

Toy unboxing videos and the mimetic production of play

Benjamin Nicoll and Bjorn Nansen

This paper contributes to research on the digitisation of early childhood – particularly emerging research on young children’s participation on social media – by analysing “toy unboxing” videos. Toy unboxing videos are a popular genre on the video-sharing platform YouTube, in which children and adults record themselves unpacking various commercial toys. Existing research in this area has focused on case studies of how these videos are consumed as a means of augmenting offline toys and play practices (Marsh, 2016: 375-376), or alternatively, how well-known unboxing channels such as EvanTube operate as “brand influencers” (Ramos-Serrano and Herrero-Diz, 2016). Drawing on data produced through a content analysis of 100 recent toy unboxing videos, this paper analyses the place of children in the genre’s “affinity space” (Lange, 2014).

The “toy unboxing” videos were coded across five key categories – production, actors, narration, products, and branding – to analyse variations of expertise, professionalism, and promotion across the genre. The findings indicate that children’s modes of production as amateur content producers both shape and are shaped by the conventions of this video genre. While well-known “professional” channels such as EvanTube often seek to produce a semblance of playful amateur authenticity, the ostensibly “amateur” child unboxers mimic the production and branding strategies of the “professional” channels.

We argue that this reciprocal relationship between professional and amateur content production can be best understood through the concept of “mimesis”, which characterises the qualities of play and commercialisation within the toy unboxing genre. Such mimetic participation involves children operating as both sites *and* subjects of imitation within affinity spaces such as YouTube, articulating how “waves of collective imitation” in “brand publics” (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2015: 2) cut across rigid boundaries of production and consumption, amateur and professional, adult and child.

Reference list

Arvidsson A and Caliandro A (2015) Brand Public. *Journal of Consumer Research* 42(5): 727-748.

Lange P.G (2014) *Kids on YouTube: Technical Identities and Digital Literacies*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

Marsh J (2016) ‘Unboxing’ videos: co-construction of the child as cyberflâneur. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 37(3): 369-380.

Ramos-Serrano M and Herrero-Diz P (2016) Unboxing and brands: YouTubers phenomenon through the case study of EvanTubeHD. *Prisma Social* 1(May): 90-120.