

# Keeping it real: Authenticity and relatability in the videos of two YouTube animators

Bachelor's thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Mahdollisimman autenttisen ja samaistuttavan kuvan luominen itsestä on yksi keinoista, joilla sosiaalisen median sisällöntuottajat voivat lisätä houkuttelevuuttaan kuluttajien silmissä. Sisällöntuottaja saa positiivisemmän vastaanoton, kun hän näyttää olevansa teeskentelemätön ihminen, joka tekee aivan tavallisiakin asioita erityisosaamisensa lisäksi.</p> <p>Tässä tutkimuksessa olen analysoinut autenttisuuden ja samaistuttavuuden luomisen keinoja kahdessa animoidussa YouTube-videossa, jotka ovat kahden eri animoijan tekemiä. Analyysin menetelmänä olen käyttänyt multimodaalista diskurssianalyysia. Tutkimuksen teoreettisena viitekehyksen olen koonnut Alice Marwickin, Charles Guignonin, Christine Kowalczykin ja Kathryn Pundersin, Camilla Vásquezin ja Samantha Creelin, sekä Akane Kanain tekstien pohjalta.</p> <p>Aineistostani selvisi, että animoijat käyttivät videoissaan useita eri autenttisuuden ja samaistuttavuuden vaikutelman luomisen keinoja. He kertoivat tarinoita omasta elämästään, toivat esille valikoituja persoonallisuuden piirteitään, avasivat videoiden tekoprosessia ja puhuivat oletetuille kohderyhmilleen todennäköisesti samaistuttavista aiheista, kuten perheen kanssa matkustamisesta, hyönteispelosta ja työnkentelystä aliarvostetulla alalla. Vaikka molemmat animoijat toivat videoissaan esille myös negatiiviseksi luokiteltavia asioita, kyseiset kohdat oli kevennetty huumorin keinoin.</p>	
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# 1. Introduction

YouTube is an online video sharing service founded in 2005 and owned by Google. Alongside broadcasting its own shows, it serves as a platform for its users' content, benefiting them by helping them to get more attention to their videos and providing them with a means to earn money through displaying advertisements. As a platform, YouTube is very user-friendly: uploading videos on the service, viewing them and sharing links to them on other online platforms is easy even for people with less-than-extensive technical skills (Burgess & Green 2013: 1, 4.) The content that can be found on YouTube is so diverse that it would be misleading to call YouTube videos a genre. Instead, a myriad of genres are represented in them. (Burgess & Green 2013: 6; Johansson 2017). Even though there is a lot of amateur-generated content on YouTube, the most popular videos tend to be made by professionals of different fields, such as artists or comedians (Johansson 2017). Among the smaller players, large companies, such as Disney, also produce videos on YouTube and distribute them through their official channels (Burgess & Green 2013: 5).

But how do those who are not globally known companies stand out on YouTube? What makes some YouTubers get lots of views and likes while others do not? Skills make a difference, for sure, but they do not explain everything. Studies on social media by researchers, such as Marwick (2013), Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016), Vásquez and Creel (2017) and Kanai (2019), suggest that one of these ways is to make oneself appear as a "real" person viewers can relate to. The present study will look into how impressions of authenticity and reliability are created in one genre of YouTube videos: YouTube animation.

The structure of this thesis will be as follows: In the second section, I will provide a theoretical framework of how these two attributes help YouTube animators to appeal to their fans and in what kind of ways they could achieve this. The third section will introduce my data and method of analysis, as well as the research question. In the fourth section, I will elaborate on the examples of authenticity and relatability that I could find in my data, such as sharing details of the creative process, expressing certain aspects of the animators' personalities, using self-deprecating humor and telling stories centered around topics that viewers would probably find relatable. These findings will be further discussed and evaluated in the fifth section, which will also include some reflection on the limitations of the study, as well as suggestions for further research on this topic.

## 2. Authenticity and relatability in YouTube animation

### 2.1 YouTube Animation

Animation is an art form that began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when improved versions of motion picture cameras and roll films made it possible to project sequences of images at a constant rate onto a screen (Thomas and Johnston 1981: 14-15). O Linares Martinez (2015: 42) defines it as “a distinct type of moving image with solely illusory movement”. “Illusory” is an important part of the definition, for even though the viewer of an animation perceives movement, all the images shown are static and include no replications of real-time movement (Griffin 2007: 260; O Linares Martinez 2015: 47). In the past, not having been recorded used to be one of the criteria of animation, too, but due to the development of modern technology, that is no longer the case (O Linares Martinez: 42-43). Nowadays, there are many different types of animation ranging from traditional hand-drawn moving images to those created with the help of a computer or even completely by a specialized computer program (Griffin 2007: 261-262; O Linares Martinez 2015: 46).

