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VIRAL – ANALYZING THOSE THAT CREATE AND CONSUME CONTENT ON
YOUTUBE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

by

Devin King

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Masters of Science in Digital Content Strategies
at
Lindenwood University

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THESIS REPORT

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Arts, Media, and Communications Department
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science
at
Lindenwood University

By

Devin James King

Saint Charles, Missouri

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Title of Thesis: VIRAL – ANALYZING THOSE THAT CREATE AND CONSUME
CONTENT ON YOUTUBE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Devin King, Master of Science 2020

Thesis Directed by: Andrew Smith, Associate Professor, Communications

(example:) Analyzing content that has become viral through intent or by accident shows the cultural norms of society, personal interests of individuals to better themselves, and how platform algorithms in the form of search engine optimization are being used. Viral content commonly uses popular modern trends or can start them but creating outline content can yield the best results. Through creating viral content, this may lead to a platform where information can spread, revenue can be generated from, and ideas can influence new audiences, which can be useful for any corporation or individual.

Dedication and Acknowledgements

I want to thank Andrew Smith for teaching me everything I know about media literacy. While you have been an extraordinary professor inside the classroom, I would have never been able to attempt a graduate degree or create this project without your mentoring outside the classroom. You have no idea how vital our conversations were after the class, both as your student and friend.

Peter Carlos and Brandon McKinney were excellent thesis committee members. I cannot say how proud I am to have had both of these video production masters' advice to help with my project.

Lastly, I would like to thank every interview subject. Even the interviewees who did not make it into the final presentation gave valuable information that still helped in the documentary's eventual formation. Every single interviewee was a joyful conversation that helped piece this project together.

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Figure 1. *Viral*, 2020, 1080p, Documentary24

Introduction

Viral is an analysis of popular online content that has attracted large audiences in recent times. It does not present a tutorial on how to create viral content. Still, it showcases the indicators of what viral content says about the audience that consumes the content, the creators of the content, and the society that both parties are from. *Viral* ultimately looks at why viral content becomes popular and showcases these findings through the visual representation of videos and motion graphics. This visual presentation itself leads to entertaining moments, informative facts, and allowing the interviewees to showcase their authenticity more so by negating the need for a narration that could break immersion. Thus, the visual presentation is used as an example of the reasons that the interviewees give for how content becomes viral.

State of the Field

This documentary uses different covers different aspects of the digital content strategy industry and to see if the content echoes any of the personal qualities of the creator or audience. Many people who work on digital advertising, social media marketing, or entertaining industries understand content creation (Hwang 435). Currently, many social media marketers are incorporating commonly used techniques that take advantage of content creation techniques to make social media content or advertisement more compelling to the average user. This makes it so that when social media content is found online, it can create the entertainment value and parasocial norms that many people may relate to and understand. This use of social media or digital marketing is effective in connecting with audiences reliably. When exposed to digital ads that feature similar techniques that content creators use, users will be more likely to partake in what is being advertised. With this in mind, the production value showcase in this documentary and the techniques and methods that the users and content creators discussed in the documentary can be used to understand potent digital marketing techniques. As digital marketing grows as an industry, following these techniques will be essential to reach higher sales numbers and understand the modern audiences that corporations are attempting to achieve (Knossenburg 450).

When working in the digital content industry, practicing methods of attracting different audiences and demographics are sought-after skills. Each content creator in the documentary showcases their techniques of how they have found an audience. Some saw a trend and partook in it to become famous and find an audience that enjoys their personality. In contrast, others have created specific content that users enjoy due to the parasocial relationships that the content creators have done overtime (Liu 90). Another technique content creators use to find follows is search engine optimization, which companies commonly use to advertise (Aspara 944). A similar

practice that solely focuses on social media is practiced by companies in the form of social media optimization (Nikolinakou 717). This method relies on users finding specific social media posts on services and products. Search engine optimization and social media optimization are the practice of distinct wording phrases or embedding media and links on web pages so that users can easily find the webpages when searching for specific topics online. It is common for content creators and companies to advertise their content through these different methods, such as using keywords in a title or using specific images or videos. After users have come across advertisements that were made using SEO techniques, authenticity can will be a major factor in able to sell the user on the advertiser's idea.

