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The 3 P's: Pewdiepie, Popularity, & Popularity

Lea Medina

Written for COM 300: Media Research (Dr. Klive Oh)

Introduction

Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg—more affectionately referred to as Pewdiepie—is statistically the most successful YouTuber, with a net worth of over \$15 million and over 100 million subscribers. With a channel that has uploaded over 4,000 videos, it becomes natural to question how one person can gain such popularity and profit just by sitting in front of a camera. It seems that Pewdiepie's more controversial actions such as using offensive language have ultimately only added to his popularity; these moments of criticism show that he is a character of resilience in an industry of ever-changing trends. While gaming has been widely overlooked in the past, it became the “most popular and profitable form of entertainment” (D'Argenio, 2018). Content creators stand to gain financially from brand deals, sponsored videos, and other ways of promoting video and mobile games. By 2021, the gaming industry is set to make 180.1 billion dollars (Dobrilova, 2019). Not only can Pewdiepie be seen as a character of resilience but the gaming industry, through which Pewdiepie made a name for himself, can also be seen as a powerful force of resilience. By studying what factors make Pewdiepie's videos so popular and how he obtains money from that online success, it will be easier to understand how content creators will profit on YouTube in the future and how others can mimic such resilience. This research also helps to better understand the mind of a consumer and what they value in an online personality.

Many terms need to be conceptualized within this research question. A YouTube

Channel is an online profile created on the website YouTube where users can upload their original video content to the site. The factors of his channel that will be explored are his relationships with the viewers, his personality, relationship with his wife, and behavioral patterns.

Horton and Wohl's Parasocial Interaction Theory states that interacting with mediated figures, such as YouTube personalities, can cause viewers to feel like they have formed real relationships despite that relationship being one-sided. Parasocial Interaction Theory helps to answer the question of why Pewdiepie is so profitable. For starters, Pewdiepie has created an atmosphere in his online community in which subscribers believe they are interacting with him in a meaningful way. Subscribers can post on his subreddit (an online hub to talk about shared interests) and hope Pewdiepie displays their post in his newest video. Pewdiepie has been committed to posting once a day for over six years which ensures a constant presence in his subscribers' lives so as not to be forgotten. Finding ways to connect with and support Pewdiepie has never been so easy. From wearing his merchandise to buying his sponsored gamer energy drink, there seems to be no limit to how Pewdiepie can influence his large subscriber base.

The question is both relevant and significant because YouTube is continuing to grow and expand its user base. Within this modern context specifically, YouTube has a reliable audience who watch their favorite channels regularly as if tuning in to a network show. YouTube stars are making so much off

their online content that the pursuit of a YouTube career is becoming increasingly more common and desirable. In the United Kingdom and United States alone, being a YouTuber is about 3 times more likely to be chosen as a career amongst children than being an astronaut (Berger, 2019). Looking at the Parasocial Interaction Theory, it can be seen how modern consumers turn to YouTube to be entertained through the most mundane means. The shift in entertainment from professionally generated content (PGC) to user-generated content (UGC) is important to professional industries (entertainment, film, advertising, etc.) as this reveals consumer behavior. The increasing use of YouTube signifies an interest in varying forms of content.

In conclusion, this study will research the factors that make Pewdiepie successful on the YouTube platform by analyzing the relationship between his popularity and profitability. By studying these aspects of the most popular YouTube channel, the goal is to further understand what garners financial success on YouTube so future users of the platform and researchers can better predict what makes or breaks a new YouTube personality. This research seeks to find how social media personalities, specifically YouTube stars, can become resilient figures of influence over their viewers despite their shortcomings. By understanding this, our study will gain insight into how content creators, namely Youtubers, can create relationships with their audience and, through that, gain a profit.

Literature Review

YouTube is a social media platform that has transformed the world of new media. It affects how viewers find entertainment (i.e. “Vlogging, gaming, style tutorials”) (Craig & Cunningham, 2017). YouTube, itself, has had a transformation since its user-generated

centric creation to its now professionally-generated content selection. The content uploaded to YouTube in 60 days is the same amount of content that would be broadcast over a span of 60 years (Figueiredo, Benevenuto, & Almeida, 2011). The astonishing rate of content available to the online world is often overlooked because only some content creators and videos are deemed as popular. Online celebrities arise from the creation of YouTube as these created personalities begin to post their videos at a constant rate. As YouTubers gain more views, they increase in popularity. The most popular YouTuber, in terms of the number of views, is Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg otherwise known as Pewdiepie. Using the Parasocial Interaction Theory, Hegemonic Masculinity Theory, Inclusive Masculinities Theory, it becomes possible to understand why he can gain such a following as well as indicating what makes him profitable. Discovering why Pewdiepie’s videos are so popular is important as these are personalities that greatly influence large populations. It is important for many industries to better understand the relationship between content creator and viewer. Looking to Parasocial Interaction Theory, it is important to know what can make a subscriber so loyal to someone they have never met.

