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EXPLAINING THE JOKES

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EXPLAINING THE JOKES

Zac Whiteside

Comedy is surprises, so if you're intending to make somebody laugh and they don't laugh, that's funny.

Norm MacDonald

For me at least, when it comes to approaching Art, I believe if I want people to take the time to engage with my artwork, then I ought give them something to work with. I don't intend to give them all the answers immediately, but I feel that the first glance should act in some way as a teaser to the full movie which would encourage them to sit with the artwork for an extended second glance.

That 'something' is the bait, and in the case of my work it often comes in the form of humour achieved through visual wordplay. Using humour as my bait, I try to disarm the audience, transforming discussions that might otherwise feel uninteresting, unimportant or uncomfortable into conversations that are easier to engage with.

What follows is a brief unpacking of some of the research and thought that has gone into my work over the last two years.

MOBILE MOBILE ('SITE 2022')

The genesis of my three-dimensional word play really kicks off with the work *Mobile Mobile*, the centrepiece of my work *A Bugs Life* for 'SITE 2022.' This satirical work is a twisted reimagining of a crib mobile, replacing the traditional celestial objects with glowing mobile phones. This choice underscored the parallel between the soothing distraction a crib mobile provides to an infant and the captivating hold smartphones have over our lives.

With its legs shuffling slightly across the floor as if tiptoeing, alongside the fuzzy, peach-textured phones, eerily resembling 'forbidden fruit' that hang from the branches of the mobile, the cot possesses a spirit of its own.

It has become a representation of the living force of technology, a blending of the 'cradle' with the 'treetop.' Humanity, infantilised, resides inside this cot of comfort ... that is, until the 'bough' breaks.

This work is the first notable instance where I started with using the literal as an entry point for the audience. Taking the homophone 'mobile' and making it into a very literal object, I created my first 3D play-on-words.



Figure 1. Detail of crib.



Figure 2. *Mobile Mobile* installation.

THE GRASS IS GREENER ('SITE 2022')

At the heart of all my work is play. I think the resounding message, thought or intention underlying my work comes from the sentiment of "not taking life too seriously." I guess my intentions with my artworks are not to create super-serious pieces, but to create sincere pieces that can offer something to a wide range of people.

This message of 'non-seriousness' was probably best expressed through my work *The Grass is Greener* (next door to *A Bugs Life*), which led viewers down an artificial hallway of suburbia lined with a polystyrene picket fence, artificial grass, rows of fake roses, then up a ladder they could climb to look over the hedge. What was over on the other side? Well, that would not matter, as no matter what was over the hedge, the viewer would always be disappointed with what they found.

The point of the artwork was to have viewers experience feeling cheated after their expectations were subverted in a "what was the point of that?" kind of reaction. It did not actually matter what they expected, or what I put before them, it would never be exactly what they pictured.

Inspired by films like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*¹ and Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain*,² this work aimed to mirror the idealised reality of the Suburban Dream and modern society's subscription to 'tick-box lifestyles' that once completed, promise that we will arrive at happiness. This ideology has us chasing the next 'thing' on our list in pursuit of what Lacan calls "the big Other,"³ that is an illusionary perspective of reality. "I've got to get a degree, get a job, get a house, get a partner, have kids, save for retirement." Once we have checked off our list, we have finished climbing the ladder and have finally arrived – but at what? What was it all for? Once we look over the hedge, the finished the illusion is broken and we feel cheated, because we feel the same as we always felt.

It's not that getting a car, or a house, or having goals is 'bad' in itself – it is having your mindset stuck in the future.



Figure 3. *The Grass is Greener*.

For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success; you have to let it happen by not caring about it.⁴

Viktor Frankl

In contrast to works such as *Mobile Mobile*, where it was my hope people would connect and actually like the work, with *The Grass is Greener* I was after that kind of reaction people give when you tell them, "Hey, it says Gullible on the ceiling." I got an overwhelmingly positive response of "Well, that was stupid" – which was exactly the kind of reaction for which I was hoping.

