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YouTube Stars

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Generation Z has developed a strong emotional attachment to their YouTube superstars. Not because they are unusually talented. Not because they sing beautifully, or act skillfully. Not because they are extraordinarily pretty or handsome. And definitely not because a huge publicity machine tells teenagers that they should like the YouTube superstar.

They have this emotional attachment because they can see people much like themselves. Often these people may be a ruder, cruder cardboard caricature of what they would like to be, but they are still a version of themselves.

—[Werner Geysler](#) of Influencer Marketing Hub

YouTube Stars Have Mega-Influence Because They Mirror Teens' Interests and Aspirations

One of our staff recently learned that his 13-year-old daughter had been watching a particular YouTube channel for makeup and hair tutorials. Harmless, right? He and his wife had checked out the channel, making sure there wasn't other content they didn't like, and it was fine. But then they started noticing selfies on the family computer (she doesn't yet have a phone), some of which featured the [duck face](#) and some of which had been sent to friends, including boys.

All of a sudden, a whole new world had been opened up. Was she becoming too concerned with how she looked? How could they talk to her about that? What would be next? How could they react calmly and rationally while still taking the opportunity to steward her heart and point her toward fulfillment in Christ? And who exactly was this girl making the YouTube videos? How was she disciplining their daughter (whether that was the intention or not)?

These are questions any parent of a Gen Zer is asking since Gen Z is spending [more time on YouTube](#) than on other platforms or even on Netflix. Often, they spend this time watching their favorite stars, being discipled both by what they say and do and by their success. Never has achieving stardom seemed as possible as it does now, and never have our icons been so relatable. Snapchat gives teens a glimpse into the daily lives of celebrities, teens can talk directly with their favorite influencers on Instagram, and your kids' favorite YouTube stars are their peers—people who have made it big seemingly by using a camera and their own ingenuity.

Now a pop superstar, Justin Bieber started out as an unknown who was discovered [because of videos he posted on YouTube](#). It's easy for young people to look at the success of people who have achieved fame through YouTube and believe that this success is just as possible for them. Even if teens aren't interested in becoming famous, YouTube stars still have a powerful appeal because they are teens themselves (or not much older) and are more relatable than most traditional celebrities. So here's what you need to know about the stars your teens love.

Why do teens like YouTube stars so much? Why not traditional celebrities?

Just like our teenage selves latched on to actors, musical artists, athletes, and other celebrities we identified with and thought were cool, Gen Z also follows and cares about "[influencers](#)" and other celebrities. The main difference is that the internet has turned fans into superfans and made it possible for anyone to build a following and become a celebrity—a celebrity who may not have a particular skill that made them famous, but who is more accessible and relatable than traditional celebrities. But there are several reasons why teens may prefer a YouTube star over another type of celebrity.

For Gen Z, YouTube is normal. YouTube was created in 2005, so today's teens don't remember a time when they didn't have it. There are [currently 1.3 billion users](#) on the platform, and these users watch an average of 5 billion videos daily. To Gen Z, YouTube is the "[normal](#)" way of [consuming videos](#) and has been a significant part of their lives growing up. One young woman who gained experience with online entrepreneurship as a teenager observes:

Certain YouTube videos would take the younger generation by storm; they'd be talked about in

the hallways of schools to even the dining table at home. It's just about impossible for teens to remember the days before YouTube and other online video websites.

YouTube has made entertainment cheaper and more accessible. Young people watch YouTube videos to relax and be entertained. It's similar to how we might want to come home after work and relax by watching sports or a TV series. It's just that the formats of the videos, their creators, how they are made, and how people can watch them have changed.

Gen Z enjoys the [content on YouTube](#) more than the content they find elsewhere. There's more variety because there aren't time slots to fill or producers to please (though that's changing; more on that below). Also, the content is often more personal and unscripted, so teens find it to be more authentic than a TV show or film.

