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## THE YOUTUBERS PHENOMENON: WHAT MAKES YOUTUBE STARS SO POPULAR FOR YOUNG PEOPLE?

*El fenómeno de los YouTubers: ¿qué hace que las estrellas de YouTube sean tan populares entre los jóvenes?*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore and to analyse the channels and the five most viewed videos published in May 2017 by two YouTubers – the Portuguese Wuant and the Swede PewDiePie. These YouTube stars were highlighted by a sample of Portuguese teenagers during the fieldwork of the European research project Transmedia Literacy. Based on these two cases, the article intends to identify the main distinctive traits of their productions, focusing on contents, performances and aesthetics, seeking to understand what characteristics make these YouTubers so popular among the young generation. The video analysis reveals complex, hybrid characters whose merit of attracting millions of fans cannot be denied. Their eccentric body language, the preference for easy jokes, the recurrence of slang, and a certain civic apathy are some of the very distinguishing features of these YouTubers.

**Key words:** YouTube; YouTubers; young people; video analysis; participatory culture.

### RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo explorar y analizar los canales y los cinco videos más vistos publicados en mayo de 2017 por dos YouTubers: el portugués Wuant y el sueco PewDiePie. Estas estrellas de YouTube fueron destacadas por una muestra de adolescentes portugueses durante el trabajo de campo del proyecto de investigación europeo Transmedia Literacy. Con base en estos dos casos, el artículo intenta identificar los principales rasgos distintivos de sus producciones, centrándose en los contenidos, la interpretación y la estética, buscando comprender qué características hacen que estos YouTubers sean tan populares entre los jóvenes. El análisis de los videos revela personajes complejos y híbridos, cuyo mérito de atraer a millones de fans no puede ser negado. Su excéntrico lenguaje corporal, la preferencia por los chistes fáciles, la recurrencia de la jerga y una cierta apatía cívica son algunas de sus características distintivas.

**Palabras clave:** YouTube; YouTubers; jóvenes; análisis de vídeo; cultura participativa.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

YouTube is regularly seen as a key place to discuss participatory culture (Burgess & Green, 2009a, 2009b). Its former signature – Broadcast Yourself – encapsulated most hopes (and hypes) regarding the audiences' empowerment through the existence of platforms of and for User-Generated Content (UGC), despite its ambiguous nature (Van Dijck, 2013). The common user was even celebrated as *TIME*'s Person of the Year in 2006 «for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game» (Grossman, 2006). According to Van Dijck (2013, p. 115), «the original group of YouTubers, as they were called, was the generation of mostly active 'producing' amateurs that earned» the previous distinction, which «was easily ascribed to all users».

With YouTube, it would supposedly be easier than ever to break the corporate media's monopoly of content creation and its distribution to large audiences. People would have a free and easy-to-use tool to share contents, engage with others and learn (Bloom & Johnston, 2010; García Jiménez, Catalina García & López de Ayala, 2016). And we all would be within a «media culture that privileges an active audience» (Deuze, 2007, p. 244), a participatory culture where the frontiers between media producers and consumers would be blurred (Jenkins, 2006). More than a decade has passed and, instead, YouTube has turned out to be a business that is geared towards making huge profits rather than seeking to create a community of users. It quickly evolved from a start-up site «into a commercial platform that is now an important node in an evolving ecosystem of media conglomerates dominated by Google» (Van Dijck, 2009, p. 54). Looking at the particular case of YouTubers, in a few years, they reached a wide audience and many earned millions on the Internet (Holland, 2017). They have greater appeal and relevance for youth, they are part of their everyday life and culture. Bearing in mind such impact, it is important to dig deeper and explore this phenomenon, trying to identify the meaningful traits of YouTubers' contents. This is the main aim of this paper: to study a sample of videos produced by two YouTubers – the Portuguese Wuant and the Swede PewDiePie – seeking to analyse some distinctive features of their contents in order to understand which elements and characteristics can captivate the interest of the young audience. But why these YouTubers? They were highlighted by a sample of Portuguese teenagers during the fieldwork of the European research project Transmedia Literacy. The majority of the sample surveyed in this project (75 of 77) reported they used YouTube regularly. Amidst social media, the prevalence of YouTube was dominant: only Facebook comes close, as 71 also reported to use it regularly; the third place was occupied by Instagram, used regularly by 56. The results from the questionnaire also showed that watching YouTube videos was one of the most enjoyed activities: for 15 of them it was what interested them the most online and nine respondents stated that access to YouTube was the first thing done as soon they started to use the Internet. On YouTube, listening to music (41 answers) and watching YouTubers, gamers and channels (36) were the prevailing activities. This data was reinforced by other research tools such as workshops, in-depth interviews, focus groups and media diaries, which highlighted the importance of YouTubers as content providers. The teenagers' reasons for enjoying watching and following YouTubers can be summarized in three words: fun, authenticity and learning. They like them and their contents because YouTubers make them laugh and are perceived as natural entertainers – they are what they show in their videos. In fewer cases, YouTubers can also be sources of learning, namely for videogames. Thus, following the interests of young people and their perceptions about YouTubers, this paper intends to pay attention to these new entertainers and analyse the characteristics that attract this young audience.

