



They've got billions of hits, your children are obsessed, but you've never heard of them. Meet the YouTube superstars

What are the kids into these days? *Helena de Bertodano* meets Charlie Puth, the vlogger turned mainstream pop star who overtook Gangnam Style, and we introduce the mega-YouTubers making millions from their clicks

CHARLIE PUTH

11m
Subscribers

In 2005, Charlie Puth — pronounced like truth — was just another aspiring singer-songwriter. That was the year a small video-hosting site called YouTube launched and Puth quickly saw its potential. “I saw the light at the end of the tunnel,” he says today. “It would take hard work, but I knew what was coming.” Within three years he had 80,000 followers listening to him singing covers of Beyoncé and Adele. He was still only 17 years old.

Today, his YouTube videos have billions of views and fans wait for days to see him perform live. A single he released in 2015 with the rapper Wiz Khalifa, *See You Again*, went to No 1 in Britain and America, where it topped the charts for 12 weeks, as well as several other countries. It was nominated for three Grammys and, briefly, became the most-viewed YouTube video of all time, ending *Gangnam Style*'s five-year reign. To date that one song has notched up more than 3.5bn views. At least six of Puth's tracks have outplayed even Harry Styles's most successful single as a solo artist.

So why is Styles so much better known than Puth? Styles, in fact, is only better known across multiple generations. If you ask a teenager, someone who is actually listening to tracks on YouTube, they are more likely to be familiar with Puth's music. His first album, *Nine Track Mind*, was released in 2016 and, despite its success, Puth almost winces at the memory of its blandness. “Those songs mostly weren't me. I was trying to figure out who I was.” Now he is about to

MOST POPULAR VIDEO

Wiz Khalifa's *See You Again* ft Charlie Puth (3.5bn views). Featuring on the soundtrack for *Fast & Furious 7*, it knocked *Gangnam Style* off its perch to become, briefly, the most viewed video on YouTube

release his second album, *Voicenotes*, and feels much more comfortable: “I've definitely hit my groove.” The lead single, *Attention*, already has nearly 740m views. A “shit-talking” song, as Puth describes it, “it's the first song that really defines me as an artist — it is unapologetically jazzy.” Three days after we meet, he posts the YouTube video for another track from the album: *Done for Me*. By the following day it is already rattling towards 3m views.

Puth, 26, is a completely different product from Styles. He is entirely of the YouTube generation. What makes Puth exceptional, however, is that not only does he write his own music, he produces, records and mixes it as well. It helps, of course, that he has perfect pitch, enabling him to identify or sing a musical note without a reference tone. It also helped, in the early days, that he could put out his own videos. No need for a record contract or a team of marketeers. In the internet age, you can become a huge star without anything so old-fashioned as an actual album in an actual music store. Or, as he puts it, “I always loved refreshing my page or coming home from school and seeing my subscriber count go up. Making money online was very appealing to me and online celebrity has always been appealing to me. It wasn't the popular option and I was alone by myself a lot. I wanted to show people you can find joy in staying at home on a Friday night and making something artistic.” Such is the genesis of a pop star today.

Puth grew up in New Jersey, where his music-teacher mother, Debra, infused the house with music. “I would wake up to her playing the piano.” There is a home video of Charlie, aged three, flawlessly singing Neil Sedaka's *Breaking Up Is Hard to Do*. His mother started teaching him piano when he was four, and, when he was 12, he volunteered to step in for an organist who had failed to turn up at his local Catholic church on Ash Wednesday, playing the whole mass from memory. It was a turning point, the moment those around him realised he had an exceptional gift. Later he went to Berklee College of Music on a full scholarship. Something was missing, though. “I went on every



PUTH CULTURE
Top: as a toddler with his piano-teacher mother, Debra. Above: on stage in Miami, 2016

AUSTIN HARGRAVE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE; HAIR: SHAUL SHAYA; MAKE-UP: DAIRY GILMORE; EROTHEME; REX

TYLEROAKLEY

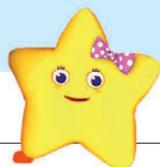


8m Subscribers

The 29-year-old American LGBTQ activist posts short diary videos from his day-to-day life, but he has also used his platform to discuss his experiences of anorexia, domestic violence and life as a gay man. Ricky Martin told the YouTuber that his videos inspired his own decision to come out in 2010.

