

# Life Changing Experiences of Unintended Popularity through Web-Video Dissemination: A Study on YouTube

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## Abstract

Along with the rapid growth of Internet companies such as Yahoo!, Google, and amazon, carries also with them the web's instantaneous trait of worldwide notoriety for ordinary people. This possibility unconceivable not too long ago, is now an ordinary experience feasible for almost everybody in the world. YouTube, a rapidly growing website now owned by Google, creates more significance in this phenomenon with its ability to contain millions of web-videos uploaded everyday by users around the globe. Moreover, it is a free service, easy, and accessible almost to anyone, anywhere, anytime with internet access. Because of the technology of the User Generated Content (UGC) and Web 2.0, videos are easily disseminated throughout the web. YouTube has become the common originator of Internet celebrities that then spread to other mainstream or old media. Some of these media stars are not initially looking for fame. Their popularity comes from other users watching and sharing their stories or videos to others which later on gained the attention of mass media. These web-videos then become life changing experiences for the subjects projected and sometimes even for the viewers that watch them as well, with good and often bad undertones. Thus is the nature of this new media.

**Keywords:** YouTube, web-video, new media, Internet celebrity, life changing, popularity, fame, dissemination, User Generated Content (UGC)

## Abstrak

*Karakteristik percepatan perkembangan perusahaan-perusahaan Internet seperti Yahoo!, Google, dan amazon, turut mempengaruhi sifat dari ketenaran yang juga instan bagi masyarakat luas. Kemungkinan ini yang sebelumnya tidak terbayangkan, sekarang adalah suatu pengalaman yang biasa yang dapat dialami oleh siapa pun di dunia. YouTube, sebuah situs web yang sedang berkembang pesat yang kini dimiliki oleh Google, sangat berpengaruh pada fenomena ini, dengan kemampuannya untuk menampung jutaan video web yang diunggah setiap harinya oleh penggunaanya dari seluruh dunia. Terlebih lagi, situs ini gratis, mudah, dan dapat diakses hampir oleh siapa saja, di mana pun, dan kapan pun dengan akses internet. Teknologi User Generated Content (UGC) dan Web 2.0 memungkinkan video-video web tersebut untuk terdiseminasikan ke seluruh jejaring maya. YouTube telah menjadi sumber utama dari para selebritis Internet yang kemudian tersebar ke media mainstream atau media lama. Beberapa dari bintang media ini memang tidak mencari ketenaran. Mereka terkenal karena banyaknya pengguna Internet yang melihat dan menyebarkan video dan cerita mereka, yang kemudian mendapatkan perhatian media massa. Video-video web tersebut lalu menjadikan suatu pengalaman yang merubah hidup atau nasib orang, baik subyek yang ada di video maupun terkadang bagi penglihatnya juga, dengan nuansa baik maupun tidak. Begitulah karakteristik media baru atau new media.*

**Kata kunci:** YouTube, web-video, new media, selebritis Internet, merubah nasib, popularitas, ketenaran, diseminasi, User Generated Content (UGC)

## 1. Giving Birth to Instant Celebrities

With the booming of mass media and new media, we have moved further, faster, and smarter it seems. Media has learned its sophisticated language and utilized all of its forms and parts to communicate to the mass in more integrated and interactive ways (Van Dijk, 2001: 9). The newer media recognizes the old

media as partners, where most of the time they converge. The Internet's rapid development and growth has made huge impact and has touched every aspect of our lives, changing how we keep in touch and share information. It is an interactive media and very keen to User Generated Content (UGC), where users are the ones creating the sites' contents and even decide which sites deserve popular views. In his book

The Language of New Media, Manovich (2002) said that "today we are in the middle of a new media revolution—the shift of all of our culture to computer-mediated forms of production, distribution and communication. This new revolution is arguably more profound than the previous ones and we are just beginning to sense its initial effects" (p. 43). Society has also changed structurally, from mass society to network society, where people are more individual but can be linked globally (Van Dijk: 2001, 33). People now easily communicate and spread or share links of information online.