With this purpose in mind, the next point briefly presents the theoretical framework that underlies this study, followed by a description of the methods. The second part presents the analysis of the

YouTubers' videos. The paper ends with the discussion of this data and pointing out some conclusions and further paths to explore.

## 2. YOUTUBE – HOPES, CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES

Since its creation in 2005, YouTube has been evolving, namely in how it frames its users. Created and continuously promoted as «a platform for sharing self-made amateur videos, an 'alternative' to watching television» (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 110), it quickly converged with traditional media in different aspects: from what is valued in its interface to the contents highlighted, much due to its incorporation into the Google sphere (Kim, 2012; Simonsen, 2013; Van Dijck, 2013). YouTube is nowadays a place for very different users, most of them video watchers. However, it is also a place for different producers, for mainstream stars and corporate media, whose individual contents are the most viewed, according to Burgess & Green (2009b) or to more recent media reports (Wyatt, 2015). It is a distribution platform for smaller independent producers or for brands' content marketing. And it is also a place for amateur creators and for YouTubers, YouTube's home-grown celebrities (Burgess & Green, 2009a), who are, in many cases, vastly popular (Lange, 2014; Ramos-Serrana & Herrero Diz, 2016).

YouTube no longer presents itself as a platform made to allow anyone to broadcast contents. Its famous signature was removed in the scope of the site's interface redesign in December 2011 (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 114). The site's signature evolution is meaningful, considering that «taglines are not only representations of what platforms are 'for', they are also performative» (Burgess, 2015, p. 282-283). Therefore, erasing Broadcast Yourself from the logo is not innocuous: contrary to initial beliefs, YouTube is not just a platform of and for UGC; its value is a co-creation of multiple actors (Burgess & Green, 2009b). Besides, this famous motto had, as mentioned before, an ambiguous meaning. It replaced the pre-Google motto – Your Digital Video Repository, which emphasized the grassroots video sharing purposes of the platform – after YouTube was purchased by Google in 2006. As mentioned by Van Dijck (2013, p. 114), Broadcast Yourself «referred not only to the site's capacity to globally distribute homemade personal content ('broadcast your Self'), but also to the platform's ability to redistribute professional content (PGC) already broadcast on television ('you can broadcast it yourself')». When the signature was removed from the site's banner, it was a sign that «the user was definitely to be treated as a viewer» (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 115). PGC became the most favoured kind of contents, even if produced outside the traditional broadcasters and still bearing the marks of UGC: «after 2007, YouTube rolled out its Partnership Program in an attempt to upgrade the quality of videos and increase its volume of professionally produced content» (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 116). The professionalized YouTubers are symptomatic of these intents, as mentioned below.

Within this business model, not all YouTube videos and channels have the same importance, contrasting with a lasting myth of the site as «an unmediated gateway» (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 117): the huge number of videos uploaded to the platform and the need to commercialize them make it impossible «to permit any one individual contributor's voice to be 'broadcast' in any meaningful sense of that term» (Kim, 2012, p. 62). Recent controversies around Google's Advertiser-friendly content guidelines (Castillo, 2016; Tait, 2016; Solon, 2017) reinforce this conclusion: even the most prominent YouTubers like PewDiePie were experiencing a decrease in views due to the promotion of more ad-friendly contents. As Van Dijck (2009, p. 54) summarized, «despite lingering images of self-effacing, engaged and productive cybernauts – echoing early internet frontierism – the 'You' lauded by *Time* has meanwhile entered the era of commercialized user-generated content, where user activity is heavily mediated by high-tech algorithms and datamining firms».

In its pursuit of a stable business model, YouTube's design, features and content valuation criteria changed many times; the layouts described by Burgess & Green (2009b), Kim (2012) or Simonsen (2013) no longer exist. Metrics such as 'most discussed', 'most favoured' or 'most responded', which emphasised the communal dimensions of the uploaded videos, are no longer available. In 2018, we can only know the amount of views of a given video and its rating. When we search for something on YouTube, we either sort the list presented by more traditional metrics, such as views, ratings and upload date, or we trust something called 'relevance', that is, YouTube's algorithm. Additionally, the number of views has a prominent place when displaying a video, especially when compared to ratings: it is larger and on top. So the measure highlighted nowadays is the one that «most closely resembles the aggregate measures of attention utilized by mainstream media» (Burgess & Green, 2009b, p. 40). This is just one example that contradicts some of the radical disruptive expectations of YouTube's impact on the media sphere.

While promoting continuities, YouTube changed things, created new opportunities and territories. It produced its own stars, who would probably struggle to reach stardom without the platform affordances to broadcast themselves. YouTube may not be the Promised Land for common users or a communal platform that many wished it would be. However, it is not just another distribution channel for corporate media. YouTube's current mission is «to give everyone a voice and to show them the world», also stating «that everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share and build a community through our stories» (YouTube, 2018). In April 2017 YouTube presented itself more clearly as a platform for diverse stakeholders, as «a forum for people to connect, inform and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small» (YouTube, 2017).