Social Media is something that is commonly used but it is difficult to define. To conceptualize such a medium, it is useful to view social media as a “proto-industry” made up of content creators who “engage in content innovation” to a global community (Craig & Cunningham, 2017). This is an ever-growing industry that allows for anyone to gain a following via the follow-button through platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc. The increase in the use of social media also brings an influx of social media influencers. These are “organizational advocates in the new medium of social media

for strategic communication” (Au, Pang, & Sng, 2019). In this case, social media is the platform by which Pewdiepie can communicate with his viewers.

Social media and its influencers create a world in which a select number of individuals can gain a position of power over their followers. Dr. Mingyi Hou, a communication researcher at Tilburg University, notes that there is a difference between traditional celebrities and a social media celebrity. This new version of celebrity found online can avoid jumping through many hoops to achieve a more temporary and limited level of fame. Hou writes that since social media influencers are native to online platforms, it is harder for them to break out to other levels of fame beyond the internet (Hou, 2018). Amongst the many platforms of social media, there is one channel in particular that can innovatively produce influencers: YouTube.

YouTube is a platform that generally allows anyone to upload videos online that anyone in the world can view. It is also the platform through which Pewdiepie has found internet fame and fortune. Dr. Jin Kim, of the College of Saint Rose, claims that YouTube used to be a site for mainly amateur creators who used the platform as a way to express themselves through user-generated content (UGC). However, it has now turned into a platform for professionally-generated content (PGC) which is content created by well-known large media corporations that is normally found on other channels. Kim describes how traditional media TV channels, such as ABC and NBC, found that using YouTube to broadcast their TV shows helped in ad revenue as well as the number of views (Kim, 2012). Though PGC creators have shown their large presence on YouTube, UGC is very much thriving on the platform. Many viewers consider UGC to be a more authentic experience than that which is professionally

created (Kim, 2012). A big part of viewing content on YouTube is being able to experience more of a realistic sense of humanity unlike the high production world of studio television. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, in their research, found that there seem to be three types of content genres that viewers tend to enjoy from amateur content creators: “vlogging, gameplay, and style tutorials” (2017). Pewdiepie is most known for his gameplay videos which show him playing video games, an interesting choice seeing as he is not known for being very good at playing these games. Parasocial Interaction Theory, as described by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl, is the theory that helps explain why people can form “real” relationships with distant mediating figures (Rihl & Wegener, 2019). Because Pewdiepie is not an exceptional gamer, his lack of skills come across as relatable and create a comfortable atmosphere that viewers respond well to. They can form a pseudo friendship with him.

Mingyi Hou looks to beauty and lifestyle YouTuber, Zoe Sugg. Zoella, her YouTube persona, often lets her audience know that she is not a “professional expert” as she gives her tutorials which creates a level of informality (2018). This informality and persona of the “girl next door” allows viewers to see her as a friend, rather than just a stranger online (Hou, 2018). Parasocial Interaction Theory says that these viewers will then have this sense of a real friendship with Zoella as well as loyalty that they will take to the store with them. If Zoella is to vocalize her opinion on any brand or product, her followers are likely to think the same way. In this same way, Pewdiepie has the same effect on his followers. Horton and Wohl, with their theory, say that “viewers’ reactions to television broadcasts resemble those of people engaged in face-to-face interactions” (Rihl & Wegener, 2019). The same can be said for

subscribers to YouTubers. In regards to Pewdiepie, there are quite a few factors that help build to the characterization of such a YouTube giant. Kristy Beers Fägersten, an associate professor at Södertörn University, Sweden, claims that viewers can look at Pewdiepie as a friend because he can disarm barriers of formality with his physical and verbal language (2017). The greatest contributor to this approachability is his excessive use of cursing. Fägersten cites cursing as an event that happens amongst friends in an informal setting (2017). Pewdiepie's use of explicit language (especially his use of English as a native Swedish speaker) allows his audience to see a friend in him. Pewdiepie especially gained popularity through his uploading of videos in the "Let's Play genre" in which he plays video games on-screen and provides a commentary (Fägersten, 2017). This act of playing popular video games online in front of an audience also strengthens the sense of friendship amongst viewers. Fägersten looks further as she dissects certain videos within Pewdiepie's Let's Play genre. In one video, she cites the use of 73 curse words, averaging 5.2 swear words per minute (Fägersten, 2017). It is these videos that launched him to his level of popularity and it appears that the cursing was a large factor in that outcome.