With the advancement of web technology, it is now possible for stars to be born out of someone's bedroom and spread to International media faster than ever before. New media technologies, however, have enabled fame to be re-constituted, and to circulate in a web of inter- and hyper-textual media sites that extends the places and spaces where it can be consumed (Holmes: 2006, p. 211). The prophetic words Andy Warhol made in 1968 had surely been proven true with the growing numbers of reality shows on television and amateur videos online. People have turned into short time celebrities, who then fade away as with the audience's attention swiftly passes to other interesting things. As Redmond suggests, fame culture offers 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' people the chance of a heightened level of intimacy, an intimacy that potentially, perhaps inevitably, destabilizes the borders and boundaries of identity, and which energizes or electrifies one's experience of the world (Redmond: 2006, p. 27).

The Internet community especially sees this opportunity to get noticed and gain some level of attention, such as with the case of "lonelygirl15." Some people even feel they have to compete for this popularity. However, there are occasions where the nature of the web itself does the work for you, without you even knowing. In the modern world the instances and footprints of fame can be found everywhere. So-called 'ordinary' people, for example, find themselves, sometimes 'accidentally', on television, online, in front of the roving film/documentary/stills camera, in the newspaper, and in the promotional and publicity material for *real* stars and celebrities. Ordinary people become 'accidental celebrities' (Turner, 2000 cited in Redmond: 2006, p. 27). You never know where a camera is going to be and when it's going to be uploaded online. And you never know when people are going to grab and reedit or remix your video and repost it online. New and old media technologies have enabled stars and celebrities to be endlessly circulated, replayed, downloaded and copied.

## 2. YouTube: The User-Generated Creature

Entering its only fourth year on the Internet, YouTube is becoming a significant name and website for people throughout the world to upload, view, and share their videos. YouTube, now a subsidiary of Google, using its Adobe Flash Video technology, can display a wide variety of user-generated video content, including movie clips, TV clips, and music videos, as well as amateur content such as video blogging and short original videos. The overnight success of YouTube, among other names on the Internet, has also given its users a chance to be overnight stars with just simply playing with their video camera and uploading and posting the result recording online. With the ease and possibility of popularity, people often compete for attention and subscribers, and hope to be discovered. But on the other hand, some people get attention and celebrity status without them wanting it or knowing it due to the very nature of the User Generated Content and the technology of Web 2.0; where dissemination of information is just a click or a copy-paste away.

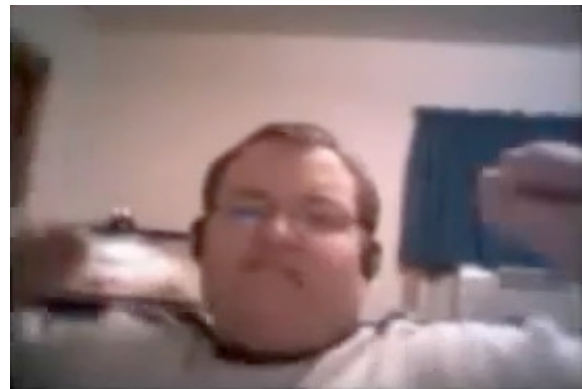
YouTube's viral characteristics can draw those who are not searching for fame or fortune, or non-users, to have a life-changing experience of popularity in an instant—for the subjects in the videos and even for viewers who access them. They are the cases where unintended popularity happens. It is from the Internet that these ordinary 'amateurs' become widely famous first before they are talked about on other mainstream media or old media. Being ordinary, authentic or 'real' is a dominant rhetorical device of fame that has increasingly found its logical point of reference in the onscreen and online antics of extraordinary and ordinary people supposedly *just* being themselves (Holmes, 2004; Biressi and Nunn, 2004; cited in Redmond: 2006, p. 28).

