

ARTICLE

YouTube Episteme under Algorithmic Governance: A Mixed-Methods Study of Clickbait Comedy

Fatma Fattoumi ^{1,2} 

¹ Telecommunications Department, University of Carthage, Carthage P.O. Box 77-1054, Tunisia

² Laboratory of Language and Cultural Forms, Higher Institute of Languages of Tunis (ISLT), University of Carthage, Carthage P.O. Box 77-1054, Tunisia

ABSTRACT

Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge explains how institutions historically controlled knowledge. In the digital age, new epistemic structures have emerged, where YouTubers, representing diverse voices, appear to democratize knowledge and influence public beliefs. However, this study argues that YouTube clickbait comedians, through sensational tactics designed to maximize clicks and views, reinforce the concentration of power within platforms that control visibility and monetization. Their algorithm-driven and commercially oriented systems reproduce what Guy Debord termed the "society of the spectacle," turning humor into spectacle and encouraging escapism at the expense of meaningful social critique. This study pursues two primary research objectives: first, to examine how YouTube's algorithmic governance structures epistemic visibility; and second, to investigate the emergence of the clickbait comedian as a new epistemic authority in the digital public sphere. A mixed-method analysis, including quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical investigation of the top 15 YouTube channels using data from the vidIQ platform, reveals three central findings. First, algorithm-aligned humor emerges as a dominant communicative form, structured around engagement optimization, sensationalism, and affective immediacy. Second, visibility and symbolic power are increasingly concentrated, favoring creators who internalize platform logics and adapt their content to algorithmic incentives. Third, the transformation of humor

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Fatma Fattoumi, Telecommunications Department, University of Carthage, Carthage P.O. Box 77-1054, Tunisia; Laboratory of Language and Cultural Forms, Higher Institute of Languages of Tunis (ISLT), University of Carthage, Carthage P.O. Box 77-1054, Tunisia; Email: fattoumifatouma@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 20 February 2026 | Revised: 12 May 2026 | Accepted: 19 May 2026 | Published Online: 26 May 2026
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63385/cvca.v2i1.470>

CITATION

Fattoumi, F., 2026. YouTube Episteme under Algorithmic Governance: A Mixed-Methods Study of Clickbait Comedy. *Contemporary Visual Culture and Art*. 2(1): 36–54. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63385/cvca.v2i1.470>

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2026 by the author(s). Published by Nature and Information Engineering Publishing Sdn. Bhd. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).

into spectacle generates significant epistemic consequences: authority shifts from institutional expertise to algorithmically amplified performativity, reshaping public discourse and redefining credibility within the digital sphere. Policymakers, educators, and the public must be vigilant about the impact of algorithms and capitalist interests on the digital episteme.

Keywords: Clickbait Comedians; Episteme; Critical Theory; Algorithm-Aligned Content; Humor Spectacle

1. Introduction

Since its release to the public in 1993, Tim Berners-Lee's World Wide Web (WWW) has been appraised as the preliminary gate for what later became known as "participatory culture^[1, 2]". The Web has become an archetypal digital arena in which novel communities and power entities were molded to forge unprecedented organisms of shared culture. At the early stages of their formation, these communities eluded traditional social and political hierarchies entrenched in the offline world. However, it was not long before dominant real-world entities realized that regulating the new freedoms originating in digital space was a prerequisite for maintaining their hegemony^[3]. This epistemic shift began to crystallize in 2012, following algorithmic updates prioritizing watch time and engagement metrics, which gradually reoriented visibility, authority, and content valuation toward algorithmic governance^[4].

YouTube was narrativized as one of the central podiums of participatory culture, where individuals could share seemingly uncontrolled content, ushering in what appeared to be a new era of democratized culture. Yet, what was celebrated as democratization ultimately yielded to norms established by the very dominant entities that own and govern digital platforms. One may drive a car wherever one wishes, but movement remains bound by the rules embedded in the vehicle's architecture. No matter how free drivers feel, they are constrained by the laws dictating that cars, by design, cannot fly. The same logic applies to YouTube, whose architecture dictates content visibility. YouTube's algorithms establish the "procedural" conditions under which content circulates and gains prominence^[5].

The platform's infrastructure demarcates the boundaries of what can be known by the public. In other words, it establishes what Michel Foucault terms a "regime of truth," one aligned with the interests of dominant elites who paradoxically celebrate the narrative of a democratized global society^[6]. User-produced content is heralded as the highest

form of freedom of expression; in reality, however, Marshall McLuhan's aphorism that "the medium is the message" remains profoundly relevant^[7]. Algorithms function as the new medium through which dominant elites regulate the circulation of knowledge in digital realms. A silent epistemic logic underlies the visibility of monetized content on YouTube. The platform is not merely a neutral host of content; it actively structures creator behavior and determines which forms of information circulate^[3, 8]. Despite extensive scholarship on participatory culture and platform governance, limited attention has been paid to how clickbait comedy operates as a mechanism of epistemic regulation within algorithmically governed environments.

This article examines how the clickbait comedian emerges as a new bearer of epistemic prominence on YouTube. Humor, as a culturally attention-attracting phenomenon, may appear commonplace; its uncommonness, however, lies in the alignment between algorithmic reward systems and content that relies on exaggerated affect, sensationalized humor, and spectacle-oriented aesthetics. The rise of clickbait comedians signals a substantial epistemic shift within the digital public sphere. Entertainment-driven spectacle has become culturally salient, while critical or reflexive communication is rendered algorithmically illegible^[8]. Rather than representing a flourishing of plural expression, this phenomenon reveals how platform logics normalize specific high-arousal modes of knowledge production at the expense of nuance and critique. Accordingly, this study pursues two research objectives: (1) to examine how YouTube's algorithmic governance structures epistemic visibility, and (2) to investigate the emergence of the clickbait comedian as a new epistemic authority in the digital public sphere.

To investigate this shift, the study builds on a synthesis of Foucault's conceptualization of power/knowledge and Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle^[6, 9]. By framing YouTube as a site where algorithmic governance and platform capitalism converge, I argue that the platform produces a distinctive "digital episteme" governed by visibility and

affect^[10].

The article proceeds through a mixed-methods analysis of fifteen leading humor channels, including global outliers such as MrBeast, SET India, and KIMPRO. By mapping their performance metrics alongside a qualitative coding of their “clickbait logics,” the study demonstrates that the circulation of comedic spectacle operates as a deliberate mechanism of epistemic regulation. I contend in this work that YouTube does not merely redistribute communicative power; it redefines the very conditions under which knowledge is constructed, valued, and consumed in contemporary digital culture, privileging monetizable affect over the democratic potential of deliberation.

1.1. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

1.1.1. Foucault and the Reconfiguration of Epistemic Power

The power/knowledge framework introduced by Foucault reconceptualizes knowledge not as an objective entity, but as a product of systems of classification, regulation, and institutional practice^[6]. In pre-digital contexts, epistemic authority was centralized within “gatekeeping” institutions such as universities, academies, and state bureaucracies, which governed legitimacy through accreditation and disciplinary norms. However, in the digital era, this architecture is undergoing a profound transformation as platform infrastructures increasingly perform functions once monopolized by these traditional bodies. Algorithmic recommendation systems and ranking procedures serve as contemporary regimes of classification; they sort, prioritize, and shape the conditions under which knowledge becomes visible^[10]. At the technical level, this classificatory function is operationalized through large-scale deep learning architectures. As demonstrated by Paul Covington and his colleagues, YouTube’s recommendation system relies on a two-stage model, candidate generation followed by ranking, designed to optimize predicted watch time and user engagement^[11]. Visibility is therefore not passively curated but computationally produced through probabilistic selection and retention-based optimization.

This shift marks the rise of infrastructural power, where governance is embedded in technical systems that operate opaquely to normalize specific modes of communication^[12].

On YouTube, metrics such as watch time and engagement velocity become the implicit criteria for epistemic legitimacy. This suggests that algorithmic governance functions as a form of digital biopower, where the regulation of the population is achieved through the microscopic tracking of affective responses and engagement behaviors. As Tarleton Gillespie argues, platforms function as “custodians of the internet”^[3]. According to him, “platforms do, and must, moderate the content and activity of users, using some logistics of detection, review, and enforcement” (p.21). Platforms design systems that appear neutral but are deeply normative, ultimately determining not just what information circulates, but how it is valued.