Masculinity is another factor to look at to explain Pewdiepie's popularity. The majority of gamers are males and Pewdiepie does well to strengthen this inequality in gender ratios. Raewynn Connell describes Hegemonic Masculinities Theory (HMT) as a "configuration of gender practice that ideologically legitimates...the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Maloney, Roberts, & Caruso, 2018). As of 2015, male gamer viewers made up about 80% of the gendered landscape. Pewdiepie's level of masculine talk within his Let's Play genre may strengthen the

masculinity that the majority of his viewers can relate to. It has been found that the Parasocial relationship between the mediating figure and the viewer strengthens the more similarities there seem to be between the two parties (Rihl & Wegener, 2019). Though Pewdiepie may not make such explicit misogynistic remarks as his gamer counterparts, he does play into masculine mannerisms. By repeatedly making sexual jokes that affirm masculinity and even going as far as making homophobic remarks, Pewdiepie can "legitimize" the position of men at a place of power while making homosexual men and women the point of laughter. He can reconcile this with his viewers by bringing in his girlfriend and fellow gamer, Marzia Bisognin, to his videos (Maloney, Roberts, & Caruso, 2018). By having a female present, Pewdiepie sends a message that he is familiar and supportive of females. His eminent presence can dwarf her smaller, feminine figure when he makes hypersexual jokes as they engage in a Let's Play game (Maloney, Roberts, & Caruso, 2018). This can often be seen as him only furthering his legitimization of the dominant man while others see the importance of having a female present to offer a more inclusive insight within Pewdiepie videos. Since Maloney et al.'s research was conducted in 2018, Felix Kjellberg and Marzia Bisognin have gotten married so it is interesting to see if that new relationship status will affect how viewers see him, his commitment to YouTube, his behavior, etc. Regardless, there is also another theory that must be discussed: Inclusive Masculinities Theory (IMT). This theory says that "boys and young men [of Western Culture]" are beginning to care less about whether they are seen as homosexual or not. This focuses on the more inclusive and affectionate behavioral patterns displayed by men. While Pewdiepie may display behaviors that legitimize masculinity, he may also use

this difference between men and women to more effectively appear inclusive. Maloney, Roberts, & Caruso note that this inclusive behavior may be seen as “a form of ironic heterosexual recuperation”. These researchers see Pewdiepie’s behavior as a way to more subtly shift from a way of explicit “marginalization” but rather to a more inclusive route (2018).

Understanding who Pewdiepie is, as a YouTuber, helps to explain why his viewers relate to him, but it’s also important to understand why YouTube videos, in general, become popular. YouTube videos’ popularity is significant because it affects industries from “technological, economic, and social perspectives” (Figueiredo, Benevenuto, & Almeida, 2011). Content is uploaded to YouTube at quite an astonishing rate, so how does any video have a chance at becoming a “hit”? Researchers from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais ultimately found that YouTube’s internal and search mechanisms contribute highly to how videos are found (Figueiredo, Benevenuto, & Almeida, 2011). Factors such as “related videos” contribute highly to how videos can gain the most views. Search referrers are the largest factor in why videos gain views (Figueiredo, Benevenuto, & Almeida, 2011). The internal algorithms of YouTube are the reason why videos can become popular. The main goal for YouTube is to get users to watch more videos for a longer amount of time thus increasing the number of advertisements watched (Cooper, 2019). The YouTube internal algorithm looks at many different aspects of a YouTuber’s videos such as retention rate, consistency of uploads, Key Performance Indicators (likes, dislikes, shares), how new a video is, etc (Cooper, 2019). This plethora of information can hurt or hinder how much a YouTuber’s video is recommended to viewers. This tracking of popularity helps signify which YouTuber can become profitable. This can be

bad and good for Pewdiepie. Seeing as he is the top YouTuber, it is more likely that his videos become recommendations for viewers at a more constant rate. However, it also means that there is an internal algorithm that may choose to work against him for reasons such as his swearing that makes him less brand friendly. With the “Googlization” of YouTube, this large media conglomerate seeks to “extract value” in an “effort to exploit digital audience labor” (Nixon, 2016). This means that Google can generate revenue from YouTube through the use of advertising. YouTubers may receive a portion of this revenue if there are no copyright infringements (Nixon, 2016). Those YouTubers with a large number of views are seen as popular which generates attention for profitability. If an industry sees popularity within a YouTuber, they may take a deep interest in monetizing their videos (Kim, 2012). The Googlization of YouTube allows for banners placed in videos as well as playing commercials throughout. The ad revenue is then split between YouTube and the copyright owner (Nixon, 2016). YouTubers can be paid when viewers do things like click on banner ads or watch their ads for longer than 30 seconds without skipping (“How do YouTubers Get Paid?”). It would be beneficial to question Pewdiepie’s viewers if they pay attention to these advertisements to further understand the profitability aspect. Understanding the concept of popularity leading to profitability helps apply this concept to Pewdiepie.

