

How YouTube Developed into a Successful Platform for User-Generated Content

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Abstract

Since its development, YouTube, the world's third most popular online destination, has transformed from a video-sharing site into a job opportunity for content creators in both new and mainstream media. Based on content analysis, the study examined how three prominent YouTubers have created a successful personal brand. Analysis revealed the common characteristics that these online celebrities shared, the appeal of their content to viewers, and their use of traditional media to strengthen their branding. The study also found that younger viewers prefer watching YouTube videos because they were able to relate to the authenticity of user-generated content.

I. Introduction

On October 2, 2010, Felix Kjellberg uploaded a 2-minute YouTube video of himself speaking on camera while playing a video game. Today, Kjellberg, better known by his YouTube alias, "PewDiePie," uploads to an online audience of more than 40 million subscribers.

At just 24, Kjellberg has developed his online persona into a brand name that pulls in an estimated \$4 million in ad sales a year (Kain, 2014). Kjellberg is not alone. An astonishing number of individuals have made YouTube their career. With consistent viewing from cable's most sought-after age demographic, ages 18 to 49, YouTubers like Kjellberg have formed a virtual yet powerful relationship with their viewers (Luscombe, 2015). User participation helps in creating the stability of loyal audiences. The wide variety of content makes YouTube a place where just about anyone can find a video that interests them, whether they are looking for Kjellberg's video game commentary or want to watch a beauty guru's daily makeup routine. Of the 3.2 billion people who have Internet access, more than 1 billion are accessing YouTube videos (Luscombe, 2015). Founded in 2005 as a platform where amateur users could upload and share their videos online, YouTube has now established itself as a part of the entertainment industry.

Since its development, YouTube has transformed from a video-sharing site into a job opportunity for content creators in both new and mainstream media. This paper used content analysis of three influential YouTubers—Felix Kjellberg (PewDiePie), Zoe Sugg (Zoella), and Grace Helbig (itsgrace)—to examine how YouTube has evolved and developed into a career platform during the past decade. It tried to identify what makes a YouTube channel successful through examining the qualities of three influential YouTubers who each

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represent one of the site's most popular content categories.

II. Literature Review

This literature review described how YouTube started as a site to distribute user-generated content and later has developed into a platform where an individual can build a personal brand and turn it into a career.

Before analyzing the rise and success of Felix Kjellberg, Zoe Sugg, and Grace Helbig, it is important to understand how YouTube has grown as a content-sharing platform around the world. Founded by Chad Hurley, Steven Chen, and Jawed Karim, YouTube launched with little fanfare in June 2005. As Burgess and Green (2009) explained in their book, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, "YouTube was one of a number of competing services aiming to remove the technical barriers to the widespread sharing of video online. The website provided a very simple, integrated interface within which users could upload, publish, and view streaming videos without high levels of technical knowledge" (p. 1). YouTube was comparable to other video-start ups at the time until Google acquired the site for \$1.65 billion in October 2006 (Burgess & Green, 2009, p. 1). The site has steadily gained popularity, and since 2008 it has consistently been in the top ten most visited sites globally (Morreale, 2014). Almost a decade later it is the world's third most popular online destination with availability in 61 languages and a million advertisers (Luscombe, 2015).

Since being purchased by Google, YouTube has evolved from a site where amateur and ad-free videos were posted to an online destination that is now consumed by commercialized and professional videos. But there is another side as Morreale (2014) wrote, "Its tagline 'Broadcast Yourself' invites ordinary users to take an active part in creating the material they consume. At the same time, less obvious is that YouTube is a business whose purpose is to generate profit" (p. 114). About this institutionalization of YouTube, Kim (2012) wrote, "If the pre-Google era of YouTube is characterized by amateur-produced videos in an ad-free environment, the post-Google purchase stage is characterized by professionally generated videos in an ad-friendly environment. Because of YouTube's popularity, industries have shown a deep interest in monetizing it" (p. 56). This interest in monetizing content has allowed channels that started as a hobby to develop into a source of income for content creators.

Describing this development from hobby to job, Lavaveshkul (2012) wrote, "Their beginnings were simple and they produced their videos from beginning to end: they wrote the script (if there was one), acted, did the camera work (oftentimes using an inexpensive camera on a tripod), and did the post production work as well" (p. 378). To a viewer, the lack of professional lighting, scripts and a set made the experience of watching a YouTube video more relatable. Kjellberg further elaborated on this experience in an interview when he said, "Unlike many professionally produced shows, I think I've established a much closer contact with my viewers, breaking the wall between the viewer and what's behind the screen. . . . What I and other YouTubers do is a very different thing. . . . My fans care in a different way about what they are watching" (Grundberg & Hansegard, 2014). Sugg also recognized the importance of creating an environment that is relatable to viewers when she said in an interview, "You want to make it a cozy environment and put in your own personal touches. I just sit on the edge of my bed because for me your bed is the coziest place to be, and you want people watching to feel as comfortable as you are filming" (Tan, 2015, p. 98). Sugg's and Kjellberg's approach to YouTube has helped them attract and keep the attention of not only brands that want to work with them, but also loyal viewership.