YouTube stars are more relatable. The fact that kids can relate to the people they're watching more than they can relate to traditional celebrities is possibly the most significant factor influencing why YouTube is so popular with teens. Werner Geysler of Influencer Marketing Hub [writes](#):

As much as a Generation X or Baby Boomer may worship an A-list Hollywood celebrity, there will always be some form of gap; a lack of close empathy or community. It is difficult to feel an affinity with a movie star living the Hollywood lifestyle, who you know you will never talk to.

Speaking of a survey conducted with 13- to 24-year-olds, the EVP of Marketing at Defy Media, [says](#):

We had someone tell us, 'I like Nicki Minaj, but I can't relate to Nicki Minaj. All she talks about is making money'...For YouTube, there seems to be this respect for them being who they are. When we asked them if they thought they could become famous on YouTube, a lot said yes.

YouTube stars either are or seem like people who might be our neighbors, just videoing themselves in their rooms and slowly building followings of people (this is the common perception, even if it is not always the case). But YouTubers do tend to interact with their followers and fans more than other celebrities do, so YouTube stars are building communities and relationships in a way that Hollywood stars, for the most part, are not.

Forbes contributor Nelson Granados believes that because teens have become so dependent on the internet, their YouTube use has gone beyond simply replacing TV; it has actually become part of their lifestyles. He says that because the members of Gen Z consume so much media on their smartphones, their media habits are so "embedded in their daily lives...they are not even consciously making a decision to consume content." This leads to a clear concern: Mindlessly and constantly consuming content means continually taking in ideas without ever evaluating them. It also means that people with these habits likely have a dependence on being online.

— So what qualifies someone as a YouTube "star"?

Unfortunately, there really isn't a black-and-white answer to the question of when someone has technically "made it" on YouTube. The biggest stars, such as PewDiePie or Lilly Singh, are multimillionaires—but they're in the top 3.5% of YouTube's highest earners. Given [how competitive YouTube has gotten](#) since it began, it's hard for the average person to come close to breaking into the top.

Several people in [this forum](#) think that YouTubers are really starting to become famous when they reach around 50,000 subscribers, but others argue that you need a million subscribers before you qualify as famous. *Business Insider* says that [the most famous YouTubers](#) typically

have about three million subscribers to their channels. Karol Krol of Business2Community [observes](#) that the most famous YouTubers generally have the following characteristics:

- They post consistently;
- They have a specific niche;
- They have a specific target audience (which doesn't necessarily speak English);
- They have high-quality content;
- They naturally integrate their products into their videos; and
- They are entertaining.

How does someone become a YouTube star?

Theoretically, someone who's clever and funny enough can post amateur videos of themselves on YouTube, and if they catch enough people's attention, they'll become famous, which is how some current YouTube stars reached stardom. But this sort of success was more likely in YouTube's early days when the platform was newer and when there were fewer people trying to use it to get people's attention. If you watch the videos that the most popular people on YouTube are currently making, you'll notice that many of the videos have high production value. A lot of today's YouTube stars are obviously not just sitting in their bedrooms taking video selfies on their smartphones.

Washington Post writer Cecilia Kang [says](#) that the reason why multimillionaires like [PewDiePie](#), [nigahiga](#), and [Jenna Marbles](#) became famous is that they had help: "That success is no accident. It is an outcome of strategic corporate planning and the commercial interests that are now shaping the modern era of online video." For example, Barry Blumberg, a former Disney executive, was the one who discovered the guys behind the popular channel, [Smosh](#). Because of Blumberg's support, "The duo has a team of about 50 editors, producers, writers, and assistants to help with a handful of YouTube channels that operate under the 'Smosh' brand."

[According to recent research](#), the most-viewed videos on YouTube are a mix of amateur and highly produced content. So for the average person to have a place among the most-watched YouTubers is not exactly impossible—but it is difficult to make it there without help (which is why there are now [summer camps](#) dedicated to teaching teens how to become YouTube stars...).

Are YouTube stars paid?

The most popular YouTubers are making millions of dollars. While these influencers are making money through advertising, a lot of them have additional ways of bringing in revenue (such as sponsorships and merch), so it can be hard to determine the total amount of money they are making.