With Pewdiepie, several factors lead to gaining more publicity. Controversy is a big one when it comes to the number one YouTuber in the world. His most notable event happened in 2017 when he paid “two people in India to hold up a sign that read “death to all Jews.” (Randell, 2019). Another figure dressed as Jesus and was told to defend Hitler’s actions (Perez, 2017). In response to

that video, many endorsers dropped deals with the YouTuber including Disney. The second season of his YouTube Red show, “Scare Pewdiepie”, was cancelled as a result to the controversy as well (Perez, 2017). Google even removed advertising from the video. It seemed like Pewdiepie could not recover from it. He was slowly distancing himself from that controversy when he made another mistake later that year by using the n-word in a live stream. It all seemed to be pointing downward for Pewdiepie but he was able to hold on to his ranking. Though controversy temporarily lowered his subscriber count, it ultimately helped in viewership as his name was constantly spread across social media platforms. Pewdiepie spent the next couple of years distancing himself from his series of controversial actions. His efforts include making an apology video where he tells his audience that he “disappointed in himself” and “there are no excuses [for his behavior]” (Hern, 2017). These apology videos allow for the viewer to decide whether they forgive the offender and in turn can create a stronger Parasocial relationship when fans decide to defend the YouTuber’s actions. In 2019, Felix Kjellberg revealed that he and his girlfriend, Marzia Bisognin, had gotten married which led to more positive publicity which is an example of how harmless news can also create more popularity (Randell). Subscribers who have followed Pewdiepie for many years can feel a strong connection to a couple that they have seen grown together. Ultimately, Pewdiepie’s relatability, controversy, masculinity, and humor all add to his popularity. His popularity creates more views which indicates more sales and thus a higher level of profitability. As of 2019, Pewdiepie’s channel has averaged more than 8 million views every day and, in one month, he can make up to 1 million dollars (Social Blade, 2019). By viewing his statistics on his YouTube summary, it becomes clear that the higher

Pewdiepie’s views increase, the more subscribers he attains. The more videos he uploads, the more money he is making (Social Blade, 2019).

Popularity is a defining term used when a creator has a high number of views and therefore the greatest number of subscribers. The most popular YouTuber to date is Pewdiepie. HMT helps to explain how Pewdiepie has sustained such relevance and popularity within the male-dominated gamer industry. Inclusive Masculinities Theory (IMT) explains how he can also appeal to broader demographics of YouTube users. This all leads to Pewdiepie being able to create a strong Parasocial Relationship as explained by the Parasocial Interaction Theory. It becomes easier to create a full context of who Pewdiepie is as an influencer as well as why he has been able to gain such popularity. Felix Kjellberg has been able to create this online persona of Pewdiepie to become a mediating figure with his subscribers. Pewdiepie’s use of curse words, display of his romantic relationship, and consistent posting allow his viewers to create a Parasocial relationship. On the other hand, through means of his more controversial affairs—such as exclaiming derogatory terms—Pewdiepie has gained infamy which ultimately leads to more views and thus more popularity. Though there has not been much research in terms of the relationship between popularity and profitability, it becomes easy to see a correlation to how Pewdiepie’s high subscriber count and viewership leads to big brand deals and high advertising revenue.

Research Question

What are the factors that lead to Pewdiepie’s popularity? What is the relationship between his popularity and profitability?

Factors that lead to popularity refer to certain characteristics of Pewdiepie that

makes him more likable. It's helpful to know if his sense of humor, Swedish background, his laugh, or any other features make Pewdiepie a popular YouTuber. Is he popular because he is likable or rather because he is controversial? The factors that lead to popularity will be the independent variable. This list of factors is the genetic makeup of popularity that will ultimately lead to profitability: the dependent variable. Profitability refers to the amount of money that one person can make based on their work. In this case, profitability is a term that directly links to Pewdiepie's revenue stream. Is Pewdiepie the highest-paid YouTuber? Is he able to make money due to his factors of popularity? Because Pewdiepie is a part of a rare breed of YouTubers that uploads every day, I suspect his consistency of video uploads will be a large factor of his popularity. I also expect to find that the more popular Pewdiepie is, the higher his profitability will be due to more viewers interacting with his monetized videos and ads.

