

How YouTube Streamers Present Their Brand on Channel Banners

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Abstract

Livestreaming, or the practice of playing video games online for an audience in real time, has become a popular, multibillion-dollar industry in the past decade. “Streamers” often use a brand to promote their channels on YouTube and attract an audience. This study uses content analysis of YouTube channel banners to uncover what strategies are employed by streamers to create their brands. Findings of this study suggest that streamers often use similar colors and gaming genres on their channel banners. Moderately sized channels are more specialized in displaying gaming genres than larger and smaller channels, implying there is a path of specialization which channels follow to become popular.

I. Introduction

“Streaming” has become a popular pastime for video game players on online media platforms, such as YouTube, in recent years (Jia, Shen, Epema, & Iosup, 2016). Streaming can be defined as the process of uploading live videos which are watchable in real time by an audience, with “streamers” being those that produce this content (Jia et al., 2016). Streaming has become an industry which has resulted in some streamers becoming micro-celebrities who can make millions of dollars a year by playing video games. Possible revenue outlets for streamers include placing advertisements on their videos and donations from dedicated fans of the channel (Zhu, Yang, & Dai, 2017). A rise of the prosumer, or those that produce and consume content, has allowed YouTube to become a viable and profitable form of media production (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2016). An example of one of these channels would be GameXplain, a channel that has 1.1 million YouTube subscribers. The job of the people who run the channel is to make content and play games based around Nintendo franchises.

Due to the rise in revenue via streaming, it is important to understand what methods these streamers are using to gain subscribers and promote their channel as a brand (Zhu et al. 2017). Since Streamers are acting as micro-celebrities, essentially giving their self-image a “brand,” and displaying the channel’s personality, they also have a strategy for branding their channel (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2016). Traditional branding literature defines a brand as a name, term, symbol, or any combination of the three meant to act as an identifier for a good or service (Avis, 2009). However, few efforts have been made to see how the traditional definition of a brand can be employed to understand streamers’ branding strategies on YouTube. Streamers may use different branding strategies, such as the channel banner on their main YouTube channel page, to display the channel’s

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personality and attract subscribers.

While past studies have explored how companies can make an approachable brand personality, and others have examined the functionality of streaming sites like YouTube (Anderson, 2017; Levy & Luedicke, 2012), there has been no research combining both brand and video game streaming on YouTube. To fill this gap, this study uses content analysis to look at the design of channel banners as a branding strategy used by streamers to appeal to their potential subscribers. This study provides insight into what choices these creators make by analyzing color choices, gaming elements, genre, and rhetorical appeals in their channel banner, which leads to a better understanding of the common ways gaming YouTubers brand themselves.

II. Literature Review

While livestreaming and uploading of video game playthroughs has been rising in popularity and profitability over the past 10 years, only platforms and various topics (other than branding) of content creators, such as eSports and how streams are narrated, have been studied.

Research by Anderson (2017) has found that there are quite a few methods that streamers can use to promote their branding. These include the channel icon, banner, and live chat. The channel icon allows streamers to feature a picture or logo that represents what their channel is about. Another way that the channel can be promoted is through the channel banner, a thumbnail (or image) that is displayed on the main channel page and is one of the first things new visitors see when visiting the channel, which will be the point of study in this research on streamer branding. This channel banner can display a variety of topics about the channel, such as logo, what games are played, color scheme, and more. Finally, live chat allows streamers to directly promote their brand and ideas to followers and potential followers of the channel by creating a dialog with them. An additional study confirms Anderson's analysis, finding that the channel icon and channel page are important resources for content creators to promote content on their channels (Gross, Wanner, Hackenholt, Zawadzki, & Knautz, 2017). While these studies highlight what streamers can use to help brand their channels, neither study examined the effectiveness of these strategies or how streamers were specifically using them.

