

**“All the dislikes are PewDiePie’s haters and
enemies”:
The case of PewDiePie’s YouTube community as a
space for right-wing populist discourse**

**by
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Abstract

YouTube, a web platform with more than 2 billion individual monthly users, is a media powerhouse. However, despite various YouTube content creators garnering attention for their connection to rising global right-wing populism and hate groups— including viral creator PewDiePie, a Swedish gamer— the platform's ability for political discourse has been little studied. Thus, this paper, aided by theory on 'anti-publics', contemporary right-wing populism, and social identity, begins to unravel the complexities of political discourse in this particular online community. Through the analysis of sixty-thousand comments from six of PewDiePie's most popular videos, this project affirms that YouTube in this context does not prescribe to the majority of elements of a Habermasian public sphere as in the original definition. However, PewDiePie's community does present aspects of an anti-public sphere through the iteration of right-wing populist narratives and an emphasis on the creation of strong social identities.

Keywords: *online discourse, YouTube, anti-publics, right-wing populism, PewDiePie*

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List of Acronyms

| | |
|-------|---|
| RWP | Right-wing populism |
| COPPA | The United States' Children's Online Privacy Protection Act |

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Social media applications, like Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, and YouTube, have become ingrained in citizen's daily lives, integrating all aspects of socialization, media consumption, politics, and more onto our technological devices. In particular, YouTube, the world's most popular video-sharing online platform with over 2 billion monthly users, is a media powerhouse. YouTube first emerged as a simple content creation platform, with a mission statement "to give everyone a voice and show them the world" (YouTube, n.d.). Now, it has not only become a place where individuals can find that 'voice' but where many, especially communities who are less likely to consume traditional media, may determine their ideological values, social identities, and political affiliations (Church, 2010, May, 2010, & Ricke, 2014). Today, videos with hundreds of millions of views from singular individuals have produced communities that bridge the intersection of politics and culture (Maloney, Roberts, and Caruso, 2017; Nielsen, 2018), through highly personal, and authentic relationships with their viewers (Nielsen, 2018; Jerslev, 2016).

Interestingly, popular media outlets have been particularly concerned about these online environments and their connection to rising populist narratives globally. Several YouTube content creators, like PewDiePie, have been under intense scrutiny for being connected to right-wing populist hate groups, violence, and extremism. In 2019, *The New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* ran scathing reports about PewDiePie's YouTube following, describing his followers as an example of "modern right-wing extremism wrapped in culture irony" (Roose, 2019).

At the same time, social scientists are becoming interested in studying how democracy, public opinion, and forms of extremism are formed online, particularly after Donald Trump's seemingly unlikely 2016 Presidential win (Nielsen, 2018). One theory that remains interesting to a wide variety of work in the political science and communications fields is Habermas' theory of the public sphere. The public sphere describes physical spaces in one's social life where individuals can come together to discuss and identify societal problems and form public opinions freely. Habermas' determinants of these spaces, such as freedom of association, equality, and debate of

rules of governance, and the ideal of the public sphere being free of domination— thus leaving the focus on the force of the argument— are incredibly valuable ideals for today’s online networks (Habermas, 1964). However, the combination of rising populism and internet connectivity have led some scholars to be extremely critical of Web 2.0 applications’ abilities to act as typical Habermasian spheres, choosing instead to understand sections of the internet as ‘anti-public’ spheres (Davis, 2020). These spaces, like white-supremacist websites and anti-immigration forums, for example, utilize right-wing populist themes and narratives to produce “counter-hegemonic opposition to democratic institutions and processes” (Davis, 2020, p. 2). Thus, if we are to begin to understand the complexities of these online spaces and the rising criticism of specific online communities, it is important to study a platform where these communities may exist: YouTube.

There are two essential objectives for this research project. The first is to examine a particular YouTube community (in this case, PewDiePie and his followers) in connection to elements of Habermasian public sphere theory. In particular, this project takes into consideration recent debates on the positive and negative impacts of Web 2.0 technologies on political discourse and breaks down whether YouTube’s platform presents some elements of Habermas’ original public sphere theory in this context. Second, by selecting a case study with connections to right-wing populism and extremism, this project aims to deepen the analysis of this particular space, and study PewDiePie and his community’s relation to these themes and the connected theories of alternative or ‘anti-public’ spheres. Thus, this project intends to bridge both the academic study of YouTube, updated public sphere theory, and current critiques and debates in the media.

This project focused on two exploratory questions:

1. *Does YouTube, as a platform for commentary and discussion and displayed contextually through the case study of PewDiePie and his community, present any elements of Habermas’ (1964) public sphere?*
2. *More specifically, if this particular online community with connections to right-wing populism like PewDiePie’s does not fit within the dimensions of Habermas’ public sphere, does it instead present as an example of an alternative or ‘anti-public’ sphere through the production of RWP themes?*

As briefly mentioned, the importance of this topic is two-fold. First, academically, while there is an emerging literature surrounding celebrities and political influence, there has been little work done surrounding YouTube and the political influence of its non-politically affiliated content creators and their followings. Also, by date of analysis, while there is literature connecting other internet platforms like Twitter or Facebook to Habermasian theory, no research had been conducted on the connection between this theory and YouTube as a platform. Thus, the academic significance of this research is two-fold: first, it aims to fill a gap in understanding whether YouTube works in fulfilling the aspects of Habermasian theory. Second, and most importantly, it seeks to understand how PewDiePie's community creates RWP narratives.

Second, substantively, YouTube is an incredibly powerful tool, particularly in the post-COVID-19 world as online political and social platforms become more critical generally, and individuals, corporations, and the media are turning their attention to the value of this platform. YouTube is vastly different than other popular content sites like Twitter and Facebook—its purpose is not to be a general social website. Instead, any person, business, or group can create video content and monetize their talent or creativity in seconds, which has led to hundreds of YouTube celebrities creating extremely loyal communities of fans. As Web 2.0 applications continue to embed themselves into our lives (Weldes, 2014), social science research mustn't ignore this site where individuals may be re-defining their ideological and political understandings of the world (Penney, 2019; May, 2010).

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

2.1. The internet as political tool

Most broadly, political scientists have focused on Web 2.0 sites like Twitter and Reddit as areas of political study through numerous perspectives, with a focus on their influence on political movements, informal and formal citizen engagement, and state censorship. However, there has been a heated debate between optimists and pessimists of the technology, as some researchers believe that the spread of the internet is positive for democracy and citizen mobilization (Diamond, 2010; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011; Shirky, 2011). Others argue that web applications are simply another instrument for continued authoritarian regime propaganda (Davison, 2014; Fuchs, 2014; Tang & Huhe, 2020).

Researchers have begun to identify the internet's ability to act as a convening or revolutionary tool through both positive and negative perspectives. In particular, a large variety of research has been conducted on Twitter's use during the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions (known as the "Arab Spring") through two main streams of argument. The first is that social media played a minimal role in the citizen uprising during these events, instead using it "as a tool for planning, [not] as a motivative factor" (Davison, 2014, p. 4). The second is that Twitter and other social media sites were focused portions of mobilization efforts, providing Arab citizens with the "space to express their dissatisfactions, to increase solidarity around a common cause and to organize themselves" (p. 4) (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011). There has also been intense scrutiny by researchers of the Western-centric means of Twitter's usage during these movements, as the platform's role increased due to the West's online engagement with the subject. While this led to an increase in awareness of the Arab Spring movement, it did not replace the importance of in-person communication from the protestors (Fuchs, 2014).

However, there is some evidence that the internet positively impacts political

mobilization around the world, though with some caveats. Lee and Fu's (2019) work on the internet's influence on political mobilization in South Korea and Taiwan shows that the Internet is positively associated with low-cost protest actions, like signing a petition. Their work acknowledges that this relationship also exists with the willingness of citizens to consider high-cost political activities such as attending demonstrations and joining in boycotts. However, they also argue that there has not been a consistent increase in actual protests or demonstrations since the onset of communicatory internet tools, even in countries like South Korea and Taiwan, where the internet is integrated into the country's political landscape (Lee & Fu, 2019).

There has also been a significant amount of research done on the impact of the internet in regards to the success of elite political actors, like politicians and authoritarian states, rather than citizens (Gounari, 2018; Penney 2019; Temporão et al., 2018; Wu et al. 2019). According to Lazaridis and Tsagkroni (2017), political parties have reacted slowly to the integration of the internet, but by the mid-2010s "politics appeared to take advantage of the power of technology" (p. 122). Consequently, "social media has been elevated to major campaign tools, [with individuals] often hosting debates via blogs and encouraging people to engage in direct communications with politicians and political representatives" (p. 122).

Political scientists are often concerned with the ability of individual states to take advantage of technologies further to censor the internet and engage in authoritarian practices online. Authoritarian leaders, including those from the United States, North Korea, Russia, China, and Venezuela, have effectively militarized the internet, bridging the worlds of propaganda and citizen 'freedom' (Fidler, 2014; Hassid, 2008; Tang & Huhe, 2020). Leaders understood, at the onset of the internet and its rapid development, that the technology had "no deterministic logic favoring liberty or democracy" (Fidler, 2015, p. 12) and that they could simultaneously censor the internet while increasing its use domestically. In one-party states like China, the internet could reinforce regime support amongst citizens, even as critical debate and adverse reporting about the government remains rampant in small-scale cyberspace communities (Boas 2006; Hassid 2008; Tang & Huhe, 2020).

2.2. Public sphere theory and ‘anti-publics’

Work done in communications and media studies helped to inform this project, including an emphasis on Habermas’ theory of ‘the public sphere’, as introduced previously. Habermas (1964) defines this phenomenon as the following: “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” where citizens “gather in an unrestricted fashion” (p. 50). Some dimensions of this theory are as follows: one, the formation of public opinion occurs at the site, two, all are granted access in some form, three, conference is allowed in unrestricted fashion (i.e., freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of expression and publication), and four, there is debate over the general rules governing relations within the space (Habermas 1964)¹. Initially, Habermas (1964) locates these as physical spaces in Great Britain and France’s coffeehouses, which emerged as popular gathering places around the late 17th century, as salons became essential sites of critical debate.

While it is evident that at concept inception, Habermas, did not anticipate the onset of Web 2.0 applications like YouTube, scholars have utilized the public sphere to understand a wide variety of public spaces outside of the initial definition. For example, Wedeen (2007) extends Habermasian theory to Yemen qat chews², stating that they “are analogous to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European salons and coffee-houses in the sense that they work to produce important forms of political engagement and critical debate” (p. 60). Importantly, Wedeen’s (2007) work emphasizes that conditions may be fundamentally different in these spaces from the ones Habermas (1964) initially identified, but they should be considered public spheres. Similarly, public sphere theory has been extended to Web 2.0 applications, as “the internet allows for potential access to a widespread diversity of political voices” (Lazaridis & Tsagkroni, 2017, p. 122). Thus, a form of ‘digital citizenship’ arguably emerged, which allows individuals to gather online, debate, and engage with each other, within the

¹ These dimensions will be utilized as criteria for the coding methodology of this project. For additional information about how these dimensions were integrated, see section 3: Theoretical Framework.

² Qat, which is a leafy stimulant drug with effects similar to caffeine, is chewed in Yemen “in the context of structured conversations occurring daily in public or semipublic places. In large rooms of houses or of a civic association’s offices, people, some of whom are strangers to one another, meet to debate critically about literary matters, political life, and social problems” (Wedeen, 2007, p. 64).

“disembodied realm of cyberspace as new social space” (Saco, 2002, p. 92; Fuchs, 2014).

There has been notable debate about the connection between the internet and Habermas’ original conception of the public sphere. Skeptics such as Mozorov (2011) and Fuchs (2014) argue that the notion of the online public sphere is based on the belief of ‘cyber-utopianism’- “a naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on the stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside” (Mozorov 2011, p. xiii). Similarly, some research that links explicitly public sphere theory to social media spaces argues that these technologies have created the opposite of an open and democratic sphere. Gil de Suniga and Bimber (2020) state that social media actively facilitates the spread of false beliefs through “obscuring the provenance of information, facilitating deception about authorship, and providing for manipulation of social signals” (p. 700). Shirky (2011) works to soften this critique and notes that despite attempts to control, censor, and monitor social media, social media platforms function as “long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere” (Shirky 2011, p. 32; Fuchs, 2014).

In a complication of the original concept and these critiques, researchers have also described spaces of the ‘anti-public sphere,’ defined as that “space of online socio-political interaction where discourse routinely and radically flouts the ethical and rational forms of democratic discourse” (Davis, 2020, p. 1). While a formerly offline space, it has been made visible through Web 2.0 applications and includes spaces such as “White supremacist websites, anti-climate science forums, militant ‘men’s rights’ sites, anti-immigration Facebook pages, gay hate memes, misogynist trolling, anti-Semitic websites, alt-right websites, and ‘truth’ websites” (Davis, 2020, p. 1). As described by Davis (2020), these sites represent something not entirely alien to Habermas’ original public sphere, as they are spaces for the development of public opinion, they present themselves in opposition to the values of Habermasian theory and publicity in three ways. First, these spaces show “little interest in adherence to principles of argumentation, evidence, truthfulness, mutuality, reciprocity, good faith and inclusiveness” (Davis, 2020, p. 3). Second, “such discourse often sets itself in pointed counter-hegemonic opposition to democratic processes and institutions such as the state, the media and the academy, and their managerial ‘elites’, and actively seeks to disrupt democratic processes for its own purposes. Third, such discourse is often

neglected or dismissed in discussions of participatory online media, and relegated to siloed discussions of such things as hate speech, cyber-racism, or anti-climate science groups, at the cost of developing a holistic understanding of anti-public discourse” (Davis, 2020, p. 3). As Davis (2020) states, “such [discourses are] a precise reflection of an everyday ‘post-normative’ democratic discourse that has itself become deeply infected with reactionist and populist themes” (p. 2). In this way, the anti-public sphere may express a “routine contempt for, and everyday attacks on, democratic processes and institutions typical of contemporary populist politics” (p. 3)³. While Davis (2020) does understand that ‘anti-publics’ are heterogeneous discursive fields, these spaces are important to research and understand as they “comprise a significant proportion of online participatory discourse” (p. 2).

2.3. Populism and discursive spaces online

Populism, especially in its right-wing form, can be an elusive phenomenon to research, as it often responds directly to challenges and discursive shifts in the relevant political environment (Alvares & Dahlgren, 2016; Kramer, 2017; Wodak & Kryzyzanwoski, 2017). As described by Taggart (2000), “it is profoundly difficult to construct a generalized description, let alone a universal and comprehensive definition of populism as an idea or as a movement” (p. 2), and there are several historically divergent definitions.

However, researchers have granted specific characteristics of populism, particularly in connection to right-wing politics. Right-wing populism (RWP) is defined as a hybrid of traditional and new forms of political actions and behavior. RWP includes several similar themes: defying ‘political correctness,’ anti-immigration and xenophobic rhetoric, patriotism, preservation of culture or traditional values, moral reasoning, and gendered, patriarchal notions (Kramer, 2017; Lazaridis & Tsagkroni, 2017; Wodak & Kryzyzanwoski, 2017). Wodak and Kryzyzanwoski (2017) also note that RWP is contradictory, as it “combines laissez-faire liberalism and anti-elitism with other, often

³ In Section 2.3, differential ways the internet has acted as a public sphere, including as an anti- or alternative public sphere, will be discussed.

profoundly different ideologies” (p. 475), where its appeal is first and foremost to one of the ‘common(wo)man.’

Researchers have also emphasized that these presentations of RWP are reinforced by fear, which grants immense substance to their messages. Works by both Pels (2012) and Wodak and Kryzyzanwoski (2017) state that current economic crises, immigration, and globalism promote an onslaught of fears. “[Fear] of losing one’s job; fear of ‘strangers’ (like migrants); fear of losing national autonomy; fear of losing old traditional values; fear of climate change; disappointment and even disgust with mainstream politics and corruption; anger about the growing gap between rich and poor; [and] disaffection due to the lack of transparency of political decision making,” among others (Wodak & Kryzyzanwoski, 2017, p. 476). Other researchers have also noted that, particularly in contemporary versions of right-wing populism, RWP discourse “promotes the relationship between masculinity and politics” (Loffler et al., 2020, p. 2). RWP groups often provide “opposition to feminism and gender-equality measures, same-sex marriage and gender studies [and] seek to re-instantiate traditional family and associated gender roles” in this patriarchal manner (p. 2).

Kramer (2017) notes that online access to information, combined with contact with those who have similar fears, mediates these themes and anxieties. He states that “persons who have a feeling of social or personal crisis get in contact with information that problematizes the current political conditions” (p. 1302), and this leads to the consolidation of RWP communities. Kramer (2017) adds on to this analysis, stating that “social media platforms allow people to communicate their identity beyond the immediate range of social interactions, and, therefore, in a more selective and stylized manner... as users adopt beliefs, symbols, and practice of rightwing populism as part of their lifestyle and identity and present them on online platforms, the ideology can also appear more plausible, viable, and attractive to others” (p. 1303). Thus, according to both Kramer (2017) and Kemners (2015), the internet allows RWP to circumvent the traditional media, releasing its information and stylized networks onto participatory platforms like Twitter, Reddit, and YouTube effectively creating online identity groups⁴.

⁴ See Section 2.4 for an introduction to social identity theory and its connection to RWP.

These communities have both been fueled by and a cause of both the predictable and unpredictable success of right-wing populists in recent years, including the election of United States President Donald Trump in 2016. While there is no consensus on what a populist leader looks or behaves like, some particular characteristics have successfully been defined – though they initially appear at odds. Leaders often use a ‘transgressive political style,’ where controversial attitudes and actions are the norms, such as in Russia’s Vladimir Zhirinovsky or the United States’ Donald Trump (Nai & Martinez, 2019; Oliver & Rahn, 2017). However, populist leaders are often extremely charismatic, which instills confidence in the leader’s ability to perform, a common characteristic of Latin American left-wing populists like Venezuela’s Chavez, though not limited by ideology (Bruk, 2013; Nai & Martinez, 2019; Oliver & Rahn, 2017). Scholars have also noted that this ideal of charisma can promote enhanced masculinity in RWP, as, “though gender-neutral, the descriptions of charisma often reveal framings that feature predominantly masculine attributes” and presents leaders as the “masculine and potentially violent ‘strongman’” (Löffler et al., 2020, p. 3). Importantly, though, whether or not a leader may have charisma himself, charisma may “exist in the relationship between the leader and the followers and the way that the former is perceived by the later” (Nai & Martinez, 2019, p. 2), stemming from a direct and active connection with their followers. Thus, this “allows them to mobilize and persuade their followers through an energetic, emotional, and bold political style” (p. 2).