As any other form of expression, animation has its possibilities and challenges. According to Thomas and Johnston (1981: 14-17), animation is good for conveying feelings to the audience and breaching language barriers. In their words, animation creates “an illusion of life”. By this metaphor, they mean that an animator can bring a character to life on screen, make it seem like a thinking and acting subject and get the viewers to empathize with it. Another strength of animation is that the constraints of physical reality do not apply for it: in animation, a character can, for instance, defy gravity or move in ways that would be impossible for real humans or animals (Selby 2013: 32). Consequently, the major challenge that comes with this art form is related to involving the audience (Thomas & Johnston 1981: 19). Enough familiarity, either in terms of character traits or the situations portrayed, is needed to make up for the charisma and chemistry a live actor would naturally have and make the audience relate with the characters (Thomas & Johnston: 19-20, 22).

Before computer animation, the field was reserved to the few lucky artists who were recruited by studios, but easily affordable modern technology and platforms, such as YouTube, have made it possible for ordinary people to become animators and start sharing their content online (Griffin 2007: 261; Burgess & Green 2013: 5). For this study, I define YouTube animators as animators who use YouTube as a primary platform for distributing their content.

By this, I make a distinction to those individual animators and studios that do also utilize YouTube but not as their most important channel, as well as those producers whose works are uploaded on the platform by third parties.

## 2.2 Authenticity and relatability as keys to success

When it comes to human beings, someone's behavior is considered as authentic if it stems from their inner motivations instead of ulterior ones (Kowalczyk & Pounders 2016: 349). As Guignon (2004: 2) points out, this notion is based on the idea that everybody has a "true self", i.e. a combination of traits that makes one unique and sets them apart from others. Consequently, authenticity is being true to that inner self.

There is a connection between authenticity and YouTube animation: While the original purpose of YouTube was social networking, in these days, the primary motive of many of its users is promoting their content, such as music, vlogs or animation. The platform has adapted to this change, which can be seen in its current slogan "Broadcast Yourself". (Burgess & Green 2013: 1, 4, 9.) Marwick (2013: 14-15), has studied what she calls "micro celebrities", that is individuals who are not famous to the masses, but to niche groups of people. Based on her research, she argues that the formula to online fame is creating a magnetic persona, producing some kind of content and appealing to fans with authenticity. Indeed, for the last 20 years, authenticity has been seen as something desirable in Western societies (Guignon 2004: 1-2). According to Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016: 347-348), consumers enjoy authentic content from celebrities and are more emotionally attached to celebrities who they view as "real" and relatable people. This is supported by Marwick (2013: 14-15), who states that micro-celebrities, such as beauty vloggers or political activists, are under a constant demand to be authentic.

In order to create the impression of authenticity, a YouTube animator needs to express their honest opinions and reactions, or at least the kind of opinions and reactions that are believable in relation to their online persona (Guignon 2004: 2; Marwick 2013: 114-115). Interaction with fans is also important (Marwick 2013: 114). One way of it is sharing stories and details about one's personal life, such as hobbies, family life or fashion choices in text posts, photos and videos (Marwick 2013: 114; Kowalczyk & Pounders 2016: 347, 352). Another is providing fans with means of engaging with the animators through actions such as commenting, liking or following (Kowalczyk & Pounders 2016: 346).

Guignon (2004: 3) brings up an important question about authenticity: is it always a positive and desirable thing? Everybody has flaws and at least sometimes makes choices that other people would find disagreeable. So, how to maintain the balance between authenticity and likability? The answer seems to be relatability. In a study on users of the microblogging site Tumblr, Vázquez and Creel (2017: 67) discovered that other users actually appreciated content that included self-criticism or revealed the vulnerabilities of its creators, for it made them seem more humane and relatable. This is in line with Kowalczyk and Pounders' (2016: 347) findings that state that glimpses of the less-glamorous aspects of a celebrity's life, such as stretch marks, can make them seem more likable to their fans. However, not all experiences can be considered as relatable. For example, they must be neither too personal nor too general (Kowalczyk & Pounders 2016: 63). The norms of the surrounding community also restrict what kind of experiences and feelings are appropriate to express. Self-deprecating humor can be used as a tool to make an otherwise unacceptable thing more palatable, but only to a certain extent (Kanai 2019: 61-62, 65, 67).