YouTube has more American viewers between the ages 18-49 than any cable network, helping increase its revenue by an estimated \$1 billion over the last year (Luscombe, 2015). YouTubers have the attention that advertisers and cable networks desire, as explained by Burling (2015), who wrote, "Book publishers are starting to pay more attention to a form of expression that has exploded over the past decade: fictional web series and vlogging, or video blogging, found mostly on YouTube. Why? That's where the kids are" (p. 22). YouTube is now the ultimate destination for kids logging on to the Internet, Luscombe pointed out, mentioning an anecdote: "*Variety* asked a bunch of teens to choose their favorite stars among 20 names, the top five were all from YouTube" (p. 72).

With consistent views from a critical mass of audience, YouTube has created an opportunity for the average person to build his or her personal brand. Kozinets and Cerone (2014) wrote, "Social branding

has been creating grassroots ‘micro-celebrities’ with increasing frequency. For personal branders, being storytellers who are capable, yet fascinating and even fantastic is a sound strategy” (p. 21). The influence of a YouTuber’s personal brand is demonstrated through the success of brands wanting to collaborate with content creators, such as Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig.

Based on the research from the literature view, this study aimed to answer three questions about YouTube:

RQ1: What are the qualities of user-generated content that make it appealing to viewers?

RQ2: What are similar characteristics that popular YouTubers have in common?

RQ3: How have YouTubers utilized traditional media to help build their personal brand?

III. Method

This study analyzed elements within the videos of three prominent YouTubers and the structure of their channel. They were selected based on Lavaveshkul’s (2012) study, which analyzed the top 10 most subscribed to YouTube channels of 2012. These 10 channels could be divided into three categories of gaming, comedy, or how-to. The current study selected one channel from each category based on their popularity on YouTube. The three YouTubers were Felix Kjellberg (gaming), Grace Helbig (comedy), and Zoe Sugg (how to).

To find answers to the research questions, the author developed 18 questions, based on the studies of Lavaveshkul (2012) and Biel and Gatica-Perez (2011). (Refer to Appendix for a list of all questions). Some answers were found by examining the videos of the three YouTubers on November 9 and 10, 2015. Others were found from Social Blade, a statistics website that tracks growth across social media platforms including YouTube (“Track YouTube,” 2015).

Content analysis was used for this study because of its characteristics that Neuendorf (2002) described. According to him, “Content Analysis may be briefly defined as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics. It includes the careful examination of human interaction” (p. 1). Content analysis allows for an objective comparison of the three channels. Instead of focusing on viewers’ opinions, this study focused on the content of each individual’s channel.

IV. Results

The current author analyzed the layout of the three Youtubers’ landing page. Both Sugg and Kjellberg featured logos on their channel. On the other hand, instead of logos, Helbig displayed in a banner her uploading schedule and a slogan that stated, “What a Charming Idiot.” Only Kjellberg displayed advertising on the landing page of his channel. For example, his banner advertised his book, *This Book Love You*, which was released in October 2015, as shown in *Figure 1*. A commercial did not play before Kjellberg’s newest video. Instead a banner advertisement was displayed at the bottom of his video. On the other hand, Sugg and Helbig displayed an advertisement in their most recent videos before the clip began.



Figure 1. Kjellberg’s logo and advertising on his banner

The three YouTubers shared similarities, like their filming location, which is primarily inside their homes. Sugg sat primarily at the end of her bed, as shown in *Figure 2*, while Helbig and Kjellberg usually sat at a desk. Even though Kjellberg (gaming), Sugg (how-to), and Helbig (comedy) represented different categories, all three YouTubers talked about objects within their videos. Kjellberg made commentary while sitting at a desk and playing a video game. Sugg's content involved baking, reviewing products, hauling items from a store, or talking about a collection of her favorite items throughout the month. Helbig used objects the least among the three, but she still posted a variety of comedic reviews or how-to videos. Each YouTuber linked their various social media sites to the landing page of their YouTube channel. None of them used the "about" feature to describe the content on their channel.