YouTubers mirror the site's complex nature: they are transmedia stars, hence no longer restricted to one platform (Hidalgo-Marí & Segarra-Saavedra, 2017), but they still earn money within YouTube thanks to its Partner Program. This revenue comes from the usual sources in the realm of the media: views and advertising. However, some of their signature content – namely vlogs, the most common UGC content found by Burgess & Green (2009b) – remain with an aesthetic that is consonant with amateur videos: a monologue to a camera, lots of personal and informal styles, nonsense and jokes. They are more influenced by social principles than by professional audiovisual storytelling practices (Simonsen, 2013). This, according to Fägersten, explains the recurrence of slang – a «feature of informal, spoken interaction, especially between close friends and intimates» (Fägersten, 2017, pp. 1-2) – as a strategy to «give the illusion of face-to-face relationship between» the YouTuber's persona and its viewers (Fägersten, 2017, p. 8). As pointed out by García Jiménez *et al.* (2016, p. 78), much of the YouTubers' success «is based on empathy between peers, is achieved with the audiovisual dissemination of scenes and comments that are socially transgressive, typical of youthful and adolescent attitudes». According to Lange (2014, p. 55), for the pioneers that started to record vlogs, «video blogging was a broad term that applied to any personally expressive video that transmitted one's point of view». YouTubers such as PewDiePie «began as an everyday person posting videos online, filmed inside their homes, having conversations with a camera through vlogging» (Holland, 2017, p. 59). As a consequence of these practices a sense of authenticity arose. Burgess & Green (2009a, p. 94) noted that vlogs appeared amid a «webcam culture, personal blogging and the more widespread 'confessional culture' that characterizes television talk shows and reality television focused on the observation of everyday life». Furthermore, a vlog addresses the audience directly and «inherently invites feedback» (Burgess & Green 2009a, p. 94). McRoberts, Bonsignore, Peyton & Yarosh (2016) studied 40 profes-

sional YouTubers and also found constant invitations to engagement: YouTubers' appeals to like, comment, subscribe their channels and follow their profiles in other social networks were very regular.

During the fieldwork of the European Project Transmedia Literacy (645238/Horizon 2020 – Research and Innovation actions), YouTubers were a recurrent reference in adolescents' practices and preferences. This is not a surprise, considering the popularity of online video amongst broader national (Pereira, Pinto & Moura, 2015) and international (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig & Ólafsson, 2011) samples of teenagers. Besides, YouTubers and their connection with young people has become a subject of attention and study by researchers and by the media themselves (Ault, 2014; Lange, 2014; Westenberg, 2016; Berzosa, 2017). A first conclusion points out that, in many cases, YouTube stars are more popular than mainstream celebrities among teens, possibly being their new influencers (Márquez & Ardèvol, 2018). Therefore, considering the potential of YouTubers as the new opinion leaders, it is crucial to explore the videos they produce, the contents they offer to their audiences and the way they communicate and engage with them.

### 3. METHODS

This article's purpose is to analyse the contents produced by the two most popular YouTubers amongst our sample: the Portuguese Wuant and the Swede PewDiePie. Considering the high number of videos published by each YouTuber and the impossibility of doing a complete analysis of them, a month (May 2017) was chosen for observation and analysis<sup>1</sup>. The five most viewed videos published during that month were studied<sup>2</sup>. Both channels' metrics and progressions were also considered.

For the video analysis three main dimensions were defined: contents, performance and aesthetics, which were based in the empirical work conducted by McRoberts *et al.* (2016) and Fägersten (2017), but also in the broader outcomes from Lange (2014) and Burgess & Green (2009b). All of the dimensions were jointly used to characterize the YouTubers' videos and to assess which traits could explain the entertaining value stated by the youngsters, as well as the reasons for their perceptions regarding the YouTubers' authenticity. Considering the first dimension, which encompasses «the topics dealt with in spoken and visual items» (Mikos, 2013, p. 413), the analysis focused on the types of video produced (vlogs, unboxing, gameplays, for instance, as these were the ones mentioned by the youngsters) and on the leitmotiv of each one of them (what they are about and what the sources at use are). As for the performance, the YouTubers' personas – the ones that were framed by the camera, helping the narrative unfold and with whom the viewers might identify (Mikos, 2013, p. 416) – were approached by studying several elements: their speaking style (regarding contents and forms), their strategies for engaging audiences and for promoting their brands (McRoberts *et al.*, 2016). In addition to this, the aesthetic composition of the videos was also taken into account, namely the closeness of the image framing and the sophistication of technical effects used, both symptomatic of more or less intimate and/or professionalized productions. Table 1 summarizes the model used. It is constituted by three dimensions that the previous studies mentioned above highlighted as relevant traits of the construction of the complex YouTubers' personas, which necessarily dialogues with their audiences, impacting their reception.

<sup>1</sup> We started by identifying every single content published in May, noting the amount of views. This procedure gave us the chance to do a first exploratory viewing of every single video uploaded in the chosen month before moving to a more in-depth analysis. This allowed for a richer understanding of the YouTubers' channels and the contexts underlying the five most viewed contents.

<sup>2</sup> The ranking list of the five videos was defined on 3 July 2017. The month of May was chosen because of the expectable stability the number of views would have reached after more than a month following the upload.

