“Congratulations, T-Series!”: How PewDiePie Exploits Racism to Advocate for the American Dream in the Online Entertainment Industry

Jerry S. Zhang
The University of British Columbia

In 2018, the then second-largest YouTube channel T-Series, operated by an Indian music record company, was rapidly gaining subscribers, much faster, in fact, than the number one channel (Huddleston, 2018). This then top YouTube channel, PewDiePie, was owned by Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg, a Swedish content creator who had been the proud keeper of this spot since August 2013. Upon knowing the possibility of being overtaken, Kjellberg initially released a “diss track” to mock the company with satirical humour and certain references to his previous online activities (PewDiePie, 2018a). The song could be seen as content created to profit from and to boost the trend, showing no apparent intention of keeping and defending his spot. Kjellberg also stated, in a later video, that he “[didn’t] really care about T-Series” (PewDiePie, 2018b, 17:15), which further indicated his lack of interest in T-Series surpassing him in subscriber count.

Kjellberg’s followers, however, did not want to see their favourite creator defeated by a company they, perhaps, barely had any knowledge of and were quick to start a campaign defending him. Some of the most influential creators on YouTube were also in support of this campaign, starting with Jimmy Donaldson (aka MrBeast), who, in a video, purchased every billboard in his city and appeared on local TVs and radio stations to promote Kjellberg’s channel (Glaze, 2018). Donaldson, furthermore, rallied all the viewers of the same video with a short, passionate speech, where he said: “We must unite under one common goal. We must subscribe to PewDiePie and put an end to T-Series” (MrBeast, 2018, 14:45). Soon after, Kjellberg expressed his gratitude for Donaldson’s effort and support (PewDiePie, 2018c). He decided to acknowledge the event as a competition and, seeing this as a chance to create content, began to actively involve himself in it as well.

Kjellberg, among many other creators, asserted that a company rising to the top of YouTube would clearly indicate the platform’s shift in focus from individual creators to businesses and corporations (PewDiePie, 2018b). In this case, a significant objective of the campaign would be to defend the dominance of individual creators on the platform. To find out whether or not the campaign was effective in doing so, I intend to begin by examining the song that Kjellberg released near the end of the campaign, titled “Congratulations.” The song, serving as part of its conclusion, best encapsulates the campaign’s nature and Kjellberg’s character as a whole. Through the lens of rhetorical analysis, I will discuss Kjellberg’s disapproval of T-Series’ inevitable victory in the competition, which, together with the racist remarks in his songs, inadvertently encourages harmful and offensive actions from his followers. Although Kjellberg had entered the campaign and created the song “Congratulations” with no ill intent, I argue that the “Subscribe to PewDiePie” campaign adversely affected the individual content creation scene on YouTube through the indirect impacts of Kjellberg’s racist humour. The effects, as they increase the pressure of negative public reaction on advertisers, increase the difficulty of achieving the American dream within the online entertainment industry and, thereby, diminish the purpose of the campaign.

Disapproval of T-Series’ Victory

The main sentiment expressed in “Congratulations” is Kjellberg’s disapproval of T-Series’ victory, and one of the ways in which he accomplishes it is through discrediting his opponent. For instance, the song highlights that T-Series started its business by “selling pirated songs” (PewDiePie, 2019, 0:45). Since redistributing copyrighted songs without permission from the copyright owners is generally considered unethical and illegal, Kjellberg paints T-Series as a company that is untrustworthy and does illegal activities to generate profit. The song also reassures that T-Series is not doing anything illegal anymore while, at the same moment, displaying a news article titled “Bhushan Kumar of T-Series questioned for ‘huge tax evasion’” in its music video (PewDiePie, 2019, 0:56). The visual confirms the sarcasm in the lyrics and continues to prove the company’s illegitimacy, as it is the company’s chairman who is suspected of having committed tax fraud. Furthermore, the song states that T-Series has not “had collusions with the mafia” (PewDiePie, 2019, 0:59). However, this statement can also be confirmed to be sarcasm, as, according to Bhalla (2021), the founder of T-Series was, in fact, murdered by an affiliate of the Indian mafia. The emphasis on the company’s connection with the underground, once again, insinuates T-Series’ involvement in unethical and illegal activities. Eventually, the song ends with one last attack on T-Series credibility, as it wishes that the “#MeToo stuff doesn’t severely affect [the company’s] bottom line” (PewDiePie, 2019, 3:59). The lyrics here are alluding to the accusations of sexual harassment

against T-Series' chairman which, as stated in the news article "MeToo: T-Series' Bhushan Kumar accused" (2018), are made as part of the #MeToo movement. With the constant celebration of T-Series' victory throughout the song, Kjellberg aims to juxtapose the company's victory with its associated criminal acts and convey the absurdity of such a wrongful company having the most quantifiable influence on YouTube. Kjellberg believes, as demonstrated by his deliberate juxtaposition, that T-Series is undeserving of its level of influence—let alone representing YouTube culture as the number one channel—and, therefore, disapproves of its victory.