With the Internet, YouTube especially, instant celebrities are born. Before YouTube, it was really difficult to upload videos online. YouTube has given an easy to use "platform" for people to share videos. The YouTube Fact Sheet explains that people are watching hundreds of millions of videos a day on YouTube and uploading around 200,000 videos daily. In fact, every minute, ten hours of video is uploaded to YouTube. 88% of the content is said to be new and original, and the majority of videos on YouTube are meant for audiences of less than 100 people (Wesch, 2008).

When we look at the Most Viewed videos on YouTube of All Time, we can categorize them into things that have to do with music or music video clips, funny performances, inspiring performances, funny amateur videos of kids or babies, and interesting or sexually related information or opinions. Some of these videos are uploaded by big companies, but most are by ordinary people wanting

to share their thoughts or experiences to their (virtual) friends. Certain videos get special attention because its ability to interest, move, or affect the viewer in some way, good and bad. More often this special attention only affects to short blurbs or comments and responses written below the videos. But some videos would receive several hundred thousand comments in the form of writing and video responses, and become videos that fall into the category of 'Most Discussed' or 'Most Responded,' or 'Top Favorited' or 'Top Rated,' which sometimes would create a worldwide Internet sensation and eventually get exposed extensively throughout other media. Jenkins describe that viewers become active participants that determine the construction and circulation of meanings and popularity. Their response typically involves not only fascination or adoration but sometimes also frustration and antagonism, and it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement with the media (Jenkins: 1992, p. 23).

On media stars, Holmes explains, "The famous are constructed, circulated and consumed through the busy channels of media production, as well as the social networks with which they intersect (Holmes: 2006, p. 6). We can map the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity. It occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role... to investigating the detail of their private lives (Turner: 2004, p. 8, cited in Holmes: 2006, p. 11). Cyber stars, however, already existed before YouTube was born, and they were from viral videos spread through emails or from peer-to-peer file sharing network. Two of the top viral videos of all time are "The Star Wars Kid" and "The Numa Numa Guy." They are amateur videos. And these kind of videos seem to capture the attention of viewers because they show something authentic or natural and spontaneous. There is something 'real' in their projection. They reach to about 900 million and 700 million views respectively. With YouTube, however, this phenomenon is further catapulted to a higher degree. Fame, however, is an elusive idea... But because the nature of fame is defined by context, both historical and immediate... no pattern traced here has the force of determining causality. Fame is metamorphic... There can be no single perspective, no secret key by which we can unlock what it really is (Brady: 1986, p. 591, cited in Holmes: 2006, p. 20).



**Figure 1. "The Star Wars Kid" and "The Numa Numa Guy." Two early viral web-videos that received head start in popular views before the birth of YouTube (Source: youtube.com).**

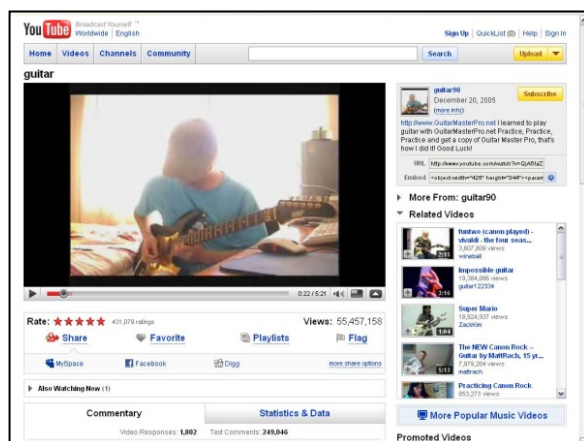
A professor who focuses on digital ethnography from Kansas State University, Michael Wesch, reminds us also that although our video might be uploaded onto YouTube, it's popularity and spread doesn't always come from just this one site or even just this one video, and not in one specific context, but from many. With the ease of Web 2.0 technology that we have today, it is quite easy to embed videos from YouTube onto your site or blog, and even reedit the video with drag and drop editing software and re-upload it online. And approximately 15% of videos on YouTube are remixes or remakes of other videos (Wesch, 2008). Videos get redone and remixed usually as responses or parodies, especially if they are popular. The popularity and hype of these videos gets the attention of mass media to do coverage on the happening. Thus, creating further popularity for the subjects involved.

