**TikTok Product Trends:**

**Upsetting the Paid Advertising Market**

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Investigating the differences between paid advertising and consumer-generated content, why do products sell better, or “trend,” when promoted by consumers, rather than the business companies? Traditional advertising is business generated – based on what the business thinks its ideal demographic would like and appreciate and aligns well with the brand message and image. Traditional advertising has been the main form of advertising since the Industrial Revolution in 1870 when brands like Coca-Cola started forming (Boone, 2021). Traditional advertising can be in the form of ads or the brand’s own social media account, while consumer-generated content was not made by the company at all. Consumer-generated content most often comes as a review or a testimonial. Representing how the style of communication has adapted with newer generations, “It is precisely this younger population that has different media consumption patterns, is more skeptical towards advertising, and for whom influencer marketing is, therefore, particularly important,” (Haenlein, et.al 2020, p 2). It was not until social media emerged that advertising shifted main priorities from traditional to consumer-generated content. Therefore, this research delves into what factors make consumer-generated content more effective and how more businesses can adapt to the new age of advertising on TikTok.

**Rationale**

As social media has grown in popularity, more and more researchers – intrigued by its depth – have added it to their research topics of interest. However, there is still a gap to be filled surrounding the mystery that is TikTok. Despite how the “unique nature of viral/social advertising has changed the way consumers engage with advertising messages and brands,” the main underlying factor as to why this type of content consumption is so addictingly popular remains steadfast: trust. Through traditional advertising avenues, consumers recognize that the large corporations are attempting to persuade them to buy their product and buy into their brand image. Influencers are a new form of earned media, therefore, “giving a reading on brand reputation; that is, they reflect what people say about the brand,” according to Moriarty, Wood, Mitchell, and Wells. Thus, the earned publicity creates a “halo of respect” for the brand. Yet, with word-of-mouth (WOM) advertising presenting itself in an updated format, “there is no more powerful way of communicating information, including marketing images, than from person to person” even if it is in the form of minute-long videos on the TikTok stream known as the “for you page” (Fulgoni; Lipsman, 2017, p 127). The movement of traditional to consumer-based advertising needs to be researched to effectively help brands re-evaluate their integrated marketing strategy to maximize all kinds of profits from social media to hopefully fill the gap of trust between a business and the consumer.

**Context**

Pertinent to explaining this phenomenon, there are two real-world examples that help demonstrate the power of consumer – generated content on TikTok: 1) Aerie crossover leggings, 2) eos Vanilla Bliss shave cream. Selling out over six times and leading to their very own product line and a partnership for the TikTok-er that posted them, the Aerie crossover leggings went viral on TikTok before they ever sold out in stores. According to Ruane (2021), what started as a normal day shopping with her mother and sister, Hannah Schlenker shared her raving review of how she could not leave the store without the Aerie crossover leggings with her 860,000 followers. A more recent video, featuring Schlenker skateboarding in her Aerie crossover flare leggings, has reached 97.5 thousand likes and 2.9 million views. Meanwhile, the same video reposted by Aerie’s name-brand account (with 134.9 thousand followers) has a measly 540 likes and 7,726 views.

Creating a traffic increase of 35 times the original amount to the website and additional “double-digit growth,” Carly Joy’s viral video of the eos Vanilla Bliss shave cream did better than any ad they could have produced. Sharing with the TikTok community, Joy’s post raved about how the “cooch blessing cream” did just that. According to Wheless (2021), not only did that post cause eos to sell 150,000 bottles of the shave cream, but they also sent her a package with her own shaving tips and instructions on the bottle. Her reaction video gained 5.6 million views. The newly-branded package was also offered to others as a prize or an online exclusive product – though never actually hitting the stores.

**Literature Review**

The research done on this topic delves deeply into the relationship between the consumer, the business and the one communicating the message. However, there is a gap in the research regarding the best way for business to use influencers on social media – specifically, TikTok – and incorporating it into their media mix. This literature is divided into three themes: Social Media and Engagement, Influencers and Engagement, and Creativity and Viral Brand Status. This research explores the differences between social media and influencers, the power of trust and WOM advertising, and the impact creativity has on encouraging a response.

