

COVER STORY

Channeling into a new generation

YouTube is a booming online community for sharing videos and building TV buzz

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Everyone loves lonelygirl15. Well, almost everyone. The doe-eyed coquette has almost 10,000 subscribed fans who seemingly adore her every word and roll of the eye.

The wistful teen is the newest on video-sharing phenom YouTube.com's A-list of self-made, pajama celebrities.

The YouTube pop star calls herself Bree and says she's a home-schooled high schooler confined to her castle by strict parents. Armed with a pink boa, purple monkey and sidekick danielbeast, aka Daniel, Bree's video posts have garnered as many as 500,000 page views on one short film. The series, a fixture in the YouTube community, has even generated thousands of spin-off parodies, commentary and conspiracy videos in a community of unlimited growth.

"People in the U.S. are addicted to being famous, and they would kill their own mothers to get on TV," said William O. Beeman, an anthropology professor at Brown University, in an attempt to explain the phenomenon. "And that's kind of an extreme view, but there's something to it. People in the U.S., starting in high school, do like the idea of being popular, or well-known and identifiable."

Instant gratification

With more than 65,000 videos uploaded to the site daily, according to the company, users can instantly craft an online video persona. The formula has proven so successful that both Hollywood and Madison Avenue have tied into the social video network. NBC, for instance, has entered into a partnership with YouTube that involves promoting the network's upcoming fall lineup.

YouTube's simple interface makes it easy for anyone with a digital video camera - be it a camcorder or cell phone - to make a film and upload for the watchings of the Web. The site provides a free and easy distribution system.

"It's so easy," said Luke Berats, 22, a recent graduate of Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., whose own video has recorded more than 71,000 hits. "Everyone can have their television fantasy realized."

In the past month, in fact, Lazy Dork, a 28-year-old attorney from Miami, challenged lonelygirl's popularity in a video labeling her an uninnovative bore. Now, Lazy Dork, code-named rickyste, is one of the Top 30 most subscribed users on the site.

The lawyer said he posted the video as part of his mission to encourage people to promote and support quality videos on YouTube. "It's incomprehensible that people get so much fame for not really doing anything," he said.

Although Web sites such as metacafe.com and myspace.com also offer video sharing, YouTube is outpacing them with a 75 percent growth week after week, according to Nielsen/NetRatings. The site broke into the Top 50 among Internet users for the first time ever on Tuesday, the same day that it suffered an hours-long outage. According to comScore Media Metrix, YouTube had 16 million unique U.S. visitors in July, a 20 percent increase from 13 million in June.

Unlike the other sites, YouTube - which was co-founded by two self-described California geeks, Chad Hurley and Steven Chen, and debuted in February 2005 - lets Web users paste a simple code that enables others to easily view their video, regardless of browser type. The technology, quite simply, has ushered the arrival of social networking. Like myspace.com, users create their own profiles and post comments - text or video - on each other's posts. The site allows users to subscribe to different "channels" and alerts you when new vlogs, or video logs, are posted by your favorite members.

Growth of the sites has been aided by the spread of computer connectivity by broadband, which is extensive on Long Island. More than 70 percent of active Web users are connected via broadband, according to Nielsen/NetRatings.

YouTube generates a \$1-million-a-month bill for that bandwidth, according to Forbes.com.

"Baby boomers would have loved it but didn't have the technology," said Jerry Del Colliano, a Los Angeles-based music industry expert. "Generation X would have jumped at it, but had to settle for MTV. But this generation is the star, and it's very, very powerful."

This generation, focused on pushing its own star power, uses the videos to create its own entertainment projects. But creating an identity and video segments that stand out in the jungle of 100 million clips currently on the site can be challenging.

At its core, the popularity of video diaries, even those as banal as lonelygirl15's, stems from the fact that American teenagers classically think they're misunderstood, said Beeman, also a professor of theater, speech and dance. Finding a network of friends to listen to otherwise inane rants is key to why contributors broadcast intimate details across the Net. But in a culture obsessed with image, even the camera can lie, helping users craft images by subtly omitting or adding information - verbal or physical - from potential friends. And

although true emotional intimacy is only fulfilled by face-to-face meetings, finding even one receptive listener in cyberspace is an irresistible offer for most teens, the researcher said.

The rise of teenage-angst videos makes way for films by bored college students. From pranks to irreverent parodies, university students find plenty to do with late nights and cramped quarters. College students flock to see videos like one by Clayton Brown, a senior at the University of Maryland.

Three years ago, Brown, then a freshman, created a 26-second clip showing his attempt to light expelled body gases but ended up burning a hole in his plaid flannel pajama bottoms. Within five months, the video had collected more than 55,000 viewers.

But some warn that the videos may be too revealing. As more and more future employers become technologically savvy and personal information seeps into the public domain, some college subscribers have had to rethink the idea of posting footage of pranks or other drunken activities online. Brown, a criminal justice major, contends that his "silly" videos have nothing to do with his potential job performance, and engaging with the online video community is just pure fun. "Heck, I would prefer if they saw it before they hired me so they would see what kind of person I really am," he said.

The latest TV buzz

Fans of news satire shows such as "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" and "The Colbert Report" regularly e-mail friends with tidbits from previous broadcasts.

Clips from "The Colbert Report," which satirizes conservative talk shows, are often among the top viewed videos of the site. Former newscaster Connie Chung's Marilyn Monroe parody after the cancellation of her short-lived talk show and a video of President George W. Bush's impromptu back rub of German Chancellor Angela Merkel during the G-8 summit were other favorites. YouTube's tremendous online community creates a buzz and, essentially, can create free marketing opportunities for several network shows with cult followings.

A "Saturday Night Live" sketch in December called "Lazy Sunday" was the first major network video to create an online buzz. The parody featured cast members Chris Parnell and Andy Samberg rapping through the streets of New York praising "The Chronicles of Narnia" and the Magnolia Bakery's cupcakes. With YouTube, subscribers frantically forwarded the link to each other; the sketch and the free viral marketing that followed was largely credited with stimulating interest back into the late-night broadcast. Still, NBC forced YouTube to yank the clip from its site, citing copyright infringement.

That action may have been misguided, Del Colliano warned. "You can't stop exponential change," said Del Colliano, who is director of executive programs at the University of Southern California's Thornton School of Music. "Radio tried. The record industry tried."

In its agreement with NBC, YouTube will launch a contest for 20-second promotional videos for shows such as "The Office," which will then be posted on NBC's page on the network. The competition's one rule? The promo must create interest in watching the show's broadcast version. It's the best promotion," Del Colliano said. "And it doesn't eliminate the need for the show, it only makes it better."

Unlike several video portals, YouTube does not place advertisements in front of user videos and allows users to engage passively or actively with its content.

"It's free and it's easy," Casey Neumann, 28, of Astoria, said of YouTube. "You can't disagree with that." Neumann was one of a handful of Queens residents who produced video blogs during the recent weeklong blackout that affected areas of New York. And while videos, like his of street hockey, didn't rack up a remarkable number of hits, its posting showcases YouTube as an access point to cyberspace.

How long or how far YouTube will go is hard to tell, but experts and users agree that the site has helped transform the world of image communication. Les Garland, co-founder of MTV and VH1, said that choice increases the demand for more editorial content.

"The consumer doesn't care if it comes through the Internet, cable wire, air or free satellite...The speed of entertainment has never been faster," Garland said. "This is not revolutionary. Believe me, this is evolutionary."

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