

YouTubers v.s. YouTube:

Analysis Into The Precarious Micro-Celebrity

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	3
Database into the History of Digital Celebrities: Being a Micro-Celebrity	5
Pre-YouTube	5
YouTube Now	7
Audience Relationships and How to Maintain Them	13
Authenticity in a Performative Occupation	13
Dramaturgy: How to Survive Cancel Culture	16
Marketing Your Career and Other “Not” Clickbait Issues	18
Precarity: Adpocalypse & Monetization	18
Image: Adpocalypse graph	24
Prosumption: Brand-Deals & Sponsorships	26
Subscribing to all of YouTube’s Hidden Downfalls	33
My Methodology: A Tutorial	34
YouTubers v.s. Wojcicki: The Unexpected “Collab”	36
Visual Data Representation: Bar Graph	40
Profit over People, According to Wealthy CEO	41
Hierarchy is Okay (As Long As You're at the Top)	47
Sorry Queer Creators, Our Robots Don’t Like You	56
Conclusion	63
References	65

Abstract

As one of the most prosperous and successful social media platforms, YouTube has become a well-known solution to young creatives who would prefer to work in an individualistic working environment rather than a corporate job. These content creators commit to the platform in hopes that it will fulfill the requirements of their livelihood, but through events such as Adpocalypse, demonetization, and a digital capitalistic landscape, these creators are awarded no protections or guarantees, making them precarious workers.

Introduction

Following Google and Facebook, YouTube is now the third most visited website in the world (Anderson, 2015). YouTube has become socially relevant because of the increased saturation of content creators on YouTube, otherwise known as “YouTubers”. After the creation of YouTube on February 14th, 2005, YouTube became a place to see a funny video or to create one with your friends in your parent’s basement. There were no advertisements, most viral videos had inappropriate humor, and having one million subscribers was seen as “making it”. Now, one million is seen at the first stepping stone to starting a business. YouTubers are now seen on other platforms besides YouTube, including Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, Snapchat, even late night TV shows as guests, and have become the image of new-age celebrities.

YouTubers are now advertisers for products, just like how conventional celebrities would shoot a promotional commercial for a L’Oréal product on TV. Being a YouTuber, like being a celebrity, is a prospective career to young viewers. The difference is, it’s seen as an easier route to achieve than the traditional means of becoming an actress, model, or singer. Some even move to LA to become a YouTuber over pursuing a traditional education through college or trade

school. YouTubers are everywhere that young people are searching on social media, showing off expensive clothing that is discarded after one wear, promoting a lavish life of endless spending, and most of all, influencing how young people respond to social problems (ie. cancel culture¹).

The research into becoming a YouTuber as a career has increased due to the heightened interest, and, simultaneously, the lack of public information into what the job entails.

Researchers, themselves, have studied the topic question, “Can you study to be a YouTuber? And is the YouTuber born or made?” (Illera & Benito, 2017) The answer eludes audiences, as well as YouTubers. Some well-known creators who never intended to be famous are now public icons because they became immersed in the culture before the explosion of popularity and before the potential downfalls and struggles could be discovered. For example, with all of the current restrictions on inappropriate language, news coverage, and even topics such as LGBTQIA+² rights, monetization for these content creators is hindered by censorship, leading to a lack of visibility and liveable wages. The phenomena known as the “Adpocalypse” was one of the platform-changing events that created an atmosphere where YouTubers had to play guessing games with their livelihoods and experience discrimination, all while conforming to the unpredictable wants of YouTube’s advertisers. This is one of the many lesser-known aspects within having a career through YouTube.

In this research, I am looking to interrogate how the perception of being a YouTuber differs from the reality of maintaining a likable public image while creating a profitable business out of said image. In order to research this topic, I analyzed content interviewing YouTube’s CEO, Susan Wojcicki, in her conversations with YouTubers regarding the underlying issues

¹ cancel culture: A modern form of ostracism in which someone is thrust out of social or professional circles – whether it be online, on social media, or in person. The purpose is to deplatform dangerous and/or abusive individuals in positions of power to cease the harm being caused.

² LGBTQIA+: An acronym that stands for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual community. (Note: further mentions will be listed as “LGBTQ+”)

plaguing the platform, also observing the responses from the YouTubers themselves about the complications of their career. This study asserts that due to the heightened idealization of YouTube as a career, there is a large gap between the marketed image of being a YouTuber and the harsh realities of producing content under YouTube, thus which strips the creator of their deserved profit and autonomy.

To finalize, this paper will share the history and notable social developments that lead to the creation of YouTube and its societal prominence, discuss the nuanced complications from the occupation, analyze the content and reactions from three interviews with Susan Wojcicki, and conclude upon these factors in a sociological manner.

Database into the History of Digital Celebrities: Being a Micro-Celebrity

Pre-YouTube

The way in which we consume YouTube videos and their creators today is vastly different from the way “real people in celebrity-like positions” were perceived decades ago. This began in the 90’s with a phenomena known as the “demotic turn” where average people started to appear in the media in the same way as celebrities (Khamis, 2016). Examples of this include shows like *The Bachelor* which allowed for the personalities, relationships, and interpersonal conflicts to be the prominent thrust of the program, or reality TV shows and radio hosts allowing guests to call in, etc. The newly named “micro-celebrities” are perceived to have relationships with their audiences that are more “authentic” than traditional celebrities and are maintained through communication that is interpreted as personal (Khamis, 2016). Audiences felt as though they could connect more with these individuals from their favorite reality shows because the

narrative promoted that they weren't actually celebrities, but rather regular, normal people in everyday life.

Though connection between the demotic turn and present-day YouTube has not been specifically analyzed, there are parallels. Now, instead of a contestant from *America's Next Top Model* being a relatable public icon, they are placed into the same category as a traditional celebrity, and therefore, are less trusted. There are a few potential exceptions, such as Karamo Brown who starred on *The Real World: Philadelphia* in 2004, and now is well-known for his modern reality TV role on Netflix's *Queer Eye*, who has connected with traditional media audiences through his transparency in being a Black gay man. However, when compared to modern creators, audiences respond even more intimately and personally to YouTubers such as Jacksepticeye (Seán McLoughlin) or Liza Koshy.

The demotic turn allowed for a more nuanced depiction of television stars, moving them away from stereotypes. Instead of audiences looking up to a Brad Pitt, who seems too "god-ly" to connect with, audiences could identify with (or even poke fun at) the vast array of women pining for Bret Michaels on *Rock of Love*. These varied reactions to these real life people speaks to the concept of polysemy, a coded communication to simultaneously appeal to different, even oppositional audiences (Marwick, 2011). For example, the "Queen of Pop" Madonna connected to young women, femmes, and queer individuals for her feminist, independent, and pro-sex ideologies while also appealing to straight men due to her sex appeal and edgy expression of sexuality (Albertson, 2006; Fiske, 1989). A modern example of polysemy with traditional celebrities is Beyoncé, who is interpreted by many white women as a symbol of feminism and girl power, whereas many Black women interpret Beyoncé's message as one of Black liberation and Black womanhood.

Polysemy manifested in reality TV on a more nuanced level with controversial shows such as *Jersey Shore*. Each of the house members attracted their own diehard fan-base and, concurrently, people that would “hate-watch”, disgusted by the actions of the members, but not being able to look away. The diametrically opposed audiences created intrigue and debate around celebrities, especially those who are part-average, part-famous.

The assumed honesty and authenticity was the driving force of popularity for these programs. While we have far more established micro-celebrities in our current media with a multitude of social media applications giving platforms to more upcoming icons (such as TikTok, Twitch, and Instagram), the demotic turn planted the seeds to how we perceive them. Now, social media influencers may appear to be more authentic and relatable because they did not grow with the help of larger organizations. Social media influencers, just as the original micro-celebrities from the 90’s and early 2000’s, have gained their popularity; and in conjunction, their audience’s trust, by separating themselves from the commercialized expectations of Hollywood. This is why self-branding has come to be such a success (Khamis, 2016). The proactive, self-starting initiative became a humble inspiration to audiences.

YouTube Now

Early YouTube had raunchy jokes, little to no advertisements, and was a cluster of one-hit-wonders. There was no concept of a “YouTuber” — one who does YouTube as a career or tool for occupational status — and was regarded as low-grade content created by ambitious amateurs. Previously, the technical tools of videography, editing, and digital marketing were not necessary for an amateur's success on YouTube. The key to success for YouTubers was audience participation and transparency (Illera & Benito, 2017).

As content creators rose in popularity and became a preferred choice of entertainment for many, brands noticed the potential for creators as advertising tools. The word for this specific role is an Influencer; someone on social media who markets sponsored products to their large following in exchange for money, trips, and free products (Kádeková, 2018). Traditional celebrities were the first types of Influencers since they promoted products through commercials, interviews, and in traditional media, but with the growth of digital forms of media, they are being replaced by new-age Influencers who cultivate closer relationships with their fan base (with the potential for more revenue in younger audiences). It must be noted, content creation is no longer for the sole purpose of self-expression and community as it was in the early iteration of YouTube. Now, it functions to market a career or further an already existing one. Influencer marketing has been one of the fastest growing modes of communication because it allows connection with target audiences in a “natural” (or authentic) way since Influencers have established credibility (Kádeková, 2018). Influencers come across as regular people who happen to have the platform to share their uncensored opinions online, while celebrities come across as actors looking to further their brand’s image in a business partnership. The two are more similar than the audiences realize but they have been blindsided to the idea that an Influencer could be promoting a product solely for profit with little to no personal interest.

While there are various social media platforms for creators to choose, YouTube attracts creators and users alike because of its uniqueness. YouTube breaks up monotony with a diverse range of content spanning from five minute videos to multi-hour separate installment productions. The platform promotes relaxation and escapism for some, while others find joy in academic learning and information-sharing. Content creators themselves are drawn to the platform because they can gain social recognition and self-esteem (Buf, 2020). And to young

audiences, the idea of a career in YouTube is enticing in its presentation; an exciting life of a creator who skips the traditional route and still makes an impressive income. Users are flooded with imagery of the few that obtain these gratifications and see this as a success marker of capitalistic ideology — “work hard enough and you will achieve”.

One description of a YouTuber is a type of Influencer who uses YouTube to connect with others through videos that express their emotions on a wide array of topics. Influencers, especially YouTubers, have a great impact on the internet economy since their relationships with audiences influence purchasing behavior (Kádeková, 2018). YouTubers fall under the category of a micro-celebrity, or as Marwick describes,

An emerging online practice that involves creating a persona, sharing personal information about oneself with others, performing intimate connections to create the illusion of friendship or closeness, acknowledging an audience and viewing them as fans, and using strategic reveal of information to increase or maintain this audience (Marwick, 2010).

These individuals are not as unobtainable as traditional celebrities, but not as accessible as regular citizens. They cross a middle line that promotes intrigue and mystery. Their networked audience, “the real or imagined viewers of digital content who are connected to the content creator and each other” (Marwick, 2010) is what helps secure this image. The image as an Influencer is important to a YouTuber’s career because it determines their financial success, and therefore, their well-being. While I think part of this connection with audiences is their divergence from traditional media, ultimately, their income derives from conforming to the establishment’s (YouTube’s) expectations. Individuals who have departed from establishment standards are assumed to be more truthful and transparent. This is assumed of YouTubers; meanwhile, they are just answering to another boss.

For a micro-celebrity today, having multiple social media accounts is expected to maintain connection with their audiences, just as it is for traditional celebrities. One platform may host the majority of content, such as video streaming platforms (ie. YouTubers on YouTube, streamers on Twitch, etc.), while other social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Tik Tok are used to further the personal bond. I predict this is because these platforms serve a different purpose. For example, while YouTube shares specific content on a topic, Twitter details one's personal hobbies or interests.

Despite these outreach techniques, there is still “a disconnect between followers and people who follow you.” (Marwick, Boyd, 2011). For example, Influencers with less popularity may view their followers as “friends” and Influencers with more popularity may view them as “fans”. Or, an Influencer may have many followers, yet follow very few people because they separate themselves from the idea of being a “follower”. Influencers, beyond just YouTubers, can perpetuate the same institutional ideas that the platform was created to combat. While this may be a character flaw for certain individuals — those who deem themselves to be above others because of an over-inflated ego — my belief is that Influencers are put into a position where they must sacrifice parts of themselves that are not “profitable”. Whether or not they go into a social media career for a wholesome, non-harmful reason, they are drawn to these platforms for their “creative-friendly” atmosphere, only to find out that they are not advertiser-friendly and must change who they are.

When an Influencer becomes popular and gains interaction, they also gain audience awareness which can alter their content to suit the audience’s desires (Marwick, Boyd, 2011). Within the context of social media, I define audience awareness as the ability to perceive and predict the reactions of audiences that consume one’s content. For example, *OfflineTV*, a group

of social entertainment streamers residing in LA with well-known members such as *Pokimane* (Imane Anys) and *DisguisedToast* (Jeremy Wang), has made it clear that their members leave their political opinions to themselves when it comes to their content. This was most-likely a reaction to cancel culture, so the members wanted to keep their potentially upsetting or offensive political opinions to themselves. One of the few exceptions to this was their “BLACK LIVES MATTER” podcast where they made clear that they are in support of the movement. One could also say that this is due to audience awareness since the members were able to recognize the pro-human rights nature of social media and their desire to seem “woke³”.

The more interaction increases (especially for famous Influencers), the more audience awareness there may be which can alter their content. Many young people aspire to become a famous YouTuber and cannot anticipate how much additional social media management and planning goes into creating a like-able and brand-friendly image in order to keep their platform profitable since the occupation is under-studied (in comparison to traditional Hollywood). I argue that it is challenging for content creators to consistently predict what type of content is acceptable, and that YouTube knows this. They are aware because this factor is what brings in new, unsuspecting talent. Even though mass audiences are unaware, I want to make it clear that creative workers are forced into a competitive environment where the winner is determined by factors other than raw talent, labor, and a charismatic personality. The current glamorous exterior of this new-age career conceals the tricky business tactics that happen behind the scenes. As I will discuss below in *Precarity: Adpocalypse & Monetization*, YouTube appeals to young

³ woke: A social media term for socially aware or conscious regarding social justice and human rights; one who is aware of systemic discriminations. Often is seen as virtue-signaling if one self-identifies as “woke”.

creatives and conceals the fact that job security is less prevalent in this neoliberal⁴ climate (de Peuter, 2011).