The final part of the documentary asks whether digital content says anything about society, content creators, or content followers. Each interviewee has their answer on this question and explains their logic to their reasoning. The consensus that many of the interviewees concluded is that the personality or culture of the individual of any given piece of content that is consumed, however, there's always a message to be made within digital content created by the creator. The interviewees also agreed that producing or drinking copious amounts of content over a long period can give glimpses into what the content creators or followers admirer. For instance, the creators that specialize in educating their audiences suggested that the creator and their audience enjoy better informing themselves. The popularity of content can suggest that an audience is interested in the specific niche that the creator is filling. Ultimately, audience members should be aware of the messages put in place within the content they consume, especially the content they consume regularly. This isn't just for potentially supporting an idea that the user does not fully believe in themselves, but by understanding the message of the content being consumed, a better understanding of the subject matter can occur. Companies should understand this as well, as

understanding large audiences online can help understand what users are looking for and help companies understand the consumers they hope to have a connection with. Ultimately, understanding what consumers enjoy in digital content can help understand how to advertise and market more effectively.

Methodology

Cultural studies is the methodology that I am looking at my thesis topic through, as viral content can create a cultural phenomenon or reflect cultural norms. This allows the viewer to understand what people are interested in and why they are interested in it through the visuals represented. In addition to the showcase of specific examples of culture memetics mentioned in the documentary, it explicitly highlights the cultural memetics indicated by an interview subject. By showing the content made by the creators featured in the documentary, the cultural aspects of which the society the content creator comes from can be seen.

Production

My thesis project is a video presentation in the form of a 25-minute documentary. This helps illustrate the themes of online viral content, which is popular online content in the form of videos, photos, and text posts. This can involve commentary on a subject matter, informing an audience, or original stories purely for entertainment. A video format works best for this project because it can showcase online content, in the form of video, photos, or text, all within the documentary itself. This way of presenting my thesis gives more of a clear, concrete understanding of the examples. It provides a purer form of knowledge of why people are attracted to the viral content because actual samples can be shown in their entirety in a video format. A video format, graphics, interview footage, and stock footage directly show what is being discussed in the documentary. While a research paper can discuss the aspects of viral content and cite sources within the text, a documentary can show the actual references that are brought up within the information and even illustrate examples through graphics.

Digital content strategies deal with entertainment and video work. Many people who work within the digital content industry understand video production, social media trends, and professional presentations involving graphics. All of these aspects are found in the documentary. With every social media platform allowing video content in some form, digital marketers and content creators are encouraged to use video production skills to enhance their online message. This documentary uses these different concepts of content creation as a way to showcase and illustrate why large audiences enjoy viral content, as well as highlight how these techniques can make viral content entertaining for multiple demographics (De Veirman 2685). While all of this information can be cited in a different format, a documentary allows for this to be experienced first-hand by the viewer.

The documentary format also allows for the interview subject to be directly shown. Instead of simple words on a page, viewers get to make a personal connection with the interviewee and get a better understanding of who they are and why they would want to create content or consume content. This also allows a better understanding of the subject material that each interviewing is discussing, as mentioned earlier, the graphics and stock footage can illustrate what is being said, for a more dynamic understanding of the subject material. Music and graphics also enhance the final product, as they can add to the illustrations the interviews and stock footage that accompanies the information. These assets and practices of video production can create an atmospheric mood or emotional reaction within the viewer, which may help the viewer relate to what is being said. These enhancements could not be added through any other thesis format, as a video documentary format allows for more ways for information to be explained and expanded upon.