**Social Media Marketing & Engagement**

StatBid lists, describes, and provides an example for each of the 12 types of advertising used in marketing. Ranging from demos to narratives, of the 12 types, influencers and user-generated content match up with type seven: testimonials. Testimonial are stories shared by “real” people (they could be actors) who are meant to gain the trust of the viewer. This is relevant since it solidifies social media’s position as an advertising platform.

Hoogenrad and Haak Advertising (2015), explored how to be successful on social media while maintaining the risk management involved in using influencers, bloggers and other content creators as a part of the marketing mix. By applying the Advertising Committee Code of the Netherlands to contextualized examples, the researchers attempt to draw the line of what is ethical in social media advertising (SMA). Despite the location, the information is still valid, applicable and provides insight on the relationship between the consumer, media, and the communicators. Thus, developing key details in how to approach social media.

On the other side of the relationship, Voorveld, van Noort, Muntinga, and Bronner (2018), conducted their own research in the form of surveys to further understand how advertising drives engagement on social media across multiple platforms. Through their four-step process of first conducting consumer surveys, demonstrating the differences in platforms, mapping engagement and connecting the results to appropriate literature, the research supports the relevance of context (over content) as a primary tool for advertising to drive engagement - despite the differences across the media platforms. Conclusively, this research helps define the key details in picking which platforms work best for the best purpose and further helps define TikTok’s role in going viral.

As a result of utilizing social media, researchers, Johnston, Khalil, Nhat Hanh Le, and Cheng (2018), take a deeper dive into SMA, to better understand its effectiveness and influence on consumer behavior. Through the expectancy value theory, they developed a four-stage framework made up of belief, value, attitude, and behavior, to discover how people perceive and react towards SMA. The results reaffirm that a positive attitude towards SMA contributes to more interaction and that SMA is held to a higher degree of credibility than regular advertising, partly due to the amount of infotainment in SMA. Despite focusing on international markets, this research proves the complexity of SMA and its relationship with consumer behavior and therefore, communicating to advertisers the importance of social media.

Similarly, Ahmed, Raziq, and Goreja (2018), explored the relationship between how consumer attitudes impact consumer beliefs directed towards SMA. Collecting data from over 300 college-aged students through an online survey in Google Docs, they found that infotainment – the combined use of information and entertainment – and integrity maintained a “significant positive impact.” On the other hand, intrusiveness held no significant impact on the consumer’s attitudes, therefore, companies advertising on social media must be well versed in the culture of social media. This study is integral for the research paper since it allows further understanding of the impact of personalized communication through integrity, and how it can be applied through infotainment.

Transitioning into the end goal of advertising – creating a response or action – researching the dynamics of firms with social media and other online elements, Yang, Lin, Carlson, and Ros Jr. (2016), focus on affiliation, conversation, and responsiveness and how are key in creating consumer action. They found that there is a positive association between brand engagement through social media and search engine advertising effectiveness. Specifically, that the three forms of brand engagement they investigated greatly result in a top advertisement rank on search engine advertising effectiveness. Therefore, brand engagement must lead somewhere – to further action – if the brand wants to profit off the interaction in more than just goodwill.

Similarly, Yeo, Tan, Lim, Leong, J., and Leong, Y. (2020), studied the relationships between consumers, SMA, and brand recognition, focusing on the interactivity developed between the consumer and the brand with the use of social media. Interactivity is defined as two-way communication between the company and the customer and the customer itself and is influenced by the participants. Therefore, the use of questions is seen as highly interactive due to the need for people to respond. These authors used a total of 219 questionnaires for research, finding that a higher level of interactivity, trust, and brand image positively influence purchase intention.

**Influencer Marketing & Engagement**

Switching to who is doing the communicating, these researchers, Delia Balaban and Roberta Racz (2020), investigated the impact that a media influencer has on brand advertising (on the company’s social media accounts) versus the how well the influencer does alone. By comparing two contextual examples and conducting a two-level survey-based online experiment, they concluded that advertising on influencer accounts is more effective towards a positive brand attitude. Unlike the other articles on influencer impacts, this article evaluates the impact on the combination of brand and influencer for the business – instead of simply utilizing an influencer to promote the brand. This is an important consideration in deciphering the weight of the role the business should play in the relationship with the influencer doing the advertising.