1.1.2. Defining Comedy: From Communicative Practice to Algorithmic Currency

To understand how YouTube platform infrastructures reshape digital discourse, it is necessary to conceptualize comedy, the medium through which such discourse is mediated. Salvatore Attardo acknowledges the difficulty of establishing a comprehensive and unifying definition of a comedy since many approaches to humor have been introduced from the days of Aristotle to the modern age^[13]. The common aspect in these approaches, which serves this work, is that comedy is defined as a deliberately designed cultural artefact. Through irony, satire, and incongruity, comedy’s final purpose is to generate laughter as an objection to this incongruity (p. 14)^[13]. Modern scholars categorize comedy as a narrative and a communicative practice. This practice articulates truth and sincerity while serving as a tool for democratic participation and social mediation^[14, 15]. Historically, the comedian functions as a “social mediator,” enabling audiences to process complex social and political issues through humor. Comedy fosters audience identification with the comedian, representing an “expression of shared beliefs and behavior” (p. 80)^[14]. However, as the loci of power shift toward algorithmically mediated platforms, this communicative potential is frequently subsumed by the requirements of the platform’s commercial architecture^[15]. Under algorithmic governance, comedy is structurally transformed: humor is no longer only a social or critical practice but also a performance optimized for metrics such as clicks, watch time, and engagement. The purpose is to shape content to align with the platform’s reward logic rather than purely with audience critique or societal commentary. This transition is

best understood through Debord’s “society of the spectacle,” which describes a condition where lived experience is displaced by an endless flow of mediated representations^[9]. In this framework, entertainment becomes a dominant mechanism for distraction, diffusing critical sensibilities through the consumption of images. On YouTube, the logic of the spectacle is codified into the interface itself, rewarding content that maximizes affective intensity and viewer retention over critical reflection.

1.1.3. Digital Epistemology and the Transformation of Knowledge Order

Drawing on the Debord and the Foucauldian frameworks, contemporary scholarship perceives an “epistemic crisis”, where conventional authorities like journalism and science are challenged by decentralized, often unverified actors^[6, 9]. This crisis, as Peter Dahlgren argues, results from “the massive amounts and speed of information”, “the processes” used in knowledge construction, and most importantly from unprecedented “forms of knowledge deriving from digital technologies” (p.20)^[16]. Christopher Neuberger and his colleagues provide a systematic model for this transformation, noting that digital media destabilize the traditional knowledge order through a structural process that involves: (a) dissolving boundaries between professional and lay contexts, (b) flattening established hierarchies of authority, and (c) opening professional roles to new actors, such as influencers and clickbait comedians^[17]. On YouTube, this “epistemic mediation” privileges rapid engagement over reflexivity^[18]. Clickbait comedians thrive in this landscape because their material aligns with algorithmic optimization routines, creating high-arousal content that feeds the platform’s dual logic of community and commerciality^[1]. Within this desta-

bilized landscape, perceived authority is no longer negotiated through institutional validation but at the intersection of social engagement and monetization imperatives, linking classical Foucauldian insights to the realities of a post-truth digital media environment.

While prior studies address platform governance and algorithmic power, few examine clickbait comedians as distinct epistemic actors^[19]. This article contributes by theorizing clickbait comedy as a mechanism of epistemic regulation on YouTube. It demonstrates how algorithmic governance, platform metrics, and monetization collectively shape cultural authority and knowledge visibility in the digital public sphere.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

As demonstrated in **Table 1**, this study adopts a mixed-methods research design integrating quantitative content analysis and qualitative interpretive inquiry. This approach aligns with the study’s aim of understanding both the measurable patterns of clickbait features and the deeper socio-semiotic logics structuring humor on YouTube. Quantitative methods enable systematic detection of patterns across titles, thumbnails, posting frequencies, and engagement metrics^[20], while qualitative analysis provides insight into rhetorical construction, stylistic exaggeration, and platform-mediated power relations^[6, 21]. Theoretical references are incorporated strictly to ground the analytical procedures and ensure methodological coherence. The integrated design enhances the rigor and explanatory power of the findings through methodological triangulation^[22].

Table 1. Step-by-step research procedure for analyzing clickbait humor on YouTube.

Step	Procedure	Tools/Platforms	Output/Notes
1. Define Sample Frame	Identify the top 15 YouTube channels primarily producing humor-focused content.	vidIQ platform; YouTube search filters	List of 15 channels with URLs, subscriber counts, and language verified (English).
2. Select Quantitative Metrics	Define variables to measure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Title phrasing (superlatives, suspense, questions, emotional triggers) Thumbnail aesthetics (expressions, colors, overlays) Posting frequency Engagement ratios (likes, comments, shares, views/subscribers) 	Spreadsheet (Excel, Google Sheets)	Data collection template with predefined columns for each metric.

Table 1. Cont.

Step	Procedure	Tools/Platforms	Output/Notes
3. Collect Quantitative Data	Extract data for each video uploaded in the last 12 months. Record in a spreadsheet.	vidIQ, YouTube, manual observation	Complete dataset of 15 channels × recent videos with metrics recorded.
4. Conduct Quantitative Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compute descriptive statistics (mean, median, frequency counts). - Perform correlations between clickbait features and engagement metrics. 	SPSS, Python	Tables and charts identifying patterns of high engagement.
5. Select Sample for Qualitative Analysis	From the top 100 channels, select 15 with the highest engagement-to-subscriber ratios*. Choose the 5 most-viewed videos per channel.	Spreadsheet filter	Final qualitative sample: 15 videos for in-depth analysis.
6. Define Qualitative Coding Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rhetorical strategies (narrative framing, irony, exaggeration) - Stylistic features (facial/vocal exaggeration, pacing, editing) - Clickbait strategies (titles, thumbnails, hooks) - Socio-semiotic interpretation (platform power, monetization incentives) 	NVivo 12, and manual coding	Coding sheet with categories and subcategories clearly defined.
7. Conduct Qualitative Analysis	Watch each video, apply coding categories, identify patterns and recurrent strategies.	NVivo and manual coding	Thematic analysis report summarizing stylistic, rhetorical, and socio-semiotic patterns.
8. Integrate Results	Combine quantitative patterns with qualitative insights to understand how clickbait strategies operate across humor content.	NVivo + SPSS	Integrated findings, supported by tables, figures, and narrative explanations.
9. Document Limitations & Replicability Measures	Note algorithmic opacity, data constraints, and language scope; provide clear coding rules and metrics definitions for future replication.	Word/LaTeX document	Section in methodology detailing limitations and ensuring replicability.

Note: * The engagement ratio was operationalized as the sum of likes, comments, and shares divided by the number of subscribers for the respective channel at the time of data collection, providing a standardized measure of audience interaction relative to audience size.

2.2. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select 15 representative YouTube channels^[23]. The strategy utilizes visibility and performance metrics drawn from the vidIQ analytics platform^[24, 25]. Inclusion criteria required that channels primarily produce humorous content, maintain active posting within the past year, and exhibit high contemporary algorithmic influence. Rather than relying on a linear subscriber ranking, channels were identified through a composite visibility measure. This measure functions as a weighted integration of established audience reach (total subscribers), current view velocity (average views per hour and 30-day volume), and engagement intensity (likes and comments relative to views). Selection prioritized theoretical saturation and algorithmic prominence within the humor category over raw volume. Consequently, the sample includes high-velocity creators who define modern “Algorithm-Aligned Humor” even if their historical subscriber base is smaller. The variation in channel size, ranging from 461 M (MrBeast) to a lower bound of 5.7 M (AMP), was intentional since the sampling

was purposive. This allows for a cross-scale comparison of how different archetypes, such as “Group Affect” or “Extreme Spectacle” maintain visibility. Furthermore, several channels in the 50 M–100 M range were excluded to maintain categorical integrity, filtering out industrial “Kids” or “Music” content to focus exclusively on the affectively intensified, spectacle-ready humor that characterizes the current digital arena. Videos were selected within a fixed temporal window to ensure exposure to comparable algorithmic conditions, mitigating the influence of long-term platform shifts^[1].

2.3. Data Collection

Quantitative data were extracted from publicly available metadata and vidIQ analytics, including title phrasing, thumbnail composition, posting frequency, and engagement metrics^[24, 26]. Engagement ratios were calculated per video as (likes + comments + shares) ÷ subscribers, then averaged per channel to standardize comparisons across varying scales. All metrics were cross-checked with YouTube’s publicly visible data to ensure accuracy. Qualitative data involved full

video viewing to document narrative, stylistic, and socio-semiotic features, with thumbnails and titles archived to maintain coding consistency. This approach ensures transparency, comparability, and replicability across the dataset. To ensure ‘comparable algorithmic conditions’ across videos uploaded at different times, the analysis focused on foundational structural constants, such as high-arousal emotional triggers and spectacle-driven thumbnails, which have remained stable platform-wide rewards despite frequent minor updates to the recommendation engine. By analyzing videos once they reached a stabilized viewership state, the study captures the platform’s long-term architectural logic rather than transient weekly fluctuations.