Research has also been conducted on gaming genres. A study by Faisal and Peltoniemi (2018) coded video game titles to determine how these games were classified based on genre. The study found the common use of 23 genres, with the most popular including role playing games (RPGs), simulation, sports, adventure, and racing (Faisal & Peltoniemi, 2018). This research sheds some light on how streamers might classify their channels by genre as a streamer might indicate that a particular genre is a part of their channel's brand, through featuring it on their logo or channel banner. It also informs how video streaming platforms, such as YouTube, might classify the videos that video game streamers are uploading.

How streamers and uploaders use narration to present themselves on their channel has also been a point of study. Kerttula (2016) examined how streamers narrate their streams, describing multiple categories including reflective and story narration. The former occurs when a streamer is narrating their gameplay, describing past experiences they have had with the game. The latter describes the action in the game or something about the game itself (i.e., describing the graphics) as they play the game live. Another study found that gaming uploaders are much more likely to upload videos of them winning in a particular game than videos of them losing (Jia et al., 2016).

Some studies have researched streaming revenue generation. One such study describes how some streaming platforms provide for ways that viewers can donate to streamers using platform-specific currency. One of these currencies is "bits" on Twitch, which users pay real world money to buy, and then donate to their favorite streamers (Anderson, 2017). Zhu et al. (2017) found that most streaming platforms or video uploading platforms make it easy and clear to users how to donate to their favorite gaming content creators. Streams of eSports, or the competitive playing of certain video games, often result in viewers feeling encouraged to donate to their favorite teams or streamers to help them gain equipment to continue competing in eSports events (Gerber, 2017). Some of these teams even have logos or team colors, similar to that of a sports team to reflect their brand. This widespread use of donations to streamers is important to highlight, indicating that streaming is becoming a popular and lucrative pastime in entertainment media. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly important to understand how streamers brand themselves to gain revenue.

While streaming video game content has been studied in a variety of ways, it has not been studied in

terms of how these streamers and uploaders have been designing aspects of their brands.

Past literature has also defined how branding has been considered in a traditional and modern sense, which provides insight on strategies streamers potentially use. According to Avis (2009), a traditional definition of brand is “a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competitors” (p. 2). However, a brand is more than just a logo or design. Brand personality is the idea that a brand conveys a value system to form a relatable connection with the public (Levy & Luedicke, 2012). However, as the current study employs content analysis to examine the design of channel banners, the above definition will be adapted for this study to define brand, but focusing only on the design elements including signs, symbols, and designs.

Brands also operate rhetorically, often appealing to *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. *Ethos* is the ethical or endorsement side of advertising, *pathos* is the emotional side, and *logos* is the logical side (English, Sweetster, & Ancu, 2011). Each of these is important in advertising as they can draw in different audiences and can convince these audiences to support the brand. A recent study examined viral videos on political candidates on YouTube, finding that most viewers preferred a video with *ethos* or *logos* appeal instead of *pathos*, opting to make a logical or ethical conclusion in political choices rather than an emotional one (English et al., 2011). This study illuminates how these appeals can be analyzed on a video uploading/streaming platform and that appeals are an important part of brand strategy. Another study observed the color choices made by a company on their product packaging and discussed how different colors indicate different expressions of a brand’s design (Mohebbi, 2014). For example, brands that have packaging with green coloring indicate growth, generosity, or health. Meanwhile, packaging with pink coloring usually indicates love, joy, or innocence. This study is important as it indicates how color is related to the way a brand is trying to present itself. Streamers, therefore, could choose certain colors to represent their brand on their channel banners to indicate a certain expression for the channel.

Finally, there have been studies on “micro-celebrities,” or social media influencers that have created self-branding strategies (Khamis et al., 2016). These influencers often use their own personality to create a brand personality and engage their audience based on their own, personal views, making them similar to the background of streamers.

Additional past research has focused on brand comparisons, or the examination of elements among multiple brands and their effects on why consumers may support certain brands over others.

