The YouTubers Phenomenon: What makes YouTube stars so popular for young people?

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## Sample

Two YouTubers – the Portuguese Wuant and the Swede PewDiePie - largely mentioned by Portuguese children in the Transmedia literacy study.
The article analyses their channels and the five most viewed videos published in May 2017.

# Abstract

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

# Outcome

The YouTubers analysed are complex, hybrid characters: on the one hand they still bear the markers of amateur creators; on the other hand, their productions are technically advanced and not within just anybody’s grasp. For both of them, being a YouTuber is their job. Wuant and PewDiePie’s videos have many similarities both in format and content: their humorous monologues are a central feature, the way they are framed in the image is very much the same, the subject matter is clearly similar. Additionally, appreciation of the content hinges on a certain familiarity: one needs to know what they do practically every day and to share their (internet) culture to fully understand the private jokes. For both YouTubers the internet is not merely a platform to show their videos. Dialogue with their followers is established via the internet. What goes on outside the web, setting local, national or global agendas, has no place in their commentaries.

As self-centred as they are, it is rare for either to create with the purpose of engaging with society, making some kind of positive contribution, supporting a cause or being committed to an ideal. The only appeals are for an increase in the number of likes, comments on their videos and subscribers. The type of humour that characterises them resorts to vulgarity and the easy joke, featuring poor vocabulary and in frequent disregard for the rules of politeness, as well as words and gestures of a sexual nature.

The slang used would be socially unacceptable in any other medium. This type of language is a very distinguishing feature of these YouTubers and it might be a strategy to build a more authentic and spontaneous character who is playing on the edge, provoking easy laughter. This is similar to the language teens use in their private and interpersonal contexts, which does not make the YouTubers’ massive use of it unproblematic.

Media education and adults’ mediation are key to the development of critical assessment tools to empower teenagers to interpret the YouTubers’ contents beyond the easy laughs they provoke. The type of humour used and the self-centred nature of the content seem to be key indicators to understand what the teenagers said were the reasons why they enjoyed watching the videos: the YouTubers’ personality and the fact that they were funny. Rather than actually learning something with these YouTubers, the youngsters seem to be seeking someone who shares their language and can provoke easy laughter, entertaining them in an (apparently) unscripted way, which at the same time challenges social correctness.

The YouTubers, through their constructed discourses and attitudes, and their intentional use of a lot of swear words, create a very close and intimate environment that is much appreciated. Teenagers are treated as peers and develop a parasocial interaction with very prominent purposes: entertainment and laughter. YouTubers are also a peer group phenomenon, that is, it is ‘cool’ to follow the personas that everyone is commenting on at the moment, understand and share the same jokes and have a common topic of casual conversation.

The YouTubers analysed must be given credit, though, for being able to engage millions of fans and for their remarkable body language. Regarding the opportunity to learn or extend forms of civic engagement, “this study did not reveal much activity at these levels, but as Lange (2014, p. 99) points out, ‘it is important to explore how each generation displays its own ‘civic style’ and explore how these mediated spaces are, or not, promoting civic engagement and participation, shedding light on important issues from which adolescents are usually sidelined or excluded. For this discussion, it would be important to listen to YouTubers themselves” (Pereira, S.; Moura, P.; Fillol, J., 2018: 120). Nevertheless, neither the YouTubers nor their agents responded to the authors’ requests for interviews.