2.4. Coding Procedures

The study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design to triangulate the relationship between clickbait architecture and audience engagement. This approach blends robust statistical modeling with socio-semiotic interpretation to capture both the mechanics and the meanings of platform-

driven content. The coding schema was developed through a synthesis of rhetorical analysis, media stylistics, and socio-semiotic theory^[27–29]. As shown in **Table 2**, following the methodological guidelines for content analysis, the framework utilizes a structured mix of binary indicators (0/1) and continuous metrics to ensure high measurement precision and replicability^[30].

2.5. Quantitative Analysis and Statistical Rigor

Quantitative data were processed using a multi-tiered statistical approach to establish foundational patterns and co-occurrences^[31]. To explore the strength and direction of these relationships, the study employed Pearson’s *r* to assess associations between continuous engagement metrics. Point-Biserial Correlations were employed to isolate the impact of binary clickbait indicators (e.g., presence/absence of a “red arrow”) on performance outcomes. Prior to analysis, all data were vetted for normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity to ensure adherence to the psychometric standards outlined by Tabachnick and Fidell^[32].

Table 2. Integrated Mixed-Methods Coding Framework for Analyzing YouTube Clickbait Humor Channels.

Category	Variable/Dimension	Description/Indicators	Examples
Quantitative Variables	Title Phrasing	Use of superlatives, suspense cues, emotional triggers, and question-based hooks designed to maximize attention and click-through likelihood.	“The Most INSANE Prank Ever!”; “You Won’t Believe What Happened...”; “Did we go too far?”
	Thumbnail Aesthetics	Exaggerated facial expressions*, bright/saturated colors, bold text overlays, and visual exaggeration to increase visibility.	Shocked/open-mouth face; neon red/yellow borders; “OMG!” text; oversized objects or exaggerated reactions.
	Posting Frequency	Number of videos uploaded weekly or monthly, reflecting output consistency.	3 videos per week; 12 videos per month.
	Engagement Ratios	Likes, dislikes, comments, shares, and views per video relative to subscriber count.	Likes, dislikes, comments, shares, views per video relative to subscriber count. 5% engagement rate; 10,000 likes/200,000 subscribers.
Qualitative Dimensions	Rhetorical Strategies	Narrative framing, exaggeration, irony, and parody shape comedic meaning and viewer interpretation.	Exaggerated storytelling; ironic voiceovers; parody of trends or influencers.
	Stylistic Features	Repetition of exaggerated expressions, pacing choices, editing cuts, and stylistic patterns enhances humor.	Quick cuts, zoom-ins on faces, repeated high-pitch vocal expressions, fast-paced montage sequences.
	Clickbait Strategies	Sensational hooks, promise-based titles, and provocative thumbnails designed to heighten curiosity and anticipation.	“This changed everything...”; thumbnails with red circles/arrows; exaggerated “before/after” visuals.

Table 2. Cont.

Category	Variable/Dimension	Description/Indicators	Examples
Qualitative Dimensions	Socio-Semiotic Interpretation	How humor functions within digital power structures such as algorithms, attention economies, and monetization incentives.	Videos structured around retention tactics; humor shaped to maximize watch time; exaggerated thumbnails favored by algorithmic visibility.

Note: The Visual Markers in the Manual Content Analysis used in this study, as indicated in Table 1, are: (1) Surprise: Widened eyes (visible sclera), open mouth (often exaggerated), raised eyebrows. These high-arousal signals are engineered to exploit “curiosity gaps” and trigger involuntary viewer responses. (2) Happiness: Overt smiling, visible teeth, narrowed eyes (Duchenne smile markers), raised cheeks. This affects functions as a tool for cross-cultural normalization, signaling accessible and “safe” entertainment. (3) Drama/Fear: Furrowed brow, hands on face/head, wide eyes, darker lighting overlays. These features leverage threat-detection logic to manufacture urgency and narrative stakes.

2.6. Qualitative Framework: Socio-Semiotic Interpretation

Complementing the statistical data, I employed iterative close reading and interpretive coding^[33]. I applied a socio-semiotic lens to decode the “discursive construction” of comedic content, situating humor not merely as entertainment but as a strategic response to platform logics—specifically algorithmic visibility and monetization pressures^[18, 34]. I examined how creators’ comedic strategies adapt stylistic choices to the platform’s governing “visibility demands”^[8, 35].

Reliability was ensured through pilot testing and iterative refinement and quantified using Cohen’s Kappa for categorical variables (clickbait logic type $\kappa = 0.81$; humor category $\kappa = 0.76$) and ICCs above 0.85 for continuous measures, with minor discrepancies resolved via discussion^[20, 36]. Validity was strengthened through triangulation of metadata, visual inspection, and interpretive coding, and all procedures adhered to established ethical standards for digital research^[23, 37].

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive Results

Algorithm-Aligned Humor as a Dominant Form

YouTube’s digital landscape is increasingly shaped by affective homogenization, as evidenced by the dominance of algorithm-aligned humor among the platform’s most subscribed channels as it is shown in Table 3. Leading creators, including MrBeast, SET India, the Stokes Twins, SSSniperWolf, and the Sidemen, exhibit a marked convergence around spectacle-driven and affectively intensified formats, despite differences in genre and scale. This convergence is visually anchored in the standardized use of exaggerated facial expressions, commonly referred to as the “thumbnail face,” which functions as an attention-capturing device within an overcrowded visual economy^[38]. To verify these patterns, a systematic manual content analysis was performed (as indicated in Table 1). This research findings show that 27% of thumbnails foreground surprise and 26.6% emphasize overt happiness.

Table 3. Integrated Subscriber Data and Algorithmic Logic (Top 15 Channels)**.

Rank	Channel	Subscribers (Millions)	Dominant Clickbait Logic	Theoretical Intersection
1	MrBeast	461.0	Extreme spectacle; shock-based generosity; open-loop escalation.	Debordian Spectacle: The transformation of lived experience into a commodity of visual consumption.
2	SET India	188.0	Institutionalized sitcom serialization; high-volume output.	Institutional Gatekeeping: The algorithmic transition of traditional media power into digital dominance.
3	Stokes Twins	136.0	Prank-based suspense; curiosity gaps; exaggerated reactions.	Affective Capital: The monetization of simulated emotional states to drive engagement.
4	KIMPRO	128.0	Universal silent comedy; visual bait; exaggerated affect.	Cross-Cultural Normalization: The flattening of humor into non-verbal, globally consumable “slapstick” signals.

Table 3. Cont.

Rank	Channel	Subscribers (Millions)	Dominant Clickbait Logic	Theoretical Intersection
5	Sony SAB	105.0	Legacy television-style comedy; recurring character loops.	Commercial Hierarchy: The survival of legacy media through “high-frequency” algorithmic adaptation.
6	Alan Chikin Chow	65.6	Short-form relational bait; dramatized everyday scenarios.	Algorithmic Dispositif: Content engineered specifically to trigger the “Shorts” recommendation loop.
7	Dude Perfect	60.6	Competitive spectacle; scale escalation; “record-breaking” framing.	Hyperbolic Logic: The “arms race” of physical feats to maintain audience attention.
8	MrBeast Gaming	45.3	Chaos framing; personality amplification; exaggerated stakes.	Affective Engineering: The use of high-intensity editing and sound to bypass critical reflection.
9	SSSniperWolf	34.8	Reaction comedy; thumbnail-face affect; emotional exaggeration.	The Affective Turn: The shift from content creation to the “performance of reacting” as the primary value.
10	Dhar Mann (Comedy)	24.2	Moral clickbait; emotional manipulation; title-driven intrigue.	Epistemic Conditioning: Using “lesson-based” narratives to mask high-arousal emotional manipulation.
11	Smosh	26.8	Legacy sketch comedy with moderate clickbait adaptation.	Survival Self-Regulation: The tension between creative identity and algorithmic survival.
12	The Sidemen	21.5	Collective hype; challenge inflation; affective thumbnails.	Spectacle-Ready Formats: The “group-dynamic” as a shield against individual content fatigue.
13	FaZe Rug	25.9	Fear/surprise hooks; prank escalation; emotional thumbnails.	Morbid Curiosity Effect: The use of “horror” and “threat” signals to trigger involuntary clicks.
14	AMP	5.7	High-energy collective reaction; challenge bait.	Group Affect: The study of how collective energy creates a “parasocial community” through high-arousal humor.
15	Logan/Jake Paul (Legacy)	43.9*	Provocation; shock humor; controversy-driven visibility.	Digital Panopticism: The performance of the “scandalous self” to maintain constant visibility.