One study explored how consumers compare brands and understand a brand’s personality and design, which encourages them to buy the product (Koll, von Wallpatch, & Kreuzer, 2010). The study found that when picturing a brand, a consumer tends to base their “reviews,” or stories, on the functionality of the product, or how beneficial it is to them. However, the consumers also used imagery to describe the brand, which emphasizes that the way the brand displays itself, or its brand strategy, is also important to the consumers (Koll et al., 2010). While the study does not give details or break down what imagery is important to the consumer (such as colors associated with a brand), the study demonstrates that consumers can make a conscious choice to buy a product based on its brand design. Similarly, a design choice within a channel banner, like logo or color scheme, might encourage potential followers to make a conscious choice to watch a channel. However, what these elements are have yet to be uncovered by academic research.

Gandhi (2014) conducted a poll to understand consumer comparisons between the Coca-Cola and Pepsi brands based on consumer interactions physically with the brand and product, or through advertising. The study found that almost uniformly, although sometimes by a small margin, Coca-Cola was seen as the superior brand due to how it displayed itself as sincere and competent in the brand’s advertising. While this study was more focused on brand personality than logos and designs, it still showcases that there are elements of brand that create more appeal for consumers to buy a product over another. This could indicate that there are reasons why viewers choose a certain streamer’s channel to watch over another.

These two cases demonstrate how there are elements of brand strategy that consumers prefer or better associate with than others for certain products. While this has been observed between major companies in competition, like Pepsi and Coca-Cola, it is a topic that has been skirted when comparing smaller scale cases like “micro-celebrities” on any social platform, including YouTube.

To address the gap that can be seen from the pertinent literature, this study examines what brand strategies streamers use to promote their channel and how popularity of the channel relates to these strategies. Popularity will be based upon subscriber count, or the number of “consumers” that channel has. If a channel has more subscribers, it will be operationalized as more “popular.” This topic of study is important because it is still a new area in entertainment

media but is highly lucrative. This research will help those in the field of communications better understand what strategies are being used by gaming content creators to attract followers and what causes the more popular creators' brands to be chosen in comparison to other creators' brands. Therefore, the questions this study addresses are:

RQ1: What brand strategies do streamers use to design their brands through the use of the channel banners on YouTube?

RQ2: What brand comparisons can be found among the channels, and, most importantly, the more popular channels?

To understand brand strategies, channel banners are analyzed with the following variables: color scheme, appeals, gaming genre, and channel logo presence. These categories will help determine what elements streamers use in their channel banners to appeal to potential audiences. Brand comparisons are analyzed by comparing the brand strategy variables to the variable of subscriber count (operationalized as popularity) to see if channels with more consumers have similar strategies. Popular brands may have some important channel banner elements in common in terms of brand strategies, as suggested by the literature on brand comparison. By coding and analyzing these categories, this study will help illuminate what methods are popular among streamers to promote their brands and what leads these brands to popularity.

III. Methods

This study uses content analysis to examine the design elements of streamer channel banners on YouTube to understand the brand strategies used to promote streamer brands. As this study is strictly on the use of logo, appeals, genres, and colors, it was logical to do this study as a content analysis to focus on the design elements on the banners themselves.

For this study, the sample is channel banners of video game streamers on YouTube. These banners can be found by clicking a channel icon either below a streamer's video or by clicking on a channel suggestion while browsing YouTube. A sample of 100 channel banners was taken for this study. Snowball sampling was used to find these 100 channel banners. A new Google account was created to ensure that no bias based on past searches was present in the results. Using this new account, the YouTube gaming page was used to collect the sample. Clicking on the first available channel, snowball sampling commenced by screenshotting that channel banner and then using the recommended channels, provided by YouTube on the right side of the channel, to continue the search. The first of these recommendations was clicked, that channel banner was screenshotted, and the process continued another 98 times. This sample was taken over one day.

The banners were coded using logo, elements, number of subscribers, color, gaming genre, gaming elements, and appeals as coding categories. The channel's "logo" for this study is defined as the element from the channel icon, which sits to the bottom left of the channel banner on the channel's main page. If the logo is repeated in the channel banner, it is counted as being in the channel banner. Name of the channel is included in this coding category as it is often a major part of traditional branding or even included as part of the logo itself. If the name of the channel, displayed next to the channel icon, is repeated in the banner, it is counted as present.