Haenlin, et.al (2017), were looking to increase the understanding of the fast-growing influencer marketing industry for businesspeople – that can be tricky to understand. Comparing and contrasting some of the most prevalent social media apps, this report exemplifies the need for a marketing mix through frequency and reach of posts and the need for synergy in brand accounts and the actual company’s brand. However, this research is missing a crucial component of influencer such as special incentives – a portion of the marketing mix that has directly impacted TikTok.

Therefore, these researchers attempt to calculate and predict trust found in the influencer relationship by computing and applying a new algorithm to test user’s trust on social media. Thus, these authors look to fill the gap of computable trust in the advertising world. They also reviewed how trust impacts the decision-making process using surveys and big data. Highlighting the trust in a consumer-to-consumer buying process involved on social media, this study concludes that 1) negative feedback can still amplify trust scores, and 2) that certain media platforms could be leveraged for greater outputs since they have higher trust levels, however, they are normally viewed at the same level.

Further researching the results, Fulgoni and Lipsman (2017), explore the positives of media outreach and weigh them against the negatives of “digital pollution,” such as fake news and fraud, asking for a new wave of cleaner and more transparent media. Recognizing the strength of digital word-of -mouth advertising, Fulgoni and Lipsman investigate how it has adapted to media in such a way that it no longer limits influencing to close-circled groups and has allowed influencers to grow under mass exposure at a very quick rate and the impact that metrics had on those developments. This information is a leading cause for the importance of TikTok in a brand’s media mix.

**Creativity & Viral Brand Status**

Further detailing the “how,” researchers, Wang, Gunasti, Shankar, Pancras, and Gopal (2020), explore the implications that follow the use of gamifications (rewards) in WOM advertising. Comparing gamifications for WOM contributors and WOM consumers and interpreting social psychology literature, they show that gamifications through symbols allow for more positive interactions and express higher competence among consumers. This research is relevant, since TikTok often uses gamification in the form of a verified checkmark and they have different standards for applying the verification mark, rather than simply being a celebrity – like on Twitter.

Highlighting the importance of narration and a personal relationship through advertising, authors, Seo, Choi, and Yoon (2018) instigated that ad reaction is stronger through paratextual features influenced by the sender, the message, and the advertiser – thus, developing the creativity of the message. This study emphasizes the importance of good communication through narration over an emphasis on content, this can be accomplished in an infotainment style that is both informative and entertaining. The paratextual form of social media can be seen expressed as likes – supporting the message or sender, thus creating a personal relationship involving trust with the viewer. Therefore, it is not just the trusting attitude and appearance of the speaker, but also the manner that the information is presented on the social platform that allows the viewer to buy in and, hopefully, act.

Similarly, authors, Mafael, Raithel, Taylor, and Stewart (2021), review the effect that creativity has on advertising and how it can make ads stand out and perform better. The research concludes that a well-balanced blend of uniqueness paired with the consistency of association are needed to build a strong and favorable brand image. These factor into the overall net brand buzz. Relative to creating buzz, this study delves into the complexity of maintaining a devoted audience, ready to buy into the brand.

Taking a more analytical approach, Rosengren, Eisend, Koslow and Dahlen (2020), evaluated the effect of creativity on advertising, these authors used 93 data sets from 67 papers totaling 878 effect sizes to conclude that creativity requires a mix of originality and appropriateness. This study also delves into the reactions of consumers to the ads, putting an emphasis on ad reactions – not brand reactions. This is crucial considering the virality is more impacted by products – not brands – on the TikTok market.

**Methodology**

Considering this research, the goals of this capstone are to further define the dynamic of the relationship between an advertiser, influencer and the viewer. This capstone will develop a grater understanding of TikTok and virality.