BEHOLD OZ ('THE FOUR PLINTHS PROJECT 2023')

Starting off the new year of twenty-three, I set out on an expedition to complete the 'Four Plinths Project' commissioned by Otago Polytechnic. Taking on this project, I decided to venture out in a new direction from my previous years' work and do something completely different. Alongside me I had my trusty navigator Isabella Lepoamo and assistant Tristan McGregor.

Behold OZ explores the modern era's information landscape. These fragmented concrete sculptures, displayed outside the Polytech Hub as the archaeological remains of 'The Great Colossus of Ozymandias', require the audience to follow clues and 'dig up' the punchline for themselves. Upon excavation, the joke is revealed, and the audience discovers that these are in fact artworks and not archaeological discoveries.



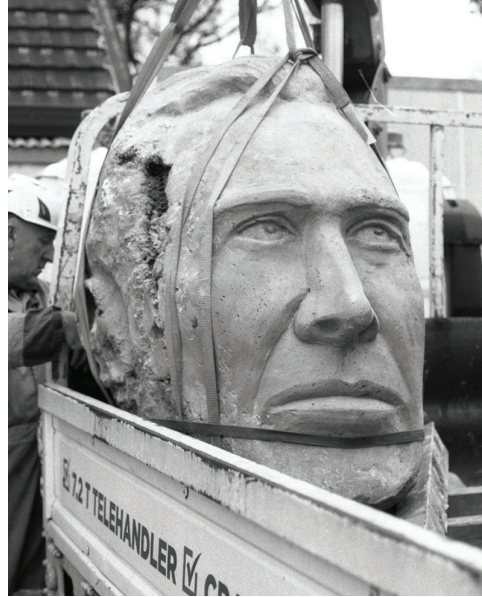
Figure 4. *Behold Oz*.

Placed in public, the work comments on the prevalence of misinformation that we often 'walk past,' acting as a litmus test for the public's trust in institutions of influence like Otago Polytechnic. In today's media landscape, where sensationalism often trumps accuracy and clickbait titles distort reality for the sake of monetisation through clicks, it is easy to fall prey to misinformation. Platforms like TikTok and other social media bombard us with other people's opinions that are not necessarily true. It is imperative that we step back and examine both sides of the story rather than simply agreeing with those we like or disagreeing with those we don't.

The placement of *Behold OZ* outside the Otago Polytechnic Hub further emphasises the message, as it challenges the audience to confront these issues in their everyday environment. The work is a commentary on the trust we place in institutions and the importance of questioning authority and information sources, even in the familiar surroundings of our educational institutions.



Figures 5, 6 and 7. *Behold OZ*, work in progress.



Undertaking the various works that made up *Behold OZ*, I first sculpted all the forms in clay. Contrary to the story that appeared in the *Otago Daily Times*,⁵ the works took a total of three months to complete, with the head alone taking an entire month to sculpt out of clay. Following this, I worked to create giant plaster break-moulds so that I could finally cast the forms in concrete.

The idea of creating 'archaeological' artworks is not a new one. *Behold OZ* sits adjacent to the works of Joshua Goode, who also makes 'faux' archaeological finds as artworks. Whereas *Behold OZ* operates within the public sphere as a lie, claiming to be real finds, presented in an educational institution, Goode's work reads more as a critique of capitalism and commentary on pop culture. By taking icons like the Simpsons and turning them into mismatched artifacts, he isn't trying to deceive anyone that these are fake.⁶

In the case of *Behold OZ*, although presented as a 'genuine' discovery, there are several clues that reveal the truth. Firstly, none of the fragments of 'The Great OZ' are to the same scale – the thumb is technically the largest, then the elbow crease, then the head, with the two legs being the smallest to scale. Secondly the head is modelled after Nicholas Cage. If those are not clues enough, the plaque itself is full of nonsense.



Figures 8, 9, and 10. *Behold OZ*, installation process.

Behold OZ!

Unearthed from the deep crevices of Sammath Naur, Nepal, comes one of the most important discoveries of the century. Esteemed Archaeologist Dr Zachariah Whiteside along with his assistant Sir Tristan McGregor and Navigator Madam Isabella Lepaomo, bring us the lost remains of The Great Colossus of Ozymandias, the statue of the fabled sorcerer that ruled over The Emerald City, Egypt until 1213 AD.