Note: ** The results are taken from <https://vidiq.com/youtube-stats/top/category/entertainment/>. The Top 15 channels were curated from VidIQ’s ‘Top Entertainment’ index. Selection criteria prioritized theoretical diversity (ensuring each of the 15 represented a distinct ‘Clickbait Logic’) over a strict linear subscriber descent. This explains the inclusion of high-velocity emerging channels (e.g., AMP) over stagnant legacy channels with higher historical subscriber counts. * Combined legacy estimate for comedy-era peaks.

These results highlight a standardized visual vocabulary required for algorithmic visibility and closely align with the findings of Eric Lu, with a negligible variance of ($\pm 0.05\%$), who identified similar emotional concentrations via automated tools^[39]. Lu used an AI facial recognition tool, Amazon Rekognition, to identify the emotions on the most prominent faces in the thumbnails of the most popular and most-watched YouTubers^[39]. In his analysis, Lu found that “surprised” (26.95%) and “happy” (26.65%) facial expressions in YouTube thumbnails correlate with the highest video views^[39]. By achieving nearly identical results through man-

ual coding, this study confirms that these specific affects function as universal “attention hooks.” This alignment further justifies the algorithmic equilibrium observed across the dataset, where creators, regardless of subscriber scale, adopt high-arousal emotional displays to meet the platform’s visibility demands.

As **Table 3** further illustrates, these visual strategies are embedded within recurring clickbait logics, ranging from shock-based spectacle and hyperbolic escalation (MrBeast) to prank inflation (Stokes Twins, FaZe Rug), reaction-based exaggeration (SSSniperWolf), and moralized emotional bait

(Dhar Mann). Even legacy comedy brands such as Sony SAB, Smosh, and the Sidemen demonstrate adaptive self-regulation, retaining established formats while incorporating affective thumbnails to remain algorithmically legible. Collectively, these findings indicate that platform reward systems incentivize a narrow repertoire of high-arousal, spectacle-ready humor, producing an increasingly standardized and epistemically conditioned comedic arena.

As **Table 4** indicates, exaggerated facial expressions operate as low-effort emotional cues that are instantly legible across cultural contexts. The dominance of surprise (27%)

and happiness (26.6%) across top channels confirms that visual affect is systematically optimized for click-through rather than expressive diversity. MrBeast exemplifies this logic most clearly, with happy expressions appearing in 36% of thumbnails and fear or shock in 18%, a distribution that reflects strategic calibration rather than aesthetic preference. By mobilizing surprise and controlled fear, creators exploit novelty effects and morbid curiosity to maximize algorithmic visibility. The result is affective standardization: emotional variety is compressed into a narrow visual shorthand optimized for engagement metrics.

Table 4. Algorithmic Patterns of Affective Optimization on YouTube.

Dimension	Key Indicator	Core Result	Analytical Implication
Visual Affect	Thumbnail expression	Surprise (27%) and happiness (26.6%) dominate; MrBeast: happy (36%), fear (18%)*	Emotional standardization optimized for CTR
Title Affect	Linguistic intensity	Shift from descriptive to hyperbolic, open-loop titles	Affect converted into algorithmic reach
Algorithmic Capital	Extremity strategy	“More extreme = better” production logic	Emotional intensity functions as exchange value
Content Visibility	Genre vs. views	Education/Society: 24% of channels, 4% of views	Structural bias toward spectacle
Gatekeeping	Creator scale	Visibility favors quasi-corporate producers	Platform amplifies institutional power
Epistemic Effect	Aesthetic conformity	Breakthrough creators adopt dominant styles	YouTube Episteme reproduced

Note: * The frequency of facial affects in sampled thumbnails align with results in Lu’s research^[39].

A parallel pattern emerges at the linguistic level. As summarized in **Table 4** under “Title Affect,” analysis of video titles across the top 15 channels shows a consistent shift from descriptive phrasing toward hyperbolic, suspense-driven constructions. Titles increasingly function as affective triggers, relying on “open-loop” formulations (e.g., I Didn’t Expect This) that withhold narrative resolution to compel clicks. This escalation reflects an internalized logic of algorithmic optimization in which extremity is actively rewarded. MrBeast’s oft-cited maxim, “the more extreme, the better”, captures this production ethos, wherein emotional intensity becomes a convertible asset. In line with Algorithmic Capital theory, affect is transformed into exchange value, directly translated into reach and monetizable attention.

The consequences of this affective optimization are visible at the level of content stratification. As shown in **Table 4**, Entertainment and Gaming (genres structurally

suited to rapid pacing and emotional spectacle) capture a disproportionate share of platform visibility. By contrast, educational and socially oriented content, while constituting nearly 24% of large channels, accounts for only 4% of total views^[40]. This imbalance reflects a structural bias embedded in platform design rather than audience preference alone. High-visibility humor is predominantly produced by creators operating at quasi-corporate scale, while smaller or critical producers remain marginal unless they adopt dominant aesthetic conventions. Thus, rather than disrupting hierarchies, platform success frequently reproduces them, stabilizing the normative framework of the YouTube Episteme.

Quantitative analysis reveals a strong correlation between sensationalist humor strategies and channel visibility, with top creators consistently deploying exaggerated facial expressions, hyperbolic titles, and emotionally charged

thumbnails to optimize click-through rates and watch time—key metrics prioritized by YouTube’s recommendation algorithm^[3, 8]. Channels such as MrBeast, the Paul brothers, and SSSniperWolf exemplify this alignment, relying on shock, joy, surprise, and curiosity as systematically accumulated forms of algorithmic capital rather than spontaneous humor.

Figure 1, representing the heat map of the top 15 channels, visualizes this aesthetic standardization across three dominant clickbait logics—shock/affect, curiosity/suspense, and hyperbole/stakes—demonstrating that platform alignment operates as a gradient of visibility rather than a binary

condition. While “Maximalists” achieve near-total saturation of affective triggers and “Affective Specialists” leverage the thumbnail face as a universal visual grammar within the Debordian spectacle, institutional actors such as SET India and Sony SAB attain prominence through legacy serialization and volume. Despite these divergent pathways, all routes to visibility ultimately converge under the singular authority of the algorithmic regime, repositioning comedy less as a vehicle for nuanced social commentary and more as an attention-extractive mechanism within a platformized epistemic ecosystem.

