this influenced his categorisation of 'And So It Begins…' and 'how does interior design work??' (a New Zealand accent and a hybrid accent) as standard vlogs, Jason stated that it had no effect. The reason that his statement about liking Australian YouTubers was particularly noteworthy however, was because it was contextually part of the discussion around trust with YouTubers, and existing relationships with the speakers. This implies that Jason feels a level of trust with those Australian YouTubers. Therefore, while the familiar accents of Beatrice and Janice might not have been

a major contributing factor, there is potentially something to be said about the influence of regionality and accents on viewer reactions to different speakers. Certainly, the focus of this research is not to understand how and why viewers react to different accents and people. However, accent was clearly a factor that was important to some of these participants. Additionally, as highlighted earlier in the discussion of fluency, accent is a factor that can affect fluently processed information, as such, accent can provoke participant responses to individual speakers.

This chapter has outlined the key responses to the videos included in the corpus, as well as YouTube as a platform. It highlighted that the participants generally had positive associations with YouTube, and defined authenticity on the platform in three keys ways. The different ways that participants define authenticity is also a key feature to understanding how they talk about what they consider to be genuine online, and the kinds of things that they were looking for while watching these videos. Further, in the absence of concrete proof, participants relied on subjective measures to determine whether the videos were fictional or not. This desire for proof is a wish for a more objective way to identify the videos but is ultimately not necessarily a solution that would work in every scenario.

7 POSITIONING MIMIC VLOGS

Moving on from how the participants identified the content, this chapter also builds from the Stage 4 interviews but specifically deals with the questions relating to mimic vlogs and replica content more broadly. As such, this chapter responds to RQ4; How do the audiences' perceptions of mimic vlogs fit into their wider opinions about other online replica content? The participants first explain their responses to finding out there were fictional videos including in the corpus, before discussing whether vlogs are trustworthy in the first place. Beyond this, I outline how participants considered mimic vlogs in comparison to other types of replica content and the role of production companies in making this type of content that replicates user-generated formats.

7.1 Response to Multiple Formats

I was intrigued to explore whether there was a consistent feeling amongst the participants regarding how they felt upon discovering that there was more than one type of video included in the corpus of videos. This was in part in response to Burgess and Green's assertion in *YouTube* (2018, p. 44) that *Lonelygirl15* "violated" the concept of authenticity associated with YouTube and user-generated content. Certainly, these participants were much less invested in the individual stories and people presented in these videos than fans of *Lonelygirl15* were, but I was still interested in finding out if any sense of 'violation' or deceit was felt on the part of participants either by the videos themselves or by me as the researcher not giving the participants all the information to start with.

Some participants expressed surprise at learning that there was more than one type of content included in the corpus of videos, with Lauren stating that:

> I wasn't expecting it at all and I guess when I was watching the videos there was some, like I said, that I definitely thought they weren't being very authentic.

Other participants said they were not *too* surprised because, as Michael said, “things seemed a bit fishy about them”. Both participants here noticed that something was a bit off, but Lauren explained this as simply inauthentic vloggers (a reaction discussed in Chapter 6), while Michael did not come up with an explanation. Lauren also stated that while she was surprised, she “wasn’t outraged or anything”. William said he “didn’t feel anything really”, while Jason said that he felt relieved upon finding out that some of the videos featured fictional characters, noting that, “some of these people come off so badly in the videos that you don’t want them to be that way in reality”. He also suggested that some of the speakers come across as self-centred, because their vlogs are quite boring in terms of the content, so for the vloggers to want to film themselves sharing that kind of content required a certain level of narcissism in Jason’s eyes.

Jason was not alone in this dislike for some of the speakers in the videos. William, for example, said he gave ‘And We’re Back!’ the benefit of the doubt when he was categorising the videos because he “didn’t want to believe someone was that boring with their dork friends”. William also stated he thought some of the speakers were “lame”. Interestingly, both Jason and William immediately followed their claims about the speakers being “lame” or self-centred by saying that at the time of watching, they would have believed these videos to be ‘real’.

7.2 Are Vlogs Trustworthy?

To consider mimic vlogs alongside content like mockumentaries and misinformation is to draw connections between the perceived trustworthiness and authenticity associated with vlogs and the perceived trustworthiness of documentaries and news. This connection prompts the question of whether or not the participants in this study considered vlogs to be a trustworthy or genuine form of media. Not every participant was asked this question, as it only came up with a few participants in response to their comments about whether there was any difference between vlogs and mimic vlogs.

Michael's response to the question of whether vlogs are trustworthy clearly links to the idea of proof. He stated that vlogs are trustworthy to a degree and that his trust comes with a few conditions. Primarily, he measures the videos on factors such as whether "they working on something", and gave an example of a car build series that he was following online. Michael noted that this series is a type of vlog, and that the vlogging is centred on the construction of a vehicle and the progress that is being made. Importantly, Michael states that "it's not like you can fake putting a car together" and so it "seems trustworthy and genuine" as opposed to someone "sitting in their bedroom talking about stuff that's happening that you could just make up". This statement is yet another example of a participant looking for some kind of evidence in the video that what they are looking at is legitimate, that there is some kind of expertise involved as well. Expertise and credibility are cited as being factors that can build trust between content creators and their audiences (Munnukka et al. 2019), such as beauty vloggers garnering trust because they show viewers they know how to use different products proficiently and seem to give genuine reviews and recommendations. Michael also stated that he did not have existing rapport with the

vloggers in the videos he watched during the exercise, which he felt impacted on his ability to consider them trustworthy:

> I think just watching a single video out of context I'm not likely to trust [the speakers]. But perhaps if they're something I've been indoctrinated in, I'd be like "Oh yeah, yeah, this is trustworthy."

Michael's choice of the word "indoctrinated" is quite an interesting one given the implications of believing something wholeheartedly and without criticism. The suggestion here is that not only are fans of content creators familiar with the speaker and aware of their presentation of themselves online, the fans are also blind to some of the ways that that presentation is constructed. The concept of familiarity with the speaker was discussed in slightly more detail in Section 6.2.3 with regards to Jenny being familiar with one of the vloggers.

Jason stated that he did not think that YouTube and vlogs are trustworthy media, but also said that trust is dependent on the person within the video and how audience members feel about them. Similar to Michael, Jason suggests that a catalogue of content from one particular person helps to establish trust. Jason gave the example of YouTuber Philip DeFranco – who hosts a news-style channel covering current events – and said that DeFranco's years of content helps Jason to feel he can trust him as a source of information and that if DeFranco was to post misinformation in an upcoming video, Jason would not know because he trusts the vlogs. Additionally, Jason stated that he did not have the same (or any) level of trust in the vloggers in the videos incorporated in the corpus. At this point, he went on to discuss his trust in Australian vloggers, as was outlined in Section 6.5.

William echoed the responses of both Michael and Jason, initially stating "no" in response to the question of whether people in vlogs are being genuine, before qualifying his

answer and saying that it depends on who you watch. To William, as established by his comments included in Section 6.3, vloggers in videos are not real or tangible people. Following that statement, I asked William if there was anyone on the internet that he would give a number one (very authentic) authenticity rating to. William – like Michael – responded with a car vlogger by the name of *Uncle Tony's Garage*. William stated that this was someone who he has watched for years and William feels as though he knows the vlogger, and that his perception of Tony's authenticity is because William has watched him for so long. Despite this, William still said that this is not someone he considers to be 'real':

> He doesn't exist. He's just a thing on my screen. You know, he's a GIF with sound. Yeah, it's not real, but I talked about him like he's real. But I need to make that separation where it's like it's not real. He's divided, you know he's over in United States. It's the least bit relevant to you.

There is something to be said about understanding the difference between something that has a basis in reality, even if it is still a representation of something, and something that is completely fictional like a mimic vlog. Michelle makes somewhat similar comments to William, though is perhaps less blunt in her assessments. For Michelle, every piece of media is influenced by bias. She also highlighted that just because "something is non-fiction or a documentary doesn't mean it's real", which speaks to an awareness of documentaries employing 'false signifiers of reality', even if those are not the words Michelle uses. The ability to portray 'reality' in a particular way in non-fiction content led Michelle to state that she did not think mimic vlogs are any less genuine than 'genuine' standard vlogs.

Further, Michelle states that could see how these texts were interesting for the people who were creating them, and a good way to adapt and analyse existing literature, but personally did not find them that interesting:

> I just don't see the point of watching these kinds of mimic vlogs and I'm sure other people are entertained by it and you know, once you know, maybe it's that thing of once you know you're like, "oh, like I'm in the know I'm part of this little club so yeah, therefore I enjoy it" but... And, yeah even the ones that are like really obvious, like how I mentioned Miranda Sings[11] earlier, I never understood the hype behind that. Obviously, there is a hype behind that, and they are very popular, but for me personally I'm just not entertained.

Personal taste accounts for a lot in these discussions, and even the participants who identified that mimic vlogs are not a form of storytelling that is appealing to them noted that the concept of being 'in the know' is potentially an enticing factor for audiences who do like this kind of content.

While some of the participants grappled with whether it mattered if the speakers are real people, I argue that ultimately there is a distinct difference between an actor and a vlogger. At a functional level, these two formats *do* achieve the same thing for an audience member in that they both present a mediated version of some kind of event (only one of them definitely *did not* happen, and one of them has the capacity to be biased in its representation). There is, of course, a very real distinction between the formats because the 'legitimate' vloggers in the standard vlogs are not actors and do exist offline even if what they are putting online is considered an online persona. There is a difference between presenting a version of oneself that exists in an offline format and acting as a fictional character who does not exist outside of the text, or a vitafictional or cameo performance. A mediated, front stage persona is different from a fictional character portrayed by an actor.

[11] Miranda Sings is a parody character played by YouTuber Colleen Ballinger.

The portrayal of a person in a standard vlog has implications for that person in their everyday, offline life. What they have done and what they have said in a video, whether embellished or not, has the ability to reflect on them and continue to have implications on the way others perceive them. While there are some implications for actors who play characters in replica content (particularly those who are not well known before they begin the series), there is still the inbuilt ability to step away from the character they are playing. The actors have a life outside of and distinct from that of their characters. This ability to step away is not something afforded to standard vloggers.

In Section 2.4.3, I used Zoe Sugg as an example of how Goffman's dramaturgical theory works in practice for vloggers. In online spaces, Zoe Sugg performs roles of vlogger, sister, business owner, and more all under the umbrella of her online persona, which also exists under the pseudonym of Zoella. In that section, I stated that while Zoe is performing her persona online, that does not make it any more or less authentic necessarily than her offline persona. When considering whether standard vlogs and mimic vlogs are fundamentally the same, we should also consider the implications of these online and offline personas being linked. Despite utilising a pseudonym online, Zoe Sugg is intrinsically linked to her online identity of Zoella even when she is offline because Zoe *is* Zoella. She is vlogging as herself, rather than acting. What she says and does online under the username Zoella has an impact on what people think of her as Zoe, even if audiences understand that they are seeing Zoe's online persona in her vlogs.

Naming practices for YouTubers are intricate because the norms around use of real names, pseudonyms, and online identities have shifted over the years. These shifts are in part due to Google's changing policies regarding the use of real names on Google+ and,

subsequently, YouTube (Gibbs 2014; Deahl 2018). Where YouTubers utilise their real names, the perceived split between online and offline persona becomes even less overt. As for all celebrities, when lending one's name to a brand (Lieb 2018, p. 63), it becomes difficult to unpick that connection between the person and the product.

We can also think about the comparisons to vitafiction wherein "celebrities play fictionalized versions of themselves and these roles cannot be completely separated from who they are as real people" (Jacobsen 2020, p. 913). Vlogging is not the same as vitafiction, because the vloggers are not acting. Rather, vlogging is more akin to a celebrity appearance on a talk show. We can understand that the celebrities are appearing onscreen in this capacity as themselves, even if we understand it to be a polished 'front-stage' performance and where they are likely promoting a product such as an upcoming film. There is a level of performance happening, but the celebrity is still their own persona. A talk show appearance is different to the same celebrity appearing in a fictional piece of content wherein they are acting as themselves, in which case it would be vitafiction. This is different again to them appearing as a fictional character, which is distinctly different from themselves.

While we can understand YouTubers as mediated personas, there is still a clear link between what happens in online spaces and its impact on the person offline. As a point of comparison to Zoe Sugg and Zoella, Ashley Clements (the lead actress in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*) is not Lizzie Bennet, and she could move on once the series concluded despite lending her face, voice, and likeness to the character. The things Ashley says and does do not, and should not, affect Lizzie's character and equally, the things Lizzie does in the show should not affect how audiences perceive Ashley because Ashley is concretely not Lizzie. The divide between the two is much clearer. Therefore, when we think about the two

formats of mimic vlogs and standard vlogs, while there are ways that we can think of them as being similar, we must always remember that at there are differences in the nature of the presentation of the speaker at the very core of the videos.