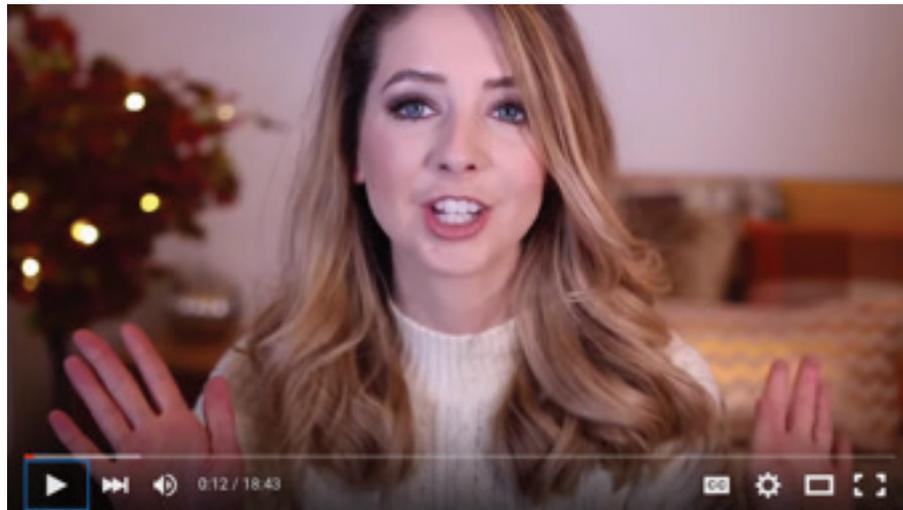


Figure 2. Sugg's filming location in the video, "October Favourites | Zoella"

Kjellberg has 40,315,481 subscribers, and 10,341,904,335 overall channel views as of October 2015. His videos garnered 29.6 million views per month on average. His estimated yearly income from YouTube reached between \$1M-\$16.5M. Sugg has 9,458,481 subscribers and 586,711,156 views overall on her channel. She garnered 22.95 million viewers per month. Sugg's estimated yearly income was between \$64.6k-\$1M. Helbig had 2,781,292 subscribers and 156,687,601 views on her channel. Her total views per month was 7.51 million. Helbig's estimated yearly income was between \$22.6K - \$361.1K. The three YouTubers earn income through advertisements placed on their videos, brand deals, and additional projects that generated profit outside of their channel.

They all began posting content more than five years ago. Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig each had their own individual uploading schedule. Helbig uploaded Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, while Sugg uploaded every Sunday. Kjellberg uploaded content the most frequently, with at least one or two videos posted daily. Based on their last 10 videos, the average video length for Kjellberg and Helbig was around 7 minutes. Sugg's average video length was about twice that at 15 minutes.

Outside of her channel, Sugg had a product range called "Zoella Beauty," which included a variety of bath products, cosmetic cases, and novelty make-up items. Sugg had written two novels, *Girl Online* and *Girl Online 2*. She also revealed her wax statue in September 2015 for Madame Tussauds London. She has appeared on *The Great British Bake Off* and the cover of *Seventeen Magazine*. In 2013 and 2014 Sugg won "Best British Vlogger" at the Radio 1 Teen Awards, and in 2014 took home the Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Award for "UK Favourite Vlogger." She also won the Teen Choice Award for "Choice Web Star: Fashion/Beauty" both in 2014 and 2015.

In addition to uploading YouTube videos, Helbig hosted her podcast, "Not Too Deep with Grace Helbig." She appeared in a series of Lowe's television commercials and has co-produced and starred in the feature film *Camp Takota*. She was the author of *Grace's Guide: The Art of Pretending to Be a Grown-up* and had a new book, titled *Grace & Style*, coming out the following spring. Helbig also hosted a comedy talk show for E! Entertainment, titled *The Grace Helbig Show*. On October 28, 2015, Helbig uploaded a video, titled "We're Making a Movie," where she announced that she would be creating another movie with fellow YouTubers Hannah Hart, Marmie Hart, and Lionsgate. Unlike Helbig and Sugg, Kjellberg was involved in few

outside projects. He had released a book, *This Book Loves You*, and a video game, *PewDiePie: Legend of the Brofist*, on iOS and Android. He also won the 2014 Teen Choice Award for “Web Star: Gaming.”

V. Discussion

This section focused on dealing with the three research questions, the YouTube video qualities that appealed to viewers; common characteristics among the three studied; and how the three used traditional media to strengthen their personal brand.

