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**DL837 BA in NEW MEDIA STUDIES**

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**MODULE: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Major Project \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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*Internet Overpopulated*

*The consequences of the oversaturated creator economy*

We live in a time where just about everyone can create content and post it online. Within the past two decades, online content creation has taken the world by storm and has permanently altered the digital landscape as we know it. Platforms such as YouTube, Twitch, Instagram and TikTok have played a significant role in it’s increase in popularity. Now, we are met with an overwhelming amount of online content and online content creators. The barrier of entry to being an online content creator has dramatically lowered over the years, leading to the online content creation sphere becoming an oversaturated field. Platforms have become algorithm driven now and there are millions upon millions of content creators competing to be seen. As Kumari writes “Once the digital age had democratized the process of making and sharing content, practically anybody could do it online. This has exploded into a huge amount of content, whereby individual pieces struggle to stand out.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The creator economy today is extremely competitive. Due to advancements in technology and the creation of more social media platforms, the number of content creators has reached significant heights, as well as people who want to make a career out of it. In 2019, “30 percent of kids ages 8 to 12 listed “YouTuber” as their top career choice in a global survey”[[2]](#footnote-2) and in the same year “a Morning Consult survey of Gen Z and millennials in the United States found that more than half of 13-to-38-year-olds — 54 percent — wanted to become social media influencers”[[3]](#footnote-3). . To say it would be difficult to stand out as a content creator in 2025 would be an understatement. According to a paper titled *The Creator Economy: An Introduction and a Call for Scholarly Research*, it is reported that “there are 50 million people who identify themselves as content creators – that is, individuals who use their influence, creativity, and skills to reach and monetize their audiences on digital platforms – but other statistics report as many as 200 million creators”[[4]](#footnote-4). As well as this, “the creator economy is booming, with an estimated market size of $104.2 billion - more than double its value since 2019”[[5]](#footnote-5).

As this barrier has lowered more and more over the years, creators have had to find ways to stand out from the crowd and capture an audience, which can mean resorting to uploading content that could be deemed controversial or extreme. This competitive online climate has resulted in a surge in short form and fast paced content that is engineered to instantly capture the attention of the viewer. As a result of this oversaturation of the creator economy, a lot of content creators struggle to build sustainable careers and start relying on audience donations, brand deals and inconsistent monetization models. This begs the question, how has the lowering of the barrier to becoming a content creator, combined with algorithm-driven platforms, resulted in a digital landscape that is oversaturated and ethically questionable?

Online content creation has been around for a while at this stage. In the 1990s, blogs were starting to appear online but in the 2000s they became popular. A blog is a regularly updated website or web page, typically one run by an individual or small group, that is written in an informal or conversational style.Back in the early days of the internet, content creation was mainly restricted to blogs and forums, where users would share their interests and opinions with an audience. This was until platforms like YouTube and Facebook arrived in the early 2000s, they would go on to greatly impact the industry of online content creation, making it more accessible than ever for people on the internet to share ideas, thoughts and creations with an audience. The increase in accessibility of content creation had its benefits but also it’s downfalls, *Competing for Attention in Social Media under Information Overload Conditions* touches on this; “while this shift has enabled diverse voices to reach audiences worldwide, it has also flooded the internet with an overwhelming volume of content. As Feng et al. note, the competition for attention in an oversaturated digital space results in a system where repeated exposure is required for any message to gain traction”[[6]](#footnote-6).

Online content creation has had an undeniable impact on what used to be “traditional media”, with the medium not only becoming an integral part of it but also pushing what we would consider to be traditional media to the wayside. Today, people are a lot less likely to engage with televised content, with the rise of streaming services and online content creation platforms. For a lot of people (especially the younger generation) YouTube has now taken the place of television. In his article “Inside The Ad, Ad, Ad, Ad World Of YouTube” Pressman writes that in 2023 “spending on TV advertising dropped 12.5% last year, while video ads surged 30.1%.”[[7]](#footnote-7). YouTube is not only popular amongst the youth but is also “the most popular social platform among almost all age groups, and the number of people under 50 using YouTube regularly tops the number of people in that same cohort who are watching traditional TV”[[8]](#footnote-8) according to a study by Nielsen.

