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

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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,”<sup>1</sup> uploads to an online audience of over 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 gaming commentary or a makeup routine. Of the 3.2 billion people who have Internet access, more than one billion are accessing YouTube videos (Luscombe, 2015). Founded in 2005 as a platform where amateur users could upload their videos online, YouTube has established itself as a part of the entertainment industry.

Since its development, YouTube has transformed from a video-sharing site into a career opportunity for content creators. In this article

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three influential YouTubers' channels – Felix Kjellberg (PewDiePie) from Sweden, Zoe Sugg (Zoella)<sup>2</sup> from England, and Grace Helbig (its-grace)<sup>3</sup> from America – were studied. The author tried to identify what makes a YouTube channel successful through examining the qualities of three YouTubers who represent one of the site's most popular content categories.

### Literature review

YouTube started as a site to distribute user-generated content and later has developed into a platform where an individual can turn their personal brand into a career.

Before analysing 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. Founded by Chad Hurley, Steven Chen, and Jawed Karim, YouTube launched with little fanfare in June 2005. As Burgess and Green (2009:1) explain:

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.

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, 2009:1). 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 consumed by commercialised videos. But there is another side according to Morreale (2014:114), "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". About this institutionalisation of YouTube, Kim (2012:56) 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.

This interest in monetising content has allowed channels that started as a hobby to develop into a source of income for content creators.

Lavaveshkul (2012:378) describes this development from hobby to job: , “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”. To a viewer, the lack of a script or 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 recognised the importance of creating an environment relatable to viewers when she explained:

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: 98).

Sugg's and Kjellberg's approach to YouTube has helped them attract 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 advertisers and cable networks desire, as explained by Burling (2015:22): “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”. YouTube is now the ultimate destination for kids logging on to the Internet. Luscombe (2015:72) points 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”.

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. According to Kozinets and Cerone (2014:21): “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”. The influence of a YouTuber’s personal brand is demonstrated through the success of brands collaborating with content creators.

## Method

In this study the author points at particular elements within the videos of three prominent YouTubers and the structure of their channels. The YouTubers were selected based on Lavaveshkul’s (2012) study, which analysed 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).

For the study the author developed questions, based on the studies of Lavaveshkul (2012) and Biel and Gatica-Perez (2011). 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).

### The channel’s common characteristics: Layout, location, upload schedule and profit

The current author analysed the layout of the three YouTubers’ landing pages. Both Sugg and Kjellberg featured logos on their channel. Helbig instead displayed her uploading schedule and a slogan stating, “What a Charming Idiot” on her banner. Only Kjellberg displayed advertising on the landing page of his channel. For example, his banner advertised his book, *This Book Loves You*, which was released in October 2015. Instead

of a commercial playing, a banner advertisement was displayed at the bottom of Kjellberg's video. Sugg and Helbig displayed an advertisement in their most recent videos before the clip began.

At the time of examination the three YouTubers shared similarities, like their filming location, which is primarily inside their homes. Sugg sat at the end of her bed while Helbig and Kjellberg usually sat at a desk. Kjellberg (gaming), Sugg (how-to), and Helbig (comedy) represented different categories, and all three YouTubers talked about objects within their videos. Kjellberg made commentary while playing a video game. Sugg's content involved baking, hauling items from a store, or talking about her favourite items throughout the month. Helbig used objects the least among the three, but she 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.

They all began posting content more than five years ago. Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig each has their own individual uploading schedule. Kjellberg uploads content most often, with at least one daily video.

The three YouTubers earn income through advertisements placed on their videos, brand deals, and additional projects that generated profit. Data collected about their subscribers, overall channel views, views per month and estimated yearly income as of October 2015 was outlined in the following diagramme.

### YouTubers outside their channels

Following their fame the three YouTubers have also appeared in TV-shows, magazines and even been portrayed in wax at Madame Tussauds in London (Sugg). Outside of her channel, Sugg has launched a cosmetic product range and written two novels, *Girl Online* and *Girl Online: On*

**Table 1.** Some characteristics of three influential YouTubers

YouTuber	Subscribers	Channel Views	Views per Month	Estimated Yearly Income
Kjellberg	40,315,481	10,341,904,335	29.6 million	\$1M-\$16.5M
Sugg	9,458,481	586,711,156	22.95 million	\$64.6k-\$1M
Helbig	2,781,292	156,687,601	7.51 million	\$22.6K - \$361.1K

Source: SocialBlade.com and YouTube.com on November 15, 2015

*Tour*. She has appeared on *TV-shows* and the cover of *Seventeen Magazine*. In 2013 and 2014 Sugg won “Best British Vlogger” at the Radio 1 Teen Awards among several other awards.