Here it is useful to draw on similarities between the relationships both mimic vlogs and mockumentaries have with their 'factual' counterparts. Documentaries seek to "represent actual people, places, and events in a manner intended to leave viewers or listeners feeling that they have gained some insight into the subject matter" (Chandler & Munday 2020) and are somewhat based in fact, regardless of the framing or bias attached to them. Mockumentaries, by comparison, use parody of the genre to reflect fictional events by utilising a non-fiction format (Wallace 2018). Typically, the people depicted in documentaries are tangibly connected to the real-world version of that person[12], whereas the people depicted in mockumentaries are played by actors and do not have that same tangible connection. This disconnect between the actors and the character is the same as in mimic vlogs.

We can also consider the similarities between vlogging personas and reality television stars. As outlined in the literature review, while the spoken content of reality television is not scripted, producers have the ability to shape content into a narrative at will (Feuer 2018). This interference has implications for the people depicted in reality television as their onscreen persona is inherently linked to – and has an impact on – their offline perception. While what the contestants say is not scripted, it is at the producers' will to decide what is and is not included, and where. The producers' power then has the ability to

[12] Though notably this is not always the case because sometimes documentaries include portrayals of real people by actors in recreations. Equally, some mockumentaries include vitafictional performances and cameos.

shape the content, which in turn can reflect the people cast in the show in particular lights. For example, Abbey Chatfield's stint on *The Bachelor Australia* saw her given the 'villain-edit', who was there for the 'wrong reasons' as she was overtly sexually attracted to the Bachelor of the season, Dr Matt Agnew. Chatfield was also depicted as 'dim-witted' in an advert in the lead up to the season as a joke she made during her introduction to Agnew was framed as though she did not know what an astrophysicist was[13]. Here we can see that the way Chatfield was depicted in the show (and the surrounding paratexts) has the capacity to impact how the broader audience sees her as a person, even if she was deliberately edited to appear a particular way. This depiction is different to if Chatfield portrayed a dim-witted character in a fictional, scripted television show. The relationship here between onscreen depiction and offscreen identity is similar to that of vlogging personas online and offline selves.

There is certainly still some grey area for unknown actors who are playing original characters in mimic vlogs where it is not clear that the speaker is a fictional character rather than a vlogger. For example, we can compare Jessica Rose Lee, who plays Bree in *Lonelygirl15,* and Ashley Clements, the lead in *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. It was less clear to audiences that they should be treating Jessica as an actor who is separate to Bree because they did not originally know that Jessica was an actor. As such, the boundary between Bree's online actions and Jessica's offline existence was less overt because there was not an understanding that what a viewer thought of Bree is not what they should have thought of Jessica. However, once the show was revealed as fictional, Jessica was able to move on from the role of Bree. This differentiation is one of the reasons it is important to be able to

[13] Chatfield made a joke about astrology by saying she was a Gemini in response to Agnew introducing himself as an astrophysicist. The comment was made in jest, but the editing does not make this obvious.

distinguish between fictional and standard vlogging content. There are implications for the speaker in the video depending on the perception the audience has of them and their actions. However, this argument is equally true of all mimic vlogs where it is not clear to the audience that what they are watching is fictional. For example this argument is applicable to Ashley Clements in cases where the audience does not know that *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* is fictional, or does not know that Ashley Clements is an actress.

7.3 Mimic Vlogs in Comparison to Other Replica Content

Given how mimic vlogs fit into a wider umbrella of content that replicates existing formats, I asked participants to list other media that might replicate types of content. This question caused some confusion, as I intended for the participants to list examples of media formats (such as parody videos or mockumentaries for example), and some participants listed physical objects and other participants listed specific text examples rather than genres or formats. Despite this, the answers are still quite interesting, and they reveal how the participants' thoughts correlate.

Participants listed other forms of replica content including satire (William and Allie), mockumentary and reality TV (Allie), deepfakes (Connor) and parodies (Jason). Jenny suggested advertisements for fake products and spoofs, and Michelle stated 'IS OATMEAL CEREAL?' reminded her of an early 2000s music video because of the "edgy angle". Jason listed sketches, in particular political sketches, as a comparison. Political sketches were of particular note to him because they draw from current, real world events. There is a link here between political sketches and mimic vlogs, because the sketches often look to imitate standard content such as news reports or press conferences.

Allie specifically pointed to parody or impostor Twitter accounts such as those discussed in Section 3.2, listing completely fake accounts (her example was right wing trolling accounts run by those who did not actually care and were just trying to stir others up online) and those impersonating real people. Allie also discussed formats "like *The Office* that replicate completely mundane things in life" and how those formats exaggerate the stories the longer they go on but are still based on everyday life. She clarified that by this, she meant mockumentary style workplace sitcom television rather than reality television, but equally stated that she thought reality television was analogous to mimic vlogs because she felt there was an interesting opposition between normal people in reality television trying to act a particular way to put up a front compared to actors in mimic vlogs trying to act like a normal person. This is quite an interesting observation from Allie, in part because it highlights the similarities and differences between performing in different spaces and in different senses of the word. In reality television, the manicured impression built by a contestant is more akin to a front stage performance. In contrast, the actors in mimic vlogs are performing a much more distinct character and are 'acting' in the traditional sense of the vocation. Additionally, Allie notably expressed an affinity for mundane or banal content in vlogs, and so there is a link here to a preference for television shows that are grounded in a relatable scenario such as office places. It appears her preference for this kind of content is true across formats.

Like Allie, Lauren also discussed impostor Twitter accounts and stated that she considered there to be a difference between fictional accounts and impostor accounts that are actively trying to replicate a celebrity. Regarding identifying content, she also stated:

> It's very contextual, because even pretending to be a real person, sometimes they're completely and obviously fake. But even then,

> what I think is obviously fake, someone without the context might not know it's fake.

Lauren acknowledges that what appears obvious to some might not be for others, but she feels that some content is more obvious that other content. Her observations about the differences between viewers is supported by the discrepancy in success between the participants in this study.

Michelle said that 'IS OATMEAL CEREAL?' in particular reminded her of an edgy, early 2000s music video because of the angle. She also spoke about a specific Christian YouTuber who Michelle thought had a similar vibe to some of the speakers in the mimic vlogs because the vlogger's content seems scripted. Michelle pointed to the fact that the vlogger and her husband take turns speaking as being an indicator of scripting in those videos. This example is noteworthy because it is not necessarily an example of replica content (i.e., it does not explicitly replicate an existing format) but it does highlight that there are standard vloggers uploading vlogs on YouTube that come across as heavily scripted. As such, it helps to explain why some participants might have a difficult time identifying when something is scripted or might categorise a video as a standard vlog even when the participant can identify that it is scripted.

In contrast to some of the other participants, Michael compared mimic vlogs to a non-media format initially. He first listed "Gucci handbags" as an example of something that actively seeks to replicate something. Here, he actually means imitation handbags that replicate the name brand. He then went on to draw from his experience as a jeweller, stating:

> In my job for instance, I'm a jeweller, so people will often come in and want a design that they've seen on a billboard or on Pinterest

> or something and they want me to replicate that. So yeah, there's a lot of that. […] In terms of media... I think on YouTube itself there's a lot of parody videos. A lot of things that I know people recreate something like TikTok. It's like these trends start and they keep perpetuating and it ends up being something different at the end but it's only through minute sort of steps – remediation.

Remediation plays an important role in how content develops in these online spaces. This occurs as both the result of peer-to-peer remediation or meme-ification of content but also as a result of the platforms creating spaces that allow for remediation of formats and mediums. Michael further discussed the role of replication in his job as a jeweller in more detail when discussing if mimic vlogs do something similar to other replica content like deepfakes. He said:

> I suppose it's in the wording, isn't it? Mimicry. It's what they're trying to do. They're trying to decipher the idiosyncrasies of all these people and what they're doing in their vlogs and trying to replicate it so it looks like that other stuff. And this comes back to my work, someone will come in with a ring or a picture of a ring and say, "I want this". Yeah I can make it, I can make it look *exactly* like the other product. But it's not the other product, it is something else. It's something different, and whether that's less genuine? I don't know. It just doesn't have the brand name.

While the comparison to imitation products was not necessarily a media-centric example, Michael's understanding of mimic vlogs through his own work still highlights some key thinking. There are links here between this kind of replication and representation of authenticity. Mimic vlogs, while they have the look and feel of a vlog, are not vlogs. They are something different. However, as Michael questions here, does that make them less genuine? It depends on the ways that we think about genuine. If we only consider genuine to be 'true' or 'real' or 'non-fiction', or are only comparing it to something that is user-

generated, we might say no, mimic vlogs are by-design disingenuous. They are not what they appear to be. However, if we compare mimic vlogs to media that also replicate content, does that answer change? Mimic vlogs might not be considered disingenuous if the text is quite clear that it is fictional.

There is a debate here in whether it matters if something is fictional (or indeed an imitation product to use Michael's example). If the audience is entertained and happy with what they are consuming then perhaps it does not matter. There is certainly an ethical question at the crux of the matter, particularly with regard to the omission of truth and the intentions of the producers. Interestingly, Michael himself states that he wants to know what he is watching, which suggests that yes it does matter if something is real or not. The participants in this study, for the most part, expressed a desire to know what they were consuming.

To return to the through line of this section – how audiences perceived mimic vlogs in the broader context of replica content – I asked participants whether they thought that mimic vlogs did something similar to the other forms of replica content that they identified. This question was to understand if participants consider mimic vlogs to fulfil a similar role as other formats and media that they consider to replicate content. Participants continue to bring their own unique perspectives to this answer, in part because they listed different formats, media, and items as being examples of replica content.

Michael, following his response about his jewellery business outlined above, said that he thinks imitation jewellery and the media formats of parody do relate to mimic vlogs, because there are what he called "signifiers of authenticity" at play. Additionally, Michael said that "putting mimic vlogs in first person goes towards that effect" of creating the

authenticity. The implications here is that telling a story online and in first person helps establish that sense of closeness which has been identified as one of the key markers of what makes vlogs seem so authentic.

Allie reflected on the examples of fictional and impostor tweets suggesting that they are quite similar to mimic vlogs. She gave the example of 'Steady State' (part of the retelling of *Robin Hood*), saying it was "almost similar to pretending to being a celebrity online and creating their perspective of things in the stories". She thought there were quite a few overlaps, and that it is "just a different medium of doing it". When asked to compare the mimic vlogs to mockumentary content like *War of the Worlds* Allie said this was again similar but also states that it makes her "a little bit uncomfortable when they don't make it clear it's a [fictional] story". Her reasoning for why it makes her uncomfortable was because of the potential for people to misinterpret the content:

> I guess it's the whole – I hate the phrase – but more fake news kind of thing. People misinterpreting information on the internet and in general, and them not being able to pick out when something's completely false versus real. This sort of thing where it's completely innocent storytelling, when it's down to an individual, I think is fine. But when it starts to overlap into events in real life or say a real life celebrity like Taylor Swift or something, that makes me quite uncomfortable.
>
> ***CA:*** *So whether like boundary between what's real and what's fake is kind of really blurry?*
>
> That's it, yeah. When it's completely harmless things that don't change someone's view of the world or anything, I feel it is fine, but as soon as it starts to affect real people or be about real people or real events then I get a bit uncomfortable with it.

Allie speaks here to the discomfort about there being an impact beyond the confines of the fictional piece. This is one of the turning points described by participants where there starts

to be potential harms associated with replica content. The ambiguity of the content and the appearance of truth are common factors that Allie has noticed in this content.

Lauren also compared mimic vlogs to fictional impostor tweets but had a slightly different focus in her response. For Lauren, the platform itself was of particular importance because she feels it influences how content is consumed:

> I think probably one of the biggest differences would be depends on what platform it's provided on, because I think YouTube is known for being user generated content, so there's kind of an automatic assumption that something is real or fake. I think you kind of go in with an assumption that things will be real to a certain degree, whereas if you're watching like a mockumentary on a different platform like Netflix or something, you're automatically more aware of what the content is.

Lauren and I also discussed mockumentaries and other replica content and some of the techniques that they use to construct authenticity during the interview, such as the news break-ins in *War of the Worlds.* Lauren compared this with her comments about the importance of the platform and suggested that “meaning is always generated with context”. She stated that the medium has an effect saying:

> If you're on YouTube watching vlogs, and you think you're watching real vlogs, then of course you're going to [think it’s real], that's going to be your immediate perception going in.

For Lauren, the links between these types of replica content is in the impact of the platform and the impact of the context in which audiences watch content as these factors shape how audiences make meaning.

Connor said that there are some similarities between mimic vlogs and other replica content, but did not seem particularly fussed by it. He said that there were probably some similarities between these mimic vlogs and mockumentaries like *War of the Worlds,* mostly

because without context the audience would not know what they were watching. At one point in his interview, Connor expressed that as soon as he found out that the mimic vlogs were fictional, he stopped seeing the speakers as real people and only saw them as characters. Therefore, the moment Connor discovered the videos were fictional acts as a turning point that provides him with a new perspective on the texts. This change in perspective is evidence of the impact context has on how audiences view speakers and how these views can change with new information.