The young Emperor Ozymandias also referred to as “The Prince of Darkness” was born at the age of eight, and is said to have worn a tunic of snakeskin that was a symbol of his individuality, and his personal belief in freedom. It was with this sentiment he spoke his famous last words

“if destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher
. As a nation of free men we will live forever or die by suicide.”

After his death, The Great Colossus of Ozymandias was constructed as a memorial. From all across Egypt masses would make pilgrimage to witness the enormous work in the flesh. Tales tell that when met with the gaze of the Great Oz the viewer would be struck down in terrible grief and despair, the tears of one thousand-thousand distraught souls are said to have worn the toes from the statue.

For previous or further expedition enquiries:

www.zacwhiteside.com

@zacwhiteside on instagram



Figure 11. Behold Oz!.

With references to the film *The Wizard of Oz*,⁷ the poem 'Ozymandias' by Percy Shelley,⁸ Ozzy Osbourne and even a quote from Abraham Lincoln,⁹ the work is a commentary on how easily information is misinterpreted. Furthermore, by displaying disparate elements together, the work prompts critical thinking about online reliability, while also reflecting on the potential confusion that future generations may face when interpreting our present in a tumultuous world.

BEYOND OZ, BIT COINS AND BALLOT BOXES

After completing *Behold OZ*, I went back to an idea I had side-tabled for my honours, *The McBallot Box*, which would then become *PayWave*. Originally to be a McDonalds-themed ballot box with a *PayWave* station instead of a vote slot, this work evolved as I reflected upon my recently finished work.

While the idea behind *The McBallot Box* was to illustrate what it was to 'vote with your wallet,' the limitations of using the McDonalds iconography was the risk of the work only becoming about fast food. Wanting to go broader than this, I moved away from my initial idea and started developing designs for a Voting Monolith. Moving in this new direction, having just made a giant, one-tonne concrete head, my first inclination was to go bigger; creating a towering monolithic voting machine, akin to the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It would have a *payWave* system extruded out of the front and would be plastered with thousands of corporate logo stickers and poster advertisements.

However, after taking a step back, I felt that the form had leaped so far from the recognisable cardboard voting booths we all know, that the simple idea of juxtaposing the action of paying with the action of voting would be lost in this design. So, it was decided that I must keep it simple and create recognisable imitations of actual New Zealand voting booths.



Figure 12. "Chocolate" Bit Coins.

BIT(TEN) COINS

Bit Coins was conceived as a play on words, *Bit Coins* borrowed its name from the renowned cryptocurrency¹⁰ Bitcoin but took a different approach. Rather than minting a digital currency, I would create a series of bitten bronze coins – these teeth marks, my own, akin to the artist's signature, are an individualised touch that plays off the idea of seeing the artist's 'hand' in the work.

This idea developed after learning last year that it is against the law for cash to be refused as a means of payment, as it is legal tender.¹¹ This realisation prompted me to ponder the significance of cash, not only as embodying a right to privacy, but also the impact of its physicality on our psychology during transactions, compared to alternative payment methods like payWave, Eftpos, Afterpay and, of course, cryptocurrencies.

From having to count out coins to being able to tap a card or even your phone, in just the last century our modes of engaging in trade have changed enormously. Dropping like a bomb, in 1946 credit cards first appeared.¹² With Eftpos cards coming to New Zealand in 1985,¹³ it took till 2011 for the introduction of contactless payments. Moreover, countries like Sweden¹⁴ are embracing entirely cash-free digital economies, a development which raises concerns about privacy and control over our financial transactions.

Originally intended to be a series of bronze-cast replica New Zealand coins with bite marks, the work evolved when I decided to make them into replica chocolate coins. Keeping them bronze, but adding a chocolatey patina¹⁵ and displaying the coins with a series of gold-leafed foil wrappers, the joke deepened: these are now the inedible imitation of an edible imitation of an inedible object.



Figures 13 and 14. *Bit(ten) Coins*, work in progress in the Dunedin School of Art sculpture studio foundry.



Figures 15, 16 and 17. *Bit(ter) Coins*, work in progress in the Dunedin School of Art sculpture studio foundry.
Photographs: Isabella Gillanders.