One piece of the image of the micro-celebrity is the “accidental” road to fame through spontaneous creative talent. One example of this is Jenna Marbles, one of the original famous YouTubers who created her main channel in 2010 with her first viral video, “How to trick people into thinking you're good looking”. With her humble and relatable brand, Marbles never acted as though she created content with the goal to become famous, and even when she reached 20 million subscribers, she continued to produce the type of content that genuinely fulfilled her. This is why after her departure in June 2020 fans were disappointed to see Marbles leave the platform, many calling her an “unproblematic icon⁵”.

In modern times, there is an argument to be made that more stamina is required to maintain a social media career, which I believe is due to the idea that YouTube is now a goal instead of a hobby. This includes content creators exercising discipline in completing larger projects, preparing a queue of content for the future, thinking of new innovative ideas, managing a public image, and more. Those who became famous in the period I like to call the “second-wave of YouTubers” (2015 - 2019) such as Tana Mongeau, James Charles, Jake Paul, Liza Koshy, and David Dobrik⁶ were joining YouTube with the intention of making it their career. For a content creator, being consistent is paramount (Duffy, 2017). Otherwise, they may lose steam in their following and the credibility they have earned. Viewing YouTube with a more

⁴ neoliberalism: An ideology that promotes free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending and its effect on the economy.

⁵ Marbles decided to leave the platform due to her old videos that were deemed offensive by audiences. Not only did she want a mental health break, but also wanted to reflect on her actions. There was no formal push to remove Marbles from her platform; instead, she removed herself. Marbles has made it clear in her video that she is not comfortable being called “unproblematic” since she has inflicted harm.

⁶ Many of these individuals have been accused of sexual assault, aiding in sexual assault, child grooming, etc. This is also the case for many of the “first-wave” YouTubers mentioned. I do not support or condone any of these actions, I am mentioning them for the sake of illustrating the YouTube landscape.

corporate, occupational perspective to maximize one's profits is widely understood by this second wave, and is why burn out⁷ became a more prominent topic in creator spaces.

“The historical separation between “online” and “offline” life is blurring as people use technology to manage their relationships.” (Marwick, 2010). This also goes for young creators who have to be “on” every moment since the internet observes, reacts, and comes to a conclusion to every online interaction or conflict. Since social media has moved from being a place of personal shared experiences and communal bonding to a function of consumerism and self-promotion, Influencers who are attempting to build their career and image cannot take a break. YouTube is now a branch of one's career; an “addition” to the myriad of content they produce. YouTube offers no guarantee of compensation, viewership, subscribers, or being favored by the algorithm. Sure, one is “allowed” to take a break; no manager or CEO will reprimand you or threaten your job for neglecting to make content. But this is precisely the issue, the competition doesn't allow them to. There are no paid sick days, vacation days, or room for compensation during emergency situations. YouTubers aren't granted career security. After one untimely break, creators can have their careers destroyed, left in the categories of “has been's” or “could have been's”.

Audience Relationships and How to Maintain Them

Authenticity in a Performative Occupation

Similar to the demotic turn, YouTubers are seen as entering the spotlight as average people who got lucky. Many have stories of doing makeup tutorials or story times in their bedrooms and then three years later are famous YouTubers with luxury items and millions of

⁷ burn out (on YouTube): When one feels compelled to make nonstop videos for an ever-hungry audience, afraid to take breaks for fear of losing momentum, or worse, being reprimanded by the algorithm that decides what videos people see. (The Verge; Hernandez, 2018).

subscribers. While it may seem like a simple transition, creators have had to become full-rounded self-managers who are marketable and understand the workings of the system in order to become some of the most subscribed channels.

With the influx of new diverse identities, users are drawn to authenticity. YouTube has promoted itself as a positive place for marginalized individuals⁸ because it encourages less-represented traits such as diverse ethnicities and races, sexualities, gender expressions, abilities, and socio-economic status. For example, many perceived straight men who have become big on the platform can express their masculinity in a non-traditional fashion (Morris, 2015). The example used in Morris' article was Daniel Howell (formerly, danisnotonfire), a 29 year-old British YouTuber who was originally assumed to be straight by audiences and has recently come out as being part of the LGBTQ+ community. One could interpret this coming out as an advancement in his comfortability on the platform. I conclude that, perhaps, during his earlier years, allowing himself to express femininely without need for a label was his desired level of public authenticity at the time; whereas now, since the social climate has become increasingly accepting, this represents his new level of comfort in sharing. The platform as a whole has diversified itself greatly, especially with that social change, for it has always been known as a place where people can express their true selves. In this instance, Howell was seen as a more authentic figure in the YouTube space, which was a crucial underpinning to his success.

As articulated by Alice Marwick, an expert in media studies, authenticity is a social construct and is not universally agreed upon. It is meant to replicate an idealized sense of reality digitally (Marwick, Boyd, 2011). Again, these once "average people" are meant to stay average, humble, and relatable, even when confronted with idealized possibilities of fame and wealth.

⁸ marginalized individuals: Someone who belongs to a social group that has been systemically discriminated against historically and/or currently (ie. Black people, queer people, disabled people, fat people, poor people, etc.).

Under capitalism⁹ in America, many of us can relate to the struggle of scrambling for life-saving resources to sustain ourselves and our communities, and safe-guarding our well-being in the future within an inequitable, discriminatory socio-economic structure. And while many marginalized individuals have found the start of their careers on YouTube (whether or not they stayed), YouTube's policies, advertiser-friendly guidelines, and lack of policy-making towards an equitable platform prove how marginalized creators have gained success *despite* the odds.

On the other hand, it seems as though audiences expect presentations of wealth, privilege, recklessness, success, and fame in individuals such as the aforementioned David Dobrik. Being a white, straight, cisgender man, Dobrik has not had systemic barriers (in terms of race, gender, or sexuality) to getting his content circulated on YouTube. Dobrik, up until recently¹⁰, was not getting called out for his discriminatory behaviors in his raunchy, skit-style vlogs, or for his flaunting of obscene wealth (ie. videos like “SURPRISING MY GIRLFRIEND WITH A NEW TESLA!!” and “SURPRISING MY BEST FRIEND WITH A NEW TESLA!!”). Meanwhile, creators like Jackie Aina, a Black beauty guru, came under fire for her collaboration palette with Anastasia Beverly Hills cosmetics because white women were arguing that the palette didn't cater to lighter skin tones (Nylon; Tembe, 2019). Aina's platform has consistently been dedicated to exposing racist behaviors in the beauty industry, YouTube, and social media in general. Aina created the palette to *specifically* cater to darker skin-tones because of the overwhelming bias towards pale skin in the beauty industry; and being a Black woman who doesn't keep quiet about the discriminations she endures, she is viciously attacked. Audiences went as far as to question

⁹ capitalism: An economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state.

¹⁰ At the end of March 2021, Dobrik's friend, Dominykas Zeglaitis (Durte Dom), was accused of sexually assault. This occurred during “bit” for the Vlog Squad where two women were meant to act as though they were going to have a threesome with Zeglaitis. To further the “bit”, the girls were given alcohol and became intoxicated. Now, one woman has come forward about how she has been raped. Consequences are being had for Zeglaitis, but also Dobrik, himself, for being an accomplice in directing the production.

how she could have the wealth that she does *and* experience racism. The attacks got to the point of violent racial slurs with Aina having to deactivate her Twitter in 2019. Aina, who has been upfront with her difficult upbringing, states, “Growing up, I had no leverage, I had no rich uncle.” (The List; Walters, 2020). Individuals like Aina are not given the opportunity to experience financial, emotional, or social success; rather, they are expected to remain as an underdog and live a life of endless struggle, while people like Dobrik are viewed as “worthy” of their success despite their heinous blunders. While these conflicts may go outside the realm of YouTube at times, the company has contributed to this double-standard with their inaction — both in not penalizing creators who abuse their power and platform, and also, allowing their marginalized creators to experience discriminatory harassment, while simultaneously, having their faces marketed for the benefit of YouTube.

There is a notable transition from user status to content creator (Buf, 2020). The experience changes; thus, the needs change, as well. The motivation for becoming a content creator mainly stems from “the desire for expression and self-actualization, the need for entertainment and the desire to gain recognition” (Buf, 2020). Maintaining authenticity becomes challenging, and since the idea is subjective, there are different consequences depending on a viewer’s opinion. Some viewers believe that consciously speaking to an audience is perceived as inauthentic (Marwick, Boyd, 2011) — like when a creator tweets, “You’re special.” to one million followers — while others might feel like it shows the creator’s dedication to the relationship. Since this is expected of content that is produced by mainstream media, which has already lost the trust of authenticity by many viewers, there is an idea that YouTubers are the more one-on-one, down to earth content creators. When this veil is lifted, suddenly YouTubers are in the same categories as reality stars, and not in a good way.

The guise of authenticity is meant to conceal the fact that content creators are embedded in the same commercial milieu as those institutional sites from which they distance themselves (Duffy, 2013). Tweeting for oneself can show more authenticity than tweeting for an audience; meaning, for example, a creator sharing a special occasion in their life that one can assume they would still share if they had a mundane life. That's the narrative many creators choose. Despite the limitations that creators find themselves in when attempting to please “corporate YouTube” and “audience YouTube” (more on this in *Marketing Your Career*), YouTubers have been able to exercise some agency, such as when they discuss professional difficulties with their audiences (Macdonald, 2019) which can promote feelings of empathy and compassion. However, if YouTubers are exposing the corrupt inner-workings constructed by the business of YouTube, their transparency is valued, reading as anti-establishment and/or vulnerable to viewers (ie. a queer YouTuber sharing that their videos have been demonetized for not being advertiser-friendly), but revealing this information can potentially cause drama with their brand or “boss” since a part of them is trying to comply with the demands of corporate YouTube.

Dramaturgy: How to Survive Cancel Culture

The relationship between YouTubers and dramaturgy, along with many performers and public figures, have been put under Goffman’s lens. Boiled down, the symbolic interactionist¹¹ theory of dramaturgy describes how the actions “on-camera” do not always match the actions “off-camera” and can create turmoil for the individual and their audience. As Goffman stated, “Sometimes disruptions occur through unmeant gestures, faux pas, and scenes, thus discrediting or contradicting the definition of the situation that is being maintained ... we find that performers, audience, and outsiders all utilize techniques for saving the show.” (Goffman, 1956).

¹¹ symbolic interactionism: A sociological theory that views society as composed of symbols that people use to establish meaning, develop views about the world, and communicate with one another.

YouTubers have learned to damage control once their public image gets shattered, even if what was revealed is more true to their “backstage” self. For example, the aforementioned James Charles was involved in one of the biggest and complicated instances of cancel culture in YouTube’s history (beginning with YouTuber Tati Westbrook’s video, “Bye Sister.”). The video detailed not only claims that Charles was becoming an egotistical Influencer, but also for preying upon straight men as a gay man. Though it was later revealed that two other prominent YouTubers, Shane Dawson and Jeffree Star, were potentially feeding Westbrook false information, it has since been revealed in 2021 that Charles, a 21 year old man, was indeed attempting to find romantic and sexual connections with underage children via TikTok.

Throughout this entire, multi-year case study of cancel culture, each of these YouTubers have made their attempts to “save the show” and damage control (ie. “No More Lies” by Charles, “BREAKING MY SILENCE ...” by Westbrook). Sometimes these attempts work and the YouTuber is awarded a “redemption”, meaning their past harms are absolved and they won’t be further asked for accountability by general audiences. Or, sometimes, it doesn’t work; leading to either a long hiatus in hopes that they can receive redemption in the future, or a complete removal from the internet, altogether.

Dramaturgy is tied to the phenomena of cancel culture, and though it has not been explicitly studied to a large extent in scholarly research, the conflict is representative of Goffman’s concept of impression management. When news comes forward that threatens one’s public image, YouTubers swoop in (with PR teams behind the scenes) and manipulate their audiences’ reactions, whether it’s by posting an apology video, making a statement on Twitter, or taking a break from all platforms. The “manipulation” is not necessarily in a negative sense, it means that creators are altering their image to preserve positive attention since it is crucial to

preserving a favorable relationship with their audiences. Impression management is essentially the same concept, like how on a micro-scale, we conceal the parts of ourselves to others that we assume may upset or offend them depending on the individual or group we're talking to. Most of us can relate to the idea that we are different people by ourselves or with our closest friends than we are when we're in public or at work — it's a similar concept for YouTubers. Despite the lack of literature on this topic, cancel culture and impression management has been increasingly popular, particularly in the last five years.

In general, public figures who build an image of being socially harmonious can have their character brought into question when it is brought to their attention that they have potentially inflicted harm. Then, instead of reflecting on repairing the harm committed (intentional or not) and learning from the situation, most creators become focused on preserving their social image, whether it is authentic or not. Regardless of how squeaky clean an Influencer's image may be, any accusation demands action; either apologize or backpedal.

According to Kenneth Hansen, reality, the drama that occurs in our real lives, is bland in comparison to the staged occurrences of reality TV. It is a controlled experiment that is “real enough” to audiences (Hansen, 2004). Even the definition of the word “reality” — which many of us may associate with unaltered circumstances and re-tellings — changes when we put it in the context of media, even back in 2004 before YouTube's creation. “Reality” is a genre in itself. In this case, it's a reality that is tampered with (Hansen, 2004). Content creators of various genres and platforms are attempting to craft a reality that puts themselves in good graces for the foreseeable future.