William's perspective on mimic vlogs, standard vlogs, and the semantics of things being 'real' online continued in response to whether mimic vlogs relate to mockumentary and satire, stating:

> Unless they're actually highlighting a trope of the genre, it seems a bit pointless to do because … you're saying it's a mimic vlog, but you may as well just – well you call it that, but it becomes just a story vlog. Or not even a vlog. It's just story time, that's it. It's just people doing stories. It's people playing characters, you know, and that's a fictional narrative you can set it up with like a vlog style which is fine, but the call to mimic vlog is pointless to me because it's like-
>
> ***CA:*** *Why is it pointless?*
>
> Well, what is there to say about vlogs? I mean they're recounts of some people's day and if you want to put on a character then you're just doing a story. A vlog is something that happened. So a mimic vlog isn't a mimic vlog. You're just telling stories.

William's distaste for the semantic labelling of the vlogs is ultimately not very constructive. Fundamentally, we know that mimic vlogs are stories and that naming them after the genre they replicate is not as challenging as William is insinuating. Calling a story that takes place on the radio a radio drama is not a disservice to the idea of dramas, instead, it is merely situating the particular type of story audiences are dealing with. What William's thoughts

here do speak to, however, is the intricacies of considering people online to be representations of themselves. William has said at other points that people in vlogs "aren't real people", and by this logic, those people are also characters. As such, the categories of fiction and reality are blurry for William enough that the differences between the formats are minimal.

Jenny did not consider mimic vlogs to be similar to other types of replica content, primarily because of the difference in scope and focus. She suggested:

> Vlogs are basically just telling your life story and solely about you, whereas for the documentary it's about a current event that affects more or slightly either a more communal or global scale.

Jenny also notes the point at which videos would transition to being more like other replica content would be if the topic of the vlogs started to have more of an impact, such as if vloggers were doing "sketchy video essays on coronavirus", which she claimed would be similar to mockumentary. Michelle similarly suggested that mockumentaries directly parody conventions of the genre of documentary, rather than adapting other specific media or literature content like mimic vlogs do. She also suggested that parody music content, such as *The Lonely Island,* is referencing music of particular genres. For Michelle, the point of mockumentaries and parody music is that they *are* a parody, and that the joke is in understanding what the content is and how it is utilising the genre's conventions. Michelle considered mimic vlogs to be too close to the original format they are mimicking in comparison to other types of replica content. She compared it to an existing piece of parody content:

> *What We Do In The Shadows,* the Taika Waititi film, that just can't possibly be realistic and I think that is similar to 'Jack's Vlog 2' where he's talking about like the man eating bugs and revealing

> his name and stuff, and I'm like that just can't exist in the real world. Whereas the others don't seem to make a-? I guess the others are more like *Modern Family* – like it's called a mockumentary and obviously we know it's fake, but that could exist in a real world. There's nothing there that can't exist in reality.

This comparison ties into some of the discussion around the idea of plausibility as an indicator of truth in some of these videos which was explored in Section 6.5. In this instance Michelle identifies some of the implausible aspects of 'Jack's Vlog 2' and compares that with a mockumentary about supernatural beings. Comparatively, the other mimic vlogs in the corpus have fewer markers of implausibility. However, these videos still do not necessarily fit with the types of information people typically discuss online, and some participants still used the implausibility of what was discussed as a factor in categorising the videos. The more outlandish a piece of replica content is (at least in this regard) the more obviously it points to the norms of the genre. Additionally, for Michelle, there is no point in a text being an adaptation unless it is obvious to the viewer.

An example of a particularly outlandish mimic vlog (though is also a DIY make-up tutorial) is "Sarah's Channel" which was a series of YouTube videos produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 2019 (ABC TV & iView 2019). The videos were posted to the ABC's YouTube channel which had been renamed as "Sarah's Channel" for the project, and features a vlogger 'Sarah' who uses increasingly wild 'products' for her make-up during the apocalypse, such as melted sleet (notably strained through a piece of fabric) and ash mixed with saliva. An actress, Claudia O'Doherty, portrays 'Sarah' and the video is completely fictional. The video is very much in the style of a vlog/make up tutorial but appears to be so over-the-top that the implausibility of the content soon makes it clear (to

most audiences) that the video is a parody of the genre. Hyperbole and exaggeration are hallmarks of satire, which in turn, goes hand in hand with parody. Hutcheon's (1985) definition of parody as being a result of intertextual references and ironic inversion is in clear effect in these videos, and while Hutcheon argues humour is not necessary for successful parody, the effect of the exaggeration in this video functions to add comedic elements regardless.

Jason also listed parody in his examples of other types of replica content. He stated that mimic vlogs (at least the ones included in the corpus) are "made well enough that [he] didn't even get that they were a thing", stating that until it was mentioned that there was no part of him that considered them to be unreal apart from the last video (though this was a standard vlog) and even then, the thing that caught his attention was a preview of a different video that plays at the end. Ultimately, when comparing mimic vlogs to other forms of replica content that he listed (primarily parody and political sketches), Jason said it's "definitely harder to tell that [mimic vlogs are] a parody". Interestingly, Jason rationalised his own way through this by proposing that this might be because he does not watch many vlogs (in particular, not these confessional, video-diary style vlogs) he resultantly does not know much about how they are made, or the tropes of the genre. Additionally, Jason tied his reasoning here back to some of his earlier comments that indicate a desire for 'evidence' in vlogs:

> I think [mimic vlogs are easier to fake] because they don't require a lot of production. Let's say I wanted to fake... I don't know, let's say I wanted to do the vlog, but I was going to take the vlog skydiving with me right? That requires a lot of production right? It's a lot harder to fake. Whereas just talking to a camera becomes more about the person, less about the actual video. I

was analysing it heavily based off what the video was.

Jason's response is similar to Michelle's in a number of ways. The focus is on parody, and it is apparent in both participants' answers that they believe audiences should know that a parody is a parody. For Jason, however, this comes across in that desire for clear evidence that helps support whether something has happened, and Jason's success in identifying content is also muddied by his lack of experience with the genre.

Thinking about replica content more broadly, a number of the participants expressed that harm may occur where real people are involved as this presents a turning point towards tangible, rather than intangible, harm. This is a significant finding as it highlights why it is important that audience members understand what they are viewing. The involvement of real people (typically celebrities in the participants' examples) in fictionalised content presents as a moment where what is said and done in the otherwise 'harmless', entirely fictional replica content has the ability to cause harm with a clear consequence for those involved. This potential for harm offers a point of interest in comparison to the argument presented earlier regarding the difference between standard vloggers and actors. In replica content that mimics real people, there *is* a link between the fictional content that has been produced and the offline person represented in the content. What is said and done in the fictional text *does* have an impact on the person whose voice and likeness is co-opted. Take for instance, the examples of fan-created content about celebrities. Here, the fictional content has the potential to cause real harm for the people involved and it is more complex for audiences to create the distinctions between what is real and what is not. While Lantagne argues that online stories featuring real people are engaging with "obvious […] fictional play" (2016, p. 58) and that audiences know that the

fanfiction version of the celebrity is not an accurate depiction of the actual celebrity, there is still a link that is not as distinct as that between an actor and a completely fictional character. Equally, content that impersonates real people has the capacity to misled people (such as impostor tweets). The similarities to vitafiction once again come to mind here. The celebrities involved in vitafiction, by contrast to other replica content, tend to have an input in the mimicking of themselves as they are involved in production. Celebrities whose likeness is used in fanfiction and other replica content including deep and cheap fakes are not afforded this same involvement. In entirely fictional content, the lack of a link to an offline identity helps protect people from some forms of tangible harm.

A recent article from *The Cut* examines the use of celebrities as 'faces' for fictional work (i.e., where a person's likeness is used to represent a fictional character in a book) and discusses the impact of fans' use of celebrities for fictional purposes. In the article, González-Ramírez (2023) utilises the example of a Canadian ice hockey player, Alex Wennberg, who recently expressed discomfort with what he and his wife labelled sexual harassment from the fans who adopted Wennberg as a 'face' for the fictional works. This exemplifies the impact of 'face-claiming' real people for fictional content, particularly in circumstances where someone has not leant their likeness to works in any formal capacity. Certainly, the use of people's likeness beyond the original text is problematic in some circumstances (i.e., perhaps some actors are uncomfortable with their likeness being extensively used in fanworks), but fans using people who never expected to be in these fictional settings at all (such as sports people) adds an extra layer of ethical concerns.

Some content creators have been working to unpick the expectations that audiences have of them. An example of these content creators includes singer/songwriter YouTuber

dodie who has released a song called “Parasocial Promise” as well as Instagram stories discussing the impact of parasocial relationships (Figure 18, below). Discussion around parasocial relationships (as explored in Section 2.4.4) has become increasingly common as creators and audiences become more aware of the concept, with many creators actively discussing what the relationships are and how they have an impact on how audiences perceive the content. In this sense, content creators are increasingly telling audiences what they are looking at online is produced and that it is a representation of events and a persona as crafted by a person. The graph below (Figure 19) shows Google search trends for the term ‘parasocial’ since 2004, on a scale of frequency with 100 being the highest frequency over time (as distinct from number of times searched). Since 2020, searches for the term have increased drastically, spiking in September 2023, and this reflects a growing understanding of the concept in popular culture.

Interestingly, this discussion of parasocial relationships can play into the idea of vloggers being vulnerable and ‘being themselves’ as a means of establishing authenticity. By highlighting that what audiences see is only a version of the vlogger’s life, vloggers can add to the perception of authenticity because they are acknowledging that there are limitations to what they share.