Adding to the originality of a documentary format, the narration is done through the interviews. Instead of having an overarching voice that narrates and explains the information directly to the viewer and tells them exactly what to feel, the only words spoken are by the interviewees and carry the documentary's message in a purer form. This allows for a continuous flow of information to the viewer without being interrupted. This form of narrating also allow those being interviewed to display their personality or knowledge better, and give the video a tighter focus on pacing so viewers can understand who is speaking at which given moment. Through this method, the interviewees were able to necessarily continue each other sentences so that the documentary could have cohesive pacing (Erickson 5). This was made possible due to the interviewees being asked the same question during the interview process. This kept the

subjects on-topic and supported the chapter format of the documentary were each subject has its section.

The narrations allow the viewer to create their conclusion of this information through the facts presented by experts on the subject. An overview narration performed by a single person can give specific details on the subject matter, but having the interviewees directly speak to the audience helps the viewer understand the subject into your better (Verhoeven 10). Visual cues are given to the viewer what the subjects are being discussed through motion graphics. The motion graphics help the documentary feel more professional and entertaining.

It is important to keep the documentary's immersion through interview narration because each distinct voice helps with the originality and helps the viewer understand the subject material better. When content creators and journalists may be discussing how to use content in the day-to-day lives, their perspective is more enact, adding to their involvement in content creation and can give viewers who have never created content before a better understanding of the process. It also breaks away from my personality from the video for a more informative final product. As Fredrik Knudsen says in the documentary, the content creator needs to break away from your creation in order to create a more compelling message to the audience.

If there were a voice-over narration to the documentary, it would have possibly been more biased. By essentially have the sources give the information given to the viewer, there are no jumps in logic or conclusions that are made besides the sources of information and the viewer. This undisturbed form of presenting information is valuable for an academic setting, as digital content behaviors can change within industries over the years. This direct form of information can still be useful for decades to come. When these individual aspects of viral content are

repeated in the documentary, they can be used to compare the future aspects of the digital content industry and how it changed over time. This useful function of the literature is made better through the video format. The specific examples are fully featured, and the videos, images, and other text that are presented can be fully compared to their future counterparts.

The production value presented in the documentary adds it to the originality. It gives the video its tone, setting, and presentation that currently, no other video has. The graphics, stock footage, and music were all developed to enhance the entertainment aspect of the documentary. Many specific graphics and video footage were specifically captured for the thesis project. All of the graphics were individually animated in Adobe After Effects, and stock footage, and the music was color corrected and cut respectively to fit each chapter. The documentary's examples also show the different ways each content creator uses production value in their content. While some creators, like Dave Hanson, have high-end visuals, others like Katie Legate, only use as much production value as necessary to get their content out quickly. Since many of the content creators discussed the importance of production value, it should be practiced within the documentary to reflect on what is said.

Graphics allow for information to be explained and examined in unique ways. It's primary purpose is to directly point out a specific part of what the interview subjects are saying so that the viewer will be more likely to remember and understand the more critical pieces of information. While the interview subject is speaking directly to the camera, there are nametags and screens of information that give the viewer definitions of the terms being discussed. For instance, at the beginning of the documentary, Gabby says that she enjoys authentic content creators. Since this is such an essential aspect of the documentary and is supported in other

interviews, the decision was made that this quote is needed to be highlighted to bring it to the attention of the viewer.

Music helps carry the tone that each interviewee during their time explaining their place in the digital content industry. Each piece of music was specifically chosen and cut to fit the length of each video. At certain moments of the documentary, the music pauses for dramatic effect. Still, to also highlight specific information, as when this happens, more attention is brought to what is happening on screen. This helps create a clear picture of what is being discussed in the documentary and allows the viewer to understand it better.

