

A Qualitative Case Study on TikTok: The Silver Lining for Brands During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 has profoundly changed the ways we communicate. In times of isolation and online interaction, brands have shown an increased reliance on social media to communicate with large communities. Although social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook are already being used by brands, TikTok offers unique marketing and advertising advantages. TikTok is designed to inspire and entertain with authentic, creative content that is unique to the platform itself. Previous research regarding the impact of the pandemic has largely focused on behavior for preventative health; however, little attention has been given to the impact of a pandemic on consumer behavior relative to social media. This qualitative study aims to better understand how brands on TikTok, including The Washington Post and Gymshark, have each created and promoted content during the coronavirus pandemic. The study will contribute to the wider understanding of how brands and marketers can successfully build meaningful, measurable campaigns.

I. Introduction

COVID-19 has changed the way that communities, families, brands, and influencers alike communicate and connect with each other. In times of isolation and online interaction, brands have shown increased reliance on social media to communicate with large communities. Although social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are already being used by brands, TikTok displays new unique marketing and advertising advantages. The pandemic has accelerated social media use among U.S. consumers and has also transformed the dynamics of the electronic marketplace by creating social networks of consumers, opinion leaders and field experts. In the literature of consumer behavior during the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, findings indicate that the pandemic is having significant structural impact on consumers' decision-making processes, which, in turn, creates new opportunities for successful campaigns and marketing tactics (Mason et al., 2021).

This qualitative case study aims to better understand how two brands on TikTok have created and promoted communications messages and content during the coronavirus pandemic. This study contributes to the wider understanding of how brands and marketers can successfully use unique platforms such as TikTok to build meaningful, measurable messages.

Keywords: COVID-19, social media, brand storytelling, TikTok
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II. Literature Review

The coronavirus pandemic has brought about a massive shift in the communications field, and there is a clear need for advertisers and agencies to adapt to an environment that has dramatically changed. The Covid-19 pandemic has additionally served as motivation for research and as inspiration for ideas and creation (Mason et al., 2021). This literature review will focus on how social media has contributed to the building and maintenance of brand loyalty, and has allowed for messages to spread, movements to begin, and consumers to build communities of creators.

How the Coronavirus Pandemic Has Shaped Social Media Marketing

Social media is defined as “activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge and opinions using conversational media” (Erdoğan & Çiçek, 2012). Social media campaigning requires special attention and strategy building to achieve brand image and loyalty. Researchers are noticing a shift from “trying to sell” to “making campaigns” and sticking with “small acts” since some small campaigns can easily reach many people and accomplish objectives in a very short period of time (Hensel & Deis, 2010).

Engagement with social media advertising is key in explaining how (and which) campaigns resonate with consumers and inspire them to act further. Voorveld et al. (2018) identified four different categories of social media that determine successful campaigns. The first category is relationship, which represents social media platforms that are profile-based and consists mostly of customized messages (i.e., Facebook & LinkedIn). The second category is self-media, which is also profile-based but offers people the chance to manage their own social media communication channels (i.e., Twitter). The third category is creative outlet, which is content-based and allows users to share their interests and creativity (i.e., YouTube and Instagram). The fourth category is collaboration, which is content based but allows people to ask questions, get advice or find the most interesting news and content of the day (Voorveld et al., 2018). While many of the existing social media platforms are siloed across one or two of the several categories of social media, TikTok encompasses all four categories, and it is crucial to understand how brands on TikTok have used the social media space.

It is also important to analyze trends relevant to communicating in times of crisis. Harris (2020) noted that the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated social media use and has also transformed the dynamics of the electronic marketplace by creating social networks of consumers, opinion leaders and field experts. Although social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are already being used by brands, TikTok displays unique marketing and advertising advantages. Proposing a conceptual framework explaining best practice for marketers to communicate with TikTok users further explains the importance and cruciality of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) communication (Gvili & Levy, 2018).

How Covid-19 Has Prompted Changes in Consumer Behavior

Previous research regarding the impact of the pandemic has largely focused on behavior for preventative health; however, little attention has been given to the impact of the pandemic on consumer behavior relative to social media. Gangadharbatla (2021) found that consumer behavior is contextual, with four contexts that disrupt consumer habits:

1. Changes in social context (i.e., marriage, having children)
2. Changes in technology (i.e., advent of the internet, mobile devices)
3. Changes in rules and regulation
4. Ad-hoc natural disasters (i.e., earthquakes and pandemics)

Gangadharbatla (2021) noted changes in individuals’ media consumption habits and indicated that the pandemic is having significant structural impacts on consumers’ decision-making processes, which, in turn, creates new opportunities for successful campaigns and marketing tactics. Recent examples are accelerated consumer cord-cutting of cable television and increased preference and reliance on social media (Alalwan, 2018).