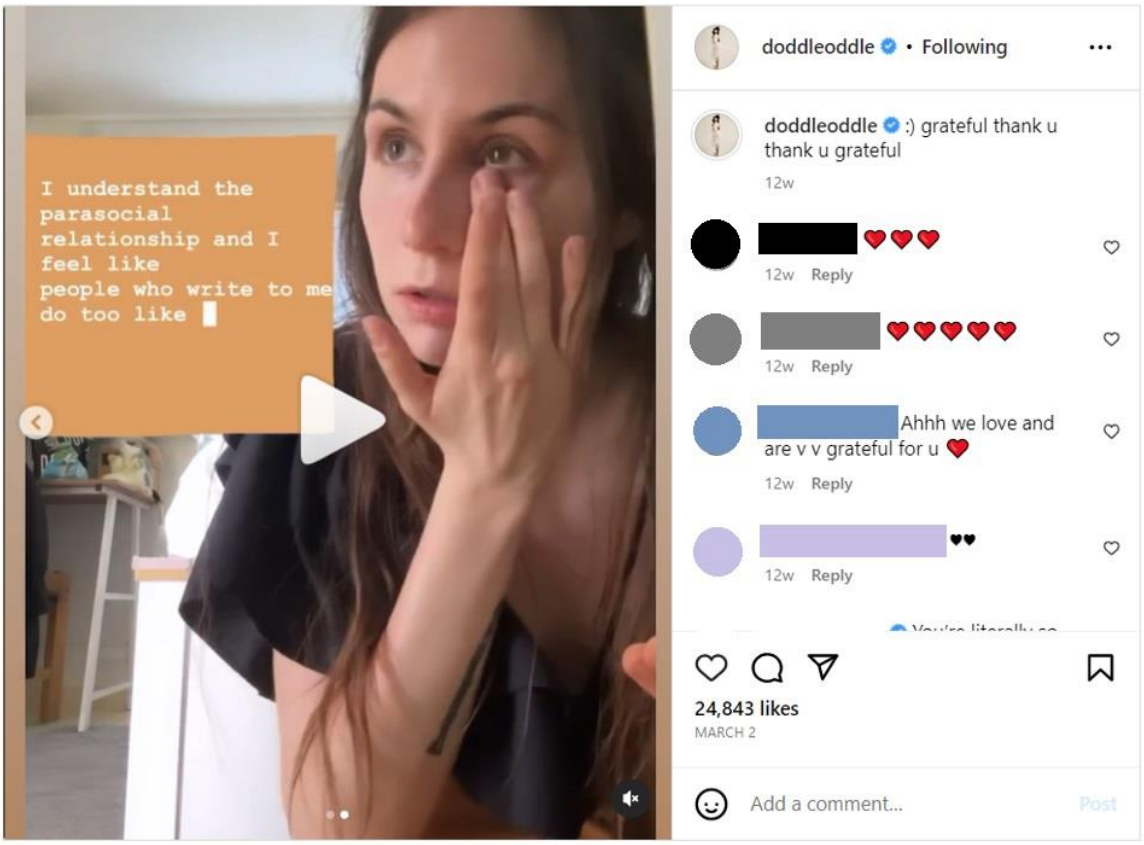


Figure 18 – Example of dodie discussing parasocial relationships

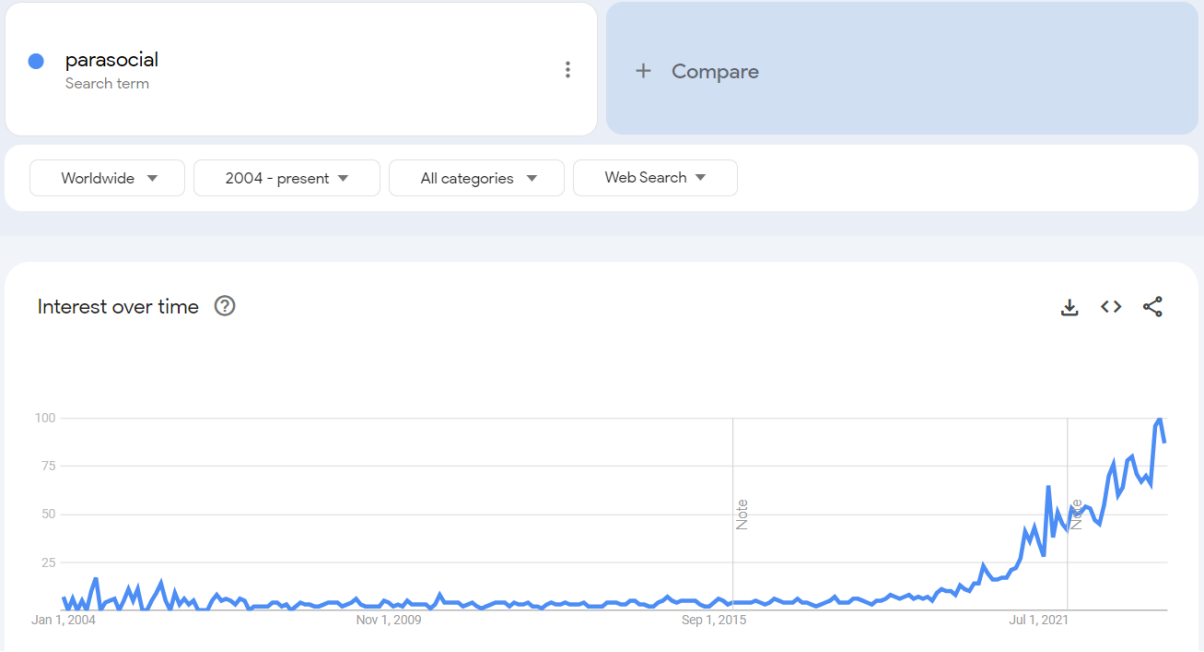


Figure 19 – Google Trends chart of worldwide search frequency for the term 'parasocial' since 2004. Image retrieved 22nd of October 2023

The awareness that vlogs are mediatised representations of an online persona is what causes participants to consider standard vlogs to be the same as mimic vlogs. The participants who felt that the two formats are functionally the same are not entirely incorrect, as indeed both of the formats feature mediatised speakers. Therefore, there is no denying that this is a valid way to think about these videos. The harms associated with misunderstanding fictional content are not necessarily limited purely to fiction, and harm as one of the participants pointed out, real people (i.e., standard vloggers) have the same capacity to cause harm. Bearing all of this in mind though, I argue that there are still clear differences between the two formats due primarily to featuring real versus fictional people, and it is important to acknowledge the way the formats are similar and dissimilar in order to have a meaningful debate about their impact.

At this stage, it is important to emphasise that not all of the participants considered mimic vlogs and standard vlogs to be functionally the same. In fact, the majority of them dealt with the formats as two separate entities. Either way, the discussions overall focused on the videos as a form of content that replicates an existing one so even if we think of them as presenting similarly, the interviews still primarily dealt with the videos as a point of comparison to a wider media landscape. From here on, I will continue to discuss the formats as primarily disparate forms.

Returning to Burgess and Green's assertion that "*Lonelygirl15* violated the ideology of authenticity associated with DIY culture" (2018, p. 44), the violation depends on authenticity being the expectation. As discussed earlier, for some of the participants, there was an understanding that vloggers were not necessarily exactly as they appear in their videos. This understanding positions audiences as no longer having that same expectation of

authenticity. By this logic, participants are not expecting YouTubers to be quite as authentic as audiences used to perceive them to be, which in turn influences their opinions about fictional speakers. Burgess and Green's above statement is true of YouTube and its audiences at the time of *Lonelygirl15*'s release, and they note that "*Lonelygirl15* marked a new phase of ambivalence with respect to authenticity, intimacy, and branding. Authenticity (even when it is performed reflexively or ironically) has remained fundamental cultural logic of YouTube" (2018, p. 44). *Lonelygirl15* was a turning point in how audiences understood content on the platform, but in the time since there has certainly been a greater comprehension of the ways in which content on the platform has the capacity to take many different forms. YouTube has shifted culturally both in regards to content and user expectations over time. The platform now hosts a significantly wider scope of content, the content itself has shifted, and YouTube is much more a part of the cultural norm than it was in 2007.

At this stage, it is worth continuing the discussion of harm as a potential consequence of mimic vlogs. Burgess and Green's assertion about the violation of authentic ideology is distinctly linked to intangible harm; violation of expectations of authenticity is intangible, but it does relate to audiences responses at discovering something is not what is appears to be. If early audiences expected authenticity, then disrupting those expectations is a form of harm, or the risk of harm. Bakioğlu states that once producers confirmed *Lonelygirl15* videos were fictional, viewers had various reactions including some viewers who "were ready to accept it for what it was, good entertainment, but others felt cheated and betrayed because they took Bree's plight for real and offered heartfelt advice to someone they believed was a young girl in distress." (2018, p. 189). Intangible harms in this particular case primarily relate to feelings of embarrassment or shame for being misled, as

well as loss of the time and emotion invested into a story that turns out not to be true. Certainly, these are relatively minor versions of harm when considered in the wider scale of possible harms and outcomes of fictional content. For most audience members, discovering they have been deceived will generally have minimal impacts beyond initial feelings of embarrassment or surprise. As highlighted in Section 7.1, for the participants in this research, the response to discovering some of the videos were fictional was minor.

One of the more interesting points amongst all of this is Jason's contention that he is more likely to believe fictional content on YouTube than he is to believe a false news story. Jason stated he is more likely to be critical of news content because he feels there are ramifications for that kind of content. By comparison, he feels if a video about someone's day turns out to be false, that has no real impact on him and so he does not think to critically analyse them as much. Even if he did, to what end, given he did not consider these stories to be of particular importance? For Jason this would be critically analysing something of little importance or impact for him and his life. Jason also drew a comparison to satire content in *The Chaser's War on Everything*[14] and said he found that the bigger a trick became, the less believable it was. Comparatively, he thought that the mimic vlogs were more believable because they were working on such a small scale.

It is a fair position for Jason to take that these videos are of such little consequence to him and his life that he does not cast a critical eye over them, because it does not matter to him if the videos are not real. As I mentioned in earlier, Jason was quite clear in stating that vlogs are not a type of content he typically watches, so there is the potential that he sees them as not particularly worth his time anyway. Jason's nonchalance about misinformation

[14] *The Chaser's War on Everything* was an Australian satire television show that aired from 2006 to 2009.

in everyday content highlights the capacity for audiences to be both oblivious to mimic content and vulnerable to misinformation in seemingly everyday formats. Resultantly, we can see the opportunities for creators of replica content to capitalise on the casual approaches of viewers. Nonchalance about seemingly unimportant everyday content has the capacity to slip in to approaches to other content. The combination of expectations of the platform (i.e., that it will host authentic amateur content) and indifference to the truthfulness of banal content heightens the potential for slippage and means misinterpretation can scale in impact. Given the potential for misinterpretation is similar between the different formats, despite the difference in outcomes, this could have implications for other 'more nefarious' content.

7.4 How Mimic Vlogs Compare to More 'Malicious' Content

When asked how they felt about mimic vlogs in comparison to more 'malicious' types of replica content, such as deepfakes and misinformation online, participants disagreed about how similar the content was. I use the term 'malicious' in this particular situation as a means of differentiating between content such as parody which appears to have a less overt intent to harm, and content such as disinformation which is purposefully created with the intent to fool people for ideological, economic, or political purposes. This phrasing choice is editorialising the question to some degree, implying initially in the question that there is a scale of harm in these types of content. Scales of harm is an existing idea and Wardle's (2018) seven types of information disorder, as noted in Section 3.2, is a good example of how there is an existing school of thought that ranks harm in false information. In her diagram, Wardle positions satire and parody content on one end of a spectrum of harm, with fabricated content on the other end. That said, participants gave a range of responses

when it came to comparing mimic vlogs to other types of replica content. Participants variously felt that the mimic vlogs were either equally as problematic, more harmful, or less harmful, and gave differing reasons for each of these reasons. This variation was a particularly surprising response because one of my initial expectations was that participants would all consider mimic vlogs to be less problematic or less inherently harmful than other types of replica content like fake news or deepfakes.

Some participants considered mimic vlogs to be fairly equivalent to more malicious types of replica content. The participants who questioned whether mimic vlogs were any different to user-generated vlogs thought that the mimic vlogs were equivalent to these other forms of malicious replica content. William, for example, considered them to do very similar things:

> They're all the same because it's like: can you meet a deep fake? No. Can you meet these people online? No. Oh maybe if they go on tour or something, but I'm not paying for that. They're not relevant in my life at all, so they're about the same as if someone AI generated faces that were made to talk with whatever application. Yeah – fool me.

William's perspective speaks to the discussion of mimic vlogs and deepfakes being essentially the same fits within the broader discussion of the perceived differences between mimic vlogs and vlogs and whether there is any real difference there. For William, all content online seems to be viewed through the lens of the text being constructed. William acknowledges that there are real people behind standard vlogs, but he does not consider the vlogs to be anything more than a representation of that person. By that same logic, he considers the standard vloggers to be the same as fictional characters in mimic vlogs, and in turn, the same as constructed representations of people in deepfakes.

The caveat of knowing what the audience is looking at came up once again in response to the question of how mimic vlogs compared to 'malicious' replica content. Michael expressed hesitancy at the idea of calling mimic vlogs malicious. At the start of his interview, he stated that replica content is "good if I know what I'm watching". I asked him how that caveat fit into the discussion of mimic vlogs in comparison to malicious fake content, to which he responded:

> Eh, I'd like to know otherwise I would feel it's malicious. Like I'm being deceived, you know, not that I know it's a story. Or maybe you tell me at the end, "no this is actually Romeo and Juliet".
>
> ***CA**: Surprise!*
>
> Exactly. Maybe that's what keeps me on the edge of my seat. I'm not really sure how it's malicious or not.

There is something interesting about Michael wanting to know if something is fictional, but also not necessarily considering it malicious if he does not. The indecisiveness could be for a few reasons, and potentially it is the use of the word malicious, which has some strong implications. This exchange ties into Michael's remarks in Section 6.1 where he suggested that while storytelling has a place on YouTube, he does not consider fictional content less genuine than standard content. He also highlighted that he still wants to know what he is watching. Therefore, for Michael, ideas of maliciousness are related to not knowing the full context.

Lauren's response to the question of how mimic vlogs compare to other types of replica content considered the role of the people producing the content and their intention when creating content that looks like something else. She stated that:

> I personally think the intention does matter. I'm assuming, I suppose I shouldn't assume, that most mimic vlogs aren't

> intending to take advantage of people or cause anyone harm in any way, whereas something like a deepfake is trying to get people to donate to something or create some kind of big scare about something, that kind of has more of a malicious intent. So I think the intention does matter. I suppose you would hope that the people making the mimic vlogs are aware enough of the effect they could have that maybe they intentionally try and not create something that could possibly generate some harm to people.

Lauren's response speaks to the role of the producers of replica content and the intent to harm. As alluded to in the opening paragraph of this section, the scale proposed by Wardle incorporates varying levels of harm. Lauren's response speaks to this in some ways by suggesting that mimic vlogs without an intent to harm are less malicious than replica content with an intent to harm. The role of producers will be discussed in more depth in Section 7.5, which looks at the impact of producers replicating user-generated formats for storytelling.

Connor notes that mimic vlogs are harder to identify than deepfakes because there are fewer reference points for him to compare the content to. For example, in the event of a celebrity deep fake, audiences might be able to compare what is shown in the manipulated content to existing preconceptions of that celebrity and then determine that the content is not accurate. By comparison, Connor states that people appearing in vlogs are just "random people you don't know" and there is no way to verify what they are saying. This statement ties into the earlier discussion about the importance placed on evidence and proof in Section 6.3.