Chocolate coins hold a special place in Kiwiana¹⁶ iconography, immediately recognisable and cherished by many. They serve as an entry point for children to begin understanding the concept of money. In a similar vein, my chocolate coins function as a gateway to a broader conversation about physical cash and the implications of the ongoing shift toward digital currencies like Bitcoin. These *Bit Coins*, larger than genuine New Zealand currency, carry significant weight in symbolising how we spend our money and the mediums we employ to do so, emphasising the seriousness of the issue if we lose cash entirely.

The bite marks aid in disguising the bronze as soft chocolate, tempting the viewer to bite them. However, biting these coins would be like biting a piece of display fruit. Just as in the sixteenth century, when counterfeit lead coins contaminated the economy – biting the soft lead coins revealed their fakeness – these coins, disguised as the chocolate imitations, also reveal their true nature when bitten: hard, cold bronze.

By trading my *Bit Coins* in art trades with fellow artists after 'SITE 23', they once again blurred the lines between what may be considered valuable in the artworld. How many 'bit coins' is one work worth compared to another? Can I debase the value of my coins? Or can I inflate their value? Well, since 'SITE 23', they have found themselves in Dunedin's Gallery De Novo¹⁷ listed at a higher price, and so they have already inflated in value.

What happens down the line when I begin to price my artwork using my own coins? "This painting can be purchased using 10-bit coins." What happens when I stop producing them? These are questions I plan to explore over the next few years as I continue to build my art practice.

VOTING BOOTHS ('SITE 2023')

Expanding on the idea of 'voting with your wallet' introduced by *PayWave*, I sought to embody the overarching concept of 'Actions as Votes' in the two additional voting booth works, *Pay Attention* and *Pay It Forward*. While *PayWave* highlights the act of voting through financial support, where money represents the medium for our actions, this notion extends to all the actions we undertake. Every choice we make can be seen as a vote in the broader context of our interactions.

If the action of voting is understood as the expression of advocating for something, then it would follow that for any deliberate action we take, by doing that action, we have in fact advocated it.

Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative¹⁸ is the deontological moral philosophy used to evaluate motives for action. Kant proposes that we should "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."



Figure 18. Voting Booths.



Figure 19. PayWave.

Consciously or unconsciously, when we take an action, we are producing more of that action. If I steal, there is one more stolen thing in the world. Kant highlights the framework making up this fundamental logical reality and builds on it, proposing that we ought to act with this process in mind, prompting a more conscious way of navigating decision making.

Building on Kant's Categorical Imperative, I would propose that in this framework, every action the individual takes should be regarded by that person as a vote for that action. I call this framework 'Actions as Votes.'

Once our actions have become votes in our minds, we start to live more consciously regarding what we are advocating for and contributing to society. However, not all actions in our day-to-day lives are as simple as that, as we live in an abstracted world full of nuance where there are many circumstances in which an individual will be completely unaware of what they are voting for when they take an action.

In the 'Actions as Votes' framework presented by the voting booths, there is no prescribed morality shoved in the viewer's face except their own. The voting booths simply outline a fundamental reality – they do not instruct the viewer how or why to vote, only that they are voting.

As we explore this framework presented by the voting booths, they start to function as institutional critique.

'Actions as Votes' in a world of nuance

While *Behold OZ* operates directly as a source of misinformation, in the context of our political climate the voting booths also point to issues of 'fake news' – regarding what we buy in *PayWave*, what we watch in *Pay Attention* and what 'good' we think we are doing in *Pay It Forward*.

A good example of such an action is buying an electric car; a purchase that has been politicised as typically an act of 'good,' of altruism. However, after doing some research we soon discover the unethical way in which rechargeable battery technologies are produced, with some vehicle batteries using chemistry which requires cobalt, mined under slave-like conditions in Third World countries.¹⁹

This example emphasises the struggle of acting morally within an industrial capitalist society that is founded on the exploitation of other people. If we are to think of every possible outcome of anything and everything we do, before we did it, we would be stuck, frozen, unable to act.

In politics, no party nor candidate is going to represent our values perfectly, and neither do corporations and the products they produce. If we are to 'vote' only for products or candidates that fully represent us, then many of us would be stuck, unable to act, while we consider all the possible ramifications of our actions.