Marketing Your Career and Other “Not” Clickbait Issues

Precarity: Adpocalypse & Monetization

Young creatives have been around before the invention of YouTube and the problems they face have created new discourse, such as precarity, which has been further complicated with social media. According to Rosalind Gill & Andy Pratt, “Precariousness (in relation to work) refers to all forms of insecure, contingent, flexible work — from illegalized, casualized, and temporary employment, to homeworking, piecework, and freelancing. In turn, precarity signifies both the multiplication of precarious, unstable, insecure forms of living.” (MacDonald, 2019). Fields that are reliant on creativity often have their tendency for precarious labor overlooked, which I argue happens because the work that goes into a creative project is often viewed as leisurely, or only appropriate for hobbies, and is amplified by American society valuing STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) over the arts (drawing, design, literature, etc.). The cybertariat, which was coined by Ursula Huws as a specific form of the “precariat” on social media, has traits such as the fear of losing one’s job amidst outsourcing and relying on low payments (de Peuter, 2011). Essentially, this is the combination of the Precariat and workers who exert labor via the internet. These creative workers are forced into a competitive environment where the winner is determined by their technological talents, marketing ingenuity, and luck. Job security is less prevalent in this neoliberal climate because technology has sped up the methods of production; ultimately, decreasing the value of labor. Many articles note precariousness' lack of stability and longevity — some calling it a form of poverty (MacDonald, 2019; de Peuter, 2011).

The institutionalization¹² of YouTube has increased social pressures for YouTubers to release content at a professional level on par with television. By bringing celebrities and television programs to the website, it discourages lower production cost usually typical of user-generated content. In contrast to this, Susan Wojcicki, CEO of YouTube, stated, “Our users don’t come to YouTube for polish, they come to YouTube for texture. They come to see the world as it truly is, filled with people just like themselves. They come to witness our shared humanity.” (MacDonald, 2018). What Wojcicki means when saying this is that, similarly to what I mentioned earlier, YouTube was originally known to be the platform where disadvantaged, marginalized, struggling, or just “socially rejected” people could share their unconventional experiences with autonomy. In modern YouTube, this idea has not been true for many creators who feel that the algorithm¹³ is not on their side, perpetually prioritizing certain videos in the search results, recommendation feed, and Trending Page¹⁴ without explicit explanation as to why. YouTubers are not given these specific numbers from YouTube directly — and instead, are left to calculate it themselves (see: Green, 2017; *Adpocalypse Survey Data Collection*.) — yet are still expected to thrive in a digital free-market that they cannot predict.

“The creative economy relies on a new mantra of creative work centered around flexibility, and is based on 1) entrepreneurship and self-employment; 2) labor flexibility; 3) network-based work organization, and 4) project-based production.” (Christopherson, 2009). The career of being a YouTuber checks all of these boxes. Although YouTubers are under YouTube

¹² institutionalization (on YouTube): When an organization meets the standards of other powerful, socially accepted institutions (ie. placing unskippable advertisements on videos, charging viewers to watch certain videos, etc.).

¹³ algorithm: A real-time feedback loop that tailors videos to each viewer's different interests. It decides which videos will get suggested to individual users. The algorithm's goals are twofold: find the right video for each viewer, and get viewers to keep watching (Hootsuite; Cooper, 2020).

¹⁴ Trending Page: A metric that determines which videos are getting the most traffic. According to Google Support, trending aims to surface videos that a wide range of viewers would find interesting. Some trends are predictable, like a new song from a popular artist or a new movie trailer. Others are surprising, like a viral video (Google).

and must follow their guidelines, they are ultimately in a free-market environment and act more as individuals who are self-employed. So, YouTubers are creatives working in the creative economy. Along with this, their work times must be flexible in order to get content out at the optimal time of viewership via the algorithm whilst networking and promoting every piece of content they produce. And, finally, these individual projects are what grant creators their “paycheck”, either by not violating YouTube’s guidelines and accumulating AdSense¹⁵, or having a sponsorship to pay them for the promotion.

Because of the precarious nature of their work, YouTubers (and content creators, in general) are operating under a “pleasure-pain axis” (McRobbie, 2001) which is self-evident in it’s meaning — there is one side of the worker that enjoys what they do and finds creative fulfillment, while the other side is struggling to be in a financially and mentally comfortable position. The more hard work and self-sacrifice, the more your aspirations may come to fruition (despite that not being the case for many creators in an oversaturated, exploitative market).

With fewer boundaries between “work” and “leisure”, people may work for free in the hopes that it will, one day, turn into a paid position (McRobbie, 2001) as many do now on YouTube. Because of this aesthetic labour, the lines are blurred so the worker is convinced that they are not working; but rather, expressing themselves creatively as they would for a hobby or pastime. Since YouTubers are committed to their individualistic pursuits, they are willing to settle for unstable working conditions in order to have creative freedom and expression in their work. New-age YouTubers are working in a more precarious work environment due to the unpredictability of their work, the sudden standard for professional-grade production, and the

¹⁵ AdSense: A free, simple way to make money by placing ads on your site. Google's ad network connects advertisers looking to run their ads on the web with publishers like you, looking to monetise your website, making it simple for everyone to succeed ... Once you link your AdSense account to your YouTube account, you will receive credit for each video's monthly revenue. Once you accumulate \$100 in earnings, Google will issue a payment to your bank account (Google).

discrimination of advertising revenue¹⁶. Because of this, creators try to supplement their income with other avenues such as merchandise, brand deals, streaming, patronage¹⁷, etc. (MacDonald, 2018).

Their creative individualism is exploited by the powerful institution, YouTube, with a majority of the concluding funds and benefits funneling back to the institution itself rather than the workers. As McRobbie puts it, “They make their own way, they are always on the move, they have to get their names known, they are their own brands, they have to look after their own self interest ,they are ‘artistic individuals’.” (McRobbie, 2001). There is a contrasting combination of dependency and independence. The dependency is because creators need to have security in making a liveable wage, but they are also contracted like entrepreneurial freelance artists, meaning their payment is project to project. Along with this, there is a discrepancy in the expectations. Like the ‘artistic individuals’, YouTubers must play both roles perfectly, the independent creator and the dependent worker, in order to be successful. And if you do not bring the company success at any point, someone else will take your spot. Rather than getting traditionally fired at a regular corporate job with guarantees and benefits, you can be silently replaced by a “trendier”, more privileged, more advertiser-friendly creator who is favored by the algorithm. In terms of who will bring the most views and please the most advertisers, the creative worker is disposable.

Before YouTube was bought by Google in 2006, copyright holders didn’t pay YouTube much attention. However, following the purchase, copyright holders saw YouTube as a new economic resource and promotional tool; thus, YouTube conformed to the institutional

¹⁶ advertising revenue: The monetary income that individuals and businesses earn from displaying paid advertisements on their websites, social media channels, or other platforms surrounding their internet-based content.

¹⁷ patronage: The support, encouragement, privilege, or financial aid that an organization or individual bestows on another. In this context, financially supporting the occupational pursuits of a creator.

expectations of copyright lawsuits and licensing deals (Jin Kim, 2012). YouTube went through a transformation regarding their monetized content and revamped their guidelines as to what was considered appropriate, or advertiser friendly, content. For the multitude of creators who fell outside of these admissible guidelines, they were in for an unexpected loss of income by the end of 2016.

This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the “Adpodcalypse” coined by the infamous YouTube, Felix Kjellberg in early 2017. The first, biggest, and most well-known Adpocalypse was an 18 month period starting in late 2016 where advertisers boycotted their adverts from being marketed on YouTube to avoid their brand from being associated with harmful, offensive content. During this boycott, YouTube changed their YouTuber advertiser-friendly guidelines¹⁸, which explained how YouTubers could receive revenue through the YouTube Partnership Program¹⁹, and did a platform-wide demonetization of millions of videos through an automatic algorithm without a heads up to the creators. It took these creators noticing the differences between their video views and advertisement revenue to reveal that there was a problem. YouTube’s covert actions were finally revealed in 2017 (Stanford, 2018).

This forced YouTubers to become even more precarious, suddenly adapting to the new standards of content creation. Big YouTube stars such as Philip DeFranco, h3h3productions (Ethan and Hila Klein), and pewdiepie (Felix Kjellberg) were upfront with their income loss. DeFranco specifically disclosed an 80% fall since the boycott, which leveled out to a less devastating 30% (YouTube; DeFranco, 2017). Plus, more options were awarded to advertisers to select what kinds of videos they didn’t want their advertisements on. Some options for

¹⁸ YouTube’s guidelines for advertiser friendly content, viewed here: <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6162278?hl=en>

¹⁹ A programme through YouTube which allowed for creators to monetize their content through adverts once they have fulfilled the required guidelines.

advertisers to select against were videos that include themes of ‘tragedy and conflict’, ‘sensitive social issues’, and ‘sexually suggestive content’. These specifications were not specifically defined by YouTube at the time (Genius Link; Mustarde, 2017).

During the height of the Adpocalypse in 2017, Ethan Klein tweeted, “The best part is that @TeamYouTube doesn’t explain this roll out or how to protect yourself, they just silently screw everyone as usual.” (Tubefilter; Weiss, 2017) Efforts were made by many creators to combat the social and economic chaos of the YouTube ecosystem. Notably, Hank Green, one of the two *Vlogbrothers*, created the Internet Creators Guild, a space for creators who needed support or assistance through the uncertain time. Green, also, offered to show creators how to collect their data so that he could then evaluate the trends of ad revenue decreasing.



Image: Adpocalypse graph

Green’s example graph based on his offshoot channel, GamesWithHank during the Adpocalypse. The horizontal (x) axis represents the date recorded while the vertical (y) axis represents the Ad Placement Rate. Green focuses on the dip late 2016 and the larger one early 2017 (YouTube; Internet Creators Guild, 2017).

In this “Adpocalyptic” YouTube, the decision of who gets their video on the Trending Page is much more difficult and confusing than ever before. There was already pressure to post a certain type of content in order to even be considered in the YouTube algorithm, but now creators

had to guess what types of content would appeal to the new YouTube that was looking to please covert conservative²⁰ advertisers in an unfortunate happenstance of lost trust. In one of

DeFranco's videos during this period of Adpocalypse, he states that,

YouTube doesn't owe me anything, advertisers don't owe me anything. We as creators need to diversify. We need to figure out plan B, plan C, plan D. Through this big bump in the road we are going to find that certain genres are going to have to be fan funded. One of the reasons I sell shirts is because we have such horrible ad rates. Last week when we were doing the run of the 'Don't Be Stupid, Stupid' shirts, we made 8 times the amount of money off of that shirt, and support from you beautiful bastards, than we did from YouTube advertising. I love YouTube, but you gotta treat it like you are walking over a frozen lake and it's got cracks in it.

An incident that became one of largest impactful factors in the Adpocalypse involves the previously mentioned Felix Kjellberg, who is one of the most subscribed YouTubers on the platform (currently ranking 3rd at 110 million). Kjellberg had been known for his offensive and crude humor — such as making rape jokes, saying the ‘N’ word, featuring anti-Semitic imagery, doing the Nazi salute (Sieg Heil), and calling female gamers “stupid Twitch thots” — until, one day, it went too far with YouTube. Kjellberg paid two men on the freelance platform, Fiverr, to make a sign saying, “Death to All Jews”. Kjellberg was surprised that the two men went along with his “joke” while the two men later apologized stating they were unaware of what the message meant since they didn't speak English. Consequently, Kjellberg lost his revenue from future projects with YouTube Red²¹ and connections with Disney due to this incident (New York Times; Herman, 2017). This brought into question YouTube's capability to shut down inappropriate content before it goes viral, making brands question what types of videos are hosting their advertisements.

²⁰ conservative: A political and social philosophy promoting traditional social institutions. I define covert conservative* as ideology that isn't outright defined as “conservative” but upholds its social values underhandedly (ie. Advertisers expressing public support for the LGBTQ+ community while also denying their advertisements on LGBTQ+ creators' videos).

²¹ YouTube Red: An earlier iteration of what is now known as YouTube Premium (2014 - 2018) which is a subscription service where viewers can get advertisement-free and exclusive content on YouTube.

Many brands removed their advertising from GoogleAds such as Coca-Cola, Walmart, and Dish Network, with brands such as Starbucks removing themselves from YouTube specifically (Nicas, 2017). “On March 27th 2017, Fortune Magazine estimated the overall loss to be over 750 million USD” (Ingram 2017). This was a defining moment for YouTube where they were forced to realize that they were no longer considered the “acceptable” or “safe” option. If they wanted to save their business prospects, sacrifices would have to be made. Incidents like this are what propelled YouTube into heftier censorship guidelines, and ultimately, future, smaller Adpocalypses that content creators have speculated on.

Due to the fact that YouTube has censored so many YouTube personalities, Influencers have to choose between revealing a side of themselves that they perceive as authentic or profiting off of the work they put into videos every week. Attention from viewers is a commodity and their reactions are “popularity markers” and allow content creators to have their platforms. Not only does content need to be produced independently without help from the company, but it needs to then be advertiser-friendly and commodified for public consumption. To reiterate an earlier point, this virtual capitalistic environment is both independent and interdependent (Comor, 2015). This means that content creators cannot solely work by themselves or rely entirely on YouTube, they must balance the two aspects.

Prosumption: Brand-Deals & Sponsorships

In prosumption theory, there is a mixture of production and consumption, not solely one or the other, creating a complicated situation where one is *both* a “producer” and a “consumer”. Prosumption is not new in the world of creative business, but digital prosumption via social media is a new avenue for exploitation (Comor, 2015). In line with Karl Marx’s idea of the “value of a commodity”, which is the amount of labor that goes into production, digital

executives are not comprehensively compensating their workers because their whole career is commodified, from their looks and image to their personal relationships. This is why YouTubers are expected to be present on other social media apps, like Instagram or Twitter, ready to disclose details from their personal life, or why they are scrutinized when it's found out that their YouTube colleagues are not actual real life friends. Every aspect of their life is deemed a valuable and pertinent asset of their career. And while they are critically judged for these personal details or faults, creators are not compensated for the time spent crafting and monitoring their uninterrupted persona.

Fuchs defines presumptive relationship as, "consumption time becomes production time [and] capital tries to commodify disposable time." (Fuchs, 2014). Social media morphs from a hobby to a potential job, but even then it's not always considered an established job. Since it has elements that are enjoyable or self-expressive, it's often seen as an extension of one's hobbies; therefore, these activities are not considered appropriate for compensation for that work.