In contrast to the other participants, Allie discussed the varying types of replica content on a scale from least to most problematic or harmful in a similar fashion to Wardle's seven categories of information disorder which places types of content on a scale of

potential harm. Allie indicated that mimic vlogs that were mere adaptations of existing works were on the lower end of the scale, saying they were “like a one” because they’re a “creative spin on old stories”. By comparison, Allie considered mimic vlogs that are brand new stories to be more problematic. Allie also made a distinction between things that are clearly fictional stories and videos that feature people trying to make their life seem a particular way, who are purposefully not being genuine. Allie rated both of these types of video on the lower end of her scale (which she did not give a specific numerical range, despite giving adaptations a “one”). Actively impersonating real people is then next on the scale, with Allie stating that the level of harm increases depending on the type of imitating the person is doing. For example, Allie suggested impersonating a celebrity to make them seem racist is more harmful than just spreading inane rumours. At the top end of Allie’s scale were politicians spouting fake news. The level of impact is one of the key factors that influences this scale.

Lauren also stated that there was difference between adaptations of content that already existed and creating new content that looks as though it could be real without ways to verify the content. She stated that the difference depended on how aware audience members are of what is going on:

> I guess it all depends on how aware people are of it. That seems slightly more problematic to me. Like if you're deliberately making an adaptation of something that's already fictional, and I think people are more likely to pick up on it, but also maybe more likely for the channel to somehow indicate that that's what they're doing seems less problematic than someone just creating a totally fictional life.

The difference here is in the ability for the audience to understand what they are watching, but also, like Allie’s scale, there is a difference in the level of impact these stories can have.

Jenny was unsure of whether she considered mimic vlogs to be similar to other types of replica content such as deepfakes and edited content, stating that she was “on the fence depending on the context”. She considers some content to be “just regular YouTube”, giving the example of editing a YouTuber’s face over the top of scenes from Marvel movies. Other content, such as editing a YouTuber’s face over a bank robbery or fabrications of politicians is, however, more problematic. This speaks to what is considered the norm on the platform and also what audiences expect from different types of content creators. Implicit here is the allusion to the possibility for harm.

Clearly, the participants had differing viewpoints about the ways in which the mimic vlogs compared to the more malicious types of replica content that have an intent to harm. That said, there was still quite a lot of discussion from participants about intent and harm, which leads to the question of what triggers participants to consider a piece of content harmful. While different participants identified different content as being more harmful in their comparisons, there was a common thread between them in that the turning point often related to the point where there is tangible harm to the audience member or others. For Jason who considered mimic vlogs to be more likely to fool him, this was as a result of his perceived the lack of impact or relevance of these fictionalised stories in his life. Participants who considered the mimic vlogs to be less malicious than other forms of replica content often gave examples where high-profile people are impersonated such as celebrities or politicians, causing harm as a result of the clear impact on the people involved and also their wide reach.

Michelle was overt in her judgement that replica content is fine provided it is not harming people. For her, the catalyst for turning toward the problematic is when there is a

real-life repercussion for actions. Michelle used the example of when two Australian radio presenters, as part of a prank, called the hospital where Princess Catherine Middleton had just given birth to son George and pretended to be the Queen and Prince Charles. The nurse who answered the phone put through the call to another nurse who disclosed details of the Princess' condition. The nurse who initially answered the phone died by suicide in the days following the phone call, and the coroner suggested the impact of the hoax weighed heavily on the nurse in the days before her death (ABC News 2014). Michelle noted that while this is not necessarily mimic content, it is an example of taking something too far where there are real life repercussions. She said:

> Obviously there needs to be like things put in place so that doesn't happen and I think when you look at all those fake news sources like *The Betoota Advocate* or whatever, I have seen people on my Facebook page tricked by it. And I think if it's a harmless article it's fine, because I'm like "oh haha like my aunt didn't know". But I think when you're talking about more serious content which can actually based on them believing stuff, and can affect the way that they act or what they do in response, I think then it's a real question of ethics and whether you should be creating that kind of content.
>
> ***CA**: And so how do mimic vlogs fit into that?* Do *they fit into that?*
>
> I don't know. I think it's nice to think of them as fun little videos that exist outside of making a message on the world. But I mean, yeah? Like, genuine YouTubers like Zoella are selling 10 year olds expensive products that are shit to be honest. I don't think that's a good thing to be doing. So I think tricking people a little bit... if it's just a little bit I don't think it's … yeah. Like you're going to be convinced of something regardless if it's like quote unquote "genuine" or not.

Michelle very much speaks to the idea of harm here in a few different ways. Firstly, there was the harm associated with impersonating people as outlined in the radio incident, there is the harm associated with being fooled (which interestingly Michelle seems to consider

very minor depending on the content) and then the discussion of money. The level of impact here is a recurring one. Simply being fooled does not seem to be considered harmful, unless it is about something considered serious. Lauren also considered money to be a turning point wherein content shifted from being fine to being malicious. She was one of the participants who questioned the difference between vloggers and fictional characters in vlogs and when asked if there was a time where it did matter that it was a fictional person, Lauren said:

> I suppose if there's anything around money it gets a bit of an issue. Or even if they're like putting out a certain cause that they want people to get behind if they're being disingenuous and then I guess that could be an issue.

Lauren's response presents as a turning point regarding ethics for the audience, because there is tangible impact as a result of the misrepresentation of the content.

Participants tended not to list intangible harms. For example, participants did not overtly point to feelings of humiliation or embarrassment at being caught off guard by fictional content as forms of harm or reasons why something is more harmful. Some participants did point to the potential harms of creators constructing 'perfect lives' online, but this was also spoken about in relation to mimic vlogs and standard vlogs which polish the content to give off a particular perspective.

A slightly different application of harm is an example from a mimic vlog series not included in this study's corpus of videos, *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*. Most of the participants were not familiar with mimic vlogs as a genre prior to this exercise. A few had heard of *Lonelygirl15* or *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries,* but most had not actually seen them. Lauren was the exception, having watched *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* and as such, I was interested to

hear her thoughts on the idea of harm in relation to this particular series. In modernising *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, one of the key story moments that was updated for the web series was Lydia's elopement to Wickham which became re-fictionalised as the threat of a sex tape being released online. The transmedia story included a website that featured a countdown to the release of the tape, and this served as a pivotal moment to the plot as Darcy takes down the site to protect Lydia, thus in part redeeming himself to Lizzie. Members of the audience attempted to take the site down themselves, which caused problems for the producers of the mimic vlogs who needed the website to be taken down by Darcy as one of the story beats. I asked Lauren how she considered something like this in terms of presenting storylines that have the potential to cause harm and action from the audience if they take it at face value. Lauren said that when it comes to more sensitive topics like that, producers need to be a little bit careful, but in this particular case she said that because it was all within the fictional world (rather than including celebrities not involved in the creation of the text), she thought it was "probably mostly okay". We also discussed how it is hard to tell how much of the interaction is the audience playing along with the story as a means of engagement, and how much is people actually believing it. Similarly, Connor mentioned this during the interview when he asked to see the comments on 'Jack's Vlog 2', which consisted mostly of audience members responding to the video as if it were real. Connor expressed surprise and confusion at the audience's treatment of the text as 'real'. Lauren suggested that it is possible we take certain cultural things for granted, and that other people might not recognise references to, or adaptations of, classic English language literature. Ultimately, Lauren states that because of the transmedia nature of *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, audience interaction is encouraged, because the characters are made as

three dimensional as possible. As such, leaning into the fictionality is part of the ideal audience experience.

Thinking beyond this specific exercise, the context in which audiences consume media changes frequently, and this context can be key to ensuring that audiences know what they are watching. Returning to Lauren, she specifically spoke about fictional content on YouTube being notable because YouTube is not normally a place where people seek out fictional content. The platform itself is one context that influences audience responses. If viewers are not expecting fictional content, then it may take them by surprise. Burgess and Green's assertion that *Lonelygirl15* "violated" expectations of authenticity once again comes to mind. The connotation of content on YouTube is that if it is user-generated, it is seemingly authentic. Equally though, as Lange highlights, even when audience members are trawling user-generated content they are navigating a minefield of both authentic and inauthentic content (2019) developed by either the actual creator or by others respectively.

When content moves, it loses some of the context that helps audiences to understand what they are looking at. Scholarship around information disorder often speaks about the role of context, primarily because of its ability to inform the reader of what they are looking at. Context is a compass that tells us how we should direct our understanding of information. In Wardle's (2018) work around types of information disorder, she includes discussion of parody and satire by explicitly outlining that while they might not be harmful to begin with, through a change in context, parody and satire pose the potential to misinform people who take them at face value. With regard to this idea, Hight notes that context is a fundamental piece in Wardle's work, stating:

> A key insight from [Wardle's] framework is the importance of the context in which material is used and shared, which means that content takes on different connotations and plays out in diverse interpretations by subsequent audiences. To some extent, this is a quality of all media exchange and reception within society, but in an era of misinformation the ultimate impact can suddenly range from mischievous to malicious, and audiences can contribute to this range of outcomes both deliberately and unwittingly.
>
> (Hight 2022, p. 396)

The reference here to the role of media exchange and reception is also important because of the overt acknowledgement of context as having an impact on media reception. Considering media reception theory is an approach in this research, understanding the impact of context on how audiences make meaning is essential. The participants' frequent references to context or wanting more context shows how it influences their responses to the videos.

Ian Brodie (2018) expands on the role of context in regard to satire in his discussion of the news outlet *The Onion.* Brodie discusses the idea of a satire newspaper as not a genre, but rather a context (2018, p. 453). In doing so, he suggests that readers caught unaware by the original print formats of *The Onion* were required to look past "the publication's absurd title and [focus] solely on the headline and the text. But that story was connected—in all senses, including the most literal, by being co-located on a contiguous tangible object—to other stories with a similar satirical intent" (2018, p. 453). Now in its online format, *The Onion* no longer sits alongside stories from its original context, as it is instead found alongside news sources (legitimate or otherwise), social media updates, advertising, and a plethora of other posts online. Resultantly, while most satire stories from *The Onion* still include identifying markers to guide the reader not to take them at face value, in order to not misinterpret the content "those markers must both be noticed by and

mean something to the reader" (Brodie 2018, p. 455). Mimic vlogs, and indeed most replica content, include similar markers that must mean something to audiences in order for those audiences to not misinterpret the content. However, these markers can be lost.

All replica content is susceptible to this shedding of contextual markers known as context shift, and also susceptible to blind spots in a viewer's conceptual map. I return, here, to the section regarding replica content more broadly (see Section 3.2). Thinking back to the examples of fan created replica content, the majority of this content exists within the bubble for which it was created: i.e., fans of the show or a particular text, 'ship' (short for a preferred relationship in a text), or celebrity. Within the bounds of this bubble, the contextual clues all make sense. Fans of *The 100*'s Clarke and Lexa know that #Clexa refers to the ship within the show[15]. They know that screenshots of text messages featuring the names Clarke and Lexa, posted to Tumblr, and hashtagged #Clexa is referring to the show and that these messages are not real, but are instead a form of fanfiction. The Tumblr user likely made many of these kinds of posts and it was very much the norm for them to share this kind of fanfiction. The contextual clues here make sense to those in the know. The reason that audiences misconstrued the Clexa text message exchange as texts between a husband and wife is because the fanfiction moved beyond the initial circle it was intended for. The problem is context shift; when the bubble pops and content moves beyond those in the know. Suddenly, viewers who do not know what the contextual markers mean are interacting with the content blindly.

[15] Clexa is an example of fan communities' tendency to create 'ship' names out of portmanteaus of the two characters names. Other examples include Bechloe (from Section 3.2's Beca and Chloe example) and Louis Stylinson (Louis Tomlinson and Harry Styles).

Despite some viewers interacting with content without knowing the context, a number of mimic vlog web series are quite obvious, or overt, in their fictionality. This overtness is especially obvious for audience members who are following a particular series. Part of the reason the mimic vlogs are effective is that a number of them are also transmedia stories and audiences lean into the verisimilitude of the text and interact with the characters through social platforms as though they are real people. These audience members participate in the story by looking past the fictionality and experience it as an interactive piece. In the same way that kayfabe (the acknowledgement and acceptance of the scripted nature of wrestling as explained in Section 3.3) invites the audience to accept the fictionality and move beyond it and into the story world, mimic vlogs inspire a similar reaction from audience. This interactivity can also contribute to the appearance of truth in mimic vlogs. To someone who is unaware of the fictional status of the series, audience participation seems to lend credence to the story by making the speakers seem more real.

An example of this kayfabe can be seen in the following screenshot which captures a number of comments made on one of the videos from the exercise. The comments are in response to 'Jack's Vlog 2" which is a part of the *Mina Murray's Journal* web series:

Figure 20 – Comments on 'Jack's Vlog 2'

Each of the comments included here appears to either be playing along with the kayfabe of the fictional web series or a comment from a misled viewer. Part of the difficulty in examining these kinds of comments is it is nearly impossible to identify which type of comment each one is. As observers, we cannot know for certain if the audience member knew or not. The video only has 12 comments, and only two of them are making comments that are not playing along with the fictionality. Both of them make specific references to the actor, addressing him by his real name Matt. *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* routinely had audience members responding to the videos as though Lizzie was a real person, though now that the show has concluded a number of the newer comments start to discuss the videos

with more critical distance. The same can be seen in comments on *Lonelygirl15* where there are some remnants of the comments from 2007, but newer comments are now primarily responses to the concept of the videos as a whole. Conversely, some of the web series inspire fewer diegetic comments from audience members, such as the one below from *Nothing Much to Do.* The size of the audience here could be something worth paying attention to. Smaller web series with highly motivated fans might feel more inclined to lean into the kayfabe.