In particular, Trump’s victory, and his follower’s belief in his charisma and leadership potential, is believed, in part, to have stemmed from his unconventional use of Web 2.0 technologies, like Twitter. This aids to what Wodak and Kryzyzanowski (2017) describe as the “*right-wing populist perpetuum mobile*: the intentional, regular, and excessive self-medication of right-wing populists on social media” (p. 476) and their excellent ability to create ‘alternative public spheres’ online, often allowing for falsified ‘democratic’ attributes within their group. Alternative public sphere theory, which is similar in scope to the understanding of counterpublics, has more traditionally been used to understand how marginalized groups, like women or racialized individuals, have gathered for anti-hegemonic discourse (Wodak & Kryzyzanowski, 2017). However, works by Wodak and Kryzyzanowski (2017) and Wright (2017) extend this theory onto RWP groups, stating that these groups are particularly good at creating emerging ‘weak’ public spheres. What is different between an alternative public sphere, in Wodak and

Krzyzanowski's (2017) understanding, and a directly anti-public sphere, is that RWP have, in these spaces, been able to successfully achieve a "delicate balance between appearing, on one hand, as extraordinary, unique, and possibly even anti-establishment, and, on the other, as authoritative and legitimate" (p. 476). Still, they may not necessarily allow for a broader discussion beyond RWP themes. Thus, they can effectively utilize the community aspects of the internet, where "self-expression and monologue is encouraged... but discussions are more likely to be as narrow or perhaps even narrower than those across the backyard fence" (Wright, 2017, p. 35).

In this way, the combination of the internet and RWP groups is vital. As work by Hauser (2018) states, populist leaders, while they may not always create a coherent doctrine with a central idea, utilize a tendency towards communality to reinforce their perspectives, and the internet provides the perfect opportunity for these spaces.

2.4. Social identity theory and right-wing populism

The integration of social identity theory is necessary to understand the in-group membership of particular online communities. The social identity approach focuses on the "attitudinal and behavioral consequences of the sense of self that people derive from the categorization of self (and others) in terms of group memberships (i.e., social identities)" (Steffens et al., 2018, p. 24). In short: social identity and self-categorization theories base their argument on the human need for a positive social identity, where the desire to achieve, maintain or enhance one's social status and hierarchy is triggered (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Shulz et al., 2018). Research suggests that shared group membership forms the basis for a range of meaningful social and political behaviours, "including people's capacity to influence and to be influenced by others" (Steffens et al., 2018, p. 25). Initially discussed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), the theory has been utilized in various academic paradigms, including psychology and political science, to describe the impact identification with specific social categories has on individuals' behaviour.

Social identity theory connects directly to RWP group membership and in-group thought. Tajfel and Turner's initial approach (1986) states that groups define themselves positively through three specific actions: one, by dissociating themselves from an out-group, two, by "seeking positive distinctive-ness for the in-group by redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation" (p. 286), and three, through direct competition

with an out-group. Bos et al. (2019) state that “in line with social identity theory, populist rhetoric frames issues as reflecting irreconcilable differences in norms, identities and interests while exaggerating intra-group homogeneity and intergroup differences” (p. 3). Thus, “populism not only addresses voters’ grievances but reaches out to vulnerable voters by fostering a positive social identity, irrespective of specific social context” (Bos et al., 2019, p. 4). Bos et al. also (2019) stress that individual racial, ethnic, or national identities are not always incredibly strong predictors of who votes for populist parties. Instead, it is the “priming of anti-elitist identity considerations that voters are most likely to agree with” in several cases, which may lead to in-group identification (Bos et al., 2019, p. 20).

Bos et al. (2019) and Schulz et al. (2020) also argue that populist political leadership is strengthened by this type of shared group membership and social identities, and vice-versa. While an “in-group’s self-understanding is promoted by prototypical in-group members... individuals learn their biases from [their group] role models” (Schulz et al., 2020, p. 207). Also, if an individual can connect with an in-group leader, depersonalization can occur, leading to the individual being “more likely to adopt populist opinion majority claims and believe in the numerical superiority of the own group” (Schulz et al., 2020, p. 207). Thus, social identity theory not only provides insight into how RWP groups form connections but also strengthens the work on the importance of RWP leadership outlined in Section 2.4.

2.5. YouTube

YouTube, as a technological application, though studied much more rarely than sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit, has been acknowledged by researchers for specific political qualities. According to Church (2010), “YouTube has moved on the digital continuum from obscurity to increasing political relevance,” and “should be considered as an emerging credible outlet of political discourse” (p. 124). Just as in Church’s (2010) research, the few studies on YouTube have focused primarily on large-scale corporate YouTube accounts, including from political parties, corporate entities, and think-tanks (Antonia et al., 2019; Church, 2010; May, 2010; Ricke, 2014; Gross, 2015).

Ricke (2014) and May (2010) state that YouTube can blur the boundaries between politicians, audiences, and mass media, creating an accessible and wide-reaching political space for its users. However, there is little discussion about the medium's ability to act as a public sphere between regular individuals and non-political YouTube 'celebrities' like PewDiePie. Work by Ridout et al. (2015) explains why this gap in academic work may exist: elite actors, such as politicians, are much more influential for the development of individuals' political ideologies, and have a more significant impact on voting than small, individual accounts. For example, while just as many non-elite actors were creating politically-focused YouTube videos leading up to the 2010 United States Senate elections, these organizations were dwarfed by views of traditional media advertisements – posted by large-scale accounts – on the site.

YouTube can also be challenging to study from a methodological standpoint, as generalizable data collection and analysis is difficult (Miller 2015; 2018). Miller (2018) notes that representativeness in the selection of YouTube videos is particularly tricky, especially if researchers select a video with very few comments. He states that “no single video (or handful of videos) can fully encompass the incredible magnitude of possible video sources on YouTube, other social media sites, or the Internet more generally” (p. 2). Thus, he discourages claiming any sort of representativeness of the larger (general or more internet-based) population.

The few researchers that have looked at individual YouTube celebrities, instead of corporate or political accounts, are particularly concerned about their sociological study. In Abidin's (2019) work on online 'Influencers,' she describes how Youtubers like PewDiePie now constitute an alternative estate of the media, as they produce loyal viewerships through charisma and their ability to create specific community contexts and vernacular. Similarly, Murthy and Sharma's (2019) work on YouTube content creators Das Racist specifies that the nature of YouTube comment sections allows for the natural reinforcement of ideology and political narrative directly from the videos themselves. Interestingly, these themes line up with the theories surrounding social identity theories and charismatic RWP leaders. While no specific work has been done to connect

YouTube communities and these theories, these online followings pick up YouTube content creators' beliefs, symbols, and practices in remarkably similar fashions⁵.

PewDiePie, specifically, while little studied as a case, has been shown to serve as a creator of *masculine gaming ideology* through this familiar internet vernacular. Masculine gaming ideology combines traditionally sexist and patriarchal ideologies with pop culture forms like video games, including popular online games Minecraft and Doom (Roberts & Caruso, 2017; Neilsen, 2018). As the majority of gamers in North America are male, PewDiePie's use of masculine talk, such as repeatedly making sexual or homophobic jokes to reaffirm masculinity, or utilizing the word 'bro' to discuss his fandom, "legitimizes the position of men at a place of power while making homosexual men and women the point of laughter" (Medina, Reed, & Davis, 2020, p. 24). However, he can reconcile this by featuring his wife and fellow gamer Marzia Bisognin, which sends a message that he is supportive of female gamers (Roberts & Caruso, 2017). Medina, Reed, and Davis (2020) state that PewDiePie's immense popularity is due in part to his work in reaching out to this male online community he has helped to reaffirm, making it seem as if his followers are his personal friends. Followers may post a comment that PewDiePie may feature in new videos or buy merchandise, or they may simply reproduce Kjellberg's informal physical and verbal language both online or in person. Through these actions, community members feel personally connected to him and are committed to watching, re-posting, and adding to the discussion (Medina, Reed, & Davis, 2020).

2.6. Conclusion

The existing literature provides a solid understanding of both the internet and YouTube's role as a formal and informal political tool, as well as its application in connection to rising right-wing populism worldwide and potential 'alternative public spheres.' In particular, the research questions and objectives of this work were informed by connecting literature from four areas of work: YouTube, social identity theory, RWP, and works on other Web 2.0 applications' functionality as Habermasian public spheres

⁵ Social identity theory plays an important role here, as analysis of both community members' leadership and the promotion of in- and-out-group identities could serve to be important aspects of the discussion. For an understanding of how social identity theory may bridge the gap between RWP, online communities, and the public sphere, see Section 3.5 in the theoretical framework.

and 'anti-public spheres.' Thus, this work acknowledges a contextual gap in the literature explicitly concerning discourse in online communities on YouTube like PewDiePie's, and seeks to understand the connection between the above-mentioned theories in this context.

Chapter 3.

Theoretical Framework

3.1. Public Sphere theory

Habermas' original theory, as well as newer uses from political science and media studies literature, informs both this research's concept of the 'public sphere' and acts as a starting point for the integration of additional theories like those of 'anti-publics'. While there has been significant critique of Habermas' original theory in regards to his focus on the bourgeois, this analysis also considers Habermas' acknowledgment of this shortcoming. It utilizes his idea of the "plebeian [or commoner] public sphere... [where the] economically dependent masses [could contribute to] the spontaneous formation of opinion to the extent to which they had attained the equivalent of the social independence of private property owners" (Habermas 1989, p. 434). Thus, to work within this critique, while this analysis utilizes his original dimensions to begin to analyze PewDiePie's online space, it also defines this online space as 'plebeian.' While access to YouTube does require an internet and technological connection, which may connect to class, its comment sections allow anyone to participate, not just those of higher economic standing.

Wedeen's (2007) understanding of the flexibility of the public sphere, wherein there is "variation in the size, composition of their publics, the mode of their proceedings, and topics open to debate" (p. 64), is also essential for this project. As described in her use of Habermasian theory, she also understands that conversations that may not appear political have consequences for power relationships, and this idea is included throughout this particular project. By acknowledging these aspects, this project understands the flexibility that has been applied to Habermas' theory and allows for additional discussion throughout the analysis.

The dimension of 'citizens' from Habermas' original theory will be flexible throughout this research, with members of PewDiePie's audience described as 'community members' rather than 'citizens' throughout the analysis. The term citizen, which connotes official political membership and is often "conceptualized within the

'boundaries' of the modernist state" (Cammaerts, 2007, p. 2), does not fully apply to the audience PewDiePie attracts for several reasons.

First, Habermas' original term of citizen "presupposes citizens to be rational and knowledgeable, active and informed" (Cammaerts, 2007, p. 4), which may not apply to all members of PewDiePie's audience, mainly since the videos are meant for entertainment, not information (pewdie.tumblr.com, 2017). Second, the global spread of the internet and economic opportunity structure, as well as YouTube's ability for asynchronous communication, removes any necessity for formal political or national citizenship from members (Cammaerts, 2007). Finally, members of PewDiePie's community may not wish to be considered 'citizens' in the traditional sense, mainly due to PewDiePie's emphasis on creating his community and the ideology of its members (Medina, Reed, & Davis, 2020). Thus, the term 'community member,' which allows for a broader interpretation of membership than 'citizen,' will be utilized.

Interestingly, YouTube's values echo many essential dimensions of the Habermasian public sphere, including freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of opportunity, and the freedom to belong (YouTube, n.d.). However, in this online context, YouTube's moderation policy must be taken into consideration, as it could impact the application's connection to Habermas' concept of debate over governing rules. YouTube's Community Guidelines, which state they do not allow "pornography, incitement to violence, harassment, or hate speech" (transparencyreport.google.com, n.d.), rely on both automated flagging systems and active YouTube employees to remove content by users that are either connected to these disallowed themes or flagged as spam or bots. As well, as of 2019, YouTube was subjected to COPPA⁶, which made additional removal of comment sections, advertisements, and videos necessary. Between just October 2019 and December 2019 alone, YouTube removed approximately 540 million user comments, which adds complexity to this research's analysis. This moderation policy could either reduce the applicability of the concept of the public sphere, as it is a restriction on freedom of

⁶ COPPA is the United States' "Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA)" which imposes certain requirements on operators of websites or online services directed to children under 13 years of age. In 2019, YouTube was subjected to COPPA, which means that it asks for content creators to label any videos of theirs that may appeal to children; if they do, it means data collection about viewers are blocked, resulting in lower ad revenue, and comment sections and end screens will be blocked. If they do not comply, content creators may be fined by the FTC.

expression, or it could strengthen Habermas' understanding of the force of argumentation. To Habermas (1998), communicative rationality, wherein members pursue goals based on a shared understanding and a meriting of cooperative behavior, should be encouraged in public sphere spaces. Thus, moderation could be an aspect of domination that, which negates aspects of the public sphere, could act as a force in which community members may co-operate in order to oppose.

Finally, moderation could also act as an expression of the fourth element of the theory – debate about the governance of relations– as PewDiePie's online community tends to disagree with internet regulation on any basis. As some of PewDiePie's videos are aimed at children, and YouTube's regulatory policies, including COPPA, look specifically at that type of content, PewDiePie and his followers tend to feel personally attacked and unfairly disqualified from freedom on the platform⁷.

In response to potential critiques about the positive or negative connections between the internet and public sphere theory, this analysis will attempt to take neither a 'techno-optimist' nor 'techno-pessimist' positionality. Instead, this project focuses on a nuanced theoretical understanding not dissimilar from Shirky's (2011). As the case selection for this study combines a positive framing of online democratic and discursive spaces with a potentially destructive and violent RWP community within PewDiePie's followers⁸, this analysis will explore the community's experience without disregarding the technology's possible drawbacks in this case.

⁷ While COPPA was originally established by the United States Congress, not YouTube, PewDiePie and YouTube have clashed about opinions surrounding COPPA and other government regulations related to the free internet. In 2019, YouTube's Chief Executive Susan Wojcicki announced that the platform's top priority would be responsibility and a "pledge to police troubling videos and protect millions of underage users" (Bergen & Shaw, 2019). Not only did YouTube accept COPPA with open arms, but went further than the regulation, stating that they would screen every video aimed at kids younger than 8 in its YouTube Kids app and ensure that no malicious content would appear for those users. At the time of the announcement, PewDiePie stated that he would leave the video site in a since-deleted video, blaming the new policy. However, he did not resign from his channel as announced, and still uploads videos as of August 2020 (Bergen & Shaw, 2019).

⁸ For in-depth information about violence and extremism within the PewDiePie community of followers, see Section 4.2: *Case selection*.

3.2. Right-wing populism

Theories surrounding right-wing populism are vital to this analysis. While populism more broadly is consistent with other ideologies, such as left-wing populism or socialism, this analysis focuses on right-wing populism (RWP) in the context of the case study's community vernacular and activities⁹ (Wodak & Kryzyzanowski, 2017). Instead of approaching rightwing populism as a static ideology, this analysis examines the theories of RWP, which are relevant to online, worldwide, participatory platforms like YouTube and are inclusive of PewDiePie's global reach (Kramer, 2017). Thus, this analysis characterizes right-wing populism as a manifestation of global crises, or as an "ideology which pits a virtuous and homogenous people against a set of elites and dangerous "others" who are together depicted as depriving the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, and voice" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 3). However, it will not define it via one specific sovereign state or as a result of one particular historical event. The following characteristics of RWP, derived from the literature, will be used: fear of 'strangers' (like migrants), disgust with mainstream politics and corruption, fear of losing old traditional values (like masculinity and traditional gender norms), anti-elitism, and defying 'political correctness' (Wodak & Kryzyzanowski, 2017).

Also, this analysis departs from the assumption that RWP is expressed and spread primarily by elites or mainstream media (Kramer, 2017). To effectively analyze PewDiePie's community, this research will look at both PewDiePie as an 'elite' producer of RWP ideologies while not disregarding the impact of his community members within their alternative public spheres (or their *right-wing populist perpetuum mobile*). Thus, as informed by the work of Oliver and Rahn (2016), this project characterizes the personality and leadership style of a populist leader in the following way: they "adopt a transgressive political style" that emphasizes "agitation, spectacular acts, exaggeration, calculated provocations, and the intended breach of political and socio-cultural taboos" through charisma and leadership (p. 191). Though not all populist leaders employ these characteristics, and not all populist parties or movements have a clear, identifiable leader, this broader inclusion of features allows for integration and connection to PewDiePie and his community. PewDiePie's role as a leader is essential to consider

⁹ For in-depth information about the context of this case selection, and why RWP is relevant, see Section 4.2: *Case Selection*.

throughout the analysis, even if there is no explicit policy discussion, especially when considering social identities.

3.3. Alternative, or anti-, public spheres

This analysis also emphasizes theories of alternative, or anti-, public spheres, which help to fulfill the objectives of this research if Habermas' original dimensions are not met. While alternative public sphere theory applies to a variety of contexts, including groups concerning women and racialized communities, this particular project focuses on Kodak's (2015) definition of the concept, which connects it to RWP. The alternative public sphere in this context acknowledges that specific communities, like PewDiePie's, may still reinforce democratic principles, and utilize their free spaces to discuss and debate their political ideologies. However, they often do so through a narrower lens in which RWP ideas are promoted and reinforced through agreement (Kodak, 2015). Additionally, Kodak's (2015) understanding of the alternative public sphere, through an RWP lens, emphasizes that leaders in this context continue to reinforce principles that make them look favorable in the views of the public-at-large. This definition of the alternative public sphere also considers the role these spaces play for groups aiming to confront or challenge hegemonic power relations, which could present itself as the type of anti-elite or anti-establishment narratives offered by RWP (Dahlgren, 2018; Kodak, 2015).

In contrast to the idea of an 'alternative public sphere' or 'counter-public', the concept of the 'anti-public' sphere opposes Habermas' ideals of these spaces. This analysis uses Davis' (2020) definition of the idea as described, as it directly connects to online RWP communities. This project recognizes that PewDiePie's community, through the iteration of RWP themes and the way that community members may disregard public sphere principles altogether, may fit better as described as an 'anti-public' sphere. Debate is discouraged in these spaces, and members "see only what they want to see, and publicize only what they want us to see, refusing to debate anyone who questions the nature or reality" of the specific community (Davis, 2020, p. 5). These spaces are incredibly important to understand from a research perspective, as these communities develop political and ideological meanings that help to inform a participant's everyday discourses (Davis, 2020).