### 3. The Present Study

#### 3.1 Data

My data consists of two videos from the two most popular YouTube animators listed on the online ranking site, Ranker (2019): TheOdd1sOut and Jaiden Animations. TheOdd1sOut, whose real name is Robert James Rallison, is a cartoonist who also draws comics alongside animation. Jaiden Animations, whose last name is not public, is an animator who specializes in so-called "storytime videos" that deal with things that have happened to her. Both of them are Americans from Arizona. In fact, they even know each other personally and sometimes work together in doing videos (Wikitubia 2019). My reason for including data from two different animators is that since there might be variation between how individual animators create authenticity and relatability in their works, a more heterogeneous data set will hopefully be less biased in that sense.

I chose the videos for the analysis because they were approximately of the same duration and had been published close to each other. The video by The Odd1sOut is called "The Spiders and the Bees" and it was uploaded to YouTube on 3 March 2019. Its duration is nine minutes and twenty-five seconds, and it is a humorous discussion of arachnophobia, fear of bees and

why both spiders and bees are not as bad as they seem to be to many people. The one by Jaiden Animations is called “What my trip to Japan was like.” It came out on 23 December 2018 and its duration is ten minutes and fifteen seconds. As implied by its name, it is an animated recollection of the animator’s family trip to Japan in October 2018.

## 3.2 Methods

As already noted, authenticity and relatability can come in various forms. The videos of my data are multimodal texts, which means that they contain and combine a variety of meaning-making resources: animated images, still images, photos, videos, speech, sound, music, text, etc. According to Kress and Mavers (2005: 172), focusing on just one mode, such as image or speech, would not be enough to uncover the meanings of a multimodal text. For this reason, the method of this study is multimodal discourse analysis. Drawing on the theories on authenticity and relatability by Burgess & Green (2013), Marwick (2013), Guignon (2004), Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016), Vázquez and Creel (2017) and Kanai (2019), I will answer the following research question:

“What kinds of techniques of creating authenticity and relatability are used in these videos?”

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Examples of authenticity

Animated videos are texts that require a lot of work and planning beforehand. Both Jaiden and James recognize this in their videos and make their creative processes transparent, at least to some extent. After the story part in “What my trip to Japan was like” ends without covering the whole trip, there is a section where Jaiden explains how she has not quite followed her plans for making the video, but talked for too long, and chosen to break the video in two parts, the latter of which will come out later. She shows an image of the written script of the video and even admits that there will be “some classic Jaiden stuff I think you’d enjoy” in the second part of the story, making it clear that her creative process is guided by what she thinks her fans would appreciate.

James does not share the script of his video in “The Spiders and the Bees”. However, he makes an effort to credit all the people who have helped him with making the video: At the end of the video, while fan art is shown on the upper part of the screen, the lower part

features an image with the (user)names and drawn avatars of the people who have contributed to the making of the video, as well as their roles in the process, such as “Get Madz - Audio + 2nd channel”. James also thanks them aloud, calls them “really cool people” and encourages the viewer to watch their content. A bit later, he shows the photos of two other people, the creator of another YouTube channel called The Game Theorists, Matpat, and his wife, Steph, to thank them for doing some voice-acting for the video. He also shares how he used to watch Matpat’s videos before becoming a YouTuber himself, and how excited he is over getting to feature him in this video. Jaiden also credits her assistants, but only in the full description under the video.

When it comes to expressing one’s true self, both Jaiden and James seem to have certain aspects of their personalities that they have chosen to emphasize in these videos above all others. For Jaiden, it is awkwardness, whereas for James, goofiness.

Jaiden conveys her awkward side in “What my trip to Japan was like” through personal anecdotes and self-deprecating humor. The first instance of self-deprecating humor appears in a scene where she talks about how Japan was not what she had expected it to be, accompanied by an animated shot of her pet bird Ari pecking her following one where she depicted them both as Studio Chibli characters. The second one occurs as a self-commentary to a somewhat smug recount of how Jaiden and her family visited a shrine and she recognized one of the gods depicted in its statues on the basis of her knowledge of Pokemon. This is followed by a scene where a close shot of Jaiden with a Pokemon trainer’s cap is accompanied by flashing lights, a swirly text “Dork Alert”, a terrible recorder music and an edited, pinkish image where she has sunglasses photoshopped on her face and the Pokemon logo on her cap has been replaced by the word “gangster”. (Figure 1) By making fun of her interests that would generally be considered uncool, Jaiden “owns” them and turns them into something positive.



