

# **Subscribers to Providers**

*YouTube influencer raises millions to plant trees*

By: Christian Tomczyk

3/18/2020

It is incredible how a seven-minute-long YouTube video can create a movement raising over five million dollars and planting millions of trees across the United States. In this case study you will see the impact one YouTube video influencer had on not only social media, but the whole world, because of one of his followers' comments on the online forum *Reddit*. The purpose of this paper is to apply The Symbolic Convergence Theory to this case study in order to understand how YouTube influencer MrBeast, and his fellow influencer, Mark Rober, were able to create the large movement that they did for The Arbor Foundation.

Jimmy Donaldson, otherwise known as MrBeast to his Youtube followers, is a social media influencer on YouTube, he started his YouTube channel in 2012 and is still active on it today with a collective 31.6 million subscribers. The name, MrBeast, gained quick popularity throughout YouTube when Donaldson started posting different type of videos that no one had ever heard or seen before, these would include large-scale, exhausting, and expensive challenge videos, such as; "Paying People \$10,000 To Eat Ghost Pepper," "I Bought Everything In A Store," and "Last To Remove Hand, Wins House." MrBeast hit his latest social media landmark, hitting 20 million subscribers, on June 8, 2019, and as a social media influencer, he realized the gravity of power put into his hands with 20 million people watching him. Once MrBeast realized this, he knew he had to do something big in celebration of his 20 million follower achievement. Not knowing what to do, he turned to his followers on social media to help him come up with some good ideas. While scrolling through his feed, he saw a fan's comment on *Reddit* stating, "You should plant a tree for every subscriber you have." As MrBeast read this comment, he realized how relative, helpful, and great of an idea it actually was. He knew that in doing this, it would not only bring global attention to the movement at hand because of the current global

warming crisis, but also would help him get his YouTube name out there in order to expand his YouTube channel.

Once MrBeast made his final decision to plant a tree for every subscriber, he ran with the concept, partnering with fellow YouTube influencer Mark Rober. The duo then reached out to the Arbor Day Foundation, a global nonprofit group dedicated to planting trees, to see if the plan was feasible. In asking why Mark Rober and MrBeast picked The Arbor Day Foundation, out of any other tree planting NGO out there, they stated, “We quickly realized that to plant trees in a sustainable and environmentally friendly way we would need to partner with the professionals. After speaking with a number of people in the environmental space, the Arbor Day Foundation stood out as being the best. They are one of the largest and longest-running tree planting NGOs, with 47 years of experience, and they have the same Charity Navigator rating as the American Red Cross.” (teamtrees.org) “The Arbor Day Foundation was founded in 1972 and is the largest nonprofit membership organization dedicated to planting trees. Their vision is to help people understand how we can use planting trees as a solution to many of the global issues we face today, including air quality, water quality, a changing climate, deforestation, poverty, and hunger. They work to restore forests, improve tree cover in communities, and inspire the next generation of tree planters to ensure this important work endures.” (arborday.org)

With confirmation that plan was even possible, the next step was needing to create a seven-minute-long video promoting the movement so that he could encourage his friends and followers to come help, so he reached out to a PR agency Zeno Group. The Zeno Group was founded in 1998 by Daniel J. Edelman, and is a global, integrated communications agency.

For the next five months, MrBeast, Rober and the Arbor Day Foundation worked together to prepare for an October 25 campaign launch. This included developing a planting plan, preparing video assets, which featured footage from tree planting events and building an easy-to-use donation website that could handle the anticipated traffic. MrBeast wanted to promote his movement in the best way that he possibly could, this is why he decided to post a video on his social media account rather than creating an emailing chain or buying advertisement space on a roadside billboard. Most, if not all, of MrBeast followers view his content on social media, therefore, MrBeast wanted to promote his movement where his followers react to him the most. In posting his campaign video on social media, it encourages more people to participate and donate because it is free, easy to share, as well as the convenience of being able to donate right from the platform itself.