YouTube’s transformation from video sharing to profitability

The three YouTubers all began posting videos more than five years ago. Helbig began posting content as early as October 2006, just one year after the site was developed and around the same time that YouTube was purchased by Google. According to Kim (2012), “Since being purchased by Google, YouTube has adopted a new e-commerce model; it puts banner ads in videos or in YouTube pages and shares the revenue with the copyright holders of the videos. The basic idea of selling banner advertisements is to play commercials during the streaming of videos” (p. 57). All three featured advertisements in their videos. An advertisement played before videos even began on Sugg’s and Helbig’s channels, while Kjellberg had a banner placed in his video. Over the past decade, YouTube became a launching pad for careers (Luscombe, 2015). Based on the videos watched throughout this study, Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig all mentioned that they used their videos as a source of income.

Kjellberg was then the most subscribed user on YouTube, with over 40 million subscribers and 10 billion overall views on his channel (“Track YouTube,” 2015). His videos generated more views than the world’s population, which was then a little over 7 billion (“Worldometers,” 2015). Grundberg explained, “The 24-year-old Mr. Kjellberg, who created PewDiePie five years ago, had parlayed his persona into a brand name that pulls in the equivalent of \$4 million in ad sales a year, most of it pure profit” (2014). According to *Business Insider*, most YouTube millionaires got paid through advertisements, previews, and sponsored videos. Side projects, such as book deals, also added to their amount of income (Kosoff, 2015). Kjellberg, Helbig, and Sugg all had advertisements display throughout their videos in addition to book deals. Sugg’s book, *Girl Online*, “broke the record for highest first-week sales for a debut author in the U.K., selling 78,109 copies—besting J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* titles and E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey*” (Burling, 2015, p. 24). Without Sugg’s following on YouTube, her book would likely be just another young adult novel. What began as a place for Sugg, Helbig, and Kjellberg to upload videos as a hobby is now their career.

Appeal to Viewers

In relation to RQ1, the study found a YouTuber’s authenticity appealed to their viewers. Strangelove (2010) explained, “There is no one authoritative YouTube identity, but there is one dominant YouTube community—the community of amateur videographers. Their numbers will most likely always exceed those of participating celebrities and media corporations” (p. 113). Each YouTuber analyzed in this study began as a normal individual posting videos online. YouTube provided a look into the extraordinary lives of everyday people (Strangelove, p. 127). This study found that all three YouTubers filmed inside their homes either sitting on the edge of their beds or at their desk. They have conversations with a camera through vlogging (video blogging). Burgess and Green (2009) explained, “The vlog reminds us of the residual character of interpersonal face-to-face communication . . . it is a form whose persistent direct address to the viewer inherently invites feedback . . . Traditional media content doesn’t explicitly invite conversational and inter-creative participation” (p. 54). According to Sörman, founder of a YouTuber network in Sweden, “PewDiePie is like a cool friend you have and subscribing to him is almost like Skypeing with him—that’s why viewers are such dedicated fans” (Grundberg & Hansegard, 2014).

All three link their other social media platforms to their YouTube account so they can continue to interact with viewers. Kjellberg’s fans, or “bros” as he called them, were engaged because he took the time to talk about them in videos or answered their questions (Kosoff, 2015). Helbig and Sugg did the same and had created a community for their fans within the Internet. Strangelove (2010) explained, “Participation in online groups leads to a psychological sense of community. People can be deeply engaged in online communities.

... On YouTube we find groups of individuals who interact around shared interests” (p. 105). Sugg’s biggest piece of advice for creating good content on YouTube was “to be yourself and have fun. If you’re not having fun, no one is going to have fun watching your videos” (Tan, 2015, p. 98). Creating an enjoyable, personable environment distinguishes YouTubers from other celebrities. They are being themselves and creating an environment where the viewer feels as though they are listening to their friend speak. Within this environment viewers are able to engage with an online community that enjoys similar content.

Qualities of Successful YouTubers

Regarding RQ2 on the qualities that influential YouTubers have in common with one another, the study found the following: Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg invited viewers into their homes by filming and vlogging in their bedrooms or living rooms. Biel and Gatica-Perez explained, “Although conversational vlogging is obviously not exclusive of YouTube, the forms of social engagement inherent in vlogging are key features that distinguish YouTube as a platform for creativity and participation around video, rather than just a repository and distribution system” (Biel & Gatica-Perez, 2011). This allows for diverse content even within each YouTuber’s category. Each YouTuber in this study used two elements, background music and objects, throughout their videos. The background music was specific to each YouTuber and became a part of their brand. The music was instrumental and helped to move along the audio of each YouTuber. Objects varied for each YouTuber, but overall Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg were each talking about something or someone specific in their videos.

