

# Social Media's Star Power:

## The New Celebrities and Influencers

Stuart A. Kallen





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# Billions of Hits, Millions of Dollars

After her photos were posted to Reddit in 2012, she became an instant internet celebrity. By 2019 she had 8.2 million followers on Facebook and an additional 2.7 million on Instagram and 1.5 million on Twitter. Her YouTube channel had 282,000 subscribers, and her internet fame brought attention from the mainstream media. She appeared on *American Idol*, *The Bachelorette*, and numerous talk shows. When she attended the prestigious alternative media festival South by Southwest in 2013, six hundred fans waited in line for hours to take a selfie with her.

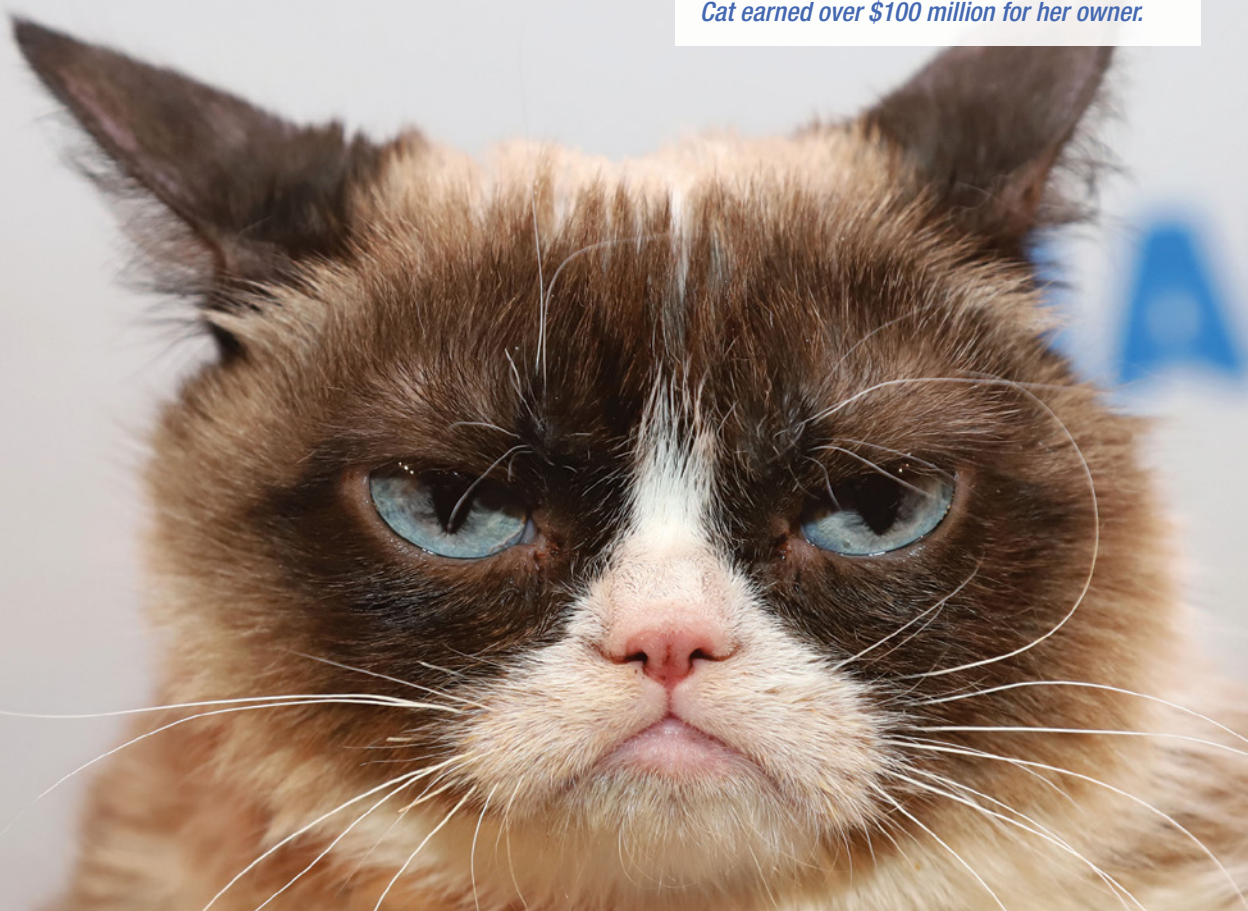
This social media star had a merchandise line that included nine hundred items such as T-shirts, mugs, stuffed toys, a video game, and an annual calendar that featured photos of her. Her internet celebrity helped push her 2016 book to number three on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. After racking up billions of hits and attracting millions of fans, she became the official representative for Friskies. This was a perfect brand for her to endorse—the internet celebrity was Grumpy Cat, a brown and white cat with a permanently frowny face caused by feline dwarfism.

By the time Grumpy Cat died in 2019, she had achieved a level of social media stardom that millions of humans can only dream of. By some estimates,



Grumpy Cat's owner, Tabatha Bundesen, earned over \$100 million from her famous feline. Like other internet stars and influencers, Grumpy Cat used social media to bring in money from a number of sources. Bundesen's early revenue came from sponsored ads on Grumpy Cat YouTube videos. Advertisers paid to display pre-roll ads that play before a video starts and also sponsored banner and sidebar ads that are visible at all times. Google, which owns YouTube, paid Bundesen through its AdSense program, which tallies every click on each video. While figures vary, AdSense generally pays an average of 18 cents per video view, or \$18 per thousand. Google keeps 45 percent, so a YouTuber earns a little less than \$10 for every thousand views. Grumpy Cat's original YouTube video from 2013 received over 22 million

*Grumpy Cat was an internet celebrity with millions of fans. By some estimates, Grumpy Cat earned over \$100 million for her owner.*



views, which means Bundesen earned over \$220,000 from that one video alone. And several dozen videos of the cat were uploaded later, many of which have more than 1 million views.