You might think that getting into the top 3% of the most-viewed videos on YouTube would at least give YouTubers enough advertising money to be self-supporting. But most of the people who do make it into this top tier are not making that much money, at least from advertising anyway. [According to the new research](#):

Breaking into the top 3 percent of most-viewed channels could bring in advertising revenue of about \$16,800 a year...That's a bit more than the U.S. federal poverty line of \$12,140 for a single person. (The guideline for a two-person household is \$16,460.)

The vast majority of people (96.5%) uploading content to YouTube will never make enough money from ads to surpass the U.S. poverty line.

In addition, if YouTubers are popular enough, brands will pay them to feature products in their videos. The key phrase there is “popular enough.” Brands won’t pay attention to YouTubers until they build up their audience, and [as Inc. points out](#), it’s more difficult to get people to subscribe to your channel than it is to get people to watch your videos. People who have at least 100,000 subscribers and are actually celebrities can potentially make around \$12,500 per sponsored post. There are [other ways to make money from YouTube](#), such as affiliate links or selling your own products. What is clear, however, is that becoming a YouTube star and making a significant amount of money is fairly difficult and takes a lot of work. Even if your kids are willing to invest the time and effort it takes, there’s no guarantee of success.

Who are the top 10 YouTube stars right now?

Below are the top 10 YouTube stars for you to be aware of at the moment. Keep in mind that this list changes with some frequency. You can go to Social Blade to find out who the top YouTubers are at any given time, though it’s a little inconvenient because you’ll have to sort individual accounts from major celebrity and music channels. (We’ve relied on this post from Influencer Marketing Hub for a lot of our info.)

1. [PewDiePie](#)

Although it’s difficult to become a YouTube superstar, [Bloomberg reports](#) that gamers are 14 times more likely than “traditional vloggers” to achieve fame. PewDiePie is a Swedish gamer named Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg who got famous posting videos in the “Let’s Play” genre. He would upload videos of himself playing video games and commenting on them, often with a lot of shrieking. There are quite a few reasons why he became sooooo famous, but one is how well he has connected with his audience.

2. [HolaSoyGerman](#) and 7. [JuegaGerman](#)

Germán Alejandro Garmendia Aranís is the name of the Chilean man behind the channels, HolaSoyGerman and JuegaGerman, two of the most popular accounts on YouTube at the time of this writing. His videos on HolaSoyGerman are primarily comedic. He talks about his life experiences and everyday topics, speaking rapidly and engagingly. JuegaGerman is the channel Garmendia mainly uses for posting videos of himself playing video games. He also has his own band, with songs on Spotify and YouTube. All of his videos are in Spanish; some have subtitles, but some do not.

3. [Dude Perfect](#)

The audience for Dude Perfect is—you guessed it—dudes. Among other things, Dude Perfect is known for trick shot videos and stereotypes of different sports fans (most of the videos focus on sports). He’ll post on anything that might appeal to dudes. For example, there is a series of videos showing what happens when the guys blow up different items, like eggs, action figures, or flour.

4. [elrubiusOMG](#)

The channel elrubiusOMG belongs to Rubén Doblas Gundersen, a Spanish-speaking YouTuber who posts videos of himself playing video games. He mostly focuses on gaming, although he has other vlogs that are random and comedic and sometimes feature him completing challenges. Some of his videos have subtitles.

5. [whinderssonnunes](#)

Whinderssonnunes is the channel of Brazilian YouTuber Whindersson Nunes Batista who

primarily posts vlogs that are comedic or feature him singing. His videos are in Portuguese and do not have subtitles that we saw.

6. Fernanfloo

Fernanfloo is the channel of YouTuber Luis Fernando Flores who is from El Salvador. Surprise, surprise—his channel features vlogs and gaming videos, as well as comedic sketches. His videos are in Spanish and have subtitles.

8. Smosh

Smosh is an entertaining, comedic channel created by Ian Hilcox and Anthony Padilla. They post sketches on topics that include satires of reality TV, hotels, movie genres, and social media.