Voting Autonomy in an Industrial Society

Unfortunately, acting completely morally in modern society is incredibly difficult when we consider all the nuances. As I pointed out with *Behold OZ*, when it comes to misinformation, we must navigate a world of abstract truths, where it is a full-time job informing yourself about each side of every story.

Because we are heavily reliant on industrial society to meet our basic survival needs, our autonomy to act entirely in accordance with our individual moral ethos becomes harder to exercise when the individual lacks the ability to survive outside of it. Within each choice offered, each individual has the ability to exercise different freedoms based on their skills, knowledge and expendable income.

When I was thinking about *PayWave*, I realised immediately that if in this instance money is our vote, then some people have more votes than others, and so our economy cannot be truly democratic. Extending this thought, because there are disparities in wealth, we are all voting with different candidates available to each of us.

For instance, one individual might not be able to vote for organic food because they only have enough votes to afford the budget brands drenched in pesticides, meaning in turn that they have less autonomy over their health.

As Alexander Berkman eloquently states:

The freedom that is given you on paper; that is written down in law books and constitutions, does not do you a bit of good. Such freedom only means that you have the right to do a certain thing. But it doesn't mean that you can do it. To be able to do it, you must have the chance, the opportunity. You have a right to eat three fine meals a day, but if you haven't the means, the opportunity to get those meals, then what good is that right to you? ²⁰

Following the logic inherent in juxtaposing the action of monetary exchange with the action of voting, my work *PayWave* presents the beginnings of an institutional critique. With capitalism in an industrialised society, we cannot have a democratic economy as the autonomy to act on the 'freedoms' promised in this society differ from one individual to the next.

The commodification of our attention in Pay Attention

Pay Attention was inspired by a personal struggle that many of us have faced – our insatiable addiction to the digital realm. This idea was sparked when I found myself entrapped in the endless scroll of Instagram reels,²¹ an irresistible allure that threatened to consume precious hours of my life. To combat this compulsion, I employed mindfulness.

I realised that my time spent in the labyrinth of social media was not without cost, although it might seem 'free' on the surface. In exchange for 'costless' access to these platforms, we unwittingly relinquish a piece of our privacy, casually signing it away in the dense legalese of terms and services.²² Our personal data, the treasure trove of our online activities, becomes the currency we unconsciously barter. Every like, share or comment we make, every video we watch and every post we interact with generates income for the big social media platforms such as Instagram.²³

This revenue model, reliant on various forms of advertising and the existence of 'monetised accounts',²⁴ hinges on the commodification of our attention. It is no longer merely the time we invest; it is the very essence of our focus, which is harvested, packaged and sold to the highest bidder. By reminding myself of this each time I click onto an application, I can consciously navigate my time spent on any one, only spending an amount of time with which I am comfortable.

With *Pay Attention*, the work is not only a commentary on our digital age; it is a reminder that the act of looking, scrolling and swiping has become a valuable commodity in a world driven by data. It beckons us to pause, to contemplate and to reclaim control over our most precious asset – our undivided attention. In so doing, we break free from the invisible chains that tether us to the digital world that often threatens to keep us perpetually distracted.

Pay Attention reframes the action of giving our attention as a vote, a conscious action that can create change.



Figure 20. *Pay Attention*.



Figures 21 and 22. *Pay it Forward*.

PAY IT FORWARD

Pay it Forward presents us with a juxtaposition of choices: a bowl of native kowhai seeds and a pile of pine seeds. These options invite us to reflect on the nuances of doing good, highlighting the complexities that arise when navigating the path of altruism. The seeds nestled within this artwork are a metaphor, urging us to sow the seeds of change that will yield the fruit we may never taste.

The metaphor of “planting trees we won’t sit under the shade of” encapsulates the essence of this work, urging us to consider the long-term implications of our actions. While growing pine trees may seem like a step towards combating climate change, their invasive nature poses a threat to biodiversity. On the other hand, native kowhai trees not only contribute to biodiversity but also support our native wildlife.

In this way, *Pay it Forward* serves as a reminder of the importance of mindful decision-making. Each seed we choose to plant represents a commitment to fostering a more sustainable and compassionate world. Just as a tree grows to provide shade for future generations, our actions have the power to shape the environment in which those who come after us will live.