Kjellberg's disapproval of T-Series' victory is also expressed by his belief that the company possesses unfair advantages compared to him. The first verse of the song claims that the company has needed "a billion Asians" to "beat one Swedish boy" (PewDiePie, 2019, 0:30). The song proceeds to elaborate that the size of the company is a deciding factor of its victory, and supports it by stating that it owns "every song in Bollywood" (PewDiePie, 2019, 0:38). The large scale of the company is emphasized by both its human resources as well as its material resources; however, when the song suggests that it has required such an unreasonable amount of resources for T-Series to be able to defeat Kjellberg in subscriber count, it undoubtedly shows—with clear logical connections—the unbalance of power between both parties of the competition. Another logical implication is present when the song references the company's past, illegal activities and "recommends" that the company should "[get] used to [its] past being held against [it] by the media" (PewDiePie, 2019, 0:52). Kjellberg is known for having been accused, famously by Winkler et al. (2017) from *The Wall Street Journal* (which is discussed again in a later section), of his potentially offensive humour. According to Solon (2017), these accusations have affected his business relationships with both Disney and YouTube. Kjellberg's recommendation for T-Series alludes to the consequences that he has received in the past and, upon introducing the company's criminal activities, hints at the illogical victory that the company has achieved despite its supposedly unfavourable reputation. This implied process of reasoning indicates Kjellberg's resentment at being surpassed by a channel that he believes should have received worse public reception. The unbalance in both the resources and the impacts on the public images of both entities further encourages his disapproval of the competition's result.

Racist Jokes Brought into the Real World

Kjellberg's song "Congratulations" employs several humorous expressions that can be interpreted as being racist or rather offensive to some people. For example, Kjellberg expresses his gratitude for his Indian viewers "from Bombay to Bangladesh" (PewDiePie, 2019, 1:13). Some, like "How PewDiePie Ended Up" (2019), argue that this phrase shows Kjellberg's ignorance for not knowing that Bangladesh is not a part of India. According to Cuthbertson (2018), he did make this mistake back in November 2018 but was already corrected by his followers from Bangladesh, many of whom have remained supportive of his campaign. It is likely that Kjellberg has deliberately added this phrase—including calling Mumbai by its old name Bombay—as a reference to his past mistake, possibly mocking his own ignorance to create a comedic effect. The song also mentions a cease and desist letter that Kjellberg has received from T-Series, accusing him of defamation. Kjellberg claims that T-Series does not understand the meaning of defamation and provides a few offensive statements that are not defamatory, with one of those being: "Did you know that Indians have poo-poo in their brains?" (PewDiePie, 2019, 2:14). Although the statement here is, in fact, racist, as it makes a claim about a whole race, the song does acknowledge it by calling it a "blatant racist lie" (PewDiePie, 2019, 2:17). Moreover, Kjellberg confirming that the statement is a lie immediately asserts his disagreement with the statement and separates himself from being associated with it.

Unfortunately, as much as Kjellberg wishes, it appears to be impossible for him to detach himself from all the offensive jokes that he has made. According to Alexander (2019), numerous Kjellberg followers have shown racist behaviours towards Indians during the campaign. All of Kjellberg's possibly racist comments that he has made at the beginning of the campaign are references to materials that have appeared in his past videos (McDonald, 2018) and are, therefore, neither endorsed nor condoned by him. Nevertheless, as long as the possibility exists for his comments to be interpreted as his own opinions, it will attract people who support these comments and, in turn, demonstrate their beliefs by supporting Kjellberg.