9. VanossGaming

Evan Fong is the YouTuber behind VanossGaming, which mainly features videos of Evan and his friends playing video games like *Gmod*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, and *Call of Duty: Black Ops III*.

10. VEGETTA777

VEGETTA777 is the channel of Samuel de Luque Batuecas. He posts videos of himself playing games like *Gmod*, *Minecraft*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, and *God of War*. The videos are all in Spanish and do not have subtitles (as far as we saw).

A few things that jumped out at us about the top 10 channels are:

- Because there is so much content on YouTube and because YouTubers upload content so frequently, **you can't really vet videos like you would a movie or TV show**. It's common for videos to contain strong language, vulgarity, or ideas that are not biblical or healthy.
- It's interesting how many of these popular channels are in Spanish.
- A lot of this content seems highly produced—there's no way an average person could make videos like the ones Smosh or Dude Perfect are making.
- Gamers are *definitely* popular.
- A lot of YouTubers sell their own merchandise. Brothers [Logan Paul](#) and [Jake Paul](#) are known for shamelessly promoting theirs. PewDiePie, Dude Perfect, Fernanfloo, Smosh, and VanossGaming all have websites for their merch. And even if YouTube stars don't manufacture and sell their own merch, it's almost a guarantee that their fans have created merch for them.

Who should I look out for in the future?

Some YouTubers who are on the rise, according to YouTube channel [Nicki Swift](#), are:

- [The Dobre Brothers](#)
- [Sommer Ray](#)
- [Christian LeBlanc \(Lost LeBlanc\)](#)
- [Ayla Woodruff](#)
- [Jordan Houston](#)
- [Joey Bizinger](#) (see also his channel, [The Anime Man](#))
- [the johnson fam](#)

If my teen likes a particular YouTube star, what does that mean?

YouTube is designed so that people will constantly consume videos. If you watch one video, related videos will immediately start playing. So it's a safe bet that if your teen likes a particular YouTube star, he or she will watch a great deal of that person's videos, or at least similar ones.

A Dutch university [conducted a study](#) about the behavior of teens on YouTube and the influence that YouTubers have on teens. The study supports our earlier observations that teens like YouTubers because they can relate to them and because they feel like they could be them. The study says:

YouTubers are often about the same age as their audience. For them it is easier to create content that fits the current frame of reference of teenagers. People tend to copy behavior of people they like, or share the same behavioral style (Bentley, Earls & O'Brien, 2011). According to researchers of the Stony Brook University (2015), behaviors and beliefs are more contagious among those with shared social connections.

The researchers say that when teens like a YouTuber, they will copy the YouTuber's behavior, including how that person dresses and how he or she speaks (including swearing). The study found that the majority of teens watch YouTube every day and that they know when their favorite YouTubers are going to upload new content. Many teens do try to connect with their favorite YouTubers online by commenting on videos or sending direct messages.

There are also YouTube conventions, at which teens can meet their favorite YouTubers in person. About 1 in 10 teens in the study had actually attended one of those events, although many teens reported wanting to go, particularly if they were younger. 15% of teens had joined fan chats on Instagram or Whatsapp so that they could discuss their favorite YouTubers. Some even created or followed fan accounts on YouTube. Other teens in the study reported following YouTubers on other social media platforms. 50% of the teens owned merch promoted by their favorite YouTuber, and the other 50% said they would like to own their YouTuber's merch.

What are some of the controversies YouTube stars have been involved in?

Logan Paul, though not in the top 10, is one of the most famous personalities on YouTube (he got his start on the now-defunct [Vine app](#)) and is known for posting ridiculous pranks. He arguably caused the [biggest scandal YouTube has ever seen](#) when he posted a video in Dec. 2017 of himself and his friends making jokes about someone who had just committed suicide in Japan. Paul did apologize, but many pointed out that YouTube tolerated the video, even though it went against their policies against violent content. The video actually went viral, getting hundreds of thousands of likes before Paul took it down himself—YouTube did not force him to do so. Eventually YouTube did [drop Paul from its Google Preferred program](#), from a movie, and from a YouTube Red series, but he still is able to monetize his videos and remains a popular vlogger.

