
The Age of Micro-Celebrity Fiction: The Impact and Influence of YouTube Celebrity Authors on the 21st Century British Publishing Trade

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Abstract

This paper will explore the position of micro-celebrities writing fiction within the British publishing trade and the social and cultural influences that have occurred because of their presence. Utilising the location of YouTuber turned celebrity Zoella within the market, this article will discuss how the role of celebrities within the trade has changed and how they have impacted the trade economically. This paper will also analyse culture versus commerce using Bourdieu's theoretical model and identify what is at stake in the 21st-century publishing trade.

Keywords

Micro-celebrity; Celebrity fiction; Culture; British publishing trade; Internet.

Introduction

The term micro-celebrity was created by Terri Senft in her book *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* to signify those who seek to increase their popularity among viewers and/or readers by using technology such as webcams, blogs and social networks. They “view themselves as a public person to be consumed by others, use

strategic intimacy to appeal to followers, and regard their audience as fans.” (Marwick 2015). Marwick identified micro-celebrity as “something one does, rather than something one is” and therefore the role of a micro-celebrity is often a full-time job. These micro-celebrities can be identified as bloggers, YouTube vloggers or amateur writers; the common element being that they are “internet famous”.

In regards to publishing, the role of the micro-celebrity has taken an important place not only in the online publishing world of YouTube or potentially even writing platforms such as Wattpad (Melanie Bold, 2016), but also within the traditional publishing world. There has been a fast-moving trend of micro-celebrities, most notably bloggers and YouTube vloggers, receiving book deals from large publishing houses such as HarperCollins, Penguin Random House and Hachette. This is not just apparent in the UK, but similar strategies have been launched in the US in recent years.

Many of these micro-celebrities are offered non-fiction book deals, such as KSI’s and Caspar Lee’s self-titled memoirs, adding to the genre of biography which has lost its popularity over the last decade (Crone 2014). What has drawn the biggest criticism towards the book trade, however, has been the growing list of micro-celebrities who have been offered fiction deals and who have subsequently begun to dominate book sales, particularly amongst children’s fiction. The criticism focuses on the literary merit of these publications and the subsequent threat to literary culture by placing commercial value above cultural value.

The move from culture to commerce within publishing or in critic Moran’s (2000) words the “vulgarization of literary life by commercial mass media”, has been steady. In light of celebrity fiction, the opportunity for further monetary exploitation of audiences is clear. When a publishing conglomerate such as Penguin Random House offers a book deal to YouTube phenomenon Zoe Sugg (also known as Zoella), they are doing so with the hope that they are accessing her 11 million subscribers.¹ If 1 percent of her followers purchase a book by her then this is an easy 100,000 units sold. Indeed, this is the case for Zoe Sugg and many other micro-celebrities within the publishing trade.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/user/zoella280390?gl=GB&hl=en-GB>

However, the distinction between the choice of publishing a non-fiction book and a fiction book is intrinsically important. Whilst celebrity biographies have been popular for decades, there is a limit to their commercial value because they are “one-offs” by nature. The arrival of micro-celebrity fiction, therefore, brings the opportunity for multiple new fiction titles with an almost guaranteed audience based off a micro-celebrity or celebrity’s already cultivated brand.

The Culture of Brand Power

The celebrity brand has always been an important aspect of the advertising and publicising of consumer culture. In the realm of publishing, 18th and 19th century authors such as Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson were modern-day celebrities (Bold 2016), whilst Mark Twain even went as far as trademarking his name in order to sell other products such as cigars and postcards (Moran 2000, 23).

This progressed to the popularity of the celebrity autobiography and biography during the late 20th century and the industry has continued to become increasingly brand driven in the 21st century, where publishers look for potential bestsellers and concentrate on marketable authors (Bold 2016). There is a natural gravitation towards introducing writers who can guarantee sales, these primarily being celebrities. In comparison to signing a contract with an unknown writer, a celebrity writer comes with an increased advance, but a substantially more targeted and logical marketing budget and guaranteed sales. In today’s digital age, possible sales can be gauged by followers and subscribers.

The trouble with this mindset is that publishers can fall into the cultural mind-field of the ethics behind ghost-writing and subsequently lose their integrity by “branding an individual”, which to public communication critic Khamis, is conceptually, practically and ethically problematic (2016, 2). In 1994 with Naomi Campbell’s *Swan*, William Heinemann

bought the model's name for a ghost-written novel. The endeavour failed as mid-way through writing, the publisher decided to publicise Campbell as the writer when the press was already aware of the ghost-writer. Many critics at the time believed that its failure was "very obviously linked to a perception that she tried to fool people by pretending to talents she didn't have" (Merritt 2008).