YouTube is an online video sharing website that was created on February 14th 2005. The site has propelled the medium of online content creation to what it is today. With the site having so many users, the videos on it would rack up millions upon millions of views. Some of the first “viral” videos uploaded to the site were created by corporations and networks rather than regular users, for example the first ever video to reach one million views on YouTube was in November 2005. This was a Nike advert for tiempo air legend 1 football boots starring Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho. Soon enough, there began to be a surge of users on the website who would make videos of their own and upload them. Videos of regular people would start to gain traction and we would begin to see videos of regular people going “viral”.

When videos like these gained popularity, interest in content creation on the site majorly increased. Videos like these showed people that content uploaded on YouTube didn’t necessarily need high production value and famous people in them to attract a large audience, content uploaded by regular people could resonate even more with the general public. Content that was rooted in authenticity and everyday life became viewed just as much or even more than the professional, highly produced videos.

What exactly did it take to go viral on YouTube back in the 2000s? Well, in a time before algorithms dictated what we would be shown online, content on the internet was discovered through curiosity and users sharing it to their family, friends and whoever they thought might be interested. What does it take to go viral now? Well, in a climate where we as consumers are continuously engaging with high levels of content on a daily basis (most of it against our will) the framework of how to achieve virality has changed. Short form content is a massive dictator in this. Platforms such as TikTok, YouTube (with YouTube shorts and Instagram (with Instagram reels) specialize in short form content. Platforms like these hold a substantial priority on fun-sized, digestible content that keeps consumers engaged until they scroll on to the next tidbit of content.

Despite it being only a year old, Google would go on to buy YouTube in November 2006 for $1.65 billion[[9]](#footnote-9). This was quite a milestone for YouTube, it also paved the way for content creators to use YouTube as a platform to build audiences and grow as creators. In 2007, YouTube introduced the YouTube Partner Program. This program gave creators the opportunity to monetize the videos they created and uploaded to the site through ad revenue. This was a huge step for YouTube as it meant that the creators could profit from uploading their content to the platform, making YouTube a viable career platform. We would see the consequences of the YouTube Partner Program begin to take course in the mid to late 2010s era of YouTube. This was an era where many people started getting interested in the idea of being a content creator. Back in 2013, “Universal McCann found that while 29% of Americans in their sample had ever uploaded video to a video sharing site, 67.5% of Filipinos and 57.8% of Indians had”.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In around the mid-2010s on YouTube, there was a rise in vlogs (short for video logs) being uploaded to the site. Creators filmed themselves, capturing what they were doing during the day, showing funny and entertaining moments in their daily life. With the rise of vlogs on YouTube we also saw the rise of public prank content on YouTube (sometimes known as “social experiments”). This genre of content saw creators take to the streets and play practical jokes on unknowing citizens (although in a good few cases, these “unknowing citizens” would be paid actors). These public pranks would often be controversial as many prank channels in this era held a priority on “shock value”.

This era of YouTube was a significant turning point in the shift from community-driven, harmless, creative content to engagement-centered sensationalism on the YouTube platform, where ethical boundaries were increasingly pushed in the pursuit of virality, views and monetization. This could all be seen as the result of the introduction of the YouTube Partner Program. Since more views meant more money, creators began to prioritize engagement over creativity and ethics. This would result in something called “clickbait”, meaning creators would make over the top, exaggerated thumbnails and titles for their videos that were misleading all in the name of fostering engagement.

One example of a creator who partook in this is British prank YouTuber Sam Pepper. Sam was well known for his public “social experiment” content, (which would more often than not revolve around harassing the public rather than actually playing a prank on them). One of Pepper’s prank videos involved him going out in public and groping unsuspecting women, he would call this a “social experiment”. The video was uploaded in September 2014 but has since been deleted. Another video that brought major backlash was one he made with Vine creators Sam & Colby. The video was titled “Killing Best Friend Prank” and was uploaded in November 2015. In the video, Pepper stages the kidnapping of Colby. The video ends in the two of them on a rooftop, with Sam tied up in a chair and Colby on his knees next to him. The kidnapper then “shoots” Colby in the head. After a few seconds, Colby gets up and attempts to reassure a distressed Sam, telling him it was all a prank. People wanted Sam Pepper’s channel deactivated because of this sort of content. A petition was created calling for this deactivation and “the petition was signed by over 220,000 people”[[11]](#footnote-11).

During this time of YouTube, it was also vlogs that were gaining traction on the site. Many people began taking their cameras and documenting what they were doing during the day to entertain their audience. This new online phenomenon thrived off authenticity, however many vloggers would stage events that happened in their vlogs, with hired actors and scripts. This was reflective of the prank side of YouTube.