Table 1: Model used for the video analysis

Dimensions	Components	Indicators
Contents	Types of video produced	Vlogs
		Gameplay
		Unboxing
		Other
	<i>Leitmotiv</i>	Video theme
		Video references
Performance	Speaking style	Discourse rhythm
		Use of slang
	Strategies for engaging audience	Appeals to interactivity
		References to the publics during the video
Aesthetics	Video composition	Image framing
		Use of CGI and sound effects

Source: own creation

This work is intrinsically hermeneutic: based on two particular cases and on the insights from the broader fieldwork with the 78 youngsters (aged between 12 and 16 years old; 45 girls and 33 boys), it aims to provide content-based insights to think the relationship between YouTubers and young people, identifying some distinctive features of a phenomenon that fascinates the latter.

#### 4. A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE YOUTUBERS

Paulo Borges is a 21-year-old YouTuber known as Wuant. He is one of the most popular Portuguese YouTubers, sitting at the top of the country's leading 250 YouTubers list drawn up by the site SocialBlade: the number of his subscribers surpassed the two million mark and his videos have been watched more than 450 million times. In 2016, his channel's fifth year of operation, Wuant went from 400,000 subscribers at the beginning of the year to over a million at the end. In 2017, a little over six months sufficed for the number to double and exceed a total of two million, as mentioned before.

PewDiePie, a pseudonym for Felix Kjellber, is a prime example of the new mass phenomena that YouTube is able to generate. He was 20 years old when he created his channel in 2010, which, a few years later, would surpass those of stars made famous through classic media. PewDiePie currently has more than 56 million subscribers on YouTube and the number of views is over 15 billion. These astronomical numbers ensure that his channel has been at the top of the list of the most subscribed channels since December 2013. Since September 2016 it has also held the title of the most-watched channel of all time on YouTube.

#### 5. CHARACTERIZING THE YOUTUBERS' VIDEOS

This analysis will follow the three main dimensions mentioned above: contents, performance and aesthetics. Despite the division made, in each point all of them are present, reflecting their interrelatedness.

##### 5.1. CONTENTS

There are two common and relevant traits in both YouTubers' videos: the recurrence of the Internet and the YouTubers' inner lives as leitmotiv. Their videos, despite having different themes, al-



ways reference their public status as celebrities and the broader culture of the Internet. This last feature is also evident in the language used. Both Wuant and PewDiePie employ English swear words regularly. Their use is consonant with what Fägersten (2017) stated: more than a sign of rude manners, swear words verbalized in a language that is not their native-one were used as strategies for building their personas as (1) part of the Internet/gaming culture, which their contents derive from, as explained below, where English slang is naturalized, and (2) as intimate companions to their viewers, their ‘guys’ and ‘bros’. With regard to PewDiePie, Fägersten (2017, p. 2) classified his use of slang as a practice of social swearing, which «not only simulates casual conversation between friends, but actively reduces social distance, creates the illusion of intimacy, and ultimately helps to establish his unequaled status on YouTube». The same strategy was found in Wuant. Not surprisingly, vlogs were the type of contents most found.

The five most viewed videos posted in May<sup>3</sup> by Wuant (Table 2) are a mixture of stand-up comedy with challenges. The YouTuber comments (supposedly) annoying videoclips, fan arts of cartoons as grown-ups (most of them highly sexualized), WiFi names (found online, as everything else) and pictures of clouds. There is an exception that comes off as almost a diary entry, a lifestyle video, which was the second most viewed. However, distinguishing them in this manner does not mean they do not share many common features, starting with the intimate, almost confessional tone adopted when he addresses the viewers, the ‘guys’. All the videos analysed clearly seem to have the features of vlogs outlined above.

Table 2: Top 5 Wuant's videos posted in May

Title	Length	Views (up to 3 July 2017)
<i>Tenta não te Irritar</i> (Try not to get annoyed)	12'12"	2,542,464
<i>Um dia na nossa piscina</i> (A day at our pool)	13'39"	1,249,021
<i>Como seriam os desenhos animados em adultos?</i> (What would cartoon characters look like as grown-ups?)	10'21"	1,211,360
<i>Nomes de WiFi engraçados</i> (Funny WiFi names)	10'01"	1,132,456
<i>Imagens engraçadas em nuvens</i> (Funny images on clouds)	10'26"	1,105,370

Source: own creation

The four stand-up videos share the setting, the format and the leitmotifs. For approximately 10 minutes, it is all about slapstick comedy, physical and boorish humour, mixing Portuguese slang with mass-use foreignisms such as «what the fuck». In all of them, the YouTuber uses his usual greeting (not only are the words always the same but also the rapid-fire and euphoric delivery) – «Sup, dudes? My name is Wuant and welcome to another video» – and signs off with «My name is Wuant and see you next time. Peace!». At the end of each video, requests are made for comments and likes, despite the fact that in none of the five videos were interactions between the YouTuber and his audience found in the comment box ranked by ‘main comments’. Not even a single comment by the YouTuber was to be found.