Method

Research Design

To investigate the factors that contribute to Pewdiepie's popularity and profitability, an online survey was conducted through Qualtrics.com. The survey method allows for wide online distribution to specifically Pewdiepie viewers. Other research designs requiring in-person testing are impractical for this study, as Pewdiepie viewers are a demographic defined only by their online activity and no geographical or physical traits. Locating and testing Pewdiepie fans online is the only feasible method that allows for a meaningful sample size. Surveys also allow for significant data to be quickly compiled and compared.

Survey questions allow for the testing of what key factors relate to Pewdiepie's popularity and profitability. Humor, controversy,

masculinity, cursing, skill at video games, consistency of uploads, and Parasocial Interaction theory were identified as potential factors of popularity to be tested through questioning. Purchasing or desiring merchandise, paying attention to advertisements, purchasing or desiring endorsed products, and sharing Pewdiepie content with others were identified as potential factors of profitability to be tested in the survey. The factors identified as contributing to profitability will impact Pewdiepie's popularity as well due to their positive correlation.

Sampling and Procedure

The survey was distributed across YouTube comments, Instagram, and Reddit targeting Pewdiepie subscribers or heavy viewers (at least once a week). Pewdiepie's channel was created in 2010; his popularity and social relevance has grown substantially over the last decade. Because he has been considered the most subscribed to individual YouTuber--or at least competing for that top rank--for so long, traces of his followers' activity are visible across the web. Thus, we sought to collect data from this population of Pewdiepie's followers. It did not make sense for us to question consumers who don't know about Pewdiepie or perhaps don't care about him, because that doesn't help to signify what factors make Pewdiepie appealing or popular. For these purposes, the logical solution is to take an expert sample. Experts, in this case, are subscribers or viewers who watch Pewdiepie at least once a week. By posting in the YouTube comment section, we aimed to target experts watching new or old videos of Pewdiepie's. Reddit is a platform created solely for the purpose of allowing opinionated users to share their opinions. Because of this, it is easy to find those passionate experts of Pewdiepie by finding subreddits that speak specifically about him. Finally, it is even more

apparent which Instagram users are Pewdiepie experts; if one is willing to run their own Pewdiepie-related fan account with the sole purpose of posting about his videos and life, then they are experts on the topic of Pewdiepie.

To entice Pewdiepie viewers to take the survey, comedic comments were left that sought to match the humor of Kjellberg. One such comment was: “Do NOT Take This Survey! 99% of People can’t complete this Pewdiepie survey for a university study.” To avoid being marked as spam, multiple comments were constructed to leave on differing YouTube videos including; “University Students NEED Responses to This Pewdiepie Survey! Please, PLEASE, click the link!”; “Are you a Pewdiepie Fan? Do you call yourself a gamer? Prove it. Take this survey.” and; “Good morning, gamers. This Pewdiepie survey is for a university study. Please, for the love of God, click the link.” The survey was posted on eleven of Pewdiepie’s recent videos from October and November 2019.

When messaging fan accounts on Instagram, messages were tailored to be friendly and personable: “Hello! I’m doing a research project on Pewdiepie and would be so grateful if you completed this survey for me! And maybe even let your followers know about it. Thanks!” The message was sent to more than 54 fan accounts, one of which posted the survey link on her story. Creating personable messages was done to convince participants that the study was legitimate and nonthreatening.

Lastly, the survey was attempted to be distributed on Reddit. The most popular subreddit for Pewdiepie, r/PewdiepieSubmissions, does not allow links to be included in posts which made accessing their subreddit user base impossible. Another subreddit for Pewdiepie, r/Pewdiepie, marked the post as spam due to the link being included which resulted in Reddit being

abandoned as a source of participants for the study.

In total, 60 survey responses were recorded. Two participants did not complete every question, resulting in some total scores being out of 59 or 58 participants. Data was stored on Qualtrics.com and analyzed through Microsoft Excel. Researchers analyzed the data for trends, themes, means, differences, frequencies, and anomalies. No data was discarded, but profanity was censored. Questions started from a broad lens asking how often participants consumed YouTube content. The survey then asked about the participants’ experience and interest in Pewdiepie’s specific channel with the intent to find the factors that lead to his popularity. It then ended with questions that questioned the expert population about their interactions with advertisements and merchandise with the intent of finding what leads to profitability.