The preoccupation with sales and economic value in publishing fits with what Bourdieu stated about economically-obsessed publishers and writers: "Failure...is a condemnation without appeal: the person who has no audience has no talent" (1992, 147–148). In the eyes of these people and oftentimes the mass public, having an established audience becomes a talent for the writer. Bourdieu suggests that true talent is reflected in those with cultural capital, so by admitting that a commercial author with an audience is a talent itself, suggests that they *do* hold capital. It is not the same kind of cultural capital that Bourdieu wishes, as it suggests success without effort, making it this "give and take of a commercial exchange" he speaks about. "Pure art" and "commercial art", though "linked by their very opposition" (148), cannot exist without each other. The hope and belief that commercial art may fund pure art therefore remains and is an important ideology within the current publishing industry. In order for the argument of culture versus commerce to still maintain relevance and meaning, the commercial must exist to balance the non-commercial. As Bourdieu says: "the struggle for the monopoly of legitimacy helps to reinforce the legitimacy in the name of which it is waged" (166–167).

A New Era of Fiction

There is a sentiment that publishers are now losing their integrity and place in culture because they are willing to publish anything they know they can sell easily and widely. The first indication that fiction by celebrities was a profitable trend after *Swan* failing was after Katie Price's *Angel* sold 249,129 copies in 2006.² This triggered a trend within the publishing

² Nielsen Bookscan

industry to get celebrities on the books. It led to Kerry Katona's *Tough Love* (2007), Martine McCutcheon's *The Mistress* (2009), Sharon Osbourne's *Revenge* (2010) and more, which were mocked by critics (Allen 2009). The popularity of these books was very much related to Fairchild's "attention economy", where "in a media-saturated world full of information, what is valuable is that which can attract 'eyeballs'" (Marwick 2015). It became a fitting replacement for the celebrity (auto)biography, which Philip Jones, editor of the Bookseller, believes is now being replaced by 'YouTubers' books':

Jones insists that the phenomenon has been a saviour for an industry that was struggling; the books are a key factor in the upturn of physical sales from 2015 onwards [...] Print's overall resurgence encourages bookshops to invest, Jones says. 'I think it was an important affirmation that the book is probably going to survive. The next reading generation, buying their YouTuber books, clearly want books. It has given everyone a lot more confidence in what they're doing. (Speed 2016)

Access to publishing through online platforms, self-publishing and generally more "trend-setting" minded publishers has changed Bourdieu's fields of cultural production (1992). Whilst the sub-field of large-scale production (mass or popular culture) was seen to borrow from the sub-field of restricted production (high art) to "renew itself", what has now occurred is that the serious literature of restricted production must seek profit.

This is reflected in the commercialisation of the Booker prize, where the literature must hold symbolic and cultural value, but also be saleable. Publishers who enter their books into the Booker prize, must pay an entrance fee, as well as provide funds for the Booker prize marketing budgets (Squires, 2007). The sub-field of large-scale production now seeks brands to renew itself and has achieved relative success over the last two decades with celebrity biographies, memoirs, fiction and the continued "celebrification"³ of popular authors. Its assumed lack of "susceptibility to formal experimentation" (Bourdieu 1992) is no longer accurate.

³ 'The process by which individuals are transformed into celebrities' (Marwick 2015)

As indicated earlier, the “celebritization”⁴ of the publishing industry and the celebrification of authors has been prevalent for two centuries. Before the advent of social media, Joe Moran (2000) commented that authors were unavoidable: “Newspapers and magazines are filled with author-interviews and profiles and features about them”. They were present on talk shows, TV programmes, at signings and lectures. They had become normal celebrities and Moran saw this as a cultural phenomenon.

The mass move, especially among younger audiences, towards social media culture has made for a natural progression from the publication of novels by generic celebrities towards works by micro-celebrities. The brands this type of celebrity cultivates is usually child-friendly and consequently the majority of their audience is made up of under 18s. YouTube vlogger-turned-author Zoe Sugg has an audience of girls ranging in age from 10-16, though she often indicates that the age range is much wider (Zoella 2016). Naturally, her novels target the same audience, a fact that is reflected amongst other YouTube micro-celebrities turned authors, such as the UK published Joe Sugg (ThatcherJoe), Oli White (OliWhiteTV) and Carrie Hope Fletcher (ItsWayPastMyBedTime) and US published Joey Graceffa and Italy’s Marzia Bisognin (CutiePieMarzia).