As these works stand within the context of a group exhibition, *PayWave*, *PayAttention* and *Pay it Forward* collaborate with the other artworks on show to provide a reframed perspective. Our actions within this gallery become expressions of support: buying student artworks becomes a vote for budding art careers; our attentive presence affirms the importance of arts in our society; and, in embracing these moments, we engage in a collective act of “paying it forward.”

STEPS FORWARD

Looking at my work, I can see a pattern forming and feel new ideas brewing. I think back to when I did not have a distinctive style and was overthinking who I wanted to be and what I wanted to create. It was 2021, I was in second year, my first year at the art school; riddled with anxiety about the future, I had chewed my nails down to the bone.

My sculpture tutor Michele Beevors sat me down and asked me where I wanted to see myself in ten years. “Well, I want to make films,” I answered. “So, well, then start now,” she told me. She could see my ideas were too big for my belly. I was hesitating to create, because I wanted to execute my ideas true to my vision, which frankly I lacked the skill to do – but I had to make something, otherwise I would never learn the skills I needed to create these ‘amazing’ film ideas I had.

Michele really put things into perspective for me. She told me this story of some guy who was always talking about how he was going to write this amazing sci-fi novel. Every year he'd tell her about how he was going to do it, but 30 years on he still hadn't started, and so she warned me, "Don't be that guy." That day I decided I was going to become a filmmaker:

I told Michele my decision that I was going to make a film. She encouraged me to start small and just shoot one scene, or just make the trailer: I was only in my second year of art school and didn't need to rush into making an entire movie by myself. She kept saying something about not going bigger than *Ben Hur* ... Well, I didn't even know who this Ben fella was or why he was so big, so for the better half of second year I went on to attempt to create a full-length feature film.

Flip forward to now, and I am a sculptor:

Zac Whiteside is a sculptor, freelance photographer and videographer. He graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Arts with First Class Honours from Dunedin School of Art in 2023. His practice explores humanity's relationship with technology and the impacts of industrialization on our autonomy through his use of humour and three-dimensional wordplay.

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- 2 Alejandro Jodorowsky, *The Holy Mountain*, 1973, DVD, (ABKCO Films, United States).
- 3 Slavoj Žižek. *The Big Other and the Event of Subjectivity*, European Graduate School Video Lectures, 2012, n.d., YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/7aYDwHNmb4?si=7qS3-HFkbENjribc> (accessed 17 July 2024).
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- 13 "How EFTPOS Works: A Brief Overview," *SmartPay*, <https://www.smartpay.co.nz/blog/how-efpos-works-a-brief-overview>.
- 14 "Sweden: The Cashless Country," *Nature Travels*, <https://www.naturetravels.co.uk/blog/sweden-the-cashless-country/>
- 15 Patinas are used to speed up the oxidisation process of a metal in order to change its colour and texture.
- 16 Kiwiana refers to a collection of items, icons and symbols that are distinctively and quintessentially New Zealand in nature. These items and cultural symbols reflect New Zealand's unique identity and heritage; examples include pavlova, jandals and the Buzzy Bee.
- 17 <https://www.gallerydenovo.co.nz/artists/zac-whiteside>.
- 18 "Kant's Moral Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/>.
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- 20 Alexander Berkman, *Now and After: The ABC of Communist Anarchism* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1929).
- 21 Instagram Reels is a short-form video feature on the Instagram platform that allows users to create and share 15- to 60-second video clips. It is designed for creative and engaging content, often featuring music, special effects and quick edits. The videos are accessible as an endless loop of content via the 'Reels' tab on the app.
- 22 "Data is the New Gold – How and Why it is Collected and Sold," *Usercentrics*, 2021, <https://usercentrics.com/knowledge-hub/data-is-the-new-gold-how-and-why-it-is-collected-and-sold/> (accessed 17 July 2024).
- 23 A social dilemma.
- 24 The term 'monetised account' typically refers to an online account – such as a website, blog, social media profile or YouTube channel – which has been set up in a way that allows the account owner to generate income from it. This income can be earned through various methods, including advertising, affiliate marketing and sponsored content.