Despite the fact that social media is seen as an escape from the 9-5 work day prison to make six-figure salaries (Duffy, 2017), there are more unknown, nuanced problems. While YouTubers exert their energy, resources, and time, they may not always obtain monetization or a large audience. Ultimately, their labor is no longer their own, since they, the worker, are not reaping the entirety of their deserved benefits or wealth. Instead, YouTube, the company, is.

By YouTubers being creators on the platform, whether or not they are making a fair and adequate amount, they are visible "employees" and advertisements of YouTube. Not only are they accruing viewership, which YouTube capitalizes and brands off of, they are promoting being a content creator as a potential career to audiences, like a walking, talking job description. An example of this is in 2018 when YouTuber, Tana Mongeau, detailed her second conflict with

VidCon in 2018 where she was, once again, not allowed to be deemed a Featured Creator. This title is a badge given to creators who are invited as guests to the event that include necessary privileges such as accessing safe passageways throughout the convention to avoid safety hazards. Though she was formally invited to the event and was told she would be a Featured Creator, upon arrival, she was not allowed the title and security denied her access to the safe tunnels (which Mongeau assumed to be informed by a prejudice against her sexually open, uncensored content). Mongeau then noted how although she wasn't granted access to the privileges of being a Featured Creator, her face was being used for promotional materials throughout the entire event for a YouTube Red (now YouTube Premium) show she acted in, *Escape the Night*. Mongeau explained the hypocrisy of the situation in her video "Why I Won't Be Attending VidCon 2018: A Rant",

Escape the Night is actually premiering in the main room, the biggest part of VidCon where thousands of people gather, the first episode of the show that I'm in is going to be premiering and that all of the billboards everywhere and all of the banners and everything is going to be *Escape the Night* ... And now I'm getting thousands of tweets like, 'I can't wait to meet you at VidCon', 'I can't wait to see *Escape the Night* premiere', 'I can't wait to see you in *Escape the Night*', 'I can't believe your face is going to be plastered across VidCon' ... VidCon is telling me I'm going to be a featured creator, I'm so pumped. I'm promoting the fuck out of the event, obviously ... And so a few weeks before VidCon comes around, VidCon announces the Featured Creator lineup. I'm sure that by this story you see where this is going. For the second year in a row, VidCon decided that they were not gonna make me a featured creator ... I just spent the last six months being told by VidCon that this event was going to be themed around ten people and one of them was going to be me. That I would be doing so many things every day of VidCon, FOR VidCon, FOR their company, as a Featured Creator. And so immediately we call VidCon so angry saying, 'Hey, if you're gonna plaster my face all over this event, and you're gonna give every single other person on that billboard, on the *Escape the Night* show, a Featured Creator pass, if you're going to sell hundreds and hundreds of tickets to watch a premiere of a show that I'm in to people, why can't you give me a stupid fucking plastic badge so that this year isn't hell like last year's hell that you put me through? If you're gonna make me go through all of these escape rooms, and meet and greets, and press packages, and photoshoots, for your event that is themed around a show I was in and you're gonna SELL me to the public like this, you're

gonna say, ‘Come meet Tana Mongeau, come do this escape room with Tana Mongeau, if you wanna meet Tana Mongeau buy a four hundred dollar mother-fucking ticket to our event’, but you can’t even make me a Featured Creator? You’re gonna promise me, for an entire year, that I can be a Featured Creator, and then you’re not gonna do it? You’re gonna make thousands upon thousands of dollars on this event? ... You think I’m relevant and poppin’ enough to plaster my face along with nine other people across your entire building, but I’m not relevant enough to feature at YOUR event? ... And of course, even though I’m not a Featured Creator, I can’t not go now. I’ve been promoting this to my fans for the last six months. I’m required to speak at this panel, I’m required to do this meet and greet ... My fucking face is on the building that this event is held in, I can’t not go now!

Mongeau’s image and promotion were being used to propel VidCon’s success, with none of the benefits of her labor being rewarded to Mongeau, herself. In this instance, Mongeau was purposely misled, for the second year in a row, in order for VidCon to increase ticket purchases for their own event. And while VidCon is not technically associated with YouTube, it was created by Hank and John Green, two prominent creators from YouTube, and hosts one of the largest spaces for digital creators in the industry. In the words of Comor, “even if a commodity is not sold ... labour has been exploited.” (Comor, 2015).

Commodification through intimacy is when a product is promoted through a perception of closeness with the public figure. Authenticity (the “product” in this case) is a commodity to propel the image of YouTube as a platform for underdogs. This intimacy can be achieved by showing “behind-the-scenes” content or showcasing mundane tasks in an individual’s life. In Mongeau’s case, she accused VidCon (and YouTube) of discriminating against her for her unfiltered content. I agree with Mongeau, and further argue that YouTube was aware of the viewership she brought to the platform and wanted to use her popularity to their advantage and *also* keep their advertisers satisfied. This is proven by the fact that Mongeau’s content has never been forcibly removed by YouTube, only demonetized. Easily, they could have removed her content, which could have a viable argument considering they have violations of their

community guidelines²², specifically “Nudity and sexual content”. Instead, YouTube allows Mongeau to keep her videos up so that views accumulate, exposure for YouTube increases, and Mongeau receives no compensation for her labor.

“With authenticity’s status as a resonant ideal across social media, accidental entrepreneurship is expressed as a chance discovery of one's true passion.” (Duffy, 2017). The hobby after the work day becomes the actual work itself. Typically, this was the case for early YouTuber’s success stories. It aided in the authenticity of their narrative and propelled a career in content creation as achievable for all creatives. An example of this mentioned earlier is Jenna Marbles, who didn’t have any predisposition that the platform would become her full-time career and turn her into a micro-celebrity. She later became one of the most relatable figures on YouTube up until her departure in June 2020.

Successful YouTubers are always found wearing multiple hats in the realm of production and consumption. Being solely a YouTuber entails being a content creator, editor, PR manager, ambassador, etc. Add the layered roles of various social media platforms and suddenly the YouTuber is contributing to community engagement on Twitter, streaming daily on Twitch, or becoming a photographer and graphic designer on Instagram. The more platforms, skills, and visibility a creator has, the more reach with diverse audiences. There is an insatiable need to expand because the market on YouTube never settles long enough for creators to relax.

One day an indie game²³, such as *Fall Guys*, may become popular on the Trending Page, but seemingly overnight will drop viewership exponentially. This new-age perspective on

²² community guidelines: “Our Community Guidelines are designed to ensure our community stays protected. They set out what’s allowed and not allowed on YouTube, and apply to all types of content on our platform, including videos, comments, links, and thumbnails.” (YouTube Help)

²³ indie game: An independent video game or indie game is a video game typically created by individuals or smaller development teams without the financial and technical support of a large game publisher, in contrast to most “AAA” games.

capitalistic individualism is rooted in libertarianism²⁴; on a micro digital level, meaning that individuals have to cultivate their own creative talents to benefit the economy (McRobbie, 2001) without assistance from a larger entity (ie. YouTube balancing the algorithm so that more creators can get views). Others see this as a benefit since there can, theoretically, be no cap on the level of success that a creator could earn, so long as they grind their talent away solely for profitable gain. While this ideal encourages abundance, it doesn't allow for all individuals to have access to that. I'm highlighting the dangers of this ideology; how in this system, there would be no equity²⁵ to ensure that everyone can remain safe, respected, and compensated. Digital libertarianism is, essentially, work as hard as you can, whenever you can, because not everyone can win and nobody is going to support you if you lose.

What many audience members don't consciously recognize is the emotional and relational labor content creators exert regularly. They can be paid, or unpaid, depending on the instance. For example, a YouTube video that is monetized will be "paid" labor, whereas maintaining social media relationships with fans and other creators is not. Still, Influencers are consistently expected to show up emotionally on the internet (ie. reacting to a tragedy, consoling a fan, etc.) For social media celebrities, "comments are like currency" (Duffy, 2017) because they prove that you are making an impact on the virtual world. Then, maybe you will *actually* be compensated and receive physical currency.

Many creators rely upon sponsorships to create income, but this creates a complicated presumptive experience. When advertising is not clearly stated it can be hard to determine what is personal and what is advertisement, and as we've established, the authentic representation of

²⁴ libertarianism: A political philosophy that advocates only minimal state intervention in the free market and the private lives of citizens.

²⁵ equity: Appropriate treatment, assistance, or recognition for certain individuals and groups. As opposed to equality, equity understands that certain accommodations are necessary to ensure fair opportunities across all people.

one's personal life is what sells. Some YouTubers will say that they've been sent products rather than admit that they bought it when the product is expensive (Dekavalla, 2019) in order to hide their wealth and appear more relatable, while others will be uncomfortable to admit when they've been sponsored because it can indicate ties with traditional establishments, and they would rather opt to act as though they bought the products themselves for personal pleasure. This is called "interdependence", which is one way YouTubers can distance themselves from the industry whose products they feature and retain more trust from their audience (Dekavalla, 2019). Even if they are taking brand-deals behind the scenes, this is to keep their image away from being associated with big companies who potentially have problematic practices. It keeps Influencers paid from their sponsorships and in a favorable light with viewers. However, there is potential for being exposed for this concealed information and harming their career.

Advertising and consumerism create a market of artificial needs that are personalized for audiences, inclining the audience to buy products that may pique interest (Fuchs, 2014), but won't actually deliver on the product's promises (ie. teeth whitening kits and complexion products being advertised on TikTok with unrealistic results). While authenticity plays a role in a YouTuber's success, the money coming from brand deals can aid in financial security, despite if these products uphold their highest standards or not. Advertising and authenticity are at odds with one another. If an Influencer is not being transparent with which products are funded from sponsors and which are personally preferred, they risk losing the trust from their audience. However, if they only take brand deals from companies they whole-heartedly support and are in line with social justice protocols, then there are not many brands for them to choose from, resulting in less compensation. While the goal of harm reduction in promoting brands that stay socially accountable will better our society (and I believe is one we should all strive towards), it's

important to note that the majority of content creators are marginalized in this system as precarious workers and deserve to get compensated where they can in order to survive.

“Ninety-two percent of consumers say that they trust word-of-mouth recommendations of their acquaintances, relatives, friends, or influencers more than any other type of advertising; 70% of teenage YouTube subscribers trust influencer opinions more than traditional celebrities; 71% of consumers are more likely to make a purchase based on a social media reference.” (Kádeková, 2018). Based on these statistics, I conclude that Gen Z is particularly welcoming of Influencers who use brand-deals in their regular content because they are used to it, unlike older generations such as Millennials or Gen X who were shocked and betrayed at the shift from authenticity to economic gain. The fear of these older viewers is that a creator will “sell-out”, promoting products that they don’t really believe in just to make money in a similar fashion to traditional celebrities. While the social tide is shifting to understand the need for compensation for creators, there is still discourse on how to remain authentic as they gain more exposure, get offered more brand deals, and are enticed to do what’s best for their brand rather than themselves.

The most obvious avenue for creators to make an income under YouTube is advertisements, which is different from compensation for other media such as Twitch, where the main avenue for income is through a monthly subscription (Illera & Benito, 2017). As we’ve discussed, YouTubers can make money beyond AdSense with brand-deals and sponsorships not associated with the platform. And unfortunately, once YouTubers agree to private partnerships with brands (such as Kellogg’s, Domino’s, Kit Kat), there is research to suggest that they lose a feeling of reliability with their audiences. This can be analyzed through negative comments and dislikes, especially if the ideologies between the brand and the YouTuber seem to contrast. Over

time, content creators learn to become more deliberate with their sponsorship disclosures rather than just spontaneously stating or visually showing it in videos (Illera & Benito, 2017). That way, audiences will feel they are “on the inside” of the business deals, rather than feeling ingenuity like they do with most mainstream media outlets. If the creator is tactful and lucky, backlash doesn’t occur because there is transparency between all parties — YouTubers and audiences — which can actually allow the creator to be authentic *and* make a living. Over time, content creators learn to become more deliberate with their sponsorship disclosures rather than just spontaneously stating or visually showing it in videos (Illera & Benito, 2017). That way, audiences will feel they are “on the inside” of the business deals, rather than feeling ingenuity like they do with most mainstream media outlets. This is a rare occurrence. Again, it’s a difficult balance to strike with nuanced conversations around wealth and relatability only developing within the past few years.

Subscribing to all of YouTube’s Hidden Downfalls

The connection between the demotic turn and present-day YouTube is one of the phenomena that made the platform what it is today. Now, many young people aspire to become famous YouTubers and may not understand what is involved and sacrificed to achieve success. While there is research on the perceptions of authenticity in public figures, there is not as much critical analysis about the similarities and differences between how conventional celebrities maintain authenticity and how micro-celebrities do so. Goffman’s principles have been applied to YouTubers in the past, but existing work does not encapsulate the modern perspectives that YouTubers are moving into; this includes more commercialized media such as talk shows, online series, and films due to their elevated fame. Monetization has become more well-known and talked about in social media forums, but has not been given the proper attention due to how

critical it is in a YouTuber's career. Finally, there is little discourse in academic literature about the consequences of digital capitalism and entrepreneurship, specifically for YouTubers and other social media creators. The nuances that have developed for this niche career over the past ten years have created a gap in the research that needs to be filled using a critical analysis applied to these modern concepts.

My Methodology: A Tutorial

This research was conducted in a qualitative manner which fostered insights into the opinions and motivations of individuals involved in the YouTube scene. By using content analysis, the research question was interrogated with a subjective interpretation of three formal interviews of YouTube's CEO, Susan Wojcicki, including ten of the most-liked comments from each interview. The observation includes an analysis of Wojcicki's answers and the implications they have for YouTube as a whole. In addition, it examines the socio-political²⁶ factors for each of the interviewees themselves and how that informs their experience being YouTubers, and the conclusions being made by the most-liked commenters. The portions of the interviews and comments being analyzed were textually transcribed with subsequent codes, or general themes and terms, for each section so that the analysis could be made in a straight-forward, easily-comparable manner.