By employing these two theories of the anti- or alternative public sphere, this project understands that these online spaces are incredibly complex and leaves space for additional research in the future.

3.4. Social identity theory

To further bridge the complexities of public sphere theory, anti-public sphere theory, and RWP, this paper utilizes Schulz et al.'s (2020) definition of social identity theory. Social identity theory, and Schulz et al.'s (2020) particular use, was picked for two reasons. Firstly, an analysis of in-group identities can help us understand how strongly PewDiePie's followers promote group values and what role PewDiePie plays as a leader. As Schulz et al.'s (2020) definition connects social identity theory and RWP, it was also relevant for this particular context and discussion of PewDiePie's in-group values.

Secondly, consequences of membership driven by strong in-group identities may prevent the platform from acting as a Habermasian public sphere. Powerful social identities, in an RWP context, may "stimulate generalized attitudes, biased perceptions, or comprehensive categorizations regarding diverse societal entities" (Schulz et al., 2020, p. 204). False consensus can be easily created within an in-group, which fosters in-group strength, but may prevent increased depth of discussion or debate. Thus, this theory is not only relevant for RWP and alternative sphere theory but aids in the assessment of Habermasian theory as well.

Chapter 4.

Methodology

4.1. Case Selection

The chosen case study for this project is YouTube's PewDiePie, a Swedish gamer with more than 100 million subscribers, and his online community. PewDiePie, which rhymes with 'cutie-pie,' is the online moniker of Felix Kjellberg, a white male who was born in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 1989. A university dropout, he launched his YouTube account in 2010, and through the succeeding years, has become one of the most popular YouTube celebrities and content creators on the site, being the first individual to reach 10 billion views in 2015 (Parker, 2016). At first glance, PewDiePie's content, where he sits at his computer and plays games like Minecraft, could be tedious to watch; however, his "irreverent authenticity: an off-handed personal approach... which blurs the line between playful and obnoxious" (Moran, 2019) has turned passive gaming into active, enjoyable entertainment for millions.

This case was selected for study for several reasons, which are informed by Miller's (2015; 2018) work on YouTube commentary. First, while PewDiePie may not be a 'typical' case for YouTube, its value is, at the macro level, of intrinsic importance (Gerring, 2017). As large-scale corporate YouTube accounts are more actively studied, the individual case selected needed not to be overtly politically affiliated nor subsidized by corporate interests other than YouTube ad revenue to reflect YouTube's community outside of the corporate field. Thus, no YouTube accounts or videos from political parties, corporations, or news organizations were considered.

Secondly, I chose PewDiePie to fulfill some of Miller's (2015; 2018) critiques of studying YouTube as a platform. A case needed to be selected from an individual content creator with a substantial enough YouTube following to gather enough data for the quantitative aspect of this research and to be representative of the technology in this community's context (Miller, 2015). As PewDiePie has the highest number of followers of any one, non-corporate individual, at over one-hundred and five million subscribers as of August 2020, it is possible to study a high number of comments (10,000 per video) within a substantial online following (Tassi, 2019). As well, to respond to the potential

problem of representativeness, I focus on providing analysis solely on PewDiePie's community and group membership, rather than the broader platform. This project does not aim to assess whether YouTube as a whole can be a public sphere. Rather, it assesses whether PewDiePie's community acts a public sphere specifically.

PewDiePie, as a content creator, is also directly tied to RWP narratives and events, which connects this case to the second research question for analysis and acknowledges the platform's ability to act as an alternative public sphere. According to reports from the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ), and *Vox*, PewDiePie has been linked to activities that are a "hotbed of anti-Semitism, racism, and alt-right rhetoric disguised as pop culture commentary" (Romano, 2018). As a white, Swedish man, PewDiePie's followers describe themselves as his 'bros,' and his fans on his community Reddit site *r/PewdiepieSubmissions* often debate current political events and re-post from Reddit sites like *r/The_Donald*¹⁰ and *r/TheRedPill*¹¹ (Winkler, Nicas, & Fritz, 2017). According to the WSJ, 14 of PewDiePie's videos, which have been taken down by the date of this analysis, contained antisemitic or Nazi imagery. One in particular, which included the imagery of two Indian men holding up a "Death to All Jews" sign, caused Disney to sever all business ties with PewDiePie (Winkler, Nicas, & Fritz, 2017). The most heinous of PewDiePie's connections was to the white supremacist Christchurch shooter in New Zealand, who uttered "subscribe to PewDiePie" minutes before gunning down worshippers in two different mosques, killing forty-nine people (Dickson, 2019).

However, he has distanced himself from those viewpoints and events. While the *WSJ* and other sources presented PewDiePie and his followers as subscribers to RWP ideology, PewDiePie has tried to debunk this theory. In a since-deleted video, he made the following points: one, that the media thus far only focused on his earnings and wealth, ignoring his charity work with organizations in opposition to RWP views. Two, those who do not utilize YouTube fear the influence of YouTubers, and the *WSJ* is attempting to discredit and undermine his economic value. Three, *WSJ* took his jokes

¹⁰ Reddit site *r/The_Donald* was a subreddit where participants created discussions and memes in support of U.S. President Donald Trump. While it grew to over 790,000 subscribers, it was banned in June 2020 as activities by members and moderators of the site were controversial, including a history of racist, misogynistic, and islamophobic posts (Winkler, Nicas, & Fritz, 2017).

¹¹ Reddit site *r/TheRedPill* is known as the "men's rights" subreddit, and was notorious for extremely misogynistic posts deriding feminist ideologies and mocking rape victims (Romano, 2019).

out of context and misrepresented his jokes as intentional hate posts. Finally, four, he cannot control the fact that hate groups support him and are a part of his community (Abidin, 2019). In a public statement on his Tumblr account, PewDiePie denounced these hate groups, stating that “as laughable as it is to believe that I would endorse these people... no, I don’t support these people in any way” (pewdie.tumblr.com, 2017).

PewDiePie emphasizes that he makes videos for “entertainment, and not [as] a place for serious political commentary,” and that his loyal audience knows and understands this (pewdie.tumblr.com, 2017). This audience is an essential consideration for this case study, as his community of ‘bro-fists,’ as he calls them, are integral to his branding and communication. While it is difficult to find information about the demographic of PewDiePie’s more than 100 million followers on YouTube, PewDiePie describes his followers unironically as “bros,” which reinforces the idea that the majority of his followers are male-identifying (pewdie.tumblr.com, 2017). Though PewDiePie has distanced himself from specific hate groups, he continually reinforces the ‘masculine’ gaming narratives that gained him a following, which could add an aspect of identity, and restrict freedom of association that original Habermasian theory emphasizes.

This analysis also takes into consideration the contextual male internet vernacular that PewDiePie and his followers subscribe to, including PewDiePie and his followers’ responses to allegations about connections to RWP. This internet culture could create complexity in the analysis, as it has the potential to generate overlap between their community’s internet vernacular and RWP narratives. As stated in *The New York Times*, “it’s tempting to write off [PewDiePie’s] scandals as an inscrutable product of a teen subculture, wrapped up in layers of irony and the peculiar language and aesthetics of YouTube... but it’s most useful to understand Kjellberg’s actions in the context of the vast platform on which it took place- YouTube- and nascent strains of politics that could come to define it” (Herrman, 2017).

4.2. Data

To reinforce the case selection, I retrieved commentary and visual data from five of the most popular of PewDiePie’s videos (i.e., high view count and popularity) (Gerring, 2017) as well as his video entitled “My Response.” The six videos selected all had a minimum of 10,000 comments and were all mentioned as part of the top ten posts of all

time on the subreddit r/PewDiePieSubmissions (a page on online forum Reddit, where PewDiePie supporters gather to discuss his videos). The six videos that were selected and utilized for analysis are PewDiePie’s top five most popular videos of all time containing open comment sections¹², as well as PewDiePie’s video entitled “My Response”:

Table 1: Videos Included in Analysis

| # | TITLE | DATE PUBLISHED | URL ID | LENGTH (MINS) | VIEWS ¹³ |
|---|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | “bitch lasagna” | October 5, 2018 | 6Dh- RL__uN4 | 2:14 | 244,445,336 |
| 2 | “Congratulations” | March 31, 2019 | PHgc8Q6qTjc | 4:18 | 181,668,794 |
| 3 | “Level 7 I’M NOT CRAZY (OUTLAST IRL GAMEPLAY)” | February 10, 2016 | MsplPPW7tF o&t=4s | 20:43 | 118,691,410 |
| 4 | “THE RUBY PLAYBUTTON / YouTube 50 Mil Sub Reward Unbox” | December 18, 2016 | 7Vj5M0qKh8g &t=1s | 10:08 | 78,762,792 |
| 5 | “YouTube Rewind 2018, but it’s actually good” | December 27, 2018 | By_Cn5ixYLg &t=88s | 5:34 | 74,156,540 |
| 6 | “My Response” | September 12, 2017 | cLdxuaxaQwc &t=33s | 1:35 | 14,344,220 |

¹² Note: PewDiePie’s video entitled “A Funny Montage” from 2014 is the fourth overall most popular video on his channel; however, it could not be included due to its comment section being restricted.

¹³ As of June 20, 2020.

A short description of each of the videos, derived from analytic memoing¹⁴, is the following.

1. “bitch lasagna”:
 - a. In this video, PewDiePie raps a “diss-track” to T-series¹⁵, which is an Indian, corporate-owned Bollywood YouTube account, nearing PewDiePie’s channel as the most subscribed account in the world. PewDiePie, while standing on a beach, uses the rap to emphasize the differences between him and T-series, including their nationalities (Swedish vs. Indian), and states that his fans will overtake theirs in subscribers through an “internet war” he ignites.
2. “Congratulations”:
 - a. In a follow up to the first video, PewDiePie and guest rappers Dave and Roomie satirically congratulate T-series for “winning the war” between them and becoming the most subscribed YouTube account in the world in early 2019.
3. “Level 7 | I’M NOT CRAZY (OUTLAST IRL GAMEPLAY)”
 - a. As part of a series directly supported by YouTube HQ, PewDiePie plays a real-life, artificial-intelligence version of *Outlast*, which is a popular horror survival PC game.
4. “THE RUBY PLAYBUTTON / YouTube 50 Mil Sub Reward Unbox”
 - a. In this video, which is the oldest of the videos included in this analysis, PewDiePie unboxes a reward given from YouTube for obtaining 50 million subscribers; it is a physical ruby play button, in the style of YouTube’s logo.
5. “YouTube Rewind 2018, but it’s actually good”

¹⁴ As described by Saldaña (2016), analytic memoing is “somewhat comparable to researcher journal entries or blogs- a place to ‘dump your brain’ about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more about them” (p. 44). During the process of viewing each video multiple times, I created memos about PewDiePie’s actions and the content of each of the videos. This informed the short descriptions of each video, as well as it helped to understand the context of the comment sections under analysis.

¹⁵ Super Cassettes Industries Private Limited, otherwise known as T-series, is a music record label and film production company in India founded by Gulshan Kumar in 1983. As of 2014, it is India’s largest record label company, produced the vast majority of Bollywood and Indi-pop music in the country (“Super Cassettes Industries Ltd”, n.d.). As of 2020, T-series’ YouTube channel is the most subscribed channel on YouTube, with over 141 million subscribers.

- a. Every year, YouTube produces a “Rewind” video, which is a semi-parodical compilation of clips from some of the most popular videos of the year. In 2018, PewDiePie was not included in YouTube’s official Rewind, so he created his own, which contains clips from internet memes, his videos, and supporter videos.
6. “My Response”
- a. In the only remaining published video in direct response to media allegations of racism, xenophobia, and connection to hate-groups, PewDiePie apologizes for using the n-word in a video stream on Twitch.

While the “My Response” video has a lower number of views than the other five, it was added to the analysis for context. It would have been informative to include the 14 videos that the *WSJ* used in their report, or PewDiePie’s since-deleted response video to the allegations, but as “My Response” is the only still published video of this type, it was selected to help fill this gap in the data. As well, it allows for a comparison between videos of PewDiePie’s, between those where he sets the list of his videos to one where he is responding directly to critique. Thus, this video may be useful to help assess the fourth dimension of the Habermasian public sphere (discussion on what is and what is not acceptable discourse in this particular community). It is also interesting that this particular video was left up and open for discussion, while the others in connection to his actions have been removed.

4.3. Method of Analysis

This project utilizes a descriptive-interpretive approach to explain the connection between YouTube, public sphere theory, and RWP online (Saldaña, 2016; Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). Though there is little agreement on how best to research YouTube’s application, this project has been heavily informed by previous work in political science and communications about the platform. These works include Murthy and Sharma’s (2018) analysis on YouTube comment sections and networked identities and Miller’s (2015; 2018) work on emotion within YouTube’s visual and textual data.

To interpret the project’s objectives within this particular context, this research project conducted qualitative coding and simple quantitative matrix coding in Nvivo and Excel. For the quantitative aspect of this project, 10,000 comments were scraped off of

each YouTube video using Nvivo's NCapture application, and then auto-coded using Nvivo's coding feature for themes. I then exported the data into Excel, and its descriptive statistics (including percentage of occurrence) were analyzed.

For the qualitative aspect of this project, an eclectic combination of values, emotions, concept, and versus coding (Saldaña, 2016) was applied to the top fifty comments from each video through Excel. The coding processes were used in the following way to analyze whether or not this particular case met the criteria for a Habermasian public sphere or an anti-public or alternative sphere through the promotion of RWP values:

1. *Emotion coding* was utilized to assign or label the emotion within a comment. While not always relevant to aspects of the public sphere, as political expression can occur with technical, policy-driven debate rather than emotive language, emotions like *anger*, *fear*, helped to develop analysis on RWP themes and potential hostility towards out-groups. As well, emotion codes like *humour* or *enthusiasm*, aided investigation on group dynamics and bonds between members of the PewDiePie group and their common social identity.
2. *Values coding* was utilized to reflect the values, attitudes, and beliefs within a comment, which aided the analysis of both Habermasian and RWP themes. Codes related to political ideology and debate like *approval of content* or *call to action* helped to inform whether or not individuals were participating in the formation of public opinion on subject matter outside of the realm of PewDiePie's videos. Those codes related to values of identity or community membership, like *racialized identities* or *internet communality*, were used to inform connection with RWP and social identities.
3. *Versus coding* relates to dichotomies in the comments, such as conflict through personal opinion or membership (i.e., male versus female, left versus right), and assigns them their relevant code. This coding process is particularly suitable for RWP framing and social identity theory, as both are strengthened by othering and an in-group versus out-group established narrative. In terms of dimensions of the Habermasian public sphere, coding of

these dichotomies helped to inform values of inclusive access, freedom of association, and expression.

4. *Concept coding*, perhaps the most crucial of all of the four processes, was used to pre-determine aspects of the Habermasian public sphere and RWP theory and connect them to specific comments. RWP themes informed codes like *critique of government* and *masculinity*, and Habermasian theory created codes such as *freedom of association* and *inclusivity*¹⁶.

Cells were color-coded according to the type of coding utilized, with up to two types per comment, and additional narratives were given rich text features to enhance analysis 'at-a-glance' (i.e., if a comment was a direct reply to another user, this was bolded within the cell). As well, qualitative visual coding occurred, with a descriptive analysis of each of the six videos through analytic memoing, which was then stored in Nvivo. For more information about this coding process, including codebooks, see Appendices A and B¹⁷.

As previously discussed, there are two main objectives of this project. The first to understand what elements, if any, of Habermas' public sphere theory may appear within the context of PewDiePie's online YouTube community. The second is to understand, if elements of Habermasian theory are not met, does this particular case instead present as an anti-public or alternative public sphere through the group's connection to themes of RWP. To achieve the objectives outlined within this project, three significant steps of analysis were taken after the coding process, which were then used to achieve the goals concurrently at the final stage

First, I took the codes from the large-N auto-coded commentary and analyzed their frequency to give context to future analysis. The themes created in this step were created through NVivo inductively and then connected to any RWP or public sphere

¹⁶ Interestingly, the code *inclusivity* is the only code in the codebook that does not have referenced comment, as there were zero qualifying comments in the data set that could be connected to this concept.

¹⁷ Not all original codes are included in the Appendices. Codes that were similar to each other were combined for clarity, and those that were not found in the data set were not included in the final codebook.

themes from the theories to begin to understand the full picture of the comments as a data set and to inform the qualitative coding and analysis process.

Second, I analyzed the make-up of the qualitative coding, and the frequency of each code created in the data set, as the coding processes utilized in this step was directly informed by questions about Habermasian theory and RWP alternative sphere themes. Particular attention was applied to the codes that were directly connected to Habermasian theory (i.e. *disagreement*, *discussion*, *inclusivity*, and *freedom of association*) and their frequency, as the qualitative connections between individuals are vital to the understanding of this online space as a potential public sphere.

Finally, the in-depth analysis occurred through the combination of the first two processes to answer the research questions. To understand the interaction of words within the context of PewDiePie's community, this work adapts Schaffer's (2014) Ordinary Language interviewing technique to this textual analysis. Thus, this project insists that "everyday words reflect the accumulated wisdom of a shared culture or a community, [and that] the meaning of a word consists in how [it is] used" (p. 184-185). By identifying key themes arising from the auto-coded commentary and examining their use in the small-n comments, a nuanced analysis was conducted on the difference in how these words were used and emphasized. For example, terms like *bro* and *bitch*, which frequently occurred in the quantitative data set and were determined to be in potential connection to RWP themes, were analyzed qualitatively for their use in PewDiePie's context. Using this method, the codes were determined to be of consequence to both the link to RWP and the definition of social identities in this space, which may not be the case in other contexts. Importantly, the qualitative codes were used to understand how these words were being used (i.e., whether or not debate with these themes was taking place, or how YouTube's platform either did or did not aid these interactions). Through the combination of both the quantitative and qualitative analysis, it was possible to understand the complexity of communication between PewDiePie's community members and YouTube's platform, which aids our first objective, and how, if any, RWP themes were being expressed, which aids our second objective.

As well, to fully answer the second objective of this research, and determine any potential connection to alternative or anti-public sphere theories, I took careful time and

consideration on analyzing the six videos visually, through several viewings of each video. This consideration allowed for the acknowledgment that, while RWP themes may exist, they may also be applied through a particular community vernacular and emphasized by PewDiePie as a content creator.