Looking at UK hardback-only sales amongst the above YouTubers in 2016 (Figure 1) found that fiction by these micro-celebrities amounted to a large percentage of sales value within their publishing houses according to the genre they publish in. Sugg’s *Girl Online: Going Solo* (2016) accumulated 12.59 percent of sales value within Penguin’s Children’s & Young Adult Fiction genre and Oli White’s *Generation Next* (2016) made 91.69 percent of sales value for Hodder & Stoughton’s Children’s & Young Adult Fiction list. Despite not being commissioned by a British publisher, Joey Graceffa’s *Children of Eden* (2016) and Marzia Bisognin’s *Dream House* (2016) tell similar stories with their UK sales. *Children of Eden* made 7.66 percent of sales value and *Dream House* made 1.45 percent, both for Simon & Schuster imprints. The fact that many of these authors have been published more than once (in fiction and non-

⁴ ‘The ways in which social and cultural life is transformed by celebrity, but also contemporary changes in celebrity’ (Driessens 2013).

fiction) since 2015, indicates that a multimillion-pound industry has been created that has a notable impact on publisher income.

Figure 1.⁵

Title (All Hardback)	Author	Date Published	Sales in 2016	Publisher (Imprint)	Genre (Nielsen classification)	Publisher's sales in genre (Hardback only)	Author's % of publisher's sales
UK Authors							
Girl Online: Going Solo (Book 3)	Zoe Sugg	17 Nov 2016	£1,218,604.88	Penguin	Children's & Young Adult Fiction (Y2)	£9,679,191.80	12.59%
Generation Next	Oli White	31 May 2016	£376,646.96	Hodder & Stoughton	Children's & Young Adult Fiction (Y2)	£410,801.22	91.69%
Username: Regenerated (Book 2)	Joe Sugg	22 Sep 2016	£472,121.26	Hodder & Stoughton	Graphic Novels (F3)	£805,925.65	58.58%
On the Other Side	Carrie Hope Fletcher	14 July 2016	£163,502.72	Little Brown Book (Sphere)	Fiction General (F1)	£1,077,122.78	15.18%
Non-UK Authors							
Children of Eden	Joey Graceffa	4 Oct 2016	£85,239.05	Simon & Schuster (Atria/Keywords Press)	Children's & Young Adult Fiction (Y2)	£1,112,628.42	7.66%
Dream House	Marzia Bisognin	5 Apr 2016	£16,141.27	Simon & Schuster (Atria/Keywords Press)	Children's & Young Adult Fiction (Y2)	£1,112,628.42	1.45%

Although book sales for micro-celebrities have become an important part of Children's and Young Adult Fiction lists for some publishers, their quality remains under scrutiny. When it was revealed that Sugg did not write her debut novel, she received backlash among the traditional media, who seemed to want to expose her unsuitability as a writer. Her core audience, however, were easily placated through social media, explaining that "everyone needs help when they try something new".⁶

⁵ Data gathered from Nielsen Bookscan

⁶ <https://twitter.com/Zoella/status/541635465544466432>

Marwick, in her article “You May Know Me From YouTube” (2013), explains that the key difference between micro-celebrities and celebrities is the somewhat artificial nature of celebrities. Micro-celebrities require authenticity to maintain their audience and therefore their income. Zoella’s admission of not writing her first novel could potentially have been very detrimental to her livelihood, as her authenticity was under threat. Anne Jerslev (2016) sees this as a problem that micro-celebrities are now forced to confront as they move into “mainstream celebrity culture”. They must balance their authentic brand inside and outside of their social media platforms. This is therefore the biggest threat to this YouTuber book industry; fans might see books brought out by micro-celebrities as inauthentic. However, what has managed to trump present issues of authenticity amongst the audience is the quality of the literature itself. A commenter said the following during Sugg’s scandal: “what does it say that girls relate to this writer’s books only when Zoella’s name is on the cover?” (Butterfly 2014). The suggestion here is that regardless of content, Sugg’s influence reigns supreme on her audience of “girls”, and this is a point of contention among not only the media, but within education as well.

In 2017, a survey found that two of the favourite books of secondary school girls were Zoe Sugg’s *Girl Online* and its sequel *Girl Online: On Tour* (Topping 2017b). Unfortunately, this poll came with the news that a huge amount of secondary school students’ reading ages were falling three years behind their own age (Turner 2017). Subsequently, this had led to judgement of Sugg’s books as being unchallenging (Harris 2017), potentially because her audience is mostly secondary school age, but her books are perhaps aimed at a lower age bracket and unsurprisingly, she has been blamed for declining teenage literacy (Williams 2017). It is however representative of a reading problem only among secondary school children, as primary school children were generally reading above their age (Topping 2017a). Despite there being a steady rise in reading for pleasure among children (Burnes 2017), judgement then falls on authors whose books are not “challenging” enough, despite encouraging children to at least read *something*.