The videos uploaded by each YouTuber in this study varied in length; however, the average video length did not exceed 20 minutes. Although Sugg’s content is about twice as long as Helbig’s and Kjellberg’s, it is still significantly shorter than a traditional 30-minute television program. According to Kim (2012), “YouTube has come to represent what video on the web looks like: short, mostly humorous, and easily accessible” (p. 53). Uploading schedules for each YouTuber varied; however, each individual posts at least once a week. Even though Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig did not post content on the same days, each YouTuber has developed their own routine schedule so their viewers know when to expect content. Their viewers consist of a younger demographic, as “YouTube is the ultimate destination for kids logging on the Internet. It pretty much owns kids’ eyeballs at this point. One of its core demographics is 8 to 17 years old” (Luscombe, 2015).

Personal Branding through Traditional Media

Regarding RQ3 on YouTubers’ reliance on traditional media, this study found that their personal brand became influential by working with traditional media. Helbig’s YouTube channel included segments from her television show, *The Grace Helbig Show*, which ran for eight episodes this past summer. Jeff Olde, executive vice president of E! Entertainment, explained, “This show is a fresh take on the conventional talk show with a very unconventional host who has already captured an enormous fan base of young viewers on the Web” (Stedman, 2015). A traditional network like E! Entertainment utilized user-generated content to gain younger viewers. Helbig is currently working on her second movie with Lionsgate. She even appeared on an episode of *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* in March 2015 (“How Grace”, 2015). Sugg has also made her share of television appearances, including a segment on *The Great British Bake Off*.

Although YouTube draws in more viewers, traditional media such as television or professionally generated content are not going anywhere soon. According to Strangelove (2010), “Amateur video’s proliferation of quick thrills and brief clips also feeds into an attention-deficit generation . . . Fragmentation in itself does not spell doom for television. In the end, even though contemporary audience is highly fragmented, it is still watching commercially produced entertainment” (p. 168-169). YouTubers are not trying to end professionally generated media with their user-generated content. Sugg, Helbig, and Kjellberg are not exclusive to YouTube. They are on television, being nominated for or winning Teen Choice Awards, and each have a published book. To build their personal brand and audience, they have taken advantage of traditional media in addition to their YouTube channel.

Future for YouTube

With jobs that rely on viewers, it is easy to question the longevity of the online careers of Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg. YouTube has completely transformed in 10 years from a site where content was shared to a place where user-generated content thrives. Luscombe (2015) explained, “Not only must the company contend with youth-savvy tech firms—your Snapchats, your Spotifys, your Vines—but established media

companies are onto the fact that kids are just future users” (p. 75). With increased competition, Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg have to maintain their audience while appealing to new viewers. As their young viewers grow older, each YouTube celebrity is faced with the problem of appealing to older loyal fans while still attracting new viewers. Strangelove (2010) explained, “Above all, what the moment of YouTube highlights is the uncertainty surrounding the future of participatory culture, and the complexity arising from the intersection of various changing and competing ideas about what digital media are, or could be, for” (p. 107).

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, YouTube has evolved from a content sharing website to a platform for creating user-generated content. An analysis of popular YouTubers explains why viewers find videos from Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg entertaining. Regardless of the category they represented, the trip all shared similar video elements including filming location, an uploading schedule, and video length. YouTube is the world’s third most popular online destination because viewers, especially those of a younger demographic, can relate to the authenticity of user-generated content. In addition to their own content, popular YouTubers are utilizing traditional media to build their personal brand. They can be found on bookshelves, on the television screen, and even in a wax museum.

This study had its limitations. The sample size of this study was small. If the size was larger, more data could have been collected that would have further explored the similarities and differences that popular YouTubers share. This study did not focus on the audience of each YouTuber. Future research could be conducted among different age groups to gain more perspective about what viewers like and dislike about user-generated content.

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IX: Appendix

Coding Sheet

General information

1. Name of YouTuber:
2. Date Retrieved:
3. Location while Filming:
4. Does the person have a logo?
5. Is there advertising on the page?

Questions

1. What is their most popular video?
 2. What is their total subscriber amount on the day the information is retrieved?
 3. When did they begin posting videos?
 4. How do they describe themselves in their 'about' section?
 5. What is the total amount of channel views?
 6. What is the total view per month as of October 2015?
 7. What other forms of social media do they promote on their landing page?
 8. What is the overall "theme" of their channel?
 9. How many videos do they have uploaded?
 10. What are their estimated yearly earnings?
 11. Does this person have an uploading schedule?
 12. Based on their last 10 videos, what is the average length of one of their videos?
 13. What are some of their brand deals or projects outside of their channel?
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