Brands can do more than promote a product or service via social media, and consumers have noticed this. Alalwan (2018) indicated that a strong majority of consumers believe that marketers can play a positive role during times of crisis. There is likely to be a greater focus on social media campaigns using emotional appeals, as it was proven to be effective during the pandemic thus far. Taylor (2020) referenced a new notion of “homeinfluencers,” being that during lockdowns or increased hours staying at home, social media users might take on an additional importance. Brands must take note of this and cater their campaigns and marketing strategies to the emergence of this new quarantine consumer base. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Boateng & Okoe (2015) found that there is a significant relationship between consumers’ attitude towards social media marketing and their behavioral responses, and these responses may be heightened due to considerable environmental factors.

TikTok and Its Burgeoning Popularity

TikTok is one of the most popular video-sharing applications in the world, downloaded more than 2 billion times globally (Kale, 2020). TikTok originally allowed users to create, promote and react to short-form music video content, but now the social media platform offers so much more. Pandemic isolation created a need for people to entertain themselves and connect with others, increasing the app’s popularity (Johnson, 2020). The content on the platform is fun, relatable, and presented in an easily digestible format, making it perfect for lockdown viewing. The social media platform has a strong identity - TikTok knows its purpose of helping users share and create unique video content that resonates with others.

Very little research has specifically been done on TikTok. Xu et al. (2019) analyzed the development status of TikTok and provided a new model reference for helping the operation and development of the short video industry. The study found that the content of TikTok is very active, with a lot of activities online and offline, targeting young people with imagination and curiosity. Also, media consumption habits are rapidly changing, with consumers often being no longer satisfied with text and static picture.

III. Methods

This research consisted of a qualitative case study of two brands and their use of TikTok during the coronavirus. A case study is a research approach that is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context. It is an established research design that is used for a specific subject, person, group, place, event, organization, or phenomenon of interest, in its natural real-life context (Crowe, 2011). Case studies can be used to explain, describe or explore events or phenomena in the everyday contexts in which they occur - helping to understand and explain causal links to pathways resulting from a new policy initiative or service development over time.

This type of research methodology helps researchers generate new ideas, illustrate theories, and show how different perspectives may be related to one another. Scholars such as Johnson (2020) and Xu et al. (2019) have adopted this method to analyze videos and to design coding procedures. Moreover, this method is often employed when exploring key characteristics, meanings and implications of a specific case to then generate insights and make recommendations for the future (McCombes, 2020). In this study, a qualitative case study approach was used to describe specific examples of exemplary marketing techniques and campaigns used by brands and marketers.

Two brands were selected to analyze as part of the case study: *The Washington Post* and Gymshark. Both brands were recognized by TikTok as being particularly notable. *The Washington Post* was chosen for its success in creating a relatable, humanizing brand identity and for breaking the reserved barrier that newspapers traditionally have (TikTok, 2020), helping the publication stay relevant during the pandemic. Gymshark’s account was studied in this paper because it managed to create a community with heavy reliance on user-generated content from influencers, while staying true to its fitness-forward mission (TikTok, 2020).

A content analysis was completed for the two brands. The content analysis consisted of investigating both visual and textual elements of the TikTok accounts. In the content analysis, the researcher categorized the type of challenge or main idea being communicated and studied the words that were communicated via audio, as well as specific phrases used in captions, hashtags, and comments. Both brands’ TikTok accounts

were analyzed in terms of follower count, number of likes, TikTok username, tagline, bio, and appearance.

In addition, news articles, blog content, press releases, and other pieces about specific strategy employed by *The Washington Post* and Gymshark were analyzed from a variety of sources (including *Forbes*, *HubSpot*, *The Guardian*, *Poynter*, *Insider*, among others). These documents shed light on what other companies and news outlets have noticed from the two brands, what has differentiated them during the pandemic, and what other brands looking to use the TikTok space can do to best communicate to and resonate with consumers.

IV. Findings & Discussion

Case Study 1: @washingtonpost

The Washington Post had more than 900,000 followers on TikTok and 37.4 million likes as of spring 2021. The newspaper is one of TikTok's earliest brand adopters and creates content that is funny, musical, and embraces some of TikTok's weirdest special effects. Examples of content posted by *The Washington Post* includes news team discussion of *The Bachelorette* instead of the Democratic debates and a comical highlight of a slip up made by Vice President Harris during a prior debate. Posts occasionally infuse news and quotes into the videos (Bump, 2020).

The Washington Post has a team who tailors content to young viewers who want to laugh and be entertained. That team is responsible for talking directly to its specific audience. In an article published by *Poynter*, Dave Jorgenson is highlighted as *The Washington Post's* TikTok guy (Mahadevan, 2020). Before Jorgenson developed *The Washington Post's* TikTok account, he was a Vine native and helped propel the *Independent Journal Review's* Vine account into the hundreds of thousands of followers with clips from the first Democratic primary debate in 2015 (Tenbarga, 2019).