Family vlogging channel DaddyOFive is the best example of how toxic the prank/vlogging time of YouTube was, as they combined the two with their content. This was a channel created by Mike Martin, the father of five kids. Martin and his wife, Heather Martin would document their daily lives as a family, with videos featuring their children. DaddyOFive would gain a bad reputation for the way he and his wife would treat their children in these videos as they would torment and abuse them on camera regularly, exploiting their children online in the name of gaining engagement. The abuse would be both emotional and physical. In one video, Mike pushes his son Cody into a wardrobe and causes him to bleed. However, the video that brought them the most controversy was one titled “Invisible Ink Prank”. In this video, Mike sprayed disappearing ink all over his son’s bedroom floor, the parents called in their son into the room to scold him for this, screaming and cursing at him to the point where he started to cry hysterically. After a few minutes, Mike would reveal to his son that it was all “just a prank”. They received backlash and in September 2017, they were sentenced to five years of probation for child neglect.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Even in present day toxic prank content still runs rampant. On YouTube but also on short form content platforms like YouTube Shorts, TikTok and Instagram reels, creators often turn to going out and harassing the public. It’s gotten more intense with short form, with some creators going out and intentionally provoking members of the public hoping for an extreme reaction and even an act of violence. Since we are constantly overwhelmed with short form content, creators do whatever they need to stand out. We are intrigued by conflict and seeing people provoked, it makes us wonder “what’s going to happen next?”.

With this being said, only so much blame can solely be put on creators. Platforms also play a role in shaping the behaviour and actions of creators. As Deirdre K. Mulligan writes, “in the law’s shadow, online platforms are largely given free reign to configure the governance of expression.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Platforms like YouTube and Instagram can operate with little insight, which results in creators pushing ethical boundaries in an attempt to attract engagement as ethical gray areas are present. Creators are made to operate within a system that holds priority over engagement rather than creativity and ethics, then the blame is put entirely on the creators rather than the platform that made that system in the first place. The YouTube Partner Program has had it’s triumphs but has also had a negative influence on how content creators operate within the platform. Those who put this system into action should also be held accountable to a degree.

In a digital world overpopulated by content creators, the mindset of “anything for views” was manufactured on YouTube but it has made it’s way into other platforms. We can look to streaming platforms Twitch and Kick to see how this mindset has transferred across platforms. “Twitch is approximately the thirtieth most-viewed website in the world, with over 150 million spectators, and 2 million individuals around the world regularly broadcasting”[[14]](#footnote-14). This is a live streaming platform and is a staple of the streaming scene.

In the past five years, there has been something of an ecosystem built between the streaming world and YouTube. More specifically, YouTube shorts. We’ve seen streamers gain widespread recognition through short clips taken from their livestreams being uploaded to YouTube shorts. These streaming clips are not only posted to YouTube shorts but can also be widely seen circulating on some of the other short form content platforms such as Instagram Reels and TikTok. This has led to many streamers trying to manufacture a funny or shocking moment that they know can be taken from their stream and posted on one of these platforms, this practice is known as “clip farming”.

An extreme case of this can be seen with Jack Doherty, a popular content creator in the live streaming scene. During a livestream of his back in October 2024, Doherty can be seen speeding in his McLaren down a Miami highway. Suddenly, he swerves out of control and crashes the car. His friend that was in the passenger seat appears to be injured, Jack asks him if he’s okay but instructs his cameraman to “keep filming”. Even after a near death experience, priority is held on the footage being taken to ensure a clip can be made from it, rather than making sure that his friend is okay.

Over time, online content creation has been through a significant transition throughout the years. We’ve seen it go from a harmless, niche activity to a global phenomenon that has permanently altered the digital world. Interest in being a content creator has grown to unimaginable heights and still continues to grow, which has created an oversaturated environment where ethical boundaries are consistently pushed, as a result of a flawed system being put in place by platforms. The combination of accessible platforms and the promise of fame and financial success has led to a surge in creators pining for attention. While this has democratized the ability for people of all backgrounds to have a platform, it has also contributed to the dilution of personal expression, with creators often prioritizing engagement over creativity to maintain relevancy. The rise of monetization and content that is dictated by the algorithm has blurred the lines between authentic creativity and promotional material. What was once an open area for creators to share their passions and interests is now dominated by trends, sponsored content, and a constant race for likes and views.

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