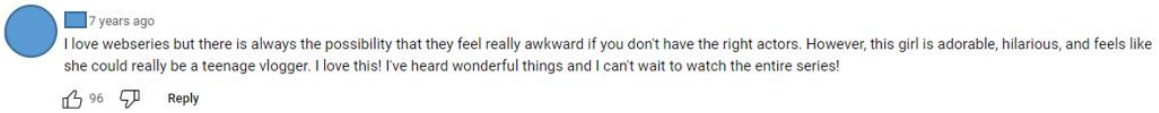


Figure 21 – Comment on *Nothing Much To Do*

All of this is to say that when considering the role of proof, it can be exceptionally difficult to ensure audience members are aware of the fictionality of a text by introducing seemingly concrete measures. Context changes both within the video and the outside viewing environments and this change has an impact on the audience reception. Concrete measures have limitations, and markers of authenticity are susceptible to misinterpretation as texts can move and audiences have different capacities to identify them.

Given a relaxed approach to misinformation in banal content permits the potential for disengagement with fact-checking more broadly, it is important to consider how mimic vlogs fit within the broader scheme of replica content. Importantly, we know that replica content exists on platforms other than YouTube and is particularly widespread on platforms that feature user-generated content. This kind of produced, fictional, original content is also popping up on newer platforms and brings with itself particular new forms of replica content. The short-form video sharing app TikTok now has fictional content featuring actors

who are playing characters in a fictional story. Production company FourFront, for example, has a cast of 22 fictional TikTokers played by actors creating fictional content on the platform (Haasch 2021). This content comes with interesting changes to the unique features of mimic content on TikTok, meaning this fictional content involves the confessional style delivered with an impromptu, amateur, unpolished style. It may also include textual overlays on videos of the TikToker either lip-syncing or dancing or even just looking at the camera. The replica content on TikTok executes mimicry in the same way as mimic vlogs do, just with different specific aesthetic choices that are dependent on the platform.

There are identifiers of replica content that are unique to TikTok. For example, a number of these MimicToks (to coin a term) utilise the hashtag #Fictional to identify the content as featuring fictional characters and events. In and of itself, this signposting helps to label the content in a way that tells audiences what they are looking at, in line with what participants in this study identified as being useful to them. However, there are some sticking points in the execution here because the "BookTok"[16] community (a sub-community who make content about literature) also uses #Fictional to tag content. This means that some decoding must occur to identify the difference between the two types of content. Additionally, some BookTokers create content that essentially looks the same as standard confessional style TikToks but include overlays that are plot points from novels. While these are not MimicToks, because the TikToker is not portraying a fictional character, they can have the same effect with viewers mistaking the content for non-fiction content.

[16] Given the similarity of content on TikTok and Reels, I use the term 'BookTok' to refer to book-related content on both platforms despite the term drawing from TikTok.

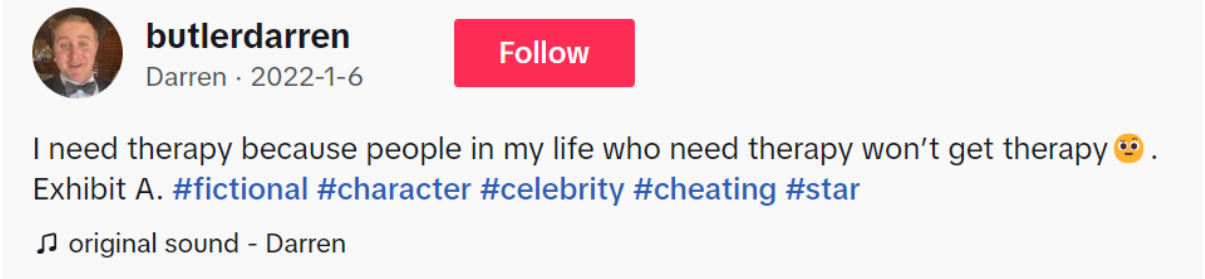


Figure 22 – Example of a fictional MimicTok (@ButlerDarren 2022)

These #Fictional videos also exist on the image-sharing site Instagram which hosts 'Reels' which are short form videos similar to that on TikTok. The #Fictional content exists on both sites primarily because of the similar nature of TikToks and Reels and the ubiquity with which creators post to both platforms interchangeably. Figure 23 is an example of a #BookTok post shared on Instagram that at first glance looks to be a video sharing the real events of the creator's life. Upon further inspection, it is clear that the content is fictional as it is conveying the plot of a book, but the ways that content appears on Reels and TikTok affects the amount of extra-textual content viewers get. Viewing a reel on the individual post page specific to the Instagrammer gives all of the details, but watching them in the Reels tab limits the information that viewers can take in.

Figure 23 uses a format native to TikTok and Reels, with a few indicators that the content is based on a fictional novel that might not be immediately obvious to a viewer particularly if they come across the content through the 'Reels' tab rather than the creator's profile. The cover of the book appears briefly onscreen at the end of the video, but this is relatively small and fast. Equally, the description on the Reel includes the name of the book, tags the author, and includes additional hashtags. A notable inclusion in the hashtags is #Storytime which social media users often utilise to indicate content will include an anecdote. Hashtags with multiple uses can then become their own false signifiers of reality, as they anchor the reading of particular texts. Whether these hashtags are used for that purpose or not is not quite the point, as it is the impact of incorporating them that is important. Users who search hashtags like #Fictional or #Storytime do so with the expectation of a specific kind of content. Creators who incorporate content which subverts those expectations (such as Figure 23) have the same kind of impacts as mimicking other conventions of a genre.

Figure 23 – Example of a BookTok video that shows a plot in a novel

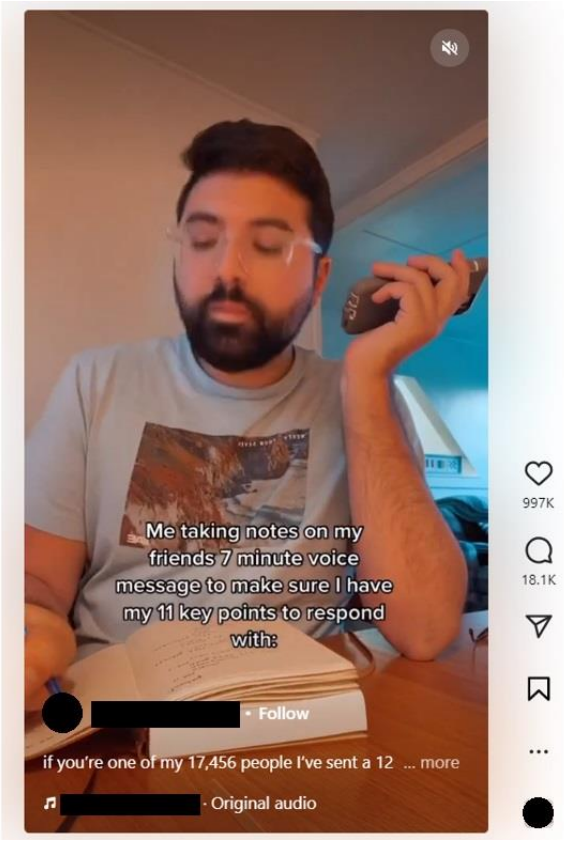


Figure 24 – Example of a standard TikTok/Reel aesthetic

These paratextual markers have the ability to influence a reading of the text itself. The comment from a viewer included in Figure 23 showcases the capacity for audiences to misinterpret the content as the viewer states they "thought it was [poster's] story" at first before realising it was the plot to a book. With regards to the aesthetics, it is useful to compare Figure 23 with another user-generated Reel. In Figure 24, the Reel features a similar textual overlay while the creator films himself taking notes, but the creator is not playing a role other than themselves. These examples highlight the difference between the amounts of paratextual content shown in posts in the Reels tab on Instagram (Figure 24) and in a creator's individual post (Figure 23). The Figure 24 Reel only includes a short excerpt of the description at the bottom of the video but not the full description. Hashtags included after the text in the description box are excluded.

Platforms that feature user-generated content are often spaces that people use in a multiplicity of ways and have a number of overlapping interests and capacities within which they are used. Sites like YouTube, TikTok, Twitter and more have all become common places for users to interact with brands, celebrities, friends, and production companies on a frequent basis. The different interests of each of these parties make the ability to identify content particularly important. That YouTube hosts more than just home videos is part of the reason why mimic vlogs end up being functional and interesting ways to tell stories; because they blend in. In Section 3.1.2 I quoted Highfield as discussing how "Platforms are employed for purposes for which they were not originally intended; media content is appropriated for critical, sarcastic and ironic commentary" (2016, p. 2030). Highfield's statement that platforms are used in emergent ways will continue to be true and understanding that is integral to preparing audiences for content that may seek to fool them (whether maliciously or not). Podcasts, for instance, are used as a new format for oral

storytelling, Twitter is used to tell short stories, as well as transmedia texts with seemingly realistic characters tweeting in real time, and TikTokers are creating fictional content in short snappy videos. Wherever user-generated content thrives, there is the capacity to create content that mimics the style in a way that poses the potential for misunderstanding.

It is integral to consider how audiences approach these similar kinds of fictional content on other platforms that are seeing this new form of storytelling. Replica content in the most general sense functions by mimicking formats in a way that gives off a similar aesthetic to the content it seeks to emulate. If audiences are susceptible to minor falsities in everyday content, how do we best ensure that they are not susceptible to more harmful content? In addition to all concretely fictional content such as mimic vlogs, we can also consider the capacity for regular users to post content that is not true by sharing content ranging from hyperbole to complete fiction. This type of content occurs all the time in user-generated spaces like Reddit and Twitter, and often prompts other users to label the content as made up. Some profiles exist purely to highlight content that others think is made up, such as the Twitter profile @_DHOTYA (Didn't Happen of the Year Award). If audiences uncritically accept stories because they have an illusion of authenticity, audiences are vulnerable to misinformation from other users and production companies alike.

Take for example the phenomena of short video 'hacks' from channels like *5-Minute Crafts*. These videos often include how-to tutorials or recipe videos that simply do not work, but producers make the hacks look like they do work through deceitful editing (i.e., changing out pans between takes or mislabelling ingredients). Trusting these videos can result in minor harms when hacks or recipes do not work, but also more severe harms, such as burns when hacks turn out to be dangerous 'pranks'. *5-Minute Crafts* and channels like it

are known for creating videos that induce a certain amount of rage from viewers who are baffled at the concepts of some of the hacks, and the videos also manage to gain very large numbers of views, with *5-Minute Crafts* boasting over 80 million subscribers, 6 thousand videos, and 26 billion lifetime views. These videos come from both well-known channels like *5-Minute Crafts* but also from less well known content creators who look to imitate the success of the channels. Equally, there are YouTube channels dedicated to debunking viral hacks to explain the science behind why something should or should not work, such as Australian food scientist Ann Reardon's *How To Cook That.* Downey (2022) highlights how these kinds of debunking videos can be important for approaching fake news by explaining how the replication of content works.

It is clear that there is an entire ecosystem of content that blurs the line between reality and fiction. The focus then turns to how producers capitalise on the expectation of authenticity on platforms that champion user-generated content. What factors promote the idea of authenticity, and what does being authentic actually mean? For participants of this task, authenticity was being true to oneself online, being spontaneous, and forging connections with viewers.

To reiterate, "false signifiers of reality", as Springer and Rhodes state (in Wallace 2018), are the factors that contribute to a *sense* of realness, and are 'false' in that they do not necessarily mean something *is* real. As such, false signifiers of reality are what producers can emulate to mimic an appearance of truth. In standard vlogs, the false signifiers of reality are primarily in the direct address to camera and the sense of authenticity that direct address promotes. In order to equip audiences to best detect fictional content that

replicates an authentic style, audiences must know which specific false signifiers make content on a particular platform seem authentic.

On TikTok these signifiers can include expressions of emotional "rawness" and disclosure of major events and experiences (Barta & Andalibi 2021, p. 13). The signifiers also include an aesthetic of authenticity that is "recognisable because it values the ordinary, individual lived experience and encourages the representation of ordinariness over the hyperreality, simulation and professionalization expressed in other settings" (Cover 2023, p. 161). While these are just a few factors, they are factors that make for a fertile format from which to create a fictional story because there is a focus on the banal and confession. Cover goes on to note that TikTok's authentic aesthetic is "much more like early YouTube: marked by everydayness, casualness, unedited uploads, play, creativity and representing the banal and mundane, such as dancing around in one's pyjamas in the living room" (2023, p. 162). It makes sense why these formats are conduits for fictional stories as they are easy to replicate and highlight storytelling in their original format anyway.