The number of subscribers for a particular channel can be found to the bottom right of the channel banner on the channel's main page. This data is important to collect for each channel banner because it will give a sense of how popular a channel is. The following range of codes for this variable has been chosen for this study:

0-10K or "Tiny Channels"

10K-500K or "Small Channels"

500K-1M or "Midsized Channels"

1M-10M or "Big Channels"

10M- or "Huge Channels"

The color of a channel banner was determined by finding the dominant color on the banner. A dominant color for this study is defined as the color that takes up the largest proportion of space on the banner. For

example, if one color takes up 30% of the banner and other colors take up 5% each, the color that is 30% will be the color that is coded. If there is no dominant color, then the banner is coded as 0. The colors used in the study by Mohebbi (2014) are those coded in the color variable for this study, as the list used for that research is exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

The gaming genres for this study come from the study by Faisal and Peltoniemi (2018) that conducted extensive content analysis of the most prominent gaming categories. Most of these genres are straight forward and do not require defining such as puzzle games, where players attempt to solve a puzzle, or a shooting game, where players use a gun to aid them in reaching an objective. However, some do need to be defined. God is a genre that allows the player to control actions in a video game setting, such as *The Sims*, where the player runs a virtual family. Arcade is a genre that contains classic video games originally found in an arcade, such as *Space Invaders* or *Pac-Man*. This list is useful because it exhibits the possible ways gaming genre can be defined and found within a YouTube banner. Each of these genres will be coded individually as sub variables in which each genre will be coded as either present (1) or not present (2). If no gaming genre is present, the category for each subcategory will be coded as 0. If the genre is indeterminable, each subcategory will be coded as 3. This will provide for variation in the banners if multiple gaming genres are present.

The gaming elements variable was coded by looking at the channel banners once the sample was collected. Many of the banners have some form of gaming elements, like a video game disc or cartridge, a video game controller, or even a person playing a video game or holding a controller. This category could reveal useful data if multiple streamers are using these elements.

The definition of appeals for this study will be based on the study by English et al. (2011) on viral political videos. This has been chosen because their definitions of these three appeals are exhaustive and mutually exclusive and can be used to code channel banners for these elements. *Ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* are coded separately for each banner as multiple could potentially be present. Numerical counting of each coding category was used to determine the prominent features of color, gaming genres, appeals (*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*), gaming elements and logo presence as categories.

IV. Findings

Through the coding of 100 different YouTube streamer channel banners taken on April 1, 2019, some interesting findings are evident. Each research question is answered in depth to fully understand what strategies these streamers are using to develop their banners and what comparisons can be made among the channels based on popularity or subscriber count.

Brand Strategy

















From an analysis of the data, numerous similarities can be found among channels in terms of the gaming elements, color, and logo elements categories. Secondly, across the dataset, action/adventure games, role playing games, and fighting games were found to be the most popularly displayed genres on the channel banners.

Table 1: Gaming Elements

Code	Count of Banners
No Gaming Elements Present	46
Game Console Only Present	0
Game Controller Only Present	3
Game Cartridge Only Present	0
People/Person Present	45
People/Person Holding a Controller Present	2
Multiple Elements Present	4

Table 1 details the gaming elements present among the channel banners. It is important to point out the strong presence of a person or people on the channel banner. Forty-five of the 100 channel banners had some depiction of a person on their banner, occasionally used to create a sense of *ethos*. These streamers want to create a personal connection with their audience, thus putting a depiction of themselves, or a human avatar, on their banners. Meanwhile, the other elements were almost non-existent. No banners had just a console present or just a cartridge present and very few banners had some depiction of multiple gaming elements (4) or humans holding a controller/cartridge/console (2). While almost half of the banners had humans as an element, 46 did not have any of these gaming elements present at all. The findings were almost entirely split between human presence and nothing.