On January 11, 2017, Kjellberg uploaded a video onto YouTube "that included two men laughing as they held a banner that read, 'Death to all Jews,'" which was one of his nine videos containing "anti-Semitic jokes or Nazi imagery" since August 2016 (Winkler et al., 2017, para. 1, 3). According to the article from *The Wall Street Journal*, upon the authors' inquiry, YouTube decided to remove advertisements on this one video, regarding which Kjellberg also said that the "joke went too far" (para. 8). YouTube continued to host all nine videos after conducting a review, finding that the videos are "intended to be provocative or satirical" and not to "incite hatred or violence" (as cited in para. 12). However, Disney, a business partner of Kjellberg, decided to completely terminate their partnership, stating that he "went too far" and that the "videos are inappropriate" (as cited in para. 6). Furthermore, despite Kjellberg's belief in the importance of "separating what is a joke, and what is actually problematic" (as cited in para. 19), some neo-Nazi websites were eager to en-

dorse him, such as Daily Stormer, who "changed its motto to 'The world's #1 PewDiePie fansite,' according to the Internet Archive, celebrating [him] for 'making the masses comfortable with [its] ideas'" (para. 12–13).

Kjellberg's unwanted influence on supporters of racial discrimination continued, as two weeks before the release of "Congratulations," a mass shooting of two mosques in New Zealand occurred, with a short video of the attack posted on social media (Lopatto, 2019, para. 1–2). The shooter, who said the slogan "subscribe to PewDiePie" at the start of the video, was confirmed to be a racist and white supremacist by the manifesto that they had also posted (para. 3, 6). The shooting concluded with more than fifty people killed (Alexander, 2019, para. 10).

These events clearly indicate that, even with Kjellberg's innocent intentions and clarifying statements, some still choose to interpret his racist jokes as his own opinions and, for this reason, either worship him or detest him. After Disney stopped its business with Kjellberg, YouTube also revealed to have removed his channel from its premium advertising program and cancelled the new season of his reality show (Spangler, 2017, para. 1). These treatments from both Disney and YouTube that Kjellberg received ultimately display the weight that problematic public reactions have on the evaluation of a creator's content, and Kjellberg's continuous use of racist jokes throughout the "Subscribe to PewDiePie" campaign further diminishes its *advertiser friendliness*.

Why Does Advertiser Friendliness Matter?

What makes something advertiser-friendly appears to be dependent on the platform that it is hosted on, and, in the case of YouTube, the platform has curated the "Advertiser-friendly content guidelines" for this purpose. Instead of discussing its actual definition, this paper considers the advertiser friendliness of a video strictly as whether or not a brand would *want* to associate with and advertise in the video. The importance of advertiser friendliness on YouTube is realized as it determines a creator's eligibility to monetize their content, making it possible to achieve the *American dream* on the platform.

The American dream is originally defined by Adams (1931) as the "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (p. 404). It has since been a reoccurring symbol in American literature, and it now exists on creator-oriented online platforms like YouTube. In the modern world, where, as famous YouTube creator Chris Broad has put it, making videos has "never been easier and cheaper . . . than now," since one only needs "[a] camera, the Internet," and something to "share with the world" (TEDx Talks, 2017, 14:31), the monetization of videos has further encouraged creators to explore their creativity and potentially turn that into their livelihoods. Anyone with a modern smartphone and access to YouTube has the opportunity to become a creator, and their success is solely dependent on their ability to attract and entertain an audience. Sternheimer (2014) also agrees with the idea that anyone is able to increase their influence from nothing, just by "[being] interesting enough for people to want to watch, even for a little while" (p. 246). However, Hokka (2021) criticizes YouTube's emphasis on creators' influence and their connections with the audiences, arguing that YouTube tolerates racist comments by creators because a significant number of viewers adore these offensive jokes, using Kjellberg as an example.

The "Subscribe to PewDiePie" campaign advocates against corporate presence on YouTube, as it tries to prevent the Indian music record company T-Series from surpassing Kjellberg's YouTube subscriber count and obtaining the most quantifiable influence on the platform. Since part of the platform's mission is to "give everyone a voice" ("About YouTube," n.d.), its focus has always been on individual content creation; though with its most subscribed channel now being owned by a company, many believe that the focus of YouTube is shifting towards businesses and corporate contents, and, subsequently, less of the platform's resources will be available to individual creators. Through an analysis of his song "Congratulations" in this paper, it becomes apparent that Kjellberg disapproves of T-Series' victory and believes that the company is undeserving of its following. However, Kjellberg's use of racist humour during the campaign has received some negative and unwanted reactions from the public and within his audience. Such reactions have affected the advertiser friendliness of the campaign, while advertiser friendliness is what enables individual creators to monetize their content in the first place. The indirect impacts of the public reactions to Kjellberg's humour cause the campaign to demonstrate non-ideal advertiser friendliness and create effects opposite to its original intent. The campaign and the public reactions will continue to serve as evidence of the pressure that advertisers may encounter when supporting individual creators. As online entertainment is most commonly supported by advertising revenue, the campaign ultimately discourages the American dream that individual creators are able to achieve in the online entertainment industry.