MOST POPULAR VIDEO
The Photobooth Challenge, featuring Miranda Sings (13m views). Tyler Oakley and Sings (a fictional character played by the American comedian Colleen Ballinger) mess around with photo filters

LITTLE BABY BUM



15m Subscribers

A channel dedicated to animated videos of nursery rhymes. Mixing classic tunes with new songs, Little Baby Bum holds the Guinness World Record for the most-watched educational video of all time, with a 54-minute compilation featuring Wheels on the Bus, which has gone round and round more than two billion times. The channel is the brainchild of Derek and Cannis Holder, a husband-and-wife team from London.

MOST POPULAR VIDEO
Wheels on the Bus compilation (2.1bn views). This 54-minute mix features nursery rhymes animated by various animated characters, and proves that sometimes you can't beat a classic



RYAN TOYS REVIEW



13m Subscribers

As the name suggests, Ryan reviews kids' toys. The twist? Ryan himself is a kid. It may not be everyone's idea of scintillating,

but millions watch this modern child star play with toys and take on various challenges, with a little help from his parents, who often act as playmates.

Ryan, 7, has viewing figures most pop stars can only dream of, though his full name and location remains a secret. Forbes estimates his channel made \$11m last year.

MOST POPULAR VIDEO
Huge Eggs Surprise Toys Challenge (1.2bn views). An extreme Easter egg hunt, where Ryan plays with toys he finds inside giant eggs on an inflatable in his garden

IISUPERWOMANIIAKA LILLY SINGH



13m Subscribers

The 29-year-old Canadian comic creates observational videos and skits about everyday life, relationships and

gender stereotypes. She has started her own movement #GirlLove to encourage positive female relationships. Her first video in 2010 received just 70 views; now she attracts stellar guests, from Hollywood actors Will Smith (above) and Charlize Theron to the singer John Legend. Last year, Singh's first book, How to Be a Bawse — Canadian for "boss" — reached No 1 on The New York Times Best Seller list.

MOST POPULAR VIDEO
How Girls Get Ready (25m views)



JENNA MARBLES

18m Subscribers

Marbles shot to fame in 2007 with her video How to Trick People into Thinking You're Good Looking, where she put her own spin on modern beauty standards. Now the quirky 31-year-old is a YouTube veteran and has made more than 300 videos, with weekly posts that mock everyday life (titles include Things Guys Lie About and Drunk Makeup Tutorial). A sure sign of success: Marbles is the first YouTube star to have her likeness turned into a waxwork in Madame Tussauds New York. Old school.

MOST POPULAR VIDEO
How to Trick People into Thinking You're Good Looking (67m views). This 157-second video went viral and brought Marbles overnight success



THE GAMERS

18m Subscribers

What's the world coming to? People like watching other people play games. Two of the top game-vlog channels are those of Jacksepticeye and the Minecraft-expert Dan TDM (pictured). They each have more than 18m subscribers. Still a long way off the 62m who subscribe to PewDiePie, the Swedish game vlogger who, despite a series of scandals in recent years, remains the most subscribed YouTuber of all time.

MOST POPULAR VIDEO
All the Way, Jacksepticeye Songify Remix (66m views). A musical remix of one of his "lively" commentaries



GONE GIRL
Puth with Selena Gomez in 2015, around the time they were linked. She later resumed her on-off relationship with Justin Bieber

X Factor show," he tells me, "every America's Got Talent, and got rejected because I was a 15-year-old showing my shy side; I don't think I've ever had visual star power. I was very different [from other kids] in school. Everybody was playing football and doing high-school things. I was the weird one going to class and making YouTube videos. I was alone a lot."