The videos Jorgenson created for the *Independent Journal Review's* Vine account convey personality with bits based on popular memes from the platform. Jorgenson's methodology towards *The Washington Post's* TikTok account links directly with the work he was doing on Vine years prior. Jorgenson stated that *The Post's* TikTok strategy best resembles a metaphor:

The metaphor that I use is we've been invited to this dinner party by TikTok, TikTok is the host, and TikTok is a really good cook, and they do everything right ...We just got invited, and we don't want to walk into the house and say 'Hey, this is how you cook your steak.' We might bring a bottle of wine and be like 'Hey, we brought this to help make the meal better, and we also have some new jokes you haven't heard' (Tenbarga, 2019).

The Washington Post believes that TikTok could be a funnel for new subscribers - and for news consumers everywhere (Mahadevan, 2020). *The Post's* account is self-aware and slightly cringey, but successful (Nover, 2019). Explaining in an interview why *The Washington Post* is on TikTok, Jorgenson sees TikTok as a lighthearted side project that serves to reinforce the paper's journalistic mission and draw in new readers: "The average subscriber to The Post is well over 40. So this is a really good way to, at the very least, get [younger people] to trust the brand or to know the brand" (Nover, 2019).

To accomplish this, *The Washington Post* shows the newsroom in action. The newspaper uses TikTok as a medium to humanize the people behind the bylines. Drawing inspiration from *The Office*, *The Washington Post* attempts to recreate the tone that Generation Z loves (Nover, 2019).

The main findings taken from analyzing *The Washington Post's* content on TikTok, its online media presence, prior TikTok case studies, and articles written about its infiltration of this social media phenomenon bring about four major tips to other brands and marketers who seek to be successful on TikTok (Neal, 2020):

- 1. Share important information.** Becoming a resource for relevant and useful information solidifies your role as a thought leader.
- 2. Speak your mind.** According to 5W PR's 2020 Consumer Culture Report, 76 percent of respondents ages 18-34 like it when CEOs of companies speak out on issues they care about. Recent research also shows that 83 percent of Millennials find it important for the companies they buy from to align with their values (Neal, 2020). The Washington Post published a series of videos educating its audience on the significance of the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery, what privilege is and how it plays into racial injustice, and the measurable steps everyone can take to minimize their roles in systemic racism (Neal, 2020).
- 3. Interact with other organizations.** This includes highlights from any competition with other newspapers to increase engagement and collaborations with other organizations, allowing for brands to reach multiple audiences and sway potential new members by displaying a sense of humor and self-awareness.
- 4. Have fun.** Self-deprecation, making light of mistakes and diffusing common frustrations using theatrics are some of the ways Jorgenson has connected with younger demographics (Neal, 2020).

As previously stated, Jorgenson is a major contributor to *The Washington Post's* TikTok success. On TikTok, the prestigious newspaper is not trying to impose itself as the traditional, straightforward newspaper it is online and via print. The TikTok content occasionally infuses news and quotes into their videos, but in large part, the posts are pleasant, funny and show users the real people behind the hard journalism.

The Post employees who are showcased on TikTok seem like relatable people. Authenticity is key for young users, and this could potentially result in fans going to *The Washington Post* as a trusted news source when they want to read something written by sources they identify with. Gene Park, audience editor at *The Post*, noted that "... [Tik Tok] and its ilk are definitely a mutant strain of memology that encourage repetition with quick, easy-to-digest narratives ... Part of what Dave does is mix trending TikTok memes with slice-of-life newsroom insight, which gives us the ability to laugh at ourselves while also hinting at the depth of our work" (Mahadevan, 2019).

Jorgenson knows that TikTok has a large, untapped audience of teenagers. *The Washington Post's* main strategy is to highlight the brand and expose teen viewers to a variety of reporters and beats. This served as a chance for *The Post* to cultivate new audiences and new revenue streams in an industry that is constantly searching for both. *The Washington Post* is one of the few news outlets that has successfully mastered TikTok.

The strategy works because being on trend is key to operating on TikTok and many other social networks. This means that brands need to understand standards, trends, inside jokes and other nuances before they post. Otherwise, they run the risk of appearing inauthentic - one of the biggest online errors, and a quick way to lose audience trust. While already an established source of information, using TikTok to share in ways that appeal to younger audiences has created a cult-like following for the newspaper, allowing it to connect with a new segment of its audience, allowing for *The Washington Post* to be one of the largest, and most reputable, TikTok giants. Jorgenson noted: "We're slowly kind of proving to them that their [young users'] perception of *The Washington Post* - wherever they got it from, if it was negative - now they're looking at our TikTok, and they're saying, 'This is not what I expected, but in the best way'" (Tenbarge, 2019).

