

Final Project Formatting Paper

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Rhetorical Analysis of PewDiePie vs T-Series

“My fellow bros, my fellow brethren, my fellow comrades, the time has come for us to fight back. No more will we become oppressed by mainstream media. No more will I take this online abuse and hatred” (PewDiePie 2018). It was these words online creator PewDiePie stated in his video *THIS VIDEO WILL OVERTAKE PEWDIEPIE* that would start a movement not seen before, spanning across the globe. It would lead to millions of people worldwide spreading his name, asking people to become his subscribers, escaping from simple online memes to real-world activism. Billboards would be put up to saying to subscribe to him. Fellow internet YouTube celebrities would livestream and tell their own follow base to go out and support him and the movement would come to an end tragedy.

In 2018, online Swedish Youtuber Felix Kjellberg, referred to as PewDiePie, made a “declaration” of war against the up-and-coming Bollywood and India-pop channel T-Series, which was threatening to dethrone PewDiePie’s five-year reign as the top subscribed channel on YouTube. PewDiePie, the most subscribed content creator in the YouTube platform had been known at this point for his comedy commentary on internet memes and internet culture, though had a previous reputation of being a video game playing channel, something he had been doing with less frequency at the time. Though not one of original YouTube creators at the start of the platform like Jacks films and Smosh, he had still been there in its early days and had made a name for himself as the top creator in the internet. It was due him being the top creator he would declare in his video *THIS CHANNEL WILL OVERTAKE PEWDIEPIE!* while wielding a katana, “*In no less than in November this year, PewDiePie will not be the biggest channel on YouTube! ... We must fight BACK. ... No more lame boxing matches, I challenge T-Series to a saber fight, like real men*” (Kjellberg 2018).



Figure 1: PewDiePie declaring war on T-Series for the first time (PewDiePie 2018)

PewDiePie's declaration of war was made originally as a funny intro segment for his weekly Reddit community interaction video he did with his community every week. The segment was meant as a jab at the YouTube trend of YouTuber's creating controversy or "beef" with each other to get more media attention on their channels. This can be seen referenced in the segment when PewDiePie states he will fight T-Series to the "death" with no "boxing glove or helmet" in reference to the topical Jake Paul vs. KSI YouTuber boxing match which started the YouTube trend. However, though the segment was meant as nothing more than a joke. It would eventually spark a movement symbolizing a David and Goliath fight between a single content creator fighting a large media corporation.

For this analysis, I will first be analyzing how the movement started and was kept sustained. Then I will use Aristotle's rhetorical tools of ethos, pathos and logos to analyze

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the movement's effective or ineffective rhetoric. Lastly, I will discuss the conclusion of the movement and give final thoughts on whether the campaign was effective rhetorically as a whole.

Sparks to the Fire



Figure 2: PewDiePie's diss track video towards T-Series (PewDiePie 2018)

One of the first sparks to get the fires of activism to start was PewDiePie's diss track to T-Series (a popular form of verbally disrespecting people in music or starting "beef") that was uploaded on October 5th, 2018. PewDiePie's diss track labeled

with a strongly read title was made in reference to a Facebook messenger meme at the time circulating at the internet.

The video came out of nowhere at the time due to PewDiePie not being a music-based channel. It would garner massive widespread attention, peaking at #120 for most popular videos on YouTube, being charted for 9 weeks according to YouTube view analyst site kworb. Though popular, what would really start people mobilizing and turning the PewDiePie vs T-Series joke into a meme and active movement was fellow YouTube creator, Mr. Beast. Mr. Beast bought every billboard in his city, each advertising to subscribe to PewDiePie in his video I Bought Every Billboard In My City For This released within the same month of bitch lasagna in October 26, 2018.

PewDiePie would later account Mr. Beast's stunt as a major contributor to the PewDiePie vs. T-Series movement in his video This is getting out of control... reminiscing *"It all started with Mr. Beast creating the billboards to tell people to subscribe to me...Which then inspired my fans all across the world to do the same, hand out flyers, put up posters"* (Felix 2018).

Fuel to the Fire

Though the release of bitch lasagna and Mr. Beast's billboards advertising to subscribe to PewDiePie were initial sparks to start the flame of audience engagement for the movement, it was PewDiePie for better or worse who kept fanning the flames with his weekly LWIAY videos (Last Week I Asked You). He would review memes, photos, comments and other forms of content made by his fans in his subreddit r/PewdiepieSubmissions. This would, directly and indirectly, incentivize viewers to participate in the movement and post their activism to try to get featured in one of his videos and get recognition from their favorite internet celebrity.