Although confident in himself, he minded the exclusion. "I wanted to experience things that were typical. I wanted a girlfriend and I didn't have one for a really long time. Sometimes I'd go to parties I wasn't invited to and people would be bummed out I was there."

What eventually gave him the missing X factor was the sheer force of his musical talent. And the platform, of course, was YouTube. In 2011, the US talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres spotted one of his videos and invited him on her show. "I put the phone down because I didn't believe it was true," says Puth. She persisted,

"I was very different in school. Everybody was playing football, I was the weird one making YouTube videos. I was alone a lot"

bombarding his former schools with calls, and finally he got the message. She signed him to her record label, but it folded and he was not picked up again until 2015, when he was signed to Atlantic Records. In retrospect, the delay was a blessing in disguise. "I matured more. I'm glad fame didn't hit me when I was younger."

Now, of course, everyone wants to be his friend. He has 9.6m Instagram followers and his feed is strewn with infatuated comments such as "You're my idol" and "Please marry me". He finds this almost as unnerving as the ostracism he experienced as a teenager. "I never want [people] to speak to me like every word I say is a golden egg. I'm still just a guy."

We meet at the Sunset Marquis hotel in Hollywood, where Puth is staying in a villa. He chooses an upstairs sitting room for the interview, which is furnished with a grand piano. "I can sit anywhere you like," he says — but gravitates immediately towards the piano stool. The piano becomes a conversational prop. Every few minutes he turns round and plays a few notes, either to emphasise a point — he plays and sings snatches of songs by the Beach Boys, the Carpenters and the Isley Brothers, when explaining his musical influences — or to replicate the pitch of a sound he has just heard. There is a swimming pool outside the villa and an overexcited child keeps shrieking. "That's an F sharp,"

GETTY

he says, playing the note. Every sound is a note for him. "It can be pretty overwhelming, because I'm trying to speak to people and I hear the wind, an air conditioner, a bird, a phone... Sometimes it can get out of control." He raises his hands to his ears as he says this, as though his head is exploding. "I just have to breathe."

Dressed in white T-shirt and ripped jeans, he is self-deprecating about his appearance. "Someone like Harry Styles, you just see him and think [he clicks his fingers] 'rock star'. He has the hair." He pulls at his own hair and jokes: "I'm trying to grow it, I want it to look like Harry's. Not really. But I've never thought of myself like the rock-star type."

His right eyebrow is distinctively jagged and fans shave their eyebrows to look like him. But his is a scar, from a dog attack when he was two years old that nearly killed him and necessitated 450 stitches. "I don't remember it, but maybe deep in my subconscious it made me more of a sensitive, introverted person."

When he first found himself in the full glare of publicity, he almost lost his way. "I've never been a crazy partier, but I thought to continue being famous I had to be a certain way. I lost my head for a minute. I surrounded myself with people who were not necessarily enhancing my life and making me the best Charlie that I could be — as my mom says." ➔

How to stop your kids overdoing it

It's an alarming equation. The more time children spend looking at screens, the more likely they are to report symptoms of depression.

For parents it is difficult to strike a balance between supervision and surveillance. The simplest solution is to set limits. On Amazon's Fire tablets, you can set overall daily screen time or limits for different activities (longer for reading, shorter for games). Apple devices can be locked into particular apps (via Guided Access in Settings).

A customisable approach is to install a parental-control app such as Qustodio or Net Nanny. These enable you to control which websites your children can access and for how long. You can either ban an entire website (say, Facebook), or on Net Nanny you can filter out specific pages or keywords; while on Qustodio you can block apps that are difficult to monitor,

such as the social media platforms Snapchat and Twitter, or unsuitable for children, such as the dating app Tinder.

Last month, the health secretary, Jeremy Hunt, announced a new review on how social media affect children's wellbeing. He condemned the tech industry's failure to introduce age checks, to take action against cyberbullying and to limit screen time as "morally wrong" and "deeply unfair for parents".