The Washington Post makes clear that brands can use TikTok to give an unexpected audience a comedic and authentic experience into who they are. The brand took creative risks and had fun in the process - resulting in new subscribers, entertainment for the TikTok community, and a new way to showcase brand identity and mission consistent with its values.

Case Study 2: @gymshark

Gymshark had a total of 2.5 million followers on TikTok and 39.9 million likes in spring 2021. Founded in 2012, United Kingdom-based Gymshark came alive in the age of mobile social media. The brand primarily used influencer marketing to reach its consumers to become a global clothing competitor (MediaKix, 2020).

With the top fitness influencers attracting followers in the millions, fitness is exceedingly popular on social media. Gymshark has been collaborating with Instagram influencers since the company's inception, working to create unique, visual language to separate itself from competition.

Gymshark uses a similar strategy on TikTok, partnering with fitness and lifestyle influencers on the platform to further its reach and messaging. Gymshark demonstrates how TikTok users are turning to the application for fitness-related content, with the most popular hashtag (#fitness) generating over 44 billion views globally. The top content categories for fitness-related TikTok videos are workout tips, workout dances, and no-equipment workouts due to the pandemic (RightMetric, 2020). Gymshark publishes an average of 40 videos per month, its top performing video categories including gym/fitness humor, workout challenges and ideas and fitness inspiration (RightMetric, 2020).

Its "66 Days | Change Your Life" challenge on TikTok relied on six influencer accounts in categories spanning health, fitness, lifestyle and dance to help increase Gymshark brand and product awareness, promote the challenge, and create an active, meaningful connection with fans by inviting them to participate in the brand's challenge (MediaKix, 2020). The social reach targeted 19.8 million fans, increased the engagement rate by 11.11 percent, and allowed for 45.5 million views of its #gymshark66 hashtag.

Gymshark's reliance on user-generated content, indirectly involving its users in its campaigns, is one of its reasons for success (Kolsquare, 2020). The brand knows who its audience is and produces content with them in mind. The "66 Day | Change Your Life" challenge was evidence that when brands find their niche on a platform and create targeted content that includes relevant influencers, they can achieve high engagement on their posts and increase brand awareness (Media Update, 2020). By reposting content by creating its own hashtag and displaying it in the caption of its publications, Gymshark encourages its community to use it, too. This is how the brand collects sometimes very qualitative content from its customers, thus boosting overall virality of the brand.

Gymshark is a prime example of a retail brand that has chosen to expand its digital marketing strategy on TikTok, posting content that is beneficial to their consumers, like workout videos, challenges, or inspirational fitness journeys. The brand does this with the help of influencers.

For the "66 Day | Change Your Life" challenge, Gymshark employed the help of six major influencer accounts in categories spanning health, fitness, lifestyle and dance. The six influencers included the Wilking Sisters (approximately 1.1 million fans), the Rybka Twins (5.2 million fans), Laurie Elle (2.5 million fans), Twin Melody (6.3 million fans), the Lesotwins (1.2 million fans), and Antonie Lokhorst (3.5 million fans) (Mediakix, 2020). Those influencers conveyed the Gymshark message and challenge on their own personal accounts and platforms for their large followings to see and interact with, thus expanding reach and leading to direct traffic to the Gymshark TikTok account and website.

As a result of that challenge, Gymshark was able to expand its influencer marketing strategy into the growing, short-form video platform, TikTok. The brand's image and offerings matched up well with TikTok's format and influencers. The influencers successfully highlighted the brand and its clothing, while also promoting their "66 Day | Change Your Life" challenge (Mediakix, 2020). Gymshark is proof that when a brand uses the strengths of a platform and partners with influencers that align well with their brand, high engagement rates are achievable.

V. Conclusion

As the coronavirus sparked a new environment of campaign culture on TikTok and changed the way brands connect with consumers, this study aimed to understand how brands have successfully used TikTok to their advantage. The motivations of each brand to carry out specific video content and campaigns on this social media platform is relevant to both their personal missions and how they attempt to take creative risks. The brands analyzed in the qualitative case study are notable and highly regarded on TikTok because they both share a balance between having fun, fostering a community, and bringing to light fresh content and perspectives that emotionally resonate with a widespread audience.

This qualitative research was conducted over the course of one semester. That four-month time frame limited the number of campaigns that could be analyzed. As a result, only two campaigns were examined. Future research could consider similar campaigns on TikTok or observe how influencers specifically are communicating successful brand partner messages on the platform, and how corporations and businesses can use this different marketing avenue. In addition, future research could also investigate the consumer perspective on a national or international scale, interviewing consumers of different demographics. This study indicates that brands can successfully use the TikTok space to create unique campaigns, messages, and content to untapped audiences with the right strategy.

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