### 3. Three Cases of Unintended Popularity

#### 3.1. The Mysterious Talent

This is an example of when a video unintentionally changes the life of the subject or the person seen or captured. A video shows a person playing Pachelbel's Canon in rock version, sitting on his bed in his bedroom with his electric guitar next to his computer. The anonymous person wears a baseball cap and hides his face throughout the video. The video attains popularity and viewers start asking and discussing who is the mysterious person skillfully playing the guitar. The clip currently has 63 million views and counting. This is just from one user, not counting from other users who grabbed it or made remixes of it. The guitar player turned out to be a South Korean named Lim Jeong-hyun, also known online as 'funtwo.' Lim did not intentionally want this International fame. He originally uploaded his video

to a popular Korean music site called Mule.co.kr. Then an unknown person nicknamed “guitar90” grabbed the video and put it on YouTube where it further spreads. His video is among the twentieth most viewed and fifth most ‘favorited’ video in YouTube history. Lim's cover of Canon Rock has been mentioned on CNN, 20/20, The New York Times, National Public Radio, MBC news, CBC Radio, KBS news, and other Korean news stations. This phenomenon is then referenced by a major label band Weezer in the beginning of their music video clip for song “Pork and Beans” which shows a replica of Lim’s room with the band’s members playing their various instruments. After his exposure to the media, Lim has created worldwide followers and has also played in a large concert with top musicians. He has inspired millions of youths on practicing their guitars.



**Figure 2. Lim’s video, put on YouTube by “guitar90” (Source: youtube.com).**

An analysis on why the video might be popular on YouTube in the beginning is that the username ‘guitar90’ probably was a starting point for users wanting to find tutorials on how to play the guitar. Learning the guitar is the trend for teens and young adults, who make up the largest group of users of YouTube. And this new media generation is very much wired. They know that information such as this musical example or tutorial is available to find on the Internet. They would most likely go to YouTube and type in the keyword ‘guitar.’ A second factor is that the mysterious identity of the talented player adds curiosity to our thirst for information. The third factor is that music can be said to be a universal language comprehensible to worldwide audience. Especially a classical music such as Pachelbel’s Canon in D, which has long been heard by many generations. Its variation into rock is also a sure way to capture the viewer’s interest and attention.



**Figure 3. Lim Jeong-hyun featured on a New Zealand TV program, Campbell Live. (Source: youtube.com)**



**Figure 4. Weezer’s music video “Pork and Beans” showing the iconic bedroom; and funtwo playing in a concert with Joe Satriani (Source: youtube.com).**

### 3.2. Finding Inspiration

Life changing experiences can also work both ways, for the subjects in the video as well as for the viewers. Randy Pausch, a professor from Carnegie Mellon University gave a talk on the university’s lecture series entitled "The Last Lecture: Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams" on September 18, 2007 to an audience of 400 people. In this series, the

appointed speaker is supposed to address something that he or she thinks would be important to say if it was his or her last lecture. Randy Pausch—at that time was suffering from pancreatic cancer and had only months to live—gave an inspiring lecture about achieving your childhood dreams. The speech was officially recorded by the university and uploaded to the Carnegie Mellon's YouTube channel. Before long, through 'word of mouth,' the video was watched by millions. Words spread of the talk through the Internet and became a global sensation, which later translated or subtitled into many languages worldwide. Randy Pausch was later invited to several TV shows like Oprah to give a short version of the talk. The video appeared on countless websites and has been viewed by millions. Appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show, ABC's Good Morning America and the CBS Evening News. A book version, "The Last Lecture" co-written by Jeff Zaslow of the Wall Street Journal, became a best-seller immediately after its publication.