## **Social Media Influencers**

There are more famous humans than famous cats on social media, but the revenue stream for people and pets is the same. And those looking at their Instagram feed for more than ten seconds will see some major celebrity, microcelebrity, or vlogger promoting a product. Promoters might be fashion bloggers, gym instructors, musicians, chefs, or even woodworkers, but they all have something in common: they are social media influencers. They are paid by advertising agencies to hype products on social media sites.

The reason influencers are inescapable on social media is because they are convincing spokespersons. According to the influencer marketing website Mediakix, 60 percent of YouTube viewers have made a purchase based on an influencer's advice. This fact has propelled 72 percent of major brands, including Nissan, Uber, Revlon, and Old Navy, to significantly increase their influencer marketing budgets since 2018. These major corporations work with influencer marketing directors at advertising agencies to hire Instagram stars, bloggers, YouTubers, and TikTokers who can create social media buzz around their client's products.

Marketers are most interested in social media influencers who have already built their own brand online and have a large audience that follows their videos, photos, blogs, and other posts. However, an influencer does not need to be as famous as Grumpy Cat to attract attention from advertisers. Influencer marketing director Joe Gagliese explains how social media personalities appeal to select markets and often have a powerful influence even if that market is relatively small. "A middle-aged audience is . . . a valuable demographic," Gagliese states. "We work with this one influencer, Gerry Brooks, for example, who is a school principal and a Facebook personality with almost 1 million likes; 90 percent of his followers are women who work as teachers, and are 35 and



up.” Brooks makes videos and does public speaking tours that are aimed at inspiring teachers and educational administrators. “That is a unique, and lucrative, audience,”<sup>4</sup> Gagliese says.

Gagliese is the cofounder of Viral Nation, a marketing agency that represents over ten thousand influencers—including PewDiePie, one of the most-followed people on YouTube, with 120 million subscribers. PewDiePie was born in Sweden in 1989, and his real name is Felix Kjellberg. He began posting videos to YouTube in 2010 before the concept of social media influencer existed. PewDiePie initially worked at a hot dog stand and spent his free time posting YouTube videos with color commentary on video games. When PewDiePie made a play-by-play video of the popular *Minecraft* game, his antics and comments racked up 12 million views. The following year when his YouTube channel reached sixty thousand subscribers, PewDiePie quit selling hot dogs.

Four years into his career, PewDiePie earned an estimated \$7.4 million, more than double his income from the previous year. PewDiePie ended his video posts with a pumping, clenched-fist

## Going Live for Tips

The concept of patrons providing monetary tips to social media stars began with the fund-raising service Patreon, which remains popular on YouTube. Those who seek donations on TikTok for their lip-synching, dancing, singing, comedy, and acrobatics have their own system for collecting tips. Anyone with at least one thousand followers can use TikTok’s Go Live feature to livestream. TikTok users can buy virtual currency in the form of digital coins. Prices vary depending on the number purchased: 100 coins were 99 cents in 2020. Users store their virtual coins in an online wallet and can give them to TikTokers during livestream performances. (TikTok keeps around 20 percent.) TikTokers see Go Live as a great way to stay connected with followers and reap rewards from fans. Performers can redeem their tips at any time, up to \$1,000 a day.



*Felix Kjellberg (on left), known as PewDiePie, has 120 million followers on YouTube.*

gesture he called a Brofist. In 2015 he turned this into a lucrative video game, *PewDiePie: Legend of the Brofist*. The five-dollar mobile app was a hit among his fans, whom he called his Bro Army. A second successful video game, *PewDiePie's Tuber Simulator*, was released in 2016.

PewDiePie possessed a near-mythical formula that helped him grow from a minor YouTube publisher to a social media celebrity. Like most social media celebrities and influencers,

PewDiePie is entertaining and informative. He is charismatic, attractive, and photogenic. PewDiePie's camera presence gives fans the feeling that he is their best friend. The Bro Army thinks he is funny and engaging. His videos are high quality, on topic, and not rambling or boring; he often drops in clever pop culture references and humorous comments. As fan Vincenzo Tsai writes, PewDiePie comes across as authentic and relatable: "He is very dedicated to his fans as he constantly provided his fans an opportunity to express themselves through his various media channels. He produced videos almost weekly just for his many fans which increased his popularity as most of his fans were youth which have great accessibility to social technology."<sup>5</sup>

**"[PewDiePie] produced videos almost weekly just for his many fans which increased his popularity as most of his fans . . . have great accessibility to social technology."<sup>5</sup>**

—Vincenzo Tsai, PewDiePie fan

One of the revenue streams social media stars like PewDiePie can tap into is the online fund-raising service Patreon. Followers, called patrons, give their favorite social media star donations on a regular basis to support current or future projects. In exchange, patrons often receive behind-the-scenes material, exclusive content, and access to early releases. YouTubers might also personally interact with patrons via text or email. YouTuber Evan Edinger explains how patronage works. "Think of it as an online tip jar," he says. "If you really like [the videos] and want to support them then you can pay something like a dollar per video, or a dollar per month. . . . I've had a patreon [account] for about a year now and those viewers get to watch my videos a bit early and sometimes they ask questions."<sup>6</sup>

**"Think of [Patreon] as an online tip jar. . . . If you really like [the videos] and want to support them then you can pay something like a dollar per video, or a dollar per month."<sup>6</sup>**

—Evan Edinger, YouTuber

While the Bro Army might love PewDiePie, he has generated his fair share of controversy for using racial slurs, making crude anti-Semitic jokes, and publishing expletive-laden rants. But the controversies did not drive

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