I gathered my data via content analysis, which is defined as “a research method used by sociologists to analyze social life by interpreting words and images from documents, film, art, music, and other cultural products and media. The researchers look at how the words and images are used, and the context in which they are used to draw inferences about the underlying

²⁶ socio-political: Something that takes into consideration the social and political factors applied and/or affected. For example, Black Lives Matter is a movement that is built upon the social ideology that Black identifying individuals do not deserve racially-motivated violence, and also, the political ideology of restructuring our systemic institutions to create a safer world for Black people.

culture.” (ThoughtCo.; Crossman, 2020). This method is the most optimal way to answer this question because observing direct information from individuals who work for/with YouTube is crucial to understanding the complicated situation. The only other method that could have compared in valuable, insider information would be conducting interviews. One benefit could have been that interviews would also allow for more honest responses, especially since these YouTubers wouldn’t be immediately analyzed by their CEO. Nonetheless, there were barriers to utilizing this method. First of all, this was most-likely an unreasonable venture considering Wojcicki and the YouTubers interviewing her are all micro-celebrities who most-likely wouldn’t have the time to engage in an interview with a stranger. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has been on-going throughout this research, encouraging many of us to focus more on family, health, and well-being (even for micro-celebrities).

Despite no personally-conducted interviews, content analysis remains a strong contender for answering the research question. I argue that content analysis is not only the most practical option in this scenario, but it allows for the most assorted range of content to be analyzed (ie. YouTube’s CEO’s answers, famous YouTubers reactions, comments from the audience) which can ultimately help formulate a more well-rounded conclusion. Studying a recorded conversation between a YouTuber and their CEO can yield an interesting result; YouTubers with their up-close perspective into the YouTube culture, expectations, economics, and stigma, that audiences on the outside do not have, with their boss who also has an image to maintain while pleasing everyone — viewers, advertisers, and YouTubers. This is the closest one could get to a personal one-on-one interview with only a few factors sacrificed.

One limitation that is fair to state is that there are only three interviews (total: 2 hours and 39 seconds) and a total of thirty comments are being analyzed. There is not enough content for

this data to perfectly encompass the wide range of Wojcicki's administrative practices, the stances of each interviewer, or the opinions of all commenters and viewers. While insight can be found through this process, it does not mean that other opinions and experiences don't exist. YouTube has focused on how the creators on their platform come from a number of backgrounds, experiences, and identities; therefore, it is safe to say that each individual gets into YouTube for their own unique reason and could view the career-starting platform very differently.

It should be noted that qualitative methods do *not* focus on explicit correlation, causation, impact, or relationship between numeric variables; instead, the purpose of this research is to examine the influences on a phenomena. This research could be replicated by another individual and have a different conclusion, informed by different codes from a different sociological framework than myself. To quote C. Ray Borck and Lisa Jean Moore from their data and methodology section in *This is My Voice on T: Synthetic Testosterone, DIY Surveillance, and Transnormative Masculinity*, "Our aim is not to standardize observations into scientific units but rather to appreciate and explore both the trends and the range of variation found within a given phenomenon." (Borck & Moore, 2019) Similarly to this research, my aim for this methodology is to analyze differing experiences on YouTube to hopefully reveal accounts of what it's like to function with a career under the platform.

YouTubers v.s. Wojcicki: The Unexpected "Collab"

For the purpose of this methodology, three different interviews with Susan Wojcicki conducted by well-known YouTubers were evaluated. The first interview is with Matthew Patrick, a.k.a. MatPat, a gaming creator who predominantly runs the YouTube channel, *The Game Theorists* (and smaller entities such as *The Film Theorists* and *GTLive*) where he makes

long-form essay-style videos on gaming lore and theories. Patrick joined YouTube in 2009 and started posting game theory content in 2011. Since then, he's been one of the most well-known creators in the gaming space on YouTube and has been part of projects such as *MatPat's Game Lab* on YouTube Premium while also guest-starring in other creators' shows, such as Joey Graceffa's (previously mentioned) *Escape the Night*. Patrick ended up being the one to interview Susan Wojcicki at the Gaming Creator Summit in 2019 in front of a live audience. The video begins with Patrick explaining general information about the footage the audience is about to see and ends with this disclaimer, "After this interview, they probably won't be inviting me back." Patrick made clear, in his video and the description, that his goal was to get answers for the creator community on transparent communication regarding monetization, specifically for gamers.

The second interview is with Hank Green, a vlogger, science communicator, and one of the first content creators on the platform. He started on the channel, *Vlogbrothers* with his brother, John Green, and created early projects such as *Brotherhood 2.0*, *Crash Course*, the separate channel, *SciShow*, and many more. Green's content focused on education on topics such as biology, chemistry, psychology, and philosophy in formal videos as well as more casual content of "video blogs", or what we know today as vlogs. As previously mentioned, during the Adpocalypse, Green had created the Internet Creators Guild, which was intended to "educate creators, protect their interests, and help them succeed on platforms that were constantly changing monetization methods." (The Verge; Alexander, 2019). Though this project shut down after three years, Green has continued connecting with viewers and content creators alike by posting videos on the predominantly Gen-Z populated app, TikTok, which has garnered him a wealth of positive responses. In 2020 during the first spike of the COVID-19 pandemic, Green

was asked by Wojcicki's team to facilitate a virtual interview hosted on a video conference platform, making it seem more informal like a podcast. In the preface to this video, he shares that he wasn't entirely sure if he wanted to at first, explaining how learning more about the inner-workings of a business might make it more difficult to be "properly incensed". He also discloses that he has "Pro-YouTube" bias since he's so closely tied to the platform, but also that he doesn't want to upset Wojcicki because of the power she has on YouTube and in business in general. That being said, he doesn't think that it strongly affected the truthful questions he asked. The description of the video notes this power imbalance — "YouTube, the company, has a massive amount of power, not just over viewers and creators, but over society." — and ends the paragraph ominously with, "I suppose, it may be eventually possible for them to lose it [power]." This indicates that Green has an awareness of the power that YouTube holds and is confident enough to publicly state it, despite his professional ties. To go further, one might assume that someone on the "inside" is going to be too afraid to speak up; and while, yes, individuals need to maintain some form of job to cultivate a livelihood, I believe that Green was dropping a subversive hint. One that isn't explicit enough to get him in trouble but is also too intriguing for viewers to ignore.

The third interview is with Eugene Yang, an entertainment creator, filmmaker, actor, and activist well-known for his start on BuzzFeed in 2013. He eventually left in 2018 with his three other co-workers to start the spinoff channel, *The Try Guys* with their separate property 2nd Try, LLC. This channel consists of many popular types of videos with a comedic frame such as trying social media challenges ("Try Guys Try The Ghost Pepper Challenge"), exciting food and drinks ("Try Guys Test The Craziest Food Hacks on Tik Tok"), and most-importantly, bringing awareness to social issues. Yang himself is outspoken about being a South Korean-American and

gay and incorporates it into his section of content on their shared account. This includes informative, call-to-action videos with multiple interviews such as, “We Need To Talk About Anti-Asian Hate” and polar-opposite videos such as, “I’m Gay - Eugene Yang”, a creative, theatrical interpretation of his struggles of being a young, queer person in an Asian-American household. At the end of 2019, Yang was asked to interview Wojcicki at YouTube Headquarters. The interview is higher production and more edited than the other interviews, not having the disclaimer in the beginning like Patrick and Green did to reveal any feelings of discomfort or worry. The two discuss sensitive topics such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA), harassment policy, LGBTQ+ issues, the algorithm, demonetization, politics, and freedom of speech, but without any indicator of how Yang is feeling about the interview.

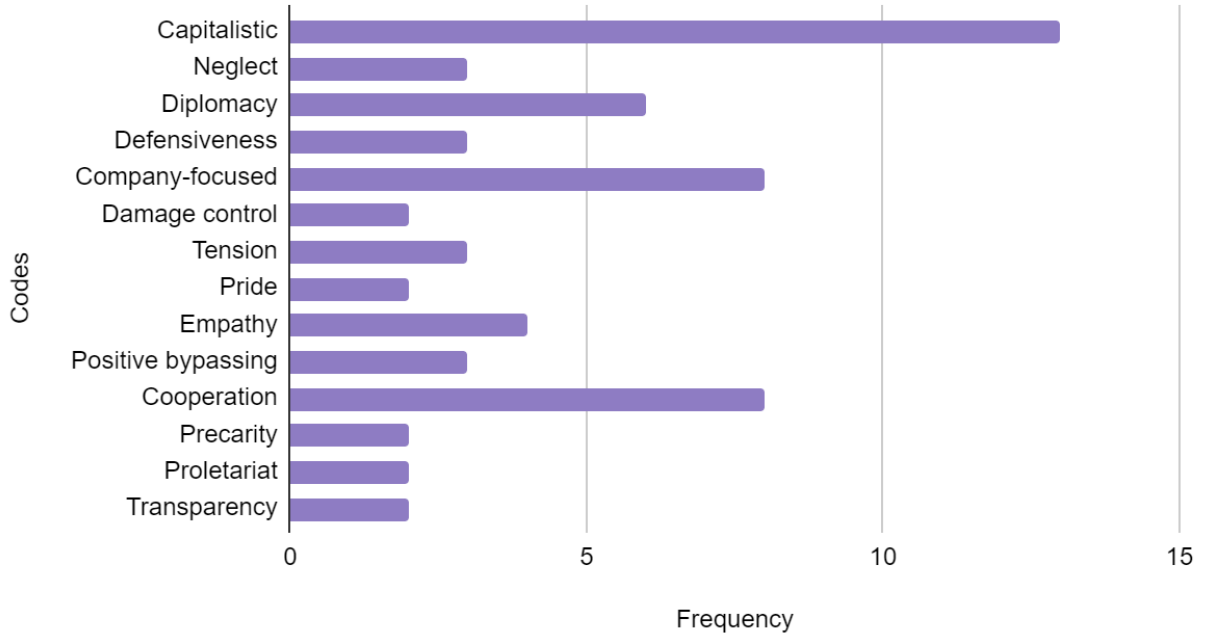
Each YouTuber comes from a different sect of YouTube (gaming, education, entertainment) which influences their perspectives and priorities, but each main channel they’re affiliated with has sizable followings; *Game Theory* with 14 million, *Vlogbrothers* with 3.37 million, and *The Try Guys* with 7.54 million. Despite their differences, these creators are well-known for their long-standing successes, and also for their outspoken nature when issues arise, even if that includes their boss, YouTube.

Below this paragraph is a bar graph representing the codes derived from each interview and the comments from each video (“2+” means the graph contains codes that appeared at least two times). The horizontal (x) axis represents the frequency that the codes appear in the data while the vertical (y) axis represents the codes. The codes were determined by examining the content in the interviews and comments from a sociological perspective, predominantly a critical theory²⁷ lens with a focus on marginalization, class struggle, and wealth inequality.

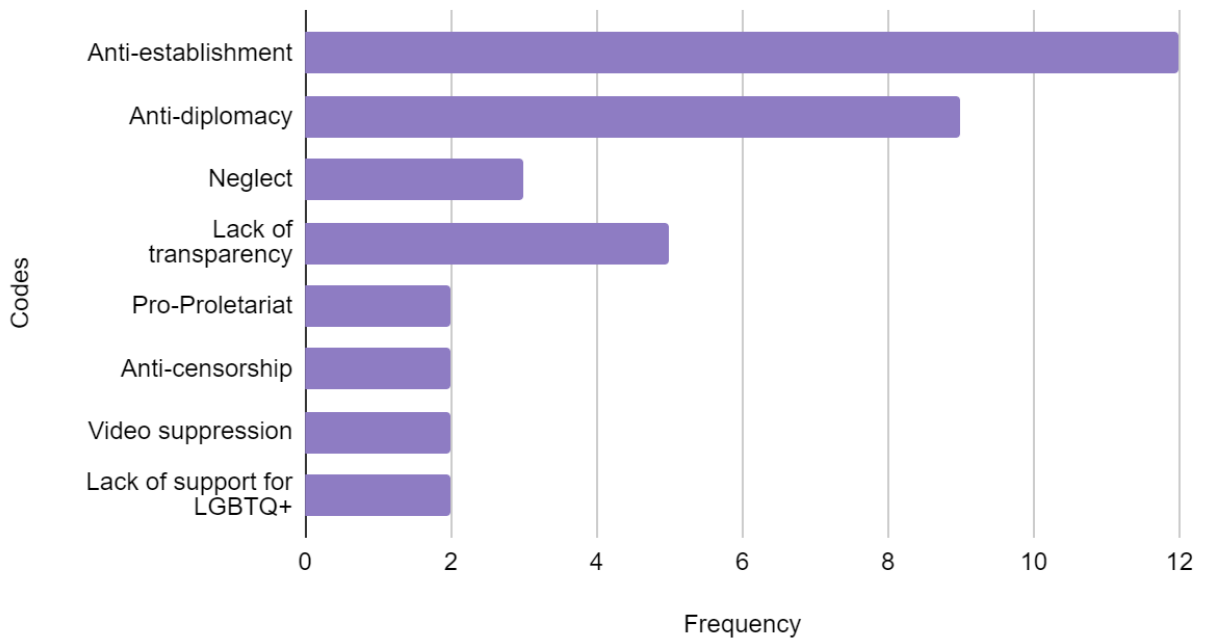
²⁷ critical theory: A Marxist approach to sociology that focuses on reflective assessment and critique of society and culture in order to reveal and challenge power structures.