One of the most important elements was "making sure we were ready to fulfill the tree planting," said Dan Lambe, President of the Arbor Day Foundation. The nonprofit partnered with organizations in the U.S. and internationally; it plans to plant trees on every continent excluding Antarctica. "There was a cascade of other YouTubers creating messages for their followers and encouraging them to be part of the initiative," Lambe said. "It truly became a viral campaign. People started posting, challenging friends to be a part of it."

As the donations flooded in, the campaign began to generate interest from the media, particularly as high-profile influencers started donating as well. Tesla CEO, Elon Musk, donated \$1 million, along with briefly changing his Twitter handle to "Treelon." In addition to Elon Musk, Shopify's CEO, Tobias Lutke, donated \$1 million, the Salesforce CEO, Marc Benioff, donated \$900,000, YouTube CEO, Susan Wojcicki, donated \$200,000, as well as some of

YouTube's biggest names, including PewDiePie, donating \$69,420 and Jeffree Star donating \$50,000. The campaign has raised more than \$17.87 million from more than 500,000 individual backers, influencers, and companies. #TeamTrees broke multiple records, it experienced the fastest ever climb to \$5 million in individual online donations to an environmental cause, and is responsible for the largest four-day total of individual donations in Arbor Day Foundation history which is \$6.3 million. MrBeast's initial video announcing the campaign received more than 36 million views, and a clip from the video made it into YouTube's annual *Rewind* compilation, which has been viewed more than 55 million times.

The strategy that MrBeast and Mark Rober used in completing this celebrational goal by outsourcing to local NGO's and using social media to their advantage was very successful. MrBeast and Rober were able to bring awareness to a topic that might not have otherwise garnered as much attention. Multiple famous names and big company CEO's got involved with this project which ultimately trickled down to their followers and employees as well making an even greater impact on the overall mission.

With the current global warming crisis, MrBeast's outreach topic was relevant on how we can all be making an impact on today's world, one step at a time. Trees are like the lungs of the planet; they play a major role in cleaning the carbon dioxide from the air, while also producing oxygen into the atmosphere which helps fight off climate change. Therefore, the goal of planting 20 million trees would play a massive role in fighting climate change because the trees that will be planted will help everyone live longer and healthier lives by taking out more and more carbon dioxide from our oxygen, while also replenishing us with more. It is amazing to see the power that only one social media influencer was able to make, and for a good, relative cause. A

movement like this would've never happened if MrBeast did not simply make a short video telling his fans about his celebrational goal for hitting 20 million subscribers on YouTube. In doing so, MrBeast, as well as people from the local community, The Arbor Day Foundation team, and any willing fans, were able to participate in this large group mission with a diverse group of people who were able to connect and complete one goal together.

The success of this Youtubers reach can be defined through The Symbolic Convergence Theory. This theory focuses on two aspects of communication that helps with the creation of group identity and the ways group identity influences norms or behavior. "According to the theory, a fantasy theme is developed through group interaction and introduces group consciousness." (Dainton/Zelly, Pg.148) This theory was created by Ernest Bormann an "American communication theorist best known as the originator of symbolic convergence theory (SCT) and its attendant method, fantasy theme analysis, which both explore how the sharing of narratives or "fantasies" can create and sustain group consciousness. Bormann applied symbolic convergence theory and fantasy theme analysis to a variety of topics and issues, such as inaugurals, campaigns, and even political cartoons. In addition, he published several books addressing a range of topics, from interpersonal and small group communication to speech communication." (Encyclopedia Britannica) According to the theory a fantasy theme is developed through group interaction and introduces group consciousness. It helps explain the process by which groups transforms from a collection of individuals to a group with a unique identity or consciousness. The power of group synergy is created. This is when groups are more effective than the best individual in them. The whole is greater than the parts.

The campaign, and overall mission, was a huge success due to the proper use of The Symbolic Convergence Theory by MrBeast and Rober. This is a perfect example on how social media influences the power to create a group and impact a group identity to support a movement. This situation showed what the power of one voice can do and how it only takes one person to influence and attract others that agree with you, the bandwagon effect. Often individuals may be afraid to stand up for what they believe in or share their honest thoughts without the acceptance of others. By highlighting someone who is reputable in the community, it brings a sense of confidence for others to also come forward and join with their voice to make a difference as well.