Stock footage breaks up the interviews in the documentary and helps illustrate the information in a digestible manner. It makes what is happening in the documentary more visually appealing, as having only interviews would possibly be distracting. It also gives the editing process a chance to hide cuts made in the interview, such as “umms” or verbal pauses in between sentences. In addition to the stock footage, direct examples of the content creators’ work are displayed to break up the visual repeat using stock footage and interview footage.

Each interviewee brings something significant to the techniques of creating content and what content says about them. To create the most vivid picture possible of the current digital environment, people were chosen from different demographics and backgrounds. The students and journalists gave specific insight into the everyday lives of average Americans in 2020 by explaining the content creators day enjoy and the different aspects of content they enjoy. The content creators and other digital content experts explain their content, why they create digital content, and how they content to an audience.

Students Cara Smith and Gabbie Dumas and news anchor Savannah Louie explain the content creators they are typically interested in and what aspects of their lives have attracted specific content (Keh 181). Each of these content consumers takes part in entertaining themselves with digital content for many hours of the week, and explain how they find content when there is a large selection of seemingly endless content found online. Despite the three content consumers being different in age, the similar qualities that they all enjoy in content speak volumes of what many different demographics look for in entertainment. These three interviews show that they enjoy compelling, authentic, and relatable content that can be purling entertaining or educating them on a different subject. These are all aspects that other consumers may look for in content, despite other demographics interested in the various subject material (Peters 162).

Social media discovery manager Jeanie Smith, media literacy instructor Julie Smith, and news anchor Morgan Young are experts in the field of digital content. While each individual has created digital content on their personal social media pages, they also analyze what is being posted online on different platforms as part of their occupations. Each of these experts has different experience levels with different popular platforms. Every platform is different and can invite different types of content and audiences, so having experts who have used multiple platforms is essential for painting an accurate picture of current digital content practices. Each digital content expert reflects on how audiences can create communities or interact with content creators to conjugate something unique.

Youtubers David Hanson, Fredrik Knudsen, Katie Legate, Mark Watson, and TikToker and Instagram influencer Sasha Sanders, are all content creators with large audiences. Combine, all of the content creators have over 2 million followers and have over three decades of content creation experience. Each content creator explains that they do not necessarily grow their

audience member numbers as much so as they focus on creating content that they enjoy making and enjoy consuming. Each content creator also enjoys informing an audience by creating content that can educate viewers on a myriad of different subjects. These content creators are in a unique position because there are no significant influences on their content from regulations or advertisers. Other forms of entertainment, such as TV shows and films, have multiple goals that can be reached in addition to entertaining and informing an audience. Advertisers and corporate stakeholders approve these older forms of entertainment much and are long enough to meet their timeslot's runtime. In contrast, YouTube videos and Instagram posts can be direct, informative, enjoyable, and be the length of any time the content creator chooses to be.

The importance of authenticity found in digital content is brought up multiple times throughout the documentary by creators and consumers. Content creators who present themselves as authentic in their content over a long period can create a parasocial relationship with their audience. Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships, where one person extends emotional energy, interest, and time, and the other party, the persona, is completely unaware of the other's existence (Beauchamp 341). Mostly, when audience members consume content over long periods, they can receive similar feelings that they would have as spending time with a friend. Always creating authentic content over some time can increase these parasocial relationships to the point where viewers will understand inside jokes made by the creator that is only found in the creator's content, audience members can interact with the content creator on social platforms for years to come, and a robust parasocial relation may leave the viewer holding the creator in high regard to the point where they look for the creator's opinion on real-world events as a way to understand the events better (D'Avanzo 322). In

contrast to this practice, content creators can lose a large portion of their audience if it is found that they have not been truthful in their content (Berryman 85).

Making authentic content makes it easier for the content creator to produce weekly content consistently. When a content creator has been creating content for years, authenticity typically shines through, especially for those content creators who have grown with a broad audience. When content creators adapt to different platforms and adjust to their preferences, being consistently authentic is the most significant factor when developing an online audience (Literat 1989). Like any other activity that requires time, creating consistent content for years can be tiresome and difficult after many ideas have been used (Gardner 1155). However, as Watson speaks of in the documentary, creating content that the creator enjoys themselves can make the process more engaging, enjoyable, and easier to produce.

