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Storytelling in TikTok: A Path to Engagement

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Abstract

This research examines the impact of TikTok content types (humour, music, employee, storytelling, animations, information, slideshow, sketch, sound, promotion, product, photo, reviews) on TikTok's engagement rate, performance and followers. The study was conducted within the frame of a project, by third-year students in the E-commerce course at Athens University of Economics and Business. In the context of digital marketing, multiple teams tested different content types on TikTok content. The data collection included 202 posts of 17 different accounts, 546.498 views and 39.172 reactions. The experiment extended over four months, and the findings were utilized to investigate the efficiency of these characteristics. Through statistical analysis, this research examines the performance metrics, engagement levels, and overall impact of the explored content applied by each team. A One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was utilized to examine the variations across these categories in relation to each metric of engagement. Whenever significant disparities were found, the Bonferroni post-hoc test was then applied to pinpoint the specific differences between pairs of categories. The results contribute to our understanding of the role of content types on TikTok and provide valuable insights for marketers seeking to optimize their content and strategy on this platform.

Keywords: *Storytelling, social media, TikTok, engagement, performance.*

Jel code: M30, M31.

1. Introduction

In the digital era, social media is a ubiquitous and accessible tool, integral to various industries, especially digital marketing. It serves as a vital platform for information exchange, transforming the traditional communication dynamics

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between marketers and customers (Sashi, 2012). TikTok, a rapidly growing social media platform, exemplifies this trend with its significant user base, making it an effective tool for marketers to engage consumers (Anderson, 2020). Its cost-effectiveness and interactive features, such as likes, comments, and shares make it suitable for product or service promotions (Rangaswamy et al., 2020; Yosep et al., 2021). The platform is not just for product promotion but also for building networks and interactive communication.

Creative content on TikTok has been used to market various products, including e-cigarettes (T. Sun et al., 2023). This platform is also effective for athletes and bodybuilders in online branding and endorsements (Jaffar et al., 2019). Despite controversies, TikTok's large user base makes it an ideal digital marketing platform. However, this necessitates enhanced security and specific supervision for safe and compelling content creation and information dissemination. Previous studies on TikTok in marketing have shown its effectiveness in engaging consumers and influencing public opinion on various issues, from tourism to climate change (Li et al., 2017; Y. Sun et al., 2024; van der Bend et al., 2023). However, there is little empirical research on the impact of content characteristics and non-verbal information on social media content (Wahid et al. (2023).

The main objective of this study is to examine the impact of content characteristics and non-verbal information on TikTok content. By analysing the findings, we seek to assess how different types of TikTok content affect the engagement rate and performance indicators on TikTok. By means of this study, we aim to contribute to the existing field of knowledge in digital marketing and social media by providing insights into the utilisation of different TikTok content types, specifically within the TikTok platform.

Nevertheless, beyond evaluating TikTok's effectiveness, it is also crucial to conduct content analysis on TikTok. This is to determine whether the created content has successfully engaged customers. Moreover, content analysis serves as a vital tool for marketers to evaluate and reflect on their promotional strategies on TikTok. With this understanding, the researchers have formulated three research questions:

RQ1: How do content characteristics and non-verbal information affect the views of a TikTok post?

RQ2: How do content characteristics and non-verbal information affect the reactions of a TikTok post?

RQ3: How do content characteristics and non-verbal information affect the engagement rate of a TikTok post?

2. Literature review

We live in a time where narratives and connections unfold within media realms through the creation of imaginative universes shaped by both corporate actions and individual choices. In this context, society is actively involved in evolving storytelling methods on social media platforms. Here, individuals can showcase their voices, identities, and emotions through diverse digital tools including text, images, memes, and music (Kim & Li, 2021). This interactive phenomenon is grounded in the concept of hyper-narrativity, as described by Wagener in 2020, and it revolves around the transformation of collective identities into widely shared memes (Ask & Abidin, 2018). This leads to the creation of discourses and content on platforms like TikTok, where elements like humor, imitation or replication, and a sense of belonging to a group, are predominant factors.