The prevalence and impacts of misinformation, as Altay et al. (2023) argue, are often overstated in academic research. It is worth reiterating that mimic vlogs are relatively minor in their impact. However, the casualness with which audience members can approach content they see as mundane or unimportant does speak to the possibility of blind spots in audience's fact-checking practices. In the same article, Altay et al. contend that audience members are active receivers of information and are sceptical of content they see online (2023, pp. 5-6). If there are gaps in this scepticism and fact-checking practice then we should question how big those gaps are, and what the impacts are of 'banal' misinformation. For example, how far does Jason's approach of "the content in this video doesn't have the

capacity to impact me" extend? What kinds of information are viewers willing to dismiss as being truthful (or not) simply because it does not matter to them, and therefore they do not feel the need to fact check? Answers to these specific questions are outside the scope of this research, but are certainly questions worth asking and exploring.

7.5 The Role of Production Companies

Underlying in the participants' discussions of harm, intent, and impact, is the role of the creators of content and the way that they share their content with audiences. This is at production level for fictional content, but also at an individual level for user-generated content as Michelle pointed out when discussing Zoella's ability to influence young people. The role of the content creator is an important one as the intent and actions of creators affects content in a number of ways. Given vlogs are a user-generated form of content, I was intrigued to know how participants felt about production companies utilising this format, and so asked each of them what their perceptions were of this practice. The question is particularly pertinent because of the participants' discussion of the role of YouTube as a platform and host of content throughout the rest of their interviews, and how some participants highlighted that content seems to be genuine because of the user-generated content typically associated with YouTube.

My question was originally designed with the idea of asking participants about the concept of replicating user-generated formats on platforms that also host that particular style. However, my phrasing was more focused on the roles of 'big' production companies or 'professional' production companies creating content in these spaces. I prefaced this question by stating that most of the videos were made by amateur production companies,

but there are some more professional production teams also making similar content. For example, we might think of KindaTV's queer vampire romance *Carmilla*'s product placement deal with U by Kotex. This production was certainly still on the smaller end of production companies (it is by no means Warner Brothers, for example) but certainly more elaborate than just a few friends making something for a school project, which is what some small-scale mimic vlog series are.

Much like in the responses to the question about harm, money was a recurring theme in response to the question of how participants felt about professional production companies imitating a form of user-generated content. Michael said that "media companies are going to do what makes money. If it's something that they can latch on to make money, why wouldn't they?" This then prompted thoughts around other forms of media content:

> It kind of reminds me of how cinema started. It was very much like people trying to just make films and then these production companies sort of latched on, and it's not to say they *can't* do it. But now with all this data analysis, they can do so. We're starting to see films like, I don't know, *Avengers #27* and it's just there to make money. If it's just there to make money, I think it loses a bit of the story, but I don't think it's any less... I mean they *can.* I don't know. Like is it less genuine? I feel like it's less genuine. But I feel like they're entitled to if they want. But not that it would be my preference. Keep it small. Get the little guy popular, but then the little guy probably needs support you know. "Oh, why don't I hire a cameraman - an editor?" How long until the little guy is the big guy? I mean, yeah so. I don't know.

Michael's thoughts in this response are quite fluid; he was thinking his way through it. He clearly thinks that production companies are within their rights to create this type of content, and to continue to make content that will make money even if he is a little

sceptical about it, but ultimately considers it less genuine if the only purpose of the content is to make money.

William's response also discussed the impact of money, but stated that the intentions of the company producing the content are integral. He compared companies producing this content to those who produce parody newspapers and pirate radio[17], stating it is fine and they exist, and they can do whatever sells, but audiences must question their intentions:

> Why are they doing this? Are they here to entertain? Or are they here to entertain *and* get money? Or are they here to get money? You gotta be, if a major production company is doing it, they must be doing it for malicious purposes.
>
> ***CA**: What do you consider a malicious purpose?*
>
> Only for cash. I think if that's your sole purpose and you're pumping all your resources just to get the cash and not really teach anything, even if it's like a stupid teaching or something like that, then what's the point? If they're really just trying to get that coin, then shag off. It's like I don't want to support you if that's all you're on about.
>
> ***CA**: Even if it was the world's best story?*
>
> I don't care. I'm not watching *Supernatural*. I'm not watching *Doctor Who*. I know they're not what you're talking about, but you know popular TV series - are they popular for the sake of being popular or they actually good? I'm usually on the side of "stuff comes and stuff goes" and you could probably just leave it at that. I don't want to watch it because everyone else says it's good, and that's probably what they want anyway. Viral marketing.

William's scepticism about popular media continues to fit with his overall response to the interview questions: he questions most things he sees and tends to prefer smaller producers, whom he is also quite sceptical about. Both Michael and William's concern about

[17] A radio station that broadcasts without a valid licence.

profit as an intention speaks, in some ways, to an underlying interrogation of the role of large media companies as tastemakers and producers of content for mass audiences. William's response also speaks to a desire for texts to *mean* something beyond just existing – he wants there to be a 'teaching' or a message. In his early discussions of storytelling on YouTube William stated that good content needs good stories and part of that is learning something, somewhat like a moral in a children's story. He says that audiences can learn through vloggers' experiences and that can be perfectly fine entertainment, but there must be a point to the content.

Lauren asserted she is "a little bit cynical of [producers]" and expressed distaste for producers hijacking genres that users had developed for free to then go make money. She suggested that production companies should invest in people who are already making the content. Additionally, Lauren considers production companies to give themselves away when they try to replicate user-generated content because they cannot quite replicate the aesthetic:

> Someone doing it just as a user generated content will look like user generated content because that's the equipment they have access to. That's the level of skill they have. Whereas a professional company even ... I guess they can try and emulate like a user generated content look, but I think generally they end up looking a little more polished. So I feel like a lot of the time you can tell that there is a bit of a distinction.

Lauren also suggested that some producers seem to try and go more towards a "user-generated look" but seem to forget what the limitations are for that kind of content, or do not construct it in the right way, meaning that professionally produced content ends up looking worse than something that would be acceptable in a user-generated video. Lauren, notably, was the only participant to correctly categorise all of the videos and her success is

in part due to her existing understanding of the genre. Lauren not only routinely watches standard vlogs but has also an awareness of mimic vlogs. This prior knowledge gives her greater insight into the videos and more scope for comparison. Lauren's success supports the idea that audiences are more likely to accurately decode a text if they have an existing understanding of the codes at play.

Connor put himself back in the position of not knowing that the videos were fictional and stated he thought that the involvement of professional production companies makes the videos more interesting but feels less authentic. He suggested that even if the videos do not have a production company behind them, it feels like "they care more about how you see them than what they're talking about, which is sort of not really the point of a vlog". Additionally, Connor expressed discomfort with the fictional videos because of the contrast between them and the amateur content, and pointed specifically to 'And We're Back!' which he said was an "amateur fake, which made them seem real". This ties in with earlier discussions about the amateur aesthetic that is associated with vlogs causing confusion when it came to distinguishing between standard vlogs and mimic vlogs.

Jenny and Allie both thought that the transparency about how the videos were made is important. Jenny stated that the videos can be fictional, provided the creators clearly flag the content in the description. Jenny noted that some people do not read the description box and so there is still room for misinterpretation, but by flagging it, the producers can remain more "authentic". Allie said that small groups of people working on these kinds of mimic vlogs reminded her of the early days of YouTube where groups of people worked together on comedic skits. So long as the creators are transparent about the fictionality of the piece and credit the original creators of a text if it is adapted, then Allie considered it an

acceptable thing to do. Given Allie's comparison to content posted on 'early YouTube', I asked her if she would consider similar content to also be fine if it was on a different platform, such as TikTok. Allie responded that TikTok adds "a whole complexity" because users frequently re-use and remediate sound from other creators and lip sync to it. Ultimately, so long as credit was given where required, Allie has no problem with the involvement from professional production companies or this type of replica content.

Jason said that most production companies get found out pretty quickly when they start making content that replicates user-generated content, and also questioned the purpose of having a production company to make this type of content anyway given it is quite a low budget format with few technical demands. For Jason, these two facts were related, because he felt that part of the reason these companies are found out is *because* they have a team that is larger than necessary, presumably, because it changes some of the aesthetics and feel of the video.

Michelle expressed a dislike for big companies in general, but also stated she did not feel it was any less genuine just because it is created by a company rather than an individual. She pointed to the idea of bias once again and highlighted that individuals are equally biased and are not perfect representations of who they are or what they do. Beyond this, Michelle said that, like anyone else, she wants to be in the know. She does not want to be tricked or deceived and just wants to know the answer, which she felt is "a very human way to think about things." Overall, the participants' responses tended to skew towards a scepticism of the role of the producers and the re-imagining of a user-generated format for storytelling.

This chapter has presented the key findings from the interview section of the study with each of the participants. The participants' initial perspectives about YouTube and YouTube as a platform for storytelling laid the groundwork for understanding the ways in which participants thought about the site as a place for content in the first place. This initial idea of everything being welcome on YouTube but participants wanting it to be clear what they were looking at was a recurring concept throughout the entirety of the interview responses. Time and time again, the notion of wanting to be in the know came up in response to questions about who produced content, the format of mimic vlogs in comparison to other types of replica content, and the point at which something became problematic.

Some of the specific answers participants gave in these interviews spoke to the ways that they categorised content in the surveys, but also gave additional information that the initial short form answers in the survey did not capture. The concepts of gut feeling, plausibility, and even accent, speak to the role that fluency plays when audiences watch content for the first time. Fluency also plays a role when audiences consume different types of replica content, so understanding the ways it applies specifically to mimic vlogs provides some insight into how participants understand things like parody and mockumentary, fanfiction, and even fake news.

The findings outlined above illustrate the ease with which even simple media formats can be mimicked, resulting in viewers misidentifying the content they are watching. Understanding the ways that viewers interact with and identify content is crucial to ensuring that media users are aware of the potential fictionality of media online, regardless of the perceived level of risk of that content. The false signifiers of reality that are prevalent in

mockumentaries clearly have a similar impact in mimic vlogs as they are easily manipulated and exploited. Therefore, by imitating the conventions that develop trust and intimacy in a standard vlog, fictional mimic vlogs highlight how even experienced YouTube viewers struggle to identify differences between authentic and inauthentic content online. This emphasises the ways in which viewers are vulnerable to more malicious types of media which also makes use of factual formats' false markers of reality.

8 CONCLUSION

In considering the ways that mimic vlogs speak to the wider phenomenon of replica content, we can see that there are clear links between the ways that mimic vlogs function and existing ways that legacy media replicates formats that claim to represent reality. This point is important, because it helps us to situate this seemingly frivolous type of fictional video amongst other more known types of mimicry such as parody and disinformation. Replicating existing trusted formats is not new, and understanding the similarities between the formats helps us make sense of how mimic vlogs work. Springer and Rhodes' (2006 in Wallace 2018) concept of false signifiers of reality, for example, is a key tool in understanding how legitimacy is established in traditional media and then adapted in replica content.

This thesis explores audience reception of mimic vlogs, but also situates these videos by drawing comparisons between existing and novel forms. This contribution is particularly pertinent in a 'post-truth' era where distinguishing between truth and fiction is increasingly difficult yet unequivocally crucial. Mimic vlogs represent just one small part of the evolving media environment that internet users must navigate every day. By drawing comparisons between mimic vlogs and other formats such as parody news, fanfiction, and mockumentary, I hope to de-centralise the idea that all replications of 'legitimate' content are inherently harmful. There is scope and reason to understand these forms as being important examples of how practices of mimicry can be creative, playful, culturally rich, and deeply intertextual as much as it can pose the potential to be dangerous misinformation. For the participants in this research, it was clear that they each had their own perception of the format from boring to interesting to exciting. Exploring these texts as only creative or

only dangerous undermines the ways that audiences and creators actually engage with these spaces. This research explores the many intricate facets of audience reception and highlights that the individual perspectives are very diverse and that reception of videos goes far beyond whether the participant could correctly identify a video.

Linking this back to the concept of media literacy, wherein readers (or viewers) of texts understand, question, and make meaning from texts, then the findings of this research show that familiarity with the genre plays an important role in identifying content. This dataset of participants is too small to be the basis of generalisations about media literacy more broadly, but as Lauren was one of the two participants who listed vlogs as a genre she frequently watches and was the only participant to acknowledge having previously engaged with a mimic vlog series, it is still of note that she was the only participant to identify all eight videos correctly. Michelle was the other participant who listed vlogs, but she only correctly identified half of the videos, thus illustrating why we cannot make generalisations. Exploring these questions with a larger dataset of participants will help determine if a pattern exists between familiarity with vlogs and success in categorising the videos. If we consider media literacy to be an important factor in how well audiences can identify content, then familiarity is also worth highlighting in exploring patterns for success. When audience members have never seen vlogs before, it makes it hard for them to compare what is presented in the video to what is considered the norm. Equally, norms change over time and this change is ongoing.