From Satiric to Rhetoric

PewDiePie made it known early that he viewed the whole PewDiePie vs. T-Series movement as a joke as seen in his video posted Oct 21, 2018, How long will I keep doing Youtube? QnA, stating *“I don't care if T-Series passes me, but this is all too fun. I don't remember the last time I had this much fun on YouTube”* (PewDiePie 2018). Though the original intent of the movement was for a joke or meme, it had built rhetoric of it being a movement of content creators standing their ground against corporations trying to enter and take over the space. It was this rhetoric that had massive YouTubers like Jacksepticeye, Mr. Beast, Markeplier, Jake Paul, and other famous YouTubers rallied behind PewDiePie to be not overtaken by T-Series and not let T-Series be the first to reach 100 million subscribers (a goal PewDiePie would set as a joke in his video Pewdiepie vs Tseries the Anime LWIAY - #0069). To individual creators and avid fans of YouTube, holding T-Series at bay meant holding the massive corporations, by proxy, at bay from becoming #1. YouTube,

which was once was a place for individual people to post funny videos, was now grabbing the attention of large corporations with large production budgets. The fight between PewDiePie vs. T-Series and the first one to get to 100 million subscribers was viewed as the fight between the average single person making videos at home vs. large money-making corporations taking over the platform. This is even highlighted in PewDiePie's Q&A video, How long will I keep doing Youtube? QnA, where he mentions "*It's already a heated subject now that a company is taking over. Everyone is going on the rant, 'YouTube is not really becoming YouTube' and 'it's never going to be the same now'*" (Kjellberg 2018). He does end it with a bit of hope though mentioning that if YouTube does end up shifting too corporate, then some other platform will take its place, as people "*enjoy this connection so much*" (referring to his connection with his community of fans).

Where does Rhetoric Fit in?

Usually, it is a free-for-all when it comes to being #1, especially on online platforms like YouTube. So, for the largest creators in the platform to rally behind a single YouTuber to keep him #1 was unprecedented at the time, and still is. To figure out how such activism could have happened, an analysis will be conducted using the rhetorical lenses of ethos, pathos, and logos laid out by Aristotle's Rhetoric. They will be used to determine the effectiveness of the movement in meeting its goals, having a lasting impact, and its ability to have rallied individuals under one cause in an online space. Within Rhetoric, Aristotle defines ethos, pathos and logos as *“The first depends upon the moral character of the speaker (ethos), the second upon putting the hearer into a certain frame of mind (pathos), the third upon the speech itself, in so far as it proves or seems to prove (logos)”* (Aristotle, 1926, 1.2.3). With the groundwork set, we will now focus on one of the most prominent appeals throughout the whole movement, being its pathos.

Pathos

Aristotle phrases pathos as something that frames the minds of its audiences. We view pathos oriented emotional appeals regarding how one can frame one's viewpoint on a discussion based on their emotions. An example of this would be visuals of war shown in a US army advertisement to evoke pride vs a pacifist article which might show similar imagery but, in a way, to evoke fear or disgust.

In the case of PewDiePie, the PewDiePie vs. T-Series movement is one that predominantly leans towards pathos due to its relation to online YouTube entertainers in the field having a strong emotional connection with their audience as their entertainment. This connection will often lead to a connection an audience may feel to a creator, which may lead to them falling into a label to refer to themselves to feel part of a community built by said online creators. PewDiePie has commonly given a label to his subscribers, building a more personal connection with them by calling them by their assigned label rather than just his

subscribers. Originally, he would refer to his audience as the “Bro Army” in his early days of YouTube, calling every subscriber a “bro”. However, around the time of the movement, he would refer to his followers as “9-year-olds” as a tongue-in-cheek joke from his internet drama with Twitch streamer, Alinity, where she would refer to his audience as 9-year-olds as an insult. PewDiePie would then grab onto this saying in a now-deleted video saying *“Hello every nine-year-old watching this video, I know you are a complete army just ready to follow my single demand”* (Felix 2018) [grabbed from a short reupload clip called The birth of the most powerful army. (9-year-old army) by tax series]. It was under this label of “9-year-olds” that participators of the movement had a label for identifying themselves with. This can be seen in activism and promotions to subscribe to PewDiePie throughout the web and his subreddit.

