

The YouTube stars heading for burnout: 'The most fun job imaginable became deeply bleak'

Why are so many YouTubers finding themselves stressed, lonely and exhausted?

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Sat 8 Sep 2018 09.00 BST

When Matt Lees became a full-time YouTuber, he felt as if he had won the lottery. As a young, ambitious writer, director and presenter, he was able to create low-budget, high-impact films that could reach a worldwide audience, in a way that would have been impossible without the blessing of television's gatekeepers just a few years earlier. In February 2013, he had his first viral hit, an abridged version of Sony's announcement of its PlayStation 4 video game console, dubbed with a cheerily acerbic commentary. Within days the video had been watched millions of times. "It hardly seems viral at all, by today's standards," Lees says, yet it was one of the most viewed videos on YouTube that month. The boost to Lees' ego was nothing compared with the effect it had on his career. When YouTube's algorithm notices this sort of success, it starts directing viewers to the uploader's other videos, earning the channel more subscribers and, via the snappy advertisements that play before each one, higher income. Overnight, Lees had what seemed like the first shoots of a sustainable career.

Excitement soon gave way to anxiety. Even in 2013, Lees was aware that his success depended not so much on smash hits as on day-by-day reliability. "It's not enough to simply create great things," he says. "The audience expect consistency. They expect frequency. Without these, it's incredibly easy to slip off the radar and lose favour with the algorithm that gave you your wings." By the end of the year Lees had grown his channel from 1,000 subscribers to 90,000, and caught the attention of one of his influences, Charlie Brooker, who invited Lees to collaborate on writing a Channel 4 special. For a month Lees worked 20-hour days, dividing his time between the TV script work and, ever conscious that missing a day's upload could cause his videos to tumble down the search rankings, his YouTube channel.

At the end of the month he was pale, gaunt and tired in a way that, he recalls, seemed "impervious to rest". His work, he noticed, had become increasingly rushed and harsh in tone. Yet the angry, provocative quality of his videos seemed only to be making them more popular. "Divisive content is the king of online media today, and YouTube heavily boosts anything that riles people up," he says. "It's one of the most toxic things: the point at which you're breaking down is the point at which the algorithm loves you the most."

Lees began to feel a knock-on effect on his health. "Human brains really aren't designed to be interacting with hundreds of people every day," he says. "When you've got thousands of people giving you direct feedback on your work, you really get the sense that something in your mind just snaps. We just aren't built to handle empathy and sympathy on that scale." Lees developed a thyroid problem, and began to experience more frequent and persistent stretches of depression. "What started out as being the most fun job imaginable quickly slid into something that felt deeply bleak and lonely," he says.

For years, YouTubers have believed that they are loved most by their audience when they project a chirpy, grateful image. But what happens when the mask slips? This year there has been a wave of videos by prominent YouTubers talking about their burnout, chronic fatigue and depression. "This is all I ever wanted," said Elle Mills, a 20-year-old Filipino-Canadian YouTuber in a (monetised) video entitled *Burnt Out At 19*, posted in May. "And why the fuck am I so unfucking unhappy? It doesn't make any sense. You know what I mean? Because, like, this is literally my fucking dream. And I'm fucking so unfucking-happy"

Mills had gained a lot of attention (and 3.6m views) for a slick and cleverly edited five-minute video she posted last November in which she came out as bisexual to her friends, family and followers (many of whom had been asking about her sexuality in the comments). She went on to be featured on the cover of *Diva* magazine, and won a Shorty award for "breakout YouTuber". But six months later she posted the *Burnt Out* video, explaining how her schoolgirl ambition of becoming a YouTuber had led her to bigger and bigger audiences, but that "it's not what I expected. I'm always stressed. My anxiety and depression keep getting worse. I'm waiting to hit my breaking point."

The same month Rubén "El Rubius" Gundersen, a 28-year-old Spaniard who is currently the world's third most popular YouTuber, with more than 30 million subscribers, talked about how he felt as if he was heading for a breakdown, and had, as a result, decided to take a break. They are the latest in a string of high-profile YouTubers, including Erik Phillips (better known as M3RKMUS1C, with 4 million subscribers) and Benjamin Vestergaard (Crainer, with 2.8 million), to have announced hiatuses from the channel, or described their struggles with exhaustion.

The anxieties are tied up with the relentless nature of their work. Tyler Blevins, AKA Ninja, makes an estimated \$500,000 (£384,000) every month via live broadcasts of him playing the video game *Fortnite* on Twitch, a service for livestreaming video games that is owned by Amazon. Most of Blevins' revenue comes from Twitch subscribers or viewers who provide one-off donations (often in the hope that he will thank them by name "on air"). Blevins recently took to Twitter to complain that he didn't feel he could stop streaming. "Wanna know the struggles of streaming over other jobs?" he wrote, perhaps ill-advisedly for someone with such a stratospheric income. "I left for less than 48 hours and lost 40,000 subscribers on Twitch. I'll be back today... grinding again."