<sup>3</sup> Wuant uploaded 14 videos in May. An exploratory view of those showed that they have very similar forms and contents. The major exception being a gameplay of a videogame called Hello Neighbour, which has become a familiar feature in Wuant's videos (as he himself confirmed by stating in the video that he was taking up the game again). Even so, the gameplay is clearly marked by the YouTuber's usual humour, his comments and asides. His videos can be found at: <<https://www.youtube.com/user/imWUANT>>.

In PewDiePie's videos the Internet is also, as mentioned before, a regular source for his contents, which work in a kind of loop: one needs to be acquainted with PewDiePie's life and the overall Internet culture to appreciate them. His five most viewed videos posted in May (Table 3) have very similar formats and contents, assuming the form of online challenges (trying not to laugh or get angry with images and videos found online), tests and trends (his own newsworthiness, in general, as well his opinions on YouTube's policies changes and other YouTubers): in all of them the YouTuber makes humorous comments, mostly in a sarcastic tone, about something to be seen on a computer and/or about his own life as a YouTuber<sup>4</sup>. His humour hovers around the boundaries between what is acceptable/unacceptable in issues like race, gender and hate speech. In addition, the *Wall Street Journal's* accusations of anti-Semitism (Winkler, Nicas & Fritz, 2017) are also lampooned, as will be seen below.

The videos are all shot in a studio with a chroma key background using at least two cameras and some of the equipment is visible: a microphone and a mixing board. In the description of 'Time for something new...', links are provided to online outlets that sell the technical equipment used: the camera, for example, costs roughly £1,500. It is, therefore, evident, even more so than in the case of Wuant, that the content produced by PewDiePie is far from being regarded as amateur. However, albeit to a lesser extent than in Wuant's videos (requests for feedback, for example, are practically inexistent), they still have many of the vlog features described. The familiarity of the relationship established with the viewers is the most evident, not only because of the way he addressed the 'bros' but also by what he expects them to know about him. After all, a good part of the content revolves around his much-publicised life as a YouTuber and to fully appreciate it one has to be familiar with the adventures and misadventures of PewDiePie.

Table 3: Top 5 PewDiePie's videos posted in May

Title	Length	Views (up to 3 July 2017)
<i>Try Not To Laugh: SAVAGE 100000000% EDITION</i>	10'14"	7,169,492
<i>Are You Racist? (Test)</i>	10'02"	6,467,406
<i>Time for something new...</i>	10'15"	5,645,404
<i>TRY NOT TO GET ANGRY CHALLENGE!</i>	13'48"	5,169,010
<i>I'm on Sweden's official hate list</i>	12'05"	5,031,158

Source: own creation

## 5.2. PERFORMANCE

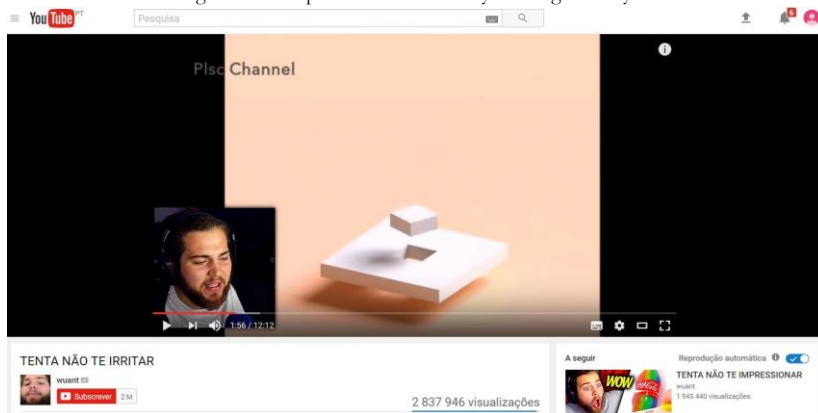
Borrowing Umberto Eco's (1979) understanding on the cultural shared knowledge between authors and readers, the encyclopaedia that Wuant puts at work is very strict: both in its diversity and deepness and in its expected audiences. Therefore, Wuant's contents function in closed circuit: much like Simonsen (2013, p. 48) found, their success lies on a «popular culture that is specifically consumed and understood by YouTube's widespread community and in that sense demonstrates what we can regard as a mode of social connectivity». For instance, in 'Try not to get annoyed', the YouTuber says he is focusing on a «new challenge on the Internet». After this introduction made by speaking directly to the camera, Wuant begins to watch and comment clips of supposedly annoying videos, either sharing the screen with them, or taking up the whole screen himself. For almost 10 minutes, the YouTu-

<sup>4</sup> PewDiePie posted 31 videos in May. This is a large number and, despite having similar formats and contents, there are some dissonant elements. There is a video drawing attention to Mental Health Awareness Week. In another, PewDiePie satirises his own newsworthiness, going on to the streets disguised as a TV reporter and questioning passers-by about YouTube and YouTubers (namely about himself). His videos can be found at: <<https://www.youtube.com/user/PewDiePie>>.



ber swears, wriggles and twitches around, yelling at and abusing anyone who, for example, throws a frisbee 'incorrectly' or is unable to fit the different parts of an object together (Figure 1). Throughout this performance, the YouTuber addresses his audience a few times, underlining the aforementioned confessional style, saying things like: «I am being very honest, guys. I am getting pissed off». He talks about the authenticity of these reactions at the end of the video in the same style: «You guys say, 'Hey, you're faking it, Wuant. 'For fuck's sake, dude! Go fuck yourself! And then they say it's not true». The YouTuber was adamant that he was never able to do the "Try not to" type videos.