Visual Data Representation: Bar Graph

2+ Interview Codes



2+ Comment Codes

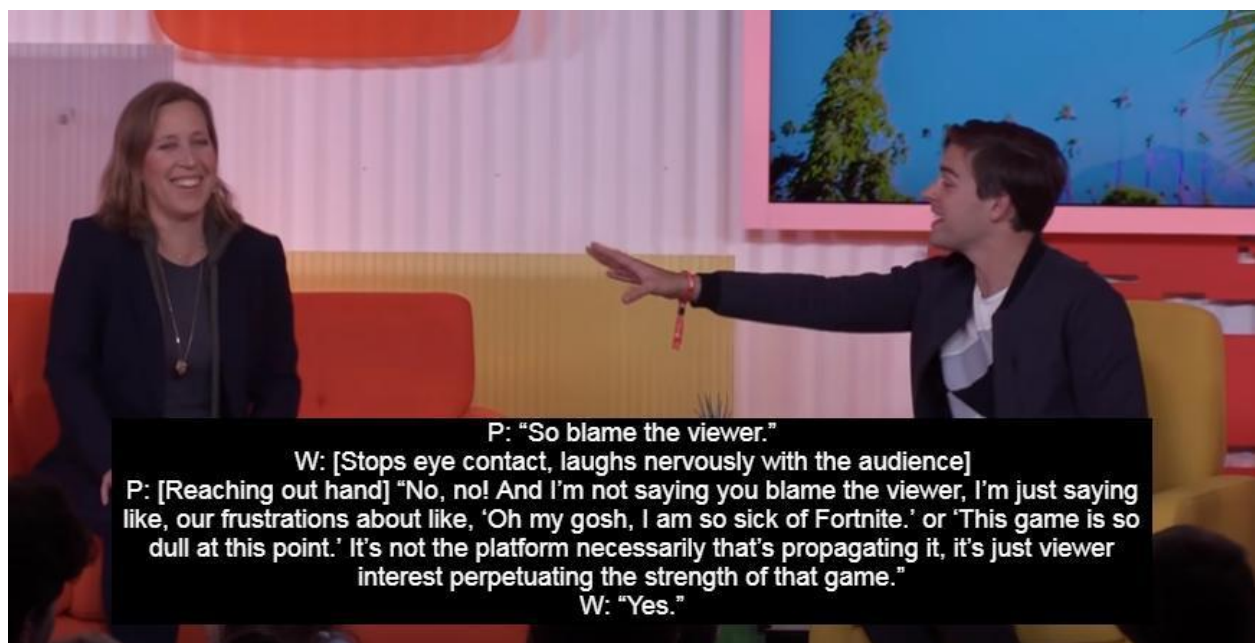


Profit over People, According to Wealthy CEO

It's no surprise that YouTubers feel left in the dark by YouTube. Patrick confirms this by specifically saying that YouTubers feel like "second-class citizens" and states early on in the interview that, "To the external eye, [it] feels like creators are no longer a priority on this platform or a small piece of it." Neglect was one of the most frequent codes (appearing 3 or more times) that arose from the data, which is defined here as an emotion that arises from abandonment, lack of support, or occupational mistreatment. Patrick states, "I think a lot of us in this room aren't looking to necessarily gain the system but play by the rules, we just don't know what the rules are so it feels like we're operating in a black box ... Can't we be empowered with tools to help us make better content and feel more comfortable and confident on the platform? The question is, why doesn't that list exist if it does?" What he is referring to is the lack of straight-forward communication regarding demonetization processes; what type of content will be flagged, nuances for different genres of content, etc. One commenter shared a sentiment similar to Patrick's perspective, "How can gamers play by the rules if they don't know them? How can they avoid demonetization if they don't know what causes it?" The audiences are, too, noticing the inaccessible standards expected of YouTubers.

During their discussion on trending games on YouTube and how gaming creators often feel pressured to play the same game over and over in order to maintain views and make profit, Wojcicki explains that the company does want people to view different types of content — "It's good for us." she states — "but if someone continuously keeps clicking on a Fortnite video, then that's what they'll be recommended." The viewers decide what gets popular and advertisers decide who gets monetized, which means that any agency of the creator to succeed is taken from them. They are now forced to pump out countless hours of the trendiest games, such as Among

Us²⁸, no matter how repetitive in hopes that they are deemed “advertiser-friendly”. In response to Wojcicki’s explanation, Patrick summarized, “So blame the viewer.” While, most-likely this comment wasn’t meant to be taken literally, Wojcicki laughed uncomfortably with the audience, breaking eye-contact with Patrick. The CEO is hesitant to confirm nor deny this claim because, as far as I believe, the answer is yes. Wojcicki wouldn’t admit that this is the case, for it would fuel the uproar in the YouTube community of accusations that content creators are not protected on the platform. But since Wojcicki’s (ultimately, YouTube’s) bottomline can’t include the goal of personal success of the creator, since it would betray the wants of advertisers, she would rather remain vague with a laugh.



All YouTubers are operating under precarity, or a state of being in an unstable or uncertain working environment that exploits one’s labor (especially creatives) by not properly compensating the labor or having appropriate protections for the laborer. They are unable to accurately project their incomes, no matter how much they’ve worked. The free-market

²⁸ Among Us: A 2018 online multiplayer social deduction game developed and published by American game studio Innersloth that spiked in popularity in 2020 on popular streaming platforms such as Twitch.

ecosystem of YouTube promotes itself as a start-up location for small creators with untapped talent, but in reality, it will not support them in setting up for success in any way. Whether that means getting consistent monetization or maintaining compensation even when their content is not fitting a trendy market, that is viewed as an over-extension; one YouTube is not willing to make.

Often, Wojcicki supplies diplomatic responses, prioritizing equality phrasing over equity, meaning that she's promoting the idea that everyone gets treated exactly the same rather than giving people help based on their needs. The CEO represents YouTube as wanting to be fair to all creators, celebrity or not, yet celebrities have an extreme advantage when it comes to presence, viewership, and monetization on YouTube. This hypocrisy comes up in Patrick's interview where he discusses the verification button, stating that, "The verification button doesn't exist for creators but does exist for celebrities." Meaning that, celebrities can reach verification before achieving 100 thousand subscribers while creators have to strictly follow that rule. Wojcicki interjects swiftly, assuring that this exists for all creators in the "same way". However, Patrick acknowledges the hypocrisy with a hypothetical situation, "You say that if, like, Billie Eilish comes onto the platform without 100 thousand subscribers she's not gonna get a check mark until she gets 100 thousand subscribers?" At first, Wojcicki is taken off guard by this situation and flounders (potentially, because she was put on the spot). She then admits that there *is* different treatment for different individuals and explains with an example, explaining that if a politician were on a platform, and people were making parody videos of them, it could potentially be misconstrued as them and cause the spread of misinformation²⁹. By verifying the politician, all other videos are understood to be fake.

²⁹ This is considered in YouTube's community guidelines under Spam & deceptive practices: "Impersonation".

While Wojcicki's logic can be understood, it directly contrasts her earlier interjection, "It [the verification button] exists for everybody in the same way." Clearly, by her example, that is not the case. It wouldn't be the same problem if this was an upfront fact, if content creators were aware that there is a difference in treatment. I found it questionable as to why she felt the need to defend with something that isn't true. This right here is the heart of the issue. YouTubers don't know basic information and the truth can only be revealed in interviews where the CEO is pushed into an uncomfortable position and forced to reveal more. Even the commenters took note of this, one of them saying, "The last question was basically confirmation that they care more about celebs than creators." It's not as egalitarian as YouTube makes it out to be. And for whatever reason that is, legitimate or not, it's dubious as to why it's not transparent.

Near the end of the interview, Patrick inquires about why content creators should choose YouTube as their platform since there are many other competitive forces attempting to "purchase" certain creators. He makes the comment, "And YouTube isn't appearing in any of those kinds of press releases." to which Wojcicki interrupts, "Are you sure?" It's a tense moment, and Patrick challenges her, "I don't know. That's why I'm asking you the questions. Honestly. I know you lost Nick Eh 30 uh, like, that's the one time I've seen you show up, sorry." Since Patrick is representing this idea that creators feel that YouTube is playing guessing games with their livelihoods, it not only clearly communicates their pain, but puts Wojcicki on the spot, having to articulate and defend the administrative actions of YouTube. Even in this moment of conversation where the topic strays, Wojcicki is ready to defend YouTube. This is why defensiveness, or an action out of fear that one will be exposed, mistreated, or put on the spot; a retaliation to protect one's image and comfort, is one of the most frequent codes, as well.



Though Patrick’s approach could be deemed aggressive or antagonistic by some, many commenters supported his approach. One states, “I appreciate MatPat sticking to his guns and asking the questions that creators clearly deserve to have answered.” Another noted how Patrick said, “I’m surprised your team let some of the questions through.” as a way of keeping the viewer in the loop about censorship behind the scenes. There is a valid argument here for the sexism that is most-likely at play in these comments — the internal bias that encourages us to legitimize a man’s voice over a woman’s — and at the same time, there is validity in criticizing Wojcicki’s role as CEO when we look at the harm caused to those beneath her. While Wojcicki gets discrimination for being a woman, she’s also white, cisgender, heterosexual, and wealthy, giving her immense amounts of privilege³⁰. Many of the smaller creators on YouTube are not as privileged. This is important to acknowledge, despite Wojcicki’s immense privilege, to be mindful of the social institutions at play for the commenters (and my own) reactions to Wojcicki and any potential bias that could be at play.

³⁰ privilege: A special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group.

Wojcicki changes her focus from Patrick to the audience when trying to defend the way YouTube is operating. It's logical for her to connect with the viewers of YouTube, based on her other actions and mannerisms, though it seems to be more of a damage-control than intrigue for connection. Multiple commenters noted on this, one stating, "I feel like the Ceo of YouTube should be someone who actually understands the creators needs not someone who is just trying to please the press." And another, "Susan is almost always speaking to the audience, like she's advertising instead of giving a straight answer." Many also comment on how she is "talking in circles" rather than sharing meaningful information. In YouTube's attempts to gain the trust of the viewer, they are actually pushing them further away by being what modern audiences have come to despise — establishment.

Finally, Wojcicki has a *laissez-faire* attitude, meaning the market is solely determined by the advertisers and the users, giving creators almost no autonomy. Wojcicki talks about how competition for platforms is good, which is how she's also viewing the climate on YouTube, meaning that creators are also expected to thrive in that competitive environment. It's easy for Wojcicki to praise competition when she is the CEO of a multi-billion dollar company with many resources and opportunities. Wojcicki explains that advertisers choose what channels they want their advertisers on, whether they're okay with profanity, sexual themes, or controversial topics. The CEO states, "That's their choice. They're an advertiser, they're paying money." Commenters noticed this shift of perspective for this once creative website, one saying, "They are turning youtube into cable TV. This used to be a website for us, now it's all Fox News, Conan, Jimmy Kimmel, and child friendly crap. They monopolized the platform and went full dictator." Even though Wojcicki is seeking to prioritize the decision-making for those who "have the money"

(advertisers) and frame it as a logical explanation, commenters are seeing the true nature of the platform's conformity to establishment, and they are not valuing it as a viable solution.

Hierarchy is Okay (As Long As You're at the Top)

Wojcicki seems to be more relaxed in the interview with Green, having open posture and laughing, as opposed to the first interview with Patrick. There are many moments of agreement and ease, with Green accepting, and at times, praising YouTube's company-focused actions. In the beginning, Green praises how the majority of the advertising revenue goes straight to him (the creator) on YouTube, which is different from other platforms. When Green likens YouTube to a "government" and YouTubers as the "taxpayers", he doesn't use this analogy in a criticizing manner, but rather views it as a reciprocal relationship. Green states, "You [YouTube] provide services and exchange for that tax." and even goes as far as to say, "If you [the audience] think that YouTube hates creators you just have to ask like, 'Okay, if the number of people making 5-6 figures has increased 40%, that's good for YouTube as well as for creators because we have to pay our taxes.'" In this instance, Green has normalized the unbalanced power dynamics between creators and the company of YouTube and is referring to it similarly to how Wojcicki has, as a natural consequence in a digital free-market. Green is not explaining what exactly he means by "pay our taxes", but it can be assumed that he means when YouTube uses creators for their financial gain, relating back to prosumption (ie. YouTube profiting off a demonetized video while the creator gains no compensation). The company-focused ideology is what has contributed to the suffering that creators have endured.

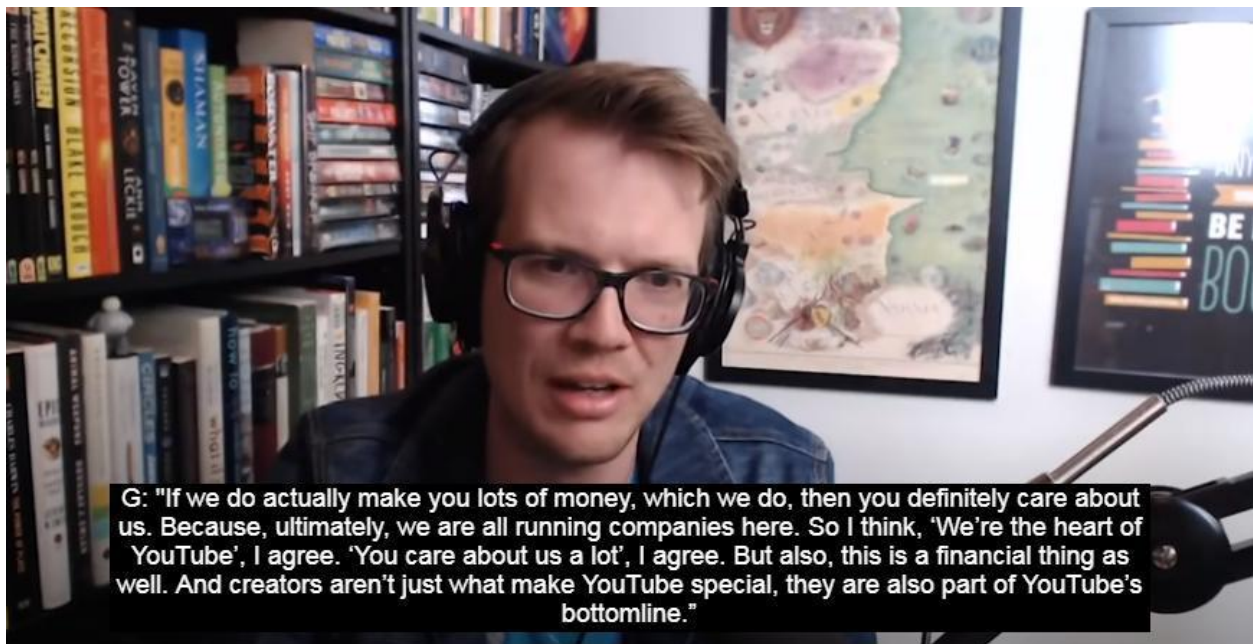
Green admits that there is tension between YouTube and YouTubers; meaning, as mentioned before, he is socially aware enough to notice and comfortable enough to state it in front of the CEO of YouTube. However, instead of framing it as a Proletariat position,

precarious, or an abuse of power narrative, he views it as an equal give-and-take, like it's just another inevitable element of the economic ecosystem. This is exactly how YouTube would want their creators to view the platform since it would enable them to continue their practices and make profit without protest.