In addition to uploading YouTube videos, Helbig host a podcast, and has appeared in TV-shows, commercials as well as published books. Kjellberg has also involved in outside projects such as releasing a book and a video game.

## Discussion

### *YouTube’s transformation from video sharing to profitability*

All three YouTubers began posting videos over five years ago. Helbig began posting content in October 2006, just one year after the site was developed and around the same time Google purchased YouTube. According to Kim (2012:57):

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.

All three featured advertisements in their videos. Over the past decade, YouTube has become a launching pad for careers (Luscombe, 2015). Based on the videos watched throughout this study, Kjellberg, Sugg, and Helbig all mention that they use their videos as a source of income.

At the time of examination (November 9-10, 2015) Kjellberg was 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 seven billion (“Worldometers”, 2015). According to Grundberg, “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). As reported by *Business Insider*, most YouTubers get paid through advertisements, previews, and sponsored videos. Side projects, such as book deals, also add to their 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, 2015:24). What began as a place for Sugg, Helbig, and Kjellberg to upload videos as a hobby is now their career.

### *Appeal to viewers*

It is presumably the YouTubers' authenticity that appeal to their viewers. Strangelove (2010:113) explain, "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". Each YouTuber analysed in this study began as an everyday person posting videos online, filmed inside their homes, having conversations with a camera through vlogging (video blogging). In keeping with Burgess and Green (2009:54):

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.

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 Skyping with him-that's why viewers are such dedicated fans" (Grundberg & Hansegard, 2014).

All three link their other social media accounts to their YouTube channel to interact with viewers. Kjellberg's fans, or "bros" as he calls them, are engaged because he takes the time to talk about them in videos or answer their questions (Kosoff, 2015). Helbig and Sugg do the same and create an online community for their fans. Strangelove (2010:105) explains, "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". Sugg's advice for creating content on YouTube is "to be yourself and have fun. If you're not having fun, no one is going to have fun watching your videos" (Tan, 2015:98). Creating an enjoyable, personable environment distinguishes these YouTubers. They are being themselves and establishing an environment where the viewer feels as though they are listening to their friend. Within this environment viewers are able to engage with an online community that enjoys similar content.

### *Qualities of successful YouTubers*

On the qualities that these three influential YouTubers share, the study found the following: Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg invited viewers into their personal space by filming in their homes. According to Biel and Gatica-Perez, “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 within each YouTuber’s category. Each YouTuber in this study used two elements, background music and objects, throughout their videos. Instrumental background music was specific to each YouTuber and helped to move along the dialogue. Although objects varied for each YouTuber, all three were talking about something 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 programme. According to Kim (2012:53), “YouTube has come to represent what video on the web looks like: short, mostly humorous, and easily accessible”. Uploading schedules for each YouTuber varied; however, each individual posts at least once a week. Each YouTuber has developed their own 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 YouTubers’ reliance on traditional media, this study found their personal brand became even more influential by collaborating with traditional media. Helbig’s YouTube channel included segments from her television show, *The Grace Helbig Show*. A traditional network broadcasting her show (E! Entertainment) utilised user-generated content to gain younger viewers.

Although YouTube draws in more viewers, traditional media is not going anywhere. According to Strangelove (2010:168-169):

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.

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, 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.

## Summary

In conclusion, YouTube has evolved from a website where users simply upload content to a platform where an individual can build their career. An analysis of popular YouTubers explains why viewers find videos from Helbig, Sugg, and Kjellberg entertaining. Regardless of their category, they all shared similar video elements. 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. Once established, in addition to their own content, popular YouTubers are utilising traditional media to build their personal brand. They can be found on bookshelves, on the television screen, and even in a wax museum.

With jobs that rely on viewers, it is easy to question the longevity of online careers. YouTube has transformed in 10 years from a site where content was shared to a place where user-generated content thrives. According to Luscombe (2015:75), "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". As their young viewers grow older,

each YouTuber is faced with the problem of appealing to older loyal fans while still attracting new viewers. Strangelove (2010:107) explain, “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”.

### Notes

1. <https://www.youtube.com/user/PewDiePie>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/user/zoella280390>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/user/graciehinabox>

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## 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?