Figure 1: Excerpt from the video 'Try not to get annoyed'



Source: <https://youtu.be/SUyaU8qfZ5o>

What unifies those traits is Wuant's persona, his personal brand as a YouTuber – precisely what distances the current professional YouTubers from the grassroots pre-Google platform. Wuant's career is on the rise and, at the moment of the analysis, he was living with six other YouTubers in a luxurious house with an estimated value of near one million Euros (Ruela, 2017). Most of them had their careers being managed by the same company: the Portuguese BeInfluence. This fact got the attention of the media. A piece broadcasted by a national television channel (*TVI*) set the theme for a monologue in 'A day at our pool' about YouTubers and YouTube in Portugal and about the benefits of living together in a common space:

We were on this huge piece by *TVI*. It was the biggest one I have ever made... [a clip from the piece is shown in which the YouTuber states it is his laugh which the 'guys' say is the funniest thing in his productions]. The longest coverage they have ever given to YouTubers in Portugal. And that is a major step both for us and for YouTube itself here in Portugal. That's massive. It might not seem like it, but there is a lot work behind all this. There are many things you don't know, that you don't see because we obviously don't show them. Sometimes when I don't post a video or when somebody else doesn't post a video, it's because we've been working on something bigger. We've had lots of cool meetings to go to in Portugal... Do you get it? There's lot of stuff you don't know that I'd like to tell you. But, now let's just go downstairs because we have to go buy drinks and stuff.

Over lunch the YouTubers were filmed and interviewed by journalists working for a national newspaper (*Jornal de Notícias*). At the end of the day, Wuant goes back to his room, the usual setting for most of the analysed videos. The confessional tone is taken up a notch in this scenario, where he invites his viewers to his personal space (Holland, 2017, p. 60):

I had great fun today. I just wanted to show you what a cool day is like, a relaxing day here at the house. If you want more videos like this one, say so down here [in the comments] and, maybe, I might even start bringing vlogs and such. If you're interested... We do lots of stuff, go to lots of places, it's just that I don't tape anything because I don't know if you would like it.

As is the case with the Wuant videos, euphoria, rapid-fire delivery, sudden changes in the tone of voice, visual and sound effects, nonsense and boorishness are the resources most often used by PewDiePie in his videos to up the pace in and to become humorous. However, his personal and commercial brand – far more developed than Wuant's and much more widespread – was even more obviously the core of PewDiePie's work, who no longer welcomes his viewers in his room, but in a chroma key studio. The way he addressed his feud with the *Wall Street Journal* and the changes in YouTube's policy for video monetisation are perfect examples of how PewDiePie works around himself – even when incorporating the contributions of his viewers – in order to build an irreverent character. For instance, in 'Are You Racist? (Test)', the YouTuber takes a so-called 'legitimate' test: one that would be able to determine different levels of racism. It indicated he had a moderate preference for white people. PewDiePie used this information to address the *Wall Street Journal*, asking them not to label him as a racist. The video is marked by awkwardness, as the YouTuber tries to distance himself from racism while approaching it due to humorous remarks. This performance also extends to the farewell. Instead of the 'brofist', the YouTuber goes on with the hesitations and contradictions, offering and then taking back explanations: «Oh, I'm trying to dig myself out, but I can't do it. Help!». The video ends abruptly, cutting of a swear word, reinforcing the sense of urgency in finishing the recording because of the result of the test and the confusing explanations.

### 5.3. AESTHETICS

The editing of the Wuant's videos has the marks of sophistication that can only be achieved with good taping/editing tools and seeks to further quicken the pace of the YouTuber's monologue: the shots follow each other in rapid succession and the abruptness of the cut outs is often used to reflect the fickleness of the states of mind. Euphoria is only a few frames away from anger or sadness. Editing is, thus, a prime resource to ensure the video is dynamic, seemingly in non-stop motion, despite the fact that the YouTuber is mostly standing in front of a microphone. The sense of constant movement is also achieved by using visual and sound effects, as is the case when, for example, images suddenly change to black and white with background sound effects that are meant to make the moment more dramatic, or explosions and echoes aspiring to be epic rants. Considering framing, Wuant is either shot from the side (in close up or in a window in the bottom left corner [Figure 1], which often changes in size) as he looks at some audiovisual material on a hidden screen, or looking straight to the camera, with the shots nearly always being quite close.

In PewDiePie's case, there is the sarcasm around his channel and YouTube. This YouTuber is also known for signing off his videos with what he calls the 'brofist' (however, he does not do so in the

second and fifth most watched videos). In ‘TRY NOT TO GET ANGRY CHALLENGE!’, for instance, his trademark farewell gesture represents one of the most relevant moments of familiarity with his ‘bros’: in a slow movement, accompanied by visual and sound effects (greyish image, petals falling, and a well-known tune from the film *Titanic* clumsily played on a flute as soundtrack) the YouTuber signs off with: «And as always, bros, brofist. Are you ready? It's coming. It's coming, I promise. I'm not gonna do anything. We have a trust, you and I» (Figure 2).