Mass media has the power to persuade people. This YouTube movement spanned a farther distance with individuals who might not have otherwise been interested in the topic. The power of the group and MrBeast's followers was a clear demonstration of a collective group coming together to support a group consciousness surrounding this issue. Another similar example on how The Symbolic Convergence Theory influences a social movement is when the ice bucket challenge went viral. In this case, professional golfer Greg Norman nominated news anchor Matt Lauer on July 2014 to take part in the challenge. The purpose of this challenge was to raise money for A.L.S. research by dumping a bucket full of ice water onto your head, then nominating family or friends to donate and partake in the challenge as well. The trend went viral and ended up raising over \$115 million for the A.L.S. Association, millions of regular people, social media influencers, and even celebrities participated in the challenge making it as much of a success as it was. These cases are both similar because they show how social convergence influences movement within a group. Both cases started with one influencer posting a video of them doing something while nominating other influencers to do so as well, this causes both of

the influencers followers to be able to see the posts and become influenced to do the same thing or get involved themselves.

Social media has a large influence on the perception of an organization and the issues it aims to highlight. Social media brought a spotlight to the needs and issues of this organization where it might not have received the attention otherwise. This situation is a primary example on how much of an impact media can have on the general public. The general public, in today's global crisis, would not have willingly gone outside and planted trees all day, for multiple days in a row, without the push of motivation from some type of influencer or group. There are some issues to consider with cross cultural communications in a message like this. The environment is a topic that has been top of mind for many for years. Different cultures though, may view the importance or utilization of its resources differently where it would make this campaign difficult to make an impact.

One thing that could have been improved throughout the campaign is the encouragement for more involvement within the community as well as the fans who did show up to help. In reading this case study, I kept on questioning if the reach could have gone any further than it did, I feel like if he would have encouraged each of his followers, that were going to show up, to then share and encourage their friends and family to either go help or donate toward the cause. Another action that could have improved the amount of support and donations throughout the campaign is if he would have encouraged a group like a church, school, or a local organization or business to encourage their members to either donate or use planting trees as a means of service hours. Doing this would have given MrBeast the potential to encourage even more people to



come out and increase support, as well as, donations to create even more of an impact on the world than they already achieved.

Being inspired by his 20 million followers helped create an impact that was far bigger than social media influencer MrBeast could have imagined. The power of a 7- minute - long YouTube video and millions of followers along with celebrities and other influencers propelled the Arbor Day Foundation awareness out of the water. In doing so, 20 million trees were planted from the support of 41 million views. The global warming crisis was brought to light for many of MrBeast's followers who would have not otherwise had interest had he not shared it in this light. The power of the Social Convergence Theory came to life. One thing that we can confidently take away from this case study is knowing that it only takes one voice to start a life changing movement in the world. Too many people are afraid to speak their mind. This case study shows that if you are not afraid to stand up for what you believe in, people that agree and like what you are saying will be attracted to what your message; do not be afraid to make your voice heard. Moments can move mountains and it is up to you if you are going to take advantage of that moment or let it slip away.

Citations (APA):

- Entis, L. (2019, December 20). YouTubers MrBeast and Mark Rober raise millions to plant trees. Retrieved March 13, 2020, from <https://www.prweek.com/article/1668677/youtubers-mrbeast-mark-rober-raise-millions-plant-trees>
- Dickerson, A. R. (2019, December 18). Ernest G. Bormann. Retrieved March 21, 2020, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ernest-G-Bormann>
- Donaldson, J. (2019, May 1). Help Us Plant 20 Million Trees - Join #TeamTrees. Retrieved March 21, 2020, from <https://teamtrees.org/>
- Leskey, J. (2018, February 12). Now is the time. The time for trees. Retrieved March 19, 2020, from <https://www.arborday.org/>
- Text Book: (Dainton/Zelly, ch.8, Pg.148)