Table 2: Color

	Code	Count of Banners
	No Dominant Color Present	8
	Red	5
	Blue	22
	Green	10
	Yellow	3
	White	11
	Black	9
	Gray	10
	Orange	6
	Brown	8
	Pink	0
	Purple	7
	Indigo	0
	Violet	0
	Magenta	0
	Rose	0
	Other	1

Perhaps one of the most interesting finds of this study is the use of color in channel banners. As shown in Table 2, the most dominantly coded color by a wide margin was blue, with 22 of the 100 channel banners having the color as the dominant color. This was followed by white at 11 out of 100, and green and gray as the dominant color on 10 of the 100 banners. Meanwhile, colors like pink, indigo, and violet are not used at all on the sampled channel banners. The only exception to this was purple, being dominant on seven of the 100 channel banners.

Table 3: Logo elements

Code	Count of Banners
No Logo or Channel Name Present	23
Logo, but Not Channel Name Present	4
Channel Name, but Not Logo Present	33
Both Channel Name and Logo Present	40

Logo elements also reveal an interesting trend. As shown in Table 3, 40 of the 100 channel banners depict both the channel's logo and the channel's name. Meanwhile, 33 channel banners depict the name of the channel on the banner, but not the logo. Only four channels feature solely the logo on the banner. While 23 banners have no depiction of their logo or brand name on their banner at all, the majority have at least some depiction or another, emphasizing the importance of streamers showcasing their brand front and center for new visitors on their channels.

Table 4: Comparison of Present Gaming Genres

Code	Count of Banners
Channel Banners with No Gaming Genre Present	35
Action/Adventure	54
Shooting	31
RPG	43
Strategy	27
MMORPG	18
Simulation	1
God	2
Sports	1
Racing	3
Fighting	41
Platforming	12
Puzzles	11
Music	1
Family Games	19
Children's Games	11
Virtual Life	3
Flight	3
Arcade	9

In terms of gaming genre, the most used were action/adventure followed by role playing games and fighting games (see Table 4). Multiple genres could exist on any one banner. This has some interesting implications. As action/adventure and fighting games, such as *The Legend of Zelda* and *Street Fighter*, tend to have a lot of excitement and energy in them, most likely these banners are designed to create similar feelings.

Appeal	Present/Not Present	Count of Banners
<i>Ethos</i>	Present	35
	Not Present	19
<i>Logos</i>	Present	7
	Not Present	47
<i>Pathos</i>	Present	19
	Not Present	36
No Appeals at All	N/A	46

The final important finding is the use of the *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* appeals. Across the channel banners, *ethos* was the most popular appeal with a total of 35 banners appealing to it (see Table 5). Many channels opted to put famous video game characters on the banner like Mario and Zelda, for example, to appeal to an audience and what characters would feature on the channel through the games being played. Other more famous YouTubers put themselves on these banners as a way to emphasize themselves as a brand. The second most used appeal was *pathos*, with 19 banners using it. These channels often had something exciting or sweet on their banner, whether it was an action scene with explosions, or a person cuddling *Pokémon* characters. They opted to try to get potential subscribers to feel either excited or charmed in order for subscribers to buy into that channel's brand. Finally, *logos* was the least used with only seven banners containing the appeal. A banner with a statement to appeal to *logos* like "New streams everyday" was rare.

Brand Comparison

It is also important to understand differences between more and less popular channels. Most interesting is that channels having up to 10 million subscribers all tend to use a wide variety of colors, with some banners sampled in this group having 10 different colors across the banners. However, after the 10-million subscription mark, the variety drastically reduces to around six colors per banner. In addition, colors that are used among the most-popular sites (often blue and green) exude trust, relaxation, confidence, and quality to consumers (Mohebbi, 2014).

Another interesting finding is that Midsized channels (from 500,000 to one million subscribers) have less variation in the kinds of genres they display than other sized channels.