TikTok is a powerful video-focused social media platform, in which users can create videos for up to 10 minutes, utilising the platform's editing tools (Haenlein et al., 2020). The platform is considered highly engaging (Wiley, 2022) due to its content characteristics, the ability to easily skip videos and the content provided by the channel that is interspersed with related content posted by friends (Belanche et al., 2019). In the period following the pandemic, TikTok has emerged as the social network experiencing the most rapid growth. TikTok is more instinctive and authentic than other social media like YouTube and Instagram, representing a specific aesthetic of high-quality and filtered content (Barta et al., 2023). Content on TikTok is more playful and ludic (Y. Wang, 2020), that is, its usage is for amusement and pastime. TikTok creators upload content from their everyday life, showcasing everyday circumstances, such as videos in their home, as well as creating engaging and entertaining content through parodies (Barta et al., 2023). TikTok enables the promotion and display of product activities across a wide spectrum of digital marketing channels efficiently, without incurring significant financial expenditure, as highlighted by Yosep et al. (2021).

TikTok's audience primarily consists of younger users, particularly teenagers and young adults (Haenlein et al., 2020). While Facebook and Twitter's average user age is around 40, and Instagram appeals to those in their 30s, TikTok attracts a younger demographic, primarily around 20 years old, with 40% of its users between 10 and 19 years (Haenlein et al., 2020). This age group shows distinct media consumption patterns, often being resistant to traditional advertising and less engaged with conventional media like television (Xu et al., 2021). Given TikTok's rapid growth, unique format and content style, and direct reach to a younger, influential consumer segment, it presents a significant opportunity for influencer marketing campaigns.

The "Store Intelligence Data Digest" report on recent mobile trends from SensorTower in 2020 identifies TikTok as among the top 10 most downloaded apps globally in the past decade. Available for Android and iOS devices, this app enables users to craft brief videos accompanied by audio clips, songs, or pre-existing video sequences enriched with effects, stickers, filters, augmented reality, and green screen options. Specifically, it's common for users to blend music with lip-syncing in their posts.

Additionally, TikTok is a platform for spreading narratives and opinions, primarily through music and sounds (Abidin, 2021). It is a platform strongly connected to self-expression, creativity, and storytelling (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Storytelling is an accessible and effective means of interaction, facilitating easy and straightforward communications (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2022). As a content tool, storytelling can engage viewers by involving them in the evolving story and encouraging them to connect with their own experiences and personality (Woodside et al., 2008).

Storytelling is an approach to communication that is straightforward, understandable, and effective, as described by Vázquez-Herrero et al. in 2022. The strength of storytelling is critical in propelling a social business project via TikTok, enabling the dissemination of positive and inspiring stories from various archipelago regions, as Weimann & Masri noted in 2023.

Social Media Engagement

Engagement is the most important terminology in the social media world (Grewal et al., 2017). A. Wang (2006) defined engagements as “the contextual relevance in which a brand’s messages are framed and presented based on its surrounding context,” which refers to the usefulness, engagement, and emotional attachment that arises in reaction to information related to a brand. (p. 355). Particularly in the social media world, engagement was defined by Mollen and Wilson (2010) as “the cognitive and affective commitment to an active relationship with the brand as personified by the website or other computer-mediated entities designed to communicate brand value” (p. 5). Previous studies have associated engagement on social media platforms, with consumers 'Follow', 'Like', 'Comment' on or 'Share' content (Kumar et al., 2016; Pentina et al., 2018).

Consumer engagement is related to following and sharing brand posts (Brubaker & Wilson, 2018), and it is a necessary condition to building consumer communities, trust, loyalty (Haverila et al., 2020), purchase, and word-of-mouth for brands (Srivastava et al., 2020). When a brand creates and engages consumers, they show strong relations and emotions for brands, for example, by using personal pronouns to reference them on social media (Chen et al., 2015). Research shows that marketers are striving to incorporate social

media and endeavoring to enhance their social media communication to promote consumer engagement (Chen et al., 2015; Hayes et al., 2020).