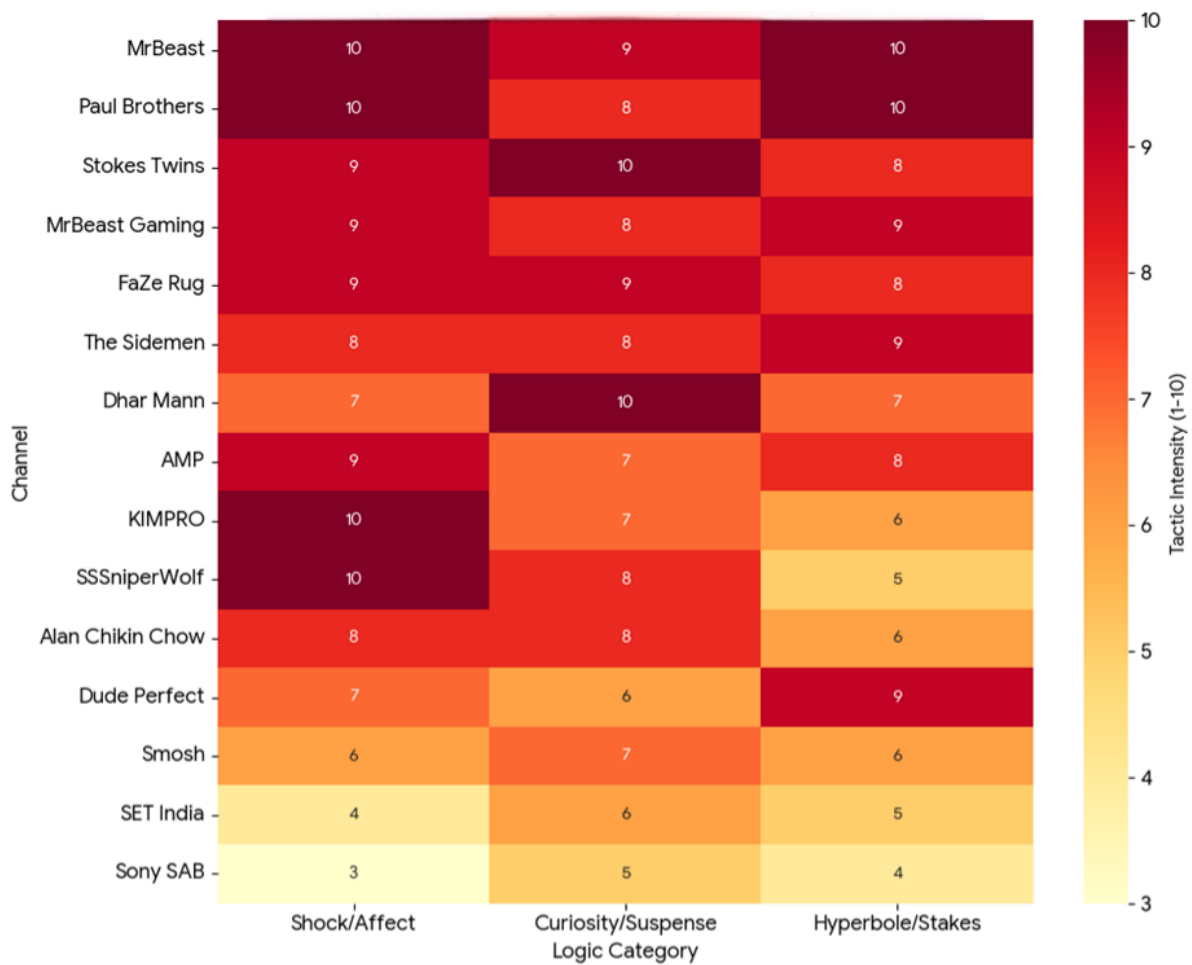


Figure 1. Heat Map of Clickbait Logic Intensity across Top 15 Channels.

3.2. Inferential Results

3.2.1. Concentration of Visibility and Power

This integrated analysis of fifteen high-visibility comedy channels addresses the persistent claim that YouTube operates as a democratized space of cultural production. The

findings suggest that the concentration of power on the platform is not merely a byproduct of revenue or subscriber counts; rather, it is a structural condition that organizes visibility, shapes production norms, and ultimately dictates which forms of digital knowledge become legible and legitimate.

3.2.2. The Power-Law Logic of Elite Visibility

The distribution of attention across the platform conforms to a pronounced power-law dynamic, fundamentally challenging the notion of a digital meritocracy. While YouTube ostensibly hosts millions of voices, empirical indicators reveal that a small elite captures the overwhelming majority of audience attention. With approximately 3% of channels accounting for nearly 90% of total views success on the platform reflects a winner-take-all system rather than a standard bell curve^[41]. MrBeast exemplifies the pinnacle of this hierarchy; with over 460 million subscribers (Table 3), his channel generates an exponential concentration of views that dwarfs the cumulative reach of the vast majority of creators. In this ecology, visibility ceases to be a neutral outcome of audience preference and becomes an exclusionary resource—a form of elite commodity accessible primarily to those who have already achieved massive scale.

3.2.3. The Industrialization of the “Indie” Creator

The findings reinforce and extend prior scholarship on digital labor and platform power. Consistent with, creators function as a proletariat, “do not own the means of production,” and are compelled to generate value under conditions they cannot control^[42]. Taina Bucher similarly observes that algorithmic systems act as “gatekeepers of visibility,” structuring creator behavior and shaping which content circulates^[8]. This aligns with the results from 2018 research by José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal, who argue that platforms transform cultural production by privileging engagement metrics over critical substance, turning affect into a primary form of capital^[12]. In their book, *The Cost of Connection*, Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias further note that such digital infrastructures create “a new layer of structural power” that centralizes epistemic authority in platform algorithms^[43]. Our results show that humor on high-visibility channels is calibrated to these systemic pressures, privileging spectacle and affective intensity over interpretive depth, confirming that algorithmic governance mediates both content creation and public knowledge circulation. A significant proportion of the examined channels is either directly owned by, or structurally embedded within, legacy media institutions. Entities like SET India and Sony SAB operate as digital extensions of established broad-

cast conglomerates, leveraging industrial-scale production capacities—often exceeding thirty uploads per day—to dominate recommendation systems. Simultaneously, individual creators who emerged from YouTube’s early participatory culture have evolved into vertically integrated media enterprises^[40]. The transition of entities like Beast Industries, or the commercial ventures of Logan Paul, KSI, and The Sidemen, illustrates how subscriber bases are converted into durable transmedia brands. In this configuration, attention is materialized into commercial infrastructure, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than disrupting them.

3.2.4. Algorithmic Gatekeeping and the Closed-Loop System

A third mechanism of concentration is facilitated through Multi-Channel Networks (MCNs) and self-incorporated corporate structures. Twelve of the fifteen channels analyzed are formally partnered with dominant MCNs or operate as independent corporate entities with comparable professional resources. These affiliations confer distinct “network advantages,” including enhanced search optimization and coordinated cross-promotion. Channels embedded within these structures exhibit a substantially higher likelihood of appearing in top recommendation results, effectively creating a closed-loop visibility system. Rather than facilitating open competition, algorithmic amplification disproportionately favors these professionally managed actors, instituting a de facto barrier to entry that centralizes the YouTube Episteme within a narrow stratum of elite producers.

3.2.5. The Normalizing Gaze and Epistemic Centralization

This concentration of visibility exerts a powerful normalizing force across the entire platform ecosystem. Because these elite channels define the dominant aesthetics of success, other creators are compelled to internalize these standards to remain discoverable—a contemporary instantiation of Foucault’s “normalizing gaze.” This dynamic is empirically observable in the widespread adoption of affective thumbnails and hyperbolic titling conventions across the platform. While channels like KIMPRO and SSSniperWolf exemplify the mastery of affective standardization, even legacy collectives such as Smosh have been forced to incorporate click-optimized metrics into their creative process. This suggests

that adaptation to the algorithmic regime is not a choice, but a requirement for survival.

The findings assembled here confirm that humor on YouTube has been repurposed as a form of “algorithmic capital”^[44]. Visibility is no longer a product of expressive diversity but is manufactured through affective intensity, institutional embedding, and strategic conformity. The data reveal a clear intersection between digital panopticism and the spectacle; provocation and emotional exaggeration have become the primary mechanisms for remaining within the platform’s field of vision. This evidence fundamentally challenges the narrative of epistemic plurality, revealing instead a highly centralized system where a small number of actors define the contours of what can be seen, circulated, and known

in the digital age.

3.2.6. Humor Spectacle and Epistemic Consequences

Qualitative analysis of fifteen high-visibility comedy channels indicates a clear reconfiguration of humor’s function on YouTube; a pattern synthesized in **Figure 2**. Rather than serving primarily as a vehicle for social critique or reflective commentary^[13], humor increasingly operates as spectacle, engineered to maximize emotional stimulation and rapid engagement. As reflected by the highest Visibility/Engagement Index, spectacle-oriented formats, reaction videos, extreme challenges, and prank-based content occupy a structurally dominant position within the platform’s attention economy.

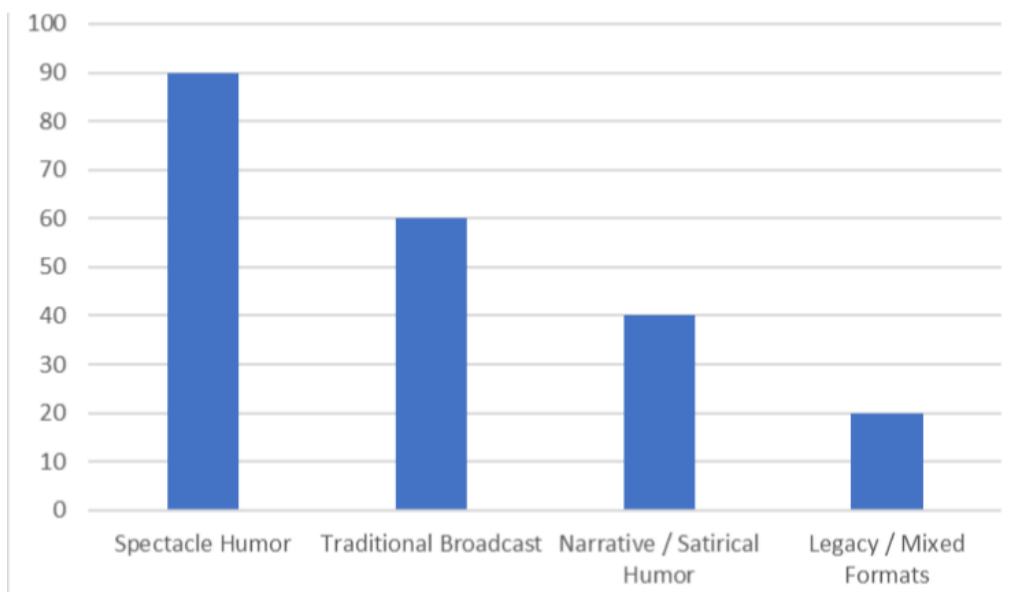


Figure 2. Visibility/Engagement Index by Humor Type with Channel Examples (vidIQ Entertainment Category).

