



Selected Papers of #AoIR2018:  
The 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Montréal, Canada / 10-13 October 2018

## **“LIKE, COMMENT AND SUBSCRIBE”. EXPLORING THE ROLE PROFESSIONAL YOUTUBERS PLAY IN YOUNG PEOPLE’S HEALTH BEHAVIOURS AND IDENTITIES IN THE UK**

Jane Harris  
Liverpool John Moores University

### Supervisory Team:

Dr Lorna Porcellato  
Liverpool John Moores University

Dr Amanda Atkinson  
Liverpool John Moores University

Dr Michael Mink  
California State University

### **Background**

In the United Kingdom, there are now over 150 individual YouTubers with more than one million subscribers (Socialblade, 2017). The majority of their audience are under the age of 30 and a significant proportion are aged between 13-18 years. YouTubers produce content on a whole range of topics including: gaming, music, beauty, fashion and vlogs of their daily lives, and the content they produce is often commercially sponsored and largely unregulated. Their content often both purposefully and accidentally touches on a whole range of health topics including: mental health, alcohol, sexual health, body image, healthy eating and physical activity.

YouTubers successfully create “illusions of intimacy” (Ellcessor, 2012) for their audience. Through both YouTube and other social media platforms including Snapchat,

Suggested Citation (APA): Harris, J. Porcellato, L. Atkinson A, Mink, M. (2018, October 10-13). *“Like, Comment and Subscribe”*. Exploring the role professional YouTubers play in young people’s health behaviours and identity in the UK. Paper presented at AoIR 2018: The 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Montréal, Canada: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Instagram and Twitter they appear increasingly interactive and accessible to their audience. For young people, YouTubers could represent a magnified version of their own searchable and replicable online socially networked lives and could encounter the same difficulties that come from feelings of surveillance and misinterpretation online. YouTubers could therefore be a particularly relatable source of health information for young people, more so than those of other adults offering them advice on their health and wellbeing (Beer, 2008; boyd, 2008; Uhls & Greenfield, 2012).

However, there remain concerns about young people's ability to critically analyse the quality and reliability of health information they encounter online (Bartlett and Miller, 2011). Inequalities in health information seeking exist across all age groups and are influenced by a number of factors including: experience, motivation, self-efficacy and autonomy of use (Eastin and LaRose 2000, Correa 2015). Research suggests that young people have complex and often thorough methods for evaluating online health information and that popularity and peer appraisal plays an important role with likes, comments, views and favourites all influencing how likely young people are to engage with a particular information source (Gold et al., 2012, Fergie et al., 2013). This is reflected in an increased focus on digital media literacy on both national (House of Lords 2017) and international (Bulger and Livingstone 2013) policy agendas.

This study is the first to: examine the health related content produced by UK YouTubers, and explore the role this plays in young people's own health information seeking and YouTuber's perceived role in health promotion. By triangulating these findings it considers the potential contribution that YouTubers could make to health promotion in the UK.

## **Aim**

The aim of the research is to explore the role that professional YouTubers play in young people health behaviours and identities in the UK.

## **Methods**

The study was a four stage, sequential mixed methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2006). The first stage, a school based questionnaire with 931 13-18 year olds quantified young people's engagement with YouTuber produced health content and provided a sampling frame for the later qualitative stages. An online analysis of 7 UK YouTubers examined the type of health content they produced. Focus groups (n=7, 85 participants) with 13-18 year olds explored the impact this content had on young people's health behaviours and case study interviews with professional YouTubers (<1 million subscribers, n=3) explored their perceived role in health promotion.

## Findings

YouTubers appeared to be a significant source of health information for the participating young people with 80% watching at least one UK YouTuber, 70% recalling YouTubers talking about at least one health topic and 47% having used YouTube to seek health advice. The survey also measured participants' confidence in performing a number of social media literacy tasks. Those who could recall YouTuber health content and had sought health advice on YouTube were at significantly increased odds of a high confidence score suggesting perceived confidence increases with exposure to YouTuber health content.

There are three broad characteristics which typify the way in which YouTubers communicate health information. YouTubers share personal health experiences with their audience, give health advice and encourage their audience to do the same through the comments section and share certain social norms about health and wellbeing. This appears to align well with the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). However, interviews with professional YouTubers suggest that numerous factors impact upon their decision to make health related content; both commercial and ethical. YouTubers are treading a fine line between health promotion and self-promotion. Interestingly, the young people participating in the focus groups were also aware of this tension and yet, despite demonstrating competence to critically analyse this content, still stated a preference for YouTuber produced content when it was what they perceived to be "real and honest" experiences.

## Conclusion

YouTuber produced health content appeared to be a recognized source of health information for young people in this study. Young people appeared able to critique the accuracy and commercial influences on YouTuber content. However, this content still appears to be a relatable way of sharing health experiences, giving advice and communicating social norms.

## References

- Ajzen, I. (1991) The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 50(2), 179-211.
- Bartlett J & Miller C. (2011) Truth, lies and the internet: a report into young people's digital fluency. London: Demos
- Beer, D. D. (2008) 'Social network(ing) sites...revisiting the story so far: A response to danah boyd & Nicole Ellison', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(2), 516-529.

- boyd, d. (2008) 'Why Youth heart Social Network Sites: The ROle of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life' in Buckingham, D., ed., *Youth, Identity and Digital Media*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 119-142.
- Bulger, M. and Livingstone, S. (2013) *Media literacy research and policy in Europe. A review of recent, current and planned activities*.
- Correa, T. (2015) 'Digital skills and social media use: how Internet skills are related to different types of Facebook use among 'digital natives'', *Information, Communication & Society*, 19(8), 1095-1107.
- Creswell, J. & Plano Clark, V.L. (2006) *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Michigan: SAGE.
- Eastin, M. S. and LaRose, R. (2000) 'Internet Self-Efficacy and the Psychology of the Digital Divide', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 6(1), 0-0.
- Ellcessor, E. (2012) Tweeting @felciaday: Online Social Media, Convergence, and Subcultural Stardom. *Cinema Journal* 51(2)
- Fergie, G., Hunt, K. and Hilton, S. (2013) 'What young people want from health-related online resources: a focus group study', *J Youth Stud*, 16(5), 579-596
- Gold, J., Pedrana, A. E., Stooze, M. A., Chang, S., Howard, S., Asselin, J., Ilic, O., Batrouney, C. and Hellard, M. E. (2012) 'Developing health promotion interventions on social networking sites: recommendations from The FaceSpace Project', *J Med Internet Res*, 14(1), e30.
- House of Lords (2017) *Growing up with the Internet*, TSO: Westminster.
- Socialblade (2017) Top 250 YouTubers in UK. Available at: <https://socialblade.com/youtube/top/country/gb>
- Uhls, Y. T. and Greenfield, P. M. (2012) 'The value of fame: preadolescent perceptions of popular media and their relationship to future aspirations', *Dev Psychol*, 48(2), 315-26.