There was little sympathy on Twitter for the millionaire. But the pressure he described is felt at every level of success, from the titans of the content landscape all the way down to the people with channels with just a few thousand subscribers, all of whom feel they must be constantly creating, always available and responding to their fans. "Constant releases build audience loyalty," says Austin Hourigan, who runs ShoddyCast, a YouTube channel with 1.2 million subscribers. "The more loyalty you build, the more likely your viewers are to come back, which gives you the closest thing to a financial safety net in what is otherwise a capricious space."

When a YouTuber passes the 1 million subscribers mark, they are presented with a gold plaque to mark the event. Many of these plaques can be seen on shelves and walls in the background of presenters’ rooms. In this way, the size of viewership and quantity of uploads become the main markers of value.

For researcher Katherine Lo, ‘invisible’ labour such as interacting with fans is ‘a major contributor to occupational stress. In many cases it can contribute to PTSD’. Photograph: Jessica Chou for the Guardian

Professional YouTubers speak in tones at once reverential and resentful of the power of “the Algorithm” (it’s seen as a near-sentient entity, not only by creators, but also by YouTube’s own engineers). Created by the high priests of Silicon Valley, who continually tweak its characteristics, this is the programming code on which the fate of every YouTuber depends. It decides which videos to pluck from the Niagara of content that splashes on to YouTube every hour (400 hours’ worth every 60 seconds, according to Google) to deliver as “recommended viewing” to the service’s billions of users.

Every time you log on to YouTube you are presented with videos chosen by the algorithm. The idea is that a clip particularly well suited to your tastes will inspire you to click the Subscribe button - which, hopefully, will bring you back to watch a new episode tomorrow. The viewer feels that YouTube understands what he or she likes, while advertisers are reassured that the video in front of which their five-second commercial will run will reach an appropriately targeted audience.

When your income is dependent on the number of people who watch your videos each week, this code can decide what, or even whether, you eat. And, 13 years into YouTube’s existence, many believe it has come to sit at the core of a growing mental health crisis among video creators.

In April this year there was a particularly extreme example, when 38-year-old Nasim Najafi Aghdam entered YouTube’s Californian campus and opened fire on employees with a 9mm pistol, wounding three before she killed herself. A video Aghdam uploaded prior to the attack suggested that it was driven by her belief that the company’s algorithm had passed over her videos; in March she posted on Instagram, “All my YouTube channels got filtered by YouTube so my videos hardly get views.”

Algorithm-led content curation makes creators feel disposable, challenging them to churn out videos in the knowledge that there are younger, fresher people waiting in the wings to replace them. For YouTubers who use their daily lives as raw material for their videos, there is added pressure, as the traditional barriers between personal and professional life are irreparably eroded.

At a recent party at a conference for YouTubers and streamers, Hourigan was standing with a group of YouTubers when he quipped: “I think every YouTube career should come with a coupon for a free therapist.” Everybody laughed, he recalls, but “in a sad way”.

“By the way,” he adds, “I’m medicated and have a therapist.”

Katherine Lo is a researcher into online communities at the University of California, Irvine. For her, it’s not simply the frequency and consistency of content creation that lead to burnout, but the specific nature of the work required to keep audiences engaged, which includes being active on social media, interacting with fans, and other roles beyond writing, presenting and editing. “This kind of labour is often invisible but very taxing and a major contributor to occupational stress,” Lo explains. “In many cases it can contribute to PTSD, especially when creators are subject to harassment, threats to their safety and privacy, or ongoing toxicity in their community.”

She recently developed a list of occupational factors that contribute to mental health risks for creators. It includes the exhaustion that comes from performing “familiarity” with the audience, the stress of reading comments, the financial anxiety associated with managing sponsorships and donations, and the pressure of managing reputation and professional ties in the YouTuber community, where recommendations are key to getting fans.

Kati Morton: 'I have trouble with boundaries. I always feel like I should be working, or that subscribers are counting on me.' She has taken one holiday in the last three years.
Photograph: Jessica Chou for the Guardian

Those who work on larger channels, which have enough money to employ a staff and spread the pressure, are not immune to these risks. Belinda Zoller joined the team behind the Extra Credits YouTube channel in 2016. The channel publishes weekly lessons in video game design and world history, using cheery animations. It has close to 1.6 million subscribers; Zoller works as a moderator, responding to comments. Moderation is one of the most gruelling jobs in the web's emergent economy, and while Zoller does not work in front of the camera, her role puts her in the firing line for anonymous abuse and bad-faith interaction. Within months she was exhausted. "There is a lot of emotional labour involved in my work," she says. "I empathise with the root of people's concerns and criticisms, even if I disagree with some of them."