This dominance is underpinned by what this study terms affective reflex, whereby algorithmic visibility is contingent on the creator’s demonstrable emotional responsiveness. Channels such as SSSniperWolf and KIMPRO, coded within the spectacle category, illustrate how exaggerated expressions, vocal intensity, and affect-laden thumbnails function as core visibility mechanisms rather than peripheral stylistic choices. Existing empirical research supports this dynamic, demonstrating that visceral, largely non-linguistic humor, particularly shock-based reactions, regularly surpasses 6% engagement rates and benefits disproportionately from algorithmic amplification^[4]. This engagement rate is deter-

mined by calculating the sum of likes, comments, and shares relative to total subscriber count, thereby standardizing responsiveness across channels of varying scale. This measure reflects audience interaction in a manner directly relevant to algorithmic visibility. Epistemically, this privileging of affect reorients audience attention away from interpretation and toward immediate sensory response.

The visibility gradient displayed in **Figure 2** further highlights a systematic algorithmic attenuation for complex humor forms. Content requiring significant interpretive labor—such as narrative, satirical, or socio-political comedy—exhibits markedly lower visibility, with an ob-

served 30% reduction in inferred recommendation likelihood compared to high-stimulus, spectacle-driven formats. This estimate is based on normalized engagement-adjusted views across the sample, serving as a proxy for algorithmic discovery in the absence of proprietary recommendation data. Channels classified under Narrative/Satirical Humor (e.g., Smosh or long-form sketch creators) consequently occupy an intermediate-lower visibility tier, while Legacy/Mixed formats register the weakest algorithmic presence. These patterns indicate that recommendation systems privilege immediacy, affective escalation, and novelty over ambiguity or critical depth, contributing to the progressive homogenization of digital comedic expression.

Concurrently, humor within highly visible channels has become increasingly multimodal, privileging accelerated editing, sound design, and visual exaggeration over linguistic or thematic complexity. Channels such as The Sidemen and Dude Perfect, situated within the spectacle category, exemplify humor's deployment as an engagement technology designed to generate collective excitement through affective intensity. Despite superficial stylistic variation, the distribution captured in **Figure 2** reveals a centralized evaluative logic governed by spectacle-oriented performance metrics. High-visibility creators internalize these constraints, adapting humor to algorithmic thresholds rather than critical intent.

Taken together, the convergence between qualitative findings and the visibility hierarchy illustrated in **Figure 2** demonstrates that humor on YouTube functions as an epistemic structuring force rather than a neutral expressive form. Satirical and critical humor are not actively suppressed but are rendered peripheral through algorithmic devaluation. The transformation of humor into spectacle thus emerges as a key epistemic consequence of platform governance, wherein sensory appeal supersedes inquiry and visibility becomes the principal criterion of cultural legitimacy.

4. Discussion

4.1. Algorithmic Spectacle and the Closure of the YouTube Episteme

In this study, I concerned myself with conducting a mixed-method investigation to examine how YouTube, although narrativized as an auditorium for participatory culture, deploys codes of ciphery and deciphering (i.e., algo-

rithms) to deliberately reveal and conceal knowledge. This ciphery–deciphering process effectively reshuffles and filters information within what appears, from the outside, to be a democratized communicative space in which knowledge is produced by the people and for the people. YouTube, despite its slogan “Broadcast Yourself,” cannot be understood as a neutral mediator between message senders (clickbait comedians) and receivers (YouTube users, followers, and subscribers).

Since its acquisition by Google in October 2006, YouTube has implemented a series of managerial and infrastructural interventions, such as introducing premium subscription-based channels in 2013, removing the public display of dislike counts in 2021 to expand revenue streams beyond advertising and, in 2023, deploying server-side advertisement injection to prevent advertisement blocking. In addition, the platform relies heavily on recommendation algorithms—often framed as information-filtering systems purportedly designed to meet users' interests based on their search history^[34, 40]. These, although, presented as legitimate procedures, seem to be barriers to truthful cultural participation that lead to the marginalisation of digital subalterns^[45]. The use of Spivak's “subaltern” here identifies a structural epistemic injustice inherent in the platform's procedural architecture^[45]. While these creators may not occupy the socio-historical position of the colonial subaltern, they are subject to a computational subalternization. Following Spivak, the subaltern is not “silent” but is “unable to be heard” because their mode of expression does not translate into the dominant power's “master language.” In this context, critical and narrative humor, which necessitates “interpretive labor” and ambiguity, is rendered “unintelligible” to a commercial logic that speaks exclusively in high-arousal metrics. The evidence of this injustice is empirically visible in the visibility gradient (**Figure 2**), which shows that as humor moves from “affective reflex” (spectacle) to “critical deliberation” (satire), its reach is systematically regulated. These creators are algorithmically marginalized not by identity, but by epistemic incompatibility: their mode of humor is structurally excluded from the circuits of automated amplification, preventing the critical voice from achieving legibility within the dominant recommendation ecosystem. Indeed, as the results of this research reveal, these selective procedures have little to do with freedom of speech or the democrati-

zation of society. Algorithmic governance on YouTube is examined both empirically and qualitatively in this article as a regime that normalizes affect rather than fostering critical thought—an epistemic formation that ultimately undermines democracy rather than serving it.

4.1.1. From Participatory Promise to Algorithmic Governance

The findings of this research empirically substantiate Tarleton Gillespie's and Bucher's critique^[3, 8]. Although YouTube enables anyone to upload content, visibility—rather than expression per se—emerges as the decisive epistemic currency. The stark disparity between the proportion of educational or socially oriented channels (approximately 24%) and their marginal share of total views (around 4%) indicates that algorithmic amplification operates as a selective regime rather than a neutral facilitator (**Figure 2**). This result also reveals how humor is shaped within this selective system: through affective standardization and the conversion of emotional intensity into algorithmic capital. Participation persists, but under conditions that systematically reward conformity to spectacle-oriented norms, confirming that algorithmic visibility governs both attention and perceived legitimacy.

In the same vein, these empirical patterns align with van Dijck et al.'s argument that platform societies are structured by connective and commercial logics that reorder public communication^[12]. Scholars cannot be blamed for adopting a particular stance toward a social phenomenon when it is considered outside the temporal framework in which it emerged. In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins cannot be faulted for his optimism regarding the capacity of emerging technologies to foster participatory culture; in the era of high interpretive flexibility, these platforms appeared genuinely promising as engines of cultural diversification^[2]. However, scholarly vigilance necessitates a dialectical understanding of how the medium has since evolved. As researchers such as Gillespie and Bucher have demonstrated, the subsequent platformization of the web has reconfigured those original participatory impulses into a standardized “affective reflex”^[3, 8]. This shift marks a transition from possibility to procedurality: platforms no longer merely host participation but actively govern it through an infrastructural power that optimizes content for algorithmic discovery. By foregrounding this evolution, this study argues that the grassroots “voice” cele-

brated by early scholarship has been subsumed by a structural logic that privileges high-arousal spectacle over the very diversity Jenkins originally envisioned.

4.1.2. The Algorithmic Dispositif and the Normalization of Affect

The results of the mixed method analysis conducted in this research empirically confirm that although YouTube permits universal expression, visibility—not speech—emerges as the decisive epistemic currency. The marginal reach of educational and socially oriented content (e.g., satirical comedy aiming to criticize and ridicule social and political incongruity), despite its numerical presence, reveals algorithmic amplification as a selective regime of truth rather than a neutral enabler. Exaggerated thumbnails and hyperbolic titles exemplify the clickability logic. It is a logic, as I may suggest, that supplants epistemic rigor as the measure of value, instituting what David Beer identifies as a metricized reality^[18].

Crucially, this system produces self-regulating subjects who internalize the algorithmic gaze. Creators pre-emptively align their output with affective norms, prioritizing high-arousal spectacle over critical deliberation to ensure platform viability. Power here operates as a productive force rather than a repressive one; critical content is not overtly censored but is instead subalternized, rendered algorithmically illegible because its “interpretive labor” cannot be processed by the platform's high-velocity metrics^[45]. Far from democratizing expression, YouTube's algorithmic governance simulates participation while consolidating symbolic power in alignment with capital incentives. This process ensures that while critical comedic discourse remains “permitted,” it is relegated to a structural periphery, effectively silenced not by a ban, but by its exclusion from the circuits of automated amplification.