References

About YouTube. (n.d.). *YouTube*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://about.youtube/

Adams, J. T. (1931). *The epic of America* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351304122

Alexander, J. (2019). PewDiePie concedes to T-Series in battle for YouTube's biggest channel. *The Verge*. https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/31/18289617/pewdiepie-tseries-congratulations-subscribe-youtube-diss-track-100-million

Bhalla, G. (2021). Gulshan Kumar murder case: Bombay HC upholds Dawood Aide's conviction; what we know so far. *Indiatimes*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/gulshan-kumar-murder-case-bombay-hc-upholds-dawood-aides-conviction-what-we-know-so-far-543987.html

Cuthbertson, A. (2018). Bangladesh backs PewDiePie in YouTube battle with T-Series, despite him not realising it's a country. *Independence*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/pewdiepie-vs-t-series-youtube-channel-bangladesh-india-most-popular-a8623886.html

Glaze, V. (2018). Mr Beast's citywide ad campaign is actually helping PewDiePie keep his top spot on YouTube. *Dexerto*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.dexerto.com/entertainment/mr-beast-bought-every-billboard-in-his-city-to-help-pew-die-pie-win-over-t-series-202353/

Hokka, J. (2021). PewDiePie, racism and YouTube's neoliberalist interpretation of freedom of speech. *Convergence*, *27*(1), 142–160. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520938602

How PewDiePie ended up taking a 'dig' at India while "congratulating" T-Series. (2019). *The Times of India*. Retrieved November 20, 2022, from https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/68689767.cms

Huddleston, T., Jr. (2018). This Bollywood Youtube channel is on the verge of bumping 'PewDiePie' from his top spot. *CNBC*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/31/t-series-could-soon-pass-pewdiepie-as-youtubes-biggest-channel.html

Lopatto, E. (2019). The mass shooting in New Zealand was designed to spread on social media. *The Verge*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/15/18266859/new-zealand-shooting-video-social-media-manipulation

McDonald, A. (2018). PewDiePie – bitch lasagna (T-Series Diss Track) (lyrics meaning) [Review of the song *Bitch lasagna*, by PewDiePie]. *Justrandomthings*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://justrandomthings.com/2018/12/13/pewdiepie-bitch-lasagna-t-series-diss-track-lyrics-meaning/

MeToo: T-Series' Bhushan Kumar accused of sexual harassment, he says 'appalled, anguished'. (2018). *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/metoo-t-series-bhushan-kumar-accused-of-sexual-harassment-he-says-appalled-anguished/story-mnzTvfTmrGDoHKXdckY9mO.html

MrBeast. (2018, October 26). *I bought every billboard in my city for this* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZNxvnQv0h4

PewDiePie. (2018a, October 5). *Bitch lasagna* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Dh-RL__uN4

PewDiePie. (2018b, October 21). *How long will I keep doing Youtube? QnA* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggsqvFsgoKk

PewDiePie. (2018c, October 29). *I need your help... LWIAY - #0053* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAPUK5gqCQ8

PewDiePie. (2019, March 31). *Congratulations* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHgc8Q6qTjc

Solon, O. (2017). PewDiePie angrily accuses media of 'out-of-context' reports on antisemitic video. *The Guardian*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/feb/16/pewdiepie-antisemitic-video-media-wall-street-journal

Spangler, T. (2017). YouTube cancels PewDiePie show, pulls channel from ad program after his 'Death to All Jews' stunt. *Variety*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://variety.com/2017/digital/news/youtube-cancels-pewdiepie-pulls-ads-death-to-jews-1201987810/

Sternheimer, K. (2014). *Celebrity culture and the American Dream: Stardom and social mobility* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315776170

TEDx Talks. (2017, May 18). *Your audience is waiting | becoming a YouTube vlogger | Chris Broad | TEDxTohokuUniversity* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zX_rqdSohyA

Winkler, R., Nicas, J., & Fritz, B. (2017). Disney severs ties with YouTube star PewDiePie after anti-Semitic posts. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from https://www.wsj.com/articles/disney-severs-ties-with-youtube-star-pewdiepie-after-anti-semitic-posts-1487034533