For both the first and second objectives, my methods focus on the analysis of the YouTube comments and community within this particular context. It should be noted that I do not engage in complicated statistical analysis, due in part to limitations of time and resources.

4.4. Researcher Bias

In this section, I will discuss why I chose this particular project, and address some biases I may have as a researcher in this subject.

This research project was motivated by popular culture discourse on the topic of RWP and YouTube. In particular, I paid close attention to the *WSJ* and *New York Times*' reports on PewDiePie and his connection to alt-right hate groups and violence, igniting interest in both PewDiePie and his community's response to the allegations. While the discourse presented by media outlets like the *WSJ* is incredibly exciting and informative in its own right, it may misrepresent or dramatize the connection between PewDiePie and emerging youth political cultures.

I have potential biases in this analysis, as I have been an avid YouTube content consumer for several years. I am also a personal subscriber to PewDiePie, which could add additional complexity to this analysis. Because of this, I may be more likely to conclude that YouTube communities serve as an example of a public sphere as I have a personal connection and enjoy the platform in my day-to-day life. However, I do not consider myself a member of PewDiePie's 'bro-fist' community, partially because I do not comment or contribute to any online discussions about his content. Also, I am female-identifying, and his community members are often obsessed with their masculine attributes, which has turned me off from the community in the past.

Thus, while I am a personal subscriber of PewDiePie and avid user of YouTube, I have tried to be mindful of these potential connections and limit their impact on my work. During the research process, I did not enter PewDiePie's community (either on YouTube

or Reddit) on my personal accounts, and did not post comments or questions on any videos or content related to PewDiePie or his followers. As well, by utilizing Nvivo's comment capture software, and capturing the top 10,000 comments from each of the videos, it prevented any cherry-picking of data to occur that would have confirmed potential biases.

4.5. Quality and Rigour

To further reduce potential biases, and to maintain quality and rigor throughout this approach, I gave special attention to maintaining a comprehensive codebook as well as tracking procedural logic through analytical memos (Saldaña, 2016; Tie, Birks, Francis, 2019). While Nvivo automatically keeps a record of all auto-codes and creates a codebook, the compilation of codes from the qualitative analysis of commentary and videos will be held both on paper and within a Microsoft Word file to answer any potential methodological questions that arise.

As well, identifying information, such as usernames from accounts, were not reported in this project. Although usernames often appear anonymous, and they are presumed pseudonyms, usernames could allow one to conduct an online search on an individual, thereby violating the original poster's privacy (Miller, 2018). Thus, all comments are identified by the number of users in an exchange rather than the commenter's username.

Chapter 5.

Results

Through the careful quantitative and qualitative analysis of the sixty-thousand comments included in this project, it is apparent that although specific characteristics of the public sphere do appear within PewDiePie's community, it does not fulfill the majority of the theory's elements as examples occur at a low frequency throughout the quantitative data. PewDiePie's community does lend itself to be a type of an anti-public sphere, though, as themes connected to RWP do occur throughout the data set and help to define strong group membership outside of the realm of classical Habermasian publicity. However, this is nuanced in this particular community.

In the following section, I go into depth about each step of the analysis, quantitative and qualitative, followed by a discussion of the above-combined results and conclusion in Chapter 6.

As only over a quarter of each dataset yielded referenced codes or themes¹⁹, it is also crucial that this large-N analysis act as an informative, and exploratory, background for the qualitative assessment, rather than include definitive answers for the project's research questions at this stage.

Table 2: Number of Comments Auto-Coded in Nvivo

| Video # | # of Comments Scraped | # of Comments Referenced during Auto-coding | # of Codes Created | % of Comments Referenced |
|---------|-----------------------|---|--------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | 10,000 | 2733 | 186 | 27.3% |
| 2 | 10,000 | 2769 | 148 | 27.6% |
| 3 | 10,000 | 2572 | 198 | 25.7% |
| 4 | 10,000 | 2721 | 123 | 27.2% |
| 5 | 10,000 | 2579 | 129 | 25.8% |
| 6 | 10,000 | 2607 | 154 | 26.1% |

In this fashion, the auto-coding revealed *two significant themes* from the data set.

1. Interestingly, the majority of themes created are seemingly unrelated to any political or democratic discourse, and instead are general concepts related to YouTube's platform and PewDiePie's content.
2. Codes (i.e., *bro*, *bitch*, and *war*) that connect to RWP themes of racial othering/fear of strangers, anti-elitism and the promotion of traditional masculine values frequently appear in the data set. However, qualitative study and additional information such as context, use of sarcasm, upvoting and

¹⁹ Nvivo will only create a code or theme if there is a high enough frequency of use throughout the data set— though this percentage is not defined and varies by each data set. A vast majority of the comments from this data set were unique, contained typos, and utilized individualistic phrasing, which prevented them from being auto-coded.

downvoting²⁰, and participant replies, is necessary to determine the purpose and relevance of each code.

First, the auto-coding process show variety across sections through language and form. In all five of the videos, there are only six themes that represented a percentage of coverage in the data set of one percentage point or more, and these themes are unspecific to any particular political narrative, ideology, or community broader than PewDiePie's videos. As seen in Figure 2, these codes, which are *rewind*, *gang*, *play button*, *series*, *video*, and *PewDiePie*, are words taken directly from the titles of the videos themselves (as in "YouTube Rewind, but's good" or "THE RUBY PLAYBUTTON"). Or, they are generic words from within the YouTube community, such as *series*, *video*, or *PewDiePie*.

The only word with a percentage coverage higher than one percentage point that requires additional analysis to derive relevance is the word *gang*. The reference and

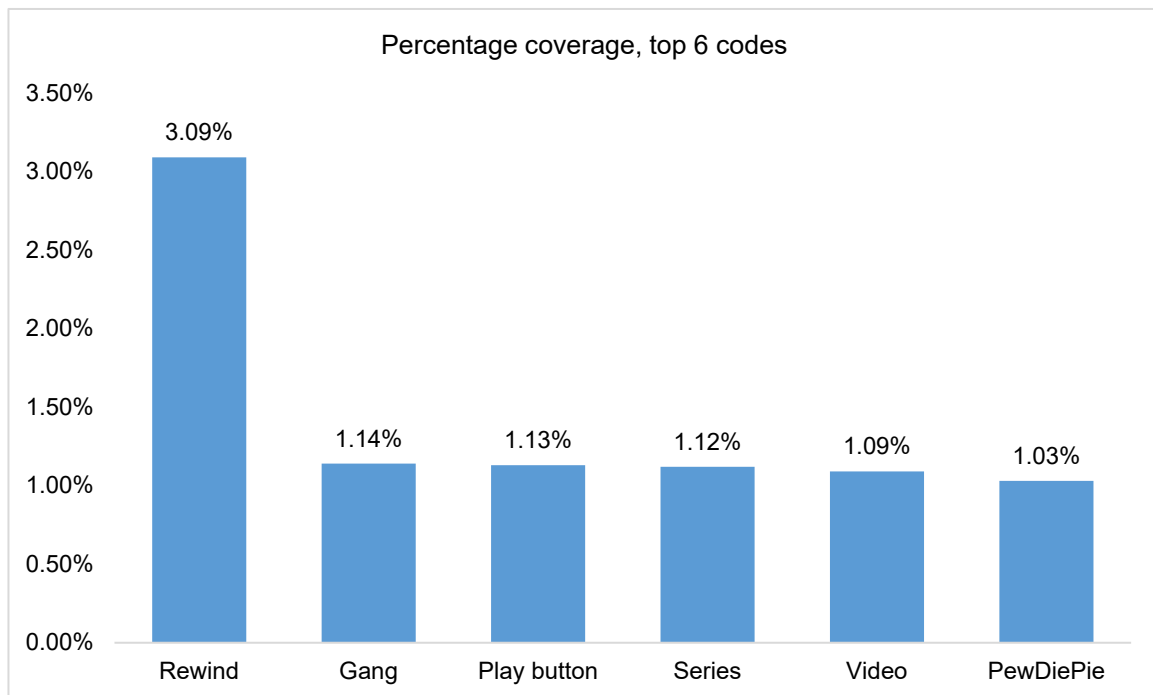


Figure 2: Auto-coded Themes with Over 1% Coverage

²⁰ Upvoting and downvoting is a form of follower 'poll' on YouTube. While not all users up or downvote content, they may upvote something that they enjoy, including videos or comments from other users, or downvote something they disagree with or dislike. Upvoting and downvoting is extremely common on social media applications, though it might take different forms, like liking and reacting (Facebook) or favoriting (Twitter).

related codes²¹ of *floor gang*, *chair gang*, and *ceiling gang* here lead to the interpretation that this word isn't being used per its original definition, which connotates criminality. Instead, this seems to stem from a particular 'inside joke' or vernacular determined by the community and would not fit with any RWP themes.

5.1.2. Auto-Coding Video-by-Video

When we examine the codes by each video, however, we see variety and depth in the themes leading to a greater connection to RWP. Figure 3 showcases the first video's, entitled "bitch lasagna," comment section. While the most common themes are

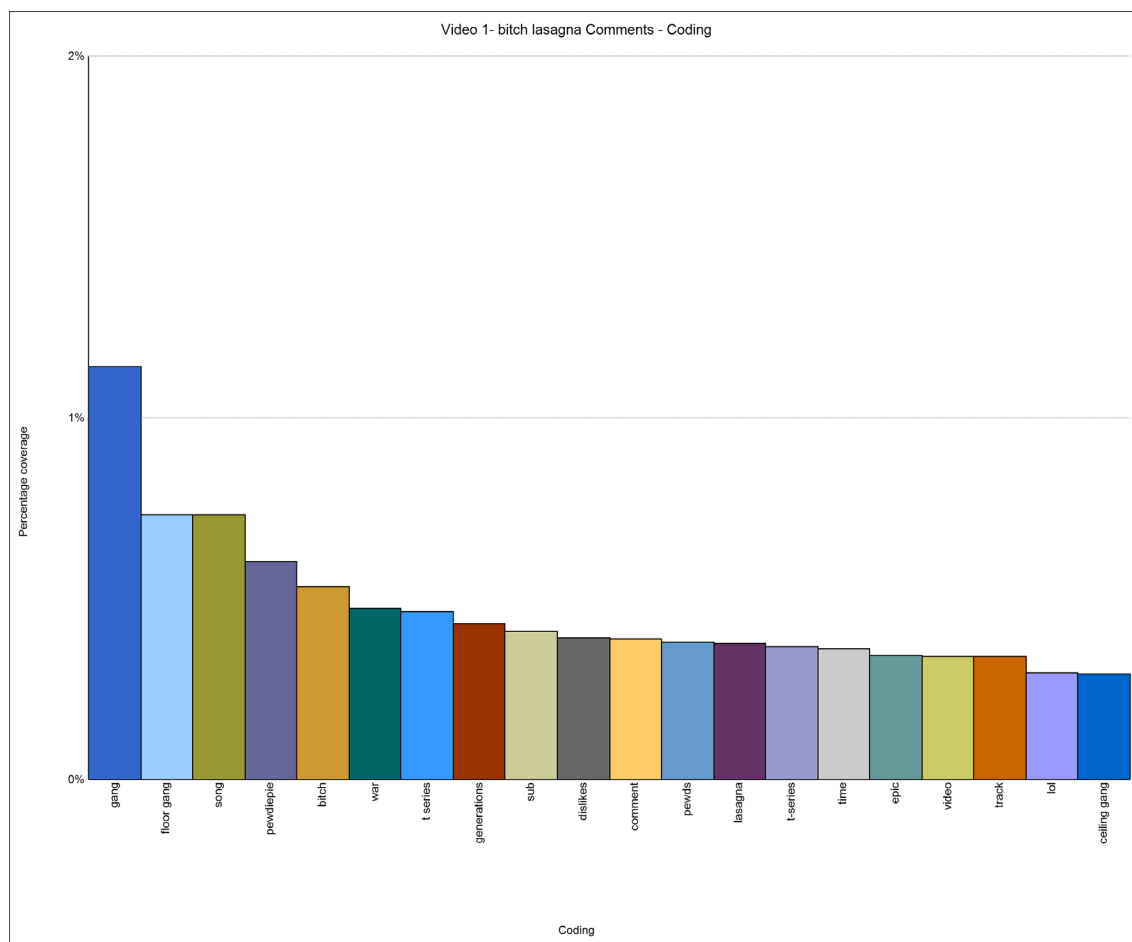


Figure 3: Video 1, "Bitch Lasagna", Top Codes (by percentage of coverage)

similar, including *gang* and *floor gang*, the most interesting themes come from two areas, which both seem to begin to reinforce the RWP theme of 'us versus them' or even

²¹ See Appendix A, Nvivo's Codebook or Appendix B, Nvivo's Reference Hierarchy Chart, for additional information.

fear of ‘strangers’ and anti-elitism, depending on the context. First, the 5th most common theme, which is *war*, connected to *t-series*, *generations*, and *epic*, and second, the 9th most common theme, *sub*, related to *dislikes*, *comment*, and *time*. The video “bitch lasagna” was created during PewDiePie’s subscriber competition with Indian account T-series and is meant to start a campaign between PewDiePie and T-series’ fans. It is interesting, then, that the community members use the word *war* so often to signify this competition in subscribers rather than a less potentially violent alternative. As PewDiePie himself uses racially-charged language to describe T-Series and presents him and his followers in opposition to them within the video, the use of war in this context seems to signify othering of more than just the group. By describing T-Series in terms of its nationality and language, this provides the narrative of fear of Indians and India’s population— the ‘external other’ or ‘stranger.’

As well, the words *sub*²², *comment*, *dislikes*, and *time*, when examined together, may be used to discuss and criticize both, or either, of YouTube itself or T-Series’ account in connection to algorithms, auto-recommendations, and fake subscribers²³. These themes may also reinforce an anti-establishment or anti-elitism RWP narrative, with YouTube or T-series presenting as the establishment or the elite, and PewDiePie and his followers acting as the ‘common(wo)man’ as defined in the literature review. As T-Series is a billion-dollar corporation, and PewDiePie is an individual with no previous corporate or political ties, the context reinforces this RWP theme.

Interestingly, one word that also should be considered for additional analysis is the word *bitch* and the narrative of male domination. Generally, according to work done by Coyne, Sherman, and O’Brien (1978), when used against men, *bitch* means that an individual or group— in this context, T-Series— are acting outside the confines of typical male gender roles. This meaning underpins the narrative of male domination by showcasing that stereotypically feminine traits (i.e., sensitivity, gentleness) are unfavorable. It also, in this case, insists that T-Series, as PewDiePie’s rival, is subordinate to PewDiePie’s masculine identity. Thus, *bitch* serves the “social function of

²² “Sub” is short for subscriber or subscriptions.

²³ According to many posts and comments by PewDiePie community members in R/PewDiePieSubmission, their Reddit community, there is a belief, though not proven by any legitimate data collection or report, that T-series purchases fake, or ‘bot’, subscriptions to up their subscription number (Demolmetdesnor, 2019).

isolating and discrediting an entire class of men,” in this case T-Series and their Indian followers, “who do not conform to the socially accepted patterns of behavior” (Coyne, Sherman, and O’Brien, 1978, p. 828). While *bitch* is in the title of the first video, it is essential to note that it is echoed a significant number of times throughout the commentary.

This theme of male subordination connects to RWP in two ways. First, it could be a presentation of traditional values of masculinity, as PewDiePie announces himself as the dominant masculine figure over T-Series’ feminized form. Second, it could bring added complexity to the “us versus them” RWP framing, which presents in all six of the videos analyzed. T-Series is not only being racially othered and discussed as an ‘elite’ in opposition to PewDiePie and his followers, but the subordination of T-Series also occurs through a traditionally patriarchal frame. Thus, this theme of masculinity will be examined further in the qualitative analysis in Section 5.2.2 and Section 5.2.3.

