

The Terms and Conditions of the Low Cost of Fame: The Vulnerabilities of the Aspiring Social Media Stars of Today and Tomorrow

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As my research interest in social media stardom has developed over the past few years, my interest has focused on what I refer to as “aspiring social media stars”: individuals who see the success of prominent figures like PewDiePie or Logan Paul and model their social media presences on those who have successfully transformed themselves from hobbyists into online entrepreneurs. I argue that rather than understand these individuals as “microcelebrities,” a term designed to reflect their relatively small followings, we should focus instead on how the relative accessibility of the formal and discursive strategies deployed by social media stars makes it possible for the connections between aspiring stars and their fans to mirror the connections developed by the stars that inspired them.

However, in completing this research, I have had a first hand glimpse of the struggles that such aspiring stars face given a lack of clear mentorship or institutional guidance on how to navigate the complications therein. When I first started investigating the Nintendo YouTuber known as CaptainNintendoDude, a.k.a Wisconsin 19-year-old Alex Pekala, he had successfully transformed a channel he started as a 13-year-old enthusiast into a full-time job, tapping into trendy video formats, clickbait headlines, and the intimacy of live gameplay sessions to dramatically expand his following. He then leveraged this audience for a GoFundMe campaign to fund a trip to New York City, where he stood outside of the Nintendo Store in Rockefeller Center to be first in line for the March 2017 launch of the Nintendo Switch console. His daily vlogs of his time in New York further expanded his profile, and showcased his connection with the (mostly young) viewers who came out to visit him, as well as his sophistication at constructing a narrative of his time on the line and the recurring characters who would go on to become part of his channel during subsequent visits to stand in line at the Nintendo Store. I began my research seeing Alex as an example of how the easily replicable formats of YouTube stardom enable enterprising creators like Pekala to find success outside of formal multi-channel networks and the efforts by Hollywood and other forces to institutionalize production on YouTube and other online video platforms.

But as I continued that research, I watched as Pekala stumbled his way into numerous controversies not unlike those faced by creators like PewDiePie and Logan Paul. There was the livestream where he effectively staged a break-and-enter of his apartment, disappearing from social media and leading his followers to express serious concern for his well-being. There was the video

promoting a meet-and-greet at PAX East with the title “I’m coming out,” using a fake reveal of his sexuality to pivot that he was in fact coming out to greet his fans in Boston. There was the “bit” where Pekala implied that his friend Etika—a more provocative gaming YouTube personality he met while in New York—had graffitied his YouTube “Play Button” with the N-word during shipping as a joke. And through all of it, I realized that Pekala had no idea how to navigate any of these situations, and had no one who seemed to be in a position to assist him. His channel has grown to over 350,000 subscribers, and he is placing advertising and sponsorships through a management company, but he still lacks the kind of training that could help him sustain this identity formation into the future.

And so it wasn’t surprising that Pekala disappeared for nearly a month in May of this year, and returned with a tearful video discussing his depression and the pressures of producing content to feed his new following. My research into Pekala focused on his videos, but I also looked at his social media posts, as well as the social media posts tagging Pekala. It was striking to me during his hiatus—which was unplanned, and without explanation—how his followers hounded him for new content. A YouTuber even posted a video decrying what happened to “the old CND,” dismissing his focus on personal vlog content and suggesting an intense entitlement among his audience, weaponizing the internal pressures that had pushed Alex into the hiatus to begin with.

While burnout created by the YouTube algorithm is common among even successful creators, with more and more speaking out about the need for better resources, aspiring stars like Pekala are particularly vulnerable, and such struggles will only grow more common as a younger generation who grew up with YouTube Star as a legible (if not necessarily viable) career path comes of age on the platform. Pekala is an adult now, and ultimately responsible for how his videos lessened the struggle of marginalized groups, but there is an entire generation of young creators who will independently develop followings and have limited models on how to navigate the consequences of that, a problem that will define YouTube as an entrepreneurial platform for the foreseeable future.