1. This research paper is designed to help explain how trust impacts trending products on TikTok, focusing on trust and interactivity. It is pertinent to remain educated about the newest forms of communication since technology continues to be updated and reproduced consistently, as well as, tracing the lines around the niche that need to be filled by the next researcher.
2. A promotional package is included in the capstone deliverables, consisting of a promotional poster, audio ad, newsletter, content calendar, style guide, and the maintenance of three social media accounts. This content will develop conversations on social media, therefore, allowing the consumers to contribute information to the project and provide input on other content.
3. Seven articles will be published in The Roar, investigating social media trends and influencers. These articles will provide context and understanding to viewers that might not fit into the identified demographic on TikTok.
4. A website set to house the podcast and the blog content will be maintained for this project. The website will allow anyone to continue their own research into the relationship between TikTok and advertising by tuning into more than one episode or post. The content created will be organized to benefit and be accessible for the viewer.
5. A collection of 12 blog posts will be uploaded to the website weekly, along similar topic lines as the podcast. The blog will be more relatable to the consumer yet will provide perspective to a business owner or influencer.
6. The weekly 18-20-minute podcast, titled #GoingViral, tells the stories of 12 different TikTok-ers and the context surrounding their circumstances. Thus, breaking down what they did or did not do that eventually led them to success or something less than.
7. The technologies that will be utilized for the capstone project are as follows: Adobe Photoshop to ensure that all photograph content is edited and pristine, Wix to develop a website that can maintain a blog and podcast, Canva for all content creation and project organization, Audacity and Sony SoundForge to edit and prepare the recorded content for the podcast and audio ad until it is broadcast ready.

**Capstone Project Management**

**Timeline**

This semester-long project has six deliverable deadlines over the span of a two-month time frame. A schedule in necessary to stay on track, accurately allotting enough time for pre-approval and editing. The deliverables have hard deadlines and must be clearly marked in the schedule. They are as follows: 1) February 8, 2) February 15, 3) March 8, 4) March 22, 5) March 29, 6) April 5. Since some of the deliverables are posted weekly, a schedule for weekly content is needed alongside the overarching one. Everything must be approved by the “Drop Dead” date April 20, including presentations. The final presentations will take place April 25-26.

**Challenges**

There are a few challenges that have either already occurred, or that are expected to occur. Firstly, scheduling enough people that have enough to say or are experienced enough to qualify to be a speaker on TikTok is a challenge. Whether it is busyness of their schedule, or a difference in priorities, it is hardly accomplished in one try. Secondly, the size of the project itself is a challenge. It is a large project and must be handled correctly, by meeting all of the deadlines and doing everything in a timely fashion.

**Successes**

Despite struggling to find and schedule people, most have been excited about being on the podcast and willing to help. The design process and planning has already gone well so far. Fitting together nicely, the colors and fonts chosen bear great resemblance to TikTok’s style and express the attitude of the podcast well.

**Conclusion**

In determining why products sell better, or “trend,” when promoted by consumers, rather than the business companies, the same attributes that are found in WOM advertising have aided consumer-based content, specifically on TikTok with a concentrated young audience. The combination of consumers and influencers sharing content in the form of testimonials and reviews on TikTok’s for you page, acknowledged by likes, stitches, and duets, strengthens the relationship and trust between consumers – thus, simulating the sharing of content with friends. Due to the enjoyment connected to the for you page, consumer-based content is interacted with more. Therefore, it is pertinent for businesses active on social media and attempting to reach a younger demographic to incorporate consumer-based content into their marketing mix. As seen in the context, riding the virality of the trend allows the company to better connect to consumers using their own style of communicating. The involvement of consumer-generated content to business-generated content creates value in the form of advertising that would otherwise be absent of trust. The research would open the gateway for businesses to connect and understand younger audiences and allow them to build trust that would otherwise be hard to improve. Learning how businesses could increase trust in advertising and be able to duplicate it without the help of consumers or influencers would open the door to a new age of advertising.

**Future Suggestions and Applications**

For future research on this, it would prove beneficial to run focus groups. These groups would show old ads and then new ads with the applications of the research developments and then compare the results. This would test the effectiveness of the study, thus indicating the need for a different angle of research.

Considering the future of the post-presentation’s capstone, the entity of #GoingViral could be taken over by a third party. They would then oversee and maintain the podcast, website, blog, social media accounts and send regular newsletters to the subscribers. If this does not occur, the future of the capstones would be at a stalemate. While having – hopefully – enjoyed capstone, it will be kept up for the next year under a controlled domain on the website, yet I will not be carrying it any further. The articles which will remain available on *The Roar* will still be found on The Roar website. However, the skills I have been gained through creating and insight gained form conducting each deliverable will be prove insightful in the workforce into advertising/social media advertising.

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