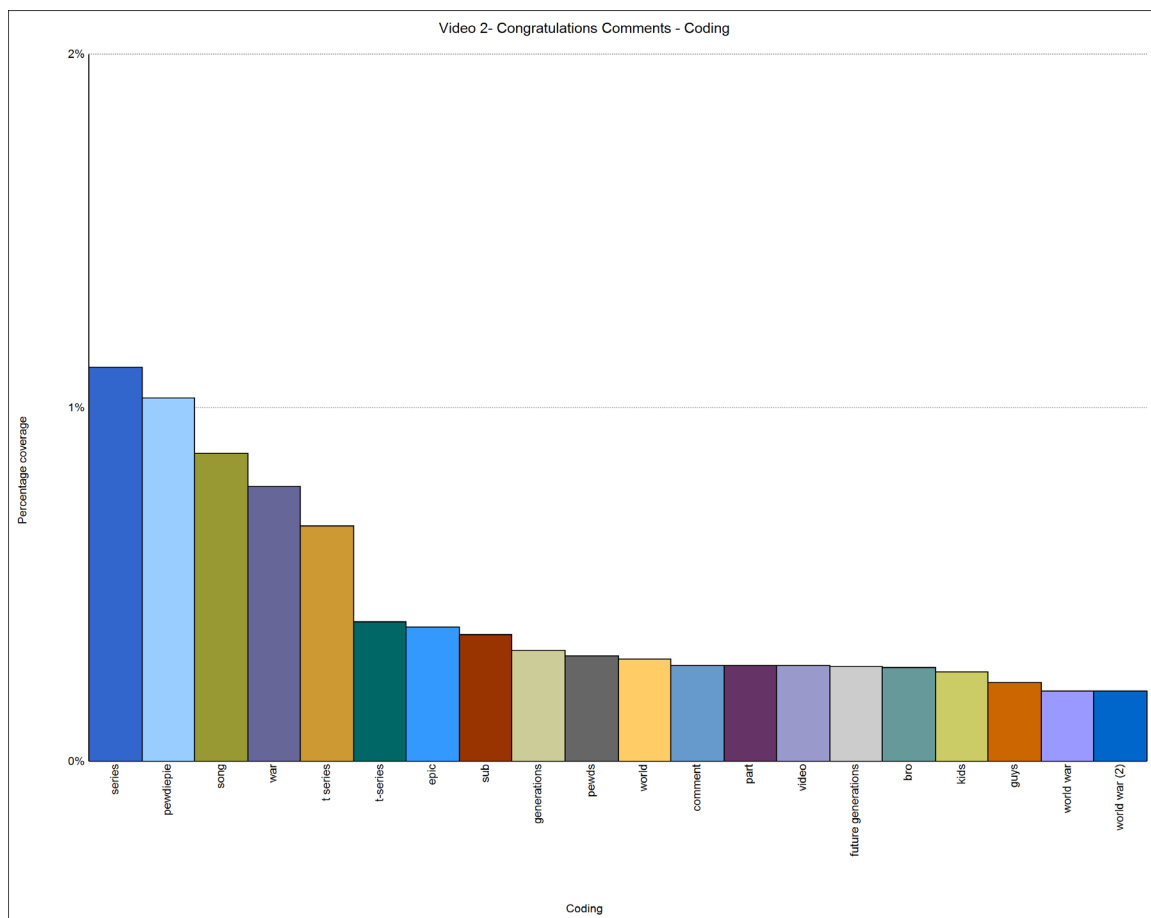


Figure 4: Video 2, "Congratulations", Top Codes (by percentage of coverage)

Similarly, in the comments of the second video, “Congratulations,” Nvivo’s auto-coding revealed themes like *war*, *epic*, *sub*, *comment*, *world war*, and *world war 2*, which reinforce the same anti-establishment and anti-elitism RWP themes presented above. However, what is interesting about this particular video, as seen in Figure 4, is that identity-based codes occur here, referencing masculinity and the masculine gaming culture that PewDiePie is known for, including *bro* and *guys*. As this video is not particularly concerned with PewDiePie’s male identity, and it does not seem centered around male domination as in the previous video, it is interesting that these themes occur relatively frequently. They may lend itself to additional assessment about the social identity of PewDiePie’s community members and is salient for considerations of

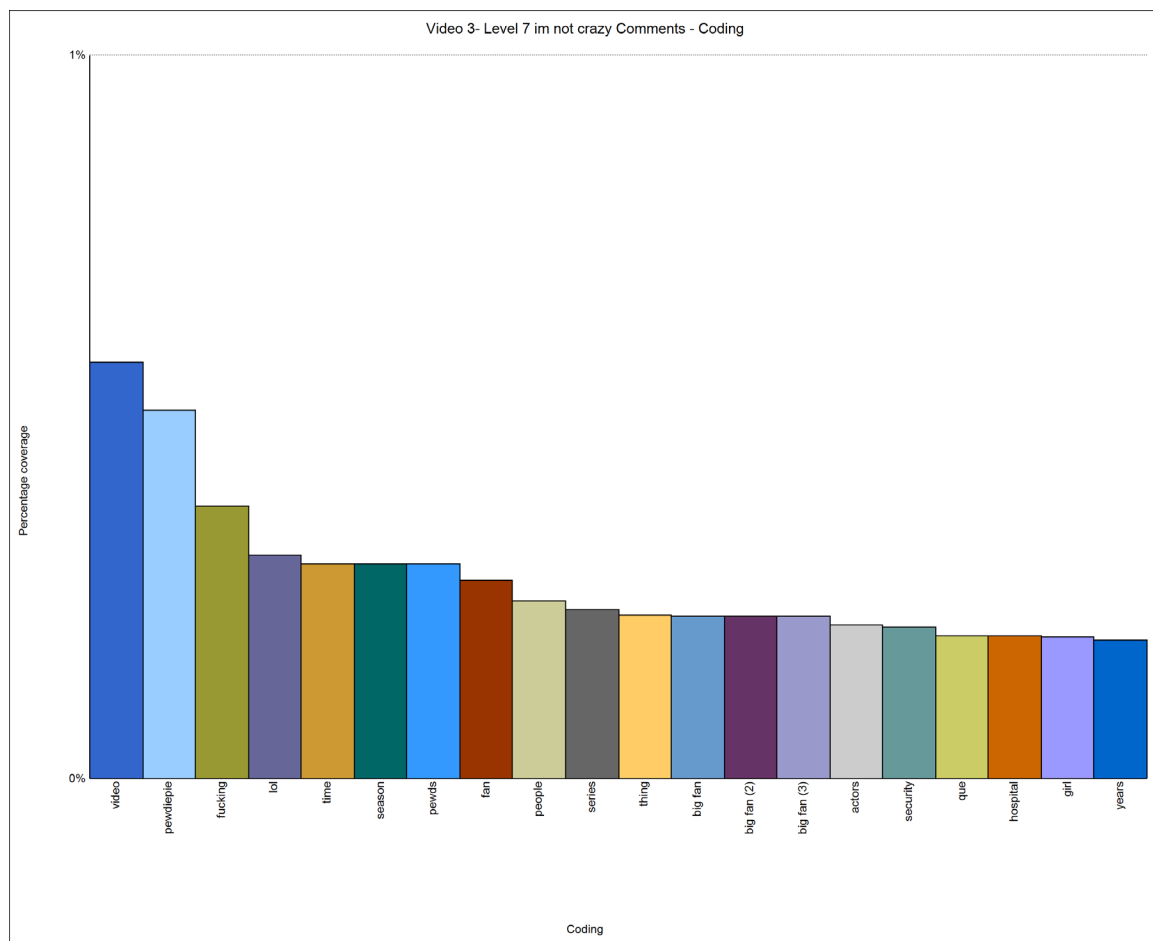


Figure 5: Video 3 "LEVEL 7", Top Codes (by percentage of occurrence)

the public sphere's potential inclusion and RWP's presentation of masculinity and traditional values²⁴.

In the third video, “LEVEL 7”, the context of the video itself is very different than the first two, and this is reflected in the type of codes that arise. This particular video shows PewDiePie playing a real-life version of a horror video game, and the narrative of the video doesn't seem to promote any type of campaign or competition as in the first two. As seen in Figure 5, nearly all of the top codes are related to either PewDiePie and his community, including *pewdiepie*, *pewds*, *fan*, *big fan (2)*, *big fan (3)*, *actors*, or YouTube's platform, including *video* and *series*. The one code that stands out in this particular data set is *que*, which is a common word in both Spanish and French, which

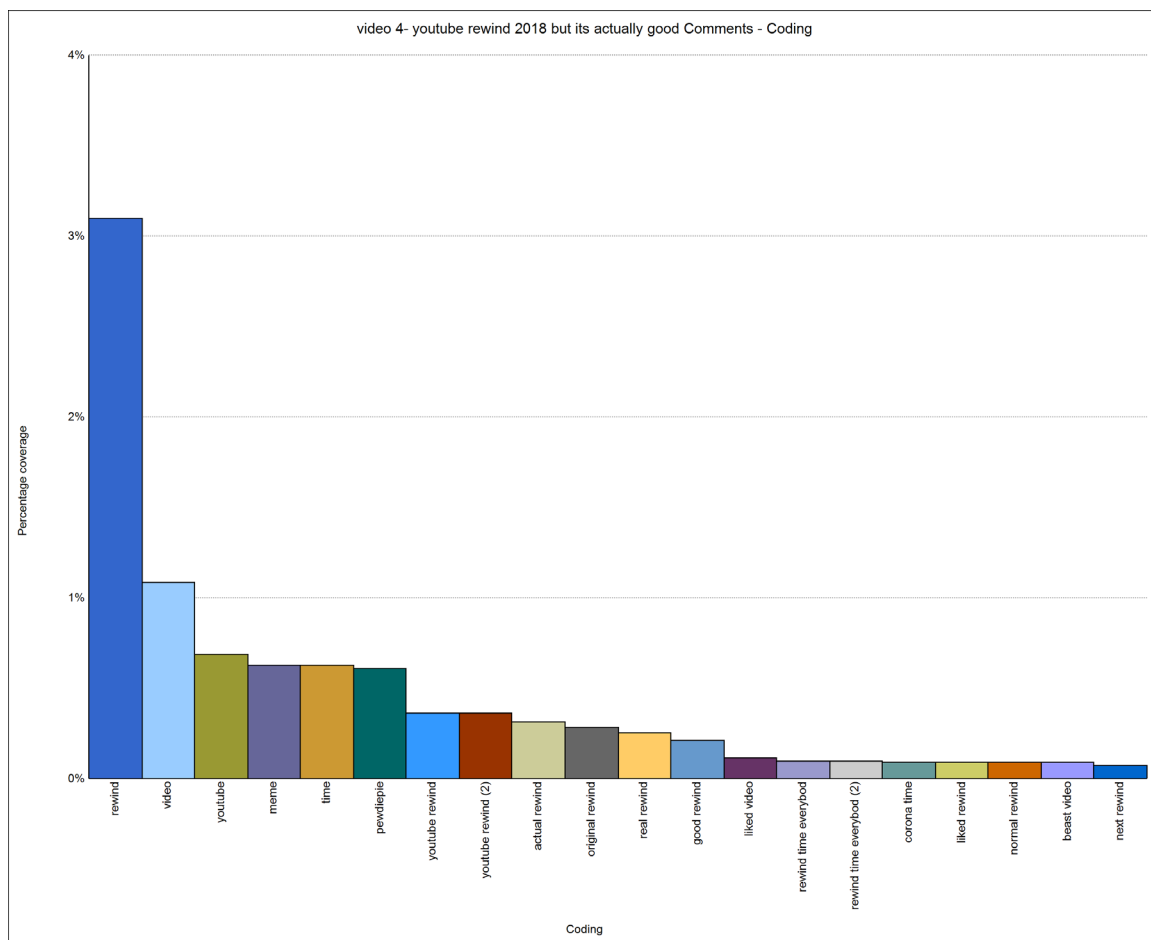


Figure 6: Video 4, "YouTube Rewind 2018, but it's actually good", Top comments (by percentage of coverage)

²⁴ For an in-depth analysis of these connections, including themes of masculinity, sexuality, and the group's social identities and aspects of membership, see Section 5.2.3.

warrants additional consideration of its use if it appears in the qualitative data set. However, besides this one particular code, no codes stand out in this video that connects to any of the theories relevant to this analysis.

The next video, entitled “Youtube Rewind but its actually good,” can be connected to the RWP theme of anti-establishment or anti-elitism. The majority of the top codes are all directly related to the subject matter of the video, in which PewDiePie creates his own YouTube rewind after YouTube does not include him in the original version. The comments also appear to be inherently positive about PewDiePie, and cynical about YouTube, the establishment or elite in this context, generally. As seen in Figure 6, the adjectives like “actual,” “original,” “real,” “good,” “liked,” “beast,” and “normal” are used in the creation of their codes while still referencing the word *rewind*. Thus, this leads to the possible interpretation that PewDiePie’s community members reinforce the narrative of PewDiePie’s version of YouTube Rewind being better than YouTube’s original release. In this way, just as in the first two videos, PewDiePie’s community members help to shape the broader “us versus them” RWP narrative that PewDiePie often employs in his videos, as well as the anti-establishment view recognized as a theme in Video 1.

There is also one definite outlying code in this particular data set: *corona time*. As the data collection and analysis of this project was conducted in the Spring and Summer of 2020, during the Covid-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, *corona time* is a direct reference to that particular period. Thus, this code may not be seen at different times and doesn’t seem to directly reflect the context of the video or PewDiePie’s community specifically.

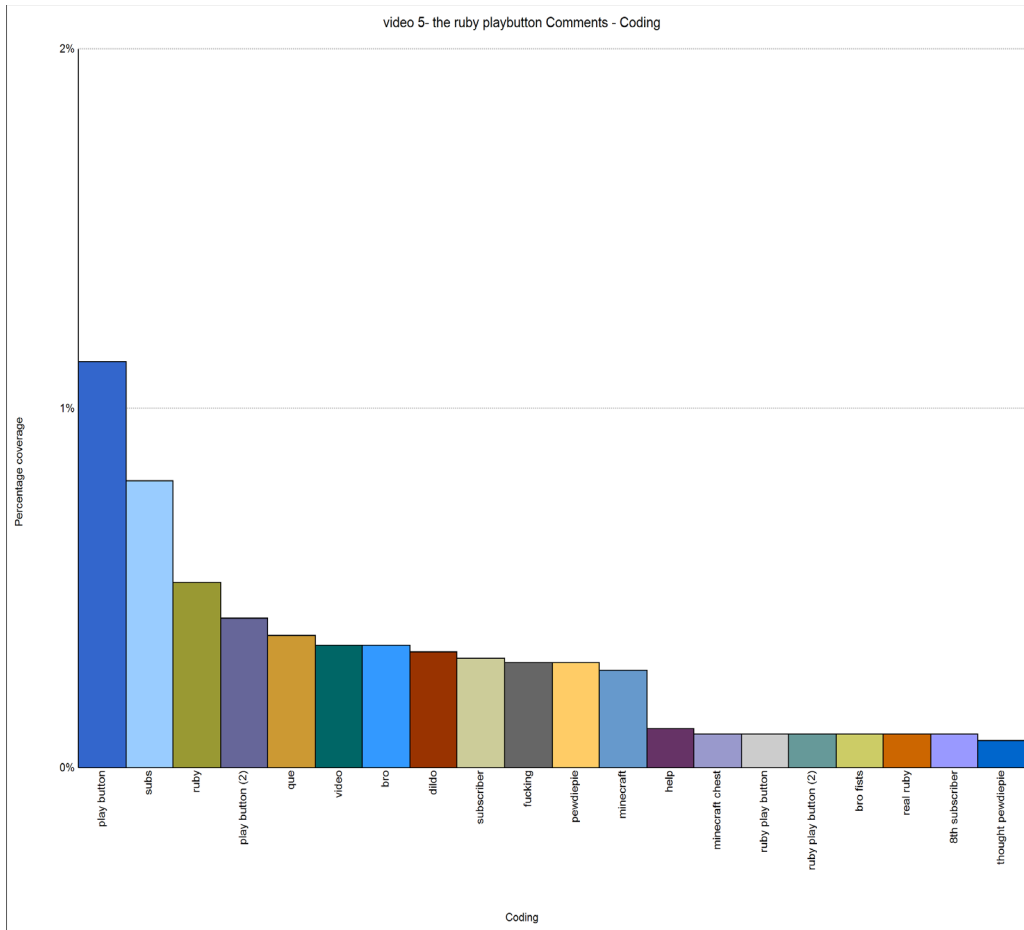


Figure 7: Video 5, "THE RUBY PLAYBUTTON", Top comments (by percentage of coverage)

For the fifth video, entitled "THE RUBY PLAYBUTTON / YouTube 50 Mil Sub Reward Unbox", several similar themes arise from the data. First, a large number of the auto-coded items are general, and directly related to either YouTube's platform, the context of the particular video, or simply PewDiePie himself, including *play button*, *subs*, *ruby*, *play button (2)*, *video*, *pewdiepie*, etc. However, this video has some very particular codes in connection to RWP's aspects of identity and masculinity, as well as the compelling addition of sexuality, as apparent through the words *bro*, *bro fists*, *f*cking*, and *dildo*. In comparison to some of the other videos, this particular data set includes masculine words more often, even though the video itself does not have any specific attention applied to it about 'bro' culture, masculinity, or sexuality. Again, as with "bitch lasagna," these words may be a presentation of the RWP theme of a return to traditional values, like the hierarchy of the patriarchy and traditional gender and sexual roles, but it is difficult to state conclusively without an understanding of how the community uses them.

Finally, and perhaps the most interesting of all six of the videos, is PewDiePie's video entitled "My Response," which is a short apology video for when Kjellberg said the n-word in a live gaming stream on a different platform. Perhaps due to the nature of the video, codes such as *black*, *people*, *n-word*, *black people*, *person*, and *white people* vastly change the data set's narrative in comparison to the other videos. While in this project's theoretical definition of RWP specific racial identities are not mentioned, these words may create a connection to the preservation of culture and traditional values, or fear of strangers/othering, depending on the context. As PewDiePie is white, and the comments utilize both black and white racial identities, whether or not individuals are justifying his use of the n-word, or disagreeing with his actions, is extremely important. In Section 5.2: Results of Qualitative Coding, these words are analyzed further for their use.

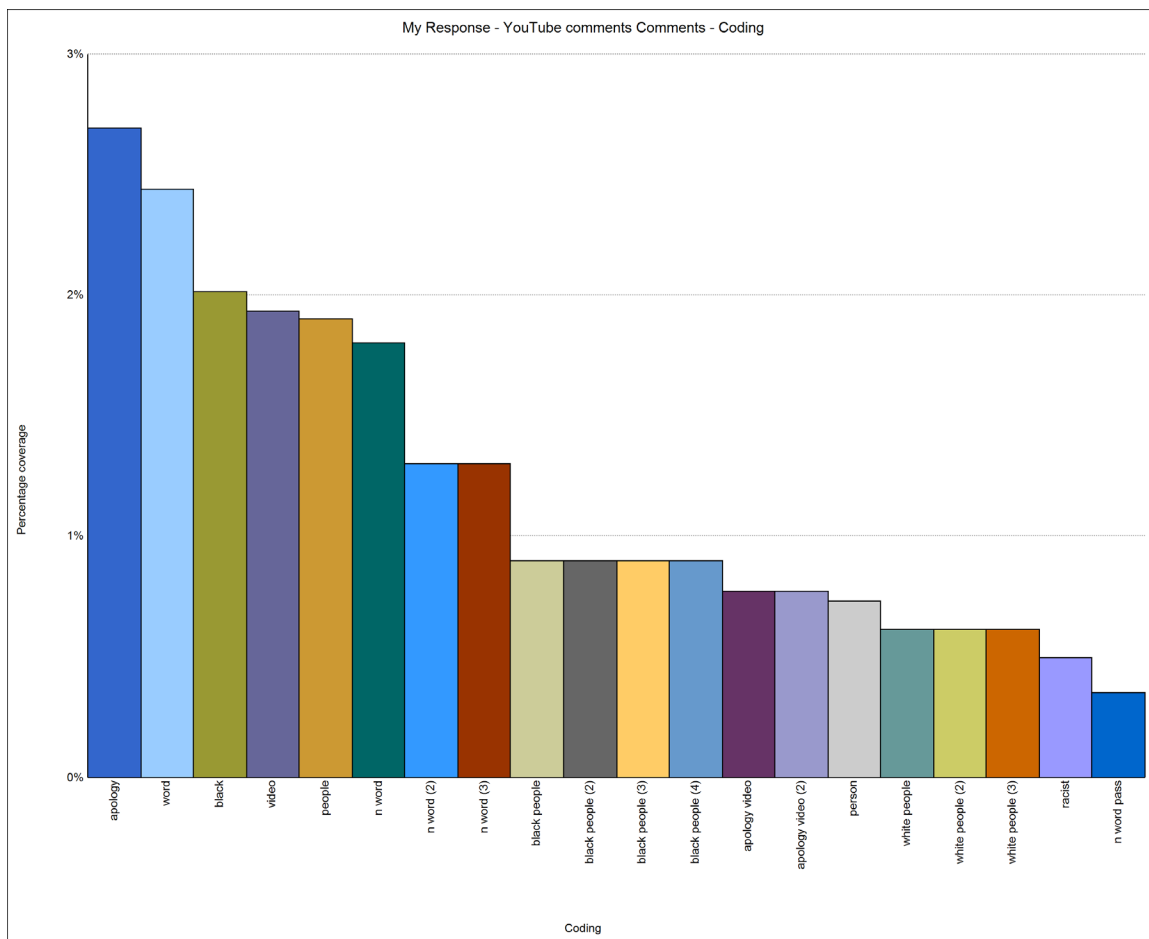


Figure 8: Video 6, "My Response" Top Comments (by percentage occurrence)

5.2. Results of Qualitative Coding

Next, I will discuss the results of the small-N coding processes, which added both agreement and complexity to the results from the previous quantitative stage. As a reminder, the dimensions of Habermas' theory that heavily informed the definition of some qualitative codes are as follows: one, formation of public opinion occurs at the site, two, all community members are granted access in some form, three conference is allowed in unrestricted fashion (i.e., freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom of expression and publication), and four, there is debate over the general rules governing relations within the space (Habermas, 1964).