Despite the criticisms many creators have for the platform, these two seem to be on the same page, at least during this interview. This could be due to the fact that Green plays a large role in YouTube. For one, LinkedIn writes that one of Green's jobs is being the "CEO of Complexly, the largest YouTube-native educational media company". Also, he and his brother, John Green, are the creators of the previously mentioned VidCon, a video tech convention created primarily for content creators on YouTube to meet their fans, participate in interviews, and network. Together, Wojcicki and Green are able to highlight some potential positives that the platform is implementing, such as moving towards monetizing content for creators that isn't directly tied to advertisers. Wojcicki lists a few options such as "memberships, super chat, super stickers, merchandise, ticketing" as well as subscription-based revenue in order to diversify types of income possible for creators. This exemplifies cooperation, or finding the middle ground between two potentially opposing parties and embracing compromise in that space, is a frequent code for the 2nd Interview. In contrast to the other interviews, Wojcicki is the most open to share solutions that YouTube is working towards for creators to have a more fruitful experience, rather than feeling a need to defend the company and hide their future prospects.

Green discusses multiple angles throughout the length of the interview, but still winds up showing a more company-focused approach more than an empathetic, communally-based one. For example, when Wojcicki expresses care for content creators, "YouTubers are the heart of YouTube." Green dissects how that statement is less emotional and more financially motivated.

He prefaces that he doesn't want to appear "heartless", but argues that YouTubers are important because they bring YouTube money, and with that understanding, it gives context as to *why* YouTube cares about them. He closes out the thought with, "Ultimately, we are all running companies here. So I think, 'We're the heart of YouTube', I agree. 'You care about us a lot', I agree. But also, this is a financial thing as well. And creators aren't just what make YouTube special, they are also part of YouTube's bottomline."



It could be argued that Green is trying to expose Wojcicki's words for what they really mean, revealing the true exploitative motives behind her dramaturgical mask, but the commenters don't seem to think that Green is really on the viewers side at all. Multiple commenters note the fact that Green seems to be in Wojcicki's "pocket" and they wish that someone else would have been chosen for the interview (the fact that Green was chosen, alone, could potentially indicate his bias). A commenter also noticed the phrasing of Wojcicki's line, "YouTubers are the heart of YouTube." and deemed it as sounding corporate, insinuating that it's said to keep a favorable image, and is at its core, disingenuous. This is what Green is pointing out, but the two are coming from different perspectives. This commentator is trying to express

disdain towards the establishment nature of YouTube while Green is accepting this hidden motive (that viewers find to be insidious) as a natural, even legitimate consequence. One commenter focused on the irony of the situation, likening it to a boss asking their worker, “Do you like working for the company?” Obviously, most employees would enthusiastically answer to keep their job.

While it’s debated how much YouTubers are authentic in any video due to the upkeep of their image, it’s even less likely that Green is to be as transparent as the audience is hoping. Based on the reactions, many people in the comments viewed Green as a non-threatening, passive, agreeable interviewer, and essentially, another cog in the machine attempting to protect their status. This observation conflicts with the way Green is portrayed on his TikTok account, where he shares scientific and socio-political educational posts to his younger, Gen Z audience; plus, as mentioned prior, he was the creator of the Internet Creators Guild which directly advocated for more transparency for creators. It seems as though the bulk of the negative backlash to Green is only present in this video, primarily due to his agreeability with Wojcicki.

Wojcicki says that YouTube is a place for small business but also believes that these small businesses need to have multiple avenues of business (such as merchandise, Patreon, etc.), not just solely content creation. Instead of creating those avenues on the platform itself, YouTube is promoting creators to struggle in a virtual capitalistic environment where they must find these avenues themselves. One commenter points out how Wojcicki views YouTube as having a lot of competitors from other platforms while Green asserts that there is no competitive company that can rival YouTube. In regards to the economic environment that their content creators exist in, YouTube (being represented by Wojcicki), promotes valuing the inherent nature of competition

within capitalism, not only within their confined economic ecosystem, but also in their own competitions. Wojcicki states:



“We’re always looking at the competitive landscape and that’s a good thing about competition, it inspires all of us in different ways ... I think that happens both ways. People look at what we’re doing and get ideas, and we look at what others are doing - and again, that’s the benefit of having so many different players.”

YouTube seems to take pride in their desire for competition, but more importantly, their success from beating other companies; however, the difference they haven’t acknowledged is that YouTube is an established brand (worth up to \$170 billion in 2020) with very few competitors, many of which don't offer the same kind of content YouTube does. TikTok hosts short form video, Facebook Watch isn’t as popular, and the most similar, Instagram’s IGTV only allows for 1 hour videos (to compare, YouTube allows for 11 hour videos). Similar to the bourgeoisie, YouTube is able to exploit resources from the working class (YouTubers as the Proletariat) in order to obtain more resources. Due to their substantial climb in power, they are

not only able to continuously market off of themselves, but make sure that nobody else can reach the same monopolistic³¹ peak.

This is far different from the situations many small content creators face on the platform; struggling to make a few thousand views, trying to get monetized, or can't even have their content watched because they are shadowbanned³², meaning their content has been blocked without their knowledge and cannot be seen on the Subscriptions page and doesn't show the majority of comments to viewers. Wojcicki goes to great lengths to explain the difficulty of balancing the two sides of advertisers and content creators, yet focuses more on rebuilding the relationship with advertisers (after the Adpocalypse), trying to sympathize with how their CEOs will be upset if their content shows up on inappropriate videos. She goes so far as to say, "I think the creator community sometimes doesn't understand some of the fragility with the advertisers and we've been working really, really hard to bring back all of our advertisers after brand safety and make sure they feel confident and keep spending.." Yet, there isn't the space for understanding the hardship of the content creators. One commenter asked why YouTube isn't doing the heavy lifting in finding more advertisers that are okay with a diverse range of content, or why they are not trying to have conversations with brands about how associating themselves with YouTubers, even those who are more sexually explicit or controversial, can be good for their brand. Instead, Wojcicki treats it as a stagnant situation, one where one group will always have options and the other has to deal with it, which is what has led to the gap of opportunities on the platform.

³¹ monopolistic: Relating to a person or business that has exclusive possession or control of the supply of or trade in a commodity or service.

³² shadow ban: The blocking of a user from a social media site or online forum without their knowledge, typically by making their posts and comments no longer visible to other users.

There is little power for these creators to leverage success for themselves, yet they must continue producing content. The aforementioned phenomena of precarity, or the state of being in an unstable or uncertain working environment that exploits one's labor (especially, creatives) by not properly compensating the labor or having appropriate protections for the laborer, accurately illustrates the position of many content creators. When describing what it's like to work under YouTube, Green says, "Our feeling about YouTube is almost physical, like it is a reliance, and it is almost like you are our government and when your policy changes it affects our business and it's a little bit like we pay you a tax." The reliance on YouTube is apparent, but the idea of comprehensive compensation per the amount of labor exerted onto a project is not an idea or discussion brought up in this interview. If this were the case, YouTubers would be able to determine less strenuous schedules, freely decide what type of content they would want to produce, and rely on a stable income. YouTube would no longer foster a culture of precarious workers.

In the same vein of advocating for creators, Green proposes the return of a similar concept to the YouTube Program and Grant, which allowed for many Hollywood businesses and a few smaller content creators to have funds for larger projects. It gave opportunities to many of the most well-known YouTube legends today to reach their height, such as Philip DeFranco, Rhett and Link, and the Fine Brothers. Green inquires why a similar program hasn't been implemented since, and suggests an example of a "YouTube Creator Stimulus" (since he likens YouTube to a government). Wojcicki tries to dismiss the idea by claiming that there were many failures in the program, to which Green pushes back:

I will tell you, Susan Wojcicki, that the successes were the creators and the failures were the Hollywood production companies! And there is learning that you can take from that, but it's not, 'Don't do it again'!

Though the two are laughing during this, Wojcicki clarifies how this is similar to their current YouTube Original program which allows well-known creators to use YouTube's resources to fund larger projects. She states, "The focus that we have is investing in creators who are already on our platform that are successful there. I don't think you would like it if we said, 'Oh, we have this big fund and we're gonna go out and we're gonna give it to people who aren't even a creator' when there are so many successful creators already on YouTube." Essentially, she's framing it as allocating resources to someone who is not producing content on YouTube, which is not what Green was suggesting. Green notices this, and argues that there's a "middle class"³³ of YouTubers who deserve these opportunities, rather than investing in YouTubers who already have a lot of success. He gives an example — allowing creators to "employ twenty people for the next twenty years, making something rather than employing two-hundred people for the next six months". This would grant creators, large or "middle-class", the means to create a long-term business via YouTube. By ensuring longevity and stability in a creative position, the individuals involved could work on projects that they genuinely care about and create more impactful content.

Wojcicki shares why YouTube isn't going this route by explaining that they are attempting to "reward" creators who make it big on the platform, because she sees it as "enhancing what we do". This, once again, is an example of how YouTube is not invested in the well-being and success of the creators who need assistance, but rather, would like to support the already established names to bring more viewership to their platform. Wojcicki, and by extension, YouTube, may feel as though they are able to successfully conceal their true business motives, by acting as though a "reward" to larger creators will make the platform better for

³³ Green isn't referring to a YouTuber's real life income making them "middle class", but rather, a socio-economic group on YouTube consisting of creators who haven't reached the wealth and fame of well-known YouTubers.

audiences. In actuality, it is obvious to myself (and many of the commenters) that YouTube is keeping their answers vague and agreeable in hopes that nobody notices their harmful practices without receiving backlash.

In this disagreement, the two are the most opposed; Green believes that YouTubers who have less opportunities should get a chance to build their business, while Wojcicki sees a promotion via YouTube as a “reward”. The reward is from becoming successful and supporting the platform. The CEO does not view assistance as a right, but a privilege.

In the comments, this discourse continued between two commenters, one who agrees with Green, arguing that smaller creators deserve a chance to expand their work, while the other spoke from YouTube’s side. This second commenter explained how the current motive for a program like this would be to get more subscriptions to YouTube’s paid service, YouTube Premium. By choosing the creators who are already well-known with millions of subscribers, it means that they will go on to create more high-quality content on the platform, such as YouTube Originals, and ultimately make more money as a company. Financially uplifting a smaller creator wouldn’t allow YouTube to market an established face, and they would be investing in projects that they are unsure will be successful. In my analysis, the second commenter’s argument makes logical sense from a capitalistic business perspective. Though, I will argue that normalizing this type of thinking is a slippery slope to other dehumanizing, inequitable practices inherently tied to capitalism (ie. helping the rich get richer, lack of financial aid for those struggling, a “suck it up, work harder” attitude, etc.).

Since this conversation happened during the early months of COVID-19, the two begin discussing why creators are seeing less views and less revenue, which led them to the topic of CPMs, or Cost Per Thousand. This is a creator’s total revenue divided by their number of views

(ie. \$2/1,000). As Explained by Green, CPMs were potentially down because even though there's been more views, movies and sports aren't a thing so there's less advertisers. The fact that Wojcicki was speaking with Green about CPMs at all indicates a comfortability between them that allows for transparency. Other interviewers maybe wouldn't have gotten more detailed information (and as we saw in the first and third interviews, they did not) which could again indicate that Green is on the "inside" of YouTube. In the first interview with Patrick, he couldn't even get an upfront reason why there is not a concrete list of what will be demonetized, and now Wojcicki is discussing with Green (and educating the audience) on what CPMs are and how they are currently affecting creators. One might argue that Green is already aware of CPMs (or that he should be, as a YouTuber); therefore, it is able to naturally come up in conversation. However, concealing this information from audiences — a.k.a YouTube's potential future content creators — is what creates this culture of uncertainty. By only discussing it with those at the top (the virtual bourgeoisie) they are the only ones who can use it for their personal success. Wojcicki goes as far as to ask Green what he would suggest for a subscription-based service that is more for creators rather than the platform's ecosystem at large. This strongly contrasts from how she interacted with Patrick, not at all inquiring what he would suggest for the problems he faces as a gaming creator. It goes to show how some of the feelings of neglect from the first interview (from Patrick, the commenters, and creators in general) could have been circumvented with more consistent, upfront, and interactive dialogues.

This laissez-faire attitude, or an ideology that allows for social and economic competition without interference from a governmental or ruling entity, is what has created the inequity and unrest within the creator community and is also reflected in the lengthier comments on this video (as opposed to the first and third interview). By only advancing those who are at the top and

letting the rest fend for themselves, it only allows for the successful to become more successful, and the disadvantaged to remain as such. A modern day Proletariat v.s. bourgeoisie in the internet landscape. Once again, this factor is unknown to the majority of audience members who are looking to turn YouTube into a job. The hierarchy is glamorized for future content creators who can insert themselves into the idea of becoming prosperous in wealth and fame through the platform if they just work “hard enough”. The reality is that many creators do, infact, work hard, but only few can become successful.