Zoller views YouTube as her primary "office space" - a shift that, she says, has "very much negatively impacted my mental health". No matter how much she enjoys helping to run a popular channel, the platform itself is steeped in negativity. Moderating comments in order to maintain a clean and safe online space is like weeding a garden: every time a root is pulled up, another three nose through the soil in its place. Zoller believes that, far from wanting to deal with the negativity, YouTube actively encourages it via the design of the algorithm. "People tend not to discuss content unless they have very strong opinions about it, and most of the time those strong opinions favour disagreement," she explains. "So the algorithm favours clickbait and controversial content over meaningfully nuanced and positive content."

For Lo, video-based social media platforms are catastrophically failing those who sustain their business. "YouTube fails to protect creators from the extremely common occupational hazards of being doxxed, stalked, harassed and threatened online," she says. (Doxxing is the revealing of someone's identity or other personal information.) "They claim no responsibility for the wellbeing of their creators or the communities they create."

Asked about Lo's comments, a spokeswoman for YouTube replies: "Harassment is abhorrent and wrong. YouTube has policies against harassment and bullying, as indicated in our community guidelines. We review flagged content quickly, and remove inappropriate videos according to our policies." In order to avoid burnout, it encourages creators to "take breaks, enjoy weekends, nights and vacations just like any job". "Of course," the spokeswoman adds, "we always hope creators are discussing their struggles openly with others in the YouTube community."

As part of its Creator Academy, a vast online "school" covering everything from how to "enhance your channel's search and discovery potential" to how to "make deals with brands", YouTube recently commissioned a series of videos designed to teach its partners how to avoid fatigue. (Few of the people I speak to who run YouTube channels are aware of the resource.) The video on burnout has been viewed just over 32,000 times. It's written and presented by 34-year-old Kati Morton. A licensed therapist based in Los Angeles, Morton has been posting videos to YouTube for eight years. As such, she is well placed to understand both the problem and the potential solution.

In 2010, when she started her channel, Morton was working as a therapist with a private practice. YouTube was her way to reach a wider audience with tips and information that she believed could help them. Three years ago, her success on the platform enabled her to become a full-time YouTuber, but learning to personally manage the pressures she had warned about has been challenging. "I am no better than anyone else," she says. "I've got tired, stressed about everything. It was a journey to get to the place where I felt able to tell my audience that I would be taking a vacation."

That holiday, a two-week break last Christmas, was the first Morton had taken since going full-time in 2015. "Maybe I took a long weekend the summer before, for our anniversary?" she says. "No. Wait. I worked then, too."

Every time Morton posts a new video she is expected to be in the comments, responding to questions and suggestions, before starting work on the next. "I have trouble with boundaries," she says. "I always feel like I should be working, or that they're counting on me."

Like all YouTubers, Morton also feels the financial pressure of the system, which typically pays between £1.50 and £3 for every 1,000 views. "The reward for your work is liable to change at any time," she says. "Your views can go down for a variety of reasons, and when that happens, you earn less." For this reason, even with close to half a million subscribers, Morton feels unable to employ anyone to help her with the workload.

YouTube recommends that creators who are struggling "enlist support". Morton argues that, for the majority, it is an impossible expense. "If I had someone supporting me it would make all the difference," she says. "But I'd need my daily views

to double before I'd feel comfortable doing that. Could you imagine having to fire someone because my views went down? That would be awful."

For her, the solution comes back to the algorithm. "YouTube rewards people who produce daily," she says. "They made the algorithm, so they have the power to remake it. If they set different criteria, it would help. We are human beings. We need some time for ourselves."

Matt Lees is furious at what he sees as YouTube's lacklustre approach to support and advice. "Encouraging creators to 'take a break' is pretty laughable from a system that actively promotes quantity over quality," he says. "There's no sense of responsibility for the culture that YouTube has created." For Katherine Lo, the capacity to maintain a healthy work/life balance while being successful on YouTube and Twitch is a "barely possible" dream. "They offer highly precarious work, where the promise of robust success - where one has a reliable, sustainable income - is only enjoyed by a small percentage of creators. Trying to reduce frequency of content and establish work/life balance merely adds even more risk."

The demands of the YouTuber life suit younger creators - and the largest demographic on the site is those in their 20s (when once teenagers may have dreamed of becoming pop stars, now they dream of becoming YouTubers). Many find it possible to keep creating at a high enough rate, if only for a few years. "At that age you absolutely can," Lees says. "You've got the energy and focus to work incredibly long hours, you've got very few responsibilities to take your attention away from work, and - perhaps most importantly - you've likely still got a solid social circle, friendships that aren't difficult to maintain." But, as every casualty of childhood stardom demonstrates, early success carries with it tremendous risk.

"The journey to creative stardom used to take more time - learning the ropes and developing a thick skin, and having a team of advisers and trusted friends," says Chris O'Sullivan, from the UK charity the Mental Health Foundation. "Today, you can become a superstar online with one viral video - at any age or stage and from any location. Without support and guidance, the potential to be burned by the exposure is great."

As time goes on, and life grows more complicated, the sense of isolation, anxiety and weariness is exacerbated.

"I spent my 20s working ceaselessly, feeling invincible and boundless," Lees says. "And honestly, I was. Right up until the point where I wasn't."

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