All of the comments went through a four-method coding process based on Saldaña's (2016) emotion, values, versus, and concept coding methods, as explained in the Methods section of this project²⁵. While about one-hundred codes were created, a 2nd round of coding was done to create a more uniform set of codes. As can be seen in the codebook in Appendix C, all three-hundred comments, which are the top fifty comments from each video chosen for the case selection, were connected to at least one of twenty-eight codes. Through this coding process and the resulting analysis, three significant patterns arose:

1. While there are aspects of Habermas' public sphere apparent within the comments and community, including evidence of political opinion and debate about governing rules, there was little respectful dissent or discussion, and disagreement is little valued.
2. PewDiePie's community often reflects RWP themes, which are first recognized in the quantitative data and echoed in the qualitative analysis, often labeling themselves as a homogenous, virtuous, group and presenting RWP themes of fear, anti-establishment, and anti-elitism.
3. PewDiePie's online community on YouTube is regulated by strong in-group identities, with PewDiePie playing the role of the charismatic group

²⁵ For a detailed codebook of all utilized codes and references in the qualitative stage, see Appendix C.

leader. In-group agreement and positivity govern membership, and negative out-group narratives are reinforced heavily by all actors.

5.2.1. Theme 1: Aspects of Habermas' Public Sphere

There were some identifiable elements of Habermas' public sphere within the comment sections, including accessibility, debate about general rules governing relations within the space, and some public opinion is discussed through which is related directly to political viewpoints. However, there is little room for dissent outside of PewDiePie's community membership, and YouTube's platform, through the downvoting function, in particular, seems to prevent lengthy debate from taking place.

For example, within the six and final video that was analyzed, titled "My Response," PewDiePie is acknowledging the 'mistake' he made when he said the n-word in a gaming stream, and apologizing to his viewers and community for his actions. In this particular comment section, there is significant conversation about the impact PewDiePie had on his community for saying the word. In particular, users pay close attention to each other's' identities in these debates. While the users themselves are anonymous, and none have identifiable characteristics within their profile pictures, they are often explicit about their racial identities and community membership. An example of this type of exchange is seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Comment Exchange from Video 6

| User | Comment |
|------|--|
| 1 | <i>"During this time, I was a fan of pewdiepie, and I am black and I can say I was offended and disappointed for what he said. He should have known better".</i> |
| 2 | <i>"that why he made an apology video, didn't try to weep... and he didn't even knowingly put it in a processed video, it was on a live stream, people say all sorts of shit when they are around a comfortable bunch, it's human nature to regurgitate"</i> |

| | |
|---|--|
| 3 | <i>"K N I still don't see why anyone even cared, honestly if words said by someone who is not trying to be offensive ends up offending you, you probably have bigger problems and demons. Also I'm white and I don't care"</i> |
| 1 | <i>"If you're not black you have no right to say this. This word is offensive to black people. It hurts us and we're allowed to be offended. It has a bad background and definitely just 'isn't a word'"</i> |

The majority of these comments are respectful, other than User 3's response. None of the comments are downvoted, and the conversation remains related to the topic at hand: racial identity, and who gets to decide whether or not what PewDiePie did was okay. As well, all members of the conversation are explicitly part of PewDiePie's community; even the first user, who begins the debate, mentions that they have been a viewer of PewDiePie for a long time. The one comment from User 3, which is a direct attack on the first commenter, is the one that stands out in this particular exchange. Attacks like this are reflected in many of the conversations, even when there is some respectful debate and disagreement.

As well, there are certain nuanced aspects of debate about the governance of rules, as described by Habermas' theory, though it is not about a community member's role. Instead, this debate positions community members (with the inclusion of PewDiePie), in opposition to YouTube and government regulation. Both the videos entitled "Level 7 | I'M NOT CRAZY (OUTLAST GAMEPLAY)" and "YouTube Rewind 2018 but it's actually good" have a high frequency of comments related to this theme. Between the two videos, almost twenty percent of all the comments were given one of the following codes: *PewDiePie versus YouTube* (versus coding), and *Critique of YouTube* (concept coding). These comments were often directly related to one of two things: one, YouTube's relationship with PewDiePie, and an apparent disrespect between them (one being an individual with a base of fans, and the other being a corporate entity), and two, YouTube's platform, including the 'Recommended Videos' and auto-bot features, or its connection to COPPA, a recent bill passed in the United

States which restricts children’s access to online content. A number of these comments, from different videos, can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Examples of ‘Debate about Governance’ Commentary

| Example # | Relevant video | Comment |
|-----------|------------------|--|
| 1 | “LEVEL 7” | <i>“YouTube: let’s recommend to this guy Me: Wait, that’s illegal”</i> |
| 2 | “LEVEL 7” | <i>“YouTube putting this in recommendations only because its trying to tell they are preparing for the first 100 mil playbutton [for PewDiePie]”</i> |
| 3 | “LEVEL 7” | <i>“Me: tries to ignore the YouTube algorithm Algorithm: ah,there he is, we got something for you”</i> |
| 4 | “Youtube rewind” | <i>“[YouTube] has gotten worse because COPPA was on their ass after youtube took kids’ info and it sucks”</i> |
| 5 | “Youtube rewind” | <i>“The dislikes are from autobots or the people at Youtube behind COPPA screaming about bad words”</i> |

These comments, which are upvoted in the thousands by other community members, establish a dislike of YouTube as well as government regulation like COPPA. Thus, the debate about governance, which follows the fourth component of the public sphere, is often tied directly to YouTube’s platform. Interestingly, this also reinforces a potential RWP theme of *us-versus-them*, or the *common(wo)man versus the elite*, which will be discussed further in section 5.2.2.

However, despite some aspects of public sphere narratives, including this debate of governance and some community member dissent, the majority of all comments do not reinforce Habermasian themes. In all six of the videos' top fifty comments, only twice is there any type of respectful political opinion-style debate like the one mentioned above. The majority of those individuals who try to disagree with PewDiePie's actions or other community members are downvoted and called names, which often leads to them deleting their initial comment. Table 5 showcases an example of a prevalent type of exchange within the PewDiePie community, which also echoes internet vernacular and culture throughout.

Table 5: Comment Exchange from Video 2

| User | Comment |
|------|---|
| 1 | <i>"PewDiepie is ugly"</i> |
| 2 | <i>"your ugly"</i> |
| 1 | <i>"*you're ugly"</i> |
| 2 | <i>"stop liking your own comment weirdo dumbass"</i> |
| 1 | <i>"I didn't even do that dumbass"</i> |
| 2 | <i>"send me ur address"</i> |
| 1 | <i>"I live in hell you know where that is?"</i> |
| 2 | <i>"its in ur mum"</i> |
| 1 | <i>"I'll kick the fuk outta ya, ya wudnt say it to ma face"</i> |
| 2 | <i>"he wasn't even talking to u dumbass"</i> |

Thus, in this particular data set of 300 comments, it does not appear that there is connection to elements of Habermasian theory, other than some debate about governance or the aspect of the platform's accessibility online.

5.2.2. Theme 2: Aspects of Right-wing Populism

Codes connected loosely to RWP themes frequently appeared in the qualitative data set and resulting coding analysis, though it was essential to connect them to each particular video's context. As a reminder, the following is the definition of RWP for this specific project: an "ideology which pits a virtuous and homogenous people against a set of elites and dangerous "others" who are together depicted as depriving the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, and voice" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 3). As well, the following were critical dimensions of RWP for consideration: the fear of strangers/migrants, defying 'political correctness,' patriotism, preservation of culture or traditional values, and anti-elitism (Kramer, 2017; Lazaridis & Tsagkroni, 2017; Wodak & Kryzyzanowski, 2017).

Specifically, two major themes connected to RWP occurred throughout all of the videos and small-n sample of comment sections:

1. PewDiePie and his group of followers presented as 'versus' YouTube account T-Series from India. This idea not only reinforces the RWP theme of fear of 'strangers' (like Indians) but also connects to anti-elitism as well, as T-Series is a corporate-owned YouTube account.
2. PewDiePie and his community 'versus' YouTube as a corporate entity, presenting the platform and its creators as the 'elite.' This theme strengthens potential fears of disappointment or disgust with the mainstream establishment (YouTube).

Importantly, in this dual way, PewDiePie and his community members present themselves as the 'virtuous peoples' utilized in the project's definition. These homogenous people, while they may not be one particular nationality or ethnicity, present themselves as their own identity group. For additional analysis of the complexities of this group membership and the characteristics of the in-group, see Section 5.2.3.

Table 6 showcases comments coded by the *us versus them* versus code found within the data sample from the first two videos. These comments were all directly related to pitting PewDiePie and his followers against the Indian corporate account t-series, which allows for both racialized ‘othering’ through the varying nationalities. This theme also qualifies as a ‘common-man’ versus ‘the elite’ – an anti-elite or anti-establishment framing– often found in RWP discourse (Wodak & Kryzyzanowski, 2017). This dialogue is similar to that from section Section 5.2.1 (in connection to YouTube); however, this example shows a specific concern with T-Series’ nationality.

Table 6: Example of Comments Coded "PewDiePie versus T-series"

| Example # | Relevant video | Comment |
|------------------|-----------------------|--|
| 1 | "bitch lasagna" | <i>"Sweden vs India"</i> |
| 2 | "bitch lasagna" | <i>"All the dislikes are pewdiepie's Haters/ enemies, t-series fans and Probably this video TRIGGERS t-series"</i> |
| 3 | "bitch lasagna" | <i>"Liked people: 98% people are the world, 2% Indians. dislikes 50% T-series fans/ Indians 1% song haters 49% pewdiepie haters"</i> |
| 4 | "Congratulations" | <i>"Actually PewDiePie is still the top 1 youtuber, t series is a company not a youtuber so it's not count it"</i> |
| 5 | "Congratulations" | <i>"sub bot company versus youtuber"</i> |
| 6 | "Congratulations" | <i>"more like racist t-series against us haha but I'm not even a fan"</i> |

The framing of this feud between PewDiePie and T-Series also presents it as a manifestation of crisis– a literal war– rather than just a pure competition of subscriber numbers, and this continues as a comment theme throughout differing contexts. This framing of PewDiePie’s ‘war,’ and use of weaponry, against external actors occurs often in the data set and appears in five of the six video’s comment sections– even those videos that are not related to T-Series– which strengthens this aspect of RWP crisis manifestation. Examples of those comments, shown in Table 7, reinforce both the *us versus them* framing while also presenting them in more violent terms.

Table 7: Comments that Exemplify 'War' Thematic

| Example # | Relevant video | Comment |
|------------------|-----------------------|--|
| 1 | “bitch lasagna” | <i>“Imagine countries in the future doing disstracks instead of wars”</i> |
| 2 | “bitch lasagna” | <i>“Dear Future generations, I’m sorry you couldn’t see this epic war”</i> |
| 3 | “Congratulations” | <i>“Kid: “Mom, what is this [the song Congratulations]?” Mom: “A song of war””</i> |
| 4 | “Ruby Playbutton” | <i>“Felix: Thank you all for this. Next video: LETS SHOOT MY 50 MILLION AWARD”</i> |
| 5 | “Youtube rewind” | <i>“Remember boys, if Minecraft isn’t in rewind 2019 we RIOT”</i> |
| 6 | “Ruby Playbutton” | <i>“we got another war with cocomelon soon well I hope so”</i> |

This *us versus them* theme also appeared often in connection with YouTube, as first discussed in Section 5.2.1. YouTube is presented as an all-powerful corporate entity and is regarded by community members as a threat to PewDiePie's success. Specifically, there is a lot of conversation about YouTube's moderation algorithms. The discussion focuses on YouTube's recommended videos feature either ignoring PewDiePie, only recommending him when they sponsor his video content, such as in "LEVEL 7", or allowing T-series and other accounts to buy bot subscribers and reinforce their content. Throughout these comments, YouTube is presented as an "enslaving" corporate entity, with PewDiePie, as the common man, disrespected and ignored by the elite and those in power, which is relevant for RWP framing. Table 8 showcases these types of comments, which are in addition to those introduced in Section 5.2.1.

Table 8: Example of Comments Coded as "PewDiePie vs. YouTube" or "Common-man vs. Elite"

| Example # | Relevant video | Comment |
|-----------|-------------------|--|
| 1 | "LEVEL 7" | <i>"I'm kinda surprised youtube is recommending a Pewdiepie video this much"</i> |
| 2 | "LEVEL 7" | <i>"This was back when YT actually respected PewDiePie they made this and helped him too"</i> |
| 3 | "Ruby Playbutton" | <i>"f*ck YouTube"</i> |
| 4 | "Youtube rewind" | <i>"A billion dollar company [YouTube] vs a Swedish boy with a few editor friends"</i> |
| 5 | "Youtube rewind" | <i>"I wonder if they [YouTube] will ever get the point and put pewdiepie in the next rewind"</i> |
| 6 | "YouTube rewind" | <i>"Original rewind 2018: Ah yes, enslaved cringe PewDiePie's rewind: ah yes, memes"</i> |

PewDiePie's community members seem to seek out competition against these external 'others,' often moving on to new YouTube celebrities to continue the 'internet war' they prescribe to. For example, though T-Series and PewDiePie's so-called feud over subscriber counts has finished, the first two videos in this analysis have numerous comments pitting PewDiePie and his fans against new threats, such as social media star Jake Paul. This 'fear' that T-Series personifies is not reconciled when PewDiePie's war with them is over. Instead, his followers pick a new threat or 'other' to continue this specific narrative.

There is also a concern for government regulation within PewDiePie's community, which presents as an anti-establishment or anti-elite RWP framing. The code of *disgust* throughout the commentary even exacerbates this RWP framing, which, while not directly 'disgust with mainstream politics' as in the original RWP definition, does bridge between disgust of regulation more broadly and the current respective governments that put those laws into place. COPPA, which is a United States federal law that restricts access and advertising revenue on content created for children, as introduced in Section 5.2.1, is just one example of internet government regulation that PewDiePie's community challenges. In general, PewDiePie's community is vocal against any type of governance that restricts the free internet, as this is where their community groups, as shown in the commentary in Table 4 in Section 5.2.1 of this project.

5.2.3. Theme 3: Strong Community Membership through Social Identities

An essential theme concerning the theoretical understanding of the Habermasian public sphere, RWP, and alternative and anti-public spheres is membership to the particular discursive community. In the Habermasian sense, publicity, openness, and transparency is encouraged in these spaces (Habermas, 1964). However, in anti-public spaces, which RWP groups often prescribe to, membership can be restricted, these spaces promote discussion and debate among those who reject mainstream discourses and reflect one specific ideology or group understanding (Davis, 2020).

At first glance, it appears that membership is defined by gender and sexual identity, as there is some presentation of community members' masculinity and heterosexuality. As initially seen in the quantitative analysis, words like *bro*, *bruh*, and

male often appear in the dataset and were used to signal community membership to others. Similarly, when identifiable women or girls appeared in the comment sections, with feminine screen names, they were downvoted, called out, and argued with by community members. Table 10 shows an exchange from one of the video's comment sections, in which User 2 is an identifiable woman from her screen name "Julia"²⁶.

Table 9: Comment Exchange from Video 2

| User | Comment |
|------|--|
| 1 | "YouTube did something good?" |
| 2 | "WHAAAAT" |
| 1 | "Oh, I see we have a gamer girl ²⁷ here" |
| 3 | "get out, you don't even play tuber simulator [a popular PC game]" |

However, these exchanges occur infrequently, and the majority of community members do not have masculine or feminine-appearing usernames or profile pictures. In this way, even as one is considered a member of the 'bro-fist' community, there is no identifiable reason to believe that all of his community members are male. While there are significant examples of a strongly exclusionary culture, particularly a sexist exclusionary culture, and the group does not specifically try to transcend these identities, it occurs less frequently than what was originally expected in this particular case.

Instead, these exchanges help to formulate a strong aspect of this online community: its members' social identities. The type of community is not merely limited to

²⁶ While this particular community member's screen name is "Julia", which is also the first name of the author of this project, the commenter is not, nor is related to, the author of this project.

²⁷ The term "gamer girl", which is often used to sexualize or disrespect women in the gaming industry, often accuses women of feigning interest in video games in order to attract male gamers (Roberts & Caruso, 2017).

one nationality, language²⁸, ethnicity, or status – despite some nationalities, such as Indian, being mobilized against as an outgroup. Rather, the defining aspect of PewDiePie’s online community is the members’ sense of belonging to an in-group of dedicated PewDiePie fans (i.e., you, as an individual, promote PewDiePie’s characteristics and are a self-identified member of the ‘bro-fist’ community). The most utilized code throughout all six of the videos in this section of the analysis is *value = pewdiepie community* (values coding), and the second most used code is *agreement* (emotions coding). As seen in Table 11, community members present PewDiePie extremely positively, even when they are not reinforcing specific narratives that he has produced.