YouTube itself has been criticised frequently for not policing its content effectively. Its parent company, Google, claims to be cracking down on content that violates its community guidelines, but graphic or adult videos are still easy to find. Last week, it announced an update to the YouTube Kids app that will give parents more control and collate age-appropriate channels. The update will launch later this year.

BROOKLYN AND BAILEY



5m
Subscribers

These 18-year-old identical twins are the daughters of Mindy McKnight, the founder of the YouTube channel Cute Girls Hairstyles.

It was on this hair-styling channel that the twins first got the taste for vlogging. Now the blue-eyed pair have their own channel, where they make videos on everything from dating to craftwork.

MOST FAMOUS VIDEO

Identical Twins Get Wisdom Teeth Removed (20m views). Follow the twins to the dentist's chair, through the anaesthetic and then afterwards, reunited minus a bit of wisdom

MATTYBRAPS

10m
Subscribers

MattyB is an American 15-year-old singer-rapper who began by covering artists such as One Direction. On the back of his YouTube

success, the Justin Bieber homunculus now plays concerts across America. His social-media posts are dominated by pictures of him with his close-knit family.

MOST POPULAR VIDEO

Gym Class Heroes: Stereo Hearts — a MattyBRaps cover featuring Skylar Stecker (230m views). MattyB and Skylar were both 10 when he covered this Gym Class Heroes track in 2013



SLIME EXPLORER (ETAL)

>1m
Subscribers

If you haven't seen a slime video, you might be imagining 1990s-style "gunging" as used to be seen on children's TV shows.

In fact, slime makers are like mini mad scientists, perfecting their recipes for making goopy, malleable substances and garnering millions of views. With more than 200,000 subscribers, the anonymous Slime Explorer is one of the new gods of gloop. His videos appeal to primary-school kids (and older) who find watching the process oddly relaxing — and then badger mum and dad to order the ingredients to make their own slime at home... resulting in much scrubbing of carpets nationwide.

MOST FAMOUS VIDEO

How to Make Slime: Fluffy Hologram Glitter Slime (37m views).

In which Slime Explorer combines three different coloured slimes and hand soap to create a very prodable bright pink glittered slime



Words by
Charlotte Irwin

There is something endearingly dorkish about this statement. Puth unabashedly adores his family: "Thank goodness I've always had them around me to keep me in check." He lives in the Hollywood Hills with his younger sister and brother, twins Mikaela and Stephen, and his parents have moved nearby. He still runs all his music past his mother first. "She has the best ear ever. I always loved the way she reacted when her favourite songs came on. It made me want to make songs that made her react in the same way."

The child's shriek drifts through the window again. "Wow that was E flat this time, a little bit lower," he says, turning to play the notes. "F sharp then E flat..." He turns back. "What were we talking about?"

Though he sings about relationships, Puth no longer talks about them. "You can ask, but I'm not going to answer," he says good humouredly, but adds that he looks forward to settling down one day and having a

"I thought to continue to be famous I had to be a certain way. I was surrounding myself with people who were not enhancing my life"

family. There was a reported fling in 2016 with Selena Gomez, with whom he sang We Don't Talk Anymore, which may have later led to an uncharacteristic on-stage outburst when he shouted "F*** you, Justin Bieber" mid-song. (In case the gripping Bieber-Gomez saga has escaped anyone, they have had an on-off relationship for the past eight years and those who come between them usually end up as roadkill.) There have been a couple of other brief relationships that have found their way into the public eye. Anyone who wants an insight into Puth's love life just has to listen to the new album. Attention is a bitterly brilliant song about a girl stopping him from moving on. How Long is an apology for a one-night stand. "These songs have to be genuine or else it's going to look stiff on stage," he says. "My hope is that people will hear the honesty."

However, there is one new song, The Way I Am, that he admits is an undisguised self-portrait. "It's the most honest song I've ever written." I am struck by the lyrics: "Everybody is trying to be famous/And I'm just trying to find a place to hide."

Bear that in mind if your teenager decides they want to make videos on YouTube ■

Charlie Puth's album *VoiceNotes* is out on Atlantic Records on Friday