Instrument

Initial questions were designed to validate the credentials of participants as Pewdiepie subscribers or consistent viewers (at least once a week). Likert scale questions were crafted to investigate the factors that contribute to Pewdiepie’s popularity. The statements “I like when Pewdiepie curses” and “Pewdiepie has many masculine traits” were included to directly verify if Fägersten and Maloney et. al respectively were correct in their hypotheses that these elements contribute to Pewdiepie’s large following. Other statements such as “I watch Pewdiepie because he is funny”; “I watch Pewdiepie because he is good at video games”; and “I like that Pewdiepie uploads every day” were made to gauge whether humor, skill at video games, and consistency of uploads relates to why participants watch and subscribe to Pewdiepie (popularity). Several questions were distributed specifically to investigate the

profitability of Pewdiepie. Participants were asked if they have bought Pewdiepie merchandise or a product he endorses. They were also asked if they pay attention to YouTube ads on Pewdiepie videos. Lastly, questions were posed that aimed to understand if the YouTube community surrounding Pewdiepie encourages his popularity through online discussion. Participants answered if they would share a Pewdiepie video with a friend, if they create internet posts concerning Pewdiepie, and if they have their own YouTube channels with a following.

Findings & Analysis

As of December 1, 2019, the survey that was distributed to Pewdiepie experts had a total of 50 participants. The survey was re-released for a week and was closed again on March 1, 2020. Of the total 60 participants, 2 of the participants did not fully complete the entire survey which will affect the data. The survey data shows that 91.53% ($M = 1.12$, $SD = .42$) of the participants watch YouTube every day with another 8.47% watching anywhere from one to four times a week. 54 of the 60 participants (90%) were subscribed to Pewdiepie's channel. 49.15% claim to watch Pewdiepie every day while 25.42% watch him 2-4 times a week. The study supports the notion that followers like Pewdiepie's humor and his consistency, while simultaneously indicating that the survey successfully captured an expert sample group, of whom watch Pewdiepie frequently. 67.24% strongly like that he uploads every day. 61.02% of participants strongly agree with the statement, "I watch Pewdiepie because he is funny." Moreover, 62.71% at least somewhat agreed with the statement that they feel like they personally know Pewdiepie. This statement helps to support the idea that Parasocial Interaction Theory contributes greatly to Pewdiepie's popularity. The survey

data for these three factors is the most significant. Additionally, 59.32% ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 1.49$) of participants at least somewhat agreed with the fact that they felt that Pewdiepie exhibited masculine traits, which Connell's Inclusive Masculinities Theory could attribute to his popularity, but only 13.56% strongly agreed with that statement.

Another interesting statistic points to the positive effect of Marzia, Pewdiepie's wife, and her involvement with the videos. 56.9% of participants at least somewhat agreed that they are more likely to watch a Pewdiepie video if Marzia is in it. Many of the Instagram accounts that were direct messaged were fan accounts for both Pewdiepie and Marzia, as these two often are seen as a package deal. Based on the responses, many of Marzia's fan accounts are young females and that demographic was more willing to participate in the survey. This helps to explain the positive response to Marzia. However, Pewdiepie's relationship displayed normally on screen adds to the Parasocial Interaction Theory. By normalizing the appearances of his girlfriend-turned-wife, Pewdiepie can create a comfortable and personal atmosphere on his channel. It most likely also allows him to reach out to a larger fanbase such as the younger female demographic that was willing to participate in this survey.

In addition to highlighting contributing factors, the survey also disproved factors that have not seemed to play any significant role in Pewdiepie's popularity. Only 32.2% of participants at least somewhat thought Pewdiepie is controversial signaling that it is not a contributor to his popularity. Other factors mentioned in the survey that did not hold significant relevance to this study include the fact that 56.9% of participants at least somewhat like when Pewdiepie curses suggesting that this may be a contributor to his popularity and that Kristy Fägersten's research is valid. Our study at the

very least confirms that cursing is not necessarily a hindrance to a YouTube channel's popularity with 31.03% not having an opinion on swearing and only 12.07% at least somewhat disliking it. 39.66% said that they somewhat agree that they watch Pewdiepie because he is good at video games but the rest of the results were distributed somewhat evenly ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These statistics show important components that explain why Pewdiepie is popular. This data shows that those who have subscribed to Pewdiepie and watch him regularly do so primarily because they find him to be funny, they can enjoy new content every day and they feel as though they know Pewdiepie personally. As shown in Table 1 and 2 are Likert scale responses which allowed survey participants to express their reasoning for being invested in Pewdiepie.