Most people consume social media content every day (Hu 762). This exposure of different personalities, advertisements, and a wide variety of information they come across makes the presentation of authenticity a desirable trait. With much of the information commonly found online being exposed as false, and seeing truthful information can be attractive to a consumer looking to inform themselves. Many people are aware of fake news, scams, and misleading information that are commonly found online (Jones 1389). Conspiracy theories have become a famous sight online due to the lack of authenticity some users find. With this said, authentic content typically presents itself as more engaging and enjoyable, regardless of whether it is truthful. Making genuine content means that what is presented and the personality of the creator, appear to be believably honest.

The content creators elaborate on creating content on popular platforms where users have many other choices to find a creator that meets their preferred standards. Social media platforms allow users to find content that appeals to them, typically through a search engine. The freedom of choice between different content creators also means that audiences can find content they usually would not consume otherwise. In addition to this, the freedom of creating content online also allows for niche entertainment creations to be published that would not typically be approved by a corporation, FCC regulations, or other standards that broadcast entertainment must meet (Soni 339).

Making sure that their content is informative and entertaining has been a number one priority for Hanson and Knudsen. Informing an audience is a way to engage with them, as it is a direct form of communication that may influence the audience's lives if they choose to use the knowledge presented. By presenting information on any given topic, the viewer may learn something themselves. By offering information on the subject the audience is already familiar with, the audience gets to enjoy the content creator's opinion on the content's topic. After significant events in an industry or field of interest occur, followers of specific content creators will see how content creators react to these events to form a better opinion. This is because the audience values the content creator's opinion due to the parasocial relationship. The creator may also shed light on more details that the audience is not aware of.

Consistency in communicating with an audience is an essential aspect of creating viral content, respectively. Online content allows for flexibility that few other forms of media can deliver. Many of these content creators are producing long types of content multiple times a week. This is more content regularly than what most other forms of entertainment tend to have,

and the added engagement the content creators typically have in their content makes it so that followers can influence or have some part in the content they continuously consume.

The ability to grow with time and adapt to multiple situations is also a desired trait that content creators highlighted within the documentary. Platforms change just as much as the people that use them. Each one of the content creators that was interviewed in the documentary has become popular due to the platform's algorithm that suggested their content to a potential follower (Deveau 328). Platform algorithms are search engine recommendations based on a user's behaviors. Platforms will look at a user's history in terms of content consumption, what fields of interest they are active in, and suggest content that the users will be likely interested in. (Sophie 11) Algorithms can determine what trends, creators, or content becomes popular (Rieder 54). Many content creators take part in trends, which allow them to be found by audience members that typically would not consume their content since the trend can make the platform's algorithm suggest the creators content to many users (Chae 2231).

Conclusions

Each interviewee brought their perspective on the importance of content creation and the current digital marketing environment. The students explained what they appreciated about content creation and how they consume content; the digital content experts explained how they use digital content to understand the audiences they work with. The content creators explained their thought-process when creating digital content. Most people use platforms and consume content. Therefore there is information that almost everyone can take away from this documentary. The information in this documentary can be useful for those interested in making content themselves, working for a corporation, or just looking for entertainment. A primary goal that the documentary focuses on is making the viewer understand that there are almost endless amounts of digital content niches that can be found online. Each piece of content has its own focus and goal-directed at who is watching the content. By understanding this, the viewer can reflect on the content they consume themselves.