Logan Paul is not the only YouTuber [who has gotten in trouble](#) for his antics. A YouTuber named [Sam Pepper](#) came under criticism for traumatizing people with certain pranks. PewDiePie landed in hot water for making anti-Semitic jokes and other racist comments. [GloZell](#) is a popular YouTuber who participated in the [Tide Pod Challenge](#), a bizarre

internet dare to eat a Tide laundry detergent pod. (YouTube removed her video because she was encouraging dangerous behavior.) There has also been some [controversy around HolaSoyGerman](#) regarding whether or not he has been using bots to buy views for himself.

How can I keep up with the most popular YouTube stars?

We recommend Common Sense Media's (CSM) [YouTube reviews](#) as a way of getting a sense of what various popular YouTube channels are like. We make this recommendation with the obvious caveat that you will still need to be discerning. For example, CSM recommends the Amaze channel, which has videos educating children about puberty. One video validates kids who might want to identify as transgender. CSM also recommends Tyler Oakley, who is an outspoken advocate on LGBT issues. On the other hand, CSM is pretty on point when it comes to cautioning parents about channels with swearing and crude humor. We would say, for example, that its assessment of Logan Paul is pretty accurate.

CSM has reviews for all the YouTube stars who speak English and who are in the current top 10. (We did not find reviews for the Spanish-speaking channels.) They also have reviews for channels that are not in the Top 10 but are still popular, such as [SoulPancake](#), [Good Mythical Morning](#), Jenna Marbles, [Ryan ToysReview](#), and nighaiga. We think it's important to be aware that, while it might not be likely, American teens could be watching YouTube videos that are in another language. Some of the Spanish-speaking channels, such as Fernanfloo's, have subtitles and contain crass humor.

Again, keep in mind that the list of the top 10 YouTubers will change over time. And there are plenty of YouTubers who are very popular but who are not in the top 10. More importantly, your teen's favorite YouTuber could be someone who is relatively obscure. Your best bet is to actually talk to your kids about what they like, then do some research from there.

Anything else I should know?

We talked to a mom who says that the internet is her biggest competition when it comes to parenting. If her kids disagree with her on anything, they can easily go online and find communities of people who support and validate their opinions. YouTube is a major platform where teens can find robust communities with a variety of perspectives. While on the one hand it is a benefit to learn from other people's points of view, teens might also fail to critically engage with those ideas, or they might use them to support what they are already inclined to believe.

How do I talk to my teens about who they watch/follow?

Our "[Parent's Guide to YouTube](#)" has some helpful information on YouTube in general, as well as more advice about how to talk to your teens about who they follow. [Common Sense Media is a solid resource](#), but you will ultimately have to rely on getting to know your teens and on keeping up with YouTube trends yourself. You can go to YouTube's [Trending page](#) to see the

most popular videos at any given time.

Talk to your kids about why they love YouTube and what they enjoy about it. Express curiosity about what interests them. Try to help them to think critically about the pros and cons of the people they are watching, as well as how these people might be influencing them in more subtle ways. Help them see that it's not just what someone says or does that influences them, but also their mannerisms, who/what they support, how they dress, what they *don't* say, etc. Validate them when their opinions are good, and help them recognize when their thinking is poor. You cannot control everything your kids do, and trying to wouldn't be a good idea anyway. It is far better if you know their hearts and train them on how to react to the circumstances they encounter in life and the ideas coming at them from culture.

Still, it's wise to help your kids have accountability, say, by checking their viewing history now and then. If your kids' delete their watch history, it's a good idea to talk them about why they did so. The related videos can give you an idea of what they were watching (although be careful not to jump to conclusions).

