

Social Media Influencers: Creators, Celebrity, Content, Audiences, Brands

“Generation Z Influencers”

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New models and approaches are clearly called for in our attempts to more fully understand social media content as it becomes increasingly prominent across the mediascape. Some of the more novel phenomena to have emerged in the first decade of social media were haul and unboxing videos, and one even more recently successful strain of these has been the youth-oriented toy unboxing video. Finding great success online, I offer two successful toy unboxing YouTube channels – EvanTubeHD and FunToyzCollector – as cases indicative of the shifting dimensions of creators, celebrity, content, audiences, and brands. Each provides insight as to how social media platforms, particularly YouTube, are being used to create interest, engagement, and loyalty with their publics.

Although they take different approaches with how they position their creators, court celebrity, and define brand, they are similar in terms of content and what sort of audiences they hail. While YouTube viewership data is largely inaccessible, both channels are appealing to very young audiences. This is made obvious in their manners of address and in the subject matter. This matches the content, which is dominated by toys of various sorts, though specific types do vary considerably between the channels.

In the case of EvanTubeHD and his/its affiliated channels, the toys unboxed are largely ones appropriate to the “Evan” of EvanTubeHD, a six-year-old boy who has now aged to ten over the four years of the channel’s existence. Created with his father, a professional videographer and producer, it was purportedly started as a way to introduce Evan to a bit of his father’s work life. The channel was designed to allow Evan to act as an expert in the one topic area for which he would be truly qualified. His toy unboxing videos, which incorporate play demonstration and review elements, became so popular that he and his younger sister Jillian have been tapped for promotional tie-ins with toy and food manufacturers. The brand has expanded beyond that as well, offering affiliated channels devoted to “behind the scenes” or home videos (EvanTubeRAW), Jillian’s unboxings and reviews (JillianTubeHD), and let’s play videos (EvanTubeGaming). Although steps are taken to shield the children’s personal information, they are the onscreen stars of most videos, and it is the children’s presence as relatable figures that likely attracts many of their millions of subscribers. Various reports have estimated that the channels are yielding millions in revenue on an annual basis on the strength of this audience.

With close to 8 million subscribers, FunToyzCollector has been featured on several lists of the most highly compensated YouTubers. FunToyzCollector is quite different in how it positions its creator(s) and talent. Nearly all videos are shot POV-style,

obscuring the host, aside from her hands which are marked by brightly-painted nails. She never speaks her name nor does she formally introduce her videos. They instead emphasize the presence of toys, often featuring vividly-colored packaging. The toys here are less about the age-appropriateness of EvanTubeHD's featured products, as the FunToyzCollector host is clearly adult. The dominant theme is blind bags or boxes, where part of the unboxing is the surprise of what will be found inside. There is also a very different soundscape to these videos. The host's voice is distinctive, speaking in English but with an accent that many have claimed most resembles that of a speaker of Brazilian Portuguese. The voice over is recorded and mixed in a way that almost makes a listener feel that one is inside the narrator's head. Even more notably, the sounds of unwrapping, tearing, and moving the toys and their packaging around are mixed loudly, making them prominent features. This has led some to speculate that her audience may include Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response-sensitive viewers in addition to 3-6 year-olds.

The toy unboxing video was something that did not exist pre-social media (though obviously not without home movie precursors), yet these two channels show that media brands are being built from this new format of entertainment content – brands courting some of our youngest viewers and serving for them as foundational instances of media engagement. One offers role models for play and consumption that reflect and refract the experience of Generation Z; figures who will likely attempt to maintain celebrity in some form for years to come – not unlike child stars of mass media. The other offers something more cryptic (at least to adults), albeit soothing, and only partial in its virtual presence. There's much to be said here about how consumerism, age, gender, and race/ethnicity factor into these brands and the lasting (and/or fleeting) influence that they will have, but for the purposes of this roundtable, I would like to offer these examples as indicators of how our influencers are functioning in modalities both familiar and unexpected.