Figure 2: PewDiePie's brofist surrounded by visual and audio effects



Source: <https://youtu.be/Pn6puoLXuhI>

In ‘Time for something new...’, PewDiePie’s use of the chroma key studio is aesthetically more relevant, as the narrative unfolds in different digital scenarios. The YouTuber starts by discussing how underrated his contents are, having a rail tunnel as a setting and taking on the role of a homeless person. «What are you still doing here? YouTube, those sons of bitches. They took all my money [cough]. They demonetized all my videos. As you can see by this background, I'm living in the... I'm living in the slums». The complaints set the theme for a video about the use of Photoshop software: «I'm gonna have to find another job. What job am I qualified at? What talents do I have as a YouTuber? [He laughs and, against a green background, in an aside to the camera, he says] That's a joke because YouTubers don't have talent. [He resumes his performance] Photoshop! Photoshop, that's right». The YouTuber then logs onto his Twitter account, which becomes the digital backdrop, reads a few tweets and responds to the requests. He uses one of them, suggesting photoshopping the future of YouTube, to go on once again about what is valued and undervalued on the platform and implicitly contrasts his channel with other more ad-friendly ones: «The real future of YouTube... You just go to the trending tab and look whatever cancer is on that shit. We got Roman Atwood, Vox, iJustine and WhatsUp-Moms». The next tweet allows him to resume his animosity towards the *Wall Street Journal* as he reformats the newspaper’s logo to the point where it resembles that of a pornographic video site. His follower had requested: «Photoshop WSJ into a good publication».

To conclude, there is a final relevant point about PewDiePie’s videos: in each of the descriptions, besides one or two sentences about the video (and, in just one of them, a list of the hardware used) one can find the names of the authors of the subtitles in the video in question. This work is apparently done by other YouTube users.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND FINAL REMARKS

YouTube is today one of the most popular digital platforms, erasing geographical and cultural boundaries. The YouTubers phenomenon is a good example of the formation of global digital communities that share the same tastes and interests, meet online and establish parasocial interaction via the videos (Chen, 2016). These YouTube celebrities have become increasingly popular and are gaining the attention of young people all over the world, aspects that deserve to be addressed and that this paper intends to help to understand.

The YouTubers analysed are complex, hybrid characters: on the one hand they still bear the markers of amateur creators, on the other hand, their productions are technically advanced and not within just anybody's grasp. For both of them, being a YouTuber is their job. Wuant and PewDiePie's videos have many similarities both in format and content: their humorous monologues are a central feature, the way they are framed in the image is very much the same, the subject matter is clearly similar. Additionally, as Simonsen (2013) previously stated, appreciation of the content hinges on a certain familiarity: one needs to know what they do practically every day and to share their (internet) culture to fully understand the private jokes.

For both YouTubers the internet is not merely a platform to show their videos: it is also the main source for their contents. Dialogue with their followers is established via the internet. What goes on outside the web, setting local, national or global agendas, has no place in their commentaries. As Turkle (2015, p. 307) points out, «the web promises to make our world bigger. But as it works now, it also narrows our exposure to ideas. We can end up in a bubble in which we hear only the ideas we already know. Or already like». Given the videos assessed, as self-centred as they are, a question has to be raised about the reality they are living in and to which they invite their followers. Is these YouTubers' world a kind of bubble or a fishbowl in the society they live in? Since they are opinion leaders for young people, what role do they play raising awareness for current issues in the social and political sphere? Not even learning about videogames seems to be possible anymore: both started by doing gameplays and both are now producing essentially vlogs and a kind of stand-up comedy.

In their productions, it is rare for either to create with the purpose of engaging with society, making some kind of positive contribution, supporting a cause or being committed to an ideal. The only appeals are for an increase in the number of likes, comments on their videos and subscribers. The type of humour that characterises them is far from being of the intelligent kind. Instead, it resorts to vulgarity and the easy joke, featuring poor vocabulary and in frequent disregard for the rules of politeness, as well as words and gestures of a sexual nature. This is light years away from media personalities who use humour for social, political and economic critique and thereby sagaciously assist their audience in having a take on the world we live in. While the internet does have many differences when compared to the traditional media, competing for ratings and advertising, by those who are professionals in the field, is certainly not one of them. There are, therefore, certain questions that need to be asked. Are these YouTubers really unable to raise the quality of their productions? Or is the option for poor videos, in terms of content, their own choice? Do they produce easy humour to be easily and universally understood, expanding their potential audience?

The number of subscribers to their channels suggests that it is a recipe for success – which immediately raises many questions concerning the interests (or lack thereof) of their young followers. Are they looking for easy and ready-to-use companies in an era where relationships are increasingly mediated by technologies? Or are they youngsters who, like all previous generations, are interested in forms of entertainment that only make sense to them, and that together with other hobbies, whose quality is more widely acknowledged, help them to develop their tastes, to discern what is in their best

interests? If one considers, on the one hand, Sherry Turkle's (2011, p. 281) view that with technologies we are «alone together, each in their own rooms, each on a networked computer or mobile device» and, on the other, the perspectives shared by Shirky (2008, 2010) and Jarvis (2011) that the internet can be seen as the new public space that enables, expands and accelerates a culture of sharing, one of relationships, cooperation and creation, then one may ask: on which level can these YouTubers' followers be placed? Where can they be positioned with regard to this mediatisation?

