Behind the Tube: Exploitative Monetization of Content on YouTube

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Background

MrBeast Ranks as Highest-Paid YouTube Star Ever, Earning an Estimated $54 Million in 2021

Source: variety.com

Ryan Kaji, 9, earns $29.5m as this year's highest-paid YouTuber

Source: theguardian.com
Background

Viewer

Content Creator

Multi-Channel Network
Background

Viewer

Content Creator

Multi-Channel Network

1. YouTube
   - 1K subs
   - 4K hrs

2. YouTube Premium

3. Google AdSense

[Diagram of the relationships between Viewer, Content Creator, and Multi-Channel Network through YouTube and Google AdSense]
Comparison to Prior Work

Focus on **internal** components

- YouTube as a *system*
- YouTube as a *discussion medium*

Little to **no exploration of monetization**
Comparison to Prior Work

Focus on internal components

- YouTube as a system
- YouTube as a discussion medium

Little to no exploration of monetization

We focus on external items out of YouTube's control that affect monetization

- E.g., user actions, third-party software/services, user-group relationships
- Expose illicit exploits and their harm
- Provide suggestions for exploit mitigation
Methodology & Data

Keyword-based Crawler

1

Identified Boards and Forums

2

Codebook Analysis

3

Illicit Exploit Discovery

4

11 public forums
- 3 Reddit boards
- 8 social media forums

hosting 1.6 million members

from 7 unique regions
## Discovered Exploits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploit</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Illicit Commerce of YouTube Accounts</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artificial Channel Engagement</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-Content Deception</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Content Theft</td>
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<td>Withholding Affiliate Payment</td>
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<td>MCN Content Theft</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discovered Exploits</td>
<td>Party(ies) Harmed</td>
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1. Viewer
2. Content Creator
Exploit 1: Illicit Commerce of YouTube Accounts

**Purchasing** YouTube accounts for **immediate monetization**

"Channel for sale... monetization criteria [is] already more than enough for monetization"
Exploit 2: Artificial Channel Engagement

Generating **fake engagement** to simulate **popularity** and interaction

"[I bought] views. After [3 months, my] channel started having organic views"
Exploit 3: Withholding Affiliate Payment

MCN refusal to pay affiliated creators their share of revenue

"I haven’t been paid [although] I earned more than [MCN's] claimed requirement"
Evasion via MCNs

Establishing a relationship with an **MCN** to **evade restrictions** and **fees**

**Tax Evasion**

"Popular MCN payment methods such as PayPal and Skrill [draw less attention] in filing taxes and audits"

**Prior Ban**

"[After being demonetized], I partnered with [MCN] so I could get at least some money"

**Sanction Circumvention**

Iranian MCN advertises: “…cash out YouTube channel revenue … with the lowest possible fees"
Conclusions

- Observe online communities to understand YouTube monetization exploits
- Leverage 11 public forums as source of threat intelligence
- Discover 6 monetization exploits perpetrated by both creators and MCNs
- Present techniques to mitigate exploit harm to viewers and creators
Thank You!

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