Our study unravels technical optimization from commercial logic by framing the YouTube algorithm as an intersection of Foucault's Biopower and Debord's Society of the Spectacle^[6, 9]. We argue that ‘user preferences’ and ‘watch-time metrics’ are not autonomous drivers of content but quantifiable manifestations of a capitalist imperative. The ‘thumbnail face’ (the almost 27% surprise/happiness identified in **Table 4**) thus functions as a form of biometric discipline. From a Foucauldian perspective the platform creates a regime of visibility where creators inevitably perform

a ‘standardized affect’ to be granted digital existence. This process transforms human facial expression into Affective Capital, a commodified, predictable asset. From a Debordian perspective, high Click-Through Rate (CTR) requirements embody the modern Spectacle, where the thumbnail becomes the primary site of social relation. The ‘disentanglement’ lies in the observed homogenization: while organic psychology would produce diverse expressions, the overwhelming convergence across all 15 channels reveals a top-down structural coercion that prioritizes capital circulation over the organic variety of human humor.

Read through a Foucauldian lens, YouTube’s algorithmic architecture constitutes a fully operational dispositif. Technologies, economic imperatives, and legitimizing discourses are strategically accumulated to govern what becomes visible, knowable, and valuable. In this study, the concept of a “regime of truth” is operationalized through measurable indicators such as video view counts, watch time, likes, shares, and engagement velocity, alongside qualitative coding of clickbait strategies including exaggerated thumbnails, sensationalized titles, and affective performance^[6]. This aligns with Gillespie’s and Bucher’s arguments that platforms are politicized, and under the guise of technical neutrality, normative decisions are embedded in their infrastructural design^[3, 8]. Similarly, the results of this research do not contradict Bucher’s discussion of algorithms’ function as affective infrastructures that discipline expression through anticipatory reward^[8].

4.1.3. Spectacle, Escapism, and the Epistemic Consequences of Humor

The observed correlation between extremity and engagement lends strong empirical support to Guy Debord’s diagnosis of the society of the spectacle^[9]. On YouTube, humor increasingly functions as a mechanism of affective capture rather than critique. Whereas comedy has historically operated as a site of social inversion, satire, and resistance, the findings suggest that algorithmically optimized humor is structurally discouraged from fulfilling this role^[13]. This conclusion complicates Jean Burgess and Joshua Green’s influential claim that YouTube sustains a productive tension between community and commerciality^[1]. While such coexistence may have characterized earlier phases of the platform, the current data suggest that commercial logic has achieved near-total dominance within high-visibility spaces.

The success of channels such as MrBeast, the Stokes Twins, and similar spectacle-driven formats exemplifies what Peter Dahlgren describes as an epistemic crisis—but with a crucial refinement^[16]. The crisis here is not primarily driven by misinformation or epistemic relativism; rather, it is produced by algorithmic systems that privilege distraction, escalation, and emotional immediacy over interpretive labor^[45].

Humor, in this context, becomes a technology of pacification. By organizing attention around shock, excess, and novelty, the platform fosters passive consumption, displacing opportunities for sustained reflection^[9]. The relegation of critical or satirical humor to the margins—approximately 30% less likely to be algorithmically recommended—confirms that the spectacle is not merely cultural but epistemic in its effects.

4.1.4. Reconfiguring Epistemic Authority under Platform Capitalism

The framework of knowledge order presented by Neuberger provides a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics^[17]. They argue that digital platforms flatten traditional epistemic hierarchies by blurring boundaries between professional and lay knowledge producers. While this flattening is observable at the level of access, the present findings indicate that it does not yield epistemic equality. As shown in **Table 3** and **Figure 1** in Section 3, the analysis of the top 15 humor channels shows that quasi-corporate creators—such as MrBeast, SET India, and KIMPRO—dominate attention and engagement metrics, with high-arousal, clickbait-oriented videos capturing disproportionately large shares of views, watch time, and likes. In contrast, socially critical or educational comedic content, even when present, consistently achieves lower visibility and is less likely to be algorithmically recommended. Instead, this flattening produces a new hierarchy governed by algorithmic visibility and economic scalability^[39, 40].

The concentration of attention among quasi-corporate creators—often embedded in legacy media networks or operating as vertically integrated brands—demonstrates that epistemic authority is being recentralized rather than dissolved. This supports recent research’s results warning that networked publics can reproduce power asymmetries even in ostensibly open systems^[46]. The metrics presented in **Table 3** and **Figure 1** further show that top-performing channels maintain affective dominance through exaggerated thumb-

nails, sensationalized titles, and high-arousal content, making emotional resonance the key proxy for epistemic authority. What distinguishes YouTube is that authority is no longer anchored in institutional credentials but in the capacity to perform affect at scale. Emotional resonance becomes a proxy for truth-value, credibility, and relevance^[40].

This shift marks a fundamental transformation of epistemic legitimacy. As Jonas Ingvarsson suggests, digital infrastructures do not merely mediate knowledge; they redefine its conditions of possibility^[47]. The empirical results, illustrated in **Tables 3** and **4**, confirm that immediacy and affect dominate the YouTube Episteme: critical deliberation is marginalized, satire and social critique appear in the periphery, and commercial scalability dictates visibility. Algorithmically optimized humor thus functions as both the driver and measure of epistemic power, privileging spectacle over substantive reflection and constraining diversity of thought^[10]. Within the YouTube Episteme, immediacy displaces deliberation, affect substitutes for argument, and commercial scalability overrides epistemic diversity.

4.2. Theoretical and Empirical Contributions

The research findings advance three key contributions to the literature. First, through qualitative and quantitative observation, this work indicates that YouTube functions as an epistemic institution that challenges conventional ones. YouTube's supremacy emanates from an unprecedented capacity to coalesce multimodality, attention-drawing humor and algorithmic governance, enabling it not only to discipline what circulates but how knowledge is formatted, valued, and consumed. Second, the findings extend Foucauldian and Debordian theories into the domain of algorithmic humor, showing how the clickbait comedian spectacle operates as a mechanism of epistemic regulation rather than mere entertainment. Third, they enhance contemporary debates on digital epistemology by identifying algorithms, not users or misinformation alone, as the pivotal drivers remodelling dominant elites' "regime of truth" "in a way that backs it up rather than challenging its tenets.

To sum up, the study contests persistent accounts of digital democratization allegedly meant to challenge conventional hierarchies, as well as the notion that humor is always "analytical, critical, and rational"^[15]. While YouTube expands expressive capacity, it simultaneously constricts

epistemic scope. It empowers only elite creators—clickbait comedians—whom, drawing on Marxist theory, I permit myself to call the digital proletariat, to produce content aligned with platform capitalism^[42]. The YouTube Episteme is therefore not fluid or pluralistic but increasingly impenetrable, recursive, and affectively standardized^[43]. What is publicly knowable is constrained not by censorship but by the soft, unremitting operations of algorithmic silencing of digital "subalterns"^[45].

5. Conclusions

In this study, my purpose was to investigate the unparalleled rise of clickbait comedians on YouTube and the epistemic implications of humor purposefully aligned with platform incentives. The findings demonstrate that sensationalist content, manifest in exaggerated expressions, hyperbolic titles, and emotionally charged thumbnails, is not incidental. It is systematically rewarded by the platform's algorithmic architecture to maintaining giant media companies' hegemonic status^[18]. YouTube softly defines how knowledge is produced, evaluated and perceives within digital ecosystems^[3, 7].

Although YouTube is often framed as a democratizing space for participatory culture, the concentration of attention and monetization among a limited subset of creators underscores the durability of structural hierarchies^[1, 2]. Commercially optimized content dominates visibility, leaving reflective, socially critical, or nuanced humor at a marked disadvantage^[12]. This dynamic illustrates a broader epistemic reconfiguration in which power, knowledge, and visibility are co-constituted: creators internalize platform expectations, viewers engage primarily with affective spectacle, and the platform's infrastructure enforces the normative standards of what counts as valuable or legitimate content^[6, 9].

By situating clickbait comedy within this structured digital epistemic order, the study contributes to scholarship on digital knowledge production, highlighting the intertwined roles of algorithms, monetization logics, and platform design in shaping cultural meaning and collective understanding^[17, 47]. It underscores that participatory access alone does not guarantee epistemic equity: while technically available to all, visibility is strongly channelled toward content optimized for engagement and commercial return, narrowing the scope of socially recognized knowledge and humor.

The structural mechanisms of digital governance—algorithms, recommendation systems, and monetization frameworks—now act as the primary regulators of visibility and epistemic legitimacy. To address the systematic attenuation of critical humor, platform design must move beyond content-level moderation toward a structural recalibration of recommendation systems. Rather than focusing exclusively on engagement metrics, platforms should incorporate transparency mechanisms that clarify how affective intensity, watch-time velocity, and retention curves are weighted in visibility rankings. Such disclosure provides principled insight into the procedural logics shaping cultural exposure without necessitating the release of proprietary code.