The slang used would be socially unacceptable in any other medium. This type of language is a very distinguishing feature of these YouTubers and, as mentioned by Fägersten (2017) it might be a strategy to build a more authentic and spontaneous character who is playing on the edge, provoking easy laughter. This issue was raised with the Portuguese teenagers participating in the project and they were not surprised by it, as to them it seems a natural use of language, similar to the language they use in their private and interpersonal contexts. Despite the recurrence of slang in these teenagers' lives, this does not make the YouTubers' massive use of it unproblematic. Traditional media regulate the language used for well-established reasons. According to Fägersten (2017, p. 1), the extensive reach of mass media makes it impossible «to know about or control for audience membership, and for this reason swearing, which is widely considered taboo, is a common target of regulation or even censure». The use of slang is not indifferent to the context of its use: sometimes it is used in its traditional sense, «to abuse, insult or derogate» (Fägersten, 2017, p. 1), other times it is a tool for building relaxed social settings and intimacy (Fägersten, 2017, p. 8). It may be a common feature of online gaming and the Internet, namely in its English-form. However, the pervasiveness of YouTubers in most social contexts – much due to mobile media – and their role as influencers call for a special attention to its reception by young people. It is crucial to make them recognize and critically understand the YouTubers' reasons to use slang in order to frame it in bigger pictures. Media education and adults' mediation are key to the development of critical assessment tools to empower teenagers to interpret the YouTubers' contents beyond the easy laughs they provoke.

The type of humour used and the self-centred nature of the content seem to be key indicators to understand what the teenagers said were the reasons why they enjoyed watching the videos: the YouTubers' personality and the fact that they were funny. Rather than actually learning something with these YouTubers, the youngsters seem to be seeking someone who shares their language and can provoke easy laughter, entertaining them in an (apparently) unscripted way, which at the same time challenges social correctness. Considering Simonsen (2013, p. 62), the centrality of the YouTubers' self on the videos also reflects their existence as a commercial brand being promoted on YouTube. These are, then, the characteristics that allow one to answer the initial question of this study – what makes YouTube stars so popular for young people? The YouTubers, through their constructed discourses and attitudes, and their intentional use of a lot of swear words, create a very close and intimate environment that is much appreciated. Teenagers are treated as peers and develop a parasocial interaction with very prominent purposes: entertainment and laughter. YouTubers are also a peer group phenomenon, that is, it is 'cool' to follow the personas that everyone is commenting on at the moment, understand and share the same jokes and have a common topic of casual conversation. A study recently conducted in Catalonia (Spain) with 1406 eleven-twelve year old students concluded precisely that alongside entertainment, what attracts preadolescents the most in YouTubers is the «feeling of being part of a digital teen culture, which they can share with their peer group» (Aran-Ramspott, Fedele & Tarragó, 2018, p. 77). Also, as stated by Fägersten (2017, p. 8), «it is the act of swearing that proactively constructs a setting as relaxed and comfortable. In other words, the language style does not simply reflect the setting, it defines it». This mediated communication has an impact on teen's

identity, as also observed Sábada and Vidales in the research studies they conducted on the impact of mobile phones on adolescents' relationships through social capital (Sábada & Vidales, 2015; Vidales-Bolaños & Sádaba-Chalezquer, 2017). A conclusion of these authors, also pointed out by this study, is that:

Mediated communication influences the formation of one's identity, since it allows to individuals becoming part of new communities in which they share interests and personal preferences that define them. At the same time, the use of these devices can generate such dependence, which reduces the capacity for self-sufficiency or self-confidence, so that they are unable to act alone and to face certain changes in the different areas in which they operate. (Sábada & Vidales, 2015, p. 83).

So, the YouTubers analysed must be given credit, though, for being able to engage millions of fans and for their remarkable body language. Patricia Lange (2009, p. 84) states that this kind of creators have to be given credit for making «well-crafted or at least interesting videos». Considering the nature of the videos studied, one finds it is debatable whether they can be regarded as 'well-crafted' or 'interesting'.

More studies on the influence YouTubers have on younger audiences are needed since it is still a new or recent phenomenon or probably because, as yet, its impact is only now beginning to be socially noticed. As reported by Westenberg (2016, p. 6) in a study on the influence of Dutch YouTubers on teenagers, most adults do not even know of their existence. A fundamental aspect that needs to be studied is the extent to which the videos afford those watching an opportunity to learn, extend forms of civic engagement (Lange, 2014) and stimulate participation. This study did not reveal much activity at these levels, but as Lange (2014, p. 99) points out, «it is important to explore how each generation displays its own 'civic style'» and explore how these mediated spaces are, or not, promoting civic engagement and participation, shedding light on important issues from which adolescents are usually sidelined or excluded. For this discussion, it would be important to listen to YouTubers themselves, something that we have tried to do within this study but without success since neither the YouTubers nor their agents responded to our requests for interviews.

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