Figure 1. Jaiden emphasizes her “dorkiness” with flashing lights, swirly text and a caricature of herself. Image from the video by JaidenAnimations.

In addition to self-deprecating humor, Jaiden also shares stories of mishaps that happened during her trip. In one of them, she makes a mistake at a local restaurant and causes a mess, feeling very sorry for it. In another, she must wipe her hands on her trousers after having drunk from a spring at a shrine. Then there is also a description of how she and her brother went to an arcade and did not know how to play a dancing game. She describes the embarrassment she felt and how she thinks the local kids were looking at them, baffled at how two people who look like them could be so bad at the game. “They look Asian, but they’re white as crackers”, one animated bystander comments.

“The Spiders and the Bees” is full of examples of James goofing around. The simplest example of it is probably a cartoon-like scene where he throws a rock at a wasp’s nest and then gets stung. However, even the more serious arguments he makes for the importance of spiders and bees are always made with a bit of humor. For example, in one scene he juxtaposes a National Geographic article with an old comic of his as an equal source of information. In another, he says “just as all the *memes* say” (emphasis mine) instead of, say, “just as all the *statistics* say” while showing an infographic of the decrease in the amount of bees in the background. He also accompanies bits of information with humorous comments, such as when stating “The golden silk orb spider has too many middle names” or following a fact about how bees pollinate 30% of the world’s crops with “Don’t ask me who pollinates the rest, ‘cos I don’t know.”

James makes two insect-related puns on the video: one is that spiders “are good at web design” and the other “we will bee in good shape”. These are accompanied by depictions of him laughing with tears in his eyes and dressed as a giant bee. With the latter one, he also states that he made a bee pun. This indicates that he knows he is making so-called “dad jokes”, but still shamelessly tells them. He also pranks the viewer in one scene by saying that he has “been stung by a bee not three times, not four times but two times.”

## 4.2 Examples of relatability

Examples of relatability in “What my trip to Japan was like” are roughly centered around three themes: travelling, family and hobbies/interests. First, the topic of the entire video is a family vacation abroad, which is something many watchers must have experienced at least once in their lives. Even though every trip is unique, there are some things that are more common for travelers to face than others and sharing them can create relatability. For example, at the beginning of the video Jaiden tells about how she and her family were very confused with the Tokyo traffic on their first day and did not know how to read the metro map before they managed to find an English-speaking local who explained it to them. In another scene, she shares how an image translation app she had downloaded for the trip did not work how she had expected it to. In addition to issues with traffic and the local language, the video also contains several small stories and mentions of visiting Tokyo landmarks, such as famous shrines and the Studio Ghibli museum, and engaging in different kinds of activities, such as going to a robot show or an arcade. While sharing these experiences, Jaiden also brings up how she and her family were not always perfect: for example, she shares a photo of the Studio Ghibli museum play area that she had taken in secret even though photographing was strictly forbidden. In another scene she tells how she and her family visited a famous staircase called The Thousand Red Gates but were too busy to climb them.

Second, since Jaiden was on the trip with her family members, the video also features some relatable experiences about family life. The story begins with Jaiden explaining how it had been years since she had been on a vacation with her entire family and how strange she felt when suddenly faced with the reality of spending many days with them in a foreign city. As a young adult, I would say this is something many people who have moved out of their childhood homes can relate to. Jaiden also shares how different attitudes she and her mother had towards Tokyo and its attractions than her father and brother: while the former were very

excited over everything, she claims that the latter were not so much, except for the food. The video also includes an example of a parent being embarrassing, something almost universally relatable: in one scene, Jaiden commiserates how her father reacted to Japanese people not knowing English by trying to speak very slowly to them.

Third, “What my trip to Japan was like” is sprinkled with references to hobbies and interests the viewers of the video might or might not share with her. Some of them are intertextual references to quite well-known popular culture characters, such as animated images of Godzilla destroying the city or characters from *My Neighbor Totoro*. There are also two references to Pokémon: one where Jaiden recognizes a statue and one where she tells how she spent too much money at a Pokémon fan store. Given that Jaiden has made several Pokémon-themed videos in the past, it can be expected that she has fans who like the franchise and that these bits would be relatable to them. In addition to works that are known in the West, Jaiden has also included some more niche ones, such as the popular anime series *My Hero Academia*, which is referred to in a scene where two of its villains are presented as members of “the Japanese Mafia” (Figure 2). The last example I have chosen to include into this category is not an intertextual reference, but a reference to a shared experience. When recounting a trip to a Japanese arcade, Jaiden says: “You know these Asian kids who are super good at arcade games? This is their hive.”