**Figure 5. Randy Pausch's Last Lecture: Achieving Your Childhood Dreams (Source: youtube.com)**

Randolph Frederick Pausch (October 23, 1960 – July 25, 2008) was an American professor of computer science and human-computer interaction and design at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Although quite long for a web-video, his lecture inspired millions. People want to listen and download the talk, given the recommendations of other viewers. Over 10 million people have watched his video on YouTube alone. From the comments and reviews about the talk, it can be said that it has not only changed the life of Pausch and his family but also the viewers from the inspiration they get from watching the video. His popularity, moreover brought awareness to pancreatic cancer, which in turn accumulated more donations to go to the cause. He is survived by his wife, Jai, and three children: Chloe, Dylan and Logan. The family requests that donations

on his behalf be directed to the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network.



**Figure 6. Pausch giving a condensed version of his talk on Oprah (Source: youtube.com).**



**Figure 7. TV coverage after his death on July 25, 2008 (Source: youtube.com).**

Pausch's talk seems to be directed to the very core of humanity, that is probably why his talk is inspiring to many. Pausch was also a good communicator. His oration skills have been compared regularly to Lincoln, Churchill, and Kennedy. He was a good storyteller. To the worldwide audience, language is not a problem here, because people voluntarily translate and reedit the video with subtitles to their languages. Furthermore, people tend to empathize and also have concerns towards their own health issues and very common sickness such as cancer. A person suffering from such illness but still have such a positive outlook on life and can motivate others usually grabs people's interest and attention. But in short, Pausch emerged unintentionally from obscurity to touch the hearts of millions.

### **3.3. The Disturbing Scene You Just Have to Watch and Make Fun of**

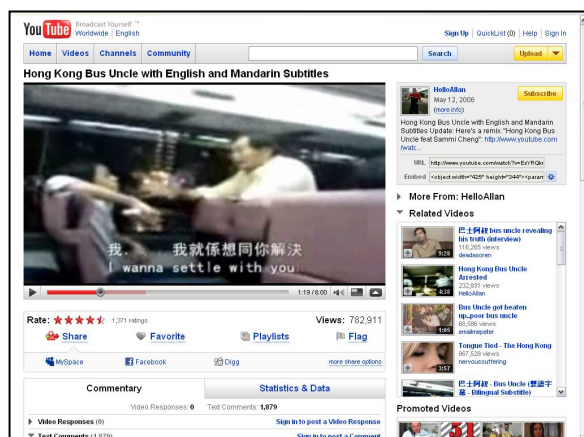
On April 27, 2006, in a Hong Kong bus, a quarrel happened between two men. An older man scolded a younger man seated behind him endlessly, while a nearby passenger recorded the whole scene with his camera phone. The resulting six minute video was then uploaded to YouTube and became YouTube's most viewed video in May 2006, receiving 1.7 million hits in only the first three weeks of that month. The video attracted viewers because of its rhetorical outbursts and numerous use of profanity by the older man, who was later found out named Roger Chan and nicknamed "the Bus Uncle." The video became a cultural sensation in Hong Kong, inspiring debates and discussions on lifestyle, etiquette, civic awareness and media ethics, which eventually attracted the attention of the media around the world. The media then revealed that the 51 year old Chan had been unemployed for more than ten years, living off \$1,800 in welfare payments and lived by himself, with no friends and rare contact with his family. It has been said that he does not listen to radio nor watch TV, and he had no idea that he was such a superstar. Although famous, Chan's case has a negative undertone to it; especially because of his bad behavior and character. He is reportedly demanding payment for interviews and made many extraordinary claims about himself. The media in Hong Kong covered the Bus Uncle story for days. Chan appeared cheerful on camera and laughed off the incident, saying he doesn't use foul language at all. After this incident, he has experienced being mugged at work and ended up in the emergency room.

Uncle" and sympathized with whatever stress the older man was suffering.