At the same time as facing judgement for using a ghost-writer to write her debut novel, Sugg is blamed for the literary content of her work. The antithetical nature of this argument therefore calls into question whether judgement of fiction by micro-celebrities goes beyond simply literary value. It is the speed in which the books gain sales that is ultimately harmful to culture, a point Bourdieu puts forward: “Immediate success has something suspect about it, as if it reduced the symbolic offering of a priceless work to the simple ‘give and take’ of a commercial exchange” (1992). Sugg became the fastest selling debut novelist since records began in 2014 (Singh 2014), which is no surprise since debut authors release their books with limited familiarity to the public. This manipulation of sales skews the reality of the book trade and too many consumers and critics, it understandably becomes a point of tension over ‘unearned’ popularity within the book trade.

The Migrating Micro-celebrity

Olivier Driessens uses the word migration to refer “to the ability of celebrities famous in one realm to migrate to another” and believes that it is an intrinsic part of celebritization, which describes celebrity transformation within social and cultural life, and also indicates how the term celebrity changes in the present. The acceptance of the literary author becoming a celebrity is different from the attitude towards celebrities becoming authors. A key aversion to celebrities becoming authors may be that as they are not primarily literary, they lack the status and cultural capital, even though they are a marketable commodity, unlike many literary celebrities (Moran).

Using Barthes’ (1977) theoretical approach to the death of an author supports the idea that as a result of the commodity culture of celebrities – they exist to be sold – the author is very much alive. The work only exists because the author exists within a commodified world as an object to be sold. This ideology is not limited to publications by celebrity novelists, as Moran explores in *Star Author* (2000), “celebrity is becoming an increasingly significant part of literary culture” (Moran 2000, 149) leading to name-brand and popularity taking first

place. Rather than the work holding Bourdieu's "cultural capital", it is the authors themselves who hold it and will continue to as the publishing industry continues to commercialise to stay afloat.

Publishers now seek best-seller power from their authors and this has become a priority over literary prowess. English and Frow (2006) talk similarly about authors who become celebrities, such as JK Rowling "extraordinary commercial success can sometimes lead to widespread interest in the figure of the author herself, just as this kind of popular attention to the person can be leveraged into commercial success for the work" (Frow 2006, 43). They then relate this to the supreme brand name power of best-selling authors, who lack "the aura of 'personality'" (Frow 2006, 43) and therefore do not function as celebrities.

This philosophy can be reversed in the case of micro-celebrity, where the work itself is somewhat redundant because of the name behind it. Journalist Stephanie Merritt said regarding fiction by celebrity authors: "the counter-argument says that using a celebrity's name as a brand is no different from putting the Disney logo on a book" (Merritt 2008). There is an assumption, therefore, that the commercialisation of fiction and therefore the lowering of quality cannot be put on the shoulders of today's micro-celebrities or the celebrity authors of the noughties. It has just become part of the current publishing trade.

Conclusion

Melanie Bold sees the influence of micro-celebrities within the digital sphere important in understanding not only gatekeeping within the 21st-century publishing industry, but authorship too. Those who are in control of or even just hold authority within the digital sphere can have an impact on traditional publishing, and therefore the importance is seeking out a means by which traditional authors or publishers can migrate towards the digital world. By publishers acquiring or commissioning work by digital influencers, or authors cultivating their online presence, they can find a contemporary solution within a saturated market. This means that authors like Zoe Sugg allow the industry to grow and

publishers are able to learn more about potential audiences or markets that they can exploit.

It cannot be said, however, that the presence of celebrity and micro-celebrity fiction does not have a significant impact on publishing culture. In terms of Bourdieu's theory, the rise of celebrity fiction is at odds with the idea of "investing one's capital". These skills or talents represent your own capital, however, what has been occurring since celebrity fiction began with Katie Price and others is that these attributes have all been unnecessary. Katie Price used a ghost-writer, just as Zoe Sugg used a ghost-writer in her first novel. The cultural value of literature is therefore under threat as Bourdieu's economic field is now infringing on the cultural field. In this economic culture, the idea that no one writes a novel, to receive bad reviews for example is potentially false now.

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