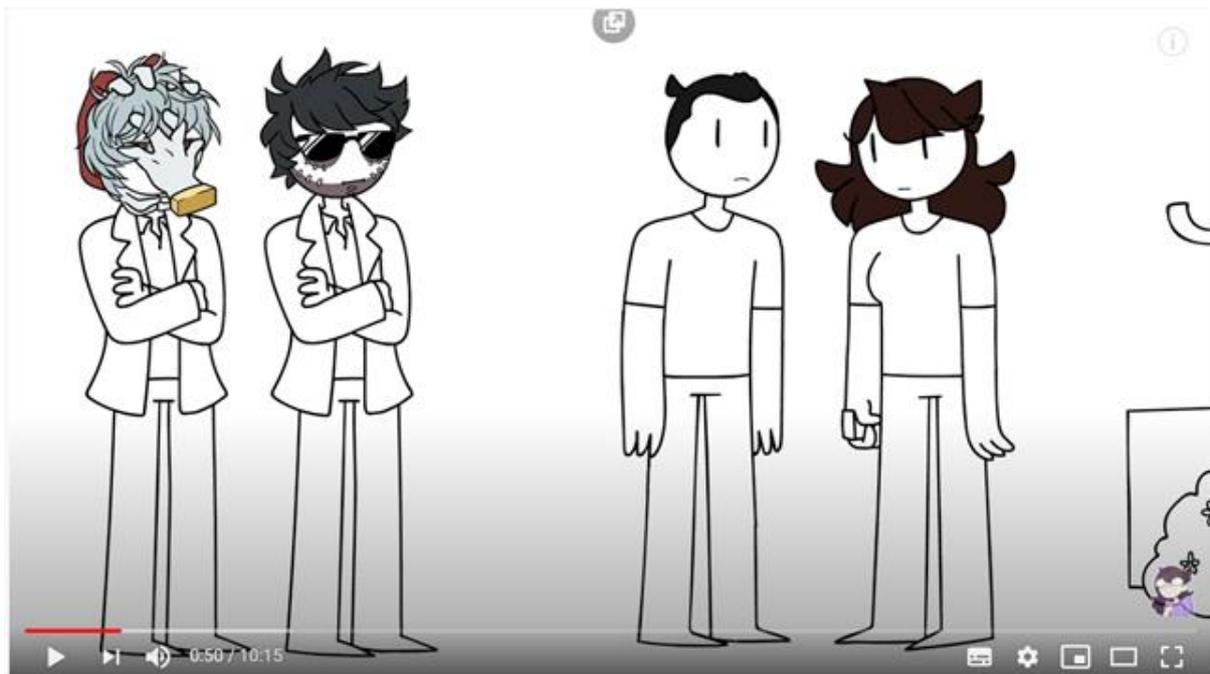


Figure 2. An intertextual reference to a popular Japanese anime series. Jaiden represents two villains from the show (the characters on the left) as members of “the Japanese Mafia”. Image from the video by JaidenAnimations.

Unlike in “What my trip to Japan was like”, examples of relatability in “The Spiders and the Bees” are not as clearly centered around distinctive themes. However, two that can be found are reactions to spiders and bees and James’ profession as a YouTuber.

As can be expected from the name of the video, it features its maker’s reactions and experiences to spiders and bees, creatures of which most people on this planet have at least some experience. James also recognizes this, which can be seen, for example, in a scene where he states that it is understandable if one is unnerved by a spider creeping up their leg in the shower. Many viewers can also probably relate to scenes that show him panicking when a spider lands on his face or being horrified by a video of a beekeeper covered by bees. I could relate to a story of James stepping on a bee as a child, for my foot has also had an unfortunate encounter with a bumblebee almost twenty years ago.

However, there is one scene in this category that sticks out as focusing on relatability. In it, James says, “When a bee lands on your arm, holy frick, that’s true fear.” In the animation, these words are accompanied by an exaggerated scene, where there is first a close shot of a terrified face with wild, moving eyes and a real mouth photoshopped on it (Figure 3), followed by a close-up of an angry bee sitting on James’ arm. The dangerousness of the situation is highlighted even further by the background colors: the background of the first shot is blue and in the latter one the entire image is red-tinted (Figure 4). All these elements serve to emphasize the fear a person can feel in that kind of a situation.