Seventy percent of participants interact with other Pewdiepie subscribers on social media platforms. 62.71% make social media posts about Pewdiepie on sites other than YouTube. 61.02% would share a Pewdiepie video on social media. These statistics show how Pewdiepie's popularity leads to the creation of a community amongst his subscribers. A YouTube personality that people are willing to talk about shows popularity but it also shows a potential for profitability. Though it is more difficult to make conclusions about the profitability aspect of the reading questions, there are key points to highlight. Although 71.19% of participants have never purchased Pewdiepie merchandise, 83.05% say that they would be willing to purchase merchandise in the future. Based on this finding, a new question must be asked; what is the bridge between a potential buyer and an actual customer when it comes to Pewdiepie merchandise? It is more difficult to create a merchandise customer, but viewers can contribute to profitability in other ways. YouTubers that monetize their videos can be

paid when viewers do things like watch full ads or for longer than 30 seconds (if it is a longer ad). According to the participants, 74.58% ($M = 2.12$, $SD = .61$) at least sometimes pay attention to ads on Pewdiepie's videos. By paying attention and fully watching Pewdiepie's ads, these participants can greatly be contributing to the profitability of his videos.

Discussion & Conclusion

Maloney, Roberts, & Caruso found that Pewdiepie was popular because of Hegemonic Masculinities Theory in tandem with Inclusive Masculinities Theory (2018). About 59.32% of participants at least somewhat agreed that Pewdiepie has many masculine traits while another 27.12% could neither agree nor disagree. A threat to reliability is the nature of the question. Not many people will likely be willing to answer thoughtfully to questions like, "Does Pewdiepie have masculine traits?" or "is Pewdiepie controversial?". Nevertheless, it is imperative to note the 59% of participants who do see Pewdiepie's contributions to Hegemonic Masculinities Theory (HMT). As of 2015, males dominated the platform of gaming viewer demographics with a makeup of 80% (Maloney, Roberts, & Caruso, 2018). Pewdiepie is a gamer who curses constantly and will make sexually explicit jokes; he encompasses the very characteristics that encourage a hypermasculine setting. However, looking at the Inclusive Masculinities Theory, it can be seen that Pewdiepie perhaps uses these masculine traits to create a more inclusive setting. The presence of his wife, Marzia, ensures a more playful and inclusive atmosphere. As shown from the survey, 56.9% of participants at least somewhat agreed that they are more likely to watch a video if Marzia is in the video. On May 25, 2019, Pewdiepie posted a video titled, "I brought back Marzia for this" referring to the fact that

within the past few months Marzia has been noticeably absent from his videos. The video accumulated more than 6 million views which is astonishing considering the purely advertising content. Essentially, the video is a nearly 8-minute video sponsored by the app, Archer, to promote their mobile game. One of the top comments read, “8 minutes ad that people actually watch. That’s how Marzia works”. The inclusivity and presence of a female figure allow for Pewdiepie to relate to a broader audience while also making him seem more appealing as a man in a multicultural, happy relationship. Fägersten’s work cited Pewdiepie’s excessive use of curse words as one of the greatest reasons why he is popular which coincides with 56.9% of participants that could at least somewhat agree to liking when Pewdiepie uses curse words (2017). Once again, both masculinity and cursing could be hard topics to ask participants to be honest about which could affect the reliability of the question. However, since there is a majority that like Pewdiepie’s use of curse words, it is important to consider this. Fägersten believes that the excessive use of curse words helps to create a very comfortable setting amongst Pewdiepie and his viewers that is often only felt amongst friends (2017). The effective use of cursing adds to the Parasocial Interaction Theory that allows Pewdiepie to create such a strong relationship with his viewers.

The findings for Pewdiepie’s controversiality were notable. Only 32.2% even somewhat agreed that Pewdiepie is controversial. Not one person strongly agreed with this notion which is surprising but also understandable. Not many people want to admit that they willingly support someone who has made anti-semitic jokes or blurts out racist slurs. Even credible sources such as the New York Times have written about Pewdiepie’s controversial behavior stating that he is “embraced by the far right” while

listing his ill-mannered past such as: using derogatory terms to refer to female gamer, Natalia Mogollon, and uttering the “n-word” online (Chokshi, 2019). Nevertheless, with such a small percentage of Pewdiepie experts only somewhat agreeing with the notion that Pewdiepie is controversial suggests that controversiality does not affect the popularity of a YouTuber. The validity of this finding is questionable as this could also point to the possibility that users are willing to overlook and justify Pewdiepie’s offensive behavior because he is likable due to other personality aspects. This research shows that while Pewdiepie’s controversial behavior may not add to his popularity, it also does not hurt it.