The labeling of PewDiePie’s community to help build a personal connection and sense of community also builds upon the pathos of the movement as it preys on the desire for people to be a member of a community, to be a “fellow 9-year-old”. It also builds a parasocial relationship with PewDiePie, as you feel he is directly talking to you “A fellow 9-year-old” when he tells you to go make more “9-year-olds” to beat T-Series.

Another pathos appeal that helped the movement gain traction was the David and Goliath narrative that was

built around it. Creators and fans of YouTube would label PewDiePie as the last hope to fight against corporate giants entering YouTube due to his position of still being the top creator on the platform. PewDiePie, a single content creator, being at #1 showed that YouTube was still run by individual content creators. T-Series, a big corporation, taking that spot would symbolize that transfer of power being taken away from content creators to corporations. Cameron Frita, a publication manager from news site Periscope puts it well by stating, *“This battle between channels isn’t about subscribers, it’s about identity. YouTube is so willing to forget everything that it stood for in its youth in order to build a system that values money over content. Longtime users want nothing more than for the individual creator to reign, not the corporation”* (Frita 2019). The struggle between PewDiePie vs. T-Series in the eyes of long-timer watchers of YouTube and creators really stood for the fight between keeping things as they were, vs having corporations entering the scene and changing YouTube for the worse. This desire to keep things as they were, came from this sense of nostalgia, and the automatic hatred and fear of corporations transforming the landscape, adding another layer of pathos to the movement which originally started out as a lighthearted joke from PewDiePie.

Ethos

Socrates defines ethos as the “moral character of the speaker” when referring to his text in *Rhetoric*. This type of lens revolves around the credibility and reputation that a speaker has when speaking to his audience. When it came to the movement against the T-Series, PewDiePie had one major advantage over the T-Series, his online reputation. PewDiePie had been at the time the top subscribed channel on YouTube since 2013, and his name had been widely known as demonstrated by his 64 million followers a few months before declaring his “fight” with T-Series, as shown by Wayback Machine screenshots of July 19th, 2018, from Sociable, a popular YouTube analytics site. Beyond T-Series, the closest channel to PewDiePie at the time was Justin Bieber at 40 million subscribers, 24 million subscribers behind PewDiePie. For reference, the gap between them would be about the entire population of Australia (26 million) according to current records from the worldometer.

On top of being the largest channel on the platform since 2013, PewDiePie had been posting on the platform since 2010. He had, at this point, built an audience that had grown up watching him for 8 years. To these fans, he had been their entertainment for a better part of their childhood, and now a random company named T-Series was coming over to take his spot as #1. Though T-Series' first post came in 2011 (a year after PewDiePie's), it took them 7 years to reach the YouTube top #1 spot compared to PewDiePie which only took him 3 years. Additionally, T-Series was an Indian-run channel compared to PewDiePie's English-run channel. Though it's hard to get an exact number for 2018, looking at the numbers now for 2024, according to the International Center for Language Studies, 1.52 billion people speak English compared to Hindi at 609 million. It would not be surprising that PewDiePie would have built such a strong ethos with his audience due to having longevity with them, a faster rise to stardom in the entertainment world and a wider reach to build said reputation due to him reaching a 22.7% larger audience simply by speaking English compared to T-Series.

Even if people did not grow up with PewDiePie, nor cared for his content, they might join the movement based on ethos of built reputations from other creators who supported the cause and urged their fans to do the same. This could be seen in support from top channels like JackSepticEye, Jake Paul, and Markiplier. An specific

example of this can be found in December 2nd, 2018, where popular gaming YouTuber, Markiplier, started his livestream called I Literally Won't Shut Up Until You Subscribe To PewDiePie for his 22 million followers. Within it he advocated to them “we must all do our part in this fight whether we feel like we're a part of it or not, because the truth is, this affects all of us every single one of us. Every single one of us needs to fight harder than we've ever fought before” (Markiplier 2018). In the live stream, Markiplier refers to PewDiePie as the “light” fighting the darkness (T-Series), referring to how this fight affects everyone as it is the fight between content creators and large corporations taking over YouTube.

Through activism efforts done by YouTubers like Markiplier to keep you PewDiePie #1, PewDiePie's ethos is built up not only due to his own efforts of building his reputation on the platform, but also by having other creators who have built their own reputations within the platform actively using it to tell their own built audiences go and subscribe to PewDiePie. Part of the reason why PewDiePie got as many followers as he did, wasn't simply by his own ethos, but by the usage of ethos built by the community of individual content creators within the YouTube space itself to help PewDiePie stay on top.