Figure 3. A terrified face. Image from the video by TheOdd1sOut.



Figure 4. Red as a color of danger. Image from the video by TheOdd1sOut.

“The Spiders and the Bees” features two scenes that address James’ profession as a YouTuber. The first of them follows a video clip from a documentary film where a researcher pulls silk out of a spider’s behind. This is followed by him joking how telling his profession at a party is not that bad anymore, as well as an animated scene where he meets the spider researcher at a party and is very uncomfortable when hearing him describe what he does for a

living, which serves both the purposes of authenticity and relatability. The second scene comes shortly after the topic of the video has shifted from spiders to bees. James is telling about the positive things related to bees, and remarks “Not only do they have the best work ethic of any living things...which is why none of them are YouTubers.” In the animation, a bee in a suit is first shown in an “Employee of the month” portrait. Then the hard-working bee is presented standing next to a YouTuber bee, looking very disapproving (Figure 5).

James’ commentary of his own profession serves both the purposes of authenticity and relatability. Even though he keeps the tone humorous, his experiences of feeling awkward revealing his profession to other people at social gatherings are most likely real, as well as having had to face prejudices about YouTubers being lazy or worse. After all, the hoodie of the YouTuber bee says “Logan”, which is a reference to the infamous YouTuber Logan Paul who caused a scandal in 2018 by making fun of a person who had died by suicide, and probably was seen as the epitome of YouTubers’ “bad work ethic” at the time when this video was published. Even though few can make a living by being YouTubers or other kinds of social media influencers, the struggles of having a job in an industry that is not that respected is something many viewers can relate to.



Figure 5. A hardworking bee and a YouTuber bee. Image from the video by TheOdd1sOut.

The other examples of relatability in “The Spiders and the Bees” are more miscellaneous. For instance, related to the stepping on a bee story, there is a scene where James comments: “You know how sometimes you realize you’re making a mistake but your body is already committed to the motion and you can’t stop it”, accompanied by animation where he accidentally closes an illustrating program on computer without saving his work first. In

another scene, he admits that he googled a fact about bees that he just presented and used Wikipedia as his source, being just as clueless about the worldwide mechanics of pollination as most people who have not studied it. The last example comes from the end of the video where James shares that he is a long-time fan of another YouTuber, Matpat. By telling this, he shows that he has also been, and still is, like his viewers in that aspect.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has looked into what kind of ways of creating authenticity and relatability can be observed in the videos of two YouTube animators. Overall, the findings mostly resonate with what has already been discovered by studies of other kinds of social media content: Both Jaiden and James shared personal stories and experiences – in Jaiden’s case to the extent that her entire video was a travel story. The experiences tended to be connected to themes relatable to young adults, such as travelling, work, family life and pop culture. The animators also brought up certain aspects of their personalities, such as awkwardness and goofiness, and presented them as things they were proud of, regardless of what other people might think of them, which fits well with the ideal of expressing one’s “true self” described by Guignon (2004: 2).

What my findings seem to confirm is that authenticity is strongly linked to relatability. Most of the examples of authenticity found in the videos are also examples of relatability. As expected, even though Jaiden and James expressed some sides of themselves that could also be negative, such as being a bumbling tourist or having an underrated profession, they did not bring up anything that would have been negative enough to be considered unacceptable by their target audiences. Furthermore, the possibly negative features were mitigated by the use of self-deprecating humor, which kept the tone of the videos light. In conclusion, relatability made the YouTubers of my data authentic in a positive and desirable way.

It can be argued that animation is not as authentic as a photo or a video. However, a fascinating way of increasing authenticity and engaging with the viewer could be observed from both videos: going beyond the movie- and series-like ending credits to share details about the creation process and even the artists’ own paths as content creators. It would be interesting to find out more about whether this kind of inviting the viewer behind the scenes is typical to other YouTube animators, or even other kinds of Youtubers. An analysis of a

greater number of videos by different animators could give a more representative look into authenticity and relatability in animated YouTube videos.

Kowalczyk and Pounders (2016: 353) found that product placement in celebrities' social media content annoyed consumers and decreased their perceived authenticity. Both James and Jaiden have official merchandise, and even though it was not present in the videos of my data, YouTube animators can also have sponsors and collaborate with companies. An intriguing topic for further research would be to find out whether this commercialization of YouTube animators affects their authenticity and reliability in viewers' eyes.

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