Catchphrases from the Bus Uncle became popular sayings in Hong Kong. The two most used were: "It's not settled!!!" and "I am stressed, you are stressed," and were used on many shows and everyday conversations, especially by teenagers. Chan's famous quotes appeared on Internet forums, posters, radio shows, music videos, parodies, video games, composite pictures, movie posters, TV ads, and mentioned on the main evening news on TVB, as well as Cable TV news. Merchandizes such as cartoon T-shirts with Bus Uncle's picture and sayings, and mobile phone ringtones from the video had also been produced and sold on the Internet. An advertisement for a bottled water company also features a reenactment of the 'Bus Uncle' incident.



**Figure 9.** In June 2006, TVB television made a parody of the Bus Uncle video in promoting its coverage of the 2006 FIFA World Cup (Source: [zonaeuropa.com/20060524\\_1.htm](http://zonaeuropa.com/20060524_1.htm)).



**Figure 8.** Bus Uncle in action (Source: [youtube.com](http://youtube.com))

The young man scolded in the video was Elvis Ho, a 23-year-old property agent of his family's property management company. He also became famous after revealing himself to a Hong Kong talk show radio. To a reporter of South China Morning Post, Ho said he often takes long bus rides home and frequently asked passengers to lower their voices so he could nap. Despite being threatened, Ho said he forgave "Bus



**Figure 10. T-shirt with the famous quote sold on the Internet and print media coverage (Source: [zonaeuropa.com/20060524\\_1.htm](http://zonaeuropa.com/20060524_1.htm)).**

As Johansson mentions in his writing, that there is pleasure taken from damaging celebrities. “Celebrity-bashing”, like in tabloid newspapers, provides a momentary experience of power and control to viewers, as they, as spectators, are part of dragging the deviant personality down. They are the audience for which the celebrity is sacrificed (Johansson, 2006, cited in Holmes: 2006, p. 355). Especially when the

celebrity has terrible character, people tend to not be hesitant in making fun of him. People act out in playful vengeance for his misdemeanor and his terrible and strange manner in scolding in public, and also his indifference to the media spotlight.

#### 4. Conclusion: An Inclusive Dissemination

Video dissemination creates the chance of unintended popularity. YouTube accentuates this possibility with its ease of use and the amount of acquired users worldwide that login and view videos daily. With the dissemination of knowledge and culture comes with it the ability to lure in little phenomena into huge phenomena, and unknown or little known characters into International stars. Life changing experience does not necessarily mean popularity, some videos might affect certain viewers a certain way, but not to the majority of viewers. But popularity almost always changes the life of an individual in a good or bad way, depending on the character of the person. The phenomenon of viral video stars and life changing experience of popularity is not exclusive to those who compete for attention or the users of YouTube, but also to those who never had the intention, so to me it can be described here as inclusive dissemination. Where you are in some way or another, in one time or another, are going to be digitally captured and disseminated whether you like it or not, intended it or not, or aware of it or not. Popularity, however, is another story.

Life changing experiences can come to different aspects of the video. It could come to the subject of the video, like funtwo and Bus Uncle—with positive or negative nuances, or it can come to two aspects of the video—the subject and the viewers—such as what happened with Randy Pausch and his last lecture which inspired millions. YouTube has mediated and accelerated the life changing experience, making it possible for a dying person like Pausch to give a strong and lasting impact to the world that can be replayed even after his death. YouTube has become an entity that besides facilitates people in uploading, sharing or commenting on videos, it also has the ability to involve or include people in (through the help of other people) to its webs and further fill this new global community that we are stepping into. The videos in YouTube or in any other video sharing sites reflect the many shades of characters of humanity today and our outlook on life. Although digital culture tends to produce information and communication overload that ruins the opportunities for higher quality of wisdom and deeper experience in life (Van Dijk: 2006, p. 202), life lessons can sometimes in some occurrences still be extracted from it with a much broader and faster impact than before. It is right to conclude this paper with a quote taken from Horace Greeley (1811-1872), an American Newspaper Editor,

who wrote: "Fame is a vapor, popularity an accident, and riches take wings. Only one thing endures and that is character."

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