This suggests that channels become more specialized in a particular genre or set of genres to "stand out" as a channel once they become Midsized, but once they gain more subscribers and grow into a Large or Huge channel, they are able to "branch out" again and have slight variation in their genres, as they have already captured their large audience. It would appear that gaming genre barely varies among YouTube streamers, but when it does vary, it tends to be the more popular channels that can afford to do so, or smaller channels still trying to establish their brand.

Brand comparison among all the YouTube channel banners by popularity is interesting, as it shows that there is less color variation among larger channels, but blue is still solidly the color of choice among all channels, and that there is slight variation in gaming genre among smaller channels and larger channels, just not Midsized channels. This could have some further interesting implications about how streamers create their brand.

V. Discussion

The findings of this research suggest practical implications about what brand strategies streamers use to create their channel banners. First and foremost, the findings indicate that blue, white, and green are the most predominantly used colors by streamers. These colors are might be chosen by streamers because they see other streamers using them, but these choices might subconsciously come into play due to color theory. Blue, according to Mohebbi (2014), signifies "tranquility, trust, [and] confidence" (pg. 100). Based on this definition of color theory, streamers are trying to make potential audience members feel as though they are trustworthy and relaxing to watch. The color blue is used to exude confidence to emphasize that viewers can be

confident that streamers know what they are doing. Hence, based on color theory, it is understandable why blue is such a popular color choice among streamers. Meanwhile, the second color choice, white, emphasizes ideas of youth, cleanliness, truth, and humility (Mohebbi 2014). In other words, streamers are trying to emphasize that their streams are new and that audiences should be able to expect what they are seeing advertised on the channel banner. These two colors both try to create a sense that the audience can trust the brand and that it is of a superior quality to other channels, which is understandable why, overall, they were used more than the other color choices.

Meanwhile, there is also a heavy focus on the gaming genres of action/adventure games, fighting games, and role playing games within the channel banners. This would also tie in directly with the use of appeals, as ethos and pathos were most common. Having action/adventure and RPG genres allows for streamers to include famous video game characters (*ethos*) and exciting or cute moments/scenes (*pathos*) on their channel banners, allowing streamers to pull audience members in. These appeals may help generate more viewership instead of just stating factual information about the channel through *logos*. These findings were present across all of the popularity groups, meaning that less popular and more popular channels had similar results in terms of color and logo elements.

These findings suggest that streamers create brands using similar elements for their branding strategies. While this is not necessarily something that can be confirmed quantitatively alone, the implication that streamers create similar brands is present in the data. Streamers appear to have developed a culture, understanding, or ethos of some sort concerning what a “good” streaming brand is.

There also is a clear indication that channel banners become more specialized as a Midsized channel and display fewer genres. This implies that there is almost a normalized “formula” on how to grow your channel on YouTube. Once streamers realize they need a “focus,” they create one to grow their channel and make themselves stand out. Again, it is unclear if this is a conscious choice, but if streaming can be described as a microculture, there does seem to be an implied rite of passage to becoming a successful channel.

VI. Conclusion

This study provides insight on what strategies are employed by streamers to create their brands. In this study, some of their techniques employed have been examined, including color choice, use of appeals, and gaming genres preferred. This research helps to expand understanding the modern practice of streaming video games in the field of communications, especially in terms of branding.

The limitations of this study are that the study only sampled 100 channel banners, and there are thousands of streamers on YouTube alone. As such, these findings cannot be generalized to streaming as a whole. Nevertheless, it does suggest some implications that would be worth analyzing in a larger study in the future. A second limitation is that this study was coded by a single individual. Due to this, the full accuracy of the data collected cannot be confirmed as there is no presence of intercoder reliability.

However, more can be done in terms of examining what strategies are being used in the future through studies of larger sample sizes and qualitative interviews with streamers. A larger scale, quantitative study, of a similar focus would be pertinent to more confidently generalize the results to streaming as a whole. In addition, future study could examine how streamers are promoting their brands on platforms outside of YouTube, such as Facebook and Twitter, to attract and expand their audience by acting as social media influencers.

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