Thinking about this in conjunction with the concept of fluency (Lewandowsky et al 2012) that I outlined in Chapter 6, the way in which audience members use mental short cuts to reach conclusions becomes obvious. While factors like accents were not something I

considered specifically in selecting the videos for the study, they are just one example of fluently processed information that affects the response of a viewer. We can consider the use of plausibility as an indicator of fictionality to be similarly fraught with the potential for misplaced confidence. Plausability as an indicator of fictionality relies heavily on the participants expectations of what vloggers can and do share and this is a subjective measure. Identifying the types of mental shortcuts that audiences use to determine (often subconsciously) the type of video that they are watching is one of the keys to providing future audiences with the tools they need to be able to identify content.

One result that was particularly interesting was the difference in authenticity ratings that participants gave to the vloggers prior to finding out that some of the videos were fictional. The fact that participants almost exclusively rated the videos featuring standard vloggers as more authentic than the mimic vlog counterparts speaks to something that the participants were picking up on in the videos. If we are investigating the role of perception, then this is perhaps one result we should refer back to. The way participants rated videos highlighted some key issues that help us understand how audience members identify content. How do we expect audience members to differentiate between types of content online? It is impossible to narrow this answer down to any one point because audiences never interact with these factors in solitude. Media literacy encompasses all the aspects at the same time, and that is where the role of fluency is important. Therefore, the pieces of information in these videos that audiences process fluently are important, as are the factors that strike viewers as unusual. Future studies could examine with more depth the ways that audiences balance and negotiate these factors to reach a conclusion about the type of content they are consuming.

Looking at the list of factors participants used to determine fictionality, the intratextual elements of the video were far more frequently called upon than extratextual factors such as the name of the video and view counts. While most participants could list a few extratextual elements of the video in the survey section, these tended not to be as specific and did not come up very often in the interviews. For example, a number of participants listed titles and usernames as something they noticed but did not specifically refer back to them later. These are the places, however, where participants would not be leaning quite so heavily on their perception to make decisions. Once again utilising the example of "Ep. 3" in the title of 'Steady State', the very overt reference to the fact that the video was fictional was one that none of the participants caught.

The methods that participants used to identify content were often fraught, and participants often relied on indicators that they had (unknowingly) misconstrued to decide if the videos were fictional. The results, however, are in keeping with audience reception theory's understanding that each viewer will make their own meaning of a text (Livingstone 2007). As such, it seems natural that different participants will read the same factor as being either an indicator of reality or fictionality, depending on their own conceptual maps. Lauren's awareness of vlogs and mimic vlogs, for example, would then act as a reference point for her to consider the videos in the corpus. Jason, on the other hand, who actively stated he did not watch many vlogs, was at a disadvantage in identifying content because he did not have a point of reference.

The participants frequently mentioned a desire for proof, and a desire to know what content they were consuming. However, as I outlined earlier, including visuals beyond the direct-to-camera address in vlogs and mimic vlogs does not necessarily equate to 'proof', as

this would only serve to become another false signifier of reality. Additionally, attempts to label AI, deepfakes, misinformation and disinformation already exist as approaches to mitigating the spread of this type of content online. FirstDraft (an independent non-profit aiming to provide practical guides to verify and publish content on the web) broadly groups the different approaches to indicating AI and deepfake content into five categories: labels, metadata, interruption, annotation, and discussion (Shane, Saltz & Leibowicz 2021). Approaches to indicating misinformation do however have some drawbacks, both in application and in impact. Pennycook et al. (2019), for example, argue that a potential side effect of labelling misinformation is the "implied truth effect", wherein articles or posts that do not feature a form of misinformation label may be taken as true because they are not overtly labelled otherwise. As such, labelling some content while not labelling others allows for ambiguity of truth for those that have not been labelled. Despite this, many platforms continue to integrate these markers, with TikTok recently introducing an AI label in 2023.

Literature around misinformation, disinformation, and other kinds of replica content frequently reference the role of context. I have spoken at length throughout this thesis about the ways the context in which participants viewed the videos had an impact on their responses. While this dataset is limited in a variety of ways (not least because of its size), the role of context was one factor that came up multiple times with participants. The participants' desire for the labelling of content, their comments about watching the videos for the first time 'cold', and their remarks about wanting to interact with comments and the description box are all examples of the ways that participants sought out or valued context.

Ultimately, many types of replica content typically aim to entertain rather than to mislead. Fan content is made for those in the community and other forms of replica content

on emerging platforms are seeking to tell interesting stories in innovative ways. While they have the potential to do harm, this is generally on a small scale. That said, having an awareness of how the false signifiers of reality can be used to replicate authenticity is key to providing audiences with agency to be critical of the media they consume. The way that authenticity is curated in 'real' content has impacts on the way it can be successfully imitated. We cannot guarantee all viewers will respond to texts in the same way, and equally we should not prevent stories from being told through novel means. Concretely 'confirming' texts to be fictional or 'real' on all platforms can be difficult, and as much as viewers might want proof, executing this at a large scale has its hurdles. While mimic vlogs are just one example of how user-generated formats have been co-opted for storytelling, they are indicative of the same phenomenon on new and emerging platforms. Understanding how audiences perceive and categorise these videos, as articulated in this thesis, is one important part of exploring the growth of all forms of replica content. These findings highlight that the methods audiences currently use to identify content are flawed, and going forward, more emphasis must be placed on objective (rather than subjective) markers, but the findings also show how implementing these factors is more complex than it seems.

These findings are important because they serve to highlight the nuanced experience of individual viewers. By focusing on audience reception, this research contributes to the field by addressing a gap in the existing literature, which tends to focus on the interactivity afforded to users by producers of texts, adaptation practices, or the transmedia elements of the text. Undertaking audience-focused research is critical to investigating how authenticity is perceived, how meaning is made, and how replica content (both on YouTube and more broadly) is understood by users. Chapter 6 in particular presents ways that audiences

understand authenticity and the kinds of factors they look for in identifying it. The participants' differing understandings of authenticity speak to the existing discussions in the field which negotiate the multiplicities of the concept such as whether authenticity is self-referential or other-referential, the polysemic nature of 'authenticity', and the complexity of performing one's self online.

This research offers a nuanced exploration of mimic vlogs as a case study of replica content online and makes a substantive contribution to the ongoing research focused on storytelling in new media formats. In doing so, this thesis contributes to scholarship in the field of audience reception studies by furthering understanding of how audiences' unique perspectives and experiences contribute to their ability to distinguish different types of content. It identifies a number of factors that audiences draw on to identify content, and these factors are useful for examining how audiences identify similar content on other platforms too. The research clearly identifies the relationships between 'authentic' content and its fictional counterparts, and maps the similarities between various types of replica content which allows us to make connections between existing scholarship on disinformation, parody, mimic vlogs and more. Furthermore, this research expands understandings of the ways in which people create, watch, enjoy, and misconstrue media texts in evolving online environments.

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10 APPENDICES

10.1 Stage 1 Handout

1. **Name**:_____
2. **Age**: _____
3. **Gender**: _____
4. **Frequency of YouTube viewing:**

   More than one sitting per day: ☐

   Daily: ☐

   More than twice a week: ☐

   At least once a week: ☐

   A few times a month: ☐

   Monthly: ☐

   More infrequently than monthly: ☐

   Other: ☐ _____
5. **Approximately how long do you watch each time?**

   _____
6. **Describe how you typically watch (i.e. which device, where, are you multi-tasking?):**

   _____
   _____
   _____
7. **What kind of content do you normally consume on YouTube? Who are some of the creators you engage with?**

   _____
   _____
   _____
8. **In a sentence or two, what are your general feelings about YouTube?**

   _____
   _____
   _____

10.2 Stage 2 Handout

Participant: _____

Video One

The following questions will be asked of each of the 8 videos.

1. **Have you seen this video or person on YouTube before?**
   Yes ☐ No ☐ I'm not sure ☐

2. **Describe this video in a sentence or two:**
   _____
   _____
   _____

3. **Describe the person featured in this video in 3 words:**
   _____ _____ _____

4. **Describe how you felt watching this video in 3 words:**
   _____ _____ _____

5. **How authentic do you feel the person in this video was being?**
   Rate on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being Extremely Authentic and 7 being Extremely Inauthentic.

   1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐

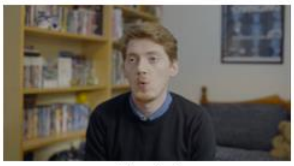
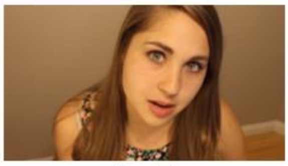
6. **What factors influenced your perception of their authenticity?**
   _____
   _____
   _____

7. **How likely are you to watch more of this person's videos?**
   Rate on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being Extremely Likely and 7 being Extremely Unlikely.

   1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐

8. **Any other thoughts about this video?**
   _____
   _____
   _____

10.3 Stage 3 Handout

 Vlog: ☐ Mimic Vlog: ☐ Why: ______	 Vlog: ☐ Mimic Vlog: ☐ Why: ______	 Vlog: ☐ Mimic Vlog: ☐ Why: ______	 Vlog: ☐ Mimic Vlog: ☐ Why: ______
 Vlog: ☐ Mimic Vlog: ☐ Why: ______	 Vlog: ☐ Mimic Vlog: ☐ Why: ______	 Vlog: ☐ Mimic Vlog: ☐ Why: ______	 Vlog: ☐ Mimic Vlog: ☐ Why: ______

Complete this survey after categorising the 8 videos as either fictional or user-generated vlogs.

1. **How difficult was this task?**
   Rate from 1 to 7, with 1 being extremely easy and 7 being extremely difficult.

   1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐

2. **Why did you give it this difficulty rating?**

   ____
   ____
   ____

3. **Describe what methods you used to categorise each of the videos.**

   ____
   ____
   ____

4. What things did you look for ***inside*** the video that signified fictional or "real" content?

   _____
   _____
   _____

5. What things did you look for ***outside*** the video that signified fictional or "real" content?

   _____
   _____
   _____

6. **How accurate do you believe your categorisations are?**

   Rate 1-7, with 1 being Extremely Accurate, and 7 being Extremely Inaccurate

   1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐

7. **Explain why you gave yourself this rating.**

   _____
   _____
   _____

8. **Any final thoughts on this task?**

   _____
   _____
   _____

10.4 Glossary Handout

Vlog:

A vlog (video blog) is a type of video format common in online spaces, especially YouTube. They typically focus on one speaker who directly addresses the audience by looking straight at the camera and speaking to the audience. The focus of a vlog is most often on what is being said rather than what is being done – this helps distinguish it from other similar videos online such as how-to or sketch comedy videos. Vlogs are typically shot in a singular, domestic location (such as a bedroom or kitchen), though this is not always the case.

Mimic Vlog:

Mimic vlogs utilise the format of a vlog to tell a fictional story. The speakers are actors and are playing characters. Mimic vlogs are visually similar to a vlog and utilise the same direct mode of address. They are typically filmed in locations that replicate domestic settings. The content of the videos is equally focused on what is being said, and this is typically driving the narrative forward.

User-generated Content:

User-generated content is defined as content created by the users of the platform, rather than a production company. Users are people who use a website. User-generated content exists on other platforms as well. For example, Facebook posts are a type of user-generated content, as it is the user who creates the content rather than the platform, which instead acts as a host.

There is both amateur and professional user-generated content. For example, Zoe Sugg (Zoella on YouTube) began as an amateur vlogger and is now considered a professional vlogger. Professionally produced content (i.e., by a production company) is not considered user-generated content. An example of professionally produced content is *The Late Late Show with James Corden*'s channel on YouTube.

10.5 Stage 4 Semi-structured Interview Schedule

- When you think of YouTube, what words come to mind?

- Where does storytelling fit into those perceptions?
    - How suitable is YouTube as a platform for telling stories?
    - What are the pros and cons?

- The individual surveys each asked how authentic you thought the presenter was.
    - Firstly, how do you define authenticity?
    - Secondly, how do you feel authenticity fits into our discussions around vlogs, YouTube, and storytelling?

- What feelings were associated with discovering there were fictional videos included in the 8 videos we watched?

- There are lots of types of content that replicates other content. What are some examples?

- What do these things have in common?

- How would you compare the mimic vlogs to this kind of content?

- The *War of the Worlds* radio play utilised a realistic sounding news break in, which is a type of media format that audiences find very trustworthy. How similar is that to what mimic vlogs do? Why?

- How does that perception fit in with typically more malicious content like deepfakes?

- Most of the mimic vlogs we watched today were amateur productions, but there are mimic vlogs produced professionally. What are your thoughts surrounding production companies replicating this type of user-generated content?

- How do you think you went with the categorisation task?

- Revealing which videos were and weren't fictional – what factors do you think led to your outcomes in identifying content?

- Is there anything you wanted to mention that we haven't been able to touch on yet?