Table 10: Examples of Commentary Coded “V= PewDiePie Community”

| Example # | Relevant video | Comment |
|-----------|-------------------|---|
| 1 | “bitch lasagna” | <i>“Pewdiepie has more subscribers then the roman empire, that’s a fact”</i> |
| 2 | “Congratulations | <i>“Pewgaypie is god”</i> |
| 3 | “Ruby Playbutton” | <i>“PewDiePie always tells us the truth about how he makes his videos”</i> |
| 4 | “Ruby Playbutton” | <i>“I like how he says ‘we did it’ instead of saying ‘I did it’ like other youtubers”</i> |

²⁸ As we saw in the quantitative comment analysis, *que*, as a code, was seen often throughout the data set. As well, while the vast majority of comments, as expected, are in English, there are many high-level comments in languages such as Spanish, French, Hindi, Arabic, and Tagalog. However, In the quantitative auto-coding process, it was not possible for Nvivo to derive which comments were in languages other than English, due to high numbers of typos and individual internet vernacular utilized throughout the data set.

| | | |
|---|-----------|---|
| 5 | "LEVEL 7" | <i>"Let's be honest, we looked this up. I can't imagine not watching his videos right after I wake up. It's been a routine of mine to watch his videos"</i> |
|---|-----------|---|

Members also reinforce particular viewpoints because of PewDiePie's actions and language, not from external forces. Through the visual analysis of the videos it is apparent that there is a connection between relating referenced quantitative and qualitative codes and the discussion and actions PewDiePie takes in each video. For example, in the first two videos, PewDiePie explicitly mentions his competition with T-series as a "war." He even utilizes racially charged language to frame their identities, stating that he is a "Blue-Eyes White Dragon while [t-series] are just Dark Magic, oof:" (Kjellberg, 2019 [Video]). His followers reinforce these presentations and are fiercely loyal to the competitions that PewDiePie creates.

As well, he is the one who initially presents the values of traditional male masculinity, heteronormativity, and male domination, which his followers seem to disseminate regardless of their gender or sexuality. As seen in the "bitch lasagna" comment section, the reason the word 'bitch' is utilized so often is because of PewDiePie's formation of the subject matter. Then, because they are members of his 'bro-fist' community, they may strive to feel as if they prescribe to the same social identity as PewDiePie himself. To do this, they reinforce PewDiePie's identities and opinions throughout the comment sections to gain a better hierarchical position within the in-group (Shulz et. Al., 2020).

The sixth and final video of this analysis, entitled "My Response," reflects these ideas. As mentioned in its introduction in the quantitative analysis, the number of times the codes *n-word* or *black people* occurs in the comment section is high. At first glance, this could be an example of RWP racial fears or preservation of culture; however, while it seems to be mostly a presentation of the importance of PewDiePie's leadership in defining group membership. PewDiePie's actions may be unforgivable to those from outside of his community, as his utterance is one that has led many other celebrities in

different fandoms to be ‘cancelled’²⁹, like R. Kelly, Kanye West, Scarlett Johansson, and Gina Rodriguez (Romano, 2019). However, PewDiePie’s actions and his arguably charismatic response seem to have reinforced his followers’ adoration of him as a leader. Through the fifty comments qualitatively assessed, only one community member offered any kind of disagreement with PewDiePie’s actions– the replies showcased in the first section of this qualitative analysis. As well, there are no comments which bring his efforts into a broader significance, nor do they connect with any kind of more extensive political or racial statement, like when T-Series nationality is made fun of in “bitch lasagna” or “Congratulations.” Instead, the majority of comments joke about his use of the word, with some who describe themselves as ‘black’ or racialized stating that he has the ‘n-word pass.’ Table 12 showcases a number of these comments.

Table 11: Examples of Comments from Video 6

| User | Comment |
|------|--|
| 1 | <i>“As a professional black person, I approve this message. Edit: BTW if you like my comment you get n word pass”</i> |
| 2 | <i>“Imagine at the end he just goes “Peace out, my n***as”</i> |
| 3 | <i>“Lmfao. Even tho I think the N-word is generally racist, I think its funny in some contexts, like how you explained in this one, and pewdiepie just blurted it out”</i> |
| 4 | <i>“He has gotten the n word pass from millions so he doesn’t have to worry lol”</i> |
| 5 | <i>“PewDiePie: says N-Word Media: we must kill him Jake Paul: Assaults his girlfriend and physically abuses her Media: nothing wrong whatsoever”</i> |

²⁹ According to Vox, ‘cancel culture’ has become extremely prevalent in the past five years and a similar pattern has emerged: “a celebrity or other public figure does or says something offensive. A public backlash, often fueled by politically progressive social media, ensues. Then come the calls to cancel the person- that is, to effectively end their career or revoke their cultural cachet, whether through boycotts of their work or disciplinary action from an employer” (Romano, 2019).

These community members not only ‘forgive’ PewDiePie for his actions but reinforce that he never had to apologize in the first place— he always had their support and acceptance. Interestingly, the final comment in Table 12 compares the media’s response to both PewDiePie’s utterance of the n-word and YouTuber Alissa Violet’s allegations of abuse from her then-boyfriend and social media celebrity Jake Paul (Glaze, 2018). Again, this presents PewDiePie against an outward enemy— the media— and critiques that enemy instead of PewDiePie himself.

Out-group othering is also presented through YouTube’s platform functionality, including the prevalence of up- and down-voting. When a comment presents an alternative viewpoint from PewDiePie’s—or they announce that they are from the out-group, such as when a commenter stated: “Im an Indian bro, 19 years old!”— they are immediately downvoted. However, when a comment presents a view that is in solidarity with PewDiePie and his followers, they are granted thousands of upvotes. This solidarity strengthens the importance of group membership while also lowering the possibility for a true Habermasian public sphere to be achieved in this space.

Chapter 6.

Discussion

6.1. Key Assertions

By combining the qualitative and quantitative analyses, there are two final assertions in connection with the objectives of this research.

1. *PewDiePie's online community on YouTube does not present the majority of elements of a Habermasian public sphere, and the comment section cannot be considered one in this context.*
2. *However, PewDiePie's community does lend itself to be a form of an anti-public sphere, as community members and loyalists promote RWP themes through strong group membership.*

6.2. Discussion of Objective One

A variety of commentary appears within the PewDiePie community, with upvoting, downvoting, and replies utilized within virtually all interactions on each video's comment section. However, this analysis showcases that PewDiePie's online community on YouTube does not present many elements of Habermasian public sphere theory.

First, the comment sections of the videos analyzed simply did not establish all four of elements of the theory as outlined in the literature review. Table 12 examines how these four dimensions may or may not exist within this particular context; interestingly, the only aspect that is positively associated with PewDiePie's online community is the fourth, debate about the general rules governing relations.

Table 12: Fulfilled Dimensions of Habermas' Public Sphere Theory

| The dimension of Habermas' public sphere theory | Is the dimension fulfilled (Y/N, or Sometimes) | Reasoning |
|--|--|--|
| <i>1: Formation of public opinion (deliberation) occurs at the site</i> | Sometimes | This aspect is challenging to confirm, as some deliberation occurs within comments. However, direct understanding from participants, through interviews or surveys, about the space's role in formulating their public opinions, is necessary, as it is impossible to analyse the difference between performative deliberation and shared understanding here and the reality of mutuality. |
| <i>2: All community members are granted access in some form</i> | N | While YouTube is an open and free application, some community members are pushed out of the space if they offer dissent or present different identities than others. |
| <i>3: Conference is allowed in an unrestricted fashion</i> | N | Again, as loyalty to PewDiePie is the most important aspect of membership, freedom of association, and expression is discouraged. Speech is also discouraged through YouTube's moderation and upvoting and downvoting policies. |
| <i>4: Debate over the general rules governing relations within the space</i> | Y | There are certain aspects of debate about governance, including surrounding YouTube's moderation policies, as well as |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | | government regulation like COPPA, within the data set. |
|--|--|--|

Aspects of YouTube's platform, also seem to prevent additional depth of discourse. Comment voting creates an incentive for community members to agree – otherwise, they risk being humiliated and bullied on the platform through downvoting. Even if dissenting comments do exist, the algorithm pushes them to the end of the comment section, thereby effectively creating a uniform front-page of like-minded individuals.

In this way, it is paramount to mention the importance of moderation policies on any discussion of an internet application serving as a public sphere. No popular social media application, including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, or WeChat, exists without often strict moderation policies, and this is an extreme barrier to discourse. This project thus tends to agree with Mozorov's (2011) critique of the connection between the Habermasian public sphere and Web 2.0 applications. Arguably, there can be no 'perfect' formulation of Habermas' public sphere in an online context with preventative moderation, especially when community members do not have the power to change the governing policies at hand.

However, additional research on this topic could take a more holistic view of the public sphere, and conceptualize it based on the notion of civic culture rather than deliberation as the primary form of communication for these spaces. Civic culture is defined in this context as a "way to conceptualize the factors that enhance or impede political participation through the enactment of citizenship understood as forms of social agency" (Wright, 2017, p. 32). Wright (2017) argues that this concept states that the quality of deliberation may not be as crucial for contemporary public spheres as in Habermas' original definition. If a similar project were to utilize a broadened understanding of communication, YouTube comment sections like PewDiePie's might fulfill additional elements of Habermasian theory.

6.3. Discussion of Objective Two

The theory that does tend to align more closely with this particular online community is that of an RWP-style anti-public sphere, though this is nuanced.

As described by Kemners (2015), RWP leaders regularly utilize online applications to spread their messaging, and PewDiePie's messaging– which connects to RWP themes– is spread effectively in this medium through the contribution of members' strong in-group identities. Through the quantitative analysis outlined in Section 5.1, items linked to RWP themes and community membership were used relatively often in the data set, and are contextually reinforced through the qualitative analysis in sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3. What is particularly interesting about this community's iteration of RWP themes, however, is how deeply connected they are to the context of PewDiePie's content and career. In particular, the RWP subject of anti-establishment or anti-elitism was present throughout all of the six video's comment sections. Still, they are always contextually connected to PewDiePie's career and his out-group enemies, like T-Series and YouTube. Table 13 compares RWP themes from the literature and the data set's expression of each theme.

Table 13: RWP Themes and Expressions

| RWP Theme, as defined by Wodak and Kryzyzanwoski (2017) | Expressed As |
|--|---|
| <i>Fear of 'strangers' (like migrants)</i> | Fear of T-Series and those of Indian nationality |
| <i>Disgust with mainstream politics and corruption</i> | Abhorrence of government regulation and internet censorship |
| <i>Fear of losing old traditional values</i> | Presentation of masculinity and heterosexuality |

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>Anti-elitism</i> | Critiques of YouTube and corporate YouTube accounts like T-Series |
| <i>Defying 'political correctness'</i> | Approval of PewDiePie's lack of political correctness, including stating the n-word |

Even if community members do not believe that they are subscribing to RWP beliefs, they are inadvertently adopting forms of RWP through their loyalty to PewDiePie and their intense willingness to agree to be a part of the social group. This type of participation is acknowledged by Dalghren (2018), as the author states that, as individuals access social media platforms and their online communities, “people become communicatively linked to political ideas and sentiments, as well as to each other” (p. 27). While PewDiePie's community may not be formally engaged in RWP groups, they are necessarily– and perhaps unconsciously– linking themselves to similar RWP themes. Consequently, these group members may be sacrificing individual opinion and creating a false group consensus, as mentioned by Shulz et al. (2018), to make sure they can contribute to the majority and consider themselves connected to and through PewDiePie as their own social group with a common identity.

However, the connection the anti-public sphere in the context of PewDiePie's online discursive space is nuanced, and additional research in this field should be considered. First, Davis (2010) states that the anti-public sphere must be a sphere of activism. There is no particular evidence of activism taking place in this space, as the proliferation of pro-PewDiePie loyalty does not seem to extend to spaces other than the community members' (like R/PewDiePieSubmissions). Davis (2020) also mentions that anti-public spheres position themselves in a counter-hegemonic position to democratic processes and institutions– PewDiePie's online community only fulfills this element of an anti-public sphere if a very loose definition of democratic institutions is utilized, as even though there is some debate about YouTube's policies and government regulation like COPPA, there is little direct discussion of specific democratic institutions.

Thus, this analysis showcases PewDiePie's online community as a version of an anti-public sphere, where members can exhibit their loyalty to PewDiePie through

contribution to in-group agreement and discussion about external, out-group threats. However, it is essential to mention that by labeling this online space as such, and placing an influence on the discursive elements of this community, this project does not disregard the potential harm this anti-public sphere may create. PewDiePie's community, as seen within all of the comment analyses, is fiercely loyal to both Kjellberg himself as well as his 'bro-fist' persona. Thus, English-speaking, Americanized identities of its members use violent language to prevent others, like women, from joining or providing dissent. In the most dramatic example, PewDiePie's competition with T-series, which launched a global "Subscribe to PewDiePie" campaign, was mentioned in the white nationalist Christ Church shooter's manifesto. These global campaigns of his loyal followers, whether or not PewDiePie believes in all of their values, are incredibly influential.

Chapter 7.

Conclusion

7.1. Limitations

There are several limitations to this project. First, due to time and lack of resources, including the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic, this project's initial methodology was simplified for it to be conducted online with publicly available data. As well, the methodology for the collection of comments and auto-coding was not incredibly extensive, and the automated coding was basic.

In this realm, due to the nature of the PewDiePie community and its fans, as well as internet vernacular, more broadly, it is sometimes difficult to interpret the meaning of specific words or phrases used in his video's comment sections. To try to rectify this, I anonymously posted in R/PewDiePieSubmissions asking for how members would define their community. However, I received few responses, and they were either irrelevant in scope, such as one-word replies like "tambourine" (r/PewDiePieSubmissions, 2020), or difficult to understand like "FLOOR GANG OUH OUH" (r/PewDiePieSumbissions, 2020). Because of this, this information was not included in the analysis³⁰. If I had additional resources and time for the project, I would like to conduct qualitative interviews or surveys with willing members of the PewDiePie community to understand their perspective of the community. This addition would only strengthen this emergent analysis and contribute additional contextual information to the final discussion.

It is also important to mention that, again, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the comment sections did have *quarantine* or *COVID-19* themes, which may not be applicable in other specific periods of analysis if this work were to be conducted again. As the data collection and analysis took place in the Spring and Summer of 2020, the data reflects the culture and context of the particular time.

³⁰ To see the posting and the commentary from Reddit, see Appendix D.

7.2. Conclusion and Relevance

This project objectives were two-fold: one, to better understand PewDiePie's online discursive YouTube community through its potential presentation of elements of Habermas' (1964) public sphere; and two, to acknowledge that, through the presentation of RWP themes and a negation of elements of Habermasian theory, this particular online community presents itself as a form of an anti-public sphere (Davis, 2020). While some politically focused debate does occur within the comment sections, in this context, this project asserts that YouTube is not a contemporary version of Habermas' public sphere, especially as the vast majority of commentary is unrelated to democratic discourse. However, through the proliferation of RWP themes throughout PewDiePie's community, and the prevalence of strong group membership there is some evidence that it acts as an anti-public sphere as mentioned, though this is nuanced.

Thus, this project asserts that social media, while it may facilitate democratic discourse, also ushers in a "new 'chaotic pluralism,' whose consequences we cannot quite envision yet" (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 6). As Dahlgren (2018) states, "there is no singular effect, and it is not so much a question of arriving at some ultimate judgement, but rather to continue to explore and analyze ongoing change in society and politics in tandem with the transformation of the media landscape" (p. 5). In this way, researchers must continue to research the Web 2.0 applications, including sites like YouTube, and be open to the various positives and negatives that these platforms create.

The relevance of these findings, for the broader academic community, is that they showcase how some researchers may overestimate the representation of YouTube's political influence. Work has been done on YouTube's political relevance regarding large-scale corporate and political YouTube accounts– with some agreement that YouTube exists as a mediator site between politicians, audiences, and the mass media (Church, 2010; May 2010). However, this is not as clear when non-political content creators are the study's case. This showcases that nuanced, exploratory work is necessary to understand this platform in greater detail.

The aim of this research project was not to conclusively assess YouTube's ability to act as a contemporary public sphere or anti-public sphere, nor to rule-out additional work on RWP and PewDiePie in the future. Instead, it was to explore and

understand these issues within this particular community at this current time. Due to the limitations of the research project, including time and resources, scope, and data types, this analysis does not conclusively answer our two research questions. However, my findings do leave suggestions for future study, including more in-depth data collection directly from community members, and a more extensive and sophisticated methodology for the collection and coding of commentary.

As YouTube continues to rise in influence, and, at the same time, right-wing populism becomes more mainstream online, research plays an essential role in connecting these concepts and work through how individuals develop their political ideologies in new, unfiltered spaces. While YouTube and other social media applications may pose a research challenge, we mustn't ignore their ability to integrate into one's daily life, challenging mainstream media's influence and allowing them space to formulate their political consciousness. As PewDiePie himself has said: "that's what's so cool about YouTube: anybody can do it" (Kjellberg, 2019).

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Appendix A.