The objective is not to suppress spectacle, but to mitigate its monopolistic dominance by ensuring that high epistemic-value content—such as socially critical or narrative comedy—is no longer structurally disadvantaged. Consequently, this study advocates for algorithmic pluralism through three specific procedural interventions:

1. Transparency Mandates: Clarifying the weighting of affective triggers relative to narrative retention to audit visibility gradients.
2. User-Configurable Curation: Implementing features like a “Narrative Depth” toggle that empowers viewers to manually shift recommendation logics.
3. Researcher-Access APIs: Enabling independent auditing of visibility patterns to monitor platform-wide standardization.

By recalibrating the medium’s procedural architecture rather than regulating speech itself, platform governance can expand the range of legible cultural forms within the digital public sphere.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

Data is available upon request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

AI tools assisted in some paragraphs of this work. Specifically, ChatGPT and Google’s AI assistant (Gemini) were used solely for minor editing, language refinement, and proofreading. All substantive content, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are my original work. The use of AI did not contribute to the intellectual arguments or research findings presented in the manuscript. The author takes full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

References

- [1] Burgess, J., Green, J., 2018. YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture, 2nd ed. Polity: Cambridge, UK.
- [2] Jenkins, H., 2006. Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. New York University Press: New York, NY, USA.
- [3] Gillespie, T., 2014. The relevance of algorithms. In: Gillespie, T., Boczkowski, P.J., Foot, K.A. (Eds.). Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA. pp. 167–194.
- [4] Habib, H., Nithyanand, R., 2025. YouTube recommendations reinforce negative emotions: Auditing algorithmic bias with emotionally-agentic sock puppets. arXiv preprint. arXiv:2501.15048. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2501.15048>
- [5] Bogost, I., 2008. The rhetoric of video games. In: Salen, K. (Ed.). The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, USA. pp. 117–140.
- [6] Foucault, M., 1977. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Sheridan, A. (Trans.). Pantheon Books: New York, NY, USA.
- [7] McLuhan, M., 1964. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. McGraw-Hill: New York, NY, USA.
- [8] Bucher, T., 2018. If...Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics. Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA.
- [9] Debord, G., 1995. The Society of the Spectacle.

- Nicholson-Smith, D. (Trans.). Zone Books: New York, NY, USA.
- [10] Fattoumi, F., Channouf, G., Channouf, G., 2023. Orientalism in US digital entertainment media and anti-Americanism in the Arab world: An integrative review. *Annals of the International Communication Association*. 47(4), 449–478. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2023.2239779>
- [11] Covington, P., Adams, J., Sargin, E., 2016. Deep neural networks for YouTube recommendations. In *Proceedings of the Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems*, Boston, MA, USA, 15–19 September 2016; pp. 191–198.
- [12] van Dijck, J., Poell, T., de Waal, M., 2018. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA.
- [13] Attardo, S., 1994. *Linguistic Theories of Humour*. Mouton de Gruyter: Berlin, Germany.
- [14] Mintz, L.E., 1985. Standup comedy as social and cultural mediation. *American Quarterly*. 37(1), 71–80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712763>
- [15] Brassett, J., Sutton, A., 2026. US satire and the everyday politics of decline. *Comedy Studies*. 1–23. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2026.2640737>
- [16] Dahlgren, P., 2019. Media, Knowledge and Trust: The Deepening Epistemic Crisis of Democracy. In: Splichal, S. (Ed.). *The Liquefaction of Publicness: Communication, Democracy and the Public Sphere in the Internet Age*, 1st ed. Routledge: London, UK.
- [17] Neuberger, C., Bartsch, A., Fröhlich, R., et al., 2023. The digital transformation of knowledge order: A model for the analysis of the epistemic crisis. *Annals of the International Communication Association*. 47(2), 180–201. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2023.2169950>
- [18] Beer, D., 2018. *The Data Gaze: Capitalism, Power and Perception*. SAGE Publications: London, UK.
- [19] Henman, P., 2021. Governing by algorithms and algorithmic governmentality: Towards machinic judgement. In: Schuilenburg M., Peeters, R. (Eds.). *The Algorithmic Society: Technology, Power, and Knowledge*. Routledge: London, UK. pp. 19–34.
- [20] Krippendorff, K., 2019. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*, 4th ed. SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA.
- [21] Rose, G., 2023. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 5th ed. SAGE Publications: London, UK.
- [22] Feters, M.D., Freshwater, D., 2015. The 1 + 1 = 3 integration challenge. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. 9(2), 115–117. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689815581222>
- [23] Flick, U. (Ed.), 2022. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Design*. SAGE Publications: London, UK.
- [24] VidIQ, 2026. Get More Views & Subscribers on YouTube. Available from: <https://vidiq.com> (cited 2 February 2026).
- [25] vidIQ, 2026. Best Entertainment YouTube Channels—Top 100. Available from: <https://vidiq.com/youtube-stats/top/category/entertainment/> (cited 2 February 2026).
- [26] Venturini, T., Rogers, R., 2019. “API-based research” or how can digital sociology and journalism studies learn from the Facebook and Cambridge Analytica data breach. *Digital Journalism*. 7(4), 532–540. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1591927>
- [27] Charland, M., 1987. Constitutive rhetoric: The case of the *Peuple Québécois*. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 73(2), 133–150. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638709383799>
- [28] Bateman, J.A., Schmidt, K.H., 2012. *Multimodal Film Analysis: How Films Mean*. Routledge: London, UK.
- [29] Jewitt, C., Bezemer, J., O’Halloran, K., 2025. *Introducing Multimodality*, 2nd ed. Routledge: London, UK. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003513698>.
- [30] Neuendorf, K.A., 2017. *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, 2nd ed. SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA, USA.
- [31] Field, A., 2024. *Discovering Statistics Using IBM SPSS Statistics*, 6th ed. SAGE Publications: London, UK.
- [32] Tabachnick, B.G., Fidell, L.S., 2019. *Using Multivariate Statistics*, 7th ed. Pearson: London, UK.
- [33] Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S. (Eds.), 2018. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. SAGE Publications: Los Angeles, CA, USA.
- [34] Oeldorf-Hirsch, A., Neubaum, G., 2025. What do we know about algorithmic literacy? The status quo and a research agenda for a growing field. *New Media & Society*. 27(2), 681–701. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231182662>
- [35] Ingraham, C., 2020. The present as platform. *Media Theory*. 4(2), 115–138. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70064/mt.v4i2.626>
- [36] Cole, R., 2024. Inter-Rater Reliability Methods in Qualitative Case Study Research. *Sociological Methods & Research*. 53(4), 1944–1975. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241231156971>
- [37] Markham, A., Buchanan, E., 2012. Ethical decision-making and Internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0). Association of Internet Researchers: Chicago, IL, USA. Available from: <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>
- [38] Gallagher, J.R., Hernandez, A.P., 2025. Algorithmic Anthropomorphizing, Platform Gossip, and Backlashes: Aspirational Content Creators’ Narratives about YouTube’s Algorithm on Reddit. *Social Media + Society*. 11(2). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051251331761>

- [39] Lu, E., 2024. The YouTube thumbnail faces that attract the most views. Available from: <https://www.kapwing.com/resources/the-youtube-thumbnail-faces-that-attract-the-most-views/> (cited 2 February 2026).
- [40] Gaw, F., 2022. Algorithmic logics and the construction of cultural taste of the Netflix Recommender System. *Media, Culture & Society*. 44(4), 706–725. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211053767>
- [41] Social Blade, 2026. Top YouTube Creators by Subscribers, Top 10 YouTube Creators in Hong Kong by Subscribers, Top 10 Entertainment YouTube Creators by Subscribers. Social Blade. Available from: <https://socialblade.com/youtube> (cited 2 February 2026).
- [42] Marx, K., Engels, F., 1978. *The Communist Manifesto*. International Publishers: New York, NY, USA.
- [43] Couldry, N., Mejjias, U.A., 2019. *The Costs of Connection: How Data is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, CA, USA.
- [44] Durand Folco, J., Martineau, J., 2023. *Algorithmic Capital: Accumulation, Power and Resistance in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*. Écosociété: Montréal, QC, Canada.
- [45] Spivak, G.C., 1988. Can the subaltern speak? In: Nelson, C., Grossberg, L. (Eds.). *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. University of Illinois Press: Urbana, IL, USA. pp. 271–313.
- [46] Benkler, Y., Faris, R., Roberts, H., 2018. *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. Oxford University Press: New York, NY, USA.
- [47] Ingvarsson, J., 2021. Digital epistemology: An introduction. In *Towards a Digital Epistemology: Aesthetics and Modes of Thought in Early Modernity and the Present Age*. Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, Switzerland. pp. 1–28. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-78724-0_1