The filming of the documentary took time to plan out, set up the interviews, and manage the equipment involved. The goal for filming was to create a professional setup that could make the documentary pass as high-quality entertainment, such as the documentaries that can be found on streaming platforms. Lighting, camera equipment, and audio set up were all where all parts of the production process that had to be managed while interviewing the subject. The equipment needed to be operated correctly, but keeping the interviewee's interest took focus and dedication to execute well. Unfortunately, COVID-19 occurred in the middle of the production cycle of the thesis project, and therefore many of the interview subjects had to be filmed through Zoom captured videos. This did drop the quality of the interviews themselves, as the information from the interviews was still informative and compelling, which is essential when creating a piece of

content that is meant to educate an audience. Stock footage is used more often than it typically would, as COVID-19 has made it more challenging to capture original stock footage. While these limitations may have undermined the final project, they ultimately make it an excellent work as the documentary showcases what content creation during this historical.

Another message within the documentary is that content creation requires both an audience and creator to exist. There is a relationship between the two that does not exist in any other form of media. Within content creation, parasocial relations form, content can be consumed through different media types, and followers can interact with creators on social media. Content can be whatever the creator chooses it to be, and anyone can create content if they so want. Despite millions of content creators online, there are niches that anyone can fill to gain an audience. Content creators do need to understand trends, parasocial relationships, and search engine optimization techniques to fully reach a broad audience.

The main piece of information that I learned by creating this documentary is how much people appreciate authenticity. Content is commonly viewed as entertainment for entertainment purposes; however, being authentic can make content into something that no other form of media can recreate. Every content creator that was interviewed for the documentary added that they would not be able to create viral content to meet their broad audience had they not used their authentic personality. This practice made them easier to create content and give them the inspiration to grow along with time. Viral content is defined by being media that large audiences enjoy; however, I hope to show that viral content is content that displaces relatable traits to an audience with these traits. If it were not for the fact that the content is relatable to a large number of different individuals, content would not become what more consider to be viral.

Illustrations



<https://youtu.be/Fp8TamXMs2E>

Figure 1. *Viral*, 2020, 1080p, Documentary

Literature Review

For a documentary on social media, there is a need to have relevant sources that can help explain what the subjects are explaining. From children teaching their enjoyment of family bloggers, to how journalists follow stories on social media, to how YouTubers explain how they create thumbnails for social media views, there are many opportunities for disclosing the information the interviewees are giving. In addition to the interviews, there will be graphics of information provided that will require sources to understand their context. Lastly, there should be carefully put forth in how the documentary flows and what information is brought forward. There needs to be a purpose for the information and understanding the context that content creators, consumers, and experts are giving is relevant to the current field of digital content strategies and social media.

Currently, viral content is through to be made mostly accidental. Sources that were interviewed explained that their actions that content creators can do that could attract viewers to their content; however, the act of making content “go viral” is essentially not something that can be replicated on purpose. Currently, some trends attract different demographics, such as family lifestyle blogs, reaction videos, and informational video essays that people enjoy. Still, the demographic that watches each of these types of content is widely different (Berryman 86). Honesty is a reoccurring factory that is reported in the documentary’s interviewers, citing that unauthentic social media content is easily disguised by audiences and found to be unenjoyable.

The collective opinion that is shared among the interviews helps explain how social media platforms used algorithms to help content find larger audiences effectively (86). There are also a series of smaller children and a mother of children that explain their experience with how children are attracted to and fuel the popularity of viral content (De Veirman 2685).

Through the examples of videos and social media content, as well as the popular references that they feature, cultural studies are my preferred reach methodology for my documentary, as viral content does show aspects of culture that society finds essential and how a collective culture is created online. Many TikToks use popular music clips, movie references, and scenes from television shows, as this platform has embraced the popular cultural aspects that the users find enjoyable. These cultural references can also show the demographic of the users on the platform, which might be useful to the advertisers that are looking to connect with an audience (Knossenburg 449). Lastly, other social media platforms also have content that builds upon already popular content, showing how companies and now interact with their viewers in a new way. Social media platforms have also shaped the ways that users view and discover viral content, which can change the way trends are made and influences what types of topics are discussed and brought up in the non-digital world.

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