The papers suggest that high engagement on social media has positive effects on brand relationships and firm performance. Dessart (2017) found that high social media engagement increases brand relationships, particularly affecting brand trust, commitment, and loyalty. Customer engagement in social media is driven by satisfaction, positive emotions, and trust, and has substantial value for companies, directly impacting firm performance, behavioral intention, and word-of-mouth. From consumer engagement through social media, brands gain brand association and increased brand performance (Fulgoni, 2015; Rapp et al., 2013) influencing purchase decisions and sales (Kumar et al., 2016; Muralidharan & Men, 2015; Pentina et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

This field experiment was conducted in the context of an e-commerce project of third-year students from the Athens University of Economics and Business. The students were divided into 17 teams, and each team was asked to develop a digital marketing plan for a fictitious business, using TikTok as one of the social media platforms. The experiment lasted for four months, during which the teams uploaded a total of 202 posts. The objective of the research was to assess the efficiency of different content characteristics on TikTok. The content characteristics were categorized based on the main constructs outlined by Wahid et al. (2023) and each post could fall under one or more of these categories. In particular, Wahid et al. (2023) position content characteristics into two main categories, the informational content that provides relevant or irrelevant information and emotional content that shares “affect-laden messages that intend to evoke emotional responses”. Moreover, they divide those two categories into specific themes. Based on this categorization we pinpointed the collected data into one or more the proposed variables.

The sampling for this study was predetermined and based on the posts created by the student teams. Data collection involved monitoring the number of views and reactions received by each post. In total, the posts amassed 546,498 views and 39,172 reactions. The sampling for this study was predetermined as it was based on the posts created by the student teams. This study adopted a quantitative approach to examine the influence of content type on viewer engagement, measured via three metrics: views, reactions, and Engagement Rate (E.R.). The independent variable, content type, was categorized into 13 distinct types (humor, music, employee, storytelling, animations, information, slideshow, sketch, sound, promotion, product, photo, reviews). One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to investigate the differences among these categories with respect to each engagement metric. In cases

where a significant difference was observed, a Bonferroni post-hoc test was further employed to identify specific pairwise differences. These statistical techniques allowed for a comprehensive examination of the relationship between content type and viewer engagement, revealing both overarching trends and specific inter-category variations.

4. Results, Discussion and Contributions

In an exploration of the relationship between content type and various user engagement metrics, the study reveals noteworthy findings. A distinct relationship is found between content type and both viewer count and user reactions. A one-way ANOVA exhibited significant variances across 13 content categories in terms of views ($F = 3.58, p < .001$) and reactions ($F = 3.74, p < .001$). Further scrutiny through Bonferroni post-hoc tests indicated that category 13 (storytelling) significantly deviated from each of the other 12 categories in terms of attracting views and provoking reactions (all $p < .05$). This suggests that category 13 might possess unique features that resonate with viewers, triggering increased interest and interaction. In contrast, no significant variation was found among the content categories regarding engagement rate ($F = 0.4, p = .963$). These insights underscore the nuanced role content type plays in different facets of user engagement, with the exceptional performance of category 13 pointing towards a possible area for content strategy optimization. However, the unaltered engagement rate suggests additional variables may need to be considered to fully comprehend and enhance user engagement. This study contributes to the realm by affording factual signs on the importance of storytelling and how this type of content affects user engagement and Tik Tok account behavior, a new and uncharted territory in the social media literature.

5. Implications

This study provides valuable insights for content creators, marketers, and the academic community, offering a deeper understanding of the factors that drive user engagement on TikTok and potentially shaping future content strategies. This research implies that incorporating further storytelling techniques into content can potentially boost user reactions and total views. The provided results contribute to the creation of a more complete TikTok content strategy. Crucially, these results also emphasize the importance of further exploring the relation of content characteristics to user engagement, which could direct future research in this area. Finally, the distinct results of storytelling display a fascinating approach for further study in the domain of TikTok content creation. Nevertheless, the unchanged rate of engagement indicates that there might be other factors that need to be taken into account to fully understand and improve user interaction and engagement. Further research will focus on

analysing the factors and testing them using large-scale business accounts on TikTok and other social media platforms.

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