Nvivo Codebook

| Autocoded Themes | Words used |
|----------------------|---|
| Actors | <i>actor lol, actors part, background actors, insane actors, n't actors</i> |
| Big fan | <i>Big fan</i> |
| Bitch | <i>Bitch lasagna, bitch lasagne, bye bitch, pewdiepie-like bitch lazania-com, real bitch lasagna, realist bitch, video bitch</i> |
| Bitch lasagna | <i>Bitch lasagna, real bitch lasagna</i> |
| Bots | <i>Sub bots, t-series bots, t-series bots subscriber, t-series sub bots</i> |
| Bro | <i>Asian boobs bro, balls bro, big bro fist, bro fist, bro fists, everyday bro, fist time, game bro fist, gg bros, going bros, hell bro, kotor bro, last bro fist, mom bro fist, small bro fists, song bro, video bro, wtf bro, ze bro fist</i> |
| Ceiling gang | <i>Ceiling gang, ceiling gang smh cringe</i> |
| Chair | <i>Chair hahaha, chair pathfinder, gamer chair</i> |
| Comment | <i>1m comment, 917k comments, active comment, begging comments, comment bros, comment section, coronavirus comments, finally comments, mil fucking comments, nonmeme comments, original comments, pewdiepie comment, top comment, top comments, underated comment</i> |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Cringe | <i>Cringe man, cringe tiene, kinda cringe, pure cringe</i> |
| Dildo | <i>Big red dildo, blurred red dildo, dildo lol, red diamond, red dildo, red violets, ruby dildo</i> |
| Dislikes | <i>800k dislikes, 835k dislikes, disliked everything, mil dislikes, peoplewho dislike, wtf 800k dislikes</i> |
| Epic | <i>Epic battle, epic batle, epic content war, epic song, epic thing, epic war, epic war ladies, something epic</i> |
| Fan | <i>Bad fan, big fan, good fan, huge fan</i> |
| Fans | <i>Pewdiepie fan everybody, pewdiepie fans, series fans, t series fans, t-series fans</i> |
| Fucking | <i>Bruh fuck, fuck king, fuck man, fucking acate, fucking button, fucking gayass, fucking play button, fucking poop, fucking stop, fucking sucks, fucking thanks, fucking times, fucking video, fucking years, saying fuck</i> |
| Game | <i>Gamer chair, hey game dreadout, video game lol</i> |
| Gang | <i>Anyone floor gang, ceiling gang, ceiling gang smh cringe, ceiling gang smh, floor gang, floor gang floor gang</i> |
| Generations | <i>Confused future generations, future generations, millennial generation, right generation</i> |
| Girl | <i>Blond hair girl, blonde girl, creppy girl, girl ghost creep, girl</i> |
| Guy | <i>Crazy bananas guy, lol scare tactic guys, nice guy, security guy</i> |

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Guys | <i>Bucket guy, c'mon guys, guys careers, honest guys pewdiepie, nice guy, single guy</i> |
| Hahaha | <i>Chair hahaha, corona virus hahaha, ok pew hahaha</i> |
| Help | <i>Big help, hallo help</i> |
| Hospital | <i>Hospital stuff, mental hospital, real hospital, ruining hospitals</i> |
| Kaguya | <i>Kaguya akan bangkit lagi malalui segel, membunuh kaguya, ternyata mengapa hagaromo mengatakan kaguya hanya</i> |
| Kangaroo | <i>Australian kangaroo, australein kangaroo, grey kantgaroo, kangaroo these, red kangaroo</i> |
| Lasagna | <i>Beef lasagna, bitch lasagna, eating lasagna, lasagna today, lasagna wit, real bitch lasagna</i> |
| Lmao | <i>Lmao, clicked lmao, funny lmao, white powder episode lmao</i> |
| Lol | <i>★lol★, 14 times lol, 1k likes lol, actor lol, apologize lol, booming lol, duck lol, house lol doesn, lol 100m views, lol scare tactic guys, mama lol, proof lol, references lol, video game lol</i> |
| Man | <i>Amazing man, camera man, cringe man, man pews</i> |
| Meme | <i>Big meme, dead memes time everybody, good meme mashup, good meme year, good ole memes, meme community, meme moment, meme rewind, meme time, memes flyingkitty, memes suck, much memes, next memes, peak meme time, s memes</i> |
| Minecraft | <i>28 minecraft chest, minecraft ches, minecraft chest, minecraft hit, minecraft series, minecraft skin</i> |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Music | <i>Background music, beautiful music, great music, music pewd</i> |
| Outlast | <i>Outlast irl, outlast remake, outlast time, real life outlast</i> |
| Part | <i>Brofist part, daves part, favorite part, final brofist, last brofist, last brofist part</i> |
| People | <i>Actual people, crazy people, creepy people, scary peoples</i> |
| Pewdiepie | <i>alternate world pewdiepie, amassing pewdiepie, big youtuber pewdiepie, congratulations pewdiepie, cus pewdiepie, fast pewdiepie, god pewdiepie, good job pewdiepie, good pewdiepie, good shit pewdiepie, goooooooooo pewdiepie, hard pewdiepie, honest guys pewdiepie, honorable eres pewdiepie, horrible para pewdiepie, im pewdiepie, much pewdiepie, ni pewdiepie mais, pewdiepie beat t-siries, pewdiepie comment, pewdiepie congratulations, pewdiepie control, pewdiepie don't, pewdiepie fan everybody, pewdiepie fans, pewdiepie haters, pewdiepie lasagna, pewdiepie mám tvou zidli, pewdiepie notice, pewdiepie number, pewdiepie review, pewdiepie rewind, pewdiepie scare pewdiepie cant, pewdiepie season, pewdiepie simulator, pewdiepie sub counts, pewdiepie subscribers, pewdiepie tribute, pewdiepie video, pewdiepie vif</i> |
| Pewds | <i>beat pewds, continued pewds, daddy pewds, day pewds, e pewd desculpa, liked pewds, man pewds, music pewd, n word pewds, overcoming pewds, pewds vids, pewds wedding, seeing pewds, sixth form pewds, sorry pewds, supported pewds, supporting pewds, thumbnail pewds, trash pewds, watching pewds</i> |
| Playbutton | <i>50m button, billionaire play button, blue diamond play button, cardboard play button, custom play button , diamond play button, fucking button, fucking play button, giant play button,</i> |

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| | <i>house play button, little ruby button, next play button, play button, play button, play button thumbnail, quadrillionare play button, ruby play button, shiny play button, sliver play button, standard play button, sub play button, toilet bowl silver button, trillion play button, wood play button</i> |
| Quarantine | <i>Coronavirus quarantine anyone, quarantine anyone, quarantine hits, quarantine listening, quarantine session</i> |
| Que | <i>alguien que hable español, canal para que nadie piense que, diganme que, duvido que tenha, entendendo tudo que ele tá falando, eu sou londrinence espero que entenda, mejor youtuber que haya existido, persona que hable español está viendo, primer video que, que por cierto, que veo, que você não, sabía que hablaba español</i> |
| Real life | <i>Real life, real life outlast, real life thing</i> |
| Recommendations | <i>Classic recommendations, constant recommendation, recommended system</i> |
| Rewind | <i>2020 rewind vid, actual rewind, awesome rewind, corona rewind video, cringe rewind, decent rewind, epic rewind, favorite rewind, fucking rewind, good rewind, hot rewind, liked rewind, meme rewind, next rewind, normal rewind, original rewind, original rewind fans, perfect rewind lol, pew rewind people, pewdiepie rewind, pewdiepies rewind, real rewind, real rewind lol, rewind creator dude, rewind cuz, rewind everyone, rewind intro, rewind lol, rewind review, rewind time, rewind time everybody, rewind video, tru rewind, upcoming rewinds, whole rewind, years rewind, youtube rewind, youtube rewind lol, youtube rewind pews, yt rewind</i> |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Ruby | <i>khi nào nút ruby thứ, little ruby button, maverick ruby, real ruby, ruby brofist, ruby dildo, ruby horse, ruby play button, ruby playbuton brter, ruby sex toy</i> |
| Scare | <i>Lol scare tactic guys, pewdiepie scare pewdiepie cant, scare me-w, scare scare</i> |
| Season | <i>2nd season, next season, pewdiepie season, season tho, wont release season</i> |
| Security | <i>Security guard, security guy</i> |
| Series | <i>series haha, series plz, series prank encounters, series sub-bots, series sucks, series valio pepino, t series, t series congratulations, t series fans, t series hmmmmmm, t series tho, tea series, whole series</i> |
| Song | <i>amazing song, awesome song, bad song, classic song, dis song, diss songs, downloading songs, english rap song, epic song, favorite song, fire song, freekin song, fricken song, good song, heartwarming song, iconic song, incredible song, legendary song, nice song, official songs, pewdie songs, pirata songs xdd, racis song, song bro, song chains, song kaukasian boy, song war, top song, whole song, whole song company</i> |
| Sub | <i>200 mil subs, indian bots, live sub, live sub counts, pewdiepie sub counts, sub boot, sub bot, sub boting, sub bots, sub bots t-series, subbed channel, subed cring, subs guardian angels, t-series sub bots, using sub bots</i> |
| Subs | <i>0 subs lol, 000 mil subs, 100 mill subs, 10000ml subs, 100m sub hhhh, 100mil subs, 106mil subs, 150 mill subs, 1billion subs, 50 millions subs, 50mil subs, 6b subs, everyone sub,</i> |

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| | <i>nuevo sub, pls sub, sub play button, sub reward, youtuber yng mempunyai subs</i> |
| Subscriber | <i>100m subscribers, 104m subscribers, 104mil subscribers, 20k subscriber, 8th subscriber, next subscriber landmark, pewdiepie subscribers</i> |
| Subscribers | <i>10k subscribers, 136m subscribers, 4 subscriber tbh, t-series bots subscribers, t-series subscribers</i> |
| T series | <i>poop series, series fans, t series, t series alts, t series cry hahahaha, t series fans, t series war</i> |
| Thing | <i>fiverr thing, real life thing, scariest thing, thing scientists, thing wassup, weird thing</i> |
| Time | <i>14 times lol, 2018 man time, 5 years time, 5th time, 6th grade dang time, bad time, corona time, dam man time, dead memes time everybody, fuckin time, fucking times, good times, last time something, meme time, multiple times, mutch times, number times, outlast time, peak meme time, quarantine times, quarintine time, rewind time, rewind time everybody, ruwind time, single time, time corona virus, time pewdiepie nah, trying time</i> |
| Track | <i>diss songs, diss track, third dis track</i> |
| t-series | <i>bet t-series, cking t-series channel, dang t-series, roasting t-series, search t-series, sub bots t-series, t-series bots, t-series bots subscriber, t-series fans, t-series friends, t-series report, t-series sub bots, t-series subcribers, t-series subscribers, watching t-series</i> |
| Video | <i>beast video, cool video, corona rewind video, disliked video, egg video, este video, favorite video, felix videos, fucking video,</i> |

| | |
|------------------|---|
| | <i>full video, good video, good video bro, great video tho, hitting video, incredible videos, jimmys video, korean ladies video, liked video, liked video overtook, minecraft video, minute video, music video, nice video that's, non-music video, perfect video, pewdiepie video, popular video, primer video que, random videos, reaction video, rewind video, shit watch mojo video, shitty video, shxt videos, sponsored video, sus videos, unboxing video, video bitch, video bro, video dude, video game lol, video idea, video oop, video pewdiepie, video top, video worst, wedding video wtf, whole video, wonderful video. wrong video, youtube videos</i> |
| Views | <i>116mil views, crore views, lol 100m views</i> |
| War | <i>actually world war, cocomelon war, epic content war, epic war, epic war ladies, glorious war, golden war, good war, great war, infinite war, legendary war, pewdiepie war, real war, song war, t series war, wold war, world war, youtube war</i> |
| Watching | <i>im watch, watching mind field, watching piewdiepie</i> |
| World | <i>actually world war, alternate world pewdiepie, world war</i> |
| Year olds | <i>10 year olds, 19 year olds, 9 year olds</i> |
| Years | <i>19 year olds, 4 years dude, fucking years, whole years</i> |
| Youtube | <i>rewaind youtube, studied youtubes policy guidelines, wont youtube, youtube channel, youtube employees, youtube needs, youtube rewind, youtube rewind lol, youtube rewind pews, youtube videos</i> |
| youtuber | <i>e querido ser youtuber, mejor youtuber que haya existido, ser youtuber solo tengo, small youtuber</i> |

Nvivo Hierarchy of Codes



Appendix C.

Qualitative Codebook

| Code | Type of Coding | Description | Examples |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|---|---|
| Adoration | Emotions | Used when there is evidence of deep love, worship, or respect of PewDiePie | <i>"PewDiePie is truly a masterpiece", "It's better for his back tbh I don't want Felix to get back problems"</i> |
| Agreement | Emotions | Used when there are simple comments of cooperation between users and throughout replies | <i>"truth right there", "I highly agree", "same", "same lol"</i> |
| Anger | Emotions | Used when the comment is purely angry in tone, without additional context or values presented in the comment | <i>"@User, u mad?"</i> |
| Approval of content (belief) | Values | Used when the comment is in direct approval of PewDiePie's content production, and no other context, or argumentation, is presented | <i>"Who else just comes back here because this song is amazing?"</i> |

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| Call to listen to PewDiePie (action) | Values | Used when a comment is a direct call to action and command for other community members to follow PewDiePie's lead | <i>"PewDiePie said to stop", "Im going to force my children to memorize this like pewdiepie said"</i> |
| Common man versus the elite | Versus | Used when a comment is a generalized comment about PewDiePie's community members, as the 'common man' versus the 'elite'; no explicit connection to a particular group | <i>"billion-dollar companies versus a few editor friends"</i> |
| Conversation | Concept | Used when the comment is a direct conversational response to another comment, and informational in form | <i>"My name is from Turkey, so I'm Turkish", "I'm from the states"</i> |
| Critique of government regulation/censorship | Concept | Used when a critique of internet censorship more broadly is stated, rather than just YouTube or COPPA in particular | <i>"PewDiePie: Makes this song Internet: blocks this song VPN: hold my beer", "lol its really blocked in India and china? Oof guess they're mad"</i> |
| Critique of YouTube/ the establishment | Concept | Used when a critique of YouTube, as a physical platform, is offered, and doesn't directly emphasize competition of | <i>"Wow, recommendations actually worked?", "they [YouTube] wants you to buy premium, I bought it..."</i> |

| | | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------|---|--|
| PewDiePie and the platform | | | |
| Disagreement | Emotions | Used when a reply is in direct dissent with another, but does not include any other contextual argument or concept | <i>"lol ur wrong pewd isn't floor gang anymore", "naw he didn't invent the floor gang before, idiot"</i> |
| Disgust | Emotions | Used when a comment utilizes revulsion or strong disapproval within its form, often in direct reply with another user | <i>"your name disgusts me"</i> |
| Economic hardship (belief) | Values | Used when an expression of economic hardship, or belief of class issues, arises in a comment | <i>"2:36 'but never mind the poor people, we just here to party' Aight, imma head out", "I'm actually poor I live in my grandpa's basement my mom and dad are divorced and we do not have money"</i> |
| Embarrassment | Emotions | Used when a member mentions their embarrassment of either PewDiePie's content, or another user's comment, or attempts to embarrass another user through humiliation | <i>"idk its cringe", "your ugly", "stop liking your own comment you weirdo"</i> |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|----------|---|--|
| Female versus male | Versus | Used when a female community member is belittled, downvoted, or called-out | <i>“ah yes we see we have a gamer girl”</i> |
| Freedom of association | Concept | Used for comments that showcase members’ associations with other groups | <i>“I’m an Indian bro, 19 years old!”</i> |
| Homophobia | Concept | Used when a mention of homosexuality, like the word ‘gay’, is used to belittle or make fun of another member or group | <i>“2.2 mil t-series gays”, “Pewgaypie vs. god”, “more like God vs t gay”</i> |
| Humorous | Emotions | Used when the aim of a comment is to be humorous or joking, and doesn’t have any additional context | <i>“2016: PewDiePie swears every two seconds 2020: PewDiePie is a Minecraft channel”, “Damn I was dumb when I was a 10 y.o., I finally realized why he blurred that play button LOL”</i> |
| Inclusivity | Concept | Used for comments that showcase that all community members are granted access through welcoming language/ acceptance | <i>N/A</i> |



| | | | |
|---|----------|---|---|
| Internet community or generation (value) | Values | Used when a comment mentions a particular generation or community of knowledge, which will be passed down to future generations | <i>"One day in the future, teachers will talk to students about the war between Sweden and India.", "Imao we are the best generation XD"</i> |
| Internet culture | Concept | Used when a comment is connected directly to an internet 'inside joke', which may not be understood by all outside of the community | <i>"is that a soul eater reference?", "101 dislikes... 101 likes... Perfectly balanced, like all things should be"</i> |
| Internet war | Concept | Used when PewDiePie and t-series' competition is presented as a war, with implications of terrorism, globalization, etc | <i>"This is one way war ends, last man standing. Pewds is still standing. THIS WAR IS NOT OVER", "History teacher: Analyse a source from a modern war. Me:"</i> |
| Laughing | Emotions | Used when a comment is only a laughing emoticon or symbol and has no other content. Not in agreement or disagreement codes as it is difficult to know the implication of each emoticon in each context. | <i>"lol", "XDDD"</i> |


| | | | |
|--|----------|---|--|
| Masculinity | Concept | Used for comments that present traditionally masculine ideations | <i>“hell ya bro fists”</i> |
| Membership in PewDiePie’s community (value) | Values | Used when an explicit connection is made between the adoration of PewDiePie and the other community members in the comment sections | <i>“Who is better? Pewdiepie: Like, PewDiePie: Like”, “Who is here because this amazing song randomly crosses your mind?”</i> |
| Nostalgic | Emotions | Used when a comment has a sentimental longing or affection for the past | “ |
| PewDiePie versus another YouTuber | Versus | Used when PewDiePie is positioned in direct competition with another YouTube account | <i>“Why isn’t this top on billboards? James Charles after he got canceled. PewDiePie: Burnt Lasagna James Charles lol”, “Jake Paul: 5mil in 6 months pewdiepie is next PewDiePie: hold my broken 100 mil award that I broke!!”</i> |
| PewDiePie versus T-series | Versus | Used when PewDiePie is explicitly positioned as in competition with T-series | <i>“All the dislikes are pewdiepie’s haters/ enemies, t-series fans and Probably this video TRIGGERS t-series”</i> |



| | | | |
|---|----------|--|--|
| PewDiePie versus YouTube | Versus | Used when PewDiePie is explicitly positioned against YouTube, it being the platform and a corporate entity. | <i>"I'm kinda surprised youtube is recommending a PewDiePie video this much", "back when YouTube liked PewDiePie. Season two please".</i> |
| PewDiePie's community versus COPPA | Versus | Used when PewDiePie's community makes explicit mentioning of how COPPA has affected their viewership and use of the YouTube platform | <i>"The dislikes are from the people behind COPPA screaming about bad words", "it's gotten worse because COPPA was on their ass after youtube took kids info and it sucks"</i> |
| Racialized identity | Value | Used when a racialized identity is uttered within a comment | <i>"As a professional black person, I approve this message. Edit BTW: if you like my comment you get the n-word pass", "black people understood him and white people who say the n-word many times got offended"</i> |
| Sympathetic | Emotions | Used for comments that have a sympathetic or apologetic undertone, and are not seemingly sarcastic in nature | <i>"Sorry about your dog bro..."</i> |


Appendix D.

R/PewDiePieSubmissions Reddit Post Responses

 MessageMan1402 2 points · 1 day ago
 FLOOR GANG OUH OUH

 Reply Give Award Share Report Save

 Samantha69420 1 point · 1 day ago
 Tambourine

 Reply Give Award Share Report Save