Recruitment proved to be difficult as we failed to ask the participants through which platform they found the link. This could have been beneficial in clarifying which platform was the most effective in terms of recruitment. However, targeting Instagram accounts that consistently interact with their followers seems to be a very effective means of sampling and was further pursued for the final data collection. Ultimately the main components—as found from this survey—which create Pewdiepie’s popularity (i.e. his humor, consistent posting, Parasocial relationships) coincide with our initial expectations. With these results, we are further able to create a clearer relationship between Popularity and Profitability. One conclusive point that was found through the sampling process is that a viewer does not guarantee a customer. Though the purchasing of merchandise is not the only way in which to measure profitability, it is a simple way of observing clear patterns. It certainly takes more effort to create a customer of Pewdiepie merchandise rather than just a fan, as it does for consumers of any product. It can be concluded that there are several missing factors to take into consideration such as financial background, fashion sense, frugality,

etc. However, Pewdiepie's profitability can be measured through other means such as the level by which viewers pay attention to the ads in his videos. 61% of participants pay attention to Pewdiepie's ads sometimes while 13.56% answered that they always pay attention. Apply these percentages to Pewdiepie's 102 million subscribers and that creates a sizable ad revenue. It can be seen that Pewdiepie's high levels of popularity as seen in his subscriber count translate to a higher level of profitability. The more subscribers and viewers that Pewdiepie has, the more people who are viewing his monetized ads, sponsorships, buying merchandise, and more. It is interesting to note that only about 27% of participants had actually bought merchandise. This makes sense when 27% of 100 million subscribers equates to 27 million consumers buying sweatshirts, t-shirts, etc. However, this number may also pertain to any number of smaller YouTubers. This consumer behavior suggests that 27% of a given population are willing to make a monetary investment in a parasocial relationship. While this is not the only way in which YouTubers make a sizable profit, this research shows that only a small percentage of viewers need to actively invest in a YouTuber's merchandise. Rather, a viewer contributes greatly to a YouTuber's profit every time they watch a 30-second ad without skipping, click on a banner ad, watch a sponsored video, use a promo code, and more. As of March 2019, a sponsored video on Pewdiepie's channel could cost up to \$450,000 (Chokshi, 2019). YouTubers, like Pewdiepie, are able to gain millions of dollars based more on a viewers' on-platform engagement rather than their active consumer behavior.

Topics that can be explored in the future include why many participants say they have not bought Pewdiepie merchandise (71.19%) but 83% of participants said that they would be willing. What is the factor that leads

to Pewdiepie fans who say they would be open to buying merchandise and those who actually do make the purchase? Due to timing constraints, it was not possible to develop analyses and implement specific theories unto various genres of Pewdiepie's videos. However, one can further apply theories such as HMT, IMT, and Parasocial Interactions theory to different types of Pewdiepie videos (i.e. Let's Play, Reaction videos, Reddit Review).

This research is important because Pewdiepie is one of the most influential online figures who has fans that span across multiple generations. Though Pewdiepie may not always be the #1 YouTuber (in terms of subscribers), the patterns of what makes a social media influencer popular and profitable may be applied to other online personalities. It is important not only to the field of communications but also to industries like advertising and marketing who may fail to understand why consumers have the potential to be loyal to a brand. Furthermore, this research shows the varying aspects of why controversial influencers can remain relevant and highly popular despite offensive or bad behavior: whether it be due to relatability or by showing a clear portrayal of regret via apology videos. Pewdiepie's constant posting about relevant and modern content allows him to strengthen this bond between him and his subscriber base. He is able to sustain sentiment and support because he effectively humanizes himself through his lack of gamer expertise, foul language, wife, and more. Beyond that, Pewdiepie is resiliently popular because he becomes a familiar figure to his viewers who are more willing to forgive his shortcomings. After all, friends are more willing to understand and forgive the insolent behavior of their own friends.

This research indicates that there are certain factors that YouTubers need in order to create a parasocial relationship with their

viewers in order to increase popularity. An important factor to note for marketers is that a popular influencer needs passive engagement (watching ads, etc.) while only needing to sell merchandise to about 27% of their fanbase in order to produce a sizable profit. Finally, all of these factors indicate

how a popular YouTuber/influencer can become a character of resilience in the ever-changing landscape of social media. The gaming industry has become one of the most profitable industries in the past decade and Pewdiepie is a representation of that growth and resilience.

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Appendix

Survey Results (CSV): For those interested in full survey data, they can be accessed here: <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/19-UD2416ehFXv37so7CdZrYSipX7xC6T/edit#gid=1505518817>