



Bowler, Rick and Razak, Amina (2021) Executive Summary  
Report: Evaluation of TryLife TV April 2021. Project Report.  
University of Sunderland, Sunderland, UK.

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# Trylife



Executive Summary Report:

## EVALUATION OF TRYLIFE TV

April 2021 - Dr Amina Razak and Dr Rick Bowler



The University of Sunderland were commissioned by Trylife TV to conduct an evaluation on the processes and production of Trylife TV and their model. The evaluation was conducted between April 2020 - March 2021. The research took a multi-method approach and consisted of a survey distributed to those who had worked on previous Trylife TV episodes, online interviews with young people and staff and the Executive team, workshop observation, an online focus group with placement students, and online interviews with professionals. The research was approved by the University of Sunderland ethics committee.



## TRYLIFE TV: Some context

The concept of Trylife TV was born in 2008 when one of the Executives, Paul Irwin, left his job as a youth worker and began to experiment with interactive storytelling to help young people to understand the consequences of their decision making. In 2011 Trylife TV was created as a film production company with Paul Irwin and Nicky Kaur as the Executives.

Trylife TV have developed an expertise in creating digital interactive films designed to encourage young people to engage in a process of reflection about the different implications and outcomes of choices and decisions made. This process aims for viewers to interact, learn and develop critical thinking and reasoning. Technological advancements have changed the way young people use and interact with the digital world and the use of digital space is a key part of everyday life for young people across the UK. Digital spaces are used by young people for communications, socialising, education and entertainment (JETS 2020). Reaching young people online is now seen as a critical, impactful and powerful tool (OFCOM 2019, JETS 2020). Trylife TV's digital interactive educational films are a young person focused co-production approach to public health concerns and it has attracted a great deal of interest from public health professionals.

Anne Rathbone et al, (2018:5) identify co-production as 'working together to produce a product, service or activity'. The challenging public health issues Trylife TV have been commissioned to explore are co-

produced with stakeholders and young people and led by statistical data in the region in which the film is being produced. Stakeholders and young people are engaged at critical moments which ensures young people's agency becomes embedded in the interactive story lines for each film. The Executives intentional use of regional slang and dialect ensures that each film appears authentic and speaks to young people. The youth work approach that Trylife TV has adopted focuses on how 'youth workers aim to help young people explore their identity, their experiences, and the logic of their decision-making' (Bowler, 2013: 151).

The Trylife TV co-production model is complex, detailed and follows several stages of film development. It is grounded in the notion of building young people's capabilities, self-efficacy and skills while also empowering them to become agents of change (Clark and Laing 2018) on improving the health of young people (Vallentin-Holbech 2020). Young people's involvement has the added benefit of film promotion through young people's social networks thereby increasing the reach of the Trylife films and 'maximising learning opportunities' (Bartindale et al 2016: 1414). The co-production experience was described by the young people we interviewed, as empowering. It has added critical benefits of enhancing employability, equipping and building young people's skills, creativity, knowledge, confidence and career aspirations in media making as well as soft skills such as communication and teamwork.

## TRYLIFE TV AND THE TRYLIFE CO-PRODUCTION EXPERIENCE

Trylife TV films was recognised by research participants as an innovative interactive tool enabling the autonomy of young people to explore life choices through testing out the consequences of their decisions and the potential impacts of these in a safe medium. Young people in our research highlighted interactive films as an engaging educational tool which can help young people connect to and decipher experiences, emotions and issues that they may be undergoing. Accessing online resources was noted as especially important in the current pandemic where young people may be experiencing loneliness and isolation.

## The research evaluation noted particular benefits for young people involved in the co-production process:

- The Trylife TV experience raises the aspirations of young people, it offers them and specifically those who are socio-economically disadvantaged the opportunity to explore and engage in media making and additional experiences that come with this
- Trylife TV offer a supportive learning environment and are invested in the personal and social development of new and inexperienced cast and production members
- The learning opportunities are varied and include developing young people's knowledge and skills in film production, script writing, storytelling, acting, editing, reflexivity, digital and IT skills, marketing and research
- Trylife TV offer mentoring and advice on future work opportunities and offering employment with Trylife projects to help them continue to develop and grow their skills, knowledge and CVs and sometimes even offering financial support
- 93.9% of survey respondents told us that the Trylife TV film co-production experience helped them develop critical thinking
- 94% of survey respondents stated the Trylife TV experience helped them develop decision making skills
- 84.9% considered that their awareness improved of where to find support on the issues raised in the film that they had been working on
- 45.8% noted their involvement helped to increase their awareness of the issues explored in the TrylifeTV films
- 87.9% of survey respondents stated that the Trylife experience helped them increase confidence in themselves in approaching and working in new environments
- 90.9% felt that the Trylife experience had helped them gain skills and knowledge for a career related to media and film making
- 90.9% felt that the Trylife experience had helped them develop additional other workplace skills
- Trylife TV films have the added potential of educating and informing parents and professionals on social and health issues impacting on young people
- Health professionals noted Trylife TV's potential ability to educate and inform decision making on health issues for other age groups



## ENHANCING TRYLIFE TV FOR THE FUTURE

The research evaluation identified areas in need of strengthening and we conclude that issues found are in the majority directly linked to infrastructure and funding. As Campbell and Vanderhaven (2016: 59) identify 'If co-production is going to be supported effectively, at the very least this interstitial activity needs to be recognised and valued [...]'. Based on our findings we make a number of recommendations:

- Trylife TV need to increase infrastructure to resource the administrative, digital engagement, marketing and business development tasks to expand the company, drive engagement and further increase the reach of Trylife TV films
- All aspects of the media production process need to be properly costed and fully funded to reduce the pressure on the Executives and can help improve communication, mentoring and engagement
- The Executives consider youth worker led engagement that delivers Trylife learning in schools.
- The Executives engage and network with The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and UK Local Education Authority Departments (LEA) to promote the Trylife TV films, the co-production model and the potential to deliver engagement in schools and other youth settings

Trylife TV have rich data on the benefits of their co-production process, the involvement of young people and their offer of employability, mentoring, training and upskilling of young people. Capturing and presenting this data will evidence the significant added on value that Trylife TV provides to commissioners. We suggest:

- Mapping out the co-production process to enable commissioners to better understand the complexity of the work undertaken to engage, develop and produce each film. A visual process map will be useful to consider when presenting to prospective commissioners
- Robust data collection on the engagement of young people in training and employability to help evidence the impact of the Trylife TV co-production experience
- Robust data collection on the engagement of young people in the Trylife TV co-production process to inform the generation of social return on investment
- Consider including costs for evaluation into every future episode

One of the integral elements of the Trylife TV process is its use of a youth work approach to co-production which is central to the development of the interactive film product. To enhance and support the experience of young people in the co-production process we suggest:

- Pre-production workshops to help young people adjust to their role and to understand the production process
- Enhancing partnerships with the youth work sector to further explore using Trylife TV as a learning resource
- Consider formalising the mentoring process to ease the pressure on the Executives
- Consider employing a JNC qualified youth worker and access to mental health and other specialist advisors accessible on each film location



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