Discussion Questions

Here are some questions you might raise with your teens about their favorite YouTube stars:

- Do you know who the most popular YouTubers are? Why do you think they're so popular?
- Are your favorite YouTubers "stars," or are they not that well known?
- Who are your favorite YouTube stars?
- How did you find out about them?
- What do you like about them?
- What are their positive and negative qualities, if any?
- Is there anything they *never* talk about or do? Why do you think that is?
- Do you see YouTube stars influencing your friends in either positive or negative ways? Explain.
- Do you notice that your favorite YouTubers influence you in any way?
- Do the YouTubers you follow ever do or say anything you disagree with or that makes you uncomfortable?
- Do you follow your favorite YouTubers on other platforms or ever message them online? Are you in any of their fan forums?
- Would you ever buy their merch?

What do I do if my kids want to become YouTube famous?

Those of us who *didn't* grow up in the age of influencers or with the promise of fame and fortune virtually at our fingertips might be tempted to be concerned by learning of our kids' aspirations. But remember that Gen Z doesn't know anything different. In fact, they're so used to young people curating an image and having an online persona that they don't even question whether it's a good thing. It's just part of life.

So rather than reacting poorly or simply forbidding it, take time to talk with them and understand where they're coming from. By doing so, you may be able to redirect their good intentions to a truly worthy cause or calling. Or, if doing this is truly a good step for them, your

guidance can prevent a lot of heartache, frustration, and other issues down the road. Keep the following in mind as you chat with them:

Don't discourage them from being creative. Your kids may want to be on YouTube because they view it as an outlet for their creativity or skills, which is great. But they may not realize exactly [what it takes to become successful on YouTube](#). You might sit down with them and watch some of the videos from their favorite YouTube stars, then analyze what those people are doing that makes them successful. Then talk about whether a different medium or outlet may actually be more appropriate for their goals.

Help them evaluate why they want to become famous. There's nothing wrong with wanting to build an online business or even an online following; it's good to be driven and ambitious. Encourage them to have a goal to make a good "product" and serve their audience, rather than to simply pursue fame. Often, younger kids and teens view fame as a solution to their insecurities or as a valid source of affirmation. Their subconscious (or maybe even conscious) thoughts go something like: "If I can get thousands of followers, then I'll know that I'm valuable/beautiful/cool/interesting/worthy/enough." But we parents know that the only place to find true fulfillment is in Christ alone, so they need our wisdom to help them see that. Get them to think about the motivations behind what they want to do. Are those motivations honoring to God? Is it really the solution to the problem they're trying to solve?

Talk about the balance between creating and consuming. In our "consumer" world, we think it's awesome when teens have a desire to not just constantly consume, but to actually create and produce. In fact, creation and cultivation are part of what we call "[the cultural mandate](#)" from God. So in so doing, they're fulfilling their mission from God and reflecting His image to the world. They may just need a bit of guidance on what is worth creating and whether the world needs what they hope to produce.

Consider their age. If your kids are younger, [Common Sense Media recommends](#) you share their YouTube account with them or just opt for using a different platform. If you have teens, help your kids come up with a plan for their YouTube channels, i.e., how often they plan to post, how to reach the intended audience, etc. Support them and give them feedback throughout the process. [This article](#) from FamilyTech describes a mom who decided that she could help her daughter stay safe by being involved and helping her edit and upload the videos.

Conclusion

YouTube is the modern form of entertainment, and the stars on it can have a lot of influence over teens. Your kids need to be aware of how far this influence goes so that they don't waste their time online or mimic foolish or harmful behavior. Your kids need you to help them steward their time well, love what God loves, and think critically about the media they are consuming.

Additional Resources

- "[From Logan Paul to PewDiePie: 11 YouTube Stars Whose Scandals Caused Major Controversy](#)," *People* magazine
- "[21 profitable YouTube channel ideas \[Best niches 2018\]](#)," Vlogging Guides

- [“YouTube’s Latest Shake-Up Is Bigger Than Just Ads,”](#) Wired
- [“Aspiring YouTube star? It’s time for a reality check.”](#) The Next Web
- [“What Millennials’ YouTube Usage Tells Us about the Future of Video Viewership,”](#) comScore

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