Sorry Queer Creators, Our Robots Don't Like You

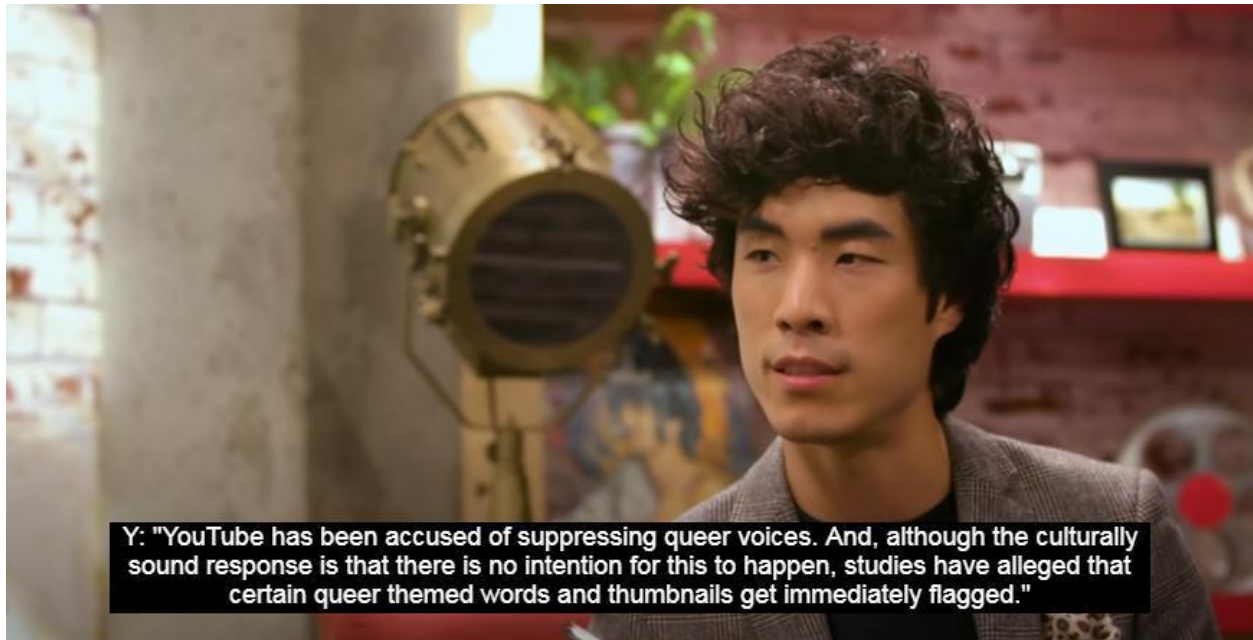
A large focus of Yang's interview questions is to bring attention to the multiple studies that show a trend of LGBTQ+ creators being suppressed by the algorithm and being demonetized more frequently than heterosexual and cisgender creators. Wojcicki denies that there could be any human bias at play in their machine learning fairness. She says, “The machines only know what we tell them.” When asked about the idea of potential human bias slipping through the system, Wojcicki denies it, “No, because those terms are not terms that we look at. There's no ability to have bias. You can't have bias if you don't know.” However, if the machine learning terms are determined by humans then there absolutely can be. Whether or not we want to admit it, social bias can slip into anything — and most of the time — *everything* we do. Wojcicki claiming, “You can't have bias you don't know” actually indicates how privileged she is. She doesn't have to consider LGBTQ+ bias because she does not belong to the community; it's a blind spot. Marginalized individuals understand that it is safe to assume that there *is* social bias impacting what content is flagged.



An article about machine learning bias by Mary K. Pratt defines artificial intelligence bias as, “a phenomenon that occurs when an algorithm produces results that are systemically prejudiced due to erroneous assumptions in the machine learning process.” They go on further to say that the individuals programming these machines are the ones, consciously or unconsciously, inputting the bias, not the machines themselves. This is specifically called a prejudice bias, but all of these types have been a known concern for decades (SearchEnterpriseAI; Pratt, 2020). To further this point, Aja Romano from Vox shared how a group of YouTubers reverse-engineered YouTube’s algorithm and revealed how YouTube is flagging LGBTQ+ terms at a disproportionate rate. They state, “A full third of titles tested specifically for queer content triggered the bot.” This includes words such as “gay” and “lesbian”, and when those terms were replaced with words such as “friend” or “happy”, it would later be found that the videos became monetized (Vox; Romano, 2019).

Wojcicki didn’t elaborate on any of these studies that Yang brought up about LGBTQ+ creators getting flagged more than non-LGBTQ+ creators and didn’t provide any potential explanations or commentary on this data. Even an acknowledgement of the pain from the

community would potentially begin the emotional reparations from the damage that has been caused. Since Wojcicki has been upfront with the fact that advertisers control monetization, YouTube is catering to certain anti-LGBTQ+ advertisers and not being upfront with that fact because, from my assessment, it would make them seem less socially liberal³⁴ and put them out of favor with their younger Gen Z and Millennial audiences.



Wojcicki claims how important the LGBTQ+ community is to YouTube, and while the purpose of this research is not to determine whether or not Wojcicki is a homophobe or transphobe on a personal level, there are some criticisms to be made. On top of YouTube attempting to protect their image of acceptance, it's likely that YouTube does genuinely value their LGBTQ+ creators, but not because they're LGBTQ+. I assert that it is because being queer has become more embraced as mainstream, and even chic, which will bring YouTube more revenue.

³⁴ liberal: A political and moral philosophy based on liberty, consent of the governed and equality before the law.

A few times throughout these interviews, Wojcicki's lines are coded for empathy, or the ability to deeply feel for the struggle or pain of someone else or a group. This is not a comment on her personal empathy, but rather, YouTube's attempt to dramaturgically preserve their image of acceptance. Wojcicki shares a personal anecdote from a GLAAD³⁵ event she attended where a creator expressed how YouTube has changed the media landscape for diverse, often overlooked communities such as the LGBTQ+ community (the assumption here is that the creator was potentially a queer person). Wojcicki continues,

I just wanna say because I think this gets misunderstood, that we really do care and we really do value that perspective and we're trying to make sure that we are a place where those stories can be told. And we'll continue to do everything we can to make sure that the LGBTQ+ community feels as welcome and safe as we can possibly make it on YouTube.

The empathy noted here is a tactic for preserving the public image. YouTube knows that their large LGBTQ+ creators have brought them a lot of traffic, and by appearing as though they are a proponent for the cause, it allows for more audiences to feel comfortable on the platform and one day create channels of their own. While this may all sound good on paper, it is worth noting once again that YouTube's activism stops where the profit ends. They would never step into the realm of cutting off business deals with anti-LGBTQ+ advertisers, which is what would allow these creators to truly flourish on the platform.

A commenter who is also a content creator shared their personal experience with posting their LGBTQ+ content and getting harassed by homophobic and transphobic commenters. These harassers don't have any consequences come their way (as far as the creator is aware of) despite being reported for "account closing offenses". The creator shares how they don't feel as though YouTube cares about the comfort of the LGBTQ+ community "besides giving us a few videos on

³⁵ GLAAD: A non-governmental media monitoring organization focused on disproving defamatory statements and actions against the LGBTQ community.

the front page for Pride month.” Essentially, YouTube is using their LGBTQ+ creators as a way to market themselves in a socially acceptable light, exploiting them for marketing purposes while not having any protections in place for these creators to make a stable income. Queer creators can’t be safe from harassment, or be heard, in general.

Two prevalent codes in this interview are cooperation and company focused.

Cooperation, in this case, means finding the middle ground between two potentially opposing parties and embracing compromise in that space. An example of this is Wojcicki mediating conflicts between advertisers and YouTubers to find a common solution. Company-focused refers to when one takes actions that benefit and support company needs over all other (or most other) variables. An example of this is when Wojcicki gives priority to advertisers choosing what videos to put their advertisements on rather than lobbying to get more YouTubers advertised and compensated. Of course, given Wojcicki’s position it’s fair to assume that diplomacy is expected of her in order to keep the peace between multiple entities. That being said, there is a large focus on compromising with advertisers, even if what the advertisers want greatly infringes against the creators. In the words of Wojcicki, “We [YouTube] want to provide solutions to advertisers that work for them.”

Wojcicki cites YouTube’s success in uplifting smaller creators with the quote, “The number of creators who are making either 5 or 6 figure incomes has grown 40% over the last year. And the number of creators who have a million subs or more has grown by 65%.” Though this is a significant factor in proving evidence towards YouTube assisting creators, it’s a massive lack of context to not mention how YouTube’s overall viewership increases by each year (4.6% according to Statista). So this is potentially not due to YouTube’s efforts, but just more people watching and subscribing. Also, there are no statistics given by Wojcicki on the identities of

these creators making 5 or 6 figure incomes. Given YouTube's lack of protections for their most marginalized, it is fair to guess that they are not the ones thriving on the platform.

Wojcicki acknowledges the backlash that YouTube receives by saying, "A lot of times we read the comments and people think that we have some kind of ulterior goal — which we don't!" These types of statements have been seen in every interview so far, and this one is no exception. However, each time Wojcicki makes this statement, there's no follow up. She's never clarifying why audiences might be perceiving YouTube negatively, or debunking accused abusive practices, or even sharing how they are addressing the problems creators face. A majority of the commenters observed how Wojcicki doesn't answer questions directly, one commenter even comparing CEOs to politicians. Some comments even mentioned how the video wasn't getting promoted on their feeds or suggested by the algorithm, which these commenters believe has to do with YouTube's censorship and their corporate agenda. One commenter said, "This video didn't show up in my feed at all, but Eugene mentioned it in the Keith Chair video so I went searching for it." while another said, "Eugene is an incredibly poised and confident interviewer, it's a shame that the person he was interviewing just hid behind talking points given by corporate." YouTube's lack of transparency with their audiences and creators is decreasing their own perceived authenticity and reliability.

Not only do the viewers not trust Wojcicki, but they view Yang, the content creator, as a separate entity that is reliable on a more human, less corporate level. Most-likely, this is due to his activist content and emotional relatability showcased on multiple *Try Guys* videos as well as his social media accounts. Since there seems to be trust for him within the fanbase, Yang makes a bold argument for YouTubers also playing a role in the establishment, themselves. He calls out early on in the interview, "The fact that we [YouTubers] are worried about demonetization means

that as creators we are part of that business, we are looking to gain some sort of income for working within the parameters of the platform.” It can also be said that since content creators are suffering at the hands of YouTube’s company-focused actions, that they are seen as the exploited class, or the Proletariat. Given that context, a creator’s need for income to survive is not the same as a multi-billion dollar company extorting labor from their creative workers to maintain power. It’s unclear if Yang, similar to Green, was attempting to cooperate with Wojcicki and give credence to YouTube’s practices to secure his good-standing with the company, or, if he truly views the pursuit of resources as the same between YouTubers and YouTube. Either way, there is still a potential consequence that this message harms conversations about creators getting compensated and why that need is so dire today.

By Yang trying to see both sides of this issue and outing YouTubers as part of the capitalistic business operations, he is taking on a centrist³⁶ perspective where he is equating the exploitation from big businesses to the survival techniques of the lower class. This had the potential to spark controversy in the comments, but based on the ones reviewed, Yang overall is received positively. I argue that this is partially due to his attempt to get answers for other content creators and viewers by uncovering the mystery behind YouTube’s hidden practices. This represents him as a “for the people” type of creator and individual. With social unrest coming to a head in 2020 and themes of accountability and social justice becoming more prominent in social media spaces, Yang’s narrative resonates extremely well with audiences, specifically because he is a queer icon and activist that uses his platform to address systemic³⁷ problems in

³⁶ centrism: A political outlook or position that involves acceptance and/or support of a balance of social equality and a degree of social hierarchy, while opposing political changes which would result in a significant shift of society strongly to either the left or the right. Many criticize centrism for its inaction against far right, fascist governments and attitudes.

³⁷ systemic: Patterns of behaviour, policies or practices that are part of the structures of an organization, and which create or perpetuate disadvantage for racialized persons.

YouTube's ecosystem. Meanwhile, Wojcicki is most-likely to be regarded as worse than ever before in this heightened social climate.

Conclusion

By now, we've been able to theorize some of the hardships that fall upon content creators on YouTube due to the power structures at work, such as demonetization, precarious working conditions, presumptive exploitation, a lack of transparency, and discrimination. Instead of YouTube treating YouTubers the same as regular employees that would legally have the right to financial and social protections, they are treated as freelance advertisements and voluntative producers without the leverage to negotiate contracts, receive benefits, take paid vacations, or be notified of why their profits are decreasing. Similar to the dramaturgical environment of YouTube where creators work as actors to an audience, the administration follows suit; protecting diplomacy during public conflicts over working towards solutions that can satisfy all players (advertisers, audiences, *and* content creators).

Overall, the findings of this research shed light onto a topic that is rarely talked about in a professional YouTube space — the struggle content creators face when endeavouring to stabilize their employment, accommodate advertisers, share their marginalized experiences, and ultimately make content that satisfies their creative enterprises. We can deduce from Wojcicki's statements that YouTube's priorities lie in increasing their capital and expanding their company off the labor of precarious workers. By analyzing both parties' perspectives in each interview, it paints a picture. There is miscommunication between all types of creators and YouTube, uncertainty of future income, and a capitalistic, free-market environment that isn't interested in changing to improve the experience for all.

Conclusions can only go so far in proving a positive or a negative; that being said, the purpose of conducting this research was to reveal any potential acts of harm occurring on the YouTube space. With so many content creators revealing their pain and hardship over the decade, it's no surprise that YouTube isn't adequately protecting their vulnerable populations. In conclusion, there is a case to be made for the neglectful, exploitative treatment of content creators on YouTube and that the system of operations needs to be uprooted and transformed to reflect the values of individuals the platform claims it stands for.

Moving forward, research needs to focus on those who are the most harmed from YouTube — the creators. Though there is value in getting the opinions of CEOs and the administration, there is only so much transparency that will be had when these individuals represent a multi-billion dollar company. Understanding the impact the digital legislation has on YouTubers can illuminate how severe the issues are. This includes getting the perspectives of larger YouTubers with millions of subscribers, but more importantly, smaller YouTubers who are not deemed marketable or advertiser-friendly and unjustly suffer the consequences in their professional life. Hopefully, with the awareness shared throughout this research, we as creators and consumers can use our voices, our talents, and our dollars to expose a system that does not serve us and determine where we put our energy in the future.

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